

United Nations Volunteers (UNV)

»Leave no one behind« - Inclusive Volunteering for Peace and Development with the UN Volunteers Service



In order to »leave no one behind«, persons with disabilities themselves, from all over the world, can get involved as active citizens to support development and peace worldwide. The ›United Nations Development Programme‹ (UNDP) and the ›United Nations Volunteers‹ (UNV) programme have jointly launched a ›Talent Programme for Young Professionals with Disabilities‹ to turn this into reality. This article gives an insight into the Talent Programme, shows what has been reached already through this initiative and shares an inspiring best practice example from the first volunteer with disability serving through this programme.

United Nations Volunteers

The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme contributes to peace and development through volunteerism worldwide. UNV works with partners to integrate qualified, highly motivated and well supported UN Volunteers into development programming and promote the value and global recognition of volunteerism. UNV champions environments in which volunteerism can flourish. It pushes for the ability and right of people to participate in their own development. Volunteers are mobilized to serve in UN agencies, both in development programmes and peacekeeping operations.

UNV is administered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). UNDP works in about 170 countries and territories, helping to achieve the eradication of poverty, and the reduction of inequalities and exclusion. The agency helps countries to develop policies, leadership skills, partnering abilities, institutional capabilities and build resilience in order to sustain development results.

Talent Programme on Inclusion of Young Professional with Disabilities

»Young people with disabilities from the global South are among the most marginalized and underrepresented populations in the world. We must recognize that they can be fundamental drivers for innovation and change.« (Lykke Andersen, Manager of the UNDP Junior Professional Officer Service Centre)

With a commitment to diversity, inclusion and leaving no one behind, UNDP and UNV are implementing a Talent Programme for Young Professionals with Disabilities. This programme was launched in 2018. It aims to increase the inclusion of persons with disabilities into the workforce of the development sector and to build a talent pipeline of highly qualified professionals with disabilities who can contribute to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at national and global levels.

The programme offers young people with disabilities the opportunity to acquire practical work experience and exposure to the work of the UN Development System through assignments with country, regional or headquarters offices of UNDP and other UN entities. UNDP-UNV identify relevant assignments and select applicants. Programme participants and host offices benefit from dedicated support, guidance and professional development opportunities as part of the programme.

The duration of assignments is 12 months with a possibility of extension for 6-12 months. Participants are deployed as national UN Volunteers (in their home country) or international UN Volunteers (assignments outside of their home country). Initially the programme focuses on engaging professionals with physical and sensory disabilities and with a particular focus on women with disabilities.

Learning and professional development is an integral part of all assignments. It is expected that through participation in the programme, young professionals will gain greater knowledge and experience in thematic areas related to the SDGs, including development and implementation of programmes and projects, operation management, partnership building and UN coordination.

Being better equipped with relevant competencies, skills and professional experience will enable participants to be more competitive in the labour market and strengthen their ability to explore employment opportunities with the UN System and a career in the broader development cooperation sector.

The programme is implemented in two phases: (1) a pilot phase with up to 10 participants deployed primarily in UNDP offices globally, and (2) a scaling-up phase during which the programme will be expanded to cover a larger number of participants and offices, as well a larger number of UN agencies.

The Programme is administered jointly by the UNDP Office of Human Resources and UNV. It is being implemented in partnership with interested governments, private sector organizations, foundations, and disabled peoples' organizations. A special fund has been established to cover the costs of reasonable accommodation for the participants and host offices.

Story of the first UN Volunteer with disability through the Talent Programme

Kasunjith Satanarachchi is the first UN Volunteer with disability who serves through the Talent Programme of Young Professionals with Disabilities. He is currently with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Sri Lanka under its Youth Lead programme.

»From my younger days, I had three dreams. One of them was to have the opportunity to work as a part of the UN system. Through the Youth Lead programme, I have now been able to achieve this.« (UN Volunteer Kasunjith Satanarachchi).

28-year-old Kasunjith Satanarachchi, sits back and reminisces about the long journey to get to this point. Kasunjith has cerebral palsy and while the majority of persons with disabilities living in Sri Lanka choose not to pursue their studies, he was determined to prove everyone wrong.

Coming from a town in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka, he completed his studies from Grade 1 to Grade 11. These 11 years in school were not the easiest. Kasunjith had to go through constant bullying and rude comments from his teachers. One experience that he vividly remembers, was an instance when the sectional head of the school spoke to his parents. He had asked them why they were wasting their time and money trying to educate their child, who would be better off just at home. The majority of Sri Lankan schools are not equipped and lack training to teach children with disabilities.

But still he persisted. He enrolled himself to an advanced level school and completed his studies by passing the Advanced Level examination with excellent results. With these results, he had the opportunity of entering the university to study Law which he obtained after 3 years of hard work.

»I do not expect much from people, but my only wish is to always look for ways in which I can contribute to society.« (UN Volunteer Kasunjith Satanarachchi)

This was the start of greater things to come. Kasunjith was part of the Youth Parliament of Sri Lanka from 2016-2017, where he was the Deputy Minister of International Affairs and the Representative for persons living with disabilities. He then worked as the youth focal point for a Disability Rights Organization for 3 years and also has experience working as a research intern at a leading law firm. His articles in Sinhala and English have been featured in national newspapers. It was during this period that he was fortunate to receive the opportunity to visit the Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland.

When Kasunjith saw the advertisement for the »Talent Programme for Young Professionals with Disabilities«, he completely dismissed the possibility of him being able to qualify for the position. It was his friend who prompted him to apply for the vacancy. »I couldn't believe it when I got the callback for an interview« Kasunjith shares. From then on, everything else just fell into place.

Kasunjith as a part of his assignment has worked on mapping the disability sector, the Comprehensive Youth Development Programme, accessibility of the UN Compound in Colombo and is working closely with colleagues working with the Governance and Peacebuilding portfolio of UNDP. He is proud to be the first person with disabilities in Asia to be working with UNDP as a part of this programme. His teammates describe him as a »passionate individual who does not give up«.

Kasunjith hopes to go on and complete a Masters in Disability studies and continue to be an advocate for the rights of persons living with disabilities in Sri Lanka.

»I have achieved two out of three dreams in life. I hope to one day participate at the UN General Assembly and bring to light the importance of inclusion, accessibility and continue to work towards leaving no one behind.« (UN Volunteer Kasunjith Satanarachchi)

Summary

Kasunjith is just one volunteer out of the growing group of persons with disabilities serving worldwide through a UN Volunteers Service. Since the launch of the Talent Programme for Young Professionals with Disabilities, the number of candidates with disabilities who signed up and applied for a UN Volunteers Service increased enormously. Not all stories need to be as outstanding as the one from Kasunjith, nevertheless all are outstandingly impacting on the life of the volunteers with disabilities and on peace and development initiatives they support as UN Volunteers worldwide.

»Inclusion of persons with disabilities is one of the biggest human rights issues of our time. Persons with disabilities experience inequalities, as well as stigma, abuse and prejudice. UNV will work in partnership with UNDP to establish a solid foundational structure for scalable engagement of youth with disabilities in the United Nations. We aspire to bring in new talents to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.« (Toily Kurbanov, UNV Deputy Executive Coordinator)

Are you interested in participating in the Talent Programme for Young Professionals with Disabilities or in receiving more information about the programme, kindly let us know

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