



PRESS RELEASE

Embargoed until 5 December 2011, 00:01 hours EST

Volunteer Action is an Essential Asset in the Face of War and Disaster

Volunteer action increases the resilience of societies and reduces the impact of violent conflict, United Nations report shows

Bonn, 5 December 2011 (United Nations Volunteers) – Volunteer action is an important asset in supporting people and communities before, during and after violent conflict and natural disasters, the State of the World's Volunteerism Report (SWVR) shows.

Volunteerism has a crucial impact on the prevention of conflict. It can also play a positive role in conflict and post-conflict situations. At individual level, volunteer action enhances social harmony thus preventing people from being drawn into conflict. At community level, civic engagement strengthens trust by reducing insecurity locally. The report suggests that "vigorous and well-integrated communities can serve as agents of peace." Examples from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, and Israel/Palestine demonstrate that strong associational forms of civic engagement are often able to mitigate outbreaks of violence. Examples include work in trade unions, political parties and professional organizations.

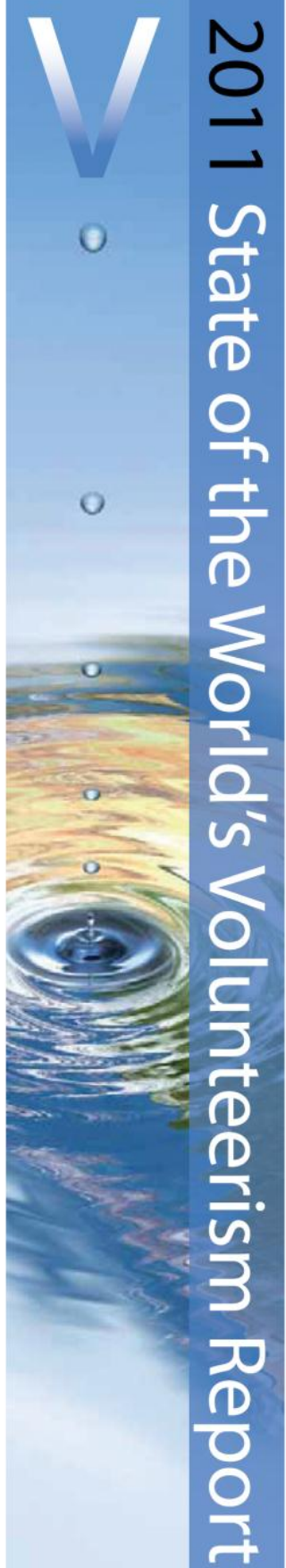
During conflicts, external volunteer initiatives can be highly effective in turning people away from violence. The SWVR highlights the example of India where inter-religious conflicts are often addressed by "peace volunteers" who mediate and facilitate mutual reconciliation. As another example, in Papua New Guinea, the Kup Women for Peace initiative has been active since 1999 in resolving tribal fighting.

In post-conflict situations, volunteerism can be especially effective in building cohesion and peace when former opponents connect in new ways. The report stresses that young people are a vital resource when engaged in peace-building efforts after a conflict, as examples in Liberia and Uganda illustrate.

The report calls for the integration of volunteer action into policies and programmes aimed at preventing and responding to conflict. "Strengthening the values of solidarity and mutual support is as important for a peaceful society as rebuilding the infrastructure and stabilizing the economy," UNV Executive Coordinator Flavia Pansieri said. "The one cannot be successful without the other in the long run."

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In preventing, mitigating and responding to disasters, volunteers add immeasurably to the resilience of communities, the report finds. Disaster programmes are increasingly striving to enhance prevention, mitigation and preparedness. Volunteerism plays an essential part in disaster risk reduction. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local organizations can mobilize communities and create community-based systems for disaster risk management. The Women's Tree Planting and Caring Movement 2009 for Water Conservation in Indonesia is one such example. Volunteers contribute to helping their countries to adapt to climate change: in Australia, the traditional practices of indigenous people have been adopted by fire fighters near Sydney to reduce fire risks.

When a disaster strikes, the influx of foreign personnel, including many volunteers, can overshadow local and national volunteers. The first respondents to natural disaster, however, are not usually trained personnel but neighbours and local people. When their actions are coordinated, they are vital for saving lives, reducing health risks, ensuring public safety and meeting the needs of affected people. Some countries have established national volunteer schemes, for example Pakistan after the 2005 earthquake. In other countries, the use of "permanent volunteers" is increasing rapidly. In China, an estimated 100 million volunteers are trained and ready for large-scale disasters.

In the recovery phase, the report notes, rebuilding efforts too often focus on physical infrastructure and ignore social infrastructure. However, the Hyogo Framework for Action for Disaster Risk Reduction 2005-2015 highlights the importance of the "spirit of volunteerism". Empirical research shows that communities with more trust, civic engagement and stronger networks, which are largely volunteer-based, have a better chance of recovering after a disaster than fragmented, isolated ones.

"The spirit of volunteerism as a universal characteristic of human beings contributes greatly to bringing back hope and confidence to communities," UNV chief Flavia Pansieri said. "Education and training at the local level as enshrined in the Hyogo Framework for Action will unleash the full power of volunteerism to reduce vulnerabilities and increase resilience to disasters."