Strengthening China’s involvement in the development of international volunteer service

Volunteer programmes in the global South often seek to internationalize their efforts, but lack international networks and overseas partners and are not well integrated into the international development ecosystem. To address this above challenge, United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme, with the support of the Beijing Volunteer Service Federation (BVF), launched the project "Strengthening China’s Involvement in the Development of International Volunteer Service through South-South Cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative".

Volunteer programmes are frequently not well integrated into their own country’s broader overseas national development programming, with potential partnerships with official mechanisms, national strategies and development actors (including the government, the private sector and the third sector) limited by a lack of trust and experience.
One challenge is the lack of capacity to assess development needs in other countries and effectively monitor and evaluate overseas projects, and experience in ensuring that overseas projects have local ownership, remain needs-based and build a long-term relationship with the recipient community.

An additional core challenge relates to knowledge gaps that are an obstacle to creating a substantive knowledge base for South-South volunteering. These knowledge gaps impede advocacy efforts, hinder the development of more effective programming and diminish the potential for capacity development through sharing best practices and experiences among developing countries.

The UNV project, Strengthening China’s Involvement in the Development of International Volunteer Service through South-South Cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative (2016-2019), aims to bolster the engagement and capacities of Southern actors to mobilize, deploy and manage volunteers within the framework of South-South cooperation initiatives and in support of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The project aims to explore new partnership-building opportunities by creating new channels for the exchange of information and best practices for volunteer actors from the global South and supporting their effective engagement and contribution to sustainable development.

It also focuses on creating opportunities for Chinese and other Southern youth to volunteer internationally, share international experience and develop the capacities of volunteer involving organizations (VIOs), and facilitate cross-country knowledge-sharing and co-creation with strong support for joint research. The project activities mainly take place in developing countries in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is China’s flagship international development project.

UNV facilitated the connection and engagement between Chinese partners and volunteer organizations in other countries, with a view to creating new South-South partnerships on volunteering, and supported in identifying opportunities for relevant UN Volunteer assignments.

Some of the innovative approaches/outputs include:

The creation of a new global platform for peer learning, sharing best practices and identifying challenges and opportunities for international volunteerism through new and innovative partnerships.
Through the project, the Beijing Volunteer Service Federation (BVF) established international connections with 83 volunteer-involving organizations from 52 countries and regions. It hosted 20 visits with 420 delegates from volunteer-involving organizations worldwide, and sent 33 experts to visit potential partners or attend international knowledge-sharing events, such as Thailand’s South-South Knowledge Exchange on Youth Volunteering for the SDGs.

**The International Volunteer Service Exchange Conference (IVSEC) in the Belt and Road Era.**

UNV co-hosted the successful IVSEC conference in December 2017, with the participation of 126 international and domestic volunteer-involving organizations across the Belt and Road Initiative region. Participants shared experiences from the South on volunteering and South-South Cooperation, urban volunteering, managing and deploying youth volunteers, monitoring and evaluation of volunteer programme, and the role of corporate volunteering under the Initiative. The Belt and Road Initiative Volunteer Service Alliance (BRVSA) was launched, with the main purpose of facilitating exchange of experience and new South-South volunteering partnerships.

**BVF and China volunteer organizations increased their capacity to effectively deploy volunteers through training and research.**

Training for 60 international volunteers from China and beyond was held to support volunteer preparation for international deployment. This included sessions on domestic and international situation and policy, Belt and Road national cultural customs and volunteer work, voluntary service concepts and skills, and emergency and psychological adjustment. Furthermore, six field trips to enterprises and non-governmental organizations and five teambuilding activities were held, broadly enhancing the preparedness and technical competence of those interested in international volunteering. A research seminar on Chinese volunteering for the SDGs was held in June 2017, with 100 participants from governments, volunteer-involving organizations, academia and the private sector sharing their research.

**New opportunities were created for Beijing youth to volunteer internationally as a model of South-South "people-to-people" cooperation that could serve as a template for future deployments from other Chinese and Southern volunteer organizations.**

The project assisted in developing new opportunities for Beijing volunteers, with the Chinese Government and civil society making joint efforts in international volunteer deployment and exploration for innovative cooperation of overseas assistance. The BVF partnered with the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation in the Chinese Foreign Aid Volunteer Programme to send 10 Chinese representatives to Nepal and Myanmar for 6-12 months in support of local social and economic development. A volunteer manual and project guidance were designed to support volunteer deployment.
For the first time, under this partnership, BVF also deployed mainland Chinese UN Youth Volunteers to serve within the United Nations system in Myanmar and Thailand.

Under the Belt and Road Initiative, many Chinese government entities began to cooperate with the United Nations system. For example, adhering to the principles of the 2030 Agenda and the SSC Framework, China set up the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund for international organizations and Chinese local non-governmental organizations to support their international aid activities and citizen engagement in development projects. The Fund has invested up to US $3.5 billion and both UNV and BVF are included in the candidate organization list to apply for projects to develop and promote volunteerism internationally.

In collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of Cambodia, UNV submitted a proposal to continue its programmatic support to foster youth employability through volunteerism. To ensure long-term sustainability, UNV implements its intervention together with the Ministry and other Cambodian partners (civil society, academia, the private sector, etc.) under the framework of a national United Nations programme on youth employment, which is aligned with national priorities.

Asia and the Pacific

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Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 10: Reduced inequalities, SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals