

2001 International Conference on Volunteer Administration

International Leaders Share Global Perspectives on Volunteerism

As part of the 2001 International Conference on Volunteer Administration hosted by the Association for Volunteer Administration, four speakers gave their perspectives on volunteerism around the world. They identified key issues and posed questions about volunteerism that many countries, communities and individuals are facing today or will face in the future.

Volunteering Tomorrow: Changes and Challenges

Speech given by Kenn Allen, Ed.D., founder and president of the Civil Society Consulting Group, LLC and World President of the International Association for Volunteer Effort

In his speech to the joint session of Congress, U.S. President Bush said of September 11, "Night fell on a different world."

As we gather today, we are meeting in the shadow of that night. Our world has changed dramatically. But, empowering people through volunteering is more important today than ever before. As the "on the ground" leaders of the global volunteer community, we share responsibility for ensuring that volunteering has the greatest possible impact on the way we lead our lives. Beyond the work we promote are the values that work represents.

So how do we think about our new world? Yesterday, you heard about critical demographic trends. Today, I want to share with you 10 more ideas about volunteering that are in play around the world - and suggest some of the questions we need to ask ourselves.

1. Volunteering is the fundamental building block of civil society. Over the last 10 years, there has been a growing recognition of civil society as essential for free democratic societies. But only now is there a significant understanding that without volunteers, there is no civil society. Without volunteers, there are no NGOs, no private philanthropy, no pressure on government.

How do we convince funders and policy-makers that an investment in strengthening volunteering has a positive long-term affect on the development of civil society?

2. Volunteering and social activism must be reconciled as complementary ways to empower people. For too long we have either kept them at odds or declared them as fitting under the same umbrella without doing much to bring them together - or to release the energy that can come from that joining.

In a practical sense, how do we change our own behaviors so that we can engage effectively in mutually beneficial partnerships, particularly with those who are taking political positions that may differ from ours?

3. Volunteering is universal, not a phenomenon of Western, Northern, or more developed countries. Volunteering happens wherever there are people who care and are willing to convert that caring to action. I want to applaud AVA for the significant steps it is taking to become more international.

How do we begin to invest time and financial resources in more systematic learning across cultures? How do we cap-

ture and transmit to "more developed" countries the lessons they must learn from "less developed" countries?

4. Volunteering is a powerful response to the spiritual call to service. It is present in all major religions. In a world searching for meaning, volunteering for and through religious groups is likely to increase.

Is it possible to both honor religious tenets and find common ground around the work being done by both religious-based and secular volunteers? How do we build our understanding of how people of different religious beliefs view volunteering?

5. Effective, sustained, high impact volunteering requires effective management.

We all know that — but how do we convince others? How do we become agents for change within our organizations, making volunteers an integral part of achieving the organization's mission?

How can we convince funders, particularly those who operate multi-nationally, to commit the resources that are required to develop the knowledge and skills of local volunteer leaders? How do we ensure that the content of training in volunteer mobilization and management is culturally appropriate and not dominated by "Western" approaches?

6. Volunteering needs dedicated national and local leadership organizations. Volunteering is strongest where there are organizations that take responsibility for promoting and supporting volunteering, not on its own behalf, but to benefit the total community.

What is the most convincing case that can be made that governments, foundations, and businesses should be investing in the fundamental infrastructure that promotes and supports volunteering? How do we move beyond our own immediate organizational concerns to support the development of the infrastructure we need to support our work and our profession?

7. Government can play an important role in ensuring that everyone has the right and the opportunity to volunteer.

There are five significant ways it can do that: (1) by helping to create a public environment that values volunteering; (2) by removing barriers to volunteering that may exist in law or regulations; (3) by modeling excellence in volunteer management in its own engagement of volunteers; (4) by ensuring the development of appropriate organizational infrastructure to promote and support volunteering, and (5) by finding innovation in volunteer programs.

How do we prevent government's exploitation of volunteers, either by co-opting them for political purposes or seeking to substitute the work of volunteers and NGOs for the responsibilities of the state?

8. Business worldwide is increasingly interested in how volunteering can help it meet its strategic goals. They recognize that it is good for their workers to be involved as volunteers in the community. They also recognize that it is good for the company itself. And, of course, it is good for the community. This growing interest potentially brings new resources to us. But there is no such thing as a "free lunch." There may well be a cost to us in our independence.

Is it possible for NGOs to work in partnership with business and remain independent of business? How do we prevent the exploitation of volunteering by business — either by co-opting NGOs or by turning volunteering into a marketing tool? How do we prepare both business and NGOs to work effectively with one another?

9. Volunteering empowers people who have been marginalized by their communities. We know, from experience and from research, the power of volunteering to change the lives of those who volunteer. We know

particularly its power for youth, seniors, and those we usually think of as recipients of service. But, we need to understand that in some parts of the world, their volunteering is an act of courage, one that can expose them to harm?

Can we act at a global level to build standards that can be agreed upon among international NGOs to ensure the rights, the safety, and the opportunity to perform effectively for our volunteers? How can we change our thinking to ensure that the right and the opportunity to volunteer is extended to all people, regardless of their life circumstance?

10. Technology has a tremendous potential to help connect people with one another and with work they can do as volunteers. But can we really replace the “high touch” that is essential for our work with “high tech”?

How do we stem the investment of scarce resources in unproven technology when it comes at the expense of program needs? In online volunteer efforts, how do we protect the recipients of services, potentially those who may be most vulnerable, from those who may in some way seek to do them harm? How do we evaluate the value of online volunteering to both those who volunteer and those they serve and of technology generally in the promotion and support of volunteering?

“Night fell on a different world.” Our work is essential to ensure that the sun rises on a better world, one in which every person can live in dignity, in safety, with opportunity, and with justice — not only here but worldwide.

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