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PRACTITIONER'S CORNER

Practitioner's Corner: Project management – the missing part in law books

FRANCESCA CAONERO — 9 December, 2015



The “Practitioner’s Corner” gives the floor to practicing international lawyers. Their accounts illustrate the diversity of work within the field of international law and offer personal insights into the practice of international law.

My name is Francesca Caonero. I’m from Italy and am currently an Associate Expert at the United Nations (UN). Associate experts are generally individuals participating in the Junior Professional Officer (JPO) programme. The JPO is a programme funded by a limited number of countries across the globe that enables young professionals to work

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for an UN agency as professional staff for a minimum period of two and up to four years, depending on the sponsoring country.

Based in Nairobi, Kenya, I am currently working on maritime crime and related programming aiming at building the capacity of States to deal with maritime threats, such as piracy. During the first year and a half of my contract I supported the implementation of one of the pillars of the counter-piracy strategy, dealing with developing infrastructure and custodial capacity in Puntland and Somaliland, two regions in Somalia.

Before taking on this role I was a legal consultant with a UN agency in Lima (Peru) working on arms control and disarmament, which I like to think are my areas of expertise. Indeed, from the moment I decided to pursue a career in the international field, I strived to orient my studies and my professional path towards this niche area of international law: I have a masters' degree in international law and an LLM in International Humanitarian Law, I wrote my dissertations around this topic and engaged in early internships in key agencies active in this field. I had no hesitation: arms control and disarmament were the topics that I was passionate about and that the UN was the organization I wanted to work for. A legal background, a strong interest in a specialized topic, the willingness to go to the field and a bit of luck are the four ingredients that have allowed me to pursue my dream.

Over the years the legal studies – which in the early stages of my academic path I reluctantly engaged in – have proved to be pivotal to my academic and professional achievements. Without a law degree I would have hardly got an LL.M and

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started working on legal issues relating to arms control. International law has been the driver of my career so far. Yet, not international law broadly speaking – but a specific area of it. I believe that identifying a topic of interest and gaining in-depth knowledge of it has been the added value to my legal background. Indeed, without being able to showcase that I could meaningfully add to discussions and promote work on arms control and disarmament I would have never got my first contract with the UN. In this sense, my advice to those who pursue a career in international law and international relations is to pick a niche area in which they can really shine in front a potential employer. Maybe twenty or thirty years ago it was enough to have knowledge of international law or human rights broadly understood. Today it is not. To put your foot in the door you need to be conversant with international law at large and in addition be targeted and specialized in one niche subject – as I will explain this is not all if you also want to advance in your career.

After one year and a half spent in between studying for the LL.M. and doing internships in Geneva, I realized that experiences at headquarters are not enough for all those who seek a first paid professional experience. Plus, I had always been a strong supporter of field experiences and to me being able to move to Latin America opened the door to learning a new language, delivering substantive technical assistance to direct beneficiaries (and not dealing with delegates only), while giving me region specific work experience.

As for the luck, a bit of it is needed in pursuing every career. During my Erasmus at the University of Amsterdam I asked my international law professor how I could be successful in

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pursuing a career in international law. She answered: “being the right person in the right place in the right moment”. And this is what I mean by luck. At the time I would not understand. Later on I found that this means being knowledgeable in a specific topic, interning in the right office and funds being allocated to that office to do work in your area of expertise. Luck can have other forms such as having the right nationality, but in most of the cases it is the office you want to work for having funds to employ additional staff.

So if I was so lucky enough to work on the topic I loved and in the agency I dreamt of, why ending up in Africa dealing with maritime crime and related programming? Pursuing a career within the UN does not necessarily coincide with being an international lawyer. Many of us graduate from law schools thinking that knowing everything about international law will get us a job in the UN, working on development, humanitarian aid or human rights protection. Unfortunately, while this legal background is necessary to put the foot in the door, this is not necessarily enough to advance and in some cases even to get a paid job at the UN. Over time, I came to learn that most of the work that UN professional staff engages in is programme management related. This is possibly why internships in some cases seem so boring to law students. Dealing with excel sheets, uploading material on webpages, systematizing e-material for stakeholders and engaging in lengthy note taking exercises do not seem to meet the appetite and the expectations of international legal minds or strenuous human rights defenders. Well, note that the delivery of technical assistance, humanitarian aid or human rights protection won't happen without skilled programme managers that plan activities according to funds received

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from donors and agreed outputs and strategies. Knowing what constitutes a violation of ICCPR article 6 (right to life) won't necessarily help protecting the right to life of citizens across the globe, if law-enforcement officers are not duly trained. Yet, training can only happen if a manager has identified potential donors, fundraised, programmed the funds in accordance with the activities to be carried out, organized the logistics for the training (procurement), dealt with national authorities to appoint the officials to be trained and identified trainers. These and other tasks are inherent to programme management.

Of all this programme management work there is no trace in international law books or law schools. Here comes the most challenging part of reconciling the divide between substantive studies and pursuing a professional career within the UN. Or at least, these are the challenges that I faced, wanting so badly to work for the UN. (I can't tell if working for an NGO or pursuing a PhD involves similar challenges, maybe it does). In my case the divide has been filled by an opportunity. The JPO programme came to my rescue, giving me the chance to undertake a job in programme management. Over the past two years I have learned a great deal of it and this is what the JPO is all about: learning and showcasing that not only you have substantive knowledge of international law but that you can also work as a manager. Due to the limited number of participating States and positions, the JPO is clearly not an option for many, so the alternative is to make the most of internships and paid professional experiences focusing on management aspects rather than on substantive knowledge only. Being knowledgeable in international law and your niche area is needed to entertain an intelligent conversation with donors, beneficiaries and your (potential) employer while developing

meaningful programming, but I don't think this is enough to become a UN professional.

Today I am a JPO and I support programming in the areas of detention and maritime crime. The work I engage in has taken me to the most challenging and rewarding places, e.g. Somalia, working in prisons to improve the detention conditions of detainees. And – it is important to remember – this is achieved through procurement (e.g. of beds, welfare items, sport material), infrastructure work, delivery of training, monitoring of budget and managing of people. This is what I do every day and this is how I finally turn international law into reality.

The opinions expressed in this text are those of the author alone and do not represent or reflect the views of the United Nations.

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