

## The Regional Consultation on the Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda in the UNECE Region

Geneva, 21 March 2019

**Time:**  
10:00 – 13:00

**Venue:** International Conference Centre  
Geneva (CICG)

**Address:** Rue de Varembe 17, 1211  
Geneva, Switzerland

The Regional Consultation on the Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda in the UNECE Region was organized as part of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, as mandated by UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/73/140. The Consultation sought to provide a space for Plan of Action stakeholders from the UNECE region to identify opportunities to support volunteerism in a way that accelerates SDG progress and maximizes the potential of volunteering to tackle the region's most pressing issues.

The Plan of Action is a framework developed by Member States through UN General Assembly Resolutions to help governments, UN agencies, civil society organizations, academia and the private sector to enhance the recognition and integration of volunteerism in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Around the world, people everywhere volunteer for the good of their communities and societies. Research has shown that their efforts are equal to that of 109 million full-time equivalent workers – a workforce that exceeds many global industries. This not only constitutes a major resource for the 2030 Agenda, but it is strategy that can give people a sense of ownership and belonging, transforming citizens from beneficiaries to agents of change. Through the collective efforts of all stakeholders, the Plan of Action seeks to strengthen people's ownership of the 2030 Agenda, integrate volunteering into national and international strategies, and improve measurement of the impact of volunteering.

The discussions and recommendations of the Regional Consultation will feed into further dialogues on the Plan of Action and the development of best practices, lessons learnt and draft policy recommendations on the trends, evidence and approaches on how volunteerism can act as an SDG accelerator for Agenda 2030. A global synthesis report containing this evidence, analysis and policy recommendations will be presented and discussed during the Global Technical Meeting on 'Reimagining Volunteering for Agenda 2030' to be held at the 2020 High Level Political Forum, and co-chaired by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme.

In her opening remarks, Ms. Monika Linn, Principal Adviser, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) explained how many Member States in the UNECE region have already reported on the integration of volunteerism into the 2030 Agenda. In 2018, a number of Member States, including Andorra, Canada, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania,

This consultation is organized and facilitated by:



*under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)*

Malta, Poland and Spain, referenced volunteerism in their Voluntary National Reviews. The intention behind this consultation, therefore, is to further discuss how development stakeholders can leverage the potential of volunteers in pursuit of sustainable development in the UNECE region. Mr. Jason Pronyk, Regional Manager, United Nations Volunteers (UNV) Programme, then stressed his desire that the Consultation have an action-orientated focus, which would also draw upon Member States' submissions of the National Situation Analysis and 2018 Secretary-General's Report on the Plan of action to integrate volunteering into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Before handing over to the Chair, Professor Cécile Aptel, Director of Policy, Strategy and Knowledge at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, delivered welcoming remarks on behalf of the organization. She emphasised the central role that volunteerism will, and should, play in attaining the SDGs. For example, Prof Aptel noted how volunteerism provides essential access to the most vulnerable people in the most remote areas - areas which are often overlooked by larger organisations. This has been evident in Syria, where volunteers form the majority of aid, in Central Africa, particularly in dealing with the Ebola outbreak, and on the Mediterranean Coast, where volunteers have provided refugees with blankets and warm food. However, Prof Aptel also stressed that there are a number of challenges for volunteerism. The first is the diversity of the workforce - she noted that the volunteer workforce at the moment is diverse, but it can go further, especially in relation to those with disabilities. The second challenge is our response to the digital age, which provides an unprecedented opportunity to recruit volunteers, to retain volunteers, and to publicise the importance of volunteerism. The third relates to Climate Change - an effect that is making it increasingly difficult to access remote areas and provide aid sufficiently quickly following natural disasters. Prof Aptel concluded by stressing that these challenges should be borne in mind during the consultation.

The chair of the event was Dr. Yerlik Karazhan, Chairman of the Board at the Economic Research Institute, Ministry of National Economy, Republic of Kazakhstan. He opened the panel discussion sessions and introduced the moderator of the first panel, Ms. Emma Morley, Chief of the Volunteer Advisory Services Section at UNV.

Ms. Morley proceeded to share the findings from a regional synthesis report that draws on information submitted by UNECE Member States. The report shows that according to recent estimates in the 2018 State of the World's Volunteerism Report, the combined efforts of volunteers in the UNECE region would be equivalent to least 45 million full-time workers. Most volunteers are informal, volunteering directly between people, with only a minority of around 32 percent volunteering formally through an organization. Most volunteers in the region are also women, an estimated 59% of the total. The report findings showed that people across the region are contributing to all SDGs, with strong reporting of volunteers working to achieve health, education and youth targets. According to the Regional Synthesis Report, at least 37 UNECE Member States have introduced policies, legislation or other measures specific or relevant to volunteering and there are an increasing number of schemes and platforms designed to promote volunteering, including those empowered by new technologies. The report gives recommendations on how Plan of Action stakeholders can overcome identified challenges and support volunteers to contribute to the 2030 Agenda.

This consultation is organized and facilitated by:



*under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)*

Recommendations include further mainstreaming volunteering into sector policies, greater emphasis on lowering access barriers and creating incentives to ensure that all people can benefit from volunteering, and reinforced efforts to gather evidence and data on volunteering and its impact on SDGs. The report is published in English, French and Russian and available on the Plan of Action website.<sup>1</sup> The moderator then asked the panelists to share their experiences.

Ms. Narmin Aslanbayova from the Ministry of Youth and Sport, Azerbaijan, shared best practices, trends and challenges faced by volunteers and volunteering organizations contributing to the 2030 Agenda locally, nationally and internationally. She highlighted how Azerbaijan has been leading the way in integrating volunteerism into national legislation and policy; in particular, the country has made clear budget commitments and placed volunteerism into mainstream policy, as highlighted in Azerbaijan's National Situation Analysis. The integration of volunteerism into Azerbaijan's youth development strategy was also discussed, with Ms. Aslanbayova emphasizing how youth participation in volunteering activities can be an important facilitator for personal development, particularly through education programmes and service-learning for practical and social skills. Ms. Aslanbayova also noted that a key challenge going forward is the lack of data on volunteering activities, which in turn constrains the assessment of the impact of volunteerism.

Ms. Anne-Sophie Jouanneau, from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in France gave an account of how volunteerism has been integrated into French national policies and strategies. This included the history and development of the Civic Service which has placed great importance on enabling youth to enhance their employment prospects through a number of initiatives, such as the 'International Business Volunteer Year' and 'International Administration Volunteer Year'. Awareness of the importance of inclusion in the Civic Service programme was also apparent, and it was stressed that the programme sought to be for everyone, from any background, and particularly for people living with disabilities. Ms. Jouanneau noted that France intends to establish a National Universal Service which would include a mandatory two weeks of volunteering for youth aged between 16 and 25, and a non-mandatory service of volunteering for up to three months. Ms Jouanneau also shared methods that the government and French volunteer organizations are using to lower access barriers to ensure that all people can volunteer and to enhance people's ownership of the SDGs, including taking into account volunteering when considering pension contributions and removing obstacles faced by those in rural or deprived areas. Finally, Ms Jouanneau shared how volunteering is mainstreamed into French international cooperation, including current challenges, priorities, and future actions of France Volontaires and the European Voluntary Service.

Dr. Yerlik Karazhan then shared experiences of volunteering in Kazakhstan, presenting efforts to promote volunteering through legislation and policy that included the 2016 Law on Volunteerism. He also discussed the 2018-2020 Action Plan for the Promotion of Volunteerism in the Republic of Kazakhstan which aims to increase volunteers' capabilities, improve the regulatory environment, promote volunteerism among young people, encourage corporate volunteerism, and improve cooperation between volunteers and State bodies. The experience

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.unv.org/planofaction/synthesisreports](http://www.unv.org/planofaction/synthesisreports).

This consultation is organized and facilitated by:



*under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)*

of Kazakhstan in involving 4,500 volunteers at the International Winter Student Games in Almaty in 2017 was also highlighted. Dr. Karazhan finished his intervention by raising two points that he believed should be focused on going forward: first, the potential to foster a greater corporate role in volunteerism; second, the need to place greater emphasis on measuring the scale of volunteering activities, while also acknowledging that some volunteers may not actually want to be recorded in such a way.

The panel was then opened up to allow for questions from the audience. The first question came from the President of Autistic Minority International. He made the point that it is essential that we shift away from the assumption that volunteering is a product of affluence. He shared his experience of attempting to engage in conversations relating to the access of minorities in volunteering activities and called for more to be done so that people living with disabilities could participate in volunteering activities and discussions. The panel endorsed the sentiment underlying the intervention and agreed that while the focus is often on who reaps the rewards of volunteerism, a greater focus is needed on who can get involved in volunteering in the first place.

The second intervention came from a representative of UN Environment who highlighted the importance of volunteering for environmental protection and climate action, and drew attention to the role of volunteers in collecting environmental data and the importance of supporting and recognizing their actions. In particular, he highlighted how the positive behavioural aspects of volunteerism can be used to encourage and model behaviour, values and lifestyles for the future of the environment - and the opportunities that volunteerism brings to scale this up.

The third intervention came from an academic from Russia who asked whether the panelists recommended trying to utilize volunteerism in a way which covers a number of SDGs, or whether it might be more prudent to concentrate on a select few. Ms. Aslanbayova responded by noting how, by their nature, the SDGs are overlapping and therefore it is difficult, and perhaps not conducive, to focus on concentrated number of SDGs. It was also highlighted how different communities and geographies require different kinds of support and this further suggests that focusing on just a concentrated number of SDGs would be difficult, at least at a global level.

The fourth intervention came from civil society and was directed at Ms. Jouanneau. She was asked how France can simplify the way it integrates volunteering into national policies and strategies. Ms Jouanneau responded by acknowledging that the system in France was somewhat complex but that the focus of any simplification should be on inclusion – that is to say, breaking down access barriers so that anyone can get involved with volunteering activities and ensuring that those activities benefit the most appropriate groups.

The second panel looked at ‘reimagining volunteering’ with a forward-looking focus that addressed opportunities and challenges, including those identified in the regional synthesis report and the first panel discussion. The moderator of the panel, Mr. Amjad Saleem from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) started the session with a few personal reflections. He reiterated that volunteering is one of the most effective strategies enabling apathy to be turned into action, allowing individuals to become the agents

This consultation is organized and facilitated by:



*under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)*

of change. Mr. Saleem emphasized that it is hard to imagine how the SDGs could be achieved without volunteers. However, Mr. Saleem also raised the concern that volunteerism is considered by some as a form of cheap labour and therefore stressed that governments and organizations should be mindful of this. The moderator concluded his intervention by noting two further challenges, namely the diversity of the volunteer workforce and how to utilize new digital technologies to optimize volunteerism. Mr. Saleem then invited the panelists to consider these issues in their presentations.

Mr. Artem Metelev, Association of Volunteer Centers (Russian Federation) discussed the achievements of Russia in its support of volunteerism for development purposes, and considered the possible ways to replicate these in the region and beyond. In particular, he focused on the experience of awareness-raising in Russia including the 2018 Year of Volunteering. He highlighted how we need to change the image of volunteering so that it is not just considered as a non-paid workforce. Mr. Metelev also shared best practices of Russian volunteers contributing to sustainable development, including the fact that each Ministry has an individualized strategy to maximize the potential of volunteers and that the country has a number of regulations in place to protect the rights of volunteers. Mr. Metelev called for additional consultations on the Plan of Action at sub-regional and country level to better leverage volunteerism for development and to share best practices. He suggested to host such consultations for CIS in Russia.

Mr. Vladimir Ganta, from the International Labour Organization called for countries to urgently build capacities for data collection, explaining that once data is produced, the data can inform policies and measure progress. He put a spotlight on the fact that there has been only a slow shift away the perception that volunteering is a secondary activity which merely supplements other employment and called for more to be done to ensure that volunteerism is considered with equal respect when compared to other kinds of employment. Mr. Ganta also shared the results and recommendations of the ILO-UNV partnership and 20th International Conference on Statistics which included a special session on volunteering. He discussed the best practices from the UNECE region, including statistical tools and cross-regional efforts, and noted the importance of disaggregating data on volunteering to promote inclusion. Mr. Ganta ended his intervention by identifying important steps that should be taken by Plan of Action stakeholders to increase the effective measurement of volunteering, including forming new partnerships.

Mr. Emrah Tek, from the Turkish Red Crescent Society then shared how volunteers strengthen ownership of the 2030 Agenda. He celebrated the contributions that volunteers have made to the response to the Syrian crisis and its impact on migration. He also referred the room to the seven fundamental principles that guide the Turkish Red Crescent and explained how volunteers are an essential part of the organization's ability to bring assistance without discrimination and to carry out humanitarian work throughout the territory. On this point, he highlighted the role of volunteering in localizing the SDGs and the challenge of ensuring inclusivity. Finally, Mr. Tek reiterated the point made by Mr. Metelev that there should be a focus on making volunteering a more attractive activity that is seen as on par with other kinds of employment.

This consultation is organized and facilitated by:



*under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)*



Finally, Ms. Bogdanka Tasev Perinovic, UNHCR/UNDP Project Manager gave an account of the joint UNDP-UNHCR project that uses volunteering to facilitate the involvement of Roma men and women in local communities in Serbia. Ms. Perinovic explained that 30 young Roma were given the opportunity to develop their skills through an initial six-month volunteering assignment across 24 municipalities, including in the Ministry of Culture and Information, and health and social welfare centers. They were assigned as accountants, legal advisers and social workers. Ms. Perinovic highlighted how these opportunities allowed Roma people to become agents of their own change. Ms. Perinovic also analysed the steps that could be taken to scale up the project, for example through supporting other marginalized groups and by encouraging members of these groups to seek roles in local government that would allow them to reinforce integration into the community.

The panel was then opened up to allow for questions from the audience. The first intervention queried whether the best way to measure the impact of volunteerism was against the SDGs, since so many are overlapping. The panel appreciated the point but noted that the SDGs provide an important international standard that fosters consistency across all Member States. It was also acknowledged that evidence is critical to showcasing the role that volunteerism should play in pursuit of the 2030 Agenda and that the method of measuring the impact of volunteerism should be constantly considered.

A further intervention was put forward by a stakeholder who works with the UN Resident Coordinator Office in Kyrgyzstan and related to the lack of political will and high-level advocacy in support of volunteerism. Mr. Metelev responded by saying that the focus needed to be on children's education because they will have the greatest influence in the future. He also stressed that the UN and civil society must use any interactions with UN Member States as an opportunity to reinforce the role of volunteerism in the SDGs, and suggested that the use of public figures, such as celebrities, could be helpful. Ms. Perinovic commented that governmental institutions needed to be in the field promoting volunteerism too and should not just rely on civil society to do the job. Finally, Mr. Tek highlighted that one of the best ways to give volunteerism a positive image is through the use of the digital media – technology allows us to improve volunteering management and most effectively spread the message and positive image of volunteerism. Mr. Tek also considers that the focus of this positive image campaign should be on youth.

Delivering the closing remarks as Chair, Dr. Karazhan put forward a number of key messages that should be taken away from the panel discussions. First, he noted that it was clear from the discussions that volunteers can be a powerful SDG accelerator but only if they are fully integrated into national development strategies, sector strategies and incorporated into national SDG roadmaps. Second, he recognised the central theme of inclusion that ran throughout the discussions – that volunteering must be an activity for everyone, and this can be ensured through lowering access barriers and creating incentives. This will reinforce volunteering not only as a useful instrument for implementing the SDGs, but also as a genuinely transformative one for those left behind. Third, he stated that a key priority was to generate further evidence which could continue to build the case for volunteering. This requires a refined focus on measuring the impact of volunteers against the SDGs. For example, national statistical offices should collect more data on volunteers, including

This consultation is organized and facilitated by:



*under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)*



disaggregated data, and UN Member States need to recognize the enormous contributions of volunteers, including in the Voluntary National Reviews. Finally, he stressed that we should not forget that volunteers themselves are powerful data collectors, particularly from marginalised and local groups.

The Chair concluded by saying that, as we move towards the Global Technical Meeting to integrate volunteerism into Agenda 2030, renewed efforts will be made to convene national and sub-national dialogues and online consultations to collect further evidence, to widen participation and to inform the 'reimagining of volunteerism' for the 2030 agenda. He urged all stakeholders to work through the Plan of Action to integrate volunteering into Agenda 2030 and gather further evidence to enhance, recognize and advocate for volunteering so that the 2030 Agenda is implemented **by all people, for all people**.

This consultation is organized and facilitated by:



*under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)*