Volunteers: An Essential Building Block for a Society of Shared Knowledge

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It was at the African Regional Conference in Bamako in 2002 that the volunteer sector first became involved in the process of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Since then, volunteers and volunteer organizations have actively contributed both to the preparatory process of the WSIS, the Geneva Summit and the Tunis phase. As one of the families of the International Civil Society Bureau, the WSIS Volunteer Family brings together organizations working with volunteers both locally and at an international level[1], as well as volunteers themselves. In this article, I would like share some of the outcomes of the work and active participation in the WSIS of a sector that is often underestimated, or even overlooked. The concepts presented in this paper synthesize the outcomes of a collaborative effort of the Volunteer Family. They also outline some of the challenges before us for the future of a society of knowledge accessible to all.

Volunteering is a global fact of life, a mass social phenomenon involving hundreds of millions of people around the world who offer their time, skills and knowledge for the well-being of their neighbors, community or society at large.

Volunteers have played an active role in information technologies since the genesis of the modern information age. Many of the key components we use each day, are in fact, to a great extent, the result of volunteer effort. Well-known examples include Internet protocols, open source software and the World Wide Web itself.

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[1] Among others, the WSIS Volunteer Family includes ATD Quart Monde, CIVICUS (World Alliance for Citizen Participation), the European Volunteer Center (CEV), the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Netcorps-Cyberjeunes, OneWorld, and ICVolunteers (International Conference Volunteers). The latter has to date served as the focal point and secretariat of the WSIS Volunteer Family. Throughout the entire first phase of the WSIS, the civil society Volunteer Family closely collaborated with the United Nations Volunteers Programme (UNV) and the United Nations Information Technology Service (UNITeS).

Volunteers are teaching the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and working at a grassroots level to reduce the digital divide between those who have access to technology and those who do not, through human capacity-building and literacy programs. Volunteers are also raising awareness about the possibilities of these technologies (e.g. by providing outreach to local users in community telecenters).

Furthermore, volunteers can facilitate the production and dissemination of local content, enhancing cultural and linguistic diversity through ICTs.

New forms of volunteering have emerged through the availability and use of ICTs. One such application is Online Volunteering (also referred to as e-volunteering), a new way of collaborating through the Internet, with a different continent or in one's own city. In this way, volunteers translate documents, create Internet sites for non-profit organizations, advise local communities through online fora and chat facilities on technical issues related to ICTs, regardless of the distance between partners, often combining onsite and online collaboration. In this sense, ICTs are opening up attractive new opportunities for involvement, especially for young people, which can be enhanced through increased collaboration between the volunteer sector and university networks. The availability of technology can thus result in a significant increase in the number of people who are able to contribute their time, skills and knowledge to development, including people living in other parts of the world, homebound individuals and people with disabilities.

Online resources can help the volunteer sector conduct more successful recruitment and awareness raising campaigns. Successful examples include www.hacesfalta.org, a volunteer portal offering volunteer opportunities in Spain and Latin America; www.onlinevolunteering.org, the online volunteering site of United Nations Volunteers Programme (UNV); and the www.SeniorWeb.nl, a Dutch web site involving older persons in a society with an increased number of retirees, to name just a few.

While volunteerism largely happens in the informal and non-profit sector, multi-actor partnerships can strengthen and enhance it. One such form is employee volunteering, building partnerships between the volunteer sector and the private sector. "Employee volunteering" or "employee engagement" may be described as the giving of employees' time and skills to the benefit of the communities in which they operate. This is done through a three-way partnership between the employer, employee and the beneficiaries of the volunteer effort. Forms of corporate volunteering can also increase the chances for youth on the labor market, as employees or even as entrepreneurs, for example setting up local cybercafés. Private, public and voluntary sector organizations constitute an enormous reserve of resources, skills and expertise, which can be called on to support local schools,

communities and organizations. Businesses on the other hand, benefit from a much-improved public image, and better skilled and motivated employees.

Volunteers can help train ICT trainers, but also get training themselves by exchanging knowledge. In the context of a developing country, this increases the critical mass of qualified ICT specialists available locally, and reduces the dependency on personnel coming from abroad. Sylvie Niombo, Director of Azur Développement, an NGO training women on the use of ICTs in the Congo (Brazzaville), points out that many young students are still leaving the Congo to study in Europe, because locally, there are no or very few opportunities for such training: While some Congolese information technology specialists have been trained in higher education schools in Kinshasa, the demand remains much greater than the training opportunities available. Development structures such as NGOs, associations, and cooperatives generally do not have the means to hire qualified personnel, limiting the effectiveness of the organization. Volunteers thus bring much needed assistance, contributing to the success of local projects.

Achievements to date

Volunteerism happens at both a formal and informal level. In the information and knowledge society, many of the volunteers work at the local level. Therefore, in the spirit of a bottom-up approach, the WSIS Volunteer Family and the Youth Caucus have strived to get voices heard and projects presented which involve volunteers and youth in ICTs from around the world.

As one of the main outcomes of the work achieved by the Volunteer Family, the Volunteer Action Plan presented to Governments in December 2003 is designed to: (1) strengthen the contributions of volunteering to transform the Information Society into a society of shared knowledge accessible to all, and (2) improve the way in which volunteers and volunteer organizations make use of these technologies.

Through the creation of a Working Group on Volunteering and ICTs, the development of specific language related to volunteerism was included in the WSIS Plan of Action in which governments acknowledge that "everyone should have the necessary skills to benefit fully from the Information Society." It further states that "volunteering, if conducted in harmony with national policies and local cultures, can be a valuable asset for raising human capacity to make productive use of ICT tools and build a more inclusive Information Society. Activate volunteer programs to provide capacity building on ICT for development, particularly in

developing countries."[2] In the Civil Society Declaration, volunteers are mentioned in the context of poverty reduction and human capacity building.[3]

Further, achievement and activities include:

- Organization of several meetings and conferences (Brussels, Dakar, Geneva, Edinburgh, Bogotá, Barcelona, Bamako).

- Creation of an online library on "Volunteerism and the Information Society" and a report titled "Volunteering and ICTs: Establishing the framework for action" (www.worldwidevolunteer.org/wsis2003).

- Creation of a documentary film titled "Something out of Nothing", an inquiry on the role of the Internet in Senegal and Mali and the lessons that can be learned from it.

- Organization of a photo exhibition under the title "Something out of Nothing: Volunteerism and the Information Society, Crossroads between the North and the South", illustrating the digital divide in a concrete manner. The exhibition brought together ten artists from Europe, Africa and America who showed some 80 photographs.

If nothing else, the efforts of the Volunteer Family in the first phase of the WSIS have underscored the tremendous diversity and broad-reaching aspects of information and communication technologies. These technologies have the power not only to affect us globally, but also to touch us locally.

The concept of the Information Society suggests that there is only ONE such society. It also assumes that we are either part of it or excluded from it. Yet, local communities have each their own culture, language and way of thinking. This is why the notion of a single information society seems somewhat limiting. Volunteers are a key resource and driving factor in empowering communities to use ICTs effectively and sensibly in each of our societies. Volunteers are agents of solidarity all over the world, in the South and in the North, promoting values of mutual help and exchange.

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[2] WSIS Plan of Action, C4. Capacity Building, point 11, http://www.itu.int/wsis/
[3] WSIS Civil Society Declaration, 2.1.1. and 2.4.5.

Ways forward and challenges ahead of us

Electronic networking was a key factor in the outstanding success of the International Year of Volunteers 2001 (IYV 2001). The General Assembly resolution A/57/L.8, after IYV 2001, recognized the contribution of volunteering to economic and social development, and urged governments to support and invest in volunteer action. While precise and global statistics on volunteerism do not exist, volunteering is estimated to constitute between 5 and 11% of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).[4] To illustrate this point, it is worth mentioning the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, where ten million people volunteered in 2000 to vaccinate 550 million children. The total value of this support was estimated at ten billion US dollars.

It has already been acknowledged by the United Nations and governments around the world that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will not be achieved without massive involvement of the world's citizens as volunteers. One of the stated goals of the WSIS is to devise ways in which ICT can be applied to help reach the MDGs. Strengthening the connection between Volunteering and ICT will constitute an important step towards of the attainment of these goals.

As previously mentioned, the phase 1 report of the WSIS Volunteer Family[5] was entitled "establishing the framework for action". The Tunis phase is now a time to implement some of the priorities identified. To achieve this goal and in the spirit of cooperation, the WSIS Volunteer Family and the WSIS Youth Caucus have joined forces to work on national campaigns around the world and develop partnerships for cooperation for the years to come.

However, it is important to keep in mind some of the major challenges before us:

First, for volunteers and volunteer organizations there is a need to work at all levels of action, described by Dr. Kumi Naidoo of CIVICUS (World Alliance for Citizen Participation) as the macro-level (governance), the mezzo-level (policy), the micro-level (operational).[6]

Second, there is a need for people to recognize that the scope of volunteerism is much broader than is often understood and goes well beyond the common stereotype of cookie baking. Volunteerism includes social activists, open source software programmers, and others making very real impacts on social, political and economic levels. It is an essential

[4] United Nations Volunteers Programme.
[5] http://www.worldwidevolunteer.org/wsis2003
[6] Ibid.

factor in turning youth into active citizens of tomorrow, and giving retirees a place to continue making use of their skills and knowledge acquired over a lifetime. In this way, volunteerism helps not only to bridge the digital divide, but also the divide that too often separates generations.

Third, by offering their time and skills, volunteers are able to achieve a lot with a small investment. However, it is important for governments and other potential donors to recognize that a minimal investment is indispensable to cover basic expenses for volunteers, if they are to be effective. Only if volunteers are given the place they deserve, alongside other stakeholders, can they make use of their full potential, in areas such as capacity-building in the use of ICTs towards the attainment of the MDGs.

The Geneva phase of the Summit has been an encouraging beginning towards the construction of a society of shared knowledge, where ICTs are more than just technical tools, but where their social and human dimension is fully being considered. Thanks to the inclusion of the volunteer sector in the Summit process, it was possible for the WSIS Volunteer Family to contribute actively to this vision.

As H.E. Mr. Adama Samassékou, President of the WSIS Geneva phase Prepcom, points out, "volunteers commit themselves to the environment in which they are operating and serve as catalysts, paving the way for the future. Initiatives focusing on South-South volunteering, such as the CyberVolunteers Program launched in the context of the Summit, can further contribute to a society of shared knowledge, where volunteers listen to people and in this way bring a community approach. They come to learn in order to serve better."[7]

In the months and years to come, we need to further strengthen cooperation between the volunteer sector, governments, academia, the private sector, and other civil society organizations. In doing so, volunteers can in fact help governments implement their objectives and goals in a spirit of accompanying, cooperation and solidarity in action.

Websites about Volunteering and ICTs

World Wide Volunteer, online library on volunteerism and ICTs:
www.worldwidevolunteer.org/wsis2003
UNITeS, United Nations Information Technology Service: www.unites.org
Energize: www.energizeinc.com and www.e-volunteerism.com
World Volunteer Web: www.worldvolunteerweb.org
IAVE Colombia: www.iavecolombia.org/ic_cmsi.htm

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[7] ICV Newsletter, first quarter 2005, http://cyber.icvolunteers.org.

Specific ICT Volunteering Projects
Computers for Schools Kenya: www.cfsk.org
CyberVolunteers Program: http://cyber.icvolunteers.org
EduCities: www.educities.edu.tw
ELEM: www.elem.org
European Commission, Ploteus Portal: www.ploteus.net
Freeflex: www.freeflex.nl
Geekcorps: www.geekcorps.org
Iko Poran (IKP): www.ikoporan.org
Internet Child Safety Foundation (ICSF): www.icsfonline.org
Hacesfalta: www.hacesfalta.org
National Centre for Volunteering, England: www.employeevolunteering.org.uk
NetAid: www.netaid.org
Netcorps-Cyberjeunes: www.netcorps-cyberjeunes.org
Net Corps Americas: www.netcorpsamericas.org
One World: www.oneworld.net
Online News of the Commission on Human Rights: www.ngochr.org
Online Volunteering: www.onlinevolunteering.org
ProVobis National Volunteer Centre, Romania: www.voluntariat.ro
SeniorWeb, Netherlands: www.seniorweb.nl
Taking IT Global: www.takingitglobal.org
Time Bank UK: www.timebank.org.uk
Volunteer Development Scotland, 2003: www.vds.org.uk
Volunteering Ireland, 2003: www.volunteeringireland.com
Women of Uganda: www.wougnet.org

WSIS Volunteer Family
ATD Quart Monde: www.atd-quartmonde.org
CIVICUS (World Alliance for Citizen Participation): www.civicus.org
European Volunteer Center (CEV): www.cev.org
International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE): www.iave.org
ICVolunteers (International Conference Volunteers): www.icvolunteers.org
International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC): www.ifrc.org
Throughout the entire first phase of the WSIS, it closely collaborated with the United
Nations Volunteers Programme (UNV): www.unv.org