

## James O'Brien Volunteer Groups Speech for MGOS Thematic Roundtable 11 July 2017

Chair, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen. I am honoured to speak today on behalf of volunteer groups. I am a Focal Point for Volunteer Groups, and a volunteer - last year I volunteered with VSO in Rwanda, working with UNICEF and a team of Rwandan and international volunteers to help improve the quality of pre-primary education.

As volunteer groups, our ultimate aim is to increase the impact and effectiveness of volunteer efforts, and to make sure that over the next thirteen years, these efforts make the greatest possible contribution to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

I want to speak today about how volunteers are promoting and implementing the SDGs, how VNR countries (and indeed all countries) can better support this work, and how it can be recognised in VNRs.

Today more than one billion people around the world freely volunteer their time to contribute to efforts that support the implementation of the SDGs. Volunteers make up 44% of the global nonprofit workforce. *Put somewhat differently, if these volunteers lived in a single country, it would be the third most populous in the world.*

There are many types of volunteer, including formal and informal volunteering, and people volunteering in their own communities, countries and across borders.

### ***What is it about volunteering that is unique or particularly impactful?***

First, volunteers help to extend the reach of a range of SDG-related services to the poorest and marginalised people, helping to ensure that no-one is left behind. For example, community health volunteers in many countries facilitate access to health care and support health education.

*Because they tend to be embedded within communities and living and working in similar situations to the people they serve, volunteers build strong and reciprocal personal and working relationships. This approach can create a bridge between 'hard' development outcomes, like getting more children into education, and softer development outcomes like engaging a wider range of people in decision-making processes.*

Through volunteering, people participate in their own growth, build their resilience, enhance their knowledge and gain a sense of responsibility for their own community. Volunteerism strengthens civic engagement, safeguards social inclusion, deepens solidarity and solidifies ownership of development results.

What have a billion volunteers been doing over the last year, and how are they contributing to SDG implementation? I understand that I do not have time today to talk about all of those billion volunteers, so I will offer a quick, illustrative example.

Sonke ('son-kay') Gender Justice is an organisation that works with thousands of community volunteers, and a small number of international volunteers, in 20 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. They work to strengthen the capacity of government, civil society and citizens to promote gender equality, prevent domestic and sexual violence, and reduce the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS.

Sonke ('son-kay') volunteers design and implement a broad range of approaches including partnering with government on policy development; advocacy, activism and community mobilisation; capacity building and training with partner organisations; community education; and research.

Since 2015, they have partnered with the Australian Volunteers for International Development program to recruit Australian volunteers to support aspects of their work. Local and international volunteers are working together to develop training for faith leaders to drive change in attitudes towards gender and gender-based violence. They have also developed a sport and experience-based learning program for 14 and 15 year-old boys to develop their skills to interact positively with girls and women, and a girls' empowerment program for the same age group.

*One of the volunteers working on this project Ruth, reported that 'Particularly working with these vulnerable and disadvantaged people, it is essential to forge strong relationships of trust, approach all cases with empathy and demonstrate willingness to partner and share resources and skills with others'*

This example shows the power of national and international volunteers cooperating, bringing together and sharing insider and outsider perspectives. It also demonstrates successful partnership between government and a volunteer-involving organisation.

Most importantly, it illustrates the main learning that volunteer groups want to share with you today, based on our experience of SDG implementation over the last two years. And that is this -

While volunteerism is a universal phenomenon, that happens in nearly every culture and community, it does not happen at uniform rates and it is not uniformly effective. It depends on an enabling environment, and that environment is to a large extent shaped by government.

*We want Member States to leave this afternoon's session thinking about a number of concrete things that they can do to create and sustain an enabling environment for volunteering, and to maximise the contribution that volunteers make to SDG implementation in their country.*

In recent years we have seen an increasing number of success stories of governments supporting volunteering

- **By enacting supportive legislation and policy**
- **Through government-supported volunteering schemes**
- **And by measuring and recognising the role of volunteers**

**To conclude, we propose a number of concrete policy recommendations for VNR countries. We call on governments first to consult with national-level volunteering platforms in conducting VNRs, and secondly to consider the following questions and reflect them in your national reviews -**

- 1. How are volunteers contributing to SDG implementation in your country, how do you measure and capture that contribution in your VNR?**
- 2. How are you supporting volunteering - through laws, policies, schemes, funding, recognition and other ways? Report on this too.**

**And finally -**

- 3. How can volunteers support your follow-up and review, for example through voluntary citizen-led monitoring?**

**As volunteer groups, we have developed research, best practice, and policy guidance that address these questions, and we look forward to continuing our work with Member States to ensure that we maximise the contribution that volunteers make to achieving the SDGs.**

**Thank you.**