



## **Ubuntu Partner Perspective**

30<sup>th</sup> September 2009, the Apartheid Museum, Johannesburg, South Africa

Today we are celebrating the contribution of young volunteers and the contribution that they make to development, to their own education, to the fostering of relations between Africa and Europe, and something close to my heart, to the development of global active citizens.

The history of youth voluntary service programs in Africa and the world as a whole is not new but rather embedded in the culture and beliefs that is very cardinal to the realisation and attainment of development. Voluntary programmes have existed ever since the idea of development cooperation emerged almost 50 years ago. Youth international voluntary service offers a framework for multiple educational efforts to improve future perspectives for the individual and to change societies so that they are capable of dealing with growing social, economic, ecological and political challenges.

Important international aims and programmes such as the youth exchanges and volunteer placement are based on the hope for progress in the development of voluntary programmes and growing awareness and responsibility towards our common future as a global society.

We are aware that international voluntary service has provided young people with an opportunity to learn from each other and share skills that otherwise could not be acquired if such interactions were not created. Young people are able to exchange ideas on many different issues and shared experiences and cultures from their countries. Efforts like these help to uplift young people in different ways making them better world

leaders not of tomorrow, but of today. Looking at challenges us from a global perspective, it is imperative that through working together young people will look for global solutions for the benefit of all.

Countries that have invested in young people and created space for volunteerism have scored meaningful levels of development both in human resource and infrastructure. Young people who volunteer at different levels and in different areas have contributed greatly to meeting the Millennium Development Goals. The role that youth international volunteering has played in the development paradigm can not be underestimated. Today young people are contributing to communities in projects related to HIV and AIDS, the environment, poverty reduction, and ICT among others.

Many of the people who are halting the spread of HIV/AIDS in the world, people who are actively involved in the climate change campaign and in poverty eradication are young people as they are full of energy and constitute a larger segment of any society. Youth international voluntary service seeks to create the space to develop this potential and build active citizens.

We have no doubt that communities have benefited a great deal from the energies and involvement of the young people in different projects. This can be seen from the number of youth volunteers that have continued to increase day by day and the readiness of communities to receive and work with young people in the quest for development. We understand that Southern Africa alone received more than 1200 youth volunteers in the last year and about half of these did their volunteer work in South Africa. There is also a slow but increasing trend for young African volunteers to serve in Europe.

Of course, providing these opportunities does not manifest without great investments from governments, from sending organisations and from the organisations that host these young people. There are many role-players in the task of creating an enabling environment for international volunteering, each with its own special contribution to make. It is naïve to imagine that a young volunteer, or a group of volunteers from a

different environment can be transported from their country of origin, deposited in a new environment and within a limited time period make a meaningful contribution to the local development agenda, or contribute to improving the lives of the local community, without the necessary preparation, education and ongoing support.

Successful volunteering experiences are best recorded when close co-operation and common focus exists between sending and hosting organisations. International volunteers who are subjected to rigorous and accurate pre-departure training, who are emotionally ready for an alternate cultural experience, whose expectations are transparent and realistic, and who embraces a spirit of learning whilst participating in a volunteering programme, invariably make an indelible mark within their host organisation and community.

International volunteering does not come without its challenges. We must recognise that international volunteering has its earliest history rooted in the work of missionaries and colonists so it is not without power dimensions that need to be challenged and questioned. International volunteering should not lead to greater dependence or a lack of sustainability. Rather it should contribute to collaborative decision making and problem solving, a greater awareness of other cultures and ways of life and recognition of the common challenges that we as a globe face. The process that has underpinned this Ubuntu awards process has sought to do just that – to facilitate greater conversation between Africans and Europeans and to contribute to good practice standards for sustainable and more equitable international voluntary service programmes. It has created a platform to recognise good practice and to celebrate the collaboration of local and international volunteers. This event challenges all the role players in sending and host countries to celebrate the successes and to learn from the challenges.

Host organisations also need to rise to the challenge of creating more opportunities for collaboration between local and international volunteers. We cannot underestimate the capacity that local young, committed volunteers, have in order to survive and better their prospects. We should continue to acknowledge their capacity, ingenuity and endurance.

We have to always respect this and facilitate the work of local and international volunteers - in partnership with communities. Volunteering gives the opportunity for development to happen in a way where there is mutual giving and receiving of gifts and talents in a way that builds networks and ties of solidarity and care amongst diverse groups.

Most governments in the European Union and the European Commission itself have realised the need to invest heavily in young people and volunteer programmes. Youth volunteers who successfully complete their volunteer time in Africa and other continents have played an important role in the development of their economies as they bring along their vast experience acquired while on the volunteering project into the mainstream development plan. This is also possible to achieve in Africa if there is commitment and political will from governments and other stakeholders.

We would therefore appeal to African governments to think seriously about investing in youth voluntarism. Youth volunteering should be given the space it deserves and should be looked at in the sense of development and cultivating a responsible and empowered global citizenry. These efforts should be backed by financial obligations and infrastructure development to facilitate the growth of the youth through active involvement in societal roles and responsibilities.

Beyond contributing to national development priorities, a voluntary experience, whether it is abroad or not, has great potential to develop an ethic of service and activism that is sorely needed in the world today. We face increasing inequality, high levels of poverty, environmental degradation, real effects of climate change and real challenges to democracy and social justice. There is a huge need for a global sense of justice and a commitment to being involved in doing something about it. Young people have great energy and ideas to be contributing to a global justice movement. Creating opportunities where this potential can be nurtured and find expression is therefore very necessary.