

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

Beirut, 10 April 2019

**Time:**

11:15 - 13:00

**Venue:**

UN House

**Address:**

Riad El Solh 1107-2812, Beirut, Lebanon

The Regional Consultation on the Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda in the ESCWA Region was organized as part of the Arab Forum on Sustainable Development, as mandated by the UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/73/140. The Consultation sought to provide a space for Plan of Action stakeholders from the ESCWA 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 a 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.

The session was commenced by the chair Mr. Mahmoud Ataya, General Director, Prime Minister's Office, State of Palestine, who welcomed the participants and briefly introduced the panel.

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In his opening remarks, Mr. Frederico Neto, Director of the Social Development Division, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) introduced the aim of the session and identified 3 major challenges to address:

- 1- How can we more efficiently measure the scale and scope of volunteering in the region?
- 2- How can we identify and overcome obstacles to women volunteering, and ensure the safety and wellbeing of female volunteers particularly in crisis countries?
- 3- How can we enhance youth employability through volunteering?

Mr. Jason Pronyk, Regional Manager, United Nations Volunteers (UNV) Programme, then appreciated the strong traditions of volunteerism in UNESCWA cultures and stressed the importance of the consultation in providing Plan of Action stakeholders with a space to identify opportunities for volunteers to accelerate SDG progress and maximize the potential of volunteering to tackle the region's most pressing issues. Mr Pronyk then presented some of the key findings of the National Situation Analyses in the region and urged all participants to seize this opportunity to actively share innovations, best practices, and opportunities for new partnerships and approaches, and to analyze ways to overcome common challenges.

The moderator, Mr. Ziad Abdel Samad, Executive Director, Arab NGO Network for Development, emphasized the importance of volunteerism as a pivotal part of Plan of Action stakeholders' programmes and interventions. He acknowledged the significance of situating the consultation in the context of the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development (AFSD) to pave the way for optimal solutions and reinforce sustainable development in the region. Also, he appreciated the diversity of the panelists' profiles and work experience, facilitating an interactive discussion.

H.E. Sheikha Hissa Al-Thani, Arab League Special Envoy for Humanitarian Affairs, League of Arab States, acknowledged volunteers' spontaneous and instinctive engagement in humanitarian work, particularly in societies prone to crisis. Volunteers' well-founded relationship with their societies can be properly translated into organized activities and can ensure efficient coordination with the national and international organizations and aid providers especially in conflict countries. According to H.E., volunteers also play a vital role in building trust to ultimately generate more responsive and sustainable solutions to the most pressing needs. Furthermore, volunteers provide basic social services such as hygiene and public facilities and contribute to improving the quality of life and wellbeing of communities in particular to marginalized groups including people with disabilities. The international societies such as the Red Crescent and the Red Cross as well as universities play, in her opinion, a role in promoting the volunteerism spirit and culture. It is important to identify the potential expertise within our societies to better meet the needs of refugees and internally-displaced persons and to enable them to take part in the recovery and reconstruction of their home countries. She emphasized the need to identify means to ensure the integrity and credibility of volunteers to avoid accidental misusing of vulnerable and needy communities particularly in conflict countries. Also, it is increasingly crucial to protect and support volunteers to ensure they are not deployed as cheap labour. Following a question by the moderator on how to actively harness the momentum of women volunteers for the purpose of changing traditional

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stereotypes and perceptions of women's participation, H.E. Sheikha Hissa referred to volunteering in the Gulf region where women volunteers gain new knowledge and skills through volunteering. However, she also made the point that women volunteers struggle to gain equal access to volunteering opportunities.

Ms. Meryem Agadi, Manager of Cooperation and Partnerships in the General Secretariat, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Morocco, informed about a new law to promote volunteering in Morocco and manage volunteers more effectively by setting up a new framework that comprises both national and international volunteers serving in Morocco as well as Moroccan volunteers serving abroad. Centers of Excellence will also be established to improve the performance of volunteers and promote their contributions. Following a question by the moderator on how volunteering in the region could decrease youth unemployment, Ms. Agadi indicated that the Centers of Excellence would address problems related to youth employability, based on well-founded surveys and studies, by supporting youth to gain new skills and knowledge, and by framing and institutionalizing the experiences of volunteers in Morocco to connect them to potential employers. According to Ms. Agadi, Morocco has a lot of organizations and associations that promote volunteering, but they are not very well structured. Morocco would like to cooperate with other countries in the region to set up similar centres of excellence.

Mr. Nader Keyrouz, Regional Labour Statistician, International Labour Organization, highlighted ILO's focus on paid work and its definition. In 2013 ILO adopted new approaches to measure labour including a new definition of volunteer work and internships which identifies volunteering as an economic activity that is producing services and goods. Mr Keyrouz highlighted the importance of measuring volunteering and its impact on the society, social cohesion and labour market. To that end, a guide was developed and is being currently updated based on new methodologies. In Jordan, ILO, in collaboration with the Department of Statistics is planning to conduct cognitive testing to assess pre-identified survey questions on ground. This aims to develop a module for future surveys of labour forces aiming to measure volunteering and provide official concrete numbers. In that regard, one of the challenges is related to people being unaware that they are indeed doing voluntary work. To tackle that challenge, statisticians were obliged to ask additional follow-up questions for more details. Although it is difficult to encompass volunteering in a definite number of questions, a survey template is being tested in three continents to identify a group of questions that may capture volunteering at a global level. In the second stage, ILO will test those survey templates and integrate the findings in its global report. One important point is that the survey questions are in local dialect to ensure comprehensive understanding and response by the targeted communities.

The chair of the event, Mr. Mahmoud Ataya, General Director, Prime Minister Office, State of Palestine, gave an account of State of Palestine's contribution to the Regional Synthesis Report by developing a National Situation Analysis in the country. Huge efforts have been made by volunteer networks and civil society and Palestine has a strong tradition of volunteering and community-based assistance. A study conducted in 2011 reflected a change in the concept of volunteerism and its trends over time; particularly for youth, volunteering is an opportunity to gain new skills and improve oneself. According to a further survey on youth

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volunteering in 2015, 20% of youth confirmed doing diversified voluntary work including charitable, educational and community-based activities. Also, the percentage of volunteers differed based on locations (West Bank vs. Gaza) and gender (26% male vs. 13% female). 30% of Palestinian society is youth; equal to 1.5 million. If each one of them volunteers for 1 hour daily, the total will be 215 working days which exceeds by triple times the work done by public service staff; therefore, volunteers are according to the chair a great asset. Following a question by the moderator on Palestine's distinguished experience in the education field and how we can reinforce a culture of volunteering through education and simultaneously reinforce education through volunteering in the region, Mr. Ataya explained that, by careful examination of the current situation in Palestine and by planning and implementing adequate innovative activities, volunteering can significantly serve education including to improve human capital.

Ms. Emma Morley, Chief of the Volunteer Advisory Services Section, United Nations Volunteers (UNV) Programme, stressed that from a global perspective, there are 2 important questions to frame the event's discussion; First, how does volunteering need to adapt and evolve to maximize its potential to accelerate SDGs progress? And second, are there specific development challenges and policy priorities where volunteering can act as an SDG accelerator to help tackle some of the region's most pressing challenges? Ms. Morley shared the findings from a regional synthesis report that draws on information submitted by UNESCWA Member States. This included highlighting some of the laws, schemes and policies that ESCWA countries have introduced to support volunteers, as well as some of the challenges that volunteering faces in the region. According to the evidence reviewed for the report one of the challenges is that although most volunteering done in the region is local or informal. Volunteerism is also not universally reflected in the enabling environment or the reporting done by Member States. A related challenge is the disconnect between volunteering and wider development efforts, with volunteering rarely mainstreamed into local or national efforts to tackle key sustainable challenges, with the exception of youth. Ms. Morley also outlined the recommendations from the report, including in particular the need to gather more evidence to support and promote volunteering. The gaps include evidence on local and traditional forms of volunteering, and the impact of volunteering on SDGs. A second set of recommendations focused around accessibility and inclusion, and included the importance of creating new schemes that offer opportunities to all people to volunteer, and the role of laws and policies in creating an enabling environment in which volunteers are protected from exploitation and harm. The report is published in Arabic and English and available on the Plan of Action website ([www.unv.org/planofaction/synthesisreports](http://www.unv.org/planofaction/synthesisreports)).

The panel was then opened up to interventions and questions from the audience. The first intervention came from a member of the Tunisian Parliament, with 15 years of volunteering experience, who confirmed the importance of promoting volunteerism to achieve development goals, create job opportunities, reduce state expenditures and reinforce a sense of citizenship particularly to improve hygiene and ensure respect of local laws. In Japan, promoting volunteerism starts with children at an early age; this model should be followed in all Arab countries. In Tunisia, a parliamentary network was set up to work closely with civil society to advocate for new laws to boost the achievement of the sustainable development goals through volunteering.

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A second participant from Bahrain confirmed that volunteering is an indigenous part of traditional societal systems including related to religion. The participant also emphasized that volunteering should not just be seen as an economic activity producing goods and services; it also produces many other cultural and social benefits, for example promoting collective awareness. One outstanding challenge is that volunteering is not being reflected in most legislation or integrated in states' strategies to combat poverty. Similarly, the private sector was not doing enough to engage volunteering in its activities.

The third intervention from the Lebanese Fransabank (private sector) stated that if there is no culture of volunteering, banks cannot work efficiently. Governments must also adopt policies promoting volunteerism and NGOs in Lebanon should do more to properly design volunteer-involving programmes.

Another intervention came from a Lebanese graduate student, who mentioned that after the war, volunteering was misused for private and personal interests, not for public ones. People in general prefer paid and profitable jobs. Therefore, there is a need to re-acknowledge the civil society as volunteering-based, not paid, by promoting a culture of volunteerism at an early age through education.

A participant from the Ministry of Administrative Development, Labour and Social Affairs in Qatar, emphasized that we should not restrict volunteering to youth despite their vital role in our societies; instead, more demographic groups should be involved. He requested more information about the challenges facing volunteering in the ESCWA region.

The sixth intervention came from a member of the Iraqi Parliament who mentioned that in Iraq there is no scheme or mechanism to motivate citizens to get involved in volunteering. After the war against ISIS has come to an end, the unemployment rate in Iraq is very high; an important related question is how we can install and spirit of volunteering into the Iraqi people and how we can propose a law to the Iraqi Parliament, as a legislative authority, to promote volunteering.

A further intervention came from a member of the Syrian Parliament who echoed his peer from Iraq and stressed that unemployment and volunteering can be contradictory topics. He also highlighted the need to differentiate between volunteering in crisis and conflict countries, and volunteering in stable and peaceful countries. Also, he complained that after 4 years of attending the AFSD, there is still no concrete action plan or model to follow and implement; instead there are recurrent efforts to redefine the concept of volunteering and sustainable development. He requested countries that had conducted the National Situation Analysis to share knowledge, lessons learnt and experience.

A participant from the State of Palestine then asked about existing means to measure volunteering in the region in terms of potential increase or decrease in the number of volunteers. He also enquired about the fields where volunteers are more or less active, about the estimated cost of volunteering in the region, and lastly about the difference between formal and informal volunteering.

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A ninth intervention came from a participant from Syria, who explained that volunteering increased significantly during the Syrian conflict due to the huge number of initiatives responding to the increasing needs of affected populations. Those initiatives focused on humanitarian aid and later advanced to development projects in diverse fields such as empowering women, supporting people with disabilities and empowering youth. The intervention also stressed that Syrian youth are facing multiple challenges and that they would therefore benefit from special attention in future capacity building and knowledge sharing initiatives.

A question then came from a participant from the Ministry of Youth and Sports in Tunisia. According to the speaker, legislation for volunteering that was created in 2010 resulted in multiple deliverables including the establishment of an institution to organize volunteering work in Tunisia. The National Agency for Voluntary Work was later created as a result of the National Conference for Youth in 2016. According to surveys, 16% of Youth in Tunisia are doing voluntary work; more information will be available soon following the upcoming National Survey of Youth.

A university student from Yemen, also a member of the Arab Network, asked about the reason behind discrimination between foreign and local volunteers.

A participant from the Ministry of Social Affairs in Lebanon emphasized that it is often the case that people are not interested in volunteering unless it is paid. There is also a need to strengthen the legal framework and coordination between different actors.

A participant from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Oman asked if there is evidence that certain types of volunteering - for example smart volunteering - that have been shown to have deeper and more sustainable impact.

Finally, a participant from the Ministry of Social Development in the State of Palestine, explained about an ongoing initiative for voluntary work to provide knowledge, skills and space for volunteers who are deployed to work on activities pertaining to social development such as gender-based violence and psycho-social support.

In response to the participants' interventions and questions, H.E. Sheikha Hissa Al-Thani talked about the importance of engaging volunteers in awareness-raising, particularly about the importance of participation of under-represented groups such as women. Also, she stressed that to promote volunteering we need to establish criteria and avoid gender-based and age-based discrimination, and that in order for volunteering to accelerate the SDGs, it must be linked to the local social culture and should be mainstreamed across all ministries and institutions. Volunteers also ensure much broader outreach to remote and rural areas than regular staff due to bureaucratic and routine restrictions. With her support as a Special Envoy, volunteering initiatives related to youth and sports were launched in the region. Regarding the Regional Synthesis Report, she requested clarifications on how the data was collected and who the targeted groups were.

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Mr. Nader Keyrouz agreed that there is no age limit for volunteering, so everyone is encouraged to volunteer. He explained some definitions that are related to the difference between voluntary and paid works. There are no official accurate numbers of volunteers in the region. To measure volunteering more efficiently, ILO would need to coordinate with as many countries to obtain more reliable information about the domains and trends of voluntary work.

Ms. Meryem Agadi stressed the importance of promoting good citizenship through volunteering. Besides, benevolent work is different from volunteering. She also explained that despite the focus of the discussion on youth, there is an agreement that all age groups should be supported to volunteer.

Ms. Emma Morley thanked all panelists for the excellent inputs and contributions which will form part of the evidence to be collected while moving forward towards the Global Technical Meeting in 2030. She also clarified that UNV was mandated as Plan of Action Secretariat by the General Assembly, in coordination with many stakeholders, to collect what is called the National Situation Analysis of the state of volunteerism in all member states. For the ESCWA Region, the Secretariat had a challenge because only three member states (Iraq, State of Palestine and Sudan) completed their national situation analysis. The Secretariat urges all Member States to share information. This stage forms one part of the consultative process which eventually leads to the GTM 2020. Yesterday, UNV launched its first online consultation specifically for youth around how youth can share their ideas and proposals pertaining to volunteering for development. Finally, Ms. Morley highlighted the role of parliamentarians in building momentum for the Plan of Action.

The Chair concluded the event by thanking all panellists for their contributions and emphasizing the importance of collecting and measuring data and generating more evidence to build the case for volunteering for the 2030 Agenda in the ESCWA Region. This entails more efforts to build the capacity of Member States, statistical offices and all stakeholders. The second point is the vital role of youth in achieving the SDGs; but remembering that all people, regardless of their age, should also contribute through volunteering. Also, we need to mainstream and integrate the concept of volunteering in our sectoral and national strategies and policies. Volunteering should engage both men and women equally and should contribute to empowering women in all fields. Volunteers must be protected particularly in crisis and conflict countries. Finally, the Chair suggested that the Plan of Action organize future event events to further discuss how volunteering can be integrated into the 2030 Agenda in the ESCWA region.

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