Social aspects of volunteering in the context of COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka

This is the third in a series of articles featured by the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme in Sri Lanka, as part of celebrations marking International Volunteer Day 2020.

The prevailing COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the long-established patterns of day to day lives of a large majority of people in Sri Lanka. Many people have lost their income sources leading to serious social and economic problems for their families. Disruption of education has adversely affected school children, university students and other youths engaged in diverse training activities. Lockdowns and other public health restrictions have drastically curtailed the mobility of people in affected areas, seriously limiting their normal activities.

The emergent situation outlined above has affected the lives of people of all walks of life. Many people who are normally very active and engage in all sorts of activities such as sports, cultural and social activities, professional work, community engagements, volunteer activities and travelling today remain confined to their domestic sphere. As for people who usually engage...
in volunteering work, such restrictions have prevented such work at a time when social support of all kinds is critically needed to address diverse issues created by the pandemic.

This is really a dilemma that has to be dealt with, as the absence of volunteer engagement has deprived many people who need the support of volunteer action to cope with diverse problems they face today.

Physical mobility of volunteers is critically important for them to reach out to individuals and communities that usually benefit from the work of volunteers. Yet, the pandemic has made it very difficult for volunteers to move around. But, the critical question is whether the prevailing public health restrictions preclude all volunteering work. My position is a resounding “No”.

This is where we need to think out of the box and explore possibilities for voluntary action at a time when it is most needed. In the remainder of this article, I outline a program that can overcome the barriers and address issues that many people face today.

The key word here is networking. Networking is a way of bringing together people who share a set of common interests and aspirations for the purpose of working together to mobilize human and material resources to address a problem or need they identify together. Such networking can be done using modern communication technology, minimizing the need to organize face to face meetings.

Moreover, members of such a network can reach out to individuals and families in need of social support using the same technology which is easily available today. Such a strategy is necessary today to develop and implement social support programs that are needed today to meet diverse needs of individuals and communities adversely affected by the pandemic and the resultant social and economic dislocation.

As regards to the above strategy, younger members of the community can play a significant part due to their greater familiarity with modern communication technology. So, youth volunteers can take the lead in bringing potential volunteers into a network which can operate at national, regional and local levels in the country. The organisation so established can do an initial need assessment, do the mapping of the spatial distribution of people who are in need, make an assessment of the resources needed, develop an implementation plan, mobilize the necessary resources and take measures through regional and local networks to provide the support needed by the potential beneficiaries.
The process outlined above can be facilitated by a range of institutions such as the UN volunteers, National Volunteering Secretariat, other international agencies, corporate sector and civil society organizations. What is critically important is the mobilization of professional groups in diverse fields to provide the necessary guidance for the entire program as the needs of the people adversely affected by the pandemic and its social, economic and psychological fall out can vary widely and the interventions needed have to be designed and implemented with professional guidance.

Mobilization of professionals through national, regional and local volunteer networks to deliver services to the needy such as counselling, personal services and information is as important as the delivery of material support such as food and planting material. And, finally, the role of the youth in the activities outlined above needs to be highlighted. As is well known, younger people are more knowledgeable and competent to handle modern communication technology than the older citizens and therefore, play a bigger role in managing volunteer activities at a time physical mobility of people is highly constrained by the pandemic.

This article was first published in The Sunday Times of Sri Lanka. It is the third in a series of five articles:

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