

Volunteer Groups Sectoral Position Paper for HLPF 2017 on the theme ‘Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world’

The unique contribution of volunteering to sustainable development

Volunteers and volunteer effort are essential to the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and to achieving the aim of eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity. Without the contributions made by millions of volunteers, properly supported and enabled, the aim of eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity will not be realised.

Volunteers help to extend the reach of a range of SDG-related services. Volunteering, when properly supported, facilitates access to services in health, education and many other areas to some of the poorest, most marginalised or most vulnerable communities, ensuring that no-one is left behind.

Volunteerism makes a distinct contribution to sustainable development. By being embedded within communities, volunteers build strong, reciprocal personal and working relationships. Volunteers and the people they work alongside have a mutual understanding of each other's experience, skills and networks and can generate solutions that are locally owned and sustained. Volunteers contribute to processes of long-term, culturally and contextually appropriate, respectful, effective and sustainable capacity development. Volunteers foster an exchange of skills and knowledge, particularly concerning appropriate development, good governance and civil society, but also on more personal and philosophical levels between volunteers and their host organisations and communities. This leads to the integration of the rich cross-cultural experiences and understandings gained by volunteers into the culture and life of communities, thus contributing to positive global transformation.

This approach can create a bridge between ‘hard’ development outcomes, such as increased numbers of children in secondary schools, and the softer development outcomes such as greater participation and influence of individuals in decision-making processes. Volunteers help create trust between people. It is these softer outcomes that can make development more sustainable. As a civic engagement mechanism, it harnesses the ingenuity of people in addressing the challenges of sustainable development and is a key driver for positive change, building on the foundation of solidarity, cooperation and mutual accountability.

Volunteering is a conveyor of impact for the volunteer

For poor and marginalised people, including minority indigenous peoples, refugees, those with disabilities, and others who are all too often on the edges of society, the opportunity to volunteer is a chance to move from being a passive recipient to being actively engaged in development processes.

The act of volunteering is often the first route through which individuals begin to actively engage in their community and become empowered to realise their rights. Volunteers build relationships based on trust with members of their communities and in turn help those communities establish ways of participating in and guiding their own development.

Follow-up and review, and community-led monitoring

National statistical offices alone will not be responsible for SDG monitoring. There is a role for citizens to voluntarily support, engage with and monitor SDG implementation at community, local and national levels, and to ensure that governments hear a greater range of voices and are held to account for reaching the most marginalised groups as they implement the SDGs.

Citizen-led monitoring offers opportunities to not only collect data at a level that is closer to poor and marginalised people, but, when combined with participatory processes, has the potential to empower people in realising their rights as citizens. The data revolution can change power dynamics between citizens, governments and the private sector, and will be most successful if marginalised people are driving the agenda for their own progress.

Member States and the HLPF have a key role in creating an enabling environment to ensure that we make the most of volunteer effort

Volunteerism 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. Where governments have created a conducive environment for civic engagement, and more particularly for volunteer participation – or where they have been responsive to volunteer-led community initiatives – volunteers are more effective in SDG implementation.

Some governments recognise the value of systematic legislation, policies, structures and programs for volunteer engagement, and have structures to enable more people to volunteer.

National and local government, the UN system, the private sector, volunteer groups and volunteers themselves have a role to play in creating and sustaining an enabling environment for volunteerism. When this succeeds, we unlock the power of volunteerism and enable volunteers to make the greatest possible contribution to poverty eradication and the promotion of prosperity.

The social, legal and political context in which volunteers operate matters greatly for what they can or cannot contribute to efforts to eradicate 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, the diversity of governance actors working at various levels – all are elements that affect who can and cannot enter spaces, whose voices are heard, and who influences decision-making.

Volunteering and the focus goals for HLPF 2017

Volunteers will be essential to the achievement of the goals to be reviewed in depth at this year's HLPF. Here are some examples:

Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere

Volunteers are crucial links in the diverse chains of action needed to end poverty and create economically productive opportunities for all citizens.

Much of the institutional infrastructure for delivering social assistance the world over is in the hands of volunteers who make it possible for food banks, homeless shelters, drug abuse prevention clinics, workforce training centres, micro-finance self-help groups, and a host of other organisations to boost the living standards of people mired in poverty or in danger of falling into it.

Beyond that, people the world over engage in advocacy activities to collaboratively promote improvements in social protection systems, expansions of economic opportunity for women, protection of children, and safeguards against environmental and other shocks and disasters.

Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

Volunteers extend new knowledge into rural settings. They assist farmers in organising themselves, and promote agricultural production and consumption cooperatives. They operate feeding programs, distribute nutrition packages to pregnant women and provide nutrition education. They distribute contraceptive devices, promote birth control and channel capital to small farmer producers.

Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Throughout the world, volunteers provide vital supplements to the health care available through government health provision, reaching out to especially marginalised and excluded groups, and delivering healthcare to the most needy populations in even the most dangerous contexts, often at great risk, as the recent battle against the Ebola crisis in West Africa powerfully demonstrated.

Because volunteers work closely with local communities, they build strong links based on mutual respect and trust. For this reason, they are able to deliver sensitive messages to communities and thus make a critical contribution to dealing with the scourges of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and other diseases.

Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Volunteerism can provide women with leadership experience and access to local political structures, provide educational opportunities for women students, help women start businesses, educate women on financial literacy, offer venues to campaign against harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation, promote access to reproductive education and reproductive health, work to combat violence against women, encourage female political participation, and generally work to protect women's civil, political and economic rights.

Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation

Mutual aid and self-help groups have been crucial providers of micro-credit resources that have allowed small- and mid-sized enterprises to grow. These new businesses are important sources of social innovation, devising new, more effective ways to address and reduce social and economic problems that would otherwise absorb valuable governmental resources.

Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

Volunteers have long been important advocates for sustainable conservation of the oceans and protecting endangered species, cleaning trash and waste, rehabilitating marine life, and engaging in issues like overfishing and deep-sea drilling. With new pressures on sea resources as a result of global warming, these are important voices.

Volunteer Groups Recommendations

Volunteer groups make the following recommendations to the HLPF for 2017, and in future years:

1. Formally recognise the contribution of volunteering to the implementation of the SDGs in the Member States' voluntary national reviews
2. Ensure that Volunteer groups are fully recognised and supported in the national plans and strategies for implementing the 2030 Agenda

3. Note the commitment of volunteer groups to sharing in the accountability for the successful delivery of the SDGs
4. 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
5. Ensure the data for monitoring the SDGs is captured through participatory processes and includes the perspectives of the most marginalised voices, as well as the volunteers that work closest to them
6. Ensure 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 that work closest to them