

Volunteering: Empowering individuals and communities



2011 has been designated the *European Year of the Volunteer* and *United Nations International Year of the Volunteer +10*, to promote the values of volunteering, and encourage people to volunteer and make a positive difference.

We in Ireland have a rich and long-standing history of volunteering in communities at home and overseas. We value volunteering as it enables individuals to gain experience, acquire new skills, meet new people, expand their network of contacts, help a friend, promote a worthwhile activity, or just to give back to their community.

Likewise volunteering plays an important role in international development as it empowers individuals, organisations and communities to tackle poverty, take control over their own lives, and it fosters solidarity between people of different backgrounds, cultures and traditions.



“At the heart of volunteerism are the ideals of service and solidarity and the belief that together we can make the world better” *Kofi Annan*

Empowering both the volunteer and the host community

Volunteering not only has benefits for the communities in which volunteers serve, but also for the volunteers themselves, whether in Ireland or overseas. Volunteering can help people who are unemployed to avoid or minimise marginalisation, expand their skills and reintegrate into the labour market. The experience gained through volunteering can provide an invaluable stepping stone to employment.

In Ireland, volunteers provide invaluable support to NGOs in areas such as fundraising, campaigning, administration, telephone helplines and outreach, in a wide variety of sectors. In contrast to international volunteering, domestic volunteering receives relatively little attention, but it is vital for the effective running of all not-for-profit organisations.

International volunteering is more specifically aimed at empowering both overseas partners and the volunteers themselves to share and gain new skills, while working across a broad spectrum of areas and activities, such as:

- ★ Improving access to basic services such as health, education and shelter;
- ★ Sharing knowledge and skills to build individual capacity;
- ★ Building intercultural understanding and relationships across communities;
- ★ Providing support to partners to build organisational capacity and strengthen systems;
- ★ Supporting institutional development at local and national government levels;
- ★ Contributing funding and resources to partner projects;

- ★ Supporting partners to engage in advocacy and lobbying activities on human rights issues;
- ★ Peace-keeping in conflict zones;
- ★ Responding to natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies.

A distinctive and important aspect of international volunteering is realised through volunteers who bring home stories highlighting the realities of the challenges overseas partners face and communicating these to the Irish public. This “solidarity of voice” influences many others in Ireland to change their ways to bring about lasting change overseas.



“Having volunteers from a different cultural background has always been an enriching mutual learning experience. The perspectives of people from a different background help in understanding problems differently, as well as planning strategies in a structured way. Volunteers also bring with them new perspectives and learning.” *Host organisation, India*

Voluntary action and volunteers add great value and will be indispensable in meeting the Millennium Development Goal targets. Research has found that people who have volunteered overseas are also more likely to engage in subsequent volunteer activity in their local communities upon return and at a higher rate than the broader population.

Working to promote good practice in overseas volunteering

There are many ways to volunteer, and there is a wide range of opportunities to get involved with global development, supported by a diverse sector of volunteer sending organisations. In 2010, approximately 4500 volunteers with varied ages and backgrounds contributed their time and skills through volunteer placements with Irish sending organisations in a range of countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe.

While overseas volunteering has many positive outcomes, there are also potential pitfalls. The needs of the host partner and community must be placed at the heart of any volunteer initiative, with clear roles and demand identified for volunteers, and placements structured according to best practice to minimise possible harmful impacts on all stakeholders.

This is why Comhlámh, the Irish Association of Development Workers and Volunteers, has worked closely with Irish volunteer sending organisations, volunteers and representatives of host partners, to develop a Code of Good Practice for Volunteer Sending Organisations and a Volunteer Charter, with funding from Irish Aid. This Code sets out 11 principles, which aim to ensure that volunteering has a positive impact for the volunteer, the sending organisation and the host partner and community.

The Code of Good Practice and Volunteer Charter have been recognised internationally and adapted for use in other countries such as the UK, New Zealand and Slovenia. Both documents are available at www.volunteeringoptions.org.

