

Volunteering during the pandemic: Which mechanisms enabled groups, communities and agencies to mobilise and why?

A rapid realist review of the evidence

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Authors : Dylan Kneale*, Mukdarut Bangpan*, Kathryn Hartley, Meihui Hou

**Joint project leads*

Author affiliations

- Dylan Kneale, EPPI Centre, UCL Social Research Institute
- Mukdarut Bangpan, EPPI Centre, UCL Social Research Institute
- Kathryn Hartley, EPPI Centre, UCL Social Research Institute
- Meihui Hou, EPPI Centre, UCL Social Research Institute

Funding & funder involvement

This review was undertaken by the EPPI Centre as a partner of the International Public Policy

Observatory (IPPO) (<https://covidandsociety.com>) which is ESRC-funded.

Conflicts of interest

There were no conflicts of interest in the writing of this report.

Contributions

The opinions expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the EPPI Centre or the funders. Responsibility for the views expressed remains solely with the authors.

This report should be cited as: Kneale D, Bangpan M, Hartley K, Hou M. (2022). *Volunteering during the pandemic: Which mechanisms enabled groups, communities and agencies to mobilise and why? A rapid realist review of the evidence*. London: EPPI Centre, UCL Social Research Institute, University College London.

Cover design by: Lionel Openshaw

ISBN: 978-1-911605-36-2

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Acknowledgements

This work benefitted enormously from the input attendees to a series of roundtables on social capital and volunteering and we would like to thank all attendees for their generous contributions within the roundtables and afterwards.

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of IPPO colleagues in producing this review including Professors Jo Chataway and Geoff Mulgan, Ayden Wilson, Katrina Rattu and Sarah O'Meara. Thanks also to Karl Wilding for providing valuable input through discussions about policy.

We would like to also acknowledge the support of Lhachi Selden in producing a systematic map of social capital literature (which will be published separately from this review).

The contributions of the EPPI Centre to the International Public Policy Observatory are managed by Associate Professor Ian Shemilt, Professor James Thomas and Professor David Gough and we are grateful for their support.

Foreword

IPPO is delighted to publish this systematic review on volunteering and focused on the different ways in which policy can best support and build on the work of volunteers over the past. We have looked at volunteering as a key element of social capital which has inspired so much interest and attention as we grappled with the social impact of COVID19

The work has given us the opportunity to review evidence on support for volunteering in depth and explore an issue fully from a number of angles. Our intention is that the review is a resource for those with interest and need to learn from how volunteering took shape during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing insight and guidance for future action. We also hope it will be a useful input into future decision making.

The International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO) aims to mobilise and assess evidence from different geographical and institutional contexts to inform policymakers throughout the United Kingdom about the best ways to mitigate social harms associated with COVID-19. Our overall ambition is to contribute to better policymaking and thereby to the wellbeing of UK citizens.

The pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for policymakers and other decision-makers across the UK. They continue to be asked to make varied and complex decisions in quick succession. The range of evidence and information grows continuously - but if it's not easily accessible and relevant, it is not helpful. Indeed, it can even create obstacles to developing the effective measures that are needed to help society through the severe and widespread impacts of COVID-19.

The research that IPPO undertakes and commissions is shaped and framed by numerous and diverse conversations with decision-makers. Those interactions help us to identify important questions and issues that can benefit from rigorous knowledge synthesis, drawing on research and expertise from around the world. I very much hope that this review will be of use to a range of policy stakeholders.

Professor Joanna Chataway

Principal Investigator of the ESRC International Public Policy Observatory

Executive summary

What did we want to know?

In this review we are primarily interested in the social processes (mechanisms) through which individuals, agencies and communities stepped up in order to identify *how* volunteers were mobilised. Through identifying these mechanisms we may be able to identify what tends to work, how, for whom and in what context, which may be of particular value for future pandemics. Our review therefore addresses the following question:

What were the core mechanisms for mobilising volunteers for local groups, communities, and organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic and under what circumstances, where, and among whom do these mechanisms occur?

What did we find?

This rapid review identified mechanisms that underpinned the mobilisation of volunteers for local groups, communities, and organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic. From a total of 59 studies, six mechanisms and fourteen context-mechanism-outcome configurations were identified in the review.

Gaining experience and developing role identity was a core mechanism that was key in mobilising volunteers to undertake activities during the pandemic; gaining experience and developing role identity also resulted in positive outcomes for volunteers themselves in terms of greater confidence, professional and skill development, personal development, and better mental wellbeing outcomes.

Adaptability was a second core mechanism for mobilising large numbers of volunteers during the pandemic. This broadly ensured that individuals, groups and local agencies and organisations were able to respond to the changing needs of beneficiary groups (e.g. where social isolation or inability to access essential supplies became problematic) and were able to adapt to new ways of working (particularly to adapt to the circumstances of lockdown).

Emotional support, support in the form of social and material recognition, and support through training were important in sustaining a volunteer workforce, protecting the wellbeing of the volunteer workforce, and may be important in broadening the profile of volunteers. In addition, community level support during the pandemic, organised through mutual aid groups, can be viewed as a form of activism where communities step in as a response to the limitations of the state to provide support for basic essential for community members in need.

Altruism was a mechanism observed at an individual level, but also one that emerged at a population level as a key motivator for stepping up during the pandemic and becoming a volunteer.

Greater **trust** was linked with the efficient organisation of volunteers during the pandemic and the extent to which groups and communities were able to scale up efforts to respond to the higher demands that were exhibited during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Co-ordination helped communities, agencies and mutual aid groups to work together rather than in competition, and to work more efficiently around one another rather than in duplication.

The mechanism and the outcomes they generated are summarised below:

Context	Mechanism	Outcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Types of occupation groups • Resources and skills before the pandemic • Pre-existing networks and relationships 	Developing role identity through gaining experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidence • Develop skills and knowledge • Personal development • Encourage future volunteering • Improving(decreasing) well being
<p>Individual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People with vulnerabilities • People with more resources and capacity <p>Agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology use • Previous structure for service delivery in health care settings <p>Social system:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial support policies 	Adaptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being able to address the urgent needs of service users • Becoming a volunteer • Having new ways of working • Having new services/continuing of services • Having new volunteer opportunities • Improving efficiency
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People working in the frontline • Level of social capital 	Supporting volunteers: Mental and well-being support for volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health and well-being
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The volunteer workforce does not (always) represent the whole population 	Supporting volunteers: Material support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustaining and broaden volunteer opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disadvantaged groups 	Supporting volunteers: Provide support through suitable training and management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustaining and broaden volunteer opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community members in need • Social capital- bonding • Socially excluded populations 	Supporting volunteers: Support as activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic essentials for community members • Inclusiveness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not all populations can act e.g. disadvantaged populations 	Altruism and intrinsic motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becoming a volunteer
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Across levels: proactive connections such as community hubs; mutual aid groups and community groups; Mutual understanding and trust 	Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working more effectively • Having different approaches of working • Having (Less) duplication • Sharing information • Managing volunteer mobilisation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At community level: Mutual aid groups, local community groups 	Trust and sense of community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying resources • Making timely decisions • Social capital such as constructing new social relations and having new relationships • Scaling up

What are the implications for policy and practice?

Drawing on the evidence identified, and going beyond the evidence to consider broader implications, the following actions may help to mobilise and sustain volunteers in the future::

- Developing better systems of matching volunteers to suitable roles based on skills and preferences and demonstrate the importance of all roles (frontline and back-office)
- Reconceptualising volunteering as a mutually beneficial process
- Increasing public familiarity with volunteer opportunities through offering short experiences of volunteering (e.g. taster sessions or open days)
- Broadening the social profile of volunteers to develop a mobilised volunteer workforce.
- Developing strategies for volunteer attrition
- Developing strategies for adapting to change, and considering the equity implications of rapid change including the movement of services online.
- Developing strategies to provide emotional support and integrate volunteers into existing teams
- Understanding the needs of volunteers as much as beneficiaries
- Continuing to invest in community engagement activities which pay dividends in times of crisis
- Removing barriers to volunteering to enable everyone to act upon altruistic motivations.
- Investing in systems and policies that help local organisations, mutual aid groups, local communities to access timely, up-to-date information, provide appropriate training and incentives for staff, and build social infrastructure.

How did we get the results?

Following the systematic mapping exercise on the role of social capital and the feedback from the experts participating in the roundtable events, this rapid realist review focussed on the role of volunteering and how communities and local organisations were mobilised during the COVID-19 pandemic. We followed the RAMESES checklist for conducting a realist synthesis, we followed five key stages. First, we identified the underlying theories and designed the conceptual framework that could be used to guide the data collection and Context-Mechanism-Outcome configuration development. The Volunteer Process Model (VPM) and other ecological and community-focused theories were used as a basis for our working theory. Next, we identified relevant evidence from the systematic map of the social capital and subsequently carried out supplementary searches to capture studies that specifically focused on volunteering. Grey literatures were identified through websites, suggestions from Advisory Group/experts from roundtable meetings, and through interactions between IPPO policy teams and a wider group of stakeholders. Searches were iteratively conducted between February - October 2022. The included studies were assessed for their relevance. Descriptive and empirical data were extracted and analysed from individual reports. The review team members met to pilot the inclusion/exclusion criteria and the coding framework, and finally discussed and finalised the findings and the final set of CMO configurations, as reported. In addition, we used the PROGRESS-Plus framework to guide our analysis to identify key equity issues, which was the main way in which context was assessed in this review.

International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO)

An ESRC funded initiative to provide decision-makers in government at all levels with access to the best available global evidence on the social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the effectiveness of policy responses. IPPO is a collaboration between the Department of Science, Technology, Engineering and Public Policy (STeAP) and the EPPI Centre at UCL; Cardiff University; Queen's University Belfast; the University of Glasgow; the University of Auckland and the University of Oxford, together with think tanks including the International Network for Government Science (INGSA) and academic news publisher The Conversation.

EPPI Centre

Founded in 1996, the EPPI Centre is a specialist centre in the UCL Social Research Institute. It develops methods: (i) for the systematic reviewing and synthesis of research evidence; and (ii) for the study of the use research. As well as being directly involved in the academic study and the practice of research synthesis and research use, the centre provides accredited and short course training programmes in research synthesis and social policy and research.

UCL Social Research Institute (SRI)

The SRI (formerly the Department of Social Science) is one of the leading centres in the UK for multidisciplinary teaching and research in the social sciences. With more than 180 academic, research and professional staff, it works to advance knowledge and to inform policy in areas including gender, families, education, employment, migration, inequalities, health and child/adult wellbeing.

First produced in 2022 by:

**International Public Policy Observatory
Department of Science, Technology, Engineering and Public Policy (STeAP)
Shropshire House (4th Floor), 11-20 Capper Street, London WC1E 6JA**

<https://covidandsociety.com> | Twitter: @covidandsociety

ISBN: 978-1-911605-36-2

Design and editorial support by: Lionel Openshaw

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Email: ioe.sriadmin@ucl.ac.uk