Closing the Gap: Volunteerism, Inequality and Nelson Mandela’s Legacy

Inequality is a paradox of our modern society. A 2018 Oxfam International report shows that 26 people own the same wealth as 3.8 billion who make up the poorest half of humanity.

According to UNDP, more than a quarter of all adults globally are working poor, making less than $3.10 per day, and the number of low-paid workers is rising - yet between 2017 and 2018, one billionaire was made somewhere around the world every two days. However, inequality is not just about wealth or income. It can also be seen in life expectancy, or how easily a person can get healthcare, quality education or public services.

Inequality thrives in different facets such as gender, social, urban areas - all slowing our progress towards achieving the SDGs. For instance, a girl born in a poor community from a poor country is less likely to attend a good school compared to a boy born in a wealthy family from a developed country. The girl will most likely have less opportunities, end up in early marriage and perpetuate poverty through generations. Africa, for example, has made tremendous economic progress in recent years, with impressive economic growth and success stories in some countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Botswana and South Africa. Yet inequalities persist and grow, intersecting and reinforcing each other and continuing the cycle.
of intergenerational poverty and exclusion.

But inequality is not natural or inevitable. It stems from policies, laws, cultural norms, corruption, and other issues that can be addressed. Inequality increases and persists because some groups have more influence over the policy-making process. And other groups can’t make the system responsive to their needs. This leads to policy distortions and undermines the democratic process. Inequality therefore can be tackled by people.

As Nelson Mandela popularly said,

"Overcoming poverty is not a task of charity, it is an act of justice. Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. Sometimes it falls on a generation to be great. YOU can be that great generation. Let your greatness blossom."

Volunteers closing the gaps of development;

Volunteering offers people-centered approach to peace, humanitarian response and sustainable development, as it strengthens trust, solidarity and reciprocity among citizens and empowers change from the grassroots up. The United Nations Volunteers programme, for example, deploys about 8,000 volunteers each year to work in various United Nations projects and programmes across the world. This opens an important pathway for different groups of people to participate in the world largest international organization with arguably the most critical mission for helping tackle our global common challenges.

As we honor Mandela’s sixty-seven years of service for the greater good of South Africa, we are inspired by his life. As the UN Secretary General said in his Message today, “Nelson Mandela exemplified courage, compassion and commitment to freedom, peace and social justice. He lived by these principles and was prepared to sacrifice his liberty and even his life for them.... Our best tribute is found in actions.”
At UNV, we live by the mantra of inspiration in action.

“Peace is the greatest weapon for development that any person can have,” said Nelson Mandela.

Through United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, UN Volunteers contributes to peacekeeping and special political missions, the UN Global agenda as well as support national government development efforts. Today on the Nelson Mandela International Day, we celebrate our volunteers and their inspiring actions to tackle development and transformative change across the globe and in Africa. One day at a time, these volunteers close the gaps of inequality, human rights, peace, good governance and environment as they perform their tasks and services across the world. Not only do these volunteers address inequality, but they also embody the solutions we urgently need to tackle inequality, because despite coming from some of the most underprivileged backgrounds, a lot of them are at the forefront of transforming their societies. Mohamed, for example, was born in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya. He is still a refugee today, unable to go back to his country of origin. However, he did not let this status deter him from applying for our UN Refugee Volunteer position with UNHCR. Today, he is a living example of how volunteerism can help overcome inequality and advance the SDGs.

In his own words,

“When people hear the word ‘help’ or ‘support the refugees’, they automatically think of giving out free things. But I think people need to be told that we have labour, we have brains, we have talents. So let's make use of refugee ideas.”

In Lesotho, UNV worked with UNFPA and civil society to build the employment skills of young people and ensure their access to information
on health and gender issues.

Volunteer action also adds value to peace and development efforts by widening inclusive spaces for engagement, including for remote and marginalized populations, such as for youth and women. Volunteerism also enhances capacities and developing skills, building trust as well as bridging social capital between diverse people who are not used to interacting with each other. It also develops a sense of opportunity and ownership for local challenges, leveraging collective engagement, strengthening local governance and accountability through increased people’s participation in governance. Volunteers helps in building resilience and preparedness, enhancing knowledge and a sense of responsibility for one’s community and an enabling environment for of civic engagement.

A lot more should therefore be done to promote volunteerism and empower volunteers to fast-track the realization of the SDGs. As the United Nations Secretary General stated in his synthesis report ‘The road to dignity by 2030: ending poverty, transforming all lives and protecting the planet’, “as we seek to build capacities and to help the new Agenda to take root, volunteerism can be another powerful and cross-cutting means of implementation. Many of the Sustainable Development Goals call for long-term attitude and behaviour changes. Volunteers facilitate changes in mindsets by raising awareness or championing those changes and inspiring others. Volunteerism strengthens civic engagement, safeguards social inclusion, deepens solidarity and solidifies ownership of development results. Through volunteering, citizens build their resilience, enhance their knowledge base and gain a sense of responsibility for their own community. Social cohesion and trust are strengthened through individual and collective volunteer action, leading to sustainable outcomes for people, by people. This is crucial to build ownership and localize the SDGs. Volunteer organizations can serve as brokers of and bridges of engagement, connecting governmental strategies and initiatives with complementary, inclusive, yet essential, community voluntary action.


Sub-Saharan Africa
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Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 10: Reduced inequalities