From polio to peace: voluntary action remains essential for societal wellbeing

As the United Nations Volunteer (UNV) programme turns 50, we feature the reflections of former executives and personnel on its development and achievements. Ms Flavia Pansieri was the Executive Coordinator of the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme from 2008 to 2012. She shares her reflections on the reach of volunteerism and its importance for societal wellbeing.

During my 33 years of service in the UN, the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme has never been far from me. Likely because the spirit of UNV – the inspiration that moves people of all ages to act and make a difference in the lives of others – is what the UN itself is all about.
Voluntary action is essential for the impact on direct beneficiaries, but also for the social cohesiveness it promotes. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how important it is to be an active member of society and how much more is achieved when government action is combined with civic engagement. --Flavia Pansieri, former UNV Executive Coordinator

When I started my UN carrier, as the junior-most international professional at the UNDP Beijing office, I was the Associate Expert on what was then the largest UNDP project worldwide: geothermal exploration in Tibet. During a lull in the winter of 1984, I went to my supervisor seeking new opportunities. Before long, my responsibilities went from one major project to all 10 of UNDP’s energy projects, plus management of UNV and its programme for the Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals (TOKTEN).

My new UNV responsibilities kept me busy. At the time, organizations in China were not used to having international personnel embedded as UN Volunteers. Most UN Volunteers were native English speakers, placed with various universities and higher education institutions.

Then Executive Coordinator Hikmat Nabulsi appealed to the Chinese authorities to broaden UN Volunteer skill profiles, however teaching English remained the priority. I recall to this day some of the most active UN Volunteers, such as Will White, teaching English at the Geological Institute, who settled in China and still lives there; and David Weston, a retired British teacher who left a well-paying position in Qatar to teach English at the Tianjin Aviation Institute.

In China and every duty station I have worked at since, I have admired the engagement of UN Volunteers. However, the moment when the value of volunteering really hit me in all its power was in Yemen, in the midst of a major polio outbreak when I was UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative.

The World Health Organization (WHO) realized that to bring the outbreak under control, it would not be enough to invite parents to take their children to health centres for vaccination – if they could access them. Instead, they wanted a door-to-door campaign, so WHO asked UNDP for help. Working with colleagues to develop an approach, I suggested we focus our efforts on the remote region of Hadramaut and help in organizing and monitoring the vaccination campaign.

My suggestion was met with outright scepticism. Hadramaut was devilishly hot and going door-to-door would be exhausting. Regardless, with a small team, we volunteered to participate in the vaccination campaign, administering a drop of vaccine on a sugar lump. It did not need medical skill – just persistence and endurance.
As the campaign got underway, I could see the enormous pride the volunteers felt about doing something useful for their country. Many experienced the realities of poverty for the first time. Having braved the sun and the heat, they would end the day exhausted, but elated, having made a concrete difference in a moment of need.

The experience changed them, but it changed me too. My passion for volunteerism ignited, I realized that this was what I wanted to do next – join UNV as Executive Coordinator. Once the post became available, I rushed to apply.

“UNV is truly a happy place to be. All the volunteers are by nature full of drive and optimism. I made it a priority to balance my frequent travels to New York or donor capitals with visits to the field, meeting as many volunteers as possible. And 5 December each year – International Volunteer Day – was almost always spent among them, celebrating the pride and joy of volunteering.

One exception was in 2011, the 10-year anniversary of the International Year of Volunteers, which coincided with the launch in the UN General Assembly of the first State of the World’s Volunteerism Report, a publication I strongly promoted, even in the face of some scepticism among a few colleagues. I am happy to see that my successors have continued the practice of issuing follow-up reports.
After five years of service in UNV, I was preparing to retire but was called back as the Deputy High Commissioner in the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). No contrast could be starker. Where government authorities always welcomed the UNV Executive Coordinator and the “extra help” of volunteerism with open arms, human rights officials address some of the most heinous crimes and violations. Consequently, they are met, at a minimum, with extreme hesitation and wariness.

Once again at OHCHR, I came across volunteers whose contributions were essential to the success of human rights programmes, from the UNV forensic expert in Cambodia helping identify the victims of the Killing Fields, to volunteers providing the backbone of on-the-ground peacebuilding. They conducted their work under extremely tough circumstances, yet with dedication and commitment.

Now that I have retired, I once again volunteer myself. Whether working with Syrian non-governmental organizations in Turkey, or close to home, with Italian organizations active in the environment, human rights or democracy, I feel, like David Weston did so many years ago in China, that at the end of a long professional career, there is so much more one can contribute to societal wellbeing.

So, dear UNV, to you my best wishes for your 50th birthday, along with my conviction that
the 50 and more years yet to come will see ever greater recognition of the value of volunteer action.

UNV50

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 10: Reduced inequalities SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals