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Exploring Volunteering in Moroccan Rural Areas: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Volunteering has its grassroots in human history. It has established itself as a critically significant topic for academic endeavor and scrutiny over the last few decades, resulting in a rapidly growing body of literature. Nevertheless, the critical question remains: what are the challenges and opportunities of volunteering in the Moroccan local communities? Within this realm, the primary aim of the present study is to explore the challenges and opportunities that volunteers face in Morocco. This study utilized a qualitative case study approach to achieve an in-depth understanding of the topic under scrutiny from a volunteer perspective. After analyzing the collected data thematically, the findings revealed several challenges and opportunities to volunteer in Moroccan local communities. The challenges included the lack of resources, unfamiliarity with the culture of volunteering, language, and cultural barriers. The findings also showed numerous opportunities for volunteer in Morocco, including improving the psychological well-being of the volunteer, interpersonal development, interpersonal development, and professional development. The findings put forward invaluable significant implications for policymakers, program designers, and volunteer organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Volunteering (also called volunteerism) is a voluntary, ongoing, planned, and helping behavior that increases the well-being of others, offers no monetary compensation, and typically occurs within an organizational context (Finkelstien, 2009). This definition stresses continuity, systematicity, and the willingness (of the volunteer) to give without expecting something in return, it also situates volunteering with an “organizational context”, which is also known as formal volunteering. This latter (formal volunteering), which is the scope of the present study, is defined as “an activity taking place through non-profit organizations or projects”, according to Australia as cited in Noordegraad and Celebi (2015). This definition also situates (volunteering) within an organizational framework. In this realm of (formal) volunteering, the primary aim of the present study is to explore the challenges and opportunities of (formal) volunteering in Morocco, with a special focus on Ex-CorpsAfrica/Maroc volunteers.

Volunteering has recently gained prestigious attention from scholars, investigating distinct aspects of volunteering, including the challenges and opportunities of volunteering. In this respect, Allen (1981) explored the challenges of (senior volunteers) volunteering. She found that volunteers encountered several challenges, including financial constraints, changing attitudes and values in society, health issues, lack of transportation, and more importantly lack of recognition for their contributions. Similarly, Rogers *et al.* (2013); Ndu *et al.* (2022), and Atalay Noordegraaf & Celebi (2015) emphasized the limitation of resources, “budget” and retention of volunteers as critical challenges. Additionally, these studies added also

harassment and gendered benefits and risks to the set of challenges involved in the volunteering process. In the same vein, Dian *et al.* (2019) found an uncontrollable turnover of volunteers, inconsistent commitment to the project, the absence of professional identity and orientation (from volunteers), and working collaboratively with people from distinct backgrounds to be highly affecting the success of the volunteer and volunteering process. In addition to the above-cited challenges, the opportunities of volunteering were also of interest to scholarly endeavors.

As far as the opportunities of volunteering are concerned, volunteering, in return, endows the volunteer with several opportunities or benefits. According to Chelladurai (2001); Rogers *et al.* (2013); Atalay Noordegraaf & Celebi (2015), and Yau (2022), volunteering opportunities include, but by no means limited to, the following: improving the organization’s performance, community impact, developing organizational backup (human resources), networking, personal and professional development, social recognition, gaining work experience, giving back to society, investing time, “using present skills” to develop others.

All the aforementioned studies have attempted to demystify the challenges and opportunities of volunteering. However, most of these studies investigated these challenges in the healthcare field, which has been the context for scrutinizing the challenges of volunteering. Additionally, the above-listed studies have successfully delineated the challenges of volunteering in (urban) cities and developed areas, and none of them considered the Moroccan context. That is why, the current study is of particular significance and relevance and contributes to the growing body of literature on volunteering. The

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present study addresses the topic from the lens of (rural) community development perspective and brings fresh insights from the field, hence filling the gap (focus on volunteering in urban areas).

Purpose of the study

As noted above, there is a rapidly growing literature on the challenges and opportunities of volunteering, focusing on urban areas. Thus, the purpose of the current study is to explore the challenges and opportunities of volunteering in Morocco, focusing on volunteering in rural areas. In doing so, this present study attempts to answer the following critical research question:

❖ What are the challenges and opportunities of volunteering in Morocco?

To achieve the purpose of the study, which is to explore the challenges and opportunities of volunteering in Morocco, this main research question was split into two sub-questions, and they are as follows:

- ✓ What are the challenges of volunteering in Morocco?
- ✓ What are the opportunities of volunteering in Morocco?

Setting the Context: CorpsAfrica and its Activities

CorpsAfrica is a non-profit organization that was founded in Morocco, and expanded to several African countries later, in 2011 by a former Peace Corps volunteer. The main idea behind launching this organization is to turn “community development in Africa over to local changemakers”. CorpsAfrica, which prioritizes young people and allows them to drive change, draws heavily upon the belief that youths are the key or “catalyst” for development, change, and growth in Africa. In doing so, it trains qualified and educated Africans (volunteers) so that they empower their communities to “identify” and “solve” their problems. CorpsAfrica/Maroc refers to the headquarter of the organization based and operating in Morocco, whereas sub-headquarters, in different countries, are referred to as CorpsAfrica. This latter (CorpsAfrica) has the following core values: “Local Ownership”, “Locals helping Locals”, “Collaboration”, government bodies), “Listening and Capacity Building”, “Monitoring and Evaluation”, and “Accountability and Transparency” (www.corpsafrica.org).

CorpsAfrica/Maroc

In an attempt to contribute to shaping the (development of the) contemporary Moroccan society through volunteering, CorpsAfrica/Maroc adopts an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach. This latter (ABCD) is an inside-out approach to problem-solving, and it draws primarily upon unleashing and ‘leveraging’ the ‘hidden resources’, ‘skills’, and experiences available in the community (Russell & McKnight, 2022). This ABCD has been utilized by CorpsAfrica/Maroc to address the pressing issues in remotely rural areas in Morocco, more specifically in the regions of Al Haouz,

Azilal, and recently Tata. Thus, it places volunteers in remote and underprivileged communities in the High Atlas Mountains, and they spend ten months serving their communities (www.corpsafrica.org). While serving in a remote rural community, the volunteers indispensably encounter challenges. That is why, the primary aim of the present study is to explore the challenges faced by volunteers and the opportunities emanating from embarking upon such a journey.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Case Study

The primary aim of the present study was to explore the challenges and opportunities of volunteering in Morocco, with a special focus on ex-CorpsAfrica/Maroc, and this study was guided by the following research question: What are the challenges and opportunities of volunteering in Morocco? To achieve the objective of the study and answer the research question, it adopted an exploratory case study approach or method. Therefore, this section provides a meticulous description of the research methodology and procedures followed throughout the current study.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher served as a “key instrument”. Hence, the primary roles of the researcher were to collect and interpret data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To explore the challenges and opportunities of volunteering in Morocco, the present study utilized a case study method. According to Kothari (2004),

“The case study method...is a form of qualitative analysis.... It is a method of study in depth rather than breadth. The case study places more emphasis on the full analysis of a limited number of units. Thus, the case study is essentially an intensive investigation method of the particular unit (case study) under consideration”.

The case study method draws on numerous assumptions. Firstly, there is a uniformity in human nature, but behaviors may change from one situation to another. Secondly, the case under consideration must not be disassociated or deprived from its context. Finally, the comprehensiveness of the case study is critically important (ibid).

The case study method has emerged in social sciences, more precisely in sociology, as a “systematic field research technique”, and it has widely been applied in several other disciplines such as medicine, anthropology, and management. This is presumably due to the merits of the case study method. Through a case study, the researcher gets a real record of the personal accounts of the case under scrutiny. This method allows the researcher to get an in-depth

understanding and insights into the phenomenon of interest. However, using the case study method makes it a bit difficult to generalize the findings over a population, and there is always room for the researcher’s subjectivity and subject interpretations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Collection

Sampling Procedures

As far as the sampling procedures are concerned, the present study used the convenience sampling technique to collect data. The convenience sampling technique is used for selecting the interviewees of the present study. Having access to the study participants is the rationale behind the adoption of this technique. Consequently, the researcher chose ex-CorpsAfrica/Maroc volunteers as interviewees for this study. Participation was voluntary, which means interviewees volunteered to (or not) take part in this study. However, adopting a convenient sampling technique restricts the generalizability of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Collection Instrument

Because the current study aimed at exploring the challenges and opportunities, that require depth and detailed accounts, in Morocco, it adopted semi-structured interviews for data collection. The interviews contained open-ended questions, which made it possible to get in-depth insights and understanding of the topic under scrutiny. Additionally, the interviews were carried out in written electronic format; Creswell and Creswell (2018) referred to this as an “e-mail internet interview”. Thus, twelve ex-CorpsAfrica/Maroc volunteers took part in this study and answered the open-ended questions based on their experiences. Because the researcher had no direct contact or relationship with the participants, they received the written format of the interview questions in a Google Form via the organization’s alumni WhatsApp group. This E-mail-written format of the interview is useful. It lessens social desirability and allows the participants to express themselves freely. It made it possible to get historical information as soon as the participants had finished their volunteering experience. Besides, it leaves room for the researcher to control the line of questioning. However, this type of interview has some limitations, the most important of which is that “not all participants are equally articulate and perceptive” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis following broad steps: reading and rereading, initially noting and identifying emerging themes, checking and searching for connections, and then moving on to the next. This process was repeated multiple times to get an in-depth understanding of participants’ responses, hence, establishing the ties between them. Each interview was read to elicit emerging themes. Data were coded into recurring themes for a rich and meticulous analysis using an open-coding approach and then analytically split into discrete parts for closer examination and comparison for similarities and differences. This thematic analysis was carried out inductively by building codes and themes from the bottom up (Creswell & Creswell, 2018)

Strategies for Validating Findings

Subjectivity characterizes qualitative research. To lessen the interference of the researcher’s subjectivity and bias, there are several strategies for doing so, the most important of which is the “use of member checking” the accuracy of the results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, another researcher assisted as a checker. He was endowed with the transcripts of the interviews and asked to check the most recurrent themes. The checker’s analysis confirmed almost the same findings/themes except for “the lack of communication”, which was considered by the researcher as a theme. Therefore, the researcher did not consider the “lack of communication” as a theme and deleted it.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Challenges of Volunteering

The results of the present study revealed several challenges to volunteering in Morocco. After analyzing the collected data thematically, the lack of resources has emerged as one of the most recurrent and astounding themes. The lack of resources proved to be a big challenge given that it was accompanied by three codes, namely ‘lack of resources’, ‘funds’, and ‘limited (access to) resources’. The interviewees expressed this lack of resources as follows: “Funds are the biggest challenge”.

“For the organization, it’s lack of resources to effectively involve volunteers”.

“Lack of resources”.

Even though interviewees were not generous enough to explain meticulously this lack of resources, it is conspicuously clear that this issue of lack of resources affects presumably negatively, if not hinder, the whole volunteering process.

In addition to the lack of resources, unfamiliarity with the culture of (formal) volunteering has also turned out to be an important theme (challenge), which was accompanied by two codes (unfamiliarity with volunteering and not understanding volunteering. This unfamiliarity with the practice of (formal) volunteering can be spotlighted easily in the following excerpts:

“The Moroccan mindset is not very familiar with volunteering work, so it was challenging to convince the people I am working with that I am participating as a volunteer; they often perceive me as an employer”.

“Convincing people you are working with that you are only a volunteer and don’t get a salary out of what you provide”.

“People don’t understand the culture of Volunteering”.

As is clear from the above excerpts, it seems that the unfamiliarity (of the community) with (formal) volunteering poses a critical challenge for the volunteers. As expressed by the first interviewee, being perceived as an “employer”, who has money, makes the service a bit difficult because people may anticipate money from the volunteer. This point has also been emphasized in the second quote. In the last quote, volunteering, for

the interviewee, is no more than a mere activity, but it has become a culture, which people do not understand. The studies identified in the literature concerning the challenges of volunteering did mention “the unfamiliarity with the culture” of volunteering as a challenge. However, this study found unfamiliarity with formal volunteering to be a significant challenge, which makes the volunteering process a bit harder. Thus, this is a modestly significant contribution to the knowledge base.

Alongside the lack of resources and unfamiliarity with (formal) volunteering, language barriers have been featured as an important theme, which is supported by three codes. The interviewees labeled this as follows:

- “language”
- “language barriers”
- “Tachlhit”

This theme can even be expected to emerge because the volunteers served in two regions, namely Azilal and Al Haouz in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco, where Tamazight, including its varieties, is mainly the medium of communication.

Closely related to language barriers, culture (cultural issues) was one of the most critical challenges that volunteers faced during their service. The interviewees expressed this challenge of culture using the following expressions:

- “Cultural barriers”
- “Intercultural differences”
- “Cultural changes”

The interviewees used distinct expressions to describe this challenge of culture. This latter (culture) can be a real challenge for volunteers because Morocco is well-known for its cultural diversity and richness. In big cities like Casablanca, some practices, such as wearing shorts, for men, or walking in the street with a lady can be perceived as normal. However, in conservative areas, in Al Haouz for instance, the same practices are considered culturally inappropriate, hence unacceptable. So the challenges of volunteering are visually represented below.



Figure 1: Challenges of Volunteering

Opportunities of Volunteering

Although volunteering in Morocco has several challenges, that are not indispensable, the results of this study showed that volunteering is a rewarding activity. There are numerous opportunities and benefits, which presumably outperform the challenges, to volunteering in Morocco. Based on the findings of the present study, these opportunities include personal development, professional development and improving the psychological well-being of the volunteer.

After analyzing the collected data thematically, several themes, subthemes, and codes emerged. Improving the psychological well-being (of the volunteer), which was featured by three accompanying codes, was one of the themes. The interviewees expressed the improvement in their psychological well-being using the following expressions:

“Overcome stress, loneliness, isolation and depression”.

These expressions show that volunteering is more than a mere activity because it has got the power to improve and heal the psychological issues, including ‘stress’, ‘loneliness’, ‘isolation’, and above all ‘depression’, of the volunteer. This smoothly leads to the volunteer’s personal development, which is the concern of the upcoming section.

The findings of the present study showed that personal development turned out to be the most recurrent and significant theme. This means almost all the interviewees agreed upon the fact that volunteering is a priceless activity. The theme of personal development was boosted by sixteen codes, and it encompassed two crucially significant subthemes, namely interpersonal development and interpersonal development. This can be supported and justified by the following excerpts:

“There are a lot of things I have learned during my volunteering service, including my public speaking skills, networking, and implementing a successful project for the community”.

“Volunteering develops skills such as effective communication, leadership, project design, and management”.

“Volunteering helps you share your talents, learn new skills, and create a better work-life balance. It helps you feel better about yourself by improving your self-esteem and confidence. Volunteering helps combat stress, loneliness, social isolation, and depression and helps you meet new people, which can help you feel more connected and valued”.

As demystified in the first excerpt, volunteering is an invaluable priceless opportunity for developing several interpersonal skills, including ‘public speaking’, ‘project implementation’, and management. The same point was also explicitly put in the second excerpt emphasizing the development of interpersonal skills such as ‘effective communication’, ‘leadership’, and ‘project design and management’. The third interviewee, however, highlighted the development of the interpersonal aspect of the volunteer, more than its counterpart (interpersonal

development). In doing so, the following intrapersonal qualities have been spotlighted: improving your ‘self-esteem’ and ‘confidence’. Additionally, the third excerpt emphasized the improvement of the psychological well-being of the volunteer as well.

In the same line as the significance of personal development comes professional development as a theme, which was characterized by five codes. Volunteering opens new horizons for volunteers, including professional development and job opportunities. Some of the interviewees expressed the professional development aspect through the following quotes:

“Volunteering was not just a personal growth experience; it also contributed to my professional development”.

“Through volunteering you are more open to humanitarian development and job opportunities related to it”

“Volunteering can help you to be part of the NGO”

The first extract clearly emphasized the professional development aspect given that the volunteering experience opens up new opportunities for growth for the involved volunteers. The second and last extracts seemingly added that volunteering could be a gateway to the job market. All the previously mentioned opportunities are visually outlined beneath.



Figure 2: Opportunities of Volunteering

Discussion and Implications

The present study explored the challenges and opportunities of volunteering in Morocco, focusing on ex-CorpsAfrica/Maroc volunteers as a case study, and it attempted to answer the following research question: What are the challenges and opportunities of volunteering in Morocco? In doing so, the findings of this current study delineated several challenges to volunteering in the Moroccan context. These challenges involve the lack of resources, unfamiliarity with the culture of volunteering, language, and cultural barriers, which present a complicated landscape that volunteers navigate during their service. Despite these limiting challenges, volunteering in Morocco is an extremely rewarding activity. It has a wide range of advantages, which contribute positively to the development and growth of the volunteers, including improving the psychological well-being of the volunteers, personal development, and professional development.

Challenges of Volunteering

The recurring theme of “lack of resources” emanated constantly, with interviewees emphasizing inarguably concerns about the funds and limited access to essential resources, which are not sufficient. This finding aligns with the ongoing debate on volunteering in resource-restricted environments, Morocco for instance. This aligns seamlessly with the findings of Allen (1981); Rogers *et al.* (2013); Ndu *et al.* (2022), and Atalay Noordegraaf & Çelebi (2015). These studies scrutinized the challenges of volunteering and found the financial aspect (budget)

to be a critical challenge, influencing the volunteering process presumably negatively. This makes the present study a significant contribution to the existing literature surrounding the issue under investigation, bringing evidence from the Moroccan context.

The influence of this challenge goes beyond the logistical aspects, presumably affecting the efficiency and sustainability of the volunteers’ initiatives. Additionally, the volunteers and volunteering organization, CorpsAfrica/Maroc in this case, need to look for more governmental and non-governmental funds so that it can address this critical and possibly limiting issue. For instance, volunteers/volunteering organizations can apply for grants and sign up partnerships with other stakeholders, operating in the same sector.

The unfamiliarity with the culture of (formal) volunteering makes the experience a bit challenging, people seeing the volunteer as an “employer”. This finding is consistent with that of Dian *et al.* (2019), who found working with people from different cultures to be a largely influential challenge affecting the work of volunteers, especially in rural and conservative communities. This makes this study fit perfectly within the literature surrounding volunteering and its challenges. This entails carrying out awareness-raising initiatives, which are very challenging because of the limited resources, so that the inhabitants understand the roles of the volunteer in the community. In doing so, a clear understanding would be achieved from the very beginning. However, this must be done on a large/national scale. To do so, the government has to support organizations working in this sector.

Language and cultural barriers are intricately related. Serving in regions where Tamazight is primarily the main vehicle of communication, underscores the importance of linguistic diversity in volunteer programs. Besides, cultural issues, including cultural differences and diverse cultural traditions and rituals within Morocco, lay forward significant hurdles for the volunteers. Morocco is well-known for its cultural and language diversity and richness. While this can be a very challenging issue, it can be a blessing in disguise, that is to say, it can be an invaluable opportunity to learn a new language and cope with a new culture. These findings (cultural and language barriers), however, have not been identified in the literature. This can be attributed to the fact that the present study explored the challenges of volunteering in a multilingual context, where speaking up to three languages is the norm. This adds to the existing knowledge about the challenges associated with volunteering. Therefore, cultural sensitivity training is paramount so that volunteers can navigate the language and cultural nuances.

Opportunities and/or Benefits of Volunteering

Despite the above-mentioned challenges, the present study illuminates the promising aspects of volunteering in Morocco. The thematic analysis unveiled that volunteering has significantly prominent opportunities. These latter (opportunities) involve improving the psychological well-being of volunteers, personal development, and professional development opportunities as well. This indicates conspicuously that volunteering is a transformative and horizons-broadening experience. Personal development emanated as an essentially central theme. This theme involved holistically the development of both the interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions of the participating volunteers. These latter (volunteers) improve their interpersonal aspect through the acquisition of numerous skills such as public speaking, effective communication, leadership, and project management. Simultaneously, the volunteers develop their intrapersonal dimension. In so doing, they improve their self-esteem and confidence; thus, volunteering has an immensely transformative influence. All these skills and qualities, both interpersonal and intrapersonal, are hugely significant and highly demanded in the job market at the present time. With these skills and qualities, the volunteer becomes more ready than ever before to embark upon professional opportunities. Professional development also emerged as a critically important theme, opening new horizons, opportunities, and career paths for the volunteers. The findings show that volunteering not only develops the personal dimension but also boosts the professional aspect of the volunteers. Volunteering opens several networking and professional development opportunities; this involves meeting new people and organizations working in different sectors and finding training and study programs. Upon the successful completion of the volunteering experience, volunteers become professionals who have propensity and readiness

for the job market and NGO-related opportunities. These findings of the present study correlate with the previous studies. In this regard, Atalay Noordegraaf and Çelebi (2015), and Yau (2022), who studied the opportunities of volunteering, found volunteering to play a significant role in (the) professional development of the volunteer. Therefore, this study contributes to the existing literature with insights from the Moroccan landscape.

Recommendation

The delineated challenges, namely the lack of resources, unfamiliarity with the culture of volunteering, language, and cultural barriers, necessitate focused interventions and support systems in volunteer programs in Morocco. Addressing the lack of resources entails strategic and large-scale (including governmental) partnerships, fundraising initiatives, and efficient resource allocation. Language and cultural barriers can be addressed in many ways. While the former (language barriers) can be solved by training programs or recruiting volunteers with multilingual capacities, training volunteers on intercultural communication/competence can address the latter (cultural barriers). Therefore, focused training is important to avoid misunderstandings and bolster meaningful interactions based on understanding and intercultural empathy. Moreover, celebrating cultural diversity is central to coping with a new language and culture.

The findings of the present study have implications for policy development and program design, highlighting the significance of holistic support mechanisms for volunteers. Despite the identified challenges to volunteering in Morocco, this latter (volunteering in Morocco) is highly encouraged because it brings with it various benefits, including the improvement of psychological well-being, personal development, and professional dimensions of the volunteers.

Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research

The present study sought to explore the challenges and opportunities of volunteering in Morocco. However, there are several limitations to the undertaken study; these limitations are as follows:

- The present study utilized a qualitative approach. However, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods may yield different results. Thus, mixed methods studies are highly encouraged to investigate this issue.
- This study adopted “E-mail-internet” interviews for data collection. Yet, it was felt that participants were not generous enough to give detailed accounts. Future research may use another method for data collection or triangulate the methods of data collection. For instance, future studies may use both interviews and focus groups.
- The number of interviewees (12) is somehow small and limits the present study. Hence, future research is required to involve a larger number of participants in

order to generalize the results over the studied population.

- Generalizability of the findings is difficult because the present study focused on volunteers who served in the Azilal and Al-Haouz regions. Thus, the findings are limited and context-specific. Future research can include other regions.

CONCLUSION

Volunteering is a voluntary, ongoing, planned, and helping behavior that increases the well-being of others, without expecting compensation in return. While volunteering, it is likely indispensable to encounter several challenges. These challenges have been the subject of scholarly scrutiny in distinct contexts and over different periods. Within this realm, the present study sought to investigate the challenges and opportunities of volunteering in the Moroccan context using a qualitative case study.

To explore the challenges and opportunities of volunteering in Morocco, ex-CorpsAfrica/Maroc volunteers were taken as a case for the current study. In doing so, it attempted to answer the following research question: What are the challenges and opportunities of volunteering in Morocco? The findings of this current study delineated several challenges to volunteering in the Moroccan context. These challenges involve the lack of resources, unfamiliarity with the culture of volunteering, language, and cultural barriers, which present a complicated landscape that volunteers navigate during their service. Despite these limiting challenges, volunteering in Morocco is an extremely rewarding activity. It has a wide range of advantages, which contribute positively to the development and growth of the volunteers, including improving the psychological well-being of the volunteers, personal development, and professional development. Insights from the present study can be crucially significant for policymakers, program designers, and volunteer organizations. Addressing the lack of resources entails strategic and large-scale (including governmental) partnerships, fundraising initiatives, and efficient resource allocation. Moreover, including an element of intercultural communication/competence is central to overcoming cultural challenges. Despite the identified challenges to volunteering in Morocco, this latter (volunteering in Morocco) is highly encouraged because it brings with it various benefits such as the improvement of psychological well-being, personal development, and professional dimensions of the volunteers.

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