

IE3 Internship Report

Alyssa Bryson
UNIFEM – Ecuador
April 2007

Introduction

Since January 16, I have been interning for the United Nations Development Fund for Women, which is an international agency of the UN that works to advance women's rights in 100 countries. The Quito office represents the countries of the Andean Region, which is defined as Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela. The mission of UNIFEM – Andean Region is focused on four central areas that affect women: Poverty, Violence, HIV/AIDS, and Governance. These four 'goals,' as they are called here, have separate staff, budgets, and programming, so while there is a common sense of drive toward establishing and protecting women's rights, there are also very clear divisions in terms of the content of each person's work. The area of governance, in which I work, funds and supervises projects that aim to increase and strengthen the political participation of women in each country of this region.

Daily Responsibilities

While my daily routine varies significantly, a number of tasks have come up frequently. Due to the highly political nature of the projects that UNIFEM, and particularly governance, takes on, a large part of my job is to stay informed on the political situation in each country of the region, as well as any effects changes in each might have for our projects. I also stay on top of the progress of each project by reading numerous emails and corresponding with our implementing counterparts. This also involves going to many meetings, both as a representative of UNIFEM in terms of talking to the people present about our programming, as well as gathering information and conclusions of note to report back to the office. At said meetings, I generally prepare minutes to circulate among UNIFEM staff that could potentially be interested in the information presented. Within the office, I act as a support for my direct supervisor, the coordinator of the governance area, the director and deputy official of the regional office, and the communications area. In this respect, I research a variety of topics in order to prepare presentations, read project proposals and offer critiques, prepare responses to a variety of UN reports, and translate documents to or from English.

One recent highlight was my participation in a training that the UN Development Program held for two of its communications employees. This team works specifically on distributing information about the UN Millennium Development Goals on behalf of UNDP, and my role in the training was to explain how gender is underrepresented in these objectives, and why it should be a factor in any strategy designed to achieve them. While giving a thirty-minute presentation is not a regular part of my job here, researching a topic and formulating a response, report, or even Power Point is a fairly common occurrence. As a result of having completed multiple investigations on the Millennium Development Goals, I am considered the focal point for MDGs and

gender within my area, so I will likely be working on similar assignments in the future.

Although my work is quite varied, it is given coherence by a couple of considerations. Like I mentioned, the MDGs are a theme I will work on repeatedly, and I receive emails to keep me up to date on their progress regularly. The interns in my area are also assigned certain projects for which they are responsible in terms of monitoring and evaluation. While my particular projects have not yet begun, I know in a general sense that I will be corresponding with the organizations implementing programs in Bolivia. One other activity that often falls to me is, not surprisingly, translation. Currently I am the only native English speaker, despite there being an impressive amount of people who speak English in the office, so I get asked 'favors' quite frequently. That has put me in a unique position, as the documents I edit or translate are often relatively important, as they are usually being sent to headquarters in New York. As a result, I am able to read many planning documents and large project proposals, which helps to broaden my understanding of the work that UNIFEM carries out in the region and its overall mission as well. Finally, I am the secondary focal point (after my supervisor) on a large-scale project designed to strengthen the organizations of female politicians in Ecuador and publicize the importance of women's participation in politics. It involves the National Women's Machinery (part of the executive branch of the national government), a prominent Ecuadorian university, and a local civil society organization focused on women's legal advances. This project is just beginning, but will also give my internship more coherence and I am very much looking forward to the experiences it will entail.

Internship Benefits

Working at the UN has reinforced my interest in international development, and has given me various opportunities to explore some of the important aspects of work in the field. As a result of the regional nature of this UNIFEM office, it is very much an administrative job, and my coworkers spend a lot of time reading and evaluating project proposals, as well as monitoring their progress and following up with their results. For me this has meant using my analytical skills to prepare responses to such documents, and I have found that even when I have only a basic or conceptual understanding of what the project is about, I can pick out weaknesses or positive points relatively well. It is a great exercise in reading and evaluating, and I am gaining confidence in that area.

Another crucial determinant of the benefits of my internship at UNIFEM is the team with which I work. Our office consists of 25 women with one central common interest, which creates an extremely unique environment in which to work. Basically starting my professional experience here has been fantastic, as it is a very supportive and empowering group to work with. My supervisor and the office director are very good about providing positive feedback on my various assignments, which I believe is relatively rare in any workplace especially when considering their individual workloads. They always read what I submit and let me know what they think of it, which makes me feel like valued member of the team and reinforces the overall positive dynamic of the office.

In addition, because of the small size of the office (related to other UN agencies) and its limited resources, interns here are a large part of the

workforce. This fortunately means that we do real work, which also makes UNIFEM unique. As a result, I have sometimes been given assignments that I thought were over my head, but was able to complete well and with very positive feedback from my colleagues. This has been very helpful for my professional confidence and is another example of how the team at UNIFEM empowers its members.

One such encouraging experience occurred when my supervisor asked me to write a response to the UN system strategy to respond to the floods in Bolivia. The document consisted of a narrative list of what each UN agency planned to contribute to the humanitarian relief effort, and was very practical and specific. This was challenging because I had no direct experience to draw from in this area, but was able to apply what concepts I do have of both the role of gender in poverty-related issues and basic analytical skills to find holes in the strategy. My supervisor sent what I had prepared to her boss, who then forwarded it to UNIFEM headquarters as the response on behalf of the Andean Regional office. This allowed me to realize that even without specific training on disaster relief or even development strategies, I could use my skill in maintaining a broad perspective – ability to ‘see the big picture’ if you will – to construct a response. My supervisors’ faith in my capacities, in this case, also reinforced my own.

Challenges

Speaking Spanish in the office was, of course, an initial challenge of this internship. Having spent six months studying in Buenos Aires, however, in addition to years of academic experience, allowed me to adapt fairly quickly to the language. In fact, while operating in Spanish in the office came somewhat easily, I found that the main language problem I encountered was social. When being introduced to my coworkers and while conversing with them, I found it hard to express myself and came off quite reserved at first. Now I feel much more comfortable and believe that my colleagues know me better, but I feel that the language factor will always create at least a slight distance between us that would not otherwise exist.

Another challenge of my time here has been the large variety in the amount of work I am given on a daily or even weekly basis. Assignments often come in spurts, and because I deal with a lot of small tasks and have only a few ongoing projects, I am largely dependent upon my supervisor in terms of giving me things to do. If she is gone or otherwise occupied, it can get fairly slow, which can be frustrating. When possible, I seek out work, but have sometimes had to devise ways to keep myself engaged, such as reading news articles about the Andes, reviewing past projects, etc., in order to not get bored.

Tips for future interns

Quito is a fantastic city in which to live. It is very easy to get around, and the people are very helpful. In terms of general advice, I can offer the following observations:

Housing in Quito is plentiful, and prices vary significantly by neighborhood and amenities. Living alone is generally more expensive, as is renting a furnished apartment, as they are generally geared toward foreigners. To find listings of apartments of all kinds, the postings in internet cafés are a good option, especially for those interested in living with foreigners or finding

furnished apartments. The UN building also has a board with apartments and furniture for sale. I also know multiple people who met their future roommates in the hostel where they first stayed while looking for places to live. I chose to live with another intern from my office, but that is a decision that one should make sparingly, as it can be somewhat intense to share both an office and personal space with one person.

Finding informal Spanish teachers is also easy for anyone wanting to refresh their conversational skills, and internet cafés, once again, are a great place to look. Living with a native Spanish speaker is also a wonderful way to develop one's skills. I live with a Spaniard who talks quickly and mumbles, and if nothing else it has very much encouraged my language confidence, because if I can understand her, I simply cannot foresee having any problems understanding other speakers.

The professional culture here was surprising for me at first. While it is definitely common to see people in suits on their way to work, the UN building (and my agency in particular) is significantly more casual. This applies to dress as well as time consciousness. I frequently attend meetings, especially with large groups of Ecuadorians, that begin 30 minutes late, and arriving early is not only a waste of time, but can be a surprise to the hosts and awkward for the attendee. Arriving 5-15 minutes late is generally a safe bet.

It's also important to note that requirements for registering visas and receiving a census card change frequently. As a result, it is advisable to ask someone who has gone through the process recently, or check at the

Private Building Agency

al45n3(r)4g(a)-6.7()5o(a)-6f12 theroa (a)-6(onscio)4r6(e)k5(c)7,eetaa8(ia)4.7()-5s5(c)7o5(o)
a a
a

aof.(eet)7((a)-6(olo5(e5(c84t12)o)ics.7(
a
al34aplia

everyone that is working toward the same goals will agree on a course of action, and that egos enter into every type of work - even development.

The logistics of that seminar have recently taken over my life, but before taking on the organization of that event, I was working on another project that was very interesting. The UNIFEM headquarters in New York sent my supervisor (the Coordinator of the Governance area) a proposal for a global Womens Election Watch project, which she then passed onto me. The project aims to hold political parties and actors accountable for women's interests and political participation, through a number of means. The proposal we received was for a global project, but with a national component - six countries were to be chosen to pilot activities to effectively bolster women's political participation in a meaningful sense, beyond simply looking at electoral results. That number was chopped down to two: Ecuador and Morocco. The purpose of sending the proposal to us, then, was to 'Ecuadorianize' it in order to present it to the Belgian government for financing. Writing a draft for this proposal was very challenging, but I was also impressed with how much I have picked up about the political situation here, as I was able to effectively apply the objectives of the project to Ecuador, and pick out the important points of interest regarding why the project should be carried out here. As a result of my supervisor being overworked and a sudden urgency on behalf of the Belgian cooperation, my draft was sent to HQ, and then to representatives of the Belgian government, to give them a sense of what we were working toward. A more finished draft was then elaborated by my supervisor and UNIFEM HQ staff, but I was very glad to be involved in the process.

The programmatic part of my job is also expected to pick up in the near future. I am the focal point for multiple projects in Bolivia for which I will have to provide monitoring and follow-up, which I expect to be very enriching. My supervisor will also be gone for a couple of weeks in July, during which I will be the representative of the governance area. This means I will have to really develop my understanding of all of our current projects in order to assure that our counterparts are able to proceed during Caroline's absence.

In short, my internship is proceeding in a very fulfilling way. Life in Ecuador is also going very well, and I have been travelling quite regularly to other parts of the country. The sheer diversity of climates and people is fascinating, and I have been taking advantage of the proximity of all of these different areas as frequently as I can. I have had multiple friends come to visit, which gives me a great excuse to see new parts of the country as well as a new perspective on the lifestyle here as I see it through my friends' eyes. I really couldn't be happier with this experience thus far, and I look forward to getting even more involved in both UNIFEM and Ecuadorian culture.

Summer update September 2007

During the summer months of my internship at UNIFEM I was presented with a series of new challenges, both professionally and personally. Our office

activities were composed mainly by workshops and special events and not much work regarding ongoing programs.

The professional highlight of the summer for me was the Tenth Conference on Women of Latin America and the Caribbean. This was an event organized by ECLAC (Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean) and was attended by official delegations from all of the Latin American and Caribbean countries and a small number of civil society and UN representatives. I spent extra time working on the logistics of the side events put on by UNIFEM, which eventually allowed me to attend its official events that are normally closed to all who are not accredited ahead of time. At this event, all of the subregional directors of UNIFEM from LAC were in attendance, which was also very interesting as I was able to meet the director of UNIFEM LAC as well as the Southern Cone, Mexico, and Caribbean directors. The fact that government representatives, many of whom were ministers, UNIFEM regional representatives, and valued members of various women's movements were all brought together to discuss issues that affect women in the entire LAC region was very inspiring for me. I realized what a variety of individuals are dedicated to protecting women's rights, which also solidified my desire to continue in this field.

In July I was also able to travel to two seminars being put on within the framework of a joint project that my area funded, which was a great opportunity. I prepared a report on my findings, as it was a mission focused on monitoring and evaluation of the project. The workshops I attended were carried out by the association of Ecuadorian women in municipal government, and so the women there were mainly elected municipal officials. The trainings were aimed at solidifying the skills of women in government regarding within a variety of areas, as well as increasing their solidarity. It was a very interesting experience, first of all to travel to other provinces of Ecuador and to notice the regional differences that exist, and also to interact with the women as a representative of UNIFEM.

While these two events were extremely interesting, the lack of regular work outside of event logistics was a challenge for me this summer. Many people were out of the office on vacation, including my supervisor for three weeks, and I felt that the office dynamic suffered as a result. I found it harder to maintain my work ethic and felt less engaged in my work. I also reached a point where the newness of this experience had worn off, and found it hard to maintain my initial enthusiasm. Fortunately, this was a temporary stage, and I currently am very happy in my position. Taking a vacation for a week in the US has allowed me to come back to work with a renewed perspective, and many of my colleagues are now back in the office, restoring the striking energy and dedication (and workload) that characterizes UNIFEM. I made my way through the rocky five and six month period, and am looking forward to the months that come.

Fall update

January 2008

My last months as an intern at UNIFEM Andean Region were both fascinating and extremely busy. The process of closing projects before the end of the year, as well as the multitude of events and workshops that are carried

out in order to spend remaining annual funds, added to the activities that are normally carried out in this period. It was a very interesting time in terms of the work in which I was involved, and I am thrilled to be able to continue my collaboration with UNIFEM in 2008.

In the fall quarter of my internship, there were various occasions on which I was asked to write responses to UNIFEM headquarters, evaluate proposed publications by other UNIFEM sub-regional offices, or synthesize the answers of my colleagues to discussion questions posed by the Latin America and Caribbean office or HQ. These opportunities allowed me to deepen my understanding of UNIFEM strategy on the global level, and also provided me with a chance to see what kind of projects and programs other offices are carrying out. I was also able to take part in the analysis of the planning system used by UNIFEM around the world, which was evaluated and redesigned in 2007. All of these activities were very interesting and valuable, as they provided great insight into the functions of a UN agency on the global level.

Another highlight of the last month of my internship was the opportunity to organize the logistics of a workshop held in Lima, Peru. The event was one of five designed to bring together all of UNIFEM's major stakeholders in each of the Andean countries to inform them of the effects of UN reform on the agency, and gather feedback on UNIFEM's work in the country and their suggestions for its future direction. I traveled to Lima with the Regional Director of UNIFEM for the Andean Region to assist with the event, as well as having done much of the preparation in the preceding weeks. It was fascinating to see another Andean country and get a sense of the work UNIFEM does there. I will be traveling to La Paz in February of 2008 for the corresponding workshop with our government, civil society, UN, and other development counterparts in Bolivia.

I was also able to complement my professional growth with an online class, offered by the United Nations Development Program Online School, which is based in Colombia. The ten-week course, entitled "Introduction to Human Development," dealt with the contemporary issues associated with the human development paradigm, which is a popular conceptual framework for development programs that became dominant in the 1990s. The most valuable part of the class for me personally was that it gave me a framework for the projects already being carried out by UNIFEM and other UN agencies in Ecuador. This process was aided by the final assignments, which asked students to apply the concepts of the human development approach to a controversial current policy in their country. I chose the Electoral Quota Law of Ecuador, and through my process of evaluation of the policy I deepened my understanding of the values of affirmative action policies, which is often the basis of development projects that are designed to strengthen the guarantee and exercise of women's rights. I look forward to applying these concepts to the planning and evaluation processes in which I take part in 2008.