Serving the underserved has not been a bed of roses, but the benefits far outweigh the challenges

It all started in February 2021, when I decided to leave my home country Sierra Leone to volunteer with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Somalia. My goal? To serve the most vulnerable persons of concern from hard-to-reach communities. These often include refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons, internally displaced people and returnees, according to UNHCR.

At UNHCR, there is a saying: "Protection is what we do, and we do it through programmes." With a background in development management, I am privileged to put my knowledge and skills into practice as UN Volunteer Associate Programme Officer with UNHCR in Somalia.
In my role, I support the team leader and Field Officer in the UNHCR Area of Responsibility where I serve, ensuring business and operational continuity, and meaningful engagements in support of the communities that we serve.

Through active consultations and engagement with my colleagues and all stakeholders, I support the implementation of critical partner project agreements and interventions. These include delivery of timely cash-based interventions, emergency shelter kits and non-food items to refugees, returnees, internally displaced persons and host communities.

I also support communication and visibility efforts for programme interventions, and ensure clarity among partners on project results and impact.

As the Associate Programme Officer, I have prepared results-based reporting in the sub-office. I support the production of weekly situation reports, monthly operational updates, talking points, meeting minutes and quarterly internal control mechanisms.

During my UN Volunteer assignment, I have gained so much knowledge and skills though daily activities and interactions, and also through the courses that are a part of my volunteer assignment.

Some of the critical skills that I have gained include teamwork, empathy,
inclusivity, active listening and learning. Additionally, meeting a diverse group of people and learning about different cultures has been one of my greatest experiences so far.

“Despite the invaluable experience I have had in my assignment, serving the underserved has not been a bed of roses. High cost of living, language barriers, significant security issues and a constant feeling of home sickness are just some of the numerous and complex challenges I have faced as a UN Volunteer. --Jestina Simba, UN Volunteer Associate Programme Officer with UNHCR

Notwithstanding, I implore everyone who can spare some time to join any opportunity to volunteer for humanity. From my experience, the benefits always far outweigh the challenges, both for one’s self and for the communities served.

East and Southern Africa

• World Humanitarian Day • refugees • internally displaced persons

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 10: Reduced inequalities SDG 11: Sustainable cities and communities SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals