Challenges of International Online Volunteering: Re-Learning Words, Transcending Boundaries

Jayne Cravens

United Nations Volunteers, Bonn, Germany

With the permeation of cyberspace, it is difficult for even the smallest of volunteer programs anywhere to think of itself as only local—any volunteer manager with an Internet connection will interact internationally in some way eventually, if not regularly. However, there are substantial cultural differences throughout the world that may cause discrepancies in how volunteerism is talked about. These differences can make it difficult for volunteer managers in "the West" to engage effectively with people in "the South." Being aware of these differences can help all volunteer managers more easily transcend country boundaries, and to be better communicators in every aspect, locally and globally.

The phrase "volunteering in the developing world" conjures an image for most people: volunteers from "the West" (North America, Western Europe and Australia) going to the developing world, also known as "the South" (Africa, Asia, Latin America, Arab states, and former Soviet Union states). Such volunteering can also be seen as the domain of only large volunteer-sending organizations.

Two things are changing the concept of volunteering in the developing world. The first is increasing pressure to empower local people to help themselves. This pressure comes not only from the donor nations of the West, but also from within the countries of the developing world themselves: local people

are saying, "Give us the tools, and we can feed our own children and build up our own communities and create sustainability." Volunteerism can play an important role in this paradigm shift in the way we think about helping these countries. Volunteerism means not only sending volunteers from the West to these countries, but also means building the capacities of these communities to involve local volunteers effectively.

The second thing changing the concept of volunteering in the developing world is the Internet. Cyberspace is making an increasing number of volunteer programs global, whether the staff behind these programs like it or not. A volunteer manager in a small town in Kansas may find herself or himself answering questions via e-mail for a person half a world away, trying to run a similar program. A volunteer manager seeking an online volunteer to design a brochure may find that the best qualified and most passionate person lives on another continent, even in a country thought of by most as "poor." Online communities, once the sole domain of volunteer managers based in the West, are seeing increasing numbers of people from the South who are interested in learning more about volunteer management. These increasing global encounters mean that we all have to look at the way we communicate and the words we use.

The vast majority of volunteer manage-

ment books, guides, Web sites and conferences are dominated by people in the United States and Canada, as well as Great Britain and Australia. This does not mean that the people behind these activities, as well as the primary audiences they address, are not diverse: a volunteer management seminar in San Jose, California, for instance, may draw people descended from immigrants from Europe, Asia and Africa, as well as actual Europeans, Asians and Africans, and also American Indians. And certainly these practitioners do not always speak with a unified voice, from a unified understanding: for instance, bring up your own definition of who is and isn't a volunteer on CYBERVPM (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/cybervpm), an online discussion group for volunteer managers, mostly in the United States, and watch the sparks fly as the debate ignites yet again.

There are substantial cultural differences throughout the world that may cause discrepancies in how volunteers are involved, or even talked about, and these are becoming more and more apparent as the Internet is used by more and more volunteer managers worldwide. These differences can make it difficult for volunteer managers in the West to engage effectively with people in the South. Being aware of these differences can help a Western-based volunteer manager more easily transcend country boundaries. Ultimately, it will make him or her a better communicator in every aspect, locally and globally.

SAME WORD, DIFFERENT MEANING

Take, for example, the word "development." A person who is involved in causes relating to people and communities in the South, such as education programs about HIV/AIDS in Africa, community technology centers in Latin America, or agricultural reforms in Asia, is referred to as working in "development." Among volunteer managers in the United States, however, that word means fund-raising. For people in many regions of the United States, it is also associated with software. But for the majority of the world, "development" means improving the lives and raising the standards of living of

people, usually the world's poorest people, through building their capacities and increasing their access to education, health services, sustainable livelihoods and healthy environments.

Another word that can cause misunderstandings is "entitlement." To most Americans, the word can have a very negative connotation. For them, it means having an assumed right to something, and in the negative sense, someone with an "entitlement attitude" means someone who believes they are owed various things by other people, particularly the government. But "entitlement" in development work means something quite different; it relates to the frameworks, established through trade or an individual's direct production, that help a person or family gain access to food. Imagine a volunteering project proposal from a developing country frequently using the word "entitlements" landing on the desk of a corporation in Texas in the hopes of attracting funding, and you can understand how misunderstanding of this word could lead to the proposal's rejection.

Even simple phrases that we use in the West can be seen with a hostile eye in developing countries. Susan Ellis's popular book on volunteer management, *From the Top Down,* is frequently recommended to people online seeking volunteer management advice. It was once recommended to a person working at a large, international volunteer sending organization. The employee saw the title and replied, "I don't believe in 'from the top down' strategies. We need to be more grassroots focused." This immediate hostility came from the mantra that permeates most development organizations now: "bottom-up." Once the context of the title and the focus of the book were explained, he was much more relaxed and much more receptive to the book's recommendations—but still did not want to share the book with colleagues because of the title, a title which is perfectly acceptable in a Western context.

HOSTILITY TOWARDS THE WORD "VOLUNTEER"

When working in international contexts, it is important to be aware that there can be

much more hostility against the idea of volunteerism in the South than in the West.

For example, and as mentioned at the start of this article, the concept of volunteerism often immediately conjures up the idea of someone from, say, Canada, coming to a poor country to help build a new fishery. To this, the local people now will often say, "Why did you bring in an outsider when there are people with this expertise in our country you could have hired?" As a result, the necessity to be clear about what one means when talking about volunteerism in the developing world has never been more important.

Countries in the South are often facing dire unemployment, and volunteers can be perceived by communities as taking paid jobs away from local people, or as a way for organizations to avoid paying staff. Yet, the concept of volunteering is not foreign anywhere—people in every community volunteer in some way, but may not call it such. Building bridges between the word and the concept, through avoiding assumptions about its understanding and through constant dialogue, goes a long way in convincing people that formal volunteerism initiatives are worthwhile, culturally appropriate, and beneficial to all involved.

STANDARDS "HERE"
MAY NOT FIT "THERE"

Standards that are taken for granted among volunteer managers in the West are sometimes almost impossible to apply in some developing countries. For instance,
• Time and short deadlines often seem quaint concepts to organizations in international settings and the South, who are facing immediately dire circumstances, from staff members dying of AIDS to a drought wiping out surrounding villages. It can be very difficult to convince a non-governmental organization (NGO) serving the South that they must devote the time needed to developing a volunteer policy or a tracking system for volunteer applications when this same organization may be near an armed conflict that could break out into a civil war at any moment.

• In the West, most organizations are understanding of the "hoops" they have to jump through in order to receive grants, volunteers or other support, and often appreciate detailed guidance on how to manage a project. They know that meeting set requirements can help prove credibility and even improve chances for more support. Organizations in the South, however, are often resentful of the values of the North being forced on them, and can interpret such "hoops" as being oppressive. What seems normal to be asked of volunteer centers that refer volunteers in the United States or Canada can feel imperialistic, unrealistic or culturally-insensitive to similar organizations in the South.

• In managing the Online Volunteering (OV) service (www.onlinevolunteering.org), the United Nations Volunteers program (www.unvolunteers.org) has found that it is imperative to strike a balance between empowering individual organizations to find their own best practices regarding online volunteer involvement versus enforcing quality control measures, obtaining high user numbers, and requiring certain standards among OV host organizations. The staff of the OV service frequently recommend certain practices in recruiting and managing online volunteers, and the service does require certain basic activities, but most of what is offered are suggestions for management, rather than requirements. For instance, users are frequently encouraged to report to UNV about the impact online volunteers are making to their work, but UNV does not require it. That can make some things difficult for staff, particularly the reporting of meaningful service results. Staff at the OV service are continually looking for ways to help build the capacities of service users, without imposing what could be perceived as unrealistic demands.

• The writing style of people and organizations in the South can be less structured, and more wordy, than those of the West, but it also can sound much less "PR-esque." Staff at organizations in the South don't try to talk in sound bites, and this

adds a strong element of sincerity to their words. In addition, for many, English is not their native language. When "cleaning up" a proposal or testimonial, a person from the West should keep these realities in mind, not only to make sure that the information is accurate, but also to keep the unique voice and style of a particular community or culture. Often, a questionnaire can work best in obtaining the material for a testimonial, rather than asking someone to write the entire testimonial themselves.

DIFFERENT COMMUNICATIONS STYLES

People in developing countries may seem to have a "please provide this information/ help right now" attitude to people in the West, particularly via e-mail. It can feel rude and overly demanding to the recipient. There are several reasons this kind of communication can happen. One is that, according to the television shows and movies people in the South have seen about the West, everyone there has unlimited amounts of wealth and time on their hands, and this stands in the starkest of contrasts to how those in the South are living. Another reason is that, indeed, they may be facing an immediate, dire circumstance, and aren't thinking in terms of how to be polite and professional but, rather, how to communicate in the quickest and most effective manner to get the critical information or resources needed. When a person from the West receives such a communication, the best tactic is to respond in the most polite, helpful, and definite way possible. Be clear about what can be done or offered, by when, and what cannot be done or offered. Whether they say it or not, the

person on the other end of the e-mail will be most appreciative of your response, no matter what it is, and your "style" of response may even rub off on them in future communications.

A WORTHWHILE ENDEAVOR

Ultimately, the world's people, including volunteer managers, probably have much more in common with each other than differences. Helping at local community events (if you happen to be lucky enough to go on-site in the South), learning about a local community's situation on your own, and, whenever possible, listening more than talking, go a long way in building bridges in an international context. Cultural gaffes are frequently forgiven, and expert knowledge deeply appreciated by volunteer managers and volunteers worldwide. It doesn't mean leaving your professional standards and ideals behind; it does mean being flexible, open-minded, ready to try and to propose new things, and ready to alter your communications style as needed, and on an ongoing basis.

Jayne Cravens, the face behind the UNV Online Volunteering project. Many readers may be familiar with her frequent contributions to CyberVPM.