



"My call to my UN partners is to look at ways to systematically invest in UN Volunteers," says Mr Sudipto Mukerjee, UNDP's Resident Representative in Bangladesh.

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Investing in UN Volunteers is investing in the future of our planet

Mr Sudipto Mukerjee, Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Programme in Bangladesh, recalls with pride the time he volunteered as a schoolboy in Calcutta, India, to help the community and the elderly. Many years later, he is still a strong advocate of volunteering and has been instrumental in mobilizing UN Volunteers for interventions across Iraq, West Africa and Bangladesh. In this blog, Mr Mukerjee shares his experience and thoughts on how volunteering can instill much-needed values for a better world.

Today, we live in a world without borders: we are currently experiencing a global pandemic which does not follow borders; international terrorism does not follow borders; climate change does not follow borders. To address these borderless problems, you must have citizens across the world who are equally borderless and conscious about supporting the planet. I believe this is where volunteering plays a significant role and that we must invest in a

future for these responsible citizens.

My experience of working with UN Volunteers goes all the way back to over 10 years ago, when I joined UNDP Iraq. As there were no UN Volunteers serving in Iraq at the time, I was able to initiate their mobilization and deployment, initially in Erbil. This greatly benefitted our organization in carrying out effective stakeholder engagement, including with the Government. This relationship also acted as a catalyst for the autonomous Government of Kurdistan to start supporting a self-financed national volunteer programme. The UN Volunteers offered an array of specialist knowledge and were instrumental in working towards the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), by addressing issues such as gender, human rights, poverty and inequality.

Later, when I was posted in West Africa during the Ebola pandemic, we worked effectively with UN Volunteers during the response and recovery phases. As the virus continued to claim an increasing number of lives of frontliners, including doctors and nurses, the UN Volunteers and West African volunteers courageously stepped forward to fill the gap and provide vital medical care during emergency response activities in the field.

When we started the community volunteers programme in Bangladesh, I pushed to hire UN Volunteers, as I believed there would be a different flavour to the programmes when we had talented young people flying the UN flag at the community level. What these UN Community Volunteers continue to bring to the programme is exceptional. I must also point out that UNDP in Bangladesh has a poor record in terms of gender parity, however, when it comes to UN Volunteers, 70 out of 160 are women.

“ If we can nurture and groom these young professionals and keep them in the development sector, this will be a worthy investment for the UN system in the long term, and for addressing gender parity in our workforce.

Volunteers and response to COVID-19 in Bangladesh

We have seen the unprecedented efforts of volunteers across the world

throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and I have proudly experienced this first-hand through UNDP's work in Bangladesh. We, in Bangladesh, run UNDP's single largest urban programme globally. The same urban programme's COVID-19 response was also implemented the fastest in comparison to all UNDP offices globally.

Our work in urban slums, where most inhabitants are daily wage workers, was crucial in the context of providing basic support to ensure improved public health standards during the pandemic. To achieve this, it was not enough to simply ask people to stay at home; we had to think of ways to make sure that conditions were better for them to do so. Therefore, we took steps not just with outreach initiatives, but also by providing food baskets, handwashing points with soap and water, sanitizer and masks, all in an effort to keep low-income communities safe.

All of these factors, including door-to-door deliveries to prevent spread, were carried out by our frontliners, and all of them were UN Community Volunteers. They provided tremendous support in the communities; we must reflect and credit the decrease in the rate of infection mainly to the UN Volunteers, who were able to reach out to vast communities with preventative measures in a very short space of time, and who at times also risked their health at the frontline.

To design and develop an effective recovery programme, you must know where recovery is required;. The Government has announced an economic stimulus packaging – and most people do not know how to access the loans and government recovery programmes, among other things.

“ UN Volunteers know the needs of their communities and have the necessary insights for outreach and information. At times like these, the engagement of UN Community Volunteers will be crucial to support efforts at the grassroots, and I am confident that they will do so very well.

Promoting volunteerism in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, UNV is doing a great job – looking beyond mobilizing UN

Volunteers, looking beyond a workforce supply programme. I always consciously think of bringing volunteers to our programme work from the start and not as an afterthought.

We have also deployed some UN Volunteers within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and I believe this is helping them to address a critical gap in their workforce, which is having tech-savvy people for research, analyses etc. We have identified UN Volunteers, including fresh graduates, who have brought in completely refreshing and modern perspectives to the government departments. These talented UN Volunteers are also delighted to have found a bridge linking – and including – them in important initiatives at an early age, where they are able to fill the gaps in technology, and in carrying out timely and quality reporting, amongst other activities. We will involve UN Volunteers in trainings and over time, they will have a hugely beneficial impact on building local capacities.

UNV's work with the Government of Bangladesh in developing the National Volunteer Policy is also of utmost importance. For a country with a history of volunteerism, this could not have come at a better time. This is the 50th year since the birth of Bangladesh, which was achieved thanks to the selfless efforts of volunteers who fought the liberation war. Through this policy, I believe that it's not enough to look at just education and skills in the spirit of volunteering – what's important is to have good values.

“ Times have changed, and families do not seem to have values that were so commonly present in the past. I believe that volunteerism has the potential to instill these values in modern societies for the sake of the community and country, and to generate a sense of duty and pride beyond that offered by an average job. It allows us to invest in a planet of responsible citizens.

Message to UNV and UN partners

My appeal to UNV is to get more and more young people into the UN, trained and equipped to work in conflict and emergencies. Bring them into

crises with adequate insurance covers, so they are protected and have the opportunity to learn. This probably happens to a certain extent, but we should not keep UN Volunteers away from experiences which they, as future leaders, can benefit from by being part of crisis management and resolution – these are investments for peace. Those who know the cost of conflict will understand the value of peace.

My call to my UN partners is to look at ways to systematically invest in UN Volunteers. This is very important. The objective should be, when you hire a young volunteer, to continue to pave the way for them to become senior professionals. It's important to have structured, peer-to-peer learning experiences and I believe this is something not just the UNV office, but also the host agencies can take the initiative on. We have a responsibility for their professional development. It may be happening already, but their professional growth needs to happen in a more structured way, and not just through a learning allowance. I always consider: what is UNDP's investment to help volunteers grow professionally? Otherwise, they end up only as temporary resources for a certain period and not as an investment.

Inspiration in action

“ Irrespective of what the motivation behind initially joining UNV is, over time, the volunteer assignment cultivates the values of the UN system: integrity, compassion, fighting for an equal world, leaving no one behind, a greater sense of empathy and a sense of being selfless in whatever you do. Volunteering is undoubtedly a calling beyond a career.

In Bangladesh, most of the UN Volunteers are young people with a high level of skills. I started my career in teaching, and I get along with these young UN Volunteers very well. They look at me as somebody they would aspire to become, like a role model – someone who came from a developing country with a middle-class background. My success is their inspiration to work hard to reach similar heights. This motivates me to maintain more of a mentor and mentee relationship with the UN Volunteers.

I feel, at this stage of my career, that it's my payback time. Even if I can achieve a humble five per cent success or just have 180 UN Volunteers on the ground, I will try to leave some enduring values in them, and for me, their ultimate growth and success will be an inspirational story.



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