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## Volunteers Create Worlds

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Global Research, December 02, 2017

Url of this article:

<https://www.globalresearch.ca/volunteers-create-worlds/5620670>



*Featured image: Yossef Ben-Meir (author) and project partners visiting the Aboghlou women's cooperative in the Ourika Valley, Morocco.*

*A world created is one that begins with a path taken by an individual who gives time, energy, thought, and care without personal material return, to people seeking a genuine change. The volunteer-of-oneself may begin this journey with heavy concern over the unknown, with boundless belief in the infinitely possible, and with even outright alienation from the people to benefit. The giver-without-recompense may start a dialogue within oneself, asking why am I here, what can I do that really matters, and must I do this and feel cold, tired, hungry, and alone?*

The passage of time, persistence, and remaining true to the ideal of service-to-others leads to people's familiarity with the volunteer. Stories of joy and hardship are sometimes shared, dreams and fears may be expressed, and trust emerges from the people's observations of the volunteer during setting after setting. Finally, the people's acceptance opens a pathway for creation.

There can be no set timetable for this new path to development becoming open. Social and environmental factors that are understood, that could take a lifetime to precisely identify, or that are oftentimes uncontrollable, bear upon the pace at which a volunteer's service may become supported by the people. At a certain point, however, a moment is reached after the volunteer passes an unacknowledged and informal trial set by the community when they become willing to gather for a meeting, facilitated by the volunteer. At this time, there are methods – call them participatory, action research, community management, or by more than 100 other names – that assist the local participants in assessing their priority needs and viable project options.

The volunteer plays a key role in launching this analytical process taken by the community. The giver to local sustainable change helps to coordinate a suitable time and location for people to meet. The volunteer works to ensure that all people – women and men, homeowners and homeless, youth and retirees, all and one – are part of the conversation about the first and following initiatives they create. The volunteer shares information about prospective public and civil, local and distant, partners to a given development project. The volunteer organizes the community's data, searches for synergies, writes proposals, identifies funding – and builds the capacities of the people so that they can carry forward this change process for themselves.

What exactly is the new world created from this evolving experience? An empowered path taken by the people; a discovery of a future far more fulfilling than the future prior imagined; new and changed relationships derived from a new and changed sense-of-self; and a new world gained from livelihoods derived from one's own production that is achieved in conjunction with others. In Morocco – where I have given as a Peace Corps and civil society volunteer and then supported others in their giving – this means women's healing and legal recourses from abuse, drinking water in schools and deserts, organic fruit trees stopping eroding places, university students once volunteers facilitating change and now employed to accomplish change, and Muslim, Christian, and Jewish people restoring together their scared sites as a strategy for poverty-alleviation. It involves program and policy advocacy at all levels to advance the sustainable development the nation has envisioned for itself. It means consequences that we can measure, and generational ones that have yet to enter our imagination.

For many volunteers, they may not have to blaze that initial beginning difficult pathway to new worlds, the winding road with its enough measures of doubt, misunderstanding, and even risk. They may instead find a placement to help already-accepting-others to further along an existing development pathway to transformation, or maybe even evaluate the tangible empowerment changes that have been generated by new projects.

In any case, there are also new worlds formed for and by the selfless traversing of the volunteers. They may be introduced to a profession that provides the wonderful flexibility to promote the people's self-growth. Their studies may take an action-orientation, which recognizes that to explain a social problem without improving the situation leaves the research design incomplete. They move along a new way they would not have otherwise, meeting people, forming relationships, and effecting communities never before projected. They discover more of themselves, love more themselves and others, and find higher meaning that a harsh reality cannot take away. They become filled with the people's stories, and can with time and the accumulation of the narratives, communicate on behalf of the marginalized.

Advocates of including service in schools and the workplace remind us that we are three times more likely to volunteer if we are asked to do so. With December fifth's International Volunteer Day mobilizing thousands of volunteers, let's join this chorus and energy that will forge better worlds that reflect our giving-selves and the sustainable projects that are just steps away.

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