

**Volunteer Groups'
thematic position paper
to the High-level Political
Forum (HLPF) 2019**

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Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality

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 (UNV), 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.¹ As recognised by the synthesis report of the Secretary-General on the post-2015 sustainable development agenda, the ambition of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will not be realised without the 'contributions of millions of properly supported and enabled volunteers'² and volunteer driven organisations in both developing and developed countries.

Volunteering 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 governments, the United Nations (UN) 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 citizenship³ and can help strengthen people's ownership of their community's development. Some governments recognise the value of systematic legislation, policies, structures and programs 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. Volunteers, too, are important for holding Member States accountable for their commitment to the SDGs.

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

1 UNV (2018), *The thread that binds – Volunteerism and community resilience, State of the World's Volunteerism Report 2018*, available at: https://www.unv.org/sites/default/files/UNV_SWVR_2018_English_WEB.pdf

2 United Nations (2014), *The road to dignity by 2030: ending poverty, transforming all lives and protecting the planet, Synthesis report of the Secretary-General on the post-2015 sustainable development agenda*, available at: <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/publications/files/2015/01/SynthesisReportENG.pdf>

3 Burns, D et al. (2015) *The role of volunteering in sustainable development*, IDS and VSO, available at: https://www.vsointernational.org/sites/default/files/the_role_of_volunteering_in_sustainable_development_2015_vso_ids.pdf

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.

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, as evidenced in the recent Cyclone Idai in Madagascar, Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe. They extend support to the most vulnerable and also empower marginalised people to take an active role in addressing the challenges they face.

Recommendations

The Stakeholder group representing volunteers offers the following recommendations to the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) for 2019, and beyond:

1) Formally recognise the contribution of volunteering to the implementation of the SDGs in Member States' Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) at the HLPF 2019

Volunteers are instrumental in building strong civil society that is active in implementing the SDGs. As such, their work should be recognised as a valuable contribution to achieving the SDGs. In 2018, Australia, Slovakia, Sri Lanka, Togo and other countries included volunteers in their VNRs. In 2016, Australia recognised that volunteers served 932 million hours, and these efforts were the equivalent of an estimated annual economic and social contribution of \$290 billion.⁴ Slovakia has recently created a Volunteer of the Year award, which is now presented in a special category devoted to contribution to the Agenda.⁵ Sri Lanka recognises that 40% of the able population volunteers, mainly in rural areas, and are an important driver of development initiatives.⁶ We encourage all Member States to include the contribution of volunteers in their VNRs.

2) Ensure that volunteer groups are fully recognised and supported in national plans and strategies for implementing the Agenda

We encourage every country to build volunteering into their plans and strategies. When volunteers are included in countries' strategies for implementing the SDGs, 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.⁷

4 Voluntary National Review of Australia, 2018, available at: <https://dfat.gov.au/aid/topics/development-issues/2030-agenda/Documents/sdg-voluntary-national-review.pdf>

5 Voluntary National Review of Slovakia, 2018, available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/19604Slovakia_Agenda2030_VNR_Slovakia.pdf

6 Voluntary National Review of Sri Lanka, 2018, available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/19677FINAL_SriLankaVNR_Report_30Jun2018.pdf

7 UNV (2018), *The thread that binds – Volunteerism and community resilience, State of the World's Volunteerism Report 2018*, available at: https://www.unv.org/sites/default/files/UNV_SWVR_2018_English_WEB.pdf p.104

For example, in 2002, the Lebanese government established the National Permanent Committee on Volunteering, and in 2011 included volunteering as an objective in the *National Social Development Strategy*. Since then, the government has allocated resources to the National Volunteer Service Program to promote youth civic engagement through volunteering. This initiative is estimated to be responsible for 70,000 student volunteers who have contributed 4.2 million service hours.⁸

In Niger, a 2014 law created the Nigerien Volunteer for Development (ANVD). Volunteers in Niger, with the support of UNV and France Volontaires, are engaged in the promotion, advocacy and integration of volunteering for peace and development. Their work contributes to Niger's international commitments, including the Agenda.

3) 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 HLPF. 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 Agenda. In recent years, the governments of Egypt, Ireland and Togo, along with UNV, have partnered with the Volunteer Groups Alliance to create events affirming the importance of volunteers during the HLPF 2019.

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 VNRs, and to engage volunteers for the monitoring of progress towards achieving the Goals at the national and subnational levels and as part of wider citizen engagement.⁹

4) Ensure that 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 who work most closely with them

Volunteers and groups organising volunteers are working daily to meet the SDGs 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.

⁸ Voluntary National Review of Lebanon, 2018, available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/19484Lebanon_VNR_2018.pdf

⁹ United Nations General Assembly (2018), Volunteering for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, available at: <https://undocs.org/A/C.3/73/L.13>

Some Member States have been open to actively including the voices of the most marginalised in their SDG review processes. For example, when drafting its VNR in 2017, Kenya led a series of community dialogues that included volunteer groups in order to help ensure that the voices and experiences of those who were furthest behind in the Agenda were brought into the process.

In 2018, both Sri Lanka¹⁰ and Laos made conscious efforts to consult with volunteer organisations and volunteers during their VNR processes.

We encourage all Member States to consult with volunteer groups and include volunteer voices as part of the mechanism to review the SDGs at national and local levels.

Volunteering and the focus goals for HLPF 2019

Volunteers will be essential to the achievement of the goals to be reviewed in depth at the HLPF 2019. Their work can be vastly improved with active and legislative support.

Here are a few examples of how volunteers are currently contributing to achieving the SDGs. We share these examples with two goals in mind: 1) to highlight the impressive, varied and impactful work of volunteers around the world and 2) to educate Member States on the power of volunteering.

GOAL 4. ENSURE INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE QUALITY EDUCATION AND PROMOTE LIFELONG LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

In Nepal VSO is working to promote access to the education for marginalised girls through the Sisters for Sisters program¹¹, funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID). Community volunteers are trained to act as 'big sisters' and mentor girls who are at risk of dropping out of school. Volunteer teachers from abroad work alongside Nepalese teachers to improve the quality of teaching, and British and Nepalese youth volunteers are working to raise awareness of the value of education and to challenge some of the traditional attitudes and cultural norms which are preventing girls from attending school, such as child marriage. The project has led to significant increases in both attendance and achievement for girls, with 98% of the girls from the first phase of the project remaining in school.

Over the last 15 years through its Grow in Family program, United Way Chile has mobilised more than 11,000 volunteers from corporations committed to improving early education. The effort addresses problems that affect children's healthy development: lack of quality pre-schools and toxic or unsupportive environments at home. Volunteers are sensitised about

10 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2018) *Synthesis of Voluntary National Reviews*, available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/210732018_VNRs_Synthesis_compilation_11118_FS_BB_Format_FINAL_cover.pdf

11 VSO profile of its work in Nepal, available here: <https://www.vsointernational.org/fighting-poverty/where-we-fight-poverty/nepal>

the importance of early years in life and provided with opportunities to take action, such as helping to improve educational infrastructure and learning environments and facilitating workshops for parents. All this has led to more opportunities for about 27,000 children.

In Senegal, volunteers through a local partner of France Volontaires, le GREF, supported the development of a training plan on early childhood learning which has been subsequently developed into a national plan and adopted across the country following a partnership with the national government.

GOAL 8. PROMOTE SUSTAINED, INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH, FULL AND PRODUCTIVE EMPLOYMENT AND DECENT WORK FOR ALL

Worldwide there are 1.8 billion young people between the ages of 10 and 24 – the largest-ever population of young people. More than 20% are not active in education, training, or employment. To address this, IMPACT2030 is collaborating with UNICEF and Generation Unlimited to mobilise companies around the world and develop a unified strategy that will combine capabilities, resources and innovative approaches to activate employee volunteers to teach critical foundational, digital, job and entrepreneurial skills and prepare youth for the future. One such company, Tata Consultancy Services, has created an IT training program where nearly 3,000 volunteers in 59 cities across North America have contributed 200,000 hours to train and educate 17,000 students and prepare them for work in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math focused careers.¹²

Skills for Life is a volunteer program led by United Way Brazil that brings professionals from partner companies and vulnerable youth together to facilitate the development of soft skills. Over the last 10 years, United Way Brazil has directly impacted more than 1,300 young people, involving a similar number of mentors from partner companies.

GOAL 10. REDUCE INEQUALITY WITHIN AND AMONG COUNTRIES

In Rwanda, up to half a million people are estimated to be living with a disability,¹³ many of whom struggle to access health care services. People with disabilities are also more vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections and more likely to experience abuse.¹⁴ Deaf volunteers supported by VSO have trained 22 nurses and 500 community health care workers in sign language, helping to ensure that deaf people are able to access health services, and

¹² Profile for IMPACT2030 Innovation Awards, available at: https://www.impact2030.com/viewpage?id=2018_impact2030_summit_-_innovation_awards

¹³ Government of Rwanda (2016) *Labour Force Survey Report*, available at: <http://www.statistics.gov.rw/publication/labour-force-survey-report-august-2016?ga=2.175898530.1431143240.1553699656-216407221.1537451080>

¹⁴ World Health Organisation (2009) *Promoting sexual and reproductive health for persons with disabilities*, available at: https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/srh_for_disabilities.pdf?_ga=2.184637737.1431143240.1553699656-216407221.1537451080

that health care providers are able to effectively communicate with patients. This has led to significant increases in deaf young people within the community being able to understand their rights to access sexual and reproductive health services and protect themselves.

In Pakistan, youth volunteers have established peace forums¹⁵ to bring together different ethnic and religious groups, helping to foster social cohesion between different communities.

GOAL 13. TAKE URGENT ACTION TO COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE AND ITS IMPACTS

Volunteers in vulnerable communities are on the front lines, facing the impact of climate change and the devastation that so often accompanies storms of increasing strength. Volunteers from abroad also respond to natural disasters and remain in communities to rebuild and prepare. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) alone has 12 million active volunteers ready to respond to disasters of all kinds.¹⁶

Volunteers are also addressing climate change before a disaster or shock occurs. For example, in 2018, France Volontaires and its partners from 5 countries (France, Italy, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia) launched the TERO project (Territoires Engagés pour la Résilience des Oasis or Territories Engaged for the Resilience of Oases), funded under the European Union Aid Volunteers Initiative (EUAV). The TERO project is designed to raise awareness of the threat of climate change among oasian communities and how to address it. The effort is developing the organisations' capacities regarding volunteers' mobilisation, creating partnerships between youth organisations and environmental protection organisations and implementing concrete actions to increase oasis resilience to climate change.¹⁷

GOAL 16. PROMOTE PEACEFUL AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, PROVIDE ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR ALL, AND BUILD EFFECTIVE, ACCOUNTABLE AND INCLUSIVE INSTITUTIONS AT ALL LEVELS

Volunteers around the world are working to ensure just societies and to build strong institutions.

A recent survey of pro bono legal services in 75 countries reports that lawyers from around the world are volunteering their time, energy and expertise to provide access to justice and uphold the rule of law. A survey of 64,500 lawyers in 75 countries found that these lawyers provided 2.5 million hours of pro bono work in 2015, helping ensure that lack of financial

¹⁵ VSO *Young people against religious conflict: Peace forums in Pakistan*, video available at: <https://youtu.be/uQ8VOpUzE0A>

¹⁶ IFRC profile of volunteer activity, available at: <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/what-we-do/volunteers/>

¹⁷ France Volontaires profile *Lancement du projet TERO 'Territoires Engagés pour la Résilience des Oasis'*, available at: <https://www.france-volontaires.org/-TERO-.html> See also: <http://tero.focsiv.it/en/project-tero/>

resources is not a barrier to a just society.¹⁸

Singapore's 2018 VNR states '[p]ro bono legal services are provided through a partnership between the Government, the Law Society of Singapore, various volunteers, and volunteer welfare organisations.' The support has resulted in a fourfold increase in the number of Criminal Legal Aid Scheme applicants who received full representation or unbundled legal services between 2014 and 2017.¹⁹

In Sierra Leone, community volunteers supported by local partner Fambul Initiative Network for Equality and VSO have worked to harmonise local gender-based violence laws with national laws and gain support from local leaders, leading to a significant increase of referrals of gender-based violence cases to the local courts and the reduction of cases that are 'settled' within the local community.²⁰

In Northern Ireland the Small Steps Programme of Volunteer Now, Ulster University, and Sport Northern Ireland promotes awareness of the law and the importance of active citizenship to children aged 10-11 by exploring the themes of lawfulness, personal responsibility, citizenship, and the law. Sessions were delivered by 30 trained volunteers to approximately 450 children in 16 primary schools in disadvantaged areas.

GOAL 17. STRENGTHEN THE MEANS OF IMPLEMENTATION AND REVITALISE THE GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

All stakeholders are involved in achieving the SDGs. They are interlinked and therefore support collaboration across goals and sectors. Corporations and their employees, government, educators, students and civil society are creating partnerships to work together to educate each other and to actively work towards meeting the Goals.

Across the world, volunteers are also playing a critical role in educating and informing citizens about the SDGs. For example, Habitat for Humanity's global leadership program has supported volunteer youth advocates to train more than 5,000 young people in Cambodia, the Philippines, India, Indonesia and Nepal about the importance of sustainable development. In the United States, the Commission on Voluntary Service has supported students to raise awareness about the SDGs across the greater Los Angeles area, and distributes a catalogue of volunteer opportunities across the country that connects volunteers with community based service organisations working towards specific Goals.

18 Trustlaw (2016) *Spreading the practice of pro bono worldwide to drive social change*, available at: <http://www.trustlaw.org/contentAsset/raw-data/d31d8b72-0f82-4241-88e1-71abc90e3d72/file>

19 Voluntary National Review of Singapore, 2018, available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/19439Singapores_Voluntary_National_Review_Report_v2.pdf

20 Taylor, Lucy (2016) *Justice for women who face violence in Sierra Leone*, blog post available at: <https://www.vsointernational.org/news/blog/justice-for-women-who-face-violence-in-sierra-leone>

Volunteering connects people within local communities and across borders and cultures. Through innovative corporate partnerships, volunteers are making a substantial contribution to the implementation of the Agenda. As an example, IMPACT2030 is working with 65 multi-national companies to equip them with resources to educate and engage millions of employee volunteers around the world on the Agenda and the SDGs, and to create collaborative platforms for employee volunteers to scale impact. Their open-source, multi-lingual resources, *Employees for the Global Goals*, were created to introduce volunteers to the SDGs and help them identify how they can best serve local stakeholder groups through volunteer action to advance the SDGs.

Many countries and civil society organisations also promote international volunteering, which promotes and develops a principle of reciprocity, bringing together people from different cultures and communities to develop common solutions to shared issues – complying with the universal spirit of the Agenda.

It is through the effort of all stakeholders working together, including one billion volunteers worldwide, that we will achieve the SDGs. The Volunteer Groups Alliance welcomes collaboration and partnership with all Member States, the United Nations and affiliated entities, and all groups around the globe who work with volunteers.