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From UN Volunteer to Head of Experimentation: a journey of innovation and questioning

After a great experience in the private sector as Programme Manager for the company Pwrdby based in Los Angeles and with, in my heart, the invigorating memories of a thrilling internship at the United Nations Headquarters in Peacekeeping Operations with the West Africa Integrated Operational Team (WAIOT), I gained valuable tools like design thinking methodology, nonprofit fundraising mechanisms, political analysis and risk management. At that time, becoming a UN Volunteer seemed to be a mandatory step to prove one’s value in the field, autonomy and drive. I chose to be a UN Volunteer in my own country because of an inner feeling that giving back should start in one’s own door and that I had gained enough exposure to valuable tools to be able to bring something new to the table.

And so I did, I joined the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Morocco as a UN Volunteer Associate Programme Manager in Democratic Governance and the experience was more than just professional. By promoting the values of volunteerism for
peace, I discovered that the UNV programme was designed to help us grow in a unique way. No one is going to tell you what is the best path for you and on the contrary people are going to try to tell you to stick to the reasons that got you there. Nonetheless, in the programme there is a hidden power to discover who you are; you can use a learning grant to explore the topic of your choice and to push a little forward the barriers of your knowledge.

**Questioning: at the core of my experience**

With the status of UN Volunteer comes a lot of questioning: is the work that you do every day behind a desk as valuable as the work of another UN Volunteer who is hands-on in the field helping the population; or does the comfort that you have implicitly chosen by staying home make you less brave than a UN Volunteer who is volunteering abroad? Would you be judged in your next carrier move? With all of this questioning in mind, there comes a time when you have to choose to make the most out of your own experience. I became very proactive so that when my contract ends I would have at least became more skilled and more knowledgeable, if not even a better person...

Among all the events and opportunities to learn, two of them have contributed to a positive development impact, or so I believe, and they gave me to willingness to remain a UN staff member working day and night in my professional and private life to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

The first event was the Youth Leadership Programme (YLP) Forum in Tunisia in December 2018 where UNDP regional office for Arab States had gathered youth from all over the region to build design thinking capacity, entrepreneurship network and most importantly I think, to broadcast success stories of young people with innovative ideas, which, actually, have a chance to contribute to achieving the SDGs or at least get us a little closer to the targets. The YLP is therefore unique in the sense that it provides the tools and the hope that these tools will come up handy, I have talked to many youth about what they have learned from that experience and none of them had the same answer. To me, that means that the experience worked and that people coming to the event with their unique stories can leave with a common feeling of having contributed to their unique growth.

The second opportunity to question my knowledge and advance it was my learning mission to New York UN Headquarters in February 2019 working on the Central African Peace Agreement. By trying to bridge the gap and connect SDG 16, Peace Justice and Strong Institutions, with the other SDGs notably SDG 5, Gender Equality and Women's empowerment. I had the good surprise of having my report published by UNDP Oslo Governance Center. I did not mean it to be published, as the format is not quite perfect and it can largely be improved.
isolation. They are interrelated and every programme, document or action we take should take these interconnections into account and evaluate their impact on multiple SDGs at once to accelerate the positive effects and limit the bottlenecks in achieving Agenda 2030.

Innovation does not have to be technology

As you may have read in my previous article about a day in prison to fight violence against women and girls, the smallest interaction with an unknown environment can allow you to see things differently and contribute to small innovations at no cost and potentially changing the life of people who are anchored in that environment without seeing the bigger picture. For example, witnessing kids living in prison with their moms, who have committed a crime, can lead one to think that this is sad and stop the reflection there.

On the other hand, one can notice that the kids’ school bus is dropping the inmates' kids in front of the big gate for all the other children to witness when a uniformed guard take the inmates' kids back through the main door of the prison. One can then stop the reflection again and be sad or one can suggest that the school bus parks in the next street, where a prison guard in civilian outfit (once again at no extra cost) can pick up the inmates’ kids without their peers knowing that they live in prison and avoiding therefore the stigma of the this whole situation.

Innovation does not have to be technology and technology is not always innovative. My point here is to think of innovation as the capacity to listen and look at a situation with new eyes and ears to maybe solve frontier challenges that the people emerged in the context don’t have the time or possibility to see.

Head of Experimentation ... what does that mean?

I am writing this article to call for ideas from you, from my network. As Head of Experimentation, starting in August 2019, my new role is to identify hypotheses in order to solve these frontier challenges creating bottlenecks, and contribute to achieving the SDGs in an accelerated manner. I am part of what UNDP calls the “fastest learning network in the world”, a network of 60 laboratories dedicated to innovation all over the world. My role is to formulate and test hypotheses of how we can collectively do things better by listening and learning from what "lead users" on the ground are currently doing.

It is very exciting and I am calling on all of you for ideas; there is no good or bad answer, no
limit and no frontier. If you ever had an idea or witnessed one that contributes to make things slightly better in one of the 17 Development Goals please, now is the occasion to share, send it our way and maybe we can scale it up to solve similar situations all across the world.

*This article was first published by the author, Oumayma Raimi-Rodè, on LinkedIn.*

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**Arab States**

- **UNDP**

Sustainable Development Goal: **SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals**