



# JOURNEYS OF INSPIRATION







**JOURNEYS OF**  
**INSPIRATION**

**IT IS  
IN YOUR HANDS  
TO CREATE  
A BETTER  
WORLD  
FOR ALL  
WHO LIVE  
IN IT.**

Nelson Mandela



# FOREWORD

We live in a time of extraordinary complexity. Climate change is accelerating faster than predicted. Conflicts are multiplying and becoming more protracted. Inequality, disinformation, and democratic backsliding are eroding trust in institutions. Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), once seen as within reach, is now under serious threat. We are, as the UN Secretary-General has called it, in an age of “polycrisis”—a convergence of risks that strain our capacity to respond.

Yet amid these challenges, there are also signs of hope and resilience. Across the world, volunteers step forward in moments when communities need them most. They rebuild after disasters, accompany refugees in their journeys to safety, and mobilize around human rights and social justice. In Africa, for instance, youth volunteers have played a critical role in bridging divides after political violence, in bringing health services to remote villages, and in powering climate adaptation efforts at community level. Similar stories can be found in every region: ordinary people choosing to act, often at great personal cost, to create pathways to peace and development.

This spirit of volunteerism is at the heart of the United Nations (UN). Many of the leaders whose stories are captured in this photobook began their journeys not in positions of authority, but in service—as UN Volunteers, as community activists, as individuals determined to make a difference. Their reflections remind us that leadership is not defined by titles, but by purpose, and that the path to leadership often begins with the willingness to serve.

As the UN retools itself through the UN 2.0 vision—becoming more data-driven, digital, strategic, and focused on innovation—we must not lose sight of the human dimension. Volunteerism brings exactly what is needed in this era: agility in crisis, trust in divided

societies, creativity in problem-solving, and authenticity in building connections with people. Volunteers help bridge the gap between global aspirations and local realities. They make the SDGs visible and real in people’s daily lives.

The stories in this photobook are therefore more than personal narratives. They are a call to action. They show that volunteerism is not an optional add-on for programmes, but a strategic resource for achieving peace, development, and humanitarian goals. They illustrate how service shapes character, builds resilience, and fosters the kind of leadership we urgently need. And they invite all of us—policymakers, partners, UN colleagues, and citizens—to reimagine what is possible when volunteerism is placed at the centre of global efforts.

The clock is ticking. Turning the tide on the SDGs will require a whole-of-society approach, one that combines political will, resources, innovation, and collective action. Volunteerism offers a thread that weaves these elements together. It reminds us that solutions are not found only in institutions, but in the choices that people make to stand up for one another.

I hope this collection inspires you as it has inspired us. It is a tribute to those who have served, and an invitation to all of us to recognize that the journey to a better world begins with the decision to give our time, our skills, and our energy to the common good.

**Lucy Ndungu**, Regional Manager  
UN Volunteers Regional Office for East and Southern Africa



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*We can, and must, continue rising above  
division and working together to make  
our world a better place for all.*

— António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations



# PURSUIT OF PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT

# CHANGE IS IN OUR HANDS

**Nelson Muffuh**

UN Resident Coordinator in South Africa

*Volunteering doesn't just help communities. It transforms those who serve.*

Every day, I work to bring together the United Nations family in South Africa to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). But before this role, before the meetings, milestones and coordination, my story began with something far simpler: volunteering.

Inspired by Nelson Mandela's words, *"It is in your hands to create a better world for all,"* I believe that the world changes only when people choose to act. Volunteerism was my first step, and it has shaped everything since.

### **Finding purpose through service**

I didn't start volunteering with a grand plan. I joined organisations like Transparency International and Amnesty International because I cared about their causes and wanted to help. What I didn't realize then was how much those experiences would define my future.

Through volunteering, I learned how to solve problems, work in teams, and lead

with empathy. One of my first managers, herself a former volunteer with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), told me, *"To truly serve humanity, you must be willing to give your time, energy, and skills – even without pay."* That lesson stayed with me. It taught me that the value of what we give often goes far beyond any paycheck.

### **The power of volunteerism**

Volunteering doesn't just help communities. It transforms those who serve. It builds resilience, adaptability, and leadership, while opening doors to opportunities you might never imagine. For me, it led to global work on the Millennium Development Goals and later, the SDGs, experiences that deepened my belief in what people can achieve when united by purpose.

Today, as UN Resident Coordinator, I see that same spirit every day. Volunteers are at the heart of many of our most meaningful efforts. From driving social cohesion to supporting clean energy and empowering young people, they bring fresh perspectives, new ideas and an incredible drive to make a difference.

### **Ubuntu in action**

In South Africa, we speak of *ubuntu*: *"I am because we are."* Growing up, I saw *ubuntu* everywhere – neighbours building schools together, families helping one another, and communities caring for the vulnerable. That is the essence of volunteerism: recognizing that none of us can thrive alone.

As we work towards achieving the SDGs, this spirit of *ubuntu* is more important than ever. The challenges are vast, but so are the possibilities if we come together. Governments, civil society, the private sector and volunteers all have a part to play in creating the future we want.

Nelson Mandela once said, *"There can be no greater gift than that of giving one's time and energy to help others without expecting anything in return."*

So I ask: what will you do with your time? Take the first step. Volunteer. You might be surprised where the journey leads.





*Nelson Muffuh, UN Resident Coordinator in South Africa at an outreach activity for the 16 Days of Activism campaign in South Africa.  
Photo @UN South Africa*



*Nelson Muffuh, UN Resident Coordinator in South Africa together with colleagues and volunteers during a tree planting activity in South Africa. Photo @UN South Africa*

# FROM COURTROOM TO COMMUNITY: FINDING PURPOSE IN SERVICE

**Dr. Ozonnia Ojielo**

UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Ethiopia, formerly in Rwanda

Every morning I woke up in Rwanda, I was reminded of possibility: in the hills, in the people, in the quiet determination of a country rebuilding itself boldly, deliberately, and together. In Ethiopia, my current country of assignment, and across the region, I see that same spirit of people

determined to shape their own destiny. Before I took up my role as UN Resident Coordinator, my journey began in a very different setting: the crowded courtrooms of Lagos, Nigeria, where I was known as a sharp, successful lawyer.

## **Law and the unexpected detour**

Back then, I thought I had it all figured out. I made good money, had a growing reputation and carved out my space in legal circles. But something inside me was restless. My colleagues and I started an institute for Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). We travelled across Nigeria, without pay or fanfare, helping communities resolve conflict. I didn't think of it as volunteerism then. I simply knew it mattered. Then one day, the United Nations came calling. I was asked to help set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone. It was supposed to be a short-term engagement. I went, helped write the policies, trained commissioners and prepared to return home. But life, as it often does, had other plans. The commissioners asked me to stay and lead. It was then, working alongside volunteers, many of whom were students trying to help their country

heal, that I realized my purpose wasn't tied to courtroom wins or accolades. I found my purpose in service.

## **The soul of a nation**

Volunteers were the backbone of that Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 179 of them. They took statements, conducted interviews, and built trust in broken communities. Without them, we couldn't have done our work.

Later, in Kenya, I saw this spirit again. In the aftermath of the post-election violence in 2007, we mobilized 150 volunteers from different ethnic communities, many of whom had once seen each other as enemies. We trained them as peacebuilders. When violence threatened, they intervened, mediated, and built trust where governments and institutions couldn't. That courage left a lasting mark on me.

## **The heart of the UN**

Volunteers in the UN are not just an extra set of hands; they are the human connection between institutions and communities. They are the embodiment of UN values: service, solidarity, and inclusion. They go where others won't. They speak the languages of the people. They make development real.

*Africa is rising. But it won't rise on the backs of institutions alone. It will rise on the collective strength of its people.*

Across Africa, volunteerism is part of people's culture and character. It helps us reach those furthest behind. It enables people to actively shape their future. It drives community resilience, builds peace, and unlocks economic potential from the grassroots up.

## **Lessons from the frontlines of service**

I didn't plan to work for the United Nations. But every step along the way – each unpaid trip to a rural village, each pro bono training session, each late night drafting policy with young volunteers – brought me closer to a truth I now live by: that giving back gives you more than anything money can buy. I still teach pro bono. I still look for ways to mentor and pass the baton. Because we owe it to the next generation. We need more people who are not only skilled, but inspired, and who understand that a life of service is not a sacrifice, but a calling.

## **Advice to my younger self**

If I could speak to my younger self, as an ambitious lawyer in Lagos, I would remind myself that success is not measured by wealth or prestige. It is measured by the lives you touch, the communities you help heal, and the systems you strengthen. It's about finding relevance in the service of others.

## **Passing the baton**

Africa is rising. But it won't rise on the backs of institutions alone. It will rise on the collective strength of its people. Volunteerism is how we build that strength. It's how we transform societies from within. So, to every volunteer in Rwanda, Ethiopia and anywhere else, whether part of the UN system or simply answering a community need, we see you. We thank you. You are not just participants in development; you are its heartbeat.



# WITNESS TO DIGNITY

## Abigail Noko

Regional Representative, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Southern Africa

Leadership is a continuous journey of learning. I have often thought of it as stepping into shoes that are a bit too big, and spending a lifetime growing into them, with humility, professionalism and a commitment to results. To me, true leadership isn't merely defined by rank. It is shaped more by the people we work with and those we serve, than the titles we hold. Human rights are my anchor and keep me grounded in that belief: the simple, yet profound truth that by virtue of being human, we are all equal.

### **Walking beside the vulnerable**

One of my earliest missions with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) brought me to Sierra Leone in the wake of the civil war. It was the early 2000s, a pivotal moment of transition for the country when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and a path toward lasting peace was established. That experience reshaped how I understood the UN's work. I saw how people can be stripped of their humanity, how even the most deep-seated wounds can heal, and how leadership must always be an act of service. It was one of many experiences that shaped my philosophy: servant leadership is not a position to be claimed,

but a responsibility to be lived.

Part of this is about getting the right people into the room, especially those in situations of vulnerability and most at risk of being left behind. It is about believing in a future that can be different, and then using the principles of inclusion, participation, co-creation and local ownership to bring about that change.

Volunteerism nurtures these values by building a sense of purpose, fostering a sense of belonging and cultivating empathy that binds divided societies. Without these, there can be no sustainable development or enduring peace.

### **The human face of human rights**

What keeps me hopeful about humanity is the resilience I have witnessed in the people I have worked with. I have seen hope rise in the most unlikely places, such as the courage of human rights defenders who continue to stand up against injustice despite overwhelming odds. Their quiet bravery is a force more powerful than despair. It reminds me that humanity always finds its way back to its moral compass – the dignity and equality enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

*What keeps me hopeful in humanity is the resilience I have witnessed in the people I serve.*

If my journey were a book title, it would be *“Witness to Dignity.”* Time and again, I have had the privilege of witnessing the strength and grace of people claiming their rights. These moments have shaped who I am and continue to fuel a profound belief that we, the people, shall always rise.

This belief also draws me back to a guiding principle from Southern Africa, where I work – the philosophy of *Ubuntu*. The idea that *“I am because we are”*, not only informs my worldview, but is also deeply connected to the spirit of volunteerism. Service and solidarity: these are not abstract ideals. They are daily choices we make, the acts of humanity that remind us to put people first every day.



# FAULT LINES AND FRONTLINES: FINDING PEACE

**Nicholas Haysom**

Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for South Sudan

Growing up under the apartheid regime in South Africa, the systematic humiliation of black South Africans was all around us. I know many of my white South African colleagues say they did not see what was happening but for me, it was obvious. Even at school, I had already developed very strong feelings about apartheid and its lack of justification.

## **Driven by inner conviction**

Those convictions had consequences. I was detained five times, mostly in solitary confinement. The longest period was about six months, followed by two years under house arrest. Rather than pushing you away, that experience draws you deeper into a culture of resistance. It becomes the basis of one's stance and political position.

I think you have to be motivated by your own moral inclinations, not by some abstract sense of "doing the right thing." When you go to jail, you have to ask yourself why you are there. Are you simply living up to other people's expectations or moral guidance? Or is it something inside you - an inner conviction that justifies what you are going through?

## **The law as a tool for justice**

Law became an important tool for me. It allows you to engage with people as they go about the business not only of their own lives, but of protecting and strengthening the lives of large numbers of people - those living in townships, those working in trade unions and those trying to secure organizational rights. These were the rights that mattered and they ultimately affected the balance of power in South Africa. They compelled both sides to recognize that they had to find a new way of living together.

South Africa went through a major earthquake in its legal foundations during that time. It was an exciting period establishing a new legal order based on human rights, and a new approach to political and civil liberties.

## **Navigating complexity with compassion**

Later, working in conflict-affected contexts such as Afghanistan, and through my work with the United Nations, one cannot help but be struck by the enormity of the challenge countries face in trying to bring their people together. Many of my colleagues paid the ultimate price. Looking back, it does beg difficult questions: what



required the international community to make such an effort, and why did it sometimes seem to come to so little?

But the answer lies in the effort itself. Because trying matters. Standing with people in their most vulnerable moments matters. Peace is not a guarantee. It is a choice, made daily by individuals, communities, and nations.

In South Sudan today, the focus is very much on the protection of civilians, and on the imminent danger faced by hundreds of thousands of South Sudanese particularly if the country were to erupt into civil war for a third time in less than a decade. Our task is to help create a common platform where all South Sudanese can come together and craft arrangements for living together,

*In our mission, volunteers are indispensable.  
I genuinely don't think we could do our work  
effectively without them.*

notwithstanding the terrible fault lines exposed by those conflicts.

**Volunteerism: a moral imperative**

In this context, volunteering is a very important option, particularly through the UN Volunteers programme, but also in the broader sense. It is about engaging with the United Nations in giving expression to the values of the UN Charter as a voluntary act. It is not simply a search for employment or a way of filling out a career, but a decision to say: I want to make my contribution to world peace.

In our mission, volunteers are indispensable. I genuinely don't think we could do our work effectively without them.

**A fractured world needs moral leadership**

We are operating at a time when the international consensus on living peacefully and harmoniously together no longer exists in the way it did 10 or 20 years ago. The leverage that the international community once had in conflict settings has dissipated. Mediation has become harder, and it is more difficult for the United Nations to secure the objectives we set ourselves.

But if we surrender to cynicism, we lose more than diplomatic leverage. We lose our shared humanity. That's why I believe in doing something for others. Because in doing so, you are also doing something for yourself. You grow. You learn. You reaffirm your place in a wider human story.

Ultimately, the work we do is truly rewarding. It affirms the importance of standing with others, even in the most difficult circumstances, and of continuing to choose engagement, service, and peace.

*This story is adapted near verbatim from video message by Nicholas Haysom, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for South Sudan and Head of UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) during past International Volunteer Day.*

**Scan to watch the original message:**



*Nicholas Haysom (second from right), Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for South Sudan and Head of UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) with a section of UN Volunteers in South Sudan during past International Volunteer Day event. By end of 2025, UNMISS hosted 456 UN Volunteers, one of the largest deployment of UN Volunteers globally. Photo @UNMISS*

# SOMALIA'S PATH FORWARD

## George Conway

Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia

I began my United Nations journey in 2001 – as a UN Volunteer in Indonesia. For five years, I served in that capacity, working on post-conflict community recovery and peacebuilding programmes across the country. Those early experiences shaped me profoundly. They taught me that service is not just about technical expertise, but about solidarity, humility and listening to communities.

From the foundations of this volunteer assignment, my career took me across the globe. I worked on disaster recovery in Aceh, Indonesia, after the 2004 tsunami; supported state-building and peacebuilding in South Sudan in the years leading to its independence in 2011, and later served in New York as the Deputy Director of the UNDP Crisis Bureau, advising on development solutions in



## *Volunteerism continues to inspire me.*

fragile states and conflict settings across the globe. Each assignment challenged me, stretched me and reaffirmed what I first learned as a volunteer: that the UN is at its best when it works, not just for the people, but with the people.

### **Coming full circle**

Two decades later, I find myself in Somalia, this time as Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Resident Coordinator, and Humanitarian Coordinator. It feels like coming full circle.

Somalia is a country I know well. From 2013 to 2019, I led UNDP here working alongside national institutions, civil society and communities to strengthen governance, peacebuilding and development. At that time, the country was rebuilding its institutions and deepening its federal system. We supported electoral processes, governance reforms and initiatives to expand livelihoods and resilience in a context still scarred by conflict and humanitarian need. It was not easy work, but it was deeply meaningful.

Returning now, I see both the remarkable progress and the immense challenges. I feel both a sense of continuity and renewal. I also see what I felt as a volunteer years ago: the determination of people to create a different future.

### **Shaping Somalia's future**

Volunteerism continues to inspire me. Across Somalia, I meet volunteers who help in the face of adversity, supporting displaced families, promoting peace, or helping communities recover from drought and floods. Their spirit reminds me of where I started, and why I believe service is at the heart of lasting change.

Today, Somalia faces enormous challenges – climate shocks, insecurity and displacement – but it also has unprecedented opportunities to consolidate peace and development. The country's path forward will not be easy, but it is being written every day by the courage and commitment of its people and by the solidarity of those who choose to serve alongside them.

I feel privileged to be part of that story.



*George Conway (kneeling), Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia during field assignment  
Photo @UN Somalia*

# A LIFE OF PURPOSE

**Jane Marie Ong'olo**

Regional Director, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Regional Office for Southern Africa

Every morning, I wake up with a sense of purpose, knowing that the work I do helps build a safer, fairer world. A world where people are protected from the harms of drugs, crime, corruption and terrorism. It's not always easy work. It challenges me, stretches me and reminds me daily why I chose this path. But my journey to this point began long before the titles and responsibilities. It began with a desire to make a difference.

## **Finding my calling**

As a young girl, I often questioned the inequalities I saw around me. I watched girls my age held back by barriers such as exclusion and lack of opportunity, and I knew something had to change. I felt drawn to act.

That curiosity grew into a calling. I sought spaces where I could contribute meaningfully, helping others overcome the obstacles in their way. What started as compassion became a lifelong mission to expand opportunity for those too often left behind.

My professional path has taken me across government institutions, NGOs and international organisations. Before joining UNODC, I led the Division of Social Welfare

at the African Union Commission, working on drug control and crime prevention. Each role and each challenge reaffirmed my purpose in service, especially to the people of Africa.

## **The gift of giving back**

Volunteerism has always been at the heart of that purpose. Long before I knew the word, I was living it. After high school, I spent my university breaks teaching in a rural school. I wanted those girls to see that university was not beyond reach, and that dreams could be real. That experience changed me. I saw how giving even a little of yourself could spark hope in others. Since then, volunteering has remained a constant thread in my life through community projects, mentorship and church work. Even today, no matter how busy my schedule is, I make time for it. Volunteering fills me with perspective and gratitude. It reminds me why I do what I do.

## **The power of collective effort**

At UNODC, our work tackles some of the most complex issues of our time – organized crime, corruption, terrorism and drug trafficking. These are not just policy issues, they are human issues that affect lives, families and communities.

*Together, we can build a world rooted in peace, dignity, and opportunity for all.*

One of the most inspiring parts of my work is seeing how volunteers contribute to this mission. UN Volunteers bring energy, innovation and fresh ideas to challenges that demand both courage and compassion. Whether addressing gender-based violence, countering terrorism or promoting justice, they help us reach people and places we couldn't reach on our own. Many are young professionals full of optimism and drive. Their passion reminds me that meaningful change often begins with a simple decision to serve.

## **The spirit of service**

In my native language, there's a word – *Chiwruok*. It translates to "commitment," but it literally means giving yourself in service to others. Growing up, I saw that spirit everywhere. We called it *Harambee*, meaning "pulling together" – communities came together to build schools, support neighbors and care for those in

need.

That spirit still guides me. It's what fuels my work at UNODC and my belief in volunteerism. It's what makes me certain that, even in the face of enormous challenges, we can make a difference when we choose to act together.

## **Lessons in service**

There's a saying I hold close: "*Never say die until you die.*" It means there's always an opportunity to do good no matter how tough the road ahead.

If my journey has taught me anything, it is to always stay true to my core values: to always know who I am, what I stand for and why I do what I do. Volunteerism offers that space. It allows anyone, anywhere, to contribute, to grow and to discover purpose through service.



We all have something to give and when we give our time, our voice and our care, we light the way for others. This way, we can build a world rooted in peace, dignity and opportunity for all.

# BRIDGES OF IMPACT

## Edward Kallon

UN Resident Coordinator in Zimbabwe

My journey in public service began before I held formal titles. As a young socio-economist working in communities in Sierra Leone, I saw how a small act could change someone's day or sometimes, their future. That awareness has stayed with me for long. It is what pushed me to volunteer early in my career and later shaped the way I lead.

### Early UN Volunteer role

My first UN role was as a United Nations Volunteer with the World Food Programme in Afghanistan. Resources were thin. The needs were overwhelming. Every contribution meant something. I learned to listen more than I spoke, to adapt, and to respect the resilience of people navigating hardship. Those lessons stayed with me as I grew through roles in Somalia, Iraq, Uganda, India, Bangladesh and later as UN Resident Coordinator in Jordan, Nigeria and now Zimbabwe. Across each assignment, I learned that people know their realities better than anyone, and progress comes when we work with them, not for them.

### Volunteerism in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe today, that same spirit guides my work. The launch of *UNited 4*

*Youth Inclusion*, a joint UN effort placing young people, including those with disabilities, into important roles across several UN agencies, reminds me of my own early steps. These young volunteers bring energy, curiosity and a willingness to try. They challenge us. They shape programmes. They make the UN more connected to communities.

During the El Niño-induced drought and in the aftermath of Cyclone Idai, UN Volunteers in Zimbabwe played a critical role in supporting humanitarian response and recovery efforts. They worked alongside communities and institutions to deliver life-saving information, facilitate access to essential services and strengthen trust in relief operations. Their commitment often made the difference between despair and resilience. Once again, I witnessed how volunteerism builds bridges between institutions and people, and between uncertainty and hope.

Leadership, to me, has always been about service. Not as a slogan, but as a practice. My career, from community development work in Sierra Leone to my role as a UN Volunteer at WFP and now as UN Resident Coordinator in Zimbabwe

*Leadership, to me, has always been about service. Not as a slogan, but as a practice.*

has taught me that influence grows from humility, consistency and the willingness to stand with people, especially in difficult moments.

Zimbabwe's development journey is shaped every day by such moments and by people who decide to make a difference: community workers, youth volunteers, public servants, farmers and teachers. My role is to help connect those efforts, to build trust, and to ensure that the UN's work reflects the voices of those we serve.

### Pathways to bridges

My message for the next generation of changemakers? Your contribution matters. Small steps build pathways. And over time, those pathways become bridges – bridges that shape nations, communities and lives.



*To girls and women everywhere,  
I issue a simple invitation: my sisters, my  
daughters, my friends; find your voice.*

— Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Nobel Peace Prize winner and  
first woman President of Liberia



**WOMEN  
LEADING  
CHANGE**

# WHEN WOMEN LEAD, COMMUNITIES RISE

**Letty Chiwara**

UN Women Representative in Malawi

I am originally from Zimbabwe and currently serve as the UN Women Country Representative in Malawi. My journey to this role has been anything but linear. I began as a town planner in the Government of Zimbabwe. I loved the

work, but over time I felt a pull toward something deeper: working with and for women. That shift transformed me into a feminist and a women's rights advocate. It set me on a path that has shaped the rest of my career.

## **Building change that lasts**

I first joined the UN in the early 1990s as a Programme Officer for UNIFEM in Zimbabwe. My work focused on designing and supporting projects with women in rural communities. These were not just short-term initiatives. They were programmes that changed lives and livelihoods.

More than two decades later, some of those projects are still running. Whenever I think of that, I am reminded that what we do at the UN creates real, lasting change. That was a defining moment for me. It showed me that development is not just about the present. It is about building something that can stand the test of time.

## **From villages to the African Union**

Later, I spent nine years in Ethiopia representing UN Women at the African Union. The role focused on policy advocacy at the highest levels. It was challenging, but it was also incredibly rewarding.

One of the proudest moments of my career came in 2015. Through collective advocacy, we secured the first-ever African Union "Year of Women." It was historic. For me, it proved that women's voices and agency can reshape the development agenda, even at the continental level. The fact that this happened while my home country, Zimbabwe, was chairing the AU made it even more meaningful.

Those years also taught me something important. Whether you are working in a small rural village or in the corridors of power, the principle is the same. When women are at the centre, change follows.

## **What keeps me hopeful**

There are times when the challenges we face such as conflict, climate change, inequality and even the questioning of multilateralism itself feel overwhelming. Yet, what keeps me going is the resilience I see every day especially among African women. When I first arrived in Malawi, Cyclone Freddy had

*For me, progress is built on two things: the strength of communities who refuse to give up, and the courage of those who serve.*

just struck. The devastation was staggering. But when I returned to the affected communities months later, I saw something remarkable. Women were leading the recovery. They were rebuilding their homes and finding ways to move forward. That determination gives me hope. It reminds me that with the right support, communities can overcome even the hardest setbacks.

## **Why volunteerism matters**

I have always believed in the power of volunteerism. It comes from passion, commitment and the desire to give back. Here in Malawi, I work closely with UN Volunteers. I see first-hand how they bring energy, creativity, and fresh perspectives to the work we do. Their service not only transforms the communities they serve but also shapes them as future leaders.

## **A journey still in motion**

Looking back from my early days as a town planner to grassroots work in Zimbabwe, from years at UN headquarters in New York to advocacy at the African Union and now in Malawi, I see a journey defined by resilience, agency and service.

For me, progress is built on two things: the strength of communities who refuse to give up and the courage of those who serve. That is what keeps me going. It is also what gives me hope for the future.



# CARRYING HOPE FORWARD

**Amanda Khozi Mukwashi**

UN Resident Coordinator in Angola, formerly in Lesotho

*I believe in the role that volunteers, especially young people, can play in transforming our societies from within.*

My career has taken many turns, but has always been rooted in a deep commitment to justice, dignity and service. Straight out of university, I knew I wanted my work to be about more than a job. I wanted it to be about poverty eradication, rights, equality and giving people a fair chance in life. That calling has guided every step of my path, whether working in civil society, in government, or with international organizations.

## **Volunteering was my bridge**

One of the turning points for me came when I moved from Zambia to the UK. Like many young professionals in a new country, I wasn't sure how to find my way into the sector I cared about. Volunteering became my bridge. I offered my skills to small NGOs, writing proposals, building cases for funding, and helping them articulate their vision. Many of those proposals succeeded. But what mattered more was the connection it gave me to people, to communities and to the

struggles and hopes that development must respond to.

Those experiences showed me that volunteering is not about charity. It is about dignity. As one of my mentors told me, *"we are only dignified when we dignify others."* Volunteering restores dignity and grounds us in our shared humanity.

Now in Angola, as in my previous assignment in Lesotho, I see that same spirit in many places. Both countries are beautiful, vibrant and full of potential, yet both face significant challenges: poverty, inequality, climate shocks, health pressures and the need to create opportunities for a young population eager to build its future. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are not abstract ideals in these countries. They are about real lives. Children who need vaccines. Women who deserve security and safe childbirth. Young people who need education, jobs and digital access.

And yet, I don't despair. I believe in the power of people. I believe in the spirit of *ubuntu*, which reminds us that we rise when others rise. I believe in the role that volunteers, especially young people, can play in transforming our societies.

## **Ubuntu in action**

For me, leading UN teams is about channeling that spirit into action. It means accelerating progress on the SDGs, building resilience to climate change, empowering women, and unlocking opportunities for youth.

It's about reminding ourselves that development is not measured in statistics, but in lives uplifted and dignity restored.

Volunteering was a significant entry point into my international career, and it remains central to how I see solutions today.

I want to continue building spaces where communities are not passive recipients of aid, but active drivers of their own change.



# DEVELOPMENT BEGINS WITH PEOPLE

## Aissata De

Deputy Regional Director, UNDP Regional Bureau for Africa

I was born in Diourbel, a town in central Senegal, about 200 kilometers from Dakar, Senegal. It is not a place that appears often in global conversations about development. Yet, it is where my understanding of dignity, solidarity, and agency was formed.

I was marked by loss early on in my life. I lost my father, who helped shape Senegal's army, when I was barely two years old, and my mother when I was 27. But I never grew up feeling deprived. I grew up surrounded by people – family, neighbours and teachers – who believed that community is a form of wealth. Even in grief, there was love. Even in hardship, there was purpose.

My mother was a teacher before she became a political trailblazer: Senegal's first woman mayor and vice-president of the National Assembly. She led at a time when leadership by women was rare. She did not ask for permission to care. She simply did. And she showed me by example, that being a woman is not a limitation, but a source of strength.

From her, I learned courage. Not the loud kind, but the steady kind. The courage to be who you are. To stand for others. To

believe that leadership is not about status, but about responsibility.

When she passed away in 1992, the loss was devastating but what she gave me never left: a deep belief that our lives only truly make sense when they are useful to others.

### **From activism to service**

My engagement in development did not begin in an institutional setting but through grassroots activism, particularly in advancing women's rights. I had the privilege of contributing to the establishment of the *Conseil Sénégalais des Femmes (COSEF)*: a pioneering platform that brings together Senegalese women leaders from across political parties, trade unions, media, the private sector and other institutions – with a shared focus on women's economic and political empowerment.

Founded in 1995, COSEF emerged from a strategic reflection supported by a UNDP Regional Programme on the Promotion of Democracy in Africa and coordinated by the late Babacar Sine, an exceptional leader and advocate for democratic governance. The initiative was driven by the mobilization of diverse women leaders,

*The lesson I carry is that development is not just about systems or structures—it is about people.*

notably under the leadership of renowned Senegalese writer Aminata Sow Fall, whose vision and convening power were instrumental in creating this unique and enduring framework.

Recently celebrating 30 years of sustained engagement, COSEF stands as a lasting example of inclusive, cross-sectoral women's leadership in Senegal.

I also contributed to the drafting of the Maputo Protocol, a milestone for gender equality on the African continent. Later, through my work with UNDP and UNIFEM (now UN Women), I supported women's political participation across West and Central Africa, working on elections, representation and leadership.

University opened other doors. Through a National Model United Nations experience, I discovered

multilateralism. Not as an abstract idea, but as a space where voices could converge. An internship at the Centre for Human Rights (now UN Human Rights) in New York confirmed something I already felt: development was not just a career path for me. It was a life commitment.

### **Learning from others**

My work has taken me across continents, from Senegal, to Mozambique, Cambodia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, New York, The Gambia and Cameroon.

In the DRC, I worked with one of UN's largest electoral assistance programmes. One image will never leave me: millions of Congolese standing in the rain for hours to vote, many of whom were voting for the very first time. No speech, no report, no theory compares to that moment. It taught me



something fundamental: people do not lack courage or aspiration. What they often lack is opportunity.

In post-conflict settings, I worked on reintegration, transitional justice, security sector reform and recovery. Later, as a UNDP Country Advisor, I supported over 12 complex country contexts across Africa. Every experience reinforced the same lesson: development works when we listen, truly listen, to what people want for their own lives.



Aissata De, Deputy Regional Director, UNDP Regional Bureau for Africa, during her time as UN Volunteer at UNDP Mozambique (between 2000-2002), together with colleagues: Henny Matos, then Head of the Governance, Habiba Rodolfo, current Head of Governance, Kjetil Hansen-Shino, Economist and Miguel Castanha from Environment Unit. Photo @Aissata De

### **Choices, sacrifices and silence**

As a woman, the journey has not been simple. My extended family expected me to settle down early. But I felt a responsibility to my parents' legacy and to myself to continue this path of service.

Balancing family, personal life and work in fragile contexts requires sacrifices that are rarely visible. I have seen trauma up close among communities and among colleagues. Mental health remains one of the most challenging issues in

development work, especially in some country offices and in hardship duty stations. Silence is often mistaken for strength. I believe leadership must create spaces where people can be human and not just resilient.

### **Leadership and volunteers at the centre**

Following UN reform and the delinking of the UN Resident Coordinator function from UNDP, I became part of the first cohort of NextGen UNDP Resident Representatives. In The Gambia where I was posted, I worked alongside government and civil society to support democratic transition, peacebuilding and reform. I also led UNDP work in support of government efforts to overcome the global shock of COVID-19.

We introduced virtual courts, supported prison reform, strengthened health systems and expanded digital solutions. But what stayed with me most were the people who made these changes possible.

### **Volunteers matter**

In every country I have worked, in moments of crisis and in times of hope, it was often volunteers who were first to show up and last to leave. People offering their time, skills and creativity, national volunteers grounding our work in local realities and international volunteers bringing solidarity across borders.

They gave their time selflessly to others.

They adapted quickly, creating new opportunities and proposing new ways to help communities survive crises.. They brought deep local knowledge and unwavering commitment. They reminded me, every day, that development is not delivered. It is built together.

### *Development begins with people. It always has, and it always will.*

I served for two years (2000-2002) as a UN Volunteer at the UNDP Country Office in Mozambique, an assignment that combined substantive professional development with close institutional engagement. During this period, I acquired working proficiency in Portuguese and contributed to UNDP programmes supporting the police, electoral processes, parliamentary assistance and the justice sector.

This experience remains a defining milestone in my professional trajectory. My key contributions included participation in the *Artists Against Poverty* campaign and a central role in facilitating collaboration between Eduardo Mondlane University and United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI). This partnership enabled the conduct of victimisation and police performance

surveys that informed the formulation of the police's first Strategic Plan, integrating a gender-responsive perspective. Equally significant was the strong inter-agency collaboration within the UN Country Team. Notably, in partnership with UNICEF and national counterparts, we supported the establishment of Mozambique's first gender desk in model police stations, within the framework of the new Police Academy in Mishafuten.

### **Giving changes you**

I am deeply convinced that volunteers are not a footnote in development. They are central to it. They carry values, hope and action into places institutions alone cannot reach.

I have learned that giving to others does not diminish you. It transforms you. When you commit to service, you begin to see the world differently. You understand that development is not about structures, but about dignity. It is about ensuring that people are seen, heard and given the chance to shape their own futures.

I hope more leaders understand that caring for others does not make you less ambitious. It makes your ambition meaningful. Leadership rooted in empathy is not weakness, it is necessary. An important lesson my mother left me is that your legacy is not what you accumulate. It is what you enable in others.

# NEVER GIVE UP: MY JOURNEY TO UN LEADERSHIP

**Aleta Miller**

UN Women Representative in South Africa

*When we act, when we try, when we keep moving, there is always hope. And that's what keeps me up at night.*

I never imagined a career in the United Nations. I didn't grow up in a city. I come from a small rural town in Australia, surrounded by sugarcane farms. At 17, I left home for the city. I had never used public transport. I had never eaten in a restaurant. I was on my own for the first time, working in a supermarket, studying psychology and trying to find my way. What I had was curiosity. A sense of adventure. And a need to see beyond what I knew. That drive shaped everything that came next.

## **Volunteering in Papua New Guinea**

In my twenties, I volunteered in Papua New Guinea. I lived with the Koiari people on the Kokoda Track. Their history is tied to Australia. During World War II, they saved many Australian soldiers. Our group of young volunteers went there to give back. We helped install a water supply through the jungle and recorded oral histories from elders. But the real lesson wasn't in the work. It was in learning to slow down. To sit with people. To listen. I discovered that belonging and connection matter more

than quick outcomes. That experience changed how I see development. It's not about arriving with answers. It's about being present, building trust and asking communities what matters to them. It's about really listening.

## **Choosing the next Step**

I never had a master plan. I said yes to challenges that felt meaningful. I always looked for adventure. I practiced as a psychologist. I taught drama in a refugee camp in Hong Kong. I worked on HIV/AIDS for the Chinese Ministry of Health. Later, I joined World Vision in Myanmar, leading their work on HIV/AIDS.

That was the start of my UN journey. I stayed in Myanmar for years. Later I joined UNFPA and then UN Women. Since then, I have led UN offices in Fiji and the Pacific Islands, in Afghanistan and now in Southern Africa.

## **Lessons from hardship**

I have worked in some of the world's most difficult places, including Afghanistan under Taliban rule, refugee camps and fragile democracies. People often ask if I find this work depressing. My answer is no. The challenges are real: gender-based violence, patriarchy, inequality and more.

In Southern Africa, violence against women and girls is at crisis levels. Progress can feel painfully slow. But what keeps me going is the question: what more can we do? When we act, when we try, when we keep moving, there is always hope. And that's what keeps me up at night. Not despair, but challenge, strategy and the belief that we can, and we must, find a way that everyone lives a life of dignity and equality.

## **Making the UN and SDGs work**

When I first joined UNAIDS, frustrated by systems I did not yet know how to navigate, my boss said something I have never forgotten: "Until you have a better idea, we must make this one work." He meant the United Nations itself. It is not perfect. It can be slow and frustrating. But the UN remains humanity's best collective idea for solving global problems. Until there is a better idea, we must keep making this one work. It is the only way. That is what I tell young colleagues now. It is not easy. It is not perfect. But it is worth it. And each of us can help make the UN work.

Through the UN, world governments adopted the ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aimed at ending poverty, hunger and inequality. We have less than five years left, and progress is stalling. Some goals are even reversing. We cannot afford modest ambition. Volunteerism is vital. Volunteers bring energy, ownership and community connection that no policy can replicate. In South Africa, many national volunteers are young people. They're not just contributing skills – they're shaping their own future. Volunteerism also challenges us in the UN. It pushes against hierarchy. It reminds us that real change happens when we step down from our towers and work side by side as equals.

I always tell young professionals just starting out their careers to choose adventure. Say yes to opportunities. Follow what you love, what challenges and inspires you. Don't wait until you're ready. You'll learn by doing. And never give up. I have two teenage kids, and my family's motto is simple: *never give up*. Dive in. Set the bar



*Aleta Miller (right), UN Women Representative in South Africa during meeting with Lucy Ndungu, Regional Manager, UNV ESARO in South Africa.*

high. That mindset has carried me through every challenge. The SDGs demand that spirit – ambition, hope and action. Humanity needs all three. Volunteerism is where it begins. It's where I began. And it's where the next generation will find their power to lead. I remain radically optimistic about the future.

# TOGETHER, WE THRIVE

## Christine Musisi

Former UNDP Resident Representative in Tanzania

My career in development began exactly where it should have – on the ground, shoulder to shoulder with communities, as a United Nations Volunteer in Mongolia. It wasn't a detour on the way to leadership; it was the foundation.

In Ulaanbaatar's biting winter, I joined a government team tackling poverty and gender inequality. We trained local authorities across 21 provinces, worked with parliament to review national policies and launched a Local Development Fund that evolved into a lasting microfinance institution. We even convinced the national philharmonic to perform a charity concert on the condition that I sing a Mongolian ballet piece. I sang. They played. And I learned that development is most powerful when it carries both rigour and joy.

### **Volunteering gives more**

Volunteerism gave me more than professional experience; it gave me a way of working. It taught me to enter a room not with instructions but with curiosity, to lead from within rather than above. Those lessons carried me from Mongolia to Kyrgyzstan, across Eastern Europe and Central Asia and ultimately into senior UN roles, where the challenge was no longer

proving expertise but keeping humanity at the centre of policy.

### **Inside UNDP**

When I arrived in Tanzania as UNDP Resident Representative, I found a country whose heartbeat matched my own. *Ujamaa* – the philosophy of collective care – is infused in everyday life across the country. From women's savings groups in rural regions to youth driving climate action, volunteerism here is not a project; it is a social reflex. Inside UNDP, more than sixty UN Volunteers became catalysts for this energy during my tour of duty as Resident Representative. National and international volunteers worked side by side, combining local insight with global experience to advance gender equality, expand financial inclusion and bring digital innovation into community spaces. Their presence softened bureaucratic edges and opened conversations that formal authority alone could not.

I remember a young Tanzanian volunteer mapping gender-based violence hotspots with digital tools. Another team quietly helped rural women influence national finance debates. These are not footnotes to development – they are the very engine of it.

*Societies move forward when people give not only their expertise but also their willingness to belong to something larger than themselves.*

### **Looking back**

Looking back, my trajectory might appear as a climb from volunteering to senior leadership. In truth, it is a continuum. Every role has deepened the first lesson I learned in Mongolia: service is not preparation for leadership; it is leadership. Volunteerism is the practice of inclusion, the discipline of listening and the courage to co-create change.

Whether in the steppes of Mongolia or the coastal plains of Tanzania, I have witnessed that societies move forward when people give not only their expertise but also their willingness to belong to something larger than themselves. That is where transformation begins and where I continue to find my purpose.



# UN VOLUNTEERS OVER THE YEARS

## 1968-2026

From one UN Volunteer in 1971 to tens of thousands today, UN Volunteers have become central to the work of the UN across the world. This chart shows the journey of UN Volunteers (UNV) over the years.

### 1970 – UNV is born

- The UN General Assembly creates UN Volunteers (UNV) programme under UNDP to mobilize volunteers for peace and development.

### 1971 – First deployments

- First 35 UN Volunteers deployed to serve in Chad and other countries, setting the stage for future growth.

### 1970s – Early expansion in Africa

- UN Volunteer assignments expanded across least-developed countries in the region, engaging youth and refugees in fragile contexts.

### 1972–1976 – Growth and reach

- UNV Headquarters moved to Geneva. By 1976, 285 UN Volunteers were serving in 52 countries – 65% in least-developed nations, including several in Africa.
- By the late 1970s, the number had grown to more than 600 UN Volunteers.

### 1968 – Vision Sparked

- A call for a “UN legion” to fight poverty, hunger and injustice plants a seed for a global volunteer movement within the UN.

### 1970s

### 1985 – International Volunteer Day

- The UN designates 5 December as International Volunteer Day, elevating recognition of volunteer action across the world.

### 1990s – Peace and democratic transitions

- UN Volunteers support UN peace operations and electoral processes across the region.
- **South Africa:** Over 200 UN Volunteers help monitor the 1994 elections that ushered in democracy.
- **Mozambique:** UN Volunteers assist in post-war recovery and governance rebuilding.

In the mid 1990’s, UNV headquarters relocated from Geneva, Switzerland, to Bonn, Germany, reflecting Germany’s growing role in international diplomacy.

### 1960s

### 1980s

### 1990s

### 2000s

### Early 2000s – New era for volunteerism

- Launch of the UNV Online Volunteering service and the first International Year of Volunteers enable wider, more inclusive volunteer participation.
- **South Africa:** UNV launches a volunteer doctors programme in 2004 to fill critical gaps in health service provision.

### 2010s – Governance, climate and SDG action

- Volunteers strengthen local governance and resilience:
- **Ethiopia:** UN Volunteers back district-level SDG localization and youth engagement programmes.
- **Malawi and Zambia:** Volunteers support climate-smart agriculture and disaster preparedness.
- **Uganda:** Volunteers assist with local development planning and data for SDG tracking.
- UNV releases the first State of the World’s Volunteerism Report in 2011 with a focus on universal values for global wellbeing, and second edition in 2015 focusing on volunteerism and governance.

### 2017 – Electoral peacebuilding

- **Kenya:** UN Volunteers coordinate peace and cohesion monitoring during national elections, activating county-level early warning and dialogue forums.

### 2017–2018 - UNV expands field presence

- UNV unveils its 2018-2021 Strategic Framework, guided by the United Nations General Assembly resolution 70/129 and building on previous 2014–2017 framework.
- UNV puts into place a new, decentralized business model that increases its regional presence at the field-level.
- UNV publishes the third edition of the State of the World’s Volunteerism Report (SWVR) in 2018, focusing on volunteerism and community resilience.

### 2020 – COVID-19 response

- Across Ethiopia, Zambia, South Africa, Kenya, Malawi and other countries, UN Volunteers, on site and online, deliver health campaigns, support testing and vaccine rollouts and help keep UN operations running during COVID-19 lockdowns.

### 2023–2025 – Scaling UN Volunteers’ reach

- The UN General Assembly adopted a historic resolution designating 2026 as the International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development (IVY 2026) and tasked UNV with facilitating its implementation.
- UNV scales mobilisation of UN Volunteers significantly. Over 14,600 UN Volunteers from 180+ nationalities served in 170 countries, including nearly 3,000 in UN peace and political missions. Online Volunteers exceeded 23,000.
- UNV mobilizes more than 2,300 UN Volunteers across 23 countries in East and Southern Africa.

### 2025–2026 – Looking forward

- International Volunteer Year (IVY 2026) is officially launched worldwide, with global launch events in New York and Nairobi.
- UNV releases the 2026 State of the World’s Volunteerism Report, introducing the first-ever global framework for measuring volunteerism.
- UNV unveils new Strategic Framework 2026–2029.
- UNV introduces new Unified Conditions of Service for UN Volunteers.



Scan to explore more on UNV's history

*Our interconnectedness is our shared vulnerability, and the world is only getting more and more interconnected.*

— Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, former Regional Director, WHO Africa



**CHAMPIONS  
FOR  
HEALTH**

# OPENING DOORS FOR WOMEN IN HEALTH

**Dr. Matshidiso Moeti**

WHO Regional Director for Africa (2015-2025)

When I look back at my tour of duty as the Regional Director for WHO Africa Regional Office, I see how much it was shaped by my roots and by the choices my parents made. Both were doctors in South Africa, then under the apartheid regime. They moved our family to Botswana so that I could grow up with more opportunity and learn in a more equal environment.

## **A vision for women in leadership**

Medicine was a natural calling, but public health became my purpose. After qualifying as a doctor in London and earning a Master's Degree in Community Health, I chose to dedicate my career to strengthening health systems and serving communities. From my early years in Botswana's Ministry of Health, to UNICEF, UNAIDS, and later the WHO Regional Office for Africa, I worked through some of the continent's most pressing challenges: HIV/AIDS, noncommunicable diseases, fragile systems and repeated health emergencies.

In 2015, when I was elected as the first woman Regional Director of WHO for Africa, it felt less like a personal milestone and more like a turning point for the institution. It was a chance to open doors for women, to show that leadership in

global health must reflect the people it serves. That conviction led me, in 2020, to launch the Africa Women Health Champions initiative with the UN Volunteers (UNV) programme.

## **A talent pipeline for WHO**

As of 2025 when my tour of duty at WHO was ending, the programme had brought on board more than 145 young women from 38 nationalities to WHO. They served in 47 WHO Country Offices across the region, working in diverse areas such as emergency preparedness, data, communications and external relations. They brought fresh ideas, digital skills and determination. When I met them during my travels, I was struck not only by their professionalism, but also by their stories of how they were strengthening health systems, responding to crises and connecting communities to care. Some have already moved into permanent roles within WHO in Africa and beyond.

The Africa Women Health Champions initiative has shown us what becomes possible when young women are trusted with responsibility and supported with mentorship. It also shaped WHO itself. Through the initiative, WHO's work has become more responsive, more innovative

and more reflective of the people we serve. Going forward, I hope that we can expand the initiative and extend its reach, especially into underserved communities, Lusophone countries, and to women with disabilities. We must also move faster in recruitment and deployment, particularly in emergencies where speed saves lives.

## **Lessons for the future**

Through the Africa Women Health Champions, and over the years, I have learned that technical knowledge alone is not enough to help us move the needle on the multiple issues that we face as humanity. It is the ability to listen, to work as part of teams, to earn trust and communicate clearly that makes the real difference. These values and competencies form a large part of what defines good leadership – not written in books, but learned through service, mentorship, and collaboration. It is about empathy, courage and creating pathways for others. The Africa Women Health Champions are carrying this spirit forward. They remind me every day that Africa's future in public health leadership is not only promising. It is already here.



*Technical knowledge alone is not enough....It is the ability to listen, to work as part of teams, to earn trust and communicate clearly that makes the real difference.*



*Dr. Matshidiso Moeti (front, 2nd from left) with some of WHO Africa Women Health Champions.  
Photo @WHO*



*Dr. Matshidiso Moeti (left), WHO Regional Director for Africa, visiting WHO in Butembo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, during the 10th Ebola outbreak.  
Photo @WHO*

# GIVING OF SELF

## Christine Muhigana

Former UNICEF Representative in South Africa

*In my language, 'kwitanga' means to give yourself. I believe that is where real change begins.*

I was born in Kigali, Rwanda. When I finished my studies in Belgium, I went home, eager but uncertain. At a small gathering, I met a few young people working for the United Nations. They told me about an opening at UNDP. The role was not glamorous—just helping to close a civil aviation project. Still, I felt a spark. I said I would do it even without pay.

### A doorway into purpose

Walking into the UN office for the first time, I felt both small and full of pride. I had studied Political Science and International Relations. To me, the UN was not just a workplace, but a doorway into purpose. That first step, humble as it was, set me on a path that spanned over 35 years.

Looking back, what drew me in was not ambition. It was something deeper: a willingness to give myself. In Kinyarwanda we call it *kwitanga* – to offer yourself fully. Rwanda has a tradition called *Umuganda*, where communities gather each month to clean, plant or rebuild together. You show

up because the community needs you. No one pays you. No one forces you. You give yourself because that is how society moves forward.

That spirit has never left me. In Mauritania, my first international posting, I worked alongside UN Volunteers scattered across vast, remote areas. They inspired me. One, a fellow Rwandan serving with UNICEF, left a strong impression. He was middle-aged, with grown children, yet chose to volunteer far from home. He brought humility, skill and care. He showed me that service is not about age or titles, but about presence.

### Serving children

When I served as UNICEF Representative in South Africa, our programmes covered health, nutrition, HIV, education and child protection. But one challenge cut across them all: violence against children. It seeped into homes, schools and communities. It robbed children of safety and trust. Tackling it required more than technical solutions. It required presence, compassion and persistence – the very qualities I first admired in volunteers.

South Africa is also a country of extraordinary potential. I saw it in the young volunteers who mentored children

after school, who brought digital tools to classrooms and who helped teachers in overcrowded schools. They reminded me of my beginnings and of the decision to give myself without expecting anything in return.

With the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) now off track, time is short. For children, this is not an abstract concern but their daily reality. They cannot wait for us to work in silos, each in our own corner. Their lives demand that we connect, collaborate and act with urgency. I believe volunteers help us see those connections more clearly. They stand at the intersections where health meets education and protection meets dignity. They sit with children when teachers cannot and help bridge the digital divide to make learning more personal.

### Kwitanga – Giving of self

In my language, *kwitanga* means to give yourself. I believe that is where real change begins. My career journey began with a small choice: to say yes, even without pay. That decision taught me that service shapes us more than any position ever could. It is how we build resilience, how we discover leadership and how we keep hope alive for the next generation.



Christine Muhigana (2nd from right), former UNICEF Representative in South Africa, with a UN Volunteer from UNICEF South Africa and colleagues from UNV. Photo @UN Volunteers

# FINDING SELF THROUGH SERVICE

**Dr. Aboubacar Kampo**

UNICEF Representative in Ethiopia

As a surgeon by training and a humanitarian by purpose, I have spent the past sixteen years with UNICEF navigating some of the world's most complex emergencies. From war zones to disaster-hit regions, I have witnessed how fragile and resilient life can be. Yet, long before I wore the UNICEF badge or stepped into operating rooms, my journey began in quieter, humbler places. It began with showing up.



## **The first step: showing up to serve**

In high school and university, I didn't think of it as "volunteering" in the formal sense. We were just helping support the elderly in their homes, organising vaccination campaigns and mobilising our communities. It felt natural. It felt right. We weren't looking for recognition. We were showing up because it mattered. Later, I completed my youth service in a remote corner of Mali. It wasn't full-fledged volunteerism, but it changed me profoundly. I was freshly out of medical school, with no safety net and no mentors around the corner. But that isolation built something powerful: character, confidence and clarity. That experience shaped the way I would carry myself as a doctor, a leader and a human being.

## **Volunteering as a mirror and a bridge**

There's something about stepping into a world that's not your own – walking dusty roads you've never known, listening to stories you've never heard and helping people you've never met. It teaches you humility. It forces you out of your comfort zone and into a space where your values are tested and your empathy is stretched. Volunteering opens your eyes – not only to new cultures or contexts, but also to parts of yourself you hadn't met yet. And

the reward? It's not material. It's the gratitude of someone who has nothing, who thanks you not for what you brought but for simply being there. Just showing up. That alone is priceless.

## **Giving back, and receiving even more**

I've been fortunate in life. I had the chance to study, to grow and to build a career. That privilege carries a quiet responsibility to give back. And giving back – I've learned – often means receiving just as much or more in return. Throughout my career, from development to emergency response, I've been blessed to work alongside people who may not have had my credentials, my training, or my platform, but who gave me invaluable lessons in compassion, resilience, and perspective. Volunteering isn't one-way service. It's mutual transformation.

## **Volunteers: the unsung backbone of progress**

In the vast field of international development, peacebuilding and humanitarian response, we're always working with limited

*There's something about stepping into a world that's not your own – walking dusty roads you've never known, listening to stories you've never heard, helping people you've never met.*

resources. The needs far outweigh what's available. In this landscape, volunteers are indispensable. They extend the reach of our missions, bring energy where it's needed most and bridge the gap between strategy and action. For young people especially, volunteering offers something that no textbook or degree can: real-world exposure. It's a chance to learn by doing, to grow by giving and to lead by serving.

## **To the next generation**

To young professionals and to my younger self, I would say: volunteer more. Give your time. Learn. But more than that, open your heart. Engage with others not just from your own experience but by embracing theirs. Understand that people come from different starting points, and that embracing difference doesn't mean losing

yourself. It means expanding who you are. Take the best of where you come from and let it meet the best of where you're going. That's how you become not just a better professional, but a better person.

You don't need all the answers. You don't need a perfect plan. Sometimes, you just need to show up. Even without knowing exactly what to do, your presence can bring hope. And in a world where so many feel forgotten, that act alone can mean everything. So if you're wondering whether it's worth it, take that first step. Volunteer. Try it once. Let it shift your perspective, challenge your assumptions and stretch your heart.

You might be surprised how much it gives back.

Dr. Aboubacar Kampo (in striped shirt), UNICEF Representative in Ethiopia, engages with children  
Photo @UNICEF



# WINNING TOGETHER

## Miranda Tabifor

UNFPA Representative in Zimbabwe

I have had the privilege of working within the United Nations (UN) system for over 25 years. Looking back, my journey has been shaped by the idea that if you are in a position to serve, you have a responsibility to do it well.

*Ultimately, everything comes back to one word: impact. It's about the difference we make in the lives of people, and that's what keeps me going every day.*

One of the moments that stands out in my career was being asked to establish the UN Women office in the Democratic Republic of Congo. At that time, there was no presence on the ground, and I was responsible for setting up the main office in Kinshasa and two sub-offices in Bukavu and Lubumbashi. I was young, and it was a big responsibility. It was exciting and intimidating at the same time. I had to figure out how to make the office functional, build relationships with partners, and ensure that our work truly contributed to the empowerment of women.

That experience taught me a lot about focus, persistence and the importance of leaning on others.

### Life compass

Throughout my career, four things have guided me: determination, being resourceful, clear communication and collaboration. Determination helped me stay on course when things got tough. Resourcefulness allowed me to make the most of limited resources. Communication ensured people understood what we were doing. And collaboration reminded me that meaningful work is never done alone. You need a team, partners and communities to succeed.

My sense of responsibility comes from my upbringing. My father believed deeply in educating girls and gave me the foundation to pursue my ambitions. Later, my husband supported my career and professional goals. Those experiences taught me the importance of creating opportunities for others, especially women, and recognizing potential that often goes unseen.

### Working together

Volunteerism, to me, is an important avenue for creating opportunities for more people. It's about being present, listening and supporting communities to achieve their priorities. At UNFPA Zimbabwe, we keep listening, especially to the voices of young people. We are proud to be part of the *UNited 4 Youth Inclusion programme (UN4Youth)* – a pioneering inter-agency initiative designed to break barriers and open career pathways for young UN Volunteers, including those with disabilities. Real impact happens when we work with diverse people and when communities take ownership of their solutions. That's where change sticks.

If I had to name a chapter of my career, it would be "*Winning as a Team*". No matter the context, success comes from working together. For those stepping into change-making roles, be determined, be resilient, and don't be afraid to be bold. Step up, listen, learn and trust the people you serve.

Ultimately, everything comes back to one word: impact. It's about the difference we make in the lives of people, and that is what keeps me going every day.



Miranda Tabifor (right), UNFPA Representative in Zimbabwe with Louise Chamberlain, UNV Deputy Executive Coordinator ahead of launch of *UNited 4 Youth Inclusion Programme (UN4Youth)* in Zimbabwe in August 2025. Photo @UNFPA Zimbabwe

*We all share one planet and  
are one humanity; there is no  
escaping this reality.*

— Wangari Maathai



**PEOPLE  
AND  
PLANET**

# THE FUTURE IS IN OUR HANDS

## Elizabeth Maruma Mrema

Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations and Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme

A defining chapter of my career was working with and supporting countries to establish Ministries of Environment as well as Environmental Authorities and draft their first framework and sectoral environmental laws. It was deeply fulfilling, because it was not only about building institutions, but also about laying the foundations of governance to protect people and nature for generations.

Another pivotal moment came when I entered the world of multilateral environmental agreements and international negotiations. Sitting at the table with governments, civil society and scientists revealed both the immense complexity of global challenges and the extraordinary potential of collective action. I learned that while progress can be slow and consensus difficult, when nations listen, compromise and find common purpose, they can craft agreements that truly change the course of our shared future.

Integrity has been an anchoring value throughout my career, particularly in moments of uncertainty, when difficult choices demanded courage and clarity. Professionalism has shaped how I work, driving me to uphold the highest

standards, remain accountable and deliver with reliability and excellence. And innovation has been a guiding principle, encouraging me to stay open to new ideas, embrace creative solutions and remain focused on achieving results that make a lasting difference.

### **Volunteering and environmental action**

For me, the values of volunteering are not peripheral to environmental action; they are its foundation. Volunteerism channels the selfless energy of people into the collective good. Inclusion ensures that those most affected can help shape the solutions. Co-creation transforms dialogue into shared responsibility, while local ownership secures the longevity of change by rooting it in community identity and pride. Together, they weave a fabric of trust and shared purpose. They remind us that lasting progress does not flow from the top down, but emerges when people themselves drive the transformation. In this way, environmental outcomes become not only more equitable, but also more resilient and enduring.

What gives me hope for the future is the creativity and determination of people, especially the younger generation, who

bring fresh ideas and the courage to shape a better future. Free from the mindset of “how things have always been done,” they take bold steps, embrace innovation and inspire us all to think differently.

This spirit shows that humanity can change the narrative, turning crisis into resilience, sustainability and hope. Young people remind us that systems can be transformed and new paths can be created. Their courage, combined with the wisdom of older generations, strengthens my belief that together we can rise to the triple planetary crisis and build a just, sustainable and hopeful future.

Young people today carry a power that cannot be ignored. Their voices are rising, calling for urgent action to protect our planet. They are holding leaders accountable, imagining solutions and turning commitments into real change. My message to them: continue bringing your passion and creativity into every space where decisions are made. Refuse to stand on the sidelines. Be bold. Be innovative. Above all, be demanding. Insist on being heard. Every transformation began with voices like yours.



*Sitting at the table with governments, civil society, and scientists revealed both the immense complexity of global challenges and the extraordinary potential of collective action.*

As youth leader Helena Gualinga reminds us: “*The future is in your hands. Come together, raise your voices and demand the sustainable and just world you deserve.*”



Elizabeth Maruma Mrema (4th from right), Deputy Executive Director, UNEP with Inger Anderson (5th from right), Executive Director, UNEP together with UN Volunteers serving at UNEP through the UNEP Young Talent Pipeline — a joint initiative between UNEP and UN Volunteers.

Photo @UNEP

Between 2015 and 2025, 764 UN Volunteers have served with UNEP in 42 countries.

In 2023, UNV and UNEP launched the Young Talent Pipeline to recruit early-career professionals from underrepresented regions, with a second diverse cohort deployed in 2024.



Elizabeth Maruma Mrema (in red) Deputy Executive Director, UNEP planting a tree together with student volunteer groups in Tanzania. Photo @UNEP.

# STEPPING FORWARD, TOGETHER

**Fatmata Lovetta Sesay**

UNDP Resident Representative in Rwanda

My career has taken me across Africa, working on economic development, sustainable finance and institutional reform. But titles and portfolios have never been the point. What has mattered, from early on, is responsibility. Being entrusted to speak for others. To carry their concerns with care. To understand that representation is not about visibility, but accountability.

That lesson came early in my life. I was young when I was first asked to speak on behalf of others. I remember the weight of it. Not the fear, but the clarity. When you speak for others, your words must be grounded in truth and respect. You must listen more than you talk. That instinct has never left me.

*At UNDP Rwanda, the contributions of UN Volunteers often appear in the background, but have been extremely essential to our work in the country.*

**Development begins with dignity**

Later, in public service and academia, those instincts deepened. I learned that

development is not abstract. It is about dignity. About equity. About whether people feel seen in the systems that shape their lives. Policies matter, but only when they translate into real change.

Rwanda is a powerful place to serve because of its focus. There is a clarity of vision here and a seriousness about inclusive progress. But even the strongest vision requires people to carry it forward. That is where volunteer service comes in: volunteerism, inclusion, co-creation and local ownership. These are often treated as concepts. I see them as practices. They show up in how decisions are made and who is invited into the room. They determine whether development becomes something done to people or something built with them.

**Rwanda's success story**

In Rwanda, we see what happens when communities, institutions and partners move together. Over time, I have seen how volunteerism, embedded deliberately in national development priorities, has strengthened governance and community engagement. It has helped government institutions stay connected to the realities of the people they serve.

At UNDP Rwanda, the contributions of UN Volunteers often appear in the background, but have been extremely essential to our work in the country. I have seen volunteers supporting innovation ecosystems, mentoring young entrepreneurs, organising challenges and helping ideas move from concept to practice — not by replacing national capacity — but by reinforcing it.

I have seen this too in climate-smart agriculture and rural resilience efforts. Volunteers working alongside communities. Supporting training. Following up. Staying present long after pilot projects are launched. This kind of work is quiet, but it is what allows solutions to take root and scale.

**Pathways for change**

These contributions are not parallel to development. They are part of the delivery chain. They bring energy, adaptability and perspective into systems that can otherwise become rigid.

For optimal results, such volunteer contributions need to be well supported and integrated into development plans. This requires intention. Not symbolic gestures, but strategic choices: placing volunteers where they build lasting capacity, creating pathways for young people to serve meaningfully and ensuring that service leads to inclusion, learning, and long-term civic contribution.





*Fatmata Sesay (front, left), UNDP Resident Representative in Rwanda interacts with Hon. Marie Solange Kayisire, Rwanda's Minister of State for Local Government during International Volunteer Day commemoration in Rubavu, Rwanda.  
Photo @UNDP Rwanda*



*Fatmata Sesay (left) in an exchange with Yvette Munyana, UN Volunteer Executive Assistant at UNDP Rwanda.  
Photo @UN Volunteers*

# CARRYING LESSONS, SHAPING CHANGE

**Lionel Laurens**

UNDP Resident Representative in Somalia

*We are empowering youth to participate in the digital economy efforts and to become leaders in their own future.*

About twenty-eight years ago, I joined the United Nations as an international UN Volunteer, posted in southern Laos, a remote district where tigers roamed free, dozens of ethnic groups coexisted and I was the lone UN presence for miles. My car served as my evacuation plan to the Thai border. That time taught me courage, adaptability and above all that service begins with humanity.

### **Purpose through fragility**

That chapter launched my UN career. I later served in Afghanistan rebuilding rural infrastructure, in Iraq advancing inclusive local governance and in Sierra Leone during the Ebola crisis. I then became Country Director in Guinea-Conakry. Subsequently, for four years, I was UNDP's Resident Representative in Zambia. There, in 2020, our office partnered with UN Volunteers and the Zambian government to launch a door-to-door youth outreach campaign during COVID-19. Together, we mobilized 2,500 youth volunteers, reaching 700,000

households with life-saving health messages, breaking communication barriers and building trust with vulnerable communities.

Today, I am honoured to serve as UNDP Resident Representative in Somalia. I arrived here in June 2023, drawn by the Somali people's resilience and indomitable spirit despite years of conflict, climate shocks and displacement.

### **My Inspiration**

Somalia's youth, especially, inspire me. They are at the forefront of a digital revolution, harnessing technology to address both local and global challenges. Through them, I see how digital innovation is reshaping possibilities where more than a third of the population is under 25 and mobile phone penetration exceeds 58%.

This is why UNDP Somalia is supporting Somalia's national *Youth, Peace and Security Plan*, integrating digital tools with peacebuilding across communities. We are empowering youth to participate in the digital economy efforts and to become leaders in their own future. Women's leadership is also central to Somalia's prevailing development path. Through the Women Peace Networks, over 255 women across federal states are

strengthening mediation capacities and driving grassroots resolutions. UNDP is by their side, helping build a more inclusive, peaceful and sustainable Somalia.

### **Change is not top-down**

My own journey from remote jungles in Laos to the Horn of Africa has continuously affirmed to me that change is not top-down. It grows from the grassroots and when people choose to serve. I chose to focus on youth and women empowerment. In order to harvest the so-called "demographic dividend" for a prosperous and peaceful future, countries need to invest in young people and give them vision and hope.

We need to think of how to harness this incredible potential of positive energy of youth in constructive ways. This is a key development question UNDP can help countries to address.

It is a complex question with many aspects. It requires careful comparative analysis of strategic and realistic sectors with market access while also decoupling economic growth from pollution, waste, environmental depletion and biodiversity loss.



Lionel Laurens (right), UNDP Resident Representative in Somalia, during meeting with Toily Kurbanov, UNV Executive Coordinator ahead of 2023 International Volunteer Day commemoration in Somalia  
Photo @ UN Volunteers



It is also about accompanying youth and women through their arduous journeys to overcome obstacles, starting with building self-confidence, promoting entrepreneurship and encouraging initiative to turn challenges into opportunities. It also requires acquiring the right business and technical skills, including financial education, and providing business support and adequate infrastructure.

Empowerment also embraces other key dimensions, including social and political empowerment so that citizens can participate more actively in a vibrant democracy anchored in the rule of law, with greater tolerance and respect for gender equality.

When youth and women claim greater agency and space, and when they have the right to influence decisions that affect their lives, we can unlock their transformative power and build inclusive and resilient societies together.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is guided by values grounded in the UN Charter's core principles of dignity, equality and humanity. These values reflect the organisation's deep commitment to gender equality, inclusive and human rights-based approaches, and the highest ethical standards in all its actions and decisions.

I feel privileged to lead by example in applying these values as I work alongside the people of Somalia to help shape the country's next chapter – a prosperous and peaceful Somalia.

# CURIOSITY, CODE AND COMMUNITY

**Edo Stork**

UNDP Resident Representative in Mozambique

I never planned to end up in development work. At least not in the UN. I studied Computer Science. I loved algorithms and systems. But curiosity pulled me beyond code. I wanted to see the world I had only read about.

## **Lessons far from home**

After I graduated from university, my first step towards this ambition was leaving the comfort of my home in the Netherlands, to serve as a volunteer in Swaziland (now eSwatini). I lived with students and helped build the University of Swaziland's first student results information system. There was no internet at first. I wrote letters home by candlelight. I sent the occasional fax and celebrated it like it was a victory. Those small, odd moments taught me a lot about patience, improvisation and what systems look like when the context is very different from my home country. My early volunteering experiences taught

me two main things. One, technology is only useful if it fits people's lives. Two, learning from the community is not an optional step in development. It is the starting point.

I finished a Master's Degree in Computer Science at the Free University of Amsterdam with a specialisation in Artificial Intelligence (AI) – before AI became trendy. That training sharpened my technical thinking. After my studies, my time in eSwatini showed me how to apply technology: always putting people first.

## **Across countries and crises**

Those early choices pulled me into decades of work across countries and crises. In the course of my work, I have seen volunteers across the world build trust where institutions were strained. They helped strengthen the social fabric of many countries by working together for solidarity and community interest, which can be far more powerful than just working for financial incentives. There are many stories that demonstrate this. For instance, at the height of the multiple cyclones that hit Mozambique recently, UN Volunteers and local volunteers played

critical roles in rebuilding devastated communities. They did more than stack bricks. They restored routines, hope and places where children could feel safe again.

In northern Mozambique, volunteers still work on stabilisation, repairing clinics, schools and public facilities, and supporting families displaced by conflict. In each case, volunteers shorten the distance between help and the people who need it most.

This spirit of service heavily influences how I lead at UNDP. I ask: what can we learn today? What will we leave behind that helps communities stand on their own? I try to flatten hierarchies and encourage teams to listen, iterate and connect technical solutions to human needs. That is how resilient systems are built.

## **The tie that binds**

We are racing the clock on the Sustainable Development Goals. The problems we face now are complex and overlapping – climate shocks, conflict and inequality. Siloed solutions from siloed sectors will not be enough. Volunteerism is one of the things that ties sectors

*My path began with curiosity, a computer, and candlelight. It has led me to work with people who rebuild schools, clinics, and lives.*





together. Volunteers are nimble, close to communities, and often the first to spot what is broken and what can work.

I always tell people with curiosity and the urge to make a difference: if you feel unsure about how to contribute, start small. Offer your time. Bring a skill. Work alongside people who know the place. You will learn faster than from any manual. And if you are a policymaker or a programme designer, think about how volunteers can be woven into the design from the start. They are not a bolt-on. They are a bridge.

My path began with curiosity, a computer and candlelight. It has led me to work with people who rebuild schools, clinics and lives. That combination of technical skills and a willingness to give of oneself still guides and inspires me. It is how we translate ambition into results.

*Edo Stork, UNDP Resident Representative in Mozambique during an exchange with Clementino Abdala, UN Volunteer Communications Assistant at UNDP Mozambique.*

*Photo @UN Volunteers*

# ACROSS BORDERS, IN SERVICE OF HUMANITY

**Emanuela Muscarà,**  
Chief of Mission, IOM Burundi

I began my UN journey as a UN Volunteer with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Cairo, Egypt. It was not a stopgap or a trial run. It was the work itself, real, urgent, and human.

## Early lessons

One of my assignments as a UN Volunteer was to support migrants and refugees arriving in Egypt from the Horn of Africa, many of them victims of trafficking. We set up referral systems with UNHCR, local NGOs and community leaders to secure shelter, provide medical care and help survivors rebuild their lives. One Ramadan afternoon, a Sudanese family needed urgent help while most offices were closed. Not knowing what to do, I reached out to a community worker, a refugee himself. He did not know me, yet he left his *Iftar* (*breaking of the fast*) to respond without hesitation. That night, I understood the quiet power of commitment and the value of the networks we build based on a shared sense of purpose. I learned quickly that titles do not open doors - relationships do. Volunteerism taught me to listen before acting and to work with what is at hand. It sharpened my instincts for partnership and showed me that leadership is service in

motion. Those lessons carried me through every step since, from working with vulnerable migrant women in Mongolia to shaping migration policy in West Africa and now leading IOM mission in Burundi.

Today, Burundi faces its own migration and displacement challenges – from climate shocks to regional instability. My role is to help communities navigate these pressures with dignity and choice. The skills I rely on – empathy, ingenuity and the ability to bring people together – are the same ones I practiced as a volunteer.

To anyone wondering how to start creating change, it is always best to begin with service. You do not need a title to lead. Volunteerism is not preparation for leadership, it is leadership. It is where you learn to solve problems with people, not for them.

Two books remain with me as reminders of this journey. *Chasing the Flame* recounts Sergio Vieira de Mello's courage in the field, where he lost his life while serving as the United Nations Special Representative for Iraq. *Never Learn to Type* reflects Margaret Anstee's quiet persistence in

*Volunteerism taught me to listen before acting and to work with what is at hand.*

breaking barriers for women in the UN, culminating in her becoming the first UN Under-Secretary General in 1987. Both affirm lessons I have learned throughout my career, that service is never a straight path. It is sometimes rosy, sometimes rocky. In this work, courage is not optional, it's the compass that guides us through the toughest decisions.

Looking back, I see service and human connection as a continuous thread running through human development and progress. From the bustling streets of Cairo to the hills of Burundi, change happens when we choose to stand with others, to listen and to build bridges where borders once stood.





Emanuela Muscarà (third from right), Chief of Mission, IOM Burundi, together with national authorities, the UNICEF Representative, Burundi and the U.S. Ambassador to Burundi, took part in the distribution of non-food items to support communities affected by El Niño-induced floods in Rumonge Province.  
Photo @IOM



Emanuela Muscarà (in blue jacket) joins national authorities and partners on a field mission to Nyanza, Burunga in Burundi, to review progress in the implementation of durable solutions for displacement-affected populations.  
Photo @IOM

# LEADING WITH COURAGE, BALANCE, AND BELIEF IN PEOPLE

**Fenella Frost**

UNDP Resident Representative in Malawi, formerly in Comoros

What has always driven my work is the belief that development is richer, more sustainable and more just when every person has the chance to contribute. Regardless of gender, background or circumstance, people must have the opportunity to play their part and fulfill their potential. That conviction, along with a passion for sustainable development, is what led me to join the UN and eventually UNDP.

Working across UN headquarters and country offices, I have been inspired by countless colleagues who dedicate themselves to impact. But inspiration also comes from outside the UN. When I travel to communities across Malawi or speak with mothers, farmers, entrepreneurs and people building better lives for their families, I am reminded why I do this work; not because of a job title, but because of a calling that began as many meaningful things do, with volunteering.

## **A volunteer at heart**

Before I took on the title of Resident Representative, I was a UN Volunteer, proud and wide-eyed, deployed to Kosovo after the war in 1998.



It was a place scarred by conflict but alive with resilience. I was there to help with civil registration for the first post-war elections. The role wasn't glamorous. It was challenging, meticulous and at times overwhelming.

I was posted to a district called Viti (or Vitina), where I led a team of both national and international UN Volunteers. Together, we registered the entire population of that district in just six months. It was a mammoth task, and yet we did it day by day, name by name. I was the only international woman volunteer in the team, surrounded by male colleagues in a post-conflict setting.

But that never stopped me. In fact, it strengthened my resolve. I was proud not just of what we achieved for Kosovo, but of what it meant for me, as a woman leading in complex environments. That experience became a defining milestone in my journey, not just professionally, but personally. It showed me the power of determination, of inclusion and of what happens when people from all walks of life come together for something bigger than themselves.

## **Service in many forms**

After Kosovo, I served as a volunteer firefighter in my home country New Zealand, running into emergencies when others were running out. It may sound like a world away from development work, but at its core, it was the same calling: to serve, to protect and to stand up for community. These experiences – civil registration in war-torn regions, emergency response in my hometown – taught me that

service knows no borders, no titles, and no limits.

## **The path to UNDP**

Years later, as Resident Representative at UNDP in Comoros, together with the government, we positioned UNDP as a trusted partner of choice for national development planning and financial reform. We advanced women's economic and social empowerment, recognizing how central women are to inclusive growth in small island states. We supported environmental stewardship, including the recognition of Moheli as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve – a reminder that protecting fragile ecosystems is inseparable from protecting lives. And we did all this while keeping the wellbeing of our staff at the centre.

For me, leadership is never just about strategies. It is about nurturing a team culture where people feel safe, valued, and empowered to do their best work. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, tested that conviction in

*For me, leadership is never just about arithmetic strategies. It is about nurturing a team culture where people feel safe, valued, and empowered to do their best work.*

ways I could not have imagined. In fragile settings like Comoros, you cannot work remotely and hope to make a difference. That meant leading from the front even as risks mounted. Some of our staff fell ill. Some had to be evacuated. Every decision weighed heavily, balancing delivery with safety. What got us through was a sense of collective purpose – the understanding that, in moments of crisis, our presence matters. UNDP was not just delivering programmes; we were saving lives.



Fenella Frost (middle), UNDP Resident Representative in Malawi with colleague from UNDP Malawi (2nd from left) and colleagues from UNV  
Photo @UN Volunteers

When I moved to Malawi, I carried those lessons with me. Malawi, like Comoros, is a country where the challenges of climate change, economic vulnerability and inequality intersect in complex ways. Here too, I have seen how volunteers strengthen resilience, from supporting flood responses to driving youth-led innovation in communities. Their contribution affirms what I have always believed: individually, we are one drop; together, we are an ocean.

### **A pathway for everyone**

Throughout my leadership journey, I have seen how volunteering opens doors, not just for those we serve, but for those who serve. Whether young or old, a student or a retiree, from a big city or a rural village, volunteerism is always a way to connect to humanity: a way to learn, grow and give.

In Comoros, for example, I saw first-hand how volunteers sustained fragile systems when institutions were stretched thin. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when borders were closed and resources were scarce, it was the UN Volunteers and national volunteers who stepped forward. They staffed emergency systems, supported public awareness campaigns and helped us mitigate the pandemic's impact in villages that might otherwise have been left behind. Their courage and humanity gave UNDP's interventions real meaning.

And what I love about the UN Volunteers programme is that it welcomes this diversity. It proves that impact isn't reserved for those with decades of experience or multiple degrees. It shows that commitment, compassion and courage are enough to change lives.

### **Looking back**

Throughout my career, what stays with me are not just the projects delivered or the policies shaped, but the moments of human connection: a volunteer in Comoros explaining how she convinced her village to adopt health measures during COVID-19; a Malawian woman sharing her dream of starting a climate-smart business; a colleague finding the courage to take leave after years of burnout because we created an environment where wellbeing is valued.

For me, leadership is not measured in titles or reports. It is measured in the lives touched, the dignity restored and the collective resilience built along the way. That is why, even in the hardest moments, I remain inspired. Because I know that when people are given the chance to contribute, their voices are heard and their potential unlocked, development becomes not just possible, but transformative.

### **A call to serve**

You don't need to cross oceans. You can start where you are. Volunteerism is not just about where you serve. It is about how you serve. It is about saying, "I am here. I can help. I choose to care." In a world facing so many interconnected challenges, volunteerism is a bridge that connects us. It is how we bring the Sustainable Development Goals closer to reality, not through grand gestures alone, but through everyday acts of humanity.

So, wherever you are, whatever your background, say yes to showing up, to giving back, to making a difference. You never know how far that first act of service might lead you.

**...TO ALL  
UN VOLUNTEERS,  
PAST AND  
PRESENT.  
THANK YOU  
FOR 55 YEARS  
OF SERVICE  
AND IMPACT**



— Toily Kurbanov, Executive Coordinator of UN Volunteers (UNV) programme, on the 55th anniversary of the establishment of UNV (UN General Assembly Resolution 2659 (XXV), 7 December 1970).



*Scan to read  
more about UNV.*

*Countless opportunities  
await the youth, but it takes  
determination to seize them.*

— Ahunna Eziakonwa, UN Assistant Secretary-General and  
UNDP Assistant Administrator and Director, Regional Bureau for Africa



# POWERING THE NEXT GENERATION

# WALKING IN MY FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS

## Dr. Stephen Jackson

Former UN Resident Coordinator in Kenya

My story begins long before I joined the United Nations. I grew up with volunteering in my blood. My father, Bill Jackson, was a senior staff member of the UN Volunteers (UNV) programme in its early days, and through his stories, I learned early on that this work was about more than programmes – it was about serving people with dignity.

I have served as UN Resident Coordinator in Kenya since 2021, after nearly thirty

years of experience across international development, peacebuilding and humanitarian affairs. I have worked through post-conflict recovery in the Great Lakes, supported peacekeeping and political transitions in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, helped launch global peacebuilding strategies in New York and led UNDP in Gabon.

### Co-creating the future

The seed planted in me by my father's

passion and by volunteering itself remains central throughout my career. Volunteering, I believe, turns people from passive recipients of development into co-creators of their futures. It builds sustainable solutions because communities own them, not because they receive them.

In Kenya, I saw how volunteering shaped solutions. During the COVID-19 crisis, we mobilized 50 UN Volunteers as health workers to serve in 14 counties. They became trusted messengers and vital partners in reaching communities, accelerating both health outcomes and trust. I am equally proud of the support UN Volunteers provided to the SDG Partnership Platform in Kenya. The Platform, a flagship initiative of the UN in Kenya, is envisioned as a “one-stop shop” for development solutions. It aligns UN support with Kenya's Vision 2030, launching transformative innovations like the world's first Development Impact Bond for Adolescent Reproductive Health and catalysing \$6 billion in private sector investments to upgrade 200 public health clinics.

*Today, I look ahead with both urgency and optimism.*

### Moment of change

Today, I look ahead with both urgency and optimism. I leave Kenya at an extraordinary inflection point – speeding forward in innovation, sustainability and human development. How we turn such innovative spirit of people into progress for all depends greatly on how we harness the spirit of volunteerism. My job as UN Resident Coordinator was to channel that energy and make the UN's support greater than the sum of its parts.

Volunteering shaped me. Now, it drives how I lead UN teams – with solidarity, efficiency and hope. I am privileged to walk this path, following in my father's footsteps and helping turn the peace and development mandate of the UN into reality for people wherever I have had the opportunity to serve.



*Stephen Jackson, UN Resident Coordinator in Kenya (2021-2026), and Inger Andersen, UNEP Executive Director, during the launch of the 2022 Drought Flash Appeal in Garissa County, Kenya.*

*Photo: © UNEP*



# INVESTING IN VOLUNTEERS, INVESTING IN OUR SHARED FUTURE

**Mary Louise Eagleton**

UNICEF Representative in Mozambique



I arrived in Mozambique in November 2024, after years of working with UNICEF and other organisations across Africa, the Middle East and beyond. My journey started long ago, in Bosnia, just after the war in 1992. From there I went on to countries in North and Central Africa – Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Congo Brazzaville and Sudan. Each place taught me that when communities are strong in the spirit of volunteerism, they are stronger in every other way.

## **A unifying force**

I have seen it again and again. Where people give their time and energy freely, where young and old stand side by side in service, countries have a better chance of protecting children and building resilience. That is why I believe so deeply in volunteerism, not only as a pragmatic tool, but as a force that can hold societies together.

Here in Mozambique, that belief has only grown stronger. UNICEF works hand in hand with UN Volunteers across all our areas – health and nutrition, child protection, education and even administration. I see it in Maputo, and in

our field offices. Volunteers bring more than skills. They bring energy. They bring urgency. They bring innovation. When they walk into a room, they change the spirit of the whole workforce.

I began as a volunteer myself while still in high school. Those early steps shaped my values and gave me a sense of what it means to contribute. Later, as I advanced in my career, I saw colleagues close to retirement eager to return to volunteering. They wanted to keep supporting communities, to keep giving of themselves. Volunteerism, I believe, is not tied to age. It is a thread that can run through an entire life, connecting generations in service and wisdom.

In Mozambique, this spirit was tested recently. In Cabo Delgado, sudden violence forced 50,000 people to flee their homes. We had to respond quickly. Volunteers were already there. They knew the communities. They helped us mobilise and deliver aid when it

mattered most. Without them, the response would have been slower, less effective and more distant from the people who needed us most.

## **Through the lens of volunteering**

Volunteers also help in quieter but equally powerful ways. Earlier in my time here, I was introduced to a UN Volunteer leading our youth programme. Through him, I gained insight into the realities of young people in Mozambique: their struggles, their ambitions, their vision for the future. His voice bridged a gap for me, helping me connect UNICEF's mission with the heartbeat of the youth we serve.

These experiences remind me that the Sustainable Development Goals will not be achieved by institutions alone. The SDGs are faltering, and time is short. Volunteerism is one of the keys to reigniting progress, because it mobilises people at every level. It transforms good intentions into

concrete actions, whether that means mentoring a child in an overcrowded classroom, fixing a broken water pump or amplifying community voices in policy spaces.

In emergencies, volunteers are often the first to respond. In development, they are the ones who keep programmes alive long after the headlines fade.

For anyone wondering if volunteering is worth it, yes, it is. It is worth it for the communities that benefit. It is worth it for the institutions that grow stronger through volunteer contributions. And it is worth it for the volunteers themselves, who gain not only experience, but meaning. I believe that investing in volunteers is investing in our shared future. It is an investment in equity, in inclusion, in resilience. It is an investment in children, in communities and in the planet we all share.



*Volunteerism is one of the keys to reigniting progress, because it mobilizes people at every level.*

*Mary Louise Eagleton (left), UNICEF Representative in Mozambique, interacts with UN Volunteer with UNICEF Mozambique supporting youth engagement.  
Photo @UN Volunteers*

# A LEGACY FRAMED IN SERVICE

## Walid Badawi

Deputy Director, Bureau for External Relations & Advocacy (UNDP BERA)

My story has always been threaded through the idea of service. My grandfather signed the United Nations (UN) Charter in 1945 as Egypt's Foreign Minister and later became a judge at the International Court of Justice. My father negotiated borders between Egypt and Israel and represented my country at the United Nations. That lineage was not a trophy to display. It was a responsibility that pushed me to show up, to do more than I had been given.

### **Troubled beginnings**

My own entry into the UN was as a young tour guide at the UN Headquarters in New York. This opportunity opened a window into a vast and complex institution. Explaining the UN to visitors from around the world helped me see it from the inside – its energy, complexity and extraordinary potential. That experience set me on the path to UNDP.

*Explaining the UN to visitors from around the world helped me see it from the inside – its energy, complexity and extraordinary potential.*

The path was not straightforward by any stretch. My first international assignment as a Junior Professional Officer was made possible through a generous contribution from the Dutch Government, for which I will forever be indebted. But this funding ended rather abruptly and prematurely, leaving me in Indonesia without a job or plan. I survived by teaching squash and coaching the national team until a short consultancy turned into a series of contracts. About six years later, I landed my first fixed term staff post. Those early years taught me resilience and a lesson I still carry: perseverance and purpose matter more than titles.

### **The power of volunteers**

That same belief would guide me years later in South Africa where I saw purpose come alive through the UNV Doctors programme in Limpopo, a rural province in South Africa that then faced severe shortages of medical professionals and high maternal and child mortality.

Through the UNV programme, volunteer doctors from several countries brought skills in surgery, anaesthesia, family medicine and other specialties to hospitals that had gone months without specialists. Their presence meant shorter

hospital waiting times, safer deliveries and the return of crucial services like surgery and obstetrics to district hospitals. These doctors worked long hours under tough conditions, becoming the only specialists in some facilities and instilling a stronger work ethic among local staff.

I remember speaking with these doctors about the tough conditions in which they operated and the sacrifices they made on a daily basis to save lives. In those moments, I saw how the commitment of a few could ripple outward, protecting thousands. The volunteers were not simply supporting our work, they were leading it, carrying the UN flag into underserved communities and strengthening trust in the UN's role in improving and improving people's lives.

In Kenya, where I served as UNDP Resident Representative, the challenge was different. COVID-19 swept across the country and exposed fault-lines across various sectors. Volunteers embodied our response: filling gaps in health services across the country, driving digital innovations through the UNDP Accelerator Lab and supporting socio-economic recovery. Many were young Kenyans whose energy turned plans



into action – ensuring vulnerable groups accessed services and helping communities navigate the crisis. I will never forget watching buses depart with young doctors and health workers heading to distant counties. They carried more than protective gear – they carried hope in dark times, filling important gaps and bringing life-saving services to the hardest-hit communities.



Walid Badawi (right) together with government officials and colleagues from UNV during launch of the 2022 State of the World's Volunteerism Report in Nairobi, Kenya  
 Photo @UN Volunteers



Walid Badawi (right) interacts with a section of UN Volunteers who supported COVID-19 response in Kenya.  
 Photo @UN Volunteers

These experiences deepened my belief in building adaptable teams, embedding youth and volunteers into development responses and designing programmes with the humility to listen and the courage to change.

these lessons forward. Strategy and policy matter, but they must be anchored in people – and volunteers often show us how. They embody resilience, adaptability and courage – qualities I have sought to cultivate in my own journey, shaped by both privilege and struggle.

**Development anchored in people**

Today, in my role at UNDP's Bureau for External Relations and Advocacy, I carry

# LEADING WITH CARE AND PURPOSE

## Christine Jaulmes

UNICEF Representative in Madagascar

I began my career at UNICEF as a communications specialist. But the role was never the reason I stayed. What drew me, and what continues to anchor me, is the simple purpose of the work: helping people in need, especially children, and contributing to lives that deserve more protection, dignity and opportunity.

I often say I have been fortunate to spend my entire career at UNICEF. Not because it was easy, but because it allowed me

to live out a conviction I formed early on. Service matters. Values matter. Care, respect, integrity, trust, accountability and sustainability are not words on paper. They are daily choices. They shape how we show up for others.

### Early windows to the world

My sense of responsibility began at home. When I was a child, my parents welcomed refugees into our house. I was young, but I remember the quiet adjustments. New languages at the table. Different customs. Stories shaped by loss and resilience. Those experiences opened my eyes to the realities faced by people living through crises and displacement. They taught me empathy long before I had a name for it.

Around the same time, I had a pen friend from Madagascar. We exchanged letters, stories and small details about daily life. Long before I ever set foot in the country, Madagascar lived in my imagination. Years later, serving here feels less like arrival and more like a return.

### Leadership learned from young people

Throughout my career, my belief in people-centred leadership was shaped by working alongside young people. In many countries, I have seen youth advocates

step forward with courage, clarity and creativity. They do not wait for permission. They organise, speak up and lead on issues they care deeply about, from climate justice to education and gender equality.

Being close to that energy is grounding. It reminds me that leadership is not about directing others from above. It is about creating space. Encouraging initiative. Trusting people to lead in their own way. When people, young and old, are supported to contribute meaningfully, they do not just participate. They transform societies and inspire hope.

In Madagascar, volunteerism holds enormous potential. The challenges facing communities are complex, and no single actor can address them alone. Volunteers – especially young people – bring vital energy, creativity and deep connections to the communities they serve. When their contributions are recognised, supported and aligned with national priorities, they become a powerful force for progress. In this way, volunteers bring the UN commitment to *leaving no one behind*, to life. Volunteers reach the hardest-to-reach places, offering hope to the most remote communities.

*As leaders, we should continue modeling a society where care, service, humility and ethics are held in high regard.*

I have seen this firsthand at UNICEF Madagascar, where volunteers, including UN Volunteers, play a critical role in driving community-level change. Recently, more than 32 UN Volunteers came together under a joint project between UNICEF, UNDP and UNFPA to support peacebuilding among local communities across Madagascar. Their contributions demonstrated the power of volunteers in driving practical change and building stronger, more resilient communities.

### Service as foundation

As leaders, we should continue modelling a society where care, service, humility and ethics are held in high regard, especially for the most vulnerable members of our societies, such as children. Nelson Mandela once said that there is no clearer measure of a society's soul than how it treats its children. I hold that thought close. The way we treat the smallest reflects who we are. This quote motivates me to always do better for children in my work and



throughout my career at UNICEF.

To the young changemakers of Madagascar and beyond, your voice matters. Your actions matter. Your compassion is not a weakness. It is a strength. Keep speaking. Keep building. Keep caring. Never give up. Hold on to your ideals and aspirations and never

underestimate the power of your voice or your actions. At UNICEF and across the UN, we believe in your potential to transform communities, act for a better planet and defend the rights of every child.

Keep dreaming boldly, acting bravely and leading with heart. The world needs you now more than ever.



*Christine Jaulmes, UNICEF Representative in Madagascar interacts with children during a past event  
Photo @ UNICEF Madagascar*

*Christine Jaulmes during a past event  
Photo @ UNICEF Madagascar*

# ENGAGE UN VOLUNTEERS

UN Volunteers bring motivation, commitment and a diversity of perspectives, experiences and cultures that enrich the UN system. Follow these 5 simple steps to engage UN Volunteers. Scan the QR code below to find out more.



## 1 Host a UN Volunteer

Explore the categories of volunteers available to you, support we provide and financial arrangements.

## 2 Recruitment

Secure the best talent for your team, made easy with our support.



## 3 Transition

Process extensions, reassignment and separation through simple steps for business continuity and positive closure.

## 4 Onboarding

Set your UN Volunteers up for success through an easy 90-day plan.



## 5 Managing

Leverage best practices to support UN Volunteers reach their full potential and address workplace issues with a flair.



More information  
on UN Volunteers



## PARTNER WITH UNV

United Nations Volunteers (UNV) relies on voluntary contributions from UN Member States and funding partners. These enable UNV to promote volunteerism and deploy UN Volunteers, who assist United Nations partners in delivering on their mandates and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

**Scan the QR codes  
below to partner  
with UNV**

### **Special Voluntary Fund**

The Special Voluntary Fund (SVF) of United Nations Volunteers (UNV) is an open trust fund that helps UNV carry out its mandate and Strategic Framework. UN Member States and partners who recognize the potential of volunteerism in driving forward the Sustainable Development Goals make vital contributions to the Fund.



### **Sponsor UN Volunteers**

UNV connects Member States, UN agencies, and funding partners with UN Volunteers to address critical global challenges. Through the Full Funding programme, partners sponsor UN Volunteer assignments to contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.



### **UNV and the private sector**

At local, national and multi-national levels, growing numbers of private sector partners are joining forces with UNV through onsite and online corporate volunteering to support achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).





## CREDITS

We hope this photobook was a page-turner for you.

This publication was prepared by UN Volunteers East and Southern Africa Regional Office (UNV ESARO), under the vision and guidance of Lucy Ndungu, Regional Manager, UNV ESARO.

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*Scan to read the stories  
in this book and more.*

