

Introduction

Background and purpose of the study

Since its establishment in 1945, one of the mandates of the UN has been to promote economic and social advancement. This is confirmed in the Charter of the UN, and for more than 50 years the funds, programmes, and specialized agencies of the UN have provided assistance to developing countries.¹ Even if great disparities continue to exist between rich and poor, a generally accepted view is that international development cooperation has achieved economic and social progress – measured, for example, through increased income per capita, life expectancy, and literacy, or declining mortality rates among children.²

The effectiveness of development cooperation has been the subject of much debate, and while some critics continue to argue that aid is wasteful, a more commonly held view is that development cooperation can be justified on grounds that are not merely humanitarian. While recent research is beginning to show more clearly under which conditions aid can be most effective, what remains less clear is the extent to which different bilateral or multilateral organizations have been able to contribute to social progress and improved standards of living.³

A number of audits, management reviews, and evaluations have been carried out with respect to different UN bodies, but none of these studies really seems to be able to determine conclusively

whether the agencies, organs, funds, or programmes of the UN have an impact on economic development.⁴ In part, this can be explained by the fact that for many years, the primary concern of studies and evaluations of the UN, the World Bank, and other programmes was on the design and implementation of projects, rather than their outcomes and long-term benefits.⁵

In recent years, however, organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank have increased their focus on the long-term impact and sustainability of their operations, and the effectiveness of the work of the UN has come under increased scrutiny. An example of this is a recent evaluation of the impact of the UN operational activities for development, which was carried out at the request of the General Assembly.⁶

While the UN impact evaluation suggests that the UN system as a whole has been able to strengthen national capacities in the six countries examined as part of the evaluation, it is difficult to determine from the evaluation the relative impact or contribution of the different UN funds, programmes, and agencies viewed separately. The evaluation does contain some examples of where individual organizations of the UN have done particularly well or poorly, but since the purpose of the evaluation was to evaluate the impact of the UN system as a whole, the performance of individual funds, programmes, or agencies was not examined in any greater detail.⁷

Therefore, despite even these most recent efforts, information available about the impact of the work of the UN remains rather scarce. Meanwhile, considerable attention has, once again, been given to the reform of the UN, and a number of measures have been implemented to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the organization. It is, however, striking that even the efforts aimed at preparing the UN for the new millennium do not appear to be based on thorough reviews of the past performance or achievements of the organization. In part this can probably be explained by a perceived urgency to reform the organization, and a reluctance to initiate comprehensive reviews or studies of the work of the UN that would

take a long time to complete. All the same, the lack of in-depth evaluations is a cause for concern.⁸

What this study tries to do is start filling the gap of in-depth assessments of the achievements and performance of the UN. Recognizing that the task of evaluating all of the activities of the UN in the economic and social fields is enormous, the study focuses on a small part of the organization – the UN Volunteers (UNV) programme. The UNV programme is used as a case study of the development cooperation activities of the UN, and the study tries to show that assessments of the achievements and performance of the UN in the economic and social fields are possible and worthwhile undertakings, notwithstanding methodological difficulties and the considerable amount of time and resources needed to assess even a very small programme of the UN.

Scope and limitations of the study

The specific aim of the study is to assess the impact of the UNV programme. The impact of the programme is determined based on an assessment of the achievement of the objectives of the programme. In addition, the study assesses the perceived value of the programme to its users and beneficiaries, and, more generally, discusses methodological issues related to an assessment of the impact of UN programmes, funds, and agencies.⁹

The impact of the UNV programme is assessed in terms of changes in human and social capital as well as changes with respect to the availability of jobs, the level of poverty, women's lives, and the environment. The perceived value of the programme is based on an assessment by the users and beneficiaries of the programme of (i) the relevance of the work of the Volunteers, (ii) the performance of the Volunteers, and (iii) the results achieved and their sustainability.

The evaluation covers the time period from 1987 to 1996 and focuses on one country, Nepal. Nepal was chosen based on the size and length of the UNV programme in the country, the availability

of different categories of Volunteers and types of Volunteer assignments, and the fact that the country was both a major recipient as well as an important supplier of Volunteers. In addition, it was possible to identify and train a group of surveyors to carry out the data collection in Nepal at a reasonable cost.

The idea of using more than one country as a case study was seriously considered, but in the end it was rejected in order to place the evaluation in a particular economic, social, cultural, and political context, within which to analyse the considerable amount of data that could be obtained from one country alone. Information and data from other countries visited during the course of the research was used instead to assess the validity of the methodology and the results from Nepal.

The study included a review of existing reports and previous evaluations, but is primarily based on new data specifically collected for the study. The study draws on interviews with 300 respondents: supervisors, co-workers, and other beneficiaries of the work of the Volunteers in Nepal, and a reference group of respondents who had no contact with the Volunteers, but who in other respects were similar to the users and beneficiaries of the programme. In addition, information from approximately 50 Volunteers who had worked in Nepal during the period covered by the study was used to complement the findings of the interviews and the other data sources.

Approximately 90 evaluations and assessments of the UNV programme were reviewed as part of this study, including one attempt at a more comprehensive evaluation of the UNV programme, which was undertaken in 1987. Experiences of individual UN Volunteers documented in reports prepared by the Volunteers themselves were also reviewed as part of the study, as were those included in the book entitled *Volunteers against Conflict*.¹⁰ While that book contained the personal accounts of nine Volunteers who worked with electoral assistance, human rights, peace building, and humanitarian relief, this evaluation presents an in-depth assessment of the work of 50 Volunteers in what has been the main field of work of the Volunteers since the establishment of the programme – development cooperation.

Overview

Chapter 2, which follows this introduction, presents the context of the research: the role of the UN in supporting economic development over the past 50 years and the establishment and evolution of the UNV programme. Chapter 3 presents the research questions and the areas of focus of the study, and also includes an overview of previous studies and evaluation literature consulted.

The development of the methodology and the conceptual framework of the study are presented in Chapter 4, which also briefly describes how the data for the evaluation was collected and analysed. Chapter 4 also discusses the validity, reliability, objectivity, and relevance of the study.

Chapter 5 summarizes the findings of the study in three sections: (i) human and social capital accumulation and other outcomes of the work of the Volunteers; (ii) the performance of the Volunteers and the relevance, results, and sustainability of their work; and (iii) other findings of the evaluation, including assessments of the role of the head office of the UNV programme and the perceived value of the programme to the Volunteers themselves.

Chapter 6, the final chapter, summarizes the main findings, presents the conclusions and recommendations of the study, and discusses lessons learned that could be applied in the evaluation of other programmes, funds, or agencies of the UN. While the starting point for this study is very different from that of the book *Volunteers against Conflict*, mentioned earlier, several of the issues raised in that book are also discussed in the concluding chapter of this study; these include the identification of the UN Volunteers as true volunteers and the role of the UNV programme within the UN system.¹¹

Additional details regarding the impact of the UNV programme, and the statistical analyses on which the evaluation is based, are presented in Appendix A. Appendix B includes details regarding the perceived value of the programme and the other findings of the study. Appendix C lists reports of previous evaluations and reviews of the UNV programme, in chronological order.

Notes

1. Preamble, Article 1(3) of Chapter I “Purposes and Principles” and Articles 55–60 of Chapter IX “International Economic and Social Co-operation”.
2. See: United Nations Development Programme. *Human Development Report*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 24.
3. See: (a) Cassen, Robert and Associates. *Does Aid Work?: Report to an Inter-governmental Task Force*, 2nd edn. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994; (b) World Bank. *Assessing Aid: What Works, What Doesn't, and Why*. Washington, DC: Oxford University Press for the World Bank, 1998.
4. Roberts, Adam and Benedict Kingsbury. “The UN’s Roles in International Society since 1945”. In: Roberts, Adam and Benedict Kingsbury, eds. *United Nations, Divided World*, 2nd edn. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 1–62. See also: United Nations Joint Inspection Unit. “Accountability, Management Improvement, and Oversight in the United Nations System”, Report 95/2. Geneva: United Nations Joint Inspection Unit, 1995.
5. Valadez, Joseph and Michael Bamberger, eds. *Monitoring and Evaluating Social Programmes in Developing Countries*, EDI Development Studies. Washington, DC: The World Bank, 1994, p. 227.
6. General Assembly Resolutions 53/192 and 50/120. Both entitled “Triennial Policy Review of Operational Activities for Development of the United Nations System”. 25 February 1999 and 16 February 1996.
7. Report by the Secretary-General to the General Assembly A/53/226. “Triennial Policy Review of Operational Activities for Development of the United Nations System”. 12 August 1998, paragraphs 18–35.
8. Report by the Secretary-General to the General Assembly A/51/950. “Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform”. 16 July 1997.
9. The need to take stock of the UNV programme was raised by several delegates to the 1996 annual session of the Executive Board of the UNDP, which administers the UNV programme. See: Report of the Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme Annual Session DP/1996/19. 23 May 1996, paragraphs 59–61.
10. United Nations Volunteers. *Volunteers against Conflict*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1996.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 221–225.