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Submitted Version  
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Understanding international volunteering:  
Who is most likely to participate?

Young-joo Lee  
The University of Texas at Dallas

Doyeon Won  
Liverpool John Moores University

## **Abstract**

International volunteers are playing an increasingly important role in meeting various challenges and improving the lives of many across the world, and opportunities for international volunteering are available across many sectors, including the government, corporate, and nonprofit sectors. Nevertheless, not much is known about international volunteering and the individuals who participate in this activity. This study examines the utility of the existing volunteering by testing how its traditional attributes predict participation internationally versus domestically. The findings show that individuals who have attained post-secondary education, are in a professional occupation, or are self-employed are more likely to volunteer internationally. The results also indicate that some of the known predictors of volunteering, such as age, gender, and household income, do not satisfactorily explain participation in international volunteering. The results call for further research on international volunteering, and this study concludes by providing recruitment suggestions for international volunteer programs.

Keywords:

International volunteers, international nonprofits, attributes of volunteers, recruitment

## **Understanding international volunteering:**

### **Who is most likely to participate?**

The world today faces serious challenges that one nation cannot solve in isolation, including environmental problems, spreading terrorism, financial crises, and the unequal distribution of wealth across the world (Yashima 2010). In response to these global issues, international civic organizations deploy people with important skills and resources to aid in situations where solutions cannot be achieved by individual national governments. According to the Union of International Associations (2014), there were over 38,000 international nonprofits in 2014, providing disaster relief, delivering social services, building local capacities for self-help, promoting self-governance, and enhancing the political and policy influence of marginalized populations around the world. The number of these organizations has increased to almost four times that of 10,000 in 1981. Doctors without Borders, Human Rights Watch, Green Peace, and Save the Children are a few examples of these international organizations. International civic organizations have implemented various development and assistance programs in areas such as Latin America and the Caribbean, South and East Asia and the Pacific, and Sub-Saharan Africa (Kerlin and Thanasombat 2006). One of the common characteristics of these international nonprofit organizations is that they depend heavily on volunteers for the delivery of services in the host country. Recently, a heightened awareness of global issues has led to the increased involvement of these organizations in various matters and, in turn, to an even higher demand for volunteers across the world.

Along with the international nonprofits that are leading the operations of volunteer programs to solve economic and humanitarian issues worldwide, other types of organizations, both public and private, are continuously involved in international volunteering. Many national

governments have supported international volunteering as part of their public diplomacy and civic engagement to strengthen their relationship with other nations (Brookings Institution 2014). Established in 1961 by President Kennedy's executive order, the Peace Corps has sent 220,000 American volunteers to foreign countries over more than five decades (Peace Corps 2014c). The Australian government has sent volunteers to its development programs in different countries through the Australian Volunteering for International Development (AVID) program (AVID 2015). Business corporations have also taken part in this drive, providing their employees with opportunities to play significant roles as global citizens. For instance, IBM's Corporate Service Corps program has been deploying their employees to provide business and IT consultation in developing countries since 2008 (Caprara and Litow 2010). With these government and private sector initiatives on international volunteering, international volunteers have taken on meaningful roles in promoting the social, economic, and political development of the particular countries in which they are operating.

More recently, a new type of organization has emerged as one of the major players in international volunteering. These organizations typically work with nonprofit service organizations by recruiting participants in volunteer abroad programs combined with tourism. This form of travel is called "voluntourism," also known as "vacation volunteering" (Wymer, Self, and Findley 2010), and the participants volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that include aiding or alleviating the negative living conditions of some groups of society or in restoring social or environmental conditions (Mangold 2012; Tomazos and Butler 2009; Wearing 2001). Examples of voluntourism organizations include the International Volunteer HQ, Civil Service International, Global Crossroad, and United Planet. They typically charge fees to individuals who participate in the volunteer activities in host countries. The popularity of this

form of travel has rapidly increased in the past decade, attracting industry and research attention (Guttentag 2009). Although the concept of volunteer tourism is still too new to generate reliable statistics, experts suggest that this type of leisure is the fastest developing segment of the travel industry (McGray 2004; Tourism Research & Marketing Group 2008).

With the increased awareness of global issues and the growing number of organizations tackling these problems, more individuals are participating in international volunteering, donating their time in foreign countries. International volunteers improve the lives of numerous individuals by building homes, providing healthcare, supporting human rights, educating youth, and protecting endangered species, to name a few. In addition to the direct benefits to those who receive these volunteers' services, researchers emphasize the personal benefits of international volunteering experience to the volunteers themselves (Hudson and Inkson 2006). McGhee and Santos (2005) explain that participation in international volunteering increases network ties among volunteers and provides consciousness-raising opportunities. Overall, the literature suggests that the unique context and responsibilities of an international volunteer assignment enable volunteers to gain and develop skills at an accelerated rate, even while taking a break from the workforce (Brook, Missingham, Hocking, and Fifer 2007; Jones 2011).

Despite the increasing interest in the concept of international volunteering, the existing literature falls short in understanding its uniqueness. Volunteering is an umbrella term that includes diverse types of behaviors under different contexts (Carson 1999), and research suggests that personal and social characteristics have distinctive effects on participation in various types of volunteering (Lee and Brudney 2012; Paço, Agostinho, and Nave, 2013). Although there exists abundant literature on the general attributes of volunteers per se, research has not examined who are most likely to volunteer internationally and whether the common

attributes of volunteers apply to predicting this particular type of volunteering as well. The present study examines who are most likely to participate in international volunteering and compares the attributes of international volunteers with those of volunteers in general. It concludes with the findings' implications regarding recruitment for nonprofit organizations with international programs.

### **What are unique features of international volunteering?**

Volunteering behaviors are generally influenced by prosocial motivations to help others (Wilson 2000). However, research suggests that there exist dissimilarities in terms of the importance of specific motivations and attributes in a person's decision to participate in different types of volunteer activities as well as the cultural and organizational contexts (Carson 1999; Lee and Brudney 2012). This study examines whether the factors that influence a person's decision to participate in international volunteering are different from those that influence volunteering in a domestic setting. Before estimating a model of participation in international volunteering, this section examines some of the unique contexts of international volunteering that may impact differences between the two decisions.

#### **Intensity and stress**

International volunteers travel overseas for their volunteer assignments and work in isolation from their families and familiar environments. Although actual volunteer hours vary depending on the nature of the work, all international volunteers have to stay at their volunteer sites during the time of their service. This means that these volunteers are responsible for their personal conduct for the entire duration of their stay, whether they are actually conducting volunteer work at the moment or not. This pressure is a unique challenge of international volunteering. The challenge becomes more taxing because of the quality of living in most host

countries of international volunteer programs. Developing countries, especially those where they need the volunteers' help most, typically do not have the same level of hygienic conditions available in the volunteers' home countries. International volunteers are sometimes even exposed to health risks due to poor sanitation. They, therefore, must be capable of dealing with psychological and physical challenges and able to adjust to difficult living conditions effectively.

### **Time commitment**

International volunteering activities typically require a longer time commitment due to the geographic distance from the volunteers' residences and the nature of the projects. Although volunteer tourism organizations provide programs with varying terms of duration, many international volunteer opportunities require a long-term commitment. Peace Corps volunteers serve a term of 24 months abroad after three months of training (Peace Corps 2014b), and United Nations International volunteers have assignments that range from 3 to 24 months (United Nations 2013). Even if the project itself is relatively short term, participation still requires extra time for transportation to the host country and back home. Voluntourism programs also require that participants spend a few weeks in a foreign country. Given the longer terms of commitment, the flexibility of schedule and availability of time are two of the most critical requirements for international volunteers. Consequently, individuals who can afford to take a long break from their paid work, personal matters, or studies are more likely to participate in international volunteering.

### **Qualifications**

Although not all organizations require specific levels of educational attainment, the nature of work in an international volunteering context often necessitates knowledge in a specific field, such as healthcare, education, environment, and local development. Because of the



technical requirements of volunteer projects in the host country, international volunteers in many cases are recruited based on the requisite professional qualifications of an individual (United Nations 2013). For instance, education is one of the primary areas of international volunteering, and volunteer teachers are required to possess an appropriate associate or bachelor's degree to work in schools around the world (Jackson and Adarlo 2014). Organizations may judge the qualifications of volunteers on the basis of their educational backgrounds. For instance, 90 percent of Peace Corps volunteer positions require a bachelor's degree (Peace Corps 2014b), and the UN volunteer program requires that volunteers have a university degree or higher technical diploma. In addition, international volunteering involves interaction with individuals from different cultures in a foreign setting. This requires openness and understanding of cultural diversity, to which education can contribute.

### **Financial resources**

Typically, volunteering entails giving time for a cause without receiving monetary benefits (Wilson 2000), and most volunteers do not receive any financial benefits from their volunteering. With some exceptions, such as Peace Corps and UN volunteers, most international volunteers are not paid for their service, not to mention participants in voluntourism.

International volunteers may be required to pay for the costs associated with participation in a volunteer program, which is not very likely in other volunteering contexts. The concept of volunteer tourism implies that the volunteers themselves pay for all of the expenses associated with the trip, including travel, food, and accommodation. Moreover, many international volunteer programs charge volunteers a fee to cover their operational costs (International Volunteer Programs Association 2014). Domestic volunteers' expenses are generally limited to

transportation. International volunteers also incur higher opportunity costs because they spend time outside their own countries while on leave from their jobs or studies.

In sum, international volunteering differs from the traditional concept of volunteering in terms of intensity, stress, time commitment, human capital, and financial resources requirements. Given these unique features of international volunteering, this study raises the question of how the existing research can help understand this increasingly popular form of volunteering. In particular, this study examines how effective the common attributes of volunteers are in explaining participation in international volunteering. The next section reviews the known determinants of volunteering, which will be tested to determine whether they predict a person's participation in international volunteering.

### **General attributes of volunteers**

The literature suggests that various social, demographic, and economic characteristics of an individual affect their participation in volunteering.

#### **Educational attainment**

Educational attainment is one of the most consistent predictors of volunteering. Research lists a number of ways that education increases participation in volunteering, including providing better knowledge of social problems, increasing empathy, building self-confidence, and expanding social networks (Wilson 2000).

#### **Household income**

The dominant status model predicts higher rates of participation among individuals with higher social and economic status. One of the common indicators of one's status is household income. Research indeed finds that household income is a consistent predictor of volunteer participation (Cutler 1980; Sundeen 1992).

## **Employment**

The literature finds two opposing effects of employment on volunteering. On the one hand, work can constrain the availability of a person and therefore decreases their participation in volunteering. On the other hand, labor force participation can lead to social integration and build one's civic skills and therefore increases their likelihood of volunteering (Wilson 2000).

## **Professional occupation**

Research finds a close relationship between occupational status and volunteering (Smith 1994; Wilson and Musick 1997). Studies report that individuals withholding a managerial and professional position are more frequently approached by volunteer organizations (Wilson 2000). Wilson and Musick (1994) also report that people who have self-directed jobs with a high level of autonomy volunteer more than do those involved in different types of work. Pavalko (1988) finds that individuals who possess greater autonomy are more likely to engage in leisure activities that require proactivity, planning, decision-making skills, and coordination, as in the international volunteering case.

## **Self-employment**

Studies report a positive relationship between occupational self-direction and volunteering outside of work (Wilson and Musick 1997). Rotolo and Wilson (2006) also explain that self-employment allows for a more flexible schedule that enables them to commit a significant amount of time to volunteering. They also suggest that self-employed individuals have a greater number of associational memberships in professional, community, and religious organizations because of their need to cultivate their clientele.

## **Age**

The literature suggests that the volunteering rate increases through middle age, when it reaches its peak and then decreases after that point (Menchik and Weisbrod 1984; Schoenberg 1980). This change in the volunteering rate according to age is explained as correlating with the changes in a person's human and social capital and attitude toward community engagement (Wilson 2000).

### **Parental status**

As Wilson (2000) summarizes correctly, children in a household both constrain and promote volunteering. Research suggests that parents use their children as a medium of social integration, and therefore, participate more in volunteering, especially in educational and youth organizations (Gallagher 1994). Others report that parents of young children volunteer less due to their childcare responsibilities.

### **Marital status**

Research generally finds that married people are more likely to volunteer than those who are not married (Sundeen 1990). However, Wilson (2000) points out that the effect of marriage on volunteering varies depending on the type of activities and where the activities were performed.

### **Gender**

Regardless of the type of volunteer activity, American women volunteer more frequently than do men (Mesch, Rooney, Steinberg, and Denton 2006; Wilson 2000). The literature offers several reasons for the higher volunteer rate among women, including greater availability and flexibility of time (Tiehen 2000), higher levels of altruism and empathy (Donoghue 2001; Wilson and Musick 1997), role-related norms, and the "morality of care" (Lyons 1983; Tronto 1987).

## **Race**

Surveys on volunteering report that racial and ethnic minorities tend to volunteer lesser than do non-minorities (Bryant et al. 2003; Gallagher 1994). Human capital theory points to the gap in education, income, and occupational status between minorities and non-minorities as a reason for the lower volunteer rate among minorities. Scholars also explain that the gap is due to the differences in patterns of volunteering, as racial and ethnic minorities engage in different types of helping behaviors, such as informal and ethnic volunteering (Lee and Brudney 2012).

The present study examines how the above common attributes of volunteers predict their participation in international volunteering. It also compares how these factors predict a person's participation in domestic and international volunteering, given the latter's unique context.

## **Data and Method**

This study tests how the common attributes of volunteers predict a person's participation in international volunteering using the 2012 Current Population Survey (CPS) September Supplement. The CPS is a monthly survey of a sample of 60,000 households conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The survey collects the basic labor force data on the civilian non-institutional population 16 years and older, and its September supplements contain information on people's volunteering activities. The survey asks an individual the details about his or her volunteering activities, which include whether he or she had volunteered in a foreign country. This study limits its focus on individuals who are 19 years or older because individuals who have not finished their secondary education face a dissimilar decision-making environment.

The outcome variable in this study, whether a person participated in international volunteering, is measured using the responses to the question, "Did any of the volunteer work

(you have/he has/she has) done since September 1<sup>st</sup> of last year take place in a foreign country, that is, outside the United States or any of its territories?” The dependent variable is binary, taking the value of “1” if the respondent volunteered internationally and “0” if he or she had not (including non-volunteering). The descriptive statistics on Table 1 show that approximately 0.4 percent of the sample volunteered internationally in the past year.

Using the common attributes of volunteers explained above, this study compares how each attribute explains participation in general volunteering and international volunteering. The first model for participation in volunteering, in general, is estimated using logistic regression. The second model for participation in international volunteering is estimated using complementary log-log regression because of the rarity of international volunteering (less than 0.4 percent of the sample volunteered internationally). Logistic regression typically underestimates probability for  $Y=1$  and overestimates probability for  $Y=0$ , and the resulting maximum likelihood estimation of the coefficients is known to suffer from a small sample bias (King and Zeng 2001). Researchers have employed the model in such rare event data as bidding wars and lockups between R&D-intensive firms (Coff 2003), adoption of governance reform in the United States (Wong and Langevin 2004), and homelessness during the transition from foster care to adulthood (Dworsky, Napolitano, and Courtney 2013).

## **Findings**

Table 1 provides a descriptive comparison among the general population, those who volunteered at all, and those who volunteered internationally.<sup>1</sup> While there is little difference in terms of age and gender between the general and international volunteer groups, the comparison among the four groups reveals some distinguished social and demographic characteristics of

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<sup>1</sup> Because domestic volunteering is the overwhelmingly predominant type of volunteering, the statistics on general volunteers and domestic volunteers are identical.

international volunteers. Most notably, international volunteers tend to have the highest level of educational attainment. Table 1 shows that 65 percent of international volunteers have a bachelor's degree or above, whereas 30 percent of the general population and 47 percent of general volunteers do. The proportion of those with a graduate degree (36 percent) among international volunteers is nearly twice as high as that of domestic volunteers (19 percent) and almost three times as high as that of the general population. Another noticeable distinction of international volunteers is the proportion of self-employed individuals. In the international volunteer group, self-employed individuals account for approximately 16 percent, while the self-employed account for 7 percent of the general population and 9 percent of the general volunteer group. Table 2 also indicates that a greater proportion of international volunteers belongs to the higher levels of household income group than it does in the domestic volunteer group. Approximately 28 percent of international volunteers come from a household with an income greater than \$100,000, compared to 11 percent of the general population and 17 percent of the general volunteer group.

The comparison of regression coefficients in Table 2 suggests that what we know about volunteering does not necessarily apply in the international volunteering context. The first column shows the estimation results of the logistic regression on whether an individual volunteered at all. As expected, most of the coefficients are significant, suggesting that the common attributes of volunteering are effective predictors of Americans' volunteering in general. Contrarily, the rare event logistic regression results for participation in international volunteering indicate that some of the "common" attributes of volunteering do not have significant coefficients in the international volunteering model.

First, participation in international volunteering is positively associated only with the highest level of income (\$100,000 or higher), while the likelihood of general volunteering increases with the level of household income. This result suggests that international volunteering has been an activity for those who can afford the costs associated with it. Second, while greater educational attainment predicts a higher likelihood of volunteering in general, the likelihood of international volunteering is only positively associated with post-secondary education. Third, being in a professional occupation is positively related to general volunteering, but it does not predict participation in international volunteering. Being self-employed is positively associated with both general and international volunteering. The results suggest that the decision to participate in international volunteering is greatly affected by discretion in a person's use of time rather than autonomy in the job itself. As explained earlier, participation in international volunteering requires a significant time commitment, and the ability to manage one's work schedule definitely helps. These individuals may also have higher incomes than that of an average person. Given that many international volunteers, especially those who are on volunteer tourism, pay for the costs associated with their travels and room and board, individuals with disposable income are more likely to participate.

Overall, the differences between participation in domestic volunteering and international volunteering imply that existing literature on volunteering fall short in helping nonprofit organizations understands potential volunteers for their international volunteer programs.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The contribution of international volunteers has become a critical element in meeting the mounting challenges in education, health, the environment, agriculture, and more (Caprara et al. 2010). This study contributes to the literature on volunteering by identifying differences in the



attributes of participation in general and international volunteering. The results indicate that post-secondary education, including both a bachelor's degree and graduate degree, predicts a higher likelihood of a person's participation in international volunteering. This finding suggests that international volunteer organizations should approach colleges and universities, perhaps through their alumni organizations, in order to recruit future volunteers. Scholars point out that institutions of higher education as social actors have responsibilities to create knowledge for solving social problems and to promote global sustainable development (Perić and Delić, 2015). Therefore, universities and colleges will make great partners of international nonprofit organizations. These results also suggest that those who own their own businesses can be primary targets of international volunteer recruitment. Therefore, international nonprofit organizations may collaborate with professional associations or business leagues in order to recruit volunteers. These findings show that opportunities for international volunteering might be available only to those who are wealthy enough to afford the costs. In order to expand the opportunities to a broader population, international nonprofit organizations may collaborate with funding organizations for financial support. Nonprofit organizations may also collaborate with higher education institutions so that these institutions fund the students' engagement in international volunteering as part of their service-learning program.

This study by no means provides a definitive answer regarding what determines an individual's international volunteering. Other personal traits and social contexts, such as fluency in more than one language and past experience residing in another country, might also explain participation in international volunteering. In-depth surveys of international volunteers that collect more information about these traits will provide better insights into the motivations

behind this activity. In addition, future research can also examine the patterns of volunteering among business owners and their motivations for volunteering.

With the rapid growth of the international nonprofit sector, more organizations will compete for volunteers for their programs in different countries. The competition will become fiercer as the number of organizations providing international volunteering programs keeps increasing. Therefore, understanding the international volunteer population will help these organizations plan their recruitment strategies and successfully manage their programs. This study contributes by addressing the gap in the literature in understanding this group of volunteers.

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## Tables

Table 1: Descriptive statistics (N=63,321)

Variables	Total sample (63,321)	All volunteers (17,454)	International volunteers (242)
Less than high school	11.1%	3.5%	1.2%
High school diploma or GED	30.7%	19.2%	9.5%
Some college or Associate degree	28.6%	30.2%	24.0%
Bachelor's degree	19.1%	28.0%	28.9%
Master's degree or above	10.5%	19.0%	36.4%
Household income less than \$25,000	23.9%	15.0%	13.6%
Household income \$25,000-49,999	28.2%	23.5%	14.9%
Household income \$50,000-99,999	37.4%	44.1%	43.4%
Household income equal to or greater than \$100,000	10.6%	17.4%	28.1%
Employment status	57.8%	64.8%	68.6%
Professional occupation	26.2%	38.9%	50.4%
Self-employment	6.7%	9.3%	15.7%
Age	47.5 years (16.30)	48.31 years (15.48)	47.24 years (16.28)
Parent	28.4%	35.4%	22.7%
Married	55.8%	65.5%	62.0%
Female	51.6%	58.3%	49.6%
White	82.5%	86.6%	87.6%

Standard deviation in parentheses

Table 2: Regression coefficients (standard error in parentheses), N=63,321

Variables	General volunteering	International volunteering
	LR Chi <sup>2</sup> (16)=7161.53 Prob>Chi <sup>2</sup> =0.0000 Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> =0.0955	LR Chi <sup>2</sup> (16)=240.63 Prob>Chi <sup>2</sup> =0.0000 Non-zero outcomes=241 Zero outcomes=63079
High school diploma or GED	0.699*** (0.047)	0.963 (0.616)
Some college or Associate degree	1.322*** (0.046)	1.878** (0.597)
Bachelor's degree	1.662*** (0.048)	2.330*** (0.600)
Master's degree or above	1.927*** (0.049)	3.060*** (0.603)
Household income \$25,000-49,999	0.110 (0.030)	-0.311 (0.245)
Household income \$50,000-99,999	0.313*** (0.029)	0.144 (0.216)
Household income equal to or greater than \$100,000	0.468*** (0.038)	0.517* (0.243)
Employment status	-0.042 (0.026)	-0.328 (0.208)
Professional occupation	0.247*** (0.026)	0.323 (0.192)
Self-employment	0.345*** (0.037)	0.767*** (0.191)
Age	-0.003 (0.004)	-0.049 (0.028)
Age2	0.000** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Parent	0.445*** (0.024)	-0.523** (0.176)
Married	0.217*** (0.022)	0.125 (0.157)
Female	0.386*** (0.019)	-0.043 (0.131)
White	0.321*** (0.027)	0.301 (0.197)
Constant	-3.381*** (0.098)	-6.542*** (0.827)