



**UN**

**Volunteers**

## **Volunteerism and the Millennium Development Goals:**

### **an opportunity and an imperative**

*In 2000, 10 million people volunteered to support the immunization of 550 million children as part of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative. The vast majority were concerned citizens, volunteering in their own communities. They gave their time to ensure that children reported to immunization stations, were properly documented and received the oral vaccine. The estimated total value of the support provided by these volunteers was US\$10 billion, putting it well beyond the reach of either governments or the United Nations and its partner organizations. Capacity was developed in the process. In return for their time, the local volunteers received health training and the opportunity to continue to contribute to their communities.*

1. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) can only be achieved with the full involvement of people all over the world. Citizens need to take ownership of the Goals and apply their ingenuity and creativity if absolute poverty is to be reduced by 2015. Efforts on the part of national governments to meet MDG targets, even when supported by the international community, will have limited impact without significant voluntary effort. Citizen action is both an imperative and an opportunity, and volunteerism - when adequately supported and promoted - can be a highly effective channel through which such action can be mobilized.
2. The International Year of Volunteers (IYV) 2001 created global awareness about the massive contribution that individuals make to development through voluntary action.<sup>i</sup> Whether expressed as volunteer service, mutual aid and self-help, campaigning<sup>ii</sup> or other forms of voluntary participation, the willingness and ability of people to give freely of their time out of a sense of solidarity will have a major influence on the extent to which the MDGs are attained and sustained. IYV 2001 also highlighted the need to plan strategically for volunteer involvement and for channelling volunteer effort towards activities that have a high impact on the living conditions of the more disadvantaged members of society.
3. Volunteers are helping to create wide-scale awareness about the imperative of meeting the MDGs and the ways and means by which everyone, individually or through collective action, can contribute. International Volunteer Day (IVD) on 5 December of each year provides a rallying point for organizations and individual volunteers to express their support for the MDGs and to consider ways to help achieve the targets. Volunteers are being called upon to consolidate and multiply capacity to act at all levels, in particular at the grass root level, thus creating conditions for citizens to play a fuller role in addressing poverty issues.
4. The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme, the UN organization that promotes volunteerism and mobilizes volunteers for peace and development, works towards the attainment of the MDGs. Each year, UNV assigns as UN Volunteers over 7300 skilled and experienced professionals from some 165 countries around the world to support a broad range of development programmes - themselves at the core of the MDGs - in some 140 countries. The Programme provides a unique window of opportunity for qualified global citizens, whatever their origins, to share their expertise and to demonstrate solidarity with, and support for, the aspirations of the Millennium Declaration.

#### **United Nations Volunteers**

PO Box 260 111 53153 Bonn Germany Telephone +49.228.815-2000 Fax +49.228.815-2001

Email [information@unvolunteers.org](mailto:information@unvolunteers.org) <http://www.unvolunteers.org>

UN Volunteers is administered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)



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5. UNV has both experience and a number of assets to draw on in helping to ensure that the power of volunteerism is recognized and acted upon in support of the MDGs, including:
  - A direct link to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and its extensive network of country offices;
  - Close partnerships with the United Nations and most UN system organizations, funds and programmes as well as with international and national volunteer involving organizations and volunteer networks;
  - A global volunteer network of which the more than 7300 UN Volunteers themselves are only a part<sup>iii</sup>;
  - An active online volunteering programme (co-founded in partnership with NetAid) that since its launch in 2000 some 30,000 people have joined with more than half taking on an assignment;
  - The World Volunteer Web ([www.worldvolunteerweb.org](http://www.worldvolunteerweb.org)), a global volunteering portal, which houses a growing data base of information resources that can be used for campaigning, advocacy, networking and action;
  - Know-how in running a global campaign demonstrated by its recognized success as focal point of the International Year of Volunteers (IYV 2001) and its follow-up.
6. The UNV programme promotes volunteerism in other ways including support to efforts to measure the economic contribution of voluntary action and have this reflected in the system of national accounts; identifying and sharing best practices in the field of volunteerism; promoting suitable capacity development for national volunteer centres and volunteer service schemes; advising on enabling fiscal and legislative frameworks; and fostering the creation of training infrastructure for organizations to introduce and enhance volunteer opportunities for citizens.

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<sup>i</sup> Voluntary action is at the core of social capital and underpins most social action in civil society. It occurs spontaneously as is often the case with natural disasters where citizens come forward to volunteer to assist the victims of floods, earthquakes or forest fires. It is also expressed through civil society organizations (CSOs). CSOs encompass a very broad range of types and serve an array of constituencies. However, one feature they have in common is that their roots lie in volunteerism. People join non-governmental organizations to volunteer a wide array of services in every field covered by the MDGs. People also volunteer to serve in the governance structures of the organizations themselves. Volunteerism is also present, in a less visible way, through membership in innumerable grassroots associations found in every part of the globe. Generally drawing on long-established traditions of sharing skills, time, ideas and energy, the full alignment of volunteer action through community groups with the MDGs is critical in addressing the challenges.

<sup>ii</sup> One of the most successful global campaigns of recent times - the International Campaign to Ban Landmines relied on the active participation of hundreds of thousands of volunteers. Large numbers of citizens have been mobilized around other campaigns in such fields as literacy, housing, human rights, sustainable environment and women's rights.

<sup>iii</sup> Networking among volunteers and volunteer involving organizations is a critical factor in the scaling-up and replication of experiences across communities and national frontiers.