"Accelerating Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Asia: Taking a Fresh Look at Volunteerism" was the topic of discussion at a regional workshop held in Bangkok, Thailand last week (11-12 November). Stakeholders from five countries gathered with the aim of applying ‘systems thinking’ to map specific entry points and actions where volunteerism could accelerate progress on the SDGs. The two-day workshop was organized by the UNV Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, together with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). It also aimed to strengthen national institutional coordination around leveraging volunteers to support the implementation of SDG-related actions.

Katinka Weinberger, Chief of the Environment and Development Policy Section, Environment and Development Division at ESCAP, delivered the
opening remarks.

“By learning about the interconnected nature of the SDGs and using a systems thinking approach, we hope that you will be better equipped to support the integration of volunteerism in policies and programmes that place people at the center, to ensure that no one is left behind. --Katinka Weinberger, Chief of the Environment and Development Policy Section, ESCAP

The workshop was a follow-up to the Regional Consultation on the Plan of Action for Integrating Volunteerism into the Agenda 2030 in Asia and the Pacific, held in March 2019 in Bangkok as a pre-event to the Sixth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development.

Stakeholders representing the government, civil society and volunteer-involving organizations, as well as UN staff – from India, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Timor-Leste – participated in the regional workshop. They discussed the interconnected nature of the SDGs and how to integrate volunteerism into national policies and programmes, and shared best practices and challenges from their country contexts.

“An important benefit of the workshop was that it opened up a new strategic direction, which will unlock a lot of potential. This has opened a space for us to think about how we can engage volunteers in the national plan of action on SDGs. --Dr Sugath Yalegama, Acting Director-General of the Sustainable Development Council, Sri Lanka
The workshop explored the interlinked contributions of volunteers in the context of the 2030 Agenda, as reported by UN Member States in their Voluntary National Review reports, to understand interlinkages and complexities in implementing the SDGs. While policy coherence and working with diverse stakeholders are key, the participants also stressed the importance of having the required tools and approaches to implement.

“A systems-thinking approach should be customized at the national level to help us make clear collective contributions from the volunteering sector to the SDGs. –Ms Undral Gombodorj, Chairperson, Network of Mongolian Volunteer Organizations

The workshop concluded with sharing global and regional perspectives and next steps recommending volunteer solutions for SDG acceleration.

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Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals