

The motives and motivation of volunteers in refugee assistance

Results of a survey on volunteer work

At a glance

- The volunteering survey conducted by the SVR's scientific staff revealed that 45 per cent of the more than 4,000 respondents had volunteered in the 12 months preceding the survey. Roughly 13 per cent of those who had volunteered were involved in supporting refugees. The study also shows that there is still a lot of untapped potential. Around three out of 10 of all those volunteers who have not yet been active in providing refugee support can imagine working in that area and there is a share of those who have never volunteered before who are willing to get involved. In total, around one in four of the survey respondents can imagine volunteering.
- Altruism (i.e. meeting the needs of others without reward) is the most important motive for people to volunteer in refugee assistance, although self-serving interests also play a big role.
- The social function (i.e. the desire to act in the interests of one's own peer group) is most likely to increase the chances of someone volunteering at all. The case is different when it comes to supporting refugees, where the chances of someone volunteering increases if they are motivated by altruism.
- To get more people to volunteer, the study recommends focussing more on self-serving motives, employers should also be involved more, and work promoting civic engagement and democracy should be systematically dovetailed.

Summary

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which led to many people fleeing the consequences of the ensuing war, gave rise to the second wave of readiness to help others within the space of 10 years. Donations and the number of volunteers supporting refugees sharply increased, though the donations of time, money and goods dropped off again after only a few months. Since people's willingness to get involved will continue to be important going forward, this study examines what motivates people to actively support refugees. It investigates how volunteers' and non-volunteers' individual motivational dispositions differ and how these motives are linked to their likelihood of volunteering.

The volunteering survey conducted by the SVR's scientific staff in 2023 provided the empirical basis for the subsequent analysis. The survey of more than 4,000 people was conducted in three phases between February and August 2023. It shows that a total of 45 per cent of respondents had volunteered in the 12 months prior to the survey. The most popular areas for volunteering were sports, cultural and leisure activities (42% of volunteers), followed by social and health issues (35% of volunteers). Refugee assistance (13% of volunteers) was in the lower mid-range. Volunteering for refugees includes providing language and learning support (24%), welcoming refugees into one's home (17%), collecting donations of money and in kind (16%) and working in reception centres (12%). A further 51% stated that they volunteered to help refugees in other diverse, unspecified ways. Multiple answers were possible.

The survey also investigated what potential there was for more people to get involved in supporting refugees. The "hidden reserve" makes up around 26 per cent of all the survey respondents in the total sample.

The analysis of the survey data first and foremost confirms previous findings from empirical research on civic engagement. Those volunteering in refugee assistance often have a higher level of education, for instance. Besides a general interest in politics, trust in political institutions also has a positive influence on people's willingness to get involved. Moreover, what is referred to as "external political self-efficacy" – that is how responsive a political system is perceived to be – has a significant positive influence on people's willingness to help. Volunteers and those who are willing to get involved are much more likely than non-volunteers to believe that politicians take an interest in their concerns.

People's motives for volunteering in refugee assistance are diverse. Besides altruistic motives – that is the desire to meet the needs of others (without reward) – there is a broad spectrum of self-serving, or self-oriented, motives, such as enhancing self-esteem and developing one's talents. To conduct an in-depth analysis of motivational dispositions, the study draws on a well-established psychological model comprising six basic motivations for volunteering to which a further two were added: social function; personal growth; altruism; self-esteem; protection; career prospects; work–life balance; and political responsibility.

The results show that volunteers working with refugees are more altruistic and more politically motivated than non-volunteers or those volunteering in other areas. At the same time, this group's various motives differ only very slightly from those of people who can imagine

volunteering to help refugees. Overall, the study shows that agreeing with each of the eight motivations increases the likelihood that a person will get involved, or that they will be willing to do so. There is an especially strong link between altruism and political responsibility and the likelihood of someone being a refugee assistance volunteer. The social and the work–life balance motives predominate when it comes to whether someone is likely to volunteer at all (ignoring the different areas of volunteering). The possibility of volunteering to further one’s own career is the least relevant across all areas of volunteering.

In the light of the study’s empirical findings, the following recommendations were made:

- Dovetail the promotion of civic engagement and the promotion of democracy more systematically;
- Strengthen local cooperation structures;
- Involve employers more to help create space for people to volunteer;
- Support refugees who themselves have received help and would like to volunteer on their path to volunteering;
- Place more emphasis on the value added in terms of personal growth when addressing volunteers;
- Link volunteering and the social sphere.