

# IVCO Conference 2016: Increasing Resilience of Communities through Volunteering<sup>1</sup>

Susann Tischendorf<sup>2</sup>

United Nations Volunteers programme

## About the IVCO-Conference

The annual conference “IVCO” (International Volunteer Cooperation Organization) brings together leaders of international volunteering agencies from around the globe. It is led by The International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum) – the most significant global network of IVCOs – and represents a unique opportunity for information exchange, networking and advocacy work in this sector. In 2016 the conference took place in Bonn, Germany, and was jointly hosted by the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, both members of the Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum). 138 delegates from organizations engaged in national and international volunteering met on the UN Campus from October 9-12th to debate the conference topic: Increasing Resilience of Communities through Volunteering.

The participants from 24 countries and diverse sectors, such as civil society, government, UN bodies, academia and the private sector, shared the common goal to contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Acknowledging the fact that volunteerism is an agent of change in a changing world, the conference highlighted key areas where international Volunteering Cooperation Organisations can make a contribution. Against this background the delegates discussed the relevance of their actions and ways to measure impact, the necessity for strategic relationships and the scope of interaction between international and national volunteers.

IVCO 2016 gave volunteers, especially from the Global South, the opportunity to actively contribute to the debate. Participants also highlighted the importance of volunteers in fragile contexts. Acknowledging the importance of global and local partnerships, the conference strongly focused on creating space for collaboration among IVCOs. Relevant research was discussed during the conference and made available on the conference website.

1 Please find the full and detailed meeting report on IVCO 2016 published by UNV, giz and Forum here: <http://forum-ids.org/conferences/ivco/ivco-2016/meeting-report/>

2 Contact: [Amanda.Mukwashi@unv.org](mailto:Amanda.Mukwashi@unv.org).

## The Topic: Increasing Resilience of Communities through Volunteering

As evidence shows, the vision set out in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – for people, the planet, prosperity and peace – will inevitably fail if shocks and stresses are not addressed. The topic of ‘resilience’ cuts across the SDGs and highlights the urgent need for vulnerable communities to be made more sustainable: up to 325 million extremely poor people are likely to be living in the 49 most hazard prone countries by 2030 and over half of those living on less than \$1.25 per day will be living in fragile states by 2030.<sup>3</sup> Against this background resilience building has become increasingly important to the international community.

*What is resilience?* The sector-wide concept of resilience is rooted in material sciences and ecology<sup>4</sup> but has also been applied in various social disciplines and psychology. It typically relates to the ability of systems to respond and adapt effectively to changing circumstances. In concrete terms, it is the ability of critical physical infrastructure to absorb shocks.<sup>5</sup> From a more psychological point of view, it is the process of adaptation and a set of skills, capacities, behaviours and actions in order to deal with adversity.

Traditionally, much of the humanitarian effort focuses on immediate life saving responses to disasters or crises. At the same time, individuals and communities facing simultaneous or repeated shocks, such as economic crises, disease epidemics, or natural disasters with destruction of shelter or productive assets, are better supported when humanitarian action also addresses the underlying vulnerabilities and builds capacities to better cope with future shocks.<sup>6</sup>

In this context, volunteerism is the key to building resilience. It contributes to both the humanitarian action necessary to respond to immediate post-crisis needs and addresses the underlying causes of vulnerability. In this new reality, global partnerships and resilience planning are becoming more important. A systematic and collaborative approach in strengthening resilience can support necessary reforms of governance at all levels. This was recently underlined at the United Nations World Humanitarian Summit where it was emphasized that resilience building can be adequately addressed only through the collaboration of national governments, civil society, people affected by crises, the private sector, national and international organizations. IVCO 2016 did not offer universal definitions of the term “resilience” but embraced the diversity of opinions on the topic.

3 <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9780.pdf>

4 UNICEF humanitarian action for children, ‘Fostering resilience, protecting children: UNICEF in humanitarian action’, [www.unicef.org/hac2011](http://www.unicef.org/hac2011)

5 Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism, Project on Resilience and Security, ‘Resilience in Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Natural Disasters’ Workshop Report, Syracuse University, 9 March 2009.

6 [http://www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/96178/1224500-Road%20to%20resilience-EN-LowRes%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/96178/1224500-Road%20to%20resilience-EN-LowRes%20(2).pdf)

Over the course of three days, inspiring talks, provocative discussions, and in-depth learning sessions helped participants to better understand:

- Why resilience building matters for the international volunteering community – both in host and home countries – and how it relates to the SDGs;
- How international volunteers can create lasting impact in a changing global development context;
- What strategies can be developed to reduce risk and measure progress;
- What structures need to be in place for volunteering interventions to be most effective;
- How International Volunteer Cooperation Organizations (IVCOs) can build a body of knowledge on the added value of international volunteering.

## Outcomes of the conference

At the end of three days of in-depth panel discussions and dialogue sessions, IVCO 2016 attendees committed to continue working together to strengthen the diverse contributions of volunteer sending organizations and to demonstrate accountability, ultimately aiming to achieve greater visibility, recognition and resourcing of volunteering. As a result, a Call to Action was proposed that aims to help achieve the SDGs and build more resilience against global risks – at the individual, community, and organizational level.

Besides, the discussion of the notion of resilience in the international development context showed an agreement on the following:

- Resilience building, e.g. in cases of natural disasters through climate change needs to focus on the individual, personal, community, regional and national level. It addresses institutions, structures, the academia, the media, and the digital world. It helps people and communities to be better prepared and deal with crises.
- Participants agreed that to be effective in building more resilient communities, IVCOs have to complement each other's work more, build sustainable partnerships and be more accountable in terms of measuring impact.

The need to find effective strategies in building resilience of local communities has been echoed by the conference outcome document – the Bonn Call to Action:

*“The Bonn conference demonstrated the power of volunteerism in strengthening individual and community resilience in order to adapt to change, build back better, and so achieve sustainable development. We therefore call on local and national governments, the High-level Political Forum of the United Nations and other major stakeholders to make volunteerism key to the achievement of the SDGs.”<sup>7</sup>*

---

7 See Bonn Call to Action: [forum-ids.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Bonn-Call-to-Action-2016.pdf](https://forum-ids.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Bonn-Call-to-Action-2016.pdf)