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Mikaelou Demba Dia, former UN Refugee Volunteer who served as Programme Assistant in the West Africa Regional Office of UN Women.

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## The power of inclusion: story of two Refugee UN Volunteers

According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), there are 26 million refugees in the world and more than half of them are under the age of 18. Although there are various ways to help refugees, in this article, we highlight the work of our Refugee UN Volunteers, who are working tirelessly to ensure the successful integration of fellow refugees into society.

In the collective imagination, 'refugee' refers to a person living in a white tent, or who is homeless, very vulnerable and inspires pity and compassion. We challenge you to a mindshift, as we share the story of two refugees who dismantled this perception.

Mikaelou Demba Dia (33) and Ibrahima Watt (36) arrived from Mauritania in Senegal in 1989 due to the Senegalese-Mauritanian conflict. They are among 20 refugees awarded an

Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) scholarship to pursue studies in Law and Human Resources, respectively.

In 2019, the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme, in partnership with UNHCR, piloted the Refugee UN Volunteers special initiative, offering a pathway to professional employment to high-skilled refugees over the age of 22 and promoting refugee empowerment through volunteerism. The initiative facilitates the engagement of persons of concern as UN Volunteers for assignments that require specific skills or insights within the local refugee community. As for Mikaelou and Ibrahima, they seized the opportunity.

**Ibrahim Watt** overflows with positivity. "This special initiative is one of the best things that happened to me. It's an investment in the human being that is more sustainable and pushes us to project ourselves and have greater aspirations," he says.

Assigned to the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in Senegal as Operations Assistant, Ibrahima speaks enthusiastically about his position and his added value within the Operations Department, which plays a crucial role in the UNDP system.

"I am involved in staffing processes, from advertisement to recruitment and interview reports. I do the quality control of the UNDP recruitment files, including other UN agencies. I make sure that the whole process is transparent and complies with the standards before submitting them to management," he explains.

Ibrahima's supervisor highly praises his work and considers his contribution decisive and fundamental for the team.

“ Ibrahima quickly adapted to the unit's work methods and was the source of innovative initiatives in our recruitment processes. He knows how to manage his stress and remain calm when faced with the challenges of our daily work. --Aly Ndione, Human Resources Analyst with UNDP, Senegal

Being actively involved in the development through his support of UNDP programmes is Ibrahima's biggest source of pride. He is now in a position to help his young refugee brothers and contribute to the rehabilitation of his community.

“ The stability volunteering has given me is priceless. I believe that this UNV initiative should be perpetuated and extended to support refugees sustainably. It allows us to get the best out of ourselves. I

“ hope that other UN agencies and international organizations will leverage this experience in their support to refugees. --Ibrahima Watt, UN Volunteer Operations Assistant with UNDP, Senegal

Recently, Ibrahima became a naturalized Senegalese citizen; the next step in his ambitions is to move up to a national or international staff position.

**Mikaelou Demba Dia**, a former Refugee UN Volunteer who served as Programme Assistant in the West Africa Regional Office of UN Women, shares a similar goal.

He had the opportunity to demonstrate his talents to the UN Women regional advisor in assisting the implementation of governance and women's political participation activities in Senegal. For instance, Mikaelou participated in training that allowed UN Women to build a roster of trainers for the region. Getting involved in building the capacity of women politicians was rewarding for him, as he thinks women are the future of the political world of tomorrow.

“ Being a refugee is not an end in itself, nor is it a disadvantage. I encourage all refugees to get involved in making a positive change in this world. We have a role to play, and we need host states to give us more access to the job market and basic services such as education and health care so that we can fully express our potential,. --Mikaelou Demba Dia, former UN Volunteer with UN Women, Senegal

Mikaelou refers to the Refugee UN Volunteers special initiative as a very welcome initiative that plays a catalytic role in the inclusion and development of refugees, because it empowers them.

"Refugees can think, propose, and above all participate in positively changing the world, if they are included in society. And that's what we have through the Refugee UN Volunteer modality," says Mikaelou.

During COVID-19, Mikaelou coordinated activities with young refugee leaders to assist the refugee community in Senegal. Together, they supported 25 single-parent, female-headed households, providing food and hygiene products to 120 people.

Since May 2021, Mikaelou has taken up a staff position as a Programme Associate with UNHCR's regional office, covering Nigeria, Chad, the Central African Republic and the multi-country office in Cameroon. As he is now better placed to serve his community, he thinks

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this is a good way forward in his fight for the inclusion of refugees.

"Volunteering has opened my eyes more to the role that anyone can and should play in the community. That is why I am investing back into mine," he concludes.

Success stories like those of Ibrahima and Mikaelou are evidence of the brighter future.

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The UN Refugee Volunteer special initiative is part of this commitment, offering a pathway to professional volunteering assignments to high-skilled refugees over the age of 22. The modality was established together with UNV's long-standing partner, UNHCR. It facilitates the engagement of persons of concern as UN Volunteers for assignments that require specific skills or insights within the local refugee community.

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