



Forum Member Responses to COVID-19

25 May 2020

Volunteer repatriation and deployment

The initial phase of volunteer repatriation has now ended. Some organisations repatriated all of their volunteers, or left a small number who were in strategically important roles in place. Some kept most of their international volunteers in placement, as many as 70% or 80% in some cases. In some cases, those who did return were predominantly on short-term placements or were in vulnerable categories for COVID. All organisations offered their international volunteers the option of returning. Community and national volunteers remained in their placements at a higher rate than international volunteers. South-North international volunteers stayed in placement at a higher rate than North-South international volunteers.

Members are not planning to deploy volunteers in the coming months, with the exception of some who will be part of COVID-related humanitarian relief. Some organisations hope to deploy volunteers internationally before the end of 2020. Travel restrictions in some countries are beginning to lift, but quarantine requirements remain in place and the risk remains that recently-lifted restrictions will be re-instated. Some organisations are seeing increased interest in volunteering, possibly linked to higher unemployment rates as a result of COVID.

Alternative volunteer models

National volunteers and in-country staff are helping to maintain contact with partner organisations and keep programmes going, and they are gathering and sharing on-the-ground intelligence with head office and home governments. A number of organisations have carried out surveys of partner organisations to assess their needs. Forum will host a webinar in June on how organisations are supporting partners through national volunteers and in-country staff following the repatriation of international volunteers.

Most organisations are now seriously considering remote volunteering – to support existing programmes, and as a way to keep volunteers engaged. In many cases, returned volunteers and those who were scheduled to depart are remotely supporting overseas partners. As a result, some organisations have not yet faced the challenges of establishing new programmes or new partnerships with remote volunteering, or recruiting and on-boarding new remote volunteers. Some members are exploring a blended model – placements with an in-person component and an online component.

Challenges with remote volunteering include the fact that many people in the Global South lack internet access, especially in rural areas, and that some partner organisations are too focused on immediate COVID response to engage fully with remote volunteers. IVCOs are faced with the question of how to pay stipends to online volunteers, and they are putting in place new systems to train and support online volunteers.

Funding and Advocacy

Government support and donor support are holding steady for many Forum members, but they are fragile. For many, funding from governments and major donors is relatively secure for 2020 but uncertain for 2021 and beyond. There is pressure on ODA budgets in general, and on volunteering in particular. It is expected that this will increase. Across the board, public fundraising has decreased as a result of COVID.

Members are advocating for the value of volunteering, including through direct lobbying of decision-makers and public engagement through telling volunteer stories. Organisations are developing the case for volunteering for development and demonstrating the impact of volunteers. This includes but is not limited to the role of volunteers in COVID response. Part of this case is demonstrating that IVCOs can continue to support partner organisations without deploying international volunteers.

A number of members are producing and pushing out volunteer success stories, especially through social media. Forum has produced an opinion piece on [the future of volunteering in the coronavirus era](#). Forum can play a role in sharing the case for support between organisations and coordinating this work.

What next?

Members are considering how to diversify their offerings so future crises that result in travel restrictions do not have the same effect. Organisations are fundamentally re-thinking how they work, and what new modalities can enable them to continue to operate without sending volunteers internationally.

Organisations are considering how to keep volunteers, staff, and host communities safe going forward. Forum will host a webinar in July on volunteer safety and security in the wake of COVID.

Some members are supporting awareness-raising and public information around COVID, and disaster response.

Human Resources

All members have been working remotely, some are beginning to return to office working, in a limited and phased way. The shift to remote working continues to be a challenge.