UN Volunteer helps efforts to build participatory democracy in India

New Delhi, India: In his celebrated work *The Prophet* author, poet and artist, Khalil Gibran, wrote, “You give but little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.”

Experiencing a sense of fulfillment by contributing to engage the voter, the smallest but the most significant stakeholder in arguably the world’s largest elections made me realize the difference volunteerism makes. (The General Elections to Lok Sabha 2014 in India were considered to be one of the world’s most historic elections for their massive scale. During these elections, the largest electorate in the world elected the members of parliament for all 543 of the country’s parliamentary constituencies.)

Working as a national UN Volunteer with the Election Commission of India (ECI) for the Democratic Governance unit of UNDP, I contribute my efforts towards educating electors about the most fundamental of their rights and duty - the universal adult franchise which guarantees to them a multitude of rights. Through the programme Systematic Voter Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) at ECI, a blend of development communication, edutainment and behavior change communication tools are used to educate and inform, motivate and induce the enrolled voters to exercise their right to choose the government.
Women and youth, complacent urban populations and illiterate rural masses, defense personnel posted in difficult terrains, indigenous tribes and marginalized groups - all are covered under SVEEP activities with the aim of inclusive elections.

Being raised in a country where altruism, renunciation and service to the society above self are ideals woven into the cultural values by all the flourishing religions, and where all socio-political movements upholding human rights starting from the Indian struggle for independence, stem from voluntary participation of individuals, the idea of volunteerism was not new to me. Volunteering for the Government of India with the ECI at the headquarters does not offer me often the opportunities to directly interact with the beneficiaries at the grassroots, but gives me enough chances to propel the ideas and activities that would trickle down to areas where they are most needed.

Providing assistance for planning policies and interventions, setting agendas, coordinating with partner government bodies, CSOs and the media, facilitating implementation of activities, content-development are the areas that I have been working in. Working for the ‘SVEEP-India National Document 2009-14’ was a great learning experience for me. But developing voter education “Creatives” like board games, animated film and cartoon strips that would reach every town and village, and first-hand interaction with communities gave me a deep sense of satisfaction.

Volunteerism to me is the first step in the long-term involvement in development. By promising to be committed to a cause out of one’s own free will and motivation, a volunteer connects the individual self with the society thereby benefitting and making a difference to both. Since participation in the electoral process in India is not mandatory but voluntary, it is imperative to evoke the spirit of volunteerism to contribute to the task of nation-building. Each step of voluntary involvement by individuals, holds the potential of translating the micro level difference into a macro level change and growth.

Facilitating the exchange and sharing of resources between UNDP and ECI, and feeding into the multiplier effect of their programmes, has in turn facilitated my constant learning process. I believe volunteerism has brought freshness in both ideas and the approach towards work in my project. The enthusiasm in volunteerism and zeal to take initiative reflects and helps create a positive environment for co-workers.

And most of all, the difference that volunteerism makes is to the individual, instilling self-confidence, enabling self-realization, developing capacities,
providing space and opportunity to express and explore and construction of a positive identity, ‘for it is in giving that we receive’.

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