

**Jennifer Stapper**

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## **United Nations Volunteers**

### **During crisis – diversity in volunteering is more important than ever**

The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme matches tens of thousands of individuals, each with a unique background and expertise, with UN Volunteer assignments in programme countries to support the work of the United Nations under the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals. In addition, UNV oversees an online volunteering service where thousands more around the world take on virtual volunteer assignments from their own homes to support sustainable development.

How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect these two types of volunteering managed by UNV? First, like in all other sectors throughout the world, the crisis called for immediate action and quick adaptability. Second, it not only brought UNV's commitment to diversity and digital transformation to the forefront, but showed that digital agility is conducive to opening up volunteer opportunities to a more diverse group of people. With support from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), UNV has engaged over the past years in a digital transformation process to better serve United Nations partners and to effectively support the delivery of the 2030 Agenda. This progress has greatly supported the organization's readiness and capacity to address new global challenges. Special analysis has also gone into assuring non-biased within the Artificial Intelligence elements of the upgraded digital candidate matching.

### **Scaling up the response to COVID-19**

With the pandemic unfolding, partners turned to UNV to help them scale up preparedness and response efforts and enhance local capacity. UNV increased recruitment of local experts through new and existing categories of volunteers, and it expanded its online volunteering programme to meet unprecedented demand.

By the end of 2020, UNV had mobilized over 1,000 UN Volunteers in 105 countries to serve with 26 United Nations entities on COVID-related assignments. Of these, 85 per cent were national UN Volunteers deployed in their own country, and 54 per cent were women. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the lead technical agency in COVID-19 socioeconomic recovery efforts, deployed the largest share of these UN Volunteers – 500 in total – in support of emergency mitigation and response measures.

## **National UN Volunteers**

Diversity is the DNA of the United Nations. UNV is no different, and continues to have the vast majority of UN Volunteers, over 80 percent, coming from the Global South. UN Volunteers taking action in the field represent over 170 countries.

Even before COVID-19, there was a long-term trend towards increased demand for national UN Volunteers. This was accelerated in 2020, in part due to international travel restrictions, and the proportion of national to international UN Volunteers grew from 46 per cent in 2019 to 56 per cent in 2020.

In 13 countries across West and Central Africa, UNV contributed to pandemic response activities at the community level. UN Volunteers reached more than 736,000 people through awareness campaigns, mask production and distribution, and supply of soap and hand-washing facilities.

In Mali, 60 volunteers with UNDP worked at the community level to raise awareness of COVID-19 transmission and protective measures, while in Liberia, 50 volunteers served as contact tracers under a joint project with UNDP, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In Niger, nine specialist UN Volunteers (epidemiologists, nurses and laboratory technicians) were deployed with the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNDP.

In the Arab States, UN Volunteers supported WHO's epidemiological teams and helped prepare refugees in Sudan for the onset of the pandemic. They provided logistical support in the delivery of humanitarian aid in Yemen and helped to counter the unequal gender impact of COVID-19 in Morocco.

Across Asia and the Pacific, 15 United Nations entities recruited or repurposed 242 UN Volunteer assignments in 24 countries to address COVID-19 related challenges. There were 109 assignments with UNDP, 34 with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and 28 with IOM, contributing capacity to community development, coordination, medicine and nursing.

## **Gender Equality and Women's Rights**

Already in 2019, half of UN Volunteers worldwide were women. Hitting gender parity was a major milestone for UNV. However, there is still a need to have more women assigned to traditional male roles and within peacekeeping. We also need to look at the hidden figures and go beyond averages to better understand and uncover intersectional and regional disparities.

For example, just like the global labour market, volunteering roles can be highly segregated. Research shows that women are more likely to volunteer for organizations in the areas of social and health services, particularly unpaid care work beyond the household, while male volunteer participants are often found in political, economic and scientific fields.

UNV recently published a [new toolkit](#) to help policymakers consider how to construct an environment for volunteering that is conducive to equal rights and opportunities for all, regardless of gender, income, ethnicity, disability, age or any other personal characteristic.

Further Information on [gender disparities among volunteers](#)

A concrete example of where UNV is also proactively recruiting women for UN Volunteer assignments is the launch of the UN Women and UNV »Young Women Leaders« Initiative.

The initiative consists of a diverse cohort of young women from the Global South who are committed to gender equality and women's empowerment and to the mission and work of the United Nations. While participating in a structured professional development programme, the participants are mentored by leaders in their respective fields of expertise. They have the opportunity to contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment and become part of a network of young leaders at UN Women.

Further information on the [»Young Women Leaders« Initiative](#)

Another example of UN Volunteers dedicated to serious gender-based issues is in Turkey. National UN Volunteers with UNDP in Turkey devote their skills to help women and girls subjected to violence access legal aid. The project »Support to the Improvement of Legal Aid Practices for Access to Justice for All in Turkey Project Phase II« (ILAP) aims to implement pilot practices for specialized legal aid services towards gender-based violence (GBV) victims, especially women and girls. The pilot practices comprise the establishment of seven Violence Prevention Centers (VPCs). Enhanced coordination is targeted between NGOs, public institutions, and bar associations to improve the legal aid system in these provinces.

Further information on the [ILAP](#)-project

### **Disability inclusion**

UNV deploys an increasing number of UN Volunteers with disabilities every year. In 2020, UNV engaged a total of 88 UN Volunteers with disabilities in the United Nations system, with support from United Nations host entities along with funding partners. We are well aware that this may not capture the full picture, because these figures only factor in those volunteers who voluntarily disclosed their disability. There are many more, serving on regular volunteer assignments. In 2020, there have been deployments of UN Volunteers with disabilities for the first time in Burkina Faso and Egypt, Guatemala and Nigeria, North Macedonia and Timor-Leste, to name just a few.

Not only are the currently serving UN Volunteers deployed in 36 countries across all regions, they are also engaged with 17 different UN entities. Many UN host entities have a close relationship with the UN Partnership for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD), which further strengthens UNV's contribution to leaving no one behind.

Our volunteers with disabilities serve in 50 different technical and thematic areas, ranging from human rights, inclusion and diversity, via projects and operations, partnerships and communications, human resources and law, to climate change and engineering, medical care and education. 51 per cent of them are women and 65 per cent come from the Global South. Related to our strengthened outreach, the number of candidates with disabilities registered in the global UNV Talent Pool is growing. In addition, about three per cent of our Online Volunteers have self-declared a disability.

UNV is also partnering with the Governments of Germany (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development – BMZ) and Sweden (Sida) to further increase opportunities for national UN Volunteers with disabilities in 2021.

Further information on [volunteers with disabilities](#)

### **Volunteering at any age**

The average global age of UN Volunteers is 32 years – but James and Carmen Haddows can attest to the many benefits their presence brings both to the United Nations missions they serve, and to themselves as older volunteers. Rather than spending their retirement years in quiet relaxation, the Haddows, both from the United Kingdom, chose to share their lifetime of expertise as UN Volunteers with United Nations missions. Both in their 70s, they are currently serving as UN Volunteers: James as an Electoral Logistics Specialist with the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), and Carmen as Administrative Officer, Human Resources, Training and UNV Support, with the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

James served in the military, before finding his way to the UNV programme over two decades ago, in 1999. Prior to his current role as Electoral Logistics Specialist with UNSOM, James served as a UN Volunteer with the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). Carmen, a former UN staff member, was approaching her retirement age when, through her former boss, she discovered an opportunity to continue contributing to global peace and development as a UN Volunteer with UNAMA.

Rudolf Maulany, UN Volunteer medical doctor in South Sudan, just can't get enough of UN volunteering on the international stage. Dr. Maulany and his wife Lisbetty, who is also a medical doctor, and whose UN Volunteer experience equals that of her husband, have opted for a return to the action, making them quite the unique couple.

Hardly surprising, Rudolf Maulany highly recommends anyone to give volunteering for the UN a chance and has even handily summarized his top three pieces of advice for aspiring do-gooders: »Make your dream come true, keep improving yourself continuously and enjoy your life.«

### **Online Volunteering**

The UNV online volunteering service allows organizations and volunteers to team up to address sustainable development challenges – anywhere in the world, from any device. Online

volunteering is fast, easy – and most of all, effective. When skilled, passionate individuals join forces online with great organizations working toward sustainable development goals, everyone wins.

Technology development, outreach and advocacy, art and design, teaching and training and, most recently, COVID-19 response, are only a few possibilities for volunteers to engage virtually.

UNV received a high number of applications for the 320 online COVID-19 related assignments posted in 2020. Online volunteering opportunities increased by 133 per cent from 2019, with United Nations entities putting forward a total of 1,240 online assignments. UNV partners sourced expertise in areas such as translation, graphic design and information management, primarily for community outreach and advocacy. UNV's worldwide reach to highly motivated professionals unlocked significant capacity for partners and resulted in unprecedented online volunteer engagement.

In Sudan, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) used Online Volunteers to translate 20,000 names of schools, enabling the effective planning of education programmes by UNICEF and the Ministry of Education.

Online Volunteers with the UNDP Pacific Accelerator Lab in Fiji visualized pandemic-related data to inform the health system and crisis management responses. Online Volunteers also modelled the impact of COVID-19 on Small Island Developing States, leading to innovative solutions and interventions.

Further information on [Online Volunteering](#)

### **Diversity – SDG 10 and UNV**

COVID-19 has deepened existing inequalities, hitting the poorest and most vulnerable communities the hardest. It has put a spotlight on economic inequalities and fragile social safety nets that leave vulnerable communities to bear the brunt of the crisis. At the same time, social, political and economic inequalities have amplified the impacts of the pandemic. Accordingly, especially [Sustainable Development Goal 10](#) – reduced inequalities within and among countries – has become even more urgent.

In conclusion, the push in volunteering, due to the pandemic, has brought more diversity than ever before in volunteering for the United Nations. UNV strives to continue being as inclusive as possible in all of its initiatives – and especially in the current vaccine roll-outs and post-COVID recovery. It is only together, with our partners and UN Volunteers, that we can achieve diversity in all its strength and leave no one behind.

## **Autorin**

*Jennifer Stapper* is Communication Specialist and Global Communications Team lead at the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme.

**Kontakt:** [jennifer.stapper@unv.org](mailto:jennifer.stapper@unv.org) and [@UNVenture](https://twitter.com/UNVenture) (Twitter)

## **Redaktion**

BBE-Newsletter für Engagement und Partizipation in Deutschland

Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement (BBE)

Michaelkirchstr. 17/18

10179 Berlin

Tel: +49 30 62980-115

[newsletter@b-b-e.de](mailto:newsletter@b-b-e.de)

[www.b-b-e.de](http://www.b-b-e.de)