



FFT volunteer Nisanart Yeamkhong supports the COVID-19 data entry and processing team at the Royal Centre for Disease Control in Bhutan as part of her work to set up a quality management system in the laboratory.

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## Volunteerism building solidarity and solutions transcending borders

"Initially, some people didn't believe I could do anything. I was only 28 years old at that time, but I said, 'join me and we will learn together'," said Suphawit Pharom, a volunteer with the Friends from Thailand (FFT) volunteer programme on his experiences in Mozambique.

Since 2003, more than 160 people have volunteered through the programme, which places them for one or two years in countries across Asia and Africa, where they use their expertise to contribute to Thailand's development cooperation projects.

The programme aims to promote partnerships at the local level, providing technical advice in its main development areas, including agriculture, public health, technology, education, carpentry, eco-tourism, local products development and community development based on the sufficiency

economy philosophy, while highlighting the people-to-people aspect of Thailand's development cooperation.

The programme represents global best practices on volunteering described in the recently launched publication "South-South Volunteering as a Driving Force for Development: Experiences from Asia and the Pacific" by the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme, United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation and the Thailand International Cooperation Agency (TICA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Beyond the programme's mission to "cultivate friendship and better understanding between the people of Thailand and those of our development partners", the FFT programme also ensures the projects' alignment with Thailand's 20-year National Strategy. Indeed, it also encourages a new look at development cooperation through the lens of volunteerism, itself being an innovative, yet not widely-known approach.

"I think cooperation is the right thing to do and volunteerism is one way where everyone can do their part in making the world a better and happier place," said Phuttiphum Arsanok, another FFT volunteer in Benin, about his volunteer experience.

Volunteering is often one of the first experiences of civic engagement for young people. It is also a way to build skills for future employability and act upon issues that matter to youth, such as climate change, peace, gender equality and economic empowerment. One billion people globally are active volunteers, and around one in three young people report that they are volunteering – nearly 600 million youth worldwide.

The prime minister of Thailand, in his keynote address on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the UN Global Compact and the 75th anniversary of the UN, said Thailand is committed to increasing participation of all sectors in sustainable national development, especially by engaging the civil society, academia, and the general public in the form of volunteer work.

Thai people are generous, and this is proven by the fact that there are more than 10 million registered and non-registered volunteers. Volunteerism provides space for the public to participate in the development process and can also play a role in localising government policies at the community level and helping the voices of the people be heard during the policy development process.

The FFT Programme is also an opportunity to develop the skills of young people through their experiences, demonstrating volunteerism's value as a

two-way learning process. During their assignments, volunteers develop skills, increase their understanding of development, and gain international experience in line with national priorities. Through the programme, Thai youth, aged 22-35, who have at least a bachelor's degree, have been recruited and prepared to work abroad as FFT volunteers.

As part of the response to Covid-19 pandemic, more than 1 million village health volunteers came forward in their communities, in addition to more than 15,000 public health volunteers in Bangkok. Volunteer movements like Covid Relief Bangkok, used demographic data analysis to identify the most vulnerable communities and coordinated efforts to support through donations and psycho-social support, while Covid Thailand Aid, provided aid and care packages to elderly citizens.

Beyond Thailand, FFT volunteers also played a role in assisting their host countries in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. Two such volunteers in Bhutan work with their Bhutanese counterparts to contribute to the national effort in containing the virus. This kind of volunteering is a manifestation of common humanity and collective strength speaking to a whole-of-society approach.

The pandemic has exposed the fragility of societies and existing ever-growing challenges, such as widespread inequality, worrying levels of ecosystem damage, greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution, and high levels of vulnerability to climate-induced disasters.

The response in Thailand, however, points to the possibility of a very different future based on solidarity, reciprocity and community, as well as innovative development pathways at the local level. Volunteerism builds social capital that needs consistent investment. The FFT programme is one example but the challenges we face call for more initiatives to expand with proper support ecosystems and partnerships.

However, gaps remain in the way volunteering is seen as isolated from development discourse and efforts. Imagine the development dividends if volunteers were included and owned development initiatives on the ground together with communities. Imagine providing opportunities for the elderly, minorities, indigenous people, and persons with disabilities to engage in volunteering as part of building social cohesion in their neighbourhoods.

We need to show our gratitude to those who step up and volunteer to rise to the challenges and uncertainties of our time beyond the annual National Volunteer Day on October 21 and International Volunteer Day celebrated on December 5. To build sustainable social capital through volunteering, we

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need more citizens engaged and a broader space created for bold solutions to help society to flourish and build the belonging that transcends borders.

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This [article](#) was originally published by The Nation Thailand, authored by Ms Gita Sabharwal, UN Resident Coordinator in Thailand; Ms Pattarat Hongtong, Director-General, Thailand International Cooperation Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand; and Ms Shalina Miah, Regional Manager of the UNV Office in Asia & the Pacific.

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