



Volunteer activity in Burundi in 2018. Photo by Bianca Fadel.

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Research Fellow Bianca Fadel: “The presence of local volunteers is often taken for granted in academic and policy debates.”

The theme of this year’s United Nations’ International Volunteer Day, due to take place on Sunday 5 December, is ‘volunteer now for our common future’ and aims to celebrate the power of volunteerism to help create a better tomorrow.

Bianca Fadel, a Research Fellow at Northumbria University, has already dedicated 15 years to volunteering and currently works with colleagues across disciplines as part of Northumbria's Centre for International Development, on research projects which engage with different aspects of volunteering and community development.

She is part of the [Refugee Youth Volunteering Uganda \(RYVU\)](#) research team and is also working on policy-focused projects with volunteer-involving organisations including [Voluntary Service Overseas \(VSO\)](#) and the [Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement](#). She holds a Masters in Humanitarian Action and has previously worked as advisor for humanitarian diplomacy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brazil. Her current work explores identity and belonging in local volunteering experiences during protracted crises, particularly in the case of Burundi, in East Africa. Here, she tells us more about herself and her latest research.

What led to your interest in volunteering and how important is it that we understand the impact of the work of local volunteers?

My interest in this area comes from my own personal engagement as a volunteer for more than 15 years. During this time, I have engaged with organisations in different countries, such as through the implementation of local youth engagement activities with the Brazilian Red Cross and the provision of mental health support with Macmillan Cancer Support. I also volunteered with family members and friends to provide support to others in our surroundings. In doing research about volunteering it is important to prioritise local volunteers' voices and experiences, because we do not always acknowledge how and why people mobilise voluntarily in their own communities, as well as the challenges and particular needs they have.

Can you tell us more about your latest research focusing on volunteering in Burundi, East Africa, and what impact you hope it will have?

My research aims to understand experiences of local volunteering in contexts where conflict and socio-political instability have persisted over time, and the implications of volunteers' work for humanitarian and development practices in Burundi, but also other contexts in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Despite their critical roles in responding to local needs, affected communities are usually portrayed as passive recipients of aid, and the presence of local volunteers is often taken for granted in academic and policy debates. The

Burundian case study is showing how volunteering is more than a one-way system for helping others but becomes a space of learning and developing livelihoods strategies among volunteers and beyond. I hope the research findings and its participatory approach will contribute to enhance academic debates in the field from new perspectives and also shape broader policy-making processes in the volunteer sector.

What do you feel is your biggest achievement to date and how might/did that instigate change?

Engaging with volunteer-involving organisations such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has contributed to connecting my research interests with the realities of volunteers actively working in their communities. An important achievement has been to collaborate in the [Volunteers in Conflicts and Emergencies Initiative \(ViCE\)](#), a project that connected researchers, practitioners and local volunteers to better understand the lived experiences of volunteers in conflict and emergency settings, and jointly develop responses to the challenges they face. This work contributed, for example, to the development of standards for facilitating their safety, security and wellbeing in volunteering. This is not only raising awareness about the importance of protecting volunteers but also contributing to improving the ways volunteer policies prioritise such themes.

Tells us about what brought you to Northumbria and how that has helped you to develop your work?

I came from Brazil to the UK in 2017 to start my PhD studentship motivated by Northumbria's research expertise in the area of volunteering and development studies. Since then, the friendly and inclusive environment at the [Centre for International Development](#) has highly contributed to my academic and personal development. I have been learning from my colleagues who are actively working in different thematic areas and countries, and they have also fully supported me to develop my own research.

Click [here](#) to find out more about International Volunteer Day 2021.

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Contacts



Rik Kendall

Press Contact
PR and Media Manager
Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences
rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk
07923 382339



Andrea Slowey

Press Contact
PR and Media Manager
Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences
andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk
07708 509436



Rachael Barwick

Press Contact
PR and Media Manager
rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk
07377422415



James Fox

Press Contact
Student Communications Manager
james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk



Kelly Elliott

Press Contact
PR and Media Officer
kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk



Gemma Brown

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk