



Community Youth Volunteers deployed by UNDP and UNV in Zambia to help with the COVID-19 response.

© UNDP Zambia, 2020

How we can overcome the COVID-19 pandemic together

For most of this year, our lives have been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lives have been lost, livelihoods disrupted and education adversely impacted. Poverty levels have increased in some countries, societal bonds have been strained, and the overall trend of development has been reversed. Yet, despite the bleak outlook, we have witnessed stories of hope, courage, triumph and kindness towards one another: the spirit of oneness – ubuntu, obuntu bulamu or utu, as it is commonly known in East and Southern Africa.

The spirit of volunteerism, innate in all of us, is what drives the selflessness of people who, during the COVID-19 pandemic, have extended kindness to their neighbours, supported access to medical care for those in need, and shopped for the elderly and other vulnerable people, among other acts of generosity. This resonates with a quote from former UN Secretary-General, the late Kofi Annan.□

“ Behind the progress lie many factors. One is the willingness of many individuals to donate their time, effort, resources and ideas to the wellbeing and advancement of all. We call them volunteers. --late UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan

Volunteers have been at the forefront of medical, community and societal responses across the East and Southern Africa region. The COVID-19 [Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan](#), developed by the World Health Organization (WHO), identifies community volunteers as key stakeholders for risk communication, community engagement and provision of health services.



The UN Development Programme (UNDP) and UNV team, together with some of the 50 UN Volunteer health experts deployed by UNDP to support the COVID-19 response in Kenya. ©UNV, 2020

Since joining the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme in East and Southern Africa in November of this year, I have been humbled by the selflessness shown by volunteers of all ages, races and genders across the region.

In Zambia, more than 800 community youth volunteers have [reached about 700,000 households](#) through a [door-to-door COVID-19 outreach initiative](#), debunking myths and spreading life-saving messages. In Kenya, Nicodemus Otieno and Cynthia Wandabwa are two of [50 UN Volunteer health professionals deployed by UNDP Kenya](#) across the country to support the national COVID-19 response.

In Mozambique, Ângela Macie, a UN Volunteer serving with the World Food Programme (WFP), is on the frontlines [supporting logistics for food distribution in vulnerable communities](#). In [Somalia](#), there are many [UN Volunteer medical doctors](#) supporting UN clinics in remote regions. In moments like this, these and many other volunteers globally are supporting countries across the region and the world in combating COVID-19.

“ As countries move to build back better their socio-economic foundations that have been greatly fissured by the pandemic, volunteers will play a vital role. --Lucy Ndungu, Regional Manager, UNV East and Southern Africa

According to the [State of the World's Volunteerism Report 2018](#), published by UNV, [over a billion people volunteer every year globally](#), with many more willing to do so, if given the opportunity. This translates to one in every seven people, an equivalent of 109 million full-time workers globally. If they constituted a country, the global volunteer workforce would be the fifth largest in the world, roughly equivalent to the number of employed people in Indonesia.

Additionally, the contribution of volunteerism to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) cannot be underestimated. In Kenya, for instance, volunteerism contributes to about 3.6 per cent of the GDP according to research commissioned by Kenya's State Department for Social Protection in 2017.

This year's commemoration of International Volunteer Day (IVD) recognized the contributions of such volunteers across the region. During the regional virtual forum to mark IVD 2020, we celebrated outstanding volunteers and received useful reflections on volunteerism from our partners.

Governments, UN entities, academia, civil society and volunteer-involving organizations enumerated additional benefits of volunteerism as: support to skilling where capacity gaps exist across the development context; support to service delivery (particularly in far-flung areas), building community resilience and ensuring no one is left behind. Noting that volunteers at times work in challenging environments, they also advocated for support and care for volunteers.

From lessons of 2020, anecdotes from partners showed that [online volunteering](#) works just as well as onsite volunteering where extenuating circumstances limit the latter. Further evidence showed that the nimbleness of local volunteerism, in particular flexibility, swiftness to act and the ability to self-organize, were attributes that came in handy in response to COVID-19.

“ UNV will continue partnering with the UN and Member States in East and Southern Africa to promote volunteerism as a “*powerful and crosscutting means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*” as recognized, for the first time, in the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR) of operational activities of the United Nations system, adopted in December 2020.

 East and Southern Africa

• International Volunteer Day • IVD2020 • COVID-19 • Coronavirus •

TogetherWeCan

Sustainable Development Goal: [SDG 3: Good health and well-being](#) [SDG 10: Reduced inequalities](#) [SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals](#)