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Global Connections - International Volunteerism

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Last month I participated in the 6th annual Volunteurope conference (it was in Paris this year--a hard job, but someone has to do it!). And, as this "hot topic" is posted, AVA's 1997 International Conference on Volunteer Administration will be coming to a close in Norfolk VA, USA--as I keep my bags packed and return to Europe for two weeks of seminars in the UK, Stockholm and Rotterdam.

This jet-setting existence is but one indicator of a truly global interest in the role of volunteering and the work of those who lead volunteer efforts. Every year the AVA and Points of Light conferences (major volunteerism conferences in North America) see the number of international registrants grow--including the submission of workshop proposals from outside the region. In August 1998, IAVE (International Association for Volunteer Effort) is planning a major event in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada to attract volunteer leaders from all over the globe. (To learn more about this and other international events, check out our [conference area](#) on this site.

What does this all mean to the profession and to each of us as individuals?

The Internet

The Internet has given us the world on a keyboard. We have only just begun to explore the communication possibilities. This was driven home to me by two incidents that occurred during my recent trip to Europe. First, the conference organizers wondered how two registrants from Greece had learned about the event. It turns out that they heard it from me! Three months ago, after finding this Web site, a Greek businesswoman e-mailed me with questions about employee volunteering. As part of my response to her, I mentioned the Paris event. And there she was, with a colleague, delighted at having been connected to a new field. Four days later I was in Newcastle in the UK. My workshop host commented on his surprise at welcoming two participants from the Swedish Red Cross. Initially this did not surprise me, as my work in Stockholm in mid-November will be for the Swedish Red Cross and I assumed these two staffers had come over to sample the workshop. But it turned out that they learned of my visit to Stockholm only after having registered for the Newcastle training--they had gotten the information about the workshop from this Web site!

The power of the Internet is that, at absolutely no additional cost except some time and attention, "passive" notices such as the conference list on this site take on a life of their own. Why shouldn't someone from Sweden hop over to England for a seminar? Why wouldn't someone from Boston fly to Chicago for a worthwhile conference? Even things we plan locally or regionally now have the potential to attract any interested person.

Interestingly, academics have already begun to support international research exchange. Several conferences each year are held around the world to present papers and studies about philanthropy, the voluntary sector, nongovernmental agencies, and volunteering. Few practitioners are involved.

Many Causes Have No Geographic Boundaries

Many causes in which volunteers are active have no geographic boundaries. AIDS is a world-wide health crisis. Environmental issues affect the entire planet. Hunger and famine require international solutions. One of the powerful things about volunteers is that they are always private citizens. An "official" representative of a government or a formal agency or organization may be restricted by laws, treaties, diplomacy, or just plain red tape. But a volunteer, as a concerned individual, can pack a passport and cross all sorts of geographical and psychological boundaries. With the tool of the Internet and the accessibility of air travel, we ought to encourage the potential of such direct person-to-person interaction. By the way, you don't need to leave the country to make use of this unique ability of volunteers to cross formal jurisdictional lines. How many social problems could be addressed more effectively if organizations were able to work within a geographic proximity region instead of areas defined by voting and taxing boundaries?

Volunteering is NOT Uniquely American

If you still hold on to the myth of "volunteering is uniquely American," educate yourself! The United States may have a voluntary sector with more structure and impact than other countries, but every culture has developed ways in which people help people. Even the former USSR had a form of volunteering: it was called the "Underground"! By learning what other countries do by volunteer action, we can examine our own beliefs and get new ideas, too.

For example, in the United States, organizations take pride in proclaiming: "We take no government funds." In England, organizations feel that it is a *mark of success* if they have demonstrated the value of their work sufficiently to convince the government to fund a service and make it accessible to everyone. It's useful to challenge our assumptions every so often.

Over the years I've come across some intriguing examples of volunteer activity in other lands. Some I only heard about in passing, but here are a few:

- In Japan, with probation officers spend time coordinating volunteers who, in turn, are the ones who work with offenders.
- In Ecuador, volunteers maintain some of the largest cemeteries.

- In Israel, volunteers work with the military to offer bereavement support to families who lose loved ones in armed conflict.
- In Spain, volunteers provide the medical services in prisons.

Let's Hear From You!

This Web site is regularly visited by international volunteerism colleagues--we estimate that at least 15% of our "hits" are from outside North America. For everyone, what have been your international experiences regarding volunteering or making contact with foreign colleagues? What would you like to see evolve in terms of international exchange over the next few years? What examples of volunteering can you share that other countries might find unusual? How can we help each other?

Of course, you can always hold out for the first Intergalactic Conference on Volunteerism, but why not go international right now?!

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Submitted by Ginny Orth, Volunteer Program Manager, The Volunteer Center, St. Paul, MN

I have had three opportunities to visit with people from other countries about volunteerism. A woman from Mongolia who worked for the president, was studying at the Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota. She wanted to implement a volunteer program in Mongolia, a former communist and nomadic country. I spent many hours on several occasions talking with her and sharing materials.

I also met with two women from Sweden who spent a week at Lynblomsten Home in St. Paul observing a volunteer program. They hoped to implement ideas learned in St. Paul in a Swedish Nursing Home. At the Minnesota State Confence I visited with a woman from Korea who started a volunteer program in health care in her country.

Each woman had unique challenges to meet in her country due to history, culture, customs, and even geography!

Submitted by Liz Weaver, Volunteer Centre of Hamilton & District, Hamilton, Ontario Canada

Volunteerism is alive and well in Canada as our neighbours to the South know. We are watching trends like the VC2000 and the initiatives of the Points of Light Foundation with interest. While, activities which take place in the US may not always fit the Canadian model, we can learn from both successes and failures. Civic participation enriches all of us.

Pamela Kruse-Buckingham, Volunteer Coordinator, Washington, USA

Although the scope of our mission at the county museum I work for is not "international", I have taken strides to reach out to all ethnic backgrounds in this county. I invite all ethnic groups I can find to participate in the volunteer activities here, and to hopefully, eventually round out the museum's

volunteer base, Board of Trustees, and the museum's collection. Creating an "international" scope for your non-profit organization can start small and continue to grow. Either way, it can truly be an asset.

Response from Bruce Fraser, Body Positive Strathclyde, Scotland

Susan is absolutely correct. Volunteerism is not uniquely American. I manage a force of Volunteers in Glasgow, Scotland for an organisation for people living with HIV/AIDS. We have two volunteers who have only been to The Body Positive Centre where we are based once for an interview. One has children and cannot get in. She works on documents and we e-mail each other back and forth. Another one is a University student and actually updates our website, without us having to do anything. There is no reason why we cannot have volunteers from other countries (of course we don't have an electronic application form yet and the problem of interviewing/checking for suitability is yet to be solved I feel) but these are challenges, not reasons not to accept volunteers from other countries.

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