

# Is Volunteerism Effective in Building Capacities of Rural Women for Development Works? - A Global to Local Perspective

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## Abstract

The works of Government and Non-Government efforts to nurture the development consciousness among rural women through various initiatives and volunteerism have been widely accepted. The voluntary efforts exponentially paved the way for development action and people's participation among marginalized sections. This article explores and tries to understand the role of volunteerism in building capacities of rural women for development works in a local perspective through the international and national initiatives and its importance.

**Keywords:** Volunteerism, Rural development, Women development, Capacity building, Local development, Volunteers

## Introduction

It has not widely appreciated that the roots of volunteerism are different in Eastern societies, in particular in Indian society, from those of Western societies. The result has been the implanting of an alien culture in most NGOs, no matter what their ideology is.

Aparigraha, a Sanskrit word, implies the value of non-accumulation or not keeping anything more than is necessary for one's minimal needs. The concepts of sacrifice and charity are also differently rooted in the Indian mind. When one gives away one's dearest object to a needy person, the sacrifice is considered charity. If giving away something is only for one's self-purity and not aimed at someone else's well-being, it is that sacrifice, but not charity. Contrast this with the Western notion of giving away something that one can do without, or that one needs, or having much more than one needs.

Volunteerism is the manifestation of people's willingness and capacity to improve their community. In most cultures, voluntary action, under its many names, guises and dimensions, is deeply rooted in long-established traditions of sharing. It brings significant benefits to individuals and communities by addressing specific needs to foster and sustain a rich social consistency and a strong sense of mutual trust and cohesion. Both of these are essential for a society's stability.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Programming for Development Concept note, February 2009, P 1.

Volunteering is one of the several ways social capital is constructed; it represents a particular type of social capital in which benefits accrue to the larger community by enhancing non-profit public benefit activities (Gronbjerg and Never, 2004). Volunteers are designated as one core dimension of human agency in voluntary organizations (Barley and Tolbert, 1997; McDonald and Warburton, 2003). Volunteers are catalysts and messengers of change. Volunteers make a difference to societies and communities. They are assigned by helping hands as well as active models of change. Volunteers transform societies exponentially and are transformed through volunteering. Volunteerism enables people to participate in development activities. Volunteerism is an opportunity for everybody, including marginalized groups, women and youth, to have their voice heard and their actions recognized in society and before authorities. Volunteerism strengthens social cohesion and trust by promoting individual and collective action, leading to sustainable development for people by people.<sup>2</sup>

People who are excluded often experience a sense of shame and failure and lose hope of affecting their circumstances. Through volunteering, people can tackle some of underlying causes of social exclusion, such as lack of employment, education, and health.<sup>3</sup>

We consciously decide on and plan projects designed to improve our social systems. It is the characteristic of modern societies. It is our universal dilemma that our projects do not always have their intended effects. Probably, we all share in the experience that often we cannot tell whether the project had any impact at all. The complex is the flux of historic changes that would have been going anyway, and so many are the other projects that might expect to modify and revisit with the same indicators. It is interesting to analyze the effects of multi-projects in a society where the impact becomes more powerful than a single intervention. Multi-purpose components in a professional manner bring social changes intrinsically where volunteerism is noted clearly.

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2 UN volunteer Mobilization and Management Strategy

3 Volunteerism and Social Inclusion, An Extract from the 2011 state of the world's volunteerism report.

## **Volunteerism at the International Level**

United Nations (UN), since its inception in 1945, has been engaged with Non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They develop partnerships with the United Nations Secretariat, programs, funds, and agencies in various ways, including consultation with the Member States. NGOs contribute to several activities, including information dissemination, awareness raising, development education, policy advocacy, joint operational projects, participation in intergovernmental processes, and services and technical expertise.

Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was erected as per Article 71 of the United Nations Charter, which states that the Economic and Social Council may make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations concerned with matters within its competence. Such arrangements may be made with international standards and, where appropriate, with national organizations after consultation with the Members of the United Nations. United Nations Charter, Chapter X, Article 71 Article 71 of the UN Charter opened the door to provide becoming arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations and further involvement in the development sector. The consultative relationship with ECOSOC<sup>4</sup> is governed today by ECOSOC resolution 1996/31, which outlines the eligibility requirements for consultative status, rights and obligations of NGOs in consultative status, schemes for the withdrawal or suspension of consultative status, the role and functions of the ECOSOC Committee on NGOs, and the responsibilities of the UN Secretariat in supporting the consultative relationship.

The United Nations has been working to strengthen cooperation with NGOs across the entire United Nations system and in all areas of its work. As a result, United Nations entities are identifying new modalities to promote the strategic participation of NGOs. The necessity of strengthening UN/NGOs relations has been underlined in various documents, particularly in the Millennium Declaration in September 2000.

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4 *Working with ECOSOC - An NGO Guide to Consultative Status*. United Nations, 2011.

ECOSOC<sup>5</sup> remains the only main UN body with a formal skeleton for NGO participation. This accreditation framework benefits both the United Nations and the NGOs. As stated by resolution 1996/31 on the “Consultative relationship between the United Nations and non-governmental organizations,” “Consultative arrangements are to be made, to secure expert information or advice from organizations having special competence in the subjects for which consultative arrangements made, and, on the other hand, to enable international, regional, sub-regional and political organizations that represent important elements of public opinion to express their views.”

The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) program has been working for the past 42 years in terms of the size and spread of its mandate, results, and activities, driven by the changing external environment for peace, development, and the eradication of poverty, by the return of the role of volunteerism globally and by intergovernmental legislation. In 2006, the UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS Executive Board confirmed and allowed UNV’s business model, leading to UNV being operational in three domains: mobilizing volunteers to enable more people to be directly involved in humanitarian, peace-building, and post-conflict recovery, as well as sustainable development and poverty extermination work of the UN; advocating for volunteerism and civic engagement in peace and development, and persevering integration of volunteerism across policy, legislation, & programming as well as delivering on internationally agreed on development goals.

UN Volunteer enjoys a unique global model and mandate to promote volunteerism for development. This work started in 1970. UNV champions situations in which volunteerism can flourish and network. It pushes for the strength and right of people to participate in their development locally and internationally by integrating volunteers into the objectives and activities of partner organizations, local and national ownership of growth and transformation processes fortified effectively for the communities and vulnerable sectors.

Every day, millions of individuals worldwide engage in development initiatives through

volunteerism to improve conditions for others and themselves, their families, and communities. Individual and collective action has an impact on peace and development. Volunteer action was pivotal to accomplishing the Millennium Development Goals and will be even more decisive for the Impact 2030 agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the localization process.

The world leaders adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit on 25<sup>th</sup> September 2015, which includes a set of 17 SDGs to end poverty, fight inequality and injustice, and tackle climate change by 2030. The SDGs are universal, inclusive, and a bold commitment to people and the planet and thereby ensuring sustainable development. Volunteerism is intrinsically rooted in Goal 17 yet mobilizes people to leverage cooperative and systematic engagement across all Goals. UNV and its volunteers have unmatched relevance in the age of Sustainable Development Goals and their implementation globally and locally. Never before has the organization’s mandate aligned more closely with the global improvement agenda. The 2030 Agenda calls for leaving no one behind and understands that traditional means of implementation are not enough and must complement convergent actions that deepen impact and widen reach for inclusion.

UNV’s volunteer modalities and its leadership expand development opportunities worldwide. UNV supports volunteer groups and schemes to be recognized and integrated into the post-2015 development agenda. Creating enabling circumstances for volunteerism stimulates civic engagement and participation in local governance and sustainable development of citizens and communities.

UNV’s international, national, and community volunteers enhance international and local exchanges. They strengthen regional cooperation, and they build trust between diverse neighborhoods and peoples in the development process. UN Volunteers raise continuous capacity building and awareness about the 2030 Agenda among the constituencies with which they work. UN Volunteers organize local campaigns and devise inventive approaches for

<sup>5</sup> ECOSOC resolution 1996/31, part II, paragraph 20

SDG achievement, individually in remote areas and marginalized populations, such as women and youth. UN Volunteers dedicate their services and energy to achieving development goals and its targets. They bring skills, and they build skills among various stakeholders. UN Volunteers facilitate knowledge participation and transfer while leveraging local expertise. UN Volunteers help monitor SDG progress using citizen-driven qualitative and quantitative data collection and its analysis. The model behavior of volunteers inspires others to strive for the SDGs locally and regionally.<sup>6</sup>

The UN-sponsored International Year of Volunteers - 2001 provided a unique opportunity to highlight the achievements of the millions of volunteers worldwide and to encourage more people globally to engage in volunteer activity.<sup>7</sup> Volunteerism is related to the part-time or full-time work done by any person in his / her own free will for the welfare and development of people and society.

Joel Bhoose, in his work 'NGOs and Rural Development' – Theory and Practice (2002), propounds a "Theory of Volunteerism." Voluntary Organizations are the outcome and manifestation of such volunteerism. NGOs are promoted, chiefly by one or a few persons supported by a group of like-minded persons who have similar inspirations. If individuals are good, the organization will naturally be good. This inner inspiration, inner drive, love for others, a missionary zeal, humanitarian concern, a divine or a social calling realized within an individual, a burden within one's heart to serve others, etc. Such inspirations are derived from religious doctrines or societal demands. Also, volunteerism within a person enhanced and influenced great social thinkers and reformers like Swami Viveka, Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru, Jaya Prakash Narayana, and Mother Teresa, etc. "Any activity which involves spending time unpaid, doing something which aims to benefit someone (individuals or groups) other than or in addition to close relatives, or to benefit the environment."<sup>8</sup>

6 <https://www.unv.org/about-unv/our-mission-promote-volunteerism>

7 Draft resolution of ECOSOC in UN General Assembly 50th Session. 1997

8 National Centre for Social Research and the Institute for Volunteering Research, 2007.

People who perform a service without pay on behalf of a charitable or other nonprofit organization include any unpaid help provided to schools, religious organizations, sports, or community associations (Statistics Canada, 2006). The commitment of time, energy, or skills, of one, 's free will and without being paid. Volunteers help others or undertake activities mainly for the public benefit and the benefit of society. Helping one's family is not considered to be a volunteer activity" (Estonian Ministry of the interior, 2006).

A wide range of activities, including mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation, undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where the monetary reward is not the concern."Can you imagine a world without volunteers? It would be a poorer world because volunteering is about action and service, active citizenship, social cohesion, partnership, and relationships. Its impact on local, national, and global development can be transformational."<sup>9</sup>

### **National Policy on the Voluntary Sector 2007 in India<sup>10</sup>**

The government of India published a national policy on the voluntary sector in 2007. The policy envisages its commitment to encourage, enable, and empower an independent, creative and effective voluntary sector, with diversity in form and function, to contribute to the social, cultural, and economic advancement of India's people. The voluntary sector and volunteers have contributed significantly to finding innovative solutions to poverty, hunger, health, education, gender, natural resources, humanitarian aid, deprivation, discrimination, and exclusion, through means such as awareness-raising, social mobilization, service delivery, training, research, and advocacy with various programs and projects. The voluntary sector has been serving as an effective non-political link between the people and the Government and serving as the development platform in the third sector. This policy recognizes the role that the voluntary sector has to play in various

9 Greer, Gill, CEO, Volunteer Service Abroad (New Zealand)

10 *National Policy on the Voluntary Sector*. Voluntary Action Cell, Planning Commission, Govt. of India, 2007.

areas and affirms the growing need for collaboration with the voluntary sector by the Government, as well as by the private sector, at the local, provincial, and national levels with its futuristic scope of volunteerism.

Based on the policy, India's planning commission took appropriate steps to coordinate and register the Non-Governmental organizations in India as an NGO Partnership portal. NITI Ayog<sup>11</sup>, Government of India started innovative methods updating the NGO Darpan portal and coordinates the Non-Governmental efforts and volunteerism in the humanitarian and development sector. It is a good sign that the NITI Ayog established a voluntary action cell for the promotion of volunteerism and sustainable partnerships with CSOs for the socio-economic development of the country. This has opened a wide range of volunteers to collaborate with Government and its programs. Some state governments have also initiated the process of potential volunteers and enabling them in the development and humanitarian sector. The government of Andhra Pradesh has started implementing a volunteer cadre in the development sector called Andhra Pradesh Grama / ward sachivalayam volunteers. They involve the holistic development of the marginalized sector, especially women.<sup>12</sup> The government of Kerala started a community volunteer engagement program called samookhya sannadha sena<sup>13</sup> and trying to engage volunteers in humanitarian and disaster management activities. Many international and national Non-Governmental organizations practiced in developing volunteers at various levels and supporting the development and humanitarian activities.

### Women and Rural Development

Rural development improves the quality of life and economic well-being of people living in rural areas, often comparatively isolated and sparsely populated areas. Rural development has traditionally centered on the exploitation of land-intensive natural resources such as agriculture and forestry. Increased urbanization has changed the character of rural areas. The need for rural communities

to develop from a wider perspective has created more focus on a broad range of development goals than merely creating incentives for agricultural or resource-based businesses. Rural development is a blanket term. It essentially focuses on action for the improvement of areas outside the mainstream urban economic system. We should think of what type of rural construction is wanted because modernization of villages leads to urbanization, and the village environment disappears. Rural construction aims at finding ways to improve rural lives with the participation of rural people themselves, to meet the essential needs of rural neighborhoods. The outsider may not understand the context, culture, language, and other things prevailing in the local area. As such, rural people themselves as volunteers have to participate in their sustainable rural development.

"Women Creating Social Capital and Social Change": A Study of Women-Led Community Development Organizations, the authors examine different women-led groups involved in community development. Even though community development groups may not be "social movements" per se, many developed out of neighborhood movements for social change around affordable housing, economic development, racism, etc. The women-led organizations were found to be committed to "process, participation and internal democracy." Also, the groups created social capital through leadership programs (getting people in the community involved, especially youth, community participation, and networking. The high degree of community participation translated into programs that directly corresponded to community needs. The authors found that the women-led community development groups tended to emphasize collective decision-making and promote institutional change.<sup>14</sup>

Democracy, Good Governance, Peoples Participation, Globalization, etc., are mutually interrelated concepts finding essential for strengthening the development process. On one angle, the debate is on the Civil Societies becoming powerful and active, must fill up the gaps through discharging functions and roles performed earlier by the centralized governing structures. Panchayat

<sup>11</sup> <https://ngodarpan.gov.in>

<sup>12</sup> <https://gswsvolunteer.apcfss.in>

<sup>13</sup> <https://sannadhasena.kerala.gov.in>

<sup>14</sup> Gittell, Marilyn, et al. "Women Creating Social Capital and Social Change." *Trotter Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2000.

Raj Institutions, the agency for grass root level democracy at the national and state levels, is both an end and a means. Thoughts also prevail over the qualitative and increased involvement of the Civil Societies to leverage the Panchayath Raj institutions in the democratic and planning process promoting volunteerism.

The establishment of democratic bodies below the State level is imperative from the political and socio-developmental perspectives. Democratic institutions with periodic elections at all levels will provide a forum for the assertion of their strength in large numbers by the weaker sections. With the people and political parties having adequate opportunities to exercise power at various levels, national energy in political recrimination will yield constructive competition and mutual co-operation in developmental activities among stakeholders.

The local Self Government institutions have inculcated a synergy for mobilizing and capacitating volunteers, especially women at their level, and the space of involvement have been increased through GDPDP<sup>15</sup> exercises and practices throughout the country.

There are many programs and projects at the national and state levels implemented by various ministries and departments where they are promoting volunteerism in development works. Here-, we are trying to analyze two programs, namely, the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) project implemented by the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, and Kudumbasree Mission project implemented by the Department of Local Self-Government, Government of Kerala, as the best models of nurturing volunteerism among women and engaging them into the development sector.

The Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, implements rural poverty alleviation through programs directly targeted at the poor rural households. The Planning Commission set up a committee under the chairmanship of Prof S R Hashim in 1997 to review and rationalize various Central Sponsored Schemes for Poverty Alleviation and Employment Generation. The Committee recommended the integration of the allied program with IRDP for better linkage. The report formed

the base for shifting from an individual beneficiary approach to a group approach for poverty alleviation. Based on the recommendations of the Planning Commission, the schemes of TRYSEM, SITRA, GKY, DWCRA, and MWS were merged into a single self-employment program, namely Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), to be implemented by the states, with effect from April 1999. The objective of SGSY was to improve the family incomes of the rural poor and, at the same time, provide for flexibility of design at the grassroots level to suit local needs and resources. The cornerstone of the SGSY strategy was that the poor need to be organized and their capacities built up systematically to access self-employment opportunities. This restructuring also helped establish effective linkages between the various components of the program, such as the capacity building of the poor, credit availability, technology transfer/up-gradation, marketing, and infrastructure.

The experience of implementing SGSY in the ten years (1999 to 2009) brought up a mixed bag of learnings. On the one hand, it focused on shortcomings like uneven mobilization of rural poor and formation of SHGs across the States, insufficient capacity building of beneficiaries, low credit mobilization, and lack of professionals to implement the program. On the other, it amply validated the need for the poor to be organized into SHGs and SHG federations as a pre-requisite for poverty reduction and the social & economic empowerment of the rural poor. Further, the program had also apparently reached a level of maturity. It was necessary to take to the next phase to acquire inter & intra-departmental/ministerial and sectoral linkages along with the revised economic package of assistance. The situation warranted higher-order flexibility and a focus on targets and outcomes. Accordingly, based on the recommendations of the Prof. Radhakrishna Committee report, the government restructured SGSY into National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) in FY 2010-11 to provide a sharper and greater focus as well as momentum for poverty reduction. The decision also aimed to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) by 2015. The Framework for Implementation for N.R.L.M<sup>16</sup>

15 <https://gdpdp.nic.in>

16 <https://aajeevika.gov.in>

was approved by the Ministry on 9th December 2010, and the Mission was formally launched on 3rd June 2011. The NRLM program components comprise the institutional building, capacity building, financial inclusion, livelihood promotion, social inclusion, systems, and convergence of women and marginalized through professional and volunteer engagement in development activities.

Kudumbashree<sup>17</sup> is the poverty eradication and women empowerment program implemented by the Government of Kerala. The name Kudumbashree in the Malayalam language means ‘prosperity of the family.’ The name represents ‘Kudumbashree Mission’ or State Poverty Eradication Mission, as well as the Kudumbashree Community Network. Kudumbashree was set up in 1997 following the recommendations of a three-member Task Force appointed by the state government. Its formation was in the context of the devolution of powers to the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Kerala, and the Peoples’ Plan Campaign, which attempted to draw up the Ninth Plan of the local governments from below through the PRIs and mobilization of development workers at the micro-level.

Kudumbashree has a three-tier structure for mainly for its women’s community network, with Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) formed at the lowest level with memberships of 10 to 20 women members, Area Development Societies (ADS) at the middle level – a federated structure and networks of NHGs, & Community Development Societies (CDS) comprising all ADS at the local government level.

Kudumbashree community network was extended to cover the entire State in three phases during 2000-2002. The Kudumbashree network at present had 2,35,313 NHGs affiliated to 19,489 ADSs and 1064 CDSs with a total membership of 43,93,579 women. Kudumbashree membership is open to all adult women, limited to one membership per family. All these programs and projects have nourished a culture of volunteer engagement of women folk in the rural areas and explored the potentials of participation in development works. Kudumbashree is one of the major women volunteerism promotion agencies in Kerala other than the initiatives of several Non-Governmental Organizations.

## Conclusion

Voluntary organizations, local development committees, federations, and Self-Help Groups (SHGs), etc., are the practical tools for promoting volunteerism at the local level. Lack of professional development in volunteer engagement, most of the volunteerism did not make productive results. Lack of proper laws, rules, and guidelines makes the effects of volunteerism void and voiceless. The futuristic scope of the volunteerism to be created for the community capacity building and people’s participation in development activities with appropriate volunteerism planning and implementation.

Non-government organizations, with their advantage of non-rigid, locality specific, felt Need-based, beneficiary oriented, and committed nature of service, have established a multitude of roles, which can affect rural development. It will be better if we sustain the following;

- Volunteerism is an effective instrument that determines the marginalized groups to participate in rural development programs and projects. The organizations promoting volunteerism should be coordinated and converged at the local level.
- National and state-level policies on volunteerism have to be formulated with a national and state-level framework for quality volunteerism in rural development.
- A national council for volunteerism promotion in development activities must be promoted with key administrative capacities at the state, district, block, and local levels.
- The national council for volunteerism promotion can develop a tailor-made training curriculum for the local volunteers and continuous capacity building.
- The volunteers promoting volunteerism are integrated with mainstream development and their livelihood to be ensured with social protection measures.
- A local action plan for volunteerism promotion and sustainable development goals has to be developed by the concerned authorities with national leaders’ support.
- An intelligent volunteer repository should be created and the capacities of local volunteers

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.kudumbashree.org>

from marginalized sectors to be improved continuously.

- Organizations promoting volunteerism should be networked at the district level and effective volunteerism guidance to be provided for the local development activities.

Volunteerism has effectively supported the marginalized section in building capacities of rural women in the participation of development works. A well-coordinated effort at the national level with proper legislation will help the volunteer impact in the local development and localization of sustainable development goals 2030.

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