

By Jeje Muhinde;

At seven sharp on a Monday morning, Elie Nizeyimana dressed in a visible green with reflecting stripes bib is standing at the main entrance of the University of Rwanda's College of Education in Rukara, a small village in Eastern Rwanda.

Nizeyimana glances back and forth at everyone coming into the university campus, he stands there to make sure everyone is wearing a facemask, clean hands with water or sanitizer and take temperature tests before entering.

The 24-year-old is one of the 30 college youth volunteers at this campus who have been assigned to remind and advice people around to observe preventative and protective health measures against coronavirus.

"I joined the youth volunteer community this year to safeguard our communities and my fellow students from coronavirus by advising them to respect safety measures that have been setup" Nizeyimana explains his role.



Elie Nizeyimana

Youth volunteers joined Rwanda's law enforcement agencies including the Police in encouraging the public to obey the rules.

Clad in luminous green jackets, the volunteers are stationed at various urban centres especially in areas where there is a large concentration of people, in places such as bus stations and parks, markets and road intersections, trading centres among others.

Nizeyimana works the morning shift from 8 am to 2 pm. But most importantly he expects no personal reward but understands the need for people to follow and respect COVID-19 preventive measures.

"We fight misinformation by sharing lifesaving facts, our work involves distribution of hygiene kits like sanitizers to washing stations at the college and to ensure that face masks must be worn in all university buildings." He explains.

Temperature screening

The volunteers also raise awareness using their social media platforms about good

hygiene, social distancing and they too help other students to overcome feelings of inertia.

If anyone's temperature screening is high or shows mild symptoms, Nizeyimana and his colleagues immediately inform the standby health team stationed at campus, which handles the case thereafter.



Last year, the college just like other universities and schools was put under lockdown because of the surge in virus cases among students. In November, more than 200 students were quarantined after testing positive with mild coronavirus symptoms, the main cause was failure to social distance in lecture rooms.

Nowadays, students' perceptions as regards guidelines have changed thanks to volunteers, Nizeyimana says that everyone is washing their hands and wearing masks before entering a lecture room.

As government continued to further strengthen measures and sometimes establish new ones, volunteers help in communicating and guiding people to adapt to the new measures.

Still, with such measures in place, these volunteers are ensuring a significant role for the population to remain alert and informed about changing outbreak conditions, including community spread of virus, testing availability, and control measures accordingly.

Awareness campaigns

Some people in the public are reluctant to take up health guidelines, a reason why having volunteers stationed in public venues is helping the authorities to clamp down on offenders hence saving time and resources.

The youth volunteer programme in Rwanda was initiated in 2013 by 50 members, today it has seen more than 415,000 fellows join. The City of Kigali alone has over 43,000 active volunteers involved in different voluntary programs.

Positive change in the community

The volunteers include unemployed graduates, students, non-students, others are

members with jobs but find time for community services.

They are engaged in different community awareness campaigns like fighting malnutrition, human and drug trafficking, malaria, building houses for homeless and before Covid-19 restrictions would meet every month for a community work-Umuganda.

According to a report conducted by the youth group, since 2013 they have built 113 houses and 200 toilets for the vulnerable people, a project valued at Rwf 693 million. They are creating a positive change in communities.

Those under the coronavirus awareness programme are stationed in public places like main roads, pathways, on entrances to markets, schools and bus stations.

“We work with local authorities and police at the district, sector, and cell level. We’re given protective gear on top of training and capacity building lessons on particular tasks before being deployed” Joseph Mugabo, a student volunteer in Rwamagana district points out.

Emmanuel Ntakimirimbo another youth volunteer from the Eastern province says it is their duty to engage and make a difference when it comes to the civic duty of sensitizing the public about Covid-19. “We also think we have to play a role when it comes to building and development of our communities and societies,” Ntakimirimbo says.



Emmanuel Ntakimirimbo

As frontline workers in the fight against the pandemic some have been affected in their line of duty and got infected with Covid-19 while others have gotten into fights with community members.

Masudi Nduwayezu, who works at Rukara community centre, says that he contracted the virus last year and was told to self-isolate for two-weeks. Having recovered from the disease, the 29-year-old resolved to continue volunteering. “Some people in the public just intentionally don’t want to listen; we always come across people who deliberately decide to take off their face mask in public, and when you ask them why, they claim the mask as an inconvenience,” he says.

“It is not easy to deal with people since most come from different backgrounds,”

Nduwayezu adds, “Some people are respectful while others are defiant. They don’t even listen when you remind them politely to keep a social distance in queues, sometimes we are obliged to call security personnel to intervene.”

“In most cases we’re sympathetic, we give a warning and try to educate people to abide by the health protective measures,” he points out.

“The job demands a lot of sacrifice without expecting any direct reward but we try to put our hearts into it to the benefit of our community,” he observes.

Facemask covering in public

Some of the volunteers claim that they at times burnout because of standing on dusty roadside under the sunshine for several hours. For student volunteers combining both studies and voluntary work is hectic especially during examination period.

Annet Mushimiyinana, a resident in Rwamagana commends youth volunteers for the hard work they are doing. She says that there is a change compared with the past.

She notes that volunteers have been more recognizable during the pandemic because they help you like customer care providers to put you in queues, kindly remind to wear your facemask and give you directions.



“I believe without them, the carelessness of people would have led to high rise in coronavirus cases in Rwanda like we have seen in other countries,” she observes.

Fred Mugabo, who works near Rukara campus observes that the pandemic has shown us how to better put to use the youth because they have done good work to support the community in dealing with coronavirus.

The resources that the youth volunteers have could not have been mobilized easily through other ways, Mugabo is convinced even the security agencies would not afford to deploy as the youth volunteers have deployed in different places.

He says that the youth volunteers explain health guidelines politely and in a language everybody understands. They help people understand the preventive

measures even too those that are not able to follow what is required through media platforms

On the other hand, some people claim that volunteers have also turned out to be informants to police and authorities which they despise.

Grace Ingabire, a shopkeeper in Kayonza underlines, “Some volunteers’ take-up the job in their own hands henceforth up being hated in communities. We have witnessed them fighting with pedestrians.”

With the pandemic fight still a stretch out; more serious and practical issues are likely to emerge which youth volunteers may or may not be equipped to deal with.

Volunteering

Youth Volunteers work in partnership with the City of Kigali and Rwanda National Police. The programme was founded in 2013 with the aim to engage the youth in the fight against corruption and other vices like drugs.

Eric Bayisenge, the Secretary General of Youth Volunteers in Rwanda acknowledges the group is doing some good work, while facing hiccups.

“Yes, there are challenges in the work that we do, for instance mobilizing the youth is an issue since most of them tend to ask how they will be facilitated, yet it is a voluntary job. Transport is another concern, if management is to travel countrywide especially during the lockdown period we don’t have an operational budget.” He explains.



Eric Bayisenge, the Secretary General of Youth Volunteers in Rwanda

Few youth volunteers were able to be vaccinated against coronavirus leaving a big number still exposed to virus infections.

Some volunteers like Nduwayezu claim that transport is one of the major impediments to work, many have to walk long distances from their homes, first to convening centres usually at sector office before starting their work.

To try and solve some of these problems, government ordered districts to come up

with budgets so that the volunteers can be facilitated in order to perform their duties.

Bayisenge is confident with time; such problems will be resolved, "Already districts have mobilized resources to provide volunteers with some money for transport and airtime as well as sanitizers."