



## **Plan of Action**

to integrate volunteering  
into the 2030 Agenda

**A PLAN OF ACTION  
SYNTHESIS REPORT ON**

# **INTEGRATING VOLUNTEERING INTO THE 2030 AGENDA**

**IN THE  
UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC AND  
SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR  
WESTERN ASIA REGION**

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This is a synthesis report of Member State submissions on integrating volunteerism into the 2030 Agenda in accordance with the 2015 Report of the United Nations Secretary-General (A/70/118) and General Assembly Resolution A/RES/73/140. Information synthesized in this report is based upon Member State National Situation Analyses on volunteering submitted to the Plan of Action Secretariat in 2018, contributions to the 2018 Secretary-General’s report on volunteering and Voluntary National Reviews submitted by Member States as part of the process to monitor implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The report is an input to the regional Plan of Action stakeholder consultation, as requested by United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/73/140.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Volunteering is a powerful means to engage people to deliver the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) and an environmentally sustainable, peaceful world, free of poverty, hunger and inequality where no one is left behind.<sup>1</sup> From providing medical care to taking climate action, from giving technical assistance to monitoring post-disaster reconstruction, an estimated one billion people globally volunteer.<sup>2</sup> Volunteerism is essential to ensure that global sustainable development efforts are owned by all people, implemented by all people and for all people.

The 2030 Agenda recognizes the vital roles that volunteers everywhere are playing. Following its launch in 2015, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a Plan of Action developed by United Nations Member States through UNGA Resolutions (Figure 1) to help volunteering stakeholders enhance the recognition and integration of volunteerism into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs.) Through the concerted efforts of volunteers, governments, civil society, the private sector and the United Nations, the Plan of Action seeks to strengthen people's ownership of the 2030 Agenda, integrate and mainstream volunteering into national strategies and policies and better measure the impact of volunteers.

Figure 1 Key United Nations General Assembly resolutions mentioning volunteering.



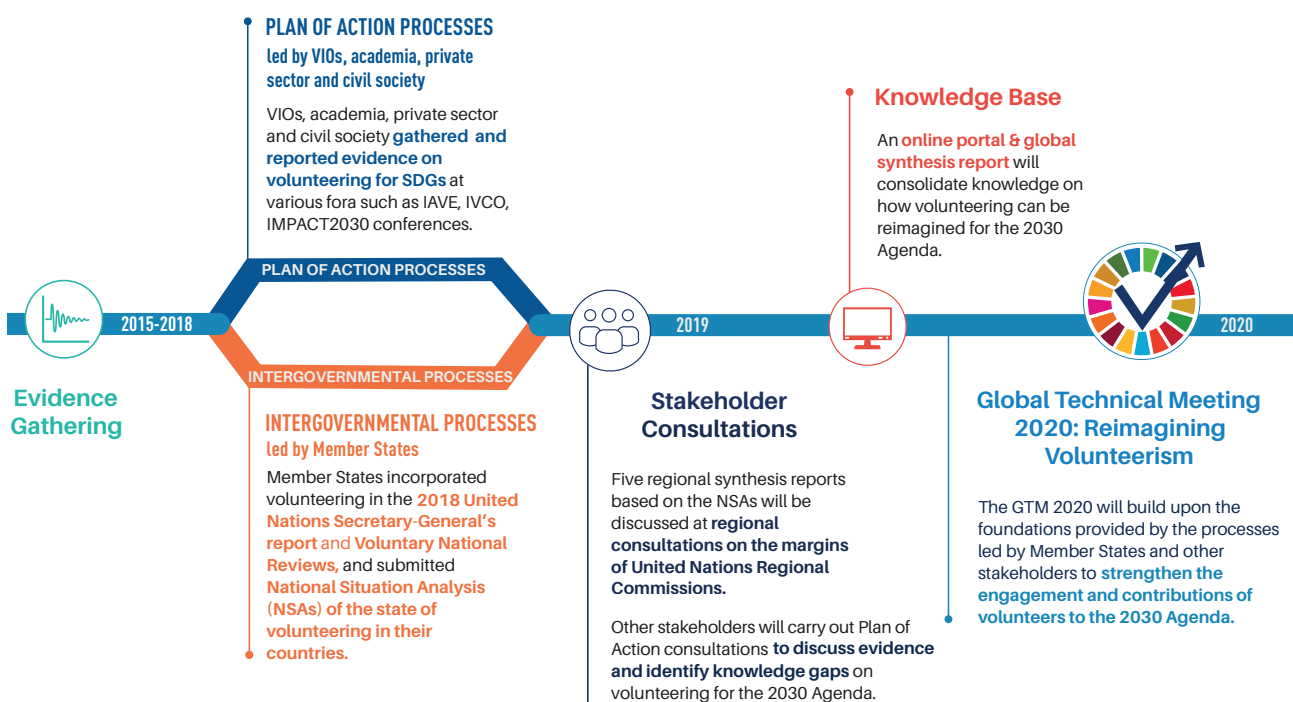
Substantial progress has been made in integrating volunteerism into the SDGs and volunteers not only have a voice at the United Nations,<sup>3</sup> but often in their own countries and organizations. More than 100 countries have now measured volunteer work and over 90 countries have policies or legislation that aim to promote volunteering.<sup>4</sup> In 2018, 29 Member States recognized the efforts of volunteers in their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) on SDG progress.

Implementation of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution (A/73/245) on the Plan of Action will shape the future of volunteering in the context of the 2030 Agenda. Progress will be assessed and reported at the Global Technical Meeting with the theme of 'Reimagining volunteerism for the 2030 Agenda,' at the 2020 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.<sup>1</sup> In the build up to this special event, the Plan of Action Secretariat is reviewing the role of volunteerism in achieving and localizing the SDGs and creating a knowledge base that is inclusive of good practices, lessons

learned and data sets using inputs from Member States, United Nations agencies, volunteer-involving organizations, civil society organizations, academia and the private sector. The Plan of Action aims to engage stakeholders to generate evidence and convene dialogues to strengthen and broaden this knowledge base on how volunteerism can be reimagined for the 2030 Agenda.

In 2019, five regional consultations on volunteering will take place in the context of the Regional Forums on Sustainable Development, providing space for Plan of Action stakeholders to discuss evidence and approaches, share best practices and identify opportunities for addressing knowledge gaps. Further civil society-led consultations are envisaged in the second half of 2019 and will be supplemented by online consultations and conversations. Together these dialogues, analyses and best practices will inform a global synthesis report for the 2020 Global Technical Meeting.

Figure 2 The Plan of Action Process: Road to 2020, 'Reimagining Volunteerism'.



This regional synthesis report is a Plan of Action input to the regional consultation on volunteerism held as part of the 2019 Arab Forum on Sustainable Development convened by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). The report draws on information from three sources (refer to Annex A for details). Firstly, the report uses information from National Situation Analyses (NSAs) on volunteerism that were developed in consultation with the United Nations, civil society and volunteer-involving organizations to generate evidence and data on the scale, scope and impact of volunteerism for the Plan of Action.<sup>i</sup> Secondly, it uses information on volunteering that was reported by Member States in their 2018 VNRs on progress towards the 2030 Agenda. Finally, this report also uses evidence from recent reports, including the 2018 Secretary-General's report on volunteering, global, regional and national level data from Member States and regional bodies and key reports from United Nations agencies and programmes.

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i As requested by United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/70/129, the United Nations Volunteers programme and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies will chair a Global Technical Meeting at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in July 2020, with Member States and other stakeholders.

The report consists of four chapters. Chapter 2 gives an overview of regional progress made towards the 2030 Agenda to help identify trends and opportunities through which volunteerism could help strengthen and accelerate SDG progress. Chapter 3 looks at existing progress on integrating volunteerism into the 2030 Agenda. Chapter 4 brings together the information in Chapters 2 and 3 to provide initial recommendations on actions that volunteer actors in the ESCWA region can take to achieve the goals of the Plan of Action. These initial recommendations are not exhaustive and will be used as inputs into further dialogues and consultations on the Plan of Action at the Regional Forums on Sustainable Development and in the lead up to the 2020 Global Technical Meeting.

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ii In line with the 2015 Report of the United Nations Secretary-General (A/70/118), United Nations Member States were called upon to contribute a National Situation Analysis on volunteerism in 2018 as part of the implementation of the Plan of Action and to submit these to the United Nations Volunteers programme.

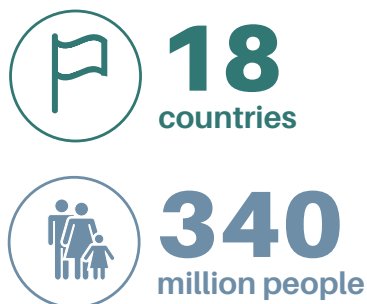
## 2. THE 2030 AGENDA IN THE ESCWA REGION

Across the ESCWA region, Member States are taking steps to achieve the SDGs by 2030. As can be expected in such a diverse region, progress has been mixed, and data gaps make it difficult to provide a full picture. Human development index<sup>5</sup> levels have been generally increasing in the region.

For example, the United Arab Emirates now ranks 34<sup>th</sup> of the 189 countries measured globally. However, in some countries, human development index levels have fallen due to serious and prolonged conflict and unrest.<sup>6</sup> The 2017 Arab Multidimensional Poverty Report notes that extreme poverty rates have fallen

overall, but remain high in certain countries, including Mauritania, the Sudan and Yemen.<sup>7</sup> Many countries have been making progress in promoting good health and well-being, but life expectancy ranges from 62/64 years (men/women) in Yemen to 77/81 years in Qatar.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 3 Map of the ESCWA region.



### Member States

Bahrain  
Egypt  
Iraq

Jordan  
Kuwait  
Lebanon

Libya  
Mauritania  
Morocco

Oman  
State of Palestine  
Qatar

Saudi Arabia  
The Sudan  
The Syrian Arab Republic

The United Arab Emirates  
Yemen  
Tunisia



Most children now have access to primary education and several countries have achieved 99 percent youth literacy, but some notable exceptions exist. For example, for the period 2009-2014, secondary education enrolment in Yemen is only around half of male youth and only one-third of female youth, and Mauritania has youth literacy rates of just 66 percent for males and 48 percent for females.<sup>9</sup>

While significant progress has been made in achieving the SDGs, many challenges remain that need to be overcome to achieve the 2030 Agenda. Volunteers are already playing an important role across the SDG spectrum, but they can further accelerate progress in the decade leading up to 2030. Given current trends and positioning of volunteering, there are certain challenges and opportunities that volunteers in the ESCWA region are particularly well-placed to address.

One broad area relates to rapid population growth across the region, with a tripling of the population since 1970.<sup>10</sup> Seventeen percent of the population in the ESCWA region is between the ages of 15 and 24, with particularly high numbers of youth in Iraq, Mauritania, the State of Palestine, the Sudan and Yemen.<sup>11</sup> Achieving full and fair employment is a significant challenge as the youth unemployment rate in ESCWA countries was higher than in any other of the five United Nations regions in 2017, with a regional average of 20 percent unemployed youth, rising to 29.5 percent in North Africa.<sup>12</sup> Rapid population growth has led to the growth of large cities such as Amman, Baghdad, Cairo and Riyadh and 92 percent of the ESCWA population lives in just three percent of the total land area.<sup>13</sup> This rapid and concentrated urbanization has resulted in the growth of informal settlements which generally have lower levels of human development and are more vulnerable to resilience shocks and stresses.<sup>14</sup>

A second impact area relates to peace and stability, a major challenge for the region and one in which volunteers are already playing a very active role. Due to conflicts in Iraq, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, there were an estimated 333,298 recorded deaths between 2010 and 2016.<sup>15</sup> These conflicts

have also displaced an estimated 30 million people in the ESCWA region, around 50 percent of the global total of displaced people. These include internally displaced people and refugees who have fled to surrounding countries.<sup>16</sup> Women, youth and marginalized groups are particularly vulnerable when displaced, for example about 28 percent of female Syrian refugees in Jordan reported incidents of psychological abuse and physical assault.<sup>17</sup> In addition, war and other forms of violence have inflicted serious damage on public services and infrastructure, with both immediate and long-term impacts on human capital, environmental protection and economic growth.<sup>18</sup>

Another huge and cross-cutting challenge where volunteers are well-placed to accelerate progress is environmental sustainability and climate change mitigation and adaptation. With rapid urbanization in a sensitive ecosystem, environmental challenges to sustainable development in ESCWA countries are significant. For example, in ESCWA countries the air quality in urban areas often exceeds World Health Organization guidelines by more than five times, with several Arab cities among the most polluted in the world.<sup>19</sup> These environmental problems are being exacerbated by climate change with increasingly frequent and intense flooding, droughts and other extreme weather events affecting ecosystems, livelihoods and food, water and energy security. These effects of climate change are already resulting in health issues, economic losses and displacement of people in several parts of the region.<sup>20</sup> Some areas are more affected by climate change than others, including the Sahel and the south-western Arabian Peninsula, although all ESCWA areas are affected by severe water scarcity.<sup>21</sup> Lower income ESCWA countries and fragile states are also far less resilient and have lower capacity to adapt to climate change, while within populations women and marginalized communities are usually the most vulnerable to the impacts of a rapidly changing climate.<sup>22</sup>

Across all the key SDG challenges, persistent gender inequality holds back the potential for half the population to contribute to, and benefit from, solutions. Most ESCWA countries fall into

the lowest fifth of 149 countries assessed by the 2018 Global Gender Equality Gap Index which measures economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health outcomes and political participation.<sup>23</sup> There is extremely low female participation in the labour market<sup>24</sup> and high unemployment rates for women, with Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar being the only countries in the region in which female labour force participation is over 30 percent.<sup>25</sup> Violence against women is also prevalent, with over 35 percent of married women in the Middle East and North Africa region experiencing physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner.<sup>26</sup> Yet, encouraging signs of progress exist. For example, Tunisia enacted a 'Law on Eliminating Violence against Women' in 2017<sup>27</sup> and the girls' enrollment rate in tertiary education in the Arab region (33.51

percent) is now higher than that of boys (30.52 percent).<sup>28</sup> However, progress to achieve gender equality needs to be rapidly accelerated and volunteering can potentially play an important role through empowerment and awareness-raising.

In conclusion, this section demonstrates uneven progress in achieving the SDGs and identifies some of the key challenges that volunteers can work to overcome. The following sections will look at the main trends in volunteering in the region, how volunteers and volunteering stakeholders are already supporting SDG implementation, and how new support, implementation methods and measurement can maximize and catalyze ESCWA volunteering to accelerate SDG progress across the region.



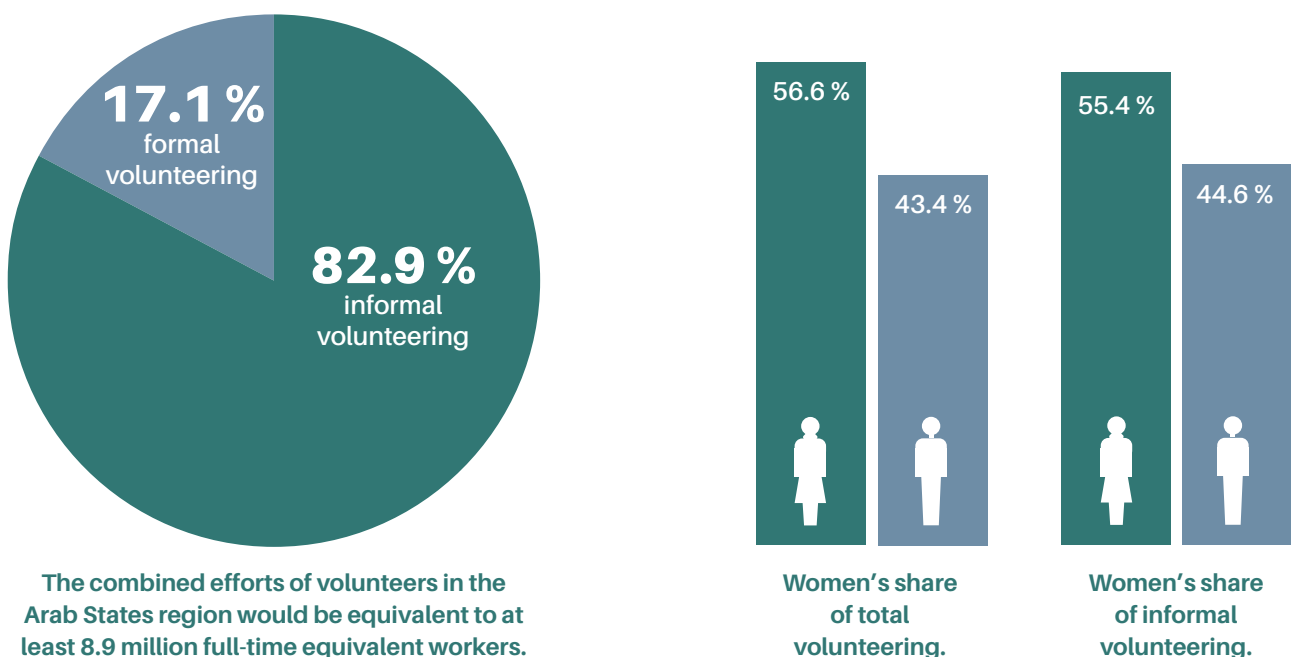
### 3. KEY TRENDS IN VOLUNTEERING IN THE ESCWA REGION

According to recent estimates in the *2018 State of the World's Volunteerism Report*, there were over 8.9 million full time equivalent volunteers in the Arab States region in 2018.<sup>29</sup> Only an estimated 17.1 percent of these are formal volunteers, with the vast majority (82.9 percent) volunteering informally.

Notably, more women volunteer than men, comprising around 56.6 percent of the total number of volunteers and 55.4 percent of those engaged in informal volunteering. Volunteering has been part of all ESCWA cultures for millennia. For example, in the Sudan community members traditionally gather following a *nafeer*, 'a call to mobilize' that relies on collective volunteer engagement.<sup>30</sup> Such traditional forms of volunteering play a powerful role in delivering sustainable development, but often

go unrecognized and unmeasured. In addition to informal and traditional ways of volunteering, new, formalized forms are emerging, such as through national schemes. Surrounding volunteers is an evolving infrastructure of organizations, institutions, laws, policies and norms that set out to support and promote volunteering. Together, volunteers, and the support that enables them, are making powerful contributions to the 2030 Agenda across the ESCWA region.

Figure 4 Scale and scope of volunteering in the ESCWA region.



Estimates derived from data from the 2018 State of the World's Volunteerism Report.

### 3.1. STRENGTHENING PEOPLE'S OWNERSHIP OF THE SDGS

The 2030 Agenda emphasizes a people-centred approach to development and can only be implemented through the engagement of all stakeholders. However, while localization debates often focus on national ownership, less attention is paid to the mix of capacities required at the national level down to the community level. Volunteerism can engage all people in collective efforts, while promoting solidarity and awareness and empowering and building the skills of those who volunteer. Through engaging all people in these ways, volunteering can be a powerful way to build bottom-up ownership of the 2030 Agenda – the first objective of the Plan of Action.<sup>31</sup>

#### ESCWA VOLUNTEERS ARE TAKING ACTION

Across the ESCWA region volunteers have been taking action to make substantial contributions to SDG targets. Drawing from the available data, volunteers can be seen to be making a particularly strong impact on some SDGs, while for others great potential exists for engaging more volunteers. Firstly, volunteers across the ESCWA region are often the first to respond to humanitarian crises, including in areas affected by conflict and those afflicted by natural disasters.<sup>32</sup> For example, in Jordan volunteers provided medical support to people displaced

by conflict,<sup>33</sup> while in Iraq volunteers with highly specialized professional skill sets repaired housing damaged by extreme weather.<sup>34</sup> Volunteers in the ESCWA region are also on the frontline of efforts to mitigate climate change, such as dealing with water scarcity (SDG 6), one of the biggest challenges for the region. For example, in Jordan, which has one of the lowest levels of water availability per capita globally, volunteers install and repair rainwater catchment systems in schools.<sup>35</sup> Volunteers across the region are also playing a key role in promoting access to education. In Qatar, volunteers provide learning support to 600 elementary students to improve their school performance and enhance their language skills.<sup>36</sup>

#### VOLUNTEERISM IS BUILDING PEACEFUL, INCLUSIVE AND RESILIENT SOCIETIES

With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, United Nations Member States pledged to ensure that 'no one will be left behind' and to 'reach the furthest behind first.'<sup>38</sup> Volunteers can extend support to the most vulnerable and work day to day to strengthen communities and societies across the region in the face of multiple resilience stresses. In areas affected by conflict, volunteers work to rebuild physical and social structures, such as in Iraq where volunteer teachers ensure that education services are not disrupted.<sup>39</sup> Throughout the region volunteers help protect the rights and well-being of refugees and internally displaced people, not only by providing

#### YOUTH VOLUNTEERS SUPPORTING RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN YEMEN

Yemeni university students volunteer through the Rural Advocates Working for Development initiative to promote rural development in their home communities. This includes through raising awareness and training communities on clean water and sanitation issues and environmental protection. From 2004 to 2017, more than 6,000 Yemeni youth participated through the initiative, many of whom were volunteers. Following the intensification of armed conflict in Yemen in 2015, the initiative has continued to grow and has adapted training and awareness-raising activities to include issues related to conflict.<sup>37</sup>

*Source: World Bank Group, 2018b.*

essential services, but also through supporting resettlement and social integration. In Lebanon, volunteers provide shelter, drinking water and sanitation to displaced people<sup>40</sup>, while volunteer teachers help young refugees with issues related to bullying, violence and discrimination.<sup>41</sup> Refugees and asylum seekers themselves also volunteer to take ownership of solutions to the many challenges they face.<sup>42</sup> In Jordan for instance, Syrian refugee volunteers support more than 3,500 children with disabilities to access education in camps and host communities and through running an after school programme.<sup>43</sup> Volunteers also play an important role in sustaining peace and strengthening social cohesion. Young volunteers in particular can be powerful advocates for peace, providing positive role models and reaching across community divides. In Bahrain, volunteer initiatives foster citizenship and empower young people through government established youth centres,<sup>44</sup> and youth from different ESCWA countries volunteer through the *Shughel Shabab* programme to showcase how young people can help repair the social fabric of communities.<sup>45</sup>

## ENGAGING PEOPLE AS CHANGEMAKERS

An important step towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda is raising awareness about sustainable development challenges and how people can engage in the solutions. By recognizing and valuing volunteerism as a social behaviour, governments can create an enabling environment that encourages

more people to volunteer. Campaigns and initiatives, such as the global International Volunteer Day on 5 December and special awards ceremonies for volunteers, help raise public awareness of the value of volunteerism. In 2018, International Volunteer Day was celebrated in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Somalia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen. Incentives can also encourage more people to volunteer. For example, in 2018, the Capital Governate in the Kingdom of Bahrain launched a 'Volunteering Passport' to be given to individuals and organizations who engage in volunteer activities. The passport initiative provides training and tools for individuals, businesses, schools and government agencies to engage in volunteering.<sup>46</sup> Alongside ESCWA Member States promoting volunteerism, volunteers themselves play an important role in changing social norms that prevent people from taking action. For example, as part of the '#HerStory initiative', 500 volunteer editors have worked on more than 2,000 articles to increase the representation of women in the Arabic-language Wikipedia.<sup>47</sup> And volunteers of the Arab Youth Climate Movement raise the awareness of local populations to understand the effect of climate change on their communities and to promote change at national, regional and international levels.<sup>48</sup>

## NATIONAL VOLUNTEERING DAY IN THE SUDAN

Since 2005, July 11<sup>th</sup> has been celebrated in the Sudan as the official National Day of Volunteering to recognize the efforts of Sudanese volunteers. In 2017, over 100 organizations showcased their initiatives and 2,000 volunteers participated in a National Volunteer Day exhibition. Exhibition events included seminars on sanitation and environmental awareness, a training session for 1,000 volunteers on fighting water-borne and endemic diseases, and a volunteer-led optometry clinic which examined over 5,000 patients.

*Source: Government of Sudan, 2017; IAVE, 2017.*

## 3.2. INTEGRATING VOLUNTEERS INTO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 2030 AGENDA

Volunteers need legal protection, training and funding to ensure that they can operate effectively, safely and inclusively. The evidence reviewed for this report indicates some ways that ESCWA Member States have been supporting volunteers as an integrated part of their national and international efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

### LEGISLATING AND POLICY MAINSTREAMING

Some governments create legislation, structures and institutional mechanisms for volunteerism to contribute to national development goals. In the ESCWA region, the Emirate of Dubai, the Sudan and Tunisia have specific laws on volunteerism.<sup>49</sup> In the Sudan, the Voluntary and Humanitarian Work Act of 2006 defines basic volunteering principles, such as non-discrimination for volunteers and accountability to beneficiaries.<sup>50</sup> In Tunisia, a law on volunteerism protects the rights of volunteers by calling for the provision of volunteering contracts and outlining volunteering organizations' duty of care.<sup>51</sup> In the Emirate of Dubai, the 2018 Law on Volunteerism sets out minimum standards for protecting and recognizing the contribution of volunteers.<sup>52</sup> Alongside legislation specific to volunteers, in the ESCWA region eight Member States<sup>53</sup> regulate volunteering through other legislation. This includes laws on civil society organizations in Iraq, Lebanon, the State of Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen as well as laws on civil service such as in Kuwait.<sup>54</sup>

To leverage the full potential of volunteerism for national development, governments mainstream volunteering into sector policies and national development strategies. In the ESCWA region, enhancing employability and supporting the economic and social participation of young people is one of the key methods through which governments are integrating volunteerism into their sector policies.

Bahrain, Lebanon, Morocco and Saudi Arabia have introduced national policies that explicitly emphasize the value and contribution of volunteerism to youth development and employability.<sup>55</sup> The National Integrated Youth Strategy of the Government of Morocco aims to enhance employability, improve services for youth, decrease inequalities and promote the active engagement of youth in social and civic life.<sup>56</sup> Saudi Arabia reports that volunteerism has been introduced into educational policy as a means to promote social responsibility among students.<sup>57</sup> In Qatar, the Secretariat for Development Planning will establish co-curricular activities that encourage students to volunteer to develop leadership abilities, communication skills and self-confidence. In addition to mainstreaming volunteering in youth policies, ESCWA Member States have been integrating volunteering into other policy areas. For example, Egypt references volunteerism in its Sustainable Development Strategy as a means to promote sustainable agriculture and includes mechanisms to encourage voluntary activities and involvement of civil society organizations in environmental protection and biodiversity preservation.<sup>58</sup> Iraq references volunteering in its National Health Policy and Lebanon's National Social Development Strategy includes volunteerism as a means to strengthen communities through an increased sense of civic responsibility and cross-cultural understanding.<sup>59</sup>

### CREATING OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH SCHEMES AND INNOVATIONS

Volunteering may be a cost-effective approach to peace and development, but it is not a free resource and regular funding commitments are necessary to expand formal volunteer opportunities to all people. For example, the Government of Lebanon allocates funding to the National Volunteer Service Programme and Volunteer Work Department, as described in the case study box.<sup>60</sup> National volunteer schemes, such as Lebanon's, are likely to be well publicized and can generate interest from a large pool of potential volunteers of all ages. The inputs of volunteers through these schemes are also sometimes recognized for their contribution to national

development, as for example calls for volunteers in Qatar and Saudi Arabia that invite people to volunteer to be part of achieving national development objectives.<sup>61</sup>

Other examples of governmental efforts that recognize, promote and invest in volunteers include the establishment of national centres for volunteering in Kuwait<sup>62</sup> and Qatar<sup>63</sup> and the creation of government-sponsored digital platforms to link volunteers with volunteering opportunities in the State of Palestine<sup>64</sup> and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>65</sup> Such platforms enable volunteers to find opportunities, apply for them and learn about their rights and responsibilities as volunteers, while at the same time allowing volunteer-involving organizations to submit requests for volunteers. Technology is both a part of the enabling environment for volunteering in the ESCWA region and a powerful tool for enhancing volunteer-led sustainable peace and development outcomes. This includes the use of digital platforms to mobilize and coordinate volunteers. For example, in Bahrain a volunteer web portal links volunteering organizations to young people keen to volunteer. Jordan provides an online application portal through which interested individuals can apply for volunteer opportunities and Saudi Arabia is preparing to launch a national volunteering portal to promote awareness of the importance of voluntary work.<sup>66</sup>

### 3.3. MEASURING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ESCWA VOLUNTEERS

Measurement is important to demonstrate impact, monitor contributions to the SDGs and ultimately make the case for increased investments of time and money in volunteering.<sup>67</sup> Measurement also plays an important role in monitoring overall progress towards the 2030 Agenda with disaggregated measurement particularly important to ensure that inclusion is tracked.<sup>68</sup> However, while volunteering is increasingly recognized as an important cross-cutting tool for achieving the SDGs, often it is not measured. This is largely because effective measurement requires the reliable and regular use of statistical tools that are often beyond the resources of many countries. Nonetheless, measurement efforts are improving. The International Labour Organization (ILO) Manual on the *Measurement of Volunteer Work*, published in 2011, provides a measurement model that some countries have taken as the basis for the development of national surveys<sup>69</sup> and in 2013 the International Conference of Labour Statisticians recognized and defined volunteer work, opening the door for new comparable data.<sup>70</sup>

#### THE LEBANESE NATIONAL VOLUNTEER SERVICE PROGRAMME

In response to national challenges that include the Syrian refugee crisis, poverty, social tensions and youth unemployment, the Lebanese government launched the National Volunteer Service Program in 2013. As part of the National Strategy on Youth Volunteerism, the first phase of the programme provided volunteer opportunities and soft skills training to Lebanese Youth. In the second phase, the programme expanded to include young Syrian refugees, with the additional goals of enhancing social service delivery in vulnerable Lebanese host communities and improving inter-communal relations between citizens and refugees.

Source: Government of Lebanon, 2018.

From the evidence reviewed for this report, only very limited measurement data was available on the scope and impacts of volunteerism in the ESCWA region. According to recent ILO estimates, between 2007 and 2017, only five of the 103 global United Nations Member States who collected data on volunteering were from the ESCWA region, covering only 24 percent of the ESCWA region's population. Five countries collected data on volunteering through time-use surveys that measure time spent by people in all activities during a short period (usually 24 hours) and give estimates of participation rates and time spent volunteering. These five countries were

Iraq (2007), Oman (2008), Morocco (2012), Qatar (2012) and the State of Palestine (2013 and 2017).<sup>71</sup> The State of Palestine also conducted a labour force survey in 2016, with specially designed questions added on volunteering (as recommended by ILO) that found that 1.4 percent of Palestinians aged 15 years and above volunteered. Some countries in the region (for example, Jordan and Kuwait) have expressed their interest in developing statistical tools to measure volunteer work, while others (such as the State of Palestine) have indicated that they are planning to repeat measurements in the future.<sup>72</sup>

**Figure 5** Geographical distribution of ESCWA countries by experience in measuring volunteer work, 2008-2017.



## 4. TOWARDS A REIMAGINED VOLUNTEERISM IN THE ESCWA REGION

Based on the data gathered for this report and the analysis of the key findings above, it is clear that ESCWA volunteers are making important contributions towards the SDGs. Through volunteering, people in the ESCWA region are becoming empowered both as agents and beneficiaries of sustainable development efforts and ESCWA Member States are increasingly mainstreaming volunteering into their SDG strategies.

Figure 6 Reimagining volunteerism for the 2030 Agenda in the ESCWA region.





However, the evidence for volunteering in the region remains limited, hampering efforts to highlight the distinctive contributions of volunteer efforts in comparison to other technical and financial interventions. And volunteerism cannot realize its full potential in the region until some key challenges are overcome. Despite the limitations of the evidence reviewed for this report, some initial recommendations can be put forward on how Plan of Action stakeholders can work together to realize the potential of volunteering to accelerate SDG progress across the ESCWA region.

The 2016 Doha Declaration on a Data Revolution in the Arab Region calls for new, multi-stakeholder efforts to collect data on SDG implementation.<sup>73</sup> However, many ESCWA countries are not yet measuring the scale and scope of volunteering and not enough data is available to demonstrate impact or the value of volunteerism for progress against the SDGs. When volunteering is measured, the focus is usually limited to organization-based formal volunteering and little is known about how more traditional and often informal forms of volunteerism in the ESCWA region contribute to the SDGs and are changing in response to shifting social norms and development challenges. Given these gaps in the evidence base, an important first step for ESCWA Plan of Action stakeholders is to **generate more evidence on the contribution of volunteerism to the SDGs**. Evidence should look at the holistic contributions of volunteering, including building social and human capital and the different forms of volunteerism that are common across the region, with special attention paid to the role and impact of gender. Doing so can help determine and eliminate barriers to participation in voluntary action and assist development practitioners in extending their reach to marginalized and excluded groups. Analysis should also be conducted on the contribution of volunteers within national peace and development frameworks to improve coordination with other actors and leverage further investment into the volunteer sector. As the Doha Declaration acknowledges, data collection capacities in the region are mixed and face serious resource and coordination challenges. Low-cost, high quality approaches to measurement

should be developed and shared as part of efforts to monitor SDG implementation. In line with the recommendations of the Doha Declaration, this can be done through bilateral exchanges between national statistical offices and the existing work of measurement actors, including the Statistics Division at ESCWA and the Statistical Centre for the Cooperation Council for the Arab Countries of the Gulf (GCC-Stat). Using volunteers for data collection should also be promoted as a people-centred, low-cost approach to enhancing the ability of ESCWA countries to gather regular, disaggregated data in the face of resource and capacity constraints.

The 2030 Agenda recognizes that people everywhere expect to be agents of change and drivers of their own development. Because equality and inclusion are major challenges for the ESCWA region, volunteering can be a powerful tool to empower and support the most marginalized. However, access to volunteering opportunities and the benefits that volunteers provide is often unequal. In line with the 2030 Agenda's goals to "leave no one behind" **governments and other actors need to create an enabling environment that allows all people, regardless of gender, ethnicity or social background, to volunteer and benefit from volunteering**. This includes ensuring that laws, policies and standards explicitly promote equality and access. An enabling environment for volunteering also requires freedom to participate, organize and communicate, and ESCWA Member States should take steps to protect and widen civic space. Central and local governments should promote a culture of volunteerism to help volunteers gain legitimacy, trust and respect and encourage the engagement of new volunteers. This can include creating incentives, raising awareness and integrating volunteering into broader strategies to increase human capital. ESCWA volunteering schemes need to take proactive steps to ensure that all people can access the opportunities they provide and that all people can benefit from the support that volunteers give. When appropriate, targeted interventions should be introduced to support the inclusion of under-represented groups, including the creation of new schemes or focused awareness-raising for under-represented groups. All



volunteering actors in the ESCWA region therefore need to make long-term operational, financial and political commitments and investments to support volunteering. Recognizing that many countries in the region are restrained by significant budgetary pressures, it is recommended that emphasis be placed on the cost-effective nature of volunteering, while recognizing that volunteers are not a free resource.

Persistent gender inequalities severely limit SDG progress across the ESCWA region and the region needs new ways to tackle the issue. This report recommends that special attention be made **to recognize and enhance the potential of volunteering for women's empowerment and gender equality**. Engaging in volunteering can build skills and shift perceptions of women's roles and capacities. Across the region, women's groups are beginning to promote greater awareness of gender equality issues and solidarity around campaigns for change. However, in many ESCWA countries women are restricted from engaging in volunteering because of cultural constraints and norms, such as restrictions on mobility and unpaid caring responsibilities. In line with regional efforts to implement The Beijing Platform for Action, dedicated efforts are needed to ensure access, including policies and frameworks that support women's leadership and meaningful participation, while also ensuring the safety and well-being of female volunteers. Support and training on gender equality should be part of volunteer schemes to enable the development of proactive strategies to reach out to women. Quality evidence needs to be generated on how the distinctive qualities of volunteering can empower women, through partnerships with stakeholders such as the ESCWA Women, Family and Childhood Department of the League of Arab States.

Great potential exists for volunteering to help with high rates of youth unemployment across the region. Volunteer schemes are often aimed at developing the capacities and skills of volunteers, which in turn can enhance employability. This report therefore recommends that ESCWA Member States support more youth volunteering schemes to provide

opportunities to youth to enhance their employability. These schemes can be developed through sharing best practices across the region. For example, Morocco is establishing volunteer centres to improve youth employability. However, volunteering should not be a substitute for fairly paid work. **ESCWA Member States should work with private sector companies, education providers and volunteer-involving organizations to integrate volunteering into education strategies and the job market to allow ESCWA youth to volunteer while also having access to paid regular employment.** These interventions should reach beyond the urban middle classes to ensure that youth from marginalized groups can also enhance their employability through volunteering. Furthermore, youth volunteering for employment should take place within broader efforts to support youth as a development asset rather than a burden. Youth volunteers should be supported with training and protected by legislation that prevents exploitation and other abuses. And youth should be involved in planning, implementation and monitoring, to ensure that real-life needs are met and the full spectrum of strengths and new perspectives that youth provide are fully harnessed.

The ESCWA region is experiencing many of the world's most destructive conflicts, and while volunteers are sometimes recognized as playing a key role in responding to conflict through humanitarian action, they are rarely given adequate support and protection. Furthermore, the benefits of volunteering for peacebuilding go far beyond frontline response, to preventing conflict and building peaceful and resilient societies after conflict. For example, volunteers can promote trust and understanding across religious, tribal and national boundaries to create space for dialogue within the most exclusionary and restrictive contexts. Volunteering can also provide vital entry points for women and youth to engage in meaningful participation, which is recognized as vital to deepen the effectiveness and sustainability of peacebuilding. This ability to promote trust and social cohesion in fragile states and conflict zones aligns with the strong focus of the Sustaining Peace Agenda on engaging civil society, particularly women's and

youth groups, and inclusion of those who are marginalized.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, it is recommended that **regional actors should mainstream volunteering into a people-centred approach to sustaining peace.** The vital role of engaging local volunteers should be recognized as building ownership within frameworks, such as the Dead Sea Resilience Agenda,<sup>75</sup> which emphasize that aid should reinforce and not replace local capacities. In addition, the ability of volunteers to support people displaced by conflict needs to be recognized and supported as a key part of the Global Compact for Migration's call to engage multiple stakeholders to protect, support and empower migrants and host communities.<sup>76</sup> With the world's largest population of displaced people, ESCWA volunteers already provide vital assistance, while volunteering can empower refugees and asylum seekers to help themselves and integrate with host communities. However, volunteers in conflict-sensitive environments are often more likely to experience physical and mental health issues. Volunteering in conflict-affected areas should therefore not be promoted without access to training and protection, while volunteer-involving organizations should be encouraged to introduce accountability mechanisms that address their duty of care to all volunteers. Lastly, given the many social and political sensitivities in conflict and post-conflict contexts, ESCWA governments need to be open and responsive to widening participation of citizens through volunteering to support sustained peace. This can include awareness-raising and giving sensitization training to other peacebuilding actors, in particular security and military forces.

Rapid population growth in a delicate ecosystem means that societies across the ESCWA region remain highly vulnerable to environment and climate change-related resilience risks. Evidence, such as the *State of the World's Volunteerism Report 2018*, suggests that volunteers contribute to building resilience by enabling communities to self-mobilize, reducing their vulnerabilities and, in certain contexts and given appropriate support, transforming the ability of communities to respond more strongly to future resilience risks. However, volunteers are often ignored in resilience-building strategies. Following the emphasis of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction on people-centred, cost-effective and locally-owned approaches to resilience-building, this report recommends that **local governments strengthen the capacity of local volunteer groups to prepare for and respond to resilience risks.** With climate change posing multiple resilience threats across the region, concerted efforts are also urgently needed to integrate volunteering into climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts. As water scarcity is one of the most pressing needs for the region, this should include mainstreaming volunteering into water-related interventions, such as the Arab Water Security Strategy (2010-2030) and the monitoring and awareness-raising components of the Regional Initiative for the Assessment of Climate Change Impacts on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region.

# NOTES

- 1 UNGA, 2018a.
- 2 UNV, 2018a.
- 3 This includes through the Volunteer Groups Alliance which represents volunteers and VIOs from over 150 countries as a stakeholder group at the United Nations Economic and Social Council. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/majorgroups/volunteers>.
- 4 ILO, 2018a; UNV, 2018b.
- 5 The Human Development Index is a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and have a decent standard of living. It is the geometric mean of normalized indices for each of the three dimensions. Available at: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi>.
- 6 UNDP, 2018a.
- 7 ESCWA, 2017a.
- 8 ESCWA, 2017b.
- 9 UNICEF, 2016.
- 10 UN DESA, 2017a.
- 11 UN DESA, 2018; UN DESA, 2017b.
- 12 UN DESA, 2017b.
- 13 ESCWA, 2017c.
- 14 ESCWA, 2017c.
- 15 ESCWA, 2018a.
- 16 ESCWA, 2018b.
- 17 ESCWA, 2017d.
- 18 ESCWA, 2018e; Stimson Center, 2018.
- 19 AFED, 2017.
- 20 ESCWA, 2017e; UNDP, 2018b.
- 21 ESCWA, 2017e.
- 22 UNDP, 2013.
- 23 World Economic Forum, 2018.
- 24 ESCWA, 2017d.
- 25 World Bank Group, 2018a.
- 26 ESCWA, 2017d.
- 27 UNDP, 2018c.
- 28 UNESCO, nd.
- 29 UNV, 2018a; The Arab States region is a UNDP grouping that contains Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen. It is, therefore, the same as UNESCWA, with the exception of Mauritania and the addition of Algeria.
- 30 UNV, 2018a.
- 31 UNV, 2018a.
- 32 UNDP, 2019.
- 33 UNV, 2018a.
- 34 Government of Iraq, 2018.
- 35 Taiwan ICDF, 2018.
- 36 Government of Qatar, 2015.
- 37 World Bank Group, 2018b.
- 38 UNDP, 2018e.
- 39 UNHCR and UNDP, 2018.
- 40 European Commission, 2019.
- 41 Government of Lebanon and United Nations, 2017.
- 42 UNV, 2018a.
- 43 UNHCR, 2018.
- 44 Government of Bahrain, 2018.
- 45 UNV, 2018a.
- 46 Capital Governorate – Kingdom of Bahrain, 2018.
- 47 UN Women, 2018.
- 48 Arab Youth Climate Movement, nd.
- 49 Government of Sudan, 2017; IFRC, 2006; The Supreme Legislation Committee in the Emirate of Dubai, 2018.
- 50 Government of Sudan, 2017.
- 51 Government of Tunisia, 2010.
- 52 Law No. (5) of 2018 (The Supreme Legislation Committee in the Emirate of Dubai, 2018).
- 53 Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Syria and Yemen.
- 54 Iraq: The NGO Law 12; Kuwait: Decree Law No. 15 of 1979 concerning the Civil Service; Lebanon: 1997 Ottoman Law on Associations, reinforced by the Circular No. 10/AM/2006 of 19 May 2006; the State of Palestine: The Law on Charitable Associations and Community Organisations (No.1), adopted in 2000; Qatar: Law 12 of 1998; Syria Civil Society: Law 93 of 1958; Yemen: International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, Law 1 of 2001 on Associations and Foundations.
- 55 UNV, 2015; Government of Bahrain, 2018; Government of Lebanon, 2018; Government of Saudi Arabia, 2018.
- 56 UNV, 2015.
- 57 Government of Saudi Arabia, 2018.
- 58 Government of Egypt, 2015.
- 59 Government of Lebanon, 2011.
- 60 Government of Lebanon, 2018.
- 61 Qatar Charity, nd; Takatuf, nd.
- 62 The Voluntary Work Center was established by a decree from the Emir of Kuwait in 2004.
- 63 The Qatar Voluntary Center operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Qatar.
- 64 The Palestine Volunteers Platform is an initiative owned by the Higher Council for Youth and Sports.
- 65 The portal volunteers.ae is co-sponsored by the Emirates Foundation and the Ministry of Community Development and is the national volunteer platform of the United Arab Emirates.
- 66 Government of Saudi Arabia, 2018.
- 67 ILO, 2018a.
- 68 ILO, 2018b.
- 69 ILO, 2011.
- 70 ILO, 2013.
- 71 ILO, 2018a.
- 72 ILO, 2018a.
- 73 Government of Qatar/MDPS, PARIS21 and GCC-Stat, 2016.
- 74 UNGA, 2018c.
- 75 UNDP, 2015.
- 76 UNGA, 2018b.

# ANNEXES

## ANNEX A. KEY SOURCES

This report is primarily based on inputs from Member States of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) through National Situation Analyses submitted in 2017 and 2018, Voluntary National Reviews and contributions to the 2018 Secretary-General's Report on Volunteering.

National Situation Analyses	Voluntary National Reviews	Submissions to the 2018 Secretary-General's Report on Volunteering
Iraq	Bahrain	Lebanon
State of Palestine	Lebanon	
Sudan	Saudi Arabia	
	United Arab Emirates	

## ANNEX B. TERMS AND CONCEPTS

For the purposes of the report, **volunteerism** is understood to be “a wide range of activities undertaken of free will, for the general public good, for which monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor” (UNGA, 2002).

**Formal volunteering** usually involves volunteers making a regular commitment and contributing their time to a civil society organization, governmental organization or private sector company (UNV, 2015).

**Informal volunteering** happens outside of organizational structures and takes different forms, including community-based activities and larger-scale mobilization of citizens, for example to respond to humanitarian disasters (UNV, 2015).

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# PLAN OF ACTION TO INTEGRATE VOLUNTEERING INTO THE 2030 AGENDA

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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 agencies, volunteer-involving organizations, civil society organizations, academia and the private sector come together to accelerate the impact of volunteerism for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by: a) strengthening people's ownership of the 2030 Agenda; b) integrating and mainstreaming volunteering into national strategies and policies; and c) better measuring the impact of volunteers.

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**Plan of Action**  
to integrate volunteering  
into the 2030 Agenda