



Online Volunteerism during COVID– 19 Pandemic in India

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 virus posed to the whole world as a threat to life. International organizations like WHO also called it a shadow pandemic as during this period there was a rise in violence, abuse, and insecurities among many socio-economic groups. Amid all these challenges, volunteers, frontline workers, social workers, health functionaries, doctors, and counselors continued to serve the people in the situation of crisis. The present paper is an attempt to explore the practices and challenges of Telle-counsellors who were associated with telle services (special helpline for Covid- 19) set-up exclusively to cater to the migrant population, women, children, etc to address problems that occurred during Covid- 19 pandemic and worked as volunteer or was given the task to serve at helpline by their respective social organization and dealt with multiple issues of the clients affected by Covid- 19. The data in the present study was collected using a mixed method approach (sequential explanatory design) through volunteers who were giving their time in coordinating welfare activities during the time of pandemic through online connections. To reach out to these volunteers, snowball sampling was used as many organizations were not willing to participate in the study due to confidential issues. The data was collected by reaching out to 62 online volunteers. Further, the researcher reached out to five volunteers who were willing to share their extensive experience of online counseling. Both quantitative data and qualitative data were analyzed to conclude. The study shows that India has contributed substantially to the welfare of its people through many volunteer organizations and individual volunteers but the same is not appropriately supported in the world of digitalization therefore the national level policy is required to tap this human resource to utilize during the time of crisis, especially through online and remote outreach.

Keywords: Online volunteerism, COVID-19, Telle – counseling

The Global goals which emerged as a result of deliberation by the world leaders during the United Nations sustainable development summit in September 2015 strive to end poverty, fight for social justice and inequality and address climatic challenges through people partnership, prosperity, peace, and progress. The 2030 agenda explicitly recognizes volunteer groups as the most important stakeholders to achieve the 17 SDGs. All the goals require strong civic engagement and volunteerism to help to expand and mobilize resources to pedal and gainfully engage people in participatory

planning and effective implementation of SDGs (UNV report, 2022).

Volunteerism is an age-old concept but with a very strong solution-oriented mechanism to heal and stitch the social fabric of any society. The contemporary world is facing several uncertainties which may pose threats to humankind and nature too. Human beings, if sensitized can realize their

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responsibilities and can volunteer their service to transform the world.

Conceptualizing Volunteerism

Volunteerism has been defined as a very complex phenomenon or as an act it is a complex situation as there cannot be one definition of volunteerism as it has a vast list of activities and these activities cannot be explained through a single theory. A multi-dimensional theory can be a conceptual framework of volunteering that includes defining volunteerism through layers of complexity which are defined based on the nature of the problem which signifies either a single issue or multi-disciplinary or with multi-dimensions. While defining volunteerism the main theoretical building blocks would be the specific building block which is defining what volunteering is not and what volunteering is and its social construct. For example, in India volunteers are called social workers whereas in Russia there is no specific word used to denote volunteer. Volunteerism should also be understood in the backdrop of subject areas or discipline, different perspectives and disciplines attribute different meanings. Volunteerism is mostly a matter of public perception (Hustinx *et al.* 2010).

In India even though Charity and renunciation were placed on a high pedestal in Indian culture, no cadre of workers mainly committed to social service was created till Swami Vivekanand emerged on the Indian scene. He could see that spiritual development can be brought about only after the basic requirements for human existence are adequately met. Mahatma Gandhi during the freedom struggle was instrumental to a large extent in creating greater awareness about the role of voluntary or selfless service he laid great emphasis on the role of a voluntary social worker in nation-building. Through his appeal, many idealist youths came forward and took up one or more items of the constructive work program. Gandhi's leadership and teachings encouraged voluntarism and voluntary social service in our country and are now recognized as a vital instrument for generating a moral climate and promoting the overall well-being of the community.

In India, volunteerism has a broad spectrum starting from schools and colleges and civil society organizations working in multidisciplinary fields.

In the world out of a hundred and nine million full-time volunteer workforce, almost 70% of work is attributed to informal engagement between people. Engaging youth to meet India's developmental challenges through volunteerism is an achievable goal, considering the concept has been part of the culture and the value system (India CSR, 2020).

The history of volunteerism has given birth to many prominent humanitarian organizations during the time of world wars. It continued to emerge in different forms in different cultures in the history of mankind.

The recent pandemic also posed a humanitarian crisis worldwide and people from all walks of life tried to contribute by giving their services through different mediums. Due to the high risk of the contagion, guidelines to remain in isolation and within the confines of homes were enforced in almost all countries. The educational institutions were also given special guidelines to work on online mode. But many students were willing to volunteer through online services.

Online volunteering was a new way that emerged during the pandemic. Online volunteering allows different civil society organizations and people willing to volunteer to form virtual teams and address any societal issue or challenge a community is facing by using an electronic device like a mobile, computer, or laptop, etc. to address sustainable development challenges – anywhere in the world, from any device.

Online volunteering emerged in India more predominantly due to the pandemic. Virtual volunteering is not a regular phenomenon and therefore there are no specific rules. Whether it was effective or not is still not known. If we consider other areas of public dealing like public health, mental health, and other social services, online consultation and counseling were emerging at a fast pace.

The Pandemic also had significant consequences on the mental health of people. A study conducted

on university students on pre and post-pandemic psychodynamic counseling intervention shows that students seeking counseling both before and during the pandemic faced similar levels of psychological distress and online counseling was as effective as face-to-face counseling, especially during an intervention in addressing psychological distress.

Online volunteerism

Today online volunteering is an emerging concept and is given importance by the United Nations Volunteers. The use of digital media has increased manifold but using information technology for volunteer services is still not organized well. The use of mobile phones since the year 2017 worldwide has increased and its peak use was witnessed by the world during the time of the pandemic. The impact of the pandemic was seen in the Global digital divide but the usage of mobiles and smartphones also increased manifold. As per the PWC report, the internet data was used not only for entertainment, and education but many world governments used the data to implement socio-economic and welfare policies to support people at the grass-root level and civil society organizations through the crisis. Internet access was vital for billions around the world in helping them navigate the impact of the pandemic (Shah, N. 2010).

The COVID- 19 pandemic impacted lives psychologically which can also be understood in the context of the Nocebo phenomena. It's a phenomenon where a traumatic event attached to any situation leads to a pessimistic outcome. The Wuhan virus spread came with sudden lockdowns and closures leaving many jobless and insecure. The media news as well as the circulation of horrifying scenes which consisted of panic-creating misinformation and contradictory statements from even the most relied news agencies due to the virus's unpredictable nature had a demonstrable impact in the form of the Nocebo phenomena. Different conspiracy theories made the situation more challenging for people to take their call on many areas related to health, hygiene, and even socializing (Amanzio M *et al.* 2020).

The Pandemic also had significant consequences on mental health. A study conducted on a university student on pre and post-pandemic and psychodynamic counseling interventions show that students seeking counseling had a similar level of psychological distress and online counseling was as effective as face-to-face counseling interventions in addressing psychological distress. Volunteerism is a powerful force and an important part of the social fabric of society. Globally, it remains an important vehicle for shaping and advancing the social fabric of any society. Its potential to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development that delivers to all is, however, yet to be realized.

As countries and regions grapple with enormous challenges, one thing is clear: no single stakeholder, entity, or sector can address these challenges alone. Now more than ever, partnerships are vitally important.

The fourth State of the World's Volunteerism Report (SWVR) report, titled *Building Equal and Inclusive Societies*, shows that how volunteers and state authorities interact, collaborate and partner is vital for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals. With the emerging challenges of the contemporary century with uncertainties like pandemics, climate-based wars, and emergencies, citizen volunteerism could play a role in building a better future where no one is behind. This new social contract can have the power to build inclusive societies by way of consensus on the human rights and obligations, citizenry roles, and opportunities of and by different stakeholders in society.

Online volunteerism is very important to be understood to be more effective in the digital age and especially during times of crisis which can be threatening to human life. From this perspective of volunteerism especially in a time of crisis which brought manifold uncertainties not only for the general population but also for the people who were willing to offer their service in terms of listening patiently, understanding the situation of the clients, and responding appropriately was the need of the hour. The pandemic has opened up the

scope of online services in the field of telemedicine, psychological counseling, aid distribution, etc.

Methodology

The present study also sets a precedent for encouraging online volunteering by exploring the practices and challenges of tele counseling services for the distribution of food, medicines, and other essential services during the time of the pandemic. However, volunteerism is an old concept and phenomenon, its new nuances can guide the future of online volunteering in developing countries like India. The data in the study was collected through volunteers who were giving their time in coordinating welfare activities during the time of the pandemic through online connections. To reach out to these volunteers, snowball sampling was used as many organizations were not willing to participate in the study due to confidential issues. The data was collected by reaching out to 62 online volunteers. Also, the researcher reached out to five volunteers who were willing to share their extensive experience of online counseling.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Age and Gender of Volunteers

The data shows that 44% of the volunteers were from the age group of 21 to 25 followed by 19% of volunteers who were above the age group of 40. Another 15% of the volunteers were from the age group of 26 to 30 years. Together 21% of the volunteers were from the age group of 31 to 40. Volunteerism in India is mostly unpaid activity contributing to the sustainable development of India. Youth are found to be engaged in voluntary acts across the country. According to a study conducted on the *Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan* volunteers, it was found that across all age groups the motivation to volunteer was to learn more and accumulate more knowledge and hone new skills which are five pivotal for livelihood opportunities. During the pandemic, women throughout the world serve the community at the grassroots level. In India, among the grassroots functionaries,

there were Asha workers, ANM and *Anganwadi* workers in the communities, and female doctors and nurses in the hospital who took the lead. The value of solidarity was predominant among women volunteers.

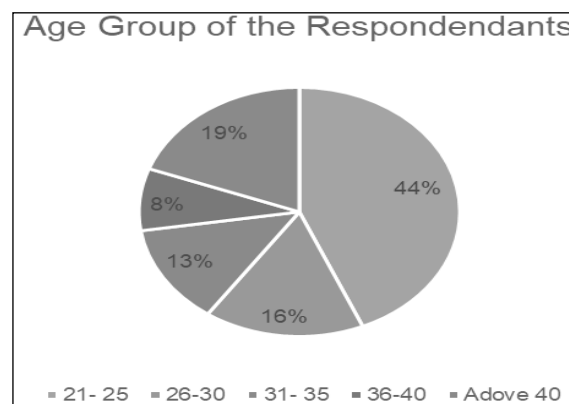


Fig. 1

Women also demonstrate strong ties with society and have the readiness to volunteer. Volunteer work among individual women in an organization differs depending on the extent of women's location, age, or experience. The online volunteering data outnumbered females who were double the number of males.

V-1: *I feel that I had always been a good listener and during the complete lockdown we were to be at home as all universities were closed. But through Telle- counseling I reached out to so many families to give COVID-19 mental health counseling. Through telle counseling, I did psychoeducation about the infection and was aware of precautions and addressed and stabilise mental health status.*

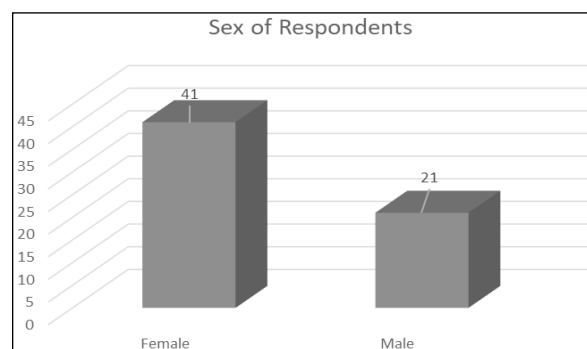


Fig. 2

The data shows that the number of female volunteers was double the number of male volunteers. This shows the space of female volunteers and their willingness to work due to restrictions outside.

Experience of Volunteers

Respondents were asked if they have worked before also as volunteers. The data shows that the highest percentage of volunteers already had more than 3 years of experience working in the field. It also shows the status of volunteerism in the country where prospective candidates are ready to volunteer due to the non-availability of jobs.

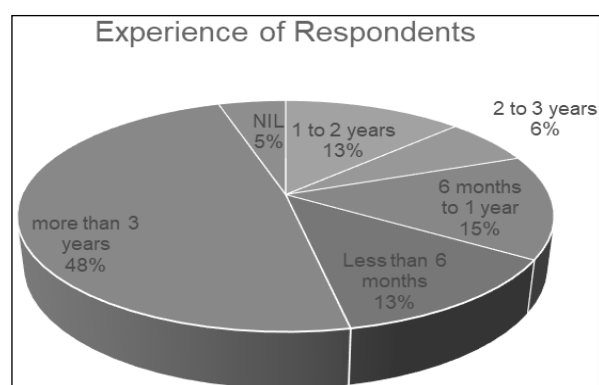


Fig. 3

The data shows that only 5 percent of the volunteers have no experience before joining as volunteers. It also shows that the reach of organizations towards volunteers is minimal as most organizations can get experienced volunteers for humanitarian work. This also indicates that organizations lack the definition and boundaries of what will constitute volunteerism and what will not. Also, the aspiration of adult volunteers is very different as primarily they give their services for a specific vocational purpose.

V:2 *I have taught about psychological help and counseling and I am also associated with many mental health organizations to train their therapists in counseling and crisis management. The times of COVID came as an unprecedented loss to not only lives and mental well-being. We have very less trained mental health volunteers and so I decided to help not just the mental professionals with guidance and destressing counseling but also, took up online counseling for many people with difficult*

situations who were facing violence and severe anxiety issues, and helplessness. My whole day would just go on my devices with the spirit of volunteerism and passion to help others.

V:3 *Counseling, coordination, and hearing the grievances were of course part of the online volunteer. I helped people with the availability of blood, platelets, oxygen, beds, and counseling.*

Funding in the development sector appears very low compared to its growing needs in living in an uncertain world. Volunteers provide their services in several fields to support many national and international organizations with their time, energy, and skills. However, turnover is posing challenges due to the lack of clear policies to retain them. The initial period for a volunteer to sustain his/her crucially to choose by them to retain the position and discharge services.

Also, it is important to understand that the aspiration of adult volunteers is very different from older volunteers. Older volunteers experience a greater increase in their life satisfaction whereas young volunteers come to give their services for a specific vocational purpose.

Volunteerism increases with a structured organization. If the organization's objectives are clear in the context of its policies and other essential variables to follow organized volunteerism, then the number of volunteers also increases (Dovido & Penner, 2001). It is a non-obligatory helping without any implicit or explicit personal application to help, the volunteers are ready to help clients/ people given by the organization.

Volunteerism during the Pandemic and the Skills set of volunteers

During the pandemic, the most vulnerable population of society was under life threat and exploitation. Mostly the migrant laborers were struck due to restrictions in the moments and closing of all workplaces. During this time crime against women and children also increased. The other communities which got affected were students and persons with special conditions like disabilities, cancer, life-threatening diseases, etc.

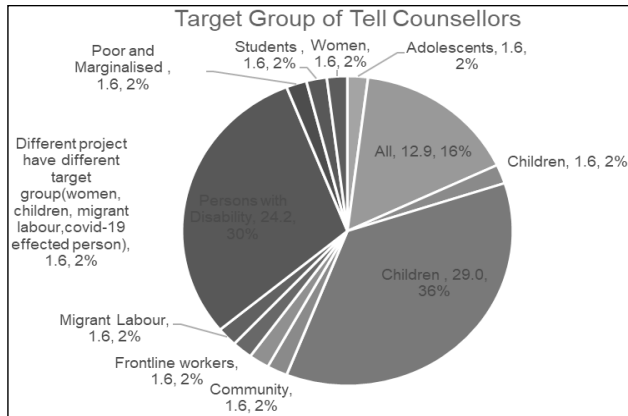


Fig. 4

The study shows that these volunteers were also trying to reach out and help these vulnerable groups especially children (36%) and persons with disabilities (30%). The other groups to which the volunteers reached out were poor and marginalized (2%), women, migrant laborers, and poor communities. All these vulnerable groups require skilled volunteers to address their specific needs.

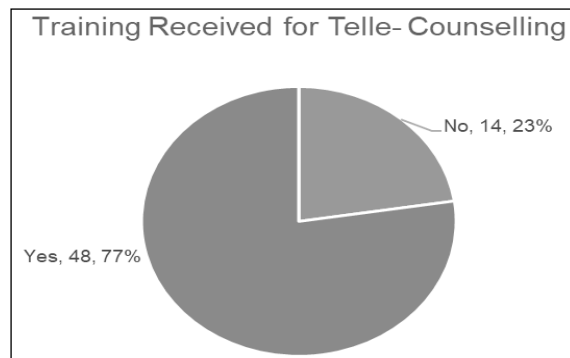


Fig. 5

The data shows that 23% of volunteers did not receive any training. However, it is important to mention that any volunteer who agrees to give his/her service should also possess minimum training to deal with people in vulnerable and stressful situations.

Maximum volunteers during online work were working with children and persons with disabilities and their families. Volunteers in NGOs and other Mental Health Services set up are increasingly

providing mental health and other support due to the increasing burden on social development Institutions. Children and persons with disabilities are also highly vulnerable due to their social status in society and especially during the time of complete lockdown due to COVID- 19 to help them required professionals or volunteers dealing with them to have in addition to intrinsic motivation, skills, and knowledge to cater to their needs. All the vulnerable groups which were most affected during the time of the pandemic were under severe stress whether it was students, temporary workers, migrant laborers, etc.

As a volunteer, there should be clarity on what kind of volunteer traits one possesses. The goodness of being a volunteer can also be seen as unscathed versus conceit activity. Both are at the opposite end where volunteer work is done selflessly on one end and all the other end it is done with the specific purpose to gain other fame, and recognition for some vested interest (Cialdini, R.B.S *et al.* 1999).

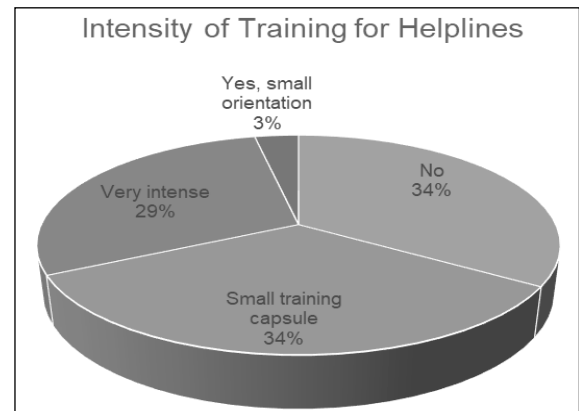


Fig. 6

For any online counseling, a briefing would be an essential part but the effectiveness of the counseling depends on the intensity of training given to volunteers. The perception of training as per the volunteers based on the work given to them shows that only 29% of the volunteers feel that they received intensive training to deal with the needs of the client. 37% of volunteers felt that a small orientation and a small training capsule were given before they started callings to the client. The

remaining 34% of volunteers reported that there was no intensive training given at all. According to Bussell & Forbes, 2003 non-student volunteers in the qualitative study noticed a lack of motivation and high turnover by student volunteers. Also for students to volunteer is an obligation. Therefore, mastery of skills such as connectedness, self-care, or self-growth may not have occurred. Therefore, the intensity of training, management, and continuous orientation of the ongoing volunteers is important. Comprehensive training can include areas like being effective volunteers, goal setting, serving customers, teamwork, effective communication, the relationship of volunteers and paid staff, and crisis and risk management extra (Volunteering Australia Inc. 2001).

During the pandemic due to the restrictions, online helplines emerged as the alternative source for volunteering. The people who were willing to volunteer had to work within the confines of personal spaces. Further at home also these volunteers were facing restrictions from the telle counseling service centers, for example, instructions were given on the time limit of the call as everything had to be managed at home but intensive training on how to deal with a highly emotionally charged client was not given. The telle calling list of clients was also long and was to be contacted and updated on the database daily. Agreeing to work voluntarily led to the agreement on the guidelines given to them.

Online Volunteerism during the crisis of contagion – other significant challenges and way forward

Working from home became the normal norm but it led to many problems faced by the volunteers. Many were facing inadequate private space and they were not satisfied with the facilities, however, more than 50% perceived their space as adequate for counseling services, but the data also shows that more than 50% of volunteers also felt burnout and fatigue during Telle counseling. A few volunteers (8%) were dealing with as many as 60 calls a day during the time of crisis which indicates that

organizations that were implementing their services were not equipped to attract volunteers in good numbers. Had there been strategies or long-term policies to attract volunteers, the situation would have been different.

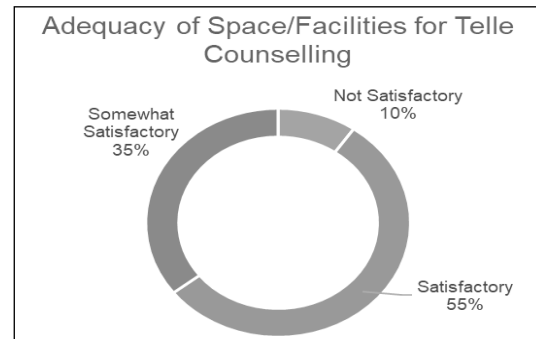


Fig. 7

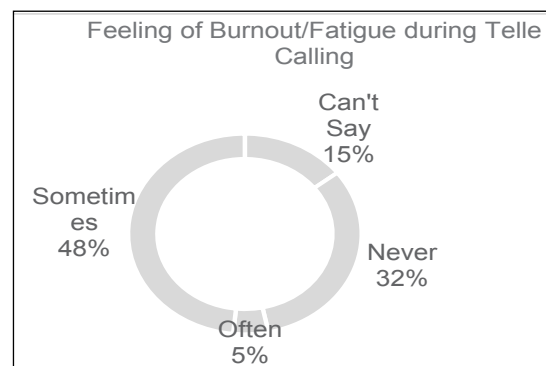


Fig. 8

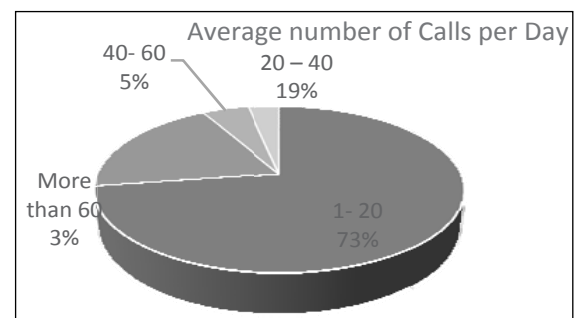


Fig. 9

As the telle counseling was taking place within the personal spaces/home it was important to understand that one of the most important motivations for volunteering is to improve the quality of life of both

service recipients and volunteers. However, critics claim that altruism is not the primary driving force, but above all, a person pursues his/her own goals, working for the benefit of others.

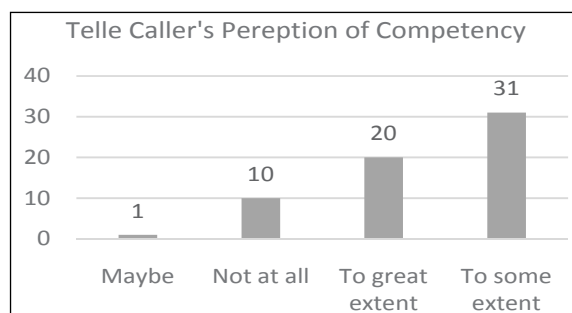


Fig. 10

V:4 Stress and burnout situations during online counseling were common in online counseling. And sometimes we can't relate victim and the problem situation, unable to understand what they want.

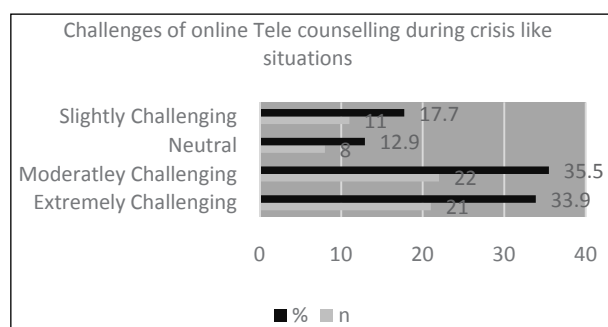


Fig. 11

To be an effective volunteer, certain core competencies are essential. The perception of volunteers working virtually during the pandemic shared that their competencies to deal with the clients were low, and as many as 20 volunteers felt that their competencies were good to a great extent to deal with odd situations like handling clients who lost their family members or dealing with parents of children with disabilities who were facing a tough time to get their children admitted to the school during the lockdown.

The COVID-19 crisis has shown that technology is expanding online volunteering opportunities to reach the most vulnerable populations. This

also indicates the possibility of flexible use of technological solutions. The 2020 Global Technical Meeting on Volunteering, hosted by the United Nations, was held online. It called for a concrete action plan for the integration of volunteering into the agenda for the period until 2030"

V:5 I think the human touch is important. However, online volunteering gave the opportunity even to people who were engaged in different jobs to participate. I feel helping others is a personal choice; it only comes to you if you feel it is your call and you feel happy about it. It is a sort of realization and youth can only feel it when they experience it.

Experiencing volunteerism is equally important in the process of forming empathetic attitudes. Lack of empathy results in conflicting minds with deep-rooted hatred in the form of cultural, racial, or economic differences. Empathy increases when an individual is made to put human relations first. People of different cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds when come together to serve develop empathy due to proximity (Penner, 2002).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that the sustainable goals that are before us for their accomplishment require meticulous planning and participatory planning. Every single goal is to be achieved by people for the people. Therefore, volunteerism can play a very important role in achieving sustainability as it will allow people to participate and, in that process, understand the core issues. Online volunteerism emerged more prominently during the time of COVID -19 and it taught many lessons to people who were ready to volunteer. The study shows that online volunteerism can not only open the door for people to understand grassroots realities but it can help them to explore more occupational skills which may help in striving in the uncertain world. Organizations and educational institutions should have well-thought programs and strategies to attract volunteers by introducing different forums where people can utilize their capabilities, capacities, and creativity to serve a better world tomorrow.

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