

2020 HLPF and the ECOSOC High-level Segment General Debate Written Statement:

VOLUNTEER STAKEHOLDERS GROUP

Accelerating action and transformative pathways through volunteering will help realize the decade of action by volunteers' delivery on sustainable development goals. Supported by the Volunteer Groups Alliance, we are the stakeholder group representing volunteers at the United Nations. As a global coalition of organizations and networks working in over 150 countries, the Volunteer Groups Alliance members know that volunteers and support for their efforts are essential for peace and development.

Volunteers, and support for their efforts, are essential to the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Agenda). According to the *State of the World's Volunteerism Report 2018 (SWVR 2018)* produced by the United Nations Volunteers programme, an estimated one billion volunteers are freely giving their time to make a difference on the issues that affect them and their communities, often in the most difficult of circumstances. As recognised by the synthesis report of the Secretary-General on the post-2015 sustainable development agenda, the ambition of the Sustainable Development Goals will not be realised without the 'contributions of millions of properly supported and enabled volunteers' and volunteer driven organisations in both developing and developed countries. The transformative power of volunteering particularly has the potential to contribute to the Decade of Action if properly championed.

Since 2015, however, we have seen a shift, whereby recognition of volunteering has extended well beyond our volunteering community. Indeed, the synthesis report of the Secretary-General on the post-2015 sustainable development agenda confirms that the ambitions of the Sustainable Development Goals will not be realized without the contributions of correctly supported volunteers and volunteer-driven organizations in both developing and developed countries [United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) (2015a). A/69/700. Synthesis report of the Secretary-General. *The road to dignity by 2030: ending poverty, transforming all lives and protecting the planet*. New York: UNGA]. Right from its design, the 2030 Agenda has been "of the people, by the people and for the people" [United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) (2015b). A/RES/70/1. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. New York: UNGA]. Volunteering allows Member States to ensure that this people-centred approach continues in implementation.

But the journey to reimagine volunteering as a critical resource for the Sustainable Development Goals is not complete. As Member States and international institutions prepare for the Decade of Action, the Volunteer Groups Alliance is imagining a world in which the phenomenal resources, social capital and insights of volunteers mean they are truly in the driving seat of development. We know that these goals can be achieved in the following three ways:

Firstly, reimagining through knowledge, by integrating evidence on volunteering at all stages in the 2030 Agenda processes at the national level and together in the United Nations. Evidence is critical for the recognition of volunteer contributions on sustainable development. In 2019, countries around the world as diverse as Cambodia, Chile, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Iceland, Mongolia, Pakistan, and Sierra Leone all recognized volunteering in their Voluntary National Reviews. Member States should cooperate with volunteer-involving and civil society organizations to include information on the scale, contribution, and impact of volunteering, including informal volunteering.

Secondly, reimagining through dialogue, by creating new spaces to hear the voices of people taking action for the Sustainable Development Goals. Millions of volunteers from all walks of life are playing a critical role not only in delivering the Sustainable Development Goals but also in supporting their accountability. Governments should engage volunteers in monitoring sustainable development at all levels as part of a wider commitment to civic engagement, accepting citizen-generated data and other evidence to complement official processes. Member States should also consult communities on sustainable development policies at all levels, take advantage of new forms of technology, and work with volunteers to listen to and amplify the voices of those who are frequently excluded or left behind.

Thirdly, reimagining how we work together to partner with the world's one billion volunteers, boosting the role of Member States as "connectors" and enabling partnerships to ensure robust cross-sector volunteering practice. Strengthening partnerships across sectors is essential to advance the state of volunteering globally. It is imperative to bring together governments, civil society, the private sector, academia, and the international community in a collective conversation featuring multiple perspectives.

Perceptions of volunteering have shifted considerably since the Millennium Development Goals. Power dynamics have moved away from old paradigms of North–South volunteering towards a greater focus not only on the importance of volunteering as a powerful tool in the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals but also on the infrastructure required to successfully engage volunteers. Member States are increasingly recognizing the power of volunteers, but more can still be done. With better evidence, participatory consultation and stronger partnerships, Member States can help reimagine their engagement and support volunteers to drive forward the Decade of Action and reach those furthest behind.

Although volunteering is a universal phenomenon, we know it does not occur at uniform rates, nor is it uniformly effective. It is strongest when it is recognised and supported. National and local governments, the United Nations system, the private sector, civil society, volunteer groups, and volunteers themselves have a role to play in creating and sustaining an enabling environment for volunteering. When this succeeds, we unlock the power of volunteering and enable volunteers to make the greatest possible contribution to eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity.

Volunteering is often the first step towards active citizenship and can help strengthen people's ownership of their community's development. We commend those governments that recognise the value of systematic legislation, policies, structures, and programs for volunteer engagement and that 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. Volunteers, too, are important for holding Member States accountable for their commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals.

The social, legal, and political context in which volunteers operate matters greatly for what they can or cannot contribute to eradicating 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; and 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. We recommend the following four recommendations to the 2020 High-level Political Forum, and beyond:

First, formally recognise the contribution of volunteering to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Member States' Voluntary National Reviews at the 2020 High-level Political Forum. Volunteers are instrumental in building a strong civil society that is active in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. As such, their work should be recognised as a valuable contribution to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Taking Mongolia as an example, volunteers play an important role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. In 2018, more than 27,000 volunteers contributed nearly 4 million hours, which can be valued as ₮5.5 billion of benefits to the economy, and cooperation with volunteers could be directed towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (Civil society network, 2019.5.10.). In Madagascar, the National Institute for Statistics found that volunteers contributed over 360 million hours in one year. We encourage all Member States to include the contribution of volunteers in their Voluntary National Reviews.

Second, ensure that volunteer groups are fully recognised and supported in national plans and strategies for implementing the 2030 Agenda. We encourage every country to build volunteering into their plans and strategies. When volunteers are included in countries' strategies for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, volunteers are more likely to be supported and engaged effectively. Several Member States have already passed legislation which supports and promotes volunteering.

Currently, some 90 countries throughout the world now have policies or legislation on volunteering. For example, Chad passed a law establishing a national volunteers corps in 2019, and a draft law on volunteering in Kazakhstan will be developed by the end of 2020. Cameroon has adopted a National Volunteer Strategy. Volunteer-involving organisations stand ready to work with member states to support the development of frameworks and laws which promote responsible and impactful volunteering.

Third, 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. Volunteer groups are one of the key stakeholder groups with rights and privileges to participate in the High-level Political Forum. We encourage all governments to continue to engage all stakeholders as contributors to and beneficiaries of policies that will allow us all to work towards the 2030 Agenda.

At the 2020 High-level Political Forum, a General Technical Meeting will be co-chaired by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the United Nations Volunteers programme on July 13-16 to discuss "Reimagining Volunteering for the 2030 Agenda." This meeting will be informed by a Global Synthesis Report that will analyze evidence gathered by the Plan of Action Secretariat in 2018 and 2019 (see [information about the Plan of Action](#)).

Additionally, in 2018, resolution A/RES/73/140 -- which was co-facilitated through the Third Committee of the General Assembly by the Permanent Missions of Brazil, Chile, Japan, and Russia, and co-sponsored by 124 Member States -- commends volunteers and calls on Member States to increasingly cooperate with volunteer-involving and civil society organisations. It also calls on Member States to include information on the scale, contribution, and impact of volunteering in future Voluntary National Reviews, and to engage volunteers for the monitoring of progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals at the national and subnational levels and as part of wider citizen engagement.

Fourth, ensure that the accountability, transparency, and review framework for the Sustainable Development Goals involves community consultation at all levels, including representation of the most marginalised voices, as well as the volunteers who work most closely with them. Volunteers and groups organising volunteers are working daily to meet the Sustainable Development Goals in their local communities. As such, they must be afforded an opportunity to be included in the drafting and tracking of policies that affect them, and they can offer valuable insights to duty bearers about the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Some Member States have been open to actively including the voices of the most marginalised in their Sustainable Development Goals review processes and accepting citizen generated data as part of their official processes.

We encourage and urge all Member States to consult with volunteer groups and include volunteer voices and civil society groups as part of the mechanism to review the Sustainable Development Goals at national and local levels. Embedded in communities, volunteers can often get to places that others cannot, forging links with local communities and forming a bridge between formal and informal provision of public services. Volunteers are at the forefront of responding to disasters, and they not only extend support to the most vulnerable but also empower marginalised people to take an active role in addressing the challenges they face.