

This report was compiled by Katie Truong, Turing Scheme trainee at the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) from the University of East Anglia (UEA). The report is based on information gathered from online research. This is a preliminary study to gather information about the lack of volunteering in rural areas compared to urban areas with an insight of volunteering in Romania.

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Introduction

Around [23% of Europeans](#) are involved in volunteering, which can be defined as “an activity undertaken of a person’s own free will” (European Parliament 2009). According to the European Parliament and Eurofound, countries like Bulgaria, Romania and Lithuania had some of the lowest volunteering participation rates, being below 20%. In spite of the low participation rates, various research has demonstrated that volunteering initiatives help contribute to the development of a cohesive society, generating bonds of trust and solidarity.

Urban volunteering often benefits from government investment, access to institutional networks, and public visibility, in contrast to rural volunteering programmes which tend to operate on very minimal support and rely on limited resources and volunteer goodwill (European Economic and Social Committee). The gap between urban and rural volunteering shows the lack of investment in rural volunteer infrastructure. The lack of rural volunteering further undermines the delivery of essential services, like healthcare and education, to these rural communities (Eurofound 2023).

In these rural areas, there is a clear challenge of an ageing population alongside a [youth outmigration](#). These challenges are compounded by the lack of rural volunteering, and contribute towards a decline of social cohesion and access to basic services in these rural communities. Without the adequate funding, training, and support, volunteering in rural areas will struggle to remain sustainable and feasible.

The urban and rural volunteering divide contributes to the existing inequalities which leads to service gaps, reduced civic participation and growing feelings of marginalisation among rural populations. This report calls for a rethinking of frameworks to help ensure that rural volunteers will be empowered through inclusive representation and better allocation of resources, in order to advocate for further planning and tailored support systems to reflect the unique challenges that rural populations may face. Bridging this gap will help foster stronger and more resilient communities.

This report will consider the imbalance between urban and rural volunteering, primarily through analysis of a case study from Romania.

Case Study in Romania

Mandatory voluntary participation was in place in Romania, during the communist rule (1947-1989) which meant that civil participation was state controlled and compulsory for

children and adults. As a consequence of the communist rule, this had significantly changed how individuals view volunteering, therefore creating a [lack of voluntary participation](#) after the downfall of Communism. After the collapse of Communism in 1989, many Eastern European nations including Romania benefitted from substantial access to international aid, which provided urban areas with funds and resources to rapidly rebuild civic organisations (Mihaylova 2005).

In contrast, rural areas in Romania were slower to rebuild civil participation due to [depopulation](#) and the limited access to funding (Shaw 2014). The contrast between the funding allocation to these two areas is a clear contributor to the current imbalance of volunteering engagement across the country. As urban areas have more access to public services and funding, organisations are able to offer more impactful, resource intensive volunteering projects than rural areas, and thus generate more engagement and motivation among volunteers. Furthermore, there is more accessible information and research regarding urban volunteering, which reinforces the imbalance as organisations and policy makers in urban areas are far better equipped with evidence to advocate for volunteering programmes to receive funding. Without similar research and impact measurement in rural areas, it is more difficult for rural organisations to clearly demonstrate to policy makers the value of these programmes.

Through the research and interviews undertaken as part of this study, there is evidence of clear demographic difference in volunteering rates in Romania and more widely in Europe. Urban volunteers in Romania are typically younger individuals (18-25), students or professionals that would often engage in these volunteering programmes to build their CVs or networking. While in contrast, it was found that rural volunteers were more likely to be older or very young school students. This could be because of how urban volunteers exhibit more individualistic motivations like career progression and skills acquisition, while rural volunteers are typically more community-centric. These differences suggest that there is a divergent perception of civic duty between urban and rural areas.

Furthermore, urban areas generally benefit from the fact that many Non Governmental Organisations are based in cities, and they have a better digital infrastructure and accessible transportation as compared to rural areas where they face logistical barriers like long travel distances, under-resourced organisations and poor internet access. These factors, along with the demographic and cultural differences between urban and rural communities, reinforce lower volunteer participation in rural areas.

The previously described focus on funding urban civic participation in post-communist rebuilding efforts, depopulation of rural areas, and additional challenges of building civic engagement in rural areas, all contribute towards a sense of inertia where policy makers and NGOs tend to cluster further support in rural areas because they already have some

infrastructure to facilitate this. However, this perpetuates rural neglect, with shifting resources and focus to rural areas becoming increasingly challenging.

Findings

A representative from MasterPeace Romania, an Non Governmental Organisation that [focuses on building peaceful relationships among people of all ages and cultures](#), was contacted as a part of the research for this report. They noted that there is a misconception concerning what the media may portray volunteering in Romania as. MasterPeace Romania makes it extremely clear that volunteering in Romania is on a steady rise while also emphasising the popularity of volunteering among the younger generation.

It is clear that volunteering is popular among younger generations in Romania but this is also arguably applicable anywhere else in the world, one explanation for this is that the older individuals get, the busier their lives get. This includes focusing on personal and family lives but also on careers which leaves little time to volunteer. As younger generations typically have less commitments and demands on their time, this allows them to focus more on engaging as volunteers. A source from MasterPeace Romania, noted that volunteering rates are higher among younger generations because these volunteering opportunities help improve their CVs and provide experience & skills which are attractive to employers.

Linked to this, individuals who live in rural areas will often migrate into more urban cities in order to find better opportunities as employment rates are much higher in urban areas compared to rural areas. It was found that over [68% of individuals in urban areas are employed as compared to rural villages with an employment rate of 58%](#). People from younger generations are also more likely to be members of voluntary associations compared to the older generation (Silo 2016). Within MasterPeace Romania, where there are around 700 youth volunteers, 60% live in rural areas showing a high level of rural engagement with volunteering. Despite these high levels of youth volunteering in Romania especially in rural areas however the problem of youth outmigration due to the imbalance of opportunities (both in terms of employment, and volunteering), is apparent.

The urban-rural divide is exacerbated by this youth outmigration, alongside the concentration of volunteering opportunities in urban areas. This is mainly because most rural areas have no major municipality owned buildings and community buildings which therefore contributes to a lack of major volunteering programmes or even places for individuals to convene. Furthermore, as there is a lack of volunteering programmes in rural areas, this encourages many youth to look instead for urban volunteering programmes, therefore creating a youth outmigration from rural to urban areas.

Discussion

It is clear that there is a critical flaw in Romania's volunteer policy as it is not sufficiently tailored to rural context therefore leaving rural areas out. While urban centers benefit from well-developed infrastructures, professionalised NGOs, and access to modern volunteering programmes, rural communities remain largely excluded from these opportunities due to the systemic neglect and underinvestment.

Romania's volunteering ecosystem reflects broader socio-economic divides as urban areas thrive with structures, modernised volunteering programmes while rural communities have less structure and support in order to provide rural volunteering programmes.

Urban areas are better equipped with administrative capacity, digital infrastructure, and organisational support, enabling them to host diverse and sustainable volunteer programmes. While in contrast, rural communities often lack even the basic scaffolding necessary to initiate or sustain such efforts, including stable NGO presence, institutional trust, and access to information or funding mechanisms.

It is clear that there should be more hybrid models in place to help facilitate urban-rural volunteering programmes which can happen by decentralising Non Governmental Organisations funding to help further allocate specific grants for rural volunteer initiatives.

Addressing this imbalance requires more than rhetorical commitment as it demands actionable and systemic reform. A key step for this reform should be the implementation of hybrid volunteering models that explicitly bridge the urban-rural divide. These models should help facilitate mobility between urban-based volunteers and rural volunteers. For this to be effective, the government must decentralise NGO funding mechanisms, making specific allocations and flexible grant lines available for rural volunteer initiatives.

Moreover, the state should revise national volunteer strategies to include rural indicators, foster local capacity building for rural NGOs and establish regional volunteer hubs that act as intermediaries between central institutions and rural beneficiaries. Without these reforms, volunteering in Romania, risks becoming a tool of urban privilege rather than a vehicle for inclusive civic engagement.

Conclusion

Romania's volunteer policy must move beyond a one size fits all framework in order to include rural integration. Without rural integration, national volunteer efforts risk reinforcing the very inequalities they aim to alleviate, there it is essential for building a truly participatory resilient and inclusive civic society

References

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