



Volunteer Value Creation and Distribution: A Systematic Literature Review

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Volunteering is easy to count and harder to account for. In this literature review, the researcher maps not only the value that volunteer work creates and how it is studied, but also how that value is distributed among its recipients.

The following research question is addressed: What types of value are created and distributed through volunteering?

To answer it, the researcher synthesizes 146 empirical studies and sorts the value they report across three levels: the micro level of individual volunteers, beneficiaries and paid co-workers, the meso level of host and sending organizations, and the macro level of communities and society. The picture that emerges is uneven: most of the value studied accrues to volunteers themselves, research tends to focus on the positive outcomes, and the questions of who captures value, and at whose expense, remain underexamined.

[#Volunteering](#) [#Volunteervaluecreation](#) [#Systematicliteraturereview](#)
[#Volunteerimpact](#) [#Volunteeroutcomes](#)

Background

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Context



- Scholars describe volunteer value in scattered ways: volunteer numbers, hours, replacement-cost figures, or vague "benefits." **Without a shared definition, the actual worth of volunteering stays fragmented and hard to communicate to funders and policymakers.**
- Volunteering itself is changing. Alongside traditional, ongoing roles inside civil society organization, people increasingly volunteer episodically and choose causes that fit their own life stories. **This pluralization reshapes who creates volunteer value, and how.**
- Volunteering increasingly involves third parties: corporations release employees, schools embed service learning, governments run programs. **These "sending organizations" gain value too, and may appropriate value meant for beneficiaries, sometimes at their expense.**
- Value from a volunteer's effort rarely reaches only one recipient. It is distributed at once across individuals (micro), organizations (meso) and communities or society (macro). **Volunteer value is created and distributed at multiple levels, not just in one place.**
- Most studies still examine one outcome, one recipient or one term at a time. **A holistic framework is needed to see what value volunteering creates overall, and how it is distributed.**

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Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens

Take aways & Learnings



- **Research concentrates at the micro level.** Across 146 empirical articles, most examine value for individual volunteers (skills, well-being, social capital, careers), while organizations (meso) and society (macro) receive far less attention. This is paradoxical, since volunteering is meant to benefit *others*.
- **Beneficiaries and paid co-workers are overlooked.** Value for the people volunteers serve, and for staff working alongside them, remains under-studied. Where studied, beneficiaries often see volunteers as more sincere and altruistic than paid staff, while staff may face added workload or tension.
- **Research overwhelmingly reports positive value.** The negative "dark side", including inequality, "othering," reinforced dependency, power imbalances (e.g. voluntourism) and value appropriation, receives far less attention and is flagged as a priority for future work.
- **"Value created" is not the same as "value added."** Some outcomes happen whether a task is paid or unpaid; others arise *specifically because* a volunteer does them. Telling them apart helps organizations decide when volunteers, not paid staff, make the real difference.
- **The evidence base is narrow and uneven.** Most studies are quantitative, use little theoretical grounding, set in the Global North, in service-delivery organizations, and look at "volunteers in general." Newer forms (episodic, online, corporate, third-party) and fair-distribution questions remain open.



Figure: Value themes by level and recipient, mapped across 146 reviewed articles.

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 2026/20 is published in September 2026 and has been written by Silva Lässer from the Center for Public Management (KPM) at the University of Bern. More information can be found at www.ernop.eu.

