A lifetime of volunteering: a retiring UN Volunteer looks back on his journey

At 70 years of age, Sam Stembo served as a national UN Volunteer Expert and Project Manager with the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme in Sri Lanka. Throughout his life, he has been passionate about volunteering, starting from the young age of fourteen. Having dedicated over five years as a UN Volunteer, he happily retired in February 2023. Looking back on his volunteering journey, he feels a sense of fulfillment and pride in having contributed to the volunteer agenda, particularly in addressing socio-economic crises.

With a Doctorate in Business Administration, Sam joined UNV in 2013, bringing with him extensive experience and expertise in project management, marketing, and agro-enterprise development. Reflecting on his journey, he says, “Volunteering has been my passion since my youth.”
As a national UN Volunteer Expert, Sam played a crucial role in supporting the Government’s efforts to establish a state-led volunteer coordinating mechanism. In 2019, he spearheaded the development of the National Policy on Volunteering, making Sri Lanka one of the countries with a dedicated policy on volunteering.

This led to the establishment of the National Volunteering Secretariat (NVS) under the Department of Social Services, which strengthened the volunteer infrastructure in the country. Additionally, Sam collaborated with the Computer Science and Engineering Department of the University of Moratuwa to develop the Volunteer Management System, an online real-time platform to support NVS.

Recognizing the significance of tracking volunteering information in the country, Sam contributed to the National Survey on Volunteerism (2014), Online Survey on Volunteerism (2022) and National Situation Analysis (2022). The National Survey on Volunteerism was the first of its kind in Sri Lanka, providing crucial data on the status of volunteering and estimating volunteer contributions to the country's development.

Furthermore, Sam facilitated a partnership between the Sustainable Development Council (SDC), the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS), and the National Volunteering Secretariat.

Sharmalee Jayasinghe, UNV Country Coordinator in Sri Lanka, praises Sam’s dedication, professionalism and technical expertise, highlighting his positive outlook and determination in overcoming challenges. "Sam has been an integral part of UNV’s success story," Sharmalee says. "He has played a significant role in the volunteering journey in Sri Lanka, leaving behind a remarkable legacy."

In the past year, Sam actively supported the launch of the National Volunteering Network (V-NET), an extensive network comprising volunteer-involving organizations, volunteer networks and philanthropists. V-NET aims to drive the volunteer agenda forward by supporting response and recovery efforts during the crisis in Sri Lanka. Moreover, it serves as a vital resource for talent acquisition, as it promotes opportunities for volunteers associated with registered entities. This is in line with UNV’s Strategic Framework 2022-2025 and promotes volunteerism to support Sri Lanka’s development agenda.

It was a fulfilling journey to support the development of Sri Lanka’s volunteering infrastructure. Sri Lanka is truly a volunteering country, and with the groundwork laid and substantial volunteering inputs, we can make a meaningful impact on the development agenda once the current economic crisis eases. --Sam Stembo, UN Volunteer Expert

Reflecting on his experience, Sam continues, "With trained statisticians at the Department of Census Statistics and the agreed-upon importance of capturing volunteering information, along with the co-partnership of Sustainable Development Council, Department of Census Statistics, and National Volunteering Secretariat, we are on the path to see volunteering contributions for the 2030 agenda highlighted in national reports."

"Overall, I want to thank my supervisors and colleagues for the unwavering support extended to me in accomplishing tasks that seemed impossible. Kudos to UNV Sri Lanka," Sam concludes.
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