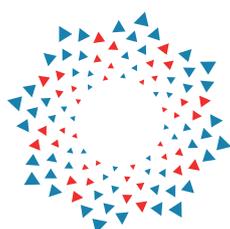


IVCO 2021 THINK PIECE

# THE CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES OF INCLUSIVE ONLINE VOLUNTEERING

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Traditional volunteering is shifting. The current pandemic has forced us to adapt to a new world where virtual arrangements and remote working are now becoming common practices. Although we have all learned and rapidly adapted to this changing situation, challenges still exist. These new working methods have presented positive opportunities, but they have also introduced and amplified existing challenges. As an online volunteer with CBM Ireland, I have experienced first-hand the benefits and barriers of working completely remotely and navigating the world of online volunteering. In this Think Piece, I will highlight some opportunities as well as barriers I have grown to appreciate based on my experience, as well as learnings from the project I am working on-VIVID: Technical Assistance in Humanitarian Response, Ensuring Valuable Volunteering and Inclusion of persons with Disabilities. Overall, I think online volunteering is hugely positive and a significant way forward for inclusive volunteering opportunities.

## Challenges

### 1. Digital Accessibility

A rapid research study was conducted by the volunteer sending organisation Viatores Christi, exploring the opportunities and challenges of online volunteering for humanitarian aid. Results have shown most organisations are not educated on the importance of digital accessibility. A challenge with online volunteering is the complex task of technology. It can be extremely overwhelming learning how to navigate an organisation's online space. Most people have different levels of competence in terms of technology, and it is often very difficult to teach someone remotely how to access and follow certain programmes and training. In addition, most online platforms are not accessible for persons with disabilities. This can compound barriers for enabling diverse practices in online volunteering. There are many digital accessibility toolkits available to overcome this challenge. Moreover, capacity building for transforming an organisation's practices can improve this along with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) being involved and leading the process of change.

### 2. Lack of resources

Research results also highlighted that most organisations primarily identify costs as a barrier to facilitate remote volunteering opportunities. For example, cost-related barriers create obstacles to access training resources to take on volunteers in a remote capacity and to have the appropriate equipment in place. Training is considered important as research participants highlighted high levels of concern on how to communicate effectively and build relationships to ensure an effective impact. These challenges can be addressed with appropriate planning, resource investment, programme design and monitoring and evaluation.

## Opportunities

### 1. Inclusion

Persons with disabilities are often excluded from opportunities to volunteer offline. Online volunteering has opened up many opportunities for people with disabilities, and other often excluded groups, to get involved in the organisations they have wanted to. For example, by allowing people from different geographical locations to work remotely.

Inclusive online volunteering could become significantly more universal in the humanitarian and development sectors if organisations consult OPDs in training their teams on digital accessibility.

### 2. Diversity

Online volunteering provides opportunities to shift programmes which exclude specific groups, such as persons with disabilities, from participation in humanitarian aid and to play an important and effective role in the future.

The VIVID-T research states that "Persons with disabilities, persons who have settled in Europe, and other groups such as the long term unemployed, traditionally excluded from volunteering for humanitarian aid, offer valuable and often unique perspectives that can improve the EU's humanitarian responses". Overall, it is clear that diversity should be considered an added value to programmatic strategies.

Disability-inclusive-development seeks to include people with disabilities in humanitarian aid processes by recognising their potential, valuing and respecting their contributions and perspectives, honouring their dignity, and effectively responding to their needs.

To sum up this Think Piece, online volunteering and its ability to provide opportunities far outweigh the challenges for humanitarian aid. Online volunteering contributes to the sector by connecting and empowering people, realising their full potential, building futures, and contributing to mutual learning. However, these opportunities need to be enabled for all and must respect the SDG principle of 'Leaving No One Behind' in order to be considered effective and successful.