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The critical role of volunteers as first responders

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The side event called for greater recognition, support and integration of local volunteers, who are the first people to take action when natural disasters strike and are also the ones that stay after the crisis is over. The panelists stressed that as natural disasters and health emergencies increase in frequency and severity, the role of first responders needs to be supported and strengthened.

Mr. Richard Dictus, Executive Coordinator of UNV, said that "greater recognition needs to be given to the critical role that women, young people and volunteers play in saving lives in the first hours and days of a crisis" and added that "even though local volunteers are often the first responders they are usually not included in humanitarian coordination structures and are often marginalized once national or international responders arrive."

Mr. Dictus also emphasized the need to invest more in volunteer protection, mobilization, management and training with a long-term approach, in an effort to provide sustainable solutions to humanitarian challenges. "This is what we are arguing for in order to be able to integrate volunteers and volunteerism into the whole humanitarian response. We need strong policies that recognize the quality of the contributions of volunteers," he stated.

Finally, Mr. Dictus also took this opportunity to affirm UNV's strong support for the *One Billion Coalition*, an initiative launched by IFRC to scale up community and civic action in order to strengthen individual and community capacity in the face of adversity. "Investment in the capacity of volunteers is investing in emergency preparedness. With such an investment, we will be able to deal with humanitarian crises as soon as they hit," he concluded.

The role of volunteers as first responders was also stressed by the Secretary General of IFRC, **Mr. Elhadj As Sy**, who pointed out that "volunteers are working within local communities to support, care, help, heal and build social capital in order to find common solutions to humanitarian challenges." Other panelists included the Chairman of the Pakistani National Disaster Management Agency, **Major General Asghar Nawaz**, and the Secretary General of the Philippine Red Cross, **Mrs. Gwendolyn Pang**, who provided an account of the institutional side of the response. However, it was through the stories of two young volunteers, **Mr. Prakash Sharma** from Nepal and **Mrs. Mere Nailatikau** from Fiji, that the audience could perceive firsthand how life-changing and life-saving the volunteer experience can be.

The side event's overarching theme to recognize, support and integrate local volunteers as first responders into the coordinated humanitarian responses falls under the UN Secretary-General's Agenda for Humanity and is tied to the Core Commitments of the World Humanitarian Summit, "Leave no one behind" and "Change people's lives", which emphasize the need to reach the most marginalized communities by reinforcing, instead of replacing, national structures and systems.

In his concluding remarks, Mr. Dictus reminded the audience that "Volunteering requires respect, support, and safety. And that is exactly why a small organization like UNV has organized this event and will continue to be advocating for volunteerism. We need to get policy makers to realize that volunteerism is not just a nice ideal, but an essential component of any humanitarian response."

Sustainable Development Goal: [SDG 13: Climate change](#)