

**UN****Volunteers**

## In FACT: Volunteers and disaster reduction

### Volunteerism and Prevention

Volunteerism is essential in preventing and reducing vulnerability to natural disasters. Early warning systems are one example where volunteerism helps to strengthen the resilience of communities. As part of the World Meteorological Organization's (WMO) daily routine of weather observation, every day millions of farmers, fisherfolk, pilots and sea captains read hydrological and meteorological recorders, measure rainfall and test climatic conditions, and report their findings to the national authorities. More than 30,000 village volunteers work for the Bangladesh Red Cross and Red Crescent Society. Equipped with hand sirens, transistor radios, signal flags, first aid equipment and rescue kits, they are a communications channel relaying weather bulletins to some ten million people living in areas of high cyclone risk. Voluntary action by ordinary citizens is vital for the provision of accurate forecasting of weather patterns around the world.

### Volunteerism and Response

Volunteerism also serves as an effective support system in the wake of a disaster. UN Volunteers served on the front line of a disaster mitigation and prevention programme developed by UNDP and the

The Indian Ocean tsunami disaster, which has resulted in more than 150,000 fatalities and affected the social and economic livelihoods of more than 3 million people, has once more drawn attention to the power of volunteer efforts in responding to disaster situations and in building solidarity networks between different religious and ethnic groups. The unprecedented scale and diverse nature of this response highlight the need to factor volunteerism into national policies and programmes to ensure that the full potential of voluntary action for disaster management is realized.

Government of India following the devastating cyclone in Orissa (1999) and the earthquake in Gujarat (2001). In

2003, in the aftermath of the worst flooding in Sri Lanka in 50 years, Indian UN Volunteers arrived within hours to provide relief alongside their Sri Lankan colleagues. The experience the volunteers from India had acquired in coordinating relief and rehabilitation activities - such as providing survivors with shelter, food and first aid, helping contain epidemics, rebuilding infrastructure and using ICT strategically - was shared effectively in Sri Lanka. The UN Volunteers helped authorities and communities in Sri Lanka assess damage, streamline information and distribute relief, acting as district-level focal points for local and international donor assistance.

### Volunteerism and Reconstruction

Volunteering also plays a central role in post-disaster reconstruction efforts. In 1999, following Hurricane Mitch in Central America, the UNV country team in Nicaragua engaged with student volunteers to reconstruct settlements damaged by the hurricane. A continuing initiative conducted under the University Volunteer Service fosters solidarity and volunteer spirit among students of two national universities. An earthquake in El

Salvador in 2001 saw the mobilization of significant numbers of local volunteers with financial support forthcoming from citizens of Kobe to match locally raised funds for school reconstruction. UNV acted as a bridge for channelling this assistance from people who could easily share the feelings of victims of a disaster occurring almost exactly six years after their own.

On 17 January 1995, the Great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake struck the city of Kobe, Hyogo, Japan and surrounding areas, resulting in thousands of fatalities and extensive damages. Over one million people from all over Japan arrived to help rebuild Kobe. Their response to the earthquake impressed the international community and inspired the Japanese government to head the founding of the International Year of Volunteers (IYV) 2001. The clear link established by the Yokohama Strategy between disaster prevention and participation of local communities makes Kobe an apposite setting for the World Conference on Disaster Reduction (WCDR) during 18-22 January 2005.

*Based in Bonn, Germany, UNV is the UN organization that supports sustainable human development globally through promotion of volunteerism, including mobilization of volunteers. As a part of its activities, UNV each year provides the opportunity for more than 7,000 skilled and experienced professionals, 70 percent coming from developing countries, to support peace, relief and development initiatives in some 150 countries. It also engages thousands of other individuals in the work of the UN as online volunteers and manages the WorldVolunteerWeb, a global volunteering portal that serves as a knowledge resource base for campaigning, advocacy, information dissemination and networking.*

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