

From obligation to voluntary action

A historical account of service, mutual aid and civic action from antiquity to 2026.

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A HISTORY OF GIVING

FROM OBLIGATION TO VOLUNTARY ACTION

The historical formation and transformation of volunteering



FROM COMMUNITY DUTY TO CIVIC ACTION

How voluntary action became a force in modern society — and what its long history tells us about solidarity today.

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Abstract

Volunteering is often presented as a characteristically modern institution: a product of civil society, philanthropic association, humanitarian organization and, eventually, the professional non-governmental sector. That account captures an important part of the story but mistakes the modern vocabulary and administrative form for the deeper history of the practice. Long before the word volunteer acquired its present civilian meaning, societies had developed ways of supplying labour, care, food, money, protection, burial, infrastructure and emergency assistance outside an ordinary wage relation. Some of these arrangements were imposed by rulers, some were embedded in religious obligation, some rested on expectations of reciprocity, and some grew from status-bearing benefaction. They were not all volunteering, and treating them as such would be anachronistic. Yet they provided much of the moral and institutional substrate from which later voluntary action developed. The history of volunteering is therefore best approached not as a search for the first volunteer but as a history of the changing boundary between obligation and choice: who was expected to help, whom they were expected to help, through which institutions, under what sanctions, and with what forms of material or symbolic return.

This study reconstructs that history from antiquity to 2026, while giving its principal chronological attention to the period after 1700. It examines Greek civic liturgy and euergetism, Roman associations, Christian poor relief, Achaemenid service and gift structures, Sasanian charitable foundations, reciprocal labour in Central Eurasian communities, Islamic waqf, guilds and confraternities, and then follows the growth of associational philanthropy, industrial-era mutual aid, humanitarian organization, wartime mobilization, welfare-state partnership, international volunteer service, professionalized NGOs, corporate and skills-based volunteering, digital service, episodic participation and informal mutual aid. A separate conceptual section explains the terminology used in contemporary research and policy, distinguishing formal or organization-based volunteering from direct and informal volunteering, and clarifying individual, institutional, regular, episodic, spontaneous, virtual, micro-, corporate, skills-based, international, faith-based, mutual-aid and state-supported forms. The central argument is that modern volunteerism did not supersede earlier forms of solidarity. It accumulated them. The result in 2026 is an institutional ecology in which very old logics of reciprocity and moral obligation coexist with modern ideas of autonomous choice, professional standards, statistical measurement and digitally mediated participation.

Keywords: volunteering; volunteerism; civil society; philanthropy; mutual aid; humanitarianism; associational life; informal volunteering; Central Asia; history of welfare.

1. Introduction: Volunteering as a Historical Problem

The starting point for a serious history of volunteering is a refusal to equate unpaid activity with voluntary activity. In contemporary statistical usage the distinction is explicit: the International Labour Organization treats volunteer work as unpaid, non-compulsory work performed for others beyond the volunteer’s own household or family.¹ This definition excludes court-ordered community service, labour required by law, mandatory national service and other activities in which the individual cannot meaningfully refuse. The apparent clarity of that formulation becomes much less secure when it is carried backward in time. In an Athenian polis, a wealthy citizen might finance a warship or a dramatic chorus at his own expense because civic status made him liable to do so; in a medieval confraternity, a member might contribute to the burial of another member because fraternity entailed mutual duties; in a Central Asian village, neighbours might assemble to build a house because the expectation of reciprocal help was woven into local belonging; in a Christian or Muslim setting, a donor might understand assistance to the poor simultaneously as compassion, religious duty and a means of securing spiritual merit. None of these actors occupied the conceptual world presupposed by the modern survey question that asks whether one has volunteered in the previous four weeks. Their actions were shaped by thick social relationships in which freedom, obligation, honour, faith and reciprocity were not mutually exclusive categories.

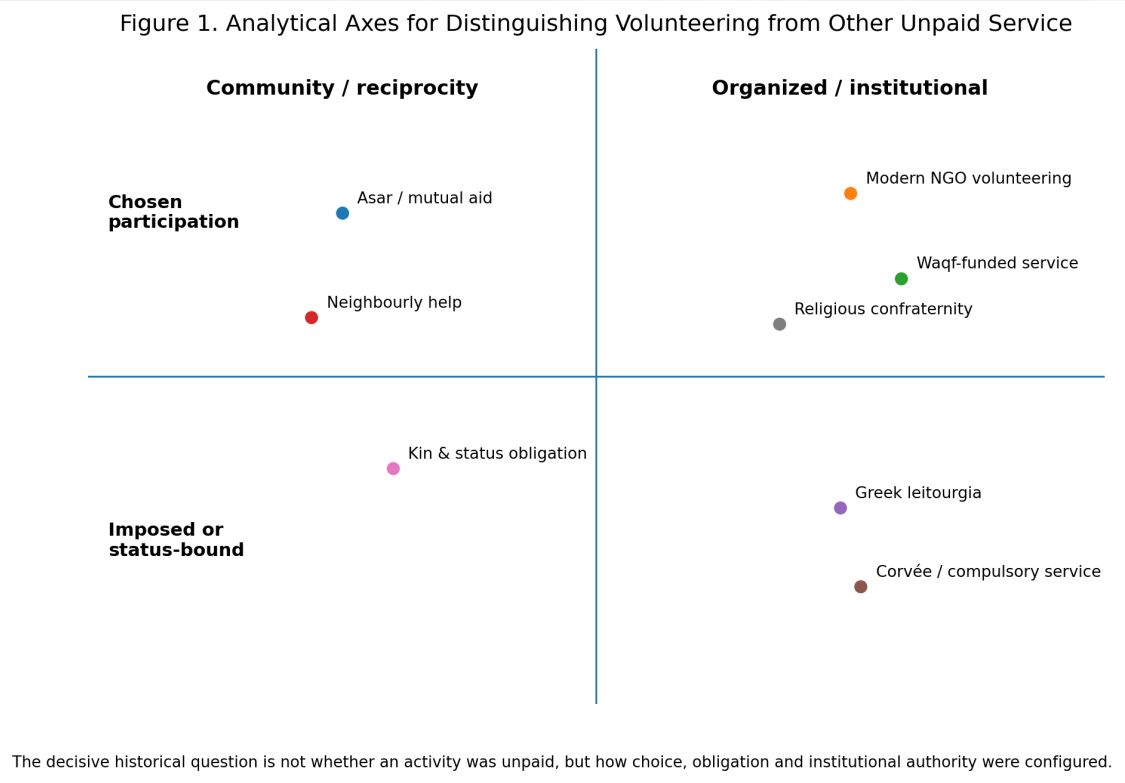
That problem is more than semantic. Cnaan, Handy and Wadsworth famously showed that the category 'volunteer' has long been used too broadly even in modern research, and that public judgments about who counts as a volunteer depend upon dimensions such as free choice, remuneration, organizational structure and the identity of beneficiaries.² Historical analysis therefore needs a vocabulary capable of describing gradations rather than forcing every case into a binary. The most useful approach is to ask four questions. First, was participation legally or administratively compulsory? Second, if not legally compulsory, how strong were the social, religious or status sanctions attached to refusal? Third, was the activity organized through a household, community, religious corporation, state, association or some combination of these? Fourth, what did the participant receive in return: money, reciprocal labour, protection, religious merit, civic honour, political access, professional experience, or nothing that could reasonably be construed as remuneration? These questions reveal why the genealogy of volunteering includes many practices that are not themselves volunteering. Corvée labour, for example, belongs in the story precisely because it demonstrates the boundary: it is unpaid labour for purposes beyond the household, but compulsion removes it from the modern category. Athenian liturgy likewise illuminates the civic ideal of service while remaining distinct from freely chosen volunteering. By contrast, forms of mutual aid may satisfy the modern requirement of non-compulsion while still being strongly embedded in expectations of reciprocity.

The argument developed in the pages that follow is consequently historical rather than celebratory. Volunteering has never been a single moral impulse moving steadily toward greater benevolence. It has

¹. International Labour Organization, “Volunteer Work,” April 14, 2016; ILO, Volunteer Work Measurement Guide (Geneva: ILO, 2021).
². Ram A. Cnaan, Femida Handy, and Margaret Wadsworth, “Defining Who Is a Volunteer: Conceptual and Empirical Considerations,” Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly 25, no. 3 (1996): 364–383, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764096253006>.

repeatedly served different social orders. It could consolidate elite reputation, express religious discipline, provide working-class insurance, open limited spaces of public authority to women, support imperial projects, sustain wartime states, challenge bureaucratic institutions, reproduce unequal access to unpaid career-building opportunities, or strengthen local resilience in moments when formal systems fail. Its institutions have changed because the surrounding architecture of society changed: states became more capable, markets penetrated further into everyday life, urbanization loosened some older ties while creating new concentrations of need, print and later digital communication expanded the radius of association, professional occupations claimed domains once occupied by amateurs, and decolonization forced international service to confront questions of hierarchy and reciprocity. To understand volunteering is therefore to understand how societies allocate responsibility between household, community, religion, market, association and state. The history is less a subsidiary branch of charity history than a window into the changing organization of social obligation itself.

Conceptual figure developed for this study.



2. Before “Volunteering”: The Ancient and Pre-Modern Infrastructure of Voluntary Action

Classical Greece offers an unusually clear illustration of the distance between public service and modern volunteering. The Athenian leitourgia—literally a 'work for the people'—required wealthy citizens to undertake particular public expenditures at their own cost. The trierarchy could make a citizen responsible for a naval vessel; festival liturgies could require the financing of choruses, athletic teams, banquets or public delegations.³ Such activities were unpaid and visibly public-spirited, but voluntariness was not their defining principle. The polis deliberately converted private wealth into public capacity and channelled elite competitiveness into civic service. What matters for the long history of volunteering is therefore not that the liturgist was a volunteer in disguise, but that the institution normalized an enduring proposition: possession of resources could create a legitimate claim by the community upon the possessor. A related but less coercive institution, euergetism, developed the logic of benefaction more explicitly. Elite men and, in some cities, women financed buildings, festivals, distributions and other amenities and were repaid in the currency of civic honour—inscriptions, titles, statues, precedence and public memory.⁴ This pattern unsettles the modern habit of contrasting altruistic and self-interested motives. Ancient benefaction could materially assist a community and simultaneously strengthen the benefactor’s prestige. Modern philanthropy, corporate social responsibility and even certain forms of high-status pro bono service still display this duality. The relevant continuity is therefore not pure selflessness but the socially organized conversion of private resources into public benefit under conditions in which symbolic return remains legitimate.

Roman associational life added a different component to that inheritance. Collegia and related private associations were organized around occupations, cults, neighbourhoods, conviviality and funerary practice; many possessed names, rules, treasuries, officers, meeting places and patrons⁵. Their significance lies in the fact that they organized durable cooperation beyond immediate kinship and outside the direct machinery of the state. Shared meals and religious rites mattered, but so did the practical security of belonging. Funeral support is a revealing example because burial was simultaneously material, religious and social: membership could ensure rites and commemoration for people whose households could not guarantee them alone. The logic was reciprocal rather than simply charitable. Members contributed to a collective structure from which they or their dependants might later benefit. This is one of the oldest institutional ancestors of the modern mutual-aid association, friendly society, cooperative and membership-based welfare organization. At the same time, Roman authorities periodically restricted associations when they feared their political potential, then used or tolerated them when they supported urban order. The relationship between voluntary association and public authority was thus contested long before the rise of the modern NGO. States have

3. P. J. Rhodes, “Liturgy, Greek,” Oxford Classical Dictionary (Oxford University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.3735>.
4. See “Euergetism,” in The Oxford Handbook of Greek Cities in the Roman Empire (Oxford University Press, 2024), 189–202, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780192870933.013.14>.

repeatedly regarded associations as useful intermediaries, reservoirs of social discipline, potential challengers or some combination of the three.

The Christianization of the late Roman world did not create concern for poverty out of nothing, nor did it erase the older civic economy of benefaction. It reworked the moral language in which assistance was justified. Richard Finn’s study of almsgiving between 313 and 450 shows a world in which episcopal relief, monastic self-dispossession and lay giving interacted with established classical practices; churches gathered resources, bishops distributed food, coins and clothing, and some urban communities established institutions for sick or destitute persons.⁶ Christian preaching re-described the poor not merely as socially inferior dependants but as morally significant recipients whose need imposed claims upon wealth. The spiritual economy surrounding almsgiving—where material gifts could be answered by prayers and by expectations of divine merit—was still an economy of reciprocity, though its medium was no longer exclusively civic honour. Over time, hospitals, xenodochia, almshouses and leprosaria formed increasingly durable infrastructures of care, eventually regulated within ecclesiastical law.⁷ This matters because modern volunteer service inherited from religious charity two concepts that civic benefaction did not necessarily require: first, that the morally relevant beneficiary might be a stranger with no capacity to return the favour in worldly terms; and second, that service could be mediated through institutions whose purpose was the continuing care of categories of vulnerable people rather than the episodic generosity of a patron.

The Iranian world complicates any narrative that moves too comfortably from Greece to Rome to medieval western Europe. Achaemenid Persia possessed sophisticated systems of taxation, tribute, service, reward and gift exchange. Gift-giving at court was not a sentimental survival from a pre-state economy but an administrative and political practice capable of communicating hierarchy, royal favour and service-reward relationships within a complex empire.⁸ At the same time, Achaemenid taxation and later Iranian and Central Asian traditions of *bīgār* or *corvée* demonstrate exactly why unpaid labour cannot be treated as evidence of volunteering: subjects could be required to supply labour for roads, irrigation, fortifications, palaces or elite estates.⁹ The historical value of these examples lies in the contrast they establish. A society may mobilize enormous quantities of unpaid labour without generating anything that a modern analyst should call volunteerism. By the Sasanian period, however, evidence for pious foundations presents a different institutional logic. Zoroastrian *ruwānagān* could dedicate property for ritual and charitable purposes connected with the soul of the deceased, including almsgiving and in some cases public works or infrastructure.¹⁰ Such foundations were not volunteer labour organizations; they were endowed arrangements. Yet they demonstrate a mechanism of enduring importance across Eurasia: private property could be legally and morally detached from ordinary inheritance or consumption and committed to continuing public or religious purposes. That institutional principle would reach extraordinary development in Islamic *waqf*.

6. Richard Finn, *Almsgiving in the Later Roman Empire: Christian Promotion and Practice 313–450* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), especially 1–33 and 176–220.
7. Peregrine Horden, “Poverty, Charity, and the Invention of the Hospital,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 715–743.
8. Samuel Ellis, “Greek Conceptualizations of Persian Traditions: Gift-Giving and Friendship in the Persian Empire,” *The Classical Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (2021): 77–88, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838821000525>.
9. Muhammad A. Dandamayev, “Achaemenid Taxation,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, updated 2018; Yuri Bregel, “*Bīgār*,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, updated 2013.
10. Maria Macuch, John R. Hinnells, Mary Boyce, and Shahrokh Shahrokh, “Charitable Foundations,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 5, no. 4 (1991): 380–385, updated 2013.

Central Eurasia requires still greater methodological caution, but caution should not become an excuse for treating the region as an evidentiary blank. The source problem is instead one of asymmetry. Chinese dynastic histories, royal inscriptions, funerary texts and later religious documents preserve different layers of social life, and none of them was written to answer a modern historian's question about volunteering. The *Han shu* and *Hou Han shu*, for example, describe the Xiongnu primarily through diplomacy, war, tribute, markets, kinship and political organization. They are indispensable for reconstructing the political economy of the eastern steppe, yet they say far more about rulers, envoys, military mobilization and exchange than about everyday reciprocal assistance within camps or households. It is also methodologically safer to write of the Xiongnu as the polity described in the Chinese sources rather than to collapse them without qualification into the later European Huns or into later Turkic-speaking confederations. What the *Han* records do establish is a social world in which material transfers, livestock exchange, political allegiance and military service were embedded in durable relationships rather than organized as impersonal wage transactions. Gifts moved between courts, frontier markets linked pastoral and agrarian economies, and political protection entailed expectations of service. These arrangements belong to the prehistory of non-market social obligation, but they do not by themselves constitute volunteer work in the modern sense.¹¹

The evidence becomes more explicit with the Turkic khaganates. For the First *Türk* Khaganate, the sixth-century Bugut inscription and the corresponding Chinese materials in the *Zhou shu*, *Sui shu* and later compilations reveal a political order whose cohesion depended upon dynastic legitimacy, aristocratic offices, tributary relations and the ability of the khaganate to mobilize people and resources across a very large pastoral-imperial space. Bugut is especially valuable precisely because it does not resemble a modern civic inscription: written principally in Sogdian and connected to the ruling house, it reflects the cosmopolitan political culture of the first khaganate and the close involvement of Sogdian intermediaries in its public representation. Chinese accounts likewise describe *Türk* society through rulership, migration, military power, pastoral production, diplomatic exchange and the hierarchy of subordinate groups. There is therefore little basis for finding 'volunteers' in the First Khaganate. There is, however, strong evidence for a political culture in which labour, military effort, tribute and loyalty were understood through personal and collective bonds to the khagan and the *el*. This distinction matters because the later Old Turkic inscriptions make the language of service itself visible and thereby allow us to move beyond the looser inference that mobile pastoral societies must have relied on cooperation.¹²

The *Kül Tegin* and *Bilge Qağan* inscriptions of the Second *Türk* Khaganate are particularly important for this history because they repeatedly employ the formula *ışığ küçüg bér-*, literally to 'give one's work and strength' and conventionally translated as to render service. In the retrospective account of the period of *Türk* subordination to the Tang, the inscriptions speak of the *Türk* people having rendered such service for decades; elsewhere the political question is formulated with striking directness: 'To which *qağan* do I render my service?' The same semantic field recurs in the *Ongin* inscription and, later, in Uyghur monuments. Service here is not a casual act of generosity. It describes a relation between political allegiance, bodily effort and

11. Ayşe Onat, Sema Orsoy, and Konuralp Ercilasun, eds., *Çin Kaynaklarında Türkler: Han Hanedanı Tarihi Bölüm 94 A/B: Hsiung-nu (Hun) Monografisi*, 3rd ed. (Ankara: *Türk Tarih Kurumu*, 2020); Ban Gu, *Han shu*, juan 94A–B; Fan Ye, *Hou Han shu*, juan 89; Nikolay Kradin, “Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History* (Oxford University Press, 2018); Thomas J. Barfield, “Nomadic Pastoralism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of World History* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 160–175.
12. Mehmet Ölmez, “A Short History of the Bugut Inscription,” *Journal Asiatique* 307, no. 1 (2019): 91–96; Takashi Ōsawa, “On the Location and Political, Cultural Role of Umma Khan in the First Turkic Khaganate,” *Türk Dili Araştırmaları Yıllığı - Belleten* 60, no. 1 (2012): 59–76; Liu Mau-tsai, *Die chinesischen Nachrichten zur Geschichte der Ost-Türken (T'u-küe)*, 2 vols. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1958).

membership in a ruling order. The language is therefore more useful to a history of volunteering than a speculative claim that steppe peoples were 'naturally communal': it gives us an indigenous vocabulary for non-wage service while simultaneously warning us that such service was embedded in hierarchy. A subject who owed iş küç to a qağan occupied a different moral and institutional position from a twenty-first-century volunteer who chooses an NGO role and may leave it without loss of political status.¹³

The same monuments also reveal the reciprocal side of that political relationship. Bilge Qağan does not legitimate rule solely by conquest. He repeatedly presents good government as the restoration, concentration and material improvement of a distressed people. In the inscriptional rhetoric, the qağan gathers the poor and scattered, makes the poor rich, increases those who are few and, in one formulation, clothes the naked and sustains those close to death. These famous lines should not be converted into evidence for an early welfare state, still less into proof of royal 'volunteering'. They are nevertheless crucial for understanding the ethical economy within which service was imagined. The ruler claims an obligation to feed, enrich, protect and reproduce the community; the people, in return, are expected to remain with the ruler, preserve the el and render service. Tonyukuk's memorial pushes the same ethic into the language of personal exertion: he describes himself as not sleeping at night or sitting by day, shedding 'red blood' and causing 'black sweat' to run while rendering his service. This is an elite political ethic of self-expenditure rather than modern altruistic service, but it demonstrates that unpaid or non-commercial exertion on behalf of a collective could carry high moral prestige. In other words, the Old Turkic texts preserve not merely coercion from above but an entire rhetoric in which service, sacrifice, protection and political belonging legitimated one another.¹⁴

The TÜRGEŞ evidence should be inserted into this sequence rather than bypassed. The Orkhon monuments themselves refer to the TÜRGEŞ within the fractured political world of the On Oq and represent their qağan and people as closely related to the wider TÜRK political order even while narrating violent conflict with them. Chinese Tang sources, meanwhile, allow the TÜRGEŞ khaganate to be followed through its military confederation, diplomatic relations with the Tang court and its resistance to both eastern TÜRK power and Umayyad expansion in Transoxiana. Runiform inscriptions from the Tian Shan, including the Koçkor and Talas groups studied by Rysbek Alimov and others, confirm that epigraphic self-representation was not confined to the Orkhon valley. Yet these short texts are often funerary, commemorative or fragmentary; they do not license a claim that the TÜRGEŞ operated organized systems of charitable labour. Their importance is more subtle. Together with the Chinese chronicles they show that the western Turkic world possessed dense networks of political allegiance, military followership and local commemoration, while the appeals of Sogdian rulers for TÜRGEŞ military assistance against Arab expansion illustrate inter-polity solidarity and alliance under conditions of strategic reciprocity. Such assistance was political and military, not 'volunteering', but it belongs to the broader history of how help was mobilized before the appearance of autonomous voluntary organizations.¹⁵

¹⁴. Chen Hao, “On the Authorship of the Old Turkic Inscriptions,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 30, no. 4 (2020): 707–719, especially the translated Bilge Qağan/Kül Tegin passages on gathering the poor and making them rich; Tekin, Orhon Yazıtları, Tonyukuk D2.
¹⁵. Rysbek Alimov, “Koçkor’daki TÜRGEŞ Yazıtları,” *İstanbul Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 1, no. 1 (2004): 13–43; Édouard Chavannes, *Documents sur les Tou-kiue (Turcs) occidentaux* (Paris: Librairie d’Amérique et d’Orient, 1903). The Tian Shan inscriptions are used here as evidence of epigraphic and political networks rather than as direct evidence of organized charitable labour.

The Uyğur imperial inscriptions sharpen the distinction further because they preserve the same vocabulary of service in an increasingly complex political and urban environment. The Taryat (Terkhin) inscription states that peoples in the four quarters render iş küç, while the Şine Usu inscription has the qağan command a defeated or wavering population to 'give your service again' (yiçe işig küçüg bérgil). In such contexts, service is plainly tied to domination, allegiance and the reconstruction of political order after rebellion. It is therefore analytically closer to tributary or subject service than to voluntary civic participation. At the same time, Uyğur state formation generated large collective projects whose labour history is unusually visible. Şine Usu records the foundation of Bay Balıq on the Selenge in a phrase that can be read as the city having been built either for or by Sogdians and Chinese; archaeological and textual research likewise points to Chinese and Sogdian specialists in the construction and economic life of Uyğur urban centres. This is valuable evidence of organized, multi-ethnic labour, but the safest interpretation is state-directed mobilization of skilled communities rather than spontaneous communal volunteering. The point is not to diminish cooperation, but to classify it correctly.¹⁶

Tang historiography adds a second corrective to romantic readings of Uyğur 'assistance'. During the An Lushan crisis, Uyğur forces played a decisive role in helping the Tang recover its capitals, and the Jiu Tang shu records subsequent requests for Uyğur troops, large-scale gift exchange and the horse-for-silk relationship that became central to Sino-Uyğur diplomacy. Colin Mackerras's translation and analysis of the Tang dynastic histories makes clear that this military help was embedded in alliance, marriage diplomacy, booty, prestige and material compensation. It is therefore an excellent case of reciprocal inter-state assistance but a poor candidate for the category of volunteering. The contrast becomes historically productive only when the analysis moves into the post-imperial West Uyğur religious world.¹⁷

A further chronological distinction is essential here. The Buddhist evidence belongs principally not to the East Uyğur Khaganate of 744–840, whose ruling house adopted Manichaeism under Böğü Qağan in the eighth century, but to the post-840 West Uyğur Kingdom centred on the Turfan-Qocho region, where Buddhism gradually displaced Manichaeism and had become the predominant Uyghur religion by roughly the later tenth or early eleventh century. The institutional record from this transition is unusually revealing because it separates royal support from private religious giving. A document concerning a Buddhist monastery at Murtuq appears to promise tax exemption, while another source reports that in 983 a Uyğur ruler ordered the removal of a Manichaean monastery so that a Buddhist monastery could be established, with a Uyğur prince personally participating in the construction. An account book associated with a sanctuary converted to Buddhist use around 1008 records provisions for both Manichaean and Buddhist communities; the allocations to the latter are explicitly characterized as the king's charity and were substantially greater. These acts belong to the history of state patronage and religious policy rather than volunteering. They nevertheless created the institutional infrastructure within which non-state donors, pilgrims and lay believers could support monasteries through their own resources and devotional labour.¹⁸

¹⁶. S. G. Klyashtorny, “The Terkhin Inscription,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 36, nos. 1–3 (1982): 335–366; S. G. Klyashtorny, “The Tes Inscription of the Uighur Böğü Qaghan,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 39, no. 1 (1985): 137–156; Erhan Aydın, *Uygur Yazıtları* (Istanbul: Bilge Kültür Sanat, 2018); Takao Moriyasu, “Site and Inscription of Şine-Usu,” in *Provisional Report of Researches on Historical Sites and Inscriptions in Mongolia from 1996 to 1998*, ed. Takao Moriyasu and Ayudai Ochir (Osaka, 1999), 177–195; “Karabalgasun i. The Site,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, on Bay Balıq and the participation of Chinese and Sogdian specialists in Uyğur urban construction.
¹⁷. Colin Mackerras, *The Uighur Empire According to the T’ang Dynastic Histories: A Study in Sino-Uighur Relations, 744–840* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1972); Jiu Tang shu, juan 195, on requests for Uyğur troops, court exchanges and the horse–silk relationship; Dai Matsui, “Old Uyghur Graffiti Inscriptions from Central Asia,” in *Graffiti Scratched, Scrawled, Sprayed: Towards a Cross-Cultural Understanding* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2023), 173–214; Yukiyo Kasai, “Uyghur Legitimation and the Role of Buddhism,” in *Buddhism in Central Asia I* (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Uğur Uzunkaya, “Buddhism, Food and Food Charity: A Philological Analysis on Three Ancient Uighur Fragments,” *Türk Dili Araştırmaları Yılığ*ı - Belleten 76 (2023).
¹⁸. Yukiyo Kasai, “Uyghur Legitimation and the Role of Buddhism,” in *Buddhism in Central Asia I: Patronage, Legitimation, Sacred Space, and Pilgrimage*, ed. Carmen Meinert and Henrik H. Sørensen (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 74–76, 83–85, especially the evidence for the Murtuq monastery, the 983 monastery construction, and the account book distinguishing ordinary charity from “king’s charity.”

The evidence for those non-state contributions is much closer to what a genealogy of faith-based volunteering and charitable giving is seeking. Old Uygur Buddhist colophons identify lay donors who commissioned the copying or production of scriptures and devotional texts in order to accumulate religious merit. One particularly instructive pre-Mongol example, U 4921, names the lay brother Alp Bars and the lay sister Kōkāč as patrons of a copied praise of Avalokiteśvara; the colophon frames the act as a deliberate response to the impermanence of both the body and material possessions and as a means of accumulating durable merit. Other colophons show that the merit produced by such acts could be dedicated outward: to divine protectors, to the security of the Buddhist teaching and polity, to living relatives, to deceased family members and, in broader formulations, to sentient beings. This was not altruism stripped of expectation, since the Buddhist economy of puṇya gave donors powerful spiritual reasons to act. Yet neither was it tax, corvée or qağan-centred iş küç. The decision to finance a manuscript, sponsor its copying or dedicate the resulting merit was a discretionary pious act undertaken through religious institutions. Kasai's analysis is particularly significant in this respect: members of the Uygur royal family and other high-ranking persons appear as donors, whereas the rulers themselves are strikingly absent from most surviving donor colophons. The sources therefore preserve a sphere of religious benefaction that cannot simply be reduced to the commands of the court.¹⁹

Nor was Buddhist giving confined to manuscripts. Old Uygur graffiti and donor records from the cave-temple networks of Turfan, Bezeklik, Toyoq, Dunhuang and Yulin reveal pilgrims and visitors supporting sanctuaries through material offerings as they travelled, studied, meditated and participated in ritual life. The inscriptions record offerings including fruit and other provisions, and the Old Uygur vocabulary itself incorporated terms for offering and donation such as lab and buši. Matsui concludes from the graffiti corpus that lay visitors materially supported Buddhist monasteries, while the wider donor evidence shows that members of elite and royal families could endow or present temples. Food charity formed another concrete strand of this religious economy. A Buddhist Old Uygur fragment from the Berlin Turfan Collection, U 2050, preserves discussion of piṇḍapāta, the giving of food that sustained monks and nuns; its survival in Uygur Buddhist literature is direct evidence that alimentary charity was not merely an imported abstraction but part of the religious vocabulary through which giving was understood. Taken together, manuscript sponsorship, temple support, offerings to monasteries and food alms form a much firmer basis for discussing religiously motivated voluntary giving among Buddhist Uygurs than the earlier imperial vocabulary of political service. They remain embedded in merit, ritual status and community expectation, but they are materially and institutionally distinct from tribute or compulsory labour.²⁰

Seen across this longer sequence, Central Asian evidence suggests at least three different institutional logics that should not be compressed into one label. The first is qağan-centred service: iş küç, military followership, tribute and public labour attached to membership in an imperial order. The second is reciprocal community assistance, better documented in later practices such as Kazakh asar and neighbouring forms known as ashar, hashar or khashar, in which households contribute labour to tasks too large for one family and

¹⁹. Yukiyo Kasai, “The Afterlife in Uyghur Buddhism – Judgement and Hell,” Bulletin of SOAS, First View (2026): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X26101281>, especially the discussion of donor colophons U 4921, U 1949 + U 1614, U 5033, and the transfer of merit; Kasai, “Uyghur Legitimation and the Role of Buddhism,” 83–85.

²⁰. Dai Matsui, “Old Uyghur Graffiti Inscriptions from Central Asia,” in Graffiti Scratched, Scrawled, Sprayed: Towards a Cross-Cultural Understanding, ed. Ondřej Škrabal et al. (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2023), 173–214, especially 202–208, on pilgrims, offerings, material support for monasteries, and the vocabulary of donation; Uğur Uzunkaya, “Buddhism, Food and Food Charity: A Philological Analysis on Three Ancient Uighur Fragments,” Türk Dili Araştırmaları Yılığı - Belleten 76 (2023): 45–72, <https://doi.org/10.32925/tday.2023.103>, especially the discussion of U 2050 and piṇḍapāta food charity.

assistance circulates through the community over time. The third is religiously structured giving, increasingly visible in the Buddhist Uygur materials and later, in a different theological and legal framework, in Islamic sadaqa, zakat and waqf. The later ethnographic practices remain useful for understanding how non-commercial cooperation can operate in pastoral and agro-pastoral settings, but they should not be projected mechanically back onto Scythians, Xiongnu or Göktürks. Their value lies in demonstrating a durable social possibility: legally non-compulsory labour may nevertheless be embedded in powerful expectations of reciprocity, reputation and belonging. 'Normatively embedded voluntariness' therefore remains a useful category, but it should now sit at the end of a source-based historical argument rather than stand in for the missing history itself.²¹

These layers of service, reciprocity and religious giving persisted and recombined through the Islamic centuries, when Central Asian pastoral and sedentary communities were increasingly integrated into Muslim institutions without abandoning older forms of reciprocal assistance. Nomadic culture remained a distinctive social ecosystem even as Turkic, Iranian, Mongol and Islamic traditions interacted over long periods. The waqf, meanwhile, offered one of the most consequential institutional technologies in the pre-modern history of non-state welfare. By rendering property inalienable and dedicating its revenue to specified religious, educational, infrastructural or charitable purposes, founders could support mosques, schools, water systems, hospitals, soup kitchens, roads and other services over generations. Here again the distinction between philanthropy and volunteer labour must be preserved. A waqf was not itself a volunteer. Yet the institution created durable spaces in which unpaid service, religious participation, paid employment and charitable distribution could coexist. It also illustrates why the conventional modern boundary between 'state' and 'civil society' cannot simply be imposed on earlier periods: rulers, judges, religious authorities, households, merchants and communities frequently participated in the same welfare ecology. Similar complexity marked medieval Christian Europe, where hospitals, parishes, monasteries, guilds and confraternities administered gifts and mutual support in configurations that were simultaneously civic, religious and corporate. By the later Middle Ages, much of the organizational grammar of modern associational life—membership, common funds, officers, rules, regular meetings, burial provision and charitable obligations—already existed, even though its participants did not imagine themselves as a separate 'voluntary sector'.²²

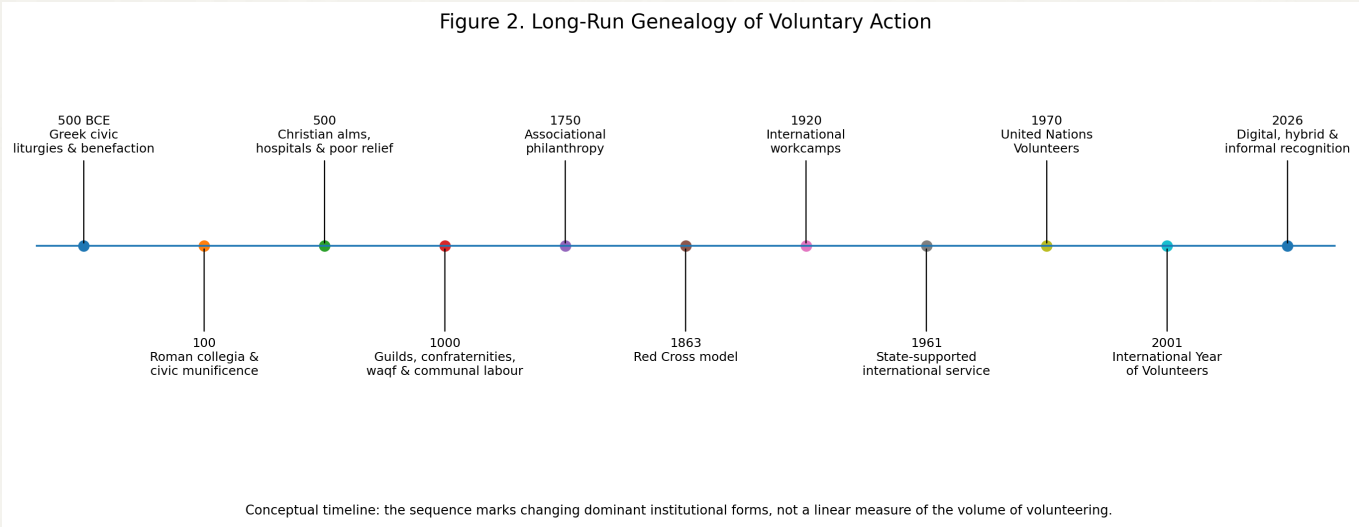
²². Daniel Prior, “Nomadic Culture in Islamic Central Asia,” Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History (Oxford University Press, 2024); Pascale Ghazaleh, ed., Held in Trust: Waqf in the Islamic World (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2011); Sadullah Yıldırım, “Women’s Engagement with Waqf in the Ottoman Empire,” Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History (Oxford University Press, 2026); Sethina Watson, On Hospitals: Welfare, Law, and Christianity in Western Europe, 400–1320 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Table 1. Pre-modern forms related to, but not identical with, modern volunteering

Form / setting	Primary centre	Choice / constraint	Dominant logic	Relationship to modern volunteering
Greek leitourgia	Polis / civic order	Often legally or status-compelled	Civic obligation; elite expenditure	A precursor to public service, but not modern volunteering
Greek-Roman euergetism	Elite-community relation	Generally more discretionary	Benefaction, honour, prestige	Closer to philanthropy than volunteer labour
Roman collegia	Association	Variable, but associational membership important	Mutuality, cult, burial, fellowship	Strong precursor to organized voluntary association
Christian almsgiving and hospitals	Church / religious community	Moral-religious duty with variable discretion	Charity, salvation, justice, care	Major source of service ethics and welfare institutions
Achaemenid tribute / corvée	State / royal administration	Compulsory	Taxation, service, hierarchy	Outside volunteering; useful boundary case
Sasanian pious foundations	Private / religious foundation	Founder's initiative; institutionalized thereafter	Merit, commemoration, public utility	Precursor to institutional philanthropy
Old Turkic iş küç / qağan-centred service	Qağan / el (political order)	Politically embedded; obligation and allegiance predominate	Service, loyalty, labour and military exertion	Not modern volunteering; an indigenous vocabulary of non-wage service and political duty
Türgeş alliance and military assistance	Khaganate / inter-polity network	Strategic and reciprocal rather than freely civic	Alliance, military support, diplomatic reciprocity	Not volunteering; demonstrates politically mobilized assistance across communities
West Uygur royal Buddhist patronage	Royal court / monastery	Policy-directed; ruler or prince controls resources	Monastery construction, tax privilege, "king's charity," religious legitimation	State-supported religious welfare/patronage rather than volunteering
West Uygur Buddhist lay and elite giving	Religious community / monastery / private patron	More discretionary, though strongly structured by merit and piety	Scripture sponsorship, temple donations, offerings, food alms, merit transfer	Close to faith-based voluntary giving and religious philanthropy
Later Central Asian asar / hashar as mutual aid	Community / neighbourhood	Non-wage, often socially expected	Reciprocity, solidarity, labour exchange	Close to informal volunteering where participation is genuinely non-coercive
Waqf	Religious-private endowment	Founder-directed	Piety, public utility, continuity	Institutional philanthropy; can support volunteer activity
Guild / confraternity	Association / religious corporation	Voluntary entry varies; obligations after entry	Mutual insurance, fraternity, piety	Important precursor to formal volunteering and membership welfare

The long pre-modern background therefore supplies no single line of descent. It supplies several. Civic service contributed the idea that private capacities could legitimately be directed toward public goods; benefaction linked generosity to status; reciprocal labour embedded assistance within durable social relations; religious charity widened the moral circle beyond kin and fellow citizens; endowments stabilized charitable purposes across generations; and associations created organizational forms capable of governing collective funds and obligations. Modern volunteerism would eventually detach some of these elements from their original settings and recombine them around a stronger doctrine of individual consent. That recombination, rather than the first appearance of unpaid assistance, is what makes the eighteenth century a meaningful turning point.

Conceptual timeline developed for this study from the historical literature cited in the text.



3. 1700-1850: Associational Society and the Emergence of the Modern Voluntary Actor

The eighteenth century did not invent association, but it altered its density, reach and self-consciousness. Peter Clark’s history of British clubs and societies shows how rapidly associational life expanded across the early modern and Georgian urban world; by 1800 clubs and societies had become a routine part of social life rather than marginal curiosities.²³ The organizational innovation was subtle but profound. People increasingly constituted bodies for purposes that were neither inherited through kinship nor wholly prescribed by church, guild or municipal status. They subscribed, elected committees, kept minutes, circulated printed appeals, created treasuries and sometimes established auxiliaries beyond the locality in which an organization originated. The act of joining could therefore become an expression of chosen commitment to a cause. This did not abolish hierarchy: many associations remained socially exclusive, and religious identity, gender, property and class structured participation. Yet the institutional form made it easier to imagine public action as something that private persons could deliberately organize rather than merely perform within inherited corporate obligations. In this sense the eighteenth-century association supplied one of the key missing elements in the older history of service: the modern volunteer could become a person who entered an organization because he or she chose its purpose, not simply because birth, residence or occupation had assigned a duty.

Philanthropy was transformed alongside association. Roshan Allpress’s work on British philanthropy between 1756 and 1840 shows an expansion from comparatively small committees toward interconnected societies capable of mobilizing money, information and activism across national and imperial spaces.²⁴ Religious renewal, commercial networks, print culture, banking and new fundraising techniques all mattered. Evangelical philanthropic networks were especially important because they joined personal moral discipline to systematic organization. Antislavery, missionary, educational and reform associations did not merely distribute relief; they sought to alter behaviour, institutions and public opinion. This broadened the repertoire of voluntary action. The volunteer could collect subscriptions, circulate petitions, organize meetings, inspect conditions, teach, campaign, write, visit households, distribute literature or coordinate distant auxiliaries. The beneficiary, correspondingly, was no longer always a visible person standing before the donor. Print and association allowed people to act for populations they would never meet. The geographical reach of moral concern widened at the same moment that imperial power widened, producing a tension that would recur throughout the history of international volunteering: the capacity to act across distance could support solidarity, but it could also carry paternalistic assumptions about whose knowledge, religion or social order ought to prevail.

Industrialization and urban growth intensified these tendencies because they changed both the scale of social problems and the social technologies available to respond to them. Dense cities concentrated poverty,

²³. Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580–1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).
²⁴. Roshan Allpress, *British Philanthropy in the Globalizing World: Entrepreneurs and Evangelicals, 1756–1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), esp. 57–100 and 175–253.

disease, insecurity and migration, but also potential subscribers, printers, meeting rooms, transport networks and administrative talent. Charitable organizations could become more specialized because the urban population was large enough to sustain specialized constituencies and specialized institutions. At the same time, working people did not simply wait for elite philanthropy. Friendly societies, mutual-aid arrangements and other forms of collective insurance pooled risks among members who might otherwise face illness, funeral expenses or periods without wages alone. The contrast between philanthropy and mutuality is analytically important. Philanthropy can be vertical: one social group assists another. Mutual aid is more horizontal because participants contribute to a common structure from which they may themselves draw. Modern volunteering inherited both models, and neither has disappeared. The food bank and the mutual-aid network may address similar material needs while organizing the relationship between giver and recipient quite differently.

4. 1850-1914: Industrial Society, Humanitarianism and the Professional Boundary

During the second half of the nineteenth century, voluntary action expanded in scale but also became entangled with the emerging question of expertise. Urban missions, visiting charities, settlement houses, temperance associations, rescue societies, educational initiatives and reform movements relied upon large quantities of unpaid labour. Women were particularly important to this expansion. In societies that restricted their formal political rights and access to many professions, philanthropic and religious organizations offered forms of public agency that could be represented as extensions of respectable care while nevertheless producing experience in administration, fundraising, case work, public speaking and social investigation. Voluntary action therefore functioned ambiguously in the history of gender: it drew upon assumptions that women should provide care without wages, but it also created organizational spaces in which women acquired authority and networks that could later support campaigns for political and professional rights. The same ambiguity appeared in class relations. The charitable visitor could bring resources into a household while also subjecting that household to moral scrutiny. The professionalization of social work in the twentieth century would partly emerge from criticism of precisely this mixture of goodwill, amateur judgment and unequal authority.

The Red Cross model marked a different and exceptionally influential transition. Henry Dunant’s encounter with the aftermath of Solferino in 1859 led him to propose two connected innovations: national relief societies prepared in peacetime to assist military medical services, and international legal protection for the wounded and those assisting them. The committee that became the International Committee of the Red Cross first met in Geneva in 1863; the first Geneva Convention followed in 1864.²⁵ The historical importance of this development lies less in the fact that volunteers had never helped the wounded before—Dunant himself saw local civilians already doing so—than in the creation of a standing institutional architecture that

could train, identify, coordinate and legitimate voluntary humanitarian service before a crisis occurred. The model linked local recruitment to national societies, international coordination and legal norms. It also separated, at least normatively, humanitarian assistance from the political allegiance of the wounded person. This was a major step toward the modern conception of humanitarian volunteering as disciplined service governed by principles, procedures and recognizable symbols rather than spontaneous benevolence alone.

Yet nineteenth-century international benevolence developed within imperial structures that profoundly shaped its assumptions. Missionary organizations, medical missions and educational societies could deliver real services while at the same time treating European religious, moral or administrative norms as standards by which other societies should be transformed. The modern sector’s later language of partnership and localization emerged in part from the need to confront this inheritance. The relevant historical lesson is not that international service is inherently imperial, but that mobility itself is unequal. Who possesses a passport, professional credential, income cushion or organizational sponsorship that permits them to cross borders and serve abroad? Who is described as an expert, and whose knowledge is treated as merely local? International volunteering would carry these questions into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, even as its institutions changed.

5. 1914-1945: Mass Mobilization, War and the Limits of Voluntariness

The First World War transformed voluntary action by placing unprecedented demands upon states and societies. Charities collected money and materials, women entered auxiliary medical and welfare roles, local committees supported soldiers and dependants, and voluntary agencies became integrated into national mobilization. Peter Grant’s account of British voluntarism during the war emphasizes both the extraordinary scale of participation and the state’s growing effort to coordinate and regulate it.²⁶ This is one of the periods in which the term 'voluntary' must be handled with greatest care. A person could be legally free to refuse and nevertheless face intense patriotic, gendered or class-based expectations to participate. Social pressure does not necessarily turn volunteering into compulsory labour, but it makes voluntariness a matter of degree rather than metaphysics. War also changed organizations. Small philanthropic bodies operating through informal trust encountered the administrative requirements of mass mobilization: registration, coordination, accounting and standardization. In other words, the management of volunteers became a field of governance.

The interwar period did not simply return voluntary action to a pre-war pattern. Associational life remained vigorous and increasingly connected to mass democracy. Organizations such as women’s councils, veterans’ groups, clubs and internationalist associations could socialize citizens into public participation beyond party politics.²⁷ At the same time, the devastation of war inspired experiments in which voluntary labour itself was

²⁶. Peter Grant, “Voluntarism and the Impact of the First World War,” in Matthew Hilton and James McKay, eds., *The Ages of Voluntarism: How We Got to the Big Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press/British Academy, 2011), 27–46.

used as a method of reconciliation. Service Civil International traces its origins to the 1920 international workcamp at Esnes-en-Argonne near Verdun, where volunteers from formerly belligerent countries carried out reconstruction work.²⁸ This represented an important shift in meaning. Service was not only a means of repairing houses or clearing land; the shared performance of labour was supposed to repair political relationships. The workcamp model would become a durable form of international youth volunteering because it combined material output with social contact, education and symbolic peacebuilding.

The authoritarian and revolutionary states of the twentieth century simultaneously exposed the danger of retaining the language of voluntary service after the substance of choice had weakened. Soviet campaigns of unpaid collective labour, including subbotnik traditions, could originate in ideological enthusiasm and later become administratively expected. Comparable problems arise whenever service is tied to school completion, employment, political loyalty or access to benefits. A modern definition can draw a bright line at legal compulsion, but historical reality often presents more graduated forms of pressure. The distinction remains normatively essential: a state may finance, coordinate or publicly honour volunteering without contradicting voluntariness, but once refusal carries formal penalty the activity belongs to compulsory service rather than volunteer work. This distinction is particularly important when interpreting hashar, corvée, wartime mobilization and state-sponsored mass campaigns, all of which can resemble volunteering at the level of visible behaviour while differing fundamentally in the structure of choice.

6. 1945-1990: Welfare States, Decolonization and International Volunteer Service

The expansion of welfare states after 1945 generated an influential but ultimately misleading prediction: if public institutions assumed responsibility for health, education and social security, voluntary action would wither because charity would no longer be necessary. Historical scholarship has instead shown adaptation, complementarity and partnership.²⁹ In Britain, for example, first-aid organizations such as St John Ambulance and the British Red Cross remained significant after the creation of the National Health Service, demonstrating that expanded public provision did not erase a cultural commitment to voluntary public service.³⁰ The division of labour changed. Some functions once performed by charitable visitors became professional social work; some forms of emergency care became highly regulated; local associations shifted toward supplementation, advocacy, companionship, experimentation or service niches not easily standardized by bureaucratic systems. The welfare state therefore professionalized some activities while simultaneously creating new interfaces at which volunteers could operate. This pattern remains central to contemporary debates about whether volunteers complement public services or compensate for their retrenchment.

²⁹. Matthew Hilton and James McKay, eds., *The Ages of Voluntarism: How We Got to the Big Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press/British Academy, 2011); Pete Alcock, “Voluntary Action, New Labour and the ‘Third Sector’,” in the same volume, 158–179.

³⁰. Grace Huxford and others, “First Aid and Voluntarism in England, 1945–85,” *Twentieth Century British History* 30, no. 4 (2019): 504–528.

Decolonization added a transnational dimension. Voluntary Service Overseas began in 1958 by sending British volunteers abroad and later transformed itself into a more international organization recruiting skilled people from multiple countries and increasingly within countries of assignment.³¹The United States established the Peace Corps in 1961, placing overseas volunteer service inside an explicit governmental framework concerned with skills, international understanding and national public purpose.³²These programmes turned the volunteer into a recognizable figure of development policy. Teachers, health workers, agricultural specialists and other professionals could spend extended periods working in societies undergoing rapid political and economic change. The model brought resources and person-to-person contact, but it also inherited the unequal geographies of empire. Knowledge and expertise were often imagined as flowing from affluent northern states to a developing south. Later critiques of international service—summarized in scholarship on reciprocity, public funding, short-term placements and neocolonialism—emerged from this structural asymmetry rather than from a rejection of international solidarity itself.³³

The establishment of United Nations Volunteers in 1970 institutionalized voluntary service at the multilateral level. General Assembly resolution 2659 created an international group of volunteers within the UN system with effect from January 1971.³⁴The move is historically significant because volunteerism was no longer simply a private civic practice or a national programme; it became part of the infrastructure of international development and later peace and humanitarian action. The following decades also expanded the substantive range of what counted as voluntary action. Civil-rights organizations, women’s movements, environmental campaigns, community groups, tenants’ associations and health activism relied upon unpaid work oriented not only toward service delivery but toward rights, representation and institutional change. The volunteer could be an advocate, organizer, researcher, campaigner or peer supporter. This blurred the boundary between volunteering and activism, a boundary that remains analytically useful but empirically permeable: both can involve freely chosen unpaid action for collective ends, but activism more explicitly seeks changes in power, policy or public norms.

31. Voluntary Service Overseas, “History,” noting the organization’s establishment in 1958 and its subsequent transformation into an international volunteer organization.
32. Peace Corps, “The Founding Moment,” and “Peace Corps History,” documenting Executive Order 10924 of March 1, 1961 and the agency’s early deployment.
33. Benjamin J. Lough, “International Volunteer Service,” Encyclopedia of Social Work, updated June 30, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199975839.013.959>.
34. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2659 (XXV), “Establishment of United Nations Volunteers,” December 7, 1970; United Nations Volunteers, “United Nations Volunteers over the Years,” May 6, 2025.

7. 1990-2026: Professionalization, Networks and the Reappearance of Informality

The late twentieth century brought a level of professionalization that would have been unfamiliar to most nineteenth-century voluntary societies. Large NGOs and humanitarian agencies developed volunteer-management systems, safeguarding protocols, codes of conduct, recruitment criteria, insurance arrangements, monitoring frameworks, training curricula and role descriptions. This bureaucratization is sometimes described as the decline of the volunteer spirit, but such a conclusion confuses informality with virtue. When volunteers work with children, refugees, survivors of violence or people affected by disaster, the absence of a wage does not remove the need for competence, confidentiality, accountability or supervision. Professionalization can constrain spontaneity, yet it can also protect both beneficiaries and volunteers. The central ethical question is therefore not whether volunteering looks increasingly organized, but whether organizational discipline remains proportionate to risk and whether unpaid roles are being used to displace employment that should reasonably be remunerated.

The growth of corporate and skills-based volunteering illustrates how far the sector has moved from the image of the benevolent amateur. Skills-based programmes enable employees to donate specialized knowledge—law, accounting, engineering, communications, data analysis, medicine or other professional capabilities—to nonprofit or community organizations. A systematic review by Dempsey-Brench and Shantz places such programmes at the intersection of human-resource development and corporate philanthropy.³⁵The arrangement complicates the language of 'unpaid' work because an employee may volunteer during time for which the employer continues to pay a salary. For labour statistics this may require careful classification; for organizational practice it remains recognizable as volunteering because the beneficiary organization does not purchase the specialist’s time and the employee is participating through a voluntary-service scheme. Corporate volunteering also makes explicit a feature that was already present in ancient euergetism: socially useful giving may generate reputational or career benefits for the giver without ceasing to generate public value. The modern ethical concern is not the existence of secondary benefits but whether those benefits overwhelm service objectives or create access advantages available primarily to already privileged workers.

Digital communication then began to alter the unit of participation itself. The classic voluntary association asked a person to join, attend meetings and sustain membership. A digital platform may ask for a translation, a map edit, an hour of mentoring, a dataset classification or a single remote task. This environment supports virtual volunteering and microvolunteering, but also a wider cultural shift toward episodic participation. Research on episodic volunteering defines it in terms of one-off, short-term or task-specific assignments that do not assume continuing organizational commitment.³⁶Such participation is sometimes interpreted as evidence of declining civic loyalty; it may equally reflect labour precarity, mobility, caring responsibilities

35. Sarah Dempsey-Brench and Amanda Shantz, “Skills-Based Volunteering: A Systematic Literature Review of the Intersection of Skills and Employee Volunteering,” Human Resource Management Review 32, no. 4 (2022): 100874, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2021.100874>.

and time fragmentation that make fixed weekly schedules difficult. The significant institutional change is that organizations increasingly design volunteer roles around the participant’s limited availability rather than expecting the participant to adapt to the organization’s traditional rhythm.

At the same time, informal and spontaneous volunteering has become more visible precisely because researchers have become less willing to treat the formal organization as the natural centre of the subject. Disaster studies have repeatedly shown that ordinary citizens are often first at the scene and remain active long after formal emergency services have departed; Whittaker, McLennan and Handmer argue that such informal volunteers can provide speed, local knowledge and capacity while also presenting coordination and safety challenges.³⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic provided a global demonstration of the same phenomenon. A rapid review of volunteering in the United Kingdom found diverse organizational forms, including local mutual-aid groups as well as institutionally supported schemes, with food delivery, prescriptions, emotional support and digitally mediated coordination among the most visible activities.³⁸ Historically, the striking point is not that the pandemic invented mutual aid, but that ancient social logics of neighbourly reciprocity were reorganized through contemporary technologies. A WhatsApp group coordinating medicine deliveries is technologically new; the underlying proposition that neighbours mobilize for one another in a crisis is not.

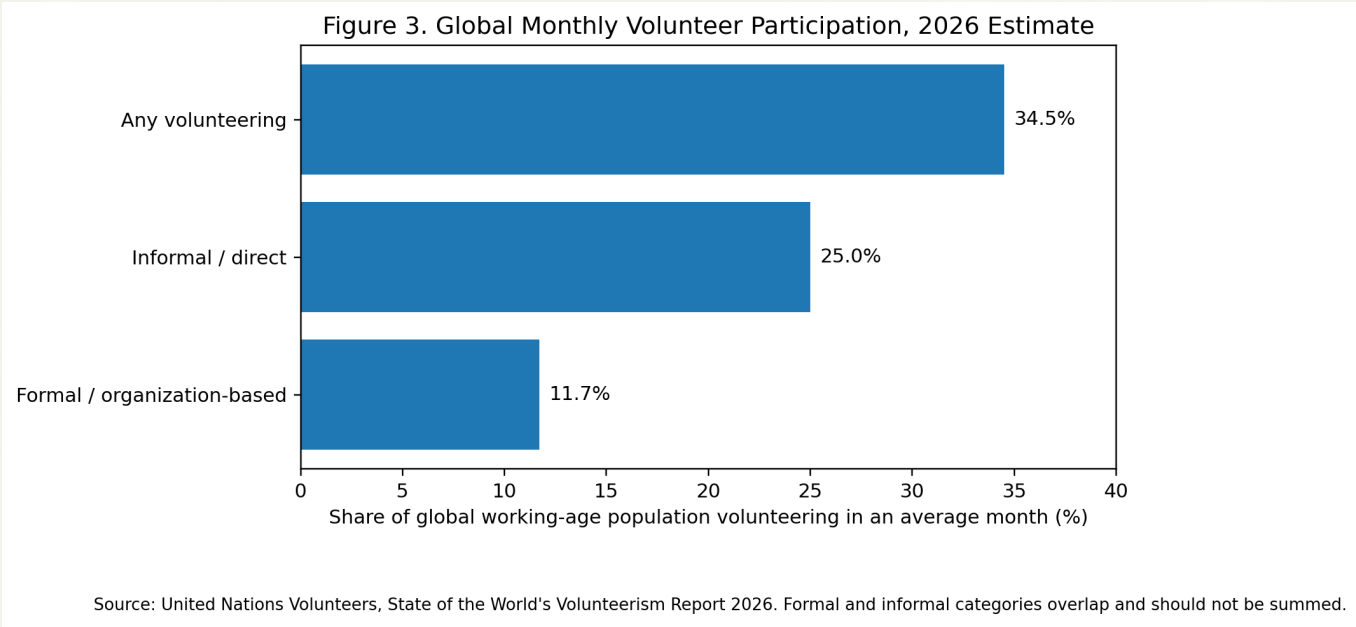
The scale of this informal sphere is now impossible to treat as marginal. The State of the World’s Volunteerism Report 2026 estimates that 2.1 billion people—34.5 percent of the global working-age population—engage in volunteer work in an average month. It estimates informal or direct volunteering at 25.0 percent and organization-based volunteering at 11.7 percent, with overlap between the categories.³⁹ A joint ILO-UNV publication released in 2026 likewise emphasizes that informal volunteering is the most widespread and least understood form, often undertaken by people who do not identify themselves as volunteers.⁴⁰ That evidence has conceptual consequences. If public discourse recognizes only the person wearing an NGO badge, it systematically undercounts a vast field of everyday care, practical help and community problem-solving. Recent scholarship has therefore proposed a task-centred approach that asks what social needs are actually being addressed rather than defining volunteering primarily through organizational membership.⁴¹ The shift is, in a sense, a return to the historical insight with which this study began: institution matters, but the social act cannot be understood merely by asking whether a formal organization was present.

The political symbolism of 2026 reinforces this broader recognition. The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2026 the International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development, linking volunteer action explicitly to the Sustainable Development Goals, knowledge-building and the challenges posed by new models of volunteering.⁴² The year also arrives twenty-five years after the International Year of Volunteers in 2001 and fifty-five years after the operational beginning of United Nations Volunteers. Yet the most important development is conceptual rather than commemorative. International policy is increasingly forced to acknowledge that volunteering is not a single sector populated by registered organizations. It is an

³⁷. Joshua Whittaker, Blythe McLennan, and John Handmer, “A Review of Informal Volunteerism in Emergencies and Disasters: Definition, Opportunities and Challenges,” *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 13 (2015): 358–368, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2015.07.010>.
³⁸. Guanlan Mao, Maria Fernandes-Jesus, Evangelos Ntontis, and John Drury, “What Have We Learned about COVID-19 Volunteering in the UK? A Rapid Review of the Literature,” *BMC Public Health* 21 (2021): 1470, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11390-8>.
³⁹. United Nations Volunteers, *State of the World’s Volunteerism Report 2026* (Bonn: UNV, 2026), reporting that 2.1 billion people, or 34.5 percent of the global working-age population, volunteer in an average month; informal volunteering is estimated at 25.0 percent and organization-based volunteering at 11.7 percent.
⁴⁰. Anna Barford, Vipasana Karkee, and Niall O’Higgins, *Informal Volunteering: Trends and Characteristics* (Geneva/Bonn: ILO and UNV, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.54394/HMOM2673>.
⁴¹. Lærke Høgenhaven, “What Volunteers Do: Toward a Task-Centered Framework for Recognizing Informal Volunteering,” *Voluntas* 37, no. 3 (2026): 358–365, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0957876526000483>.

ecology that includes institutions, networks, spontaneous groups, neighbours, professionals, activists and remote contributors. That recognition makes a rigorous terminology indispensable.

United Nations Volunteers, *State of the World’s Volunteerism Report 2026*. Categories overlap.



8. Terminology and Classification: What Counts as Volunteering in the Modern Period?

Modern terminology begins with three core conditions: the activity must be productive work or service, it must be performed without ordinary pay, and it must be non-compulsory. The ILO framework further places the work outside the volunteer’s own household or family and distinguishes organization-based volunteering from direct volunteering.⁴³ Small reimbursements, meals, transport or living support do not necessarily transform a volunteer into an employee, because reimbursement can cover the cost of participation rather than purchase labour. Likewise, a volunteer may gain experience, status, contacts, meaning or employability; secondary benefits are not wages. The decisive difference is that the organization has not entered an ordinary labour contract in which remuneration is the expected exchange for the person’s work. Free will is equally important. Court-mandated community service and service required to obtain an educational or professional qualification fall outside a strict statistical definition, even if the activity benefits society. This is why 'voluntary' must describe the terms of participation rather than merely the public value of the task.

The most important classificatory distinction is between formal or organization-based volunteering and informal or direct volunteering. Formal volunteering is performed for or through an identifiable organization such as an NGO, charity, hospital, municipality, school, sports club, faith community or international body. The organization usually defines the role, provides some form of supervision and assumes at least part of the responsibility for risk, safeguarding and continuity. Informal volunteering takes place outside these established structures: helping a neighbour obtain food, tutoring a child in the community without an institutional programme, coordinating local assistance through an unregistered group, or supporting people during an emergency. The newer literature warns against treating the informal category as a deficient version of the formal one. Informal action may be better suited to urgent, relational or highly local needs precisely because it is not burdened with the procedures that formal organizations require. Conversely, formal organization may be indispensable when continuity, technical standards, large-scale resource management or safeguarding are central. The two forms are therefore better understood as complementary modes of organizing service than as high and low versions of the same phenomenon.

'Individual volunteering' is useful when the initiative rests primarily with the person rather than a programme, but it should not be treated as a synonym for informal volunteering. An individual may independently approach a registered organization and then serve formally; conversely, a mutual-aid group may coordinate dozens of people informally. 'Institutional volunteering' is also an operational rather than universally standardized term. It is useful for programmes embedded in universities, hospitals, municipalities, museums or other institutions, where the institution supplies rules and infrastructure even if volunteering is not its principal purpose. 'Organized community volunteering' describes collective action that may possess clear leadership, schedules and roles without formal legal incorporation. These distinctions

43. International Labour Organization, Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work (Geneva: ILO, 2011).

matter because the word 'organized' does not mean 'registered'. A neighbourhood response group can be highly organized while remaining informal in legal and statistical terms.

The words 'unofficial' and 'irregular' are especially prone to confusion. 'Unofficial volunteer' has no single international statistical meaning. In disaster management, the more precise terms are spontaneous, unaffiliated or emergent volunteer, depending upon whether the emphasis is on lack of prior recruitment, absence of attachment to an established response organization, or the formation of a new group. 'Irregular volunteer' can sound as if participation were unauthorized; when the intended meaning is infrequent participation, episodic or occasional volunteer is more precise. The literature on episodic volunteering specifically examines short-term and one-off assignments, including event-based service and highly specialized tasks that can be completed without continuing membership.⁴⁴ Terminological precision matters because the wrong label can turn a description of frequency into a judgment of legitimacy.

A second family of categories describes the relationship between volunteering and professional competence. Skills-based or pro bono volunteering uses expertise already possessed by the volunteer: legal advice, medical care, translation, engineering, financial management, research, design or data analysis. Corporate or employee volunteering describes participation facilitated by an employer; the activity may be performed outside work hours or on paid volunteer days. Faith-based volunteering is organized or substantially motivated through religious institutions, but it should be distinguished from religious obligations that participants cannot meaningfully refuse. International volunteering crosses national borders or operates through international programmes, although contemporary practice increasingly includes South-South, national and local volunteers within organizations once associated primarily with northern expatriate service. Virtual volunteering is performed substantially through digital communication, while microvolunteering divides participation into discrete, short tasks. Regular or sustained volunteering involves continuing commitment, whereas episodic volunteering emphasizes bounded duration. None of these classifications is mutually exclusive: a person may simultaneously be a regular, organization-based, skills-based, faith-based volunteer working virtually.

Mutual aid occupies a particularly important edge of the classification because it destabilizes the usual separation between volunteer and beneficiary. Conventional charity often imagines a giver and a recipient occupying distinct roles. Mutual aid imagines participants whose roles may reverse. A household receives assistance today and contributes tomorrow; a neighbour delivers food during illness and later depends upon others during a crisis. Reciprocity does not make this commercial because the return is not normally fixed, priced or contractually equivalent. It does, however, distinguish mutual aid from some forms of one-directional service. Historically, this is why asar, guild welfare, friendly societies and contemporary neighbourhood networks belong to a common analytical family despite enormous institutional differences. Their social durability often depends precisely on the idea that assistance circulates through a community rather than flowing permanently from benefactor to dependent.

44. Cnaan et al., “You Thought That This Would Be Easy?,” 415–427.

Table 2. Modern typology of volunteering

Type	Definition / identifying feature	Typical example	Main analytical issue
Organization-based / formal	Performed for or through an organization	NGO, Red Cross, museum, hospital volunteer	Institutional accountability and supervision
Direct / informal	Unpaid service directly to non-family persons outside formal structures	Regular help to an elderly neighbour	Often invisible in surveys and public narratives
Individual	Primarily initiated by the volunteer	Independent tutoring or community assistance	Can become formal after initial self-initiative
Organized community	Collective but not necessarily registered	Neighbourhood clean-up or local response group	Organization does not require legal incorporation
Institutional	Embedded in a university, municipality, hospital, museum, etc.	Campus service programme	Volunteer autonomy within a host institution
Regular / sustained	Continuing commitment over time	Weekly mentoring	Continuity, trust and role accumulation
Episodic / occasional	Short-term, one-off or bounded assignment	Festival, marathon, campaign event	Flexibility versus organizational attachment
Spontaneous / emergent	Arises in response to a crisis without prior recruitment	Earthquake or flood response	Safety, coordination, legitimacy
Unaffiliated	Not attached to recognized response body	Independent disaster helper	Unaffiliated does not mean unskilled
Virtual / digital	Service performed remotely using digital tools	Online mentoring, mapping, translation	Digital access, privacy and data governance
Microvolunteering	Small discrete task with minimal time commitment	Tagging data or translating short content	Scalability versus shallow attachment
Corporate / employee	Facilitated by an employer	Paid volunteer day or employer-organized service	Boundary between paid time and volunteer contribution
Skills-based / pro bono	Uses occupational expertise	Lawyer, engineer, translator, analyst	Professional liability and high responsibility
International	Service across national borders or in international programmes	UN Volunteer, development placement	Power, localization, mobility inequality
Mutual aid	Reciprocal solidarity among participants	Community food and care network	Volunteer/beneficiary distinction may disappear
Faith-based	Organized or motivated through religion	Congregational food or refugee support	Voluntary choice versus religious obligation
State-supported	Government facilitates but does not compel	Municipal volunteer programme	Must be distinguished from compulsory civic labour
Advocacy / activist volunteering	Unpaid action seeking social or policy change	Environmental or rights campaign	Overlap with political participation

Analytical typology synthesizing ILO categories and contemporary volunteering scholarship.

Figure 4. A Practical Typology of Modern Volunteering

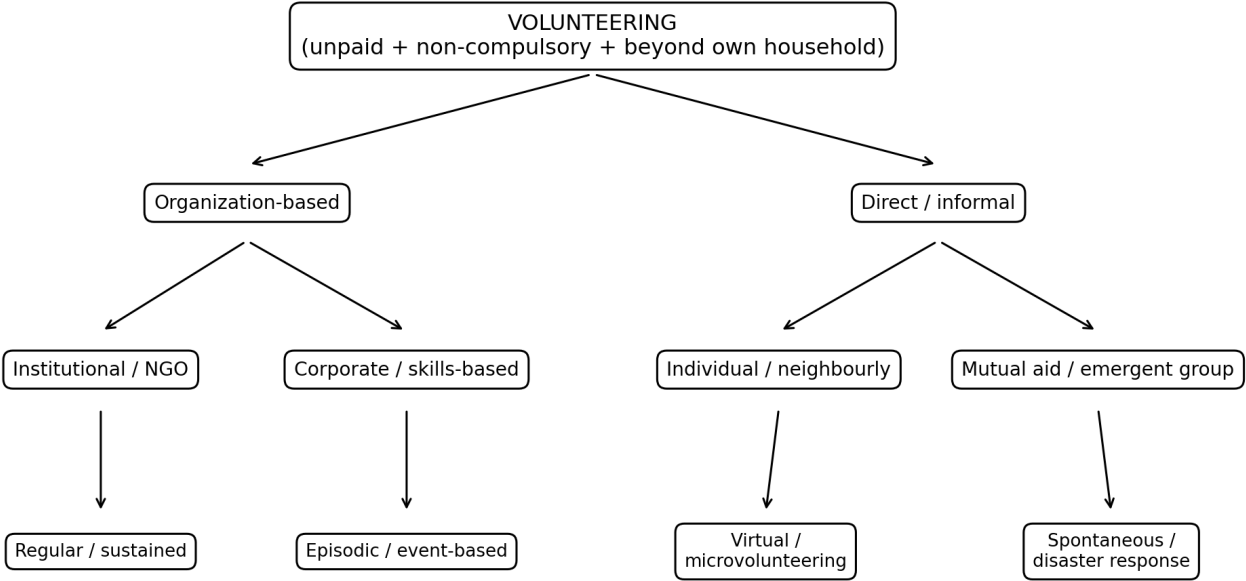


Table 3. Boundary cases: unpaid work that should not automatically be called volunteering

Case	Why it resembles volunteering	Why classification requires caution
Court-ordered community service	Unpaid and socially useful	Compulsory; excluded under ILO criteria
Military or national service under legal obligation	Service to community/state; may be unpaid or low-paid	Legal compulsion removes it from volunteer work
Mandatory service-learning	Public-benefit activity through an institution	If required for graduation/certification, voluntariness is compromised
Corvée / bīgār / compulsory hashar	Unpaid collective labour for public works	Coercive extraction rather than volunteering
Unpaid internship replacing an ordinary job	Unpaid and sometimes chosen	Primary purpose may be labour-market entry; exploitation and labour-law issues differ from volunteering
Family care within own household	Unpaid care and social value	Normally excluded from ILO volunteer-work statistics; belongs to unpaid care work
Paid employee on a corporate volunteer day	Community-benefit activity chosen as volunteering	Worker may still receive salary; classification depends on unit of analysis and programme design

9. Why Volunteering Changed: Structural Causes from 1700 to 2026

Chronology identifies when new forms appeared; explanation requires asking why they became plausible and durable. The first structural change was the gradual individualization of membership and citizenship. In many pre-modern settings, social responsibility was mediated through statuses people inherited: household, village, guild, estate, parish, confession or subjecthood. Modern associational culture did not erase these identities, but it made it increasingly normal to join a body because one endorsed its purpose. Volunteering became intelligible as a chosen identity rather than merely a duty attached to another identity. This change was legal, cultural and organizational at once. Associations acquired greater ability to hold property, collect subscriptions, publish, convene and claim public legitimacy; individuals acquired a broader repertoire of affiliations that were not reducible to birth. The modern volunteer is therefore inseparable from the modern association, even though, as the 2026 evidence on informal volunteering shows, volunteering itself is not confined to associations.

Urbanization and communication technology supplied the second transformation. Large cities concentrated need but also concentrated potential volunteers and donors. Print made it possible to mobilize strangers around distant causes; postal systems and railways allowed national auxiliaries and federations; newspapers and telegraphy accelerated humanitarian appeals; radio and television produced mass fundraising publics; the internet and smartphone reduced the cost of coordination still further. Each technological regime altered the feasible radius of solidarity. A medieval confraternity could maintain intense local obligations; an eighteenth-century antislavery society could create a national petitioning network; a twentieth-century humanitarian organization could coordinate internationally; a twenty-first-century platform can recruit a translator in one country to support a beneficiary in another within minutes. Technology does not manufacture willingness to help. It changes the scale, speed and organizational form through which willingness can become action.

War and disaster form a third driver because they expose gaps between existing institutional capacity and urgent social need. Solferino helped generate the Red Cross model; world wars normalized mass voluntary mobilization; post-war workcamps connected service to reconciliation; earthquakes, floods and pandemics repeatedly produce spontaneous groups before formal systems can fully respond. Crisis accelerates innovation because it suspends ordinary assumptions about who is responsible for what. Yet crisis also magnifies coercion, danger and inequality. The same society that celebrates volunteers may implicitly pressure women to provide unpaid care, ask citizens to perform hazardous work without protection, or use volunteers to mask institutional failure. The history of crisis volunteering is therefore a history of both solidarity and contested responsibility.

State capacity is the fourth driver. The rise of welfare states did not abolish voluntary action because state and volunteer are not substitutes occupying a fixed quantity of social space. Governments can fund, regulate, coordinate and even create infrastructures for volunteering while leaving participation non-compulsory. Conversely, a weak or retrenching state may increase demand for voluntary provision in ways that burden communities. The relationship is best described as a mixed economy of welfare in which households, markets, associations and public authorities continuously renegotiate roles. Professionalization belongs to the same process. As medicine, social work, counselling and humanitarian protection developed specialist standards, some tasks moved from amateur benevolence into paid professions. At the same time, new opportunities for expert volunteering emerged. The distinction between 'professional' and 'volunteer' therefore concerns remuneration and role, not competence. A volunteer can be a highly trained professional; what matters is whether the service is being provided outside the ordinary wage exchange and under ethically appropriate conditions.

Gender, class and global inequality constitute a fifth set of drivers that any institutional history must keep visible. Voluntary organizations historically relied heavily upon unpaid female labour, especially in care, religion, education and welfare, while describing that labour as an extension of moral character rather than a

contribution with economic value. Expansion of women’s paid employment and political rights altered the available volunteer pool and challenged the assumption that caring time could be drawn upon indefinitely without compensation. Class shapes participation for similar reasons: sustained unpaid service is easier for people who possess disposable time, secure income and transport. International volunteering adds passport privilege, language, credential recognition and mobility to the equation. These inequalities do not invalidate volunteerism, but they explain why access to volunteering can itself be unequal and why apparently altruistic programmes may reproduce advantage through networking, credentials or international experience.

Finally, measurement changed the field by making volunteer work visible as a category of production. Once governments and international organizations attempted to count volunteers, concepts had to be operationalized. Household care, mutual aid, direct help, organization-based service, compulsory service and paid work required defensible boundaries. The ILO’s measurement work and the 2026 UNV emphasis on informal volunteering are therefore not merely technical developments. They alter what governments and organizations are capable of seeing. A society that measures only registered NGO volunteers will conclude that civic contribution is concentrated in institutions; a methodology capable of identifying direct help will reveal an entirely different social landscape. Measurement can consequently redistribute recognition, bringing forms of community work traditionally ignored by formal-sector research into the official picture.

Table 4. Major drivers of change in volunteering, 1700–2026

Driver	Historical effect	Typical institutional result
Individualization and associational citizenship	More affiliations entered by choice rather than inherited status	Voluntary societies, NGOs, campaigning associations
Urbanization	Concentrated need and organizational capacity	Specialized charities, settlements, mutual aid
Communication technology	Expanded geographical radius and reduced coordination cost	National campaigns, international networks, digital volunteering
War and disaster	Rapidly exposed gaps in public capacity	Red Cross, wartime auxiliaries, spontaneous response
Welfare-state growth	Shifted rather than eliminated non-state provision	Partnership, supplementation, advocacy
Professionalization	Raised standards and moved some tasks into paid occupations	Volunteer management, safeguarding, skills-based service
Gender transformation	Changed availability and legitimacy of unpaid care labour	More flexible roles; professionalization of care functions
Decolonization and globalization	Questioned one-way transfer of expertise	Reciprocity, localization, South-South and national volunteering
Digitalization	Reduced the minimum unit of participation	Virtual service, microvolunteering, platform coordination
Statistical recognition	Made invisible forms more legible to policy	Formal/direct distinctions; measurement of informal volunteering

10. Conclusion: From a Sector to an Ecology of Voluntary Action

The history reconstructed here makes it difficult to sustain a simple narrative in which modern volunteering gradually replaced older, less developed forms of assistance. The evidence points instead to institutional sedimentation. Greek civic duty, elite benefaction, Roman association, religious charity, reciprocal communal labour, endowed welfare, guild mutuality, philanthropic association, humanitarian organization, state-supported service and digital networks belong to different historical worlds, yet elements of each remain recognizable in the present. Contemporary volunteering is therefore plural because its genealogy is plural. A neighbourhood mutual-aid group may resemble an old reciprocal labour tradition more than a nineteenth-century charity; a corporate pro bono programme may reproduce aspects of prestige-bearing benefaction; a modern humanitarian society inherits the nineteenth-century ambition to train volunteers before crises; and a faith-based food programme may combine ancient religious ethics with contemporary safeguarding and data systems.

The central transformation since the eighteenth century lies not in the appearance of generosity but in the increasing separation of voluntary action from statuses that once made assistance obligatory. Modern institutions privilege consent: one becomes a member, accepts a role, signs up for an assignment or responds to a call. That normative achievement should not be romanticized. Social pressure, economic inequality and institutional incentives still shape participation. Yet the insistence that unpaid public service must be non-compulsory is historically significant precisely because so much earlier unpaid service was demanded by state, lord, community or religious status. The modern concept has therefore narrowed one boundary while broadening another: it excludes coercive labour more clearly, but increasingly includes forms of direct and informal assistance that earlier policy frameworks overlooked because they occurred outside registered organizations.

The 2026 moment is especially revealing. Global estimates now suggest that informal volunteering is more prevalent than organization-based volunteering, while international policy simultaneously treats volunteerism as a component of sustainable development. The apparent contradiction disappears once volunteering is understood as an ecology rather than a sector. Institutions matter because they supply continuity, accountability, training and scale; informal networks matter because they supply proximity, speed, trust and relational knowledge. Neither can replace the other. The analytical task is to determine which form is appropriate to which need, how volunteers can be protected, how beneficiaries can receive competent service, how unpaid participation can avoid displacing fair employment, and how opportunities to volunteer can be distributed more equitably.

Seen over the long durée, the most persistent question is not why humans sometimes work without wages. Societies have always generated obligations and solidarities that exceed market exchange. The harder question is how such contributions are governed: whether they are demanded or chosen, vertical or reciprocal, status-bearing or anonymous, professionalized or spontaneous, local or transnational, and whether the institutions that mobilize them enlarge human agency or merely transfer responsibilities onto those least able to refuse. Modern volunteering rests upon ancient infrastructures of civic duty, religious ethics and mutual assistance, but its distinctive promise lies in combining social responsibility with genuine choice. Preserving that combination is the central historical lesson of the field.

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