Supporting communities in South Sudan to embrace a culture of peace and reconciliation

Building and keeping peace is an overarching priority for the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). This mission hosts 448 UN Volunteer, 43 per cent of them women. These are mostly Civil Affairs and Human Rights Officers, Air Operations and Inventory Assistants, and Medical Doctors. On the occasion of International UN Peacekeepers Day, UN Volunteers Silvia Kavrochorianou and Salil Shah share their experiences serving as Civil Affairs Officers with UNMISS.

"It takes a village to raise a child. Same goes for peacekeeping."

Silvia Kavrochorianou (Moldova), UN Volunteer Civil Affairs Officer with UNMISS

South Sudanese are genuinely peace lovers. I have met youth and women endeavouring to support their communities to embrace a culture of peace and reconciliation. With our support, the people of South Sudan
can achieve a sustainable peace for their future. My department, Civil Affairs office, has regularly facilitated my engagement with other colleagues in various peacebuilding fora, where one easily notices how bold and vocal South Sudanese youth are becoming in addressing their local challenges. There are continuously growing levels of readiness among local populations for strengthening lasting peace among their communities.

When I first joined the mission in 2020, I thought it would be very difficult for me to integrate in an environment so different to what I was used to. But, I was welcomed by a wonderful team that has been greatly supportive to me throughout my assignment. My colleagues are always eagerly sharing their knowledge with me, strongly believing that the recipe of a well-done job is the collaborative teamwork. My supervisor has shared with me one of the most valuable pieces of advice I have ever received: “If you want your contribution to be more impactful, then start with building friendships with local community members – they are the most genuinely warm-hearted people you will ever meet.” Over these two years of my assignment in South Sudan, I got to understand the real meaning of his words.

In the Civil Affairs Division department. I mostly undertake tasks related to monitoring and reporting. My objective is to maintain a high degree of situational awareness, ensuring effective cooperation, coordination, and information sharing. I also support crisis management activities in the mission area.

Just one month after I began my assignment as a UN Volunteer in South Sudan, the country instituted a lockdown to contain the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which seriously impacted the modus operandi of the mandated activities of the Civil Affairs department at UNMISS. Yet, Civil Affairs are the eyes and ears of the mission. Therefore, we had to keep a sustainable level of interaction with communities, while strictly observing COVID-19 preventive measures.

“The major lesson I learned through my work, particularly in context of the COVID-19 pandemic was: the COVID-19 virus does not have boundaries, neither does peace. Peacekeeping activities can never wait, despite programmatic challenges. We need to innovate online options for community engagement and building collaboration with our civil society partners.”

I am happy to witness how impactful a volunteer’s work can be. Whenever I am interacting with local youth and women at our grassroots fora, they share how significant our contribution is. Most of them are willing to join the national volunteer team on the ground. It looks like we are leading by example and that makes me particularly proud.

A long journey starts with the first step. I encourage anyone who wants to support communities in need to take that first step, regardless of their gender, age or origin. There is nothing more rewarding than being able to contribute – with your work, time and experience – to peacebuilding and peacekeeping for those in dire need of it.

“In Africa, they say it takes a village to raise a child. Same goes for peacekeeping. It takes the efforts of all of us to ensure sustainable peace. Let us not remain silent and unconcerned when there are millions of people in need. --Silvia Kavrochorianou, UN Volunteer Civil Affairs Officer with UNMISS

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As a volunteer, one should be ready for a change of mindset. I am in the UN peacekeeping mission in South Sudan with the primary goal of bringing my voluntary contribution to the delivery of the mission’s mandate. I am grateful to admit that I gained more than I delivered. This has materialized in the opportunities I have had to meet incredible people from around the world, building friendships and working with an amazingly supportive team at the Civil Affairs department in UNMISS.

"I am humbled and inspired by the strength and resilience of the people that we serve."

Salil Shah (Canada), UN Volunteer Civil Affairs Officer with UNMISS

I joined UNMISS in March 2022 and serve in the Civil Affairs Division. I support and liaise with field teams serving communities in different states in South Sudan. I have a background in conflict management, security and development. Previously, I worked at a Canadian non-governmental organization on a project that was implemented in collaboration with the UN Population Agency (UNFPA).

I work in the head office at the Civil Affairs Division at UNMISS. The department is involved in various peacebuilding and development programmes across the states in South Sudan. These programme interventions are unique and tailor made for the different prevailing cultural, humanitarian and development contexts. My role is to ensure that the work of our field teams that coordinate these programmes is facilitated
in a quick, efficient and effective manner. This entails various elements of programme management and coordination, including helping with documentation, proposal development, reporting among others.

The projects implemented by the field teams help in maintaining peace across the country. Many of our interventions revolve around strengthening existing community-based peace mechanisms and traditional structures that puts local communities at the center of our programming and ensures sustainable impact.

One important point to note is that different states and communities in South Sudan have different issues and conflict challenges. Therefore, we apply different approaches to various contexts when designing our programme interventions. Through involving traditional leaders and dialogue mechanisms, we have been able to strengthen the capacity of community members in various states to engage in conflict prevention and mediation.

“In a world that is increasingly fragile, we all must work together for our shared humanity. We all need each other.” --Salil Shah, UN Volunteer Civil Affairs Officer with UNMISS

The operational dynamics for our work in South Sudan are quite unique and varied, hence we take a lot of time and effort understanding various contexts and sensitives of our engagements with communities. Working in humanitarian contexts can often pose challenges with access to necessities, so we often must adopt to prevailing circumstances. One lesson I have learnt is never to take anything for granted. Things like peace and access to basics such as food and shelter are not privileges everyone has access to.

I am honoured to work in a very supportive and well-coordinated team at UNMISS. What stands out about our work at the department is the scale and impact of our operations. As a UN Volunteer serving in a peace context, one quickly learns a lot due to the dynamic nature of operations. Despite what often seem like small gains, every day I am humbled and inspired by the strength and resilience of the people that we serve.

• International Day of UN Peacekeepers

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 10: Reduced inequalities SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals