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# Volunteerism and Voluntary Work



## ABSTRACT

This summary seeks to clarify the concept of volunteering and to identify related social actions in Hungary. Social cooperation and solidarity have been key issues of recent years and decades, in which voluntary work and selfless individual or community activities have become more and more prominent.

More focus was put on volunteering in Hungary after the regime change, leading the NGO/non-profit sector to strengthen and expand and voluntary activities to grow in importance. Voluntary work has become a value and social achievement.

The study presents the development of the number of volunteers in Hungary, regional distribution of volunteers and territorial rates of volunteering, as well as the types of voluntary work and NGOs. Following the brief introduction to the history of volunteering in Hungary, the research carried out on volunteering in 2018 is described, including its key elements and highlighting future goals and expectations. The main aim of the study is to highlight what forms volunteering as a social value has taken in Hungary in the past 30 years.

## KEYWORDS

collective mentality, altruism, social solidarity, organisation

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## **MODERN APPROACH: PRELIMINARY REMARKS**

Volunteering in its modern sense, as defined above, dates back to the regime change in Hungary. In tandem with the strengthening of the NGO sector, the number of volunteers helping organisations also increased in an exponential way in the 1990s. However, it was, and partly still is, difficult to break out of the interpretative framework that labels voluntary work as unpaid work. This wrong attitude has been inherited from the era of state socialism ('Communist Saturday' or 'social work').

'Volunteers act under their own free will, according to their own choices and motivations and do not seek financial gain. Volunteering is a journey of solidarity and a way for individuals and associations to identify and address human, social or environmental needs and concerns. Volunteering is often carried out in support of a non-profit organisation or community-based initiative' (Communication on EU Policies and Volunteering: Recognising and Promoting Cross-border Voluntary Activities in the EU 2011, as cited in BATTÁ 2013).

## **THE MAIN ELEMENTS OF VOLUNTEERING**

Volunteerism is a particularly important area both with regard to public and private/ecclesiastical initiatives. Although European societies, including the Hungarian society, have had opportunities for volunteering for a long time, voluntary work appears to be treated differently in the world of work and in social life. Volunteering can be regarded both as work and relaxation; the minimum common criteria that emerge from these approaches are that voluntary work is based on shared values and promotes integration.

'In comparison with the economic developments and the new forms of social organisation in Europe, the forms of voluntary assistance arrived relatively late in Hungary. Until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, they were almost exclusively limited to the charitable activities performed by the church. From 1867 the Hungarian state framed regulations for assisting the poor, continuing to rely greatly on the voluntary work carried out by the church, by civil organisations and by noble and generous citizens with material wealth. The systems of support — organised by the church — gradually introduced in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century played an important role in the history of the development of voluntary assistance in Hungary and in the expansion of its organised forms. In the inter-war period, the churches, civil organisations and private persons continued to fill the dominant role in carrying out work unselfishly and without payment, and in operating the system of social support. From 1945, the state began to take on an increasing number of social tasks, which pushed the activities of private persons, civilian charity organisations and churches into the background. During the decades of the socialist period, the state had exclusive responsibility for providing social security.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *National Volunteer Strategy 2012–2020.*

Volunteering and non-governmental organisations necessary for carrying out this kind of activity emerged in the 1990s. However only non-profit organisations emerged at that time, the Hungarian society started to regard volunteering as labour in the late 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000 decade. The programme called ‘International Year of Volunteers 2001’ was an important step in this process; the Health Ministry started organising the programme in September 2000 by holding a discussion forum. ‘The forum was attended by 7 ministries and 70 non-governmental and church organisations, who discussed their ideas on opportunities for developing volunteerism in Hungary, and on the tasks to be done during the international year. (...) The most important outcome in the period following the International Year of Volunteers was the passing of Act LXXXVIII of 2005 on voluntary activities in the public interest, which institutionalised volunteerism, and had the objective of regulating and institutionalising voluntary activities in the public interest as a legal relation in the Hungarian legal system.’<sup>2</sup>

‘There is no uniform and common definition of “volunteering”. “Voluntary activity” can have different meanings in different countries, and its meaning is largely determined by the history and cultural traditions of a given state or area, as well as by cohabitation patterns.’<sup>3</sup>

In examining the multiple definitions of ‘volunteering’, a common element in these definitions is that volunteering is a form of human activity of a person’s own choice that adds value to the community and strengthens solidarity.

The following conditions for voluntary activity are laid down in the UN Resolution adopted on the occasion of the proclamation of the year 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers:

‘Volunteering refer to a wide range of activities, including traditional forms of mutual help and formal service delivery, carried out on an individual’s own initiative and of his own free will, for the public good, for the benefit of others or the society, and for which the volunteer does not receive any remuneration.’<sup>4</sup>

Although the Hungarian volunteer law (Act LXXXVIII of 2005 on voluntary activities in the public interest) does not provide a specific definition, it provides clear criteria for voluntary work in the public interest. ‘Voluntary activities on the part of individuals or communities which are based on the solidarity of members of society and which are carried out, for no consideration, for the benefit of others as an expression of the independent actions of citizens are recognised by the Parliament.’<sup>5</sup>

Work on the document entitled ‘National Volunteer Strategy 2012–2020’ had started in 2011, and the Parliament adopted the Strategy and its related action plan in 2012. The Strategy has three broad aims. It stresses that there is a necessity to develop a volunteer culture and to change attitudes in order to achieve a reduction in negative opinions about volunteering. Volunteering should therefore become a public talking point and part of the citizens’ regular activities.

The involvement of special target groups, in particular of young people, the elderly, and mothers with young children, is essential for enhancing the relevance of voluntary work, and thereby the chances of the members belonging to these groups for social reintegration can also be increased.

<sup>2</sup> *National Volunteer Strategy 2012–2020*. 4–5.

<sup>3</sup> BATTÁ 2013. 16.

<sup>4</sup> BATTÁ 2013. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Farkas 2012. 62.

Volunteering strengthens social solidarity, reinforces social cohesion, contributes to the reintegration of the unemployed into the labour market, and strengthens volunteers' participation in society. It is particularly important to integrate disadvantaged people and to strengthen common values.

The National Volunteer Strategy<sup>6</sup> defines volunteering as 'an activity undertaken of a person's own free will, choice and motivation, and is without concern for financial gain, for the benefit of another person or other persons, or for the community at large. It comes together with its own particular set of values, which distinguishes it from paid work. Volunteering is a good and valuable thing in itself, which can make members of society capable of taking an active role, whether in a broader geographic sense or in more confined interest groups, and which is simultaneously beneficial to those in need of assistance and to voluntary workers themselves. Volunteerism is a tool for promoting equal opportunities, makes a contribution to the reduction of poverty and exclusion and to an increase in employment, and can help the unemployed re-enter the labour market, although it cannot replace paid labour.'<sup>7</sup>

Volunteering is therefore an activity carried out by a volunteer in the interest of the general good, for the benefit of those affected by the provision of assistance. Voluntary activity can be carried out individually (e.g. care of the elderly) or in groups (e.g. helping flood victims), and volunteering can mean undertaking only one task or a regular commitment. Voluntary work can be carried out with a governmental or non-governmental organisation, or with an organisation having an economic or commercial interest. However, it should be noted that volunteering is still a recognised activity in areas based on the solidarity principle.

An increasing number of Hungarian volunteers have undertaken voluntary work abroad in recent years and over the past decades, which can contribute to increasing our knowledge of problems that are not specific to Hungary.

'The meaning of volunteering has been completely reinterpreted, owing to constant economic and social changes, in Hungary in recent years and has got closer to the meaning of volunteering as interpreted in the United States or Western Europe today. However, regarding the motivation why people volunteer, Hungary is trailing other countries.'<sup>8</sup>

The diverse forms of voluntary activity include mutual help and self-help, as well as charity work, philanthropic activity, and assistance to others. Formerly, voluntary activities were mainly carried out under the auspices of the church and civil society organisations (foundations and associations).

Volunteers are frequently involved in matters of public interest; they participate in lobbying and society actions and are engaged in activities of interest representation. At the same, they are also involved in community life and society actions aiming at strengthening of the role of civil society.

Ferenc Péterfi (2002) gathered the main characteristics of voluntary work in one of his studies. According to this study, volunteering is an activity that has the following characteristics: 'it is undertaken of personal motivation, free will and choice, for the benefit of others, and is not motivated by material concerns; it facilitates for individuals and communities their involvement

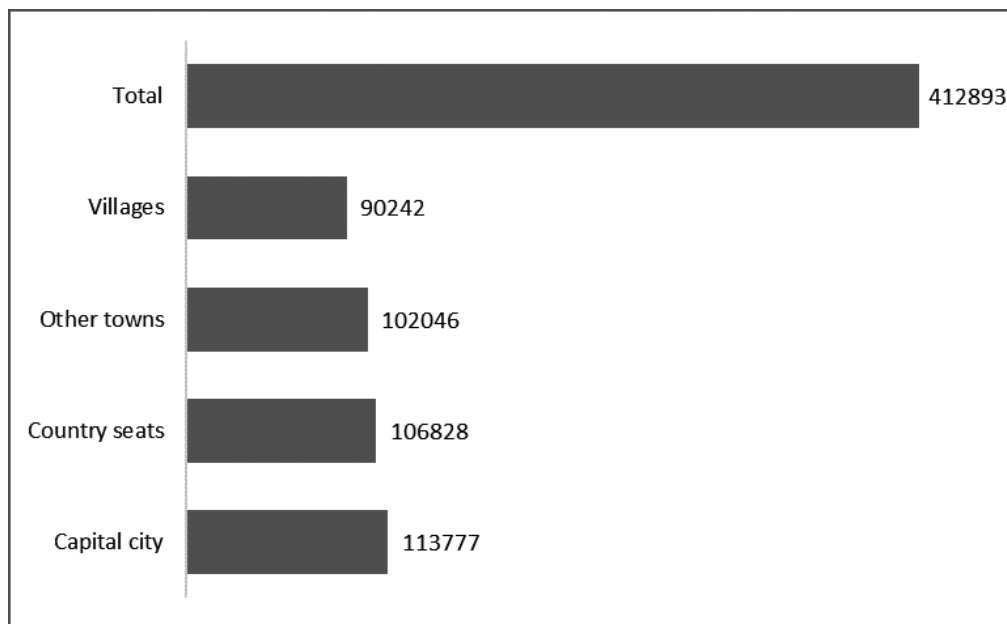
<sup>6</sup> *National Volunteer Strategy 2012–2020*. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *National Volunteer Strategy 2012–2020*. 3.

<sup>8</sup> FARKAS 2012. 63.

in resolving their own problems, and it is of benefit both to persons in need of support and persons carrying out voluntary work'.<sup>9</sup>

'In the mostly international literature on volunteering, over the last decades there has been a wide debate about to what extent a volunteer's "own" choice, motives, and motivations — weighed against external circumstances, opportunities, and "invitation to participate" — affect the volunteer's reasons why (s)he volunteers in a given field of activity. "Patterns" of volunteering have changed over the last more than half century. There appears to be a decreasing tendency to "volunteer alone", and volunteers' organizational attachments are increasingly strong.'<sup>10</sup>



**FIGURE 1. Number of voluntary assistants in Hungary (person)  
(2015)**

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office

(<https://www.ksh.hu/docs/eng/xftp/stattukor/nonprofit/enonprofit15.pdf>)

Data from the analysis of non-profit organisations of 2015 shows that the number of persons carrying out voluntary activity was 412,893, presenting a uniform spatial distribution, in 2015. As regards the capital city, county seats and other towns, one observes that voluntary work carried out in Budapest accounted for one-third of voluntary work carried out in the whole country.

<sup>9</sup> PÉTERFI 2002. 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Az önkéntes motivációkról.*

Type of settlement	Average number of hours worked per capital	Number of persons employed as calculated volunteers	Estimated duration of work carried out by voluntary assistants during the year (number of hours)
Capital city	113	6192	12,880,860
County seats	117	6022	12,526,500
Other towns	112	5506	11,451,480
Villages	115	4992	10,382,820
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>22,712</b>	<b>47,241,660</b>

**TABLE 1. Core indicators of voluntary assistants attached to non-profit organisations by type of settlement (2015)**

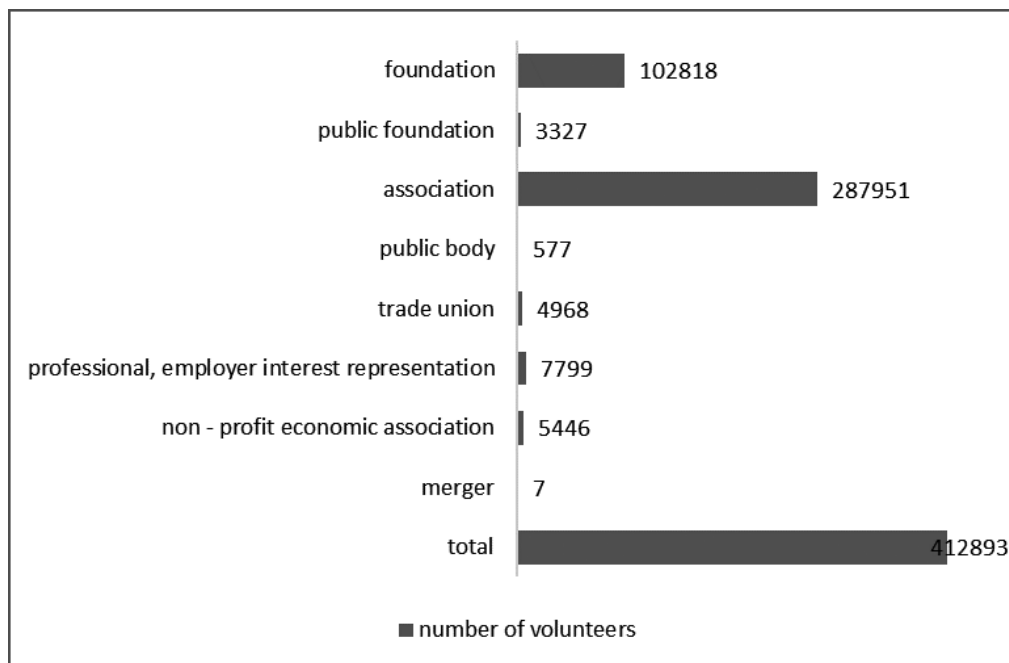
Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office

(<https://www.ksh.hu/docs/eng/xftp/stattukor/nonprofit/enonprofit15.pdf>)

‘Voluntary work is one of the most appropriate methods of team building that is so popular nowadays. Voluntary work can actually teach us how to work together as a team, and we can experience the joy of working together. Companies often encourage their employees to volunteer, e.g. by organising a company volunteer day.’<sup>11</sup>

More than half (69.7%) of the voluntary assistants attached to non-profit organisations in Hungary worked with associations, and 24.9% of them worked with foundations. The number of volunteers working with church organisations cannot be seen from this statistical data, but it is well-known fact that the proportion of voluntary workers attached to church organisations is high, as volunteering is an activity closely linked to the regular routine of the members of the communities belonging to the church.

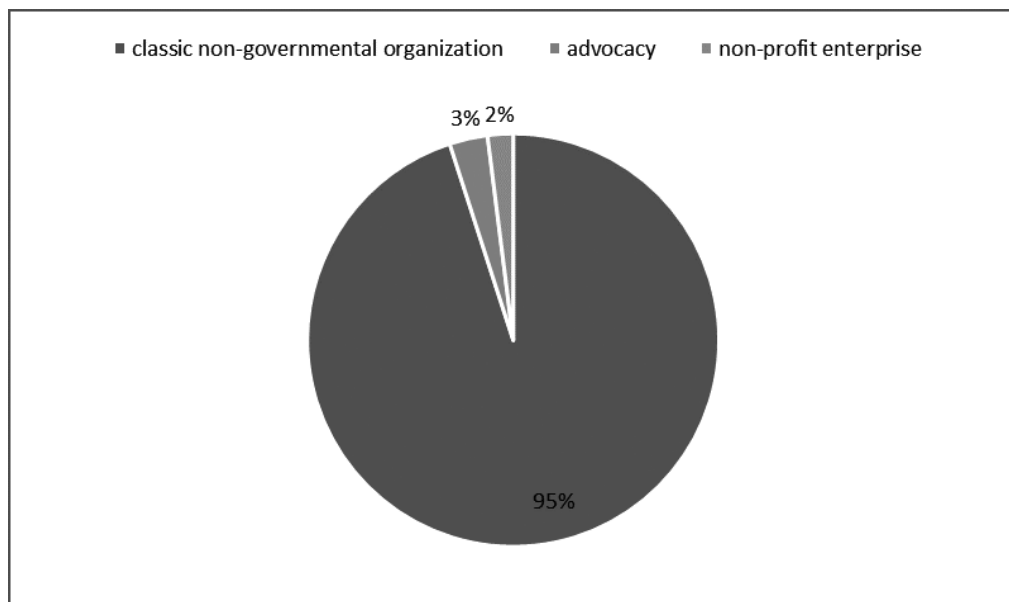
<sup>11</sup> FARKAS 2012. 63.



**FIGURE 2. Core indicators of voluntary assistants attached to non-profit organisations by type of organisation (person per organisation) (2015)**

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office (<https://www.ksh.hu/docs/eng/xftp/stattukor/nonprofit/enonprofit15.pdf>)

Volunteers working with organisations in Hungary had links with ‘classic’ non-governmental organisations (95%), while a low number of them were attached to non-profit enterprises or advocacy organisations (2-3%). The reasons for this include the fact that these organisations have still carried out voluntary tasks based on traditional values.



**FIGURE 3. Core indicators of voluntary assistants attached to non-profit organisations by nature of organisation (2015)**

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office

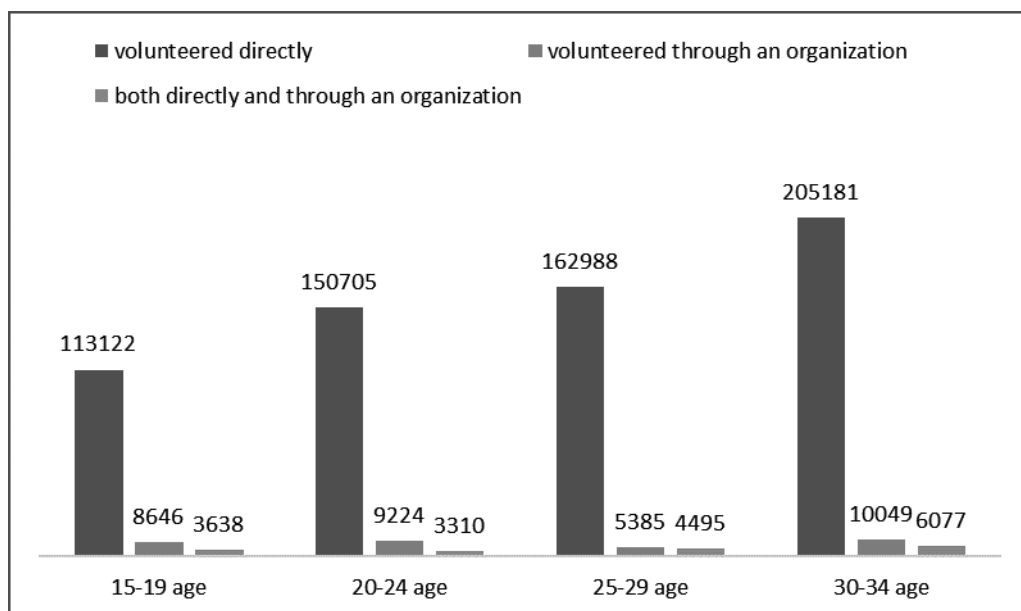
(<https://www.ksh.hu/docs/eng/xftp/stattukor/nonprofit/enonprofit15.pdf>)

Persons who carry out voluntary activity can be separated into two basic groups. Volunteering is of particular importance to **young people**, as it plays a socially cohesive role and binds a community together. They also take part in the life of society through the specific solution of social problems, which increases their sensitivity to these problems. Voluntary work carried out by young people can be particularly beneficial to develop useful experience for working life and to increase their circle of friends and acquaintances.

Volunteering is of great value to **retired people** as well. Older people ‘often find that they no longer feel “useful” to society. They can be active again which has a positive effect on their health and quality of life.’<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> FARKAS 2012. 63.

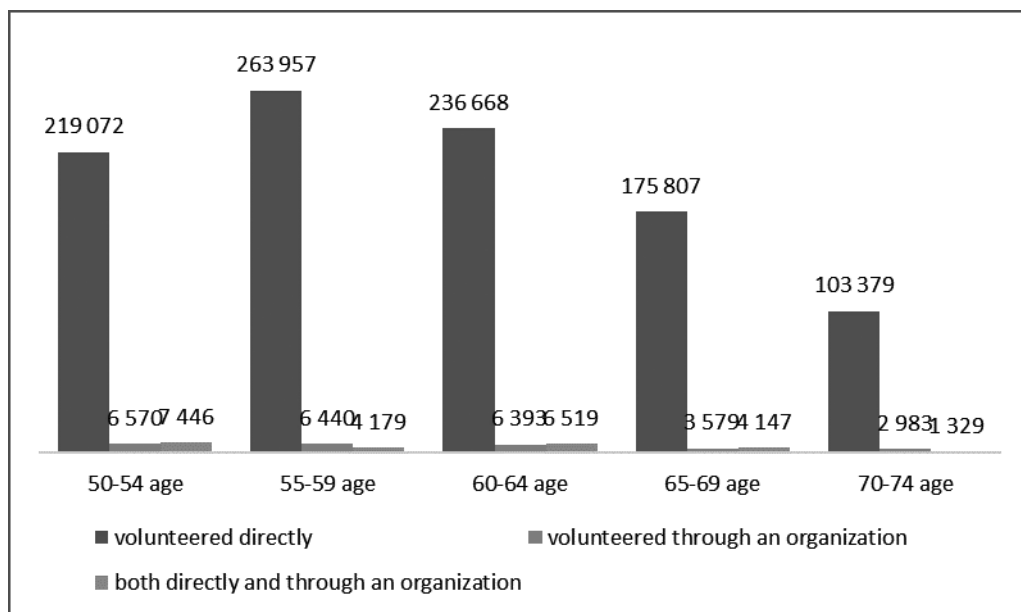




**FIGURE 4. Volunteering population by demographic and other characteristics, and by formal or informal nature of work carried out - First quarter of 2014 (person)**  
(Young people aged 15-34, and young adults)

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office ([http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat\\_evkozi/e\\_onkent9\\_03\\_02.html](http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat_evkozi/e_onkent9_03_02.html))

Demographic data of voluntary workers shows that 26.6% of the population aged 15-34 (i.e. 682,820 people) and 31.1% of the population aged 50-74 (i.e. 815,380 people) were active volunteers. They represented 58.5% of all volunteers.



**FIGURE 5. Volunteering population by demographic and other characteristics, and by formal or informal nature of work carried out -First quarter of 2014 (person) (Adults aged 50-74)**

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office

([http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat\\_evkozi/e\\_onkent9\\_03\\_02.html](http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat_evkozi/e_onkent9_03_02.html))

Volunteering is a form of activity undertaken on the basis of a person's preference. In our modern-day societies, it is a tool for improving quality of life, while is still on the track to development in East European societies. Social structure, level of education, and social cohesion are factors which largely determine the commitment to a development pathway.

In addition, institutionalisation is another factor, furthermore, governmental, church and private organisations — an essential task of all of which is to establish cooperation and shape its nature — are also important actors. Volunteering is therefore a form of social responsibility which helps increase members' willingness to integrate others.

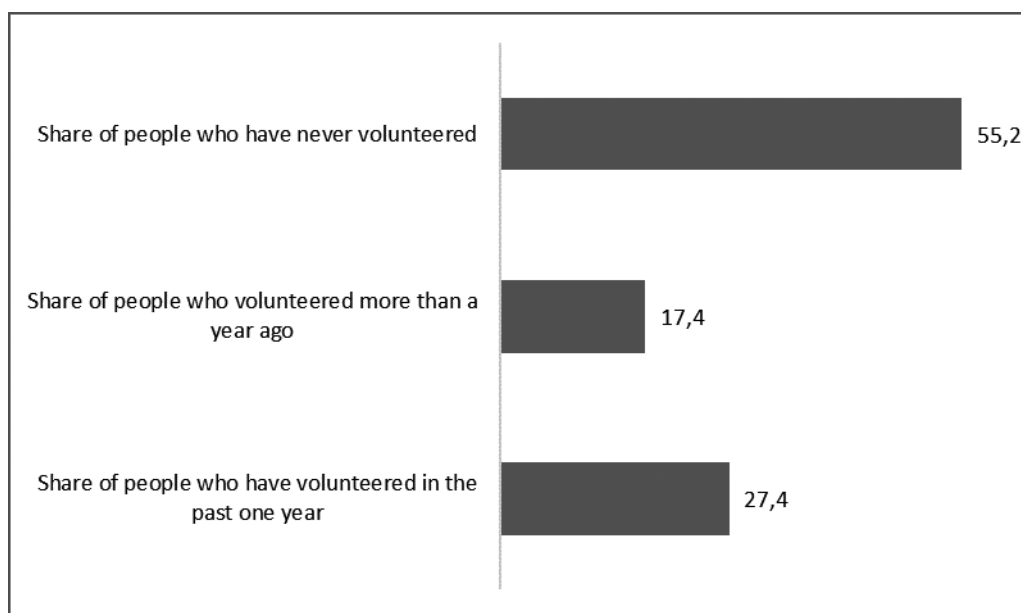
## **VOLUNTEERING IN HUNGARY – RESEARCH ON VOLUNTEERING (2018)**

New research in 2018 was conducted on volunteering in Hungary, with the aim of determining to what extent the general social attitude towards volunteering changed and how successfully people (of all age-groups) were involved in voluntary activities.

Research objectives were defined as follows:

‘The goal of the nationally representative survey covering the general adult population and involving 2000 persons is to describe the attitude of the population of Hungary towards volunteering, to determine the prevalence of engagement in voluntary work and the nature of voluntary activities, to identify the barriers to volunteering, and, last but not least, to gain a broad picture of social attitudes towards volunteering.’

The research found that a quarter (27.4%) of the adult population of Hungary, i.e. approximately 2,209,000 adults, volunteered in the 12 months preceding the conducting of the survey. The survey also asked the respondents, if they did not volunteer in the past year, whether they had previously performed voluntary work as defined herein. An additional 17.4% of the respondents answered the question in the affirmative, meaning that, combined, nearly half (44.8%) of Hungarian adults had volunteering experiences.



**FIGURE 6. Distribution of respondents by volunteering experience in autumn - (%)**

Source: Önkéntesség Magyarországon 2018 (Volunteering in Hungary 2018).

The majority of volunteers in Hungary were women in their mid-40s. A large part of Hungarian volunteers had a degree. ‘In terms of settlement types, the residents of Budapest, the capital of Hungary, constituted only a tenth of volunteers, while the inhabitants of towns and villages were over-represented. The reason for this is partly reciprocity, since smaller towns and villages have a strong tradition of reciprocity and helping one another, and this kind of activity falls within the definition given above’ (Önkéntesség Magyarországon 2018 [Volunteering in Hungary 2018]).

Between 2013 and 2018, the number of adult volunteers who volunteered regularly (at least once a month) increased to around one million people.

In terms of age groups, an above-average proportion of young people within the age range 18-29 seeking first-time employment and, particularly, of 50-59-year-olds nearing the end of their career volunteered regularly.

Those solely engaged in informal volunteering represented two-thirds of volunteers (18.1% of the total adult population). In contrast, a third (33.9%) of the volunteers surveyed performed formal voluntary work (that is, volunteering to an organisation or an institution), representing approximately 750,000 adults (9.3% of the total adult population). A total of 7.2% of the volunteers participated solely in formal volunteering, while an additional 26.7% of the volunteers carried out both formal and informal voluntary activities.

The number of students among formal volunteers was twice as high (17.5%) as among informal volunteers or in the mixed group. Furthermore, women were considerably over-represented among formal-only volunteers; they represented 71.8% in this group.

Volunteers said that they performed voluntary work by intrinsic motivation on the one hand and, on the other hand, were motivated by sympathy and solidarity. However, non-volunteers cited lack of time as one reason for not volunteering or stated that they never even thought about it or saw no need to volunteer.

‘Act CXC of 2011 on national public education introduced school community service in national public education from the 2012/2013 school year in a phasing-in system. Community service means social and environmental protection activity carried out individually or in group for the advantage of the local community of the student, which is carried out within organised framework and is independent of financial interests. The National Volunteer Strategy 2012-2020 states that, although a distinction needs to be drawn between community service and voluntary work, community service can be regarded as the starting point, and the introductory step in the direction of carrying out true voluntary work, and the role it can play should not be underestimated’ (Önkéntesség Magyarországon 2018 [Volunteering in Hungary 2018]).

Two-thirds of the adult respondents of the surveyed sample replied to the question whether the introduction of community service was a good idea in the affirmative, i.e. they thought it was a great idea for young people to be integrated in social life, while the members of the age group concerned, i.e. 18-29-year-olds, agreed less with the introduction of community service, but, overall, more members of the same age group were in favour of school community service than against. In light of the above, however, the proportion of respondents agreeing with the statement was much higher among those with higher education.

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