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Expert seminar on Volunteering and Inequality, convened by UNV and the Human Development Report Office in New York, 2019

HDRO and UNV host joint expert seminar on volunteering and inequality

Three strategies by which volunteering can make a greater contribution to reducing human development inequalities were identified during the expert seminar that was jointly organized by the Human Development Report Office (HDRO) and the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme on 4 September in New York. These strategies are addressing the ‘unequalizing aspects’ of volunteer work by redistributing its costs and benefits, integrating volunteer work in policies designed to tackle inequalities, from social care to climate change, and building an ‘enabling environment’ for equality through volunteering, including social and cultural recognition for those groups most often left behind.

Why volunteering and inequality?

The 2030 Agenda highlights the need for new partnerships between citizens and states in order to tackle complex challenges. Citizen contributions through volunteer work, as a form of unpaid work, are manifested in every community and society.

[More than one billion people globally are estimated to volunteer](#), making contributions

worth 2.4 per cent global GDP. To date, more than 70 UN Member States have highlighted the role of volunteers in their Voluntary National Reviews on the SDGs.

But as Emma Morley, Chief of Volunteer Advisory Services at UNV demonstrated, this huge resource for peace and development is largely overlooked in mainstream policy discussions. To start to address this gap and drawing on some of the latest thinking on human development inequalities, the seminar explored relationships with volunteer work across diverse contexts.

Emerging themes

As we seek to improve our understanding of human development concepts, **more and better data on volunteer work can contribute to discussions on well-being and happiness.** The nature of and returns to volunteering at individual, community and society level need to be explored further, since evidence presented at the seminar demonstrate that the same participatory opportunities do not have the same value across diverse social groups.

Pedro Conceição, Director of the HDRO, noted that volunteering is often seen as an expression of agency and incorporated into conceptual frameworks on that basis. But a more comprehensive measurement approach will also help us to understand aspects of *dignity* which are essential to the models that will take us beyond GDP.

Secondly, while volunteers play essential roles in mitigating the impact of inequalities, **costs and benefits of volunteering need to be better balanced** to avoid an ‘unpaid work premium’ in those communities that are already furthest behind.

For example, Laura Addati from International Labour Organization ILO shared data on [unpaid care work](#), including volunteer care work outside the household, and its implications for women’s labour market participation.

Liana Ghuskayan from the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, the world’s largest volunteer organization, shared examples of how largely local volunteers around the world are bearing the brunt of risks in conflict and disaster-prone areas without the necessary protections and support.

These are challenges that will not be addressed by siloed volunteer policies and programmes, but by integrating analysis of volunteering into gender and social policies, labour policies and risk reduction planning, for example.

I. How much time do women and men spend on unpaid care work? (ILO: [Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work](#))



Turning to **the distinctive contributions that volunteering can make to address human development inequalities**, Cielo Morales, Director of the Latin America and Caribbean Institute for Economic and Social Planning, described the shape of inequalities in the most unequal region in the world. There is a large spatial or territorial element, both in terms of rural under-served populations, and stark disparities across urban contexts.

The impacts of climate change exacerbate these inequalities, and lack of trust rooted in levels of corruption and social segregation are a key feature across these societies. Based on the examples shared, volunteering can have its biggest impact addressing these social inequalities, particularly at the local level.

Experiences from the region show that municipal or sub-regional approaches, rather than national initiatives, can perhaps best be used to hold authorities to account and build meaningful collaborations.

A very different perspective, **looking at patterns of social mobility across generations**, provided by Ambar Narayan, Lead Economist on Poverty and Equity at the World Bank, also looked at issues of spatial segregation and how volunteering may counter these impacts.

His research demonstrates that moving beyond simple distributions of inequality, to look at how people's human development opportunities relate to both those of their parents (absolute mobility), the world has stagnated since the 1980s.

Furthermore, looking at how a person's position in society is determined by their parents' position (relative mobility), the developing world lags significantly behind higher-income countries, creating a persistent poverty trap.

II. Economies with higher educational mobility tend to have lower levels of spatial segregation by education (World Bank: [Fair Progress? Economic Mobility across Generations around the World](#))



Narayan suggests that in addition to fiscal policy, part of the policy response to high inequality and social mobility in these contexts needs to be about **'equalizing opportunities across space'** including through local actions.

For example, beyond providing services in under-served areas, volunteer initiatives can create social infrastructure to connect diverse groups across pockets of disadvantage. Volunteers can also contribute to improving neighbourhoods and social environments.

Both of these elements are important for addressing the critical element of *aspirations gaps* in societies, an important response to multi-generational inequalities and lack of social

mobility.

Looking beyond the functional roles that volunteers play, to the social and cultural assets and norms that can be developed through volunteering was also picked up on by Professor Michele Lamont of Harvard University.

Rather than measuring inequalities in terms of achievement gaps, such as wealth, education levels or life expectancy, her research demonstrates the need to also look whether volunteer work is exacerbating or challenging **recognition gaps for different groups**.

Professor Lamont defines recognition as a social act where the work, actions or identity of groups are recognized by others. Recognition is important, because it shapes cultural membership, and notions within a society (including among those who are excluded) of fairness and merit. So essentially it can frame acceptance or rejection of inequalities, or more positively, the way in which societies see the equality of all people and groups.

For example, where a middle-class person volunteers in a deprived area, this can reinforce inequalities since it supports narratives around who is the productive member of society, even while the middle-class person is building up their CV and ‘banking’ the experience.

But volunteering has the potential to also contribute to an enabling environment for equality. Volunteering can be used to support collective identities that go beyond our standard frameworks of employment and markets, to recognize the inherent equality of social and economic groups. Through volunteer-based initiatives, low-status communities can also build ‘repertoires of hope’ that are important to strengthen their own self-value.

What next?

As we look to improve our multi-dimensional understanding of human development, the issues of well-being, and dignity are an important part of the picture.

Analysis of volunteer work provides valuable insights since it demonstrates how ordinary people, everywhere are responding to social and economic inequalities across all societies. But volunteerism also provides a vital social infrastructure that can be further shaped to support greater equalities particularly through shaping more inclusive collective identities, fostering social capital building and helping those groups furthest behind to recognise their own self-worth.

This conversation will inform preparations for the Global Technical Meeting on ‘Reimagining Volunteering’ at the High-Level Political Forum of the SDGs in July 2020 which is an opportunity for UN Member States and their development partners to share collective learning around people’s participation under the 2030 Agenda.

Sustainable Development Goal: [SDG 10: Reduced inequalities](#)