



IVCO 2025

CONFERENCE REPORT

STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY IN CHALLENGING TIMES



14 - 18 September 2025

Siem Reap, Cambodia



In Partnership with



Acknowledgements

This report reflects the collaborative efforts of the IVCO 2025 Organising Team. IVCO was organised by the International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum) with co-hosts the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC) and in partnership with Australian Volunteers International (AVI), France Volontaires and VSO Cambodia.

The report was written by Dr. Sathish Rao Appalanaidu and Fazirah Naser, with the support of conference facilitators who assisted with note-taking and documentation: Yakshika Vats, Kathleen Cass and Maia Baillie Smith.

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to all the inspiring speakers and moderators whose insights and participation enriched every discussion, and to IVCO 2025 co-organisers; James O'Brien, Katharine Brown and Heather Shapter of Forum, together with Kathleen Cass and Sam Werner for their guidance and assistance throughout the process.

Special appreciation also goes to the members of Forum's IVCO Working Group and the Forum Board for their constructive feedback and support before, during, and after the conference.

Our gratitude also extends to the many volunteers, partners, and contributors whose efforts ensured the success of IVCO 2025 in Siem Reap and the completion of this report.



Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	0
Overview	2
1.0 Day 1: Volunteering in Strengthening Civil Society	3
1.1 Takeaways for Delegates:	3
1.2 Context	3
1.2.1 State of Civic Space	3
1.2.2 Volunteerism as Civic Infrastructure	4
1.2.3 Partnership and Inclusion	5
1.2.4 Ethical Practice and Reciprocity	5
1.2.5 Exchanges, Leadership and Continuity	6
1.3 Questions for Further Discussion	7
2.0 Day 2: Volunteerism in Challenging Environments	8
2.1 Takeaways for Delegates	8
2.2 Context	8
2.2.1 Field Realities and Adaptation	8
2.2.2 Selection, Preparation and Ongoing Support	9
2.2.3 Safeguarding and Duty of Care	10
2.2.4 Equity and Mobility	10
2.2.5 Technology with Ethics	11
2.2.6 Programme Resilience and Advocacy	12
2.3 Questions for Further Discussion	13
3.0 Day 3: Taking Action: Measurement and Takeaways	14
3.1 Takeaways for Delegates:	14
3.2 Context	14
3.2.1 Principles for Meaningful Measurement	14
3.2.2 Practice Standards	15
3.2.3 Frameworks and Tools	16
3.2.4 From Evidence to Action	16
3.3 Questions for Further Discussion	17
4.0 Research, Practice, Policy and Learning Day (RPPL) Day	18
5.0 Concluding Reflections – What We Take Home from Siem Reap	21
6.0 At a Glance - Mind Map	22

Overview

IVCO 2025 brought together 145 delegates representing 70 organisations from 24 countries, including government agencies, international volunteer-involving organisations, academic institutions and civil society partners. Over three days, complemented by the Research, Practice, Policy and Learning (RPPL) Day and CEO Day, the conference featured 100 speakers and moderators across 6 plenary sessions and 13 breakout discussions.

With the theme *Strengthening Civil Society in Challenging Times*, IVCO 2025 highlighted the essential role of volunteers in sustaining a vibrant civil society amid mounting global challenges. Shifting funding priorities, policy changes, and the shrinking of civic space are transforming how volunteers operate and how Forum members support them. While these challenges present obstacles, they also create opportunities for innovation and collaboration. The conference unpacked the vital contribution that volunteers make to strengthening civil society, and explored how they can be better supported as they navigate increasingly complex and restrictive environments.

The conference combined strategic dialogue with practical exchanges on systems, safeguarding and measurement in international volunteering. The opening keynote by Relyne Dela Paz of CIVICUS set the tone for IVCO 2025, emphasising the importance of civic space and collective action. A volunteer roundtable brought field perspectives into broader discussions, drawing on lived experiences to ground the dialogue in practice. Overall, IVCO 2025 provided a space to reflect on how volunteering is adapting to current realities and continues to strengthen communities, foster dialogue, and contribute to a more open and peaceful society.

The Forum CEO Day drew on findings from Forum's research to inform organisational priorities. IVCO 2025 concluded with a half-day plenary workshop on measurement and impact, which provided a collective space to test tools and approaches for evidence-based learning.

IVCO 2025 affirmed the belief that *'peace begins with the individual'*, positioning volunteering as both a civic responsibility and moral endeavour. Together, delegates explored how volunteering strengthens civil society, sustains peace and contributes to global solidarity in times of uncertainty.

For the benefit of readers, this report is based on session notes, presentations and facilitation reports from IVCO 2025. The quotes included throughout are selected to illustrate key ideas and turning points in the discussions. They are not full transcripts, and some have been lightly edited for brevity and clarity. Where possible, quotes are attributed to individual speakers and organisations. In other cases, attribution is omitted where the wording reflects a shared view expressed by several participants or summarises a theme that recurred across sessions such as the idea that peace begins with the individual.

1.0 Day 1: Volunteering in Strengthening Civil Society

1.1 Takeaways for Delegates:

- Understand the current state and trajectory of civil society worldwide and the role of volunteering within it.
- Identify strategies to align volunteer programmes with broader civil society goals so that volunteering actively strengthens civic systems.
- Recognise how volunteering within our organisations can serve as a launch pad for lifelong civic engagement and how volunteer-involving organisations can facilitate this process.



1.2 Context

1.2.1 State of Civic Space

Civic space continues to contract globally, with most of the world's population now living in repressed or closed environments. In the opening keynote, Reylynne Dela Paz of CIVICUS outlined systemic pressures on the freedoms of association, assembly and expression. These restrictions stem from legal constraints, disinformation and persistent economic and political instability. Environmental and land defenders, women's rights advocates and democracy activists remain among the most affected groups.

Shrinking civic space has led to suspended programmes, barriers to registration and funding, and rising mental-health strain among civil-society actors. Yet examples from Colombia, Sierra Leone, Gambia, Guatemala, South Korea, Ecuador, India and Switzerland showed that progress is still possible even in restrictive contexts. Advances in gender equality and environmental protection illustrate that civic resilience endures when communities act collectively.

Discussions further explored how resource scarcity and declining donor support compound these challenges. Organisations face growing administrative hurdles and heightened threats in both online and offline environments. Speakers emphasised the need for continuous monitoring of civic space, documentation of emerging trends, and coordinated efforts to counter false narratives. The dialogue reinforced the importance of transnational solidarity and collective advocacy to sustain civic action and safeguard the well-being of those working in restricted settings.

The discussion reaffirmed that sustaining civic space depends on coordinated, networked responses supported by rights education, intergenerational collaboration and wellbeing frameworks that protect those at the forefront of civic action.

‘Civic space is not only about rights on paper. It is about whether people can speak, organise and defend their communities without fear.’

1.2.2 Volunteerism as Civic Infrastructure

Sessions explored volunteerism as a structural pillar of civil society rather than a complementary activity. Professor Matt Baillie Smith (Northumbria University) described volunteering as a practice that strengthens civic infrastructure through trust building, inclusion and connections between people and institutions across social and geographic divides. Volunteers offer perspectives often independent from institutional agendas, contributing community-level insights that enhance legitimacy and responsiveness within constrained environments. In this framing, volunteerism functions as a civic act that reinforces the social fabric in times of democratic stress.

Speakers highlighted how volunteer networks can extend the operational reach of civil society in restrictive contexts, sustaining engagement where formal organisations face limitations. Programmes presented by organisations such as VSO, JICA and Volunteer Initiative Nepal (VIN) illustrated that volunteers serve as connectors linking local realities with global perspectives, transferring knowledge and maintaining dialogue even when state-civil relations are fragile.

The dialogue reaffirmed that when adequately supported, volunteerism evolves beyond service delivery into an essential element of civic resilience and social cohesion. This perspective positions volunteers not only as contributors to programmes but as integral actors within broader systems that uphold participation, solidarity and trust.

‘Volunteers offer an independent voice, often less tied to institutional agendas, amplifying community perspectives.’

1.2.3 Partnership and Inclusion

Inclusion emerged as a cross-cutting requirement for resilient civil societies. Examples from Nepal, Malaysia, China and Ethiopia illustrated how volunteering amplifies the voices of women, youth and marginalised groups. Zhang Lihua (Beijing Pro Bono Foundation) presented models that combine vocational training for rural women with teacher empowerment programmes reaching millions of students. In Malaysia, the Ministry of National Unity and Yayasan Sukarelawan Siswa (YSS) highlighted initiatives promoting interethnic and interfaith solidarity, including the “Speak Nicely” campaign. These initiatives demonstrated that volunteering functions as both an entry point to civic participation and as a platform for unity across diverse communities.

Corporate and cross-sector partnerships were also discussed as mechanisms for scaling such inclusive practice. Volies and Crossroads International shared how structured corporate volunteering contributes professional expertise, strengthens organisational capacity and supports local economies while aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals. Speakers emphasised that such partnerships are effective when grounded in shared values, mutual accountability and clear ethical frameworks.

The discussion highlighted that inclusive volunteering must guard against exploitation and resist narratives that position volunteers as low-cost labour. Instead, inclusive approaches should centre solidarity, reciprocity and respect to ensure that all partners benefit equitably from engagement.

‘Partnerships succeed when they are rooted in shared purpose and ethical clarity, not when one side defines the terms.’

1.2.4 Ethical Practice and Reciprocity

Ethical practice emerged as a recurring focus throughout the sessions. Participants discussed how volunteerism can strengthen the civic space when guided by principles of reciprocity, safety and accountability. Examples shared by Norec and the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) demonstrated that volunteer exchanges are most effective when designed as two-way, co-created and values-based partnerships. Equal collaboration, where organisations alternate coordination roles and co-develop assignments, was shown to reduce imbalances between Global North and Global South partners. Speakers stressed the importance of comprehensive orientation, re-entry support and anti-racism resources to ensure ethical participation and security for all volunteers.

‘Reciprocity is more than rotation or funding parity. It is about recognising knowledge and leadership wherever they exist.’

Discussions on risk navigation, including those led by Cuso International and Waker Welfare Action Association highlighted the ethical responsibility of organisations to safeguard volunteers working in politically sensitive contexts. Diaspora volunteers were recognised as distinctive

contributors who bridge heritage and global experience. Their engagement, however, requires careful management of identity, legitimacy and safety considerations.

Across sessions, a shared understanding emerged: volunteering involves both power and vulnerability. Ethics must therefore be institutionalised through transparent frameworks, informed consent and mentoring systems that uphold dignity, equity and trust.

‘Duty of care is not a procedure; it is a promise to the people who serve.’

1.2.5 Exchanges, Leadership and Continuity

International exchange was identified as a core mechanism for sustaining civic leadership and institutional learning. Programmes facilitated by Norec, the Mennonite Central Committee and KOICA demonstrated that reciprocal exchanges foster mutual understanding, strengthen advocacy capacity, and build regional solidarity. Through placements and return programmes, volunteers acquire adaptable skills and broader worldviews, while host organisations reinforce internal systems and leadership pipelines.

‘When volunteers return as mentors, the cycle completes itself. Leadership becomes shared and learning multiplies.’

Continuity was further strengthened through structured post-placement initiatives. KOICA’s career services and Engagement Global’s alumni programmes showed how sustained follow-up can transform short-term placements into pathways for lifelong civic engagement. In Malaysia, the YSS Volunteer Leadership Development Programme extends this model across the ASEAN region, nurturing leadership and peer mentoring.

Collectively, these initiatives position volunteering as a continuous civic pathway that cultivates capable and ethical leaders, sustaining networks of solidarity and innovation long after formal placements conclude.

‘Continuity gives meaning to volunteering. Without sustained engagement, impact fades as quickly as it begins.’

1.3 Questions for Further Discussion

1. How can volunteering be formally recognised and resourced as civic infrastructure that sustains social trust and resilience within shrinking civic spaces?
2. What collective actions between governments, funders and civil society can counter the erosion of civic space without compromising local agency and autonomy?
3. How can organisations institutionalise ethics, reciprocity and safety across international and domestic volunteering systems while still enabling courageous civic action?
4. What long-term investment models can transform short-term volunteer placements into enduring leadership and solidarity networks?
5. How can inclusive volunteering across gender, youth and corporate partnerships be leveraged to influence systemic change rather than deliver isolated projects?

2.0 Day 2: Volunteerism in Challenging Environments

2.1 Takeaways for Delegates

- Explore strategies to support volunteers' resilience, adaptation and advocacy in complex and high-risk environments.
- Identify approaches to leverage digital tools and decentralised networks for safer and more effective engagement.
- Strengthen connections between organisations and with international movements to collectively support civil society.



2.2 Context

2.2.1 Field Realities and Adaptation

Volunteering in challenging environments often requires navigating bureaucratic, cultural and logistical barriers that extend far beyond formal job descriptions. Field experiences from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam revealed how volunteers faced administrative delays, unclear mandates and geographic isolation that limited their reach. Living with host families and integrating into community life fostered trust but also exposed volunteers to the strains of cultural adjustment. Adaptation was described as a process of continuous learning that demands humility, empathy and persistence.

The panel *Volunteering in Challenging Environments* emphasised that the quality of preparation and in-country support determines whether adversity becomes a source of growth or frustration. France Volontaires and JICA shared that strong local integration, consistent mentoring and flexible coordination with host partners ensured continuity even during disruption. Delegates

agreed that structured frameworks for orientation and support are critical to reducing risks of underutilisation or fatigue.

Speakers also noted that power dynamics can unintentionally marginalise local actors when volunteers are positioned as external experts. Effective adaptation, therefore, depends on participatory engagement that values local agency and lived experience. Delegates reaffirmed that field realities should not be treated as obstacles to overcome but as contexts that shape the authenticity and sustainability of volunteer contributions.

‘Every assignment begins with uncertainty. It is the process of learning, adjusting and collaborating that transforms difficulty into growth.’

2.2.2 Selection, Preparation and Ongoing Support

The session led by presenters from France Volontaires, Fidesco, KOICA and the Peace Corps explored how volunteer selection and preparation shape safety, resilience and long-term effectiveness. Comprehensive screening, realistic previews of placement conditions and psychological readiness assessments were identified as key tools in recruitment. France Volontaires emphasised that emotional preparedness and risk tolerance should be treated as core competencies rather than optional attributes. Fidesco shared how pre-deployment assessments and follow-up coaching improved volunteer retention and overall satisfaction.

‘Screening and coaching are not administrative steps. They are the foundation for resilience and trust in the field.’

Structured and continuous training emerged as a decisive factor in supporting volunteers throughout their assignments. The Peace Corps model spans multiple stages, from online and in-country orientation to periodic refreshers and post-service debriefings. Sessions on trauma awareness, gender-based violence and intercultural sensitivity have become standard practice. KOICA’s inclusion policies allow low-income and disabled volunteers to participate through financial protections and tailored placements, including Deaf-to-Deaf partnerships. These innovations redefine who can serve and under what conditions.

Ongoing support systems such as regular wellbeing check-ins, peer mentoring and decompression breaks were highlighted as essential components of organisational responsibility. France Volontaires described flexible deployment mechanisms that allow temporary suspension or hybrid participation in volatile contexts. Post-placement reintegration, alumni mentoring and group coaching sessions further sustain motivation and learning. Collectively, these approaches demonstrate that support must be embedded across the volunteer lifecycle, requiring both financial investment and policy reform.

‘Inclusive selection means removing barriers before departure, not compensating for them later. Equity begins in recruitment.’

2.2.3 Safeguarding and Duty of Care

Safeguarding discussions on Day 2 centred on the updated Global Volunteering Standard (2025), introduced through case studies from ECPAT International, APLE Cambodia and AVI. The session highlighted the sometimes blurred line between legitimate volunteering and exploitative voluntourism, especially in unregulated orphanage or school settings. Weak vetting procedures, profit-driven intermediaries and lack of supervision expose both children and volunteers to harm. ECPAT and APLE Cambodia presented evidence of fabricated orphanages, manipulated fundraising and inadequate background checks that have enabled offenders to gain access to vulnerable groups.

‘Safeguarding is not a checklist. It is a culture that must exist before, during and after every placement.’

Speakers called for stronger and more consistent enforcement of the Duty of Care that extends equally to volunteers and host communities. The revised Global Standard establishes simplified, actionable pillars across safety, safeguarding and wellbeing. It mandates local risk assessments, informed consent and the exclusion of orphanage tourism from all programmes. Capacity building and transparent reporting mechanisms were identified as the foundation for credible and sustainable practice.

Duty of Care was reframed as a shared responsibility across donors, implementing partners and intermediaries. Speakers acknowledged that even well-intentioned initiatives can perpetuate harm without robust oversight. The revised Standard’s focus on awareness, prevention, reporting and response aims to harmonise practices across sectors and geographies. Evidence from Cambodia and Sri Lanka demonstrated that when compliance is aligned with community-led safeguarding, it delivers the highest level of protection and trust.

‘Duty of Care extends to all sides of the partnership. Protecting communities also means protecting those who serve them.’

2.2.4 Equity and Mobility

Volunteers’ access to opportunities remains shaped by systemic inequalities linked to visa restrictions, financial capacity and structural privilege. The session convened by CCIVS and KOICA addressed the inequities of *‘passport power’* and the ongoing need to decolonise mobility systems. CCIVS highlighted how current visa regimes reflect global hierarchies that privilege volunteers from wealthier nations. Volunteers from the Global South face higher fees, longer processing times and frequent rejections, undermining the principle of global solidarity. KOICA

presented legal reforms that allow low-income volunteers to retain social benefits during service and introduced a mandatory quota for participants from disadvantaged groups.

‘Accessibility is part of mobility. When technology removes barriers for persons with disabilities, the principle of universality becomes real.’

Speakers called for a collective advocacy agenda to establish a recognised international ‘volunteer status’ that facilitates equitable cross-border mobility. Embassies and migration authorities were identified as key actors in this process, particularly through streamlined visa procedures and specialised consular training.

Ensuring inclusion also requires designing mobility systems that are accessible to all volunteers. KOICA’s voice-eye codes for persons with disabilities demonstrate how technology can reduce barriers to participation. Programmes supporting care leavers and volunteers with disabilities showed that adaptive design, when integrated from the outset, can expand both representation and impact.

The discussion reframed mobility as a determinant of equity rather than a logistical concern. Participants agreed that without addressing the systemic bias embedded in migration and funding policies, volunteering will continue to replicate global inequalities. A rights-based approach to mobility, supported by coordinated policy reforms and inclusive funding, was proposed as essential to realising the universality of volunteering.

‘Mobility must not depend on the colour of a passport. True global volunteering requires dismantling the hierarchies that limit who gets to move.’

2.2.5 Technology with Ethics

Digital transformation has expanded volunteering’s reach while introducing new vulnerabilities. Presentations by Youth Corps Singapore, Waker Welfare Action Association, and a joint presentation on forthcoming research by Forum and UNV explored how technology enhances engagement, learning, and safety in volatile contexts. Tools such as AI-driven translation, real-time communication platforms and virtual training modules now support hybrid and decentralised forms of volunteering. Youth Corps Singapore showcased digital storytelling and gamified learning to bridge intergenerational engagement between seniors and youth.

However, technology’s potential remains constrained by ethical and social risks. Forum and UNV cautioned that algorithms and data systems can reproduce bias, while Angela Wang of Waker emphasised the need for human oversight and accountability. Privacy concerns, digital surveillance, and overreliance on automated tools were identified as growing challenges.

Participants agreed that technology should serve as an enabler of human connection, not a replacement for it.

‘Digital volunteering is most effective when it connects, not replaces, human presence.’

Organisations are beginning to adopt AI and digital-engagement policies to safeguard volunteers and communities. Shared responsibility between institutions and individuals was proposed as the cornerstone of ethical digital practice. Delegates recommended strengthening digital literacy, consent protocols, and transparent data governance to ensure inclusion and safety. The session concluded that technology should amplify civic participation while remaining grounded in values of accountability, trust and human dignity.

‘Technology cannot replace responsibility. Every algorithm and platform must be guided by human judgment and accountability.’

2.2.6 Programme Resilience and Advocacy

Resilient volunteering programmes were presented as those that are participatory, evidence-driven and locally owned. SUCO’s organisational diagnosis methodology, co-developed with partners, enables self-assessment and continuous improvement through baseline and endline reviews. PAROCS, a collaboration between AVI and the Center for Knowledge Co-Creation and Development Research (CKC), applies participatory action research to strengthen partner capacity and embed reflective learning cycles. Both approaches position volunteers as catalysts for innovation, contributing to governance reforms, stakeholder engagement, and fundraising capacity.

Speakers from Waker, CKC and France Volontaires described how volunteers sustain organisational continuity during crises. Waker’s ‘build the system first’ framework positions volunteers not as emergency responders but as integral actors in programme design and delivery. France Volontaires’ REVER initiative in Cambodia demonstrated how multi-actor collaboration revitalised the VolCam network and aligned national and international volunteering efforts. Participants agreed that resilience depends on embedding volunteering into organisational systems rather than treating it as supplementary labour.

The connection between resilience and advocacy was reinforced through the session on volunteer-involving organisations as advocates for civic space. Case studies from Taiwan, India and multiple African countries illustrated how youth volunteers drive civic innovation and influence public policy. Examples from VSO, SMGC and Waker showed volunteers leading mental health programmes, election monitoring and anti-child labour campaigns. The combined insight from these cases positioned volunteering as both a mechanism for community resilience and a credible channel for civic advocacy in restrictive environments.

‘Resilience is built when organisations learn with, not for, their partners. Participation is the strongest form of preparedness.’

2.3 Questions for Further Discussion

1. How can volunteer-involving organisations institutionalise adaptive models of preparation, wellbeing and support so that resilience is designed into programmes rather than improvised during crises?
2. What collective accountability mechanisms can ensure Duty of Care and safeguarding are universally applied, including in smaller or resource-limited organisations and in across all types of volunteering?
3. How can equity and mobility barriers be dismantled at the systemic level through visa reform, inclusive financing and recognition of volunteers' legal status without reinforcing Global North–South dependency?
4. Where should ethical guardrails be set for technology and AI in volunteering, balancing innovation, privacy and human connection while avoiding digital exclusion and surveillance risks?
5. What investment and advocacy strategies can position volunteering as a central component of programme and civic resilience, ensuring volunteers are recognised as partners in policy influence and long-term system change rather than as temporary workforce inputs?



3.0 Day 3: Taking Action - Measurement and Takeaways

3.1 Takeaways for Delegates:

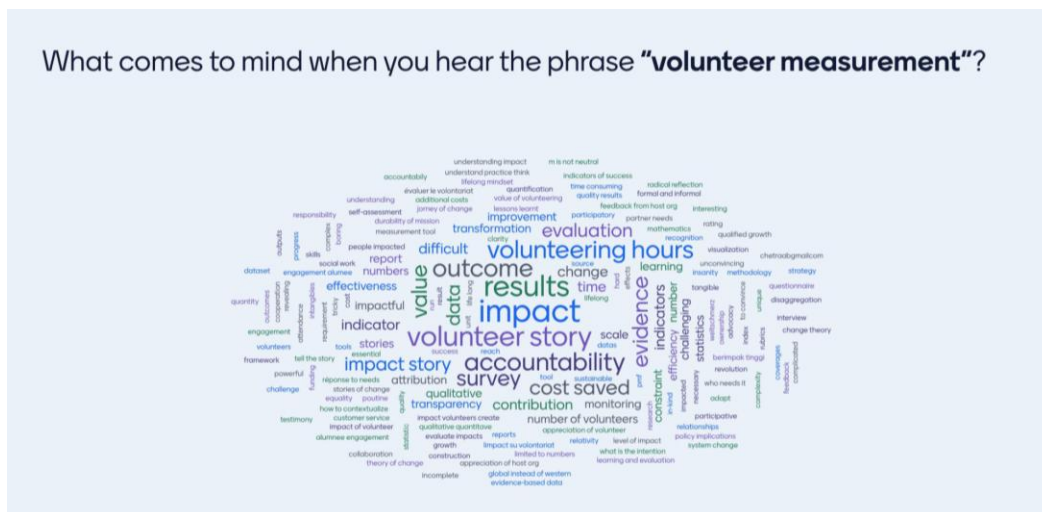
- Acquire practical methods to measure and communicate the impact of volunteer efforts.
- Identify actionable strategies to embed conference insights into organisational practice.
- Strengthen inspiration and networks for future collaboration and shared learning.

3.2 Context

3.2.1 Principles for Meaningful Measurement

The Day 3 plenary on measuring volunteer impact, led by colleagues from Northumbria University's Centre for Global Development, reaffirmed that meaningful measurement goes beyond technical indicators. Speakers emphasised that evaluation practices are deeply influenced by governance systems, institutional agendas and cultural contexts. Measurement was described as inherently political, determined by whose contributions count and how value is understood.

The discussion framed volunteering as both a social and developmental process, where outcomes are often relational and intangible. Quantitative metrics alone fail to capture this complexity.



A participatory exercise, *Toolkit in a Box*, invited participants to role-play as donors, government officials and community members to debate what ‘impact’ truly means. The activity revealed how priorities differ by stakeholder: governments seek standardised data for national reporting, while communities value stories of empowerment and trust. The key insight: measurement must recognise multiple truths rather than impose a single universal model.

Speakers from UNV and JICA stressed the need for participatory and context-sensitive approaches. Measurement should reflect not only the outcomes of volunteering but also its processes, how relationships are built, capacities strengthened and social cohesion reinforced. The concept of ‘social capital’ as applied in JICA’s Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers programme illustrated this relational focus, mapping the networks of bonding, bridging and linking that volunteers facilitate within and beyond host communities.

‘We might not have a problem with measurement. We might have a problem with how governments want us to measure the things we can’t measure. That is not a measurement problem, that is a politics problem.’

3.2.2 Practice Standards

Discussions on practice standards highlighted growing alignment between global volunteering frameworks and development-effectiveness principles. UNV introduced its forthcoming Global Volunteer Impact Measurement Framework, structured around four dimensions: contribution to society, value to individual volunteers, economic return, and the enabling environment. Designed for national-level use, the framework complements existing organisational systems and aims to enhance comparability without prescribing rigid methods.

Participants noted that data must serve people, not the reverse. Excessive standardisation risks marginalising grassroots experiences and reducing volunteering to output statistics. Speakers from France Volontaires and JICA underlined that the credibility of measurement depends on inclusivity, transparency and local ownership of data. Japan’s experience in assessing volunteers’ contributions to trust-building and social capital showed how qualitative insights can coexist with quantitative rigour to produce a richer understanding of impact.

‘We have to remember that data must serve people, not the reverse. Standardisation is helpful, but only when it strengthens, not silences local voices.’

Data ethics and accountability also featured strongly. Delegates agreed that indicators are never neutral, they carry power and political consequences. As one panellist observed, ‘numbers often appear scientific but reflect underlying agendas.’ The consensus was that standards should

prioritise responsible data governance, privacy protection and participatory approaches, treating communities and volunteers as co-owners of evidence rather than subjects of study.

‘When communities and volunteers co-own their data, measurement stops being about compliance and starts becoming a tool for empowerment.’

3.2.3 Frameworks and Tools

Several frameworks and tools were shared as practical entry points for strengthening measurement capacity. The forthcoming UNV Global Framework, scheduled for launch on 5 December 2025, was presented as a benchmark for comparing national-level data while allowing adaptation to local realities. It integrates economic and social dimensions, enabling governments to capture volunteering’s contribution to GDP alongside wellbeing and inclusion indicators.

Complementary approaches, such as JICA’s study on social capital, focused on relational outcomes. The model measured bonding within host organisations, bridging across community networks and linking through institutional partnerships, quantifying trust and collaboration as indicators of civic strength.

Other organisations, including France Volontaires and UNV, presented pilot tools linking evidence-gathering to learning cycles, such as self-assessment checklists, story-based evaluation and blended dashboards combining volunteer-reported outcomes with organisational data. Across all models, the emphasis was simplicity and usability: frameworks should guide decision-making, not burden practitioners. Delegates concluded that flexible, multi-layered tools allow measurement to remain rigorous yet responsive to evolving contexts.

‘Standardised frameworks create comparability, but adaptability ensures relevance. The balance between both is what turns data into shared learning.’

3.2.4 From Evidence to Action

The final theme of Day 3 emphasised that evidence has limited value unless translated into strategy, funding and policy. Speakers highlighted that measurement must drive accountability and learning across all levels; volunteers, organisations, governments and funders. Data on volunteer impact should not only demonstrate effectiveness, but also the systemic conditions that enable or restrict civic participation. UNV and France Volontaires highlighted that credible evidence can shift donor narratives from cost-efficiency to social value, encouraging long-term investment in volunteer-based approaches.

Discussions also addressed the risks of data misuse. Participants cautioned that measurement outcomes can be distorted to serve political agendas, particularly in contexts where civic action faces constraints. Governments may selectively highlight volunteer contributions while overlooking activism or dissent. Transparency and shared ownership of data were identified as essential safeguards. Participants proposed including volunteers in data interpretation and dissemination processes to enhance legitimacy and inclusivity.

Across the plenary and group exercises, participants agreed that measurement must become a collective civic act. When organisations use evidence to advocate for enabling environments, they transform data into leverage for systemic change. The future of volunteering impact measurement, as discussed, lies in merging rigour with empathy using credible evidence not only to count change but to inspire it through inclusive, context-driven action.

‘When data belongs to everyone, it becomes a tool for solidarity, not surveillance.’

3.3 Questions for Further Discussion

1. How can volunteer-impact measurement remain meaningful and ethical amid growing pressure for standardisation and performance metrics?
2. What frameworks can balance national comparability with local ownership so that measurement strengthens, rather than constrains, community action?
3. How can evidence from volunteering be leveraged to influence donor priorities and public policy, positioning volunteers as agents of civic resilience rather than as service providers? What safeguards are needed to prevent the misuse or politicisation of volunteer data, particularly in contexts with limited civic freedoms?
4. How can participatory and story-based measurement approaches be institutionalised within international and government systems without losing authenticity or rigour?

4.0 Research, Practice, Policy and Learning Day (RPPL) Day

Forum's annual Research Day brings together practitioners, academics, and researchers working in the field of volunteering and development to explore how we design, conduct and use research to strengthen our work. The RPPL Day served as a space for co-learning and exploring how existing evidence can be used to create impact and change. The day was also used as a space to build skills and capacity to improve the collection, storage, use, and sharing of new evidence that is critical to promoting the impact of research outputs for all stakeholders.

Through a mix of interactive sessions, group discussions and visual storytelling, the group reflected on emerging questions, shared learning across contexts, and deepened the understanding of what meaningful and impactful research looks like in practice.

The day commenced with a poster exhibition highlighting participants' past, present, and planned research work.



The Pecha Kucha session followed, featuring researchers and practitioners who presented emerging evidence and practical tools that advance evidence-based volunteering across diverse contexts. The presentations covered themes ranging from volunteer management and diaspora engagement to measurement, skills, and inclusion.

View the full deck here – [Access to the posters and pecha kucha slides](#)

1. **Volunteer Organisation Management Toolkit – VOW Center**

The Volunteer Organisation Management Toolkit introduced a practical system for volunteer programme improvement. Categorised into international standards (Class A), creative tools (Class B), and community focused tools (Class C), it uses 49 interactive cards and 21 thematic sections. The toolkit supports annual reflection and volunteer engagement through senior- and child-friendly activities.

2. **Transforming Volunteering in Development – Janet Clark, Centre for Global Development, Northumbria University, UK**

This presentation explored how volunteering organisations have adapted to post-COVID realities, decolonisation, and shrinking civic space. Drawing on change management and power literature, it analysed shifts in trust, solidarity, and local ownership within development volunteering. The study found an increasing emphasis on local volunteers and community-led approaches with ongoing analysis to follow in 2026.

3. **Volunteerism in Focus: Evidence-Based study – Trinnah Caracho, Habitat for Humanity International**

Habitat for Humanity presented a qualitative study on the impact of its volunteer programmes in Indonesia. Findings showed that volunteers addressed housing vulnerabilities, built cultural exchange, and strengthened civic participation. Key recommendations included developing clearer frameworks, aligning with local systems, and integrating volunteer metrics into MEAL structures to ensure sustainability and recognition.

4. **Collaborative Research on Diaspora Volunteering – Clarisse Bourjon, Head of Recognition and Valorization, France Volontaires**

France Volontaires outlined its multi-country research on diaspora engagement in Morocco, Cambodia, and Senegal. The study explores how international and diaspora volunteers can strengthen solidarity, bridge knowledge gaps, and generate mutual benefits. Using a participatory methodology, it aims to build an evidence base for more inclusive and interconnected volunteering ecosystems by 2026.

5. **Measuring Skills Development in Reciprocal Exchanges – NOREC**

Norec shared its pilot study measuring the skills gained by exchange participants before and after placements. Using global skills taxonomies, the framework identified growth in professional and interpersonal competencies while highlighting the need for longer post-return integration. Findings will inform future programme design and contribute to evidence on reciprocal volunteer exchanges.

6. **Researching Organisational Capacity Strengthening** – *Huong Tran, Australian Volunteers Program (AVP) and Van Nguyen, Centre for Knowledge Co-creation and Development Research (CKC)*

The Australian Volunteers Program conducted a three-cycle action research project with 30 partner organisations to examine resilience and learning. Findings showed that capacity strengthening depends on recognising existing assets, fostering critical thinking, and enabling networks. The process helped partners integrate research into practice and demonstrate how evidence based learning supports organisational confidence and adaptability.

7. **Volunteer Work Among Older Persons** – *UNV*

UNV's study analysed trends in volunteering among older adults and its implications for ageing policy. Results indicated that volunteerism enhances wellbeing, cognitive health, and social cohesion, though participation varies by income and gender. Policy recommendations include expanding infrastructure, improving digital access, and integrating volunteering into national ageing strategies to promote inclusion and lifelong engagement.

5.0 Concluding Reflections – What We Take Home from Siem Reap

IVCO 2025 provided a space for collective reflection and practical learning on what it means to strengthen civil society in increasingly complex and challenging times. Delegates from across regions and sectors explored how volunteering continues to adapt, innovate, and respond to the changing dynamics of civic participation.

Throughout the conference, discussions reaffirmed the central message of this year's theme: *Strengthening Civil Society in Challenging Times*. The sessions highlighted how volunteers contribute to protecting civic space, promoting inclusion, and fostering trust within communities even in contexts of uncertainty and constraint.

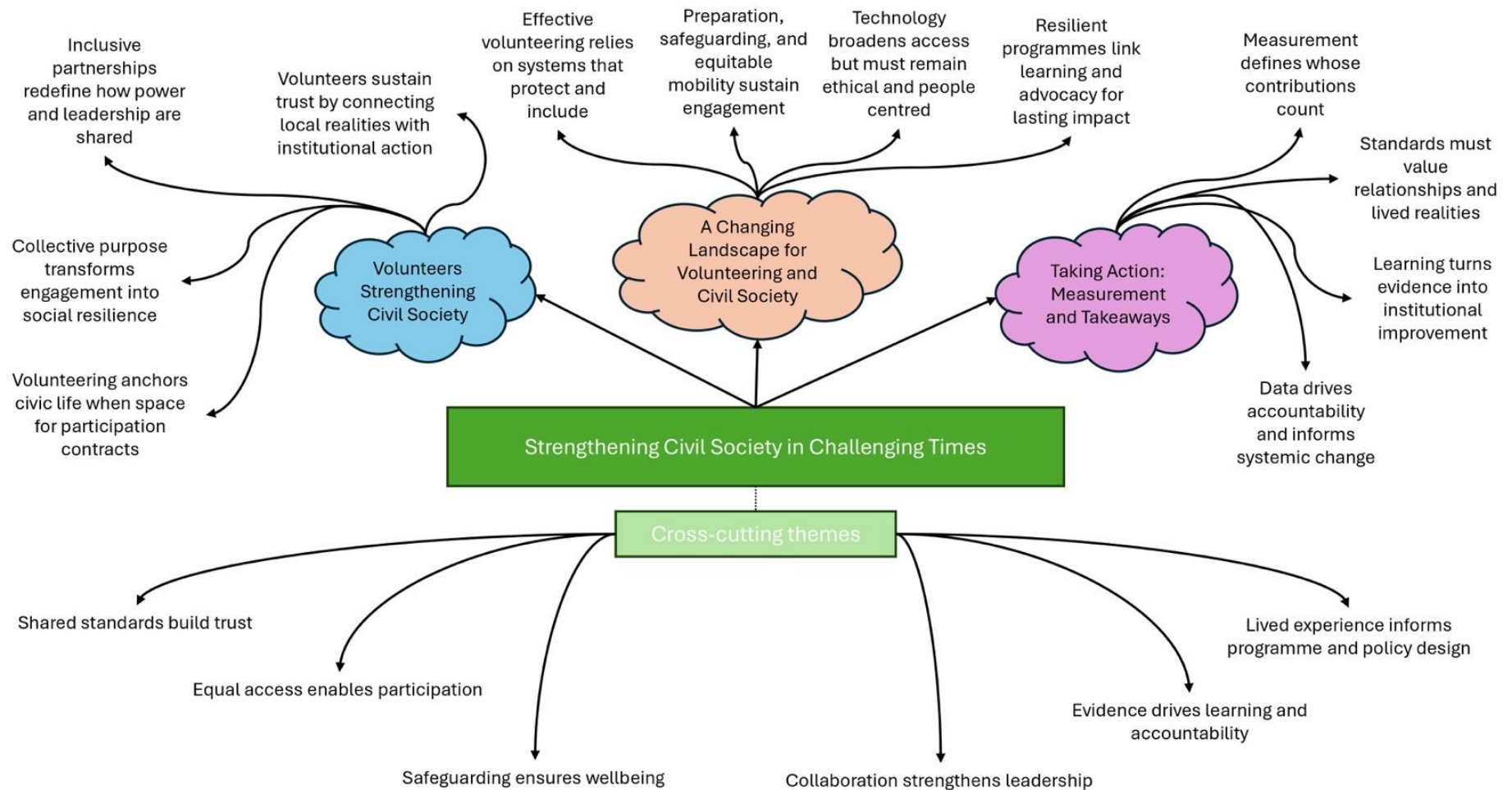
Across plenaries, workshops, and informal exchanges, participants shared experiences and strategies that can be taken forward within their own organisations and countries. These included new approaches to ethical partnership, safeguarding, and leadership development; stronger frameworks for measuring impact; and greater attention to volunteer wellbeing and reciprocity in programme design.

The dialogue also highlighted the importance of collaboration across sectors between governments, civil-society actors, academia, and the private sector to create enabling environments where volunteering can thrive. The lessons from Siem Reap call for continued investment in people-centred systems that value participation, transparency, and mutual learning.

As Forum and its members move forward, IVCO 2025 stands as a reminder that the strength of civil society lies in its ability to connect across differences and act with shared purpose. The insights and commitments generated through this conference will continue to inform practice, research, and policy as we collectively work towards more inclusive, peaceful, and sustainable communities.

‘Volunteering remains one of the most powerful ways individuals and organisations can contribute to peace and social resilience, within and across borders.’

6.0 At a Glance - Mind Map



END