

Volunteerism: a powerful force for strengthening democratic processes

**108th Inter-Parliamentary Union Conference, Santiago, Chile
Thursday, 10 April 2003
Robert Leigh - United Nations Volunteers**

Mr. President

It is a great honour to address this important assembly on a subject which lies at the heart of efforts to create and strengthen democratic institutions – I am referring to the willingness and ability of citizens to contribute their time on a voluntary basis for the good of their communities and of society at large. Volunteering is as old as mankind and it is manifested in many ways – through mutual self-help systems such as minga in South America, harambee and ujaama in Eastern Africa, and shramadana in South Asia; through service volunteering with organizations of civil society; and through volunteer activism in crucial campaigns in areas such as the banning of landmines, the elimination of child labour, and the ending of the practice of female genital mutilation.

It is no secret that there is a positive correlation between peoples engagement in volunteering and participation in the wider political process. Volunteering is a nursery for citizenship. It helps build strong and cohesive communities. It teaches people to be good responsible citizens and schools them in the process of democratic involvement. It promotes trust and reciprocity, which are essential ingredients to stable communities, Volunteers are more likely to vote in elections, to join political parties, and to become involved in the broader governance of local communities. Providing ready access to opportunities for all citizens to participate in volunteerism is a vital, action-oriented, part of any effort to promote civic education.

Mr. President

While volunteering is not new, what is new is a recognition that legislative frameworks can provide valuable support for volunteering to flourish in a society, or at least can ensure that obstacles to volunteering are eliminated. In recognition of the power of volunteering in the democratic process the IPU Council, at its 168th session held in Havana in 2001, adopted a resolution urging Parliaments around the world to establish legislative frameworks supportive of voluntary action from a good governance perspective. Other organs - including the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the United Nations General Assembly itself - have also adopted resolutions which refer to the need for legislation on volunteering. The Seoul Declaration from the Second Ministerial Conference of the Community of Democracies held in Korea last November cites volunteering to strengthen civil society as one of six areas for priority action, including the need for supportive legislation.

The good news is that during the International Year of Volunteers in 2001, proposed by the Government of Japan, and in the immediate aftermath, national laws were adopted in a number of countries aimed at promoting volunteering while in other legislatures new laws are currently under active consideration. There is still a long way to go however and, in this regard, the United Nations Volunteers, together with IPU Secretariat and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, are collaborating in the preparation of guidance on legislation in the field of volunteerism for use by parliamentarians. We expect that this exercise, which calls for extensive consultations with Members of Parliament from around the world, will provide legislators with a strong information base from which to launch discussions on how volunteerism can be promoted, taking into account each country's own national values and culture.

Mr. President,

We wish to thank the IPU for its active role during the International Year of Volunteers 2001. In the context of the strong commitment of the United Nations Development Programme to work with IPU, as underlined by the Administrator Mr. Mark Malloch Brown at the opening session of this conference, the United Nations Volunteers is pledged to work closely with your Secretariat, and with individual parliamentarians, in helping to ensure that the enormously powerful force that volunteerism represents is channeled towards supporting democratic institutions and good governance.

Thank you