



Bringing a non-traditional background to OHCHR Guatemala in the context of COVID-19

As countries continue implementing and adjusting their COVID-19 responses, it has become increasingly important for the world to consider the interrelated and mutually reinforcing nature of the founding pillars of the United Nations: human rights, peace and security, and development. National UN Expert Volunteer César Pérez serves as Information Management Associate within the Information and Press Unit of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). He shares his experience demonstrating and encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration. His assignment is financed through the Special Voluntary Fund of the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme.

Despite the need for immediate response to the threats posed by the pandemic, countries must maintain a long-term perspective. The protection of human rights would help maintain peace and security and ensure the continuity of sustainable development, especially in post-conflict states such as Guatemala. In line with this, OHCHR continues to fulfill its mandate in Guatemala – albeit virtually due to COVID-19.

César joined OHCHR in June 2020 as one of ten UN Volunteers in the region. He

had minimal knowledge about human rights, but a unique skill set acquired from years in computer science and engineering in both the private sector and with non-governmental organizations.

Curious about the intersection of technology and human rights, César was optimistic about the potential of interdisciplinary teams – in which humanities and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) professionals collaborate and complement one another – to tackle multifaceted issues. In the face of the COVID-19 challenge, he feels fortunate to have found a niche in which he is able to contribute his unconventional background to OHCHR's mission.

“ I value the possibility to apply certain learnings from my career development to support others. In an interdisciplinary team, your contribution is always going to bring a different point of view because you have different expertise and background. --César Pérez, national UN Expert Volunteer Information Management Associate with OHCHR

The match between César's skills and the particular reporting needs of the agency became evident when his team requested his assistance in developing more concrete and concise reports. In a fast-paced, data-driven world in which convenience and credibility of information are key, such reporting is indispensable. The effectiveness of particular elements of OHCHR's work – follow-ups and the monitoring of cases involving allegations of possible human right violations via online broadcasts of hearings – could be compromised, for example, if insecure or inadequate internet connection, resolution or sound result in the team not being able to catch the judge's words.

OHCHR's quick adaptation to the remote format necessitated by COVID-19 is further evidenced through the copious webinars and workshops the teams are organizing with various partners, covering topics such as digital security and the impact of COVID-19 on various vulnerable groups. Despite these efforts to continue pursuing objectives, however, OHCHR cannot be in the field as usual due to the pandemic, and this reality inevitably impacts morale.

Nevertheless, César reflects that the trying circumstances and challenges do not undermine his colleagues' deep engagement and passion for human rights issues. "Rarely have I seen groups so immersed in a subject, so committed to advancing causes," he shares.

Cesar's dedication to fulfilling, as well as going beyond, his duties as a UN Volunteer is further exemplified by his involvement in virtual workshops with *Desafío Joven* (Youth

Challenge), a partner of OHCHR. When Desafío asked César to give a workshop on project management for social projects geared towards the young leaders of the NGO, he accepted without hesitation. Plans are being developed to do more webinars in the future on topics such as fake news and disinformation.

Not only did César appreciate the reach that the platform provided for 77 young leaders, as each represents a different municipality in Guatemala, he also valued the opportunity to explain how volunteering works, as this was inquired at the start of the workshop. César encouraged the participants to explore opportunities to volunteer, underscoring that it is a worthwhile investment:

“ I think that something very important in volunteering is that you feel that it is a win-win, long-term relationship. You're giving back, but you're also developing yourself. I think that's the formula for a good and lasting relationship, hopefully a long-term one. --César Pérez

César is experiencing this win-win firsthand, as he is continuously learning about human rights within his assignment with OHCHR. Not only is he contributing his hard-earned skills, he is also raising awareness in Guatemala about the power of volunteerism to drive significant change and achieve the SDGs, to leverage otherwise untapped human capital.

César was highly impressed and inspired by the culture of volunteerism he observed while studying abroad in Japan – an enriching experience made possible through a scholarship funded by the Government of Japan. From this opportunity, he realized people would mention not only their name, profession, or studies, but also their volunteer work while introducing themselves.

"Maybe, one day, this will be standard in Guatemala, as well," he says.

“ Developing such a culture of volunteerism is a process, but it is one that could, and should, be accelerated during this [Decade of Action](#). Anyone and everyone can be an agent of change. --César Pérez

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