

RESEARCH PAPER

# The role of Volunteering Organisations in Europe in implementing the SDGs and preventing the creation of gaps in the civic space during the COVID-19 pandemic time-threats, challenges and good practices

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*The role of Volunteering Organisations in Europe in implementing the SDGs and preventing the creation of gaps in the civic space during the COVID-19 pandemic time: threats, challenges and good practices*

## **List of abbreviations**

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

CSOs: Civil Society Organisations

ODV: Organizzazione di Volontariato (Volunteering Organisation)

VNR: Voluntary National Review

HLPF: High Level Political Forum

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper aims at analysing the consequences that the progressively increasing effect of the shrinking civic space and additionally the COVID-19 pandemic have on the role of volunteering organisations in regard to their commitment to collaborate closely with marginalised and vulnerable communities towards the implementation of the SDGs.

Volunteers, volunteer organisations and volunteering infrastructure organisations can contribute in a vast number of ways to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and they are committed to building a cooperative and supportive environment that benefits and enriches each individual. However, the contemporary context presents challenges that can make it difficult for volunteers and volunteering organisations to operate effectively. CEV has called for policy makers to apply a “change of gear” in terms of volunteering policies and programmes within the post pandemic recovery phase.<sup>1</sup> This paper will take into account the recent phenomenon of the shrinking civic space taking place in Europe, which is an alarming factor that requires full acknowledgment and prompt action. Moreover, since the beginning of 2020 a new challenge has emerged as the world witnessed the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, with devastating effects worldwide. This theme will be addressed below as one of the obstacles to volunteering, together with a series of good practices from member states’ organisations showing how they have consequently adapted and shaped their work to meet their values and continue their activities. A focus will be addressed to the threat deriving from criminal networks exploiting contexts of vulnerability emerged as a consequence of the restrictive measures implemented in Europe to contain the spread of the virus.

The overall context described throughout the paper and an overview on some countries’ examples on the matter, give inputs to a series of recommendations useful to proactively pursue the SDGs whilst making volunteering a driving force towards their implementation.

## **2. Volunteering and the SDGs**

### **2.1. The role of Volunteering organisations in implementing the SDGs**

Volunteering brings an enormous contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development<sup>2</sup>. Volunteers, volunteer organisations and volunteering infrastructure organisations, if properly supported, can contribute to an effective delivery of a wide range of services in health care, education, and support to marginalised or vulnerable communities. The act of volunteering endorses the concepts of solidarity, positive change and active citizenship, it brings communities together and is an important tool towards sustainable development. The engagement of volunteers and communities contributes to building social cohesion within a positive environment that leads to significant change. Therefore, if adequately valued and enabled, volunteers can meaningfully contribute to the eradication of poverty and the promotion of human well being.

### **2.2. Obstacles to volunteering on the implementation of the SDGs**

In order to be able to perform and carry out volunteering activities and to focus on the implementation of the SDGs, Volunteering organisations need to operate within an enabling environment. The access to data on volunteering is a crucial aspect in measuring volunteers’

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<sup>1</sup> *The Road to Recovery*, [https://issuu.com/european\\_volunteer\\_centre/docs/the\\_road\\_to\\_recovery\\_en](https://issuu.com/european_volunteer_centre/docs/the_road_to_recovery_en)

<sup>2</sup> *Volunteer Groups*, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=30022&nr=794&menu=3170>

impact on the achievement of the SDGs. The recognition of the importance of volunteering is essential to establish a context that facilitates the engagement of volunteers through a coherent and compelling volunteering narrative that provides an understanding of the impact of volunteer activities. The civic engagement generated through volunteering is more effective when a full recognition is achieved. The EYV 2011 Alliance Policy Agenda for Volunteering in Europe (P.A.V.E.) provides volunteering involved organisations with guidelines to “recognize skills and competencies gained through volunteering”<sup>3</sup>, useful in increasing volunteers’ motivation to continue volunteering and a better understanding of their impact on the community.

The VNRs would be an important tool in reporting the impact of volunteering, which should be taken into account when assessing the progress of each State towards the achievement of the SDGs. It is therefore necessary to have reliable and comprehensive data on volunteering in order to prove its essential contribution in reaching the SDGs at a global level, and to encourage individuals to engage with volunteering organisations in making a constructive and valuable change.

The challenges and obstacles to volunteering organisations in implementing the SDGs are yet to be completely overcome. A full recognition of the role of volunteers in building an inclusive society is key in enabling volunteering groups to be adequately funded and valued.<sup>4</sup>

### **3. Civil Society Shrinking space and the effects on volunteering**

#### **3.1. Definition of “Civil Society Shrinking Space”**

Although the phenomenon of the so-called “shrinking civic space” began around 2004-2005, limited attention has been drawn to it as it was initially confined to few EU Member States. Later on, the trend expanded and started affecting democratic countries as well as States presenting influences of authoritarian ideologies.

During the last decade, CSOs have increasingly faced restrictions and obstacles in the rights of basic freedoms such as freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. A reason for this phenomenon to have started can be explained as CSOs activities being perceived as a threat by governments that consequently act against their favor, by shrinking the space in which civil society works<sup>5</sup>.

CSOs require an enabling environment to be performing and well-functioning. The characteristics of such an environment depend on many factors and firstly on the relation between CSOs and the States. Some countries have strengthened and established collaborative relations with CSOs, yet in other countries this relation is delicate and can often become counterproductive as CSOs face restrictions and difficulties in securing funding.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Policy Agenda for Volunteering in Europe*,

[https://issuu.com/european\\_volunteer\\_centre/docs/eyv2011alliance\\_pave\\_copyfriendly](https://issuu.com/european_volunteer_centre/docs/eyv2011alliance_pave_copyfriendly)

<sup>4</sup> *Measuring the Contribution of Volunteering to the Sustainable Development Goals: Challenges and Opportunities*,

[https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.istr.org/resource/resmgr/WP\\_Stockholm/11142016/HaddockDevereux\\_Vol\\_SDG\\_IS\\_TR.pdf](https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.istr.org/resource/resmgr/WP_Stockholm/11142016/HaddockDevereux_Vol_SDG_IS_TR.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> *The future evolution of civil society in the EU by 2030*,

<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/future-evolution-civil-society-europe-an-union-2030>

<sup>6</sup> *The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe’s engagement with Civil Society in external relations*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2012:0492:FIN:EN:PDF>

### **3.2. Public attitude towards CSOs' role in a context of rising populism**

The worrying phenomenon of the civil society shrinking space has been spreading across European countries and the EU is yet to find appropriate solutions to counter this trend<sup>7</sup>. In terms of tools and mechanisms to counter this phenomenon, the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy addresses the shrinking space trend by identifying and reporting threats to Civil Society space<sup>8</sup>. There are a variety of reasons undermining the escalation of this phenomenon and equally a variety of measures are required to re-establish a free and democratic space in the EU.

In fact, shrinking civic space is affecting not only the operational field of CSOs, but is also threatening basic freedoms and human rights. In both democratic and non-democratic countries, the appearance of political influences presenting right-wing ideological traits, can result in either restricting CSOs' functioning or contributing to the implementation of measures to disadvantage them. CSOs are being questioned in terms of foreign funding and even their own existence is being challenged and contested. The shrinking space issue is a consequence of a wider trend witnessing a backlash against democracy owing to a relatively recent global authoritarian turn, which needs to be addressed and fought back, also by countering the populist narrative. The populist agenda is fostered by a discourse emphasised by the disappointment of citizens towards European issues related to illegal immigration, the threat of terrorism and the fear of economic instability. Amidst these complex circumstances, CSOs face challenges in countering populist trends owing to a variety of factors such as "the shrinking civic space, limited human resources (many of the organisations are almost entirely reliant on volunteers), reduced funding and lack of expertise".<sup>9</sup> Considering these circumstances and the growing digitalisation in Europe, the role of social media is becoming increasingly relevant in conveying messages and in providing people with a platform to debate. In this context, fake news is spread easily also owing to the fact that "quick to read" and unchecked news are generally available on social media platforms. Populist ideologies take advantage of people's frustration or dissatisfaction towards contemporary European issues to intensify populist rhetoric and people's feelings relating to euroscepticism.<sup>10</sup>

### **3.3. Organised criminal groups exploiting social vulnerabilities**

Volunteering organisations in Europe are actively taking part in the 2030 Agenda by supporting, engaging with and monitoring the implementation of the SDGs at the local and national levels. Volunteers are an essential resource in building inclusive communities, and they provide a great contribution to shortening the distance between marginalised communities and local authorities. Being embedded in such environments, volunteering organisations are enriched by cross-cultural experiences and simultaneously, marginalised and vulnerable groups consider volunteers' support as valuable towards the building of

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<sup>7</sup> *Shrinking space for Civil Society: the EU response*,  
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/578039/EXPO\\_STU\(2017\)578039\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/578039/EXPO_STU(2017)578039_EN.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> *EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy*,  
[https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/30003/web\\_en\\_actionplanhumanrights.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/30003/web_en_actionplanhumanrights.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> *Societies outside Metropolises: the role of civil society organisations in facing populism*,  
<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/files/qe-04-19-236-en-n.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> *Populism Against Europe in Social Media: The Eurosceptic Discourse on Twitter in Spain, Italy, France, and United Kingdom During the Campaign of the 2019 European Parliament Election*,  
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2020.00054/full>

strong and sustainable communities. This cooperation circle allows for a beneficial transformation that needs to be preserved and fostered<sup>11</sup>.

Situations of vulnerability can constitute a fertile ground for organised crime to operate and many factors contribute in setting the space for this threat to develop. As stated by Europol<sup>12</sup>, criminal networks have the ability to change quickly and adapt to diverse situations and the changes can be triggered by factors such as:

- An increase in the demand for certain goods and services:
  - A higher and sudden demand for certain products can be a triggering factor for criminal groups to establish or increase illegal markets of counterfeit and substandard goods.
- Increased anxiety due to a certain situation that may lead to vulnerabilities:
  - Criminal networks may take advantage of a temporary situation of vulnerability to exploit the victims of emergencies and adapt their activities targeting individuals, business and organisations.
- Increase of the use of digital solutions:
  - New technology tools and the increasing digitisation are used by criminal networks to operate on a cybercrime level, taking advantage of vulnerable groups such as children, for instance during emergencies that leave them isolated and unsupervised. Cyberattacks constitute a higher risk and the Darkweb can become a place for criminality to spread by selling illicit goods that are in high demand during emergencies.

Examining closely the SDGs, great relevance lies on SDG Goal 16 which focuses on peace, justice and strong institutions, and the States' efforts towards the accomplishment of its targets can make a meaningful contribution to the reduction of crime rates.

On this regard, particular focus is on targets:

- 16.4 Significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen recovery and return of stolen assets, and combat all forms of organised crime;
- 16.5 Substantially reduces corruption and bribery in all its forms.

Criminality and corruption are major threats in combating poverty and exclusion as they exacerbate social vulnerabilities as a result of misallocation of funds, increase of costs of essential goods while lowering their quality.<sup>13</sup>

States can contribute to assessing the progress on the SDGs by taking part in the VNRs presented each year at the HLPF. In order to provide a clear track of the progress, civil society has to be taken into account and consulted for an inclusive participation in the drafting of the VNRs. Adding to this, the lack of data on corruption in some countries as outlined by the SDG16+ Progress Report 2019<sup>14</sup> shows that an alternative methodology for progress-tracking is needed and it should involve CSOs' data collection.

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<sup>11</sup> *Volunteer Groups*,

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=30022&nr=794&menu=3170>

<sup>12</sup> *Pandemic profiteering how criminals exploit the COVID-19 crisis*,

[https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/pandemic\\_profiteering-how\\_criminals\\_exploit\\_the\\_covid-19\\_crisis.pdf](https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/pandemic_profiteering-how_criminals_exploit_the_covid-19_crisis.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> *COVID-19, crime prevention and criminal justice priorities: a spotlight on vulnerable groups*,

[http://www.unicri.it/sites/default/files/2021-01/UNICRI%20Virtual%20Meetings\\_Summary%20Report\\_0.pdf](http://www.unicri.it/sites/default/files/2021-01/UNICRI%20Virtual%20Meetings_Summary%20Report_0.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> *SDG16+ Progress Report 2019*,

<https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/SDG16Progress-Report-2019-web.pdf>

#### **4. Volunteering in moments of crisis: the COVID-19 example**

In times of crisis volunteering is registered as a quick response to emergency situations. Despite the reasons that triggered the crisis, volunteers engage and take action promoting solidarity and reflecting European values. Right after an emergency occurs, be it a natural catastrophe, a man-made disaster or a health crisis, citizens make their time and expertise available from the first stage after the emergency. It is implied that the sudden increase of citizens committing to help the community can derive from informal volunteering activities, therefore not necessarily included in the structure of a volunteering organisation. In order to turn this voluntary force into a long lasting and safe one, it is necessary to implement measures aimed at including and formalising volunteering in emergency situations, which include the anticipation, planning and managing of spontaneous volunteers' involvement.

##### **4.1. COVID-19 scenario and consequent vulnerable groups' marginalisation**

The pandemic initiated a frightful social and economic crisis which is still ongoing and is having a considerable impact at all levels<sup>15</sup>. The close collaboration between vulnerable communities and volunteering organisations produces numerous benefits on both sides if this happens in an enabling and safe environment. The safety measures imposed to contain a further spreading of the virus have resulted in a limitation in the ability of volunteering organisations and vulnerable groups to physically work together. At a local level, some groups have been more affected by the pandemic noticeably because of the difficulty in being provided with essential goods and services. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of supporting local groups in reaching their own independence and sustainability, and has underlined the critical aspect regarding the lack of services and support at the local level, accountable for a threatening civil society vacuum.

Despite the lockdown and the restrictive measures imposed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, criminality has not reduced, rather it has reshaped in different forms posing new challenges to the society. Criminal networks are taking advantage of the political, economic and social crisis and benefiting from the vulnerabilities that the pandemic has accentuated. Interpol has warned against online hacks and scams relatable to the COVID-19 emergency situation that criminal networks exploit to gain financial outcomes. As stated above, the increased use of digital tools has opened to new ways for criminality to spread and it can be more challenging to protect ourselves from online frauds. In case of shortage of surgical masks, criminal groups will take the advantage by responding to the demand through illicit means. Likewise, targeted vulnerable groups could be reached by fraudsters offering services under seemingly legitimate names, for instance they could claim to be offering help with shopping or they could reach people through fundraising campaigns hiding fraudulent purposes. In order to avoid the infiltration of criminal networks in sectors of the society, it is crucial for local authorities to find responses to such evolving challenges.

The presence of gaps between vulnerable communities and local authorities facilitates the opportunity for criminal groups to fill the gap and operate as substitutes to the institutions in assisting local communities which are more difficult to reach as a result of the restrictions imposed. In this matter, CSOs play an essential role as not only are they able to reach remote and isolated communities delivering goods and services, but also they have a safeguarding role that could fail owing to limitations on movement.

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<sup>15</sup> Eurostat, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/main/home>

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed member states to invest great resources in containing the virus and limiting the effects of this on socio-economic aspects. Nonetheless, it is crucial to keep addressing resources to communities that are suffering isolation due to COVID-19 restrictive measures, with the aim of preventing criminal groups from profiting from any possible lack of presence of the states.

The Updated Study on Corruption in the Healthcare Sector by the European Commission<sup>16</sup> reports bribery in medical services as being a major challenge especially in western and southern European countries. In the same study, a survey was conducted on the topic and addressed to stakeholders, who contributed in drawing general conclusions. In particular, it emerged from their responses that a relevant active role belongs to governments and civil society: the former in promoting transparency in the relation between the industry and healthcare providers, the latter in putting pressure on the fight against corruption and acting as “watchdogs”.

#### **4.2. Good practices during the COVID-19 pandemic - filling the gaps**

Since the COVID-19 pandemic started to emerge in February 2020, people have witnessed a sudden crisis affecting all aspects of life. The measures taken to tackle the pandemic in Europe, particularly the consequent lockdown and social distancing rules imposed, have prevented people from moving around hence the volunteering organisations previously involved in collaborating with local communities were suddenly unable to carry on their activities. In particular, the restrictive measures equally affected volunteering organisations as they became incapable of delivering basic needs, as well as local communities who were cooperating with the former towards sustainable and resilient development.

While structured and organised volunteering was active before the pandemic, in times of crisis it is usually witnessed an increase in the number of citizens willing to commit to volunteering in order to help other people in need. Following are a few examples of good practices and management of volunteering during crisis times undertaken by CEV Member organisations.

##### **4.2.1. Organisations’ examples on how they have responded to the crisis and adapted their work in order to reach isolated groups**

**4.2.1.1. ITALY** - In Italy<sup>17</sup>, since the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, various ODV across the country have come up with new strategies to make sure that people who needed support were properly helped and taken care of. A great number of citizens devoted their time to take part in volunteering organisations in delivering basic and essential services, such as the delivery of medicines, groceries and goods, or they made available a phone support service. With the aim of delivering a more structured support system, the project “Per Padova noi ci siamo” targeted people in vulnerable social and economic

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<sup>16</sup> Updated Study on Corruption in the Healthcare Sector, [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/20170928\\_study\\_on\\_healthcare\\_corruption\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/20170928_study_on_healthcare_corruption_en.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Azioni, volti e sogni del volontariato padovano - rapporto annuale 2020, [https://csvpadova.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Report\\_2020\\_ultimaversione.pdf](https://csvpadova.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Report_2020_ultimaversione.pdf)

situations. The main areas covered by the project were the coordination of volunteers who joined the project, the purchase and delivery of goods, technology devices for families in situations of economic hardship, and finding temporary placements for homeless people. The positive outcome of the project led to an increase in the number of volunteers that will commit to volunteering after the crisis, and the offer of invaluable support to vulnerable groups.

- 4.2.1.2.** UNITED KINGDOM - Volunteer Scotland has developed a research on Scotland's volunteering response to COVID-19.<sup>18</sup> The aim is the understanding of who is identified as a vulnerable target in order to maximise the emergency response and reduce the impact of the disaster on vulnerable groups. The research found "low earners, women (single parents, domestic abuse), disabled and minority ethnic groups" as being most vulnerable to the pandemic. It is then hypothesized how these groups are being targeted by mutual aid groups, formal volunteering and informal volunteering. The outcome of the analysis conducted, suggests that a coordinated "tier" system could be a solution to maximise the efforts of the different volunteering groups. In terms of resilience strategy, the research suggests that increased funding and priority is dedicated to preventive measures for the most vulnerable groups.
- 4.2.1.3.** FRANCE - The COVID-19 pandemic has made volunteering organisations rearrange their activities to comply with the safety regulations. France Bénévolat<sup>19</sup> has witnessed an increase in the number of citizens who were registering as willing to volunteer joining one of the missions. In order to transform the temporary volunteering activity related to the crisis situation into a lasting one, France Bénévolat assigns to volunteers a supplementary activity to carry out once the restrictions are lifted, in a way that people engagement is not only confined to emergency volunteering.
- 4.2.1.4.** MALTA - The Malta CVS<sup>20</sup> has developed a guidelines document for the voluntary sector to be able to continue to operate within a safe and regulatory framework. Part of the post-crisis planning focuses on the recovery in terms of

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<sup>18</sup> *Resilience - lessons from International Contexts*,

[https://www.volunteerscotland.net/media/1664344/resilience\\_lessons\\_from\\_international\\_context\\_vssn\\_.pdf](https://www.volunteerscotland.net/media/1664344/resilience_lessons_from_international_context_vssn_.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> *[COVID-19] France Bénévolat en action sur les territoires*,

<https://www.francebenevolat.org/actualites/covid-19-france-b-n-volat-en-action-sur-les-territoires>

<sup>20</sup> *Guidelines for Voluntary Organisations re-COVID 19*,

<https://maltacvs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Guidelines-for-VOs-re-COVID-19-Aggornat-10-ta-Marzu-2021.pdf>

long-term sustainability of volunteering organisations, aiming at building stronger resilience and preparedness.

- 4.2.1.5.** IRELAND - Volunteer Ireland<sup>21</sup> has developed guidelines on Returning to Volunteering Safely that provides, among the compliance to safety measures already in place, a series of inputs to online volunteering such as “microvolunteering - bite-sized, on-demand, no commitment actions that benefit a worthy cause”. With a view to re-starting volunteering activities in the post-pandemic phase, Volunteer Ireland has also produced a sample action plan containing outcomes, activities and key performance indicators, focusing on the development of new virtual roles as well as considering risk-based assessments related to COVID-19 guidelines.

## 5. Recommendations

Based on the features presented in this paper and having taken into account the risks deriving from the COVID-19 pandemic, the threats related to criminal networks’ exploitation of social vulnerabilities and the challenges faced by CSOs in a context of rising populism, this paper aims at providing a set of recommendations in the short and long term perspective. This context proves the need for the adoption of new measures to fund initiatives, develop volunteering infrastructure and measure volunteering impact on both crisis and normal times. Furthermore, CSOs’ adoption of common criterias to fully become transparent and accountable to both governments and citizens is crucial in combating fraud, bribery, corruption and abuse/misuse of resources. Besides, if operating within a favourable environment, CSOs can also play an important role in countering populist trends by establishing a stronger positive narrative around European values and by combating disinformation.

- Given the essential role played by volunteers and volunteer organisations during the pandemic and the ongoing support they are still providing to the community, it is crucial that in sight of the achievement of the 2030 Agenda volunteering is fully valued, supported and integrated in governments’ actions on development.<sup>22</sup> According to point 45 of the 2030 Agenda<sup>23</sup>, governments will work closely with authorities, institutions and among others, volunteer groups. The COVID-19 pandemic has proved how meaningful volunteers’ efforts are in overcoming crises by showing solidarity through every action or task.
- Openness and transparency are fundamental aspects in achieving public trust and being accountable to the society. In order to gain public consensus it is crucial that people are aware of the role played by CSOs and are able to access data on funding, progress and goals reached. Transparency and accountability are among the key factors to be considered by CSOs to effectively reach and implement SDG 16 and it’s

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<sup>21</sup> *Returning to volunteering safely- Practical Advice for Volunteer Involving Organisations*, <https://www.volunteer.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Returning-to-Volunteering-Safely.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> *Building back better: why volunteering matters for the post-COVID world*, <https://www.unv.org/Success-stories/Building-back-better-why-volunteering-matters-post-COVID-world>

<sup>23</sup> *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

targets 16.4 and 16.5. Being accountable to the public can increase the public perception of the role of CSOs in a positive way, allowing donors to track how the funds are spent. Therefore, full transparency can attract more funding as a consequence of a public positive attitude towards CSOs' role and scope. On the other hand, being accountable to the institutions can secure mutual cooperation and trust that bring benefits to both parties.

- CSOs can play an important role in countering populist trends by establishing a stronger positive narrative around European values and by combating disinformation. A collaborative relation between the EU and CSOs is pivotal in producing an enabling environment in which democratic rights are CSOs values and missions are conveyed in a positive way, whilst developing mechanisms to combat disinformation that leads to false narratives and smear campaigns.<sup>24</sup>
- Often, vulnerable groups are the targets of fraud and online scams. Volunteering organisations can play a key role in protecting them and preventing citizens from becoming victims of such crimes. It is essential that awareness on the topic is raised amongst the volunteers so that they can actively tackle fraudulent activities by making the people they help aware of them.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Analysis and recommendations on the promotion of civic space and enabling environment in EU external action,*

<https://actalliance.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/CONCORD-Policy-paper-on-civic-space-March-2018.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> *Safeguarding in voluntary organisations,*

<https://knowhow.ncvo.org.uk/coronavirus/safeguarding-in-voluntary-organisations/safeguarding-in-voluntary-organisations#>

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