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Recognizing and protecting those who serve us as volunteers

"Volunteering is a nucleus of resistance to the uncertainty [of the pandemic]. Volunteering is the hope of being able to continue, the hope that there is a better tomorrow." These were the words of Carmen Ramirez, UNV Regional Communications Officer for Latin America and the Caribbean, when asked how she would reimagine volunteerism. "Five years from now, I would hope that decision makers – in governments, universities, the private sector and beyond – realize the value of volunteering, because that would enable us to achieve so much more."

During the [Global Technical Meeting](#) (GTM) on Reimagining Volunteerism for the 2030 Agenda, high-ranking officials and volunteers exchanged on how volunteering is contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), how governments and organizations can better protect volunteers, and how volunteering can and should be recognized.

"All forms of volunteering can propel the goals and principles of the 2030 Agenda, as well as address inequalities, even in uncertain times such as these," said Lita Paparoni, UNV's Regional Manager in Latin America and the

Caribbean, during a breakout session for the region during the GTM[1]. "Both the 2030 Agenda and the COVID-19 socio-economic recovery framework highlight [the power of community-based solutions](#)[2] and the importance of strengthening social cohesion and resilience."

At times such as these, volunteerism has become the number one tool to ensure that no one is left behind. Volunteers are at the heart of at-risk and vulnerable communities, doing what they can to serve and ensure that rights are respected and resources available for all.

"This is a critical time to recognize all forms of volunteering[2]: from the spontaneous to the institutional, including volunteer actions led by indigenous communities, migrants and refugees, youth, women and people with disabilities, among other groups," Lita continued. "An example is women who are in soup kitchens, cooking for those in need... their spontaneous volunteering enables the vulnerable in our communities to overcome challenges and reach for a better future."

Yet the issue of protection of volunteers is essential, as Carmen reiterates. "The future of humanity does not depend on a specific group of people, it depends on all of us working collectively to ensure that no one is left behind. It also necessitates us protecting those tirelessly serving in the front lines."

"The volunteer may have the same need and be in the same situation as the people s/he serves," said Bessy Valle, Head of Volunteers at the Red Cross Honduras. "We must be aware that volunteers can have different roles depending on the moment and depending on the situation that is occurring. S/He can be a volunteer, a beneficiary and even a victim of the system and of the abuse and violence that often permeates our societies."

All over Latin America, governments, civil societies and private organizations have been working to ensure that volunteers have all the resources at their disposal to be able to continue the invaluable work they do, and the GTM provided all stakeholders with the platform to share their experiences.

For example, in Ecuador, public and private universities, local actors and the government have been collaborating towards the achievement of the SDGs by developing a space where organizations and volunteers share different perspectives on their area of specializations.[3] "We utilize a participative methodology of commitment that allows exchange, collective creation, recreation and innovation of knowledge, [and at the same time] the search for solutions for the problems that societies face," said Isabel Ramos, Vice-President of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO).

Iraida Manzanilla, Research Project Consultant with the International Association for Volunteer Effort in Venezuela, spoke of how the National Association of Industrialists in Colombia – in collaboration with civil society organizations and local governments – organized awareness sessions in vulnerable communities. In Venezuela, companies and organizations have come together to provide food for children who attend early childhood care centres to supplement their diet and avoid malnutrition, depending on volunteers to implement.

"This pandemic not only makes us reimagine volunteerism, but also forces us to make the processes more flexible, from recruitment to onboarding, management to transitions," said Maria Cekalovic, Director of the National Institute of Youth in Chile. "It challenges us to ensure that every day our volunteer has adequate care in all aspects of volunteering."

To face the challenges the pandemic will surely continue to bring, it will be indispensable that development practitioners and policymakers think and act beyond business as usual, so that volunteering, with a special focus on the spontaneous kind, is well protected and recognized as the backbone of societies to recover better. UNV continues to engage in this discussion, in addition to nurturing the [Knowledge Portal on Volunteerism](#), where you can find the latest global, regional, and national data and evidence on volunteerism.

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[1] The UN Volunteers (UNV) programme and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies hosted the 2020 Global Technical Meeting (GTM), which took place from July 13 to 15 via Zoom and UN TV. During the GTM, Latin America and Caribbean Region hosted their [breakout session](#) on Wednesday, July 15 at 9:30 AM EST with over 15 high-ranking officials from all Latin American and over 500 attendees from various sectors discussing how can stakeholders better support volunteers, what a volunteer is, and the role that different stakeholders should take to promote and ensure the safety and security of volunteers. In addition, a [Knowledge Portal of Volunteerism](#) was launched, to collect in one main site different global, regional and national data and evidence on volunteerism.

[\[2\] Global Synthesis Report: Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda,](#)

[\[3\] UNV Regional Office of Latin America and the Caribbean, Global Technical Meeting: Breakout Session of Latin America and the Caribbean](#), Facebook Live, 9:30 AM EDT, July 15, 2020



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