"The only way to achieve the SDGs is village by village, volunteer by volunteer"

Michael Emery served as a UN Volunteer in Liberia and Guinea from 1990 to 1991. Since then, he has made a career in the United Nations, and crossed paths with UNV and UN Volunteers repeatedly. A UN Volunteer by passion and teacher by profession, Michael, now Director of Human Resources at the International Organization for Migration (IOM), reflects on his journey.

At 25 years of age, I was a teacher in Australia, yearning to experience something new. Out of the blue, I was offered an opportunity to teach at a missionary school in central Liberia. I remember going to a nearby library to check where Liberia was in the atlas!

That was very much a real-world experience – out of my comfort zone and in a situation that challenged all of my assumptions and cultural norms. I settled in Gbarnga in central Liberia, teaching children who were as eager to learn as they were to have fun. Unfortunately, the peace did not last.

In 1990, Liberia descended into civil war. Within weeks, local children were forced to become child soldiers or flee to neighbouring Guinea as refugees. My work as a teacher came to an abrupt halt.
I headed to the capital, Monrovia, where I worked with the United Nations as a daily wager, helping out during the emergency with displaced Liberians fleeing the conflict. I was then contracted by the UN Resident Coordinator’s Office as a UN Volunteer with the Office of the UN Disaster Relief Coordinator (UNDRO), the precursor to the UN Office for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

They say it takes a village. I say, the only way to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals is village by village, volunteer by volunteer.

Statistically, the war in Liberia claimed more than two hundred thousand lives in a nation of 2.1 million people and displaced over a million people as refugees in neighbouring countries like Guinea.

I was one of four UN Volunteers, and working with the most amazing colleagues I have known. This was one of the best professional experiences in my life, one where we worked 14-15 hours a day, but felt like we were building something better. Despite the downs, it was exhilarating.

My UN Volunteer assignment was dedicated to mass feeding the displaced, first in Guinea, then in Monrovia. We set up a wet feeding centre with the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) to provide a high protein diet. According to UNICEF, the local population faced a 37 per cent severe malnutrition rate at the time.

When we think of wars, we fall short of imagining the uglier picture. The reality of human suffering and destruction. People left to die on the streets. People executed on the killing fields. I saw so much loss of human life in Liberia in such a short time span.

I was tasked with burying the dead, after failed attempts to identify them. Mass burials are beyond words, certainly confronting. There was no way I could have been prepared for this, so my attitude was: do what you need to do, make it up as you go. It was good to bring closure with whatever little ceremony was possible and ensure that people were laid to rest in a respectful way. And that brought us peace.

Six months later, the World Food Programme (WFP) and UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) started to bring in more volunteers.

One impression I cherish about Liberia is that the people you work through and with have tremendous resilience. I had a very good network of community liaison officers and collaborated with them to mobilize local volunteers. Together, we set up a self-help group, Liberians United to Serve Humanity (LUSH), that were implementing partners providing emergency and humanitarian support. Soon after, I left the country to get married and then onto Ex-Yugoslavia with the peacekeeping mission.

In 2003, while with UN Peacekeeping, I returned to help set up the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). It had been almost 10 years since I left the country. Things had changed and this was an opportunity for me to witness the evolution.

As part of workforce planning at UN Peacekeeping, I contacted a dear friend of mine, Kevin Gilroy, Head of Special Operations at UNV at the time, to tell him this was a fantastic opportunity to deploy UN Volunteers in
peacekeeping missions.

Kevin joined me to assess the situation in Liberia, and soon hundreds of volunteers were being deployed, with such efficiency that the mission had to ask UNV to slow down deployments, because they didn’t have sufficient staff to manage the volunteers.

I had met Kevin in Dili, where I served from 2000 to 2002 as Chief of Language and Training Unit with the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT). He and Sandra Marinkovic (now Le Grey and Recruitment Associate at UNV) were in the container office next to me and put around 3,000 UN Volunteers through the mission. I recruited 25 UN Volunteers, including a former minister from the Gambia, I recall.

UN Volunteers provided translation and interpretation services, as well as capacity building of national cadres on every aspect of running the new Timor-Leste. To see a country emerge from the ashes and establish a nation is an opportunity you rarely get and that was an amazing time.

If I chalk out my professional journey over the years, it spans many different roles, each bringing its own highlights and learning. From teacher to UN Volunteer; from career development and succession planning with UN Peacekeeping to heading recruitment at UNDP and human resources at the UN Population Fund (UNFPA).

Presently, I am the Director of Human Resources at the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Our ambition is to increase our deployment of UN Volunteers to 500 (by 2025) and we’re already about half way there.

At the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic, we realized we needed to augment our staff welfare setup. I knew that UNV had a roster of experienced professionals, offered agility in getting people on board quickly and had a business model that lent itself to working remotely.

So, we recruited initially 12 UN Volunteer Staff Welfare Officers from all over the world. What we got was a depth of experience that was inspiring and could work in 20 languages. Through them, we were able to offer our staff professional counselling and welfare services 24/7, and that could only have been possible with UNV.

The compelling narrative around the service of UN Volunteers is captured in UNV’s motto: inspiration in action. If people haven’t worked with UN Volunteers, they think they are predominantly young and unexperienced. That is not the case. For years, I have been educating people about the specialized skillsets volunteers bring, UNV’s speed of deployment and the spirit of volunteerism.

Once a volunteer, always a volunteer. I feel utterly privileged to have been a UN Volunteer. And I know already now that after I retire, I would like to re-join UNV and give back to society and to the world at large as a UN Volunteer. For me, that would be the most wonderful way to complete the circle.
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