SOCIAL INCLUSION AND VOLUNTEERISM:

Considerations for post-2015 development agenda

From the outset, discussions about the post-2015 UN development agenda have recognized and emphasized the central importance of social inclusion in the new development framework. This Issue Brief aims to further enhance those ongoing discussions by demonstrating that volunteerism, when well facilitated, can be a powerful mechanism for promoting social inclusion throughout the world. With the support of research-based evidence, it demonstrates how the values inherent in volunteerism open up diverse pathways for marginalized groups to overcome social exclusion, while enabling them to become drivers of development action. Any framework that aims to reverse a 'top-down' approach must recognize the contributions of volunteerism in aiding progress towards the Millennium Development Goals and sustainable human development in a post-2015 world.

A community health volunteer in Nepal (right), provides Vitamin A, iron and folic acid supplements to a woman who is nine months pregnant, during a home visit in the remote mountainous Eastern Region. ©Anita Khemka/UNICEF [NYHQ2007-1493], 2007

I. Social inclusion and the post-2015 agenda

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have shaped global development discourse since they were adopted in 2000. Discussions are now quickly evolving within and outside the United Nations on progress towards achieving the MDGs by 2015 as well as what will constitute the new post-2015 framework that will replace the MDGs. There has been a call for a bold vision of *transformative change towards inclusive, people-centred sustainable development*, integrating social development, environmental protection, peace and security, and economic growth.[1]

The achievements of the MDGs have been substantial, with trends indicating progress in many countries, particularly around reducing hunger and improving access to education. On the other hand, the MDGs have also faced criticism for their perceived weaknesses, including employing a top-down approach and limited consideration of the enablers of development. One particular criticism of the MDG framework has been that it fails to adequately incorporate key human development dimensions in its goals and targets, including those related to operationalizing inclusive and resilient development. Assessments of MDG progress have shown that those disadvantaged by factors such as gender, age, disability or ethnicity are likely to be bypassed by progress towards development goals.[2]

The UN-led post-2015 processes are addressing social inclusion as both a normative basis for the new development framework and a goal that needs to be operationalized.[3] The UN System Task Team[4] has identified 'inclusive social development' as a core dimension of sustainable development,[5] while the High-Level Panel[6] has identified

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1   UNTT 2012a, p. 21.

2   UNTT 2012b.

3   HLP 2013; UNTT 2012a.

4   The UN System Task Team on the post-2015 UN development agenda, which assembles more than 60 UN agencies and international organizations, was established by the UN Secretary-General in 2012 to support the post-2015 agenda by providing analytical thinking and substantial inputs. It published its first report, *Realizing the Future We Want for All*, in June 2012.

5   UNTT 2012a, pp. 26–27.

6   The High-Level Panel of eminent persons was launched by the UN Secretary-General in July 2012 to advise on the post-2015 UN development agenda. The Panel assembled representatives from civil society, the private sector,
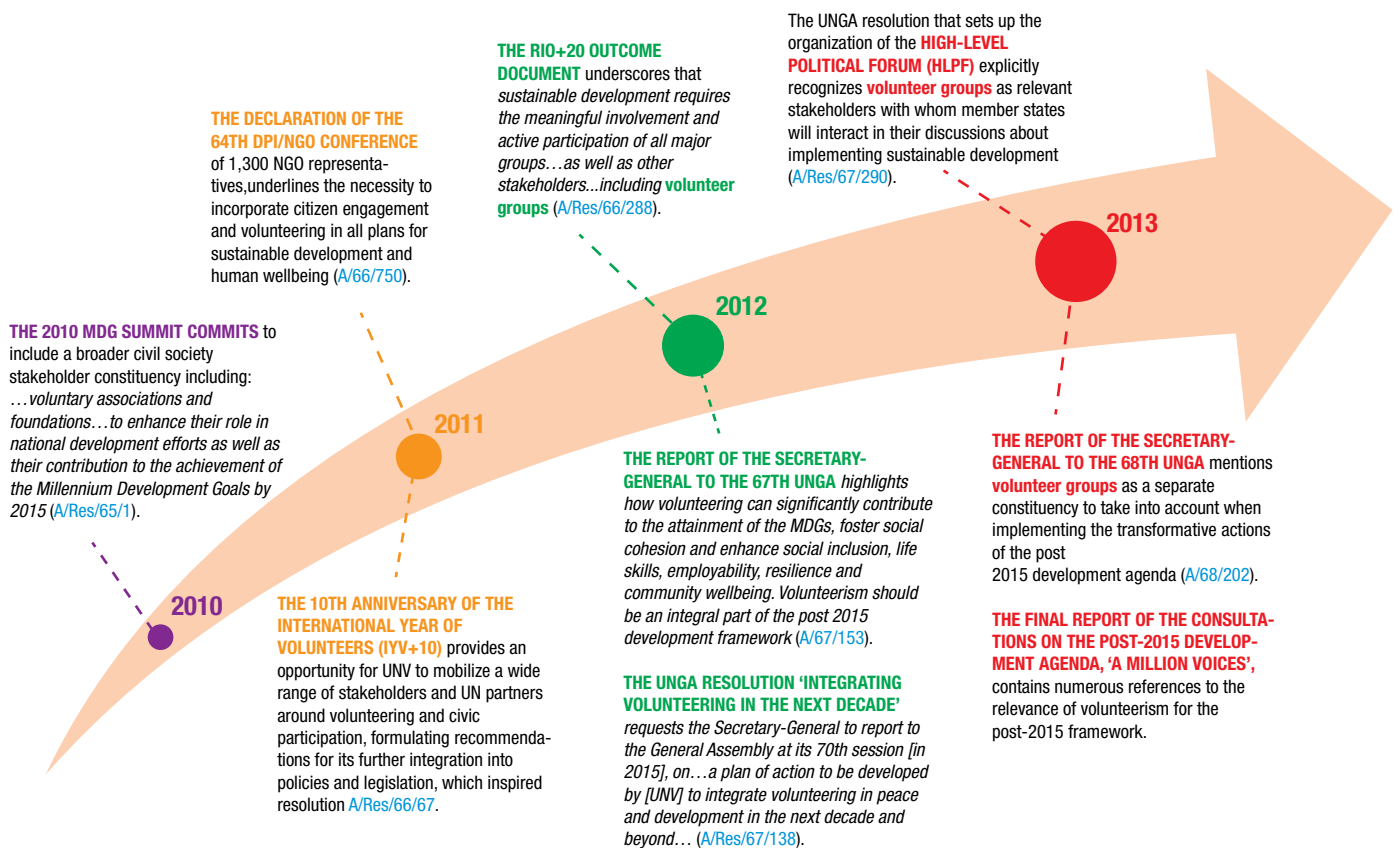
UN Volunteers
inspiration in action

VolunteerActionCounts

'leaving no-one behind' as one of the five transformative shifts required in its vision of a post-2015 development agenda.

The concept of social inclusion first gained prominence at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995, which recognized social development as central to the needs and aspirations of all people. It affirmed social integration as a central goal of social development in order to create 'society for all', in which every individual has rights, responsibilities and an active role to play.[7] Social inclusion is also a process by which societies can combat poverty (Box 1). As emphasized by the High-Level Panel, social inclusion is *a universal challenge for every country and every person on earth* that requires *structural change, with new solutions*.[8] A new development agenda that aims for transformational and structural change to build inclusive societies must consider innovative mechanisms that promote the inclusion of all people to *voice their views and participate in the decisions that affect their lives without fear*.[9]

Volunteerism is a critical mechanism by which social inclusion can be promoted in the post-2015 development framework. With its universality and value base, volunteerism opens up powerful pathways by which people can find their way out of exclusion in a range of ways. In 1999, during the first Preparatory Committee for the 2000 special session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to assess achievements since the Copenhagen Summit, the Government of Japan proposed that the importance of volunteerism for social development be addressed. The recognition of volunteerism as a path to inclusion was specifically acknowledged by the UNGA in 2000, when governments identified volunteerism as an *additional mechanism in the promotion of social integration.*[10] In 2001, the UNGA further recognized volunteerism as a particularly important component of the range of strategies aimed at overcoming social exclusion and discrimination (Box 2).[11]

THE DECLARATION OF THE 64TH DPI/NGO CONFERENCE of 1,300 NGO representatives, underlines the necessity to incorporate citizen engagement and volunteering in all plans for sustainable development and human wellbeing (A/66/750).

THE RIO+20 OUTCOME DOCUMENT underscores that *sustainable development requires the meaningful involvement and active participation of all major groups…as well as other stakeholders…including* **volunteer groups** (A/Res/66/288).

The UNGA resolution that sets up the organization of the **HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM (HLPF)** explicitly recognizes **volunteer groups** as relevant stakeholders with whom member states will interact in their discussions about implementing sustainable development (A/Res/67/290).

THE 2010 MDG SUMMIT COMMITS to include a broader civil society stakeholder constituency including: *…voluntary associations and foundations…to enhance their role in national development efforts as well as their contribution to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015* (A/Res/65/1).

2010 **2011** **2012** **2013**

THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF VOLUNTEERS (IYV+10) provides an opportunity for UNV to mobilize a wide range of stakeholders and UN partners around volunteering and civic participation, formulating recommendations for its further integration into policies and legislation, which inspired resolution A/Res/66/67.

THE REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL TO THE 67TH UNGA *highlights how volunteering can significantly contribute to the attainment of the MDGs, foster social cohesion and enhance social inclusion, life skills, employability, resilience and community wellbeing. Volunteerism should be an integral part of the post 2015 development framework* (A/67/153).

THE UNGA RESOLUTION 'INTEGRATING VOLUNTEERING IN THE NEXT DECADE' *requests the Secretary-General to report to the General Assembly at its 70th session [in 2015], on…a plan of action to be developed by [UNV] to integrate volunteering in peace and development in the next decade and beyond…* (A/Res/67/138).

THE REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL TO THE 68TH UNGA mentions **volunteer groups** as a separate constituency to take into account when implementing the transformative actions of the post 2015 development agenda (A/68/202).

THE FINAL REPORT OF THE CONSULTATIONS ON THE POST-2015 DEVELOPMENT AGENDA, 'A MILLION VOICES', contains numerous references to the relevance of volunteerism for the post-2015 framework.

GRAPHIC 1: VOLUNTEERISM MILESTONES

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academia, and local and national governments to reflect on new development challenges while drawing on experiences gained in implementing the MDGs. It submitted its Report to the Secretary-General in May 2013.

7   United Nations 1995.

8   HLP 2013, p. 6.

9   HLP 2013, p. 12.

10   UNGA 2000, p. 24.

11   UNGA 2001.

Box 1. What is Social Inclusion?

Social inclusion can be defined as the process by which societies combat poverty and exclusion. Social exclusion, on the other hand, is the involuntary exclusion of individuals or groups from political, economic and societal processes that prevents their full participation in societies.[10] Access to decision-making bodies or community networks is diminished as a result of social exclusion, and it often involves a feeling of powerlessness to affect one's daily life.[11] While social inclusion requires attention beyond economic exclusion, along with effective national strategies and governance of disparate social development and protection systems,[12] it also implies a sense of belonging within the community and society.

II. Volunteerism as a mechanism for social inclusion

Box 2. Volunteerism for social inclusion

In 2001, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution that recognized volunteerism as an important component of any strategy aimed at, inter alia, such areas as poverty reduction, sustainable development, health, disaster prevention and management and social integration and, in particular, overcoming social exclusion and discrimination (A/RES/56/38).[15]

Volunteerism is universal and accessible to everyone, regardless of their background or social status (Box 3). It is predicated on the premise that everyone has something to contribute, and it provides the opportunity for all people to participate and play fuller roles in their communities by making use of their skills and capacities.[16] By way of this, it can also potentially address inequalities faced by groups or individuals who are discriminated against due to factors such as economic status, gender, lack of education, poor health or unemployment. In its 2013 Report to the UN Secretary-General on the post-2015 agenda, the Sustainable

Development Solutions Network (SDSN)[17] highlighted that rising inequalities are exacerbating social exclusion.[18] It further pointed out that policies and investments aimed at social inclusion can play a role in reducing these rising inequalities. The premise of universal access on which volunteerism is based opens up powerful pathways that promote social inclusion, as the following key points note.

Box 3. What constitutes volunteerism?

The terms volunteering, volunteerism and voluntary activities refer to a wide range of activities, including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation, undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor (A/RES/56/38).[26] Within this conceptual framework, at least four different types of volunteer activity can be identified: mutual aid or self-help; service to others; participation or civic engagement; and advocacy or campaigning.[27]

- **Volunteerism nurtures solidarity and cohesion** in societies through its norms of cooperation and reciprocity.[21] Research from the UN Research Institute for Social Development indicates that social policies that promote solidarity and reciprocity are likely to lead to long-lasting social inclusion.[22] The strongest evidence in the literature about the impact of volunteering highlights the transformative experience that volunteers undergo. Research on international volunteering[23] as well as case study documentation of community volunteerism in developing countries support the view that volunteerism engenders a sense of agency in people. Fostering such a sense of responsibility also helps to mobilize communities for their collective long-term wellbeing.[24]
- **Volunteerism provides opportunities to connect with others** face to face or online, which reduces personal isolation and extends or generates new networks and webs of social interaction.[25] Such networks are critical

12 Atkinson and Marlier 2010, p. 1.

13 UNV 2011a, p. 52.

14 UNTT 2012a, p. 26.

15 UNGA 2001, p. 2.

16 Devereux and Guse 2012, UNV, p. 24.

17 The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) was launched in 2012 by the UN Secretary-General to mobilize scientific and technical expertise from academia, civil society, and the private sector on the challenges of sustainable development, including the design and implementation of the post-2015 global sustainable development agenda.

18 SDSN 2013, p. 3.

19 UNGA 2001, p. 3.

20 UNV 1999, p. 4.

21 UNV 2000, p. 4.

22 Al-Adhami 2011.

23 McBride *et el* 2007; Machin 2008; AusAID 2013.

24 UNV 2011a.

25 UNV 2011a, p. 28.

to inclusive social development, especially for those who experience involuntary exclusion. The more recent phenomenon of online volunteering has opened up ways of increasing inclusion by providing the opportunity to contribute to those who might not otherwise be able to volunteer. Online volunteering allows people to overcome social inhibitions or anxiety, particularly if they experience disability-related labelling or stereotyping.

- **Engaging in volunteer activities leads to improved confidence** among volunteers about the contribution they can make to their community or society, which fosters a greater sense of self-worth.[26] The element of recognition by the community of people's volunteer contributions is an important aspect of belonging.[27]

Volunteerism as a promoter of social inclusion

This section presents examples of volunteering initiatives involving specific groups — women, youth and marginalized rural communities — in a range of development sectors, highlighting how volunteerism has promoted social inclusion in each case. These case studies demonstrate how the outcomes engendered by volunteerism, such as solidarity and empowerment, can drive powerful development outcomes at community and national levels.

Women

The empowerment of women and girls has been identified as a centrepiece of the post-2015 agenda. It has also been recognized that achieving this will require the structural causes of discrimination and exclusion faced by women and girls all over the world to be identified and addressed.[28] The intrinsic value and potential of volunteerism for social inclusion can be crucial in supporting gender empowerment, especially in societies where the custom and law favour men.[29]

The UN Population Fund specifically articulates women's empowerment as: *women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to control their own lives; and their ability to influence the direction of social change.*[30] While volunteerism may reinforce existing gender roles in society,[31] it can also expand women's life choices and roles by providing them access to social networks, skill sharing and opportunities to which they may otherwise have no formal access. The societal and communal links of mutual support that volunteerism provides are crucial to the empowerment of women.

A 2007 study on service and volunteering in five countries in the South African Development Community (SADC) — Botswana, Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe — identified strengthening social networks and building social relations of trust among community members as the key benefits that women derive through civic service and volunteering initiatives: *this enhanced their standing and the likelihood that they would be supported when they were in need. In short, they gained social capital*.[32] The study reported that additional benefits related to women's personal empowerment through civic engagement included growth in knowledge and skills.

Volunteerism has contributed to the social inclusion of women by opening up access to opportunities and resources that notably improve their physical and mental wellbeing. In Nepal, one volunteer programme has functioned as a mechanism for social inclusion for both the female volunteer service providers and the recipients of those services. In a setting where multiple gender norms place women at a disadvantage and where government capacity is limited, Nepal's national Female Community Health Volunteer (FCHV) programme organizes, trains and deploys around 50,000 female volunteers to deliver maternal and infant health care services. Each of these volunteers, who receive virtually no support from the government, covers 100–150 households and provides diverse services ranging from antenatal counselling to distributing biannual vitamin A and deworming dosages for children. The attrition rate of FCHVs is low, at around 3–4 percent.[33] Nepal is one of 10 developing countries to have reduced their maternal mortality ratio by at least 75 percent between 1990 and 2010, and many believe FCHVs have contributed to this progress.[34]

While the need to actively include members from traditionally excluded groups has been highlighted in programme assessments,[35] their role as FCHVs has clearly had an empowering impact on the self-esteem of the women involved. A study of the programme in 2010 revealed that a tradition of moral duty was a key motivating factor for FCHVs, while another highlighted the respect they received from their communities.[36] The Government of Nepal also reported that community recognition and public appreciation were important motivating factors for FCHVs.[37] Volunteerism has expanded the roles FCHVs play in their communities: they have become recognized health educators and promoters, community mobilizers, referral agents and community-based service providers.[38]

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26 Haski-Leventhal 2011; UNV 2011a; Bortee 2011.

27 UNV 2011a, p. 53.

28 UNTT 2012a; HLP 2013.

29 UNV 2011a, p. 68.

30 UN POPIN (n.d.), p.2.

31 Patel *et el* 2007; Antonowicz *et al* 2009.

32 Patel *et al* 2007, p. 39.

33 The Earth Institute 2011, pp. 42–43.

34 IRIN 2012.

35 Zaleski and Purn 2011; UNICEF 2004.

36 IRIN 2012; Glenton *et al* 2010.

37 UNICEF 2004, p. 23.

38 UNICEF 2004, p. 21.

Youth

The world's attention is increasingly shifting to young people as a force for social change and progress, while at the same time it is recognized that youth constitute a group that is highly susceptible to social exclusion. The recent global and national economic downturns have created a crisis that particularly affects youth,[39] exacerbating their potential for social exclusion. Governments, UN entities, youth and youth-led organizations are rightly promoting the importance of youth as key stakeholders in the post-2015 forum. *Young people must be subjects, not objects, of the post-2015 development agenda…they must also be active participants in decision-making, and be treated as the vital asset for society that they are*, says the Report of the High-Level Panel on the post-2015 agenda.[40]

Volunteerism, as a form of civic participation, can be a powerful mechanism for giving youth a voice in decision making. Studies show that engaging in volunteerism from a young age helps people take their first steps towards long-term involvement in development. The findings of a 2006 study[41] on volunteerism and social activism demonstrated that not only are individuals who volunteer more likely to be active in civic issues, but those who volunteer at a young age are more likely to sustain participation in later life.[42] A 2007 study in the United States also identified voluntary and high school community service as strong predictors of adult voting and volunteering.[43]

When volunteerism facilitates the inclusion of youth in development processes, it can enhance social inclusion by strengthening the bonds between young people and their communities, giving those volunteers a feeling of belonging to and respect for their society. The communities in turn also develop a better understanding of the potential asset that youth represents in today's society. In Tanah Papua, Indonesia, the University Volunteer Scheme for Youth Empowerment and Development, a joint UNV-UNDP programme, deployed volunteer university graduates from two local universities to poor rural communities that were facing major development challenges as a result of their remoteness, low agricultural productivity and lack of local capacity and resources. The programme provided an opportunity for the young volunteers, known as community development volunteers, to live and work in the rural communities and jointly address development priorities.

Engaging local youth through volunteerism maximized the impact of the programme as the participants had insights into the needs of their own region. The volunteers supported community members in a range of delivery outcomes, including family health promotion, water distribution, adult literacy programmes and after-school tutoring.[44] In one case, a volunteer successfully lobbied the local government to reroute the public transportation system to remote villages, which has opened up economic and social opportunities for the villages.[45] In this example, youth volunteerism fostered good community relations and social cohesion while providing young people the opportunity to connect with and serve their communities. The volunteers reported gaining important 'soft' skills as a result of their experience, such as respecting differences, problem-solving in difficult situations and learning to relate to people who are different to themselves.[46]

Employment is a critical component of any discussion regarding the social inclusion of young people, so it is important to highlight evidence that volunteerism can complement formal education by teaching young people practical skills that enhance their employability.[47] While it is essential not to see volunteering solely as preparation for employment, volunteer programmes, if well managed, can improve the career prospects and progression of young people by enhancing their job-related skills — from cross-cultural communication and conflict resolution to evaluation and management, problem solving and leadership skills.[48] Volunteer programmes introduce young people to a range of professions, enabling them to experience different types of work as well as connecting them with social networks through which they may be able to access bursaries or work opportunities.[49] Volunteer programmes are also known to assist young people in making informed decisions about their career paths.[50]

While the bulk of this evidence comes from volunteering agencies in the North,[51] assessments of volunteer programmes in the South also present similar findings. For example, the *loveLife groundBREAKERS* volunteer programme, South Africa's largest national HIV prevention initiative for young people, is implemented by a national youth volunteer service corps of more than 1000 members 15–25 years old. An evaluation of the programme from

39   ILO 2012.

40   HLP 2013, p. 17.

41   The study engaged over 100 volunteering-involving organizations and individuals from 53 countries and looked at the relationship between volunteering and social activism in promoting development. It was commissioned by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) and the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) Programme.

42   CIVICUS, IAVE and UNV 2007, pp. 9–11.

43   Hart *et al* 2007.

44   UNV 2013b, pp. 6–7.

45   UNV 2012, pp. 18–19.

46   UNV 2013b, p. 10.

47   UNV 2013a, p. 5.

48   AusAid 2013; Machin 2008; McBride *et el* 2007; Brook *et al* 2007.

49   UNV 2011b; VOSESA 2008.

50   Machin 2008; UNV 2011b.

51   Brook *et al* 2007; McBride 2007; Machin 2008.

2001–2005 by Volunteer and Service Enquiry Southern Africa (VOSESA) shows that *loveLife*'s volunteers had a significantly higher success rate in terms of accessing employment opportunities than the national average.[52] The extent to which volunteering enhances employability, however, needs to be further explored using robust empirical evidence in order to inform policy,[53] particularly with respect to case studies from developing countries.

Rural communities

Ensuring universal access to services such as quality education and health care, particularly for the neediest and most vulnerable, is a critical element of the post-2015 vision of inclusive social development.[54] Volunteerism has long played an important enabling role in communities that are out of the reach of formal delivery systems. When well supported and facilitated, volunteerism becomes a source of community strength that harnesses the latent knowledge, skills and social networks of community members.

Important insights are present in the results of a community-based kindergarten project in poor rural areas of Senegal which was aimed at MDG 2 (achieving universal primary education). The project,[55] supported by UNV and Senegal's Ministry of Education and initiated in 2003, aimed to raise awareness of the importance of preschool education in Senegal's poor rural areas and increase the rate of primary school enrolment. While preschool education is known to have a positive effect on later schooling, it is almost non-existent in Senegal's rural areas.

The kindergarten project directly involved community volunteers in the building and management of the kindergartens and in raising awareness of the importance of education. The parents, mothers associations and local authorities worked together to improve the conditions of the kindergartens as well as focusing on the quality of the education they were providing. As the project progressed, local communities voluntarily began expanding on the project's activities by initiating the building of new classrooms. When the project officially closed in 2006, it had resulted in a higher rate of enrolment of girls in preschool and primary education, and the local communities had taken over the maintenance of the kindergartens, demonstrating their continued commitment to the issue.[56]

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52 VOSESA 2008, pp. 8–9.

53 UNV 2011a, p. 57.

54 UNTT 2012a, p. 26; HLP 2013, p. 7

55   The project targeted roughly 540 children in nine rural villages where the population subsists on farming, trade and fishing.

56 UNV 2006.

III. Recommended actions

The evidence in this Issue Brief underscores the argument that progress towards building socially inclusive societies can be substantively supported by volunteerism as a form of civic engagement. There has been an important normative focus in the post-2015 discussions on including *all stakeholders*, based on mutual respect and responsibility,[57] to work together towards achieving sustainable development. The post-2015 agenda offers a historic opportunity to identify ways, including through volunteerism, of involving new and emerging actors as responsible partners.

The post-2015 agenda: UNV position

- Volunteerism is universal and strengthens civic engagement, social inclusion, solidarity and ownership.
- Volunteerism should be part of a new measuring framework that goes beyond GDP and demonstrates progress in human wellbeing and sustainable human development.

In order to realize volunteerism's full potential as a mechanism for implementing national and global development agendas, however, it must be well supported and facilitated. This requires an enabling environment supported by various actors, capacities that support sustainable volunteer participation, and channels for community-wide engagement.

- Volunteerism is resource efficient, not cost free. Investing in supportive public policies and legal frameworks will directly assist governments to tap into the enormous resource that volunteerism represents. Governments can proactively nurture an enabling environment for volunteerism through the creation of public programmes and schemes and the development of enabling policies and legislation for volunteerism.

- Both governments and development agencies can take the lead in supporting volunteer schemes that enable or create special incentives to engage disadvantaged or marginalized groups in volunteering, including in development programming. This can occur through various modalities, including facilitating volunteer schemes that target the contributions or integration of particular groups.

- Governments, civil society and development agencies can support research studies that measure and document various dimensions of volunteer involvement,

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57 HLP 2013, pp. 9–12.

including its impacts on marginalized groups. Rigorously documenting impacts and good practice will be crucial in taking forward discussions on the contribution of volunteerism at the global level. Governments should play a role in collecting data on volunteerism disaggregated by gender, age and disability, in partnership with civil society.[58]

Civil society, including academia and volunteer groups, and development organizations should support global, national and local volunteering networks in order to widen engagement and participation. Development agencies and civil society organizations with appropriate capacity should also provide training and guidelines for online volunteering, which is a key new channel for increasing inclusion.

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