



The Toolkit

HANDS ON DEVELOPMENT:

Increasing civic engagement and participation of young people/youth organisations in development work through understanding of UN SDGs and EU's development policy

Friends of Don Bosco

Malta



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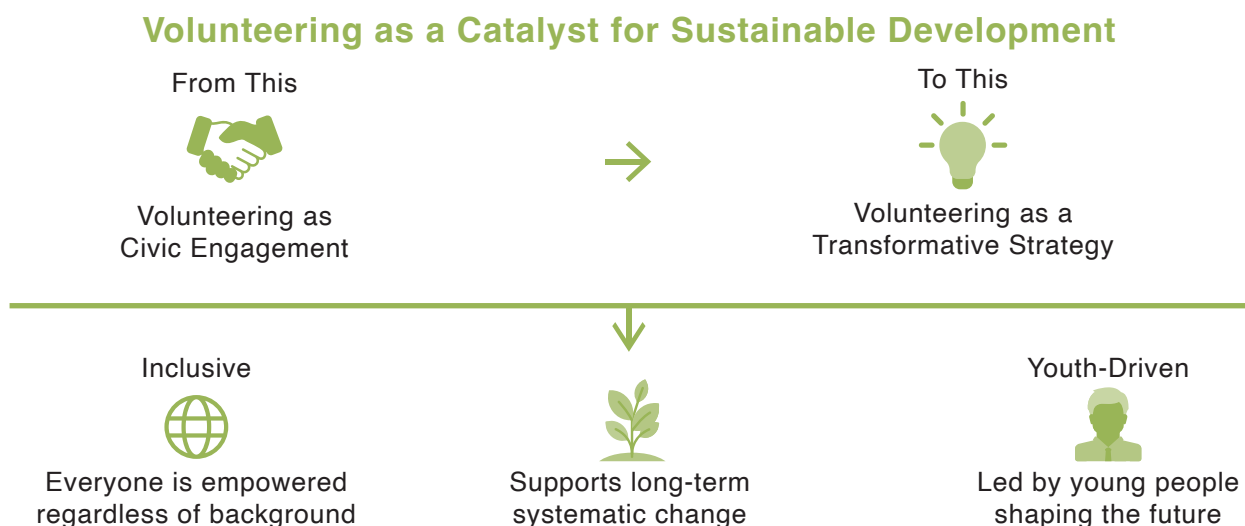
Abstract

This research explores the role and implications of youth volunteering in development work in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the EU development policy. The study investigates how young people engage in civic participation, what drives or hinders their involvement, and the impact of their experiences on personal and social transformation.

Using grounded theory and thematic analysis, the research employs a qualitative design based on 60 semi-structured interviews conducted across different stakeholder groups, including youth volunteers, non-volunteers, youth workers, and policymakers from several European countries.

The study explores four themes, which reveal that there are intertwining dynamics between motivations, development work, youth organisations and self-transformation. Ultimately, the findings emphasise the need to shift from charity-based and tokenistic participation models to those built on reciprocity, empowerment, and partnership to reach the desired Sustainable Development Goals.

Volunteering should be reconceptualised not just as a form of civic engagement, but as a transformative strategy that promotes inclusive, sustainable, and youth-driven development. The study concludes with a call for more inclusive outreach, structural support, and participatory policy frameworks that acknowledge young people not merely as beneficiaries but as essential actors in shaping a more just and equitable future.







Introduction



Young people and youth organisations are definitely pivotal in advocating, shaping, and implementing development work. In this regard, the SDGs and the EU development policy have been widely accepted goals and standards to which everyone is committed. Youth-focused and youth-led organisations often tell governments, private institutions and development agencies that young people have “a role to play” in contributing towards these causes (Plan UK 2015).

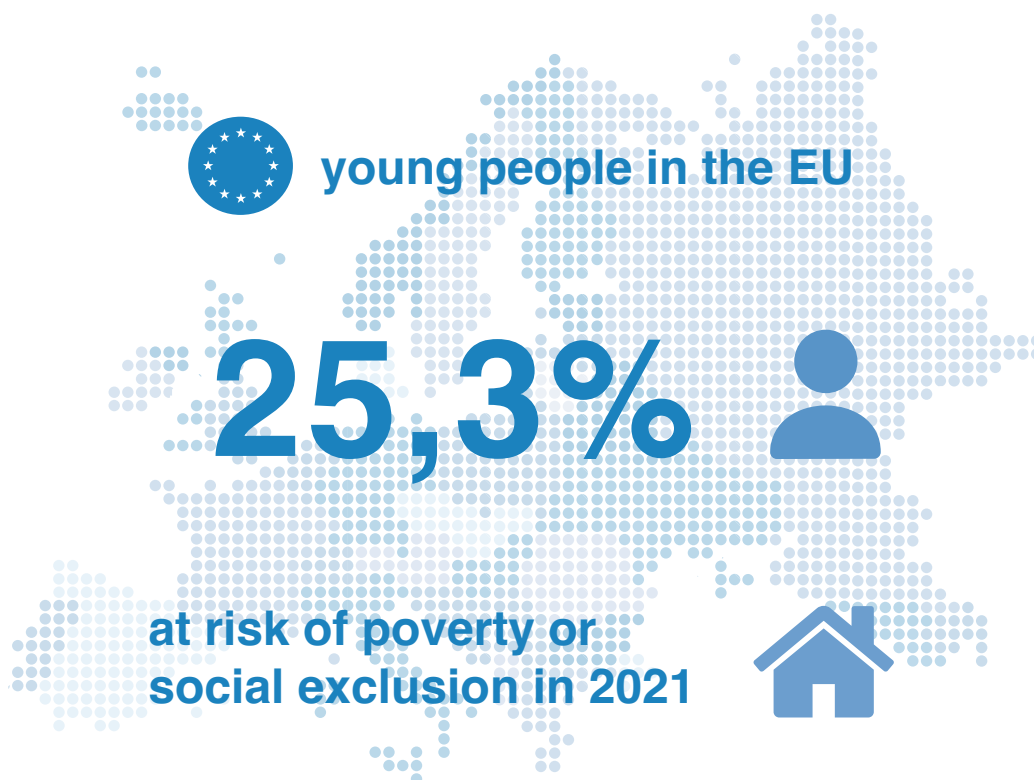
According to the Global Youth Development Index Update Report (Commonwealth 2023: 14), on average, 23.2 % of youth globally reported volunteering their time in a 2021 survey, a 2.2 percentage point increase over 2020 and the highest rate since at least 2010. Similarly, 19.4 % stated that they had voiced their opinion to an official in the previous 30 days, a 1.6 % increase over 2020 and the highest rate since at least 2010. However, only around 10 % reported having received recognition for helping improve the city or area where they lived.



23.2% of Youth Globally Reported Volunteering Their Time

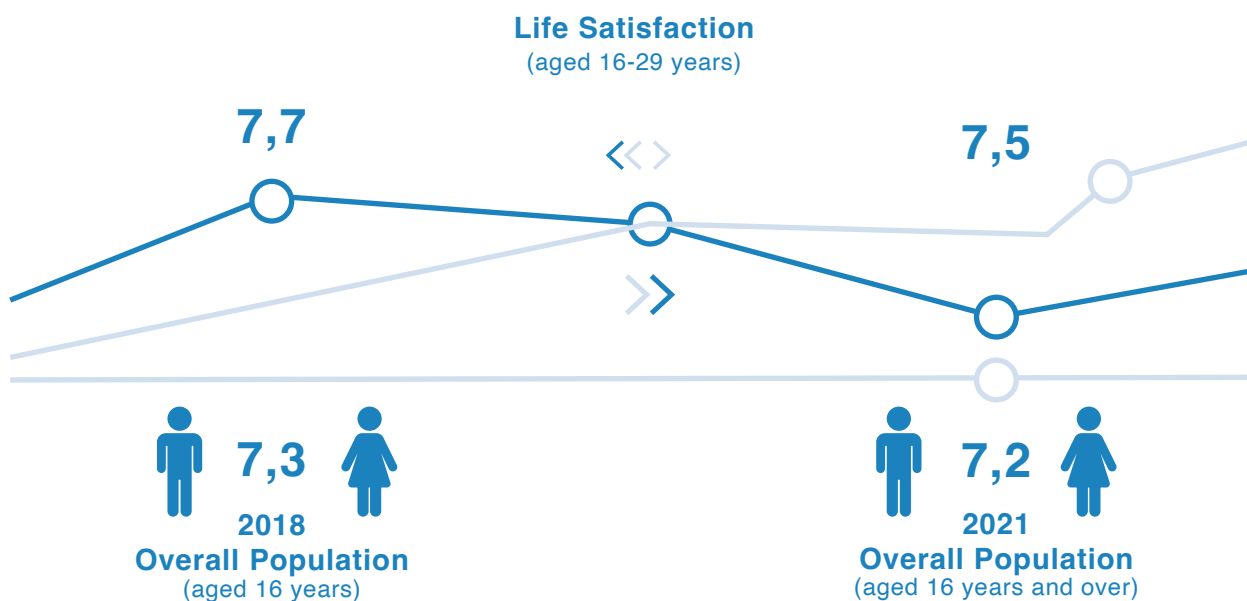
2021 Survey

Global Youth Development Index Update Report (Commonwealth 2023:14)



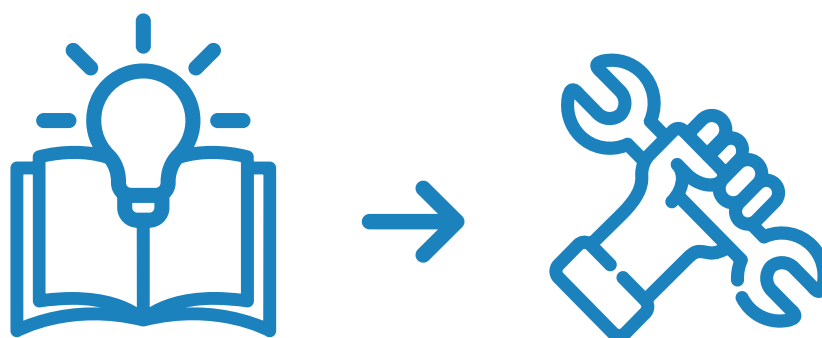
Although the above figures show some minor improvements in development and youth volunteering, pertinent challenges have been pointed out in various studies. Indeed, scholars have cautioned that the embedding of neoliberal policies in many societies may be contributing to a cohort that is increasingly opting out of public life or whose actions are becoming more individualised and consumer-oriented (Hayward 2021; Holdsworth 2017; Kyroglou and Henn 2017, as cited in Carlton et al. 2023). In this neoliberal context, it is essential to highlight that one quarter (25.3 %) of young people in the EU were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2021; for people of all ages, the share was lower, at just over one-fifth (21.7 %). In 16 of the EU

In Life Satisfaction Ratings



Member States (including the four largest), the share was higher for young people than for people of all ages, while in 11 others the reverse situation was observed. The highest share among young people was recorded in Romania (36.1 %) and the lowest in Czechia (10.6 %). Moreover, between 2018 and 2021, the life satisfaction rating for young people aged 16–29 years decreased from 7.7 to 7.5, compared with a decrease from 7.3 to 7.2 for all people aged 16 years or over. It is important to note that the data for 2021 reflect the situation during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted not only physical health but also many aspects of life, including education, work, leisure activities, travel, and relationships (Eurostat 2022).

Learning By Doing



Evidence demonstrates that the abovementioned challenges can be readdressed by increasing and improving the understanding and quality of youth volunteering in development projects. Andreas Karsten, the executive director of YouthPolicy.org, has reiterated that “meaningful participation can be an empowering experience for every young person. Too frequently, however, participation is reduced to a playground for democracy without real impact” (Goldin, Patel & Perry 2014).

The promoted method in research on youths and civic engagement is the “learning by doing” approach, which was shown to improve academic, personal, and social competence (Goethem et al. 2014). Thus, service learning programs, which are designed to foster civic skills and volunteering in youth, appear to instil the understanding of social issues as well as organisational and academic skills (Yorio & Ye 2012). The direction points towards more active participation where consulting young people means that decisions are informed by their experiences and perspectives, which increases the likelihood of impact, often expressed as “nothing about us, without us” (Oaktree et al. 2016). When



young people feel that the experience is meaningful, they are more likely to become active citizens equipped with skills, knowledge, and motivation to contribute to their communities and countries throughout their lives (Moore 2005; ODI 2013).

The essence of such an approach is thus founded on the quality of relationships fostered between those involved in such projects. This is certainly highlighted in an interview with Nicole Monney on the best things in youth and community development work:

Seeing people's journeys. It doesn't happen overnight, but you build relationships with people and then see them go from not really speaking or having confidence in their ideas, to a total change in their body language and demeanour and belief in themselves. A lot of that is down to the fact that, so often, people are defined by their problems. What's wrong? What are they lacking? But when you work in the community you see the strengths, you see passions and resilience, you see people who are activists and want to make a change. That's the starting point. It's about working together to find solutions and not putting all the onus on one group or another. It's recognising that everyone has something to bring to find a solution...you definitely need to come into communities with an open mind that works with, listens, responds and collaborates. Equally valuing partners is a good start.

(Rhodes 2023)

After analysing the relevant literature, four aspects to be explored:



1 | Motivation

What motivates young people to participate in development work?



2 | Development

What kind of development work do they participate in?



3 | Youth Organisations

What is the function of a youth organisation in development work?



4 | Transformation of the self

What transformations do youths go through in development work?



Literature Review



Motivation

The reasons to get into volunteering and participate in development projects are not homogenous, and, more often than not, they are a combination of factors rather than one singular motive. The literature repeatedly refers to three main categories:



1. **ALTRUISTIC OR VALUES-BASED MOTIVATIONS**, usually connected to religious beliefs, support for a cause, or a desire to help others.



2. **INSTRUMENTAL MOTIVATIONS** like gaining work experience, exploring career paths, enhancing résumés, and making contacts to increase future paid job opportunities.



3. **SOCIAL MOTIVATIONS** include extending networks, making new friends, or responding to peer pressure in the community, an organisation, or the workplace.

(Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen 1991; Cappellari & Turati 2004; Handy et al. 2010)

Therefore, in this exploration, there is a category that veers more towards altruistic reasons and another one that steers more towards self-interest. Most studies refer to altruistic reasons like “helping other” or “making a contribution” and those aimed at own benefit such as “personal growth”, “the desire to have a personal experience” (Heron 2007, as cited in Demicheli et al. 2023), “travelling or seeking an adventure” (Simpson 2004, as mentioned in Demicheli et al. 2023), “escaping from routine” (Lo & Lee 2011, as cited in Demicheli et al. 2023), and “career or skills development” (Jones 2011; Jones 2010; Tiessen 2012, as mentioned in Demicheli et al. 2023).

Similarly, Schondel and Boehm (2000) revealed that youth motivation to volunteer is similar to that of older volunteers, and common themes included helping others, social interaction, and recognition. However, some motivations are more prevalent in youth volunteering, such as socialisation to pro-social behaviour, self-actualisation, and peer pressure.

ALTRUISTIC MOTIVATIONS

Carlton et al. (2023) conducted a study amongst young volunteers in the Canterbury region of Aotearoa New Zealand to understand how they negotiate their participation with established organisations. The idea of ‘giving’ was identified as central to many volunteers’ actions. Participants described volunteering as being a question of “how much you are willing to give” and that they “have something to give, and so they’re going to give it.”

Time is crucial, and it is a recurrent theme in these discussions. Participation in such activities has been referred to as being “time-consuming” and also ending up being “super jammed” because of volunteering. However, participants concluded that although they know they will not get anything in return, they still give “that time and energy away.”

Overall, the studies show that personal motivations for volunteering have changed over time, particularly among young people. Generally, one can see a shift from altruistic and collectivist to personal benefit factors. Economic factors also play a more prominent role in the decision to volunteer (Demicheli et al. 2023).

SELF-CENTRED MOTIVATIONS

Studies that focused on understanding the motivations to volunteer by European Youths suggest that they are more focused on individual interests rather than the more traditional reasons, such as being of service to others (Jardim & Marques 2018).

It has become more common that nowadays young people opt for volunteering because of motivations related to their benefits, such as “career development, personal growth, useful leisure activity, work experience, and professional improvement” (Roman et al. 2018). In a study by the German Children and Youth Foundation (2020), the reasons for volunteering are also rather individualistic, veering towards personal growth and learning something new, leading the authors to conclude that young people are more prone to volunteer for personal gain than for other reasons. Similarly, Jardim & Marques (2018) clearly show that the motivations of the European young people to engage in voluntary service are mainly focused on their own needs and interests. This reflects an intergenerational shift towards a more reflexive

“that both altruism and reputational concerns are positively associated with the decision to volunteer”

and individualised form of volunteering founded on self-interest rather than altruism. Mainly, they are interested in developing skills that would benefit their professional and personal lives. As suggested in other studies, volunteering is valued by young people because it helps them acquire social and cultural capital, which can be translated into material capital.

Although personal benefit factors appear predominant, most studies acknowledge the importance of both types of motivations, citing previous research pointing out “that both altruism and reputational concerns are positively associated with the decision to volunteer” (Demicheli et al. 2023).

BARRIERS

Volunteering is not always perceived as something that lures young people, and there are undoubtedly several barriers. In a recent study (Observatory of Voluntary Work: Lessons and Reflections’ 2020, as cited in Demicheli et al. 2023) the reasons which the participants highlighted refer to “lack of time, lack of knowledge, lack of contact with social surroundings and voluntary action in general, along with lack of awareness of the need for this action and a perceived inability to make a difference”.

Davis - Smith (1999) discovered that volunteering suffers from negative image among young people, perceived as expensive, time consuming, tedious, and outdated, and found that 61% of young people in the United Kingdom could not see the point of volunteering, and 41% thought their friends would think badly of them if they volunteered. Other reasons point to social anxiety, whereby young people are not comfortable coming forward to start volunteering unless they come in groups with whom they are familiar (Haski-Leventhal et al. 2008).

“lack of time, lack of knowledge, lack of contact with social surroundings and voluntary action in general, along with lack of awareness of the need for this action and a perceived inability to make a difference.”

Adopting a critical perspective is essential to delve deeper into the challenges youths face in volunteering. Academics like Holdsworth and Quinn (2012) and Eliasoph (2013) suggest that framing volunteering as a ‘good thing’ can be unhelpful in flattening the complexity of young people’s participation. Young people are not a homogenous group, and how they relate with the rest of the community is very diverse and certainly influenced and conditioned by power relations (Bečević & Dahlstedt 2021; Tupuola 2004). Furthermore, it is not always the case that volunteering empowers all those involved. There is evidence that, especially in neoliberal societies emphasising individualism and self-responsibility, some participants experience stress and burnout issues (Hayward 2021; Nairn 2019).

These sentiments correspond with the findings of Carlton et al. (2023), whereby interviewees stated that volunteering could come at “a cost”. Quite literally, the participants complained

“ There is evidence that, especially in neoliberal societies emphasising individualism and self-responsibility, some participants experience stress and burnout issues ”

about the financial burdens associated with volunteering, like travelling and, in some cases, accommodation, which are considered potential barriers for young people, especially in this stage of their lives. Some respondents also pointed out that donating time could be better spent working and earning an income to reduce their strains and predicaments. Interviewees spoke about the need to consciously preserve and allocate their time and energy because of these demands. The way volunteers negotiate these decisions

varies. Some make a deliberate and strategic decision to commit a lot to an event or a cause that is deemed necessary or impactful, whilst others are more wary about their engagement since they are developing signs of anxiety and stress.

Development

Development is a multifaceted concept that generally refers to improving the well-being of individuals in a community or a nation. A widely accepted notion is that of sustainable development, which emphasises that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (United Nations 2015). In line with this strategy, the EU also developed its development policy, a comprehensive framework aimed at tackling global challenges guided by the international commitments of the SDGs. It integrates social, economic, and environmental dimensions of development and strongly emphasises human rights, democracy, and sustainable growth (European Union 2017).

“ A widely accepted notion is that of sustainable development, which emphasises that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs ”

Youth volunteering should undoubtedly be at the forefront of contributing to and achieving these global targets. **Youths can be agents of change through their engagement in volunteering projects, which can facilitate the implementation of the SDGs.**

The United Nations (2021) established a plan of action to integrate volunteering into the 2030 Agenda. The objectives to incorporate volunteering in sustainable development are the following:

1. Strengthening people's ownership of the development agenda.
2. Integrating volunteering into national and global implementation strategies.
3. Measuring volunteering to contribute to a holistic understanding of people's engagement in SDG implementation.

ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP FOR DEVELOPMENT

The United Nations (2021a) has devised a plan to foster a more profound sense of active citizenship to achieve better development goals. Active involvement is the capacity and ownership of volunteers to contribute to others and communities. Voluntary workers are generally more willing to contribute than the rest. "It is possible to hypothesise that being a volunteer makes a difference concerning assuming responsibilities to move towards a more just and sustainable future" (Observatory of Voluntary Work: Lessons and Reflections, 2020, as cited in Demicheli et al. 2023). Similarly, in the State of the World's Volunteerism, it was reported that:

“ Voluntary workers are generally more willing to contribute than the rest. ”

Volunteers have the capacity, through collaboration, to reconfigure unequal power relationships between ordinary citizens and state authorities. With appropriate support, all groups can take up more active volunteer roles, claiming their rightful place in decision-making spaces. In this way, volunteerism allows people to shape the development agenda and own it, creating spaces for people-centred discussions. Adopting an inclusive and participatory approach to public governance can promote people's understanding of, and interest in, equality and shared social responsibility.

(United Nations 2021b)

“ More knowledge is required on the volunteering strategies that best amplify the voices of the most marginalised. ”

Volunteering has the propensity to empower youths to own the sustainable development agenda and work organically towards its implementation. The strategy is fruitful when there is inclusion, participation, and collaboration by the different stakeholders. The emphasis is on shared responsibility, which cannot be fostered through top-down schemes and programs. Volunteering should be recognised as a transformative strategy, and its most significant attributes are

demonstrated when the whole of society is approached. Beyond widening access, stakeholders must deepen the evidence on the quality of participation through volunteering. More knowledge is required on the volunteering strategies that best amplify the voices of the most marginalised. This could help to move beyond rapid surveys and consultations to building on the relationships created through volunteering, to deepen dialogue, and to empower those who are the furthest behind (United Nations 2021a).

“ young volunteers become more equipped to deal with the increasing levels of polarisation in many societies since volunteering can help diverse groups to work together on shared goals.

”

Civic participation is crucial for youth development as evidence demonstrates that it helps in personal development and social networking, reducing risks and problems, thus preventing the need for social care in young people's lives (Catalano et al. 2004). Therefore, young volunteers become more equipped to deal with the increasing levels of polarisation in many societies since volunteering can help diverse groups to work together on shared goals. This can foster and increase trust and solidarity within and between communities (United Nations 2021a). A Dutch study shows that young people who participated in a volunteering project:

- They are found to speak more often about events/ factors influencing the community to others.
- They are found to donate more and more often to charity.
- They are more likely to feel connected to people in developing countries.
- They are more likely to proclaim that they feel like they could improve their community.

(‘Impact Study World Servants’ 2016, as cited in Demicheli et al. 2023)

SKILLS

In development projects, young volunteers gain crucial skills that empower them and the communities they are assisting. A critical skill in this regard is the learning of advocacy. Case studies demonstrate that although volunteers had different profiles, worked on different issues, formed part of different organisations, and had diverse social and political contexts, they experienced four aspects that contributed to the informal learning of advocacy skills:

1. **THEY LEARNED ABOUT THE ISSUES.** Through their involvement, they got closer to the realities that affected their communities, including the historical, legal, political, and technical ramifications. This facilitated their advocacy efforts to be more relevant and efficient.

2. **LEARNED HOW TO AFFECT GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND CORPORATE ACTIONS.** There is evidence demonstrating that volunteers got to know how to apply both vertical and horizontal pressure to instigate change.
3. **HOW TO MAKE A CAMPAIGN.** Learned how to educate the general public and involve the community.
4. **PREVIOUS SUCCESS STORIES.** Past initiatives, including those that failed, were mentioned. Volunteers also reported on learning strategies for nonviolent direct action and on tailoring a message to have more impact.

(Duguid et al. 2013)

Another significant skill that is crucial in development projects is political efficacy. Findings suggest that participants who volunteered in development projects learned that social change is possible and they can be active agents in this process. Generally, volunteers felt empowered through their participation, which led to a heightened sense of political efficacy, especially in community representation and development cases. Volunteers were involved in empowering marginalised groups in various ways to influence change in government policy, which included forming coalitions to garner more public support for their cause (Duguid et al. 2013).

“ Findings suggest that participants who volunteered in development projects learned that social change is possible and they can be active agents in this process. ”

There are other benefits to skill transfer when youth volunteering is involved. When youths volunteer, there is a greater chance that they will pass on skills related to technology innovation within their organisations and establish better networks with other youth beneficiaries through different aspects of youth culture, such as music. Recipients of youth volunteering, such as the elderly, gain from their energy, enthusiasm, and presence (Horton Smith et al. 2016).

MODELS OF DEVELOPMENT

The outcome of volunteering projects surely varies, and that certainly depends on the development model adopted by the relevant stakeholders. For many years, the standard strategy focused on charity.

Farmer (2004) argues that this method lacks a systemic strategy for dealing with poverty, ultimately making the charity recipients powerless and inferior. The culture of charity

“ For many years, the standard strategy focused on charity. ”

“ Development programs should be founded on long-term relationships as they facilitate understanding local culture and community. ”

normalises poverty to such an extent that instead of seeking social transformation, we seek personal generosity, which seems to be the only adequate response. It also reinforces an asymmetrical power relationship between a generous donor and a grateful recipient (Occhipinti 2014: 81-2). In Tiessen and Heron's (2012: 51) study, Canadian international development volunteers were asked about their volunteering experience and its impact on developing countries. A participant referred to the interweaving of development and charity work

through international placements, producing: "...this sense of dependency on the foreigners... perpetuates this stereotype of the west rescuing everyone, and you won't have a chance of getting out of poverty without the help from a white person."

A superior model is the one that is founded on reciprocity. In such a relationship, both parties have the opportunity to give and to receive. The expectation of return creates a relationship based on equality, rather than a power imbalance. In their study trip to Guatemala, Rhoads and Neururer (1998) focus on mutuality of service, which means that through service one is both a giver and a receiver. Participants should become more aware of this, which is vital for their growth. This promotes the idea that during international volunteering projects, participants also learn from the disadvantaged hosting communities.

Therefore, the approach that is being promoted and recommended is that of the partnership model. Development programs should be founded on long-term relationships as they facilitate understanding local culture and community. This model suggests "horizontal relationships within a diffuse network of relationships and mutual understanding, learning, and growth... decentralisation and a grassroots approach, taking into account cultural differences and local contexts" (Occhipinti 2014: 121). Wilson (2006) recognises that a 'learning space' develops throughout this process where partners work together on perceived problems and are empowered to challenge each other. This might promote joint learning and mutual trust, crucial to transformational change. This is highlighted in Lough and Matthews' (2013) research in Kenya on the participatory approach, where the locals are empowered and are active in the development process through the relational dispositions and contributions of the volunteers. This is integral for community-centred development, which is often overlooked in more technical development impact assessment studies.

“ the locals are empowered and are active in the development process through the relational dispositions and contributions of the volunteers. ”

Correspondingly, capacity development resonates with this strategy as this framework emphasises reciprocity. The guiding principles, as developed by the UNDP (United Nations Development Program), are:

1. Don't rush.
2. Respect the value system and foster self-esteem.
3. Scan locally and globally.
4. Reinvent locally.
5. Challenge mindsets and power differentials.
6. Think and act in terms of sustainable capacity outcomes.
7. Establish positive incentives.
8. Integrate external inputs into national priorities, processes, and systems.
9. Build on existing capacities rather than creating new ones.
10. Stay engaged under difficult circumstances.
11. Remain accountable to the ultimate beneficiaries.

(Lopes & Theisohn 2003)

The essence of these strategies emphasises the concept of **'doing with' rather than 'doing for'**. Development within the partnership model accentuates the importance of empowerment rather than reinforcing dependency through the charity model.

NEGATIVE CONSIDERATIONS

Although these volunteering opportunities are open to all young people through national and international associations and generally do not require financial contributions, some studies warn that in several countries, the majority of participants in many volunteering programs are still coming from well-educated backgrounds (Williamson, Hoskins & Boetzelen 2006). This data shows how such opportunities are still more available to privileged groups rather than being inclusive. There are still barriers and challenges that youths from less educated backgrounds face in accessing such opportunities.

There is also evidence that volunteering projects can negatively impact the participants. **Certain volunteers have mentioned unfair treatment, lack of necessary training, and even symptoms of burnout.** Long-term volunteering makes the costs more evident, with people feeling a high level of commitment leading to more emotional exhaustion. In this work, it is highlighted that there is not enough research on the impact of volunteering on young people's well-being. One final issue that has to be considered is **the risk that international volunteering might reinforce paternalism, which positions the locals as "powerless receivers" of help they did not ask for** (Pantea 2012).

“ data shows how such opportunities are still more available to privileged groups rather than being inclusive ”



YOUTH VOICES MATTER THEY INFLUENCE A NATION'S STANDING IN WELLBEING



Global Youth Wellbeing Index (2014)

Youth Organisations

In the Global Youth Wellbeing Index (Goldin, Patel & Perry 2014), youth voices matter in terms of outlook, satisfaction, and behaviours, and these indicators play a significant role in a country's overall ranking. Therefore, evidence shows that policies and programs aimed at youths should be designed with young people on board throughout the process. Active participation of young people is critical when drafting policies and programs to create impactful opportunities for young people. Youth participation should ensure processes of equality where their input is genuine and their influence can be measured. Thus, youth organisations are key in this realm as they provide an avenue where youths can 'change stuff up' (Carlton et al. 2023).

Central to this discussion is the conviction that established organisations could facilitate youth agency to further their engagement and interest in issues they are passionate about. In this environment, professional youth workers master relevant knowledge, skills, and attitudes obtained through formal education, peer learning, and experience working with young people (Metz 2017). The purpose is that youth workers engage with youths in such a way that they build lasting and meaningful relationships, especially throughout their adolescence. Youngsters often participate in these groups for years because they offer them a safe and familiar environment in their leisure time (Taru 2010). Therefore, one of the most crucial ingredients in this regard is to foster a sense of belonging (Fyfe et al. 2018; Nolas 2014, as cited in Sonneveld et al. 2022; Lehner et al. 2022). The process should start with the experiences, needs and interests of the youngsters (Batsleer 2008, as cited in Sonneveld

“ youth organisations empowered the participants by providing an outlet for connection and collective solidarity. ”

et al. 2022) as the most crucial starting point and then use an open approach (Metz 2016, as mentioned in Sonneveld et al. 2022) where the adopted methods of engagement are not strictly pre-planned and time-limited but fluid and responsive to the specific needs and interests of the youngsters and the different dynamics of the social and political contexts in which they occur (Doherty & De St. Croix 2019; Ord 2014, as cited in Sonneveld et al. 2022).

PROSOCIAL SKILLS AND BENEFITS

These organisations provide a system of rules and a structure whereby youth group activities and individual feedback sessions guide youngsters to understand which prosocial skills are necessary for social integration into society (Sonneveld et al. 2020). Prosocial skills are essential for youths to function well in society and foster harmonious relationships, thus preventing behavioural issues that potentially can instigate conflicts with others (Bergin et al. 2003). These points are substantiated in a study by Carlton et al. (2023), where interviewees contended that volunteering in established youth organisations empowered the participants by providing an outlet for connection and collective solidarity. It motivates them to volunteer as it gives a sense of purpose and helps them relieve everyday life's pressures.

There is evidence from research that youth work in such organisations provides the following benefits:

1. **Developing skills which facilitate prosocial behaviour, like having respect for others and improving relationships with adults** (Dickson et al. 2013; Fyfe et al. 2018; Ord et al. 2018; Rumping et al. 2017, as cited in Sonneveld et al. 2022).
2. **Gaining self-mastery which means that an individual believes they have more control over life circumstances and stressful conditions** (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, as cited in Sonneveld et al., 2022). Youth workers in such organisational settings try to boost this mastery in young people by guiding them to make informed decisions and supporting them (Bradford 2000, as cited in Sonneveld et al. 2022), helping them to set goals (Fish 2014, as cited in Sonneveld et al. 2022) and empowering them to work towards achieving these targets (Dworkin et al. 2003, as cited in Sonneveld et al. 2022).
3. **Reinforcing their social networks, not simply the number of people but the quality of such relationships, resulting in belonging and familiarity with other people** (Bartelink & Verheijden, 2015, as cited in Sonneveld et al., 2022). Youngsters who participate in such groups get informal social support, such as getting good advice, having someone to listen to them, and receiving signs of appreciation. This enables youngsters to develop positive relationships based on mutual support (Dunne et al. 2014; Fyfe et al. 2018; Ord et al. 2018, as cited in Sonneveld et al. 2022).
4. **Youth work promotes and contributes to the enhancement of civic participation.** Participating and volunteering in group-based settings helps youth develop into responsible, active citizens who can take leadership roles in various environments (Fyfe

et al. 2018; Rumping et al. 2017, as cited in Sonnevold et al. 2022). This also results in better well-being for young people (Ince et al. 2018, as cited in Sonnevold et al. 2022).

5. **Finding care.** Youngsters sometimes hesitate to go directly to certain professionals to seek help. These informal and non-formal settings assist and also link with social care institutions to give the required assistance and service (Fyfe et al. 2018; Koops et al. 2014; Manders & Metz 2017, as cited in Sonnevold et al. 2022).

NEGATIVE IMPLICATIONS

Although these contexts are commonly framed positively, some issues must be pinpointed. Established organisations are ‘adult’-dominated and rely on certain processes that might relegate young people to inferior positions with the possibility of negating their concerns and needs (Hadfield-Hill & Christensen, 2019; Vromen & Collin, 2010, as cited in Carlton et al., 2023). This might turn these participatory opportunities into ‘tokenistic’ experiences, resulting in little real power or influence. Instead of empowerment, they end up perpetuating inequality, discrimination, and marginalisation, especially those youths who come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Carlton et al. 2023).

Another challenge youth organisations experience this time is the continuous and arduous bureaucratic procedures they are obliged to follow. Many volunteers complain of such time-consuming and energy-draining processes that they must go through, for instance, during the pre-volunteering vetting, especially when children are involved. In one study, the interviewees lamented this fact, especially on how volunteering now has just ensued that you have yourself covered if something goes wrong, ending up tainting the experience by removing any spontaneity and spirit (Carlton et al. 2023).

“ ‘adult’-dominated and rely on certain processes that might relegate young people to inferior positions ”



Therefore, while these established organisations can provide the right space for social connection and empowerment, they might also place negative demands on young people, such as energy and financial resources, with risks of burnout. Unfortunately, such spaces and experiences run the risk of youths experiencing discrimination, marginalisation, and tokenistic participation (Carlton et al. 2023).

Transformation of the Self

Volunteering is associated with the act of transformation. Studies claim that volunteering can be related to the top section of Maslow's hierarchy of needs since "it is an opportunity to develop oneself as a human being, which is a highly valuable reward" (Observatory of Voluntary Work: Lessons and Reflections, 2020, as cited in Demicheli et al. 2023). Apart from personal gain, such as an improved well-being (Calvo et al. 2012; Plagnol & Huppert 2010, as cited in Horton Smith et al. 2016) and better mental health (Benson, Clary & Scales 2007; Handy & Cnann 2007; Hunter & Linn 1980; Smith 2017a, as cited in Horton Smith et al. 2016), youth volunteers were found to have more positive attitudes towards society which included more social responsibility, more social awareness about others, and were more capable of decision making (Sundeen and Raskoff 2000). Some argue that through this process, a permanent social or civic identity is formed, clarified, and strengthened (Youniss & Yates, 1996).

Participants claimed that they acquired a great amount of knowledge, skills, aptitudes, and values in these volunteering projects. For instance, in a study about how volunteers engage with super diverse cities, the participants in Rotterdam suggested that they gained attitudes of openness and interacted better with the notion of diversity through their volunteering organisations. In this case, volunteers referred to personal growth as a result of volunteering, which involved learning about different types of diversity, through diverse encounters, or even the act of advocating for diversity itself (Lehner et al. 2022). Thus, **these experiences are deemed transformational due to the engaging and informal methodology of this learning process.**

INFORMAL AND NON-FORMAL LEARNING IS KEY

Something clear that is found in many case studies is that volunteers often "learn by doing". This generally occurs in a context that gives prevalence to informal and experiential learning, which at times is also supported by non-formal educational processes like workshops, conferences, and meetings. Volunteers recognised that the acquired knowledge, skills, values, and practices are then transferred to other spaces, including other volunteering projects and even their working environments (Duguid et al. 2013).

Volunteers claimed that certain informal learning experiences are demarcated, such as when they are learning something technical, but there are also instances when the learning is unplanned and prompted by an urgency to solve something, the need to change certain practices, or to collectively reflect and resolve a conflict. In this realm, mentoring was seen

as an important component, although it is rarely formalised. Normally, the process occurred organically when the more experienced volunteers helped and guided the new ones. Essentially, they learned from other volunteers, from themselves through trial and error, from other individuals and organisations who shared similar experiences, and

sometimes they also learned important lessons from the people they served. The non-formal education setting of workshops and conferences also provided opportunities to learn, not simply through the knowledge shared by the trainers, but also through the networking with other volunteers, which provided the opportunity for more memorable informal learning processes (Duguid et al. 2013). Therefore, volunteering opportunities together with these learning methods helped the participants to acquire:

“ gives prevalence to informal and experiential learning, which at times is also supported by non-formal educational processes like workshops, conferences, and meetings. ”

1. **Instrumental Skills:** many respondents noted how they have acquired finance and budgeting skills, office and clerical skills, IT skills, language skills, research skills, skills on funding applications, and the operations of NGOs and the government.
2. **Interpersonal and Communication Skills:** volunteers noted learning skills related to working with others. Some even claimed that they revisited their assumptions and changed their perspective on a particular issue or their attitudes towards a specific group, which is defined as “transformative learning” (Mezirow 2000, as cited in Duguid et al. 2013). Volunteering helped the youths improve their communication skills, leading to more effective teamwork and personal development of leadership skills. They also improved their listening skills, allowing them to grasp various perspectives and enhance their diplomacy and conflict resolution skills. Some also attributed their newfound ability to speak publicly and present their position more convincingly.
3. **Values and Dispositions:** Through interactions and immersion with the familiar and unfamiliar, volunteers deepened pre-existing values and dispositions, acquired new ones, and sometimes revised pre-existing ones to replace them with new orientations.
4. **Social Awareness:** These experiences helped them to see particular social realities from a much closer perspective. They referred to learning about diversity, social justice, privilege, exploitation, environmental problems, social dynamics, connections between personal and community development, and international issues. The emphasis on specific themes depended on the organisation’s mission and the context of their volunteering project.

(Duguid et al. 2013).

THE COMPETENCE MODEL

Several studies refer to the significance of the volunteering experience as a transformative engagement that instils and enhances various competencies. Examples of such learning outcomes include:

1. **Personal and Professional Growth:** These volunteering experiences challenge participants to develop their communication, empathy, and interpersonal skills since they always encounter people from diverse backgrounds. These interactions help volunteers to adopt a broader worldview and enrich their cultural competencies.
2. **Skills Development:** This program exposes volunteers to different contexts where they will acquire practical skills, such as organisational and leadership skills, that can be beneficial in other life situations.
3. **Adaptability and Flexibility:** The volunteering environment presents dynamic challenges that require problem-solving, critical thinking, and resilience. Adapting to new and different circumstances is essential.
4. **Working in a Group:** participants come together to work for a particular aim as specified in the project. These experiences enhance the skills of collaboration, leadership, decision-making, and conflict resolution.
5. **Professional Development and Creation of New Networks:** When volunteering, participants can build relationships with many others, especially those in their field of interest. This networking is valuable for mentorships, internships, or future job prospects.
6. **Increased Self-Awareness and Confidence:** These experiences can help individuals discover their strengths, interests, and passions. They can better understand themselves and boost their self-confidence and sense of purpose.

(Demicheli et al. 2023)

Conclusion

There is a lot of literature on volunteering and the aspects of motivation, development, youth organisations, and self-transformation. What needs to be explored is the fact that there is still a huge number of European youths who are not engaged in such projects for various reasons. It might be out of indifference or lack of proper outreach or obstacles that are discriminatory that still need to be overcome (Demicheli et al. 2023).



Research Methods

Capturing Diverse Perspectives



Youth Volunteers
3 per country



Youth Non-Volunteers
3 per country



Youth Workers
2 per country



Policymakers
2 per country

60 **Semi-Structured Interviews**
(10 per country)



This research explores the different facets of youth volunteering and development regarding the significance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the EU development policy. In line with this aim, the study employed a qualitative research design influenced by Grounded Theory, a methodological approach that seeks to “analyse, interpret and explain the meanings that social actors construct to make sense of their everyday experiences in specific situations” (Charmaz 2014; Glaser & Strauss 1967; Suddaby 2006, as cited in Saunders et al. 2019). Grounded Theory was chosen as it supports the discovery of theory grounded in data, particularly when exploring intricate and context-specific social phenomena such as youth engagement and civic participation.

To capture diverse perspectives, the study focused on four key stakeholder groups: Youth Volunteers, Youth Non-Volunteers, Youth Workers, and Policymakers. 60 semi-structured interviews were conducted in total, with 10 from each partner country. Each country contributed 3 Youth Volunteers, 3 Youth Non-Volunteers, 2 Youth Workers, and 2 Policymakers. This balanced approach ensured an inclusive and comparative analysis across different national and socio-political contexts. Purposive sampling was initially used to identify individuals with relevant knowledge and experiences (Saunders et al. 2019). As the research progressed, theoretical sampling was used to expand upon emerging patterns and deepen conceptual insights by Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2014).

The interviews were conducted through online video calls with integrated transcription software. This enabled the automatic production of verbatim transcripts, ensuring accuracy and consistency. AI-assisted tools were used to compile, organise, and code the transcriptions. These tools were instrumental in managing large volumes of qualitative data, facilitating comparative and critical analysis. While Rubin and Rubin (1995) emphasise the human-centred nature of qualitative analysis, recent advancements in AI-assisted tools further enhance the ability to conduct comparative and critical analysis, particularly through automated coding and pattern recognition. The integration of these technologies enabled the researcher to detect thematic connections more efficiently, identify outliers, and ensure analytical consistency across stakeholder groups and national contexts.

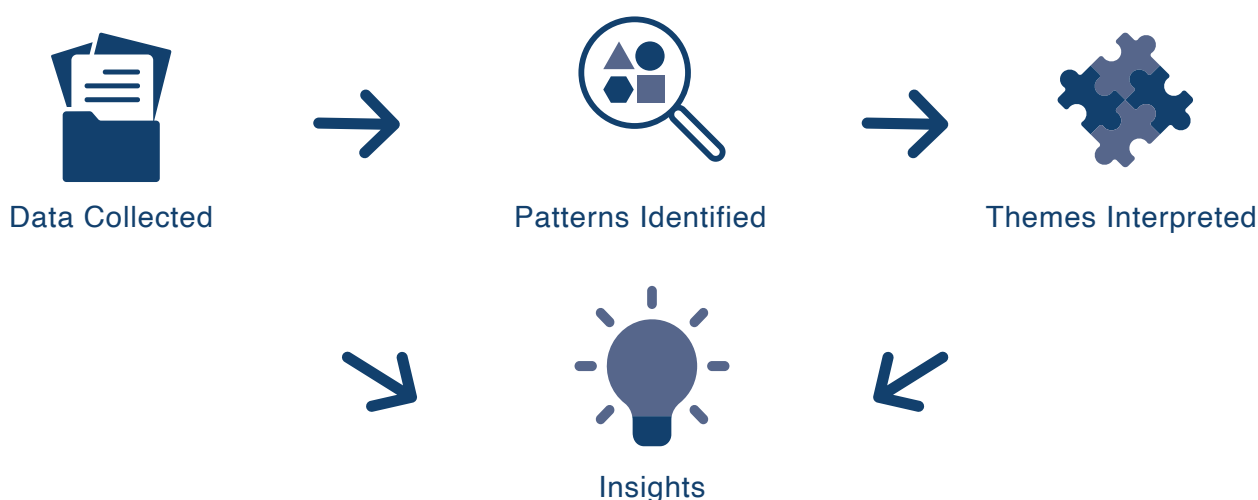
“Data were analysed using thematic analysis, a method particularly suited to qualitative research aimed at identifying and interpreting patterns across data sets.”

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, a method particularly suited to qualitative research aimed at identifying and interpreting patterns across data sets. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data.” This method was selected due to its flexibility and compatibility with both inductive and deductive analysis approaches. It allowed for data organisation according to prominent themes in the literature: Motivation, Development, Youth Organisations, and The Transformation of the Self, while remaining open to emerging themes throughout the coding process. Thematic analysis also complemented the logic of Grounded Theory, supporting a dynamic interplay between data collection and theory development (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Ethical considerations were central to the design and implementation of this study. All participants were provided with clear, accessible information about the nature and purpose of the research, and written informed consent was obtained before participation. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasised, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant anonymity, and ethical standards and data protection legislation handled all personal data. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely and accessible only to the researcher.

This study offered a robust, contextually grounded, and critically reflexive examination of youth volunteering by combining Grounded Theory with semi-structured interviews, supported by AI-enhanced data tools and thematic analysis. The methodology was designed not only to collect data, but to allow emerging insights to inform a deeper understanding of how youth participation in sustainable development work intersects with socio-political realities such as individualism, neoliberalism, and declining civic engagement. The resulting analysis is therefore richly informed by both participants’ lived experiences and the interpretive frameworks emerging from the data itself.

Thematic Analysis in Qualitative Research



A method designed to identify and interpret patterns across qualitative data sets



Data
Analysis





Introduction

This section comprehensively analyses the qualitative data collected through interviews with youth volunteers, non-volunteers, youth workers, and policymakers across several European countries. By examining personal testimonies and thematic patterns, the analysis explores the multifaceted motivations behind youth volunteering, the barriers they encounter, and the impact these experiences have on their personal development and broader community engagement. Drawing on rich narratives, this section highlights how volunteering intersects with themes of altruism, individualism, social transformation, and sustainable development, offering valuable insights into the evolving role of youth in civic and development work.

Motivation

At first, I didn't know what I was going to do after my A-levels...then I thought to myself that I would like to do something useful. By chance, I came across a voluntary service position at Don Bosco through private contacts. It makes sense to work in a place where you can make a difference. On the one hand, it's directly with young people, but on the other hand, it also involves international work...you can also have a positive impact indirectly on a much larger number of people.

(Lens, 22, Volunteer, Germany)

This volunteer is suggesting that the reasons to engage in volunteering are multifaceted and include a combination of motives. This corroborates the literature, which denotes that, in many instances, motivations are not one-dimensional but include variations and blends of altruism, instrumental, and social reasons (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen 1991; Cappellarri & Turati 2004; Handy et al. 2010). Lens stated he wanted to “make a difference” and “have a positive impact” on a large number, but the international aspect enticed him even more. Therefore, his motivations are altruistic, but he also intends to improve his work experience and extend his international network. Similarly, Mike (22, Volunteer, Malta) mentioned that

what motivates him is “the opportunity to travel and discover new things, a new culture and challenges that you feel that you can enjoy, but at the same time, you can do something good.” These reasons are both instrumental and social since he is referring to the importance of learning from challenges and exploring new cultures whilst noting the significance of doing something good, which implies altruism.

Youths who are not into volunteering also alluded to these ideas. Lia (23, Non-Volunteer, Italy) expressed that “the idea of doing it for others, knowing it would have a positive impact not only on them but also on me, could motivate me...volunteering isn’t just an altruistic act”. Again, the coexistence of the dynamics between altruistic and instrumental motivations is crucial and very significant (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen 1991; Cappellari & Turati 2004; Handy et al. 2010). Similarly, Patrick (28, Non-Volunteer, Netherlands) emphasises the importance of finding “it enjoyable” whilst being “happy to help others.” He concludes with the statement that “meeting new people” and “making new friends is a big part of volunteer work”, which points to the amalgamation of altruism and social motivations.

“deeply enriches you, improves your heart, and makes you more aware of your role in the community.”

Something which may not have been explored in depth in the literature review, but was constantly brought up during the interviews, was the problematic context of the ever-increasing individualist culture. Lia (23, Non-Volunteer, Italy) showed her concerns on how today we live in a society where people simply focus on themselves, whilst volunteering offers an opportunity that “deeply enriches you, improves your heart, and makes you more aware of your role in the community.” Although Lia (23, Non-Volunteer, Italy) is not a volunteer, she sees a lot of value in it, especially

to counter rampant individualism, which is hindering our communal nature. Likewise, Gergo (24, Non-Volunteer, Hungary) pinpointed how the media and the music industry are constantly promoting individualism, thus discouraging young people from giving up their time for a greater cause. Policymakers are also alarmed by this rampant individualism and emphasise the importance of community-based activities to counteract it. Pana (35, Policymaker, Spain) expressed how volunteering can help you “to take care of yourself but also collectively,” since the culture of individualism has become so pervasive. Some argue that there is even a kind of resistance in being of help to others. Emma (42, Policymaker, Italy) is so concerned about “this enormous difficulty in finding young people animated by a passion for social work...I see them as very closed in their worlds, too centred in themselves.” This statement presents a very critical outlook of the current situation, which is distancing young people from engagement in social and political issues. Rampant individualism intertwines with the surge of consumeristic culture, which is

“this enormous difficulty in finding young people animated by a passion for social work...I see them as very closed in their worlds, too centred in themselves.”

highly evident in the lifestyle of our youth. Karl (41, Policymaker, Malta) highlighted how consumerism and financial aspirations are steering young people away from volunteering and civic participation since they are more focused on “employment”, “cars”, and “money”. These statements therefore prove what scholars argue, that the expansion of neoliberal policies has fostered a cultural shift where individuals, particularly younger generations, are increasingly disengaging from public life. This shift prioritises personal advancement, economic self-sufficiency, and consumerism over civic participation, leading to more individualised behaviours and declining engagement in community or political activism. Such trends raise concerns about the long-term sustainability of social cohesion and democratic involvement (Hayward 2021; Holdsworth 2017; Kyroglou & Henn 2017, as cited in Carlton et al. 2023).

Another important consideration is that there is a decrease in life satisfaction in European youths (Eurostat 2022), and this can be correlated to the rise of both consumerism and individualism:

As life goes faster and faster and more and more things are demanded of us, we end up neglecting what truly matters. We never dedicate enough time to personal growth or meaningful connections. In the end, this weakens organisations because it dehumanises them, and therefore, it dehumanises people. If we do not nurture the emotional and personal aspects of life, we end up receiving more negative than positive outcomes.

(Pana, 47, Policymaker, Spain)

This argument suggests that youths are exposed to a context that is dominated by an accelerated way of life, where various demands have increased. This fast-paced, consumer-driven individualism is negative since it is leading to emotional exhaustion, weaker social bonds, and a sense of dehumanisation. This suggests that societies should redefine success and happiness, focusing on mental health, social well-being, and meaningful personal engagement rather than purely material or economic achievements.

Youth and community development work could be a valid solution to counter the pervasiveness of individualism and high consumerism. When youths engage in meaningful volunteering experiences, which are based on fostering skills, knowledge, and enhancing the quality of relationships, there is a higher probability that they will become active citizens (Moore 2005; ODI 2013; Rhodes 2023). Martha (19, Volunteer, Malta) highlighted how, through her volunteering, she developed very deep connections, which also empowered her to mentor others:

I feel this community now is my family, almost my second family, and I have received a lot from it. Now I'm a coordinator, so it's my time to give back to this community and watch it grow, meeting new people... Being the person like the mentor that I had in the beginning. What makes it worthwhile is meeting new people and instilling these sorts of values in them, hearing new stories... yeah.... it doesn't get boring... ever.

This shows that such experiences have the propensity for community development since they instill prosocial values and agency. Similarly, Lina (25, Volunteer, Hungary) expressed how meaningful interactions inspired her to continue volunteering since she always experienced “the feeling of being taken care of, being loved.” That also motivated her “to provide that for the kids too”, so that they can feel as good as she did. Certainly, these statements provide evidence that these volunteering spaces create an environment where personal and social skills are developed, fostering a sense of agency toward communal values rather than reinforcing individualism. These sentiments certainly indicate that, in such cases, volunteering contributes to an increase in life satisfaction. Lana (36, Youth Worker, Malta) contends that although life in general is so money-oriented and individualistic, these experiences offer a respite through “the satisfaction you get from voluntary work, the relationships you build, and the connections you make”. Correspondingly, Nick (29, Youth Worker, Estonia) claims that volunteers develop a sense of community and strong relationships, which become essential for their well-being, and that is why they continue to participate.

To a certain extent, there are similarities in motivations between older and younger generations of volunteers. For instance, to help others is very common in both, however, in youth volunteering themes like socialisation to pro-social behaviour and self-actualisation are more evident (Schondel & Boehm 2000). Davi (23, Volunteer, Estonia) recounted how he was going through a harsh time, and he was encouraged to become a volunteer because he wanted to change for the better. In all of this, his friends inspired him with their own volunteering experiences. Correspondingly, Mike (26, Youth Worker, Estonia) explains how young people are motivated by “the group they belong to” and the unique opportunities they are provided, through which they can develop. These statements both resonate with the concepts of pro-social behaviour and that of self-actualisation, since the interviewees highlight personal growth. This kind of reasoning was also revealed by those youths who are still non-volunteers. Lisa (20, Non-Volunteer, Estonia) stated:

Yeah, so, I think personal development is something that could motivate me to start volunteering at some point. Like, I know it could help me grow as a person, you know? And then there’s also the whole networking aspect, which is pretty appealing. It seems like a good way to make connections and get some job experience, which would be super useful. So, I guess those are the kinds of things that could push me to give it a try.

The following discussion will shed more light on both altruistic and self-interest motivations, which will be analysed in separate sections.





Altruistic Motivations

These kinds of motivations are dominated by the long-standing idea of “giving”, “helping others,” and “making a contribution,” which is evident in several studies (Demicheli et al. 2023; Carlton et al. 2023). Rina (20, Volunteer, Italy) vouched for how the testimony of the Salesians, in the school she attended, provided an “impulse towards solidarity and charity”, which underlines the influence of Christian teachings on helping those who are in need. Her volunteering journey started by helping in the organisation of “after-school activities at the oratory for the most disadvantaged kids.” Similarly, Petra (22, Volunteer, Hungary) acknowledged how she is motivated to “help and connect with these children” because “they’ve been through hell.” Again, this shows how the reasons to help the most vulnerable are rooted in a sense of purpose and emotional fulfilment, denoting this strong sense of altruism.

“ impulse towards solidarity and charity ”

Volunteers also point to the fact that what keeps them going is this feeling of having a positive impact on others. Davi (23, Volunteer, Estonia) expressed how one of his primary motivators for continuing his voluntary work, and not to give up, is the way he’s contributing to making “their lives better” because “even the tiniest changes matter.” This shows how he is explicitly linking volunteering motivation to the tangible impact it has on others, reinforcing “contributing” as a long-standing reason to participate in such work. Moreover, his perspective reflects an altruistic drive, but also a sense of agency since he believes that volunteering provides an opportunity to effect real social change, however small.

However, there was a shift in motivational trends in recent years from altruism towards a more self-oriented approach (Demicheli et al. 2023). Niko (48, Youth Worker, Montenegro) acknowledges that while altruism remains a major factor, there is a clear shift toward self-interest, particularly career advancement and international opportunities.

Self-Centred Motivations

In recent years, self-interest motivations have become more evident in the sphere of volunteering, especially in professional development, skill acquisition, and networking. Many young people are engaging in volunteering as a personal investment. Dalma (25, Volunteer, Hungary) claimed that he started because he was “trying to make friends and was also interested in international work”; therefore, he joined a youth

“are perceiving volunteering in a very strategic way to provide networking and professional growth”

organisation to organise events for foreigners whilst also being able to participate in other countries. Similarly, Petra (22, Volunteer, Hungary) stated that an important reason for her to continue volunteering is to gain more valuable experience because she doesn't want to finish University with the thought that she doesn't “know anything about patients and people, and how to approach them as a psychologist.” This shows how these volunteers are perceiving volunteering in a very strategic way to provide networking and professional growth, reflecting current trends where young people see volunteering as a future investment, as also proven in several studies (Jones 2011; Jones 2010; Tiessen 2012, as cited in Demicheli et al. 2023).

Besides their careers, youths are also driven by reasons related to travel and seeking adventure (Simpson 2004, as cited in Demicheli et al. 2023). Inga (25, Volunteer, Estonia) recounted how she started volunteering with this “organisation that was doing different events for students, and it was international, which sounded pretty cool” as she was “looking to make more friends”. Likewise, Karl (41, Policymaker, Malta) mentioned how young people get into volunteering since they are “interested to explore new things...like seeking adventure...like getting to know new people...” These show how youths are attracted to volunteering when it is exciting seeing it as a means of adventure and exploration rather than solely altruistic purposes.

Another significant self-centred motivation that the participants recounted relates to gaining experiences of personal growth (Heron 2007, as cited in Demicheli et al. 2023). Many Policymakers, including Raul (46, Policymaker, Spain), Gabor (35, Policymaker, Hungary), and Pana (35, Policymaker, Spain), recounted how youths are drawn to volunteering to socialise with their peers and develop on a personal level. Raul (46, Policymaker, Spain) emphasised that for them, the most important value they get from volunteering is “it's this emotional part of being with similar people,” and through “continuous feedback,” there is a possibility for personal growth. Even non-volunteers acknowledged these reasons, in fact Mark (21, Non-Volunteer, Malta) highlighted how he could be motivated to volunteer since it can improve his “self-esteem”, “confidence”, and “emotional well-being”, showing that volunteering isn't just about giving back but it's also about personal transformation.

To conclude this part, the literature on this field demonstrates that nowadays volunteering is shifting towards motivations of personal benefits related to career, leisure, profession, and skill development (Roman et al. 2018; Jardim & Marques 2018), and these findings prove it. Paul (19, Policymaker, Estonia) discussed how “voluntary work helps young people on the career ladder and contributes to gaining work experience,” and similarly, Mike (26, Youth Worker, Estonia) discussed how “a skill that started from voluntary work can generate a very good income later.” Janos (25, Youth Worker, Hungary) pointed out that “volunteering is not just memories, but it’s building future connections,” denoting the importance of developing prospective networking opportunities. Inga (25, Volunteer, Estonia) admitted that volunteering is “about self-belief and personal development” whilst Maris (28, Volunteer, Spain) gives weight to “the opportunity to travel and discover new things...”. However, the clearest finding is that self-centred motivations are practically always combined with a dose of altruism, as indicated in Lia’s (20, Non-volunteer, Italy) response.

The idea of doing it for others, knowing it would have a positive impact not only on them but also on me, could motivate me. Volunteering isn’t just an altruistic act; it’s an experience that helps you grow as a person. It allows you to see the world through different eyes and become a better version of yourself.

This perspective reinforces the idea that volunteering is both an outward and inward journey; it is about helping others while also evolving as an individual.



Barriers

While volunteering is often promoted as a fulfilling and valuable experience, many young people face significant barriers that prevent them from engaging in volunteer activities. These obstacles range from time constraints and financial limitations to a lack of awareness and social pressures. This part explores the key findings in this regard.

“the unpaid nature of volunteering is a significant obstacle”

A significant reason youths do not volunteer is a lack of time, often due to work, studies and personal commitments. Lisa (20, Non-Volunteer, Estonia) argued that the biggest challenge is time when it comes to volunteering. She would “probably consider volunteering more seriously,” but right now, with her “job and everything else going on, it’s just hard to find the time.” Likewise, Sarah (19, Non-volunteer, Malta) combined the issue of time with money as she stated that she would be ready to cut down on her working hours and volunteer, but financial constraints get in the way. This situation is critically summed up by Karl’s (42, Policymaker, Malta) statement when he emphasised that “nowadays, young people need to study, they need to work, or they want to work, and that leaves them with little time for their personal growth.” Therefore, this resonates with the literature that time and financial constraints are obstacles to getting into volunteering (Observatory of Voluntary Work: Lessons and Reflections, 2020, as cited in Demicheli et al. 2023; Davis-Smith 1999), also highlighting the correlation between the two.

For many young people, the unpaid nature of volunteering is a significant obstacle. Those who need to earn money to support their studies, housing, or daily expenses often prioritise paid jobs over such experiences. Nina (26, Volunteer, Belgium) argued that although she wanted to do more voluntary work, she also had to get a job to fund her studies whilst Nick (29, Youth Worker, Estonia) was more critical in his analysis as he mentioned that not getting money can be demotivating “especially as you grow older and you realise that you need to take care of yourself, pay rent, pay utilities, bills, and everything.” These comments precisely resonate with the findings of Carlton et al. (2023), where interviewees alluded that volunteering could come at a “cost,” specifically due to financial burdens.

Some youths do not volunteer due to a lack of awareness and complex procedures of engagement. Lara (21, Non-Volunteer, Italy) claimed that “not knowing where to start can be a significant hurdle. The vast array of associations can be overwhelming, or sometimes you’re just unaware of available opportunities.” Likewise, Nara

“not knowing where to start can be a significant hurdle. The vast array of associations can be overwhelming, or sometimes you’re just unaware of available opportunities.”

(33, Youth Worker, Spain) argued that “they don’t have enough information about volunteering projects”; therefore, they do not know where they can go. These issues corroborate with other research where participants also referred to lack of knowledge, lack of contact, and lack of awareness as barriers to volunteering (Observatory of Voluntary Work: Lessons and Reflections, 2020, as cited in Demicheli et al. 2023). Another related matter is that of complex application processes. Paul (19, Policymaker, Estonia) lamented how this “process created fear in young people; the process is similar to applying for a job,” having to write a motivating letter, which for some is quite daunting. This is surely a great obstacle for those who suffer from social anxiety, as they need to come out of their comfort zones to participate (Haski-Leventhal et al. 2008). Thus, such processes hinder them even more. This was also highlighted by Karl (41, Policymaker, Malta) when he stated that some people are “too shy” and getting “out there and meet new people can be a challenge”, therefore insinuating that some youths are hesitant to join due to social anxiety and a reluctance “to get out of their comfort zones.” Other struggles are those that are more of a logistical nature. Ana (32, Youth Worker, France) contended that some youth groups quite literally do not have a place where they can meet, and those living in more rural areas are at a huge disadvantage to participate. Similarly, Lara (21, Non-Volunteer, Italy) pinpointed the same logistical challenges for those living in isolated areas or facing mobility complications; therefore, transportation costs and rural remoteness discourage participation.

Some barriers are social and psychological, coming from various sources. Cisco (23, Non-Volunteer, Spain) explained how “family opinion and some social pressure play a role.” His family wants him to stay focused and not get distracted by secondary things. Correspondingly, Jane (34, Youth Worker, Estonia) referred to how youths can face negative outcomes like bullying “when volunteering is not seen as ‘cool’ in their school or their community”. Therefore, social perceptions shape whether youth engage in volunteering since, as Holdsworth and Quinn (2012) and Eliasoph (2013) argue, it is not always framed as a ‘good thing’. Moreover, in both Cisco’s (23, Non-Volunteer, Spain) and Jane’s (34, Youth Worker, Estonia) statements, there is a reference to the conditional influence of power relations (Bečević & Dahlstedt 2021; Tupuola 2004) exhibited by “family” and “bullies”.



Demotivation

Many volunteers claimed that such experiences are very rewarding, however, youths also referred to feelings of demotivation due to burnout, lack of recognition, or unclear impact. These factors can lead volunteers to lose interest, disengage, or quit entirely.

One of the most common reasons by which volunteers get demotivated is when they are feeling overworked or undervalued. When it becomes too much, volunteers experience burnout. Ana (32, Youth Worker, France) argued how “volunteers sometimes feel

“volunteers sometimes feel overwhelmed because the work keeps increasing, but there are not enough new people joining in to help.”

overwhelmed because the work keeps increasing, but there are not enough new people joining in to help.” Inevitably, this “makes it hard to sustain the same level of enthusiasm over time” since there is a lack of additional support, which leads to exhaustion. This resonates with the findings of Hayward (2021) and Nairn (2019), which show that the rise of individualism and self-responsibility is leading to volunteers experiencing more stress and burnout.

Another factor is a lack of recognition and appreciation. Lisa (20, Non-Volunteer, Estonia) claimed that “sometimes, volunteers work hard, and it feels like no one even notices. It makes you wonder if what you’re doing matters.” This shows an element of frustration towards the situation, indicating that volunteers need regular feedback and appreciation to remain engaged. Nonetheless, this also depends on the possibility of seeing a tangible impact of their work. If volunteers feel disconnected from results, they may feel that their efforts are meaningless and lose motivation. Research (Observatory of Voluntary Work: Lessons and Reflections’ 2020, as cited in Demicheli et al. 2023) shows that a perceived inability to

make a difference is a significant barrier, which policymakers also highlighted in this study. Karl (41, Policymaker, Malta) was very clear in this when he remarked that “if people do not feel that their actions are making a difference, they may stop engaging. Volunteering should have visible results that motivate people to continue.” Likewise, Gabor (35, Policymaker, Hungary) was critical of projects which are “repetitive or unstructured,” also emphasising that volunteers need to “understand what they are contributing to.” These interviewees are reinforcing the importance that participants need to see a real-world impact of their work to remain motivated, and having the right structure will help them not to feel lost or disengaged.



Development

For me, development means that something in the environment changes as well. You can educate and help children, but if nothing else changes, more children will end up in the same situation. What also attracted me to this project is that, besides taking in children and giving them a home, they also worked in the slums. They tried to get children off the dumps and provided sexual education to help control family sizes. I found that important because it helps prevent future problems.

(Pim, 29, Volunteer, Netherlands)

This explanation looks at the term from a holistic view of development that aligns more closely with the principles of sustainable development, which are “future” oriented. It emphasises the need for systemic change rather than temporary relief by referring to long-term solutions, such as education and improved living conditions, to prevent recurring issues like poverty. Addressing root causes, such as providing sexual education to promote informed family planning, supports health and gender equality, whilst the focus on transforming slum conditions also ties into sustainable urban development. Ultimately, this statement dovetails with the United Nations’ (2015) SDGs as it underscores that true development requires long-term, inclusive strategies that empower communities and create lasting impact. Likewise, certain non-volunteers have the same understanding of the term. Mary (24, Non-Volunteer, Estonia) outlined that development is “the process of improving the quality of life and well-being of people,” especially those who live in economically and socially deprived areas. She added that efforts should include “better living conditions, access to education, healthcare, and opportunities to build a better future”, therefore reinforcing the importance of a strategy which is founded on principles of sustainable development.

“the process of improving the quality of life and well-being of people”

Youth volunteers should be at the forefront of the development agenda, and this was highlighted by the United Nations (2021) as a strategy to engage more youth in the implementation of the SDGs. Jane (34, Youth Worker, Estonia) supports this vision since she believes that “volunteering plays a significant role in sustainable development because it engages people in actively executing programs and initiatives.” Moreover, she emphasised that volunteering provides an opportunity for young people to “understand global issues, test themselves in different activities, and raise their awareness of real-world challenges.” For Nick (29, Youth Worker, Estonia), youth volunteering is even more relevant to achieve the development agenda since young people will be on this planet longer than the older generations. This provides a better possibility of a bigger impact to create “a better planet and society for the future.”

One of the targets that the United Nations (2021) established in this plan of action for youth volunteering and SDGs is to strengthen people's ownership of the development agenda. Fr. Reja (46, Policymaker, Colombia) complied with this objective since he advocates

“understand global issues, test themselves in different activities, and raise their awareness of real-world challenges.”

that volunteerism can increasingly achieve its scope of being a main axis in development cooperation and that volunteers are indeed key actors in this process. However, there is a lot of evidence that proves that there is a lack of awareness of SDGs, thus hindering the ownership of it. For instance, Pim (29, Volunteer, Netherlands) claimed that he is completely unaware, whilst Berta (24, Volunteer, Hungary) hinted that she “heard about them” without deep understanding or knowledge. While some volunteers are unaware of the SDGs, non-volunteers generally have less exposure and a weaker recognition of them. Liis (16, Non-Volunteer, Estonia) expressed a complete lack of familiarity, whereas Lisa (20, Non-Volunteer, Estonia) claimed that she has minimal awareness about them from school, and Ester (18, Non-Volunteer, Hungary) acknowledged that she simply has a very limited understanding from an event. Helen (40, Policymaker, Malta) showed her concern about the limited awareness of SDGs among young people and stated that, apart from those who study politics or law, only those who “are activists within the environment field or the community field” have any knowledge about this. On this point, Paul (19, Policymaker, Estonia) contended that, unfortunately, SDGs are not a priority in education because “there is not much information on this topic in schools.” Moreover, Karl (41, Policymaker, Malta) argued that even educators lack knowledge and understanding because his colleagues are “not even aware of what the SDGs are...there's a lot of push, but not enough.”

Another target that the United Nations (2021) founded in this plan of action for youth volunteering and SDGs is to integrate volunteering into national and global implementation strategies. To address this issue, Maris (28, Volunteer, Spain) claimed that “all development should be brought closer together in some way to make it more accessible to our young people” and that those “who have been volunteering and helping others should spread their testimony and share their experiences with those who have not been exposed to voluntary work.” This perspective highlights the importance of creating a synergised system to promote volunteering and integrate it into policies to create a more sustainable impact. Helen (40, Policymaker, Malta) was critical on how “at times, volunteering is taken lightly, mainly associated with good-hearted people rather than being an active citizen”, thus missing on the possibility to empower young people to take ownership of the development agenda and drive meaningful change by aligning volunteer initiatives with formal strategies.

The final target that the United Nations (2021) devised is to measure volunteering to contribute to a holistic understanding of people's engagement in SDG implementation. Janos (25, Youth Worker, Hungary) claimed that the influence of volunteering can be evaluated by monitoring how it affects participants' professional lives and local community growth. This provides insights into long-term contributions beyond immediate project outputs. Nick (29, Youth Worker, Estonia) contended that it can be done through direct feedback via

surveys, interviews, and focus groups, depending on the project. This offers a well-rounded evaluation of volunteer contributions. Measuring delayed but meaningful outcomes is also significantly highlighted by Ana (32, Youth Worker, France) since “the fruit will come later, and it might take different forms,” which insinuates the importance of longitudinal studies and continuous monitoring of volunteer-led initiatives in this regard.

Active Citizenship for Development

Volunteering can develop active citizenship to achieve better development goals (United Nations 2021a). Raul (46, Policymaker, Spain) is a strong advocate for this and believes in this vision:

For me, young people are key. Not only because of the impact they can make, but also because volunteering builds citizenship. When young people engage in volunteering, they develop critical thinking and become more interested in the development agenda. They are likely to push for policies supporting sustainability and demand action from political stakeholders. Volunteering is a citizenship learning process.

Raul (46, Policymaker, Spain) sees volunteering as a pathway to active citizenship, and this perspective aligns with the United Nations’ (2021a; 2021b) argument that volunteering enhances civic engagement. By engaging in voluntary work, young people become aware of policy issues and demand action from political leaders, ultimately contributing to democratic participation and sustainability. Both the United Nations (2021b) and Raul’s (46, Policymaker, Spain) insights indicate that volunteering empowers individuals, particularly youth, to influence governance structures. Volunteers do not simply contribute at a grassroots level; they also advocate for systemic changes by demanding more inclusive and participatory



policymaking. Moreover, Helen (40, Policymaker, Malta) argued that “volunteering should be a responsibility of every citizen. If we want to have a healthy community and a solid society, everyone should contribute.” This argument supports the notion that volunteering instils a civic duty mindset, ensuring that individuals take active responsibility for social equity and sustainability. This dovetails with the findings of a study (Observatory of Voluntary Work: Lessons and Reflections’ 2020, as cited in Demicheli et al. 2023) which hypothesises that being a volunteer significantly influences one’s sense of responsibility and engagement in development efforts.

Volunteering is also a civic engagement that fosters social cohesion and reduces social risks. Gabor (35, Policymaker, Hungary) stated that youth volunteering enhances “social connections” and “social networks” as it provides the space for growth in “a lot of skills, mainly soft skills and empathy.” This aligns with Catalano et al. (2004), who found that civic engagement reduces risks and the need for social care. These findings suggest that volunteering fosters social cohesion and equips young people with skills that make them more adaptable and resilient in diverse social environments. Moreover, Fr. Reja (46, Policymaker, Colombia) highlighted that youth volunteering can counteract the rapid increase of polarisation if youth organisations promote “a vision of openness” whilst empowering them to take initiative and create resilience against social fragmentation. This was also remarked by the United Nations (2021a) that volunteering can help diverse groups to come together and improve the spirit of social solidarity. Ultimately, youth volunteering enhances skills that facilitate effective development work.

Skills

In development work, advocacy is an indispensable skill, and volunteering provides this possibility. Raul (46, Policymaker, Spain) claimed that within the right process, young people can become “more critical-thinking citizens, more interested in policies, and they will push for change.” He is suggesting that volunteering fosters critical thinking, making young people more likely to advocate for policies that support sustainability and social justice. Advocacy, in this sense, emerges not just as a practice but as a learned skill through active participation. This dovetails with the study by Duguid et al. (2013), which emphasises how young volunteers acquire crucial advocacy skills, including:

1. Understanding social issues. Pana (35, Policymaker, Spain) highlighted that this is obtained because volunteers step outside their comfort zones, develop critical thinking, and engage with diverse social realities, making their advocacy more impactful.
2. Influencing government and corporate policies. Raul (46, Policymaker, Spain) stated that through activism, volunteers learn how to apply pressure, both at the grassroots and institutional levels.
3. Building public campaigns. Karl (41, Policymaker, Malta) argued that the practical experience of volunteering by direct engagement helps the participants to move

beyond the theoretical and be able to mobilise people effectively. This is because they would have developed “real-world skills”.

4. Learning from past successes and failures. Helen (40, Policymaker, Malta) emphasised that youth organisations should be encouraged to document “their successes and failures” so we would be in a better position to “ensure that future advocacy efforts are stronger and better informed”. Structured reflection and historical awareness strengthen future advocacy strategies.

In this regard, Nara (33, Youth Worker, Spain) stressed that the volunteering experience should be amalgamated with training on advocacy as it builds confidence and equips individuals to influence change:

I felt so empowered after I finished every training course in which I participated. I gained the self-confidence that I could change the world. I got the knowledge for free, funded by international grants, and learned how to do advocacy campaigns.

This statement suggests that free, grant-funded advocacy programs provide accessible opportunities for youth to engage in meaningful social action. Another important skill that correlates with advocacy is that of political efficacy. Raul (46, Policymaker, Spain) claimed that when volunteers engaged in development projects, they are more likely to get “more involved in politics in an open way of saying politics. I mean, not only in political parties but also in activities to change policies.” Similarly, Fr. Reja (46, Policymaker, Colombia) explained that after their voluntary experiences, several young people end up making decisions to dedicate their professional life “to development issues, particularly in psychological support, the social sciences, or the world of politics.” These statements correspond to other findings where it is proven that volunteers felt more empowered to participate in political activism by influencing policy and gaining public support for their cause (Duguid et al. 2013).

Volunteering bridges the gap between civic participation and active political engagement; however, the model of development that is applied in such work has huge implications for both the participants and the communities.

Models of Development

For many years, the structure of development work focused on charity, which reinforced the normalisation of poverty and the culture of dependency stemming from a disproportionate power relationship between a generous donor and a grateful recipient (Farmer 2004; Occhipinti 2014).

Although over the years, there were efforts to change towards more equitable models, the discourse of charity within development work is still prevalent. For instance, Maris (28, Volunteer, Spain) stated that she always wanted “to go to Africa as a volunteer, but for

personal reasons,” she couldn’t do it. Her biggest motivation is the “great satisfaction” she will get by helping “those most in need, and to get closer to those brothers and sisters of ours who don’t have the necessary resources, as I could have, or anyone else around me...these people need us”. These statements portray a deep personal connection that is founded on altruism and charity; however, sustainable development efforts must shift from “helping” to “empowering” or else these efforts will just be one-time charitable acts, reinforcing a system of dependency. Similarly, Pim (29, Volunteer, Netherlands) stated how he still donates “a decent amount each year to that charity...seeing what you can do with that kind of money in the Netherlands and how many people you can help abroad is quite remarkable.” This alludes to the popular appeal of charity-based giving which, although it is crucial, there is a risk of becoming a feel-good exercise rather than a meaningful sustainable intervention. Karl (41, Policymaker, Malta) highlighted that he is critical of charity-based projects because they create dependency instead of enhancing people’s ability to shape their futures. Correspondingly, Pim (29, Volunteer, Netherlands) emphasised that “development means that something in the environment changes as well. You can educate and help children, but if nothing else changes, more children will end up in the same situation.” This critique highlights a major flaw in the charity model, that although it often provides temporary relief it does not address the root causes. Development efforts must target long-term solutions with a framework where, as Nicole Monney stated

It’s about working together to find solutions and not putting all the onus on one group or another. It’s recognising that everyone has something to bring to find a solution...you definitely need to come into communities with an open mind that works with, listens, responds, and collaborates. Equally valuing partners is a good start.

(Rhodes 2023)

Participants acknowledged that collaborating and valuing the partnership model is much more beneficial than simply being driven by charity. Janos (25, Youth Worker, Hungary) highlighted the significance of international partnerships, including those in less developed regions, such as “opportunities in Chile...opportunities in Asia, opportunities in Africa...chances to build good partnerships.” This shift in discourse recognises the possibility of cross-border knowledge-sharing whilst strengthening the skills and resources of all participants. Likewise, Ana (32, Youth Worker, France) noted the importance of the co-learning aspect of partnership within development work:

With other NGOs, I would say usually it’s kind of like development in our domain. So, for example, education, non-formal education. But then also touching on human rights education, democracy, peacebuilding, gender equality, and so forth. That would be cooperating to do the projects together but also learning from each other through meetings and sharing good practices.

This approach prioritises collaboration not just to execute projects, but also to exchange knowledge and refine approaches. Partnerships bridge the gaps and lead to an inclusive, more

comprehensive, effective, and sustainable decision-making environment. This corroborates studies that demonstrate the positive effect of horizontal relationships within development programs, as these create a challenging and empowering learning environment (Occhipinti 2014: 121; Wilson 2006). The UNDP (United Nations Development Program) is founded on such principles of reciprocity (Lopes & Theisohn 2003), which in essence emphasise the concept of 'doing with' rather than 'doing for'. Gabor (35, Policymaker, Hungary) stated that they are in line with this vision since they "run capacity-building projects to strengthen internal and external networks. Through these projects, we exchange knowledge internationally, supporting organizational growth beyond just financial aid." This shows a shift from financial dependency towards knowledge-sharing and empowerment.

Negative Considerations

Volunteering opportunities in development work should be inclusive and incorporate everyone. However, that is not always the case. Pana (35, Policymaker, Spain) alluded to the fact that in certain situations, "participation is elitist" because "you have to have a series of economic resources or a certain way of life, otherwise volunteering is very complex." She is emphasising that not all youths can afford to participate, creating more marginalisation and reinforcing the status of privilege. This also resonates with Pim's (29, Volunteer, Netherlands) reference to how he was inspired by other volunteers who were "well-educated and spoke English" since "they came from a similar background" to his. These findings corroborate with other studies which show that there is a correlation between volunteering, privilege, and well-educated backgrounds (Williamson, Hoskins & Boetzelen 2006).

Another consideration that must be factored in is the negative impact that volunteering projects can have on youths if they are not run well, offering the right training and the necessary support structures. Rosa (34, Policymaker, Italy) highlighted that.

Sometimes there is a lack of mentoring during the volunteer projects. The fact that we send, we need to... safeguard the environment. In some volunteering projects, it is not a friendly environment towards volunteers, and can become toxic after a while. Volunteering sometimes ends up in a kind of professional exploitation.

Finally, there are also negative consequences of reinforcing paternalism within such development projects (Pantea 2012). Niko (48, Youth Worker, Montenegro) argued that, unfortunately, there is still a lack of education about ethical volunteering on this. Many young people engage in international volunteering without critical awareness of its potential harm, such as promoting attitudes of superiority towards those being helped and negating the possibility of empowerment or agency.

Youth Organisations

They just start liking it so much. They like the community that we have. They find friends among the volunteers. And it's kind of like they develop almost sort of a habit, where if they do not do something, they miss this feeling. They miss these emotions that they're getting. They miss the connection.

(Mike, 26, Youth Worker, Estonia)

One of the most significant questions that was addressed in this research was to actually find out why youths join and even continue their participation in such organisations. As indicated in the above statement, seeking a sense of belonging and emotional connections are important factors. Likewise, Ana (32, Youth Worker, France) claimed that young people join organisations to experience a “sense of community,” and that motivates them to stay engaged.

This shows that the motivations to start and continue their participation are founded on social bonds and emotional connections. Furthermore, Niko (48, Youth Worker, Montenegro) added that to stay engaged, youths have to feel trusted and valued within an organisation. This sense of acceptance and inclusion strengthens their bond with the group. The desire to belong in safe environments corresponds with very similar findings from other studies, whereby it is portrayed as a crucial element for any youth organisation (Taru 2010; Fyfe et al. 2018; Nolas 2014, as cited in Sonneveld et al. 2022; Lehner et al. 2022).

Another important aspect that youths seek in organisations is an avenue where they can make a noticeable difference. Pana (35, Policymaker, Spain) pinpointed that apart from wanting to “belong somewhere”, youths join because they “want to be part of something to do their bit in the world...to be the change”. This shows how youth organisations provide a platform for young people to engage in social and political change. Similarly, Janos (25, Youth Worker, Hungary) claimed how as an organisation they strive “to empower youths to make their own decisions, create their own goals and also organise their events.” Therefore, youth organisations are not just passive spaces but active platforms where young people develop the necessary skills to engage in decision-making and influence policies. This was also corroborated by Gianni's (25, Volunteer, Italy) testimony of CasaleLab:

CasaleLab was born out of a need - a need felt by a group of young people from Casal di Principe to commit to their community during a time when young people, particularly in Casal di Principe and nearby areas, showed no interest in self-improvement or improving their surroundings...The goal was to create opportunities, even something as simple as leisure activities, to fill free time in a meaningful way, rather than just hanging around outside a bar.

This demonstrates that youth organisations help young people take ownership of local development rather than being passive recipients of policies designed for them. It aligns with the argument that youth voices should be included in policymaking from start to finish. These statements resonate with other findings that youth organisations are agents of change (Carlton et al. 2023), especially when young people's interests and needs are at the centre (Batsleer 2008, as cited in Sonneveld et al. 2022) in an environment that is very conducive to openness (Doherty & De St. Croix 2019; Metz 2016; Ord 2014, as cited in Sonneveld et al. 2022).

Prosocial Skills and Benefits

Voluntary organisations provide a system and a structure where prosocial skills can flourish. Rina (20, Volunteer, Italy) claimed that these groups provide structured opportunities for individuals to engage in meaningful prosocial activities and “seeing the smiles of people who receive the medicines we collect during the pharmaceutical collection days...these tangible responses to a need are incredibly motivating.” These initiatives promote and reinforce prosocial skills like empathy, altruism, and responsibility. This corresponds to other studies which demonstrate the importance of youth organisations in fostering social integration and collective solidarity (Sonneveld et al. 2020; Bergin et al. 2003; Carlton et al. 2023).

The findings indicate that participation in such organisations develops the following benefits:

1. **Personal Growth and Self-Confidence.** Martha (19, Volunteer, Malta) and Mike (26, Youth Worker, Estonia), as previously mentioned, referred to how youth organisations provide a sense of belonging and experience of growth. This is similar to other studies, which demonstrate that these groups help participants to gain self-mastery (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, as cited in Sonneveld et al. 2022) and improve the quality of their relationships (Bartelink & Verheijden, 2015, as cited in Sonneveld et al. 2022).
2. **Leadership and Organisational Skills.** Both Janos (25, Youth Worker, Hungary) and Gianni (25, Volunteer, Italy) indicated that their organisations provide opportunities where youths develop skills in leadership, decision-making, event planning, and active citizenship. This corresponds with similar findings whereby youth participation in such group-based settings enhances these skills (Fyfe et al. 2018; Rumping et al. 2017, as cited in Sonneveld et al. 2022), especially in setting goals (Fish 2014, as cited in Sonneveld et al. 2022) and achieving them (Dworkin et al. 2003, as cited in Sonneveld et al. 2022).
3. **Networking and Career Development.** Dalma (25, Volunteer, Hungary) explained how these organisations help youths to expand their social networks, even internationally, whilst Niko (48, Youth Worker, Montenegro) mentioned how youth organisations are stepping stones towards career growth.

4. **Emotional Support and Guidance.** Rana (21, Volunteer, Spain) recounted how “the scouts’ group was like a whole family to me because at the time, I had some issues at home with my parents’ divorce. I felt that the scouts group place was very safe for me...”. Many young people find emotional refuge in such organisations, particularly in challenging times, and this corroborates studies that indicate how youngsters are more likely to find support firstly in these settings because they are more hesitant to directly seek professional help. However, these groups are necessary channels for such services. (Fyfe et al. 2018; Koops et al. 2014; Manders & Metz 2017, as cited in Sonneveld et al. 2022).

Negative Implications

Certain dynamics within voluntary organisations result in negative experiences for participants. One of them is a lack of real influence and decision-making power. Helen (40, Policymaker, Malta) warned that this can come from the more experienced volunteers when they create an environment “that disheartens the young person because they might want to be very involved, but there’s no room for them to explore...they might feel that they’re wasting their time or that they do not have the accurate skills to give their service.” Volunteers can feel excluded from meaningful participation when long-lasting members dominate decision-making. This creates a sense of tokenism, where young people are present but have little actual influence. This resonates with findings suggesting that, because of certain processes, youths end up relegated to inferior positions, losing any sense of meaningful involvement and empowerment (Hadfield-Hill & Christensen 2019; Vromen and Collin 2010, as cited in Carlton et al. 2023).

Other negative considerations that the participants lamented are those related to bureaucracy and institutional barriers. Gianni (25, Volunteer, Italy) argued, “you have to study the rules and laws, understand the bureaucratic procedures, and figure out how to follow the regulations to establish an association.” Therefore, it is very challenging to operate, especially when there is a lack of cooperation. In fact, on this point, Linda (30, Policymaker, Estonia) highlighted that “there is no coordination in the big picture,” and similarly, Rosa (34, Policymaker, Italy) argued that there are opportunities out there, “but we don’t know how to reach them. So sometimes, it’s just a basic issue of accessibility.” These arguments suggest that governments and institutions need to create an improved system and a cooperative framework to facilitate the work of such youth organisations. Gianni (47, Policymaker, Italy) complained that they try to engage more youths in their organisations through “youth forums, association councils, civil service projects...but the process to get them involved can be bureaucratic and slow.” The conclusion is that red tape is affecting youth engagement, which corresponds to similar data from another research (Carlton et al. 2023).

Engagement and Effectiveness

One of the aims of this research project was to find out how youth organisations can attract more young people to participate in development projects and how their efforts could be more effective. All the different stakeholders were asked these fundamental questions.

A lack of awareness is one of the biggest barriers preventing young people from joining youth organisations. Many young people have little to no exposure to volunteer opportunities, and they do not actively seek them out. The absence of strong promotional efforts means that volunteering remains invisible to many. Lisa (20, Non-Volunteer, Estonia) contended that “there needs to be way more promotion around volunteering. I never see anything about it on social media, and at school, they barely mention it.” Therefore, outreach strategies need to be strengthened and made more visible.

Social media and digital presence are certainly crucial. Davi (23, Volunteer, Estonia) argued that youth organisations have to up their game and strive for “a clear and appealing brand identity...this should also extend to platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where young people are most active.” Correspondingly, Inga (25, Volunteer, Estonia) specified that “organisations should provide high-quality graphic design, photography, and video content because good visuals attract young people.” The point that is being emphasised here is that there needs to be more investment in the quality of their social media and digital presence if a youth organisation aspires to be successful. They should focus on an appealing, engaging, and highly visual digital presence.

Schools and universities serve as primary hubs for young people. If youth organisations present volunteering as an extracurricular or community service initiative, it increases exposure and normalises participation. Dalma (25, Volunteer, Hungary) believes that “organisations should be in contact with universities or educational institutions. That’s where motivated people have time to engage” and Adriana (22, Volunteer, Estonia) added awareness in schools and universities helps especially by giving “information sessions, introducing the organisations, and sharing personal experiences.”

Therefore, enhancing visibility through digital marketing and educational outreach ensures that youth organisations remain on young people’s radar. Volunteers are often more likely to share and speak out (‘Impact Study World Servants’ 2016, as cited in Demicheli et al. 2023). Thus, they should be encouraged to share their experiences online. The more young people see, hear, and develop personal connections with the organisation, the more likely they are to get involved.

Another critical factor, which is very much linked to the above, is understanding the new generation; in fact, Karl (41, Policymaker, Malta) asked, “Do we know enough about this generation?” Young people today have different interests and motivations compared to past generations. Many are drawn to experiences that provide excitement, align with their values, and integrate into their existing lifestyles. On this point, Martha (19, Volunteer, Malta)

emphasised that “instead of sticking to old methods, organisations must adapt to how the current generation views volunteering and social engagement.” If volunteering is viewed as outdated or too formal, organisations should gamify, create social challenges, and offer engaging opportunities rather than obligatory and boring. Programs need to be tailored accordingly since young people are more motivated by personal needs and interests (Roman et al. 2018; Jardim & Marques 2018).

Many young people express interest in volunteering but feel constrained by time, complex application processes, and unclear expectations. Flexibility and clear entry points are crucial to lowering these barriers (Observatory of Voluntary Work: Lessons and Reflections’ 2020, as cited in Demicheli et al. 2023). Ester (18, Non-Volunteer, Hungary) argued that “if there were volunteer opportunities that weren’t very time-consuming, more young people would get involved.” Long-term commitments deter many young people. Offering one-time events, weekend projects, or micro-volunteering opportunities can increase participation. Another problem is the application process; in fact, Dalma (25, Volunteer, Hungary) encouraged organisations to “provide clear steps for how to get involved, with simple application processes and guidance.” Making sign-ups quick, digital, and straightforward will encourage more participation. Moreover, Cara (19, Non-Volunteer, Spain) contended that “youth organisations should offer a small rewards system or points-based incentives for participation. All these changes might even encourage first-time participants to later commit to long-term involvement.”

Something which was also clearly emphasised is that organisations should develop a strong sense of belonging. If they feel welcomed and valued, they are more likely to promote it and remain committed to the group. Gianni (25, Volunteer, Italy) highlighted that “The best way to attract young people is through word of mouth. We grew from seven volunteers to 32 because of shared passion, not coercion.” Likewise, Mark (21, Non-Volunteer, Malta) admitted that he will be more motivated to join a voluntary organisation if his friends recommend it. He concluded that “friends can be a major influence in getting more young people involved.” This suggests that if the organisation is appealing, the youths themselves will spread the word and encourage peer engagement. Therefore, to achieve this, Jane (34, Youth Worker, Estonia) contended, “community-building is key. If young people feel that they belong to a cause and a group that cares, they are more likely to invest time in volunteering.” Finally, this strategy bears fruition if young people are empowered to lead, and on this point, Niko (48, Youth Worker, Montenegro) argued that it is not enough to give young people “a voice” but to “let young people drive initiatives” themselves. These recommendations correspond with other studies, which indicate the importance of creating safe and welcoming spaces (Taru 2010) and also of actively involving young people in decision-making rather than just offering them pre-planned opportunities (Oaktree et al. 2016).

Finally, there are financial and logistical barriers that need to be addressed. Rosa (34, Policymaker, Italy) argued that “volunteering should not be a privilege. If young people were reimbursed for some costs or offered small stipends, more would participate.” Although there are a lot of funding opportunities, some segments are still being left out. Therefore, youth organisations have to find broader ways to make these experiences more accessible.

This dovetails with the research of Williamson, Hoskins, and Boetzelen (2006), which confirms that the majority of participants in many volunteering programs are still coming from well-educated backgrounds. Moreover, Inga (25, Volunteer, Estonia) stressed that youth organisations should also create fundraising and seek sponsorship programs to fund their marketing strategies because “without financial resources, it’s difficult to attract new members.”

The interviewees provided suggestions that could make youth organisations more successful in attracting and retaining young volunteers, ensuring long-term growth and impact. However, the final and most indispensable component in any kind of volunteering is the experience of self-transformation. This will be addressed in the next section.

Transformation of the Self

My experience made me understand that I can do everything I wish...that I shouldn't be afraid, and I will manage to handle whatever life has in store for me. Volunteering has turned my life upside down in a good way; it boosted my self-confidence, helped to establish my beliefs, and gave me a sense of involvement and value.

(Davi, 23, Volunteer, Estonia)

Volunteering is more than just an act of service, as it allows the possibility of immense self-transformation. In this case, this volunteer indicated how these experiences expanded his self-perception, tested his resilience and adaptability, inspired a radical shift in his perspectives, improved his self-esteem, and provided a sense of purpose. This powerful statement is a testament to the transformative influence of volunteering as it portrays a journey of discovery and self-growth. This parallels with other studies where volunteering contributed to achieving Maslow’s highest level of the hierarchy of needs (Observatory of Voluntary Work: Lessons and Reflections’ 2020, as cited in Demicheli et al. 2023) and improved their wellbeing, especially their mental health (Calvo et al. 2012; Plagnol & Huppert 2010, as cited in Horton Smith et al. 2016; Benson, Clary & Scales 2007; Handy & Cnann 2007; Hunter & Linn 1980; Smith 2017a, as cited in Horton Smith et al. 2016).

Raul (46, Policymaker, Spain) admitted that “it changed my life. I’m another person”. Like other interviewees, he asserted that he went through a fundamental change in his identity, possibly in mindset, priorities, or self-concept due to volunteering. He also mentioned a shift in “values and perception of reality,” suggesting that his morals and beliefs have been altered, including a broader worldview. He also emphasised that he witnessed this transformation “in any kind of person who goes through volunteering.” Therefore, whether or not volunteering makes a political or systemic impact, it always has some form of personal influence on those who engage in it. Niko (48, Youth Worker, Montenegro) also acknowledges that through volunteering “you are challenged to go deep into your self and seek the strength you need

to do something.” He explained that because you are exposed to different realities you are “challenged to find who you are.” This helps the volunteer to develop inner strength and more self-awareness to “make the difference” both externally and internally.

One of the most crucial differences is the way volunteers start to perceive and interact with diversity. This is a crucial development goal, and several research participants have also become advocates for it. Nick (29, Youth Worker, Estonia) claimed that through volunteering, he witnessed a lot of personal growth when “people became more open, more knowledgeable...but also try to do everything to spread this knowledge as much as they can”. Likewise, Lisa (20, Non-Volunteer, Estonia) claimed that her friends changed after development projects since “they became a lot more open-minded and willing to talk about different ideas and experiences.” These observations conclude that volunteering fosters openness, knowledge, and engagement with new perspectives which suggests that not only it transforms individuals but also creates a ripple effect to embrace diversity in all its forms. These findings correspond with another study, demonstrating how volunteers become more involved and invested in learning and advocating for diversity (Lehner et al. 2022). The success rate of such transformations in development projects lies in adopting informal and non-formal learning strategies.

Informal and Non-Formal Learning is Key

Informal learning in volunteering happens naturally through engagement, observation, and real-life experiences, leading to tangible transformation and growth. Karl (41, Policymaker, Malta) argued that in development projects, “we are interacting with people all the time, and that you cannot learn from books and from lectures that you attend, but you learn by immersing yourself in these types of experiences.” This statement highlights the essence of informal learning through direct experience rather than traditional education. He implied that interpersonal skills, cultural awareness, and adaptability are best developed through real-world interactions rather than textbooks or lectures. This aligns with experiential learning theories, which suggest that active participation fosters deeper understanding and retention. In the context of volunteering, young people gain practical knowledge, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving skills by engaging with diverse individuals and situations, making it a transformative process beyond formal education. Similarly, Inga (25, Volunteer, Estonia) pinpointed how through the experience of volunteering “you get out of your social bubble...you learn how to work in a group, you improve your social skills...”, therefore “learning by doing” which is also supported and enhanced by non-formal learning methods.

Non-formal learning occurs in planned activities such as youth programs, training, and workshops that build competencies practically and engagingly. Ana (32, Youth Worker, France) claimed how important and effective non-formal education programs are, especially when collaborating with other NGOs. Dalma (25, Volunteer, Hungary) also acknowledged

that these non-formal methods work; they have developed a trainer system where “people who are part of the organisation can participate in an event where they can become a certified trainer for the organisation. Then, they can do trainings for the local groups or international groups, or also online.” These statements emphasise the significance of non-formal education in volunteering, where learning occurs in a more structured yet flexible and interactive way. This dynamic and transformative nature of non-formal learning demonstrates that volunteers gain expertise and empower others in the process. The above corroborates the results of Duguid et al. (2013), which demonstrate how self-transformation in volunteering is embedded in both informal and non-formal learning experiences.

Skills and Competences

Volunteers are transformed through such learning experiences as they develop crucial skills and competencies needed to achieve better results aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. Similar to the findings of Duguid et al. (2013) and Demicheli et al. (2023), the participants in this research project stated that volunteers are more likely to acquire the following competencies:

1. **Instrumental and Professional development Skills:** About finance and budgeting, Adriana (22, Volunteer, Estonia) claimed how she “learned how to prepare a budget, develop logistics” and Pim (29, Volunteer, Netherlands) acknowledged how they “organised quite a few fundraising activities” which ignited this enterprising aspect to tap into funds. Likewise, Lana (36, Youth Worker, Malta) mentioned how volunteers learn how to write and submit projects via the EU portal, and Dalma (25, Volunteer, Hungary) claimed that he improved his language skills, especially in being more fluent in English. Pana (35, Policymaker, Spain) also noted that these experiences help in acquiring practical skills on how certain things operate in NGOs and Governments and to substantiate this point Inga (25, Volunteer, Estonia) mentioned how she knows someone that “after volunteering as a partnership manager for a year, actually got a job as a partnership manager. The experience of volunteering greatly helped her get that position because she learned how to make partnerships, how to build contracts, how to negotiate deals.”
2. **Interpersonal and Communication Skills:** Elio (33, Youth Worker, Italy) disclosed that it was a very transformative experience because “at the beginning of this journey, I was very shy, introverted, and even distrustful. Over time, thanks to volunteering, I’ve opened up to others, became more cheerful and trusting.” Janos (25, Youth Worker, Hungary) stressed that during volunteering, young people develop “interpersonal communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, persuasion, emotional intelligence”, which are skills that can be applied in every area of one’s life. Something that is found to be a hurdle that participants alluded to is public speaking. Dalma (25, Volunteer, Hungary) contended that volunteering improved his teamwork skills. However, the biggest transformation was feeling comfortable “to talk to 400 people” during an event,



which before was inconceivable. Finally, acquiring diplomacy and conflict resolution skills is undoubtedly very beneficial to achieve better sustainable development goals. Nick (29, Youth Worker, Estonia) stated that through volunteering, “we learn how to manage difficult conversations...we meet people from different cultures, different attitudes, and sometimes it can be challenging. But through experience, you develop patience, diplomacy, and an ability to understand perspectives other than your own.” This aligns with Mezirow’s (2000, as cited in Duguid et al. 2013) transformative learning theory, as it highlights how volunteering provides meaningful learning experiences, which, through critical reflection, provide the possibility for shifts in perspectives. Undoubtedly, this intertwines with the next point.

3. **Values and Dispositions:** Nora (26, Volunteer, Italy) claimed that volunteering transformed the way she perceives life. “So yes, it has positively impacted me as a woman today, and I think it has resonated positively within my community.” This signifies that she experienced a “positive” shift in her disposition towards life and others. Similarly, Davi (23, Volunteer, Estonia) noted that “the biggest transformation was realising that the world is much bigger than my reality. Volunteering exposed me to different perspectives...it changed the way I see social issues and made me more engaged.” This statement highlights the profound impact of volunteering in expanding his worldview and challenging his pre-existing beliefs and values. Likewise, Petra (22, Volunteer, Hungary) concluded that volunteering “can open your perspective about people and society, and it helps you stay open and become more accepting of different views.”
4. **Social Awareness:** Volunteering in development projects provides the possibility to get closer to social issues and increase activism. Vanessa (24, Volunteer, Italy) “used to think that poverty was just a statistic until I met families who struggled every day. That experience completely changed how I see social issues and made me want to be part of the solution.” This demonstrates the transformative impact of first-hand experiences in shaping social awareness, as she moves from viewing poverty as an abstract statistic to recognising its human reality. This perspective shift deepens her empathy and fuels her motivation to actively contribute toward addressing social issues. Both Pana (35, Policymaker, Spain) and Raul (46, Policymaker, Spain) concluded that volunteers increase social awareness and develop skills to advocate for societal change. Therefore, self-transformation leads to active citizenship, making young people more invested in achieving development goals.

Impact on Community or Project Beneficiaries

Although this section is more dedicated explicitly to self-transformation, it was also important to discover how this translates into some form of impact on the community or project beneficiaries.

Mike (22, Volunteer, Malta) emphasised how volunteering leads to the sharing of values and experiences within the community. He explains that after completing a volunteer project, individuals bring back what they have learned and share it with those around them:

I think that when you finish your volunteer project, then you come back home... you start to tell your friends, or the people around you, the values you shared, your vision, what you did, what you learned...I think that is the best way to communicate and to share your experience with the people around you.

This demonstrates how the impact of volunteering does not end when the project is completed; rather, it continues to shape communities through storytelling, inspiration, and the transmission of knowledge and values.

Nora (26, Volunteer, Italy) described the direct impact volunteering has had on vulnerable individuals in her community. She recalls organising guided tours for children from challenging family situations, explaining that these initiatives allowed them “to discover new places, interact with peers, or simply change their environment.” Her work provided these children with opportunities they might not have otherwise had, helping to bring joy and enrichment to their lives. She also emphasised the importance of fundraising for medical causes, stating that “only those who have experienced a tragedy like cancer or a rare disease can truly understand its impact,” but through volunteering, communities can come together to support those affected.

Davi (23, Volunteer, Estonia) acknowledged that while his tasks as a volunteer may have seemed small, they were part of a much larger effort that had a profound impact. “Even though sometimes my tasks were small and seemed not to be meaningful, I knew that my work was a part of something huge and important.” His experience highlights how community support is built piece by piece, with every volunteer playing a role in a collective effort to improve lives. Likewise, Mary (24, Non-Volunteer, Estonia) also recognises the power of volunteering in strengthening communities. She explained that “volunteering can make a big difference to communities. It helps tackle local problems, supports people in need, and contributes to making society a better place.” Her perspective demonstrates that even those who do not actively participate in volunteering can see how it fosters unity and solves pressing social issues. When people come together for a common cause, they create an environment of care and support that benefits everyone involved.

Nina (26, Volunteer, Belgium) provided a firsthand account of how witnessing volunteers in action inspired her to become involved herself. As a young participant in a playground initiative and dance workshops, she recalled watching volunteers lead these activities and being deeply moved by their dedication. “11 young people were leading this. And I also found it so cool. I found them so cool. I looked up to them. And I thought, I want to do that too when I’m older.” Her story illustrates how volunteers serve as role models, encouraging others to engage in their communities and continue the cycle of giving and transformation.

These testimonies demonstrate that volunteering is far more than just an act of service; it is a force that transforms entire communities.

Conclusion

This research has provided a rich exploration of youth volunteering, revealing a complex interplay between motivations, barriers, and transformative outcomes. The findings confirm that young people are drawn to volunteering through a spectrum of motivations, ranging from altruistic ideals of social impact to self-oriented goals such as personal growth, skill development, and career advancement. These motivations are not mutually exclusive; rather, they coexist and evolve as youths engage deeper with volunteer experiences.

A recurring concern throughout the study is the increasing influence of individualism and consumerism, which often obstruct civic participation and weaken community ties. Yet volunteering counteracts this by cultivating empathy, community spirit, and a stronger sense of agency. The study reinforces that when youth are engaged in well-structured, supportive, and inclusive volunteering environments, they are more likely to become active citizens who contribute to sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Key barriers, such as time constraints, financial limitations, lack of awareness, and bureaucratic hurdles, continue to hinder youth participation. Additionally, youth organisations and policymakers must address demotivation due to burnout, lack of recognition, and unclear impact. Tailored outreach strategies, simplified processes, and greater institutional support are essential to increasing accessibility and retention.

Importantly, the study highlights the profound self-transformation that volunteering provides in shaping identity, instilling prosocial values, and equipping young people with practical and interpersonal competencies. Through both informal and non-formal learning, youth gain critical awareness of social issues and build the confidence to advocate for change.

For volunteering to be a sustainable force in development, it must shift from charity-driven models to inclusive, empowerment-based partnerships rooted in reciprocity and mutual learning. When properly supported, youth volunteering not only transforms individuals but also fosters resilient communities and more equitable societies. Investing in youth as agents of change is, therefore, not just desirable but imperative for the future of global development.

As Davi (23, Volunteer, Estonia) emphasises:

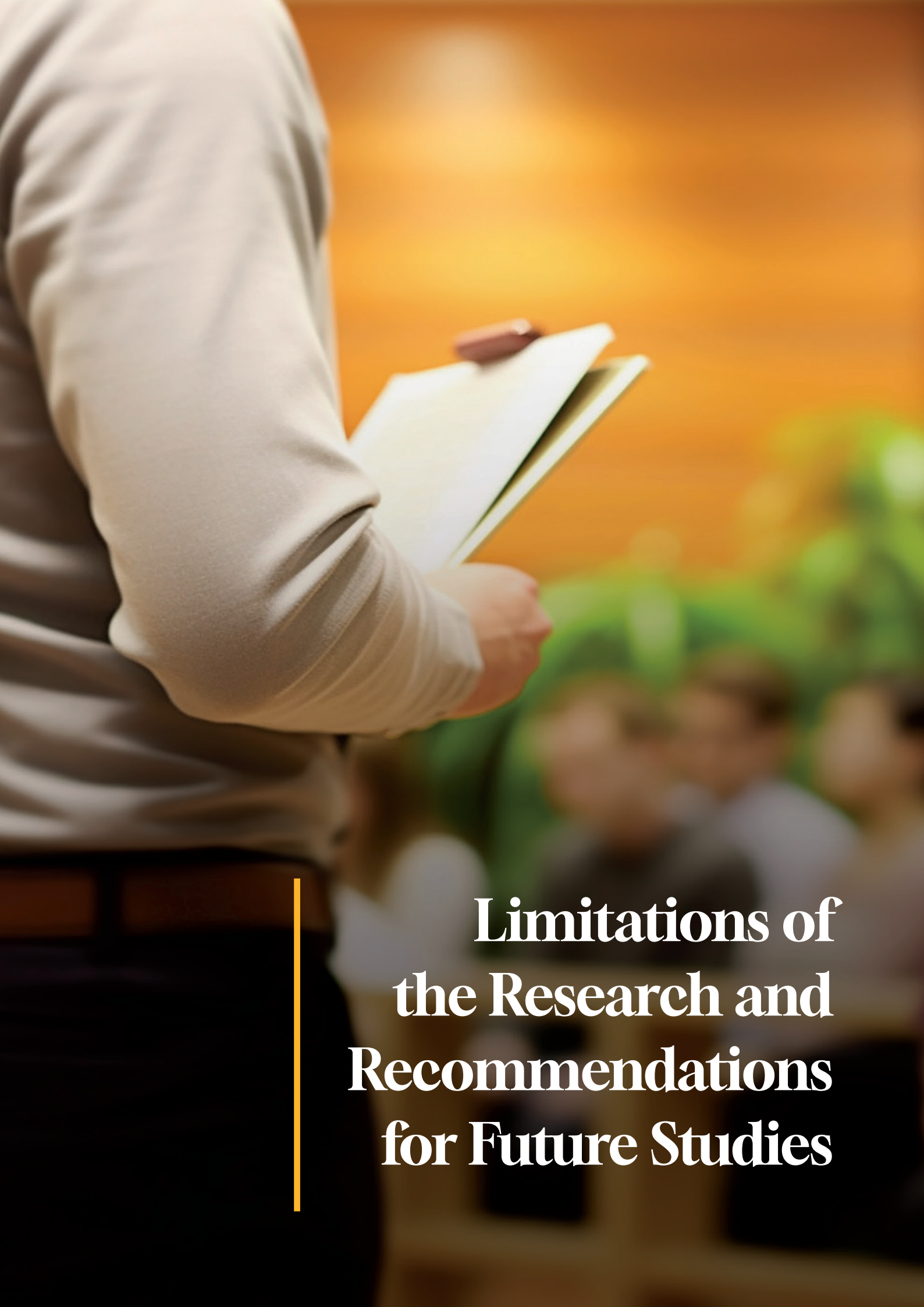
People should be open-minded and flexible. Development projects might contain unexpected challenges, so one should always be prepared to adapt to new environments, cultures, and situations. Another good idea is to set realistic expectations. It's important to understand that meaningful change takes time. Someone's efforts might not lead to immediate results, but every small contribution counts. Also, one should remember that volunteering is as much about personal development as it is about helping others. People should try every opportunity to learn new skills, gain new perspectives, and grow as a person. Also, there should be no hesitation about reaching out for help if one is struggling. And the main thing is don't be afraid of the things you don't know.

Similarly, Lana (36, Youth Worker, Malta) encourages young people to embrace opportunities with an open mind:

To be open to it and to say yes...at least to be open to explore and be involved in as many opportunities as possible, and do not close doors. You know, because really, sometimes even a small project can have endless opportunities afterwards. So yeah, I think the idea of saying yes rather than initially saying, 'Oh no, I'm not good at that' or 'I don't have the time'...I think say yes and then see what comes out of it.

These insights reinforce the central theme of this research: youth volunteering is a transformative journey, not only for communities but also for the volunteers themselves. By remaining open-minded, adaptable, and willing to take risks, young people can maximise the benefits of volunteering and contribute meaningfully to achieving the scope of this research project, which is to engage more youths in implementing the sustainable development goals.





Limitations of the Research and Recommendations for Future Studies

While this research provides in-depth qualitative insights into youth volunteering and development, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size, though rich in personal narratives, is not statistically representative of all European youth. The perspectives primarily reflect those already engaged or interested in the volunteering sector, potentially underrepresenting deeply disengaged or marginalised voices.

Secondly, while the study spans multiple countries, cultural, socio-economic, and political contexts vary greatly across Europe. These variations may influence motivations, barriers, and organisational structures, limiting the generalisation of some findings. Additionally, the focus on interviews means that social-desirability bias may have influenced responses, particularly in discussions about altruism and self-growth.



For future research, it is recommended to:

- **Include a mixed-methods approach**, integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to triangulate findings.
- **Expand the demographic and geographic scope**, including more diverse socio-economic backgrounds and regions underrepresented in the current study.
- **Conduct longitudinal studies** to assess the long-term impact of volunteering on personal development and civic engagement.
- **Investigate digital and virtual volunteering**, especially in the context of post-pandemic youth engagement.
- **Explore gender and intersectional dimensions**, including how identity factors shape volunteering motivations and barriers.





Youth Activities



NAME OF ACTIVITY	TAKING CHARGE OF THE SDGS
BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE OF ACTIVITY	The SDGs are not well known by all and young people do not take their responsibility in building a better welfare. We will do an awareness session for young people from a non-formal education centre and then tell them about the problems and why it is important. They will choose an SDG and take care of preparing something for the smaller ones in the centre. In this way, they take an active role in raising awareness of the problem.
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	10-20
AGE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO CAN PARTICIPATE	13-19
DURATION OF ACTIVITY	2 sessions (60 min each)
MATERIAL AND SPACE REQUIRED FOR ACTIVITY	Photos (dynamic museum), chairs, cardboard, down, social networks, colors
DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY (METHODOLOGY)	1. Students walk around the room and look at images stuck to the walls. Then they pick one and stand in front of it. They share with us why they have chosen it, tell us some story of their life that relates to the image. 2. After sharing the story, we ask you to flip the image and paste it inside out. They will see global issues linked to an SDG and related to the first image they chose. We ask you to walk again and look at the new images. 3. In assembly, we started discussing these issues. Why do they happen? What can we do? What are the SDGs? 4. After presenting the SDGs and talking about how important it is for everyone to know them, you are asked to choose one and think of a way to spread it among the little ones. 5. Young people create posters, posters and publications to raise awareness among children. 6. Students present them to the minors in the centre.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF ACTIVITY What Skills will the participants learn? What Attitudes will the participants learn? What Knowledge will the participants learn?	Skills: Oral communication: narration, expression and listening. Critical thinking: analyze, reflect and solve. Creativity: designing and adapting visual messages. Collaboration: working as a team and presenting. Information literacy: researching and finding information. Attitudes: Empathy: awareness and social responsibility. Open-mindedness: curiosity and respect. Commitment: motivation and action. Respect: value opinions and diversity. Knowledge: SDGs: Understand, know and relate. Global problems: causes and effects. Awareness: strategies and adaptation. Personal awareness: relation to global problems.
OUTCOMES OF ACTIVITY	Increased awareness of the SDGs: Participants will have a deeper understanding of the Sustainable Development Goals and their relevance in today's world. Understanding of global problems: Participants will be able to identify and understand complex global problems and their interconnections. Development of communication skills: Participants will improve their ability to express ideas, tell stories and present information effectively. Fostering creativity and design: Participants will create visual materials (posters, publications) to communicate important messages to a specific audience. Promoting empathy and social responsibility: Participants will develop a sense of empathy for others and a commitment to social action. Capacity for action: Participants will feel motivated and empowered to take action to address global issues in their own communities. Team work development: Participants will collaborate to produce teamwork. Ability to adapt a message to a different audience: Participants will learn how to adapt a message to a children's audience.

RELEVANT RESEARCH/ READINGS IN RELATION TO THE ACTIVITY	“Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives” (UNESCO) - https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000247444 “Youth and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: A Guide” (PNUD y UN-Habitat) - https://www.undp.org/publications/youth-and-2030-agenda-sustainable-development-guide “The Power of Non-Formal Education: How it Can Transform Young Lives” (Consejo de Europa) - https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-youth-foundation/-/the-power-of-non-formal-education
COMMENTS	Encourage Personal Connection: Facilitators should encourage participants to connect global issues to their personal lives and stories. Actively listening and validating their experiences reinforces the idea that SDGs are not abstract concepts, but are relevant to them. Facilitate Critical Thinking: When discussing the causes of global problems, ask open-ended questions and resist the urge to provide direct answers. Allowing for silence and giving young people the space to reflect and propose solutions on their own fosters critical thinking and a sense of ownership. Reflect on Message Adaptation: The activity’s final step is to create materials for a younger audience. It is important to guide a reflection on this process. Ask participants about the challenges they faced when simplifying complex messages and how they believe their communication will impact the younger children. This solidifies their learning about empathy and effective communication.

NAME OF ACTIVITY	STORIES OF CHANGE
BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE OF ACTIVITY	The rationale behind this activity is connected to the need to provide young people with accessible information about post-graduation opportunities beyond traditional education and employment pathways. Many students may be unaware of programs such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, which offer experiences for personal and professional growth, intercultural learning, and skill development. By connecting students with volunteers who have firsthand experience in these programs, the event will inspire and empower youth to consider volunteering as a meaningful step in their own journeys.
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	10 volunteers and 50 participants
AGE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO CAN PARTICIPATE	15-18 years old
DURATION OF ACTIVITY	2 hours max (for 1 visit)
MATERIAL AND SPACE REQUIRED FOR ACTIVITY	Visual presentation, online form for data collection Space: any hall/room that can accommodate 5 groups of 10 participants
DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY (METHODOLOGY)	In this activity, around 10 volunteers from different backgrounds will visit high schools in Tartu to share their experiences with volunteering, including programs like Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps. The session will follow a rotating format (similar to the format of the Human Library): students will be divided into small groups and will spend about 10–15 minutes with each volunteer, listening to their stories and asking questions. After each round, the groups will rotate to meet a new volunteer. After the activity, students will have an opportunity to fill out the Google form and identify what they are interested in (Erasmus+, ESC, local opportunities, humanitarian aid, etc.). Based on the answers, a follow-up email will be sent to each participant sharing the links and useful tips based on what they identified to be interesting. In one month, another evaluation form will be sent out to students to see how impactful the activity was and evaluate the progress of the volunteering promotion.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF ACTIVITY

What Skills will the participants learn?

What Attitudes will the participants learn?

What Knowledge will the participants learn?

Aims:

- to introduce high school students to volunteering opportunities and post-graduation possibilities
- to inspire students to consider volunteering as an experience for personal and professional growth
- to create an interactive space for students to engage with volunteers and learn through storytelling

Objectives:

- to provide information and insights into programs like Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps
- to encourage students to ask questions and actively participate in discussions
- to showcase different perspectives on volunteering and how it can impact individuals and communities
- to help students understand the skills and experiences they can gain from volunteering
- to motivate students to explore and take the next steps toward volunteering opportunities

Skills students will learn:

- communication skills (asking questions, engaging in discussions)
- active listening and critical thinking
- adaptability and open-mindedness
- networking and confidence in speaking with new people

Attitudes students will develop:

- curiosity and openness toward new experiences
- motivation to explore non-traditional paths after graduation
- appreciation for cultural diversity and social impact
- a proactive mindset toward their own future and opportunities

Knowledge students will gain:

- different types of volunteering opportunities available after high school
- details about programs like Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps
- real-life benefits and challenges of volunteering
- how volunteering can contribute to personal and professional development

OUTCOMES OF ACTIVITY	1. Students learn about volunteering opportunities – they get a better idea of programs like Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, and how they can join after high school. 2. Students feel inspired and motivated – hearing real stories from volunteers makes them more interested in trying volunteering themselves. 3. Students gain new perspectives – they learn about different cultures, career paths, and how volunteering can make a difference in communities. 4. Students improve communication skills – talking with volunteers helps them practice asking questions, listening, and thinking about new ideas. 5. Some students take the next step – they might start looking into programs, applying for opportunities, or getting involved in local projects.
RELEVANT RESEARCH/ READINGS IN RELATION TO THE ACTIVITY	The research shows that a big reason young people volunteer is not just to help others but also for personal growth, career opportunities, and meeting new people. This connects directly to our activity because we are showing students real examples of how volunteering can be beneficial for them, not just something they do for others. Another important point from the research is that a lot of young people do not know where to start with volunteering. Our event helps with that by giving them clear, firsthand information in an engaging way. The research also talks about how volunteering feels more relevant when it is hands-on and practical rather than just an abstract idea. That is exactly what we are doing by using storytelling and real experiences instead of just listing opportunities. Finally, the research mentions that some young people do not volunteer because of economic pressure or because they do not see how it fits into their future. We are tackling this by showing how volunteering can actually help with career development and skill-building. Overall, this activity is doing exactly what the research recommends—making volunteering more accessible, relatable, and valuable for young people.
COMMENTS	Cover photo for the event: https://drive.google.com/file/d/151TOwIk48hR8Eqz-gyNVWbanQJ-sqlh8/view?usp=drive_link

NAME OF ACTIVITY	BUILDING SUSTAINABLE CITIES: YOUTH IDEAS FOR SDG 11
BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE OF ACTIVITY	Many young people feel disconnected from urban planning and decision-making about their own communities. Yet, they have unique insights into what makes a city or town feel liveable, inclusive, and sustainable. This workshop is designed to engage youth in imagining how their environment could better meet their needs and align with SDG 11. It builds their critical thinking, design, and civic engagement skills while empowering them to see their ideas as valuable contributions to community development.
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	15–40 participants
AGE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO CAN PARTICIPATE	16–25 years old
DURATION OF ACTIVITY	2 hours
MATERIAL AND SPACE REQUIRED FOR ACTIVITY	• Large room or open space with movable chairs and tables • Flipcharts, markers, post-its • Printouts of SDG 11 targets and inspirational case studies • Large paper/maps for group drawing • Projector (optional for intro)
DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY (METHODOLOGY)	The workshop begins with a short interactive presentation about SDG 11 and real examples of youth-led urban initiatives around Europe. Participants are divided into small groups (3–6 people). Each group is given a scenario: a neighbourhood with a specific challenge (e.g., lack of green space, youth unemployment, poor transport). Using markers, flipcharts, and creative tools, each group will design a “sustainable neighbourhood” and develop youth-focused solutions to improve that area. This might include infrastructure ideas, youth hubs, mobility services, or civic campaigns. Each group presents their idea in a 3-minute pitch at the end. A short reflection follows.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF ACTIVITY What Skills will the participants learn? What Attitudes will the participants learn? What Knowledge will the participants learn?	Aims: · To raise awareness among youth about Sustainable Development Goal 11 · To promote youth creativity and engagement in community development · To empower young people to become local changemakers Objectives: · To reflect on challenges in local communities · To co-create sustainable and inclusive urban solutions · To develop presentation, design, and collaboration skills · To make SDG 11 tangible and relevant for youth What Skills will the participants learn? · Teamwork and co-creation · Public speaking and presentation · Urban/environmental awareness · Problem-solving and design thinking What Attitudes will the participants learn? · Sense of agency and civic responsibility · Openness to different perspectives · Curiosity about urban and global challenges What Knowledge will the participants learn? · What SDG 11 is and how it relates to everyday life · Examples of sustainable urban practices · How youth can impact city development processes
OUTCOMES OF ACTIVITY	1. Participants understand the relevance of SDG 11 and local action 2. Participants develop concrete ideas for youth-friendly urban improvements 3. Participants gain experience in collaboration and design 4. Participants feel motivated to get involved in their communities 5. Ideas from the workshop may feed into follow-up advocacy or youth policy
RELEVANT RESEARCH/ READINGS IN RELATION TO THE ACTIVITY	Research shows that involving youth in community design boosts local ownership, sustainability, and civic participation. According to the UN-Habitat Youth Unit, youth are disproportionately affected by urban inequalities but are rarely included in city planning. This workshop bridges that gap and gives them a platform to envision better futures.
COMMENTS	Could be used as a pilot workshop for future youth-city council partnerships or policy dialogues.

NAME OF ACTIVITY	RESPIKE BEACH VOLLEY TOURNAMENT
BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE OF ACTIVITY	Born from a desire to unite Budapest's volleyball community around sustainability, the ReSpike tournament at combines 6×6 and Mixed 2×2 play formats with • a clothing-donation drive to advance SDG 3 (by promoting physical health and well-being), • SDG 12 (by encouraging responsible consumption through the collection of the donated clothes from participants), and • SDG 16 (by celebrating FairPlay, teamwork, and respect), • creating a fun, inclusive event that strengthens community bonds while raising awareness of environmental and social responsibility. The event was realized in cooperation with <u>Budapest Association for International Sports</u>.
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	65
AGE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO CAN PARTICIPATE	18+
DURATION OF ACTIVITY	6 hours
MATERIAL AND SPACE REQUIRED FOR ACTIVITY	Beach Volley Balls, Trophies, medals, certificates, Snacks/ Refreshments, Selective littering boxes, Papers and pens. Space: Beach Volleyball courts and toilets
DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY (METHODOLOGY)	Participants pre-register via separate Google Forms for 6×6 (individual) or 2×2 (mixed pair) play and arrive at BME Sporttelep by 13:40 to check in and deposit 1–5 clothing items for donation; 6×6 entrants are then assigned to balanced teams by random draw while 2×2 duos head straight to their courts, after which a round-robin/bracket schedule kicks off at 14:00 across multiple outdoor courts, with each match played as best-of-three short sets, all overseen by volunteer referees and fair-play monitors who track sportsmanship alongside scores, culminating in a prize ceremony (including a FairPlay award) around 19:00 and the handover of donated garments to partner charities. At the end of the event there was a discussion related to the topics where participants could actively learn about SDGs.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF ACTIVITY

What Skills will the participants learn?

What Attitudes will the participants learn?

What Knowledge will the participants learn?

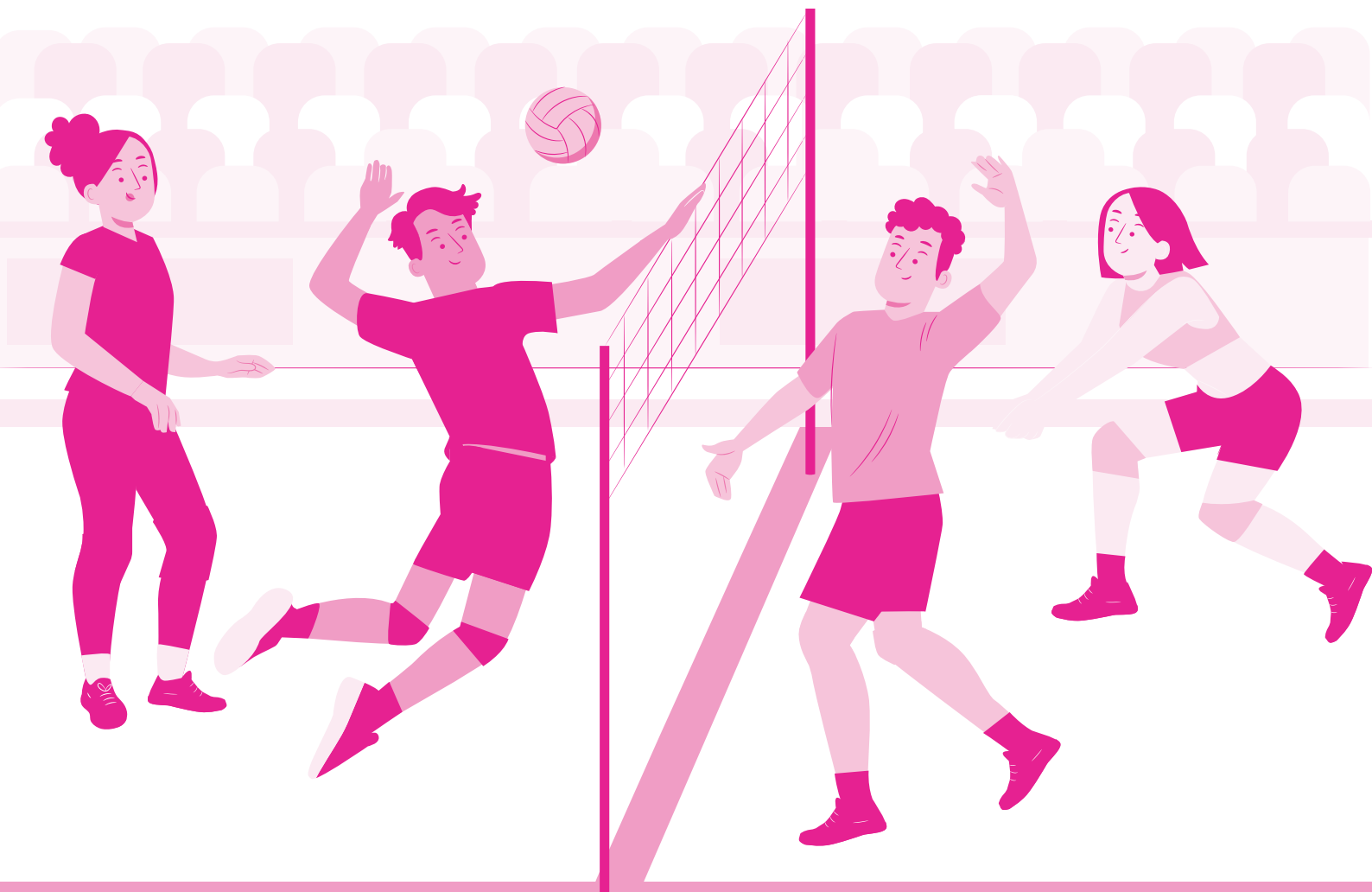
The ReSpike tournament aims to harness volleyball as a tool for community engagement and sustainability, promoting

- health (SDG 3),
- responsible consumption (SDG 12) through a clothing-donation drive, and
- fair play (SDG 16), by staging 6×6 and 2×2 formats;

participants will develop volleyball techniques (serving, setting, spiking, blocking), on-court teamwork and communication, and rapid adaptation to new teammates;

cultivate attitudes of sportsmanship, respect for opponents and officials, community solidarity, and environmental stewardship;

and acquire knowledge of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in sport, practical donation logistics and distribution, health and safety best practices, and the mechanics of grassroots round-robin/bracket tournament structures.

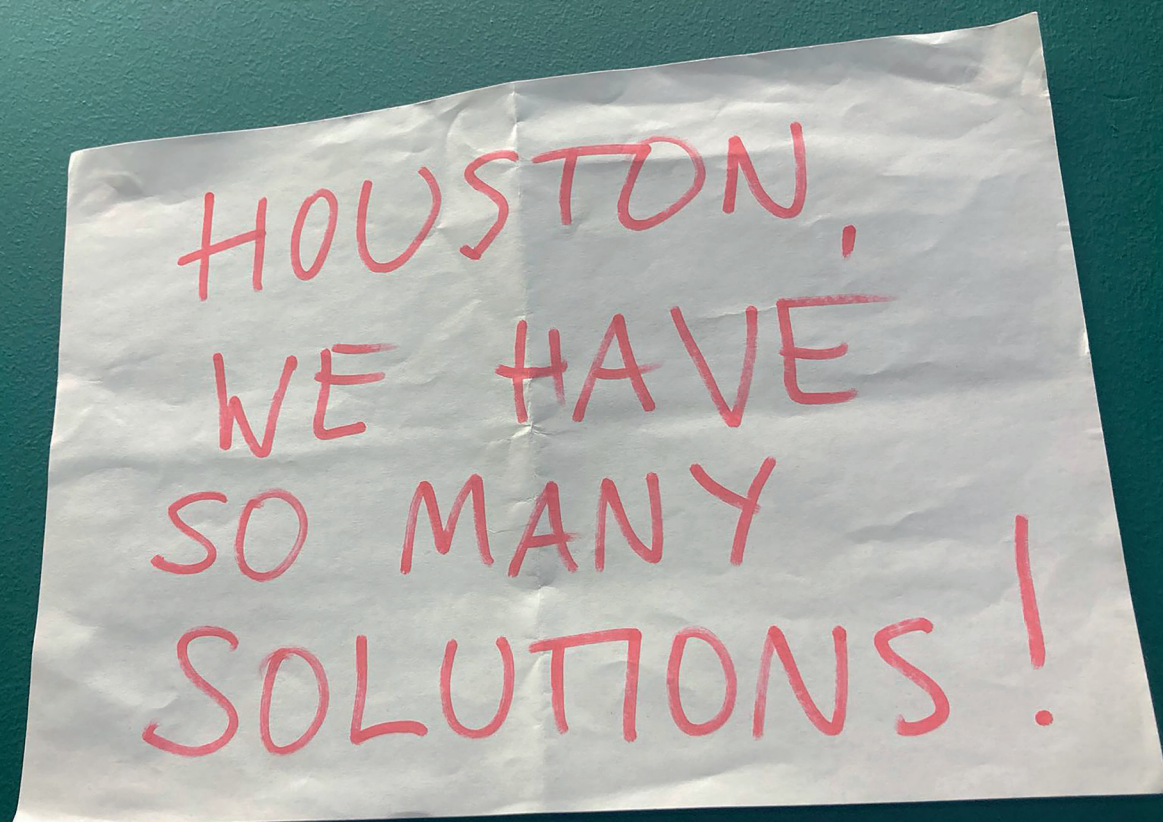


OUTCOMES OF ACTIVITY	By the end of the day, participants will have donated dozens of gently used garments to local charities, honed their volleyball techniques under real-match conditions, and practiced effective teamwork and communication; they'll have demonstrated and reinforced FairPlay values on court, gained a concrete understanding of how SDG 3 (health), SDG 12 (responsible consumption) and SDG 16 (fair play) can be advanced through community sport, and built new social bonds, leaving not only fitter and more skilled, but also more environmentally conscious and connected to Budapest's volleyball community.
RELEVANT RESEARCH/ READINGS IN RELATION TO THE ACTIVITY	Kokolakakis, T., Schoemaker, J., Lera-Lopez, F., de Boer, W., Čingienė, V., Papić, A., & Ahlert, G. (2024). Valuing the contribution of sport volunteering to subjective wellbeing: evidence from eight European countries. <i>Frontiers in sports and active living</i>, 6, 1308065. https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2024.1308065
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NAME OF ACTIVITY	PARK CLEAN-UP AND SUSTAINABILITY AWARENESS
BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE OF ACTIVITY	Environmental pollution and unsustainable waste management are growing concerns in many communities. Public parks often suffer from littering, which not only harms local ecosystems but also reduces the quality of shared community spaces. Engaging young people in park clean-up activities raises awareness about these issues and empowers them to take direct action. Such initiatives align with the goals of sustainable development by promoting responsible consumption and active citizenship. Organizing a clean-up encourages a sense of ownership, community pride, and long-term commitment to environmental care.
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	10
AGE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO CAN PARTICIPATE	15+
DURATION OF ACTIVITY	2 hours
MATERIAL AND SPACE REQUIRED FOR ACTIVITY	Gloves, trash bags and a park
DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY (METHODOLOGY)	The park clean-up activity will begin with a brief orientation where participants will receive safety instructions and be equipped with gloves, trash bags, and visibility vests. The group will be divided into smaller teams, each assigned to a specific area of the park to ensure thorough coverage. Participants will be instructed to collect all visible waste and to separate recyclable materials wherever possible. The clean-up process will emphasize teamwork, environmental awareness, and responsibility for shared public spaces. At the end, the collected waste will be sorted and disposed of appropriately, followed by a short reflection on the impact of the activity.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF ACTIVITY What Skills will the participants learn? What Attitudes will the participants learn? What Knowledge will the participants learn?	The activity seeks to educate participants about sustainable waste management while contributing to the cleanliness of public spaces. Objectives include fostering teamwork, raising awareness of SDGs (11, 12, and 13), and encouraging youth involvement in local environmental initiatives. Skills, Attitudes and Knowledge: • Teamwork and collaboration • Waste collection and sorting techniques • Problem-solving in a real-world context • Time and task management • Basic organizational and leadership skills • Responsibility for the environment • Respect for public and shared spaces • Willingness to volunteer and take initiative • Sustainable living mindset • The impact of littering on the environment and community • How to sort waste and recycle correctly • Local waste management practices
OUTCOMES OF ACTIVITY	Cleaner environment, more educated citizens
RELEVANT RESEARCH/ READINGS IN RELATION TO THE ACTIVITY	https://doi.org/10.1080/09640568.2024.2409963 https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916516649412 https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnq007



NAME OF ACTIVITY	INTERGENERATIONAL EXCHANGE: CREATING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL VALUE
BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE OF ACTIVITY	The activity was designed to guide university students through a process of personal reflection and collective planning, inspired by the Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030). The initiative emphasized intergenerational dialogue as a powerful tool for fostering economic, social, and environmental value. Through the IKIGAI framework and interaction with senior professionals, the activity aimed to empower young people to connect their talents and values with sustainable professional paths and to co-design green, socially impactful solutions
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	12
AGE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO CAN PARTICIPATE	18–25
DURATION OF ACTIVITY	4 hours
MATERIAL AND SPACE REQUIRED FOR ACTIVITY	• Flexible classroom or coworking space with mobile tables • Projector and sound system for the introduction • Preset Google Form for IKIGAI • Post-its, flipcharts, markers for group work • Information material on SDGs, sustainable enterprise, best practices • Identification cards for students and professionals • Final evaluation/feedback forms (paper or digital)
DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY (METHODOLOGY)	1. Pre-event / Initial Phase: Participants complete their IKIGAI via Google Form. 2. Inspirational Talk: Keynote on entrepreneurship and Agenda 2030. 3. Group Work: Participants are divided into subgroups based on IKIGAI proximity to co-create green solutions aligned with the SDGs. 4. Feedback Session: Subgroups present their projects to senior professionals and receive advice on career development. 5. Networking: Informal space for sharing contacts, ideas, and opportunities

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF ACTIVITY What Skills will the participants learn? What Attitudes will the participants learn? What Knowledge will the participants learn?	Skills • Facilitate personal and collective reflection using the IKIGAI model. • Promote intergenerational dialogue for co-designing sustainable projects • Raise awareness of Agenda 2030 and the role of business in social/environmental change. • Stimulate youth leadership and entrepreneurial thinking. • Connect young people with professionals to build lasting mentorship and networking opportunities Attitudes: • Openness to intergenerational dialogue • Responsibility towards sustainable development • Entrepreneurial mindset • Proactive engagement in societal challenges Knowledge • IKIGAI as a tool for personal and professional alignment • SDGs and Agenda 2030 as frameworks for action • Insights on sustainable entrepreneurship • Practical steps toward impactful project creation
OUTCOMES OF ACTIVITY	• Enhanced awareness of personal values and professional aspirations • First-hand experience of collaborative sustainable design • Activation of new professional networks across generations • Tangible project ideas with feedback from experienced professionals • Desire to further explore roles in sustainable entrepreneurship
RELEVANT RESEARCH/ READINGS IN RELATION TO THE ACTIVITY	Agenda 2030 (United Nations Sustainable Development Goals) IKIGAI model for purpose-driven career development Best practices in youth sustainable entrepreneurship Case studies on intergenerational collaboration (suggested in info materials used)
COMMENTS	Future editions of this activity would benefit from an extended networking session to consolidate emerging relationships. The setting should support fluid transitions between individual, group, and plenary moments. Interest from professionals in continuing relationships with participants indicates the strong potential for long-term impact

NAME OF ACTIVITY	RAINWATER AND GREYWATER RECYCLING FOR SUSTAINABLE WATER USE
BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE OF ACTIVITY	Water scarcity is a growing concern in Malta due to limited natural resources and increasing demand. A needs analysis highlighted the urgency of sustainable water solutions. This activity addresses the issue by promoting rainwater collection and greywater recycling, offering a practical, community-based model for responsible water use.
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	10-15
AGE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO CAN PARTICIPATE	16-25
DURATION OF ACTIVITY	4 months
MATERIAL AND SPACE REQUIRED FOR ACTIVITY	This is a long-term activity and requires various resources. The essential elements are a place for meeting, internet access, and NGO premises for the collaborative action.
DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY (METHODOLOGY)	Following a needs analysis built on expert interviews and a public survey, the team identified water sustainability as a pressing local issue. To address this, a partnership was formed with a local NGO. Through a series of meetings, the NGO's specific needs were mapped out, and together we explored potential solutions. The final project concept focuses on collecting rainwater and recycling greywater for use in gardening, reducing reliance on potable water and supporting sustainable practices. Key steps taken: 1. Feasibility Study: Engineers experienced in similar water systems were consulted to assess technical and environmental viability. 2. Design & Planning: After reviewing multiple concepts, one design was selected. A detailed budget, project timeline, and safety measures were developed. 3. Permits & Resources: All required permits were secured, and procurement of materials and equipment was initiated. 4. Implementation: Construction and installation work began, ensuring quality control and adherence to sustainability principles. 5. Completion & Dissemination: Upon finalizing the system, outcomes and learnings will be shared with the community and stakeholders to encourage replication and raise awareness.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF ACTIVITY What Skills will the participants learn? What Attitudes will the participants learn? What Knowledge will the participants learn?	Skills - Plan, manage, and implement a sustainability-focused project from concept to completion - Collaborate effectively with NGOs, engineers, and local stakeholders - Communicate ideas clearly in meetings and awareness campaigns - Solve practical challenges using creative and analytical thinking - Conduct needs assessments and feasibility studies - Understand basic design elements of water recycling systems Knowledge - Understand the principles of water sustainability, including rainwater harvesting and greywater reuse - Gain insight into Malta's water management challenges and EU environmental policies - Learn about the role of NGOs and community engagement in environmental action - Familiarize themselves with permitting processes and environmental regulations - Discover how engineering and sustainability intersect in real-world applications Attitudes - Foster a strong sense of environmental responsibility and civic engagement - Demonstrate leadership, initiative, and accountability in group settings - Show empathy and responsiveness to community and ecological needs - Embrace teamwork, interdisciplinary collaboration, and continuous learning - Commit to making informed, sustainable choices in their daily lives.
OUTCOMES OF ACTIVITY	Environmental Outcomes - Installation of a functioning rainwater and greywater recycling system for sustainable gardening - Reduced use of potable water for irrigation - Decreased water wastage and pressure on Malta's groundwater resources Educational & Social Outcomes - Increased awareness of water scarcity and sustainable water use among young people and the community - Development of transferable skills in project management, teamwork, and environmental design - Empowered young people with practical experience in sustainability and civic action

	Knowledge & Capacity Outcomes · Improved understanding of local and EU water policies · Strengthened collaboration between youth and NGOs · Creation of a model project that can be replicated in other communities or youth initiatives Dissemination Outcomes · Community and stakeholder engagement through awareness campaigns · Sharing of results via presentations, social media, or local events to inspire further action
RELEVANT RESEARCH/ READINGS IN RELATION TO THE ACTIVITY	Aquatech. (2023, September 11). <i>Sustainable water: our essential guide to sustainable water resource management solutions & strategies</i>. https://www.aquatechtrade.com/news/water-treatment/sustainable-water-essential-guide European Commission. (n.d.). <i>Drinking water. Improving access to drinking water for all</i>. https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/water/drinking-water_en#overview
COMMENTS	This is a long-term project that incorporates multiple activities and requires a long-term commitment by the young people.



NAME OF ACTIVITY	WATER AWARENESS AND ACTION – FROM KNOWLEDGE TO COMMUNITY IMPACT
BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE OF ACTIVITY	The main objective is to design and implement a youth-led action that addresses the key challenges we identify throughout the project process. As part of the information-gathering phase, we conducted multiple interviews with experts in the field of water sustainability and distributed an online questionnaire to gather insights from the general public. The final activity is aimed to raise awareness among the public about the sustainable use of water.
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	10-12
AGE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO CAN PARTICIPATE	16-25 years old
DURATION OF ACTIVITY	Total Duration: 10 sessions across 3 months Each session: 1–3 hours
MATERIAL AND SPACE REQUIRED FOR ACTIVITY	• Internet-connected devices (laptops, tablets) • Google Forms / Canva accounts • Meeting space with projector/whiteboard for collaboration • Recording equipment or phones for expert interviews • Access to Canva or publishing tools for leaflet creation
DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY (METHODOLOGY)	Session Outline: This youth-led session formed part of a broader initiative as part of the Hands-On Development project. Participants worked in small teams to: 1. Conduct expert interviews with professionals in water sustainability. 2. Distribute and analyse an online public survey to gather local perceptions and behaviours. 3. Synthesize findings into a comprehensive analysis document. 4. Create an online leaflet to communicate the findings to the public in a clear, accessible way. 5. Begin planning for a follow-up hands-on community activity using the research outcomes.

	Methodology and Methods: - Qualitative interviews (3 experts) - Quantitative public survey (52 responses) - Collaborative analysis and discussion workshops - Visual communication design (leaflet) - Group brainstorming for follow-up activity Timing: Total Duration: 10 sessions across 3 months Each session: 1–3 hours - 3 Separate sessions with 3 different experts in water sustainability. - 7 Sessions which were split into: i. Brainstorming and planning sessions in the beginning before the expert interviews ii. Analysis and document writing sessions after the interviews were held - Leaflet design + community activity planning at the end.
AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF ACTIVITY What Skills will the participants learn? What Attitudes will the participants learn? What Knowledge will the participants learn?	General Aims - To educate young people on the challenges and opportunities related to water sustainability in Malta. - To collect and analyse data from both experts and the public to understand perceptions and practices. - To translate findings into accessible public education tools (leaflet, discussions). - To prepare for a community-based hands-on activity informed by the research results Skills - Conducted expert interviews and public surveys - Analysed data using collaborative methods - Created accessible digital communication materials - Worked effectively in teams and managed tasks - Initiated planning for a follow-up community activity Knowledge - Gained insight into water sustainability and local challenges - Learned to apply basic research methods - Understood how youth can engage in civic and environmental action Attitudes - Strengthened sense of environmental responsibility - Built confidence and initiative - Fostered respect for collaboration, diverse input, and evidence-based decision-making

OUTCOMES OF ACTIVITY	- A completed analysis document summarising expert and public perspectives on water in Malta. - A youth-designed online leaflet to raise awareness and share practical solutions with the public. - Increased participant understanding of real-world environmental challenges and communication strategies. - Initial planning of a hands-on community water conservation activity based on identified needs.
RELEVANT RESEARCH/ READINGS IN RELATION TO THE ACTIVITY	EU Water Framework Directive (for context) Resources on rainwater harvesting and greywater reuse Google form filled out by the general public: https://forms.gle/SV4qsb7CX87RRUZS6 Questions asked to the experts: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kXuGX6bpqvxdpKE6NYoafBbgJChGp8slsrRB LH2hXGg/edit?usp=sharing Final document presenting all the findings: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1CPjHemED-ZtLpCJkoPepfLYWR0p6aJ2U/edit Online leaflet: https://www.canva.com/design/DAGu6Wx_ewo/1HiqRBPBcP4W9y3Qbt3ORg/view?utm_content=DAGu6Wx_ewo&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link2&utm_source=uniquelinks&utlId=h69b670919f
COMMENTS	For this activity to be meaningful in other contexts, a process of identification of relevant stakeholders needs to be carried out.





INNOVATION TRAINING COURSE



APRENDE SOBRE LOS ODS Y OBJETIVOS SMART



HAREMOS UN PROYECTO CONJUNTO FINAL PARA LA CIUDAD DE ELCHE



21 JUNIO 9:00



**SALESIANOS SAN
JOSÉ ARTESANO**

**HARÁS UNA PRÁCTICA APORTANDO SOLUCIONES
EN BASE A LOS "ODS" Y OBJETIVOS SMART**

NAME OF ACTIVITY	YOUTH IN ASSOCIATION
BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE OF ACTIVITY	Today's youth live in an era of heightened individualism, often resulting in decreased community involvement and reduced collective social awareness. Promoting civic and social engagement is crucial, as involvement benefits both society and youth by fostering skills, mental well-being, and social connectedness. Leadership development models, such as the Social Change Model, emphasize collaboration, community action, and global citizenship as key components to youth empowerment. Engaging youth through experiential learning approaches, such as project-based learning and service-learning, significantly enhances their ability to address real-world problems. Connecting local initiatives with global frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) strengthens youths' sense of purpose and global responsibility. Numerous youth-led initiatives worldwide exemplify the transformative impact young adults can have when supported and empowered. Ultimately, intentionally designed educational frameworks and practical opportunities are essential for nurturing young people into active participants and leaders for sustainable global change. We want young people to be involved with the social reality that's around them and be active participants of change.
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	10
AGE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO CAN PARTICIPATE	18-30
DURATION OF ACTIVITY	2 '40 hours
MATERIAL AND SPACE REQUIRED FOR ACTIVITY	1 room, projector, folios, pens.
DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY (METHODOLOGY)	Activity 1: Talk – Social Reality, SDGs, and Leadership (50 min) 1.1 Introduction Brief overview of current youth culture emphasizing individualism. Connection to the importance of shifting towards collective and global perspectives.

1.2 Social Reality & Global Citizenship

Introduction to global citizenship and its relevance to contemporary social challenges.

Presentation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a practical global framework for action.

1.3 Leadership Development

Discuss leadership as collaborative action, referencing the Social Change Model.

Highlight successful youth-led projects globally that embody SDGs.

1.4 Experiential Learning & Project Examples

Explanation of the importance of experiential learning (project-based learning, community-based initiatives).

Methodologies such as SMART, RMSOS and Hart's ladder.

Tangible examples of youth projects related to SDGs.

ACTIVITY 2: WORKSHOP – IDENTIFYING SOCIAL NEEDS & CREATING PROJECTS (1.5 HOURS)

2.1 Group Formation & SDG Exploration

Participants form small groups based on similar interests or community backgrounds.

Each group selects 1–2 SDGs relevant to their local context.

2.2 Identifying Local Social Needs

Groups analyze their community's needs/problems in relation to chosen SDGs.

Participants use methods such as brainstorming, mapping, or root-cause analysis.

2.3 Project Ideation & Development

Groups develop a concrete, actionable idea addressing the identified social need.

Each group outlines goals, key activities, required resources, and intended impact.

2.4 Presentation & Peer Feedback

Groups briefly present their projects to peers.

Facilitated discussion for constructive feedback and potential collaboration.

2.5 Conclusion & Next Steps

Wrap-up summarizing key learnings and encouraging commitment to action.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF ACTIVITY What Skills will the participants learn? What Attitudes will the participants learn? What Knowledge will the participants learn?	This activity aims to empower young participants to become socially aware leaders and active contributors to their communities and the global goals. Through reflection, discusión, and hands-on experience, participants will Connect with real-world social realities and explore how they can drive change locally while contributing to the SDGs. This session fosters personal growth, collaborative learning, and civic responsibility. Skills and knowledge learned by the participants: • Leadership skills: communication, decision-making, teamwork, and initiative • Project development: identifying needs, ideating solutions, and planning actions • Critical and systemic thinking: understanding root causes and connections to SDGs • Collaboration: working with diverse peers and building consensus • Empathy and active listening: engaging with different perspectives Attitudes: • A proactive mindset toward social involvement and leadership • A sense of responsibility and commitment to their communities and global issues • Openness to diversity, dialogue, and collaboration • Confidence in their ability to make a difference • Willingness to take initiative and lead with purpose
OUTCOMES OF ACTIVITY	4 different projects/lines to work with. One in each organisation young people are part.
RELEVANT RESEARCH/ READINGS IN RELATION TO THE ACTIVITY	Ana Maria: Project management and planning youth involvement training (Hands on development material) 2025 Humphrey, A. et al. Western Individualism and the Psychological Wellbeing of Young People: A Systematic Review – Youth (MDPI) 2022 Twenge, J.M. et al. Generational Differences in Young Adults' Life Goals, Concern for Others, and Civic Orientation, 1966–2009. J. Personality Soc. Psych. 2012 International Youth Foundation (2018). Youth Civic Engagement Has Lasting Benefits

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A close-up photograph of three hands of different skin tones (light, medium, and dark) stacked together in a circle, symbolizing teamwork and sustainability. The hands are positioned in the center of the frame, with the fingers interlaced. The background is a blurred green field, suggesting an outdoor setting. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image, with a vertical green line on the left side of the text block.

Recommendations and Practical Solutions for Enhancing Youth Volunteering in Sustainable Development



Building on the insights gathered through data analysis, this section provides targeted recommendations and practical, actionable solutions across four key thematic pillars: Motivation, Development, Youth Organisations, and Transformation of the Self. These aim to address the barriers and unlock the full potential of youth engagement in sustainable development.



Motivation

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Promote a balance between altruistic and self-oriented motivations.
- Address individualism and consumerism by positioning volunteering as a path to connection and growth.
- Highlight social and emotional benefits of volunteering (ex. well-being, relationships).
- Emphasise volunteering as a means of self-actualisation and exploration (ex. travel, networking).
- Encourage storytelling from current volunteers.
- Promote inclusive narratives that resonate with youth identity and aspirations.
- Implement workplace policies that reward volunteering with tangible benefits.

SOLUTIONS:

- **Balanced messaging:** Use real volunteer stories that reflect both community impact and personal growth (ex. confidence, skills, travel experiences).
- **Counter individualism:** Launch group-based community projects and workshops on emotional intelligence and mindfulness.
- **Social benefits storytelling:** Run peer-led testimonial campaigns online and in schools to humanise the volunteer experience.
- **Reflective practice:** Introduce tools like journals, debriefs, and guided reflection to help volunteers link experiences to personal development.
- **Storytelling platforms:** Develop a digital program for volunteers to share experiences via blogs, TikTok, or mini documentaries.
- **Youth-led content:** Involve youth in designing promotional content using inclusive, values-based narratives (ex. climate justice, equity).
- **Work Benefits:** Introduce more paid volunteer leave, flexible or reduced working hours, and recognition bonuses. Volunteering contributes to improved mental health, well-being, and stronger community engagement.





Development

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Align youth volunteering with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Improve SDG education and accreditation in formal, non-formal, and informal learning spaces.
- Integrate volunteering into development strategies at the national and global levels.
- Transition from charity models to empowerment-based frameworks.
- Foster mutual partnerships and horizontal collaboration.
- Recognise and measure impact using meaningful evaluation methods.
- Centre youth voices in development initiatives.

SOLUTIONS:

- **SDG-linked projects:** Create visual toolkits that show how local volunteer actions contribute to global goals.
- **Educational integration:** Embed SDG content in school syllabi, workshops, and gamified apps or challenges.
- **Policy embedding:** Collaborate with governments to integrate youth volunteering in national SDG strategies, budgets, and recognised accreditation systems.
- **Ethical training:** Offer modules on ethical volunteering, anti-paternalism, and community co-creation models.
- **Global exchanges:** Facilitate cross-border youth partnerships with NGOs to encourage cultural and knowledge exchange.
- **Impact tracking:** Use simple, youth-friendly tools like feedback loops, video diaries, or impact journals to evaluate and share results.



Youth Organisations

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Foster belonging and emotional connection within organisations.
- Empower youth with genuine decision-making roles.
- Collaborate with educational institutions to award recognised qualifications.
- Create inclusive, supportive spaces.
- Build leadership, organisational, and prosocial skills.
- Boost visibility through modern digital outreach.
- Reduce access barriers and bureaucracy.
- Offer flexible and micro-volunteering opportunities.
- Provide financial accessibility (ex. reimbursements, stipends).
- Gamify and modernise programs to reflect Gen Z values.
- Invest in capacity-building and targeted promotion.

SOLUTIONS:

- **Community-building:** Establish mentorship circles, peer support groups, and regular social events.
- **Youth governance:** Include young people on boards and give them full project leadership roles.
- **Safe spaces:** Train leaders in emotional support and mental health awareness.
- **Skills training:** Provide recognised and accredited training in project management, communication, budgeting, and advocacy.
- **Social media revamp:** Launch professional campaigns using short video, strong visuals, and influencer collaborations.
- **Easy entry points:** Offer mobile registration and starter packs with clear guidance.

- **Flexible opportunities:** Promote weekend projects, micro-volunteering, and trial periods.
- **Remove cost barriers:** Offer subsidies for travel, meals, or accommodation through public-private partnerships or by tapping into CSR and ESG company targets.
- **Youth-centred design:** Develop gamified challenges, creative competitions, and project missions aligned with climate, justice, or tech themes.
- **Identify Competencies:** Map volunteering activities to skills that align with national education frameworks.
- **Partner with Institutions:** Work with schools, colleges, and vocational bodies to co-develop modules or badge systems.
- **Assessment Tools:** Include reflective journals, mentor evaluations, and practical outcomes to assess learning.
- **Certification:** Offer digital badges or certificates endorsed by both the volunteering organisation and formal educational institutions.
- **Policy Advocacy:** Engage with policymakers to integrate non-formal learning into accredited pathways.



Transformation of the Self

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Present volunteering as a transformative journey of self-confidence, resilience, and identity.
- Emphasise and accredit informal and non-formal learning experiences.
- Provide structured training and certification opportunities.
- Support reflection and growth through storytelling and feedback.
- Build both instrumental and interpersonal skills.
- Cultivate empathy, social awareness, and intercultural understanding.

- Foster a shift in values and commitment to advocacy.
- Celebrate personal impact and recognise achievements.

SOLUTIONS:

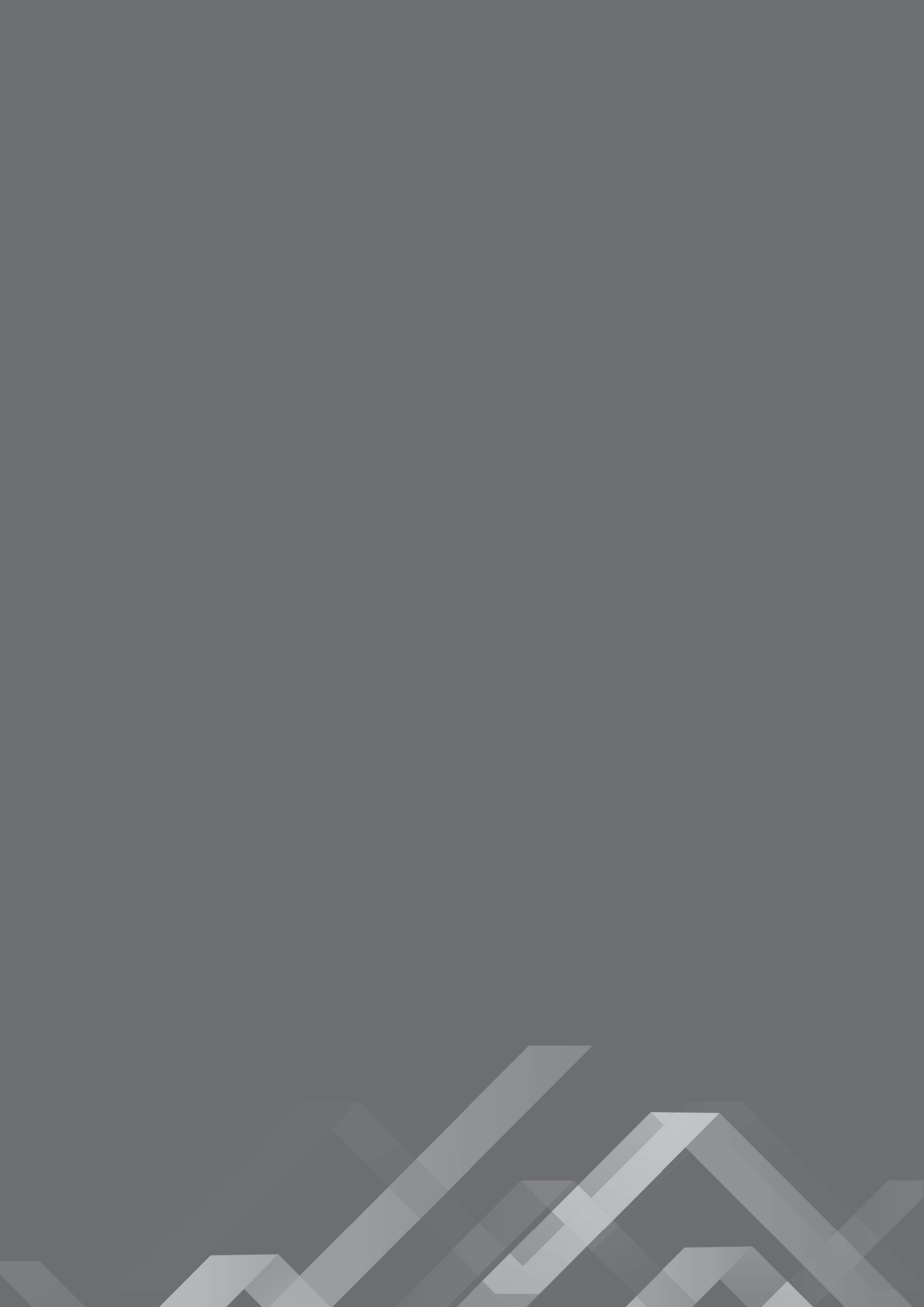
- **Transformation onboarding:** Feature powerful personal growth stories in volunteer inductions.
- **Experiential learning:** Prioritise immersive, real-world tasks over traditional instruction and embed these experiences as part of the official educational curriculum.
- **Blended learning:** Pair hands-on volunteering with formal workshops, certifications, study units, and reflective exercises.
- **Skill-building:** Offer rotating roles, upskilling, and badges for accomplishments (ex, teamwork, budgeting, diplomacy).
- **Diversity and empathy training:** Host intercultural events, story-sharing circles, and community interviews.
- **Value activation:** Expose youth to real-life issues (ex. inequality, climate change) through project immersion and dialogue.
- **Mentorship and feedback:** Assign mentors, conduct regular check-ins, and support self-evaluation practices.
- **Recognition culture:** Celebrate transformation through annual awards, impact showcases, and personal testimonials.
- **Education and Qualifications:** Integrating volunteering, along with non-formal and informal learning, into official educational programs, such as school curricula, diplomas, and degree pathways.

Conclusion

Youth volunteering, when thoughtfully designed and strategically supported, can be a powerful catalyst for personal growth, civic participation, and sustainable development. The dual focus on empowerment and inclusion ensures that young people are not only participants but leaders and changemakers. These recommendations and solutions provide a roadmap for organisations, educators, and policymakers to transform volunteering from an optional extra into a cultural cornerstone of youth development and social innovation.



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