Volunteering as a pathway for refugees to transition from education to employment

Mr Toily Kurbanov, Deputy Executive Coordinator of the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme, addressed the UNHCR Spotlight Session on Tertiary Education at the first-ever Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in Geneva. He was accompanied by Mikaelou Demba Dia, who shared his experience as a refugee from Mauritania currently serving as a Refugee UN Volunteer with UN Women in Dakar, Senegal.

Education is one of six themes at the centre of the GRF, critical to the support of refugees and the countries that host them. The Spotlight Session focused on tertiary education for refugees, through a conversation about how barriers are being overcome, how interventions are improving the quality or expanding the quantity of opportunities available, and ultimately, how higher education pathways can support self-reliance and solutions for refugees.

In his address, Mr Kurbanov shared how UNV collaborates with partners to open pathways for refugees to shape the future. He also spoke about how these programmes are working to change perceptions of refugees as passive recipients of assistance, to one where refugees are active agents of
Yes, refugees have the right to education and the right to employment, but even in the best of circumstances the transition from school to work does not have a magic switch. So, UNV focuses on volunteer work as a public good—and as a pathway from education to employment.—Toily Kurbanov, Deputy Executive Coordinator, UNV

Mr Kurbanov elaborated, "UNV creates tailored solutions to enable refugee graduates to do volunteer work in the UN. Together with UNHCR and other partners, we do our best to empower refugees to shape their future—and the future of their communities—by volunteering."

UNHCR and partners, including UNV, have set the goal to achieve enrolment in higher education for 15 per cent of young refugee women and men by the year 2030.

In Senegal, Ghana, Niger and Nigeria, UNV and UNHCR have partnered to empower graduates of the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI). Funded by Germany, this scholarship programme enables refugees to access higher education in countries of asylum.

Since 2018, 22 DAFI graduates have served as UN Volunteers with 11 UN entities, including IOM, UNDP, UNICEF and UN Women. This partnership is **promoting refugee empowerment and livelihoods through volunteerism**.

This is an opportunity for the DAFI graduates to gain professional experience as UN Volunteers in the UN system, where they can contribute with their unique background and perspectives to help achieving the SDGs.

They work in fields like communications and public relations, inclusive finance, governance or women’s political participation. One of these is UNHCR-UNV-DAFI graduate Mikaelou Demba Dia, who joined Mr Kurbanov at the Spotlight Session. Born in Mauritania, Mikaelou fled his native country to Senegal with his parents in 1989, following violent border and ethnic clashes.
As recipient of the UNHCR-UNV DAFI scholarship, Mikaelou spoke of how his transition from tertiary education to employment was supported by the programme. After a year of serving as a UN Volunteer in Dakar, Senegal, Mikaelou’s UN Volunteer assignment is now funded directly by his host agency, UN Women. Speaking at the Session, Mikaelou explained how his situation now allowed him to take charge of his family and play an important role to drive change in his community.

“The issue of job search is a global issue that is not specific to refugees. That is why refugee graduates must take their destiny into their own hands. I urge my community, the refugee community, to own its past, but not to let itself be possessed by it. Without forgetting our past, we must seek to heal our memory and take advantage of the opportunities that life offers us to create our future and that of our children. --Mikaelou Demba Dia, UN Volunteer with UN Women

In 2019, UNHCR and UNV went beyond the DAFI initiative and successfully piloted a dedicated volunteer modality in Burkina Faso, Colombia and Kenya. The aim was to enable more refugees to offer their specific expertise to other refugees, displaced populations and host communities, as cultural mediators and interpreters, community mobilizers and livelihoods specialists. After a thorough assessment and preparations, the Refugee UN Volunteer modality will become fully operational in 2020.

“Contributions of Refugee UN Volunteers are priceless. They bring to the UN unique insights, competencies and expertise. Usually, when a solution works we say it’s a win-win. Refugee UN Volunteers are win-win, win-win: a win for the communities they serve, a win for the communities
they represent, a big win for the UN agencies that hire them, and a net gain for the world. --Toily Kurbanov

In Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya UNV, UNHCR and partners are enhancing security, co-existence and refugee protection through Refugee Outreach Volunteers.

In Serbia, UNV partnered with UNDP and UNHCR partnered with the aim of strengthening the social inclusion of young Roma through UN Community Volunteer opportunities.

UNV also shared how, in Lebanon, refugees turned UN Volunteer Teachers educate fellow refugees twice displaced from Syria to Lebanon. This partnership developed when UNRWA Lebanon approached UNV seeking a way to recruit teachers to support the learning needs of Palestinian refugee children displaced due to the conflict in Syria.

The first Global Refugee Forum comes at the end of a tumultuous decade in which the number of refugees has risen to over 25 million people worldwide.

Guided by the Global Compact on Refugees, the Global Refugee Forum is an opportunity to translate the principle of international responsibility-sharing into concrete action.

UNV is committed to supporting the Global Framework for Refugee Education. Through its work, UNV hopes to help create the conditions for global support for the education of refugees and host communities to meet the commitments of the Global Compact on Refugees and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particular SDG4, which aims to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ by 2030.

Global Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 10: Reduced inequalities