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Contributing to a more inclusive and happy world

Quito, Ecuador: I arrived in Ecuador in February 2012 to strengthen the Articulation of Territorial Networks team of the United Nations Development Programme (ART/UNDP) on issues related to gender and human development in land planning and management.

Thanks to the fund for capacity development at my disposal, I was able to closely inspect successful experiences in El Salvador that demonstrate the importance of incorporating women’s voices and needs into public policy and governance forums in the territory. Combined with education and training on women’s rights, this can have a transformational impact on women’s lives.

In collaboration with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), we concentrated our efforts in the provinces of Carchi and Esmeraldas, on the northern border. After conducting a survey to assess the training needs of the members of the Dialogue Groups - local governance forums for the planning and management of regional development in these provinces - we developed courses on topics such as women's rights, gender responsive budgeting and citizen participation.

These courses were given to 29 canton leaders and 36 members of the Dialogue Groups of Esmeraldas and Carchi. In addition, the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador and the Central University of Ecuador can continue offering these courses to create a critical mass to support the inclusion of women’s voices in local human development.

To be a volunteer is to be flexible, to be open to contributing your skills and enthusiasm to new opportunities. This is how I’ve had some of the most rewarding experiences of my assignment, helping ART/UNDP and UNV to organize post-2015 consultations. These consultations sought to draw together people’s wishes and dreams for the world from 2015 onwards, the year in which the Millennium Development Goals will culminate.

During International Volunteer Day 2012, we held the first consultation with young people and volunteer students from the Quito Equatorial Technical University. As part of an ART programme workshop in Aguarico canton, we organized another consultation with the Waorani, in the heart of the Yasuni National Park. Surrounded by thousands of green hues, Waorani women, young people and children had the opportunity to participate and share their visions of a just and sustainable world, with access to basic services and full enjoyment of their rights.

To see the satisfaction on the faces of these people on contributing their voices to this global debate made me forget the pains of having travelled over 17 hours by boat to reach their community, the Amazon humidity and the ever-present mosquitoes. But above all, it
made me understand once again that volunteering gives you the opportunity to go beyond the expected and contribute to a more inclusive and happy world.

**Bio:** Tom Van den Steen (Belgium) is an international UN Volunteer specialist with the UNDP Articulation of Territorial Networks Programme in Ecuador. He has a degree in International and Comparative Politics and a Masters in Humanitarian Assistance and Security. Before becoming a UN Volunteer, he worked in the Monitoring and Evaluation section of the Vredeseilanden (VECO) NGO in Belgium, and as National Manager of the Catapa volunteer movement in Peru.

Story translated from Spanish by UN Online Volunteer Amanda Moody.

**Latin America and the Caribbean**

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Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 5: Gender equality, SDG 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure