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# VOLUNTEERING AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

## Pathways for participation in human development



These stories point to the innumerable ways in which people who volunteer are participating around the world to deepen democracy, facilitate social change, and advance development. The forthcoming paper explores this theme through a range of civil society perspectives and practical examples of volunteer action.

In the words of Kumi Naidoo, outgoing Secretary General of CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizenship Participation,

“While there are growing numbers of citizens increasingly engaged in advocacy and work to tackle the root causes of poverty, injustice and inequality, citizens [also] toil to help bring services to their communities through volunteerism. The two are not mutually exclusive.”

FORTHCOMING JOINT CIVICUS-IAVE-UNV PUBLICATION

available at: <http://www.worldvolunteerweb.org/resources/research-reports/global/doc/volunteerism-and-social-activism.html>



International Association for Volunteer Effort



# VOLUNTEERING AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

## Pathways for participation in human development

Helping to do the right thing, and helping people, goes together with promoting a system that is more just and more equitable.<sup>1</sup>

Volunteerism is as diverse as the individuals who volunteer. Whether advocating for the rights of the disabled, planting a tree, visiting the sick, organising a local community development meeting, raising awareness about HIV/AIDS, teaching a young girl to read, or fundraising for an orphanage, these diverse forms of volunteering are all examples of the range of ways by which people are reaching out and participating in actions of solidarity, development and social change.

Some of the above types of engagement can also be associated with social activism, which is often understood as activities directed at creating change, including advocacy, agenda-setting, lobbying, protesting, negotiation, campaigning and awareness-raising.<sup>2</sup> Despite this apparent overlap between volunteer and activist activities, uneasiness exists among some within civil society, government and the private sector around the association of volunteering with activism. This is in part due to a perception, in some quarters, of volunteering and activism as separate spheres of activity.

Sometimes traditional volunteering has been criticised as being a band-aid to society's problems, doing more harm than good by distracting attention and resources away from the root causes of problems such as poverty and injustice.<sup>3</sup> This has included the notion that volunteering undermines political involvement and action, thwarting opportunities to affect much-needed structural change.<sup>4</sup> A similarly narrow view of activism exists: it is sometimes portrayed as elitist and irrelevant to the problems on the ground, linked also to public disturbance and, at times, even violence. As a result, the important contributions of both forms of participation, have, sometimes, been overlooked.

The 2002 Human Development Report<sup>5</sup> notes that volunteerism, in all its forms, including aspects of social activism, holds "enormous scope for broadening participation in governance and promoting more equitable outcomes for people." Interested in the role of both volunteering and social activism in development, three partner organisations – CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) and United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme – jointly

commissioned a study in 2007/8 to explore this topic. The study involved contributions from all three organisations and drew on inputs from nearly 100 volunteer-involving organisations across 54 countries in all regions across the globe.

The study shows that central to an understanding of volunteering and social activism is the notion of people's participation, which expresses solidarity, fosters social cohesion and promotes participatory development. Taken together, the diverse forms of volunteerism help us understand the range of actions by which people seek to participate in efforts to change conditions of poverty, inequality and under-development.

Based on the research, the partners will be publishing a short paper that discusses the commonalities and synergies between volunteering and social activism, within the broader context of development. The paper seeks to promote a shared understanding of how different forms of volunteerism contribute to the achievement of local, national and international development objectives, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in particular.

Consider the following scenarios:<sup>6</sup>

After her husband passed away Noelle, a South African, decided to become a volunteer at St. Luke's Hospital, because of the care and support they provided while her husband was ill. With the support of the Cape Town Volunteer Centre, Noelle has cared for patients and provided bereavement counselling at St. Luke's for nearly 11 years. She has learnt new skills and says that volunteering has helped her to develop greater self-confidence and spirituality. A long-time committed volunteer, Noelle says that she will volunteer at St. Luke's until she can volunteer no more.

Francis volunteers with the Community Development Volunteers for Technical Assistance (CDVTA) in Cameroon where he gives freely of his time to help the elderly clean their homes, fetch water, and plant their vegetable gardens. This evening he will meet with local government officials, traditional leaders and other members of the community to persuade them that the needs and rights of the elderly in his community require greater attention.

Kafui is a teacher in Togo and serves as a volunteer with a group of women in her village. Earlier this week she trained the women to use solar energy for purifying water and cooking. Next week they will learn to make solar cookers out of cardboard and aluminium. But just today, Kafui noticed that the women are drawing new respect from the traditional leaders who are impressed with their knowledge and skills of natural resource management.

Nina is a student in Manila, Philippines and started volunteering to help street children in her city. "I had heard before about the 'urban poor', through statistics," she says, "and I was afraid to be in contact with those people. Now I have been able to meet Aldo, Jessica, Leo and other children. I discovered that they are children, with their dreams and hopes, just like all other children." She continues to participate in community activities to better understand the daily realities of people in poverty.

Simon is at his computer in London. As an online volunteer, he participates in awareness raising, campaigning and advocacy activities as part of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP), the world's largest civil society movement. Simon is one of millions of other volunteers, including the poor themselves, calling for an end to global poverty and inequality. October 17th, the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, saw Simon and 45 million volunteers call on governments to provide the necessary resources to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 2015. It will take millions more people acting voluntarily at local, national and international levels, if the MDGs are to be met by 2015.

<sup>1</sup> Eigen, P., 2007. [Interview] [Personal communication, 12 November 2007]

<sup>2</sup> Sherrod, L., Flannagan, C., Kassimir, R., & Syversten, K., 2005. *Youth Activism: An International Encyclopedia*. Greenwood Press.

<sup>3</sup> Winne, M., 2007. When handouts keep coming, the food line never ends. *Washingtonpost.com*, [online]. Available at: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/11/16/AR2007111601213\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/11/16/AR2007111601213_pf.html) [accessed 12 October 2007].

<sup>4</sup> Campbell, D., 2000. Social capital and service learning. *Political Science and Politics*, [Online]. 33 (3), p. 641-645. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/420872> [19 April 2008].

<sup>5</sup> UNDP, 2002. *Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World: The Human Development Report*. [online] Available at: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2002/> [accessed on 4 June 2008].

<sup>6</sup> These stories are fictitious, but are based on factual stories of volunteer action which were submitted during the course of the research. A list of sources will be made available in the final publication.