



The Thread that Binds: Volunteerism and Resilience in Arab States

A Regional Perspective

2018 State of the World's Volunteerism Report
Regional Launch, Cairo, 21 October 2018

Foreword

The United Nations Volunteers programme contributes to peace and development through volunteerism. At the time of this launch, 917 UN volunteers are deployed with 27 partners in 15 countries of assignment, in over 100 professional areas across the Middle East and North Africa region. 52% are women and over half are nationals, serving in their own countries. Fifty are fully funded by donors.

The enclosed regional perspective applies the findings of the UN's flagship report on volunteerism and suggest options for UN, government and civil society partners to scale up and strengthen volunteerism for the achievement of the 2030 SDG agenda.

A new resolution on volunteering will be passed by the General Assembly during this 73rd session. It encourages governments, together with their partners, to continue to integrate volunteerism into national strategies and plans, and to invest in measurement of volunteer work through national statistical systems.

Furthermore, it invites governments to showcase, and to exchange experiences of volunteerism for the SDGs at regional meetings in 2019, and at a global technical meeting in 2020, in the margins of the High Level Political Forum on the SDGs. UN Regional Commissions will coordinate these efforts, and UN entities including UN Volunteers as well as the International Federation of the Red Cross/Red Crescent and others will support knowledge building efforts in this area.

I encourage us all to engage with this important process over the next 2 years, to ensure that volunteerism is really evolving in a way that allows all the talents of the region to contribute and to work together on long-term solutions to development challenges.

Jason Pronyk, Regional Manager, Arab States, Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States.



I. Introduction

The Arab States region is vulnerable to a wide range of threats, both climatic and man-made. It is home to fragile ecosystems, extreme weather and subject to natural disasters such as catastrophic droughts and floods. Many Arab States have also witnessed armed conflicts that increased the pressure on their societies and local communities – namely forced displacement and food insecurity.

Four Arab States (Iraq, Somalia, Syria and Yemen) are still considered on-going crisis countries, while two others (Lebanon and Jordan) are considered the world's largest refugee-hosting countries relative to the size of their population.

In addition, average rates of youth unemployment in Arab States remain the highest in the world. In 2016, youth unemployment rate in Arab States reached 30.6%, which is more than double the global average of 13.1%.³

Similarly, the Middle East and North Africa region is still the most distant from gender parity, with Arab States averaging well below the global average in economic participation and opportunity and political empowerment for women⁴.

Table 1:
Gender equality worldwide and in the Arab States⁵

Region/Country	Gender Gap Index	Economic Participation and Opportunity	Political Empowerment
Global	68.0%	58.0%	23.0%
Arab States	60.7%	42.2%	8.3%

Resilience-building has been one major UN strategy in supporting Arab States to overcome shocks and face development challenges in the way towards achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) in response to the Syria Crisis is one example of such resilience-based approaches.

¹“On-going crises,” UNDP, 2018, in: <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/crisis-response/on-going-crises.html>

²“Poorer countries host most of the forcibly displaced, report shows,” UNHCR, 2017, in: <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2017/2/58b001ab4/poorer-countries-host-forcibly-displaced-report-shows.html>

³“World Employment and Social Outlook 2016: Trends for Youth,” ILO, 2016.

⁴“The Global Gender Gap Report,” World Economic Forum, 2017.

⁵*Ibid*, Arab States' average was calculated based scores of 14 Arab States indexed in The Global Gender Gap Report.

Volunteers help scale up and humanize responses to crisis

Volunteer Voices:
MOHAMMAD

I used to be an accountant, but I was unhappy with my job. In 2015 I got the opportunity to volunteer to support asylum seekers in Cairo. Outside the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office, tired and desperate people would start lining up from 8.00 in the morning. We would receive more than 100 new applications every day, and alongside these existing applicants would also queue up to inquire about resettlement cases, refugee status determination and financial and medical assistance.

My volunteering work entailed providing these asylum

seekers with information and help to fill out their forms. I also worked to identify the most vulnerable cases.

We had a total of 120,000 registered applicants but we didn't have the capacity or the funds to serve them all.

What I consider most precious about my volunteering was the opportunity to listen to everyone's problems and offer some compassion. For the asylum seekers, I represented someone they could talk to who could try to find solutions or at least some respite from their hardships. This brought me happiness and I hope it did to them as well.

II. Contribution of volunteerism to community resilience

1. Local volunteerism is a fundamental resilience strategy and a property of resilient communities

The scale and scope of volunteer activity in responding to shocks and stresses are unparalleled. According to 2018 SWVR, Arab States have around 9 million equivalent full-time volunteers, 8.2% of the global volunteer workforce. This means that there is a great potential in Arab States for drawing on local volunteers' support in facing development challenges.

Beyond its scale, volunteerism has distinctive contributions when compared with other resilience approaches. For example, in fragile and post-conflict environments, volunteers can strengthen resilience by supporting the integration of refugees and displaced people into communities, building people's ownership of peace and development processes and strengthening social cohesion within and across groups.

2. Local volunteerism enables collective strategies for managing risk

By bringing together individual actions under a shared purpose, volunteerism expands the choices and opportunities available to communities as they prepare for and respond to crises.

Youth volunteers as peacebuilders

Young volunteers can be positive role models and advocates for promoting peacebuilding and social cohesion within fragile communities. Young volunteers can also play a role in discussing and addressing factors such as social exclusion and cultural norms that can contribute to extremism.

In 2017, UNDP and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization launched a regional youth-led advocacy campaign known as “Shughel Shabab” in response to a United Nations Security Council resolution on youth, peace and security.

It aimed to highlight youth-led initiatives, transform perceptions about young people and support them as change-makers and peacebuilders. Young volunteers from countries across the Arab States region worked together to showcase the many positive ways in which young people – many of whom are volunteers – reduce social tension and violence and repair the social fabric of communities. In 2018, the campaign will focus on developing an enabling environment for sustained youth participation.

Source: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2017). Story Competition: Shughel Shabab. Available at www.arabstates.undp.org

There are diverse forms of volunteerism in the Arab States contexts. Communities report that informal local volunteering, happening directly between persons, is more flexible and responsive than both formal or organizational volunteering as well as institutional development and humanitarian programmes. Around 83% of voluntary efforts in Arab States are informal (figure 1).

While these local and informal systems of support are a massive resource for resilience in Arab States, these systems can themselves come under strain in the face of conflict, forced displacement, resource depletion and inequalities. To meet increasing needs, local voluntary efforts must be matched with adequate resources, capacities and incentives to be sustainable. To be most effective, volunteers can benefit from support from wider, more formalized structures.

Figure 1:

Formal and informal volunteer work, as a per cent of total volunteer work



3. Volunteerism is particularly significant for vulnerable and marginalized groups, but its costs and benefits are not always distributed equitably

Mutual aid, self-help and reciprocity are important coping strategies for isolated and vulnerable communities. Self-organized actions can help marginalized groups meet their own needs in the absence of wider provisions and services, by giving them voice and connecting them with others in advocating for their needs.

However, volunteering is not inevitably inclusive or egalitarian and can take advantage of people who are vulnerable (often youth, women, poor people and people with disabilities). For example: globally, women are more likely to take on the majority of informal volunteering, which tends to be lower status and less well supported, in an extension of their domestic and community caring roles.

Interestingly, the share of women in total and formal volunteering in Arab States is relatively equitable, differing significantly from the ratios of women's economic participation in Arab States. This means that gender gap is smaller in volunteer work than in other forms of work, making volunteering a potential pathway for women's empowerment.

In fact, women actually take on a greater share of formal volunteering than informal volunteering in comparison with men in the region. The SWVR field research found that formal volunteering is more likely to challenge traditional cultural roles and responsibilities, especially those related to gender, and can expand leadership roles for women.

Additionally, formal volunteering can open access to community networks, strengthen community capacity by training people in new skills, widen access to resources and enhance opportunities for employment, all of which can strengthen community resilience for the long term.

Both formal and informal volunteering have their own strengths for resilience-building. Bringing diverse forms of voluntary participation together in a complementary way can help empower communities by providing new forms of social capital, skills and other resources to marginalized groups already engaged in local volunteerism.

Table 3:
Share of total volunteering by gender

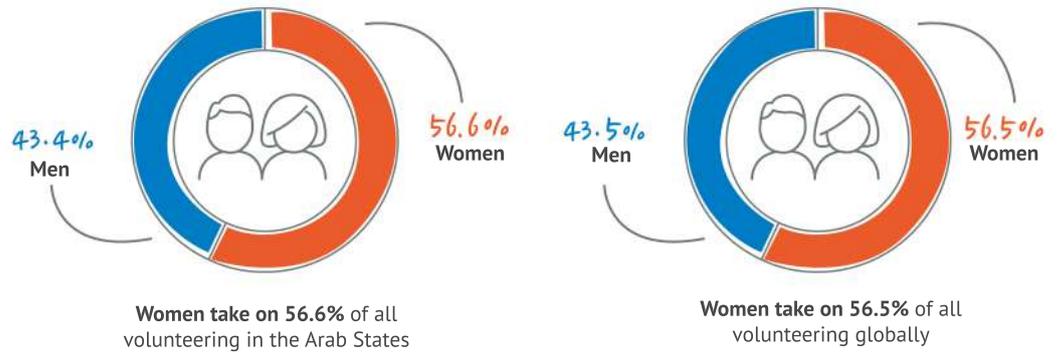
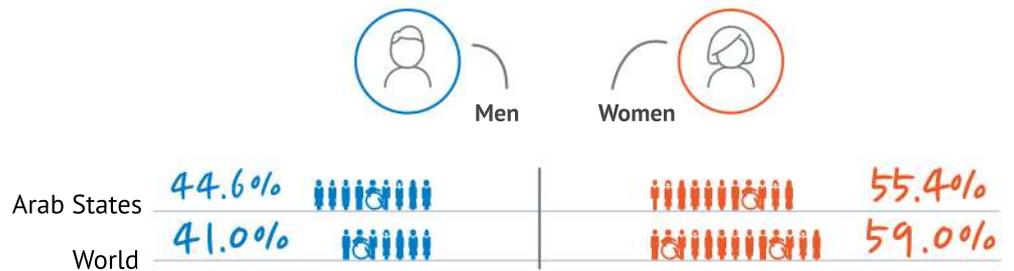


Table 4:
Share of total informal volunteering by gender



Communities develop new ways of working to protect shared natural resources

In Dagag Village, volunteerism is changing. In Sudan, *nafeer*, or a call to mobilize, is a traditional social activity that relies on collective volunteer engagement across the community. With the advent of a local youth volunteer *network* supported by UN actors (*UNDP, UNEP and UNV*), the tradition of *nafeer* is changing. Before, only the eldest called for *nafeer*, making decisions about what work would be done and where. Now the young men and women *volunteering* through a UN project to address water management and environmental issues have helped evolve the concept of *nafeer*, expanding and linking traditional norms with new ideas and initiatives. Volunteers are taking on new leadership roles, and the community is working to address issues of concern for youth, women and men including environmental matters and gender equality. The community is better *organized* to tackle problems, there has been an influx of new ideas and *nafeer* has expanded to new fields of work.

Source: *SWVR field research*

4. Effective collaboration with volunteers can transform volunteering from a coping mechanism to a strategic resource for community resilience

Local volunteerism is what allows communities to cope in times of stress. But drawing on their own limited resources, it is difficult for communities to move beyond simply coping, to preventing, or adapting to risks. Local volunteers sometimes lack the technical capacity, skills or access to the information, knowledge and resources needed to produce transformative solutions. They may lack the political space to assemble and organize, or they may be confronted by situations that are dangerous or inappropriate for voluntary interven-

External collaboration between local volunteers and wider actors can help local self-organization by:

- > Boosting available financial, human and technological resources to sustain local action.
- > Influencing social norms and enhance the participation of marginalized groups, for example through the introduction of standards for participation.
- > Conferring legitimacy and legal recognition on local voluntary efforts.

Local collaboration can strengthen external actors' resilience strategies by:

- > Incorporating local knowledge and feedback from communities, ensuring more cost-effective and appropriately designed responses.
- > Partnering with local voluntary efforts, providing a significant boost to external interventions and responses at a comparatively low cost.
- > Enhancing feedback and learning through the development of more egalitarian relationships between communities, recognized as volunteers rather

III. Moving Forward:

SWVR research highlights that Governments and other stakeholders can strengthen the contribution of volunteerism to resilience-building in Arab States in two main ways:

1. Nurturing an ecosystem for resilient volunteering:

The starting point for building an ecosystem for resilient volunteering should be improved research and analysis of the diverse forms and benefits of volunteerism at national and subnational levels. Such analysis requires multi-stakeholder cooperation among volunteers, public authorities, the private sector and civil society actors.

In this regard, national dialogue on volunteerism with all types of volunteers - as part of the development of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) on the Sustainable Development Goals - is a highly encouraged practice.

In 2017 and 2018, six of 9 reporting Arab States (Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE) highlighted the contribution of volunteers in a variety of sectors and roles. Evidence from the VNRs shows that promoting volunteerism was frequently associated with national policies for the empowerment of women and youth.

Communities Volunteerism in the Voluntary National Re- views of Arab States 2017-2018

Bahrain:

Volunteerism was introduced into educational programs as a tool for promoting a culture of peace.

Jordan:

Volunteerism has been recognized for its role in youth empowerment and the implementation of the SDGs.

Lebanon:

Promoting volunteerism was included as an objective in the 2011 National Social Development Strategy. A National Permanent Committee on Volunteering was established by the Council of Ministers in 2002 with defined roles. Resources have been allocated by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) for a National Volunteer Service Program to promote youth civic engagement across the country through volunteering. A Community Service project was initiated in public and private schools in September 2012, and it was re-activated in all public and private schools starting from the academic year 2016-2017.

Saudi Arabia:

Volunteerism has been introduced into educational programs, with the aims of “developing an educated generation who take the lead in volunteerism with active involvement in advancing the society and serving the nation,” and “promoting respect of volunteerism, developing a sense of social responsibility and active interaction among students.” Volunteerism has also been included in the Ministry of Labor and Social Development’s strategy for 2020, with the target of increasing the number of volunteers and per capita economic value of volunteering in the country. A national volunteering portal was established for that purpose.

United Arab Emirates:

Volunteerism has been recognized for its role in youth empowerment and the implementation of SDGs. Additionally, a law is being adopted with the aim of enhancing the social status of voluntary work as a humanitarian act.

Source: Voluntary National Reviews of Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia (2018) and United Arab Emirates (2017)

Specific support to nurture and support local volunteerism is another important step. Legislation, policies and investments need to be relevant to all types of volunteering in the context, including informal volunteerism. An enabling environment balances the freedom for communities to self-organize around their own priorities, while providing more formal opportunities for all groups that enable formal volunteers to develop skills, capacities and leadership opportunities.

Since 2008, few Arab States (Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia) have introduced or updated policies, legislation or other measures specific or relevant to volunteering. UAE reported that a similar legislation is currently underway.

Beyond specific policies and legislation on volunteering, policy directions and associated resourcing should be integrated across sector plans and prioritized in strategies for community resilience, humanitarian response and gender equality and inclusion, given the essential roles that volunteers are already playing.

2. Forming partnerships based on greater appreciation of the value of communities' own contributions:

When governments, UN agencies, NGOs and other actors work with communities, they should take local volunteerism as a starting point for joint work on resilience-building. Rather than providing an external 'expert's-eye' view of risks and vulnerabilities, documenting and understanding communities' own strategies is a more effective approach to understanding community priorities, capacities and power dynamics.

Furthermore, external actors must ensure that any joint initiatives or partnerships complement rather than undermine the local action that helps people to cope. Such analysis can also help these external actors to work with communities to ensure that volunteering is inclusive and empowering for all groups.

External resilience actors that want to partner with communities can establish community compacts or agreements, which enable the voices of all volunteers, not just community leaders, to be heard. Such agreements should allow greater voices of volunteers in resilience structures at national and sub-national level. A plurality of relationships between local volunteers and other communities, actors and organizations would help weave a more resilient network of relationships that goes beyond the limitations of traditional and top-down power structures.

Together, an ecosystem to nurture volunteering, and more equitable partnerships with communities will ensure that volunteerism contributes towards resilience. Volunteerism is itself resilient because community knowledge, resources and response capacities are not being undermined or exploited. Rather, the development system is able to nurture the distinctive contributions of volunteering in a sustainable way.

IV. Conclusions

The Arab States region has a long history of voluntary action. Investment in volunteerism in the region has the potential to:

- Provide a valuable resource for the implementation of the 2030 SDGs, by connecting official actors with informal efforts.
- Create new opportunities for women and youth, by giving them a voice and an entry point to economic and social participation.
- Help with relationship-building across communities, for example host and refugee communities.
- Address pressing challenges, such as the management of natural resources and the management of refugees.

How to maximize the benefits of local volunteerism?

1. UNV's offer:

- Design and develop specific **volunteer-led interventions and programme components that address development priorities in the Arab States**, such as stabilization, women's and youth empowerment, refugee management and natural resources management.
- Assist in **integrating volunteerism into strategies and plans of Governments and other stakeholders**, to assist in shifting from ad hoc and isolated volunteer projects to sustainable investment at scale in volunteerism.
- Advise on **reviewing national structures and systems for volunteerism**, including policies and legislation.
- Assist in providing a **more comprehensive measurement of volunteer activity**, which is required to support strategy and investment decisions in line with ILO standards on the measurement of volunteer work.

2. Recommended actions for partners:

- **Provide adequate resourcing and funding for volunteerism**, which is critical to sustaining participatory development. Contributions to the Special Voluntary Fund enable UNV to embed the values of volunteerism in the work of Governments and the United Nations.
- **Provide greater leadership and empowerment opportunities** for women and marginalized groups through volunteering interventions.
- **Ensure that educational systems provide opportunities to children and youth to volunteer**, as volunteerism is often the first experience of civic engagement for young people.
- **Ensure the security and well-being of volunteers**, by developing/reviewing legislation or policies related to volunteerism, to create an enabling environment that ensures the burden of risk does not fall on volunteers.
- **Actively engage with volunteerism monitoring initiatives** and regional and international cooperation and partnerships around volunteering. This includes taking part in the UNV-coordinated National Situation Analysis (NSA), reporting on volunteer contributions in the Voluntary National Reviews on the SDGs, and participating in regional and global cooperation initiatives related to volunteerism such as the Regional Consultation Meeting in 2019 and the Global Technical Meeting in 2020.

The UN Community Volunteer modality



is one of UNV's multifaceted answers to the quadrennial comprehensive policy review A/Res/67/226, through which the General Assembly established key systemwide policy orientations for the development cooperation and country-level modalities of the United Nations system with a view to enhancing its coherence and efficiency, as well as the United Nations' capacity to address effectively, and in accordance with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the full range of development challenges of our time.

The aim of the proposed UN Community Volunteer scheme is to mobilize residents with a strong community presence, local knowledge and networks who often live and work in their own communities and tend to have attained some basic education. It would also strive to provide economic inclusion and empowerment of community members in engaging meaningfully in their local development. While contributing to improving the lives of others in the communities which they serve, UN Community Volunteers receive a volunteer living allowance, health, life, and emergency insurances and a training disbursement to facilitate their service in line with these principles. Furthermore, UN Community Volunteers can expect to gain invaluable experience and technical skills which can serve them well when re-entering workforce after volunteering.

Robust health and safety standards and compliance with the spirit of volunteerism that ensures "safe, adequate, and modest" living provisions to UN Volunteers are the main guiding principles that are enshrined in UNV's obligation for the well-being of UN Volunteers. Line responsibility for good health and safety practices begins with the supervisor, the UN Host Agency, and proceeds upward through the levels of UNV volunteer management.



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unv.swvr@unv.org