

**SOUTHERN AFRICA CONFERENCE ON
VOLUNTEER ACTION
for DEVELOPMENT**
17-19 October 2011 Johannesburg

Southern Africa Conference on Volunteer Action for Development
CONFERENCE REPORT Executive Summary



**UN
Volunteers**

inspiration in action



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The **United Nations Volunteers (UNV) Programme**, with the support of its implementing partner **Volunteer and Service Enquiry Southern Africa (VOSESA)**, hosted the first ever Southern Africa Conference on Volunteer Action for Development from October 17-19 October 2011 in Johannesburg, South Africa. The conference was convened to raise the profile of volunteer action as a tool for development and regional integration in southern Africa and contributed to marking the 10th Anniversary of the International Year of the Volunteer (IYV+10).

In addition to the UNV Programme, the generous support of **11 conference sponsors** helped to make the conference possible and ensured multi-stakeholder engagement from the region – Canada World Youth (CWY), the European Commission's Youth in Action Programme, the First Rand Volunteers Programme, FK Norway, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the South African National Youth Development Agency (NYDA), the New loveLife Trust, the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA), the Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA), the Talloires Network and VSO-RAISA.

The **178 participants hailed from 21 countries**, including 13 of the 15 southern African countries, and represented non-governmental and community-based organisations (45%), government (national and regional) and inter-governmental organisations (18%), the private sector (14%), higher education institutions (11%), youth (10%) and trusts and foundations (2%).

Notable speakers included Mr Pravin Gordhan, Minister of Finance, South Africa, Emiliana Tembo (Director, Gender and Social Affairs, COMESA), UNV Deputy Executive Coordinator Naheed Haque, Francis Chuks Njoaguani (Director, ECOWAS Youth and Sports Development Centre), Sizwe Nxasana (CEO, FirstRand Ltd), Bhekinkosi Moyo (Programme Director, Trust Africa), Ruth Cangela (Director, Department of Youth Affairs, HoD Ministry of Youth and Sport, Mozambique), Rethabile Mosisili (Deputy Principal Secretary, Ministry of Gender, Youth, Sports and Recreation, Lesotho), and the Honorable E Kayembe, MP, Malawi.

The conference highlighted the **potential of volunteer action to foster community-centred sustainable development and regional integration** in southern Africa. In particular, the conference explored the contributions of the following five different forms of volunteer action in addressing the below three development priorities in the region:

Forms of volunteer action	Three key development priorities in the region
1. Community-based volunteering; 2. Youth voluntary service; 3. Corporate (or employee) volunteering; 4. Higher education and civic engagement; and 5. International (including regional) volunteering	1. Fighting the HIV and AIDS epidemic; 2. Promoting youth social and economic participation; and 3. Facilitating social cohesion within and between southern African countries.

To access the conference programme, view conference presentations and read short descriptions of each session, visit: <http://www.vosesa.org.za/sadconference/programme.php>

For the purposes of the conference, the term '**volunteer action**' was used to refer to **both civic service and volunteering** and participants noted that volunteer action can differ in terms of its formality, structure, aims and duration. While there was no consensus on the definition, volunteer action was generally seen as 1.) undertaken for the common good of society and associated with *ubuntu*, 2.) done through free will and 3.) motivated by a sense of 'belonging' to a particular community. Departing from traditional definitions of volunteering, participants pointed out that in



the context of poverty and underdevelopment in southern Africa, volunteers often need financial or material support for the costs they incur when choosing to volunteer.

Many participants drew attention to the **unique cultural practice of ubuntu** in the region (also referred to as *umunthu*, *botho*, *obuntu* and *unhu*), which underpins volunteer action in communities across the region. A unifying and deeply embedded way of life in the region, participants paid tribute to volunteers who each day help others in their communities to persevere in the face of poverty, inequality, ill-health and lack of opportunity, but who often go unrecognised.

Although *ubuntu* and the spirit of volunteer action are still very much alive in the region, participants also emphasised the need to **“reinvigorate” its practice for development and social cohesion** in a contemporary regional environment. While volunteer action is not a replacement for the responsibilities of government or the private sector, participants affirmed the need to strengthen support for volunteer action and to channel it more effectively and purposely towards achieving critical regional development objectives so as to improve the lives of citizens in southern Africa. In particular, participants discussed the role of volunteer action in ushering in a **new development paradigm** that is driven by community members and which draws heavily on community assets and knowledge.

A total of **14 research papers** and document on volunteer action in southern Africa were produced for the conference to inform discussion about the role and contributions of volunteer action to **community-centred sustainable development and regional integration**. These can be accessed at: http://www.vosesa.org.za/sadconference/conference_papers.php.

The **Conference Declaration**, outlining key recommendations from the conference can be accessed here: http://www.vosesa.org.za/sadconference/Conference_Declaration.php.

The role of volunteer action in promoting youth social and economic participation

The South African Minister of Finance, Pravin Gordhan, highlighted the **major issue of youth unemployment in the region**, which stands at 40% in South Africa and is also high in other SADC countries, although country-level data is limited.¹ Youth participants from six countries in SADC echoed the need to address issues of youth unemployment at the conference opening, but also highlighted other challenges that prevent youth from becoming fully integrated members of social and economic life in the region – poverty in their communities, difficulty in accessing education, insufficient mobility in the region, a lack of information about policies that affect their lives, inadequate access to funding to support youth initiatives, and low levels of participation of youth in the policy process.²

Youth participants fuelled a debate about the role of volunteer action in promoting youth social and economic participation in a context of high unemployment. Although many participants were uncomfortable with positioning volunteer action as the answer to high youth unemployment in the region, there was widespread agreement that volunteer action can help enhance **youth employability and social participation**.

¹Delaney, Aislinn and VOSESA. 2011. *How can volunteering and service promote the social and economic participation of youth in the SADC region?*, Johannesburg, South Africa, 17-19 October 2011, Johannesburg: VOSESA.

²For more information see the youth declaration at <http://www.vosesa.org.za/sadconference/presentations/111021%20Youth%20statement.pdf>



Representatives from **higher education institutions, the private sector, government, civil society and youth** themselves attested to the role of volunteer action, including National Youth Service programmes, in helping young people develop their leadership capabilities, build skills critical for the workplace in the 21st century, gain a sense of belonging, and access new social networks and opportunities. Some participants emphasised that while the provision of stipends is sometimes necessary, these can undermine the spirit of volunteer action and confuse volunteering with employment, although this is not always the case.

Overall, participants recognised how **volunteering can mainstream young people into society** by helping young people build confidence, cultivate active citizenship, learn about different cultures, access new networks and opportunities, explore different career paths and acquire skills.

The role of volunteer action in fighting the HIV and AIDS epidemic

The **far-reaching and negative impact of HIV and AIDS** on families, communities and economies in southern Africa was discussed in various conference sessions. While there have been some gains with respect to reductions in the number of infection rates compared to 2001 and improved access to anti-retroviral drugs, sub-Saharan Africa still has the highest HIV and AIDS prevalence rates in the world.³ In her keynote address, Emiliana Tembo (Director, Gender and Social Affairs, COMESA) emphasised that, *“HIV and AIDS ...touches the very social and economic fabric of our nations and many of our people.”*

Participants shared examples of how volunteering has been leveraged to help the prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS and also highlighted that home-based care for people with HIV and AIDS is disproportionately performed by women and girls in communities. **The contributions of these community volunteers largely goes unrecognised**, which is in part due to the fact that volunteering is often taken for granted as a way of life in southern Africa. Gender stereotypes of women and girls are ‘carers’ also contributes to community volunteers being taken for granted. The involvement of international volunteers from developed countries in southern Africa also shapes dynamics at the local level where community volunteers are sometimes less valued and supported than international volunteers.

Numerous participants recommended **strategies for recognising and supporting community volunteers in the region to provide home-based care** and highlighted the importance of private sector as well as civil society and government involvement in this sphere of volunteer action. For example, definitions of volunteering crafted in developed countries need to be adapted to reflect the particular manifestations of volunteering in southern Africa and assess their impact. The development and adoption of home-based care guidelines and policy at the national level, guided by the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, is also necessary for raising the status of community volunteers. Other recommended strategies for alleviating the burden of care on women and girls highlighted at the conference included:

- Capacity building and training for community volunteers
- Psycho-social support to community volunteers
- Mobilising more men into home based care
- Stipends for community volunteers

³Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO), Regional AIDS Initiative of Southern Africa (RAISA) and VOESAS. 2011. *Reducing the Burden of HIV and AIDS Care on Women and Girls in the SADC Region: Insights from the VSO-RAISA programme*, Johannesburg, South Africa, 17-19 October 2011, Johannesburg: VOESAS.



- Community mobilisation and community-driven development; and
- International and regional youth volunteer exchange programmes.

The role of volunteer action in promoting regional integration

“The ‘sense of being part of a common political space and of holding common political values in southern Africa ... is shared more by governments, and in particular heads of state and government ... than by the average person’ (Kornegay 2006). This sentiment was shared by many conference participants who indicated that the **concept of regional integration lacks tangible meaning in the day to day lives of ordinary people in the region**. Piyushi Kotecha (CEO, Southern African Universities Regional Association -SARUA) emphasised that regional integration has typically been defined in economic and political terms, but needs to be redefined in social terms among ordinary individuals at the grassroots level.

Volunteer exchange programmes were hailed as a potential mechanism for fostering regional identity, building bridges across borders, facilitating regional knowledge building and promoting integration. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Volunteer Programme was launched recently to *“consolidate peace, recovery, national reconciliation and rehabilitation in crisis-affected communities”* and serves as an encouraging example of how national governments can work together to support volunteering for peace throughout a region.

A **ground-breaking study on youth volunteer exchange programmes** in southern and eastern Africa was presented at the conference and demonstrated the potential for volunteer exchange to foster regional integration in a more social sense. A key finding from the study is that participants reported ‘friendships across borders’ as the greatest impact of the programme. Furthermore, participants talked about how the programme helped them to develop deep bonds of trust with someone from a different country in the region, to learn about development in the region, and to gain a better understanding and respect for different cultures.

The conference also highlighted **that higher education institutions are uniquely positioned to promote regional integration in southern Africa**, given their mandate to promote community engagement alongside teaching and research. By mainstreaming a commitment to community engagement, higher education institutions can provide solutions to major development challenges in the region while also cultivating civic leaders with a regional consciousness. Increasingly young people at universities are providing leadership on community engagement and are looking for opportunities to engage with other like-minded students in the region.

Finally, the conference shed light on the ways in which corporate employee volunteering programmes help to build bridges, particularly across socio-economic divides within countries in the region.

Recommendations towards an enabling environment for volunteer action in southern Africa

Participants agreed that there is still a great deal of work to be done to **foster an enabling environment for volunteer action** development and regional integration in southern Africa.

The following **six recommendations** emerged strongly conference discussions and require attention, if volunteer action is to be strengthened in southern Africa.

1. **Develop** policies, legislation and structures that support and promote volunteer action in the region;



2. **Strengthen** opportunities for youth volunteer action in southern Africa, particularly youth volunteer exchange opportunities;
3. **Support** research on the impact and contribution of volunteer action to regional development and integration in southern Africa;
4. **Build** volunteer management and organisational capacity among civil society organisations in the region; and ,
5. **Promote** networking and knowledge-building in the sector in the region; and
6. **Identify** opportunities for multi-stakeholder partnerships for volunteering and development.

Many participants pointed out that for volunteer action to thrive, civil society must be able to operate freely. This is particularly important in southern Africa where some governments have restricted or are taking steps to restrict civic freedoms. At the same time, other governments in the region have developed and adopted legislation that recognises volunteer action as a critical development resource that deserves the support of government.

Participants called on governments in the region, as well as the SADC Secretariat, to demonstrate leadership on youth volunteer action and to invest in regional volunteer exchange programmes that provide young people in the region with opportunities to learn about the region and make meaningful contributions to its development. Participants also called for greater support for youth leadership development in service programmes, including National Youth Service programmes, and for greater mechanisms to recognise young people for their efforts to promote development in the region.

To secure greater support from government and other stakeholders, there is a pressing need to demonstrate the developmental impact of volunteer action. Research on volunteer action in the region was thus prioritised as a key area that requires greater investment going forward. Some examples of research suggested by participants include:

- a feasibility study on creating a multi-stakeholder supported youth volunteer exchange programme in southern Africa;
- research on the relationships between youth volunteer action and employability;
- measuring the impact of volunteer action on community-centred sustainable development;
- research on the role of volunteer action in fostering peace and social cohesion within and between SADC countries;
- a study that looks at policies and laws that influence volunteer action at the national and regional levels; and
- further research into corporate support for volunteer action as well as higher education community engagement.

Participants also highlighted the need to build the capacity of civil society organisations in the region through different forms of volunteering (e.g. employee and international volunteering). However, to achieve this, mutually respectful and mutually beneficial partnerships need to be struck between companies and the civil society organisations they support, as well as between volunteer-sending organisations and host organisations. Participants also cited the need compile and develop indigenous approaches and materials for volunteer programme development and management, that are tailored to the different manifestations of volunteering in the region.

The final two recommendations from participants highlighted the need for more structures to facilitate knowledge-building and networking in the field and emphasised the importance of multi-stakeholder engagement for furthering volunteer action through policy and practice.



The **Conference Declaration**, adopted by participants at the closing session, summarises the key recommendations that emerged from the conference and underscores that government, business, and civil society all have a significant role to play in strengthening volunteer action in the region. The conference declaration can be accessed at:

http://www.vosesa.org.za/sadcconference/Conference_Declaration.php.

Conclusion

The conference presented a **unique opportunity for like-minded individuals** from the region to engage on issues of volunteer action in the region. Throughout the conference, and in the conference evaluations, participants repeatedly emphasised their interest in future opportunities to learn and exchange with others in the field. Many participants stressed that there is a need for an organisation to take leadership in fostering mutual exchange and networking in the region.

To date, **many participants have already taken steps to build on the conference discussions** and are seeking to strengthen volunteer action, policy and practice in their countries. Thanks to the advocacy efforts of United Nations Volunteers, the Conference Declaration was referenced at the UN General Assembly convened on 5 December 2011 to celebrate International Volunteer Day and the 10th Anniversary of the International Year of volunteers (IYV+10). VOSESA is aiming to pursue further research into the relationship between volunteer action, peace and social cohesion and is supporting the convening of the African Conference on Volunteer Action for Peace and Development, which will be held from 2-4 July 2012 in Nairobi, Kenya. Other participants have also reported interesting developments in their companies, universities, government departments and NGOs.

The Conference Steering Committee will meet again to identify new opportunities for taking forward the major recommendations from the conference. It is, however, clear that capitalising on the conference momentum will require not only passion and commitment, but also investment and collaboration by government, inter-governmental agencies, the private sector, higher education institutions and civil society organisations to build the field.