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Swiss association for the
exchange of personnel in
development cooperation

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Experiences of Unité volunteers in the 2020 pandemic



This study has been commissioned by Unité, in the frame of Unité institutional partnership with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

December 2020

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We are indebted to Martin Schreiber who led on this process within Unité. We also thank Unité for giving us this opportunity to engage with and learn from some of its member organisations. This study has made an important contribution to the Forum study on the impact of Covid-19 on volunteering for development.

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
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| Forum | International Forum for volunteering in development |
| IVCO | International Volunteering Co-operation Organisation |
| VIO | Volunteer Involving Organisation |
| SDC | Swiss Development Cooperation |

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Experiences of Unité volunteers in the 2020 pandemic

Topline findings

In September-October 2020, the research team conducted an online survey to capture the perspectives of Unité volunteers on their experience of Covid-19 in field. The survey data informs the larger Unité research report which explored lessons learned from the initial months of the Covid-19 response, alternative models being applied, and opportunities for innovation and growth.

How well did Unité members handle the Covid-19 crisis?

At least 75% of volunteers either strongly agreed or agreed that their organisation had handled the crisis well in terms of the pace of volunteer-involving organisations' (VIOs') responses, communications, processes, and proactive engagement. 13% disagreed that their organisation had communicated effectively or that systems and processes worked well

What happened to the volunteers? 77% of the volunteers who responded to this question reported they continued at their place of assignment. Just under 70% of the volunteers who left their place of assignment stated they had been offered another opportunity to volunteer, with 85% indicating that remote online support for their partner organisation was overwhelmingly popular. Nearly half of those responding stated they were offered this opportunity in a different context. Over 61% of respondents stated they were offered the opportunity of raising awareness of international development issues.

Volunteer support. 67 replied to this question. Arguably the answers reflected the number of volunteers who remained on assignment and did not return home because only 15% required financial support to return home or for a period afterwards (e.g. payment of returning grant in full or additional allowance) and 17% required support for post-assignment plans. 47% of the respondents (likely volunteers who remained on assignment) required counselling in respect of the sudden experience and impact on personal circumstances; and 24% required ongoing medical support due to the risk of exposure to Covid-19.

Despite the volunteers being positive about how Unité member organisations handled Covid-19, there are learning points and individual negative experiences. Approximately 10% of volunteer respondents scored their sending organisation performance as "poor" for repatriation and support for volunteers remaining on assignment. Concerns include a perception that there was no manual or guidance for crisis

management, and that volunteers were side-lined in decision-making about how the crisis was managed.

Perspectives on partner organisations' experiences. Most volunteer respondents considered the support given to partner organisations and primary actors as average or higher. 60% rated alternative ways of providing volunteer support as above average or excellent. Nevertheless, there were areas where volunteers rated the member organisations' support as "poor", notably financial support to partners, support to partners on Covid-19 issues and identifying new partners to deal with the challenges of the pandemic.

Looking to the future

How could volunteer organisations do better? 60% of the 45 respondents stated there was nothing that could have been done better. At the same time some respondents commented that there could have been more financial support for volunteers working from home, better planning to guarantee the security of the volunteers and their family members and the need for funding to assist partner organisations. Some mentioned the discussing Covid-19 to the exclusion of other issues had a demotivating impact.

Will the Covid-19 experience affect whether volunteers will volunteer in the future?

88% of volunteer respondents stated that the experience of the Covid-19 crisis had not changed their interest in volunteering in the future. Nevertheless one mentioned that they prefer to volunteer onsite; another said s/he would carefully assess where and when to volunteer; and one said *"I do not trust my volunteering organisation anymore to take care of the volunteers during difficult times."*

Volunteering for development in the future. 60% of the volunteer respondents were optimistic or very optimistic about the future of volunteering for development, with only 5% of respondents expressing pessimistic views. Some mentioned opportunities such as the use of technology and better investment in local staff; others mentioned constraints such as a lack of funds that may force partner organisations to close down, and Unité volunteers being difficult to replace because *"it is very difficult to find local instructors instead, because they are not willing to volunteer or with low salary..."*.

The survey data show that 80% of respondents felt that capacity building and skills development would feature strongly in volunteering for development in the future. 70% of the respondents expected greater involvement of national and local volunteers in member programmes. Areas in which less change was expected are programme priorities and the use of online volunteers. Indeed, 37% of respondents disagreed that online volunteering would increase.

Introduction

Unité is a Switzerland-based network of Swiss organisations involved with international volunteering development co-operation, including exchange programmes. As part of their understanding and learning of the experience of their network members, Unité requested that the research team undertake an exploration of their experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. This research sits alongside a larger research project undertaken for the International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum) but is entirely focused on the members of Unité.

There are 16 members in the network. These are referred to as “network members” or “volunteer organisations” in the text below and are not identified unless an individual organisation appears in a quotation from the survey. Since the interviews were conducted in English, which is not likely to be the first language of those quoted, some minor textual amendments have been made which have served to clarify the meaning of the quotations. A sample of five network members were interviewed as part of the study.

This report focuses on the experiences and views of the Covid-19 pandemic of Unité ‘volunteers’. Since the survey was conducted alongside a larger survey of Forum members, the term ‘volunteer’ was used in the survey questions, but we are aware that other terminologies may be used more frequently by Unité and its members. In the covering letter to the survey link we tried to clarify the terminology so that it was understood that ‘volunteer’ included all of these different expressions. In this report we retain the use of the term ‘volunteer’ in the same way.

Unité and its member organisations distinguish between “professional volunteers” and “learning volunteers” (trainees, culture / sensitisation exchanges). They use various terms in addition to professional ‘volunteer’ such as ‘Fachleute’, ‘cooperantes’, ‘volontaires professionnels’, ‘coopérants’, ‘co-workers’ and ‘development workers’ to describe people being given assignments on a voluntary or stipend basis. In this survey report, all of these descriptions are included in our use of the term ‘volunteer’.

1. Methodology

1.1. Data collection

In September-October 2020, the research team conducted an online survey to develop our understanding of the research questions.

The Unité network was asked to identify volunteers who had been serving at the time the news of the pandemic emerged. To this end Unité worked with its member organisations to identify and distribute the survey link to their volunteers. In total 308 volunteers were sent the link, of which 89 (i.e. 29% response rate) replied.

1.2. Survey instrument

The survey data provide insights on the experiences of volunteers during the pandemic, and how volunteering organisations responded to the challenges experienced by volunteers. Volunteers were also asked for their views on what shape volunteering for development might take in the future.

The survey outcomes from Unité members and their volunteers can be compared with the qualitative data emerging from organisational interviews and the larger volunteer survey undertaken for the Forum. When the data are disaggregated, such comparisons may provide differences as well as commonalities in the findings.

2. Characteristics of volunteer respondents

The survey asked volunteers to report on their gender, age, type, and role. Outcomes were as follows:

2.1. Gender

Figure 1 shows the gender breakdown of respondents. 57% identified as female and 39% as male.¹

¹ 87 out of 89 volunteers replied to this question, of which one described their gender as "other" and two "did not wish to say."

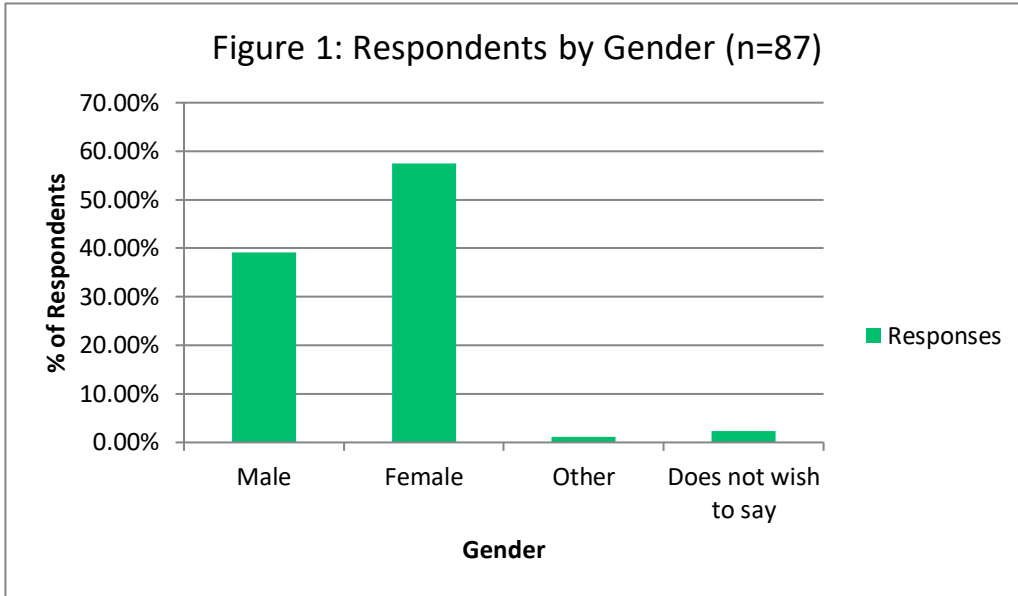


Figure 1: Respondents by Gender

2.2. Age

Figure 2 shows the age bands for respondents. Most (61%) of respondents were in the age range of 26-40 years.

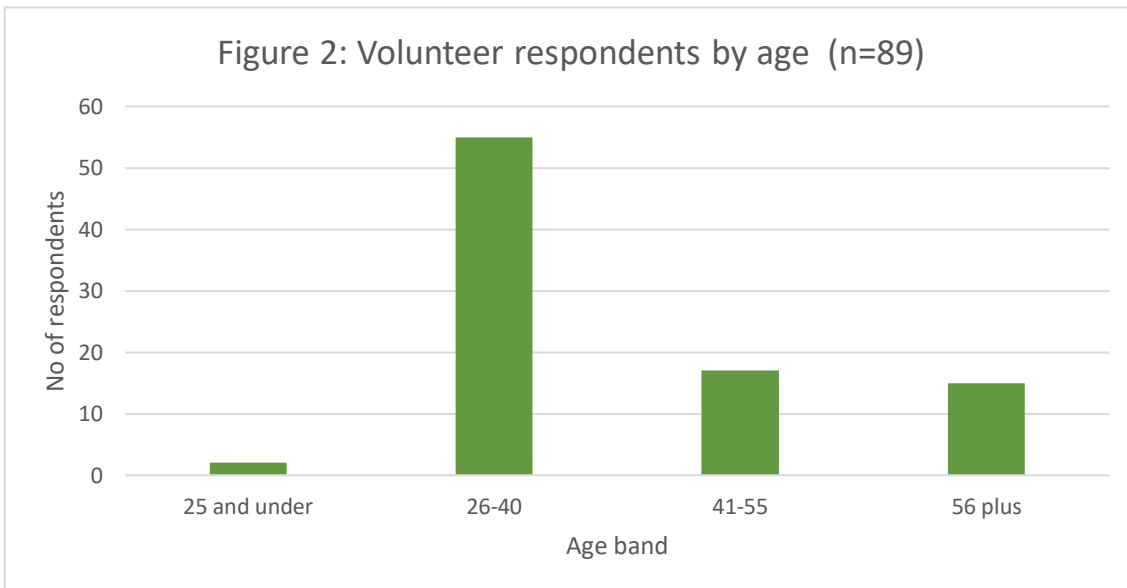


Figure 2: Volunteer respondents by age

2.3. Volunteer type

Figure 3 shows that 91% identified as an international volunteer, 8% as a national volunteer and 2% as a community volunteer.

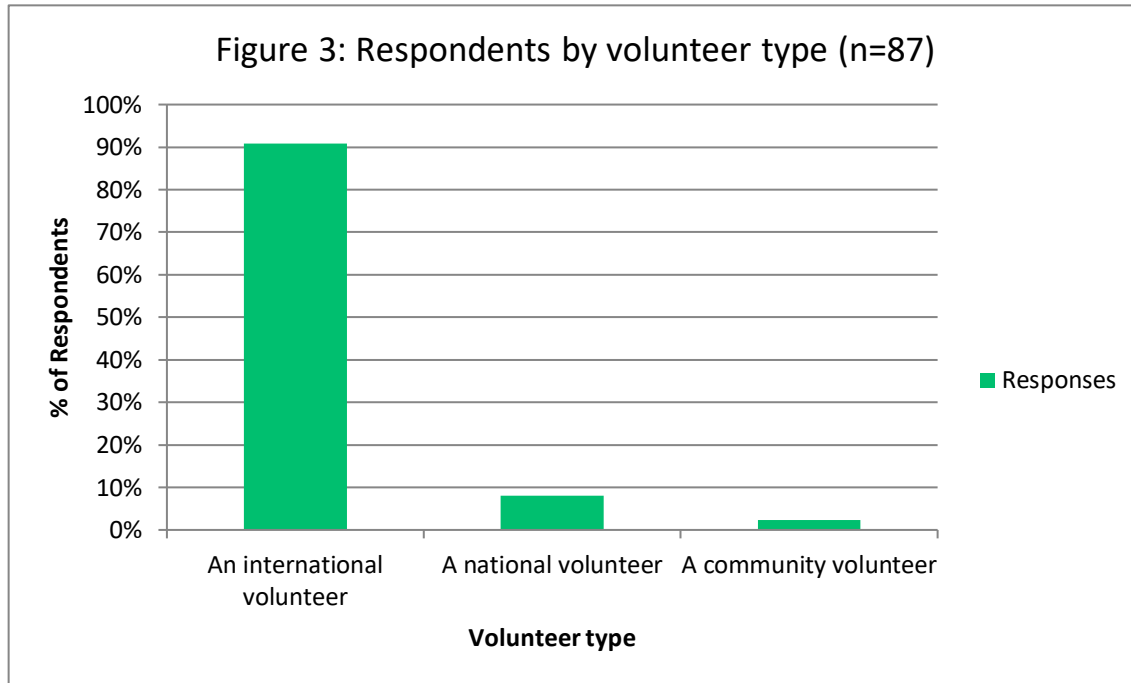


Figure 3: Respondents by volunteer type

2.4. Volunteer role and programme type

Volunteers were asked to identify what type of volunteer programme they were assigned on. Figure 4 shows the range of responses against options offered in the survey. The results show how respondents described their assignment.²

48% of volunteers identified as being on a long-term capacity building programme, with another 30% stating they were based in a partner organisation, and 1% describing their assignment as an exchange program. No volunteers identified as being on a youth programme, while those on a short-term expert assignment comprised 3%. Of the remainder, 6% stated they were assigned directly in the community while 12% of respondents identified as being “other”.

² The categories are not mutually exclusive but represent how volunteers viewed their prime focus. 87 respondents replied to this question and 87 options were selected which means volunteers chose one of the offered descriptions to define their assignment.

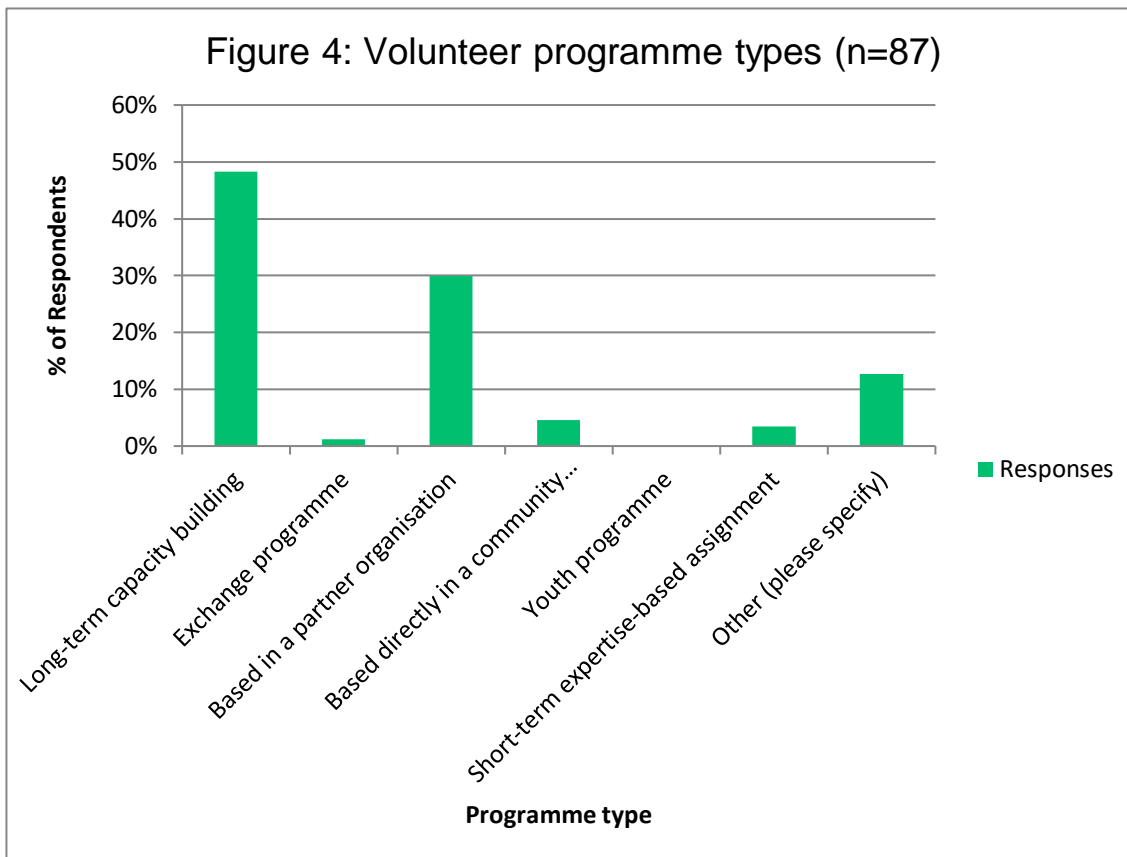


Figure 4: Volunteer programme types

3. What happened during the Covid-19 crisis?

3.1. How well did Unité member organisations handle the crisis?

Volunteers were asked to review how well they thought the issues around Covid-19 had been addressed by their volunteering (sending) organisation.³

The volunteers were asked to comment on five different dimensions of how their volunteering organisation had handled the pandemic. They were asked to rank the performance on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree.

- They responded quickly to the crisis
- They communicated effectively with key stakeholders, including staff, volunteers and families, partner organisations, and donors
- Their systems and processes worked well
- They sought feedback from myself and others at my place of assignment
- Overall, my volunteer organisation handled the Covid-19 situation well

Qualitative results to this question are illustrated in Figure 5 below.

³ The intention of this question was to identify volunteer views of their Unité member organisation.

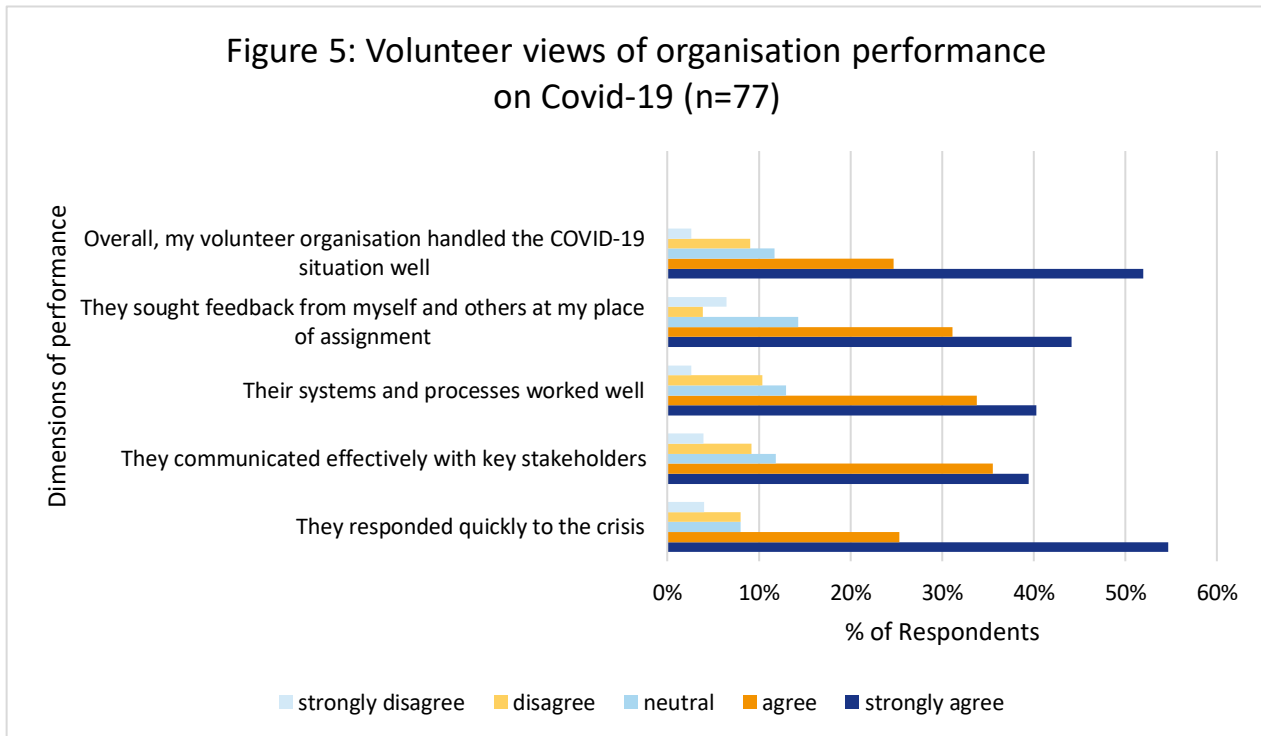


Figure 5: Volunteer views of organisation performance

This shows a level of consistency against all five measured criteria, where at least 75% of volunteers either strongly agreed or agreed that their organisation had handled the crisis well. These five measures indicate the pace of VIOs’ responses, communications, processes, and proactive engagement, as well as an overall rating.

On the negative experiences, 13% disagreed that their organisation had communicated effectively or that systems and processes worked well. But overall, less than 12% disagreed that their organisation had handled the Covid-19 situation well. Two open-ended comments from volunteers provide additional insights about these challenges:

My organisation contacts us regularly to make sure that my family and I are well protected and that the teleworking system set up works well with us.

Very good at the beginning, but lack of follow up after.

3.2. What happened to the volunteers?

59 out of 77 volunteers who responded to this question reported they continued at their place of assignment.

I am still there. Never left.

I went for holiday and home assignment to Switzerland from beginning of July to end of September and now I am back in the project.

Of the international volunteers 19% reported they had been repatriated.⁴ This comprised 13 volunteers who were then asked if they had a choice in that decision. However, responses from 23 volunteers indicated that some volunteers who had not been repatriated also responded to this question. Only 2 out of 23 stated they had not had a choice in this decision.

I had the choice and its temporary.

Yes, it was my own decision.

We had a choice, we remained in Kenya.

Volunteers were offered the space to add further comments. They indicated several additional challenges for volunteers and their organisations.

Interteam / Comundo gave us the option to go back home, end our contract, or come back to our assignments. The decision to stay in the country was made by the volunteers.

I was going to be repatriated because of all the panic and had a flight quickly arranged by Eirene Suisse - but then the government of Uganda shut the airport and flights were cancelled, so I ended up staying on and this was a great decision for me.

Was given choice to repatriate, entirely my decision, was offered full support to repatriate if wished, decided not to stay and other support provided to ensure precautions possible while at assignment site (PPE purchase, etc).

The volunteers who left their place of assignment were asked if their volunteering organisation had offered them an alternative opportunity. Just under 70% stated they had been offered another opportunity.⁵ They were then asked what they had been offered. These results are shown in Figure 6.

⁴ 79 respondents identified as international volunteers, of which 70 answered this question. 13 stated they had been repatriated and 57 stated they had not been repatriated. The definition of repatriation was determined by the respondents.

⁵ 26 responded to this question of which 18 stated they had been offered an alternative.

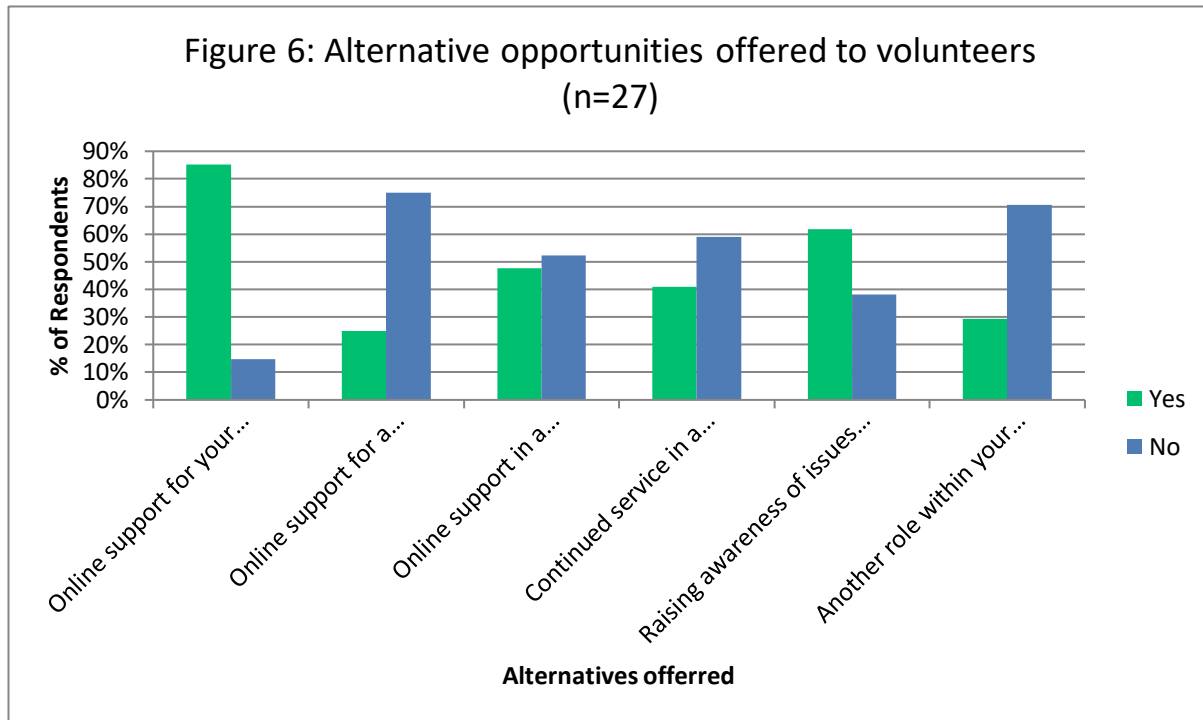


Figure 6: Alternative opportunities offered to volunteers

Remote online support for their partner organisation was the overwhelmingly popular opportunity offered for alternative assignments – at 85%.⁶ Furthermore, nearly half of those responding stated they were offered this opportunity in a different context. Over 61% of respondents stated they were offered the opportunity of raising awareness of international development issues.

3.3. Volunteer support

Volunteers were asked what support they needed in the Covid-19 situation and whether it was provided. 67 replied to this question. Arguably the answers reflected the number of volunteers who remained on assignment and did not return home.

Five different options were provided for volunteers to comment on (see Figure 7). In all cases, a minority of respondents said they required these options.

⁶ 27 respondents answered this statement. The other statements had between 17 and 21 respondents.

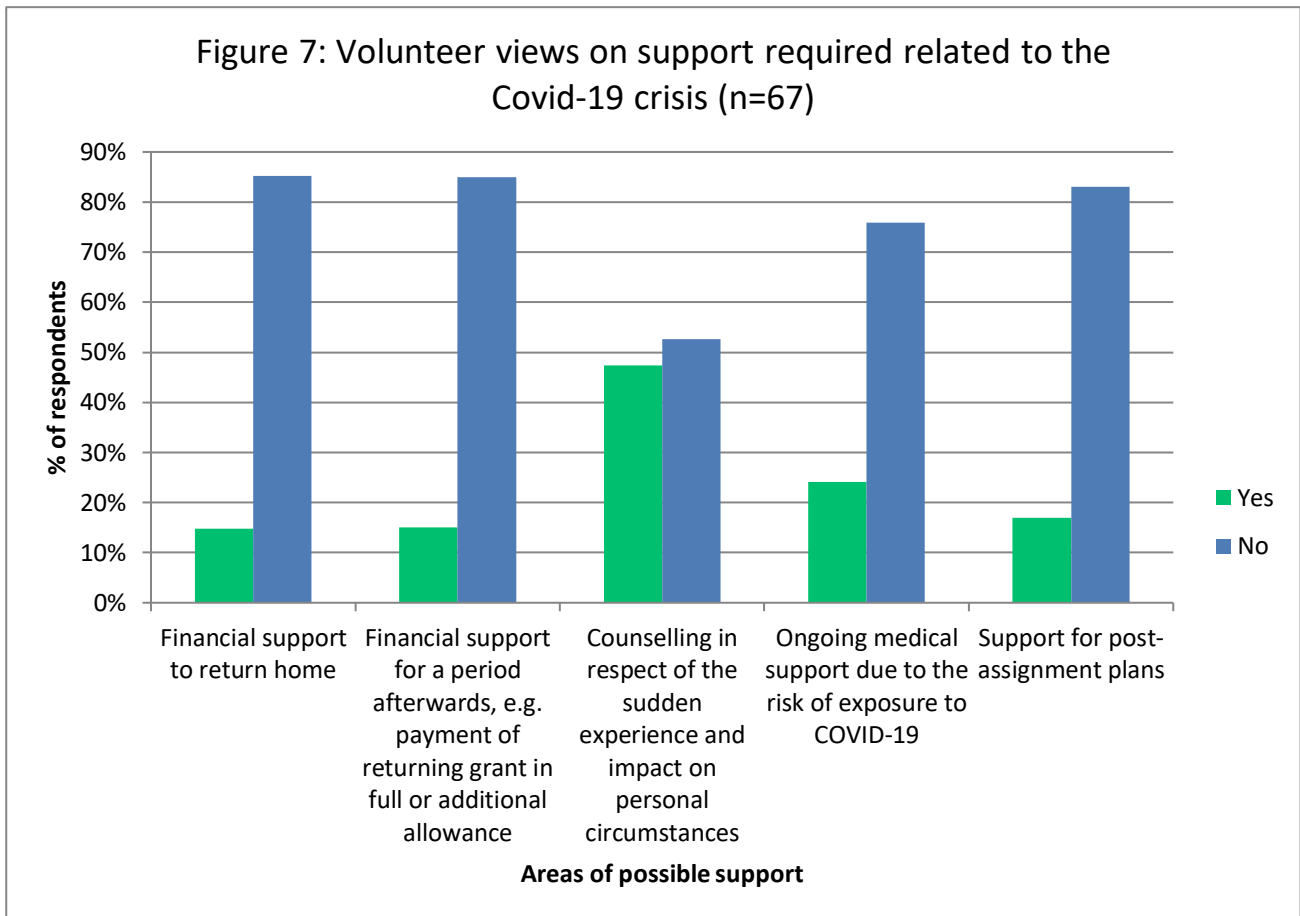


Figure 7: Volunteer views on support required related to the Covid-19 crisis

- Only 15% required financial support to return home or for a period afterwards, e.g. payment of returning grant in full or additional allowance.
- 47% required counselling in respect of the sudden experience and impact on personal circumstances.
- 24% required ongoing medical support due to the risk of exposure to COVID-19.
- 17% required support for post-assignment plans.

Figure 8 shows the results when volunteers were asked what their volunteer organisation had offered to them. Over 80% stated they believed their organisation would offer financial support to return home with 52% believing this would be offered for a period afterwards. 89% thought counselling support was available while 67% thought their organisation offered ongoing medical support. A minority of volunteers (36%) thought support for post assignment plans was available.

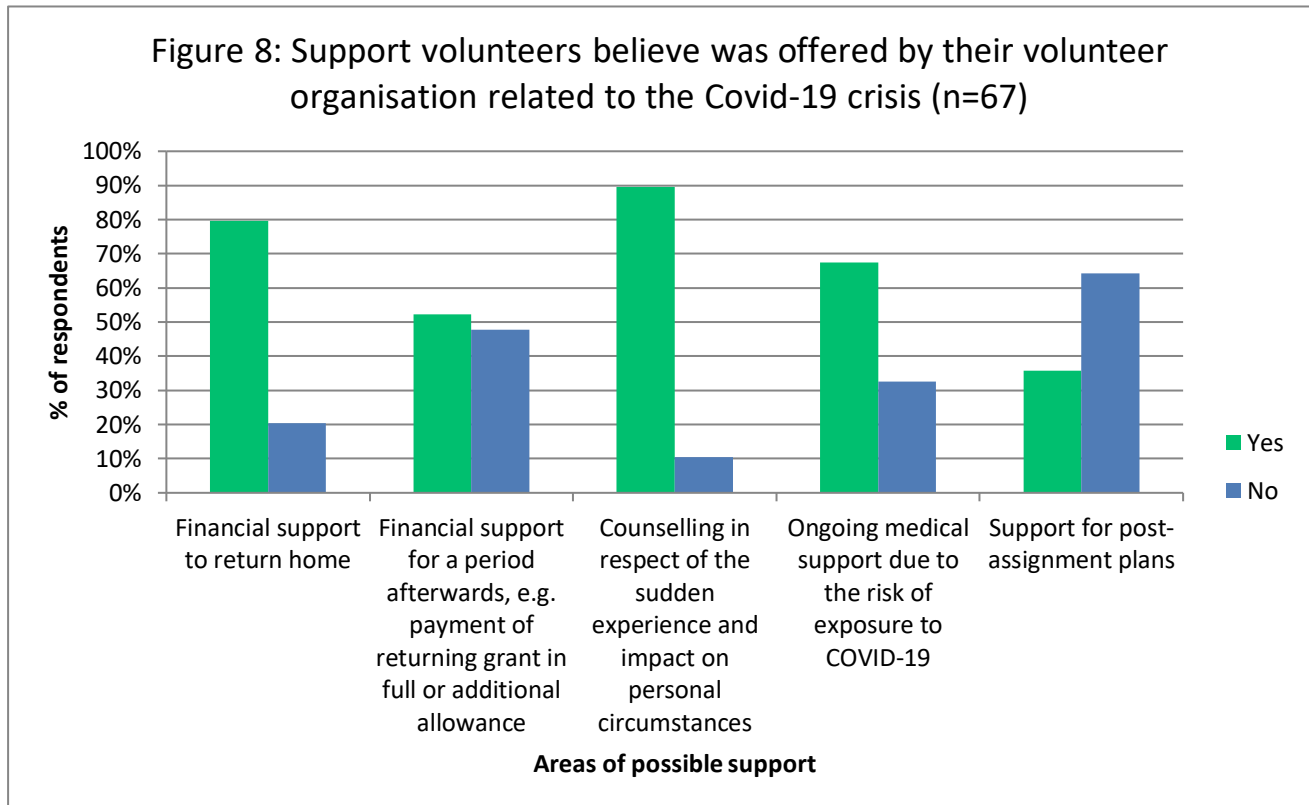


Figure 8: Support volunteers believe was offered by their volunteer organisation related to the Covid-19 crisis

In comparing what was required by volunteers and what they believed was offered, counselling and medical support were the two highest scores for what volunteers believed was offered.

3.4. The overall picture: comparing volunteer and organisational perspectives

In conclusion, the survey asked volunteers to comment on the overall performance of their volunteering organisation during the Covid-19 crisis against specific areas. They rated performance on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent) on the following five areas:

- repatriation of international volunteers;
- continued support for international volunteers upon repatriation;
- removal of national and/or community volunteers from their place of assignment;
- continued support for national and/or community volunteers once removed from the place of assignment;
- support for international, national or community volunteers who remained on assignment.

The results are shown in Figure 9.

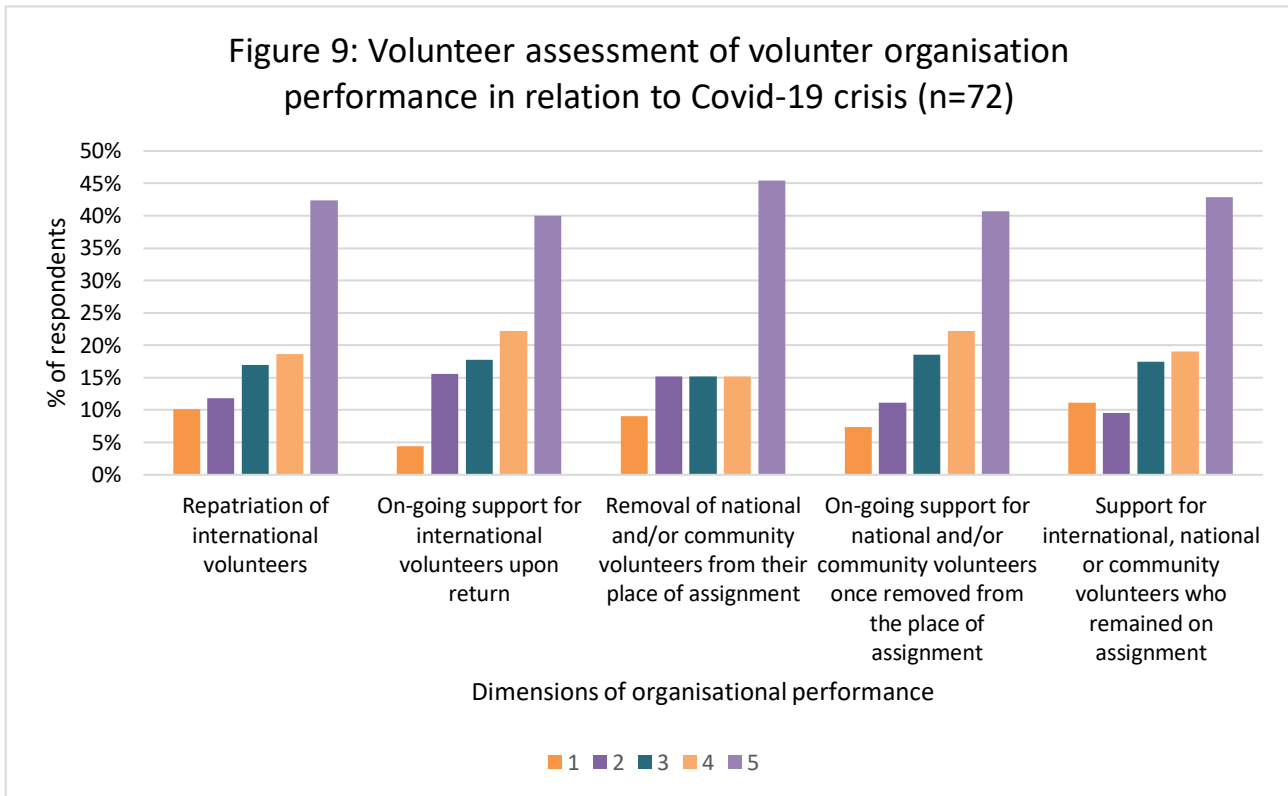


Figure 9: Volunteer assessment of volunteer organisation performance in relation to Covid-19 crisis

Over 40% of volunteer respondents assessed their volunteer organisations as “excellent” (level 5) in how they performed in all five dimensions.⁷ When this is combined with volunteers who with those respondents who assessed their organisations at level 4, this extends to over 60% on all five dimensions.

At the other end of the scale, 10% scored “poor” for repatriation and support for volunteers remaining on assignment.

The general picture demonstrated a generally positive view of how Covid-19 was handled by Unité member organisations but there are learning points and individual negative experiences. Some examples of areas for learning are below.

I would have expected that Comundo would have had like a crisis manual/guidance they would have only needed to adapt to that specific situation. To react faster and more frequent.

Include more the opinion and experience of our country coordinator because in Switzerland they didn't really get to know how the situation in Bolivia was. After asking for an extra reunion he could explain better and in detail how the politic, sanitary, economic and social situation was.

⁷ The numbers responding to each statement varied. Where the statements involved international volunteers the number of respondents ranged from 45 to 63. The statements which were only related to national and community volunteers ranged between 27 and 33.

Overall, the organization handled the crisis very well. Since it is a small structure, being part of a larger, more active network that can be activated in case of emergencies might be helpful.

More contacts with the volunteers. A less unidirectional dialogue. More economic support for the partner organisation.

3.5. Perspectives on partner organisations' experience

Volunteers were asked to identify how their volunteer organisations had supported partner organisations and primary actors in the South. These results are shown in Figure 10.

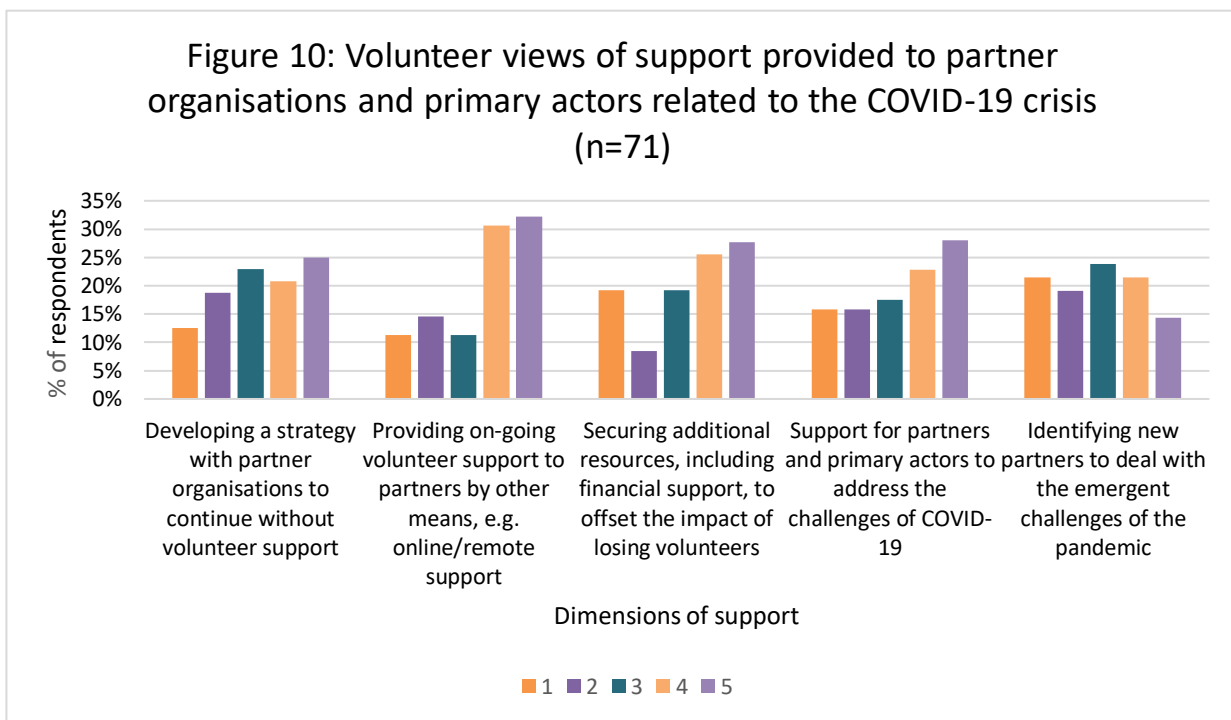


Figure 10: Volunteer views of support provided to partner organisations and primary actors related to the COVID-19 crisis

In general, the scores show that most respondents considered the support for the partner organisations and primary actors was average or higher than average (levels 3,4 and 5 combined). 60% rated alternative ways of providing volunteer support as above average or excellent (levels 4 and 5). Nevertheless, there were areas where volunteers rated the organisations' support as "poor" (level 1) – notably financial support to partners, support to partners on Covid-19 issues and identifying new partners to deal with the challenges of the pandemic.

Maybe more financial support to partner organisations to cope / react / to this special situation and so they could provide help to end beneficiaries.

The possibility for partner organizations to change their budgets and redirect financial support was given, but the official communication could have been faster.

Provide guidelines and ongoing support how to live with the corona virus present in the places where we live and work.

4. Looking toward the future

4.1. How could volunteer organisations do better?

Volunteers were asked what their volunteer organisations could have done better or differently in the future. This was an entirely open-ended question. 45 respondents replied to the question and 60% stated there was nothing that could have been done better.

Some of the write-in comments raised different issues about the perceived lack of support provided to volunteers:

For home office: offer funds/help in case our computers (my primary work tool) needed repairs or maintenance. Personally, I've used my private laptop for work during half a year now.

The demotivating impact of discussing Covid-19 to the exclusion of other topics was also raised.

It's likely that some problems can arise from the extensive use. In our country group: not reduce the range of topics to Covid related topics only. Not dampen our optimism by indulging in picturing all the horror scenarios, however unlikely, that maybe might occur.

Some respondents expressed negative experiences of planning in the context of understanding the local situation.

Personal level: I felt there was little done to really understand the local situation and there was no real emergency plan. Local level / Partner organisation: I also feel that the organisation could have done more to support the partner organisation in providing a temporary humanitarian aid fund and support in providing prevention measures.

In general, I think that skills development and capacity building are the most effective ways of volunteering / coworking. This has not changed so much through Covid-19. But it would be great if sending organisations could develop concrete plans on guaranteeing the security of their volunteers and their family members in any kind of emergency situation. It would further great, if there was any kind of emergency help fund to assist organisations to continue their work, protect their workers and quickly deliver (temporary) humanitarian aid/ prevention measures, when an acute crisis breaks out.

Despite being frustrated with the organisation's approach to getting volunteers out I also respect how new the environment was and how little training anyone had in the field of pandemics. That said, moving forward, the organisation needs to consider its priorities and if the volunteers are the experts in the field, then the organisation needs to act that way as well, and listen to their advice in the moment.

4.2. Will the Covid-19 experience affect whether volunteers will volunteer in the future?

88% of volunteer respondents stated that the experience of the Covid-19 crisis had not changed their interest in volunteering in the future. However, the 9 volunteers who responded “yes” offered additional comments which suggests this response is more nuanced than might appear at first sight.⁸

I do not trust my volunteering organisation anymore to take care of the volunteers during difficult times.

I am still interested in a possible future assignment, but would assess well where and how, especially being a parent of young children.

It's still in my interest, however it's much nicer to be able to work directly with the target group than only working at home and neither being able to get to know more people and their culture.

5. Volunteering for development in the future

The survey asked volunteers about their overall view of volunteering for development in the future in the context of the challenges posed by Covid-19. Their view is shown in Figure 11. 60% were either optimistic or very optimistic, with only 5% of respondents expressing pessimistic views.

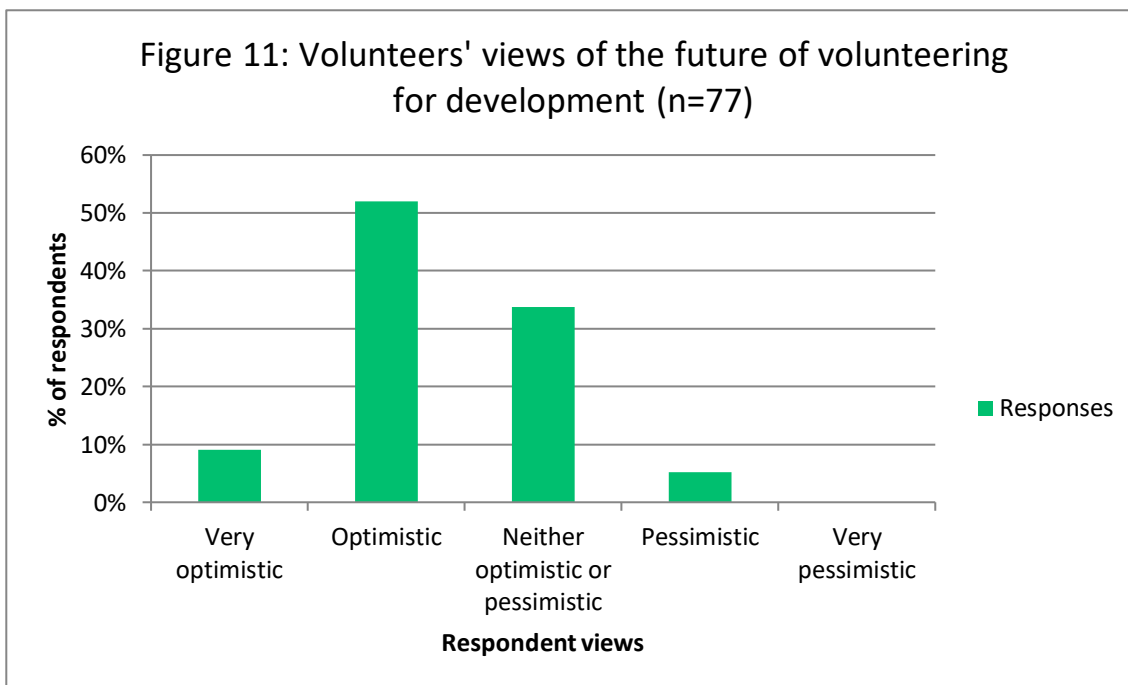


Figure 11: Volunteers' views of the future of volunteering for development

For those who were pessimistic there was the opportunity to offer ideas for what might be different in the future.

⁸ 75 volunteers responded to this question.

I think if we invest in providing technology (+training), ensure power and network availability, there are many chances with online training, consulting, coaching, capacity building or, support in certain areas. And even experts who wouldn't consider moving to a country for a couple of years might consider offering support and share their know-how.

Instructors are now difficult to bring into Sri Lanka because of airport closing, restrictions and not giving Visas... like this our College does not get the needed professional workers to go on with a good education plan... and it is very difficult to find local instructors instead, because they are not willing to volunteer or with low salary...

The problem that I see for the world of volunteering in the future is the lack of funds and the likelihood that many projects will close down.

And there were also some more radical comments:

Better investment in local staff, which is more sustainable anyway and does not perpetuate power imbalance of white supremacist and colonial legacies.

The survey also explored the shape of volunteering for development in the future. Respondents were asked to indicate on a five-point scale whether they agreed or disagreed with the five different statements, where 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree. The specific areas identified by respondents for the future of volunteering for development were:

- a heightened focus on skills development;
- a heightened focus on capacity building;
- a change in programme priorities where volunteers are assigned;
- a heightened focus on national and local volunteering;
- increased use of on-line volunteers.

The survey results are shown in Figure 12. The focus of the work as capacity building and skills development features strongly, with 80% of respondents agreeing that these areas will have a heightened focus in the future.⁹ 70% of the respondents expected greater involvement of national and local volunteers. Programme priorities and the use of online volunteers did not receive the same level of support for expected changes. Indeed, 37% disagreed that online volunteering would increase.

⁹ It is noted that Unité has a specific model of capacity building and that Unité members operate within this framework. However, since the survey covered seven different IVCOs, it was not possible to draw out the specific understanding that different volunteers have of capacity building.

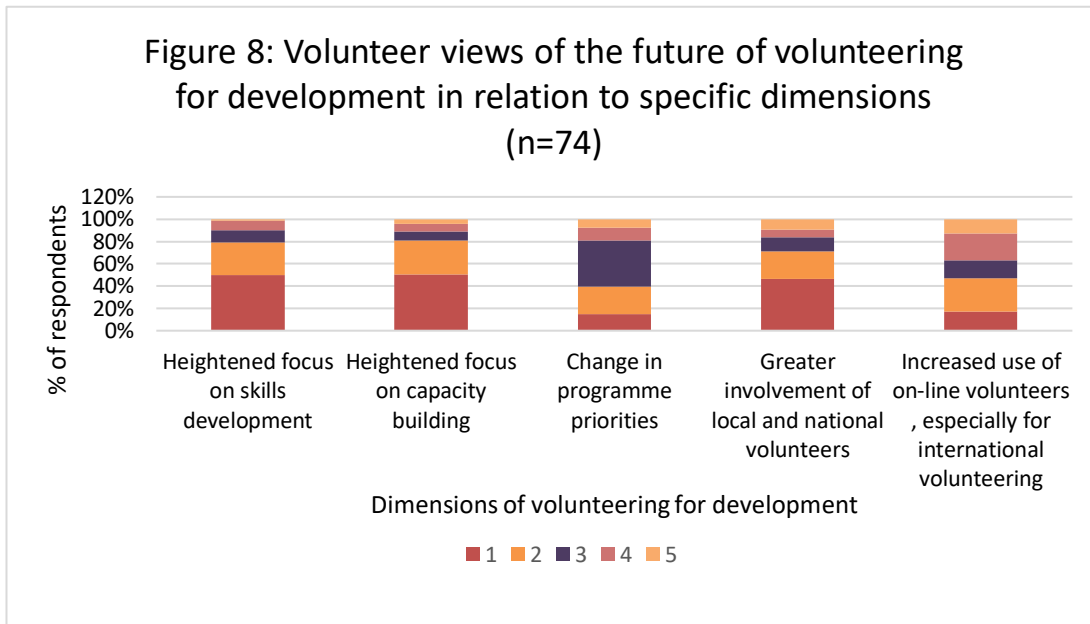


Figure 12: Volunteer views of the future of volunteering for development in relation to specific dimensions

Less top down (North - South), more South North exchange.

Within international partnership, it'll be a higher demand on flexibility and capacity to improvise.

I see a lot of chances in online possibilities if we are able to overcome the challenges (power, network, available equipment). And local grassroots projects should be highly supported.

Postscript: Volunteer reflections

It is fairly stressful Covid-19, especially knowing the poorer quality health care systems here and the low adherence to safety precautions among the general public and even local partners.

I am so thankful Eirene allowed us the option of mostly working from home as a bunch of my colleagues have been quarantined in a town nearby. It is scary to think of being forced into quarantine by the government, and also a bit frightening to think of the backlog in testing. It is hard, too, with vacation/leave time because you are stuck inside all day and that is not really a rest. There has been a lot of work I have been able to get done with my local organizations - but they are struggling to grapple with adjusting to new restrictions with the pandemic.

The management of the crisis was very well executed by Comundo. We had the choice to come back to Switzerland and we had support all the time. I know other NGOs where they didn't provide any of this. Thank you Comundo.

We need volunteers who are not just afraid of getting infected but stay engaged attending those in need.

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Unité
Swiss association for the exchange of
personnel in development cooperation

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partnership with the Swiss Agency for
Development and Cooperation (SDC).

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About

For 55 years, Unité, the Swiss association for personnel exchange in development cooperation, has been monitoring the quality of international volunteer for development assignments through standards, evaluations, institutional support, studies and training. It is made up of 13 member organisations. In partnership with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Unité is committed to an efficient and sustainable cooperation with partners in the South.

Unité

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