

05 June 2014

Photo: UNV Nicaragua/2014



World Environment Day

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World Environment Day 2014: Raise your voice, not the sea level

Volunteerism has been a key driver of the global environmental movement, mobilizing communities all over the world to help them to respond to, withstand, and recover from adverse environmental situations. When well facilitated, volunteerism can help communities use their own resources to maintain core structures under extreme climate events or changing environmental conditions without requiring significant external aid.

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World Environment Day, celebrated every year on 5 June, brings people from all backgrounds together to act to achieve a sustainable future for our planet. This year, the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme is marking the Day by highlighting how volunteer action can increase both communities' and individuals' resilience to adverse impacts of climate change. In a rapidly changing world, volunteerism stands as a constant – a universal, dynamic and creative resource present in every society to support multidimensional responses to the challenge of ensuring environmental sustainability.

This is of specific relevance for small island states since they are most vulnerable to environmental risks stemming from global warming. The urgent environmental challenges faced by small island states and others require people-centred multi-sector and multi-stakeholder responses. By strengthening community structures and by empowering people, volunteerism is an excellent and strategic tool to 'raise the voice of the people' rather than 'raising the sea level'.

UNV has already made sustainable contributions to community resilience for local climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts, with a focus on climate change adaptation through people-centred approaches. UN Volunteers offer technical assistance in natural resource management, sustainable biodiversity conservation and climate change adaptation, and

encourage civil society to take responsibility for their environment.

To view a video message from Richard Dictus, UNV Executive Coordinator, please visit:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZ2tS8VaK3s&feature=youtu.be>

For example, in Comoros UNV helped develop the capacities of communities dependent on protected areas to pursue alternate livelihood options. Within one year, about 1,700 community volunteers were engaged in areas as diverse as book-keeping, seedling production, community development and project management. UNV also supported the development of 35 local community groups, each of which was to formulate its own plan to maintain environmental sustainability and biodiversity.

Small communities are frequently the most severely affected, yet the least prepared to handle the effects of climate change. To address this, UNV has been a partner in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Global Environment Facility (GEF) Community-Based Adaptation (CBA) project since 2008. The project aims to build the resilience of communities and the ecosystems on which they depend.

UN Volunteers' involvement was instrumental in piloting this five-year initiative in countries worldwide. Within the project, UNV strived to enhance community mobilization, facilitate volunteer contributions and ensure inclusive participation. The project generated invaluable knowledge and facilitated capacity building of partner NGOs and local community-based organizations. From 2008 to 2013, projects were implemented in 10 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Working with 100 community groups, the projects reached 64 communities and an estimated 240,000 people.

In Guatemala, as part of the CBA project, national UN Volunteers aided indigenous communities in identifying negative impacts of climate change and strengthening their resilience to them. National UN Volunteers worked closely with community members to identify improved farming techniques, including soil conservation and reforestation.

In collaboration with UN agencies, governments, volunteer involving organizations, and other partners, UNV supports innovative approaches for long-term processes that help to build the resilience of communities, improve capacity for local self-sufficiency, encourage empowerment at the grassroots level and durably change attitudes, which is necessary to sustain environmental gains.

About 100 UN Volunteers have served with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) over the past seven years, supporting the conservation, protection, enhancement and support of nature and natural resources, including biological diversity. They work within communities at the grassroots level, making them well-placed to build community resilience to climate change impacts.

UN Youth Volunteer Dana Siedemova (Czech Republic) served at the UNEP Liaison Office in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, as a UNV Environmental Outreach Specialist. Her role included increasing UNEP's visibility and enhancing environmental awareness and communication, as well as liaising with the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Forestry. Dana was also responsible for engaging local government and Ethiopian civil society organizations that work closely with communities, youth and volunteers. One of Dana's major tasks was organizing environmental outreach events and running environmental outreach campaigns. The recent campaign "Clean Up the World - Clean Up Addis!" showed that with a minimal budget, high levels of motivation and a strong commitment to environment and volunteering, a lot can be achieved.

Responding to growing requests from UN Member States and UN entities, UNV is developing a global programme on community resilience for environment and disaster risk reduction, aligned with UNV's Strategic Framework for 2014-2017. This comes at a time when renewed calls for sustainable development and focus on the post-2015 agenda are being strengthened to address increasing challenges to communities and their ability to respond to them. Through this global programme, UNV will expand partnerships and ensure lasting impact by leveraging its expertise in volunteerism for community resilience.

Evidence from UNV evaluations underlines that planning must take into consideration a range of issues that include input from communities so that they may become empowered and take ownership of initiatives. That is where the power of volunteering comes in. For the sake of future generations, "let us all raise our voices, not the sea level" to engage in a spirit of solidarity with those most vulnerable to climate change today.

Global

Sustainable Development Goal:

