



Sustainability of Volunteer Participation in Recreation Management: Leadership Strategies and Managerial Approaches

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Abstract

The purpose of this review study is to examine the sustainability of volunteer participation in recreation management within the framework of leadership strategies and managerial approaches. The study employed a narrative literature review based on a comprehensive analysis of peer-reviewed articles, books, institutional reports, and international publications focusing on volunteer management, leadership, recreation services, community sport organizations, and volunteer-intensive events. Relevant literature indexed in major academic databases and reports published by leading international organizations were systematically examined to identify the main determinants of sustainable volunteer participation. The findings indicate that volunteer sustainability extends beyond volunteer recruitment and retention and should be understood as a multidimensional process involving volunteer selection, role matching, training, support, recognition, and integration into organizational processes. The review demonstrates that transformational, servant, and ethical leadership approaches positively contribute to volunteer satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intention to remain, whereas the effectiveness of shared, participatory, and adaptive leadership depends more strongly on organizational and contextual conditions. In addition, management practices such as structured orientation, training, social integration, flexible scheduling, recognition, and data-driven evaluation emerge as critical determinants of long-term volunteer sustainability. In conclusion, volunteer sustainability in recreation management is a holistic and dynamic process shaped by the interaction of leadership approaches, management practices, institutional capacity, and contextual factors. The study provides a theoretical framework and practical implications that may assist recreation managers and organizations in developing more effective strategies to strengthen long-term volunteer engagement and organizational sustainability.

Keywords: Recreation management, volunteer sustainability, volunteer retention, volunteer management, leadership, volunteering.



Introduction

Volunteering is regarded as one of the key components of social solidarity, community participation, and public service provision in contemporary societies. Volunteers strengthen the service capacity of organizations across a wide range of fields, including social services, health, sports, culture, environmental protection, and recreation programs. However, volunteering is not a spontaneous process based solely on individuals' goodwill. Particularly within the context of recreation management, the sustainability of volunteer participation is closely associated with professional management processes such as organizational planning, leadership, role design, safety, training, and evaluation (Hager & Brudney, 2004; Wilson, 2012).

Recreation management is not limited to the organization of leisure activities in a narrow sense. Park and recreation services, community sports clubs, open space and conservation programs, recreational services provided by local governments, sports events, and volunteer-intensive organizations constitute the main fields of application within this domain. In these institutions, volunteers are not merely considered as auxiliary labor but as strategic stakeholders who strengthen community ties, enhance service capacity, and support the social legitimacy of the organization (Barnes & Sharpe, 2026; Nagel et al., 2020).

The sustainability of volunteer participation has become a significant challenge for recreation managers today. Many organizations face difficulties in recruiting volunteers, assigning them to appropriate roles, ensuring long-term commitment, and aligning the volunteer experience with institutional objectives. Therefore, volunteer sustainability should not be addressed merely as a matter of "recruiting more volunteers." The core issue lies in how volunteer energy is attracted, directed, supported, and renewed over time (Brudney et al., 2019; Dietz & Grimm, 2023).

The literature indicates that variables such as satisfaction, organizational commitment, role identity, motivation–role fit, recognition, managerial support, and workload balance significantly influence volunteers' intention to remain in an organization and their actual continuation behavior (Chacón et al., 2007; Clary et al., 1998; Stukas et al., 2009). In addition, leadership approaches are among the key determinants of volunteer sustainability. Approaches such as transformational leadership, servant leadership, and ethical leadership can positively influence volunteers' satisfaction, commitment, and intention to remain within the organization (Almas et al., 2020; Benevene et al., 2018; Ngah et al., 2022).

The primary aim of this study is to examine the sustainability of volunteer participation in recreation management within the framework of leadership strategies and managerial approaches. Considering the relatively limited scope of the recreation management literature, the study evaluates related fields such as park and recreation services, community sports clubs, open space management, sports events, and general volunteer management literature. In this respect, the study aims to provide a theoretical and managerial framework for understanding volunteer sustainability in recreation management.

Methodological Framework and Research Questions

This study is a review based on a comprehensive literature analysis. Priority was given to studies published in journals widely indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. In addition,



reports from major academic publishers and platforms such as Sage, Wiley, Springer, Taylor & Francis, Elsevier, Cambridge, Frontiers, and PLOS, as well as institutional reports from organizations and portals including UNV, ILO, NPS, and the Urban Institute, were also examined. During the search process, English keywords such as “recreation management,” “parks and recreation volunteers,” “volunteer retention,” “volunteer sustainability,” “volunteer management practices,” “transformational leadership volunteers,” “servant leadership volunteers,” “shared leadership nonprofit,” “participatory governance sport clubs,” “adaptive leadership volunteer organizations,” “sports event volunteering,” “community sport volunteers,” and “legal framework volunteerism” were used.

No strict time limitation was imposed in terms of the starting year. Foundational studies in the fields of volunteering, leadership, and volunteer management, as well as up-to-date publications accessible up to May 17, 2026, were evaluated together. The selection criteria included: being a peer-reviewed publication, containing findings related to volunteer continuity or retention, having relevance to recreation, sport, or leisure organizations, and providing policy or managerial value in the case of official or institutional reports. For some very recent publications with restricted access, evaluations were conducted based on publisher abstracts and metadata rather than full texts.

This review is structured around the following research questions:

1. What are the key components of the concept of “volunteer sustainability” in recreation management, and how does it differ from the concept of “retention”?
2. Which leadership strategies most effectively support the long-term commitment of volunteers?
3. Which volunteer management practices are replicable at the organizational level, and under what conditions do they lose effectiveness?
4. How do cultural, legal, and organizational contexts transform these practices?
5. What practical insights do international cases and comparative findings offer to recreation managers?
6. What gaps exist in the current literature specific to recreation management, and which research designs should be prioritized in future studies?

These questions constitute the main framework for structuring both the theoretical discussion and the managerial implications of the study.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: Not applicable. This study is a literature review based on previously published sources and did not involve human participants, animals, or primary data collection.

Conceptual Framework and Key Definitions

In this review, recreation management is conceptualized as a broad umbrella field encompassing the planning, organization, implementation, supervision, and evaluation of park and recreation services, community sports clubs, open space and conservation programs, and volunteer-intensive events. The primary reason for this broad framing is the limited number of studies directly addressing “volunteer sustainability in recreation management.” However, the managerial challenges faced by parks, sports clubs, and volunteer-based events are highly



similar. Therefore, recreation management is approached here as an interdisciplinary field of practice in terms of organizing and sustaining volunteer labor.

Volunteers in recreation organizations should not be considered merely as “auxiliary labor.” Rather, they are key stakeholders who fill service gaps, strengthen community ties, enhance the organization’s social legitimacy, and support participatory governance processes. The Canadian case study in parks and recreation, along with the volunteer management standards of the United States National Park Service, demonstrate that this field cannot be sustained without professional coordination, safety, training, and community relations (Barnes & Sharpe, 2026; National Park Service [NPS], 2025).

In the literature, volunteer sustainability appears not as a single, well-established concept but rather as a combination of several related constructs. In this review, volunteer sustainability is defined as an organization’s capacity to attract volunteer energy over time, assign it to appropriate roles, support it, retain it, and renew it through the recruitment of new volunteers. This definition integrates volunteer lifecycle approaches, Hager and Brudney’s framework of volunteer management capacity, Chacón et al.’s duration of service model, and the “stewardship” approach proposed by Brudney, Meijs, and van Overbeeke (Brudney et al., 2019; Chacón et al., 2007; Hager & Brudney, 2004).

Volunteer retention, on the other hand, constitutes a subdimension of this broader sustainability framework. Retention focuses on the intention to remain within a specific organization and the actual continuation behavior. In other words, sustainability refers to institutional system performance, whereas retention refers to continuity outcomes at the individual volunteer level. This distinction is important because an organization may achieve short-term retention but fail to ensure long-term sustainability if it cannot establish processes for recruiting new volunteers, renewing roles, developing leadership, and fostering organizational learning.

The concept of formal volunteering is also central to this discussion. According to the United Nations Volunteers (UNV), formal volunteering refers to volunteer activities conducted through an organization and characterized by regular or sustained commitment (UNV, 2022). This definition highlights the organizational nature of most volunteer activities in recreation institutions. Therefore, when assessing sustainability, it is necessary to distinguish between irregular, one-time, seasonal, and continuous forms of volunteering.

Volunteer persistence should be assessed at two levels. The first is the subjective level, which includes the volunteer’s intention to remain within the organization. The second is the behavioral level, which involves indicators such as repeated participation, continued engagement, role transitions, or withdrawal. Recent studies conducted in Singapore, Spain, and within the field of event volunteering suggest that intention-based models are useful; however, predicting actual retention or withdrawal behavior requires the joint consideration of experience, organizational factors, and decision-making processes (Chiu et al., 2024; de-Miguel-Molina et al., 2024).

In terms of leadership styles, the key concepts used in this study are defined as follows: transformational leadership focuses on creating shared meaning, inspiration, and



purpose; servant leadership emphasizes the development, care, and empowerment of volunteers; distributed/shared leadership involves the dispersion of influence and decision-making beyond a single individual; participatory leadership/governance ensures that volunteer voices are reflected in organizational decisions; and adaptive leadership is based on the capacity for learning under uncertainty, role redesign, and mobilization for change (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Greenleaf, 2002; Heifetz et al., 2009; Pearce & Conger, 2003).

From a theoretical perspective, these leadership styles are not mutually exclusive. Successful recreation organizations often combine inspirational direction-setting with service-oriented, participatory, ethically consistent, and learning-focused day-to-day micro-behaviors. Therefore, leadership that supports volunteer sustainability should not be reduced to a single style; rather, it should be understood as a dynamic combination of different leadership behaviors applied across various stages of the volunteer experience.

Comparison of Leadership Strategies

The impact of leadership approaches on volunteer sustainability can be explained through different mechanisms. Transformational leadership supports volunteers in attributing meaning to their work and identifying with the organization's mission. The core mechanism of this approach lies in fostering a sense of purpose, inspiration, and role meaning. In the volunteer literature, empirical evidence related to transformational leadership is relatively strong. However, its primary risk is that, if not reinforced by operational support, it may turn into a symbolic and abstract motivational discourse (Almas et al., 2020; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Servant leadership places the development, empowerment, and support of volunteers at its core. This approach contributes to volunteers feeling valued, experiencing job satisfaction, and increasing their tendency to remain within the organization. The literature indicates that servant leadership is particularly effective on volunteer retention through the mediating role of job satisfaction (Greenleaf, 2002; Ngah et al., 2022). Nevertheless, an excessive emphasis on care and support may, in some cases, overshadow performance feedback and role clarity.

Distributed or shared leadership refers to the dispersion of decision-making and influence across multiple actors. This approach is theoretically strong, especially in volunteer-based organizations, as it supports volunteers not only as implementers but also as contributors to decision-making processes. However, empirical evidence in this area is largely based on theoretical and qualitative studies. Moreover, if the discourse of shared leadership is not supported by actual distribution of decision-making power, authority may still remain concentrated within a core group (Mumbi & Obembe, 2021; Routhieaux, 2015).

Participatory leadership is grounded in principles of voice, representation, co-design, and democracy. Particularly in sports clubs and community-based recreation organizations, involving volunteers in decision-making processes can enhance organizational identification and a sense of ownership. However, if participatory processes are not well designed, decision-making may slow down, participation fatigue may emerge, and volunteers may feel that their involvement is merely symbolic (Ibsen et al., 2019).



Adaptive leadership, on the other hand, is based on learning under uncertainty, role redesign, and organizational agility. In recreation organizations, adaptive leadership is particularly important due to seasonality, event intensity, resource scarcity, volunteer turnover, and changing community needs. However, direct empirical evidence regarding this leadership approach in volunteer contexts remains limited. Furthermore, a continuous emphasis on change may create role ambiguity; therefore, adaptive leadership must be supported by role clarity and effective communication (Heifetz et al., 2009; Purwanto & Rostiani, 2023).

Leadership Strategies and Managerial Approaches

Findings related to transformational, servant, and ethical leadership are relatively clear in terms of volunteer sustainability. Almas, Chacón-Fuertes, and Pérez-Muñoz demonstrated that the exhibition of transformational leadership by a volunteer coordinator increases volunteers' intention to remain within the organization. This effect is not only direct but also operates through mediating variables such as satisfaction, organizational commitment, and volunteer role identity (Almas et al., 2020).

Ngah et al. found that servant leadership enhances volunteer retention, particularly through the mediating role of job satisfaction. This finding indicates that volunteers' decision to remain within an organization depends not only on the nature of the task but also on the supportive relationship established by the leader (Ngah et al., 2022). By enabling volunteers to feel valued, supported, and recognized in their personal development, servant leadership strengthens organizational commitment.

Two separate studies by Benevene et al. revealed that ethical leadership and leadership behaviors that facilitate learning and innovation have significant effects on volunteer satisfaction and affective commitment (Benevene et al., 2018, 2020). The key implication here is that leadership that retains volunteers is not merely "charismatic." Rather, leadership that supports long-term volunteer commitment is characterized by creating a safe learning environment, fostering respect and feedback, ensuring ethical consistency, and making volunteer contributions visible.

The picture is more complex for shared/distributed, participatory, and adaptive leadership approaches. Routhieaux argues that shared leadership can provide a strong foundation for resilience and sustainability in nonprofit and civil society organizations (Routhieaux, 2015). However, a qualitative study conducted by Mumbi and Obembe on volunteer sector organizations in the United Kingdom shows that, despite the discourse of shared leadership, volunteers are often involved only in low-level operational activities, while strategic decision-making remains in the hands of trustees and paid staff (Mumbi & Obembe, 2021).

A European multilevel analysis on democratic participation in sports clubs points to a similar conclusion. As volunteer and social participation increase, involvement in decision-making processes also rises; however, this relationship is not automatic. For meaningful participation to occur, organizational structures, process design, and representation mechanisms must be deliberately established (Ibsen et al., 2019).



Although direct empirical studies on adaptive leadership in volunteer contexts remain limited, evidence suggests that in uncertain and turbulent environments, team climate, role ambiguity, and personal constraints significantly influence volunteers' intention to continue. This finding implies that leadership behaviors focused on agile learning and role clarification are critical for volunteer sustainability (Purwanto & Rostiani, 2023).

Evidence-Based Volunteer Management Practices

Managerial practices represent one of the most consistent domains in the volunteer sustainability literature. The classical framework proposed by Hager and Brudney demonstrates that practices such as communication and supervision with volunteers, liability coverage, screening and appropriate role matching, written policies and job descriptions, recognition and rewards, measurement of volunteer impact, volunteer training, and training of paid staff to work with volunteers are all associated with retention (Hager & Brudney, 2004).

Research on sports clubs and event volunteering has extended this framework by emphasizing dimensions such as planning, orientation, training, social interaction, recognition, empowerment, and scheduling flexibility (Cho et al., 2020; Chiu et al., 2024; Cuskelly et al., 2006; Nagel et al., 2020). A common conclusion across these studies is the need for a professional yet volunteer-friendly design that combines low bureaucracy with high clarity, rather than relying on "well-intentioned but loosely structured" volunteer management.

Selection and role matching constitute a fundamental stage of volunteer management. Alignment between a volunteer's motivation and the nature of the assigned task enhances role satisfaction and reduces the risk of withdrawal. Therefore, the assumption that "everyone can do everything" is not sustainable. Volunteers' skills, availability, interests, and expectations must be carefully matched with appropriate roles (Clary et al., 1998; Stukas et al., 2009).

Orientation and training increase role clarity, self-efficacy, safety, and a sense of belonging. The volunteering process should not begin with a brief introduction alone. Particularly in recreation organizations, information regarding the scope of activities, safety procedures, target groups, crisis situations, and communication protocols must be clearly conveyed to volunteers. For this reason, a structured and staged onboarding process is essential (Davis et al., 2003; NPS, 2025).

Flexible scheduling enhances accessibility, especially for working individuals, students, and episodic volunteers. Due to weekend, evening, event-based, or seasonal demands, recreation organizations should offer flexible shifts and roles that accommodate different volunteer profiles. Rigid scheduling models may limit volunteer participation (Chiu et al., 2024).

Recognition and appreciation support volunteers' sense of being valued, organizational pride, commitment, and satisfaction. However, recognition should not be limited to formal ceremonies. Regular, personalized, and role-related feedback mechanisms should be established (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007; Nagel et al., 2020).



Social integration transforms volunteering from a mere task into a meaningful social experience. In recreation contexts, volunteers often participate in search of community, friendship, belonging, and purpose. Therefore, practices that foster interaction, team spirit, and a shared identity among volunteers are essential (Haake et al., 2022; Renfree & West, 2024).

Participatory governance strengthens volunteers' voice and sense of ownership. Particularly in club- and community-based organizations, recognizing volunteers not only as implementers but also as contributors to decision-making processes is crucial for sustainability. However, participatory processes must be genuine and supported by real decision-making authority rather than being merely symbolic (Ibsen et al., 2019; Mumbi & Obembe, 2021).

Monitoring and evaluation make volunteer sustainability manageable. Indicators such as retention rates, reasons for withdrawal, volunteer satisfaction, workload, risk areas, and role change requests should be systematically tracked. Sustainability cannot be managed without volunteer data. Therefore, recreation organizations should adopt data-driven rather than purely intuitive approaches to volunteer management (Dietz & Grimm, 2023; Hager & Brudney, 2004).

Risk management is particularly critical in the recreation context. Parks, sport events, open space programs, activities involving children, and physically active environments inherently carry safety risks. Accordingly, procedures related to registration, screening, child protection, liability, insurance, emergency response, and clearly defined role descriptions must be formalized (NPS, 2025).

Finally, funding and infrastructure are integral components of volunteer sustainability. Although volunteer labor may appear "cost-free," the coordination, training, safety, monitoring, and motivation of volunteers require institutional resources. Therefore, volunteer infrastructure should be considered a strategic investment with significant, though often invisible, costs (Dietz & Grimm, 2023).

Processual (Lifecycle) Approach in Volunteer Sustainability

One of the fundamental characteristics of volunteer sustainability is its cyclical rather than linear nature. Successful recreation organizations do not focus solely on volunteer recruitment; instead, they implement a lifecycle management approach that encompasses all stages of the volunteer experience. This approach represents a holistic management model covering the entire process from volunteers' entry into the organization to their eventual exit (Brudney et al., 2019; Hager & Brudney, 2004).

This cyclical structure includes the following stages:

- Organizational needs analysis
- Role design and risk assessment
- Targeted volunteer recruitment
- Motivation–role matching
- Orientation and training
- Initial experience support and mentoring



- Social integration and communication
- Feedback and participation mechanisms
- Data-driven monitoring and evaluation
- Role redesign and flexibility
- Leadership development and transition from volunteer to leader
- Impact evaluation and sustainability

One of the most critical stages in this process is the initial volunteer experience. The first 90 days constitute a decisive period for the development of organizational commitment among volunteers (Davis et al., 2003). Therefore, during this phase, role clarity, training, feedback, and social support mechanisms must be effectively structured.

Furthermore, due to seasonality, event intensity, and weekend/evening workloads in recreation organizations, volunteer management requires a dynamic structure. This necessitates the periodic redesign of volunteer roles and the enhancement of flexibility (Chiu et al., 2024; Cuskelly et al., 2006).

Contextual Factors, Empirical Findings, and International Perspective

Cultural and Legal Context

One of the key determinants of volunteer sustainability is the cultural and legal context. The definition, scope, and forms of volunteering vary significantly across countries. A comparative study by Salamon and Sokolowski (2001) revealed that volunteering rates and organizational structures are closely linked to national institutional traditions.

According to the United Nations Volunteers report (UNV, 2022), the number of countries with legal regulations concerning volunteering has been increasing. However, the mere existence of a legal framework is not sufficient. Effective legal regulations should:

- Protect the rights of volunteers
- Clarify responsibilities
- Regulate insurance and safety procedures
- Include child protection and risk management measures (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2011; International Center for Not-for-Profit Law [ICNL], 2010).

While overly bureaucratic and rigid legal structures may limit volunteer participation, supportive and flexible regulations tend to promote volunteering (UNV, 2022).

Organizational Size, Resources, and Structural Factors

The relationship between organizational size and volunteer satisfaction is not unidirectional in the literature. In a multilevel analysis by Nagel et al. (2020), the strongest determinants of volunteer satisfaction were found not to be organizational size, but rather recognition, support, leadership, and workload.

In contrast, Swierzy et al. (2018) demonstrated significant relationships between organizational capacity (human and financial resources) and volunteer participation. This finding indicates that volunteer sustainability is not only a social issue but also a structural one.



Urban–Rural Differences and Local Dynamics

Volunteer participation exhibits different dynamics in urban and rural contexts. However, these differences are not solely determinative. Research by Dietz and Grimm (2023) shows that challenges in recruiting volunteers are often related to:

- Finding individuals with appropriate skills
- Identifying volunteers with available time
- Organizational coordination capacity

These findings highlight the critical importance of local networks and organizational capacity in ensuring volunteer sustainability.

International Case Analyses

The international literature indicates that volunteer sustainability is shaped by similar structural dynamics across countries, although implementation practices vary depending on the context. Studies conducted in the field of parks and recreation in Canada show that traditional and overly formalized volunteer management approaches may limit participation, whereas flexible, low-bureaucracy, and collaboration-oriented models tend to increase volunteer engagement (Barnes & Sharpe, 2026). In contrast, the example of the United States National Park Service demonstrates that volunteer sustainability should be supported not only by flexibility but also by institutional infrastructure, emphasizing that the standardization of training, registration, safety, and risk management processes strengthens sustainability in volunteer management (NPS, 2025).

In the context of sports clubs, studies conducted in Australia reveal that human resource management practices such as planning, training, and recognition play a decisive role in reducing volunteer turnover (Cuskelly et al., 2006). Meanwhile, the *parkrun* model in the United Kingdom illustrates that volunteer sustainability is not solely dependent on managerial processes but is also closely linked to community-based participation and a sense of belonging. In the *parkrun* example, the continuity of low-threshold, recurring, and socially interactive volunteer roles significantly enhances sustainability (Haake et al., 2022; Renfree & West, 2024).

On the other hand, studies on event volunteering conducted in Singapore indicate that the volunteer experience is not homogeneous and that different management strategies are required depending on individuals' experience levels. These findings highlight that developing differentiated management approaches for new and experienced volunteers is critical for sustainability (Chiu et al., 2024; Cho et al., 2020).

When these international examples are considered together, it becomes evident that volunteer sustainability is shaped along three main dimensions: (i) the balance between flexibility and bureaucracy, (ii) institutional management capacity and infrastructure, and (iii) community, belonging, and experience-based participation. Therefore, sustainable volunteer management cannot be based on a single model; rather, it requires a context-sensitive, flexible, and multidimensional managerial approach.

Synthesis of Empirical Findings



The literature generally reveals three main regularities:

1. Satisfaction as a mediating variable.
The effects of leadership and management practices on volunteer continuity are largely mediated through satisfaction (Benevene et al., 2020; Nagel et al., 2020).
2. Motivation–role fit as a key determinant.
Alignment between the tasks performed by volunteers and their expectations constitutes the foundation of sustainability (Clary et al., 1998; Stukas et al., 2009).
3. Heterogeneity of the volunteer experience.
4. While the initial experience is more critical for new volunteers, management quality and autonomy become more decisive for experienced volunteers (Chacón et al., 2007; Chiu et al., 2024).

Therefore, volunteer sustainability requires a stage-based and segmentation-oriented management approach rather than a standardized one.

Discussion

The findings of this review study reveal that volunteer sustainability in recreation management is not a unidimensional phenomenon; rather, it is a multilayered structure shaped by the interaction of individual, organizational, and contextual factors. The results indicate that the continuity of volunteer participation cannot be explained solely by volunteers' initial motivations; instead, leadership approaches, management practices, and institutional capacity must be considered together.

First, from a leadership perspective, transformational and servant leadership approaches demonstrate clear and consistent effects on volunteer sustainability. Transformational leadership enables volunteers to attribute meaning to their work and identify with the organization, while servant leadership enhances commitment by addressing volunteers' needs for support, recognition, and personal development (Almas et al., 2020; Ngah et al., 2022). In addition, ethical leadership and leadership behaviors that promote learning have been shown to significantly influence volunteer satisfaction and organizational commitment (Benevene et al., 2018, 2020). These findings suggest that leadership in volunteer sustainability is not only directive but also supportive and relationship-oriented.

In contrast, the effects of shared, participatory, and adaptive leadership approaches appear to be more dependent on contextual conditions. Although these approaches are theoretically strong, direct and consistent empirical evidence in volunteer contexts remains limited (Ibsen et al., 2019; Mumbi & Obembe, 2021). This indicates that volunteer participation in decision-making processes may remain at a symbolic level unless supported by appropriate organizational structures and power distribution mechanisms.

From a managerial perspective, the findings demonstrate that the most concrete determinants of volunteer sustainability are institutional practices. In particular, role definition, training, social integration, recognition, flexible scheduling, and data-driven monitoring processes have direct effects on volunteers' retention behavior (Hager & Brudney, 2004; Cuskelly et al., 2006; Nagel et al., 2020). This highlights that volunteer sustainability cannot be achieved solely through goodwill but requires a systematic and planned management approach.



Another important finding is that volunteer satisfaction emerges as the most critical mediating variable in the literature. The effects of leadership and management practices on volunteer continuity are largely mediated through satisfaction and organizational commitment (Benevene et al., 2020; Nagel et al., 2020). In this context, motivation–role fit also stands out as a key determinant. As the alignment between volunteers’ individual expectations and their assigned roles increases, so does their likelihood of remaining within the organization (Clary et al., 1998; Stukas et al., 2009).

Findings from international case analyses indicate that volunteer sustainability is highly context-sensitive. While flexibility and low bureaucracy increase participation in Canada, institutionalized structures appear to support sustainability in the United States (Barnes & Sharpe, 2026; NPS, 2025). Similarly, community-based volunteering models are prominent in the United Kingdom, whereas in Singapore, the volunteer experience varies depending on individuals’ experience levels (Chiu et al., 2024). These findings demonstrate that a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient and that contextual factors must be taken into account in volunteer management.

Another key insight is that the volunteer experience is not homogeneous. While the initial experience and onboarding process are critical for new volunteers, management quality, autonomy, and comparative expectations become more important for experienced volunteers (Chacón et al., 2007; Chiu et al., 2024). This suggests that volunteer management should be approached as a dynamic, stage-based process rather than a static one.

Finally, volunteer sustainability is shaped not only by individual and organizational factors but also by cultural and structural contexts. Legal frameworks, organizational capacity, local networks, and social structures directly influence the continuity of volunteer participation (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2001; UNV, 2022). Therefore, volunteer sustainability should be considered a complex process requiring a multilevel analytical perspective.

Taken together, these findings suggest that volunteer sustainability is structured along three main dimensions: (i) leadership and management practices, (ii) institutional capacity and contextual factors, and (iii) volunteer experience and motivational structure. The interaction among these three dimensions constitutes the foundation of sustainable volunteer participation in recreation management.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the sustainability of volunteer participation in recreation management is not merely a matter of recruiting or retaining volunteers; rather, it is a multidimensional process shaped by the interaction of leadership, management practices, and contextual factors. The findings clearly indicate that volunteer sustainability cannot be reduced to individual motivations alone, but must be understood through the combined influence of institutional capacity, leadership approaches, and the overall volunteer experience.

The results of the study show that volunteer sustainability is structured around three main axes: (i) leadership and management practices, (ii) institutional and contextual factors,



and (iii) volunteer experience and motivational structure. The interaction among these axes constitutes the fundamental dynamics that determine sustainable volunteer participation in recreation management. This highlights that volunteer sustainability cannot be explained by a single variable and requires a multilevel analytical perspective.

From a leadership perspective, transformational, servant, and ethical leadership approaches emerge as key determinants of volunteers' organizational commitment and continuity. The influence of these leadership styles is largely realized through processes of meaning-making, support provision, and the establishment of trust-based relationships. At the same time, the effectiveness of participatory and shared leadership approaches appears to vary depending on contextual conditions and is closely linked to organizational structures.

In terms of management practices, the findings emphasize that institutional processes represent the most tangible determinants of volunteer sustainability. In particular, role clarity, training, social integration, recognition, flexible scheduling, and data-driven monitoring mechanisms have a direct impact on volunteers' retention behavior. This underscores that volunteer management requires a planned and systematic approach rather than a purely ad hoc or intuitive one.

Another important conclusion is that volunteer sustainability is inherently context-sensitive. Cultural structures, legal frameworks, organizational capacity, and local dynamics directly influence the continuity of volunteer participation. International evidence shows that different management approaches become prominent in different contexts, indicating that a one-size-fits-all model of volunteer management is insufficient.

A further key finding is that the volunteer experience is not homogeneous. Volunteers' persistence within organizations is shaped not only by their initial motivations but also by their experiences throughout the process. While the initial experience is decisive for new volunteers, factors such as management quality, autonomy, and expectation fulfillment become more prominent for experienced volunteers. This highlights the need for a dynamic and stage-based approach to volunteer management.

In conclusion, volunteer sustainability in recreation management should be considered a strategic domain that extends beyond individual motivations and requires the integrated consideration of leadership, management practices, and contextual dynamics. Sustainable volunteer participation can only be achieved through a holistic management approach that structures the volunteer experience in a meaningful, supportive, and institutionally grounded framework.



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