Walking the talk: How volunteer-to-volunteer empowerment advances the 2030 Agenda

No one left behind – the pledge of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – is not just about advocating and speaking up for those without a voice. It is about committing to include as many voices as possible and bringing opportunities to find and use that voice.

Amidst the pandemic, the world finds itself at a critical turning point. To fulfil the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to overcome both current crises and future ones, this Decade of Action needs to be just that – one of urgent, inclusive and long-term-oriented action. And the impact of this action, as is being observed worldwide, is magnified when it is bottom-up, when it is localized[1] and when it effectively addresses and integrates the nuances of different cultures and groups. Here, is the truly transformative power of volunteering.

“I believe the SDGs need to be achieved and localized in order to achieve development. Volunteers have an immense role to play” --Samprit
UN Volunteers around the world are promoting citizen engagement and providing tools and training to others, encouraging them to become agents of change in their own communities. Mobilizing the community helps to drive inclusivity and sustainability and exemplifies that the volunteer spirit is a collective phenomenon that gains strength in number. It helps communities to overcome the most pressing, local national, regional and global challenges and ultimately, realize the achievement of the SDGs.

This is solidarity. This is what it means to empower anyone and everyone to demonstrate, embody, and promote inspiration in action.

This philosophy motivated UN Volunteer Helen Mayelle, serving with the United Nations Development Programme in Sierra Leone, to design an unprecedented inclusive community engagement strategy in response to the pandemic. Aiming to disseminate facts on prevention measures and combat misinformation, Helen planned the recruitment, training and deployment of nearly 1,000 volunteers to help promote behaviour change and communicate safe public health measures.

"We need to support volunteerism more. Volunteers drive change in the world in terms of humanitarianism and development. We are the drivers of change. Our driving force is an unconditional passion and zeal to positively impact humanity and that same force binds us together as a powerful team.” --Helen Mayelle, UN Volunteer Communications Analyst with UNDP in Sierra Leone

Critically, Helen ensured the campaign would involve the participation of marginalized groups, including market women, fishing communities, persons with disabilities, youth groups, civil society and artists, among others. Truly
equality and diversity in action, many of those participating who belong to marginalized groups, felt that their contributions were valued and that their engagement was truly making a difference – for themselves, their countries, their communities, but also the world.

Clearly, motivation and spirit know no borders. In Nepal, UN Volunteer Samprit Rai, Information Database Coordinator with the UN Resident Coordinator's Office, mobilized over 500 volunteers for the V4ACTION (Volunteers for Action) online campaign which aimed to spread awareness about COVID-19 and provide accurate, verified information gathered from the Government of Nepal, World Health Organization and other UN agencies.

Samprit also served as the coordinator in mobilizing 300 volunteers, representing all of Nepal's provinces for the UN75 online survey[2]. In less than a two-week time frame, they collected more than 50,000 responses via phone calls.

In Venezuela, two UN Volunteers with UN Population Fund (UNFPA) are engaging community volunteers in their gender-based violence awareness and sensitization efforts. While in Bolivia, a UN Volunteer with the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) UN Volunteer with UNICEF Bolivia who is harnessing the power of professional volunteers for the operation of an emotional support and violence prevention call centre.

As part of the International Volunteer Day (IVD) celebrations, UNV in Latin America and the Caribbean has launched United People, which seeks to showcase the power of volunteering, including the more than 1300 UN Volunteers deployed in the region in 2020, as fundamental to innovative, inclusive and sustainable solutions for the UN.

"After all, Volunteers are United People: with the same dreams, same hopes and the same passions. That is, ultimately, what the region and the entire world need, now more than ever. --from the International Volunteer Day campaign in Latin America and the Caribbean[3]."
Yet, the true impact of such mobilization and community engagement cannot be reflected in a number. An inspiring, hope-inducing virtuous cycle is generated. Peer-to-peer connections are established at the grassroots, leading to strengthened social bonds and sense of inclusion and community resilience.

So where to from here? What steps are decision-makers taking to guarantee all forms of volunteering can flourish and to support the integration of volunteer efforts in pandemic recovery strategies? What are we as citizens doing to preserve and strengthen volunteer-to-volunteer empowerment and spread the volunteer spirit?

On this IVD 2020 special commemoration, let’s reflect and open the dialogue on this important matter. Let’s commit to unity, to humanity and to even more inspiration in action. Let’s commit to building back better, together.

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[1] “Localizing” is the process of considering subnational contexts in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, from the setting of goals and targets, to determining the means of implementation and using indicators for the measurement and monitoring of progress.

[2] The UN75 initiative is meant to empower people everywhere to share their thoughts around current and emerging global trends, and to have a conversation with as many people as possible to spark ideas for building the future we want, particularly youth.

[3] You can watch the campaign's launch video through UNV's Latin America and the Caribbean social media accounts: [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).
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Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 3: Good health and well-being SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals