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Volunteer capital

At a recent meeting of the heads of International Volunteer Sending Organisations, Social Development Minister Zola Skweyiya paid tribute to over 1,5 million South African volunteers who serve various non-profit groups, a contribution equivalent to the labour of over 300 000 full-time employees or at least R5 billion. In anticipation of World Volunteer Day tomorrow, Niki Sampson gives an overview of volunteerism, in the first part of a two-part series.

"VOLUNTEERING is not new. It was born the moment one person reached out to another in friendship and support. It has been shaped in the crucible of many battlefields and in the willingness of people to stand before those in power and demand change -- and justice.

"It will be sustained because of what we volunteers do to enable people we may never meet for whom volunteering is one of their best hopes for the future."

So said K Allen, world president of the International Association for Volunteer Effort, in his report to the International Symposium on Volunteering (ISV 2001) on the preceding International Year of the Volunteer (IYV).

The word "volunteer" comes from the Latin "voluntas", which means "human will": the factor that shapes our beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviour and is the source of volunteer "capital".

By donating our own human capital we draw deeply on resources that renew themselves. We use, but we do not deplete. We give but we get infinitely more. We bring blessing but we ourselves are blessed abundantly. We grow as the enterprise we serve grows.

"Volunteerism is the only form of capital that has



CO-OPERATION: Patricia Jina, Mieta Mopp and Eunice Cassels show off their membership certificates at a recent dedication day for LifeLine/Childline volunteers in Braelyn, East London.

human will as its source," points out A Sfeir-Younis, special representative to the UN and the World Trade Organisation, World Bank.

"As it is non-material, it emphasises the real importance of the 'inner decisions' in life."

Rejoice that you have a free will. Rejoice that the Constitution of South Africa allows you to exercise that free will in a socially responsible way. We do not choose the circumstances of our birth, the genes we inherit, the people who nurture us or the culture into which we are propelled -- but we do make a uniquely personal response to all these.

Our decisions, minute by minute, determine the people we become and the influence we exert on our environment.

The spirit of volunteerism

A form of socio-economic development, volunteerism exists in all societies. Volunteers worldwide provide services that would have cost society trillions of rand. Research shows that their contribution to world economy is now equivalent to between eight and 14 percent of the global GNP.

"These are services that the 'egotistic market' has decided to forget and disregard in the name of profit-making and other material gains. Volunteers correct the negative external effects of markets," says Sfeir-Younis.

But while it is cost-effective, volunteerism is not free. And that is why one of the goals of UN Volunteers in IYV 2001 was to encourage decision-makers in both the public and private sectors to remove obstacles and create incentives for voluntary effort.

C Kaiso, vice-chairman of the IYV 2001 National Committee in Uganda, says it is vital to lobby governments to put in place favourable laws, policies and regulations for volunteer work, and to budget more for volunteer activities.

Sfeir-Younis tells it thus: "There is a huge questioning and increased mistrust with regard to the role and performance of international organisations, governments, private sector and some of the other forms of social organisations.

"This questioning comes from realities we all face today -- poverty, environmental degradation, and the marginalisation of women and elderly

persons."

Kaiso outlines Uganda's programme, *Rekindling the Spirit of Volunteerism*, as the key to sustainable development.

Volunteering "helps to build strong, cohesive communities by fostering trust between citizens, and develops norms of solidarity and reciprocity that are essential to stable communities".

Allen sees it this way: "A state can't be fully developed without the help of volunteers, and the role of government and multinational institutions, of business and the media, is to help create a public environment that values volunteering.

"Their success will be measured by how they enable us, the volunteer movement, in an effective partnership -- not by how they shape or manage us."

Personal cost

In practical terms, a potential volunteer needs to ask: "What services are expected of me?"

S Capeling-Alakija, executive co-ordinator of UN Volunteers, lists the different forms volunteering takes:

- * Formal service delivery;
- * Mutual aid and self-help;
- * Activism;
- * Citizen engagement.

She says volunteerism should:

- * Be freely undertaken;
- * Provide support in a spirit of trust and reciprocity;
- * Serve the general public good;
- * Not look for monetary reward.

C Makunya, delegate from the Kenyan IYV *Focal Point*, reminds us that volunteers themselves can incur costs in offering their services: directly (for transport, child minding, etc) and indirectly as opportunity costs -- those earnings a volunteer

may have to forgo.

A volunteer can expect to be trained, either by the organisation or through a programme run by a third party.

C Doukas, Greek secretary-general of Adult Education, sees volunteerism as an "educative-learning function that develops social, communicative and professional skills. It also makes people's lives more exciting".

Volunteers should tell the organisation the extent of their commitment, and then participate wholeheartedly within this, acting consistently and reasonably.

They need to be persistent and positive in tough times. They should be prepared to move from trivial involvement to more profound involvement -- but only at their own volition.

Strong leadership needed

A potential volunteer also needs to ask: "What should I expect from the organisation that uses my services?"

K Campbell, executive director for the Association for Volunteer Administration, says skilled co-ordination of volunteers is basic to effectiveness.

An organisation's policies and strategies as regards volunteers should:

- * Inspire people to get involved;
- * Maintain volunteers' motivation;
- * Match their skills and interests with specific tasks;
- * Applaud volunteers' efforts;
- * Advocate for what they need;
- * Ensure volunteers have a good experience;
- * Educate the community about its needs, to prepare the way for volunteers.

Campbell emphasises: "The voluntary sector can only be as strong as its leaders, and volunteering requires skilled guidance and co-ordination.

"While voluntary action is what builds community, competent leadership is what keeps volunteers effectively involved.

"It is critical that we attend to the development of a global profession that is understood, valued and effective in sustaining the ideals of volunteering and civil society."

According to Campbell, to utilise fully volunteer capital, leaders of voluntary organisations should:

- * Be skilled and do their job well;
- * Speak up and tell their stories;
- * Talk about impact and results;
- * Join with their colleagues for a stronger voice;
- * Build relationships with those who need to be educated about what they do;
- * Increase awareness of the profession among funders, policy makers and NGO leaders;
- * Gain society's respect.

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