



EXPERT'S REPORT

UNITED NATIONS

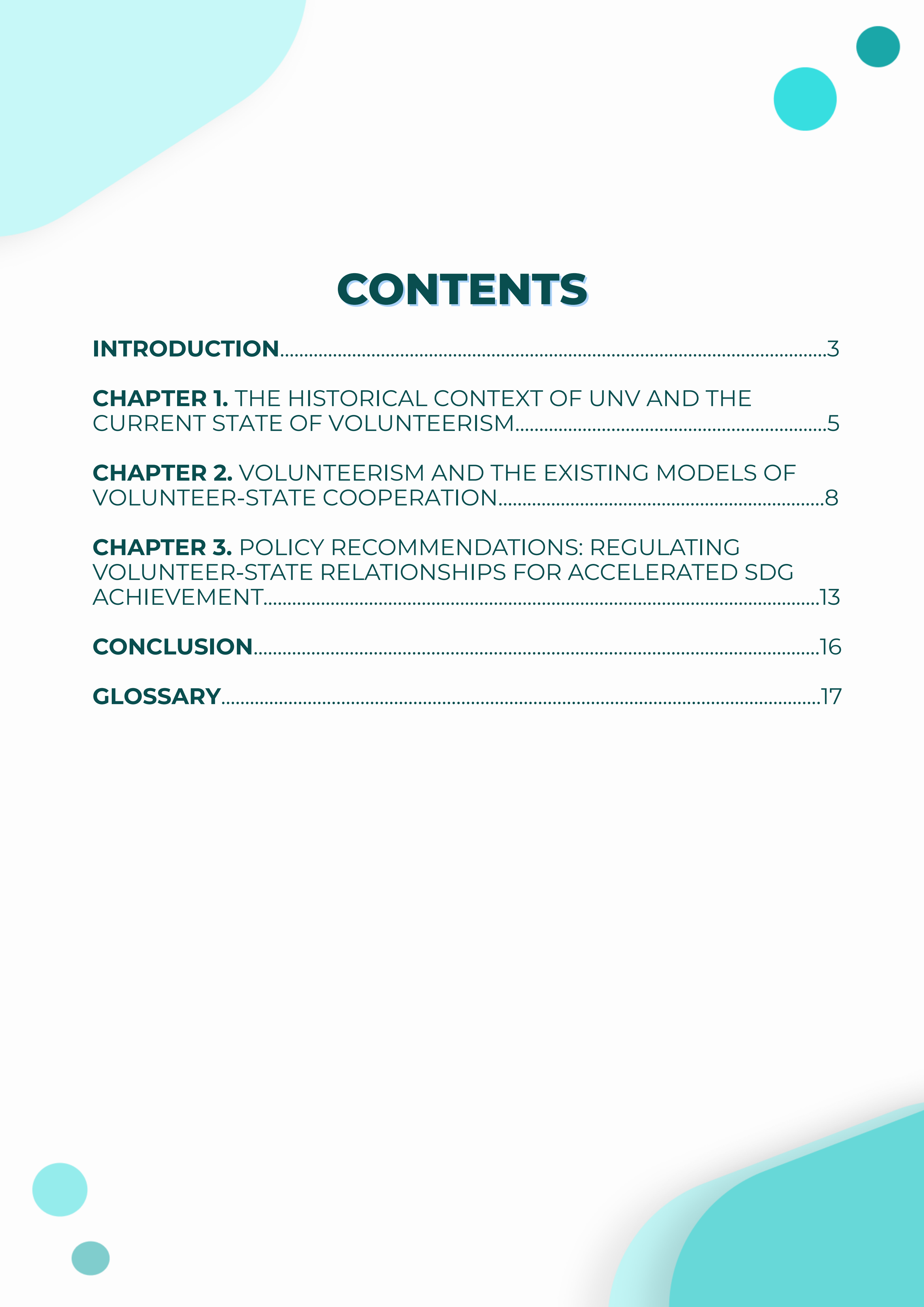
VOLUNTEERS

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DEVELOPING FORMATS (MECHANISMS) FOR COOPERATION BETWEEN UN VOLUNTEERS AND GOVERNMENTS TO ACHIEVE THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



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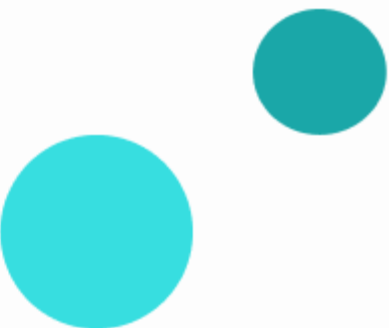
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INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a universal framework for global progress in peace and prosperity for people and the planet. At its core there are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which demand action and partnership from countries all around the globe. The SDGs acknowledge that solving such issues as poverty and other forms of deprivation must be accompanied by policies that also address climate change, protect our seas and forests, enhance health and education, reduce inequalities, and promote economic growth. Achieving the SDGs requires an unprecedented mobilization of human capital, skills, commitment and innovations, but at present its implementation faces significant delays. Within this context, volunteerism emerges as a critical mechanism for bridging the gap between a state and people.

The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) Programme, administered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), serves as a primary multifaceted platform for channeling this potential. UNV mobilizes qualified, highly motivated professional volunteers to support peace and development initiatives on a worldwide scale, thereby promoting the integration of volunteerism into development programming. UNV's unique operational model assists direct community engagement, local capacity building, and the on-the-ground implementation of development objectives.

Evidence emphasizes the strategic value of institutionalized volunteerism. The 2022 State of the World's Volunteerism Report (SWVR), "Building Equal and Inclusive Societies," claims that collaborative partnerships between volunteers and state authorities are beneficial for strengthening governance, fostering social inclusion, and enhancing civic engagement. Such cooperation is especially vital for addressing complex, interconnected challenges, like the 17 SDGs.



However, the full potential of this synergy remains underexploited due to the frequent absence of formalized cooperation frameworks between UNV and national governments. Ad-hoc arrangements often limit the scalability, sustainability, and impact of volunteer contributions within national development plans. Moreover, volunteers from marginalized groups — women, persons with disabilities, slum dwellers, and the urban poor — remain disadvantaged as the problems of exclusion and gender inequality are yet to be tackled. Only by designing clear, innovative mechanisms for effective collaboration, the full power of volunteerism can be unlocked.

Now more than ever, volunteer–state partnerships are critical as households, communities and countries strive to move forward towards a more equal and inclusive post-pandemic future in which no one is left behind. Recognizing that volunteerism is a powerful tool for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the United Nations General Assembly has proclaimed 2026 the International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development.¹ This milestone—achieved through the collaboration of Member States of the General Assembly—offers an opportunity to celebrate volunteers and their contributions on a global stage.

This report will explore practical formats for the partnerships between the United Nations Volunteers programme and national governments, demonstrating how governments and volunteers can work together not as separate institutions, but as unified teams to accelerate progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals and build a greener, more inclusive, and sustainable future for all.

¹ UN GA A/RES/78/127. URL: <https://www.unv.org/pressrelease/un-general-assembly-proclaims-2026-international-year-volunteers-sustainable>

CHAPTER 1. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF UNV AND THE CURRENT STATE OF VOLUNTEERISM

The official acknowledgement of the volunteering movement existed long before the establishment of the United Nations Volunteers, first as a reaction to the devastating harm caused by WWI, then in the form of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, taking care of the victims of the Holocaust. Later, as a result of the International Conference on Middle Level Manpower² in Puerto Rico, the International Secretariat for Volunteer Service (ISVS), consisting of 17 members, was created as a global organization to promote volunteer services for development around the world. ISVS became the first stone in the foundation of the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme.

The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme was officially established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1970 (Resolution 2659³), following a proposal by Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, who advocated for the creation of an "international legion" dedicated to combating poverty and injustice. The first cohort of 35 volunteers worked with other UN agencies such as UNDP, the United Nations Children's Fund, and the Food and Agriculture Organization to help those in need. By the late 1970s, the number of UN volunteers had risen to more than 600

In 1985, the UN General Assembly resolution established 5 December as International Volunteer Day for Economic and Social Development, thus recognizing the pivotal role of volunteer service in peacekeeping and humanitarian response both on the international and domestic levels. Global changes, such as the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, showed the necessity for volunteer programmes in international cooperation. The boundaries of volunteer support have expanded to include peace operations (e.g., Cambodia, 1992) and electoral processes (South Africa, 1994) to assist in democratic transitions.

² The Hidden Force: A Report of the International Conference on Middle Level Manpower, San Juan, Puerto Rico, October 10-12, 1962. URL: <https://nlj.gov.jm/MinistryPapers/1962/No.60.pdf>

³ UN GA Resolution A/RES/2659(XXV). URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/195974?v=pdf>

The turn of the millennium saw the launch of the UNV Online Volunteering service, promoting a more inclusive and barrierless form of volunteerism. In 2024 the number of online requests from UN partners, Member States and civil society amounted to about 23,000, ranging from creating educational materials and conducting surveys to tackling the impacts of natural disasters by using AI tools. In recent years, the role of UNV has significantly expanded to deal with emergencies and humanitarian crises. The UN Volunteers work across all humanitarian agencies which reflects both growing demand and UNV's effective response. As of the end of 2024, UNV deploys over 14,600 UN Volunteers of more than 180 nationalities across 170 countries, working with 59 UN partners⁴.

Currently, the UNV and national governments cooperate through several mechanisms, which form the foundation for achieving the SDGs. One of them includes the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), a formal yet non-binding agreement that outlines mutual intentions, roles, and objectives between two or more parties. MOUs are particularly beneficial in the early stages, outlining intentions and shaping the relationship, which can later evolve into a deeper commitment. The UNV has signed MOUs both with countries (e.g., Germany⁵) and other UN departments, such as the United Nations Refugee Agency⁶ to continue contributing to refugee protection and humanitarian assistance. Still, the non-binding character of MOUs, while flexible, can lead to a lack of accountability and inconsistent commitment, creating legal loopholes and hindering long-term strategic planning.

⁴ UNV 2024 Annual Report. URL: <https://www.unv.org/annual-report/annual-report-2024>

⁵ UNV signs Memorandum of Understanding with Germany. URL: <https://www.unv.org/news/unv-signs-memorandum-understanding-germany>

⁶ UNV signs Memorandum of Understanding with UNHCR. URL: <https://www.unv.org/news/unv-signs-memorandum-understanding-unhcr>

To address these limitations and provide more structure, the UNV Strategic Framework 2022–2025 is the guiding document that promotes volunteerism as a "powerful and cross-cutting means of implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." The Framework focuses on three main outcomes:

1. **Contributing to a people-centred United Nations**, engaging and empowering UN Volunteers, thus fostering inclusivity in the United Nations system.
2. **Serving the United Nations system**, positioning the UNV as a "fit-for-purpose" organization that provides a diverse and qualified talent pool of volunteers for the needs of the UN.
3. **Promoting volunteerism**, by integrating it effectively into the SDG framework with the help of Member States and the UN system.

To implement these goals, the Framework urges to create global partnerships of the UNV with the United Nations Secretariat, specialized agencies and funds and programmes all over the world. Thus, the UNV Strategic Framework provides some formalized guidelines of collaboration with governments.

Such initiatives as the **Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda**⁸ specify the areas where governments and the UNV can collaborate directly. The Plan urges Member States to integrate volunteering into national development strategies with a focus on social and economic inclusion to systematically promote volunteerism as a tool to achieve the SDGs.

⁷ The UNV Strategic Framework 2022-2025. URL: UNV 2024 Annual Report. URL: <https://www.unv.org/annual-report/annual-report-2024>

⁸ The Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda 2020. URL: <https://www.unv.org/sites/default/files/POA%20INFONOTE%20V7pdf.pdf>

CHAPTER 2. VOLUNTEERISM AND THE EXISTING MODELS OF VOLUNTEER-STATE COOPERATION

Volunteerism plays a central role in building and strengthening people–state relationships. In turn, these relations lead to better governance that promotes sustainable development and peace, helping to build equal and inclusive societies. To achieve the SDGs, governments and other stakeholders need to work even more closely with volunteers, seeing them as key partners and opening up the space for them to collaborate on vital development solutions.

Volunteering, as described by the 2002 UN General Assembly, is defined as “a wide range of activities, including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation, undertaken of **free will**, for the **general public good** and where **monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor**.”⁹ In this context, volunteerism is a fundamental component of people–state relationships that strengthens the new social contract, which prioritises human rights, inclusivity, and environmental protection

In 2020, a paper published under the Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda proposed a new model for understanding volunteering practices in the 21st Century. This new model takes a broad view of volunteering, where volunteering is defined according to five components, each representing a dimension of volunteer action: structure (formal and/or informal), site (online and/or offline), intensity (episodic and/or regular), aspiration (self-building and/or community-building) and category (service, mutual aid, participation, campaigning and leisure; these are not mutually exclusive).

⁹ UNGA A/RES/56/38. URL: <https://www.unv.org/sites/default/files/A%20RES%2056%2038.pdf>



Table 1. A model for volunteering practices in the 21st Century.

Thus, volunteering can be categorized into five types¹⁰:

- **mutual aid**, an informal community-based support, when people gather and volunteer together as a response to a shared need or issue;
- **service volunteering**, responding to the perceived needs of another person or community;

¹⁰ The 2022 State of the World's Volunteerism Report. URL: <https://swvr2022.unv.org/>

- **campaigning**, amplifying “marginalized” voices and changing the status quo;
- **participation**, engaging with governance and decision-making mechanisms at different levels;
- volunteering as **leisure**, contributing to wider well-being through expressing personal interests or passions, e.g., in the arts, culture, and sports.

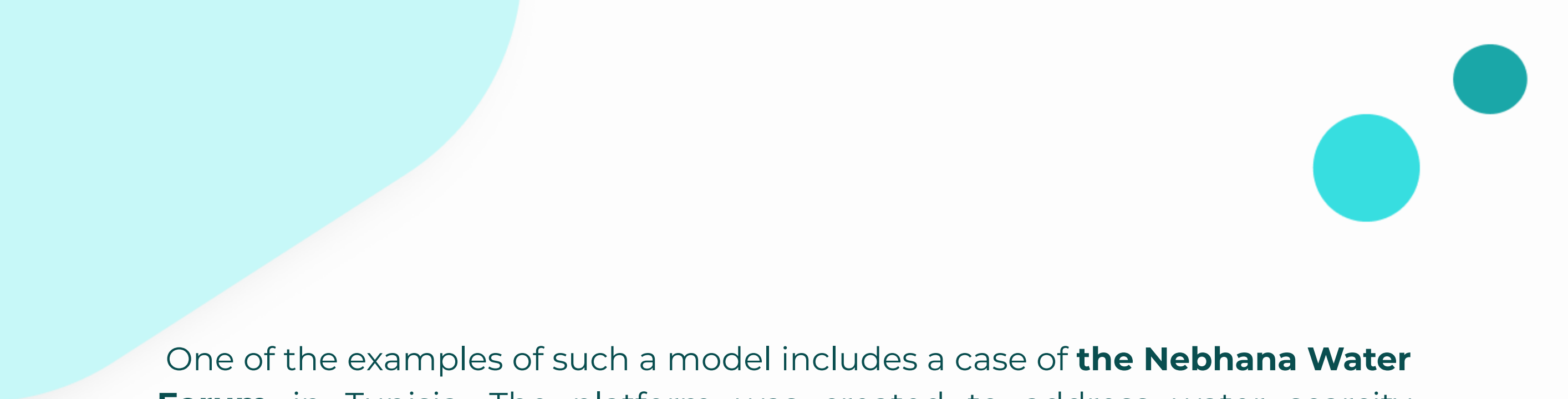
Integrating all these forms of voluntary action into public policy frameworks can significantly accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

The interaction between volunteers and state authorities can be categorized into three models that illustrate the mechanics of collaborative engagement. These types of interactions do not exist in isolation and they can change and intertwine over time.

1. **The Deliberative Governance Model**

This model involves formal and informal dialogues between volunteers and state authorities to influence policy formulation and strategic priorities. Citizens are also engaged actively and directly in solving some of the most pressing policy challenges. Consequently, diverse voices, including those from marginalized groups, can be heard, which promotes inclusion and contributes to long-term and sustainable solutions.

Deliberative governance mechanisms may include town-hall meetings, co-designing local policies, policy forums such as hackathons or community campaigning.



One of the examples of such a model includes a case of **the Nebhana Water Forum** in Tunisia. The platform was created to address water scarcity problems as Tunisia has very limited water resources, 82 percent of which are used by the agriculture sector. Farmers (some of them acting as volunteers) and government representatives engage in deliberative dialogues to develop sustainable water management strategies.

2. The Co-Production of Services Model

This model presupposes the direct collaboration between volunteers and state authorities in the design, implementation, and evaluation of public services. The partnerships in this model can lie on a spectrum between state-led and people-led. Volunteers, belonging to the communities in which they work, act as experts on the issues faced by marginalized groups. Moreover, they serve as mediators helping marginalized groups to navigate highly bureaucratic processes and to obtain services from state authorities.

Co-creation and co-implementation of social protection programmes and services is executed through planning and delivery initiatives, community response teams and mutual aid groups.

The China Disabled Persons' Federation (CDPF) serves as an example of this approach. In CDPF's volunteer-state relationship model, both government concerns and those of people with disabilities are represented as among over 1,300 volunteers, persons with disabilities are also included. The CDPF functions as a network operating on an official, governmental level, however informal voluntary groups are also formed to help people with disabilities and their families.

3. The Social Innovation Model

Volunteers in this model generate, implement, and distribute new ideas and practices to address persistent and emerging social challenges. Being community experts and possessing invaluable knowledge, volunteers can think outside the box and create innovations that bridge the gaps, change social norms, attitudes and values, and thus lead to more sustainable outcomes.

The examples of this model may include: community health volunteers as part of a devolved national health system, national volunteering programmes, neighbourhood governance, local councils, climate boards, social entrepreneurship, technological and digital projects.

For instance, **the Markets for Change programme** in Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu supported the creation of market vendor associations (consisting mainly of female volunteers) that successfully advocated for gender-responsive market infrastructure, such as breastfeeding huts and sanitation facilities. With a collective voice, the vendors were able to advocate for their needs to local market managers and influence the market budget allocation.

Nevertheless, significant limitations in implementing the models above persist. For example, partnerships are often initiated and led by state authorities or UN entities, with limited space for volunteers or local communities to act on their own. In addition, there is no permanent system or reliable funding to expand successful local innovations to a regional or national level. And on top of that, volunteers from marginalized groups (for instance, women having unequal home responsibilities) continue to face significant barriers preventing them from participation, which makes these partnerships less inclusive.

CHAPTER 3. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: REGULATING VOLUNTEER-STATE RELATIONSHIPS FOR ACCELERATED SDG ACHIEVEMENT

Taking into consideration the analysis of existing volunteering models and identified gaps, this chapter proposes key points that should be acknowledged in formulating the policies regulating volunteer-state cooperation. The proposed policy recommendations, built on UN frameworks and aligned with the strategic direction of the UNV, could let volunteerism maximize its contribution to the accomplishment of the SDGs.

1) **ADdress barriers to volunteering faced by marginalized groups.** If these groups are underrepresented or face barriers to participation (including limited mobility, home responsibilities or difficulty accessing information), there may be a need for strategies that make volunteer participation across all levels more accessible to them. Policymakers can adopt policies to ensure access and inclusion so that marginalized groups and volunteers can address the barriers that limit their participation in deliberative governance processes. Policies aimed at promoting partnerships between volunteers and government and other entities, including the private sector, can be important in this regard. The implementation of the policies should be carried out on several levels — at the national, regional and local level — to effectively integrate volunteers within their institutions.

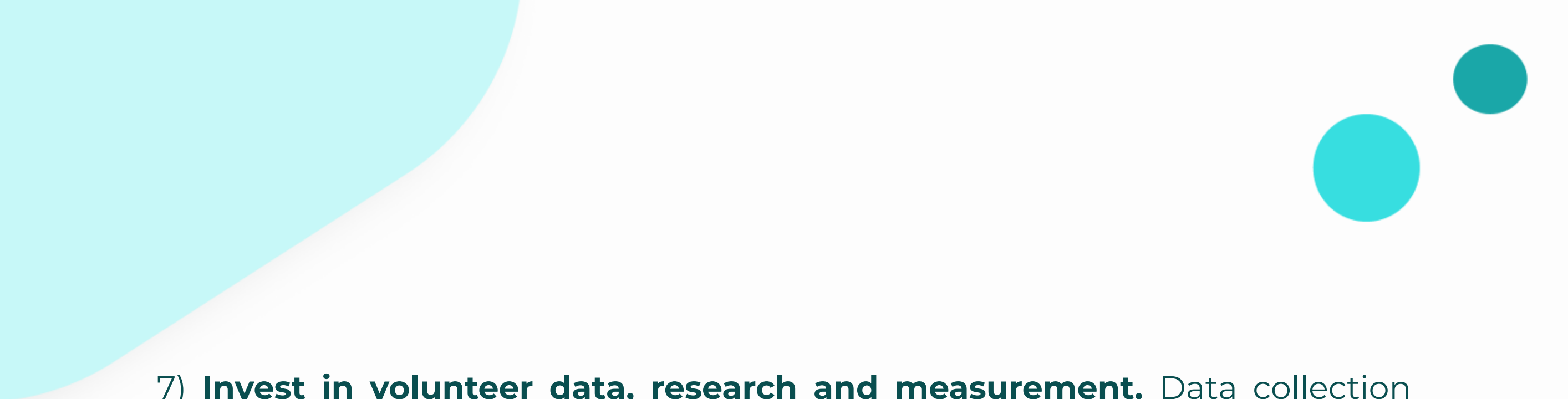
2) **Encouraging partnerships through volunteering.** Creating local/informal systems of support, leadership and practices while developing volunteer-state relationships is critical. Doing so increases the legitimacy and ownership of development programmes and helps build trust between state authorities and volunteers. Greater attention should be paid to the study of systems, practices and informal systems of support and the invention of ways to integrate these in designing sustainable volunteer-state partnerships.

3) **Adopt gender-sensitive measures to address inequalities.** As women face barriers to volunteerism, in particular less engagement in decision-making activities, compared with their male counterparts, their access to decision-making processes needs to be ensured. Thus, to amplify women's voices and agency as well as ownership in the development process and to optimize women's participation in volunteering, policymakers should realize the ongoing barriers of women and other gender groups and adopt gender-sensitive measures, especially in decision-making processes.

4) **Make use of volunteers' expertise, knowledge and experiences.** Public policy discussions and consultations should consider and be grounded on multiple ideas, perspectives, local and indigenous practices in order to result in more productive outcomes such as more responsive and tailor-made development programmes. Therefore, it is vital to recognize the knowledge and experience that volunteers from marginalized communities bring and more importantly to harness it for development.

5) **Promote social innovation.** Policymakers should promote measures that support the development of new ideas in order to enable innovations that align with and are more responsive to communities' development needs. Volunteers share the values of inclusion and equality and collaboration with state authorities, and their commitment strengthens the contribution to social innovation in the spheres where development is needed most. To facilitate social innovation, inclusive policies should be adopted that enable marginalized groups to engage. However, they should be adequate enough not to reinforce digital inequalities, particularly among marginalized groups.

6) **Recognize informal volunteers' work and contributions.** As informal volunteers in resource-poor contexts generally receive less recognition and less practical support, recognizing their time, effort and contributions is vital and can boost their motivation to engage in volunteering. Various forms of incentives can be introduced to acknowledge volunteers' contributions.



7) **Invest in volunteer data, research and measurement.** Data collection and measurement are needed to better understand the contribution of volunteering to the development, needs and capabilities of volunteers from diverse backgrounds, including informal volunteerism. Any effort to measure volunteering needs to be separated by factors such as gender, socio-economic status, urban/rural location and age. This helps policymakers and practitioners to gain a better understanding of volunteering in countries and regions and globally. To close the gap in data and measurement, policymakers should explore partnerships with entities at the various levels, including national, regional, and international, for data collection and better measurement of volunteering. Special attention should be paid to the improvement of the UNV's Knowledge Portal Volunteerism as a key repository of volunteering data.

Ultimately, the accelerated achievement of the SDGs by 2030 demands a profound shift in understanding of human resource management. By formalizing mechanisms of volunteer–state relationships, ensuring inclusivity, investing in evidence, and aligning with existing strategies, Member States and UNV can unlock the full potential of volunteerism.

CONCLUSION

The structured and institutionalized cooperation between the UNV programme and national governments is essential for accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. In this context, volunteer–state partnerships serve as an indispensable mechanism for expanding volunteers’ roles in achieving the SDGs and can help in laying the foundation for a 21st Century social contract, founded on inclusion and equality in response to the needs of communities.

Volunteers have worked with the state, playing important and diverse roles in deliberative governance, in the co-production of services and in social innovation. Now more than ever, volunteer–state partnerships are critical and in need of new ways of working as communities and countries strive to achieve a more equal and inclusive future.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that now volunteers have more opportunities than ever to engage in activities that are meaningful to them, the full potential of volunteer–state collaboration remains restrained. Gaps in participation, especially for marginalized groups, and the lack of systematic integration into national policies continue to exacerbate inequality and exclusion in these partnerships.

Thus, these gaps need to be addressed, particularly considering the fact that 2026 is declared the International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development. The UNV urges Member States and UN partners to acknowledge the crucial role of volunteerism in achieving SDGs and to implement structured frameworks and collaborative mechanisms that ensure no one is left behind.

GLOSSARY

Abbreviations and acronyms

UNV — United Nations Volunteers;

UNDP — United Nations Development Programme;

SDGs — Sustainable Development Goals;

SWVR — State of the World's Volunteerism Report;

MOU — Memorandum of Understanding.

Terms and definitions :

Marginalized groups — people excluded or discriminated against due to their gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, or other characteristics, leading to social, economic, and political disadvantages. These groups face systemic barriers preventing their full participation in society and are often left behind by progress.

Social contract — a dynamic and implicit agreement between states, people and communities on their mutual roles and responsibilities, with participation, public goods, public policies and taxation chief among them.

Social innovation — broadly refers to the development of new ideas or processes that aim to address gaps.

Volunteering — a wide range of activities, including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation, undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor.

Volunteer-state relationships — refer more specifically to situations when volunteers, volunteer groups or volunteer-involving organizations work with state institutions and government officials.

