forum

International Association for Volunteer Effort

A New Generation of Volunteers as Changemakers

A Challenge Paper for the International Association for Volunteer Effort and the International Forum for Volunteering in Development

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FOREWORD

This paper was jointly commissioned by the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) and the International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum). It forms part of IAVE's series of challenge papers on youth volunteering, and also as the framing paper for Forum's IVCO 2023 conference: A New Generation of Volunteers as Changemakers. Find links to the other challenge papers and IVCO 2023 resources at the end of the paper.

Introduction

As the world faces the existential threat of the climate emergency and persistence of global injustice and inequality, young people are increasingly seen as key players in meeting these challenges. This is not only because they face the consequences of past generations' actions, but also because they bring energies, dynamism and innovations. Volunteering by young people sits alongside diverse forms of activism, advocacy and youth organising as a critical mechanism for achieving change. But does the celebration of youth volunteering in policy-making, organisational strategies and social media reflect an approach that places young people as changemakers? Or does it offer cover for a reluctance to change, decolonise and democratise? This paper explores these questions and presents a set of critical challenge issues for thinking about enabling youth volunteers to be the changemakers the world so badly needs. The first section of the paper sets the context and background for this challenge. It explores existing research and other literatures that document youth volunteering for sustainable development, the diversity of forms of engagement, some of the existing institutional frameworks that focus on youth involvement in volunteer spaces and gaps in knowledge. The second part analyses primary data collected through short interviews with key stakeholders involved with youth volunteers as changemakers, including youth-focused organisations and international non-governmental organisations, as well as researchers. It brings this evidence into dialogue with existing literatures and debates to explore three core questions:

a. How are young people volunteering, and how do they want to volunteer?
b. How can organisations develop programs that are truly youth-led?
c. How can we create a more conducive enabling environment for youth volunteering?

Using examples of organisational practice, stakeholder commentary and wider data and evidence, the challenge paper highlights the importance of 1) the context for exploring youth volunteering; 2) the need to avoid homogenising youth volunteers and youth volunteering; 3) the challenges of shifting the power around organisations' approaches to youth volunteering; and 4) the importance of youth voices in creating an enabling environment and shaping the youth volunteering landscape. The paper concludes with a set of challenge questions to promote dialogue and action that supports young volunteers as key actors in development spaces, positioning them as central figures in creating meaningful change through their volunteer efforts.

PART 1:

Context and background

In a world of growing global challenges triggered by financial crises, emergencies, conflicts and climate change, we also see the largest generation of youth in history, with 1.8 billion people aged 10 to 24 years old, nearly 90 per cent of whom live in developing countries (United Nations, 2023). Globally, there is a growing recognition of the roles that youth populations play in shaping development, both nationally and locally, as a 'generation of doers' (UN ECOSOC Youth Forum, 2023). In this context, diverse development actors—and young people themselves—have celebrated and promoted the value of the latter's volunteer engagement in addressing critical development challenges, while at the same time building young participants' skills, capacities and networks. COVID-19 brought this to the fore, with young people playing critical roles as volunteers in supporting communities through the pandemic. Similarly, the climate emergency has highlighted youth agency and capacities for shaping change. However, these headlines, and organisational celebrations of youth volunteering, can hide a more complex picture.

The very definition of youth varies across settings and needs to be understood in context-specific ways. The United Nations' definition comprises the ages of 15 to 24, both inclusive (United Nations, 2013). This also relates to the language of volunteering, a phrase that young people might not consistently identify with or regard as suitable language to describe their work, or that might not mean the same thing in different settings (Lukka and Ellis Paine, 2007). In some places, forms of youth activism and community organising might not be called volunteering but are referred to as such elsewhere. Established definitions of volunteering, which often emerge from experiences in the Global North, are unable to capture this diversity, and can risk excluding forms of volunteering that do not fit the norm but that young people value. Intergenerational dialogues involving members of the millennial (born 1981–1996) and Generation Z (born 1997–2012) generations have shown their sense of urgency in transforming current development models to better tackle inequalities, climate injustice, energy injustice and power imbalances (Weber et al., 2022). Therefore, discussion of youth volunteering in particular contexts needs to be situated not only in relation to global volunteering discourses, but also in relation to aid and development structures and approaches, histories of volunteering, patterns of unemployment, the nature of community institutions and disparities in local socioeconomic conditions (Baillie Smith, Mills et al., 2022).

There are multiple models for understanding youth engagement in volunteering for development (Georgeou and Haas, 2019). Traditionally, volunteering has often been perceived as a component of the broader 'culture of experience' among young individuals (Holdsworth, 2017), and is placed at the core of citizenship initiatives and youth exchange programs, both

national and international, as a catalyst for social change (Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011; Mati, 2016; Mills and Waite, 2017; Tiessen et al., 2021). Experiences of youth-led accountability in shaping the direction of government agendas have been found to improve 'healthy social accountability relationships' across sectors (ActionAid, 2022). Current evidence explores diverse forms of youth participation in environmental governance (Beckwith et al., 2022), while the COVID-19 pandemic underlined the importance of youth networks in mobilising local action in response to emergencies (Chadwick, 2020). More recently, the use of new technologies has ushered a new era of cooperation and organising. Such technologies have been critical to moves toward e-volunteering. More radical uses can be seen in youth-led social media campaigns, activism and blogging in different contexts, such as the Occupy Movement in Europe and the United States, the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement or the Hijab campaigns in Iran. This is increasingly recognised by development actors; for example, the Reboot the Earth initiative was established to support young information and communication technologists like coders, engineers and programmers to be active in solving regional climate action challenges through a global hackathon series.

Overall, and for a long time, the practice of volunteering by young people has also been heralded as a major way of building skills (Oliveira et al., 2020) through experiential learning in preparation for the workplace. Prevailing rhetoric on volunteering has often portrayed young people as the 'leaders of tomorrow' (Lund and Thomas, 2012) whose skills need honing through volunteering in preparation for the active work life ahead. However, this obscures the fact that, for some, volunteering does not necessarily lead to skills acquisition, and specific skills may be required to volunteer in the first place (Tukundane and Kanyandago, 2021). Besides, the very understandings of 'work' and 'volunteering' can be blurred amongst youth due to diverse patterns of financial compensation through volunteering and its implications on the wider sector (Prince and Brown, 2016; Baillie Smith, Fadel et al., 2022). On the one hand, financial compensation through volunteering can become a component of the livelihoods of young individuals grappling with unemployment; on the other hand, volunteer opportunities might be tailored to respond to workforce requirements of the global aid and development industry, rather than reflecting young people's own interests and aspirations.

As Honkatukia and Rattila point out, youth participation in society not only contributes to wider development agendas, but also to young people's own welfare, itself a critical part of achieving development (Honkatukia and Rattila, 2023). It has, however, only been five years since the United Nations launched its first-ever system-wide youth strategy, dubbed Youth2030, as a common framework to work together on pro-youth policies and actions across its pillars of peace and security, human rights and sustainable development (UN Youth 2030, n.d.). Hence, there is also a risk that youth volunteering is perceived as a new panacea (Davies, 2019). Critical evidence to inform approaches to youth volunteering and its impacts on change is uneven, with some parts of the world poorly represented. There is a growing body of evidence within and beyond volunteering that shows, despite the popular rhetoric and celebration of youth agency

for change, young people are often excluded from critical decision-making processes or invited to participate informally. This presents a risk of their volunteering focusing less on them as changemakers, and more about them as delivering the changes others see as important. It has been suggested there is a need for development actors as well as policy implementers to 'step back so that young people can step forward' (Wijeyesekera, 2011) in reclaiming the volunteering agenda.

PART 2:

Engaging young people meaningfully as changemakers

How are young people volunteering, and how do they want to volunteer?

While organisations are increasingly engaging young people as volunteers in new ways, young people themselves are creating their own increasingly innovative and diverse approaches to volunteering. This is partially driven by new opportunities, including those provided by technology. But it also reflects a response to the limitations of currently available opportunities, and frustration at existing actors' failures to address the challenges their communities are facing.

This diversity—both within and between countries—cannot possibly be captured in a short challenge paper. This is exacerbated by the fact volunteering can mean different things in different places, as mentioned earlier. It is therefore important to recognise significant differences between the ways in which young people volunteer in structured and 'formal' ways with organisations, and the less formal and 'everyday' (Baillie Smith, Mills et al., 2022) ways they may contribute to the development and wellbeing of their and others' communities. Across both forms, youth volunteering takes myriad arrangements in terms of development focus; type and length of activity; who can participate; and whether it takes place across distance. For instance, while Lungelo Youth Development, an organisation based in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa,

adopts volunteering to run a youth centre that supports youth skills development, Malaysia's Yayasan Sukarelawan Siswa (YSS)/Student Volunteers Foundation runs a youth volunteering program to equip young people with skills and experiential learning through placements abroad. Another example is the work of YES Empowerment, a volunteer-involving organisation in Uganda, which runs programs based on online mentorship to train young people from different parts of the country. As one interviewee noted:

'In today's challenging world of mass unemployment amidst global economic crises, young people find themselves at the centre stage of contributing efforts to address some of the development challenges. Young people are pioneers of innovation and creativity. They are primary responders in mobilisation of efforts for community change' (international non-governmental organisation [NGO] staff based in Asia).

But while there is recognition of the important role of youth volunteers in making change, the evidence gathered in this research, and reflected in wider work, demonstrates certain forms of volunteering are not necessarily meeting the needs and interests of young people, as explained by the interviewee quoted below. It is worth noting that extensive consultation of youth volunteers themselves was beyond the scope of this work:

'Sometimes young people find certain volunteering activities not exciting, not challenging and therefore not rewarding enough. This happens when they are subjected to routine activities with unclear expectation or direction. As such, there should be a clear means of gauging the level of contribution that a volunteer brings onboard' (international NGO staff based in Asia).

The international NGO official identifies a tension between youths' desire for challenge and excitement, reflecting the importance of volunteering as 'experience'—and the needs of organisations for routine activities to be completed. This creates a risk that volunteers are sometimes assigned tasks that are important from an organisational perspective but provide limited opportunity for a young person's expectations to be met. It expands beyond how volunteer placements are managed to a broader trend of volunteering used as cheap service delivery:

'In many organisations that I know, there is a tendency to enlist the services of young people as a buffer to address manpower needs. Usually, the recruitment of young people as volunteers is an HR function as part of human resource planning. Therefore, you find young people volunteering in places such as customer care, fleet handling, registration centres or sitting in for staff on leave. The tendency here therefore is to view young people as an expendable labour force whose usefulness is short-term only so nobody cares much about what kind of skills they are getting or how the volunteer activities match their career plan' (international NGO staff based in Latin America and the Caribbean).

This data reveals a potential disconnect between volunteering to meet organisational needs, and volunteering that enables young people to gain what they want from a volunteering experience. Self-organised and youth-led volunteering reflects some of these frustrations. But it is also important to acknowledge the kinds of volunteering young people seek is context-dependent. For example, the kinds of volunteering sought by young people in contexts where they struggle to access education and training may inform a desire for programs that deliver skills development and pathways to work (Baillie Smith, Jenkins et al., 2022). In settings where young people see international mobility as key to their pathways to university and work, the travel may shape what they seek from their volunteering. Moreover, where their voices are routinely ignored, the desired volunteering may focus on creating spaces for youth representation. This highlights the importance of not homogenising young people and youth volunteers, and understanding the kinds of change they seek are very context-specific. Their preferred types of volunteering are not static and one-dimensional:

> 'Young people want to volunteer in their communities but at the same time, they want to try out challenging and exciting things. They do not want anybody to think for them but rather, to be in control themselves. They love autonomy, but no one is willing to give it to them and that is why I feel for our youth of today. They are so full of hope and passion. They dream about a better future but are also among the most frustrated when these dreams don't come true. Everywhere you hear of youth programs, youth advocacy, youth-centred budgeting, youth empowerment and all the buzzwords. But in all [of] these, we rarely see young people taking charge. In fact, I believe the young people's agenda has become a cash cow for attracting easy funding from donors' (government official based in Latin America and the Caribbean).

As this interviewee noted, youth volunteering does not exist in a vacuum and risks being 'used' by established organisations and actors, rather than playing a key role in shaping change. Critical is the degree to which young people are delivering others' agendas or their own, and whether they are 'leading' or simply being engaged, as the next section explores.

How can organisations develop programs that are truly youth-led?

> 'The notion that youth can lead organisations is something that is still alien to many people because, for a long time, the youth have been taken to be immature, reckless and not capable of strategic leadership. But the rise of huge successful tech companies started by and run by young people has challenged this kind of thinking. Because of this, organisations should first of all recognise the existing competence amongst the youth and have deliberate plans to tap on their fresh ideas and go ahead and place them in charge of implementing them. Only then shall we be able to see more case studies of successfully run youth-led initiatives' (academic based in Europe).

While there is growing interest in engaging young people as volunteers, it is crucial to recognise its distinction from youth-led programs. It could be argued there exists an inbuilt assumption the aforementioned organisations are not—or cannot be—youth-led, but can provide programs that are. Given the importance of horizontal organising, agile use of technology, and emphasis on voice and participation in youth action for development, it could also be suggested the involvement of more conventional development organisations—and their traditional processes of audit and strategic planning—are antithetical to some of the most valuable features of youth leadership. Therefore, there is a growing need to explore volunteer engagement processes that can better support young people to lead change locally, nationally and globally through their volunteering, which goes beyond a youth presence 'in the room.' Evidence gathered for this paper shows the growing participation of young people in development spaces and events around volunteering does not necessarily reflect a commitment to youth leadership. As one interview respondent commented:

> 'Several times you see big conferences organised where young people are represented and there is a good feeling about their presence without going into the details of how involved they were in the planning, agenda-setting or even directing the affairs being discussed. We have to be honest as grown-ups and acknowledge this is not a fair game' (academic based in Europe).

There are echoes in the ways in which Global South civil society activists were increasingly engaged in global civic spaces in the 1990s and 2000s, but this was episodic and superficial, providing a means for established organisations to appear more legitimate (Baillie Smith and Jenkins, 2012). When fostering youth-led approaches, it is important not to do so in ways that celebrate young people as a means to be seen as relevant—but actually sideline young people and their agency in the process. This highlights the importance of how programs are designed over what the content is. While ensuring young people lead the design and conceptualisation of a program is likely to lead to greater engagement and success, organisations are often not readily set up to facilitate this. As a senior official of an international NGO noted:

> 'We still have a problem with institutional governance where boards and senior management of most organisations still consist of much older people charged with the duty of framing policies and major decisions for running the organisations. Amidst these, there should be a cessation in reference to young people as "leaders of tomorrow" yet they continue to play important leadership roles today' (international NGO official based in Europe).

While the growth of youth-led organisations may be changing the volunteering and youth activism landscape, many organisations continue to approach young people in a paternalistic manner. This partially reflects organisations' long-standing processes of professionalisation, often due to donor demands, but can also reflect a defensiveness about existing positions. This mix can inform degrees of reticence to change and a focus on inducting young people into existing thinking, rather than enabling young people to transform through new thinking:

'...Of course we realise the potential of young people to contribute to organisational growth. Their participation as volunteers is mostly supportive of the day-to-day operational requirements to keep things running smoothly. But the main thing driving organisational direction is strategy, something that young people may not be good at due to their lack of experience. I would therefore suggest that if we need a truly youth-led program, then we must first induct young people in strategic thinking. Therefore, developing youth-led programs should not mean throwing organisational principles away but rather, strengthening them' (international NGO staff based in Africa).

The evidence collected for this report demonstrates existing processes and systems can constrain innovation and create pressures to engage youth rather than foster and enable youth leadership. Developing youth-led programs often requires organisations to look beyond particular programs to the broader ways in which they are organised. While it may be tempting to provide opportunities for young people to participate more actively within existing structures, this can limit their potential to effect change in ways that align with their needs, skills and hopes for the future. As one respondent noted, there is a need to move beyond business as usual: '...this calls for adoption of new ways of doing usual things; for instance, the idea of a youth-led grant making process is taking shape today...' (academic based in Europe).

Critical to developing youth-led programs is ensuring youth are in the driver's seat through program design and delivery and are supported to work equitably with other stakeholders. This can be challenging, which speaks to fundamental tensions around the limits of youth participation and areas of improvement raised by youth themselves (UN ECOSOC Youth Forum, 2023). For NGOs to design volunteer-led programs means relinquishing some power and developing new (and more inclusive) mechanisms that provide young people the chance to genuinely shape how these programs are conceived, designed and delivered.

How can we create a more conducive enabling environment for youth volunteering?

Our evidence shows that creating a more conducive environment means responding to the specifics of contexts, acknowledging and working to address barriers to participation, and in many cases, changing the very terms of the participation itself. As the discussion above has shown, what volunteering means can vary between places, and different young people engage with volunteering for different reasons. An increasing number of national governments have developed, or improved, their volunteering policies in recent years, and sometimes these frameworks also overlap with youth-focused strategies (UNV, n.d.). Although the overall policy environment in each country or region can influence youth volunteering practices and priorities, this challenge paper focuses on enabling environments facilitated by volunteer-

involving organisations. It is also important not to assume that, because youth volunteering is not immediately visible in national or organisational policy frameworks, it is not taking place, since this could lead to actions that inadvertently undermine the volunteering that is already happening.

While it is important to address the specificity of contexts when identifying ways to build a more conducive environment to volunteering, evidence collected for this report reveals a set of overarching principles and challenges that eclipse places and forms of volunteering. A key starting point is not to see youth volunteering as a threat to other forms of work performed by different stakeholders in humanitarian and development spaces, as indicated by one of the interviewees:

'I think one of the ways is to stop seeing volunteers as threats to job security. Older people feel threatened by youth, feeling that they have worked so hard for those privileges they enjoy currently. Therefore, to create a more conducive enabling environment for volunteers, we need to first paint a more positive picture of the useful roles that volunteers play in complementing the work of full-time staff in an organisation' (government official based in Europe).

The ways in which volunteering is used as a form of cheap service delivery need to be addressed—for instance, in situations where volunteers might be engaged on a full-time basis within organisations yet receive only small stipends not commensurate to their efforts and time. Volunteering opportunities must be promoted in ways that are accurate and transparent to all involved, particularly amongst vulnerable groups (RYVU, 2022). Without this, volunteering can become a contested space wherein youth volunteers provide services but have limited influence on wider development outcomes, which leads to weakened relationships and impacts at the community level.

In this context, there is an intergenerational dimension to shaping a conducive environment for youth volunteering. Harnessing the strengths and experiences of different age groups involved in volunteering can create a more inclusive, sustainable environment for youth, whilst promoting opportunities for mentorship, knowledge transfer and mutual learning. Celebrating youth volunteering must not take place at the expense of recognising the energy and dynamism of other volunteers. At the same time, if young people are not seen as holding knowledge and ideas, but simply capacity and energy, this will undermine other efforts to provide a conducive environment for enabling youth participation and leadership: 'Youth volunteers need equal opportunities as other employees. There is need to stop exploiting them just for their labour contributions. Their ideas should also be taken in decision-making' (local NGO staff based in Africa).

Addressing exploitation requires the presence of frameworks or standards that provide mechanisms of accountability. They can take the form of national-level policies, but unless there

is an accessible system of addressing lack of compliance with such policies or frameworks, their impacts will be limited—particularly in resource-poor contexts where capacities are stretched.

Perhaps more critical to creating a conducive environment for youth volunteering is creating that environment with youth volunteers rather than for them.

'...I am sure many organisations still do not think a young person like me can really work as one of the executives. I think the first step is for organisations to initiate dialogue with young people and seek their opinion on priority needs. These dialogues could yield a lot of fruitful ideas based on perspectives of young people and whatever activities that may be crafted out of that could be truly youth-friendly and youth-led. Unfortunately, what we see in reality is that volunteer programs are developed somewhere by some unknown people and young people are simply incorporated into them. This must change' (youth volunteer based in Asia)

Young people are best placed to understand how youth volunteering can be enabled. They will not only identify opportunities for innovation, but also provide insight into barriers to participation in volunteering. Developing genuine mechanisms for youth participation in decision-making around the volunteering environment, which ensures diverse youth experiences are considered, will ensure the development of relevant, inclusive approaches. Volunteering organisations cannot build a conducive environment on their own if volunteering is also shaped by persistent inequality, changing development needs and individual circumstances. Working with young people to understand those constraints can help identify opportunities to work with other stakeholders to address them.

PART 3:

Conclusion and challenge questions

This challenge paper highlights both the rich potential of youth volunteers as changemakers, and the constraints on realising this potential. It shows some of the change needs to come in the ways volunteer organisations work. It also highlights how some of the limitations young people face in becoming volunteers and shaping change go beyond the volunteering sector, reflecting the inequalities they experience and wider challenges they and their communities face. The data collected and wider literature reviewed point to a set of critical challenge

questions to consider for volunteer engaging organisations, as well as wider stakeholders whose work shapes, or is shaped by, volunteering. In particular:

▶ **How can volunteer-involving organizations better integrate youth volunteers and activists in decision-making processes, particularly on issues that they care about?**

▶ **How can organisations address the power dynamics and ensure young people's voices play a key role in shaping volunteering environments, platforms and standards?**

▶ **How can organisations work to provide more inclusive approaches to volunteering for young people in different contexts?**

▶ **What mechanisms are needed to provide accountability to young people for the volunteering work they do?**

▶ **What kinds of training and learning are needed to better equip organisations to recognise, respect and empower young people as changemakers?**

▶ **How can we share best practice from organisations that are successfully enabling youth-led volunteering?**

Overall, this paper demonstrates that youth activism is a powerful force for positive change, with young people taking a leading role in shaping the future of their communities and the world. By combining activism with volunteering, young people are able to amplify their impact and make an even greater difference – empowering themselves and their peers to take ownership of their communities. Young volunteers and activists are changemakers of today (and not tomorrow), they are sources of hope, and they take matters into their own hands – inspiring others by their passion and determination and their commitment to social justice and equity.

Read the *other challenge papers in IAVE's series on youth volunteering*.
Find *Forum's blog posts on the theme A New Generation of Volunteers as Changemakers*.

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Matt is an interdisciplinary global development academic, with particular interest in the relationships between civil society, citizenship and development. His current work focuses on volunteering in humanitarian and development settings, environmental citizenship and young people as development actors. He has led diverse international collaborative research projects in this area, and works in partnership with a range of national and global volunteer-involving, humanitarian and development organisations. At Northumbria University, Matt is the Dean of Research Culture and co-director of the Centre for Global Development, which promotes research expertise, knowledge exchange and learning on volunteering, humanitarian crises and development.

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