

Research Paper

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What Volunteers Do: Toward a Task-Centered Framework for Recognizing Informal Volunteering

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Abstract

Informal volunteering remains underrecognized in both research and public discourse, partly due to two interconnected issues: an analytical focus on who volunteers and what they gain from volunteering, and persistent measurement challenges that make it difficult for respondents and researchers to define and identify informal volunteering. Both issues originate from frameworks of volunteering developed in the context of formal volunteering and the assessment of informal volunteering through the conceptual lens of formal volunteering, emphasizing individual benefits and organizational affiliation. This article argues for a shift in analytical attention from a volunteer-centered framework to a task-centered framework that focuses on what volunteers do and accomplish through volunteering. Such a task-centered framework contributes to volunteering literature by including recipients of volunteering, and by providing a framework to approach informal volunteering on equal terms with formal volunteering.

Introduction

Volunteering research has long struggled to recognize informal volunteering (Carson, 1999). Much of the early literature defined volunteering narrowly, including only activities carried out through formal organizations (Salamon & Anheier, 2004; Wilson, 2000). Since then, scholars have acknowledged that volunteering is a broader phenomenon that also encompasses activities taking place outside formal institutions, thereby recognizing the importance of informal volunteering (Dean, 2022; Han et al., 2023; Martinez et al., 2011). Despite this, informal volunteering continues to hold a lower status in the volunteering literature, which still tends to prioritize formal volunteering (Dean, 2022). This persistent bias toward formal volunteering disproportionately undervalues the contributions of women and minority groups to civil society, as they are more likely to engage in informal volunteering (Martinez et al., 2011).

The underrecognition of informal volunteering stems partly from two interconnected issues. First, there is an analytical focus on who volunteers and what they gain from volunteering (e.g., Ahn et al., 2011; Appau & Awaworyi Churchill, 2019), entailing that the value of volunteering is typically ascribed from the perspective of the volunteer. In this framework, formal volunteering tends to “overperform” compared to informal volunteering in measures of volunteers’ happiness and health (e.g., Ackermann, 2019; Ang & Malhotra, 2024). However, this overlooks the recipients of volunteering, who remain underrepresented in the literature. Therefore, the value of volunteering from the recipients’ perspective is rarely included (Casiday et al., 2008; Grönlund & Falk, 2019; Wilson, 2012). This is particularly problematic for informal volunteering, which in many cases is oriented toward the needs of recipients, for example, when helping a neighbor with a specific task, making a volunteer-centered framework less suitable. Second, surveys consistently underestimate the prevalence of informal volunteering because respondents often fail to recognize their own actions as volunteering unless these occur through formal organizations (Einolf et al., 2016). Although several methodological improvements have been introduced to help respondents identify informal volunteering, such as including examples and probes in survey instruments (Lim & Laurence, 2015; Manatschal & Freitag, 2014), these efforts have had limited success. This is likely because the underlying framework provides a clearer conceptualization of formal volunteering, whereas informal volunteering is largely defined as a residual category of volunteering (Dean, 2022). As a result, informal volunteering remains difficult to capture empirically through survey measures.

This article argues for a shift in the analytical approach from a volunteer-centered framework to a task-centered framework, thus focusing on what volunteers do and accomplish, rather than on who volunteers are or what they gain. This shift provides a more equitable framework for understanding both formal and informal volunteering. Drawing on Tilly’s (2008) concept of *repertoires of action*, this approach views volunteering through the lens of tasks and needs that are handled in civil society, such as care, education, or community safety, and examines how these tasks are carried out across both formal and informal organizational settings. By focusing

on the tasks being addressed, the framework shows that different forms of volunteering are suited to addressing different kinds of needs: formal volunteering may be particularly well suited to sustaining long-term initiatives, whereas informal volunteering may excel in meeting urgent or relational needs that emerge within everyday networks.

The proposed task-centered framework contributes to volunteering research by addressing the systematic underrecognition of informal volunteering (Dean, 2022; Martinez et al., 2011). First, by redirecting attention from the volunteers themselves to the tasks being performed, the framework incorporates the *demand side* of volunteering, that is, the recipients and the social needs being addressed, which remain largely underexplored in a literature that predominantly focuses on the *supply side* and individual entry into formal volunteering (Eimhjellen, 2023; Hustinx et al., 2022; Southby et al., 2019). Second, a task-centered framework helps to resolve the empirical ambiguity that currently surrounds the distinction between formal and informal volunteering, where empirical distinctions often are linked simultaneously to organizational affiliation and differences in activities carried out (Ang & Malhotra, 2024; Fiorillo & Nappo, 2014; Helms & McKenzie, 2014). Thus, it provides a shared unit of analysis, tasks, that allows for more consistent and meaningful comparison across forms of volunteering. In doing so, the framework reframes informal volunteering not as a residual category of volunteering, but as an equally legitimate form of volunteering, defined on the same analytical basis as formal volunteering by reference to the tasks performed. Third, rather than evaluating volunteering primarily in terms of what volunteers gain from their participation, this framework centers on the social tasks that volunteering fulfills. This enables a more equitable comparison between formal and informal volunteering, recognizing that each form of volunteering is better suited to address different kinds of needs (Drabek & McEntire, 2002). Consequently, value lies in the tasks being solved and the outcomes achieved, not just in the capital acquired by volunteers.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Drawing on a comprehensive review of studies comparing formal and informal volunteering based on survey data, I first outline the two issues identified above and demonstrate how they each stem from an underlying framework that disproportionately favors formal volunteering. Next, I introduce a task-centered framework and discuss its implications and suggest directions for future research aimed at further developing and applying it.

State of the art

The literature review draws on studies comparing formal and informal volunteering using survey data, as these studies explicitly juxtapose the two forms of volunteering. The limitations of this selection are discussed in the concluding section. A full overview of the studies included is available in Table A1 (Online Appendix).

The limits of focusing on the volunteer

Articles that compare formal and informal volunteering overwhelmingly focus on the characteristics of volunteers. Many studies have set out to examine who engages in formal versus informal volunteering (e.g., Ackermann, 2019; Ahn et al., 2011; Qvist, 2024) and consistently find differences between the two (Shandra, 2017; Wang et al., 2017). In general, individuals who participate in formal volunteering tend to possess greater social and economic resources, while minority groups are more likely to engage in informal

volunteering (Martinez et al., 2011). Some studies suggest that informal volunteering involves fewer barriers and lower entry costs than formal volunteering (Russell et al., 2020). However, this line of reasoning remains centered on the volunteer and treats volunteering as a supply-side phenomenon, focusing on the motivations and capacities of the volunteer. Alternatively, further insight can be gained by considering the *demand side*: individuals with fewer resources may be more likely to volunteer informally because the demand for mutual help and support is greater within their social networks (Carlsen & Toubøl, 2024). On the contrary, more resourceful individuals may engage in formal volunteering as a recreational activity (Stukas et al., 2014).

Another manifestation of the volunteer-centered focus is the large body of research examining what volunteers gain from volunteering or what outcomes and characteristics are associated with formal and informal volunteering, respectively (Appau & Awaworyi Churchill, 2019; Greenspan & Walk, 2024; Lee & Brudney, 2012; Li & Ferraro, 2005; Wang et al., 2017). The rationale behind such studies is often similar: since more is known about formal volunteering, there is a need to test whether existing findings also apply to informal volunteering. Thus, given the growing recognition that volunteering should not be narrowly defined as an activity conducted through formal institutions, the studies argue for the inclusion of informal volunteering to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of volunteer behavior (Clerkin & Fotheringham, 2017; Han et al., 2023; van Tienen et al., 2011). Consequently, many studies attempt to determine whether the relationships established in the formal volunteering literature extend to informal volunteering as well (Manatschal & Freitag, 2014; Wang et al., 2017):

Informal volunteering may provide some of the same benefits as formal volunteering, especially with regard to meaningful social interaction, role fulfilment and a sense of belonging and community; furthermore, it may have fewer barriers to initiate and sustain than formal volunteering. However, because it also differs from formal volunteering in several ways [...], an examination of whether informal volunteering leads to improved well being separate from, or in addition to, the activities carried out in formal volunteer settings is needed. (Russell et al., 2020)

However, this approach positions informal volunteering as a secondary form of volunteering, since the core question becomes: How does informal volunteering compare to what we already know about formal volunteering? In effect, the same research questions that have guided earlier studies of formal volunteering are simply extended to include informal volunteering (Ang & Malhotra, 2024). Consequently, when analyses show that informal volunteering yields fewer individual benefits, it often appears meaningful to recommend that individuals engage in formal volunteering instead:

Further, we show that volunteering can improve quality of life through personal mastery, but this is limited to regular volunteering in formal settings. What this means is that a sustained and structured environment may be necessary for older adults to fully benefit from completing tasks related to volunteering. (Ang & Malhotra, 2024)

Thereby, many studies conclude by discussing the potential recruitment of informal volunteers into formal volunteering (Ahn et al., 2011; Lee & Brudney, 2012; Shandra, 2017). This is a natural line of reasoning when the analytical focus remains on the volunteer: if formal volunteering offers greater individual benefits, why not

encourage volunteers to choose the form of volunteering from which they gain the most? However, this reasoning does little to advance recognition of informal volunteering. Instead, it implicitly accepts that for volunteers to receive proper acknowledgment, they must transition into formal volunteering, thereby reinforcing rather than challenging the hierarchy between the two forms.

The broader issue with the volunteer-centered focus is that it rests on frameworks of human and social capital, which are well-suited to understanding formal volunteering but less applicable to informal volunteering. Such frameworks make sense for activities typically organized through formal institutions, such as scheduled shifts at a community café or charity event, where participation can be linked to individual skill development, social connections, or personal fulfillment (Stukas et al., 2014; Tse, 2020), although some studies suggest that the personal benefits associated with formal volunteering may be overstated or unevenly distributed (e.g., De Wit et al., 2015; Mohan, 2024; Paine et al., 2013). In contrast, the aim of much informal volunteering may not be centered on the volunteer but on the recipient. If comparisons between formal and informal volunteering rely primarily on the perspective of the volunteer, formal volunteering will always appear to be more valuable. However, this systematically undervalues informal volunteering and obscures the purpose that it fulfills.

Conceptual and measurement challenges in capturing informal volunteering

Respondents often have difficulty recognizing informal volunteering (Einolf et al., 2016), largely because formal volunteering is more readily identifiable as volunteering. Consequently, studies tend to measure formal volunteering as any unpaid work performed for an association or organization (Ackermann, 2019; Choi et al., 2007; Fiorillo & Nappo, 2015; Greenspan & Walk, 2024; Jegermalm & Grassman, 2011; Russell et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2017). Measures of formal volunteering thereby rely on an organizational reference point and typically ask respondents to recall activities conducted within volunteer organizations, which makes it easier for respondents to remember and report their volunteering engagement (Cnaan et al., 2011). Further, formal volunteering is typically measured in broad terms, often through a general question about whether respondents have volunteered through an organization, which allows them to interpret and report their own activities within that context. The main variation across studies lies in additional cues: some include examples of different fields of volunteering (Henriksen et al., 2008), others mention specific types of organizations (Helms & McKenzie, 2014), and some list examples of volunteering activities (Ang & Malhotra, 2024).

Whereas measures of formal volunteering rely on respondents recalling their affiliation with an organization, measures of informal volunteering typically prompt respondents to remember specific helping activities, often related to care (e.g., Liang et al., 2023; Lim & Laurence, 2015). Accordingly, informal volunteering is more commonly measured through detailed lists of activities, such as helping, caregiving, or providing assistance, rather than through organizational membership. There is considerably more variation in how informal volunteering is measured, as activities range from neighborhood maintenance or repairs (Piatak et al., 2018; Shandra, 2017), to caring for older adults (Mitani, 2014), to providing more intimate forms of personal care (Strauss, 2019). Some studies include helping relatives as part of informal volunteering (Hank & Stuck, 2008; Henriksen et al., 2008; Liang et al., 2023), while others explicitly exclude assistance to family members (Greenspan

& Walk, 2024; Russell et al., 2020). In some cases, regularity of engagement is emphasized as a defining criterion (Ahn et al., 2011). A few studies measure informal volunteering solely on the basis of organizational context (Ackermann, 2019; Ahn et al., 2011), though these remain exceptions. Others combine references to organizational affiliation with lists of specific activities (Plagnol & Huppert, 2010; Russell et al., 2020), yet the emphasis across most studies remains on the activities themselves:

I will ask you a number of questions with regard to people providing help to others, particularly help with practical household things, looking after children, shopping, lending someone something, giving advice or talking with someone who needs cheering up? (van Tienen et al., 2011)

Thus, there is far greater consensus regarding how formal volunteering is measured. However, the core of the issue lies not in measurement itself but in an underlying conceptual ambiguity surrounding informal volunteering, as the literature has a clearer understanding of what constitutes formal volunteering. Indeed, theoretical definitions of formal volunteering are largely consistent across studies, typically defined as an unpaid activity carried out through an organization or institutional affiliation (e.g., Reed & Selbee, 2000; Russell et al., 2020; Statistics Canada, 1987; Qvist, 2024).

In contrast, definitions of informal volunteering vary more, though most fall into one of two main categories: a broad definition, which frames informal volunteering as any voluntary activity occurring outside of organizations (Ackermann, 2019; Appau & Awaworyi Churchill, 2019; Perpék, 2012; Russell et al., 2020), and a narrower definition, which emphasizes informal helping or caregiving directed toward individuals beyond one's household or close circle of friends (e.g., Helms & McKenzie, 2014; Strauss, 2019). However, defining informal volunteering in a consistent way remains challenging, particularly when distinguishing it from other forms of prosocial behavior (Carson, 1999; Clerkin & Fotheringham, 2017; Lawton et al., 2021). One key area of disagreement concerns whether to include helping activities that occur within the household (Choi et al., 2007; Clerkin & Fotheringham, 2017). A common approach is to conceptualize informal volunteering as *informal helping or care provided directly to others*, typically outside an organizational setting (Helms & McKenzie, 2014; Henriksen et al., 2008; Liang et al., 2023; Lim & Laurence, 2015; Mergenthaler, 2015; Reed & Selbee, 2000; Strauss, 2019; Taniguchi, 2012; Qvist, 2024):

While formal volunteering occurs in structured organizational settings and tends to be formalized and planned (Wilson & Musick, 1997), informal volunteering captures “small helping behaviours outside of organizations for people outside the household” (Ramaekers et al., 2021:1). Such behaviors are a form of social support (Einolf et al., 2016) and can include childcare for friends, grocery shopping for neighbors, supporting adults outside the family or mowing the lawn for the elderly (Jegermalm & Grassman, 2011; Wang et al., 2017). (Greenspan & Walk, 2024)

In sum, the literature exhibits far greater agreement on the definition of formal volunteering, which is consistently understood with reference to organizational membership. In contrast, informal volunteering is either defined as encompassing everything that is *not* formal volunteering, making it difficult to measure empirically, or as limited to informal caregiving taking place directly between individuals, thereby failing to capture the full

range of activities that can occur through informal volunteering, such as coordinating mutual aid through online platforms, or participating in community initiatives outside formal organizations. This illustrates how informal volunteering continues to function as a residual category, defined primarily by its difference from formal volunteering (Dean, 2022). Simply put, it is relatively straightforward to define a phenomenon based on organizational membership or affiliation, but much more difficult to define one by the absence of such structures while keeping the concept sufficiently precise to remain meaningful and measurable.

A task-centered framework

To move beyond the continued underrecognition of informal volunteering, I propose a task-centered framework that includes the recipients of volunteering, provides a shared unit of analysis across formal and informal volunteering through a focus on tasks, and enables value to be ascribed with reference to the needs that are met through volunteering activities.

Repertoire of volunteering tasks

A task-centered framework builds on Tilly's (2008) concept of *repertoires of action*, understood as the range of actions available to people seeking to achieve particular goals, such as, different forms of protest like sit-ins, demonstrations, or petitions. The concept of action repertoire is usually applied in the context of political struggles to conceptualize different means or activities that can be used to foster change or accomplish a political goal. Applied to volunteering, this idea can be adapted to describe a *repertoire of volunteering tasks*, that is, the various activities through which individuals can contribute to meeting social needs through volunteering. However, the logic shifts slightly in this context: rather than focusing on the actions available to individuals to reach a certain political goal or contest a political order, it is useful to think in terms of a *repertoire of needs* to be addressed within civil society through volunteering. From this perspective, people volunteer because they identify needs that require attention, whether that involves contributing to education, alleviating loneliness, supporting someone in need, or wanting themselves to stay active. These needs can be met through a range of volunteering tasks, such as weekly shifts at a social café or offering to run errands for a neighbor or a family member. The repertoire of volunteering tasks thus spans a wide range of areas such as education, recreation, culture, and sports, resembling the international classification of non-profit organizations (Salamon & Anheier, 1996). The starting point in this framework is the need itself, something that needs to be addressed, and any volunteering action undertaken to address such needs is part of a broader repertoire of volunteering tasks.

A framework centered on needs and tasks is well established in the context of crises and disasters, where disruption generates new needs or temporarily shuts down the usual structures that deal with existing needs (Dynes, 1970; Malinen et al., 2025; Twigg & Mosel, 2017). Examples include repairing damaged infrastructure, providing temporary housing to displaced individuals, or sharing information if common channels of communication are shut down. In such situations, it is widely recognized that people organize in civil society, formally and even more often, informally, to address emerging needs that existing institutions can no longer handle (Whittaker et al., 2015). Similarly, the literature on social support illustrates an increased need for social support following crises, and the importance of receiving support for affected individuals

(Labrague, 2021; McGuire et al., 2018; Sasaki et al., 2019). What unites the literatures on emergent tasks and social support during crises is their analytical focus on the needs of those who receive help and the tasks that arise in response to a disruption. Extending this perspective to non-crisis contexts broadens the analytical scope of volunteering research beyond the volunteer to also include recipients and the tasks being fulfilled. The proposed framework thus argues that the perspective of recipients is as important outside of as well as within a crisis.

Consequently, a task-centered framework centers on the *tasks* of volunteering and what volunteers seek to accomplish through their engagement. Although the framework includes recipients of volunteering, the needs that are being addressed through the repertoire of volunteering tasks may also relate to the volunteer. A person can choose to volunteer because they experience a need to contribute to society, to do something meaningful or to connect with other people, which is shown repeatedly in research on volunteers' motivation (e.g., Stukas et al., 2014; Tse, 2020). The framework simply posits that the needs being addressed through volunteering can relate to both the volunteer and the recipient, and that both are equally important.

The role of organizational setting in accomplishing volunteering tasks

A task-centered approach does not eliminate or replace the distinction between formal and informal volunteering. On the contrary, by using *volunteering tasks* as a shared analytical unit, formally and informally organized volunteering can be understood as different strategies for meeting different needs. In this way, formal and informal volunteering represent distinct yet complementary approaches to addressing social needs. Focusing on tasks therefore allows different forms of volunteering to be analyzed through a shared analytical lens while highlighting the circumstances under which informal volunteering plays an important role.

Three characteristics of tasks are particularly relevant for understanding how volunteering activities are organized: the duration of the need, the proximity between volunteer and recipient, and the orientation of the task.

First, the *duration and urgency of the need* influence how volunteering activities emerge and are organized. Some needs arise suddenly and require immediate responses, such as during crises or disasters. In such situations, volunteering often takes place through flexible and rapidly mobilized forms of coordination, including informal initiatives and community responses (Drabek & McEntire, 2002; Malinen et al., 2025; Twigg & Mosel, 2017). For example, after natural disasters or emergencies, residents frequently organize ad hoc efforts to distribute supplies or check on vulnerable neighbors before formal organizations are able to mobilize. Over time, if these needs persist, such initiatives may become formalized into structured programs (Drabek & McEntire, 2002). Research on episodic volunteering similarly highlights how volunteers may return to participate in short-term activities again and again, particularly when they have prior volunteering experience (Rey-Garcia et al., 2024). This suggests that episodic engagement may be shaped by the emergence of particular tasks rather than by continuous organizational commitment. Furthermore, a study within the same organization shows that episodic and regular volunteers are often allocated different types of tasks, implying that episodic forms of engagement may be particularly suited to certain activities (Hustinx et al., 2008). A task-centered perspective therefore highlights how the sometimes short-term

character of informal volunteering reflects the temporal nature of the needs being addressed rather than a limitation of the activity itself.

Second, the *proximity between volunteers and recipients* shapes how needs are encountered and addressed. When individuals become aware of needs within their immediate social networks, such as among neighbors, friends, or local community members, they may respond directly through informal acts of support. This perspective shifts the focus from the *supply side* to the *demand side*, viewing social networks as *demand networks* through which people encounter and respond to needs (Carlsen & Toubøl, 2024). For instance, a neighbor noticing that an elderly resident is struggling with groceries may offer assistance directly, while broader causes, such as environmental protection, may require coordination through organizations that connect volunteers with more distant recipients (Aydinli et al., 2013). This perspective also helps reinterpret observed differences in the resources of formal and informal volunteers (Eimhjellen, 2023; Hustinx et al., 2022; Southby et al., 2019). Rather than viewing these differences solely as a matter of supply, they may instead reflect variation in demand: individuals with fewer resources might face stronger or more immediate demands for help within their networks.

Third, volunteering tasks may differ in their *orientation toward the recipient or toward the volunteer experience*. Many volunteering opportunities provide participants with opportunities for social interaction, personal fulfillment, or skill development (Ang & Malhotra, 2024; Stukas et al., 2014). These features are often embedded within structured volunteering settings where organizations provide training or recognition. However, other forms of volunteering emerge primarily from a desire to respond to concrete needs faced by specific individuals or communities. In such cases, the activity may be oriented primarily toward the recipient, and the volunteer may receive little institutional recognition or personal reward beyond the act of helping itself (Dean, 2022; Wang et al., 2017), although research also shows the ability of informal volunteer networks to provide support for each other to foster well-being among crisis volunteers (Nissen et al., 2023). For example, providing regular assistance to a recently widowed neighbor or coordinating informal childcare among parents in a neighborhood may respond directly to pressing needs without involving formal organizational structures (Appau & Awaworyi Churchill, 2019; van Tienen et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2017).

Taken together, these dimensions illustrate how a task-centered approach helps illuminate forms of volunteering that may otherwise remain less visible when attention is focused primarily on volunteers themselves. By beginning with the needs being addressed, whether sudden or sustained, socially proximate or distant, and oriented toward recipients or volunteer experiences, it becomes possible to see how different organizational arrangements emerge to meet these needs. For example, in the case of elderly support, one person may participate in weekly shifts through an organized program, while another may assist an elderly neighbor who recently took a fall informally. The underlying need, support for older adults, is the same, but differences in proximity to the recipient and the onset of the *need* call for different organizational arrangements and forms of engagement.

This perspective also helps highlight the value of informal volunteering. When activities are assessed primarily through the characteristics or benefits of volunteers, forms of engagement that occur within informal networks or relational contexts may appear less significant. However, when attention is directed toward the tasks accomplished and the needs met, the contributions of

informal volunteering become more clearly visible. For example, studies have highlighted the important role of informal volunteering in disaster responses (Nahkur et al., 2022) as well as the contributions of minority communities through informal helping and community support networks (Martinez et al., 2011).

A task-centered framework therefore emphasizes the tasks accomplished and the needs addressed when assessing the value of volunteering. This perspective does not deny that volunteers may gain benefits from their engagement, nor that such benefits are meaningful. Instead, it highlights that these outcomes represent only one dimension of volunteering's value. Particularly in relational contexts, the primary significance of volunteering may lie in its tangible impact on recipients and communities, often achieved without institutional support or public recognition.

Discussion

This article proposes a task-centered framework of volunteering to address the persistent underrecognition of informal volunteering in volunteering research (Carson, 1999; Dean, 2022; Martinez et al., 2011). The framework shifts the focus away from a volunteer-centered approach and broadens the analytical scope to include the recipients of volunteering, emphasizing the types of needs and tasks that are addressed through volunteer engagement. By taking tasks and needs as the vantage point, the framework allows for comparison between formal and informal volunteering without establishing a hierarchy between the two.

The proposed framework contributes to the volunteering literature by enabling recognition of informal volunteering on more equal terms with formal volunteering. At the same time, the limitations of the review should be acknowledged. The analysis presented in this article is based solely on studies that explicitly compare formal and informal volunteering using survey data. However, a substantial body of research examines informal volunteering on its own terms and highlights its contributions to both volunteers and recipients (Mao et al., 2021; Nakamura et al., 2024). The purpose of this article was not to provide a comprehensive review of that literature, but rather to examine how formal and informal volunteering are conceptualized when they are analyzed within a shared empirical framework. As such, the limitations identified here are not representative of the entire volunteering literature; instead, they illustrate the analytical logic that has contributed to the comparatively weaker recognition of informal volunteering in studies that rely on direct comparisons between the two. In this context, the article contributes by situating the approach to informal volunteering within a framework that explicitly conceptualizes volunteering as a whole, and thus avoids treating informal volunteering as a secondary or “add-on” category of volunteering.

The proposed framework contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating how dynamics studied during times of disruption can also be extended to non-crisis contexts. It draws on research from situations where the value of informal volunteering is clearly visible and shows how these lessons can inform our understanding of volunteering more broadly (Carlsen et al., 2021; Carlsen & Toubøl, 2025). Importantly, the framework does not diminish the significant value of formal volunteering; rather, it highlights that while the usual parameters for assessing value are meaningful in formal contexts, they are not appropriate for informal volunteering. Regarding certain tasks that require organizational stability and support, formal volunteering may be the best option. Ultimately, the framework shows that formal and informal volunteering are not

better or worse than one another; they are simply effective in addressing different types of needs.

It is important to note that a related body of literature has examined volunteering tasks primarily in relation to volunteer motivation and task preferences. This research has shown how task characteristics influence volunteer satisfaction and retention, as well as how volunteers select tasks based on their motivations (Houle et al., 2005; Millette & Gagné, 2008; Willems & Walk, 2013). The framework proposed here complements this line of work by shifting the analytical focus from the individual volunteer to the tasks themselves as responses to social needs. Rather than examining how tasks can be designed to attract or retain volunteers, it considers how different types of tasks emerge from the needs being addressed and how they are distributed across formal and informal settings. In this sense, the article extends existing task-oriented approaches by moving from an individual-level perspective on task selection to a broader perspective on the repertoire of tasks required to meet social needs.

Implications

A task-centered framework carries methodological implications for how volunteering is measured. Current survey instruments tend to capture formal volunteering more effectively because they rely on indicators of organizational membership or structured participation (Einolf et al., 2016). A task-based approach instead suggests that measurement should begin with the characteristics of the activity and the need that is addressed. One context where such an approach has already proven useful is the study of crisis volunteering. In crisis situations, the range of needs and volunteering tasks is often more clearly defined, making it easier to identify and categorize activities. For example, research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic measured volunteering by first asking respondents about the specific activities they undertook or the needs they addressed, such as delivering groceries to vulnerable individuals, providing economic support, or sharing information, and only subsequently asking how these activities were organized, including whether they took place through online social media groups, within networks of family and friends, or through voluntary organizations (Carlsen et al., 2021). By separating the task performed from the organizational form through which it was carried out, such survey designs are better able to capture the full range of volunteering activities.

Although more challenging to apply outside the context of crises, this sequencing allows researchers to capture both formal and informal volunteering without assuming that certain volunteering tasks are organized in a certain way. This approach is particularly feasible within more clearly defined contexts, such as sports volunteering or climate-related volunteering, where the range of tasks and needs is easier to delimit. Here, future survey designs could include items that focus on tasks, and only then on the organization of these tasks, thus enabling more accurate comparison of formal and informal volunteering. While the proposed framework builds on quantitative and survey-based research, a task-centered approach could also inform qualitative research that is able to provide insights into the nuanced and context-specific ways volunteering responds to social needs from the perspective of both volunteers and recipients.

From a policy perspective, the framework calls for greater recognition of informal volunteering as a crucial component of the tasks handled by civil society. Policymakers and organizations could use a task-based lens to identify where informal volunteering

already fills gaps in welfare provision, particularly in areas where rapid response or relational care is required, and work to strengthen these activities to acknowledge the value contributed by informal civil society. Thus, acknowledging the specific strengths of informal volunteering can inform more flexible policy frameworks that complement, rather than attempt to formalize, these efforts. At the same time, organizations could apply this framework to design more context-sensitive volunteer programs to support episodic volunteering concerning temporary tasks rather than being occupied with the retention of episodic volunteers (e.g., Compion et al., 2022; Hustinx et al., 2008; Rey-Garcia et al., 2024).

Limitations and future research

The framework implies a stronger focus on tasks and volunteering activities in survey measures. However, this also requires a narrowing of analytical scope, as mapping the full range of volunteering activities across civil society would make survey instruments impractically long. In crisis and disaster research, the repertoire of volunteering tasks is often easier to identify and describe comprehensively, but outside such contexts, it becomes considerably more complex. Future research should therefore test and explore its empirical utility, particularly in non-crisis contexts. A key next step is to operationalize a *repertoire of volunteering tasks*, perhaps within smaller or thematically specific domains, since mapping the full scope of volunteering activities is infeasible. Developing such an operationalization would enable researchers to examine how different tasks are distributed across formal and informal volunteering. Moreover, the task-centered framework incorporates the recipients of volunteering into the conceptual model of volunteering. However, empirical insights into recipients remain scarce, and only a few studies directly compare the receipt of formal and informal support (Höltmann et al., 2023; McCann & Evans, 2002). Consequently, understanding how recipients experience the help they receive would strengthen the empirical grounding of a task-centered approach. Finally, future research could explore how task-centered and motivation-based approaches may be integrated to better understand how different types of tasks are matched with volunteers across formal and informal settings.

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