

BLESS VOLUNTEER POLICY



Applicable to: National and International Volunteers

1. PURPOSE

BLESS welcomes volunteers from India and around the world who are committed to serving vulnerable communities with dignity, respect, and professionalism. This policy establishes clear expectations, procedures, rights, and responsibilities for volunteers and BLESS staff to ensure a safe, meaningful, and mutually beneficial volunteering experience.

BLESS is a community development organisation based in Reddichavady, Pondy-Cuddalore Main Road, Cuddalore District, Tamil Nadu, India — 607 403. Since 1989, BLESS has worked to create self-reliant communities through a family-focused approach, implementing programmes across Housing, Education, Health, Livelihood, Women's Empowerment, Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), Community Development, and Disaster Relief. Our campus includes a Children's Home, a small working farm, staff residential quarters, and volunteer accommodation — all forming one close-knit family environment.

This policy applies to all volunteers engaged directly with BLESS programmes, whether individually or as part of a group, and whether identified through BLESS's own platforms or through partner platforms such as Workaway, Worldpackers, or Host and Volunteer. Acceptance of a volunteer placement at BLESS constitutes acceptance of this policy and the accompanying Volunteer Guidance Handbook in full.

2. ELIGIBILITY

Volunteers must:

- Be **18 years of age or older** at the time of arrival. There is no upper age limit, provided the individual is in good health and capable of participating in field or organisational activities.
- Demonstrate genuine interest in community development and social service.
- Be physically and mentally fit to participate in volunteer activities.
- Respect the values, culture, and mission of BLESS.
- Possess sufficient English communication skills. Knowledge of Tamil is advantageous but not mandatory.
- Be willing to comply with all BLESS policies and procedures.

BLESS accepts individual volunteers, student volunteers, skilled professionals, corporate volunteers, and groups of volunteers. Group volunteering arrangements shall be discussed and approved in advance based on programme capacity. Groups must designate a single point of contact (group leader) who will liaise with BLESS on all logistics, scheduling, and compliance matters. All group members must individually meet the eligibility criteria and submit their own documentation as specified in Section 6.

Volunteers with specific health conditions or disabilities are encouraged to disclose these at the time of application so that BLESS can assess how best to support them. BLESS will make reasonable efforts to accommodate differently-abled volunteers in suitable roles.

3. MINIMUM DURATION OF STAY

To ensure meaningful engagement and continuity of community activities:

- The **minimum volunteering period is one (1) calendar month (30 days).**

- Longer commitments are strongly encouraged. Community development work operates on trust and relationships — both with the communities we serve and within the BLESS team. A shorter engagement does not allow volunteers or BLESS to derive genuine value from the experience.
- Exceptions may be considered only under special circumstances and solely at the discretion of BLESS management.

4. HOW TO APPLY

Prospective volunteers may apply through any of the following channels:

- ✓ **Official Website:** www.bless.org.in (Volunteer section under "Support BLESS")
- ✓ **Workaway:** Search for BLESS on the Workaway platform. Please note that volunteers applying via Workaway are charged a platform contribution of **4 EURO per day** as per Workaway's host arrangement with BLESS.
- ✓ **Worldpackers:** Search for BLESS on the Worldpackers platform.
- ✓ **Host and Volunteer:** BLESS is listed on the Host and Volunteer platform.
- ✓ **Direct Email:** admin@bless.org.in — Applicants are welcome to write directly to present their experience, skills, motivation, and ideas for contributing.
- ✓ **Director's Contact:** The contact number of the Director (Executive Secretary, Mr. L.S. Anthony Samy) is available on the BLESS website at www.bless.org.in/contact-us/
- ✓ Applications should include a brief introduction, the applicant's background and skills, the intended period of stay, and any specific ideas or areas of interest.

5. ADVANCE COMMUNICATION REQUIREMENTS

To facilitate proper planning and field coordination:

All Volunteers

Volunteer plans, objectives, proposed activities, and ideas must be communicated to BLESS **strictly at least one (1) calendar month prior to arrival**. This is a firm operational requirement. BLESS's field project teams operate on scheduled activities across multiple villages. For a volunteer to be meaningfully integrated into field activities, the relevant team must be notified and given adequate time to plan. Volunteers who communicate their plans with less than one month's notice cannot be guaranteed integration into field activities and may have a limited experience as a result.

Confirmation of travel itinerary and expected date of arrival must be communicated **at least one week before arrival**. This allows BLESS to arrange reception, coordinate room readiness, and if required, arrange pickup.

International Volunteers

International volunteers who have been travelling elsewhere in India must not plan to check in at BLESS as a last-minute addition to their trip — for example, arriving with only a week's notice after completing travel in other parts of India. BLESS must be a planned destination, communicated well in advance. Requests made less than one month prior to intended volunteering commencement may be declined.

6. DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS

All documents must be **originals**. Photocopies, scanned copies, digital copies, or soft copies on a phone or laptop will not be accepted under any circumstances. A volunteer who is unable to produce original documents upon arrival will not be permitted to stay or volunteer with BLESS.

A. International Volunteers

Upon checking in at the BLESS head office, international volunteers must produce:

- Valid original **Passport**
- Valid original **Visa** (appropriate category permitting volunteer activity in India)

- **Passport-size photographs** (minimum two copies)
- Any other documentation required by Indian authorities

These documents are required because BLESS registers international volunteers with the **Bureau of Immigration, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India**, from its head office. This is a legal obligation and non-negotiable.

B. National Volunteers

National volunteers shall provide:

- **Aadhaar Card or any valid Government-issued National Identity Proof** (original)
- **Updated Resume / Curriculum Vitae**
- **Letter of Recommendation from their institution** — mandatory for student and intern volunteers. The letter must be on the institution's official letterhead, signed and stamped by the authorised signatory (Head of Department, Principal, or equivalent).

BLESS reserves the right to request additional documentation when necessary.

7. ORIENTATION AND INDUCTION

All volunteers shall participate in a mandatory orientation programme upon arrival at the BLESS head office. Volunteers may commence field activities only after completing orientation.

The orientation includes:

- Introduction to BLESS history, mission, vision, and values
- Overview of organisational structure
- Introduction to staff, project teams, fellow volunteers, and children
- Overview of all current programmes and the communities served
- A tour of the campus, Children's Home, and farm
- Discussion of the volunteer's skills, interests, and deployment
- Safety and security guidelines
- Cultural orientation
- Administrative procedures, including Bureau of Immigration registration for international volunteers
- Review of this Volunteer Policy and the Volunteer Guidance Handbook

8. VOLUNTEER GUIDANCE HANDBOOK

Upon arrival and as part of the orientation, every volunteer will receive a physical copy of the **BLESS Volunteer Guidance Handbook**. This is a detailed reference document that remains with the volunteer throughout their stay. Volunteers are required to read it in full and sign an acknowledgement of receipt and understanding before commencing any programme activity.

The Handbook contains:

- Comprehensive overview and detailed explanation of all BLESS programmes and project activities
- Organisational values and expectations
- Clear boundaries in community and field interactions

- Mutual expectations between BLESS and volunteers
- Volunteer roles, responsibilities, and limitations
- Recruitment and placement procedures
- Code of Conduct
- Child safeguarding and protection requirements
- Confidentiality and data privacy obligations
- Legal protections and liabilities applicable to volunteers in India
- Grievance redressal procedures
- Disciplinary procedures
- Health and safety guidance
- Emergency contacts and protocols

This Handbook forms an integral part of the volunteer agreement with BLESS.

9. NATURE OF VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT

Volunteers support existing BLESS initiatives and do not replace paid staff. Depending on skills, interests, and programme needs, volunteers may contribute to the following areas:

Education and After School Study Centres — Volunteers support children in the communities where BLESS works by engaging with them at the After School Study Centres. This may include conducting English classes, facilitating workshops in dance, yoga, arts and crafts, or sports, tutoring individual children in academic subjects, assisting with homework, conducting educational games, life skills sessions, and developing learning materials suited to the local curriculum. These Study Centres are embedded within BLESS's working villages, giving volunteers a direct and meaningful connection with the families and communities that BLESS serves.

Women's Empowerment — Volunteers can support BLESS's work with women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs), including facilitating awareness programmes, supporting vocational and sewing training sessions, assisting group activities, and documentation and training support.

Livelihood Promotion — Volunteers may support livelihood training activities, assist fish vendor federations, contribute to market linkage documentation, support agricultural demonstrations, and provide entrepreneurship mentoring. Those with relevant backgrounds may contribute to BLESS's work with the fish vendor Self-Help Groups, alternative livelihood training, or de-addiction programme awareness campaigns.

Housing and Community Infrastructure — Volunteers with civil engineering, architecture, or construction backgrounds and also who believe they can physically contribute as labour can contribute to BLESS's ongoing housing support work, which has included constructing and repairing over 500 homes, particularly for Tsunami and cyclone-affected families. Volunteers may also support documentation of housing initiatives and assist community mobilisation activities.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) — Volunteers may support hygiene promotion and waste management activities, community education sessions, and WASH awareness campaigns.

Health and Nutrition — Volunteers may support preventive health camps (including bi-monthly eye camps, women's health meetings, and nutrition camps), assist with nutrition awareness activities, and contribute to documentation and reporting.

Organisational Development — Volunteers with communication, writing, or management skills can support BLESS in fundraising, grant proposal writing, social media and communications, photography

and videography, graphic design, monitoring and evaluation, research and report writing, and administrative support. Volunteers have previously run successful online fundraisers and developed full project documentation during their placements.

Farm Support — The BLESS campus includes a working farm. Volunteers may assist with daily farm routines and, where relevant, contribute knowledge in agriculture.

Volunteers are warmly encouraged to bring their own ideas. Creative proposals that align with BLESS's values and community needs are welcomed — provided they are communicated at least one month in advance of arrival. Actual assignments will depend on organisational priorities and volunteer competencies.

10. EXPECTED SKILLS AND ATTRIBUTES

BLESS values diverse backgrounds and does not require a specific professional qualification. The following skills and attributes are expected of all volunteers:

- Respect, empathy, and cross-cultural sensitivity
- Adaptability and flexibility
- Teamwork and professional conduct
- Initiative and creativity
- Reliability and punctuality
- Strong communication skills
- Commitment to learning and problem-solving
- Willingness to comply with all BLESS policies

Professional skills relevant to programme areas including teaching, healthcare, social work, engineering, IT, design, agriculture, or finance are welcomed and will be deployed purposefully.

11. ACCOMMODATION AND FACILITIES

Volunteers will be accommodated within the BLESS residential complex at Reddichavady, on the same campus as the Children's Home and working farm, creating a family-like living environment. Subject to availability, accommodation may be private or shared.

Facilities include:

- Private or shared room with basic furnishings
- Shared bathroom facilities
- Access to common areas, garden, and farm
- Electricity and running water
- Home-cooked Tamil Nadu meals (breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea, and dinner)
- Internet connectivity for work purposes, subject to availability

Accommodation arrangements shall be communicated prior to arrival. Volunteers are expected to maintain cleanliness and respect shared living spaces. BLESS can arrange airport or bus-stand pickup if required — please communicate this need in advance.

The campus is situated close to Pondicherry, which is accessible by bus and offers markets, restaurants, beaches, and cultural attractions that volunteers frequently visit during personal time.

12. WORKING HOURS

Volunteer schedules vary according to programme requirements. Generally:

- Volunteers are expected to contribute approximately five working days per week.
- Daily schedules shall be agreed upon with supervisors.
- Attendance and punctuality are expected.
- Flexibility may be required depending on community activities and field schedules.

13. DRESS CODE

Volunteers shall dress modestly and appropriately at all times, both on campus and in the field, respecting local customs and cultural norms of the communities where BLESS operates. Comfortable, modest clothing such as full-length trousers, kurtas, or salwar kameez is recommended for field visits. Revealing, offensive, or culturally inappropriate clothing is not permitted. Failure to comply may result in corrective action.

14. PERSONAL TIME AND CURFEW

BLESS does not impose a specific curfew outside of official volunteering commitments. Volunteers are adults and are free to spend their personal time as they choose. However, all travel, activities, and personal exploration undertaken outside of BLESS's programme schedule are entirely at the volunteer's own risk and expense. BLESS does not bear responsibility for the safety, costs, or outcomes of personal travel. Volunteers are expected to inform designated staff when travelling independently, as a courtesy and for safety awareness.

15. HEALTH, SAFETY AND INSURANCE

Health: Volunteers are strongly advised to consult a travel health specialist before arriving in India and to obtain all recommended vaccinations. Volunteers should bring an adequate personal supply of any prescription medications. BLESS is not in a position to provide or finance medical care.

Safety: The BLESS campus and programme areas are generally safe. Volunteers should exercise standard personal safety precautions, particularly when travelling independently. BLESS staff are available to advise on local conditions.

Insurance: BLESS does not provide health, travel, accident, or any other insurance coverage to volunteers. All volunteers — national and international — must arrange and maintain their own comprehensive personal insurance covering the full period of their stay. International volunteers are strongly advised to obtain comprehensive travel insurance including medical evacuation coverage before departing for India. BLESS shall provide reasonable support during emergencies but shall not assume financial responsibility for medical treatment, hospitalisation, repatriation, or related expenses.

16. EXPENSES AND COMPENSATION

Volunteering with BLESS is entirely **unpaid**. BLESS provides accommodation and meals as in-kind support for the duration of the volunteer's stay. BLESS does not provide salaries, stipends, travel reimbursements, personal allowances, visa expenses, medical expenses, insurance coverage, or costs associated with leisure activities. All such expenses are entirely at the cost and responsibility of the individual volunteer.

Volunteers applying through **Workaway** are subject to the platform's daily contribution rate of **4 EURO per day** as outlined on the Workaway listing. Applicable terms from the respective platform also apply.

17. CODE OF CONDUCT

Volunteers shall at all times:

- Treat all BLESS staff, children, community members, and fellow volunteers with dignity and respect, without discrimination
- Maintain professional boundaries and protect the dignity of community members
- Follow staff instructions and respect organisational hierarchy
- Refrain from political and religious comments
- Refrain from substance abuse during volunteering activities and on the BLESS campus
- Use organisational resources responsibly
- Obtain explicit consent before taking photographs, recording video, or sharing stories involving community members or children. Images and content must not be shared on social media or other public platforms without BLESS's prior written approval
- Not enter into personal financial transactions with community members or children
- Not make commitments or promises to community members or children on behalf of BLESS without explicit authorisation

Any behaviour compromising the safety, dignity, or reputation of BLESS or community members may result in immediate termination of placement.

18. SAFEGUARDING

BLESS maintains zero tolerance toward abuse, harassment, exploitation, bullying, discrimination, and sexual misconduct. All volunteers share responsibility for safeguarding children and vulnerable adults.

Volunteers working in proximity to children must:

- Not administer any form of physical punishment or engage in inappropriate physical contact
- Not share personal contact details with children
- Not photograph or film children without explicit permission from BLESS staff
- Report any safeguarding concerns immediately to the designated BLESS supervisor

Detailed child protection and safeguarding requirements are contained in the Volunteer Guidance Handbook.

19. DATA PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Volunteers may access sensitive personal, organisational, and community information during their service. Accordingly, volunteers shall:

- Maintain confidentiality of all organisational information
- Protect beneficiary and community member identities
- Refrain from sharing personal data without authorisation
- Comply with applicable data protection requirements, including BLESS's Privacy Policy available at www.bless.org.in/privacy/

These obligations continue after the volunteering period ends. Volunteers may contact admin@bless.org.in regarding their own personal data held by BLESS.

20. GRIEVANCE AND DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES

BLESS is committed to fair and transparent processes.

Grievances: Volunteers may raise concerns through their designated supervisor or directly with the Director. BLESS will treat all concerns with confidentiality and seriousness, and will work to resolve issues constructively through informal discussion in the first instance.

Disciplinary Action: Where a volunteer violates this policy, the Code of Conduct, safeguarding guidelines, or any applicable law, BLESS may respond with a written warning, suspension of activities, or termination of the volunteer placement, depending on the severity of the conduct. Serious misconduct, including any matter involving child safeguarding or criminal conduct, may be referred to appropriate authorities.

21. TERMINATION OF VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT

Volunteer placements may be discontinued by either party with reasonable notice. BLESS reserves the right to terminate placements where volunteers violate policies, provide false information, engage in misconduct, fail to comply with documentation requirements, or compromise the safety or reputation of BLESS or the communities it serves. A volunteer whose placement is terminated on disciplinary grounds will not receive a refund of any platform fees or accommodation contributions.

22. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

This policy and all volunteering engagements are governed by the laws of India. The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, the Foreigners Act, and applicable provisions of Indian law apply to international volunteers. All international volunteers are responsible for ensuring that their visa status permits voluntary activity in India. BLESS will assist with Bureau of Immigration registration as required, but the volunteer bears sole responsibility for their legal compliance while in India.

23. CONTACT INFORMATION

BLESS Head Office

Pondy-Cuddalore Main Road, Reddichavady — 607 403
Cuddalore Taluk and District, Tamil Nadu, India

Executive Secretary (Director): Mr. L.S. Anthony Samy

Mobile: Available at www.bless.org.in/contact-us/

Email: admin@bless.org.in

Website: www.bless.org.in

24. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

By participating as a volunteer with BLESS, individuals acknowledge that they have read, understood, and agreed to comply with this Volunteer Policy and the accompanying Volunteer Guidance Handbook in full.

BLESS values the time, skills, compassion, and commitment that volunteers bring. Together, we work toward creating self-reliant communities through a family-focused approach.

This policy is subject to periodic review and revision. The current version will always be available on the BLESS website. Volunteers are advised to read the latest version before applying.