

Sri Lanka National Policy on Volunteerism

1. Introduction and Preamble

Sri Lanka Government is committed to enhance voluntary active participation of citizens in socio economic development, public welfare, and environment protection of the country and to formalize this process.

In Sri Lanka, volunteerism in Sri Lanka is not merely a modern concept, it is a praiseworthy practice rooted in our cultural heritage, collectivism, and religious values, and nourished by indigenous traditions such as “shramadana” and “generosity”. The voluntary contribution of citizens is crucial for accelerating a nation's sustainable socio-economic development, public welfare, and environmental conservation.

In the current global context, the prime objective of the government is to obtain voluntary efforts and expertise contribution to the national development process with a view to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Voluntary Social Service Organizations (Registration and Supervision) Act No. 31 of 1980 has primarily used in regulating and coordinating voluntary organizations in Sri Lanka to date. This Act provided a robust legal foundation for the registration and regulation of voluntary organizations, while providing significant legal support to the advancement of the voluntary sector in the country.

In order to more effectively manage the emerging socio-economic challenges of the 21st century, disaster management, and the active potential of the youth community, it has become essential to incorporate necessary amendments to further strengthen the National Policy on Volunteerism, which was approved in accordance with the Cabinet Decision No. 19/2059/132/023 dated 19.07.2019. Accordingly, the Sri Lanka National Policy on Volunteerism is a significant stride in promoting volunteer service at national level and ensuring the rights and protection of volunteers interconnecting prevailing legal provisions and contemporary requirements.

This national policy is based on the following fundamental policy guidelines:

- Ensuring minimum cost and maximum efficiency in the implementation of voluntary activities.
- Coordinating volunteer groups with all relevant state, private, and civil society organizations for the advancement of the community and the country.
- Recognizing, encouraging, and duly appreciating voluntary service at the national level.
- Establishing a mechanism to ensure the necessary standards and quality assurance for the health, life, and occupational safety of volunteers.
- Effectively digitizing and modernizing the organizational mechanisms and infrastructure that deploy volunteers.

2. Vision and Mission of the Policy

Vision

“Building a noble society that promotes the well-being of the general public and social development by means of voluntary service”.

Mission

“To expedite community and national development in Sri Lanka by structurally strengthening volunteerism and promoting citizen participation, in which individuals contribute their time, labour, knowledge, and skills without anticipating any financial or other benefits.”

3. Background and timely requirement

3.1 Historical Background

Since ancient times, the proud tradition of volunteer work has deep rooted Sri Lanka's cultural and religious values. The “Dayaka Sabhava”, an association of individuals voluntarily serving religious affairs and the “Wewa Sabhava”, an association of farmers assisting villagers with agricultural activities, are the first two types of voluntary organizations identified in ancient history. Since the mid-20th century, this field has gradually expanded through development-oriented non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations, beyond merely 'charitable activities'.

Sri Lanka has a long history and culture of volunteerism that is shaped by religion and nourished by its cultural practices, extending to all practical aspects of human activities. Despite all the changes that have taken place throughout history, the inclination towards voluntary service remains unchanged. All religions' traditions increase the opportunities for engaging in volunteer work.

3.2 Challenges and timely requirement

Sri Lanka is more and more vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change and natural disasters, including floods, droughts, landslides, coastal erosion, extreme weather conditions, and rising temperatures. In recent years, prolonged dry weather and changing rainfall patterns have affected agriculture, water resources, food security, livelihoods, and public health in many parts of the country. Seasonal floods and landslides have resulted in loss of life, displacement of communities, and damage to infrastructure, causing significant economic losses. These environmental and climate-related challenges unequally affect vulnerable communities, including children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and low-income communities. Therefore,

strengthening voluntary participation in community resilience, disaster preparedness, environmental conservation, and disaster response and recovery is essential for saving lives, promoting sustainable development, and enhancing the well-being of communities in Sri Lanka.

In such a context, a significant number of community workers participated at regional levels in programmes such as community development, post-disaster management reform activities, pre-disaster preparedness planning, and livelihood activities carried out at the community level. However, due to the lack of a unified policy, structures, and systems regarding voluntary service within the country, there can be duplication when implementing voluntary programmes within the country. There is no systematic approach generally for the voluntary sector and especially for volunteers, so their contributions are not reflected.

This system must sustain ethical and moral values alongside humanitarian ideas reinforced by the religion, culture, and conduct built on the nation's heritage. Such ethics should be maintained and refined through human compassion and cooperation relevant to modern society and it is ensured through quality voluntary service.

Therefore, this policy will enable to maximize volunteer resources and opportunities for Sri Lanka's social and economic development and also contribute to the government's efforts to achieve its planned objectives

In this background, Sri Lanka is facing various challenges of disasters, such as climate changes, floods, droughts, and landslides and complex issues like poverty, drug menace, and social inequalities. Although volunteerism is essential for overcoming such challenges and for post-disaster management efforts, the following shortcomings exist within the sector:

- The volunteerism has been fragmented due to lack of nationally accepted collective guidelines, structures, legal frameworks or a reporting mechanism.
- There is no proper methodology to calculate the contribution of volunteerism to the national economy (GDP).
- There is no recognition, appreciation or reliable approach for volunteer workers in the society.
- There is no proper mechanism to get effective contribution of transition period of young community who complete school/ university education and the experience of retired senior citizens to volunteer service

4. Legal interpretation

"Volunteer service" means: Volunteer activities performed for the human well-being without expectation of any economic and financial benefit and in a manner not incurring any additional cost to the ultimate beneficiary.

"Volunteer" means:

- (a) Any Sri Lankan citizen who is willing to work voluntarily and acts in accordance with this policy;
- (b) Any foreign volunteer who is willing to work voluntarily in Sri Lanka subject to the approval of relevant public authority and visa clearance;

"Organizations engaging/ deploying volunteers" means: legally registered entities that achieve their primary objectives through volunteers and do not generate financial benefits (profit distribution) for their owners or directors. (This includes government institutions, private sector CSR units, non-profit enterprises, non-governmental organizations (NGOs/INGOs), community-based organizations, and youth/welfare societies.)

5. Objective, Specific Objectives and Rationale of Expected Objectives

5.1 Objective

The primary objective of this policy is to create a supportive, formal, and conducive environment to strengthen and promote volunteerism in Sri Lanka. It aims to build a robust and coordinated volunteer sector by encouraging individuals to voluntarily contribute their time, knowledge, and skills to society. Furthermore, this policy aims to utilize volunteer service as an important tool to maximize such contributions, thereby fostering the country's economic, social, and political development and enhancing community well-being.

5.2 Specific Objectives

1. Strengthen national policy, legal and institutional framework for the voluntary service in Sri Lanka.
2. Establish proper mechanisms to efficiently manage coordinate and monitor the voluntary service.
3. Introduce national code of ethics and standards to voluntary service.
4. Expand the voluntary participation at public, private, civil society and corporate sectors.
5. Effectively use untapped human resources, knowledge of retired people and competencies youth for national development priorities.
6. Promote research, data collection, innovation and best practices relevant to voluntary service.
7. Establish methodologies to appraise, recognize the contribution of the voluntary service ensuring their identity.

5.3 Rationale of Expected Objectives

At present, Sri Lanka is facing various challenges in implementing development programmes. This involve poverty eradication, child-related issues, skills development, social reintegration and reconciliation, the youth community facing numerous challenges, single-parent families, empowering women, combating AIDS, Dengue, and similar diseases, leveraging knowledge for

economic growth, human trafficking, rehabilitation of drug addicts, food and agricultural development, enhancing the contribution of technology, improving health and sanitation facilities, water resource management, environmental management and development, and housing development. The contribution of voluntary service is significant in this context. The immense contribution of persons dedicated to volunteer service could be obtained to overcome these challenges. It is a timely need to follow a systematic approach to utilize this untapped workforce. Accordingly, establishment of a formal, responsible, and sustainable national policy framework for the development of voluntary service is a timely requirement.

6. Policy goals and main sectors

6.1 Public Sector

- Introducing proper mythologies to get volunteers contribution across all ministries, departments, and local government institutions to strengthen public service.

6.2 Private and Corporate Sector

- Granting volunteer leave to corporate employees or opportunities to engage in voluntary service on special occasions and days of national significance.
- Integrating Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds and projects with the National Volunteer Policy Framework.
- Ensure occupational safety of private sector volunteers and establish mechanisms to provide compensation and relief in the event of accidents/ disasters.

6.3 Key focus areas for volunteer contributions

- Health and sanitation
- Education, youth affairs and sports
- Disaster preparedness, mitigation and management
- Environment conservation, forestry and resilience to climate changes
- Agriculture, food security and water resources management
- Social integration, reconciliation, social service and welfare
- Technical development, language and sign language interpretation
- Prevention of drugs and rehabilitation of drug addicts
- Other sectors where voluntary service can make a significant contribution to human well-being

6.4 Categorizing volunteer service

- Young volunteers – Youth aged 15 – 29 as specified in National Youth Policy.
- Retired volunteers – Individuals retired from formal employment contributing their service voluntarily.
- Online Volunteers - Individuals or groups of people providing volunteer service using modern information and communication technology.

- Institutional based volunteers - Individuals or groups of people offering volunteer service through organizations or institutions.
- International volunteers – Non Sri Lankans offering volunteers services in Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans offering volunteer services abroad.
- Diaspora volunteers - Sri Lankan citizens residing abroad who come to Sri Lanka to provide voluntary services.
- Community based volunteers - Individuals or groups of people who engaged in voluntary activities informally within their own community.
- Child and adolescent volunteers – Sri Lankans under the age of 18 engaged in voluntary activities under the guidance of an adult or an organization.
- Persons engage in government volunteer programmes.
- The Scout movement, Youth Clubs, the Cadet Corps, and the Red Cross Organization
- Professional volunteers – individuals who provide part time volunteer service while engaged in formal employments in various sectors.
- Registered Voluntary Organizations.
- Members of the Tri-Forces, the Police, and the Civil Security Force.

7. National Volunteering Secretariat (NVS)

The “National Volunteering Secretariat” (NVS) is to be established under the subject ministry, to build and coordinate robust, transparent and sustainable volunteer service system in Sri Lanka. A Board of Management is appointed to take administrative and policy decisions of NVS.

7.1 Composition of the Board of Management (members with voting rights)

1. Chairman: Secretary to the Ministry in charge of the subject, or an Additional Secretary or an officer in a position similar to Additional Secretary as nominated by the Secretary.
2. Convener/Secretary of the Management Board: Head of the National Volunteering Secretariat (NVS).
3. Senior member of the subject ministry (Additional Secretary/ Director) as nominated by the Secretary to the Ministry.
4. A senior officer nominated by each of the following institutions:
 - General Treasury
 - Social Services Department
 - National Secretariat for Persons with Disabilities
 - National Secretariat for Elders
 - Tri forces, police and civil security force
5. An representative of each following ministry, holding Additional Secretary or Director level post:
 - Ministry of Youth Affairs
 - Ministry of Education
 - Ministry of Health
 - Ministry of Environment

7.2 Observer and Advisor level members (members without voting rights)

- Advisor: Minister in charge of the subject.
- Director General of the National Secretariat for Non-governmental Organizations or a senior representative.
- An officer in the main position of the Chamber of Commerce or a senior representative.
- Two (02) representative from the civil society by the invitation of the Secretary to the subject Ministry
- A senior member serving with the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) in Sri Lanka.
- A senior officer of the Department of Census and Statistics.
- A representative of each from a youth organization/ Non-Governmental Organization and research institute.

7.3 Composition of the National Volunteering Secretariat

Establish an office comprised of an appropriate Director and supporting staff to efficiently deliver the functions of the National Volunteering Secretariat

7.3 Releasing officers of public institution for voluntary service

The officers of public institutions are released to voluntary service whenever necessary. The services of all field officers serving in institutions under the purview of the Ministry to which the Secretariat is attached, as well as field officers working within the key sectors identified in Section 6.3 of this revised National Policy, key focus areas for volunteer contributions, shall be obtained to ensure the proper functioning of the National Volunteering Secretariat in Sri Lanka.

When appointing the Board of Management, it is mandatory to ensure equal opportunities for persons with disabilities, as well as to maintain gender balance and ethnic balance.

7.4 Main functions of the National Volunteering Secretariat

- Establishing a modern volunteer management system for the registration, coordination, and monitoring of volunteer service activities.
- Maintaining a database of volunteers who have knowledge, skills, and experience in various fields. Ensure that such registration does not create any legal rights or obligations for the volunteers or the organizations associated with them.
- Issuing a volunteer agreement for formal volunteer service that involve more than 20 hours of service per week.
- Formulating and issuing necessary guidelines and regulations to ensure safety, welfare and service quality of the volunteers.
- Maintaining and updating register that include information relevant to legally registered and volunteer involving organizations.
- Referring volunteers for the opportunities available through the volunteer management system and monitor progress of their work.

- Obtaining feedbacks (opinions, suggestions, and complaints or commendations) from individuals who have completed voluntary service (free of charge) for any organization, project or programme.
- Entering information on completed voluntary activities into the data system.
- Preparing reports on minimum contribution level for volunteer activities.
- Exchanging data with the Department of Census and Statistics and other relevant institutions.
- Coordinating with authorities' relevant to volunteer service whenever necessary.
- Organizing bilateral and multilateral meetings with stakeholders.
- Regularly contact the institutions that support to formalize volunteer service within the country.
- Encouraging public institutions to improve public service, utilizing participation of volunteers.
- Obtaining assistance of other institutions and divisions that can contribute to human wellbeing.
- Obtaining expertise consultancy whenever necessary.

8. Operational Process and Primary Activities

National Volunteering Secretariat (NVS) is performing the following core functions:

1. **Digital management system:** Registration of volunteers and volunteer organizations (VIOs), maintaining a national digital data system (online portal) for the registration, coordination, and monitoring of volunteers and volunteer organizations (VIOs). (This registration does not create any legal rights or obligations for any party.)
2. **Attachment of public servants:** Releasing and coordinating field officers of public institutions for the operations of the secretariat in sudden disasters or in special requirements.
3. **Education Curriculum:** Include volunteerism to school, higher education and university curricula and expand activities of student's organizations like scouts, red cross etc.
4. **Data exchange and research:** Exchanging data with the department of census and statistics to calculate economic value of the volunteer service and encourage research.

9. Volunteer service contract, rights and responsibilities

9.1 Volunteer service agreement/ contract

The National Volunteering Secretariat issues a formal volunteer service contract/ agreement to the individuals who engage not less than minimum 20 hours volunteer service per hour

- It should clearly state that it does not constitute a permanent recruitment to government service or does not give rise to any such legal expectation.
- An allowance may be provided to cover the volunteer's basic living expenses during the period of contracted voluntary service, only if it is specified in the contract/agreement. Salaries should be paid by the government in accordance with the prescribed minimum

salary scale, calculated based on the number of hours served. If government funds are used, prior approval should be obtained from the General Treasury.

9.2 Rights of volunteers

- Right to serve in secure and conducive environment when engage in volunteer services.
- Right to reimburse relevant expenses as per agreement.
- Right to have a written confirmation or certificate regarding the performed volunteer service
- Right to have required training, professional consultancy and support required to deliver the functions effectively.
- Right to secure his privacy and personal data.

9.3 Responsibilities of volunteers

- Delivering volunteer service responsibly, efficiently and reliably during the prescribed timeframe.
- Participating at training programmes, meetings and orientation programmes conducted by the National Volunteering Secretariat.
- Adhering to a code of conducts while respecting the cultural, religious, traditional, and ethnic diversity of society.

10. National Volunteer Service Fund

A formal "National Volunteer Service Fund" will be established to promote and facilitate volunteer service. All income, expenditure, and financial statements of this fund are subject to the prior approval of the board of management and must undergo mandatory government auditing.

10.1 Sources of Fund

- Local and foreign grants, donations, bilateral aids and corporate sponsorship contributions.
- Procedures for granting membership to individuals and institutions who contribute to the Fund.

10.2 Approved purposes for the utilization of funds

1. **Operating and administration cost:** cover the administration and coordination cost of the Secretariat.
2. **Programmes and resource base:** provide tools, material and equipment required for volunteer projects.
3. **Training and capacity building:** Organizing training sessions and capacity-building workshops for volunteers.
4. **Community outreach and publicity:** Recruitment of new staff, raising awareness and communication.

5. **Transportation and Logistics:** Covering the costs of transporting materials and personnel.
6. **Safety and Insurance:** Securing insurance coverage, first aid, and safety equipment for volunteers.
7. **Technical infrastructure:** Development and maintenance of management data systems, websites, and communication equipment.

11. Legislation, implementation and review

11.1 Legislation

The government will take actions to enact legislation through Parliament to legally enforce the provisions of this policy and to regulate the voluntary sector. The relevant regulations will be issued by the Minister in charge of the subject.

11.2 Implementation

The subject ministry should prepare a detailed “National Action Plan” to implement this national policy, in consultation with all the relevant government, private and civil stakeholders.

11.3 Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation of volunteer activities should be carried out by the National Volunteering Secretariat (NVS).

11.4 Revisions to the policy

This national policy shall be revised align with changing social-economic environment following a review conducted in every three years or within any appropriate period as decided by the Board of Management.