

# Conclusion: the way forward

*The aid effectiveness agenda has produced important behavioural changes on the part of both donors and partners.*

*Yet the question that now faces the global community is whether this progress is enough to overcome even greater global challenges. In the face of the recent financial, security, food, health, climate and energy crises, I have to conclude that the development paradigm has not shifted enough. To solve these crises and meet the Millennium Development Goals we must all do more.*

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## INTRODUCTION

This report has highlighted the universal nature, and underlying values, of volunteerism and the significant contributions that it makes to some of the major global issues of our times. We have seen how people engage in volunteerism as a route to inclusion, to achieve livelihoods that are sustainable, to manage disaster risks and to prevent and recover from violent conflict. We have also seen how voluntary action can significantly contribute to the cohesiveness and well-being of communities and of societies as a whole. With massive social upheavals affecting most of the planet, there has never been a greater need to recognize, nurture and promote actions that lead towards a global community living in harmony, characterized by justice, equity, peace and well-being.

This report does not claim that volunteerism is a panacea that can be “programmed” to put right the injustices of the world by itself. A key point, and one that features prominently in intergovernmental legislation over the past decade, is that volunteerism should not take the place of actions that are the responsibility of the state. However, governments and other stakeholders from civil society, the private sector and international development agencies do have vital roles to play in promoting and nurturing an environment in which volunteerism can flourish.

At the same time, care should be taken not to overprescribe how citizens should engage in volunteerism. Such action could remove the spontaneity of volunteer action and impact negatively on the very values that drive people to engage. It is essential to understand and appreciate volunteerism in terms of the focus which it places on people-centred approaches, on partnerships, on motivations beyond money, and on openness to the exchange of ideas and information. Above all, volunteerism is about the

relationships that it can create and sustain among the citizens of a country. It generates a sense of social cohesion and helps to create resilience in confronting the issues covered in this report. This cohesion and resilience are often the mainstay of a decent life for which all people strive. Volunteerism is an act of human solidarity, of empowerment and of active citizenship.

Despite all of its attributes, it is regrettable that volunteerism has, so far, been largely absent from the peace and development agenda. This was explained in Chapter 1 as being due to common misperceptions that form a “dominant paradigm” as to what volunteerism is and what it achieves. This misleading paradigm tends to obscure the essence of volunteer action and the impact that it has on our daily lives. The powerful complementary role that volunteer action can have, alongside other areas of intervention, is therefore unfortunately minimized, or not raised at all, in core discussions on development policy and programmes. As a result, those interventions are less effective than they would be if people’s desires and abilities to engage through volunteerism were fully taken into account. This refers not only to achieving desired development outcomes but also to creating more intangible benefits associated with people’s participation such as enhanced well-being and social cohesion.

Volunteerism in developed countries is the subject of extensive research, discussion and writing. Indeed, it is increasingly a part of the discourse on the kind of societies that we seek. It is an aspect of human behaviour that needs to be nurtured and encouraged. This very same phenomenon in many developing countries, when it is recognized, is generally considered to be integral to local cultures and traditions, a point which is rarely factored into strategic thinking. Yet these very cultures and traditions, with reciprocal volunteer-based relationships at their root, are both ancient and highly contemporary for a large part of

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humanity. They are a key feature in strategies enabling people to survive and to progress to higher levels of well-being. As expressions of solidarity throughout the world, they need to be respected and revalidated and brought under the spotlight in the development debate.

### THE TIME IS RIGHT

The timing of this report is crucial. In 2010, the world reviewed the progress of the eight MDGs that countries had agreed to achieve by 2015. This review highlighted the very uneven progress in attaining the goals among regions and between, and within, countries. The governments expressed “grave concern” about the status of some of the goals.<sup>1</sup> They included among their recommendations “supporting participatory, community-led strategies [that are] aligned with national development priorities and strategies.”<sup>2</sup> The implementation of community-led strategies is rooted in expressions of volunteerism. Thus, this report should be one important element in helping to get the MDGs on track. Connecting volunteerism and national development planning is likely to bring considerable benefits to the countries that most need to accelerate progress towards the MDG targets.

The timing of this report is also crucial for other reasons. Concern over the effectiveness of development cooperation is growing. Pressures are mounting both to increase and to demonstrate more clearly the effectiveness of aid in terms of improving the lives of poor and marginalized populations who are, or should be, at the centre of development. A recent study on aid effectiveness in the health sector stated that the focus has been mainly on processes and coordination of aid rather than on the downstream impacts of those processes on health delivery and outcomes.<sup>4</sup> When the focus does move downstream, the role and contributions of volunteer action must be understood if this

### BOX C.1 : Recognizing the contribution of volunteerism

In 2001, the United Nations General Assembly recommended that governments recognize the potential contribution of volunteerism to achieving sustainable development goals. It further recommended to governments to “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 to enlist public support for development cooperation.”<sup>3</sup>

Source: UNGA. (2002b).

major resource is to be incorporated into development strategies. It needs to be recognized that aid is not the only tool in the development cooperation kit.<sup>5</sup> Home-grown volunteerism already plays a very significant role in peace and development, and constitutes a vast untapped resource. However, there are large gaps in our knowledge on the subject that urgently need to be addressed. This was one of the recommendations that governments made in 2001.<sup>6</sup> Yet research on volunteerism in developing countries still falls far short of hopes and expectations raised at the time.

Another marker in the evolving debate on development is the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, or “Rio+20”, to be held in 2012. Chapter 4 examined the synergies between volunteerism by the poor and natural resources. The World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in 2002 stressed social factors, underlining that the link between economic development and improving human well-being is not automatic.<sup>7</sup> The conference cited the need for enhanced partnerships between governments and major groups including volunteer groups. This position needs to be reinforced at Rio+20.<sup>8</sup> A synthesis report on best

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practices, prepared as an input for Rio+20, stated that national development plans have to commit many more resources to community-based policies and programmes.<sup>9</sup> The United Nations Secretary-General has highlighted how ignoring social marginalization, vulnerability and the uneven distribution of resources weakens the trust needed for collective action.<sup>10</sup> Rio+20 is an extraordinary opportunity to give greater recognition to the fact that volunteer action at grassroots is a key way for the income poor to engage in sustainable development practices at local level. As such, this needs to be supported. We have stated throughout this report that volunteerism is a powerful, yet largely under-exploited, resource with which to address development challenges. Its close links with the green economy, in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, must not be overlooked.<sup>11</sup>

In the larger timeframe, the approaching end of the MDG cycle in 2015 is currently of primary concern. Considerable effort is needed to sustain progress where it is being achieved and to work towards overcoming obstacles where they have been identified. It is hoped that this report will provide an impetus to include volunteerism as a complement to other efforts at meeting the challenges. However, we cannot ignore the fact that bilateral and multilateral organizations, national governments and civil society are now thinking seriously about the shape of the development framework for the post-2015 period. Growing recognition of the limitations of the present development paradigm, and a related desire to see well-being issues more prominent in the development discourse, were discussed in Chapter 8. The context for

ideas now circulating about an evolving development paradigm is very different from the one prevailing in 2000 when the Millennium Declaration was adopted. Issues now dominating international debates on peace and development, including climate change, disasters, conflict, population movements, young people and exclusion, are all discussed in this report in the context of volunteerism.

Volunteerism is a very old tradition. At the same time it is a novel, and potentially fruitful, approach when thinking about development policy. In a world experiencing unprecedented change, volunteerism is a constant. Even if its forms of expression are evolving, the central values of solidarity and feelings of connectedness with others remain as firm as ever and are universal. People are driven not only by their passions and self-interest but also by their values, their norms and their belief systems. With North-South distinctions becoming increasingly irrelevant, volunteer action is a renewable global asset with huge potential to make a real difference in responding to many of the most pressing concerns of the world.

It is certainly possible to be optimistic that volunteerism will assume a much higher profile as quality of life is increasingly seen as occupying a place at the core of concerns of all nations. We are increasingly questioning what we value in life. The well-being benefits associated with the volunteering experience, together with bonds of trust and societal cohesiveness that derive from relationships forged through volunteer action, are likely to be at the forefront of such thinking. The moment has come to ensure that volunteerism is an integral part of any new development consensus.