



These satellite images demonstrate some of the work by international UN Volunteer Rohini Swaminathan (India) for UNDP. (Swaminathan, 2017) Go to the link to Sway at the bottom of the article to experience the live interactive images.

Geospatial technology for sustainable development—a UN Volunteer's perspective

I am a volunteer. Most often than not the response I get sounds like ‘You are just doing something for free? Girl you should get a real job’ or ‘So you hand out fliers every day?’ Mmm.. Not really. My ‘something’ here is analysing satellite imageries for monitoring development projects and supporting disaster response, all while sitting in the bustling heart of New York City, Manhattan. From a forest in south India where I originally hail from, to this vast urban jungle in the US – it has been quite the cultural shock so far. I always fondly recall my first day as a UN Volunteer, I was inadvertently checking for any little scorpions in my shoes – there were none. The adventure for me begins early in the morning - taking the crowded NYC Subway and zooming past the crowd and the high raised buildings all around to get to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) HQ where I am currently based. Days have become weeks and months

now, I still feel amazed by the grandeur of the city around me. Enter the building and take the elevator up – I enter the world of Office of Information Management and Technology (OIMT). In today’s world, information and technology is everywhere around us. Taking leverage of innovative technology to provide real world solutions has become a crucial key to success and OIMT has fully absorbed this. Our project ‘Geo-localized Maps and Satellite Imagery Analysis’ is one such story. Around the world UNDP has myriads of projects, anywhere from building a maternity ward in Nigeria to rehabilitating irrigation canals in Sri Lanka. Satellite imagery allows us to closely monitor the progress of these projects, especially in locations that are not easily accessible. Apart from monitoring development work, one of the things that I am personally proud of as a UN Volunteer is contributing to disaster response. Satellite data offers the incredible bird’s eye view to see the scale and extent of any disaster. In the past few months, the world has seen the worst of natural hazards – from Hurricanes ravaging the Caribbean to major earthquakes in Mexico and floods in Niger. I overheard someone in the Subway saying that the world was ending. (I couldn’t blame her for thinking that). In times like these, one of the crucial needs is in getting the right information at the right time to the right person – but sometimes one can be overwhelmed by the amount of information that they can get (a good problem indeed, but still a problem). As a UN Volunteer, I could gather crucial data from different sources around the world and aggregate them into an easily readable format for our colleagues in various country offices, despite the hour of the day or day of the week (Volunteering definitely goes beyond the regular 9-5). Thanks to the technology we have today, it is quite amazing what one can do to lend a helping hand, all while sitting thousands of miles away, just with a laptop and (in my case) a big pot of coffee. Creating innovative applications using available technology is indispensable in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To understand and achieve the width and breadth of the 17 SDGs, the roles and contributions of volunteers across the globe will be critical. I am grateful to have this opportunity to do my little ‘something’ and as for me, this is more than a real job! Working as an international GIS specialist with UNV has opened doors to many adventures so far – from utilizing geospatial technology for addressing the SDGs to meeting incredible people (yup, the list includes an astronaut!) and learning Russian! ☺☺☺☺ ☺☺☺! This article first appeared on Sway.

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Sustainable Development Goal: [SDG 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure](#) [SDG 11: Sustainable cities and communities](#)