VOLUNTEERING:
AN EVOLVING PARADIGM

To volunteer one’s time and effort to help others is a basic human impulse. Volunteering plays a vital role in preserving the stability and cohesion of societies and makes a significant, but largely overlooked, economic contribution. It also brings considerable benefits to people who have the opportunity to volunteer. Moreover, volunteering helps to widen social, economic and cultural networks, enhances self-esteem, meets the need of people to learn from each other, facilitates acquisition of skills and experience thus widening employment options and builds up reserves of goodwill that can be drawn upon when needed.

Young people who volunteer are better able to develop their potentialities, share knowledge and skills and secure employment; working adults, through social contacts, obtain opportunities for career advancement; and older people who volunteer can expect to live longer, healthier lives. The traditional view of volunteering as purely altruistic service is evolving into one characterised by benefits to everyone involved, in other words, reciprocity.

Equally important is the shift away from the perception of poor people as sole beneficiaries of volunteering to one in which collective forms of voluntary action are a fundamental way they participate in society. Voluntary action, when undertaken together by those living in poverty and those who do not, leads to innovative partnerships and creates bridges between sectors of society. Voluntary action therefore is a major component in the fight against poverty and destitution. Indeed, the inability of an individual or family to access reciprocal ties of voluntary behaviour within the neighbourhood or community, as well as within their society and the world at large, is one extreme form of exclusion. Terms such as “neighbouring” and “active community”, which are beginning to find currency in the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively, are helping to redress the image of the passivity of poor people in poor countries. Some form of volunteering can be identified in almost every society, but it has been largely overlooked as a vital resource in addressing issues of human development and human security. [...]

Volunteering: the question of parameters

In most societies, volunteering is a fundamental part of peoples’ lives and most languages have terms to describe it. From shramadana in South Asia, harambee in East Africa, mingu in Latin America and al taawun wal tawasul in many Arab States, the act is very familiar, even if the word “volunteer” is not. Three basic criteria can be identified to distinguish volunteering from other types of human activity:

- It is not undertaken primarily for financial gain. Because voluntary action is not rewarded with a wage or salary, it is generally cost-effective, although not cost-free, as discussed later in the report;
- It is undertaken of one’s own free will. The decision to volunteer may be influenced by peer pressure or personal feelings of obligation to society but, in essence, the individual must be in a position to choose whether or not to volunteer;
- It benefits a third party or society at large. Actions that benefit only the person who volunteers or that cause harm to society do not meet this criterion.

Action falling within these parameters may be categorised as: mutual aid and self-help; formal service delivery; civic engagement; and campaigning with overlap among the various volunteer types. A group may form for income-generating purposes, establish a mutual health fund, campaign for access to an infrastructure facility and extend services to less well-off members of the community. Volunteering is not a time-bound occupational category, but a widespread form of social behaviour.

Mutual aid or self-help. In many parts of the developing world, this form of voluntary action constitutes a mainstay of social and economic support systems. From small, informal kinship and clan groupings to more formal, rotating credit associations and welfare groups, voluntary collective activity is central to the welfare of communities. Volunteering along these lines is also important in industrialised countries, particularly in the health field.
Formal service delivery. Citizens also volunteer time through formal organisations in fields such as health, literacy, sports and social welfare. The service may be local, national or international in scope and be part of the governmental, non-governmental or private sector. The focus is on support to others, but individuals who volunteer also derive benefits themselves.

Civic engagement. Whether it concerns representation on government consultative bodies or user involvement in local development projects, the full engagement of all citizens in the life of a society is an essential component of good governance, as recognised at the World Summit for Social Development. This is becoming accepted as a key factor in effective strategies for human development.

Campaigning. Achieving a worldwide ban on landmines, passing measures to combat racism, raising public awareness of human rights abuses and environmental destruction and publicising the concerns of the women’s movement have all resulted from massive voluntary action. Some campaigns are localised; others are global in their reach, aided by the internet. The anti-landmine campaign, for example, involved more than 300 million volunteers from over 100 countries.

Contributions of volunteering

Economic

Available empirical data points to the sizeable economic contribution of volunteering. Surveys in the United States of America suggest that volunteering equals 9 million full-time jobs with a value of US$ 225 billion a year; in Canada, the figures are 1.11 billion hours a year or 578,000 full-time jobs with an estimated value of US$ 11 billion; and in the Netherlands, 802 million hours a year are spent in volunteering, or 455,000 full-time jobs equivalent to $13.65 billion. In the United Kingdom, volunteering is valued at the equivalent of $57 billion a year and in South Korea 3,898,564 people volunteered over 451 million hours in 1999 with a value exceeding $2 billion. While methodologies for calculation vary from country to country, making comparisons unreliable, where data does exist, volunteering is believed to account for between 8 per cent and 14 per cent of gross domestic product.
Little attention has been paid to the monetary value of voluntary action in developing countries. However, any notion of halving extreme poverty by 2015 or making serious inroads so as to assist the 700 million people without access to primary health care, clearly calls for massive self-help, voluntary effort on the part of concerned people themselves with appropriate support from Governments. The United Nations system and other external agents can supplement internal efforts but cannot substitute for them.

**Social**

As important as the economic impact of volunteering is the channel that voluntary action offers for people from all social groups to participate in society. Young people can acquire skills and a valuable grounding in citizenship through volunteering; older people who volunteer can expect to lead more fulfilling and even longer lives; people with disabilities can demonstrate that far from being at the receiving end of assistance, they have a valuable contribution to make themselves. Volunteering also builds up reserves of trust and cohesion and can contribute in a significant way to peaceful coexistence in potential conflict and post-conflict situations, whether at the local or national level. Vibrant volunteering is a constituent part of the glue that holds together the social fabric of democratic societies, without which it is difficult to envisage a responsive and responsible civil society. The social contract that sustains volunteering is not legal but moral. is not forced but chosen. The conception of one’s obligations as a citizen to help others is matched by what one expects in return. The notion of “enlightened self-interest” captures well the reciprocity that is at the root of volunteering. [...]

**Volunteering and Poverty reduction**

[...] All Governments and the international community can play a role in dispelling the image of passivity and helplessness often ascribed to the poor. Self-help and mutual aid have always been central features of survival strategies of poor people to withstand man-made and natural shocks to which they are exposed. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Poverty Report 2000, “the foundation of poverty reduction is self-organisation of the poor at the community level - the best antidote to powerlessness, a central source of poverty”. Nevertheless, such efforts are often too small-scale, uncoordinated and under-resourced to make significant inroads in helping poor people overcome poverty in a sustainable way. In recent times such traditional forms of volunteerism have been under considerable strain as a result of such factors as the displacement of populations whether due to civil strife or to out-migration from rural to urban areas, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the breaking down of local cultural identities and the generalised increasing economic uncertainty and vulnerability.

There is great scope for Governments and the United Nations system to help to address some of the challenges for volunteerism at the local, national and international level, although this has to be handled sensitively so the creativity and knowledge of poor people are built upon and not replaced. A starting point is the recognition that poverty reduction strategies and programmes of Governments and the United Nations system, although not specifically targeted at local-level volunteerism, do impinge in some way on the ability and willingness of people to undertake voluntary action. The next step is to ensure that the nature of the interaction between external initiatives and volunteering by poor people is understood and strategically incorpo-
non-discriminatory workplace practices for workers do so on a voluntary basis. [...] 

**Government and United Nations system support for volunteering**

The link between volunteering and economic and social development is increasingly recognised in developed countries, as evidenced by expanding research on the subject, parliamentary hearings, legislation, media coverage and other signs of interest. By contrast, in developing countries, voluntary action is rarely singled out as a subject for special analytical study and measurement and is even less considered as a matter for public policy and action. In many instances, volunteering is so deeply embedded in long-standing traditions that it is not always seen as a variable that can be pro-actively influenced by external actors. There is also some reticence on the part of some Governments to consider volunteering as a domain for public intervention. However, there are many determinants of the well-being of volunteerism in any society, which depend directly and indirectly on action taken by Governments.

In some instances there is a temptation to regard volunteering as one means to compensate for the reduction in the size and outreach of the public sector brought about by economic crisis or by ideological precepts on the extent to which the State should intervene in the lives of citizens. However, a vibrant level of volunteering depends on a strong and effective Government, one that recognises the contribution that volunteering makes in extending the reach and enhancing the sustainability of programmes in the public domain. The challenge is to seek ways whereby actions by Governments and activities of individuals and groups with similar commitments who volunteer time can be mutually reinforcing through common actions rather than striving to create autonomous communities. Far from being a second best option, volunteering offers an enormous pool of skills and resources that can complement Government initiatives. Partnerships are built on trust. The curtailment of the legitimate role and responsibility of the State to provide appropriate support for volunteering to flourish may diminish the confidence of citizens in Government and lead to a decline in overall volunteer effort.

Another temptation to be avoided is to attempt to co-opt voluntary action for its own ends. Volunteerism flourishes where individuals and groups have the freedom to choose the nature of their volunteer activities in an environment conducive to active citizen involvement. The challenge for Governments is to determine the ideal balance between articulating the rights and responsibilities of citizens to volunteer and defending the citizen’s freedom of choice as to how and where to volunteer.

This reflection on ways that Governments, together with the United Nations system, can promote volunteerism at all levels. Its point of departure is that it is not possible to accept one universal model of best practice since what works well in one country may not work in another with very different cultures and traditions. There is no common recipe for success. Actions by Governments and the United Nations system are treated separately for the sake of clarity but, in reality, they are mutually reinforcing. Immunising 550 million children against polio in 1999 required coordinated efforts on the part of many thousands of government health officials and hundreds of staff from the United Nations system in addition to the millions of volunteers referred to previously. [...] 

Volunteering is not a new phenomenon. It has always been a part of civilised behaviour. What is new is approaching voluntary action strategically as a means of expanding resources, addressing global issues and improving the quality of life for everyone. Governments and the United Nations system can positively affect the level and impact of volunteering. However, the converse is also true. By neglecting to factor volunteering into the design and implementation of policies, there is a risk of overlooking a valuable asset and undermining traditions of cooperation that bind communities together.

*United Nations Secretary General (extracts from the report submitted to the 56th session of the General Assembly in 2001)*

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**Stamps issued by Bhutan on the occasion of the International Year of Volunteers.**