"Digital is the next big thing." We have been hearing this for quite a while, but it was COVID-19 that really demonstrated the impact of online engagements and the power of digital media. This was evident in various walks of life, but most importantly in volunteering. Online volunteering emerged as trend to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ever since the start of the Coronavirus pandemic, we have learned that we have to rethink our business practices and integrate online volunteering in our working environment in order to build forward better and thrive.

The culture of telecommuting proves that a lot of things can be accomplished through online engagement in an efficient way. This was true in case of UNV's Nepal office as well, where we collaborated with the UN Development Programme (UNDP) on a youth programme and Nepal’s Election Support Project (ESP). The ESP supports the Election Commission of Nepal (ECN) in election-related engagements.

The idea of having Online Volunteers as social media campaigners was put forward in early
2022 in a bid to support the local elections of May 2022. Under the slogan *My Vote Matters*, Online Volunteers took to social media to educate young Nepalis on civic participation and the right to vote, and encourage youth to become aware about voter education.

In April 2022, we onboarded around 400 young Online Volunteers (48 per cent women and 52 per cent men – with an average age of 25 years). These young people took the ownership of this campaign and advocated for voter education. They had an induction *orientation session* on their roles and responsibilities, with tips on dos and don’ts.

These young people served an hour a day every week on average, and created posts using the *communications assets* of the Election Commission of Nepal in their social media platforms. A variety of posts related to voter education and youth engagement were amplified across the board. Not only this, but some also started to create their own *content* to feature themselves and have an expanded audience across all *social media platforms*. Digital media became an avenue to share innovative *communication products* created by young people for awareness on the importance of youth voting.

"The UNV online volunteering campaign *My Vote Matters* was an interesting initiative to educate and inform young voters about the local level elections for their participation and engagement through social media. The campaign supported the Election Commission of Nepal in disseminating their voter education materials through social media to inform voters with correct information, and counter misinformation and disinformation. --Said Mohammad Shahid Reza, Civic and Voter Education Officer with the Election Support Project of UNDP Nepal"

Shahid Reza adds: “Each piece of information is important in election for its integrity. Building a democratic culture is an important key to the protection of free and fair elections, and that is why election stakeholders conduct voter education to inform voters for wider participation in the election process.”

After five weeks of online volunteering, it was time to analyze the results. The social media analysis showed that Online Volunteers made the best out of their volunteering experiences through social media channels like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, LinkedIn and Snapchat – whereby they reached 200,000 people.

To recognize their efforts in successfully completing their tasks, an *Online Volunteers graduation* ceremony was convened, where seven exceptional Online Volunteers from
seven different provinces were acknowledged for their inclusive and creative content in social media and awarded UNV and UNDP merchandise.

“Data shows that around 3.5 million youth were eligible to vote as first-time voters during the local election of 2022. Encouraging them to vote in real life was the major challenge, as young people were not interested in political affairs and civic engagement. The *My Vote Matters* campaign for youth by youth encouraged youth to be responsible, citizens not only as voters, but also as messengers to encourage people to take part in the election. --Binita Karki, national UN Volunteer Youth Programme Officer with UNDP Nepal

Saru Chauhan, a Nepali youth acknowledges that he was motivated to vote through the social media campaign: "I felt like I have a great responsibility as a citizen. I voted for the first time from Ward number 08 of Budhanilkantha municipality, and I felt proud after voting, and will be voting in the upcoming elections as well."

This campaign also brought diverse youth from various backgrounds into a single safe
space. What this meant was that through the exchange of coherent information and an environment of sharing and learning together, a feeling of social cohesion and bonding developed within the youth. We had a dedicated Facebook group with 331 members for this campaign, and over time we saw online bonding between the Online Volunteers who served together for one overarching purpose – voter education.

“This was the first time that I worked as an Online Volunteer, and I am grateful for all the learning through this experience. One major learning for me was that in previous elections, there used to be a lot of misinformation amongst youth with regard to voting. But through this campaign, I got the opportunity to learn accurate information about voting and got myself acquainted with voter education and civic participation, and was able to disseminate legitimate information to my youth community. —Rachana Kharel, Online Volunteer, summarizing her experience at the Online Volunteers graduation ceremony

Surya Prasad Aryal, Assistant Spokesperson and Under Secretary of the Election Commission of Nepal says, "We appreciate the support of UN Volunteers in spreading ECN's voter education information materials through their social media. Youth engagement in voter education is important to increase voter turnout and reduce invalid votes. We hope for your further engagement in the upcoming elections as well."

In a nutshell, we believe that this experience serves as a shining example for other UNV offices, UN entities, as well as volunteer-involving organizations who want to engage young Online Volunteers for civic participation. In the case of UNV Nepal, online volunteering exemplified the mantra "digital is the next big thing", where social media was used to create awareness and amplify the power of youth for sustainable development.

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