

The Volunteering Landscape in Ethiopia

The UN Volunteers estimate that one in seven people volunteer each year. Among them, one in four volunteers engage through organizations¹. In Ethiopia, volunteerism has long been embedded in the cultural practices of various communities. Traditional forms of volunteering include **Edir** (community-based mutual aid association (for funeral and emergency support)), **Debo** (loosely translated as "communal labor"), **Equb** (Rotating Savings and Credit Association), **Jige** Support or contribution (often referring to financial or in-kind assistance provided to someone in need), and **Wonfel**- Support or contribution (often referring to financial or in-kind assistance provided to someone in need)

Volunteerism is not a new concept to Ethiopia. Particularly in rural areas, communities have historically pooled their labor to support agricultural activities such as weeding and harvesting. They also come together to build traditional thatched-roof huts for the poorest or barren couples. Recognizing the significance of volunteerism, the Ethiopian government launched the **Summer Volunteering Scheme** in 2010, a program designed to mobilize university students to provide tutor services to lower grade students. Originally focused on tutor service, the scheme has since expanded to include community development objectives, such as upgrading homes for the elderly.

Ethiopia's **Ten-Year Development Plan (2021–2030)** prioritizes improving living standards and access to services, with infrastructure and urban development among its key focus areas². While government structures remain the primary drivers of volunteer-led housing initiatives, various non-state actors also play a significant role. These include the Ethiopian Red Cross Society, Rotary Ethiopia, VSO, the UN Volunteers Program, Cuso International, the Global Inspired Volunteers Society, and numerous grassroots youth associations and collectives, all contributing to Ethiopia's volunteering landscape.

Volunteerism also plays an essential economic role in Africa. According to the African Union's first State of Volunteerism in Africa Report (2023 draft), if African volunteers were to form a country, their combined efforts would create the fourth-largest economy on the continent, following Nigeria, Egypt, and South Africa. Furthermore, volunteerism is a powerful tool for youth empowerment and gender equality. The report highlights that 74% of volunteering assignments in Africa are carried out by individuals under 35, aligning closely

¹ <https://www.unv.org/swvr/volunteers-count-their-work-deserves-be-counted#:~:text=Global%20estimates%20place%20the%20number,published%20by%20John%20Hopkins%20University.>

² <https://www.mopd.gov.et/en/#:~:text=10%20Year%20Development,for%20Ethiopia's%20long%2Dterm%20prosperity.>

with Ethiopia's demographic structure, where 70% of the population is under 35. Women also play a crucial role, constituting 50.5% of volunteers.

In Ethiopia, the government's 2024 Summer Volunteering Scheme (runs from June-September) generated an estimated economic contribution of ETB 19.3 billion³ surpassing the country's ETB 14 billion budget allocation for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the 2024/25 fiscal year. The scheme covered 14 thematic areas, including building and upgrading housing infrastructures, environmental conservation through the Green Legacy initiative, professional services (e.g., free engineering support), road traffic management, and youth empowerment. In 2024 alone, the initiative resulted in:

- More than 20,000 new houses constructed
- More than 15,000 homes upgraded
- 1,500 organizations receiving free engineering services

Additionally, the Ministry of Women & Social Affairs reported that 22.4 million youth volunteers participated in the scheme, benefiting 52.7 million people nationwide.

At the national level, the Ministry of Women & Social Affairs is responsible for coordinating volunteerism, while in Addis Ababa, the Community Participation & Voluntary Coordination Commission is the only government institution explicitly dedicated to volunteerism. In regional states, Women and Social Affairs Bureaus oversee volunteer-related activities.

From a policy frameworks perspective, A draft National Volunteerism Policy, introduced by the Ministry of Women & Social Affairs in 2018, is currently under review by the Ministry of Planning and Development to ensure alignment with other policies⁴.

Despite its importance, Ethiopia's volunteerism sector faces several challenges:

1. **Lack of an Approved National Volunteering Policy** – The absence of a formal policy hinders institutionalization and creates disputes over ownership among government ministries.
2. **Funding Constraints** – A shrinking global funding landscape limits the capacity of grassroots organizations to mobilize volunteers.

³ <https://web.facebook.com/share/p/WDQsBrBPSifZLCsL/>

⁴https://vmis.acso.gov.et/registerPartner?_gl=1*19jqkho*_ga*MjA1NDQ0Njc3OS4xNmM3MDEwMDE5*_ga_CDNy6D49VL*MTc0MDQ4Mzg3Ny41LjAuMTc0MDQ4Mzg3Ny4wLjAuMA..*_ga_KBMFQ7Q13K*MTc0MDQ4Mzg3Ny41LjAuMTc0MDQ4Mzg3Ny4wLjAuMA..#collapseFour

3. **Weak Coordination** – Poor integration among volunteer-involving organizations reduces efficiency and impact.
4. **Tokenism in Volunteerism** – In some cases, volunteers are engaged symbolically rather than given meaningful roles.
5. **Limited Awareness** – Many organizations lack the knowledge or frameworks needed to effectively operationalize volunteer efforts.

Despite these challenges, Ethiopia has significant opportunities for strengthening volunteerism. With a growing population of 129.7 million (UNFPA, 2024) and a youth demographic (28% between the age of 15-29), the country has a strong potential volunteer base. Government-led initiatives integrating volunteerism with national development programs further provide avenues for enhancing engagement and impact.