From tiny ideas: Finding meaning in 21st century volunteerism

An event of the alumni initiative, the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme’s regional alumni meeting for Europe and Central Asia provides UN Volunteers with the opportunity to learn from former volunteers now working in managerial positions in the UN system. Ms Ulziisuren Jamsran, UN Women Representative in Kyrgyzstan, former UN Volunteer and top innovator in gender-transformative changes, was a recent guest speaker. She shared her story and vision for the future of volunteerism, touching many and inspiring the next generation of volunteers turned leaders.

I arrived in Kyrgyzstan aged 25, along with my spouse and child. My assignment as a UN Volunteer was to assist communities to overcome poverty in remote areas of the country.

My experience as a UN Volunteer in Kyrgyzstan, from 1999-2001, was unique and enriching. It allowed me to become a professional and
ultimately, it paved the way for my future. It is truly the most amazing and life-changing journey I have been on.

I commenced my UN Volunteer service in a national programme aimed at raising the financial literacy and wellbeing of vulnerable and marginalized groups in rural communities. I worked with local financial institutions, agricultural services and project teams to help community members find their solutions for improving their livelihoods.

We worked with tiny ideas. We saw how it was possible for simple supplies – good quality needles, chickens or potatoes – to help people start their own income generation. The community members, who came together as self-help-groups, were supported to learn how to trust and work together through small scale saving and credit schemes, collaborate on joint actions, produce and sell their joint products, ultimately bringing benefits to the entire community. --Ulziisuren Jamsran

In the end, people were able to believe in their skills and potential and transform themselves, their families and communities. When I started my assignment, communities were using only 10 per cent of all agricultural land. By the end, they were managing more than 70 per cent of it productively.

Through strength and wisdom along with the help of the communities themselves, I learned how to turn every challenge into a dialogue and an opportunity.

The experience and knowledge I gained in running these community resilience initiatives in Kyrgyzstan became foundational to my career. Later, when I became a Senior Rural Development Specialist and Social Development Advisor in Ukraine, we replicated many of the same principles for the Crimea Reintegration Programme.

I faced many challenges here too, both personally and professionally. I was constantly challenged about community development and the role of
women in the community and society. At the personal front, my spouse and I were frequently questioned about me being the breadwinner, while being a married woman and a mother.

This motivated me to confront these challenges head on. I began to actively engage women to advance change and we challenged norms by initiating unconventional activities, such as playing football with the communities in rural areas. Just imagine women’s slippers flying together with the football in the air — that brought a lot of laughter, and thus a lot of great opportunities to reflect with the communities about equal opportunities for women and men, girls and boys in every context and society.

We were always together with the communities and were brave in our fight for change.

During my journey, I have come to strongly believe in the empowerment of women and their voices. I have since worked as the Gender Adviser for Moldova and Ukraine and the UN Women Representative in Moldova and the State of Palestine.

I have also taken on roles including Regional Governance Specialist in Kazakhstan and Poverty Alleviation Specialist in Mongolia. In 2019, I joined the UN Women’s Kyrgyzstan country office as Representative.

“Women in Kyrgyzstan suffer from domestic violence, trafficking or other forms of physical or sexual abuse. To find the data on its prevalence in the country, UN Women is taking the lead on a Gender in Society Perception Study. UN Women in Kyrgyzstan plays a significant coordination role in advocating for women’s and girls’ rights in the framework of the UN Secretary General’s UNiTE to End Violence against Women campaign by mobilizing the government, civil society and partners. The organization also supports the introduction of a gender dimension to the reform of the judicial system in Kyrgyzstan.” --UN Women Kyrgyzstan
There is no doubt that my career evolved from my experience in volunteerism. I recognize the importance of volunteer assignments, like mine in Kyrgyzstan, to provide grassroots experience and valuable training for the future leaders of the UN.

So far, I have devoted 20 years to international development, strategy and managerial leadership in gender and women’s issues in Moldova, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and the State of Palestine. I have provided technical expertise on development, gender issues, knowledge management and microfinance to the UN (UNDP, UNIFEM, UN Women) and the governments of Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Albania and Mongolia on various assignments. I am also an active promoter of social innovation in the UN.

In June this year, I participated in an online session with a younger generation of volunteers, part of a series on ‘UNV personalities in Europe and the CIS – Legacy and Honour’. While I shared my vision for the development agenda, I really wanted to hear the fresh volunteer voices of our times.

For me in that session, it was critically important to explore the question: Why volunteer?

It is my belief that within each of us there is a set of core values that motivates us to take action.

I am glad I could meet the new generation of volunteers, answer their questions and learn from them about the meaning of volunteerism. The UN system is evolving every day and volunteers play an important role delivering its development and humanitarian agenda.

My message to new volunteers is this:

Align your actions to the core values and principles, then you can be certain you will successfully serve those who are in greatest need of your support.

While you may feel like your contribution is small – or even seems like a tiny idea – remember it is just the beginning. Do not be afraid, test it together with others, and learn as much as possible, also jointly with others.

Volunteering may not only help advance your career in the UN system, but advance grassroots communities and the UN system as a whole. Your volunteer contribution hugely matters.
National and international UN Volunteers serving with the Poverty Alleviation programme in Kyrgyzstan gather for a joint national meeting in Talas region, where Ulziisuren Jamsran (standing, far right) served as international UN Volunteer. Courtesy of Ulziisuren Jamsran

Ms Ulziisuren Jamsran holds a master’s degree in Leading Change from the University of Oxford and École des hautes études commerciales de Paris, and another in Economics (Statistics and Demography) from the Mongolian State University.

A native of Mongolia, Ms Jamsran speaks Mongolian, English, and Russian.

- Kazakhstan • Mongolia • gender equality • Volunteerism

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 5: Gender equality SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals