LSE International Organisations Day, 11 Nov 2017

Brief introduction about UNFPA

The UNFPA (United National Population Fund) is a very controversial part of the UN. It’s three core aims are to promote:

* Universal access to family planning (because of the clear correlation between lack of family planning and poverty)
* Safe childbirth (the chance of dying in childbirth is 1:20,000 in the UK but 1:27 in South Sudan)
* The fulfilment of every young person’s potential (including issues surrounding SRH and reproductive rights in adolescents and young people, also a lot of work on HIV/AIDS).

Because this work is controversial the competency of courage is particularly important to UNFPA.

‘An approach to a holistic career working in an international organisation’, Michael Emery, HR Director UNFPA.

11 elements to think about when trying to get a job in a UN agency:

1. Qualifications – the various agencies vary a little; the UNFPA likes a master’s degree (but it doesn’t matter what in), UNHCR and World Food Programme are less worried about whether you have a master’s. But degree class is not a big consideration (see point 3).
2. Documents – you have to expect to provide a lot of documents when applying to international agencies (including providing some quite ‘politically incorrect’ information about your domestic life). Different parts of the UN require different documents and it is important to get the documentation right. UNDP wants an ‘achievement orientated’ CV (be aware the UN is increasingly ‘results orientated’, with funders such as DfID making funding dependent on results). As with any CV, make sure it is very tailored to the organisation you are applying to (and be aware that there is ‘sibling rivalry’ between Unicef and UNFPA, so don’t make any mistakes there). Avoid photographs on your CV (although many European countries like a photo, the UN does not).
3. Networking is vital – description of networking: “Long term professional reciprocal relationships where you’re sharing knowledge, resources and information”. “Informal/formal networking is complementary to application process for 90% of jobs” but there are different types of networkers:

‘Tier 3 – passive networkers’ – “suck more out of an organisation than they put into it”

‘Tier 2 – active networkers’ – they stay late, volunteer to organise things for people and “put more into the organisation than they take out”

‘Tier 1 – creative networkers’ – the 2% who actively make networks, set up students associations etc, make things happen.

Be a Tier 1 networker!

Five heads of recruitment for five of the UN agencies advise that they don’t look at class of degree, so Michael Emery’s advice is “Put down the books and pick up a glass of wine or a cup of tea” because networks and relationships are so important. He points out “It’s always harder to say no to someone you’ve met” but also advises that networking is complex across different levels and cultures eg some cultures it is inappropriate to give a gift (can be construed as bribery) whereas in others it is inappropriate not to.

Don’t only network ‘upwards’ but practise 360 degree networking. Never think you have nothing to offer someone else because you are at the start of your career – you might see a job advertised that someone else would be interested in – pass it on.

1. Reputation management – how other people see you is a very powerful career driver. Never, ever send an angry e-mail, always guard your reputation too carefully for that. Be very careful about your social media presence (gave example of the CIA, who look at the social media presence of applicants “especially the stuff that is deleted”). In response to the question of whether it is a disadvantage to have no social media at all his advice was that it is good to have some presence (in a professional capacity).
2. Competencies – UN uses competency based interviews and competencies are also used in job design, classification and performance management.
3. Job satisfiers – essentially, what you like in your job – take time to work that out.
4. Values – what is important to you? These can be hard to articulate, for example when asked the interview question “What are the three values that are most important to you and how do these values translate into your work?” Think about that question.
5. Opportunity scans (where are you most likely to get an opportunity) – think about what is on the horizon as jobs change. What do you need in your armoury? Always follow the money – in other words, be aware of where money is flowing (what geographic areas, what issues) as that is where the jobs are going to be. For example geographically, right now there is lots of reconstruction to be done in Iraq and Syria. Thematically, money is currently going into the Take advantage where your nationality and/or gender may mean a role is more likely to be available to you: there are two types of UN organisations – assessed contributions and voluntarily funded. Assessed contributions organisations include UNESCO and the Secretariat; each country has to pay a certain percentage of funding, set down by treaty. They aim to recruit in proportion to the funding each country provides, so for example Japan is chronically under-represented amongst the workforce in proportion to the funding it provides so there is a priority to recruit Japanese. In the voluntarily funded organisations the aim is to have 50:50 M/F split and for the North/South balance to be in proportion to contributions. The top five contributors to core programmes are Sweden, Norway, Holland, Denmark and Finland. If you include non-core programmes UK is a top contributor. Countries that are under-represented in the workforce compared to their contribution level are a priority for recruitment, such as Norway, which provides massive contributions but is under-represented. (The relationship between funding and which nationalities are recruited is not absolute – the Trump administration has cut UNFPA funding to zero but Americans are still being recruited.)

The JPO (Junior Professional Officer) programme is a good way of getting in (“silver bullet into the UN”) but unfortunately the British government has just withdrawn funding meaning British nationals are no longer eligible to apply. (JPO posts are funded by the postholders’ home governments.) The Dutch government currently funds some JPO posts for candidates from developing countries.

Languages: English is the dominant language of the UN and therefore the best language to have. French is a clear second, then Arabic, Portuguese, Russian.

1. EQ (Emotional Intelligence) – the ability to fit. How aware are you of your cultural/personality coding? For example, humility in inter-cultural relations is extremely important and will be assessed: “Tell me about a time when you have made a cultural mistake and what did you learn from it?”
2. Momentum - building a career in the international organisations takes a long time. Most people join when they are in their early 30s. Build momentum through experience. Every year around 40,000 new people are taken on, but you might have to apply for 30-40 jobs – you will need to persist. Consultancies are a good way in – 600 consultancies a month are advertised by UNDP.
3. Luck – “when preparation meets opportunity” (Oprah). “The harder I work, the luckier I get” (Edison).

Remember, everyone who works for the UN has had a point where they’ve never had a development job. Michael Emery started as a school teacher and went to be a volunteer teacher in Liberia (when he applied he had expected to be sent to aboriginal schools in Australia, his home country). Civil war started the day he got there. 6 weeks later all the children from the schools were either refugees or fighting. He drove in to the UN and was given the task of organising a feeding station – the beginning of his UN career.

Q: Is UN Volunteers an important step?  
A: Formal volunteer work is a massive plus (whether UNV, VSO, Peace Corps or similar). It shows values. With the UN you can become a National, International or Online volunteer.

The internship programme is helpful – they do keep some people on who do a good job.

Core skills: agility, love, diversity, care.