

Interview with Claire Balbo, Programme Analyst, UNDP Addis Ababa

«Get professional experience abroad. Be patient and keep trying»



Claire Balbo is 32 years old and since 2011 has served as Junior Professional Officer (JPO) in Addis Ababa. Her work as Programme Analyst within the Climate Change, Environment and Disaster Risk Management Unit of UNDP allows her not only to apply, but also to further develop her professional skills and expertise. Claire talked to cinfo about her professional experience, competencies and about being a Swiss JPO in the United Nations.

cinfo: What motivated you to apply back in 2010 for the JPO position funded by Switzerland?

CB: Actually I applied for the JPO programme twice – the first time, in 2006, I wasn't successful, unfortunately. My motivation to try again was driven by the fact that in the meantime I had gained work experience abroad in the area of development through short-term assignments with WWF and ALT in Madagascar. I knew that being assigned as JPO to the UN would mean having a stable position for two to three years and would boost my career and open a wide range of opportunities.

What made your application successful the second time?

For me it was clearly the professional experience abroad. When I applied the first time I hardly had any. The second time I could look back at almost four years of experience volunteering and working in developing countries for different NGOs. While I easily met all the requirements for this position, I feel solid experience abroad was of the utmost important to me.

Still, working abroad can be very challenging. What has your mission as a JPO been like so far?

It might be different for every JPO, but in my case it was my first UN experience; the UN is a very complex, multi-agency and bureaucratic institution with its own dynamics. Understanding this while being in a foreign country with its own bureaucratic processes can be difficult. Still, the learning effect from such challenges is priceless and makes me want to continue work in international cooperation. Looking back, I would not want my mission to be different, and I would not hesitate to do it again.

What professional competencies and skills have you gained in the past three years?

Working in a multicultural environment requires you to be patient, understand the dynamics between people and know how to build trustful relationships with various people from different backgrounds. In addition, thanks to Swiss JPO funding, I have been able to develop my technical skills in disaster risk management and climate change adaptation by participating in a course on these topics in Lausanne and Bangladesh.

What is a typical day in your life as JPO like?

I work in UNDP's country office with the Environment, Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management Team, which consists of nine people in the country office, all of whom are responsible for different projects. My tasks are varied and include financial management, preparation of proposals and donor reports as well as liaising with partners. And I have a staff in the field that I manage at a distance.

What advice would you give young Swiss professionals interested in a JPO assignment and an international career with the UN?

Get professional experience abroad – either by doing internships or by volunteering. Be patient, keep believing in what you want to do and keep trying. Don't be afraid of setbacks. Remaining ambitious and knocking on doors of different organisations with my CV was what got me where I am today.