



Ulrika Modeer is UN Assistant Secretary-General and UNDP Assistant Administrator and Director of the Bureau of External Relations and Advocacy. She served as a UN Volunteer in Guatemala in the aftermath of the civil war.

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## "Volunteerism connects us to our purpose," says UN Assistant Secretary-General Ulrika Modeer

UN Assistant Secretary-General, UNDP Assistant Administrator and Director of the Bureau of External Relations and Advocacy, Ms Ulrika Modeer, reflects on her experience as a UN Volunteer in Guatemala in the late 1990s. Ms Modeer commenced her assignment in the aftermath of the civil war and the signing of the Agreement on Firm and Lasting Peace. She speaks of the ability of volunteerism to connect organizations and people working in international development to their purpose.

I fundamentally believe in the power of volunteerism to effect change – on the individual, on communities and on the organizations they serve.

In my role as Assistant Administrator and Director of the Bureau of External Relations and Advocacy at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), I am proud to be working with an organization that is among the prime movers, supporting countries to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

“ Every day, I see the contribution of UN Volunteers to our work – they are an important grassroots network and allow us to remain connected to our purpose and leave no one behind.

My history with UNDP and my own experience with volunteerism dates back to 1997, when I volunteered with UNDP as a specialist in Guatemala. I was placed in the municipality of Sololá, with the civic committee.

As part of the peace accords signed in 1996, Guatemala's Indigenous people, who had endured years of entrenched racism and abandonment yet comprised nearly half of Guatemala's complex multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual population, were for the first time, able to run for public office forming beyond the traditional political parties what was called civic committees. It was my task to provide technical support in the municipality supporting them in planning and partnerships. It was challenging and daunting, not just for me, but for the municipality of Sololá as well as the situation was very new to them.

My interest in the assignment in Guatemala stemmed from my university studies, where I had focused on the rights of indigenous people. I arrived in Guatemala on my own and had a quite long immersion process. Although I had travelled and lived abroad, the experience was challenging and frustrating, especially in the beginning. I lacked experience and was struggling to find out how best to support and understand organizational processes within the municipality and I did not have guidance or support from UNV or UNDP.

With so many different tasks to deliver, I hit the road. I took my own car and drove to the communities the municipality served. I felt I needed to reach the people I was working for and so I worked hard to become part of a team and create trust and one way of doing that was to give very practical support.

I worked closely with newly-employed civil servants and was the bridge between the old and new staff. I supported planning services of the Sololá municipality and coordinated with other municipalities that had also experienced quite abrupt political change, regionally and across the country.

“ When you work in international development, it is important to have experience at the local level. I certainly learned a lot by getting out there and connecting in communities. My experience as a volunteer was good – everyone was highly appreciative and really kind.

Yet, I also learned the value of good preparation. It was such a new experience for everyone involved, but with better and more preparation it could have been a much smoother start and more beneficial.

On my own initiative, I tried to take my experience back to UNDP Guatemala and tell them how I perceived development at the local level. Strengthening democracy within communities was direly needed at the time and to think an international volunteer was the best solution is perhaps questionable! It showed though that UNDP, as we do today, tries to make use of all levels of staffing and skills and that even a UN Volunteer can make a valuable contribution.

“Volunteers work very close to the grassroots and they should be part of shaping the direction of the organization they serve.

My experience as a UN Volunteer was emotional, unique and challenging and I'm happy I had the opportunity. At this stage in my career, I can see that in order to be professional international development workers, we need experience working on the ground and we need to get back to the local level throughout our careers.

“Whether you work at home, in your community or abroad, the volunteering experience forms and enriches you, giving you a strong foundation in forming policy and practices for development.

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