Online Volunteering @ UNV:
A future?

A discussion regarding the Online Volunteering service at UNV;
and a strategy on how online volunteering can be further mainstreamed
into UNV and UNDP.

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Also see "**UNV_OV_outreach strategy**", a PowerPoint presentation by the UNV's OV staff that details strategy for recruiting more organizations and volunteers to use the Online Volunteering Service, and the obstacles to undertaking such a strategy.

What is Online Volunteering (OV)?

- Volunteer activities that can be completed, in whole or in part, via the Internet and a home, work, or public access computer.

- Examples of assignments: translation, research, web design, data analyses, database construction, proposal writing, writing articles, online mentoring/coaching/tutoring, professional advice, curriculum development, publication design…any project with results that can be transmitted through the Internet.

Benefits of OV

- For the UN Volunteers program, as an institution   **- For UNV staff**

- For UN Volunteers in the Field   **- For Online Volunteers**

<u>For the UN Volunteers program, as an institution</u>:

- Online Volunteering (OV) represents the most exciting innovation in volunteerism in many years, and UNV can be identified as a leader in this innovation by both promoting online volunteering and sponsoring its own online volunteering service.

- There is great potential for participation, collaboration and, perhaps, even funding from corporate partners, because of online volunteering.

- There is great potential for participation and collaboration from non-governmental organizations, volunteer-sending organizations, and other nonprofit initiatives because of being a leader in online volunteering and hosting an OV service.

- The number of online volunteers for which UNV can take at least partial credit for could be the same as UNV's onsite volunteers each year.

- Online volunteers can become part of the range of tools and resources UNV can use to promote volunteering for development. The OV service provides UNV with an attractive avenue to "walk the talk". It is a tool for people to directly take action on the UNV message of volunteering for development.

- Promoting OV, and bringing online volunteers together with onsite UN Volunteers, will further give UNV a positive image in providing support to its onsite volunteers.

- Involvement with the UN Volunteers program becomes possible by a much, much greater pool of people (involvement doesn't have to mean being an actual onsite volunteer, at least 25 years old; or signing an MOU; etc.)

- There is potential for other agencies within the UN system to look to UNV for leadership in involving online volunteers (OVs) and thereby creating more OV assignments.

- If the OV service is staffed at sufficient levels to grow, it will provide UNV with greater visibility on a grass roots level, the media, other public channels and within UNDP and the UN as a whole regarding UNV's services and effectiveness.

- The OV service fits into the tripartite categorization of basic UNDP business processes:

- o **Influencing Development Agendas**: "These activities establish our presence and credibility in the international development arena and define us as a partner of choice in development work" and are part of the "efforts to highlight UNDP's work to public audiences (including through web sites and the media)."

- o **Supporting Development Solutions**: "This part of the strategy includes ICT support for all stages of the programme/project cycle, from planning and resource mobilization to procurement, financial and results-based management to archiving documents... Most ambitiously, it includes support for ICT for Development programmatic tools."

- o **Building an Enterprise Architecture**: "Since UNDP's competitive advantage in all areas of our work (both of the above boxes) lies in our ability to network, the ICT strategy will also support strategic initiatives that strengthen the technical foundation... it sets the direction by which UNDP will continue its evolution... to a stronger relationship with the rest of the UN system."

For UN Volunteers in the Field

- They can receive technical assistance and support regarding various issues from "experts" anywhere. Help can be just an email away.

- They can tap into resources and expertise that might otherwise be unavailable to them.

- OV support can free up some of the time of onsite UN Volunteers to engage in other much-needed activities.

- OV support can allow UN Volunteers to engage in supplemental activities they couldn't otherwise, such as producing a special report, brochure, web site or other "luxury" activities that contributes to their goals as a Un Volunteer but aren't necessarily part of the set activities for the overall onsite assignment.

- Online volunteers can offer a diversity of views, or a neutral sounding board, that might not be available onsite.

- Managing people online is a desired skill in the evolving economy; UN Volunteers would probably appreciate the opportunity to learn this skill.

For UNV staff

- They can tap into additional expertise and knowledge to support UN Volunteers in the field.

- Online volunteers can offer a diversity of views, or a neutral sounding board, that might not be available to the UNV staff member.

- Support from online volunteers can allow UNV staff to engage in supplemental activities they couldn't otherwise, such as producing a special report, brochure, flash feature for a web site or other "luxury" activity that contributes to their goals as a UNV staff member but aren't necessarily an absolutely critical/vital part of their jobs.

- Involving online volunteers means a greater number of people are exposed to information about the work of the UN Volunteers they support.

- Managing people online is a desired skill in the evolving economy, and UNV staff would probably appreciate being exposed to learning this skill.

For Online Volunteers

- They can easily experience the good works of UN Volunteers, development and volunteering from their home or work computer, and learn more about and to be involved in development, particularly activities associated with the United Nations

- They can gain insight about cultures and countries, and possibilities for more global understanding. They can become connected, on a personal level, with issues and people they may have only read about or seen briefly on TV.

- It gives people the opportunity to get directly involved in development activities, instead of just sending money. This is probably the number one motivation of online volunteers.

- In some cases, it may connect an expatriate to his or her home country.

- In some cases, it may be a person's only avenue to volunteer (for instance, for people with disabilities, for teens, for people in remote areas, for people who stay home to be caregivers, for people who work non-traditional hours, etc.).

- It provides opportunities to develop and apply skills and knowledge they might not be able to otherwise, or to apply a skill in an entirely new way.

- For students, it may give the opportunity to apply knowledge, or to generate activities and knowledge for a class assignment.

For list of benefits for those external to UNV, including UNV, please see:
http://www.onlinevolunteering.org/why_volunteer.htm

OV Service Management

Tasks Done Every Day

- Read and respond to email in OV Service In-Box.
  Every inquiry gets a response from us within 48 hours (two business days) of receipt

- Log on to the OV Service first thing in the morning, and at least once late in the afternoon, to assure that the service is working. Any problems reported promptly to tech support

- Read and respond to new and edited OV assignments.
  Every OV assignment is approved or rejected, or a request for edits made from us, within 48 hours (two business days) of receipt of assignment.

- Read and, if necessary, respond to edited or deleted OV assignments.
  Some organizations use certain features on the OV service incorrectly or unintentionally; we review these activities and sometimes provide guidance, to ensure that organizations are using functions in the way they are intended.

- Read and respond to messages relating to group applications.
  Every new group application is approved or rejected, or a request for edits made from us, within 48 hours (two business days) of receipt; and for any email relating to a pending group application is responded to within 48 hours (two business days) of receipt. Please note that there can be several email exchanges with just one organization in the process of guiding the organization to complete the application process.

- Provide other guidance to OV users as necessary, bring technical problems to the attention of programmers, etc.

Bi-Monthly Tasks

- Draft and send OV user email update.
  This email provides practical details and tips for using the OV service, and is sent to all OV service users twice monthly (the first and third Tuesday of every month). It is essential in building the capacities of users.

Monthly Tasks
(please note, however, that these tasks may call for some activities to be completed each day of the month in order to complete the overall task)

- Review those organizations with more than 20 people who are "pending" as online volunteers for one assignment.
  The goal is that organizations approve or reject applications within four weeks of the person's application. Those organizations who have not should be contacted and reminded to accept or reject all pending candidates quickly. Chronic "abusers" should not have new assignments approved until this problem is corrected.

- Review those accounts who have begun the applications process to start a new OV Group, but have not finished it. Write each to remind them of how to complete the process.

- Produce and distribute various monthly reports
  Review and report on OV Service in-box activity, list new groups approved to the OV service each month, compile other stats, etc.

- Update spreadsheet of UN-related users.
  This monthly analysis and report tracks all organizations that are a part of the UN who have created an account on the OV service, and tracks their OV-related activity (how many assignments they have posted, how many volunteers they have accepted, etc.)

- Update "news" section on home page.

- Maintain "stories section of OV service.
  This includes identifying prospects for "stories" section, providing guidance, and updating the stories section. The goal is one new story every month. In particular, we need stories from *organizations*. Often, authors need some or a great deal of guidance in preparing their stories. All stories require at least some degree of editing.

- Notify online discussion groups, such as SURF-ICT, of new items on the OV service.

- Update Excel spread sheet of tasks that need to be completed re: the OV service.
  Adding and assigning new tasks, such as new web page development or feature development; noting which tasks have been completed; and assigning new tasks.

Quarterly Tasks

- Generate user statistics (for Executive Board, for ERG, and as needs arise)

- Incorporate statistics into various presentations, so that the latest are always available.

- Identify & address gaps/needs among UN-related users.
  Using the monthly report that tracks all organizations that are a part of the United Nations who have created an account on the OV service, note which organizations have created accounts but not posted assignments, that have posted assignments but not accepted volunteers, etc., and contact these UN organizations to offer assistance.

- Identify & address gaps/needs among users.
  - Is every developing country represented with at least one Group posting OV assignments?
  - Are particular types of assignments not getting enough applicants?
  - Are particular types of groups under-represented on the service?
  - Do new support pages or features need to be developed?
  - Etc.

(please note that, per current staffing shortages, this and the following quarterly tasks have been suspended)

- Make sure all data in our stories and pictures archive are updated: S:\PDOG-e-volunteering\Public\Online Volunteering\StoriesPictures

Yearly Tasks

- Generate user statistics.
  The statistics needed are outlined in a document called "ideal OV reporting stats" and can be located here:
  Online Volunteering\UNV Online Volunteering\statistics and reports\

- Top Online Volunteers of the Year Campaign.
  This includes posting a call for nominations on the web site and email newsletter; providing guidance to those who wish to nominate; guiding nominees through the testimonial process; compiling all information; selecting and communicating with judges; guiding the judges through the selection process; writing a profile of each "winner"; writing announcements for various outlets; working with ERG for promotion of "winners"; updating the web site with all Top OV of the Year information; and coordinating a postal mail thank you to all "winners" and nominators.

- Internal outreach to purge system and prompt more activity.
  - Contact all organizations who have been approved in 2004 (and then each year after) but have never posted an assignment, to encourage them to do so.
  - Contact all organizations who have been approved and have posted an assignment prior to 2005 (and then each year after), but not in 2005, to encourage them to post a new assignment (and for each year thereafter)
  - Contact all organizations who submitted applications in 2004 (and then each year after) and did not finish the application process, to encourage them to do so

  Use the above three activities to purge the system of bad email addresses and, therefore, inactive groups. In 2004, these activities reduced the number of public groups by about 100, because the activities had not been done before.

On Demand

- Meet UNV HQ staff requests re: onsite presentations and advice re: OV.
  Requests for such presentations and meetings comes up frequently, usually without notice. These requests must be filled in a timely, highly-responsive manner -- for instance, when ERG requested OV material for UNV News and for its document on volunteers and the MDGs. Or when the P.O. from Lebanon called for a specialized presentation on OV. Or when R & D asked for participation with a consultant regarding a paper that needed to be written. Or when the editor of ESSENTIALS asked for input about OV. Etc.

Obstacles & Issues to OV Service Success

- Reduced staffing of E-Volunteering team with increased responsibilities since OV service moved from NetAid; no time or resources for significant outreach, site refinement / improvement, or other critical activities. Current staffing allows us only to maintain the OV service, at a minimum level, with no real growth, and no real improvements.

- OV management is overly-reliant on onsite volunteer intern support. This puts critical business tasks at risk, should an intern not be available. This also goes against the ethics regarding volunteerism -- that volunteers are not primarily a substitute for paid staff.

- OV service still is not up to 100% functionality. The volunteer evaluation tool, the organization evaluation tool, the volunteer certificate (recognition tool), and the story submission function still no longer work (since the move from NetAid); there are still numerous bugs unaddressed and interfering with effective management and use of the service; and there are still critical functions as yet undeveloped that are needed in order to greatly improve the management and use of the service (several have been overdue since July 2001).

- In more than four years of existence, the OV service is under-utilized. After four years of existence, the OV service still does not have a profile as prominent as VolunteerMatch or Idealist.org. Press reps tend to profile VolunteerMatch rather than OV when it comes to stories about OV:

  - There are less than 600 organizations listed on the OV service. Most are not regularly posting assignments, and only 5 – 20 are accepted each month. Less than 150 orgs have posted assignments since the re-launch in February 2004.

  - On average, just 70-80 assignments are posted each month (please note that each assignment usually asks for more than one volunteer. VolunteerMatch, which is supposed to be focused primarily on the USA, has between 500 and 1000 online volunteering assignments listed, 200 to 300 of which are listed as "international."

  - Only xx people on average log in to the service each day (there are xxx visitors to the site each day).

  - There are just slightly more than 500 references on Google to the OV service. There are more than 800,000 "VolunteerMatch" references on Google. There are more than 4,000 "Idealist" references on Google.

  - The OV service comes in second to VolunteerMatch on a search for "online volunteering."

- UNV staff usually don't include OV in presentations about UNV (latest example: RONA presentation about UNV at the Points of Light Foundation conference).

- There are fears and misconceptions regarding OV and the Internet (confidentiality, who are these people?, safety, lack of technical expertise, more work, etc.). UNV staff and volunteers do not understand benefits of involving OVs, nor in promoting OV. "This is just another UNV thing on my plate, and I don't have time."

- Creating OV opportunities (and delegation, in general) is difficult for everyone. This is the biggest obstacle to getting more OV assignments on the service. "Outside of emergencies, indigenous NGOs, with a few notable exceptions, are poorly equipped in skills and in finance, to deal with the roles now being asked of them" in delivering services to communities instead of the state. Thus, "the watchword for donors and NGOs alike is 'capacity building', with the role of international NGOs increasingly consigned to that of an

intermediary agency in the development of people skills." -- Bennet and Gibbs, 1995, as quoted in *Managing Development* book, published by Open University. Also, using the OV service can actually build capacity of these organizations. For instance, the TOp OVs of the Year stories often note where the OV provided advice on non-profit management, accountability to donors etc.

- Staff at UNV, and most people at NGOs, are not used to the rapid response, nor initial level and style of detail, required in communications for managing people online.

- Online volunteers may think they are actual UN Volunteers, and often have unrealistic expectations about their involvement with UNV (such as expecting a stipend). This is especially true since the OV service move from NetAid.

Trying to integrate OV @ UNV: results so far

- Worked with ERG to include OV in newsletters, its publication on volunteers and the Millennium Development Goals, and other documents and publications; and to develop a section of the UNV web site for returned UN Volunteers that emphasizes OV involvement.

- R & D section, Evaluation section, ARLAC and APEC are including OV in their presentations and strategies.

- E-Vol team created content regarding online discussion groups and online culture for UNV staff, as well as a profile of the various UNV staff and units (ARLAC and APEC) engaging in online volunteer and online group involvement/management. (this and other activities help UNV staff get used to online culture -- knowing what online interactions "feel" like, seeing conflict online, learning how different people interact with each other online, knowing who among their peers can offer advice, etc. Knowing how to engage with people online is key in involving online volunteers).

- E-Vol team has placed information on its intranet site regarding online communities, with profiles of the various groups managed by UNV staff member to date. As a follow-up, the team would like to do a presentation in Fall 2004 for the large P.O. training, regarding online discussion groups and online culture (in addition to presentations re: Online volunteering and UNITeS).

- Training in OV were part of three regional workshops for P.O.s in the field in 2002 (Caribbean states, Arab states, and former CIS states). OV presentation made for Cairo UNDP office in 2003. E-Volunteer team is in contact with PDOG sections regarding participating in large onsite trainings in 2004 regarding OV and online culture.

- Updates regarding OV results and testimonials from both online volunteers and hosts of OVs are repeatedly shared internally with entire UNV staff.

UNITES Support to OV -- A Key to OV Success So Far

- The E-Vol team already has a successful online discussion group for volunteers engaged in ICT4D (UNIteSCommunity). Therefore, volunteers affiliated with UNITeS are now also OVs, in that they see participating online as part of their service.

- UN Volunteers affiliated with UNITeS are involving online volunteers. For instance, a UN Volunteer in Tanzania successfully engaged more than 200 online volunteers to support ICT4D activities, through his own online discussion group.

- More than 200 people have supported UNITeS UNV staff to date as online volunteers, most recruited from the OV service managed by UNV. The UNITeS web site and the OV site has details on their contributions.

- The UNITeS web site has information for online volunteers who support onsite volunteers applying ICT4D in the field (the Knowledge Base). This material is updated by online volunteers, as well as volunteers in the field, via the UNITeSCommunity.

- The E-Vol team records its experiences with all of the above, and is exploring ways to communicate these experiences to all UNV staff, to encourage their own activities regarding OV.

- UNITeS web site features an original, pioneering paper, "Using Instant Messaging to Work With Volunteers," and E-Vol team created a business strategy for UNV to better-incorporate IM as a tool for staff, including profiles of how UNV staff are already using IM to support volunteers and ways to address security concerns.

Next steps

with _current_ staff (skeleton staff) = 2 staff members and 1 volunteer, unpaid intern (that changes every two months)

- Present this revised OV strategy to UNV section-chiefs to get their feedback and buy-in for further mainstreaming OV at UNV.

- VR unit, working with ISU, provides contacts of all returned UN Volunteers as their assignment ends, and UNV invites them to be OVs. Also, contacting returned UNVs to help facilitate online relationships with their ex-host organization.

- Provide more-detailed trainings for UNV staff in involving online volunteers (developing activities, working with people online, etc.), and continue to offer one-to-one support by E-Vol staff for further assistance. This could include presentations specifically for geographic sections.

- Work with section chiefs to make training in OV a part of regional workshops for P.O.s

- Continue to promote OV success stories and testimonials internally, particularly regarding UNV staff's own involvement of OV.

- Provide an update twice yearly to program specialists at UNV and POs in the field regarding OV activities in their areas (how many OVs from their geographic areas, how many hosting organizations, and what kinds of activities are being engaged in), and encourage their exploration and promotion of these activities.

- Send an email to all OV service users with a UN email address (@undp, @unesco, @unicef, etc.) reminding them of the OV service, encouraging them to use it, and offering UNV staff support for their involvement of online volunteers.

- Address only "blocker" bugs -- no system enhancements/improvements.

with _full_ staffing (additional full-time administrative assistant added to the above)

- Gather all UNV staff who have used the OV service for an informal meeting regarding the future of the OV service, to gather their feedback.

- Research and implement best practices and new ways of involving online volunteers.

- Address ALL bugs, and add additional critical features that have been frequently suggested by OV users and that E-Vol team has determined would improve the service and UNV's management of it.

- Undertake outreach activities detailed in "**UNV_OV_outreach strategy**", a PowerPoint presentation by the UNV's OV staff that details strategy for recruiting more organizations

and volunteers to use the Online Volunteering Service, and the obstacles to undertaking such a strategy.

- Create a CD Rom that provides an offline version of the OV service, and distribute to all P.O.s, all UNITeS-affiliated volunteers, and others, as appropriate, to further encourage and provide support for OV involvement.

- Submit proposals to present at key conferences (IAVE, VSO, etc.) regarding OV and the OV service.

- Conduct a presentation for UNV staff regarding online discussion groups, reviewing activities by UNV staff so far, benefits of engaging volunteers in this way, how to get started, etc.

- Do an assessment to determine and document successes of OV at UNV so far, areas that need to be improved, possible future activities and issues regarding online volunteering, and a UNV/OV strategy for the rest of 2004 and beyond (see page xx). This would include reviewing the results of a NetAid assessment done of the OV service in 2003 (which UNV has never had the time or staffing to review). This assessment would also help determine the organization's readiness to brand some online volunteers as official UN Volunteers.

- VR unit, working with ISU, provides contacts of all returned UN Volunteers as their assignment ends, inviting them to subscribe to a special email update specifically for returned UN Volunteers.

- Research possible funding resources and develop funding and partnership proposals.

- Explore idea of OVs as UN Volunteers.

Future Trends in Online Volunteering

Veteran online volunteers and volunteer managers were asked what was in the future for online volunteering, in general. These are their thoughts. Not all of these will affect UNV in the future, but some may -- which are which needs to be further explored:

- Corporations allowing employees to volunteer during work hours from work stations.

- Group volunteering (a group mentoring an entire classroom; an entire marketing department of a company providing online service to a nonprofit; etc.).

- More direct-service opportunities (working directly with children or women wanting to learn a particular trade, for instance, rather than working only with staff).

- A higher expectation of online volunteering management and opportunities (as people and organizations become more experienced in working with OVs).

- Greater numbers of NGOs in developing countries involving online volunteers.

- More online volunteers whose primary language is NOT English (therefore, an expectation for more materials, resources and assignments languages other than English).

- Technology innovations, such as handheld devices, increasing the ways volunteers can contribute online.

How will UNV address these trends and other future trends in Online Volunteering? Please note that, with current UNV staffing for the OV service, these trends cannot be addressed.

OVs as UN Volunteers: Initial Exploration

Possible criteria
- Extended length of service: minimum 6 months
- Intensive dedication: 20 hrs/week minimum
- Direct involvement in UNV projects (i.e. supporting onsite UN Volunteers)
- Defined goal/product to be attained as a result of OV service

Required support:
- specially designed information and training packages
- material support (e.g. compensation for connectivity, software)
- arrangements for onsite visits to their supported projects
- supervision by appropriate P.O. (just as with onsite volunteers)
- further research about how working hours could be monitored, etc.

Please note, however, that further exploration cannot take place with current OV staffing levels.

Evaluation Needed

UNV needs to do an internal assessment of its online volunteering activities. However, with current OV staffing, such an assessment cannot take place; even if the Evaluation unit undertook these activities, there would need to be substantial support from the OV staff.

Through surveys, interviews and, perhaps, an onsite meeting, these questions need to be answered:

- Are UNV staff and UN Volunteers in the field satisfied with their experiences in working with OVs? Do UNV staff and UN Volunteers in the field feel supported in their involvement/advocacy of online volunteering? Why or why not?

- Are returned UN Volunteers satisfied with their experiences as OVs? Why or why not? What do they see as their accomplishments, and as areas that need to be improved? What assignments are potential online volunteers looking for that they *aren't* finding? Are people who sign up to volunteer online actually getting to do it?

- What are the results of online volunteering efforts?

- How well is the OV service working as a vehicle for matching online volunteers with UNV-affiliated online volunteering assignments?

- Can UNV staff and UN Volunteers in the field envision scenarios where online volunteers would be official UN Volunteers themselves? If so, what could this look like?

Evaluation activities would also include reviewing the results of a NetAid assessment done of the OV service in 2003 (which UNV has never had the time or staffing to review).

Key to Success in Involving OVs @ UNV

- Overcoming obstacles and issues previously mentioned, through aforementioned capacity-building activities and next steps.

- Ensuring that current UNV staff and UN Volunteers feel supported in working with OVs and in promoting OV to country offices and program officers.

- Never forcing UNV staff or UN Volunteers in the field to involve online volunteers.

- Ensuring that online volunteers are encouraged, valued and supported by all staff as investors rather than "free labor." Also ensuring that online volunteers are recognized by staff for their contributions in a similar way as onsite volunteers.

- Online volunteers are placed quickly into assignments -- there is little waiting time between the initial email of interest in a particular assignment and the volunteer starting on that assignment (or being told it is already filled).

- UNV staff answer emails from OVs within four business days of receipt.

Also see "**UNV_OV_outreach strategy**", a PowerPoint presentation by the UNV's OV staff that details strategy for recruiting more organizations and volunteers to use the Online Volunteering Service, and the obstacles to undertaking such a strategy.