

# **The Role of Volunteerism in achieving the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals**

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In 2015, the United Nations (UN) established 'The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' - an agenda which aims to achieve peace and prosperity throughout the world- consisting of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To many, these goals are perceived as idealistic and unachievable, and this may be true to some extent as specific SDGs are in conflict with short term notions and interests of several countries; nevertheless, in the long-term, it is crucial that these goals are achieved on a worldwide scale, not only for the benefit of the current generation, but also for all future generations and for the survival of the human race. It is well acknowledged that SDGs could only be achieved through full cooperation of all UN members. However, the role of volunteerism in fulfilling SDGs are often overlooked. The 'Synthesis report of the Secretary-General on the post-2015 sustainable development agenda' acknowledges volunteers as a vital stakeholder in achieving the 17 SDCs<sup>1</sup>.

The UN defines volunteerism as "activities undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor"<sup>2</sup>. All acts of volunteerism are divided into two types: informal and formal volunteerism. Both are, by definition, unpaid. But whereas formal volunteering is coordinated by an organization or institution aimed for a specific purpose, informal volunteering doesn't necessarily require coordination and could even be performed on an individual level. It isn't possible to determine which is more effective as both have its benefits. Whereas community based informal volunteering is more responsive to situations, and constitutes the majority of all volunteering activities, formal volunteering is more resourceful and consistent. Thus, both types of volunteering and its effect will be addressed in this essay.

The 2030 agenda stresses the importance of a people-centred approach to development. Therefore, instead of the traditional approach of government led development, citizens' role in development must be expanded. This could be achieved through encouraging local volunteerism: a type of informal volunteerism. As a collective community act, local volunteerism sends out a strong message of unity and cohesion amongst the community. It is also capable of extending its help to areas where the government might have difficulties reaching. But most importantly, local volunteerism connects community members and allows each member's voice to be represented

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<sup>1</sup> "As we seek to build capacities and to help the new agenda to take root, volunteerism can be another powerful and cross-cutting means of implementation. Volunteerism can help to expand and mobilize constituencies and to engage people in national planning and implementation for sustainable development goals. And volunteer groups can help to localize the new agenda by providing new areas of interaction between Governments and peace for concrete and scalable actions." (General Assembly resolution A/67/700, Synthesis report of the Secretary-General on the post-2015 sustainable development agenda, (4 December 2014))

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Volunteers, 2018 State of the World's Volunteerism Report, available from [unv.org/sites/default/files/UNV\\_SWVR\\_2018\\_English\\_WEB.pdf](http://unv.org/sites/default/files/UNV_SWVR_2018_English_WEB.pdf)

more widely. In a sense, local volunteerism could be seen as a method of reinforcing democracy through the direct representation of each people. However, the lack of resources and the natural tendency of focusing towards ingroups makes it unsuitable for targeting long-term goals, and by extension, achieving specific SDGs. Therefore, coordination with the government or another organization with proper resources and a broad yet clear goal could augment the effectiveness of informal local volunteerism.

Regarding the achievement of specific SDGs, formal volunteering poses as a subtle yet effective method of promoting gender equality and empowering women: the 5<sup>th</sup> SDG. The involvement of people from various global communities is a source of transferring modern ideas to communities that are more traditional. In addition, formal volunteering brings women to the front where they are given more exposure to the public, whereas informal volunteering for women typically consists of traditional roles. Furthermore, women assuming leadership roles in formal volunteering challenges traditional gender roles. Thus, formal volunteering has a high potential of empowering women in traditional patriarchal societies.

However, the negative effects that volunteerism could have on achieving SDGs should not be ignored. Challenging traditional values that are deep-seated in a society often leads to conflicts between those who accept new values and those who try to defend traditional values. For example, the uncontrolled influx of Western values into the Middle East has contributed to the formation of a fundamentalist group known as the Taliban. Taliban is a very extreme example of how the struggle between modern and traditional values could disrupt peace and the influx of Western values couldn't be completely accredited for its creation as numerous other factors were involved. Nonetheless it demonstrates how volunteerism could potentially hinder efforts to achieve SDGs. This is why all kinds of volunteerism must be carefully localized and integrated into national goals so that it doesn't seriously oppose cultural norms of various regions.

Although often underestimated, volunteerism is an important stakeholder in achieving SDGs. Volunteerism, when carefully planned out and coordinated with national governments, could be a very effective tool of complementing democracy and empowering people. Yet, this doesn't mean that volunteerism should become completely subordinate to the government. As aforementioned, the 2030 agenda attempts to shift the subject of development towards the people. By putting volunteer groups under the control of the government, there is a chance that they become politicized and fail to serve its original purpose. This is why volunteer groups must maintain primarily independent and the government act only as a supporter and source of help in case it is needed. Through joint effort, both formal and informal volunteerism could be an effective tool of completing SDGs.