

Being a volunteer won't land you a job, but it could improve your chances of getting one

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The South African government has implemented numerous economic policies to boost employment since the democratic transition in 1994. But between 1995 and 2022 the growth in employment—[from 9.5](#)

[million in 1995 to 15.8 million in 2022](#)—wasn't enough to keep up with the more rapid increase of job seekers which more than doubled from [13.7 million to 27.7 million during the same period](#).

As a result, both the [unemployment](#) number and the rate increased during the 27-year period. The number of unemployed rose to a shockingly high 7.7 million while the unemployment rate reached [32.8% in 2022](#).

There are [numerous reasons for the rise of unemployment in South Africa](#), ranging from skills mismatch to structural changes in the economy and barriers to entry for the informal sector.

But, in our view, an overlooked option for responding to the problem is encouraging people to get involved in volunteer activities. In a recent [study](#) we investigated the relationship between labor [market](#) outcomes and volunteering of working age South Africans.

Volunteering can be seen as an activity that encourages more people to work in the labor market. It can also help people gain soft skills, improving their labor market prospects. International studies have shown that [volunteers enjoy higher earnings](#).

This motivated our study into what has been happening to volunteers in South Africa.

We found that volunteers were associated with a higher likelihood of participating in the labor force compared with those who didn't volunteer. This was even though there was no strong indication that volunteers enjoyed relatively greater employment probability. In other words, volunteers were more likely to be looking for work than non-volunteers, but were not much more likely to actually get work.

What's known about volunteers

The South African government conducted the first Volunteer Activities Survey in 2010. It was done again in 2014 and 2018. We used data from all three.

The data enabled us to set out the personal characteristics of volunteers and the different activities they got involved in. By running econometric analysis we were also able to gain insights into the association between labor market status and volunteering.

The survey's main aim was to ensure [accurate data](#) was collected on the profile of volunteers and estimate the economic value of volunteer opportunities. The data has rarely been used by scholars and researchers to examine the activities of volunteers and how they fare in the labor market.

The sample for the survey was linked to the Quarterly Labor Force Survey which took place at the same time. It was therefore possible to examine the labor market status and labor market activities of the volunteers (if they were employed) by linking to two sets of data.

The surveys show that the number of volunteers more than doubled between 2010 (1.11 million) and 2018 (2.56 million). More than 60% of volunteers were females. Africans represented the greatest racial share of volunteers (2010: 71.78%; 2018: 88.52%).

By age cohort most of the volunteers were between 25 and 54 years old at the time of survey, with a mean age of 40 years.

Most of the volunteers lived in urban areas. This share dropped from 67% in 2010 to 52% in 2018.

Volunteers with incomplete secondary education represented the greatest share (41%–46% range across the three waves), followed by those with the school leaving qualification only (about 25% share). On average the volunteers had only 10 years of education.

In 2018, most of the volunteers had spent 1 to 10 hours on their main volunteering activities in the past four weeks, whereas the mean volunteering hours was 15.30.

Cooking was the main type of work that volunteers did. Other popular volunteering activities included elementary sales and services, home-based personal care, [domestic work](#), door keeping and keeping watch.

More than 85% of the volunteers in all three waves indicated that they did not expect to receive something back from the volunteering activity. For those who said they did expect something, most expected to receive out-of-pocket expenses, food, experience and skills.

More than half of the volunteers declared the volunteer activity was performed as an individual. Others were involved through a charity or religious organization.

We also examined the labor force participation rates (the proportion of working-age population aged 15–65 years who seek work in the labor market) and [unemployment rates](#) (the percentage of job seekers or labor force who worked at least one hour in the past week in the labor market) of those who volunteered and those who did not. The labor participation rates of volunteers were higher in all three waves (2010: 66%, 2014: 61%; 2018: 62%) compared with people who did not volunteer (2010: 56%; 2014: 57%; 2018: 59%).

This finding suggests that people volunteered to gain certain soft skills and unofficial work experience, and it may help them to more actively

seek work in the labor market at the same time.

On the other hand, while the unemployment rate was lower among the volunteers in 2010 (23.9%, compared with 25.1% among those who did not volunteer), the opposite took place in both 2014 and 2018. In those years, the unemployment rate was higher for those who volunteered (2014: 27.7%; 2018: 33.5%), compared with the unemployment rate of those who did not [volunteer](#) (2014: 25.4%; 2018: 27.1%).

In other words, involvement in volunteering activities did not necessarily lead to significantly greater employment likelihood.

The findings don't show that volunteers predominantly enjoy a lower [unemployment rate](#) all the time. But volunteering at least encourages the working-age population to actively seek work in the labor market, instead of feeling discouraged and ending up inactive.

More information: Jaydro Fondling et al, Investigating volunteer activities in South Africa, *Development Southern Africa* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/0376835X.2022.2163227](#)

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