

This Day in History... December 5, 1986

International Volunteer Day

International Volunteer Day (IVD), officially known as International Volunteer Day for Economic and Social Development, is celebrated every year on December 5. Its purpose is to highlight the essential role volunteers play in communities around the world and to encourage even more people to serve. While it was first observed in 1986, its origins trace back to earlier United Nations efforts to strengthen global development through volunteerism.

The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) program, which helped lay the groundwork for IVD, was formed on December 7, 1970, with the first 35 volunteers recruited the following year. The program was designed to bring skilled volunteers—engineers, teachers, health workers, environmental specialists, and others—into communities that needed development support. Instead of working as short-term helpers, UNV volunteers often served for long periods, working side-by-side with local people to address long-term challenges. Over the years, UNV became one of the most visible global organizations promoting volunteer service as a solution to social, economic, and environmental problems.

As the UNV program grew, the United Nations looked for new ways to promote volunteerism worldwide. That

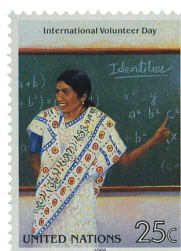
opportunity came in 1985, when the UN General Assembly was marking its 40th anniversary. During that session, the General Assembly adopted a resolution designating December 5 as International Volunteer Day, encouraging governments, organizations, and communities to use the day to raise awareness,

recognize achievements, and inspire more people to volunteer. The first official celebration took place on December 5, 1986, and it has been observed annually ever since.

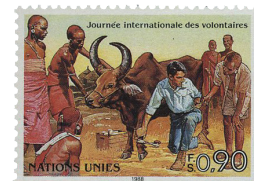
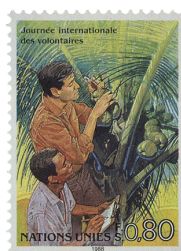
Early observances in the late 1980s and 1990s were mostly organized by UN agencies and partner nonprofits, but participation quickly expanded. Countries around the world began using the day to recognize volunteers in schools, health clinics, disaster-response teams, youth groups, and community organizations. By the 2000s, IVD events had taken place in nearly every region, from large cities to remote rural communities.

International Volunteer Day has been especially notable for its connection to major global development goals. Many IVD campaigns have aligned with the UN's Millennium Development Goals and, more recently, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals include reducing poverty, expanding access to education, promoting gender equality, improving maternal and child health, fighting diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria, and protecting the environment. Volunteers have played meaningful roles in all these areas, whether by mentoring students, leading public-health campaigns, planting trees, or providing emergency relief after natural disasters.

Over the years, IVD has featured a wide range of activities. Communities have



The 1988 UN NY International Volunteer Day stamps depict education and vocational training.



The 1988 UN Geneva International Volunteer Day stamps depict agriculture and veterinary medicine.



Issued in honor of the UN Volunteer Program, these stamps picture a honeycomb with symbols representing different fields in which people volunteer.



The 1988 UN Vienna International Volunteer Day stamps depict medical care and construction.

This Day in History... December 5, 1986 continued



The UNV 10th anniversary NY stamps picture symbols of progress.

The set of six 2001 UN International Year of Volunteers stamps display art from "One Heart, One World – International Exhibition of the Heart," which opened at UN Headquarters in New York on April 5, 2000. The Exhibition consisted of 100 poems by people with disabilities and 100 works of art corresponding to each of the poems.



These stamps feature a painting by Jose Zaragoza for the poem "Weather" by Fabrizio de Francesco and a design by John Terry, inspired by Katharine Annear's poem "The Electric Dance."



These stamps picture Ernest Pignon-Ernest's drawing corresponding to Michèle Delmond-Gaudard's poem "Ignored Olympiads" and Paul Siché's painting for Simone-Amélie Boinot's "Poetry, my sweetness..."



Nguyen Thanh Chuong's oil painting represents Tran Quoc Minh's poem "Bridges," and Ikko Tanaka's artwork depicts Shiko Ogasawara's, "Hands."

organized rallies, marches, parades, cleanup efforts, tree-planting projects, food drives, and neighborhood improvement programs. Nonprofits and health organizations have offered free medical checkups, vaccination clinics, and public-health workshops. Environmental groups have led recycling campaigns, coastal cleanups, and wildlife-protection efforts. Many events highlight volunteer stories, celebrate local achievements, or showcase the impact of ongoing development projects.

Several memorable global observances have drawn broad attention. In 2001, the United Nations declared the International Year of Volunteers, giving IVD special significance with worldwide conferences, national volunteer awards, and large-scale service campaigns. In 2011—marking the 10th anniversary of the International Year of Volunteers—hundreds of events highlighted how volunteering contributes to peacebuilding and sustainable development. In most recent years, campaigns have focused on themes such as climate action, youth leadership, digital volunteering, and support for communities affected by crises.

Today, International Volunteer Day continues to shine a spotlight on the millions of people who give their time and energy to help others. The day serves as a reminder that volunteer work—whether small acts of kindness or major community efforts—can make a powerful difference. By recognizing volunteers and encouraging more people to get involved, IVD helps strengthen communities, promote global cooperation, and build a more sustainable and equitable world for everyone.

The UNV 10th anniversary stamps from Geneva picture symbols of science, agriculture, and industry.



UNV 10th Anniversary Stamps from Vienna Office with designs from the NY and Geneva issues.

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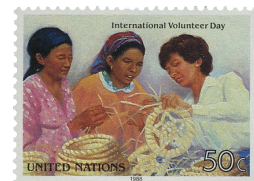
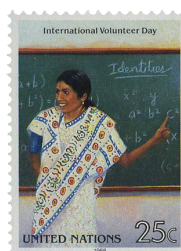
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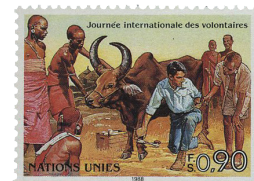
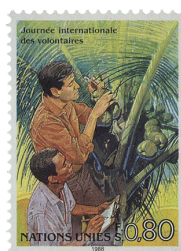
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