



Silvia Illescas (right) is an international UN Volunteer from Nicaragua, serving as Health Advocacy and Coordination Officer with WHO in Lao PDR.

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She who has health has hope; and she who has hope has everything

My journey as a UN volunteer started when I arrived in Laos in May 2016. The idea of me moving to a small developing country in Southeast Asia to help the World Health Organization fight against HIV, tuberculosis and malaria was not exactly shocking to my friends. They had seen me volunteer for various projects in Nicaragua before.

Nicaragua suffered a terrible civil war in the 1980s. The city where I was born was one of the main centres of the conflict. Consequently, I grew up amidst political instability and economic hardship.

Witnessing the vast unmet needs of our population inspired me to volunteer for several projects committed to improving health and sanitation in remote communities of Nicaragua.

I serve as a UN Volunteer in Laos focusing on public health issues, which I have always felt passionate about. I work towards ending three diseases that can have fatal outcomes for the people of Laos.

Malaria and tuberculosis pose a big challenge to Laos, especially for poor people living in remote areas. HIV cases are increasing, with the majority of people living with HIV not understanding the risks related treatment.

As a Health Advocacy and Coordination Officer, I help to oversee the implementation of the grants provided by the Global Fund to Laos.

My task is to coordinate contributions from various organizations, including the government, the private sector, international organizations, civil society and communities living with the diseases to ensure that everyone's views are heard and that we work together to ensure a healthy life for all citizens of Lao PDR.

“ It's not all altruistic, however. I get immense joy out of my work; the most rewarding part being encounters with local people and visits to the provinces most affected by these three diseases.

I have had a chance to meet with members of some of the most vulnerable groups in the country, such as children, women, men who have sex with men, transgender people and migrants. These people are often excluded, although they experience devastating effects of these diseases. When I hear stories of their hard-fought struggles and triumphs, I cannot help but be inspired by their strength.

Throughout these two years, I have had the opportunity to visit most of the Lao provinces, where breathtakingly beautiful nature is often paired with terrible poverty.

In many provinces, such as Attapeu, which borders with Cambodia and Vietnam, there is a large migrant population. While migration is not itself a risk factor for HIV, travel conditions, accommodation and work associated with migration increase the risk of infection.

Phongsaly province, on the other hand, located in the north of Laos, is home to 28 different ethnic groups, many of who don't speak Lao, the official language of the country. Lack of access to important health information, low awareness and language barriers are the main challenges in reaching and treating these population groups.

In Phongsaly I had the wonderful experience to deliver polio vaccines to families from Khmu, Phounoy, Akha, Tai Lue and Hor communities and teach them about malaria, tuberculosis and HIV.

By living in Laos and working with Lao people, I have had the opportunity to experience Lao culture, eat authentic Lao cuisine, dance Lao dances, celebrate Lao New Year and take part in spiritual ceremonies.

The longer I live here, the more I can relate to my own country, Nicaragua, located exactly on the opposite side of the world.

“ I have realized how similar Nicaraguans are to Lao people. We find happiness in simplicity and we always find the time to share meaningful moments with family and friends.

My wish today is that both my first home Nicaragua, and my second home, Laos, develop quickly. This will not happen unless our people are able to lead a healthy life. As a Nicaraguan wisdom says: “He who has health has hope; and he who has hope has everything”.

I hope I have been able to spark and further this hope through my work.



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