

Volunteerism, Turning Goals into Action

With the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the world community set for the first time measurable development goals on a global scale and volunteerism has been a significant contribution to achieving the MDGs. While recognizing a number of challenges to the MDG framework, the world community again agreed to 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for a better world by 2030. They reflect a comparatively wider scope of targets and explicitly identify volunteer groups as key stakeholders of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Indeed, SDG 17, designed to “strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development”, speaks directly to this. The achievement of SDGs relies on volunteerism and global volunteer networks for three reasons, by raising awareness through creating community dialogue, enhancing social integration by opening up opportunities for volunteerism of the marginalized, and producing essential citizen-driven data to implement SDGs.

Volunteerism raises awareness of the SDGs through campaigns and creative approaches, especially by creating community dialogue among local people to ground ownership of problems embedded within their communities. One example is the volunteerism of the youth and religious leaders in Afghanistan. Young Afghan men and women are crafting campaigns and visiting communities by caravans to spread messages of gender equality and women's rights to rural communities such as provinces of Herat and Balkh that corresponds to SDG 5 which is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. The partnership that brought the local youth, religious leaders, and caravans all together as a campaign called the ‘Youth-Mullah Gender Volunteer Caravans’ can help tackle the social norm and cultural practice of the communities because it can counter deeply rooted gender-based discrimination. Another example is ‘The Great African Caravan’ volunteer project. It started last August and is known as an ‘international creative campaign for the SDGs’. It first took 12 international artists and is bringing together local youth groups, artists, and civic society bodies who would like to voluntarily collaborate and be responsible for deciding locally specific SDG as they travel around 12 African countries; Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Sudan and to end at Egypt this March. The project specified one SDG per one country; Climate Action goal for Mozambique, Sustainable Cities for Uganda, Zero Poverty for Zambia. This volunteer caravan is working to expand the knowledge and conversation on SDG by building a network of communities across the borders of Africa. Volunteerism can create and broaden community dialogue by encouraging local people to ground responsibility of problems embedded within and across their communities, therefore, help relevant organizations and stakeholders to furthermore be involved.

Volunteerism, by purposefully creating ways of participation of marginalized people, can help to enhance integration into society, achieving one of the core dimensions of SDGs which is inclusive social development. Some population groups are more likely to suffer from social exclusion than others, and development does not have a universal effect to all people. The economically poor, women, people with disabilities and youth as well as older people, etc., can be marginalized from the positive results of the SDGs, and mostly could be considered as

vulnerable recipients or dependents of services carried out by others. However, volunteerism can be a means to move away from being passive service recipients to persons that actively contribute to society. Anima Dhakal, for example, a Nepali UN Youth Volunteer civil engineer, talks about her engagement of the reconstruction of Karthali, Sindhupalchowk community in Nepal after the 2015 earthquake. She used her skill that she developed as a site engineer for a water supply improvement project in Kathmandu Valley to organize the demolition and debris management operations in the earthquake-affected areas. As she says, volunteerism does not limit to personal satisfaction by increasing confidence in one's own capacities, but create the sense and feelings of inclusion and contribution which is the first step towards addressing underlying causes of social exclusion such as lack in employment, education or health. Volunteerism is a way to break down the dichotomous approach or misperception that volunteerism is only about giving, from the 'abundant' to the 'lacking' or 'vulnerable'. It recognizes every person's capacity and full potential of meaningful contribution. Volunteerism highlights the conviction inherent to itself that everyone is an expert in something, and that we all have something to learn from as well as to teach others regardless of our social, economic or health status which points out directly to the ultimate purpose of SDGs, realizing people-centered development.

Volunteerism enables the direct, active participation of people in the SDGs through the production and use of citizen-driven qualitative and quantitative data relevant to the achievement of the goals. Volunteerism makes data that is gathered on themes that matter to citizens, potentially flagging up issues such as social injustice, sexual harassment, economic inequality or environmental degradation. Volunteerism in data collection can complement official sources of data, fill data gaps that exist in a timely way, and supplement official reporting when data quality is insufficient. Float Beijing, for example, a volunteer program that gathers citizens in the city to build air quality sensors attached to kites that could produce an accurate, timely data set on air quality of the city complemented data of the Chinese government that wasn't publishing sufficient air quality information. Not only a useful complement to existing data, but since data produced through volunteerism is a reflection of the direct response and concerns of citizens to the accuracy and quality of data production process that corresponds to the implementation of the SDGs, volunteerism has the potential of strengthening local governance and accountability through amplifying citizen voices and perspectives on SDG progress.

The growing importance of people-centered approaches to tackle development challenges will be impossible without the vast reservoir of skills, energy and local knowledge for peace and development represented by volunteerism. Volunteerism, being a basic expression of human relationships, infused with values of solidarity, reciprocity, mutual trust, belonging and empowerment, broadens community dialogue and involves more people to take ownership and responsibility of making progress of the alleviation of embedded problems, recognizes and creates space for the contribution of marginalized people that integrally enhances social inclusion of all members, and amplifies the voices of citizens, the main actors of turning goals into action, through data collection and monitoring on SDG progress.