

# Volunteering and Volunteer Management in Armenia

Susanna Grigoryan

Armenia, a former Soviet republic, is now in a transitional period. In December 1988 a ruinous earthquake destroyed about 40 percent of the economy and killed thousands of people. Since 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia has been an independent democracy struggling to develop a free market economy. A war over disputed territory known as Karabakh, located in Azerbaijan, ended with a ceasefire in 1993, but resulted in boarders being closed with Azerbaijan and Turkey (in support of their Muslim brothers), cutting access to railway, motor transport routes and gas pipelines. Mass poverty has been the social consequence of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the blockade, war, the energy crisis, production decline and the economic collapse. All of these factors have brought people together to begin the process of solving these societal problems. As a result many Non-governmental Organizations (NGO) have been formed, and the need for voluntary action has increased.

In preparation for this report I interviewed 20 NGOs and the Ministry of Social Security to investigate the state of the volunteer movement in Armenia. The results showed that only five NGOs had developed volunteering sectors with more formal volunteer systems. The remaining fifteen NGOs had no systematic systems for volunteering, but were engaged in spontaneous volunteer activities. According to the Ministry of Social Security, the Armenian state structure does not support or assist the volunteer movement.

I would like to share a little about four of

the NGOs with more formal volunteer systems.

Zartonk-89, organized following the earthquake of '88, formally develops volunteer activities by planning how many volunteers are necessary for the implementation of projects, what kinds of specialists are necessary, and what volunteer activities they must do. Our organization has searched for different forms of encouragement for volunteers, as well as means for evaluating the volunteer work. As encouragement, we give volunteers a transportation fee, rations, gifts to the best volunteers, and we write articles for the press about the best volunteers. These volunteer encouragements help raise the effectiveness of the volunteer work.

The management of our volunteer work is done in the following ways:

- The volunteer chooses the form of work s/he wishes to do.
- The beginning and end times for the selected work must be fixed in written form.
- The volunteer work must be described in written form.

We find that the volunteer work has greater effectiveness when the organization has definite focus, aims, objectives and strategies.

The Armenian Volunteer Union was established two years ago to engage the involvement of Diaspora (Armenians living outside of Armenia) volunteers to develop and strengthen the NGO work in Armenia. They have created databases underlining their

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needs, mission and work focus. Cooperating with other international organizations they provide apartments and health insurance for international volunteers.

Areg-73 is a scientific cultural youth association begun in 1994. The association works in the capital city of Yerevan with disabled children and the elderly and has 120 volunteers. The leader of the group organizes the management of the volunteers. It receives no government assistance, and funds its work through membership fees and entry fees.

Mission Armenia, founded in 1988, implements small business development projects for refugees. In this organization the volunteers are the beneficiaries of services. They serve the elderly, students and refugees. The volunteer department organizes and coordinates the volunteer activities.

In Armenia most NGOs do not work cooperatively with each other. The organizations mentioned here, however, do work cooperatively, and have considered the creation of a volunteer center but lack funding for such a project.

In Armenia volunteering is a developing tendency. The volunteers are mainly the elderly, women, children, refugees and youth. Volunteers become involved because they believe in the aims of the organization and share their ideas. These volunteers are very kind in their works, and this ideological stimulus is a more powerful factor for enhancing productivity than the expectation of financial compensation. Volunteer work tends to develop very quickly, with a positive dynamic. Volunteer work helps organizations economically because they do not have to pay obligatory state salary taxes. While these are positive factors affecting the development of the volunteer movement, there are also negative factors:

- The concept of volunteering is not accepted by the Armenian society as it is in other countries.
- The volunteer movement does not receive government assistance.

- There is no institution to coordinate the volunteering work.
- There is a lack of experience for the exchange of knowledge and awareness of volunteer work and volunteering ideas.

I would like to conclude with the following observations regarding the development of volunteerism and volunteer management in Armenia:

- There is a volunteering movement, but it is spontaneous and must be systematized.
- The administration/management structures of volunteer organizations are poorly developed and very feeble.
- There is an absence of adequate legislation.
- There is a need for organized seminars, trainings and investigation works (inviting best volunteers and specialists) to develop the volunteer movement.
- Create a volunteering fund, which may help the volunteering movement long-term and for great vitality.
- Organize experience exchanges with those countries where there are developed volunteer movements. We must participate in international conferences and forums on the volunteering movement.
- Create a volunteer center in the Republic of Armenia that will systematize the volunteering movement.
- Organize training to raise the skill of administrative management in volunteer organizations
- Cooperate with foreign countries to implement volunteer and management exchange projects.
- Create a state commission with volunteering organizations to work on legislation.