

# Editorials & Opinion

## Converting concern into action

**R**oughly 75,000 Canadians have been overseas as volunteers. They range in age from their 20s to their 80s. They can be found in executive suites, farm fields, operating rooms, lecture halls, Parliament and suburban kitchens.

Almost invariably, these volunteers returned from the field eager to talk about what they had learned, driven to help the people they had met, acutely aware of their good fortune and the need to share it.

But there was no outlet for their passion. The people who had shared their experience were scattered across the country. The agencies that had sent them overseas weren't equipped to use their talents at home.

Their friends listened to their stories and responded to their enthusiasm for a while, then lost interest.

They settled into good jobs and productive lives.

Now a coalition of international service organizations is calling on them to volunteer again — not to go back to Africa or Asia or Latin America, but to become the vanguard of a new movement called Global Citizens for Change.

"We know that people who have gone overseas see the world differently and want to do something," said Karen Takacs, executive director of Canadian Crossroads International, which is spearheading the initiative. "We're asking them to be catalysts in their communities, to talk about the importance of global poverty and mobilize others."

"We know Canadians care, but our politicians don't seem to think so."

The other eight members of the coalition are World University Service of Canada; Voluntary Service Overseas Canada; Canada World Youth; Canadian Executive Service Organization; CUSO and its francophone counterpart, SUCO; OXFAM Québec; and the Canadian Centre for International



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By banding together, they hope to link their alumni to like-minded people, to amplify their voices and to build public support.

Anyone — regardless of background or experience — can join Global Citizens for Change. But the founders are approaching former overseas volunteers first because so many have expressed an interest in staying active.

The project is still in its early stages. It was launched in December, after a test run in 12 communities.

The response confirmed what Takacs and her colleagues intuitively knew. Canadians, especially those who travelled or served abroad, wanted to do something about the staggering inequities in the world. But they felt helpless, overwhelmed and isolated.

So the coalition set about developing tools that citizens could use to convert their concern into action.

It produced fact sheets on extreme poverty, the AIDS crisis, the commitments Canada has made to the world's poorest people and its actual performance. It drew up a directory of national and international groups leading the fight for hunger eradication, fairer trading rules, a more equitable distribution of global wealth and a more sustainable way of life. It drafted pointers on how to lobby an MP, write a newspaper article, organize a local discussion group or volunteer for overseas service.

Finally, a website ([www.globalcitizensforchange.ca](http://www.globalcitizensforchange.ca)) was rolled out,

marking the formal kickoff of the campaign.

There is still work to do. The communication plan is fairly rudimentary. The agencies in the coalition (which often compete for government funding) are learning how to collaborate. The whole idea of public advocacy is still new to many organizations that send volunteers abroad.

"But we're already seeing momentum," said Christine Campbell, director of external relations for Crossroads International. "We're pretty excited."

Patrick Johnston, president of the Walter and Duncan Foundation, is sanguine too. His organization provided the start-up money for the project.

Johnston foresees two benefits. The first is that young volunteers coming back from developing countries will have a way to stay engaged. The second is that the groups in the coalition will be able to stand up to Ottawa, which encourages aid organizations to fight over a limited pot of money.

"This is an issue that they all care about," he said. "They all face the frustration of not being able to harness their returning volunteers' excitement."

The timing of the project is opportune.

The generation coming of age now is more outward-looking than any previous cohort. These young people grew up in an era of borderless technology and global travel. Many have roots and relatives in other countries. They want to work overseas and stay connected when they return.

What they need is a government that shares their sense of global responsibility and a country that stands proudly behind them.

Global Citizens for Change is working to make Canada that kind of country.

Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.