UN Volunteers share their experiences at the World Festival of Youth and Students

CLIMATE ACTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Part of my assignment is the provision of education and training to people in the remote areas of Northern Ghana on flood preparedness. Our timely interventions have increased the knowledge of locals in these areas and are now they are well prepared to secure the lives of their family members and their properties should there be any occurrence of flood. The call for Climate Action in the Sustainable Development Goals has come at a very critical period where the need for joint efforts to reduce global warming has become the only solution. It is therefore important to re-emphasize that: “Atuhuaky3 adwuma ho hia ma mpontuo” – Our mandate as volunteers for development is very relevant!
Valeria Drigo, Environment and Disaster Risk Reduction Project Coordinator in Rwanda

Together with Rwandan and international colleagues, we gather local women and discuss ways to spot early signs of disaster risks and what to do to prepare for it. A lady came up to me at the end of the first training we rolled out, in one of the Districts called Ngororero. She had come from a village a couple hours of walk away, just for disaster risk reduction training. With her blue and red flower dress and her best shoes, she approached me and said, Umuhungu wangye yaguye mu biza byubutaka bwamugwirirye. Ibi ntibizangera. “My son died in a landslide. This will not happen again.” This is what I’m doing with the UN Volunteers Programme in Rwanda. I highlight the importance of volunteerism in disaster risk reduction, and outline how people can take simple actions to manage it.
Nathanik Klaklangsmorn, UN Volunteer Communications and Outreach Officer in Thailand

Climate action is very important for Thailand. Through my volunteer work, I served on a project through which I educated local people how to indulge in the use of organic crops. Sarus crane, a large non-migratory crane is back in Thailand again after 50 years of extinction. Working with this project with UNDP and the zoological organization of my home country, I visited the rice field of Buriram, Northeast of Thailand. This province is known for its amazing rice fields. The Saurus crane was brought to this region. Our work was to make sure that the crane can survive in the nature by encouraging the local people to grow organic rice and to eradicate the use of pesticides which can kill the bird. As a result of our intervention, the farmers earned more money by cultivating the organic rice. So, this was in essence two-fold benefit.
Mohamed Benjmoud, Local Development Officer in Morocco

I serve with UNDP as a local development officer in the Circular Economy Approach at Souss Massa Region in the South West of Morocco. I have been volunteering with the rural communities for two years in the Argan landscape. Our global aim is to empower women who live in poverty and to develop income generating activities for them. This ensures their livelihood opportunities. Fatima ait Moussa is from the same area and has become a shining testament to what women can achieve if they are empowered. She is literate but needed guidance for her to become an entrepreneur. She got knowledge from our capacity building workshops on how to initiate women’s cooperatives. Today Fatima is a leader in her rural community, she has with her 3000 more women, the sky is the limit for her. The argan products are her livelihood.
The best and most recent example of regional development is the International Specialized Exhibition EXPO Astana 2017 which was held for three summer months under the “Future Energy” topic. It was the first time when such an immense event united 4500 young volunteers and hundreds of corporate volunteers to show how climate action can lead to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. These youth groups mobilize many more like them and become the change makers of the future. Volunteerism plays a very important role in developing local capacity. And it also generates new networks. Corporate volunteering is a new phenomenon which we need to further explore for Sustainable development of Kazakhstan and the whole world.
My assignment in raising awareness and youth engagement only strengthened my belief that youth are truly change makers. We still fail to recognize young people’s ability to walk in that school for example and deliver the right message without waking up the sensitive beast that we like to call society. We still underestimate the power of volunteerism. Youth account for a large percent of the population. Palestine is a young country, where youth comprise 30% of the society. If we don’t allow our youth in decision and policy making processes, if we don’t try to fill the huge intergenerational gap, and if we don’t encourage their active participation in their communities, we will face many obstacles in making a real substantial impact.
Vimukthi Caldera, Peacebuilding Assistant with the UN Resident Coordinator’s Office in Sri Lanka

Last year the Sri Lankan youth was included in the substantive work of constitutional reform with the UN Volunteers and V force, assisting the first level of the entire process. It was a significant achievement because it was the first time in independent Sri Lanka, that public consultations were sought for constitutional reform – the last time was in 1945 when Sri Lanka was known as Ceylon and was still a colony. It was also the first time that the youth was included in the decision making of the country. Through this exercise, youth volunteerism in Sri Lanka is taken seriously and the young demographic is taken as a resource rather than a development burden. To me, this was an important milestone for volunteers and young adults both in Sri Lanka and abroad, and a clear indication of the level of impact young people can have on social change. If we really put our minds to it, can you possibly imagine how far we can go?
It is simply impossible to imagine attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals of education, peace, security, employment, gender equality without engaging a wide range of people at all levels, at every step and at all time. From local community volunteers to those who are frontiers of peace and development, our society should motivate and encourage its youth to utilize their potential in different forms of volunteering. Only this will create a ripple effect of significant change. This assignment has been my life defining moment, because it has given me a perspective on the privileges I enjoy. It has also brought with it a sense of responsibility. To support and share the burden of driving positive change that will benefit everyone, and
Tín Bùi Mạnh, Youth Programme Officer in Viet Nam

Viet Nam is experiencing a period of demographic dividend, recording the highest proportion of young people in the country’s history with the numbers of adolescents and youth aged 10-29 account for about 30% of the total population. This demographic window of opportunity presents Viet Nam with a timely and unique opportunity to develop. However, like many other countries, Viet Nam is facing its own challenges to balance the economic growth and other social values, culture and environment. Young people are crucial to address these challenges. Their talent, potential, creativity and accessibility to the new world makes them the drivers of social and economic progress. Youth inclusion is the key for the sustainable development of my country.

PEACE, JUSTICE, EQUALITY AND SUSTAINABLE
Kevin Ochieng, Programme Support Officer in Kenya

As a UN Volunteer programme support officer in the UNV Kenya office, I interact with stories from different UN Volunteers. Stories of hope. Stories of change. I document these stories believing that they will inspire greater action today and tomorrow. I help build their capacity and periodically identify challenges they face in exercising their duties and recommend remedial action. This, is the power of volunteerism, and what UN Volunteers can achieve. Throughout my work, I have learnt that all development issues are so interlinked, that we lose so much leverage by isolating them in our day to day 'siloed' working culture. It is time we started looking at issues in a more integrated way, and volunteerism offers the glue that joins all the joints together.
Maureen Namuleme, Programme Officer in Uganda

Coming from a tribe which considers women inferior to men in all aspects of life made me take it upon myself to do something however less significant it might be against the gender inequalities that exist in Africa. As a Gender activist, a feminist and a mother, my goal is to fight for the rights of women and girls especially in African countries where a girl is trained at a tender age that their main responsibility and achievement in life is to become a good wife and a mother. Girls are trained not to talk back to men as it is a sign of disrespect. It’s because of these issues happening to women and girls in the society that I had to step up and take responsibility because if it’s not me, then who? And where else to volunteer than in Karamoja where all these negative practices are strongest. I was privileged to get an assignment with UN Women which is a global champion for Gender equality and empowerment of women.
Déogratias Nkurunziza, Communication Associate at UNDP in Rwanda

For me, this has been an opportunity to serve my country. The organization I am working with – UNDP – is a major partner in development to Rwanda. It has significantly contributed in restoring hope in Rwandan people’s faces. When it supported the unity and reconciliation efforts made by the government, it restored people’s hopes. This process has enabled Genocide perpetrators and survivors, of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsis, to forgive and forget about hate and focus on development. As a matter of fact, a delegation of Sudanese (Darfur region) came to Rwanda last year to learn from best practices on Rwanda case of reconciliation as they believe it has yielded impressive fruits. Darfur region in Sudan has experienced similar division as Rwanda.
I undertake refugee status determination interviews with asylum seekers from different countries, who like my own family, had to flee their own country due to war, violence, leaving everything behind, except their will to survive. Volunteerism has made me more human, in this fast pace of life, it makes me remind myself that I am still a human being at the end of the day. It has taught me resilience and has made me more tolerant, more embracing. It has connected my past, my present and my future all into one beautiful golden story with meaning.

→ More information on UNV's participation in the World Festival of Youth and Students.