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THE IMPORTANCE OF MEASURING ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND PERSONAL BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERING

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aims to broaden the understanding of volunteering by exploring its wider economic, social, and personal impact beyond individual altruism. It aims to promote the recognition of volunteering as an important contributor to community well-being, social cohesion, democracy, social change, and personal development.

Methodology: The research draws on existing literature on volunteering, service-learning, and civic engagement, and presents original research based on a sample of 489 students from Croatian business schools. It discusses various methods of measuring the impact of volunteering and provides an overview of the current state of volunteering in Croatia.

Results: The research shows that different measurement methods reveal the diverse impact of volunteering on individuals and organizations, highlighting the need for comprehensive data and frameworks. Traditional techniques provide a foundation, but the integration of advanced methods—such as stakeholder engagement, personal development, and social reporting standards—provides a holistic perspective on the contribution of volunteers. These methods improve evaluation, promote transparent communication, and acknowledge the economic, social and personal benefits of volunteering, leading to effective volunteer programs and stronger policy support in Croatia.

Conclusion: The study highlights the importance of improving the recognition of volunteering as an important contributor to community well-being, social cohesion, democracy, social change, and personal development. By highlighting the multiple benefits of volunteering, this study is of relevance to scholars specializing in volunteering, service-learning, and civic engagement, practitioners seeking to improve volunteer programs, and policymakers considering institutional support for volunteers and civil society organizations (CSOs).

Keywords: Volunteering, impact measurement, economic benefits, social benefits, personal benefits

1. Introduction

Recognizing human potential as a critical driver of development demonstrates the importance of promoting social responsibility and awareness among individuals, communities, and nations. In this context, volunteering serves not only as a response to identified societal needs and challenges, but also as a catalyst for the personal development and self-actualization of volunteers. In Croatia, the growth of volunteering reflects the development of civil society and represents active citizen engagement in addressing various social problems that exceed the capacity of the public and private sectors. However, obtaining accurate and comprehensive data on the state of volunteering in Croatia remains a challenge.

Building on existing research on motivational factors for volunteering (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Ledić, 2007; Moore et al., 2014; Garai-Fodo et al. 2021; Rampasso et al., 2021) and the economic, social, and personal benefits of volunteering (Hadađ & Găucă, 2014; Bere et al., 2019; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2020; Liszt-Rohlf et al., 2021), this study aims to fill a gap in the current literature by focusing on the methods used to measure the impact of volunteering. In particular, it emphasizes the importance of assessing the impact of volunteering on individuals, organizations, and society (Shin & Kleiner, 2003; Haddock & Devereux, 2016; Sadowski et al., 2018), with a special focus on socio-economic development in Croatia. This includes describing the specific methods of measurement and emphasizing the benefits that various stakeholders can derive from the knowledge gained through such assessments.

This paper aims to achieve three objectives: firstly, to explain the methods used to measure the benefits of volunteering; secondly, to provide an overview of the current state of volunteering in Croatia, drawing on official data, reports, and a literature review; and thirdly, to present findings from an empirical study conducted in 2017 involving 489 students from five public business schools in Croatia. A comprehensive questionnaire was used to examine several dimensions, including attitudes toward volunteering, motives for volunteering, volunteering behavior, and socio-demographic data. This study focuses primarily on the results related to attitudes toward volunteering. The data was analyzed using SPSS 24.0. Despite the time lag, the results retain their validity as there is limited data on the percep-

tion of volunteering in Croatia, especially among young people. A 2023 study on the general population (D-Kolektiv, 2023) underlines this continuity by showing that only 7% of people volunteer. These results not only confirm the static nature of the situation but also underscore the continued relevance of the above-mentioned research from 2017. These findings highlight the need for discussions aimed at aligning society's priorities with activities that are conducive to its development, as the results show that, since 2017, volunteering is still not perceived as a potential source of self-development, and that the social climate continues to diminish the importance of volunteering and its impact on economic, social, and personal development.

The study highlights the state of volunteering in Croatia and the existing challenges related to volunteering, emphasizing the need to understand the multiple impacts of volunteering. It also examines the methods and tools needed for a comprehensive evaluation. In this context, the study focuses on answering the following research question: Can efficient measurement of the economic, social, and personal impact of volunteering contribute to the development of volunteering in Croatia? Placing volunteering in the context of human and social capital means considering it as a space for action and learning. This experience leads to the acquisition and transmission of this capital within the community (Buzov & Ivošević, 2024).

Furthermore, the findings of the study underscore the importance of measuring the impact of volunteering and emphasize the need to implement comprehensive frameworks, such as those proposed by Social Value International (2021) to capture the broader social value created by volunteering. In addition, the study highlights the need for a holistic approach to assessing the impact of volunteering, particularly in terms of personal development and social progress, and emphasizes the importance of promoting volunteering as a catalyst for personal growth and social progress.

The paper consists of three main sections. The first section includes both the introduction and the literature review. The introduction highlights the importance of volunteerism and sets forth the specific objectives and context of our study. The literature review includes an analysis of previous research and studies on the importance of volunteering and the measurement of its economic, social, and personal benefits. The second section is devoted to our

research methodology, outlining the three main objectives of the study, explaining the intricacies of the methodology used, and highlighting the value of our research. Finally, the third section presents the research findings, along with a discourse and concluding remarks that derive from our initial research question, acknowledge the limitations of our study, and offer insights and recommendations for future research and recommendations for the formulation of tailored policies, infrastructural support, and volunteer programs.

2. Literature review

Measuring the impact of volunteers can help provide valuable insights into the tangible benefits that volunteering brings to individuals, organizations, and society as a whole. Rochester et al. (2010) argue that organizations have to prove themselves and provide evidence to back up claims of their effectiveness. In 2014, the European Economic and Social Committee emphasized the importance of measuring the social impact in the third sector, advocating for standardized indicators of the third sector impact at the macro level, as well as the standardization of practices and methodologies at the organizational level (European Economic and Social Committee, 2014). Social impact measurement provides a better tool for organizational management and should be integrated into the organization as an organizational process, not as an additional activity that the organization performs. Civil society organizations (CSOs) strive to bring about positive change for society, and they focus not only on understanding and quantifying the magnitude of change that results from their actions, but also on the outcomes of their activities (Hadad & Găucă, 2014). However, the essence is not only in measuring, understanding, and reporting, but also in learning and improving the organization based on the measured data (Social Impact Measurement for Civil Society Organization, 2022). This includes optimizing resource use in smart, sustainable, or regenerative ways to maximize the value of the resources invested. According to Samuels (2023), volunteer impact evaluation can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the volunteer program. It addresses key questions such as the number of clients directly benefiting from volunteer service, observed behavioral changes among those served by volunteers, variations in the organization's resource capacity, the effectiveness of volunteer appreciation initia-

tives, the performance of the volunteer engagement strategy, the feasibility of expanding the volunteer program, and the potential to convert volunteers into donors. Haddock and Devereux (2016) describe several benefits of measuring the impact of volunteerism, including provision of a foundation for diverse volunteer groups to demonstrate their significant collective contribution to sustainable development. This process allows these groups to concentrate their efforts on areas of common interest and synergy, promoting a more cohesive and impactful approach to their work.

Volunteering provides value on multiple levels, highlighting that by recognizing the value of volunteering, individuals, communities, societies, and economies can be strengthened (Sadowski et al., 2018). Measuring the social impact of volunteering is important, as Sadowski et al. (2018) emphasize, for several reasons. It demonstrates the value of volunteering by enhancing communication and reporting on community action and engagement. It strengthens accountability within civil society organizations by properly recording resources allocated to community initiatives. The measurement process ensures that the quality of volunteering is not only assessed but also improved through enhanced internal management and more effective benchmarking. In addition, this approach enables a more critical analysis of performance and helps to understand both intended and unintended benefits. This understanding can in turn influence strategic decisions about the allocation of resources for future initiatives. Also, measuring the social impact contributes to project sustainability. By aligning with evolving donor expectations that go beyond traditional annual reports and include financial, social, and environmental indicators, organizations can make a compelling case for continued support. Finally, the emphasis on evidence-based decision making for policymakers, donors and investors underscores the broader implications of rigorous impact measurement in volunteering and community engagement.

Consideration of these principles reveals a departure from the traditional approach to impact measurement. Rather than relying solely on standard economic metrics such as resources invested and volunteer hours, the focus is on recognizing the broader impact of volunteering. This includes not only the financial benefits to the organization, but also the potential impact at multiple levels: the

personal sphere, which includes volunteers, employees, and beneficiaries; the institutional sphere, which refers to the nonprofit organizations that carry out these activities; the immediate beneficiaries; and the larger community, which includes family members, friends of beneficiaries, local NGOs, the corporate sector, and government. Volunteering is commonly viewed as a social and community endeavor that enriches social capital, strengthens the community, and facilitates the provision of services that would otherwise be either more expensive or less accessible (Putnam, 2000).

Many aspects of the welfare state and community development in contemporary society depend on voluntary activities. The economic assessment of volunteering is usually calculated through quantifying the market replacement cost of volunteers. However, the economic impact of volunteering is often ignored. It is not captured by GDP statistics because usually no monetary transaction takes place. Nevertheless, the UNDP recognizes the economic impact when assessing volunteering in terms of GDP, estimating that one billion people were actively volunteering in 2019, accounting for around 2.4% of global GDP (Human Development Report Office, 2019). In Great Britain, for example, formal volunteering generates an economic output of around £23 billion, equivalent to 0.8% of GDP (Armour, 2023). Many countries acknowledge the significance of unpaid volunteer service for economic, social, cultural, and individual development. In the United States, the value of a volunteer hour was estimated to be \$31.80 in 2023.

According to Shin and Kleiner (2003), volunteers are not simply an unpaid working force, nor do they merely help organizations in which they volunteer save money. They actually help organizations to streamline their financial resources toward maintaining their mission, which in turn leads to personal, organizational, and community development.

There is significant academic and public interest in the idea that volunteers, who are perceived as donating their time and energy, receive compensation in the form of increased earnings (Wilson et al., 2020). The authors mention a survey conducted by LinkedIn, a popular professional network, which found that 41% of employers consider volunteer work as equal as paid work when selecting new employees. Additionally, one in five employers having

made a recent hiring decision based on a candidate's volunteer experience.

The UN definition of volunteering includes "... benefit to others" as one of the core characteristics of volunteering. Therefore, social benefits are usually the most emphasized ones in the case of volunteering. Social benefits of volunteering include numerous "positive externalities": improved employment and income prospects, lower criminal activity, lower risk of mental-health problems, and so on. Volunteering plays a vital role in maintaining a democratic society, as it helps build citizenship skills such as negotiation and public speaking (Ott & Dicke 2016). It also enables people to interconnect and enhance their social networks, thereby strengthening communities. Ironmonger (2000) emphasizes that it is important to recognize the value of volunteering. Very often, the time donated to voluntary activities is even more valuable than money—many people may not be able to donate money, but they do donate their time.

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2011), volunteering brings significant benefits to society since it:

- provides important employment training and access to the labor force,
- is a critical resource for achieving global development goals (e.g., according to the ILO, efforts to eradicate smallpox and vaccinate children against polio would not have been possible without the mobilization of millions of volunteers for this purpose),
- can provide services that cannot be readily provided by paid workers, such as mentoring and serving as role models,
- enhances social solidarity, social capital, political legitimacy, and the quality of life in a society,
- can help promote social inclusion and integration.

Although the ILO (2011) refers to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), volunteering remains useful and relevant in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015. "The newly adopted Sustainable Development Goals offer another opportunity for individuals to show solidarity through volunteerism" (UN Volunteers, 2015).

Volunteering offers individuals—volunteers—the opportunity to increase their social engagement. Research by Thoits and Hewitt (2001) found that volunteering improved all six aspects of personal well-being of volunteers: happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, sense of control over time, physical health, and depression. Numerous studies have found that volunteering improves the physical and psychological well-being of elderly persons by maintaining self-esteem, life satisfaction, access to support systems, and activity level (Van Willigen, 2000). Moreover, volunteering fosters the development of “civic skills” (Verba et al., 1995) and has been linked to increased chances of employment, especially for individuals re-entering the workforce. In addition, volunteering is associated with higher self-efficacy. Shin and Kleiner (2003) emphasize that volunteering helps improve self-efficacy and self-esteem, which in turn prevents depression by increasing energy and promoting a more positive attitude toward life. Students are an ideal population for volunteering due to their energy, enthusiasm, and desire to gain practical experience. Edwards et al. (2001) found that student volunteers were not only reliable and respectful but also provided significant value to organizations, underscoring their importance in helping maintain and enhance organizational operations. In return, volunteering provides many opportunities for students. It enables them to apply academic knowledge to real-life examples, provides a platform to develop new skills and improve existing ones, expand their social and professional network, and explore different career paths.

In their literature review, Haski-Leventhal et al. (2020) identified the main individual benefits of volunteering. Volunteering can lead to several personal benefits, including increased employability, improved cognitive and behavioral adaptability, accumulation of human capital, acquisition of valuable life skills and practical experience, personal growth, development of leadership skills, improvement of critical thinking skills, greater self-confidence, and improved conflict resolution skills. It also promotes additional benefits such as improved interpersonal communication skills and self-efficacy as well as the development of positive civic values, a sense of social responsibility, and a commitment to community. According to Liszt-Rohlf et al. (2021), volunteers develop their ability to delegate tasks to other people or train them to perform various tasks independently (leadership

skills), and they gain social and process-oriented competencies, including communication (in challenging situations) and technical skills (assisting people with disabilities).

In addition, volunteering contributes to a deeper understanding of social issues and fosters reciprocity and appreciation for the voluntary sector. It fosters greater empathy and increases sensitivity to critical social issues such as poverty, illiteracy, unequal educational opportunities, and community violence.

3. Research method

The present study has three objectives: first, to comprehensively present and explain different methods used to measure the benefits of volunteering, with the aim of quantifying its positive impact on economic, social, and personal development; second, to present the current state of volunteering in Croatia based on official data and reports that provide information on the estimated number of volunteers, volunteer hours, and related costs; and third, to provide an overview of the perception of volunteering in Croatia. This was achieved through an empirical study conducted in 2017 with a convenient sample of students studying at five public business schools in Croatia - Osijek, Pula, Rijeka, Split, and Zagreb. The main reason for selecting business schools is that their curricula include courses dealing with nonprofit and voluntary activities as well as civil society development, so students are introduced to the sector and often have the opportunity to actively participate in such activities, which is often not the case at other faculties. The survey was conducted in the form of a paper-and-pencil questionnaire and administered by trained instructors. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no incentives were offered to participants. The questionnaire was distributed to 500 students, 11 of whom did not complete it. Usable data were thus obtained from a sample of 489 students. The questionnaire consisted of four groups of questions. The first group related to general attitudes toward volunteering, the second to motivation for volunteering, i.e. non-volunteering, the third to volunteering behaviors, and the last group included socio-demographic data. The data were analyzed using SPSS 24.0. Descriptive statistics and ANOVA analysis were used to interpret the results. The major characteristics of the sample are given in Table 1.

Table 1 Sample description

		FREQUENCIES	PERCENTAGE
GENDER	male	152	31.1
	female	337	68.9
YEAR OF STUDY	1 st	76	15.5
	2 nd	180	36.8
	3 rd	114	23.3
	4 th	82	16.8
	5 th	37	7.6
LOCATION	Osijek	105	21.5
	Pula	94	19.2
	Rijeka	95	19.4
	Split	83	17.0
	Zagreb	112	22.9
HOUSEHOLD INCOME	Below average (650 Euro or less)	110	24.6
	Average (651-1,300 Euro)	187	41.7
	Above average (above 1,300 Euro)	151	33.7
VOLUNTEERING EXPERIENCE	Yes	215	44.0
	No	274	56.0
TOTAL		489	100

Source: Authors

This study highlights the importance of evaluating the economic, social, and personal impact of volunteering, while also shedding light on the current landscape of volunteering in Croatia. Empirical findings from a student survey deepen the understanding of attitudes, motivations, and behaviors related to volunteering. They also highlight the need for a comprehensive impact assessment to stimulate positive change in the volunteering landscape and encourage greater engagement of all social actors.

4. Results

The results of this study are structured around three core objectives. Firstly, the study details various methodologies for measuring the benefits of volunteering, focusing on its impact on economic, social, and personal development. Secondly, it examines the current landscape of volunteering in Croatia, utilizing official data to report on volunteer numbers, hours, and related costs. Lastly, it explores the societal perception of volunteering within Croatia, providing insights into how volunteering is viewed and valued by the community.

4.1 Measuring the benefits of volunteering

The first objective of this study is to examine the practical dimensions of impact assessment of volunteering. In this context, it emphasizes the central role of different methods, principles, and tools in translating theoretical knowledge into concrete, actionable measures. In this way, a practical roadmap is offered to guide both organizations and researchers involved in assessing the impact of volunteering.

According to Bere et al. (2019), monitoring is the process of collecting the facts and figures such as:

- Numbers of volunteers,
- Demographic information, e.g. age and ethnicity,
- The frequency and duration of the volunteer activity,
- The type of work that volunteers do,
- The number of beneficiaries served.

These criteria, as described by the authors, represent a traditional approach to measuring the con-

tribution of volunteers. However, it is important to note that this method may not fully capture the essence of the contribution that volunteering makes to the personal development of individuals and the sustainable economic development of a country.

Different measurement techniques are used to quantify and assess the social value created by organizations and individuals. According to Social Value International (2021), social value is the value that stakeholders experience through changes in their lives. The organization has defined eight core principles derived from social accounting and auditing, sustainability reporting, cost-benefit analysis, financial accounting, and evaluation practices. A comprehensive understanding of these eight principles can provide organizations with the tools to effectively assess the impact of their initiatives and programs.

1. **Stakeholder engagement** – This principle emphasizes the importance of identifying stakeholders and engaging them in consultation processes to ensure they have a clear understanding of what is being measured and how it will be assessed in a social value report.
2. **Understanding change** – This principle focuses on the need to explain how change occurs and to evaluate these changes using collected evidence. It involves identifying both positive and negative, as well as intended and unintended, changes.
3. **Valuing stakeholder preferences** – Resource allocation decisions should take into account the values and preferences of stakeholders. This will ensure that their input is appreciated.
4. **Materiality** – This principle involves identifying the essential information and evidence to provide a complete and accurate picture, allowing stakeholders to draw reasonable conclusions about impacts.
5. **Avoiding overclaiming** – This principle encourages the use of baseline data, trends, and benchmarks to assess the extent to which the activity caused a specific change, as opposed to other contributing factors.
6. **Transparency** – This involves openly presenting the basis of the analysis to ensure

accuracy and honesty, while also committing to reporting and discussing the information with stakeholders.

7. **Verification** – This principle refers to obtaining independent confirmation or validation of the results, thereby ensuring the credibility and reliability of the information provided.
8. **Responsiveness** – This principle emphasizes the importance of timely decision-making based on appropriate accounting and reporting practices to achieve optimal social value.

Measuring the impact of volunteering on an individual's personal development allows volunteers to reflect on their own achievements. Kamenko Mayer et al. (2020) introduce four dimensions that serve as a tool to measure the impact of volunteering on personal development assessed through self-assessment using six statements within each dimension that indicate the extent of the impact of volunteering. These four dimensions include:

- **Self-esteem** – Self-image of personal change, psychophysical improvements, and volunteer self-perception, including the level of self-esteem achieved, social and emotional development, proactive behavior, and personal responsibility, among others.
- **Relationship with others** (“*me and others*”) – Assessment of the relationships that volunteers build with others, as measured by indicators such as a sense of belonging, social networks, and positive identities.
- **Relationships with the community** (“*me and the community*”) – Examining volunteers' improved understanding of social responsibility, commitment to values, willingness to continue volunteering, and willingness to engage in community actions.
- **Knowledge and skills** – Assessing improvement in skills and competencies acquired through volunteering, e.g. communication, gaining new experiences, organizational skills, etc.

The primary goal of this self-assessment is to actively involve volunteers in the evaluation process and create open channels of communication to address issues related to impact.

When determining the criteria for measuring the degree of inclusion at the organizational level, the following aspects should be considered, as outlined by Kamenko Mayer et al. (2020):

- **Quality of service delivery** – The degree of innovation in organization services, the introduction of new services to beneficiaries, among others.
- **Quality of volunteer programs** – The number of volunteers, the range of volunteer activities, the quality of those activities, the introduction of new activities, and the degree of innovation within activities, among other factors.
- **Quality of intra-organizational relationships** – The level of team cohesion, interpersonal relationships among employees, and relationships with volunteers.
- **Organizational policies** – The content of organizational documents, the values they express, the extent to which inclusion is embedded in organizational policies, and any infrastructural or technical improvements aimed at improving accessibility.
- **Organization and community engagement** – Improved understanding of community needs, an organization's public image, visibility, and recognition within the community.

The process of measuring the impact of volunteering on social inclusion was designed as a self-evaluation and team process within the organization. To help the organization understand these aspects and what they mean to them during the self-assessment process, a list of possible supporting documents for each statement is provided. This evidence helps validate the changes brought about by volunteering and their impact on social inclusion at the organizational level.

Table 2 illustrates how each stakeholder can be impacted across these dimensions and provides organizations with a valuable tool to determine which aspects they should assess and communicate.

Organizations can also use social reporting to comprehensively assess and communicate the tangible impacts of their activities, both internally and externally. While these social reporting standards are primarily used as an important tool for measuring the impact of social enterprises, they can also be used by nonprofit organizations. They have been recognized and adopted by experts and academics in certain countries, making them an accepted scientific framework (Hadad & Găucă, 2014). This type of reporting serves as a robust tool to assess the outcomes of an organization's operations quantitatively and qualitatively. A social report provides deep insights into the value created and the broader impact for different stakeholders. It provides a comprehensive assessment of an organization's performance in relation to its commitments and its impact on individual stakeholders.

Table 2 Measuring the impact of volunteering

	Human capital (people's knowledge, skills, attitudes, health)	Social capital (more cooperative relationships between people)	Economic capital (benefits or costs with financial value)	Cultural capital (sense of own identity and understanding of others' identity)
Volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increased personal development (self-esteem, empathy, etc.) - increased transferable competences (especially in relation to social services) - improved health and wellbeing - increased employability chances (in the social sector and beyond) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - expansion of the personal social network - enhanced sense of trust in others (individuals and community) - increased social competences - increased transferable skills - improved health and wellbeing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increased access to training for that would otherwise require payment - improved employment prospects and future earning potential 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - better understanding of one's own identity - greater appreciation of other cultures and interests - shift in perspective toward society and the active role of each citizen
Institution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increased personal development and skills of staff - increased motivation of staff to develop professional skills in the field of volunteer management - increased staff satisfaction and retention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - improved organizational working procedures - greater income for the institution - job creation/decrease in paid job - improvement of human interaction relationship within the institution - increased institutional visibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increased economic savings - increased financial value of the organization's activities (greater impact for the same costs) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - services are more reflective of cultural diversity within community - greater diversity in the institution
Beneficiaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increased personal development (self-esteem, empathy, optimism) - increased skills and abilities - improved physical and mental health - greater sense of wellbeing among beneficiaries - increased number of beneficiaries aware of volunteering opportunities - increased number of beneficiaries that become volunteers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - new friendships, contacts and network - increased number of beneficiaries that become volunteers - increased awareness of the benefits of volunteering - greater involvement in local activities, groups or clubs - increased empowerment to take actions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increased access to services that would otherwise require payment - increased employment opportunities due to newly developed skills and personal development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - greater sense of belonging to a group and taking part in culture and expressing values - increased understanding of other cultures and values - increased opportunities to practice or express faith - development of desirable behaviors - improvement of civic activism (beneficiaries can become volunteers)
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - improved skills and a more productive workforce - better personal development - increased level of awareness of the community regarding local problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increased social networks - enhanced trust and participation - more organizations working together 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - enhanced value for money in public services - increase of investment financial value (higher impact for the same costs) - reduced anti-social behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - volunteering is recognized, promoted, and practiced as a desirable behavior model - new values are being promoted within the community, such as solidarity, human dignity, and human rights

Source: Bere et al. (2019)

4.2 Volunteering in Croatia

Building on the examination of methods for measuring the benefits of volunteering, the study moves on to a detailed examination of the current state of volunteering in Croatia, drawing on findings from rare studies and official data and reports, which include the estimated number of volunteers, volunteer hours, and associated costs.

Although previous research has emphasized the importance of volunteering for social and economic development, studies conducted more than a decade ago found that Croatia is lagging behind in researching the civil sector and the benefits of volunteering as a basis for civil society development (Forčić & Čulum, 2010). Since 2005, only a few studies have addressed volunteering in Croatia. This lack of empirical research and limited availability of data has already been recognized as an obstacle to discussions about the nonprofit sector and the role of volunteering (Bežovan, 1996). Most studies are conducted regionally or locally and are carried out by the local volunteer centers (Kotlar et al., 2016). These studies are not conducted on a regular basis and can hardly show the actual number of volunteers. The 2005 research on volunteering in Croatia (Črpić & Zrinščak, 2005) shows that about 35% of Croatian citizens were members of at least one civil society organization (mostly religious, sports, and unions). Only a small proportion

was active within social, ecology, human rights, and similar organizations. At the same time, over 38% of respondents were involved in different types of informal volunteering. Volunteers most frequently engaged in organizing different events and local community activities (Franc & Šakić, 2005). A study carried out in 2007, which investigated why people do not volunteer, found that only 30% of respondents do so (Ledić, 2007). A comparative study on 13 countries in 2011 (Grönlund et al., 2011) mentions specifics of volunteering in Croatia, where formal volunteering was organized by the state but not compulsory, while many individuals engaged in informal volunteering among family and friends. The most important motives for volunteering were altruism and learning, while the least important were social and protective motives. The 2023 survey found that while 25% of Croatian citizens aged 16 and over have volunteered at least once in their lives, 11% have volunteered in the last three years (2020-2022), and only 7%, as mentioned above, are currently actively volunteering (D-Kolektiv, 2023).

In order to have at least a certain number of volunteers, all organizers of volunteer activities of any kind are required to submit an Annual Report on Services Performed or Activities of Volunteering Organizers. As shown in Table 3, there has been an increase in the number of volunteers, volunteer hours, and volunteer costs in recent years.

Table 3 Annual report on services performed or activities of volunteering organizers

	2021	2022	2023
Number of volunteers	59,161	63,275	67,909
Number of received reports on organized volunteering	1,607	1,720	1,660
Volunteer hours	3,181,557	3,236,883.5	3,012,837
Volunteering costs	2,160,715 Euro	2,748,985.86 Euro	3,812,714.77 Euro

Source: Ministry of Labor, Pension System, Family and Social Policy (2024)

These numbers, however, still depend solely on the responsibility of organizers to submit the exact data. Moreover, there is still no systematic measurement of the impact of volunteering and volunteer programs neither on personal development of individuals nor on economic and social development of the country. For this reason, this research provides some important evidence on the importance of measuring the impact of volunteering.

4.3 An overview of the perception of volunteering in Croatia

In the research conducted by the authors of this paper on a sample of 489 students, respondents indicated that the social climate in Croatia has a limited positive impact on volunteering: The average score on the 5-point Likert scale for this statement was 2.76, and only 20.3% of respondents agreed or completely agreed that the social climate has a positive

influence on volunteering. The overall state of volunteering in Croatia is rated at 3.05, with the highest level of agreement for the statement that people are generally passive and lack ambition for any engagement, including volunteering (3.62). Overall, 56% of respondents agreed with this statement. The lowest level of agreement (2.51) was recorded for

the statement that the Croatian government has implemented good policies and measures to promote volunteering. Overall, 47.3% of respondents disagreed with this statement.

The research also revealed a significant difference in perceptions of volunteering in Croatia between volunteers and non-volunteers, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Differences between volunteers and non-volunteers with respect to attitudes toward volunteering

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Attitudes toward volunteering	Between groups	3.098	2	1.549	6.407	.002
	Within groups	116.282	481	.242		
	Total	119.380	483			

Source: Authors

These results indicate that students with negative or neutral attitudes toward volunteering are likely to participate in volunteer activities less than students with positive attitudes. The prevailing sentiment among students is underlined by the fact that only 20.3% of them perceive a positive impact of the social climate on volunteering. The introduction of a transparent indicator of the impact of volunteering could change this perception and promote a more positive attitude toward volunteering.

The analysis of students' opinions about the visibility and social value of volunteering shows that volunteering in Croatia is not perceived as a potential source of self-development. This is the most important point in the evaluation, which was rated 3.66, and a total of 59.5% of respondents agree with this statement. The majority of students (58.7%) believe that volunteering is adequately portrayed in the mass media. However, mass media create not only positive but also negative publicity regarding volunteering, which can explain the high percentage (38.8%) of respondents who claim that there is no trust in volunteering. In addition, 46.2% of respondents believe that although children are exposed to volunteering throughout the educational process, they lack role models (i.e. actual involvement in volunteering), especially in their families.

Students who volunteer are often involved in a variety of organizations, particularly their local non-

profit organizations. The study shows a preference for short-term volunteering (67.9%).

The motivation to volunteer generally arises from a combination of utilitarian and altruistic motives, with an emphasis on developing personal skills, gaining experience, and improving one's resume. In general, 207 responses could be categorized as altruistic motives (helping others) and 159 as utilitarian motives (improving human capital). However, the most important single motive was "to develop personal skills, gain experience, and build and improve one's resume," a utilitarian motive cited in 114 out of 366 cases. This information is of great value to nonprofit organizations seeking volunteers.

5. Discussion

Various methods for measuring the benefits of volunteering underscore the complexity of their impact on individuals and organizations. Along with the recognition of the important economic and social contribution of volunteering, there is a need for high-quality data and evidence that would support that contribution (Šimunković, 2022).

Most of the studies on volunteering impact in Croatia and other countries focus on social contribution and social capital building (Buzov & Ivošević, 2024; Dekker, 2015; Begović, 2006). Placing volunteering in the context of human and social capital means viewing it as a space for action and learning that

necessarily leads to dealing with its effects or consequences, but also experiences, that is, the acquisition of these capital and their exchange in the community (Bourdieu, 1986). In Croatia, the persisting problem of low levels of trust in civil society and its poor potential for building social capital seem to be a lasting barrier to strengthening civil society, which represents another insufficiently researched area (Bežovan, 1996). This still remains the case as the focus on the performance of CSOs at the lowest levels of indicators, rather than their broader impact, continues to cause concern and distrust toward the sector (Baturina, 2018).

According to Putnam (2000), volunteering can be an efficient response to these challenges - if accompanied by positive experiences, it should increase trust by participating in the achievement of common goals, by the gratitude that accompanies volunteer activities, by working in an environment of people who inherently have a higher level of trust and act pro-socially, etc. In addition to the various other positive effects on trust that should accompany any membership in civic organizations, volunteering should foster a large number of positive interactional experiences, and thus cumulatively affect a higher level of generalized trust. Gvozdanović (2017) shares the same notion, stating that nonprofit organizations not only connect individuals with the same and similar interests, but also have the potential to connect different social groups through membership in several civil society organizations. In this way, individuals create bonds of lower intensity, but there is an increased spread of social trust.

While traditional monitoring techniques provide the foundation for understanding the contributions of volunteers, it is imperative to incorporate comprehensive frameworks, such as those articulated by Social Value International (2021), that can capture the broader social value generated. The emphasis on stakeholder engagement and transparency underscores the need for an integrative approach to impact assessment that ensures the comprehensive inclusion of all impact dimensions. In addition, the dimensions proposed by Kamenko Mayer et al. (2020) provide a valuable framework for comprehensively assessing the impact of volunteering on personal development. Implementing these strategies can help organizations conduct thorough evaluations and effectively communicate the tangible results of their initiatives, fostering a better understanding of the value created. By integrating

findings from previous research and aligning our study with established frameworks, we argue for a holistic methodology for measuring the impact of volunteerism that facilitates the development of sound strategies and effective volunteer programs.

Measuring the impact of volunteering would contribute to the transparency of CSO activities and allow society to better recognize the contributions that specific volunteer activities and programs make to society. By integrating advanced methodologies such as self-assessment, stakeholder engagement and change evaluation, civil society organizations can make the far-reaching impact of volunteering visible. Focusing on the personal development of volunteers and social inclusion at the organizational level contributes to an understanding of the broader impact of volunteering, facilitates knowledge sharing between practitioners, and promotes network building and the transparent handling of social issues. In addition, the introduction of social reporting standards can improve the ability of civil society organizations to assess, communicate, and promote the real impact of volunteering in society.

This paper serves as a resource for scholars specializing in volunteerism, service-learning, and civic engagement by providing comprehensive insights into advanced methodologies for understanding, measuring, and promoting the broader impact of volunteerism. The study provides a literature review and practical guidance on impact measurement that can enhance scholars' research, contribute to academic discussions, and support the development of educational programs, also known as service-learning programs, that promote volunteerism among young people and provide them with opportunities to develop their social awareness and civic engagement. Recognizing the personal benefits of volunteering has a positive effect on preferences for short-term volunteering, as shown by a study commissioned by the nonprofit association D-Kolektiv in 2023, which found that over 60% of volunteers in Croatia volunteer sporadically. The idea that people are generally passive and lack ambition to get involved, including volunteering, is in line with the findings of Wymer et al. (2008), which indicate that young people's decision to volunteer is highly dependent on the observed volunteering of significant others (parents, siblings, close friends). This sporadic nature of volunteering is probably also influenced by the lack of support at a policy level, which highlights the need for strategic measures to

promote coherent and effective volunteering in the long term. The low ratings of government policies and actions indicate that policy support for volunteering needs improvement. As Handy et al. (2009) point out, countries where volunteering has a positive signaling value tend to have significantly higher volunteering rates, suggesting that improving policy support could boost participation. Many young people do not see volunteering as a potential source of personal development, which underscores the need to promote volunteering as a means of personal development. Several government measures implemented, such as recognition of volunteering in the process of employment and education, adjustment of the system for measuring the economic value of volunteering, ensuring various opportunities to finance volunteering, and establishment of the National Volunteer Award (Šimunković, 2022), do not seem to be effectively communicated to young people. If these elements were properly measured, they could improve the communication.

Examining the state of volunteering in Croatia reveals several critical insights into the prevailing attitudes and challenges within the volunteer landscape. Although the number of volunteers and hours volunteered has increased, there is still no systematic approach to measuring the impact of volunteering, which highlights the need for comprehensive evaluation mechanisms. These findings underscore the need for a comprehensive approach to assessing the impact of volunteering, especially given the limited perception of volunteering as a catalyst for personal and social development. This study answers the research question and shows that efficient, clear and transparent measurement of volunteering can be used to understand, improve and communicate the undeniable economic, social and personal impact of volunteering. By leveraging the findings of existing studies and aligning with established frameworks, organizations can create a more conducive environment for volunteering within the Croatian community.

6. Concluding remarks

Evidence of volunteer impact becomes a powerful tool for advocacy and fundraising, as it can be used to gain the support of donors, sponsors, and

policymakers who are more likely to invest in volunteer programs that have demonstrated positive outcomes. Policymakers can use data on volunteer impact to make evidence-based decisions about volunteering, social services, and community development. This can lead to the formulation of supportive policies that recognize and incentivize volunteerism.

The study used a convenient sample of students from business schools in Croatia, which may limit the generalizability of the results to a broader population of volunteers or individuals outside the educational setting. In addition, the cross-sectional nature of the study may have prevented exploration of changes or trends in volunteer behavior over time, which would have allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of volunteering in Croatia.

Implications for future research include the potential use of measurement tools in different contexts by conducting cross-cultural or cross-national studies that use the measurement tools to compare the impact of volunteering in different regions and shed light on regional differences and best practices. The tools can be used to segment and analyze the impact of different volunteer demographics, such as age groups, skills, or motivations, to gain an understanding of how different volunteer profiles contribute to societal outcomes. Future research can use these measurement tools in longitudinal studies to assess how the impact of volunteering evolves over time, gaining insights into long-term impacts on individuals and communities. Organizations can use these tools to continuously assess and improve their volunteer programs to ensure that they are aligned with the evolving needs of their beneficiaries and communities. Research can explore the global impact of volunteering by examining how the influence of volunteers contributes to addressing global challenges such as climate change, humanitarian crises, and sustainable development goals.

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