



**PRESS RELEASE**

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# New Forms of Volunteerism Contribute Significantly to Human Development

*New opportunities to volunteer are excellent news for the social fabric of our societies, says United Nations report*

**Bonn, 5 December 2011 (United Nations Volunteers)** – Globalisation and the digital age are changing the face of volunteerism, according to the State of the World's Volunteerism Report. It highlights three major trends: migration and travel are transforming the way people volunteer; the private sector is increasingly involved in volunteerism; and information and communications technologies (ICT) are opening up new means of civic engagement.

The increasingly worldwide access to ICT provides ever more opportunities for people to participate in their communities and beyond. Cellular phones have reached subscription rates of 60 per cent in the developing world. In developed countries, active mobile phones outnumber the total population. Cell phones, and their short message services (SMS), have had perhaps "the most profound impact" on volunteerism. This "micro-volunteerism" raises awareness of local issues. It provides information and can help to improve public services in areas such as crop forecasting, education and health. One such example is the Kenya-based programme *Ushahidi* in which volunteers use SMS to map symptoms of diseases.

Online volunteering is on the rise despite the significant gap between developing and developed countries in terms of Internet access. Usually a short-term form of engagement, online volunteering offers a unique opportunity to people including those with special needs. Social networking has also contributed to popular mobilisations, for instance during the Arab Spring earlier this year.

International volunteerism is undergoing enormous changes. Large volunteer organizations in developed countries traditionally sent volunteers from North to South. Now they have set up national volunteering schemes to promote South-to-South or South-to-North volunteering. These schemes enhance opportunities for people from the developing world to volunteer, either abroad or together with international volunteers in their home country, and build sustainable local capacity to contribute to development. Diaspora volunteering brings specialized knowledge from expatriates to their original homelands.

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There is a trend in international volunteerism toward shorter-term placements of less than six months. Privately organized engagements, usually of one to two weeks, are also known as volunteering tourism or “volun-tourism”. These have grown by 5 to 10 per cent over the past five years in Western Europe. The report stresses that the shorter the engagement on site, the more likely it is that the entertainment and convenience of the volunteer tourist were the main motivating factors. As such, volunteering tourism can actually be a burden for the receiving community.

Dynamic new forms of international volunteering illustrate the need to rethink development assistance, the report notes. “International volunteering is not only the transfer of technical skills,” UNV Executive Coordinator Flavia Pansieri said. “It is also the enhancement of relationships, global cooperation and the values of solidarity.”

The report finds that the private sector is increasingly involved in volunteerism through the framework of corporate social responsibility (CSR). This is the case worldwide although CSR is less institutionalized in developing countries where fewer companies commit resources to volunteering. Companies are increasingly seeking partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to tap into the knowledge of local partners and respond more effectively to community needs. Volunteer activities depend on the cultural context as well as the size of the company. Companies that support volunteering enable citizens to engage in activities that correspond to their values and that strengthen the fabric of society,” the report stresses.

The SWVR finds that “modern forms of volunteerism have the potential to contribute significantly to human development”. Yet they may also have drawbacks. Meaningful, high-impact volunteering may be supplanted by ICT-based activities. International volunteering can be exclusive and CSR could be disingenuous. But these new opportunities, including through CSR, open volunteerism to more people. “This is excellent news for the fabric of our societies,” the SWVR concludes.