

# When In Amsterdam...

## Global perspectives on volunteering

The World Volunteer Conference was held in Amsterdam recently, gathering 1,500 participants from nearly 100 countries. Convened by the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE), this biennial event was specially scheduled to kick off the International Year of Volunteers 2001.

As with any conference, luck and a wide range of workshop choices com-

bined to give each attendee a different learning experience. The conference was stimulating and often challenging. The following are five themes that seemed to be of universal interest.

**1. The role of youth.** The subject of young people engaging in community service is not new in the United States. Special "youth forums" and "days of service" have proclaimed the need to in-

clude youthful voices in planning as well as doing volunteer work.

But this theme takes on far greater significance when one considers some sobering demographic facts. For example, due to deaths from AIDS, war, and other disasters, the number of youth in some African countries tallies more than 60 percent of the population. In such circumstances, young people have no choice but to take a leadership role in addressing their nations' needs.

In the process of discussing "youth," no one definition was acceptable to all. In many European countries, "youth" is used in reference to people aged 18 to

24. For the United Nations and in many African countries, "youth" includes people up to age 30, which strikes those from North America as strange. North Americans, in fact, tend to include teenagers in the term "youth," which people in many countries do not.

Do some cultures block young adults from contributing? If a 20-something affects change, is this attributable to "youth" or "talent"? What exactly do we expect from teenagers who have few legal rights but lots of energy and skills to share? While there are good reasons to allow young people (and older people) to meet together in separate sessions, when and how are they then integrated into the talent pool of "people"?

**2. Social inclusion.** For many countries, volunteering raises important questions of diversity. Australia, the Netherlands, Canada, the United Kingdom and Sweden (among others) see participation in community service as a method of incorporating people on the "outside" into the mainstream of social life. This often means immigrants and refugees, particularly in countries where the majority of the population is homogeneous and newcomers are clearly "different" in looks and language. Also seen as excluded from the center are hardcore unemployed people and those with various disabilities or mental illness.

The conference showcased a variety of projects designed to reach out to such citizens, demonstrating how volunteering is a way to exercise democratic rights, gain productive skills, and become accustomed to the culture. In most cases, the government has funded such projects as a conscious attempt to increase social inclusion.

**3. Government funding.** One of the things that truly distinguishes Americans at international events is the United States' attitude about funding. First, very few people from other countries consider it a badge of honor to proclaim "we receive no government money." In fact, just the opposite is true.

In the U.K., for example, it is a sign of accomplishment when a community organization has demonstrated the value of its services sufficiently for the government to institutionalize the service and make it available to all. So, seeking the support of government becomes a priority.

For example, in 1992, some 300 conference participants discussed the crisis of the Swedish welfare state in the face of AIDS, aging of the population, streams of refugees, etc. At the end of that event, the stated desire to start a national volunteer center was deemed unlikely in the near future because no one in the Swedish government wanted to pay for it. In Amsterdam nine years later, the Swedes reported that their government has not yet formed a national volunteer center. Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands have one.

Being immobilized without govern-

*continued on page 21*

**Why isn't your organization using the web to collect donations, sign up volunteers, and communicate with supporters online?**

**a. You don't think that 118 million Americans using the Internet is a big**

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On Volunteers

continued from page 22

ment funding is evident on the individual level, too. Americans tend to take foundations and private donors for granted. In the last analysis, Americans would never allow a closed government purse to stop initiating a dream.

**4. Building online community.** Despite the expense of the equipment and difficulties of access, Internet technology is universally hailed as a major asset for the volunteer community. A majority of the organizations represented at the World Volunteer Conference already have Web sites (even if rudimentary).

There is huge interest in tapping free online resources and in engaging in various technical assistance exchanges via email. Workshops led by speakers from many countries dealt with topics ranging from online volunteer training to virtual volunteering opportunities.

One factor was noted frequently. English is becoming the international language, whether or not anyone wants it to, mainly because the Web is currently an English-intensive environment.

Web sites in the United States and other English-speaking countries are seeing visitors from every corner of the globe. Further, the Internet is allowing

those fluent in English to interact in ways totally impossible even five years ago.

Volunteer centers in Canada, Australia, and Scotland are leading the way in creating valuable Web sites and online learning opportunities. Even places such as Singapore, culturally Asian but English-speaking, are taking center stage because they can present volunteerism information to a worldwide audience.

**5. The split between volunteers and managers.** IAVE began as an organization of volunteers for volunteers. Certainly these volunteers had wider

horizons than their own organizations, wanting to foster international exchange. They were leaders, both of IAVE and of their various groups.

But, they tended to be what some call "professional volunteers" — often women with sufficient personal finances to allow them to volunteer full time.

Over the years, as might be expected and in tune with the evolution of volunteer management as a professional discipline, IAVE started to attract people who had made volunteer program management a career. In almost every case, such new members were indeed active volunteers in their private lives, but their primary reason for attending a World Volunteer Conference was to improve their professional skills.

The meeting of these two groups produces tension as well as collegiality. Interestingly, negativity often begins with the volunteer contingent. They are not quite sure of the "motives" of paid volunteer program leaders, seeing themselves as more devoted, by definition, to community service. Very few of these volunteers have read — or written — volunteerism resources nor been trained in best practices. Some are incredibly effective, others the opposite.

Within the paid manager contingent there are yet two more divisions: government representatives and consultants. Many of the paid volunteer program managers at the World Volunteer Conference attended for their own, personal education. But others were in attendance because their national governments are encouraging volunteering. Such staffers may or may not have a personal commitment to this strategy, and each government has its own agenda for why citizen participation is important.

Now add in the growing number of university researchers, private consultants/trainers, and authors/publishers who attended because their focus is volunteerism. While no one challenges the interest in the field, there is a degree of hostility connected to a sense that this group "makes money on" volunteer effort. Such prejudice undoubtedly surfaces in other fields, but desire for "purity" of volunteer involvement is a unique factor that can hinder collaboration if not faced honestly.

Leaving home soil can be an opportunity for reflection. When opinions must be articulated to non-Americans, it forces the examination of assumptions — and, presumably, the reverse is true for non-American colleagues. Conferences such as this one go way beyond burying forever the popular theory that volunteering is "uniquely American." Not only is community involvement a universal, human activity, but it is fundamental to building a global civil society.

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