

**A HANDBOOK FOR ORGANISATIONS THAT
WORK WITH VOLUNTEERS IN DEVELOPMENT**

Managing Volunteers: Debriefing, Recognition & Ongoing Engagement



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Introduction

The Global Volunteering Standard is a voluntary standard that seeks to promote continuous learning and improvement for volunteer-involving organisations. It is the result of a collaborative global effort over five years drawing upon the expertise and wisdom of several hundred people and organisations from 80 countries across the volunteering in development sector and beyond. We have aimed to capture and reflect our collective understanding of good practice throughout the volunteering programme cycle:

- **Designing and Delivering Projects**
- **Duty of Care**
- **Managing Volunteers**
- **Measuring Impact**

This manual is the fourth in a four-part series addressing the Managing Volunteers Theme within the Global Volunteering Standard. For key terms, please see our Definitions document and visit Forum's **Global Volunteering Standard Resource Library** for guiding documents and templates shared by volunteer involving organisations. The topics in this manual address how volunteers are recruited and selected, using consistent criteria, to fulfil the needs defined by the community.



Good Practice:

Use Forum's **Global Volunteering Standard Resource Library** to locate resources to complement this handbook by selecting the overall tag label **"Managing Volunteers"** as well as **"Debriefing, Recognition and Ongoing Engagement"**.

Support for Reflection

MEETING THE STANDARD:

- Organisations provide time and tools for volunteers, community members and relevant staff, to reflect upon the placement and analyse its impact.
- Volunteers and organisations have a record of how specific placements impact on personal development and on development projects.
- Volunteers receive guidance on how best to present and discuss their volunteer experience in professional and social settings.

This handbook focuses on the support provided to volunteers, and others, following the completion of their placement and therefore it is important for your organisations to provide the time and tools for volunteers, community members and relevant staff, to reflect upon the placement and analyse its impact. Creating the space and time for reflection is an opportunity for self-learning, organisational growth and future planning. However, for this to work and be an effective practice for all involved, taking into consideration people's needs and vulnerabilities, your organisation must create the space for reflection. This can be done in a variety of ways, enabling a larger segment of your volunteers, staff and community members to participate in such exercises:

- **Create a safe space for reflection:** Opinions shared are valued, there is no retribution for constructive criticism and people can choose to state their opinions or not at a time that is conducive for them and their wellbeing.
- **Allow and respond to anonymous feedback:** Not everyone will be able to share their opinions openly, especially if the feedback is about a specific individual who is in a position of authority or who might be in the same space. Therefore it is important to create avenues for anonymous feedback and to respond to them with the same thought and rigour as you would a non-anonymous feedback. This could even be done through anonymous surveys or online "feedback boxes"
- **Have open lines of communication:** opinions can and should be expressed at appropriate times to the right individuals, however this should not only be done during performance reviews, but during regularly scheduled staff meetings or even through an open door policy where one can speak directly to their supervisor or a trusted member.

- **Incorporate reflections into reviews:** This should be done at least quarterly with specific questions outlined to help volunteers reflect and respond. Asking the same questions at each review can also help the volunteer and your organisation track the changes or progression.
- **Organise structured planning and reflection workshops:** Opportunities for staff members, community participants and volunteers to come together and reflect on the work being done, assess if the needs are being met and if change is taking place. Using a SWOT analysis could be a good reflection activity during these workshops.

SWOT Analysis Example:

STRENGTHS

- *What do we do well?*
- *What is unique about our organisation?*

Volunteer Management:

Our volunteer management practices and policies are well researched, well conducted and well received by all parties.

WEAKNESSES

- *What could be improved?*
- *What resources could improve our performance?*

Visibility:

Our website has low traction and therefore harder to recruit qualified volunteers.

OPPORTUNITIES

- *Are there any gaps in our operations?*
- *What are our goals this year?*

Recruitment Campaigns:

In order to improve our recruitment efforts, we will run adds on social media platforms, including through sponsorship adds.

THREATS

- *Are there industry changes?*
- *What other organisations are competing for the same types of volunteers?*

New Competitor:

There's a new national volunteer organisation that has been developed that focuses on the recruitment of youth volunteers which could further impact our recruitment.

Comprehensive Debriefing

MEETING THE STANDARD:

- Organisations' debriefers are trained to follow agreed formats for both operational and personal debriefings.
- Volunteers are informed about debriefing arrangements, and volunteers that request a debrief receive one.
- Volunteers are informed of how concerns raised by the volunteer during debriefing will be handled by the organisation.
- Volunteers are made aware of channels for investigating and responding to grievances.

Similar to reflecting, debriefing is a core component of learning as an organisation and giving volunteers a great experience where they feel valued.

Debriefing with volunteers allows your organisation to learn, as a debrief is a great opportunity for volunteers to provide their honest feedback and to support them in return, especially if they have had more challenging placements or frustrating experiences.

Debriefs can be conducted prior to the volunteer ending their placement through an exit interview with the partner and upon completing their placement. Some organisations engage in debriefing phone calls, others conduct 1 on 1 interviews, and still others make use of small group discussion. It is up to you to make sure you choose what will work best for your organisation, but it is essential to have resources set aside for this process. If you have large groups of participants in a debrief session, it will be important to break them into smaller groups to create safer spaces and provide the time for sharing.

To prepare for a debrief session, consider the following:

1. Contact the volunteer in advance by email and ask about what topics they want to discuss so that you can brief yourself and include relevant staff in the discussion if needed.
2. If you anticipate that the debrief may be difficult, consider expanding the conversation beyond a 1 on 1 interview for extra support and to take notes. You can let the volunteer know in advance and explain the role of an extra person or people.

3. Remember that the main objective of the debrief is to let the volunteer talk and to listen to them, not to answer specific questions. The provided questions below are simply guidance for the structure of the conversation, and additional prompts are available if the volunteer needs them.
4. It's important to reassure the volunteer at the beginning and end of the debrief that their feedback is valuable and that you are committed to improving the experience for other volunteers. Be specific about any actions that will be taken as a result of the conversation. Keep in mind that volunteers expect to have a positive experience, so it's important to be sensitive to the fact that they may feel disappointed or like they didn't succeed.

You might wish to ask about any and all of the following elements of volunteer support and experience, depending on the context:

- Housing
- In-country or in-placement support
- Partnerships
- Safety and security
- Communication
- Orientation and training
- Reintegration support
- Relationships (with other volunteers, with your organisation, with the partner)

Examples of prompting questions to ask during a debrief include:

- How did it feel?
 - This question gives you a sense of how the person is walking away from the experience. You might need to prompt further if people just respond with "good".
- What was the best part?
 - This gives the volunteer the space to reflect on what went well, or at least reminds them that something good happened.
- What challenges or issues did you encounter?
- Facing those challenges and issues, how did you feel?
- What approaches did you employ to handle the challenges?
- Currently, how do you feel about the challenges/issues you faced?
- What actions could we have taken to improve the situation?
- What would you change or do differently?

- What have we done or can we do to aid you in coping and moving forward?
- This should enlist responses based on self-reflection (“what would I do differently?”) and through constructive suggestions (“What should have been done differently?”).

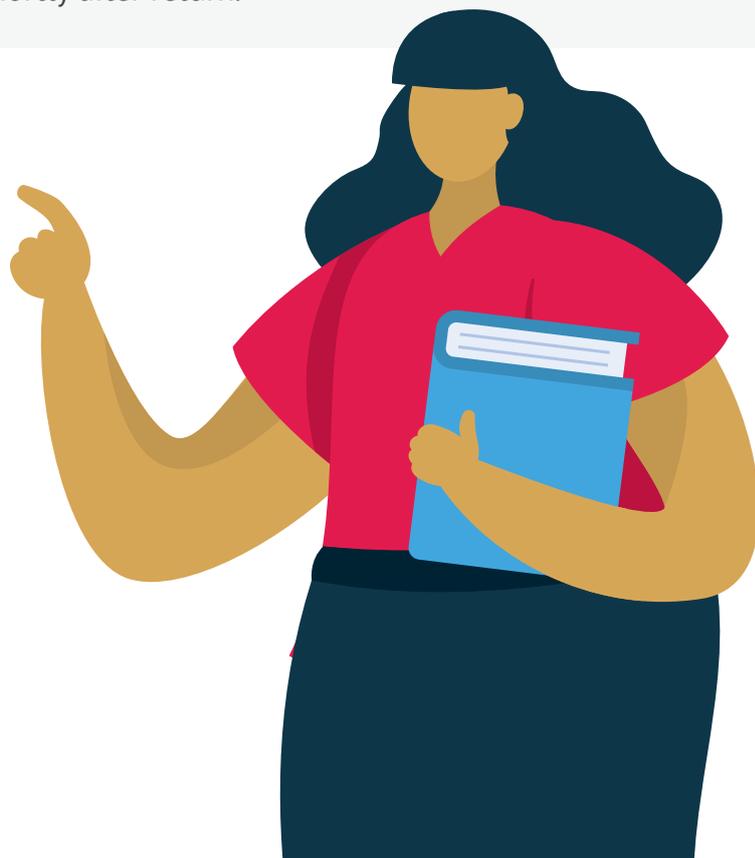
Take notes. Make sure your volunteer’s feedback gets recorded and acted upon. Let them know you are taking notes and how you will be using them. If a volunteer doesn’t want their name associated with a specific note, leave it anonymous and give them the opportunity to request anonymity as much as possible.

Be sure to follow-up on any action points you outline and provide updates to the feedback shared where relevant. Debriefs are a great way to retain volunteers and continue engaging with them. However, they are also a space for volunteers to be vulnerable and to share their experiences in a safe space. It is possible that some volunteers may have had very challenging or even traumatic experiences during their placements. Should this be the case, additional support may be required. The type of follow-up support provided will be depending on your organisation’s resources and policies.



Good Practice:

Organizations should encourage their volunteers to reflect on their experiences and develop prompts and/or activities to help them reflect upon completing their placements. Where possible, organizations should conduct debriefing sessions with their volunteers in reintegration sessions made available shortly after return.



While reflection and debriefing are often used interchangeably, based on a study conducted in Australia the research noted the following features of each:

DEBRIEFING:

Debriefing is a process of reflection and analysis that involves looking back at a specific experience or event in order to gain insight and improve future outcomes.

It is a guided and facilitated process where a facilitator can help to structure the debriefing and facilitate a deeper exploration of the experience.

Debriefing can take a structured or unstructured approach, depending on the context and goals.

The focus of debriefing is on action, moving forward, problem-solving, and the future. It aims to identify areas for improvement and develop strategies for positive change.

Debriefing can also involve the processing of emotions related to the experience or event, helping participants to understand and manage their feelings in a constructive way.

Debriefing is an intentional process that requires open communication and sharing, conducted shortly after the experience or event.

Participants must be willing to actively engage in the process and contribute to the discussion, including receiving and giving feedback.

By reflecting on what went wrong and what could be done differently in the future, participants can develop skills and strategies that can be applied to future situations.

REFLECTION

Reflection is a process of introspection, analysis, and evaluation of past experiences.

It is a personal and independent process that requires individuals to engage in self-examination.

Reflection can take on a fluid, cyclical, and ongoing process or a more structured and systematic approach. It involves examining one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in relation to a particular experience or situation.

The goal is to gain deeper insight and understanding, with a focus on the future.

Reflection is a practice that can promote engagement with emotions and can help individuals to gain a better understanding of themselves and their motivations.

This process involves looking back over a past experience, analysing what happened, and considering what could have been done differently or what could be done in the future to improve the outcome.

Reflection takes time, effort, and discipline. It requires individuals to set aside time to engage in the process, to be honest with themselves, and to be willing to engage with their emotions.

It is largely a quiet, gentle, and introspective practice, allowing individuals to fully explore their thoughts and feelings without external distractions.

Reflection can be a valuable tool for personal growth and development, and can help individuals to better understand themselves and their place in the world.

If you're not reflecting and debriefing, you're not learning.

Reintegration

MEETING THE STANDARD:

- Provide volunteers returning from long term placements remote from their home community with formal and informal resettlement support.
- Facilitate volunteer peer support from current and former volunteers.
- Provide the volunteers with guidance to assist their social reintegration and entry into education, training, employment or retirement.

Upon returning from long term placements, it is recommended that volunteers are given both formal and informal resettlement support. The extent of this support may depend on the policies and resources of your organisation. Volunteer peer support can be facilitated by your organisation through current and former volunteers. Additionally, volunteers can be provided with guidance to help them reintegrate socially and transition into education, training, employment, or retirement. This can be done through one-to-one support by providing proof of volunteering letters, support with resume writing (especially for youth), and provision of reference letters for those looking to return to more formal employment or perhaps enter into additional education or training programmes. Some organisations even host reintegration workshops, bringing groups of returned volunteers together for a weekend of discussion, reflection and debriefing. This is a great opportunity to provide ongoing support to volunteers in need, sharing information on changes to the organisation or what has transpired from feedback shared as a result of placement reviews and continuing ongoing engagement with volunteers. While not every organisation can afford to host such weekends, the debrief process with each volunteer is essential, thanking them for their time, contribution and commitment to volunteering and to your organisation and seeking how best to support them as their transition from volunteering.

Recognition

MEETING THE STANDARD:

- Ensure transparent recognition procedures and agreed recognition tools for use at the end of the placement.
- Keep sufficient records of volunteer personal development and performance achievement to validate any formal recognition of achievement, in employer references for example.
- Express appreciation to volunteers who complete their placement satisfactorily.

Finding simple, yet creative ways to say “thank you” for the work, dedication and commitment of volunteers can go a long way not only to show appreciation, but for volunteer retention and loyalty to your organisation and to your mission. However, recognizing volunteers for their work should be carefully planned and should be a priority in your organisation’s way of working. This ensures fair and equitable treatment for all volunteers. There are many ways to show appreciation to volunteers. Though far from exhaustive, the following is a list of suggestions of good ways to make sure that volunteers feel appreciated:

Expressing gratitude: Saying “thank you” – and often! – will show your volunteers that their efforts are appreciated. Do this regularly, and in a genuine and personalised way.

Providing recognition: Public recognition of volunteers who have gone above and beyond in their service is important. You can do this through awards or by highlighting achievements in organisational publications and social media.

Offering opportunities for growth: Providing volunteers with opportunities to learn or take on new responsibilities can help them to feel valued. Recognising that veteran volunteers can assist with the integration of newer volunteers can not only be a way of showing appreciation for their experience, but it can help them to feel invested in your organisation.

Providing support: Volunteers often face challenges in their work. Providing them with support and resources can help them overcome these challenges and feel appreciated.

Showing respect: Volunteers dedicate their time and skills. Communicate with them clearly, sincerely and regularly with the message their work is meaningful and contributing to your organisation and partner goals.

Celebrating successes: When your organisation or your partners achieve your goals, celebrate and recognize the contributions of volunteers. This can be done through social events, thank-you notes, or by sharing success stories on social media or in newsletters.

The following are some example of volunteer recognition good practices:

- Recognizing the work of volunteers should be a priority and someone should be responsible/ assigned to do it.
- Recognizing volunteers should happen all the time, not just during placement reviews.
- You need to be creative when you recognize the volunteers - it can't be done in the same way all the time.
- It should be done genuinely. You should do it because you want to and the volunteer deserves it, not because you feel like you have to.
- You should recognize the volunteer not just the work - so instead of saying "this is a great job", you should say, "you did a great job".
- The way you recognize a volunteer should be appropriate. Sometimes you want a certificate, sometimes a simple private thank you is enough, but sometimes you should make big announcements in team meetings or even on your social media pages!
- How you start recognizing volunteers needs to be maintained and needs to be equitable.
- You should also ensure to recognize volunteers soon after the achievement or success. You don't need to wait for a specific meeting or event to do it.



Ongoing Engagement

MEETING THE STANDARD:

- Support and encourage volunteers' continuing learning and their ongoing engagement with the wider context of development.
- Provide opportunities for volunteers to connect to local, regional or national societies and organisations focused on development as well as local organisations focused on volunteering, including any alumni networks.
- Facilitate e-volunteering or re-volunteering, connections with outgoing volunteers to share insights and advice, and knowledge sharing between volunteers and with external audiences.

Volunteering in Development is a potential route for returned volunteers' engagement in social action on development issues after placement. It is therefore important for your organisation to stay engaged with the volunteers throughout their volunteer journey and especially as they are returning from placement. Provide them with opportunities for them to get engaged in. Whether that is ongoing volunteer opportunities closer to home or through remote/e-volunteering, connecting with other returned volunteers within their communities, attending events and workshops and inviting them to speak at these events. Volunteers can play a multitude of roles following their placements, however their level of engagement and interest will be dependent on their volunteer experience. Volunteer engagement is a long term strategy that begins from the moment the volunteer applies to your organisation, it is therefore important to engage with and support your volunteers from the beginning.



Good Practice:

Develop a volunteer engagement strategy. This will help you think through all of the "touch points" that you would like to have with volunteers throughout their volunteer journey and once their placement has ended.

Keeping People Safe

Safeguarding in the context of reintegration and return will need to deal with ensuring support for volunteers as well as ensuring any complaints are dealt with. Volunteers should be informed of how their feedback, exit interviews, debriefs and reports will be shared. Any changes as a result of feedback shared should be communicated with the volunteers. Additionally, depending on your organisation's policies and resources, additional psycho-social support might be required for volunteers who have had challenging or traumatic experiences, or for those whose expectations were not met. While psycho-social support in the form of therapy may not be possible, provision of additional debriefs and peer to peer support might be feasible.

Next Steps

This manual is only one of a series of guides outlining the sections of the Global Volunteering Standard. We encourage reading through the other guides for a holistic understanding of volunteer management.

For more information on the Global Volunteering Standard and access to the Resource Library, as well as an organisational Self-Assessment Tool, please visit the Global Volunteering Standard Platform: www.forum-ids.org/global-volunteering-standard-platform/.

To learn more about Forum or become a member, please visit www.forum-ids.org/. To share any feedback on the guide, please email globalvolunteeringstandard@forum-ids.org

This handbook was developed and produced in 2023.



The International Forum for Volunteering in Development, commonly known as Forum, is a global network of organisations that work through volunteers to achieve sustainable development. Forum promotes more responsible and impactful volunteering by sharing information and good practice through convening, research, and the Global Volunteering Standard.

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