

Volunteering Practices in the Twenty-First Century



Plan of Action
to integrate volunteering
into the 2030 Agenda

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CONTENTS

1. Introduction and background	4
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2. Evidence of the changing landscape of volunteering in the twenty-first century?	6
2.1. Volunteering shaped by broader social issues and patterns	7
2.2. Increasing individualism	8
2.3. A northern-bias in understanding volunteering?	8
2.4. Volunteering and its “distinct” contributions to sustainable development	9

3. Expanding the 1999 typology	11
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4. A model for capturing volunteering practices in the twenty-first century	14
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5. What happens next?	18
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NOTES	20
REFERENCES	21

1. Introduction and background



In 1999, the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme published the background paper “Volunteering and Social Development” in advance of an expert meeting in New York that year. Both the paper and the meeting informed the design, preparation and outputs of the International Year of Volunteers in 2001 and the associated United Nations General Assembly resolution ([A/RES/56/38](#)) and report ([A/56/288](#)). Two decades after the International Year of Volunteering, the United Nations General Assembly has requested UNV and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) to organize a Global Technical Meeting on “Reimagining Volunteering for the 2030 Agenda” in July 2020 as a milestone in the Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda. This short paper revisits the 1999 background paper after two decades, reviewing and updating the analysis to inform the Global Technical Meeting.

The 1999 paper proposed a typology of volunteering informed by a conceptual framework based on rewards, free-will, beneficiaries, organizational settings and commitments. The typology grouped different volunteering practices in four categories, broadly defined as follows:

- *Mutual aid/self-help (“By us, for us”)*: When people join informally with others to address a perceived need. People volunteering in this category either work together to address common needs, reciprocate support or solve a personal need in order to offer help and support to others in the same situation.
- *Philanthropy and service to others*: This is the most commonly perceived form of volunteering and is usually conducted through organizations and associations, where people work to deliver specific services to others in need.
- *Civic participation*: Involves people voluntarily engaging in political or decision-making processes at any level, for example through committees, social audits or providing other forms of feedback.
- *Advocacy and campaigning*: Collective action aimed at securing or preventing change in broad or specific areas, including pressure groups.

Since the publication of the typology over two decades ago, there has been growing interest in the potential of volunteering for social and economic development, including research conducted by new actors, from new perspectives and through new lenses, in increasingly diverse settings. The rapid and widespread changes in the social, political, economic, technological landscapes throughout the world have also created causes for volunteers, new tools they can use and new channels for volunteering. However, while changes have undoubtedly occurred both in the theory and analysis of volunteering and in its practical application, it is not clear whether this has had an impact on the fundamental roles played by volunteers. This paper aims to re-examine the 1999 typology and update the framework, if needed, as part of the “reimagining” of volunteering by the Plan of Action for the 2030 Agenda.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first explores attempts to capture and describe how volunteering has changed over the years. This section examines the dominant conceptualizations of volunteering as a social practice and explores how research has taken into account the contribution of volunteering to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda. The second section briefly revisits the 1999 typology and discusses how it can be revised and updated in light of the changes described. Finally, the third section presents a framework for understanding volunteering practices in the twenty-first century and raises some critical questions for further discussion.

2. Evidence of the changing landscape of volunteering in the twenty-first century?



Do people volunteer differently in the twenty-first century and, if so, how? What factors have driven these changes? These questions are important for taking stock of volunteering today and how it could evolve in the future. This section explores how some of these changes are captured and described in a variety of ways.

2.1. Volunteering shaped by broader social issues and patterns

There is evidence to suggest that volunteering practices are changing in response to wider social patterns and challenges, such as the climate emergency, technological advances, migration, the changing nature of work, humanitarian crises and inequalities. The global climate emergency, for instance, has inspired diverse forms of volunteer action. The State of the World's Volunteerism Report 2018¹ underscored the role of volunteers in response, relief and rehabilitation efforts following increasingly common natural disasters. Spontaneous volunteer responses and emergent groups—comprising individuals who are themselves “victims” of crises—are often the first responders following natural disasters.² During the earthquake that struck Nepal in 2015, for example, local survivors immediately came together to care for and support each other, while community members and neighbours were noted as the first and most important rescuers.³ These informal volunteering responses have also been taken up in policies and programmes by formal actors, with mixed results. For instance, in one account of volunteering responses from Australia, broader political and social factors led to higher regulation of volunteering responses to disasters, which were strained by increasing state expectations.⁴

Additionally, the rapid spread of new technologies and online connectivity has also diversified volunteer engagement and facilitated certain individuals with access to volunteering opportunities. For example, around 12,000 individuals from 187 countries volunteer online every year through the UNV online volunteering platform.⁵ Online volunteering encompasses a wide range of activities, including graphic design, updating a Wikipedia page, administering the website of a club or writing reports.⁶ Many volunteer-involving organizations incorporate online spaces in their engagement strategy, since they can improve access to individuals who may have encountered difficulties to volunteering in the past, such as persons with disabilities.⁷

There has also been global recognition of the contribution of informal volunteering or person-to-person helping activities in many communities, with 70 percent of the world's volunteering carried out directly and informally between individuals, outside of “formal” organizations and groups.⁸ Recognizing that volunteering goes beyond a “service-delivery mechanism” and is in fact a regular part of many people's everyday lives and livelihoods means acknowledging that volunteering practices can shape and are shaped by social issues at the community and individual levels. For instance, researchers have looked at the link between gender and volunteering, concluding that 57 percent of global volunteering activity is performed by women.⁹ Similarly, another cross-country study found that the majority of women volunteer in social and health services while volunteering among men tended to be focused on cultural activities and sports.¹⁰ It has also been observed that VIOs tend to rely on female volunteers, including because they problematically assume that “women have infinite time to participate in volunteer-based community groups”.¹¹ In contrast, ethnographic studies of women health workers in India¹² and Peru¹³ found that women struggle to balance volunteer work with other, equally demanding roles at home and in their community. In the Peruvian context, the skills and expertise of women health volunteers are lo-

cally recognized as “innate” and “natural” among women, warranting no special reward or remuneration. This lack of recognition (e.g. in financial terms) makes women feel undervalued and, to a certain extent, places them at an even greater disadvantage.

2.2. Increasing individualism

Another dominant observation of how volunteer work has changed is the increasing individualism in decision-making as to where, how and why individuals volunteer.¹⁴ Personal benefits for the volunteer (e.g. improved employment, well-being and mental health) are valued alongside more altruistic motivations and a sense of obligation. This trend is also characterized by a greater interest in short-term and episodic volunteering. In these volunteer engagements, volunteers offer their time flexibly, depending on their lifestyle and availability.¹⁵ In general terms, episodic volunteering refers to short-term, emergent, sporadic volunteer engagement, which may even be a one-off event.¹⁶

Volunteers also tend to engage with specific causes and outcomes they personally identify with or those that are “fashionable” and “trendy”, instead of showing long-term loyalty to specific organizations. These trends are described as “new” forms of volunteering that are often pitted against “traditional” ones characterized as “lifelong and demanding commitment”.¹⁷ Much of the research in this particular area has been conducted in countries in the global North, where there are often formal volunteering spaces, meaning it is important to explore whether such trends can also be observed in other contexts. Nonetheless, both “forms” of volunteering can coexist within a particular time and context, instead of one replacing the other.¹⁸

2.3. A northern-bias in understanding volunteering?

The IFRC Global Review of Volunteering report¹⁹ found that the dominant understanding of volunteering—which is often presented as “universal”—has been framed by the experiences of the global North. Even volunteering studies conducted in contexts in the global South often use theoretical approaches grounded in the North as a starting point or focus on the experience of international volunteer from the North. This skewed focus means “particular forms of volunteering are privileged over others”.²⁰ For instance, the tendency to frame the South as the “host” of volunteer programmes from the North, leads to the wealth of volunteering practices within these contexts being eclipsed, especially with in the context of “poor” and “marginalized” communities.²¹

To make progress with volunteering for development, we must first understand the realities of volunteering within contexts in the global South, instead of using frameworks highly influenced by experiences elsewhere.²² In terms of research on volunteering, this means diversifying the methods used to understand volunteering practices, such as by conducting participatory and ethnographic research. In terms of practice, this means that development actors (volunteers, development workers, staff and partner communities) must examine power relationships in volunteer activities in greater depth.

There have already been changes in practices that take these local experiences into account. In 2015, researchers mapped out how volunteering aims and practices have responded to the “changing tides” of development approaches over time.²³ They noted, for example, that certain international volunteering organizations that post volunteers have moved beyond service-delivery approaches to a practice where international volunteers, who are often from the global North, engage in volunteer work in contexts in the global South to provide services and skills to fill “gaps”. The emergence of South-to-South volunteering schemes have also influenced the reappraisal of the roles of volunteers as agents of change at the local and global levels.²⁴ Organizations are increasingly using approaches focused on partnership-building with local volunteers and involving “marginalized” groups in decision-making on interventions that directly affect them. This can be seen as a response to critiques of traditional North–South approaches to international volunteering, which can, Devereux notes, at its worst “be imperialist, paternalistic charity”.²⁵ Against the backdrop of these increasingly diverse ways of “doing” volunteering, we must remain vigilant when it comes to how power relationships embedded in the wider development ecosystem play out in practice. It is crucial to critically examine how certain volunteering modalities—particularly those employed by certain actors and institutions—can co-opt the agenda and practices of others.

One of the main features of this paper is that it draws from pieces of work that use an endogenous approach to understanding volunteering in the global South grounded in understanding the “cultural and contextual realities of the Global South in all its diversity”.²⁶ In addition to cross-country comparisons and statistics, this paper also includes ethnographic, highly contextual work that makes visible nuanced issues that intersect with volunteering, such as gender²⁷ and inequality.²⁸

2.4. Volunteering and its “distinct” contributions to sustainable development

Under the Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda, it is being positioned as a key driver towards achieving the SDGs. UNV notes that volunteering is “often a powerful means to engage people to ensure that global sustainable development is owned and implemented by everyone and leaving no one behind”.²⁹ Volunteering is framed as a way to support participation and inclusion when it comes to the SDGs. As such, it is well-positioned to contribute to campaigns such as the Decade of Action, which aims to speed up and scale up efforts to achieve the SDGs through individual and collective action, both locally and globally.

However, what is the unique contribution of volunteering to development, for example in the case of the SDGs? In 2015, Voluntary Service Overseas and the Institute of Development Studies conducted a two-year participatory action research project in Kenya, Mozambique, Nepal and the Philippines to answer this question.³⁰ The project aimed not only to find out what volunteers do but also to assess their unique contributions to supporting and enabling positive change. The research identified five ways volunteering does this:

1. Inclusion – extending the reach of public services to the poorest and most marginalized
2. Ownership – strengthening local ownership of development processes
3. Innovation – creating new forms of collaboration that lead to social innovation
4. Participation – creating a pathway to participation and active citizenship
5. Inspiration – modelling different norms.

A common theme across these five aspects is the relational aspect of volunteering: “the relational way in which volunteers work makes them better able to interact with those groups which are less easy to reach – the poorest and most marginalized”.³¹ The research explained that the effectiveness of development programmes is not determined by the lack of services but by how they are delivered, highlighting the importance of the relationships facilitated by volunteers. The State of the World’s Volunteerism Report argues that it is the capacity of volunteering to stimulate self-organization and create and develop human connections that allows it to contribute towards community resilience. Considering social relations is key to answering our question about the kind of change that volunteering facilitates³² while a focus on relationships also brings issues of power to the fore (an aspect not explicitly addressed in the original 1999 typology).

3. Expanding the 1999 typology



In light of the trends and patterns described in the previous section, this section considers how we can expand the previous typology. Taking the 1999 typology as a starting point, we examine critical questions and issues that can help develop our thinking about volunteering practices in the twenty-first century. Based on the original four types, this paper proposes the following extensions for the updated 2020 typology.

Types of Volunteering	Characteristics (1999)	Extension (2020)
Mutual aid or self-help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● When people gather informally to meet a perceived need, either working together to address common needs or reciprocating support to each other or those in the same situation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Because mutual aid and self-help activities are deeply embedded in community practices, there are many individuals who do not (or choose not to) call themselves volunteers. They are an important part of the picture.
Philanthropy or service to others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Primary recipient of volunteering is not the member of the group but an external third party. ● Often takes place within voluntary or community organizations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Greater recognition of the diversity of organizations in which volunteering through service takes place, such as corporations and universities.³³ ● A closer look at the varying roles of volunteers within organizations, beyond delivering services. Volunteers could also be leaders, decision makers, planners and evaluators.
Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Roles played by volunteers in participatory governance processes. ● Participation as an essential component of good governance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Could be expanded by looking into participation by volunteers in development programmes in civil society spaces (e.g. in non-governmental organizations (NGOs)).

Types of Volunteering	Characteristics (1999)	Extension (2020)
<p>Participation (cont.)</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● It is important to include issues of agency and voice in the discussion. Understanding the extent of participation is critical, since it could only mean “attendance”, without the ability to directly shape outcomes. In line with this, there is a need to critically examine the possibility of states and governments co-opting volunteering agendas and practices, which would otherwise be embedded in community-based practices. ● Consider the possibility of volunteering to disrupt/question/challenge government and development processes and not only support them.
<p>Advocacy or campaigning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collective action to lobby for change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Could look closely at the political aspect of volunteering practices and how they could go beyond awareness-raising to actually challenge power structures at a systems level.

In addition to the four types introduced in 1999, this paper also proposes adding a fifth type of volunteering practice, following the proposal by the Institute for Volunteer Research to include volunteering as “expressive behaviours” or “volunteering as leisure”.³⁴ This type would cover volunteering motivated by a personal interest, in activities such as concerts, arts and sports events and tourism. This type of volunteering includes the wealth of volunteer activities primarily conducted by individuals to obtain human, social and cultural capital that could be valuable, for example, for young people entering the job market. It is important to highlight that thinking of volunteering as leisure does not mean a frivolous activity performed by hobbyists and nor is it synonymous with “voluntourism” (a combination of leisure travel and charity work that is not compatible with principles of effective and sustainable development). Stebbins has proposed the term “serious leisure” to indicate that this form of volunteering could be performed systematically and be “sufficiently substantial, interesting and fulfilling for the participant to find a (leisure) career there acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience”.³⁵

As we shall see further on, to avoid misconceptions it is also worth noting here that all five proposed types are not mutually exclusive and can be overlapping. A volunteering activity with aspects of “leisure”, for example, can be combined with aspects of the other four types in different combinations and intensities.

4. A model for capturing volunteering practices in the twenty-first century



In light of the extensions proposed above, this section presents an updated and reconceptualized model for understanding volunteering practices in the twenty-first century, reflecting its complexity, configurations and intensities. The 2020 model comprises five rings, each representing a dimension of a volunteer action.

Figure 1. The five components of volunteering practices: Structure, site, intensity, aspiration, category

1. The first ring represents the **structure** of the volunteering activity. Volunteering can be done **formally** through organizations, community groups or any platform that allocates support. It can also be done **informally**, as part of everyday activities to help other people.

2. The second ring refers to the **sites** of volunteer practice. This can be **online**, on-site or a combination of both. Virtual and online volunteering use technology both as a channel and a tool for volunteer activities. In many spaces, online volunteering is done in conjunction with on-site, face-to-face volunteering. The various spheres of on-site volunteering could further be broken down into community-based volunteering, national volunteering and/or international volunteering.

3. The third ring represents the **intensity** of volunteer engagement. It can be **episodic**, involving short-term, emergent, sporadic engagement of volunteers and may even be a one-off event. Volunteering can also be more regular and long-term, with fixed patterns.

4. The fourth ring represents the **aspirational** element of volunteer practice, i.e. the final goals of volunteering. **Community-building** refers to contributions towards wider societal outcomes, such as those outlined in the SDGs. This takes into account volunteering that is primarily conducted for the benefit of others. **Self-building** is the component that takes into account benefits to individual volunteers, such as the accumulation of social and cultural capital (e.g. knowledge, skills, experience, networks, and well-being) as part of volunteering practice.

5. The final ring represents the **categories** of volunteering. Four are from the previous typology and an additional type “leisure” has been added. The five categories are shown below.



Figure 2. Within this model, each ring is considered not as binary but as a spectrum. This means that volunteering activities, for instance, could have both offline and online components or a certain mix of both. A particular volunteering practice can occupy any position across the two ends of the following scale

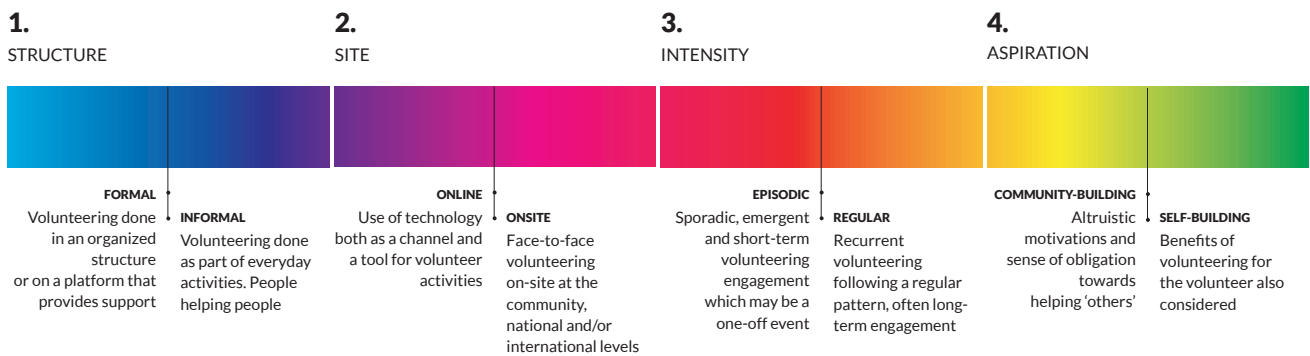


Figure 3. The five categories of volunteering in 2020



While the four types are not mutually exclusive in the previous typology, the framework must be updated to take account of the extent of the overlaps between them. In this respect, the new framework moves away from thinking about mutual aid, service, participation, advocacy and the new leisure type as discrete boxes into which volunteering practices can neatly be filed. Instead, they are framed as different dimensions and categories of expressions of volunteering, which can coexist in different magnitudes and intensities, depending on the practice.

Volunteer activities include various combinations and intensities of these elements, as shown in the following examples:

The *Khuluma* programme was launched in South Africa in 2013 to provide an online support group for young people living with HIV. The young people are grouped together with 10–15 other members and share with each other any concerns about their health condition via text messages for a period of three months at a time. Volunteering activities take place online and episodically with the goal of building the self and each other based on mutual aid.

In the UK, a woman in her 70s volunteers for a local school to accompany pupils during field visits. She has done this during her free time for the past five years. It increases her confidence but also helps teachers in managing workload. This volunteering activity is on-site, conducted on a regular and long-term basis, contributes to both building the self and the community and is underpinned by principles of both service and leisure.

The elements within each ring can also coexist in different intensities over time, depending on the context, illustrated by the following example, which shows the wealth of volunteering activities during a context of disaster response and rehabilitation:

In 2013, “super typhoon” Haiyan, which was at the time one of the most powerful typhoons of all time, affected more than 14 million people in the Philippines, with a death toll of 6,000. Some of the immediate responses included online and on-site fundraising and awareness-raising (campaigning and participation) by volunteers on an episodic basis. On Twitter, many users helped spread the word about missing people and which sites needed most help. There were also on-site responses by volunteers in various NGOs and individuals who were affected by the typhoon. They distributed relief goods and health services (practices that lean more towards service-delivery and mutual aid). Over time, the focus shifted from response to rehabilitation, where some volunteering practices were part of larger development projects: involvement became more regular and longer-term, with a combination of on-site rebuilding and livelihood projects and online fundraising, including donations from income-generating activities organised by overseas Filipino workers. Arts-based campaigns, such as a theatre groups (leisure and community building), setting up community-based theatre reflecting on stories of people affected by Haiyan also emerged.

5. What happens next?



The model proposed in this paper recognizes volunteering as a complex activity that cuts across a range of practices, benefits and motivations. Volunteering is relevant throughout people's lives and people may take part in multiple aspects at different times. Volunteering is both a means and an end to achieving, challenging, disrupting and even shaping development outcomes.

This document will be used as an input into the discussions at the Global Technical Meeting in July 2020 and as a foundation for the four workstreams that feed into the meeting. Rather than being the "final say" on the complexity of volunteering practices, it seeks to stimulate discussion among practitioners, policy-makers, academics and the many volunteers who practice these activities first-hand. Some critical questions to be considered include:

- Which configuration(s) of these elements could make the greatest contribution to achieving development goals such as the SDGs?
- How do configurations of these elements change over time? For instance, within a development project lifecycle or the time-frame between devising and implementing volunteering policies?
- In terms of the intensity of volunteer engagement, how can organizations better support both longer-term and shorter-term engagement?
- How can organizations strike a balance in the provision of volunteer opportunities with a development component (i.e. community-building), while also taking into account the welfare and development of volunteers (i.e. self-building)?
- What types of volunteering practices do certain policies promote?
- Who should be included in interpreting this typology in organizations, national contexts or groups?
- How will this model change in the future? Will certain rings include more elements or will some cease to exist? What are the potential opportunities and threats presented by these changes?

NOTES

- 1** UNV 2018.
- 2** Twigg and Mosel 2017.
- 3** Devkota, Doberstein and Nepal 2016.
- 4** McLennan, Whittaker and Handmer 2016.
- 5** www.onlinevolunteering.org.
- 6** Amichai-Hamburger 2008.
- 7** Amichai-Hamburger 2008.
- 8** UNV 2018.
- 9** UNV 2018.
- 10** Anheier and Salamon 1999.
- 11** Lind in Banerjea 2011.
- 12** Banerjea 2011.
- 13** Jenkins 2009.
- 14** Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003, Rochester, Paine and Howlett 2010.
- 15** Holmes 2014.
- 16** Macduff 2005.
- 17** Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003.
- 18** Hustinx 2001.
- 19** Hazeldine and Baillie Smith 2015.
- 20** Hazeldine and Baillie Smith 2015, p. 29.
- 21** Laurie and Baillie Smith 2018.
- 22** Burns and Howard 2015.
- 23** Lopez Franco and Shahrokh 2015.
- 24** Lopez Franco and Shahrokh 2015, Baillie Smith, Laurie and Griffiths 2017.
- 25** Devereux 2008, p. 358.
- 26** Butcher and Einolf 2017, p 4.
- 27** Banerjea 2011, Jenkins 2009.
- 28** Lewis 2015, Patel, Perold, Mohamed and Carapinha 2007.
- 29** UNV 2020.
- 30** VSO and IDS 2014.
- 31** Burns and Howard 2015, p. 12.
- 32** Aked 2015.
- 33** Allen, Galiano and Hayes 2011.
- 34** Rochester, Paine and Howlett 2010.
- 35** Stebbins 2013, p. 2.

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PLAN OF ACTION TO INTEGRATE VOLUNTEERING INTO THE 2030 AGENDA

The Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda is a framework under the auspices of the United Nations through which Governments, United Nations entities, volunteer-involving organizations, private sector, civil society including academia and other stakeholders come together to integrate volunteerism into the planning and implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by:

- a) strengthening people's ownership of the development agenda;
- b) integrating volunteerism into national and global implementation strategies; and
- c) measuring volunteerism.



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Plan of Action
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