Building bridges between refugees and host communities

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) organized a webinar on volunteerism in Turkey, with the support of national UN Volunteers. The event brought together 120 Turkish and Syrian young people to discuss opportunities to contribute to the greater good through volunteering.

The event was part of a project funded by Japan and implemented with the Ministry of Youth and Sports aimed at improving life prospects for young Syrian refugees and their Turkish peers. Young people make up half of the 3.7 million Syrian refugees under temporary protection in Turkey.

Webinar participants learned about the youth centres that the Ministry of Youth and Sports operates in all 81 provinces of Turkey. “Our aim is to make young people more aware of local and universal problems and encourage them to be part of the solution,” explained Seda Akyürek, İpekyolu District Youth Centre Manager.
Participants heard about volunteering from national UN Youth Volunteers. Six of these currently serve in different cities of Turkey as project assistants namely Mr Ozan Karaçam, Ms Hazal Bölerek, Mr Yaman Gonen, Ms Tuğba Toplama, Mr Mehmet Emin Cetin, Ms Ayşe like Gürbüz (pictured from left to right above).

Tuğba Toplama assists the Project Team in Istanbul. Like other UN Volunteers, she helps in organizing training and social cohesion activities.

“’The most thrilling aspect of being a UN Youth Volunteer is to see hope, joy and the happy faces of Turkish and Syrian participants. --Tuğba Toplama, Youth UN Volunteer

Ozan Karaçam, Project Assistant in Ankara, shares an experience that inspired him. During a social cohesion training in 2020, one of the Syrian participants who did not speak Turkish shared a message in Turklish on their WhatsApp group which read "good morning; it is better to live with hope".

“The most significant thing is to witness vividly how the gap between Syrian and Turkish young people is shrinking. Turkish and Syrian young people who have been participating in our training are treating each other in a friendly way. --Ozan Karaçam, UN Youth Volunteer
The webinar was held online, however, participants had ample opportunity to engage firsthand in volunteer work. Eight volunteer activities organized in five provinces in June and July 2021 helped 286 young people to forge new friendships and learn new skills. Working through the youth centres in Ankara, Bursa, Istanbul, Kocaeli and Şanlıurfa, UNDP Turkey brought together mixed groups of Turkish and Syrian young people to plant trees, paint village schools, set up libraries and prepare food containers for street animals. Participants said the activities helped them gain self-confidence and feel more comfortable in exploring different cultures.

“Volunteering softens the heart and increases compassion. --Arif Muştu, Director of Volunteer Management, Turkish Red Crescent Society

UNDP’s efforts to promote volunteering are part of a larger project on the employability, entrepreneurship and social cohesion for Syrian and Turkish youth. In addition to activities aimed at overcoming war trauma and promoting social cohesion, Syrian and Turkish young people will have opportunities to learn job skills and receive entrepreneurship training. Grant support and focused mentoring to the tune US $350,000 will be provided to 70 young entrepreneurs. UNDP has already set up computer labs in 30 youth centres in nine provinces.
By engaging those furthest behind, volunteering can bring us closer to the Sustainable Development Goals. --Nil Memişoğlu, UNV Country Coordinator, Turkey

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 14: Life below water