

Below the Waterline of Public Visibility

Roundtable on Volunteerism and
Social Development

The Hague, Netherlands, 29–30 November 2000



UN
Volunteers

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Whenever there is a funeral, we work together. . . . women draw water, collect firewood, and collect maize flour from well-wishers. . . . while the men dig the grave and bury the dead. . . . We work together on community projects like molding bricks for a school. . . . Women also work together when cleaning around the boreholes.

From a discussion group, Mbwadzulu, Malawi

Forward

The 55th session of the United Nations General Assembly on 4 December 2000 in resolution 55/57 requested the 39th session of the 2001 Commission for Social Development, to make appropriate suggestions and recommendations to the General Assembly to further the contribution of volunteering to social development. To prepare for this event, the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) organized a round table discussion on 2 and 3 November 2000 in The Hague. The discussions, which were hosted by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports of the Government of the Netherlands, brought together a small group of experts from around the world to consider ways that volunteerism and voluntary action are manifested in different cultures and the constraints encountered.

The round-table followed a sequence which began with an expert working group meeting organized and hosted by UNV in New York in November 1999 and an invitational seminar on volunteering and the role of the state organized by the Government of the Netherlands in Hilversum in May 2000. The intention of the round-table was to strengthen further the perspective of developing countries on the subject and to facilitate the drafting of the document which formed the basis of the discussion on volunteering and social development at the 39th session of the Commission for Social Development on 15 February 2001.

This meeting was made possible by a generous contribution from the Government of the Netherlands. The report draws on text prepared by Miguel Darcy D'Oliveira, President of the Instituto de Aço Cultural in Brazil with contributions by Robert Leigh and Richard Campanaro from UNV.

Introduction

Voluntary action, under its many names and guises, is in most cultures deeply embedded in long-established, ancient traditions of sharing. Be it understood as mutual aid and self-help, philanthropy and service, or civic participation and campaigning, voluntary action is an expression of people's willingness and capacity to freely help others and improve society. It brings significant benefits to individuals and communities and helps to nurture and sustain a richer social texture and a stronger sense of mutual trust and cohesion. Volunteering constitutes an enormous reservoir of skills, energy and local knowledge but it is unusual for volunteering to be recognized as a strategic resource which can be positively influenced by public policy. It is even rarer for it to be factored into national and international development strategies.

The International Year of Volunteers (2001) offers a unique moment to bring about significant progress in bridging the gap between acknowledgement of a long-standing tradition of voluntary action on the one hand, and a recognition of its potential as a major national asset for promoting social development on the other.

This report attempts to reflect a discussion the goal of which was to recapture the human and community dimension of voluntary action as well as its diversity, and to explore possible avenues for government support in the context of the unprecedented opportunities offered by the International Year.

Our sincere thanks go out to the highly committed individual experts who traveled to The Hague and participated in the round table, sharing their extensive knowledge of the subject matter from very different country and regional perspectives. By enriching our understanding of various cultural expressions of

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voluntary action, the group has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the enabling environment for volunteerism to flourish. We would like to recognize in particular Miguel Darcy D'Oliveira who prepared the background paper for this roundtable and the document that eventually formed the basis of the UN Secretary General's note to the 39th session of the Commission for Social Development.

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I. Why is volunteerism important to public policy?

1. Volunteering is a form of social behaviour deeply embedded in traditional social structures. As a result, its many manifestations are strongly influenced by the histories and cultures from which they emerge. Although listening to, being concerned with and responding to the needs of others are evidence of our highest human motivations, volunteering is not simply something we do for others. Solidarity and enlightened self-interest coexist in people's minds when they give time. Voluntary action is predicated on reciprocity, a belief that one's voluntary efforts will be recognised by the community. Giving time is an act founded on trust, strengthening the fabric of our societies and defining the communities in which we live.

2. The will to volunteer is one expression of the social relationships by which people pursue their livelihoods and solve development problems. Rooted in trust, voluntary action is an expression of social capital, the networks of social interaction and norms of reciprocity that allow the volunteer to assume some level of reciprocity within the community. Volunteering also generates new networks and norms, extending society's existing capital reservoirs by building new relationships and widening its webs of social interaction. From one-on-one support at a personal level to community service, from mutual support in self-help groups to participation in broad-based movements and campaigns, voluntary action is as varied as the creativity of the volunteers, the nature of its cultural setting and the breadth of the problems it tackles. The common thread in this diversity is the fact that in a world characterised by uncertainty, volunteering provides a strong platform for

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reconnecting people who have become divided by gulfs of wealth, religion, class, ethnicity, age and gender. In an age of instantaneous communication and global awareness, society's reliance on the healing power of inspiring, committed action for the public good is undiminished.

3. Nothing here is new. Caring and sharing are essential characteristics of human behaviour, indicative of communities' attempts to look after their weakest and most vulnerable members. As a non-market response to situations in which markets function poorly or have a negative impact, the webs of social connectedness generated by volunteerism constitute the most basic safety net protecting the powerless from despair, destitution, abuse and fear. Volunteering is an expression of the individual's involvement in their community. Participation, trust, solidarity and reciprocity, grounded in a shared understanding and a sense of common obligations, are mutually reinforcing values at the heart of governance and good citizenship. Volunteering is not a nostalgic relic of the past. It is our first line of defence against social atomisation in a globalising world. Today, maybe more than ever before, caring and sharing are a necessity, not a charitable act.

4. People who trust and support each other tend to be more sensitive to the needs of the underprivileged, more tolerant of ethnic and religious diversity and more concerned with the well-being of unknown and distant peoples. The lessons of trust learned through voluntary action teach us to extend our localised moral commitments to people we will never personally know. For contemporary examples of this ethical phenomenon, one need look no farther than the global movements to safeguard peace, human rights and the environment, or the recent campaign against landmines. These realities reflect a rich interplay between local commitment and global outreach and highlight the enormous variety of voluntary initiatives underway worldwide.

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5. By the same token, 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.

6. Because the networks of interaction generated by voluntary activity exist outside the traditional division between the public and private sectors, mainstream development programmes often fail to establish partnerships with these reservoirs of solidarity that enable and empower society. The networks of social capital that exist below the waterline of public visibility are an indispensable component of any strategy aimed at promoting social integration, poverty reduction and sustainable development. They are also a critical factor in maximising the effect of physical and human capital on productivity and growth. The impact of investments in volunteering can be at least as great as, and will remain more sustainable than other forms of public expenditure.

II. What impact can volunteerism have on government action?

7. As the primary development actors in their national spheres, governments are well positioned to play a leading role in devising innovative ways to articulate and harness voluntary action in support of their social programmes. The challenge is not to replace the all-providing government paradigm with that of the self-reliant community, but to integrate them in a mutually reinforcing way. Neither government nor civil society can meet the challenges of equitable and sustainable development alone. They need to cooperate and complement each other.

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8. In the search for a balance of duties and responsibilities, a crucial first step is to agree on some fundamental assumptions:

- there need be no contradiction between the duties of the State in providing public services and the responsibilities of the citizens to ensure that the benefits derived from those services is maximised;
- there need be no contradiction between ‘top-down’ public policies and ‘bottom-up’ community initiatives, between the offer of services and the strengthening of local voluntary initiatives;
- there need be no contradiction between voluntary action as a form of social commitment on the one hand, and productive labour on the other.

9. Trust between public and private partners must be nurtured. Alliances involving multiple partners will be best served if they are flexible, action-oriented and problem-solving so as to build on their own success. Where synergies between the government and the public are established, experience shows that voluntary action does not constitute a risk to governments. On the contrary, volunteers are more likely to be partners than rivals, increasing the pool of skills and resources available to the cause of development.

10. Because they must be founded on trust, state partnerships with voluntary stakeholders can neither be a rationale for government downsizing, nor be an excuse to exploit volunteers’ unpaid work. In welcoming and expanding its network of partners, a government does not curtail its legitimate role and responsibility. Partnership building should not be a strategy dictated by a shortage of public funds if the aim is full collaboration. The argument in favour of citizen participation is based on a win/win strategy, not a confrontational one or a second best option.

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Partnerships between the government and volunteer stakeholders are desirable insofar as they increase the efficiency and outreach of government programmes while strengthening people's and community's trust in themselves and in their government.

11. Educational and health-care reforms based on partnerships with volunteer stakeholders have illustrated the benefits of making room for community participation in the public arena. Evaluations of national programmes indicate that where parents are involved in their children's education, day-to-day management gains in efficiency; dialogue between teachers and parents becomes the rule rather than the exception; there is greater community support to at-risk students; and waste of resources and political patronage are drastically curtailed. Similar positive correlations occur where partnerships are incorporated into the provision of health services. Services for the disabled, preventative outreach programmes, the physical condition of hospitals and public attitudes towards government health workers have benefited from the systematic involvement of volunteer stakeholders.

12. Voluntary action is invaluable in times of national emergency such as the scourge of HIV-AIDS. The experiences of Brazil, Senegal, Uganda and Thailand demonstrate that the HIV/AIDS pandemic can only be addressed if the broadest synergies are established between government programmes and the often spontaneous initiatives of community associations, women's organisations, religious leaders, educators, health professionals, artists and entertainers, universities, the media other volunteer stakeholders. When voluntary action is factored into state policies, these trends reinforce each other in a virtuous cycle of mutual support, increasing effectiveness in the face of grave national crises.

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III. How can governments maximise volunteerism's contribution to society?

13. Too often underrated as contributions in kind by the development community, the societal norms and networks generated by voluntary action are key forms of social capital and important tools in the fight against poverty. It is therefore important to enhance these social networks and to link them to intermediary organisations, broader markets and public institutions. Moves to facilitate these enhancements must include the development of an integrated national strategy for action that establishes an enabling fiscal and legislative framework, raises public awareness of volunteering's contribution to the general welfare and promotes volunteering amongst excluded segments of the population.

14. The decentralisation of resources and authority must be a centrepiece in any strategy to promote voluntary action. A deliberate plan of decentralisation can bring public agencies closer to communities, enhance the latter's control over their services and increase accountability in public sector programmes. This opens space for parental involvement in schools, facilitates community involvement in natural resource management programmes and promotes more efficient income-generating opportunities for the poor. Development initiatives should systematically involve users who are willing to invest their own time – an investment that must be recognised and rewarded.

15. The promotion of an environment supportive of local networks contributes significantly to the creation of entrepreneurial rather than dependent citizens. By removing barriers to local associational activities, a governments can enhance the capacity

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of its population to organise for voluntary action. Legislative measures should include a review of the legal status of and registration requirements for local voluntary organisations, the rules governing their funding mechanisms and the tenure rights over local resources. Support for volunteering is cost-effective, but it is not cost-free. If partnerships are to be effective, the state must provide their voluntary partners with the resources necessary to complete their tasks. Governments can also revise regulations regarding qualifications for involvement in health and education and amend laws pertaining to employment in the private sector to take into account the benefits of employee volunteering to the employee, company and society at large.

16. Limited transportation and communication infrastructures limit a population's organisational capacity. This is especially true of geographically dispersed populations and of those living in poverty, who must be able to gather if they are to organise. Targeted programmes of infrastructure improvements can overcome these constraints, augmenting social capital by means of an investment in physical infrastructure. Bridging the digital divide will also make an important contribution to overcoming these hurdles, and should remain a priority for national governments and the international community.

17. Access to information is essential if voluntary action is to flourish. Being well informed about government programmes allows local populations to feel ownership of their public services and to know where and how to get involved, making them more likely to complement government programmes through voluntary action. Information about other local initiatives and best practice is equally important, economising on time and effort. Furthermore, governments should encourage and undertake research into local traditions of volunteering and their economic and social impact on contemporary society. The results of these studies can be disseminated through public, private and voluntary

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media, in schools and places of worship and at special periodic celebratory moments such as the National Day or International Volunteer Day. This will forge a common sense of purpose between governments and communities, facilitating and reinforcing their interaction and co-operation as partners in development.

18. State action should strive to expand opportunities for volunteer contribution among excluded segments of the population. Given the community networks, practical skills and sense of personal worth earned through voluntary involvement, the right to volunteer must apply to all sectors of society. People with disabilities, older persons, those living in poverty and refugees have skills and knowledge to contribute to their communities and would be well served by the personal benefits of voluntary action. Volunteering should be promoted within a holistic framework that incorporates volunteering and paid work as key ways in which citizens share their knowledge and skills.

19. Governments can also play a key role in devising innovative ways of enhancing youth participation. Experience shows that when youth are offered creative and meaningful opportunities to contribute to the improvement of their communities, they react very positively. Incorporating community service programmes into school curricula, provided the service opportunities are meaningful and regular, can have a real impact on the level of youth participation. Moreover, the impact is likely to have lasting results given that volunteering in one's youth is a strong predictor of volunteering later in life. A number of promising strategies centre around the dissemination of new information technologies, enabling youth around the world to communicate with one another and to discuss their values and cultures, enhance their self-esteem, and heighten their sense of social responsibility and civic leadership.

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20. Volunteering is an important component of successful social development. It can expand resources, solve complex problems and improve the quality of life for all. By playing a proactive enabling role, governments can positively affect levels of voluntary participation in their national societies. However, the reverse is also true. By not factoring volunteering into the design and implementation of their social policies, governments run the risk of overlooking an extraordinary national asset and unwittingly undermining the very social traditions that underpin civic engagement and bind people together in common pursuits.

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