



RESPONDING TO EMERGENCIES

CRISIS RESPONSE AND DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT

The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme has a long history of supporting relief operations in the aftermath of disasters, from Hurricane Mitch in Central America in 1998, to the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, the October 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, the Honduras storm in 2007 and the 2008 cyclones in Myanmar and Haiti.

Scores of UNV volunteers have helped coordinate relief efforts, mobilize resources and rehabilitate devastated populations. Their rapid deployment, professional skills and prior experience in disaster response brings hope to overwhelmed communities. Their presence also supports communications between ordinary people and national governments, donors, international aid organizations and the UN system. UNV volunteers provide a crucial way to tailor assistance to local needs and conditions.

UNV volunteers based in disaster-prone regions, often serving in their own communities, work with residents, local and regional officials and representatives from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to empower communities to respond to disasters. They work with community volunteers to develop disaster mitigation programmes that reflect local circumstances. As a result, thousands of villages across several countries are now ready to face and survive natural disasters.

Advocacy, integration and mobilization

UNV advocates the importance of engaging trained and organized volunteers in disaster responses. We also advocate for national policies and concrete actions to strengthen support and recognition of volunteers in disaster response activities. We work with partners to integrate volunteerism into development programming, and we help mobilize volunteers directly and via partnerships.

After UNV volunteers responded to the Pakistan earthquake in 2005, the government established a National Volunteer Movement to mobilize Pakistani citizens to support relief and rehabilitation activities. The scheme continues today.



Krukira Region, Nicaragua. A beneficiary from the Techo programme cutting wood to repair his roof. The wood used to repair the roofs comes from the trees fallen after the passage of Hurricane Felix. (Photo: UNV/Mario Rizzolio)

Tsunami response

Following the Indian Ocean Tsunami of December 2004, UNV quickly mobilized experts to support immediate and long-term recovery and reconstruction in Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Indonesia, with financial support from the Governments of Japan, Germany and the Czech Republic. Less than 24 hours after the tidal waves hit, UNV volunteers were able to join UN country teams in many of the affected countries to identify relief and recovery priorities.

In the weeks that followed, additional volunteers arrived to help coordinate the massive relief effort. UNV volunteers were engaged as emergency aid coordinators, psychologists, education specialists, urban planners, project officers and community development specialists. They set up and managed information networks and databases that played a vital role in the distribution of aid to victims. UNV continues to support UNDP, other UN agencies and national governments in long-term recovery and reconstruction efforts.



Volunteerism and Response

Volunteerism also serves as an effective support system in the wake of a disaster. In 2003, in the aftermath of the worst flooding in Sri Lanka in 50 years, Indian UNV volunteers arrived within hours to provide relief alongside their Sri Lankan colleagues. The Indian volunteers brought with them experience in coordinating relief and rehabilitation activities. They helped Sri Lankans provide survivors with shelter, food and first aid, contain epidemics, rebuild infrastructure and make strategic use of information tools. The UNV volunteers assisted authorities and communities in assessing damage, streamlining information and distributing relief, acting as district-level focal points for local and international donor assistance.

Volunteerism and Reconstruction

Volunteering also plays a central role in post-disaster reconstruction efforts. An earthquake in El Salvador in 2001 saw the mobilization of significant numbers of local volunteers. Citizens of Kobe, Japan, offered financial support to match locally raised funds for school reconstruction. UNV acted as a bridge for channelling this assistance from people who could easily share the feelings of victims of a disaster occurring almost exactly six years after their own.



Kashmir, Pakistan. UNV volunteer Naheed Hanif (standing) talks to internally displaced people after the 2005 earthquake. (Photo: UNV/Waqas Anees)

Volunteerism and Prevention

Volunteerism is essential in reducing vulnerability to natural disasters. Early warning systems typically rely on volunteers to strengthen community resilience. Voluntary action by ordinary citizens is vital for the provision of accurate weather forecasts around the world, for example. Every day millions of farmers, aviators, sea captains and fishing industry workers provide information on a voluntary basis about rainfall and climatic conditions to national authorities and the World Meteorological Organization. This information helps to predict storms and other phenomena and give people an early warning of their potential impact.

More than 30,000 people in Bangladesh volunteer with the Red Cross and Red Crescent Society. Equipped with hand sirens, transistor radios, signal flags, first aid equipment and rescue kits, they are a communications channel relaying weather bulletins to 10 million people living in areas of cyclone risk.

About United Nations Volunteers

UNV is the UN organization that contributes to peace and development through volunteerism worldwide. Volunteerism is a powerful means of engaging people in tackling development challenges, and it can transform the pace and nature of development. Volunteerism benefits both society at large and the individual volunteer by strengthening trust, solidarity and reciprocity among citizens, and by purposefully creating opportunities for participation. UNV contributes to peace and development by advocating for recognition of volunteers, working with partners to integrate volunteerism into development programming, and mobilizing an increasing number and diversity of volunteers, including experienced UNV volunteers, throughout the world. UNV embraces volunteerism as universal and inclusive, and recognizes volunteerism in its diversity, as well as the values that sustain it: free will, commitment, engagement and solidarity.

If you want to become a UNV volunteer, please visit the UNV website:

<http://www.unv.org/en/how-to-volunteer.html>