

Paper Presentation

Topic: Mobilization and Management of Volunteers

Creating a Favourable Environment for Volunteerism in Development

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Abstract

The International Year of Volunteers (IYV) 2001 focused international attention on the power of voluntary action. Main objectives of the Year were increased recognition, facilitation, networking and promotion of volunteering. It highlighted the need to support and promote volunteering in all its forms—provision of service, mutual aid and self-help groups, activism and campaigning, and civic participation.

As more and more countries seek to incorporate volunteerism into their development thinking and planning, it is important to develop strategies to ensure that volunteers, volunteer-involving organisations, and participatory development strategies may flourish in a supportive, encouraging, and promoting environment.

Strategies should include increasing public knowledge, understanding and appreciation of volunteerism; adopting public policies and regulations which will nurture and support volunteering; and expanding volunteer infrastructure and management capacities as well as encouraging innovative approaches to volunteering in development.

“If our hopes of building a better and safer world for all are to become more than wishful thinking, we will need the engagement of volunteers more than ever.”

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan

Introduction

The International Year of Volunteers (IYV) 2001 focused international attention on the power of voluntary action. Main objectives of the Year were increased recognition, facilitation, networking and promotion of volunteering. It also highlighted the need to support and promote volunteering in all its forms—provision of service, mutual aid and self-help groups, activism and campaigning, and civic participation.

Voluntary action is both a huge resource and catalyst for sustainable development.

During the last decade, volunteering has been explicitly recognized as an asset in an increasing number of global agreements and plans of action. For example, the Plan of Action of the World Summit on the Information Society (2003) emphasizes the valuable role volunteering can play in building a more inclusive information society. The Report of the World Conference on Disaster Reduction (2005) recognizes the importance of involving, among others, volunteers in disaster reduction and proposes strategic management of volunteer resources, such as community-based trainings, and national, regional and international volunteer corps.

World leaders made a compact to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—eradicating absolute poverty, fighting illiteracy and disease, protecting the environment, promoting gender equality, and creating a global partnership for development—by the year 2015. The extent to which Governments, civil sectors, private sectors, and international partners recognize the value of volunteerism as a means of capital formation for development, and support and cultivate it, will help to define the extent to which the MDGs will be reached and sustained.

Creating a favourable national environment for volunteerism in development is key to unleashing the power of voluntary action. Strategies should include increasing public knowledge, understanding and appreciation of volunteerism; adopting public policies and regulations which will nurture and support volunteering; and expanding volunteer infrastructure and management capacities as well as encouraging innovative approaches to volunteering in development.

Increased Knowledge and Awareness

Four years after the International Year of the Volunteer, a global survey of developments in volunteering, was commissioned by the United Nations Volunteers (UNV), which included extensive consultations with government, civil society organisations, UN agencies, international volunteer-involving organisations, and private sector stakeholders, as well as an internet public poll.

The review suggests that there has been a growing public awareness of volunteering. International Volunteer Day (IVD) in many countries is helping to stimulate this. It is becoming a well established and supported global event with increasing linkages to the Millennium Development Goals. More than 125 developing and industrialized countries mark the Day annually. Numerous countries have backed volunteer awareness campaigns through statements from high level officials and special media coverage, and instituted local and national volunteer award schemes.

Another indicator of increased awareness of volunteerism is the WorldVolunteerWeb.org portal administered by United Nations Volunteers, launched in December 2002, as a global one-stop-shop for news and information, resources, and interactive volunteer networking services. It is unique in offering a place where the global volunteering community can come together to share best practices and mobilize activities at all levels to address the Millennium Development Goals. In 2004 the number of organisations and individual visitors, as well as pages viewed, increased by over twenty percent. Monthly newsletters, introduced in 2004, have over 20,000 subscribers and the number is rising. With support from One World Net, a civil society news portal, the WVV portal launched a first online discussion forum on

volunteering and environmental sustainability, with around seven hundred people from over a hundred countries. Other Millennium Development Goal related discussions are planned in partnership with the Millennium Campaign. This portal also serves as a global networking hub for International Volunteer Day national focal points.

Some research is being done in developing countries to understand the national characteristics and scope of volunteerism and to help to determine appropriate volunteering development strategies and policies, e.g. Mauritania, Albania, Croatia, the Philippines, Hungary, Indonesia, Lebanon, Ghana, and Mexico. The United Nations Volunteers and New Academic of Business action research project (Enhancing Business-Community Relations, 2004) explored business-community relations and volunteer-related corporate responsibility practices at the local level in seven countries in the South. Acceptance by the United Nations Statistical Commission of the Handbook on Nonprofit Institutions in the System of National Accounts (2003) holds the promise of an objective global civil society index, which will allow analysis over time and across countries. This should increase awareness of the economic contribution of volunteerism and facilitate supportive policy development. Nine developing countries, out of the 43 countries piloting the Handbook, are part of a joint UNV and John Hopkins University initiative emphasizing the volunteer indicators of the Handbook. But overall, developing country research remains a small and insufficient portion of the total research on volunteerism.

Supportive Public Policies

Government and Parliament play vital roles in supporting and nurturing volunteerism locally and nationally. Enactment of national legislation on volunteering can build an environment that recognizes volunteering and encourages its development. Beyond volunteer specific policies, existing laws and regulations should be reviewed in terms of their impact on volunteerism. Volunteerism should be considered as a major development resource and integrated into national development planning and objectives. The UN General Assembly included legislation which encourages or inspires citizens to volunteer among the recommendations for supporting volunteering in Resolution 56/38, adopted at the 56th session in 2001.

Eastern Europe and Latin America has been particularly active in formulating and passing supportive legislation. In response to growing interest by countries, a Guidance Note on Volunteerism and Legislation (2004) was prepared jointly by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the United Nations Volunteers.

International and domestic laws and regulations can affect volunteerism in a country. States should be conscious of the implications of existing laws in different areas on volunteering:

- Fundamental rights and freedoms: Volunteering should be promoted and protected under laws on fundamental rights and freedoms. The term “volunteering” should not be misused to cover compulsory labour.
- Labour law: Some labour laws expressly or tacitly extend their scope to

protect individuals other than paid employees. Unpaid voluntary service often share similar characteristics to paid work. The issue is whether such protection benefits volunteerism or imposes unnecessary or undesirable burdens on the volunteer involving organisations or beneficiaries of volunteer services. It may be necessary to expressly exclude volunteers from certain labour law provisions.

- o Health and safety: should cover volunteers along with employees at the workplace
- o Liability of volunteers: Volunteers should be protected from liability for damage or injury, through transfer of liability to the volunteer involving organisation, as is the case for paid employees. Laws which encourage or prescribe liability insurance policies, should also ensure regulation of rates so that costs do not become prohibitive for organisations wanting to involve volunteers.
- o Minimum wage: Volunteers should be expressly excluded from application of minimum wage provisions. Reimbursement of reasonable expenses and necessary subsistence support of their service should not be construed as requiring they be considered employees.
- o Employee volunteering: Labour laws should encourage and facilitate employee volunteering. When an employer encourages employees to volunteer during work hours, time spent should be compensated as work. Laws may allow employees to take sabbatical time from work to volunteer with civil society organizations, without detriment to the contract with the employer.
- Tax law:
 - o In some countries, even reimbursement of travel expenses and subsistence allowances are taxable. To facilitate recruitment of volunteers from all economic backgrounds, tax provisions should expressly exempt volunteers from paying taxes on “reasonable” and “necessary” reimbursements.
 - o Tax regulations can encourage and help to sustain voluntary action through tax exemptions and deductions for private, individual, or corporate funding to volunteer involving organisations.
- Social welfare law: Social welfare laws should establish clear conditions under which beneficiaries are permitted to volunteer without losing their entitlements. This can promote the inclusion of diverse volunteers who might otherwise be excluded, such as migrants, ethnic minorities, the disabled, aged, and unemployed.
- Immigration law: Immigration law should facilitate entry into a country for the purposes of volunteering through acknowledged international cooperation programmes. Adequate visa and resident permits should be provided, such as issuance of volunteer visas, work permits for “activities of a charitable nature” or entry permits for specialized workers contributing to economic or social development.
- Regulatory frameworks for civil society organisations: Civil sector organizations, including nonprofit organizations, secular and religious associations, foundations, and trade unions, actively involve volunteers in a

multitude of capacities. A supportive legal environment for the establishment of non-governmental organizations is a key to the further development of volunteerism in a country. This environment should encourage the establishment of formal and informal volunteer organizations; improve their visibility and credibility with reasonable official registration conditions; recognize their independence from the State; and ensure dialog with the State and measures to support and facilitate the sustainability of nonprofit organizations.

State recognition of volunteers as a legal category per se will provide the maximum benefit from volunteerism and from the exchange of volunteers among countries. Leaving volunteers within the legal framework for paid work or employment creates a danger that employers may use the undefined situation to exploit cheap labour. Adoption of framework laws on volunteerism, which enhance recognition of voluntary activity and remove legal and regulatory barriers, can facilitate incorporation of volunteerism into policy-making processes.

Existing volunteerism framework laws tend to include the legal definition of a volunteer and voluntary activity as distinct from employment, general principles of volunteerism, codes of conduct that determine the relationship between volunteers and their volunteer involving organizations, and measures to further recognize, facilitate, and promoted the development of volunteerism and networking of volunteers.

- Legal definitions: Different national laws and regulations establish different definitions of “volunteering”, depending on tradition and culture. Legislators should provide the most comprehensive, flexible, and inclusive definitions possible for volunteers and voluntary activity. Laws should distinguish clearly between unpaid volunteer service and paid employment, by beginning with the assumption that volunteers are not paid for their services and that financial gain is not the primary motivation.
- A code of conduct for volunteers and volunteer involving organizations helps to clarify roles and responsibilities. Provisions might include volunteer rights and benefits, such as a safe, secure and healthy environment or accreditation; duties of volunteers, such as observe organization regulations and respect beneficiaries; and responsibilities of volunteer involving organizations, such as reimbursement of expenses, appropriate training, and appropriate infrastructure.
- Recognition of volunteer contributions: Laws should recognize the value of volunteer contributions, e.g. institute national volunteer awards, approve a system of academic credits for volunteering, count time spent on volunteer action towards future social welfare pensions.
- Role of governments: Government plays a key role through policy measures to implement the laws. Policy measures can include:
 - o Awareness campaigns on the value and benefits of volunteering
 - o Technical, logistical and financial assistance for volunteer coordinating organizations
 - o Financial support measures for volunteers, such as public transportation discounts
 - o Development and support of research on volunteerism, including national mechanisms to measure the contribution of volunteerism to

development

Governments should also consider supporting national and local volunteer committees with relevant public authorities, public and private volunteer organizations, business and other important donors, and academia as members. Such committees can help to monitor implementation of laws, identify issues for future legislation, and provide forums to identify roles, better coordinate activities, exchange best practices, and identify areas for cooperation.

- Role of Parliaments:
 - o Oftentimes, there will be legislation on issues which does not directly address volunteering, but where volunteer support can be vital to the success of the action proposed. Consultative systems can assist parliamentarians to identify these cross-cutting issues and advocate for the inclusion of support for volunteerism.
 - o Other laws and regulations may support organized voluntary action, such as establishment of a national volunteer centre and provide legal protection to volunteers acting through public or private organizations.
 - o Some laws and regulations promote and support voluntary participation by specific groups, such as youth or unemployed persons; or promote volunteerism in specific areas of interest, e.g. social development, international development cooperation, civil protection, and disaster management.

It is important to note that laws and statutes alone cannot fully define the environment for volunteerism. Volunteerism is about people choosing to make their own contribution. Legislation and regulations drafted for the purpose of control, instead of facilitation, would distort the spirit of volunteerism. Legislation on volunteerism should not restrict or undermine the social and cultural characteristics, traditions and other principles and norms by which citizens of a country choose to undertake voluntary action. Also there should be full consultation with principal stakeholders, especially from the civil society sector, so that the legislation and regulations are aligned with real needs and possibilities and not creating additional challenges to volunteerism for development.

Expanding Capacity and Approaches

With increased encouragement of volunteering has come increased awareness of the need for effective volunteer management systems. National volunteer studies frequently note the need for infrastructure, coordination, and training. “Professional” training of public and civil sector volunteer managers is increasingly popular, as are volunteer networks, and online resources. There have been examples of both government-led and civil society-led efforts to establish national volunteering agencies (including national youth corps), national volunteer centres, regional and local networks of volunteer agencies, and incentives and recognitions for volunteers.

Globalization is providing innovative opportunities for volunteering for development, such as online volunteering, information technology volunteering to bridge the digital divides, regional multi-national volunteer service projects, and diaspora and South-South expert service initiatives.

For example, online volunteering provides new access opportunities both to

volunteers and service recipients. Online volunteers are recruited and provide their services through the internet and other technological means, rather than on site. It broadens the opportunities for service for people such as the disabled, seniors, youth, busy professionals and caregivers, and those with limited means. It also provides service recipients with new opportunities for capacity development. Individuals and organisations in remote areas and other countries may access specialized volunteer services that might not be available or affordable otherwise. In 2005, the United Nations Volunteers Online Volunteering service is celebrating its 5th year. This initiative has involved some 600 organisations and about 15,000 assigned volunteers. Approximately 55 percent of the organisations participating in the Online Volunteers service are based in the developing world, as are 45 percent of the online volunteers.

Formal support by the private sector for volunteering, whether in terms of employee volunteer schemes, resources for volunteer projects, or private-public-civil sector partnerships, has been growing rapidly in industrialized countries and is spreading within more and more developing countries. Under the UNV-managed Corporate/Private Sector programme, senior business leaders and retired executives provide managerial and technical advice to companies and industries in developing countries and emerging economies. For example, in Vietnam, two employee volunteers, during a 2 week mission, provided technical assistance and made recommendations on how to standardize and improve the quality of a local coffee and prevent mould contamination. In developing countries, although the formal programmes tend to be encouraged mainly by the multinational companies, traditions of volunteerism among local businesses have resulted in noteworthy actions in response to disasters.

Conclusion

The 2005 Report of the Secretary-General on the “Follow-up to the Implementation of the International Year of Volunteers” concludes overall progress on the developing of supportive environments for volunteerism. Levels of awareness are growing in many countries in all regions. Governments, the media and the private sector are increasingly vocal in their support for volunteering. Infrastructure is being developed to facilitate volunteerism, both in terms of the human capital needed to recruit, train and support volunteers and in terms of the physical structures to sustain and enhance those activities. The legislative environment is becoming increasingly supportive of volunteering and the contribution that volunteering makes to individuals and societies is increasingly recognized. All of which should lead to increased participation in voluntary activity.

These global trends vary widely, however, between countries and regions. In some countries, negative concepts of volunteering must still be overcome; the government is not supportive of volunteering; media is not interested; or economics, national security or internal conflicts are diverting attention from the expansion, or even maintenance, of levels of volunteering.

Volunteerism is an important component of any strategy to reduce poverty and to ensure that development is sustainable and that health and education is improved; an important component to bring about social integration and, in particular, to overcome social exclusion and discrimination. As more and more countries seek to incorporate

volunteerism into their development thinking and planning, it is important to develop strategies to ensure that volunteers, volunteer-involving organisations, and participatory development strategies may flourish in a supportive, encouraging, and promoting environment.

References

1. *Volunteerism and Legislation: A Guidance Note*, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and United Nations Volunteers
2. <http://www.worldvolunteerweb.org/>

Based in Bonn, Germany, UNV is the UN organisation that supports sustainable human development globally through the promotion of volunteerism, including the mobilization of volunteers. As a part of its activities, each year, UNV provides the opportunity for over 7,000 skilled and experienced professionals, 70 percent coming from developing countries, to support peace, relief and development initiatives in some 150 countries. In addition, it engages thousands of other individuals in the work of the United Nations through www.onlinevolunteering.org, and manages the WorldVolunteerWeb, a global volunteering portal that serves as a knowledge resource base for campaigning, advocacy, information dissemination and networking.