



My Journey as a Junior Professional Officer  
with the United Nations

**Magdalene Matthews**

# Pathways to International Development

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The author wishes to acknowledge the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) for their immense support in advancing her career in international development through the Junior Professional Officer Program (2018-2020).

The author extends warm gratitude to Sue Coates and Samuel Godfrey for their guidance, mentorship, and supervision during her assignment as a Junior Professional Officer (JPO).

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The author dedicates this resource to current and future JPOs, to the next generation of young minds striving to make a difference in the world.

To the dreamers, whoever you are, wherever you are, however far along you may be on your journey, keep striving, your dreams are valid.

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About the Author: Magdalene Matthews Ofori-Kuma is an Environmental Health and International Development Specialist who served as a Junior Professional Officer (JPO) with UNICEF from 2018-2020. A Dutch-funded JPO from Liberia, Magdalene worked as a Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) Officer with the UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office in Nairobi, Kenya providing technical advice and program support to 21 countries in the region.

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# Prologue

I first heard the word “JPO” in 2011 while being introduced to a new colleague from Sweden. Helen joined our team in the UN Resident Coordinator’s Office in Liberia after serving as a JPO with UN-Habitat in Nairobi. She was not much older than I was, but here she was with two Master’s Degrees in Development Studies on a Professional Post (P3) supporting Liberia’s critical post-conflict recovery efforts. I was intrigued.

As the second most senior International Professional (IP) Staff on our team, she was ready to slide in as Officer in Charge (OIC) of the UN Resident Coordinator’s strategic advisory team whenever our Head of Office (P5) was out on leave.

Young, bold, daring, decisive, and eager, Helen represented a fresh face of the United Nations that I would come to profoundly admire. Hers was an emerging image of the UN that I did not know, then would someday also be mine.

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## Acronyms

<b>ECOSOC</b>	United Nations Economic and Social Council
<b>ESARO</b>	UNICEF Eastern & Southern Africa Regional Office
<b>JPO</b>	Junior Professional Officer
<b>MHM</b>	Menstrual Hygiene Management
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SDG6</b>	Sustainable Development Goal on clean water & sanitation
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization
<b>WASH</b>	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
<b>WASH FIT</b>	Water and sanitation for health facility improvement tool



*On country-mission to UNICEF Ethiopia to support WASH in schools efforts*

# PART 1

The Junior  
Professional Officer  
(JPO) Program of  
the United Nations



## Introduction

There are many pathways to a career as International Professional (IP) with the United Nations:

- You could start as a national staff member, work for a few years, sit the UN Competitive Recruitment Examination, and move on internationally.
- Depending on the agency, you could be hired directly to an international role after due process.
- You could start as a consultant, build credibility, and later apply for a longer-term staff role for which you qualify. **OR**
- Depending on the agency or department within the UN system, you could get recruited as a Junior Professional Officer (JPO).

After working with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN Development Program (UNDP) in different capacities in Liberia, in 2018, my career took an international turn when I joined the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) as a Junior Professional Officer. I was recruited as a Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) Specialist with UNICEF's Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO) in Nairobi, Kenya.

Within weeks, I relocated from the western coast where I had lived and schooled most of my life to new adventures in international development across the continent. For three years, I had the remarkable opportunity to represent UNICEF at strategic high-level convenings and help drive WASH results for African children by providing technical oversight and advisory support to 21 program countries in the region. This resource represents a legacy effort to capture the highlights, lessons learned, and reflections from my fulfilling JPO assignment.

With this book, my goal is to provide young professionals with a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) guide on the United Nations Junior Professional Officer Program. For **candidates interested in the Program**, I aim to share an accessible tool that simplifies the scope, application, and expectations of the process. To **current and future JPOs**, I hope to share my lived experience as a colorful template of what's possible and the associated career-enhancing opportunities within reach following a Junior Professional assignment with the United Nations. To **prospective JPOs from developing countries**, with these few pages, I hope to share information on possible opportunities to keep your dreams alive and help advance your career in international development.

## 1. What is the Junior Professional Officer Program?

### **The Concept**

The United Nations Junior Professional Officers (JPO) Program was first introduced within the UN system in 1961. It emanated from a United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) resolution to approve and encourage the collaboration of young graduates, financed by their respective Governments, in implementing development cooperation initiatives and programs. They were then known as '*Associate Experts*'. Over time, this name was replaced by the term "*Junior Professional Officer*." The goal then, as it is now, is to mentor young talent to contribute to critical aspects of the UN's mandate while allowing them to gain significant hands-on experience in multilateral cooperation.

Within the UN, the JPO Program is under the direct management of the Capacity Development Program Management Office (CDPMO) in the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN/DESA) of the UN Secretariat.

As defined by the UN,

***“The United Nations Secretariat carries out the day-to-day work of the UN as mandated by the General Assembly and the Organization’s other main organs. The Secretary-General is the head of the Secretariat, which has tens of thousands of staff members working at duty stations worldwide.”***

Beyond the Secretariat, multiple UN agencies, funds, and programs have since recruited and hosted JPOs under bilateral agreements with donor countries to support the UN's global activities. Some affiliated organizations like UNDP, UNESCO, and the World Bank have gone a step further to introduce a specialist development program (SDP) focused on the Sustainable Development Goal targets and the Mid-Level Professional (MILPP) or Young Professionals Programs (YPP) for emerging leaders with slightly higher experience (>3-5 years) and educational credentials (Masters to Doctorate) than the average JPO.

The UN describes the Program as follows:

***“The JPO Program recruits Junior Professional Officers for the UN Secretariat, Funds and Programs. JPOs are recruited under bilateral agreements between the UN and donor countries. They are generally nationals of donor countries, however, some donors also finance nationals of developing countries.”***

### **The Criteria**

JPO candidates are young professionals who:

- Are usually < the age of 32,
- Have an advanced university degree (Master’s Degree or equivalent) and a minimum of two years of professional experience, preferably in a developing country.
- Have written and spoken proficiency in at least one (English), but preferably two of the three working UN languages: English, French, and Spanish. Fluency in Arabic, Russian, or Portuguese is an asset.
- Have advanced IT skills (word processing, database and presentation software),
- Demonstrate cultural and gender sensitivity (ability to work with people of different language, national, and cultural backgrounds),

- Possess a strong commitment to development and
- Respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and the UN organization’s Mission Statement.

### **The Contract**

Initially, JPOs are granted a one-year appointment which may be extended up to three years based on good performance within the host UN agency and the approval of the funding donor.

The JPO program presents a pathway to a career in international development. It is designed to foster diversity while building a pipeline of professionals, passionate about responding to pressing global challenges.

### **The Objectives**

The UN explains that the objectives of the JPO Program are:

- To provide young professionals with the opportunity to gain hands-on experience in the field of multilateral international cooperation through a learning experience under the supervision of specialists, and

- To contribute to the advancement of their organization’s mandate, particularly regarding the Sustainable Development Goals or 2030 Agenda.

### **The End-Results**

The results of the JPO Program are:

- **For developing countries and donors:** it represents another form of development aid through the UN System. It provides vast opportunities for on-the-job training for young graduates and enables donors to contribute multilateral capacity to developing countries where they have no official representation. It allows donors to promote specific humanitarian and development goals in countries that are of interest to donors’ short and long-term development agendas.
- **For the UN Secretariat and Programs/ Funds:** the JPO Program represents a significant opportunity for mobilizing additional capacity development resources from donors. It also allows agencies to effectively discharge their increased and complex responsibilities;

- **For the JPOs:** it offers possibilities for participation in the capacity development activities of the UN with exposure to the humanitarian and development processes in developing countries. It enables them to obtain work experience in the international sphere for future career growth.

### **2. Who can apply for the JPO Program?**

Across the UN and participating Agencies, there are several donor countries with bilateral agreements to finance their nationals as JPOs worldwide.

#### **a. Donor Country Applicants**

As of July 2019, the following countries have agreements for participation in the JPO Program with the UN Secretariat: Australia, Austria, Belgium, China, Denmark, DPRK, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Luxembourg, Mongolia, Morocco, The Netherlands, Norway, Republic of Korea, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and the United States.

Participating countries may vary from one agency to the next and one year to another. For example, my host agency, UNICEF's current donor list includes Austria, Belgium, Canada, China, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Luxemburg, The Netherlands, Norway, Qatar, the Republic of Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Arab Emirates, and the United States.

### **b. Developing Country Applicants**

In addition to their nationals, several donor countries fund young talent from developing countries. I happened to be one of them.

This creates a platform for JPOs from under-represented countries to start international careers in multilateral cooperation outside their countries of origin while contributing to achieving the UN's global mandate. Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden are known to have funded nationals from less developed partner countries over the years. My 3-year JPO assignment as a WASH Officer with UNICEF was generously funded by the Government of the Netherlands, as part of the Dutch government's global commitment to advancing WASH sector development around the world.

### **c. Prospects for Developing Country Applicants**

Seeing the enormous benefit the program generates in terms of development cooperation and long-term international capacity development, several emerging economies have begun partnering with the UN to sponsor JPOs.

In 2023, Rwanda and UNICEF signed an agreement allowing talented Rwandan JPOs to form part of the broader global agenda for every child. Rwanda is the first Sub-Saharan African country to sign a JPO Agreement with UNICEF—announcing a new era in Africa's multilateral engagement on the global stage. UNICEF notes:

***“The JPO Program offers a distinctive opportunity for young professionals to cultivate their skills and expertise while bringing new perspectives and innovative ideas into the organization.”***

With time, the Rwanda-UNICEF JPO partnership could serve as a model for emerging economies to follow. With the lessons learned, in addition to the existing opportunities across the Secretariat, and other UN agencies, such a model could pave

the way for additional prospects and increased participation of developing and under-represented countries in global development.

### 3. How do you apply for a JPO position?

Junior Professional Officer positions are advertised as are all other UN positions.

Depending on the agency and donor, the terms of reference (TOR) are advertised on various platforms the webpage of the affiliated UN organization for the post, and the donor's page.

In my case, I found the vacancy for my JPO post on the UNICEF jobs page and the UN jobs page. A Google search of current vacant JPO posts with the UN may also be helpful.



*Trying to motorolo, Uganda to assess water projects*

# PART 2

My Memorable JPO  
Assignment with  
the UN



#### 4. What drew you to a career in development work?

The experiences that sparked my interest in humanitarian and development work go as far back as childhood. Growing up in conflict instilled in me a passion to end human suffering. In my final year of college, I decided to conduct one of Liberia's first post-war, lab-based bacteriological analyses of tap water. The 2009 study was significant in that at the time, the country, still reeling from 14 years of war (1989-2003), had no suitable laboratories.

Microbial tests to check if water was safe for drinking were being conducted using qualitative methods. An advanced quantitative assessment required collecting the samples, having them flown on ice to a certified lab in neighboring Ghana, and placing them under incubation—all within the World Health Organization's (WHO) stipulated 24-hour timeframe. The dream was ambitious, having no external funding, and a one-woman research team, the challenges were endless. Still, curious to get a deeper understanding of the state of the nation's drinking water, I was determined to get it done.

It took a well-laid-out plan. First, I had to get permission from the Liberian Ministry of Health, engage residents in the communities for easy

sample collection, obtain authorization from the airport, customs, and health officials in both Liberia and Ghana to allow the water samples through speedily, then hop on the plane and pray there'd be no flight delays or cancellations.

Despite the many hurdles and logistics involved, I succeeded. The results showed bacterial contamination in all the samples analyzed. Harmful fecal and total coliform bacteria counts across all tested communities failed to meet WHO standards of 0cfu per 100ml, meaning Liberia's tap water was unsafe for drinking.

My research emphasized the need for stronger water quality treatment and testing in Liberia's recovering tap water sector. Most importantly, it demonstrated just how much impact a determined young professional can have on addressing critical national issues. That was my first applied research project, designed and implemented from start to finish in response to an identified development need that my lived experience and technical expertise could help solve.

With the strategic planning and execution involved, not only were my critical thinking skills enhanced, it turned out to be a richly fulfilling professional exercise. Since then, my decision to pursue development work was made. I had found my purpose—helping solve societal problems.

## 5. What made you apply to the JPO program?

Growing up with my country, Liberia, at war, I was exposed to unequal access to basic services, including safe drinking water. Watching a young mother prepare her baby's cereal with murky water was the epiphany that drove my career path toward water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). With a newfound purpose, I set out to help change the narrative. I began working on governance and capacity development in the WASH sector at a critical time in Liberia's history— during post-conflict, post-Ebola recovery. I advised the Government on approaches to rebuild war-ravaged water and public health infrastructure. I trained several technicians from the national utility in water quality management and drafted a National Water Quality Assurance Plan to harmonize test protocols in water treatment plants across the country. Inspired by my involvement and achievements at the national level, I was drawn to a career as a Junior Professional Officer to support water sector development in other countries in Eastern and Southern Africa. My dream was to contribute to the wider sustainable development agenda of universal access to safe water, dignified sanitation, and hygiene around the world (SDG 6). My JPO assignment enabled me to do just that.

## 6. What was your motivation to work with a UN agency?

When I reflect on my childhood, it is impossible not to acknowledge the critical role organizations like UNICEF, WHO, and UNHCR played in the lives of thousands of war-affected children during Liberia's prolonged crisis. I have profound respect and gratitude for the work of the UN through its agencies, funds, and programs, and the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), which provided peacekeeping and nation-building support across Liberia from 2003 to 2018. I began my UN career working with UNHCR and UNDP, supporting Liberia's recovery.

Many UN agencies offer JPO positions. I applied and was recruited for a JPO position with UNICEF. UNICEF's mandate centers on children—the most vulnerable members of the human family. The UNICEF logo depicts a person holding up a child in a warm embrace. With 14 years of my childhood spent surviving violent conflict, I connect with UNICEF's mandate to create a better world “for every child” and its values of care, responsibility, integrity, transparency, accountability, and sustainability. Joining UNICEF allowed me to establish a career in an agency with a strong global footprint in climate-resilient WASH, and sustainable development.

## 7. What were the main tasks you were working on? What did your role entail? What SDG(s) did you help to implement?

I served as a Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) Officer (P2) in the UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO). I provided policy guidance and strategic technical advice to 21 countries, helping to translate Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets and the global UNICEF WASH Strategy into implementable programs at regional and country levels. My role involved country missions to Ethiopia, Comoros, Tanzania, Zambia, Kenya, and Uganda. My primary SDG of focus was SDG 6: sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. As the institutional WASH lead and regional menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) focal point in ESARO, I focused on climate-resilient (SDG 17) WASH in schools (SDG 4), and WASH in healthcare facilities (SDG 3). I led two regional UNICEF research studies. The goal was to assess the constraints to scaling up WASH in schools and WASH in healthcare facilities interventions across the 21 countries in East and Southern Africa. I later published two UNICEF WASH reports on the policy landscape in the region. I attended high-level meetings and served as a liaison between Headquarters and country offices.

## 8. What was the highlight of your experience in the JPO Program?

The highlight of my experience was the extensive field exposure to WASH issues in Eastern and Southern Africa, including missions to Comoros, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Zambia, Uganda, and Kenya. Country missions allowed a deep dive into WASH sector programs within a particular country—from policy to implementation and bottlenecks. It provided an opportunity to engage with local authorities, partners, communities, students, and healthcare facility workers at schools and health centers during site visits. I eagerly looked forward to engaging with the adolescent girls during school visits to observe their menstrual hygiene club sessions. Oh! And interacting with joyous mothers who had had safe deliveries thanks to UNICEF's holistic maternal and newborn child health interventions and accessible WASH services within their local health center. For me, it was the most fulfilling part of the job. It was a critical aspect of field monitoring/country office support and was very useful for compiling observational and anecdotal data for reports.

Lastly, missions also create a platform to witness the responsiveness of communities to the development assistance being provided by the UN and partners in the field at various levels.

## 9. What was your most rewarding experience during your assignment?

UNICEF ESARO commissioned two scoping studies into the enabling environment for WASH services in schools and healthcare facilities in the region. As a WASH Officer in ESARO, I served as lead researcher on the studies and authored the ensuing reports. The findings, a cohesive effort across the 21 countries, were timely in informing UNICEF's regional COVID-19 response in schools and healthcare facilities in ESAR, benefiting thousands on the continent. As a public health specialist, an African and a mom, it is truly rewarding to have contributed to the outcome.

## 10. What set of skills did you develop most throughout your assignment?

As a member of a strategic coordination and technical support office (UNICEF headquarters, donors, country offices, etc.), the skills I most developed were high-level representation, multi-stakeholder engagement, tact, networking, gravitas, and political savvy. Given the diverse nature of the region, I also developed the ability to quickly absorb large amounts of complex information, while being able to provide prompt solutions to situations as they arise. The ability to think on my feet is one skill I remain grateful to have sharpened during my three years as a JPO in ESAR.

## 11. What was your biggest challenge? How did you overcome it?

Supporting multiple countries with different socio-economic and geo-political realities requires a grasp of diverse contexts and dynamics. An appreciation of international relations, national politics, cultural/religious norms, and regional current events was essential to remaining effective on the job. Employing daily organizational skills, strategic planning, careful notetaking, with an eagerness to learn and adapt as well as having subscriptions to development news apps such as UN News, Reliefweb, and Devex is how I stayed current and ahead.



Delivering a presentation on public health and unsafe drinking water at the 2016 annual Water and Health Conference at the University of North Carolina, USA.

# PART 3

Tips, Thoughts &  
Reflections



## 12. What advice would you give to those who are considering applying to the JPO Program?

The JPO program is a unique career-enhancing opportunity to grow, learn, and develop one's passion within the exciting environment of the UN while being closely mentored and coached along the way. It provides funded training opportunities and a strategic platform to glean from seasoned team members.

To anyone interested in the program, approach it with an appetite to learn, the flexibility to adapt to new cultures, and an eagerness to catch career-enhancing insights. Consider it a stepping-stone to some of your wildest dreams.

### **To donor-country nationals:**

My advice would be to be as open-minded and as flexible as possible. You may be recruited for a post in a country that's different from yours socio-economically. Yet, there is so much you can contribute and so much you can learn as part of this unique cross-cultural exchange. See this as an opportunity to contribute to sustainable development in another part of the world, through an immersion in a new culture, cuisine, and way of life, and it will certainly be an experience you will

come to treasure. Try the local food. Learn a few sentences in the local language. Try the local beer. Have the full experience. Make a positive impact on the people around you.

### **To developing-country nationals:**

My advice here too would be to be open and adventurous. Your post is probably being funded by your government (congrats Rwanda!) or by a generous donor. This is a limited opportunity, for which only a few can qualify. Maximize it to the fullest. Make your country, continent, and family proud. You may be applying for a post in a country that's different from yours. Yet, there is so much you can contribute and learn from this rich cross-cultural exchange. This is your opportunity to contribute on the international stage. Prepare a solid application, read up on the organization and current events in your field for the test, and practice for the interview. You've got this!

### 13. What piece of advice would you give to those who are currently in the JPO Program?

To current JPOs, my advice would be to **LEARN, LEARN, LEARN.**

#### a. Maximize the opportunity of your JPO assignment to learn.

The JPO assignment is probably the only time in your growing career as an international professional where you may not have supervisory or management responsibilities. Maximize the time and opportunity this season provides in your career to learn as much as possible about your chosen career path and what comes next.

#### b. Make the most of mentoring and coaching opportunities.

Depending on the agency or UN department you are recruited by and your respective donor, the JPO Program presents a lot of on-the-job learning opportunities to enhance your career growth.

UNICEF, for example, provides the following options throughout your assignment:

- Professional coaching
- Mentoring programs
- Career counseling
- Online courses through the UNICEF Agora platform
- Stretch assignments
- Buddy program
- Career transition program.

During my three-year assignment with UNICEF, I was assigned a professional career coach who worked with me to streamline my career trajectory and develop my leadership style. I also benefitted from productive mentoring relationships with my supervisor and an external mentor within another UNICEF Office through a structured mentoring program. I attended numerous online and in-person courses, all centered on building my capacity to deliver WASH results for children.

Many thanks to the generous training budget allocated with my JPO assignment by my donor (the Kingdom of the Netherlands), I undertook a 2 months-stretch assignment to Uganda (July-August 2019). I supported UNICEF Uganda by leading a desk review of national standards for WASH in Healthcare Facilities, exploring bottlenecks and approaches for scale.

**Note:** Find out which learning, coaching, mentoring, and stretch assignment opportunities are available to you within the scope of your assignment. MAXIMIZE THEM.

**c. Go on a Stretch Assignment**

If your JPO post is located in a headquarters or regional office, as much as possible try to source a stretch assignment in a country office. If your post is in a country office, try to source a stretch assignment in a headquarters or regional office location. The advantage is that by the time your assignment is over, you will have accumulated experience across the aisle. Both offices have different styles of work, different responsibilities, and require different skill sets to be successful. Where strong political savvy may be required for high-level representation at the regional level, attention to detail will be needed for effective programming and implementation at the country level. Both skills will make you a more efficient manager. A stretch, in addition to your main post, allows you to build both and gain exposure across multiple duty stations in the process. My stretch assignment to the Uganda country office was a useful experience.

**d. Rely on colleagues for support**

Settling into a new country may seem daunting but the UN offers immense support to help you ease in. Some agencies have JPO buddy programs, where they introduce you to another JPO or simply other colleagues to help you find your way around.

For me, settling into a new city, as a young mom, with an infant was challenging. My UNICEF teammates were very supportive in helping me navigate the transition; and meet my professional targets, while maintaining a healthy work-life balance. As a new staff, do not hesitate to reach out to other colleagues to assist you. They are usually more than willing to help.

**e. Listen and Ask a lot of questions**

During your assignment, you will be in a new country, a new office, in a different culture, with its unique way of doing things. Remember to always be respectful of the local socio- cultural and religious norms and ask questions. Never assume knowledge. Also, never assume that how situations were resolved in a previous context would be

cookie-cutter in this one. Context, lived experience, and localization matter in development work. Refer to national colleagues for guidance. The rule of thumb is to ask as many questions as you need to deepen your understanding of the norms in your new surroundings.

#### **f. Network and Identify Mentors**

While the JPO assignment provides mentoring opportunities, it is important to source additional mentorship support, depending on your needs. For example, my JPO WASH mentor was male. As a female professional and a young mom, I reached out to a senior female to help me navigate the gender-specific challenges associated with my career growth. Identify areas where a mentor can help guide you during and perhaps beyond your assignment. Networking is a major factor in securing a mentor and establishing vital relationships as a JPO and for the future. Interact. Get to know people. Network. It's important.

#### **g. Maximize your JPO orientation**

The JPO orientation is one of the most exciting moments in your assignment. While some things may have gone virtual during COVID-19, in my first JPO year (pre-COVID, thankfully!), all UNICEF JPOs convened in New York for one week to immerse ourselves in the culture, values, and the actual building complex of the organization we had now been chosen to represent. I got to meet JPOs from Japan, Italy, Germany, Canada, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Netherlands, etc. Each day included sessions by different heads of units from HR, to Health, WASH, Innovation, Budget, and Policy with a special session with the then, newly appointed Executive Director, Madam Henrietta Fore (2018-2022). Maximize the opportunity to meet other JPOs and network.

#### **14. Any valuable tips you would like to share?**

During orientation, I took careful notes, much of which inspired this Q&A resource. Some tips from the speakers, I would like to share:

*“Lead and manage yourself well.”*

*“Work on your own and your manager’s goals.”*

*“Overcommunicate.”*

*“Flex to your manager’s style.”*

*“Show loyalty.”*

*“Value your manager’s time.”*

*“Do what others won’t.”*

*“Succeed with difficult people.”*

*“Keep learning.”*

*“Be careful who you give power to, to affect how you feel.”*

*“Develop the skill of empathy.”*

*“Know when to let go and don’t take things personally.”*

*“Be the best time manager you can think of.”*

*“Develop your competencies of writing and speaking.”*

*“Be nice, be friendly, be honest, develop your network.”*

*“Be solid, develop your humor. Your emotional stability will be tested, humor will be your rescue.”*

*“Document, assess, evaluate.”*

*“Learn how to negotiate.”*

*“Your career will depend on your field experience (outside headquarters), so do it now.”*

*“Think of your daily tasks with the eye of your next recruiter.”*

*“Always have your elevator pitch.”*

*“Find something you can own.”*

*“Follow the money. Get in the habit of doing budget analysis regardless of the sector you are in.”*

*“Country office experience is vital.”*

*“Make friends and do your best, treat people as you would wish to be treated.”*

*“Take the time to read stuff as a JPO, because the higher you go professionally, you won’t have the time to do so.”*

*“Keep dreaming.”*

### **15. After the JPO assignment, what next?**

Depending on the donor, the duration of the JPO assignment varies. Some donors fund a maximum of two years per JPO. The Dutch Government generously funded my three-year assignment which was subject to good performance. This had to be annually assessed and reported on by UNICEF, my host agency. Once your JPO contract (1-3 years) ends, the question then is: What next? How is life after the assignment?

### **Will I find a job within the organization?**

According to UN ECOSOC’s *A Guide to a Career with the United Nations*, while “the experience as a JPO can be the first step of a career in UN,” there is no commitment [...] from the agency and the donor government to hire the JPO into the system.”

In other words, the JPO contract guarantees you a funded step in the door but does not secure you a long-term assignment with the UN beyond the duration of your assignment. What happens beyond the 12-36 months of your JPO life is entirely up to you, with some mentorship and career coaching from your organization. So you have to be proactive. Network strategically with hiring managers. Start job hunting months in advance. Let them know you are open to work in a few months. A stretch assignment in a different duty station will diversify your experience. As a JPO, you qualify for posts advertised for internal and external candidates. Make use of your active contract to apply for those posts. Once your JPO assignment ends, you will only be able to apply for externally advertised positions. It is very important as a JPO that you take your post-assignment career growth and next steps into account in the early stages as you carry out your assignment.

### **What do I do if I don't find a job within the organization?**

This is also a possibility. After a few years within an organization you have grown to love, it may be time to consider other options.

Keep all your cards on the table. Apply within, as you apply externally for other posts for which you qualify. If all your diligent efforts to secure an internal post seem unsuccessful at the moment, it may as well be time to explore other horizons.

At the end of my JPO assignment, I had to broaden my horizons. I had gained international exposure and UN experience beyond my national portfolio and was ready to contribute to the global SDG agenda.

In such a case, bow out responsibly. Move on graciously, and maintain your UN networks and relationships, especially with mentors. Once you're qualified and have a good reputation, there is always room to return to the UN.



*Attending high level meetings with Government and senior UNICEF officials to drive SDG 6 in East and Southern Africa Region*

## Conclusion

Before I became a JPO, I was certain the only people who could become JPOs were citizens of high-income countries. Even with my years of UN experience at the national level, that's all I'd seen up to that point. So, that's all I knew.

When I first came across the vacancy for the JPO post that would eventually be mine, I hesitated to apply. **“UNICEF Vacancy: WASH Officer, Nairobi, Kenya (ESARO) (JPO - Dutch Sponsored - Open to Developing Country Nationals)”** it read. The tagline **“Open to Developing Country Nationals”** seemed too good to be true.

I did some research and confirmed that the Netherlands did indeed sponsor developing country nationals. It was my first attempt at an international post, so you can imagine my anxiety. I applied, was shortlisted, took the written test, was interviewed by UNICEF and, as they say, the rest is history. None of that would have been possible had I not taken the chance to apply.

Much can be learned from my experience. I want to share those reflections here with you.

### 1. Stay open to life's surprises

There is so much we do not know that we don't know. From a least-developed post-conflict African nation, I did not know that I too could someday start an international career with the UN as a JPO. I admired others whose careers had evolved along that pathway. Somehow, it was a dream that seemed out of reach.

Interestingly, just a few years later, thanks to the Government of the Netherlands, life would present me with the opportunity to realize a dream I never once thought was possible—to work with the UN internationally starting as a JPO.

### 2. The JPO Program is a stairway

The JPO Program is a holistic growth opportunity that can positively impact you professionally, personally, and socially. During your assignment you will get to work in a country you have perhaps never resided in, interact with people you have never met, seek to embrace a culture very different from yours, and deliver life-impacting development results while upholding the highest values and moral standards of the United Nations. You will make friends and forge relationships— some of which you will carry into life. You will savor new food, try new spices, and discover that there are a million ways to cook chicken. In your first UN meeting, you will hear more jargon and

acronyms than you've ever heard in your entire life. Don't worry, within three months you will be just as unable to speak plain English without your own set of favorite jargon. On a more serious note, if you can only approach your assignment with an "Explore, Learn, and Grow" mindset, the sky will merely be a stepping stone to higher heights.

### 3. Keep Dreaming

Lastly, as I draw the curtains on my reflections, I want to leave you with an inspiring phrase that repeatedly echoed throughout my JPO life: **Keep Dreaming.**

While the JPO assignment may/may not guarantee you an immediate follow-up job within your host organization, it will provide you with the international exposure and UN experience you need to build a promising portfolio in other multilateral organizations, donor entities, development banks, foreign missions, academia or the private sector.

With a target group of professionals under age 32, the JPO journey was never designed to be an end but a means to merely get started. It presents a rewarding stairway to a fulfilling career in sustainable development.



So, dear JPO, wherever you choose to land hereafter, my advice to you: **KEEP DREAMING...**



*Dutch-funded JPO Magdalene Matthews from Liberia with the 2018 UNICEF Cohort of JPOs at JPO Orientation in New York in June 2018*



UNICEF WASH in Healthcare Facilities Report with senior Government and UN officials in Zambia



Presenting WASHFIT, a joint WHO and UNICEF guidance tool to a health center administrator during a site visit in Uganda

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