Promoting refugee empowerment and livelihoods through volunteerism

DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) is a programme of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), funded by the Government of Germany, that plays an integral role in enabling refugees to access higher education in their country of asylum and contribute to their reintegration upon repatriation. Since 1992, the DAFI programme has awarded scholarships to over 15,500 refugees to study at universities in over 50 countries of asylum. In 2018, UNHCR and the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme partnered to complement the DAFI programme to empower young refugee graduates in West and Central Africa by offering them the opportunity to serve as UN Volunteers.

The UNHCR-UNV DAFI Initiative seeks to expand the success of the DAFI programme by addressing the difficulties that graduated refugees face when trying to enter the job market.

The Initiative constitutes an opportunity for the DAFI graduates to gain professional experience as UN Volunteers in the UN System, where they can contribute with their unique background and perspectives to help achieving the SDGs.

In West and Central Africa, many of the 350 recent DAFI graduates struggled to enter the job market. UNHCR and UNV therefore identified one-year UN Volunteer opportunities. In 2018, 14 young DAFI refugee graduates successfully volunteered for the UN and paved the way for the next generation of DAFI graduates.

The Initiative was expanded from Senegal and Ghana to Niger and Nigeria, with a total of 22 DAFI graduates currently serving as UN Volunteers in these four countries.

A total of 14 selected DAFI graduates were deployed as UN Volunteers in Senegal and Ghana between June 2018 and June 2019 serving with various UN Agencies (IOM, UNCDF, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNIDO, UNU-INRA and UN Women). Areas of assignment were project development, inclusive finance, communications and public relations, governance and women’s political participation as well as human resources.
By providing opportunities for UN Volunteer assignments, graduated refugees can practise and apply their competencies in a professional context.

Host UN agencies coached, mentored, and empowered UN Volunteers during their assignments. UN Volunteers took part in trainings (benefiting from the UNV training mechanism) and volunteering activities.

These DAFI graduates turned UN Volunteers themselves became role models for their communities.

**Results achieved**

The 14 UN Volunteers expressed high satisfaction about their experience. The host UN Agencies praised this innovative initiative as forward thinking and highly relevant to help the UN System remain fit-for-purpose.

The leadership skills that DAFI graduates develop through their UN Volunteer assignments turns them from “passive” beneficiaries to active agents of change for the benefit of other refugees/displaced and host communities. Thus, making the UN system more inclusive.

As the pilot is coming to an end by end 2019, 6 UN Volunteers have already been retained by their host agencies to pursue a second year as UN Volunteers (now funded by the host agency and not anymore by UNHCR). Some of these UN Volunteers are now being given UN staff contracts, as for example was the case for one female UN Volunteer with IOM. This shows that if host UN agencies are satisfied with the performance of the UN Volunteers, this is a great incentive for them to continue to host and/or find alternative opportunities at the end of their assignments.

One of the main benefits of the UNHCR-UNV DAFI Initiative is that it reduces the economic and psychological dependence of educated refugees, improves their self-reliance and livelihood and offers them long-term solutions.

**Challenges and how they were addressed**

The integration of refugees into UN Agencies workforce is time consuming as all practicalities need to be explained and the necessary clearances obtained from the Managers which often led to delays. UNV is therefore developing an Information Note for hosting UN entity Country Offices to make the Initiative more known and to explain how it works.

Refugees do not always have access to the internet to register in the UNV Talent pool. The UNV Field Units do however help them to apply for opportunities.

West and Central Africa
refugees UN Community Volunteers DAFI
SDG 10: Reduced inequalities SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals

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