Keynote of Executive Coordinator, Olivier Adam, to the Management Council of Viva Voluntario Programme Special Session in Brazil, March 6th

Olivier Adam, Executive Coordinator, UNV, delivered the keynote speech to the Special Session of the Management Council meeting of the Viva Voluntario Programme in Brazil on March 6th, 2018. The Executive Coordinator spoke about the power of volunteerism and the importance of providing volunteer opportunities for citizens to engage and be part of the solution to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The full speech is below - to be checked upon delivery (note: speech was delivered in Portuguese version)
Mr Daniel Sigelmann, Head of National Volunteers Programme and President of the Management Council of the Viva Voluntario Programme,

Mr Niky Fabiancic, UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative,

Mr. President of the Brazilian Scouts Association,

Mr Didier Trebucq, UNDP Country Director and Deputy Resident Representative,

Members of the Management Council,

Distinguished guests

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to join this Special Session of the Management Council meeting of the Viva Voluntario Programme. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share some thoughts on volunteerism and to have the opportunity for a space for dialogue on the importance of providing volunteer opportunities for citizens to engage and be part of the solution to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

First I would like to congratulate the President and the Members of the Management Council on the success in consolidating the role that Viva Voluntario Programme plays in ensuring active participation of society in implementation of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs in your January meeting. In particular, your Volunteer Annual Award and the Volunteer Platform will increase incentives for university students to volunteer.

Second let me also recognize Mr Niky Fabiancic, UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative for the role played by the United Nations family and in particular UNDP in this flagship Programme.

Today I will share my thoughts on the trends and opportunities in Volunteer Infrastructure programmes, such as Viva Voluntario, and how these support systems for volunteering are helping us move further and faster in meeting our development objectives.

But first, let me give some background on my organization, the United Nations Volunteers programme, know as “UNV”, to give you a better understanding of who we are.

I would like to acknowledge once again the leadership role of Brazil on issues of volunteerism for development, along with being a loyal and long term partner of UNV. Recently, Brazil was a critical Member State which co-sponsored the General Assembly resolution 70/129 on volunteerism that helps position volunteering as a powerful and cross-cutting means of implementation for the Sustainable Development. I recognize and
appreciate Brazil’s steadfast support to volunteerism at the intergovernmental level.

We have worked together with the Government of Brazil to strategically position volunteering as essential to our post-2015 development efforts, under the Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering.

The United Nations Volunteers programme was established in 1970 by the United Nations General Assembly to mobilize volunteers within the United Nations system to enhance UN work on peace and development. Throughout the years, through additional UN resolutions, the mandate of UNV has grown into a dual one: continuing to mobilize UN Volunteers (both national and international) for the UN system (we are currently working within 34 UN Agencies) and to promote volunteerism worldwide.

This year, UNV launched its new four year Strategic Framework (2018-2021), the first since the adoption of Agenda 2030. It is an ambitious fit-for-purpose programme with two linked areas of work:

First, in line with UN System reforms, UNV is more focused than ever on supporting national capacity through volunteerism. This means working at the country level to support national policies, legislation and volunteer schemes through the mobilization of volunteers and the provision of advisory services to governments to help them maximize the contribution of volunteerism to national development objectives.

Over the past 47 years, UNV has developed a solid track record in this area of international cooperation with UN entities and Member States. We have worked across 5 continents with multiple governments and helped create over 20 national volunteer infrastructure programmes, as well as on all aspects of volunteer programming.

Second, UNV continues to support UN agencies in their work towards achievement of the SDGs. Through the integration of volunteerism into UN strategies and plans we continue to expand the opportunities for people to contribute as volunteers in the UN system.

In 2017, 6,500 UN Volunteers in over 100 different professions served with 35 United Nations entities in 131 countries. 55 percent served in assignments in Sub-Saharan Africa, 16 percent in the Arab States, 13 percent in Asia and the Pacific, 10 percent in Latin America and Caribbean and 6 percent in Europe and the CIS. Of these UN Volunteers, 59 percent served on international and 41 percent on national assignments, 83 percent were from the global South and 47 percent were women.

Our UN Volunteers on-the-ground use their experience and talent to bring people to the forefront of development and to give them a voice in their communities.

In addition to our on-site volunteers - in 2017, over 13,000 UN Online Volunteers gave their time to engage in sustainable development virtually. They completed close to 18,000 online
volunteer assignments. Their assignments range from raising awareness of violence against women to geo-mapping and analyzing big data to measure development indicators and progress.

Our new Strategic Framework is all about strong partnerships for peace and development. These partnerships of course include those here in Brazil, of which we are extremely proud of. To take a couple of examples:

- UNV has been able to support the Scouts in Brazil to play an active role in SDGs awareness raising and localization. Following capacity building from UNV, the 90,000 scouts here have adopted the SDGs as their theme for both 2017 and 2018.
- In 2013, in honour of Sergio Vieira de Mello’s legacy, the Government of Brazil, in partnership with the us launched a new scholarship to support the participation of Brazilian youth in humanitarian work. The scholarship provides university graduates in Brazil with the opportunity to volunteer with UNV under its UN Youth Volunteers Programme. Some of them have worked on rural infrastructure management in Haiti and food security policies in Pakistan.

Let me now tell you a bit more about the Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering:

As mentioned above, thanks to the resolution sponsored by Brazil in 2015, the UN General Assembly requested UNV to support a Plan of Action and provide a roadmap for different stakeholders to engage in volunteerism as a means of implementing Agenda 2030, based on three objectives:

- First, it highlights the key development priorities where governments can get the best returns from integrating volunteerism.
- Second, it highlights the steps that governments commit to take to systematically integrate volunteerism into development policy and to enable volunteer initiatives in the next decade and beyond.
- Third, it identifies the institutional arrangements and inputs from non-state actors that will be necessary for volunteerism to fulfill its potential in promoting sustainable development.

The Plan of Action requires strong partnerships between governments, United Nations entities, civil society organizations, volunteer involving organizations, the private sector and academia to leverage existing knowledge, skills and capacities; including those of young people and students, in different communities and countries.

The achievement of the plan will depend on the support of Member States and strong institutional arrangements at all levels: national, regional and global. While each country will have its own institutional arrangements for implementing this Plan of Action, there are synergies to be reaped from cooperation at the regional and global levels, especially in the context of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.
Each UN Member States has been asked to undertake national level situation analyses based on three elements:

- Policy and legislation;
- Functioning schemes and organizations at the national and subnational levels including those targeted at young people; and
- State of the impact assessment, monitoring and evaluation of volunteer initiatives.

The information of national level analyses will feed into Regional Preparatory meetings in 2019, aiming at leveraging existing intergovernmental platforms for dialogue and knowledge exchange. The information will also feed into other processes and mechanisms, such as countries’ Voluntary National Reports which are presented every year at the High Level Political Forum on the SDGs in July at the ECOSOC.

And finally, knowledge and experience from the national and regional levels will be brought together at a Global Meeting in 2020. By that time, Member States will be able to look back on four years of experience in integrating voluntarism into Sustainable Development Goals and on that basis, determine the scale of mobilization and types of modalities needed to accelerate their implementation. 2020 will, fittingly, also be the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of UNV.

Let me now tell you a little more about the role of Volunteer Infrastructure and what UNV has learnt so far about the role of volunteer mechanisms in boosting countries' national development priorities through voluntarism.

By 'Volunteer Infrastructure', we mean an enabling environment, operational structures and implementation capacities to promote voluntarism, mobilize volunteers and support them in their work.

The enabling environment includes the body of policies and laws that protect volunteers and provide incentives for volunteer action.

Operational structures include schemes through which volunteers are mobilized, deployed and supported. Implementation capacities include functional and technical resources of volunteer organizations to adapt to changing circumstances, function at high standards of efficiency and achieve results.

UNV’s experience across diverse contexts show that a strong volunteer infrastructure is a critical component in terms of moving voluntarism from a universal social behavior and general public good, to a means of implementation that enables citizens to become agents of change and drivers of their own development. Volunteer Infrastructure provides a bridge between needs and opportunities, and builds the capacities of people to enable them to contribute to wider goals.
One of UNV’s longstanding success stories in terms of Volunteer Infrastructure has been the ECOWAS Volunteer Programme (EVP) in West Africa. UNV’s technical assistance to the EVP enabled three pilot ECOWAS countries (Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone) to benefit from the intervention of young people in vital sectors such as education, health and youth. Early results showed significant increase in passing rate of students taught by ECOWAS volunteer teachers in Guinea e.g. 93% passing rate as compared to 23% national average.

And now, as promised, let me discuss key trends on volunteer infrastructure and the SDGs

For the next State of the World’s Volunteerism Report on Resilience, which will be launched in July this year at the High Level Political Forum in New York; UNV has carried out a review of volunteer infrastructure trends, some of which I would like to share with you now in advance of the report.

Member States continue to develop new forms of national volunteering policy and legislation. From a UNV survey in 2017, 60% of the 90 countries had relevant volunteering policies and laws, though with marked disparities between the Global North and South. Here in Brazil, we commend the Presidential Decree of last year which provides a clear mandate and the mechanisms for coordinating volunteerism and SDGs at the national level.

At the same time, our research indicates that volunteering legislation and policy have also seen a shift from control and regulation, to creating a model of volunteerism that promotes the contribution of all types of volunteers. For example, in addition to stand-alone volunteering policy, the current trend sees recognition of volunteers in a range of youth, gender and inclusion and other policies and initiatives, demonstrating clear linkages between the potential of volunteerism to meet development goals. And there is more focus on partnership, including in two thirds of countries that have established public or non-profit national coordination bodies. These bodies are at the frontline of building national capacities for volunteerism in countries as varied as China, Cabo Verde, Peru, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, Senegal, Benin, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Nepal, Vietnam, Peru... just to mention a few.

Simultaneously, cities and local government or regions are playing a more visible role in volunteering. With more than 1 billion active volunteers worldwide, Member States are looking beyond their own national level to find the configurations that best suit their development context and challenges.

As you know over 86% of Brazilians live in urban areas – and we know that cities and localities are ever more important for connecting people to local causes, and enabling to shape their worlds. On the Good Deeds Day 2017, in Brazil, UNV was delighted to support and partake in the events organized by Atados NGO, to promote volunteerism for the SDGs in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia. 4,600 volunteers in 36 cities contributed to over 230 local joint volunteer initiatives.
Perhaps more than anything else, technology, through new skills and partnership has encouraged volunteer participation on a wider array of issues and from a wider social spectrum. 17 of the 20 national online volunteering platforms documented in UNV’s 2017 survey are located in the Global North, where digital infrastructure and social media have created the conditions for more diverse engagement, by changing the types of contribution offered. UNV’s online volunteering service has around 2% participation rates of persons with disabilities. So, from this we can conclude there is a need for improvement but there is also potential to move faster on those issues than with onsite volunteering. Here in Brazil you are investing in online volunteering platforms, and we would be interested to discuss how this is supporting the inclusion of groups who may have been traditionally less involved in volunteering.

As an example, in Latin America, we are discussing an Ibero-American Youth Volunteering Programme for Social transformation aimed at all young Ibero-Americans interested in becoming agents of change and those who want to contribute their experiences, knowledge, commitment, and capacities, to initiatives that impact their communities.

Member States are also looking for new ways to integrate volunteerism into their specific priorities. We know that 17 of 43 countries highlighted the role of volunteering as a means of implementation in their Voluntary National Reviews at the High Level Political Forum in 2017. In many cases this recognition was achieved through partnership and collaboration between national civil society, volunteer alliances and platforms, private sector and authorities. Governments recognized the role of volunteers in extending health services, disaster preparedness and response initiatives, skills training and employment creation and in monitoring and reporting on SDGs progress.

After highlighting some key trends, I would like to raise some opportunities, and the development challenges that a strong volunteer infrastructure can address in contexts such as complex as the one in Brazil.

First, volunteerism plays an important role in supporting the effectiveness of public services.

Evidence shows that volunteers can support fiscal reform efforts where Member States are looking to reach further and wider with the resources that they have. Creating better information flows, feedback loops and monitoring mechanisms through the efforts of volunteers can help target resources, identify gaps, and reduce inefficiencies.

UNV’s State of the World’s Volunteerism Report 2015 highlights best practice here in Brazil, where the Maringa Social Observatory and its volunteers improved financial monitoring and accountability at municipal level through social audits of bidding processes.

Such mechanisms are becoming increasingly popular in the provision of social services, but systems and capacities need to be built to ensure effective engagement from citizens. In countries with large populations cascading systems are required with cost-effective
coordination.

Another example of citizen engagement in support of Government programmes in Brazil was the 2010-2 Pacifying Police Units (UPP) Social Initiative of Rio de Janeiro. In partnership with UN-Habitat, UNV provided analysis, design and development services for this successful volunteer programme.

Second, we should not forget also the role of sub-national infrastructure to address regional disparities and specific challenges.

As I mentioned earlier, municipal and regional volunteer structure has been critical in some contexts to address local challenges and to foster local ownership of national goals and targets. As well as specific local policies and incentives for volunteering, investments in city or district volunteer centers for example continue to be popular in bringing stakeholders together to share information and to coordinate efforts.

I propose that UNV and Viva Voluntario Programme work together with the Brazilian Corporate Volunteer Council (CBVE)- with which we have an ongoing collaboration- to forge innovative partnerships for such investments.

In terms of addressing specific regional challenges, volunteer-led initiatives can also augment social systems to extend and improve the outreach of services particularly in remote areas.

For example, in Togo, UNV supported the Government to establish the National Programme for the Promotion of Volunteerism (PROVONAT) in 2011. Since then, more than 3,000 national volunteers have been deployed in the field. More than 4,000 young volunteers have been placed in areas linked to national priorities such as maternal and infant health, and preventable diseases in priority areas. Though it was a national initiative, regional programmes like this national one could be used to support the eradication of Malaria and other public health challenges. In a country with a population of 6.2 million (among whom 31% youth) and an 28.6% unemployment rate among the youth, 44% of the volunteer deployed through the PROVONAT gain stable and productive jobs after their volunteer assignments. This an encouraging achievement.

What is more, national initiatives such as those in Togo often manage to combine other objectives to reduce regional disparities beyond health or education indicators. For example, Togo’s program places university degree students outside of the capital in remote areas where basic social services are most needed. For some of these volunteers it is the first time that they have lived outside of Lome, giving them an opportunity to learn more about their country and development.

Third, we should also continue increasing the engagement and inclusion of target groups, such as youth and persons with disabilities.
Another area where there is a strong case for investment and engagement is in addressing issues of inclusion and empowerment of women and marginalized groups. Earlier I mentioned our next State of the World’s Volunteerism report 2018 which focuses on the theme of community resilience. Our research finds that although volunteering can provide pathways to new opportunities, it is not necessarily always inclusive or egalitarian. The right support is needed to ensure that volunteering challenges rather than reinforces social or economic inequalities.

For example, the majority of the world’s volunteering, and the gap is particularly wide when it comes to informal volunteering. Though such voluntary action is critical for community cohesion and support, it is the type of volunteering which is least likely to bring benefits in terms of new opportunities, skills and outside networks.

New structures and partnerships are needed to encourage an environment for volunteering which challenges inequalities. Each of us should continue to strive for better evidence and research to make the case for the social and economic value of volunteering. We want to see the next generation of volunteer programmes really build this in from the start – so that in five years we can discuss how volunteer infrastructure has contributed towards the reduction of gender and socio-economic disparities.

One area where we see a huge growth in investment and interest is in volunteering opportunities for young people to foster civic engagement and build skills for employability.

For example, in India, working with UNDP, UNV deployed 34 UN Volunteers for a project that supports the Government to strengthen its youth volunteer scheme. The project has mobilized more than 125,000 youth to volunteer within their communities, helped link youth to skills development programmes, set-up an online volunteering portal and prepared action plans for implementing national youth policy.

Furthermore, volunteerism is also an excellent tool for supporting disaster preparedness and response efforts:

Research shows that 90% of lives saved in crises are by local volunteers. Though the spotlight may fall on communities during periods of intense crisis, losses are actually most extensive over the longer-term and as such are borne by communities themselves rather than external actors. Local volunteers have excellent knowledge of risks, have often developed their own early warning systems and coping strategies, but they need access to resources, training protection, training and support in order to carry out their roles in a supportive and secure way.

Beyond the purely local, UNV also works with Member States to develop disaster response capacities.
In 2012, UNV and the White Helmets in Argentina concluded an agreement to facilitate a rapid and efficient response to complex emergency situations or socio-natural disasters, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean, but also in other regions around the world. Under this agreement, UNV has worked with Argentina to support volunteerism and the mobilization of UN Volunteers funded by Argentina for emergencies and humanitarian assistance across the world.

Finally Multi-stakeholder approaches work best;

Recognizing that achievement of the SDGs requires a whole of society approach, UNV is increasingly seeing a large scale of actors re-engaging with volunteerism as a means of implementation.

Under Agenda 2030, civil society, authorities, and UN Agencies are all rediscovering or boosting their people-centered approaches to delivery and engagement, including volunteerism.

There is a need for new types of partnership not only between governments and citizens but involving the private sector and civil society organizations. Volunteering networks and platforms that bring together actors and combine their resources are critical to meeting the scale of Agenda 2030.

In Cabo Verde, UNV worked with the Ministry of Youth UN Agencies and civil society organizations to set up the ‘National Volunteer Programme’. A national Volunteer Agency was created, which became a center of information, training, and support for national volunteering development. A “Volunteer Passport”, was also established acknowledging volunteers’ contribution as well as the skills they have acquired, and gave life to a Network of Volunteering Organizations.

It is critical to document and measure volunteer impact, including cost-benefit analyses.

UNV promotes an evidence-based approach to the development and testing of volunteer infrastructure. This is an emerging field but undoubtedly, the evidence, the concrete results and the lessons-learned are encouraging.

We invest in our flagship publication every 3 years, the State of the World’s Volunteerism Report, as well as thematic research to better understand how volunteerism can best be supported by a range of actors. We have worked with Member States and other partners to increase knowledge through research and evaluation, and of course will be focusing on facilitating countries’ own knowledge through the Plan of Action regional and global workshops in 2019 and 2020.

UNV also has a partnership with ILO to work with Member States on increasing work on measurement of volunteering at national level. This is an important building block to
capturing how voluntary efforts contribute to peace and development. In the context of this initiative, we will organize a dedicated event at the 20th International Conference of Labour Statisticians in 2018 to bring countries together to share best practices. We have had initial conversations with some countries of developing impact tools for cost-benefit analysis particularly of publicly funded schemes and programmes, drawing on our networks of volunteer experts to do so.

Mr. President,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In closing let me reaffirm that at UNV, based on the various experiences of our volunteers – both international and national onsite and online volunteers- and our joint-efforts with a wide range of partners, we strongly believe that the development of national volunteer infrastructures is the best way to ensure an accelerated delivery of the SDGs and the sustainability of peace and development gains.

Volunteer infrastructure is a resource in our hands if we want to step up the meaningful contribution of volunteerism to the realization of people’s aspirations enshrined in the SDGs. Volunteering can take us further faster by providing the channels and opportunities for ordinary people to make a difference.

UNV is ready to work with you in all your efforts to strengthen the volunteer programmes here in Brazil and abroad.

I thank you for your kind attention and I look forward to further discussions and hearing more about your experiences here under the Viva Voluntario initiative.

*This is from the forthcoming SWVR 2018 paper on ‘trends in volunteer infrastructure’ in development.*
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Sustainable Development Goal: