UN Volunteers go beyond the call of duty to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 in Malakal

Catherine Amboga-Rimmele, a Kenyan-born UN Volunteer from Germany, sits in a prefabricated container at the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) Field Office in Malakal. With a cluster of sewing machines for company, she expertly cuts through reams of fabric in preparation of the next phase of her current project.

"Like everyone else, I have been watching and reading about the chaos around the world caused by COVID-19 and I really wanted to do something to help the community here fight this pandemic," reveals Catherine. "I saw that there was a shortage of face masks. I love sewing and the idea dawned on me that I could actually make some here," she adds.

Determined to make her plan succeed, Catherine presented it to Hazel de Wet, Head of Field Office, UNMISS Malakal, who embraced the innovative and creative idea at once. To kickstart the project, all UNMISS staff in Malakal contributed financially—not a lot, but just enough to cover the cost of a face mask for themselves and three other people. Following the financial input from colleagues, Catherine set about working on the design as per recommended specifications.
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Her initial goal was to make a few hundred masks. However, the project took on a life of its own! Catherine, who works with the Mission’s Civil Affairs team in Malakal, also engaged with humanitarian agencies and other mission sections to put together a team of South Sudanese counterparts who have previously been trained in tailoring.

Everyone she approached, of course, was more than happy to assist. For example, representatives from the World Health Organization and medical personnel from the UNMISS hospital run by Indian peacekeepers conducted tests on the prototypes Catherine produced while the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) provided the sewing machines and they got down to work.

"Let’s just say we ended up making more than 2,000 masks in the first phase of the project. These were mostly distributed among the displaced people living at the UNMISS Protection of Civilians site in Malakal."

Given her success, Catherine has received further impetus and funding to initiate the next phase of her project, which will include the production of child-friendly masks.

For the upcoming second phase, she is aiming to run the production of masks both within the UNMISS base, as well as locally in Malakal town, to ensure more local tailors learn how to make masks and every person living here has one to use. Cloth face masks in the typical “UN Blue” created by Catherine have thus become a common sight within the UNMISS base here and in adjacent areas.

This committed UN Volunteer believes that this project is an extension of her professional role in UNMISS Civil Affairs. "What I’m doing is actually part of my job--it’s just more hands on,' Catherine says.

"Civil Affairs involves the community. We work with people. We bring them together; we give them room to talk to each other and find solutions to issues affecting them. --Catherine Amboga-Rimmele, a UN Volunteer Civil Affairs, South Sudan

Catherine’s colleagues, especially Mike Dzakuma, the Civil Affairs Team Leader, Malakal, agree with her. "Catherine is one of our team’s greatest assets. She is multi-talented and dynamic in her approach, whether it be for promoting the role of women in conflict resolution and governance, or social issues, like this face mask project," he says.
With her zeal and commitment, Catherine and her team of tailors are contributing massively in our collective drive to fight this virus. --Mike Dzakuma, UNMISS Civil Affairs Team Leader, Malakal

29 May is annually commemorated as the International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers. In 2020, the UN is specifically commemorating the service given and sacrifices made by female peacekeepers such as Catherine for the cause of sustainable peace, given that it is also the 20th anniversary of the landmark Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

"It is an honour to be recognized by the UN on all fronts – for being a woman working in a very challenging environment, for being a UN Volunteer and most of all, for contributing positively towards the wellbeing of the people of South Sudan," states Catherine.

- International Day of UN Peacekeepers • COVID-19 • Germany

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