

15 March 2019

Your Excellency, Madam President of ECOSOC,

Subject: UNV input to the thematic review of the United Nations High-level Political Forum (HLPF)

On behalf of the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme, I am grateful for the opportunity to provide an input to the thematic review of the United Nations High-level Political Forum (HLPF).

Volunteers are recognized as a ‘powerful and cross-cutting means of implementation’ under the 2030 Agenda. Globally, there are an estimated 1 billion volunteers carrying out a range of roles in their communities and societies for the greater good. Conservative estimates that tend to capture the most visible types of volunteers have shown that volunteering adds significant value to economies and societies, for example, 2.4 percent of global GDP.

The role of volunteerism in the implementation of SDGs is anchored in high level UN documents and in United Nations General Assembly resolutions on volunteering for development: Most recently, a resolution was supported by 126 Member States (A/Res/73/140) in December 2018, encouraging the participation and integration of all people in volunteer activities. The resolution also encourages Governments, in partnership with the United Nations, the private sector, civil society and others to integrate volunteerism into national development strategies and plans. Volunteers have been designated as a stakeholder group within ECOSOC processes through the Volunteer Groups Alliance (VGA).

The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme is the UN agency mandated to promote volunteerism and to support United Nations entities through the mobilization of volunteers. In 2018, 7,201 UN Volunteers served in the UN system, with a ratio of 47 percent women and 81 percent volunteers from the global South. In 2018, UNV partnered with more than 38 United Nations organizations to strengthen whole-of-society approaches for Agenda 2030. UNV also provides advisory services to Member States and others on volunteerism research, policies and practices to strengthen citizen engagement for the SDGs.

Ms. Inga Rhonda King
President
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Drawing on UNV and our partner's activities over the past 12 months, I am pleased to provide the evidence set out in Annex 1, to support analysis under the theme of the 2019 High-level Political Forum '*Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality*'.

Best wishes for a successful Forum in July.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Olivier Adam", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Olivier Adam
Executive Coordinator

Annex 1 – Submission of inputs, United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme

- A: State of global volunteerism – opportunities and challenges for leaving no one behind
- B: Evidence and experiences on volunteering for social and economic inclusion and the empowerment of marginalized groups
- C: Additional evidence of the contribution of volunteering under SDGs 4, 8, 10, 13 and 16
- D: Recommendations for UN Member States, UN Agencies and other stakeholders to accelerate progress and address gaps

A: State of global volunteerism – opportunities and challenges for leaving no one behind

The 'imperative of partnerships' for the SDGs must augment the ability of ordinary people, everywhere, to work together and to be drivers of their own development. The universality of the SDGs enables the international community to move from a discourse of 'assistance', to a framework where all people's contributions are recognized and valued. Well-supported volunteerism can provide an entry point for new partnerships with citizens, and collaborations to support greater inclusion, for example:

- At local level, enabling **more equitable partnerships** between development actors and those communities left furthest behind, who day in, day out, are working on solutions to their development needs;
- At national level, convening **multi-stakeholder ways of working** between governments, private sector and civil society that bring the needs and perspectives of marginalized groups to the fore;
- Internationally, building south-south **coalitions between diverse peoples** to forge a common path for progress.

Globally, over 1 billion people are active volunteers.ⁱ In its report on the state of the world's volunteerism in 2018, UNV estimated the global formal and informal volunteer workforce at 109 million full-time equivalent workers, a number exceeding the workforce of many major global industries. Estimating the number of individuals participating in volunteering is highly challenging but has previously been put at close to one billion people. Globally, 70 per cent of volunteer activity is organized informally between persons. Volunteering occurring formally through organizations and associations has relatively equal participation rates between women and men. **Informal volunteering tends to have lower status and is largely carried out by women and girls, who take on more than a 70 per cent share in some regions.** Thus, women constitute globally the majority of volunteers, at 57 per cent.ⁱⁱ

Volunteering comprises a wide range of activities from service delivery in communities to participation in crowd-sharing information platforms. **In 2018, technology, policy and social norms continue to shape conditions for voluntary action.** A notable trend is the simultaneous move towards localization and globalization of volunteering efforts. Social media

and improved access to information have catalysed informal volunteerism and self-organization on a range of issues. Where infrastructure is available and accessible, this means that volunteers are not constrained by physical location and can choose to engage digitally or face-to-face. **For those on the other side of the digital divide, however, this can represent another barrier to volunteering opportunities.**

Evidently, opportunities to participate in formal volunteering through organizations depend on a range of factors, **including public and private volunteer structures which are less prevalent in regions such as Africa and Arab States.** UNV data on national volunteer infrastructure showed that 72 countries had introduced, updated or were in the process of drafting policies and legislation specific or relevant to volunteering in the decade to May 2018, with many focused on the inclusion and empowerment of specific groups, particularly young people.⁴ Volunteer infrastructure growth is often focused on youth demographics, including national citizen service programmes, and alignment with emerging official development cooperation programmes, including South-South cooperation. National volunteering policy trends demonstrate an increased focus on promotion and recognition. More broadly, an environment favourable to civil rights has a positive impact on both formal and informal volunteering opportunities. Private sector volunteerism also continues to grow, with significant new activity in the global South.

Analysis by the International Labour Organization in 2018 shows that in total, 103 governments have now collected data at least once on the scale and scope of volunteer work, using a range of sources. **However, significant data gaps still exist, particularly in the least developed countries.** Moving forward, under a partnership with UNV to support greater availability of data across all contexts, and particularly in low and middle-income countries, new tools are being developed and tested by ILO.ⁱⁱⁱ

UNV analysis of Voluntary National Reviews for the SDGs shows that overall 29 of 46 reporting countries (63%) documented the contributions of volunteers in 2018, increasing from 40% in 2017 and 9% in 2016 to reflect a whole-of-society approach to planning and implementation.^{iv} In Lao PDR, Spain and Sri Lanka, volunteer organizations and platforms supported consultation and feedback processes for their countries' voluntary national reviews in 2018, including stakeholder workshops and online and onsite consultations to address data gaps.^v

B: Evidence and experiences on volunteering for social and economic inclusion and the empowerment of marginalized groups

Increasing engagement with the SDGs by all stakeholders: One lesson from the global conversation leading up to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda is that crowd-sourced and volunteer-led data can be a powerful resource for reaching those often left furthest behind. The global MY World Survey led by the SDG Action Campaign and supported by UN Volunteers, gathered over 8.4 million votes through online, mobile and offline channels. Eighty

per cent of votes were collected offline through volunteer effort and eighty per cent of voters were under 30 years of age, reaching those who would usually not be able to participate.^{vi} Subsequently, national and regional initiatives are increasing awareness of the 2030 Agenda and providing channels for participation through voluntary action on an ongoing basis.^{vii}

Bridging gaps between citizens and government in remote areas: In Nepal under the Local Governance and Capacity Development Programme, hundreds of national volunteers as well as UN Volunteers have strengthened the ICT capacity of 5,400 civil servants in local government offices, enhancing delivery through increased use of software systems, improving information dissemination and reporting mechanisms for improved governance in the most rural and under-served areas. Given Nepal's constitutional transition to a federal structure and many new provincial offices being established, this work was an essential part of institutional strengthening.^{viii} One donor report notes that this work also saved the government a considerable amount in maintenance costs for outdated infrastructure, as well as making information more accessible for communities.^{ix}

Improving the well-being of older persons through volunteering: With ageing populations increasing across the world, older people can particularly benefit from volunteering. Around the world, informal and formal volunteers are already providing invaluable support to older persons. In most countries, informal volunteers are shouldering the burden of elderly care, especially in developing regions^x. In Africa, for example traditional support systems based on family and kinship ties, represent a way of life to provide voluntary support to older persons.^{xi} Older persons can also benefit from engaging in volunteering itself, for example in Azerbaijan where the 'Volunteering Has No Age' project empowers elderly people living in social care facilities to volunteer to supervise children.^{xii} Formal volunteers also provide invaluable support to older people, for example in China where volunteers from the 'See Young' initiative help older people navigate new technologies, increasing their autonomy and independence^{xiii}.

Youth leadership through volunteering: Volunteering can also empower young people. Based on Youth Development Index global participation rates of 21%, it can be estimated that around 230 million young people aged 15-24 were actively volunteering through organizations in 2016.^{xiv} Furthermore, based on 52% average reporting 'helping a stranger' in the past month this would translate to around 570 million young people doing so at a global level.^{xv} In many instances, volunteerism provides entry points for young people to determine their own priorities, set their own agendas and engage with young people or other actors. Volunteering may be a catalyst, particularly for young people, to participate in the political realm. For example, a 2012 Mercy Corps report suggests that expanding participation of young people in local groups nurtured greater electoral and political participation.^{xvi} Youth often engage in volunteering through peer groups rather than as individuals; such groups can become brokers of engagement, connecting institutional initiatives with volunteer action at community level to ensure that their interests are reflected.

Bridging regional development disparities through volunteer exchange: Volunteer mechanisms are an important part of governance and delivery structures that address inequalities. The Government of Togo established a national programme for increasing youth employability through volunteering in 2011, PROVONAT, in partnership with UNV, UNDP and France Volontaires. A positive secondary effect of the programme came from its ability to bring volunteers from the south of the country to the north, and vice versa. This was important in Togo, where there have historically been political tensions between the two regions. Leveraging the success of PROVONAT, a further government-led initiative PROVONAT–JDS was planned, targeting out-of-school youth and school dropouts between the ages of 15 and 35 to volunteer on local development projects for six months, after which they will receive training or apprenticeships.^{xvii}

Reaching those furthest behind through volunteer-led health extension services: In research for the 2018 State of the World's Volunteerism Report, health promotion volunteers were active in nearly every low-income field research community, particularly in remote and vulnerable areas beyond the reach of state services. These volunteers transmit information about nutrition, maternal and child health, reproductive health and other areas of primary health care and disease prevention. They are often perceived as having a better understanding of the needs and problems of the community than medical professionals.^{xviii} In Ethiopia, The National Health Extension Program has mobilized society to successfully address local health needs. The programme covered family health, hygiene and sanitation, environmental health and health education. Nearly 38,000 health workers were trained and a 'Voluntary Women's Health Army' was organized, engaging more than 2 million women to improve critical and basic maternal and infant health care services.^{xix}

Volunteer interpreters connect refugee communities: In refugee camps, where people from many countries and cultures occupy severely constrained space, volunteer interpreters play an important connective role in making daily life as normal as possible. In one Malawi refugee camp, volunteer interpreters supported by UNHCR and UN Volunteers facilitate community connections and learning by breaking through common communication barriers associated with multicultural and multinational communities. These interpreters not only connect refugees to service providers and other institutions, but also facilitate interactions between refugees of different backgrounds. Respondents asserted that daily life for many of the refugees and activities of partner organizations in the camp would have essentially 'come to a standstill' without both the official and unofficial volunteer interpreters.^{xx}

Promotion of equality within the United Nations: UNV recognises and promotes volunteerism in non-traditional professions, such as women in peacebuilding, since volunteers can be important role models, helping to shift social norms and increase the range of roles open to women and men. Furthermore, in 2017 UNV established the disability talent pool, supporting capacity development for young professionals with disabilities within the UN, with

a view to augmenting their representation and leadership within the wider peace and development sector.^{xxi}

C: Additional evidence of the contribution of volunteering under SDGs 4, 8, 10, 13 and 16

Includes excerpts from the Secretary-General's Report on Volunteering under Agenda 2030 (A/73/254)

SDG 4 - Addressing regional disparities in school examination results: The ECOWAS Volunteer Programme (EVP) in West Africa enabled communities in three ECOWAS countries (Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone) to benefit from the intervention of young people in vital sectors such as education and health particularly in disadvantaged areas. Early results showed a significant increase in the passing rate of students taught by ECOWAS volunteer teachers in Guinea e.g. 93% passing rate as compared to 23% national average.^{xxii}

SDG 8 – Skills for employment: Lifelong learning, adaptability and skills development are becoming ever more critical to enable workers to adapt and transform in line with technological advances; equitable access to these opportunities are essential for the social mobility of future generations ^{xxiii} including volunteering that augments skills and strengthens social capital. Many regional and national Governments are focusing on formal and informal volunteering to enhance the employability, competencies and leadership skills of young people. In its voluntary national review for 2017, Nigeria reported that several states were operating volunteer corps schemes for unemployed graduates to improve skills and provide access to small business financing.^{xxiv} In Azerbaijan, the ASAN service launched a website portal to link young people with experienced persons in public and private entities, with 1,000 volunteers finding employment in government entities and private companies. In Slovakia, the Platform of Volunteer Centres and Organizations has an online tool for skill certification awarded by Matej Bel University. BIT Alliance, an association of software industry companies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, provides school students with free opportunities to learn coding skills and explore careers in the technology sector. Cisco Networking Academy graduates serving as United Nations Youth Volunteers are supporting information and communications technology innovations in Bangladesh, Indonesia and Sri Lanka.^{xxv}

SDG 10 – Volunteer initiatives increasing accessibility for persons with disabilities: The Accessible India Campaign, launched in 2015, is the flagship programme from the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities. Volunteers can report accessibility issues in their locality through online and other mechanisms, while UN volunteers perform quality assurance, auditing reports on accessibility for persons with disabilities. For example, UN Volunteers have overseen accessibility reporting on over 1,600 public buildings across 25 major cities.^{xxvi}

Leadership schemes through volunteering for ethnic minority groups: In Serbia, Roma are the largest ethnic minority and remain one of the most disenfranchised communities, often facing discrimination, social exclusion and unequal access to employment. UNDP, UNHCR and UNDP worked with local government to engage young Roma women and men as UN Community Volunteers in local governments and other governmental or non-governmental institutions at the local level. Graduates will become employees in the public services to further improve the integration of Roma citizens.^{xxvii}

Volunteer initiatives are increasingly focusing on gender equality and women's empowerment. In Ghana, the National Peace Council strengthened the capacity of women and young people to engage in conflict prevention and mediation. Volunteers from Papua New Guinea, the Family and Sexual Violence Action Committee in Papua New Guinea, the Omid Foundation in the Islamic Republic of Iran and VANWODS Microfinance in Vanuatu are addressing gender-based violence. Through the YouthMullah Gender Volunteer Caravans in Afghanistan, young Afghan men and women spread gender-equality messages. UN-Women, Wikimedia, Empower Women, the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth and volunteer champions launched the HERstory project in the Arab States region to highlight the contributions made by women and enhance gender-equality content on Wikipedia. IMPACT2030 worked with the WomenRising2030 initiative of the Business and Sustainable Development Commission to elevate women's leadership, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals.

SDG 13 – Climate change: The 2030 Agenda prioritizes the need to protect the planet for present and future generations. Building on a long history of volunteerism in environmental conservation, volunteers are contributing significantly to environmental protection, climate change mitigation and adaptation and disaster risk reduction and management. The partnership among the Government of Cape Verde, UNV and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa to promote volunteerism for a sustainable and durable environmental management mobilizes young people in support of environmental protection and the fight against desertification. In Sri Lanka, under the purview of the Ministry of Disaster Management, the Disaster Management Centre and the National Disaster Relief Services Centre, UNDP supported the 2017 HackaDev 3.0 initiative, which encouraged volunteers to develop technological solutions for disaster risk reduction. Bulgaria, Cameroon, Estonia, Tajikistan and Trinidad and Tobago also support environmental volunteering

SDG 16 – Peaceful societies: Volunteers are promoting justice, protection, conflict prevention and peacebuilding. UNDP is assisting the Government of Malawi with establishing volunteer district peace committees, as enshrined in the National Peace Policy. In Timor-Leste, UNDP also supported a national early warning system in which young volunteers take on an active role in monitoring conflict-related risks. The Youth Movement for Employment and Violence-Free Africa in the Gambia engage volunteers in peacebuilding and conflict prevention activities. In 2017, 2,169 United Nations Volunteers served with peacekeeping and special

political missions. Sixty United Nations Volunteers served with the United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia to support the implementation of the ceasefire agreement. Under the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur, United Nations Volunteers are working directly with vulnerable groups to provide them with information on human rights and child protection. In Kenya, UNHCR is training 100 refugee volunteers to contribute to sustainable solutions through dialogue. Like many national societies, the Palestinian Red Crescent Society provides emergency medical support and psychosocial support through its network of volunteers. In Sri Lanka, volunteer-involving organizations and evaluation partners are developing a reconciliation scorecard and a barometer survey that are an integral component of the country's national reconciliation action plan. To celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights launched a year-long digital volunteering campaign in 2018.^{xxviii}

From volunteering to women's political representation: In Uttarakhand local women began engaging with formal governance structures after developing new skills, capacity, knowledge and the ability to collectively organize by engaging in local volunteer activities. They began with organizing informal women's groups to discuss issues on running and maintaining centres for preschool education, supported by a community-based organization, the Uttarakhand Environment Education Centre. Groups began to develop around these preschool centres in different villages, and eventually an informal network made up of over 450 groups spread across seven districts in Uttarakhand. A key organizing principle of the groups (encouraged by the Centre) was that they should include a woman volunteer from every family in the village, irrespective of caste and economic status. Subsequently, several women from the groups have been elected as ward members, block committee members or representatives of the village *panchayat*.^{xxix}

D: Recommendations for UN Member States, UN Agencies and other stakeholders to accelerate progress and address gaps

Sustained and predictable investment is required from Governments and their development partners to create an enabling environment for volunteering that can help to accelerate and measure progress under the Sustainable Development Goals. Recognizing voluntary action as a development asset requires reflection on the appropriate scale and mechanisms for creating transformative partnerships with citizens in line with national development priorities.

To promote and facilitate the inclusion of all peoples and reduce inequalities, Governments, with United Nations entities, volunteer-involving organizations and other stakeholders, should widen opportunities for people's engagement through volunteering, for those groups left furthest behind. As a form of cooperation rooted in social relationships, the potential of volunteerism for fostering the inclusion and empowerment of marginalized groups will not be fully realized without policy

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coherence and related investments. A greater focus by all actors on understanding, nurturing and investing in informal volunteering is required, owing to its higher prevalence in fragile contexts and higher female participation rate.

The protection, security and well-being of volunteers must be of the highest priority. Governments should approve and apply policies that safeguard both the physical and social protection of volunteers and guarantee that adequate medical, disability and death benefits are universally provided.

To facilitate knowledge exchange and cooperation, Governments and their development partners should scale up the use of the common measurement indicators and methodologies provided in the ILO Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work, most urgently to increase the availability of data on low-income contexts. Innovations on measurement carried out by all stakeholders should draw on this common methodological foundation. Volunteer measurement data have the potential to improve the analysis of the means of implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals as a basis for investment decisions.

Finally, in line with A/Res/73/140^{xxx}, UN Member States, UN Agencies, volunteer groups and other stakeholders are invited to participate in the plan of action regional and global process on volunteering for the 2030 Agenda in the margins of the High-Level Political Forum processes. The plan of action provides an opportunity for Member States and partners to discuss evidence and approaches, identify opportunities for addressing knowledge gaps and ensure that national and regional inputs into the high-level political forum on sustainable development take account of volunteer contributions to the 2030 Agenda.

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ⁱⁱ United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme (2018). State of the World's Volunteerism Report: The thread that binds. Volunteerism and community resilience. Bonn.

ⁱⁱⁱ ILO (2018) Review of national practices in measuring volunteer work: A critical review.

^{iv} United Nations Volunteers (UNV) guidance note (2018) Reflecting citizen voluntary contributions in Voluntary National Review 2019 available at:

https://www.unv.org/sites/default/files/REFLECTING%20CITIZEN%20CONTRIBUTIONS%20VNRS%202018_0.pdf

^v Ibid.

^{vi} United Nations Development Group 'Leaving No One Behind, a guide for UN Country Teams' (2016)

^{vii} Report of the Secretary-General (2018), Plan of action to integrate volunteering into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; <https://undocs.org/A/73/254>

^{viii} <https://unv.org.np/blog/national-volunteers-support-the-initiative-of-e-governance-with-the-government-of-nepal/>

^{ix} UK Department for International Development, Annual Review of the Local Government Capacity Development Programme (2017) accessed at http://iati.dfid.gov.uk/iati_documents/5697004.odt

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- xviii United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme (2018). State of the World's Volunteerism Report: The thread that binds. Volunteerism and community resilience. Bonn. p61
- xix Government of Ethiopia (2017) Ethiopia Voluntary National Review on the SDGs accessed at [http://www.et.undp.org/content/dam/ethiopia/docs/2017/The%202017%20VNRs%20on%20SDGs_Ethiopia%20\(Eng\)%20Web%20version%20.pdf](http://www.et.undp.org/content/dam/ethiopia/docs/2017/The%202017%20VNRs%20on%20SDGs_Ethiopia%20(Eng)%20Web%20version%20.pdf)
- xx United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme (2018). State of the World's Volunteerism Report: The thread that binds. Volunteerism and community resilience. Bonn. p37
- xxi <https://www.unv.org/news/leaving-no-one-behind-undpunv-talent-programme-young-professionals-disabilities>
- xxii UNV (2015) Partners for Youth: UNV Success Stories https://www.unv.org/sites/default/files/UNV%20Success%20Stories_FINAL_ws.pdf
- xxiii ILO (2019) Work for a brighter future: Global Commission on the future of work p30
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- xxvii <https://www.unv.org/our-stories/engagement-employment-improving-social-inclusion-young-roma-serbia>
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