SAPF | Southern Africa Philanthropy Foundation | Formerly CAF

Empowering Philanthropy, Creating Impact. Together.

SAPF Newsletter
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Voluntary Action as Social Infrastructure

Across South Africa, individuals and communities contribute their time, skills, care, and resources every day. Whether assisting in schools, supporting health facilities, responding in crises, or simply neighbour-to-neighbour support, these contributions are vital to how our civic and social life is sustained. Yet this work is rarely named or understood as "volunteering" embedded in social systems.

At Southern Africa Philanthropy Foundation (SAPF) we understand that voluntary action does more than fill gaps: it **interacts with, strengthens, and depends upon the systems meant to serve people.**

When voluntary action is coordinated, governed, and aligned with local leadership and institutional functions, it can reinforce resilience, dignity, and public agency. When it is unsupported or uncoordinated, it can unintentionally shift risk onto individuals and communities who are already vulnerable.

This newsletter reflects on **voluntary action as a system** function, not a discretionary activity, and on the conditions required for it to contribute safely and effectively within development and public service ecosystems.

We hope that you will be as inspired as we are by the services of these unsung heroes.

Best,
Gill Bates (CEO – Southern Africa Philanthropy Foundation)

Voluntary Action Within Social Development Systems

Voluntary action does not exist in a vacuum separate from South Africa's social development systems. It is fundamentally embedded within them especially where public systems are stretched or disrupted.

Across many service arenas from health and education to disaster and water responses, individuals and groups step forward to meet needs that systems struggle to fulfil. This **contribution** is essential, but it does not replace the need for planning, regulation, and institutional accountability. Where environments are high-risk or complex, such as in health and emergency response, uncoordinated volunteer action can increase exposure to harm, reduce accountability, and undermine system integrity by creating parallel, unregulated channels of service.

Read more:
From Nice to Necessary

Key System Pressures Shaping Voluntary Action

SAPF's work across institutions and communities' highlights three recurring system factors that determine whether voluntary action strengthens or undermines social development outcomes:

Coordination
Alignment of volunteer roles with institutional processes, standards, and responsibilities including risk frameworks, legal safeguards, and accountability is essential. Effective volunteer engagement is not self-organising by goodwill alone; it requires infrastructure and governance.

Care and Protection
Safeguarding both those receiving support and those providing it must be central. Volunteers are members of communities themselves, and without protection, their contributions can create new vulnerabilities or exacerbate existing ones.

Contextual Fit
Voluntary action must match the skills, knowledge, and authority of participants with the local conditions and needs they aim to address. One-size-fits-all or poorly matched activity often fails to generate sustained, meaningful impact. These are system responsibilities, not individual ones.

Read more:
IFRC Solutions – Volunteer Coordination
Psychology Today – Volunteering and Safety
University of Johannesburg – Volunteering in Africa Report

Evidence from Practice: Public Health Contexts-Image

In practice, well-structured voluntary action can make a real difference but only when integrated within institutional governance.

SAPF's facilitation of an employee engagement initiative at Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Academic Hospital demonstrated the importance of structured voluntary action in high-risk public institutions.

The initiative succeeded because it operated within hospital governance, clinical protocols, and leadership structures. Roles were clearly defined, volunteers were prepared and supported, and institutional responsibility remained with the hospital. SAPF acted as intermediary to ensure coordination, safeguarding, and alignment with identified needs.

This experience reinforces that voluntary action in public institutions must complement, not bypass, existing systems.

Read more:
SA Journal of Human Resource Management – Structured Volunteering in Hospitals

Image by: Aditya Romansa(Unsplash)

Volunteer Burnout as a System Indicator-Image

Volunteer burnout is a **system indicator**, not just an individual problem. When unpaid contributors repeatedly step in to cover institutional shortfalls without support, recognition, or safeguards, exhaustion and withdrawal are predictable outcomes. It signals that systems are **offloading essential responsibilities** onto citizens without investing in the conditions that make volunteering sustainable.

Sustainable volunteering requires systems that:
- Value and recognise contributions
- Share responsibility across institutions and sectors
- Provide adequate protection, training, and support

Read more:
Burnout in Volunteering: The Cost of Caring

SAPF Remembers

We remember David Sejobe for his kindness, his quiet dignity, and the way he showed up for others. He is remembered not only for who he was, but for the warmth he left behind.

In the days following his passing, South Africans responded with an extraordinary act of care, raising over R600 000 to support his family. It was a moment that reminded us of something deeply true about this country: the heart of our nation remains generous.

At SAPF, we honour David's life and the compassion shown in his memory. This is the South Africa we believe in, one where people come together, gently and generously, when it matters most.

Watch here: https://youtu.be/_VZZXuCT6Q0

Image by: Sujeeth Potla(Unsplash)

Look Ahead: March Focus (Water, Systems, and Human Dignity)

Following the **2026 State of the Nation Address (SONA)**, next month's newsletter will examine **water as a constitutional right and a determinant of human dignity**. As South Africa marks Human Rights Month and World Water Day, SAPF will explore how civic contribution supports water and health systems and where **institutional responsibility must ultimately reside**.

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