

IYV 2001: Volunteers' support to the Millennium Development Goals

A little over two months prior to the opening of the International Year of Volunteers 2001 at the United Nations on 28 November 2000, all 189 Member States at the Millennium Summit adopted the Millennium Declaration. The Declaration encourages a favourable environment within which citizens can play their full role in contributing to the various goals, known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set out in the Declaration.

The International Year of Volunteers (IYV) 2001 provided an opportunity to recognise the role that volunteers play in economic and social development. It further highlighted the importance of harnessing this untapped resource in the campaign to achieve the MDGs by 2015. As stated by the UN Secretary General at the opening ceremony of the IYV 2001: "At the heart of volunteerism are the ideals of service and solidarity and the belief that together we can make the world better. In that sense, we can say that volunteerism is the ultimate expression of what the United Nations is all about"¹.

We should be mindful that many of the key concepts and objectives underpinning the MDGs originated in the innovative grassroots programmes of civil society organization and were given voice and visibility through their advocacy campaigns of the past 40 years. Moreover, this growing civil society is energized by volunteers and supported through the voluntary action of individuals. While there are definitional differences amongst civil society organizations - the "Third Sector", the voluntary sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and so forth - the majority of organizations placed in these overlapping categories include some elements of voluntary engagement².

Background on IYV 2001:

- In the preparation for and implementation of the IYV 2001, the four objectives of which were the recognition, facilitation, networking and promotion of volunteering, the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme observed a key principle: the Year was geared towards world-wide national and local observance, with governments and the public in all countries determining their own priorities and goals within the overall agreed framework.
- The formation of IYV Committees was perhaps the best articulation of networking among the various stakeholders. Membership was often very broad, including international and national volunteer involving organisations, government, academia, private sector, members of parliament, faith groups, mass media, international organisations, and foundations. In addition to the 123 National IYV Committees, decentralisation of IYV activities was achieved in many countries through the establishment of over 500 local, regional and state committees. There were IYV Committees in large metropolises, including Buenos Aires, Hong Kong, New York, Prague and Rio de Janeiro, to name a few. IYV committees were also formed in smaller towns and regions, such as all of Algeria's 48 district (*wilaya*) committees, Argentina's provincial committees and the almost three hundred local committees set up in the Netherlands.
- IYV Committees conducted public awareness campaigns on the role and the value of volunteer action; they also engaged thousands of volunteers in concrete actions for social development. The

¹ http://www.iyv2001.org/iyv_eng/calendar/00_11_28opening/opening.htm

² For more on "Volunteering and social development", please see: http://www.iyv2001.org/iyv_eng/policy/unitednations/supporting_docs/soc_dev/soc_rec.htm

UN Secretary General will report to the 57th session of the General Assembly on the many activities undertaken by volunteers throughout the Year.

The following are but a few of the examples of voluntary activities, carried out by IYV 2001 networks, often led by volunteer-involving civil society organisations.

1. Prevention of armed conflicts

Civic participation and advocacy are forms of volunteering found in all countries, but most developed in countries with a strong tradition of civic engagement. They refer to the role played by individuals in the governance process, from representation on government consultative bodies to user-involvement in local development projects.

- **Political transition in East Timor**

In 2001, volunteers play a critical role in rebuilding and restoring trust in societies emerging from crisis. In East Timor, international UN Volunteers and local volunteers worked side by side conducting civic education campaigns, registering voters, and supervising elections³.

- **Peace building in the Mano River Union – Guinea-Conakry, Liberia, Sierra Leone**

Active Women's associations, participating in the National IYV Committee from Guinea-Conakry, led a regional campaign caravan through the three countries at the end of July 2001. Their efforts were rewarded when the three countries agreed to resume peace and reconciliation talks.

Also, members of Guinea's National IYV Committee and over 170 doctors provided medical care, food, clothes and cash donations to 6,000 victims of fires that spread from a military arms depot in the capital, Conakry. This type of co-ordinated volunteer action is set to continue.

2. Extreme poverty alleviation

In many parts of the developing world mutual aid and self-help constitute the main system of social and economic support. From small informal kinship and clan groupings to more formal rotating credit associations and welfare groups, volunteering plays a primary role in the welfare of communities.

- **Partnership for access to water in Ecuador and Peru**

UN Volunteers in Ecuador's Lake San Pablo Basin - an area afflicted by poverty and environmental degradation - worked with local people to find ways to improve their standard of living. By diversifying crops and rediscovering plants that were traditionally used for medical purposes, communities now have better opportunities to increase their income. More than 8,000 people have directly benefited from the work, most notably indigenous women. In efforts to conserve precious natural resources in Peru's arid coastal areas as well as in the Andes, UN Volunteers advised local authorities and community volunteers in Ayacucho and Tumbes on ways to manage water without wasting it. Following UNV training sessions, volunteer brigades were able to work within poor urban settlements to explain how to use water wisely and how to pay for it.

- **Relief in El Salvador**

Two strong earthquakes shook El Salvador in January and February 2001, leaving widespread damage throughout the country. This prompted a call to action for the country's National IYV Committee. As a result, eight "Solidarity Brigades" (Brigadas de Solidaridad) co-ordinated by the Mayor of San Salvador joined local institutions in distributing food, clothes and medicines to over 3,500 families.

³ For more: <http://www.unv.org/>

- **Volunteer support to the World Food Programme**

In the spirit of IYV 2001, a team of on-line volunteers recruited by the World Music Foundation (WMF) from the NetAid website has launched a new web called "World Aid Shopping". Up to 80% of the profit made from on-line purchases will be distributed to the United Nations World Food Programme and the WMF International Children's Fund⁴.

3. Sustainable Human Development⁵

"The sustainable human development approach starts with the recognition that people's knowledge, skills, experience, culture, energy and inventiveness are every country's most valuable resource, and that people and their traditions must be regarded as assets, not liabilities. This approach gives prime emphasis to the role of human beings in their social context. For this reason, a strong civic society, in which norms of reciprocity, co-operation and trust are respected, would be the best way to underpin sustainable human development"⁶.

IYV 2001 offered an important platform to promote voluntary action for social development. The following are only a few of the many examples of the sustainable human development approach, promoted during 2001.

- **Partnership for the polio immunisation programme in India**

One good practice of partnership was the successful polio immunisation programme of 550 million children in India in 2000/2001. Some 10 million volunteers, mostly local people, were involved in this Rotary International, WHO/UNICEF-led programme. The total value of their contribution is estimated by WHO to have exceeded US\$ 10 billion⁷.

- **National Commission for Human Development - Pakistan**

In Pakistan, the newly established National Commission for Human Development draws on volunteers at the grassroots to help meet development objectives in education, health, and poverty alleviation.

- **Global Environment Facility Small Grants Programme in the Caribbean subregion implemented by volunteers**

During 2001, UNV worked closely with NGOs in the Caribbean subregion on Global Environment Facility (GEF) Small Grants Programme activities. In St. Lucia, for example, a national UN Volunteer helped set up the Praslin Conservation and Development Foundation to co-ordinate community action for conservation and development at the grassroots level. Other UN Volunteers in the regional GEF programme served in Antigua and Barbuda, Grenada, Guyana, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago.

⁴ For more: <http://www.worldaidshopping.com>

⁵ "Sustainable Human Development is development that not only generates economic growth but distributes its benefits equitably; that regenerates the environment rather than destroying it; that empowers people rather than marginalising it. It gives priority to the poor, enlarging their choices and opportunities, and provides for their participation in decision affecting them. It is development that is pro-poor, pro-nature, pro-jobs, pro-women and pro-children", UNDP Administrator report: *Initiatives for change*, 1994

⁶ In: "Sustainable Human Development and Macroeconomics", Stefan de Vylder, 1995

⁷ For more, please see the UNV publication: "Volunteering and the UN System", 2001

- **Young volunteers in Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Lesotho, Moldova, Niger, Uganda, Vietnam and Zimbabwe**

During IYV 2001, environmental activities such as tree planting and city cleaning campaigns had a strong youth involvement in Ethiopia, Moldova, Niger, Uganda, Zimbabwe. In Lesotho and Vietnam, youth volunteers were mobilised for public healthcare services. In Algeria, over fifty thousand young people volunteered in areas such as agriculture, and sports.

Egypt's Institute for Cultural Affairs launched a "Child Volunteer" training initiative in primary schools in three districts. Each school chose an activity to pursue, such as assisting the handicapped, cleaning streets or helping at blood drives. Teachers and parents were advised on how to encourage their children to contribute to their communities as volunteers.

In India, the group of students volunteering for the cleaning of the Yamuna River, 'We for Yamuna' (an IYV campaign) renamed themselves "We for Quake" to offer assistance and relief for victims of the 26 January earthquake in Gujarat. "We for Quake" raised thousands of rupees through street performances to purchase supplies.

- **Blood donation in Senegal**

The Service Civique National (SCN) of Kédougou District in the Tambacounda region (Senegal) organised the 'Journées Départementales du Volontariat' in March 2001 in order to enhance social and human development at the regional level. More than 500 persons donated a total of 1500 hours of their time for blood collection and STD-AIDS tests in the cross-border area. Part of this initiative included the mentoring of school children.

- **The Red Cross national society training "caravan" in Niger**

Supported by UN Volunteers and local volunteers, Niger's Red Cross initiated a training "caravan" through which participants carried their new skills back to their home regions. At the end of the Year, 2001 nurses, 2001 midwives and 2001 health care trainers had taken part - a sustainable action for healthier children.

- **Online support of People With Disabilities-Uganda**

Home-based American, Laurie Moy, took her extensive experience in managing "on-line" volunteers - over 100 of them - in support of People With Disabilities-Uganda "on-site". As a UN Volunteer in Uganda, she personally delivered book donations from other on-line volunteers and set up a new library for children with disabilities. Her story demonstrates the enormous potential of tapping new resources for development by combining online and on-site volunteer skills from all points of the globe.

4. HIV/AIDS

Volunteers have raised public consciousness about the disease and also paved the way for the introduction of new welfare services in the field of HIV and AIDS.

IYV 2001 produced many excellent examples of partnerships involving persons living with HIV/AIDS as actors in and subjects of initiatives. The campaign against HIV/AIDS in Africa received a critical boost from a global citizen and individual volunteer, former President J.J. Rawlings from Ghana, in his capacity as Eminent Person for IYV 2001. Mr Rawlings focused on promoting volunteerism in the campaign. He visited Botswana, Ethiopia, Guinea, Kenya, Tanzania and Swaziland and addressed several international conferences on the subject. In his visit to Ethiopia alone, he spoke to half a million people.

- **Engaging persons living with HIV/AIDS as volunteers**

During the IYV 2001, HIV/AIDS was the subject of special campaigns in Zimbabwe and of a "Race for Life" in the Ukraine. The IFRC launched a global campaign to mobilise volunteers worldwide to lobby for

policy changes and to fight the stigma and discrimination around HIV/AIDS. IFRC Societies also stepped up efforts to recruit HIV positive volunteers to work in prevention and care programmes.

A UNV-supported People Living with HIV/AIDS programme, a joint initiative with UNAIDS that mobilises HIV positive people as UN Volunteers, was expanded to new countries such as Burundi, Cambodia and Suriname.

- **Mozambique Walks Against HIV/AIDS**

On 7 April 2001, the Mozambique National IYV Committee organised a "Walk for Health" in the streets of the capital Maputo to mark World Health Day. The National Dancing and Singing Company performed a play focusing on HIV/AIDS during the Day. The President of the National IYV Committee gave a speech on volunteer contributions in fighting the HIV/AIDS pandemic and also distributed condoms and informative brochures to the audience.

- **HOPE Ghana volunteers in the fight against HIV/AIDS**

HOPE volunteers took part in the global outreach programme, launched on 21 April 2001 in over 150 cities around the world, to educate local communities on the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Ghanaian volunteers from Hope-Ghana went to Kasoa - a low income community in the Central Region - to raise awareness on HIV/AIDS prevention. Over 12,700 people participated in the programme and spread the message. Most people in Kasoa had heard about the disease through the media but the campaign was actually their first opportunity to ask questions⁸.

Conclusions

The years leading up to IYV, and the International Year itself, saw a sensitisation to, and mobilisation around volunteerism amongst a large and diverse range of stakeholders at national, regional and international levels, including government agencies, non government organizations, community groups, private companies, academia and the media. There is now a better understanding of the concept of volunteerism and the connections amongst its diverse expressions - from traditional mutual aid and self-help to more modern forms of service volunteering and activism. Its cross cutting nature as well as its reciprocal relationships lie at the very roots of voluntary action. The issue of exclusion of certain population groups from access to opportunities to engage in volunteerism is an emerging issue likely to take on a greater dimension in the future. Increased supportive infrastructure is now in place, or is in the process of being developed, in many countries. Networks amongst interested organizations, established as a result of the Year, are likely to continue and grow.

One of the greatest achievements of the IYV has been to generate a collective recognition by governments of the role and contribution of voluntary action and of the need to adopt strategic approaches to enhancing the environment within which such action can flourish. Global trends towards greater self-help, decentralisation, participatory democracy and networking are all having an impact on citizen participation, and volunteerism is one of its defining characteristics. The challenge now is to consolidate successes obtained and build on the momentum created by the Year to move the volunteer agenda forward.

The International Year of Volunteers 2001 (IYV 2001) took place in the first year of the new millennium, coinciding with year one of working towards the goals set at the Millennium Summit which lie at the heart of the United Nations agenda for the coming years. United Nations General Assembly resolution A/RES/56/38⁹ adopted on 5 December 2001 highlights the risks of neglecting to factor volunteering into

⁸ For more information on this initiative, please contact HOPE Ghana at hopeghana@yahoo.com

⁹ http://www.iyv2001.org/iyv_eng/policy/unitednations/unlegislation/index.htm

the design and implementation of social and economic policies, and the effectiveness of these policies will determine the extent to which the goals agreed upon at the Millennium Summit are achieved¹⁰.

Team IYV, UN Volunteers
2 August 2002

UNV Mission Statement

Volunteering brings benefits to both society at large and the individual volunteer. It makes important contributions, economically as well as socially. It contributes to a more cohesive society by building trust and reciprocity among citizens. The United Nations Volunteers is the United Nations organization that supports sustainable human development globally through the promotion of volunteerism, including the mobilisation of volunteers. It serves the causes of peace and development through enhancing opportunities for participation by all peoples. It is universal, inclusive and embraces volunteer action in all its diversity. It values free will, commitment, engagement and solidarity, which are the foundations of volunteerism.

¹⁰ As an example, the National IYV Committee in **Tanzania** commissioned a study highlighting the economic benefits that volunteer action brings to society. Results revealed that 89 per cent of respondents were active as volunteers in the areas of personal and social assistance - providing food, transport and emotional comfort to those at risk and unable to care for themselves.