

Volunteer Taiwan



The development of volunteer services is an indicator of the maturity of a civil society.

–Tim E.M. Wu, President, IAVE (International Association for Volunteer Effort in Taiwan)

A New Era

In the early 1960s, when Taiwan was a developing country, many international organizations provided aid and assistance that was essential to the country's eradication of malaria, control of tuberculosis, and significant improvement of medical care and facilities. Once Taiwan's economy began to develop rapidly through the 1970s, the concept of Taiwan making its own contribution to the international community began to take hold. A number of private organizations were established to encourage public service and volunteerism. Volunteer service commissions were gradually established within municipal and county governments to channel volunteer services to priority areas. During the 1980s, the government encouraged the establishment of NGOs to further stimulate volunteer services. By the 1990s, in light of the rising profile of volunteerism on the international stage, Taiwan developed specific rules and regulations to govern volunteer service organizations and their operations. The Legislative Yuan passed the Volunteer Service Law in January 2002, the culmination of the 2001 International Year for Volunteers. The Volunteer Services Law both encourages and provides protection to those participating in volunteer services. It also coincided with designation of 2001 as the International Year for Volunteers.

Amid an increasingly global, borderless society, volunteer services are becoming an important tool for the implementation of international development assistance. Volunteering constitutes an enormous reservoir of skills, energy and knowledge that can assist organizations in carrying out more targeted, efficient,



Photograph by Chou Ya-fen

President Chen at a flag ceremony for the seventh group of Overseas Volunteers

participatory and transparent development programs and policies. However, achieving these goals often requires specialized expertise and well-developed human resources. Since many international development organizations face finite resources and budget limitations, volunteer work has become an integral component of effective international assistance.

Many international development institutions in advanced countries have long integrated volunteer corps into their organizations. President John F. Kennedy established the U.S. Peace Corps in 1961 and appointed his brother-in-law, R. Sargent Shriver, as its first director. During the past 40 years, more than 165,000 volunteers have served overseas with the Peace Corps, making it the world's largest volunteer program. In the same spirit, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) established the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) in 1965. As of March 2001, JOCV had assigned over 21,500 volunteers overseas. Approximately 1,500 volunteers are recruited annually (each April and October).

The alleviation of poverty requires the ingenuity, solidarity, and creativity of millions of ordinary volunteers. Efforts on the part of national governments, supported by the international community, can ultimately only complement the operations of international development projects, the success of which depend ultimately upon the active participation of citizens from around the world.

Strengthening Volunteerism

While there is an increasing awareness in Taiwan of volunteerism, the corporate world and society still fail to give volunteers adequate recognition for their sacrifices and contributions. Volunteers in the U.S. Peace Corps who have completed overseas service are given priority consideration for civil service jobs. Prospective employers and university admission

committees also look favorably upon overseas volunteer work experience. In Japan, JOCV volunteers enjoy employment opportunities or recommendations from the government and have priority in seeking employment at large corporations. Taiwan is clearly behind the U.S. and Japan in its recognition of and respect for volunteers. The government should draft rules that address volunteer needs and interests. Such would encourage more people to serve and would help change public values and attitudes toward volunteerism. Moreover, the government needs to set standards to govern domestic and overseas volunteer service operations, strengthen organizational management, clarify the role and status of these organizations, and strengthen organizational credibility. These measures would make volunteer service operations healthier and more effective.

Government and semi-governmental organizations must strengthen their integration of computer networking resources. A volunteer information database must be established to ensure a steady flow of new volunteers. Meanwhile, information on the variety of jobs at hand needs to be compiled so that applicants are made aware of the latest opportunities and skill requirements.

In addition, public service groups should strengthen and diversify training and coursework for volunteers. Volunteer-related lectures and basic coursework should be made available to the general public and different volunteer service organizations should work with each other to help cover any resource shortages within their respective organizations. For example, if volunteers at Taiwan's National Center for High Performance Computing are willing to do volunteer work overseas, they should be allowed to participate in the ICDF's computer software coursework and apply to be an overseas volunteer with a specialization in hardware repair. Upon completion of their service period, they



could look for new volunteer opportunities after their return to Taiwan in order to continue their volunteerism.

Valuable Experiences

Taiwan has an energetic and talented society, with tremendous resources available to conduct diplomatic work. President Chen Shui-bian has repeatedly called for private and public sector participation and cooperation in the promotion of diplomacy. In keeping with the president's focus on "people's diplomacy," the Overseas Volunteer program has been steadily expanding to help Taiwan overcome its current diplomatic isolation. Cooperation is stressed to not only further cement friendship with diplomatic allies, but also to foster relations with friendly countries. Success will boost Taiwan's visibility on the global stage and enhance its international image.

Participation in international affairs runs far beyond official and diplomatic work to include the activities of organizations and individuals. Volunteerism overcomes political boundaries and focuses on effects beyond simple contributions or repayment for previous kindnesses. Volunteers, willing to work without financial compensation, help to support government work in areas that are often understaffed. This helps reduce government expenditures on assistance work and international cooperation as well as utilizes human resources effectively, helps address critical social problems facing diplomatic allies, and strengthens friendly bilateral relations.

Overseas volunteers add to the human resource pool available to the government and represent an extremely important administrative resource. Volunteer work is a valuable experience for those who sign up for volunteer programs in numerous ways, including:

Satisfying Idealism

Most who aspire to serve as volunteers hope to

make a difference in the world and are therefore willing to forego a salary. Participating in the Overseas Volunteer program gives volunteers' idealistic intentions a realistic context and frequently results in a profound personal transformation. Volunteers break through traditional borders and provide myriad services to friendly countries. They embody the concerns and responsibilities of society, hoping to pass on insights on the "Taiwan experience" and create better conditions in their host countries. Those interested in volunteer work do so out of a desire to contribute and pursue personal growth by serving others.

Learning about Service

Talented people are a nation's most important asset. Overseas volunteers devote themselves to international work and achieve personal growth in many ways. In addition to the education and training provided by each cooperating agency, volunteers are able to interact with other volunteers and benefit from shared experiences. After assignment overseas, volunteers experience new cultures and have many opportunities to interact and learn from people who come from backgrounds very different from those of the volunteers. In living, working, and communicating with people from the host country, volunteers are able to break through all types of traditional constraints and stereotypes.

Developing Human Resources

While Taiwan's unemployment rate is low compared with most of its neighbors and industrialized countries, young people often have difficulty in finding meaningful employment. Although some people chose to remain unemployed, others do not have a job due to particular circumstances such as preparing to secure a better job or seeking better opportunities. The former could be people who are preparing to enter the

workforce or who voluntarily left the employment market when their work was not satisfying. The latter could include people who are unable to work due to changing economic conditions and unable to find work despite seeking employment. They may also no longer be in the workforce due to early retirement.

Regardless, overseas volunteer opportunities provide an important chance to raise the quality of individuals and to find them meaningful employment. In addition to utilizing underdeveloped labor, volunteers undergo comprehensive training prior to being sent overseas. They will be required to function independently in a foreign-language environment. Volunteerism offers these people a chance to boost their personal skills and become marketable again.

Nurturing a Global View and Confirming National Identity

The biggest difference between volunteers who work domestically versus those who work internationally is that those going abroad have the opportunity to nurture a global view as well as better identify with their own nation. In an increasingly globalized setting, cutting oneself off from others establishes obstacles to personal success. Only by understanding the world and trends in other nations, along with economic developments, does one come to have a global view. Living abroad enables one to learn how to respect foreign cultures and to adapt to changing times, which increases one's own competitiveness. Since volunteers are stationed abroad, they are likely to become more aware of their own nationality and feel that they have a mission and responsibility to represent the people of Taiwan. This is particularly effective for Taiwan's younger generations, who often do not have a clear sense of national identity.

The Role of the ICDF in Volunteerism

In order to repay the international community and realize the concept of "people's diplomacy," the ICDF established the Overseas Volunteers program based on the examples of the US Peace Corps and the JOCV. In 1997, the ICDF sent its first group of volunteers abroad to Swaziland, opening a new page in Taiwan's international development assistance and displaying Taiwan's determination to assume a more active and responsible role on the international stage. The ICDF fulfills many critical roles during the process, including the following:

Providing a Platform for International Volunteer Service

Finding meaningful work is extremely important for volunteer workers. For volunteers working overseas, language and distance create significant barriers. Given the totally different living environments in some countries, access to accurate information is especially important for volunteers to prepare for their future jobs.

Since it started to evaluate the needs of overseas volunteers, the ICDF has done its best to understand the requirements of living in other countries, has sent personnel abroad to stage operational assessments, and has clarified position descriptions and requirements. The ICDF makes sure that volunteers will enjoy a safe environment and provides a wide selection of available positions from which potential volunteers may choose from. The ICDF offers a wide variety of measures to its volunteers. This includes intensive training at home and abroad, free transportation to postings, accommodations at the service post and monthly subsidies to offset various living expenses. These benefits enable volunteer workers to assist the people of friendly countries without having to be concerned about other issues. The



ICDF not only serves as intermediary between volunteers and agencies overseas that require assistance, but also provides information and works to bridge supply and demand. The ICDF does its utmost to provide a safe environment and support platform for volunteers who are eager to serve overseas.

To the end of 2003, the ICDF has signed volunteer agreements with 16 countries and organizations. After evaluation missions and environmental safety assessments, the ICDF arranged for 92 volunteer opportunities abroad. It successfully found 42 volunteers with designated specialties to serve overseas. After undergoing special coursework and language training, the volunteers headed overseas at the end of October to begin intensive language training for three months. Upon conclusion of this, they will begin service in their respective jobs.

Utilizing Taiwan's Human Resources

• The Energy and Dedication of our Nation's Youth

In the course of accepting applications, the ICDF discovered that the vast majority of people interested in overseas volunteer work were recent graduates just entering the workforce. These young people, while full of passion, lack practical experience. In response to this challenge, the ICDF institutes language training before sending volunteers overseas and tries to give each volunteer a placement that will allow them to gain as much on-the-job training as possible. Added together, this specialized training will boost the competitiveness of the volunteers when they return to Taiwan and seek employment. All in all, volunteer work provides an option for new graduates who face increasing difficulties in finding work.

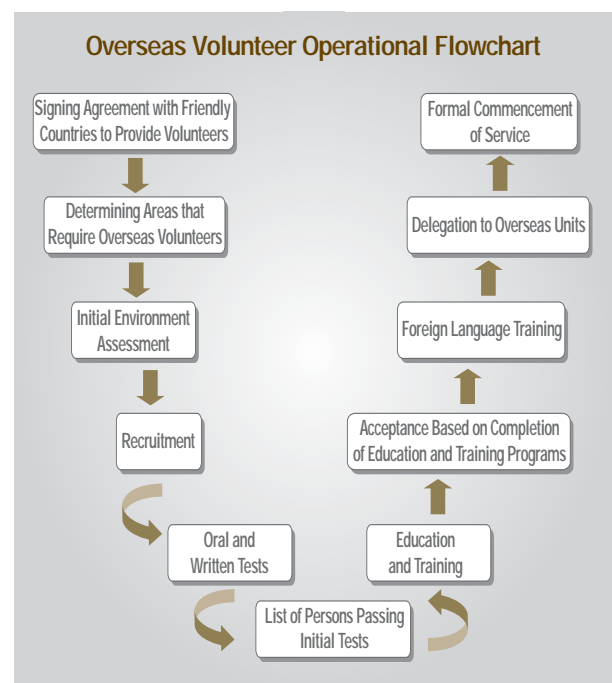
Those selected to be volunteers first attend a volunteer orientation course and take cultural coursework. They then receive specialized courses and intensive

language training depending on the type of service they will undertake. Upon being sent abroad, they continue to undergo language training and learn how to operate independently and adapt to their host culture. They also learn how to utilize limited resources in a creative manner. This learning and training continues throughout their term abroad.

• Utilization of Retired Persons

Life expectancy in Taiwan is increasing as health standards continue to rise. In the meantime, people are retiring at a younger age, meaning that retirees now have extra time and strength to devote to making a contribution and repay society. In an effort to attract highly experienced retirees into the volunteer program, the ICDF revised the age limits for volunteers in 2003. Now anyone over 20 years old who is an ROC citizen and in a good state of health may volunteer.

Included in the group of 42 volunteers sent abroad in 2003 was the former principal and founder of the Chinese School in Argentina. A retiree at 62, she decid-



ed to become a volunteer. With a forte in Spanish and a strong background in education, she was sent to Panama to teach Mandarin to Panamanian government officials.

Nurturing World Citizens with a Global Perspective

The people of Taiwan must step out into international society to have a global perspective and understand international concepts. In the rapidly changing world, one can only truly understand foreign culture and traditions by experiencing them in person. The ICDF's Overseas Volunteers program provides volunteers with a two-year period of service. By living, interacting and cooperating with people from other countries, the volunteers learn how to become more accepting and respectful of other cultures. This experience nurtures world citizens with a global view.

Bearing the Mission of the Third Sector

A new mechanism of governance is emerging. Georgetown University in Washington D.C. calls it "the third sector." Many international development agencies call it "civil society." The U.S. President's Council on Sustainable Development calls it "a new, collaborative decision process." Whatever its name, it is a process used to formulate public policy by non-elected individuals, unencumbered by the legislative process. The third sector comprises the social sector outside of the public (government) and private (business) sectors. In this era of far-reaching changes in the way that societies are organized, the third sector is playing a critical role and has gained importance in many



① Volunteer Chen Ming-chu hands out educational pamphlets on AIDS prevention at a university in Belize ② Volunteer Lin Shan-chu sells Chinese fried noodles during a local fundraising event ③ Volunteer Wang Yue-chun chats with corn extension farmers in Malawi ④ Volunteer Lin Kun-hui mingles with students at the Chung Shan School in Panama



countries. Non-profit in nature, the third sector exhibits more flexibility than the public sector and has the mission of serving public interests. The ICDF has the overriding mission of providing international cooperation and assistance, and it is an active participant in international affairs. In addition to technical assistance, investment and lending operations, and education and training, the ICDF in recent years has responded to President Chen Shui-bian's call for "people's diplomacy" by expanding the Overseas Volunteer program and becoming more prominent on the international stage.

Overall Impact

The ICDF picks people for its Overseas Volunteer program according to a strict selection process. In addition, those admitted to the program undergo coursework and intensive language training to prepare them for their future jobs. This strengthens service quality and professional expertise and enables the volunteers to meet the needs of recipient countries.

Through the end of 2003, the ICDF has sent 133 volunteers overseas for service in 21 friendly and allied countries in Africa, Central and South America, the Caribbean and the Asia-Pacific. The volunteers engage in a wide variety of services including SME consultation, computer maintenance and training, Chinese and English language teaching, ethnic dance instruction, agricultural product distribution assistance, pest prevention and medical services. About 60 percent of the volunteers partake in instruction and information support activities. The volunteers have been outstanding and have won the praise of host countries. As of December 2003, a total of 55 volunteers were stationed abroad in Burkina Faso, Belize, Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, St. Christopher and Nevis, Thailand, Indonesia, and Tuvalu.

In August 1996, in an effort to expand the

international outlook of Taiwan's youth, the MOFA commenced drafting a program in which outstanding college or university graduates would be sent to serve in overseas technical missions for two years. The two years spent abroad would offset the two-year period of national service for these men. From August 16th to the 25th, 2000, President Chen visited Taiwan's overseas missions in Central America and Africa. At a press conference upon his arrival back in Taiwan, President Chen proposed the idea of the Youth Overseas Service program.

In 2001, the ICDF processed the first group of men to participate in the program. The ICDF selected 37 individuals with specialties in agriculture and fisheries technology, hydraulic engineering, medicine, trade training and computers to be sent to Taiwan's technical missions abroad. The ICDF arranged and managed a 12-week training course as well as language instruction to help these young men acclimate to their new working environment as quickly as possible. The coursework also helped to hone a broad international vision and promote the concept of diplomacy among the general public.

As of the end of 2003, of the 72 young men assigned to technical missions overseas, 30 served in Africa (One serviceman had to return from The Gambia due to illness), 26 in Central and South America, 10 in the Caribbean and five in countries in the Asia-Pacific.

Presently there are 35 Youth Overseas Servicemen stationed in Burkina Faso, Malawi, Swaziland, The Gambia, Chad, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Panama, Honduras, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Belize, Paraguay, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, St. Christopher and Nevis, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Dominica, the Marshall Islands, Fiji and Palau.

The following describes the impact of Taiwan Overseas Volunteers and the Youth Overseas Service programs:

Africa

Most volunteer services in Africa focus on helping locals to raise living standards, particularly with regard to medical services, agricultural production techniques and professional training. The ICDF has sent volunteers through the Overseas Volunteer program to provide service in the areas of handicraft instruction, agricultural irrigation engineering, and environmental protection, and Youth Overseas Service program members to provide agricultural production development support and medical services.

Latin America and the Caribbean

The primary mission of volunteers in Latin America and the Caribbean is to assist in reducing poverty and to upgrade Taiwan's status in the international community. Volunteers provide medical assistance in Latin American villages and the eastern Caribbean, educate locals about Taiwan's culture and provide computer training. The ICDF has stationed nurses, pharmacists, social workers, agriculturalists and marketing volunteers in these areas. In urban areas, it has stationed volunteer teachers in the Chinese language, folk dance, computer software education and hardware maintenance. Servicemen in the Youth Overseas Service mainly provide assistance in agricultural production technology and other practical projects.

The Asia-Pacific Region

Taiwan's relations with countries in the Asia-Pacific region are particularly close due to geographical

①Wang Chia-min (first on right), a member of the Youth Overseas Service, assists horticultural extension farmers in Dominica ②Kao Hsiang-tai, a member of the Youth Overseas Service in Paraguay, assists in orchid cultivation ③Chang Yung-hsiu, a member of the Youth Overseas Service in El Salvador, provides instruction to agricultural college students on hydroponic vegetable technology ④Wu Chen-wei (third on left) and Hsu Shao-yu (first on right), members of the Youth Overseas Service in Palau, tour guava extension farms





proximity and common climates. Volunteers work primarily in cultural exchanges, sharing the development experience of Taiwan and the transfer of agricultural technology. Specifically, volunteers provide English-language instruction, computer network software instruction, and hardware maintenance. Men associated with the Youth Overseas Service mainly provide service in the area of agricultural production technology at technical missions within the region.

Expanding Operations

In 2004, the ICDF will institute a number of major changes in the Youth Overseas Service and the Overseas Volunteers to encourage the citizens of Taiwan become more actively involved in both programs.

Expanding the Range of Services

The ICDF seeks to attract groups of enthusiastic volunteers and servicemen to share the “Taiwan



Photograph by Weng Cheng-yuan



Photograph by Yu Chin-mei

① Shen Hsin-nan, a member of the Youth Overseas Service in Honduras, introduces the technical mission's Hog Breeding Program to a wife of an official ② Ji Mien-yuan, an overseas volunteer in Honduras, poses with students from his computer class ③ Homecoming Reception for the first group of the Youth Overseas Service ④ Volunteer Yu Chin-mei helps a Costa Rican medical worker with her work

experience.” Furthermore, the ICDF plans to expand the scope of its volunteer and youth services. The broader service areas involve SMEs, agri-business, investment and trade, urban and rural development, environmental protection, health and medicine, cultural exchanges and international human resource development. Providing more services to recipient countries will enable volunteers and servicemen to lend more assistance in boosting the living standards of people in those nations.

Broadening Volunteer Categories

To make volunteering more dynamic, in the future the ICDF will not only regularly seek applications for overseas volunteers on an annual basis but will also seek short-term volunteers to serve for short periods to take part in disaster relief work or special programs. Initially, these volunteers will provide service in the medical and computer technology fields.

Strengthening Contact with Other Volunteer Organizations

In 2004, the ICDF will strengthen exchanges and contact with other volunteer agencies and boost informational campaigns to introduce its volunteer activities to local and international audiences. This is expected to expand demand for volunteers overseas as well as the supply of volunteers on Taiwan. The ICDF will also seek opportunities to cooperate with NGOs and other non-profit agencies and encourage more people to provide service in an effort to boost recognition of and participation in the ICDF’s volunteer programs around the world.

Strengthening Public Awareness

When accepting applications for volunteers, the ICDF will increase its visual and print advertising. In addition, it will boost contact with schools throughout

the year and stage informational forums throughout the island. It will participate in a wide variety of volunteer social service activities to boost the public’s knowledge of the ICDF. While it will concentrate its information campaigns in the north, it will also hold informational gatherings at schools in central, southern and eastern Taiwan. Meanwhile, it will provide information to social welfare groups to boost the dissemination of the ICDF’s goals and operations. The ICDF will also place advertisements in regional publications and produce specialized books.

Measures for Returning Volunteers

The ICDF is currently forming a Volunteers’ Friendship Society for volunteers who return to Taiwan after completing their service. It hopes that the financial support used to bolster this organization will ultimately enable those participating to create a force through networking amongst themselves. In addition, the club will provide an avenue for informational exchanges. Furthermore, those who have worked as volunteers or in the Youth Overseas Service will have priority for vacant positions at the ICDF.

Conclusion

Every person has a duty and responsibility to promote social prosperity and progress. Participating in the Overseas Volunteer program and Youth Overseas Service is an expression of this responsibility. Overseas volunteerism and service work not only shares the “Taiwan experience” with Taiwan’s diplomatic allies and international friends, but it is also a means for idealistic people to take part in diplomatic work and make a direct contribution to the international community.