



UN Volunteer Paralegal Assistants visiting the Prison de Haute Sécurité in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.  
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## Facilitating access to justice and rights in the Sahel region

This year, the International Day of Peace calls for recovering better for an equitable and sustainable world. In the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are invited to reflect on how we can best help transform our world into a more equal, just, fair, inclusive, sustainable and healthy one. From the Sahel region, we share the impact of a partnership between the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UN Volunteers (UNV) programme.

A new project in Burkina Faso offers hope in prison in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

In Burkina Faso, UNODC, UNV and IOM launched a project supporting the prevention of risks of deterioration of social cohesion and peace in the context of the response to COVID-19 at points of entry and in places of detention, with funding from the UN Peacekeeping Fund.

One of the objectives of the joint project is to reduce the negative impacts of COVID-19 on access to justice and respect for the rights of male and female prisoners. Indeed, the pandemic has negatively impacted the functioning of the justice system, significantly increasing the duration of pre-trial detention and the problem of prison overcrowding.

UNODC recruited and trained 10 national UN Volunteers to provide legal assistance to prisoners, particularly young girls and women detainees. These Paralegal Assistants help prisoners know their rights, follow up on their cases with courts and strengthen the contact between prisoners and their families and communities, thus facilitating their social reintegration.

“ The multiple effects of the pandemic extend well beyond the consequences on the health of individuals. It impacts the fundamental rights and dignity of people, without which no lasting peace is possible. I have full confidence in the paralegal volunteers I met on my last mission to Burkina Faso. They form a pool of high-quality professionals with legal and social skills and a great sense of commitment to help the vulnerable populations of Burkina Faso stand up for a more equitable and sustainable world. --Amado de Andres, UNODC Regional Representative

From Niger to Burkina Faso: building blocks for success

The project grew out of the results and lessons learned from a similar project in Niger by UNODC and UNV. In 2017, in a specialized anti-terrorism court setting and at the request of Nigerian authorities, UNODC recruited 10 national paralegal volunteers to provide legal assistance to detainees in pre-trial detention on terrorism charges. The volunteers assisted in the timely review of cases to facilitate their processing by the judiciary.

“ We sensitized our clients on criminal law, procedures in terrorism cases and on their rights and duties as detainees, and we followed up on their cases at the level of the *Pôle Judiciaire Anti-Terroriste*, explained one of the UN Volunteers at the time.

The joint work of UNODC and UNV has reduced the number of pre-trial detentions, fostered national engagement through the deployment of Nigerian UN Volunteers, and had a direct impact on the future of hundreds of people. As a result, the number of detainees dropped from 1,600 in 2017 to 842 at the beginning of 2019.

Mr Cheibou Samna, Prosecutor of the Judicial Pole of Niger at the time and in charge of the fight against terrorism and transnational organized crime, had underlined the "direct impact on the lives of the population of Niger" of this project. The success of this joint work opened up many opportunities for UNODC/UNV collaboration for peace and justice in the Sahel, such as the project that has just started in Burkina Faso.

Since 1999, UNODC and UNV have been working together to ensure equal access to justice for all. In 2013, a new memorandum of understanding strengthened the partnership. Since then, 464 UN Volunteers have served with UNODC across the world, 108 of them in the Sahel region.



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