



Overview

People are the real wealth of a nation.

UNDP Human Development Report (1990)

Volunteerism is a basic expression of human relationships. It is about people's need to participate in their societies and to feel that they matter to others. We strongly believe that the social relationships intrinsic to volunteer work are critical to individual and community well-being. The ethos of volunteerism is infused with values including solidarity, reciprocity, mutual trust, belonging and empowerment, all of which contribute significantly to quality of life.

People the world over engage in volunteerism for a great variety of reasons: to help to eliminate poverty and to improve basic health and education, to provide a safe water supply and adequate sanitation, to tackle environmental issues and climate change, to reduce the risk of disasters and to combat social exclusion and violent conflict. In all of these fields, volunteerism contributes to peace and development by generating well-being for people and their communities. Volunteerism also forms the backbone of many national and international non-governmental organizations and other civil society organizations as well as social and political movements. It is present in the public sector and is increasingly a feature of the private sector.

While recognition of volunteerism has been growing in recent times, especially since the United Nations proclaimed 2001 the Interna-

tional Year of Volunteers (IYV), the phenomenon is still misconstrued and undervalued. All too often, the strong links are overlooked between volunteer activity on the one hand and peace and human development on the other. It is time for the contribution of volunteerism to the quality of life, and to well-being in a wider sense, to be understood as one of the missing components of a development paradigm that still has economic growth at its core. However, as the first UNDP *Human Development Report* noted, people are the real wealth of a nation. Development is about expanding the choices available to people so that they may lead lives that they value. Economic growth is only one means of increasing people's choices.¹

Alongside criteria such as health and education, another element has been added to human development: the freedom of people to use their knowledge and talents to shape their own destinies. This expanded definition of development has informed 20 years of global *Human Development Reports* (HDR) and over 600 national HDRs. This first United Nations *State of the World's Volunteerism Report* emphasizes how volunteerism is a means by which people can take control of their lives and make a difference to themselves and to those around them.

Volunteerism is a sphere of human endeavour of which the significance has not been fully understood and articulated in the development debate, particularly in the context of the Millennium Development Goals. This is not to deny that considerable progress has been achieved since IYV, especially in the developing world, in responding to the four major themes identified for the year, namely greater recognition, facilitation, networking and promotion of volunteerism. Governments have developed an extensive list of recommendations for actions to support volunteerism. These are contained in United Nations General Assembly Resolution 56/38 adopted in 2001 and have been supplemented by subsequent resolutions from the United Nations General

BOX O.1 : Volunteerism as a valuable component of development plans

Extend the notion of volunteerism as an additional valuable component of national development planning to development cooperation policy. Recognizing and building strategically on rich, local traditions of voluntary self-help and mutual aid can open the way to building up a new constituency in support of development efforts. Forging a link in the mind of the general public in countries providing development assistance between domestic volunteering in those countries and volunteering in countries receiving assistance can also help enlist public support for development cooperation.⁴

Source: UNGA. (2002b).

Assembly.² These recommendations are also emphasized in successive reports of the United Nations Secretary-General.³

The timing of this report, a decade after IYV, is crucial as it coincides with an intense debate about the type of societies that we wish to see, for ourselves and for future generations. Globalization is rapidly transforming cultural and social norms, bringing benefits to some but exclusion and marginalization to others. Many people feel a loss of control over their lives.⁵ Volunteerism is one way for people to engage in the life of their communities and societies. In doing so, they acquire a sense of belonging and inclusion and they are able to influence the direction of their lives.

At no point in history has the potential been greater for people to be primary actors, rather than passive bystanders, in their communities, to affect the course of events that shape their destiny. In Latin America in the 1980s, in Eastern Europe in the 1990s and, most recently, in the Arab world, aided by the rapid expansion of digital communications, people have articulated their desire for participatory democratic processes through volunteer-based campaigning and activism.

Volunteerism needs to be brought to the fore in the development discourse at global, regional and country levels. Interest in many aspects of volunteerism has grown considerably in recent years. This is evident from the burgeoning academic work on the topic, the diverse forums for discussing volunteerism and the considerable media coverage, especially in connection with natural disasters and major sporting events such as the Olympic Games and the football World Cup. There are also increasing signs of government support for volunteerism as a form of civic engagement, not only to enhance delivery of services but also to promote the values that underpin social cohesion and harmony. While this interest in volunteerism did not begin with IYV in 2001, many new volunteer-related initiatives can be traced back to it.

BOX O.2 : Volunteerism as an anchor in the face of global changes

“People often feel powerless in the face of globalization; like flotsam and jetsam on the waves with no stable anchor. Volunteerism can be an anchor for people as they effect change in their own community of place.”

Source: Maria Harkin, [Member of the European Parliament, UNV High-Level Advisory Board]. (2011).⁶

This report does not intend to duplicate the existing body of scholarly work on volunteerism (see bibliography). Instead, we present a vision of volunteerism and examine how it relates to some of the principal peace and development challenges of our times. The examples cited are predominantly from developing countries, thus correcting a pronounced imbalance in scholarship to date. However, the SWVR is intended to be global in application.

The groundbreaking resolution 56/38 of the United Nations General Assembly contains explicit recommendations on ways in which governments and the United Nations system can support volunteering.⁷ Among the key considerations were:

- Neglecting to factor volunteering into the design and implementation of policies could entail the risk of overlooking a valuable asset and undermine traditions of cooperation that bind communities together.⁸
- There is not one universal model of best practice, since what works well in one country may not work in another with very different cultures and traditions.⁹
- Support for voluntary activities does not imply support for government downsizing or for replacing paid employment.¹⁰

VOLUNTEERISM IN THE WORLD TODAY

An ethic of volunteerism exists in every society in the world, albeit in different forms. Since 2001, wide-ranging research has added greatly to our understanding of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, fundamental misperceptions remain widespread in the Western world and beyond as to its nature and contributions. There is no agreed methodology for measuring the extent of voluntary engagement. However, most studies attest to the universality of volunteerism, its universal spread, massive scale and impact.

NEW FACES OF VOLUNTEERISM

Opportunities for people to engage in volunteer action have been expanding in recent years as a result of factors such as globalization, the spread of new technologies and initiatives associated with corporate social responsibility from the private sector. The advent of mobile communication technologies and online volunteering, for example, has enabled many more people to participate for the first time. Mass short message service (SMS) communication is one form of "micro-volunteerism" that contributes to the production and sharing of information. It is frequently used by people to raise awareness, inform choices and monitor public services.

Online volunteering, i.e. volunteer work done via the Internet, has eliminated the need for volunteerism to be tied to specific times and locations, thus greatly increasing the freedom and flexibility of volunteer engagement. The sharing of information through social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Orkut has helped people to organize around issues ranging from the environment to democratic change, most recently in some Arab states. The Internet facilitates volunteerism by matching the interests of people who seek to volunteer with the needs of host organizations, through programmes such as the UN Volunteers Online Volunteering

service. Membership of virtual, Internet-based communities can also engender feelings of belonging and well-being.

While international volunteering is not new, it has manifested itself in new forms and has taken on new dimensions in an age of globalization. "Voluntourism" or student "gap-year" volunteerism, often undertaken for short periods, are new manifestations and their impact is open to question. Corporations, NGOs, universities and faith-based organizations have become increasingly engaged in facilitating internationally based volunteer placements. Furthermore, there is diaspora volunteerism in which experts from emigrant communities undertake short-term assignments to transfer knowledge to their countries of origin.

Another relatively new phenomenon is involvement of the private sector. Today, roughly one in three large companies offers some type of employer-supported volunteerism. There is a growing trend of long-term collaboration between private sector enterprises and local NGOs.

VOLUNTEERISM AND THE DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM

The contribution of volunteerism to development is particularly striking in the context of sustainable livelihoods and value-based notions of well-being. Contrary to common perceptions, the income poor are as likely to volunteer as those who are not poor. In doing so they realize their assets, which include knowledge, skills and social networks, for the benefit of themselves, their families and their communities. The values of volunteerism are extremely relevant in strengthening the capacity of the most vulnerable to achieve secure livelihoods and to enhance their physical, economic, spiritual and social well-being. Moreover, volunteering can reduce the social exclusion that is often the result of poverty, marginalization and other forms of inequality.

Fundamental misperceptions remain widespread in the Western world and beyond as to the nature and contributions of volunteerism

Volunteerism is one path to inclusion among population groups that are often excluded such as women, young and older people, people with disabilities, migrants and people living with HIV/AIDS.

There is mounting evidence that volunteer engagement promotes the civic values and social cohesion which mitigate violent conflict at all stages and that it even fosters reconciliation in post-conflict situations. By contributing to building trust, volunteer action diminishes the tensions that give rise to conflict and can also contribute to conflict resolution. It can also create common purpose in the aftermath of war. Indeed, people bound together through active participation and cooperation at local level are in a better position to resolve differences in non-confrontational ways.

Volunteer action in the context of natural disasters has long been one of the most visible manifestations of volunteerism. It is also one of the clearest expressions of the human values underpinning the drive to care for others. Despite the tendency of the media to focus on international volunteers, neighbours and local residents are often the first to respond. The role of volunteerism in this field has become even more prominent as the incidence of disasters increases owing to climate change, rapid urbanization and other factors. There is growing international awareness that nations and communities can and should build resilience to disasters through a “bottom-up” process in the form of volunteer initiatives rooted in the community. Indeed, the 2005 World Conference on Disaster Reduction declared that the most effective resources for reducing vulnerability are local community self-help, local organizations and local networks. “Putting people at the centre of development is much more than an intellectual exercise”, notes the HDR 2010. “It means making progress equitable and broad-based, enabling people to be active participants in change”.¹¹ Volunteerism can be a

highly effective and practical means of building on people’s capabilities in all societies and at all levels. It also provides a channel through which these capabilities may enhance the well-being of individuals, communities and nations.

In order to meet international development targets, such as the Millennium Development Goals, the voluntary efforts of countless millions of ordinary citizens are needed to bolster the efforts of governments and international actors.¹²

We want to bring about a greater recognition of the rich and manifold expressions of volunteerism as a powerful force for progress. We truly believe that volunteerism goes far beyond merely completing a given task. It creates and sustains bonds of trust, societal cohesion, and helps to forge a common sense of identity and destiny. Volunteer action by which people unite in shared endeavours towards a common purpose is a feature of most societies. As such, it touches the lives of vast numbers of people all over the world.

The SWVR is both a description and a celebration of the positive impact of volunteerism, especially on the large numbers of people experiencing income poverty, insecurity and exclusion. We hope to awaken an interest in volunteerism beyond the practitioners and scholars already engaged in the subject. We want to inform future policy debates on peace, development and well-being that will lead policymakers to take into account this massive but largely invisible and untapped resource.

A central thesis running through this report is that the values inherent in volunteerism endow it with far-reaching potential for human development. This notion of development includes factors such as solidarity, social inclusion, empowerment, life satisfaction and individual and societal well-being.

The values inherent in volunteerism endow it with far-reaching potential for human development

The well-being of individuals is intrinsically linked to their contributions to the lives of others.

These values have long been close to the work of the United Nations. Yet, despite all that it offers, volunteerism remains largely absent from the peace and development agenda. This must change. Volunteerism should be recognized as a powerful and

universal renewable resource and a vital component of the social capital of every nation. It has a huge potential to make a real difference in responding to many of the most pressing global concerns. We expect this report to contribute to a better appreciation of this potential and to encourage greater strategic thinking and action to incorporate volunteerism into mainstream policies and programmes for peace and development.