

Volunteer Networking and Capacity Development

Draft C

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"Hyperlinks subvert hierarchy " (The Cluetrain Manifesto)

I. Introduction

This paper explores renewed possibilities for volunteering in development cooperation, based on the possibilities for ubiquitous networking made possible by new digital technologies. Its preparation has been prompted by two separate yet related processes. First, the revisiting of the principles and practices of technical cooperation and capacity building underway at UNDP, for which the recent publication "Capacity for Development: New Solutions to Old Problems" ¹ (UNDP 2002) is an outstanding display of the new thinking. Secondly, the fresh articulation by UNV of how best to operationalize volunteering in the framework of development cooperation.

The paper first outlines those concepts and elements of development cooperation which bear a direct relation to the volunteer networking : the Human Development paradigm, the re-valued importance of knowledge, the context of the Information Age/Network Society, and how all of them affect development cooperation . It then proceeds to suggest ways in which a networking logic can enhance the value of volunteer participation in capacity development in the near and mid -term.

The purpose of the paper is to stimulate discussion among colleagues at UNV and staff at other volunteer agencies and development organizations, and by so doing to contribute to advance the role and enhance the value of Volunteering for Development.

¹ <http://capacity.undp.org/books/book1.htm>

II. Technical Cooperation in the Information Age

II.a Human Development

Amartya Sen has identified the expansion of freedoms as the cornerstone of Human Development, a concept which he is largely responsible for and which he developed during the 1980's. Human Development is fundamentally about expanding people's choices, and therefore provides the basis for a paradigm shift in development, from "needs" to "opportunities".

Expanding choices directly relates to exercising freedoms. This, in turn, implies more opportunities closely interlinked with the possibilities to capitalize on them. In UNDP 2002², Lopes quotes Sen as saying that the expansion of freedoms is "the primary end and the principal means of development", and that "Development consists of the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency".

Sen also claims that "the exercise of freedom is mediated by values, but the values in turn are influenced by public discussions and social interactions (...)", which is to say that those values depend on communication. Therefore, the freedom to participate is conditioned by the freedom to communicate, which is at the core of knowledge networks, as we will see later.

Empowerment is the appropriation of development. Empowerment is about increasing capabilities, higher participation, and exercising power. It is ultimately about exercising freedoms. Capacity building is therefore a necessary though not sufficient condition for development: capabilities have to be utilized. Knowledge and the new information and communication technologies (ICT) become, in this context, empowering tools for development cooperation.

Technologies change the way resources are used to produce outputs; this is mediated by knowledge. Therefore, gaps in the means to generate knowledge (like those resulting from the digital divide) add to the disparities in resource availability. Stiglitz (UNDP 2002) claims that it is the compounded gap of resources, knowledge and organization that really separates developed from developing countries today.³ Taking a cue from advanced, resource-constrained countries (like Japan, Singapore, South Korea), we may

² This is the "Capacity for Development..." publication from UNDP mentioned in the introduction. We will often refer to it, since the paper grew out of a set of notes about volunteering directly derived from the challenges posed by the publication.

³ Shashi Tharoor, Head of Communications at the UN, put it more bluntly in an Op-Ed piece in the 5 July 2002 edition of the International Herald Tribune: "... *the most striking global divide of today is information inequality. The new poverty line is drawn this side of the computer keyboard*."

even argue that knowledge generation is the critical link for socio-economic development.

II.b Knowledge

Knowledge can be described in many ways. One way to see it is through the flow and relationship between information and knowledge. From this angle, information becomes knowledge as it is interpreted and made concrete in light of a person's understanding of the particular context and previous experience.

Knowledge is increasingly perceived as the principal driver of economic growth and development, whether in the North or South. This has been repeatedly expressed in key UN documents, fora like ECOSOC, and by the World Bank and UNDP. This is in part because knowledge (in particular, explicit knowledge) can be viewed as a global public good (Stiglitz, in UNDP 1999). Stiglitz also offers a practical bit of development advice in using such a public good: "Scan globally, reinvent locally". (UNDP 2002)

Denning (UNDP 2002) offers an interesting metaphor/approach to knowledge creation on the basis of connecting people. In his view, it is impossible to extract knowledge from anything. Instead, knowledge is gardened. The gardener seeds, feeds and weeds the garden. Knowledge grows. It emerges out of a fertile field, tended by people interacting with people, groups, networks and communities.

In this regard, a knowledge organization is viewed as a type of ecosystem, largely self-organizing, but which can be degraded as well. And in development, the real experts are those that live the reality on a day-to-day basis. It follows then that a knowledge-based development organization must carefully care for its "expert gardeners" to allow them to tend its garden. Today, that garden lives in a network.

Knowledge and information are being codified, stored and made accessible at levels unimaginable in earlier decades. Advances in ICT are driving down the costs of info storage and communications to zero⁴. Today's initial broadband home connectivity allows for downloading of a book in a matter of seconds. And the upcoming Internet2 or Next Generation Internet (Rutkowski, 2000) may well finally converge the PC and TV into one information appliance, connected to global networks at unprecedented speeds.

In this context, what a person knows is important, but no less important is her/his ability to access and utilize information and knowledge. The more that knowledge is crafted in real time (and with increasingly shorter shelf-lives), the more value that will be assigned to

⁴ The Internet itself may have many elements of a global public good, although we may not be there as its publicness has to be deliberately sought (UNDP 1999).

connections over collections. Organizations that focus on collecting knowledge at the expense of enabling people connections end up with repositories of dead documents. It is critical for a knowledge-based organization to strike the right balance between connecting and collecting. Therefore, targeted communications become an indispensable institutional practice

II.c The Information Age

Driven by economic globalization and technological transformations, the Information Age is rapidly replacing the industrial age. This historic shift is altering the rewards and penalties for acquiring and using knowledge and information in global markets and in national development efforts. The Information Age increases the benefits of investing in knowledge and capacity.

The Network Society has emerged as the social expression of the Information Age, and it characterizes new models of production, communication, organization and identity. The Network Society concentrates and manages power through a limited number of primary nodes around the world, which administer vast networks in near real-time.

Networks have emerged as a principal organizing concept in sharing information and constructing knowledge. Networks are messy but necessary. The networking approach reflects the organic nature of knowledge. But networks do not operate in a vacuum: they transit information channels, and are fueled by human commitment and shared values/objectives.

To be sure, knowledge and information have always been central in all societies. The essential specific feature of the Information Age is the way in which knowledge is acting upon knowledge itself as the main source of productivity. In a positive feedback process, technology is applied to improve knowledge generation, which in turn reverts back on enhancing the technologies, which lead to better knowledge generation, and so on (Castells 1998). This determines the vital role of ICT in this new age.

Knowledge networks are efficient when they provide knowledge "just in time" and "just enough". Time becomes the critical resource constraint in the Information Age. It is the only resource in perpetually short supply anywhere in the world. Networks are efficient (ie. they make good use of the resource "time") because/when they are closely related to an actual demand for knowledge. Informal networks self-organize and self-adjust to meet the needs of members. Even so, time constraints and poor organizational and work schema are leading to the phenomenon of "network fatigue". Where the demand for

knowledge is lacking, the network is inoperative. In the "space of flows"⁵ where networks reside, inoperative is synonymous with in-existent.

Some view the Information Age as brought about by a revolution in the way in which ideas and knowledge are produced, just as the Industrial Age resulted from a revolution in the way goods were produced. Institutionally, the Industrial Age resulted in a change towards "industrial organizations", just as we are witnessing similar changes towards "networked organizations". This constitutes a paradigm shift from which technical cooperation (or development) organizations cannot be isolated.

II.d New models for Technical Cooperation

The concept and building blocks of human development, the role of knowledge and the emerging context of the Information Age have profound implications for technical cooperation. Fukuda-Parr and Hill (UNDP 2002) indicate that changing realities are setting new challenges but also providing new tools for capacity building in development, thus reshaping the agenda for the future of technical cooperation. If it is true that conventional tools of technical cooperation are becoming increasingly obsolete, as UNDP claims, it is in part due to its shortcomings in following traditional human resource development approaches.

Technical cooperation contributes to the encompassing concept of capacity development, as coined by UNDP, and which includes actions aimed at enhancing capacities at the personal, institutional and societal levels. And capacity development may be a preferable expression over simply "capacity building" because it is a longer-term process that also incorporates notions of national ownership and sustainability (Browne, 2002).

ICT is part and parcel of the renewed strategies of technical cooperation and capacity development. As the industrial revolution substantially expanded manual power with the steam engine and electricity, today's information revolution is augmenting brainpower via the new ICTs. Fortunately for developing countries, brain capacity is much more evenly distributed in the world than other resources. Thus, part of the challenge lies then in extracting utility from the new technologies to optimize the brain "empowerment" in those countries.

Networks among development practitioners and access to global knowledge systems can substitute for conventional models of technical cooperation. In the Information Age, new modalities are emerging for information access, capacity building and knowledge

⁵ This is a term coined by Castells to differentiate it from the "space of places", or physical space. It is appropriate in describing a virtual space established and organized in function of one or more types of flows (in this case, the flow of data, information and knowledge).

acquisition, helping to set new priorities for development cooperation that overcome many of the failures of conventional technical cooperation. Browne points out that knowledge acquisition becomes one of the essential facets of capacity development, requiring the expansion of South-South and South-everywhere exchanges via knowledge networks. Furthermore, knowledge networking need not be confined within the closed boundaries of information flows as it has the potential to evolve as an alternative institutional model for development promotion (Nath, 2000).

The appeal of networks within a new model of technical cooperation is that they can bypass one of the root causes of the failures of the last decades of technical cooperation, namely its donor-driven nature. It also debilitates the faulty notion of the expert-counterpart model from N to S. Networks of development practitioners across the globe are emerging, sharing relevant knowledge, information and experience from good/bad practices. They connect these people in different sectors and project areas, fostering collaboration between individuals and institutions. The network is its own source of support, and a superior one to that provided by a few designated experts.

It is difficult to predict the future, but let's peek into it. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology is in the process of placing all its course material online, freely available for the world at large⁶, demonstrating the operational viability of knowledge as a Global Public Good. Satellite communications will eventually bring Internet connectivity to every corner of the world with reasonable access speeds and prices. New generations of students are emerging from schools accustomed to integrating ICT into their learning process. Organizations are becoming re-structured around network architectures, broadly reflecting the information systems (like Enterprise Resource Planning packages and web-based applications) on which they support their operations. Looking at such a scenario, we must ask ourselves: what will be the role and modalities of technical cooperation?

Back into the present, and turning now to Volunteering for Development (V4D), the issue is to examine how volunteers can become a key component of renewed technical cooperation strategies and activities for capacity development. The previous sections set the scenario on which to base such considerations. However, to make a logical link to our exploratory analysis we do start with a basic assumption: that some of the above mentioned development practitioners interacting through networks already collaborate on a voluntary basis. Thus, we are not starting from zero, and most of the concepts outlined below are already part of real life development work (albeit probably in an ad-hoc fashion).

⁶ Refer to <http://ocw.mit.edu/index.html> for information on the MIT OpenCourseWare ambitious initiative.

III New possibilities for volunteer networking in technical cooperation

Some volunteer agencies, like UNV, place volunteers in assignments that often last a year or more. Building capacity requires human interaction and understanding, which most effectively accrue via direct and continued personal contact and exposure. Again returning to Stiglitz (UNDP 2002), he uses the term "deep knowledge" to denote the knowledge generated only through repeated and extended interactions (total immersion). Here the difference between "training"⁷ and "capacity building" is clear; capacity building aims at the generation of deep knowledge, while training cannot have such objective.

For these reasons, long-term volunteers tend to be highly effective capacity building agents. When supported with the proper knowledge flows and network tools, these volunteers can have even greater impact. The volunteer "ethos" (of service and solidarity) combined with systematic knowledge/networking support could make them especially valuable in technical cooperation and among the most visible and recognized development agents anywhere. For example, volunteers may be essential to the goals of mainstreaming ICT that more and more development agencies are seriously considering⁸.

Promoting and facilitating the participation of volunteer networks for Human Development will be at the core of expanding the role of volunteering in technical cooperation. This will come in part by extracting the maximum utility from existing ICTs, since these technologies enable networks and allow access to global information in a way that was never possible before. We now explore various volunteer network concepts for further discussion and investigation.

III.a Connecting volunteers and development organizations: Online Volunteering.

The importance of "connection" rather than "codification" was highlighted before in this document. If, as some experts hold, it's true that knowledge remains largely tacit⁹, then

⁷ Training is more closely related to traditional technical cooperation approaches. The shifting of focus of TC towards short-term assignments of experts, often in training missions, has contributed to the acquisition of "shallow" and low-value knowledge, as opposed to the "deep knowledge" explained by Stiglitz.

⁸ For information on this, please see the UNITEs website, www.unites.org. Mainstreaming ICT into development has become of late an objective in development cooperation, as expressed for example by the UN ICT Task Force (<http://www.unicttaskforce.org>). It was discussed at a recent Joint OECD/UN/World Bank Global Forum: Integrating ICT in Development Programmes (<http://www.oecd.org/EN/document/0,,EN-document-781-2-no-20-39082-0,00.html>)

⁹ Or "sticky", in Stiglitz's expression

the "C" in ICT becomes the main engine for knowledge creation and sharing across communities and networks. Finding ways to allow for better communication channels between volunteers and development organizations, like those afforded by electronic networks, will likely increase the numbers and impact of volunteers in technical cooperation.

People have been using the Internet to provide their knowledge as volunteers outside the realm of technical cooperation (Frauenfelder). It makes sense, therefore, to harness in an organized and targeted fashion that largely untapped potential of the Net towards technical cooperation.

One such example is provided by the Online Volunteering service launched in 2000, which UNV manages for NetAid (www.netaid.org/ov). Online Volunteering is a simple concept: people that offer their time and skills through the Internet, from their own homes, workplaces, cyber cafés, etc., based on some pre-arranged understanding with a host organization. With little marketing, it has already attracted over 10,000 people to offer their time and skills for development organizations (mainly NGOs) worldwide. The service contains online sophisticated management tools for host institutions to manage their online volunteers.

Most of the contributions of the online volunteers focus on direct services (designing web sites, revising project proposals, translations, etc.). There are some instances of collaboration directly aimed towards capacity building. There is no reason why this orientation towards TC could not be strengthened as the service evolves. Either way, this Online Volunteering service is already a simple and successful example of facilitating connections for volunteers with development organizations worldwide.

III.b Open-Source approach to development.

A more elaborate volunteer networked system, suggested by UNDP in "Capacity for Development", is the "open source approach to development".

The story of the GNU-Linux operating system is emblematic of the Open Source movement¹⁰, which centers on the provision of freely available software code for people to use and modify at will without being subject to commercial licenses. Open Source software results from the work of hackers (not "crackers", ie. those with a malicious intent, according to Himanen), people who are enthusiastic about excellence in computing and make contributions as volunteers to build or improve software products. It is therefore highly significant that GNU-Linux, a product of volunteer contributions and

¹⁰ Technically speaking, Free Source code and its accompanying license (General Public License, GPL) grant a larger freedom to modify software to users, and the responsibility upon them to then contribute those modifications for others to be able to alter, and so on.

coordination, is presently the only major viable alternative computer operating system to Microsoft Windows.

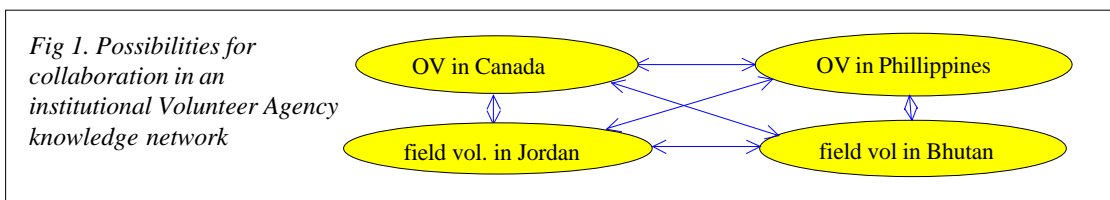
UNDP indicates that such an approach appears to be promising, when there are a number of people with expertise and passion around a subject and a credible coordinator to enable the group to come to closure on issues¹¹. Furthermore, it advocates that given its huge potential, those interested in this form of development should be actively exploring it. The Open Source Movement is powered by volunteers who collaborate amongst themselves through networks. Therefore, this development approach, promoted by UNDP, is clearly volunteer-based.

III.c Institutional knowledge networks within Volunteer Agencies.

Volunteer agencies can also enrich and expand their contributions in technical development by creating and energizing knowledge networks, where volunteers participating in different activities and in different places can easily exchange ideas, experiences, documents and contacts. This is a way to "tend the knowledge garden," that Denning so aptly described. In doing so, these networks will also typically involve other persons besides the volunteers (for example those individuals who work with them at the field level) thus extending the value and application of knowledge - perhaps planting additional seeds by bringing other gardeners.

In such institutional volunteer knowledge networks, the distinctions between volunteers at the field level and those who serve online (eg. from home or school) are quickly blurred:

- Ø A person volunteering online from home in Canada for an NGO in Jordan can also help a volunteer serving "onsite" in Bhutan. In addition, she can also be collaborating with another "online" volunteer that lives in the Philippines.
- Ø Someone in an international "onsite" volunteer assignment in Jordan can contribute to the activities of another "onsite" volunteer in Bhutan. Also, he can receive the support of online volunteers from Canada and the Philippines.



¹¹ Various types of the so-called "virtual communities of practice" have existed from the outset of global electronic networks, and these are basically volunteer networks.

The box above illustrates the relationship possibilities. In essence, "networked volunteers" can be simply viewed as potentially collaborating nodes in a network. In practice, they all become online volunteers.

An example of a volunteer initiative which is putting this concept into practice is the United Nations Information Technology Service (UNITeS; www.unites.org)¹². Volunteers under the UNITeS umbrella build human/institutional capacity on the application and opportunities of ICT for human development. The UNITeS Knowledge Network connects all members of the larger UNITeS Community (volunteers + non-volunteers from partner institutions). There are both "onsite" as well as "online" volunteers serving under the UNITeS framework. Some online volunteers collaborate with specific "onsite" volunteers (on a specific project), while others support the entire UNITeS community with knowledge resources, technical support, etc.

Community-building software or "groupware" is essential for these types of institutional knowledge networks. For example, a volunteer agency can provide tailored online collaboration tools, so that serving "onsite" volunteers can establish their own individual networks. Various web-based groupware offerings exist, and commercial examples with free services include YahooGroups or SmartGroups. Most of these groupware products do not require any sophisticated skills on ICT on the part of the user (or group manager). At a minimum, they allow for e-mail distribution of postings, and some type of a document repository. With such tools, any given volunteer with Internet connection can set up and manage their virtual community, being able to potentially involve hundreds of people in the projects or institutions with which they are collaborating.

III.d Institutional networking: Volunteer agencies as development brokers

In addition to providing networking possibilities at the individual volunteer level, volunteer agencies can enhance their roles in TC by actively participating in wider development networks. One useful role for volunteer agencies within these networks would be to help broker partnerships with outside entities (companies, NGOs, universities). This is because there tends to be a deficit in matching interests with opportunities, and institutions that are good at brokering can set up the right links for cooperation, resulting in win-win situations for all those involved.

For example, an airline may be wanting to find ways to cooperate with development causes, and a volunteer agency may propose a programme that allows volunteers in project to fly free from frequent-flyer miles donations. Or a university professor wants to do research on some biodiversity issue, and the volunteer agency may find a way to get her/him involved in a "development sabbatical" that matches the needs of a project.

¹² UNITeS was announced by Kofi Annan in his Millennium Report (April 2000), and is managed by UNV

III.e Volunteer agency networks

Volunteer agencies can improve their inter-institutional collaboration through networks that link them and bring them closer together. With the proper ICT systems, they can:

- q make more rational use of training and technical resources;
- q share candidate databases, and offer a wider range of opportunities to people interesting in serving;
- q exchange more knowledge resources (on volunteer management, monitoring and evaluation, promotion of volunteering, etc.); and
- q have wider access to demand for volunteer services (ie. project and assignment opportunities).

South-South institutional volunteer networks deserve particular attention, as well as the promotion of South-South interaction within universal networks. Beyond making the most appropriate use of limited resources, this is justified because a realistic assessment of technical cooperation shows that:

- much of the development knowledge resides in the South;
- knowledge not only lives in individuals but also in institutions and databases; and
- capacity development is fostered through learning by doing.

III.f Human knowledge metadata networks

Metadata is information about information. On the Internet, it is used to describe the contents of a data object (a document, a web site, a picture), so that it can be found by search applications.

ICT allows now for an innovative type of volunteer service, where individuals would indicate their wish to contribute their knowledge for development objectives, activities or organizations. Development stakeholders wanting the cooperation of persons possessing specific knowledge elements would type key words on a web-site, and the list of people available to cooperate would come out.

This "human knowledge metadata" system is related to the Online Volunteering services such as the one highlighted above, but with a major distinct characteristic: it would

categorize "knowledge bits" that someone may wish to share, and not simply skills. People wanting to be tapped on would not need to enter their entire CV of experiences; they would only indicate specific knowledge instances they would like to contribute with, and nothing else.

For example, a petroleum engineer may have standard skills typical of that profession, but she may only want to share her knowledge bits about "drilling under ice-capped tundra surface", or "using remedy X to contain a minor leak from a malfunctioning boiler".

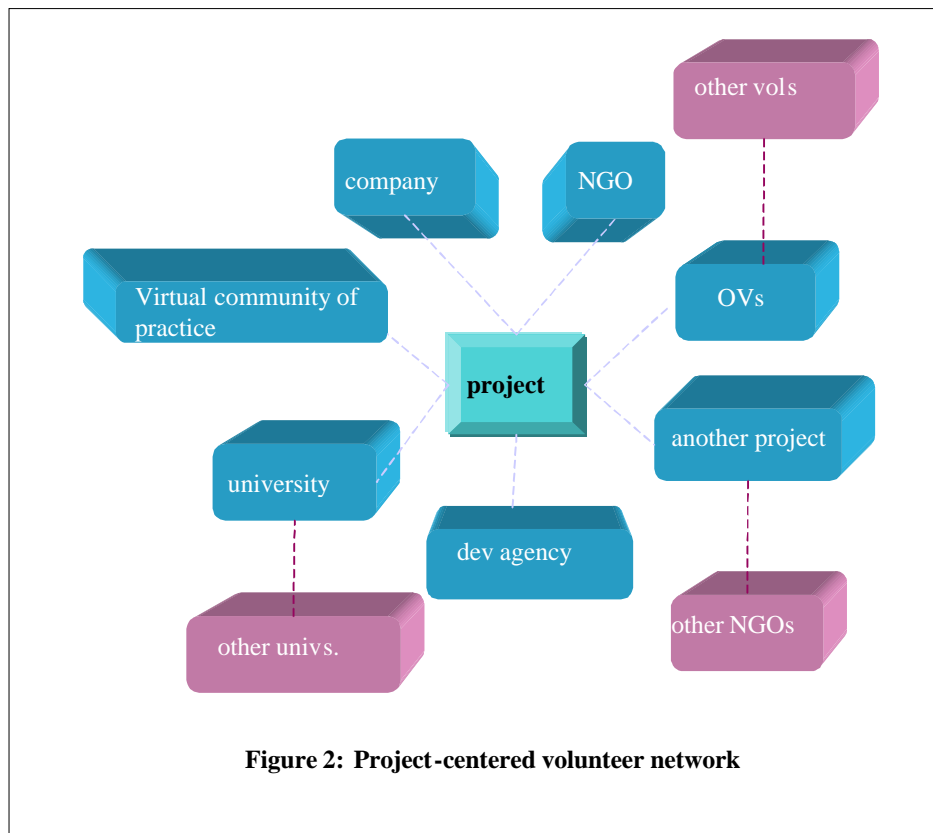
Web-based services of these characteristics would be inexpensive, easy to access and manage, and their expansion would provide considerable benefits to technical cooperation. There is a lot of talent wanting to be used for the common good.

IV "Repackaging" volunteer assignments in development cooperation

Volunteer agencies that place volunteers for periods of a year or more may experiment with different assignments structures to better exploit networking possibilities and expand the pool of potential long-term volunteers (perhaps incurring in lesser costs for the assignments). One example for a 2-year international assignment could be structured as:

- q Initial visit of the volunteer to the host organization (about 2 months);
- q Getting to know the people;
- q Absorbing the problematic where s/he should cooperate;
- q Returning home, carrying on technical tasks related to project on a part-time basis;
- q Establishing/joining network to support her/his assignment or the project;
- q Visiting the project 2-3 times per year (for a variable length of time);
- q Providing needed reports to (1) project, (2) volunteer/sponsoring agency; and
- q The project manager/direct supervisor checks ongoing tasks, interacts online with the volunteer on a regular basis, sets up periodic meetings during the onsite visits.

In such an assignment, and making use of the possibilities outlined in section III, the volunteer could help set up and manage an example of a project-centric volunteer network like the one in fig.2, involving:



- q staff in a few other related projects (and members of NGOs collaborating with such projects);
- q online volunteers (and volunteers that those OV's would be in regular contact with);
- q members or collaborators of some NGOs with thematic expertise or other direct interest in the issues dealt with by the project;
- q corporate volunteers from one or more companies
- q individuals participating in a virtual community of practice linked with the project topics;
- q students and professors of a university (and associated colleagues at other universities); and
- q staff from a different development agency than the one supporting the project.

Variable network geometries with different configurations and densities can thus be established, with a practically infinite set of combinations. However, there needs to be a deliberate effort to establish and energize any given network. Moreover, the project would have to be ready to accept and make good use of such multi-faceted volunteer contributions.

V Conclusion

Uncharted territory lies ahead in networking strategies for volunteers and volunteer agencies involved in technical cooperation. The UNDP "Capacity for Development" publication that has served as the key reference for this document argue that developing institutions may be poised for a significant overhaul in the structures and delivery mechanisms of technical cooperation, indeed of development cooperation as a whole.

Volunteer agencies like UNV which devote substantial resources and energy to technical cooperation need to shape and adapt to this evolving picture. Many of the possibilities highlighted above are certainly not exclusive to the volunteering realm, and may be adequate for other institutional settings. Nevertheless, it is hoped that they may have some value in re-examining the role of volunteering in technical cooperation (even as technical cooperation re-examines itself).

During a recent Brown Bag presentation at UNV, a visitor from a well known online university told us that they "trabajan en red, trabajan en la Red" (work as a network, work in the Network). Perhaps this is a fitting ending thought to help us reflect about the "net" challenges ahead in volunteering for development.

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Web sites

MIT OpenCourseWare Initiative: <http://ocw.mit.edu/index.html>

UNDP Capacity Development: <http://capacity.undp.org/index.html>