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Young woman working online.  
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## Online volunteers with UNDP help improve health governance

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has been expanding the reach of its health and development initiative by engaging passionate online volunteers. In 2020, UNDP published 401 opportunities via the Online Volunteering service, calling for 1,754 online volunteers. Online volunteer candidates brought a range of expertise and educational backgrounds, from students to recent graduates, medical students and doctoral researchers. Even former UN Volunteers applied, spurred by their dedication to development. All offered valuable qualities to bolster the work of UNDP's teams across the world.

Online Volunteers supporting the Istanbul Regional Hub of UNDP initially completed tasks in research, translation and economic modeling to support projects on non-communicable

disease (NCD) prevention and control across low- and middle-income countries. Soon their work reached unexpected dimensions: online researchers monitored data and information on COVID-19, NCDs and their risk-factors; updated a dedicated research and policy database; reviewed the latest research on COVID-19 and NCDs; and researched regional and national best practices on prevention and control of NCDs. Eventually, this work fed into more than 1,000 pages of new UN documents, including reports, infographics and visuals.

“ Now, we have a group of core volunteers who are helping to coordinate the larger team. This force is working on country-specific research on the political economy of different health issues. Four of them became full-time consultants for our team. --Dudley Tarlton, Programme Specialist for Health and Development with UNDP's Istanbul Regional Hub

The team of volunteers were fully responsible for one key initiative: the COVID/NCD Vulnerability Index.<sup>[1]</sup> This index examines the extent to which vulnerability to COVID-19 is driven by chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancers and diabetes, as well as the risk factors that drive them, like tobacco use, alcohol consumption, air pollution and obesity. It gives a score for more than 160 countries, informing policymakers and helping UN Member States prioritize actions to build back better with healthier populations.



Covers of some of the COVID-19/NCD dashboards and the reports Online Volunteers contributed to. ©UNDP, 2021

“ Working with UNDP was by no means a regular volunteering experience. I was given the opportunity to work on challenging assignments such as the COVID-19 dashboard. I also had creative space to think up new solutions, and was accompanied by highly competent, motivated and – I would like to emphasize – kind individuals. This is due to the supportive environment fostered by the UNDP Health and Development Team. –Bernardo Menescal Ferreira da Silva, Online Volunteer

One of the consistent early findings of the coronavirus epidemic, even in Wuhan, was that

people with underlying illnesses – usually one or more NCDs – fared far worse than those without. The mortality rate of those with NCDs was found to be more than five times higher than those without. Why? Because they need more attentive care in hospital, if they become infected. Apart from this, as hospitals and health services focus on COVID-19, the treatment of NCD patients who have not contaminated by the virus may also be interrupted.

“ As people with NCDs appear to be more vulnerable to becoming severely ill due to COVID-19, I am proud that my contribution can help support the health and wellbeing of those affected. It is also rewarding to virtually meet other volunteers from around the world who are all motivated to help. --Emily Roberts, Online Volunteer

Online volunteer Johanna Jung has expertise in academic medical research on NCDs. Her contribution was central in the development of the NCD and COVID-19 Policy Brief, for which she co-led research and writing for the *State of the evidence on COVID-19 and non-communicable diseases: a rapid review*.<sup>[2]</sup>

“ This experience has given me a purpose during lockdown, an opportunity to grow professionally and also a sense of greater value – being part of an army of online volunteers, connected by their desire to contribute their small share towards a better world. -- Johanna Jung, Online Volunteer

Volunteer support extended to projects on fiscal approaches to NCD prevention and control, namely economic modelling of health taxes (taxes on tobacco, alcohol and sugar-sweetened beverages) in a select few countries. While those with an economics background developed the methodology and modelling of taxes, volunteers with expertise in public health collected data and shared findings through presentations, infographics and reports.

“ We also lead a very promising project on health taxes. With the need to finance COVID-19 related social protection, the UN and World Bank are advocating for increasing taxes on health-harming products such as tobacco, alcohol and sugar-sweetened beverages. A team of online volunteers have worked with us to develop a model to forecast

“ revenue increases from different scenarios. --Dudley Tarlton

Volunteers also supported key projects related to tobacco control, including institutional and context analyses of the tobacco and NCD burdens in countries. Online volunteer Yuliya Pismennaya contributed to research on tobacco control and NCDs in Tajikistan.

“ Engaging in UN projects constantly depends on your eagerness to learn and grow professionally. That is why I have done some extensive research on health and smoking, global fight against diabetes, heart diseases, improving nutrition and building awareness on health risks. --Yuliya Pismennaya, Online Volunteer

UNDP and the online volunteer research team will continue developing research briefs and responding to knowledge gaps for UN entities, academia or civil society, in terms of NCD-COVID-19 interactions, impacts on health systems and access to health-care/medicines in the means of comparable data from different countries.

The UNDP Health and Development team continues to work with online volunteers on projects such as the economic modelling on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on countries.

This new virtual normal due to the COVID-19 pandemic introduced UNDP to a global online community of passionate individuals to work with. With the success of volunteer engagement in previous and ongoing projects, the UNDP Health and Development team looks forward to future collaborations with online volunteers.



UN Volunteer working online, by Marina Lucia Rieder, UN Volunteer with UNICEF Moldova.  
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[1] The COVID-19/NCD Vulnerability Dashboard is planned to be used for investigating further interactions between the vulnerability index and other development variables like Gross National Income per capita, Human Development Index etc. The current beta version of the dashboard can be viewed on: <https://public.domo.com/embed/pages/aOV4p>

[2] The World Health Organization/UNDP policy brief and rapid review on *Responding to noncommunicable diseases during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic* can be accessed here <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/hiv-aids/responding-to-non-communicable-diseases-during-and-beyond-the-co.html>

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