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Do Formal and Informal Volunteering Compete or Complement? Insights for Civil Society Support

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This article explores how formal and informal volunteering relate in Central Europe, offering insights relevant for policies aimed at strengthening volunteer engagement and civil society, especially in contexts with lower institutional trust and developing NGO sectors.

The study asks: **Do formal and informal volunteering compete for volunteers, or do they support each other, and how do social and human capital, income, and time influence this?**

The findings show that formal and informal volunteering are mutually supportive rather than competitive. Income influences participation more than time; formal volunteering is more sensitive to resource fluctuations. Supporting both forms can enhance civil society's resilience and volunteer engagement.

[#Volunteering](#) [#FormalVolunteering](#) [#InformalVolunteering](#) [#SocialCapital](#)
[#CentralEurope](#) [#CommunityEngagement](#) [#Nonprofit](#)

Background

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Context



- There is debate about whether formal and informal volunteering compete for volunteers or support each other. **Some scholars argue that they act as substitutes, reducing overall engagement, while others see them as complementary forms** that increase civic engagement.
- In **Central Europe, lower levels of trust in institutions has impacted civil society development.** Understanding how volunteering dynamics operate in this context is therefore important for strengthening civic participation.
- Recognizing that both **social and human capital affect volunteering**, the study examines their distinct roles in influencing formal and informal volunteering. Particular attention is given to **income, time availability, and institutional trust.**
- The analysis is based on a **survey of 2,034 respondents across four Central European countries.** Using structural equation modelling, the study examines how demographic, economic, and social factors influence volunteering behaviour.

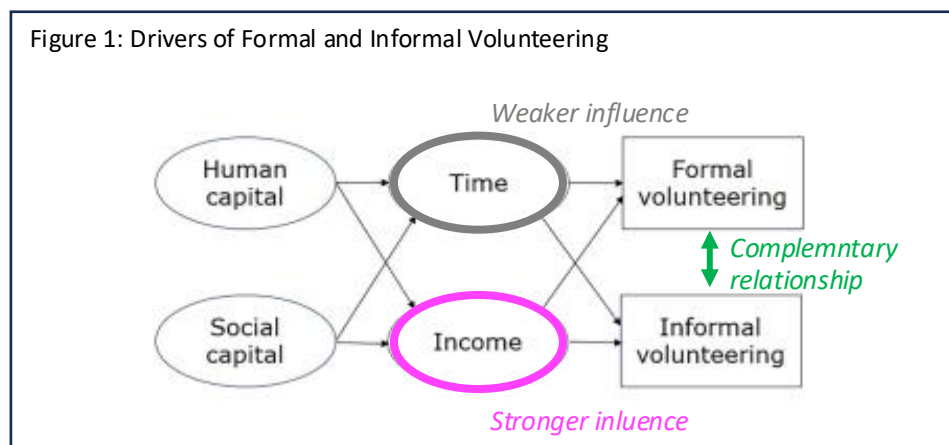
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Take aways & Learnings



- **Formal and informal volunteering reinforce each other.** Individuals engaged in one form are more likely to participate in the other, indicating complementary rather than competitive dynamics.
- **Skills and experience transfer across volunteering types.** Organisational volunteering can strengthen informal helping behaviours, and vice versa.
- **Income matters more than available time.** Higher-income individuals are more likely to volunteer, highlighting economic inequality as a barrier to participation.
- **Formal volunteering is more affected by changes in financial and time resources.** It requires greater commitment, skills, and organisational involvement and is therefore more sensitive to changes in financial or time resources.
- **Informal volunteering has lower entry barriers,** allowing people to contribute with fewer resources and less commitment.
- **Social trust (especially in institutions) and life experience (age, household size) influence volunteering.** In Central Europe, relatively low institutional trust shapes the social capital that supports volunteer engagement.
- To encourage more people to volunteer, organisations should **lower the barriers to informal participation and address the economic inequalities** that limit formal involvement. **Strengthening trust and providing opportunities to gain experience** can further encourage engagement.
- **Limitations** of the study: The analysis is based on **self-reported data**, which may not fully reflect actual behaviour. The focus on Central Europe with specific historical legacies limits broader applicability.
- **Future research** should include behavioural data and explore these dynamics in different cultural contexts.



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 2025/8 is published in March 2025 and has been written by Ashifa Agede from Centre for Health Systems Support & Initiatives for Development. More information can be found at www.ernop.eu.