

Decolonising Visa Mechanisms

Policy Paper

1. Introduction

This policy paper has been produced by young participants and International Voluntary Service (IVS) organisations from all regions of the world under the Decolonise IVS! project to reflect on concepts around solidarity and decolonization¹ and the changes that are needed for this.

In this document, we offer a **critical reflection on the neo-colonial barriers associated with the visa process.**

One of the root causes of exclusion in international volunteering can be traced to the mobility process. Here, we propose recommendations on how to decolonise access to visa information as well as to embassies at national level, and how to develop a solidarity-based approach to migration.

2. Rationale for action

In a world where discrimination, xenophobia, racism, and different manifestations of violence constantly and exponentially impact societies, **intercultural volunteering is a way to promote equity, peace and social justice.**² This can be achieved by tackling the unequal distribution of wealth and linking poverty and global warming to social justice, human rights, and free mobility. For international volunteering to challenge existing inequalities and discrimination though, it is necessary to analyse the hidden obstacles, prejudices and barriers that affect its accessibility.

Volunteering in another country does not only depend on material conditions (economic, educational, and social resources) but also on the **administrative, legal, and political barriers** that limit young people to engage in this experience, especially those from the 'Global South'.³ Indeed, not everyone is equal when it comes to the migration and visa application process.

¹This document's inconsistencies in the spelling of "decolonization/decolonisation" and other words and expressions is intentional. Diverse spelling reflects the fact that decolonial thinking and actions are made by participants coming from a variety of backgrounds and involve questioning anglicism as a colonial legacy itself. Editing for 'consistency' would silence and erase the diverse and inclusive participation that is critically needed by the decolonial movement in order to be successful.

²See 2022 State of the World's Volunteerism Report and CCIVS 2010-2020 Impact Report.

³In this paper, the term 'Global South' refers to all countries outside the 32-member Development Assistance Committee (DAC), of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which represents the 'Global North'.

There is no balance whatsoever in the way visa requirements and procedures work between individuals from the 'Global South' and the 'Global North'. It is not possible to ensure inclusive access and equity in international volunteering if we do not generate fair conditions and address the barriers to mobility.

3. Striking points

→ Passport power system

International volunteering always includes travelling from one country to another. Some volunteers face hardly any challenges when organizing their travels, whereas this is not the case for others. This is a demonstration that travel itself constitutes the first barrier. Depending on the ranking of the volunteer's nationality in the global passport power system, they face different kinds of restrictions. While some nationalities do not need a visa to travel abroad for 3 months or even 6 months, others cannot travel without going through an elaborate visa application procedure.

Most of the volunteers who either do not require a visa or get a visa very easily come from countries that are grouped together in the 'Global North', such as the European and North American countries.

For example, a European citizen can access an average of 157 countries without a visa or with a visa on arrival, according to the Global Passport Power Rank 2023.⁴ Conversely, most nationals of the countries that make up the 'Global South' require often tedious administrative procedures to travel to other countries. In fact, by comparison, the average African national can only travel to 71 countries without a visa or with a visa on arrival. **This means international mobility depends on whether you are a 'first', 'second' and probably 'third class citizen'.**

What is the future of international volunteering in this frame of asymmetry? Will the future of international volunteering be for privileged Europeans or those citizens who have more than one citizenship?

→ Unequal visa costs

Additionally, citizens of countries in the 'Global South' have a higher financial burden regarding the visa costs than people coming from countries in the 'Global North'. For example, on average, a citizen of a South Asian country has to pay **3 times more** than a citizen of Western Europe (59 USD versus 18 USD) to obtain a visa to go abroad. **And that is without acknowledging the income differences between these countries.**

⁴[Global Passport Power Rank 2023](#)

Indeed, taking these discrepancies into account, a Central Asian has to work an average of 10 days, a South Asian 2 weeks, and a Sub-Saharan African 3 weeks longer than a European, a North American or an Australian and New Zealander to cover the costs of the visa and be able to volunteer abroad.⁵

This process is reinforced by the concentration of diplomatic activities by certain countries within a single consulate or embassy, or ‘concurrent embassies’, covering several countries in a given region of the world, thus avoiding the need for that country to open embassies in the other countries concerned.

This pattern means that future volunteers have to travel to another country to finalise their visa procedure, as their country does not have the corresponding embassy on its territory. A volunteer from Togo explains that:

“

for the visa for Italy, (...) the visa application is made in Ghana, i.e., in the neighbouring country.

”

This is also the case between ‘Global South’ countries. For example, Honduras has no diplomatic representation in Africa.⁶ Therefore, “a volunteer from Kenya [hoping to go to Honduras] has to go to the nearest consulate, which is in Madrid, Spain. He or she must carry out this procedure personally, and stay in Madrid for 4 weeks, with the possibility of the procedure being refused”, comments a representative of an IVS organization based in Honduras.

This has a considerable impact on the cost of the visa procedure and is another grave obstacle to mobility. It is particularly illustrated by the low number of South-North volunteer programs and the predominance of North-South mobility opportunities.

Moreover, there is a negative correlation between the cost of a visa and the income level of the country requesting it. In other words, **the richer the country, the lower the visa fees for its citizens to go abroad.** This brings us back to the so-called Matthew effect, a sociological concept which states that the greater the level of economic wealth and connections an individual sets out with, the greater the chance of increasing them, and vice versa. Consequently, when a person is faced with the visa process to volunteer abroad, “the poor get poorer and the rich stay rich”.⁷

⁵Recchi, E., & al. 2021. “The global visa cost divide: How and why the price for travel permits varies worldwide”. Political Geography 86: 102350.

⁶Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Honduras

⁷Recchi, E., & al. 2021 “The global visa cost divide: How and why the price for travel permits varies worldwide”. Political Geography 86: 102350, pp. 4.

These inequalities are rooted in economic, religious, and political discrimination, resulting in unequal treatment depending on the volunteer's income, beliefs, and whether they come from a 'Global North' democratic country. Volunteers from wealthier, more democratic States and with a more similar culture than the host country will therefore pay less for the visa process, while volunteers from poorer, less democratic states and with a different culture from the host country will pay a higher fee.⁸

One can also observe an influence of the colonial past on this procedure. Costs are generally higher for citizens of a former colony who wish to obtain a visa to volunteer in the former colonial power than vice versa.

This, coupled with institutional racism, means that some parts of the world will pay more than others. This factor also explains the higher visa rejection rate for Asian or African citizens wishing to travel to Europe or North America. When such discriminations are not necessarily present in de jure migration laws, they tend to be reproduced in practice.

→ Regulations and policies with a bias

VISA application to France, it was a total incomprehension. I gave everything as proof, but I am told that I do not have the necessary argument for my return to the country, despite the commitments made by my sending organisations and company here in Togo,

said a volunteer from Togo. Most of the time, the experience of participating in an international project or volunteer programme is highly exhausting for a volunteer. Not only because of the procedures, costs and time involved, but also because of the situations of abuse of power and bureaucratic barriers which are constantly changing in some countries.

Some of the respondents interviewed expressed that political changes require 'lobbying', depending on who is in power, "because even if the law remains the same, the trust and availability of the embassy and the regional migration office must be restored", said a representative of an IVS organization. This necessity is due to the presence of a 'front-line policy', i.e., the arbitrariness of migration agents and the

⁸ Mau, S., & al. 2015. The global mobility divide: How visa policies have evolved over time. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 41(8), pp.1192-1213.

‘discretionary power of street-level bureaucrats’ when it comes to applying the law. Compliance with the latter depends in part on the interests and dispositions of these officials, who have the power to judge the relevance of the visa application.⁹

This margin of interpretation attributed to migration agents is a consequence of the extension of bureaucracy to immigration policies, insofar as the law is understood as determining the general principles which are then supposed to be reinterpreted by the various institutional levels.¹⁰

These bureaucratic politics are particularly well suited to New Public Management, which follows a neoliberal logic of performance and market-based management. As a result, migration agents must follow a competition-driven dynamic, with defined objectives and outcomes, which give rise to interpretations of visa application cases and discretionary power by bureaucrats to achieve these objectives.¹¹

In the context of anti-migration policies and securitising priorities pursued by many countries, volunteering is also under suspicion. Procedures are becoming more complex and technical, often outsourced, or linked to an online application platform - adding even more barriers.

Consequently, “the difference made from the embassy or the regional migration office according to the volunteer nationality is not made by the law, but rather by if you know the person is in such institutions or not. The more the official in front of you understands the context of the volunteer’s trip, the more likely he or she is to go”, added another IVS organisation representative interviewed.

The result is greater insecurity for volunteers and inequalities in the visa process, which can discourage them from getting involved in voluntary work.

The key to dealing with this discretionary power and the inequalities it engenders is to obtain as much legal information as possible on the application of immigration laws.¹²

Sending organisations are required to provide a lot more support to volunteers than before, including in establishing a diplomatic channel of communication with the authorities in charge of these laws. The difficulty for volunteer organizations in accessing this information is another barrier to volunteering.

⁹Bourdieu, P. 1990. Droit et passe-droit. Le champ des pouvoirs territoriaux et la mise en œuvre des règlements. Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales 81(1), pp. 86–96.

¹⁰Spire, A. 2020. Etik i praksis. Nord J Appl Ethics, 14(2), pp. 89–106.

¹¹Bastien, J. 2009. Goal ambiguity and informal discretion in the implementation of public policies: the case of Spanish immigration policy. International Review of Administrative Sciences 75(4), pp. 665–685.

¹²Cintra, N. 2021. Visa Policies as Externalisation Practices in the Global South.

4. Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Decolonise access to visa information.

To limit the reproduction of inequalities in visa processes, it is essential to make information on these procedures as accessible and transparent as possible. At a time when many subcontractors exist to advance the visa process, such as specialised and often very expensive companies, it is crucial to make all the information necessary for the smooth running of the process available to all applicants. The uncertainty caused by the arbitration of migration agents has in fact left the way open for numerous companies to fill this void and offer alternatives to facilitate visa processes.

The control of these processes by private companies, however, tends to recreate strong inequalities, limiting information to those who can afford the price, thus discriminating against the less privileged.¹³

Information on immigration laws, on the procedures followed by migration agents to apply them, but also on remedies in the event of non-compliance with the procedure, must be offered to participants in a clear and concise manner. Based on the practical experience of IVS organisations in managing international volunteering and their global reach on all continents, IVS

networks can share their experiences in producing information and knowledge to address policies that facilitate the mobility of young volunteers.

Recommendation 2: Provide training for public officers and service employees.

Decolonizing visa procedures also means **raising awareness and training about global citizenship, human rights and decolonial perspective** for agents who are responsible for processing applications to avoid arbitrations that encourage inequality and discrimination. Such training would make it possible to go beyond the neoliberal logic of New Public Management, by training on the quality of decisions rather than on the quantity of refusals or acceptances of visa applications.

An example of a similar civil service training course was introduced in Argentina in 2019, under the name Micaela Law.¹⁴

This law obliges public service employees, whether in the executive, legislative or judicial branches, to be trained in gender issues and gender-based violence. The law was passed after the femicide of Micaela García, a 21-year-old activist in the feminist movement Ni Una Menos.

¹³ Tekin Bilbil, E. 2018. "Neoliberal Governmentality and Consular Outsourcing: An Analysis on Visa Processing Arrangements". Marmara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilimler Dergisi 6, no. 1, pp. 97-122.

¹⁴ [Ley Micaela](#).

Providing training for migration officials on racial issues, neo-colonial attitudes and global inequalities would help avoid the reproduction of inequalities in the visa process and encourage diversity among applicants to volunteer programs.

Recommendation 3: Facilitate access to embassies at national level.

To remedy the problem of the absence of diplomatic representation of the country hosting the volunteer mission in the volunteer's country, **the 'protecting power's embassy' model** could be used. In this concept one state will represent the interests of another state in a country where this second state has no diplomatic representation.¹⁵

Today, for example, Romania represents the interests of many countries in Syria, including Australia, Canada, France, and Moldova.¹⁶ This is also the role of the Qatari Embassy for the United States in Afghanistan.¹⁷

Protecting power's embassies mostly represent states in diplomatic conflict with the host state, and in States where it is almost impossible for nationals to legally leave the country, even if more foreign diplomatic representations were present.

However, generalising this type of practice when a state lacks diplomatic representation in a country would facilitate administrative procedures for volunteers, and reduce the travel costs they have to cover when their destination state uses a concurrent embassy in another country.

While visa procedures such as the Uniform Schengen Visa (USV), or soon the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS)¹⁸ may be perceived as new financial and administrative barriers to mobility, the introduction of these new integrated migration systems points the way towards harmonised visa procedures for certain states, and could make it easier for one state to manage a visa application for another.

The development of these schemes could therefore be useful for the smooth operation of protecting power's embassies in the immigration field. In addition, the implementation of these systems could represent a tool for the European Commission and other funding bodies of volunteer programs to ensure that the visa process does not represent a barrier to volunteer mobility.

¹⁵James, A. 2016. Diplomatic Relations. The SAGE handbook of diplomacy, pp.257.

¹⁶<https://www.romania-insider.com/romania-to-represent-canadas-interests-in-syria>

¹⁷<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/12/qatar-to-act-as-us-diplomatic-representative-in-afghanistan>

¹⁸ETIAS

These mechanisms could make it easier to control the administrative procedures of national embassies and facilitate the access of volunteers to their countries.

Recommendation 4: Develop special status for volunteers.

Providing a **specific visa for volunteers**, more affordable than tourist visas and with fewer administrative formalities, would encourage volunteering and the diversity of volunteer backgrounds. It would reduce inequalities in access to volunteering and democratise its practice. IVS organizations can intermediate this certification providing the legal and formal procedure.

Guaranteeing a special status for volunteers, enabling them to leave their home country more easily to carry out volunteer missions in other countries, would give greater recognition to their work, as well as being beneficial for the host country.

This type of visa exists in Finland, where a residence permit for volunteers has been introduced, for a maximum duration of one year. This separate category for volunteers simplifies the procedure and makes volunteering more accessible.¹⁹

But for this to happen, **the political priorities of States need to be aligned with the practice of volunteering.** Including volunteering in sectoral policies and national development strategies is therefore a prerequisite for taking account of the practice of volunteering in the migration policies of States, and thus reserving a special status for volunteers.²⁰

Furthermore, establishing a special status for volunteers in the visa process is not enough to decolonize it. **It is essential to ensure that this specific type of visa is inclusive and non-discriminatory for any volunteer.** In other words, it must not exclude any part of the applicants by its price, and must recognize a diversity of IVS organisations, not just the most famous ones.



All views and opinions expressed in this policy paper are of the project partners only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or Council of Europe. Neither the European Union nor Council of Europe can be held responsible for them. **For more information**, please contact Ms. Anja Stuckert at anja.stuckert@icye.org or Ms. Mariela Ortiz Suarez at marielaortizsuarez@fundses.org.ar.

¹⁹ [Finnish residence permit application for voluntary work.](#)

²⁰ [United Nations Volunteers. 2020. Global Synthesis Report: Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda.](#)