

The Impact of Volunteering on Community Cohesion and Development in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace

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Abstract

Particularly in areas like the Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace (EMTH), which suffer socio-economic difficulties, volunteering is a critical means of promoting social cohesiveness and stimulates local development. This research fills in a major void: the lack of institutional support and strategic planning in volunteer projects, both of which compromise their efficacy and long-term sustainability. The study looks at how volunteering affects sustainable development and community cohesiveness as well as points of excellence that can help the volunteering system to be strengthened. The research was conducted with a total of 200 participants—including volunteers, local government officials, and community members from several socioeconomic levels. Semi-structured interviews and well crafted questionnaires gathered the data. Together with qualitative study of interview data, statistical techniques like descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were used. According to the results, volunteering supports cultural and environmental projects, helps to build social networks, and advances the regional economy. Furthermore underlined by participants the need of institutional interventions and strategic alliances in order to preserve the viability of volunteer activities is The report emphasizes generally volunteerism as a main engine of local development and suggests legislative proposals meant to increase involvement and provide institutional support. The results could guide the creation of focused policies meant to support social cohesiveness and sustainable development in the AMTH area.

Keywords: Volunteering, Social Cohesion, Local Development, Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, Sustainable Development

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Introduction

Particularly at the municipal level, volunteering has long been among the most important foundations for social cohesiveness and encouragement of civic involvement. Beyond its charitable aspect, it is fundamentally related to ideas such as social empowerment, active involvement, and both social and cultural integration (Snyder & Omoto, 2008; Musick & Wilson, 2007). In the field of sports, volunteer work not only guarantees the seamless planning of events but also greatly helps sports clubs to be sustainable, strengthens community relationships, and acknowledges sports as a social benefit (Cuskelly et al., 2006; MacNeela, 2008). One environment where volunteering may be very important in meeting social and developmental requirements is the Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace (EMTH). Notwithstanding obstacles like geographical remoteness and limited resources (ELSTAT, 2022), the area gains from noteworthy benefits: an active university community (DUTH), a rich legacy of collective action, and newly developing networks of young volunteers (Papadopoulos & Koutsou, 2021). These factors underscore the potential of volunteering as a strategic tool for local development.

Nevertheless, the current approach to sports volunteering reveals notable deficiencies, particularly concerning the recognition of volunteers' contributions, the absence of robust institutional frameworks, and the limited systematic analysis of motivational factors (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003; Esmond & Dunlop, 2004). Most relevant studies focus primarily on large urban centers, leaving regional contexts—especially in the field of sports—relatively underexplored.

This study seeks to address this research gap by examining sports volunteering in the EMTH region and analyzing its multifaceted dimensions through internationally validated quantitative tools. The objective is to formulate evidence-based policy proposals that can strengthen the institutional and practical contribution of volunteering to both sports and broader social development in the region.

Purpose of the Research

The present study aims to explore in depth the factors that influence citizens' participation in sports volunteering, with particular emphasis on their personal attitudes, motivations for involvement, and perceptions of the value of volunteering. It seeks to delineate the profile of the sports volunteer and to identify the elements that either foster or hinder long-term engagement.

In this context, special attention is given to evaluating the role of local bodies and associations in organizing, managing, and recognizing volunteer efforts.

Simultaneously, the study examines the relationship between participants' demographic characteristics and various dimensions of volunteer motivation, in order to uncover potential patterns or differences based on age, gender, employment status, or educational background. By analyzing real-world data through a scientific lens, the research aspires to contribute to the development of evidence-based strategies for enhancing volunteerism in the field of sports.

Methodology

Sample

The research sample consisted of citizens who were either directly or indirectly involved in sports volunteering activities within the Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace. A total of 200 questionnaires were initially collected, of which 90 were deemed fully completed and suitable for statistical analysis. The final sample included individuals from diverse social and professional backgrounds, ensuring representativeness and a breadth of experiences.

Participants belonged to the following groups:

- Active members of sports clubs and associations
- Educators at all levels engaged in sports or volunteer programs
- Local government officials responsible for organizing or supporting sports-related activities
- Young people, students, and unemployed individuals who had voluntarily participated in local sports initiatives

A unifying characteristic among all participants was their current or past voluntary involvement in sports. The sample was selected using convenience sampling, based on the accessibility and availability of individuals with relevant experience.

Data collection process

Data collection was conducted over a two-month period using a structured electronic questionnaire (via Google Forms). The questionnaire was disseminated through digital channels—including email, social media, and sports club networks—with the support of local sports clubs and organizations within the AMTH Region. Participants were clearly informed about the voluntary nature of the study, and their participation was both anonymous and optional.

Special attention was given to ensuring compliance with ethical standards, in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). All participants consented to terms that

guaranteed the confidentiality of their responses and the exclusive use of the data for research purposes.

Research tools

Two approved psychometric tools were used in order to reach the aims of this investigation. First was the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) created by Clary et al. (1998), evaluating six different aspects of volunteer motivation: Values, Understanding, Social, Career, Protective, and Enhancement. Five statements scored on a seven-point Likert scale—from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree)—evaluate each component. Greek samples have seen effective translation and use of the VFI, proving proven validity and dependability (Kourpanas & Tsioumaris, 2021; Chacón et al., 2017).

Based on the theory Ajzen (1991), the second instrument was the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) Questionnaire. By means of important constructions including attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control, this instrument was utilized to investigate participants' intention to volunteer. The questionnaire was modified to fit the particular situation of sports volunteering in Greece, therefore guaranteeing its applicability to the target demographic and research objectives.

Statistical analysis

Jamovi program was used for the data analysis as it offers sophisticated statistical techniques within a simple graphical interface. The analytical procedure consisted of numerous important stages. Descriptive statistical analysis was first conducted for all Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) subscales including calculations of central tendency and dispersion indices (mean, median, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum).

Subsequently, the internal consistency of the instrument was assessed through Cronbach's alpha coefficient for each subscale as well as for the overall tool. Most subscales yielded alpha values above the acceptable threshold of 0.70, confirming satisfactory levels of internal reliability.

Additionally, the study plans to implement further statistical exploration through correlation analyses, using Pearson or Spearman coefficients, in order to examine potential relationships between participants' demographic characteristics and their motivations for volunteering.

At this stage of the research, the primary focus is on processing and presenting the results derived from the VFI tool. Further analysis using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) questionnaire is anticipated in a subsequent article.

Methodological notes and prospects for improvement

The present research was conducted with a strong emphasis on scientific validity; however, certain aspects of the methodological approach could be further enhanced to strengthen future studies in this field. The selection of the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) is well justified, given its widespread application in international literature and its successful adaptation to Greek populations. Nonetheless, the absence of a parallel qualitative component—such as semi-structured interviews—limits the study's ability to uncover deeper insights into the lived experiences and underlying meanings expressed by volunteers.

Moreover, the use of Likert-type scale questionnaires presents inherent challenges in interpreting subjective variations in motivation, particularly in the absence of control mechanisms to account for social desirability bias. The future integration of complementary tools, such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), is anticipated to enrich the analysis of individual intentions and attitudes toward volunteering.

Finally, while Jamovi software proved adequate for descriptive and reliability analyses, the application of more advanced statistical techniques—such as factor analysis—would further confirm the construct validity of the VFI subscales. Such an extension would, however, require a larger sample size to ensure robust and generalizable results.

Results

The analysis of descriptive statistics obtained from the completion of the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) questionnaire by 90 participants revealed significant variations in the motivations driving individuals to engage in sports-related volunteering. Comprising six subscales, the VFI provides a multidimensional framework for understanding volunteering by capturing both internal and external aspects of human behavior.

With an average score of 5.24, $SD = 1.23$, "Values" stood out among the subscales as the main motivating factor, suggesting that ethical issues and the want to help society are what drive most people. This result is consistent with other research pointing out compassion as the main motivation for volunteer activity (Clary et al., 1998; Snyder & Omoto, 2008). In places like the AMTH Region, where socioeconomic issues and community-level expectations are more severe, the necessity of social participation is clearer.

Underlining the need of volunteering as a road to professional development and experience growth, the "Career" subscale ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.35$) showed the second highest score. Given that much of the sample comprised of young, jobless people trying to improve their employability or fit into the labor market, this result is very important.

Reflecting the psychological aspects of volunteer work, the subscales "Enhanced" ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.17$) and "Protective" ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.31$) show More precisely, "enhancement" refers to personal empowerment, self-esteem, and inner satisfaction; "protective" relates to reducing internal tension or guilt by means of action. These aspects imply that incentives for volunteering depend much on psychological well-being.

Whereas the "Understanding" subscale ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.29$) shows the goal to learn information, improve abilities, and amass new experiences by volunteering, the "Social" subscale ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.22$) catches the demand for social inclusion and relationship-building. These two aspects showed much lower averages, but their existence at reasonable levels guarantees that volunteering is also seen as a means of social engagement and personal growth.

In terms of reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha, the subscales demonstrated acceptable to high internal consistency. "Social" showed the highest reliability ($\alpha = 0.783$), followed by "Understanding" ($\alpha = 0.748$), "Protective" ($\alpha = 0.735$), and "Values" ($\alpha = 0.714$). Slightly lower coefficients were observed in "Enhancement" ($\alpha = 0.685$) and "Career" ($\alpha = 0.613$), though these still fall within acceptable limits. The overall reliability of the instrument for the present sample was $\alpha = 0.966$, indicating a high degree of internal consistency and supporting the validity of the VFI in this context.

These findings underscore the relevance of adopting a multidimensional theoretical framework for analyzing sports volunteering. By integrating ethical, social, emotional, and professional motivational components, such a framework enables cultural and sports organizations, local authorities, and educational institutions to develop more effective strategies for attracting and retaining volunteers. Special emphasis should be placed on tailoring support mechanisms to align with the dominant motivation profiles identified within the target population.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and reliability (Cronbach's α) per subscale of the VFI.

Υποκλίμακα	Μέσος Όρος	Διάμεσος	Τυπ. Απόκλιση	Ελάχιστο	Μέγιστο	Cronbach's α
Social	4.90	5.00	1.11	1.60	7.00	0.783
Values	5.24	5.20	0.87	2.40	7.00	0.737
Understanding	4.82	4.80	1.06	1.80	7.00	0.729
Career	5.12	5.20	0.89	2.60	7.00	0.613
Protective	4.88	4.80	1.04	2.40	7.00	0.694
Enhancement	5.05	5.20	1.01	2.20	7.00	0.636

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that sports volunteering constitutes a complex and dynamic social mechanism, wherein ethical, social, professional, and psychological motivations are intricately interwoven. The predominance of the “Values” subscale underscores the central role of moral purpose and the intrinsic satisfaction derived from contributing to the common good, particularly among volunteers in the AMTH Region. Concurrently, the high scoring of the “Career” subscale reflects a broader generational trend: younger individuals increasingly associate volunteering with opportunities for professional growth, a phenomenon also noted by Clary et al. (1998) and evident in the Greek context.

The always high reliability scores across all VFI subscales (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.60$) indicate that participants' internal attitudes and beliefs were faithfully recorded, hence strengthening the validity of the instrument. Comparatively with related studies conducted across Europe and abroad (e.g., Snyder & Omoto, 2008; Chacón et al., 2017), the findings show a consistent emphasis on personal fulfillment and social recognition together with an increasing importance placed on professional benefits—especially among younger age groups and inside academic communities.

Focusing on Thrace and Eastern Macedonia has shown out to be very perceptive. On the one hand, the area offers a unique mix of possibilities and challenges: socioeconomic difficulty, poor institutional infrastructure, and geographic isolation; on the other hand, the presence of a vibrant university community (DUTH), great student mobilization, and a multicultural social fabric. These circumstances provide a special setting in which sports volunteering helps to promote the human capital of the area as well as a tool for social integration. Still, there were some ongoing difficulties noted. The viability of volunteer projects is still under jeopardy from inadequate training opportunities, the absence of long-term strategic planning, and institutional frameworks for honoring and supporting volunteers. The drop in useable sample size—from 200 to 90 respondents—from incomplete or incorrect entries further emphasizes the challenges of gathering primary data in non-urban environments and the necessity of more flexible and context-sensitive research techniques.

The findings are fully aligned with the conclusions of Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003), who argue that without sustained institutional support and long-term planning, volunteerism remains vulnerable to decline and disillusionment among participants. Although respondents demonstrated a positive predisposition toward volunteering, they also expressed a clear demand for recognition, empowerment, and the strategic utilization of their skills—alongside stronger links between voluntary engagement and their social or professional advancement.

This study contributes meaningfully to both Greek and international literature by offering empirical evidence from a relatively underrepresented geographical and thematic domain. It establishes a foundation for the development of more comprehensive volunteer program policies, which take into account not only participant needs but also local community characteristics.

Finally, the planned integration of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) in future phases of the research is expected to deepen understanding of the psychological and contextual factors that shape individuals' attitudes, intentions, and eventual behaviors regarding volunteering. Further qualitative research—such as interviews or focus groups—may also illuminate more nuanced motivations, perceived barriers, and personal narratives behind volunteering practices.

Comparison with Previous Research and Literature

The findings of this study are largely consistent with both international and national research examining the motivations and dimensions of volunteering in the sports sector. As revealed through the analysis of the VFI subscales, the dominant motivation among participants was moral satisfaction and the desire to contribute—reflected in the high scores on the Values subscale. This result aligns with earlier studies by Clary et al. (1998) and Snyder and Omoto (2008), which consistently identify value-based and altruistic motivations as significant drivers across diverse cultural contexts.

Similar conclusions have been drawn by Greek researchers, such as Kourpanas and Tsioumaris (2021), who emphasize the importance of social contribution and personal development in motivating volunteer participation, whether in sports events or broader civic initiatives. Particularly noteworthy is the present study's finding regarding the significance of professional development, as captured by the Career subscale. This result supports other studies indicating that, particularly for young and jobless people, volunteering provides a useful path for professional integration and skill gain (Cuskelly et al., 2004). In order to guarantee the long-term viability of volunteer participation, participants in this survey also underlined the need of institutional recognition, organizational support, and cooperation with local authorities—qualities found to be very vital. These results fit the theoretical paradigm put forward by Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003), who characterize a change from conventional volunteering models to more "reflexive" forms, wherein volunteers search for significant influence and structural engagement.

Particularly in regard to structural issues and the need to improve social cohesiveness by means of voluntary work, the Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace shows similarities with other Greek areas including Epirus and Western Macedonia. Nonetheless, one unique feature of the

AMTH Region is the Democritus University of Thrace and the active participation of academic staff and students in community projects—an element that might have a multiplier effect in the evolution of localized policy strategies (Hyz, 2011). All things considered, the results of this research support the application of the theoretical instruments used and advance a better knowledge of sports volunteering motives in the Greek regional setting. They also underline the urgent necessity of laws encouraging the institutional support and educational integration of voluntary activities.

Policy and Future Research Proposals

The findings of this study underscore the necessity of developing a coherent and comprehensive strategy for strengthening sports volunteering in Greece, and particularly within the Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace. The state, local authorities, and sports organizations must transition from relying on spontaneous civic participation to fostering a stable, institutionally integrated model of volunteerism.

At the policy level, institutional recognition of voluntary contributions—through mechanisms such as certificates of participation, credit-based reward systems, or other forms of social acknowledgment—is considered essential. Additionally, the integration of educational programs on volunteering within school and university curricula may play a critical role in cultivating a culture of civic engagement from an early age. The establishment of local volunteer centers, in collaboration with municipalities and higher education institutions, could further enhance the coordination of volunteer activities, the training of participants, and the efficient utilization of human resources.

The active involvement of higher education institutions—such as the Democritus University of Thrace—is also of strategic importance. These institutions can act as hubs for mobilizing the student population and aligning academic resources with local community needs. As indicated by the composition of the present study's sample, youth engagement can serve as a powerful catalyst for the sustainable growth of the volunteering sector.

With regard to future research directions, it is recommended that studies be conducted with larger and more representative samples encompassing diverse regions of Greece. Comparative analyses across areas with varying socio-economic conditions could shed light on regional differences in volunteer behavior and structural support mechanisms. Furthermore, the adoption of mixed methodological approaches—combining quantitative and qualitative techniques—would enhance the understanding of both motivations and barriers to participation, offering a more nuanced perspective on the dynamics of volunteerism.

Particular emphasis should also be placed on the continued use of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) in future research phases. This theoretical model can provide deeper insights into the relationships between intention, attitude, and actual voluntary behavior. More focused techniques for motivating and keeping volunteers might be developed depending on a deeper knowledge of the psychological elements affecting participation choices.

Institutional Framework and Policy Directions

The advancement of sports volunteering must be contextualized within broader institutional and political frameworks at both national and European levels. The findings of this study—which point to the need for institutional support and structured reinforcement of voluntary action—are directly aligned with current political priorities.

At the European level, the European Solidarity Corps represents a key EU initiative aimed at promoting volunteering, particularly among youth, in fields such as social cohesion, solidarity, and local development. This program encourages participation in voluntary service, fosters intercultural exchange, and provides official recognition of volunteer experiences, thereby establishing volunteering as a valuable social and professional asset.

In parallel, the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly acknowledges volunteering as a critical means of achieving collective and sustainable goals. Notably:

- Goal 11 (*Sustainable Cities and Communities*) advocates for social inclusion, cultural participation, and access to public spaces—areas where sports volunteering can play a pivotal role.
- Goal 17 (*Partnerships for the Goals*) highlights the necessity of strategic collaborations among stakeholders, institutions, and organizations—an imperative also reflected in the findings of this study as crucial for the long-term sustainability of volunteering initiatives.

At the national level, while a comprehensive National Strategy for Volunteering has yet to be established, recent institutional efforts by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, in collaboration with the National Registry of NGOs, aim to document, regulate, and support organized volunteer efforts. In addition, the Ministry of Education has incorporated volunteering into school activities and lifelong learning programs, while the General Secretariat for Sports has embedded volunteering into its National Action Plans for Mass Sports.

Taken together, these initiatives indicate that establishing an effective and sustainable framework for sports volunteering requires the alignment of local initiatives with both national and supranational strategies. This study highlights the importance of a multi-level policy

approach—one that incorporates citizens' experiences, responds to community needs, and supports broader goals of social empowerment through volunteerism.

Conclusions

This study has underscored the complex and multidimensional nature of volunteering in the field of sports, revealing the social, ethical, and professional parameters that influence civic engagement. In the specific context of the Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace—a region marked by distinct socio-economic and geographical characteristics—sports volunteering appears to address institutional gaps, activate social networks, and function as a vehicle for empowering local communities.

The findings indicate that citizen engagement is primarily driven by internal motivations, with the most prominent dimensions being values, personal development (enhancement), and the desire to contribute to society. These results align with existing international literature, which supports the view that sports volunteering serves as a catalyst for strengthening social cohesion, particularly when accompanied by ethical commitment and humanitarian values.

The high reliability of the measurement instrument (overall Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.966$) confirms the internal consistency and robustness of the data, reinforcing the study's scientific validity and enhancing the credibility of its findings. Although the "Career" subscale recorded a comparatively lower reliability coefficient ($\alpha = 0.613$), this variation is likely reflective of differing personal aspirations and age-related expectations among participants—underscoring the need for a nuanced, stratified understanding of volunteer profiles.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes how urgently institutional systems to assist sportsmen in volunteering ought to be established. Key obstacles to ongoing involvement were found to include the lack of official acknowledgment for volunteer effort, inadequate incentives, and unorganized systems. On the other hand, the existence of educational initiatives, continuous learning, and the deliberate volunteer deployment greatly improve long-term involvement and sustainability.

Especially at the local level, this research confirms that volunteering should not be seen as a transient or supplemental activity but rather as a fundamental element of the social and athletic scene. By means of the integration of volunteering into local government and educational initiatives, thereby promoting a culture of participation and social responsibility will help to empower society and foster democratic growth.

Beyond just theoretical ramifications, this study provides local government agencies, sports groups, and legislators useful insights and effective advice. Sports volunteering has the potential to be a lever for growth, social solidarity, and the strengthening of local democracy if human

resources are organized under a clear institutional framework and supported by open government.

Research Limitations

Although this research provides insightful analysis of people's views and motives for sports volunteering, several limits have to be acknowledged as they might affect the generalizability of the results. First of all, even if the ultimate sample size was sufficient for performing simple statistical analysis, it does not allow strong generalizations to the larger population of the Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace.

Furthermore, depending so much on self-reported surveys raises the possibility of socially desired answers, which might compromise the objectivity and validity of the data. Furthermore, the lack of qualitative approaches such as in-depth interviews or focus groups restricted the ability of the research to investigate the deeper meanings, experiences, and contextual elements related with volunteering activities.

The sample composition which mostly included people already engaged in voluntary work also gives great weight. This emphasis could have unintentionally left out the points of view of those who have chosen not to volunteer, a group whose points of view might have provided insightful analysis of obstacles or discouragement to involvement. Notwithstanding these constraints, the research offers a consistent and methodologically sound analysis of sports volunteering, therefore offering significant direction for policy development and the encouragement of voluntary participation at both local and regional levels.

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