

UN Volunteers (UNV)

UNV CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE WSIS DECLARATION AND PLAN OF ACTION¹

Background

The United Nations Volunteers Programme (UNV) is the UN organization that mobilizes volunteers and promotes volunteerism for development worldwide. It has made Information and Communications Technology (ICT) for Development a corporate priority since 1999, because of the pervasive implications of the digital divide across the human development spectrum. UNV believes that volunteers can play a fundamental role globally in helping people draw digital dividends from the new technologies. Also, that ICT can expand avenues for volunteering and help volunteer-involving organizations to support their volunteers.

In this context, UNV defines **ICT Volunteering** as the range of volunteer actions that have a targeted use of digital technologies as their common characteristic. UNV presently manages two major initiatives in ICT Volunteering: (1) the **United Nations Information Technology Service (UNITEs)**, instituted by the UN Secretary General in his Millennium Report, is a global volunteer facility to build human/institutional capacity on the uses and opportunities of ICT for development; and (2) an **Online Volunteering for development** service, through NetAid, to use the Internet as a channel for people to give their time and skills.

The most important niche for ICT volunteers in the context of the Information Society broadly falls under the dimension of “capacity building/development” and comprise three types of actions, which will be reflected later on proposed initiatives for the WSIS Plan of Action:

- (a) Raising awareness of the possibilities of ICT for human development - from policy-makers to the community. This is often overlooked, particularly at the local level (where the masses of potential users are).
- (b) Building human/institutional capacity on the applications of ICT for human development - from education to health, from sustainable livelihoods to environmental protection, from

¹ A separate document provided by UNV at PrepComI (<http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/themes/unv-e.doc>) provides more in depth the rationale for consideration of Volunteering In the Information Society in the WSIS context. The present note focuses on how UNV and ICT Volunteering can play an active role in the actions put forward by the WSIS Plan of Action.

human rights to disaster management. In essence, to all areas of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

- (c) Creation and support to community and volunteer networks for development – facilitating joint action by Civil Society. Such networks would have variable geometries, and the “network nodes” would include volunteers (online and “on-site”), volunteer agencies, NGOs, schools/universities, development agencies, as well as professional colleagues, companies, friends and family of the individual volunteer. .²

UNV suggested inputs into the WSIS Official Documents

UNV views WSIS as a social summit³. Volunteering is a mass social phenomenon, and one of the main contributors to building social capital. This also applies to the Information Society. Therefore, UNV proposes the following for the WSIS Declaration and Plan of Action:

A. In the General Declaration⁴

WSIS recognizes the importance of Volunteering in the Information Society, particularly toward the goal of an inclusive and equitable Information Society. In particular, WSIS acknowledges that

- (a) volunteers make substantial contributions to the emergence, evolution and functioning of information societies everywhere; examples are capacity building on the applications of ICT for human development, or open-source software products.
- (b) the Information Society impacts and contributes to volunteering; examples are Online Volunteering services, and virtual community networks.

B. In the Plan of Action

WSIS recommends effective financial mechanisms for volunteer-powered initiatives to help bridge the digital divide, nationally and internationally, which expand the operational activities of Civil Society towards this major developmental goal.⁵

In particular, it recommends support to the UNITeS initiative of the Secretary General initiative as a unique volunteering service to provide, network and support ICT volunteers from South and North in development projects and organizations. UNITeS and other ICT Volunteering programmes can have a significant role in the activities and projects described below, including the larger effort to mainstream ICT into development organizations.

B.1 ICT Volunteering across development themes.

Support to a new international University ICT Volunteer Network. Through this network, university students, professors and staff would be mobilized for ICT volunteering assignments with projects

² UNV has an actual example of a volunteer-volunteer-school-university-NGO-colleagues-family network, initiated and managed by an Online Volunteer woman from Texas (one of the Top 10 Ovs recognized in 2002 by UNV).

³ Where ICT need to receive particular consideration, as it forms the nervous system of the Information Society.

⁴ A UN General Assembly resolution (A/RES/57/106) recently approved on 26 November 2002 recommends the recognition and involvement of volunteering as a force for development in all UN major events, including, explicitly, WSIS.

⁵ Youth and Universities would play a particularly central role in such initiatives.

and organizations around the world. A virtual learning and knowledge network would be established to support these volunteers. Special course material on ICT for Development would be contributed by partnering universities, and offered to all volunteers and other members of the network. Research on ICT for Development could be conducted among several of these academic centers.⁶

- Creation and expansion of national and international Online Volunteering services. Online Volunteering allow more people to get involved in development initiatives via the Internet. Existing services, like UNV's Online Volunteering for development, can help to promote new OV services. A special MDG OV project could, for example, help manage a global information platform on the MDGs, translate public outreach materials to hundreds of languages, coordinate information sharing with civil society networks, etc.
- Support to volunteers networks that facilitate involvement of the Diaspora in e-enabling activities in their native countries (sometimes as Online Volunteers).
- Creation of a "*Programmers without Frontiers*" initiative, under UN coordination, to facilitate the contributions of Free and Open Source Software initiatives⁷ to human development. It would allow existing products (e.g. Linux) to be more widely used, as well as the coding of tailored applications for specific development activities by volunteer programmers. Through such an initiative, a large, international group of programmers could be motivated, organized and supported to create a new generation of open source applications for development purposes⁸.
- Establishment of an ICT corporate volunteering programme, under UN coordination, participated by companies that have signed the UN Global Compact. Staff from these ICT companies would go on (generally) short-term volunteering assignments to build ICT capacity within projects or in organizations. On their return, they could stay engaged as Online Volunteers. Some of these companies could make their technical training curricula⁹ available for free to specific development stakeholders (like Universities or ICT-specialized NGOs), or even in the public domain – following an "open-source" approach to manage and enrich such curricula.

B.2 Volunteer inputs for mainstreaming ICT into development organizations

There is general agreement that ICT need to be mainstreamed into development processes. This will help, for example, to harness their full potential towards achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. One significant step in this direction would be to start with development organizations themselves (like UN or bilateral aid agencies). Often the main obstacle to significantly integrate ICT into project/programme portfolios of these agencies is insufficient capacity.

⁶ UNV knows of many universities that would be interested in such a volunteer facility, and in fact is involving already a few of them under the UNITeS umbrella. The main constraint here are financial resources, particularly for universities of the South – those in the North can try to access scholarship funds or other financial resources.

⁷ Successful examples are GNU-Linux, Apache, Perl, MySQL, OpenOffice or Mozilla.

⁸ Sociologist Manuel Castells posed this challenge at a meeting of the UN ICT Task Force in Feb 2001.

⁹ Microsoft, Cisco, Novell and Adobe's certification programmes are well-known examples.

Volunteers can play a uniquely effective role in this respect¹⁰. Therefore, WSIS encourages development agencies which are bent on mainstreaming ICT into their work to include ICT volunteers in their projects, because of their values of solidarity and knowledge sharing, as well as their cost-effectiveness.

B.3 Major ICT Volunteering contributions to specific development themes¹¹

- E-inclusion:
 - Community telecenters. Through outreach, promotion and capacity building to the communities, ICT volunteers have key roles in transforming “community technology centers” into “local development centers with access to ICTs”. In addition, these volunteers can in turn promote local volunteering for each telecenter. A special international “telecenter volunteer exchange” facility could be set up to allow people from successful telecenters to share their experience with other telecenter projects.
 - Basic computer literacy programmes. Local and national ICT volunteering programmes can provide fundamental inputs to allow wider sections of society to make use of digital technologies. An example is through universities (see section on e-learning below).
 - Special ICT programmes for the participation of women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities as full citizens of the Information Society. Some community telecenters, for example, could provide tailored services to these social groups.
- E-learning:
 - Establishment of national "University ICT-for-education Volunteering" schemes to build capacity of teachers in secondary schools to integrate ICT into the learning processes. Academic institutions hosting such schemes could participate in the international university ICT volunteer network mentioned under section B1.
 - Establishment of train-the-trainer volunteer initiatives for teachers that are already making practical use of ICT to help others that are just starting (including via virtual teacher networks as Online Volunteers).
 - Setup of Online Volunteer initiatives to support the creation and adaptation of electronic course material (languages, math, sciences, history, geography, etc.).
- Health
 - Support through ICT volunteers to initiatives that provide health information to medical professionals (like the Health InterNetwork of WHO) and to communities (mothers, teachers, care-takers, youth). Facilitation of volunteer networks to access, share and generate information about health and nutrition.
 - A volunteer telemedicine initiative, building local capacity on the use of various telemedicine tools and procedures. It would include an international telemedicine volunteer exchange mechanism to give professionals with successful experience a

¹⁰ For example, UNITEs is uniquely suited to provide ICT Volunteers for projects of all UN Agencies, with the added value of knowledge-sharing across the agencies and a single-point for management.

¹¹ Only a few major ones are highlighted. The cross-sectoral nature of both ICT and Volunteering allow for contributions of ICT Volunteering across the board. A document is available on request from UNV outlining such contributions to all the MDGs.

channel to share it with others that may be at the initial stages. It would also seek to engage volunteer doctors for remote monitoring and diagnostic.

- Support through ICT volunteers to HIV-AIDS related initiatives¹²:
 - Spreading use of networks among HIV-affected people¹³ and HIV-related organizations
 - Helping create telework and e-learning opportunities for HIV-affected people.
 - Use of ICTs to support capacity-replacement initiatives in countries ravaged by AIDS epidemic (for new teachers, government staff, etc.)
- Disaster situations:
 - Creation of a facility for ICT volunteers for special situations of natural/human disasters. This would be related to the “First on the Ground” initiative of the Secretary General, and would create a large roster of specialized people, some of whom could be asked by the UN to be mobilized very rapidly in emergency situations¹⁴. There is particular added value in having people available that have had experience in these type of situations.

¹² In some countries, HIV-AIDS has gone beyond health in becoming a governance and development-wide problem. Some may actually require “capacity-replacement” schemes for urgent and temporary gap filling in education, health and government services.

¹³ The term “HIV-infected” people includes HIV+ people, AIDS patients and those immediately related to them, like spouses, parents, children, companions and care-givers.

¹⁴ Microsoft, Ericsson and Telefonica are companies that have sent staff as volunteers for these purposes in the recent past.