



International UN Volunteer Deborah Benja, visiting women soap producers from Barsalogho, Burkina Faso.
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How volunteering can enable women and children to regain a decent life

Karen Deborah Benja Veromanantsoa is a 27-year-old UN Volunteer from Madagascar. She joined the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in her country in 2014 as a national youth volunteer for two years, and then served as a national specialist volunteer until 2018 as part of a project promoting youth participation in development. Deborah shares the highlights of her volunteer journey.

Years of volunteer experiences in my home country have been fascinating to me and have allowed me to meet people from different backgrounds, to exchange with many groups of young beneficiaries, and to accompany them in their activities. From these experiences, I aspired to work where I could contribute my knowledge and skills beyond Madagascar, and luckily, I got an opportunity to serve in Burkina Faso as an international UN Volunteer Community Resilience Specialist.

In August 2019, I landed in Kaya, 100 km from the capital Ouagadougou, in

the North Central Region of Burkina Faso. I arrived at a time when terrorist attacks in the northern part of the country were becoming more and more frequent, forcing communities to move to other localities. The North Central Region quickly became within a few months, the refuge of hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people.

In this context, UNDP had just opened its integrated sub-office in the region, as part of strengthening the UN system integrated presence in the region and had to respond to the needs of a population in crisis. As the focal point of the UNDP integrated office in Kaya, my role was to identify the critical socio-economic needs of the displaced population and report them to the UNDP programmatic units.

“ I immediately noticed that women and children, forced to leave everything behind to save their lives, were the most affected by this humanitarian crisis. Based on the needs identified at the local level, I proposed income-generating activities for the vulnerable women of Kaya, Barsalogho and Pissila, areas with the most vulnerable groups of internally displaced people.

In collaboration with local non-governmental organizations and partners, we were able to develop training sessions to help women build capacities in financial education and activity management. We trained participants to manage their activities, from the purchasing of agricultural inputs to production, processing and distribution, and on how to save money from their earnings.

Following the sessions, the participants decided to create a group for more solidarity. In order to support their sustainable economic development, we provided them with agricultural inputs to start market agriculture and other materials so that they could start soap production, a high-potential sector regarding the market needs.

“ To date, 300 internally displaced women and 300 women-headed households are benefiting from this project. I went back to the region a few months ago to follow up on the activities. I met our beneficiaries in Kaya, already harvesting salads and onions. In Barsalogo, they were already marketing their soaps. They feel and have become empowered.

Seeing these women who are now self-sufficient reminds me why I got engaged in volunteering and how important is my commitment to others. I am proud to see that my work has helped to make a difference in people's lives.

“ The commitment of UN Volunteers remains crucial for the accompaniment and empowerment of people. It is through them that we make sure every day that no one is left behind. --Mathieu Ciowela, UNDP Resident Representative in Burkina Faso



• Humanitarian crisis • empowerment • income generation

Sustainable Development Goal: **SDG 1: No poverty** **SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth** **SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals**

