

ENG

IVCO 2024 THINK PIECE

**THE RIGHT TO SOLIDARITY
AS A PRACTICE THAT
STRENGTHENS CITIZENSHIP**

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The social context and economic conditions of Latin America in the 21st century reflect broad political inequalities, especially in terms of human rights and constitutional rights. This has required and generated an immense capacity for resilience among non-governmental, social and community organisations that create the conditions for individuals to exercise their rights as citizens and to practice democratic values that contribute to the common good. These conditions for the common good are defined by the ability of individuals to recognise others as equals and by a sense of solidarity that can inspire a collective response to inequalities, inequities, and social injustices.

The vast majority of these social and community organisations rely on volunteering, a practice that brings together members of communities to take concrete action in different ways, strengthening and materialising collective projects, often despite precarious circumstances and unstable social relations. Due to these circumstances, different forms of volunteering can often be perceived as welfare actions, responding to specific social and economic crises and alleviating immediate needs. In this context, volunteering is seen as a 'duty' to solve immediate community problems and provide services.

If the aim is to bring about structural change and propose new social and political paradigms in communities, volunteering requires more than project-specific training.¹ In a global context characterised by multiple and overlapping crises and challenges, it is necessary to include in the training and mentoring of volunteers constitutive elements of both formal and non-formal education that enable them to understand the community context and its history, especially the cultural narratives that underpin the social and political relations within the communities in which volunteers work.

The University of La Salle in Bogotá, Colombia, through its Graduate Programme in Volunteering, invites and prepares students to think critically about the social and political conditions of Latin America and what it means to volunteer in a specific context. The aim of our academic programme is to articulate and equip students with new paradigms of volunteering, shifting the understanding of volunteering from a mere moral duty to an analysis of it as a political right that each individual can exercise based on their right to be in solidarity with others and their communities. This shift from 'duty' to 'right' is proposed as a conceptual framework that strengthens solidarity by expanding the capacity for recognition of others and the acquisition of virtues belonging to democratic communities as 'the right to be in solidarity with others' (in Spanish: *'el derecho a ser solidario/a'*).

The right to solidarity implies a paradigm shift from duty to right. That is, solidarity is seen as a right, the practice of solidarity does not emanate from one's own subjectivity, but is inspired and realised by the recognition of the other as *Another*, not *the Other*. The academic conceptualisation of solidarity as a right recognises the ways in which our experiences and perceptions of reality, as well as our moral frameworks, are shaped by the intersections of race, class, gender, economic inequalities, among others. Engaging students in discussing and investigating 'the right to solidarity' is defined by practices that integrate critiques of notions of duty, obligation and responsibility. This requires a process of learning and unlearning that is only possible through critical reflection about ourselves in relation to the wider society.

[1] Estévez, H. A., Rodríguez, I. R. (2023). El derecho a la solidaridad: una virtud política. *Revista de la Universidad de La Salle*, (91):239-250.

Therefore, our conceptualisation of ‘the right to solidarity’ goes a step further by recognising that community-based organisations and actions are completely endogenous to social and political transformations. Our definition of volunteering as a right within a community-based organisation, guided by ‘the right to solidarity’, is thus both a political goal and a political action, as it validates the rights of individuals in relation to the strengthening of their citizenship. It is important to recognise that most hierarchical social systems, based on ethnicity, disability, gender, religion, economic and social status and other factors, can further limit the access of materially disadvantaged societies to social security and social justice. Rather than contributing to democratic practices that enable equal citizenship as a right for all, existing needs-based social welfare systems often inadvertently conceive of individual rights as economic and social privileges, displacing the possibility of achieving social justice for all.

The right to solidarity as a conceptual framework and the proposals emerging from community-based organisations (see examples below) are important for several reasons. Firstly, there is evidence that community organisations tend to fade away shortly after achieving their goals, in part due to the lack of or limited opportunities for civic engagement.² This means that both organisational success and survival depend on maintaining a voice for citizens in relation to their needs in order to uphold their rights. Secondly, the socio-political legitimacy of community-based organisations relies on the contributions of volunteers who can mobilise resources and strategies for an open system model of organisation where community participants and patrons determine the degree of embeddedness in the local environment.³ Finally, the majority of community-based organisations in Colombia work in rural areas, and their agenda is localised and usually pursued in a reactive manner, relying heavily on volunteers who belong to the communities they serve.

Since the Peace Agreements between the guerrilla group Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, after its initials in Spanish) and the Colombian government in 2016, several local community-based organisations have emerged in both rural and urban areas of the country. Examples include:

- **Fundación Horizontes de Esperanzas (Horizons of Hope Foundation)**. This network brings together 20 community-based solidarity organisations working for the common and collective good of the victims of the armed conflict. It is located in the municipality of Carmen de Bolívar, in the department of Bolívar, in the north of Colombia.
- **Federación Caribeña de Procesos Organizativos por la Paz (Caribbean Federation of Organisational Processes for Peace)**. This network is made up of 17 community-based solidarity organisations that work to consolidate the right to live in peace by strengthening collective solidarity. It is located in the municipality of Ovejas, in the department of Sucre, and covers the areas of La Guajira, Córdoba, Bolívar, Sucre and Atlántico.

[2] Fernandez, J. J. (2008). Causes of Dissolution among Spanish Non-profit Associations. *Non-profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 37(1):113-37.

[3] Baum, J. A. C., Oliver, C. (1992). Institutional Embeddedness and the Dynamics of Organisational Populations. *American Sociological Review*, 57(4):540-59.

These characteristics, which are not unique to Latin America, represent the dynamics of action of low-income rural communities. It allows us to consider solidarity as a right, because of the political authority and legitimacy necessary to confront socio-economic inequalities. These inequalities determine political representation and citizens' participation in public life. They can also inhibit the voluntary efforts of communities to propose policies that can mobilise and institutionalise community voices.⁴ Such community voices are increasingly needed to promote engagement in civic life and to encourage individuals from diverse backgrounds to become active members in political arenas and to participate in institutional governance at both local and national levels.

We believe that community-based organisations, guided by the concept of solidarity as a right, can provide an entry point for individual citizenship through volunteering and the framework for transforming structures and systems of belief and action at the community level. This means promoting opportunities for volunteers to learn and engage with their communities in a horizontal way, building on their ability to recognise others as individuals with equal rights, who have a level of moral authority equal to that of all other members of their own collective.

[4] Clemens, E. S., Minkoff, D. C. (2004). Beyond the Iron Law: Rethinking the Place of Organisations in Social Movement Research. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (1st ed), pp.155-170. Blackwell.

About the Author

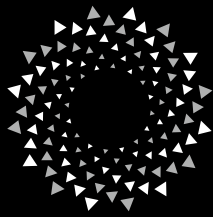


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