



VOLUNTEERISM IS A MESSAGE OF PEACE AGAINST TERRORISM

Interview with Ibrahim Hussein Hamadnallah

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We are inspiration in action

This is a full transcript of an interview with Ibrahim Hussein Hamadnallah, Senior Portfolio Manager for the Arab States, Peace Programming Section at the United Nations Volunteers (UNV), conducted by the Princess Al Anoud Foundation of Saudi Arabia and published in the Foundation's magazine, Tamkeen (May 2017).

Overview

The willingness to do good, to help others, to provide relief to the needy, and the desire to give are all inherent qualities of our Arab culture. However, a senior official of the United Nations Volunteers Programme (UNV) believes that much remains to be done, so that the Arab youth take-up a notable, and well-deserved position among other nations in the field of volunteerism, and to maximum the benefits from the exerted efforts. In the following lines, a generic assessment of the status of volunteering in the Arab world, and suggestions for development are made by an international expert who knows very well what he is talking about.

When Ibrahim Hamadnallah, Senior Portfolio Manager for the Arab States of the United Nations Volunteers Programme (UNV), speaks about volunteerism in the Arab world, he draws on a comprehensive vision of the conditions of volunteerism in the Arab world, that deal with the historic and deeply anchored roots of volunteering in the Arab culture, giving examples from the "pre-Al-Bassous war", and the unparalleled free-will and generosity of "Hatem al-Taiy", in the pre-Islamic eras. He then moves on to the present referring to the inhabitants of the villages in Sudan and other Arab countries, who gather spontaneously during the harvest seasons to cooperate, driven by their volunteering instinct without expecting pay or material return for their effort. The same happens at times of disasters; it would never occur to anyone to escape to rescue themselves leaving the others behind; they rather seek to rescue those whom they know and those who they do not know following their conviction that: "my life is not more precious than theirs'."

After the UNV official presented this bright picture, we must wonder what can someone do more than giving ones' self. He answers unequivocally that there are fundamental issues that are critically lacking in the voluntary work in the Arab world, especially the institutionalization and a structured approach, to enable guiding and coordinating this work among the many institutions actively working in Volunteering, and the establishment of networks between different local or global actors, private or governmental, to achieve the greatest possible benefit, pave new channels of work mechanisms, and set joint plans. In this context, he referred to the recent experience in Europe where the structured approach of the volunteers' efforts lead to successfully receiving hundreds of thousands of refugees in Europe, largely based on the existence of solid volunteering infrastructures and the institutional supervision.

Humanitarian work and Volunteering work

Ibrahim points at another pivotal issue that negatively affects volunteerism in our Arab world; which is the confusion between the concepts of humanitarian work and volunteerism. He explains his viewpoint that there are different convictions on the concepts of volunteering in global cultures and regions. The United Nations Volunteers Programme respects cultural differences, considering the local prevailing perceptions in each region, yet that should not lead to the loss of boundaries between different areas.

An example of this, when a wealthy citizen reacts to a natural disaster offers to contribute money, or an in-kind donation of blankets and food to the people affected by the disaster. Ibrahim clarifies that this work is indeed commendable, yet it should not be seen as a voluntary act; it is a typical charity or humanitarian act.

He pointed out that volunteering is expressed on a person providing scientific expertise, efforts, abilities and experiences to others; that is, to sacrifice one's life for the sake of others, a doctor to move away from his/her comfort zone to extend unpaid treatment for needy patients – it is important that human beings are stripped of personal material benefits through this voluntary act. The institutions that supervise the voluntary work are responsible for providing decent transportation means, accommodation and food for the doctor. These provisions are not material compensation for his/her work, since the doctor, the engineer or a volunteer specialist is not required to bear these foundation costs; they are required to extend experience and services to others.

Ibrahim stated an important element in the volunteering work, that it doesn't only benefit the needy; it equally benefits the volunteers as it upscale their humanity, self-confidence, value the importance of their roles and contributions within their community or humanity at large, and strengthen their connections with the community around them; which are noble qualities that remain unattainable if we strictly limit our provisions to financial support only.

The UNV official stresses that he doesn't mean to underestimate the role of donors and financial contributors, but he alerts that the confusion between the two roles and definitions may be the hindering factor for many people to limit their efforts to cash donations, instead of getting proactively engaged and sacrifice part of their time and efforts to help others develop within their communities. He stressed that states should work to promote and recognize the role and contributions of the volunteers.

He considered the Arab Gulf countries, with their notable financial capabilities and human resources - having the highest proportion of their population as young people - are more capable of promoting volunteering in their societies and rightly positioning them in advanced ranks, globally.

Economic value of Volunteerism

Ibrahim stressed the importance of supporting scientific research in the field of volunteer work so as to raise awareness among citizens of the importance of participating in voluntary work, to realize what the previous generations have achieved, what is done by the current generation, and most importantly, what we lay in the future generations through highlighting these concepts for today's children.

To illustrate, the UN official pointed to the studies conducted by many countries since the beginning of the third millennium, such as Canada, England, France and Germany, by calculating the material value of the work done by the volunteers, and on average, it is equivalent to 8 percent of the gross national product (GNP). These are huge sums, since we are talking about giant industrial nations. He explained that "Volunteering in the Arab world is not equally appreciated, and we do not undertake relevant research that show its actual value", hence many volunteering efforts go unnoticeable. If they were dealt with seriously and carefully, perhaps we are not less than the rest of the world's regions in this area.

In response to the question: Was the reason for volunteering efforts in the region to not surface, is a desire of many to keep the work purely for God's worshiping, and not for the purpose of showing off? Ibrahim elaborated that, if the demonstration of volunteerism encourages others to follow it as a good practice, and contributes to institutionalizing it as a public establishment in which government entities participate jointly with civil society organizations, then volunteering activities need to be known and codified. It may be advisable to approach clerics and fatwas to urge the promotion of volunteering work.

The official expressed his hope that many people in the region to refer to and draw from the "State of the World's Volunteerism Report" findings, which was first published in 2012, 2015 and is published every three years, including in Arabic. The SWVR acknowledges the existence of multiple concepts, and interpretation of volunteering in different cultures and regions, and therefore it is not relevant to develop an index ranking the nations, states and territories according to their contribution to volunteerism.

He expressed that the assessment of volunteering work in any country or region is based on four main pillars:

- Promotion of volunteering;
- Recognition of the volunteers and their roles;
- Facilitation of Volunteerism;
- Networking among various Volunteering institutions;

What did the UN Volunteers Programme do?

In response to the question: What has the United Nations Volunteers Programme done to promote the status of volunteerism in the Arab world, he referred to a most recent example of UNV's support to "the Arab Youth Volunteering for a Better Future Programme", which was initiated by UNV in response to the UN Secretary-General's call in 2011, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, following the events that affected many countries in the Arab world, the so-called "Arab Spring", according to Mr. Ibrahim.

The pilot was originally launched in 2012 in five countries: Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Yemen and Morocco. The purpose of the Programme was to rely on volunteerism to reach both sides: the Arab Youth and Governments, with the aim of sharpening young people on the one hand, and encouraging Governments in giving youth decision-making power in these countries, on the other.

On the results of the pilot Regional Programme, which was implemented over a period of four years, and ended in 2016, Mr. Ibrahim clarified that it succeeded with varying degrees from one participating country to another, according to the prevailing conditions. The conflicts in Yemen, for instance, resulted in no sustainable activities, other countries have fluctuated politically which made new governments not eager to commit to what previous governments had begun. In this context, he praised, in particular, what had been achieved in the Kingdom of Morocco.

The United Nations Volunteers Programme had undertaken this pilot on an experimental basis, with the hope to replicate its successes and expand it further to other Arab States; especially that the Arab Youth Volunteer for a Better Future Programme started with workshops in these five countries that brought together the key stakeholders including the key actors in this field, and had given the opportunity to consult and express their views during a three-day period in each of the workshops. The aim of the National Consultation Workshops was to build the project on a 'Bottom-up' approach, from the base and not to impose an agenda from the top.

As for the Arab Gulf region, there were no similar activities. However, the UN official referred to the cooperation between the UNV Programme and the Arab Federation for Voluntary Activities (AFVA), which embraces representatives from Arab States and voluntary organizations in 19 countries and has an independent legal status under the League for Arab States, hosted in Doha, the State of Qatar, which took-up the responsibility to issue the first UNV Annual Report in Arabic, in 2013.

Mr. Ibrahim expressed hope in that the leaders of volunteering will focus on the essence of developing the volunteering efforts in the Arab world more than the appearance, such as moving forward from the great ceremonial manifestations, issuance of expensive luxury publications, towards highlighting and recognizing the volunteers' efforts, their achievements and impact they make through volunteering, more than the organizers and leaders of the voluntary institutions.

The official said that he hoped for the coordination between the various bodies working in the field of volunteerism in the Arab Region, as the establishment of networks between them enhances their achievements. It does not reduce the value of the work of any individual institution, or threatens the presence of other institutions by sharing its efforts, as the uniqueness in this area is not an advantage for it causes a stuttering of efforts, and repetition imitation of the same actions, which is contrary to the lofty spirit that characterizes volunteerism.

Cooperation with Al-Anoud Foundation (KSA)

The Arab States Portfolio Manager expressed appreciation for the efforts made in volunteerism in many Arab Gulf States and stated that he witnessed sound activities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, State of Qatar and the Kingdom of Bahrain. He praised the efforts made there in volunteering to help the elderly, children and the disabled, and praised, in particular, the volunteer work carried out by adolescents, young people and adults in Saudi Arabia during the Hajj season, for instance.

Despite the absence of the UNV Programme Field Units in the AGCC countries, as in Egypt or Jordan, UNV extends its support through the UN Offices in the Arab Gulf capitals. An example of this is the collaboration with Al Anoud Foundation (WARIF Project), where following a request by the UNDP Country Office in Riyadh to UNV-HQs, an expert from the UNV Programme assisted with guiding the final Evaluation of WARIF project which is based on volunteering act, and recommended an external Evaluation consultant for the project implemented by the UNDP Country Office in Riyadh

The programme and a better world

In response to a question raised for the UN official on the potential contribution of volunteerism to the reduction of terrorism and extremism, he pointed to research linking this serious phenomenon with the exclusion of young people from decision-making in their own societies and development set-ups; emphasizing that the proactive engagement of young people's resources for meaningful development purposes for their societies, will pull the rug from under the feet of a terrorist movement, and hampers the spread of its ideas among young people.

He cited magnificent examples of young people's contribution to peace-building efforts, such as bridging the components of societies in conflict and internal conflicts, and said

that volunteers were contributing to United Nations missions throughout the world, participating in Darfur, South Sudan, Liberia and Western Sahara to name a few; noting that the UN Volunteers are specialists in administrative and developmental areas, in negotiations and dialogues between the various parties, with a spectrum of these disciplines exceeding ninety professional specializations.

In response to the question: What has the UNV Programme achieved throughout the decades since the beginning of its work in 1971, he said: The world has become better than where it was, more peaceful, with the UNV Programme contributions well documented in spite of its notably limited capacities and resources. It is not comparable to large UN Programmes such as UNICEF, UNDP or UNEP, since the mission and mandate of the Programme is not to create stand-alone Volunteer projects, as much as to provide volunteers who contribute to projects already developed by other specialized United Nations Programmes. It is meant to support and complement the efforts of the specialized Programmes of the United Nations Organization, be it in medical, logistical missions, engineering, Child protection Programmes, rule of the law, elections, disarmament, demobilization or reintegration.

He stressed that the UN Volunteers are not paid or rewarded materially for providing their efforts, technical expertise and experience to others, yet they receive the minimum remuneration for their transportation, accommodation and nutrition. That is, the facilities necessary for them to enable them carry out their volunteer work decently, to its fullest possible scope.

He stated that, Volunteerism is not limited to communities living in prosperity. Rather, the willingness to cooperate, cohesion and synergy between ordinary people and poor communities is often as great as in the case of disasters such as floods, earthquakes or harvest time - as mentioned before.

He concluded his remarks by referring to the vision of Saudi Arabia 2030, and considered the attention given to Youth in the vision, plays the cornerstone in the development plans for the KSA. He revealed with Tamkeen that he would soon receive a group of young Saudis in a visit organized by a Saudi youth group to Bonn, to brief them about the UNV role and its international experience in the field of volunteering.



The original Arabic interview, published in [Tamkeen \(May 2017\)](#), is available through the website of the Princess Al Anoud Foundation of Saudi Arabia.

This transcript was translated from the original Arabic into English with the kind assistance of [UN Online Volunteer](#) Souha El Jisr.