Plan of Action to integrate volunteering into the 2030 Agenda

REIMAGINING VOLUNTEERING IN THE ARAB STATES
A DISCUSSION PAPER
This document has been prepared as a background paper for a meeting being organized by the UN Volunteers Regional Office for Arab States and the International Federation of Red Cross and Crescent Societies Regional Office in the Middle East and North Africa (IFRC,MENA) on 27 November 2019. Building on previous discussions, the meeting will allow some leading stakeholders on volunteering in the Arab States to consider aspects of, and make recommendations for, a reimagining process for volunteerism. These recommendations will feed into a Global Technical Meeting at the UN’s High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2020.
INTRODUCTION*

The involvement of vast numbers of people through volunteer action in its many forms is an essential ingredient in delivering the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) aimed at an environmentally sustainable, peaceful world, free of poverty, hunger and inequality, where no one is left behind.

The 2030 Agenda recognizes the vital roles that volunteers everywhere are playing. Following its launch in 2015, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a Plan of Action developed by Member States through UNGA Resolutions aimed at helping to ensure the integration of volunteerism into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs.) Through the concerted efforts of the main stakeholders, governments, civil society, the private sector, academia and the United Nations, as well as volunteers themselves, the Plan of Action seeks to strengthen people’s ownership of the 2030 Agenda, integrate and mainstream volunteering into national strategies and policies, and better measure the impact of volunteers.

Steady progress is being made to integrate volunteerism into the SDGs. More than a hundred countries have now measured volunteer work and over ninety have policies or legislation that aim to promote volunteering. In 2018 some 29 Member States have recognized the efforts of volunteers in their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) on SDG progress. However, progress has been uneven across the regions. In the Arab States in particular, while there are some promising signs of positive movement, there remain significant challenges for volunteering to reach its full potential. Some of these challenges will be examined in the section that follows.

Progress in implementing the Plan of Action will be reported on at the Global Technical Meeting to be held in July 2020 at the UN’s High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. The theme is “reimagining volunteerism for the 2030 Agenda”.

*This paper is derived from the background document prepared for the AFSD, plan of action synthesis reports on integrating volunteering into the 2030 Agenda in the ESCWA region.
In the build up to this special event the Plan of Action Secretariat is reviewing the role of volunteerism in achieving and localizing the SDGs and creating a knowledge base that is inclusive of good practices, lessons, and data sets.

In 2019, five regional consultations on volunteering are taking place in the context of the Regional Forums on Sustainable Development, providing space for Plan of Action stakeholders to discuss evidence and approaches, share best practices and identify opportunities for addressing knowledge gaps. Further civil society-led consultations are envisaged and will be supplemented by online consultations. Together these dialogues, analyses and best practices, will inform a global synthesis report for the 2020 Global Technical Meeting.

This paper provides the background for a regional consultation on 27 November 2019 organized by the UNV Regional Office for Arab States and IFRC Regional Office in MENA region. Its aim is to stimulate understanding and discourse among stakeholders on how volunteer engagement in the region may be “reimagined” in such a way as to elevate consideration of its contribution to improving people’s lives. Following this brief introduction some areas where volunteerism makes a significant contribution to meeting the SDGs in the region are considered. Finally, following overall conclusions, there are a set of areas for action for the principal stakeholders. While far from exhaustive, it provides a basis for further discussion on concrete steps to be taken to help ensure volunteerism in Arab States reaches its full potential.

The paper draws on a variety of information sources. First are the National Situation Analyses on volunteerism developed in consultation with the United Nations, civil society and volunteer-involving organizations to generate evidence and data on the scale, scope and impact of volunteerism for the Plan of Action. The second source is information on volunteerism reported on by Member States in their 2018 VNRs on progress towards the 2030 Agenda. Third, evidence is drawn from recent reports, including the 2018 Secretary-General’s report on volunteering, global, regional and national level data from Member States and regional bodies, and key reports from United Nations agencies and programmes.
VOLUNTEERISM IN THE ARAB STATES

Given the immensity and complexity of the challenges confronted by ESCWA Member States, societies need to explore all avenues to harnessing available resources to meet the aspirations of the SDGs. One such resource is volunteerism, a social phenomenon that has been described as a renewable resource that can be grown and recycled, but that is also subject to misuse and misappropriation that can imperil the vitality of the resource. As General Assembly resolution 56/38 from 2001 put it “Neglecting to factor volunteering into the design and implementation of policies could entail overlooking a valuable asset and undermine traditions of cooperation that bind communities.” Volunteer action is vast and universal but it often falls under the radar when consideration is given to the main vectors of development. On the one hand, issues of definition and measurement continue to generate strong views while, on the other hand, singling out the specific impact of volunteer actions on outcomes, has often proven less than straightforward.

In Arab societies volunteerism is a new name for age-old traditions. It is a phenomenon strongly underpinned by religious and humanitarian values, including compassion and sympathy for others, that encourage pro-social behaviour and elevate altruistic thinking. In fact, at the core of Islam is the notion of helping others. A good person has the obligation to help those in need, in the name of her or his religion. The emphasis is on helping others rather than on helping one another. This approach to altruistic thinking is also uppermost in Western approaches to charity which emphasize gift relationships rather than reciprocal attributes in which motivations are very mixed and all sides benefit. Formal volunteering with participants attached to organizations, whether governmental, non-governmental entities or the private sector, is the clearest expression of service to others.

While motivations may vary widely, notions of self-help and development of social capital are much more in evidence in informal volunteering where the volunteer act takes place outside any organizational structure. In the Arab States informal volunteering accounts for 82.9% of the 8.9 million full time equivalent volunteers in the Arab region in 2018 (State of the World’s Volunteerism Report (SWVR) 2018). This is a rather conservative figure taking into account the amount of volunteering that takes place in countless towns and villages throughout the region. Local expressions of mutual support are often employed rather than the word “volunteering” but the acts are underpinned by the same notions of solidarity. Volunteerism is a cross-cutting means implementation relevant to all areas of the SDGs. This section will examine a few key priority areas where volunteerism is making a significant contribution.

With the recognition in the 2030 Agenda that people everywhere expect to be agents of change and drivers of their own development, questions of equality and inclusion are now very serious challenges in the ESCWA region. There is clearly a spread of population groups that are affected by exclusionary tendencies and for whom policies need to pay special attention if they are to find spaces to contribute to their societies in a meaningful way. In this paper youth and women have been singled out for particular focus while recognizing that both groups are comprised of a range of very different sub groups that must be taken into account in policy formulation.

Intrinsically tied to issues of equality and inclusion are incidences of conflict and natural disasters that are especially acute in parts of the region. On the one hand, while these events tend to touch entire populations, youth and women are often the least able to take actions to mitigate their impact and therefore run the greatest risk of being marginalized even further. On the other hand, given the right circumstances, youth and women can be the most responsive to peoples’ needs and most effective in the volunteer support
they provide. While the direction of travel depends on local circumstances, clearly there is a vast untapped potential to enhance the size and quality of volunteer contributions of youth and women in Arab States.

The growing interest of governments in recognizing and supporting volunteerism is evidenced by the expansion in legislation and specific policy and programme interventions. Most are aimed at encouraging volunteer action by citizens and/or safeguarding the rights of volunteers. At the same time, states through these legislations might limit volunteer action for their own political purposes.

**Youth**

The Arab States are experiencing rapid population growth, with a tripling of numbers since 1970. Some 17% are aged between 15 and 25. Meanwhile, youth unemployment rates in the region were the highest in the world compared to all other regions in 2017, with 27.3 per cent of young people unemployed in 2017 compared to the world average of 13.6 per cent (ILO, 2018). Through volunteering young people acquire skills and experience to enhance their employability. While formal school systems focus on the transmission of hard/technical skills, volunteering provides young people with soft skills such as ability to work in teams, innovation, conflict management and resolution, responsibility and flexibility in the work place. Bahrain, Morocco and Saudi Arabia have national policies that explicitly emphasize the contribution of volunteerism to youth development and employability. Morocco’s National Integrated Youth Strategy aims to enhance employability, improve services for youth, decrease inequalities and promote the active engagement of young people in social and civic life. In Saudi Arabia volunteerism has been introduced into educational policy as a means to promote social responsibility among students. Co-curricular activities in Qatar are encouraging students to develop leadership and communication skills as well as self-confidence.
In Lebanon a National Volunteering Service Programme (NVSP) was established in 2015 to increase civic youth engagement in locations outside their own communities. In a country with a highly fragmented political, religious and social landscape and large numbers of refugees it was felt this initiative could help defuse tensions by bringing groups together around shared goals. A robust impact evaluation in 2019 of over 7000 youth assignments concluded that the NVSP had a significant impact on social cohesion with volunteers more likely to report higher tolerance values and a stronger sense of belonging to the Lebanese community.

These types of schemes tend to be well publicized and can generate interest from a large pool of potential volunteers of all ages, though young people tend to be the main beneficiary. National centres for volunteering have been set up in Kuwait and Qatar and government-sponsored digital platforms linking volunteers with volunteering opportunities established in the State of Palestine and the United Arab Emirates. These platforms enable people to be aware of volunteer opportunities, apply for them and learn about their rights and responsibilities as volunteers while also facilitating the submission of requests for volunteers by volunteer-involving organizations.

Technology is a part of the enabling environment for volunteering. This includes the use of digital platforms to mobilize and coordinate volunteers as in the case of Bahrain, where a volunteer web portal links volunteering organizations to young people keen to volunteer. Jordan provides an online application portal through which interested individuals can apply to volunteer and Saudi Arabia is launching a national volunteering portal to promote awareness of the importance of volunteer work.

**Gender**

Volunteerism’s role in empowering women is a second SDG focus area highlighted in this paper. Persistent gender inequality holds back the potential for half the population to contribute to, and benefit from, solutions. Most ESCWA countries fall into the lowest 20 % of 149 countries assessed by the 2018 Global Gender Equality Gap Index which measures economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health outcomes and political participation. The region is characterized by extremely low female labour market participation, some 26% of the total compared to 77% of men (SWVR 2015) with high female unemployment rates. Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar are the only Arab State countries where female labour force participation is over 30 percent. Yet women account for 56.6 % of total volunteering in the region. This explained by the fact that that volunteering by women takes place largely through informal channels in the social services domain, helping others in need. Men volunteer more in civic and professional activities.
This gives rise to the perception that women volunteer in areas with lower status thus reinforcing gender roles. Yet volunteering can be empowering, providing women with work skills, leadership capacities and confidence to unleash their full potential in helping to meet the SDG goals. There are growing signs that across the region, notwithstanding cultural constraints and norms such as family responsibilities and restrictions on mobility, women’s groups are forming to promote greater awareness of gender equality issues and solidarity around campaigns for change and, in the process, challenging their traditional place in society. This helps to enhance social trust and feelings of self-satisfaction and well-being among women. One area in particular where the role of women and women’s organizations has been recognized is in peacebuilding and reconciliation. As the World Bank’s 2011 World Development Report states women’s organizations “often play important roles in restoring confidence and sustaining the momentum for recovery and transformation”.

The predominance of women engaging in volunteering largely in informal contexts may be changing. With the closing of the gender gap in education women are enjoying increasing access to secondary and tertiary education. The growing share of women in public sector employment in the ESCWA region suggests that there is a similar trend in formal volunteering, but analysis is hampered by the scarcity of data.

**Conflict and natural disasters**

A third area where volunteerism makes very significant contributions is in addressing humanitarian crisis including situations of conflict and natural disasters. The Arab States region is experiencing many of the world’s most destructive violent conflicts. In Iraq, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen conflicts have led to the displacement of an estimated 16 million people including internally displaced people and refugees who have fled to surrounding countries (UNHCR). Women, youth and marginalized groups are particularly vulnerable while, in the immediate and long term, the impact on human capital, environmental protection and economic growth is immense. Volunteerism in peace building extends beyond front line response. It contributes to promoting trust and understanding across religious, tribal and national boundaries to create space for dialogue within the most exclusionary and restrictive contexts. Volunteering also provides entry points for women and youth to engage in meaningful participation which helps deepen the effectiveness and sustainability of peacebuilding. The promotion of trust and social cohesion in fragile states and conflict zones aligns with the strong focus of the Sustaining Peace Agenda on engaging civil society, particularly women’s and youth groups.

In Jordan volunteers provide medical support to people displaced by conflict while in Iraq highly skilled volunteers repair houses damaged by extreme weather. Throughout the region volunteers help protect the rights and well-being of refugees and internally displaced people, not only by providing essential services but also through supporting resettlement and social integration. In Lebanon volunteers provide shelter, drinking water and sanitation to displaced people, while volunteer teachers help young refugees with issues related to bullying, violence and discrimination. In Jordan volunteers provide medical support also to people displaced by conflict. In Iraq volunteer teachers ensure minimal disruption to the provision of education services in situations of violent conflict.

Refugees and asylum seekers themselves also volunteer to take ownership of to the many challenges they face. In Jordan for instance Syrian refugee volunteers support over 3,500 children with disabilities to access education in camps and host communities and run after-school programmes. Volunteers also play a valuable role in sustaining peace and strengthening social cohesion. Young volunteers can be powerful advocates for peace, providing positive role models and reaching across community divides. In Bahrain young people from the ESCWA region volunteer through the Shughel Shabab programme that showcases how young people can help repair the fabric of communities.
Violent conflict and environmental degradation in Arab States interact as complex phenomena. Moreover, rapid population growth in a delicate ecosystem means many parts of the region are highly vulnerable to environment and climate change-related resilience risks. Volunteers are contributing to building resilience by enabling communities to self-mobilize, reducing their vulnerabilities and, in certain contexts and given appropriate support, transforming the ability of communities to respond more strongly to future resilience risks (SWVR 2018).

This often takes place outside the framework of resilience-building strategies which reduces coherence and sustainability and, as a consequence, overall effectiveness. With climate change posing multiple resilience threats across the region, concerted efforts are also urgently needed to integrate volunteering into climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts. As water scarcity is one of the most pressing needs for the region, this should include mainstreaming volunteering into water-related interventions, such as the Arab Water Security Strategy (2010-2030) and the monitoring and awareness-raising components of the Regional Initiative for the Assessment of Climate Change Impacts on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region.

**Legislation, programmes and policy**

The legal and enabling environment for volunteering in the Arab countries is relatively weak for historical reasons tied to the nature of the state and its definition of state-civil society relations (SWVR 2015). Recent years have, however, seen the emergence of legislation and the creation of structures and institutional mechanisms to help enhance the enabling environment for volunteer action. For example, in the Emirate of Dubai, Sudan and Tunisia there are now specific laws on volunteerism. Sudan’s Voluntary and Humanitarian Work Act of 2006 defines basic volunteering principles such as non-discrimination for volunteers and
accountability to beneficiaries. Tunisia’s law on volunteerism protects the rights of volunteers by calling for the provision of volunteering contracts and outlining volunteering organizations’ duty of care. The Emirate of Dubai’s 2018 Law on Volunteerism sets out minimum standards for protecting and recognizing the contribution of volunteers. Alongside legislation specific to volunteers eight Member States regulate volunteering through other legislation, including laws on civil society organizations in Iraq, Lebanon, the State of Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen and laws on civil service such as in Kuwait.

To lever the full potential of volunteerism for national development, governments are mainstreaming volunteering into sector policies and national development strategies. Some youth policies introduced in the ESCWA region are mentioned under the section on youth above while a few Member States have also integrated volunteering into other areas. For example, Egypt references volunteerism in its Sustainable Development Strategy as a means to promote sustainable agriculture and includes mechanisms to encourage voluntary activities and the involvement of civil society organizations in environmental protection and biodiversity preservation. Iraq references volunteering in its National Health Policy, and Lebanon’s National Social Development Strategy includes volunteerism as a means to strengthen communities through an increased sense of civic responsibility and cross-cultural understanding.

Mechanisms to raise awareness about the role volunteerism in achieving the 2030 Agenda includes campaigns and initiatives such as International Volunteer Day (IVD) on 5 December and special awards ceremonies for volunteers. In 2018, IVD was celebrated in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Somalia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen. Incentives can also encourage more volunteering. In 2018, for example, the Capital Governate in the Kingdom of Bahrain launched a ‘Volunteering Passport’ to be given to individuals and organizations engaging in volunteering. This initiative provides training and tools for individuals, businesses, schools and government agencies to engage in volunteering.

Volunteers themselves contribute to changing social norms that constrain people from taking action. For example, as part of the ‘#HerStory initiative’, 500 volunteer editors have worked on more than 2,000 articles to increase the representation of women in the Arabic-language Wikipedia. and volunteers of the Arab Youth Climate Movement raise the awareness of local populations to understand the effect of climate change on their communities and to promote change at national, regional and international levels.
Achieving the SDGs by 2030 requires all development actors to look at best practices in any given area and to consider how to identify, enhance and scale up successful policies and programmes that will contribute to achieving the results sought. Plan of Action stakeholders in volunteering are fully committed to pooling efforts to this end, across the Arab States region. UNV and its partners are creating spaces for achieving a better understanding of volunteer action to help ensure its full potential can be realized. There is now a solid momentum towards a “reimagining” of volunteer action that stakeholders can build upon. The following section considers some of the principal aspects of the reimagining process that can be taken into account as discussions move forward.

**Measurement**

An important foundation for reimagining is an ability to measure the scale and scope of volunteering. Measurement is important to demonstrate impact, monitor contributions to the SDGs and ultimately make the case for increased resource allocations to support and promote volunteer action. Measurement also plays a key role in monitoring overall progress towards the 2030 Agenda with disaggregated measurement particularly important to ensure that inclusion is tracked. Measurement efforts globally are improving since the publication in 2011 by the International Labour Organization (ILO) of a Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work, providing a model that some countries are using as the basis for developing national surveys. In 2013 the International Conference of Labour Statisticians recognized and defined volunteer work, opening the door for new comparable data.

In the Arab States region, measurement of volunteering is limited. According to ILO between 2007 and 2017 only five of the 103 United Nations member states that have collected data on volunteering were from the ESCWA region, covering only 24 percent of the region’s population (Iraq, Morocco, Oman, Qatar and the State of Palestine). Some countries including Jordan and Kuwait have expressed their interest in developing statistical tools to measure volunteer work but still the base line is low. Moreover, the focus is usually limited to organization-based formal volunteering. Little is known about more traditional and often informal forms of volunteerism. Given these gaps a critical step for stakeholders in the ESCWA region is to generate more evidence on the contribution of volunteerism to the SDGs building on the 2016 Doha Declaration on a Data Revolution in the Arab Region that called for new, multi-stakeholder efforts to collect data on SDG implementation. Bilateral exchanges should be encouraged between national statistical offices and other measurement actors, including the Statistics Division at ESCWA and the Statistical Centre for the Cooperation Council for the Arab Countries of the Gulf (GCC-Stat). Using volunteers for data collection should also be promoted as a people-centred, low-cost and gender sensitive approach to enhancing the ability of ESCWA countries to gather regular, disaggregated data in the face of resource and capacity constraints.

Beyond the numbers, volunteer contributions need to be considered holistically, including the effect on building up social and human capital. Different forms of volunteerism in the region also need to be explored. This can help determine barriers to participation in volunteering and identify solutions, with particular focus on opening up spaces to volunteer for marginalized and excluded groups. Analysis should include researching the contribution of volunteers within national peace and development frameworks and ways to improve coordination with other actors.
The above points to the need to build up a body of research material to provide robust evidence on a wide range of volunteer issues. In a reimagined volunteer universe policy would be evidenced based on such matters as the nature of volunteer action in Arab States, demographic related factors including gender and age, informal activism versus formal volunteering, and impact. Public and private resources need to be channeled towards universities and other research-oriented bodies to promote volunteer studies in areas directly related to policy formulation. Local volunteers can be engaged in field work. Academia should be explicitly recognized as a significant stakeholder in building up a knowledge base on volunteering in the region. Serious constraints on making headway in this area such lack of infrastructure, funding and resources in political unstable times call for joint action among all the sectors to help ensure academia and research institutions are able to respond to the challenges of enhancing knowledge on volunteer action in Arab States.

Youth

Reference was made earlier to young people and benefits to be derived from promoting and supporting a country’s youth to volunteer in terms of bringing their enthusiasm and innovation to bear on development challenges, and increasing their employability through enhanced skills acquired through the volunteer experience. Other benefits to be derived from volunteering include better health, well-being and community engagement. Volunteerism exposes young people to active citizenship and helps develop positive social behaviours that can mitigate delinquency. Governments, the media and volunteer involving organizations need to promote a climate in which the needs and interests of young people are fully respected, and essential infrastructure needs to be in place. Areas to consider might include training and skills development through youth volunteer schemes that pay particular attention to the inclusion of marginalized youth, and accreditation of some sort. These can all be key incentives for young people to get involved in volunteering. Awareness raising of the benefits of volunteering to communities and to society at large as well as to volunteers themselves could be included in school curricula in conjunction with activities that expose young people to meaningful civic activities. Were government departments and other employers to consider volunteer work as an advantage in job applications this could have very positive repercussions. A major barrier to volunteering is often a lack of awareness about how to get involved. Campaigns at national and local levels and the provision of online and physical recruitment centres such as booths at sports events, in community centres and outside schools and colleges manned by volunteers can be very effective.
There is much empirical evidence across the globe that youth, increasingly, wants a say in planning and decision processes. Volunteer involving organizations have to be open to supporting and valuing young volunteers if they are not to be put off volunteering for life. This also requires awareness raising, training and advocacy for their staff. Care is needed to ensure that volunteering support and recognition is always extended to volunteers, especially to young people. There is always a danger that volunteering may become one more factor driving exclusion if only more advantaged youth are able to access volunteer opportunities, and to derive benefits from participating. In any reimagining process it is vital that clear steps be taken to ensure that the more disadvantaged sections of the youth population are able to engage in volunteer action in a meaningful way. In this respect, policy makers should target specific population groups when designing youth volunteer policies.

Governments should work with the private sector, education providers and volunteer involving organizations to integrate volunteering into education strategies and the job market. Young people should be able to volunteer while also having access to paid regular employment. Youth volunteering should take place within broader efforts to support youth as a development asset rather than a burden. Youth volunteers should be supported with training and protected by legislation that prevents exploitation and other abuses and they should be involved in planning, implementation and monitoring, to ensure that real-life needs are met and the full spectrum of strengths and new perspectives that youth provide are fully harnessed.

**Gender**

Persistent gender inequalities severely limit SDG progress across the ESCWA region and new ways to tackle the many issues need to be found. As discussed earlier, in the right circumstances volunteer action can contribute to women’s empowerment but it needs to be recognized that in Arab States volunteerism has long been perceived as services provided through formal organizations. In fact, much volunteering is undertaken through informal channels often by women living in the context of income poverty who are likely to experience material deprivation, social marginalization, alienation, insecurity, fear, and frustration. Volunteering in the community can provide an alternative context, that of being active contributors rather than marginalized recipients. A vital part of reimagining gender aspects of development is to recognize that in small but significant ways, through volunteering, poor women become part of possible solutions to problems rather than the source of problems. In the process they forge connections and networks, share information and develop skills, and enhance their self-esteem and sense of well-being. In a region where women’s participation tends to be severely restricted by traditional religious, social and cultural norms, volunteering provides exposure to new ideas and ways of approaching problems that may lead to take more risk taking in questioning the status quo.

The challenge to bring the phenomenon of informal volunteering by poor women into the mainstream of development thinking is that many of their activities, tasks, duties and responsibilities are not considered “work” but rather the natural extensions of their, non-remunerated, gender roles. Reimagining gender roles is intrinsically linked to how women’s work, particularly in informal volunteer activities, is recognized and valued as making a significant contribution to meeting the SDGs. The essential ingredient is to ensure that gender considerations are systematically addressed in all data collection and analysis, in training and management programmes, and in all areas concerned with supporting and promoting the integration of volunteerism into mainstream policy design.
Another facet of volunteerism impacting on gender is social activism, particularly pronounced in Arab States in recent years. Women are increasingly taking a lead in advocacy for social and political change and, in the process, helping to break down stereotypes about the passivity of Arab women. While these volunteer actions may be disapproved of in some quarters, they should be considered holistically, as comprising a part of a process that empowers and brings confidence to half the population and opens spaces for a vast number of women to be meaningfully engaged and supported in policies and programmes that address the SDG challenges.

In line with efforts in the Arab States region to implement The Beijing Platform for Action, dedicated efforts are needed to develop and implement policies and frameworks that support women’s leadership and meaningful participation through volunteerism, while also ensuring their safety and well-being. Action also needs to be taken through partnerships with stakeholders such as the ESCWA Women, Family and Childhood Department of the League of Arab States to produce quality evidence on how the distinctive qualities of volunteering can empower women.

Conflict and natural disasters

In the previous section the involvement of people in helping to alleviate the consequences of crisis situations in the Arab States region and contributing to bringing about peaceful resolution was discussed. The values of solidarity and mutual support that help support cohesion in societies also underpin volunteer action in preventing, mitigating and removing the causes of conflict. A key concern in any reimagining process is to ensure that volunteer action is properly supported and protected. Programmes involving volunteer inputs need to factor in that volunteers operating in conflict areas are especially prone to physical and mental health issues. This also points to the need for proper preparation, training and protection. Indeed, volunteer involving organizations should be encouraged to introduce accountability mechanisms that address their duty of care to all volunteers. In addition, given the many political and social sensitivities in conflict and post conflict contexts, governments need to be open and responsive to widening participation to all sections of societies. Broad based programmes of awareness raising and sensitization training should be arranged for all peacebuilding actors, including security and military forces.

Notwithstanding the valuable contribution of volunteerism in addressing natural disasters, its role is often overlooked in resilience-building strategies. A reimagining exercise should build on the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction on people-centred, cost-effective and locally-owned approaches to resilience-building. Local governments need to strengthen the capacity of local volunteer groups to
prepare for and respond to resilience risks. With climate change posing multiple resilience threats across the region, concerted efforts are also urgently needed to integrate volunteering into climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts. As water scarcity is one of the most pressing needs for the region, this should include mainstreaming volunteering into water-related interventions such as the Arab Water Security Strategy (2010-2030) and the monitoring and awareness-raising components of the Regional Initiative for the Assessment of Climate Change Impacts on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region.

This ability of volunteerism to promote trust and social cohesion in fragile states and conflict zones aligns with the strong focus of the Sustaining Peace Agenda on engaging civil society, particularly women’s and youth groups, and inclusion of marginalized people. Therefore, it is recommended that regional actors should mainstream volunteering into a people-centred approach to sustaining peace. The vital role of engaging local volunteers should be recognized as building ownership within frameworks, such as the Dead Sea Resilience Agenda, which emphasize that aid should reinforce and not replace local capacities. In addition, the contributions of volunteers to supporting people displaced by conflict needs to be recognized and supported as a key part of the Global Compact for Migration’s call to engage multiple stakeholders to protect, support and empower migrants and host communities.

Reference was made in the previous section to volunteer response through the building up of resilience in situations of environmental degradation that seriously affects the Arab States region. Yet the role of volunteerism in resilience-building strategies is often ignored. One key element of a reimagining process is to take necessary steps to ensure volunteer action is integrated into climate change adaptation and mitigation policies and programmes. As water scarcity is one of the most pressing needs for the region, this should include mainstreaming volunteering into water-related interventions, such as the Arab Water Security Strategy (2010-2030) and the monitoring and awareness-raising components of the Regional Initiative for the Assessment of Climate Change Impacts on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region.

**Legislation, programmes and policy**

Arab States need to consider the impact laws and policies are having on ensuring an enabling environment for volunteering to flourish. In particular, measures are needed that open up spaces for people to participate, organize and communicate and these spaces need to be protected. Central and local governments should promote a culture of volunteerism to help volunteers gain legitimacy, trust and respect and encourage the engagement of new volunteers. Ways forward include, as has been seen, creating incentives, raising awareness and integrating volunteering into broader development strategies. Volunteering schemes in the region need to be proactive in ensuring that all people can access the opportunities they provide and that all can benefit from the support volunteers give. When appropriate targeted interventions that promote the inclusion of under-represented groups should be introduced or strengthened. It needs to be underlined however that legislation alone cannot fully define the environment for volunteerism because people themselves decide how, when and where to volunteer their time. But enlightened laws can certainly help to enhance the enabling environment within which people can take these decisions.
Conclusion

Volunteerism is universal and makes a significant contribution to addressing major global issues outlined in the SDGs. As UNDP’s first Human Development Report (UNDP HDR 1990) noted, people are the real wealth of a nation. It is by volunteering that people find a path to inclusion that enables them to be involved in their own development efforts, manage disaster risks and prevent and recover from violent conflict. It also contributes to the well-being of societies and communities. In this sense volunteering is a nursery for good citizenship. It helps build strong societies and cohesive communities. It teaches people to be responsible citizens and schools them in the process of democratic involvement. It promotes trust and reciprocity which are essential to stable societies. As a later HDR observed, volunteerism holds enormous scope for broadening participation in governance and promoting more equitable outcomes (UNDP HDR 2002 Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World).

However, volunteerism is not a panacea nor does it replace actions that the State and other stakeholders need to take. Indeed, as has been pointed out in this paper, there are a range of roles for all stakeholders in promoting and nurturing an environment that allows all people, regardless of gender, ethnicity or social background, to contribute through volunteer action and to benefit in the process. Reimagining volunteering calls for the participation of all stakeholders working together to help ensure that the potential of volunteer action is fully realized. Governments need to ensure volunteerism is fully integrated into all policies and programmes with special consideration given to the participation of marginalized group to ensure that the call to “leave no one behind” is respected; civil society organizations need to advocate Member States for positive change and also support and promote volunteerism in their own areas of work; private sector needs to provide space for employees to volunteer; academia and the research community need to focus on providing robust empirical data to ensure that steps taken are evidence based; and the media needs to enhance awareness of volunteer accomplishments. It is the responsibility of all actors in the Arab States region need to make long-term operational, financial and political commitments and investments to support volunteering.