Harriet Christine Elasu's story

Kampala, Uganda: I started volunteering at UNICEF Kampala in September 2010, after working for twelve years for a charity organisation in Uganda which works with vulnerable groups (women, children and people with disabilities) to overcome poverty and malnutrition in sustainable ways.

As a new volunteer, I had great expectations and was full of ambition. I looked forward to meeting and working with new people at UNICEF, gaining new skills and using my experience to contribute to making a positive difference in the lives of women and children in Uganda.

My role mainly focuses on supporting financial operations both at the country and regional office levels. I participate in conducting financial spot checks and provide capacity development for implementing partners, both within government institutions and non-governmental organizations. The spot checks are to see whether the resources UNICEF
channels through our partners are being properly put to their intended use, to ensure that children and mothers benefit accordingly, and whether UNICEF is getting value for money in partnerships.

I have had several challenges as a volunteer, which translate into valuable lessons for the future.

Some of the partners are quite difficult to reach, particularly those in regions that occasionally flood during the rainy season. In such cases, I have learned to take more time to meet my intended objective.

Spot checks often involve reviewing of hard-copy support documents provided by partners to gain an understanding of their transactions. However, in cases where they lack proper record management systems, we often spend hours searching for documents, which can be tedious and stressful. I have learned to be more patient with partners during such instances and to communicate in advance my needs, so that they can have the documents handy when I need them.

In one instance, I worked with a partner that was so new that they did not have adequate office space to accommodate everybody. Consequently, I worked with the finance and accounting staff members, who sat under a tree which served as their office. Their actual store facility was an old grass-thatched mud-and-wattle structure that had no door.

Through all the challenges, I have learned to be more patient with implementing partners and have strengthened my communication skills. I am always happy to provide extra support and guidance where it is needed, particularly in the areas of accounting and financial management, and in proper record-keeping.

For me, volunteering with UNICEF is such a tremendous opportunity that has changed me. I have gained greater self-confidence and enhanced my self-esteem, which I believe is the reason I have been recruited as a staff member in the same office in July 2011. The volunteering spirit is an enabling factor, and will remain a memorable life-experience for me for a long, long time.

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Sustainable Development Goal: