

**A HANDBOOK FOR ORGANISATIONS THAT
WORK WITH VOLUNTEERS IN DEVELOPMENT**

Designing and Delivering Projects: Design and Planning



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Introduction

The Global Volunteering Standard is a voluntary standard that seeks to promote continuous learning and improvement for volunteer-involving organisations. It is the result of a collaborative global effort over three years drawing upon the expertise and wisdom of several hundred people and organisations from 80 countries across the volunteering in development sector and beyond. We have aimed to capture and reflect our collective understanding of good practice throughout the volunteering programme cycle:

- **Designing and Delivering Projects**
- **Duty of Care**
- **Managing Volunteers**
- **Measuring Impact**

This manual is the first in a two-part series addressing the Designing and Delivering Projects section. For key terms, please see our **Definitions** document and visit Forum's **Global Volunteering Standard Resource Library** for guiding documents and templates shared by volunteer-involving organisations. The topics in this manual address how projects are designed to ensure long-term impact, conservation and climate resilience, all while keeping people safe.



Good Practice:

Use Forum's **Global Volunteering Standard Resource Library** to locate resources to complement this handbook by selecting the overall tag label "**Design and Planning**".

Project Design

MEETING THE STANDARD:

- Design projects that identify the needs and rights of community members and ensure inclusivity and sustainability of results.
- Co-conduct a thorough, community-led context assessment.
- Community helps to identify a clear strategic goal for the project.
- Community validates the project before it launches, making sure it honours the rights of all citizens involved.
- Design all programmes in line with best practice on the protection of children, vulnerable adults and the wider community. This means, amongst other principles, not permitting volunteering in orphanages.
- Community is involved in every step of the design of the project, defining the scope as well as what success looks like.

The design and planning of a responsible and impactful Volunteering in Development project ensures the project fits into broader development objectives, is led by members of the local community and will 'do no harm'. Integral to this approach is grounding the project design in thorough research, organisational learning, community interest, and needs assessment, all while employing a rights-based and inclusive methodology. By weaving these elements into the fabric of a project's foundation, your organisation will ensure a thoughtful and responsive framework that protects the community, including children and other vulnerable groups. Research informs nuanced understanding of local dynamics, organisational learning refines strategies based on past experiences, and community interest and needs assessments shape interventions that resonate with the people served. This rights-based and inclusive approach not only respects the inherent dignity of communities but also fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment. In essence, holistic and informed design methodology aligns volunteering in development projects with the values of equity, inclusion, and sustainable impact.



Tip:

There are numerous needs assessment guides available online as documents as well as short videos.

Identifying Needs and Assessing Context

The first step of any project design is a needs assessment. Not only is this the obvious requirement in terms of understanding community needs, but if your organisation can work with a community to design a project that will respond to identified needs and take context into account, this means that there is a greater chance that activities and programming will be successful, impactful and sustainable.

For volunteering in development projects, needs and context assessment should be informed by a human rights-based approach that recognizes the importance of recognizing and respecting the fundamental rights of all individuals within the community. This starts by engaging diverse community members, ensuring their active participation in the assessment process. Facilitating a process that allows for community leadership will emphasise the principles of non-discrimination, equality, and empowerment, seeking to amplify the voices of marginalised groups and vulnerable populations. This will involve conducting a thorough analysis of the context – all social, economic, and cultural factors, and considering how these intersect with human rights issues. Make sure that an intersectional gender-based analysis is part of this process. This will help to gain the widest understanding of inequalities, challenges and opportunities within a community.

The assessment should prioritise identifying and addressing systemic barriers to access and participation. Additionally, the incorporation of feedback loops will allow you to continue ongoing dialogue with the community to ensure that their evolving needs and rights are always taken into account. The goal of your assessment should be to increase your understanding of the community context and empower communities to advocate for their rights, fostering sustainable development that is rooted in principles of dignity, justice, and equity.



Good Practice:

Cultural sensitivity is key when designing a needs assessment, from initial planning through to the analysis and use of results. This includes accessible language and practice meant to make sure that the most diverse range of voices, perspectives and experiences are incorporated.





What is a Human Rights Based Approach?

A human rights-based approach is a framework that prioritises the protection and fulfilment of human rights in all aspects of decision-making, policy development, and implementation, ensuring that individuals are treated with dignity, equality, and fairness. It emphasises accountability, participation, and empowerment, viewing human rights as both the means and ends of sustainable development initiatives.



The following is a list of steps that will help to shape your needs assessment.¹

- **Develop a Plan:** You will want to lay out a plan that includes all aspects of the needs assessment process. There will be timing constraints, so you want to make sure that you are realistic about your planning and the amount of time available for consultations.
- **Understand the Community:** Before engaging in discussion about community needs, it is important to have a strong understanding of the community and its present resources. This can involve desk research, such as consulting available data and descriptions of the community as well as initial discussions with community members.
- **Listen to the Community:** This can include public forums, listening sessions, focus groups, interviews and/or surveys, depending on what is most appropriate in the community where your organisation is working. The goal is to identify community needs and problems.
- **Analyse Issues:** After listening to the community through a range of different approaches, the goal of this step is to analyse the data collected and identify the needs expressed.
- **Validate, Validate, Validate:** Once you have had a chance to analyse and review your data and the needs expressed, you should validate the findings with the community members and other key stakeholders to ensure you have heard and understood their needs.



Tip:

Never start from scratch! Learn from your previous programs and/or base your needs assessment on research that has already been conducted. Make sure you work with “interpreters” either cultural (if you are an international NGO) or community (if you are national but not local organization). Having allies who can not only open doors but help you understand context and give nuance to the information you are receiving is helpful. They can also help ensure you are as inclusive as possible and bridge barriers to connecting. Desk research can be incredibly helpful and help to increase efficiency!

¹ This list has been developed after consulting a range of sources, including Kansas City University's Community Tool Box, UNDP's Needs Assessment Tools and other organisations who have tools available online.

By implementing the above, you can ensure that you receive as many perspectives as possible and you have ensured that the potential project will meet their identified needs. Research has been done to discover how best to conduct a needs assessment in different contexts, be it rural or urban or otherwise. All, however, ask that you connect directly with the community through approaches such as surveying, interviews, focus groups, meetings, and observation. Context-specific knowledge is essential for fostering partnerships, and maintaining flexibility to enhance the project's effectiveness and positive impact within diverse settings.



Good Practice:

Go beyond the obvious! A crucial good practice for context assessment in international development projects is to conduct a thorough and nuanced analysis that goes beyond mere statistical data. This involves engaging with local communities, key stakeholders, and understanding the historical, cultural, political, and economic dynamics that shape the context. Utilising a participatory approach, where community members actively contribute to the assessment, helps capture valuable insights and ensures that the project aligns with local priorities and aspirations. Furthermore, regular updates and continuous monitoring throughout the project lifecycle allow for adaptability to changing contexts, promoting resilience and sustainability.



Tip:

When conducting focus group discussions, in some contexts and depending on the topic of discussions and type of questions you will be asking, it might be important to divide your community members into different groups, such as by sex, and/or age, and/or religious backgrounds, and/or by profession, etc. This encourages honest and open discussion, but also allows you to triangulate information or assess the needs of diverse groups of individuals.



Identifying Goals

It is one thing to engage in a needs and context assessment, but the next step is ensuring that specific goals for any project are developed. Many government funders demand a results-based management approach. Governments will often provide a significant amount of online support documents to assist you in thinking through goals for your project, which are often called “outcomes”. These are the desired results of the project. This is obviously key if government is your funder, but these tried-and-true resources are free and your organisation can make use of them and adapt for your own purposes. What’s most important is that the goals are identified in a participatory manner. The following is the description of a process that could be undertaken with your partners and other stakeholders to identify goals collaboratively:

- 1. Prioritise Goals Together:** Facilitate participatory sessions where stakeholders collectively prioritise the identified needs into specific goals.
- 2. Define SMART Objectives:** Work collaboratively to transform general aspirations into Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART) goals.
- 3. Seek Consensus:** Encourage dialogue and consensus-building to ensure that the identified goals align with the shared vision of the community.
- 4. Community Validation:** Share the drafted goals with the community for validation and additional input.
- 5. Iterative Process:** Embrace an iterative approach, incorporating feedback from stakeholders to refine and finalise the identified goals.
- 6. Document and Communicate:** Clearly document the agreed-upon goals and communicate them back to the community, fostering transparency and accountability.



Good Practice:

Make sure that all project design takes safeguarding and ethics into consideration. You need to ensure protection of children, vulnerable adults and the wider community in any project design. You can read more in the Safeguarding section of this handbook.

Maintaining Community Involvement

The community should be involved in the project design every step of the way – after all, they will be the participants in the project and are key to its success. It's not just about encouraging people to join in—it's also about thinking of the things that might get in the way of participation. You've got to plan around any barriers, like using languages that everyone understands during consultations, and choosing times and places that work for everyone. Small details like these can make a big difference. If you don't consider them, it can be difficult for groups that really should be part of it all to take part. By thinking ahead and making things accessible, you can make sure that the widest variety of voices is heard and that you are moving towards a more inclusive and equitable process of doing things. The following chart presents some effective ways to maintain this community involvement for your organisation as well as your partners.

ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION

Organise participatory workshops and community meetings where local residents can actively contribute their insights, needs, and priorities. Create a collaborative space for open dialogue, allowing community members to share their knowledge and perspectives. Consider where and when activities take place to increase inclusivity.

In addition to using local languages, utilise visual tools such as maps, diagrams, or interactive activities to facilitate communication and understanding. These tools can help community members, including those with low literacy levels, to actively participate in the planning and decision-making process.

ENSURING COMMUNITY REPRESENTATION

Form community advisory committees or task forces that represent a diverse range of community members. These groups can serve as intermediaries between the project team and the broader community, ensuring that different voices are heard.

Schedule regular consultations with these committees throughout the project design process. Seek their input on key decisions, gather feedback, and address concerns promptly. This approach promotes ongoing collaboration and a sense of shared ownership.

**Tip:**

Act on feedback that you receive. Be clear on the response or the adjustments made and commit to a collaborative approach in addressing any and all feedback. Think about feedback as a loop – you need to provide feedback on how you have adjusted to the initial feedback!

**Good Practice:**

Clear communication throughout the design of a project is essential. Establish clear communication channels to share project plans, updates, and any other relevant information with the community and all stakeholders. Use local language and formats that will be accessible to all in order to promote inclusivity.



Long-term Impact

Prioritise the project's delivery of enduring and sustainable development impact, emphasising long-term positive outcomes for sustained community development. Yes, the project will eventually end, but the results should continue. Strive to ensure lasting and transformative effects on the targeted communities, and this means contributing to outcomes that can continue within the community.

MEETING THE STANDARD:

- Community and partners ensure the focus of the project is on enhancing capacity within the community.
- Community and organisations ensure the project progresses a broader existing sustainable development goal for the community and, where possible, contributes to a wider, longer-term development programme.
- Organisations demonstrate evidence of project value for money in providing the intended benefits for the community.
- Community and organisations ensure there is a clear sustainability plan that volunteers contribute to where they are in roles that deliver any basic or essential services.

Enhance Capacity

Capacity strengthening means facilitating learning and growth. It's about supporting organisations and individuals to level up: to get better at what they do by boosting their skills, knowledge, and overall capabilities. This involves things like training staff, improving how an organisation is set up, and creating a culture where learning and improvement are ongoing. The idea is to make the community and/or organisations you work with stronger, more adaptable, and better equipped to tackle challenges and achieve goals. It's about championing and supporting the strengthening of partners and the community, but it is also about improving yourself, your organisation and your staff and volunteers to be more effective, resilient, and ready to take on whatever comes your way.



Good Practice:

Develop a detailed skills gap analysis within the organisation or community. This is a systematic assessment used to identify disparities between the skills possessed by individuals or organisations and those required to achieve specific goals or outcomes. There are capacity assessment tools available in the Global Volunteering Standard Resource Library. This entails identifying the specific areas where individuals need support on necessary skills or knowledge to perform their roles effectively. Once these gaps are pinpointed, design and implement targeted training programs that directly address these needs. This approach ensures that capacity-strengthening efforts are focused, relevant, and directly contribute to enhancing the overall capabilities of individuals and the organisation or community as a whole.

Working for the Long Term and Ensuring Benefit for All



What is co-production?

Co-production in the context of international development work refers to a collaborative approach where multiple stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, communities, and other actors, work together to design, implement, and evaluate development projects or policies. Rather than a top-down approach where solutions are imposed, co-production emphasises the involvement of local communities and project participants in decision-making processes.

“The community itself should be at the heart of any and all community development initiatives”

It recognizes the expertise, knowledge, and perspectives of all stakeholders involved and aims to create more inclusive, sustainable, and effective development interventions.

Key principles of co-production include participatory decision-making, shared ownership of initiatives, and mutual respect among all parties involved. This approach often leads to more contextually relevant and culturally appropriate solutions, as well as greater local ownership and sustainability of development efforts.

The best part of ensuring that any project is designed alongside communities and partner priorities is to engage with co-production. Co-production means that all decisions require active community engagement and participation, resulting in the implementation of a project that will connect with wider development concerns. An inclusive approach that builds the capacity of all stakeholders is one that benefits all. Fostering a sense of ownership and shared responsibility will help to build additional partnerships and collaboration. This also involves developing a comprehensive, long-term plan that addresses not only immediate needs but also considers future challenges and opportunities; and building flexibility into project designs to adapt to changing circumstances and evolving community needs.

Establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the project's impact over time. Check out the "Review and Exit" handbook for more information on how to monitor and evaluate projects. And always use feedback from the community to make continuous improvements and adjustments to ensure ongoing relevance and effectiveness.

Focus on Sustainability

Creating a robust sustainability plan for volunteer roles focused on capacity strengthening in communities requires a collaborative effort between the community and organisations involved. Sustainability involves thinking about different dimensions of sustainability:

- **Social:** Ensuring that communities have fair access to resources, opportunities, and services, promoting equality and well-being.
- **Economic:** Supporting systems or initiatives that work towards long-term prosperity, stability, and equitable distribution of wealth within a society.
- **Human:** Strengthening conditions for individuals and community to lead healthy, fulfilling lives, focusing on physical, mental, and emotional well-being.
- **Environmental:** Preserving, protecting and reversing damage to natural resources and ecosystems for current and future generations.

This process is initiated by ensuring you conduct a needs assessment where community members actively contribute their insights, identifying areas where capacity strengthening can make a lasting impact on these different dimensions of sustainability. Design volunteer roles that prioritise knowledge transfer, skill development, and empowerment. Through community engagement, you can establish long-term strategies that involve local leadership, ensuring the sustainability of the capacity-strengthening initiatives. Make sure you encourage community participation in decision-making processes, fostering a sense of ownership over the skills and knowledge gained. Also, ensure that young people are involved, especially those who have been involved in other projects and can bring this experience and knowledge to consult on the design of new projects: incorporating young people throughout the project design and implementation cycle is key for sustainability. By integrating these elements, the sustainability plan becomes a dynamic framework, aligning volunteer efforts with community needs and contributing to lasting positive change.

Conservation and Climate Resilience

MEETING THE STANDARD:

- Identify threats to the environment due to project implementation and design mitigation measures to be implemented throughout project cycle.
- Seek to enhance ecosystem service delivery using the ecosystem approach (e.g., nature-based solutions).
- Calculate carbon footprint of project implementation, as a minimum for all international travel and local transportation on a yearly basis; calculations are used to develop an action plan to reduce their carbon footprint where possible.

Project design and implementation are intricately shaped by a commitment to nature conservation, reducing environmental harm, and fostering climate resilience. This guiding principle underscores a holistic approach that goes beyond mere project considerations, reflecting a deep-seated dedication to the well-being of the environment. Yes, there are projects that have a direct focus on sustainability, climate change and/or the environment. But all projects need to consider these issues. Conservation and climate resilience can and should be mainstreamed into all projects with a goal of being “Nature Positive”. **“Nature Positive”** refers to initiatives, policies, or practices that aim to have a net positive impact on the environment and biodiversity. It involves actions that go beyond simply minimising harm or reducing environmental footprint to actively restoring ecosystems, conserving biodiversity, and promoting sustainable interactions with nature. This concept emphasises the importance of preserving and enhancing natural capital for the well-being of both ecosystems and human societies.

Tip: Reach out to other organisations. There are volunteer-involving organisations who have included environmental considerations in their codes of conduct or who have expertise and engage in climate-based projects. Don't be afraid to ask questions!



The integration of environmental considerations not only informs decision-making but also influences strategic choices throughout the project lifecycle. Furthermore, the emphasis on reducing harm to the environment signifies a proactive stance towards sustainability. By promoting climate resilience, the project not only adapts to the evolving environmental landscape but actively contributes to mitigating the impacts of climate change. In essence, this overarching commitment to environmental stewardship forms the bedrock of the project's ethos, ensuring that every facet aligns with principles of ecological responsibility and long-term sustainability.



Good Practice:

Every project should contain environmental sustainability goals and a plan to achieve them. Fundamental to this is an environment committee that oversees the implementation of all activities and aims to increase the level of sustainability through innovative and thorough planning. This committee should prioritise actions that take into account the local context.

Identify Any Threats

Identifying and mitigating environmental threats in the design of a project is crucial to ensure your initiative's sustainability and positive impact. Here is a step-by-step description of how to approach this process:

1. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA):

Identification: Conduct a comprehensive EIA to identify potential environmental threats associated with the volunteer project. Consider direct and indirect impacts on ecosystems, biodiversity, air, human health, and water quality, and natural resources.

Stakeholder Involvement: Engage local communities, environmental experts, and relevant stakeholders in the assessment process to incorporate diverse perspectives and local knowledge.

2. Risk Analysis and Prioritization:

Risk Identification: Identify and prioritise potential threats, such as habitat disruption, pollution, deforestation, or overconsumption of natural resources, based on their severity and likelihood.

Contextual Analysis: Consider the specific geographical, climatic, and ecological characteristics of the project area to understand the unique environmental challenges it may face.

3. Mitigation Strategies:

Sustainable Practices: Incorporate sustainable practices into the project design, emphasising waste reduction, energy efficiency, and the use of environmentally friendly materials.

Conservation Measures: Implement specific conservation measures to address identified threats, such as habitat restoration, wildlife protection, or water conservation initiatives.

4. Community Involvement:

Risk Identification: Identify and prioritise potential threats, such as habitat disruption, pollution, deforestation, or overconsumption of natural resources, based on their severity and likelihood.

Contextual Analysis: Consider the specific geographical, climatic, and ecological characteristics of the project area to understand the unique environmental challenges it may face.

5. Adaptive Management:

Monitoring Systems: Establish monitoring systems to regularly assess environmental indicators, allowing for the early detection of emerging threats.

Adaptive Strategies: Implement an adaptive management approach, enabling the project to adjust its activities based on real-time environmental feedback and unforeseen challenges.

6. Compliance with Regulations:

Legal Compliance: Ensure that the project adheres to international and local environmental regulations and standards.

Certifications: Seek certifications or endorsements from recognized environmental bodies for any infrastructure work that may impact the environment.

7. Climate Resilience:

Climate Change Considerations: Assess how climate change may impact the project and implement strategies to enhance climate resilience.

Renewable Energy Integration: Explore opportunities for using renewable energy sources to reduce the project's carbon footprint.

8. Continuous Evaluation and Improvement:

Regular Audits: Conduct regular environmental audits to evaluate the effectiveness of mitigation measures and identify areas for improvement.

Adopt Good Practices: Stay informed about evolving good practices in environmental conservation and incorporate new methodologies that align with project goals.

By systematically following these steps, a volunteering in development project can proactively identify, address, and mitigate environmental threats, fostering a more sustainable and responsible approach to community development.

The Ecosystem Approach

Designing a volunteering in development project should take into account the environment throughout its life-cycle.



Tip:

You can find many resources to help ensure consideration of the ecosystem online and in the Forum Resource Library.

Questions that can be asked in order to develop an ecosystem approach are as follows:

- How does the volunteer program assess its impact on local ecosystems, ensuring that conservation principles are upheld? Is it possible for the project to be nature positive?
- In what ways can volunteers contribute to the preservation of local biodiversity, and are there specific initiatives in place to protect threatened species or habitats?
- How are sustainable practices integrated into volunteer activities, such as waste reduction, energy conservation, and environmentally friendly approaches?
- To what extent does the volunteer program involve and support local communities in leading conservation efforts, ensuring their active participation and ownership?
- How are volunteers educated about the local environment, ecosystems, and conservation challenges, and how does this knowledge inform their activities?
- What mechanisms are in place for volunteers to contribute to long-term ecological monitoring, and how can their efforts contribute to ongoing conservation initiatives within the community?

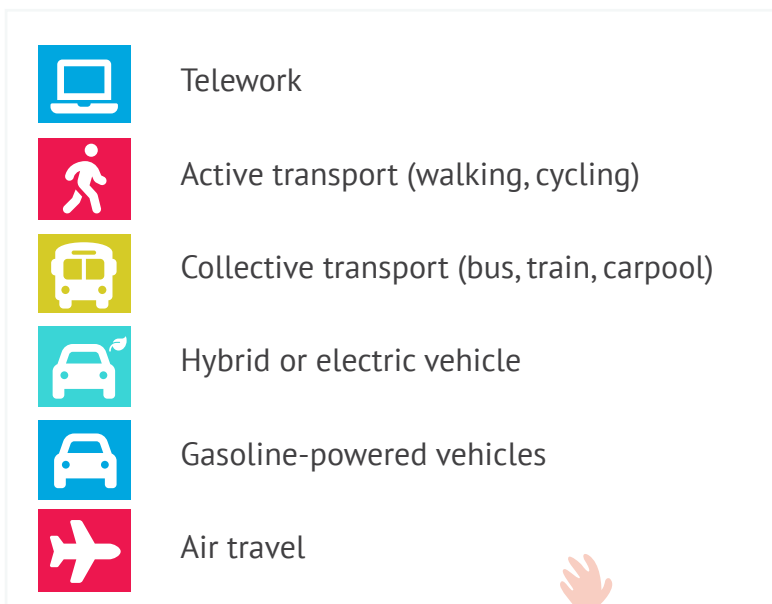


Good Practice:

While nature positivity is the goal, the 4R-D principle, which has been developed in Quebec and used by Oxfam Canada, helps in the management of any waste: reduce at source, reuse, recycle, reclaim, and dispose. Along with any contextual guidelines (such as WHO guidance or government requirements), this overarching principle can help in designing a project that considers the environmental impact of any waste created by your project implementation.

Carbon Footprint

It's important to know your carbon footprint. There are resources online that will allow your organisation to calculate a rough carbon footprint for free. Then, once you know, you can assess how you might reduce the carbon footprint. And this isn't just for plane travel! Carbon footprint is important to consider no matter what your organisation is engaged in. The overall goal is to halt and reverse the destruction of nature. Always consider whether you could switch a means of transport to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, do not provide individual water bottles in workshops, or even lean towards videoconferencing if at all possible. You will want to prioritise types of travel that favour less carbon footprint and reduce impact on biodiversity as per the following chart, adapted from Oxfam Canada.



Keeping People Safe

The Global Volunteering Standard underscores a commitment to designing all programs in accordance with good practices for the protection of children, vulnerable adults, and the broader community in the realm of international volunteering in development. Central to these principles is the explicit prohibition of volunteering in orphanages. This stance is rooted in a recognition of the potential risks and ethical concerns associated with such placements. By adhering to this standard, organisations demonstrate a dedication to ensuring that their volunteer programs not only contribute positively to communities but also prioritise the well-being and protection of those they aim to serve. It reflects a broader shift in the field towards responsible and ethical volunteering practices that prioritise the long-term welfare of vulnerable populations.

In addition, there is a need to ensure consent for any participation in initiatives that help to inform assessments, project design and implementation. This includes focus group discussions, interviews, community feedback sessions, and so on. If you are documenting these initiatives, you will also need consent for any recording or photography.

Why is volunteering in orphanages prohibited?

There are a range of ethical concerns. Well-intentioned volunteers may inadvertently contribute to the challenges faced by children in institutional care. Issues such as attachment disruptions, inconsistent caregiving, and a lack of qualified personnel can hinder the emotional and developmental well-being of children. Additionally, there is a risk of prioritisation of the volunteer experience over the genuine needs of the children which perpetuates an exploitative environment. Furthermore, this form of volunteering can inadvertently support the continuation of the orphanage system, which may not align with best practices promoting family-based care. To address these concerns, a shift towards supporting community-driven initiatives and long-term solutions, such as family reunification and addressing root causes of child separation, is essential in the realm of volunteering. It is crucial for organisations to critically evaluate their impact and choose initiatives that are in the interests of children as well as sustainable development of the communities they aim to serve.

Next Steps

This manual is only one of a series of guides outlining the sections of the Global Volunteering Standard. We encourage reading through the other guides for a holistic understanding of volunteer management.

For more information on the Global Volunteering Standard and access to the Resource Library, as well as an organisational Self-Assessment Tool, please visit the Global Volunteering Standard Platform: www.forum-ids.org/global-volunteering-standard-platform/.

To learn more about Forum or become a member, please visit <https://forum-ids.org/>. To share any feedback on the guide, please email globalvolunteeringstandard@forum-ids.org

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The International Forum for Volunteering in Development, commonly known as Forum, is a global network of organisations that work through volunteers to achieve sustainable development. Forum promotes more responsible and impactful volunteering by sharing information and good practice through convening, research, and the Global Volunteering Standard.

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