The power of working with communities to respond to COVID-19

As the old saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child. Similarly, it takes a village to provide people in crisis with the support they need. UN Volunteers in Indonesia are working with UN partners, governments and communities to respond to COVID-19.

Indonesia is a vast country with more than 17,000 islands. This geography makes for considerable logistical challenges for the COVID-19 recovery. COVID-19 vaccines must be managed under specific temperatures and distributed to the most vulnerable members of the public first.

Thirteen UN Volunteers have been recruited by the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) to serve as Health Officers. Their work impacts more than 200 million citizens and nearly 1.5 million healthcare workers across the nation.

Their first assignment as volunteers is to conduct a needs assessment. The Health Officers also assist in logistical planning by communicating supply and demand needs and integrating information from private and public bodies. This information helps the UNICEF team in Jakarta and the Ministry of Health to optimize their vaccination strategy. Timing is critical, and maintaining the cold chain is essential, as vaccines must be delivered quickly to avoid expiration.
Working directly with communities is also part of UNICEF’s work. Before meeting the public, the team conducts a strategic assessment of the area. Initially, a small group of volunteers participates with health care and community workers to identify health and community risk factors and gather information about local resources. Good assessment, planning and coordination are crucial for success as many healthcare professionals are involved in the process.

Elda Lunera Hutapea is a nurse with a long history of humanitarian commitment. Her first volunteer assignment after she graduated was with a local non-governmental organization, where she worked with under-privileged children who were terminally ill. When the pandemic started, Elda was assigned to work with the UNICEF Field Office in Makassar, South Sulawesi.

"I received a government scholarship, so I wanted a chance to give back to the community, especially during the pandemic, which was so hard on communities," Elda says.

"The new job also came with new challenges. At first, it was hard working in a new city. I was from Jakarta and only knew one person in my new location. I had to learn about the culture in South Sulawesi, but that also became an exciting part of being a UN Volunteer." --Elda Lunera Hutapea, national UN Volunteer Nurse with UNICEF, Indonesia

Elda worked on assessments and planning, and coordinated with Ministry of Health officials, who evaluated the plan and approved actions. She was responsible for ensuring that local partners had the appropriate technical knowledge and capability to deliver vaccines in the field. This included the latest evidence-based research and studies from the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF and Indonesian government guidelines and protocols. The ability to communicate and coordinate resources under pressure is critical for members of the team.

One important aspect of the work of the UN Volunteers is to promote a campaign for COVID-19 virus literacy, so everyone understands the core principles of transmission and how to minimize the spread of the virus. The UN Volunteers help spread health messages, like proper handwashing, physical distancing, wearing masks and isolation in their communities.
They also conduct assessments to track inventory. Of course, vaccines have various requirements, depending on the manufacturer. Proper planning ensures the vaccines are viable when they reach their destination.

Assessments include prioritizing and identifying specific solutions for hard-to-reach areas, including calculating health worker requirements based on population density and geographic challenges.

UN Volunteers like Elda also help manage regular logistics, provide accurate record-keeping and data analysis. Monthly monitoring is critical so the Ministry of Health and other stakeholders can respond to the ever-changing nature of the pandemic.

“The most rewarding part of my work was being recognized by government partners, and knowing that through volunteering, we can contribute a lot to tackling the COVID-19 pandemic and to the development of Indonesia. –Elda Lunera Hutapea

This article was prepared with the kind support of Online Volunteer Ted Blizzard.

Asia and the Pacific

• World Humanitarian Day • COVID-19

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 3: Good health and well-being SDG 10: Reduced inequalities SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals