

# Incentivisation Guide for Voluntary, Non-Remunerated Blood Donation (VNRBD)

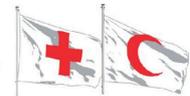
*Supporting safe, ethical and sustainable blood systems*



**Good governance, *safe blood***

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# 1. Introduction

## Purpose of the Guide

This guide is designed to help National Societies develop and implement practical, ethical, and effective strategies to encourage and sustain voluntary, non-remunerated blood donation (VNRBD). It provides a practical framework for acceptable donor incentives that align with global standards, helping National Societies transition away from family/replacement or paid donation systems toward a fully voluntary model.

## Target Audience

This guide is intended for National Society blood programs, policymakers, public health staff, donor recruiters, and community partners who promote and manage blood donation activities.

## Scope and Application

The guide outlines a range of acceptable non-remunerative strategies for motivating blood donors, based on internationally accepted principles and evidence-based practices. While respecting cultural and contextual differences, it emphasizes the importance of ethical consistency and long-term sustainability. The guide may also serve as a reference for capacity-building, advocacy, and training purposes.

The guidance is aligned with internationally recognised ethical frameworks, including the *Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine (Oviedo Convention, 1997)*. In particular, it upholds Article 21, which prohibits financial gain from the human body and its parts. By doing so, it aims to support the development of ethically sound, sustainable, and safe blood donation programs.

## Overview of VNRBD Principles

Voluntary, non-remunerated blood donation (VNRBD) means that people donate blood freely and willingly, without receiving payment in cash or in kind that could be considered a substitute for money.

The core principles of VNRBD are:

-  **Altruism** – Donors give blood to help others and save lives.
-  **Voluntariness** – Donation is given freely, without pressure, obligation, or coercion.
-  **Non-remuneration** – Donors receive no payment or benefit that could be seen as a financial incentive. Small gestures of appreciation, like refreshments or certificates, are acceptable if they don't influence the decision to donate.

These principles are not only ethical but also essential for ensuring a safe, sufficient, and sustainable blood supply. Voluntary donors are globally recognized as the safest source of blood, as they are motivated by humanitarian values rather than personal gain.

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization & International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. *Towards 100% Voluntary Blood Donation: A Global Framework for Action* (2010)

## 2. The Case for VNRBD

### Why VNRBD Matters for Safety and Supply

Voluntary, non-remunerated blood donation (VNRBD) is widely acknowledged as the foundation of a safe and sufficient national blood supply.<sup>2</sup> Donors who give blood out of altruism, without expecting anything in return, are more likely to be honest and open about their health and risk behaviours. This transparency significantly reduces the risk of transfusion-transmissible infections (TTIs) and ensures that blood collected is safe for patients.

A strong culture of voluntary donation also contributes to **blood availability and sustainability**. Regular voluntary donors tend to be more committed, more willing to return, and more responsive during shortages and emergencies. By building a pool of repeat, low-risk donors, VNRBD systems are better able to meet national transfusion needs.



The IFRC Blood Policy reinforces this by recognising VNRBD as a cornerstone of safe and sustainable national blood systems, essential to preventing shortages and protecting patients. It highlights that a sufficient supply of safe blood based on voluntary, non-remunerated donation is a critical national goal, directly contributing to public health and global commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals.

### What the Evidence Shows



The World Health Organisation (WHO) strongly advocates for 100% VNRBD as a global standard. Numerous studies have shown that blood from voluntary donors has **lower prevalence of HIV, hepatitis B and C, and syphilis** compared to blood from paid or family/replacement donors. As a result, many countries that transitioned to VNRBD models have seen improvements in both blood safety and sufficiency.

WHO's Global Framework for Action to Achieve 100% VNRBD outlines practical steps for countries to eliminate paid and replacement donation, recognizing VNRBD as a vital component of universal health coverage and patient safety.

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization & International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. *Towards 100% Voluntary Blood Donation: A Global Framework for Action* (2010)

## Challenges with Paid or Replacement Donation Systems

Blood systems that rely on paid or replacement donors face several serious challenges:

- **Increased risk of transfusion-transmissible infections** due to donors concealing risky behaviours.
- **Unreliable supply**, as replacement donors may only give once and under duress.
- **Unfair pressure**, particularly for vulnerable individuals who may feel forced to donate for a family member or in exchange for financial compensation.
- **Erosion of public trust** in the safety and ethics of the blood supply.

Furthermore, once tangible incentives - such as gifts or small payments - are introduced, there is a risk that altruistic motivations may be weakened. Evidence suggests that the initial effect of such rewards is limited, and over time maintaining donor engagement through these incentives can become costly and difficult to sustain.<sup>3</sup>

## Transitioning from Family Replacement or Paid Systems

Moving to a 100% VNRBD model requires sustained effort, cultural change, and investment in public education and donor engagement. However, many countries have successfully made this transition by:

- Starting with targeted pilot programs
- Running public awareness and school-based campaigns
- Replacing payments with non-material recognition

Key success factors include:

- Strong political commitment and policy frameworks
- Clear, consistent messaging on the value and safety of voluntary donation
- Development of donor-friendly services and environments
- Collaboration with civil society, schools, faith groups, and media

The short-term effort leads to long-term benefits: safer blood, repeat donors, and stronger public confidence.

## 3. Ethical Framework for Donor Incentivisation

### Understanding What's Acceptable

The idea behind VNRBD is simple – blood should be given freely. However, it is also important to recognise and show appreciation to donors and make their experience a positive one.

Acceptable forms of recognition are those that do not compromise voluntariness, are not of significant material value, and are clearly framed as tokens of appreciation rather than rewards.



<sup>3</sup> MacKay KJ, Schiltz F, Vandekerckhove P. Limited evidence, lasting decisions: How voluntary non-remunerated plasma donations can avoid the commercial one-way street. Vox Sang. 2024; 119: 529–532.

They should not be perceived by the donor or the public as a form of payment, nor should they create pressure to donate. In line with the principle of financial neutrality, any recognition should ensure that donors neither gain nor lose financially from their donation, maintaining the focus on altruism rather than material incentive.

## Incentives vs Rewards – What’s the Difference?

In the context of VNRBD, it's important to differentiate between:

- **Incentives** that support the donation experience (e.g. transport reimbursement, refreshments at the donation site, thank-you messages), and
- **Rewards or payments** that imply compensation for the act of donating (e.g. cash, gift cards, or valuable goods).

Sometimes the line is blurry. Decisions should be guided by principles of transparency, fairness, and the preservation of donor altruism.

## Keeping the Spirit of Voluntarism

All donor recognition strategies should uphold the following ethical principles:

- **Altruism:** The donor gives blood to help others, not to gain material benefit.
- **Voluntariness:** There must be no coercion, obligation, or undue influence.
- **Transparency:** Donors must be fully informed that their donation is voluntary and uncompensated.
- **Equity:** All donors should be treated fairly and equally, regardless of how often they donate.

Gifts or acknowledgements must be clearly presented as symbolic gestures. Public communication should reinforce the life-saving nature of blood donation rather than highlight any items received.



## Acceptable vs. Not Recommended Practices (with examples)

The table below gives examples of practices that are either consistent with, or not recommended under, VNRBD principles.

- **Acceptable** practices support altruism, voluntariness, and non-remuneration.
- **Not Recommended** practices either do not align with these principles or fall into grey areas where they may introduce ethical or motivational risks.

Incentives should always be evaluated in context. National Societies are encouraged to work with ethics committees, regulatory bodies, and communities to ensure all practices are culturally appropriate and ethically sound.



**Table 1.** Examples of acceptable and not recommended donor incentives under VNRBD principles.

Acceptable	Not Recommended
Light refreshments at donation site	Monetary payment or cash equivalents
Reimbursement for transport or parking costs	Gift cards, vouchers for food or retail
Certificates, thank-you cards, commemorative pins	Discounts on goods / services conditional on donation
Recognition in newsletters or social media	Conditional entry into prize draws or lotteries
Branded items (e.g. t-shirts, badges, mugs) of nominal value	Conditional access to services or benefits (e.g. free medical tests, faster healthcare access)
*Paid time off to donate blood (if part of supportive workplace policy and not contingent on donation)	Tax deductions, rebates or credits
#Recognition within voluntary service systems (symbolic, not financial)	High value goods or rewards (e.g. electronics, expensive items)

\* Some organisations allow paid time off for staff to donate blood. This can be acceptable if its positioned as support for civic participation and not seen as compensation.

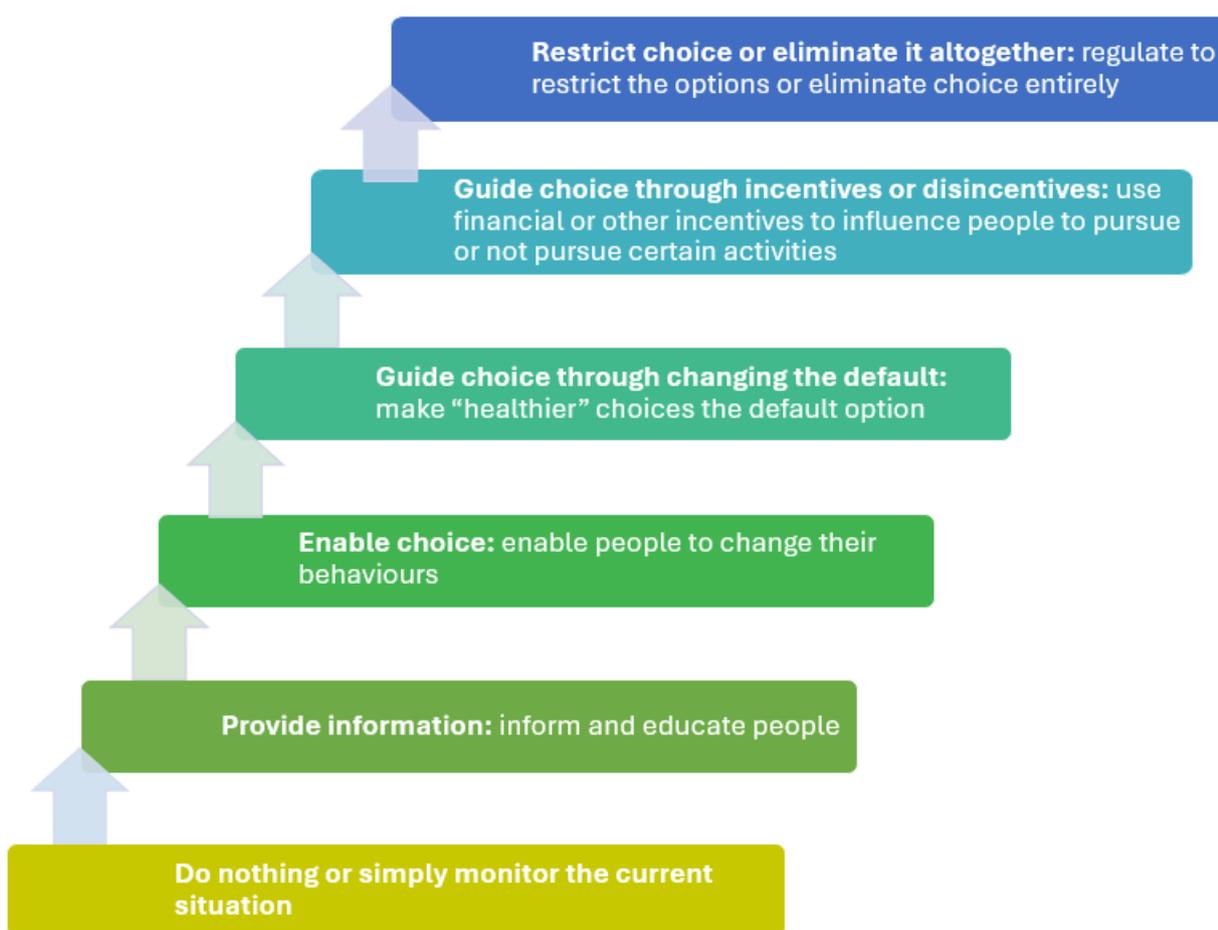
# In some countries, donation is formally counted as part of broader voluntary or civic service recognition.





Another useful way to think about acceptable vs. not recommended practices is through the Nuffield Council on Bioethics “Intervention Ladder”. This framework describes six levels of action, from least intrusive to most intrusive, that organisations can use to influence behaviour.

For voluntary blood donation, the principle is that interventions should stay in the lower rungs of the ladder - providing information, enabling choice, and creating supportive environments. Moving into higher rungs (like financial incentives or restrictions) risks undermining voluntariness and non-remuneration, which are at the heart of VNRBD.



**Figure 1.** The Nuffield Intervention Ladder. This model shows different ways organisations can influence behaviour. For VNRBD, acceptable incentives are those at the lower rungs - providing information, enabling choice, and guiding positive behaviours - while higher rungs, like financial incentives or restrictions, are not recommended.

## 4. Types of Acceptable Donor Incentives

Incentives can take many forms. To ensure they align with VNRBD principles, they must be ethically sound, non-coercive, and designed to support voluntary donation. Acceptable incentives fall into the following categories:

### Recognition and Appreciation

These forms of recognition have no monetary value and promote a culture of generosity and community contribution without implying that donors are being compensated.

- **Public recognition**  
Acknowledging donors through newsletters, social media posts, local media, or organisation websites helps build a culture of appreciation.
- **Milestone awards**  
Celebrating donation achievements (e.g. 10th, 25th, 50th donation) with certificates, pins, or wall displays reinforces long-term commitment.
- **Honorary or civic events**  
Involving donors in events like World Blood Donor Day, award ceremonies, or community health fairs provides symbolic recognition and visibility.



## Material tokens of appreciation

Small items given to donors as gestures of thanks. These should be of nominal value and not perceived as payment.

- **Branded merchandise**

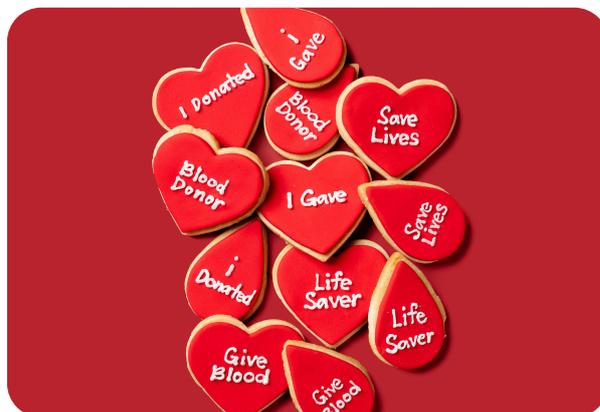
Items like T-shirts, mugs, water bottles, stickers, pens, pins/badges or keychains with blood service logos help promote the cause and give donors a sense of pride. Pins and badges can also be used to recognise donor milestones (e.g. 10th, 25th or 50th donation), celebrating long-term commitment.

- **Refreshments**

Providing snacks and drinks post-donation is a common and acceptable practice to aid donor recovery and show appreciation. Where on-site refreshments aren't possible, a voucher redeemable at a nearby café or restaurant can be offered.

- **Transport or parking reimbursement**

Covering the cost of travel to and from the donation site removes a barrier to access without constituting a financial reward.



## Employer or Institutional Support

These approaches encourage donation by making it easier and more visible, without attaching a financial value to the act. Involvement from workplaces or other institutions can help normalise blood donation as a socially responsible activity.

- **Time off work to donate**

Provided without any loss of pay, personal leave or other entitlements. This helps remove practical barriers, especially for donors who may not otherwise be able to attend during work hours.

- **Group donation programs**

Organised workplace or team-based donation drives, often with light internal recognition such as "Team Donor of the Month", shared photos, or acknowledgements in internal communications. These foster a sense of team spirit and shared community contribution.



All incentives should be regularly reviewed to ensure they are appropriate, culturally sensitive, and aligned with the core principles of VNRBD. Services should also monitor donor perceptions to ensure that even well-intentioned gifts do not shift the focus from altruism to personal gain.

## 5. Strategies for Donor Motivation and Retention

Sustainable blood supply depends not only on attracting new donors, but on maintaining long-term donor engagement. Incentivisation should be seen as just one part of a broader strategy that supports positive donor experiences and builds lasting commitment.

Key strategies include:

- **Providing a positive donor experience**

Comfortable donation environments, respectful staff interactions, and clear communication all contribute to donor satisfaction. Follow-up messages or post-donation contact can reinforce a sense of appreciation.

- **Communicating impact**

Donors are more likely to return if they understand the value of their contribution. This can include stories of patient outcomes, statistics on donation impact, or updates from the blood service.

- **Building community**

Programs that foster a sense of belonging - such as donor clubs, workplace teams, or community drives - can create a strong identity around giving blood and encourage repeat participation.

- **Tailoring messaging**

Motivations vary by demographic group. Messaging should reflect the values and concerns of the target audience - such as health, altruism, social justice, or civic duty - and avoid language that could be interpreted as transactional.

- **Recognising loyalty**

Acknowledging donor milestones (e.g. 10th, 25th, 100th donation) through certificates, events, or symbolic gifts helps reinforce long-term commitment without creating inappropriate incentives.



## 6. Incentivisation Considerations During Transition to 100% VNRBD

Many countries operate mixed blood systems, where both voluntary and paid or replacement donations exist. Transitioning to 100% voluntary, non-remunerated blood donation requires careful planning - particularly in relation to incentive use. While temporary support measures may be used in some contexts to maintain supply, these should be phased out in a way that supports long-term, ethical, and sustainable practices.

Key considerations include:

- **Gradual phasing out of inappropriate incentives**

Where material or monetary rewards have been offered, blood services should establish a clear timeline and communication strategy to remove these practices. Replacing them with acceptable forms of appreciation - such as donor recognition, personalised follow-up, or symbolic gifts - can help retain donors during the transition.



- **Managing donor expectations**

Donors accustomed to tangible rewards may need reassurance and education about the value and ethics of voluntary donation. Awareness campaigns should highlight altruism, community benefit, and the importance of a safe, equitable blood supply.

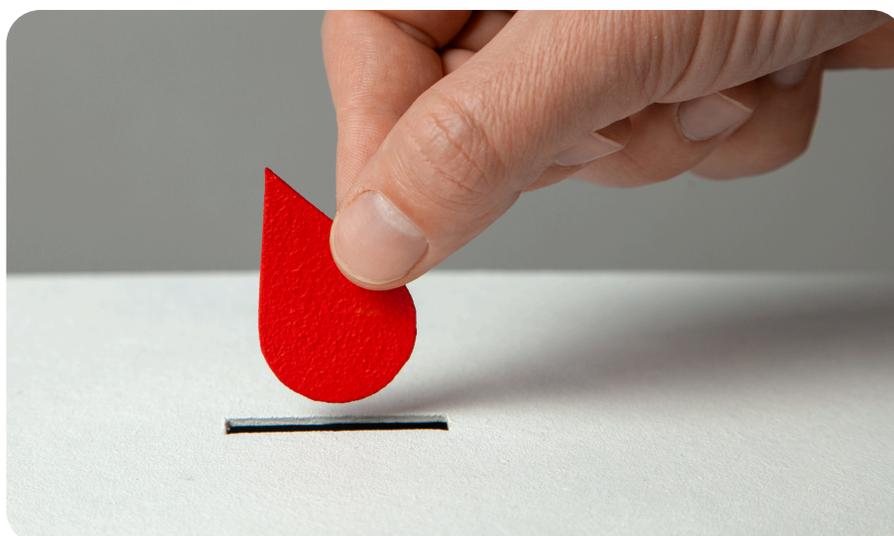
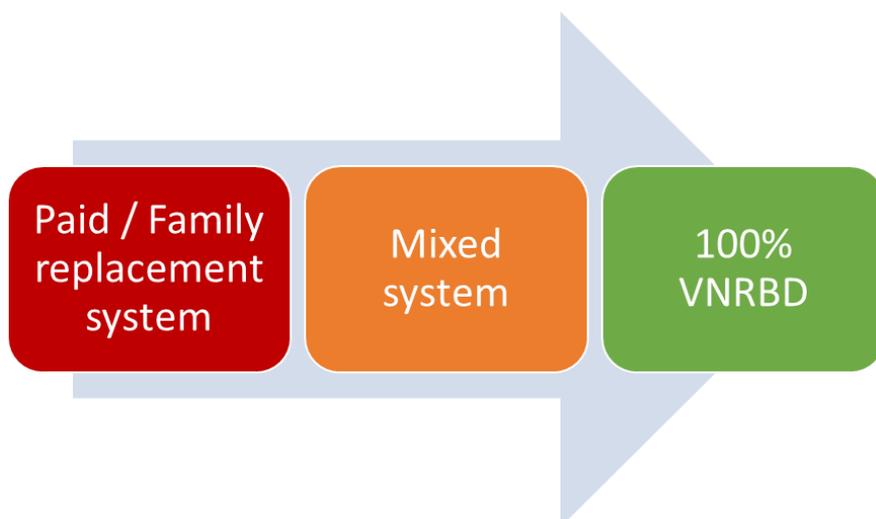
- **Engaging stakeholders**

Healthcare workers, community leaders, and employers can play a powerful role in reinforcing VNRBD messages and supporting donor retention through non-material means. Their involvement helps build credibility and community trust in the transition.

- **Monitoring behavioural shifts**

It is important to closely observe donor patterns, retention rates, and feedback to understand how changes to incentives are affecting motivation and trust. Strategies should remain flexible and responsive to local realities, while keeping sight of the long-term goal.

The transition to 100% VNRBD is not only a logistical shift - it is a cultural one. Ensuring that any form of donor recognition or support remains consistent with voluntary, non-remunerated principles is key to building a sustainable and ethically sound blood supply.





## 7. References and Further Reading

### GAP & IFRC Operational Guidance

- **Manual for the Development of Safe & Sustainable National Blood Programmes (2021)** – GAP-backed resource offering practical tools for recruitment, retention and risk reduction in VNRBD systems.
- **GAP Blood Donor Recruitment resources** - Provides customisable tools for communication, awareness, and campaign planning.
- **GAP E-learning modules** - Self-paced online training modules designed to strengthen VNRBD programs.
- **IFRC Toolkit: “Making a Difference... Recruiting VNRBD Donors”** – Practical global case studies around education, marketing, and donor retention strategy .

### WHO Global Frameworks and Policies

- **Toward 100% Voluntary Blood Donation: A Global Framework for Action (2010)** – Co-published by WHO, IFRC, IFBDO, and ISBT. Provides strategic guidance for phasing out paid and replacement donations and building sustainable VNRBD systems.
- **IFRC blood policy**
- **Expert Consensus Statement on Self-Sufficiency in Safe Blood and Blood Products (2011)** – WHO expert consultation reports on how to develop national VNRBD programmes.
- **Voluntary Non-Remunerated Blood Donations to Ensure Blood Safety in the South-East Asia Region (2023)** – WHO SEARO policy analysis and recommendations for transitioning to VNRBD in LMICs.
- **SOHO regulation** - European rules on the quality and safety standards for substances of human origin - including blood, tissues and cells - intended for human use.

### Ethics and Principles

- **The Oviedo Convention: Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine (1997)** – Council of Europe treaty establishing principles for medical ethics, including the prohibition of financial gain from the human body and its parts (Article 21). Forms a key ethical foundation for VNRBD policy.
- **The Melbourne Declaration on 100% VNRBD (2009)** – Sets out foundational ethical commitments for eliminating paid or replacement blood donation nationally
- **WHO “Voluntary Donation” webpage and policies** – Lays out the core rationale behind VNRBD as the safest source of blood donors.

## Donor Psychology & Motivation

- **Barriers and Motivations for Blood Donation: An Integrative Review (2023)** – Synthesises recent global evidence on factors influencing donor behaviour and retention
- **Advancing Understandings of Blood Donation Motivation and Behaviour (2023)** – Explores motivations, emotions, and discourse around blood giving, with an emphasis on diverse and under-represented donor groups
- **BMC Hematology: Motivational Factors and Barriers (2018)** – Empirical insights into how public education and staff attitude influence donation rates in a developing-country context

## Supporting Organisations

- **International Federation of Blood Donor Organizations (IFBDO)** – An international body promoting self-sufficiency through voluntary blood donation and organizing World Blood Donor Day activities
- **ISBT Donors and Donation Working Party** – International Society of Blood Transfusion group focused on research, training, and policy around safe donor systems and VNRBD goals



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