

IVCO
NEWCASTLE 2024

IVCO 2024 BACKGROUND PAPER

**BUILDING AND SUSTAINING
CONNECTIONS FOR CHANGE:
VOLUNTEERING FOR
SOLIDARITY**



**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE



**Centre
for Global
Development**



Comhlómh
GLOBAL SOLIDARITY IN ACTION

Introduction

Forum's Annual Conference of International Volunteer Cooperation Organisations (IVCO 2024) is taking place at a time of interconnecting crises, conflict, and upheaval across the world. Individuals and communities are confronted with unparalleled economic, environmental, technological and social challenges. Now, more than ever, volunteer-involving organisations and stakeholders need to find ways to reinforce solidarity and forge deeper connections to advance equity, social justice, and sustainability across diverse national and international contexts affected by widening inequalities.

The global volunteering community is still grappling with the significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been growing attention to the importance of localising development efforts and strengthening models to amplify community impact. At the same time, the effects of climate change are accelerating, threatening lives and livelihoods around the world and demanding that historically polluting countries confront climate injustices. In the context of these intersecting crises and challenges, are the relationships we have in the volunteering and development sector sufficient or appropriate to facilitate the change we seek? Where does volunteering sit in relation to the historic and contemporary power inequalities that underpin these crises?

Increasingly, we see the importance of solidarity-based models of connection and interaction that are grounded in mutually supportive relationships. At their best, these ways of working acknowledge power differentials that can often influence our work. In this context, it is crucial to consider longer term action on the priorities identified by those we are in solidarity with, and the interconnectedness and interdependence of people and planet. Such questions of interconnectedness and interdependence are at the heart of IVCO 2024 in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. Although the conference is physically hosted in the global North, the Northeast of England is historically characterised by persistent inequalities, with recent evidence showing that one in five (over 100,000) of all children in the region currently live below the poverty line.¹ This brings an immediacy to explorations of the interdependence between wealth and poverty, and an acknowledgement that the drivers of injustice are present to different extents, no matter where in the world we are based. At the same time, voluntary responses to these injustices, both in the region and globally, demonstrate the potential of community innovation, creativity and action in various forms.

From this starting point, the question of how we can build and sustain connections for equitable change through volunteering gains a relevance that crosses borders. Informed by this awareness, and within the context of an increasingly polarised world, IVCO 2024 will celebrate and explore how volunteering can create connections, challenge the status quo and enable meaningful, lasting social change in an ever-changing world. It is a unique opportunity to promote knowledge exchange between individuals and organisations working on inequality in different contexts, tackling social justice through volunteer thinking and practice in response to multiple interconnected crises.

(1) Bailey, A. (2024). *No time to wait: An ambitious blueprint for tackling child poverty in the North East*. North East Child Poverty Commission (NECPC).

Participatory Approaches at IVCO 2024

IVCO 2024 will provide a platform for delegates to embark on a journey of collective questioning and learning around the theme of **“Building and Sustaining Connections for Change: Volunteering for Solidarity”**. The conference will champion participatory approaches and nurture a challenging space for practice and knowledge exchange, one which is rooted in equity and care. The different types of sessions during the three days of the conference will be shaped by the experiences and views of IVCO delegates to promote learning journeys encompassing reflection and watching, active experimentation and doing, analysing and thinking. This aims to encourage delegates’ participation in different ways, sharing their knowledge in group and plenary sessions, as well as through informal, convivial spaces to discuss key issues with peers.

The first day will focus on the positioning of volunteering and the roles of volunteers within past, present, and future global crises.

Following this, **the second day** will delve into the concept of failure and its potential as a catalyst for transformative change in the ways we manage partnership and connections.

The conference’s **final day** will explore the evolving nature of volunteering, and how it can be re-imagined to foster solidarities, enhance resilience and shape more sustainable ways of living and being.

Crises of Today and Crises of Tomorrow

'...the way we respond to the crisis is part of the crisis. You see, our responses and the troubles they are directed towards are co-constitutive aspects of each other.' – Bayo Akomolafe²

As the world is confronted by myriad challenges, it is essential to identify the most imminent or already unfolding threats that require immediate responses without losing sight of the urgency of all crises. We need to ask ourselves what are some of the most urgent global crises we are currently facing, how do they intersect, and why are they relevant for volunteering and development. It becomes increasingly apparent that Covid-19 has served as a precursor to the types of systemic shocks we anticipate in the future, as the climate emergency and other severe disruptions to our lives and livelihoods become more prevalent. Hence, it is ever more pressing to reflect on the position of volunteering in relation to past, present and future crises and the potential it has to address them.

The multifaceted nature of current (and likely future) crises requires individuals and organisations to deal with the often overlapping and protracted impacts of conflict, displacement and the climate emergency, as well as the compounding effects of health, housing, and financial crises. The speed and depth of these events also call for us to consider how our ways of working affect or contribute to such crises. In this context, what can (or should) we be doing to continually integrate processes of learning and unlearning that challenge unsustainability? How can we make our ways of being and doing more reciprocal, accountable, reflexive and horizontal in volunteering and development?

The history of the international volunteering sector is deeply connected with and shaped by colonialism, and often continues to be characterised by power imbalances that contribute to replicating the conditions in which injustice can thrive. In recent years, the volunteering and development sector has begun to explore unsettling and uncomfortable questions around how (neo)colonialism, saviourism, and ethnocentrism continue to shape international volunteering. These critical discussions and reflections can help us, individually and collectively, to consider the ways in which historic power imbalances continue to show up in our relationships. Rather than focusing on and rushing to solutions, it is perhaps time to foreground inquiry-based approaches to understanding the prevailing challenges that volunteer-involving organisations are facing – and potentially contributing to. In the face of deepening uncertainty and crisis, how can we use, expand and reshape existing resources to build strategies and approaches (with a focus on ethics and integrity) that foster more socially and environmentally just futures?

(2) Akomolafe, B. (2020). *I, Coronavirus. Mother. Monster. Activist.*

IVCO 2024 builds on the insights and experiences of practitioners, academics and policy-makers in the volunteering and development sector, offering brave spaces for peer-to-peer support to share, analyse and challenge these inequalities. This year's conference aims to create generative connections and encourage a deeper awareness of the importance of solidarity-based relationships, using the power of questioning to explore alternative approaches to the paradoxes and uncertainties we are facing. We hope it will awaken delegates' curiosity about new approaches, as well as strengthening our sector's commitment to supporting volunteering that helps to imagine and create strategies for more equitable futures.

Exploring Relationships for Solidarities in Times of Crises

'I don't believe in charity. I believe in solidarity. Charity is so vertical. It goes from the top to the bottom. Solidarity is horizontal. It respects the other person. I have a lot to learn from other people.' – Eduardo Galeano³

IVCO 2024 brings attention to ideas of relationships and solidarity within and across the global volunteering community. There are many definitions of solidarity, and many examples of ways in which it is present across volunteering and development. Rather than looking for a 'one-size-fits-all' policy or approach, the sector will thrive when exploring how this richness and diversity can support the emergence of new ways of being and doing in the face of multiple crises. Drawing on each other's experiences to investigate new ideas will provide the opportunity to consider the ways in which solidarity may already be present throughout current volunteering theories and practice of today, and how they can be strengthened in the future. But are there 'quiet' or 'hidden' elements of solidarity that we may be missing within our everyday work and practice? Who are we involving in our discussions, and who are we missing?

The concept of failure is important within and across all these discussions and reflections. Volunteer managers, volunteers themselves, academics, policy-makers and all stakeholders in the volunteering and development sector certainly do (or will) encounter and experience failure in different ways. But we often lack the mechanisms to challenge it as something inherently negative and instead view it as an opportunity for learning, challenge or change. At a time when the traditional focus of aid and development flows are coming under increasing scrutiny, there is a pressing need to consider how volunteering might enable more meaningful and enduring social change, and the role(s) of solidarity within this. This involves moving into new and emergent spaces, requiring us to become more comfortable with trying, testing and embracing the idea of failure and learning from it.

(3) In Barsamian, D. (2004). *Louder Than Bombs: Interviews from the Progressive Magazine* (1st ed). South End Press.

We are rarely encouraged to consider and explore what failure looks like within our relationships. If we were to flip the weighting we give to ideas of success and failure, what might failure look like within our work and how might it be achieved? And how can we use this as a starting point to explore challenges and uncertainties across our relationships, using this to develop more solidarity-based approaches? These are some of the questions that we expect IVCO 2024 delegates to consider when it comes to the paradoxes that can be embraced for more impactful and transformational change.

Embarking on a Collective Journey of Volunteering for Transformative Change

'Move at the speed of trust. Focus on critical connections more than critical mass – build the resilience by building the relationships.' – adrienne maree brown⁴

Improving relationships with ourselves, with others, and with the environment is pivotal in realising transformative change through volunteering. Amidst moments of turmoil and unpredictability in the world we live and work in, nurturing both personal and collective resilience becomes imperative. The complexity of the existing and emerging challenges that we are facing across contexts requires us to expand our capacity for engagement and mutual empowerment. IVCO 2024 will offer opportunities for participatory and generative discussions exploring key questions and challenges around these themes in volunteering and development thinking and practice.

What kinds of solidarities and connections can volunteering mobilise to support greater equity, social justice and sustainability, and at what scales? How can we build, nurture and strengthen those connections, despite myriad challenges? How can we become more comfortable with trying and testing and embracing the idea of failing, knowing that our world and its challenges are complex and ever-changing? How might we move towards a 'volunteering for solidarity' approach?

The conference spaces will support practitioners, academics and stakeholders to explore how volunteering can create connections at different levels – community, national, international – building new solidarities that challenge the traditional focus of aid and development flows and contribute to meaningful and lasting social change. To create the conditions in which generative relationships can be built, fostered and maintained, it is crucial to reflect on whether, and in what ways, volunteer-involving organisations and stakeholders are committed to building the long-term conditions needed to nurture respectful and mutually supportive relationships.

(4) brown, a. m. (2017). *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (1st ed). AK Press.

This background paper was co-authored by Dervla King and Fiachra Brennan, from Comhlámh; and Dr Bianca Fadel, Sichelesile N. Maxine Mpofu, and Prof Matt Baillie Smith, from Northumbria University.

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About IVCO 2024 Hosts



Forum

The International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum) is a global network of organisations that work with volunteers to achieve sustainable development. This paper sets the stage for Forum's International Volunteer Cooperation Organisations 2024 Conference (IVCO 2024), which will be co-hosted in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, by Northumbria University and Comhlámh from 9 to 13 September 2024.

VISIT: www.forum-ids.org



**Northumbria
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NEWCASTLE

Northumbria University

Northumbria University is a research-intensive, modern university with a global reputation for academic excellence. Its Centre for Global Development is an established research group delivering innovative collaborative work on volunteering, humanitarian crises and development.

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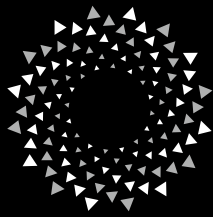


Comhlámh

Comhlámh is the Irish Association of International Development Workers and Volunteers. As a membership organisation established in 1975, it builds and mobilises communities around global justice issues. Comhlámh nurtures and supports work for change, locally and globally, and advocates for a world beyond injustice.

VISIT: www.comhlamh.org

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