

Youth Engagement in Voluntary Work for Community Development: A Systematic Literature Review of Motivations, Impacts, and Barriers

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ABSTRACT

Youth volunteerism plays a crucial role in fostering civic engagement and community development, yet factors influencing participation remain multifaceted. This study systematically reviews recent literature to identify motivators, barriers, and the broader impacts of youth volunteerism. A systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted using the PRISMA framework. Studies from 2015 to 2025 were retrieved from Scopus, ScienceDirect, and JSTOR using defined Boolean search terms related to youth, volunteerism, and community development. Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed articles addressing youth motivations, impacts, and barriers. After screening 205 articles, 31 were selected through a two-phase review process. Data were manually extracted using a literature grid, and thematic synthesis was applied for analysis. Grey literature and prior SLRs were also considered to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant studies. Findings reveal that youth engagement is driven by intrinsic motivations such as altruism, empathy, and social responsibility, alongside extrinsic factors like skill development and career advancement. Institutional support, educational integration, and organizational flexibility significantly influence sustained participation. Key barriers include time constraints, lack of recognition, and limited program accessibility. Policymakers and practitioners should design inclusive, flexible, and skill-oriented volunteer programs integrated into educational and community structures to enhance youth engagement and contribute to long-term community resilience.

Keywords: Youth engagement, Voluntary work, Community development, systematic literature review

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, youth volunteering in community development has gained significant attention in the fields of youth research. Udoma et al., 2024 states that youth volunteerism in community development is a rapidly changing and intricate field that is necessary for developing a resilient and sustainable community. The direct participation of youth in voluntary initiatives has been more recognized as an effective tool for civic and sustainable growth as communities

meet delicate social, economic, and environmental issues. In fact, Lanero et al., 2017 also states that an engaged and active citizen is one who is confident, holds an understanding of social responsibility and invests in civic engagements. Studies in this area have explored various aspects such as the motivations that drive youth to volunteer, the measurable and immeasurable effects that impact their engagement on society as a whole, and the structural or personal barriers that hinder the engagement (Mory, 2024). In the Maldivian

context, where community ties are strong, yet youth unemployment and disengagement are rising concerns, understanding both the motivations for and the decline in youth involvement in voluntary work is both timely and essential. This study responds to these gaps by systematically reviewing existing literature to explore the motivations, impacts, and barriers of youth volunteerism in community development.

Although numerous studies have been done for youth volunteerism, the literature remains inconsistent. Ferreira et al. (2022) presents on the systematic review on youth engagement and volunteer tourism, respectively, however none of the findings have addressed the cultural or development context. Bullen et al., (2021) reports civic engagement, citizenship and participation for the city of Melbourne. Focusing on different studies, it has been found that limited studies on volunteerism have been conducted in the Maldives, though youth volunteerism is an untapped area in the Maldivian context. Furthermore, the existing studies are not addressed to motivations, impact and barriers where a systematic approach is necessary to map these dimensions. The purpose of this systematic review is to critically examine and gather current studies on youth engagement in voluntary work, with a focus on understanding the motivations, barriers, and broader impacts of youth volunteerism on community development. The aim of this review is to assist the development of updated plans and strategies to encourage youth volunteerism, particularly within the Maldivian context. By the basis of this study, this provides a foundation for enhancing youth participation in community-based initiatives. The research questions will be addressed by a larger context:

1. What factors influence the decision of youth to participate in voluntary community work?
2. What impact does youth volunteerism have on community development initiatives?
3. What are the main barriers and motivators influencing youth involvement in community-

based voluntary programs?

From the recent studies focused on youth volunteerism, there is a lack of consideration for society and the growth of youth development contexts. In this regard, Muñoz-Llerena et al. (2025) stress that motivation and satisfaction in specific volunteering sectors differ significantly across social factors. Likewise, Padilla-Racero and Álvarez-García (2023) mentioned how social and cultural values such as collectivism versus individualistic behaviour influence youth engagement and perceived barriers. Yet, current reviews do not integrate and fail to systematically synthesize these Western, high-income environments. Furthermore, variations in research designs and lack of methodological transparency contribute to bias and reduce comparability. Conducting a systematic review using the PRISMA framework enables a rigorous synthesis of findings, reduces bias, and identifies critical gaps in motivation, impact, and participation barriers—particularly within underrepresented regions and cultural contexts. Such synthesis is vital for developing inclusive, evidence-based policies on youth and community development.

This research will provide major insights by integrating current research on youth engagement in voluntary work for community development, focusing on their motivations, the impact of their contributions, and the barriers they face. The study enhances academic understanding by emphasizing recent developments and research shortcomings additionally offering practical insights for community groups and youth efforts. The findings may assist practitioners in designing more focused volunteer programs that align with youths' intrinsic motivations, while also informing policymakers on strategies to promote sustained engagement. Furthermore, by incorporating recommendations specific to the Maldivian context, this review supports localized policy development and encourages culturally relevant interventions. Ultimately, this work

aims to advance both theoretical knowledge and practical approaches, laying the groundwork for future research and evidence-based decision-making in youth and community development sectors. This paper is structured into five main sections. Section 2 outlines the methodology employed to conduct systematic review. Section 3 presents the key findings, followed by a detailed discussion in Section 4, which explores their broader implications. Finally, Section 5 concludes the review and offers recommendations for future research, with particular emphasis on the Maldivian context.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to explore the motivations, impacts, and barriers related to youth engagement in voluntary work for community development. The review was conducted using a structured search strategy across major academic databases, focusing on peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2025. Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure relevance and quality. The PRISMA framework guided the selection and screening process. Data were then thematically analyzed to identify key patterns and findings. This rigorous and transparent method ensures the reliability and replicability of the review process.

Search Strategy / Data Sources

A systematic search was conducted across three major academic databases: Scopus, ScienceDirect, and JSTOR. To ensure the relevance of the review to youth engagement in voluntary community work, a strategic combination of keywords and Boolean operators was used. Keywords included “youth,” “voluntary work,” “volunteerism,” “community development,” “motivation,” “barriers,” “participation,” and “engagement.” The Boolean search string used was: (“youth engagement”) AND (“voluntary work”) AND

(“community service”) The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published in English between 2000 and 2025. Grey literature relevant to the topic was also included to provide a broader contextual understanding. Table 1 summarizes the keyword combinations and the number of search results retrieved from each database as of April 2025.

Table 1: Search Results by Database and Keyword Combinations

Database	Keyword Combination	Search Results
Scopus	(“youth engagement”) AND (“voluntary work”) AND (“community service”)	339
ScienceDirect	(“youth engagement”) AND (“voluntary work”) AND (“community service”)	1728
JSTOR	(“youth engagement”) AND (“voluntary work”) AND (“community service”)	1724

Scopus yielded the highest number of relevant articles, suggesting a broader indexing of recent studies on youth volunteerism. The use of refined Boolean operators helped narrow the results to the most pertinent studies related to motivations, barriers, and impacts of youth engagement in voluntary community development.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The studies selected for this review were based on clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, as shown in Table 2. Studies were included if they were empirical research or review articles focusing on youth engagement in voluntary work for community development. Eligible studies examined youth motivation, impacts, and barriers, were published in peer-reviewed journals, and written in English between 2000 and 2025. Studies were excluded if they were conference papers, focused on health-related civic duties among youth (e.g., blood donation), did not target the youth population specifically, or were non-English publications. After screening 205 articles based on titles and abstracts, 30 articles were identified as eligible. An additional three articles were included from previous systematic reviews and

two from grey literature.

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Article Selection

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Empirical research or review articles - Focus on youth engagement in voluntary work for community development - Examined youth motivation, impacts, and barriers - Published in peer-reviewed journals - Written in English - Published between 2015 and 2025 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conference papers - Focused on health-related civic duties among youth (e.g., blood donation) - Did not specifically target youth population - Non-English publications

Screening and Selection Process

All search results were imported into Mendeley for reference management. No duplicate records were identified. Full texts of the selected studies were reviewed in detail to confirm eligibility. At this stage, no discrepancies were reported between the reviewers. The review process adhered to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparency and replicability. The full screening and selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram presented in the Appendix (Figure 1). PRISMA MODEL

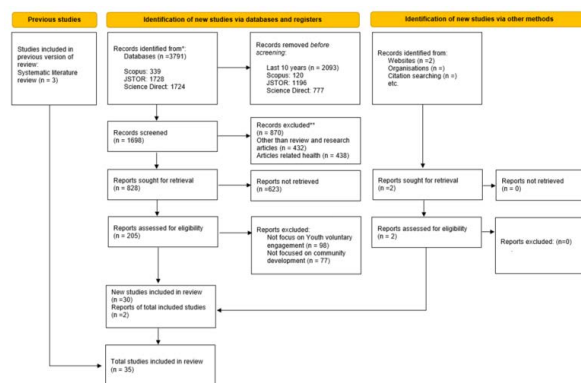


Figure 1. PRISMA MODEL

Data Extraction Process

A standardized data extraction form was developed to systematically collect relevant information from the 35 studies selected for inclusion. The extracted data included author(s), year of publication, study location, research focus, study design and methodology, key findings, and

relevance to youth volunteerism in community development. Any discrepancies in extracted data were resolved through discussion and verification. No automated tools were used in the process. The structured approach allowed for comprehensive comparison and synthesis of the studies.

Quality Assessment

The quality of the included studies was appraised using a combination of tools including SciSpace, ChatGPT, and Elicit. The assessment focused on key criteria such as research design rigor, validity of findings, sample size adequacy, and adherence to ethical standards. This multi-tool approach helped ensure a comprehensive evaluation of methodological quality and relevance. Studies that did not meet minimum quality thresholds were excluded to maintain the integrity and reliability of the systematic review findings.

Data Synthesis and Analysis

A thematic synthesis approach was employed to analyze and integrate the findings from the selected studies. This method was appropriate given the qualitative nature and heterogeneity of the included research, which varied in methodology, focus, and context. Data from each study were coded and organized into recurring themes aligned with the review's key objectives: motivations, impacts, and barriers to youth engagement in voluntary community work. These themes were further refined and categorized to ensure consistency and relevance in answering the research questions. Studies were grouped based on thematic focus and methodological approach to highlight patterns and differences across contexts. This synthesis allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing youth volunteerism and its implications for community development.

FINDINGS

This section presents the key findings obtained from a systematic review of comprehensive

literature, aiming to answer the research questions: (1) What factors influence the decision of youth to participate in voluntary community work? (2) What impact does youth volunteerism have on community development initiatives? and (3) What are the main barriers and motivators influencing youth involvement in community-based voluntary programs?

Final analysis consists of 31 studies, including peer-reviewed articles, prior systematic reviews and relevant grey literature published between 2015 to 2025. The findings are organized into three major thematic areas: motivational factors, impacts on community development, and barriers to participation. The synthesis offers a comprehensive understanding of youth engagement in voluntary work across diverse contexts.

Motivational Factors Influencing Youth Engagement in Voluntary Work

Studies show that youth engagement in volunteerism is driven by a range of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, formed by cultural and contextual factors and recent technological influences (Mokhzan & Yasin, 2023; Wondimu & Admas, 2024; Kadir et al., 2024; Utemisova, 2025).

Intrinsic Motivations

Recent studies indicate that youths are often motivated and driven to participate in voluntary activities due to intrinsic motivations; desires to help (altruism), emotional connection to people (empathy) and a strong belief of commitment to civic duties (Mokhzan & Yasin, 2023; Utemisova, 2025). Altruistic motivation induced by empathy encourages youth to contribute selflessly to community needs without any ulterior motives. Although, youths are also driven towards volunteerism because of personal growth, self-confidence and identity development, seeking to improve their skills and self-efficacy (Wondimu & Admas, 2024; Kadir et al., 2024).

Extrinsic Motivations

A mixed study conducted by researchers Wondimu and Adams (2024) at the University of Gondar, Ethiopia presented that the students engaged in volunteerism to enhance their resumes and gain career enhancing experiences. Similarly, in another study done in central and eastern European universities, identified youth volunteering is primarily motivated for career focused enhancements, aiming to gain work experience, professional knowledge development and networking opportunities (Fényes, Markos, & Mohácsi, 2021).

Cultural and Contextual Influences

Globally motivational factors vary; culture that resembles collectivism emphasizes community cohesion and shared responsibility, in contrast individualist societies often prioritize personal gains (Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2016; Smith et al., 2020). Furthermore, in comparison to developed countries, youth from developing countries may be motivated to volunteer due to the social change aspirations (Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2016; Ferreira et al., 2022). These findings indicate that volunteerism among youth varies across different regions.

Role of Technology

Volunteerism among youths is increasing due to the improvement of connectivity and easy access to opportunities, because of the facilitation of digital platforms and social media (Ghory & Ghafory, 2021). However, digital divides may limit this benefit for some groups. Together, these diverse motivators highlight the need for tailored volunteer programs that address both personal aspirations and broader cultural contexts.

Impacts of Youth Volunteerism on Community Development

Youth volunteerism helps the foster of a community due to the positive effects it has on improving social capital, enhancing

civic engagement and promoting sustainable development (Bekkers, 2016; Lanero et al., 2017; Bullen et al., 2021).

Social Capital and Community Empowerment

Studies have shown volunteering develops social networks and trust, resulting in strengthening of social cohesion and community resilience (Bekkers, 2016; Musick & Wilson, 2017). Moreover, youth volunteers often change into active civic leaders, influencing and mobilizing peers toward community goals (Bullen et al., 2021; Lanero et al., 2017).

Personal and Social Benefits

Findings also indicate that engaging in volunteer work improves youths' well-being, self-esteem, and interpersonal skills (Ducharme, 2023; Kadir et al., 2024). These personal gains enhance their future employability and social integration.

Sectoral Impacts and Sustainability

Youth involvement in sectors such as education, health, and disaster response addresses immediate community needs and supports development efforts. The volunteerism of youth in fields such as education, health and disaster responses addresses immediate community needs and facilitates development efforts (Whittaker et al., 2015; Shaw & Dolan, 2022). However, concerns arise regarding short-term volunteer projects or volunteer tourism, which may fail to provide lasting benefits unless they are well-aligned with community priorities (Avolio et al., 2024; Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2016). These effects highlight how crucial it is to implement consistent, situation-specific volunteer programs that optimize community and youth development results.

Barriers and Challenges to Youth Participation in Voluntary Work

Despite evident advantages, youths encounter several obstacles that hinder their complete participation in volunteer activities, including

personal, social, and organizational aspects.

Time Constraints and Competing Priorities

Academic obligations, professional duties, and family responsibilities often constrain the time available for voluntary work (Holdsworth & Brewis, 2014; Mori, 2024).

Lack of Awareness and Access

Studies indicate that within resource-constrained areas, a significant number of youths lack information about volunteering opportunities, or they face logistical challenges in accessing volunteering roles (Rais et al., 2021; Udoma et al., 2024).

Social and Cultural Barriers

Conventional norms and limiting societal expectations, particularly in conservative environments, may inhibit youth autonomy and reduce engagement (Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2016; Smith et al., 2020).

Organizational and Structural Issues

Recent research also shows that poor management, insufficient training and lack of recognition reduce the motivation of youth for the engagement of volunteerism (Smith et al., 2020; Mori, 2024).

Contradictory Effects of Policy and Technology

Research has shown that mandatory volunteerism policies can reduce youth's intrinsic motivation, reducing the enthusiasm and long-term involvement of civic activities (Smith & Lee, 2024). Furthermore, studies also show that when volunteering is made mandatory it affects the youth's perception on volunteerism, and feel voluntold (Kim & Morgül, 2017; Bekkers, 2020). In addition, recent research suggests that mandatory programs may result in civic apathy or disengagement, particularly when there is a lack of autonomy and choice in the experience (Smith & Lee, 2024). To address these barriers, it

is essential to implement comprehensive strategies such as flexible scheduling, awareness campaigns, enhanced volunteer management, and equitable access to technology to promote sustained youth engagement.

DISCUSSION

This systematic literature review aimed to synthesize current research on youth engagement in voluntary work, focusing on motivations, impacts, and barriers within community development. By analyzing findings across 31 peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2025, this discussion explores the important dimensions such as motivational factors, the contributions of youth volunteering to development, youth inclusion, community engagement and empowerment, as well as challenges that hinder participation.

The first key theme, on the motivational factors driving youth engagement are consistent with prior research on intrinsic motivations such as empathy, altruism, and personal growth emerged as dominant drivers (Batson, 2010; Kadir et al., 2024). Extrinsic motivational factors like career advancement also play an important role in volunteerism, especially among university students (Handy et al., 2010). Notably, the review highlighted the importance of socio-economic factors and suggests that motivations vary substantially between societies that value collectivism versus individualism societies (Grönlund et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2020). This revelation underlines that volunteer programs must be designed to socio-cultural and economic contexts rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. Additionally, the rise of digital platforms was identified as a developing enabling factor for youth engagement (Ghory & Ghafory, 2021).

The second theme addresses the impacts of youth volunteerism on community development and individual outcomes. The findings illustrate that volunteering reinforces and promotes social capital, civic engagement, and community

resilience (Bekkers, 2016; Musick & Wilson, 2017). The advantages for an individual's personality such as improved well-being and skills development were also evident (Ducharme, 2023). However, the sustainability of short-term volunteer initiatives such as volunteer tourism has been questioned and implies the need of aligning with long term community vision and goals to ensure more sustainable and meaningful impact (Avolio et al., 2024; Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2016).

The third theme explores barriers for youth engagement in volunteerism. Significant challenges have been cited to relate to constraints, lack of awareness, cultural restrictions, and organizational shortcomings (Holdsworth & Brewis, 2014; Rais et al., 2021). Interestingly, the review also reveals the unintended negative effects of mandatory volunteering policies on intrinsic motivation (Stukas et al., 1999), alongside accessibility of digital platforms further exacerbate inequities (Ghory & Ghafory, 2021). These barriers underscore the importance of flexible, inclusive, and well-managed volunteer programs.

In relation to existing literature, this review reinforces established theories on altruistic motivation and social capital but expands on them by integrating the role of modern technology and cultural nuances. Unlike earlier reviews that emphasized uniform frameworks, this study highlights the necessity of localized adaptation to optimize youth engagement outcomes (Smith et al., 2020; Ferreira et al., 2022). The findings also challenge assumptions that volunteering benefits are universally accessible, drawing attention to structural inequities that require targeted interventions.

IMPLICATIONS

The review contributes to a more contextual understanding of youth volunteerism and has important implications for theoretical models on motivation. It also sheds light on the need for youth

volunteerism and activism to incorporate cultural, technological, and policy dimensions. Practically, the findings inform educators, community leaders, and volunteer organizations about the importance of designing flexible programs that address diverse motivational aspirations of youth and address barriers for youth engagement and participation. For example, the integration of digital tools can enhance outreach. These efforts must be accompanied by efforts to bridge gaps in accessibility

Policymakers must prioritize capacity building and community partnerships programs that are sustainable and encourage meaningful participation over short-term rewards of compulsory volunteering mandates. Investments and resources in volunteer management infrastructure, awareness campaigns, and technology access can foster more inclusive and effective youth participation. Such investments must foster partnership with international development initiatives, international Not for Profit Organisations with local efforts. This intervention aligns with evidence-based practices indicating that long-term youth engagement fosters greater benefits for promoting youth inclusion, engagement and participation to promote community engagement and social cohesion.

LIMITATIONS

This review has limitations, including language restrictions to English and reliance on available databases, potentially excluding relevant studies from non-English speaking regions. Publication bias toward positive findings and variability in study quality further constrain the generalizability of results. Additionally, inconsistent use of metrics across studies limits the feasibility of meta-analysis. Furthermore, the limitations of time constrained the scope and rigor of inclusion.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should address these gaps by employing longitudinal designs, comparative studies across diverse socio-economic settings, and underrepresented populations, particularly in regions like the Maldives and similar contexts. Furthermore, volunteerism focused on specific themes discussed and new and emerging issues such as digitalism and volunteerism in the digital platforms. Expanding focus on digital engagement and policy impacts will also enhance understanding of emerging trends in youth volunteerism. Comparative research focusing on Small Island Developing States would also provide greater insights for developing evidence-based policies on volunteerism to SIDS countries such as the Maldives.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this review advances knowledge on youth engagement in voluntary work for community development by synthesizing recent research across multiple contexts. It notes the need for culturally sensitive, theory-informed, and practice-oriented approaches to maximize the positive impact of youth volunteerism while addressing persistent barriers. These insights provide a foundation for future research, program design, and policymaking aimed at fostering meaningful and sustained youth involvement in community development. Such initiatives underscore the value of youth in community development initiatives to prevent the existing issues of societal fragmentation and ensure security, harmony, peace and stability.

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