



Far more than vulnerable: motivations, people's involvement and opportunities

in community volunteering at Caritas Venezuela



II Report

A study on community
volunteering in Venezuela

Qualitative research





Caritas of Venezuela mission:

“ To promote actions in the light of the Gospel and the Social Doctrine of the Church that allow us, together with the poorest and most excluded, to protect our common home and dignify life. ”

Introduction

In recent years, participation in mutual aid activities has generated diverse expressions of resilience for thousands of people who give and receive support in communities and volunteer groups linked to the social action of the Catholic Church in the country.

In Venezuela, exchanges with organizations and actors in the international cooperation system have made significant contributions to local organizations. However, much remains to be accomplished to ensure that the experiences of the latter also influence the policies and standards that this system could adopt to break with the top-down paradigms that have guided relations between its members.

Localization creates a space for community organizations themselves to be heard in their efforts to protect and respect the cultural, emotional, and spiritual heritage that enables communities and individuals in crisis to come together in various forms of participation.

This qualitative research allows us to interpret, from our experience as volunteers, a framework of meanings that integrates aspects that allow us to understand it from the cultural heritage, identity, and imagination of those who practice it, as well as from the ideas of aid recipients who have provided their opinions in this work.

We hope to further contribute to the strengthening of the diverse and complex human tapestry that shapes us, drawing on our own capabilities and wealth, with our difficulties, successes, and opportunities to sustain life and hope.



Methodology sheet

This report corresponds to the qualitative component of an extensive mixed research project carried out by Caritas Venezuela in 2022-2023 and presented in 2025, amid the demands of the complex Venezuelan context.

The 1st report was published in December 2023 and compiled the findings of the quantitative component of the research in which 2,181 people participated, actively volunteering within the community structures of Caritas in Venezuela in 23 states of the country.

This second report systematizes the most relevant findings in:



The cultural dynamics that drive supportive behavior, rooted in the everyday experiences of Venezuelan neighborhoods.



Personal and collective resilience as part of the benefits of volunteering.



The concept of volunteering and the idea of giving freely from the perspective of volunteers and those receiving help.



Participation and opportunities for inclusion.

The qualitative data was collected through participant observation and individual interviews with key informants during visits to five states in 2023. The states involved were: Acarigua, Barinas, Sucre, Miranda, and the Capital District.

A total of 19 focus groups were held. Thirteen groups involved 258 active volunteers, and six involved 55 people who had received humanitarian aid.

Three case studies are presented, which reflect the experiences of women who transformed their role from recipients of aid to volunteers. Semi-structured questionnaires were used for the focus groups with aid recipients and in-depth interviews.

The participatory techniques used enabled us to collect a total of 1,115 responses from active volunteers. During the activities, participants were asked to write answers and comments directly on topics related to the research, allowing for group discussion and collaborative input into the construction of responses. The photos used in this report correspond to the various sessions held.

Conceptual framework:

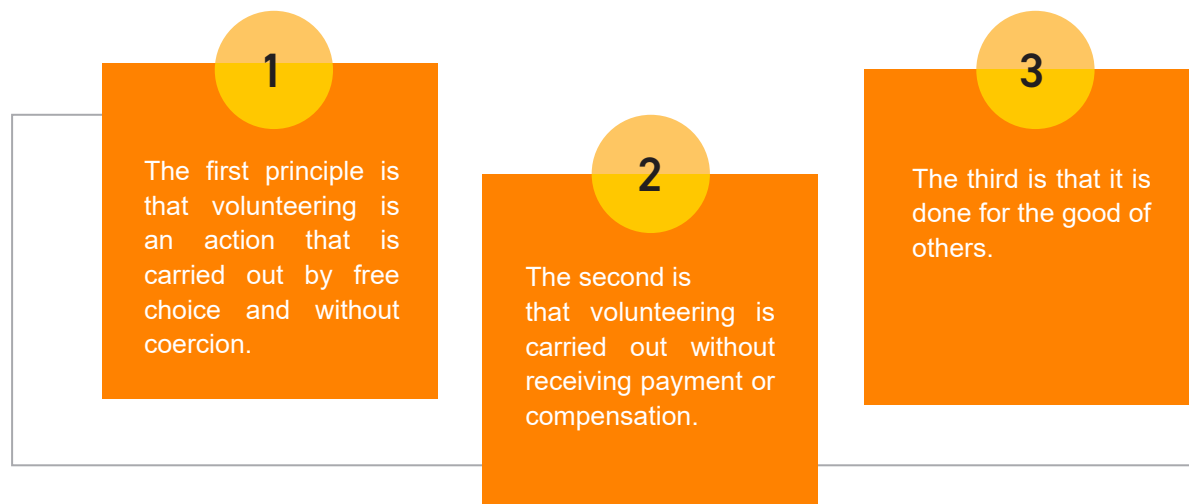
Resilience, community organization, and volunteering

In the current context, in which the world is experiencing an increase in crises generated by armed conflicts, climatic events, and the intersectionality of vulnerabilities derived from poverty, prolonged humanitarian crises, and inequality, the very concept of resilience has been subject to diverse and complex interpretations, ranging from the field of risk reduction and disaster management to social psychology.

The qualitative research conducted by Caritas Venezuela, which explored the motivations for volunteering, addressed the concept of resilience from the field of psychology, drawing on references provided by Sambrano (2010), Vanistendael (1994), and Grotberg (1995). These authors define resilience as the human capacity to cope with life's adversities, overcome them, and forge a positive attitude toward life despite difficult circumstances.

By community organization, we mean the forms of association that exist within a locality, in which people come together to share common values and participate in actions that promote the well-being of the place where they live.

Regarding the concept of volunteering, we draw on the work of Ellis Paine et al (2010) on the definitions of volunteering, through a comparative evaluation of various sources and contexts, in which the authors characterized “common principles underlying the general public understanding of volunteering.”



These characteristics were found in the experience studied in Venezuela, expressed by both volunteers and recipients of aid when referring to volunteering.

Given the religious nature of the participants, they also established the association between volunteering and service, understanding service to mean the activities carried out as part of their profession of faith and religious practice: serving God and serving others.



“ *If I stayed here all day and all night, you would be amazed at the beautiful things people do to share the joy of giving.* ”

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, 1979.

The community dynamics of solidarity: Conviviality and religious practice in popular culture in Venezuela

Understanding the motivations behind volunteering, as studied in the Venezuelan experience, also requires consideration of the context in which it takes place, the culture, and the framework of shared meanings that give a sense of unity, identity, and belonging to those who participate in these groups from their own communities.

The concept of conviviality, introduced by Ivan Illich and expanded upon by various authors in Latin American social and political thought, is essential to understanding how Latin American communities organize themselves to confront the precariousness and fragility generated by their realities of poverty, violence, and geographic exclusion.

Organizing, showing solidarity, and helping one another are mechanisms for survival in families, neighborhoods, and communities in our country. Researcher S.J. Alejandro Moreno explored conviviality as a fundamental characteristic of Venezuelan neighborhood culture.

For Moreno, conviviality promotes an environment favorable for generating autonomous initiatives that address the needs, interests, and objectives of the community itself. These initiatives are carried out through cultural mechanisms of organization and within the resources available to the community.

It is not only an enabler of participation, but also an alternative form of organization based on natural relational demands, rather than rigid or vertical power structures, which can generate relationships of dependency.



" By conviviality, I mean the autonomous and creative interaction between people, and people's interaction with their environment; this contrasts with people's conditioned response to the demands made on them by others and by a man-made environment. I consider conviviality to be individual freedom realized in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value."

(Illich, Iván Tools for Conviviality ,1973)

The “Homo Convivialis”

Characterized by the author to define the popular Venezuelan (1989) gives vital centrality to relationships and bonds, especially those established in the family and neighborhood. A man who lives deeply in a world “with others,” where people have more value than things (Moreno, A, La familia popular venezolana).

Although it is necessary to re-characterize this Homo Convivialis and observe its changes after the long period of multidimensional crisis that Venezuela has experienced, we could say that an intangible asset for coping with the crisis in the period studied was provided by conviviality. Further research should consider the impact of conviviality on Venezuelan popular culture, especially among groups or communities that are most excluded and affected by the material precariousness that has lasted for almost a decade.

An important aspect of Venezuelan culture that fuels the foundation of relationships during the period of crisis studied is the practice of religion. Religiosity provides identity, cohesion, and resources to face adversity and guides the way people live and interact with each other in a context of crisis that has lasted for more than 10 years.

In 2024,

The Psicodata research project, conducted by Andrés Bello Catholic University, characterized the psychosocial vulnerability of Venezuelans, as well as their coping mechanisms and resources.

Among their findings, they describe that 9 out of 10 Venezuelans show signs of psychosocial vulnerability. “Diffuse collective fear, hopelessness, and mistrust; perceived lack of social support from public institutions; anxiety and depression; limited access to psychologists or psychiatrists; and stressors such as the economic and health situation are among the factors that are negatively impacting the country's inhabitants.”

Researchers also point out that most rely on religious practices to protect their mental health: 85% pray daily, and 55% attend religious services; they perceive themselves as optimistic, and 88% say they can count on their family in difficult times. Regarding the religious identity of the Venezuelan population, some research cited in journalistic sources (October 2022) indicates that the Catholic religion is practiced by 63.6% of Venezuelans, while other studies report that 96% of the population identifies as Catholic (Quintero, 2022).

Collective protection elements were highlighted in the aforementioned study. 60% perceive themselves to be in a supportive environment where people help each other, and 45.3% perceive religious organizations as providing the most support. Additionally, in a survey conducted by Caritas Venezuela among recipients of humanitarian aid, 48% of respondents stated that their neighbors would help them greatly in the event of an emergency or disaster (Caritas Venezuela 2024, Community Disaster Preparedness).

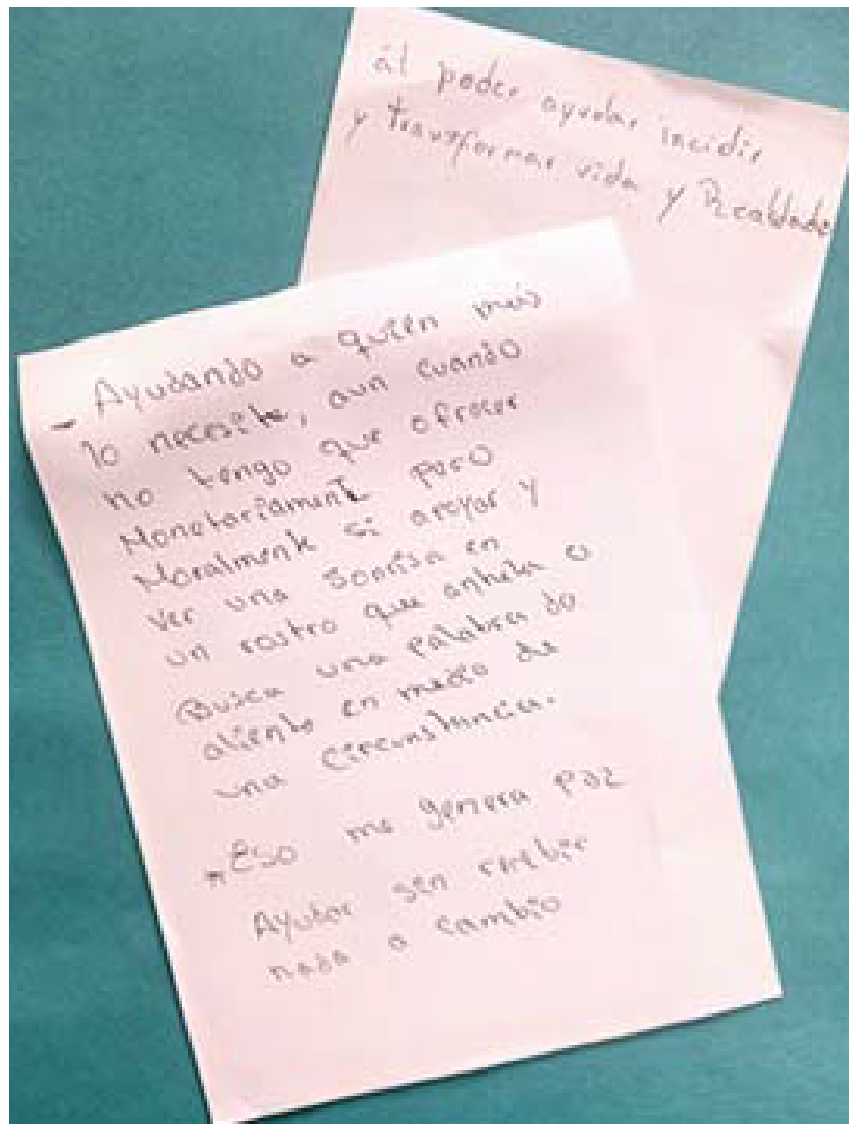
Charity as a motivating behavior in helping others

The term charity in the humanitarian world carries negative connotations related to the loss of dignity of individuals due to poor welfare practices, the establishment of power relations between those who give and those who receive, and the perpetuation of inequality and dependency.

However, it is necessary to rescue the true meaning of charity as an identifying component of the groups participating in this research, both in its meaning of charity-diakonia (as service to others) and charity-agape (expression of God's love for mankind).

In the Encyclical Deus Caritas Est, Pope Benedict XVI (2005), quoted in the compendium If I Have Not Love, I Am Nothing (2020), indicates in his dissertation on Christian love that the exercise of Caritas-Diakonia is non-transferable and an individual responsibility: "For the Church, charity is not a kind of social assistance activity that could also be left to others, but rather it belongs to its nature and is an inalienable manifestation of its very essence."

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis (2013), citing the aforementioned compendium, integrates Samaritan love as an expression of the universality of love, which is given to strangers encountered by chance: "The Church, the People of God, walks through history as a servant of humanity. In this community, no one should suffer from a lack of necessities. But at the same time, Caritas-Agape transcends the confines of the Church. The parable of the Good Samaritan remains the criterion of behavior; it shows the universality of love directed towards the needy, encountered 'by chance' (cf. Lk 10:31), whomever they may be."



Motivations, role modeling, and satisfaction:

A look at changes in helping practices in Venezuela

The people participating in this research directly experienced the impacts of the humanitarian crisis within their own communities.

In the testimonies collected, some mentioned experiencing weight loss, suffering the separation from their families due to migration, and being affected by the loss of livelihoods and purchasing power, in an environment of hyperinflation and a cumulative GDP decline of 74% between 2013 and 2020 (ECLAC, 2020).

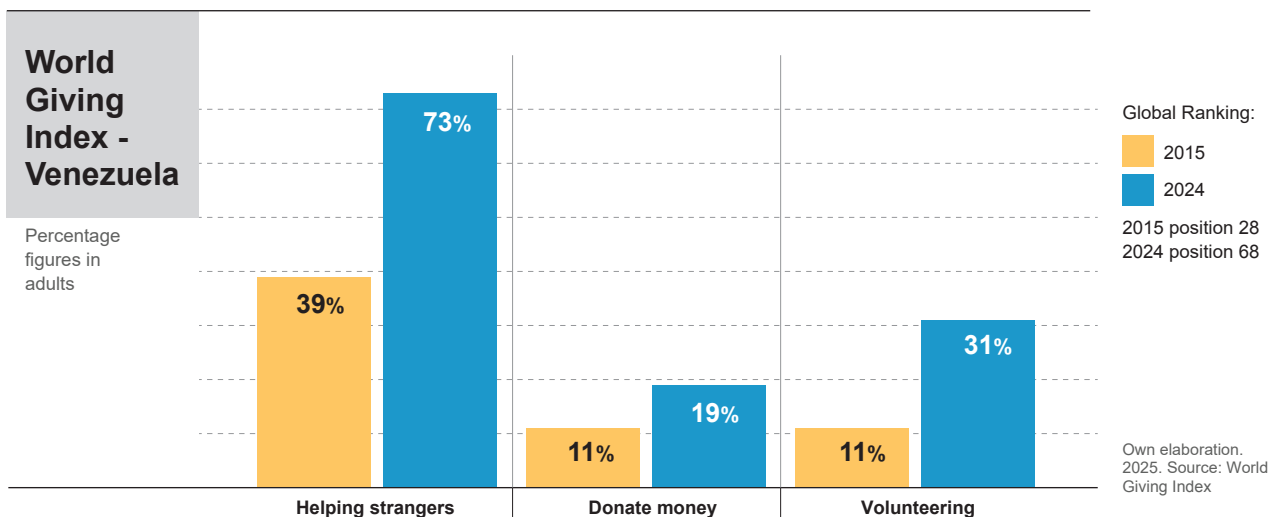
A first explanation for participation in volunteer activities could be understood as a natural behavior of seeking refuge and mutual aid, identified in the typology of behaviors observed in disaster situations developed by Provitolo et al (2012).

46,6% of participants indicate that they receive spiritual and emotional support in their volunteer group. (Caritas, 2023, 1st Quantitative Report)

However, considering the impact of the departure of more than 7.7 million people from the country during the period studied (UNHCR, 2023), participation in community volunteer activities could also be seen as a form of regrouping, which allowed people to build social networks, acquire new skills, and find support in an environment of crisis and uncertainty.

The increase in behaviors in Venezuela in the period 2015-2024 seems to confirm this hypothesis.

We conducted a comparative assessment of the figures from the last nine years of the World Giving Index and found a significant increase in helping behaviors in Venezuela during the period coinciding with the humanitarian, political, and economic crisis: **the percentage of adults who helped a stranger increased by 187%, donating money increased by 172%, and volunteering increased by 281%.**



Family molding



According to Vanistendael (1994), “Resilience distinguishes two components: resistance to destruction, that is, the ability to protect one’s integrity under pressure; and, beyond resistance, the ability to forge positive life behavior despite difficult circumstances.” In the organization studied, integration and participation are promoted organically by the members themselves because of the perceived benefits. Fifty-eight percent integrated a family member into volunteer groups (Caritas Venezuela, 2023).

We find grandmothers volunteering alongside their grandchildren, **especially in rural areas and indigenous territories, where the culture of collectively addressing problem-solving is a natural part of the dynamics of survival.**

“It’s a way for them to learn the right path and set an example of not giving up.”

“You are never so poor that you have nothing to give. Whether it’s affection, you can always give something. It has always been this way in this family; we help each other because that is God’s law.”

”



The prevailing idea seems to be linked to **a strategy of emotional contagion of resilience that extends from the person-family-community triad, especially in environments where there is ethical fragility and protection risks linked to violence, illegal activities, among others.**

The satisfaction of giving

Some researchers and psychologists have explained **the practice of helping behaviors as stemming from personal compliance with social norms of reciprocity, fairness, and social responsibility** (IResearchNet, sf).

The idea of “personal satisfaction” was one of the constructs explored in the focus groups, derived from the national survey conducted.

In the process of constructing a taxonomy of motivations and rewards, we found four central ideas that drive these volunteers.

Below are some verbatim quotes that illustrate them:

A

The satisfaction of serving God, as part of fulfilling the moral obligations of belonging to the church and giving back what God has done for me:

“By volunteering, I can help a brother in need, just as God once helped me.”

The moral satisfaction of alleviating people's suffering, feeling useful in the midst of a situation of great need:

“I feel that volunteering makes me useful and gives my life moral meaning.”

B

“To make a difference in a world full of misery and inequality, and to follow the example of my teacher and brother.”

C

The satisfaction of serving without expecting anything in return, giving oneself freely in the service of God and neighbor.

“Because you want to serve, not for monetary compensation, but because you are empathetic.”

“Being a voluntary decision, it is driven by love, compassion, mercy, and service to others.”

The emotional satisfaction of giving and receiving love, joy, peace, and brotherhood: Both the quantitative and qualitative components explored the emotional dimension associated with the volunteer experience. As a result of the participatory dynamics, 441 words were processed that spontaneously described the volunteer's experience.

D

From these responses, a total of 214 words related to the emotional gratification of the participants were counted.



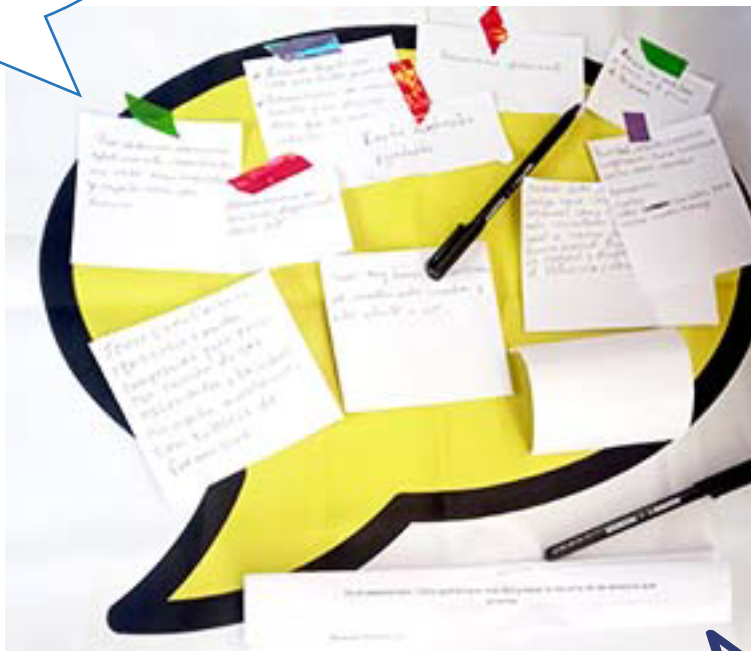
Empowerment and increased self-esteem were mentioned by some participants, especially those who were in a position to receive help and joined volunteer groups, as a strategy for overcoming adverse or traumatic events. Some of the expressions collected in the focus groups were:

"I went through a difficult time, and that led me to become a volunteer. Mainly to lift people's spirits."

"Sharing with others helps me get away from myself; helping others gives me satisfaction."

"Because I see that even in my own necessities I can help someone with greater needs than myself, and that helps me to improve."

"What I feel is indescribable: peace, tranquility, happiness."



"I feel satisfaction and joy in helping to alleviate pain and suffering."

"It gives me courage and self-confidence to help others with love."

"It taught me that my problems are small compared to those of others."

"Infinite joy, the joy of serving".

Resilience and the protection of volunteers

From within the communities, we find evidence that the social mobilization generated by these groups could be sustained by the fulfillment of purposes that respond—from the individual to the collective—on the one hand, to satisfy the urgent needs of those most affected, as well as to preserve the social fabric and transcendent identity values, built from the experience of Venezuelan popular culture itself.

Within this interpretative framework, **volunteering is not just an activity for distributing aid, but a space for the construction and mutual recognition of social, emotional, and spiritual bonds between both parties: those receiving aid and those providing it.**



Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner (cpiresearch.net.com) found in their studies on the characteristics of people who helped others during the Holocaust that those who helped felt empathy for those they helped, understanding their feelings and responding to them emotionally, as well as "having a strong sense of personal responsibility for the well-being of others, a characteristic that comes from high moral reasoning (...), they also showed a high sense of self-efficacy. They believed that they would probably be useful in helping others."

However, the emotional costs of humanitarian action require shared responsibility, especially in a country that had no experience with a crisis of such widespread proportions as the one it has had to face.

A better balance between fulfilling the pastoral mission and self-care is key for parish group leaders to avoid actions that harm volunteers.

Normalizing risks or an exaggerated sense of sacrifice can cause these individuals, immersed in complex contexts, to exhaust their emotional resources and their own resilience to get the job done.

- Oración Constante.
- Ilusión por lo que se hace.
- Reconocimiento amoroso.
- Espacios de Comunicación informal
- Compartir alegrías

- Ser escuchado, ya que el hecho de que sean voluntarios no los hace super heroes, también merecen ser escuchados.
- Una Sonrisa.
- Motivación grupal.

Responses from volunteers when asked how their volunteer group could be improved.



"A veces sólo nos reunimos para hacer, hacer, trabajar, trabajar"

"Take a short break during each activity so you don't get tired and can give your best."



"Sometimes volunteers feel empty. We must bring joy to volunteers so that they do not feel alone, support them in their situation, and fill them with hope."

"Loving recognition, sharing of joy, spaces for informal communication, psychological support workshops"

"We could also go on outings, share experiences, or go on a spiritual retreat. It's important for us too."





*“ You volunteer from the heart;
we don't do these things for money ”*

The value of gratuity and opportunities for participation for people receiving assistance

As part of the qualitative component, focus groups were held with 55 people receiving assistance from the organization's humanitarian activities. In these sessions, they shared their ideas about people's motivations for volunteering and their experiences of mutual aid in their communities.

We found that volunteers' motivation is mainly related to altruism and a personal desire to help.



“No matter the circumstances, when you want to help, you help. That's just the way it should be.”

“That is born from people.”

“They receive no remuneration, only the satisfaction of knowing that you are doing good things.”

“I see them as people who are willing to help others at any given moment.”

“They are instrumental in assisting others.”

“Their motivation is simply to help people.”

Both volunteers and beneficiaries place a high value on the intrinsic nature of volunteering, which involves donating time and personal talents free of charge. The introduction in Venezuela of hiring professionals under the term “volunteering” in paid relationships for the execution of cooperation projects could generate confusion and a loss of trust in the community fabric. We note that grassroots community organizations involved in government social projects provide modest stipends to their volunteers.





The female volunteers are seen as mentors, as mothers, demonstrating the emotional bonds established in a country with the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in the region.

“

“They adopt us as part of their family, like daughters, and guide us.”

“She calls me, “Remember that tomorrow is the meeting day.”

“They are always looking out for us.”

“She has character, but it's such that you have to be firm with the treatments.”

”

People with humanitarian needs live in situations of economic and social exclusion and on the outskirts of society. Their time is devoted to subsistence or caring for their children. They are usually cared for in their own communities by volunteer groups through missions and work days. Informally, the recipients of aid participate by organizing chairs and carrying materials.

“

“They go and observe and conduct a census, then visit the house and hold workshops.”

“In my community, where my mother lives, there are two volunteers.”

“I haven't been invited to volunteer, but if I were invited, I would accept.”

“Depending on the time, I could, because I have a 20-day-old baby. Once the baby is older.”

”

Although we found cases of people who have received help involved in volunteer work, in most of the interviews we observed a separation between the groups, between those who help and those who receive assistance, generated by the dynamics of project distribution and implementation or by an interpretation of the service that sees the other person in a passive role as a recipient.

It is also important to address signs of exhaustion in the conduct of solidarity, conflict, and individualism that threaten the bonds between those who live in the most excluded communities, after years of crisis and worsening poverty.



34,26 %

of people receiving humanitarian aid believe that their neighbors would offer little or no help in the event of an emergency or disaster (Caritas, 2024. ben)

“People are focused on their own affairs; they don’t care about others or whether they need help. Everyone is out for themselves.”

“In my community, I don’t see much motivation to volunteer.”

“People are motivated if they see a benefit, but not without receiving anything in return.”

“There are no volunteers in my neighborhood. The ladies from San Pablo came.”

“I don’t have any neighbors who are volunteers.”

“I would agree to volunteer because it’s like a process that you go through. And I could help someone else.”

Far more than vulnerable: from victims to volunteers



“When you change someone else's life, you also change your own a little bit.”

Testimonial 1:

Angeiris embarked on a path of volunteer work that would enable her to overcome years of abuse and domestic violence. After receiving help from pastoral workers, she built new bonds for a life through the volunteer group.

“This is where I found that strength, this is where I found that new Angeiris. The Angeiris I used to be is not even a quarter of who I am now. This is my family, this is where I saw that love, that affection from a father, from a mother, this is where I received it, everything I didn't receive as a child, I received it here during this time.”

“Now I feel free, now I feel that I can do things, I can do things now that I know no one else will come and hurt me for (...) I know there are bad people in this life, but we can learn many valuable lessons, and I have learned a great deal here.”

As I mentioned, I am currently taking a course and studying, and with God's help, I plan to start studying Disaster Management in October. I already have the paperwork to continue, because my dream is to be a professional."

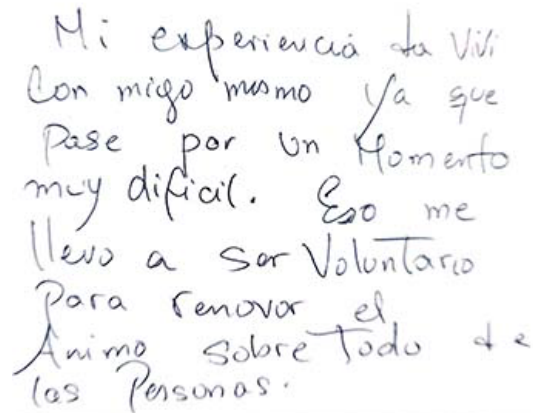
"God's love is something that motivates us to keep going. There is no love as great, as pure, as powerful as God's love. Serving from our hearts, from our experience, also gives me a sense of power; that love makes me feel powerful. I feel that way, I feel relieved, I feel free. That weight I had before, I don't have it now."

"Something I tell young people is that they should never sit around waiting for something to come to them, but that God has a gift for each person, and the Lord has given it to me. Now I help others; I help other young people to move forward. And I am left with this gift, this confidence, this joy, this motivation that I have every day. You don't know how beautiful I feel when I wake up in the morning."

Testimonial 2:

"Being here at Caritas was what motivated me to keep on living."

Maria's son died during his journey as a migrant. He left, and she never heard from him again.



Mi experiencia de vida
 con mi hijo mismo ya que
 pase por un momento
 muy difícil. Eso me
 llevo a ser Voluntario
 para renovar el
 Animo Sobre todo de
 las Personas.

"I lost my son in December. And in January, I was here. They gave me support during that painful time and invited me to come to the Caritas house. I came with my grief, my sadness, and everything else, but I came."

"It was really nice. Every day, I went to Caritas, which helped me. It cheered me up a lot because of what I was going through, and I met several people here who helped me, who were motivators, psychologists, people from the church."

"I've been here for two years now, and I'm a volunteer coordinator for SAMAN. Who would have thought that I would end up doing this when I used to stay at home with my husband and children? Honestly, when you volunteer, you receive more than you need, love and affection: the children see me and say hello, the mothers stop me, knock on my door, look for me, ask me questions, when we are going to the investigations, when they can come, when this, I tell them."

"I already lost one son, but I need the other one to come back, for everyone to find a way for him to settle in the country, to be at home like before."

Testimonial 3:

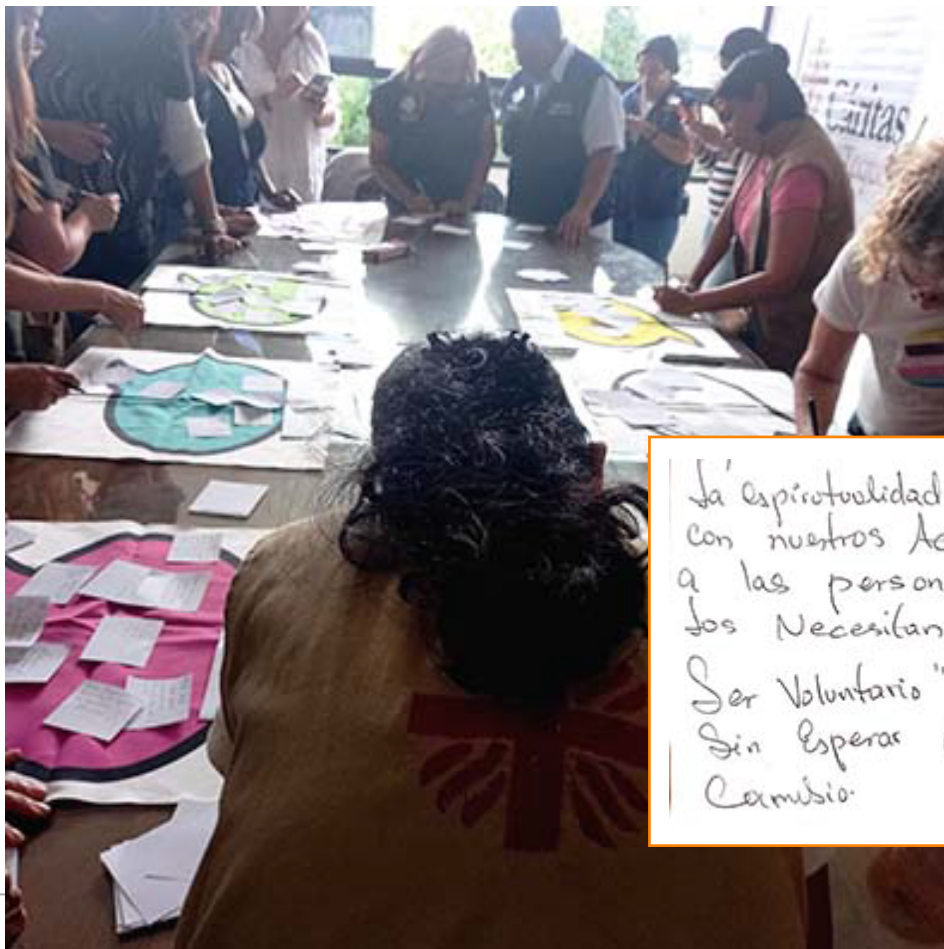
“I have received here something that money cannot buy.”

“I have six children, and the first time I came with them. But I told the priest that I had helping hands, that it wasn't just about helping one person, that there were people more in need than us. So I started helping out first at the parish and then here at the Caritas house.”

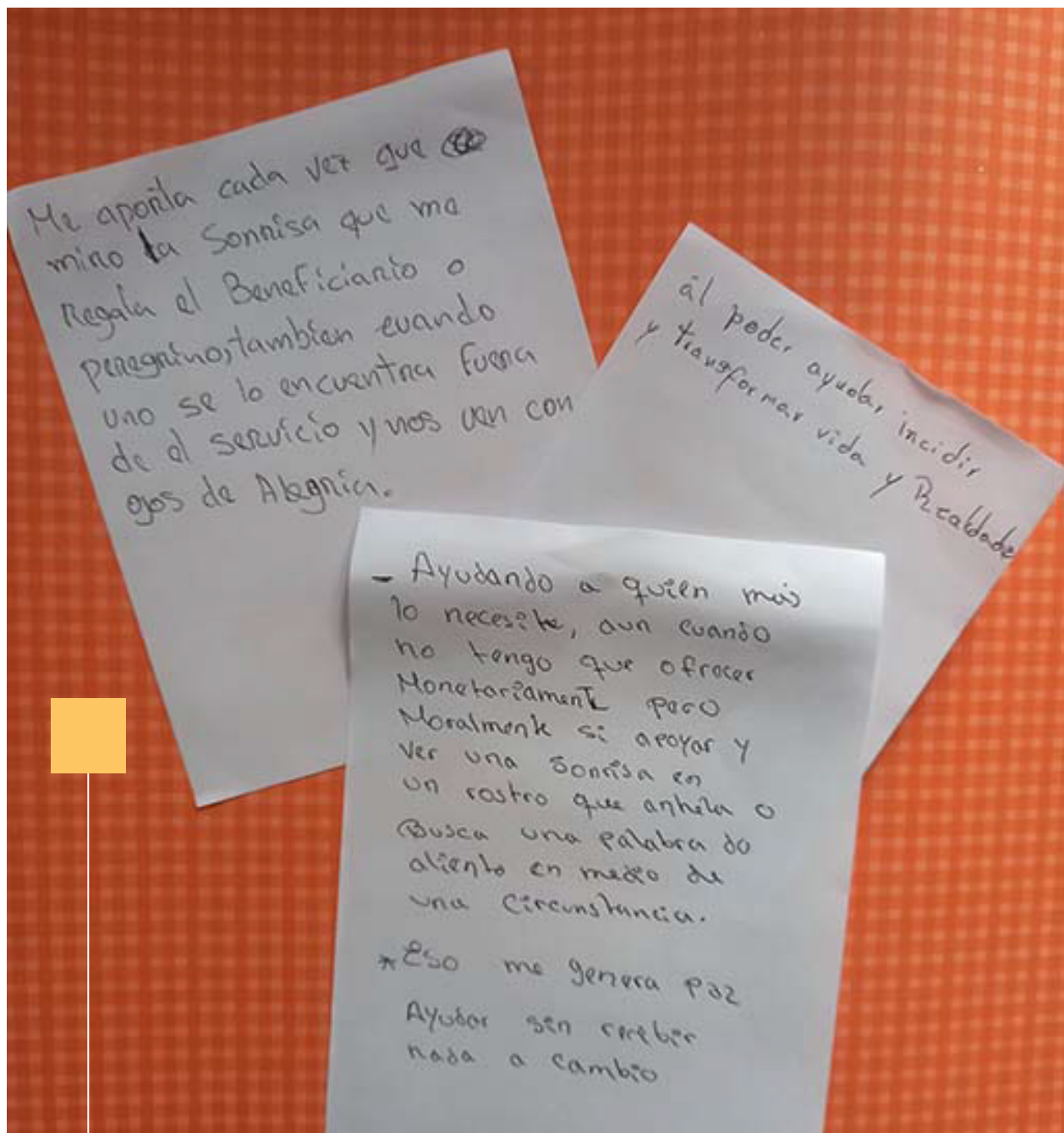
“I have received here something that money cannot buy. This has changed me quite a bit. I was very poor, and honestly, I feel that this, the church, has changed me a lot, changed me for the better.”

“I am a worker and I try to lend a hand with whatever is needed. I need to come here because we are very close-knit here, the team is great, I really love it, the sharing here.”

“I find that those of us who are middle-aged have more strength to push forward. But children and the elderly do not, and we must help them. I dream that we will help more. I would like there to be more attention given to children and the elderly.”



La espiritualidad nos los da Dios
con nuestros Actos y el Servir
a las personas que mas
los Necesitan.
Ser Voluntario "es Dar Todo
Sin Esperar Nada a
Cambios.



“To be a volunteer is to believe that despite everything, love can change and transform us.”

Recommendations based on findings regarding motivations and satisfactions.

The prolonged impact on the Venezuelan population during a decade of crisis has been accompanied by insufficient humanitarian funds, with needs exacerbated by successive crises, the pandemic, and global conflicts.

It is important that public-policy makers and international cooperation actors promote the preservation of the social capital built by volunteers, who have developed skills and knowledge related to addressing health, nutrition, and protection needs, as well as providing spiritual and emotional support to cope with adversity.

Helping this network preserve and pass on what it has learned in various community settings will help it to truly strengthen its ties, increase its capacity for mutual aid, and influence changes that promote people's well-being.



"Communal pot".-2017

Below are some recommendations derived from this work.

Preserving conviviality must be prioritized for resilience: The love and empathy that have inspired the Venezuelan volunteers participating in this research have been a sustained way of transforming their own idea of self-worth, meaning of life, and conception of community based on altruistic and fraternal behaviors oriented toward the common good, in a context of progressive deterioration, loss of family relationships, and great psychological pressures on the population.

Building intergenerational bonds, moral modeling, and behaviors toward peace can be promoted through volunteering: Based on the experience observed in Venezuela, volunteer groups are alternative spaces for training and moral modeling that mitigate risks in a socially deteriorated context that can lead to the adoption of negative strategies for coping with life.

It is possible to increase the participation of both volunteers and aid recipients: A new step toward restoring community fabric is to provide culturally adapted strategies and mechanisms for participation. This requires continuity and time, but it will guarantee organic transformation in the future, with strengthened structures and ties.

Volunteer management in local organizations must adopt protection mechanisms and limits to avoid causing harm: Grassroots organizations must prioritize appropriate strategies for the safety and protection of individuals and professionalize volunteer management. It is necessary to include activities related to emotional care, relationship management within the group, and participant motivation.

The caregiving role, usually assumed by women, can be balanced in a refreshing way through these groups: Encouraging the integration of men and young people into these volunteer groups could help to challenge cultural stereotypes regarding caregiving and support.



Bienvenido

Sonríe, Dios lo está
observando.

Todo lo que aquí se
hace es con amor.

La salud
comienza con la
prevención.



Dios los bendiga

Cáritas Venezuela

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Acknowledgements:

- *To the volunteers of **Cáritas Venezuela** who contributed their insights and reflections to this research.*
- *To the diocesan directors, weavers of bonds of fraternity.*
- *To the National Directorate of **Cáritas Venezuela**, for the sustained strengthening of the community network.*

Research design, processing,
and reporting:
Msc Nirma Hernández Ramos

Photography:
Voluntariado de Cáritas Venezuela,
Alejandro Pico,
María Leonor Sánchez,
Nirma Hernández.

Graphic Design: Nathalie Naranjo

Translation: Diego de Bari Hernández



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