

Chapter 2

What is not counted does not count: Global volunteering estimates

Key highlights

- Measuring volunteering globally continues to be a challenge, but new data shed light on the scale and scope of volunteer engagement around the world.
- Using this new data, the monthly volunteer rate, defined as the share of working-age people 15 years or older who volunteer in a month, amounts to almost 15 percent, or 862 million people.
- Most volunteer work continues to be arranged informally between individuals, with 14.3 percent of the global population participating, while 6.5 percent of working-age people worldwide engage in formal volunteering via an organization or association. A significant percentage of people carry out multiple types of volunteer work.
- While formal volunteers are mostly men, informal volunteers are more likely to be women.
- Member States can use newly developed measurement tools by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNV to better measure volunteer action at the national level.

2.1. Introduction

Every day around the globe, millions of people take action on issues that matter to them, volunteering with communities, organizations, companies and alone. In doing so, they bring us closer to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The 2020 “Quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system” recognizes that “volunteerism can be a powerful and cross-cutting means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the important role that volunteers play in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences”.⁸²

However, less is known about just how many people volunteer, how they volunteer, and how their contributions can be maximized to achieve the SDGs. Answers to these vital questions require data and evidence. This chapter builds on previous efforts to measure the scale and scope of volunteering at the global and regional level.

2.2. Meeting the challenge: producing global and regional volunteer estimates

Estimating the scale and scope of global volunteerism is challenging. Volunteerism comprises a diverse set of actors and activities and has varying impacts on peace and development, depending on the context. As a result, its definition varies from country to country, and even within countries.⁸³ This report uses the definition that was adopted in the 2002 UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution: “a wide range

of activities, including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation, undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor.”⁸⁴ Under this comprehensive definition, volunteerism encompasses both formal activities performed through organizations and informal actions performed by individuals outside formally registered organizations.

To statistically measure volunteering, a detailed definition of volunteers is required to enable comparison across different sources and countries. The International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS), the global reference body in this area, has led multiple consultations that feed into the current definition of volunteering as a form of unpaid work. In 2013, this culminated in the adoption of standardized definitions, which are essential for measurement, and official guidance for national statistics systems on how to measure volunteering.



A volunteer visits a roadside market in Malawi to encourage local women to attend a meeting on gender-based violence. *Source:* UNV.

Under the ICLS definition, people in volunteer work are defined as all people of working age who, during a short reference period, performed any unpaid, non-compulsory activity to produce goods or provide services for others, where:

- “any activity” means work for at least one hour;
- “unpaid” means the absence of cash or in-kind remuneration for work done or hours worked (although volunteer workers may receive compensation or stipends);
- “non-compulsory” means work performed without a civil, legal or administrative requirement;
- production “for others” means work performed outside of the household or family of the volunteer.

The definition excludes:

- community service and work by prisoners ordered by a court or similar authority and compulsory military or alternative civilian service;
- unpaid work required as part of education or training programmes (i.e. unpaid trainees);
- work for others performed during working time associated with employment or during paid time off granted by an employer.

Source: ILO (2013).

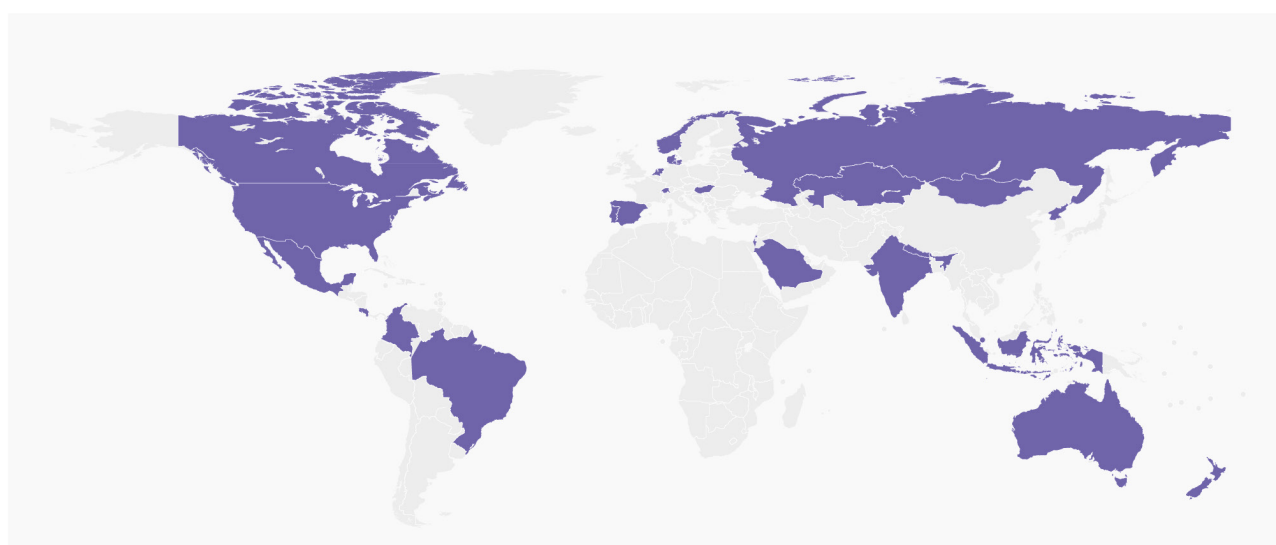
National and cross-national data can be unreliable for a number of reasons. First, the lack of consistency in how volunteering is defined across countries and the lack of regular measurements undermine the quality of statistics. Second, volunteering is typically a sporadic activity. For instance, the 2018 SWVR noted that “although national statistical agencies view volunteering as a form of unpaid work that has social and economic value, only a handful of countries, largely high-income, regularly measure volunteering, and they have done so inconsistently. And when volunteering is measured, the focus has often primarily been on organization-based volunteering, to the neglect of volunteering performed spontaneously by people in their communities”.⁸⁵

Despite these challenges, there has been much progress since the development of UNV-ILO volunteering measurement tools, which can capture the full diversity of volunteering efforts, including modules for labour force surveys,⁸⁶ modules for population censuses,⁸⁷ and a new indicator on volunteering in the ILOSTAT online database which provides national statistics

on volunteering from UN Member States.⁸⁸ Substantive changes include questions to better identify involvement in informal volunteering and in volunteering performed in relation to donations, which seem to be particularly important in the Global South. In general, focus has shifted from just formal or organization-based volunteering towards informal and sporadic forms of volunteering, which may be more relevant in countries with less formal volunteering infrastructure and likely more diverse and non-conventional forms of volunteering.

Since 2018, following the launch of the new UNV-ILO tools and guidance, at least 25 countriesⁱ have undertaken new national statistical measurements of volunteering (see Figure 2.1). UNV and ILO continue to facilitate international cooperation for national statistical measurement of volunteering. However, the pandemic saw many countries postpone plans to measure volunteering in 2020. Statistical coverage in the Global South remains patchy but efforts are under way, using the UNV/ILO tools, to systematically measure volunteer efforts in the region.

Figure 2.1. Map of countries that have undertaken national statistical volunteering measurements



ⁱ These are Australia, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Denmark, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, India, Indonesia, Israel, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Mongolia, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland and the United States of America.

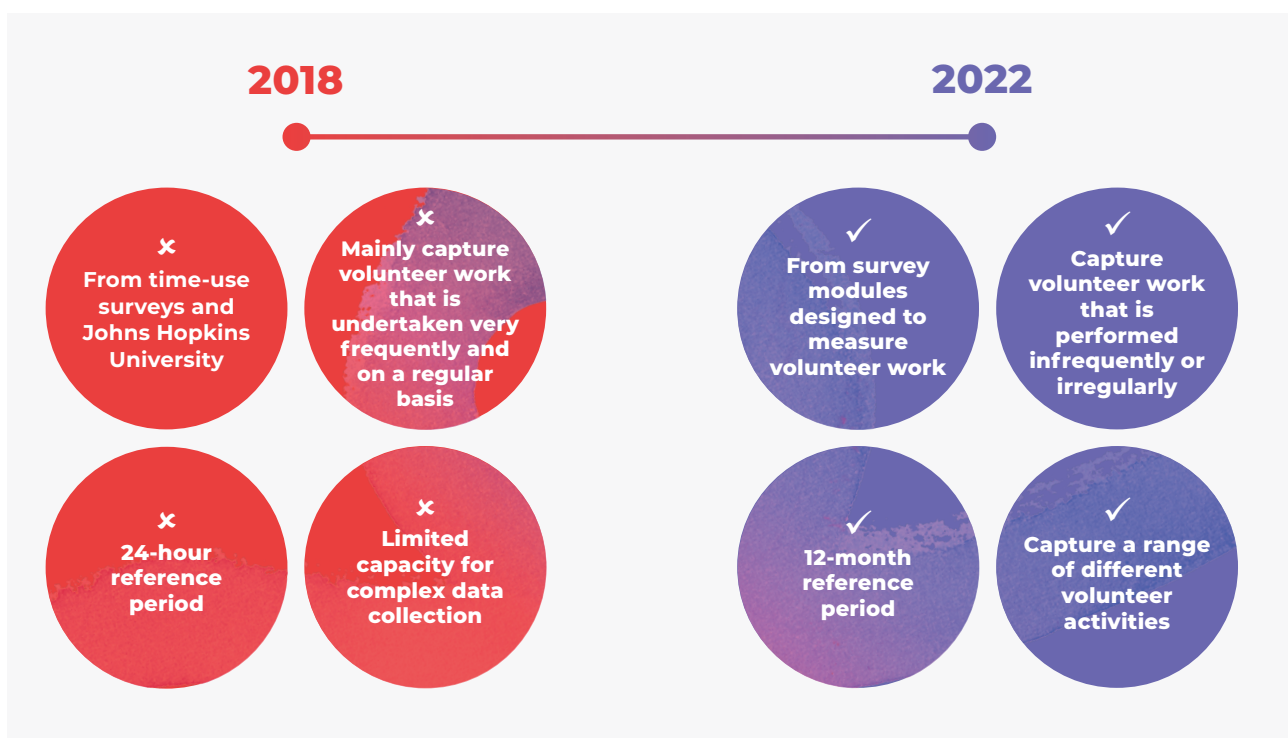
Figures presented later on in the chapter (Figures 2.5, 2.6, 2.7, 2.8 and 2.9) provide regional and global estimates of the total number of volunteers and volunteer rates; volunteering by type, formality (see Box 2.1 for definitions) and gender, and an estimate of full-time equivalents (how many full-time workers would be needed to do the work that volunteers do).

Importantly, the survey module data apply a 12-month period, which better captures volunteering that is performed less frequently, even occasionally, and captures a wider range of volunteering activities. This is in contrast with the time-use survey data used in 2018, which applied a reference period of 24 hours. As a result, they mainly only captured volunteering that was performed very frequently. In addition, the usefulness of time-use surveys is limited when it comes to more complex data-collection approaches.

Box 2.1. Formal and informal volunteering

Formal volunteering takes place through organizations, associations or groups, typically by volunteers with an ongoing or sustained commitment to an organization, who contribute their time on a regular basis. Informal volunteering occurs directly between individuals and communities without being mediated by an organization. While the terms of formal and informal volunteering are widely used in the global volunteering community, labour force statisticians often refer to them as organization-based volunteering and direct volunteering.

Figure 2.2. Comparison of 2018 SWVR data with 2022 SWVR data



2.2.1. Data sources

The ILOSTAT database⁸⁹ contains volunteer rates that are published by national statistical offices, or estimated by the ILO using data collected and published by national statistical offices, in 61 countries. For this estimation, the most recent and complete data sets were selected, especially where countries had collected volunteering data several times.

National surveys collecting volunteer work data use a variety of measurement approaches. One variable that has a direct impact on the volunteer rate is the reference period. Three different reference periods were applied to calculate the volunteer rates available in ILOSTAT: one week or seven days, four weeks or 30 days and one year or 12

months. Volunteer rates were estimated by the UNV-Gallup survey. Before proceeding to the calculation of global estimates, all available volunteer rates were made comparable—that is, they were adjusted to reflect the hypothetical situation in which all countries use the same reference period to estimate volunteer rates. This adjustment process is described in the methodological note in Appendix B.

2.2.2. Calculation of estimates

Before calculating the global and regional volunteer rate estimates, the rates had to be calculated for countries that did not have statistics available (see Figure 2.3). A more detailed explanation of these calculations can be found in Appendix B.

Figure 2.3. Calculation of estimates



Regional volunteer rate estimates were calculated as weighted averages of original and estimated national volunteer rates in each region. Global volunteer rate estimates were calculated as weighted averages of original and estimated national volunteer rates in all countries. Regional and global estimates of the total number of volunteers were then calculated by applying the estimated volunteer rates to the regional and global totals of the population aged 15 years and over. To estimate the number of men and women engaging in formal and informal volunteering, volunteer rates by type and gender were applied to the number of persons in the respective population groups (i.e. men aged 15 years and over and women aged 15 years and over).

Finally, global full-time equivalents were calculated by multiplying the estimated total number of monthly volunteers by the average number of hours volunteered per month, and then dividing this number by 160, based on the assumption that a full-time worker works 40 hours per week times four weeks per month.

2.2.3. Limitations

Volunteer rates from ILOSTAT and the UNV-Gallup survey were generated using a wide variety of measurement approaches, from simple to highly complex. The lack of consistency of country-level measurements, coupled with the fact that some countries only measure formal volunteering, make calculating global estimates challenging.

The different data dissemination formats used by countries to publish national volunteer rates also affect the reliability of the estimations. For example, volunteer rates for many European countries come from a survey conducted by Eurostat, which estimates and publishes both formal and informal volunteering rates, but not total volunteer rates. For these countries, the higher of the two rates was used as the total volunteer rate in global estimations. Because

of this, the volunteer rate values for Europe and Central Asia, and therefore, the global rate, underestimate the real incidence of volunteering in the population, if all other factors remain constant.

It is also important to note that volunteer rate estimates by type of volunteering and gender are based mainly on data from the Global North, since only five countries from the Global South had produced statistics. This makes the estimates less representative because they do not reflect regional differences.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted people's participation in volunteering in 2020 and 2021. Most statistics used to calculate these estimates—for 59 out of 69 countries—were produced between 2010 and 2019. The UNV-Gallup survey, conducted in eight countries in the Global South at the beginning of 2021, covered the previous 12 months (i.e. most of 2020).

Volunteering data collected in 2020, when strict lockdowns and other containment measures were implemented across the world, have likely impacted these global estimates.

On the one hand, it is reasonable to assume that COVID-19 restrictions stopped many people from volunteering on site, while on the other hand, many people are likely to have switched to volunteering online.

Additionally, the sudden increase in the number of people needing assistance because of the pandemic may have opened up more volunteering opportunities. These factors, and the lack of pre-pandemic volunteering statistics for countries in which the UNV-Gallup survey was conducted, make it difficult to evaluate exactly how COVID-19 has affected volunteering.

A volunteer advocates for the protection of the lomas, local ecosystems that rely on fog for moisture, from land traffickers in Peru.
Source: UNV.



2.3. Global estimates

This section looks at annual volunteering estimates but mainly focuses on monthly figures, since the latest international standards on statistics set the reference period to a month.

Looking at total numbers of volunteers, the monthly number of volunteers aged 15 years and over amounts to 862.4 million worldwide. There are significant regional differences, with Asia and the Pacific taking a strong lead (see Figure 2.4).

Regional differences can be attributed to different population sizes and varying volunteer rates. The share of the total working-age population (15 years and over) who volunteer amounts to almost 15 percent (see Figure 2.5).

While the Arab States, Europe and Central Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean display monthly volunteer rates of 9 to 10.6 percent, Africa and Asia and the Pacific far exceed this with monthly volunteer rates of 17.5 percent and 17.2 percent, respectively.

Figure 2.4. Monthly number of volunteers aged 15 years and over, by region

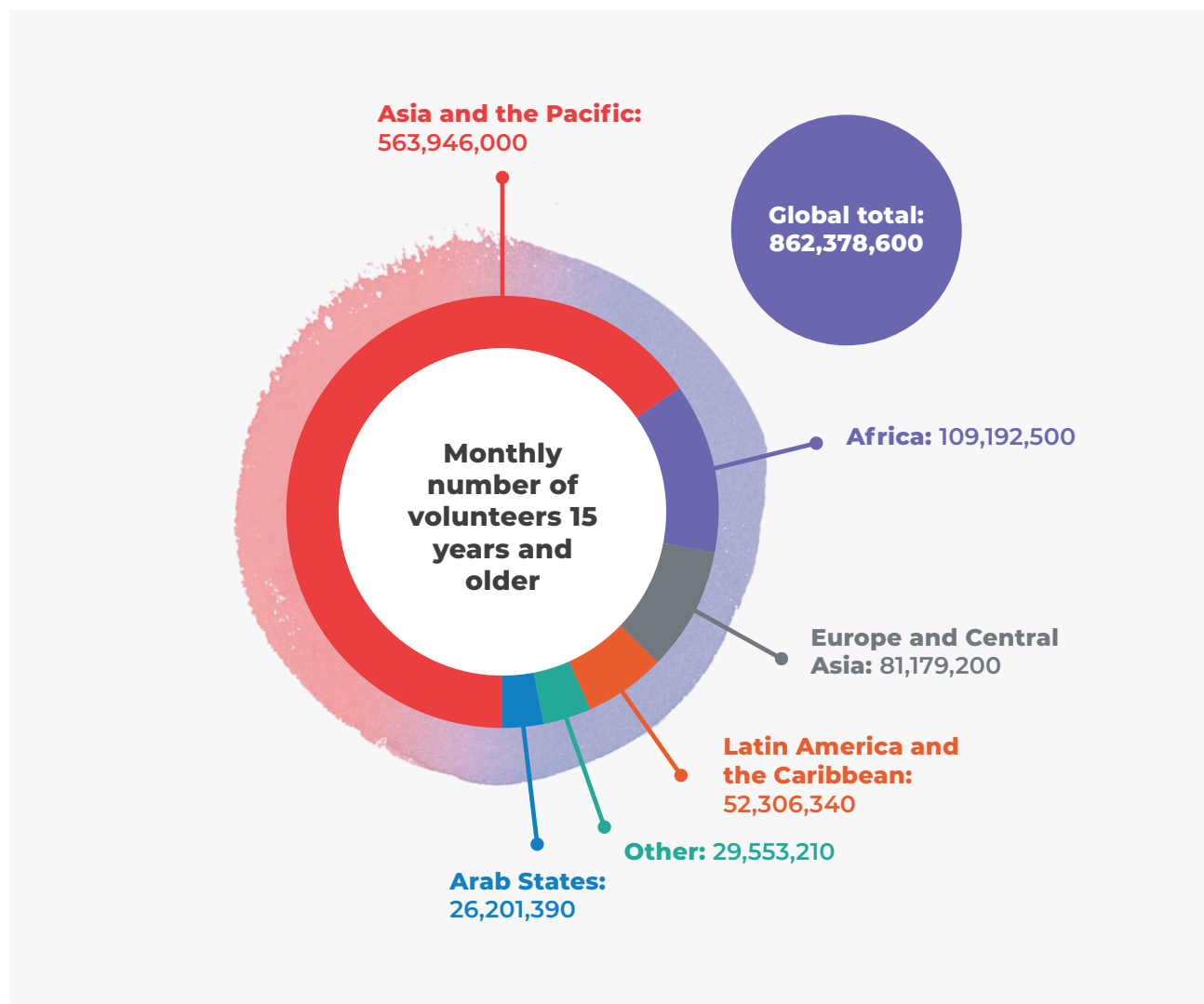
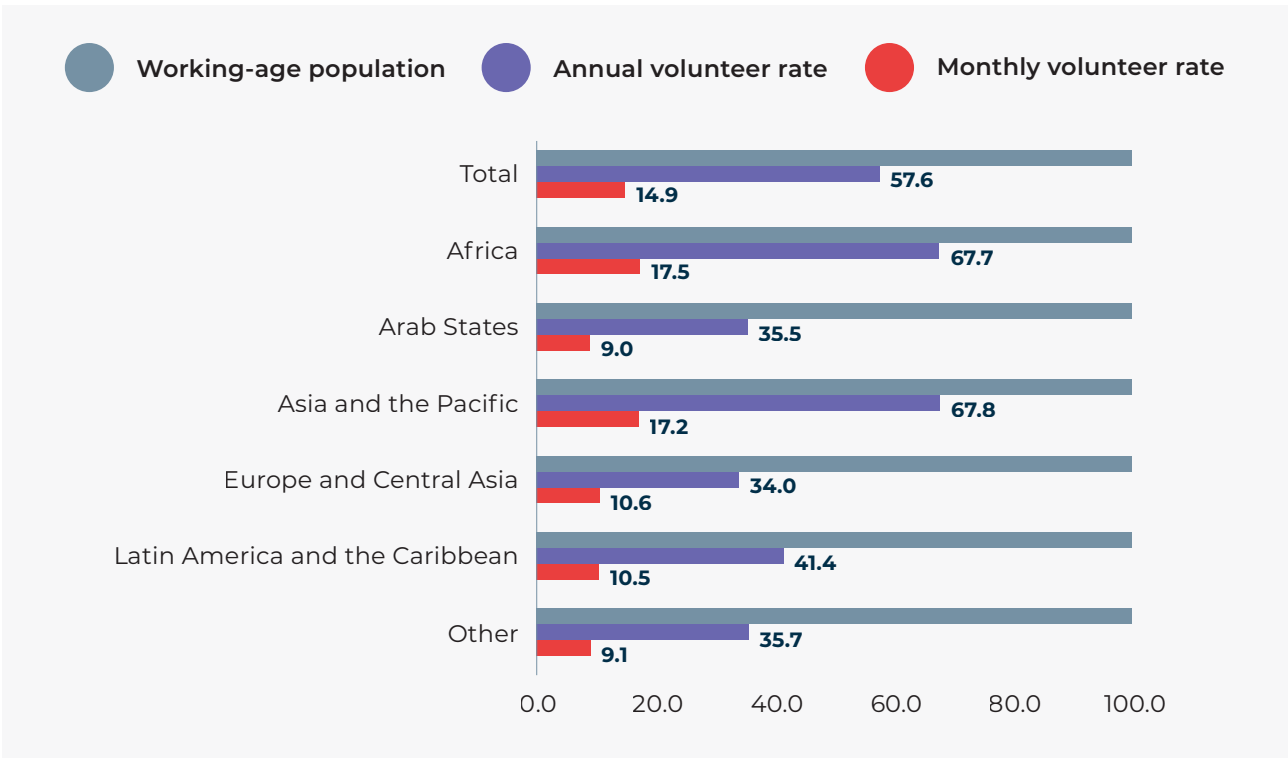


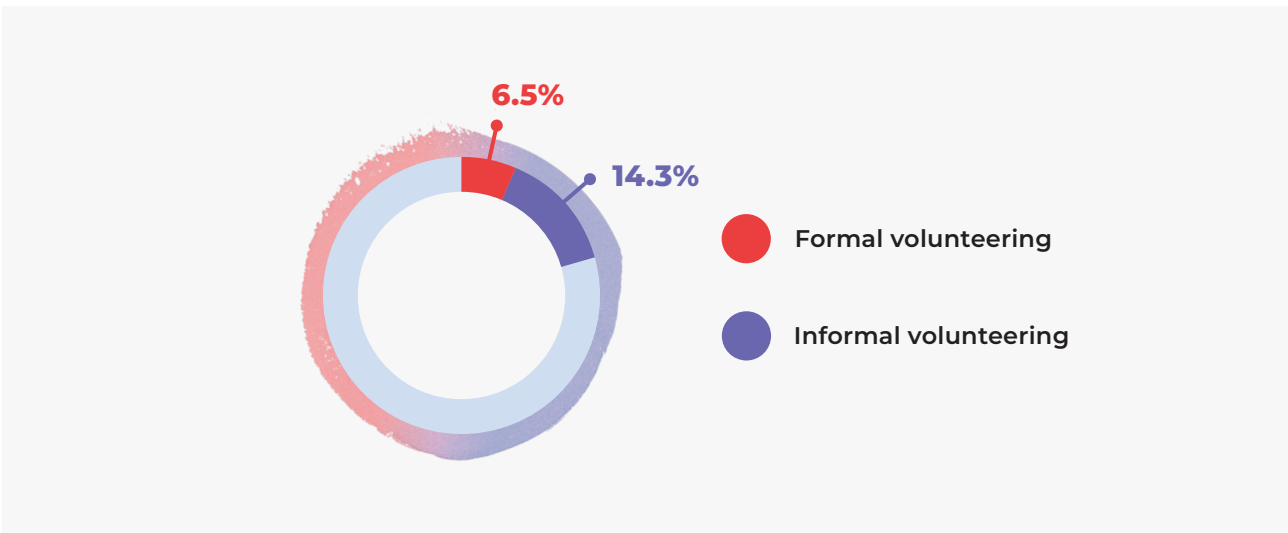
Figure 2.5. Volunteer rates (%)



When it comes to formal and informal volunteering, 6.5 percent of working-age people worldwide engage in formal volunteering, while 14.3 percent engage in informal volunteering (see Figure 2.6). This

means that worldwide, more than twice as many people volunteer informally than formally, even with informal volunteering likely still being underestimated due to the difficulties of capturing it.

Figure 2.6. Monthly volunteer rates by type (%)



Looking at gender-based differences, formal volunteers are mostly men, whereas informal volunteers are more likely to be women (see Figures 2.7 and 2.8). This has important implications for the ways in which volunteering can reinforce or challenge

gender norms: informal volunteering tends to have lower status, attract less recognition and receive less practical support such as training, insurance or administrative support, than formal volunteering.

Figure 2.7. Formal volunteering by gender

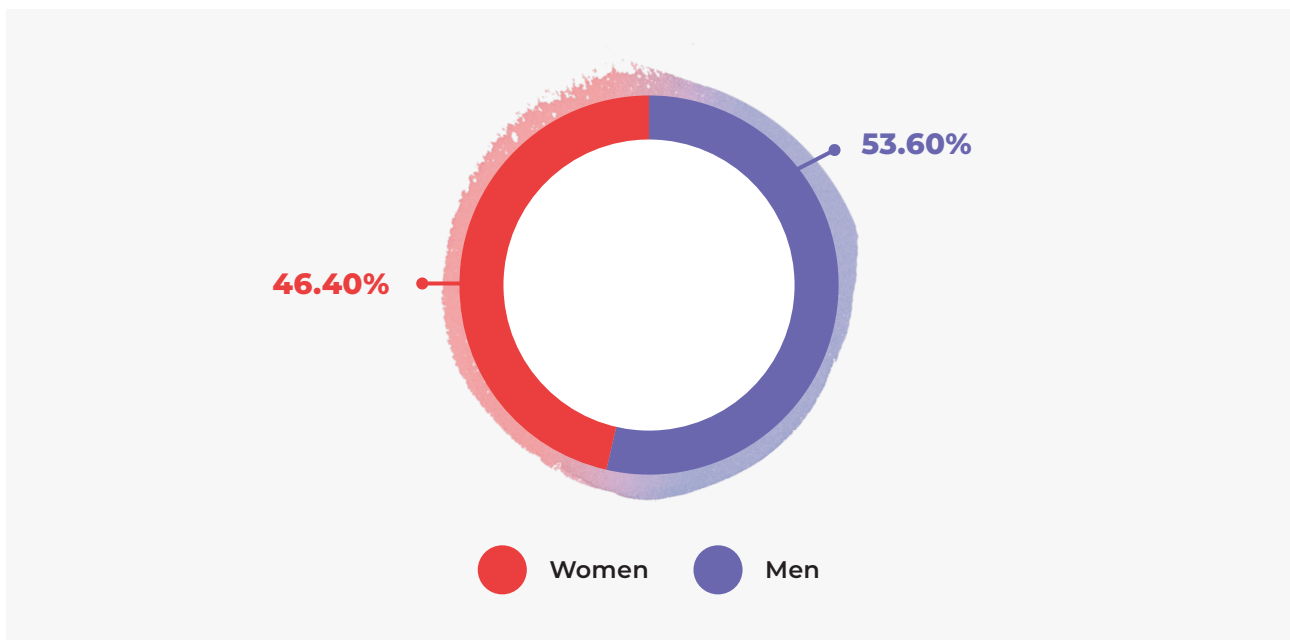
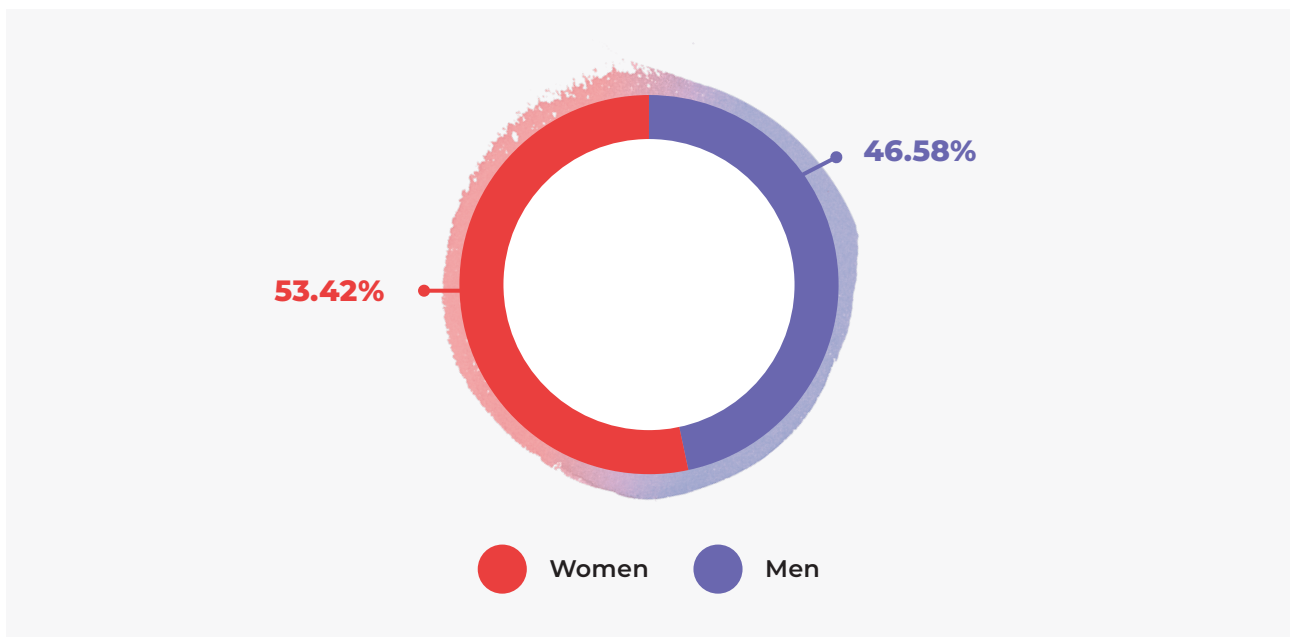


Figure 2.8. Informal volunteering by gender



To gauge the economic contribution of volunteering globally, the number of full-time equivalent workers was estimated. The result was approximately 61,000,000 full-time workers monthly, assuming a 40-hour week.

As these estimates show, volunteering is a massive resource for the Decade of Action to deliver the SDGs, with millions of people contributing across various sectors.

2.4. Improving measurement of volunteering at the global and regional level

Global volunteering could still be being underestimated, since many countries only report data on formal volunteering and difficulties in capturing informal volunteering remain. Incoherence in the data and the fact that much of the data is from countries in the Global North are further limitations. Although measuring volunteering remains challenging, progress has been made, potentially enabling better global, regional and national volunteering estimates in the future.

More countries have started to measure the scale and scope of volunteering on a regular basis. Low- and middle-income countries in particular, where data gaps persist, will benefit from investments in measuring volunteering according to the latest international standards on statistics. More high-quality and comparable data will enable the development and use of more elaborate and complex models of volunteerism.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to several countries postponing their plans to measure volunteering. There is a need to regain momentum. The ILO's creation of new data-collection methods could help accelerate the generation of comparable and standardized data across different contexts. As part of their measurement efforts, Member States should

incorporate the new UNV-ILO volunteering measurement tools in their national statistical surveys such as labour force surveys, social surveys and other household surveys.

As we seek to build forward better in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, development strategies should incorporate volunteering measurements as part of environmental, social and economic benchmarks for progress.

Furthermore, Member States should use volunteering data more widely for national planning, analysis and reporting on the 2030 Agenda, and continue to collaborate on measurement issues.

This chapter has presented statistics on global volunteering estimates: formal, informal, by gender and age, among other variables. Those wishing to incorporate volunteering mechanisms into development need data for informed policy decision-making. Making this information available to policymakers and development practitioners is therefore critical if the world is to benefit from the real value of various volunteering models. The chapter highlights the scarcity of data on volunteering, which has remained circumstantial, especially in the Global South, and thus the efforts to develop a measurement methodology that can be applied to measure volunteer efforts, both formal and informal. On the other hand, many countries in the Global North have already been quantifying the value of volunteering for many years, which has helped to position volunteering within their socio-economic contexts.

The next chapter explores trends of volunteering before, during and beyond the global COVID-19 crisis, looking at how volunteering can help us build forward better and shape the new social contract.

Volunteer voice: Gladys Mutukwa from Zambia on the inclusion of women's voices

Gender gaps in volunteering exist globally. Gladys Mutukwa, a volunteer in Zambia, shares her insights.

My name is Gladys Mutukwa. I'm 73 years old. I'm a lawyer by profession and worked as a State Advocate and a Legal Aid Officer for the Zambian Government, and eventually as a Diplomat responsible for legal and social matters in the Permanent Mission of Zambia to the United Nations in New York. I have been a volunteer all my life. I volunteered in the community while at school and university, and at church, where I taught women and young girls in surrounding villages and in other communities how to read and write. Much of my volunteer work has focused on women's human and legal rights.

In this "new normal", it will be incredibly important for volunteers to be regarded as essential partners right from the outset. Governments, the private sector and other stakeholders will need to commit to facilitating and accommodating the important role of volunteers. Gender issues are critical and must be addressed for the volunteers, the communities and/or organizations they will operate in, and the communities they will be assisting. Gender sensitization of all staff at all levels is imperative.

The most challenging aspect of being a volunteer is the lack of appreciation and respect. Volunteers are often expected to just follow orders and move at any command. Their contribution is often downplayed. The tasks assigned are often the ones that no one else wants to perform, or are deemed unimportant. Volunteers should be seen as an essential partner and player.

For me, the greatest satisfaction is having the opportunity to contribute to solving or ameliorating a problem that concerns people, including those outside and far from your own environment and culture.

The spirit of volunteerism seems to have gone down in recent years but it is critical that it be kept alive for the sustainable development of Africa.

References

- International Labour Organization (2013). Resolution concerning statistics of work, employment and labour underutilization. Adopted by the Nineteenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians, 21 November 2013. Available at https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/normativeinstrument/wcms_230304.pdf.
- International Labour Organization (2019). *ILO Model question on volunteer work for Population and Housing Censuses (Version 1)*. Technical note. Available at https://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/publication/wcms_731571.pdf.
- International Labour Organization (2021a). Statistics on volunteer work. ILOSTAT. Available at <https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/volunteer-work/>.
- International Labour Organization (2021b). *Volunteer work measurement guide*. Geneva.
- United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019). *World Population Prospects 2019*. Available at <https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>.
- United Nations, General Assembly (2002). Recommendations on support for volunteering. 10 January. A/RES/56/38.
- _____ (2020). Quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system. 30 December. A/RES/75/233.
- _____ (2021). Volunteering for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Report of the Secretary-General. 14 July. A/76/137.
- United Nations Volunteers programme (2018). *2018 State of the World's Volunteerism Report: The thread that binds – Volunteerism and community resilience*. Bonn.

Endnotes

82 UNGA (2020).

83 UNV (2018).

84 UNGA (2002, p. 3).

85 UNV (2018).

86 ILO (2021b).

87 ILO (2019).

88 ILO (2021a).

89 ILO (2021a).