

Swiss UN Volunteers: High retention rates in IC and the UN

Between 2002 and 2013, more than 260 Swiss nationals were active worldwide as UN Volunteers. An evaluation by cinfo examines the effects of a first mission as a UN Volunteer on retention in international cooperation (IC) and the United Nations (UN). Results are exciting: Two years after their mission, 87% of Swiss former UN Volunteers are working in IC – more than 30% of these with the UN. A summary of the results.

In 2001 the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the United Nations Volunteers Programme (UNV) and cinfo established a partnership focusing on increasing the chances for young Swiss professionals of joining UN agencies and international organisations Switzerland considers particularly relevant to development. With an eye to exploring the effects of a mission as a UN Volunteer on short- and medium-term career decisions, cinfo conducted an evaluation of Swiss former UN Volunteers who served as UN Volunteer Interns or Specialists between 2002 and 2013. The results are encouraging, not only for UNV, but also for the Swiss government, cinfo and Swiss young professionals aiming to start a career in IC and particularly with the UN.

Main host organisations

While 55% of Swiss UN Volunteers Interns¹ work with UNDP and the rest with other agencies, funds or programmes in a development context (e. g. UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM), 45% of UN Volunteers Specialists are assigned to peacekeeping or humanitarian-aid missions. Generally, DPKO, followed by DPA, are the two UN entities with the largest number of international staff in a host country. In general, in the context of certain peacekeeping or peace-building operations, UN Volunteers Specialists comprise up to 33% of mission personnel.

Most valuable aspect of a mission: field experience

The majority of Swiss former UN Volunteers stressed the gain of field experience, knowledge of the UN system in general and the entity they worked for in particular as being most important and valuable to them. Also appreciated was the opportunity to create a personal and professional network.

«It is a MUST for anyone who wants to work in international cooperation»

UN Volunteer Intern 2007

The end of a mission: what next?

UN Volunteers assignments do not automatically lead to an appointment with the host agency and offer no medium-term job prospects. Thus, former volunteers must apply for professional positions or work as consultants under an appointment of limited duration. Though competition is fierce, motivation remains high: 21% of all UN Volunteers Interns and 44% of all UN Volunteers Specialists continue working for the UN immediately after their initial assignment, often as consultants or UN Volunteer Specialists.

Two years later

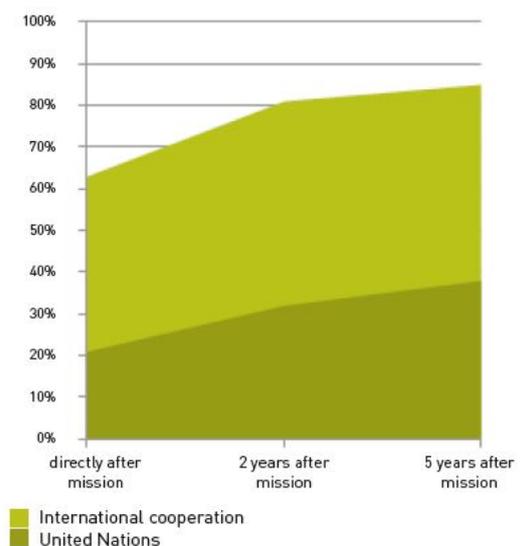
Of all Swiss former UN Volunteers still engaged in development two years after their first mission, almost half of them are within the UN system, mainly with UN regional commissions or at the UN Secretariat. The rest is mainly employed by the Swiss government, the private sector and Swiss NGOs. Others are not immediately active in the area of IC for different reasons. However, since a large portion of these persons intend to return to IC or work within the UN system one day, what they do in the interim is related at least peripherally to IC.

¹ In 2013 the title of the UNV Internship Programme was changed to UN Youth Volunteers Programme. Ever since UN Volunteers Interns are referred to as UN Youth Volunteers.

The big picture: retention in IC and the UN

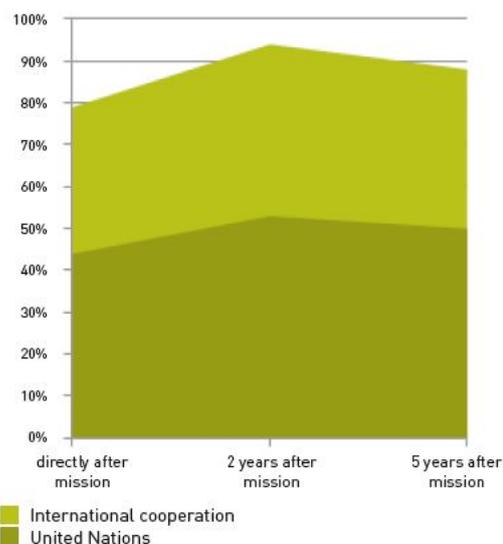
Although results for the sample group of UN Volunteers still engaged in IC or working with the UN five years after their first mission must be interpreted with some caution, there is a positive correlation between the time-period between the conclusion of a UNV mission and the number of persons still active in IC or working with the UN.

Graph 8
Retention: UN Volunteers Interns in IC and UN



Source: Survey «UN Volunteers – moving forward» (n= 73)

Graph 9
Retention: UN Volunteers Specialists in IC and UN



Source: Survey «UN Volunteers – moving forward» (n= 34)

What does the future hold?

Nearly all former UN Volunteers currently active in IC see themselves continuing to work in this area in the medium term, and almost 80% wish to somehow return to the UN system. Approximately 20% of all respondents no longer work in the area of IC. But nearly all of them would like to do so again.

«An assignment as UN Volunteer Intern is a unique experience. It gave me an idea of development work and the UN and helped me decide whether to stay in the IC sector or not.»

UN Volunteer Intern 2007

Conclusion

The evaluation has confirmed the expected outcomes of Switzerland's funding of UN Volunteers Internship assignments and of conducting outreach activities for UN Volunteers Specialists. This investment is part of a talent-management initiative whose impact is felt far beyond the UN. However, from a career perspective, the first two years after an assignment as UN Volunteer are critical, and young professionals must take into consideration the challenges of a career in IC very early on. cinfo contributes substantially to helping UN Volunteers better evaluate and consider the career options open to them after their mission.