

IVCO 2022 Think Piece

# IN TIME, AN EGG WILL WALK ON ITS FEET!

The Experience of Ethiopia  
in building National  
Voluntary Infrastructure

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**IVCO**  
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Across societies, it is common to engage in voluntary activities during a humanitarian crisis or in response to natural disasters. COVID-19 showed young Ethiopians to be well-organised, with their own initiatives in support of their communities, advocating for preventive measures and ensuring the practice of hand washing and distancing. Admirably, their voluntary movement really helped to control the spread of the virus within the capacity of the Ethiopian health system. This kind of voluntary movement happens time and again for collective social benefit, such as environmental cleaning, tree planting, etc. Although the social benefit is high, the action is sporadic and fragmented. Ensuring the sustainability of volunteering will play a vital role in harnessing the power of youth to bring about social transformation.

Ethiopia is the second most populous nation in Africa, with 150 million people of whom 65% are youth. While a considerable amount of resources have been allotted for their education, employment remains a challenge for the Ethiopian youth. The plague of unemployment among a growing pool of young graduates is an opportunity to elevate national development, if young people can gain access to structured engagement for social programs targeting people living in poverty. In this vein, creating a viable National Volunteer Infrastructure in Ethiopia has been a fundamental undertaking. The national volunteer program which is under formulation by the Federal Democratic Republic Ethiopian Authority of Civil Society Organizations (ACSO) is worth sharing.

In 2020, ACSO created a new initiative to promote volunteerism in civil society, public and private institutions, and amongst the public. Previous to this, there was limited engagement in fostering volunteerism. Access to formal volunteering opportunities to develop skills and create new connections was challenging, particularly for those in low-income communities. Therefore, ACSO mobilised development actors to develop a standard, locally-relevant framework that guides the promotion of voluntarism and voluntary management programs in Ethiopia. The main actors involved in the initiative include Serve Global, VSO, UNV, and Cuso International.

A guidance note was prepared in line with volunteering program design and management principles, and colleagues worked with ACSO to publish Standards For National Volunteering. It provides a clear framework from the inception of a formal voluntary service program, through design and management, including appropriate the duty of care for volunteers. Nonetheless, promoting the manual and building the capacity of institutions to follow the guidelines for harnessing impactful voluntary service is not a one-time event. It requires regular monitoring and support until structured voluntary programs are mainstreamed across public and private institutions. Moreover, fostering a culture of structured voluntary service must go hand-in-hand with building the capacity of potential volunteers through an ethos of volunteerism, and ensuring their level of commitment to achieve high-end results. Time and financial resources are vital for this endeavour, yet they are not sufficiently available in the development context. In order to respond to this challenge in a cost-effective and innovative way, ACSO has designed and launched a Volunteer Management Information System (VMIS). The VMIS has facilitated the registration of many people who are interested in voluntarism, though the service was mainly geared toward organisations rather than individuals.

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The Ethiopian example underlines the importance of having national-level guidance to regulate the national volunteerism framework, complemented by a tangible system that brings together opportunities and motivated individuals. Placing sustainability at the centre of this design is expected to ensure a high level of inclusive professional development opportunities for young professionals, especially women and people living with disabilities who do not have equitable access to develop their potential by engaging in activities that directly and positively affect their lives. Also, promoting national volunteer programs will help to strengthen bottom-up or home-grown solutions to development challenges. This is the emerging potential of the volunteering sector.

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Wendwossen Kebede is a development management practitioner who has worked as Cuso International Country Representative in Ethiopia since October 2015. He has two decades of experience in promoting voluntarism to address national and international development agendas through the active participation of volunteers as change agents.