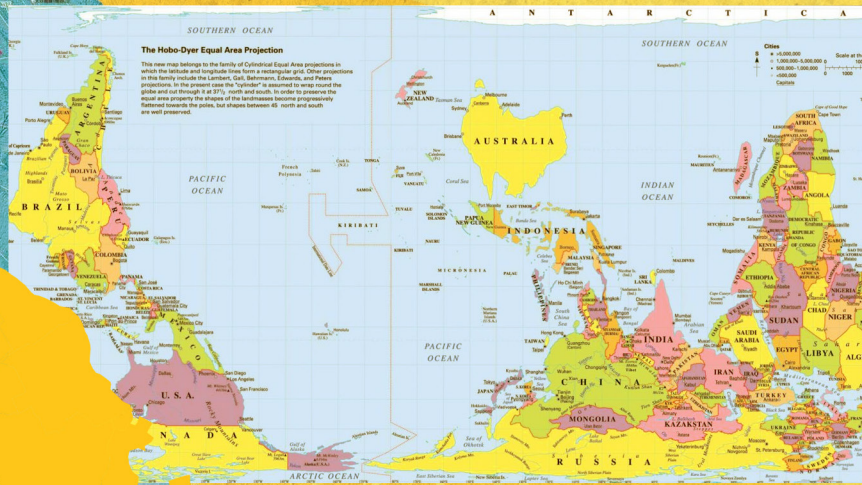


**DECOLONISE
VOLUNTEERING!**

get ready for equality..



Decolonial practice and discourse in International Voluntary Service

Evidence from over 50 organizations, 30 countries and 4 continents



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All partners, participants networks, and responding organizations are listed and linked in the Appendix.

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Design and layout: Javier Larios (javierlarios.com)

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Decolonial practice and discourse in International Voluntary Service (IVS)

Evidence from over 50 organizations, 30 countries and 4 continents

A note on global English and AI use: you will notice inconsistencies in the spelling of “decolonization/decolonisation” and other words. This is an intentional choice reflecting the variety of backgrounds that people participating in this project come from, and their non-native English status as majoritarian. This diversity will be even more apparent in quotes from open-ended answers, which are not edited. Speaking of transparent editing, in the answers to a few questions about definitions, two organizations (1 Questioning and 1 Southern) provided very articulated answers that did not follow the speech pattern of the answers they provided to previous and following questions, or that had other characteristics that prompted a check for generative AI use scoring 100% on the possibility to be AI-generated on multiple platforms. The respondents were contacted for comment but did not reply. With the positive assumption that genAI use signaled the eagerness of non-Northern organizations to participate in the decolonial debate as equally as possible, a decision was collectively taken to write this statement. The decision to maintain respondents' quotes exactly as they were written, without “corrections”, becomes even more meaningful, as it shows the absolutely human variety of speech patterns, spellings and even typos.



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Introduction

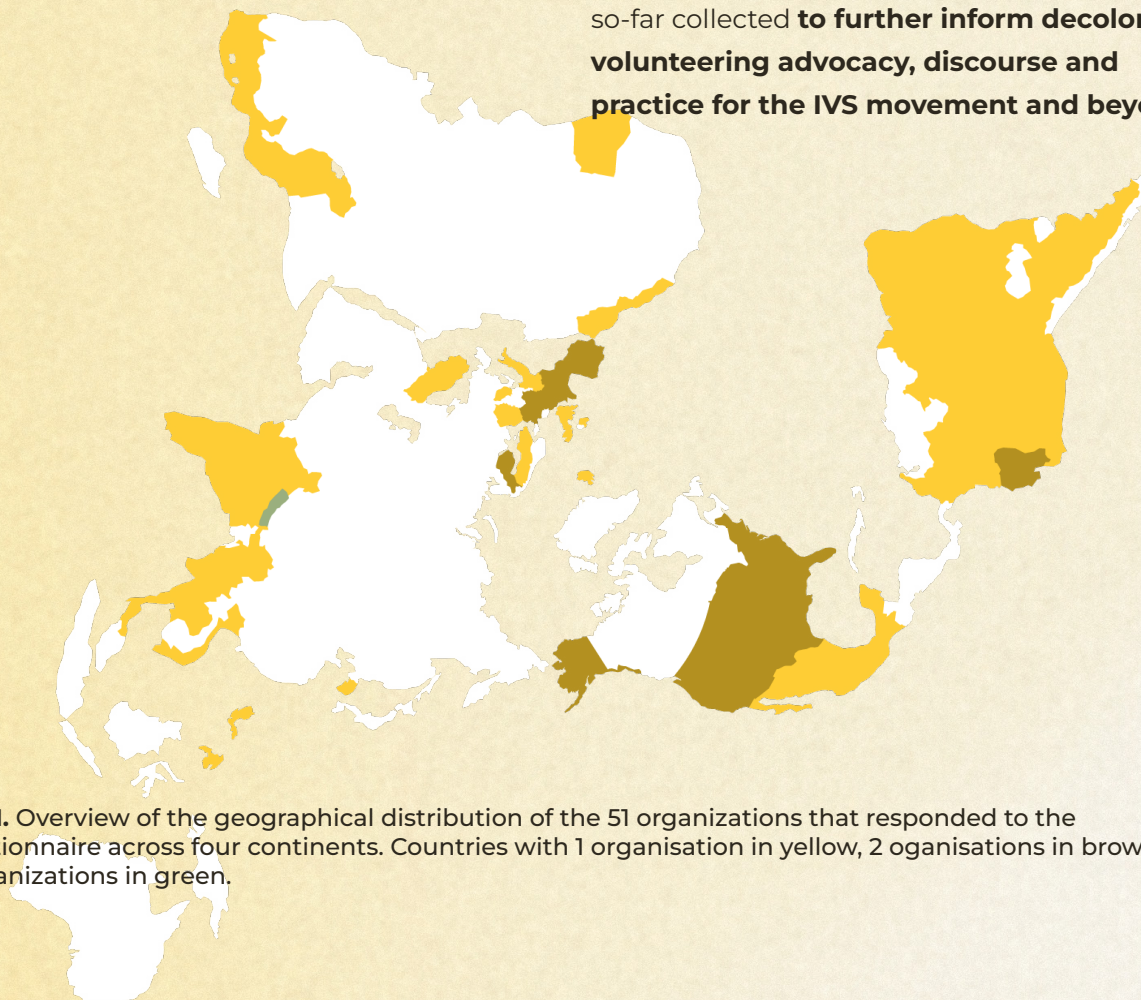
The Decolonise! IVS project was initiated in 2022 by the Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service (CCIVS), and soon joined by the International Cultural Youth Exchange (ICYE) with a co-organizing role. Gathering ten organizations practicing International Voluntary Service (IVS) from four continents in a consortium, the project aims to reflect about experiences with decolonial thinking and practices in IVS, as a century-long volunteering movement of transnationally networking organizations.

While organizing and facilitating numerous face-to-face and online moments of collective inquiry and reflection), the consortium members designed a questionnaire to capture the decolonial stance of the International Voluntary Service, and address the urgent, reflective and critical questions.

Is IVS supporting a decolonised approach or reproducing neo-colonial relationships between the Global South and the Global North? And is the North-South subdivision of the world useful and appropriate to reflect, talk about, and act for change?

Between April 2023 and January 2024, the coordinators, staff and **formal and informal practitioners** of 51 organizations from 30 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe and North and South-America provided **decolonial insights in their organizational structure, procedures and internal discussion**.

This Report analyzes and visualizes the answers so-far collected **to further inform decolonial volunteering advocacy, discourse and practice for the IVS movement and beyond**.



Map 1. Overview of the geographical distribution of the 51 organizations that responded to the questionnaire across four continents. Countries with 1 organisation in yellow, 2 organisations in brown and 3 organisations in green.

Overview

Early on in the questionnaire, organizations were asked to self-assess to what extent they are addressing decolonisation on a crude 1-10 scale. While 2 organizations did not respond, the answers' average for the rest of them was 4.8, with irrelevant differences across categories (see below). This ambiguous middle ground provides the ideal starting point to recognize that the question is complex. The aim of this report is to make complexity visible in as many layers as practicable, with minimal complication.



QUESTIONING SOUTH AND NORTH?

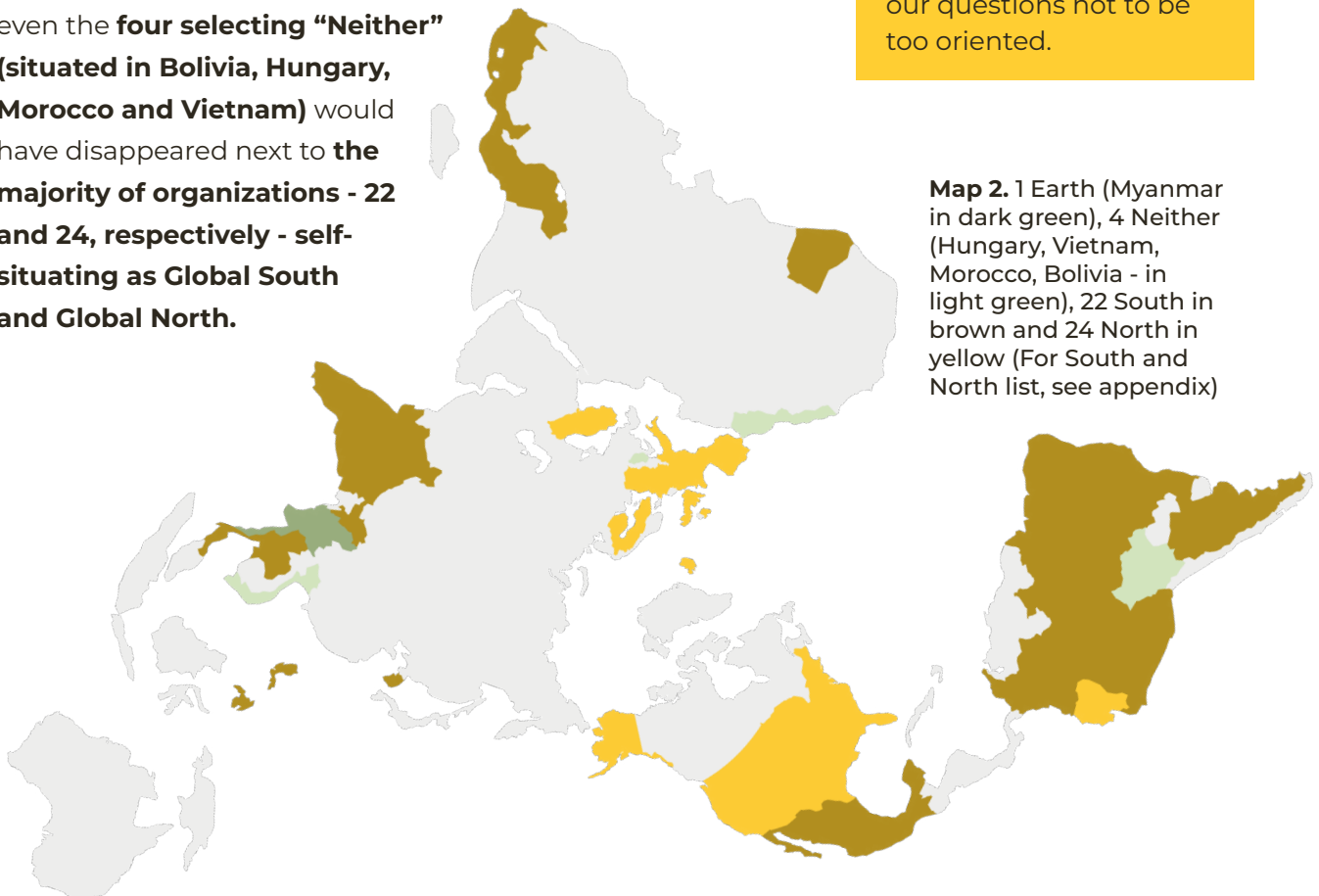
The questionnaire's attempt to reflect on the connection between colonial legacies and current global and local issues begins with **responding organizations opting to situate themselves** in the **“Global South” (or S)**, the **“Global North” (or N)**, **“Neither”** or **“Earth”** - full list in the Appendix. In this analytical report the latter two have been merged into **“Questioning” (or Q)** to align with the collective discussions taking place throughout the Decolonise! IVS project.

This decision also benefits the data visualization, where the **one Burmese organization selecting “Earth”** especially, but even the **four selecting “Neither” (situated in Bolivia, Hungary, Morocco and Vietnam)** would have disappeared next to **the majority of organizations - 22 and 24, respectively - self-situating as Global South and Global North.**

QUESTIONING

The questionnaire's introduction further specified: “Global South” and “Global North” are concepts we use to refer to a socio-economic and political divide and not a geographical one. We are aware this denomination can be questioned and do not want to provide any definition, in order for our questions not to be too oriented.

Map 2.1 Earth (Myanmar in dark green), 4 Neither (Hungary, Vietnam, Morocco, Bolivia - in light green), 22 South in brown and 24 North in yellow (For South and North list, see appendix)



Clearly, the South/North division is familiar, established and unquestioned for most of the responding organizations. The questioning, rather than targeting the South-North conceptualization itself, happens more on the grounds of uncertainty in self-situating on the one or the other side of the imaginary South-North boundary that is sometimes geographically visible. For example, the organization in Vietnam, experiencing recent developments according to neo-liberal criteria; or organizations in Hungary and Morocco, located at the periphery of Europe.

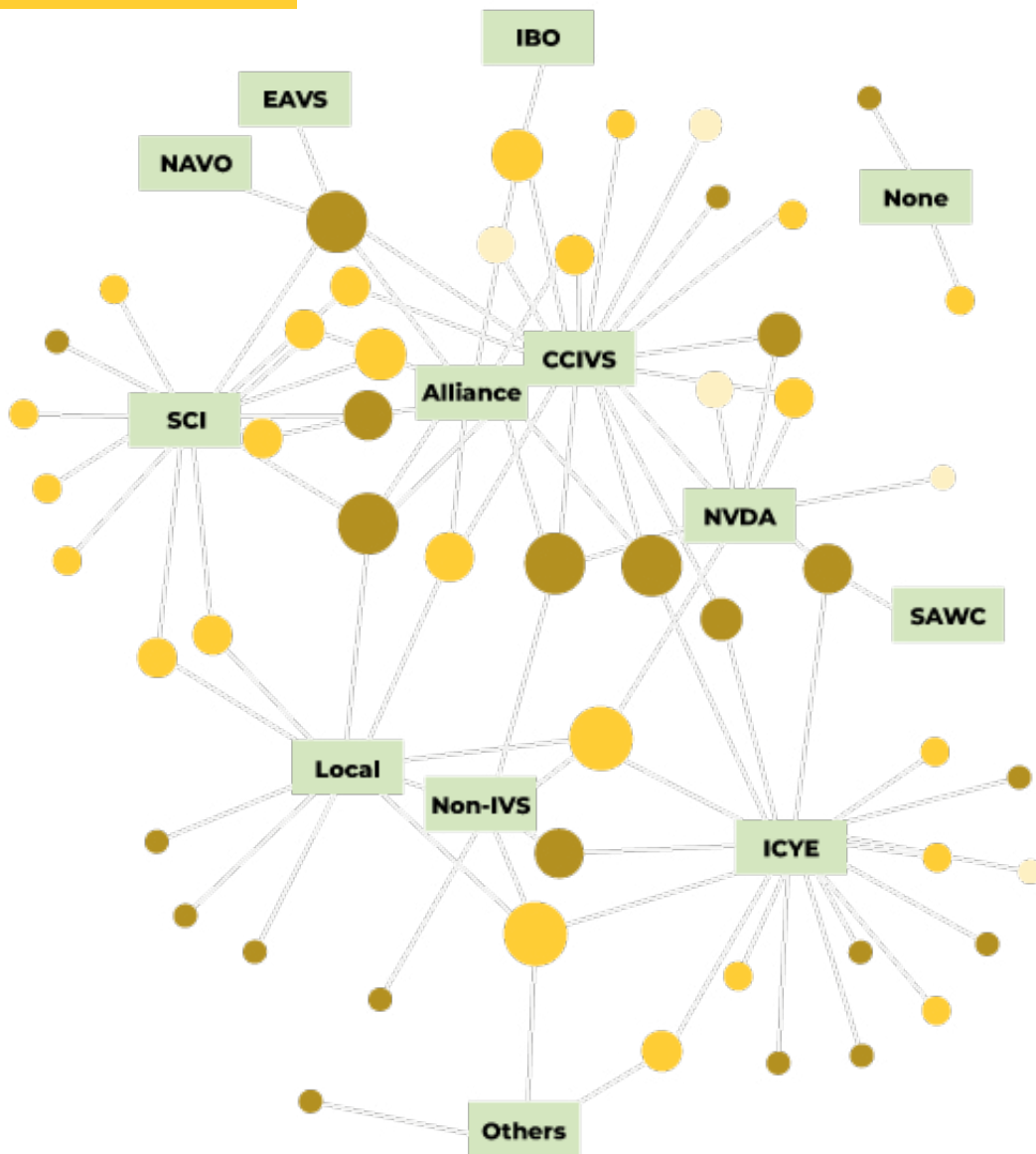
NETWORKING

NETWORKING

From its beginnings, the International Voluntary Service movement has gathered organizations into international networks. IVS organizations, however, also join local, institutional or private networks according to their own interests and strategies.

After situating themselves, organizations were asked about their **affiliation to International Voluntary Service networks** - full list in the Appendix.

In Graph 1, to simplify the network affiliation's overview, international and macro-regional networks are specified by name, while local networks have been grouped into the category "Local" and non-specified ones, into "Others".



Graph 1. The light green squares represent networks, and the circles represent organizations. The size of the networks reflects the number of affiliations they have. The color of the circles indicates how each organization has situated itself: light yellow for Questioning ones, light brown for Southern and bright yellow for Northern ones.

Clearly, **some networks gather more organizations than others, some organizations belong to more networks than others, and some are completely isolated.** Three possible explanations emerge:

→ TIME

Older networks such as SCI, CCIVS, ICYE¹ and NVDA **have more connections than newly established ones**, and the two organizations declaring no affiliation at all are both established very recently.

→ NETWORKS' STRUCTURES AND AIMS


Regionally-oriented networks like NVDA or NAVO tend to **gather organizations in their own region mostly**, and even SCI and Alliance - at least according to this sample - seem to remain anchored to their Northern, Eurocentric base.

→ IDENTITY OR PROJECT LEADERSHIP?

The **networks showing more variety** in their connections, including Southern, Northern and Questioning organizations, are those specifically **claiming and aiming for an international identity, like CCIVS and ICYE.** The fact that **these two networks, however, are also the organizers of this project:** the fact that they issued the call for organizations in their network (and beyond) to respond to the questionnaire, and the higher stakes they had regarding the questionnaire's success may have skewed the results, gathering more organizations from their networks among the responders.

An additional aspect not shown by Graph 1 - but becoming visible further on, when looking at organizations' financial structure - is that **all the European organizations - which are most of the Northern ones - including those showing only one connection to one network, are in-fact also linked through their exclusive participation to mega-projects funded by the European Union**, such as the European Solidarity Corps (ESC - see <https://europeansolidaritycorps.net/>).

Other than belonging to networks (or institutional projects like ESC) **IVS organizations also form relationships and partnerships with each other while fulfilling their main purpose of exchanging volunteers.** So the next step is to look at those partnerships and exchanges.



The decolonial reading of this is that, since the oldest networks and those who "could" claim and aim for an international identity are those born and anchored in the North², and since they still "can" claim and aim internationally and - spoiler alert, hold privileges and resources to achieve that - colonial legacies are still visible in IVS networking structure. However, new and decentralized networks are emerging and taking up space in the IVS arena.

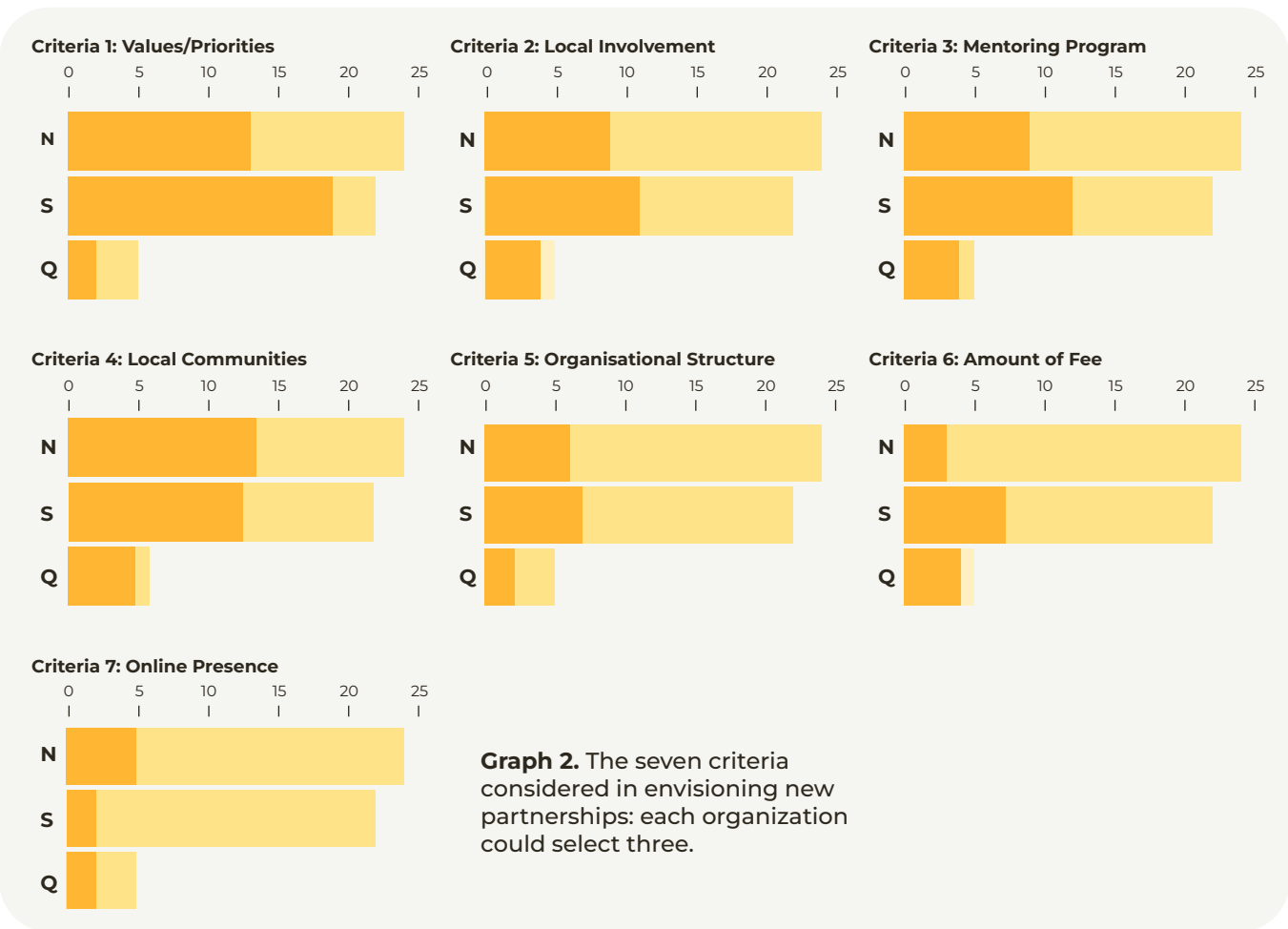
PARTNERSHIPS & EXCHANGES

When asked about **seeking potential new partnerships** - across the North-South-Questioning categories - each organization could select three out of the following list of criteria:

- The link with the values/priorities of my own organisation
- The local communities and target groups they work with
- The involvement of the local communities / target groups in the project planning
- The structure of their organisation
- Their online presence (website, social media, etc.)
- The amount of fee they charge
- The quality of their mentoring programme

Decolonial practice and discourse in International Voluntary Service

Graph 2 shows responding organizations' choices, split according to the Northern, Southern or Questioning category they situated themselves in.



This is encouraging from a decolonial perspective. If decolonizing becomes one of the core values and priorities, it is likely to spread throughout networks and influence the broader movement.

Northern organizations, however, seem to give the same amount of attention to mentorship programs and local communities, but not to the involvement of communities in planning. Mentorship is also among the preferences of Southern organizations, but it is equally directed towards local communities and their involvement in planning.

This is consistent with two known neo-colonial trends³ that this report confirms in the quantitative analysis and partly challenges in words of intention and recent practice elicited from the open-ended answers. These trends are: the main North-to-South directionality of volunteers' flow, and the consequent Northern volunteer-oriented rather than community-oriented stance. Volunteer-centrality, that will be more apparent on the Northern side, will be shown as expanding its influence and becoming a general trend itself, together with other unexplored neo-colonial trends.

While **Questioning organizations split their preference equally among mentorship, fees, local communities and their involvement in planning, the overall most sought-after criteria - with special preference reported by Southern organizations - relates to matching values and priorities.**

Northern organizations, however, seem to give the same amount of attention to **mentorship programs and local communities**, but not to the **involvement of communities in planning**. Mentorship is also among the preferences of Southern organizations, but it is equally directed towards local communities and their involvement in planning.


An additional confirmation comes when looking at the 9 responding organizations who took advantage of the "Other" or "Add option" choices - comprising 1 Southern organization, 1 Questioning organization, and 7 Northern organizations. While the one Southern organization specified that seriousness and professionalism are sought-after characteristics in new partnerships, all the remaining pointed back to **network affiliation**: either showing **preference to organizations that belong to the same network as they do, or networks that they know**, or explicitly highlighting the fact that **the network they belong to decides the partnerships they have access to**.

Since online presence is not considered so much as a route to seek and establish partnerships, the network affiliation preference is a warning against the **danger for IVS networking to be a neo-colonial tool**. In other words, if organizations rely on networking to consider new partnerships, **being affiliated to broader, more interconnected and "known" networks becomes a privilege** that reproduces the center-margin or center-periphery colonial structure seen in Graph 1.


Having this power imbalance in mind, when it comes to the open-ended question about potential reasons for ending existing partnerships, the catch is in the details.

On a first reading of organizations' responses about ending partnerships, most organizations keep mentioning **value compatibility as a foundational** aspect of their partnerships. Other elements highlighted as important are **programs' quality, communication** and **safety**. Critical areas that are frequently mentioned are **organizational reputation** and **accountability**. Scattered, but more connected with decolonial discourse, is a few organizations' direct reference to **power dynamics, intercultural competence**, and **supremacist tendencies**.

Looking into the Questioning, Southern and Northern categories, the Questioning group of organizations maintains **Quality** as the main general reason. Southern organizations, however, mention **Cost issues** and further specify **Trust** as motives to end partnerships - and with good reason. Other than the generally common aspects highlighted above, Northern organizations give an additional type of answer: the problematic **Volunteer-centered** ones mentioned in the previous Pointer. In other words, the **negative volunteer's feedback of Northern volunteers**, or judging **volunteers' support practices as insufficient** can significantly contribute in making a partnership end.



The Northern-born and based networks, then, have the choice and responsibility to avoid acting as gatekeepers and, instead, join decolonial alliances for the compensatory redistribution of power, privileges, prestige and resources - especially with emerging networks from previously colonized contexts.



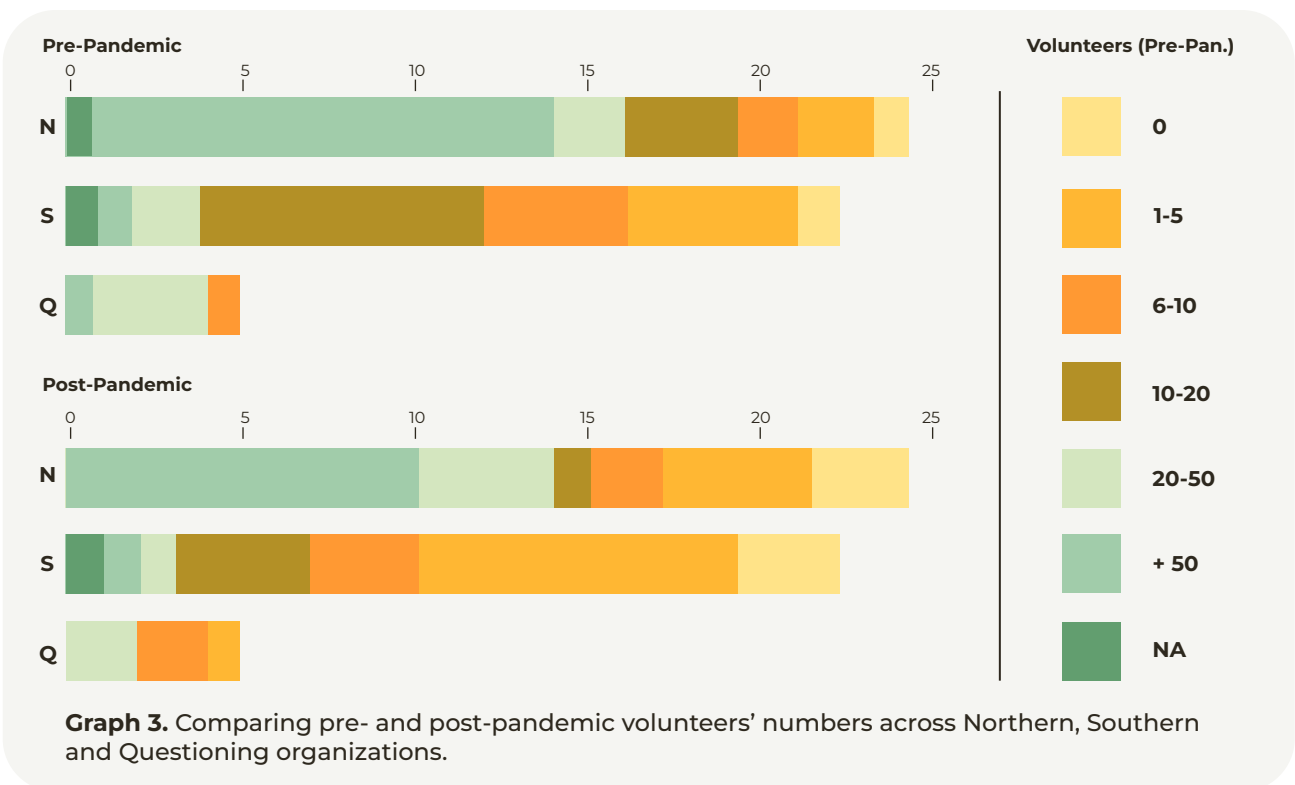
The pervasive nature of value-driven organizational choices can create a positive snowball effect, particularly if decolonization becomes a shared value and a mark of quality. However, a cautionary note is warranted: Northern organizations that prioritize their own volunteers' perspectives may diminish the hope of forming decolonial alliances. Furthermore, if Southern or Questioning organizations adopt the same "trendy" Northern-volunteer focus, the decolonial potential of these alliances could be rendered ineffective.

VOLUNTEERS & THEIR TRAJECTORIES

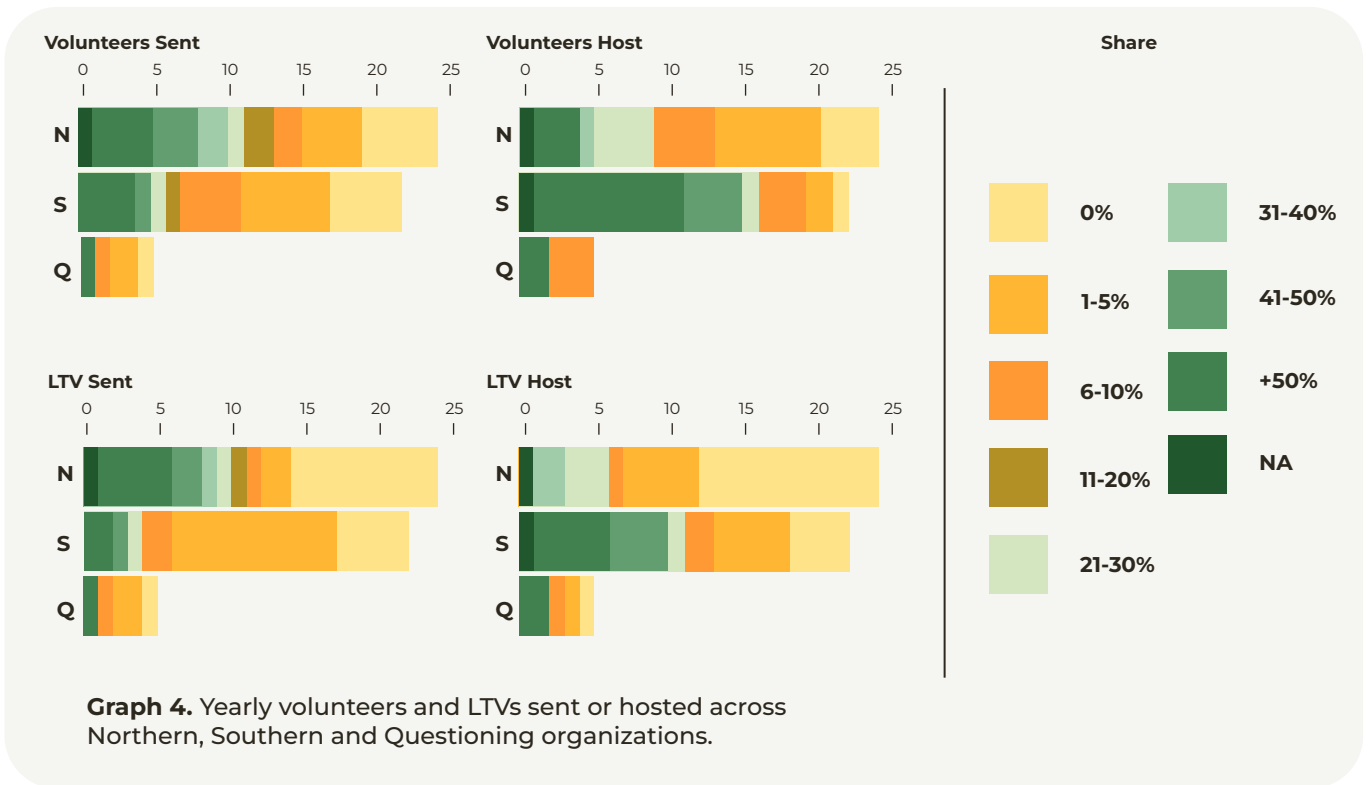
Speaking of volunteers' flow and the still prevalent North-South trajectory, organizations provided information about **the amount of the volunteers they send and host across South-North and Questioning boundaries, in neighboring countries in their region, and nationally.**

In looking at the following graphs, **readers are invited to keep in mind the structural issues of differential access to visas and, more generally, freedom of movement** - an ever-present theme in the discussions happening within the [Decolonise! IVS project](#), and in the IVS movement in general.

Graph 3 compares **volunteers' numbers, pre and post-pandemic, across Northern, Southern and Questioning organizations:** the numbers have **unsurprisingly decreased, but Northern organizations maintain the largest shares** - for example, consider the amount of organizations that responded "more than 50 volunteers per year", in green.



Regarding volunteers' trajectory, organizations were asked to quantify the **yearly average of volunteers and specifically Long-Term Volunteers (LTV, six months and up) they send to and host from their counterparts**. As shown in Graph 4, the North-to-South trajectory is markedly more prominent. This is especially evident when comparing the green section (more than 50% of volunteers/LTVs) to the yellow section (0% of volunteers/LTVs).



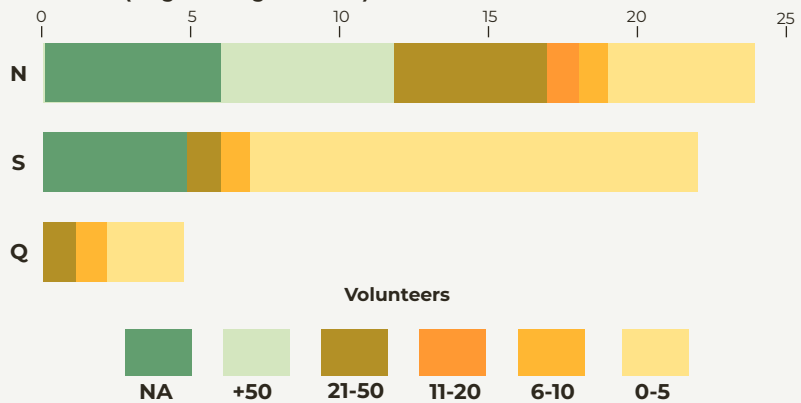
Responses regarding **volunteers sent out regionally or in neighboring countries** highlight the initial consideration about **freedom of movement and visas**. In Graph 5, the large green portions on the N column represent the **high numbers of Northern organizations' exchanges within their region - a.k.a. Europe**. These high numbers reflect the **high degree of visa-free movement obtained through long-established political stability and diplomatic relations, and the exclusive access to European mega-projects** envisioned and funded by the EU.

On the **Southern and Questioning** side, the larger yellow portion representing **zero volunteers sent to neighboring countries** reflects the **structural constraints like political and diplomatic instability** faced by volunteers and organizations in their respective regions. Participants' discussions informed by decolonial practice and scholarship confirm that **one's side instability and the other's stability** are mutually interconnected, and can be **systematically attributed to colonial and neo-colonial experiences**.



All the volunteers' counts displayed in this section show that most volunteers - pre- and post-pandemic, on average as well as LTVs - are from the North, and that they continue to be sent in a North-to-South direction. Even at the regional level, there is a higher concentration of Northern volunteers going to neighboring countries, for example within the borders of the EU, which are open for EU citizens. According to the various degrees of passport strength and visa accessibility, Southern and Questioning organizations and volunteers can be locked out or trapped within what has been called "Fortress Europe", and face similar limitations within their own region. So, while Northern organizations and volunteers have the privilege to choose and operate within an "international identity", Southern and Questioning organizations have to operate on the national and international front under various degrees of constraint and, as shown in the next section, with less resources.

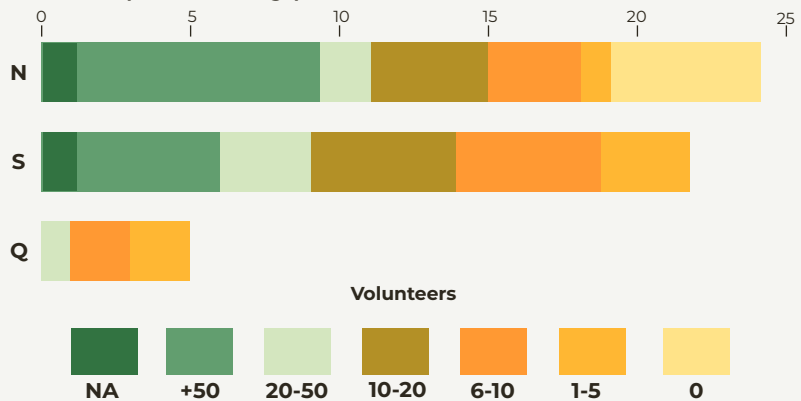
Volunteers (neighbouring countries)



Graph 5. Yearly volunteers sent regionally or in organizations' neighboring countries.

Finally, organizations were asked to share the **yearly average of volunteers involved at the national level**. In Graph 6, **the trend is confirmed** once again: in fact, **for Southern and Questioning organizations having no volunteers involved nationally is never an option**, while several **Northern organizations report that they can and do keep operating on international exchanges only**.

Volunteers (national average)

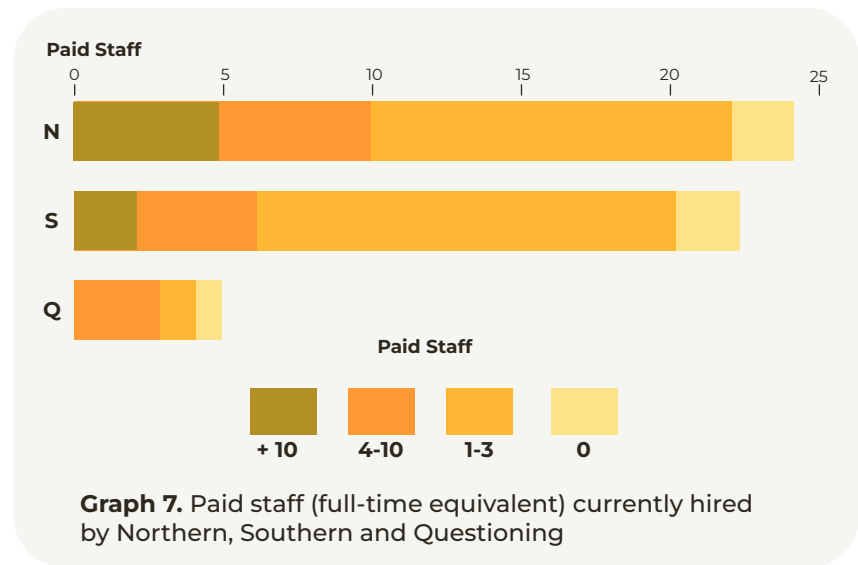


Graph 6. Yearly average of volunteers participating in national activities.

THE COST OF VOLUNTEERING

The study of volunteering costs started by asking organizations how many full-time (or equivalent) paid staff they currently employ. Graph 7 shows that **the majority of responding organizations, regardless of where they are situated, can afford or function with one-to-ten paid full-time staff.**

The apparently equal number of Northern and Southern organizations declaring zero paid staff, however, can have an opposite reasoning.



On the **Northern side organizations may not need to pay staff** for a number of **structural reasons enhancing people's access to volunteering**: aging population with pension and welfare, unionized labor structure with controlled working hours, youth population with controlled studying hours, and institutionalized recognition and support for volunteering itself.

Conversely, **organizations may need to hire staff to operate** in contexts where structural conditions are different: for example where the aging population relies only on family ties for sustenance, where labor cannot unionize and working and study hours are virtually unlimited, and where institutions do not recognize or support volunteering - or do so with coercive and surveillance intentions towards organizations or the population at large.

Finally, **staff may not be affordable at all**, when structural conditions make people's lives and organization's existence just dangerously precarious.

Both evidence and effects of this can be found in the organizations' responses about their sources of income. Graph 8 shows that **Southern organizations overwhelmingly rely on the fees paid by volunteers**, while **national funds are never the main source**, and **regional funds are only reported once**. Questioning and Northern organizations funding structure is quite diverse, but in the case of **Northern organizations, volunteers' fees and national funds are the two main sources of income, and "regional" (read European Union) funds comes second**.

Note that **almost half of the Northern organizations also selected volunteers' fees as one of their main sources of funding**. Most of them are operative within the EU or the United States, but three are respectively a Portuguese-Cameroonian organization and the Bolivian and Taiwanese member organizations of the ICYE network encountered above.

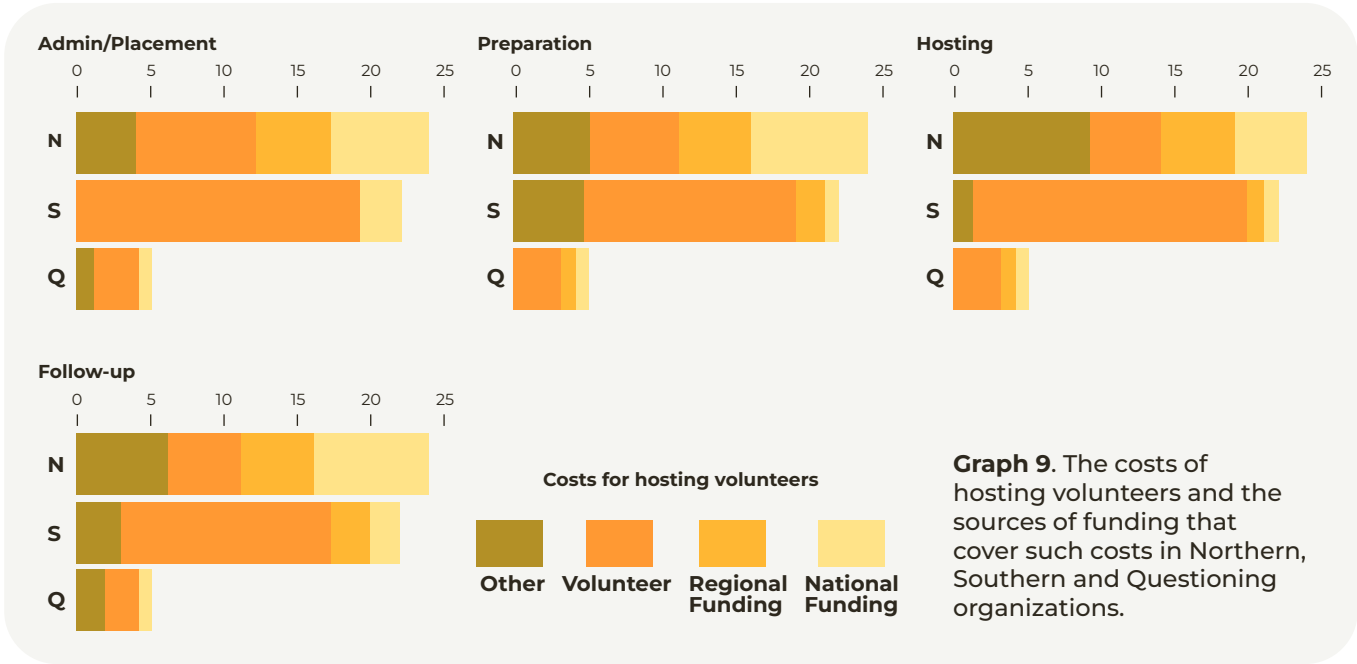


Graph 8. Organizations' main sources of income: ranked by priority and split by North, South and Questioning.

Organizations were then asked to **specify the funding source (volunteers, national funds, regional funds or other) covering the following costs of hosting volunteers:**

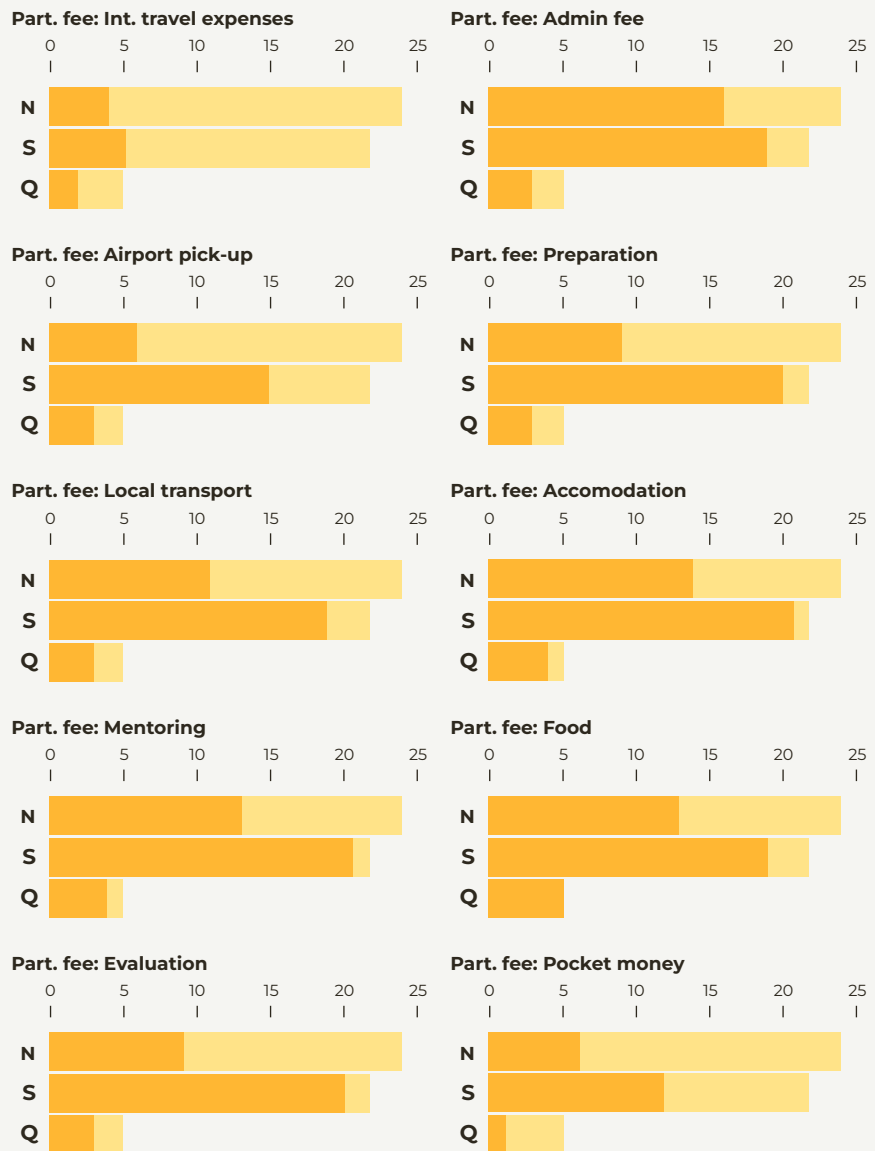
- **Admin/placement** (recruitment, help with finding project, admin work...) related to placing long term volunteers
- **Preparation** of the volunteer
- **Hosting** (food/accommodation/mentoring on the spot)
- Evaluation and **follow-up**

The answers visualized in Graph 9 provide further evidence of what was shown above: **Questioning and Northern organizations utilizing a diversity of funds, and Southern organizations overwhelmingly dependent on volunteers' fees.**



The global power structure, or center-periphery distribution of privileges and disadvantages is once again confirmed and consistently reflecting colonial legacies. Organizations that cannot rely - or safely rely - on national or regional funding, will charge volunteers. Since most of these organizations are situated in the Global South and most of the volunteers come from the North and receive institutional support, this may be mistakenly considered as a decolonial compensatory or reparatory practice. But since there is no clear decolonial aim declared, nor involvement of Southern individuals, organizations and institutions in planning, these kinds of exchanges still reinforce a pattern of Southern dependence from the North, White Saviorism and a sense of volunteer "customership". Even if that is not always the case and organizations and volunteers are taking the lead in decolonizing the discourses and practices, the responsible and pioneering political actions of individuals and civil society organizations are no excuse for institutions to evade their own accountability, change national and regional policies, and implement large-scale interventions for structural change.

In Graph 10, the participation fee is broken down by the specific items it may include: in looking at each item, **bear in mind that Southern organizations do the majority of the hosting**, and that Questioning and Northern organizations can rely on a diverse choice of sources other than volunteers' fees.



Graph 10. Admin fee (can include membership fee, communication with partner, recruitment process...), volunteers' preparation, accommodation, food, pocket money, international travel expenses, airport pick-up, local transport, mentoring and follow-up during stay, evaluation.

Also, **consider how structural conditions affect each of these costs**: for example, airport pick-up may be redundant where the whole transport infrastructure is reliable and affordable - i.e. where it was designed and constructed for public mobility rather than for colonial extraction of resources.

Decolonial practices

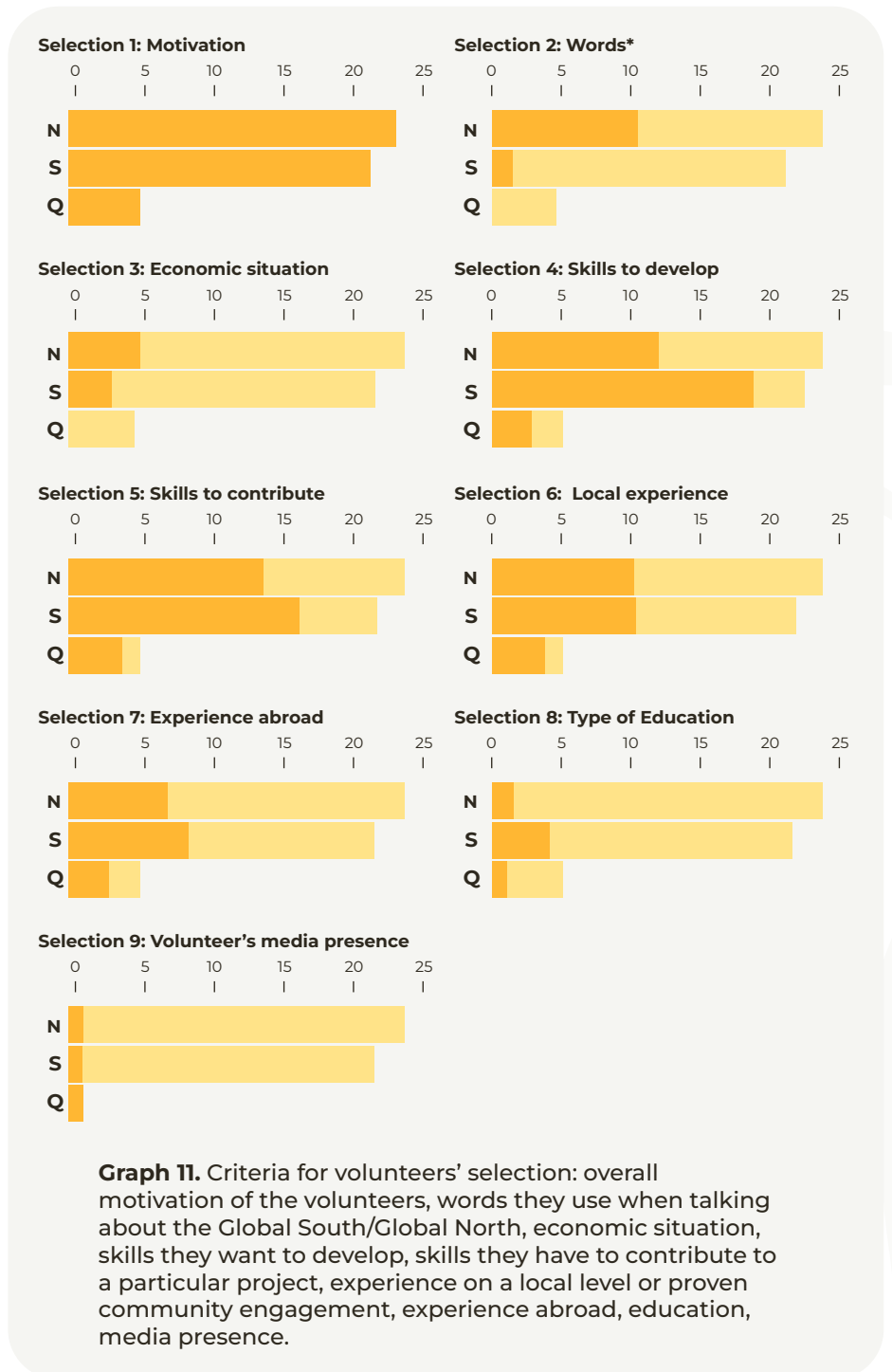
Decolonial practice and discourse in International Voluntary Service

Introducing International Voluntary Service decolonial practice, a **special feature emerges when organizations are asked about volunteers' selection.**



The **centrality of volunteers' desires, attested by the attention given to their motivation and the skills they want to develop, is no news** - it is worth repeating that Northern volunteers' centrality can be associated with White Saviorism, and with Southern organizations and communities' dependence. But Graph 11 provides additional insight regarding the **agency and gains of Southern organizations and communities**: this can be seen in the focus of Southern organizations on the **skills that volunteers can contribute and develop**, and on **previous experiences**.

The special feature, however, is in the **"Other"** options freely added by organizations. Even though the **wording around the South/North topic is considered only by few, mainly Northern, organizations** (more on this in Decolonial Discourse), respondents from every category spoke in the sense of **trying to assess the critical understanding that volunteers** may have, both towards the specific project they are applying to, as well as the concept of volunteering itself.



Graph 11. Criteria for volunteers' selection: overall motivation of the volunteers, words they use when talking about the Global South/Global North, economic situation, skills they want to develop, skills they have to contribute to a particular project, experience on a local level or proven community engagement, experience abroad, education, media presence.

*This refers to the way volunteers talk about the Global South/Global North

Critical reflection is indeed a long-established distinctive feature of the International Voluntary Service movement, both at the individual and organizational levels. Even regarding the very decolonial topic examined here, which is becoming mainstream just recently in the international volunteering sector and beyond, there are **internal publications that capture the movement's discourse dating as far back as the 1960s⁵.**

More perspective can be provided through a screenshot of where the movement currently stands, enlisting colonial dynamics that responding organizations still reproduce, and their intentional or practical solutions.

EXISTING COLONIAL DYNAMICS

The relatively **large number of organizations** - 21 in total with 11 in the South and 10 in the North - **who did not respond to the question regarding existing practices that may reinforce colonial dynamics** points to the possibility that the IVS internal debate about decolonial topics hasn't maintained its centrality since the 60s, or hasn't produced longlasting shared practices.

Among the **29 responses, 4 organizations** (1 Q, 3 N) were **not sure** about their stance on the topic, and provided general examples about "double standards" and other speech elements that may signal colonial dynamics, for example the expression "developing countries". **A Questioning organization and a Northern one reported no reinforcing dynamics** in their own organizations - the latter specifying that evaluations and follow-ups are in place to spot and address such dynamics in Northern volunteers coming back from Southern experiences.

Finally, **23 organizations (3 Q, 10 S, 9 N) do report colonial reinforcement. The explanations they provide converge on systemic causes**, with the following nuances reflecting where organizations situate themselves.

The most frequently occurring answer for **Northern organizations reflects the colonial way in which Northern funding (mostly from the European Union) shapes their operations.**

"The fact that funding comes mostly from the Global North to fund the programs with our partners in the Global South (which is a systemic situation, not a practise, but it results in a practise)"

These realities and the policies that keep them there are **challenged on a political level by the Northern organizations** reporting them, who **also take it on themselves to creatively counteract the effects** of visa policies and other barriers to access and participation related to funding and program requirements.

“There are several situations that we don’t really have control over, but can try to promote for improvement (e.g. visa practices, donor and funding practices). Within our organisation we are working on making our practices and volunteer projects more sustainable and transparent, pay more attention to accessibility (e.g. accessibility of digital tools, accessibility to funding, accessible language), promote consideration for our partners all over the world (e.g. planning events and projects, pointing out stereotypes and unfair expectations, distribution of support mechanism), train volunteers to recognize inequalities and privileges etc”

Some Northern organizations, while noticing the Eurocentrism engendered by funding practices, are also self-critical about how their own organizational structures and programs reflect Eurocentrism, recognizing the role of unconscious biases in maintaining **problematic distances and differentials between the parties involved** in volunteering:

“Our staff and co-workers are mainly non-racialized people which may reinforce colonial legacies or neo-colonial power dynamics. We must ask ourselves, why almost all of our outgoing volunteers are non-racialized people, too. It’s hard to evaluate how much unconscious biases affect our practices”

Answers from Southern organizations reflect the same phenomena from their own perspective. The **recognition of systemic causes and self-reflective accountability of organizations** go in parallel with what seen above:

“Responsibilities as leaders in our organisation need to change as the inequality that we have been fed in our schooling system or cultural life has to change”


At the same time, most Southern organizations report the effect of the **Eurocentric funding requirements seen above talking about systemic exclusion** (visa and language requirements etc.), **or the relentless demand for “adaptations”** in order to participate:

“We are always the one team adapting”

“The haves demand and we subscribe to their rules”

This is **additional one-sided labor**, that Southern organizations highlight as **reproducing “hierarchies”, “power relations” and “dependency”** of the colonial kind:

“The level of effort that we put in the organizations of the global south to find host and project situations, the follow up and accompaniment that we do for the participants, is not reciprocal in most of the cases to attend the Colombian participants that develop their experience in Europe”



The 3 Questioning organizations' responses are equally distributed per each trend described above, summarizing the systemic causes of Eurocentrism, organizational decolonial accountability and the demand for adaptation.

“We usually adjust our program to an Eurocentric program that reinforce the neo-colonial dynamics”

“It’s essential to be aware of and identify any practices that could potentially reinforce colonial legacies or neo-colonial power dynamics within our organization, also having a management structure that primarily comprises individuals from one particular cultural or ethnic background”

Finally, in writing about their own experiences, several organizations pointed at various solutions they implement to address such issues, for example their communication strategy and volunteers' training - which will be analyzed in dedicated sections below - or the specific example of one of the Palestinian organizations, sharing:

“We do organize awareness sessions, site seeing, study visits to what is left of Palestine, therefore, the international volunteer becomes more aware of the political challenges we face”

EXISTING DECOLONIAL SOLUTIONS

IVS organizations' responses about **existing solidarity mechanisms to remove entry barriers and other obstacles to participation** provide **a collection of creative solutions** mainly taking two decolonial directions: **redistribution of resources and rebalancing of volunteers' flow.**

For example, organizations offer **financial support (either self-funded, or redirecting national or regional resources)** to create targeted scholarships, weave participation fees and offer free food, accommodation and transport to the volunteers - more rarely visa and travel costs are included too.

Often, such resources are intentionally and specifically leveraged to rebalance the unequal flow of volunteers from North to South or in a South-South fashion. **Best results are obtained when intentions, planning and implementation are coordinated through organizational partnerships**, rather than by one Northern organization spontaneously offering, for example, a "South-South scholarship" - more on South-South below.

These are undeniable achievements, and yet, while 13 organizations (1 Q, 6 N, 7 S) did not provide an answer and the number of organizations responding positively and providing the examples above is balanced (4 Q, 12 N, 13 S), the distribution of negative answers tells a quite humbling story. No

solidarity mechanism to facilitate access is in place - **no, no longer or not yet - within 6 Northern vs. no Questioning and 2 Southern ones.** This confirms the risk mentioned above: **those from context that have undergone colonial plunder, and thus operating with less resources and access as a result, also tend to shoulder more of the compensatory and re-equalizing labor.**

Reassuringly, when **asked about their intentions to start looking into possible decolonial practices to implement, the overwhelming majority (28 organizations) responds positively:** either willing to expand their already existing practices, conducting and/or participating in more research efforts, or implementing new practices. **Responses were not provided by 16 organizations, and the few not responding positively cited a variety of reasons for not doing so, like the need to first raise organizational awareness on the topic, or political restrictions:**

"No, we didn't plan to implement any practices that are trying to question colonial or neo-colonial issues explicitly due to the political sensitive environment in XXX*. However, we will share the cultural differences and based on different SDGs or social issue"

*In order to avoid political retaliation against the organization sharing this view, their location has been anonymized.

Indeed, **the question about existing tools and practices*** addressing these issues, highlights how the decolonial topic is still making its way back to the center of IVS discourse and practice, with **11 organizations (1 Q, 6 S, 6 N) not providing any response, and 17 (3 Q, 7 S, 7 N) organizations reporting that they have no existing decolonial practices in place.** One Southern organization gave sort of a “negative-positive” response:

“Not really, but we will be always very careful to give importance to our hosts and the local wisdoms/culture and keep the balance with the volunteers openness to share their own”

Other than volunteers’ training, which will be treated separately at the end of this section, **the 20 positive responses point at online and offline awareness raising initiatives** of various kinds (specifically decolonial, or about anti-racism) co-organized with local activists groups. In this sense, **Northern organizations tend to report one-off initiatives and temporary campaigns directed to volunteers and the general public, while Southern organizations speak about regular - weekly or monthly - internal reflections with dedicated teams.**

Southern intra-regional efforts or “South-South” programs subsidized with Northern funding came up from one Southern and one Northern organization respectively - this is the Southern one’s response, introducing the next section:

“Yes, we are working on a possible project that will make our young people realize the possibility to travel within Southern Africa region and learn from one another South South Cooperation”

*Tools and guidelines referred to by organizations are listed in full in the references: what this list says is that there is a tendency of creating one’s own tools within the IVS world.

NOTES OF CAUTION ON “SOUTH-SOUTH”

Organizations self-positioning as Southern were directly asked about their **experiences with South-South cooperation**, both in terms of **obstacles and possible improvements** of the practice.

Curbing the general enthusiasm of certain institutions parading South-South programs as inherently immune to colonial influence and automatically decolonial, only **3 out of 20 responding organizations reported no problems at all or a neutral stance** toward such programs.

The remaining **17 Southern organizations**, other than **reaffirming the structural issues seen above** (like visa and unreliable infrastructures), confirm that **the colonial legacy of Eurocentrism has been to some degree internalized by Southern participants - organizations, volunteers and communities alike**. In other words, just like colonial tools of domination such as colorism and other forms of racial, sexist and classist discrimination and oppressions, **the whole colonial logic of supremacy, what we call Eurocentrism - and not wealth - trickles down the hierarchy it creates**.

In few responses, **Eurocentrism** stays **unchallenged, normalized as a “preference”, and assigned to a whole nationality**:

“[Nationality*] normally want to go to the North... but we have already received volunteers from the South”

*In order to avoid reinforcing a stereotypical characterization, the national identity this organization refers to has been anonymized.

In some cases, the “preference” (still unchallenged and assigned to a large demographic) gets somehow unpacked and made sense of, but the rationale reproduces a center-margin structure in which **“the South” becomes one cohesive block of reality that can be experienced from one single point**.

“there is not much interest from [nationality]* youth to travel in the south, the reason that as organisation we know is because they already know the realities of the south and want to learn from different realities”

*In order to avoid reinforcing a stereotypical characterization, the national identity this organization refers to has been anonymized.

However, **in most cases unpacking of “preference” is critical**, providing information on specific aspects of internalized Eurocentrism, **but also highlighting a sense of contempt or self-contempt:**

“Volunteers who pay to volunteer prefer to work in the global North”

“Lack of logistical means preference of the other because most of our populations think that good ideas come from Europe”

“Although the South-South exchanges would be the best alternative, partners are difficult to identify or find. An organization in the Global South looks forward to working with the partner in the Global North. They choose to undergo suppression, be controlled and follow, as long that they benefit economically”

The problem with contempt in decolonial scenarios, and especially self-contempt, is when it **targets people still affected by the negative consequences of colonialism.**

In such cases, organizations are being held accountable for the current consequences of a past imposed on them, **instead of holding accountable the institutions that still enjoy the benefits of their colonial past.**

This mechanism itself reinforces the colonial structure of privileges and oppression: for example, with **Southern organizations juggling survival, navigating the EU’s exclusionary funding logic and trying to compensate for the effects of such logic,** while the EU as an institution benefits from all that juggling and all that work, all the while posing as civil society’s world champion.

Indeed, other than preference, most organizations do recognize **three mechanisms through which Eurocentric financial standards hinder their opportunities and practice of South-South cooperation:**



Volunteers' fees

As most of the volunteers that go to the South are from the North, **fees are established with the perceived average of Northern volunteers' socio-economic status in mind, and so are often not affordable for volunteers coming from the South.**

“Fees are the major problem, candidates couldn't pay high amounts”

“Safety issues, unbalanced fees, racial discrimination, etc.”

“Yes, most volunteers we send will not be able to cover the fees for long term projects, and it is difficult to get funds for volunteers from institutions in the country/region.”



Dependency

Resource-intensive **EU funding programs create formalistic standards and conditions dictating how volunteering activities are supposed to be organized and presented.**

Once the funding is no longer there, for example due to Covid, **Southern organizations dependency shows:** they either have to renegotiate those standards, or they have to find resources that match the costs associated with those standards.

Funding is the most crucial obstacle for us. We have gone through Covid a huge significant influence for us as South to South exchanges dependent on international volunteers we have to find means as partners to make the process work in a new global shift. Gone are programmes such as Erasmus+ [Capacity Building in the field of youth for partner countries in Latin America, Caribbean, and Asia-Pacific] which opened up process for us to collaborate and work together nor the funders that were sponsoring such cooperation, now we just have to dig deeper within our associations to make such exchanges possible.”



Competition vs. cooperation

A “conflict of interest” is enabled by the Eurocentric international volunteering practice highlighted so far, where **Southern organizations have to radically transform their relationships: from the logic of competing against each other to attract Northern partnerships and volunteers, to a logic of mutual cooperation.**

“As South-South organizations we also have limited cooperation due to conflict of interests with some South organizations”

In this sense, organizations expressed their **commitment for further improvements.**

One of the Questioning organizations’ responses summarizes the general recommendations:

“Facilitate knowledge sharing: Encourage and support knowledge sharing between countries and regions in the Global South by hosting forums, workshops, and training programs that promote the exchange of ideas and best practices.

Promote capacity building: Invest in capacity-building programs that help countries in the Global South develop their skills, knowledge, and expertise in key areas such as governance, infrastructure development, and technological innovation”

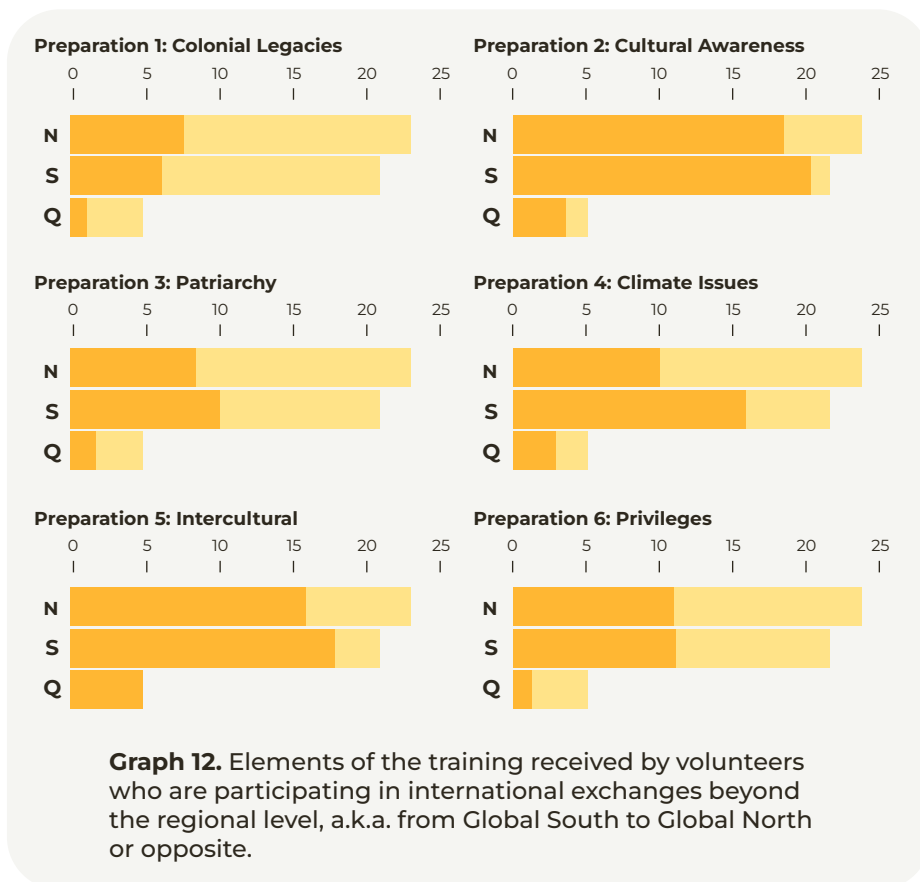
One **decolonial possibility** coming from the chances Southern organizations have to meet and discuss, is that **of alliances that transcend the practical level and go more in the direction of political advocacy.** Even though the gated access to resources and the diplomatic and political constraints mentioned so far are concrete obstacles, some **organizations say that through IVS network affiliations** they do **advocate for South-South exchanges at the organizational, national and transnational level** - this confirms how making networks’ more diverse and inclusive can really turn the colonial table.

Concluding the Decolonial Practice section, one IVS practice of collective critical reflection seems to be distinctively established throughout the IVS movement: volunteers’ training.

VOLUNTEERS' TRAINING

The global and contextual structure affects organizations' capacity to offer the same training to volunteers before departure, upon arrival and/or as follow up. For example, organizations reported great variety in terms of the **“quantity” of training** they can provide: **from informal and spontaneous conversations, to organized sessions with returning volunteers, and up to 9 days of regular pre-camp, evaluation and follow-up activities.**

Graph 12 shows the different topics that responding organizations include during their volunteers' training.



The colonial aspect of international volunteering is the least selected topic, followed by the related patriarchy and privileges. But responding organizations have a very diverse set of experiences regarding the degree of preparation on these topics when it comes to the volunteers they host. **Table 1 summarizes the responses to the question about their perception of volunteer's preparation, especially regarding global inequalities, colonial legacies and current neo-colonial practices:**

N/A	10 N (4 do not host volunteers from the South at all), 6 S
Negative	4 Q, 4 N, 7 S
Depends	3 N , 3 S
Positive	1 Q (1 with example), 6 N (6 with examples), 7S (6 with examples)

Tab 1. Summary of organizations' responses to the question: "When you host volunteers, do you feel they have been prepared enough, especially regarding global inequalities, colonial legacies and current neo-colonial practices ? Please give us an example".

When asked to assess the preparation of hosted volunteers (Tab 1), **among organizations responding that volunteers' preparation is inadequate, Northern and Southern organizations provided the vast majority of examples.** The Questioning ones, reported that **some volunteers did not receive training at all, that some did but only on a superficial level,** and only one provided the following articulated example:

“No, for example, a volunteer organization that focuses on education in a developing country may need to consider how the education system has been affected by colonialism and how this has resulted in inequalities in access to education. The organization may need to educate volunteers on the historical context and the current situation in the country in order to prepare them to work effectively and respectfully with local communities”

Southern organizations' examples highlight a variety of issues like White Saviorism, ignorance, superiority complex, entitlement and Eurocentrism:

“No, they come with a very hero idea”

“No!! The volunteers from Global North don't realize about inequality and context differences”

“No, some volunteers come here and underestimate the people from the communities”

“No. Usually they come with limited understanding about these topics. They are mostly young people who prefers more adventure outside work”

“No, in general; and some volunteers are very Eurocentric”

Among **organizations responding positively**, most describe the training volunteers report to have received in terms of quantity, reflecting the variety opening this section. In qualitative terms, several organizations, **especially Southern ones, praised organizations that are part of the Service Civil International (SCI) network as very effective in administering proper training on the topic of inequality, colonial legacies and neo-colonialism.**

On the other hand, **one Northern organization** from the United Kingdom provides the following example:

“In general they are knowledgeable e.g. to negotiate public transport”

Since the topic under investigation is volunteers’ decolonial preparation, there is something patronizing about mentioning public transportation. It is not clear whether the respondent underestimates the quality of work of the Southern sending organizations, or the value of incoming Southern volunteers’ knowledge. Either way, there are some potentially harmful stereotypes and biases underpinning this dismissive and diminishing answer. Highlighting and calling out such problematic attitudes, even when they show up in small ways, and holding space for debate around them is part of the collective decolonial efforts core to this project.

Finally, some organizations provide examples about the **belief that volunteers’ knowledge on global inequalities, colonial legacies and neo-colonialism are more dependent on volunteers’ background, upbringing and the very volunteering experiences they have, rather than the training they receive.**

This individual logic and the problematic reality of diversified volunteers’ training in IVS can be better understood confronting the opposite answers provided by the two Palestinian organizations:

“Sometimes we find some of the volunteers know nothing about the situation in Palestine (some didn’t know that we still under the occupation)”

“Yes, the international volunteers are well prepared and aware of the political practices in our region, but when they see the facts on the ground, they become more knowledgeable and more active politically”

In each case in which a volunteer arrived in Palestine without being aware of the political situation on the ground, the local organization and community had to:

1. Continue to navigate the difficulty of living and operating under occupation;
2. Managing the risks associated with hosting someone who is not prepared for the reality of living and operating under the occupation;
3. Educating the volunteer about the above-mentioned realities and their consequences;
4. Running volunteering activities so that the practice serves as a vehicle for participants to foster critical understanding, and form politically impactful (possibly decolonial) alliances.

In the second example, the local organization could instead focus on point 1 and 4, avoiding to reinforce the reality of privileges and disadvantages between Northern volunteers and themselves.

Finally, when asked about **decolonial reflections during projects' evaluation, 13 organizations (2 Q, 5 S, 6 N) answered that they do not include the decolonial topic in evaluation activities, 11 organizations declare they do not do it yet, or not in a specific or structured way (1 Q, 5 S, 5N), and 15 organizations did not respond (2 Q, 6 S, 7 N).**

Among the **11 organizations (5 S, 6 N) who responded positively, all organizations focus on the volunteer-centric perspective, often openly aiming at volunteers' retention, as in one of the following examples, respectively Southern and Northern:**

“Talk on overall experience and challenges they faced during their volunteering time. If any difference on culture, colour, races, castes etc. How they overcome them”

“We organise a yearly meeting with volunteers after their experience and we tackle the competences they gained as the impact of the volunteer in their lives and minds and also we evaluate their commitment for future volunteers programs”

Other responses reveal a **decolonial communication strategy** - sometimes cautiously reframed as “Justice, Peace and Equality” by Southern organizations. Echoing the example provided by the very question - “If you organize evaluation sessions with returning volunteers, do they include a decolonial reflection (for example on how to portray the people/culture they interacted with) ? If so, can you give an example? - **organizations do report giving attention to the portrayal of people and cultures.** The following examples are from a Northern and a Southern organization respectively:

“We have a discussion on how to portray the people/culture they interacted with. We discussed how the experience has affected one's stereotypes. We discussed about the impact of the volunteering experience to the host project and the host country”

“Yes, many returnees enjoy their voluntary service time in the global north and quite often describe life in the global north as being better compared to the global south. In the same way, some returnees portray that in some instances life is better in the global south. e.g weather and food”

These aspects will be considered in greater depth in the following section about decolonial discourse.

Decolonial discourse

Introducing International Voluntary Service decolonial discourse, organizations were asked to provide their definition of “Decolonisation”, and the sources - books, authors, schools of thought - they refer to in adopting such a definition.



The **variety of their responses, including their engagement or disengagement in responding**, shows how **the decolonial topic is experiencing a revival**. This revival, however, is itself **influenced by the very hierarchical structure that decolonial thinking and action are set up against**.

Half of the responding organizations (2 Q, 10 S, 10 N) provided their own definitions, showing an emerging agreement on decolonization being a process that involves the critical acknowledgement and dismantlement of colonial legacies reflected in political, economic, social and cultural structures, and thus the liberation of oppressed people from injustices and inequalities - see examples below.

QUESTIONING

“To work with and learn from each and every person in the same way, having the same possibilities in the project provided by us.”

“Decolonization refers to the process of dismantling and undoing the political, economic, social, and cultural structures of colonialism. It involves acknowledging and addressing the historical legacies of colonialism, and working towards the restoration of power, agency, and self-determination for colonized peoples.

Decolonization can take many forms, depending on the context and the goals of those involved. It may involve reclaiming and revitalizing Indigenous cultures and languages, challenging the dominant narratives and representations of history, promoting economic and political autonomy for formerly colonized nations, and addressing ongoing injustices and inequalities resulting from colonialism.”

SOUTHERN

“When Palestine will be free”

“It is the process of gradual disassociation from the colonial ideology and practices. Not referring to any school of thought. It is a process that allows the oppressed, suppressed and underprivileged to be free in their mindset and actions”

“It consists of the long and constant process of developing countries (colonized by European countries in our context), to build their own identity away from the oppressive cultural, social and economic models that were imposed”

NORTHERN

“Critical reflection about racism and colonial past and what this means for the present situation”

Decolonisation is the process of becoming aware of the domination/oppression mechanisms that rule the world within the frame of colonialism in history (mainly by Western countries since the 15th century)”

“We don’t have any officially approved definition in the organisation. But we understand it to mean recognizing and understanding the effects of long-lasting inequalities from the colonisation era, and working on breaking the habits and thinking that repeat and produce such inequalities still today”

Looking at the other half of responding organizations shows **what is left to be done when it comes to ensuring inclusive participation in decolonial discourse revival.**

While **5 Southern organizations did not provide a response (vs. 3 Northern ones), 3 Southern and 2 Questioning organizations (vs. 1 Northern one)** responded that they either **have never heard** of decolonization before, **do not have a clear definition** for the term, **or intentionally avoid defining the term or adopting this framework** - the latter organizations instead rely on the historical discourse specific to the organizational context, or on alternative methods, i.e. “fact finding tours”.

Among the organizations who did provide a definition, **a Southern and a Northern one generically responded that “Decolonization” is a “school of thought”.** Respondents from **2 Southern and 3 Northern organizations explicitly provided their own personal definitions, rather than one co-created or agreed upon by their organization** - at times they mentioned their sources, (like Franz Fanon and Ivan Illich) at times they referred to their own specific context and in personal terms:


“At first, I thought decolonization meant this: In the past, countries pursuing imperialism invaded weaker territories, attempting to turn them into colonies of their empire. This process gradually altered the original culture, language, and economy of the local residents, leading to their suppression and control. As a result, there arose a need for these colonized countries or regions to revive their original cultural heritage, language, diverse traditions, and even regain control of their land. However, now I find China’s One Belt, One Road initiative an interesting example. It could be considered a form of economic colonialism, as it uses debt to leverage large-scale infrastructure projects in developing countries, potentially leading to the loss of their resources and sovereignty”

Finally, but crucially, **only 1 Southern organization provided a referenced organizational response, versus 6 Northern organizations doing so.** Some of the references provided came from practical protocols or toolkits applied in specific programs or communities (for example the “Ndanifor Permaculture Eco-village”), or distributed by networks (as in “SCI Toolkits” or “Handbooks from Alliance and SCI”). Specifically referenced answers are, in alphabetical order:

“Briefly put, on one hand, breaking out colonial unequal and unjust power positions and structural and conceptual oppression, and on the other hand, reconstructing those rights, knowledge, lifestyle, and livelihood that colonialism has oppressed. Referring to the The Helsinki Term Bank for the Arts and Sciences (HTB)

“Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism; Fanon. The Wretched of the Earth and Black Skin, White Masks; Mignolo and Walsh, On Decoloniality and other articles all contribute to an understanding of the complexity of decolonisation”⁷

“Time to move on from the eurocenter perspective. Godoy, C.; Gómez, M. (2020). “Introducción” en Pensamientos nuestroamericanos. Aportes para la descolonización epistémica. Lanús: EDUNLA.⁸



Participation in decolonial discourse is affected by the need for cultural and linguistic translation of local decolonial debates. In this sense, the differential structural access to the study of languages and history, to higher education in general, to free press and freedom(s) at large, to decolonial literature (even though initiated by Southern authors), or even to funding to run “decolonising projects” generates a paradox. Northern organizations become once again a normative, standard-setting force: not only increasingly competent and confident enough to lead the decolonial debate in their own contexts, but feeling entitled to taking the lead “for” and so “upon” Southern organizations.

The case of organizations refusing to adopt a decolonial framework or avoiding to define decolonization on the ground of a more context-specific approach were exceptional in this sample. However, **even organizations who did provide definitions and references about decolonization talked in the sense of focusing their efforts in finding “practical ways to deal with it”** - rather than engaging in the debate.

While this is coherent with the “Deeds not words” original motto of Service Civil International, reprised in various fashions within and beyond the IVS movement, one of the successful practical efforts mentioned above does overlap with the co-creation and management of decolonial discourse: **the ways organizations show care in handling imagery and wording depicting the IVS experiences and their participants or, in other words, their decolonial communication strategies.**

DECOLONIAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

When it comes to the decolonial aims of international volunteering organizations in general, communication is one of the most evident red flags and most debated topics, both in terms of wording and imagery ⁶.

When asked about their consideration for colonial aspects in regards to outreach and promotion, **9 organizations did not respond (1 Q, 3 S, 5 N)**, and the remaining **42 split exactly in half** providing positive and negative answers. **The positive-negative ratio re-confirms the “Northern leadership” highlighted above; but examples provided in the positive responses finally put the spotlight on communities rather than the volunteers.**

Negative responses | Among organizations declaring that they don’t in fact consider the colonial aspect in their outreach and promotion, **3 are Questioning, 13 are Southern and 5 are Northern.** Many of the latter are either located outside, or at the periphery of the EU, and in one case the justification provided stands on the grounds of being part of an international network including Southern organizations:

“No since we are an international community with member branches in the global south”

Among center-European organization **the matter-of-fact lack of will to consider the colonial aspect** expressed by a French organization painfully stands out:

“No, we don’t want to have this colonial aspect when we promote volunteering.”

These examples show a certain “confidence” or “self-assigned entitlement not to care” that contrasts, on the other hand, with **some Southern organizations who similarly declare that they do not consider this aspect**, but either **provide examples that do show such consideration** to be in place, or **justify that they don’t do it yet for structural reasons**:

“Not yet. We have other priorities such as food self sufficiency. Help the population to develop income generating activities”

“No but we look a lot to the aspects related to poverty and wealth. The difference in the distribution of resources, especially financial ones”

Positive responses | Among organizations responding positively and, thus, considering the colonial aspect in their communication strategy, **1 is positioned as Questioning, 5 as Southern and 14 as Northern**. The Questioning organization’s answer provide insight in how **systemic inequalities addressed when considering colonial aspects echoes local ones**:

“Yes, when posting photos, avoiding white saviourism or exposing extreme poverty (but in fact it is more of a question when we promote Hungarian countryside projects)”

The ratio of Southern and Northern organizations responding positively already confirms a **higher engagement of Northern organizations in the discussion**, but additional **confirmation of their leadership role, their competence and confidence - and how they are acquired** - is in the content of their answers.

Indeed, **some Northern organizations refer to campaigns** (for example [SCI's White Savior campaign](#) [GDN: add link]) **and toolkits** (for example SCI Austria’s The power behind good intentions, see references) that are **funded by the EU**, and thus **run by European organizations and targeting European audiences**. This **can be very well-meaning on the side of the European organizations who want to take responsibility and advocate decolonial policies to their own governments, but it does have the unintended consequence of excluding non-European voices, and missing the chance of sharing knowledge, and co-creating a cohesive language and understanding to support this kind of conversations**.

The effect is evident in comparing all 5 Southern examples with half of the Northern ones, in alphabetical order:

NORTHERN

"In our external communication, we try to bring forward voices of people from various positions and backgrounds, and avoid presenting volunteers as active helpers of passive host community members. We try to advance the accessibility of our communication and respect the privacy of people in vulnerable situations. We discuss these matters with our volunteers. We should develop further our ways of evaluating our success in the actions mentioned"

"It has been discussed within the organisation and it is part of the training/info-materials volunteers get from us. We have a lot of our communications done by volunteers, so it is not always possible to curate everything very efficiently, but we try to talk with vols in communications about representation, safety issues (child protection e.g.), stereotypes and roles etc."

"Yes, because we live in a colonial society so it's really difficult to avoid clichés and stereotypical images, so we need to be careful when we promote any kind of international volunteering project, also to avoid the missionary vision"

"Yes totally, and we got stressed about it 2 years ago and tried to get rid of all white saviour images. Also we have tried to highlight South-South exchanges on our website, to counter the more traditionally colonial imagery associated with IVS, but our South-South programme is so small"

"Yes, wanting to make sure it doesn't portray a saviorism message"

"Yes, we were part of the campaign. We check on our use of pictures (white volunteers posing in a group or teaching poc kids). Language on the website. Mention our toolkits on the website"

SOUTHERN

"Showcasing popular North countries to attract more applications, highlighting their famous places and popular qualities of the country and their lifestyle"

"Since Korea is also a country that has been colonized, we talk a lot about the country's politics, culture and history"

"We try to communicate about global inequality"

"Yes, Choice of the material/ content to be shared e.g photos, newsletters, emails etc"

"yes! make clear it is an opportunity for both sides"

Similar results apply when it comes to the vision that organizations have for a “decolonised volunteering” and for “decolonial dynamics in the IVS sector”, which is the final section before the conclusion of this report.

DECOLONIAL VISIONS

What is made visible in these examples is that Northern organizations had the chance (time and access to resources, a.k.a. privilege) to engage with each other in a debate mediated by common sources: and the result is a cohesive, common language and shared understanding which can inform powerful cohesive action in their responsive contexts. On the other hand, organizations excluded from this conversation can bring about a variety of narratives, keywords and understandings: from those using their own context as a reference, to those buying into a mutual benefit narrative, and the first Southern example - either willingly exploit or unwillingly uphold the prestige reflecting the colonial hierarchy. This can be reproduced at the micro level of each volunteering activity, where Northern volunteers (still the majority) can accidentally or intentionally alienate local participants, for example, by “whitesplaining” colonial history.

Among organizations’ answers to the question about “how decolonized volunteering would look like”, almost half (21: 3 Q, 9 N, 10 S) were either null, or “No comment” or “Not clear”. Among them, more than half of the Northern organizations are, again, those operating outside of Europe, or at its peripheries. However, some Southern organizations gave the following examples, highlighting why their access is barred when it comes to developing decolonial visions:

“There is not such a thing. We are constantly in process of improvement. A more conscious volunteer would be more respectful, and value more the differences, would be more open to learnings”

“For me it is an utopical concept, because for now, as we are not known as a big movement of volunteering, we do not get support from organizations in our region, so anyway we depend on economic resources from the north”

Among the **30 organizations (2 Q, 12 S, 15 N) providing positive answers and examples there is again an imbalance in cohesiveness and articulateness in Northern and Southern answers - it is worth repeating that such positive traits are developed through Northern privileges and political power and that, if not carefully used for Southern-participated decolonial advocacy against Northern institutions, they risk reproducing the existing hierarchy, which is a legacy of colonialism.**

There is also a general misunderstanding about referring to an ideal “decolonized volunteer” rather than a vision for “decolonized volunteering”.

SOUTHERN

Open/ Virtuous / hardworking in the service of humanity

taking a position of human not a person depending on your nationality

The one who integrates/associates with the local context

It looks like a global mission to get us freed from the Israeli occupation

One who has an open mind and does not consider themselves as saviours of people of the Global South.

Open to all differences and understand the reason of each one

We would like to share with the participant To be able to understand the cultural differences that exist between countries and know how to recognize the privileges and be grateful for them, but also to actively take responsibility to allow other people who do not come from these realities (European-centric) to reach new and better levels of welfare.

Mature and practicing global citizenship as a lifestyle

Understanding that is a win-win process

Decolonized volunteering would prioritize equitable partnerships and mutual learning between volunteers and local communities, empowering local leadership and recognizing their agency in defining their own needs and strategies for development. It would foster long-term relationships and sustainability, focusing on addressing root causes of injustices and challenging systemic barriers to social justice. Ethical engagement, cultural sensitivity, and accountability would guide the volunteer’s actions, ensuring they minimize harm, respect local customs, and continuously reflect and adjust their practices based on feedback from the community.

An increased awareness of all the participants to our belief systems, our history, how we communicate and respect the differences in others’ cultures and ways to be. The feelings of guiltiness and hate would be replaced by understanding and self growth.

“Togetherness”.

NORTHERN

Make participants aware of the topic.
Sensitize the participating organization.

Volunteering focused on cooperation and mutual understanding and respect and openness to learn from each other. All parties see each other and treat each others as equals.

No more “white savior” rhetoric and mindset. Equal realistic opportunities to any volunteer anywhere to apply to volunteer wherever they want. Globally equal financial opportunities to organisations and volunteers to get support. Equal power in deciding on priorities and focus points for organisations and countries in different networks.

With experimented with our Ndanifor Innovative volunteerism scheme and we are making progress

Always under the leadership of indigenous people, serving indigenous communities.

Instead of the white saviorism, we could funnel all of their energy into cleaning up ecological disasters caused by extractivism or exploitative industries :) That is because it is becoming more and more one-sided. However, more simply it could actually be reciprocal - e.g. one from Germany to Uganda and one from Uganda to Germany. They could even stay in each others' families. I don't think it is so complicated, but the visa regime has gotten in the way.

A decolonised volunteering gathers together partners and volunteers who are aware of the global inequalities and their links with the history of colonialism, conscious about the stereotypes, oppressions or privileges related to race, gender, etc. and are eager to learn/share/exchange and work together in equality and not forgetting about their own positions in the world/society that go along with their privileges or oppressions. The work/study themes and objectives of the volunteering should reflect those values.

The volunteering co-operation would be built around the real needs and wishes of the hosting communities. The aim of it would be a joint learning experience. People would have equal chances to participate in international volunteering, and the volunteering programs would support the participants in learning about unjust power positions and privileges and breaking these down. Those who are motivated in equal learning and co-operation would be selected as volunteers, and the volunteers would get training to this before their departure. The volunteers would be interested in learning more about the history and power structures of the country they are going to. There would be no visa obstacles, and the funders of volunteering would take into account the viewpoints of the organisations of the Global South. The volunteers from the Global South would not be seen as status symbols or potential funders of the local communities. The volunteering co-operation would be organised in ecologically sustainable ways as possible.

NORTHERN

A much healthier relationship between people without thinking of what Global North countries can bring to Global South countries. The relationships would be about cooperation and not “humanitarian” kind of thoughts that North countries can have looking at South countries

Equal opportunities in a practical ways without barriers of any kind economical or political

Open to everybody, equal

Someone whose actions, thoughts and beliefs reflect an awareness of culture subjugation and works to bring light to this to redirect from it.

A volunteering financed equitably by the sending and host organizations with a common program and funding.

I think it should be a long-term activity. The focus shouldn't just be on Northern Countries helping Southern Countries in a one-way manner, but rather on the exchange of knowledge and skills, so that both volunteers and the local community can benefit and learn from each other. Just as concerns are not short-term solutions to problems, they should aim to achieve long-term sustainability, with the goal of empowering communities to continue their progress independently. More importantly, I believe that decolonization should enable communities that want to decolonize to take the lead in determining how to implement changes, rather than relying solely on volunteers. We should recognize that the community itself has its own strengths and capabilities, and that volunteers are partners in development.

The answers to **“how decolonial dynamics in the IVS sector are envisioned”** are more specific, and can be visualized as both a summary of this whole report, and as a conclusive bullet point call for action directed to all IVS participants and the European funding schemes that repeatedly came up:

1 Rebalancing participation

Example from a Northern organization:

The biggest challenge I have encountered is the lack of communication between different regions of the world. It feels that in the North we suffer from a lot of colonial mindsets even though we oppose colonialism. Examples of this could be Eurocentrism in how networks are managed and operated. Also this shows in expecting partners from the Global South to represent the oppressed victim but not the expert or just a normal person. Often it also seems difficult to get partners from the Global South to actively participate and promote their agendas, and instead organisations in the Global North are talking on issues and solutions related to Southern partners. Finding ways to balance the participation would be important.

2 Radical redistribution & Open borders

Example from a Northern organization:

“Funding would have to be more radically re-distributed, but I also cannot quite imagine how that would work. Borders would definitely have to be more open. I can imagine that”

3 Communities at the center

Example from a Southern organization:

“In IVS sector, a decolonial shift would involve reimagining power dynamics, and embracing genuine partnerships with local communities. It would prioritize the voices, agency, and leadership of local communities, while fostering mutual learning, cultural exchange, and long-term collaborations that challenge colonial legacies and promote equitable and sustainable development”

4 Redistribution & Independence from EU funding

Example from a Questioning organization:

“the most important is the re-distribution of EU money in a way more extensive scale. E.g. being able to host in E+ KAI anyone from all over the world.

Also VERY important to find the financial sources in other regions too to be able to match the funds from the EU. E.g. They are also able to finance global meetings’ travel, food, accommodation, programme costs without any EU funds”

5 Raising awareness (within IVS and at the institutional & structural level)

Example from a Northern organization:

First, we have all to be aware of the mechanisms of domination related to the colonial history and decolonize the minds, practices, prejudices in order to reach equal relations. It goes through trainings, exchanges that will lead to the co-construction of values, projects and new ways of collaboration for the future with a real reciprocity (in terms of exchanges but not only). The workers of the sector have to be aware but also the volunteers.

Example from a Southern organization:

It takes not only the IVS movement, but also other stakeholders like government agencies and development corporations to realize the desired change.

6 Solidarity

Example from a Questioning organization:

A solidarity program in all the aspects, economic, political and programmatic.

Conclusion

We started asking:

Is IVS supporting a decolonised approach or reproducing neo-colonial relationships between the Global South and the Global North? And is the North-South subdivision of the world useful and appropriate to reflect, talk about, and act for change?

Two organizations respectively from the South and from the North, provided very comprehensive answers to the final question on vision, they are the “Final thoughts” this reports is concluded upon:

“We ought to start somewhere, be it in discussions and come to implement change in IVS. We are still playing the tune of our colonisers till today. Where does our funds come from and who begins the process of change in IVS? Its a pity that organisations in the Global South are limited to resources or access to actually begin the process of decolonising dynamics in the IVS sector. Funding for our projects must not come with colonial mentality but allow dialogue to be taking place especially in IVS sector.”

“The volunteering co-operation would be built around the real needs and wishes of the hosting communities. The aim of it would be a joint learning experience. People would have equal chances to participate in international volunteering, and the volunteering programs would support the participants in learning about unjust power positions and privileges and breaking these down. Those who are motivated in equal learning and co-operation would be selected as volunteers, and the volunteers would get training to this before their departure. The volunteers would be interested in learning more about the history and power structures of the country they are going to. There would be no visa obstacles, and the funders of volunteering would take into account the viewpoints of the organisations of the Global South. The volunteers from the Global South would not be seen as status symbols or potential funders of the local communities. The volunteering co-operation would be organised as ecologically sustainable ways as possible.”

References

This list of references includes the material referred to by responding organizations, and additional references cited in this report.

1. Some of the networks discussed here have successfully attracted participation from diverse regions through a “branching in” strategy, where existing NGOs apply to join the network, rather than pursuing an expansionist “branching out” approach (Venanzi 2023, Contemporary Transnational Experiences of a Century-old International Voluntary Service Network (IVSN), PhD diss., The Chinese University of Hong Kong—available upon request to the author to respect research participants’ consent). Significant and innovative efforts have also been made to relocate international secretariats across the North/South divide or establish multiple regional offices simultaneously (SCI 2019, Words about Deeds: 100 Years of International Voluntary Service for Peace, edited by Chantal Doran, Heinz Gabathuler, and Philippe Rodriguez, Service Civil International 1920-2020, SCIIA - Service Civil International - International Archives, Bibliothèque de la ville, La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland).
2. Note that while SCI, NVDA and ICYE are networks of International Voluntary Service (IVS) organizations (further details in the Appendix), CCIVS is an umbrella organization. For more details on this classification, see Sherrard, John Stringham, Simona Costanzo Sow, and Amanda Moore McBride. “The forms and structure of international voluntary service.” *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 17, no. 2 (2006): 156-173
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6. SCI Austria toolkit, “The power behind good intentions” (last version from October 2021)
7. Godoy, C.; Gómez, M. (2020). “Introducción” en *Pensamientos nuestroamericanos. Aportes para la descolonización epistémica*. Lanús: EDUNLA. http://www.unla.edu.ar/documentos/centros/manuel_ugarte/pensamientos_nuestroamericanos.pdf
8. Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism; Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth and Black Skin, White Masks*; Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality and other articles*. They all contribute to an understanding of the complexity of decolonisation.

Appendix

Responding organizations' list

	Organisation	Country	S/N/Q Category
1	Giving For Earth	Myanmar	Earth
2	Egyesek Youth Association	Hungary	Neither
3	SJ Vietnam	Vietnam	Neither
4	CSM e ICYE Morocco	Morocco	Neither
5	ICYE Bolivia	Bolivia	Neither
6	ICJA Freiwilligenaustausch weltweit	Germany	The Global North
7	SCI Switzerland	Switzerland	The Global North
8	Kansainvälinen vapaaehtoistyö ry - KVT Finland	Finland	The Global North
9	ICYE Taiwan	Taiwan	The Global North
10	Pi Youth Association (PIYA)	Turkey	The Global North
11	Service Volontaire International - (SVI)	Belgium	The Global North
12	African Way	Portugal	The Global North
13	Volunteer Action for Peace	United Kingdom	The Global North
14	ICYE International Office	Germany	The Global North
15	COCAT	Spain	The Global North
16	SCI Catalunya	Spain	The Global North
17	SCI Belgium	Belgium	The Global North
18	AUS ICYE Iceland	Iceland	The Global North
19	Maailmanvaihto - ICYE Finland	Finland	The Global North
20	INEX-SDA	Czech Republic	The Global North
21	Association Nationale Etudes et Chantiers	France	The Global North
22	IPDJ	Portugal	The Global North
23	IBO Italia	Italy	The Global North
24	SCI LTV USA	USA	The Global North
25	United Planet	USA	The Global North
26	Stowarzyszenie Jeden Świat SCI Poland	Poland	The Global North
27	SCI France	France	The Global North
28	IAL - SCI Sweden	Sweden	The Global North

	Organisation	Country	S/N/Q Category
29	VolTra	Hong Kong	The Global North
30	ASTOVOT	Togo	The Global South
31	Youth Development Association	Palestine	The Global South
32	VASE/ ICYE Ecuador	Ecuador	The Global South
33	ICYE SOUTH KOREA	South Korea	The Global South
34	Zajel Youth Exchange Program	Palestine	The Global South
35	South Africa Volunteer Work Camp Association	South Africa	The Global South
36	Sijjuve/ ICYE México	Mexico	The Global South
37	Active YOUTH society	Nepal	The Global South
38	Voluntary Workcamps Association of Ghana	Ghana	The Global South
39	Uganda Pioneers Association	Uganda	The Global South
40	Peace4Dalits Foundation Nepal	Nepal	The Global South
41	Fundacion SES/ ICYE Argentina	Argentina	The Global South
42	Fundacion Chiriboga	Ecuador	The Global South
43	ICYE Colombia	Colombia	The Global South
44	Global Initiative for Exchange and Development Inc./ ICYE Philippines.	Philippines	The Global South
45	United Planet/ ICYE Tanzania	Tanzania	The Global South
46	AJUDE - Associacao Juvenil Para o Desenvolvimento do Voluntariado em Mocambique	Mozambique	The Global South
47	VIVOL/ ICYE Peru	Peru	The Global South
48	Volunteers Initiative Nepal	Nepal	The Global South
49	DaLaa, international volunteers for social development	Thailand	The Global South
50	ICYE Brazil	Brazil	The Global South
51	Inter Cultural Dialogue & Exchange India	India	The Global South

International IVS networks list (alphabetical)

Alliance	Alliance of European Voluntary Service Organisations
CCIVS	Coordinating Committee of International Voluntary Service
EAVS	Eastern Africa Voluntary Service Development Network
ICYE	International Cultural Youth Exchange
NAVO	Network of African Voluntary Organisations
NVDA	Network of Voluntary Development in Asia
SAWC	South African Work Cooperation
SCI	Service Civil International

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