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Anggiet Yoga Ariefianto

UN Volunteer Anggiet Yoga Ariefianto (Indonesia, second from left) conducts supervision to the coffee nursery in Houaphanh province, Lao PDR. (UNODC, 2017)

Volunteering to grow coffee instead of poppies in Lao PDR

It was exactly one and a half years ago when I started serving as a UN Volunteer with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). My life changed quite a bit since moving from Indonesia to Houaphanh province in the northern region of Lao PDR. This experience also changed how I see development beneficiaries—from numbers to persons.

I lead the implementation of an [Alternative Development Project](#) launched by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Lao PDR. Through such projects, UNODC works with communities to develop 'alternative' sources of income that are both sustainable and licit. The project is very challenging since its objective is to persuade poppy growers in Lao PDR to abandon the cultivation of illicit crops that are used in the production of narcotics like opium and heroin, and support their transition to the cultivation of viable commercial crops such as coffee.

What is equally fascinating about this project is that it targets more than the eradication of drugs, it also empowers the community economically, building the skills needed to shift their current agricultural practices to structured permanent agriculture using techniques and green houses that offer a higher level of control over outputs and income.

Two of the four districts covered in the project are among the ten poorest in the country. We currently provide support to 3,482 households in 38 villages. I constantly travel hundreds of kilometers on dirt roads to visit these communities and talk with farmers and their family.



“ Using my previous experience in protection, community empowerment, and evaluation, including work related to drug abuse, I provide regular reviews and solutions to problems that rise across the project sites. I also supervise the assessments and teach survey methodologies to seven local staffs located in four offices. We work closely with district and provincial governments throughout the process.

This UN Volunteer assignment with UNODC has been very challenging. Although I have a decade of experience working in fields tied to development and post disaster recovery, my experience was mostly based at headquarters or in national capitals. By coming to Lao PDR, I needed to adjust my lifestyle. Living in Jakarta, where there are 15 million people, compared to Xamnua, which has a population of less than 3,000, is very different. My work now happens deep in the field, allowing me to work closely with the communities where the projects are implemented. This has taught me the art of interaction with a wide range of people, from diplomats and government officials to merchants and farmers. This is one of the greatest rewards of this assignment

When I meet people from the communities of our project sites, sit, talk, eat and work with them, I realize this is what it truly means to be a development practitioner. In the past, when I developed project documents, ‘project beneficiaries’ were just numbers and figures. However, through this UN Volunteer assignment, I now know them as persons. I understand their struggles, the choices they need to make to survive, their daily life routines, and their life challenges. It is deeply satisfying to lead this project and improve their economic lives.

I will treasure this UN Volunteer experience, and every time I manage a project from now on, I will be able to picture the communities where we work and realize that they are not just numbers—they are unique human beings.



• UNODC • Lao PDR • Indonesia • poppy • opium • coffee

Sustainable Development Goal: [SDG 1: No poverty](#) [SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth](#)