Facilitating the protection of civilians and returnees in South Sudan

On the occasion of the International Day of Peace, we interviewed UN Volunteer Geraldine Chioma Nzulumike (Nigeria), who serves as Relief, Reintegration and Protection Officer with the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). She shares her experience working in a challenging duty station, where her day-to-day activities include protecting others, ensuring the safety and dignity of people, as well as providing them access to basic services.

What are the key highlights of your assignment, and who do you interact with in your daily work?

As a Relief, Reintegration and Protection Officer, my core responsibilities include facilitating the protection of civilians, the creation of a conducive environment for safe, dignified and voluntary returns, sustainable integration of returnees and the implementation of Chapter 3 of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) which focuses on humanitarian assistance and reconstruction.
In summary, my day-to-day activities lean towards protection of civilians and encompasses all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with international humanitarian, human rights and refugee laws. It also includes activities that ensure safety and dignity, as well as access to basic services.

Some of the activities I carry out in my assignment include protection monitoring, enabling the implementation of UNMISS Quick Impact Projects, community engagements, patrols, protection assessments, mapping, analysis, advocacy, reporting and facilitating vocational skills trainings targeting women and youth. --Geraldine Chioma Nzulumike, UN Volunteer Relief, Reintegration, and Protection Officer, UNMISS

Everyday, I interact with various segments of communities, such as women groups, youth representatives, chiefs, elders and others. I also engage with humanitarian partners (both non-governmental organizations and UN entities), the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, and staff of various government ministries. While my discussions with this diverse group of people cut across a range of topics, they are all geared towards the protection of civilians and ensuring safe delivery of humanitarian assistance.

How has your work impacted the people you serve?

While it is a work in progress and not so easy to measure, I will say that through capacity building, advocacy and enhancing existing systems, my work has to an extent improved the ability of individuals, communities and institutions to protect civilians.

For example, during workshops, assessments and meetings, together with
my team mates, we create an environment for community members to engage with their leaders at the state and county levels to identify and address protection concerns using available resources. Through community engagement, people have a better understanding that it is the primary responsibility of the Government to protect civilians (with the support of other partners).

Our continuous engagements, assessments, and monitoring sometimes influence UNMISS patrols to hotspot locations which help to deter violence. My section is the Secretariat for UNMISS Quick Impact Projects, hence I am often involved in the entire life cycle of such projects.

These are usually community owned, with communities involved in every step from project identification to handover. They complement the efforts of the Government to provide basic services, strengthen rule of law and justice systems, and enhance the overall capacity of government institutions which in turn builds trust in the Government and supports return and reintegration processes for displaced people.

Additionally, we work to provide livelihood and vocational skills trainings for women and youth. For the women, these trainings also help reduce incidences of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against women and improve their participation in decision making processes. The trainings provide livelihood options for the youth, lowering incidences of inter-communal violence.

**What have your greatest challenges and lessons been?**

“My greatest challenge is having to rapidly adapt to the different cultures I encounter. This involves trying to understand what is respectful and disrespectful across cultures both within South Sudan and amongst the various nationalities I work with. This has totally pushed me out of my comfort zone, but it has greatly improved my adaptability and interpersonal skills.”
In the context of South Sudan, I believe that understanding cultures helps in developing solutions to address persistent challenges plaguing the country.

In some villages, for example, some women are often not comfortable speaking in the presence of men and even when they do, they might not provide a complete story. By understanding such realities, my team mates and I are able to develop solutions that are respectful and inclusive.

Another challenge I have encountered is managing expectations. The conflict, natural disasters and climate change experienced by the people of South Sudan have created a variety of issues, gaps and needs that lead to a vicious cycle of poverty and further conflict. However, I have learnt that sharing relevant information with communities improves understanding – people appreciate being involved.

For example, continuously sharing information on the UNMISS mandate and advocacy efforts has often helped us maintain our working relationships with communities. Additionally, encouraging community ownership of activities and community initiatives promotes sustainability and resilience.

**What is the one thing you are particularly proud of in your assignment?**

In general, I will say working with community representatives to identify problems and implementing solutions to those problems in collaboration with the Government is fulfilling. In this line of work, change is mostly achieved in the long term, so it is not always easy to point at the results of our work, but whenever I can, such moments make me proud.

“I am proud of the community engagement and ownership approach we have adopted in the implementation of programmes. Interacting with members of various communities regardless of their identity, encouraging them to own initiatives, seeing people work together for a common goal and making people feel heard, allows for sustainable and acceptable work to be done.”
What are your thoughts about what it means to volunteer? How has volunteering influenced your life and the lives of those you have met?

“Volunteerism is an expression of love; it involves empathizing with people and being part of the solution (in whatever capacity) to achieve positive change. It involves treating people with honour, dignity and respect, regardless of their identity.”

For me, volunteering started in my home country of Nigeria, where I mostly focused on prison visitations to identify and support inmates who needed pro bono legal services. I also participated in engagements with teenagers aimed at helping them understand pathways for legal careers.

However, an incident in my life made me decide that I wanted to make more impact and this path led me to the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme. I joined the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) as a UN Volunteer, where I work in the Protection, Transition and Reintegration (PTR) Section. First I was deployed at the Bentiu field office of the mission, and currently I am in the Torit field office.

Formally volunteering through UNV has brought me in contact with a diverse set of people and cultures and it has made me understand that at the end of the day, we are more similar than we think because we are all human beings striving for survival. This has taught me to be more tolerant and accommodating, which has, in turn, improved my interactions with people.

East and Southern Africa

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