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Understanding Youth Participation Dynamics in Sustainable Development Programs: A Mechanism-Based Perspective.

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Abstract

This qualitative single-case study examines a placement under the European Solidarity Corps, a programme of the European Union for cross-border youth volunteering and solidarity projects, implemented by the non-governmental organisation OpenSpace Foundation in Bulgaria. Semi-structured interviews with organisational leads and volunteers were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Entry was commonly animated by altruistic commitments and the prospect of skills development. Continued engagement depended less on initial motives than on a supportive team environment characterised by reliable mentoring, inclusive peer relations and clear communication. Barriers centred on linguistic and cross-cultural communication challenges, while wider participation was constrained by limited programme visibility and personal financial pressures. From these insights, we advance a mechanism-based model that links the stages of access, entry, experience, and outcomes, yielding testable propositions. The model posits that entry motivations increase joining, while access barriers reduce it. Team climate and leadership raise retention both directly and by enabling interesting projects as a mediating path. Experienced challenges lower perceived fit and pull volunteers toward exit, while a strong team climate weakens this negative path as a moderator. Finally, longer retention is linked to greater skill gains and an increased intention to pursue sustainable volunteering.

Keywords: Youth volunteering, sustainable development, volunteer motivations, retention, barriers.

1 INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development ensures present progress does not come at the expense of future generations' needs (WCED,1987). It rests on three interdependent pillars: economic vitality, social wellbeing, and environmental protection (United Nations, 2005). This idea is put into practice through the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015 (UNGA, 2015a). The SDGs are a shared plan to end poverty, protect the planet, and enable peace and prosperity for all by 2030. Achieving these goals requires action across economic, social, and environmental spheres, a space where Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have become pivotal actors. Their effectiveness stems from a powerful combination of organizational resources and multi-venue advocacy strategies (Partelow et al., 2020; Bey, 2022).

Partnering with young people through structured volunteering, NGOs help address economic, social and environmental challenges while building volunteers' capabilities, wellbeing and social capital (Nichol et al., 2024; Ehsan et al., 2019). International evidence further indicates that volunteer-state-NGO partnerships are integral to inclusive governance and to community resilience linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (UNV, 2022). Within Europe, the European Solidarity Corps provides a robust framework for such contributions; its legal mandate and recent EU evaluations report gains in inclusion, civic engagement and transferable skills (Regulation (EU) 2021/888,2021). When NGOs co-design volunteer roles with young people, clear tasks, mentoring, links to local authorities, volunteers become part of this multi-venue strategy.

Within the European Solidarity Corps, youth work and volunteering programs mobilize young people to contribute time, skills and local knowledge to social, environmental and economic improvements, often simultaneously (European Commission, n.d.). Accredited organizations recruit and prepare volunteers, provide mentoring and safeguarding, broker partnerships with schools, municipalities and businesses, and maintain proportionate systems for learning and accountability (European Commission, 2025).

The non-governmental organization Open Space Foundation, based in Sofia, Bulgaria, was selected as the focal case because it engages diverse international and local volunteers each year. Its programs combine school-based activities, cleanings in rural areas, public events and social-media outreach to educate and raise awareness among young people, encouraging active citizenship and tangible contributions across the three pillars of sustainable development. This

mixture of settings and audiences offers a rich arena in which to examine how organizational design, mentoring and partnership brokering shape volunteers' experiences and the pathways through which their work may contribute to SDG-relevant outcomes.

To address gaps in the literature, limited attention to how motivations and retention conditions interact in youth volunteering, sparse evidence on the organizational mechanisms that convert effort into SDG-relevant contributions, and underrepresentation of Central and Eastern European contexts, this study undertakes a qualitative single-case analysis of the European Solidarity Corps as implemented by Open Space Foundation. The central question asks how the NGO's programs enable youth volunteers to contribute to the SDGs, and what helps them start and stay. Accordingly, the study (i) maps contribution pathways from specific activities to SDG targets; (ii) examines entry motivations and retention drivers; (iii) and analyses barriers to participation at entry and obstacles during service.

The paper proceeds as follows. A subsequent review of the literature situates the study and distils the theoretical lens that guides the analysis. We then detail the materials and methods, data, participants and analytic strategy. The findings are presented and interpreted in relation to this framework. The closing section draws out practical implications for organizations and policy, acknowledges limitations, and sets priorities for future comparative and longitudinal research.

2. Literature Review

Contemporary scholars increasingly treat "youth" not as a fixed age bracket but as a socially constructed transitional phase shaped by institutions, norms, and opportunity structures (Yee et al., 2021). This view aligns with global frameworks, most notably Agenda 21, which recognize young people as a Major Group essential to sustainable development, shifting youth participation from a discretionary activity to a policy-relevant lever for societal change (United Nations, 1992). Within this frame, the literature on youth volunteering converges on two broad claims about why young people step forward and why they hold back, while also surfacing contextual differences that matter for practice.

On the motivation side, evidence consistently shows that young people are drawn by prosocial aims and social influence, with career development acknowledged but rarely primary. Dermol et al. (2023) report that altruistic values, wanting to help others and improve the community, combine with cues from family and friends to trigger participation; career benefits function

more as reinforcement than as the initial spark. Motivation is also strongly conditioned by institutional climate. Kwan et al. (2023), studying student volunteering in Singapore, show that schools with a genuine service ethos cultivate intrinsic, meaningful engagement, whereas "peripheral" or compliance-driven approaches generate short-lived, checkbox participation. Access to volunteering itself is often mediated by social networks and locality. Pearce et al. (2023) find that networks are a critical gateway, especially for rural youth, yet local structural barriers (e.g., transport, fewer programs, narrower information channels) can mute the effect of motivation by constraining discovery and fit. At the systems level, country cases in Central and Eastern Europe illustrate how macro-features shape who participates and how they experience it. In Hungary, Molnar et al. (2025) characterize international volunteering as "high support but low awareness": benefits are perceived as largely personal; awareness is concentrated among women, the highly educated, and prior domestic volunteers; and returnees face cultural and project-management hurdles. In Bulgaria, Rusanova (2025) points to persistent gaps, underdeveloped infrastructure, poor coordination, and legislative shortcomings, that depress program quality and continuity.

On the barriers side, two mechanisms dominate. First, information frictions at the top of the funnel: young people often lack a clear picture of what volunteering is, where to find opportunities, and how to begin (Nursey-Bray et al., 2022); Garai-Fodor et al. (2021) found limited information and still-forming value orientations as more plausible explanations for low motivation than apathy or deficient empathy. Second, procedural and bureaucratic load inside programs: hour logging, rigid templates, and escalating compliance can convert contribution into paperwork, dampening autonomy and meaning and, ultimately, driving attrition (Nursey-Bray et al., 2022). These frictions are not evenly distributed. In "high support/low awareness" contexts (Molnar et al., 2025), informational barriers disproportionately exclude those without strong networks, while system-level coordination and legal gaps (Rusanova, 2025) increase the day-to-day costs of staying engaged even for motivated youth.

What remains missing in the literature, and constitutes the gap our study addresses, is an integrated, practice-ready account that (i) links motivations and barriers across the full engagement pipeline (from discovery and entry to on-program experience and retention) within a single organizational ecosystem; (ii) foregrounds the specificities of the international volunteer experience; and (iii) makes explicit how the motives documented in prior work

translate into concrete contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in everyday program tasks.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Design and Rationale

We employed a qualitative single-case study of the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) as implemented by the Open Space Foundation (OSF) in Bulgaria. We selected Open Space Foundation because its core mission is youth development aligned with sustainable development aims, delivered through education, and community-focused projects directly relevant to our research. Secondly, access and feasibility were strong; we had direct contact with Open Space Foundation and the organization formally agreed to participate, granting interviews and sharing relevant documentation needed for robust analysis. Finally, the case helps address a regional evidence gap, as Central and Eastern European contexts remain comparatively under-represented in studies of youth volunteering and SDG contributions. All engagement proceeded with prior ethical approval and explicit consent from the organization and participants.

3.2. Setting and Case Context

Open Space Foundation is a non-profit organization founded in 2006 in Sofia, Bulgaria. Its mission is to improve education and address social and environmental issues through educational and artistic approaches. OSF acts as both a sending and host organization within the European Solidarity Corps, running projects such as Move Your Finger, and Not Just History.

The Foundation is engaged in a variety of projects that aim to inspire and empower youth while fostering sharing and discovery.

Table 1. Overview of Foundation Projects and Their Alignment with Sustainable Development Pillars

Project	Period of the project	Pillar of sustainable development
Move Your Finger	Long term (1 year)	Social Environmental
Not Just History	Short term (45 days)	Social Environmental

Source: *Authors' own elaboration*

Move Your Finger: This project operates as an awareness and engagement initiative, employing a hybrid methodology of digital media and arts-based practices. It targets both social and environmental sustainability goals. The environmental dimension is advanced through public campaigns promoting pro-environmental behaviour and resource stewardship. Concurrently, the social dimension is addressed by facilitating community dialogues and enabling participants to initiate small-scale, tangible local actions.

Not Just History: This initiative adopts a place-based approach, using the cultural and historical heritage of the Petrich region as a foundational asset. Its primary objective is to bolster the social pillar of sustainability by reinforcing local identity, encouraging intergenerational learning, and enhancing social cohesion through structured educational and community events. Furthermore, the project integrates an environmental stewardship element, primarily through organised clean-up activities in shared spaces such as roads and forested areas.

3.3. Participants and Sampling

We used purposive sampling to include core organizational roles and diverse volunteer perspectives. Participants comprised:

- OpenSpace Foundation chairwoman (strategic leadership),
- The program mentor (operational guidance and direct volunteer supervision),
- ten volunteers; five long-term in Sofia and five short-term in Petrich, of different nationalities (Morocco, Bulgaria, Algeria, France).

This composition enabled triangulation across leadership, program delivery and participant experience.

3.4. Data Collection

Primary data derive from semi-structured interviews. After obtaining informed consent from all participants, we conducted:

- an online interview with the chairwoman to document organizational aims, current projects and perceived contribution pathways to the SDGs, and to elicit recommendations for policymakers and funders;
- an online interview with the mentor to explore mentoring practice, volunteer motivations and participation challenges;
- ten volunteer interviews to understand motivations to start and remain in volunteering, and perceived barriers to participation. Long-term volunteers in Sofia were interviewed face-to-face; short-term volunteers in Petrich, most having returned home after project completion; were interviewed online. Interviews were guided by semi-directed open questions.

Recruitment was facilitated via Open Space Foundation WhatsApp groups (long- and short-term cohorts). The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and manually coded; inductive themes were developed using grounded theory techniques (Neuman, 2006). The shortest interview lasted for 40 minutes and the longest being 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted in English, during January–June 2025.

3.5. Coding process

The data were analysed using an inductive thematic approach informed by grounded theory principles. This approach was selected because it allows analytical categories to emerge progressively from participants' accounts while also supporting the development of an explanatory interpretation of the processes shaping youth participation.

The coding procedure unfolded in three iterative stages.

In the first stage, open coding was conducted on the interview transcripts line by line. This initial phase aimed to identify meaningful units of data related to motivations, experiences,

barriers, organizational conditions, and perceived outcomes of participation. Codes were kept close to participants' language in order to preserve the empirical richness of the material.

In the second stage, axial coding was used to group related codes into broader categories by identifying patterns of similarity, difference, and connection across interviews. For example, codes related to skill acquisition, communication improvement, and confidence-building were clustered under broader categories associated with capability development. Similarly, codes referring to mentoring, peer cohesion, and leadership support were grouped into categories capturing enabling organizational conditions.

In the third stage, selective coding was employed to refine and integrate these categories into higher-order analytical themes. Through this process, the analysis converged around four central themes that structure the results section: initial motivations to join, conditions that sustain participation, challenges encountered during service, and barriers to participation at entry. These themes were not treated as isolated descriptive clusters. Rather, they were analysed in relation to one another in order to understand how access conditions, entry motives, lived experience, and retention outcomes interact over time.

3.6. Analytical Process and Validation

Theme development followed a constant comparative logic. Data segments were continuously compared across participants, roles, and project contexts to identify recurring patterns as well as important variations. Themes were retained on the basis of three criteria: their recurrence across interviews, their relevance to the research question, and their explanatory value in clarifying the dynamics of youth participation.

The analytical process moved beyond simple thematic description. Once the four main themes had been stabilized, a second layer of interpretation examined how they linked together in a mechanism-based account of participation. More specifically, the analysis explored how entry motivations increased willingness to participate, how barriers constrained access, how team climate and project design sustained retention, and how challenges such as language barriers or divergent work cultures could weaken participation unless moderated by supportive organizational conditions. This step enabled the construction of the mechanism-based model presented in the results section, linking access, entry, experience, retention, and capability-related outcomes.

Data triangulation was ensured by incorporating three distinct sources of perspective: organizational leadership, the mentor, and volunteers. This made it possible to compare strategic discourse, implementation practices, and participant experience, thereby reducing single-source bias.

Thematic saturation was considered achieved when additional interviews no longer generated substantially new categories but instead reinforced or nuanced the patterns already identified. By the end of the coding process, the main explanatory dimensions had become recurrent across interviews, particularly with regard to motivations, sustaining conditions, perceived barriers, and service-related challenges.

Attention was paid to coding reliability and internal consistency through repeated review of the coding structure and continuous comparison between raw data, initial codes, emerging categories, and final themes. This iterative process helped refine category boundaries and ensured that the final analytical structure remained closely grounded in the data.

Finally, the analysis was conducted with a concern for transparency and traceability. Coding decisions, category refinement, and theme consolidation were documented throughout the process, making it possible to maintain a clear link between participants' accounts, thematic findings, and the final mechanism-based interpretation developed in the study.

4. Results

This section first notes how Open Space Foundation practice embeds sustainable development principles and maps onto specific Sustainable Development Goals SDGs. It then reports findings from semi-structured interviews with volunteers, the mentor, and the chairwoman of the Open Space Foundation OSF. Analysis is organised around four themes: initial motivations to join, conditions that sustain participation, challenges encountered during service, and barriers to participation at entry. Each theme is presented with concise synthesis and illustrative quotations, with volunteers anonymised as V1–V10. Finally, we integrate these results into a mechanism-based model that links access, entry, experience, and outcomes.

4.1.OpenSpace Foundation and Sustainable Development Goals

An analysis of the Chairwoman's presentation and direct programme observation reveals that the Open Space Foundation's activities demonstrate a strategic alignment with seven UN Sustainable Development Goals. Rather than direct service provision, the Foundation's

contribution is characterised by a multi-level approach that operates through awareness-raising, capacity-building, and strategic partnership. This model leverages its position as a civil society organisation to effect change at grassroots, institutional, and systemic levels.

Grassroots Mobilisation and Behaviour Change

The Foundation's most direct impact is at the individual and community level, primarily targeting SDGs 3, 12, and 13. Through its flagship "Move Your Finger" project, it conducts targeted campaigns to foster responsible consumption (SDG 12) and climate action (SDG 13) by promoting sustainable practices such as reduced water usage, recycling, and composting. Concurrently, its educational initiatives on the risks of substance abuse constitute a preventative public health strategy, indirectly contributing to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) by building resilience and promoting informed behavioural choices among youth.

Educational Innovation and Capacity Building

The Foundation's work is fundamentally pedagogical, positioning it as a key contributor to SDG 4 (Quality Education). It moves beyond formal curricula by implementing experiential learning through school events and internal training. This approach not only disseminates knowledge on environmental and cultural issues but also builds the technical and civic capacity of its volunteers and employees, thereby creating a multiplier effect for its core messages.

Institutional Engagement and Systemic Partnerships

Beyond grassroots activities, the Foundation engages in partnerships that amplify its impact and address systemic challenges. Its collaboration with local schools and NGOs (SDG 17) enhances the reach and resource efficiency of its programmes. More significantly, its membership in the CHANCE network, a Civil Hub Against Organized Crime in Europe, represents a strategic commitment to strengthening institutions and promoting peace and justice (SDG 16). This membership situates the Foundation within a broader European civil society front, enabling cross-border collaboration to confront organized crime and corruption, thereby addressing the root causes of societal instability.

4.2.Motivations to join

Stepping Beyond the Comfort Zone

Across eight interviews, Importantly, this was not framed as thrill-seeking but as a disciplined way to become more effective contributors to sustainable development by testing oneself in new roles and settings. 'The appeal lay in real responsibilities' (V1) that exceeded everyday student tasks, with several interviewees describing workshops, public speaking and event planning as stretching but manageable challenges: 'Back home I never lead sessions, here I run workshops and it's scary but exciting' (V2). Cross-cultural living and teamwork were central to that stretch, 'I'd never lived with people from four countries; navigating that pushed me to listen differently' (V3), suggesting that novelty operated as a social as well as a technical demand.

Analytically, the draw of stepping out appears to function as an entry mechanism that quickly activates two needs central to sustained engagement: competence and autonomy. New roles create a credible arena to practise and demonstrate skill, receive feedback and revise performance; at the same time, volunteers experience a degree of discretion in how they deliver tasks. Several participants described this as "safe experimentation" with possible futures: 'I'm thinking about teaching, this was a low-risk way to try it before committing' (V4), which points to a liminal space where identity work and skill acquisition proceed together. When that space is scaffolded by mentoring and clear expectations, stretch converts into capability and confidence: 'Doing something totally unlike my routine, planning events, speaking in public, reset what I think I can do' (V5). Where scaffolding is thin, the same novelty risks tipping into anxiety or withdrawal.

Viewed through the study's lens, stepping beyond the comfort zone is best understood as a programme design feature that helps translate intention into sustained, SDG-relevant action. It equips volunteers with transferable skills for education and outreach, for community mobilisation and for cross-cultural collaboration, capacities that underpin contributions across the social and environmental pillars.

Improvement of Technical and Communication Skills

Participants identified the opportunity to build concrete technical and communication skills as a central reason for joining. Accounts emphasised learning-by-doing across project tasks while

practising intercultural communication in diverse teams. One volunteer noted the progression from tools to team communication: 'I came for hands-on skills, editing video, managing social media, and ended up learning how to brief a team clearly' (V1). Another highlighted direct, client-facing experience seldom available at home: 'Back home I rarely speak to stakeholders; here I email partners, take minutes and present updates, my writing and speaking have levelled up' (V2). For several interviewees, the multicultural setting was integral to that development: 'You learn to adapt your message, slow down, check understanding, choose simpler words, so everyone can contribute' (V10).

Confidence followed successful performance under mild time pressure. Participants pointed to concrete turning points running a workshop, troubleshooting a data glitch during an event, that converted anxiety into a sense of capability: 'After running a workshop and fixing a data glitch under pressure, I now feel ready for a junior role' (V5). In this way, technical tools and communication habits were acquired together, with responsibility and public deadlines making improvement stick.

Volunteers framed the placement as a structured practice lab in which they could acquire tangible tools, rehearse professional interactions and learn to communicate effectively across cultures, all while contributing to programme outputs.

Intrinsic Altruism

Across seven interviews, Participants frequently described a straightforward altruistic impulse as central to their decision to volunteer: the wish to ease someone else's burden, however modest. The appeal was immediate and relational. 'Bringing a smile to someone's face is the most fulfilling thing in life' (V2). Another traced their entry to a nearby need: 'I joined because a neighbour needed after-school help; I realised I could do the same for others here' (V1), framing service as a simple extension of everyday care.

Altruism was also narrated as a value learned at home and enacted through volunteering. 'My family always said, if you can spare an hour, you give it; volunteering felt like putting that into practice' (V8). For some, helping was intertwined with reciprocity and obligation to those who had supported them: 'I've benefited from mentors; this is my turn to pass it on' (V5). These accounts present volunteering as continuity with existing moral commitments rather than a break from them.

Interviewees linked the emotional feedback from small, concrete outcomes to sustained effort. 'When a pupil finally gets it, or a resident thanks you after a meeting, it keeps you going' (V6). Such moments were described as immediate payoffs that made the time invested feel worthwhile and encouraged further participation.

Altruism functioned as an entry motive expressed through everyday acts of service, helping a child after school, supporting a local meeting, responding to visible needs, rather than through abstract statements of principle. In this sense, intrinsic altruism complemented the sustainability frame by directing attention to people-centred contributions and by providing the relational rewards that made early participation feel meaningful.

The contribution to Sustainable Development

Participants consistently described their decision to volunteer in terms of making a concrete contribution to sustainable development. Entry was not framed as personal advancement but as an opportunity to act on shared responsibilities for place, people and planet. The environmental dimension provided the most immediate route into action because change was visible and localised. One volunteer explained, 'We made the mountain roads safer for the local population by cleaning them and cutting down trees that were about to fall' (V4). Such accounts position volunteering as practical stewardship aligned with goals on safer, more liveable communities and care for land and biodiversity.

A second strand of contribution centred on education and communication, understood as enabling others to act sustainably. Through the youth magazine *Voyager*, participants sought to inform peers and younger audiences, thereby widening the circle of impact. As one interviewee noted, 'For youth, the publication is impactful; it offers insights that support personal and professional growth' (V1). Another added, 'If someone reads my article and it helps them, that's a great outcome… inspiring children about nature, love and respect can change behaviours' (V2). Here, volunteers saw themselves as building the knowledge base and social norms that underpin sustainable practices.

Volunteers also linked cultural and community initiatives to sustainability outcomes, highlighting the social pillar alongside the environmental. Heritage events, local festivals and public activities were described as strengthening cohesion and encouraging responsible care for shared spaces. 'Cleaning campaigns and cultural events help the environment and promote

tourism and exchange', observed one participant (V5), casting service as a contribution to community vitality rather than a stand-alone clean-up.

Participation frequently broadened the way volunteers conceived of sustainability, extending attention from environmental remediation to questions of inclusion and opportunity. 'Volunteering made me notice disadvantaged people and hiring barriers… we can help society grow, and, at some point, the economy' (V6). In this view, contributing to sustainable development meant addressing social exclusion alongside environmental concerns, connecting local action to wider aims of fair participation and well-being.

The Alignment of the Project with Academic Pursuits

Three volunteers linked their decision to volunteer to their degree subjects, treating the placement as applied learning that deepened and tested what they study. A history student described how place-based heritage work reframed classroom knowledge: 'The first time I approached this organisation, I was driven by a wish to enrich my understanding of my field; working on local heritage brought the archives to life' (V3). An environmental science volunteer emphasised method-in-practice: 'Designing clean-up routes let me test techniques I'd only met in lectures' (V9). A communications student stressed professional transfer: 'Planning campaigns and writing short features felt like a live module; feedback here sharpened my editing and messaging far more than coursework alone' (V6).

Analytically, these accounts present the placement as work-integrated learning with authentic tasks, real audiences and iterative feedback. Participants reported moving from theoretical familiarity to procedural know-how selecting methods, sequencing steps, and refining outputs in response to mentoring and deadlines. The academic–practice fit offered a clear rationale for enrolment and appeared to sustain engagement when tasks mapped visibly onto degree content.

4.3.Motivations to continue volunteering

Team Climate and Leadership

Across interviews, sustained engagement was attributed less to individual grit than to the human texture of everyday work: approachable leadership, responsive mentoring and a collegial peer culture. Volunteers repeatedly described the chairwoman's visibility and follow-through as anchoring. 'She is visible, asks what we need and follows through, so you want to match that commitment' (V3). When plans faltered, her stance was to reframe rather than fault: 'When a

plan stalls, she reframes it rather than blaming people; that lowers stress and keeps you in' (V6). This style set a tone in which problems were treated as shared tasks, not personal failings, and volunteers reported that such framing made it easier to persist through setbacks.

Peer cohesion offered day-to-day stability for the team climate. Teams built simple rituals: post-event debriefs, humour, informal reflection, that prevented pressures from accumulating. 'We debrief after events, laugh, reflect, so the hard days don't pile up' (V4). Interviewees linked these routines to a sense of belonging and to practical learning: mistakes were surfaced, lessons captured and the next iteration planned without defensiveness.

From the mentor's perspective, retention depended on early structure and steady attention: clear roles, predictable check-ins and quick help with practical barriers such as transport, materials or scheduling. Once these were in place, 'motivation tends to sustain itself'. Volunteers corroborated this view, noting that timely troubleshooting and consistent feedback turned stretch into a manageable challenge rather than a reason to withdraw.

Leadership also communicated psychological safety and recognition as explicit expectations. As the chairwoman summarised, 'People should try things, fail safely and see their effort noticed; that is what keeps them here'. Volunteers pointed to small but visible practices such as public thanks after events, opportunities to lead the next task, invitations to contribute ideas, as signals that effort mattered and growth was noticed.

Taken together, the accounts depict a retention ecology made up of three interacting elements: visible, non-punitive leadership; mentoring that provides structure and removes friction early; and peer cohesion built through routine debriefs and mutual support. In combination, these features created clear expectations, rapid problem-solving, constructive feedback and everyday recognition, conditions that converted initial enthusiasm into persistence over time.

Working on Interesting Projects

Participants attributed continued engagement to the intrinsic appeal and fit of project work: tasks felt meaningful, stretched existing skills, and importantly for some were outdoors and hands-on. Alignment with personal interests was frequently cited. 'Maintaining forest paths and cleaning monuments matched what I enjoy, as well as being outside and seeing what we've achieved by the end of the day' (V4). Others emphasised intellectual fit and practical learning: 'Designing the heritage walk let me use my history training while learning event logistics' (V3).

Tangibility amplified commitment: 'Building the cycling playground was concrete; we could point to it and say, we did that' (V7).

Variety and a degree of autonomy also mattered. Volunteers reported that rotation across tasks tempered monotony and sustained attention: 'Rotating between workshops and field days stops it feeling repetitive' (V1). Having ownership over a defined stream of work deepened investment: 'Having ownership of a small workstream kept me invested' (V4). From the chairwoman's perspective, retention improved when roles were matched to strengths and then gently extended: 'We try to pair tasks with interests, then add stretch goals so volunteers keep growing'. She also underscored credibility and community value as anchors of commitment: 'When activities meet real local needs and volunteers can see outcomes; they choose to stay'.

Taken together, the accounts indicate that interesting, well-scaffolded projects, with visible results, clear role ownership, task variety and paced challenge, were central to persistence. Where volunteers could connect personal interests to credible tasks and see concrete outcomes in the community, initial enthusiasm translated into sustained participation.

4.4.Challenges and Obstacles Encountered by Volunteers

Language Barrier and Communication Issues

Participants reported that the principal communication difficulty lay outside the team, in exchanges with local residents who did not routinely use English. The challenge was most pronounced in Petrich and during public-facing activities; within the team, English operated as a workable lingua franca, though early misreads around tone, humour and task specification were common and diminished within weeks as shared routines were institutionalised. 'I can manage in English, but when speaking with locals I often need a colleague to translate or rely on gestures and a few phrases' (V2). A second volunteer captured the intra-team dynamic: 'We all speak English, yet it's not native for any of us, so small misunderstandings happen. After a few weeks, once we learned each other's style, it becomes much easier' (V4).

The barrier operated on two levels. Public-facing activities were slowed by limited shared vocabulary and occasional need for ad hoc interpreters, which constrained spontaneity and required more preparation time. Inside the team, early friction stemmed less from lack of words than from pragmatic cues, how requests were framed, how feedback was given or jokes intended, leading to momentary misreads that eased as teams adopted simple practices such as

slower pacing, explicit check-backs and agreed task terms. Over time, participants described a shift from improvised gestures to stable workarounds (paired translation, template messages, short glossaries), which reduced error and cognitive load without removing the underlying constraint. In short, language barriers were most visible at the community interface, while intra-team issues were transitional and responsive to routine-building.

Divergent Work Cultures

A recurrent difficulty concerned coordinating across different work cultures, assumptions about time, hierarchy, initiative, pace and feedback, which slowed collaboration until expectations were made explicit. Volunteers described early misalignment in feedback style: 'Back home, feedback is very direct; here it is softer and I misread silence as agreement' (V1) and in approaches to planning: 'Some of us plan everything in Trello; others prefer to "just start". It took weeks to find a rhythm' (V6). Time norms were a regular flashpoint: 'Punctuality means different things; agreeing on what '10:00' actually means helped a lot' (V5). These differences produced operational effects in the first weeks: staggered starts, duplicated effort and occasional re-work when informal assumptions did not match.

From the mentor's perspective, retention of pace depended on establishing a shared "working agreement": quickly clarifying goals, roles, task ownership and preferred communication styles, so trust could form and delivery remain predictable within short timeframes. Early clarity also surfaced points of friction before they hardened into conflict, making it easier to manage and often to prevent avoidable tensions around responsibilities and deadlines. Volunteers reported that once norms were named, response times, meeting punctuality, which channel to use for what, and how to signal dissent, coordination improved markedly and the initial frictions subsided.

Physical Demands of the Work

A less frequent but salient theme concerned the physical demands of operational tasks. One volunteer noted that fatigue could build quickly and, at times, 'I feel like stopping before the end of the shift' (V7). The chairwoman framed this within a wider observation about an underdeveloped culture of volunteering: many young people appear to prefer office-based roles in modern environments, with an implicit expectation that physically demanding tasks, cleaning, building, repairing, are someone else's responsibility.

4.5.Barriers to Participation in Volunteering Programs

Low Program Visibility

Across five interviews, low visibility and fragmented information were cited as primary barriers to entry. Several participants reported finding opportunities by chance, typically through friends or social media, rather than via schools, municipalities or mainstream youth channels. 'I found the programme through an Instagram story; nothing at my university points us to it' (V3). Others described a confusing search landscape before discovering the European Solidarity Corps portal: 'There are dozens of sites, each with different deadlines and forms; before learning about the European Solidarity Corps portal, it was difficult to navigate, and not everyone is aware of it' (V2). Two volunteers highlighted weak local outreach, particularly outside major cities: 'In my town there are posters for jobs, never for volunteering' (V4); 'If schools did a short briefing once a term, many more would apply' (V5).

Financial Constraints

Across the volunteer cohort, financial barriers were identified as a major deterrent to entry, especially for those without stable income. 'For a young person without stable income, applying to volunteer is difficult; if no grant is available to cover basic needs, participation may be impossible even when motivation to help is strong' (V2). By contrast, European Solidarity Corps placements at OSF include a monthly grant and core-cost coverage, which participants regarded as decisive in lowering the threshold for entry. Even so, several international volunteers described residual frictions that shape access and early engagement. The most common were cash-flow timing and upfront costs: 'Visa fees and initial travel have to be paid before any grant arrives; without savings or family support, applications may be abandoned' (V1). In practice, these costs delayed start dates for some, led others to withdraw before departure, and concentrated participation among those able to draw on family resources. Compared with unpaid schemes, where the same expenses operate as hard exclusion, the ESC model substantially reduces, but does not remove, the financial constraint.

Lack of Support from the Social Environment

Several volunteers identified tepid or negative messages from family, peers or the wider community as a barrier to entry. Typical comments included, 'At your age you should have a proper job, not volunteer', 'It's time to focus on starting a family, not spend months away', and

'Is it even worth it if you're not earning real money?' Such views questioned the legitimacy of volunteering as work and cast doubt on its opportunity value. Participants reported that these messages often prompted self-doubt at the outset, worry about how their choice would be judged and whether time away would be seen as a detour rather than purposeful contribution.

Analytically, the constraint operated through social norms about employment and life stage. Where families equated value with salaried roles or immediate income, the non-wage nature of placements was framed as risk rather than investment, increasing the psychological cost of applying and, for some, delaying commitment. Operationally, volunteers described spending additional time justifying their choice, seeking letters that explained programme benefits, or waiting for small external "signals" (acceptance emails, mentor endorsements, visible outputs) before sharing their plans.

Most participants also reported countervailing support within the programme, mentors, fellow volunteers and appreciative community members, that helped reframe volunteering as purposeful, skill-building work. Public thanks after events, visible outcomes (for example, a completed path or a published feature) and routine feedback were cited as important in shifting conversations at home from "why volunteer?" to "what did you achieve?". In short, limited social endorsement at entry dampened confidence and slowed decisions, but programme-based recognition and tangible results often offset this barrier once participation began.

The Reluctance to Express and Share Ideas

Teamwork is central to youth volunteering, yet several participants noted that reluctance to speak up can hinder collaboration, especially early on and when confidence, language, or status differences are in play. As one volunteer put it: 'The main barrier for youth participating in volunteering programs is often their reluctance to express themselves and share their ideas. Once they realize that everyone around them cares about the same goals and ideas, these barriers disappear, making participation easier' (V2).

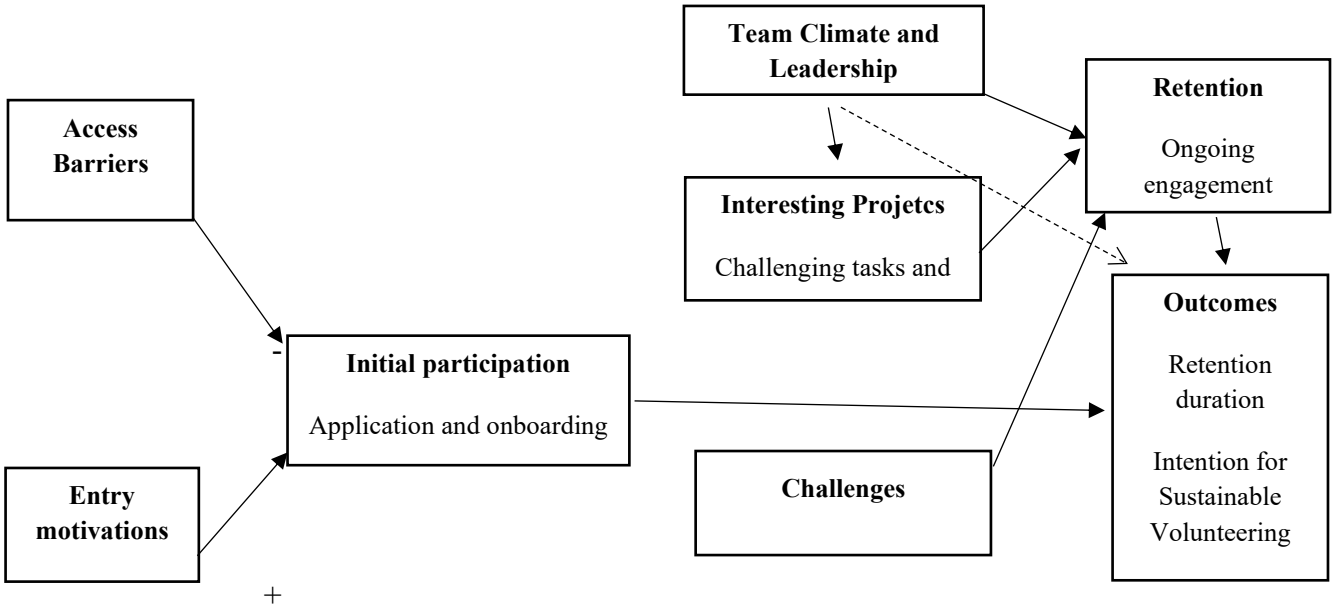
4.6.Mechanism-Based Model of Youth Volunteering

We advance a mechanism-based model of youth volunteering that links access, entry, experience, and outcomes. Motivational factors raise perceived purpose and self-efficacy at the point of entry, while access barriers lower the chance of joining by constraining visibility, affordability, and social backing. After onboarding, team climate and leadership sustain

engagement through clear norms, timely feedback, and psychological safety. They also enable a pipeline of interesting projects that carry part of the climate effect into retention as a mediating path. Participation is not frictionless. Language and work-culture challenges create strain that lowers perceived fit and pulls volunteers toward exit. A strong team climate weakens this negative path as a moderator, so the same level of challenge produces less attrition when norms and support are in place.

Retention time then functions as a capability engine. Longer tenure yields skill accumulation and a clearer sense of efficacy, which increases intention to start or join a sustainable venture.

Fig. 1. International Journal of Mechanism-based model of youth volunteering participation



Source: *Authors' own elaboration*

The model is directional and testable. Higher entry motivations should predict enrolment only when barriers are not binding. Team climate should predict retention both directly and through the presence of interesting projects. The slope from challenges to exit should be smaller when climate is strong. Retention length should predict measured skill gains and stated sustainable volunteering intention. Boundary conditions are explicit. The model targets team-based, cross-cultural programs. Different settings may alter the strength of paths but not the core logic.

We set seven propositions for future tests:

P1: Higher entry motivations increase the probability of enrolment.
P2: Positive team climate strengthens the link between entry motivations and early retention.
P3: Working on interesting projects mediates the effect of team climate on long term retention.
P4: Challenges reduce retention through lower perceived fit.
P5: Supportive leadership weakens the negative effect of challenges on retention.
P6: Longer retention increases skill gains and the intention to start a sustainable venture.
P7: Low program visibility and financial constraints depress enrolment even when entry motivations are high.

5. Discussion

5.1.Contribution

Much of the existing literature has treated motivations and barriers as relatively stable determinants of engagement. Altruism, skill development, or career orientation are typically positioned as drivers (Clary et al., 1998; Hustinx et al., 2010; Hyde et al., 2016; Khasanzyanova, 2017; Wilson, 2012), while constraints such as financial limitations or organizational frictions are seen as inhibitors. This framing has been useful, yet it often leaves unexplained why individuals with similar motivations follow very different participation trajectories.

The findings confirm that youth volunteering is indeed shaped by a combination of altruistic, developmental, and instrumental motives, in line with prior studies (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Mokhzan et al., 2023). Participants rarely enter programs for a single reason. Their accounts instead reveal overlapping intentions: contributing to sustainability, testing themselves in unfamiliar environments, and acquiring practical competencies. In that sense, the study aligns with the established view that volunteering is driven by hybrid motivations rather than purely selfless or purely strategic considerations.

Where the present analysis departs from existing work is in the role attributed to these motivations. Rather than functioning as direct predictors of sustained engagement, they appear to operate as entry conditions whose influence depends on subsequent experience. This observation resonates with insights from the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), where intention does not automatically translate into action but remains contingent on contextual and perceived control factors. In the context of volunteering, the gap seems to extend beyond entry

into the program: even after participation begins, continuity depends on how individuals interpret what they encounter.

This helps clarify a tension that has remained underexplored in previous research. Studies frequently document strong pro-social intentions among youth while also reporting high levels of discontinuity or dropout. The results presented here suggest that this is not a contradiction but a reflection of a processual gap between motivation and sustained engagement, which unfolds during the experience itself rather than prior to it.

A similar refinement applies to the interpretation of challenges. Existing literature often treats language barriers, cultural differences, or organizational constraints as factors that hinder participation (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010; Studer & Schnurbein, 2013a; Sundeen et al., 2007). The empirical material in this study does not invalidate that perspective, but it shows that these elements do not have a fixed effect. Their impact varies depending on how they are encountered and managed. In some cases, they generate frustration and slow coordination. In others, they contribute to learning, adaptation, and confidence-building.

This variability can be better understood through the lens of social cognitive theory, particularly the notion of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Situations that initially appear demanding can strengthen individuals' perceived capabilities when they are accompanied by support, feedback, and opportunities for gradual mastery. The accounts of volunteers who moved from uncertainty to confidence after leading workshops or navigating intercultural interactions illustrate this dynamic. Challenges, in this sense, do not simply act as barriers; they become part of the process through which competence is constructed.

The organizational environment plays a decisive role in this transformation. Prior research has highlighted the importance of institutional support and organizational culture in sustaining volunteering. The present study extends this line of work by showing that such support does not merely facilitate participation in a general sense. It actively shapes how participants interpret their experience. Practices such as mentoring, accessible leadership, and peer cohesion create conditions in which uncertainty becomes tolerable and experimentation possible. The idea of relational scaffolding captures this dynamic, emphasizing that support operates through ongoing interaction rather than through static structures.

At the same time, the nature of the tasks assigned to volunteers influences how motivations are sustained. When participants are involved in projects that allow ownership and produce visible

outcomes, their initial intentions, whether related to contribution, learning, or self-development, find concrete expression. This observation connects with literature on experiential learning, yet it adds an important nuance. Engagement is not sustained by activity alone, but by the perceived link between effort and impact. When that link is visible, commitment tends to persist; when it is not, motivation risks fading despite initial enthusiasm.

These findings suggest that youth volunteering is better understood as a process of alignment between individual intentions, organizational conditions, and lived experience. Participation is neither fully determined by prior motivations nor entirely shaped by structural constraints. It evolves through continuous adjustment, where meaning, capability, and commitment are renegotiated over time. From this perspective, sustained engagement emerges not as a direct outcome of motivation, but as the product of an interaction between what individuals seek, what they encounter, and how these encounters are structured.

5.2.Practical Implications

The implications for practice are significant. For organizations managing international volunteers, success hinges on intentional ecosystem design. This necessitates:

- **Investing in Relational Infrastructure:** Prioritizing the selection and training of mentors and leaders who can cultivate psychological safety and mediate cross-cultural dynamics is paramount.
- **Curating Project-Based Learning:** Deliberately designing projects that offer clear ownership, developmental stretch, and a visible line-of-sight to SDG impacts is crucial for maintaining intrinsic motivation.
- **Proactive Barrier Mitigation:** Acknowledging structural barriers like financial constraints and low visibility, organizations must actively streamline administrative processes, provide upfront financial support, and conduct targeted outreach to ensure equitable access.

For policymakers and funders, this study underscores that supporting international volunteering requires funding not only participant stipends but also the critical administrative and mentorship infrastructure that enables the transformative mediation of challenges into sustained engagement.

Conclusion

Our findings from the Open Space Foundation case reveal that volunteer engagement is a dynamic process, initiated by a complex interplay of altruism and self-development but sustained by critical, often overlooked, factors such as supportive psychosocial environment and well-scaffolded projects that yield visible results.

The primary contribution of this research is its identification of a critical transition point, from initial motivation to sustained retention. We demonstrate that challenges such as cross-cultural friction and communication gaps are not merely operational hurdles but central factors that can derail SDG contributions if not actively managed. Furthermore, by mapping specific volunteer activities to seven distinct SDGs, we move from abstract alignment to demonstrable concordance, offering a replicable model for assessing localized SDG impact.

Ultimately, this paper argues that the effective delivery of the SDGs through youth volunteering is not automatic. It is a function of deliberate, human-centred program design that addresses the holistic volunteer experience, from dismantling informational and financial barriers to entry, to fostering the peer cohesion and responsive leadership that ensures volunteers not only arrive but choose to stay and contribute.

The chairwoman recommends to policymakers an increased investment in fostering a culture of volunteering within society. Specifically, she proposes the implementation of volunteering hours for students, suggesting that individuals should dedicate at least two hours per week to volunteering for a cause of their choice starting from a young age. This initiative, she argues, *"would not only instil a sense of civic responsibility but also cultivate empathy and social consciousness among future generations"*.

These insights provide a crucial framework for policymakers and NGOs aiming to optimize youth-led initiatives for maximum sustainable development impact.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

The proposed mechanism-based model is grounded in qualitative evidence. It is explanatory, not validated. We have not tested the mediating and moderating links statistically. Measurement development and multi-site tests remain for future work.

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