

My job in international cooperation

Barbara Profeta



Age

41

Position

Senior Programme Officer, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation – humanitarian aid, Addis-Ababa Ethiopia (until June 2015)

Education

Bachelor Russian, Spanish and French Language and Literature; Master’s in development studies; Doctorate in public health

Most significant jobs to date

Interpreter, ICRC Azerbaijan (6 month); Child Protection Specialist, UNICEF Sri Lanka (1 year); Senior Programme Officer – humanitarian aid, SDC, Ethiopia (2 years); Programme Manager, SDC, Nairobi (Kenya, since Sept. 2015)

My entry into IC

During my studies in Geneva, I met a Columbian who was studying at IUED¹, and, after reading her study papers, became motivated to join the domain of international cooperation. After graduating, I applied at various NGOs and UN bodies but was unsuccessful, as though my arts studies were incompatible with a career in IC. I finally got my first position in IC after trying my luck for an interpreter position with the ICRC in Azerbaijan.

«Emotions are more intense than in more conventional sectors.»

¹ Previously IUED, now IHEID

My motivation

I was originally motivated by the desire to contribute on an international level where there was genuine need. This has remained a constant thread throughout my professional life. My initial fascination with far-away places gave way first to the desire to gain experience, and then to be able to work in different organisations.

My career

After my first experience at the ICRC, I recommenced my studies by pursuing a doctorate in public health. During this period, I changed to a fixed contract to undertake short replacement missions attached to the ICRC. My experience with UNICEF in Sri Lanka in 2008–2009 marked me significantly. After several short missions in many different countries, I wanted a more stable and lasting position. The SDC² seemed to fulfil this need for greater security and more balance between family and professional life. I remain registered on various humanitarian rosters.

My current position³

My tasks as senior programme officer for the SDC in Addis-Ababa in Ethiopia include responsibility for issues briefs associated with my areas of expertise, which comprise migration and protection of the civilian population, humanitarian aid, and health. I host NGO representatives, conduct job interviews, and write internal reports to present credit requests to headquarters or to document SDC-funded projects in the region. I also participate in meetings between UNO partners and donors. When required, I facilitate contact between the embassy and partners. I also occasionally undertake field trips to determine whether SDC funds have been distributed and how they are being used.

My personal situation

Living abroad as a family provides an opportunity to discover the world through direct experience. Because my husband was not allowed to work in Ethiopia, he had to make a great effort to stay busy and to integrate. In Kenya, however, he was allowed to work. Transitions are always challenging and there's a constant need to relearn everything. We are always 'the new people'. My everyday work doesn't change much, but one's companion must constantly make an effort to adapt. Spouses have a right to support, but this often consists of formal and at times outdated information. My husband was sometimes the one to update the office on latest developments! We live comfortably, in a type of cocoon, which can also be dangerous. We have to make a conscious effort to stay grounded and not forget where we are from.

My future

I'm currently on maternity leave and in September 2015 will be starting a new job in Nairobi, Kenya – still for the SDC as Programme Manager, but this time with a 'cooperation and development' contract. This post aims to set up new programmes quickly and on a small budget, which is an interesting challenge. Unless something exceptional happens, my professional future is mapped out: four years in Nairobi, then a rotational post in Bern or elsewhere. I'd like to stay with the SDC until my daughters are independent. I'd like to remain in

² Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

³ This paragraph describes Barbara's position at the time of the interview in June 2015. She has since changed positions.

the thematic area of public health, but that depends on budgetary allocations and available posts.

My advice to those wishing to work as senior programme officers

Make sure that you really want this type of position, because there's often a large gap between the reality and the perception of this work. It's a job like any other, at times not that different to a civil servant position in Bern, even though there can be more intense emotional moments than in a conventional job! Take every opportunity to speak to people who have experience. If you decide that it's not for you after all, have the courage to admit this without worrying about other people's opinions.

Portrait completed June 2015