

Plenary I

Topic: Sustainable Volunteerism and A Sustainable Community



Sustainable Volunteerism and a Sustainable Community

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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like, at the outset, to thank IAVE most sincerely for inviting me to address you at the opening plenary of this Asia and Pacific conference. I also want to express my deepest regrets that, due to circumstances beyond my control, I am required to be present at UNV headquarters today. We in the UN volunteer programme have the highest respect for the mission and work of IAVE under the outstanding leadership of its president, Liz Burns, and for the dedication of its member organizations. Collectively you represent many of the finest aspects of the global volunteer movement worldwide – its depth and breadth, its ingenuity and creativity and, above all, its commitment to forge a better world for everyone.

Volunteering and sustainable communities is the topic I have been asked to address and, in a sense, it is the overarching issue all of us face in our daily work. The millennium declaration was adopted by the 189 heads of state and governments at the millennium summit held at the United Nations in September 2000. In the declaration, the world community firmly committed itself to an expanded vision of poverty reduction and pro-poor growth. It is one that vigorously places human development at the centre of social and economic progress in all countries. This commitment is expressed through eight millennium development goals or MDGs – goals with measurable targets within specific time frames. The first and all encompassing goal is eradicating poverty – 1,200 million people struggle to survive on less than a dollar a day. Another goal is ensuring

environmental sustainability. Others are central to social development – achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, and combating HIV/AIDS and other diseases. The eighth and final goal, directed primarily at industrialized countries, is about trade, debt, and the financial system. The MDGs are all technically and economically attainable. However, their achievement requires the full engagement of governments on the one hand and, on the other, of many millions of ordinary people, playing their part through voluntary action.

For the volunteer movement at large, the MDGs are both an opportunity and a responsibility. Let me explain.

For the first time in the history of development efforts, the world is singing from the same song sheet. This presents us all with tremendous opportunities. Any initiative of any individual or organization, large or small, which can demonstrate a connection to the achievement of the MDGs stands a good chance of being recognized by others engaged in development efforts as “mainstream” and, in principle, deserving of attention. The MDGs are now the common currency of development work – a point of reference for everything we do. They represent a fresh look at development challenges and also a clear call for action. Ask yourselves what you can do for the MDGs – and also what the MDGs can do for you. A growing number of NGOs are now getting acquainted with the MDGs and seeing that in fact their work is more often than not aligned anyway to one or more of the goals. For volunteer activists, holding governments accountable for their actions is certainly one of the key areas of interest. For volunteers who identify their actions more with service delivery, the MDGs provide a framework for articulating the nature and contribution of the work, for sharing experiences with other volunteer involving organizations, and for establishing partnerships.

I should mention here that International Volunteer Day (IVD) every 5 December is focusing more and more on the contribution volunteerism makes to the MDGs. I urge everyone here today to approach this year’s IVD 2005 strategically, bringing the MDGs even more to the forefront. Connect with the national IVD planning process in your country. With creativity and planning, the day can be a wonderful moment to highlight the work of your organization both nationally and internationally and to make lasting contacts that can contribute to helping ensure the sustainability of your efforts. Mark 5 December in your diaries. We in the UN volunteer programme are ready to provide you with any support we can to help you maximize the impact of IVD on your projects and programmes as well as on the organizations your work for.

If MDGs are an opportunity, they are also our responsibility. They were established to ensure that disadvantaged people around the world could lead better lives. And it is through volunteerism that large numbers of people are currently engaged in the task of helping to bring about a betterment in their lives. Indeed, it is hard to see how the MDGs can be achieved without the mobilization of many millions of people. The volunteer movement has an extraordinarily critical and complementary role to play in helping to

harness and channel volunteer energy towards achieving the MDGs. Of course, it needs support to help meet its full potential – we must lobby governments to ensure they live up to the volunteer related commitments made around the international year of volunteers; we must continue to knock on the doors of funders for the resources to help volunteer involving organizations live up to expectations placed upon them. We must engage the private sector to partner with others in the global development effort. We need to strengthen existing alliances and form new ones so that the full weight of the volunteer movement's collective knowledge, experience and networks can be brought to bear on the major challenges of our times.

At the end of the day, opportunities and responsibilities are two sides of the same coin. In the year 2000, some ten million people volunteered, mostly in their own local communities, to support the immunization of 550 million children against polio. They gained a sense of satisfaction and even empowerment that comes from contributing actively to the life of one's community. The actual contribution of the volunteers, in economic terms, has been estimated at more than us\$ 10 billion, far beyond the reach of governments or international and national organizations.

At the UN we do not wear rose tinted spectacles. We know, and the Secretary General has stated on many occasions, that the world is seriously off track in meeting many of the MDGs. There are, we recognize, many complex issues to be addressed – poor countries have to put their houses in order, improve in particular their governance and build up their human resources. Rich countries have to give more aid and offer more debt relief and trade opportunities.

When we turn to volunteering, we accept that of course it is certainly not a panacea for addressing all of the world's ills. But to ignore the contributions that countless volunteers make, and not to factor volunteerism into official policy and programmes, is a fundamental mistake. All of us who care about volunteerism, and who feel in our bones that our work is all too often undervalued, have to renew our efforts in convincing governments that there is a massive potential out there which, if properly resourced, can be harnessed and channeled towards making a significant contribution to achieving each one of the MDGs.

It took many years for governments to recognize the contribution that NGOs can make to development, and we have finally seen NGOs receiving due recognition and respect. Similarly, it took years for governments to recognize the necessity of partnering with the private sector, and we now see a concerted effort to harness the vast influence and resources that the private sector brings to the table. It is now time for governments to act on United Nations general assembly resolutions they have adopted which state that volunteerism is a valuable resource for achieving development goals. Ignoring volunteerism, failing to promote it, failing to strengthen it, failing to assess how it can be leveraged, failing to use it strategically to help meet development targets, amounts to squandering this resource.

What can we do to prevent this from happening? IVV in 2001 helped to considerably increase understanding around the world of the role and contribution of volunteerism and it provided a myriad of ways in which voluntary action can be encouraged and supported. The UN general assembly will be formally adopting a resolution next month in New York reiterating the need to continue along the path of supporting volunteerism. It will also be seeking proposals for ways to mark iyv+10. While this is five years away, there is a need to intensify discussions on how we can collaborate further to ensure that the full potential of volunteerism to help bring about a safer, more prosperous and equitable world for all is fully realized. The goals are clear, and they should be within our grasp if all the energy and creativity of volunteerism in this region, added to that in other regions, is properly harnessed.

I wish you all the very best in your discussions over the coming days. I have every confidence that you will be able to return to your work with volunteers with renewed vigour and determination to ensure the contribution of volunteerism is maximized.

Thank you.