UN Volunteers Tabitha Shali (left), Nursing Officer, and Alex Munguti, Laboratory Technologist, prepare COVID-19 swabs for laboratory processing and analysis at Moi Referral Hospital, Voi, Taita Taveta County.
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Collaborating through volunteerism for a better future: reflections from the COVID-19 response in Kenya

COVID-19 has proven to be a highly infectious virus spread through human-to-human transmission. For many frontline and healthcare workers like our UN Volunteers, contracting COVID-19 in the course of duty is a significant concern. However, this has not hindered hundreds of healthcare workers from selflessly serving on the frontlines of the pandemic, giving back generously by servicing affected communities at a time of great need.

Following the outbreak of the pandemic in Kenya, 50 UN Volunteer health experts were deployed through a UN joint programme to support the COVID-19 response at county level, where the unexpected surge of infections had overstretched healthcare service-delivery capacity, impacting lives and livelihoods.

The rapid deployment of the UN Volunteer health experts to 14 most vulnerable counties in Kenya was possible thanks to the flexibility of the governments of Sweden, Finland and Italy, through the UN joint devolution programme, implemented by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), UN Women and UN Children's Fund (UNICEF). The timely deployments through the UN Volunteers (UNV) programme in Kenya provided critical support to county healthcare systems and guaranteed business continuity and services for poor and marginalized communities.

> " Mahatma Gandhi once said, "the best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others". This statement truly epitomizes what it means to be a volunteer and explains the true spirit of volunteerism. Volunteers collaborating with governments and various entities are helping us to build better communities. As we commit to building forward better, this is the inspiration the world needs right now.

While the health crisis has negatively impacted healthcare systems and access, the pandemic has created a unique opportunity for citizen volunteers to work alongside governments to protect public health. The virus has exposed our health sector's inadequacies globally, putting enormous pressure on government resources and services.

That is why together with Kenya's Council of Governors, the County Assemblies Forum and other partners, the UN system in Kenya prioritized four critical areas of intervention in the COVID-19 response: messaging to create awareness and adequately prepare communities to respond to the pandemic, strengthening county-level health systems, addressing gender-based violence, and enhancing human resource capacities to support the frontline response.

Based on our experience in engaging UN Volunteers in the COVID-19 response in Kenya, collaboration between citizens and governments is not only essential in rapid deployment to address emerging crises, but in supporting the delivery of critical public services.
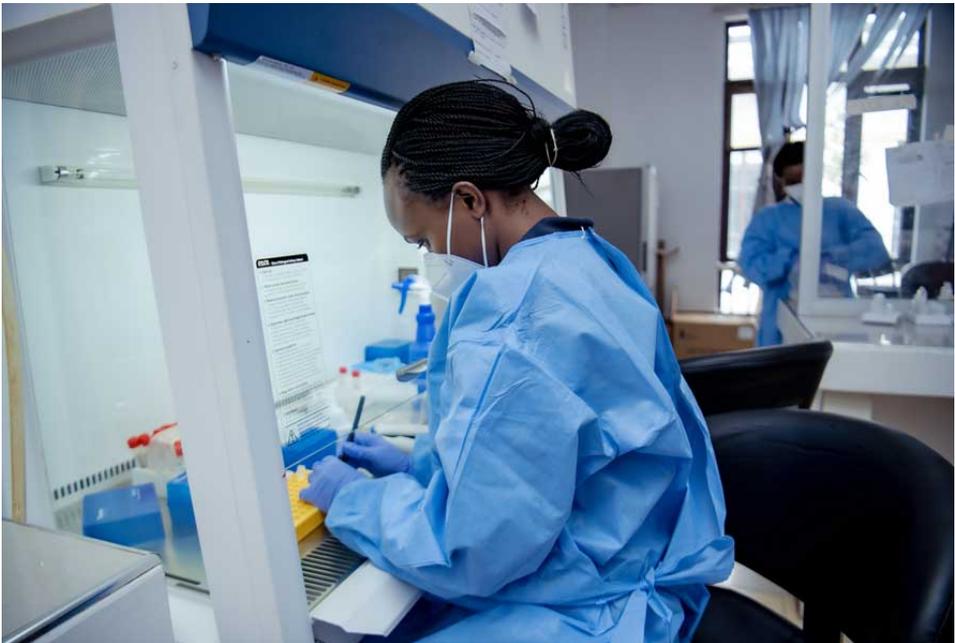
Collaboration between governments and volunteers, and involvement of citizens and community groups, guarantees better awareness of the local context and ensures interventions address context-specific needs. Additionally, relationships created by such engagements lead to enhanced long-term cooperation between government and citizens and go a long way in deepening the social contract and buy-in beyond a crisis.

> " Since we deployed the 50 UN Volunteer health experts in Kenya mid-

UN VOLUNTEERS

> " last year, many of our partners have highlighted the significant contribution the UN Volunteers are making in supporting healthcare provision and the fight against the pandemic. From public health workers, lab technicians and nurses to clinical physicians, these volunteer health professionals offer critical healthcare services where the needs have been most significant.

In recognition of their tremendous efforts and selflessness, the UN Volunteers received an award in 2020 for their crucial contribution to the COVID-19 response from the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and the Volunteer-Involving Organizations Society.

It is important to emphasise that our engagement with the UNV programme is not just about placing volunteers in different UN programmes. Their engagement is more systemic, ensuring that the spirit of volunteerism permeates every facet of our society. It is inspiring to see just how driven and dedicated these volunteers are, working on several development interventions, including the COVID-19 response. These heroes are highly adaptive to our context and remain an essential pillar of our work.

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3

UN Volunteer Cynthia Wandabwa Wafula, Laboratory Technologist, preparing laboratory specimens at Mama Lucy Kibaki Level 4 Hospital, Nairobi County. ©UNDP, 2020

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• COVID-19 • Coronavirus • Sweden • Finland • Italy

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 3: Good health and well-being SDG 10: Reduced inequalities SDG 11: Sustainable cities and communities SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals

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4