

Volunteerism Round- table Conference Report



Participants at the round table conference on Volunteerism on 18th April 2008 at Taj Samudra

Volunteering: Everyone's Business

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Volunteering: Everyone's Business, Taj Samudra Hotel, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 19th February 2008

A one day workshop was organized by the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme (UNV) and the Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) on 19th February 2008. It was attended by 75 participants representing Government, corporate, civil society, donors, media, academia, community and voluntary sectors. Representatives from volunteer involving projects were also invited. It was the first time that such a round table had been organized and provided the opportunity for in-depth dialogue on how the voluntary sector is viewed, current volunteer trends, successes, challenges and a way forward.

The presentations and discussion groups were designed to both provide an analytical context of the situation of volunteerism in the country and at the same time for participants to contribute constructively and explore angles for partnerships. The discussions covered the following areas:

- What is volunteerism?
- Key principle of volunteerism
- Types of Volunteerism
- Social and economic values of volunteerism
- Volunteer management and legislation
- How to join as a volunteer?
- How to get volunteers for your programmes?

It acknowledged the following issues:

- Volunteerism has potential for expansion in Sri Lanka especially after the massive response post tsunami
 - Volunteering is embedded in the Sri Lankan culture and history
 - Currently, volunteerism is ad hoc and needs better support, management, governance and channeling of the resources
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- Volunteerism lacks record on current status of volunteering and contributions of volunteers
- IVD recommended in 1985 through resolution 10/212 the promotion, networking and recognition of volunteerism
- IYV proclaimed in 2001 through resolution 52/17 cosponsored by 123 countries including Sri Lanka (UNV is focal point for IYV)
- UNV and VSO are committed to continuing this process

The key aspects of the conference focused on how to reach a common understand of the current nature of volunteerism, how to facilitate its promotion, networking and recognition and approaches for engaging with a wider stakeholder base.

With the current eroded notion of volunteerism resulting from the many negative practices post tsunami, people do not think highly of voluntary action. While many see it now as an economic means and entry point for career development, others shy away from the concept due to the negative connotations. However, there are many people who still want to volunteer their time and share experience but the opportunities/mechanisms for doing so are not clear. The conference was crucial in providing the open space for discussing these issues and dispelling some of the long held misconceptions. It also gave the chance for the media, corporate and civil society to identify a role for themselves as key players in this sector.

- Importance of common vision/mission
- How to promote and manage capacity building
- National coordination programme among stake holders
- Collaboration and coordination between partners and all levels
- Resource mobilization mechanisms and how to utilize existing resources
- Developing a long term plan
- Government's commitment
- Developing monitoring and reporting mechanisms

Taking a cue from the above, the group discussions examined the role of the government, civil society, donors, private sector and media.

(1) What can the Government do to create a supportive environment for volunteering?

- Currently a major challenge is the negative perception that Government has of NGOs which is leading to distrust and suspicion. A solution to this may be a more efficient and effective system of NGO monitoring that would increase confidence in NGO activities.
- There is need for a broadly owned platform that would ensure that volunteer action is properly linked to national development priorities. The proposed Volunteer Information and Coordination Centre (VOICE) could play this role.
- There is also need for some kind of formal recognition of volunteer work. The issuance of certificates could be a possible solution in this respect.
- The Government should play a proactive role in ensuring that volunteers adhere to high ethical standards in performing their work.

After the group's presentation, the following points were raised in the debate:

- There is a need for a central body that would serve as a catalyst in the promotion of volunteerism in Sri Lanka. This body would need to be closely linked to the Government, but retain at the same time a degree of autonomy and independence.
- There is a need to ensure that the volunteerism dimension is routinely reflected in national policy making.
- The National Council for Economic Development can help influence Government policies in favor of volunteerism promotion and help mobilize resources to support the work of volunteers.

(2) What can the private sector do in supporting and promoting volunteerism?

Current situation

- The existing corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives led by many private sector organizations have a win-win approach. There is less focus on real community benefits due to top-down approach. It is very evident that the private sector cannot survive without their beneficiary community. Yet there is no sign of horizontal linkages.
- Vested interest for publicity and promotion is clearly seen in their implementation thus there is no genuine service. The big businesses focus on customer service and trade mark very deeply but they fail to produce a sustainable social initiative.
- Most CSR initiative decisions are made at top level, thus the immediate needs or the actual need of the community is not addressed. This top down approach does not provide a long term benefit to the target group.

The disparity between the regions and Colombo is the main cause which is presently creating a massive setback.

- Despite above, there is clear evidence that many senior private sector employees are involved in voluntary work and that there is an openness and enthusiasm that can be harnessed for greater involvement in voluntary action to achieve a more focused impact.

Challenges

- Top down approach
- (Community) promoting a product or service might lead to threat
- Huge suspicion and gap between the business community & the NGO community
- Too many companies leading to competition
- NGO dependency syndrome
- TIME: opportunity cost of time for SME's (The big business company chairmen are not involved in actual implementation or shelling out, their huge team carries it out as paid employees. But for the SME's there are less workers to implement and thus leads to lack of recognition)
- Funding?

Solution

- Channel all services through one source as 'business sector investment on CSR' to avoid repetition & to focus/ identify areas which need help
- Promote social capital
- Create communication mediums to interchange
- Develop skills of the regional volunteers
- Breed income generating activities in the regions
- Use media to promote the approach. Media for both 'naming & shaming'
- Thus create recognition
- Dialogue with policy makers

(3) What can donors do in supporting volunteering? Does it go beyond just "resourcing"

Donor-giving money/people/materials

Strategies to encourage volunteering

Donor funding not spent appropriately

Suggestions

1. Dedicate funding for skill sharing and learning
2. Donors have to look at the criteria for funding
3. Making use of existing structures that have proven successful rather than each donor imposing their own mechanisms
4. Reduce number of needs assessments and dedicate such funding rather to volunteer programme
5. UNDP to act as liaison with ministry of foreign affairs to resolve current visa issues

6. For foreign volunteers- UNDP to sign MoU with Ministry: of public administration, MoU with local government ministry?
7. UNDP should coordinate more closely with INGOs and build linkages with NGO Secretariat, who are a clearing house
8. Establish committee to co-ordinate each sector to manage volunteers work within that sector and such a committee to be created at divisional level
9. Identify + vet local volunteers in each sector; this responsibility can be supported by the VOICE project

(4) What can the media do to support volunteering. Can they be more than just "observers"?

1. inform
2. evaluate
3. awareness building
4. getting them into the field
5. being the voice of the people

How do we do it?

1. approach youth into writing
2. training workshops
3. building a relationship with the media as a watch dog
4. 2 way approach
5. focus tv and radio community
6. use of drama, tv, street plays, cartoon fellowships and regular engagement (have a press officer-contact point), have press releases, conferences, meetings and briefings
7. Identifying the right people
8. follow up by recognizing and complementing good practices
9. be available, proactive and transparent in addressing media concerns
10. data base of media contacts in each organization
11. scenario- changing society: how to use the media
12. understanding the culture: culture-friendly especially for low esteem NGO's to be culture-friendly

Key recommendations for immediate piloting

- Redefine 'Volunteerism' by the think tank group after constructive discussions-April/May 2008¹

Redefining volunteerism in the Sri Lankan context and mainstreaming into the different government ministries & their activities; helping donors to quantify volunteer input into cash & kind (human resources input). Also, the need to categorize donors, and develop strategies for each category. And finally to develop a monitoring & evaluation framework accordingly.

- Promote the concept of the new definition amongst the business community, social leaders, sports personalities and artists via mass media & dialogue fora
- Create a volunteer task force/working committee led by company CEO's, social, academic, civil society, voluntary, artists, and community leaders and have a clearly defined ToR
- Formulate a framework, budget line and a structured operation for this process
- Task force/working committee will have to decide the scope of work area after completing a need analysis via mapping within the sectors of education, health, environment and performing art. These should be targeted at village/community levels, business community and government departments and capacity building for civil society
- Action plan should include an immediate validation of the above sectors at two selected community levels; dedicated human resources to manage process will be mandatory
- Implementation from May to December 2008 with clear baseline indicators
- Learning and documentation
- Sharing of best practices and capturing human interest stories
- Champion test project by UNV and VSO



Neil Buhne, UN Resident Coordinator in Sri Lanka, opening the conference.



Resource Panelists: from L to R: Suvendrini Kakuchi (PANOS), Douglas Keh (UNDP), Rohantha Athukorala (SCOPP), and Hugh Macleman (VSO)



A cross section of participants during an ice breaker session



Conference organizers addressing the media. L-R: Hugh Macleman, Okama Brook (UNV), and Rohantha Athukorala



Participants presenting their group discussions



Kamal Addararachchi, Famous Artist and UNV Spokesperson