



Selim Jahan is the lead author of the Human Development Report 2016 (UNV, 2017)

The role of volunteers in the human development agenda: An interview with Selim Jahan, lead author of the Human Development Report

Professor Selim Jahan was in Bonn, Germany, presenting the latest Human Development Report, "Human Development for Everyone," to the Bonn-based UN organizations. He talked to us about human development, volunteerism and how UN Volunteers can be catalysts for change in a world with lingering

deprivations and inequalities.

UNV: What do you see as the intrinsic values volunteerism can bring to the human development agenda?

Selim Jahan: Firstly, volunteerism is undoubtedly helping the human development agenda. Volunteers are working in areas such as education, health, water and sanitation, improving living conditions and, in a nutshell, providing people with all kinds of support. Volunteerism enhances human development, everywhere.

Secondly, volunteerism has a special value in the framework of conflicts and disasters. As an example, UN Volunteers both onsite and online have done an incredible work in the aftermath of the Nepal earthquake in 2015. UN Volunteers helped identify the areas most affected by the earthquake, assess who are the populations affected, and let the rest of the world know what was needed. At that point in time, when such a humanitarian catastrophe takes place, this is exactly the type of information and data gathering that is most needed.

Finally, what is also important about UN Volunteers is that, since they are working in the field, in more than a hundred countries and with many UN entities, they can bring and replicate experiences from one context to another in a meaningful and systematic way. There are currently lots of discussions about development experiments here and there, but it's difficult to quickly transfer knowledge from one place to the other. UN Volunteers are well placed to do just this.

The use of [UN Online Volunteers](#) and, more broadly, the use of people's skills to support peace and development through the internet is opening new possibilities to innovate on human development. How do you see this trend moving forward?

I think lots of human interactions are currently happening through the internet, and this trend will increase. Social media and the use of information technology are changing the face-to-face interaction we were used to in the past, and people do not need to be physically in a specific place anymore to provide support to a person or community. One example is healthcare, where the use of technology is providing virtual advice to pregnant women, or to women with infants. Doctors don't need to be there anymore, since sending information through the internet to a mobile phone may be enough.

In addition, when we talk about the dissemination and exchange of knowledge and experiences, in many cases there is no need to send experts from one country to another; you send experiences, or case studies, using technology. In the early future, most human interactions would be based on digital technology, and the scope for using this as a means to volunteer is limitless.

The process to produce the next UNV's flagship publication, the State of the World's Volunteerism Report, just started some weeks ago. [UNV, in partnership with other volunteer-involving organizations, is sending 15 volunteer researchers to the field to](#)

[collect evidence on the contribution of volunteerism in fragile communities and post-conflict environments.](#) **Do you see here a potential link with the next Human Development Report?**

Absolutely. We rely on people in the field, usually at the country level, to provide us examples of programmes that support human development. This is how we've got examples coming from UNV during the last years. I am sure we will be using some of this research, and we can complement each other. Any substantial contribution from UN Volunteers deployed in the field, especially as examples of the impact of volunteers and volunteerism in communities, is more than welcome.

In our report we always include measures of people's perceptions, such as human security "as perceived by women." This is maybe something that can be done by UN Volunteers, capture people's perceptions about volunteerism in the field. Coming back to the previous question, this could be done through both volunteers in the field and the use of modern technology and big data.

According to the Human Development Report 2016, Turkmenistan, Myanmar and Indonesia are the countries where people volunteer the most. They are all Asian and Medium Developed Countries. Do you have a theory about why this is so?

In many societies volunteering gets unnoticed. In rural areas, women volunteer for other women every day. Taking care of others' children and family members, fetching water or cooking fuel, advising on child rearing, healthcare, finance, this is all done by women, often volunteering, in rural communities throughout the world. We often miss these community-level volunteers, because they are not part of formal volunteer schemes, but people in poor societies are very resilient, and they depend on the collective help they get from each other to survive.

I think the three countries that are on top of the volunteer index share some of these characteristics, and if we are looking into a theory, I would say that the more monetized an economy is, the less volunteers would have, while economies that are more informal will have more volunteers. Basically, this is due to the fact that in certain societies people need the support of other people to provide them with basic goods, since they cannot buy those services on the market.

The problem is that much of the work done by these kind of volunteers goes under the radar, because no one picks them up. This connects to the previous question, when we talked about research on community-level volunteerism for human development, definitely something worth pursuing.

→ [Download and read the Human Development Report 2016.](#)

Selim Jahan is the director of the Human Development Report Office. He is a Bangladesh national and holds a PhD in Economics from McGill University, Canada.

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