

Report on the 5th Forum European Meeting 1-2 June 2023

Held at Førde, Norway and hosted by Norec

Current challenges in Europe and their impact on international volunteering organisations

Pandemic, war, energy shortage, price increases, refugees, budget reallocations – European governments as well as civil society and volunteering organisations have had their share of challenges since our last meeting of European Forum members and associates in Luzern in May 2018. The organisations have had to change and adapt to a new situation. It is time to meet again, take stock, share experiences, get new ideas on how to cope, and inspiration to go forward.

Extract from the letter of invitation 28 February 2023

This report attempts to draw out the main points of discussions over a two-day period amongst 24 attendees at the 5th Forum Europe Meeting. Presentations were supported by Powerpoint slides.

Welcome and Opening Addresses

Jan Olav Baarøy (Director General of Norec) welcomed the attendees on behalf of Norec. He referred back to the Forum Europe meeting in Lausanne in 2018, and how much the world had changed since. While Norec had changed since the Norwegian Peace Corps was founded in 1963, the focus on development and enabling Norwegians to understand the world was still essentially the objective today.¹

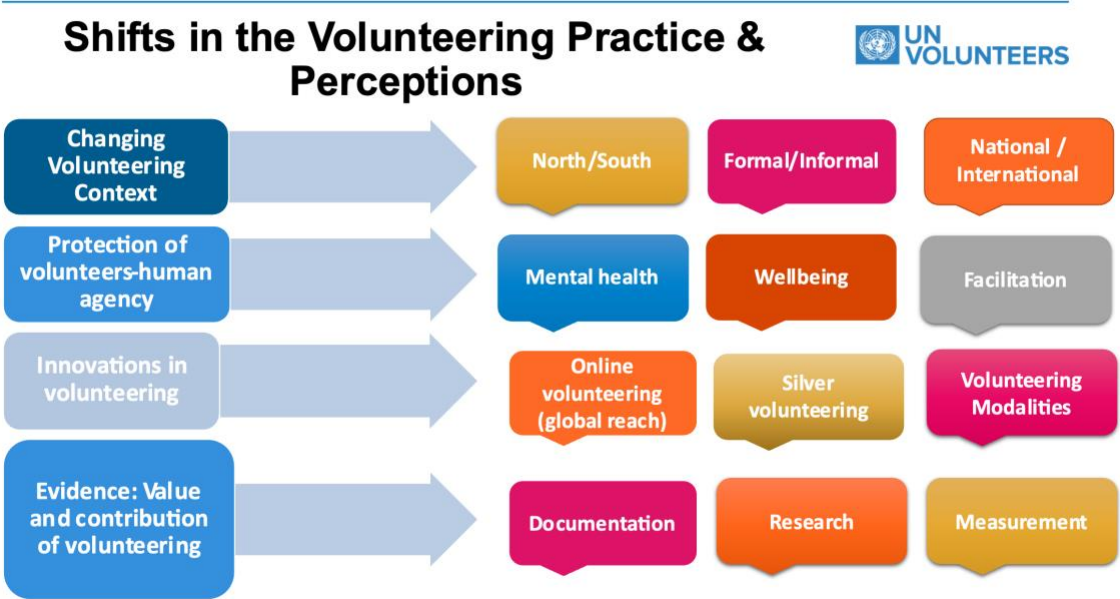
Heather Shapter (Executive Director of Crossroads International and Chair of Forum) welcomed those present on behalf of Forum and thanked Norec for hosting the meeting. Heather also reflected that it was five years since the last European Forum meeting.

Jenny Følling (Mayor) welcomed the conference to Førde, expressing her concern at the geo-political situation. The people of the town wanted to help Ukraine, and 160 refugees will be settled in Førde this year. She praised the important role of volunteers in supporting this. She was delighted that Norec were based in Førde and welcomed the conference to enjoy their stay.

¹ Norec's short film can be watched [here](#).

Video Addresses

The conference then heard from two presenters who could not attend in person. The first was Tapiwa Kamuruko on behalf of UNV, who provided an overview of the state of volunteering, focusing on the trends and drivers for change, setting out shifts in volunteering practice and perceptions and the major development challenges to be faced in the years ahead. He concluded by looking at the factors that facilitated and/or presented barriers to volunteering going forward.



The second presenter, Mrs. Bjørg Sandkjær, Norway’s State Secretary for Development Affairs, outlined the development principles of the Norwegian Government, emphasising the context of Russia’s ‘brutal attack’ on Ukraine². Gross National Income had increased as a result of surging energy prices, allowing Development Aid to rise to 1% of GDP, with Ukraine being the biggest recipient of Norwegian ODA. Her concern was higher food and fuel prices experienced by the Global South and listening to their voices that the rich countries were focusing on themselves. It seemed global trust was under pressure. The goal of a better world now seemed harder to reach. She stressed the importance of civil society partnerships in building a fair society, and so it was important for the Norwegian Government to have a close dialogue and partnerships with civil society.

Organisations sharing their experience of the current situation, and their strategies

Each organisation had the opportunity to set out what their organisation did, the challenges faced currently and how they were dealing with them. The responses ranged from global and national level issues on one hand, to specific organisational challenges on the other. The wealth of information shared cannot be repeated here, but presentations by all participants are available at the above link.

² Mrs. Sandkjær’s video address can be watched [here](#).

Challenges

A number of common challenges were expressed by those present. Quotes from presenters are presented (anonymously) in boxes.

- Inflation and increases in the **cost of living** were widely expressed. While there was limited experience of the *direct* impact of the war in Ukraine, cost of living increases were attributed to this by a number of presenters. The combination of both factors was reported to be impacting both aid budgets and the real value of volunteer allowances.

'The rising cost of living has impacted volunteers' everyday lives and stipends, as well as sending and hosting organisations' operational financial model.'

'The rising cost of living (food, rent and energy prices) heavily affect volunteers coming from the Global South. The Ukraine war reinforced this again.'

- Issues of **migration** were also widely raised, including ³ the treatment of refugees and the challenges they face. This was also linked by one presenter to the emergence of far-right political groups.

'Refugees and stateless persons are represented by third parties and considered passive elements. There is a double standard and racism in how refugees are treated.'

- **Shrinking civil society space** was referenced on a number of occasions. Central and Latin America were specifically mentioned, although the issue was also raised more generally. There was also discussion about solidarity approaches to volunteering in development, and a new solidarity programme launched by one member. Challenges around discourses on volunteering were noted, including in one European country where voluntourism has been heavily criticised.

'Central American regimes diminish space for national and international civil society, cooperation and funding.'

- **Climate change** – termed 'climate emergency' by one organisation – also featured strongly as an issue. An increasing awareness of the interdependence of people and communities was noted, and there was a recognised need for new ways of 'being and doing'. There was also a presentation on the work of the Forum Climate Action Working Group.

On the challenges faced at organisational level, **volunteer recruitment** was raised by organisations in different ways. Generally, recruitment was seen to be difficult in what was termed a competitive environment of low unemployment and other options for prospective volunteers. Some participants raised the issue of 'Generation Z' and their interest in volunteering. There was also mention in the presentations and discussions about the quality of applicants. Some participants also noted increased prevalence of mental health issues amongst potential volunteers.

The closing down of civil society space and the extension of barriers by nation states was also evidenced by the difficulties of securing **visas and work permits** for volunteers. Increased cost,

³ This was part of the Day 2 sessions which are discussed later in the report.

difficulties in obtaining them, and rule changes were all cited as barriers to international volunteering. This was mirrored by reports of growing insularity in some European societies, a point that was raised by the Norwegian government representative and was reflected in some of the presentations.

In the current context, the availability of finance was mentioned in terms of a general decline in the real value of funds or specific reductions in nominal allocations to programmes. For instance, one government had decided to increase the South-North component of an international volunteering programme, without any increase in the overall budget, leaving less funding available for North-South programmes. At the same time, funding from private sources was reported to be in decline. In contrast to the relaxation of COVID regulations, some mention was made of tighter donor controls on the utilisation of funding.

Finally, the challenges of post-COVID restructuring, notably using digitalisation, were raised and linked to a level of 'burn-out.' It was not clear how widespread this was, but it matches with some wider research on NGO staff in the post-pandemic period.

Responding to the Challenges

There were some common threads to participants' approaches to these challenges. The area that was explicitly identified on the most occasions was that of networking, building alliances, and engaging with others outside the sector. In part this is a recognition that addressing issues such as climate change cannot be done at a sectoral level. But this reflected a more general approach to what might be seen as an enhanced prioritisation of external engagement.

A second area was a focus on organisational restructuring, perhaps driven by localisation or, more commonly, digitalisation. For some this involved a repositioning of the direction of the organisation or a process of reaffirmation of their mission. This is also linked to changes in programme modalities. On this point there was no single direction of change, with some looking at South-North and South-South programmes, others considering hybrid models, or a more general focus on innovation.⁴

A third cluster of responses can be seen in respect of advocacy, campaigning, and engagement with the public. The rationale for this varied. For some it was about promoting the activity of volunteering, perhaps challenging voluntourism perspectives or trying to persuade people to become volunteers. Others linked this to engaging the public and policy-makers on the big issues of climate change or migration.

Overall there was a sense of approaches to improve organisational performance, developing more relevant and effective programme modalities, and improved engagement with the external environment. Participants were taking – or intending to take – numerous and wide-ranging actions in response to the current challenges.

⁴ Agiamondo – Managing Outcomes handbook available at https://www.agiamondo.de/fileadmin/user_upload/A_PDF-Dateien/Broschueren/PME_Handbuch_EN_final_Web.pdf

Current practices and approach to research and international volunteering

The second day of the conference started with a review of research. Forum had just published a paper on Inequalities in Research and Evidence and James O'Brien of Forum introduced this report and the activities and plans of Forum's Research, Practice, Policy and Research (RPPL) Group. IVCO 2023 would focus on youth and there would be a challenge paper, videos and blog posts to support it. A survey of Forum members was under way. Forum were also looking to develop a doctoral research studentship with the University of Northumbria in the UK.

Cliff Allum of Birmingham University reflected on recent and current research on volunteer modalities in the post-COVID era and how some changes had been accelerated and others reverted. He linked the issues raised in the 'Inequalities in Research and Evidence' report to the way in which recent research around COVID-19 had been undertaken and how this arguably had a different focus on the changes through the pandemic as a consequence. He concluded that changes in modalities now posed issues about the role of international volunteers, since COVID-19 had demonstrated that expertise existed in the Global South, and shown the resilience of community volunteers in such a crisis.

Tapiwa Kamuruko of UNV presented current thinking on 2025 State of the World's Volunteerism Report, which will focus on Measurement. He set out the rationale for the work and the latest version of the conceptual framework. A review of academic and research studies had indicated four broad areas of focus where evaluations, appraisals, or estimations of the value or contribution of volunteering have been made. These would provide the basis for developing the Volunteer Index. The initial work of stakeholder consultations and identifying research partners was now underway, with plans to launch the report in September 2025.

Martin Schreiber set out Unité's work on 'Practitioner Challenges of measuring the impact in the Global South of Development Workers on the achievements of SDGs.' This model operated at three levels: capacity development, development service, and systems development focusing on both quantitative and qualitative components. Martin explored the benefits and challenges that had emerged in this work and how this approach supported Unité members, especially through their handbook on Qualitative and Participatory Impact Assessment.⁵

The research session was concluded by Matt Baillie Smith of Northumbria University who addressed some of the themes raised in previous sessions and focused on the importance of being realistic about what research could offer. Generally, researchers were better at generating questions than answers, a learning opportunity rather than a problem-solving one. He set out the case for a collaborative and co-produced approach to research and a number key areas that would facilitate that.

Towards a hopeful, transformative, collaborative research agenda ⁶

⁵ See <https://www.unite-ch.org/en/studies>


⁶ Taken from the slide deck "Crises as catalysts for changes in research on volunteering and development?" as presented to the conference by Matt Baillie Smith

- Getting 'research' off its pedestal
- Trust and openness
- Better understand roles and added value
- Questions NOT answers
- Research is not separate from action: methodological innovations
- Collaborating vs contracting?
- Finding time for the 'thinking' as much as the 'doing'

Migration, refugees and implications for volunteering

Dervla King of Comhlámh and Syed Hasnain of the Italian National Union of Refugees and Exiles (UNIRE) focused on the major challenges of migration. Dervla opened with a simple statement: 80,000 refugees were expected to arrive in Ireland from Ukraine. This was in addition to the increasing numbers seeking international protection (14,000 in 2022). The context in Ireland was a homelessness crisis, a rise in hate crimes and protests about the cost of living. There was an emergence of far-right activity not previously known in Ireland and Dublin had seen anti-migrant protests and attacks on migrants living in tents. Counter protests had been organised on the theme of diversity not division.

Comhlámh had played a role in this, developing on-line seminars and encouraging volunteer engagement, including volunteering in refugee camps in Greece. This represented a shift in focus towards issues in Europe.



First Wednesdays Summer Series 2023

FROM LEGAL OBLIGATIONS TO ILLEGAL PRACTICES: Challenging Pushbacks & the Erosion of the Rule of Law on the European Borders

Join us for First Wednesdays Summer Series 2023, in partnership with Oxfam Ireland, which will focus on the critical issue of EU pushbacks and the breakdown of the rule of law at the European borders. It aims to shed light on the human rights violations, law breaking, and ethical concerns associated with the EU's pushback policies and unlawful actions towards people seeking protection.

Join the conversation, register now!

Syed focused on the experience of Europe as a whole. He described the situation for people seeking protection in Europe as moves towards the criminalisation of solidarity with consequences for volunteering priorities. Over 100 million people worldwide are now displaced, with 32.5 million outside their country of origin. 36% of these are hosted in five countries: Turkey, Colombia, Germany, Pakistan and Uganda. Nearly 900,000 people sought asylum in the European Union in 2022, an increase of 64% on the previous year. Syed then turned to the challenges, which were many, amplifying Devla's account of events in Ireland. He posed questions for the conference to consider:

- **What, if any, are the key issues and implications for our work?**
- **Are there ways in which our existing resources, practice and expertise around international volunteering can also be used within our national contexts?**
- **What collective next steps should we take?**

Discussion Groups

After a day and a half of presentations, there was now an opportunity for informal discussion groups. One met on research and another on climate change and others had opportunities to explore issues of common interest arising from the conference . There was a brief report back.

The research discussions had focused on issues such as expectations that organisations might have of researchers, the difference between research and evaluations, and the importance of building a relationship. The climate change report back posed questions as to how IVCOs could connect to other climate change networks and what climate change meant for volunteering opportunities in the Global South.

Concluding take aways

To conclude the event, participants were asked to consider and share their key takeaways from the two days. This generated some common threads, notably the opportunity to share, recognise what we had in common and what our differences might be, as well as specific reflections on what had emerged from the presentations, such as mental health, gender inequality and ‘criminalising solidarity.’

The conference concluded with thanks to Norec for hosting the event.

Cliff Allum

June 2023

Annex 1: Euro Forum program 1-2 June 2023

THURSDAY 1st JUNE

| | | |
|-----------|---|---|
| 0900-0915 | Welcome to Norec, Jan Olav Baarøy (Director Norec) | Norec |
| 0915-0930 | Welcome to Forum EuroMeeting, Heather Shapter (Chair Forum) | Forum |
| 0930-0940 | Welcome to Førde and Sunnfjord, Jenny Følling (Mayor) | |
| 0940-1000 | Who are we? Round of short presentations of participants | All |
| 0945-1000 | Video address on state of volunteering by Tapiwa Kamuruko of UNV | UNV |
| 1000-1030 | International development cooperation in light of the current situation in Europe. Video address from State Secretary Bjørg Sandkjær, MFA-Norway, followed by discussion. | Norec |
| 1030-1100 | Break | |
| 1100-1200 | <i>Presentations by each organisation</i> , moderated by Norec. 10 min presentation, 5 min questions and comments (ref. note) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Basic orientation about the organisation - Challenges in current situation - Solutions, strategies and actions taken | France Volontaire Engagement Global Unité Zavod Voluntariat Crossroads International |
| 1200-1300 | Lunch | |
| 1300-1430 | (Presentations continued) | Agiamondo Pista Magica UNIRE AKLHÜ Forum Climate Action Group |
| 1430-1500 | Break | |
| 1500-1600 | (Presentations continued) | HorizonT3000 VSO Comhlámh |
| 1645 | Visit to Art museum exhibition of painter <i>Nicolai Astrup</i> | Norec |
| 1800 | Bus departure (from bus station) for dinner at Jølstramuséet | Norec |
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FRIDAY 2nd JUNE

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| 0900-1030 | <p><i>Presentation of current volunteering research</i>, moderated by France Volontaires</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Forum's research agenda 2023 - Review of Volunteer models - State of the World Volunteering 2024 on Measurement - Impact measurement - Volunteering research in times of crisis | <p>Forum Cliff Allum UNV Unité Matt Bailie-Smith</p> |
| 1030-1100 | Break | |
| 1100-1200 | The situation for people seeking protection in Europe, and consequences for volunteering funding and priorities. | Comlamh and UNIRE |
| 1200-1300 | Lunch | |
| 1300-1430 | Discussion in common interest - groups based on presentations over the two days, plus bi-lateral meetings | Norec |
| 1430-1500 | Break | |
| 1500-1600 | Presentations of group-work. Conclusions of the meeting. Rounding up. Matters arising. The way ahead. Cooperation areas. Role of Forum. | Forum |
| 1630-1900 | A range of leisure activities may be facilitated, based on personal interests (and weather). | Norec |
| 1930 | Optional dinner at <i>Pikant</i> for those remaining | Norec |

Annex 2: List of attendees

| Name | Organisation |
|-------------------|--|
| Jan Olav Baarøy | Norec |
| Helge Espe | Norec |
| Thomas Viken | Norec |
| Tormod Nuland | Norec |
| Heather Shapter | Forum and Crossroads International, Canada |
| Lucie Morillon | France Volontaires, France |
| Dervla King | Comhlámh, Ireland |
| James O'Brien | Forum |
| Katharine Brown | Forum |
| Raji Sultan | UNITE, Switzerland |
| Martin Schreiber | UNITE, Switzerland |
| Raheem Hassanali | VSO, UK |
| Sónia Fernandes | Pista Magicá, Portugal |
| Petra Novarra | Horizon 3000, Austria |
| Jens Kreuter | Engagement Global, Germany |
| Martin Vehrenberg | Agiamundo, Germany |
| Wanja Amling | AKLHU, Germany |

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|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| Matt Bailee Smith | University of Northumbria, UK |
| Cliff Allum | University of Birmingham, UK |
| Syed Hasnain | UNIRE, Italy |
| Pablo Dourojeanni | Norec |
| Margunn Indrebø | Norec |
| Ane Rosnes | Norec |
| Tapiwa Kamuruko | UNV (remote attendee) |