Reflecting on the experiences of UN University Volunteers from Japan

The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme and Kwansei Gakuin University (KGU) in Japan launched a pilot initiative under the UN Youth Volunteer category in June 2013. During 2013-2014, 24 UN Youth Volunteers were deployed to UN entities worldwide. Since 2015, the programme has expanded, with 17 university students selected annually from nine partner universities to serve as UN University Volunteers for 5-month assignments.
UNV partners with nine universities, who fund UN University Volunteer deployment under the KGU Programme. These include: Kwansei Gakuin University, Osaka University, Akita International University, Sophia University, Tsukuba University, Toyo University, Meiji University, Meiji Gakuin University and Rikkyo University.

An annual event is held every year to share repatriated UN University Volunteers’ experiences and to exchange opinions for future volunteers and fruitful programme implementation. At such an event in March 2018, Professor Takeshi Sekiya, KGU, welcomed participants and delivering gratitude to all relevant staff from partner universities. He stated that he was proud of the students as all of them had completed their volunteer assignments successfully and safely returned back to Japan.

Mr Shigeru Ushio, Deputy Director-General of the International Cooperation Bureau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, spoke as guest of honour at the event. Mr Ushio was the focal point for UNV when the tragedy occurred where former UN Volunteer Atsuhito Nakata was killed while serving in Cambodia 1993. He said he was deeply moved to see youth volunteers with a passion for international development cooperation. Witnessing the actual situation happening in developing countries, as well as UN activities in the field, is the most meaningful experience. He shared the expectation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the UN Youth/University Volunteer programme will motivate students to pursue careers in international organizations, with everyone contributing to the SDGs in the area of their own interest.

Mr Tetsuo Kondo, Director, UNDP Representation Office in Tokyo, Japan moderated a panel discussion with a selected group of six students, who briefly shared their experiences, accomplishments and lessons learned while on assignments. These students were respectively involved in projects related to climate change, social business, gender, South-South cooperation and SDGs advocacy. One of the questions Mr Kondo asked was: Why you decided to become a UN University Volunteer? Why did you choose that assignment? One panelist asserted: "Joining several grassroots level activities in some countries in the past, I wanted to contribute to international cooperation in terms of programme management and coordination of stakeholders in decision making level." Another responded, "I found a description of a volunteering assignment in an area I have interest in and wanted to develop expertise for my future career."
I was deeply touched by each one of UN University Volunteers, as they have demonstrated their skills in the UN offices in developing countries. Indeed, I have served for some of UN offices in my career such as UNDP Timor Leste and can visualize these UN University Volunteers’ commitment to the offices and local community. I look forward to the careers of these students and would also appreciate these former volunteers, programme staff, and faculties from universities to nurture future volunteers all together. --Mr Tetsuo Kondo, Director, UNDP Representation Office in Tokyo

Addressing the 85 participants in the event, 11 students made debriefing presentations on their experiences as UN University Volunteers. Asked about how they contributed to the UN offices full of professionals as undergraduate students lacking expertise, they explained how they tried to acquire the required skill immediately, for example by reading books on design software or asking colleagues (interns, volunteers) for advice on terminology and other issues. The students also emphasized that a lot of things could be prepared before starting volunteer assignments, such as studying about the UN, local language etc.

SERVING AS A UN UNIVERSITY VOLUNTEER IN SRI LANKA

Takashi Kogoma (Japan) was deployed to the UNV Sri Lanka Peacebuilding Fund team as a UN University Volunteer in advocacy and outreach from Akita International University in Japan. He completed a five-month assignment during 2017-2018. He shares his experience:

In the beginning of October, the severe heat of Colombo - so unlike my home country Japan - warmly welcomed me. As a member of the Peacebuilding Fund Team of UNV Sri Lanka, I have devoted myself to youth empowerment to increase participation of youth in peacebuilding. This was
part of the wider objective to help achieve sustainable peace in the post-war period of the island. I mainly worked on V-Awards, a platform established in 2011 to recognize extraordinary volunteering contributions in the country. I was part of the team setting up the V-Awards 2017 edition, helping organize this initiative from the conceptualization phase, while taking various risks into consideration to successfully organize it. This, together with attempting to maximize the momentum of it at its finale, has shaped my skills for organizing events. Additionally, as I was thinking how to interlink 'volunteering' and 'peacebuilding', I uncovered the importance of volunteerism's contribution to peacebuilding.

“My five-month assignment as a UN University Volunteer definitely brushed up my skills. My experience working in this international environment inspired me to put as much effort as I can to contribute to the team, and achieving results. However, without the support from my colleagues, I would never have gained such an unforgettable experience. Therefore, I would like to show the highest appreciation to all of the people who supported me. Although my journey of UNV is reaching its end, I hope to continue this UNV journey in the future. --Takashi Kogoma, UN University Volunteer in Sri Lanka

During the assignment, I was given an opportunity to implement my personal project, the Virtual Student Round Table on Youth and Peace. This was an online virtual discussion centred on issues around peacebuilding and youth, which students of Akita International University and Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka participated in. This project was planned and implemented by me with the continued support of my colleagues. After spending almost three months on coordinating this event and successfully organizing it, I felt a strong sense of achievement. This experience has definitely shaped me and empowered me to overcome my
hurdles.

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