Harnessing the power of youth to protect the rights of children

Volunteer assignments foster youth engagement by providing a transformational experience that allows young people to build knowledge and develop skills. In Azerbaijan, Gunay Karimova and Rustam Jabbarov have served as Youth Advocates for Private Sector Engagement and Technology, Youth and Innovation since 2018.

Gunay, 24, has been working closely with the private sector to build a child-friendly business network with national and multinational companies. These companies aim to strengthen their commitment in maintaining corporate social responsibility, in line with UNICEF's mission for children.

"Ever since I was young, I wanted to contribute to children's rights," says Gunay. Equipped with previous private-sector experience in human resources, she was ready to support
UNICEF in starting new partnerships with local companies.

While undertaking a mapping exercise of national private sector stakeholders, this assignment also served as a learning opportunity for Gunay to deepen her knowledge about child-related global best practices and identify gaps at her country level.

Gunay considers herself lucky for being able to achieve her childhood dream of working for children through this UN Volunteer assignment.

“Being a corporate employee was a good experience, however it was not on the same level as saying: I volunteer for the rights of children and youth. One day, I hope to inspire my daughter to volunteer as well. --Gunay Karimova, national UN Youth Volunteer/Youth Advocate with UNICEF, Azerbaijan.

Rustam Jabbarov, a national UN Youth Volunteer serving as Youth Advocate for Technology, Youth and Innovation with UNICEF in Baku, Azerbaijan. ©UNICEF, 2019
As UN Volunteer Youth Advocate for Technology, Youth and Innovation, Rustam, 22, supports UNICEF in the field of data collection technology. This is an essential tool for one of UNICEF’s projects that address the challenges facing Azerbaijani mothers and children in accessing primary healthcare services.

The pilot project, which Rustam supports, is based on creating an automatic SMS notification system that sends a doctor’s recommendation to a mother-to-be according to her personal health data. The project is being implemented jointly with the State Agency for Mandatory Health Insurance and benefits 2,000-3,000 pregnant women.

Lack of knowledge on extremely important check-ups and routines before and after delivery results in late and difficult medical interventions, putting mothers and children at risk. Rustam hopes he will contribute to addressing this aspect through his work. "I hope to see how targeted SMS messaging will educate mothers-to-be on necessary examinations, doctor recommendations and particularly on the importance of exclusive breastfeeding," he says.

For Rustam, the motivation to become a Youth Advocate was the nature of the volunteering assignment, which enabled him to address specific challenges facing local people.

During my assignment, the most eye-opening part was to see how far families are willing to travel – sometimes tens of kilometers in difficult traffic conditions – just to allow their children with disabilities to participate in rehabilitation activities. --Rustam Jabbarov, national UN Youth Volunteer/Youth Advocate with UNICEF, Azerbaijan.

By advocating for the protection of children’s rights and empowering youth to harness their power to make a positive social change, the Youth Advocates Programme is advancing local ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in alignment with national agendas.

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Sustainable Development Goal: **SDG 3: Good health and well-being, SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals**