Creating health awareness among communities in Kiribati

Some 53 UN Volunteers are serving in the Pacific, many of them going beyond their usual duties to support communities during the COVID-19 outbreak. One of these is Ella Ballerini (Australia), a UN Youth Volunteer fully funded by Australia, serving with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Suva, Fiji. Ella was on a one-month field mission to Kiribati when the COVID-19 outbreak started. Going beyond her usual role, she joined UNICEF’s prevention and support efforts relating to the Coronavirus pandemic. Here, she shares her story.

In my role as a Health Communication for Development (C4D) Officer, I work with communities, nurses and the Government to strengthen communication for maternal and child health and nutrition. I am based in Suva, and cover multiple Pacific island countries, including Kiribati, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. I began my assignment as an international UN Youth Volunteer in January 2020.

This is my first time in the Pacific, and working in Fiji and Kiribati has allowed me to experience some of the unique challenges and opportunities faced by
In dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak, my first instinct was to panic. This was my first international deployment with the UN, and I had not expected an emergency. My family was calling and asking me to come home, yet I decided to stay. --Ella Ballerini, UN Youth Volunteer with UNICEF

The composure, compassion, and determination of my colleagues helped me remain calm and focused on what was important—my goal. I felt a renewed sense of urgency in the work we do and the importance, now more than ever, to strengthen the capacity of communities and countries to deal with the crisis.

I have been working with the UNICEF health team in Kiribati, who are actively engaged in the response against COVID-19. My role has been to help strengthen community engagement between health workers and their populations for ongoing primary health care service delivery. The rapport between the clinic and community is vital to ensure continuous service provision, especially during outbreak scenarios where disruption of routine services can lead to deaths.

I have also assisted with risk communication activities such as conducting focus group discussions to understand community attitudes and perceptions towards the virus and building the capacity of NGOs to conduct community awareness on nutrition during COVID-19.

Kiribati is among the few countries in the world unaffected by COVID-19. Still, UNICEF, the World Health organization (WHO), and the Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MHMS) are working hard to ensure that the country is prepared to act and respond.

Volunteering with UNICEF has made me feel that I am a part of something bigger than myself. With everything going on around the world, everyone must come together and play their role, big or small, in the fight against COVID-19.
My advice to anyone involved or affected by the crisis is that they should remain calm and balance self-care with community care. Work on what you can do within current restrictions, and reach out to your friends. Colleagues and communities should support each other. --Ella Ballerini

The Australian Government funds Ella’s assignment as part of the partnership between the Government of Australia and UNV on the Full Funding Programme. The majority of these fully-funded assignments are in the Pacific, and Australian UN Volunteers have contributed directly and indirectly across the Pacific Islands in support national COVID-19 response efforts.

• COVID-19 • Coronavirus • Australia • full funding programme

Sustainable Development Goal: