



**MMS Bulletin #8 I**

*Freiwilligenarbeit*

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***Below the waterline of public visibility***

**Volunteering and social development**

*Volunteering under its many names and guises is deeply embedded in long-established, ancient traditions of sharing in most cultures. Be it understood as mutual aid, helping the less fortunate, caring and service, or participation and campaigning, voluntary action is an expression of people's willingness and capacity to freely undertake to help others and improve society in the spirit of reciprocity.*

Volunteering brings significant benefits to individuals and communities and helps to nurture and sustain a richer social texture and a stronger sense of mutual trust and cohesion. Volunteering constitutes an enormous reservoir of skills, energy and local knowledge which can assist Governments in carrying out more targeted, efficient, participatory and transparent public programmes and policies. However, it is unusual for volunteering to be recognized as a strategic resource that can be positively influenced by public policy and even rarer for it to be factored into national and international development strategies. The International Year of Volunteers (2001) offers a unique opportunity to make significant progress in bridging the gap between the acknowledgement of a long-standing tradition of voluntary action on the one hand, and a recognition of its potential as a major national asset for promoting social development, on the other. This calls for generating in all sectors of society — government, non- governmental organizations, business, media, the educational system and philanthropic organizations — a clearer awareness of the contribution of voluntary action as a valued component of social development.

**The spirit of volunteerism**

Volunteering is both a habit of the heart and a civic virtue. It is an action deeply rooted in the human spirit with a far-reaching social and cultural impact. Listening to, being concerned with and responding to the needs of others are evidence of the highest human motivation. Human beings help each other out of love and compassion. Yet, in its deepest spiritual dimension and symbolic meaning, volunteering is not simply something that we do for others. Our own values and humanity are at stake: we are what we give.

There is also an element of enlightened self-interest in all human behaviour. ("What I do for you today, you may do for me tomorrow.") Solidarity and self-interest coexist in peoples' minds when they give time. Moreover, ties of mutual trust and emotional connection give people a personal stake in the welfare of others. In this sense, volunteering is a freely assumed moral obligation. We help one another because we feel a sense of satisfaction in fulfilling a moral compulsion to do so. It is not an action imposed by an external authority. Volunteering as mutual aid and self-help is predicated on trustworthiness and expectations, that is, there is an underlying notion that the favour will be repaid. By caring and sharing, we become more fully human while, at the same time, enhancing the moral texture of our communities, the social fabric of our societies.

Nothing here is new. Caring and sharing have been a major component of human behaviour throughout civilization. Communities have always looked after the weakest and the most vulnerable of their members. Most religions emphasize the core values of caring for the poor, the sick and the destitute, for widows and orphans. Some extend these manifestations of compassion and sympathy beyond humans and into the whole of nature. These long-standing traditions, with roots that go back to time immemorial, are very much alive and vital in the contemporary world. The values of caring and sharing are not a nostalgic relic from the past, something doomed to become increasingly irrelevant as societies grow in complexity in the face of such challenges as urbanization, development and globalization. Caring and sharing are a necessity, not a charitable act.

To use contemporary words, participation and responsibility are at the very heart of active citizenship and good governance. Civic engagement, mutual trust, solidarity and reciprocity, grounded in social relations marked by shared understandings and a sense of common obligations, are mutually-reinforcing values. Data collected from both the industrialized and developing world indicate that traditions of trust and mutual help are not withering away. The values that these traditions encapsulate continue to make sense. In today's world, maybe more than ever before, it is this web of social connectedness that constitutes the most basic and irreplaceable safety net protecting the powerless from social atomization, despair, destitution, abuse and fear.

Although they endure and thrive, these networks of interaction are often not properly understood and valued and exist at the edges of organized society. As a result, mainstream development policies and programmes fail to build on an amazing wealth of human experience, made up of informal rules of solidarity, emotional bonds and social ties. The lack of awareness and knowledge about what happens below the waterline of public visibility inhibits Governments and other development actors from establishing partnerships and synergy with the very reservoirs of energetic solidarity that enable and empower society. These attributes of social capital should be seen as an indispensable component of any strategy aimed at promoting social integration, poverty reduction and sustainable development.

People who trust and support each other tend to be more sensitive to the needs of the underprivileged, more tolerant of ethnic and religious diversity and more concerned with the well-being of unknown and distant peoples. The lessons of trust learned through voluntary action teach us to extend our localized moral commitments to people we will never personally know. For contemporary examples of this ethical phenomenon, one need look no farther than the massive movements to safeguard peace, human rights and the environment, and the recent global campaign against landmines. These realities reflect the rich interplay between local commitment and global outreach and highlight the enormous variety of voluntary initiatives.

On the other hand, the breakdown of basic community values, norms, and social relationships tends to be associated with the curtailment of voluntary action. In situations of social disintegration, people tend to take care of themselves rather than think of others. Levels of trust and social cohesiveness are greatly reduced. By the same token, volunteering can serve as a key source of reconciliation and reconstruction in divided societies, particularly where it cuts across ethnic, religious, age, income and gender lines. Restoring or building up trust should be a key policy measure in any post-conflict situation, as this will encourage solidarity and, as one expression of this, voluntary action.

Volunteering takes many shapes and forms. From one-on-one support at a personal level to community service, from mutual support in self-help groups to participation in broad-based movements and campaigns, voluntary action is as varied as the creativity of the volunteers, the nature of national settings and the breadth of problems. The common thread in this diversity is the fact that, in a world threatened by uncertainty and risk, volunteering provides a strong platform for reconnecting people who have become increasingly divided by gulfs of wealth, culture, religion, ethnicity, age and gender. In an age of instantaneous communication and global awareness, society's reliance on the healing power of inspiring, committed action for the public good is undiminished.

*United Nations Economic and Social Council, Commission for Social Development, Thirty-ninth Session: The role of volunteerism in the promotion of social development (E/CN.5/2001/6). Internet <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/csd/2001.htm> Report reprinted in part (one of three segments) under the fair use doctrine of international copyright law*

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