UNV at 50 – it’s all about the people!

No matter how well designed or how well funded, no matter how clear the vision, goals and core values or how well resourced, any organization is only as strong as the people who live it, work in it and lead it! So it is on this historic occasion of UNV’s 50th year, and with the privilege of being asked to reflect on my long service with UNV, that all my thoughts turn to the amazing people I was so fortunate to know and be associated with during my many years of service with UNV.

We’re talking of literally thousands of people, as I reflect upon 31 years. I served for two years in the early 1980s as a US Peace Corps co-sponsored volunteer in rural Liberia working for a UNDP Self-Help Village Development Project. Then in 1986, four years as the UNV Programme Officer at the Colombo office of the UN Development Programme (UNDP),
where I oversaw the UNV Domestic Development Service volunteer programme in Sri Lanka.

Following that I spent an amazing 25 years as a roving staff member – deploying back and forth between headquarters in Geneva, and later in Bonn (the relocation of which I was tasked to manage!). There were also numerous duty stations and peacekeeping missions from 1990 through to my retirement in 2015.

But back to the premise! For when sitting down with nothing but a blank sheet and a mind full of memories, one finds it is not the exceptional and privileged experiences, it is not the missions, war zones, close calls, nor is it the successes, failures and diversity of duty stations and experiences that come to mind for my reflections on UNV’s 50th.

Rather, all my thoughts and memories turn immediately to two simple things: the faces and heartfelt memories of the thousands of UN Volunteers I had the privilege of knowing and serving; and secondly, the faces and equally heartfelt thoughts and memories of the incredible UNV colleagues and staff that I had such a privilege to intimately know and work with over an entire career. It is all these people, these unique and wonderful people, who represent the very essence and heart of UNV.

“Being not only a people-based organization, but also one whose very mandate concerns the sharing and exchange of goodwill and service amongst people, UNV is truly and singularly unique within the UN and beyond.

The UN Volunteers themselves – whether international or national – can only be described as true and concerned global citizens. For 50 years, tens of thousands of experienced professionals have risen to the occasion and eagerly accepted to leave the comforts of their homes and families, to serve others as UN volunteers.

And behind these volunteers are decades of exceptional leadership and the amazing staff of UNV, so many of whom I feel privileged to have worked with. Hikmat Nabulsi was UNV’s first Executive Coordinator to put UNV on the global map, and did so with strong adherence to the original General Assembly mandate, with a no nonsense approach. Hikmat Nabulsi provided the strong and early identity that came to define UNV, and one that successive regimes at UNV have time and again strived to adhere to.
But at the end of the 1980s, the Berlin wall came down and a new global order was in the making. Long standing East-West support of fragile regimes in the South began to crumble, resulting in dozens of civil wars and millions of newly displaced people and refugees. Largely due to this, development assistance rapidly began working in tandem with a massive new need and demand for global humanitarian relief and peacekeeping interventions.

Through foresight, incredible advocacy and networking efforts by UNV’s next Executive Coordinator, Brenda McSweeney, UNV did not miss a beat. With the support of UNDP, UNV’s organizational structures and mandates were rapidly expanded to include emergency response, humanitarian relief and assistance, especially in the areas of refugees, internally-displaced persons and UN peacekeeping – the need for which would explode in the 1990s.

We must also highlight Sukehiro Hasegawa, the UNV Deputy Executive Coordinator during this critical juncture in UNV history. As my direct supervisor then mentor, Hasegawa-sensai, stuck his neck-out, took calculated risks and made big decisions, with the support of the Executive Coordinator and the UNDP Executive Board.

He safe-guarded the traditional development nature of UNV, identified by multi-year long-term assignments in stable environments, which then evolved to include rapid deployment of volunteers to humanitarian emergencies, on short-term assignments, often very large in scale. And thus began 20+ years of UNV being a major partner in the UN’s global humanitarian and peacekeeping efforts, all the while keeping the traditional development mandate.

As a result and with volunteer deployment in areas of peace and development at historic highs, the late 90s saw the arrival of the next Executive Coordinator, Sharon Capeling-Alakija, who brought UNV into the new millennium with a deep understanding of volunteerism. She saw UNV beyond its paradigm of the recruitment and deployment of volunteers, to something much more universal. In her view, volunteerism was a valuable, universal, inherent, and often overlooked, aspect of development and social wellbeing.

With a motherly hand (and an incredible singing voice), Sharon walked the organization and its partners through this new thinking. She was supported by the brain trust of UNV – the one and only Robert Leigh – who, without question, was personally responsible for aiding and guiding successive Executive Coordinators in ensuring that UNV was always at the cutting edge of broader thinking about volunteerism. Together, and building on the previously established International Volunteer Day (IVD), UNV established the newest of UN “years”, being the International Year of the Volunteer (IYV, in 2001).

“Both IVD and IYV have long since become annual spotlights for volunteer entities the world over, particularly at the local and national
levels, as important vehicles to recognize and celebrate their work and that of their volunteers, furthering greater global focus to the ever-growing acceptance of volunteerism as a key element of global development assistance.

It was during this time that another key player, Ad de Raad, UNV’s Deputy Executive Coordinator turned Executive Coordinator (following the passing of Sharon in 2003), rose to the occasion and kept the UNV ship sailing during this very difficult time (as only a strong Dutchman can!).

Coming from years of UNDP field experience and high-level finance at UNDP headquarters, Ad was practical and straight-talking, calling things as he saw them. He was always backed by real numbers, statistics and the futures such can project. (As a side note, he also loved air pilot simulation PC games to de-stress after work – yours truly even got him into the cockpit of a UN peacekeeping military aircraft once with an Australian UN peacekeeping contingent. A short flight from Dili to Darwin and afterwards, with the biggest smile, Ad said that it had been the coolest experience of his entire UN career!).

At Ad’s side during this time was the new Deputy Executive Coordinator, Joyce Yu, who was the perfect person for the perfect time in UNV leadership history. Being another career UNDP staffer with years of field and HQ experience, Joyce also had a very special way of connecting with staff on a human level – and to top it off she was one fun, smart and classy woman! Joyce and Ad were a great team and led UNV during these transitory years of sustained growth and expansion into new areas such as On-line Volunteers and the resurgence in National Volunteers.

Then there was Flavia Pansieri, the last UNV Executive Coordinator, whose full tenure I was blessed to experience. Flavia took the helm from Ad around 2008, and did so with political savvy like no other – once again, exactly what UNV needed at this point in its history.

For it was during this period that the first State of the World’s Volunteerism Report was launched (with Robert Leigh right there once again, as the lead author!), as well as the expansion of the Online Volunteers and national UN Volunteers programmes. And if that were not enough, Flavia also led us through a massive management re-organization exercise at Bonn HQ, Each of these major initiatives required high-level, global negotiation and promotion, much of which was in New York and other capital cities throughout the world. All of this took UNV forward to where the organization needed to go!

The people highlighted in this reflection are the very people who made UNV what it is today – very smart, hard-working, and exceptional people, each and every one of them! But these reflections would not be complete without highlighting the 10 years of Special Operations, the division that oversaw the unprecedented surge in UN Volunteer
mobilization between 2002 and 2012 in the areas of peacekeeping and humanitarian relief.

As the head of Special Operations during this entire period, never before, nor ever again, would I get to work with such an amazing group of people. Both those at HQ and in the field, the Special Operations staff, not only excelled professionally, but together - never had a team been so true and tight, with genuinely shared respect and friendship.

"It was magical, and we got things done! Dealing with one crisis after another, with impossible rapid deployment pressures, with intense, and sometimes tragic situations in the field, this period in UNV’s history was without doubt, the highlight of my career and time with UNV.

So, as I conclude, we come to that original premise once again – that it was, and still is, the people of Special Operations, and the thousands of UN Volunteers in the field – who have the right attitude and the right skills – who together help to make UNV shine so bright!
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Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals