

## Chapter 3

# Understanding patterns and trends in volunteerism in the Global South: a multi-country study on volunteering before, during and beyond COVID-19

## Key highlights

- As countries and communities grappled with COVID-19, adults regardless of their age, gender and employment status contributed their time and talents to help others.
- Volunteering to develop new ideas or solutions to local problems increased in most countries while volunteering through civic participation declined.
- Informal volunteering was the dominant form of unpaid help provided, but a significant share volunteered formally.
- The future of volunteering beyond the pandemic is promising as people intend to continue volunteering despite the ongoing challenges.
- Volunteers intend to engage in diverse roles beyond informal volunteering and service provision, working with others to identify innovative solutions to local problems and engaging in civic affairs.

### 3.1. Introduction

Volunteerism is a bedrock and essential thread in the fabric of all societies. However, much of the research about volunteerism focuses on the Global North.<sup>90</sup> In an effort to close the evidence gap, UNV and Gallup undertook a study on volunteerism during the COVID-19 pandemic in eight countries in the Global South: Bolivia, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Senegal, Thailand, Turkey and Uzbekistan. This chapter presents volunteering patterns and trends in these eight countries and highlights the pandemic's impact on both volunteer–state relationships and volunteering. The study, which draws on a survey of over 8,000 people aged 15 years and over (see Appendix C and D for the survey methodology) in March and April 2021, offers insights into volunteering during an unprecedented time, and contributes significantly to the otherwise lacking data on volunteering in the Global South.

The study reveals key patterns and trends in the eight countries. In terms of the

types of volunteer participation, findings show that while civic participation—defined as attending a neighbourhood meeting or contacting a public official to provide an opinion—declined during the pandemic, volunteers' engagement in social innovation—defined as working with others to identify new ideas or solutions to local issues or problems—has increased. In some countries, there was a decline in the overall volunteering rate (which compared changes in volunteer engagement), while in others there was an increase, suggesting that while the pandemic may have led some people to stop volunteering, it may have inspired others to take it up.

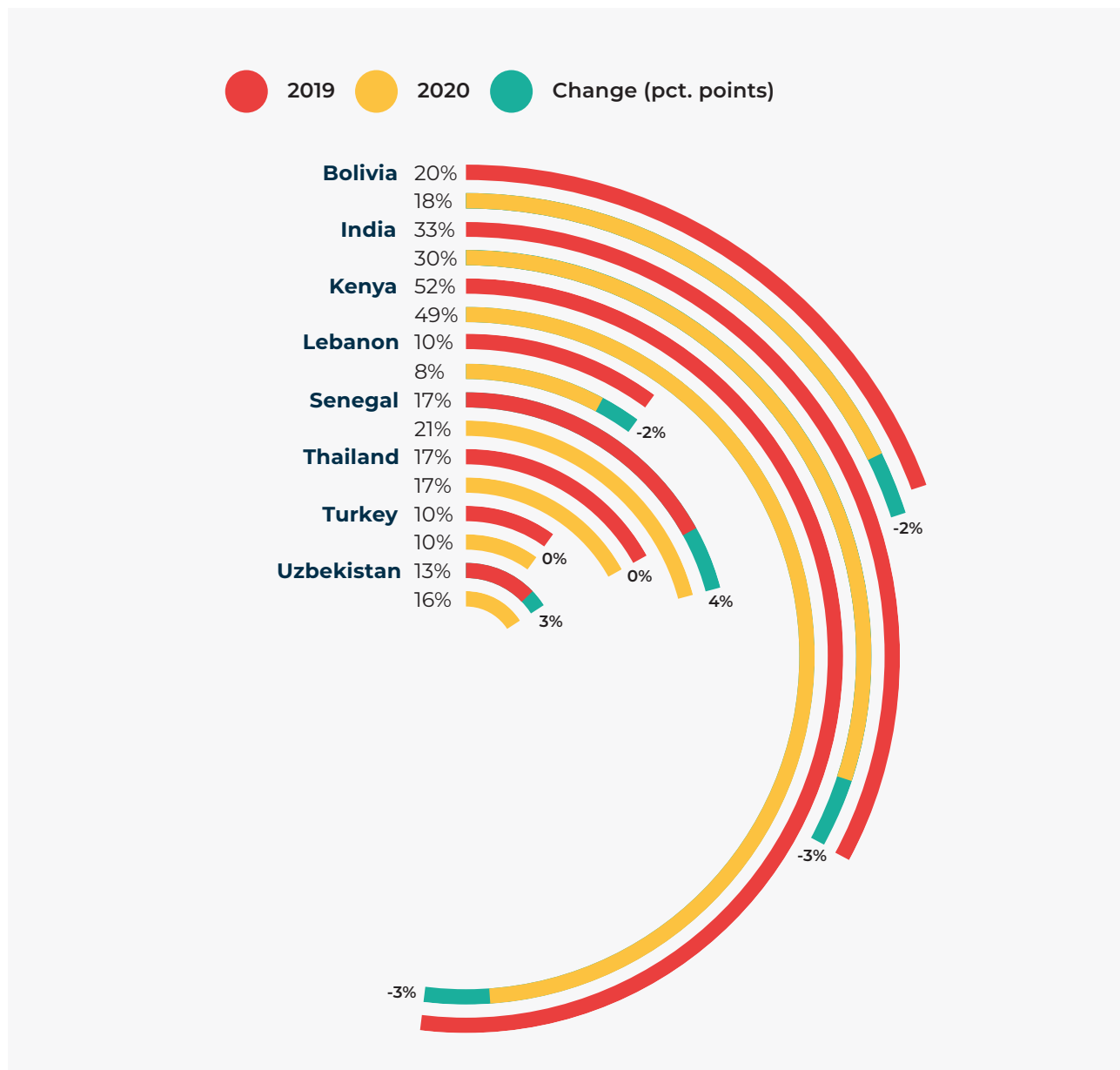
This chapter provides an overview of who volunteered and how within the context of the pandemic, and their plans to volunteer in future. In light of the survey's snapshot of experiences in eight countries, it also considers some policy implications on volunteering and how volunteering activity may be strengthened elsewhere as countries emerge from the pandemic and seek to build forward better.

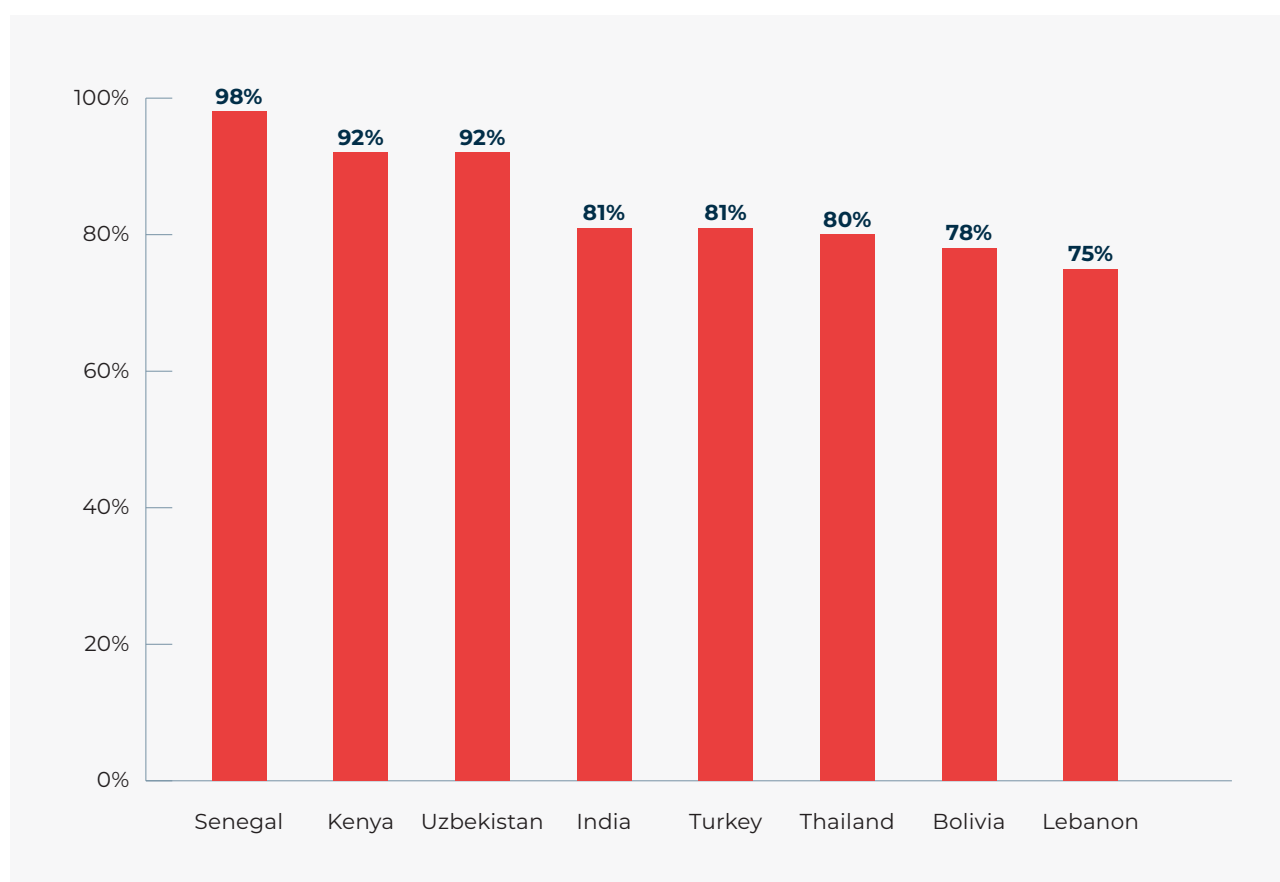
### 3.2. Volunteering patterns and trends in the Global South

The study explored volunteering patterns and trends in the eight countries. As Figure 3.1 shows, in 2019 and 2020, volunteer engagement in these eight countries remained remarkably stable despite the pandemic, with survey respondents indicating that they had volunteered

their time with an organization (formal volunteering) “in the past month”. This is in contrast with experiences in some Global North countries, for example in Australia, where volunteering was adversely affected<sup>91</sup> and characterized by lower volunteer participation, presumably due to public health-related restrictions. These restrictions would have affected formal volunteering, though in some cases this was offset by a rise in informal volunteering (volunteering outside an organization).<sup>92, 93</sup>

**Figure 3.1.** Volunteer rates in 2019 and 2020



**Figure 3.2.** Volunteer action rate by country, 2020

*Note:* These figures represent volunteering rates among the population and not time commitment to volunteering.

### 3.2.1. Volunteer participation during the pandemic

The majority of people in the eight countries reported having volunteered in some form during the pandemic. As Figure 3.2 shows, the volunteer action rate—defined as participation in at least one form of volunteer activity—was relatively high across countries during this period (March 2020 – March 2021), with at least three in four adults reporting having volunteered either formally or informally. It should be noted that there were distinct age cohort differences in volunteer action, with young adults engaging in each form of volunteering in two of the eight countries.

In terms of the forms of volunteering, they included the following unpaid activities:

- helping people outside your family or with organizations, such as those that help people, animals or the environment;
- making items to donate or distributing donations, such as food, clothing, equipment, or other goods;
- providing help to a government programme, campaign or scheme;
- providing help to an organization or group;
- engaging in civic participation by attending meetings in the neighbourhood or local area, or by contacting a public official to give opinions;
- volunteering time to develop new ideas or solutions to an issue or problem.

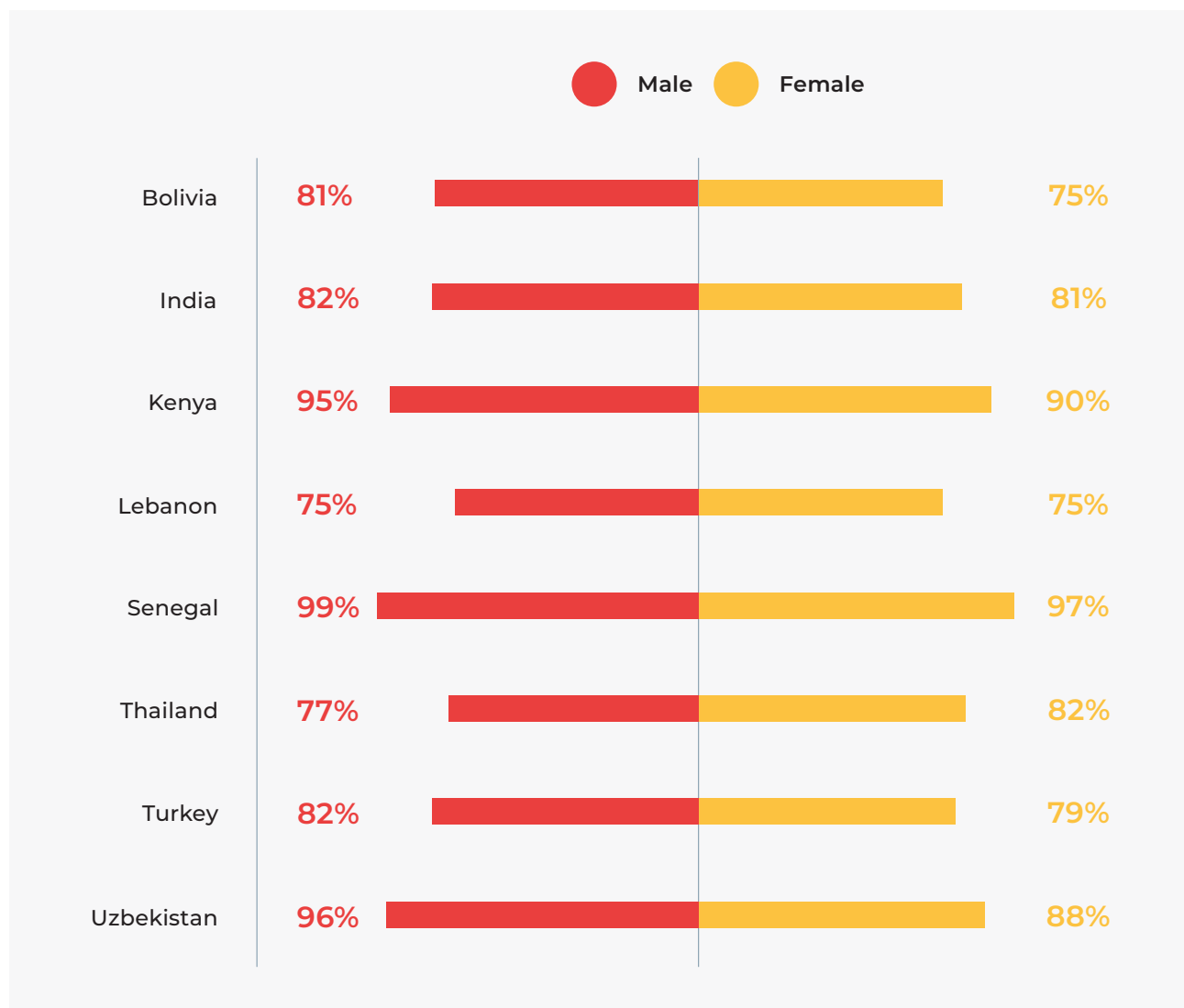
In over half of the countries, employed adults were slightly more likely than unemployed adults to have volunteered in the 12-month period, although in the remaining countries, the differences in volunteering rates between the employed and unemployed were relatively small or non-existent.

### 3.2.2. Volunteering patterns by gender

In the eight countries, there were distinct

gender differences in volunteer action during the pandemic. Apart from Thailand, where women were more likely to volunteer than men in 2020, and to some extent, Lebanon, where men and women volunteered equally, in most countries, men were slightly more likely to have volunteered during the pandemic than women (Figure 3.3). However, there were no significant disparities in terms of volunteering rates across rural and urban populations in most countries.

**Figure 3.3.** Volunteer action rate by country and gender, 2020

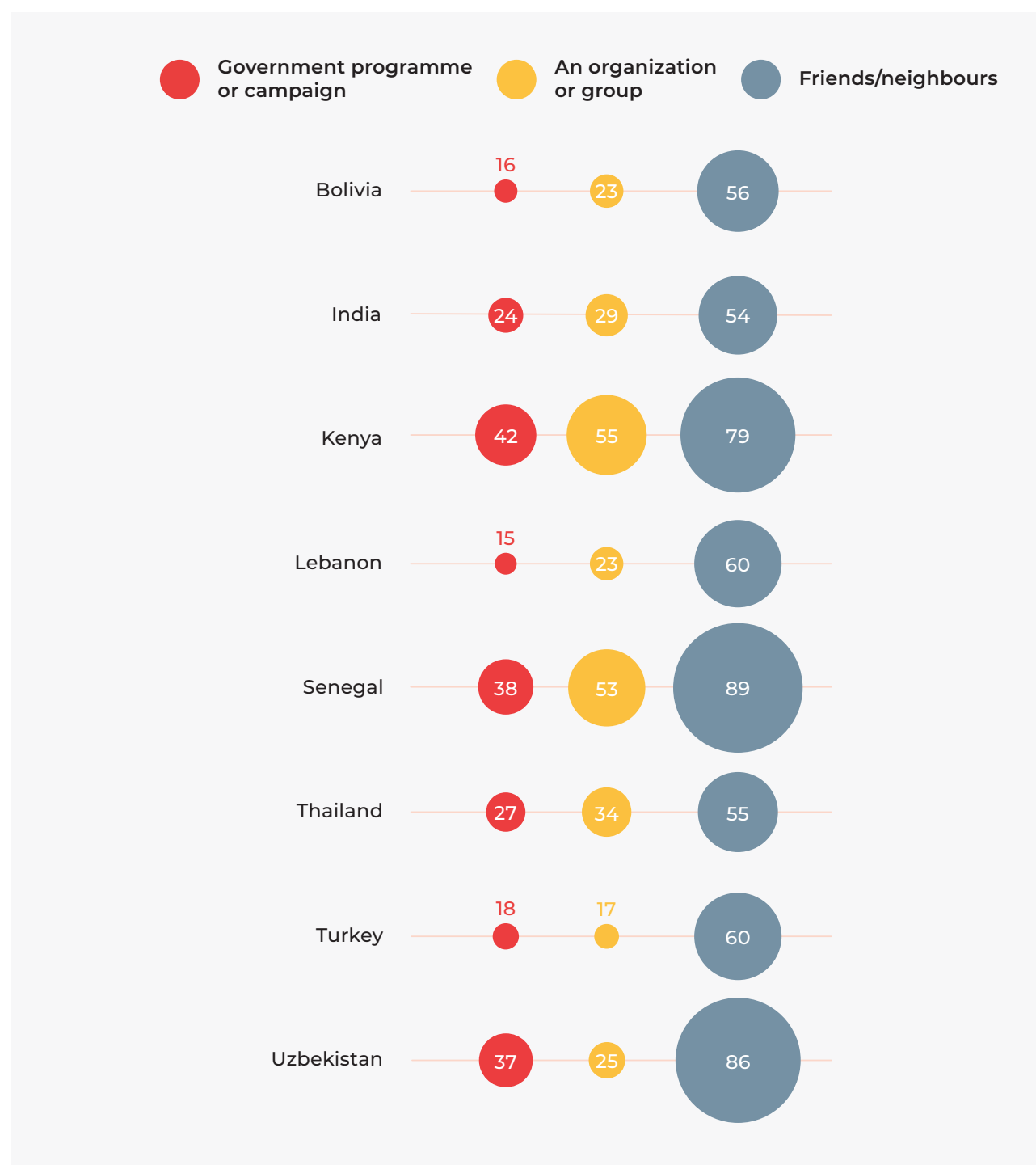


### 3.2.3. Forms of volunteering during the pandemic

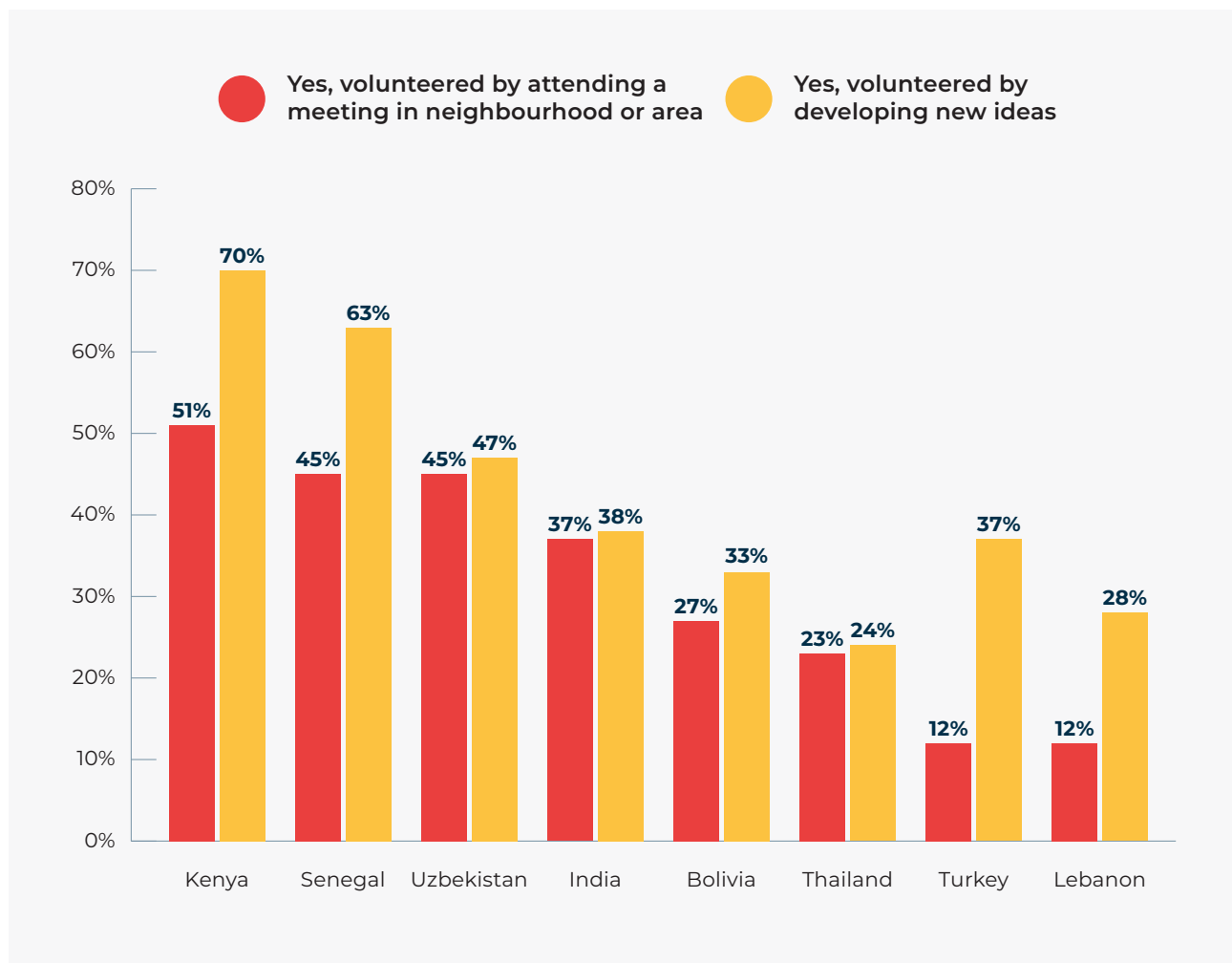
Volunteers in the eight countries were more likely to have volunteered informally, by helping friends or neighbours, than formally,

through an organization or institution (see Figure 3.4). That said, many people supported the delivery of health and social services unpaid during the pandemic through a government programme or an organization.

**Figure 3.4.** Volunteering activities in the eight countries, 2020





**Figure 3.5.** Volunteer civic participation and social innovation, 2020

In terms of the types of volunteer activity, there was great variation between volunteers who attended neighbourhood meetings or contacted public officials (civic participation) and those who engaged in the development of new ideas or solutions to an issue or problem (social innovation) (see Figure 3.5).

While civic participation was more common in rural areas and small towns, social innovation was more popular in urban areas in all countries, except in Bolivia where more rural volunteers were engaged in social innovation than their urban counterparts.

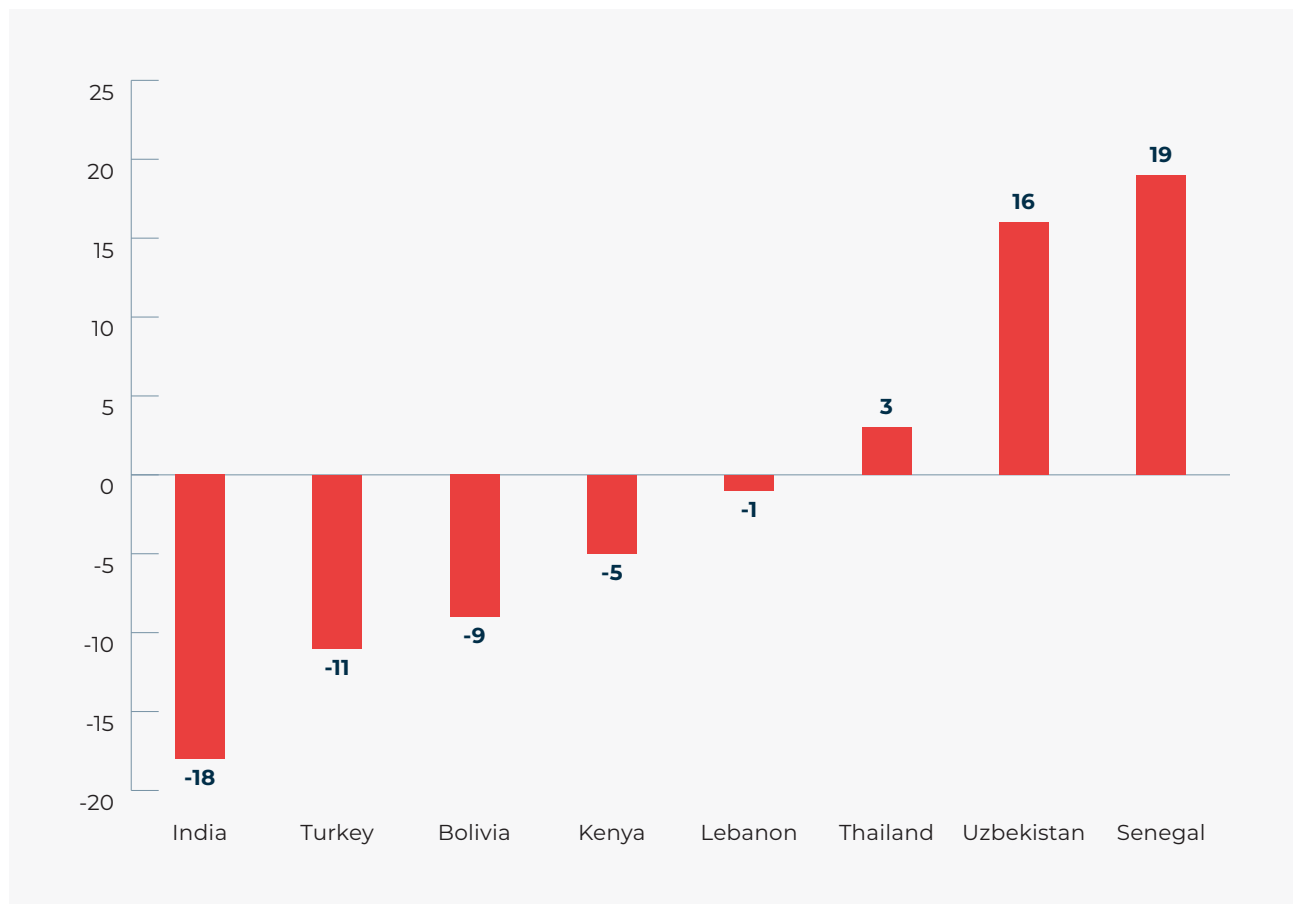
### 3.2.4. Volunteer behaviour in 2019 and 2020

Looking at how the pandemic may have affected volunteers' behaviour in the eight countries, the data reveal significant changes in volunteering in most countries between 2019 and 2020, with less than half of adults in each country reporting that their volunteering was "about the same" in both years (see Figure 3.6). Beyond this, there was no clear pattern in how volunteering changed across the countries. It is plausible that the wide variation across countries in the

degree of infection, the scale of lockdowns and the severity of public health restrictions in the lead up to, and during, the survey's implementation, may have had complex effects on volunteer participation.

A recent study from the United Kingdom found similar effects on volunteering participation, with relatively stable "net" participation during the pandemic, though it also identified many shifts in individual-level or gross participation behaviour.<sup>94</sup>

**Figure 3.6.** Changes in volunteer behaviour between 2019 and 2020



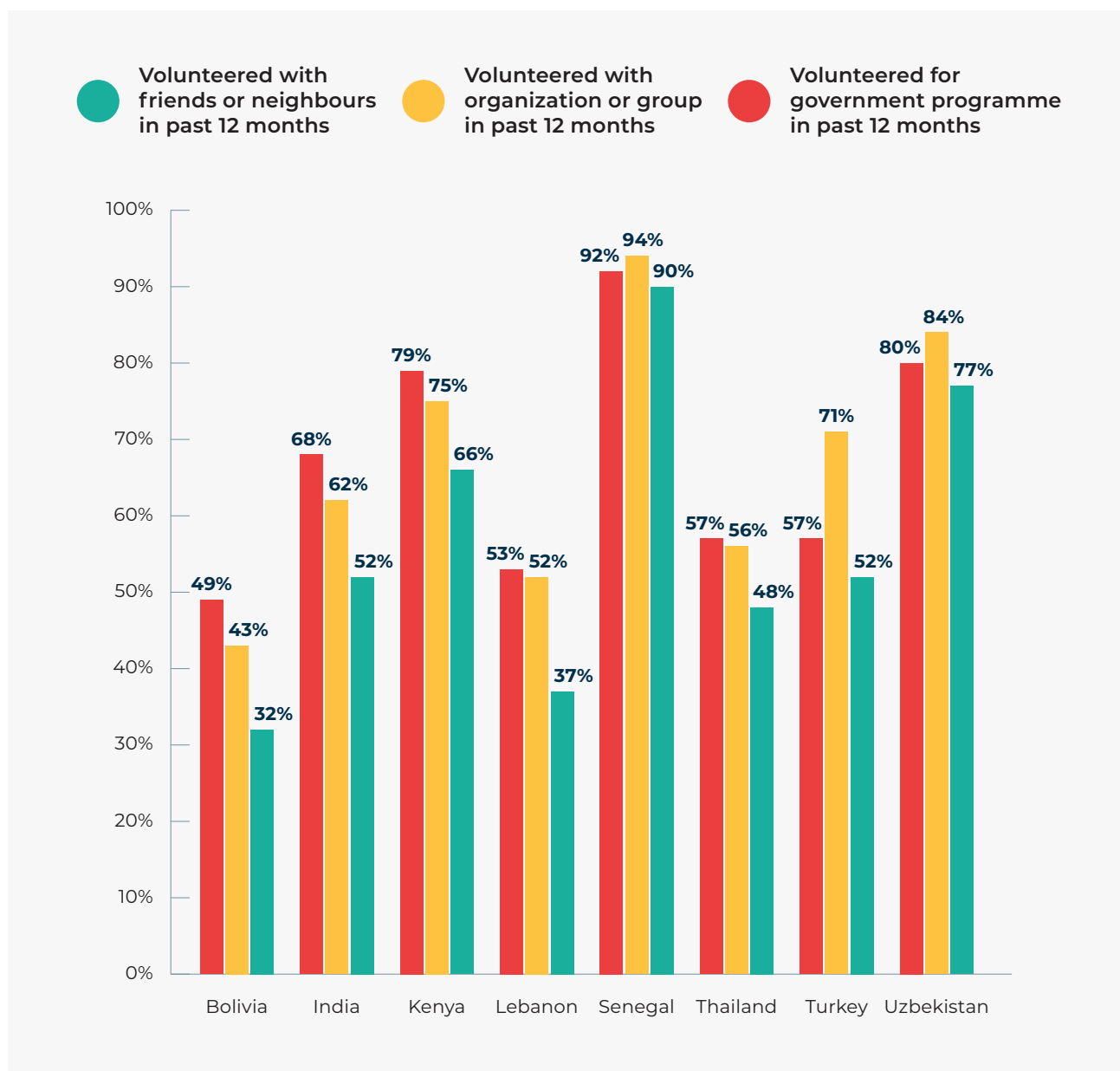


### 3.2.5. Building forward better: volunteering beyond the pandemic

Despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic, most people who engaged in volunteering during this time indicated that they planned to continue volunteering beyond the pandemic. Countries with higher volunteer action rates during the pandemic also had higher prospective volunteer rates for the next 12 months.

Across all countries, volunteers generally indicated that they intended to volunteer informally, including by spending time directly helping people they knew outside their family, and were less likely to plan formal volunteering as part of a group or organization, or engage in civic participation. In terms of future plans, however, people who volunteered through a government programme or with an organization were more likely to have plans to volunteer in the next 12 months than informal volunteers (see Figure 3.7).

**Figure 3.7.** Formal and informal volunteers' plans to volunteer in the next 12 months



In most countries in 2021, even while taking COVID-19-related shifts into account, substantially more volunteers than in 2020 or 2019 indicated that they were likely to engage in social innovation in the next 12 months.

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**From a gender perspective, future volunteering plans suggest that more men than women intend to volunteer in all activity types.**

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Findings also show distinct differences across age categories. While young adults (aged 15–29 years) expressed their intention to engage in various forms of volunteering, in half of the eight countries, older adults were more likely to report their intention to engage in civic participation.

### **3.3. Volunteers offer a helping hand and much more**

Despite demographic differences, informal volunteering is likely to dominate in the coming years. However, there is also clear interest in a more diverse and multifaceted approach to volunteering, including through online volunteering. Across these eight countries, only around one in 10 volunteers expressed their loyalty to one theme, cause or arrangement.

#### **3.3.1. Informal volunteering**

Informal volunteering in the eight countries was the most popular form of volunteering during the pandemic, consistent with volunteering in the Global South. While largely beyond the scope of government, efforts should be made nonetheless to nurture and support rather than direct informal volunteering.

#### **3.3.2. Volunteering through government programmes**

Despite participation in volunteering through formal government programmes or other entities during the COVID-19 pandemic being lower in the eight countries, strikingly, people who volunteered through such programmes, and in particular government initiatives, were more likely to have plans to volunteer in the next 12 months. To this end, governments should consider how best to harness and leverage volunteers' time and energy to address ongoing challenges in communities.



A volunteer helps migrants access COVID-19 vaccines in Lebanon. Source: UNV.

### 3.3.3. Volunteering as civic participation

In most countries, volunteering as civic participation was already lower than other forms of volunteering and further decreased during the pandemic (see Table 3.1). It is likely that civic participation declined due to pandemic-related restrictions, as local meetings may not have been as frequent in 2020, if held at all.

To address this decline, channels for providing feedback, participating in decision-making and engaging with authorities need to be strengthened while taking into account digital inequalities and hybrid modes of volunteering. In countries with low volunteer action rates, further research on the causes may be needed. These mechanisms should also address the predicted gender gaps in who plans to participate in volunteering in the future.

**Table 3.1.** Civic participation in 2020

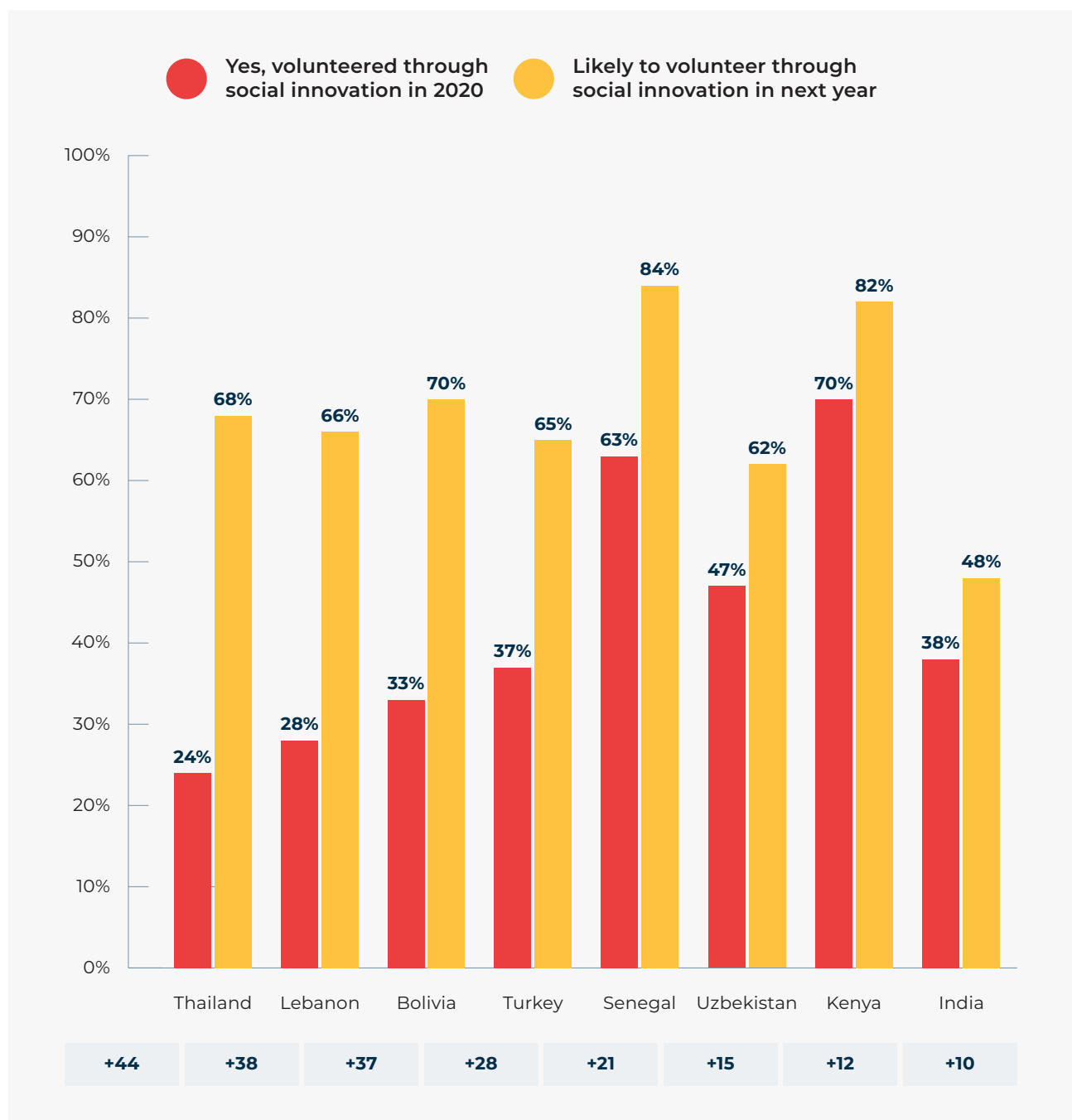
|                   | More | Less | Net difference |
|-------------------|------|------|----------------|
| <b>Turkey</b>     | 18%  | 47%  | -29            |
| <b>Uzbekistan</b> | 29%  | 46%  | -17            |
| <b>Bolivia</b>    | 21%  | 37%  | -16            |
| <b>India</b>      | 33%  | 46%  | -13            |
| <b>Kenya</b>      | 36%  | 43%  | -7             |
| <b>Senegal</b>    | 40%  | 44%  | -4             |
| <b>Lebanon</b>    | 20%  | 23%  | -3             |
| <b>Thailand</b>   | 25%  | 23%  | 2              |

### 3.3.4. Volunteering as social innovation

In most of the countries surveyed, even taking shifts during COVID-19 into account, substantially more people than in 2020 or 2019 stated that they were likely to volunteer through social innovation in the next year

(see Figure 3.8). Critically, this finding suggests that there may be an opportunity to engage volunteers in finding new solutions to ongoing challenges in communities and suggests promising potential for volunteerism to contribute to “building forward better”.

**Figure 3.8.** Volunteering for social innovation



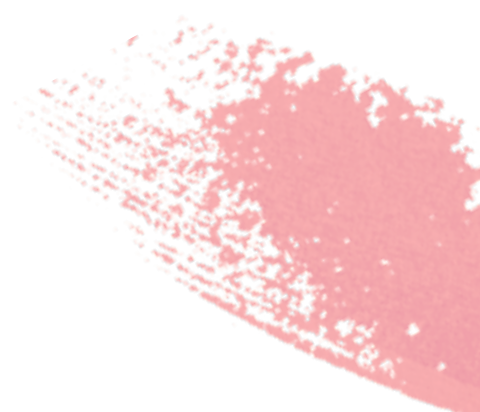
### 3.3.5. An emerging gender gap

While men's high participation in volunteering during the pandemic should be sustained, the effect of women's caregiving

and domestic responsibilities on their ability to volunteer, and the barriers to women's participation in volunteering more broadly, require further investigation.

**Table 3.2.** Future volunteering plans by gender

| Country           | Likely to give your opinion to local authorities or help them plan or provide local services |     | Likely to be part of a campaign or initiative to raise awareness of an issue, either online or in person |     | Likely to contribute new ideas or solutions to an issue or problem, either by yourself or with other people |     |
|-------------------|--|-----|--|-----|---|-----|
|                   | Women  | Men | Women  | Men | Women   | Men |
| <b>Bolivia</b>    | 48   | 54  | 60   | 59  | 65  | 75  |
| <b>India</b>      | 47   | 47  | 39   | 42  | 48  | 48  |
| <b>Kenya</b>      | 68   | 77  | 61   | 74  | 77  | 87  |
| <b>Lebanon</b>    | 35   | 42  | 56   | 58  | 65  | 68  |
| <b>Senegal</b>    | 83   | 82  | 66   | 66  | 85  | 83  |
| <b>Thailand</b>   | 45   | 56  | 54   | 56  | 64  | 72  |
| <b>Turkey</b>     | 41   | 48  | 40   | 49  | 59  | 71  |
| <b>Uzbekistan</b> | 42   | 51  | 39   | 40  | 52  | 70  |



### 3.4. Conclusion

This snapshot of volunteering during the pandemic, while limited to eight countries in the Global South, nevertheless provides some important insights that may inform volunteering in other contexts as they recover from the pandemic.

**Despite its impact, the pandemic has not dampened people's interest in volunteering. Prospects for volunteering are promising, with many citing robust plans to volunteer in the next 12 months, and in increasingly diverse ways.**

While informal volunteering seems to be the main way in which volunteers intend to engage going forward, prospects for formal volunteering through government programmes or other organizations are also encouraging. As such, stakeholders in government and other organizations ought to innovate ways to better harness volunteers' time and talents and their potential to take on ongoing challenges in communities.

In terms of trends, the decline in volunteer engagement in civic participation during the pandemic points to the need to explore the opportunities available. Efforts should be made to boost this type of volunteer engagement in the aftermath of the pandemic and beyond, including through online platforms.

Since volunteers' future intentions include participating through diverse forms such as social innovation and civic engagement, governments and other stakeholders should build on this growing interest in volunteering beyond service delivery, and create channels and opportunities that will better leverage volunteers' engagement in these areas.

Finally, with women intending to volunteer less in future, there is a need to better understand and address emerging gender-related barriers. This is especially vital since volunteering remains an important pathway for amplifying women's voices, representation and ownership of development processes.

Taken together, these findings serve as a reminder to policymakers that the economic and social value of volunteering transcends the labour provided and services delivered. More than this, volunteering could be an important channel for people to help shape countries' pathways out of the pandemic and beyond.

A volunteer discusses gender-based violence with students in Malawi. Source: UNV.





## Volunteer voice: Mohammed Ben Othman from Tunisia on volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic

**Volunteers across the world have stepped up during the pandemic. Mohammed Ben Othman, a volunteer Boy Scout, shares below his experience of volunteering in quarantine centres in Tunisia during the pandemic, and what he believes should be the future of volunteering post pandemic.**

*My name is Mohammed Ben Othman. I'm a 31-year-old Tunisian and I joined the Boy Scouts and became a volunteer at the age of five. I never stopped and have been actively engaged in volunteering, including most recently during the pandemic.*

*I supported the state's efforts to prevent the spread of the coronavirus by volunteering at the quarantine centre in Bordj Cedria from the outset of the pandemic, often working from dawn 'til midnight. As part of efforts to prevent the spread of the virus, I was involved in disinfecting the quarantine centre, distributing food to people in quarantine, collecting hazardous materials for proper disposal by health authorities, and coordinating the placement of people in quarantine.*

*Volunteering during the pandemic was particularly challenging. Volunteers face difficulties in dealing with authorities and the private sector. Despite the growing reliance on the efforts of volunteers by the state, they are only perceived as service providers, not decision makers. Volunteering has many positive and negative aspects, and one of the challenges we sometimes face is the lack of clear tasks and objectives for volunteers.*

*While the role of volunteers has been to ensure a gradual return to normal life by encouraging, guiding and educating citizens to follow proper health protocols, I feel that volunteers need to be better integrated into state institutions in order to be more efficient and active.*



## **Special contribution: Ms. Vani Catanasiga, Executive Director of Fiji Council of Social Services on the role of volunteers in supporting a robust post-COVID recovery**

The Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS) is a community-based membership organization that delivers social services to rural and marginalized communities in Fiji. About 80 percent of FCOSS members are volunteer-based groups who support the delivery of basic social services, promote the voice and agency of local communities, and support people who engage in decision-making spaces.

In 2021, despite initially having no COVID-19 response funds, FCOSS provided support to various communities through its volunteers at the district level. In addition to supporting communities in lockdown with food, providing surge support to government teams for contact tracing, and supervising testing and isolation facilities, volunteers also helped in data management during vaccination campaigns and provided home-based care. FCOSS volunteers' experience in coordinating service delivery at the community and district level during crises made them better able to respond to the immediate and emerging needs of the elderly, people with disabilities and female-headed households with multiple dependents.

Through their community observation reports, which included updates from informal settlements, FCOSS was able to show that some vulnerable populations did not receive the government's food distribution during lockdowns and its district hub volunteers alerted authorities to those often forgotten in society. As a result of volunteers' efforts, state authorities provided targeted support, including logistical support and capacity-building, and "safety net" care and protection.

Volunteers have untapped potential for inspiring post-COVID recovery in communities. As Fiji rebuilds after the pandemic, there is growing interest in forging partnerships to address ongoing needs. Increasingly, civil society and intergovernmental bodies are seeking to partner with our volunteer networks and leverage their expertise. Using our experience working with communities, we are exploring how to better engage volunteers to help their communities remain resilient in times of hardship.

With their knowledge and understanding of their communities and commitment to positive change, volunteers may well have what the post-COVID world requires to heal and recover.

## References

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Survey 2020/21. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202021>. Accessed on 25 October 2021.

## Endnotes

**90** UNV (2020).

**91** Volunteering Australia (2021).

**92** Volunteer Now (2021).

**93** United Kingdom, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (2021).

**94** United Kingdom, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (2020).