Volunteers redirect efforts to address COVID-19 in Peru

“When the first outbreaks of the pandemic were detected in Peru in the middle of March, we were here, serving for the Bicentennial Special Project (BSP) with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), to contribute in the implementation of the largest Peruvian volunteer programme in the country’s history, as part of the celebrations of a national milestone: the Bicentenary of the independence in 2021” UN Expert Volunteer Oscar Málaga shares. “Amid the pandemic, we were asked if we could provide support and we got down to business straight away.”

Oscar has 5 years of experience within UNV and was part of the team in charge of handling the mobilization of large number of citizens for this major event. Together with Ivonne Harvey, also a UN Expert Volunteer, and other committed public servants from the BSP team, he puts its knowledge and expertise at the service of the Peruvian citizens without any hesitation. Ivonne, who has a Ph.D. in Education, had the mission of facilitating learning materials to the new volunteers, as well as ensuring they had the right level of training. The
two of them, along with 6 UN Specialist Volunteers and the whole BSP team were on the ground when they were asked by the Peruvian Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion (MIDIS) to assist in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This group’s presence on the ground was vital in those initial moments. Under the command of BSP MIDIS, they started considering how to recruit volunteers and how to prepare them in a very short period of time. “This is not just about getting people enrolled and putting them to serve” Ivonne says. “It requires coaching, emotional support, logistic coordination...”

UNV has developed a whole structured methodology for organizing and training volunteers and has tested it in large-scale events ever since the UN Climate Change Conference (COP20) in 2014. The huge challenge they were about to face could only be overcome with professionalism, hard work and high commitment.

VOLUNTEERING DURING A PANDEMIC: THE VALUE OF A QUICK REACTION

With the clock ticking and increasing containment measures being applied across the country to prevent the spread of the virus, the preparation of this volunteering campaign was very different from those in which Ivonne and Oscar had previously participated. They had to combine the UNV pre-existing methodology with the power of recruitment that an occasion like the commemoration of 200 years of independence has in a new context, that of massive volunteering in a pandemic scenario.

Since most of the people were in their homes because of the lockdown, it was necessary to try out new procedures: text messages, emails and a well-established network of national organizations with pre-existing databases –including Proa and Soy Voluntario- were combined to elaborate an emergency plan which was then carried out by the BSP local staff, where the UN Volunteers are currently serving.

“The idea was to assist around 200,000 people, mostly the elderly, especially those with limited resources and who could remain isolated during the curfew. They would have to be telephoned to monitor their health and well-being.” Oscar explains. Around 12,000 volunteers were needed to make this operation possible, and in less than 48 hours, more than 19,000 had signed up online to contribute.

Another 200 people volunteered to give information by telephone about a subsidy offered by the government to people in situations of special vulnerability (Linea 101).

The solid experience of Oscar, Ivonne and the whole BSP team, together with the collaboration of the civil society organizations, made this happen. They applied their high-valued guidelines to organize the intervention. “National volunteer networks were of great
value at this time, as they provided local data and expertise and facilitated the participation of experienced Peruvian volunteers to serve as group leaders.” Oscar shares.

TRAINING, MOTIVATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CARE

In any emergency scenario, psychological attention and motivation are very important for a collective action to succeed. In this case, as it is about citizens taking care of other citizens, and since they are all in a situation of confinement due to the general lockdown, taking care of the wellness of the volunteers is essential.

“These days one can hear tough stories. Keeping very close communication between the ministry and the people who are serving, as well as applying emotional stimulation techniques, are important to avoid frustration and to make the volunteers feel accompanied in every moment.” Ivonne declares.

She and some of her mates use the information provided by MIDIS to create didactic materials that keep the Peruvian volunteers informed, in addition to providing them with psychological counseling together with local organizations. “We produce texts and podcasts with training content, and also devise challenges to maintain the volunteers engaged and enhance their emotional state.” she comments.

WHAT CAN BE LEARNED

“This is a life lesson, the whole world needs to learn to be empathetic. This is an opportunity to think beyond what we had and to build a better society, the Peru we dream of.” Ivonne states. “It is important to think about how to ensure that the bonds generated during these days will result in improving the way relationships are built between people once the pandemic is overcome.” Oscar adds.

Another challenge is to understand that what Peru has done can be replicated: “Why don’t we spread this people-driven movement to other Latin American countries?” he reflects. In a global emergency context like the current one, the expertise and dedication of volunteers and the strategic alliances between all kinds of organizations are vital in allowing Peru to confront the pandemic.

*The Bicentennial Special Project aims to build a renewed national identity based on a cohesive, participatory and responsible citizenship with integrity, ethical values, and proud and respectful of its multicultural diversity.

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