

Volunteers – The First and Last Mile of Connectivity

Remarks by Ad de Raad, Executive Coordinator, a.i., United Nations Volunteers on the occasion of the World Summit on the Information Society

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Mr. Chairman
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me begin by expressing my sincere regret that Sharon Capeling-Alakija, who was to have spoken on this occasion, sadly passed away just one month ago. As many of you know, she ably served as Executive Coordinator of the United Nations Volunteers programme from 1998. She is sorely missed by all who knew her or were touched by her distinguished service in several key United Nations posts.

Mr. Chairman,

In the year 2000, 10 million people volunteered to support the immunization of 550 million children as part of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative. The vast majority were concerned citizens, volunteering in their own communities. They gave their time to ensure that children reported to immunization stations, were properly documented and received the oral vaccine. What is not counted often does not count, but the estimated total value of the support provided by these volunteers was US \$10 billion, putting it well beyond the reach of either governments or the United Nations and its partner organizations. Capacity was developed in the process. In return for their time, the local volunteers received health training and the opportunity to play a pivotal role in future national and international efforts in their communities.

There is no doubt that achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will require the ingenuity, solidarity, and creativity of millions of ordinary people through voluntary action. Efforts on the part of national governments, supported by the international community, can only complement what ultimately will depend on the full involvement of people all over the world. Six billion people have something to contribute. Recognizing this fact is the first step on the road towards harnessing this vast resource in a global effort to meet the MDG targets.

We believe that volunteerism and volunteers represent the first and the last mile of connectivity.

Why the first mile?

Information society as we know it would not exist without the unpaid efforts of many individuals. And the Internet that grew out of these volunteers' work is a public, cooperative and voluntary effort—not owned or operated by a single agency, organization or government. That achievement was not inevitable. It grew out of a spirit of reciprocity.

The pioneers who invented the web began with a question that sounds very familiar to those of us who work in volunteerism for development: How can we link resources available in many places, combine them and then share them in support of development and to the benefit of those in need.

Volunteering is deeply embedded in virtually every culture and is manifested in many ways. And so, we do not need to invent volunteerism.

But we do need to facilitate voluntary action. We do need to lower the obstacles that keep many willing individuals and organizations from acting on their most generous impulses. We do need to scale up our most effective volunteer strategies.

With regard to the last mile, I would like to make two key points:

- ◆ that human intervention remains critical, even with the advanced technologies now available;

- ◆ that information technologies have immense potential for strengthening volunteerism, expanding participation in volunteer efforts, and intensifying their impact.

Technology has facilitated, for example, the recruitment, placement of the 5000 UN Volunteers from 160 nations who serve every year in some 140 countries around the globe.

It has provided the means to establish a network, the world volunteer web, for sharing of information, knowledge and experience among volunteers and volunteer involving organizations.

At the same time, the human dimension remains vital to our efforts. There are many times when being there matters—as so many of us have demonstrated by gathering in this room. What is happening on the ground cannot always be captured in an e-mail. Insight or compassion cannot always be conveyed by fax. Solutions cannot always be crafted online.

ICT helps to reinforce—but does not replace—the web of connections that have always existed in the offline world. Internet pioneer Tim Berners-Lee put it this way: “The ultimate goal of the Web is to support and improve our web like existence in the world.”* Offline, society is already a vast network of links among individuals.

You will see at the UNV exhibition here at the WSIS two signs over the door of the model community technology center. The “official” sign says TELECENTER. The other, more makeshift, sign says COMMUNITY CENTER. In the developing world, a successful telecenter offers more than access to technology. It provides a meeting place—a center where people can gather to exchange information and ideas, pose problems, and search together for solutions. And yes, being there matters...

This is but one example of the initiatives launched under the framework of the United Nations Information Technology Service. When the Secretary-General established UNITES, he made UNV the focal point for its efforts. The challenge was to marshal the resources of many volunteer involving organizations in order to narrow the digital divide. UNITES has responded to many and varied requests for assistance. Its volunteers share their technological know-how, raise awareness and provide training and support in the application of ICTs for development.

But for people who are not able to leave their homes and jobs but wish to contribute to development efforts, ICT opens doors. UNV is helping to tap their energy and creativity by managing an online volunteering service. These online volunteers are doing everything from writing proposals, translating books into local languages and designing websites to raising funds.

In particular, online volunteerism creates new opportunities for people who have too often been excluded from participation—such as older volunteers, people with disabilities, individuals living in remote areas, and those with pressing domestic responsibilities or very limited means.

There is no doubt that we have made progress in recent years. Nevertheless, with the disparities in access to technologies in developing countries, there is a great deal left to do. In all this, however, it is always important to remember that technology is only a tool. The last mile involves active human engagement to ensure that this tool serves development.

Ultimately, the challenges of development require solidarity, sustained commitment, creativity, and cooperation – by people, for people.

Thank you.

* Quote taken from Tim Berners-Lee, *Weaving the Web*, p. 123.