United Nations Volunteers Programme (UNV)

VOLUNTEERING IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

The United Nations Volunteers Programme (**UNV**), the UN organization that mobilizes volunteers and promotes volunteerism worldwide, has made ICT for Development a corporate priority since 1999. The implications of the digital divide are many and pervasive, spanning the entire spectrum of human development. In terms of ICT capacity the needs are enormous, ranging from basic techno-literacy to sophisticated knowledge for information management. But there are many people wanting to share their skills and experience on a voluntary basis (including among youth and the private sector). UNV believes that volunteers can therefore play a fundamental role in helping people draw digital dividends from the new technologies.

In recognizing this, the UN Secretary General called for a new volunteer initiative in his Millennium Report (April 2000), the United Nations Information Technology Service (**UNITeS**), to build human/institutional capacity on the uses and opportunities of ICT for development. UNV, as the volunteer arm of the UN, received the task of coordinating and managing UNITeS (www.unites.org). The first UN Volunteers under the UNITeS umbrella were placed in India in August of 2000, and since then over 80 volunteers have served in some 40 developing countries.

Even before UNITeS was announced, UNV was already managing another major project that takes advantage of the Internet as a barely untapped channel for volunteering in development cooperation. **NetAid's Online Volunteering** service (www.netaid.org/OV), "powered" by UNV, was launched in March 2000. Since then, over 5000 individuals have used it to contribute their time and skills in collaboration with development stakeholders (usually NGOs). Most of them dedicate a few hours per week; all do so via the Internet. Moreover, UNV is just beginning to explore the tremendous potential for complementarity between volunteers "online" and the more than 5000 UN Volunteers "on-site", in programme countries (through UNITeS, for example).

However, the WSIS is about more than technology: it aims to forge a common vision and understanding of the Information Society: a new social paradigm. Volunteering is a social phenomenon, and has always been an instrument of social cohesion and inclusion, and a key contributor to building social capital. As such, it needs to be viewed in the framework of the societies in which it takes place, and the Information Society does not constitute an exception.

In fact, the speed at which this new society is taking shape (variable in geographical terms, but rapid given historical standards) suggests an urgent need for assessing how volunteering adapts to this social paradigm shift. The information revolution affects the ways in which people live, learn and work, and how various sectors interact (government, civil society, business, academia). It will also affect how people volunteer, and the context in which they do so.

UNV suggests that a detailed analysis of the emergence and evolution of the Information Society will benefit from discussions of the topic of **"Volunteering in the Information Society".** UNV proposes to contribute to this discourse by facilitating the exploration of this issue in the preparatory process and on-going deliberations of the WSIS. It is expected that the Summit would ultimately incorporate into outcome documents a set of conclusions on the role of volunteering in the Information Society. The Action Plan should also include practical measures regarding specific contributions of volunteers towards a "better" Information Society.

In the context of this analysis, two key complementary perspectives need to be examined:

Firstly, **how will volunteering affect the emergence, evolution and functioning of an information-based society?** One way can be via training and capacity-development to help citizens make practical use of ICTs. Volunteers can also raise awareness of, as well as play advocacy roles about, the need for the benefits of the information society to be extended equitably. It is safe to assume that volunteering, as a "mass social phenomenon", will somehow shape the Information Society. The Summit can provide valuable reflections on this front.

Secondly, **how will the Information Society have an impact on volunteering and the participation of volunteers?** There are early manifestations of how ICTs help volunteers to

better carry out their activities, one example being "online volunteering" as mentioned above. These technologies can be part of improved security arrangements in risky environments. ICTs help volunteer-based organizations achieve higher efficacy (efficiency + effectiveness). These organizations will also need to adapt to new challenges posed in the information era to remain relevant and "attractive" to volunteers. The network society already provides new models for volunteering collaboration and interaction. The characterization of the Information Society during the Summit process will help to distill practical answers to this question.

In the process leading to the first phase of the Summit (December 2003, Geneva), UNV will carry out research on these topics. It will also convene a meeting of experts to discuss, debate and propose measures to effectively insert volunteering into the Information Society. An electronic discussion will also be established for the same purposes. Proposals about volunteers roles already made by various groups and fora (eg. ECOSOC High-Level Expert Group and the UN ICT Task Force) will feed into the debate. The outcomes of these consultations will serve as substantive background material for the Summit, and a possible session to be held during the December 2003 event.

The WSIS focus themes, namely "vision", "access" and "applications", will further structure the discussions on the two aforementioned perspectives about volunteering in the information society. This will help integrate resulting findings and recommended activities into the WSIS framework. Some of the issues to be considered are highlighted as follows:

1. <u>Vision</u>: "To develop a common vision and understanding of the information society"

Information poverty affects economic progress, health conditions, educational quality, efficient and transparent governance and participation by civil society in decision-making. It curtails the very freedoms (from want, from fear, etc.) referred to by the UN Secretary General in his Millennium Report. One of the priorities of the Information Society must be to drastically diminish information poverty, drawing from all available resources (including from volunteer resources).

By actively helping people to combat this dimension of poverty, <u>volunteers are already playing an important role in the creation and evolution of a fair and equitable Information Society</u>. There are multiple examples of how volunteers collaborate with people to access, produce and

share information with ICT, most often through civil society organizations. As the Information Society spreads, their participation as information agents and enablers will extend proportionately.

For example, volunteers have been instrumental in <u>creating and energizing community and citizen networks</u>. The "C" in ICT is probably most responsible for how we perceive the digital revolution. Electronic communications allow for levels of information sharing and collaboration not possible only 2 decades ago. In taking advantage of these network capabilities, civil society has gained more power to undertake joint action and to exert influence in decision-making at the local, national and international levels. These volunteers are also dynamic <u>advocates of the right to communicate</u>.

2. <u>Access</u>: "To promote the urgently needed access of all the world´s inhabitants to information, knowledge and communication technologies for development"

Meaningful access to information via ICT channels requires the <u>capacity</u> to use those technology tools. <u>Volunteers have a natural niche in helping people and institutions acquire the skills and capacity to make good use of these technologies</u>, as evidenced by initiatives like UNITeS, NetCorps Canada, Volunteers in Technical Assistance, and many others.

Volunteers can be seen as the human and dynamic "<u>last-miles</u>" of connectivity and access, often as part of civil society organizations. They extend the products and benefits of access to many more people who do not have the means for direct access – most of whom are "information poor". In this regard, these "last-mile" volunteers can be effective in the advancement towards the ultimate goal of "information and communication services for all".

3. <u>Applications</u>: "To harness the potential of knowledge and technology for promoting the goals of the UN Millennium Declaration"

Volunteers work with all sectors of society in the <u>application of ICT for human development.</u> From education to health, from employment generation to environmental protection, from human rights to disaster management, the range of these applications is limited only by the areas touched by human development and, indeed, by the limits of our imagination.

In some instances, volunteers also help to create ICT applications. One of the main operating systems today, the open-source *Linux*, has been created and is updated by volunteers. The inventor of the Web, Tim Berners-Lee, has said that the Internet is a product of volunteers. A promising area for volunteers is the creation of ICT applications specifically for development purposes.

Lastly, volunteers can also raise awareness among decision-makers as well as the population in general on the opportunities that ICT brings to development.

In conclusion, UNV proposes that the WSIS considers the role of volunteering in the Information Society, and that it expresses recommendations on how volunteers can contribute to a more inclusive and fair Information Society. UNV can actively contribute by facilitating dialogue and research that can help orient the Summit participants. Furthermore, it extends the practical services of initiatives like UNITeS or NetAid Online Volunteering for the action plans and activities catalyzed by the Summit. Our goal is to facilitate ways in which volunteers can work with/for the information-poor in converting digital gaps into digital opportunities.

As an institution that is both information-based and which believes in the central role of information and knowledge for development, UNV firmly supports UN GA Resolution 56/183 that calls for the holding of WSIS. We hope for success in all its dimensions, and look forward to contributing to that success.

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