

The International Year of Volunteers 2001

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About one year ago, an 80-year old woman by the name of Jane Buck began to speak out on animal rights in her town, nestled on the banks of the Ohio River in West Virginia, USA. Six months later, she had managed to mobilise scores of volunteers, had succeeded in establishing the county's first Humane Society and had secured federal funding for an animal shelter.

This determined and energetic 80-year old is my grandmother, and I begin with her story as representative of 50 many others I have heard about that illustrate how powerful volunteer activity can be as an expression of active ageing.

I am especially attuned to that idea as part of United Nations Volunteers (UNV), the volunteer-sending arm of the United Nations and the focal point for the International Year of Volunteers (IYV 2001). Over a third of our UN Volunteers are in their forties, over a tenth in their fifties, sixties and seventies. I remember some very special ones, like the American Ruth Lovald who served three times as a UN Volunteer in Africa in her retirement, or 70-year old Maduraivasal Ravagans, an archaeologist who joined his son as a UN Volunteer in Cambodia.

But it is perhaps in UNV's new mandate as focal point for IYV 2001 where the notion of senior volunteering is most fully expressed. The Year was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly to recognise, promote, facilitate and network volunteer activity world-wide. IYV 2001 is a chance to celebrate the countless people around the world who devote some time of their lives to serving others; to encourage more people globally to engage in volunteer activity and to bring about a public discussion about the contribution of volunteering to societies (both in social and economic terms) and about ways to ensure an enabling environment for volunteering to thrive.

At UNV we believe that volunteer activity by older persons is one of the themes the International Year of Volunteers should help bring to the forefront. Older volunteers have a great deal to offer in terms of experience, skills, flexibility and sheer numbers. In turn, there is sound evidence to indicate a positive impact of volunteering on the physical and mental health and in particular, on longevity of older volunteers. We believe that senior volunteering in its own right should be recognised, facilitated, promoted and networked in the context of IYV 2001.

IYV 2001 should also serve as the background for an extensive reflection on the place of voluntary action in active ageing. As you know, there are many issues specific to older volunteers that need to be borne in mind and carefully considered. For example, volunteering should not limit paid work for older people -- many old people are poor' there should be no pressure on older people to volunteer as it may lead to abuse if governments cut back on social services and feel that older people constitute a reservoir to draw upon; older volunteers may lack the appropriate

management infrastructure and training, as well as the delicate balance of serious expectations and standards combined with kindness, patience and compassion on the part of management. These and many other important issues should be thoroughly explored in the context of IYV 2001.

The focus on senior volunteering as part of IYV 2001 is a natural follow-up to the International Year of Older Persons (IYOP) which was marked in 1999. IYOP highlighted the importance of identifying and supporting opportunities for older people to make "continuing contributions" to society and to be viewed "as a resource rather than a burden". It also reminded us that among the types of security needed in late life (such as human and economic capital) social capital, which includes community networks, is equally important. And indeed "Participation", one of the "United Nations Principles for Older Persons", calls for the opportunity for "older persons to seek and develop opportunities for service to the community and to serve as volunteers in positions appropriate to their interests and capabilities".

UNV is actively engaged in supporting and helping ensure the focus on senior volunteers as part of IYV 2001 but we need to call on all of you to help make this possible. For example, by encouraging associations involved with senior volunteering as well as appropriate government departments to form part of the national consultations and national committees for IYV 2001 (this is already the case in countries such as Spain and Holland). Promotional campaigns for IYV 2001 in each country could include outstanding older volunteers as role models. Increased private sector support for volunteering and public-private sector partnerships in the context of IYV 2001 could include initiatives aimed to engage senior volunteers. And as IYV 2001 prompts more research on volunteering in each country, the contribution of older volunteers could be highlighted.

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