

## V-Force in Sri Lanka: Promoting volunteerism and increasing national capacity

### Context

In 2014, 8.6 million Sri Lankans, amounting to around 40 % of the country's population, volunteered at least once a year.<sup>1</sup> Sri Lanka has a **long history of volunteerism** (known as shramadana) and the concept is deeply integrated in its culture. It has historical roots of collective action and participatory decision-taking and its religious and cultural traditions foster altruism.

The initial forms of volunteerism in Sri Lanka were collectives of individuals involved in activities of the local temples (Dayaka Sabha) and village dwellers engaged in agricultural activities (Wewa Sabha).<sup>2</sup> Since then, **volunteer initiatives have flourished** in Sri Lanka and many were set up as charities, associations and corporate structures that focus on achieving sustainable development.



### Key words:

UNV/ Sri Lanka/ Capacity building/  
Community engagement/ Partnerships

The rich volunteer culture in Sri Lanka explains the **long-term relationship that the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) has built with the country**. Active in Sri Lanka since 1974, UNV has worked with various stakeholders including government bodies, UN agencies and civil society in order to foster volunteerism as a way for Sri Lanka to achieve peace and development goals.

One of UNV's areas of work is the **support of policy development and legislation recognising volunteer work**. In 2014 for instance, UNV Sri Lanka, in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Ministry of Social Empowerment and Welfare, established the first National Volunteering Secretariat to encourage existing volunteering initiatives to flourish while helping new ones emerge.

UNV also works to **enable citizens to be agents of change in their communities and to increase individual and community resilience especially towards disasters and climate change**. After the 2004 tsunami, UNV supported the Government of Sri Lanka by mobilising 104 United Nations Volunteers (UNVs) who played a crucial role in coordinating emergency relief and reconstruction initiatives. Similarly, as a part of the UNDP Climate Change Adaptation Project, UNV Sri Lanka currently works together with the Ministry of Disaster Management and UNDP to implement a Disaster Risk Reduction Project.

Finally, UNV promotes **youth engagement and empowerment in Sri Lanka through volunteerism**. According to the research report produced by UNV in 2014, "Sri Lankan Youth: Volunteering to Make a Difference", 74% of young volunteers believe that volunteering immensely contributes to the development of Sri Lanka and 86% of young volunteers believe that volunteering should be a part of schools or university curricula.

### Overview

Given the volunteerism context in Sri Lanka, UNV established a new platform for volunteerism in 2011: **the Volunteer Task Force (V-Force)**. Initiated as a part of the tenth anniversary celebrations of the International Year of Volunteers (IYV+10), V-Force was designed to give the opportunity to Sri Lankan youth and volunteers to engage with the UN agencies and to develop

<sup>1</sup> V-Force mobilises volunteers to reach beyond barriers in Sri Lanka' – United Nations Volunteers, Website article 2017

<sup>2</sup> 'Sri Lankan Youth: Volunteering to Make a Difference' - United Nations Volunteers, Report 2014

their volunteer experience. At the same time, the idea was to increase Sri Lanka's national capacity by mobilising **volunteers in development and peace building** programmes.

When the initiative started, UNV Sri Lanka developed a specific modality for V-Force volunteers, which means that **they are not UNVs but local volunteers**. The **management system** of V-Force was designed to be simple and user friendly in order to foster engagement and facilitate mobilisation of volunteers. Citizens who wish to bring in their skills and participate in development programmes can register online to be part of a volunteer database. Once there is a request issued by UN agencies, the UNV team shares it with the V-Force database and potential volunteers can express their interest and register their response through an online form. V-Force started with a small group of 10 individuals and now the database has over 8,000 registered members.

Through V-Force, UNV Sri Lanka developed **strong relationships with UN agencies** since volunteers were always mobilised with a UN agency or in the framework of a UN supported project or initiative. At the same time, UNV Sri Lanka **built partnerships with many organisations** from private and public sectors in order to maximise V-Force impact. Partners include Cisco, the British Council in Sri Lanka, Amāna Takaful Insurance, the University of Colombo and Eastern University, all of which share the willingness to foster volunteerism as an opportunity for Sri Lankans, especially for young people. Setting common goals, the partnerships are beneficial for all stakeholders involved.

According to a feasibility study undertaken by UNV in 2017, most V-Force volunteers are young people or fresh graduates who perform different types of services. **Event coordination and support** is one of the services most in demand. V-Force volunteers have supported a number of UN events including the World Conference on Youth, Twinning Schools Project, V-Awards, International Youth Day, International Volunteer Day, UN Day and OPA Conference. **ICT** is another service line where volunteers are often deployed with 10% of the requests relating to website management, database development and other ICT-related tasks. Finally, **data gathering and analysis** is an area that has been receiving attention from UN Agencies in the past years.

## **Performance**

Each year, over 1,000 V-Force volunteers are mobilised to support UN entities, and key actors perceive them as highly beneficial for UN agencies, national stakeholders and UNV.

V-Force volunteers are given an opportunity **to contribute to and to learn about global peace and sustainable human development**. According to the feasibility study, over 50 % of registered volunteers believe that volunteering enables them to know more about the UN and its activities in Sri Lanka. At the same time, V-Force volunteers can put into practice their **knowledge and skills, as well as to build their capacities** through their assignments. Some 90% of registered members feel that V-Force allows them to further develop their knowledge and skills.

As volunteers are usually highly satisfied with their experience, volunteerism is a win-win concept and UN agencies also benefit from including V-Force volunteers in their activities. Volunteers increase UN agencies' capacities since they support their work in diverse areas such as project coordination, management, teamwork and effective communication. They also bring in their knowledge of the Sri Lankan context and thus often serve as agents of change in the communities where they work. In that sense, V-Force is a key resource for enabling **community level engagement** and it allows UN agencies to localise the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Apart from being highly beneficial for both volunteers and UN agencies, V-Force is a **platform that allows UNV to increase volunteer engagement and mobilisation** in Sri Lanka. Through the platform, UNV has the possibility of quickly mobilising and deploying many local volunteers to UN Agencies and thus to build effective partnerships with them. In terms of modalities, V-Force and the regular UNV modalities complement each other since national UNVs are usually recruited

as coordinators of V-Force volunteers. V-Force is conceived as a national roster for UNV with V-Force volunteers gaining through their experiences an initial understanding of how the UN works and in time it constitutes an extensive pool of potential UNVs.

### **Lessons Learned & Upscaling**

Although V-Force is considered a successful initiative, **several challenges were faced** during its implementation, which were all related to the management and the sustainability of the initiative.

One of the main challenges faced by UNV was related to the **lack of human resources** needed to run the platform. Since the inception of the platform, the UNV field unit (FU) has been managing V-Force volunteers and the team has encountered difficulties to cope with the amount of work needed to run the initiative. In order to face this challenge, the UNV field unit recommended in its feasibility study to have three national UN Volunteers dedicated to V-Force.

Another important challenge was that the **management process** was not automated. Citizens registered to the database using a Google form and then the team would send the Terms of Reference of each request from UN agencies to all members of the database. Having reached 8,000 members, the team concluded that it needed to move towards a more formalised process. Building on the global partnership between UNV and Cisco, UNV Sri Lanka strengthened its relationship with the company by mobilising their students as V-Force volunteers. Since June 2017, nine V-Force Cisco volunteers have been mobilised to develop the new V-Force online portal, which will include the different phases of the management process from registration to deployment.

The general **lack of financial resources** has also been difficult to overcome. Since the beginning of the initiative, V-Force has been managed by the FU with no or minimal financial resources allocated to the initiative. Furthermore, UN host agencies do not provide financial support although they can be required to provide food, accommodation and transport to the V-Force volunteers when required by the activity. According to the feasibility study, UNV Sri Lanka decided to look at new ways to sustain the V-Force model.

Overall, despite the challenges, the V-Force initiative has allowed UNV Sri Lanka to **promote volunteerism as a way for Sri Lanka to achieve the SDGs**. UNV is currently looking at ways to institutionalise the initiative with proper human and financial resources allocated in order to ensure its sustainability.

Although UNV's Strategic Framework (2014-2017) implementation did not have an impact at operational level since the initiative was already in place, V-Force is aligned with the strategic priorities and the defined outcomes. The platform and its success made the case for the **integration of the concept of volunteerism in national frameworks** (Outcome 2 of Strategic Framework). **At the same time**, it has permitted UN agencies to be more effective by involving young volunteers in their programmes (Outcome 1 of Strategic Framework). Furthermore, through V-Force, Sri Lankans, especially young people have gained skills, self-confidence and experience; served as agents of change in the communities where they worked, and as a result contributed to increase the **country's national capacity** (Outcome 2 of Strategic Framework). Finally, the initiative is aligned with two priorities of the Strategic Framework: **Youth** (Youth Volunteers Global Programme), and **Volunteer Infrastructure** (Volunteer Infrastructure Global Programme).

Due to the success of V-Force, UNV Sri Lanka is interested in institutionalising the initiative in order to ensure its sustainability and to maximise its potential. Furthermore, some countries such as Egypt, Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Bolivia have shown interest in replicating the initiative and adapting it to their local context.