

Interview with Sabina Stein, former UN Youth Volunteer

«Helping to make those voices heard at the negotiating table was an incredibly humbling experience.»

Preselected by cinfo for a UN Youth Volunteer position funded by the Swiss Government, two years ago Sabina Stein was chosen and started her first professional field experience. Now working as an Associate Political Affairs Officer for the United Nations in New York, Sabina remembers and shares with us her feelings and experiences as a volunteer for UNDP in Colombia.



Name: **Sabina Stein**

Age: 30 years

Education: M.A. in Comparative & International Studies in ETH, Zurich.

Professional experience:

Associate Political Affairs Officer (JPO) with MSU, New York (2016–current). Previously working as Political Officer (2015–2016), and Associate Political Affairs Officer (UNYV) with UNDP in Colombia (2014–2015).

What motivated you to work in international cooperation?

Growing up in Geneva played a role; the city's humanitarian values and history marked me as did meeting people devoted to international service. At a more fundamental level, however, I believe it is a deep-seated aversion to conflict, violence and exclusion that drives me. I feel that anything that can be done to counteract such forces, no matter how small, is always worth it.

...And to apply for a UN Youth Volunteer position?

At the time I was working at the Centre for Security Studies (CSS) in Zurich, in the field of mediation and conflict resolution. I was looking for an opportunity to get closer to a peace process, in order to better understand how third parties could try to support them. I was lucky that the first round of UN Youth Volunteer recruitment included a position with the United Nations in Colombia, where a historic peace process is underway. It was an opportunity I did not want to miss; it was one of those rare moments in the field of conflict resolution when you could be at the right place at the right time.

What did a typical day or week look like?

I was working as an Associate Political Affairs Officer in the Office of the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator. Work in our team was intense, fast-paced and ever-changing. We had to constantly react to developments on the ground as well as in Havana, where peace negotiations are unfolding. My main tasks centred on political analysis, communications and outreach related to the peace process. The public voice of the UN was important in a country

divided over the peace process. There was also a great deal of coordination with colleagues from across the UN system, to make sure we had a common analysis and coherent message on peace. I was also involved in helping coordinate direct UN support to the peace process, for example, through the organization of civil society forums on the peace process, and in facilitating an internal reflection process on what the peacebuilding role of the UN should be in a post-agreement scenario.

What were the differences between how you imagined this experience and the reality?

The gap between what I imagined and what I experienced was considerable, and in a positive sense. I hesitated a lot before taking the UN Youth opportunity; I had a good job in Zurich, with wonderful colleagues and interesting work. I worried that in the Youth Volunteer programme I would not have sufficient responsibilities. It ended up being the complete opposite. Never have I had such an intense and enriching learning experience. The work was challenging and, to me, meaningful. I felt valued in my team and I was able to learn a lot from my supervisors and colleagues.

As a UN Youth Volunteer, what are the biggest challenges you had to face? How did you deal with them?

The biggest challenge was knowing that it would all be over in one year. I was already worried about this before departure: "Only one year? Is it worth it? Will I be able to contribute something?" It is only after a year that you begin to feel more confident in your understanding of the context, its dynamics and actors, and, hence, of your ability to contribute meaningfully. The only thing I could think of was how to stay. I worked hard and tried to create opportunities to remain by talking to colleagues both in the UN and the Swiss Foreign Ministry. I was very fortunate as I was able to stay for a second year through the FDFA's Swiss Expert Pool. At the same time, I am aware that these opportunities are not always available, and it is important to prepare early on for the next step. A year goes by very quickly!

Can you describe your most striking experience during this year in the field?

It is a hard question, because there were so many. A particularly memorable one, however, was being part of the UN team that helped organize five delegations of conflict victims that travelled to Havana. The inclusion of victim voices in the Colombian peace process was highly significant in a country where armed conflict has generated more than 7 million victims. We worked with national partners to select and accompany 60 individuals whose experience would shed light on the daily suffering of ordinary Colombians. Individuals who had lost loved ones, who had been recruited as child combatants, who had been subjected to the horrors of sexual violence, and who had lost their land and home in the wake of war. Helping to make those voices heard at the negotiating table was an incredibly humbling experience. I felt like history was being made.

How did you feel at the end of this experience? Was there a sense of uncertainty about your next steps in the international cooperation world?

My time in Colombia made me more certain of wanting a future in international cooperation, in particular in the field of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. It also made me more hopeful of the possibility of positive change, even after so many decades of violence and hate. Finally, the experience made me more confident about myself as a professional able to bring value to a team and to continuously learn from her surroundings.

You are now a JPO in New York. Do you feel a certain continuity between your work as a UN youth volunteer and your work today?

There is a certain 'red thread' connecting my time at the CSS, my experience in Colombia and this new position. In New York, I work in the Policy and Mediation Division of the UN's Department of Political Affairs. There I am part of a team – the Mediation Support Unit - that seeks to provide operational and technical support to UN and external partners involved in mediation efforts. The two years in Colombia allowed me to study a peace process from up close, to become more aware of the challenges and the unpredictability of developments, and to better understand what third party actors, including the UN, countries such as Switzerland and civil society can do to try support a negotiation process. I hope that experience will better equip me to try to support mediation teams involved in different processes around the world.

What aspects do you appreciate the most in your environment (work, culture, people...)?

Right now the UN finds itself facing many challenges: the biggest humanitarian crisis since World War II coupled with particularly difficult relations among key Member States. It is not a very hopeful moment for the global organisation. This having been said, I feel very proud to belong to the UN and to be able to increasingly think of myself as an international civil servant. That sense of global commitment is something I value enormously from my work environment and from many of the colleagues I have the privilege to work with.

What advice would you give to people interested in the UN Youth Volunteer Programme, in the JPO Programme, and in working in international cooperation more generally?

My advice to those starting their careers in international cooperation is, be confident in yourself. Believe that you have something to contribute all while remaining humble of all what there is to learn. Also, get close to the people you are there to serve. It was in my trips to conflict regions in Colombia when I felt most connected to the work I did. At the end of the day, that's really what it is all about and we should try to always remind ourselves why we are in this field in the first place.

Vittoria Groh, Talent Management & Outreach Assistant cinfo, August 2016.