



UN Volunteer Paul Mercier (Canada), left, during an event held to launch a national advocacy campaign to promote volunteerism in Mauritius. (UNV, 2011)

Fighting poverty through community development in Mauritius

After 33 years as Canadian government economist and executive, Paul Mercier decided to do something else. He had already done quite a bit of local volunteer work with NGOs for the mentally-handicapped, for hockey and kids, in football, and in school management through parent associations. It was shortly after an experience doing international volunteer work in Cameroon that he enrolled in UNV's global candidate pool. The following year, Paul was embarking on a journey that would last many years.

After returning home from Cameroon in 2009, I accepted an assignment as an international UN Volunteer in Mauritius. Initially, I was tasked with the creation of a National Volunteer Programme based on a very attractive feasibility study. That study proved exceedingly optimistic but impossible to finance. I forged ahead and developed the programme in consultation with over 75 NGOs, government and private sectors and individuals. Despite the many challenges faced along the way, the biggest of which has been securing financing for the successful rollout of the programme, I always maintained dedicated attention to the promotion of volunteerism and capacity building for both national volunteers and NGO staff.

“ In many countries, inequalities have increased over the last ten years or so. This is the case in Mauritius. Classic mechanisms of income support and redistribution have been used, without significantly alleviating either inequalities or poverty. UNDP has explored solutions at the community level. I find volunteerism to be a vital component of that approach.

In 2012, while serving as a UN Volunteer, I was invited to participate in the drafting of the 2013-2016 UNDP Country Programme for Mauritius. My proposals led to the development of community development platforms in two pilot areas, each targeted pockets of poverty. I stayed on as a UN Volunteer until the end of the programme in 2016 and extended the lessons of the pilots into a sustainable application of platforms within the government’s Marshall Plan on Poverty Alleviation. That legacy lives on in the UNDP 2017-2020 Country Programme support to the government’s initiatives.

Under the UNDP 2013-2016 Country Program ‘Social Inclusion and Empowerment’, a community development component relied on contacts with civil society organizations to explore new ways to alleviate the social ills associated with poverty, hopefully leading to self-management of communities helped by public and private institutions. Poverty in Mauritius has specific characteristics. It is historic, generational, regionalized, and associated with social exclusion while Mauritian civil society organisations are generally characterized as fragmented, working in isolation with limited staff and facing financial constraints.

Under the Programme, a small number of local federations were identified that demonstrated feasibility for groupings of social actors at the local level. However, due to financial and administrative constraints, the focus was limited to the two poorest areas of the island, Black River and Le Morne. With the contribution of a small number of national partners, a local organization agreed to cooperate in a three-year plan leading to the gradual autonomous management of the project.

The initial stages involved considerable mobilization efforts, building

confidence to gain autonomy, fostering self-management capacity building, and inviting other institutions to join the platform. The process also involved considerable participative forums: firstly, to define partners and priorities, to seek potential solutions, and finally, to manage and follow up.

Building a self-managed community is a long-term process. The three-year effort remains a fragile endeavour, and constant prodding of partners in participatory modes is a priority. Over time, funding is gradually stabilizing. Good money attracts good money, and UNDP's small investments have been coupled with major partners' contribution from private sector and international organisation to act as leverage to bring others on board. That leverage has led to increased funding of local projects.

This is what development ought to be, working in communities, building networks, and investing at the local level. Serving as a UN Volunteer in Mauritius allowed me to do just that.

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