

## The Social Impact of Volunteers Internationally

presented at

**El esfuerzo de los voluntarios en el mundo  
Volunteers and Museums Conference**

by

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I am delighted to be here in Mexico City to represent the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) and our President, Liz Burns. For those of you who are not familiar with IAVE, it is the only membership NGO at an international level that exists to promote, support and celebrate volunteering worldwide. It is a network organization with individual and organizational members in approximately 100 countries. We believe that volunteering is a fundamental building block of civil society.

Thank you for inviting me, and for offering me the opportunity to visit your wonderful country and to meet with people from around the world who are dedicated to two of my greatest passions — volunteers and museums. My topic today is the social impact of volunteers worldwide.

I have been asked by IAVE's President, Liz Burns, to convey the following to you:

As a regular visitor to Museums wherever I go, both home and abroad, I am always very aware of their importance in helping us understand our history, and to be in touch with our past, and to make

available to us our artistic and cultural heritage past and present. As President of IAVE I am proud that volunteers play a key role in supporting and maintaining museums, and making them both interesting and welcoming. This is equally true of some of the grand museums of our capital cities, and of smaller, local museums. Please accept my very best wishes for a successful conference, and for your work in the field in the coming year.

Two years ago, during the so-called Millennium Year, I gave myself a treat. I took a week of annual leave and attended a conference called the Viking Millennium International Symposium which was being held in my then home province of Newfoundland and Labrador. The conference was meant to commemorate the landing and establishment of a temporary settlement by Viking seamen in the year 1000 on the northern tip of the island portion of that province. I really had a very superficial knowledge of the Viking (or Norse, as we were told by the academics at

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the conference to call them) world beyond an abiding love of history in general, plus an early fascination with archeology when I was a teen in which I read indiscriminately about digs everywhere in the world — including Norse sites — and of course some less scholarly reading, at the same time of my life, of historical romances in which well muscled Vikings figured prominently. It was a treat, therefore, because I could just be there and be entertained. I didn't have to get up in front of an audience, with my knees shaking and my throat dry, to be a so-called expert on anything. I didn't even have to ask intelligent questions from the audience. There were no expectations around my presence.

What I hadn't expected, but what in retrospect I should have, was that in addition to teaching about Vikings the conference would also be an education on, as well as a reconfirmation of, the social and economic impact of volunteers. I want to briefly share this experience with you because it seems to me to be illustrative of many of this conference's themes, and of the topic on which I have been asked to speak, which in case you, or I, forget is the **social impact of volunteering around the world**.

The conference itself was a moveable feast that started in St. John's, the capital of the province, then moved by chartered plane to St. Anthony on the Northern Peninsula (near the Viking site at L'Anse Aux Meadows) and finally by chartered bus and ferry across the Strait of Belle Isle to coastal Labrador. Taking the lead on the conference was the Historic Sites Association of Newfoundland and Labrador and its volunteer board. The conference participants and presenters included world renowned scholars, people from major museums in Europe, Iceland, Canada, the USA, etc., writers, adventurers and more than a few like myself who had literally come along for the ride.

The St. John's portion of the conference was a fairly standard format with presentations, receptions and dinners in a local hotel,

and at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador. With the move to St. Anthony, a community of a few thousand people, things changed. There was a gala dinner the first night for conference participants and community people that was prepared and served at the local high school by volunteers. The next day each of the focus streams was bused to a different location in the region for the day's sessions. Conference volunteers traveled with us, and community volunteers greeted us at the sites. My first session was held in a small century-old church hall overlooking the harbour at Dark Tickle, a small fishing community. From there we moved on to another church in another small community for lunch hosted by the local church women, and afternoon sessions. Volunteers were involved everywhere, and despite the logistics, all the equipment worked, the buses arrived on time, and the food was to die for. Our stay in St. Anthony included a visit to the Parks Canada site and the reconstruction of the Viking settlement. Another feature of this portion of the conference was that several of the conference presenters had volunteered to speak at local schools and at a session specially organized for community people.

It was impossible, especially for one who had spent a lifetime promoting volunteering, not to see the role of volunteerism at work in the whole effort. The planning and organizing committee as well as members of the board of the Historic Sites Association were along, and riding shot-gun on problems that might arise. The conference volunteers were registering people at the different venues, answering questions, keeping the traffic flowing and, of course, selling conference fundraising products. Community volunteers were greeting us and feeding us everywhere we went. Conference speakers were going beyond the call of duty to present to local people. This, in a microcosm, was the familiar world of volunteering that we and politicians (like the ones who were popping in and out at various stages of the conference) traditionally

understood, are made to feel warm and fuzzy by, and are experts in paying lip service to.

It was when we moved to Coastal Labrador by bus and boat that my perspective and thinking about the role of volunteers was forced to broaden.

What you need to understand about this area is that it is a series of very small communities spread out along hundreds of kilometers of breathtaking, beautiful coastline, inhabited by just 11,000 people. Until 1992, when the government of Canada imposed a moratorium on the ground fishery, one which continues today, this area was almost totally economically dependent on fishing. I did not know what to expect of the area, never having visited before, but would not have been surprised to see outward signs of poverty, out-migration and despair. What we found, as we moved from community to community, stopping along the way to be fed and to listen to more presentations, were well-maintained communities with some fairly common features. These were: new development association buildings run by local volunteers and the focal point of community building efforts; and some form of community museum or historic site. The latter ranged from the burial site of a teen-aged Maritime Archaic Indian, to historic lighthouses, to a museum dedicated to the history of the well known volunteer group, the Women's Institute, and to the major Basque whaling site at Red Bay run by Parks Canada.

Coastal Labrador was fighting for survival, and using its history and heritage as one of the main vehicles. Fueling this effort was the work of community volunteers. These volunteers represented all the facets of volunteering I had recognized up until then in the conference but they were — and are still, I'm certain — engaged in mutual aid and self-help aimed at community survival. They are also activists, as they fight for scarce resources and political influence, lobby to protect and maintain their environment against forces that have let them down massively before,

scramble to maintain — and in some cases to rediscover — their unique heritage, and struggle to ensure healthy and sustainable communities. This is civil society.

This is serious stuff. This is stuff that politicians, academics, business people and world leaders are coming to recognize more and more. Increasingly this recognition is supported by legislation, covenants, accords, policy documents, research dollars and even, occasionally, dollars for civil society organizations to do their work.

Lester Salamon in the July 1994 edition of *Foreign Affairs* compares the rise and emergence of a strong and influential civil society to the rise of the nation state in the late nineteenth century. Maurice Strong, in his 1999 memoir *Maurice Strong: Where in The World Are We Going*, traced the growth of influence of NGO's on environmental issue from the United Nation's Stockholm conference on the Environment in 1972 to their increasingly central role in the Rio Earth Summit of 1994 and its follow up. It was clear from the press coverage of the recent South African Summit that this voice is stronger and even more essential today.

Strong says:

The running of our planet ... once viewed primarily as a matter of inter-governmental relationships, now involves not only governments and intergovernmental institutions but also non-governmental organizations (NGO'S), citizens' movements, transnational corporations, academics and the mass media. The emergence of global civil society, with many movements reinforcing the sense of human solidarity reflects a large increase in the capacity and will of people to take control of their own lives.

In January 2001 at another conference, this one an IAVE conference held in Amsterdam and scheduled as a lead event in the

International Year of Volunteers, the Board of IAVE issued a redrafting of the original 1990 Universal Declaration on Volunteering. Its opening states:

Volunteering is a fundamental building block of civil society. It brings to life the noblest aspirations of humankind — the pursuit of peace, freedom, opportunity, safety, and justice for all people. In this era of globalization and continuous change, the world is becoming smaller, more interdependent, and more complex. Volunteering — either through individual or group action — is a way in which:

- human values of community, caring and serving can be sustained and strengthened,
- individuals can exercise their rights and responsibilities as members of communities, while learning and growing throughout their lives, realizing their full human potential; and
- connections can be made across differences that push us apart so that we can live together in healthy sustainable communities, working together to provide innovative solutions to our shared challenges, and to shape our collective destinies.

At the dawn of the new millennium, volunteering is an essential element of all societies. It turns into practical, effective action the declaration of the United Nations that “We, the Peoples” have the power to change the world.

If, at this stage of the world’s history, the growth of civil society is as significant as the growth of nation states to the early history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and if as Strong says there is a concomitant increase in the power of the ordinary citizen to take control of their lives, the

Declaration’s statement that volunteering is a “fundamental building block of civil society” is significant. Volunteers, worldwide, are poised, and, in many cases, poised with the right tools in their hand, to make a social and economic impact on how the world does business.

I refuse to even think that the rise of the nation states is one of the causes usually cited for the start of the 1st World War! I do, however, want to return later to some of the concerns and criticisms around the growth in the importance of civil society and of volunteering in the world.

Nonetheless, can we agree in principle that civil society is wonderful, and that volunteers indeed do have a huge social and economic impact around the globe? We also need to understand that volunteering does vary in its manifestations, as I hope my story of Coastal Labrador conveyed.

I wish to deal briefly with the following issues:

- A topology of volunteering around the world
- A description of the tools that volunteers are currently using and/or need in order to have an impact
- The role of governments and other sectors in supporting volunteerism, and
- Concerns and issues that need addressing around volunteering.

Justin Davis Smith in a 1999 discussion paper for the United Nations called *Volunteering and Social Development* outlined a topology of volunteering. After stating that volunteering has different meanings in different countries, he identified four different types which were “delineated according to a final outcome or final criterion.” These are: mutual aid or self help; philanthropy or service to others; participation; and advocacy or campaigning. He states that all forms occur everywhere in the world, but the balance will be different depending on the “economic,

social and political make-up of the country” as well as its primary religious heritage. The main division between less developed countries and more developed countries seems to be that the former have more mutual aid and self-help volunteering, and the latter more formal and philanthropic volunteering. Participation volunteering is the involvement of people in the governance structures of organizations, government relations and local development. Again it is found everywhere, but more common in countries with “a strong tradition of civil society.” The fourth form is advocacy, campaigning or lobbying on behalf of a cause. This is the type of volunteering that is most likely, of course, to bring volunteers into conflict with the state, or with others in society who don’t think as they do.

What is also true of these forms of volunteering is that, just as they exist in differing degrees and importance in different countries around the world, they exist in different organizations in differing levels of importance. We need only think of our own organizations. Just as economic, social and political considerations help determine the face of volunteering around the world, the same can be said of our own structures. If we feel the need to change that balance we will need to examine the factors that contribute to it, and look for resources to effect change.

I talked about volunteers, within the framework of civil society being poised, often with tools in hand, to make an even greater impact than they have already. The tools I am talking about include:

First, The International Year of Volunteers has raised the profile of volunteering in countries around the world. In many, like my own country of Canada, governments are more open to, and even seeking dialogue with, the sector and with volunteers. Now is the perfect time to seize the opportunity this affords to advance our cause.

Second, we have a growing body of knowledge; resource materials; training and education programs both formal and informal;

websites; and experts (several of the best know of whom are here at this conference) helping us to develop better quality volunteer programs and cultivate happier and more dedicated volunteers.

Third, as a sector, the issue of effective governance, accountability and ethics has and is receiving a lot of attention. I’d say in light of recent developments in the corporate world, it is time for it to be looking to the third sector for guidance and ideas, rather than the reverse, as is so often the case.

Fourth, NGO’s and coalitions of NGO’s are making great use of new technologies and information-sharing to address and lobby for global action on issues. The landmines campaign is a case in point. It is said that over 300 million volunteers were mobilized worldwide on this issue and their lobbying, primarily electronic, was instrumental in the eventual development and signing of the Land Mines Treaty of 1997, which has led to a worldwide ban on the production of anti-personnel devices. The expansion of the ability of international NGO’s to get their work done and to take on new initiatives because of technology is incredible. This also applies to national and local organizations.

Fifth, the cause of peoples’ rights to take hold of their own issues, build on their assets, and find their own way to build community rather than relying on the professional expert, has changed the way community is looking at itself. This approach, championed by John McKnight in the United States, is gradually eroding the role of the professional fixer of problems (a structure in which the expert has a vested interest in the continuation of problems), to one of the professional being a resource, chosen when needed by engaged citizens.

Finally, we are quickly learning more about volunteers and volunteerism worldwide, and how to measure and quantify the collective impact of the activities that are undertaken. More and more researchers are interested in this area, more resources seem to be available

to support their research, more countries and /or regions are keeping statistics on volunteer activities. There is also a move in some jurisdictions for unpaid work to be included in the public accounts.

These are all tools, resources, or opportunities that everyone who is working with volunteers should be aware of in their own efforts to build their case for the four types of volunteers and/or to increase the impact of their own efforts. Of course all these tools are not as available or accessible in some parts of the world as in others, but my experience with IAVE shows that they are being utilized and having an impact almost everywhere.

At the IAVE World Volunteer Conference in Amsterdam in 2001 a document was generated, building on earlier work of the board and of conference delegates. It was called the Global Agenda for Action to Strengthen Volunteering. The Universal Declaration, a portion of which I quoted earlier, "calls on volunteers and the leaders of all sectors to unite as partners to promote and support effective volunteering, accessible to all, as a symbol of solidarity among people and nations." The Global Agenda outlines a wide range of ideas for how volunteer organizations, governments, business, education, and media can help to realize the five objectives of the International Year of Volunteers. As a refresher those were:

- Increased recognition of the importance of volunteer effort.
- Increased facilitation of volunteer effort.
- Increased and expanded networking among volunteer organizations.
- Promotion of volunteering to improve the image of volunteer effort.
- Expanded participation of volunteers.

For those of you who are interested in the Global Agenda, I refer you to the IAVE website at [www.iave.org](http://www.iave.org). I will only highlight a few of the items aimed at governments which seem relative to one of the objectives that the organizing group for this conference and the

National Council for Arts and Culture, here in Mexico, have identified. This goal is for "a new democratic relationship between State and society on behalf of cultural development" in which the role of volunteers appears central.

The Global Agenda emphasizes to governments that they can:

#### **Under Recognition**

- design a comprehensive legal framework to support the value of volunteering.
- include the economic value of volunteer effort in the calculation of their GDP.
- establish a budget line dedicated to supporting volunteering.

#### **Under Facilitation**

- create policies on volunteering.
- review legislation to enhance the positive impact of volunteering
- create focal points and a liaison structure within ministries or other national bodies.

#### **Under Participation**

- establish policies for including volunteers in the decision-making process impacting society.

These are just a few of the prescriptions submitted to governments included in the Agenda. The fact that many governments around the world have moved already on some of these items, or on others in the agenda, attests not only to their new awareness and openness, but also, I think, to the power of civil society and the social and economic impact of volunteers as its "fundamental building block."

I should add as an aside that these changes in government relationship with civil society and volunteers do not always come easily, and are not always welcomed unconditionally by all voluntary organizations.

Now to some of the concerns and issues that are being raised around the current state of civil society and volunteering.

In a presentation at the CIVICUS World Assembly in Vancouver in August 2001, Sri-latha Batlewala highlighted some criticisms. Batlewala expresses concern that international financial institutions are suddenly embracing and promoting civil society, and questions if this is their means of restricting the role of the state and public service. The question is whether this power shift will leave the masses of poor people even more disenfranchised. Batlewala harks back to major cutbacks in public spending in the developed world, like those under Reagan in the United States, which led to a huge growth in citizen action to replace or shore up social safety nets. She questions whether it was naive to celebrate that result and states that "we should be alarmed when institutions that have aggressively promoted the policies that have widened social and economic gaps extol the virtues of citizens acting to ameliorate their ill effects." She does go on to say that citizen action "is only a great thing when it is rooted in values of equity, tolerance, peace, justice and respects all human rights," and when it is not rooted in greed. Her language here, you might note, closely mirrors that in the Universal Declaration on Volunteering.

In passing, I would state that others, such as Maurice Strong, firmly believe that international financial institutions such as the World Bank are finally getting it when it comes to the relationship between social and economic development. Nonetheless, Batlewala's argument is out there and prevalent, especially in parts of the developing world, and it is incumbent upon us to listen and to consider its implications carefully.

Another criticism we must come to terms with is one that I had thrown at me by my own daughter recently. I was talking about an idea that I had for a project on the role of volunteering in helping women in the developing world to increase their social, economic and political power. Very quickly, my social activist, feminist child, shot back at me a current international feminist perspective that

volunteering by women in the developing world was simply another means of exploitation which increased the already overwhelming economic and domestic burden that women carry for their families .

Well I must say it felt like *déjà vu* all over again! I was back in the 70s when those of us who were out promoting volunteering were also dealing with resolutions from the National Organization of Women in the United States and the Status of Women in Canada which condemned volunteering by women unless it was activist on behalf of women. This whole issue caused many of us to rethink and examine closely what we were doing then and it is concomitant on us to deal with these issues now in the larger international context. What is true is that women are not well represented in the power structures of NGO's and that this is especially true in some developing countries.

Still I feel fairly comfortable taking on my daughter's argument. What turned the discussion around for us over twenty years ago was the evidence that volunteering provided women with tremendous educational opportunities, numerous skills, networks and a sense of self-worth. These proved to be a catalyst and a vehicle for personal, social and political change for women.

If any of you were at the Amsterdam Conference in January 2001 you will undoubtedly recall a stirring address by Kumi Naido, President of CIVICUS. He identified eight challenges to civil society and volunteering. I am only dealing with three and this my last I borrow from him when he said: "The first challenge I want to raise that faces the global volunteering movement over the coming decades, is the need for us to bridge the gap between activism and the world of volunteering." Kumi sees the term "volunteering" as referring, I believe, to the service and philanthropy model. He allowed that social activists are working for the common good and out of a "voluntary spirit and for no remuneration," but he felt that the two types of volunteers

and the organizations within which they function, are not always comfortable with each other and that they sit in vastly differing camps.

To illustrate what he is talking about perhaps I can examine your own world for a few minutes. Museum volunteers may be serving on boards, fund-raising for specific initiatives or for core operations, they may be serving as docents, or happily engaged in selling items in gift shops.

Some may also be advocating on behalf of your museum, but for the most part they are under your control, subject to your policies and to the support of mutually agreed upon strategic directions. However, the museum world, especially recently, has not been immune from the social activism of groups calling for repatriation of art works obtained because of wars or cultural exploitation during colonial or even pre-colonial times. Museums are having to respond to aboriginal peoples who are no longer content to let the remains of dead ancestors be exhibits in displays. These are the realities with which museums live, and to a certain extent how they are addressed will determine the role played and the impact museums will have in the cultural and social landscape of the future.

I want now in closing to come Full Circle, and back to Vikings and northern Newfoundland and Coastal Labrador. Full Circle is an apt term as well as it was the title of a major exhibition mounted in celebration of the Viking Millennium which included Norse and aboriginal artifacts on loan from around the world. It told the story of the reconnecting, and in the unfortunate way of humans, the clashing of peoples who had traveled in different directions but who had come from the same roots millennia before. The exhibition was awaiting us at the final stop of the conference in the small west coast city of Corner Brook. I had seen the exhibit when it was in St. John's, so I left the conference a bit early and took the opportunity to undertake

some training with some volunteer groups in the area.

I also paused to reflect on what I had experienced and to appreciate the impact of volunteers in their many manifestations. Part of those reflections were on the community development activities of the engaged citizen of the communities we had visited. It was clear that cultural tourism and its economic and social impact was something they understood and were actively engaged in fostering. These community people/volunteers understood the value of preserving their heritage and culture and the local museum or historic site was clearly seen as the centre-piece of this effort. It was clearly also a vital part of their larger agenda for survival and for viable, sustainable and healthy communities. These reflections also made me think beyond the local implications and informed my understanding of some of what I had learned from interactions with volunteers from around the world.

In preparing this presentation I had some concerns that my story of sparsely populated Northern Newfoundland and Coastal Labrador would have little meaning in a city of 20,000,000. I was, however, most struck by the remarks of the Manager of the Hotel Gran Melia Reforma and the Director of Mexico City's Historical Festival to presenters at this conference from outside Mexico. In these they outlined what was happening to utilize Mexico City's many museums, historic sights and cultural richness to revitalize the economic and social structures of the city. This, they said, is happening by the building of partnerships within the city between the non governmental sector, the government, business, the academy, media and the people themselves through their volunteer efforts.

What is happening in Mexico City is happening in communities large and small around the globe. Citizens are taking action to preserve and showcase their culture and heritage. Governments, business, the academy, and the media are building partnerships



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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee sent volunteers into Mississippi during the summer of 1964, a presidential election year, for a voter registration drive. It became known as Freedom Summer.

<sup>2</sup>Settlement Houses, which came into being in the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s, served as community, education, and recreation centers, particularly in densely populated immigrant neighborhoods, and worked to improve community life as a whole.

This article was modified from an article published in *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, "Building the Bridge from Episodic Volunteerism to Social Capital," by Michelle Nunn, Vol. 24:2 Fall 2000.

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