



Unpacking modern volunteering

Think piece #2

World Scout Bureau
Global Support Centre, Kuala Lumpur

April 2026

Unpacking modern volunteering

This briefing summarizes the discussion held during the World Scouting Think Tank session on 14 April 2026, which focused on volunteering in Scouting: how volunteer engagement is changing, what tensions this creates for the movement, and how Scouting can better recognise, organise, and communicate the value of adult contribution.



A growing need despite growing numbers

Recent membership data shows growth in both youth and adult membership, including an increase in adult volunteers. Yet many National Scout Organizations (NSOs) still report that they do not have enough volunteers. This suggests that the challenge is not only about headcount. It is also about whether the current model of volunteering still matches the realities of people's lives.

The apparent shortage may partly come from the fact that expectations of volunteers have remained relatively stable while people's availability has changed. In other words, the issue may not simply be that fewer people are willing to help, but that the forms of help that people can offer are no longer the same as before.

The need for more adults is practical and educational. In many local teams, six or more adults may be required not because every adult is expected to be present all the time, but because no single person can cover every week. A larger pool of adults makes it possible to respect minimum adult-to-youth ratios, protect continuity, and reduce over-reliance on a few people.

Volunteering is shifting in form

Volunteering is not disappearing, but becoming more fragmented, flexible, and distributed. In some contexts, people still give time generously, but they divide that time across several causes, organisations, or community commitments rather than investing it all in one place.

This shift is connected to broader social trends. There is less social, religious, or cultural pressure to serve one's community, while there is growing emphasis on personal growth, meaningful connection, and the value that volunteering brings to the volunteer. People increasingly expect their involvement to fit their needs, availability, aspirations, and sense of return.

Scouting is therefore no longer only competing with inactivity. It is also competing with many other meaningful and attractive opportunities for service, learning, leisure, and social connection. The internet has widened the range of choices available to people: from local community causes to global campaigns and highly engaging leisure activities. As a result, Scouting's volunteering offer must be a strong experience in itself: easy to enter, meaningful in its impact, supportive of personal growth, and sustained by good relationships and engagement cycles.

For some members, especially in societies with strong traditions of civic engagement, the deeper challenge is that younger generations may still want to contribute but often do so on more individualised, flexible, and less long-term terms.

The limits of the traditional volunteer model

Scouting often still operates with an "all or nothing" understanding of volunteerism. The implicit expectation is that a person enters a formal pathway, is trained for a sustained role, and eventually becomes a fully committed Scout leader. While this works for some, it can also exclude people who are willing to contribute in lighter, shorter, or more specialised ways.

For example, a university student offering psychological support, a parent helping occasionally at camp, or someone able to build a website for a local group may all be contributing meaningfully to Scouting. Yet in many systems these forms of contribution are not easily recognised, recorded, or understood as volunteering in the full sense.

A more inclusive approach would not mean lowering standards or weakening the educational mission. It would mean distinguishing more clearly between different types of contribution, different degrees of responsibility, and different levels of proximity to young people.

Continuity matters, but it can be shared

One of the central questions is how to balance flexibility with continuity, since Scouting, as an educational movement, depends on trust, regularity, and relationships between adults and young people. This cannot be replaced entirely by isolated or one-off acts of support.

Continuity is one of Scouting's major strengths. The movement does not simply offer one-off experiences: it offers transformational journeys, networks, and communities, for both young people and adults. This requires adults who can accompany young people over time and who can sustain the culture of the group.

However, continuity should not be understood only as the amount of time one person gives. Quality also matters. A number of short but high-quality experiences, such as a one-week camp led by capable and inspiring adults, can be more transformative than a long period of weak or passive adult presence. The goal is therefore not only to secure

continuity of attendance, but continuity of meaningful relationships, mentoring, educational quality, and care.

Continuity does not necessarily need to rest on a single individual doing everything. Team-based models can be explored, in which some adults provide consistent relational presence, while others offer technical, occasional, or complementary support. As an example, a team of leaders who cannot all be present every week may divide mentoring responsibilities among themselves, ensuring that each young person still has a named adult able to check in more deeply at regular intervals. This kind of shared continuity can preserve the educational core of Scouting while reducing the burden placed on a small number of heavily committed leaders.

New forms of volunteering require new systems

But welcoming more flexible forms of volunteering is not only a matter of attitude. It also requires systems that can accommodate them. Questions can emerge around safeguarding, training, volunteer registration, role descriptions, accountability, and evaluation.

There are elements, especially Safe from Harm requirements, which are non-negotiable. But beyond that, not every volunteer needs the same preparation or the same pathway. If Scouting wants to diversify the ways adults contribute, it may also need more differentiated structures that fit different levels of responsibility, duration, and proximity to young people.

One practical shift would be to move from a logic of hours to a logic of outputs and responsibility. A volunteer who is present for many years but does not carry real responsibility may not reduce the mental load of others, while a volunteer who contributes for a smaller share of time but reliably owns a clear task can make a major difference. Breaking roles down into the outputs, responsibilities, and accountabilities they require would make it easier to match volunteer opportunities with people's real availability.

The duration of roles also needs attention. Many adult life cycles were built around the assumption that adults would stay for many years, with long training processes and delayed recognition. In some contexts, however, adults may stay for one to three years or may be willing to commit intensively for six to twelve months but not indefinitely. Defined role durations, clearer entry and exit points, and faster recognition help short-cycle volunteers feel like they belong in the system rather than being exceptions to it. Finally, ease of access matters. Registration, screening, and onboarding should be at least as accessible as the standards people experience elsewhere. This may require stronger digital tools, simpler processes, or collaboration with other organisations to centralise or streamline administrative steps.

Recognition, fairness, and the volunteer experience

Recognition emerges as an especially sensitive issue. Frustration does not usually come from the mere fact that some people give fewer hours than others. It tends to arise when recognition systems fail to distinguish between dependable effort and superficial presence, or when very different contributions are treated as though they were identical. If Scouting is serious about diversifying volunteer roles, then it must also think more carefully about how different forms of contribution are valued. Recognition may need to become more nuanced, more contextual, and more connected to actual responsibility, reliability, learning, and impact.

Recognition should therefore focus not only on having been present, but on the contribution made and the effect it had on young people, teams, groups, and communities. A fair system should make visible both sustained commitment and high-quality, time-limited contribution.

Making the value of volunteering visible

Another major theme is the need to define and communicate the value of volunteering more clearly. Scouting knows internally that volunteering develops important qualities, but often struggles to express this convincingly to people outside the movement. Generic references to leadership or teamwork may be true, but they are not always specific enough to persuade others.

There's need to be an effort of "translation". Scout volunteering can be described more clearly in terms of competencies that wider society already recognises: strategic planning, conflict resolution, project management, mentoring, community leadership, and network building. This won't reduce Scouting to professional development, but it can help showing that volunteering benefits both the movement and the volunteer.

At the same time, the strongest promotion of Scout volunteering may still be word of mouth. Adults bring in other adults, and these new volunteers are often the ones who stay longest. This means that current adult volunteers are not only contributors; they are ambassadors for the experience Scouting offers. If adults are burnt out, exclusionary, constantly in conflict, or not living the values of the movement, that becomes the image of volunteering that others see. Good adult leadership, therefore, is also a recruitment strategy.

Retention is as important as recruitment

It is important to remember that the volunteering challenge is not only about bringing in new people. It is also about keeping those who are already involved. If adults feel unsupported, unseen, overburdened, or poorly accompanied, recruitment efforts alone will not solve the problem.

Retention depends heavily on the quality of the local adult life cycle: entry, onboarding, development, support, recognition, conflict management, and exit. When local groups are consistent and intentional across these stages, they are more likely to grow and sustain strong adult teams.

The role of the local group leader or commissioner is especially important. They shape the local culture by addressing conflicts early, ensuring quality and risk management, recognising people fairly, supporting change, reducing unnecessary administrative burdens on leaders, and keeping the purpose of Scouting alive. In a context where volunteers have more choices, they are less likely to accept poor leadership or unhealthy group cultures.

This leadership role is also becoming harder. Parents may expect more individualised attention and stronger safety assurance; governments may require greater compliance; and social change requires continuous adaptation. Yet many of these roles remain voluntary and are sometimes filled by those who have simply been present the longest, rather than those best prepared to lead. Rethinking leadership roles, redistributing administrative tasks, training leaders for flexible volunteering models, and strengthening support for local teams are therefore central to retention.

Growing the number of volunteers requires not only better invitations into Scouting, but also better experiences once people are inside it.

Looking ahead with purpose

The future of volunteering in Scouting will depend on the movement’s ability to adapt without losing its educational identity. Scouting may need to become more flexible in the ways it welcomes adult contributions, while remaining clear about the forms of continuity, safeguarding, and team culture that young people need.

New approaches	What this means in practice
Design for varied commitment	Create roles with clear outputs, responsibility levels, duration, and safeguarding requirements.
Protect the educational core	Use team-based models so flexibility does not undermine continuity, mentoring, or youth safety.
Improve the adult experience	Strengthen onboarding, support, recognition, feedback, and exit practices across the adult life cycle.
Invest where potential exists	Use Adults in Scouting maturity and national civic culture as complementary lenses for targeted support.
Rethink local leadership	Support group leaders and commissioners as culture-builders

More than a staffing issue, volunteering emerges as a strategic and cultural question. The opportunity ahead is not simply to find more adults, but to rethink how Scouting understands contribution, supports different pathways of engagement, and helps volunteers recognise both what they give and what they gain through the movement.

Additional research: culture, governance, and organisational readiness

Additional research from Dominique B nard: *The Crisis in Recruiting Volunteer Leaders in Volunteer Organizations: Analysis, Causes, and Areas for Reflection*

Dominique B nard’s research article “*The Crisis in Recruiting Volunteer Leaders in Volunteer Organizations: Analysis, Causes, and Areas for Reflection*” complements the discussion by showing that the difficulty of recruiting and retaining adult volunteers cannot be explained only by wider social changes or by a lack of time. While shorter, more flexible forms of volunteering respond to real changes in people’s availability, they do not fully address the needs of an educational movement such as Scouting, where continuity, progression, and trusted relationships with young people remain essential. Dominique’s input therefore shifts attention to the internal conditions created by organisations themselves: whether volunteers feel heard, supported, recognised, and able to influence decisions. It highlights that pyramidal or overly centralised governance can discourage frontline volunteers when they have little space to share difficulties, shape solutions, or participate meaningfully in the life of the organisation. From this perspective, the volunteer challenge is also a governance and culture challenge. Strengthening local educational communities, creating genuine feedback channels, involving volunteers in decision-making, and providing better support and recognition are not secondary improvements; they are central conditions for keeping adult volunteers engaged.

The article can be accessed at [this link](#).

Additional research from Sa d Zian: *Adult Scout Volunteering and National Contexts*

Sa d Zian’s contribution adds a broader comparative lens by linking adult volunteer engagement in Scouting to both national context and organisational maturity. His analysis suggests that differences between countries cannot be understood simply through economic capacity or general levels of development. Instead, adult volunteer mobilisation appears to be shaped by a combination of wider civic culture and the strength of the organisation’s own Adults in Scouting systems. In particular, contexts where people show trust in formal organisations and are used to engaging through structured civic institutions may offer stronger conditions for adult volunteering. However, this potential does not automatically translate into Scout leadership unless the organisation has clear, reliable, and well-supported adult volunteer policies and practices. Sa d’s input therefore reinforces the idea that WOSM and NSOs should not treat volunteer shortages as only a recruitment problem. They also need to identify where the surrounding culture already offers potential, but where organisational infrastructure, adult life-cycle management, support, training, and recognition need to be strengthened so that more adults can enter, contribute, and remain in Scouting.

The article can be accessed at [this link](#).

About the World Scouting Think Tank:

The World Scouting Think Tank brings together a select group of individuals with significant Scouting experience to serve as a sounding board for the World Scout Bureau's leadership. Their insights and experience are considered very valuable as we reflect on how Scouting can evolve to better meet the needs of young people and society throughout the implementation of the new Strategy for Scouting.

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March 2025

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