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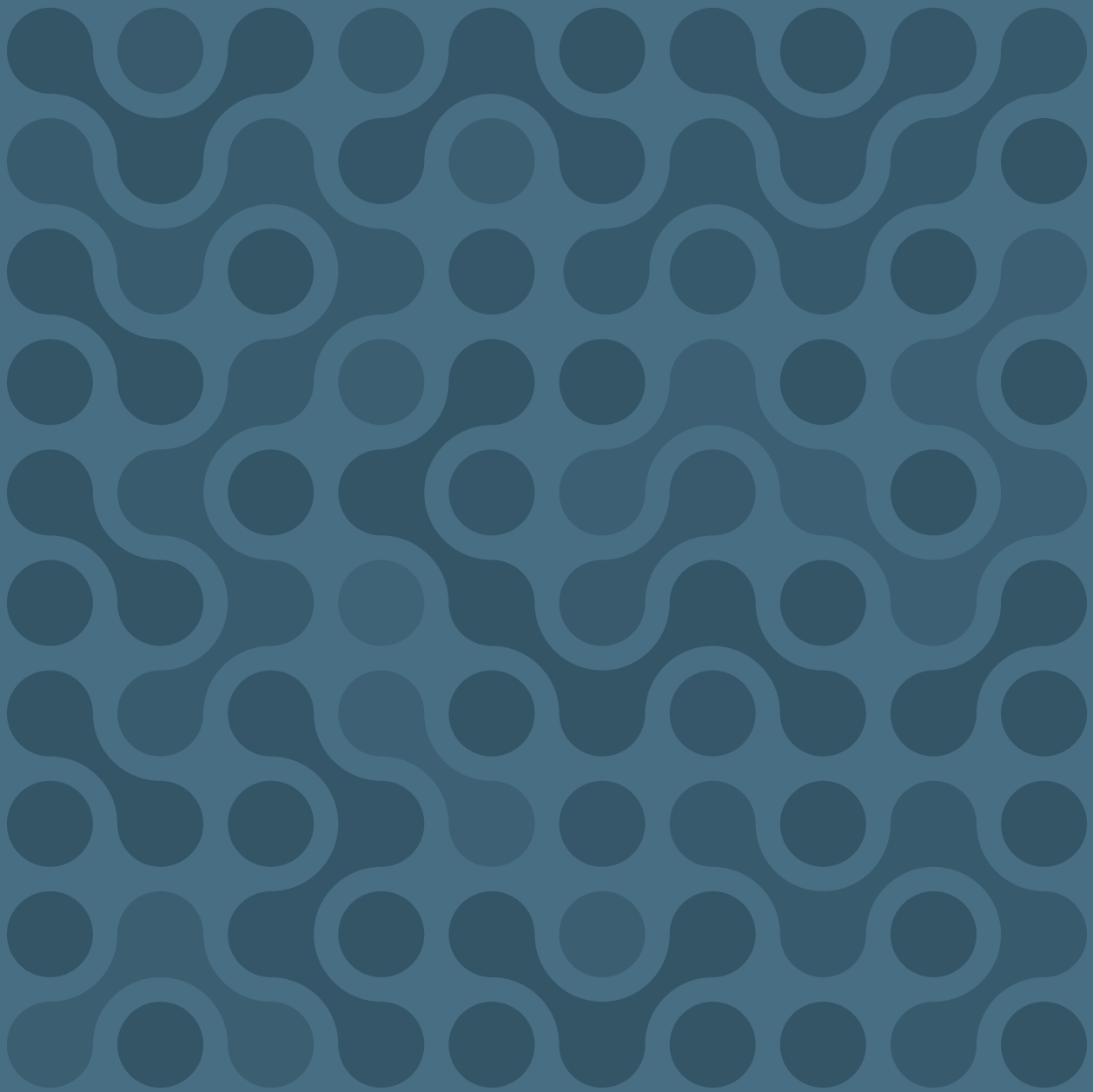
International Labour Organization

VOLUNTEER WORK AMONG OLDER PERSONS

TRENDS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR AGEING SOCIETIES

Thomas Morgan and Sara Elder



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CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF BOXES

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

EMPL	European Parliament
EPR	Employment-to-population ratios
EQLS	European Quality of Life Survey
EU	European Union
ICLS	International Conference of Labour Statisticians
ILO	International Labour Organization
ILOSTAT	International Labour Organization's portal to labour statistics
LDCs	Least developed countries
OECD	Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development
OLF	Outside the labour force
RSVP	Retired and Senior Volunteer Program
UN	United Nations
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
UNECLAC	United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNV	United Nations Volunteers
WHO	World Health Organization

KEY POINTS

- The world population is rapidly growing older. The projected share of the population aged 65+ is expected to reach 20 per cent by 2070, but this growth is not spread equally across countries. The share of older persons in regions like Eastern Asia is set to grow to well over 40 per cent, while remaining below 20 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa.

- The frameworks of active and healthy ageing, as laid out by the World Health Organization (WHO), outline how older persons can be supported to age with dignity and respect. In part this can be accomplished through activities that improve mental, physical and social health. Social participation in volunteering to help other individuals or their community at large can serve as a foundational aspect of active ageing.

- Persons who volunteer in old age perform better than non-volunteers in their self-perceived quality of life, mental health and physical health markers. Older volunteers almost always report stronger cognitive performance, improved happiness and reduced negative symptoms associated with loneliness and depression.

- Factors suspected to deter volunteerism among older persons include the lack of sufficient household income and related income- and time-poverty, burdens of household duties (felt more by women than men), insufficient social care and physical limitations. An examination of national labour force surveys in Colombia and Indonesia found old-age (65+) volunteers to be more prevalent among men (than women), those with higher levels of education and persons who were still employed. The income- and time-poverty deterrents to volunteerism among older persons was thus partially confirmed, although more data is needed to examine this further.

- Governments in ageing societies are increasingly interested in promoting volunteerism among older persons within their policy instruments for active ageing. In a review of 50 countries' national ageing strategies and plans, two-thirds of strategies were found to mention volunteerism as a tool for active ageing and one-half dedicated at least one full paragraph to the topic.

- National examples of measures to promote and incentivize volunteerism among older persons include the development and expansion of infrastructure to match potential older volunteers to organizations and volunteer opportunities, including through digital means. In addition, the extension of specific programmes aimed to promote social cohesion and wellbeing through intergenerational exchanges or cultural and civic participation further support these measures.

- Much progress toward integrated active ageing policy frameworks has been made, especially under the umbrella of United Nations and regional frameworks. However, there is still significant room for expansion and improvement at the country level. With volunteerism among older persons known to bring personal and societal benefits, countries are encouraged to increase attention and investment in making it an institutionalized tool within their active ageing policy and implementation frameworks.

1. INTRODUCTION

The world population has been growing older for decades and today is more aged than ever. The trend toward increased longevity accelerates with each passing year. In the coming decades, many economies with falling fertility rates will see large cohorts rapidly approaching old age,[1] empowered more than ever with the means and ability to retire.

Everyone deserves to age with dignity and respect and for many this involves staying active through economic, community and/or social activities. Many elderly enjoy being able to "give back" and contribute to society. A common way to do this is through volunteering – defined as non-compulsory work, performed for others without the expectation of financial remuneration. According to United Nations Volunteers (UNV), more than half of the world's population participated in some form of volunteering at least once in 2021 (UNV 2021a). Many of these volunteers were aged 65 years or more (65+).

Endowed with a lifetime's worth of knowledge and life experience, and often respected pillars of their local community, the societal value of engaging older persons in work, volunteer or otherwise, cannot be overstated. At the same time, older persons stand to gain much themselves by volunteering; social and civic participation has been shown to improve cognitive health, overall greater happiness and wellbeing.

This report aims to contribute to the knowledge base on volunteering by examining the following four questions:

- **What are the benefits to volunteering in old age?** Before exploring the "who" and "how" of volunteerism in old age, it is important to understand the "why". Volunteering is a common theme in discussions of healthy and active ageing, for good reason.
- **Who are the old-aged volunteers?** No two volunteers are the same. Nevertheless, what, if anything, can we learn about the profile of old-aged volunteers?
- **How is volunteering among older persons organized?** In particular, what actions are governments taking to promote old-aged volunteering in the framework of their ageing support strategies? To what extent are they investing in older persons?
- **What are the broader policy implications?** What lessons are there to be gained regarding the volunteering experiences of older persons and the way policymakers can promote it?

This report's structure is as follows: Section 2 lays out the context of ageing trends in the twenty-first century. Section 3 discusses the concepts of active and healthy ageing and how volunteerism plays an important role. Section 4 explores the demographics of older volunteers, both globally and, where data allows, in snapshots of specific countries. Section 5 presents examples of how old-aged volunteering has been organized in countries. Finally, Section 6 discusses the policy implications for volunteerism promotion among older persons as a win-win for active ageing.

[1] In this report, and in the absence of any internationally defined standard, "older persons" refers to those aged 65+ unless otherwise stated.

2. GLOBAL AGEING TRENDS

The world population is rapidly growing older.

For more than 50 years the global fertility rate has been in decline. Falling from an average of over 5 births per woman in 1963 to 2.3 births per woman by 2023, the United Nations (UN) projected this decline will continue, passing the replacement rate of 2.1 births by 2050 (UN 2024). Regions with presently low fertility rates, like Eastern Asia, are predicted to stay low. High-fertility regions, like Sub-Saharan Africa, are expected to see the number of births per woman nearly halved by 2100.

These trends are indicative of the increasing independence and control over reproduction that people – mainly women – can exercise. The increased access to education, ebbing of the extended family model as urbanization expands in developing economies and an increased need for a two-parent working household to offset household expenses contribute to these trends. In advanced economies, additional factors include delayed marriages, career pressures and access to stronger pension systems guaranteeing income in later life (Balbo et al. 2013; OECD 2024).

At the same time, people are living longer lives. Global life expectancy is growing, having already increased by more than one-third between 1963 and 2023, even after controlling for child mortality (UNDESA 2024). Exceptionally rapid development in certain regions, easier access to healthcare and the uplifting of billions globally out of poverty mean more individuals than ever before can live long and fulfilling lives.

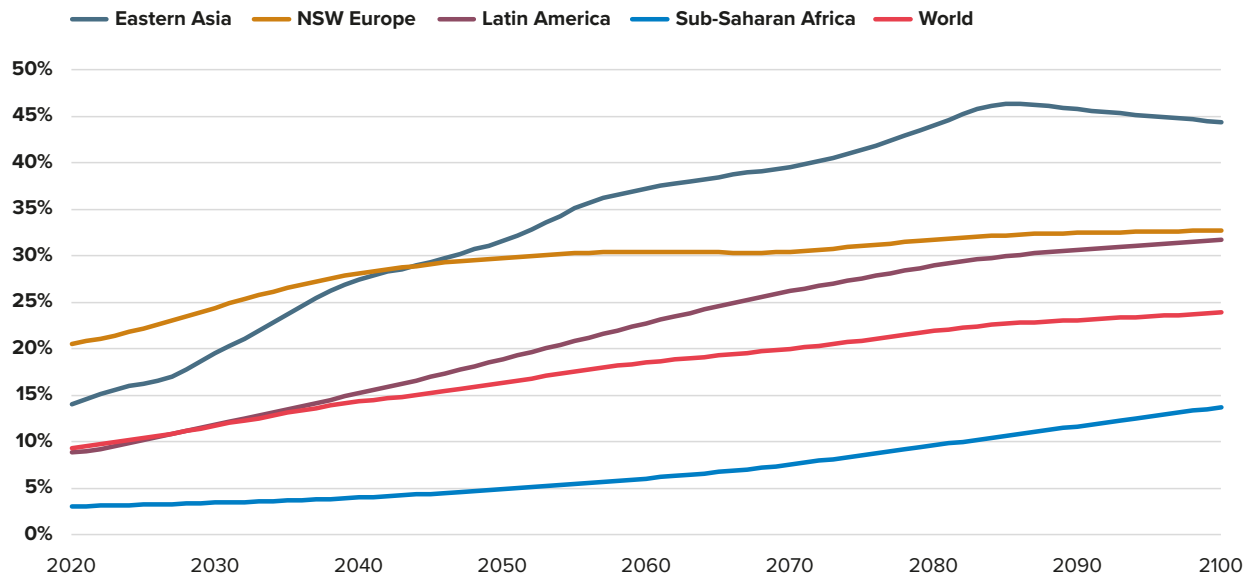
These changes have occurred rapidly, sometimes within one generation. The mid-twentieth-century baby boom precipitated unprecedented growth and development in much of the world. A person born in the Republic of Korea in 1955, for example, spent their early childhood in an agrarian economy with high birth rates, transitioned to adulthood in a time of rapid industrialization and income growth and retired in an advanced economy where three-fifths of households have no young children at all (OECD and OECD Korea Policy Centre 2024).

The population in the Republic of Korea, and in many other countries across the globe, is now rapidly ageing as the large cohorts born during periods of high fertility are entering old age at a faster rate than new people are being born or entering adulthood. The share of the total population aged 65+ is set to grow dramatically in the coming years. Projections suggest an increase from 10 per cent globally in 2023 (800 million people aged 65+) to 16 per cent in 2050 (1.6 billion), then 24 per cent in 2100 (2.4 billion), although there is much variation by region (see figure 1).

Eastern Asia[2] – the global region with the lowest fertility rate in 2023 at 1.01 births per woman – is expected to become the oldest region of the world by 2044, with a projected peak of a 46 per cent population share aged 65+ in the 2080s. Northern, Southern and Western Europe is the oldest region currently, but is projected to continue to age at a relatively low rate due to low fertility rates and inward migration. On the other hand, Latin America is projected to age quickly, due in part to the outward migration of working-aged people to other regions like North America (Beaton et al. 2017; UNECLAC 2022). For comparison, Sub-Saharan Africa will continue to be the least-aged region long after 2100 due to exceptionally high fertility rates, pronatalist social and cultural practices and poor access to family planning services and contraceptives (Bongaarts 2017). That 33 of the 46 least developed countries (LDCs) are in Africa also links to the significantly lower pace of ageing among LDCs compared to more developed countries (UNDESA 2023).

[2] China, Hong Kong (China), Japan, Macau (China), Mongolia, Republic of Korea and Taiwan (China).

FIGURE 1. Projected share of population aged 65+ globally and in selected regions, 2020–2100 (%)



Note: 2024–2100 are "medium" fertility variant projections. "Latin America" refers to the combination of continental Central and South America. "NSW Europe" refers to Northern, Southern and Western Europe. The selection of subregions was made to show extreme situations of ageing or continuing youthfulness. Regions not shown will fall in between Sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Asia.

Source: UNDESA (2024)

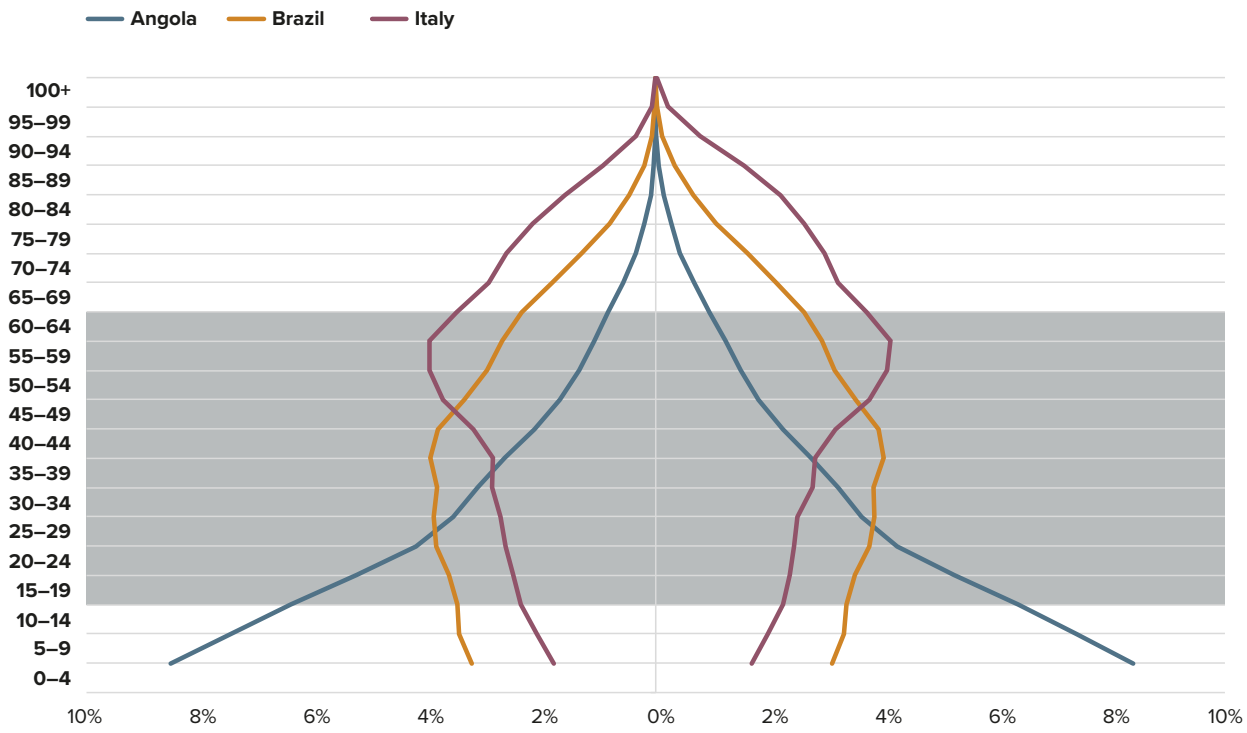
Thirty-three countries will be "hyper-aged" by 2025 – the entire world by 2070.

One common demographic framework splits societies into four categories – "hyper-aged", where the share of the population aged 65+ is above 20 per cent; "aged", where the share aged 65+ is between 14 and 20 per cent; "soon aged", where the share aged 65+ is between 7 and 14 per cent; and "not aged", where the share aged 65+ is below 7 per cent.[3] In 2023, 26 countries were hyper-aged and all of them (except Japan) were located in Europe.[4] Current population estimates for 2025 will see seven additional countries in the "hyper-aged" bracket. This population grows rapidly thereafter, soon including highly populated states such as China, which is set to reach hyper-aged status around 2032. By 2070, the entire world will become hyper-aged, albeit with a diversity of results by country.

Another common typology that reflects the ageing trends associated with income growth is the "demographic dividend". Here, the dividend describes the accelerated economic growth associated with a temporary peak in the working-age population relative to youth and older people, the majority of whom consume but are not workers (World Bank Group 2019). This occurs when a pre-dividend country advances rapidly, so a large cohort born during high fertility and low mortality may reach adulthood and have far fewer children (Mason et al. 2017). A post-dividend period follows when the leading cohort reaches the upper-age categories and the working-age share of the population declines.

[3] See for example, ILO (2019), WHO (2022) and OECD (2022).
[4] Calculations based on UNDESA (2024).

FIGURE 2. Share of total population by five-year age band and sex, selected countries, 2023 (%)



Note: Males are left of the axis, females right. The shaded area covers the 15–64 age band.
Source: UNDESA (2024)

A country that goes through the dividend process will eventually face an irregularly large cohort of older people, who mostly consume more per capita than younger people, and in high-income countries consume more than the prime working-aged, too (Mason et al. 2017). The dividend is analogous to a low point in a country's dependency ratio – the number of potential dependents per working-age person – and can be illustrated through population pyramids (see figure 2), shown here with three examples.

Angola, a young, pre-dividend country, has a very bottom-heavy population pyramid where 45 per cent of the population is below the age of 15, so that each worker supports 0.9 dependents on average. Brazil is currently enjoying its demographic dividend, with a large share of people aged 15–64 (at nearly 70 per cent), so that each worker supports just 0.4 dependents. Finally, Italy is an example of a hyper-aged society; at or approaching post-dividend, a quarter of people are over 65 and each worker has 0.6 dependents. Policymakers in Italy can anticipate a rapid increase in the share of the 65+ population across this decade. In Brazil, this should occur in approximately three decades; in Angola, it is possible that the dividend generation is just now being born.

3. VOLUNTEERING AS A FORM OF ACTIVE AND HEALTHY AGEING

3.1 Active and healthy ageing: planning for longer and more enriching lives

Given such demographic trends, it is increasingly important – not just economically, but ethically – for all countries to prepare for ageing with the necessary support for healthy living and good lifestyle choices so older cohorts enjoy a deservedly rich and healthy life. These are the ultimate goals of the twin concepts of active ageing and healthy ageing. In writing for the Second World Assembly on Ageing,[5] the World Health Organization (WHO) built on previous ageing initiatives and brought a few key issues to light. Namely, that governments needed to be proactive in preparing for ageing, that older persons demanded opportunities reflecting both their needs and capacities in later life and that supporting the health and activity of older persons was a necessity, not a luxury.

"Active ageing" was defined as "the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age"(WHO 2002). Here, "active" captures the participation of older persons in society, rather than solely physical activity, even if the latter is still important. It implies that older persons have the right to have a voice in the social, economic, cultural and political affairs of their communities. It implies that the decision on whether to work after reaching retirement age should be a personal choice, that age should not be a barrier to work, nor retirement a barrier to civic life. Active ageing necessarily promotes autonomy, independence and dignity among older persons.

The definition for "healthy ageing" elaborates on this concept in a broader way, focusing on inclusivity in particular, and has since replaced active ageing as the main conceptual vehicle for the WHO. Defined as "the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables wellbeing in older age", healthy ageing better reflects how older persons can face significant heterogeneity in health. Here, "functional ability" refers to the intrinsic capacity of individuals to continue living fulfilling lives and to do things that they value.

As a key feature of the UN 2021–2030 Decade of Healthy Ageing plan, the preeminent policy framework as of now, healthy ageing reflects ageing outcomes as the culmination of genetics, life choices and structural or environmental factors (WHO 2020). Active ageing refers to contributing to and participating in society in old age; healthy ageing is a broader concept that continues to promote civic engagement for those able to do so while being mindful of those that cannot.

Academic interest in both active and healthy ageing grew significantly after the turn of the millennium, especially in the 2010s, and the concepts now feature prominently in national ageing plans and strategies across the world (Lin et al. 2022).[6] Within healthy and active ageing, as laid out in a publication accompanying the 2002 Second World Assembly on Ageing, good policy directions include the provision of community centres, the combatting of ageism in the workplace and the promotion of volunteering as a form of civic participation (Walker 2002). More recently, national policies may include a broad array of facets linked to a supportive environment for healthy ageing, from anti-smoking campaigns to avoid the early onset of health issues, to the improvement of access to healthcare in old age and investing in age-friendly communities (UNESCAP 2022; UNDESA 2020).

[5] The prior 1982 World Assembly on Ageing yielded the first major international collaboration on the rights of older persons. Momentum was built with Resolution 46/91 in 1991, which established the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, emphasising their independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity.

[6] Box 1, in section 5, illustrates some ways volunteering, in particular, has been included in national ageing plans and strategies.

3.2 What is volunteering?

The International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) adopted a definition of volunteer work in 2013 as a form of non-compulsory work performed for others without the expectation of financial remuneration – "work" as in the provision of goods or services and "for others" as in those outside an individual's immediate household or family (ICLS 2013). It describes how volunteer work comes in two forms: (i) direct volunteering, which helps others directly (for example, a neighbour, a friend, a stranger, nature), and (ii) organization-based volunteering, performed for an organization, community-based group or other group in which an individual is a member. Not all unpaid work is generally regarded as volunteering, as with subsistence agriculture and other own-use production of goods, as well as unpaid internships and traineeships (UNV and ILO 2022).

The UN General Assembly has accepted a broad definition for volunteering, volunteerism and voluntary activities as: "a wide range of activities, including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation, undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor" (UNGA 2002). The ICLS mirrored this definition in its statistical definition. UNV presently follows this description, though also acknowledges volunteer activities as belonging to one of mutual aid or self-help, philanthropy or services to others, participation and advocacy or campaigning (UNV 2020).

3.3 Benefits to volunteering in old age

Volunteering can provide meaningful social engagement for older persons who may otherwise feel a sense of loneliness or estrangement from their communities. Older persons can tend to have much smaller social networks than they did during their prime-age years or youth, either through the community of a workplace or household. Ageing is associated with a decreasing number of friends and reduced in-person contact with others.[7] This is one of the primary motivations for including volunteering as a pillar of active and healthy ageing. It enables socialization, participation, inclusion and activity, before even considering the positive externalities associated with increased volunteerism for society at large.[8]

Numerous studies have found that volunteering intuitively correlates in a positive way with subjective quality of life for older persons.[9] One such study in China found that participating in volunteer services was associated with better perceptions of old-age individuals' own physical and mental health in self-assessments, as well as their attitudes towards ageing (Liu et al. 2020). Another study in Australia suggests that the perceived importance of the cause or impact of activities performed while volunteering can boost subjective wellbeing as well (Jongenelis et al. 2022). A third study, reviewing European survey data, found that volunteering correlates most strongly with internal rather than external domains of wellbeing, like "pleasure" and "self-realization" rather than "autonomy" and "control" (Morawski et al. 2022). And while it offers no financial reward, volunteering can help fulfil an individual's sense of innate altruism.

[7] See for example, Knipscheer et al. (1995).

[8] In its index of active ageing, the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), includes the indicator of participation in voluntary activities among older persons, measured from the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS), as an element of the index area "participation in society". The latest analytical report on the index was produced in 2019 (UNECE 2019).

[9] See for example, the literature review by Gan and Ang (2024).

Volunteering also correlates with the actual health outcomes of older persons, with many studies pointing to cognitive health benefits in particular.[10] One study of a representative sample of Florida residents found a strong association of volunteerism with better working memory and processing, more so for women, black people and those with lower levels of education (Proulx et al. 2018). A longitudinal study of older persons in Singapore found that both volunteering and employment, as opposed to retirement, were associated with better cognitive performance and fewer depressive symptoms (Schwingel et al. 2009). Through the lens of active ageing, any form of activity – especially when social, as volunteering is prone to be – is favourable for cognitive outcomes, when the alternative is inactivity.

[10] See for example, the literature review by Keefer et al. (2023).

4. TRENDS IN OLD-AGE VOLUNTEERISM

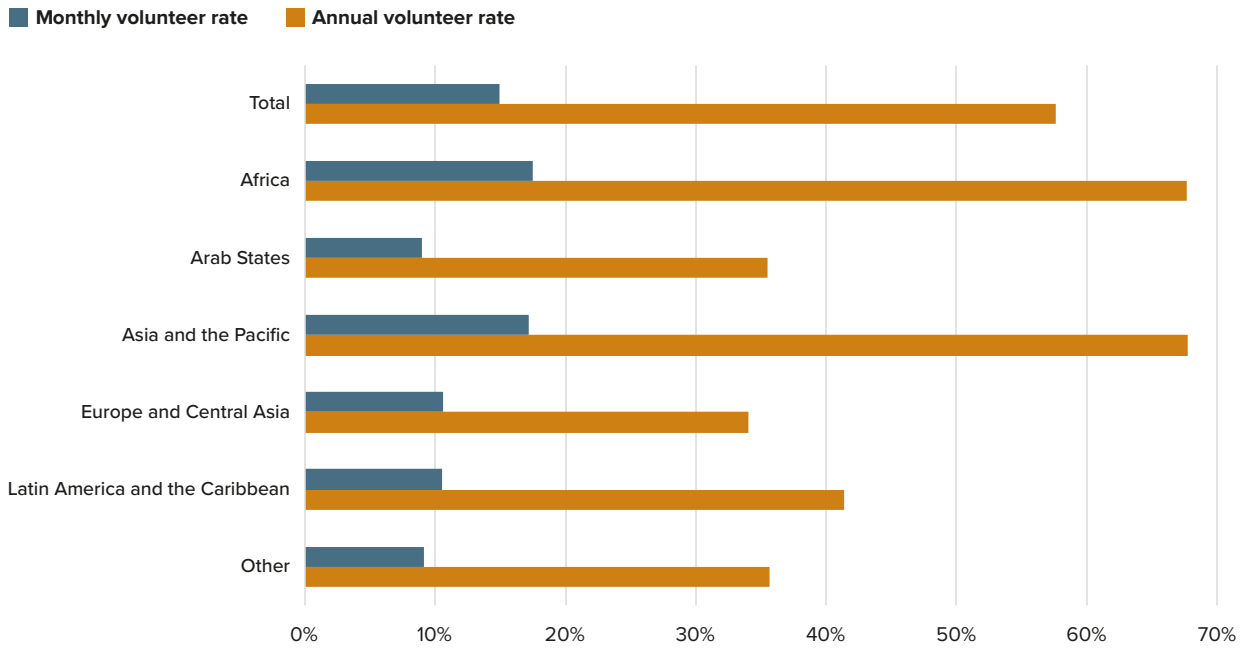
4.1 Global trends in volunteering

Millions of people each year spend their personal time helping others or contributing to a good cause. UNV estimates the number of global monthly volunteers in 2021 was 862 million people, nearly 15 per cent of the world's population (UNV 2021a). By region, volunteer rates are the highest in Africa and Asia and the Pacific, where it is estimated that over two-thirds of the population volunteers at least once a year (see figure 3).

For statistical purposes, in accordance with the ICLS, "volunteers" are measured as people who perform volunteer work for at least one hour in a four-week or one month reference period (ICLS 2013). Many countries have yet to fully implement this definition in their national statistics programmes, which means that few national data points are yet available for analysis (see figure 4). If aiming to compare results across countries, it is important to control for the duration of the reference period. Longer reference periods are typically associated with higher values, due to the increased likelihood of capturing the participation of persons who volunteer less frequently (ILO 2024a).

Data sources for volunteerism statistics can pose another challenge for cross-country comparability. Of the countries with comparable data accessible in ILOSTAT, there is significant heterogeneity in the likelihood to volunteer across countries, country-income levels and between the sexes (see figure 4).

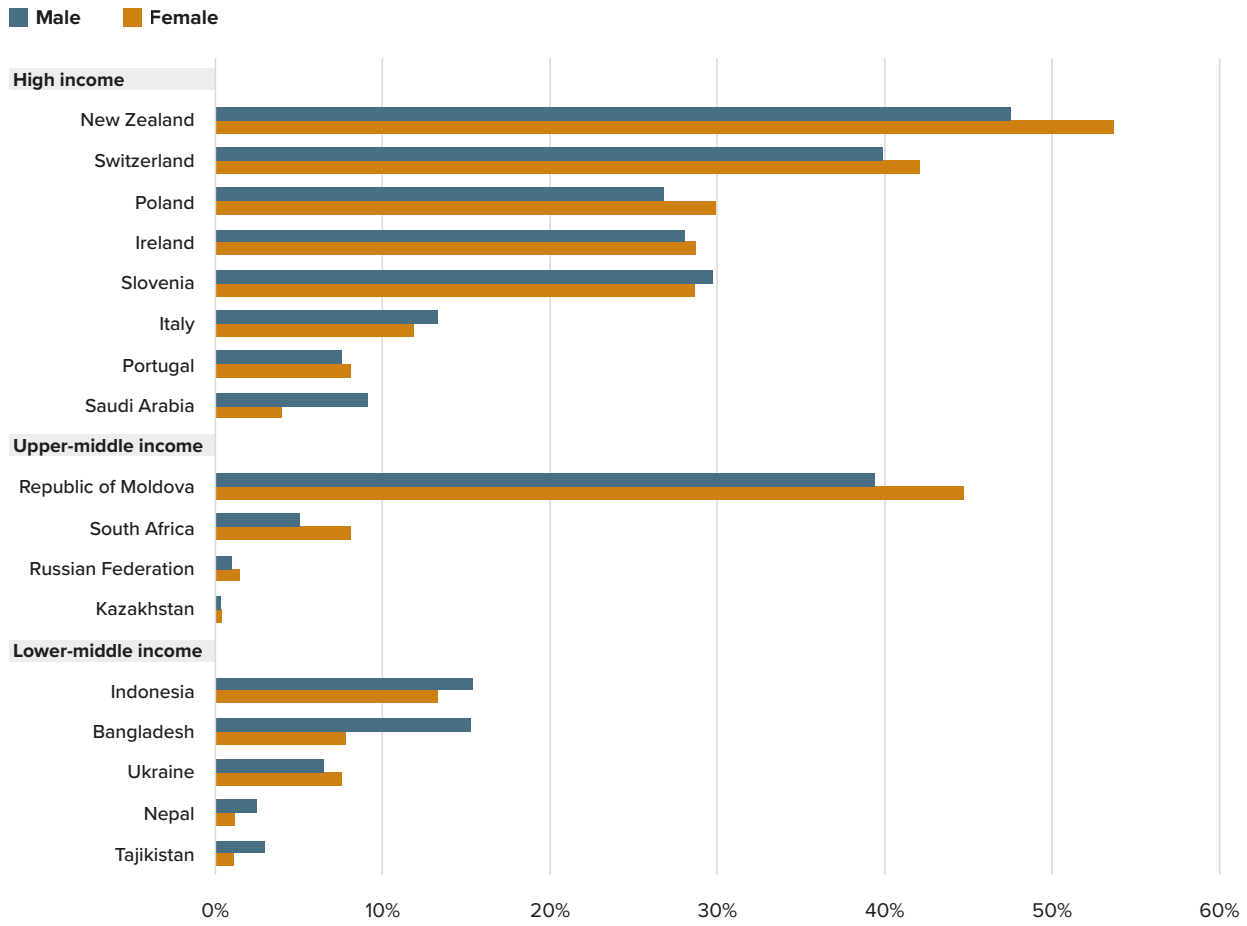
FIGURE 3. Estimates of monthly and annual volunteer rates, globally and by subregion, latest available year (%)



Note: Monthly and annual volunteer rates refer to the proportion of those aged over 15+, volunteering in one month or one year respectively. Subregions given by UNV rather than the ILO.

Source: UNV (2021a)

FIGURE 4. Volunteering rate by sex and income level in selected countries, latest available year (%)



Note: Sample of countries with one-month or 4-week reference periods only, in 2023 or most recent year, that report both organized and direct volunteering.

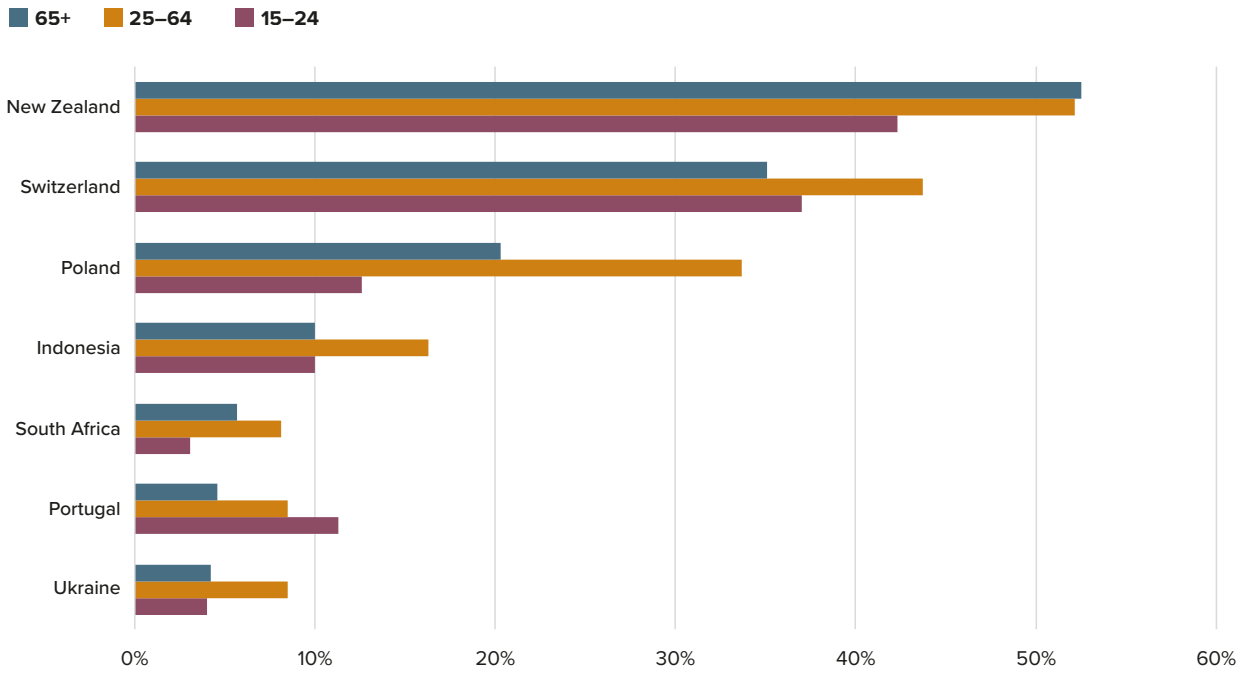
Source: ILOSTAT

Generally speaking (given the limited country coverage), there appears to be a positive correlation between country income level and the incidence of volunteering. In high-income countries, the gender split is roughly on par, while in upper-middle income countries, volunteering rates are higher for women than men and the opposite is the case for lower-middle income countries. This volunteering gender gap may be due to women's caregiving and domestic responsibilities in such countries, impeding their ability to become a volunteer (UNV 2021b; UNV and ILO 2024; EMPL 2021).

4.2 Trends in volunteerism by age

In ILOSTAT, data are found for 20 countries disaggregated according to the share of volunteer work by age. A selection of country results is provided in figure 5, spanning four continents and three income groups. As shown in the limited selection of countries, the volunteering rate seems to be correlated with country income level (e.g., New Zealand and Switzerland as high-income countries compared to lower-middle-income Indonesia and Ukraine). In all cases, the volunteering rate for those in the prime working ages of 25–64 is the highest of any age band, and, for most countries in the sample, this is followed by people aged 65+, with youth aged 15–24 last.

FIGURE 5. Volunteering rate by age cohort in selected countries, latest available year (%)



Note: Countries with one-month or 4-week reference periods only.

Source: ILOSTAT

An alternative data source for the European Union gives a different picture. Eurostat data showed volunteerism among youth aged 15–24 to be more on par with those aged 25–64 and youth are the most prone to volunteering in a handful of countries like Norway and the Netherlands (Eurostat 2024). Compared to the rough trend seen in figure 5, one implication could be that older people are more likely to volunteer regularly or as a habit, while young people are more likely to volunteer at least once in a year but less likely to do so as a (monthly) habit.

4.3 What influences volunteerism among older persons?

Employment and volunteering are among the primary pillars of healthy and active ageing,[11] and are closely linked with one another. In fact, both are forms of work, just for differing purposes. For older persons, the choices of whether to retire or continue employment and whether or not to take up volunteerism as an activity are important ones. This is especially true once an individual has a more credible ability to leave the labour market entirely. Significant factors in deciding to retire from a paid working situation include economic incentives (such as a pension), physical and mental health, work satisfaction and home dynamics like having a working partner (Knoll 2011; Beehr 2014).

However, many people lack the financial stability to choose to give up paid work. In 2023, while 80 per cent of people above retirement age globally received a pension, the gap between high-income and low-income countries remained significant. In high-income countries, 97 per cent of the older population has access to some form of old-age pension, compared to only 13 per cent of those living in low-income countries (ILO 2024b). Even in countries with relatively strong social protection systems, individuals at risk of poverty by the time of retirement overwhelmingly choose to continue to do paid work (ILO 2024c).

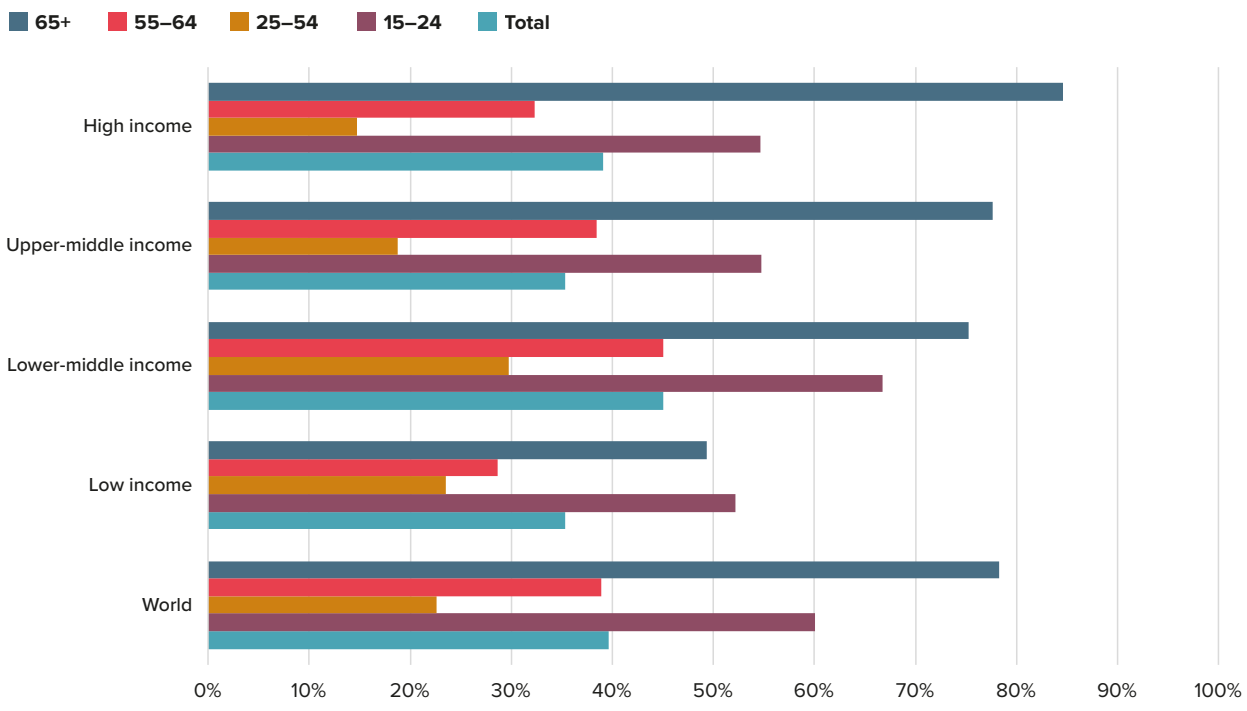
[11] See for example, WHO (2015).

Low- and middle-income countries generally exhibit a much higher propensity for people in old age to continue working. The countries with the highest employment-to-population ratios (EPR) for those 65+ are predominantly low-income, many in Sub-Saharan Africa. The EPR of the 65+ cohort for nearly 20 low-income countries were above 50 per cent.[12]

In countries with strong pensions and social security nets, people typically leave the labour force much earlier when approaching old age. The EPRs for those aged 65+ in many high-income countries falls below 10 per cent or even 5 per cent (for example in Belgium, Spain and France, notably all aged or hyper-aged countries). Among high-income countries, outliers include the Republic of Korea (where 39 per cent of those aged 65+ are employed), Singapore (31 per cent), the United Arab Emirates (30 per cent) and New Zealand (26 per cent). In such countries there are likely other contributing factors, like cultural attitudes toward work in old age and the use of migrant labourers.

Looking at the inactivity rate instead – the proportion of persons outside the labour force (neither working nor looking for work) – high-income countries see the highest rate for those aged 65+, at 85 per cent, compared to just 49 per cent for low-income countries (see figure 6).

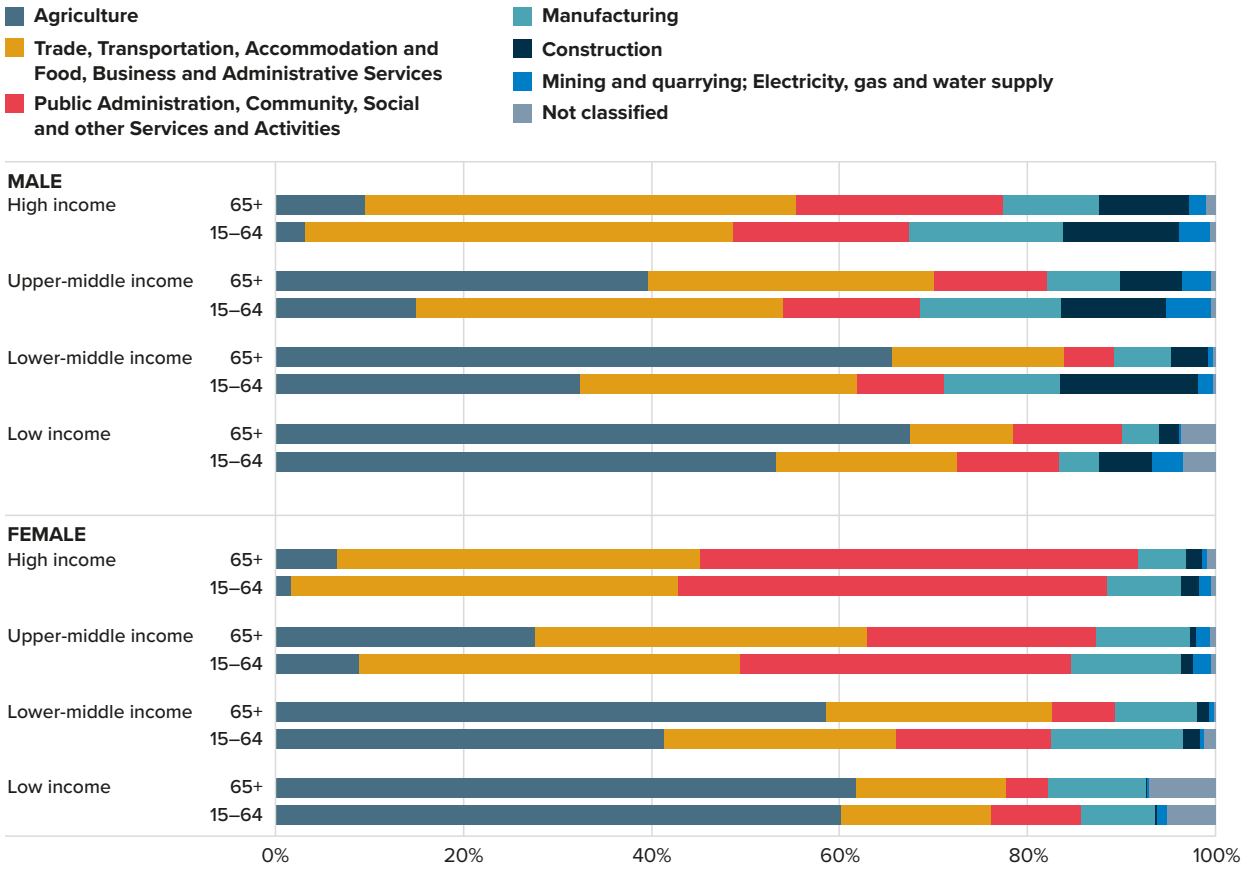
FIGURE 6. Inactivity rate by broad age band globally and by country income level, latest available year (%)



Note: ILO calculations based on data from the ILO Harmonized Microdata Repository.
Source: ILO (2024), The plight of older workers in labour underutilization.

[12] Data available in ILOSTAT.

FIGURE 7. Economic sector of employed persons by age, sex and country income level, 2022 (%)



Note: Sample covers 107 countries and territories with data for 2022, together representing 60 per cent of the entire global population and those aged 65+ globally.

Source: Calculations based on labour force survey data in ILOSTAT.

In high-income economies, most older workers who remain in employment are in the services sectors[13] (68 per cent for men and 85 per cent for women), closely reflecting the dominant sectors for such economies (see figure 7). In low-income economies, agriculture is the dominant sector of employment for older workers, similarly reflecting the distribution of prime-aged employees 15–64.

Across income level groupings and for both sexes, agriculture is more predominant for older workers relative to those aged 15–64. In fact, apart from a small number of exceptions, essentially no other sectors increase in prevalence for those aged 65+ compared to those 15–64. The increased share of 65+ workers in agriculture would suggest that many persons take up work in agriculture in their old age, perhaps retiring from an alternative activity and then doing work on their own family plots. Middle-income countries exhibit the largest increases in absolute terms in the additional share of employment in agriculture between the age cohorts. In the case of men in lower-middle-income countries, for the share of workers in agriculture more than doubled (with 32 per cent of male workers aged 15–64 compared to 66 per cent of those aged 65+).

[13] Here "services" refers to "trade, transportation, accommodation and food, and business and administrative services" and "public administration, community, social and other services and activities" taken together.

The question of relevance here is whether older workers in agriculture, a labour-intensive activity, have time to also volunteer. Agriculture work is still associated more with lower income levels. Lower income levels are associated with lower capacities of workers to enter paid retirement. It could be that those working in agriculture are more likely income- and time-poor, and hence, less likely to volunteer.

For many individuals, volunteering can provide a fulfilling alternative to paid employment in old age after retirement, or a supplement to part-time work.[14] It can carry many of the same cognitive and social benefits as employment without the same level of time commitment. it can also appeal to an individual's sense of altruism and support additional benefits to mental and physical wellbeing.

4.4 A profile of old-aged volunteers in Indonesia and Colombia[15]

Indonesia

In the 2018 Indonesian Labour Force Survey, respondents were asked if they had done voluntary work in the preceding month. The results show that volunteering in old age is prevalent in Indonesia. Of the 17 million persons aged 65+ in Indonesia in 2018, 2 million (12 per cent) were categorized as volunteers. The share of old-aged volunteers in the total adult volunteer population (aged 15+) was 6 per cent. Women were underrepresented among old-aged volunteers; 43 per cent were women, despite women making up 54 per cent of those aged 65+.

More 65+ volunteers were still in employment than were outside the labour force (OLF, or "inactive"). The shares were 64 per cent in employment and 36 per cent OLF (with a negligible share being unemployed). For comparison, among the non-volunteering old-age population, 39 per cent were in employment and 61 per cent were OLF. Old-aged male volunteers were more than twice as likely to be in employment than OLF, while for women the split was roughly even, suggesting a much higher propensity to be a working volunteer for older men than women.

Among the 65+ volunteers who are OLF, 17 per cent cite their reason for being OLF as "having other income source (pensions, rent, etc.)", nearly double that of non-volunteers (9 per cent).[16] This result could hint to the fact that many 65+ volunteers who are OLF need to have an income base to support them as they take up non-paid activities like volunteerism. This gap widens for elderly inactive males; 28 per cent of those who volunteered said they had another income source as reason for inactivity compared to 15 per cent of non-volunteers. For women, shares were 9 per cent and 5 per cent, respectively. Older female volunteers were much more likely to be OLF for personal/family-related reasons (86 per cent) than older men (62 per cent).

[14] Another perspective is that in older age, a person that was already active in volunteerism while working will continue to volunteer once not working. Yet, van der Horst et al. (2017) concludes that behaviours and tendencies towards the two activities act independently.

[15] Among microdata files made available in the ILO microdata repository, only the surveys of Indonesia and Colombia have revised their questionnaires in accordance with the 19th ICLS to allow for measurement of volunteer work. Other countries have made such revisions, but the ILO does not have access to the microdata files. The analyses in the profiles are based on the 2018 Labour Force Survey (Q3) from Statistics Indonesia and the 2023 *Gran Encuesta Integrada de Hogares* (Q4) from the Colombian National Administrative Department of Statistics.

[16] Note that this does not imply that none of the 83 per cent of 65+ volunteers who were OLF do not have access to a pension that might benefit the household income. The respondent was asked to identify the main reason for not working or looking for work, in other words, the reason for being OLF. It could be that persons who responded that they are OLF due to family responsibilities or other reason receive an old-age pension or are supported financially by working household members. Regardless of the data limitations, there does seem to be some support to the theory that volunteering is an activity that is somehow easier for those with a reasonable basis of financial security given the gap between pension-holders of volunteers and non-volunteers.

Old-aged volunteers were also more educated than their non-volunteering peers – more so for women. Volunteering 65+ males were marginally more educated than their non-volunteering peers, with 19 and 16 per cent respectively having either intermediate or advanced education. Volunteering older females were more educated, with 11 per cent having either intermediate or advanced education as compared to 8 per cent for their non-volunteering counterparts, a significantly higher percentage difference than for males.

Colombia

The Large Integrated Household Survey of Colombia (2023) also measured volunteering among respondents, but only through formal organizations rather than direct volunteering.[17] While this means overall volunteer rates cannot be compared like-for-like with other countries which record overall volunteering, one can still build a profile of the old-aged Colombian volunteer, understanding that the analysis encompasses only formal volunteering done through organizations.

The data results show that organized volunteering in old age is relatively rare in Colombia, with a little under 2 per cent of the working-age population (15+) engaging in it (700,000 out of approximately 40 million). For those aged 65+, the organized volunteer rate is the same (90,000 out of just over 5 million). Like Indonesia, while the female share of the population aged 65+ was 56 per cent in Colombia, they were underrepresented among older organized volunteers, being just 44 per cent.

For men only, serving as an organized volunteer was also strongly associated with an increased propensity to be employed. Of those men who were not organized volunteers, 35 per cent aged 65+ were in employment and 63 per cent were OLF. For organized volunteers, these rates were 61 per cent and 38 per cent respectively. The coincidence of employment and organized volunteering among older men was nearly twice that of men who are not organized volunteers. One possible explanation for this involvement could be that volunteering is organized through the workplace, such as a corporation encouraging its employees to participate in a charity run on behalf of a particular cause. For women aged 65+ there was no difference whatsoever; regardless of organized volunteering status, 14 per cent were in employment and 86 per cent were OLF.

Finally, a significantly higher level of education for organized volunteers aged 65+, especially so for women, was observed. For women, 32 per cent had completed advanced education compared to 11 per cent of those that were not organized volunteers. For men these figures were 22 and 13 per cent respectively. These statistics could reflect how volunteering is more accessible to people on a more solid financial footing, since educational attainment is a well-known proxy for general income level.

4.5 Why don't more older persons volunteer?

Just as there are barriers to paid employment in old age, there can be barriers to volunteering. Volunteering is an active choice on the part of the person and disincentives could easily dissuade an older person from participating, despite the activities' possible benefits (see section 3).

[17] For this reason, Colombia does not feature in figure 4 above.

Household income can be a major factor in determining the capacity of a person to take up volunteerism, as there is a time cost to volunteering. Every hour of volunteering is an hour that cannot be used for income-generating employment. For low-income households, this can make a noticeable difference. Increased household income is associated with higher rates of volunteering across all ages, including those aged 65+ (Cook and Sladowski 2013). Intuitively, older volunteers need a source of income to give them financial stability – apart from wages, this is likely to be pensions, savings, income from other assets like rent, or financial assistance from family members, especially in the cases of intergenerational households. The case study of Indonesia above seems to confirm this.[18]

Physical limitations, such as mobility challenges or health issues, can make regular volunteer work difficult, especially if activities are physically demanding or require travel. Limited access to transportation or restrictive schedules in formal volunteer programmes may deter those without the flexibility or means to commute regularly. Older persons rely relatively more on public transport which, in many countries, can be sporadic and unreliable. One study in Canada found that after accounting for endogeneity, physical access to charities does matter for the overall decision to volunteer. Volunteering rates are generally higher when charities are near a place of residence; in other words, places with low densities of charities will see reduced volunteering rates (Armstrong et al. 2023). This is likely especially true for those who are 65+.

Mental barriers, like a reluctance to join new social settings or low self-confidence can also play a part in deterring volunteerism. Some older persons may feel uncomfortable stepping into unfamiliar environments or meeting new people. Language barriers may also contribute to deterring volunteerism for older persons of minority communities, especially where their mother tongue is more scarcely spoken in volunteer settings.

The continuation of care duties – for dependent children, spouses, the disabled or other older household members – can be another factor preventing older persons from volunteering. With such care duties falling more to women than men, especially in countries with weaker institutional care services, volunteer work can be less frequently undertaken by older women (EMPL 2021).

Finally, volunteering can sometimes be seen as burdensome for those who view their “golden years” as a time free from work-related responsibilities – a time for rest. Older persons who expect volunteering to resemble formal employment – requiring significant time, responsibility, or regularity – may be dissuaded from participating, especially if they view retirement as an escape from such responsibilities. In addition, older persons may lack awareness of available volunteer opportunities, or not know how to effectively search for opportunities. If volunteer opportunities are advertised exclusively online in platforms with little accessibility for older persons, or if the technology to access that information is too costly, older persons may never know about existing opportunities.

[18] The equivalent question in the Colombia survey was missing, so no comparison is possible.

5. HOW IS VOLUNTEERING AMONG OLDER PERSONS ORGANIZED?

5.1 Active and healthy ageing strategies and volunteering

The prelude to the aforementioned UN 2021-2030 Decade of Healthy Ageing plan, the WHO's 2015 world report on ageing and health, emphasises how volunteering in old age is an important aspect of social participation and active ageing (WHO 2015; 2020). To promote volunteerism, the report suggests, there are a number of considerations, like: (i) encouraging people to have the self-confidence to volunteer, (ii) providing opportunities for organizations and volunteers to meet, (iii) ensuring that the type and nature of the work provides satisfaction – ensuring a "fit" between the motivations of the volunteer and the role, (iv) providing compensation to encourage retention, and (v) streamlining the ways that volunteers are contacted, selected, trained and supervised.

UN Member States can be guided toward sponsoring volunteerism as a factor of active ageing through knowledge sharing and technical support. This can include the support of partners like UNV. Still, the impetus ultimately lies with individual countries to tailor the suggested guidelines to their national contexts.

Many countries now have a national ageing strategy or plan. In a broad web-based search for such plans, over 50 countries were found to have strategies or plans that are currently in use.[19] In a review of the identified national ageing strategies and plans, about two-thirds were found to make a mention of volunteerism in old age. About one-half of the national plans dealt with the topic in more detail (with either three or more mentions of "volunteering" or having at least one full paragraph dedicated to the topic). Box 1 presents some excerpts from selected plans where volunteering for older persons is mentioned most often as a means of promoting their mental, physical and social health and where it is also mentioned as a means to improve intergenerational solidarity.

Box 1. Volunteering within national ageing strategies: selected examples[20]

Antigua and Barbuda (National Policy and Plan of Action on Healthy Ageing 2017–2027)

This national policy aims to promote volunteerism to ease social and civic exclusion.

- The government plans to "develop and implement national programmes to involve older people as volunteers, particularly targeting those at risk of social exclusion".
- It also plans to "manage an online platform that matches retirees with volunteer opportunities, enabling organisations to communicate with potential helpers and providing information on how to get involved with community and voluntary organisations".

Source: Government of Antigua and Barbuda (2017)

[19] Over 60 countries were examined, spread roughly evenly across the Americas, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa Asia. Others may exist but were not identified in the search. It goes beyond the scope of this study to understand to what degree such strategies or plans are being applied.

[20] Quotes are taken exclusively from English-language ageing strategies or their official English translations.

Box 1. Volunteering within national ageing strategies: selected examples, cont.

Barbados (2023–2028 National Policy on Ageing for Barbados)

This national policy hopes to improve the social health and support networks for older people by promoting volunteering.

- On intergenerational relationships, the government aims to "build out and facilitate more constructive volunteering opportunities to connect younger people with older people in various communities across Barbados".
- The government hopes to strengthen networks with "community-based senior centres (or activity centres) to accommodate older people in seeking recreational activities and other health-related assistance and equipped with volunteers".

Source: Government of Barbados (2023)

Cambodia (Cambodia National Ageing Policy 2017–2030)

Volunteering is mentioned as a means to strengthen intergenerational linkages.

- This national policy offers a goal of "honouring any exemplary performance by older persons, such as volunteerism or creative work, by giving awards or/and certificates of recognition".
- "NGOs and voluntary organizations" are encouraged to help "create and ensure a series of formal and informal opportunities that make the elderly self-reliant".

Source: Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Planning (2017)

Serbia (Strategy for Active and Healthy Ageing, 2024–2030)

This strategy recognizes the need to integrate volunteering into strategies at a local level.

- It aims to "encourage volunteering by older people, especially in local self-governments" and notes "activities such as sharing knowledge, helping and advising neighbours and taking on other voluntary tasks in the community mean that older people become visible beyond their age group."
- The government has set target values to improve the number of local self-governments that have "established volunteering services with older volunteers" to 60 and "organised outreach campaigns on volunteering for older people" to 87, the latter being half the total number of municipalities.

Source: Government of the Republic of Serbia (2023)

Box 1. Volunteering within national ageing strategies: selected examples, cont.

Singapore (2023 Action Plan for Successful Ageing)

This plan, the result of a partnership between the government and volunteering-focused charities, expands on pre-existing and thorough infrastructure to promote volunteerism in old age.

- The plan aims to "develop volunteer management resources to empower volunteer host organisations and improve their volunteering experiences, thereby encouraging more seniors to volunteer".
- The Silver Volunteer Fund, launched in 2016, provides "funding support for volunteer host organizations to recruit and train senior volunteers". The report notes that the Fund has supported the recruitment of more than 11,000 old-aged volunteers spanning over 100 volunteer programmes.
- Goals to improve the Silver Volunteer Fund are to "sharpen focus on volunteer training and development", "deepen volunteer appreciation efforts" and "foster opportunities for inter-generational volunteering".

Source: Singapore Ministry of Health (2023)

Slovenia (Active Ageing Strategy, 2018)

This strategy promotes volunteering for older people to participate in society and improve their community.

- "[Volunteering] allows older people to use their skills, develop new knowledge, expand their social network and strengthen their social status; it prevents loneliness and isolation and it enhances intergenerational ties. At the same time, it allows individuals to express their creativity".
- Policy guidelines include: "promote the volunteering of older persons (accessibility, provision of information, enhance the image of volunteering in society)", "promote quality volunteering programmes wherever older people live" and provide "regular training for volunteers, mentors and organisers of volunteering".

Source: Government of the Republic of Slovenia (2018)

5.2 Elements of organized old-age volunteerism in action[21]

Matching prospective volunteers to the right organizers

Policy can play a role in reducing search costs, making it easier for prospective volunteers to find relevant and available opportunities, just like in a job market. Public-private partnerships can streamline the matching process by providing centralized platforms and helping organizations by conducting outreach and advertising.

One such platform is **AmeriCorps Seniors**, an independent agency of the United States government, which comprises several subprogrammes offering ways for older people to find volunteering opportunities. The platform has seen strong use: over 140,000 people aged 55+ use the volunteer matching service each year, meaning it has contributed to well over a million volunteer-hours each year (AmeriCorps 2024a). One subprogramme offered is the **Retired and Senior Volunteer Program** (RSVP), which helps provide the volunteering equivalent of public employment services to match those searching for volunteering opportunities with available work. The program hosts a digital labour market information system where volunteering organizations post new opportunities. Activities include volunteering at food banks, vaccination centres, schools and national parks. An external review in 2019 found that, across 17 studies of RSVP since 1980, 13 studies reported strictly positive improvements in physical health and life satisfaction for volunteers, while four reported neutral effects; none were negative (Frazier et al. 2019).

Digital labour market information systems can also be run by non-governmental organizations rather than the government, although often benefiting from some government funding. **The Association of NGOs in Norway** (*Frivillighet Norge*) is a partnership and forum for the Norwegian voluntary sector consisting of over 300 organizations. The Association has received funding from the government for its successful efforts in using volunteerism to combat loneliness in older people (Frivillighet Norge 2022). It operates *frivilig.no*, a national digital platform designed to connect individuals with volunteering organizations and opportunities, again acting as a job market for volunteering opportunities. Older people are a targeted group in particular on this platform, where it is noted that nearly 80 per cent of volunteer teams want to recruit more people aged 60+ (Frivillighet Norge 2024).

A final example in Singapore, the **Silver Generation Office**, under the Agency for Integrated Care, is active in volunteer recruitment and outreach and provides a platform for prospective volunteers to find local and relevant opportunities that are appropriate and available for older people. With the newly introduced Silver Guardian Programme in particular, older volunteers help socialize and care for their local peers.[22] Augmenting these programmes are active ageing centres, spread around the country, with new centres planned so that by 2025 at least 4 in 5 older people will be within walking distance to one, where they can go for volunteering and learning opportunities (Age Well SG 2024). Altogether the programme aims to foster a sense of community and enable friendships among older persons. Box 2 quotes the Minister of Health on the aims and strategies of the programme.

[21] Names of programmes are offered in English where an official translation exists, otherwise translations from trusted sources (one of the citations) are given in quotes with the original programme names in parentheses. Exceptions are clearly marked. This paper does not limit itself to descriptions of programmes that have been found to be evaluated and/or found to be sustained (and sustainable) over time. Where impact or programmes evaluations are found, they are discussed. Otherwise, programmes are cited only as interesting examples linked to the theme of volunteerism among older workers.

[22] See for example, Agency for Integrated Care (2024).

Box 2. Launch of the Silver Guardian programme in Singapore, April 2024

In the words of the Minister of Health, Mr Ong Ye Kung, the goals of the Silver Guardian programme in Singapore are to:

- "...try to match each Silver Guardian to an AAC [Active Ageing Centre] that is located near to your home or workplace, to make volunteering easier, more convenient and more accessible. Second, we will also try to match you to your indicated areas of interest. One example is the experience of Ms. Lily Tjiunardi, who is a great cook. [She] conducts cooking demonstrations and guides fellow seniors in making delicacies like *kuih kuih*. [...] Even if you do not have a special skill, [...] you can read letters to seniors who have problems with their eyesight or cannot read English; you can help them use smart phones to videocall their grandchildren or watch YouTube; you can escort seniors to their homes, remind them to take their medication; or distribute meals to those who are not mobile or home bound. Third, for Silver Guardians who want to pick up additional volunteering skills, [we] can refer you to a relevant learning institute. For example, volunteers who wish to serve as befrienders can attend training on interaction and engagement skills. [...] Many AACs conduct volunteer appreciation events where certificates and awards are presented to volunteers as appreciation for their contributions. We should continue to do that. [We are] exploring a national-level Silver Guardian Awards to recognise exemplary and active volunteers. We will feature Silver Guardians on various media platforms and hope that with their stories, we will inspire others to also step forward to contribute."

Source: Singapore Ministry of Health (2024)

Organized volunteering to promote social cohesion and wellbeing[23]

Programmes that bring older and younger generations together through mentorship, shared projects or advocacy efforts can provide mutual benefits to all participants. Older persons can enjoy meaningful relationships with younger people, who in turn may have much to learn – or indeed, teach. Older volunteers can help foster intergenerational exchange and volunteer programmes are often designed explicitly to promote this.

The most direct form of intergenerational exchange is in the short-term care or supervision of youth. Returning to the United States and AmeriCorps Seniors, another programme they run is **Foster Grandparents**, which connects older persons with children to provide mentorship, academic and social support. As the name implies, older people take on the role of elders, assisting children from disadvantaged backgrounds, with disabilities, or any other causes for which additional support may be needed. The programme claims 84 per cent of the volunteers report "stable or improving health one year after service". In addition, 88 per cent of those who, before volunteering, "felt a lack of companionship", thereafter "reported fewer feelings of isolation after becoming [a] volunteer". Dozens of individual case studies point to valuable experiences for the children too, such as gaining skills like reading and being accompanied to medical or other appointments.[24]

[23] A useful database for finding "age-friendly actions in practice", many of which link to the organization and participation of older persons in voluntarism, is offered by the WHO's Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities at https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/afp/.

[24] See for example, AmeriCorps (2024b).

A similar programme in Copenhagen, Denmark, **Spare Grandparents**, has matched older persons with families to provide support, mainly for single parents. Financed by local governments, responsibilities span looking after children during working hours and doing chores like dropping young children off at daycare (Ehlers et al. 2011). In France, the national **Read and Let Them Read** (*Lire et faire lire*) project has had older persons give reading lessons to children of all ages, growing from around 12,000 volunteers in 2011 to over 20,000 in 2021 (Ehlers et al. 2011; Lire et faire lire 2024). In Germany, over 530 **Multigenerational Centres** have been established, where older persons connect with youth to, among other things, cook meals, read stories and teach adolescents practical hands-on skills, while the younger generation then in turn helps older persons with digital literacy (Government of Germany, Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth 2022; WHO 2015). **National seniors volunteering**[25] (*Voluntariado País de Mayores*) in Chile saw a number of older persons recruited across the country and trained in new technologies to support children's social and educational development (UNECLAC 2022). In Asia, examples of existing national volunteering activities that support intergenerational ties are highlighted in UNESCAP (2022).

Intergenerational dialogue is also important to build community bonds and social compassion. In Argentina, **Fundación Navarro Viola** is a civil society organization that promotes various initiatives for both children and older persons. For the latter, they claim, while only one-fifth of Argentinian older people participate in volunteering, nearly half have a stated interest or predisposition to do so (Fundación Navarro Viola 2024b). The **Volunteering +60** (*Voluntariado +60*) programme they run hosts various projects with older volunteers, including mentorship programmes where older people share their expertise with youth at a university and an **Older Voices** (*Voces mayores*) programme where older volunteers have been trying to make the discrimination and struggles older persons can face in various aspects of society much more visible. This is mainly done through online content creation, like podcasts talking about the unique life experiences of guests (Fundación Navarro Viola 2024a).

There are a multitude of programmes where older persons are recruited to help other older persons too, in an intra- rather than intergenerational exchange. For example, the Silver Guardian Programme in Singapore (see box 2) focuses on intragenerational exchange. In Japan, **Silver Human Resources Centers** are a government-backed initiative to provide older adults with opportunities to continue feeling productive in old age by coordinating flexible work and volunteer roles. While not exclusively focusing on volunteering, older people are similarly recruited to provide companionship to their less-abled peers, to help with household chores, grocery shopping, etc. (Hoshi et al. 2017).

Another initiative in Denmark, active in the 2000s and 2010s, was **Wellbeing of the elderly locally** (*Ældres trivsel lokalt*), set up to help reduce loneliness and isolation among older persons by matching the more abled and advantaged with those less so. With financing from central and local government, the project successfully oversaw tens of thousands of volunteer-hours each week. Volunteers visited recipients, helped with practical tasks, went shopping, joined in physical group exercises and participated in social activities. Three-quarters (76 per cent) of those involved said their quality of life improved with participation and more than a third felt direct health improvements. Above all, three-quarters of those that previously felt lonely before volunteering no longer did (Naegele et al. 2011).

In the examples discussed so far, most involve the one-on-one visitation or meeting of older persons with recipients, namely youth and peers. The location of these visits and meetings is either at home or a local community centre. But this is not always the case. Older persons can also act as a vital source of social (and material) support in times of crisis for a community at large, the most extreme cases being during natural disasters. Their social ties and local knowledge can help support networks more efficiently coordinate aid and on a personal level they can be a source of reassurance to others given their own previously lived experiences. Box 3 presents one example where older people volunteered their time in situations of natural disaster recovery.

[25] Translated by the authors.

Box 3. Older people and volunteering in natural disaster recovery

The 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami caused widespread devastation in north-eastern Japan. It resulted in nearly 20,000 dead and 400,000 displaced from their homes, in many cases permanently. In its aftermath, older people stepped up and volunteered in several ways. In Minamisanriku town, where one-third of the population was aged 65+, older people were mobilized to act as Elderly Volunteer Support Workers. They became a conduit between the overstretched disaster response team and isolated or displaced older households, who they visited daily. Outcomes included improved wellbeing, optimism and personal agency in an otherwise tragic time. At Fukushima nuclear power station, hundreds of older engineers volunteered in a "Veterans Corps" to clean up hazardous material and stabilize the plant.

Sources: Yotsui et al. (2016) and Skilled Veterans Corps for Fukushima (2025)

Cultural and civic participation in local communities through volunteering

Volunteering is one way older persons contribute to the cultural continuity of their communities. From sports to arts and culture, it is often older people that step up and volunteer to preserve local traditions, enrich the social development of youth, host fun local activities and fortify civic bonds. At the same time, older volunteers themselves can be empowered by a renewed sense of purpose and satisfaction in having contributed to the environments in which they grew up in. And, intuitively, these sorts of activities are inherently enjoyable.

Volunteering in sports is a common and enjoyable way for older persons to be productively and positively involved in their community. In Japan, **Community Sport Leaders** are a unique public sector volunteering role taken on by almost 50,000 older people (Sasakawa Sports Foundation 2024). One-third of such leaders are 60+. Appointed under local municipalities, participating sports leaders coordinate sports programmes by refereeing, organizing competitions, running school clubs and supporting larger events like marathons. While paid a token wage, they are primarily volunteers and contribute significantly to promoting sports and strengthening community bonds.

In the realm of culture, older persons can contribute to the preservation and flourishing of local cultural heritage through volunteering. They can play an important role in organizing cultural festivals, teaching traditional crafts, teaching history or sharing stories with younger generations. In Poland, the *Kraśnik Council of Women Association* (*Stowarzyszenie Rada Kobiet Powiatu Kraśnickiego*) is a local association of older women in a rural area of around 100,000 inhabitants. Volunteers promote local traditions and cuisine by participating in regional and national events featuring traditional food, promoting farm tourism and the appreciation of local nature and performing outreach at schools and community centres (Naegele et al. 2011). The organization also conducts charity on behalf of the community of Kraśnik and more generally represents the rights and dignities of older women with the government (Krajowej Sieci Obszarów Wiejskich 2024). In Hungary, older persons are encouraged to become volunteers at the **Budapest Cultural Centre**, where they can act as cultural mediators or otherwise join local community organizations as representatives. Their tasks vary from monitoring community internet outreach platforms to organizing events promoting local and Hungarian culture (Ehlers et al. 2011).

In these examples, volunteering is organized among older adults in ways that positively benefit their communities at large, by promoting and engaging in sports, the conservation of cultural heritage and traditional activities. In this way they contribute to cultivating community bonds and identity, serving also as a link from the past to the present.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Volunteering in old age is an important opportunity for individuals to improve their own mental, physical and social wellbeing, while enabling them to help others. As the ageing of societies across the globe picks up its pace, more countries will seek to enrich their policy approaches to active ageing, including through building a more coherent infrastructure for volunteering in old age. The following are some key takeaways from the current review of existing trends in volunteerism among older workers and the institutional framework in which such volunteerism exists:

- **States can better integrate volunteering into their national ageing strategies.** Volunteering is closely associated (and in many studies has a direct causal link) with improved cognitive function, improved sociability and mental health and higher life satisfaction among older persons. At the same time, it is not common for the promotion of volunteering in old age to feature prominently in currently active national ageing plans and strategies. In some cases, volunteering does not feature at all. When the connection is not made explicitly, a key tool for supporting the quality of life and wellbeing of older persons is lost. Furthermore, volunteering features noticeable positive externalities beyond the volunteering individual – for example in the proliferation of cultural heritage, supporting disaster recovery and building stronger intergenerational ties.[26] Recognizing the breadth of positive linkages adds weight to the advocacy for a more consistent inclusion of volunteerism as a vital element of current and future national ageing strategies and implementation plans. The attention that the Singapore government has given to volunteering as a form of active ageing can be seen as a possible good practice to emulate, especially as a case where its targets have been accompanied by concrete commitments and action.

- **Plans and policy documents should be backed up with actual commitments.** Once included in a national ageing plan or strategy or a related document, there is often a lack of genuine commitments beyond general goals for supporting old-aged volunteer programmes. To be taken more seriously, targets should be turned into promises with the appropriate funding allocations and plans of action. It is generally difficult to map the cause and effect of extant volunteering programmes and their underlying policy framework; going forward, ad hoc provisions are far from enough.

- **Volunteers and volunteering organizations can be better supported with dedicated volunteer matching platforms.** Many countries do not have digital labour market information platforms available for old-aged volunteers to find local and appropriate volunteer opportunities (at least of a broad/national nature, though some do for volunteers in general). By reducing searching costs and making the process of becoming a volunteer more intuitive, the number of older people participating in volunteering is likely to rise. In the cases where volunteering matching platforms already exist, targeting older people, through separate pages and curated volunteering opportunities, could be enough to improve the number of first-time 65+ volunteers. At the same time, given the technophobia of some older persons, it will be important to also utilize more traditional means of posting volunteerism opportunities, for example with flyers posted at senior community centres.

[26] The UN Secretary-General urges Member States to maximize the intergenerational externalities of volunteerism, building a lifecycle approach into programmes designed for active ageing. See UNGA (2024). The principles are also espoused in regional planning (see European Commission 2021).

- **Barriers to volunteering can also be reduced by promoting the accessibility of volunteering opportunities and improving national access to social protection and care services.** Older persons can encounter diverse barriers to volunteering, spanning physical limitations, income constraints, care burdens and a lack of access to local or easy-to-reach opportunities. By promoting (where appropriate) the geographic dispersal of volunteer organizations, including with access to public transport, more older people may be incentivized to become volunteers for the first time. In addition, it is important to promote volunteering in low-income and rural areas, which is critical so that no group is excluded, and more generally, accelerates progress in universal social protection, including old-age pensions, so that more older persons can afford to retire or work fewer hours to more easily accommodate volunteering hours. To reduce gender gaps in volunteerism, countries will need to step up the provision of care services that would allow more women to work – paid or unpaid, volunteer or otherwise – outside the home.

- **Adopting an intergenerational and lifecycle approach to creating volunteer programmes can maximize the positive benefits for volunteers and recipients across generations.** Encouraging older persons to volunteer to help younger generations can create mutual benefits and deepen intergenerational ties. Older volunteers can facilitate the transfer of local history and culture, traditional arts and crafts, culinary knowledge, stories and more. At the same time, younger generations can not only give good company for older persons but help them learn modern skills too. At the same time, older persons can successfully volunteer their time with less abled older peers, which can be especially effective at reducing loneliness and improving social health.

- **Promoting volunteering as a form of civic participation is a core tenet of active ageing that can improve community bonds and the lives of youth.** In line with intergenerational exchange and peer volunteering, older volunteers can give more generally to their local communities rather than on an individual level. By supporting local initiatives and community projects, they can make a difference in the lives of many. However, they need the supporting infrastructure to be allowed to get involved. As an example, amicable municipal governments can provide facilities and volunteer opportunities and schools can allow volunteers to help with running school sports clubs and so on.

The examples of volunteer work among older persons highlighted in this study illustrate how a simple yet robust policy infrastructure for supporting volunteering, with inclusive platforms and well-funded, targeted programmes, can better harness the potential of older persons to volunteer and benefit others on an individual and community level. Volunteer programmes for older persons, and not limited to those discussed in this report, differ dramatically programme by programme in their vision and application. Yet they are implicitly united in recognizing the importance of supporting older persons and their altruism. With much progress already made, especially under the umbrella of UN, WHO and regional frameworks, there is still significant room for improvement at the country level for promoting and sustaining volunteerism among older persons.

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