

IVR Working Paper

Understanding values in volunteer involvement: A typology of ‘values’ for policy and practice

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Introduction: Why values, why now, and what are they?

‘Values’ are commonly considered a core component of how we understand volunteer involvement. However, our review of contemporary primary sources suggests great confusion about what is meant by values and no agreement about what is valued. We argue that this confusion is contributing to falling trust resulting in lasting damage to volunteer involvement efforts.

This paper coincides with the announcement of a campaign for ‘Values and Volunteering’ on World Values Day, in October 2026. This annual day is organised by a consortium including the UK Values Alliance, a Community Interest Company and membership organisation. They claim a significant status of values in people’s lives.

“Values are what matter most to us. They motivate and guide us. They are the passion in our hearts, the reason we do the things we do.”

They construct value firmly as moral rather than instrumental, albeit suggesting potential positive outcomes, and for this UN Year of Volunteers tie their campaign to volunteer involvement.

“The theme for this year’s campaign is Values and Volunteering. Let’s use our values every day to make our world a little bit happier and more connected by volunteering and being of service to others in whichever way we can. Volunteering is choosing to put our values into action, without compulsion or expectation of reward. It doesn’t need to be done in a big organised group (though that’s good too) but can just be a small unprompted everyday act of thoughtfulness or kindness.”

(UK Values Alliance 2026, emphasis in bold by authors).

Their approach stands in rather stark contrast to that of other observers of volunteer involvement who construct ‘value’ of volunteer involvement as dominantly instrumental, such as in ‘gross value added, and not connected to the ‘passion’ in people’s heart. The new ‘Global Index of Volunteer Engagement’, introduced in the latest ‘State of the World’s Volunteering Report’ speaks unapologetically of values for the individual, community benefit, economic value and an enabling environment, to ‘redefine the true value of volunteering’ (United Nations Volunteering, 2025).

Both interpretations of the term value are present and often blended in policy and practice documents. The Gradel Institute of Charity, a new research organisation, led by the Voluntary and Community Sector veteran Sir Stephen Bubb, speaks simultaneously of a **values**-driven Third Sector and explains that it uses 'gross **value** added' 'to express its economic contribution (Gradel Institute of Charity, 2025, p7).

Initially this might solely be blamed on the English language which leaves us with a conundrum, as the word 'value' has at least three distinct connotations, each used variably in concepts and contexts. We speak, for example, of value as the worth in an exchange, 'economic'; utility in pursuit of aims, 'social'; or of personal beliefs, 'moral'. However, a further complication arises because when we discuss values in volunteer involvement, we find ideological differences about what values or which interpretation of the values are more important. For example, is the value of volunteer involvement £50 billion per year, around 3.5% of annual UK GDP (Haldane 2014) and helps sustain our economy, or does it put a concerned philanthropic mind about the condition of others to rest, as a social conscience (Beveridge 1948), or is it an evolutionary advantage Kropotkin (1902)?

The announcement of the UK Values Alliance therefore gives rise to a number of questions, such as what are we talking about when we use the word 'value', what are our actual intentions when we volunteer, and how does this work collectively?

In the texts we reviewed, we found a presumed consensus on what values are being discussed and considered important, yet without providing sufficient clarity to give confidence in such an implied consensus. We found neither a consensus on economic, nor on moral or on collective values. This lack of clarity matters. When the term 'value' is used interchangeably it masks ideologies and meaning. While often unintentional it can also do so on purpose. In practice we found that this uncertainty and disconnect is leading to misalignment between volunteers' intrinsic motivations and organisational strategies, creating commitments which cannot be enacted. Arguably this is a main cause for the increasing lack of trust found in volunteer involvement; when people think *"that their voices and priorities are not being heard and acted on, they lose faith in (...) leadership."* (More in Common 2025).

The World Values Day campaign provides an important moment to reflect on how values shape volunteer involvement. Yet its call to "put our values into action" risks being interpreted differently by individuals, organisations and policymakers unless there is clarification about what is meant by value and whose values are

being invoked. The typology presented in this paper offers a practical framework to support the campaign's aims by distinguishing different forms of value, drawing on a variety of interpretations, enabling policy makers and practitioners to engage with values in a way that is intentional and aligned.

Aims

This paper aims to contribute to a national discussion of 'Values and Volunteer involvement'. Our goal is to clarify language by identifying the varied and often uncritical use of the term 'value' and by developing a typology of 'values' in volunteer involvement. Interpreting primary sources, this paper is policy and practice orientated and aimed to sit alongside, rather than in opposition to reviews of academic literature of this topic.

A Typology of Value in Volunteer Involvement

Our 'Typology of Value in Volunteer Involvement' is constructed across three forms of value: economic, moral and collective and distinguishes three perspectives: individual, organisational and societal. The forms of value we present relate directly to uses in the English language, with economic value as the worth in an exchange, moral value as in personal beliefs, social value as in utility in pursuit of aims. We recognise that other observers have used different terminology for similar constructs such as micro for individual, meso for organisations, and macro for society (see for example van Overbeeke 2026).

To illustrate the different ways volunteer involvement is understood and talked about, these have been located on a three-dimensional value grid, see Figure 1. Together they create a simple but revealing value landscape: from volunteer involvement as a resource, to volunteer involvement as an ethical act, to volunteer involvement as a relational practice rooted in belonging and connection in pursuit of shared aims. Mapping key texts across these axes revealed how value is constructed and understood by the actors.

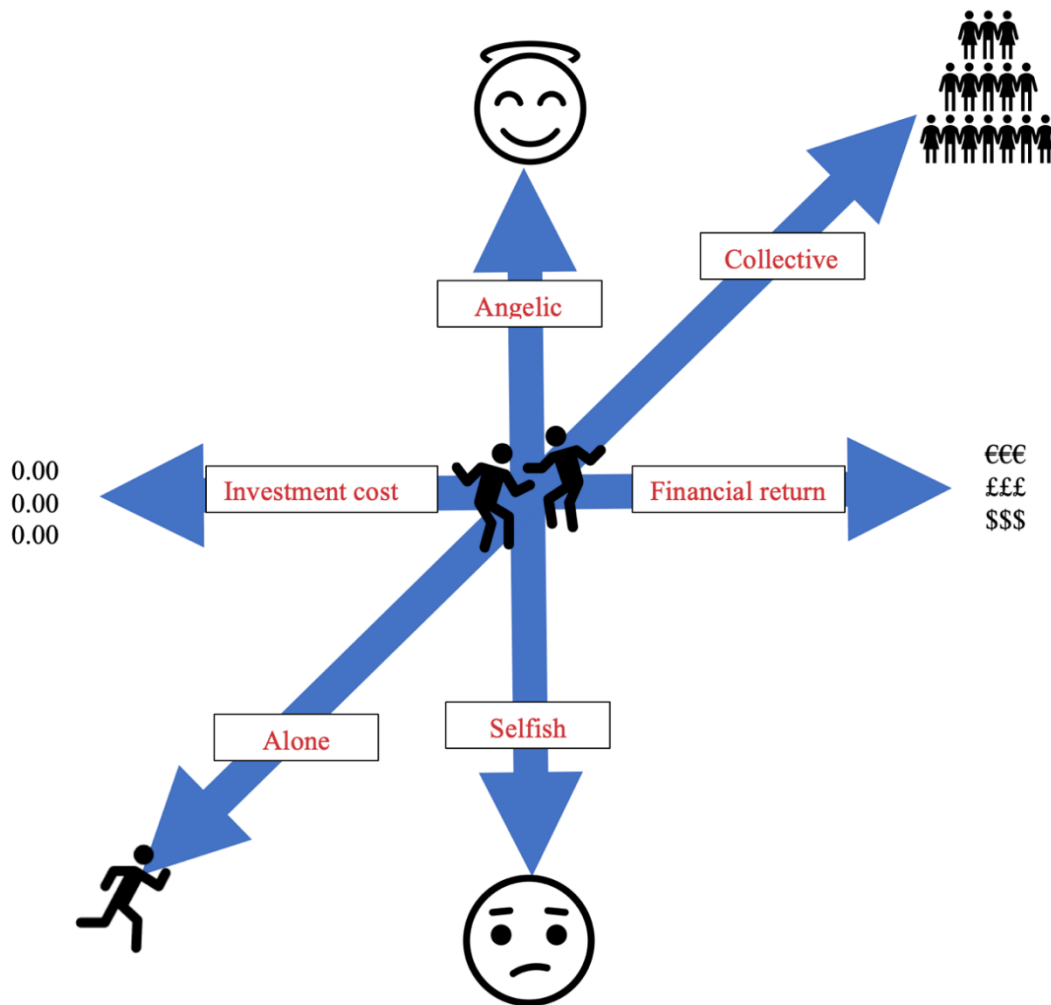


Figure 1: Three-dimensional value grid

Economic value

Economic Value refers to the measurable, functional, productive aspects of volunteer involvement. It emphasises contribution, service delivery, operational benefits and quantifiable outcomes.

Individual perspective

Economic value is absent from texts based on individual accounts which we reviewed: volunteers do not describe their involvement in terms of productivity, efficiency or work substitution. This suggests that individuals frame their volunteer involvement through moral and collective values rather than economic ones.

Organisational perspective

Economic value is consistently foregrounded in organisational texts, which describe volunteer involvement as a resource that enhances capacity, supports service delivery, or improves productivity and reduces cost. These texts frame volunteers as contributors to operational efficiency and organisational performance. For example, when examining the value of volunteer involvement CIPD reported *“if we consider the productivity benefits flowing from well-being and motivation, as well as brand and CSR value, volunteering may be one of the best investments an employer can make”* (Percy and Rogers 2021).

Societal perspective

Societal texts blend economic value with collective and symbolic narratives, frequently emphasising volunteer involvement's contribution to GDP, welfare production, development outcomes and national productivity. Economic value is present in every societal text we examined, often used to justify policy aims or articulate volunteer involvement's role in broader economic systems. Such as, *“volunteering contributes to healthy communities which are essential building blocks of a prosperous European Union”* (EYV 2011 Alliance 2011).

Moral value

Moral values are the ethical intrinsic standards which define and apply judgements about what is right. They are concerned with dignity, agency and fairness. It is this element with which World Values Day for Volunteering is concerned. Moral value frames volunteer involvement as an expression of kindness and ethical commitment rather than service delivery.

Individual perspective

Texts frame volunteer involvement as an ethical act rooted in dignity, solidarity, compassion and civic responsibility. These accounts consistently emphasise intrinsic motivations and moral purpose, showing that volunteers understand their involvement as an expression of moral purpose rather than a transactional activity. In a paper on volunteer involvement and identity it was

found that “*volunteering can (...) serve as an arena in which identity and values can be acknowledged*” (Grönlund 2011).

Organisational perspective

Organisational texts articulate moral commitments to fairness, legitimacy, safety and the ethical treatment of volunteers. These documents demonstrate how organisations can embed moral value through stewardship, rights-based practice and clear boundaries that protect volunteers from exploitation and also ensure staff roles are not replaced. Voluntary action is “*founded on the principles of mutuality and reciprocity, leading to positive changes*” (TUC Charter 2009).

Societal perspective

Societal texts frame volunteer involvement as a moral contribution to democracy, cohesion and civic life. These accounts emphasise duty, shared responsibility and ethical citizenship, positioning volunteer involvement as part of the moral infrastructure of society. An independent inquiry into civil society points out that “*too often things are done to and for people, when it could be about creating conditions for people to do things on their own terms*” (Civil Society Futures 2018).

Collective value

Collective or relational value refers to the social, interpersonal and community-building dimensions of volunteer involvement. It emphasises trust, reciprocity, belonging, social cohesion and the quality of relationships between people, groups and institutions.

Individual perspective

Individual texts emphasise belonging, reciprocity, identity and social connection as central to volunteer experience. These accounts show that volunteers value relationships, community and shared meaning, framing volunteer involvement as a relational practice rather than an isolated act. As work on pathways through participation discovered “*the relationships that are built in groups are a crucial sustaining factor in people’s participation*” (Brodie et al 2011).

Organisational perspective

Organisational texts highlight inclusion, belonging, relational care and the quality of volunteer experience within organisational settings. These texts show how organisations can cultivate collective value by developing environments that support connection, participation and community building. *“Volunteers benefit from new social connections”* with *“almost nine in ten volunteers (89%) agreed that they had met new people through their volunteering”* (McGarvey et al 2019).

Societal perspective

Societal texts emphasise social cohesion, trust, solidarity and collective action. These accounts frame volunteer involvement as a driver of community resilience and civic infrastructure, demonstrating how collective value operates at the level of society. As a UN report on the value of volunteer involvement in driving collective action found, volunteer involvement *“facilitates people’s participation in societies and helps create a sense of belonging among communities”* (United Nations Volunteers 2023).

Review of Primary Sources

For this paper 33 purposively selected historical and contemporary accounts of volunteer involvement, see Table 1, have been mapped across these axes to explore how ‘value’ is presented as a concept and in what contexts. Mapping texts across these axes shows the patterns, gaps and contradictions in how value is constructed, and highlights the growing distance between how volunteers live their values and how organisations and policymakers frame them.

	Source
1	Kropotkin (1902) Mutual Aid
2	Beveridge (1948) Voluntary Action
3	Aves (1969) Voluntary Worker in Social Services
4	Putnam (2000) Bowling Alone
5	Cabinet Office (2007) Future Role of the Third Sector
6	European Parliament Report (2008)
7	TUC Charter (2009)
8	Brodie et al (2011) Pathways Through Participation
9	EYV (2011) Policy Agenda for Volunteering in Europe
10	Grönlund (2011) Identity and Volunteering Intertwined
11	Haldane (2014) In Giving, We Receive
12	Common Cause Foundation (2016) Perceptions Matter
13	Mayo (2016) Values
14	NHS England (2017) Recruiting and Managing Volunteers
15	Civil Society Futures (2018)
16	Volunteer Canada (2018) Value of Volunteering Wheel
17	Volunteer Scotland (2019) A Volunteer Charter
18	Dean (2020) The Good Glow
19	WCVA – TUC Charter (2020)
20	Bevan Commission (2022) Values and Value of Volunteering
21	Grotz & Leonard (2022) Volunteer Involvement
22	Vision for Volunteering (2022)
23	CIPD (2023) Employer Supported Volunteering
24	NCVO (2023) Time Well Spent
25	UNV (2023-2024) The Value of Volunteering in Driving Collective Action
26	Grotz (2024) Volunteer Involvement in UK Universities
27	Leonard (2024) Engage article
28	Pereira (2024) Volunteering and Virtue Ethics
29	DCMS (2025) Estimating the economic and social Value of Volunteering
30	More in Common (2025) Shattered Britain
31	PBE (2025) Civil Society and Volunteering
32	BPV (2025) The Human Value of Volunteering
33	UNV (2026) State of the World's Volunteerism Report

Table One: Chronological list of primary texts mapped for this paper

Discussion

This discussion critically considers dominant approaches to values in volunteer involvement, dangers of uncritical uses, and implications of misaligning in practice, the moral values of volunteers with economic value sought by organisations or social value aimed at by governments and public sector bodies.

Value Signalling: A cross-cutting distortion

Value signalling is the often-encountered display and promotion of values that are not fully carried out in practice or are enacted to achieve an 'image'. It can be seen when people and organisations use moral or collective language to legitimise economic reasons for volunteer involvement. For example, organisational texts may describe volunteer involvement as 'strengthening communities' while in practice positioning it as enhancing capacity.

This can have the effect of creating a dissonance for volunteers who may experience the gap between what is said and how things are done. When this happens, volunteers feel let down and trust is eroded, creating a real consequence for volunteer involvement. At times it may be necessary to espouse values which are not enacted for example in aspirational, future focussed texts where there has been no opportunity to act on these commitments and also for charters which use language to shape boundaries. This shows that signalling is not necessarily performative; sometimes it can be due to the function of the document. It's important to know that there will be an expected congruence and plan for these values to be demonstrated.

Individual perspective

Individual texts do not exhibit values signalling. They express authentic values, identity, solidarity, belonging, compassion, without using moral language to mask economic or instrumental aims.

Organisational perspective

Organisational texts show moderate values signalling, particularly where moral or collective language is used to legitimise economic or managerial objectives. This signalling often appears as rhetorical alignment with volunteer values while operational priorities remain transactional. In this example the

framing of patient experience is a moral value, but it is used here to justify the organisation's goals of capacity enhancement; using volunteers as workforce extension; *"The time volunteers give every day, in a very wide range of roles, makes a valuable contribution to the quality of care that patients experience."* (NHS England 2017).

Societal perspective

Societal texts show strong values signalling, often using moral or collective language to justify economic, developmental or policy objectives such as when linking volunteer involvement to "strengthening communities". This signalling reflects how volunteer involvement is positioned within broader political narratives of cohesion, productivity and national resilience. In this report for a committee of the European Parliament the collective value phrase 'social cohesion' is being used symbolically to support economic development; *"Volunteering plays a major role in promoting social cohesion. At a European level volunteering translates European Values such as a solidarity, social cohesion and inclusiveness into practice"* (European Parliament 2008).

Implications for Policy and Practice

Attending to what and how language is being used and ensuring strategic planning is clear are essential when acting on values and achieving added value. It is important to be aware of disconnects between different meanings and misalignments of purpose, and to examine the ideological positions behind any rhetoric.

Risks of Misalignment

Our review of economic, moral and collective values as used by a broad range of observers, shows a misalignment between how volunteers understand their involvement and how organisations and policy makers frame it. Volunteers seek meaning yet organisations speak in outputs. Clarifying the implications of presenting values in volunteer involvement in such very different ways is central to thinking purposefully about involving volunteers. At the heart of this issue is the growing dominance of organisational and societal texts describing volunteer involvement

through economic and transactional values. Organisational value construction remains bounded by operational priorities, even when moral or collective language is present. This creates value signalling. Societal texts position volunteer involvement as contributing to GDP, welfare provision and national resilience. Such narratives risk undermining civic participation. This misalignment has practical consequences for volunteer experience, organisational strategy and policy design. When economic value becomes the primary lens through which volunteer involvement is viewed, it risks reducing volunteers to merely unpaid labour and a resource to be used. Volunteers who experience this are more likely to feel unseen and to disengage and step away. As volunteer recruitment challenges grow and are more complex, identifying and working with the values being applied is more, not less, relevant to becoming involved with volunteers.

Implications for Organisations

Organisations need to ensure that when they use values these are acted upon in practice in their ways of involving and speaking about volunteer involvement. Volunteer involvement strategies and processes have to be designed to support belonging, within environments that facilitate connection and enable people to live their values and address their motivations. Being explicit about values when developing relationships with volunteers; creating that clarity of purpose and identity. It also means developing measurement tools which include more than hours and outputs, to avoid failing to capture the full impact of volunteer involvement, and risk reinforcing the values gap. Performative value signalling should be avoided, and volunteer involvement needs to reflect moral and collective values, not solely the operational priorities. We suggest the typology can be used as a reflective tool to locate meaning and practice on the three-dimensional value grid; to intentionally reflect on which value is being demonstrated in your language.

Implications for Policymakers

The typology also offers a framework for rebalancing policy approaches to volunteer involvement. Values are not simply abstract ideals but are active forces which motivate and guide volunteers. These could be extended to recognise volunteer involvement as the broader civic act of democratic participation, rooted in solidarity and belonging from which an increasingly divided society would benefit. It should move beyond describing volunteer involvement as being a mechanism for

productivity or service delivery. Policy makers need to reconnect with the moral and collective elements of volunteer involvement, not solely as a spare or excess resource, wheeled out in times of national emergency. Enabling the conditions which support people and communities to strengthen their relationships through volunteer involvement and as a core element of civic life should be a driver in itself. Investing in civic infrastructure that facilitates volunteer involvement enables people to strengthen relationships and participate in community life, and this is the language about which volunteer involvement should be spoken. Measuring tools for volunteer involvement need to move beyond the economic metrics and to articulate volunteer involvement in ways that align with volunteers' own motivations and values.

Conclusion

Policymakers and practitioners need to clearly state whose values they are using to support funding decisions and create practice guidance, in what context and for what purpose. For volunteers, volunteer involvement is an act of agency founded in individual and collective identity and moral purpose and recognising this and articulating it will support a more resilient and connected volunteer involvement ecosystem. Volunteers are continuing to do so for intrinsic reasons, as the way to enact and live their personal moral values but policy positions and organisations are increasingly viewing volunteer involvement as a resource mechanism with economic and social added value. This disconnect could lead to volunteers feeling unseen, unheard and unappreciated, which will in turn lead to switching off and disengagement.

As we prepare for World Values Day 2026, we offer this typology as a practical tool for analysing how value is constructed and ensuring that policy and practice reflect the values of volunteer involvement. It can be used to help align what volunteers want to do and how they want to do it with what organisations need and from which societies will benefit. By doing so, we aim to strengthen the campaign's ambition to make values visible, actionable and shared across communities.

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