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Volunteer Capital

As economic development evolves, we can clearly see the limits that traditional institutions and organisations are facing today in order to reach the poorest and the marginalised, to deliver the services of development in a holistic way, and to ensure that nobody is excluded from existing programs and policies. There is increased questioning and mistrust with regard to the role and performance of international organisations, Governments, private sector and some of the other forms of social organisations. This questioning comes from a number of realities we are all facing today, including poverty, environmental degradation, marginalisation of women and elderly persons, and so much more.

Specifically, allow me to point out the following important dimensions:

- The “Government does it all” approach to development is simply part of the past;
- The blaming of the private sector in the social arena is also not the avenue to be followed;
- The development that does not take place because we argue that there are no financial resources must also be seriously questioned. If we want to do something, you have demonstrated to the whole world that we can. You have demonstrated that finance is not really all or the ultimate constraint.

In Search of a New Social Architecture

We are all in search of a new paradigm, although one could argue that we would like so for very different reasons. But it is clear that what we have now is not enough. Indeed, we are all in search of a new social architecture that is:

- peace and not war-oriented;
- human security-oriented and not the source of new forms of terrorism;
- socially just and human rights-based and not simply a residual of market forces;
- inclusive and not a major source of exclusion;
- anchored into a new set of values;
- anchored also into a new form of institutions;
- co-equal in action and equal in opportunities;
- symmetric to the huge tasks at hand.

The anchoring of the process to develop the new social architecture is indeed taking place and the shape we give to it will certainly determine the level and type of benefits many people will attain around the world. [...]

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There are millions of silent and non-acknowledged volunteers all over the world. In hospitals, in the provision of public services, in many corners of the streets of large cities, in shelters, and so on. They do not expect to be paid or recognised. They are the anonymous souls who are there when we need them.

Change in Basic Approaches to Development

It is not new if I say that we have seen major changes in the basic approaches to socio-economic development, although it has not been always for the better! Some call them fads rather than approaches, as they come and go in strange ways:

- from growth to development;
- from development to sustainable development;
- from sustainable development to sustainable human development;
- from sustainable human development to human rights-based human development.

And now, we are moving to empowered development and volunteerism. A new form of development whereby we should be able to form an effective and fraternal web of human interdependence, and also a form of self-engaged, totally owned process at all levels of decision-making.

In addition to the uniqueness of Volunteerism, a few more dimensions can be added: both the human and the economic dimensions.

The Economic Dimensions of Volunteerism Capital

If the title of my text includes the term *Volunteer Capital*, then it is to focus more prominently on the need to understand that we have a new and unique form of capital in our development process. This is as important, and perhaps more important than many other forms of capital participating in the development process.

Indeed, we can also see human volunteerism as a new set of values and perspectives that should become the principal guide to a new way of doing economic development. This new paradigm must not only be understood, but also fully supported.

In this regard, I believe that there are at least five major dimensions of this new paradigm of Human Volunteerism:

- First, it is the paradigm of free choice and total service. This is not a form of development where any one would want to be attached to a material commodity, including money, or to a condition that would determine the quantity or quality of the services provided;
- Second, it is the paradigm of the other (service to others) and one where the volunteers are expecting nothing in return. Not a financial return, an economic return. In addressing the other, there is a total purity of intentions and, therefore, the imprint of this paradigm begins with the soul and ends with a tremendous embracing of human values;

- Third, it is the paradigm immersed completely in the ethics and morals of development, while many of what we do somewhere else still remains in a total moral and ethical vacuum. Volunteerism has created a web of pure and effective interdependence, which goes far beyond the market, far beyond the imperatives of any external force as we know them now;
- Fourth, it is the paradigm of the collective, where individual gain is subjugated to the aims and goals of the collective body of our societies. This is probably the strongest suit of volunteerism in a globalising world;
- Finally, it is the paradigm of human values, and of the values of caring, sharing, fraternity, and many others. As a paradigm based on human values and humanistic actions, it defeats all possible constraints and limitations, as it shapes our future reality as a result.

The volunteers are providing a service that would actually cost many trillions of dollars, if society had to pay for it. This is not just a statement hanging in the air. Recent research has demonstrated that volunteers make a major economic contribution to the economy, which is now equivalent to 8–14% of global Gross National Product (GNP). These are services non-accounted for in our ways of measuring economic inputs and outputs.

In addition, they are providing the services that the ‘egotistic market’ has decided to forget and disregard in the name of profit making and of other material gains. This is, again, an important economic dimension of what they do. Volunteers are the ones that correct the negative external effects of markets as these marginalise the poor, the ageing, the homeless and those who have been living in absolute poverty for many generations. In the jargon of economists, this is called ‘*correcting market failures*’ and ‘*diminishing the transaction costs*’ in the economy. Volunteers, who help the ageing population, by assisting them in health care at home, have in many ways diminished the alternative health care at hospitals and at other more expensive services.

This is also a paradigm of services to the others, no matter whom, and no matter where a person is. Thus, volunteers have allowed a major increase in the effectiveness of retailing economic development, and thus allowing more benefits to be allocated among those who are distant and difficult to reach. The volunteers have the opposite behaviour of the market. While the market decides to abandon any given group, that it is the exact time when volunteers come in and assist. This approach allows us to target better the beneficiaries of projects and programmes, and therefore improve dramatically the effectiveness of the development process. Given that the development resources available today are indeed diminishing in real terms, volunteers represent a guarantee in increasing the effectiveness in the application of those resources available right now.

Essential to the new paradigms of development today, like the human rights-based and the one on empowered development participation and human and social integration. By being the capital of last resort, volunteer capital has become a major source of social integration of many people in our societies, most importantly for the ageing people and the youth.

But the economic benefits are not all.

The Political Perspective

From a political perspective, volunteers are the principal source of strengthening our democracies. Volunteerism is democracy at work, and through the exercise of volunteer work; our systems of decision-making and reaching out improve day by day. Volunteers form a new network of decision-making and governance. A unique governance structure, which is mainly supported by free choices and non-market, dominated choices. An excellent example of what good governance really means.

- Volunteers are the teachers of giving, rather than being the masters of receiving.
- Volunteers are also the examples to follow in decisions that have to do with that development that comes from the heart instead of the pockets.
- Volunteers are fully aware of the many human imperatives many people confront, and have used free will and your willpower to attain the most effective solutions.

The Origin of the Term Volunteer

Volunteer comes from the Latin “*voluntas*” that means will, human will. And, therefore, this is the year when all of us must be reminded of the true and lasting power of human values. Of true human transformation. We know that human will is limitless and powerful. This is at the source of the productivity and the reproduction of volunteer capital.

It is the only form of capital that has human will as its source. Most of the other forms of capital focus on matter, and even human capital is conceived as a passive, receiving end form of capital.

These roots are important as they make us focus intensively on the element of free choice and human free will. This is the only paradigm that has a force that reproduces itself. Its own source of expansion. While all other forms of capital depend on something or someone else, this is the only approach to development that comes from an individual decision and not from something that is too exogenously determined. No doubt that external forces do influence human behaviour, but here the decision is an ultimate personal one.

In addition, this is the paradigm of human will, pointing out to the fact that it is very non-material in nature, emphasising the real importance of the ‘inner decisions’ in life. In many senses, this is the paradigm of ‘inner choices’, of ‘inner will power’, and ‘inner self-realisation’.

This is the paradigm of the inner soul. Where the soul is the factor that determines the pace and the extent to which this form of capital expands. This is the paradigm that does not depend on material welfare, on the North or the South, on the political left or the political right, or on being young or being old. This is truly a universal form of becoming part of one whole, be it yourself, the other, the community, or the Planet.

Where Do We Go from Here?

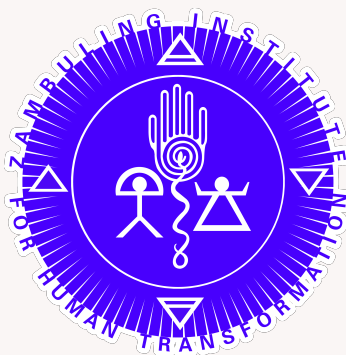
This is a fundamental question. If we put together the economic, political, social and spiritual dimensions of volunteer capital several possible implications emerge:

- First, that we, who are not always in the circle of volunteers, must rethink our strategies of development and see how can we strengthen the hands of volunteers in this process;
- Second that volunteers are crucial in the attainment of the millennium development goals. It will be impossible to cut in half the level of absolute poverty by the year 2015, without opening the political and institutional spaces for more volunteers' participation—without full recognition of this volunteer's capital—as a key form of capital participating in the development process. More work needs to be done to understand the interaction of this form of capital with all other forms of capital, including physical, financial, human, natural, institutional and cultural capital;
- Third, we must enhance and invest in the non-material dimensions of this form of capital, in order to leave an imprint of this capital brings on the economy such that we can indeed deal with the huge challenges most people and most nations are facing today. The effective management and allocation of volunteer capital is essential for economic efficiency, comparative advantage and for all the material needs an economy has at a point in time;
- Fourth, when the United Nations was created, there was a famous declaration known as the Dumbarton Oaks Declaration, issued in Washington, D.C. in 1944. This declaration not only started with "*We the People*" but it also identified the 12 most important functions of the United Nations. One of this, number seven, was "*Seeking Freedom*". And this was defined as creating the proper environment for both material and spiritual growth. Not long ago, the United Nations Secretary-General did point out at the General Assembly's 3rd Committee that social policies must not be conceived only as a matter of just enhancing the material welfare of people, but their spiritual welfare as well.

In the path to spiritual enlightenment, *Seva* [to give service without expecting nothing in return] is one of the most powerful instruments. *Seva*-based development must be promoted everywhere. *Seva* is the transformational value that unites the material with the non-material levels of our human existence.

Finally, a debate on the role of volunteers must be echoed everywhere in the world. But it should be echoed with the right set of values. We cannot knit the quilt of human voluntary decisions with an old set of values. Thus, a major revolution in values is needed to consolidate the existence of volunteer capital.

Let me pay tribute to all the women and men, youth and children who are volunteering in their homes and neighbourhoods and in our society at large. They are the pioneers, they are up from breaking the frontiers so new persons can come and serve. They are precious for our societies, and I am extremely grateful to be able to say everywhere.



Volunteering is reframed as a form of capital that enriches societies beyond monetary measures. Published in the Olympic Review, the article highlights the social and human value created by volunteers.