Designing a better future for refugees in Burundi

My name is Eve Zorawska and I am a Canadian national currently serving as UN Volunteer Associate Site Planning Officer with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Burundi. The urgent need for support in managing shelter and infrastructure in the humanitarian sector motivated me as a professional architect and urban planner to seek an opportunity to apply my knowledge and technical skills in the most urgent contexts.

With a background in architecture, urban design, planning and sustainable development, I have worked with many international organizations on emergency to long-term development projects across East Africa, Middle East, Asia, North America and Europe.

I was grateful to join the UNHCR Burundi operation as a UN Volunteer and apply my over eight years of experience, working in fast paced multicultural environments to provide the technical expertise that was needed from the national to community level.
As an expert and on behalf of the UNHCR Burundi operation, I am currently working with the implementing partners in charge of construction, maintenance and rehabilitation of infrastructure to provide technical support and capacity building in the sector.

In the framework of UNHCR’s efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, I have developed designs for more dignified isolation centres in refugee camps and quarantine facilities in transit centres in line with the COVID-19 Operation Continuity Plan. Together with our partners, I have been in the field, monitoring the construction to ensure a good quality of the new facilities.

The main challenge remains being efficient and continuing to deliver during the ongoing COVID-19 situation. I rely on email, teleconferences and phone calls to deliver towards the UNHCR operational goals. During missions to the field I use personal protective equipment provided by UNHCR and respect distancing and hygiene measures.

I enjoy working directly with our beneficiaries. Seeing them empowered with the tools and facilities I can provide is priceless. The most heart-warming experience was when I held a participatory workshop with refugees for improving the shelter design. Afterwards, I received many messages from the participants. They expressed their gratitude for my genuine care in empowering them and excitement for participating in the design process. They enjoyed having a chance to discuss their housing concerns, needs and hopes - in an environment where everyone’s input was respectfully heard. As an architect, it seems only natural to carefully listen to your client’s needs - whether they are refugees or anyone else. However, it was very heart-warming to receive such an immense expression of gratitude. --Eve Zorawska, UN Volunteer Associate Site Planning Officer with UNHCR, Burundi
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Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure SDG 10: Reduced inequalities SDG 11: Sustainable cities and communities SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals