
Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs

Vol. 11, No. 2

Volunteering as a Lifelong Career: Calling, Multi-organizational Involvement, and Life Impact

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This study explores how long-term volunteering can develop into a meaningful and sustained career path. Using narrative inquiry with 15 volunteers in Indonesia, we examine how individuals are motivated to begin volunteering, how they structure their ongoing involvement, and how they expand their roles across multiple nonprofit organizations. Our findings identify three flexible phases in the volunteering career: motivational foundations, focused involvement in one organization, and societal leadership across several organizations. We also identify four factors—environmental, spiritual, personal, and ambassadorial—that influence sustained engagement. While volunteers experience personal fulfillment and a strong sense of purpose, they also face challenges in balancing their commitments with family and work life. This study contributes to understanding volunteering as a form of long-term career development, shaped by both individual motivations and social contexts.

Keywords: *Volunteering career, Calling, Nonprofit organization, Narrative inquiry*

Introduction

Contemporary research on the intersection of personal drive and career tends to focus on lucrative jobs, often “funneling all paid work toward calling to achieve transcendent fulfillment” (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015, p. 163; Hall & Chandler, 2005). Most studies on careers have a tendency to view individual success primarily through the lens of paid work careers (Benson et al., 2020; Heslev, 2005). Consequently, individuals are often considered successful only when they build a reputation in financially rewarding jobs.

However, the literature provides little guidance on how careers can emerge in the context of meaningful but unpaid work. Although a few studies examine career development within nonprofit organizations, they largely focus on paid roles, such as social workers or salaried staff in social enterprises (Nelson, 2019; Stevens et al., 2012). As a result, the understanding of individual careers as volunteers in purely nonprofit contexts remains underexplored. This lack of attention hampers the development of a comprehensive theory of careers that integrates both paid and unpaid work. Contrary to the dominant focus on financial incentives, some individuals find meaningful work through a long-term unpaid volunteering career (Liu et al., 2017; Rodell, 2013). Existing theories that integrate financial motivations with personal commitment fail to adequately account for the career trajectories of non-paid volunteers. Many individuals, in fact, have extensive unpaid volunteering careers that span multiple organizations, as evidenced by our earlier empirical observations. Yet, there is limited

scholarly exploration of how and why volunteering career paths develop and what impacts they have on personal lives.

This study addresses these gaps by posing three key research questions: (1) How does a volunteering career path evolve?; (2) What motivates volunteers to engage in multiple organizations simultaneously?; and (3) How does volunteering impact personal life?. In this study, we conceptualize a career not merely as paid occupational work, but more broadly as a meaningful and sustained trajectory of personal engagement and development across the life span (Duffy & Dik, 2013; Dumulescu et al., 2015; Lysova et al., 2019). While careers are commonly associated with financial compensation and formal employment, we emphasize that unpaid work—when pursued with long-term commitment and purpose—can also form a coherent career path. A volunteering career, as we define it, does not necessarily replace paid work; rather, it is often pursued alongside paid employment, reflecting a dual pathway of professional and altruistic engagement. Clarifying this distinction is essential for understanding how individuals integrate non-remunerative roles into their broader career narratives.

Based on an exploratory narrative inquiry with Indonesian volunteers, we classify the volunteering career path into three flexible phases: motivational foundations, focused involvement, and societal leadership. In the third phase, individuals participate in numerous nonprofit organizations. An important issue that arises in this phase is the distinctive nature of commitment in volunteering careers. Volunteers demonstrate the ability to work effectively across multiple organizations simultaneously. Moreover, we find that the concept of calling plays a crucial role in motivating individuals to begin and sustain their volunteering careers (Angell, 2010; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Faletihan et al., 2021). Volunteers often regard their careers as a calling, aligning with the emerging construct of "career calling," which has recently gained significant attention in academic debates (Praskova et al., 2015). They sustain these callings due to various contextual factors, which have both positive and negative impacts on their personal lives.

In summary, this study contributes to career scholarship by introducing the concept of a volunteering career as a meaningful and sustained trajectory of engagement within the nonprofit sector. Rather than viewing volunteering as a secondary or transitional activity that merely complements paid employment (Mazanec, 2022; Nelson, 2019), we propose that long-term volunteering can represent a parallel form of career development—driven by personal values, social commitment, and a sense of calling. A volunteering career does not supplant paid work, but often coexists with it, forming a dual pathway of professional and altruistic identity. Our findings reveal how individuals construct and sustain this path across flexible phases of engagement, demonstrating that unpaid service can offer purpose, growth, and long-term commitment on par with conventional career frameworks.

Literature review

In career research, "career" broadly refers to "an individual's work-related and other relevant experiences, both inside and outside of organizations, that form a unique pattern over the individual's life span" (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009, p. 1543). However, this definition—while foundational—does not fully capture the meaning-oriented and developmental nature of how many individuals experience their careers. In this study, we define a career more specifically as a *personally meaningful, sustained pursuit of roles and activities that foster identity development, purpose, and contribution to others, regardless of whether these roles are paid or unpaid* (Duffy & Dik, 2013; Dumulescu et al., 2015; Hall & Chandler, 2005). This framing is consistent with our participants' narratives and with serious leisure theory, where careers may emerge through long-term volunteer work that offers psychological fulfillment, skill development, and a sense of calling (Cantillon & Baker, 2020a, 2020b).

While “career” is often used interchangeably with “occupation” in everyday language—especially in Western contexts—we distinguish between the two. Occupation typically refers to one’s paid employment, whereas career refers more broadly to the evolving sequence of meaningful roles and experiences across time, whether paid or unpaid (Cunningham et al., 2022; Discenna, 2016). This distinction is critical for our study. A volunteering career is not limited to individuals who forgo paid employment, but includes those who integrate sustained volunteer work into their broader career trajectories—often in tandem with paid roles. Recognizing this broader view enables a more inclusive understanding of how people build purposeful lives through both professional and voluntary commitments.

This study builds upon the concept of serious leisure to support the notion of volunteering as a career. Serious leisure, as defined by Stebbins (1996, p. 215), involves “the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial and interesting in nature for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience.” Serious leisure differs from casual leisure, which consists of short-lived, relaxing activities that require minimal commitment or skill development (Stebbins, 2009). Serious leisure requires the practitioner to invest time, effort, and skill into an activity that offers fulfillment and a sense of purpose, even if it is unpaid (Cantillon & Baker, 2020a). This framework helps explain how some individuals adopt long-term volunteering as a core component of their identity and aspirations, deriving psychological and social rewards similar to those found in traditional careers (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014).

Volunteering as a career, therefore, carries characteristics such as skill acquisition, identity formation, and deep satisfaction derived from contributing to the well-being of others (Hudson & Inkson, 2006; Penner, 2002; Rodell, 2013). Research has shown that sustained volunteering contributes to civic engagement, social capital, and identity development over time (Einolf & Yung, 2018; Garland et al., 2008; Musick & Wilson, 2007). While some studies focus on short-term or instrumental motivations, such as résumé building among student volunteers (Fényes et al., 2021; Handy et al., 2010), others emphasize deeper personal and social motivations for sustained involvement (Hustinx, 2010; Hustinx et al., 2010). Motivations for long-term volunteering extend beyond altruism and include a desire for self-expression, meaningful connection, and role continuity across life stages (Faletihan et al., 2021; Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Ou et al., 2023). Classic work by Clary et al (1998) identified a set of functional motivations—including values, understanding, social, career, protective, and enhancement—that shape why individuals begin and continue to volunteer. This perspective helps explain how volunteers engage for both personal and social reasons, often in ways that evolve over time. Unlike paid nonprofit work, which is often hierarchical and remunerated (Einolf, 2022), a volunteering career is typically self-directed, intrinsically motivated, and may span multiple causes and organizational contexts. Some individuals even pursue sustained volunteer roles to compensate for a lack of meaning or recognition in their paid occupations (Rodell, 2013).

Despite its significance, the concept of volunteering as a career remains under-theorized. Much of the literature continues to portray volunteering as a supplementary activity—often framed as a stepping stone to paid employment or a tool for personal development—rather than as a primary, sustained life path (Mazanec, 2022; Nelson, 2019; Pavlova & Silbereisen, 2014; Stevens et al., 2012). The emphasis frequently rests on short-term outcomes, such as employability, social networking, or psychological benefits, with limited attention to how volunteers build cumulative experience, construct identity, and sustain long-term engagement across the life course (Handy et al., 2010). Furthermore, studies have tended to examine volunteer experiences within single organizations, leaving multi-organizational involvement and cross-contextual career trajectories largely unexplored (Einolf & Yung, 2018; Hudson & Inkson, 2006).

Viewing volunteering as a structured career path also enables a better understanding of the complex challenges volunteers face. These include managing role conflicts, sustaining motivation, and balancing time between volunteering, family, and paid work (Cuskelly et al., 2002; Nesbit, 2013). Serious leisure pursuits like long-term volunteering can demand high levels of commitment and role negotiation, which in turn affect family dynamics and psychological well-being (Cantillon & Baker, 2020b; Dalla Rosa & Vianello, 2020; Elkington & Stebbins, 2014). This study contributes to the literature by offering a grounded exploration of the structure, motivation, and consequences of volunteering careers across multiple organizations. Our findings underscore how individuals perceive their unpaid service as both personally fulfilling and occasionally burdensome—particularly when navigating competing demands across personal, organizational, and societal domains.

Research methods

Research design

This study employs narrative inquiry as a qualitative research method to understand participants' stories and experiences (Bleakley, 2005; Clandinin et al., 2007). Narrative inquiry was deemed the most suitable approach for this study because it allows researchers to "look back at the rich meanings" embedded in individual life stories (Clandinin, 2006, p. 44). Previous studies have successfully used narrative inquiry to explore topics such as individual careers (Hartman et al., 2020) and social work (Gola, 2009). Similarly, this approach enabled us to examine the trajectory of individual volunteering careers across multiple nonprofit organizations and their influence on the personal lives of participants.

Adopting this approach, we investigated participants' volunteer career experiences (spanning past, present, and future) and their interactions with external factors such as family, voluntary networks, and organizational contexts (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin et al., 2007). The narrative conception incorporated dimensions of place, temporality, and sociality within individuals' volunteering career paths. As Caine et al. (2013, p. 577) emphasized, "their stories were situated within larger cultural, social, familial, and institutional narratives." This framework allowed us to capture the dynamic and multifaceted nature of a volunteering career within the socio-cultural contexts in which they unfolded.

Participant selection

We recruited 15 volunteers to share their personal stories about their volunteering careers. To ensure diversity in gender, age, religion, volunteering experience, family status, occupation, and organizational membership, we used a purposive sampling strategy with snowball recruitment. That is, we defined specific inclusion criteria to select information-rich cases (Mays & Pope, 1995), and then used snowball sampling to locate participants who met those criteria but were difficult to access through public or organizational channels (Merriam, 2014).

A unique feature of this study was its focus on volunteers who were active in multiple nonprofit organizations simultaneously. Based on insights from our earlier studies, we observed that some volunteers maintain high levels of engagement across several organizations. To explore this phenomenon further, we classified participants into two groups: (1) volunteers who were active in more than one nonprofit organization simultaneously, and (2) those who were active in only one organization. This classification enabled a cross-case analysis of how volunteers experienced organizational commitment and navigated transitions across volunteering contexts.

Our combined purposive and snowball sampling approach ensured that the study captured both breadth (diversity of backgrounds) and depth (relevant, hard-to-reach cases), offering rich insights across the life span of a volunteering career. Table 1 summarizes participant profiles, with pseudonyms used to protect identities.

Table 1. Participant biographical information

No.	Pseudo-nym	Gender	Family status	Age	Number of membership	Educational background	Length of volunteering experiences	Religion	Occupation
1	Dani	Male	Married with children	54	6 <	Bachelor	16 years <	Islam	Freelancer
2	Yuli	Female	Single	55	3-5	Master	6-10 years	Christianity	Doctor
3	Narto	Male	Married with children	61	3-5	Bachelor	16 years <	Christianity	Retired
4	Siti	Female	Divorced with children	48	3-5	Bachelor	6-10 years	Islam	Entrepreneur
5	Farid	Male	Married with children	48	6 <	Senior high school	16 years <	Islam	Freelancer
6	Eva	Female	Single	40	2	Diploma	11-15 years	Christianity	Entrepreneur
7	Rudi	Male	Single	30	6 <	Senior high school	11-15 years	Islam	Private employee
8	Putri	Female	Married with children	55	3-5	Diploma	16 years <	Christianity	Nurse
9	Udin	Male	Married with children	42	3-5	Senior high school	11-15 years	Islam	Freelancer
10	Parto	Male	Married with children	28	1	Bachelor	6-10 years	Islam	Civil servant
11	Zainab	Female	Single	23	1	Bachelor	6-10 years	Islam	Freelancer
12	Riko	Male	Married with children	34	1	Senior high school	11-15 years	Islam	Private employee
13	Selamet	Male	Single	40	1	Senior high school	11-15 years	Islam	Private employee
14	Tutik	Female	Married with children	50	1	Diploma	6-10 years	Islam	Nurse
15	Panca	Male	Single	37	1	Senior high school	6-10 years	Christianity	Teacher

Data collection

This study was conducted in Indonesia, a country ranked highest in global volunteering levels according to the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) World Giving Index (CAF, 2021). The report highlights that Indonesia's high rates of volunteering reflect the cultural significance of *gotong-royong*—a deeply rooted practice of mutual aid that transcends islands, ethnicities, and religions and becomes especially prominent during emergencies.

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling methods. Because individuals meeting our sampling criteria—especially those involved in multiple nonprofit organizations—were difficult to identify directly, we began by contacting a known volunteer who was highly active on social media and met the inclusion criteria. We then requested referrals to other volunteers who met the same criteria (Flick, 2009; Merriam, 2014). Some participants were also recruited

through networks from our previous studies. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews.

The interviews were conducted in 2019 and 2021 in two cities in Indonesia: Sidoarjo and Surabaya. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 80 minutes. The interview protocol covered four main sub-topics. First, we collected personal information, including participants' occupations, family status, religion, education, other interests, and the average time spent on both for-profit jobs and volunteering work. Second, we explored participants' narratives of how they began and developed their volunteering careers, focusing on their initial motivations and the individual and external factors driving their involvement. Third, we inquired about their engagement in multiple nonprofits, discussing the motives and factors influencing their simultaneous involvement in several organizations. Lastly, we examined the positive and negative impacts of their volunteering careers on their personal lives. Participants shared experiences that highlighted both the rewards and challenges of pursuing a volunteering career. The sample of 15 participants was deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation, as no new themes or insights emerged after the twelfth interview. The final three participants confirmed and enriched the existing themes, ensuring the completeness and depth of the data.

Data analysis

In order to capture volunteers' meaning in the narratives, we utilized an inductive thematic analysis, as a common data analysis method in narrative inquiry (Caine et al., 2013; Hartman et al., 2020), which involved "deriving categories inductively from raw data" (Bleakley, 2005, p. 535). To enhance the trustworthiness of our findings, we incorporated several validation strategies. First, member checking was conducted with participants to validate our interpretations of their stories and to ensure that the derived themes accurately reflected their experiences. Detailed descriptions of the narrative contexts were also provided to allow readers to assess transferability and applicability of our findings to other contexts.

Reflexivity played a vital role throughout the research process. While a formal reflexive journal was not maintained, reflexive practices were embedded in the research, beginning with detailed field notes that documented immediate reflections on participant interactions, setting, and emerging observations. These notes helped the researchers identify and mitigate personal biases, and they provided critical context that was revisited throughout data analysis to ground our interpretations firmly in the participants' perspectives

The interviews were conducted in Indonesian, the native language of both the participants and one of the researchers. This researcher, as the primary interviewer and translator, ensured that the participants' narratives were authentically represented in the transcriptions. To safeguard accuracy and maintain linguistic integrity, the transcriptions were carefully cross-checked against the original recordings. Additionally, we employed NVivo to store, code, and systematically analyze all transcripts, using NVivo coding to capture participants' exact language (Murphy et al., 2017) and retain contextual meaning during the coding process. These codes were iteratively refined into higher-level categories until abstract conceptual themes were formed, namely, the three phases of the volunteering career path, four drivers of sustained calling, and the impact on personal life (see Table 2).

Findings

The findings comprise three interrelated topics. First, we introduce the volunteering career path where calling plays a role. Second, we explain the drivers of volunteer involvement in multiple nonprofits at the same time. Finally, we explore the impact of this volunteering career on personal life.

Table 2. Data structure

First order concepts	Second order concepts	Conceptual codes	Themes
○ I have been active in social work since I was young. ○ I was active in the Boy Scouts. ○ I realize that we are social creatures. We need others and they need us.	Passion in social activities		
○ Islamic teachings about doing good things: be a beneficial person to others. ○ Inspired by a speech in the church: my volunteering is for my spiritual needs. ○ Buddhist teachings: love others without looking at their religious background. ○ Stories from Prophet Muhammad. ○ When I recognize Jesus, I suddenly like social things. ○ Having good religious background.	Religious teachings		
○ Follow my heart to help others. ○ I like Greenpeace activities. I often go hiking and help search for people who are missing in the mountains.	Sentiments to easily get called to help others	Motivational foundations	
○ It is just a genetic factor. My parents are social people. They participated in a foundation dedicated to the poor. They provided houses for the homeless. ○ My parent always advised me to do social services.	Genetic and familial environmental influences		
○ I was asked by an NGO's staff to do volunteering and mentoring work in a rural village. ○ My friend who is a volunteer asked me to participate in this social work.	Inspired by others		Three phases in the volunteering career path
○ I am still young. I want to seek new knowledge and challenges. ○ I love hiking and entering the forest, like Tarzan, and then helping people there.	Inclination to seek challenging activities		
Registered as new volunteers in various nonprofit organizations (e.g., environmental organizations, health care organizations, faith-based organizations, public traffic organizations, disaster mitigation organizations)	First encounter with a nonprofit organization		
○ Unhappy with their membership. ○ They do not fit with the organizational culture. ○ Seeking other nonprofit organizations.	Unsatisfied and leave the nonprofit		
○ Very satisfied with the situation in the organization. ○ Being strong loyalists so they do not pursue additional or consecutive membership in other nonprofits, but rather stay at the first organization.	Satisfied and loyalist in a nonprofit	Focused Involvement	
○ Feeling satisfied with their first nonprofit. ○ They still develop their callings by participating in other nonprofits.	Satisfied and developing further		

○ Volunteers are devoted to their work, not to their organizations. ○ Having membership in multiple nonprofits at the same time.	Very active in multiple nonprofits at the same time		
○ Working as volunteers in formal nonprofit organizations. ○ Working as volunteers in informal social activities. ○ They compare one nonprofit with other nonprofits where they are also involved. ○ Their networks become broader and reach both national and international levels since they blend with various volunteering groups from other countries.	Participating in both formal and informal volunteering	Societal leadership	
○ I am surrounded by good people who like social activities. ○ We were only five volunteers left but we survived and could develop this volunteering group. ○ Impressed with the profile of nonprofit as they are a purely social organization and do not discriminate against our religion or economical background. ○ Feeling called to build strong community and networks.	Supportive volunteering group networks		
○ Crying when visiting patients in their houses. ○ My calling gets increasing if seeing others suffering. ○ Feeling happy when seeing others are cured and helped. ○ My friend's kid was lost in the forest, and I was called to help them. Other disasters also called me to volunteer again. ○ Surprised when finding fragile communities in the rural area that cannot see their potential.	Seeing others' suffering frequently	Environmental factors	
○ Concerned with others' negligence so I must participate to solve it. ○ If not us, who will help them. ○ I have observed that my communities have low awareness about caring nature and social work, so we must handle it.	Concern with many disasters, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and low awareness		
○ Religious teachings (e.g., Buddhist teachings in loving others regardless of any religious background; Christian teachings on compassion; Islamic teachings to do good things and be a beneficial person to others). ○ Safety guarantee from God for me and my family (e.g., If we help others and then others will help our family in the future; Because of God, my friend helps my family when I am volunteering). ○ Religious duties (e.g., Collecting provision for the afterlife by volunteering; Volunteering is part of gratitude to God)	Religious values	Transcendental factors	
○ Although exhausted, I feel spiritually satisfied. ○ It feels like throwing away my burden when I help others, I feel really satisfied. ○ Volunteering is the fuel for my spiritual needs.	Spiritual satisfaction		
○ Moral obligation (e.g., The bigger we are, the bigger responsibility we have; This is something	Personal perspectives	Personal factors	

The four drivers of sustained calling in multiple nonprofit organizations

we must do; When you have moral obligation, we will be connected with beneficiaries).			
○ Self-actualization (e.g., I can take part to help others; To be beneficial to others). ○ Redemption of self-failure in the past (e.g., I was poor and sometimes stole money, now I want to become a good person; I was selfish and rich, now I must give back and pay my mistakes to communities).			
○ Passion and habituation in social activities (e.g., Volunteering is my comfort zone. Although I have problems here, I don't leave this organization; I don't seek advantage for myself; I have social groups in churches and hospitals). ○ Humanism (e.g., I realize that I am a social creature, so we need people and they need us; We cannot live alone; religious teachings are universally applicable to all humans).	Individual traits		
○ Helping other volunteers to find their passion. ○ We must train young volunteers for the next generation.	Responsibility to pass knowledge and skills to younger generation		
○ I feel that I have not fully sacrificed myself as a volunteer yet, so I want to do more. ○ The volunteer profile is still underestimated in our communities. ○ Spreading the good things with our friends and building new communities.	Responsibility to promote the profile of volunteer	Responsibility as volunteer ambassador	
○ Every day we send everybody religious messages. ○ We are already old, so we must remind other volunteers to collect transcendental rewards by volunteering. ○ We must inspire other volunteers.	Responsibility to motivate other volunteers		
○ God's insurance for the safety of volunteers and their families in the future ○ I believe God will take care of my children in the future. ○ We must help others, Allah will provide everything for us, so don't worry. ○ God always helps me; it's based on my 15 years of volunteering experience.	Increasing faith in the transcendental		
○ I feel needed by others. ○ Building new networks with beneficiaries. ○ My mission is to educate the young generation.	Social networks	Positive impact	
○ We can teach social activities to our families. ○ Focus on quality time with family. ○ We love family more than before.	Family issues		
○ Helping others is like charging a phone; it's spiritually satisfying. ○ Volunteering on the field makes me more grateful to God. We are luckier than those who are suffering. ○ When people can be cured, as a doctor, I feel spiritual satisfaction, relief, and priceless.	Spiritual satisfaction		The impact of volunteering career on personal life

○ Volunteering is a path to becoming a social worker in nonprofit organizations. ○ Volunteering can help my paid work career as a doctor. When I participated in an event, I obtained a certificate. ○ Volunteering is a form of relaxation after being busy with study or work.	Volunteering career can help paid work career	
○ Less time with family. ○ A lack of attention to family. ○ Potential conflict with children and wife. ○ Financial problems in the household. ○ A lack of a plan for family welfare in the future.	Family issues	
○ Feeling insecure about a lucrative job in the future. ○ I am a full-time volunteer because I don't have a profitable permanent job. ○ Neglecting the current job and focusing more on volunteering.	Job insecurity	Negative impact
○ I do not care about the time. Although today is my off day, I still go on the field when there is a disaster, even at night. ○ Neglecting their own health. Because of volunteering spirit, they ignore the Covid-19 protocol.	Health issues	
○ I finished my bachelor's degree in 13 years because I was busy with volunteering activities. ○ Neglecting study seriously. When the date of the national exam was approaching, I went to the location of the mountain eruption to help others.	Educational issues	

Volunteering career path

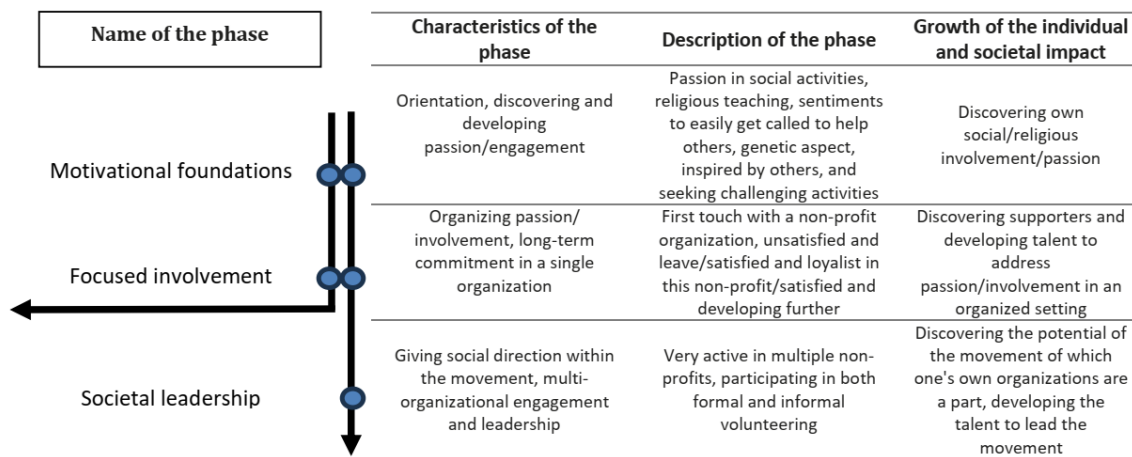
In delineating the volunteering career path, we observe three distinct phases: motivational foundations, focused involvement, and societal leadership, as depicted in Figure 1 and detailed in Table 3, based on the experiences of our 15 participants. Figure 1 presents the sequential growth of volunteers from initial motivation to a sustained commitment that often expands into multiple organizations, with Table 3 illustrating each participant's unique journey across these phases. Although we describe the volunteering career in terms of three phases, we do not present this as a strictly linear or universal sequence. Not all participants follow the same sequence. The model is considered non-linear because it does not imply a fixed progression through phases; rather, it accommodates divergent pathways. While many participants described a developmental progression from involvement in a single organization to broader engagement, others remained committed within one organizational context. We therefore treat these phases as flexible stages in a potential volunteering career trajectory, conceptualized in the Dual Pattern of Volunteering Career Path model, which accommodates both divergent pathways and developmental progression over time.

In the motivational foundations phase, volunteers establish their emotional foundations and embrace altruistic roles, often shaped by personal experiences, religious teachings, familial guidance, and external inspiration. This phase reflects an early stage of development, where volunteers' sense of duty and empathy is rooted in formative experiences. As one participant noted, *"When I was young, I used to accommodate my friends having broken family issues to sleep at my house. I also taught them some skills such as organizing events and performing religious rituals. Until now, I am already very familiar with social activities"* (Udin). Another participant shared that *"I always learn and am motivated from the stories of Prophet who kept helping the needy"* (Parto), demonstrating the influence of religious teachings. Other

factors include familial encouragement, as one participant described: *"My father was a soldier and I grew up in the military family. He advised me to do genuine social services. His sayings hit me so much"* (Farid). The inclination to seek challenging activities also contributes to the volunteering spirit, as illustrated by the statement, *"these are like our new battle for me"* (Rudi), with several participants noting how outdoor activities led them toward related volunteer work, such as search and rescue missions.

After gaining confidence and experience through informal volunteering, individuals transition to formal involvement with nonprofit organizations, marking the second phase of the volunteering career path: focused involvement. At this stage, motivations diversify as participants join organizations for various reasons—peer encouragement, organizational missions, or inclusivity. For example, volunteers cited friends' invitations to join (Yuli, Rudi, Narto, Riko, Selamat, Tutik), attraction to the organization's mission (Eva, Zainab), or feelings of acceptance despite disabilities (Parto). This phase involves a maturing sense of commitment, with some volunteers opting to stay with their first organization, while others expand into multiple organizations, fostering a deepening dedication.

Figure 1. Dual pattern of volunteering career path



For some participants, this involvement phase marked a stable point of long-term commitment to a single organization. However, for others, this phase served as a stepping stone toward broader engagement, as their confidence, networks, and sense of mission grew over time. As Dani reflected, *"At first, I joined only one organization that focused on environmental cleanups. But as I met more people, I got invited to disaster response teams, education programs, and now I'm active in at least six different volunteer groups."* Similarly, Narto shared, *"I started volunteering just with my campus organization. I thought that was enough. But later, I felt I could help more communities, and I began joining other groups with different missions."*

In the societal leadership phase, volunteers embody a broader sense of calling that transcends individual organizations, allowing them to engage fluidly across multiple groups. The societal leadership phase is often the result of a gradual expansion from earlier involvement. For many participants, a deepening personal calling and the accumulation of experiences in one organization led them to engage across multiple nonprofits. This phase is characterized by independence, spiritual connection, and broader social influence. As Farid described, *"At the beginning, I was just volunteering with one group in my neighborhood. But over time, I felt the urge to go beyond that. Now, I feel like I belong to the whole movement, not just one place."* Yuli also reflected on this expansion: *"I used to limit myself to one organization. I was*

afraid to get overwhelmed. But gradually, I found that working with different groups gave me more energy, not less. Now I help coordinate between them."

This stage, characterized by independence, spiritual connection, and an expanded social reach, reflects volunteers' dedication beyond any one organization. They may serve *"as free persons who do not attach to one particular nonprofit organization but are ready to assist anytime everywhere"* (Dani). Their career trajectory at this phase is built across various nonprofit organizations and includes both formal and informal volunteering activities. Volunteers often compare organizations and expand their networks to national and international levels, blending with diverse volunteering groups. As one volunteer noted, *"Volunteering is my comfort zone. I still volunteer although we have conflicts with paid staff or volunteer colleagues. Any bad situation does not prevent me to help others"* (Rudi). In this phase, they take on informal leadership roles, guiding others and expanding their impact across organizations.

Our findings suggest that while most participants share common motivational foundations, their paths diverge after initial involvement. Some individuals maintain long-term engagement with a single organization, driven by loyalty, clarity of mission, or time constraints. Others demonstrate a developmental progression, gradually expanding their commitment into multiple nonprofit organizations and assuming broader leadership roles. These represent both distinct patterns and, in some cases, sequential stages of a volunteering career, shaped by personal growth, evolving motivations, and external opportunities.

Table 3. Participants' volunteering career path

No.	Participants	Phase 1: Motivational foundations	Phase 2: Focused involvement	Phase 3: Societal leadership
1	Dani	○ Passion in social activities ○ Sentiments to easily get called to help others ○ Inclination to seek challenging activities	Environmental organization	Member of six nonprofits [Environmental group, rescue team, disaster mitigation group]
2	Yuli	○ Passion in social activities ○ Religious teachings	Health care organization	Member of three nonprofits [Faith-based organization, health care]
3	Narto	○ Passion in social activities ○ Religious teachings	Faith-based organization	Member of four nonprofits [Faith-based organization, health care]
4	Siti	○ Sentiments to easily get called to help others	Public traffic organization	Member of five nonprofits [Charity organization, health care, public traffic voluntary group]
5	Farid	○ Passion in social activities ○ Sentiments to easily get called to help others ○ Genetic and familial environmental influences ○ Inspiration from others ○ Inclination to seek challenging activities	Environmental organization	Member of six nonprofits [Environmental group, rescue team, disaster mitigation group, health care, charity organization]
6	Eva	○ Religious teachings	Faith-based organization	Member of two nonprofits [Faith-based organization]
7	Rudi	○ Passion in social activities ○ Religious teachings ○ Inspiration from others ○ Inclination to seek challenging activities	Faith-based organization	Member of six nonprofits [Charity organization, rescue team, community broadcasting group, environmental group, firefighter volunteer, faith-based organization]
8	Putri	○ Passion in social activities ○ Religious teachings	Health care organization	Member of four nonprofits [Faith-based organization,

9	Udin	○ Passion in social activities ○ Religious teachings ○ Genetic and familial environmental influences	Disaster mitigation organization	<i>health care]</i> Member of four nonprofits <i>[Social emergency response, faith-based organization, disaster mitigation group, education and community empowerment]</i>
10	Parto	○ Religious teachings ○ Genetic and familial environmental influences	Faith-based organization	-
11	Zainab	○ Passion in social activities ○ Religious teachings ○ Genetic and familial environmental influences	Faith-based organization	-
12	Riko	○ Religious teachings ○ Inspiration from others	Faith-based organization	-
13	Selamet	○ Religious teachings ○ Inspiration from others ○ Inclination to seek challenging activities	Faith-based organization	-
14	Tutik	○ Passion in social activities ○ Religious teachings ○ Inspiration from others	Faith-based organization	-
15	Panca	○ Passion in social activities ○ Religious teachings ○ Inspiration from others ○ Inclination to seek challenging activities	Faith-based organization	-

The societal leadership path: Factors sustaining calling in multi-organizational volunteering

Nine out of 15 participants followed what we describe as a societal leadership path in their volunteering careers, engaging actively in multiple nonprofit organizations and driven by a strong sense of personal calling. They view volunteering as an integral part of their life mission and plan to continue for years to come. In contrast, six participants focused their commitment on a single organization, citing reasons such as loyalty (Parto, Zainab), time constraints (Tutik), or a preference for focused contribution (Riko, Selamet, Panca). These findings suggest two distinct patterns of long-term volunteering engagement: one characterized by organizational depth, the other by breadth and broader societal influence. The societal leadership path, in particular, was shaped by a blend of environmental, transcendental, and personal factors, along with a sense of ambassadorial responsibility.

Environmental factors

Environmental factors that empower a volunteer's sustained calling and support their decision to pursue a volunteering career include supportive volunteering groups, frequent exposure to others' suffering, and concerns about recurring disasters and socio-economic vulnerabilities.

Volunteers who maintain a high level of commitment to their callings are often surrounded by like-minded individuals and inspiring voluntary groups. They are embedded in supportive environments characterized by a strong commitment to social work: *"We were lucky because we were introduced to volunteers who had the same spirit as us"* (Farid, Siti).

Additionally, volunteers develop deep empathy for beneficiaries or disaster victims, which compels them to act. For instance, one participant shared: *"I could not see this suffering*

anymore, so I had to go to the field even though it was my day off from volunteering” (Farid). Volunteers often form emotional bonds with beneficiaries, with some saying they felt like close family to the people they helped: “I cried when visiting the homes of the needy” (Putri); “We were considered part of the beneficiaries’ close family” (Eva).

While connecting with beneficiaries, volunteers also remained aware of recurring disasters caused by human activity. Volunteers who were also environmental activists felt a sense of urgency to address these issues: *“We never stop seeing disasters because humans have created them. Our nature is damaged because of ourselves” (Dani). Another shared: “If not us, who will help restore our earth?” (Udin).*

Transcendental factors

The second factor involves the spiritual and non-physical aspects that sustain volunteers’ callings and enable them to develop their volunteering careers. Given that most participants followed formal religions such as Islam and Christianity, religious values played a significant role in maintaining their motivation. Religious teachings encouraged participants to consistently sustain their callings and view their volunteering as a form of religious duty. Volunteers often expressed that their efforts were acts of thankfulness to God: *“Volunteering is part of gratitude to God” (Putri).*

Beyond fulfilling religious obligations, participants also believed in transcendental rewards for their efforts. They viewed volunteering as a way to secure divine blessings and protection for their families: *“We believe God will save our families in the future if we continue volunteering” (Eva).*

In addition to religious values, volunteers described experiencing spiritual satisfaction through their work, which they regarded as a profound emotional state beyond ordinary feelings of happiness. This unique satisfaction differed from typical pleasure or joy, as it was rooted in their connection to the suffering of others. Udin and Siti reflected: *“Of course, who could be satisfied while we saw their sorrow and suffering? It was not that type of regular satisfaction because seeing others’ misery did not satisfy us” (Udin, Siti).*

Spiritual satisfaction often acted as a powerful source of motivation, with some volunteers likening it to an addiction that drove them to do more. Eva explained: *“Yes, we were very exhausted, but we were delighted and needed more.”* This type of satisfaction allowed volunteers to continue their work, even without recognition: *“We could continue helping others, even without appreciation, because our motivation came from the transcendental, the highest spirit” (Udin).*

Personal factors

In considering volunteering work as a career calling, personal factors encompass two key elements: (1) individual perspectives, which are dynamic, and (2) individual traits, which are relatively stable over time and across situations. Individual perspectives are shaped by prior experiences and self-awareness, while individual traits, as aspects of personality, can be assessed through habitual patterns of emotion, thought, and behavior.

We identified three crucial individual perspectives influencing volunteers’ callings: moral obligation, self-actualization, and redemption of past failures. Based on our findings, volunteers felt a deeper connection to social actions when they regarded their volunteering careers as a moral obligation. One volunteer explained: *“This is something we must do. The bigger we are, the bigger responsibility we have in society” (Udin).* Additionally, volunteers were motivated by a desire to actualize their talents and skills to benefit others. Three

participants (Rudi, Putri, Yuli) expressed that they were driven to showcase their roles and competencies by contributing to their communities.

Another compelling factor binding individuals to sustained involvement in multiple nonprofits was the redemption of past failures or mistakes, such as being selfish, arrogant, or engaging in unethical behavior. Many volunteers sought to "repay" their perceived debts by developing a volunteering career. One participant shared: *"When I was young, I was poor and had many wishes. Sometimes I pickpocketed or misused money that my friends trusted me with. Now, I've changed since meeting someone who introduced me to volunteering"* (Rudi).

In addition to these perspectives, we also identified two significant individual traits that influence sustained calling in a volunteering career: passion for social activities and humanism. These traits appeared to emerge during the motivational foundations stage—before formal involvement—and continued to develop as volunteers matured. For instance, passion drove volunteers to actively seek out new social activities without waiting for invitations. A female volunteer stated: *"We love social actions. We always ask our friends, 'When can we go again? Where is the next social event?'"* (Yuli). This passion fueled their pursuit of future volunteering opportunities.

Passion is closely related to humanism, which emphasizes the intrinsic value of helping others. As one volunteer reflected: *"As I've grown older, I've realized that we are social creatures who must care for others. It's like when I hike in the mountains—I always create new paths so others can follow my trail"* (Dani).

The responsibility as volunteer ambassador

The final factor influencing the decision to develop a volunteering career is an individual's sense of responsibility to promote the profile of volunteers within their communities, akin to the role of a volunteer ambassador. Seven participants, particularly those of middle and late age, expressed a commitment to elevating the image of volunteering as a career. While no formal title of "volunteer ambassador" was conferred upon them, their stories reveal that they played significant roles as informal ambassadors in their daily lives.

As informal volunteer ambassadors, participants described three key responsibilities they undertook to advance the profile of volunteering. First, they felt responsible for passing on knowledge and skills to the younger generation. Many participants expressed concern about their age and the future of volunteer development programs. *"We are already old, and we need regeneration"* (Dani), one volunteer explained. Another added: *"We must train younger volunteers seriously and build their esprit de corps as volunteers"* (Siti).

Second, participants felt compelled to promote the profile of volunteering to broader society, even without formal recognition. Some volunteers observed that *"the profile of a volunteer has not yet been considered a popular career"* (Udin). To address this, they actively promoted volunteering through social media, visits to educate communities, and recruitment efforts targeting young volunteers in schools.

Third, participants took responsibility for motivating other volunteers. Recognizing that volunteers cannot work alone, they emphasized the importance of mutual encouragement to sustain their collective efforts. One participant shared: *"I tell my colleagues that we don't know when we will die, so we should use our lives to collect good deeds through volunteering"* (Putri).

The impact of volunteering career on personal life

When volunteering is pursued as a career, it inevitably influences an individual's personal life, as this career is developed within the context of unpaid work. This section explores the dual impact of a volunteering career, highlighting both positive and negative effects on personal feelings, paid work careers, social relationships, and family dynamics.

Positive impact

Participants in this study perceived numerous positive impacts of their volunteering careers on their lives. First, they experienced an increase in faith and a deeper connection to the transcendental while building their careers as volunteers. As explained earlier, volunteering created a unique relationship between individuals and their spiritual beliefs. Two participants remarked, *"We could not use logical reasoning in volunteering when we felt the presence of God here"* (Siti, Farid). Volunteers often adopted metaphysical perspectives, believing that God ensured their families' welfare and safety in the future.

Additionally, participants frequently mentioned feelings of spiritual satisfaction, which they described as a form of transcendental happiness. This satisfaction arose from *"feeling needed by others"* (Eva, Riko) and *"seeing that others' suffering had been reduced"* (Yuli, Zainab, Udin, Parto, Selamat, Tutik). These experiences rejuvenated their spirits and motivated them to continue volunteering despite challenges: *"We would not stop volunteering, even as we grew older or faced illness"* (Narto).

Volunteering also had positive effects on family dynamics, although, as discussed later, these were sometimes outweighed by the negative impacts. Over time, volunteers indirectly influenced their family members by modeling the value of social engagement. One participant noted, *"At least, my son's passion for social activities is increasing. Yesterday, he joined rescue training in our volunteering group. He knows this skill is important for himself and others"* (Farid). Another shared an effort to instill volunteering values early: *"I registered my newborn as a donor in this nonprofit so I hope he will become a volunteer like me in the future"* (Riko).

In addition to personal and family benefits, a volunteering career also fostered the development of robust social networks. Volunteers built strong connections with colleagues, paid staff in nonprofits, local government representatives, beneficiaries, and non-volunteer friends. These networks, in turn, contributed to their professional growth. While volunteering, many participants were also pursuing paid careers as doctors, nurses, students, and entrepreneurs. For example, some nonprofits provided certificates or awards that could be used for professional credit, benefiting participants' roles as doctors or students. Long-term volunteering experiences also opened opportunities for some individuals to transition into careers as social workers within nonprofit organizations.

Negative impact

While a volunteering career generates positive outcomes, it also presents significant challenges. Participants revealed that volunteering in multiple nonprofits often led to dilemmas, although they were reluctant to share these stories openly. Based on their experiences, three participants reported neglecting their education to focus on volunteering. For instance, one participant chose to prioritize volunteering during the national school examination period: *"I focused on volunteering work during the period of national examinations at school"* (Zainab). Another participant sacrificed their education savings for volunteering activities. Reflecting on this decision, a young volunteer shared:

“My father left me some money for my future education, but I didn’t use it for study. Instead, I spent it on volunteering work. I was a volunteer coordinator at the time and had to take care of my subordinates. My mother became suspicious, furious, and even printed out my bankbook to check my spending history” (Rudi).

Participants also reported overlooking their personal health to fulfill their callings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, some volunteers worked tirelessly, assisting communities by delivering masks, spraying disinfectants, and organizing emergency hospitals, even in areas with extremely high transmission rates: *“We kept assisting communities even when the rate of COVID-19 transmission was very high in that area” (Siti, Farid)*. Some volunteers ignored the risks of contagion by approaching and caring for COVID-19 patients without wearing personal protective equipment.

Another challenge involved job insecurity. While 10 participants had stable jobs that supported their volunteering activities, five were full-time volunteers who relied on their faith in God for their families’ welfare. They believed that their role was to volunteer and that God would provide for their needs. This “transcendental transaction,” as they described it, often resulted in financial uncertainty, which could jeopardize their families’ futures. Family members expressed concerns about the lack of a lucrative permanent job and its implications for long-term stability.

All participants acknowledged that volunteering in multiple nonprofits negatively affected their families in five key ways: reduced family time, lack of attention to family, uncertainty about children’s future, household financial problems, and family conflicts.

First, volunteers spent less time with their families. As one participant shared: *“I went home at night when my kids were sleeping. In the morning, I was sleeping while my kids were awake. We only met at noon when they weren’t taking a nap” (Udin)*. Second, volunteers were unable to prioritize family needs. For instance, one participant’s children complained because their father never took them on vacations, unlike other families: *“My kids complained because I never brought them on Sunday vacations like normal families” (Dani)*. Another participant reported that their husband felt uncomfortable because he couldn’t predict his wife’s volunteering schedule: *“My husband felt uncomfortable since he couldn’t predict my volunteering hours” (Putri)*. Third, some volunteers admitted they lacked concrete plans for their children’s welfare. Instead, they entrusted their families’ futures entirely to God: *“We surrendered our families’ fates completely to God” (Dani)*. Others described their approach as living life *“just like the flowing water” (Udin)*. Fourth, reduced focus on paid work careers led to financial instability, causing anxiety within households. One single volunteer explained: *“I realized that my mother sometimes disagreed with my volunteering activities because she always encouraged me to work and get married. My other family members also suggested the same” (Rudi)*. Fifth, tensions often arose between volunteers and their families, stemming from the accumulation of these issues. Conflicts worsened when volunteers perceived their careers as inherently righteous and disregarded their families’ opinions. One participant stated: *“I told my wife, please don’t ask me when I’ll come home from volunteering. I don’t like to be controlled” (Rudi)*.

Unmarried participants also reported familial challenges. For instance, one participant described the tension with her mother, despite support from her grandparents: *“I’m not married yet. My grandparents allowed me to volunteer, but my mother didn’t agree and was always angry with me” (Zainab)*. These issues often became more complex as family size and extended family involvement increased.

Discussion

This study addresses a significant gap in the literature by exploring the concept of a volunteering career as a distinct trajectory within the broader framework of nonprofit engagement. The findings highlight the three flexible phases of a volunteering career (motivational foundations, focused involvement, and societal leadership) and provide insight into how volunteers sustain their commitment across multiple nonprofit organizations. Unlike traditional paid work careers, volunteering careers are uniquely driven by intrinsic motivations, including alignment with personal values, callings, and a commitment to meaningful work.

Implications for the concept of volunteering career

Volunteering career, as described in this study, challenges conventional understandings of careers as financially motivated endeavors. Existing research often focuses on paid work careers, which emphasize financial returns, hierarchical advancement, and professional growth (Benson et al., 2020; Heslev, 2005). While volunteering is often viewed as supplementary to paid employment, our study illustrates how it can form a central, fulfilling career path grounded in serious leisure (Stebbins, 1996). Serious leisure offers a valuable lens to understand volunteering careers, highlighting the intentional pursuit of meaningful work, skill acquisition, and identity formation, even without financial incentives (Cantillon & Baker, 2020a). This perspective positions a volunteering career as fulfilling and career-like, emphasizing personal growth and societal contributions over financial gain.

Participants in this study illustrate the flexibility and plurality of a volunteering career, integrating them with paid work careers to create meaningful dual career trajectories. The three phases identified in this study—beginning with motivational foundations, followed by focused involvement in a single organization, and for some, expansion into societal leadership across multiple organizations—reflect both developmental progression and divergent pathways. This layered model illustrates that not all volunteers follow the same route, and some remain deeply committed to a single organization, while others broaden their influence across causes. Unlike traditional career ladders focused on advancement within a single organization (Stewart & Kuenzi, 2018; Suarez, 2010), a volunteering career often involves movement across multiple organizations, with volunteers exercising autonomy in choosing when and where to contribute. A volunteering career in this study may differ from other aspects of the career path as it is not about “going up an organizational ladder” (Millward & Kyriakidou, 2004, p. 20). This phenomenon highlights the distinctive nature of a volunteering career, where loyalty lies with the cause rather than any single organization, allowing individuals to navigate their career paths dynamically.

The role of calling in sustained volunteering

We suggest that many volunteers tend to regard their careers as a calling (Faletahan et al., 2021; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Volunteers view their callings as a personal mission to help others. Especially at the intersection of career and calling topics, the presence of individual calling and personal career development are considered to be closely related (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Hirschi & Herrmann, 2013; Lysova et al., 2019). In fact, contemporary literature combines calling and career at the same time (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015, p. 163; Hall & Chandler, 2005). Scholars still seek to understand how individuals can have a meaningful career (Dumulescu et al., 2015), and the construct of “career calling” has received a lot of attention in academic debates recently (Praskova et al., 2015). It seems that individuals can feel psychological success (i.e., subjective feelings of achievement) when their careers are also calling (Hall & Chandler, 2005).

In our study, calling emerged as a central theme in participants' narratives, driving their decisions to pursue and sustain volunteering career. Reflecting both neoclassical and modern perspectives on calling, participants described their motivations as stemming from either transcendental summons or personal passion (Molloy & Foust, 2017; Shimizu et al., 2018). This dual perspective underscores the versatility of calling as a motivational construct. In Indonesia, with its strong religious traditions, transcendental factors often played a dominant role, particularly among volunteers affiliated with faith-based organizations (Faletahan, 2024; Faletahan & van Burg, 2023). However, participants from secular organizations also emphasized personal fulfillment and a sense of purpose, highlighting the broader applicability of the concept.

These findings contribute to the literature on meaningful work and career calling by demonstrating how volunteers integrate their callings into a structured career path. This aligns with prior research indicating that individuals who view their careers as callings experience greater satisfaction and engagement (Duffy & Dik, 2013; Steger et al., 2012). In our study, participants at the societal leadership stage embodied their callings by committing to their roles as volunteers across multiple organizations, transcending organizational boundaries to prioritize the broader purpose of their work.

This study builds on previous research by showing that calling in a volunteering context is not only a motivator but also a mechanism for navigating multiple organizational affiliations. Participants often described themselves as “free agents,” driven by their callings to assist in diverse contexts rather than attaching loyalty to a single organization. This finding extends the work of Cuskelly et al. (2002), who examined the shifting levels of organizational commitment in volunteering roles within a single nonprofit organization, by introducing insights from volunteers engaged across multiple organizations. Additionally, it enriches the concept of super-volunteers—defined as “individuals who volunteer 10 or more hours per week with a single organization” (Einolf & Yung, 2018, p. 789)—by exploring the dynamics of high-intensity volunteering across diverse nonprofit contexts.

Challenges of a volunteering career

While the positive impacts of a volunteering career, such as personal fulfillment and societal contributions, are well-documented (Hudson & Inkson, 2006; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), this study also reveals challenges. Family tensions were frequently mentioned, with participants describing conflicts arising from differing priorities between their volunteer commitments and family expectations. Existing studies claim that family is an important construct that must be considered when individuals decide to volunteer (Cowlshaw et al., 2010; Nesbit, 2013). Our findings align with research on work-life balance in unpaid roles, which identifies risks such as workaholism, burnout, and neglected relationships (Cardador & Caza, 2012; Dalla Rosa & Vianello, 2020). Addressing these challenges requires volunteers to navigate the balance between their paid work, volunteering career, and personal lives, ensuring sustainable engagement.

The COVID-19 pandemic further influenced the dynamics of a volunteering career. Participants noted heightened demands for their services during the pandemic, particularly in health and disaster response, which intensified personal pressures. However, the crisis also fostered innovation, such as virtual volunteering, which provided new avenues for balancing commitments. These shifts underscore the evolving nature of volunteering careers in response to external challenges and highlight areas for future research on the long-term effects of the pandemic on volunteer engagement.

Our findings offer practical implications for nonprofit organizations in managing and retaining volunteers. Recognizing that volunteers often commit to the nature of their work rather than specific organizations can inform retention strategies. Flexible engagement

models, opportunities for skill development, understanding personality characteristics (Hudson & Inkson, 2006; Paterson et al., 2009), and support for balancing commitments can enhance volunteer satisfaction and sustainability. Organizations should consider the unique needs of multi-organizational volunteers, acknowledge their autonomy, and encourage collaboration across networks to maximize societal impact.

In addition, this study has several limitations. First, the narrative inquiry approach focuses on in-depth individual experiences, which may limit the generalizability of findings. Second, the research was conducted in a developing country context and involved participants primarily affiliated with religious organizations, which may restrict the applicability of insights to more secular or differently structured nonprofit environments. Third, the cross-sectional design does not capture how volunteering careers evolve over time. To build on these findings, future research should consider longitudinal approaches that explore how individual trajectories shift across life stages. Comparative studies could also examine how cultural, institutional, and economic contexts—such as labor markets, civil society structures, and religious traditions—shape the relationship between paid work and long-term volunteer engagement. Although this study centers on Indonesian volunteers, we believe the proposed flexible and non-linear model offers valuable conceptual insights that may be applicable in other settings where civic engagement intersects with identity, spirituality, and community life.

Conclusion

This study introduces the concept of a volunteering career as a meaningful trajectory within nonprofit engagement, comprising three flexible phases: motivational foundations, focused involvement, and societal leadership. While some individuals deepen their commitment within a single organization, others expand their influence across multiple organizations, demonstrating plural career pathways shaped by evolving motivations and life contexts. Our findings show how volunteers integrate values, spiritual calling, and personal meaning into long-term service, often alongside paid work and family responsibilities. This trajectory is sustained by a blend of environmental, transcendental, personal, and ambassadorial factors that reinforce commitment across multiple nonprofit roles. While many volunteers experience fulfillment and purpose, this career path can also introduce tensions in personal life, including time-related strain and relational challenges. This research reframes the notion of career to include unpaid, non-linear forms of contribution, extending theories of serious leisure and calling to better reflect the dynamic realities of volunteer engagement.

Disclosure Statement

The author(s) declare that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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