

ABSTRACT

This article presents a brief overview of the evolution of the volunteer movement in Latin America. Historic, political, and demographic differences are highlighted among the 20 independent republics of Central and South America. The author supports introducing volunteerism to youth to give them the opportunity to engage in building a better future for their countries and the region.

Volunteerism in Latin America

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BACKGROUND

Latin America consists of those countries south of the United States in which the Romance languages officially are spoken. Latin America is made up of 20 independent republics located in Central and South America. Spanish is spoken in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, México, Nicaragua, Panamá, Paraguay, Perú, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Portuguese is spoken in Brazil; French in Haiti. Sometimes Latin America includes Guyana, Suriname, and French Guyana in South America and, less often, the Caribbean Islands.

The people of Latin America are of mixed Indian, black, and white ancestry. If we include Central and South America and the Caribbean, there are approximately 429 million inhabitants. Population growth in Latin America is among the highest in the world at 2.2 percent annually. It is estimated that by the year 2000, the population will increase by 100

million, 34 percent of whom will live in Brazil.

Differences in educational levels and social status are significant. Despite educational campaigns, illiteracy rates remain high, especially in remote areas. Universities suffer from lack of full-time teaching staff and up-to-date technology. After World War II, large numbers of people moved from rural to urban areas in search of employment, and most large cities are now surrounded by extensive squatter colonies. Housing, social, and medical services are frequently inadequate to meet the needs of the people of Latin America.

Several highly developed civilizations flourished in the region before the arrival of Columbus in 1492 and the subsequent conquest and colonization of the region. During the Conquest, the indigenous populations were decimated by war and European diseases to which they had no resistance. Colonial rule by the Spanish and Portuguese lasted about three centuries but by 1825, inspired by the leadership of Simon Bolivar and José de San

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Martin, most of the colonies had gained their independence. Power and wealth, however, remained in the hands of a few, and political life was marked by corruption and instability. In the early 20th century, several countries enjoyed long, peaceful periods of constitutional rule. In the 1960s and 1970s there was a rise of military dictatorships throughout the region and violent factional strife in Central America, but since 1979 many nations have returned to democratic rule.

Historically, Latin American economies depended on a single export commodity to earn foreign exchange. In more recent times, some countries have made efforts to diversify, but economic development is hampered by poor transportation, continuing political instability, and the burdensome effects of foreign aid when new regulations are imposed that frequently adversely affect a population already suffering from inefficient government policies. Social disorder often follows.

There are two great problems in Latin America that still defy solution: persistent unequal income distribution and urban unemployment of up to 50 percent. Although half the population in Latin America works on the land, agriculture is mostly primitive and inefficient.

Although many Latin American nations borrowed huge sums from the International Monetary Fund and from private banks leading to a near-crisis in the 1980s when they were unable to repay their debts, important positive changes in recent years include the emergence of Brazil as a leading industrial power, Chile as a new emerging economy, and the use of the substantial oil revenues in México, Bolivia, and Venezuela to finance economic growth.

Although Latin American countries share a history of European colonization, common languages, and the Catholic religion, the complexity and variety of subcultures within each country's geographic boundaries don't allow for many generalizations.

Overall, Latin American nations can be divided into groups with some shared characteristics. Bolivia, Perú, México, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua have large indigenous populations where the colonization process produced a synthesis between the natives' strong beliefs and the culture of the Spanish settlers.

Argentina, Costa Rica, Chile, and Uruguay are countries where a model of planned colonization was imposed by settlers from European countries such as Italy, Germany, and Spain.

In many Caribbean countries, and also in Venezuela and Brazil, intermarriage between the European settlers and their slaves was common and is seen today in the ethnic mixture of a majority of the population there.

In recent years the crises on the political stage and in the economic and social areas in Latin America have caused strong economic measures to be taken in a number of countries that have had devastating consequences including a decline in purchasing power and the further impoverishment of a majority of the population. It is estimated that more than 80 percent of the population in Latin America lives in poverty. The middle class standard of living has declined. In addition, more than 50 percent of the population in Latin America is below 25-years-old creating a great burden on basic health, education, welfare, and social services.

It is widely believed that by the beginning of the next century changes must take place that guarantee a united and participative effort on the part of citizens leading to the establishment of a truly civil society in Latin America. Empowerment through citizen action can play a principal role in helping to overcome Latin America's current problems. The inclusion of youth in the volunteer movement should be a fundamental strategy to help build an organized and effective society in the region.

VOLUNTEERING IN LATIN AMERICAN

In the 1940s there was a surge of interest in philanthropy and social work on the part of the religious community, corporate stakeholders, and the government. Serious social problems became acute with an explosive growth in population, especially in urban areas. Governments were unable to address the increasing need for funds and human resources. To address the lack of human resources, social work degrees were given a high priority at the university level. During this time there was uneasiness about the participation of women in political, economic, and social settings, but many women's groups founded volunteer organizations out of a sense of civic duty as well as religious inspiration.

Traditionally volunteering in Latin America has been understood as:

- Work done by the church and its congregants for the community.
- Financial support of charitable causes by individual donors.
- The good works of wealthy, non-working women in hospitals, schools, and ghettos.
- Partisan political activity to solicit votes.
- Philanthropy for personal or economic gain.

Because volunteering often was limited to women from the middle to upper socioeconomic groups, many others consider volunteering self-indulgent, idealistic, and/or foolish. Few individuals today identify themselves as "volunteers."

The voluntary sector in Latin America is characterized by an increasing number of systematic, coordinated programs, including the establishment of volunteer programs. Although there is not much formal coordination among diverse public and private institutions, there are a few national strategies in the field of volunteerism that are taking into account existing initiatives. Some institutions' efforts

have borne positive results by creating prestigious umbrella organizations whose actions are of great significance. Some examples, by country, follow:

Argentina

Consejo de Coordinación de Obras Privadas (CONDECOORD) in Buenos Aires, Argentina:

- Advocates for the benefit of welfare organizations.
- Updates its affiliated volunteer groups in management techniques.
- Recognizes volunteer leaders.

Bolivia

Confederación Nacional de Instituciones Femeninas in La Paz, Bolivia:

- Provides volunteer training.
- Develops programs focused on youth and family volunteering.

Brazil

Programa de Voluntarios de la Comunidad Solidaria in Sao Paulo, Brazil:

- Identifies issues and strategic actions to empower the third sector.
- Contributes financial assistance, training and counseling to enhance the efficiency of non-governmental organizations.
- Stimulates and promotes the volunteer culture.
- Creates volunteer centers in different cities of Brazil that build upon grassroots initiatives for social development.

Chile

Guía para la Acción Solidaria, a publication of SOLIS (Solidaridad.Espiritualidad), in Santiago, Chile:

This organization publishes a directory of over 1,500 volunteer programs in Santiago. The directory is used to link volunteers with the agencies that need them.

Colombia

Corporación Colombiana de Trabajo Voluntario (CCTV) in Bogotá, Colombia:

- Runs a national volunteer center and referral and recruitment service for volunteers.

- Provides education and training for volunteers.
- Has a volunteer program for the elderly affiliated with the American organization, Retired and Senior Volunteer Program.
- Has established a fund for small business women through Rotary Clubs International.

Ecuador

Fundación Ecuatoriana de Trabajo Voluntario (FETV) in Quayaquil, Ecuador:

- Promotes and coordinates the activities of affiliated agencies and volunteer groups in Ecuador.
- Offers training in volunteer management.
- Publicly praises and appreciates volunteer leaders.

México

Centro Mexicano para la Filantropía in Mexico City (CEMEFI), México:

- Promotes community development through the donation of time, talent, and money.
- Promotes and coordinates volunteer effort through the Asociación Mexicana de Voluntarios in Mexico City.

Venezuela

Federación de Instituciones Privadas de Atención al Niño, al Joven y a la Familia (FIPAN) in Caracas, Venezuela:

- Brings under its umbrella more than 60 non-governmental organizations.
- Offers opportunities for volunteering to families and youth and works with corporations to enlist their support and gives volunteer opportunities to their employees.

VOLUNTEERING, YOUTH, AND THE FUTURE IN LATIN AMERICA

Because of Latin America's large youth population, we must direct our greatest efforts to the education and development of the generation that will be responsible for the future. We must work with the young so they become adults with values

and moral strength who wish to participate in a civil society, have a vision for the future, and are self-confident. In societies such as ours—overloaded with problems, contradictions, and disintegration—we must help the young confront challenges, develop their identities, and assume adult roles. As elsewhere in the world, important agents of socialization in Latin America—family and school—have been affected in such a manner that they have been unable to satisfactorily fulfill their functions in the areas of moral and civic education. Because of multiple and complex historic, social, and cultural reasons, youth have been left with diminished possibilities for healthy internalization of the values and standards fundamental to their culture.

If we want to develop our region, we must invest in our youth with long-term planning that guarantees continuity and results. Grandparents, parents, and youth themselves—three generations—must come up with solutions. It has been demonstrated that when youth are well supervised and have the opportunity to work in a well-run agency, their formation as citizens and their personal growth is enhanced. Volunteer experience can give them the opportunity to suggest creative solutions to the problems around them, open employment opportunities for them, and integrate them into the mainstream of the nation.

In Venezuela the department of education requires that high school students fulfill 40-60 hours of community service over a two-year period. Through the agency I represent, FIPAN, teenagers are made aware of social problems and trained in the philosophy of volunteerism. Our goal is to influence them to be proactive and competent to make a commitment to sustainable social development. In Caracas, youths volunteer in ghetto public schools helping kids learn. At hospitals they visit ill children and the elderly and help in areas such as admissions, recovery, and rehabilitation.

Youth volunteerism is a strategy we

must adopt in order to educate a very large and important population group who, often dissatisfied, disinterested, and in despair have the time and energy to apply themselves to projects that will develop their civic sense. Youth volunteerism has meaning for a generation of future leaders who will help to build nations in Latin America of which we can be proud. Through volunteerism, youth will acquire leadership tools that will allow them to motivate other youth to adopt the values of justice, freedom, friendship, and peace in more effective ways. Youth know the problems of society very well—drug addiction, delinquency, adolescent pregnancy, negative use of time, scholastic under-achievement, and family and social disintegration—and can be motivated to get involved in actions that can make a positive difference to others and to themselves. It is this vision we must embrace in Latin America.