

International Volunteering: #2 Community Development through a Social Change Lens¹

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Introduction

This is the second publication in the *International Volunteering* series, which aims to provide valuable insights into how volunteerism can improve community development in international settings by understanding factors that influence social change.

This publication provides information to stakeholders working in the international volunteer sector, particularly organizations that recruit and lead volunteer groups, with the aim of framing international volunteering services as a form of social change that impacts community development.

International Volunteering and Community Development

Community development through international volunteering involves volunteers actively collaborating with local communities to create tangible improvements in social, economic, and environmental conditions (Schroeder et al., 2015). Volunteers partner with community members to identify priorities and co-design solutions. For example, they may help implement sustainable farming techniques, support health education programs, or assist in building infrastructure that improves access to clean water and education. These efforts contribute to community development, aim to strengthen local capacity, and promote long-term resilience, thereby ensuring that communities can maintain their progress after the volunteer projects conclude (Allum, 2012; Schroeder et al., 2015).

Volunteers benefit by gaining valuable cross-cultural skills and practical experience, while communities receive resources, technical knowledge, and support that international volunteers provide (Khatri & Khadka, 2025). Examples of international community development programs include initiatives offered by different organizations, such as the [Peace Corps](#), which supports volunteer placements in various areas; and [ECHO](#), which focuses on sustainable agricultural practices in developing regions. Online platforms such as [Volunteer World](#),

[WVVOOF](#), and [Go Overseas](#) also connect volunteers with projects ranging from environmental conservation to youth mentorship and public health. For more detailed descriptions of these opportunities, see Ask IFAS publication AEC838, [International Volunteering: #1 What It Is and How to Apply](#).

Volunteerism as a Social Response to Community Challenges

Volunteerism strengthens communities by encouraging people to take collective action on local issues, playing an important role in building stronger and more resilient communities that are better equipped to handle future challenges (United Nations Volunteers, 2018). In addition, volunteerism fosters a sense of solidarity and social cohesion as volunteers work alongside community members to achieve common goals (Horsham et al., 2024).

As a result, volunteers are socially responsible by providing time, skills, and resources that complement existing community efforts to address community challenges (Kelly, 2023). This collaborative approach improves governance structures, encourages participatory decision-making, and ultimately strengthens the social fabric of the community (Davies et al., 2024; Horsham et al., 2024).

Volunteers contribute to community development through practical actions that address specific local needs. For example, they may organize education workshops on a specific topic, assist in building infrastructure, or introduce sustainable agricultural practices that improve food security. These social response efforts by volunteers complement existing community initiatives aimed at overcoming local challenges.

Furthermore, volunteers serve as powerful agents of change, addressing critical development challenges and fostering community resilience (Okech et al., 2023). Their efforts complement various forms of changemaking, such as activism and advocacy, particularly among the youth, and are essential for driving social progress (Okech et al., 2023). Consequently, volunteers act as catalysts for

transformation, delivering tangible actions that inspire hope, bolster resilience, and enhance the quality of life within communities (Allum & Devereux, 2020). For instance, volunteers could share skills related to digital literacy or sustainable agriculture with local people, helping them build long-term community capacity rather than offering short-term solutions.

Volunteering benefits communities and fosters personal and professional growth, allowing volunteers to develop new skills, build confidence, and gain a sense of purpose while serving a community. Additionally, volunteers contribute to economic development, because their time and effort hold significant value, even if not directly monetized. This contribution can be quantified in terms of economic impact, highlighting the substantial role volunteers play in driving social and economic progress.

Social Change Model Applied to Volunteerism

The social change model (SCM) of leadership development (Komives et al., 2017) is a method for preparing volunteers to serve and lead in a community (Baker & Bush, 2024; Kim & Wargo, 2022). Developed and first introduced by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) in 1996, the SCM emphasizes leadership as a process that is collaborative, values-based, and oriented towards positive social change. It provides a structure for cultivating socially responsible leadership by focusing on individual, group, and societal values (Gonzaga University, n.d.; HERI, 1996). The SCM offers guidance on how those working with a specific group of volunteers can foster socially responsible leadership (Baker & Bush, 2024).

The SCM aims to achieve two main objectives: to seek to improve learning and development by fostering self-awareness and leadership skills, and to promote positive social change within the community by encouraging actions that enhance the effectiveness and humanity of that community (HERI, 1996). These objectives can be meaningfully applied in real-world contexts such as international volunteerism, where both personal growth and community impact are central.

Based on the main objectives of the SCM, the following examples could be applied to volunteerism. For the first objective, organizations can provide pre-departure reflection workshops to prepare volunteers through sessions that prompt them to reflect on their values, cultural assumptions, and leadership styles. This self-awareness builds the foundation for ethical, culturally sensitive engagement abroad. For the second objective, volunteers could be encouraged by organizations to collaborate with community members to co-design projects that identify and address local needs.

By integrating the principles of the SCM, international volunteer programs can better prepare volunteers to act with leadership traits and values in individual, group, or society/community situations, as shown in Figure 1.

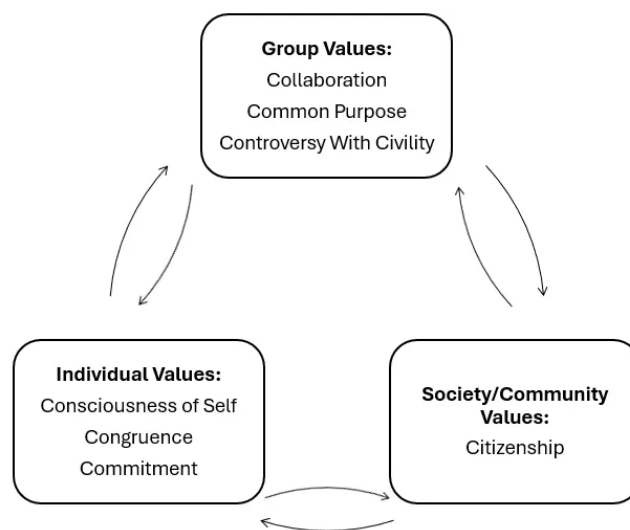


Figure 1. A social change model of leadership development. Adapted from Higher Education Research Institute. (1996). *A social change model of leadership development: Guidebook (Version III)*. Credit: Renzo Ceme, Pablo Lamino, Sebastian Galindo, and Sarah A. Bush, UF/IFAS

Table 1 explains the three central values of the SCM, the main questions for each level taken from HERI (1996), and a general example of its application to the international volunteer context.

How to Use This Information

Organizations and stakeholders in the international volunteer sector can use this information to design and implement effective volunteer programs using a social change model approach, promoting community development. Understanding these factors might help decision-makers improve the logistics of volunteer programs, promoting interaction among the three different factors of the SCM.

Organizations running volunteer programs can apply the SCM by integrating leadership development into preparation, implementation, and post-experience phases. A few practical ways in which an organization running a volunteer program can apply the SCM are listed below.

1. **Preparation:** Pre-departure training and pre-reflection are important for volunteers. These sessions should prompt reflection on personal values, cultural assumptions, and leadership styles. Incorporate interactive activities, such as case studies and role-playing, to help volunteers anticipate and prepare for cross-cultural challenges. Programs such

as 4-H International Exchange provide guidance for preparing volunteers through cultural orientation and leadership exercises (Torretta et al., 2020; Williams, 2000).

2. **Implementation:** Assign volunteers meaningful leadership roles (e.g., small project teams, coordinator of daily tasks, or liaison with community leaders). These responsibilities allow volunteers to practice decision-making, communication, and conflict resolution in real-world settings, reinforcing SCM principles of collaboration and common purpose.
3. **Post-experience:** Encourage volunteers to provide reflections and become advocates after their program experience. When they return home, they can share their experiences and stories to raise awareness and inspire others, helping them extend the impact of their work even further. Provide guidance on how to share experiences in their communities through blogs, social media, or other communication media.

Conclusions

International volunteering plays an important role in community development by addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges. Volunteers can serve as agents of change, fostering resilience and social development. By integrating the SCM, volunteer programs can effectively prepare individuals to lead and contribute to positive social change. This approach benefits the communities served and promotes personal and professional growth among volunteers. Organizations and stakeholders in the international volunteer sector can leverage these insights to design and implement impactful volunteer programs that drive sustainable development and enhance the quality of life in different communities.

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Table 1. Explanation of the SCM in the volunteerism context.

Values	Main Questions	Application
Individual: Consciousness of self, congruence, and commitment.	What personal attributes are we aiming to cultivate in participants of a leadership development program? Which personal qualities are most conducive to effective group dynamics and positive social change (HERI, 1996)?	Leadership development programs for international volunteers are often aimed at cultivating self-awareness, ethical consistency, and dedication. To help participants develop these qualities, the programs should integrate reflective activities, mentorship, and engagement. Volunteers could explore their motivations and values through journaling and group dialogue, practice congruence by making decisions aligned with ethical principles, and build commitment in community-driven projects.
Group: Collaboration, common purpose, and controversy with civility.	How can the collaborative leadership development process be structured to develop the desired individual qualities and drive positive social change (HERI, 1996)?	In a collaborative leadership development program, fostering collaboration is essential for building strong group dynamics and driving positive social change. To support this, the program can be structured around team-based projects, shared goal setting, and facilitated dialogue. Participants could learn how to collaborate by working in diverse teams where mutual respect and shared responsibility are emphasized.
Society/Community: Citizenship.	What social goals does the leadership development activity aim to achieve? Which types of service activities are most effective in motivating the group and fostering the desired personal qualities in individuals (HERI, 1996)?	In leadership development programs focused on citizenship, the goal could be focused on inspiring participants to become active and responsible members of society who contribute to the common good. These programs usually aim to achieve social goals such as community empowerment and sustainable change. To foster these outcomes, service activities that are community-based, collaborative, and reflective are most effective.

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