



**PRESS RELEASE**

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## **Volunteerism Plays an Important Role in Overcoming Barriers**

*Links beyond the community are needed to tackle poverty and supportive legislation is required to eliminate social exclusion, says United Nations report.*

**Bonn, 5 December 2011 (United Nations Volunteers)** – Volunteerism provides an important path out of poverty as well as a means to overcome social exclusion, as the State of the World's Volunteerism Report (SWVR) illustrates.

There are numerous examples from the developing world of how volunteering can empower the income poor by building up social, human, natural, physical, financial and political capital. This is based on growing evidence that the income poor in developing countries are both givers and receivers of support. Through volunteer action, a broad range of the assets of the income poor are made available to the community. These assets include their knowledge, skills and networks of relationships. This illustrates the necessity of including people who are poor in poverty reducing projects and programmes, stresses the SWVR.

Many countries promote systems of mutual support based on traditional cultures of self-help. Community health workers, for example, are the backbone of public health systems in the developing world. However, the report stresses that relying on them to maintain the health system is likely to be unsustainable unless they receive some form of incentive.

Volunteerism can be especially empowering when resources in local communities are pooled. This way, they can address immediate development problems stemming from poverty. However, as the report notes, in order to move people out of poverty, there is a need for supportive linkages with the external world and investments to provide a favourable environment.

The same is true of helping people to find a way out of social exclusion. For individuals, the report finds, volunteer action can improve feelings of self-worth and help to develop vocational and other skills. For communities, it can lead to greater cohesion through building trust. This also activates previously dormant human resources and can thus lead to economic gains.

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The report illustrates how women can challenge their traditional roles in society and experience greater empowerment. Volunteerism provides them with opportunities to engage in social and political issues. Notable examples cover activities as diverse as addressing gender-based violence or civic engagement in the Arab Spring.

Young people can acquire vocational and social skills, and improve their employability, through volunteer action. Developing countries are increasingly introducing volunteer schemes in educational systems.

Older people and people with disabilities are less likely to volunteer. Yet, for these groups, volunteerism can reduce the risk of isolation and social exclusion. Migrants who are facing challenges in overcoming exclusion can practice language skills and build social networks that can lead to greater inclusion. People living with HIV/AIDS are able to fight the stigma of the pandemic, build self-esteem and enhance their well-being, as the report highlights.

There is much to be done, the report concludes, to enhance the opportunities that volunteerism provides. On the one hand, volunteerism needs to be fully recognized in order to give this resource the place that it deserves in the public debate about social inclusion. On the other hand, governments could make greater use of volunteerism as a complementary tool for social policies.

“We need to stop focussing on the perceived ‘disabilities’ of excluded people and recognize their capabilities. Then volunteerism can contribute enormously to overcome barriers to the well-being of nations,” UNV chief Flavia Pansieri said.