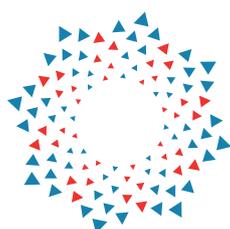


IVCO 2021 THINK PIECE

# Digitalisation, Diversity & Inclusion in Volunteering for Development

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**IVCO**  
THESSALONIKI 2021

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Digital technology has been a significant force in how, where and when people volunteer, but in 2020 COVID-19 produced a massive change in how volunteer involving organisations (VIOs) use the internet and mobile technology in their operations and programmes. This article<sup>1</sup> highlights some aspects of how digitalisation has impacted on inclusive volunteering as a pathway to other forms of citizenship and peace building.<sup>2</sup>

## Adaptation & innovation

Following the declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic in 2020, small and large VIOs had to rely on digital technology to work from home, support their staff and volunteers, and remain relevant in the new context. Online meetings became commonplace and IVCOs<sup>3</sup> were able to convene global consultations, notwithstanding the challenges of time zones, languages, and unstable connectivity in some countries.

Some VIOs reported using technology to hold online concerts, organise fundraising campaigns, and conduct internet-based advocacy.<sup>4</sup> Using mobile phones and the internet, a feminist movement in Peru<sup>5</sup> extended psychosocial support to women who were victims of gender-based violence, but who would previously not have had such access.

With COVID-19-related travel restrictions imposed worldwide in 2020, many IVCOs offered their repatriated volunteers the option of working online with their partner organisations. Initially the uptake was low and some repatriated volunteers found the online support a poor substitute for on-site engagement.<sup>6</sup> A number of IVCOs have since developed sophisticated online volunteering systems that aim to address challenges such as lack of in-country experience.

## Limitations on inclusivity

Issues of exclusion soon emerged in the new context and VIOs are particularly concerned to 'leave no one behind'. In Peru, a climate change social movement initially struggled to build the commitment of young activists: *"Trying to fill this gap through Zoom is almost impossible."*<sup>7</sup> In Uganda, the reliance on technology changed the profile of the young women reached by the YESS programme – from young girls in schools to older girls who had access to mobile phones.<sup>8</sup> In some cases democratic organisational governance was threatened where national leadership members were located in different cities and connectivity was not available.<sup>9</sup>

Driven partly by concerns about exclusion and lack of reciprocity, a debate has emerged about whether virtual volunteering will replace face-to-face volunteering, because *"digital does not work everywhere"*: Volunteer Canada reported that 56% of its members were able to adapt some programming to virtual delivery, but 20% to 30% could not. Nevertheless, Naua in Jordan is confident that in future *"everything needs to become a couple of clicks"*.<sup>10</sup>

## Will digital further widen the divide?

Despite the growing uptake of digital technology,<sup>11</sup> the persistent digital divide requires looking closely at the five 'As':<sup>12</sup>

- Availability – to whom is the technology (un)available?
- Affordability – for whom is the technology (un)affordable?
- Awareness – who is (un)aware of the technology?
- Abilities – who has the digital literacy to use the technology?
- Agency – who has the self-belief to use the technology?

Inequalities in the availability of digital infrastructure undermine efforts to build an enabling volunteering environment because of systemic interlocking factors that exclude the participation of many grassroots VIOs in the digital space.<sup>13</sup> In one country, extending the reach of digital infrastructure depends on introducing more competition in the digital space which is dominated by a private sector monopoly.<sup>14</sup>

In Peru, COVID-19 is impacting in a small way on the digital divide: *"COVID-19 has pushed people to digitalize. ... We now have a lot of families that have internet"*; nevertheless, even here internet access is not available in all sectors e.g. to micro-entrepreneurs.<sup>15</sup>

## Systemic bias & discrimination

Technological tools are not neutral and sometimes perpetuate stereotypes through 'algorithmic bias'<sup>16</sup> instead of eliminating them. For example, Google and other search engines prioritise national volunteering opportunities over those at local level. This constrains access to the full range of volunteer opportunities, which in turn hampers inclusivity.<sup>17</sup>

Gender features strongly in how the internet and other platforms are constructed. For example, the English version of Wikipedia seems to collect 'neutral' knowledge, but it is dominated by male volunteer editors, which introduces a bias against the perspectives of women.<sup>18</sup> In other contexts men can control how women use ICT at home, while online abuse can translate into offline threats and violence against women. Mobile phones with tracking devices can be used to restrict women's mobility, but can also ensure their safety and security.

## Conclusion

Volunteering for development in an increasingly digital world faces the same power structures and forms of discrimination as it does offline. Powerful interests in the private sector and governments shape the nature, reach and costs of internet provision, which triggers crucial questions for inclusivity in volunteering for development.

## Endnotes

- 1 This contribution draws heavily on the following sources: (1) a paper commissioned by IAVE on Volunteering and the Digital World (Perold, Haas & Goodrow, 2020) available at <https://www.iave.org/virtualforums2020/>; (2) data from a study on COVID-19 and the Future of Volunteering for Development (Perold, Mati, Allum & Lough, 2021) conducted for the International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum) available at <https://forum-ids.org/research/#results>; and (3) data from a research study conducted for IAVE on Volunteer Leadership: The COVID-19 Experience (Mati, Allum & Perold/IAVE forthcoming, September 2021 at [www.iave.org](http://www.iave.org)). Note that some quoted matter in this paper has been edited for clarity and brevity.
- 2 See for example Lough, B., & Mati, J. M., 2012; Caprara, D., Mati, J. M., Obadare, E., & Perold, H., 2013.
- 3 International Volunteer Cooperation Organisations (IVCOs) concentrate largely on sending/placing international volunteers in host countries. Some are funded by governments while others operate more independently as NGOs. Volunteer involving organisations (VIOs) operate in countries, sometimes in partnership with IVCOs, as well as in regions and sometimes in the international volunteering space.
- 4 Perold *et al.*, 2020b: 19
- 5 Movimiento Manuela Ramos, Peru. (Perold *et al.*, 2020c: 19)
- 6 Perold *et al.*, 2021b:19
- 7 Movimiento Ciudadano Frente al Cambio Climático (Citizen Movement against Climate Change), Peru, 2020.
- 8 The Youth Exchange South to South (YESS) programme (supported by Norec) forms part of the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) and hosts exchange participants in Ghana, Rwanda and Uganda. (See Perold *et al.*, 2021c:40)
- 9 Perold *et al.*, 2021c:21
- 10 Volunteer Canada, Volunteer Ireland and Naua in Jordan were interviewed for IAVE 2021 *op. cit.*
- 11 Figures for July 2021 show that 66.6% of the world's population use mobile phones; 61% of the world's population are internet users; and social media penetration is almost 57% of the world's population. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-july-global-statshot> Issues of exclusion are evident in the lack of information about digital prevalence in rural areas; reportedly research in these contexts was made more challenging by COVID-19.
- 12 Vota, W., 2019
- 13 For example, VIONet, Sierra Leone (*op cit*) noted that many of its members *"don't have the app, the phone, they don't have internet [and] the internet is not strong enough. In fact, they're using their phone data, which is quite bad; they just load small data which they can use for a call for a minute, seconds, [then] it's finished."*
- 14 Reported by Volunteer Support Program Guyana interviewed for the IAVE 2021 research study *op. cit.*
- 15 Reported by Perú Voluntario, interviewed for the IAVE 2021 research study *op. cit.*
- 16 Rastetter, 2020: 164
- 17 Points of Light was interviewed for the IAVE 2021 research study *op. cit.*
- 18 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender\\_bias\\_on\\_Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_bias_on_Wikipedia) In recognition of such bias, an initiative called Herstory was formed in 2016 to help close the gender knowledge gap on Arabic Wikipedia. Young volunteers produce content about gender equality and women and girls' rights. See Gul, M., 2020.

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