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# Government and volunteering

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One of the most important lessons from International Year of Volunteers (IYV) 2001 was that government support is vital if volunteering is truly to fulfil its potential. Using the findings of the IYV evaluation, this article identifies six different ways in which governments can provide that support: providing funds; making policy that is friendly to volunteering; setting an example (for example, by encouraging civil servants to volunteer); forming partnerships with organisations that involve volunteers; generating publicity for volunteering; and providing recognition for people who volunteer. However, the research also showed that there are four potential problems with government support: firstly, if a government fails to provide enough support; secondly, if it attempts to erode the autonomy of volunteering; thirdly, if it fails to provide a central contact point for volunteering within the administration; and fourthly, if it is reluctant to accept that volunteers can be campaigners as well as service-providers.

This article looks at the important issue of what is an appropriate role for government in helping to support and promote volunteering – and conversely, what are the limitations, or indeed dangers, of government involvement in the volunteering arena.

First I would like to make some general points about the nature of the volunteering/government contract at a global level, drawing on a recent evaluation of the International Year of Volunteers 2001 (IYV2001) carried out by my Institute for the United Nations.

## IYV 2001

The International Year of Volunteers was, of course, a government-initiated event. The proposal came initially from the government of Japan, following the awakening of interest in volunteering in that country in the aftermath of the Kobe earthquake. In November 1997 the General Assembly of the United Nations, with the support of 123 countries, proclaimed 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers.

IYV was a major success – indeed, one of the most successful international years of recent times. Almost 130 countries took part, and over 500 com-

mittees were set up at national, regional and local level to plan and co-ordinate a host of activities and events. Across each of the four goals of the Year – promotion, recognition, facilitation and networking – significant achievements were recorded and steps taken that will result in a considerable strengthening of the global volunteer movement.

## WHAT ROLE FOR GOVERNMENT?

During the course of 2001 and the first half of 2002 my Institute, with help from the Development Resource Centre in South Africa, carried out the global evaluation of IYV for the United Nations. As such, we have a unique insight into the achievements and challenges of the Year.

The evaluation consisted of two main elements: a survey of all participating countries with a view to getting a global feedback on how the Year went; and seven country case studies to provide a more detailed picture. The seven countries chosen to take part in the study were Canada, Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago, Laos, Lebanon, Hungary and Uganda. In addition, feedback was collected from a small number of international volunteer-involving organisations.

The full evaluation can be found on the Institute's website at [www.ivr.org.uk](http://www.ivr.org.uk). Even though I say so myself, it makes fascinating reading and offers a privileged insight into the energy and passion unleashed during the Year.

But what was the role of government in making IYV work? And what lessons can we draw for the future about the strengths and limitations of government intervention?

The IYV experience suggests that government can play a number of critical roles in helping volunteering to flourish:

### 1 PROVIDING FUNDS

Over 100 million US dollars were raised in the 126 participating countries to help run the Year. There was, of course, a huge disparity in the sums raised: 14 per cent of countries mobilised between 200 and 5,000 US dollars each, while 20 per cent of countries raised over 100,000 US dollars. The money came from a variety of sources, but the key funder was central government, which contributed 64 per cent of the total funding for the Year. A further 16 per cent came from regional and local government, which means that 80 per cent of all funding for the Year at country level came from the state. Some of the sums raised were truly massive. For example, in Canada over 7 million US dollars were mobilised for the Year, much of it from central government. It is inconceivable that the Year would have been so successful without this injection of resources from the state.

One of the key areas of government support during the Year was facilitating the development of volunteer centres at national and local level. National Volunteer Centres were planned in a number of countries, including Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Egypt, Jamaica, Hungary and Laos; while plans to set up regional and local centres were put in place in Kyrgyzstan and Chile. In Luxembourg two new national agencies were established during the year to facilitate volunteering.

Some of the countries that struggled with IYV were those which had very little infrastructure to support volunteering; and one of the key priorities identified by participants in the Year for taking things forward after 2001 was to set up or strengthen the volunteering infrastructure.

*The first lesson from IYV is that government has a key role to play in funding the development of volunteering at national and local level.*

### 2 MAKING POLICY

The second lesson from IYV is that government can help to create a favourable policy and legislative climate within which volunteering can flourish.

Legal frameworks for volunteering were introduced for the first time during IYV in the Czech Republic, Colombia and Madagascar, while in France, Japan and Portugal, existing laws were revised and improved. In Sri Lanka, IYV brought about talks between civil society and government on a Voluntary Social Service Organisations Act to improve conditions for involving volunteers; while National Plans on volunteering were developed in several countries including Portugal, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

The Year also suggested that government might usefully review legislation not specific to volunteering to ensure that volunteering is not inadvertently harmed. Measures along these lines were introduced by the Dutch government as part of its commitment to IYV.

In several countries steps were taken to include volunteering in the national accounts, while in many others specific programmes to promote volunteering were developed: in India, for example, a Volunteer Corps covering a thousand villages was set up to enlist volunteers and train them in disaster response.

*Lesson number two from IYV is that government has a key role to play in establishing a policy framework in which volunteering can flourish.*

### 3 SETTING AN EXAMPLE

Government can set an example to other sectors by encouraging public sector staff to get involved in volunteering and by opening up the public sector to volunteers.

In some countries politicians themselves signed up to take part in voluntary activities: in Northern Ireland, for example, thirty of the 108 members of the Legislative Assembly committed themselves to volunteer during the Year.

In other countries steps were taken to expand

volunteering in key public services such as health and education. In Hungary the Ministry of Health Care launched a funding programme to develop volunteering in hospitals; and in India partnerships between voluntary agencies and schools were established in several states to involve students of all ages in a range of volunteering activities, from community cleanliness to disaster preparation and road safety.

Governments also helped to stimulate debate on volunteering. In nearly all participating countries leading politicians gave set-piece speeches on volunteering; and in a number of countries parliamentary hearings on volunteering were held, often for the first time. For example, the Tunisian parliament devoted a special session to the International Day of Volunteers; hearings in the Russian parliament resulted in recommendations for a national plan to facilitate volunteering; and parliamentary meetings in Austria brought about the designation of permanent focal points for volunteering in all political parties.

*Lesson number three is that government can set a good example by opening up the public sector to volunteers and by stimulating public debate on the importance of volunteering to society.*

#### **4 FORMING PARTNERSHIPS**

Government can help to stimulate volunteering through the forming of partnerships with both the voluntary and commercial sectors. One of the great successes of IYV was the number and range of partnerships established at all levels and across all sectors, many of them stimulated or supported by government.

In some countries government and the voluntary sector came together to plan joint events and to carry out joint research. In other countries more strategic partnerships were established to develop volunteering strategies and national plans. In Fiji, for example, a partnership between rural voluntary organisations and the Fiji Council of Social Services was developed to help the outreach of the country's volunteer programme. Partnerships with the commercial sector were perhaps less successful than those with the voluntary sector, but good examples nevertheless abound. At the global level UNV managed to gain the support of the Italian clothing giant

Benetton, and its campaign of posters and the Colours magazine issue on volunteering were seen throughout Europe, the USA, South America and the Far East. At the national level private sector support for the Year was also forthcoming. In Bahrain in November 2001 Coca Cola, together with the Ministry of Social Affairs, launched the campaign 'Hand in Hand towards a better world'. In Sri Lanka the Seylan Bank assisted with the awards and prizes for the IYV poster art contest for children; and in the Netherlands, Yellow Pages provided free advertising for the Year.

*Lesson number four is that government can stimulate volunteering by forging partnerships with the voluntary and commercial sectors.*

#### **5 GENERATING PUBLICITY**

Government can do much to generate publicity for volunteering through the media. Its power to act in this way is most pronounced in those countries where the main press, television and radio outlets are state run. But even in those countries with independent media, the experience of IYV is that government can still play a part in generating news coverage. In Uganda one national newspaper ran a weekly supplement on volunteering, while in Spain a two hour television marathon was screened at prime time on 5 December to showcase the diversity of volunteering.

Another method of generating publicity for volunteering is through research, and government was also heavily involved during the Year in commissioning and conducting research on different aspects of volunteering. In a number of countries national surveys of volunteering were carried out, drawing on the Research Toolkit developed during the Year by UNV. In other countries more specific research was carried out or commissioned by government, including a study of grassroots volunteering in Cambodia, a study of the impact of volunteering in Israel and a study of the historical development of volunteering in Sri Lanka.

Governments also generated a range of promotional items during the Year. In several countries official stamps were issued to promote volunteering, and in Australia, Canada and the Netherlands flowers were given the volunteer designation. Other countries were more adventurous: a castle was

donated for use by volunteer-involving organisations in the United Arab Emirates; a volunteer street was inaugurated in Mozambique; and in Brazil a rocket was launched into space carrying the IYV logo.

*Lesson number five is that government can help to generate publicity for volunteering, both through partnerships with the media and through high-level branding exercises of 'public' goods.*

## 6 PROVIDING RECOGNITION

Government can contribute to the development of volunteering by giving public recognition to the achievements of volunteers. During the Year many governments set up or participated in awards schemes to recognise the contribution made by volunteers to national life. On International Volunteers Day in Panama the United Nations Information Centre worked in partnership with the Director General of the National Civil Protection system to host an award ceremony: a Medal of Honour for Courage was presented to the volunteer corps of the children's hospital. In Saint Helena volunteer recognition certificates were provided to a fifth of the island's population.

Another favoured way of drawing attention to the importance of volunteering was the involvement of VIPs and celebrities in the Year. At a global level the UN appointed four eminent persons to serve as ambassadors for the Year. And at a national level many VIPs were recruited to the cause. In Nigeria, for example, the president was appointed Grand Patron of IYV; in Uzbekistan DJ Max was involved as an IYV Ambassador; while Ms South Pacific was designated a volunteer advocate.

*Lesson number six is that governments can do much to promote volunteering by recognising the contribution volunteers make to national life and by recruiting VIP ambassadors to the cause.*

## THE LIMITATIONS AND DANGERS OF GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

Two things are clear. First, IYV was a resounding success. Second, the Year could not have happened without the active support and involvement of government, in the myriad different ways outlined

above. One of the key lessons from the Year is that for volunteering to flourish, government has to be engaged.

However, the Year also draws our attention to the limitations of government support for volunteering and to the dangers of state intervention.

## LACK OF RESOURCES

Perhaps the biggest challenge countries faced during the Year was securing sufficient resources to implement their ambitious plans. In some countries governments were lukewarm in their support and provided limited financial resources for the Year. Of course, governments were not the sole (or indeed-necessarily the main) source of support for the Year. Significant resources were drawn in from the private sector and from charitable foundations and trusts.

Nevertheless, in those countries where IYV was most successful, governments had a key role to play, not only by providing direct financial support but also by giving official endorsement for the Year. This enabled committees to lever in support from a range of other funders. Without government backing most countries found it hard to implement their plans in full. And with more government backing more countries would have been able to participate more fully.

## SUPPORT OR CONTROL?

More fundamentally, the Year shows just how difficult it is for some governments to strike the right balance between supporting volunteering and seeking to control it. In one or two countries the National Committees consisted either exclusively or predominantly of government personnel and the majority of activities during the Year were directed by the state.

While to some extent this was understandable – after all, International Years are proclaimed by governments operating through the UN system – such an approach ran counter to the declared aim of the General Assembly to engage a broad-based coalition in the running of the Year. Even more than in other International Years, it was essential that IYV was not taken over and coopted by government, but that government and civil society worked in partnership to promote the Year. Although overall such partnerships proved extremely effective, it was disappointing

that in a small number of cases governments failed fully to engage the voluntary sector.

#### LACK OF A CENTRAL CONTACT POINT

A further challenge thrown up by the Year was the lack of a central point of contact on volunteering within government in many countries, which made it hard for the voluntary sector to make connections and build partnerships with the state. Some countries had dedicated departments and ministers with responsibility for taking forward the government's programme on volunteering; but in others, authority (where it existed at all) was dispersed over several ministries.

In some countries the Year led to the streamlining of responsibility for volunteering within government and the 'joining-up' of previously disparate departmental briefs. In others, however, responsibility remained fragmented and confused and prevented the building of meaningful partnerships with the voluntary sector.

#### VOLUNTEERING AS SERVICE DELIVERY OR PARTICIPATION

In a document I wrote for UNV to help with the planning of the Year I drew attention to the complexity of volunteering and the diversity of forms it takes in different parts of the world. I identified four traditions of volunteering: volunteering as service delivery; volunteering as self-help; volunteering as participation; and volunteering as campaigning and advocacy. The experience of IYV suggests that some governments find it much easier to embrace volunteering in its service delivery manifestation than when it comes in the form of participation or campaigning.

Whilst numerous examples can be given from the Year of high-profile campaigns to promote volunteering in the fight against such global evils as the AIDS pandemic, it is clear that many governments

view volunteering primarily in terms of the contribution it can make to the delivery of public services. The notion that volunteering has a valuable, indeed crucial, role to play in advocating and campaigning for social and economic change is not one that finds universal favour within the corridors of power.

#### CONCLUSION

The International Year of Volunteers offers an ideal test case of the importance of government support for the development of volunteering – but also of its limitations and dangers.

The Year offers ample evidence that government support is vital in many ways if volunteering is truly to fulfil its potential. Government has a crucial role to play as funder, as policy-maker, as example-setter, as partner and as researcher. But government also needs to recognise when to pull back. A volunteering movement dominated by the state is a contradiction in terms. For volunteering to flourish it must retain its independence and its ability to challenge as well as work alongside government.

In the UK the Blair Labour government has, together with the voluntary sector, produced a Compact, or statement of principles, which enshrines this fundamental principle of independence. Of course the proof of the pudding is as always in the eating, but as a statement of principle it is an exemplary document and one which has attracted attention in many parts of the world.

One of the great challenges for the global volunteering movement in the aftermath of IYV is how to strengthen support from government without sacrificing its independence.

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