

Position paper submitted by volunteer groups on the theme of “ensuring that no one is left behind”¹

Sustainable development cannot be achieved without full engagement of individuals and communities. This important lesson learnt from the Millennium Development Goals is now reflected in the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, which is universal, transformational, holistic and people-centred, and will leave no one behind.

Acknowledging that more traditional means of implementation need to be complemented by participatory mechanisms that will facilitate people’s engagement, the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda explicitly name Volunteer Groups as key actors in their own right among the means of implementation.²

We need people to be part of identifying the problems, and to be part of building the solutions. We should focus efforts on addressing the structural causes of poverty, inequality and exclusion, rather than just providing short-term humanitarian assistance to those affected.

Existing data or understandings cannot be relied on alone to identify who is most likely to be excluded or left behind. Within all groups, sectors, institutions and parts of society there are those who are more likely to be discriminated against or excluded, but these often remain ‘unseen’. Deep contextual, social, political, gender and economic exclusion analysis is needed to identify the who, how and why of exclusion in different sectors, institutions and localities. Without this level of analysis, interventions will not address the structural or root causes of exclusion or tackle hidden assumptions and stereotypical beliefs. Real change will not be possible.

Leaving no one behind ultimately will require sustained political will, courage and targeted financial investment. It is more expensive to work with the hardest-to-reach groups of people. However, money is not the only resource needed to reach the hardest-to-reach – human resources are also vital. Here,

¹ List of contributors: this paper was drafted by staff from the following listed organizations and bodies, working under the umbrella of the [Volunteer Groups Alliance](#) (formerly known as the Post-2015 Volunteering Working Group) and representing that group’s position: International Association for Volunteer Effort ([IAVE](#)); International Forum for Volunteering in Development ([Forum](#)); [France Volontaires](#); [Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies](#); Voluntary Service Overseas ([VSO](#)); Volunteer Service Abroad ([VSA](#)) and World University Service of Canada ([WUSC](#)).

² Para 45 of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development: “We acknowledge also the essential role of national parliaments through their enactment of legislation and adoption of budgets and their role in ensuring accountability for the effective implementation of our commitments. Governments and public institutions will also work closely on implementation with regional and local authorities, sub-regional institutions, international institutions, academia, philanthropic organisations, volunteer groups and others.”

Para 10 of the AAAA: “Multi-stakeholder partnerships and the resources, knowledge and ingenuity of the private sector, civil society, [...] volunteers and other stakeholders will be important to mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, complement the efforts of Governments, and support the achievement of the sustainable development goals, in particular in developing countries.”

volunteers and grassroots community organisations can help provide a much needed link to those who are often furthest from the sight of governments and official development actors.

Implementation

Volunteers will complement the delivery of a range of public services across sectors and will play an important role in extending the reach of these services to the poorest and most marginalised, by strengthening the capacity of the existing mechanism and extending it beyond the capability of the formal systems. They are key actors who have the capacity to engage people at the local level in planning, monitoring and implementing the new framework in a universal and holistic manner. Volunteering helps move people from being passive recipients to being actively engaged in the development processes that affect their lives, and the lives of their families and communities.

However, volunteer groups are more than implementers. Volunteering for development is both a means and an end to the creation of healthy, vibrant societies and the achievement of the SDGs. Research has shown that countries with high levels of volunteerism are more economically and socially vibrant, and better placed to meet global challenges.³

International volunteer organisations have found that volunteering can serve as a key source of reconciliation and reconstruction in divided societies, particularly where it cuts across ethnic, religious, age, income and gender lines. Building and restoring trust should be key policy initiatives in post-conflict situations, where volunteering between communities can encourage solidarity and co-operation.⁴ It acts as an effective catalyst for sustainable, people-centered development, contributing to the elimination of inequality between and within countries, and between men and women.

In the Secretary General's synthesis report 'The road to dignity by 2030: ending poverty, transforming all lives and protecting the planet', he states that "as we seek to build capacities and to help the new Agenda to take root, volunteerism can be another powerful and cross-cutting means of implementation. Volunteerism can help to expand and mobilize constituencies, and to engage people in national planning and implementation for the Sustainable Development Goals. And volunteer groups can help to localize the new Agenda by providing new spaces of interaction between governments and people for concrete and scalable actions."

Volunteers have and will continue to bring voices of people into relevant debates to identify problems and define solutions. The My World Survey brought in 7 million voices of people from the most remote parts of the world. Volunteers took care to translate the survey into different tribal languages and took it to rural communities to make sure that even the remotest and often most marginalized communities had a voice in the global discussion. That same way of giving people voices can now be extremely important in the process of localizing the SDGs. Volunteers ensure that things get done even in situations that are extremely complicated, complex or where people are very difficult to reach.

³ State of the World's Volunteerism Report (UNV, 2011)

⁴ *Roundtable on Volunteerism and Social Development. 2000. The Hague, Netherlands, 2000. Below the Waterline of Public Visibility. UN Volunteers.*

Measurement

Within the context of the post-2015 development debate, a broad recognition was underlined among member states, civil society, the private sector, and the UN system—first, that the availability of relevant, disaggregated data is crucial to achieving of the SDGs, and second, that such quality data does not currently exist on the scale needed. Data is crucial to evidence-based decision-making, accountability, monitoring and evaluation.

It is not just the selection of indicators that is important but also who collects the data, where the data comes from, the scale at which the data is collected (such as at the individual or household level) and how the data is interpreted and disseminated.

Volunteers can support the ‘data revolution’ required by the new Agenda and help measure progress on SDG implementation through collecting data, providing expertise and supporting participatory forms of planning and monitoring, and helping to disseminate results. In this regard, volunteerism is a form of civic engagement that can strengthen the accountability between governments and citizens in the next decades.

Volunteers possess a wide range of skills and expertise and have a proven track record in terms of measuring success of different aspects of the Millennium Development Goals. Trained volunteers have been able to collect and communicate disaggregated data as they are able to reach the most marginalized when collecting data, for example, during household surveys.

It is important that the SDGs propel actions focused on marginalised groups and those that are affected by poverty and inequalities. At the national level governments should commit to disaggregate data for those groups identified globally **and** any further groups that are at risk of poverty, exclusion and inequality within that particular national context. It is obvious that data about groups facing multiple disadvantages are often missing. Too often women, minority ethnic groups, disabled people and other groups are systematically excluded from data collection, in part because they are not involved in shaping data collection systems. Participatory approaches to data collection, however, can actually serve to amplify voices of the marginalized and provide them with the impetus to take action.

It is important that civil society and stakeholders, such as volunteer groups, are recognized as legitimate sources of expertise and information for SDG measures of progress, and thus as valuable actors in the follow-up and review process.

The data revolution is crucial to the success of sustainable development for innovative monitoring of the SDGs. Statistical capacities in many developing countries are inadequate to carry the weight of what a data revolution might require. In this regard, innovative partnerships with actors such as volunteers and volunteer groups will be essential to harness desired data results.

Data produced by civil society is complementary to data produced by States and International Organizations, especially when it comes to the role played by civil society itself working with communities and ensuring that no one is left behind.

Recommendations

The HLPF intends to build on the strengths and experiences of existing national, regional and international processes that promote inclusive participation in the follow-up and review of the Agenda. It should provide opportunities and access for everyone to participate in decision-making processes and in the conceptualization of policies and programmes that affect their lives.

For the most vulnerable and marginalized groups to meaningfully participate in the follow up and review of the SDGs, the HLPF should set up an accessible and transparent platform that is truly open to all stakeholders, which would allow them to continuously being engaged on the ongoing conversation and offer concrete ways to facilitate their engagement.

The HLPF should also strongly support the national and regional level reviews making sure that those groups have a seat at the table, which will allow them to bring attention to their experiences to their governments.

In addition, the HLPF should serve as a space where stakeholders can share experiences and best practices on how to engage the most vulnerable and marginalised in the implementation and reporting.

Finally, the HLPF should urge member states and stakeholder groups to include in their annual reviews, evidence on their actions undertaken to involve the most marginalised to make sure no one is left behind.

Exclusion is perpetuated by a lack of opportunities for participation. The SDGs will only achieve its leave-no-one-behind objective if they are implemented with the meaningful engagement of people, especially the most marginalised and vulnerable, as well as their organizations, through formal and informal processes. This takes time and requires government, donors and development actors to go to where the people are. Therefore engaging volunteers that are formed from the bottom up is crucial to leave no one behind.

It is also critical that the HLPF prioritises climate action. As noted in the Report of the Panel of eminent persons, the challenge of climate change could prevent us from meeting “all or any of our goals”. Implementing the commitments made in Paris is essential if we are to reduce the risk of increasingly large numbers of people being left behind. The poorest being most vulnerable to its impacts, climate change acts as an accelerator of existing inequalities. Volunteer Groups have a key role to play in adaptation and mitigation as well as increasing resilience in communities and countries most at risk of being left behind, and in ensuring inclusive development in the face of climate change.