

**Address by Minister John Curran T.D. to the
Volunteering Ireland's and PAVMI Conference
3rd December 2009**

I am very pleased to be with you this morning to open this conference on the 'Value of Volunteering', and I would like to thank Elaine Bradley for the welcome opportunity to speak to you today.

At the outset, I would like to pay tribute to the valuable work that Volunteering Ireland is doing to promote active citizenship in this country. This year has seen a number of notable achievements for Volunteering Ireland – for example the Ireland Involved Awards has grown from strength to strength in only its second year here; also, Volunteering Ireland was instrumental in the decision this year by the International Association for Volunteer Efforts to hold their 2012 World Volunteer Conference in Dublin. Congratulations to Elaine and her team for these and other successes.

The holding of this conference is important for raising awareness of the real contribution volunteers are making to community participation and to society in general. As it is acknowledged in your conference notes, the role of civil society in general and volunteering in particular in contributing to economic performance and social progress is little understood. In examining volunteering along a number of dimensions including the social, economic and political, I hope that the discussions today will provide you with valuable insights that can be used by your organisations.

We know that the number of people in this country who want to volunteer has soared over the past year and the number of volunteers registering with Volunteer Centres is up by over 100 per cent. Today's discussion provides a useful opportunity to address issues of organisational capacity in response to this recent surge of public interest in volunteering; to explore the opportunities and risks in measuring volunteer contribution; and, to learn about the

tools organisations can harness to achieve maximum volunteer impact.

Volunteering is central to the ideals of democracy, social inclusion and active citizenship. It is also an expression of the individual's involvement in their community. The giving of time for others strengthens the fabric of our societies and defines the communities in which we live.

Volunteers are life's 'doers' - rather than the well-intentioned dreamers - the people who get up, get out and do the work that changes things for the better. They are dedicated to making their local communities a better place to live, to work and to do business and are always at the forefront of promoting social change in Ireland.

The individual decisions that people make in giving their time and skills are really decisions to participate in the future of their community, and they are the essence and foundation of democracy. Each act of voluntary participation combines to form the cement that binds and

unifies our society in common purpose and makes it a better place for all its citizens. Voluntary participation is at the very heart of active citizenship and good governance, which enriches and energises our democracy.

There are, I am sure, those who would regard volunteering as a luxury for better economic times, when individuals and families are not struggling to pay the bills – as many are at the present time. Right now, they will argue, getting through the recession takes precedence over everything else.

But to my mind, nothing could be further from the truth. Global economic events over the past number of months have demonstrated just how closely intertwined our fates are in the wider community - from businesses, to workers, to communities. No sector can operate in isolation from the others and we all have a duty of care for each other. The success of our society as a whole depends on all stakeholders acting with responsibility, with integrity and with due regard for the impact of their actions on others.

In these challenging economic times, there is a great need to work together to ensure that dynamic individuals and groups within our society are given the backing they need to champion new ideas. In particular we need to give young people greater opportunities to make a difference within our communities and to empower them to develop new ways of thinking about the challenges that face us now and into the future.

In my role I have the great privilege of seeing at first hand a wide range of social and community initiatives, all of which are only possible because radical new alliances have formed between communities, voluntary agencies, government, and business.

I am confident that these alliances can be of even greater benefit into the future. I am confident because the level of professionalism, skill and cooperation that now exists in communities and within the voluntary sector in Ireland has never been greater than it is today.

As a modern society, we face complex problems that cannot be simply addressed by channelling more funds - important though funding is. They require innovative thinking and flexible responses by all the relevant actors at national and local level. But I believe that this is where the vision, the dedication and the tireless efforts of individuals in the community can make a huge difference.

I just want to conclude by thanking you for the opportunity to address this conference. I am sure you will have a very productive day and I look forward to hearing the feedback from the discussions in due course.

Thank you, and I think it's not too early to wish you a happy Christmas.