

26 September 2013



UNV's China Field Unit participated in the Social Good Summit forum in Shenzhen on 21 September 2013. Their display drew over 100 visitors interested in learning more about UNV's work in China, and included recent university graduates, grassroots CSO leaders and representatives from China's leading foundations. (UNV China, 2013)

## UNV panel shows volunteers use new media to create innovative solutions to peace and development challenges

UNV hosted the panel "Changing the World in 2.0: Volunteerism" at the Social Good Summit in New York which showed live and virtual audiences that UNV already has an impressive track record addressing the summit's mission. UNV already takes on "big ideas", such as using volunteering to achieve sustainable development and peace, and uses new media, such as our Online Volunteering service, websites and social media channels, to find innovative solutions.

"Volunteerism is a universal concept - the largest expression of global solidarity you can find," United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme Executive Coordinator (EC) Richard Dictus told a live audience of hundreds gathered in New York City, while countless virtual attendees tuned in around the world. The head of UNV was taking part in UNV's panel "Changing the World in 2.0: Volunteerism" on Sunday, 22 September 2013, the opening day of Social Good Summit, where his words seemed to strike a chord with listeners.

The Social Good Summit is a three-day conference where, according to its organizers, "big ideas meet new media to create innovative solutions". Held during the week before the start of UN General Assembly meeting in September, the summit unites a dynamic community of global leaders to discuss a big idea: the power of innovative thinking and technology to solve the world's greatest challenges.

Joining the UNV EC on the panel were Volunteering and Post-2015 National Coordinator for India, Amita Dahiya, UN Online Volunteer and Pinterest Data Scientist, Dan Frankowski, Principal for Community Programs with American Airlines and Vice President of American Giving Charitable Fund, Sam Santiago, and UNDP's Director a. i., Communications, Abdel-Rahman Ghandour as moderator.

Abdel shared that, before joining the United Nations, he had been a volunteer with Doctors Without Borders for seven years. He stressed that contrary to widely held notions of volunteerism as something done by well-meaning, but inexperienced amateurs on an ad hoc basis, the panel would be addressing the kind of volunteerism he had known, service to humanity carried out by highly skilled professionals.

"Everyone on the panel has experience in community participation," he said.

Richard Dictus offered the example of Mohammad Sarhan (State of Palestine), a UN Volunteer in the Communications and Information Technology Section of the UN African Union Mission in Darfur. Born in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and raised in a refugee camp in Nablus, Mohammad became disabled at a young age due to a medical accident.

Once assigned to Darfur, Mohammad has spent his spare time working actively with a local club for persons with disabilities to raise awareness and funds to empower its assistive devices workshop, the rehabilitation clinic and ultimately its members.

"You can take things that you care about to make a difference," said UNV's EC.

Richard also gave the example of the Libya Crisis Mapping project in which 150 UN Online Volunteers, from the safety and comfort of their homes around the world, operated and maintained the "Libya Crisis Map" for the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) during the early days of the Libya revolution. The map offered relief organizations such as the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency), the Red Cross, the U.S. Agency for International Development

(USAID) and others, real-time information, from traditional and social media, on health needs, security threats and refugee movements.

With over 17,000 views in the first 72 hours, the information provided by the map was essential in a confusing situation. It provided situational awareness for geographical areas that the UN and other international organizations could not access alone, due to security limitations.

This was the cue for panelist Dan Frankowski, an American UN Online Volunteer and Pinterest data scientist who introduced himself as "just a geek." Claiming that he did not like "talking to people - raising funds [or] organizing," he said, "One thing I can do is build software." As a UN Online Volunteer, he has helped develop software to assess child malnutrition in Madagascar for Maventy, a local organization there that is trying to improve the health and quality of life of the country's children.

The UNV EC encouraged his audience to consider online volunteering if they were looking for a way of volunteering for sustainable development and peace around the world. Referring to Dan's online volunteering opportunity, he asked, "How cool does it get?"

"Volunteering has played a significant role to inform the consultative process on shaping the development path for the future," said Amita Dahiya, Volunteering and Post-2015 National Coordinator for India. She explained that it was thanks to the mobilization of over 200 volunteers in the community that she and her team were able to get over 11,000 votes for MY World, the UN global survey to capture people's priorities for the future global development agenda after 2015.

Sam Santiago, Principal of Community Programs with American Airlines and Vice President of American Giving Charitable Fund, said there were mutual advantages to bringing corporate resources and people together through volunteering.

"Corporations that support and promote volunteerism garner goodwill of those living in communities where they do business," he said. "From an employee perspective, it does build up employee morale - tons of studies prove that. It even provides individuals with an opportunity in some cases for professional development. So through volunteering you can advance your career."

The panel, described by one of the organizers with UNDP as "one of the best panels of the day", concluded with a video and special "call to action" from Martha Plimpton, an American actress, social media activist and one of the founders of "A is for" which serves as an ally and advocate for organizations working to protect reproductive rights. "A is for" uses social media to spotlight issues and encourage activism. Martha herself is active on Twitter and uses this medium prolifically to inform the public about her work and to inspire action."

Saying she believed "strongly in the power of volunteerism", the actress expressed a view

often iterated in UNV when she said, "When you are there for others who need help, and you are giving of yourself, you are not only changing other people's lives, but you are changing your own as well."

With hubs in New York City, Nairobi and Shenzhen (China), UNV not only hosted the panel in New York, but several of our own Field Units supervised their own local meet ups and supported and participated in those organized by others.

The Social Good Summit is sponsored by Mashable, the United Nations Foundation, the 92nd Street Y, Ericsson, UNDP and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

---

Sustainable Development Goal: [SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals](#)