



UN Volunteer Mariam Jaji speaking at the Youth Connekt Sahel's session on women's empowerment.
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Volunteers join in at the Youth Connekt Sahel Forum 2021

The Youth Connekt Sahel Forum convened in Dakar from 30 November to 3 December. This annual event connects youth from across the Sahel region and beyond with policy influencers, political leaders, and public, private and development sector institutions to engage, discuss, design and accelerate youth empowerment efforts in the region. Volunteers were among the co-facilitators, bringing their experience and expertise to the forum.

Under the theme [*Connecting Sahelian Youth for Peace and Prosperity*](#), the Youth Connekt Sahel Forum attracted over 1,000 youth and other participants from across the region (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, The Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal).

The three-day forum convened under the auspices of Ms Nene Fatoumatta Tall, Minister of

Youth of Senegal, Ms Chido Cleopatra Mpemba, Special Envoy on Youth to the African Union, and Mr Abdoulaye Mar Dieye, the United Nations Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel.

The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme, through its Regional Office for West and Central Africa, sponsored six young UN Volunteers from Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Kenya, Mauritania and Nigeria, as well as an Italian fellow with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to co-facilitate three sessions with partners. Here, we share a snapshot of the proceedings.

Empowering African Youth on their Journey from Learning to Earning

This session was co-organized with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). This focused on programmes and partnerships enabling young people to achieve their full potential and support empowerment activities within their communities.

UN Volunteers from UNICEF Burkina Faso and Senegal, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Mauritania, and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Senegal took part in a dynamic discussion on issues facing Sahelian youth.

They shared their experiences and demonstrated how volunteerism helped them build capacities, networks and skills. Exchanges showcased the key constraints of successful learning to earning transitions, such as employment bottlenecks, lacking skills and inadequate financial frameworks to support the inclusion of young people in the labor force.

“ We need to change our education system and include technological innovation to compete with the Eastern countries. I’m calling all our representatives to take this into account. We need to address this right now. --Mohamud Buhan, UNODC Senegal



Digital Natives of the Sahel Building a Digital Future

This session was lead by [Generation Unlimited](#) (GenU), which brings together partners from government, multilateral organizations, civil society, the private sector and young people from around the world. The panel highlighted the role of digital upskilling in youth engagement and development in the Sahel.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the need to prepare and equip young people – especially those in vulnerable situations – with the necessary skills to navigate into an increasingly digital era in education, work and training. In this context, panelists shared initiatives and solutions designed to scale up remote learning, upskilling and livelihood platforms among young populations.

The Online Volunteering service of UNV was highlighted as a tool to access remote innovative services. Pamela Badjeh, a UN Volunteer deployed as a Junior Data Analyst with UNICEF in Chad, presented her work with the U-Report platform, a messaging tool that empowers young people around the world to exchange views and knowledge. She shared how she volunteers in her free time to raise awareness on the benefits of digital solutions.

“ The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated that technology can extend volunteering to reach the most vulnerable. It’s important to equip young Sahelian women and girls with digital skills to be ready for the transition and unlock opportunities. --Pamela Badjeh, UN Volunteer Junior Data Analyst with UNICEF, Chad

Too Big to Ignore: Empowering Adolescent Girls for Accelerated and Inclusive Recovery

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNV worked together to bring the session to life, under the umbrella theme of empowering young women and girls in the Sahel. The panel covered topics such as Female Genital Mutilation, economic and political empowerment and access to education. The panelists' interventions further sparked a dynamic discussion with the audience on the critical importance of having men's engagement to counter discriminating and harmful practices and societal norms. The session further celebrated the innovative achievements of Sahelian adolescent girls and emphasized the importance of putting young people at the centre of sustainable development.

“ We need more young women in political decision-making structures. To achieve this, we must encourage women's leadership at every level. Thriving in the Sahel is also about promoting young women leaders. --Mariam Jaji, UN Volunteer with UN Women in Nigeria

Continuing the conversation

The exchanges continued throughout the forum at UNV's exhibition booth, where serving UN Volunteers interacted with participants from the region, informing them about the programme and sharing experiences, best practices and ideas. In addition to participating as panelists during the sessions, 15 UN Volunteers deployed in Senegal were mobilized to actively support the logistical activities of the event.

UNV has long recognized the value that young people bring to the table and actively supports UN entities and youth-centred initiatives to enhance the integration of young people into their programmes. The Youth Connekt Sahel Forum is a much-welcomed platform to connect the Sahelian youth, highlight best practices and encourage knowledge-sharing activities.

UNV's Office for West and Central Africa will scale up its support throughout the region, as per the call of Mar Dieye:

“ The Sahel will either be powered by its youth or not: this is what drives my involvement in the region. Join me in supporting the youth of the Sahel. --Abdoulaye Mar Dieye, United Nations Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel



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