



UN Volunteer Kasunjith Satanarachchi (left), with his fellow Youth Leads at UNDP, Sri Lanka (UNV/UNDP 2018)
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The sky is the limit: UN Volunteers with disabilities create more inclusive workplaces

Kasunjith Satanarachchi is a UN Volunteer currently serving with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Sri Lanka under its Youth Lead programme. It has been a long journey for him to get to this point, Kasunjith reminisces.

“ From my younger days, I had three dreams. One of them was to have the opportunity to work as a part of the UN System. Through the Youth Leads programme, I have now been able to achieve this. --UN Volunteer Kasunjith Satanarachchi

28-year-old Kasunjith Satanarachchi, sits back and reminisces of the long journey it has been to get to this point. Kasunjith has cerebral palsy and while majority of persons with

disabilities living in Sri Lanka choose not to pursue their studies, he was determined to prove everyone wrong.

Hailing from a town in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka, he attended Kalutara Maha Vidyalaya where he completed his studies from Grade 1 to Grade 11 after passing his GCE Ordinary Level exams. The 11 years in school were not the easiest. Kasunjith had to go through constant bullying and rude comments from his teachers. One experience that he vividly remembers, was an instance when the sectional head of the school spoke to his parents. He had asked them why they were wasting their time and money trying to educate their child, who would be better off just at home.

The majority of Sri Lankan schools are not equipped and lack training to teach children with disabilities.

BUT STILL HE PERSISTED

He then enrolled himself to the Gurulugomi Maha Vidyalaya, an advanced level school supported by the ICRC. The administration was more welcoming of him, provided special washroom facilities and it is here that he completed his studies by passing the GCE Advanced Level examination with 1A and 2Bs as results.

With his excellent results, he had the opportunity of entering a state university. However, due to the stringent regulations for applicants with disabilities, he was given limited subject streams to choose from. Kasunjith showed a great interest to pursue Law after having studied Logic and Political Science in school, so it was a disappointing realization with the limited allocations for students like him. He decided to enroll himself in a private university which offered the Staffordshire University degree. It was here that he felt like he was finally accepted.

“ I do not expect much from people, but my only wish is to always look for ways in which I can contribute to society. --UN Volunteer Kasunjith Satanarachchi

GREATER THINGS TO COME

After 3 years of hard work, he obtained an LLB with a 2nd class in law. This was the start of greater things to come. Kasunjith went on to win Mock trial mooted competitions and was also a part of the Youth Parliament of Sri Lanka from 2016-2017, where he was the Deputy Minister of International Affairs and the Representative for persons living with disabilities.

He then worked as the youth focal point for a Disability Rights Organization for 3 years and

also has experience working as a research intern at a leading law firm. His articles in Sinhala and English have been featured in national newspapers such as Silumina and Daily FT. It was during this period that he was fortunate to receive the opportunity to visit the Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland.



Kasunjith Satanarachchi, UN Volunteer serving with UNDP in Sri Lanka under its Youth Lead programme. (UNV, 2018)

UNDP-UNV PROGRAMME FOR YOUNG PROFESSIONALS WITH DISABILITIES

Globally, the United Nations Development Programme and United Nations Volunteers have designed a talent programme to enhance the employability and career prospects of young professionals with disabilities by providing them an opportunity to gain work experience within the UN.

As a part of this programme, the UNDP Youth Leads programme saw the inclusion of a young individual with disabilities this year. When Kasunjith saw the advertisement for the programme, he completely dismissed the possibility of him being able to qualify for the position. It was his friend who prompted him to apply for the vacancy.

"I couldn't believe it when I got the callback for an interview," Kasunjith shares. From then on, everything else just fell into place and the third batch of Youth Leads came on board in August 2018.

UNDP YOUTH LEADS

The UNDP Youth Leads programme was first introduced in 2015, as another step forward in opening UNDP up to young people of the country. A cohort of 4 dynamic young people would be chosen to work within the core areas of UNDP's portfolio for 50% of their time – such as the governance, environment, and support teams – while the other half of their time would be spent working together as a team furthering the innovation portfolio of UNDP.

Kasunjith as a part of his assignment has worked on mapping the disability sector, the Comprehensive Youth Development Programme, accessibility of the UN Compound in Colombo and is working closely with colleagues working with the Governance and Peacebuilding portfolio of UNDP.

He is proud to be the first person with disabilities in Asia to be working with UNDP as a part of this programme. His teammates describe him as a "passionate individual who does not give up".

Kasunjith Sataranachchi (left), with his fellow Youth Leads at UNDP, Sri Lanka (UNV/UNDP)

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NEXT STEPS

Kasunjith hopes to go on and complete a Masters in Disability studies and continue to be an advocate for the rights of persons living with disabilities in Sri Lanka.

“ I have achieved two out of three dreams in life. I hope to one day participate at the UN General Assembly and bring to light the importance of inclusion, accessibility and continue to work towards leaving no one behind. -- UN Volunteer Kasunjith Satanarachchi

Asia and the Pacific

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