



International Day of Families
*15 May 2001 **
" Families and Volunteers – Building Social Cohesion "



Families and Volunteers in Inter-Action

Families, as basic units of society create social capital and therefore contribute comprehensively to the deepening of social integration as well as to the enhancement of social cohesion. Caring and nurturing as well as educational and socializing functions of the family are vital to achieving social progress and justice. Because values and norms adopted by children are in most cases transmitted within families, families play a central role as an instrument of socialization. Tolerance, language, culture as well as attitudes and patterns of behaviour are first taught within the family. Policy makers, NGO's, the business sector, unions as well as cultural and religious groups have all recognized the central role families play in engendering social cohesion.

Volunteering plays an important role in community development both social and economic. Commitment, sharing and mentoring, social cooperation, the ideals of service, solidarity and participation are the foundations of the idea of volunteering. These foundations have been laid within families but in turn also benefit families as soon as they are the focus of attention from volunteers. Families and volunteers can be seen as agents who reinforce each other in the process of building social cohesion. Strong families as well as a vibrant volunteering sector are essential building blocks for a functioning civil society.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations launched the International Year of Volunteers in

2001 to highlight the achievements of volunteers worldwide and to encourage more people to engage in volunteer activity. This International Day of Families underscores the important link between families and volunteers.

From Social Capital to Social Cohesion

Families in every part of the world are affected by social change such as smaller size households, delayed marriage and childbearing, increases in divorce rates and single-parenthood, ageing etc. Moreover, external factors such as wars and natural disasters, poverty, famine, environmental degradation, unemployment, drugs, crime, and diseases such as HIV/AIDS place very heavy burdens on families.

Families create social capital, which consists of elements such as kinship as social institution, trust, social bonds, a culture of participation as well as common values. Social capital can serve as a force to lessen the impact of negative influences affecting families. Massive social dislocations can only be dealt with effectively by a functioning civil society, which is able to draw from a reservoir of accumulated social capital.

Volunteer organizations create and draw from social capital as well. Activities that are carried out by volunteers would otherwise have to be funded by the public sector. Volunteers building trust and reciprocity are a crucial factor in building strong communities. Sharing time, skills and talents, mentoring young people and promoting inclusion are essential elements provided by volunteers for the creation of social justice

* The International Day of Families, was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in its resolution 47/237 of 20 September 1993. On 15 May 2001, the seventh year anniversary celebration of the International Year of the Family is being observed.

and stability.

Besides an increase in solidarity and civic engagement, volunteering makes also a sizeable economic contribution to the wellbeing of societies. In countries where the work of volunteers has been studied, it is estimated that it contributes between 8% and 14% to the GDP**. In addition, volunteerism increases the chances of employability of unemployed or underemployed people, integrates marginalized groups (disabled and older people as well as youth) into society and struggles to alleviate poverty. Care giving within families as well as volunteering contributes to a more cohesive and economically prosperous society. This leads to more social integration, one of the goals of the Copenhagen process.

Issues Affecting Families and Volunteers

Globalization and social change affect both families and volunteers. In developed countries there is concern about changes in family structures and a possible decline in volunteer activity. In the developing world, numerous social, economic and political issues as mentioned above affect families. Since many women in numerous countries entered the workforce in recent decades, the availability of volunteers might be reduced. Therefore, care giving, which is often provided by women in both families and volunteering organizations, might be seriously challenged. However, the importance of care giving for economic sustainability was illustrated in the 1999 UNDP Human Development Report. Indeed, several recent studies have pointed to the link between social capital and economic advance in developing countries.

Demographic ageing appears to be a positive development with effect to families and volunteering. Since people lead longer and healthier lives, more elderly persons could be expected to participate in family as well as in volunteer work. This could lead to a relief for parents struggling between the work place and housework and could also result in a surge of volunteer activity in the future. However, ageing will also mean higher health care costs. In this regard,

volunteer efforts performed by medical and health facilities would assume an even greater importance.

The Internet has become a resource for organizing volunteer groups but also for assisting families. Awareness campaigns, advocacy and philanthropic ideas have found a much wider audience thanks to the spread of global information technology. More 'links' will inevitably lead to an increase in social capital and enhanced social cohesion.

Restructuring and reforming welfare provisions affects families as well as the volunteer sector. Less governmental services might not necessarily lead to more volunteering. In fact, volunteer organizations are dependent on the assistance of the state to be successful. Public services and volunteering should go hand in hand and complement each other. Families and volunteer organizations benefit from effective infrastructure, tax incentives and a reliable legal framework provided by governments.

The business sector can support families by the provision of day-care centers for children, part-time employment opportunities for parents, sabbaticals and flexible working hours. Some companies also encourage volunteerism activities of their employees. Besides the obvious benefits of volunteering, it also improves staff skills as well as the image of a particular company within a community.

Priorities for Families and Volunteers

- Awareness campaigns are necessary to underscore the centrality of families and volunteers in creating social cohesion. Social capital that is provided for society by families as well as volunteers should be publicly appreciated. Parliaments, schools and universities, unions and businesses, cultural and religious institutions could be platforms to emphasize the important role that families and volunteers play for a functioning civil society.
- More research is needed to determine the exact effects that family- and volunteer work provides for societies both in social and economic terms.

** see report of "Expert Working Group Meeting on Volunteering and Social Development", p.4

- Partnerships between the business sector and family- and volunteer organizations should be promoted.
- Legal protection for the establishment and funding of non-profit family organizations as well as voluntary groups is needed.
- Tax incentives for families and volunteer organizations should be encouraged.
- Greater opportunities for formal volunteering should also be provided to people of socially excluded groups to achieve the goal of increased social integration.
- To accomplish the goal of a culture of participation more cooperation between families and volunteer organizations is essential for achieving a higher degree of social cohesion.

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