

The Future of the Volunteer System in Mexico

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In Mexico, as in other countries, the work of men and women volunteers is an accomplishment of civil society, an unquestionable example of committed and unselfish participation.

Volunteer work opens paths down which philanthropy and professional nonprofit work can walk together.

Those who voluntarily give of their time for others show us that the best apprenticeship is that of knowing how to give, because you derive the most satisfaction out of sharing. Those who place their capabilities at the disposal of others show us that when you share what you know, you learn.

In this way, volunteer work, by the openness it implies, is always a lesson of the value of solidarity, not only for the beneficiaries, but also for the volunteers and for society as a whole. We all move forward with each action taken by a volunteer. In the assistance of the sick and the helpless, in social development, in the protection of rights, volunteer work contributes in inestimable ways to the improvement of citizens and the reinforcement of their feeling of belonging.

Volunteer work expresses a profound truth: that which is born out of a free and conscious decision of what is most valuable for humanity. And along with these other kinds of unselfish participation, volunteer work strengthens the basic social ties, those that emerge from recognition of others as a part of the universe of one's own concerns.

A volunteer's work is guided only by the desire to give others a more dignified life. For this reason a volunteer's commitment is a

proactive and generous critique to a state of being, a reading of the social order that indicates its needs from a point of view beyond the struggle for power. Therefore, it is very important that politicians and the government pay attention to volunteer work. This is one of the best frames of reference for verifying the objectives of politics and the orientation of policies.

President Fox and those who collaborate with him are well aware that citizen participation is one of the major strengths that defines reciprocity. We also know that volunteer work is one of the first forms of participation; it is the key to face the challenges that are still pending in the history of our country, such as combating poverty, extending quality medical services, and elevating levels of education. The politicians are aware that our country needs to improve necessary conditions in order to expand the cultivation of volunteers and for the further development of organizations born of civil society.

In the past volunteer work was not given the importance it deserved. In many instances the State attempted to supplant or control it. This is not only contrary to the principles the politicians defend, but also contrary to administrative efficiency. The world today is more complicated now than it was even for our parents' generation.

We live in a network of multiple relationships that define the aspirations, the desires and needs of each social group and of each individual. Because of this, the modern state cannot be the only provider of services.

The immense variety of needs makes it

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impossible to organize an efficient bureaucracy to deal with them. A different model is necessary, an apparatus whose reaction time for problem solving is faster than that of a centralized planning system. This is where the work and talents of volunteers have an inestimable value.

Just as living organisms have evolved according to the variations of the ecological niche, volunteer groups adapt to the needs of their community, responding to the surroundings to fulfill their social work in an efficient and effective manner. Due to its capacity to reach those corners of the social fabric that cannot be reached by governments, volunteer work forms an integral part of the humanitarian action that every civilized and democratic nation must carry out.

But even if the state had all the practical resources to meet the needs, it should not do it alone and it would fail in its attempt. The civilized society — responsible and creative — which is developing in Mexico and one that all Mexicans want, can only be strengthened if its spaces are recognized, and if the joint initiatives of the Government and organized civil organizations fully respect their autonomy.

For these reasons the Government can no longer make decisions at arms length, nor implant them from their desks. It needs to listen to all the volunteers who have gone out in the streets to be with the community, it needs to let them act, and it needs to work together with those who have experience in helping others.

The way the modern state meets its responsibilities of caring for all is to recognize that volunteer work can address the whole universe of social needs, if it is adequately supported.

This is why President Fox's government assumes its responsibility of generating and sustaining the necessary conditions for volunteers to meet their social function, so that their efforts help the community and are not wasted in surmounting artificial obstacles.

The action of volunteers is a social catalyst of enormous importance, one that mobilizes energies and talents for the realization of the common good.

Faced by this new reality that Mexico is living, one which we perceive as very promising for volunteerism, the Mexican Association of Volunteers has been in touch with the Association for Volunteer Administration to bring the AVA Academy to our country to begin to inform the not-for-profit sector about the Profession of Volunteer Resources Administration.

In this world, which has become so much smaller thanks to communications, it is of vital importance to strengthen international relationships, since we will always have something to learn from one another.

ENDNOTES

Portions of this text were taken from a speech given by Rodolfo Elizondo, General Coordinator of Citizen Alliance of Mexican Government on July 25, 2002.

The translation was done by Alicia Umaña.