Deploying 1,000 volunteers to promote behaviour change for COVID-19 prevention in Sierra Leone

The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Sierra Leone at the end of March 2020 and immediately the UN Development Programme country office switched into response mode. International UN Volunteer Helen Mayelle from Uganda represented UNDP in the Risk Communication and Social Mobilization pillar of the National COVID-19 Emergency Response Centre (NaCOVERC). Helen was selected based on her assignment in communications, and also her previous experience during the Ebola emergency.

Acting as a UNDP representative, Helen co-led the Community Engagement sub-group of the pillar and was tasked to do a rapid assessment of community engagement needs, gaps and challenges.
There were two essential things we could do: support the health care system to address cases and enhance risk communication and community engagement to help slow down and reduce the spread of the disease. --Dr Samuel Doe, UNDP’s Resident Representative in Sierra Leone

Seeing the dire need for community engagement to respond to the pandemic, the pillar launched the “STOP-COVID” campaign to promote community engagement through the dissemination of factual information on prevention measures and against fake news.

Helen got UNDP senior management’s buy-in to fund the campaign with US $253,000 re-directed from programmatic budgets. She managed the funds, coordinated procurement and designed materials for the campaign.

I planned the recruitment, training and deployment of 1,000 volunteers to promote behaviour change and to encourage safe public health measures. The campaign adopted a community-led approach by reaching out to influencer groups and individuals to spread preventive measures. This was the first national campaign that brought together people from different walks of life on an equal standing, including market women, fishing communities and commercial bike riders, persons with disabilities, albinism or dwarfism, youth groups, civil society, media, artists and politicians alike. --Helen Mayelle, UN Volunteer Communications Analyst, Sierra Leone
The initiative helped reach close to 16,000 people who, for the most part, had not adhered to prevention measures, due to denial, affordability, or lack of access to water and soap for handwashing. When the Government declared face masks mandatory in public areas in early May, they distributed 52,000 masks to the population.

The project has been praised within the UN in Sierra Leone as a model to design and implement projects that leave no one behind. And national partners recognized the great contribution of Helen as mentioned by Solomon Jamiru, Spokesperson for the NACOVERC: "I want to testify, not only on behalf of NACOVERC, but the entire Government, that UNDP, through Helen, has proven to be a friend and a worthy partner."

"I am who I am today thanks to different people who voluntarily offered me helping hands on my path. So, I pledged to help others, because I know they will be uplifted in one way or another, and the positive impact of that will be communal. I am grateful that I am now able to do that through the UN, because I can reach many more people. --Helen Mayelle"