Taean International Environment Forum

Republic of Korea, December 2008

"Civil society and the importance of volunteerism for environmental conservation"[*]

Introduction

Before December 7, 2007, few in South Korea would have imagined that an event in a particular place of the country could trigger such massive mobilization of civil society. On that day, the whole area of Korea's southwestern coast at Taean, Chungcheongnam-do (South Chungcheong Province), was affected by a large oil spill that changed overnight the coastal landscape and the lives of thousands of people.

The mobilization of 1,300,000 volunteers over three months to clean up the coast after the event is the most salient feature of the national response to the emergency, and was surely up to then the most remarkable experience of volunteerism to face an environmental disaster worldwide. It is all the more notable considering that, by accounts of Korean experts, civil society volunteerism for environmental disasters had not had a long history in the country, nor there was the institutional and societal structure to promote, nurture and support volunteerism at such a scale.

The experience of volunteer mobilization to face the disaster at Taean is an opportunity to learn lessons and take them into the future. Unfortunately, natural and human-made disasters will continue to happen, and it is quite probable that different types of extreme weather events will become more frequent in the future due to climate change. The Taean volunteerism experience is not only remarkable because of what it achieved – it is also a notable demonstration of what the Korean society can do in the future to face any emergency and to advance national causes of progress and wellbeing. For this potential to be unleashed and channelled, some broader reflections on volunteerism may help, as it will to create and develop stronger links with the volunteering networks worldwide, who share similar situations and aspirations.

The universal dimension of civil society volunteerism

Volunteerism is rooted in universal values of all cultures. As the Report of the UN Secretary-General "Support for volunteering" of August 2001 recalls, in many cultures of

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the world there are provisions, traditions and institutions of volunteering: in India, "voluntarism is an ancient social behaviour (…) The Ghandian movement was quintessentially based on the spirit of voluntary work (…) From *shramadana* in South Asia, *harambee* in East Africa, *mingu* in Latin America and *al taawun wal tawasul* in many Arab States, the act is very familiar, even if the word "volunteer" is not"[1].

Three are the main features of volunteerism: its main motivation is not financial gain, which makes it cost-effective; secondly, it's based on the free will and personal choice of the individuals; thirdly, it aims at generating benefits for others or the society at large, not for the volunteers[2]. Altruism, free decision and solidarity – these are the bases of volunteerism.

The international community has been late and slow in recognizing the value and the potential of volunteerism, among other reasons because of politics and fears. In many occasions, volunteerism creates discomfort in governmental agencies and officials, because it exposes them to the scrutiny of the public and makes their failures evident. In some cases, volunteerism raises awareness of issues that sectors such as corporations, the military or governments would rather want undisclosed. Volunteers, for their altruism and values, often attract the attention of the media, competing with the powerful whose influence on the messages communicated to the public is a key instrument to secure their interests. So, understandably, volunteerism has not been necessarily supported and appreciated by those who may have their power and authority questioned by public mobilization.

Thus, despite all the achievements of volunteerism worldwide on many fronts, it is only in the last decade that the international community has started to show appreciation of volunteerism and to develop policy frameworks and guidance for supporting it. In November 1997, the UN General Assembly, at its fifty-second session, proclaimed 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers[3]. Subsequently, the UN Secretary General issued two important reports: "Support for volunteering", in August 2001, quoted above, and "Follow-up to the implementation of the International Year of Volunteers", in July 2008[4]. Through such reports and related documents, the UN has provided in the least decade some political support and policy guidance, encouraging countries to develop appropriate systems to support volunteerism. But it is a late and slow reaction, and much remains to be done.

One of the areas that have lacked most recognition and support is volunteerism for the environment – which is a striking fact given the outstanding contributions volunteers have made to the planet for more than a century. It is only in the latest 2008 UN Secretary-General's report that volunteerism for the environment is recognized, and this due to the pressing needs of adapting and preparing for climate change. But still the report, as well as the previous UN documents, falls short of showing real appreciation and commitment about volunteerism for the environment[5].

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[1] "Support for volunteering". Report of the UN Secretary-General. UN General Assembly, A/56/288, 14 August 2001.

[2] "Volunteerism and Legislation: A Guidance Note". 2004. A joint report of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and United Nations Volunteers. Geneva.

[3] "International Year of Volunteers, 2001". UNGA Resolution 52/17. 20 November 1997.

[4] "Follow-up to the implementation of the International Year of Volunteers". Report of the UN Secretary-General. UN General Assembly, A/63/184, 28 July 2008.

[5] The UN Secretary-General's report of 2008 recognizes itself this problem: "Reporting on the significant role of volunteerism for the environment has been limited in the past" (para 40), and "Environmental considerations have received little attention to date in intergovernmental discussions on volunteerism. With

Yet on a fair assessment, without volunteerism the advances in national and international policy and actions on the environment would most probably not have been achieved.

Civil society and volunteerism in IUCN

Volunteerism and civil society action have been the fundamental driver of environmental progress worldwide. In the XIX century, civil groups in Europe and North America started to raise awareness about the devastation that the industrial revolution and colonialism were generating in many places of the world, and begun to propose safeguard actions such as the creation of protected areas. This is how advanced thinking on the protection of places and species emerged – not from governments' initiative (despite their fundamental duty to protect the environment), or from corporate policy and behaviour (despite their being the largest users and beneficiaries of natural resources). From expert volunteer networks to dedicated field workers to environmental activism, citizen movements have been the conscience of humanity and the engine of change for the environment.

It is in this context that was born IUCN – The International Union for Conservation of Nature, along with other international conservation organizations that pioneered on raising the world's environmental awareness. While Flora and Fauna International (funded in 1903) was the first international conservation organization focusing on protecting wild places, IUCN, funded in 1948, was the first international conservation institution focusing consciously and specifically on the mobilization of volunteer networks of civil society for promoting change.

Civil society is not only implicitly crucial in IUCN's vision – 'a just world that values and conserves nature' - and mission – 'influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable'. Civil society takes also a crucial part in IUCN's structure. IUCN has three big pillars: about 1,141 member organizations, almost 10,000 commission members and a professional secretariat with around 1,100 staff worldwide. Beyond its own structure, where civil society organizations and representatives are the major part of IUCN's constituency, civil society organizations are key partners of IUCN in action.

Member organizations

As of November 2008, out of IUCN's 1141 active member organizations, 902 are NGOs (composed of 812 national and 90 international NGOs). The members act collectively to provide leadership, governance and set the organization's strategic agenda. They benefit, in turn, from IUCN's scientific credibility, its knowledge base, its convening power, its networking opportunities, and the access it provides to high-level political, economic and social decision making.

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current global awareness of how environmental issues impinge on all aspects of development, greater efforts are needed to ensure that climate change and the environment feature on the volunteerism agenda of Governments and the United Nations" (para 60).

Commission members

The Commissions are "networks of expert volunteers entrusted to develop and advance the institutional knowledge and experience and objectives of IUCN"[6].

IUCN's six Commissions unite about 10,000 volunteer experts from a range of disciplines – for example scientific, legal, economic or education specialists. They assess the state of the world's natural resources and provide the Union with sound know-how and policy advice on conservation issues, broaden matters and competencies and work with members and the Secretariat to develop activities within the various regions. They are traditionally the engine room for IUCN knowledge and products as for example the Red List or guidance on the application of the Ecosystem Approach.

Box: Overview of IUCN Commissions

The **Commission on Education and Communication (CEC)** champions the strategic use of communication and education to empower and educate stakeholders for the sustainable use of natural resources. About 600 members.

The **Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy (CEESP)** provides expertise and policy advice on economic and social factors for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. It has about 700 members.

The **Commission on Environmental Law (CEL)** advances members environmental law by developing new legal concepts and instruments, and by building the capacity of societies to employ environmental law for conservation and sustainable development. Members: 800.

The **Commission on Ecosystem Management (CEM)** provides expert guidance on integrated ecosystem approaches to the management of natural and modified ecosystems. Members: 400.

The **Species Survival Commission (SSC)** advises the Union on the technical aspects of species conservation and mobilizes action for those species that are threatened with extinction. Members: 7500.

The **World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA)** promotes the establishment and effective management of a worldwide representative network of terrestrial and marine protected areas. Members: 1300.

Project partners

Another important area of civil society engagement is IUCN's work with partners on a large number of projects. Partners include large and small NGOs, scientists and academics, as well as representatives of regional communities, but also other types of members. A collaborative approach to conservation management concrete measures helps overcome barriers and accelerate environmental progress.

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[6] IUCN Statutes.

Volunteerism in IUCN Commissions: the example of the Species Survival Commission (SSC)

There are many types of volunteerism in the environmental movement worldwide. Some volunteer groups focus on generating expert knowledge and policy advice; others concentrate on community work in the field; others dedicate to environmental activism; others work on public education, awareness raising and information; others have developed particular expertise to address environmental emergencies. All such types of volunteerism have their own niche and importance and make critical contributions.

Volunteerism in IUCN has two main features, which makes it different from other types of environmental volunteerism:

1. It is predominantly volunteerism of experts and professionals in the conservation field. While IUCN values and nurtures the participation of the whole society, and partners strongly with local communities, internally IUCN's volunteerism has a high-level expert and professional profile.

2. The membership of Commissions is stable and doesn't change dramatically over time, that is, is not dependent on specific events or emergencies. Once volunteers are recruited, they stay in their groups for up to four years in each cycle, and can be reappointed for successive cycles. This feature is critical for incremental generation of knowledge and for regular monitoring of environmental progress in the areas of work of the Commissions.

IUCN Commission members are organized in smaller groups called Specialist Groups with focused mandates. Each Specialist Group is coordinated by a Chair.

SSC, the Species Survival Commission, is a virtual network in the business of generating knowledge. This knowledge forms the intellectual capital of the organisation. The effective collection and transfer of that knowledge depends on the SSC social capital - the networks and norms of behaviour for moving information.

There are about 7000 volunteers in SSC, organized in a large number of Specialist Groups. Generally, SSC is not a typical volunteer organisation in that the demands placed on the volunteers are variable, unpredictable and generally rely on their own professional expertise. Whereas a typical volunteer network has consistent meetings of the same people, reinforcing the necessary social capital, the organisation of the SSC results in very little personal contact.

This leads to a critical role for Specialist Group Chairs as network leaders. SSC Chairs in general are a distinctive group of people who play more roles for the SSC, spend more time on SSC and are generally more informed about SSC. They are the linchpins of the network, with an active interest in being more involved in decision making.

A study undertaken in 2001 about volunteerism in SSC found that:

- There were striking differences between Chairs and members – Chairs investing much more working time than members; chairs assess high proportions of their memberships as passive; a large percentage of Chairs bear some group costs personally, and the Secretariat has helped only 21% of Chairs with fundraising.
- Network effectiveness is greatly promoted by personal knowledge between individuals; the impact of single meetings between Chairs and SSC leadership or Secretariat staff persisted for over a decade.

- In general, and especially for Chairs, recognition of their efforts on behalf of the SSC network is an important issue.
- The study also showed a vast under-used network of SSC members who have a strong desire to contribute more.

The study showed the need to address issues of:

- Structure and organisation – need for more involvement of members in decision-making
- Resources and Capacity – need to provide intellectual resources through training and mentoring, improve social resources through more opportunities for personal contact and discussion, specialist training
- Recognition and motivation – recognize and celebrate distinction as expert conservation collaborators representing the world's best professional, technical expertise, rather than simply unskilled volunteers; evolution of culture of recognition; award including more personal contact
- Communications – improve knowledge of the organization, look more closely at message sending and vehicles for messages; newsletter as a motivation; improve network management.

Specifically, the strategy to respond to the requests from the study included:

- Host a meeting of all volunteers with specific responsibilities as Chairs of groups in 2008
- Developing a network training strategy
- Developing a recognition system
- Continuing to improve technical work on Species as a tool for motivating the network
- Continuing to probe into the strengths and weaknesses of SSC network design, taking lessons from other virtual networks

Community Volunteerism

Communities are fundamental sources of volunteer work because of their direct interest in their environment and the resources they depend on. Community volunteerism is usually rooted in traditional values and practices of caring for the land and the resources.

Community volunteerism is more effective, lasting and useful for the people when community members increase their benefits and security, and when they have more recognition in decision-making.

Box

Philippines: Community protection of natural forests
Mount Kitanglad National Park, Mindanao, Philippines
Kitanglad Integrated, a local NGO, worked with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources and other NGO partners to establish the Kitanglad Volunteer Guards, made up of volunteers from different ethnic communities in the area who undertake fire watching duties. Being members of volunteer guard initiatives fits well with traditional

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ideas of land stewardship and a council of tribe elders endorses their appointment. Training is provided along with transport and a headquarters[7].

Volunteerism in the humanitarian sector

The humanitarian sector has many lessons to offer on volunteerism – a good example is the Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which now is also interested in environmental hazards, including climate change.

The Red Cross has taken lead in work with volunteers all over the world and by decisively advancing related international standard setting. The Red Cross works with volunteers at the heart of humanitarian assistance and estimates suggest that they have about 20 million active volunteers worldwide[8].

Some key milestones in the story of volunteering development in the Red Cross

Along with the international trend, the last decade has seen a fundamental strengthening and systematization of the volunteerism policy and practice of the Red Cross. Some benchmarks include:

- 1999 adoption of International Federation's Volunteering Policy in order to promote, recognize and value volunteering, and to support volunteer development;

- 2000-2001 work within the UN to influence and create support for UN resolution 56/58;

- 2001 International Year of Volunteers;

- 2002 – Publication of the Volunteering Policy Implementation Guide;

- Coalition for enabling volunteer environment – International Federation, UN Volunteer Programme, and Inter-Parliamentary Union, formed to lobby governments on volunteering;

- 2000, 2004: regional volunteer networks

- 2004, 2005: Ad hoc and later permanent working group on Volunteering

- 2007: global accident insurance scheme for National Society volunteers

Pursuing a volunteer-friendly society

Volunteerism is a fundamental aspect of social progress, democracy and improvement of the lives of people, be it on environmental issues, humanitarian crises, or social improvements such as health.

Although volunteerism is a universal and cultural phenomenon, it should not be taken for granted - it needs to be supported, nurtured, cultivated, in order to unleash its full potential

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[7] Karki, S (2002). "Community Involvement in and Management of Forest Fires in Southeast Asia", Project Firefight, Southeast Asia, Jakarta, Indonesia; in Sue Stolton, Nigel Dudley and Jonathan Randall (2008). *Natural Security - Protected areas and hazard mitigation.* WWF/ Equilibrium. Gland, Switzerland, p.47.

[8] International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2007). "Taking volunteers seriously – Progress report 1999-2007". Geneva.

and to channel it for the increasingly complex challenges of today's world, where emergencies and problems take in many cases dramatic proportions. It is the duty of national authorities, the international community and the entire society to support volunteerism.

There has to be an approach of rights and duties to frame the work of volunteers: every person has the right to be a volunteer for social causes, and the society and the state have the duty to create space for volunteers and to support them.

A favourable legal environment is needed in every country for volunteerism – for example, suitable fiscal arrangements, removal of unnecessary regulatory burdens, infrastructure support, etc. The legal framework should support incentives and protection for volunteers – for example, volunteers exposed to risk should be protected by proper means including insurance, and there should be legal provisions on this matter. There has been some progress on this front. "Since the International Year of Volunteers, over 70 countries have adopted or introduced new laws or policies on volunteerism", reports in 2008 the UN Secretary-General[9]. Among others, "National laws, ratified alongside the designation of organizations to promote and coordinate volunteering, have been passed in China, the Philippines and the Republic of Korea"[10].

Many societies have beliefs, values, traditions and other norms that are relevant for volunteers – for example, in some cultures there is regular volunteer work by groups like youth, regulated by adults and elders. Such systems need to be considered, respected, and integrated as appropriate in national and subnational policies and frameworks to support volunteerism.

Every country should have a system to manage volunteers for different situations, so as to avoid improvisation. It is important to recognize that volunteers are a critical part of a society's progress engine not only in emergency times, but also in normal times, for example for prevention, preparedness and awareness-raising. This requires a properly designed and supported system that nurtures volunteerism at all levels and in several fields – from the families to the school, the workplace, leisure spaces and cultural areas.

The recommendations issued by the UN General Assembly in 2002 are relevant to the need to improve, enhance, systematize and recognize volunteerism. Some highlights are[11]:

- *There is not one universal model of best practice, since what works well in one country may not work in another with very different cultures and traditions.*

- *Support for voluntary activities does not imply support for government downsizing or for replacing paid employment.*

- *It is important to ensure that opportunities for volunteering in all sectors are open both to women and men, given their different levels of participation in different areas, and recognizing the potential positive effect of volunteering on the empowerment of women.*

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[9] "Follow-up to the implementation of the International Year of Volunteers". Report of the UN Secretary-General. UN General Assembly, A/63/184, 28 July 2008, para 26.

[10] Ibid. However, an assessment of the appropriateness of the adopted legislation is required.

[11] UN General Assembly Resolution 56/38. "Recommendations on support for volunteering". A/RES/56/38, 10 January 2002.

- *Increase public awareness of the vital contribution of volunteerism to the social and economic functioning of their communities through, inter alia, public information activities and public events*

- *Take general measures concerning encouragement and facilitation, preparation, training and recognition of volunteers*

- *Enable fiscal, legislative and other frameworks, including for community-based organizations and not-for-profit organizations engaged in volunteering*

- *Encouraging and undertaking research in the various aspects of volunteerism and its impact on society*

- *Ensure citizens' access to information on opportunities for volunteering*

- *Address the possible impact of general social and economic policy measures upon citizens' opportunities and willingness to volunteer*

- *Integrate volunteerism into national development planning, recognizing the potential contribution of volunteerism to the achievement of sustainable development goals*

- *Facilitate participation of all population groups*

- *Recognize the contributions of volunteers*