

Interview with a former UN Volunteer Specialist, currently working as Associate Expert (AssEx) in New York

This young professional talked to cinfo about his mission as UN Volunteer Specialist, about leaving his stable job in Switzerland for a 2 to 3 years' assignment as Associate Expert and about future plans. He also shared some useful tips for young professionals aiming at applying for a UNV Specialist position.

Our interviewee is 33 years old and has a Master's degree in Law. In 2008, he went on mission as UN Volunteer Specialist with MINUSTAH (United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti). After one year he decided to go back to Switzerland and took up a new position as team manager at a Department of the Canton of Zurich. Within only four years he got promoted twice: first to Deputy Head of Section and last year to Head of Section. By the end of 2013 his application for an HSD-funded AssEx position was successful and he left his job in Switzerland in order to take up this new challenge.

What do you believe made your application for the UN Volunteer Specialist position with MINUSTAH in Haiti successful?

Directly after obtaining my Master's degree in 2007, I went to Ecuador, where I applied for a 6 months' internship at the MIDUVI (Ministry of Development and Habitat of Ecuador) consultancy of UNDP/UNHABITAT (United Nations Human Settlements Programme). Consequently, I obtained another internship at the Peace and Development Programme (PDP) of UNDP, also in Ecuador. Young graduates looking for similar opportunities I recommend to search and apply on site – in most countries there are UN agencies and representation offices. Of course you cannot expect to obtain an exciting AND paid position. However, I believe that this first field experience with two UN agencies, besides my academic qualifications, helped me obtain my UN Volunteer Specialist position. By the way: I only learnt about the latter via cinfo's UNV Outreach Mission.

Tell us more about your UN Volunteer Specialist mission. What were your main tasks?

I was assigned Coordination Officer at the Joint Operations Center (JOC) of MINUSTAH. The JOC coordinates the mission's joint operations and acts as the crisis management center during conflicts and humanitarian crisis. I managed the operations room, supervised respective JOC units, monitored and reported on development, humanitarian, security and other relevant activities of the Mission and acted as operational and situational communications focal point for MINUSTAH. After half a year my position changed and I became a Strategic Analyst with the Joint Mission Analysis Centre (JMAC). One of my tasks was to analyse, assess and report on the country's security, political and socioeconomical developments in order to make long-term predictions.

What did you find most challenging during your mission?

My first assignment as UN Volunteer Specialist was very interesting, especially because I had the chance to carry out two different functions. However, the beginning was a bit challenging, as a Coordination Officer I worked in shifts. This wasn't indicated in my TORs. Further, settling down in an unknown country is not easy – especially when you have to start work immediately and at the same time have to handle all administrative issues, such as housing, on your own. For me this wasn't a problem though, I got used to the situation after a short time.

You liked being on a field mission. Why go back to your home country after one year?

Working for one year in a peace-keeping mission is tough and I couldn't maintain a healthy work-life balance. What had a greater impact on this decision was the fact that I hadn't gained any professional experience in Switzerland yet – I think it's important to have a second foothold, especially when working in international cooperation (IC). The job at the Canton of Zurich was appealing to me, because it involved a lot legal affairs. I was able to develop my legal experience and to take a lot of responsibility as team manager.

Four years later you were promoted to Head of Section. Why leave your secure position in Switzerland and apply for the exciting, but challenging assignment as Associate Expert?

I have always been interested in elections and election support and their link to politics. These are the topics I now work on. Further, I had already some previous experience in conflict prevention from my first internship with UNDP in Ecuador and from a short assignment with Swisspeace. I absolutely wanted to go work abroad again and the fact that this position was at UN headquarters, where you have a global overview on several UN activities in this area, made it even more attractive. Why, you ask, would I ever leave a stable position in Switzerland? Because for me, the UN is the only organisation that addresses such a wide range of global problems to such an extent. Having people from different parts of the world, with different backgrounds working together on these important issues makes it an even more attractive employer.

Where do you see yourself in the future?

As I only started my new assignment some weeks ago, I will now focus on that. In the long-term I would like to keep on working in international cooperation. Of course it would be great if I could further develop my career in the United Nations, but I do not want to lose the relation to the Swiss job market. It would be great to have my homebase in Switzerland.

Interview: Gabriela Müller, cinfo, January 2014