

Cairo , 16 Dec 2003--Celebrating its second year in Egypt, Open Volunteer Day (OVD) is promising to become a tradition with the country's civil society organizations.

Building on the success of last year's event, OVD 2003 featured a discussion session on "Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Volunteerism" alongside an annual exhibition showcasing the work of volunteers throughout the country and spotlighting the work of a number of companies actively involved in CSR.

The American University in Cairo (AUC), which hosted the event, opened its main campus to the general public (over 600 visitors) to visit the OVD exhibition. The exhibition included booths for 40 volunteer-based organizations including NGOs, international organizations, bilateral organizations, private sector companies and student clubs. Volunteers used publications, posters, brochures, audio-visual and computer-aided presentations to present their work, share their experiences and interact not only with the visiting public but also among themselves. The exhibition was both educational and inspiring for the visitors and provided an excellent opportunity for networking and recruitment for the participating organizations.

"Volunteerism embodies the finest of human values and sentiments. It is a true measure of a society's development and a most-telling indicator of its progress," commented H.E. Dr. Aley El-Din Hilal, Minister of Youth, speaking during the opening ceremony. He noted that promoting a "culture of volunteerism" and incorporating active citizen involvement are essential features of Egypt's current development policy, citing several recent examples of successful cooperation between government action and volunteer efforts.

Subsequently, some of the organizing partners were invited to share a few "words from the heart." Prof. Hossam Badrawi, Member of the People's Assembly and Chairman of the Education Committee stressed that notwithstanding its importance, personal initiative can no longer be the only engine of volunteerism.

Volunteer work must strive to link personal initiative with the private sector and political action to create a "synergy for development," where the whole is more than any individual contribution. Underlying such partnership Mr. Antonio Vigilante, United Nations Resident Coordinator in Egypt saluted all volunteers participating in OVD 2003 quoting the following words of the UN Secretary General: "Volunteers do not ask, why volunteer?, but rather when?, where? and how?. These dedicated and courageous individuals are important partners in the quest for a better, fairer and safer world."

Finally, Heba Nouredin, a young female volunteer from Upper Egypt, recounted how through the opportunity of volunteer work that the Youth Association for Population and Development offered her. She was able to beat the odds of tradition in her community that restricted women's involvement in public work. Now heavily involved in community clean-up and female literacy campaigns, she says: "I had to muster the courage to venture into the youth centre and seek to be involved in volunteer work. But this was the most important experience in my life. Not only did I achieve tremendous personal growth but I now feel empowered, knowing that I am a useful to my society."

The special discussion session on “Corporate Social Responsibility and Volunteerism” was moderated by Prof. Maged Abaza, professor of marketing in the Management Department at AUC and drew participation from over 110 representatives of NGOs, academia, specialised media and the private sector. Five private sector companies presented their CSR programmes giving examples of how they sought to create successful partnerships with local communities through their encouragement of their employees to get involved and volunteer their time in local human development projects. Debates highlighted that while the concept of CSR seems to be widely accepted, relationships among the triad of company-employees-community organizations still need further development. Particularly, community-based organizations and NGOs need to transform their concept in such a relationship from that of a recipient of financial support to an active partner in an equal venture of mutual benefit. “People are more important than money, most of the time!” as one discussant put it.

The successful organization of OVD-2003 is credited to the hard work and meticulous coordination of the Informal Volunteer Network-Egypt. The network comprises six organizations working with volunteers in Egypt including: Youth Association for Population and Development; Fat’het Kheir; the Technical Office of Prof. Hossam Badrawi, Member of the People’s Assembly and Chairman of the Education Committee; the Center for Development Services, Hospital 57357; and the United Nations Volunteers. Thanks to successful partnerships that the network has forged with the business community, five private sector companies contributed to this year’s event: Procter and Gamble, Coca Cola, Raya, Carte Blanche and Sekem. Their contribution surpassed traditional distant financial sponsorship to active involvement, displaying—in the exhibition—their CSR programmes in Egypt and participating in the special roundtable.