26 February 2016  Flavia Sembera

UN Volunteer Flavia Sembera, standing, (Uganda), Programme Officer for the UNV Field Unit in Zambia, conducts a session during the 2014 retreat for UN Volunteers posted in the country. (Photo by Leeroy Mapulanga, University of Zambia Student/Coordinator of the Youth Volunteer Network, 2014).

Why I am so enthusiastic to be the UNV Programme Officer in Zambia

Lusaka, Zambia: I did not hesitate to take up the UNV Programme Officer’s assignment in Zambia when the opportunity arose. I had attained my MSc. in Development Management and long experience of what volunteerism contributes to both individuals and their communities.

I had been introduced to volunteerism while boarding at primary school in Uganda, where, as children from eight to 12 years old, each of us was required to take on a six-year-old girl and voluntarily care for her: teaching her clean-self etiquettes, good manners and how to relate and socialize with others. Growing up in Kampala, the capital, I had been exposed to the diversity of cultures, values and norms.

Upon completing my BA (HONS) degree in sociology, I initially pursued a career in development as a community volunteer for the Uganda Red Cross Society. The assignment laid the ground for my exposure to international development with international NGOs like Action Aid and Plan, and my association with them of over ten years.

When I arrived in Lusaka in August 2012, given my early childhood exposure to different traditions, with a very humbling and civil welcome, I instantly felt at home!
As a Programme Officer, I get the opportunity to do a mixture of things on a daily basis and throughout the year: volunteer mobilization and management, advocacy, and programme and partnership development. The same role has given me the chance to instill a sense of empowerment in young people while building both their individual and professional skills through volunteerism. For example, by conducting open health clinics, training teachers from a community school in basic ICT skills, and supporting the UN in various fora as the UNV FU in Zambia did for the United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA) during the 2014 International Youth Symposium.

Monitoring travels to UN Volunteers in the field, hosted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), exposed me to the realities of being a refugee and provoked reflections on the issue of ‘War, Intervention and Development’. The refugees through their eyes are constantly reminding us ‘Never go to war’ and not to take anything in life for granted.

I have come to realize that some self-sacrifice for the sake of service is critical in this assignment, because as a PO I am the torch bearer of UNV at my duty station across all levels. At the same time, I have been introduced to new professional paths and learnt more about the UN system with its respective mandates and audiences. As an African, I have been able to reflect on commonalities in traditions shared across the continent while experiencing Zambia’s beautiful and diverse culture, from seeing the Victoria Falls to cooking maize meal (Nshima) with a passion.

Volunteering with UNV has been one of the most formative and influential experiences in my life. The three and a half years spent so far in Zambia have solidified my interest in international development. Also, I have developed personally and professionally. For example, I did not know that I could chair high profile meetings until July 2015 during the visit by Helen Clark, UNDP’s Administrator, to the UN in Zambia. So doing, I discovered my own leadership potential and tapped what I feel may be vast resources that hitherto were hidden within me.

Lastly, I am proud of every piece of this assignment because it has given me the chance to meet and serve wonderful people with the best of my ability.
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Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions, SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals