

National Volunteer Service: A Conceptual Model of Sustainable National Reform

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Abstract

Purpose. Bangladesh is currently experiencing a rejuvenation as a true democratic nation, following a nationwide movement where students played a pivotal role in liberating the country from a decade-long autocratic regime. Students are now actively participating in emergency public service management, including rescue and relief efforts, traffic control, public security, advocacy, and sanitation. This study proposes a conceptual model that could serve as an effective intervention to sustain the momentum of these national reforms, organizing student volunteer participation in a permanent and structured manner for national development and crisis management. Harnessing this substantial demographic

dividend and social capital, a National Volunteer Service (NVS) could be a strategic imperative for Bangladesh's development.

Design. The aim of this study is to explore the necessity of such a program or organization to propose guidelines for its implementation. The study is qualitative, drawing on interviews with key stakeholders who have field-level experience as volunteers and are involved in volunteer organizations and public service.

Findings. The findings highlight the critical need for student engagement in national service, identify potential areas for involvement, and address possible challenges.

Value. The study underscores the urgent need to initiate a National Volunteer Service and offers preliminary guidelines for its establishment.

Key Words: National Reform Movement, Youth Development, Volunteerism, Volunteer Service, Volunteer Organization, Volunteer Administration.

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1. Introduction

In July 2024, Bangladesh experienced massive protests and demonstrations by students against the discriminatory quota system in government jobs, leading to weeks of unrest and culminating in a nationwide reform movement. The turmoil resulted in hundreds of deaths of students and common people. Under immense pressure from students and mass people, the past regime was forced to resign on August 5, 2024, and an Interim Government was established under the leadership of Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus. After the fall of the 'fascist' government, the Bangladesh police force refused to return to duty, and the traffic police disappeared from the streets, as they had also suffered deaths and injuries during the movement. Consequently, the country experienced a brief period of lawlessness.

However, the revolutionary students swiftly took on the responsibility of maintaining law and order. They voluntarily participated in traffic control, cleanliness drives, and citizen security efforts and ensure communal harmony due to political vacuum.

Students continue to participate actively with volunteers from the Red Crescent Society, Rover Scouts, and Bangladesh National Cadet Corps, even though the police and other citizen service organizations have returned to their tasks. Unquestionably, such selfless work, when performed with the highest commitment and honesty, is a tremendous value to the country and should be honored. Engaging students in these national service activities would be a potentially important strategy for promoting the socioeconomic development of Bangladesh and an effective intervention to youth development because youth bring energy, creativity and will force (Glanville, 2020).

2. Rationale

A volunteer is someone who works selflessly, without expectation of any personal gain or financial reward (Cnaan et al., 1996). Volunteering is a significant social movement that contributes directly to both national and global development (Mashreque et al., 2007).

Bangladeshi students are actively participating in the nation's development, contributing to social reform projects and volunteering, demonstrating their commitment to political shifts. Bengali students' efforts in 1952 marked the beginning of the liberation struggle, leading to the Six-Point Movement in 1966, the War of Independence in 1971, and the subsequent protests for road safety and government job reforms in 2018, ultimately resulting in the fall of a fascist regime in 2024.

Currently, opportunities for students to engage in volunteer work in an organized manner are limited and many students who do have the chance to volunteer are eager to continue their service for the nation (Huda, 2017).

The events that transpired after the July 2024 Revolution highlighted how important volunteer work is in emergency situations. Notwithstanding many difficulties and inadequacies in regulating traffic and upholding law and order, the nation has acknowledged the critical role that student participation plays in socioeconomic reform.

The National Volunteer Service (NVS) in Bangladesh aims to provide a structured platform for student volunteers to contribute to national development and reform efforts, proposing a conceptual model for student engagement in this process.

3. Literature review

According to Cnaan et al. (1996), the term "volunteer" originates from military terminology, referring to the engagement and mobilization of civilian forces during battles for national defense. Another article highlights four key dimensions of volunteering: voluntary participation, limited financial compensation, involvement in both formal and informal structures, and beneficiaries ranging from individuals to humanity, emphasizing the growing importance of community engagement (Mashreque et al., 2007). According to Johnson et al. (1998) it is beneficial for the youth development of a nation, as volunteers often experience higher levels of success in their academic, professional, and social lives. Genuine volunteer service to the nation or community fosters a positive sense of fulfillment among the volunteers and enhances their career and social life (Widjaja, 2010). Volunteering is a key element in the development of social capital through the

philanthropic engagement of citizens, contributing to the creation of a cohesive society (Wu, 2011). Citizen engagement in public service volunteering helps reduce a country's development and operational costs, as volunteer labor provides a cost-effective alternative to paid work (Ivonchuk, 2019).

Student volunteer activities play a crucial role in the operation of social services within communities in Australia (McCABE et al., 2007). The database of the national surveys in the United States indicate that each year, more than 23 million people volunteer with government organizations (Brudney & Kellough, 2000). However, another study (Smith et al., 2010) reports that university students in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States have high participation rates in volunteering activities, with 64% of these volunteers engaging on an occasional basis. A study (Tansey & Gonzalez-Perez, 2006) emphasizes the critical role that academic institutions play in establishing effective platforms for volunteering in civic service activities in Ireland. It suggests that the government's strategic prioritization in promoting such platforms may be crucial. Mandatory community service, especially long-term dedication to a particular group, has a positive impact on students' lives and encourages ongoing volunteerism and civic engagement, according to a research conducted in Ontario, Canada (Pancer et al., 2000).

However, the inclusion of student volunteer organization has not remained free from criticism as their initiative are often impacted by several political factions and skepticism by the society and religious groups (Bessant, 2017). In attempt to find a careful scope to contribute, Garcia and Young (2019) have argued for student-led initiatives to fill critical gaps in the developing countries where limited capacity prevails in delivering public

service, a counterbalance force is required for unhealthy partisan politics and community-based priority tasks are required to accomplish. A bibliometrics analysis by Brescia (2020), found that the concepts of volunteering and community-based activities are underdeveloped, with most initiatives in Italy focusing primarily on psychological health and healthcare projects. However, volunteering is inherently multidisciplinary, and the outcomes of volunteering and community-based activities may not always be positive if they are not managed with proper diligence. University student volunteers, primarily involved in fundraising and recreational services, tend to serve younger populations and are more involved in planning and coordination (Edwards et al., 2001).

In Bangladesh, different forms of citizen engagement are available, such as, organizations such as the Bangladesh National Cadet Corps, Rover Scouts, Red Crescent, Leo Club, and Rotary Club are typical volunteer organizations for students to participate, but their scope and coverage are limited and inadequate compared to the country's needs (Huda, 2024; Huda et al., 2020).

The literature review clearly indicates that volunteer service by students and educated citizens significantly contributes to national development and provides valuable opportunities for individual growth. However, the scope of volunteerism in Bangladesh remains limited. This study proposes a conceptual model for a 'National Volunteer Service,' where students can formally engage in voluntary service to the nation.

4. Research Methodology

The exploratory research method was deemed appropriate for this study, as it aims to investigate the necessity of a National Volunteer Service (NVS) as a new volunteer service platform in Bangladesh. The primary rationale for selecting this approach is to facilitate

the exploration of the potentials of NVS as an organization and its design, specifically tailored to Bangladesh. The research questions were developed accordingly, and the responses were summarized in the findings.

- a. What are the prospects for establishing NVS in Bangladesh?
- b. What are the other country experiences?
- c. What could be the potential scope of NVS?
- d. What challenges might arise in forming NVS?

To collect data on the need for NVS, an in-depth analysis of literature was conducted, along with unstructured interviews with students who have participated in traffic management and cleanliness drives, academicians, members of voluntary organizations, and government officials.

The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation—interviews continued until no new themes or insights emerged from the data, which resulted in a total of 20 participants. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that those interviewed had significant experience in volunteer service, national reform projects, and crisis management initiatives. Key stakeholders included: Government officials involved in policy-making related to volunteerism and national development. Leaders of volunteer organizations and NGOs with experience in managing large-scale volunteer programs. University professors and researchers who have studied civic engagement and national development.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted both face-to-face and virtually, depending on the availability of participants. The interviews

were recorded using a voice recorder and manually coded alongside the study's research questions.

Thematic content analysis approach was employed based on the guidelines of Clarke & Braun (2017) to identify common patterns in the respondents' answers. We categorized the responses, coded the texts, and compiled a list of the most frequently mentioned opinions and arguments. These common themes are presented in the findings and discussion sections.

5. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study are based on the most frequently mentioned responses from participants. The common perspectives on the potentials and challenges of NVS are discussed below.

5.1. The prospects for establishing NVS in Bangladesh

According to the respondents, the establishment of NVS in Bangladesh holds significant promise. It has the potential to make a substantial contribution to the country's socio-economic development. The NVS in Bangladesh could empower the youth by fostering leadership and civic responsibility, promote social cohesion by uniting diverse volunteers, and enhance disaster response capabilities. It would support community development, provide skills and employment opportunities, and strengthen civic engagement and national identity. NVS could also aid vulnerable population, cultivate a culture of volunteerism, enhance Bangladesh's international reputation, and assist the government in policy advocacy and implementation.

5.1.1 Other country experiences

One prominent study by Smith et al. (2010) investigates the motivations and benefits of student volunteering across five Western, English-speaking countries: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The study highlights the prevalence of occasional or episodic volunteering among tertiary students, revealing that common motivations include altruism and career enhancement.

In contrast, others provide a critical perspective on civic service programs globally; identifying limitations such as elitism and state interests. This perspective is particularly relevant in understanding how national volunteer services may serve state agendas or reinforce existing social inequalities, rather than solely addressing community needs (McBride et al., 2006).

The forms and structures of international voluntary service (IVS) are critically examined in another study which highlights the potential of IVS to contribute to global civil society and improve human conditions across cultures, emphasizing the interconnectedness of volunteer initiatives in addressing both local and international challenges (Sherraden et al., 2006)

Anheier and Salamon (1999) provide a broader comparative lens by discussing volunteering in cross-national perspective. They argue that volunteering is gaining political and cultural recognition globally, moving from a marginal activity to a recognized component of societal structure. Notably, they identify historical attitudes towards volunteerism in countries like Sweden and Germany, where volunteering was traditionally viewed as less professional compared to paid services, reflecting broader societal values about civic engagement and responsibility (Anheier & Salamon, 1999).

5.2. Potential scopes of NVS

According to the respondents, the NVS in Bangladesh could temporarily employ members in various impactful areas, such as disaster relief, public health initiatives, education support, environmental conservation, social welfare services, urban development, cultural preservation, agricultural assistance, traffic management, digital literacy, sports, and public policy advocacy. These roles would offer members diverse experiences while contributing to national development and community well-being.

5.3. Challenges in Forming NVS

Challenges in forming the National Volunteer Service (NVS) in Bangladesh include securing sufficient funding and resources, managing logistics for volunteers in remote or disaster areas, attracting and retaining committed volunteers, providing effective training, and establishing robust monitoring and evaluation systems. Additionally, raising awareness and shifting public perceptions about volunteerism will require significant outreach and advocacy efforts.

6. Recommendations: A Framework of NVS

Creating an effective framework for the National Volunteer Service (NVS) organization involves establishing a clear structure for management, operations, and program implementation.

6.1. Organizational structure: NVS will form a functional organizational structure to ensure effective management (Figure 1). Since the members will primarily be students, the Directorate of NVS should be placed under the Ministry of Education which will establish specialized wings within each ministry, tailored to their specific needs. For example, a Traffic Management Wing for the Ministry of Home Affairs, a Disaster Response Wing

for the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, a Community Development Wing for the Ministry of Social Welfare, a Climate Change Advocacy and Awareness Wing for the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, a dedicated wing for the Election Commission, and a Women Empowerment and Sanitation Wing for the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, among others. Additionally, a District Headquarter (HQ) of NVS will be formed to plan, organize, coordinate, and oversee the activities of NVS units within educational institutions.

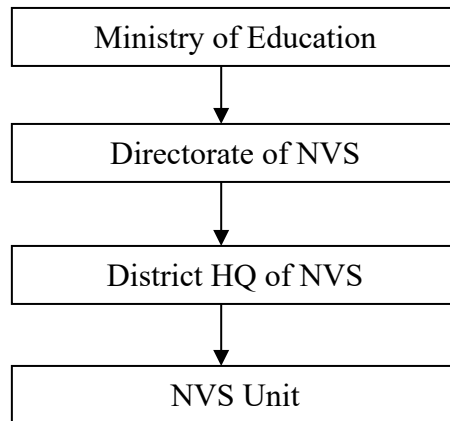


Figure 1: Organizational Structure of NVS (Source Author)

6.1.1. Executive Management: A Board of Directors will be established, consisting of experienced educators, community development leaders, and representatives from both government and non-governmental organizations to provide strategic oversight and governance. A Director General will be appointed to manage overall operations, strategic planning, and daily activities, with Directors or Deputy Directors overseeing specific areas such as operations, programs, finance, and communications. Additionally, an NVS Advisory Committee could be formed to offer expert guidance to the management team. This committee would include specialists in fields such as public health, disaster management, education, and social services to provide targeted support and insights.

6.1.2. Operational Divisions: Operational divisions could be established in every district headquarters in Bangladesh, functioning under the supervision of the District Commissioner's office. A sufficient number of undergraduate students should be engaged as interns to support program development and implementation, including the design and management of volunteer programs, training, deployment, impact assessment, logistics, operations, finance, and administration. To facilitate volunteer recruitment, an office could be set up at the sub-district level, responsible for training and deploying volunteers. The District Commissioner will serve as the Director of NVS for their district and will allocate resources as needed to fulfill this role. The heads of institutions, including principals and vice-chancellors, will be responsible for governing and managing their respective NVS units and must adhere to the requirements set by the District HQ.

6.2. Management System of NVS Program

6.2.1. Strategic Planning: Board of Directors will be responsible for developing a long-term vision, mission, and goals for NVS, including regular reviews and adjustments based on performance and external factors.

6.2.2. Program Management: A structured approach to program design, execution, and evaluation will be implemented by the Board of Directors of NVS. This includes setting clear objectives, creating detailed plans, and monitoring progress. The program should be integrated into the national curriculum, with volunteer service recognized as a co-curricular activity or internship opportunity.

6.2.3. Volunteer Resource Management: Establishing systems for volunteer recruitment, onboarding, engagement, and retention. Implementing feedback mechanisms to address volunteers' concerns and improve their experience. Student volunteers will be recruited from tertiary and secondary educational institutions and trained according to specific requirements. The heads of these institutions will be responsible for managing their respective NVS unit. The deployment of student volunteers in national development activities will be overseen by the operational division of NVS (District HQ).

6.2.4. Training and Development: Providing comprehensive training programs for volunteers to ensure that they are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge. This includes ongoing national development opportunities. The District HQ of NVS, under the guidance of the Directorate of NVS, will be primarily responsible for conducting role-specific training programs for volunteers. The training curriculum will be developed based on thorough need assessment conducted in collaboration with the relevant ministries. Certification for the training will be issued by the Directorate of NVS.

6.2.5. Monitoring and Performance Evaluation: Setting up frameworks to track the performance and impact of NVS activities. This includes regular reporting, impact assessments, and feedback collection to measure success and identify areas for improvement. The District HQ of NVS, under the direction of the Directorate of NVS, will be responsible for establishing performance standards. The Directorate of NVS will set Key Performance Indicators for specific roles. Performance assessments for volunteers will be conducted by the NVS units, with performance records submitted to the Ministry of Education to be included in the volunteers' public examination results. Autonomous institutions may process the results according to their own ordinance and the report back to the District HQ accordingly.

6.2.6. Reward Management: Since this service could be recognized as a co-curricular activity or internship, students could earn marks or credits towards their public examination results. Additionally, certificates may be awarded based on performance, and the volunteers could receive financial incentives such as daily and travel allowances. The Public Service Commission of Bangladesh could also consider these contributions with special bonus marks added to employment test examinations.

6.2.7. Risk Management: Identifying potential risks related to volunteer safety, program implementation, and financial stability, developing contingency plans and protocols to mitigate these risks will be essential. The District HQ of NVS, under the guidance of the Directorate of NVS, will be primarily responsible for risk assessment and management.

6.2.8. Partnerships and Collaboration: Building and maintaining relationships with government ministries, NGOs, and community development organizations to enhance program effectiveness and resource sharing, the District HQ of NVS, guided by the

Directorate of NVS, will be primarily responsible for building partnerships and fostering effective collaboration with strategic partners.

6.2.9. Communication and Reporting: Ensuring effective communication within the organization through regular meetings, updates, and information-sharing platforms, communication will be maintained with stakeholders, the media, and the public through reports, newsletters, social media, and outreach events.

Reporting Systems: Creating transparent and accountable reporting mechanisms for financial management, program outcomes, and organizational performance.

6.2.10. Funding and Resource Management: Board of Directors will develop strategies for raising funds through grants, donations, and partnerships. Ensuring efficient and effective use of resources to support NVS activities and programs. Potential sources of funding could include the National Development Program, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds, and foreign donations.

7. Conclusion

According to this article, Bangladesh's current interim administration should immediately create and promote the NVS program in order to maintain the momentum of the National Reform Movement 2024, as the country's youth are a valuable resource. The projected National Volunteer Service (NVS) might be a major force behind the development of the country. There are many donors who might come forward to assist if such projects are undertaken. But all donors have their own strategy framework document and there is an apparent gap of coherence and coordination in many reform and initiatives (Khaled, 2023).

To emphasize the need for the NVS, this study has launched an exploratory research project based on qualitative data analysis. The Peace Corps, Volunteers in Service to America, the National Center for Public Service Internship Programs, the Association of Leaders in Volunteer Engagement of the United States, the National Council for Voluntary Organizations (England), the National Alliance for Volunteer Action (Bulgaria), the National Service Scheme (India), and the National Center for Public Service Internship Programs are just a few examples of international youth volunteer organizations and administrative frameworks that policymakers may want to adopt as models. The results can be expanded through in-depth survey-based research or used as a basis for developing a hypothesis. A thorough quantitative study of these volunteer service initiatives could be carried out in the future by taking into account the opinions of all parties involved in national development.

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