Volunteering, a participatory approach to South-South Cooperation

South-South Cooperation can bring about a more holistic and inclusive international development landscape. But what about the ways in which South-South Cooperation is done? How do we ensure that these also remain inclusive? One powerful solution is volunteering, which can support participatory South-South Cooperation.

Volunteering and South-South Cooperation share common ideals of mutuality, respect, and equality that make them perfect partners. Today there is great potential for them to combine for mutual benefit. The volunteering landscape has shifted and programmes are no longer confined to traditional Northern donor countries. New volunteering organizations have emerged in the Global South as volunteerism becomes increasingly mainstream, more
organized, and better governed. Examples include Argentina’s White Helmets, which use volunteers as a key disaster response and resilience-building tool, or Nigeria’s Technical Aid Corps which sends volunteers to offer technical assistance in Africa, South America, the Caribbean and Southeast Asia.

This momentum provides exciting new opportunities for volunteering to add significant value to South-South Cooperation. Local volunteers can support inclusive, participatory approaches to South-South projects, gathering data and mobilizing the grassroots to ensure that all needs are assessed and met. International volunteers can channel the unique experiences and technical expertise of one developing country to another.

The act of volunteering itself also promotes norms of trust, peace, and cooperation, while providing many opportunities for the individual volunteer to learn and develop. Experienced volunteers are global citizens with transferable skills that enable them to more easily find work and make greater contributions to their own communities and countries. This is something that developing countries lose out on if they don’t deploy their own volunteers.

At the same time we should also recognize that South-South Cooperation can unlock untapped innovation, knowledge, and resources. Southern understandings of volunteerism and Southern homegrown volunteering solutions need to be shared and multi-stakeholder partnerships should be formed with new development actors. Chinese apps to manage and evaluate volunteers. Indian youth volunteering schemes to reach the most marginalized. Cape Verde’s ‘volunteer passport’ to protect and incentivize. These not only have strong relevance for developing countries that face common challenges with similar restraints. They can also enrich and re-energize global volunteering.

Organizations like the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme can support these processes by strengthening the capacities of new volunteering actors and promoting enabling environments within developing countries. They can also create opportunities for knowledge exchange and creation, as UNV has done recently through events in Beijing in 2015 and Bonn in 2016, and will do this year in Bangkok with a conference on ASEAN volunteering co-hosted with the Thailand International Cooperation Agency (TICA).

Volunteering is a powerful, cross-cutting tool that can put a human face on South-South Cooperation. Now is also the time to put Southern faces on volunteering. Together this will bring mutual benefit, contributing to deep foundations for inclusive, sustainable development.

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