

Expecting the unexpected: A year with WHO as a UN Volunteer Communications Specialist



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In early 2021, a group of dedicated communications specialists joined 7 WHO Country Offices in different corners of the WHO European Region. But they were not just any skilled communicators – they all joined their WHO Country Office teams through the United Nations Volunteer programme (UNV), administered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

When Aidana Yergaliyeva (Kazakhstan), Dayanch Hojageldiyev (Turkmenistan), Malika Djalalova (Uzbekistan), Sara Kajevikj (North Macedonia), Parandzem Paryan (Armenia), Faris Mahmutovic (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Rusudan Khotivari (Georgia) joined their teams, many countries faced – and still face – difficult COVID-19 situations. But that didn't scare them off. Some of them already had first-hand experience of the virus: Malika Djalalova, Communications Specialist for the Country Office in Uzbekistan, became infected with the novel coronavirus only 2 weeks after applying for the position. "It was indeed a bit ironic," she says. "But on a positive note, the research I did on COVID-19 while being ill was really valuable for my job. Joining WHO during pandemic times only made the job more interesting. I was thrilled."

The 'UNV dream team', their alias, quickly had to get their heads wrapped around WHO technical terminology on various health-related topics, and the European Programme of Work 2020–2025, 'United Action for Better Health in Europe' – WHO Europe's vision and roadmap for better health for all citizens in the Region. On top of terminology, the COVID-19 restrictions were an additional challenge.

"When I started, everyone was working remotely because of COVID-19 restrictions," says Parandzem Paryan, a Communications Specialist in Armenia. "I did not meet my colleagues in-person until 6 months after having started, so internal communications were sometimes

more challenging than external, but my team was great and so supportive, as was the contact with the WHO head office in Copenhagen.”

In the beginning, some of the UNVs faced misconceptions about their skills due to the so-called volunteer label.

“The UN Volunteer programme offers such a great opportunity for professionals to gain invaluable experience in working in the UN system,” explains Faith Vorting, Senior Communications Adviser in the Regional Director’s Division (RDD), who spearheaded the UNV recruitment pilot. “To be eligible as a UNV, candidates’ resumes need to show strong experience, and they have to pass competitive application processes. Throughout the year, they provided crucial communications support to country offices that were lacking dedicated communications staff, and quickly became part of the broader Region-wide communications team.”

All UNV communications specialists have been working strategically to increase both the visibility of their WHO Country Office and the presence of public health issues in national headlines.

“The strategic part is what I’ve enjoyed the most; increasing visibility, making sure our messages are heard, and strengthening our network with the national media landscape,” says Sara Kajevikj, a Communications Specialist in North Macedonia.

She is echoed by Faris Mahmutovic, a Communications Specialist in Bosnia and Herzegovina. “The biggest success was to progressively see the Country Office’s visibility and presence in the media increase, and how the risk communication and community engagement projects directly impacted COVID-19 vaccination promotion.”

For Rusudan Khotivari, a Communications Specialist in Georgia, one of the highlights was the WHO report on financial protection, issued in July 2021. “The report was rather technical. Our work to translate complicated terminology into language that would be easily understood by a larger audience definitely paid off,” Rusudan explains. “The report talks about the impact and burden of high out-of-pocket costs for ordinary people seeking health care, and it got huge media coverage and resonance among the public, influencers and politicians.”

Aidana Yergaliyeva, a Communications Specialist in Kazakhstan, decided to complement outreach to the general public, and children in particular, through a COVID-19 awareness-raising product outside the ordinary. Together with her colleagues, the idea of a comic book was born. The book, called 'White Capes: fighting the invisible' – a story about scientist-superheroes fighting COVID-19 – is set to be published during the first quarter of 2022.

Knowing no 2 days are ever the same is something Aidana has hugely appreciated during her time with the Country Office. One day, as she was out practicing photography techniques, she happened to take a few pictures of an Akita Inu dog.

"I showed the owner of the dog my photos", says Aidana. "This resulted in them being part of an exhibition, widely covered by media, and raising awareness on stray dogs and animal rights in Kazakhstan. The exhibit was visited by the Senate's working team that was drafting new legislation on responsible treatment of animals – which is of course linked to zoonotic diseases. So, maybe I have not only contributed to health awareness, but also animal rights!"

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