

Volunteering by Students in Higher Education: An Inter-cultural and Participatory Development Experience from Northeast India

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Abstract: *The article is based on a field experience of a student volunteer programme that Assam Don Bosco University (ADBU), India and University College Dublin Volunteers Overseas (UCDVO), Ireland organise in Northeast India. The programme adopts principles and practice of participatory development approaches and places the volunteer directly into the community, thus providing challenges and opportunities to work with and involve the community people in the development process. The approach provides a platform for mutual learning experience; while the volunteers are able to understand the community in its wholeness with its dynamics, cultures, traditions, practices and meaning systems that interplay with each other, the community members benefit from the volunteers who come from academic backgrounds and possess ability to critically analyse pertinent issues in the community. The article argues for a participatory approach for sustainable community development within volunteering programmes grounded in field experience. The experience has proven to be effective and the positive outcomes outweigh the challenges.*

Key Terms: Volunteerism | Higher Education | Inter-cultural | Direct Immersion | Participatory Development

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Introduction

Volunteerism is a distinct human characteristic that drives an individual to go beyond the *self* and reach out to *other* people thus linking an individual with the community. Volunteering understood as an 'unpaid non-compulsory work; that is, time individuals give without pay to activities performed either through an organisation or directly for others outside their own household' (ILO 2011) has contributed in the alleviation of people's suffering during disasters – man made or natural, and towards reduction of poverty, ill health, eradication of ignorance and illiteracy besides generation of awareness on various issues related to human, environment and rights. Also conceptualised as a constructive contribution towards a cause, volunteering falls 'within a general cluster of helping activity' and 'entails some commitment of time and effort' according to Wilson (2000). Men, women, youth and children throughout history have

played great roles by giving time and resources independently or within the structural set up and frameworks presented by various agencies and institutions for rendering free service without expecting remuneration and at times one's own expenses in the promotion of *development*. Volunteerism and volunteering is a resource as well as a virtue.

Volunteering – A Global Perspective

Volunteering though accepted and acknowledged as contributing immensely at the global level in addressing social, economic and environmental inequalities still lacks consolidation in terms of numbers and quantum of contribution. While efforts by various agencies to consolidate the information on volunteers across the globe have yielded some results, they have not been able to capture the true picture of volunteering and its contribution. One

reason for such dearth of information on volunteering programmes at a global level could be due to individualistic and uncoordinated work by different volunteering individuals and agencies.

As per the report on *Volunteering in the European Union* (2010) about 92 to 94 million adults were involved in volunteering in the European Union (EU) with 'clear differences in the level of volunteering between Member States '... with some countries having 'long standing traditions in volunteering and well developed voluntary sectors', and others with 'emerging or poorly developed' voluntary sectors. In the USA about 62.8 million people volunteered between September 2013 to September 2014 according to *Bureau of Labour Statistics* (2014) report while in Australia according to the *Australian Bureau of Statistics* (ABS) about 6.1 million people aged 18 years and above volunteered in formal volunteering programmes defined as 'people willingly [giving] unpaid help in the form of time, service, skills, through an organisation or group.'

In the context of Asia and Africa the information on volunteers and their contributions is sparse and not consolidated. Both continents have volunteering programmes for both domestic and international volunteering. According to International Volunteer Co-operation Organisation (IVCO 2010) 'majority of organisations based in Asia place volunteers in Southeast Asia (73%), South Asia (54%) and Sub-Saharan Africa (44%)' regions. IVCO further clarifies that the 'perceived advantages of operating in Asia include security, low living costs, and the benefits of Asia-to-Asia placements based on shared understanding, and similar systems, processes, living conditions, and cultures.'

The volunteers from Asian regions tend to engage in 'all major activities, with a heavier focus on development assistance' than 'building international understanding or providing disaster aid and relief' unlike other forms of volunteering in other regions. Most activities of Asian volunteers relate to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – environmental sustainability or climate change (43%), economic development (42%) and education (primary or secondary) (35%) according to IVCO (2010).

Volunteers roles can include contributing towards 'peace and development' 'strengthening trust, solidarity and reciprocity among citizens', fostering 'people's participation in social change and human

development', 'provid[ing] opportunities for marginalised groups, such as poor women, to engage in participatory development processes' (CIVICUS, United Nations Volunteer (UNV) and International Association for Volunteer Effort no date of publication) and contribute towards realization of the MDGs.

The United Nations Economic and Social Council, Commission for Social Development (UNESCO – Commission for Social Development 2001) in its article *Volunteering and Social Development* besides acknowledging that 'volunteering brings significant benefits to individuals and communities and helps to nature and sustain a richer social texture and a stronger sense of mutual trust and cohesion', also opines that volunteers have 'enormous reservoir of skills, energy and ... knowledge which can assist ... in carrying out more targeted, efficient, participatory and transparent public programmes and policies.' According to Hodgkinson, (2003) volunteers can help 'build social solidarity, and through organised citizens groups help to redress social wrongs, change public policy, and improve the quality of life of communities and nations.'

There is a general perception from field experiences across the globe that the volunteers have greatly contributed by addressing human and environment problems – poverty, inequalities, injustices, and exploitations.

The Tradition of Service and Volunteering in India

India has a long history of rendering service and volunteering practice. It is an integral part of Indian life shaped by tradition and value systems rooted in religion and culture. The tradition and practice of giving and sharing (*daanam*) set in the cardinal values of *Desh* (principle of region of need), *Kaal* (principle of time of need) and *Patra* (principle of giving to all whether they deserves or not) go beyond being practiced occasionally to becoming spirituality which made people from every stratum including kings and the poor alike to volunteer and experience 'the joy of serving and giving to others' (Choudhury & Shome, 2012). The Indian equivalent of volunteer and volunteerism '*svecchasebee*' emphasises the urge of a person to serve people as an extension of one's own self; motivated by the core value of '*aparigrah*' (practice of non-acceptance of *returns* and non-possession of anything which is more than bare necessity).

The religious traditions in India have promoted volunteerism as can be seen from various examples. The tradition of *guptdan* (anonymous charity) and the performance of *karma* (deed) in Hinduism; the practice of *Kar Seva* (person who gives free voluntary service) based on the principle of *Shramdaan* (voluntary and free physical labour for a cause) which is considered as an extension of work with ones hands that brings spiritual awakening to the soul practiced by the Sikhs; the emphasis and teachings of importance of sacrifice and renunciation of wealth for the sake of others in Buddhism, the practice of *zakat* (compulsory charity) among the Muslims and with the coming of the Christianity with its precepts of caring for and sharing with the least among the community members show a rich practice of charity and free service in the Indian tradition.

In the 19th and 20th centuries with the spread of Western education the concept of *daanam* (sharing) became equated with the concept of courage to take action against wrong doing; and people like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Vidyasagar, Dayananda Saraswati, Vivekananda and others formed various organisations to fight against discrimination based on religion, gender and caste system. In the same period literary organisations like the Royal Asiatic Society (1834) and the Dnyan Prakash Sabha (1840) were founded for promotion of education to fight against ignorance and social evils. All these individuals, organisations and societies emphasised the importance of imbibing the spirit of volunteerism among its members.

In 1901 the term *bratee* coined by Rabindranath Tagore appeared to mean offering 'selfless service to the villages around' Santiniketan by students of his under-tree, open-air school. This could be taken as the first instance of documented volunteering among the school going students and within an educational setting. Later in 1936 Gandhi founded his famous Sevagram (a village for service) in Wardha district of Maharashtra to serve as a training ground for volunteers for *Satyagraha* (insistence on the truth) and volunteers for *Service* in villages across India in the midst of poverty and suffering under the British regime. According to Gandhi volunteerism is related to the service of the needy, society and nation guided by the virtue of humility the fruits of which are happiness and contentment.

The understanding of volunteerism in India can also be related to a deep and intimate experience of life with the natural order. Some of these are found expressed in *Shlokas* (verses) such as –

Paropakaram vahanti nadyaha
(The rivers flow to serve others)

Paropakaram dugdanthi gavaha
(Cows give milk to serve others)

Paropakaram phalinthi vrukshaha
(The trees bear fruit to serve others)

Paropakaram idam shariram
(This human body is meant to serve others).

The above verse besides emphasising the existence of the concept of selfless service in the natural order mandates the human race the highest order of evolution and created being to serve others without expectations.

Thus, the Indian understanding of volunteering and volunteerism goes beyond religious lexicon found in the scriptures promulgated by Missionaries to observation of the field realities by educated Indians to inspirations derived from the natural order.

Volunteering in the Indian Higher Education System

Higher education in India refers to the formal education governed by the University Grants Commission (UGC) which designs programmes and implements various schemes through academic, administrative and financial support. The Indian higher education system with about 700 universities and 35500 affiliated colleges and enrollment of more than 20 million students in the year 2013, is the third largest in the world and is likely to surpass the USA by 2020 and China by 2030 (The Times of India, July 21 2014). The massive higher education system of India with a huge volume of student enrollment presents a great opportunity for India to draw out of the goodness of human nature of the so called an Indian youth who are 'shaped by altruistic motivations embedded in a religious ethos, and a history of social reform movements (Sundar 1996; Handy et. al. 2011) for meaningful engagement in volunteering activities for development in communities.

It is important to note that the Indian volunteering experience in higher education has been shaped not only by religious ethos and historical heritage but also by the structural opportunities and forces that exist in society where one lives.

There was always some form of volunteering among the student communities in India had and the launching of the National Cadet Corps (NCC) in 1948 to volunteer in the area of civil defense activities of the country; the launching of the National Service Scheme (NSS) in 1969 for volunteering activities in the socio-economic development of local communities; and the launching of the National Service Volunteer Scheme (NSVS) of 1977 provided students of higher education great array of opportunities to volunteer and contribute constructively in society with their time and resources. While the NCC and the NSS targeted the enrolled students of the institution of higher education the NSVS targeted those who had already graduated from colleges and universities. In the year 2012 the NCC alone had some 1.3 million volunteers enrolled and active under it (Government of India, 2012).

Further, the presence of national and international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) provide another great possibility for students of higher education in India to volunteer. According to The Times of India (Nov.19, 2014) about 186.5 million people supported the NGOs by volunteering their time and effort making India to be in the top of the volunteering chart prepared by the World Giving Index (2013).

India today, thus presents for those willing to volunteer (especially from the higher education) a vast array of volunteering options to choose from. They can get involved with either the governmental organisations or non-governmental organisations (spanning between religious in to secular; charity to rights and human to environment oriented approaches and practices). Some of these organisations are of international, national or regional in nature and also facilitate in placement of volunteers with other organisations. India thus provides structural provisions for volunteers to engage in development activities.

However, within these structural provisions for volunteering in India, there is more that the higher education system of India needs to do to encourage its students to volunteer as leaving alone to the goodwill and willingness of the individual to volunteer may not suffice. There are of course examples of students doing activities under NSS and NCC umbrella which are appreciable but many of them are sporadic activities (without proper coordination) and do not seem to go beyond

planting of trees, cleaning of some places and some relief services during disaster situations. Except for the discipline of Social Work where fieldwork and field engagement (in form of internships, block placement or volunteering) is part of its curriculum almost all other disciplines do not have such requirement and even if required, they are carried out in corporate settings with intention of not more than building one's curriculum vitae or accomplishment of projects related to coursework.

The Indian youth of today, especially those of the higher education are faced with multiple and often contradicting forces which includes – the traditional value system of free service against the evolving return oriented service influenced by the modern capitalistic world; tradition of sacredness in life against the secularisation of values; respect and consideration for social and communal against individualisation are some of the direct challenges to the practice of volunteering among the Indian youth. In such a situation, and more, when some are beginning to see donating and volunteering not only as 'social prestige but also good for business' (Sundar 1996: 425), it might be time for those engaging in volunteering to revisit and realign ones perspective of *volunteering* and *volunteerism* if not within the context of free service and charity, in alignment with the need of the community.

Role of Student Volunteer in Community Development

Development is a qualitative as well as quantitative term and connotes both an experience of a process and a stage of existence where one would be capable of making choices (Sen 1999). Thus community development in the context of the role of student volunteer would imply the changes induced by the involvement of the students in the life of the people of a locality/community. This intervention may include enhancement in the level of income thus leading towards an increase in consumption capability of the people, improvement in health, education; and increase in awareness levels on rights and social service schemes thus enabling them to access the services; enhancing and building the capacity of the people – men women, youth and children by organising educational programmes, training and workshops. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for example it would mean contribution towards achievement of the Millennium Development Goals among the people at the community level.

Keeping the above points in mind the role of student volunteers in community development is vast and diverse. One can get involved in community development process either directly or indirectly; directly by being physically part of the team that actually goes to the field, sees the field, lives the field, works in the field, experiences the field, reflects the field and takes action based on what one sees, experiences and reflects upon; and indirectly by supporting various causes by donations or expression of good will and support towards those in the field.

The student volunteers especially those from the higher education level with knowledge of human behavior, rights (legal, political and economic), science, technology, architecture, management, fine arts, disaster, environment and ecology, health, poverty, education, women, children, conflict and society; with skills for intervention grounded in theory and attitude based on critical reflection on the value of humanity and the world can contribute towards making the quality of life of community people better by applying their knowledge and skills in actual live-world where poverty, hunger, ignorance and injustice still exist. India presents a large scope for the students of higher education to volunteer for community development.

Volunteering Experience in Northeast India

University College Dublin Volunteers Overseas (UCDVO), Ireland and the Department of Social Work, Assam Don Bosco University (ADBU), India commenced a partnership and implemented a student volunteer programme in 2014. To date two such volunteering programmes have been organised between the two institutions. The first programme was in June-July 2014 and implemented in Keotpara, Hirapara and Hathkhwapara villages of Azara gaon panchayat (henceforth referred as *Azara*) of Kamrup (Metro) district of Assam. The villages are predominantly inhabited by fishing folk and belong to the Scheduled Caste (SC) community. The majority of the people earn their livelihoods by fishing in a lake (called *Deepor Beel*) which over the years has been reduced to about 4 sq km from once 12 sq km due to indiscriminate dumping of Municipal Solid Wastes as well as Liquid Wastes, and unscrupulous encroachment by real estate developers and government projects. Others earn their livelihoods by petty businesses or engaging in small income generating activities like weaving, cultivation and domestic work. There are 650 households (3850 population) in the three villages

(Keotpara – 200 households with 1050 population, Hirapara – 200 households with 1100 population and Hathkhwapara – 250 with about 1700¹ population). While Keotpara and Hirapara are Hindu Villages, Hathkhwapara is a Muslim village.

The second volunteering programme June-July 2015 was organised in the Ural basti (locality/village) of Borghat Panchayat under Sonapur in the Kamrup Metro district of Assam. Ural basti is divided into two localities (bastis) namely Ural and Kachari.² While Ural basti is inhabited by the Tea Tribe also called as the Adivasis the Kachari Basti is inhabited by the Bodo Tribe. There are 208 households (1814 population) in the area of which 31 are female headed. The majority of the people are engaged as daily wage labourers (including in the tea estates around Sonapur), some people also work in their own farms. A small section of households have members who work as drivers (private tempos or companies), masonry workers, and government employees or run petty businesses. The village has a tarred road (tarred in 2015), electricity connection and government water supply system (the water from which people say cannot be used for drinking). The nearest town is Sonapur (5 kms). There is new railway line which is under construction and runs through the paddy fields of the village and connects Assam with Meghalaya. While some see this is a possibility for growth and progress others see it as a threat to their existence and identity. The health status of Ural and Kachari bastis are low with high, repeated and reported cases of typhoid, malaria, jaundice, T.B., anemia and diarrhea. The nearest health center is located in Sonapur town. There are two primary schools with about 80 students enrolled in each and managed by two teachers each. The village has two hand pumps four open wells and an open spring that supply the drinking water requirement of the village. There is a water supply system in the village but the water is not clean and cannot be used for drinking according to the village people. There is rampant consumption practice of homemade rice beer among the community members. The men folk interpret it as part of recreational activity while women and youth call it alcoholism among its community members. The

¹ The figures are taken from the list available with the village headman and may not match with the Census of India 2011 report.

² In this paper the term Ural will refer both to Ural and Kachari bastis, unless otherwise specified. 'Basti' means 'village'.

greatest fear the people have is the fear of losing agricultural land to the state supported development projects especially the railway lines. The people fear that besides losing land there is going to be pollution, encroachment by migrants and crowding which could give rise to conflicting situation.

The amenities and services in Azara seem better than Ural. In the education sector there are primary schools, high schools, higher secondary schools, colleges and universities in and around Azara which Ural does not have. There are anganwadis (Government pre-school centers) in both the places which were renovated by the student volunteers (ADBU and UCDVO) health centers in Azara seem to be functioning better than Ural. The functioning of Public Distribution System (PDS) in both the locations needs to improve. Though Azara and Ural have different issues concerning water, transportation, market systems, health and health care services, and use of natural resources – land, water bodies and environment, both the places agree at one common point of ‘feeling threatened in the area of livelihoods’ due to development activities in and around the villages carried out by both private and public undertakings and enterprises.

The Volunteering Practice – An Approach

The volunteer team comprises of eighteen student members of higher education (Graduates and Post Graduates – seven from UCDVO and eleven from ADBU each accompanied by a Team Leader) who are placed for one month across various villages. In 2014 the three villages were Keotpara, Hirapara and Hathkhwapara in Azara gaon Panchayat and in 2015 the volunteers were placed in Ural and Kachari bastis of Sonapur. Both the areas are within the Kamrup (Metro) district in Assam. The volunteers from UCDVO come from diverse educational backgrounds while those from ADBU from Social Work.

The programme aims at giving an educational experience to the student volunteers by directly placing them in communities thus providing scope for learning by interacting with the villagers and also contributing to the community’s development by spending time, energy, ideas, skills and the resources that have been mobilised. The strategy that the volunteering programme takes to make the volunteers learn from field experience is of *direct immersion of the volunteers into the community with emphasis on the practice of the principles, techniques and methods of participatory*

development process – a strategy which the department of Social Work, ADBU strongly subscribes to and believes provides opportunities to both the development practitioners/volunteers and the community members to get involved and learn from each other thus making development process/volunteering programme participatory, enriching and meaningful.

The following are the objectives of the volunteering programme:

1. *To channel the skills, energy and enthusiasm of university students into projects which enhance the development of marginalised and underprivileged communities.*
2. *To create space and opportunity for university students from ADBU, India and University College Dublin (UCD) Ireland to share learning and experience in the areas of participatory community development and social outreach programmes.*
3. *To enhance inter-cultural awareness between students and communities for the purpose of increasing global solidarity and interconnectedness.*
4. *To promote attitude of appreciation for other cultures, practices, and traditions.*

The above objectives are achieved by deliberate and conscious efforts made to put the volunteers in direct touch with the community people without involving any other intermediating agency; thus making them experience the reality of rural community life – with all its challenges and ‘beauty’. The volunteers themselves have to initiate the process of rapport building and winning the confidence of the people, mobilise people, identify the needs of the community by intense fieldwork engagement, enable the people to prioritise their needs, plan and carry out programmes and activities by making decisions in consultation with the people, keeping in mind the pace of the community and constantly reflecting on the context of the culture, tradition and practices specific to the communities; and finally terminating the activities keeping in mind that the people develop a sense of ownership of the activities initiated and tasks accomplished such that they became sustainable. The incorporation of elements of participatory development makes the volunteers learn from the community people besides culture and tradition, the dynamics and the undercurrents of rural Indian living in the context of inter-cultural volunteering practice. The experiences become richer for the

volunteers as the programme involves members from different nationalities (Indian, Irish and community members) working together as a team and involves sharing, living together and sharing the same amenities and facilities during the entire duration of the programme.

The volunteering programme in the Northeast India organised by ADBU and UCDVO could be termed as *inter-cultural and participatory development volunteering programme model* grounded in fieldwork and experience. It is inter-cultural as members come from various nationalities and engage in meaningful activities thus learning from each other; and participatory because the community people are involved and taken along through the period of the entire volunteering programme – planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The principles of the participatory development approach acts as an overarching principle for the implementation of all the activities. The model is based on the assumption that for community development to be effective it should be participatory as the local community people know best their problems and priorities in life. Also the approach gives the volunteers a better understanding of community realities, thus making it an educational experience and beneficial for both the volunteers and the community people.

The volunteering programme process begins with recruitment and selection of volunteers by both UCDVO and ADBU (UCDVO accepts seven volunteers accompanied by a team leader and ADBU accepts eleven volunteers accompanied by a coordinator/team leader). The volunteers manage their own cost of living expenditure during the volunteering programme; while the costs of activities are covered by UCDVO (which is audited). Funds are raised by the volunteers using various strategies. The selected volunteers go through a number of orientation programmes which are compulsory and cover themes on roles and engagement of volunteers; culture, meaning systems, traditions and practices of target area of intervention determined by the local partner agency; cultures of co-volunteers (Indian and Irish contest); participatory development – meaning, principles, and practices; and ethics and values of volunteering.

The local partner agency (ADBU) with the help of its selected volunteers carries out a preliminary survey study (using Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools and techniques) to capture and

understand the issues and concerns of the community. The report is then shared with the overseas partner agency (UCDVO). This study report serves as the foundation for development of the action plan of volunteers and volunteering programme. Thus the community participation is ensured right from the planning phase.

On arrival of the volunteers from UCDVO the programme begins with an orientation followed by direct immersion process into the community along with local volunteer team members. This process enables the participants from overseas to understand the local community with its dynamics – social, cultural, economic and political; and provides them with opportunities to establish rapport with the community members based on firsthand experience of community realities. Various activities (based on the PRA report and the field triangulation by the volunteers) are carried out over the period of placement. Broadly speaking, the activities that volunteers carry out in the field include intellectual and physical aspects. The participation of the community members in all activities is encouraged and ensured. Some activities that the volunteers carry out include repair and renovation of *anganwadis*; construction of staircases, repair of hand pumps, repair of community hall and mural painting on the school wall; organising workshops on arts and crafts, education, health, hygiene, sanitation, career guidance, dance, drama as well as organising activities like English language enhancement classes, games and sports, and capacity building workshops for Self Help Group (SHGs) members, creating awareness drives on effects of alcoholism and domestic violence by use of development communication tools and techniques – street plays, grassroots comics and puppetry; and organising community-cum-exhibition day (a moment and space where people come together and share life on a common platform for a whole day).

Analysis and Reflections

The volunteering programme, following inter-cultural and participatory development approaches, promotes enriching experience and ensures sustainable community development. It goes beyond mere accomplishment of tasks and objectives by the volunteers to creating among the volunteers and community members an understanding that learning is a mutual process, and developing and promoting positive attitudes and behavior is an essential part of the community

development process. While the experience becomes liberating for the community members, to the volunteers (of higher education) it provides the opportunity to reflect critically and apply the theories they learn in classrooms. It enables them to equip themselves for the future and engage in real world where situations where development goes beyond infrastructural growth and increase in levels of income to improving in the quality of life and enhancing people's capability to make choices.

The approach responds to the concern of many development agencies across the world, that of drawing out of the psyche of both those who volunteer (or donate) and the community people, that change and development can be brought only by external help. It also provides an opportunity for better understanding that material aid alone is not an answer for change and development, but creating and sustaining the attitude of cooperation and collaboration among the community members is what drives the community ahead towards sustainable development even when external aids and inputs are withdrawn.

Experiences from the field concerning this approach have shown that the implementation of the activities becomes easier as there is transparency in the process of selection, implementation and monitoring of the activities with the full participation of the community people. The activities also get legitimised as all activities are according to people's needs and priorities.

The approach however is not without challenges. One of the major challenges that the volunteers face is the need to adjust with the pace of the local community. This becomes a huge challenge especially for those who come from *a culture where life moves quickly and in a calculated measure*. This can be frustrating especially in the first few days. However, life begins to be fast, after the first phase (generally a week), such that often volunteers begin to feel that life as 'moving too fast'. This gives an understanding that community life is not necessarily slow but perhaps the activities that the development practitioners/volunteers plan may not be in keeping with the needs and priorities of the people. It becomes challenging also as difficulties can arise out of differences in language, socio-cultural understanding, interpretation of signs and symbols and different approaches in planning and implementing activities. The challenge can become even more serious since the volunteering period is

limited and every volunteer would like to achieve all of the objectives as fast as possible.

The volunteering programmes however were no less in achieving the objectives; and actually went beyond them and created among the people a strong sense of cooperation and collaboration, broke the unbreakable oppressive norms such as – differences based on ethnicity, caste and religion, as well as developing deeper sense of community belongingness among the community members and deep sense of acceptance and bonding between the volunteers and the community members. For example, the community members allowed the volunteers to prepare and have tea by themselves at their own convenient time in their kitchens. The example is of significance as a kitchen is one area where access by non-family members is often strictly prohibited across cultures in the world and in India often due to the notion of pollution within the caste system. This practice by families is one of the ultimate signs of community members accepting the volunteers as their own.

This approaches while it exhorts the volunteers to move along with the pace of the community; it emphasises strongly among them to be systematic in planning and implement the activities with precision and professionalism. There is a need to understand and balance between these two important aspects of life while working in the development sector or else there is a great danger of compromising one's professional-self which might give rise to feelings of frustration, meaninglessness of one's activity and sometimes experiencing burnout.

The experience has given insights and strengthened the assumptions regarding the application of the principles of participatory development approaches in the context of inter-cultural volunteering programmes. A summary of the expressions of experiences by the volunteers are given below:

- *Community engagement and development requires constant effort that calls for goodwill, cooperation and collaboration between the organiser and the community; and above all among the members of the community.*
- *Direct immersion of volunteers into community though challenging is an enriching experience as it gives opportunity to know and understand the community in its reality – cultures, traditions, customs and dynamics of community processes.*

- *In a participatory approach activities and initiatives have very little trouble with legitimisation processes and activities as people themselves get directly involved in their formulation, implementation and evaluation.*
- *Moving with the pace of the community enhances acceptability of the development practitioner/volunteer by the community members. Also it enables the professionals learn to balance between professional-self and needs of the community.*
- *Participatory development approach in volunteering programme becomes educative experience for both the volunteers and the community members as it provides space for learning from each other.*
- *The inter-cultural volunteering can be challenging (language, interpretation meanings of social signs and symbols) but enjoyable and enriching (learning new things, making new friends, gaining ideas to do things differently etc.) at the same time. It also enhances team work experience especially in the context of inter-cultural volunteering and having members from interdisciplinary academic background.*
- *Field engagement facilitates rapport building process with the community members.*
- *The approach strengthens the level of the confidence of the volunteers in working with communities.*

Conclusion

The experiences have been enriching and unique for the both the participants and the facilitating institutions. The assumption of the implementing institutions that application of the principles and practices of participatory approaches to development is possible within a student volunteering programme seems to be strengthened. Also the positive experiences outweigh the challenges and thus it is effective. This approach answers two needs of the contemporary world in with reference to the contribution of students of higher education towards sustainable development at community – the need for a meaningful engagement of student and their spirit of volunteerism; and the involvement of community people in the development process in the context of the present world order where poverty, ignorance, oppression and social injustice still exist. In an inter cultural volunteering context this approach provides a way of understanding ‘other community’ and working with them for development while encouraging the spirit of volunteerism among youth

not as a resource to be exploited but as a value to be nurtured and promoted.

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