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## STUDY

Swiss association for the  
exchange of personnel in  
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# The impact of Covid-19 on the Unité international volunteering network



This study has been commissioned by Unité, in the frame of Unité institutional partnership with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

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## List of Abbreviations

Forum	International Forum for volunteering in development
IVCO	International Volunteering Co-operation Organisation
VIO	Volunteer Involving Organisation
SDC	Swiss Development Cooperation

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# The impact of Covid-19 on the Unité international volunteering network

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## Topline findings

The following summary highlights key findings from the research conducted with five Unité member organisations and 89 Unité respondents to the Forum volunteer survey conducted in September 2020.

### Impact on co-workers, partner organisations and members

**Relationships with partner organisations.** As a shared experience across the Global North and Global South, Covid-19 brought members and partner organisations together. The disruption produced more frequent communication between members and partners, which made head office staff more aware of issues in the field, produced closer working relationships and increased dialogue around a wider range of topics. Retaining co-workers in their assignment was an expressed reason why relationships with partner organisations were not affected.

In some instances it was not possible to continue normal programmes at all, but the adaptive nature of Unité members is evident in partner organisations and co-workers responding to the impact of Covid-19. Some responses went beyond local adaptation, being implemented across all the countries where the member worked. In cases where projects could continue, some flexibility was provided in supporting partners with resources, including simple basic provisions. Some partners found themselves in financial difficulty and although some Unité members were able to operate more flexibly in these financial relationships, some respondents to the volunteer survey felt that insufficient financial support was provided to partners. Arguably those Unité members who operated a project model were better placed to provide continuity in partner support.

**Repatriation.** While the Swiss government did not require citizen co-workers to be repatriated, most short-term co-workers were repatriated along with those about to end their contracts. In some cases security risks meant that co-workers were repatriated, but some of these returned to their assignments when it was possible to do so. Regarding the alternatives offered to co-workers post-repatriation, 85% of Unité respondents to the Forum volunteer survey said they were offered the opportunity to provide online support to their partner organisation, and 50% said they had the opportunity to provide online support to a different organisation. 61% had the opportunity to raise awareness of international development. The Unité respondents also

reported satisfaction with the support offered by the members, particularly in respect of counselling. In addition, members ensured access for co-workers to the Swiss Government social insurance scheme during the period co-worker contracts were suspended.

**Volunteer motivation** and interest has been largely unchanged, but the pandemic appears to have had some impact that could affect future decisions about where to seek assignments and through which organisations.

**Impact in the North.** The lockdown in Switzerland impacted on co-worker preparation, recruitment and workshops, and delayed the departure of co-workers. In some instances co-workers withdrew after delays in going out on assignment. The lockdown also impacted on lobbying and fundraising, and some members stated that the impact of Covid-19 in Switzerland was greater than in the field.

## Innovation and repositioning: Challenges and opportunities

**Programme models.** In general the strategic direction of the Unité members interviewed has not been deflected by Covid-19. Some members suggested that the future is likely to see a combination of co-worker and project funding models. Both the interviewees and 80% of Unité respondents to the volunteer survey felt that capacity building and skills development will be an increased focus in their work. Research by Comundo has found that partner organisations value ‘soft’ skills such as intercultural competencies, social and communicative competencies, and the capacity for interaction and innovation, and see these as being important for co-workers to play a facilitative role as part of their professional contribution.

Other anticipated developments include not using international volunteers if there are local competencies available, and the potential growth of national co-workers, although this would not attract SDC co-funding and would demand a different approach to mobilising funds from Swiss based donors. South-South and South-North activities are being piloted, but raise challenges as to how such models would meet the objective of sensitisation in the North.

**Online volunteering.** Covid-19 has provided an opportunity for Unité members to consider the potential as well as the shortcomings of online volunteering. In general, online volunteering is seen as complementing rather than replacing onsite volunteering. In the survey, over 80% of Unité repatriated respondents stated they had been offered the opportunity to support their assigned partner organisation online, but 37% of Unité respondents overall, disagreed that online volunteering would be a key feature in the future.

One member saw the use of online engagement as a short-term opportunity to open up programme conversations in new countries and to work with staff in remote regions on planning and implementing programmes. Another member viewed digital tools as a resource for partner discussion about focus areas such as education, food sovereignty, and emergency relief and rehabilitation, and as a mechanism for widening its learning community across countries and regions. Nevertheless some members emphasised the primacy of face-to-face work from a humanitarian or faith-based perspective while others see online volunteering as contradicting the principle of reciprocity.

## Lessons learnt

We found that Unité respondents to the volunteer survey were generally positive about how Covid-19 was handled by Unité member organisations. Nevertheless the interviews with members suggested that the organisations varied in the extent to which **guidance and plans** were in place. Some had previous experience of handling pandemics, but recognised that Covid-19 was a problem at another level and required a responsive approach rather than applying pre-determined protocols.

In a crisis, **decisions** are often taken rapidly in a context of great urgency. Respondents to the volunteer survey raised the issue of whether decisions were well founded. Some suggested that the views of country-level staff were not taken into account in member decision-making about their response to the pandemic, while others felt that the views of co-workers and others in the field could have been better heard.

Unité member interviewees reported challenges with not knowing what to communicate and when, especially during the early stages of the pandemic. Some members improved their **communication** methods, particularly when the head offices started interacting far more closely with co-workers in the field to support their response to situations arising in-country owing to the pandemic.

Specific **support issues** emerged in the case of co-workers who remained in-country and faced the possibility of quarantine and working from home. In particular the provision of food and supplies – notably phone credit – was referenced by several members. Respondents to the volunteer survey raised other matters, such as being demotivated by the singular focus on the impact of Covid-19 on their wellbeing. One important finding from the study is that **different forms of support may be required**, depending on whether volunteers are repatriated or remain on assignment.

## The future of volunteering for development

In the Forum volunteer survey, 60% of Unité respondents were optimistic about the future of volunteering for development. This resonates with the likely increase in member organisations using local co-workers. The piloting of South-South exchanges suggests a move away from the traditional model of Swiss nationals as long-term co-workers, and may signal short-term opportunities for young Swiss professionals and for the exchange of cultural experiences.

Increased variation in the programme offer may be influenced by the gradual reduction of SDC financial support (not a function of Covid-19) and declining levels of private sector support. This suggests a likely focus on fundraising in future, but carries the risk of funding-led models being developed.

A unique feature of Unité member organisations is that they tend to operate in niche areas (such as humanitarian support) which integrate strongly held values with close institutional relationships. Through a faith-based framework, in which a number of Unité members operate, the members and their partner organisations give expression to a shared value system through the work of the organisations and their co-workers. In the face of the pandemic, it seems that the resilience of Unité member operations can be attributed to such shared structures and values.

Looking to the future, Unité may need to consider the following balance: on the one hand retaining a close-knit member organisation model, which might better protect against pandemics such as Covid-19; and on the other hand, consider the extent to which less cohesive models could offer access to a wider range of partners, beneficiary groups and stakeholders, and be more inclusive. In either case member organisations would need to consider the financial sustainability of pursuing the different scenarios. We would encourage Unité to continue to engage members in these discussions and address the lessons learned from the pandemic alongside the future direction of their members.

## Recommendations

### It is recommended that ...

1. Unité members review existing plans, their appropriateness for pandemics, and how they are communicated to volunteers and their families. This might be usefully approached as a workshop to enable the sharing of experiences and best practice.
2. The experience of Covid-19 in relation to decision-making is understood in terms of good organisational practice which can be embedded in ways of working going forward.
3. As part of the development of the crisis plan, Unité members consider a systematic approach to communication in the context of a pandemic.
4. Unité members explicitly consider the different kinds of support required by co-workers who remain in the field and those who are repatriated.
5. Unité members ensure that the motivation to volunteer in the future is addressed as a matter of routine in post-assignment debriefing.
6. Unité consider convening a workshop/webinar to enable members to share their approaches to supporting partner organisations during a pandemic.
7. Unité consider using the findings of this report to engage with members about how it could support members in future crisis situations.
8. Unité members review the experiences of adapting programme models arising from Covid-19 and explore the implications of potential changes, especially national and local co-workers and digitally influenced volunteering.
9. Unité explores with its members the issue of a strategic approach to future funding of their work, including the implications and opportunities of the SDC funding options and the diversification and innovation in funding sources.
10. Unité members share experiences of new ways of working that developed during the pandemic and which of these changes could be followed as good practice in ways of working in the future.



# 1. Introduction

Unité is a Switzerland-based network of Swiss organisations involved with international volunteering development co-operation, including exchange programmes. As part of their understanding and learning of the experience of their network members, Unité requested that the research team undertake an exploration of their experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. This research sits alongside a larger research project undertaken for the International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum) but is entirely focused on the members of Unité.

There are 16 members in the network. These are referred to as “network members” or “volunteer organisations” in the text below and are not identified unless an individual organisation appears in a quotation from the survey. A sample of five network members were interviewed as part of the study.

This specific report focuses on the experiences and views of the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the survey was conducted alongside a larger survey of Forum members, the term ‘volunteer’ was used in the survey questions, but we are aware that other terminologies may be used more frequently by Unité and its members<sup>1</sup>. In the covering letter to the survey link we tried to ensure clarity on terminology so that it was understood that ‘volunteer’ included all of these different expressions. In this report, however, we have preferred to use the term ‘co-worker’ which was regularly used in the member interviews. In this report, the terms ‘volunteer’ and ‘co-worker’ should be seen as interchangeable.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research questions

This study focused on the following research questions:

- What lessons have Unité members learned from the initial months of the Covid-19 response, and how can these lessons improve their response to future shocks?
- How effective and practical are the alternative models now being applied and explored in the absence of international volunteering?
- How can Unité members innovate new areas of growth in their programmes to deliver volunteering for development in the months and years ahead?
- How can the volunteering for development sector better position itself to respond to the particular challenges and opportunities that will result from Covid-19?

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<sup>1</sup> Unité and its member organisations distinguish between “professional volunteers” and “learning volunteers” (trainees, culture / sensitisation exchanges). They use various terms in addition to professional ‘volunteer’ such as ‘Fachleute’, ‘cooperantes’, ‘volontaires professionnels’, ‘coopérants’, ‘co-workers’ and ‘development workers’ to describe people being given professional assignments on a voluntary or stipend basis. In this report all of these descriptions are included in our use of the term ‘volunteer’ when referring to the results of the volunteer survey conducted with volunteers from six IVCOS as well as Unité respondents.

These research questions were approached by a survey of Unité volunteers combined with interviews of Unité members.

## 2.2. Data collection

In September-October 2020, the research team conducted an online survey of volunteers for a study commissioned by Forum to develop our understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on volunteering for development. Unité chose to participate in the online survey and its network was asked to identify volunteers who had been serving at the time the news of the pandemic emerged. To this end Unité worked with its member organisations to identify and distribute the survey link to their volunteers. In total 308 volunteers were sent the link, of which 89 replied (i.e. 29% response rate).

In November 2020, members of the research team held a series of interviews with five Unité members chosen by Unité who reflected the diverse nature of the Unité members.<sup>2</sup> These were conducted by two researchers on a virtual platform using a structured interview framework. In the report those members have been quoted from the interviews which were held in English, which is not the first language of those interviewed. In consequence, the quotations have been amended textually, but the meaning has been carefully retained.

## 2.3. Data analysis

The survey data provide insights on the experiences of volunteers during the pandemic, and how Unité members responded to the challenges experienced by volunteers and partner organisations. Volunteers were also asked for their views on what shape volunteering for development might take in the future. The full survey findings are contained in an accompanying paper to this report.

In this report the survey data and the qualitative interview data both inform the analysis. The survey outcomes can also be compared with the larger volunteer survey undertaken for Forum. When the data are disaggregated, such comparisons may provide differences as well as commonalities in the findings.

## 3. What happened during the Covid-19 crisis?

The Covid-19 pandemic was a rapidly growing global phenomenon that within the space of a few months saw lockdowns of people in their own homes and communities, the closure of national borders, significant reductions of international and national travel and a downturn in the global economy. As a new virus to humankind, the likely impact was not known, but was recognised as easily transmitted in social gatherings with potentially lethal consequences.

Organisations using international volunteers or similar interventions were faced with significant challenges, which some at the time saw as existential, since border,

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<sup>2</sup> Comundo, DM-échange et mission, Eirene-Suisse, Mission 21, SAM Global.

travel and health restrictions all mitigated against continuing the programme. Unité members were faced with issues around their international co-workers, their activities at home and abroad, and appropriate ways to respond.

### 3.1. What happened to the co-workers?

Despite the potential impact of Covid-19, the volunteer survey showed that less than 20% of respondents were repatriated by their organisations. This was further reinforced in the interviews with Unité members which portrayed a similar story. For example, of 21 co-workers in Eirene, 15 stayed. Of the 6 that were repatriated, 2 later returned to their assignment.

*I was going to be repatriated because of all the panic and had a flight quickly arranged by Eirene - but then the government of Uganda shut the airport and flights were cancelled, so I ended up staying on and this was a great decision for me. (Volunteer)*

Unité members had a level of commonality about their response to repatriation of co-workers. The response within each organisation appears to have varied according to the co-worker model, the issue of “at-risk” co-workers and the local context.

Interviews of Unité members revealed three co-worker models: a long-term model using local and international participants; a short-term model, usually one year, which involved younger professionals; and short-term programmes of a few months’ duration, similar to cultural exchange but not always described as such.

Following the declaration of the pandemic, long-term co-workers largely remained in-country but co-workers on short-term assignments seem almost entirely to have been repatriated, along with those co-workers about to end their contracts. Mission 21 explained their overall position as follows

*The impact of Covid-19 depended on the form of the exchange of personnel. We have a long-standing exchange, which is three years or more, and in that format most of our staff remained where they were. (Mission 21)*

Comundo indicated the extent to which their co-workers stayed in country.

*From one hundred co-workers, about twelve interrupted their assignments because of Covid-19 and came back to Europe (Switzerland, Germany or wherever they came from) while 88% stayed in their countries of assignment. There have also been some premature ending of the contracts of co-workers where they would have ended in April, May or June 2020. So, they came back in March, shortening their assignment by one, two or three months. (Comundo)*

The circumstances which led to volunteers staying on assignment or being repatriated also appears to have reflected the local situation, including whether borders were closed, and flights were no longer possible. SAM Global, for example, undertook an assessment of whether co-workers could continue in Guinea. The organisation decided that the combination of the risks arising from Covid-19 and the security situation were such that their co-workers needed to be repatriated. However, the co-workers returned to Guinea once SAM Global believed it was safe to do so.

*We had two sites we had to evacuate not only because of Covid-19, but also because of the political situation. So, if it had been just one issue, maybe we wouldn't have had to repatriate them. But because we knew that it may be difficult to move them out in case of a problem, and we could see that the political situation was not getting better, we decided to bring them out. (SAM Global)*

There was also consideration of co-workers in 'at-risk' groups to Covid-19 which Comundo, amongst others, used as a criterion for repatriation.

*Of course, we were asking people who belong to an "at-risk" group, such as people above 60, or people who have some kind of illness to come back. That was the case with two co-workers. (Comundo)*

In the context of different ways of approaching whether co-workers should be repatriated, the significance of agency is apparent. Nearly all of the co-workers surveyed who had been repatriated indicated they had a level of choice in this decision. Member interviews indicated that whether co-workers stayed was often a matter for the co-worker and partner organisation.

Unité members when interviewed had a generally similar view that while the Swiss Government had requested all Swiss nationals to return home, there was no direct requirement on Unité members to action this directive from the Swiss Government concerning the repatriation of Swiss nationals on their programmes. Indeed, co-workers who returned to Switzerland during the pandemic were later able to travel back to their assignment during 2020.

Nevertheless, "at-risk" co-workers and those on short term assignments appear to have had less choice in the decision on repatriation and were not necessarily agreeable to the outcome, as SAM-Global experienced:

*We know that not all the short-term co-workers have been happy to be forced to come home. I know those from Cambodia haven't been happy that we brought them home. I don't know how they would react today, because we can see how travelling was really difficult in the last month. Maybe at the end they will say it was the right decision. (SAM-Global)*

It is interesting to consider why this situation might have arisen when compared to experiences of International Volunteer Co-operation Organisations (IVCOs) outside of Switzerland. It is perhaps important to recognise that in other contexts international volunteer programmes are either state run or state contracted on a fully funded basis. In Switzerland, the level of financial support from Swiss Development Co-operation (SDC) for Unité members is 50% of volunteer costs.<sup>3</sup> SDC essentially co-funds the co-workers on the programmes of Unité members, which creates an autonomous and decentralised operation for the programme.

In the survey, volunteers were asked about the alternatives they were offered if they were repatriated and the outcomes are shown in Figure 1.<sup>4</sup> Remote online support for their partner organisation was the overwhelmingly popular opportunity offered for alternative assignments – at 85%. Furthermore, nearly 50% of those responding

<sup>3</sup> This reduces to 40% in 2021.

<sup>4</sup> As shown in the survey, volunteers who had not been repatriated also answered this question. One possible explanation is that volunteers who were briefly repatriated and returned to their assignment also answered this question. It should be noted that there were 27 respondents to this section of the survey.

stated they were offered this opportunity in a different context to providing support for their assigned or different partner organisations. Over 61% of respondents stated they were offered the opportunity of raising awareness of international development issues.

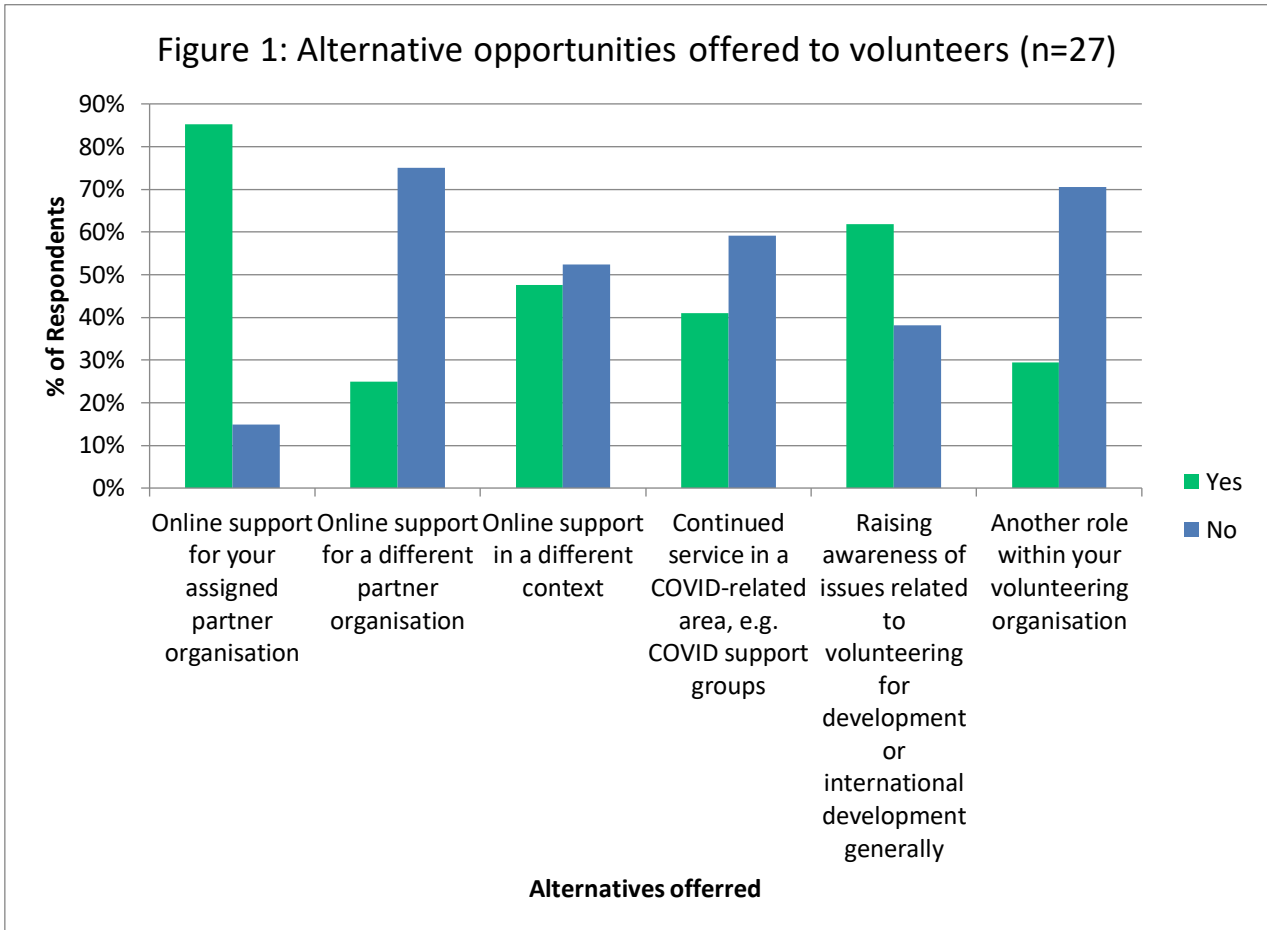


Figure 1: Alternative opportunities offered to volunteers

The volunteer survey responses indicated that the support required by co-workers was generally offered by the Unité members. The main area of support stated as required was counselling. This was, perhaps, a reflection of most co-workers remaining on assignment.<sup>5</sup> See Figure 2 below.

In some interviews, while the potential need for counselling was recognised, it was not requested by co-workers. This was attributed by one Unité member to the fact that their co-workers operate in fragile states, so dealing with shocks and trauma is not unusual.<sup>6</sup>

*We offered to all our volunteers that came back - but also the ones who stayed there - the seminar that Unité proposed on personnel resilience. We also offered to all the volunteers that came back the opportunity to have contact with a coach or a psychologist if they needed it. (DM-échange et mission)*

<sup>5</sup> In this way the responses of the Unité volunteers are different to those of some other surveyed IVCOs, but this outcome is also supported by surveys of volunteers of IVCOs whose volunteers primarily remained on assignment.

<sup>6</sup> Interview Eirene November 2020

The experience of co-workers who remained on assignment varied from country to country. In some, co-workers were faced with quarantine and the Unité members had to work out how to handle that.

*When in Gulu<sup>7</sup> we noticed that we were going into quarantine, we let the co-workers know to ensure they had some extra supplies on essentials: water, gas, connection credit, food and so on. The same applied in Kampala. (Eirene November 2020)*

The interviews with Unité members also revealed a consideration they believed was important – ensuring access for co-workers to the Swiss Government social insurance scheme for temporary repatriation during the period their co-worker contracts were suspended. Unité members expressed deep concern that repatriated volunteers could access financial support.

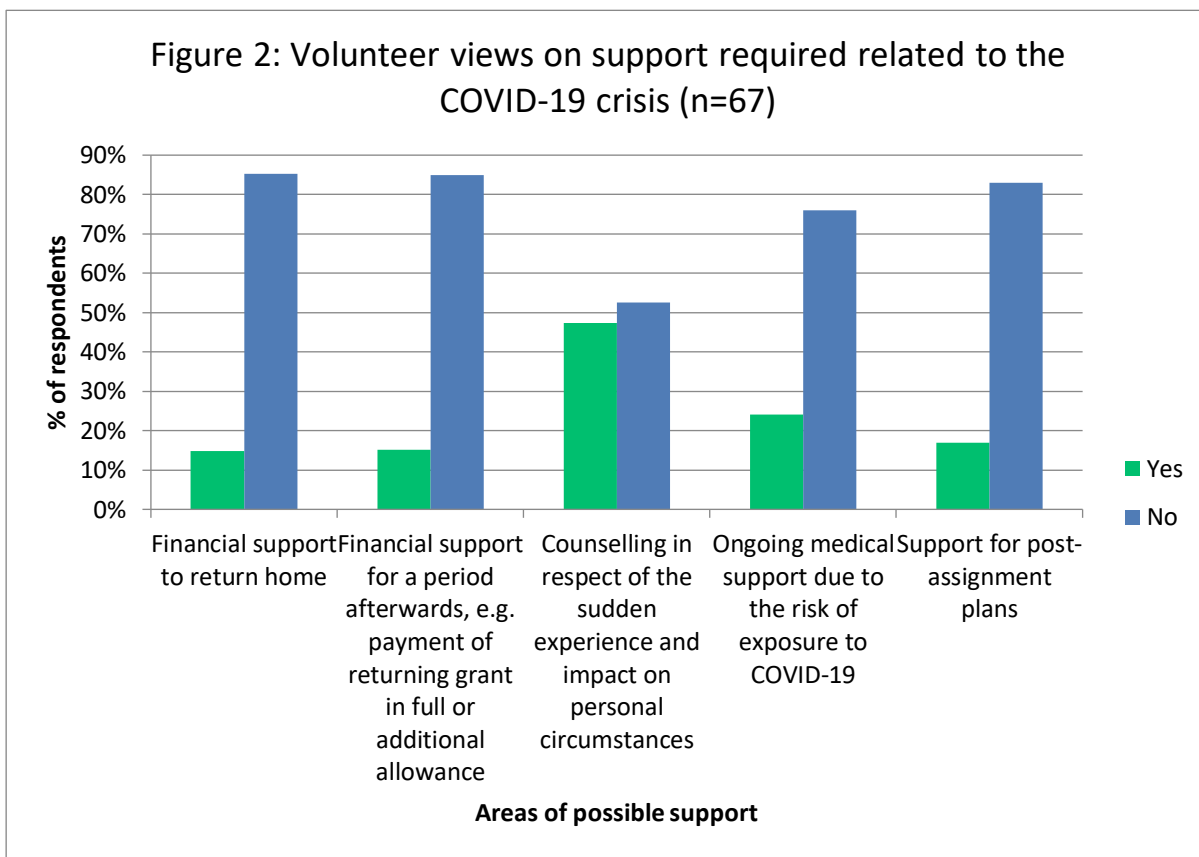


Figure 2: Volunteer views on support required related to the COVID-19 crisis

### 3.2. Relationships with partner organisations

The volunteer survey showed that most respondents considered that support for partner organisations and primary actors was “average” or higher. The survey also found that 60% of respondents rated specific ways of providing volunteer support to partner organisations as “above average” or “excellent.” Nevertheless, there were areas where some respondents rated the organisations’ support as “poor” – notably financial support to partners, support to partners on Covid-19 issues and identifying new partners to deal with the challenges of the pandemic.

7 Gulu, Uganda

*Maybe more financial support to partner organisations to cope / react to this special situation, so they could provide help to end-beneficiaries. (Volunteer)*

*The possibility for partner organisations to change their budgets and redirect financial support was given, but the official communication could have been faster. (Volunteer)*

*Provide guidelines and ongoing support how to live with Covid-19 present in the places where we live and work. (Volunteer)*

It is clear that some Unité members were able to operate more flexibly in their financial relationships with partners, but some partners found themselves in financial difficulty. Arguably those Unité members who operated a project model were better placed to provide continuity in partner support.

Unité member interviews indicated a level of success in continuing their work with partner organisations. Overall, the response of Mission-21 reflected the experience of other Unité members.

*We didn't really have to shift the whole programme focus. Some activities had to be postponed. Other activities, e.g., in the education field, could be continued via Zoom. Some teaching tools were adapted, but we didn't have to stop our programmes. We are still continuing with these in the same countries, just adapting some of the projects. (Mission 21)*

There were instances where it was not possible to continue at all. More than one Unité member reported how the closure of premises and activities (e.g., vocational training centres and schools) meant activities had ceased. On the other hand, some activities could be changed, leading to conclusions that the impact of Covid-19 was in some cases limited.

*Activities in the field finally didn't change too much because we have flexible partners that managed to adapt and still make activities and get in touch with beneficiaries. We support a project in prison; the partner is no longer allowed to go inside the prison. But he is making other activities instead, such as video for the prison to show to the detainees in order to still move forward with extra activities, and he is also taking advice on other activities. (Eirene)*

Retaining co-workers in their assignment was an expressed reason why relationships with partner organisations were not affected. It provided opportunities such as a project in Kenya, where an income generation project switched to the production of masks.<sup>8</sup>

In other cases, where projects could continue, some flexibility was provided in supporting partners with resources – including simple basic provisions. Co-workers would have been part of that initiative. This illustrates the adaptive nature of Unité members in working with partner organisations and co-workers on the impact of Covid-19, which would be outside of the normally defined relationships.

*We also changed some activities in Uganda. We were working with street children. Instead of speaking about the consequences of school drop-out, we made them aware of the importance of washing hands. We put together new activities in order to*

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8 Comundo interview November 2020.

*implement some washing stations for the street children and make sure that were still able to eat enough and have a place to “quarantine”. (Eirene)*

SAM Global talked about developing and implementing a Covid-19 focused programme across all of the countries in which they worked, not simply local adaptation.

*We also started a Covid-19 funding project. We had to communicate to raise funds to help people in all of our projects concerning the consequences of Covid-19. So, we have really changed some of our programmes or added Covid-19 programmes or projects in all of the 10 or 11 countries we are working in. We have some smaller and bigger projects to help them. So that’s the biggest change in our programmes. (SAM Global)*

This facilitated responses across countries with potentially widespread impact.

*We did a small booklet for the sensitisation of children in such a way they could print them out and colour them and then better understand hygiene issues such as washing hands. We distributed at least 40,000 of the books in four or five of our countries, especially Brazil. They have even done additional prints. They printed 20,000 books and sent them to schools. So, it really was a big sensitisation.<sup>9</sup>(SAM Global)*

Covid-19 was seen as a shared experience across the Global North and Global South which brought members and partner organisations together. Unité members also reported a closer link to partners (and between parts of their own organisation) arising from the lack of opportunity to travel out to the programme. This challenge to normal ways of working was reported to have resulted in an increase in maintaining regular rather than a model of occasional contact.<sup>10</sup> The increased frequency of communication appears to have created a greater awareness in head office of the issues a field level and has brought people across the organisation into closer working relationships. Furthermore, as this dialogue has developed, so the topics of discussion have changed.<sup>11</sup>

Another Unité member stated this kind of development had brought the inequality in relationships within the organisation and with partner organisations into sharper focus and had generated closer working between their organisation with partner organisations and donors.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.3. Impact in the North

The lockdown in Switzerland meant that activities could not continue as planned for Unité members. This impacted on co-worker preparation, recruitment, workshops and delays in the departure of co-workers. Instances of co-workers withdrawing after delays on going out on assignment were identified.

*On the recruitment of future co-workers we had to cancel one preparation course – normally we have two preparation courses per year, one in June and one in November. The one in June we had to cancel because of Covid-19. There were candidates who*

<sup>9</sup> SAM Global “made it in French first for the African countries where we are working. And then we translated into English for Cambodia. And then the partners translated them themselves into Portuguese and Spanish for use in Brazil. And we have some in local languages for Burkina Faso. In Guinea they translated it into local languages.”

<sup>10</sup> Comundo interview, November 2020

<sup>11</sup> Comundo interview, November 2020. Comundo had to rethink their management approach, implementing distributed management in a different way. They moved to long distance ongoing relationships from episodic management.

<sup>12</sup> Eirene interview November 2020.



couldn't undertake the three-week preparation course as a result. In consequence, there were some candidates who were due to go on their assignment but instead got new jobs here in Switzerland. They were no longer available as co-workers. (Comundo)

The lockdown impacted severely on lobbying and fundraising and some members stated that the impact of Covid-19 in Switzerland was greater than in the field.

The big impact was rather in Switzerland. Working on volunteer activities, we also have a mandate of information and of sensibilisation. The biggest impact was on those sectors, because it was no longer possible to do any participation workshop or seminar conference, information, or South-North exchanges that we are doing concerning volunteering. We did them online, but it's not the same impact on letting the people know how it is to do volunteering experience. So for all the activities that we were able to postpone, we did it, but there were a lot of activities that needed to be done. (Eirene)

All the events we had planned for sensitisation, events with former co-workers or with co-workers on midterm leave, could not take place. For instance, we had planned at the beginning of December a film festival on human rights here in Switzerland. But that cannot be fully realised - only one part with school classes, but not with the broader public. And there are a lot of these kinds of events we have had to cancel. (Comundo)

The impact, however, varied as the pandemic slowed. In September 2020, Comundo still managed to hold a gathering of 55 returned co-workers<sup>13</sup>.

## 4. Innovation and repositioning: challenges and opportunities arising from the COVID-19 pandemic

It is perhaps important to note that the interviews of Unité members took place in the midst of a "second wave" of COVID-19 in Europe. Understandably, some Unité members were reluctant to speculate on the future, since it was perhaps too early to say what changes were temporary and what might continue.

*It's really a going-on process that we have with the COVID crisis and that it still will go on after the COVID crisis. We think that we are always able to foster us. We also need to be as flexible as possible with our partners because our aim is to help him in his mission by sending volunteers and being able to do it at being efficient. For sure, there will be changes, that will sustain after the crisis. For example, we will have this kind of crisis, in our security issues follow up, in our security matrix, in order to keep it in mind. But it's too soon to say which are the changes that will last. (Eirene)*

*We cannot say that all the partners have really big problems or cannot do their work. But there are a lot of problems. We do not know at the moment what the consequences on a large scale will be. At the moment, most of the partner organisations try to survive and try to continue with their beneficiaries, fulfilling their targets and objectives.*

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13 Comundo interview November 2020.

*But we fear that it will be very difficult next year, when funding is not enough, for these partner organisations (Comundo)*

However, one member expressed the view that there is a need for continued volunteer cooperation because Covid-19 increased divisions between rich and poor and laid bare the high levels of inequality within and between countries.

*For poor people, it was harder, it cost them a lot, some of them lost their job. In Uganda, for example, for all the people working in the market, it was impossible to do it anymore. So poor people went poorer and the rich people went richer. There will still be a need for volunteer cooperation. I don't see any big changes related to the COVID crisis. (Eirene)*

The volunteer survey asked participants to express their level of optimism or pessimism about the future of volunteering for development and which areas are most likely to be strengthened in terms of volunteer approaches. The outcome is shown in Figure 3: 60% of respondents were optimistic about the future of volunteering for development.

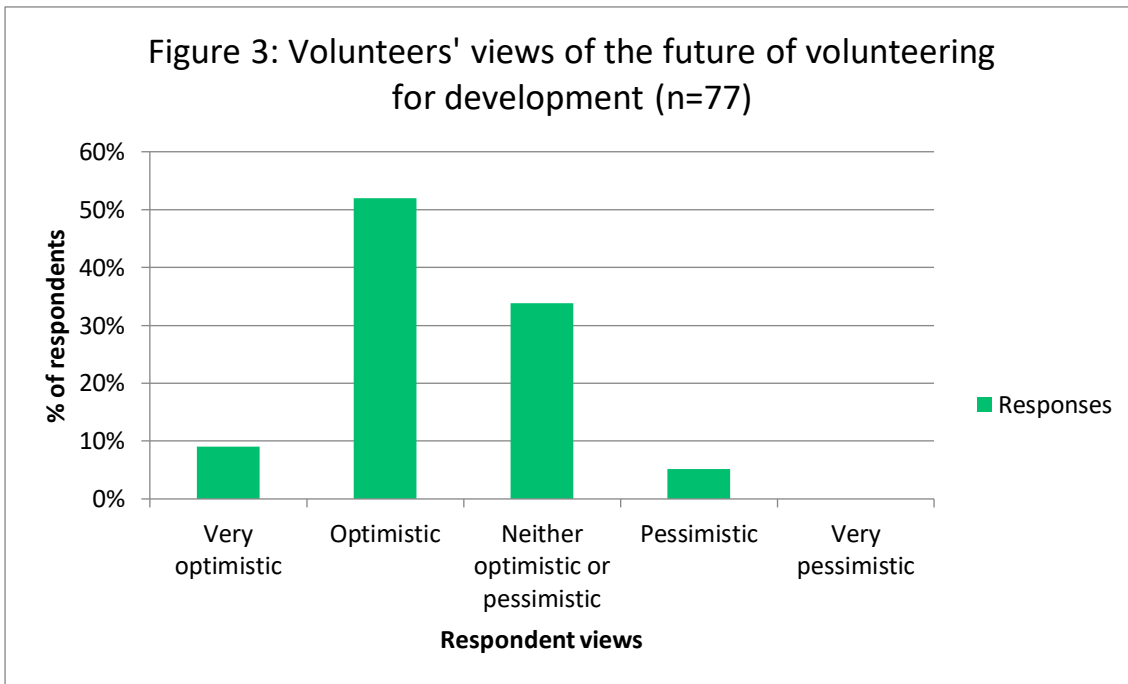


Figure 3: Volunteers' views of the future of volunteering for development

As shown in Figure 4, volunteer respondents identified “capacity building” and “skills development” as important areas for the future, closely followed by a focus on “national and community volunteering”<sup>14</sup>. These views were reinforced to some extent in the Unité member interviews.

<sup>14</sup> This is line with the findings in the Forum survey report. It should be noted that the terms in the survey questions were not defined, allowing individuals to provide their own self-definitions of, for example, “capacity building” and “skills development.” The model used by Unité is attached in Annex 1.

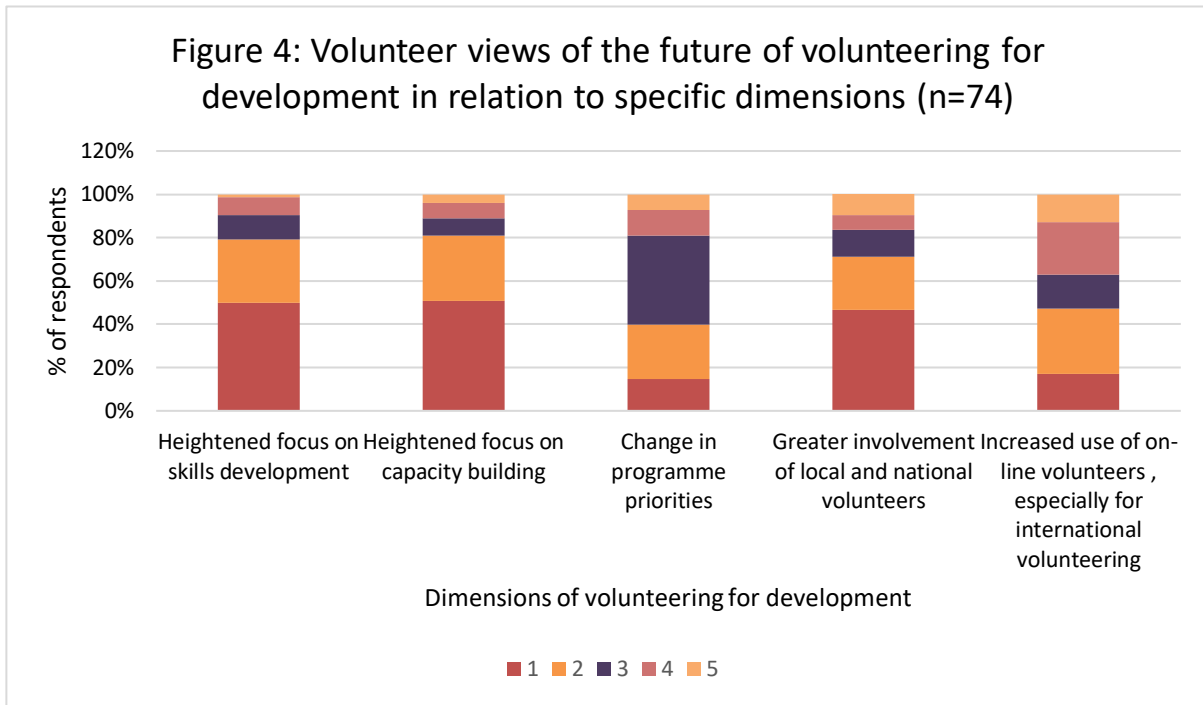


Figure 4: Volunteer views of the future of volunteering for development in relation to specific dimensions

#### 4.1. Co-worker models

Generally, the Unite members interviewed seemed not to be deflected from their strategic direction by the Covid-19 experience. DM-échange et mission, for example, had launched a new strategy and did not see how Covid-19 would affect it. DM-échange et mission sits at the interface of protestant churches in French speaking Switzerland and partners of a similar church background. They now have three models of volunteer: long term “professional”; younger professionals; and cultural exchanges and this was the direction they intended to follow.<sup>15</sup>

#### 4.2. Capacity building

Unité has a distinctive capacity building model which is attached in Annex 1. This model appears to be followed by Unité members and the comments made in both the volunteer survey and the Unité member interviews can be reviewed in the context of the model. Nevertheless, the volunteer survey was conducted across a wide range of IVCOs and VIOs and was not designed to draw out comments on specific models. This is perhaps best undertaken by Unité and its members in due course.

Given the explicit model shown in Annex 1, it is perhaps not surprising the focus of the Unité volunteers in the survey outcomes on capacity building is reinforced by the Unité members interviewed.

<sup>15</sup> DM-échange et mission interview November 2020.

*When we send a teacher, for the partner organisation, it's not so important that this person can teach at schools, but that this person is a facilitator for processes for better teaching or a better performance of the teachers at these schools. Normally, our main concern with our co-workers is not directly the beneficiary group (in this case school children), but the partner organisation and the staff and their empowerment and organisation building and capacity building in the organisation itself (Comundo)*

This focus on facilitation as a mechanism for capacity building relates to the distinctive contribution of co-workers and has implications for the issue of professional competency. One perspective on the facilitation role of co-workers is broadly understood in this way:

*And the other point of the new profile is that our co-workers take more of the role of facilitators – they are not really professionals in the sense of sharing their knowledge, transferring the knowledge and their abilities, etc, but they are facilitators of processes, of networking, of intercultural innovations, etc (Comundo)*

This carries implications for the kind of co-workers and their skill sets in the future, which emphasise 'soft' skills rather than professional skills. Research recently conducted by one organisation of what partners required produced results that might appear to be different to what was expected:

*It was very interesting to hear that professional skills are not so important for the partner organisations, but more the soft skills like intercultural competencies, like social and communicative competencies, and, of course, the capacity for interacting and to be innovative, etc (Comundo)*

### 4.3. Co-workers and project-based interventions

Some saw the integration of co-worker modalities as likely in the future: possibly as national/local co-workers alongside each other; alternatively integrating co-workers, especially local/national co-workers, within a project model (and therefore project funding). This already happens with some co-workers being local people and some programmes simply being project based without Swiss volunteers.

*We will combine sending people and project funding. And even some partners, we only have project financing without an expat sending. We don't have in all the 11 countries, expats. There are four countries at least where there is no staff from Switzerland. It's just a project relationship. (SAM Global)*

Some seemed to indicate that (international) co-workers would decline numerically, not least because of recruitment issues for co-workers prepared to commit to the requirement of a minimum three-year contract. This generates a focus on project led approaches using local people, which Covid-19 has seen as accelerating.

*We can see that all the time it gets more difficult to recruit co-workers. So, we have a strategy to focus more on partnership, project partnership, and not sending people but helping partners in their projects. That means also working more with local people, with local staff, as we do already in some countries. So, for us, it was a strategy already before Covid-19, something which has been on our mind for five years at least. And I think that may be forced (fast tracked) now with this Covid-19. (SAM Global)*

*And one of the things about these last 10 to 15 years is that the profile of the co-worker has changed a lot. I think the first thing I noticed is that the assignments are getting shorter. I have been a co-worker for eight years or nine years or more but now it's three years. Sometimes they extend to four or five years, but normally it's three years or even less for one assignment. I think the tendency in the future is that it will be even shorter. (Comundo)*

In consequence some expressed an expectation in the growth of short-term programme which is indeed evidenced as part of the recent programme developments amongst those interviewed.

Some Unité members interviewed were clear they would not use international volunteers in the future if there were local competencies available<sup>16</sup> and would find alternative ways of meeting objectives if necessary. Some indicated a potential growth in national co-workers, but this would not attract SDC co-funding. In addition, some Unité members recognised the absence of returned Swiss co-workers would undermine their fundraising strategy and consequently demand a change in approach to mobilising funds from Swiss based donors as well as in the awareness raising from Swiss volunteers.

*Normally, we can sensitise people here with co-workers who have experienced the South. They can network here in Switzerland and can share their experiences with their communities here. And this has some effect on fundraising. And that is almost impossible with local national co-workers and with South-South exchange. (Comundo).*

#### **4.4. South-South and South-North exchange**

Exchange models have become a potential new area for Unité members and from the interviews some members identified pilot activities that were already taking place. But views were mixed as to whether it would meet the desired objectives of the members. Practical barriers were identified, including how such models would address the programme objective of sensitisation in the North.

*We already have some kind of pilot projects of South-South exchange and of South-North exchange. I think in future we will be stressing much more on this kind of cooperation, but we are aware also of the difficulties these may imply – difficulties with to solving insurances of living costs, of language and re-integration of their experience to the Swiss or the European context, which is for us very important, because of our model of cooperation is always on two pillars. One is the assignment itself, and the secondary is the sensitisation in the North. And when we have South-South exchange, the second pillar is almost absent, it's not working anymore. (Comundo)*

Others were considering such exchanges, but not using them to any significant extent.

*South-South exchange we are doing sometimes, but not very often. But maybe that's also a strategy for us. If there are connections or possibilities, we try to support it. At the moment, it's not a big opportunity for us to solve the problem. It is already supported by the government of Switzerland, so they help also financially for this South-*

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<sup>16</sup> Eirene interview November 2020.

*South exchange. So, we are well aware of this possibility, but we are not really making use of that. (Mission-21)*

The impact of Covid-19 on developing such models may best be illustrated in the way some organisations were looking at how to implement exchange models, notably in the use of digital tools and formats. Mission-21 set out their vision for their “US Ambassador” programme:

*It is youth exchange between youth from Switzerland and from Africa, Latin America and Asia; also, from the networks of our partner churches and partner organizations. It is a three-year programme with physical exchange and working on topics together on burning issues. And then also we are getting active in our youth admission, which is also very active on social media network. We had to postpone it for one year and change a bit the program but we're still planning to go ahead. So next year, instead of youth from Switzerland going to other parts of the world, youth from Africa, Latin America and Asia plan to come here and if it's not possible that they come, the volunteers that can't come here will join digitally. And then in 2022 there will be another encounter of young Swiss people going there. This is about some of our exchange of personnel. (Mission-21)*

While Covid-19 posed challenges and opportunities for different kinds of exchange models, the issue of how to meet the objective of what at least one organisation called the ‘two pillars’ of the work in the South and the work in the North, presented as being less achievable than the traditional model.

#### 4.5. Online volunteering

With the shutdown of physical face to face volunteering in some areas, the potential of online volunteering has been seen as a potential area for exploration by IVCOs generally. This does not mean it is seen as other than an interim way of enabling international volunteering, especially, to continue.

Over 80% of repatriated co-workers stated they had been offered the opportunity to support their assigned partner organisation online. But in the same volunteer survey, 37% of the respondents *disagreed* that online volunteering would be heightened in the future.

This view of the future potential of online volunteering was shared in the interviews of Unité members, who also challenged the potential of online volunteering. Some emphasised the importance of face-to-face work from a humanitarian or faith-based perspective. Others saw it as contradicting the principle of reciprocity:

*I cannot see what would be the benefit of a remote volunteer because our strategy is really written to enhance or to support reciprocity in the sense that not only people from Switzerland go to other countries, but also people from other countries can come to Switzerland (DM-échange et mission)*

*I think that one thing, which is very important to DM working with volunteers is the human factor - working together with different partners, being in their country living with their people, is a huge source of learning. And it's a huge source of, of learning for the volunteers and for the partners. And really, I think that it's not the same on*

online. We would lose a huge part of the reason why we're doing this. (DM-échange et mission)

Online volunteering can be seen as additional rather than as a replacement. For instance, it featured not as an alternative but because a volunteer would be sent abroad.

We used it back in Switzerland for volunteers who had to postpone their departure. One of them did some remote support, but it is because we knew that we were able to send him the next month and we decided to keep the contract running and so he was able, not to give support rather than taking knowledge of the occupation and the activities of the partner. It was a good way of doing it (Eirene)

Others saw the potential of online volunteering in opening up programme opportunities in new countries but even so it was seen as a short term intervention.

It's quite difficult to have it on the long term, it will be an opportunity for really short term in order to adapt to a specific and temporary situation because we are thinking that it will evolve, but it won't be a long-term solution... We will rather think about opening a new country in the region where they are needs and try to set up a new partner network in this country which is linked with the same issue that we are targeting in the region. It will be used mainly as a short-term solution. (Eirene)

Yes, of course, we have had some experience with online volunteering, because of Covid-19. But it's temporarily and most of the co-workers say okay, it is a possibility to bridge these gaps at the moment, but it cannot be a modality which can be implemented as a long-term assignment, because these kinds of concrete enculturation and being in touch with people directly at the spot is very important for these kinds of assignments. (Comundo)

Some views saw beyond the short-term nature of online volunteering and broadened it into a wider contribution from digital platforms.

I think if we invest in providing technology (and training), ensure power and network availability, there are many chances with online training, consulting, coaching, capacity building or, support in certain areas. And even experts who wouldn't consider moving to a country for a couple of years might consider offering support and share their know-how. (Volunteer)

Comundo also indicated ways in which Covid-19 had provided opportunities in this area and it had involved contributions from co-workers and challenged established ways of working.

There was an input from our co-workers to manage these challenges – to go to a virtual mode of working. And there is a lot of innovation in this sense that there are now virtual platforms of doing workshops with staff, or even with the beneficiaries in remote regions. The crisis has been good in that sense. But there is a lot of knowledge and experience our co-workers which helped to build some kind of remote formation and remote planning and realisation of the project. (Comundo)

Mission 21 had an emphasis of the role of digital tools in their developing programme models which is also not limited to the specific issue of online volunteering:

We want to build thematic platforms. We have core topics we are working on together with our partners like education, peacebuilding, emergency relief and rehabilitation, agro-ecology or food sovereignty. And so, this is also one thing we want to strengthen - this semantic exchange, learning from each other etc. We have been

*building up some thematic platforms in some of the countries or cooperation programmes like in Asia and Latin America. And we are also exploring how we can support the strengthening of these platforms and widening the networks, learning and the digital tools, because it won't be possible to meet physically always and also the cost of course, and you can reach more people when you use a digital tool. (Mission 21)*

*For us, it is what I just said - invest in youth exchange programmes, explore how we can use digital tools and means as supplementary but not completely. We think that it is not possible to only have digital. Like for the PEP assignments, working from home in Switzerland only is not possible because you need this intercultural experience and encounters. But still, we can think of how we can combine it, how we can combine digital tools with the physical encounters. (Mission 21)*

Covid-19 appears to have been an opportunity for Unité members to consider the potential as well as the shortcomings of online volunteering. The integration of digital approaches alongside and integrated with the various co-worker models appears to be a path some members are undertaking, but the pace appears to vary.

**It is recommended that Unité members review the experiences of adapting programme models arising from Covid-19 and explore the implications of potential changes, especially national and local co-workers, project-based interventions, South-South and South-North exchange models and digitally influenced volunteering.**

## 4.6. Resources

As we have seen, Covid-19 had an immediate impact on some sources of funds and the potential for fundraising. But this sits within a broader concern expressed by most members interviewed about future fundraising opportunities.

*The problem that I see for the world of volunteering in the future is the lack of funds and the likelihood that many projects will close down. (Volunteer)*

There was a recognition by Unité members of financial challenges - SDC reducing from 50% support (until end of 2020) to not exceeding 40% support (from 2021)- and an ongoing decline in private donations. Movement from SDC co-funding to project style funding was seen by some as a good direction for risk management.<sup>17</sup>

*I think that the biggest challenge that will happen in the cooperation that I see it's not the specific consequences of the Covid-19 crisis, but rather with the changing of funding philosophy of different donors. Public private partnerships projects that are going on right now in development will be a biggest impact on long term volunteering than the Covid-19 crisis. (Eirene)*

Covid-19 is seen to have impacted on fundraising in the context of a challenging decline in private sector funding. With Unité members reporting that private sector funds were generally declining, Covid-19 impacted on fundraising initiatives in Switzerland at a time when funding was even shorter in supply. This impacts not just on the funding available but the donor relationship itself.

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<sup>17</sup> Eirene interview November 2020.



*The main problem we have with fundraising is the private sector, with people who have been sustaining us over the last few years. Because of the crisis they do not have so many resources to support us.*

*We had to cancel a major donor event. We were planning it for now in December with the major donors; we had to cancel it and that's really a pity because it is always very important to maintain these special relationships with our major donors, giving them our recognition and our thanks with some event where we show them our efforts, what we have done and what we have achieved. That is not possible. We are trying to substitute a little bit within an online event but it's not the same. I think it will be problematic (Comundo)*

**It is recommended that Unité explores with its members the issue of a strategic approach to future funding of their work, including the implications and opportunities of the SDC funding options and the diversification and innovation in funding sources.**

#### 4.7. Organisational strategy and ways of working

Pandemics as a major external influence may offer organisations the opportunity to accelerate changes they were planning to make or to demand new changes in ways of working that may reveal past deficiencies and highlight areas for improvement and change. One feature of the experience may be to generate a level of confidence as a result of the way an organisation has handled it.

*We will try to have some feedbacks on what we did to deal with it, what was the impact, maybe in one or two years, when we will be able to have some numbers and some return. How it went from the beginning to now. But I think it's already giving us some good feedbacks about how we are working, how we were able to adapt and also in our confidence, because with a small NGO, a lot of times people are thinking you're not quite professional, you will not survive, because you don't have the size to survive. (Eirene)*

One consequence of Covid-19 was to interrupt traditional ways of management working together, notably physical international gatherings, enabling a team across the globe to engage as a larger and diverse team. Holding this as an online team meeting was plausible and had its challenges, but also offered new opportunities

*Normally in September, we have our annual meeting here in Lucerne with all the country managers coming from their countries here for one week or 10 days for a seminar, and for also personal conversations. But this year, it was not possible. So we did it online. And it was a huge challenge because of time differences between Latin America, Africa and Asia. Language was also a problem, because some of the country managers only understood Spanish, some of them only English, etc, that was a really a huge problem. So we worked in three sections - in the morning with Africa, and late afternoon with Latin America. And then also we had one block in the middle with all of them - Africa and Latin America at the same time. So that turned out very good. We are very glad and I can say that it has strengthened the relationship between the headquarters here and the country managers in the South. (Comundo)*

Once an online meeting model is established, there is potential to create wider participation, as in one case where co-workers and partner organisations could be brought into arenas they would otherwise not have accessed.

*Normally this kind of seminar would only involve country managers coming from the countries to the headquarters. No co-worker or representative of the partner organisation would be present. (With online meetings) sometimes they were present as it was good to have their inputs. It gave us a feeling of being together – all stakeholders and also the partner organisations. (Comundo)*

The volunteer survey indicated areas where the pandemic offered opportunities for change which likely reflected previously held positions but where the pandemic offered a framework in which such views could be expressed.

*Better investment in local staff, which is more sustainable anyway and does not perpetuate power imbalance of white supremacist and colonial legacies (Volunteer)*

*Within international partnerships, it will be a higher demand on flexibility and capacity to improvise. (Volunteer)*

**It is recommended that Unité members share experiences of new ways of working that developed during the pandemic and which of these changes are ones that can be followed as good practice in ways of working in the future.**

## 5. Lessons learned and recommendations for further discussion

We found from the volunteer survey a generally positive view of how Covid-19 was handled by Unité member organisations. As the main survey concluded:

*“Over 40% of volunteer respondents assessed their volunteer organisations as level 5 (excellent) in how they performed in all five dimensions. When this is combined with respondents who assessed their organisations at level 4 (good), this extends to over 60% on all five dimensions.”<sup>18</sup>*

In that sense, whatever lessons can be learned build upon a base of positive and appreciative feedback from the volunteers. But there are learning points and individual negative experiences.

This section sets out areas for learning that have emerged from the research study and our assessment of the data generated, together with recommendations.

### 5.1. Knowledge, planning and logistics

While overall feedback from co-workers was positive and the self-review of the members interviewed recognised successes, some experiences indicated areas for possible improvement in the response to the pandemic. The importance of having pre-existing and documented guidance was an area of concern.

<sup>18</sup> See the accompanying survey report for the fuller details of the findings. The five dimensions were: speed of response; effective communication; effective systems and processes; seeking feedback from co-workers and partners; and an overall assessment

*I would have expected that Comundo would have had like a crisis manual/guidanc they would have only needed to adapt to that specific situation. To react faster and more frequent. (Volunteer)*

*It would be great if sending organisations could develop concrete plans on guaranteeing the security of their volunteers and their family members in any kind of emergency situation. (Volunteer)*

*Personal level: I felt there was little done to really understand the local situation and there was no real emergency plan. (Volunteer)*

The Unité member interviews suggested a level of variation in the extent to which guidance and plans were in place. Some had experience of handling pandemics but recognised this was a different level of problem which required a responsive approach rather than applying pre-determined protocols:

*In each country we have our evacuation plan. We call it disaster management, with the green light, orange light, red light. We used it four years ago when Ebola was in Guinea. So, we do have some experiences already. But this time, it happened rather fast, and it was not predicted. So, I think it's more maybe the experience we already had, that helped us. We took it step by step and said, 'oh, now we are on red light. Let's pack our baggage.' Of course, there is this system. Myself, I'm also the risk manager and I would say, we managed it more ongoingly and in some instances we did not go step by step. (SAM Global)*

Mission 21 expressed a level of confidence in their planning for the pandemic while recognising there were lessons to be learned.

*We have had already local security plans in each country of cooperation. We had already held security training with the country coordinators and with the programme officers. And we already had crisis team management training in the head office with the management and also the field safety and security staff. So that helped us to respond quite quickly and to activate these crisis management models. And for lessons learnt, of course we realised there were shortcomings; and we have been working on these shortcomings in the last few months and weeks. (Mission 21)*

**It is recommended that Unité members review existing plans, their appropriateness for pandemics, and how they are communicated to volunteers and their families. This might be usefully approached as a workshop to enable the sharing of experiences and best practice.**

## 5.2. Decision-making that was better informed

The issue of whether decisions were well founded and took into account the views of those in the field was raised in the volunteer survey. Some suggested that the views of country level staff were not taken into account, while others focused on how volunteer views could be better heard.

*Include more the opinion and experience of our country coordinator because in Switzerland they didn't really get to know how the situation in Bolivia was. After asking for an extra reunion he could explain better and in detail how the politic, sanitary, economic and social situation was. (Volunteer)*

*Despite being frustrated with the organisation's approach to getting volunteers out, I also respect how new the environment was and how little training anyone had in the field of pandemics. That said, moving forward, the organisation needs to consider its priorities and if the volunteers are the experts in the field, then the organisation needs to act that way as well, and listen to their advice in the moment. (Volunteer)*

**It is recommended that the experience of Covid-19 in relation to decision-making is understood in terms of good organisational practice which can be embedded in ways of working going forward.**

### 5.3. Improved communications

In the context of a generally positive response in the volunteer survey, some issues of communication were raised that could be improved. Unité members recognised this and in some instances acted timeously to improve their communication.

*I think generally the relationships didn't become worse but the main challenge is good communications - to have good communications and stay close to the stakeholders. It improved by calling the co-workers every week. Before then, I was calling once a month or whenever it was necessary, but now in this Covid-19 time, I was calling every week to the co-workers because in the Philippines since there is no country manager because it's a program which is ending in February next year, and there are only two co-workers left. (Comundo)*

Unité members reported challenges with not knowing what to communicate and when, especially at early stages. However, communication is a two-way process and in a crisis situation, a process of regular communication is essential.

*More contacts with the volunteers. A less unidirectional dialogue. (Volunteer)*

The views of Unité members reflected how communications between the head offices and the field improved as the response to the situation arising from the pandemic progressed. This suggests there was scope for improvement and that arrangements that have been developed – specifically regular rather than episodic contact – which need to be maintained and developed as a proactive response for any future similar crises.

**It is recommended as part of the development of the crisis plan that Unite members consider a systematic approach to communication in the context of a pandemic.**

### 5.4. Volunteer support

While volunteer support required as identified in the volunteer survey was also seen as provided by those surveyed, some suggestions emerged about the demotivating impact of only focusing on Covid-19 for volunteers on assignment.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Some of the issues emerged concerned the extent to which counselling was required by those remaining on assignment and the financial requirements of those who were repatriated. The full results are contained in the accompanying survey report.

*In our country group: not reduce the range of topics to Covid-19 related topics only. Not dampen our optimism by indulging in picturing all the horror scenarios, however unlikely, that maybe might occur. (Volunteer)*

One feature for co-workers who remained in-country was the possibility of quarantine and working from home, which raised specific support issues. One of those, the provision of food and supplies – notably phone credit – was referenced by several members, but volunteers raised other matters.

*For home office: offer funds/help in case our computers (my primary work tool) needed repairs or maintenance. Personally, I've used my private laptop for work during half a year now. (Volunteer)*

The importance on changing everyday approaches to supporting volunteers was recognised and acted on by some Unité members.

*I think it has to do with the frequency of communication and also to do with the soft skills, such as talking about their health situation, about their emotional resilience, about practical problems co-workers are confronted with during this time of Covid-19. And normally, if there was no Covid-19, these wouldn't have been issues of communication from the headquarters to the co-workers, but more in the country itself between the country manager and the co-workers. But now we here at headquarters are more aware of the problems on the spot. (Comundo)*

One important finding from the study indicates that depending on whether volunteers are repatriated or remain on assignment, they may require different kinds of support. If Unité members responded in a different way in future pandemics in terms of volunteer repatriation this would impact on the support required.

**It is recommended that Unité members explicitly consider the different kinds of support required by volunteers who remain in the field and those who are repatriated.**

## 5.5. Volunteering motivation

In the volunteer survey, 88% of volunteer respondents stated that their experience of the Covid-19 crisis had not changed their interest in volunteering in the future. But the open-ended responses suggested elements of caution and - in at least one case - a loss of confidence in volunteering organisations.

*I do not trust my volunteering organisation anymore to take care of the volunteers during difficult times. (Volunteer)*

*I am still interested in a possible future assignment, but would assess well where and how, especially being a parent of young children. (Volunteer)*

*It's still in my interest, however it's much nicer to be able to work directly with the target group than only working at home and neither being able to get to know more people and their culture. (Volunteer)*

At the same time, potential divisiveness emerges which links to volunteer commitment.

*We need volunteers who are not just afraid of getting infected but stay engaged attending those in need. (Volunteer)*

Volunteer motivation has been largely unchanged, but the pandemic appears to have some impact which could affect future volunteering decisions.

**It is recommended that Unité members ensure that the motivation to volunteer in the future is addressed as a matter of routine in post assignment debriefing.**

## 5.6. Partner organisation support

The volunteer survey and interviews with Unité members demonstrated a strong belief that partner organisations had been assisted during the pandemic. There were examples of a redirection of activities; ensuring objectives were met by other means, especially through the project-based model; and flexibility on funding support.

However, in the volunteer survey some respondents identified areas where there were gaps in support.

*Local level / Partner organisation: the organisation could have done more to support the partner organisation in providing a temporary humanitarian aid fund and support in providing prevention measures. (Volunteer)*

*It would further be great, if there was any kind of emergency help fund to assist organisations to continue their work, protect their workers and quickly deliver (temporary) humanitarian aid/ prevention measures, when an acute crisis breaks out. (Volunteer)*

There are valuable experiences emerging from the ways in which Unité members have supported partner organisations.

**It is recommended that Unité consider convening a workshop/webinar to enable members to share their approaches to supporting partner organisations during a pandemic.**

**It is recommended that Unite consider using the findings of this report to engage with members about how Unite could support members in future crisis situations.**

## 6. Concluding reflections on the future of volunteering for development in relation to Unité

It is noticeable that there is a level of resonance between the views expressed by Unité members in the interviews and the views emerging in the volunteer survey concerning the future of volunteering for development. The support given to capacity building and skills in the volunteer survey aligns with the increased project focus, seen as an important form of adaptation by the Unité members interviewed. The

perspective that national and community volunteering would be strengthened in the survey echoes the likely increase of the current practice of using local co-workers but piloting of South-South exchanges, might suggest a movement away from the model of Swiss nationals as long-term co-workers.

At the same time this appears to be a segmented approach, where the use of long term – perhaps increasingly locally recruited – co-workers sits within a framework of short-term opportunities for young Swiss professionals and for cultural experiences, both of which are seen as potential areas for exchange programmes. There is some recognition that different approaches lead to different outcomes – inter-cultural experience and social justice; capacity building and poverty reduction.<sup>20</sup>

In that context it is not surprising that some views of the future suggest a movement to increased variation in the volunteering offer.

*I could imagine now that in 10 years, it can be a lot of virtual cooperation in social media - but perhaps combining all these kinds of models is the future - long term, short term, South-South, South-North, co-workers in the age of retirement, online assignments. I think it will be more diverse in the future. (Comundo)*

Some of the factors that will influence this change have been set out in section 4. There is a gradual trend of reduced financial support by SDC for the co-worker programme and there is no suggestion this has been affected by the pandemic. In contrast, levels of private funding, already seen as declining, are set for further decline as both a direct consequence of the pandemic as well as the effect on donor relationships. This necessarily implies a strong focus on fundraising and increases the risk of funding led models being developed.

However, in contrast to many of the IVCOs in the Forum study, the Unité members tend to operate in niche areas (humanitarian support) or within what might be termed as a “closed” rather than “open” system. Such systems integrate strongly held values with close institutional relationships. The recurrent example in the interviews concerned the faith-based framework in which a number of Unité members operate. In the context of Covid-19, this strong value base was seen as significant in co-workers deciding to remain in place and commit to partner organisations.

The institutional arrangements reflect the framework within which members work in Switzerland and the nature of local partner organisations, brought close together by the shared values of the organisations and the co-workers.

The DM-échange et mission model derives from their historic background in the Protestant church and their continuing institutional links to similar churches in the countries in which they work.

*They're mostly churches, they're mostly Protestant churches, and then NGOs, linked to the churches or community based, but always with some kind of link. With, if not with one church, with a general question of theology and community life and faith. DM was born from the grouping of different older societies of mission from Protestant churches in Switzerland and France and other countries like this. And so, the long-term partners are churches, Protestant churches in different countries. And then we*

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<sup>20</sup> The interview with Comundo November 2020 draws this out well.

*work with academic institutions that teach theology or that form of pastors and leaders and things like this. And then we have also NGOs. But historically, all of them are strongly or well linked to churches. (DM-échange et mission)*

The significance of the commitment of the co-workers and how both Unité members and co-workers were able to respond positively is illustrated in the following account by SAM Global, which draws out the *contribution* and sense of *sacrifice* made by co-workers.<sup>21</sup>

*We are a Christian organisation, and our people they do have a mission, they are called to do their business or to do their mission, and they are attached to these people that they have been living with for one year, 10 years, whatever. And I think, you know, they know that their place is there, but it's also like, a spiritual affair, I think. Unité is not talking a lot about this kind of subject, but I think it's very important in the work and for us as SAM Global, it is a really important part. So our commitment to the beneficiary to the organisation is rather strong. And our people, they are not employees, but they are real volunteers. They are really, you know, losing something. They are not getting the same luxury they could have here in Switzerland, but they are willing to give up this luxurious life, and that's a big commitment. And maybe that's also why they are fighting to get their visa back. And they went up until the senior minister and got these letters down. And they really wanted to go back to Guinea even when the port was closed. (SAM Global)*

The consequence of this framework is well understood by some members interviewed and Mission 21 articulated the link to social capital in the context of developing their new strategy, which is focused on the idea of a “Global Learning Community”.

*The idea is of a global learning community, a community of practice, a community of expressing... there is a lot of social capital in that community because of the longstanding relationships. There are a lot of people involved. We have a lot of social capital because of former years' volunteers, or long-term assignments. All these are bridge builders. ...But also, the partners, they are not just partners, they are part of Mission 21. And we formed together this community – there is trust, there is more than just this so-called development cooperation, and we can build on that. I think that's really the social capital. And then our partners have social capital in the countries where they live, where they work, and with their faith-based networks. I think you know this term development better than I because you are more involved in the research, but there needs to be other terms. That's why I really prefer to say that we are this global community of learning, of solidarity of mutuality and exchange (Mission 21)*

This strong sense of a community - essentially of international character – talks well to the two-way sharing of volunteering which, as we have seen, some Unité members have as central to their mission. It offers a potential advantage in framing exchange programmes, since they can operate within long-standing relationships and/or where shared values provide an important starting point for any new partner participants or co-workers.

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<sup>21</sup> It is perhaps useful but beyond the scope of this report to consider volunteer motivations contextually. Arguably a relatively closed system of this kind will frame more explicitly (formally and informally) what is expected of volunteers. “Open” systems may have the benefit of flexibility in programme direction but may also have a more eclectic range of volunteer motivations, especially given that in many programmes volunteers enter in an individualistic mode which arguably generates a stronger focus on how volunteers will benefit from the experience.



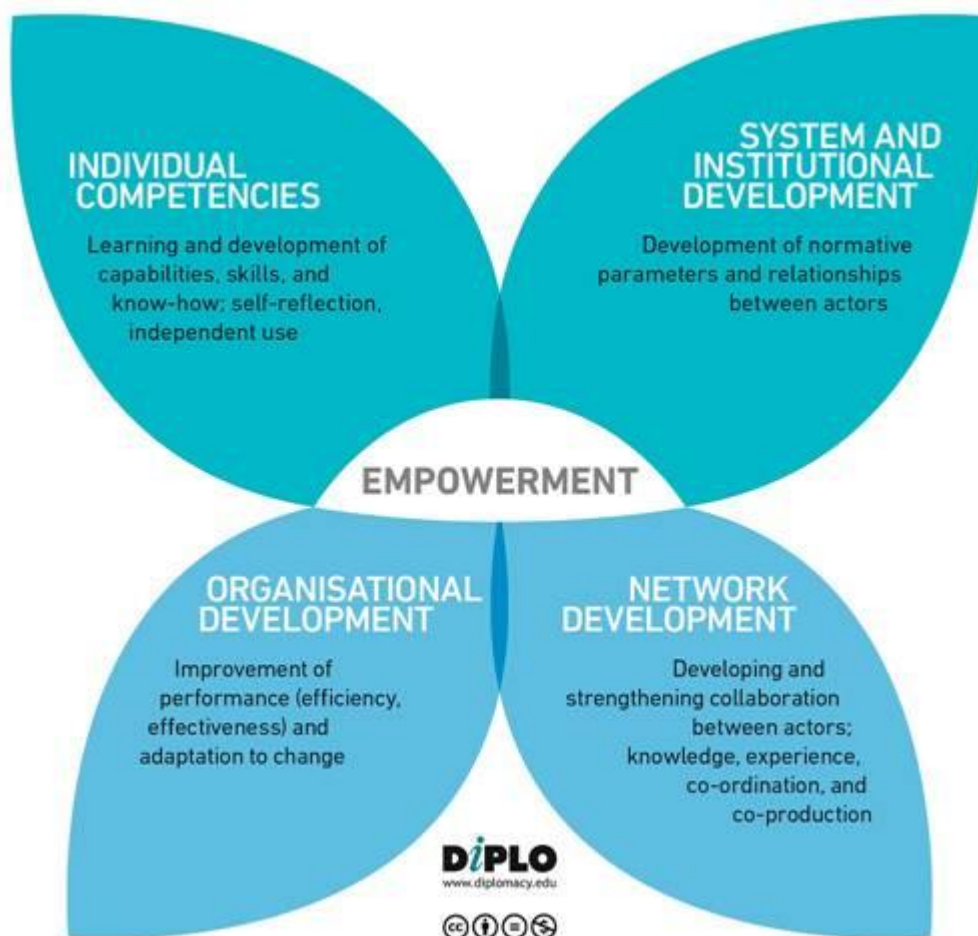
One challenge of closed systems, however, is engagement beyond those connected to the system. In development terms, it runs the risk of not accessing people and communities that are not part of that system, so may not be inclusive in approach. The recognition that such a closed system *may* be an issue has been understood by Mission 21 in developing their new strategy and recognising the potential of digital tools.

*We are not thinking in the box as a closed box of Mission 21, but really also how we can strengthen their networks and, and cooperation and exchange on issues and topics that are of common concern, in other organisations too. And there again, I think that the digital tools are really helpful. (Mission 21)*

In conclusion, it may well be that the extent and practice of what might be termed relatively “closed” systems provided the framework for the extent to which Unité member co-workers remained on assignment and why Unité members could report that their programmes were not significantly disrupted. In the face of challenges such as the pandemic it appears the models of Unité members were resilient. At the same time, it is important to consider the external factors that underpinned such resilience, notably the strength in shared structures and values, but also the longevity of the co-funding resourcing model.

Looking to the future, Unité may need to consider how members balance retaining ‘closed’ models within which volunteering takes place, which might better protect against pandemics, such as COVID-19; the extent to which more ‘open’ models could offer access to a wider range of partners, beneficiary groups and stakeholders and be more inclusive; and the financial sustainability of pursuing different scenarios. We would encourage Unité to continue to engage members in these discussions and address the lessons learned from the pandemic alongside the future direction of their members.

## Annex 1: Unité capacity building model diagram



## Annex 2 List of recommendations

### It is recommended that ...

1. Unité members review existing plans, their appropriateness for pandemics, and how they are communicated to volunteers and their families. This might be usefully approached as a workshop to enable the sharing of experiences and best practice.
2. The experience of Covid-19 in relation to decision-making is understood in terms of good organisational practice which can be embedded in ways of working going forward.
3. As part of the development of the crisis plan, Unité members consider a systematic approach to communication in the context of a pandemic.
4. Unité members explicitly consider the different kinds of support required by co-workers who remain in the field and those who are repatriated.
5. Unité members ensure that the motivation to volunteer in the future is addressed as a matter of routine in post-assignment debriefing.
6. Unité consider convening a workshop/webinar to enable members to share their approaches to supporting partner organisations during a pandemic.
7. Unité consider using the findings of this report to engage with members about how it could support members in future crisis situations.
8. Unité members review the experiences of adapting programme models arising from Covid-19 and explore the implications of potential changes, especially national and local co-workers and digitally influenced volunteering.
9. Unité explores with its members the issue of a strategic approach to future funding of their work, including the implications and opportunities of the SDC funding options and the diversification and innovation in funding sources.
10. Unité members share experiences of new ways of working that developed during the pandemic and which of these changes could be followed as good practice in ways of working in the future.

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Unité  
Swiss association for the exchange of  
personnel in development cooperation

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## About

For 55 years, Unité, the Swiss association for personnel exchange in development cooperation, has been monitoring the quality of international volunteer for development assignments through standards, evaluations, institutional support, studies and training. It is made up of 13 member organisations. In partnership with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Unité is committed to an efficient and sustainable cooperation with partners in the South.

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