My real exposure to international development through volunteering

My name is Titta Maja-Luoto, from Finland. I am a former UN Volunteer, now in a senior policy role with the Government of Finland. I am presently the Director General of the Department for Policy Development in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. My career in international development started many years ago, and being a UN Volunteer has been a big part of it.

I always wanted to work in the UN system but didn't have the experience. So after completing my graduate degree in social sciences, I started working with a Finnish non-governmental organization as a gender focal point. My university degree in gender and the new gender role seemed like a match made in heaven.

A few years into that, I came across an opportunity as a UN Volunteer. It was for a pioneering strategic gender mainstreaming programme. I recall we were a group of 12 volunteers supporting the UN Development Programme's (UNDP) regional gender advisors.

The opportunity took me to Lao People's Democratic Republic – a place that left a lasting impression on me personally and professionally.

As a young UN Volunteer, what I found most invaluable was being able to interact with people on the ground and see first-hand what it means to achieve results.

“Volunteering was a truly rewarding experience for me,” says Titta Maja-Luoto (second from left) as she visits UNV headquarters in Bonn. © UNV, 2023
was all so tangible. I could actually experience what results-based management is and how it's implemented.

Even after years, it's a coincidence that many of us are still associated with development work. My peers from UNV days continue to work in the UN system. For me, I work as Director General for Development Cooperation in the Finland Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

It's been widely debated that we are lagging behind in development, but, as the UN Secretary-General has said, some progress has been made. To continue that progress, we need expertise; we need local volunteers who know so much of their community context.

We need to think this chain through – development benefits everyone. Unless and until that is done, we won't be successful in achieving our results.

We need to have a well-rounded approach that speaks to everyone: girls, boys, women, men. And of course, we need volunteers as they are the ones who inspire; action-oriented individuals who make things happen.

Looking back, that's what I learned as a volunteer: getting real-time exposure in the field, and that's volunteering in a nutshell for me!
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Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 5: Gender equality SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals