



UN Volunteers in Congo, together with France Volontaires and the RAVSI platform, launched the Mask4All initiative to distribute 2,500 masks to the poorest people in Brazzaville, including the elderly, pregnant women and persons with disabilities.

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Beating COVID-19 with solidarity

This year marks 30 years since I started working in the UN system, mostly at the UN Volunteers program. Looking back at my experience, I have never witnessed a time like what we have experienced since the emergence of COVID-19. We have all been impacted directly or indirectly by this horrible pandemic that has spread across the world. If there is one thing I have learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is that solidarity is a strong value that stands the test of time and circumstances.

During these past 10 months, while we were all facing a global crisis devastating our socio-economic systems, adaptation, resilience and solidarity have enabled us to respond. Our country offices were able to quickly mobilize volunteers in West and Central Africa to support COVID-19 national response plans: more than 260 UN Volunteers have been engaged in 19 countries to support UN agencies either through the provision of technical medical support or implementation of [large scale awareness-raising campaigns](#).

“ With the pandemic, we had to adjust our way of working and delivering, sometimes in challenging conditions. Our volunteers took up their assignments during a lockdown and telecommuting context. They demonstrated their adaptability and their professionalism, as did the 50 UN Volunteer health workers deployed in partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to provide secondary support to those on the frontline. --
Veronique Zidi-Aporeigah, Regional Manager, West and Central Africa

One such volunteer, Eby Emile, helped ensure the [timely evacuation of patients and monitor the quarantine process for all persons who have been in contact with confirmed COVID-19 patients](#).

It is evident that a pandemic such as COVID-19, which weakens economies and social fabrics, is not only a concern for organizations or governments. It is everyone's responsibility, and communities are at the frontline of the response. We encouraged their engagement through awareness-raising campaigns, and [they became instrumental in spreading the right information](#) and making their members understand the value of their contribution in this global struggle. In line with this, 146 UN Community Volunteers were involved in helping demystify stereotypes, belief systems and misinformation, using innovative means of interaction in times of social distancing. In Senegal and Guinea, for example, our volunteers conducted community radio mass communication. In Nigeria, they helped translate key messages into various local languages and disseminate them to communities.

It was essential for us to give priority to community engagement and echo fact-based messages and calls for preventive measures, including the importance of social distancing. The story of our International UN Volunteer Helen Mayelle, who [deployed 1,000 volunteers to promote behavior change for COVID-19 prevention in Sierra Leona](#) is just one of many that show the power of solidarity.

We shifted the use of our funds for Volunteer Promotion Initiatives at the country level to facilitate the distribution of masks, hand sanitizers and soaps, and to organize local campaigns for the most vulnerable segments of the population. Our interventions at the community level showed us how impactful results can be obtained with little funds^[1].

We pooled our efforts with national and international volunteer organizations such as France Volontaires, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the Scout movement to reach as many people as possible. Our volunteers with assignments related to the COVID-19 pandemic response roughly reached 645,903 beneficiaries^[2]. These were mainly the elderly, youth, and people below the (absolute) poverty line.

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided opportunities where technology has been leveraged for equitable collaboration. While the entire world was under lockdown, volunteers worldwide were able to contribute through online volunteering. Our region [received the support of more than 400 online volunteers](#). I remember the inspiring story of 10 skilled Online Volunteers who supported 1,000 Cameroonians from Bamenda, department of Mezam, with online fundraising for an awareness-raising campaign on COVID-19, which resulted in the distribution of soap and face masks.

“ Almost one year since the first cases of COVID, the pandemic continues to disrupt jobs, health, the economy, and education, exacerbating underlying development challenges like poverty and inequality. We need to keep joining forces and valuing solidarity. Through solidarity, we can emerge on the other side of this pandemic stronger and walk towards a better future. And as we move into the recovery phase, we need to explore how volunteer opportunities can be extended to more people.

[1] *Around US \$19,400 from the Volunteer Promotion Initiatives Funds were spent on various COVID-19 awareness interventions.*

[2] *UNV Volunteer Reporting Application 2020.*



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Sustainable Development Goal: [SDG 1: No poverty](#) [SDG 3: Good health and well-being](#) [SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals](#)