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Dr Sibongile Chikombore (Zimbabwe), UN Volunteer Health Systems Specialist

Dr Sibongile Chikombore (left) and her supervisor, Dr Bejoy Nambiar (right) engaging with the Chang'ambika Health team during a planning visit in Chikwawa district, Malawi.

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## Ensuring mothers and children get quality health care

My UN Volunteer journey started in June 2021, when I joined the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Malawi. As a Health Systems Specialist, I support one of the country's flagship UN joint programmes, focused on improving maternal, newborn and child health outcomes.

In this role, my responsibilities span programme management and coordination, operational guidance, partnership building and capacity building. I ensure mothers and children receive quality integrated healthcare services.

I collaborate with district health workers from community to national levels. Together, we remove hurdles hindering mothers and children from accessing quality health services. I help them plan their activities based on evidence and best practices.

My volunteer assignment contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly good health and wellbeing (SDG 3), Gender equality (SDG 5) and clean water and sanitation (SDG 6). Nationally, the programme aligns with the country's Health Sector Strategic Plan II, which places an emphasis on reducing maternal and child morbidity and mortality.

Although the programme is still in its infancy, we have achieved significant progress. We trained 54 District Health Management Teams in leadership and management. This has boosted their governance capabilities, enabling them to coordinate partners efficiently and channel resources for their district plans using evidence-based planning.

The programme has trained the staff of more than 60 health facilities in six districts on the nine standards of quality of care. These facilities are now implementing quality improvement projects to improve maternal and care outcomes. The projects target improving data documentation and analyses and improving clinical skills to care for small and sick babies and their mothers.

In Rumphi district, key outcomes in 2022 included an increase in measles vaccine coverage

from 53 to 90 per cent, improvement in monthly reporting rates from 83 per cent in quarter I to 93 per cent in quarter II, an increase in referrals from 24 per cent in January to 67 per cent in May, increase in use of the District Health Information System and Improvement in water quality monitoring.



Sibongile is a hard-working person, with genuine commitment towards the principles of voluntary engagement, which include solidarity, compassion, reciprocity and self-reliance.; and commitment towards UNICEF's mission and vision, as well as to the UN core values. She is reliable, and her flexibility and team spirit make it easy to work with her. I can safely say she is a valuable member! --Dr Bejoy Nambiar, Health Specialist at UNICEF, Malawi

No volunteer assignment is without its challenges. For me as a Zimbabwean in Malawi, my limited ability to speak the local language was challenging initially. With time and practice, mostly with communities and colleagues, I am now able to communicate the basics.

Another challenge was stakeholder management. Working with district teams to develop evidence-based work plans takes patience and painstaking continuity, as districts have many challenges to overcome. On a positive note, I have been able to influence and build capacity to reach those most left behind, often in areas that are hard to reach.

Programme coordination with three large UN agencies was my third challenge. Even though we work under the mantra that we are one UN, some policies and procedures vary, so trying to marry all those was a big challenge. Effective communication, transparency and dedication were key to our mutual success.



I have learnt a lot personally and professionally. I have learnt the importance of humility and empathy. I have mastered the importance of critical analysis when implementing programmes and the value of accountability. Above all, I have come to appreciate the importance of effective communication to success. --Sibongile Chikombore, UN Volunteer Health Systems Specialist

Outside my core responsibilities, I have been privileged to help other national efforts, like the response to the polio outbreak documented in February 2022.

I am part of the team providing supervision and on-the-job training to vaccination teams. Our goal is to ensure that well-trained health workers and potent vaccines with well-maintained cold chains reach every child. I have participated in two rounds of the Polio vaccination campaign and have supervised over 20 teams that have reached more than a thousand children with vaccines.

This opportunity has exposed me to many learning platforms and how to engage with various stakeholders. I have gained knowledge, skills and qualities through this role that will propel my career, and I am truly grateful.

“ Volunteering is fun if you have a passion for it, and it is hugely rewarding. I go to sleep every night with a smile, knowing that my skills and knowledge contribute to a worthy cause as a global citizen. Every child matters and they deserve the best quality health services. I am glad that I have made some difference in the lives of the children of Malawi. --  
Sibongile Chikombore

In my line of work, I have met and worked closely with other volunteers, known as community health workers in Malawi and from other African countries. One thing we have in common is dedication. The community health workers I met during the Polio campaign are determined to provide every child in their communities with quality health care, including vaccinations. They walk long distances from one village to the next, vaccinating children with a smile. The community members treat them with respect and know they can count on them. To me, that is the value of volunteerism.



## East and Southern Africa

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