

## **Connecting Research and Policies on Volunteerism for Development**

It is a pleasure to be addressing this conference exploring the relevance of research to voluntary service policies, because we at the United Nations Volunteers believe that research is indispensable to the promoting of volunteerism for development nationally, regionally and globally.

I want to thank AVSO for organizing this conference and the European Parliament for hosting us. I congratulate AVSO and Promente for their leading efforts in volunteering research in Europe; and VOSESA for their ground-breaking study on service and volunteering in Southern Africa.

As our colleague from the European Commission has pointed out, volunteerism has significant contributions to make to the development and implementation of youth policies.

Last week, as the G-8 Summit got underway, the United Nations launched an update on the progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in sub-Saharan Africa. The report showed that, despite progress, the continent remains significantly off track to meeting the global Goals for fighting poverty.

Volunteering is an effective and an essential means to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It can only be achieved with the full involvement of people all over the world. Citizens need to take ownership of the MDGs and use their ingenuity and creativity if absolute poverty is to be reduced.

When the UN General Assembly declared 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers, it recognized and sought to enhance the potential of volunteerism to contribute to the achievement of national and global development agendas. The United Nations Volunteers as the UN programme responsible for promoting and harnessing volunteerism for effective development was designated as the focal point for IYV.

Before the end of IYV in 2001, 123 National Committees in six continents, composed of government, private sector, academia, and civil society

organizations, were established to recognize, promote and facilitate volunteering contributions. To facilitate research on volunteer activity worldwide, a team led by UNV and the INDEPENDENT SECTOR, a US-based non-profit organization, developed a methodology for a comprehensive qualitative survey of the extent and nature of volunteering in a country, called "Measuring Volunteering: A Practical Toolkit".

Various European fora actively supported IYV. For example, the Council of Europe adopted recommendations to promote volunteerism through legislation and policy and remove legal obstacles hindering people from engaging in voluntary action. It also called for a European Day of Volunteerism.

In 2002, based on the follow-up report on IYV, the UN General Assembly in a formal resolution recognized the importance of volunteerism as a resource for development saying: "volunteerism is an important component of any strategy aimed at...poverty reduction, sustainable development, health, disaster prevention and management, social integration and...overcoming social exclusion and discrimination."

During 2005, the UN Secretary General submitted a report on the implementation since the International Year of the Volunteer. The General Assembly again passed a resolution, reiterating the importance of volunteerism for peace and development, saying "volunteering, in particular at the community level, will help to achieve the internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the United Nations Millennium Declaration..."

The classic case example of this is the Global Polio Eradication Initiative in 2001, where 10 million local volunteers reached more than 550 million children. The total value of volunteers in the Polio Eradication Initiative was estimated at US\$10 billion; a contribution well beyond the reach of governments or international and national organizations.

The UN General Assembly resolution not only recognized the power of volunteerism to contribute to the achievement of development goals, but also the need for actions and policies to enhance this contribution. It recognized the

need for research at the national, regional, and global levels to provide objective advocacy and proven models for informed policy-making supportive of volunteerism for development. The resolution explicitly “*Recognizes* the increasing attention being given to the economic dimension of volunteerism, and encourages Governments, with the support of civil society, to build up a knowledge base on the subject, to disseminate data and to expand research on other volunteer-related issues, including in developing countries...”

Throughout the world, there is increased interest by national and regional governments in developing national and youth volunteerism schemes and policies to support their national development objectives. African nations are examining ways to engage their large populations of youth to help address the human capacity gaps caused by HIV/AIDS and other crises, and also to increase the employability of those youth. A number of countries in Asia, including Pakistan which recognized the significant role volunteers played after the earthquake, are developing national volunteer movements to facilitate an effective link between interested volunteers and successful placements with volunteer involving organizations. In Latin America, thousands of university volunteers are serving throughout the countryside helping to address national MDG goals. And in Eastern Europe and the CIS, community volunteers are active in local participatory development groups, linking with local officials to provide community voice in governance and to prioritize and address community needs, such as access to electricity, clean water, and improved schools.

The Albania 2005 National Human Development Report dedicated an entire chapter to the “Role of Civil Society and Volunteerism in Promoting the Pro-Poor and Pro-Women Agenda.” It notes “volunteerism is such an enormous asset for social and economic development, that it would seem necessary for the NHDR to shed light on it.”

I think that we all recognize that volunteering is neither free nor simple. It is important to set up, what we call, volunteer infrastructure: recognition of the value of volunteering based on national traditions and contexts, adoption or

strengthening of legislation supportive of volunteerism, establishing or building the capacity of formal and informal volunteering schemes, and ensuring commitments to resources for volunteerism, such as through incorporating the economic contribution of volunteerism into national accounts.

UNV is responding to the increasing stream of requests for support from our partners, which are the developing countries and countries in transition. There is an urgent need for policy-makers to have quality data to inform their decision-making.

Let me provide you with two quick examples of how research has influenced actions and policies.

Late last year, UNDP through our UNV office in Thailand informed us that the government of Thailand was planning to announce soon the launch of a National Volunteer Centre, and that UNV was requested to support the effort. We responded with a list of questions which focused on: Why a volunteer centre? What is the history and context of volunteering in Thailand? Would the key stakeholders currently involved with volunteerism in Thailand agree on the need for a volunteer centre? What would be its purpose? Are there other infrastructure issues which also need to be addressed to promote the success of this or any volunteering initiative in Thailand?

The answers to these questions were not available. So UNV facilitated a survey on volunteering in Thailand, which included stakeholder meetings and a report with recommendations.

At the end of May, a press release announced that Thai government officials will be given 5 days of annual leave each year to do volunteer service. The release also mentioned that “giving and volunteering” is now a national public priority, that there will be a national volunteering project managed by the new National Volunteer Centre, and that supportive legislation is being planned.

The research here was limited, but even so, it had a significant impact on the content of the policies announced by the government of Thailand, which included a National Volunteer Centre and much more.

My second case example is regional, and focuses on advocacy. Last year, UNV developed a discussion paper on “Youth Volunteering for Development in Africa.” It included a situational analysis, 10 case examples from African countries, policy recommendations and further references” and it was written by Helene Perold. UNV presented it at the 5<sup>th</sup> African Development Forum, sponsored by the Economic Commission of Africa in Addis Ababa, last November. The resulting consensus statement called for the African Union, ECA, ADB, relevant UN agencies, and African governments to commit to establishing an African Youth Corps, as well as strengthening national volunteer structures. The President of the African Union Commission personally expressed interest in implementing these recommendations. UNV is currently in discussion about moving this initiative forward.

“Hot off the press” is that news that the G8 committed to support initiatives in Africa such as “to assist the AU in setting up an African Volunteer Service, which will recruit experts for participation in post-conflict and reconstruction operations in accordance with the needs identified by the AU.”

Given the urgent issues government partners are addressing—poverty, HIV/AIDS, environmental sustainability—they cannot wait for lengthy volunteerism research studies to be commissioned and completed. Yet there is a critical need for policy-makers to have reliable data to shape and motivate decision-making.

What UNV would like to see is regular dialogues and stocktaking on the needs of research in relationship to current development issues. UNV stands ready to promote and facilitate such dialogues among different stakeholders—government, academia, civil society, the volunteers themselves, and, of course, the UN agencies. UNICEF, UNESCO, and WHO, all engage citizen volunteers.

As a UN programme, UNV can provide a convening role to bring diverse players together in a neutral forum. The Nonprofit and Volunteer Data Project with John Hopkins University is such an example. In 2002, the UN Statistical Commission accepted the UN Handbook on Nonprofit Institutions in the System

of National Accounts and called upon national statistical agencies to produce regular data on nonprofit institutions and the value of volunteering. UNV and JHU are engaged in a joint project in 9 target developing countries to secure country commitments to implement the volunteer component of the Handbook and to equip them to do so. In addition, ILO has agreed to work with JHU and UNV to develop a recommended procedure for measuring volunteer work through official labor force surveys in countries throughout the world.

UNV also has a role in facilitating the dissemination of experiences from other parts of the world, in order to support efforts to translate research into policies nationally, regionally and globally.

In the very near future, at the request of the member states, work will begin on a report to the UN General Assembly on the status of volunteerism since the IYV, and include proposals on how IYV + 10 might be marked. We are looking forward to all the stakeholders contributing. It is a tremendous opportunity to take stock as well as look to the future. Here is an opportunity for the research community and its partners to propose a global agenda for knowledge building to inform volunteerism for development policies.

There will undoubtedly be more UN General Assembly resolutions in relation to IYV + 10. The last resolution was co-sponsored by 84 member states. As I already have mentioned, more and more countries, thanks to advocacy and research efforts at the national level, are being persuaded of the value of volunteerism for development. Processes at regional and global forums to formulate and pass intergovernmental legislation are also building awareness, educating, and convincing policy makers.

And once intergovernmental legislation, such as a General Assembly resolution, is passed, that is not the end. Last year at a European Volunteer Centre meeting, a Director of a Volunteer Centre in eastern Europe expressed frustration with regard to efforts to promote national volunteering legislation. He felt the problem was the lack of commitment by his government to volunteerism. My colleague from UNV reminded him that his government as a UN member had

already made a formal commitment to volunteerism with the passage of the General Assembly resolution. He has since changed his strategy. He is now enabling his government to fulfill its General Assembly commitment to volunteerism for development.

In the same way, let us work together to ensure the fulfillment of commitments made by the international community for the building of knowledge on volunteerism and facilitating a common agenda for research, especially in developing countries, relevant to policy-making and enhancing the contribution of volunteerism to peace and development.

THANK YOU. MERCI.