

Volunteer Groups Thematic Paper for HLPF 2018

Volunteers and volunteer effort are essential to the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The aim of eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity will not be realised without the contributions of millions of properly supported and enabled volunteers, and volunteer-driven organizations in both developing countries and developed countries.

The unique contribution of volunteering to sustainable development

Volunteers help to extend the reach of a range of SDG-related services, facilitating access to services in health, education and many other areas to some of the poorest, most marginalised or most vulnerable communities, ensuring that no one is left behind. Beyond improved delivery of and access to services, volunteers build strong, reciprocal personal and working relationships by being embedded within communities, and in many cases coming from the communities in which they serve. Volunteers and the people they work alongside have a mutual understanding of each other's experience, skills and networks and can generate solutions that are locally owned and sustained. This enables volunteers to contribute to long-term, culturally and contextually appropriate, respectful, effective and sustainable capacity development.

Volunteers foster an exchange of skills and knowledge, particularly concerning appropriate development, good governance and civil society, but also on more personal and philosophical levels between volunteers and their host organisations and communities. This leads to the integration of the rich cross-cultural experiences and understandings gained by volunteers into the culture and life of communities, thus contributing to positive global transformation.

This approach also can create a bridge between 'hard' development outcomes, such as increased numbers of children in secondary schools, and the softer development outcomes such as greater participation and influence of individuals and stakeholders groupings in decision-making processes. It is these softer outcomes that can make development more sustainable. As a civic engagement mechanism, it harnesses the ingenuity of people in addressing the challenges of sustainable development and is a key driver for positive change, building on the foundation of solidarity, cooperation and mutual accountability.

Volunteering is empowering for poor and marginalised people

Volunteers build relationships based on trust with members of their communities and in turn help those communities establish ways of participating in and guiding their own development.

For poor and marginalised people, including minority indigenous peoples, refugees, those with disabilities, and others who are all too often on the edges of society, the opportunity to volunteer is a chance to move from being a passive recipient to being actively engaged in development processes. The act of volunteering is often the first route through which individuals begin to actively engage in their community and become empowered to realize their rights. Volunteers build relationships based on trust

with members of their communities and in turn help those communities establish ways of participating in and guiding their own development.

Member States and the HLPF have a key role in creating an enabling environment to ensure that we make the most of volunteer effort.

Volunteerism is a universal phenomenon, but it does not occur at uniform rates, nor is it uniformly effective. It is strongest when it is recognised and supported.

National and local Government, the UN system, the private sector, volunteer groups and volunteers themselves have a role to play in creating and sustaining an enabling environment for volunteerism. When this succeeds, we unlock the power of volunteerism and enable volunteers to make the greatest possible contribution to poverty eradication and the promotion of prosperity.

The social, legal and political context in which volunteers operate matters greatly for what they can or cannot contribute to efforts to eradicate poverty. The political bargain between states and citizens, the constitution and legal framework, the social fabric in different countries, the interaction between local, national and global governance, the diversity of governance actors working at various levels – are all elements that affect who can and cannot enter spaces, whose voices are heard, and who influences decision-making.

Some governments recognise the value of systematic legislation, policies, structures, and programmes for volunteer engagement, and have structures to enable more people to volunteer. Where governments have created a conducive environment for civic engagement and more particularly for volunteers to participate – or where they have been responsive to volunteer-led community initiatives – volunteers are more effective in SDG implementation.

The benefits of community-led monitoring

National statistical offices alone will not be responsible for SDG monitoring. There is a role for citizens to voluntarily support, engage, and monitor SDG implementation at community, local, and national level, and to ensure that governments hear a greater range of voices and are held to account for reaching the most marginalized groups as they implement the SDGs.

Citizen-led monitoring offers opportunities to not only collect data at a level that is closer to poor and marginalised people, but when combined with participatory processes it has the potential to empower people in realising their rights as citizens. The data revolution can change power dynamics between citizens, governments and the private sector, and will be most successful if marginalised people are driving the agenda for their own progress.

Volunteering and the focus goals for HLPF 2018:

Volunteers will be essential to the achievement of the goals to be reviewed in depth at this year's HLPF. Here are just some of the many examples of how volunteers are currently contributing to select Sustainable Development Goals.

Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

Volunteers are crucial in ensuring safe water and sanitation for all. They are active in ensuring water sources are clean by testing samples and clearing waterways of refuse around the world. For example, in the past three years, 9,000 volunteers have been actively monitoring water sources throughout Canada. And nearly 60,000 people participated in shoreline cleanups removing 88,018 kg of debris.¹ Additionally, in India as part of their Hand Wash Awareness drive, United Way volunteers highlighted the importance of handwashing with soap and water to more than 100,000 students in government schools.

Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

Volunteers fight for access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all. Volunteers are also involved in taking action to bring energy to everyone. They are installing and maintaining solar panels, repairing infrastructure post disaster, contributing to Bottom of the Pyramid (BoP) renewable energy improvement projects, and are even developing hydro-electric power schemes to bring renewable energy to whole communities.²³⁴⁵

Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

Volunteers and volunteer activity forms the bedrock of inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities and settlements. Volunteers fuel the entire NGO sector working to make communities livable for all. Indeed, many NGOs are solely volunteer driven in addition to being run by volunteer board members. Millions are involved with environmental volunteering, farming, building new and inclusive technology, actively educating each other, advocating and lobbying local and national governments and more. Furthermore, millions of volunteers are first responders during natural and other disasters, working to safeguard neighbors and prosper. For example, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies volunteers reached 110 million people last year, helping communities recover from disasters and making communities safe again.⁶

Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

¹ http://www.wwf.ca/conservation/freshwater/loblaw_water_fund/; <http://shorelinecleanup.ca/impact/facts>

² <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/environment/dubai-youth-volunteers-clean-hatta-s-solar-panels-1.694822>

³ <http://www.wral.com/-we-want-to-get-out-there-duke-energy-employees-volunteer-to-restore-power-in-puerto-rico/17257547/>

⁴ <https://www.unv.org/news/partnership-yamaha-motor-first-partnership-private-sector-japan>

⁵ <https://volunteer2030.org/2015/06/26/cooperating-with-cooperatives-in-vanuatu/>

⁶ <http://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/document/global-management-and-presence/>

In addition to giving time to important causes, volunteers are consumers, workers, and concerned contributors. Volunteers are crucial in efforts to lobby companies to improve production practices, and are at the fore of educating consumers about how the goods they purchase are sourced and produced to ensure our scarce resources are not squandered. Corporate volunteers are active in promoting reusable and recyclable products in the workplace and in production practices and research volunteers are enhancing the way local communities farm through data.⁷

Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

Volunteers are crucial to ensuring our natural environment is well cared for. India set a world record again in 2017 by planting 66 million trees *on one day*, an incredible feat only made possible through the work of 1.5 million volunteers.⁸

And in Lebanon, a unique collaboration between the United Nations, local government, the private sector and volunteers resulted in 2,000 volunteers planting 5,000 cedar trees, part of a plan to where volunteers will be instrumental in planting 40 million trees by 2030.⁹

Recommendations

Volunteer groups make the following recommendations to the HLPF for 2018, and in future years:

1. Formally recognise the contribution of volunteering to the implementation of the SDGs in the Member States' voluntary national reviews at the HLPF
2. Ensure that Volunteer Groups are fully recognized and supported in the national plans and strategies for implementing the 2030 Agenda
3. Note the commitment of volunteer groups to sharing in the accountability for the successful delivery of the SDGs
4. Follow the lead of Member States by affirming their full support for the implementation of A/RES/67/290, which supports the participation of non-governmental actors
5. Ensure the data for monitoring the SDGs is captured through participatory processes and includes the perspectives of the most marginalised voices, as well as the volunteers that work closest to them

⁷ <https://volunteer2030.org/2017/10/27/a-biologist-working-with-cardamom-producers-in-guatemala/>

⁸ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/02/india-plants-trees-breaks-world-record/>

⁹ <http://www.lri-lb.org/en/news.php?page=2&t=17&i=270#news&panel1-1>

6. Ensure the accountability, transparency and review framework for the SDGs involves community consultation at all levels, including representation of the most marginalised voices, as well as the volunteers that work closest to them