Volunteerism has been essential to disaster risk reduction programming by helping to assess a community’s needs and driving cooperation strategies with all stakeholders. The disaster risk reduction programme has established a pilot Youth Volunteer Network in Myanmar. In Sri Lanka, volunteers are integrated in the country’s Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme. In other regions, local authorities have established volunteer brigades in emergency situations in collaboration with the Disaster Preparedness European Commission Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection programme in Bolivia and volunteer-run Environment Commissions through the Soy Voluntari@ network in Peru.

Because UN Volunteers can be quickly mobilized and can easily recruit local help that is familiar with the country context and priorities, volunteers in disaster response situations provide immediate relief as well as pathways to mid- and long-term recovery measures. For instance, in response to the devastating earthquake of 25 April 2015 in Nepal, with the epicentre close to Kathmandu, UNV was able to recruit about 200 national UN Volunteers with vital expertise in coordination and early reconstruction. The contributions of UNV are featured in a fact file on volunteers as first responders to the Nepal earthquake.

In 2015, UNV began supporting the United Nations Plan of Action on Disaster Risk Reduction for Resilience throughout Asia and the Pacific. UN Volunteers, familiar with and often originating from local communities, have been vital to promoting sustainable development. As locals themselves, they are familiar with using locally-appropriate and environmentally-sound practices, including indigenous knowledge in environmental management and capacity development to respond to natural disasters.

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TURNING GARBAGE INTO GOLD IN MONGOLIA

Each day the people of Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, produce 1,100 tons of solid waste without any formal recycling mechanisms in place. With each year, the city’s population rises by 10,000 households all looking for a better life, but most resigned to the city’s outskirts for lack of space and opportunity.

Enter UNDP’s Turning Garbage into Gold (TG2G) project, which seeks to address environmental degradation due to weak solid waste management and urban poverty on the city’s outskirts. Miroslav Hodecek, an international UN Youth Volunteer from the Czech Republic in the UNDP Environment Unit supported identifying the most vulnerable groups in the target population and helped them create sustainable systems for recyclable waste collection in their neighbourhoods.

In conjunction with Technoj, a local NGO for business incubation, Miroslav and 20 other local student volunteers worked daily to reach out to beneficiaries. Despite TG2G’s modest project funding, more than 100 migrant, low-income households from the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar were able to start their own small, but sustainable businesses. Technoj designed selected items and TG2G volunteers trained vulnerable groups on how to make recycled products such as brooms and benches from plastic bottles, among many other product designs.

The programme is currently operational in three of Ulaanbaatar’s outer districts: Khan-Uul, Chingeltei and Songino Khairkhan. It includes 20 production groups of around five to six people each. In addition to learning how to make these products, the targeted households successfully secured contractual arrangements to sell certain products in the country’s largest supermarket chain. This led a number of national food producers to become raw material suppliers for these enterprises, paving a pathway to further collaboration with UNDP.

Several groups managed to set up small businesses through the project and secured government loans to build up small- and medium-scale enterprises.

PREVENTING AND MANAGING CRISES AND NATIONAL DISASTERS IN NIGER

In Niger, the Capacity Building Programme for the Prevention of Crisis and Disaster Management is a joint project of the UNDP Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery and UNV. This project focuses on strengthening national institutions and community actors to prevent and manage crises and disasters. Through it, UNDP and UNV have helped authorities design one national and eight regional plans, and strengthen the resilience of populations in an effort to prevent conflicts, better manage natural disasters, and help affected populations recover quickly.

UNV was the key UN contributor at the local level, conducting a population vulnerability survey and deploying two international and 10 national UN Volunteers who supported the governorates in crisis management. They also trained 60 national and regional managers on post-disaster evaluation methodologies.

The impact of this programme has been an unequivocal strengthening of national institutions, as well as local and grassroots communities, in the prevention and management of crises and disasters. Specific improvements include newly updated maps of national and regional casualty contingencies, which have been widely disseminated. In addition, the National Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction has been put in place and is operational. The system of data collection and disaster warning was improved by strengthening technical data gathering through equipment such as 100 rain gauges, four automatic recording stations and 130 smart phones.

The project also ensured that data collection and analysis mechanisms were enhanced with 15 vulnerability monitoring observatories and 32 community systems of early warning and emergency response. Revitalizing the livelihoods of small farmers in crisis-affected regions such as Agadez, Tahoua, Tillabery and Diffa was also taken into consideration, with UN Volunteers providing support for the reconstruction of these farms with a specific focus on training, coaching and mentoring.

A member of the UNDP Turning Garbage to Gold group makes a broom from a plastic bottle in the Ger District of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. (Miroslav Hodecek/UNV, 2014)