Annalisa Staffa's story

**Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic:** My work as a UN Volunteer with UNICEF Dominican Republic has been the most challenging experience of my professional career. Before arriving I did not know exactly what to expect from a different country and health system. After only a few months, I was aware of the existing problems and I was ready to contribute my knowledge and skills and work with local actors to achieve a common goal.

I arrived in the Caribbean seven months ago as a UNV HIV Official Assistant and have since spent most of my time in the field working in hospitals and collaborating with the UNICEF and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Regional Initiative for the Elimination of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV and Congenital Syphilis.

During these months, I have assisted and supported the maternity hospitals that have the highest birth rates in the country with the implementation of the medical protocol to eliminate the transmission of HIV.

I have worked alongside health care practitioners who are devoting their lives to making sure that new-born babies come to life free of HIV and
syphilis, and we have collaborated to develop solutions to the implementation problems.

While certain results are not measurable in the short term, as a volunteer I know I am working towards positive change when collaborators, such as health care providers and mothers, recognize that a solution that has been implemented is working; this is the first step in accomplishing our goal.

Working in the health sector has given me the possibility to connect with people with completely different professional backgrounds and skills, and has allowed for fruitful exchange and collaboration across hospital departments.

As a researcher and policy analyst, I have always held the conviction that in order to achieve national goals like the elimination of congenital HIV and syphilis, it is essential to understand the local situation by observing, listening and collecting data to build knowledge and evidence-based solutions that are appropriate for the local and national context.

Applied research, my passion, has become a valid instrument to systematize and apply successful tools and mechanisms to other maternity hospitals. The opportunity to interact with various sectors and local stakeholders – HIV-positive mothers, hospital staff and administration, and government officials – has given me an understanding of the various perspectives necessary to guide and apply the programme to different settings.

I now have even more conviction than before that the key to results is to be personally involved at the local level, and that being a volunteer provides the opportunity to contribute directly to the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals. As a volunteer, I have learned a new perspective on how to approach and tackle problems, and so far the experience I have had, though challenging, could not have been more enriching.

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