

International Volunteering: #1 What It Is and How to Apply¹

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Introduction

This first *EDIS* publication in the *International Volunteering* series offers valuable insights and recommendations on volunteerism and its best practices in international settings. It provides guidance on identifying and applying to various opportunities that align with the target audience's interests and goals.

This article explores the critical role of international volunteering. It discusses basic and important definitions and identifies some volunteer opportunities and the guidelines for applying to them. This publication highlights the significance of applying for volunteering opportunities to improve resilience and community empowerment (United Nations Volunteers, 2018). The primary target audience for this article is Extension professionals and anyone interested in contributing to the well-being of others through international volunteering opportunities.

International Volunteering: Definition and Importance

International volunteering refers to the act of offering one's time, skills, and services in a foreign country, typically through a nonprofit organization or as part of an individually arranged effort (Lough & Tiessen, 2018; Sherraden et al., 2008). It is a form of purposeful activity where individuals not only support local initiatives but also develop or enhance their own abilities in the process (Dempsey-Brench & Shantz, 2022). While often rooted in a sense of altruism, volunteering generates tangible benefits both for the communities served and the individuals who serve them (D'Archangelo, 2009).

This kind of engagement contributes significantly to the social system, offering both economic and practical values (Goldsmith, 2010; Tsai et al., 2024). Volunteers may engage in a range of activities — from mentoring and consulting to serving on advisory boards — all of which provide opportunities to better understand social issues, interact with those working to address them, and contribute to organizations aligned with their values (Alboher, 2018). These engagements can also create

pathways to connect with key decision makers in sectors aligned with a volunteer's personal or professional interests (Johnston, 2022).

Historically, international volunteering has been viewed as dominated by Western influences. It has increasingly been understood through a more global lens, with volunteers now being both hosted and sent by countries across the world (Polus et al., 2023).

The importance of international volunteering lies in its capacity to advance global community development and promote knowledge and innovation. Volunteers help address local needs, offering different perspectives that foster innovative solutions and sustainable practices (Terry et al., 2011). Through immersive service experiences, volunteering abroad can deepen appreciation for different traditions and social norms, which in turn can cultivate mutual respect and understanding (Grönlund et al., 2011).

On a broader scale, international volunteering strengthens community resilience and supports social transformation. Volunteers contribute to these outcomes not only through direct service but also through activities such as strategic advising and mentoring, which help build local capacity (Lough, 2014; Lough & Tiessen, 2018). In doing so, international volunteering becomes a powerful avenue for both individual growth and collective progress.

Available Opportunities

Where does one find international volunteering opportunities? To have a fulfilling experience, look for organizations that offer volunteer programs that meet your expectations, are well-organized, and have a dedicated team to manage and coordinate activities. This positively affects the volunteers and the issues they aim to address (Alboher, 2018).

Many international volunteer opportunities are available; however, sometimes it is difficult to find a program that aligns with your interests, abilities, knowledge, or available time. One suggestion is to attend an event or conference of interest, in which people who attend usually participate in

or work for a volunteer program. Table 1 provides a list of international volunteer opportunities with a short description of each program and sources where you can find more information.

Table 1 presents an overview of organizations and platforms that offer volunteer, internship, and experiential learning opportunities abroad. It summarizes each organization's mission and services, providing a useful reference for individuals seeking international engagement experiences.

How to Use This Information

The information in this publication can guide potential volunteers to apply to international programs that effectively address community needs and align with professional skills and goals. For Extension professionals working in agriculture, natural resources, health, education, or youth development, international volunteering presents a powerful opportunity to contribute to global development while enhancing their own practice.

For example, an Extension agent working in agriculture could partner with organizations such as ECHO or WWOOF to teach sustainable farming practices in low- and middle-income countries. These opportunities allow professionals to apply their expertise in areas such as regenerative agriculture, soil management, and integrated pest control. The insights gained from such experience — success stories, challenges, and community engagement strategies — can be translated into Extension program curricula, making the content more relevant, globally informed, and locally impactful.

Likewise, environmental science professionals might volunteer with organizations found through platforms such as Volunteer World, Volunteer Forever, or Go Overseas, where they could support conservation efforts, study local ecosystems, or assist communities dealing with pollution. These experiences broaden one's understanding of environmental challenges in different contexts and provide rich case studies and real-world examples to inform domestic outreach programs and community education efforts.

Volunteers in other disciplines — such as education, youth development, or health — can also find opportunities that align with their passions. Teaching abroad, engaging in youth mentorship programs, or supporting health promotion campaigns through organizations such as the Peace Corps not only contributes to host communities but also builds cross-cultural competence, leadership, and adaptability.

Integrating lessons from these experiences into local Extension work can enhance programming in the following ways.

- **Community awareness:** Exposure to different customs and worldviews sharpens your ability to connect with different audiences at home.
- **Global case studies:** Real-life examples from international settings can enrich educational content and encourage global citizenship.
- **Innovative solutions:** Practical strategies learned abroad — such as community-driven planning, low-cost technologies, or participatory education methods — can be adapted to meet similar challenges in local communities.
- **Professional growth:** Skills developed through international services, such as systems thinking and resilience, strengthen your leadership and program delivery capacity.

Tips before You Apply

Before applying for international volunteer opportunities, it is essential to consider how a program aligns with your professional interests, skills, and availability. Begin by exploring organizations and platforms such as Peace Corps, WWOOF, Volunteer Match, or Volunteer Forever, which offer various placements across fields such as agriculture, environmental conservation, education, and health. These platforms allow you to search by location, area of interest, or project type, helping you find opportunities that are both fulfilling and relevant to your career.

Once you identify potential programs, take time to research their goals, structure, and expectations. Carefully review the program's eligibility requirements, timelines, and application materials. Most programs require an updated resume or CV, recommendation letters, and completion of a formal application process. Some may also require medical clearance to ensure you can perform certain tasks, especially if the volunteer work is physically demanding or located in remote settings. Preparing these materials early can reduce stress and allow you to submit a stronger application.

It is also helpful to connect with current or former volunteers from your programs of interest. Their insights and experiences can offer a more realistic understanding of the work, living conditions, and community engagement required. Hearing about their experiences may also help you assess whether a specific opportunity is the right fit. These conversations can serve as informal mentoring and support your preparation by highlighting the personal and professional growth that can result from international service.

Things to Know before Applying

Understanding the broader context of international volunteer work is critical to ensuring a successful experience. The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) affirms the value of volunteerism, especially when it serves charitable or public purposes through nonprofit organizations (U.S. Department of Labor, 2025). This legal framework supports your ability to volunteer without compensation while still being protected under federal guidelines.

Before departure, take time to learn about the social norms, traditions, and expectations of the community where you will be volunteering. Familiarity with local customs not only demonstrates respect but also helps you integrate more effectively into the host community. Awareness of those conditions improves communication, reduces misunderstandings, and enhances your ability to contribute meaningfully.

Volunteering abroad is a deeply enriching experience, but it also comes with challenges. Being open-minded, adaptable, and willing to learn from others will serve you well. International assignments often require navigating unfamiliar systems, limited resources, or language barriers. Approaching these situations with humility and a willingness to listen will deepen your impact and personal growth.

By preparing thoughtfully and engaging with intention, Extension professionals can build meaningful partnerships with international communities, apply their expertise in transformative ways, and return home with valuable insights to enhance their local work.

Conclusions

International volunteering offers a meaningful way for Extension professionals to contribute their expertise to global communities while enriching their own personal and professional experiences. By engaging in service abroad, volunteers can support community-driven initiatives, exchange knowledge, and foster innovation. These experiences not only strengthen community resilience but also provide valuable insights that can be integrated into domestic Extension programming. In addition to these impacts, international volunteering enhances cultural awareness and fosters intercultural communication and collaboration.

This publication has outlined what international volunteering entails, why it is important, and how professionals can find and apply to opportunities that align with their skills, interests, and goals. From agriculture and environmental conservation to education and health, there is a wide range of programs available through trusted organizations and platforms.

By preparing carefully, learning about host communities, and approaching service with humility, volunteers can maximize their impact and bring back experiences that inform and elevate their work at home. As global challenges become increasingly interconnected, international volunteering serves as a powerful tool for professional development and social change.

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Tables

Table 1. Overview of international volunteer and internship opportunities.

Organization	Description	Source
Peace Corps	A U.S. government agency that promotes short- and long-term volunteer work in several areas worldwide, supporting communities abroad and collaborating with different partnerships.	https://www.peacecorps.gov/
ECHO	An organization that provides tools such as technical notes and agricultural production advice to communities abroad for best agricultural practices. It has volunteer and internship programs promoting hope and hunger solutions through agriculture.	https://echonet.org/
Volunteer Match	An organization that helps people to find volunteer opportunities in various areas and search for them based on location.	https://www.volunteermatch.org/
Volunteer Forever	An online platform that helps people find volunteerism, internships, and teaching opportunities abroad.	https://www.volunteerforever.com/
WWOOF (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms)	An organization that helps volunteers find sustainability and regenerative farming opportunities.	https://www.woof.net/
Go Overseas	An online platform that allows people to find varied study, volunteer, teaching, internship, and other opportunities worldwide.	https://www.gooverseas.com/
Volunteer World	An online platform that helps users to find and compare different international volunteer programs.	https://www.volunteerworld.com/en

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