



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz
International Programme for
a Culture of Peace and Dialogue



«Youth Volunteering and Dialogue» International Conference

Background Paper

Bureau of Strategic Planning, UNESCO

Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
3-5December 2013

«Youth Volunteering and Dialogue»

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

(Margaret Mead, anthropologist)

Introduction

In a world of globalization and inequality, which is simultaneously bringing people closer together and widening the divisions between them, listening to the voices of youth and engaging them in development processes has become a necessity. Today, youth everywhere invent, articulate, and reformulate the ‘lingua franca’ of globalization, through which their demands for inclusiveness, empowerment, prosperity and sustainability passes with a hitherto unknown intensity. Geographic and cultural borders have become more porous, leading to unprecedented encounters, exchanges and ‘togetherness’, and making instant connectivity a reality in many parts of the world through ICTs. Indeed, the advances in technology and innovation have radically changed the ways of communicating, networking, learning and participating as national and global citizens, and young people are at the centre of these new trends and developments.

Yet, as we know, the positive effects of globalization have so far been unevenly distributed, leaving many behind and even widening existing inequalities. The global financial crisis has highlighted the fragility of our social, financial and environmental systems, resulting in a deep sense of discontentment that reverberates around the globe, along with a call for a renewed solidarity and inclusiveness. Globalization, with its added weight in economic, environmental and demographic terms, has uncovered old and created new fault lines between and within countries, regions and continents, also giving way to new obstacles to social cohesion, lasting peace and sustainable development. There is the sense that our world is currently experiencing a crisis of an intellectual and moral nature and that the involvement of youth in forging new narratives for the future will be essential.

The United Nations Development Group’s (UNDG) recent report “The World We Want” on the global consultations concerning the post-2015 development agenda has underscored the extent to which people and especially youth now demand to play an active role in shaping and changing their world. Due to widespread inequalities and insecurity, a sense of injustice is widespread, which affect marginalized, excluded and poor people the most. Also, the consultations have established a clear linkage between sustainable development, the eradication of poverty and enhanced governance. Due to the fact that the world’s realities and challenges are increasingly complex and interlinked, there is a need for a sustainable development agenda that is integrated, holistic and universal, applying to all countries and all people, especially the young, yet responsive to the complexities, needs and capacities of individual countries.¹

¹ A Million Voices – The World We Want Report,

<http://www.worldwewant2015.org/bitcache/9158d79561a9de6b34f95568ce8b389989412f16?vid=422422&disposition=inline&op=view> (EN);

<http://www.worldwewant2015.org/bitcache/29fe97019e2f62b68881025679d6b3be7ca66941?vid=423172&disposition=inline&op=view> (AR)

Youth voices – a key to sustainability

Around the world, young women and men are driving change and claiming respect for fundamental freedoms and rights, opportunities to learn, and to work and participate in decisions that affect them. Today, young people have become important partners of dialogue for governments and one of the strongest voices of civil society. Over the past few years the need to engage more effectively with youth has become the focus of numerous conferences, strategies, and future-oriented initiatives across the globe. The reasons are many and interlinked. First, the number of 12-24 year olds is set to rise to 1.5 billion by 2035² and many regions are already confronted with a so-called “youth bulge”, where young people constitute a majority of the population. In the Arab world alone, 60 per cent of the population is less than twenty-five years old.³ Secondly, more than 75 million young people are currently unemployed around the globe; this is a record number, projected to remain at the same level at least until 2016.⁴ In fact, the actual global youth unemployment rate of 12.6 per cent dramatically overshadows the global adult unemployment rate of 4.8 per cent. About 152 million young workers live below the poverty line (US\$1.25 per day), a figure that comprises 24 per cent of the total working poor. Regions such as North Africa and the Middle East show unequal patterns of unemployment based on gender. And thirdly, besides unemployment, underemployment and working in the informal economy is a reality for 87 per cent of the world’s youth in developing countries.⁵

Behind these abstract numbers are millions of young people facing acute challenges that affect important aspects of their lives. Their expectations are defined by a limited horizon and the future does not appear to bring any options, clarity and/or relief. Turning their disappointment and disillusion into the ability to dream and act for a better world has therefore become a top priority, if the notion of “sustainable societies” is to be meaningfully realized in the future. Clearly, the youth represents a huge resource pool in terms of their potential contribution to sustainable development, peace and poverty eradication. This scenario becomes a reality when and if they engaged as responsible social actors and innovators and are considered equal and active players in developing and implementing sustainable development policies, and not only as mere passive beneficiaries. Young people are part of the solution and not of the problem.

Although they are far from a homogenous group, young people articulate in very clear terms the need for open and honest debate about what the future world should – and should not – look like. To this end, UNESCO’s Operational Strategy on Youth 2014 -2021 underscores the importance of creating an enabling environment for youth to fulfil their rights and responsibilities, to prosper as human beings, to be heard, engaged and valued as social actors and knowledge holders in specialized fields. Moreover, UNESCO acts towards ensuring that young women and men are engaged in policies and programmes which affect their lives, and also lead action to promote peace and sustainable development in their countries and communities.⁶ UNESCO’s action continues to address a diversity of themes,

² The World Bank World Development Report for 2007

³ Arab Human Development Report 2010, UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States, p. 12

⁴ ILO: “Global Employment Trends for Youth 2012”, May 2012, p. 13

⁵ ILO: “Global Employment Trends for Youth 2012”, May 2012

⁶ UNESCO Operational Strategy on Youth, 2013

disciplines and issues: from education to culture, sciences, humanities, communication and information. Strategic and economy of scale initiatives that are interconnected and address both the upstream (policy/governance) and the downstream (societal/grass-roots) level have proved more efficient than on-off, small scale projects which are disconnected from the overall policy environment on youth.

The UNESCO Youth Forum (8th edition), held prior to UNESCO's 37th General Conference in November 2013, gathered young people from all over the world to share their experiences and ideas on the theme of "Youth and Social Inclusion: Civic Engagement, Dialogue and Skills Development" with a view to developing and expanding UNESCO's strategy on youth. The recommendations of the Forum's Outcome Document recognized that "young people in all countries are key agents for social change, economic development and technological innovation", and affirmed that "investment in youth development and education is crucial for sustainable social, economic and cultural development". The Outcome document also underscored the importance of intercultural dialogue in discussions on the environment, the economy, health and education with a view to preventing conflicts and promoting a culture of peace and sustainable development.

Youth volunteerism – a unique resource

Volunteerism is one of the most basic expressions of human behaviour and arises out of long-established ancient traditions of sharing and reciprocal exchanges. At its core are relationships and their potential to enhance the well-being of individuals and communities. There is evidence that volunteerism promotes social cohesion and trust.⁷ Volunteerism is not only the backbone of civil society organizations and social and political movements, but also of many health, education, housing and environmental programmes and a range of other civil society, public and private sector programmes worldwide. It is an integral part of every society.

The recent UN resolution on "Integrating Volunteering into the Next Decade", (adopted on February 13, 2013) underscored that volunteerism offers valuable opportunities for youth engagement and leadership to contribute to the sustainable development of peaceful and inclusive societies, while also allowing young people to acquire skills, build their capacities and increase their employability.⁸ The resolution emphasizes that volunteerism is an important component of any strategy aimed at poverty reduction, sustainable development, health, education, youth empowerment, climate change, disaster risk reduction, social integration, social welfare, humanitarian action, peace-building, and in particular, overcoming social exclusion and discrimination. The Resolution calls upon stakeholders to do their utmost to strengthen policies relating to volunteering, including youth volunteering, at the local, national and international levels, as well as integrating volunteering in all relevant issues of the United Nations as main objectives for the next decade.⁹

⁷ State of the World Volunteerism Report 2011, p.2

⁸ Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, 67/138 Integrating volunteering in the next decade, 13 February 2013

⁹ Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, 67/138 Integrating volunteering in the next decade, 13 February 2013.

Hence, the importance of volunteerism is manifold – and growing. Although volunteerism has always existed in different forms and manifestations, it is assuming increasing importance in today’s globalizing world, because of the way in which it maintains, even “insists upon”, the continuity of universal values such as solidarity and commitment. “At the heart of volunteerism lies a basic expression of human relationships”.¹⁰ By engaging in the life of communities and societies, volunteerism generates a sense of belonging and inclusion; through the direct involvement in change processes and support to new developments, it becomes a means of appropriating one’s own life and of assuming responsibilities in this regard.

Indeed, at the core of volunteerism is the notion that “our own well-being is intrinsically linked to what we contribute to the lives of others”.¹¹ Solidarity, compassion, empathy and cooperation run through all volunteering actions like a red thread. As these values are extremely relevant for strengthening the capacity of the most vulnerable by enhancing their physical, economic, spiritual and social well-being, volunteering can contribute to the reduction of exclusion. Social cohesion and trust thrive where volunteerism is prevalent. Hence, it has become clear that volunteerism should occupy its rightful place within any development consensus which has the enhancement of human well-being at its core.¹²

Volunteerism and Dialogue

While international volunteering is far from being a new phenomenon, it manifests itself in new ways, and has taken on new dimensions, in the context of globalization. Volunteer action does not happen exclusively in one domain, but rather permeates every aspect of life. At the same time, the expression of volunteerism is also influenced, even defined, by local cultural and social circumstances. In many societies, volunteerism is linked to long-established and deeply rooted traditions of sharing and reciprocal exchanges through which people apply their energy, talents, knowledge and other resources for mutual benefit.

Deeply ingrained in many communities around the world are systems characterized by solidarity, compassion, empathy and respect for others, often expressed through the giving of one’s time. Volunteering also expresses the desire to act on one’s feelings about justice and fairness in the face of inequality and to foster social harmony based on a shared interest in the well-being of one’s community. In most languages, there are words to express the concept of volunteerism. There is mounting evidence that volunteer engagement promotes the civic values and social cohesion, which mitigates violent conflict at all stages and that it even fosters reconciliation in post-conflict situations.

In the Arab world, “volunteerism” and “civil society” are merely new names for age-old traditions, which are embedded in consultative councils and secular organizations aimed at combatting poverty and underdevelopment. Volunteerism in Arabic is (*tatawa’a*) (تطوع) which means donating something. It also means to commit to a charitable activity that is not a religious requirement. It originates from the word (*tawa’a*) (طوع), which means

¹⁰ State of the World Volunteerism Report 2011, p. xx

¹¹ State of the World Volunteerism Report 2011, p. 89

¹² State of the World Volunteerism Report 2011, p. 3-6.

compliance, smoothness and flexibility. It is of utmost importance to understand and build upon such different approaches to volunteerism and to respect their embodied diversity.¹³

In this way, volunteerism is much more than just undertaking and completing a given task. Volunteerism creates and sustains bonds of trust, societal cohesion, and helps to forge a common sense of identity and destiny. In the same vein, dialogue is more and different from mere communication, no matter how rapidly the new developments in digital technology are advancing and rather independently of social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook.

Dialogue, understood as the ability to listen to the other, to adjust one's views and standpoints, and hence to change position and adapt to a new, emerging situation, is a hitherto unexplored tool in the general understanding of, and approaches to, volunteerism. This merits our attention, since volunteering and dialogue can reinforce each other when the purpose is to unite people for a common cause. Hence, it is of utmost importance to understand and forge new and dynamic linkages through intercultural dialogue and towards rapprochement of culture drawing on related skills and principles.

The Conference

The international conference "Youth Volunteering and Dialogue" focuses on the scope and direction of volunteerism in a diverse global world, where the notions of "social service" are as different as the societies they serve. The initiative builds on UNESCO's vast experience in this domain and on the active promotion of volunteerism by the Saudi Arabian Government, both within the country as a social, ethical and humanitarian engagement, and as part of a wider strategy to strengthen dialogue and understanding among young people from different countries and cultural backgrounds.

The Conference takes on this challenge by gathering some of the most relevant actors involved with volunteerism and intercultural dialogue, as well as youth representatives from different countries across the world, to identify and develop new and innovative approaches to youth-volunteerism through dialogue. The aim is to chart future avenues that can satisfy developmental needs of young people and enable them to grow with opportunities that foster hope, success, civic engagement and ultimately peace.

"Youth Volunteering and Dialogue" is one of the 10 projects within the "Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Programme for a Culture of Peace and Dialogue", for which an Agreement was signed between UNESCO and the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2010, also setting out the cooperation between UNESCO and the King Abdulaziz National Centre for Dialogue (KANCD).

During the 3-day event, the participating young volunteers, practitioners and experts will be provided with a variety of platforms for displaying and comparing the diversity of volunteerism and to jointly define 'best practices' in this important domain. Five workshops will be organized with a view to optimizing exchanges and knowledge-sharing:

¹³ State of the World Volunteerism Report 2011, pp. 2/55.

- **Workshop 1: Youth Volunteering and the Promotion of a Culture of Dialogue**

This workshop will bring different approaches to volunteerism to the forefront in an open dialogue between its practitioners. Dialogue begins within the family, community and country. Dialogue among governments, corporate leaders, civil society organizations and the public, with the active participation of youth, can help promote good governance and accountability, and it can foster transformative approaches and processes. The workshop participants will be invited to explore the nature of youth “social engagement” from different angles and through concrete examples of volunteering.

Guiding questions: In the era of instant connectivity, how can communication provide ideas and support for youth volunteer work all over the world? What would be the features of an inclusive “culture of dialogue” in the domain of volunteering?

- **Workshop 2: Youth Volunteering, Peace-Building and Humanitarian Assistance**

One of the most well-known and visible ‘faces’ of youth volunteerism is humanitarian aid. Volunteers all over the world have a potentially important role to play in disaster risk management as well as in post-conflict situations, but there are special challenges for young volunteers. The participants in this workshop are invited to discuss how local communities can play a role in the adaptation and mitigation of natural disasters when assisted and guided by well-informed, trained volunteers. Although a highly sensitive area, social contexts marked by conflict, communal strife, and even violence also benefit from volunteer interventions in the pursuit of reconciliation and peace.

Guiding questions: What are the most important obstacles to effective volunteering in the area of humanitarian assistance? What tools, skills and training are needed?

- **Workshop 3: Volunteerism, the Culture of Peace and Sustainable Development**

At the core of UNESCO’s mission is the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence. Because of the link between violence, poverty and low achievement of development objectives, sustainable development must be both inclusive and people-centred, at once benefiting and involving everyone. Devising an inter-generational pact, supporting gender equality and women’s empowerment, and reaching out to marginalized and excluded groups, are hence key factors in any future peace-building scenarios. The Workshop participants are invited to take up these issues when discussing how peace and sustainable development can be fully realized through new linkages between education and meaningful employment.

Guiding questions: What kind of relationship could be established between volunteerism, youth employment in the future? What could the concrete elements of a new, inter-generational “pact” be in this regard? How to ensure that it contributes to peace?

- **Workshop 4: Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue in Inclusive Societies**

Social transformations are giving rise to new challenges of deepening inequality, exclusion, and even tensions within societies, as globalization brings people with different cultures ever closer together. From this perspective, volunteering and especially youth volunteering can be a way to forge a connection between a rapidly developing world, on the one hand, and enhanced mutual understanding and cooperation, on the other. By promoting openness and dialogue, volunteering creates strong ties between different youth groups both nationally and internationally, also lending support to social inclusiveness. As volunteering has many facets and dimensions, a genuine appreciation of the richness of cultural diversity is required. This in turn presupposes the ability to be receptive and flexible while engaging in constructive dialogues around new forms of active social participation.

Guiding questions: How to ensure that dialogue leads to inclusiveness? What would be core principles underlying such an endeavour? What are the linkages between cultural diversity and inclusivity; are they always mutually reinforcing?

- **Workshop 5: The Role of Information and Communications Technologies in Promoting Volunteering and Responsible Citizenship.**

The rapid expansion of digital communication and virtual social platforms has had a strong influence on volunteering actions in the past years. ICTs have encouraged unprecedented connection and provided strength to the voices of youth seeking to articulate their desire for participatory democratic processes and civic engagement both at the national and global level. Volunteer-based campaigning and activism have been redefined in light of these advances in modern information and communication technologies, and new social networks have obtained an essential role in the instant spread of information and civic participation. Although it is not always easy to demonstrate a direct link, social media can play an important role in influencing social change.

Guiding questions: What is the impact of ICTs in the different areas of volunteering? In which ways can/do they encourage of responsible, local and global citizenship?

Adoption of Declaration

Today, volunteerism should be recognized as a powerful and universal resource and as a vital component of the social capital of every country. It has a potential to make difference in responding to many of today's complex global challenges with the active participation of young women and men contributing to peace and sustainable development, including in the context of the upcoming post-2015 development agenda.

A Declaration will be adopted by the youth participants at the end of the Conference, capturing the key features of an innovative volunteerism agenda for future implementation by partner organizations, networks, associations, and other relevant parties.