

The Role of Volunteer Works in Achieving UN SDGs: Can't We Do More?

Korea University

Lee DongJun

From <Our Common Future>, the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, 'sustainable development' is defined as the 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' The world today prospers from the fruits of global economic growth. However, we have come to face environmental threats as by-product, such as climate change, desertification, water stress, and ecosystem degradation. Moreover, we also have come to face highly unequal distribution of wealth around the world, both within and between countries. Now that the world acknowledges the need of sustainable development, it is unquestionable that we should act on principles.

UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is our new principle as it replaced UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2016. Under MDGs, there was a great deal of progress around the world. For example, more than 1 billion people have been lifted out of extreme poverty since 1990, and the global extreme poverty rate has been halved. Also, global population suffering from hunger declined from 15 to 11 percent. Efforts to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities, and tackle climate change will still carry on over the next 15 years, under SDGs. The only difference is that we consider the impact of our action on the environment more.

Volunteer works are essential to achieving SDGs because there is a tendency to be reluctant to invest in valuable but unprofitable items or services in a capitalistic society. For-profit enterprises or general investors will hardly invest in eradicating world hunger or relieving poverty. Thus only through volunteer works we could solve these problems. Volunteer works also have good impact on volunteers; it relieves stress, increase happiness, but above all things, it satisfies their own causes.

However, the problem is that virtually all projects and activities held to achieve SDGs rely on volunteer works. It could tarnish the projects and activities into 'one-off things', for there are limits to support volunteers financially. Currently most volunteer works require volunteers to pay for its cost, and those volunteers who are not from well off backgrounds would unavoidably have to end their participation. Moreover, financing the activities would be harder unless the activity is government-aided or supported by enterprises.

Therefore, in order to effectively achieve SDGs, it is crucial that we make economic environment more sustainable for those volunteers. I believe that establishing social enterprises managed by UN will solve the matter. Volunteers should no longer be volunteers, they should be employees. We should move away from the notion that ‘good deeds are done only when they are done for nothing’. We should also provide sustainable environment for our participants, not only for our goals. By doing so, we could overcome financial problems of previous activities and plan for larger-scale projects.

I’m sure that this will also have a positive impact on relieving youth unemployment around the world. Who would refuse a job that is in aid of a worthwhile cause, rather than selling goods that are irrelevant to one’s own life? The youth of today are part of the 9 Major Groups and important stakeholder of our future. They will mature in the next 15 years. They consist of 16 percent of the world’s population. They have the power to drive political change and social transformation. They are the people who will experience the success or failure of the SDGs. That is why the success of SDGs hinges on the youth.

In conclusion, establishing social enterprises and hiring youth as major members is the key to success of achieving SDGs. We are at a crossroads, whether to let the youth keep chasing jobs that will only make this world economically prosperous but eventually make their lives miserable, or let them live a fulfilling life while making the world a better place.