



When People Start Volunteering for Humanitarian Organizations?

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Recruiting and retaining volunteers is a major challenge for third sector operations. Advice on how to become better in this, usually centres on the demand side: how organizations can communicate, train, award, organize. For the supply side, research has demonstrated that people who are educated, religious and economically well-off, are more likely to volunteer. Yet only some of these make this choice. And out of these, only very few for humanitarian causes.

Under what circumstances, persons decide to start volunteering for humanitarian organizations? Which life course changes act as triggers?

Panel data for the past 15 years for the Netherlands show that people start to volunteer more and to stay engaged in humanitarian organizations more stably in times of crisis. Answering the call to activation is not influenced by recent changes in the personal life. It is favoured instead by the enlargement of the social network.

[#volunteering](#) [#humanitarian](#) [#crisis](#) [#lifecourse](#)

Background

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Context



- **Life course perspective** views individual life as a sequence of age-graded events and transitions shaped by personal choices, social relationships, and historical context. Volunteering is seen as one of the roles the individual takes at different points of time. The issue at stake is to which priorities to invest limited resources of time in a given moment.
- **Longitudinal studies** collect data from the same individuals repeatedly over a period of time. They are used to tracking changes, developments, and causal relationships across the life course.
- **Panel** is a dataset that follows the same individuals over a long period of time. It permits to analyse changes within and between subjects.
- **Resource theory** says that individuals with more human, social and cultural capital are more likely to volunteer. Personal resources are measured in terms of education, income level, health condition, social ties, and prosocial values.
- **Role substitution perspective** predicts that life changes can either free time to start volunteering (for example retirement or children leaving home) or furnish incentives (for example enhancing religious participation or attaining further education).

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Take aways & Learnings



- **Over-time volatility of volunteering in humanitarian organizations is high.** Numbers of people who volunteer with continuity is stable but small. **Large numbers of volunteers hop in when the need is acute and evident and drop out as soon as the crisis is over.** Recruitment and retention require two different, and parallel, strategies.
- **Recent changes in people's lives do not directly relate to changes in volunteering for humanitarian organizations.** Findings are to be taken as a contribution in furthering understanding and not generalized: consider the limitations of the research. When a change in condition is recent, it does not mean that with time it doesn't transform into a structural condition that enhances the probability to volunteer.
- **People who have recently expanded their social network are more likely to start volunteering for humanitarian organizations.** Not so the people who have intensified their religious participation or those who have boosted their income level. When in need of volunteers, spread the word of mouth through people who meet many other people – perhaps among volunteers in sports and recreation?

Starters, quitters and stayers per year (in %)

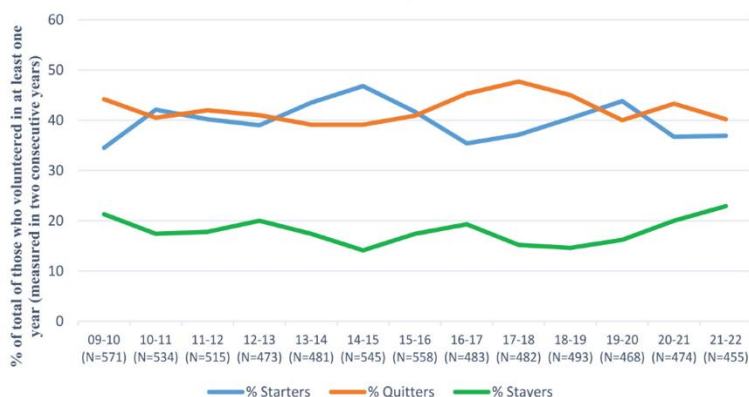


Figure 1. Longitudinal Overview of Starters, Quitters, and Stayers per Year (in Percentages).
Source: LISS (2008–2022).

Starters: New volunteer numbers rise when fewer stay on from previous years.

Quitters: Around 80% of humanitarian volunteers start and quit within one year.

Stayers: Only around 20% volunteer for two or more consecutive years.

→ **Humanitarian organizations face much volatility in their volunteer pool, making it difficult to build a stable volunteer base over time.**

ERNOP Research Notes provide easy-to-read, practice-oriented summaries of academic articles on philanthropy and are written by practitioner experts. This ERNOP Research Note 2025/27 is published in September 2025 and has been written by Ksenija Fonović from Charles University – Faculty of Humanities. More information can be found at www.ernop.eu.