Giving the most vulnerable a voice by listening and building trust

“Some people begin to see refugees as numbers — or even worse, as threats,” says Anja Ingabire, a UN volunteer with UNHCR in Jordan. “Behind each refugee there are personal stories of loss and tragedy. Every story is unique and touches you in a different way. It is the person who makes the story.”

As we sit on our comfortable couches at home and watch TV or read articles about refugees in areas of crisis or conflict, it is easy to become desensitized to the plight of this most vulnerable demographic.

It is for this reason that Anja fights to humanize refugees by giving them a voice and platform where they otherwise may be silenced.

As a UN Volunteer, Anja supports the UNHCR’s Refugee Status Determination Unit in Jordan, where she interviews asylum seekers to determine whether they meet the legal criteria to be recognized as refugees according to the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Prior to joining UNV, Anja spent more than half a decade processing asylum cases under the Swedish Governmental Refugee Status Determination
(RSD), which she found to be a rewarding experience.

Originally from Rwanda, Anja is a Swedish national. She began working with refugees when she was a university student in Malmo, where she interacted with refugee children through organizing activities, helping the children with their homework, and practicing the Swedish language with them to make their transition into a new country — and new culture — a little bit smoother.

“My decision to volunteer with the UNHCR was as a natural progression — I wanted to contribute to the protection of refugees on an international level,” says Anja, who is now 29.

Her years of experience equipped her with the necessary tools to extend her support to refugees in Jordan, a country struggling with economic challenges and coming to grips with the effects of the Syrian refugee crisis.

"Syrian refugees in Jordan are close geographically to the country they are coming from … but they remain traumatized and are left more vulnerable as a result of the economic problems in the country,” she says.

Working with refugees, as one can imagine, is not for the faint-hearted, as volunteers encounter countless instances where these individuals share heart-breaking stories of tragedy that most of us fortunately will never experience.

Most recently, Anja was deeply moved by a terrible and detailed account of a young Yazidi girl who was abducted by armed groups in Iraq. “I felt touched because when she was telling me her story, I could feel that she was trusting me,” explains Anja.

“Working with refugees has taught me to be a better listener. Listening is the most important side of a conversation, especially when interviewing refugees.” —Anja Ingabire, international UN Volunteer with UNHCR's Refugee Status Determination Unit in Jordan.

The simple act of listening to the stories of refugees can serve as a much-
needed cathartic experience for both parties — and while it’s important for volunteers to empathize with refugees, there is the delicate balance of providing comfort while not being overwhelmed by the traumatic experiences of others. Striking this balance is key to building healthy, ongoing, beneficial relationships that will yield fruit in the years to come.

Arab States

• Jordan • refugees

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 10: Reduced inequalities, SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals