The pivotal role of UN Volunteer health professionals in COVID-19 response plans

Since the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic, the United Nations has been advocating for a large-scale, coordinated and comprehensive health response. Through its Special Voluntary Fund (SVF), UNV has deployed 126 UN Volunteers worldwide since early 2020 to date in different sectors, to assist countries in the fight against COVID-19. Some of these serve as Public Health Officers with the World Health Organization and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) to reinforce health systems and capacities.

In times of health and sanitary crisis, laboratories are crucial in providing reliable data for emergency preparedness and response. In Zimbabwe, Ronald Timbe, UN Volunteer Medical Epidemiologist, is engaged through WHO in COVID-19 response surveillance activities led by the Ministry of Health and Child Care. He works on the development and revision of COVID-19 surveillance tools, including the production of situation reports.
Ronald also conducts regular data analysis and interpretation for COVID-19. He set up a mobile electronic data collection tool, using the Open Data Kit and GoData platforms, to facilitate rapid access to key COVID-19 data. He is currently in charge of training the Ministry of Health staff on the use and setting up of the platforms and supervising a test pilot in the eastern province of Zimbabwe.

“This is my first assignment as a UN Volunteer and I feel honored to serve with the leading international agency in the provision of guidance on health-related issues. When I joined, I thought I would have a small role, but from the first day, I became part of the WHO Health Emergencies team, with key responsibilities. --Ronald Timbe, UN Volunteer Medical Epidemiologist with WHO, Zimbabwe

"I have been able to positively influence some COVID-19 surveillance activities," Ronald shares. "I hope to continue helping more as this assignment has allowed me to contribute towards something that I can look back at in the future and happily say I was part of that change."

In Asia-Pacific Region, Dr Anjalee De Silva plays a similar roles to Ronald's. She joined WHO in Sri Lanka as a UN Volunteer Public Health Officer during the early months of the pandemic and has been contributing since then to the COVID-19 response. Anjalee is engaged in strategic planning and coordinated actions to maintain essential health service delivery.

The WHO Public Health Administrator in Sri Lanka, Dr Olivia Nieveras, appreciated her contribution in this video, saying, "It's amazing to see how young people are sharing their time, their talent, and sometimes their treasure to contribute to the COVID-19 response. It's really heartwarming to see the solidarity and the volunteerism of many people."

“As young people, we can be critical thinkers, change-makers and innovators. I am proud to be part of WHO's efforts in these critical times to make a difference. I encourage each of you to be an influencer in your area of expertise and promote volunteerism. --Dr Anjalee De Silva, Public Health Officer with WHO, Sri Lanka

In Pakistan, UN Volunteer Dr Saeed Ahmad is also supporting UNDP as a Public Health Officer. He has been actively engaged in COVID-19 response and relief activities. Dr Saeed
assists the National Disaster Management Authority in managing supplies of essential health products – including personal protective equipment and ventilators – to health workers and health facilities across the country.

“As a UN Volunteer, I take pride in supporting the COVID-19 pandemic response in these challenging times. It gives me a sense of fulfillment being part of this prestigious organization and contributing to the humanitarian situation the world is facing. I am currently supporting the COVAX campaign and workflow processes at adult vaccination centres in Pakistan. --Dr Saeed Ahmad, Public Health Officer with UNDP, Pakistan

UN Volunteer Dr Saeed Ahmad in the Islamabad COVID-19 vaccination centre, Pakistan. ©UNV, 2021
In Burundi, national UN Volunteer Ernest Ndikumagenge provides technical support to UNDP in the framework of national efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. He helps mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on human life, health damage and health infrastructure for primary and secondary care.

"My role is to assess the disruption caused by COVID-19 on medical programmes such as Tuberculosis, HIV, and malaria, and to develop innovative mechanisms to ensure continuity of services. The main challenge is to ensure that preventive measures remain efficient and continue delivering amidst the crisis," Ernest shares. "I have benefited from my previous experiences as a doctor with peacekeeping missions like the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic and African Union Mission in Somalia."

UN Volunteers are among the first responders to the COVID-19 outbreak. To date, UNV has deployed more than 1,000 UN Volunteers across the world in support of pandemic response. They play a pivotal role in stopping the spread of the COVID-19 as public health officers, doctors, emergency staff and community workers. Their efforts to leave no one behind contribute significantly to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. As we move into the vaccine phase, UN Volunteers can support UN entities in ensuring the efficient, safe and equitable distribution of COVAX.

*UNV’s Special Voluntary Fund (SVF) was established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1970. Over time, the SVF mandate has been modified and expanded, with the SVF providing seed funding to scale up successful projects where volunteerism has had a transformative impact. The SVF is also used to develop innovative volunteer-based solutions as well as undertake research and knowledge sharing. Read more [here](#).