



Moses Chubili (left), national UN Volunteer Coordination and Partnership Officer in Zambia, converses in sign language with Gift Govere (right), national UN Volunteer Project Officer in Zimbabwe, on the sidelines of a UN Youth Volunteer workshop held in Nairobi, Kenya. Moses and Gift serve under the UNDP/UNV Talent Programme for Young Professionals with Disabilities.

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## Overcoming barriers to inclusion through volunteerism

Volunteerism is a powerful means of including people who are still customarily marginalized in development processes. Through engagement with people with disabilities, everyone learns, and everyone has the opportunity to grow.

The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme is a United Nations system-wide service provider. Our mandate is to enable talented and dedicated volunteers to help the United Nations system deliver on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

In doing so, we are intentional in recruiting volunteers with disabilities. For a long time, we have worked together with our partners to achieve more inclusive development outcomes. Additionally, we are now working to make the United Nations system itself more inclusive and diverse.

Over the past few years, UNV has implemented the Talent and Capacity Development Programme for an Inclusive UN System for Persons with Disabilities. We have been successful in strengthening capacity, increasing institutional knowledge and protecting the rights of persons with disabilities through volunteerism.

And the word seems to be spreading. Increasingly, UNV candidates are self-reporting disabilities and requesting the support they need to serve.

“ Serving as a UN Volunteer offers candidates with disabilities the opportunity to acquire practical work experience and exposure to the UN system. While this is valuable for career learning and development, it also opens up pathways to the individual that may previously have been inaccessible. Volunteering boosts the participation of persons with disabilities in political, economic, social and cultural life. --Vibhu Sharma, United Nations Volunteer Associate Policy Officer in the Human Resources Policy Section, Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance, United Nations Secretariat

In 2020 alone, 91 volunteers with disabilities served with 18 different United Nations entities in over 50 different roles. So far in 2021, we have mobilized 150 volunteers with disabilities. While these results may seem small in the context of the larger United Nations system, they speak volumes about the reach of UNV. Through our talent pool, we can attract candidates with disabilities and partner with our sister United Nations entities to deploy them in diverse assignments and locations, nationally and internationally.

To facilitate the recruitment of persons with disabilities, we strive to provide reasonable accommodation. We support partners with accessibility and mobility schemes, and have just established the Reasonable Accommodation Fund within our Special Voluntary Fund to channel contributions from our funding partners who are championing inclusion.

The United Nations Joint Inspection Unit has indicated that the Organization needs to do more. It should develop and implement better policies on accessibility for people with disabilities. Our work environments require improvements to provide greater accessibility. To accomplish this, we need to increase awareness and training overall. We must intensify our efforts if we are serious about meeting our organizational commitments.<sup>1</sup>

At UNV, we are continually learning and trying to improve. We still have some way to go, yet we believe that we offer our partners a reliable and trusted model for disability inclusion. Pilot programmes, supported by generous contributions from our donors, Germany and Sweden, have allowed us to learn by doing and identify barriers, including those within our own operations.

In an independent review conducted in 2020, the key strengths of our Talent and Capacity Development Programme were found to be its effectiveness and efficiency in advancing the integration of persons with disabilities. We were also given some homework.

Drawing on the results of the [evaluation](#), we have aligned our volunteer assignments and recruitment tools. We have also trained our personnel to raise their disability awareness and responsiveness. We hope that this will motivate even more candidates with disabilities to join our talent pool and apply for the rising number of opportunities.

To United Nations entities and donors taking on disability inclusion, we say: partner with us.

Leaving no one behind is not an empty mantra; it is a statement of our collective responsibility and accountability. Our volunteers have the determination and expertise to make valuable contributions to sustainable development.

To quote one such volunteer, “disability does not mean inability”.<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Enhancing accessibility for persons with disabilities to conferences and meetings of the United Nations system. Available at <https://undocs.org/en/JIU/REP/2018/6>

<sup>2</sup> “Disability does not mean inability” – changing mindsets in Namibia, a contribution by Pelgrina Shimanu, United Nations Volunteer Project Officer with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Namibia, serving under the UNDP-UNV Talent Programme for Young Professionals with Disabilities. Available at <https://www.unv.org/Success-stories/disability-does-not-mean-inability-changing-mindsets-namibia>

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*In celebration of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities 2021, the [UN Chronicle](#) was pleased to present two articles, one by Ms Martha Helena Lopez, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources in the United Nations Secretariat, and the other by Mr. Toily Kurbanov, Executive Coordinator of the United Nations Volunteers programme. Each author shares their perspective on disability inclusion in the United Nations system and the barriers that must be overcome to accelerate results. The first article can be found [here](#).*



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