

# Decolonising Visa Mechanisms

## Policy Paper

### 1. Introduction

This policy paper<sup>1</sup> has been produced by young participants and International Voluntary Service (IVS) organisations from all regions of the world as part of the Decolonise IVS! project, to reflect on the concepts of solidarity and decolonization<sup>2</sup>, and the changes needed to achieve them.

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

One of the root causes of exclusion from international volunteering can be attributed to the process of human mobility, which depends on migration procedures and requirements. Patterns of discrimination associated with migration barriers continue

to have a negative impact on the accessibility of international volunteering, even if it involves only temporary, short-term mobility. Here we propose recommendations on how to decolonize access to visa information and embassies at national level, and how to develop a solidarity-based approach to temporary human mobility.

### 2. Rationale for action

In a world where discrimination, xenophobia, racism and various forms of violence have a constant and exponential impact on societies, **intercultural volunteering helps to promote equity, peace and social justice**<sup>3</sup>. This can be achieved by addressing 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, it is necessary to analyze the hidden obstacles,

a colonial legacy itself. Editing for 'consistency' would silence and erase the diverse and inclusive participation that is critically needed by the decolonial movement to be successful.

<sup>3</sup> See the UNV report on the state of volunteering in the world 2022 and the CCIVS impact report 2010-2020.

<sup>1</sup> This document is also available in French and Spanish. You can access the translations [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> This 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

prejudices and barriers that affect its accessibility.

Volunteering in another country depends not only on material conditions (economic, educational and social resources), but also on **the administrative, legal and political barriers** that prevent young people from embarking on this experience, particularly those from the 'Global South'<sup>4</sup>. Not everyone is equal when it comes to the human mobility and visa application process.

There is no balance in the way visa requirements and procedures operate between individuals from the 'Global South' and those from the 'Global North'. It is not possible to guarantee inclusive access and equity in international volunteering if we do not create fair conditions and tackle barriers to mobility.

### 3. Main barriers

#### → The passport power system

International volunteering always involves traveling from one country to another. While some volunteers have no trouble organizing their trip, this is not the case for others. The mobility process itself is the first obstacle. Depending on how volunteers' nationality is classified in the

<sup>4</sup> In this document, the term 'Global South' refers to all countries not belonging to the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

global passport system, they face different types 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 do not need a visa, or who obtain one very easily, come from countries grouped together in the 'Global North', such as the countries of Europe and North America.

For example, the average European citizen can enter 157 countries without a visa or with a visa on arrival, according to the Global Passport Power Ranking 2024<sup>5</sup>. By contrast, most people from the 'Global South' must go through often tedious administrative procedures to travel to other countries. In fact, by way of comparison, the average African can only travel to 71 countries without a visa, or with a visa on arrival. In other words, **international mobility depends on whether you are a 'first-class', 'second-class' or 'third-class' citizen.**

What is the future of international volunteering in this context of asymmetry? Will the future of international volunteering be reserved for privileged Europeans or for citizens with more than one nationality?

(OECD), which has 32 members and represents the 'Global North'.

<sup>5</sup> Global Passport Power Ranking 2024.

## → Unequal visa costs

What is more, citizens of 'Southern' countries have a higher financial burden when it comes to visa fees than those from 'Northern' countries. For example, on average, a citizen of a South Asian country **must pay three times as much as a citizen of Western Europe** (59 USD versus 18 USD) to obtain a visa to travel abroad<sup>6</sup>. **And that is not counting the income disparities between these countries.**

In fact, when these differences are considered, a Central Asian must 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, an Australian or a New Zealander, to cover visa costs and be able to volunteer abroad.

This process is accentuated by the concentration of diplomatic activities in certain countries within a single consulate or embassy, also known as 'concurrent embassies'. These have the particularity of 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 means that future volunteers have to travel to another country to finalize their visa procedure, as their country has no corresponding embassy on its territory.

<sup>6</sup> Recchi, E., & al. 2021. "The global visa cost divide: How and why the price for travel permits varies worldwide". Political Geography 86: 102350.

A Togolese volunteer explains:

“

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

”

This is also the case between countries in the 'South'. For example, Honduras has no diplomatic representation in Africa.<sup>7</sup> As a result, "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 do this personally and stay in Madrid for 4 weeks, with the possibility that the procedure will be denied", comments a representative of a Honduras-based IVS organization.

**This process has a considerable impact on the cost of the visa procedure and is another major obstacle to mobility.** This is particularly illustrated by the low number of South-North and South-South volunteering programs, and the predominance of North-South mobility opportunities.

In addition, there is a negative correlation between visa costs and the average income level of the volunteer's country of origin. In other words, **the higher the standard of living in a country, the lower the visa fees for its citizens wishing to**

<sup>7</sup> [Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Honduras.](#)

**go abroad.** This brings us back to the 'Matthew effect', a sociological concept according to which the higher the level of economic wealth and relationships with which an individual establishes themselves, the greater their chances of increasing them, and vice versa. Consequently, when faced with a visa procedure to volunteer abroad, "the poor get poorer and the rich stay richer"<sup>8</sup>.

**These injustices are rooted in economic, religious and political discrimination, resulting in unequal treatment based on the volunteer's income, religious beliefs and whether they come from a democratic country in the 'North'.** Volunteers from wealthier, more democratic states with a culture more like that of the host country will therefore pay less for the visa process, while volunteers from poorer, less democratic states with a culture different from that of the host country will pay higher fees.

We can also observe an influence of the colonial past on this procedure. Costs are generally higher for citizens of a former colony wishing to obtain a visa to volunteer in the former colonial power than for the reverse. This, combined with institutional racism, means that some regions of the world will pay more than others in the volunteering process. Such discrimination also explains the higher visa refusal rate for Asian or African citizens wishing to travel to Europe or North America. When such

injustices are not addressed by migration laws, they tend to be reproduced in practice.

## → **Biased regulations and policies**

Applying for a visa for France was a total incomprehension. I have given all the proof I need, but I am told that I do not have the necessary arguments to return to my country, despite the commitments made by the sending organizations and structures here in Togo,

said a Togolese volunteer. Most of the time, the experience of taking part in an international volunteering project is very exhausting for a volunteer. Not only because of the procedures, costs and time involved, but also because of the abuse of power and bureaucratic barriers that constantly change depending on the host country.

Some of those interviewed said that policy changes require 'lobbying', depending on who is in power, "because even if the law remains the same, the trust and availability

<sup>8</sup> Recchi, E., & al. 2021 "The global visa cost divide: How and why the price for travel permits varies worldwide". Political Geography 86: 102350, pp. 4.

of the embassy and regional migration office must be restored", said a representative of an IVS organization. This necessity is due to the presence of 'frontline politics', i.e. arbitrariness on the part of migration agents and 'bureaucratic discretion' 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.<sup>9</sup>

This margin of interpretation attributed to immigration officers is a consequence of the extension of bureaucracy to immigration policies, insofar as the law determines the general principles, which are then reinterpreted by the various institutional levels.<sup>10</sup>

These bureaucratic policies are particularly well suited to the 'New Public Management' approach, which follows a neoliberal logic of performance and market-based management. As a result, migration agents must follow a competitive dynamic, with defined objectives and outcomes, which give rise to interpretations of visa application cases and discretionary power on the part of bureaucrats to achieve these objectives.<sup>11</sup>

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

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 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 representative of a volunteer organization interviewed.

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

<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu, 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.

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

<sup>11</sup> Bastien, 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.

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.<sup>12</sup> Sending organizations have to provide much greater support to volunteers than before, including establishing a diplomatic channel of communication with the authorities responsible for these laws. Another obstacle to volunteering is the difficulty for volunteer organizations to access this information.

## 4. Policy recommendations

### Recommendation 1: Decolonize access to visa information.

To limit the reproduction of inequalities in visa procedures, it is essential to make information on these procedures as accessible and transparent as possible. At a time when many subcontractors exist to move the visa process forward, such as specialized and often very costly companies, it is crucial to make available to all visa applicants all the information necessary for the smooth running of the process. The uncertainty caused by the arbitration of migration agents has in fact left the way open for many private players 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.**<sup>13</sup>

Information on immigration laws, on the procedures followed by migration officers to enforce them, and on remedies in the event of non-compliance, should be offered to participants in a clear and concise manner. In addition, based on the practical experience of IVS organizations in their management and the global reach of this experience on all continents, IVS networks could share their experiences in producing information and knowledge to address policies that facilitate the mobility of young volunteers.

### Recommendation 2: Provide training for public officials in migration services.

Decolonising visa procedures also means **raising awareness and providing training in global citizenship, human rights and a decolonial perspective** to those responsible for processing applications, to avoid arbitrations that foster inequality and discrimination. Such training would make it possible to go beyond the neoliberal logic of the 'New

<sup>12</sup> Cintra, N. 2021. Visa Policies as Externalisation Practices in the Global South.

<sup>13</sup> 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.

Public Management', by focusing on the quality of decisions rather than the quantity of refusals or acceptances of visa applications. An example of similar training in the civil service was introduced in Argentina in 2019, under the name 'Micaela Law'.<sup>14</sup>

This law obliges civil servants, 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 from the 'Ni Una Menos' feminist movement.

Offering training to migration managers 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 IVS programs.

### **Recommendation 3: Facilitate access to embassies at national level.**

To remedy the problem of the host country's lack of diplomatic representation in the volunteer's country, **the 'protecting power' embassy model** could be used.

This concept means that one state represents the interests of another in a country where the latter has no diplomatic representation.<sup>15</sup> Today, for example, Romania represents the interests of many countries in Syria, including Australia, Canada, France and Moldova.<sup>16</sup> This is also the role of the Qatari Embassy to the United States in Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup>

Today, the embassies of the 'protecting powers' represent states in diplomatic conflict with the host state, primarily to provide consular protection to their nationals living in the host country.

However, generalizing this type of practice when a State has no diplomatic representation in a country would facilitate administrative procedures for volunteers and reduce the travel costs they incur when their destination State uses a 'concurrent embassy' in another country.

While European visa procedures such as the Uniform Schengen Visa (USV), or soon the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS)<sup>18</sup> may be perceived as new financial and administrative obstacles to mobility, the

<sup>14</sup> Micaela Law.

<sup>15</sup> James, A. 2016. Diplomatic Relations. The SAGE handbook of diplomacy, pp.257.

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

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

<sup>18</sup> ETIAS

introduction of these new integrated immigration systems also paves the way for harmonized visa procedures for certain states and could make it easier for one state to manage a visa application for another.

Consequently, the development of such administrative systems could be useful for the smooth operation of 'protecting power' embassies in the field of human mobility, particularly temporary mobility. In addition, the implementation of such mechanisms could provide a tool for the European Commission and other funding bodies of IVS programs to ensure that the visa procedure does not constitute an obstacle to volunteer mobility. These mechanisms could make it easier for national embassies to monitor administrative procedures and facilitate volunteers' access to their country.

### **Recommendation 4: Develop a special status for international volunteers.**

Providing a **specific visa for volunteers**, more affordable than tourist visas and involving less red-tape, would encourage international volunteering and a diversity of volunteers. This would reduce inequalities in access to IVS and help democratize its practice. **Guaranteeing a special status for volunteers, making it easier for them**

**to leave their home country to carry out volunteer missions in other countries, would give greater recognition to their work, while benefiting the host country.** Volunteering organizations could act as intermediaries for this certification, providing the necessary legal and formal procedure.

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

However, for this to happen, **the political priorities of states must be aligned with the practice of volunteering.** The inclusion of volunteering in sectoral policies and national development strategies is therefore a prerequisite for taking account of its practice in the migration policies of states, and thus reserving a special status for volunteers.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, establishing such a status in the visa process is not enough to decolonize the latter. **It is essential to ensure that this specific type of visa is inclusive and non-discriminatory for all volunteers.** In other words, it must not exclude any candidate by its price, and must recognize a diversity of IVS organizations, not just the best-known. The introduction of this status would as well respond to the previous recommendations,

<sup>19</sup> Application for a Finnish residence permit for voluntary work.

<sup>20</sup> United Nations Volunteers. 2020. Global Synthesis Report: Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda.



as it would simplify information on the visa process for volunteers by limiting the number and complexity of visa options, avoid arbitrariness on the part of migration

agents thanks to its less bureaucratic process, and facilitate the work of embassies and therefore their accessibility.

Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
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