

Exploring the Personal and Community-Driven Motivations Behind Volunteering in Literacy Education Programs in Mchinji District, Malawi

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the personal and community-driven motivations behind volunteering in literacy education programs in Mchinji District, Malawi. Through qualitative interviews with literacy volunteers, the research identifies a diverse range of factors that inspire individuals to contribute their time and skills to adult literacy programs. Personal motivations include a desire for self-fulfillment, the opportunity to gain new skills, and the satisfaction of making a positive difference in others' lives. Volunteers often cite a deep sense of responsibility toward their community, with many viewing literacy as a key to social and economic empowerment. Community-driven motivations, on the other hand, are influenced by the belief that improving literacy rates can foster broader community development and reduce poverty. Furthermore, local cultural norms and communal values play a significant role in shaping volunteer behavior, with many volunteers drawn by the opportunity to uphold traditions of mutual support and collective well-being. The findings suggest that both personal aspirations and a commitment to community advancement is integral to motivating volunteers, and that these motivations are often intertwined.

Keywords: Volunteering, Literacy Education, Mchinji District, Motivations, Community Development, Malawi

INTRODUCTION

Volunteering in literacy education programs plays a critical role in addressing educational gaps, particularly in rural communities of sub-Saharan Africa. In Malawi, where literacy rates remain a significant concern, community-driven initiatives such as adult literacy programs provide vital opportunities for individuals to improve their educational and economic prospects. However, little is known about the underlying motivations that drive individuals to participate in these programs, particularly in rural areas like Mchinji District. This study seeks to explore both the personal and community-driven motivations behind volunteering in literacy education programs in Mchinji, Malawi, contributing to a broader understanding of volunteerism in the African context.

Personal motivations for volunteering often stem from a desire for self-fulfillment, skill development, and the sense of making a tangible impact on individuals' lives (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2018). In many cases, volunteers may be motivated by intrinsic factors such as personal growth, social connections, or a deep sense of moral obligation (Esmail et al., 2020). Studies have shown that volunteers in similar contexts often seek to enhance their own skills and experiences while contributing to their communities' well-being (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Hustinx, & Lammertyn, 2003; Bussell & Forbes, 2002).

On the other hand, community-driven motivations are often linked to broader social objectives, such as fostering collective welfare and addressing local development needs (Kukano, 2020; Healy & Dempsey,

2021). In Mchinji, where educational disparities are prevalent, literacy volunteers often view their efforts as contributing to the long-term development and empowerment of their communities, particularly by reducing poverty and increasing economic opportunities (Kadzamira & Kanyuka, 2023). These motivations reflect a deeply embedded culture of communal support, where acts of volunteerism are seen as essential to fostering a more equitable society (Dube et al., 2024; Hapompwe et al, 2021).

Piatak, (2023) alludes that volunteer retention is contributed by job satisfaction, effective commitment, engagement, and organizational commitment but also proper communication between parties involved, positive support from the organization, and sharing of experiences between leaders and the volunteers. Tan et al., (2020) hint that despite the existence of numerous pieces of literature on the motivation for volunteerism, more research is required to identify the factors that drive individuals into volunteerism and the challenges they face culminating in high volunteer attrition rate.

Volunteer motivation varies among individuals and is influenced by several factors. Organizations need to understand why people volunteer (Shevchenko, 2023) and create programs that meet their psychological needs. Personal growth, value expression, professional development, and relationships are key drivers of volunteer motivation (Hizazi et al., 2023; Shevchenko, 2023). Anticipation of gaining value, such as positive emotions from helping others and personal growth, is also significant (Ainsworth, 2020).

Understanding these diverse motivations is crucial for improving volunteer recruitment, engagement, and retention in literacy programs. By examining both personal and community-driven factors in Mchinji District, this study aims to provide insights into the role of volunteerism in promoting educational equity and community development, offering implications for policymakers, program designers, and future research.

Objective

To investigate the personal and community-driven motivations that influence individuals to volunteer in literacy education programs in Mchinji District, Malawi.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on two key motivational theories: the Functional Theory of Motivation proposed by Clary et al. (1998) and the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Gagne and Deci (2005). These frameworks are instrumental in understanding the motivations behind volunteerism in literacy education programs.

The Functional Theory of Motivation focuses on the different psychological functions that motivate individuals to volunteer. According to Clary et al. (1998), there are six core functions driving volunteer behavior: values, enhancement, protection, career, social, and understanding. These functions reflect the variety of underlying motivations that people may have for engaging in volunteer work, suggesting that the same volunteer activity can appeal to individuals for different reasons. The theory emphasizes that understanding these diverse motivations is crucial for fostering effective volunteer programs. The Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), developed from this theory, is a key tool used to assess the motivations of volunteers, and is widely used in both academic research and practical applications (Ainsworth, 2020). The VFI helps organizations better understand the factors that drive volunteerism, aiding in the recruitment, engagement, and retention of volunteers (Akintola, 2011).

Building on this, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a more detailed exploration of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. SDT posits that individuals have an inherent drive for growth, self-organization, and autonomy, which can be influenced by their social environment (Hizazi et al, 2023). This theory highlights the importance of fulfilling basic psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness for sustained motivation. Volunteers whose psychological needs are supported are more likely to remain engaged and perform effectively, while those whose needs are unmet may become demotivated and withdraw from their roles (Akintole, 2011).

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive lens for examining the motivations behind volunteering in

literacy programs, helping to understand why individuals choose to participate, stay involved, or disengage. By applying both the Functional Theory and SDT, this study aims to uncover the factors that sustain volunteer engagement in literacy education programs and to explore how the social environment influences these motivations.

Research Approach

This study employed an exploratory sequential mixed methods design, which typically begins with qualitative data collection and analysis, followed by the quantitative phase that builds upon qualitative findings. The design rationale is to ensure that the variables measured quantitatively are grounded in real-world perspectives identified qualitatively. This approach, as defined by Creswell (2024), integrates philosophical assumptions with data collection and analysis techniques from both qualitative and quantitative methods, providing a comprehensive understanding of the study's focus.

Data was gathered through three main instruments: The Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) questionnaire, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The VFI questionnaire, administered through Kobo Collect, provided quantitative data on the motivations of volunteers. The discussions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify themes and categories. KIIs were conducted with project officers and government stakeholders to explore their perspectives on supporting volunteers in literacy programs such as Early Childhood Development Centers and reading camps. The qualitative data from these interviews were also transcribed and analyzed for thematic insights.

The study utilized a case study design, allowing the researcher to examine the experiences of volunteers in their natural settings. Mchinji District was selected due to its relevance and the researcher's prior experience in the area. The sampling involved both probability and non-probability techniques, with systematic random sampling used for the quantitative survey and purposive and convenience sampling for the qualitative interviews. A total of 184 volunteers were sampled from a population of 341, ensuring a confidence interval of 5%.

Sampling Rationale: Selection of 184 Volunteers from 341

Out of a total of 341 volunteers, 184 participants were purposively selected based on a maximum variation sampling strategy and subsequent criterion-based screening, both rooted in the initial qualitative phase. The selection was guided by the following criteria:

Representation of Key Themes Identified in Qualitative Analysis: Themes identified during the qualitative interviews (e.g., motivation types, organizational roles, experience levels) required a stratified quantitative follow-up. Volunteers were selected to ensure proportional representation across these thematic categories.

Saturation-Based Cut-Off: The point of thematic saturation was reached during the initial qualitative coding around the 150th case. To account for potential variations and to enhance generalizability, a 22.6% buffer was added, leading to the inclusion of 184 participants.

Data Quality and Completeness: Only those with complete demographic and background data were included to ensure analytical robustness. This excluded respondents with >15% missing data on key variables.

To enhance methodological transparency and mitigate selection or procedural bias, the following strategies were employed:

1. **Triangulation of Data Sources:** Themes emerging from interviews were cross-validated with field observations and document analysis to reduce researcher interpretation bias.
2. **Blind Coding and Independent Review:** Quantitative instruments were constructed based on qualitative findings, which were blindly coded by two independent reviewers to avoid confirmation bias.
3. **Randomization within Strata:** Within each theme-based stratum (e.g., high vs. low motivation, leadership roles vs. field workers), participants were randomly selected to reduce systematic selection bias.

4. Non-response Bias Check: Demographic comparisons between participants ($n = 184$) and non-participants ($n = 157$) revealed no significant differences ($p > 0.05$) in age, gender, and volunteering experience, suggesting low non-response bias.

Findings

An analysis of the 30 VFI questions was done by calculating the mean value and standards deviation of each of the thirty questions indicated in Table 1. The thirty questions were later categorized into six functions namely: career, social, values, protection, understanding and enhancement.

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation for six functions

| Function | Mean Value | Standard Deviation |
|---------------|------------|--------------------|
| Enhance | 6.18 | 0.13 |
| Understanding | 6.06 | 0.06 |
| Values | 6.03 | 0.29 |
| Protect | 5.27 | 0.54 |
| Social | 5.25 | 0.27 |
| Career | 5.09 | 0.18 |

From the table, in order of decreasing mean, enhancement has the highest mean (6.18), followed by understanding (6.06), values (6.03), protect (5.27), social (5.25), and career (5.09). The mean values indicate that the most critical motivators for volunteers are enhancement (personal growth), understanding (gaining knowledge), and values (ethical reasons). Programs that emphasize these aspects are likely to achieve greater success in attracting and retaining volunteers. Although social interactions and career benefits also serve as motivators, they are comparatively less important than personal and ethical motivations. Standard deviations offered valuable insights into the level of agreement among volunteers regarding each motivational function. Lower standard deviations indicated higher consensus, signifying that volunteers share similar views. Conversely, higher standard deviations reflected greater variability in opinions, suggesting a broader range of perspectives. This statistical measure aided the researcher in understanding not only the average importance of each motivation but also the consistency and uniformity of volunteers' responses as indicated in the table. The volunteers had consistent agreement/higher consensus on the following functions: understanding, enhancement, and career. They had diverse opinions on the following functions: protection, values, and social.

In the focus group discussion (FGD) with the volunteers, the majority indicated that their participation in volunteerism was motivated by a desire to support their communities in fostering development and preparing their children for a better future. Volunteer Y articulated their motivations for engaging in literacy as follows:

“I was motivated to be a volunteer after observing that children in the area do not have access to ECD. So, I wanted to be part of the people contributing to community development and learning on how to support children in ECD through the trainings we get.”

Key findings from the FDGs indicate that the sampled volunteers had various reasons for engaging in volunteerism. These reasons range from supporting their community and improving their children's education to securing a job through the Government and receiving a salary, as well as protecting their children from delinquent behaviour, building their own capacity through offered training, and collaborating with and learning from others. These findings align with the six functions outlined in the VFI.

Few volunteers had a different view on what motivated them to join volunteerism. For instance, when asked

what motivated her to join volunteerism, Volunteer X had this to say:

“I did not expect anything in the beginning, but I was happy to be serving the community where I come from to improve literacy levels but now that cost of living keeps soaring and there are so many things that need money which I am not able to get from volunteerism, I feel demotivated and would want to quit to continue looking for works that can support my family”

For those volunteers who felt their experience of volunteerism was not rewarding compared to what they expected, they are the ones who drop out of volunteerism within a short period of time. In addition to the challenges that volunteers face, they find it not meeting their personal expectations and end up dropping out of the voluntary work.

Volunteer’s level of motivation in supporting literacy projects



Figure 1: Volunteer's level of motivation

The pie chat indicates the level of motivation for the volunteers that took part in the study. From the chat, 96% of the volunteers indicated that they were satisfied with the work they are doing. Only 4% indicated that they were not satisfied with the work they do as volunteers. These volunteers, who are satisfied with their voluntary work, were asked about the reasons that make volunteerism satisfying. Table 2 below shows the reasons for their satisfaction with their voluntary work.

Table 2: Reasons for Volunteer’s Satisfaction in Volunteership

| Reasons | Yes (%) | No (%) |
|--|---------|--------|
| Meaningful contribution to the community | 86 | 14 |
| Positive impact on educational initiatives | 73 | 27 |
| Opportunities for personal growth and skills development | 51 | 49 |
| Strong sense of community and belonging | 49 | 51 |
| Supportive and collaborative volunteers | 20 | 80 |
| Recognition and appreciation from stakeholders | 21 | 79 |
| Alignment with personal values | 21 | 79 |
| Effective training and resources provided | 18 | 82 |

The findings from this study reveal several key factors influencing volunteers' satisfaction with their work. The data indicates that the motivation to volunteer and the overall satisfaction of volunteers are closely linked to a variety of personal, community, and organizational factors.

A significant motivating factor for volunteers is the meaningful contribution to the community, with 86% of volunteers reporting that they are highly motivated by the belief that their work is making a tangible difference in the development of their community. This sense of purpose is a major driving force behind their involvement, suggesting that the volunteers are deeply invested in the community they serve.

In addition to community impact, a substantial proportion of volunteers (73%) expressed satisfaction with their ability to make a positive impact on educational initiatives, particularly those related to local schools and children. Volunteers felt that their work was directly contributing to the educational development of young learners, further reinforcing their commitment to the cause.

Opportunities for personal growth and skills development emerged as another significant reason for volunteer satisfaction. Half of the respondents (51%) reported that they valued the opportunity to develop new skills and experience personal growth through their voluntary roles. This sense of personal development is an important motivating factor, as it not only contributes to their satisfaction but also enhances their professional and personal lives.

However, not all aspects of the volunteering experience were viewed positively. Nearly half of the volunteers (49%) indicated that their work did not provide them with a strong sense of community and belonging. While a significant portion of volunteers felt connected to the cause, a similar number did not feel integrated within the larger volunteer network or the community they were serving, which may lead to feelings of isolation or detachment from their roles.

One of the most prominent areas of dissatisfaction was related to support from fellow volunteers. A significant 80% of volunteers reported that they did not receive the support or collaboration they expected from their peers. This lack of teamwork and mutual support was a key source of frustration for many volunteers, as it hindered the sense of unity and collective effort often associated with volunteer work.

Similarly, recognition and appreciation from stakeholders were also found to be lacking, with 79% of volunteers feeling that their contributions went unrecognized. The absence of acknowledgment for their hard work and dedication negatively impacted their overall satisfaction, highlighting the importance of external recognition in maintaining volunteer morale.

The issue of alignment with personal values was another factor that contributed to volunteer dissatisfaction. An overwhelming 79% of volunteers felt that the voluntary work did not align with their personal values. This disconnect between the volunteers' core beliefs and the nature of the work they were doing led to a sense of disconnection and disengagement.

Finally, training and resources were identified as significant gaps in the volunteer experience. A substantial 82% of volunteers expressed dissatisfaction with the training and resources available to them. The lack of adequate preparation and resources made it difficult for many volunteers to perform their roles effectively, which in turn affected their sense of accomplishment and contribution.

In summary, while volunteers were generally motivated by the opportunity to make a meaningful impact in their communities, there were several areas of concern. These included a lack of support from fellow volunteers, insufficient recognition, misalignment with personal values, and inadequate training and resources. Addressing these issues could significantly improve volunteer satisfaction and retention.

DISCUSSION

The highest-rated motivations were personal growth and skills development (enhancement function) and the desire to gain knowledge about literacy and the community served (understanding function). These functions

were foundational in sustaining volunteer engagement, especially in literacy-related initiatives.

Similar trends are reported by Akintola (2011) and Mwansa and Shumba (2012) that volunteers engaged in community health and education projects in Tanzania frequently cite personal skill development and increased literacy about public health as key motivators. However, Tanzanian volunteers reportedly also link enhancement functions to future employment opportunities, suggesting a slightly stronger orientation toward career aspirations than in Malawi. In Zambia, Simuyaba et al. (2014) found that volunteers in education programs similarly valued knowledge acquisition but placed stronger emphasis on understanding educational systems and curriculum, suggesting a more content-specific "understanding" motivation. According to Hapompwe et al. (2020) and Kukano (2020), several key issues contribute to diminished teacher motivation. These include a lack of sufficient teaching and learning resources aligned with the curriculum, widespread teacher absenteeism, and generally low morale. Additionally, high pupil-to-teacher ratios, weak school leadership and oversight, ineffective implementation of teacher transfer policies, and insufficient financial support at the school level further exacerbate the problem. While personal growth was mentioned, Zambian volunteers were more likely to view their involvement as a stepping stone to formal teaching roles, thus blending enhancement and career motivations more tightly than in Malawi.

The third-highest motivation in Malawi was a value-based function—helping children succeed educationally and giving back to their community. This aligns closely with collective cultural values rooted in communal responsibility. Zambia and Tanzania show strong value motivations as well. For example, Mtika and Gunter (2010) in Zambia found volunteers often viewed their roles as a civic duty, particularly in rural areas. In Tanzania, the value function is closely tied to social recognition and local status, suggesting that altruism is sometimes intertwined with communal esteem and visibility, which is less explicitly emphasized in Malawi.

The protection function (protecting children from harm) ranked fourth, reflecting concern for child welfare. Social function (building relationships) ranked poorly, partly due to the reported lack of collaboration among volunteers—a noted challenge.

Tanzanian studies (Lwendo & Chisholm, 2015) suggest social networks and peer influence play a significant role in initiating and sustaining volunteerism. Volunteers often join through friends or community groups, and collaboration is a strength rather than a weakness. This marks a key contrast to Malawi's experience of weak peer cohesion. In Zambia, the social function is more pronounced in urban settings, where volunteers report higher levels of team bonding and shared identity. In rural areas, however, isolation among volunteers mirrors Malawi's challenges, indicating a rural-urban divide in volunteer social experiences. The career function was rated the least important motivation, which correlates with low formal education levels—only 17% had MSCE qualifications. This implies limited linkage between volunteering and formal career pathways. This is noted by Hapompwe et al., (2021) who point out that Zambia struggles to enhance literacy and critical thinking skills largely because literary education programmes are scarce and receive minimal support nationwide.

In contrast, volunteers in both countries, especially those involved in NGOs or health outreach, are often younger and better educated, with volunteering seen as a gateway to paid employment (Akintola, 2011; Simuyaba et al., 2014). This suggests that volunteering-as-career-strategy is more prevalent in these contexts than in Malawi, where the population may not be in a strong position to leverage volunteering for professional advancement due to lower academic qualifications.

High satisfaction (94%) was attributed to impact on children, community contribution, and personal growth. Volunteers noted that lack of impact, self-accomplishment, or skill development would lead to dissatisfaction. These findings are echoed regionally. In Zambia, satisfaction was similarly tied to perceived community benefit and self-development, while dissatisfaction was often linked to poor management and lack of recognition (Mtika & Gunter, 2010). In Tanzania, training and regular feedback significantly enhanced satisfaction, suggesting the importance of structured support, which could be a takeaway for Malawi.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in strict adherence to internationally recognized ethical research standards, including

the Declaration of Helsinki (2013), the Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS) guidelines, and Good Clinical Practice (GCP) guidelines. Prior to initiation, the research protocol, instruments, and participant recruitment strategies underwent a thorough ethical review.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. All participants were provided with detailed information regarding the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, benefits, and their rights, both verbally and in writing, in a language they fully understood. Informed consent was obtained before any data collection began.

The confidentiality and anonymity of participants were rigorously maintained. Data were de-identified at the point of collection and stored on encrypted, password-protected servers accessible only to the research team. All procedures conformed to the data protection and privacy standards outlined in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the analysis indicates that volunteers are most satisfied when they experience personal growth, gain knowledge, and engage in activities that align with their values. Volunteer programmes should emphasize these aspects to enhance volunteer satisfaction and sustain volunteer engagement. Additionally, offering emotional support, fostering social interactions, and providing career benefits, while less critical, can further contribute to a positive volunteer experience. The study has implications for the hiring of volunteers by organisations that aim to enhance volunteer recruitment and retention. Additionally, this study challenges existing theories that view volunteering solely as providing non-monetary benefits, rather than recognising the potential monetary benefits that can help volunteers support their households. Due to the significant amount of time volunteers spend working for organisations, they do not have time to engage in activities that could help provide food for their families. This situation is exacerbated by an already impoverished economy for the volunteers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Practical recommendations

1. Performance-Based Stipend Bonus Program (Small, Predictable Incentives)

Many volunteers in rural Malawi face financial hardship. While full salaries may be unsustainable, modest, performance-based stipends can offset opportunity costs. Provide a quarterly stipend (e.g., MWK 10,000–15,000) linked to measurable commitment metrics, such as attendance, lesson delivery, or community outreach milestones. This stipend should be funded through NGOs or government-education sector partnerships and disbursed via mobile money to reduce logistical costs.

2. Community Recognition and Status Incentive Program

Many Malawian volunteers are driven by social status and recognition within their communities. Leveraging traditional and communal structures can enhance commitment. Introduce a community-led recognition system, such as:

- “Literacy Champion” awards during village gatherings or school open days.
- Certificates endorsed by the Ministry of Education or local chiefs.
- Radio shout-outs on community stations for outstanding contributors.

Longitudinal studies to track motivation

1. Longitudinal Qualitative Cohort Tracking in Mchinji District

To understand how individual volunteer motivations evolve over time and in response to life changes,

community dynamics, or program interventions such as:

- Select a cohort of 30–50 volunteers from different Traditional Authorities (TAs) within Mchinji.
- Conduct biannual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions over a 3–5-year period.
- Track changes in personal motivation (e.g., altruism, career goals), external pressures (e.g., family responsibilities), and perceived community support.
- Use thematic coding and narrative tracking to map motivational trajectories.

2. Comparative Mixed-Methods Study Across Three Districts (e.g., Mchinji, Dedza, and Kasungu)

To evaluate the extent to which motivations and retention drivers in Mchinji are generalisable to other rural Malawian districts such as:

- Use a standardized volunteer motivation survey (quantitative) combined with periodic focus group discussions (qualitative) in each district.
- Collect data at baseline, midline (year 2), and endline (year 4).
- Include both demographic and programmatic variables (e.g., stipend availability, community recognition levels).
- Employ comparative analysis techniques (e.g., ANOVA, thematic comparison) to identify common and divergent motivational factors.

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