

# VOLUNTEERING AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

Pathways for participation in human development



International Association for Volunteer Effort



CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation is an international organisation, based in South Africa, with members and partners in over 100 countries worldwide. Established in 1993, CIVICUS nurtures the foundation, growth and protection of citizen action throughout the world, especially in areas where participatory democracy and citizens' freedom of association are threatened. CIVICUS' vision is of a worldwide community of informed, inspired and committed citizens engaged in confronting the challenges facing humanity. In all its activities, CIVICUS works in partnership with, and builds the capacity of, key partners, members and other intermediary organisations. CIVICUS' members and partners constitute an influential network of organisations at the local, national, regional and international levels that span the spectrum of civil society, including civil society networks and organisations, trade unions, and faith-based networks. CIVICUS enjoys consultative status with a range of global bodies, including the United Nations, the World Bank and the Council of Europe.

The International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) was founded in 1970 by a group of volunteers from around the world who saw in volunteering a means of making connections across countries and cultures. IAVE exists to promote, strengthen and celebrate the development of volunteering worldwide. It is the only international organisation for which this is the primary aim. It has grown into a global network of volunteers, volunteer organisations, national representatives and volunteer centres, with members in over 70 countries, and in all world regions. The majority of IAVE members are in developing countries. IAVE is registered as a charity in the USA, in California, with By-Laws which set out the governing principles and procedures. IAVE has special consultative status with the UN ECOSOC Committee, and associate status with the UN Department of Public Information. It is a member of the UN Confederation of NGO's, and has a strong working relationship with United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme.

The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme is the UN organisation that contributes to peace and development through volunteerism worldwide. Volunteerism is a powerful means of engaging people in tackling development challenges, and it can transform the pace and nature of development. Volunteerism benefits both society at large and the individual volunteer by strengthening trust, solidarity and reciprocity among citizens, and by purposefully creating opportunities for participation. UNV contributes to peace and development by advocating for recognition of volunteers, working with partners to integrate volunteerism into development programming, and mobilising an increasing number and diversity of volunteers, including experienced UNV volunteers, throughout the world. UNV embraces volunteerism as universal and inclusive, and recognises volunteerism in its diversity as well as the values that sustain it: free will, commitment, engagement and solidarity.

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# Acknowledgements

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) and United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme would like to express their gratitude to the many individuals, who informed and supported this joint initiative.

First thanks to Karena Cronin, who co-authored this publication and conducted the background study on which this paper is based. Sincere thanks to co-author Helene Perold, Director of Volunteer and Service Enquiry Southern Africa (VOSESA), for her innumerable insights into the research and engaging writing.

A special thanks to the past and current leaders of CIVICUS, IAVE and UNV -- Kumi Naidoo and Ingrid Srinath (CIVICUS); Liz Burns and Dr. Kang-Huyn Lee (IAVE); and Sharon Capeling-Alakija, Flavia Pansieri and Ad de Raad (UNV) for their vision, leadership and collaborative spirit on this project. Also, sincere thanks to Marianne Buenaventura, V. Finn Heinrich and Liz Robson (CIVICUS), Rose Ekeleme (IAVE), and Mae Chao and Robert Leigh (UNV) for their invaluable support and guidance.

Thanks also to the interviewees from the following organisations for sharing their diverse perspectives: Acción Internacional para la Salud Bolivia and Comité de Defensa de los Derechos del Consumidor, Bolivia; ActionAid International, South Africa; Aga Khan Foundation, Aga Khan Development Network, UK; Amnesty International, UK; Association for Volunteer Services, Lebanon; Association of Voluntary Service Organisations, Belgium; Barbados Association of Non Governmental Organisations, Barbados; Campaign for Good Governance, Sierra Leone; CARE International in Egypt, Egypt; Community Development Volunteers for Technical Assistance Cameroon, Cameroon; Center for Social Development, Washington University in St. Louis, USA; Chair of CIVICUS Board of Directors, Uruguay; Members of CIVICUS Youth Assembly Steering Committee, Argentina and Brazil; Civil Society Consulting Group LLC, USA; Eco-Conservation Initiatives, Pakistan; Friedrich Ebert Foundation -- Jamaica and the Eastern Caribbean, Jamaica; Global Knowledge Network, Malaysia; Global Youth Action Network, USA; IAVE -- Columbia, France, Nigeria, Singapore, and USA; ICVolunteers, Switzerland; Institute for Civic Education in Viet Nam, Vietnam; International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Malaysia and Switzerland; Just Peace International Inc., Pakistan; Kuwait Association of Social Workers, Kuwait; Logolink, Brazil; Nahdet El Mahrousa, Egypt; Network of NGOs of Trinidad and Tobago for the Advancement of Women, Trinidad and Tobago; One Campaign, USA; People's Watch, India; Portal do Voluntário, Brazil; Pro-Hope International, The Gambia; Sisterhood is Global Institute – Jordan, Jordan; Skillshare International (UK), UK; Times Foundation, India; Transparency International, Germany; UNAIDS, Honduras; UNDP, Botswana; UNDP Chernobyl Recovery and Development Programme, Ukraine; UNIFEM/UNV Engendering Budgets Programme, Ecuador; University of Wolverhampton, UK; Volunteering Development Cameroon, Cameroon; Volunteer Development Scotland, Scotland; Volunteering Australia, Australia; Youth Federation for Nature Conservation, Kenya and Volunteer Development Agency, Northern Ireland.

Thanks are also extended to more than 50 organisations who shared their stories of volunteer action. A special thanks to the organisations whose stories are included in this publication: Acción Internacional para la Salud Bolivia, Bolivia; Cape Town Volunteer Centre, South Africa; Community Development Volunteers for Technical Assistance Cameroon, Cameroon; Centre des Recherches et d'Orientations Scientifiques, Democratic Republic of Congo; Global Call to Action Against Poverty, South Africa; International Movement ATD Fourth World, France; People's Watch, India; Pro-Hope International, The Gambia; Shanti Sewa Ashram, Nepal; St Vincent de Paul Society Assisting Refugee Kids, Australia; Soul Buddyz Club, South Africa; Techo para Chile, Chile; UNIFEM/UNV, Ecuador; UNV China, China; VSO Bangladesh, Bangladesh; Jeunes Volontaires pour l'Environnement, Togo.

Thanks are also due to the following individuals for their various inputs to the publication: Ludovic Aldersley, Amy Bartlett, Kerry Constabile, Galia Chimiak, Cecilia Dockendorff, Patricio Domínguez, Katsuji Imata, Viola Krebs, Dennis Lane, Jacob Mati, Rachel Moussie, Eugenia Mpofu, Lya Raudales, Christine Reilly, Michael Schoenke, Rejoice Shumba, Pascale Stephenson, Henri Valot, Alan Van Caeter and Abby Williamson.

Thanks are also extended to Bonny Jennings and Kerry de Gale from Into the Limelight Design Company and to Nastasya Tay of CIVICUS, Scott McQuade of UNV and to Louise Kennedy of White Dog Design. Also thanks to the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP), Islamic Relief and UNV for the pictures on the front cover.

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## **VOLUNTEERING AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM**

Pathways for participation in human development

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# Executive summary

Both volunteering and social activism are important strategies for fostering people's participation in social change and human development. This is one of the key findings of a study undertaken by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) and United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme in 2007/8.

Volunteering encompasses a range of activities, including visiting to the sick, raising awareness about HIV/AIDS, planting a tree or advocating for human rights. While volunteering and social activism are sometimes viewed as separate spheres of activity, there is in fact a dynamic relationship between the two. Together, both contribute to the involvement of people in the achievement of development commitments, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Volunteering, like social activism, can be purposeful and change-orientated. For example volunteering can be directed at influencing agenda-setting, policy-making, decision-making and representation. It can also promote social change by contributing to personal transformation, whereby individuals change their beliefs, perspectives and day-to-day behaviours once they have developed a new awareness or understanding about a particular situation.

Volunteering and social activism support each other in fostering participation by people from varied backgrounds. Volunteering can help people take their first step to long-term involvement in development. Social activism, on the other hand, plays an important role in providing leadership, defining areas for engagement and mobilising individuals. That said social activism depends on the contributions of volunteers to effect the change it seeks.

In their commonality as well as their complementarity, volunteering and social activism help promote social inclusion by providing opportunities for marginalised groups, such as poor women, to engage in participatory development processes. Volunteers serve as important reservoirs of knowledge for development programmes and can help ensure that development-related advocacy campaigns are relevant and legitimate. By participating in volunteering or social activism, or both, people can be empowered with the confidence, skills and knowledge necessary to effect change in their world.

The goal of deepening and sustaining participation depends on creating new, diverse and varied opportunities for involvement. For example, volunteer centres can help to expand the opportunities for engagement offered to the public. Investments in good volunteer management and the recognition of volunteers can result in more impactful change. Government, civil society, the private sector and international agencies all have a role to play in fostering an enabling environment for people's participation.

Achieving the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 depends on the participation of ordinary people in development. This paper suggests that volunteering and social activism have the potential to help foster the level and diversity of participation needed to confront the major tensions and development challenges of our time.

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) and United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme are joined in their belief that with a shared understanding of the common and interdependent characteristics of volunteering and social activism, the vast potential of volunteerism can be released for the advancement of human development.



# Introduction

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report 2002, entitled *Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World* notes that volunteerism is an area that holds “enormous scope for broadening participation in governance and promoting more equitable outcomes for people.”

Recognising the centrality of participation and social change to development, three partner organisations – CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) and United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme – jointly commissioned a study in 2006 to look at the relationship between volunteering and social activism in promoting development. This discussion paper is based on the main findings and themes which emerged from the study.

The study drew on inputs from all three partner organisations, engaged a geographically diverse range of over 100 volunteer-involving organisations, and tapped the experience of individuals from 54 countries. Participants in the study ranged from community based organisations (CBOs) to large international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and included volunteer centres, volunteer-sending organisations, youth service initiatives, research centres and institutes, as well as civil society organisations (CSOs) focused on human rights, the environment, gender-based violence, health, good governance, humanitarian issues and international development.

The study shows that diverse interpretations of volunteering are shaped by different contexts and experiences. Taken together, however, they help us understand the range of actions by which people seek to effect positive social change in the circumstances that produce conditions of poverty, inequality and under-development around the world. Central to an understanding of these actions is the notion of people’s participation, which expresses solidarity, fosters social cohesion and promotes participatory development.

This discussion paper explores the following questions, drawing on the above-mentioned background study:

- How is volunteering and social activism understood?
- How do volunteering and social activism foster people’s participation?
- What is the relationship between participation and development?
- What is required to widen and sustain participation?

Volunteerism is as diverse as the individuals who volunteer.

Whether advocating for the rights of the disabled, planting a tree, visiting the sick, organising a local community development meeting, raising awareness about HIV/AIDS, teaching a young girl to read or fundraising for an orphanage, these diverse forms of volunteering are all examples of the range of ways by which people are reaching out and participating in actions of solidarity, development and social change.

This discussion paper explores the relationship between volunteering and social activism by looking at the many and varied forms of volunteerism. The intention of the paper is to promote a shared understanding of how different forms of volunteerism contribute to the achievement of local and national development objectives, as well as global development commitments, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

# Perceptions of volunteering and social activism

Consider the following scenarios:<sup>1</sup>

After her husband passed away Noelle, a South African, decided to become a volunteer at St. Luke's Hospital, because of the care and support they provided while her husband was ill. With the support of the Cape Town Volunteer Centre, Noelle has cared for patients and provided bereavement counselling to those in need at St. Luke's for nearly 11 years. She has learnt new skills and says that volunteering has provided her with the necessary space to develop greater self-confidence and spirituality. A long-time committed volunteer, Noelle says that she will volunteer at St. Luke's Hospital until she can volunteer no more.

Francis volunteers with the Community Development Volunteers for Technical Assistance (CDVTA) in Cameroon where he gives freely of his time to help the elderly in his community clean their homes, fetch water, and plant their vegetable gardens. This evening he will meet with local government officials, traditional leaders and other members of the community to persuade them that the needs and rights of the elderly in his community require greater attention.

Kafui is a teacher in Togo and serves as a volunteer with a group of women in her village. Earlier this week, she trained the women to use solar energy for purifying water and cooking. Next week they will learn to make solar cookers out of cardboard and aluminium. But just today, Kafui noticed that the women are drawing new respect from the traditional leaders who are impressed with their knowledge and skills of natural resource management.

In the Indian state of Tamilnadu, Kabir is a volunteer with People's Watch, a rights-based non-governmental organisation. He visits schools to teach children that every individual has human rights, irrespective of differences in caste, gender or religion. In this way he aims to foster a culture of equality and human dignity.

Nina is a student in Manila, Philippines and started volunteering to help street children in her city. *"I had heard before about the 'urban poor', through statistics", she says, "and I was afraid to be in contact with those people. Now I have been able to meet Aldo, Jessica, Leo and other children. I discovered that they are children, with their dreams and hopes, just like all other children"*.<sup>2</sup> She continues to participate in activities in the community to understand better the daily realities of people in poverty.

In Ecuador, a community meeting is in progress. Among the participants are a number of women representing their husbands who are working elsewhere in the region. At least, that's the way it was at the beginning. Today the women plan to raise an issue they feel strongly about themselves – the lack of clean water in the town and the problems this is causing for young children. They want to suggest that as volunteers they can help monitor the water supply and notify the local government officials when problems occur in their communities.

Simon is at his computer in London. As an online volunteer, he participates in awareness raising, campaigning and advocacy activities as part of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP), the world's largest civil society movement. Simon is one of millions of other volunteers, including the poor themselves, calling for an end to global poverty and inequality, including in his own country. In 2007, the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (October 17), saw Simon and a remarkable 45 million volunteers call on governments to provide the resources necessary to meet and exceed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015. It will take millions more people acting voluntarily at local, national and international levels, if the MDGs are to be met by 2015.

These examples show that volunteers are a diverse group of people engaged in a myriad of activities. Young and old, men and women, professionals and amateurs, people of all faiths and shades, disabled and able-bodied, poor, rich and everything in between, volunteers make innumerable contributions to deepening democracy, facilitating social change and advancing development.

Volunteering can be categorised in four ways:<sup>3</sup>

1. Mutual aid or self-help
2. Philanthropy or service to others
3. Civic participation, and
4. Advocacy or campaigning.<sup>4</sup>

Understood in this way, volunteering encompasses a wide range of actions such as participating in a support group for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA), organising a fundraising event, distributing food and blankets in the aftermath of a natural disaster, engaging in local development planning, advocating for the rights of indigenous populations and campaigning against gender violence.

However, this range of actions also characterises aspects of activism, which is often associated with strategies such as lobbying, advocacy, negotiation, protest, campaigning and awareness-raising.<sup>5</sup>

This overlap in the nature and scope of volunteer and activist activities points to the possibility of a dynamic relationship between the two spheres of action. Nevertheless, unease persists among some within civil society, government and the private sector, around the association of volunteering with activism. In fact, volunteering and activism are sometimes understood as mutually exclusive activities with distinct communities of interest.

Understanding volunteering and activism as entirely separate spheres has contributed to the devaluation of both concepts in some quarters. Sometimes traditional volunteering has been criticised as being a 'band-aid' to society's problems, doing more harm than good by distracting attention and resources from the root causes of problems such as poverty and injustice. This has included the notion that volunteering undermines political involvement and political action, thwarting opportunities to effect needed structural change.<sup>6</sup> A similarly narrow view of activism exists: it is sometimes portrayed as elitist and irrelevant to the problems on the ground, linked also to public disturbance and, at times, even violence. But does this polarised understanding of volunteering and activism accurately reflect the reality and diversity of people who participate in activities that potentially fall under each of these labels?

- If volunteering encompasses activities such as advocacy, campaigning and civic participation (as suggested by the scenarios mentioned earlier), does that not point to some commonality with activism?
- If so, might there be a mutually supportive relationship between the two spheres of activity?

## Un Techo para Chile (Roof for Chile): Building hope, one house at a time

In 1997, a group of Chilean youth concerned with extreme poverty in their country set out to build 350 basic houses for families living in slums. This was meant to be a short-term project, but in light of their success and the ongoing need for housing in the poor areas of Chile, the youth decided to continue with this volunteer effort.

By 2000, the volunteers had built 2,000 *mediaguas* (basic houses) in 2000 alone, an extraordinary 5,701 basic houses were constructed. Now with regional offices throughout Chile and in eight Latin American countries, the group has not only improved the housing situation of thousands of Chileans and Latin Americans, but it has also raised awareness about poverty and the need for adequate housing for the poor.

These volunteers have contributed to the pursuit of Millennium Development Goal 7, which seeks to create environmental sustainability through a significant improvement in the lives of slum dwellers. In advance of the 200th anniversary of Chile, the Chilean government is now calling for no more *campamentos* (shantytowns) by 2010, which is, in part, attributable to the work of *Un Techo para Chile*.<sup>7</sup>

In a speech for the 2001 International Year of the Volunteer Kumi Naidoo, now Honorary President of CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizenship Participation, argued that, “*While there are growing numbers of citizens increasingly engaged in advocacy and...work to tackle the root causes of poverty, injustice and inequality, citizens [also] toil to help bring services to their communities through volunteerism. The two are not mutually exclusive*”.<sup>8</sup>

“Helping to do the right thing, and helping people, goes together with promoting a system that is more just and more equitable.”



Co-founder and Director, Transparency International

## AREAS OF COMMONALITY BETWEEN VOLUNTEERING AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

The background study shows that there are three areas of commonality between volunteering and social activism.

### SPARK: Changing the world one child at a time

Thousands of refugees from war-torn countries have flocked to Australia to start a new life. At a time when the acceptance of refugees in the community has been discouraged, the St. Vincent de Paul Society Assisting Refugee Kids (SPARK) programme was launched to help the rapidly rising number of refugees, particularly primary-aged refugee children who have little or no knowledge of the English language.

Community volunteers support over 100 children, pre-schoolers and parents by participating in a care-taking programme, an after-school homework club and teaching classes on English, health and nutrition.

Talking about why she volunteers with SPARK, 21-year old Maria Franco said, “*SPARK allows me to change the world one child at a time. It is a proactive means of not only passing on my knowledge to the next generation, but ensuring they gain control over their own future through increased access to information and skills*”.

As a volunteer, Maria Franco is playing her part in the effort to achieve Millennium Development Goal 2, which aims to achieve universal primary education for girls and boys.<sup>13</sup>

**Firstly**, they both **foster opportunities for participation** by people from diverse backgrounds and from a very wide range of circumstances. Furthermore, both volunteering and activism reflect a personal choice to engage in one’s community and society.<sup>9</sup> What is significant is that both appeal to different people, at different times, providing them with a rich array of opportunities to get involved in actions that can contribute to positive social change.

The impetus to act ranges from a desire to help others by providing for basic needs such as food, shelter and clean water, to an interest in changing policies, raising awareness and empowering disadvantaged groups. While these actions may be undertaken for a combination of reasons, altruistic as well as self-interested, what binds people together is the common desire to be active citizens – to give as well as trying to change the conditions producing human suffering.<sup>10</sup>

During an interview for the background study, the Director of Volunteering Development Agency in Northern Ireland said, “*Social activism starts at exactly the same premise as volunteering – people giving time who want to make a change in their community. All the volunteers I know are social activists on some level*”.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, there is a different perspective: According to the President and Director of the Association for Volunteer Services in Lebanon “*social activism may be volunteering or it may not*”.<sup>12</sup> This relationship between volunteering and social activism is further addressed in Section 2 below.

**Secondly**, the background study shows that **both volunteering and social activism can be purposeful and change-orientated**. Some interviewees perceive social activism as a deliberate attempt to change social reality, and see volunteers as people who don’t necessarily want to change the status quo. However, this shows that, like social activism, volunteering can be purposeful and change-oriented.

For example, one view is that the desire to achieve change is a common link between social activism and volunteering: both are driven by “*the desire to contribute to change in communities in which they operate*”, said the Founder and Executive Director of Volunteering Development Cameroon.<sup>14</sup> Reinforcing this idea, the Director of Volunteering Development Agency in Northern Ireland points out that volunteers who are concerned with caring for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) “*volunteer their time to service delivery issues, [but] all of them are about changing attitudes and campaigning for [the] rights [of PLWHA and their families who are often discriminated against]*”.<sup>15</sup> Overall, both volunteers and activists are viewed as being driven by a passion and by a commitment to a particular cause. As captured by the Coordinator of the Network of NGOs of Trinidad and Tobago for the Advancement of Women this sometimes includes a shared commitment “*to change, to social change that is sustainable*”.<sup>16</sup>

Speaking about the work of International Movement ATD Fourth World, one member of their Volunteer Corps said, “*Volunteering for us is a demonstration of activism; it is inevitably ‘political’*”.<sup>17</sup> The work of ATD Fourth World, and that of many of the organisations interviewed for this background study, demonstrates that volunteers often undertake activities explicitly focused on social change. For example, volunteers meet directly with local public officials and traditional leaders to advocate for the rights of marginalised groups, conduct evidence-based research for advocacy campaigns, lobby for the passage of legislation related to child nutrition, gender violence and social inclusion, speak out through public marches and letter writing campaigns, and serve on local development committees. In this way they are acting in support of Millennium Development Goal 1, which aims to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, and MDG 3, which focuses on promoting gender equality and empowering women.

Volunteering promotes social change not only by influencing political processes such as agenda-setting, policy-making, decision-making and representation, but also because it can change relationships between people from different parts of society. Another illustration of how volunteering promotes social change comes from the work of *Jeunes Volontaires pour l’Environnement - JVE* (Young Volunteers for the Environment) in Togo, which deals with gender relations at community level. Since women have been trained in the use of solar energy for purifying water and cooking, their voices are more respected by traditional leaders on issues relating to natural resource management. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to measure the impact of this training on gender relations, it is certainly possible that through the training, women in this particular community have gained more control over decisions related to the environment and that some small gains have been made in respect to Millennium Development Goal 3, the empowerment of women.

An article in the *Australian Journal on Volunteering* exploring the relationship between volunteering and civic participation suggests that, “*Volunteering can be political in a range of ways, including in the power relations it emphasises or creates, the judgements it implies about the social or welfare system in a community, the action or lack of action by governments on a given issue, the life choices of community members, or simply in the emphasis it places on the role of individuals within the functioning of society*”.<sup>18</sup> This suggests that the charitable, humanitarian and philanthropic dimensions of volunteering can also be considered ‘political’ in that they highlight basic needs whilst drawing attention to the imperative for government, civil society and the private sector to change their responses to the conditions that produced such need.

Volunteering can also prompt personal transformation, whereby individuals change their beliefs, perspectives and day-to-day behaviours once they have developed new awareness or understanding about a particular situation. Shanti Sewa Ashram, a charity operating in Nepal, is promoting this dimension of social change by challenging faith-based discrimination. Through awareness-raising programs and inter-faith gatherings, Shanti Sewa Ashram seeks to promote greater inter-faith understanding and ultimately peace in a county where inter-faith tensions have flared into violence, for example against Muslims in 2004 following the execution of Nepalese nationals in Iraq.<sup>19</sup>

**Thirdly**, both volunteering and social activism can be **a tool for development**, particularly for helping to meet development objectives that fall within Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) framework. Most interviewees commented that both volunteering and social activism respond to the major development challenges of our time. Articulating this perception, an IAVE Board Member and African Regional Representative from Nigeria said, *“Volunteers and activists are acting together for a better and fairer world devoid of poverty, illiteracy, disease, discrimination and to secure respect for human rights and rule of law, though the approach [can] differ”*.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, research shows that inclusive participation in the identification, design, implementation and monitoring of development projects is crucial for their success and sustainability.<sup>21</sup> Describing the challenges of fighting the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the International HIV/AIDS Programme Coordinator of ActionAid International said, *“We see volunteerism in the broad sense. What we want to achieve will require a lot of giving of time, skills, resources and the energies of the poor and excluded themselves”*.<sup>22</sup> Social activism can support this work by focusing attention on a rights perspective to development, which embodies the idea that fighting poverty and inequality is fundamentally about ensuring that all people are able to enjoy their inalienable human rights. The Programme Coordinator of Governance and Civic Engagement at CARE International in Egypt suggested that by *“bringing together a rights perspective with a needs perspective”*, development is no longer just about giving people water because they need it,<sup>23</sup> but because they have a right to life and to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being.<sup>24</sup> This hybrid approach focuses attention on the right to access to clean water, one of the targets under Millennium Development Goal 7 that aims for environmental sustainability.

In the wake of natural disasters, war and conflict, volunteers and activists play a key role in helping to restore peace and stability, widely recognised as fundamental preconditions for sustainable development. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where violence has claimed the lives of more than five million people, volunteers are helping to address what the *Centre des Recherches et d'Orientations Scientifiques – CROS* (Centre for Scientific Research and Direction) is calling a “crisis in human values of harmony and integrity” by organising campaigns advocating for diversity and a multicultural and peaceful society.<sup>25</sup>

Volunteering and social activism are not only important vehicles for development, but specifically for participatory development. Speaking about the importance of the involvement of ordinary citizens around the world in development processes, the former Executive Coordinator of the UNV programme, Ad de Raad, said, *“Efforts on the part of national governments to meet MDG targets, even when supported by the international community, will have a limited impact without significant volunteer contributions. The beneficiaries of services need to be involved directly in the events and processes that affect their lives. Their active involvement and the involvement of millions like them are the key to achieving the Millennium Development Goals”*.<sup>26</sup>

# How volunteering and social activism foster participation

In democratic societies, one challenge for people's participation is to foster an environment in which individuals from all backgrounds are encouraged to participate in local, national and international issues – social, economic and political – between formal elections. Civic participation takes different forms and helps build trust and accountability between citizens and the state. It also contributes to fostering social inclusion and building social cohesion within communities. In non-democratic and authoritarian states, the lack of engagement between citizens and the state reflects the lack of participation, trust and accountability. The challenge here is to recognise the contribution of citizen action, no matter how small, to reclaiming and opening up the space for the creation of a more just, inclusive and equitable social reality.

Both volunteering and social activism have a role to play in fostering greater participation in society. In the words of former IAVE President, Liz Burns, *“We know that the MDGs cannot be achieved without the active engagement of the world's citizens as volunteers and activists. We must therefore work together to dismantle barriers like those that still exist between ‘volunteers’ and ‘activists’”*.<sup>27</sup>

The background study surfaced four different ways in which social activism and volunteering are complementary, supporting each other in fostering participation. These are outlined below.

## VOLUNTEERING CAN HELP PEOPLE TAKE THEIR FIRST STEP TO LONG-TERM INVOLVEMENT IN DEVELOPMENT

The background study shows that believing one can make a difference and taking that first step to participate is critical for fostering long-term active citizenship, which ranges from traditional forms of volunteering to social activism. The Chair of the CIVICUS Board of Directors puts it this way, *“Sporadic volunteers can become social activists”*,<sup>28</sup> while an International UNV volunteer with the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) says, *“I think the base of being an activist is volunteering”*.<sup>29</sup>

According to its Director, the work of the Volunteer Development Agency in Northern Ireland supports this assertion:

*“Our research shows that if you are a volunteer you are more likely to be involved in other forms of civic participation, such as petition signing, letter writing and voting. That could be a volunteer in a traditional setting, or for a drama group: it doesn't matter exactly what you do, it seems just giving time makes individuals more aware of how their community works and gives you some sense of ownership”*.<sup>30</sup>

Another study on female volunteers and activists shows that women who believed in their own ability to make things happen were more likely to be activists.<sup>31</sup>

This perspective challenges limited ideas about the nature of participation. While some people only engage in traditional forms of volunteering or in direct political activism, the background study shows that most individuals are involved in widely diverse types of participation throughout the course of their lives, and that the form of participation may change. Consider the following personal testimonies from a volunteer with Atlas Service Corps in the United States and the Managing Director of Nahdet El Mahrousa, an organisation of young Egyptian social entrepreneurs:

“As my friends and I sat watching the terrible tragedy of the Gujarat earthquake unfold we realised we couldn’t just feel sorry about everything.

We made phone calls and circulated emails to raise funds to buy relief supplies, which we then transported to the devastated area ourselves. I realised the difference we had made, however relatively small, meant a lot to those in need. This spurred me on to work with anti-human trafficking projects for four years, before applying for an Atlas Corps fellowship in the US.

I am now working as a volunteer with ‘Free the Slaves’ organisation. I work in partnership teams and the stories I hear inspire to fight for what is right and never any less”.<sup>32</sup>

“I think it is a very natural progression. I started volunteering first. It is a very necessary step to understanding the civil society you are operating in and to figure out the gaps: you have to have been exposed in the field to be able to identify these [gaps] and to think of ideas for how to solve the problems”.<sup>33</sup>

As the above scenarios demonstrate, participation through volunteering can foster social cohesion and put individuals on a path to longer-term engagement in development activities. One respondent pointed out that individuals who voluntarily help out at a sporting event are often the same individuals who attend community meetings with government officials to talk about community problems.<sup>34</sup> Not only are individuals who participate more likely to be active in a range of civic issues,<sup>35</sup> but individuals who volunteer at a young age are more likely to sustain their participation in later life. For example, a 2007 study in the *American Educational Research Journal* identifies community service during high school as a strong predictor of voting and volunteering in adulthood.<sup>36</sup>

This suggests that people may move from occasional volunteer action to more sustained engagement in activities related to development and change, and the other way round. These progressions may facilitate a deeper understanding of the issues producing the socio-economic conditions that volunteers and social activists aim to address, and can strengthen social inclusion by virtue of fostering people’s participation in activities seeking to change those conditions.

## SOCIAL ACTIVISM CAN PROVIDE LEADERSHIP, DEFINE AREAS FOR ENGAGEMENT AND MOBILISE INDIVIDUALS

The leadership provided by social activists is critical to mobilising people as part of a larger cause. Good leadership channels energy and skills towards development challenges, such as reducing extreme poverty, improving gender equality, ending the HIV/AIDS pandemic and combating climate change.

At the same time we need to recognise that social activists are themselves often volunteers and that social activism frequently depends on volunteers to do the work on which mobilisation depends.

A number of interviewees described the role of social activists in providing direction for social action and harnessing individual efforts towards focused social change:

“I think social activism means citizens of a country being prepared to organise themselves around a particular issue or problem in order to effect change.”

Director, Civil Society Programme, Aga Kahn Foundation, Aga Khan Development Network

“Activism is a kind of bond that brings people together in a society for a common goal.”

National UNV volunteer, UNV/UNDP Community Capacity Enhancement

“Perhaps activism is more a collective act than volunteerism, which may be collective, but is often done in smaller groups or as a one-on-one task.”

Architect, World Volunteer Web

“You are trying to move others to change the situation.”

Founder and General Coordinator Sisterhood is Global Institute – Jordan

“Social activism is encouraging people to participate.”

Chairman, Kuwait Association of Social Workers

## VSO Bangladesh: Volunteer Citizen Committees for development

What happens at the local level is critical to a country's development, particularly for achieving the MDGs. Supported by country partners, VSO Bangladesh (VSOB) formed Citizen Committees (CC) at the ward and union levels, consisting of community members, including women and youth, selected through a participatory and democratic process.

Thus far some 216 ward level CCs and 24 Union Parishad's (UPs) have been established. Members of the CCs work to make the development process as inclusive and participatory as possible. Representatives on the CCs engage community members in the identification of development priorities, which are often related to service delivery issues, such as education, agriculture and health. This information is then relayed to the local government bodies at the ward and union levels to be incorporated into annual budget plans.

Not only have CC members developed skills to champion development needs of their communities, but a broader spectrum of people is being consulted about their priorities and ideas for community development. This represents a small step towards Millennium Development Goal 8, which focuses on a global partnership for development, *inter alia* through the achievement of good governance and accountability.<sup>39</sup>

## VOLUNTEERING KEEPS SOCIAL ACTIVISM RELEVANT TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Different forms of volunteering can ensure that social activism is connected to local reality, context and dynamics: “*Social activism requires the identification of real needs that people have*”, said the Coordinator of the Network of NGOs of Trinidad and Tobago for the Advancement of Women.<sup>37</sup> By drawing on the work of volunteers at grassroots level, social activists can align their actions more closely with community-based needs and can thereby gain greater legitimacy in the communities they are trying to assist.

For example, the International HIV/AIDS Programme Coordinator at ActionAid International pointed out that unless one is connected to the realities on the ground, there is the risk that research on treatment strategies may generate recommendations that are too broad and generic to be effective. Recommendations should relate

to specific needs and conditions in different communities. To effect change that is most needed, he said, “*You need to link the reality from volunteering to what activists are asking for*”.<sup>38</sup>

Pro-Hope International in The Gambia provides a powerful example of how a gender activist responded to people’s need for food security, thereby achieving a number of objectives simultaneously. The gender activist, also the founder of Pro-Hope International, is involved in a programme to combat gender violence and promote access to reproductive health services. She recognised that one of the priorities in the remote village of Keneba was for food security. By involving local women volunteers in establishing a community garden, she supported them to meet basic needs, but in the process she empowered them also to take control of their lives. In this way she contributed to the wider goal of combating gender violence.

In the Volunteer Citizen Committees for Development established in Bangladesh, discussed on the previous page, volunteers have developed their skills to champion the development needs of their communities and have fostered participation and social inclusion by consulting a broader spectrum of people about their priorities for community development.

## SOCIAL ACTIVISM DEPENDS ON VOLUNTEERS

It is widely acknowledged that social activist organisations tend to be under-resourced, especially community-based organisations, and often turn to volunteers to help implement their activities. Social activism also depends on the support of volunteers who serve on advisory groups, on organising committees and as board members of civil society organisations. For example, as members of a youth committee, a select group of young Jordanian men and women advise the small staff of the Sisterhood is Global Institute – Jordan (SIGI/J) on issues related to women’s rights and gender violence. Similarly, in Pro-Hope International campaigns, volunteers have leveraged their personal and professional contacts to secure meetings with key political leaders: “*By combining [volunteer] activists with paid staff we are able to do much more than if we just relied on the social activists who are paid*”, said the Technical Advisor of the organisation.<sup>40</sup>

Volunteer engagement at the local level is also fundamental to achieving the objectives of development and social change. For many people, changes at the local level are the ones that matter most in their day-to-day lives. While a law was passed in Pakistan in 2004, making honour killings punishable by harsh sentencing, including the death penalty, in reality honour killings continue with impunity. Recognising the need to change behaviours within families and communities, volunteers and paid activists with Just Peace International and other organisations in the area, “*developed a strong network at the grassroots level in order to curb this menace by united action*”, reported a *Rehbar* (Guide) with the organisation.<sup>41</sup> In the process, they made a contribution toward Millennium Development Goal 3, which aims to promote gender equality and empower women.

Volunteering can also make the language of social activism more relevant and understandable at a grassroots level. In Jamaica, for example, volunteers played a key role helping people understand the macro-economic jargon of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) by putting the issues in terms that were easy to understand and providing practical examples to which ordinary people could relate. In this way, volunteers helped build a consciousness amongst a broad spectrum of people about the likely impact of IMF policies and the need for policy change to improve socio-economic conditions in Jamaica.<sup>42</sup> In so doing, they supported the pursuit of Millennium Development Goal 8, which aims to develop a global partnership for development, in part through addressing the special needs of Lesser Developed Countries (LDCs).

These examples show that volunteering and activism have complementary roles to play in fostering participation by people from a range of backgrounds in development and social change. A fellow from the Institute for Civic Education in Vietnam (ICEVN) describes the complementarity as follows:

“To make social activism successful, we need the support of people. One of the most important ‘people’ here are the volunteers. All social activism needs volunteers to support their ideas, to spread out the activities and to engage in these. The volunteers have time, prosperity, talent, ideas and enthusiasm, but need a vision, a place to contribute their efforts beneficially. That is, they need the social activists. The social activists should provide the volunteers with clear vision and broaden opportunities for them to participate”.<sup>43</sup>

## CONSTRAINTS AND LIMITATIONS

While the complementarity between volunteering and social activism fosters participation among diverse people and in a multiplicity of ways, it is important to consider that participation and social inclusion may be constrained by a range of factors. Racial and ethnic prejudices, insensitivity to religious obligations, family, social and cultural demands on women, as well as stereotypical views of disabled people and other groups can in fact limit people’s participation in giving, social action and development.

Volunteers from minority groups may be apprehensive that they will encounter racism or racist attacks in the course of their activities, while disabled people may be concerned about being perceived as passive recipients of aid rather than aid providers. Many women with families and individuals who observe certain religious practices may not be able to participate unless their time constraints, transportation and even child-care responsibilities are taken into account and catered for.

It is important to recognise that opening up space for participation through volunteering and social activism creates opportunities for engagement of all kinds. While this ensures opportunities for people to participate in the pursuit of local, national and global development goals, it also means that there will inevitably be space created for participation in activities that arguably do not promote positive social change or the common good. This paper intentionally focuses on forms of participation for the common good, encompassing both volunteering and social activism, which contribute to achieving widely-held development goals in line with universal principles of equality, including gender equality, non-discrimination and peace.

# Participation and development

If we accept that volunteering and social activism can enhance people's participation, how does that actually happen and what impact do volunteers make? In this section we explore six ways in which different forms of volunteering, including aspects of social activism, can help fulfil development goals

## PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION

Contrary to the perceptions and stereotypes held by some people, the background study shows that volunteers are not only wealthy people helping those with less. Many volunteers are in fact living in poverty themselves or face other challenges but are taking action to improve the conditions of their own lives and those of the communities in which they live. A five-country study in southern Africa found that the pattern of volunteering is quite different from social service volunteering in industrialised countries, where those who

provide service are generally more affluent than the beneficiaries. In Africa, where poverty is so prevalent, volunteering is largely the domain and the achievement of the poor. It is the extension of a helping hand between equals.<sup>44</sup>

The background study on volunteering and social activism shows that volunteering can help women and other marginalised groups gain the confidence and skills to advocate for their interests in the public domain. Perhaps one of the most powerful examples of volunteering as an entry point for inclusion in development comes from Latin America. Here, a UNV/UNIFEM project, operating in five countries, is focused on strengthening women's influence on participatory decision-making processes at the local level while also highlighting women's existing voluntary contributions to participatory processes. It merges traditional forms of volunteering with more activist strategies, by training women volunteers in soup kitchens how to advocate for greater resources from the government for improved access to food, health services and economic opportunities.

Because of this project, women's participation has been broadened to include both traditional types of volunteering and more activist approaches, enabling them to draw on their knowledge gained through their work in soup kitchens and more generally, as caretakers, to advocate for the needs of the community. The UNV/UNIFEM project provides an example of how women are actively contributing to Millennium Development Goal 3, which focuses on promoting gender equality and empowering women. One concern that emerges, however, is that wider participation by women places an additional strain on the very people who are already carrying a heavy load as caretakers and caregivers.

## UNV/UNIFEM: Promoting women's role in development

While the international women's movement yielded some important advances for gender equality, women are still under-represented in decision-making processes. Recognising this fact, as well as the important role of women in development, the United Nations Volunteer Programme and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) jointly initiated the project "Engendering budgets: Valuing women's voluntary contributions to national development of Latin America".

Currently operating in five Latin American countries, the project seeks to strengthen women's influence on participatory decision-making processes at the local level while also highlighting women's existing voluntary contributions to participatory processes. Through capacity building activities such as human rights education, training on policy dialogue and networking, grassroots women and female community leaders, who are volunteers themselves, are building new skills and knowledge to engage in the public domain.

Empowered with new confidence, skills and knowledge, women who were previously without a voice in local decision-making are now making their concerns, priorities and issues heard.<sup>45</sup>

## FOSTERING PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

Changing social behaviour, norms and beliefs requires transformation at the individual level. While typically the most difficult to achieve, personal transformation can dramatically improve the day-to-day lives of many people, reducing their risk of disease, hunger and violence, among other issues. Taken collectively, these behavioural changes also serve to make homes and communities safer, prompt people to clean up the environment, and make interactions more peaceful and respectful in general.

This is well illustrated by Nina's story shared at the beginning of this paper (page 4). Her volunteer experience with the International Movement ATD Fourth World brought about a personal transformation in her orientation towards people who were previously not in her immediate world – in this case children in poverty living in disadvantaged communities in Manila. While Nina previously viewed street children as 'different' from other children, and was afraid to come into contact with them, her perspective and behaviour towards street children changed following her volunteering experience. She no longer sees street children as different or threatening, but rather views them like all children, with dreams and hopes of their own. Her continued involvement with the International Movement ATD Fourth World provides her with a range of opportunities through which she can put into practice her new beliefs and perspectives on social inclusion and poverty. The International Movement ATD Fourth World, is a volunteer-driven network dedicated to overcoming the exclusion and injustice of persistent poverty. Central to their campaigning efforts is a commitment to breaking down social barriers, particularly between people living in poverty and those from other backgrounds. *"By encouraging this, we build a knowledge base with the people themselves, which enables us to move the debate to higher levels"*, said a member of the ATD Fourth World Volunteers Corps.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, in addition to promoting social inclusion, ATD's approach enables the organisation to gain broad-based support for legislation such as the Law Against Exclusion passed in France in 1998. More recently, in its campaign "Ending Extreme Poverty, a Road to Peace", ATD volunteers and poverty activists around the world signed a petition, gathered signatures, organised community events and press briefings, and met with government officials to raise awareness and advocate for the rights of people living in poverty to equality and dignity.

## GATHERING KNOWLEDGE FOR DEVELOPMENT

Volunteers can serve as important reservoirs of knowledge that strengthen development programmes. By gathering accurate information about on-the-ground conditions and feeding this into programmes that aim to change socio-economic and health conditions, volunteers contribute to shaping campaigns and development programmes.

### Advocating for Personal Responsibility in Combating Climate Change

Chinese volunteers from NGOs, universities and community groups including UNV volunteers, used the 2007 Shanghai Live Earth Concert as an opportunity to raise awareness about climate change. Their aim was to demonstrate how individuals can change their daily lives to help combat global warming.

In preparation for the show, UNV volunteers worked with Live Earth and leading environmental NGOs to adapt over eighty climate-change solutions to the Chinese context. Volunteers from these organizations then engaged the public to pledge to integrate these solutions into their lives to help reduce the carbon footprint – for example, by changing to energy efficient light bulbs or keeping air conditioners above 26 degrees. In total over 50,000 citizens were reached directly with the Live Earth Shanghai messages before the show.

At the concert, Live Earth Volunteers helped "green the show" by educating concertgoers on how to dispose of their trash in an environmentally friendly way. Because of their efforts, 75% of the rubbish from the concert was recycled, composted or reused. In delivering a message of hope and change for the environment, these volunteers played their part in helping people transform their personal lives so as to promote environmental sustainability, which is the focus of Millennium Development Goal 7.<sup>47</sup>

For example, volunteers working with the Sisterhood is Global Institute – Jordan (SIGI/J) provided invaluable support to recent efforts to secure greater legal protection for women suffering from violence. Throughout the country, volunteers observed relevant court trials, spoke to survivors of gender violence and met with women in jail. With the information collected by the volunteers, the organisation's paid staff met with key political leaders and successfully influenced the passage of a new law against domestic violence, which “provides greater protection for women and children who are victims of violence in the family and expands opportunities for counselling and mediation”.<sup>48</sup>

The volunteers involved in Community Development Volunteers for Technical Assistance (CDVTA), the elderly rights project in Cameroon (see Francis' story on page 4), provide another example of the way in which their knowledge of local conditions enables them to serve as advocates for community beneficiaries. Because CDVTA volunteers are involved in “*all phases of project cycle and work, from identification, planning, execution to monitoring and evaluation, they also serve as internal advocates for the elderly and other disadvantaged communities influencing organisational priorities and projects*”, explained the Director of the organisation.<sup>49</sup>

In South Africa in 2008, the responses to waves of xenophobic attacks by local people on foreigners – many of whom are refugees from Zimbabwe – demonstrate how volunteers can play a significant role in generating the information necessary to take constructive and comprehensive action. In order to foster advocacy at the highest levels of government, the Human Rights Commission met with faith-based organisations and charities helping with health services and food distribution, to understand the magnitude of the challenges facing people on the ground around safety and citizenship issues.

## ADVOCACY, CAMPAIGNING AND RAISING AWARENESS

While often unrecognised for their advocacy activities, volunteers can be instrumental in efforts related to agenda-setting and policy-making. Concerned about poverty and injustice, individuals around the globe are participating by engaging in a range of advocacy activities intended to effect positive social change and, at times, even political change.

For example, playing a strategic role, volunteers organise meetings with key political figures and meet with government officials to discuss local development needs, the rights of marginalised populations and required policy changes.

Time and time again, volunteers have supported action on a scale that would not have been possible without their involvement, and have achieved broad-based social change. Take, for example, the Campaign to Ban Land Mines, the international women's movement and the civil rights movement in the United States. Volunteers from all walks of life were undoubtedly the life source of these actions. More recently, in 2007, volunteers in the UK helped Christian Aid execute a 1,000 mile march, the longest march in UK history, to raise awareness about the carbon footprint of the West on global warming.<sup>50</sup>

Campaigning is a key advocacy strategy. As leaders and participants, volunteers drive campaigns at the local, national and international levels.<sup>51</sup> Through coordinated actions such as public marches and rallies, lobbying, and information dissemination, volunteers highlight pressing issues of gender, economic and social inequality and call on government, business and civil society to act. A recent example, as noted at the beginning of this paper, is the Global Call to Action Against Poverty, which relies on volunteers in its international campaign to mobilise support among governments and civil society to realise the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

While campaigning action tends to be associated with large international organisations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and ActionAid International, all of which have more of an activist profile, traditional volunteer organisations are also participating in similar types of campaigns. Leveraging their

worldwide membership, the World Association for Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGS) facilitates opportunities for their members to participate in Global Action Days such as World AIDS Day, the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, and Women's Day.<sup>52</sup> International volunteer sending organisations such as Skillshare International are also making important contributions to campaigns for greater justice and equality.

While often about policy change and legislation development, campaigning can also be used to influence positive social change through education. With the help of volunteers, education and awareness campaigns gain a reach that would be impossible if it were not for voluntary contributions of time, skill and energy.

At the same time, a number of study participants pointed out that in some countries advocacy activities may be illegal or actively discouraged. This makes it difficult for volunteers and social activists to engage in advocacy, campaigning and awareness-raising and may drive them into other, lower-profile, activities that are directed at social change.

## CONTRIBUTING TO EMPOWERMENT

An important strategy for human development and social change involves the empowerment of people to gain greater control over their lives. Not only does volunteering help empower beneficiaries, but it is also a means for volunteers themselves to be empowered through the experiences and insights they gain.<sup>53</sup>

The idea of empowerment often refers to marginalised groups such as youth, indigenous peoples, people living with HIV/AIDS and disabled people, and is frequently associated with women.<sup>54</sup> Study after study has shown that empowering women is beneficial for a community's social and economic development, in addition to having intrinsic value on its own. Women are not only critical to economic productivity, but also have an acute sense of the needs of their communities, and thus have an important role to play in the development process.

At the heart of empowerment is the development of new knowledge and skills gained through participation. The background study demonstrates that there are numerous instances in which skills development has enabled people to improve their own lives and the lives of others, and how volunteers play a critical role in imparting skills and implementing development programmes for empowerment.

For example, as described earlier, the Togolese volunteers in *Jeunes Volontaires pour l'Environnement* - JVE (Youth Volunteers for the Environment) have increased the status of women in rural communities by training them to use solar power for purifying water and cooking. This has empowered the women to gain greater control over their day-to-day social and economic lives. In Uganda, literacy and education is the strategy adopted by the Uganda Rural Literacy and Community Development Association (URLCODA) to

## AIS: Advocating for a rights-based approach to health

A vast network of volunteers with the *Acción Internacional para la Salud* – AIS (International Action for Health) in Bolivia engages in advocacy activities aimed at influencing decision-making processes, priorities and knowledge of government officials, and policies related to the right to health, education, food, nutrition and basic sanitation.

Alongside these political activities, AIS volunteers also work to increase public awareness on these same issues, particularly in vulnerable communities.

Largely due to the commitment of its volunteers to the right to health and its strategy of engaging the poor as volunteers, AIS has successfully influenced some local and national policies such as the adoption of a law on child nutrition, as well as a law which allows civil society organisations to access information about public policies, to monitor these policies and to evaluate decisions concerning the fight against poverty.

The organisation is actively contributing to the pursuit of Millennium Development Goals 1 (eradicating poverty and hunger), 4 (reducing child mortality) and 6 (combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases). It has also influenced the government's reporting on progress toward meeting the MDGs among other important issues like Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs).<sup>55</sup>

help Ugandans living in poverty gain greater control over their lives through new knowledge and resources. This also contributes towards Millennium Development Goals 2 and 3, which seek to increase literacy rates among men and women.

## DEEPENING CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Civic participation in one's own community and in democratic processes is another expression of volunteer action.<sup>56</sup> By participating in community meetings, interacting with local government officials on development needs, voting in elections and leading a community clean-up task team, for example, engaged citizens help build cohesive communities and strengthen democratic governance.

Civic participation is also widely recognised as being critical to the success of poverty reduction programmes. Indeed, research shows that citizen participation in development processes results in more effective and sustainable projects, by engendering 'ownership' among participants and incorporating local knowledge and priorities into project identification, design and implementation.

### Buddyz Club: Youth engaging for change

The Mkhazane Buddyz Club in South Africa is a testament to the power of youth to bring about change in their lives and the lives of their communities.

For many months, school children in Mkhazane in KwaZulu-Natal province had to contend with a huge *udhonga* (a gaping ditch) in the road on their way to school, making travel difficult and on rainy days, impossible. Club members from the Mkhazane Primary School identified the *udhonga* as the number one problem affecting them and their communities. Together *"they came up with a plan of action, which involved lobbying support from the school principal, the school governing body, the Department of Agriculture and the local Headman and Chief"*.

As a result of these efforts, government joined together with community members to resolve the problem. Initially the children along with parents collected stones to fill the ditch and the Department of Agriculture sent trucks and machines to drop the stones into it. The Department of Public Works then increased their involvement and committed to building a bridge over the ditch. Today, the Buddyz monitor progress of this project and stand ready to draw on their new leadership, communication and teamwork skills when the next opportunity to help improve their communities arises.<sup>58</sup>

The Mkhazane Buddyz Club in South Africa is one such example. It engages children, enabling them to gain an understanding of the political and decision-making processes at work, and equipping them with the skills to influence those processes.

The Kyrdany village, of Ovruch district in the Ukraine, is another example of a community that took a participatory approach to tackling its development challenges, in the wake of the Chernobyl Disaster. As one Kyrdany youth leader remarked, *"It was painful for us to see our village dying: that is why the whole village gathered together and established Community Organisations"*.<sup>57</sup> Through these volunteer associations at the village and district level, community members identified their development needs, such as access to clean water, renovation of the school and reconstruction of the health clinic. Guided by a development plan created by the community groups, volunteers organised the necessary resources and developed partnerships with different levels of government to ensure sustainability of the projects. Not only did the citizens of the Ovruch district realise their priorities, but in the process they strengthened community cohesion and developed a sense of ownership over their village's recovery and development.

These examples show that by volunteering, people start on a pathway that can lead in many directions, with some individuals becoming more directly activist in nature. Participation in activities such as those mentioned above, contributes to personal as well as social transformation and gives people the opportunity to get involved in development programmes. While social activists can play a major role in creating opportunities for people to get involved, thereby swelling the mobilisation of people, we also see the indispensable value of the work carried out by volunteers on the ground when they provide services, respond to moments of humanitarian crisis and generate the information on which social activism depends.

# Widening and sustaining participation

What are the factors that propel people from small-scale, intermittent giving to longer-term active participation? The background study suggests that there are four critical factors that deepen and sustain participation: opportunities for involvement, good volunteer management, recognition of the value of volunteering, and an enabling environment created by the mutual actions of government, civil society and the private sector.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR INVOLVEMENT

According to the views gathered in the course of the background study, the establishment of effective volunteering infrastructure is crucial to increasing people's involvement in social and development issues. For example, a national volunteer and community action centre, such as Volunteer Development Scotland, provides opportunities for people to participate in activities as diverse as reading to the blind, legal work, and advocacy and campaigning for human rights and other causes. This model aims to widen the range of opportunities for people to choose from and is thus able to strengthen their engagement with local issues, national issues and global concerns.

Volunteer-involving organisations, such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Amnesty International and Volunteer Development Scotland (VDS), point out that people need to be able to participate in different ways according to their interests, capabilities and available time at different stages of life. Their interests change over the years; their commitments and their availability for participation vary, and volunteer centres need to respond to this. In order to be as inclusive as possible and to avoid marginalising people of different cultures and faiths, or women who are the primary caregivers and caretakers, opportunities for participation need to be wide-ranging and flexible.

Take, for example, the case of Nina, featured at the start of this paper. The International Movement ATD Fourth World provided a range of opportunities through which she could contribute to fighting social exclusion and poverty. Another example comes from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which, according to one interviewee from the IFRC, is actively seeking to involve volunteers from diverse cultures and religions in order to take a more inclusive approach to their work. Amnesty International, too, in an attempt to respond to a demand for a wider spectrum of volunteer opportunities, introduced activities of moderate intensity, in addition to their existing activities that were typically short-term and casual or long-term and intense. According to a study participant working in Special Projects at Amnesty International, the experiment with more moderate intensity opportunities "*proved very popular*".<sup>59</sup>

Increasing opportunities for involvement makes the promotion of awareness about volunteering itself a key priority. For example, in 2006, Volunteer Development Scotland launched a campaign called 'You won't believe what you can do', which was meant to encourage volunteering in greater diversity and numbers. Key aims of the campaign were to challenge myths about the barriers to volunteering, educate the public on the range of volunteer opportunities they can undertake and to encourage people to get involved in their communities.<sup>60</sup> Volunteer organisations around the world are engaged in similar efforts, with the aim of increasing the number and broadening the diversity of individuals engaged as active citizens.

## GOOD VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

Good volunteer management is a prerequisite for increasing the value of the volunteering experience – both for the volunteers and to strengthen the impact of volunteering on development and social change. The background study suggests that this is important to ensure that people are engaged, feel valued for their contribution and are integrated into organisations – these are all factors that make volunteers more likely to sustain their participation over the long-term.

Good volunteer management can also help volunteers engage more meaningfully with the circumstances in which they are choosing to operate, particularly if it provides opportunities for reflection. *“How [else] can traditional volunteers come to define themselves in political terms and recognise that many of the problems they are trying to address, go back to government policies? Many of the long intensive volunteer schemes are just focused on the voluntary dimension and are not making the link between serving in a voluntary role to organising around political or policy issues”*, reported the Research Director of the Center for Social Development, at Washington University in St. Louis.<sup>61</sup>

This strengthens the imperative for volunteer-involving organisations to create opportunities for structured reflection and learning related to justice, participatory development and democratic citizenship. Through such opportunities, volunteers develop greater awareness about how national policies and global dynamics impact on local conditions and become better able to connect their individual actions with larger issues and causes. Making people aware of the importance of their contribution to development and the social fabric more generally, helps sustain their commitment to participation through their own changing life cycles.

## RECOGNISING THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEERING

Given the contributions that volunteers and social activists make to development and the imperative to encourage even greater participation by citizens in the fight against poverty and inequality, these positive actions for the betterment of society must be widely valued and recognized. *“Volunteerism has to be recognised, because it’s a value”*, said the Executive Director of People’s Watch in India.<sup>62</sup>

Referring to the need to value all types of contributions, from traditional forms of volunteering to more social activist forms of volunteering, the Director of Volunteer Development Agency in Northern Ireland said, *“It is about respect and value for all of the ways that people are prepared to give their time”*.<sup>63</sup>

Recognition of the intrinsic value of people’s participation means that broad notions of both volunteering and social activism must be advanced. It is important to recognise the commonality and complementarity in both forms of participation and to make the labels of ‘volunteer’ and ‘social activist’ more inclusive.

The Wales Council for Voluntary Action’s 2007 ‘Volunteer of the Year Award’ demonstrates how embracing a broad notion of volunteerism translates into recognising the diverse ways in which people give their time. Last year the recipients of that award included both a campaigner for disabled rights and an elderly couple who had devoted their lives to raising money for a health-care facility for the terminally ill. In another example, the Association of Voluntary Service Organisations (AVSO) initiated a year-long campaign on 5 December 2007, International Day of the Volunteer, to showcase volunteer contributions across Europe. Called ‘Invisible Heroes’, the campaign shows how the varied actions of volunteers can be recognised.

In celebrating volunteerism, it is important also to pay tribute to informal contributions, as these types of participation are often overlooked. Speaking to this point, the Director of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation – Jamaica and the Eastern Caribbean said, “*These are the persons who ensure that communities remain cohesive, but these are the people who are not recognised*”.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, in her position as Asia Pacific Volunteering Development Delegate with the IFRC: Asia and Pacific Zone, one interviewee realised, “*There was a lot of [traditional forms of] volunteering happening that wasn’t being recognised*”.<sup>65</sup> As a result, she was formally tasked with celebrating volunteerism in the Asia Pacific region, including recognising traditional practices of volunteering.

Another finding from the background study suggests that, in addition to days such as International Volunteer Day (IVD), which is celebrated every year on 5 December, volunteer awards, recognition ceremonies, publicity campaigns and volunteer focal points within organisations are all important strategies for acknowledging the diverse contributions of volunteers around the world. Much of the inspiration and momentum behind these events was generated during the first International Year of the Volunteer (2001), which succeeded in significantly raising the profile of volunteerism. Actors in all sectors – civil society, government and private – must continue to build on these efforts, in advance of the International Year of the Volunteer +10 (2011).

## CREATING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR VOLUNTEERING AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

The three factors cited above (opportunities for involvement, good volunteer management and recognising the value of volunteering) are significant enablers for increasing participation in social action. However, whether they are present does in many cases depend on the extent to which an enabling environment for volunteering has been established.

Participation helps foster trust and accountability between citizens and states, while creating the conditions for social inclusion and the achievement of national development goals. Governments need to ensure that policy frameworks are in place to guide the direction, planning and resource allocation for programmes that foster volunteering and participation in general and support volunteering for development in particular. Volunteering must be factored into national development priorities and strategies and protected by legislation. In line with UN Resolution 60/134, governments need to make provision for the allocation of resources to volunteering strategies and structures within national budgeting cycles and processes, support the establishment of volunteer infrastructure (e.g. volunteer centres and staff) and monitor and assess the impact of volunteering programmes on development.

Both volunteering and social activism have an intrinsic value to civil society, beyond their instrumental value for helping to advance local, national and global development objectives. Civil society organisations need to launch advocacy and awareness programmes to create a supportive environment in which the common and complementary contributions of both volunteering and social activism are recognised, valued and deployed. Civil society must also promote increased engagement between the range of volunteer-involving organisations (e.g. humanitarian organisations, volunteer centres, human rights organisations, faith-based organisations and volunteer-sending organisations) to share information and practices, and to identify potential areas for engagement around common goals. Staff capacity must be built to run effective volunteer programmes and community-based organisations must be empowered to support volunteers. Lack of information hinders participation and, for this reason, civil society organisations must provide basic

education (e.g. civic education, education on people's rights, etc.) to involve more people, including young people, in decision-making processes.

Increasingly the private sector has recognised that its success is linked to social and environmental sustainability, and depends on securing public trust. Large as well as small enterprises can make the support of employee volunteering programmes a platform of their corporate social responsibility strategy, including volunteering aimed at promoting development and social change. Ideally, these programmes should be flexible and promote a diverse range of participation opportunities to help employees develop a wider understanding and deepen their involvement in society. They should also consider volunteering as added value when recruiting new staff members. Companies need to partner with government and civil society organisations to establish volunteer centres and other collaborative initiatives through which volunteers can access opportunities to serve in organisations and local communities.

Recognising the centrality of citizen participation for sustainable development, peace and good governance, many United Nations and other international agencies are already involved in programmes that foster citizen participation. In view of their extensive experience and resource bases, they need to support public, private and civil society partners in putting in place vibrant and enabling volunteer environments. They also need to collaborate with one another to increase the number of opportunities for volunteers from diverse circumstances to be involved in development. The United Nations and other agencies also have a role to play in promoting the value and recognition of the diverse forms of volunteerism, including volunteer action which shares some commonalities with social activism.

# The way forward

According to the *Millennium Development Report 2007*, today fewer people are living in poverty, child mortality has decreased, more children are enrolled in primary school and women's political participation has increased.<sup>66</sup> The centrality of people's participation for sustainable development has been widely recognised and some opportunities for participatory development have been opened by civil society, governments and international institutions. Despite this progress, the participation of ordinary people in development must be broadened and the quality of their engagement greatly improved if we are to meet the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. Only in this way will we move closer to achieving a just, equitable, caring and socially cohesive world.

A critical finding of this paper is that volunteering and social activism have the potential to help foster the level and diversity of participation needed to confront the major tensions and development challenges of our time. These diverse forms of participation are already making tangible contributions to poverty reduction, sustainable development and social inclusion. However, in order to release their full potential for advancing human development, equality, social justice and peace, the common and complementary roles of volunteering and social activism must be widely recognised and vigorously supported across all spheres – in civil society, as well as in the private and public sectors.

As shown throughout the paper, volunteering and social activism are an expression of our common humanity and our shared stake in this world. Both forms of participation provide powerful vehicles for individuals from all walks of life to develop a lifelong engagement in their communities and the wider society. In this way, volunteering and social activism are an empowering and positive force for development and change. Volunteering can help people take their first step to long-term involvement in development, while social activism can provide leadership to individuals, define areas for engagement and mobilise people. Volunteering helps to keep social activism relevant to local communities and social activism in turn depends on volunteers.

Together, volunteering and social activism can help reduce alienation and powerlessness among individuals from varying cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. In the process they strengthen social cohesion within local communities, at the national level and across the world. Through a myriad of activities, volunteering and social activism can also enhance the efforts of governments to respond to situations of humanitarian crisis and socio-economic hardship, addressing the basic needs of individuals and tackling the underlying causes of poverty and inequality.

To leverage the combined potential of volunteering and social activism for development, it is first necessary to embrace a broad understanding of both, recognising the diverse manifestations of both forms of participation and the dynamic relationship between the two. This will require changing perspectives and behaviour rooted in narrow and stereotyped views of both volunteering and social activism. It also requires a commitment to identifying common development goals and opportunities for mutually beneficial partnerships which transcend political differences<sup>67</sup> and harness the synergy of action across both volunteering and social activism.

To guide these efforts, more learning is required to understand and document the ways in which both volunteering and social activism are contributing to participatory development and social change. Research should be undertaken in organisations, sectors, countries and regions, to shed light on the practical contributions of both volunteering and social activism to development. In-depth case studies could help explore models for innovative participatory development and for inclusion. This should include an analysis of faith-based organisations and movements, as well as examples of collaboration between government and civil society.

To change perspectives and actions, these efforts should be complemented by meaningful dialogue between volunteer-involving and activist organisations, within civil society, and between civil society and government. Further to this, dialogue should help foster the development of policies, practices and mechanisms across both public and private sectors and particularly within civil society, which support and broaden the spectrum of participation for development.

Through this discussion paper, CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) and United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme mounts a challenge to their organisations, to civil society and to the other sectors and makes the following call:

Embrace the recognition that, together, volunteering and social activism have a fundamental role to play in broadening and sustaining people's participation in human development and social change. Integrate this understanding in organisational and sectoral values, policies and practices. With a shared understanding of the common and interdependent characteristics of volunteering and social activism, we can release the vast potential of volunteerism for advancing human development at local level as well as within nations and across the world.

“ The volunteering and activist communities are simultaneously the same community while also being communities that need each other. ”

Honorary President of CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation

“ Both need each other and need to cooperate and complement their efforts. I think total volunteer work is not able to change a situation, and social activism, when it is elite and not involved in the ground and not providing any type of real services on the ground, they aren't going to get the support they need, the support on the ground. Any issue/action needs to be based on both; they need to have two wings. ”

Founder and General Coordinator of Sisterhood is Global Institute - Jordan

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This story and the others that follow below were collected in the course of the study. Names are fictitious, but the activities are factual. A full list of the sources is included in the acknowledgements.
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- <sup>51</sup> In *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink define campaigning as "A set of linked activities, in which people are mobilised to participate in pursuit of a common goal." pgs. 6-8
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- <sup>54</sup> In the Guidelines on Women's Empowerment by The United Nations Population Information Network (POPIN), the UN Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) women's empowerment is defined as follows: "Women's empowerment has five components: women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally". <http://www.un.org/popin/unfpa/taskforce/guide/iatfwemp.gdl.html>
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