The Batey Experience

Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic: It was my first assignment as a UN Volunteer in the field representing the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in the Dominican Republic (UNHCR DR). Since the beginning of my collaboration as a UNV Field Analyst for the UNHCR programme I have been working as a focal point focusing on a community-based approach, which has totally changed my perspective. I used to work as a lawyer at the Lands Tribunal and I felt that my work there was not changing the situation of the most vulnerable, discriminated and poor people in my country.

During my first few weeks with UNHCR I was in charge of developing and organizing training for the community workers in the province of San Pedro de Macoris, focusing on documentation issues of the population. The goal of this training was to promote the participation of parents with children under two years old who had not been registered yet. Without personal identification documents children have no right to nationality or access to
state institutions. This is a common situation in the [bateyes] (company towns where sugar workers used to live, consisting of barracks and a few houses, often with no facilities).

During my assignment, I had to organize and give workshops. On the other hand, and as a part of the documentation brigade, I prepared a presentation that showed the importance of personal identification documents, and also the impact they could have on the different communities. The workshop prepared the community leaders for subsequent documentation activities.

A first visit to the bateyes with the community leaders brought us enough information to provide birth certificates for more than 20 children, with the collaboration of the Haitian Consulate in the Dominican Republic and our implementing partner, the Scalabrinian Association at the Service of Human Mobility (ASCALA).

When I started to see the kids and the parents, and the way they appreciated our information, even if it was just answering a simple question, I felt good. The documentation brigade was a success; 29 children got their birth certificates and 95 passports for adults were requested. It was a long day, but the community leaders, ASCALA and the staff of UNHCR got so involved in the process that I didn’t even realized it was already time to go. Then I started to see the purpose of my work and how incredibly happy it makes me to be a part of UNHCR and a national UN Volunteer.

"There is not great talent, without great will power", (Honoré de Balzac).

Bio: Eykis García Díaz has been UN Volunteer Field Analyst for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in the Dominican Republic (UNHCR DR) since February 2012.