New era for the volunteers of Karakalpakstan: fighting an invisible enemy

COVID-19 has tested the strength of communities around the world. It has presented challenges for healthcare systems, economies and labor markets, and has influenced many other facets that impact people’s lives. Today the world is adapting to a new reality, in which self-isolation is a life-saving practice. However, all the while there are some who have decided to respond to the current pandemic by volunteering their time and energy, helping communities overcome the new difficulties they face.

Some volunteers load trucks with medical masks and hygiene items. Others rush to distribute printed handouts which outline basic hygiene principles to use in the face of COVID-19. Many more sit in front of their laptops and phones at home, reaching out to households in remote and affected areas,
and assisting health and social workers who disseminate handouts.

“We have included volunteerism activities in our recent activities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nowadays, volunteers are spreading their recommendations in more than 10 districts of Karakalpakstan about how to prevent and deal with the Coronavirus. --Matilda Dimovska, UNDP Resident Representative, Uzbekistan

The pandemic has changed both the work volunteers do, and the roles they perform. Gulistan Embergenova is a patronage nurse at polyclinic No. 1 in the Bozatau district of Karakalpakstan. She is also one of many passionate Health Community Volunteers in her area. Trained by UN Volunteers through the UN Joint Programme on the Aral Sea region, Health Community Volunteers are now part of the COVID-19 pandemic response.

The COVID-19 outbreak has significantly changed Gulistan's day job, and also her volunteering routine.

“The good health of my community is my victory! Every day, I keep in touch with families in my area and check on their health. My volunteer work has been invaluable when it comes to advocating for disease prevention. Through our efforts, we have identified two family members who have been affected by the early stages of COVID-19 in my area. They were treated in a timely way at home and have been completely cured. --Gulistan Embergenova, Health Community Volunteer

To prevent catching any disease, a person must first strengthen their
immune system. This recommendation has been one of the most vital measures used in the fight against COVID-19.

“There are migrants from abroad in my area, and when their homes become quarantined we carry out all the necessary checks and explanatory work. Everyday, I measure the temperature of family members, and inform them of ways to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus. --Gulistan Embergenova

Gulistan Embergenova, Health Community Volunteer of Bozataus district, Uzbekistan, while checking her wards. ©UNDP, 2020

Volunteers continually share their achievements, experiences and the results of their meetings in communities through the Telegram channel Volunteers of Karakalpakstan. Here, they can discuss the challenges they each face, and ways to prevent them in the future.

“I wish strength to all volunteers who are carrying out preventive work within the population throughout this pandemic, and I call on more citizens to volunteer and unite their efforts! --Gulistan Embergenova

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Health Community Volunteer Azima Bekbergenova conducting an information session on COVID-19 preventive measures for pupils of Takhtakupir district, Uzbekistan. ©UNDP, 2020

The UN Joint Programme in the Aral Sea region brought together 3,700 Health Community Volunteers, trained to support communities in the Karakalpakstan region. They have been educating and spreading health advice to more than 389,000 people.

The people of Karakalpakstan were affected by ecological changes resulting from the disappearance of the Aral Sea, once the fourth largest lake in the world. The UN Joint Programme on the Aral Sea region, started in 2016, had the goal to improve the health of the people of this region.

At first, 60 volunteers were trained by UN Volunteers to visit their communities and spread information about the necessary measures to prevent tuberculosis and other diseases. UN Volunteers developed training modules, educational and sanitation manuals, calendars, posters, leaflets, as well as all the necessary equipment and tools for convenient and safe work with the population.

The world needs more selfless people like Gulistan, and we hope her story inspires others to step forward and be a part of the noble journey in which one finds joy by helping others.

“Indeed, volunteers are making difference in the life of Karakalpakstan and in Uzbekistan. It is commendable than last December the President of Uzbekistan adopted the law on volunteerism in Uzbekistan, which defined volunteers, volunteer organizations and their activities, --Matilda Dimovska, UNDP Resident Representative, Uzbekistan

Read more about the contributions of Health Community Volunteers of Uzbekistan before the pandemic and in 2020.
• COVID-19 • Coronavirus • Health Community Volunteers • Volunteering • volunteerism

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 3: Good health and well-being, SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals