The 60th Anniversary of the Netherlands Junior Professional Officer Programme

Continuous investment in young talent and UN development cooperation
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Foreword by Lilianne Ploumen, Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, for the e-book about the Junior Professional Officers (JPO) programme

In 1954, five young graduates of Wageningen University set out to join the Food and Agriculture Organization on a programme that would allow them to gain work experience while contributing their skills and talent to the organisation’s activities. Thanks to sponsorship by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, these young people were able to embark on careers in multilateral development cooperation. The programme came to be known as the Junior Professional Officers (JPO) programme of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In 1970 the Dutch government opened up the programme to developing countries. The aim was – and still is – that they should comprise 50 percent of the programme's candidates. Ameerah Haq from Bangladesh was the first, in 1976. In her contribution to this e-book she recounts how she subsequently rose to the position of Under-Secretary-General with the United Nations.

Her success story, albeit especially striking, is only one among many. For in the past six decades, the JPO programme has jump-started the international careers of thousands of young professionals. JPOs have proved invaluable to their host agencies, from UNICEF to the WHO to Bioversity International. And conversely, the experience acquired during the programme has greatly benefited many JPOs in their further personal and career development. Probably the greatest compliment the Dutch programme has received in its 60 years of existence is the vast proliferation of JPO programmes abroad. In recent decades, over 30 other countries have joined the Netherlands in sponsoring Junior Professional Officers. With states like Canada, Japan and Saudi Arabia joining the club, JPO sponsorship has truly gone global.

Moreover, in 2013 Nigeria signed a historic agreement with the UNDP to launch its own programme. This event was highly symbolic. It reflected not only the great value attached to the programme by developing countries, but also the tremendous progress these states have made in recent years, assisted by the very same UN agencies that the JPO programme supports. The participation of a large number of candidates from developing nations remains a virtually unique feature of the Dutch JPO programme. Although a small number of other states sponsor candidates of other nationalities, the extent to which the Dutch programme has developed the practice is unmatched.

This has not only served to enhance the global network of development cooperation experts and promote vigorous diversification among UN staff. It has also boosted leadership capacity within the home states of these Junior Professional Officers, since a number of them have opted to continue their work within the national administration or civil society of their home country.

The JPO programme was a brilliant idea, and so was opening it up to candidates from developing countries. It is a venture that my Ministry can be proud of. But the alumni are the ones who have made it such a wonderful success, through their courage, talent and sheer hard work. I hope that you will enjoy reading their stories as much as I have.

Lilianne Ploumen
Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation
MESSAGE ON THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DUTCH JUNIOR PROFESSIONAL OFFICER PROGRAMME

The Hague, 4th September 2014

The Dutch Junior Professional Officer Programme has provided generations of young people the opportunity to serve the United Nations system. Started as a pilot programme by the Government of the Netherlands in 1954, today the JPO programme includes more than 30 sponsoring countries, which provides precious additional human resources to the United Nations, and related international organizations. Most importantly, it has exposed thousands of young and qualified graduates to on-the-job training and learning opportunities, particularly in the field of technical cooperation. I am especially grateful to the Netherlands for generously sponsoring candidates from developing countries.

This hugely successful initiative has not only enriched the lives of many young people, but has also enabled the United Nations itself to advance its global mission of peace, sustainable development and human rights. I congratulate the Netherlands on the 60th anniversary of the programme and thank all the participants for their strong commitment to the United Nations. I look forward to the presence of many more Junior Professional Officers in our offices, halls and conference rooms as they bring their incomparable energies to our indispensable work.
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The third of September 1993 marked a major change in my life. Filled with optimism, and determined to make a change in the life of people in Nepal, I said good-bye to my family and friends to start a new phase in my professional life. I had decided to join the Associate Professional Officer (APO) Programme (a programme closely related to the JPO Programme) of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and move to Nepal for the World Health Organization (WHO), rather than take up the offer of settling as a general practitioner in the North of the Netherlands. Earlier, during multiple stays in Indonesia, I had witnessed the health consequences of social inequalities, in particular of children and women. The fact that place of birth and assets of the family determined one’s access to health care and education left me with a great sense of unfairness. I was ready to make a personal contribution to address this inequality.

The fact that place of birth and assets of the family determined one’s access to health care and education left me with a great sense of unfairness. I was ready to make a personal contribution to address this inequality.

More than 20 years later, writing a contribution for this e-book, I can still recall my sense of curiosity and eagerness to engage, and particularly my commitment to work with people. This is why I have made the choice to work with the
United Nations, and this is why I am still working in the area of development. I am grateful that I have had the unique opportunity to start as a Junior Public Health Professional and experience the programmatic realities in different resource-constraint settings, with strong professional guidance by my colleagues in WHO at national, regional and global level.

In Nepal, I was working in the area of child health, focusing on diarrheal diseases and respiratory infections. I was based in the Ministry of Health, sharing the room with two national counterparts and one development partner. I could not imagine a better introduction to public health, and a more supportive team. Especially (late) Kumarji taught me the wisdom of combining passion with patience for the best outcomes.

Politics are everywhere. At one moment, I was accused of a hidden agenda, before I even had an agenda. I was devastated, but thanks to the supportive WHO representative, I sailed through. I also recall one highly committed Nepali colleague, who once cried out: “Jantine, when I was treating patients, they would be happy that I would take care of them. Now, I have partners who are complaining and blocking me – I can’t deal with all these different personalities, I believe I am not fit for public health”.

My next posting was in Africa, working in the Ministry of Health on the different aspects of reproductive health in Zambia, including family planning, safe motherhood, and youth. It was such a great opportunity to get hands-on experiences in another field and be involved in health facility surveys, operational research, policy development, programming and resource mobilization, to name a few. The mid-1990s was also a very interesting time to be in Zambia, to be engaged in the diverse process of health sector reforms and observe the dynamics between the development partners.

I remember we were doing research among Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs) and driving in a remote area, until we reached a small village. The TBA had been waiting for us and proudly approached us, saying: “you are coming for me”. We were the visitors from far, and she was at the purpose of our visit, which made her special among the villagers. There have been many discussions about the engagement of TBAs in safe motherhood. Yet, they are still a source of support, as I have discovered in my current work as Chief Gender Equality and Diversity at UNAIDS. Women living with HIV still turn to TBAs when they do not feel welcomed at the health centre and/or experience violation of their sexual and reproductive rights. Clearly, traditional care systems continue to exist for a reason.

In my days, an APO was able to get an extension for the fifth year, as long as the host organization would support the next year. I was very lucky, because I was also granted a third duty station, namely Namibia. I was tasked to work on reproductive health and HIV. The programme for prevention of vertical transmission of HIV was slowly unfolding; we studied the occurrence of abortion – a continuing challenge around the world; we designed youth friendly awards for schools; we developed a nutrition policy for HIV patients. As in Zambia, it was a wonderful experience to work with my local colleagues and to slowly expand my understanding of public health issues and practices.

I would in no way have had a similar learning curve, if I did not have the great opportunity to work as an APO within the UN. Because of my programmatic experiences, and my exposure to a wide range of public health matters in different settings, I was first recruited by WHO and later able to transition to UNAIDS, to become the head of office in Uganda and Ukraine. I trust that I will again draw on the experiences I have gained and the networks I have built in those days, in my next job as head of the UNAIDS Office in Kenya. I always carry the faces and the stories with me of people I met on the road, be it a woman with a sick child in a mountain village in Nepal; the health worker in Zambia telling about the cultural practices around maternal deaths, or the girl living with HIV in Namibia, experiencing stigma and discrimination, as elsewhere around the world. Being an APO has also helped me to relate to country realities, and more importantly, respect the challenges faced by those most vulnerable, in particular women and girls.
It was 1976 when I applied to the United Nations. I was finishing my studies at New York University and there was a notice saying that UNDP would be conducting campus interviews. I applied, went through the interview process, and was delighted to be offered a job. But just two weeks later, I read in the New York Times that UNDP was going through a major financial crisis. And indeed a few days after that I received the call I was dreading from the recruitment office – they had to rescind my offer.

I was deeply disappointed, but set about looking for another job. So imagine my surprise when a few weeks later I received another call from the recruitment office – this time telling me that the Dutch government were sponsoring a programme to fund third country nationals in UNDP, and asking if I would be interested in being a candidate. Of course I jumped at the chance and so it was that I joined UNDP.

My first assignment was in Indonesia, and I have very happy memories of that time. Rather than the traditional form of training job where you spend your time in the office, reading up all the background papers and shadowing more senior staff, the approach in UNDP was to put you in at the deep end – which I found both stimulating and a very effective way to learn. I shared an office with another Dutch JPO, Koo de Vries, and we were given real autonomy in our work. We ran our own projects and had our own set of responsibilities and outcomes. One of my first tasks was to help the Indonesian government develop their Hotel and Tourism Training Centre in Bali, arguably one of the more desirable UN assignments one can think of!
which gave me ample opportunities to travel in that beautiful country. It was also a fascinating time to be in Indonesia from a developmental point of view – at that time the government’s planning agency BAPPENAS was renowned in Asia for being particularly advanced and I made many contacts in the government, some of whom remain friends today. Obviously my contacts were junior then, but some of them are Ministers now!

Of course UNDP ultimately regularised me and I continued my career in the UN system. But I will always credit the Dutch for their generosity, foresight and vision which allowed me to join the Organization in the first place. I truly do not believe I would be an Under-Secretary-General today if it had not been for that support at that crucial time.

And more widely I believe that the JPO programme is a remarkable tool. It allows young people, who might not otherwise have had the opportunity, to enter the Organization and gain invaluable experience. It builds capacity in different ways - whatever path the JPO then takes in life, whether they stay with the UN their whole career as I did, or whether they return home and apply their experience in their own country. And it builds a network that reaches across continents and down the years – between the sponsor nation and the JPOs, between the JPOs themselves, and beyond.

My experience as a JPO was formative for me – and I am sure I have more empathy for interns and trainees as a result! I consider myself to have been extraordinarily fortunate in my career – and I will never forget how it started.
“Any organization would benefit from a constant stream of young professionals from different cultures who, although inexperienced, bring new ideas, ‘fresh air’ and a lot of energy.”

During my final year at Business School in the Netherlands, 1981/82, I applied for the JPO Programme. I had always been interested in international affairs and had focused my studies on international economics and international affairs.

My motivation to apply for a JPO posting was certainly driven by idealistic motives, but also by a feeling that a ‘deep dive’ into another culture would be much more insightful than ‘backpacking trips’. For me a JPO posting was a very attractive opportunity to get experience in international affairs and economics as well as a possibility for adventure.

I was accepted for a JPO post at UNDP in Bujumbura. Burundi unfortunately has had periods of terrible civil unrest, during the early 1970’s and again during the 1990’s. But in the 1980’s the country was relatively calm.

I must say that the JPO Programme indeed brought us (I married in 1981) a great opportunity to work and live abroad, working for a highly respected organization, hopefully being able to support local development, and a lot more.

After following a course at the ‘Tropeninstituut’ in Amsterdam to prepare for cultural challenges and attending a language school in Paris to improve our French, we flew from Brussels to Bujumbura. In these days before faxes, internet and email, the only ‘fast’ communication was through telex or telephone, both on request only, and very expensive. Therefore we were very surprised to find a soldier waiting for us at the bottom of the stairs when leaving the aircraft. He held up a sign with our name, but he was clearly expecting someone more senior: he told us we were too young... Finally we were able to convince him. This was a good introduction to the high status the UN enjoyed, certainly in those days. Customs and immigration all went very smoothly.

The two years we spent in Bujumbura were extremely impactful. First of all, the fantastic experience of working with so many different nationalities and secondly the professional experience of working within the UN system and with Burundi’s government agencies. Sometimes complex and a bit bureaucratic, but always interesting and with purpose. In addition to the pure work experience, there were very enlightening cultural experiences.

I remember all the staff of the UNDP office going to the airport to see off the Resident Representative going on his annual leave. Other experiences were more emotional and tragic, like handling serious or fatal traffic accidents involving UN staff. That type of experience remains deeply embedded to this day.

My JPO experience has had a profound and lasting impact on both my personal and my professional development. Professionally, I have continued to work in very international environments, albeit in the private sector. And there I quickly learned that large organizations share many characteristics, whether they are private or public. Experience is ‘transferable’. I am now working for Heineken, and interestingly (and to my great satisfaction) it is very active in Africa, including being the largest private company in Burundi, partnering with the government. Heineken is very active in securing local sourcing for raw materials, working with development organizations to promote agriculture. And we go through great lengths to find, hire and develop local talent. I am lucky to be asked to
speak to, and work with many of them. So part of my work comes very close to development cooperation. I regularly work with international public institutions like the World Bank and International Finance Corporation. I am also a trustee of the Heineken Africa Foundation that sponsors health projects in African countries where Heineken operates.

At the personal level, we have kept in touch with many of the people we worked and lived with in Burundi. And whenever I am back in Africa (be it privately or for work) I feel home the moment the airplane door opens. We remain involved with NGO’s that work in developing countries.

I would think that any organization would benefit from a constant stream of young professionals from different cultures who, although inexperienced, bring new ideas, ‘fresh air’ and a lot of energy. The fact that JPO’s from developing countries are also supported makes this point even stronger.

Longer term, a pool of professionals is created and maintained. They can formally work in the field of development cooperation, be it within the UN system or for national governments or NGO’s. Others, (like me) no longer formally work in the field of development cooperation, but still carry, cherish and apply the experience in another way.

Concluding: I am very grateful that I was given the opportunity to participate, and I strongly recommend the JPO Programme!
I am a national from Burundi and I started at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in May 1990 as a JPO funded by the Dutch government. Coming from a developing country, I was interested in global development issues, dynamics and challenges beyond my own country. I was very interested in interconnectedness of the global economy, how poor developing countries are affected and most importantly how these issues are addressed in a multilateral context. Where else would one go for multilateralism if not at the United Nations? I was already working in my country as a Head of Operations for a newly established investment and commercial bank, but I started to scan and search for opportunities at the UN. I fell in love with UNDP because of its mandate, which at the time covered a large spectrum of economic and social areas. When I applied it did not take long to receive a response; I was informed about the JPO Programme and a few months later I was informed I would be recruited as a junior economist for UNDP in Guinea Bissau funded by the Dutch government. I was intrigued and amazed by the fact that a government that was not mine was generous enough to take me on board and fund my first years in UNDP. This for me was the real manifestation of multilateralism, a real expression of cooperation between countries to ensure that those countries that cannot afford to have their qualified junior professionals experience working in the UN multilateral environment are also represented.

My first experience in Guinea Bissau was very exciting but also sobering: exciting because of the UNDP working environment, different nationalities and cultures, many exciting projects, and in charge of writing and publishing the first Development Cooperation Report; sobering because the country was undergoing a structural adjustment programme with many drastic budget cuts and layoffs in the social sector, a sector that was already fragile and under-resourced.

“The Dutch JPO Programme has fostered better understanding among nations by demonstrating that governments can reach beyond their borders and promote global citizenship, mutual support and friendship”
My JPO years in Guinea Bissau remain very dear to me both from a personal and professional perspective; I met my future husband in Bissau, got married and had my first baby during my third year as JPO. The Dutch government was once again very generous to extend my contract for a different assignment as a Programme Manager. I had fallen in love with the work of the UN and the Dutch government, which was so committed to my success! I will never forget a visit to Dakar, Senegal at the Netherlands’ Embassy. I was collecting data for the Development Cooperation Report for Guinea Bissau from different bilateral cooperation agencies which were not present in Bissau. I was very well received by the First Counsellor, as if I were a Dutch citizen, and he offered to organize and facilitate working sessions with key partners to facilitate my work, which he did. He was very pleased to see a JPO funded by his government and wanted to make sure that I had all the support I needed to do a very good job.

From this amazing JPO experience my belief in multilateralism grew stronger! I moved to Guinea Conakry as the lead manager of the Human Development Initiative (HDI) project, then Senior Programme Manager in Ethiopia; Deputy Resident Representative in Mauritania; Chief Budget Strategy and Policy at UNDP Headquarters in New York and since August 2011, I am the Director of Management and Administration at UN Women. This journey would not have been possible if it was not for this JPO Programme! I am in touch with a few colleagues from developing countries who were also in the same programme and we are all thankful for this amazing opportunity. The Dutch JPO Programme has fostered better understanding among nations by demonstrating that governments can reach beyond their borders and promote global citizenship, mutual support and friendship; the programme has also enhanced cultural diversity in the United Nations.

Thank you again for this opportunity to share my JPO experience and the impact it had on my life and on the UN system!
With a master’s degree in cultural anthropology and multiple trips through West Africa over the years, of course I grabbed the opportunity when I saw the vacancy for a post in the UNFPA country office in Niger sponsored by the Dutch JPO Programme. For my finals I had done a gender analysis of UNFPA’s policy and thereafter I had been involved with NGOs working on gender and reproductive/sexual health & rights. Also, my boyfriend and I had travelled extensively through West Africa in old cars, selling everything from old fridges to old TV’s along the way, so I had been in Niger before. A job with UNFPA in Niger brought many things together. And it gave me the opportunity to take the path that I had been working for and dreaming about for a long time.

From October 1995 – December 1997 I worked in the Niger country office. I was involved in the monitoring and evaluation of development projects, contributed to the development of a new country programme, coordinated the working group on HIV/AIDS and represented UNFPA in various meetings. My tasks were quite broad, starting small scale but soon I was getting more responsibilities.

At first this was quite an alienating experience. At one moment you’re an anthropologist looking for a ‘real’ job instead of going from one freelance assignment to the other, then you’re working with the UN, with colleagues from various countries, appearing on national television with a UNFPA sign right in front of you. Quite a thing to get used to, but very exhilarating at the same time.

At the beginning my tasks were not very clear, and it turned out that the Representative would be leaving the following week. I decided to just plunge into it, taking up things along the way. Luckily the national staff was willing to guide me and a JPO at UNDP gave me tips about working as a JPO and about life in Niamey. From being a young woman digging out stranded cars in the Sahara to being an employee of an international organization, life certainly works in mysterious ways.

At that time, Dutch JPOs could still apply for a second assignment. When I saw the vacancy at UNFPA HQ in New York (at the Gender Theme Group), things once again seemed to ‘click’. After being selected I left for NY in January 1998 where I stayed until January 2000.

From a small country office in Niger to the hustle & bustle of New York City; quite a transition.

From 1995 to 1997 I worked in the Niger country office of UNFPA, United Nations Population Fund. I was involved in the monitoring and evaluation of development projects, coordinated the working group on HIV/AIDS, and represented UNFPA in various meetings. My tasks were quite broad, starting small but soon I was getting more responsibilities.

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reproductive health/rights programmes for country offices, selecting consultants etc.

I don’t think that in any other job, at that point in my life and career, I would have had the opportunity to work at so many different levels. My time in the JPO Programme broadened my view, the way I look at things from different perspectives, combining a solid substantive background and idealism with the practicalities of day to day reality. My JPO experience boosted my confidence. It taught me cultural sensitivity without giving way to cultural relativism. And when talking to people professionally, I still find that my time at the UN is considered a very positive feature in my career.

At the personal level, my experiences both in Niamey and in NY were life changing. In many positive ways that I have described above, but unfortunately also marked by a personal tragedy at the end of my assignment in NY, with the passing of my husband after a long battle with cancer. Therefore, upon returning to the Netherlands I took some time to get my life back on track.

Nevertheless, I was quite quickly recruited by Amnesty International in April 2000, where I have been working since, the last couple of years as Head of the Activism Department. While my department mainly focusses on broadening the supporter base of the organization in the Netherlands, I am also quite active at the international level in the Global Group on Activism. That group, with Amnesty colleagues from ten countries and the international secretariat, works to raise the profile of activism in the movement and supports sections to develop activism in their countries and to increase the number of people that support Amnesty.

The JPO Programme provides the UN system with young, well educated people from different walks of life. Country offices are often understaffed and face many challenges, so an influx of people who are very willing to work and learn is certainly a plus. Whether a JPO really provides added value depends on many things and starts with a good selection process. The fact that the Dutch JPO Programme is serious about its selection process and provides training before going on assignment is crucial to the success of the programme. So, in my view the JPO Programme greatly benefits all ‘players in the field’: it provides the UN system with an influx of young staff members who bring in fresh energy and are willing to work hard, and on the other hand the programme can be an extremely important boost for the professional lives of young people and thus also benefits their future employers, be it in development cooperation or other sectors.

I would not have missed it for the world.
My name is Katie Ogwang, AKITE. I am a Ugandan national hailing from the Northern part of Uganda. I hold a bachelor degree in Psychology from Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda. I have complemented my education with several specialized short courses and three intensive post-degree studies in International Human Rights, Refugee Law and Gender studies.

I am delighted to have been contacted to contribute to this e-book. I wish to thank the Dutch government for providing funding opportunities to support young women and men from developing countries like Uganda.

My inspiration to work for the United Nations dates back to the period of my life between 1995 – 2000, this was the peak of the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) rebel insurgency in Northern Uganda. As a student at that time, my family members, relatives and friends were displaced by the conflict and found refuge and solace in nearby villages which were protected by the government soldiers. The war affected my family in several ways such as loss of family ties, loss of property and even our home was burnt down by the rebels. Given the magnitude of the conflict, different NGOs and United Nations agencies such as WFP, UNICEF and UN OCHA came forward to offer humanitarian assistance to the displaced populations in my home town. Seeing the different kinds of support that these agencies provided to ensure that displaced populations could access basic necessities without discriminating between race, religion or ethnicity inspired me to dedicate my life to the noble cause of humanitarian work. As observed, humanitarian work is a calling and it is always rewarding to see those sweet smiles on faces of those whom we serve.

In 2003, my journey to joining the United Nations started when I was recruited by UNHCR on a short term contract. This contract had no guarantee for extension after its expiry. I was always worried as to whether my contract would be extended because I was supporting my young siblings who were at school. In 2004, due to financial constraints, I was put on a United Nations Volunteers (UNV) contract which meant less pay but at least there was some sort of job.
security, since the contract was renewable on a yearly basis. In 2009, I got a JPO position to Rwanda and this opportunity marked a very important milestone in my personal career and professional life. Through the Dutch JPO Programme, I was able to become a professional staff within UNHCR. Serving as a JPO Associate Community Services Officer in Rwanda was the most exciting experience in my international career. I met new colleagues, faced new challenges and embarked on learning opportunities. I made the best out of every single opportunity and this has helped me to realize my goals.

UNHCR is one of the most challenging but interesting UN agencies around the world, not to mention one of the most committed. My thirteen years of experience with UNHCR operations in Africa and in the Middle-East have been extremely rewarding, especially knowing that I am serving fellow human beings, less fortunate than me, who have been forced to flee their homes. Within UNHCR I have been able to contribute to responding to different refugee emergencies, the most challenging being in Ethiopia in 2011.

In fact, writing this story gives me vivid memories of the days when I would go to the camps in Dollo Ado, collect women and children and take them to the health centres for medical care. These women and children were exhausted and malnourished. There were times when I would roll up my UNHCR long sleeve T-shirt and make porridge for families who could not afford to cook for themselves because they were so sick or too weak and helpless to do anything at all. Despite this though, their spirits were not broken. This inspired me too persevere too.

Thinking about my JPO assignment, the random words that come to my mind are: exciting, different, learning, fascinating, development, nurturing, friendship, networking, mature, professional, international career, change, and opportunity.

To new JPOs, I would advise to be open and flexible to change, see every challenge as an opportunity to bring out the best in themselves, think of the bigger picture and finally, make the best of every opportunity.
Growing up in an isolated, mountainous part of Indonesia (Tana Toraja, S. Sulawesi), I became familiar with wet rice cultivation and small scale Arabica coffee production. This inspired me to study tropical agriculture at Wageningen University (1947-54) with the intention of becoming an agricultural extension agent to help small farmers in Indonesia. The Dutch agricultural attaché in Washington, D.C. arranged for me and two others to do my required practical training in a semi-arid part of Texas, where I got my driver’s license, learned to operate a tractor and farm machinery, and irrigation of crops like cotton and sorghum. The Dutch government allowed me to postpone my obligatory military service since my education had been interrupted by three years in Japanese concentration camps. In addition, after WWII the government was promoting emigration abroad. I started to apply for jobs in Indonesia. Then I learned of the Associate Expert Programme (a programme closely related to the JPO Programme) and applied for it. They were trying to place me as an Associate Expert with a Dutch soil survey specialist in Myanmar. As the approval by that government was delayed, I accepted to work with a Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) agronomist at an experimental farm in Cyrenaica (Eastern Libya), starting late 1954.

In my one and a half years at this farm, I was in close contact with Arab speaking people of different nationalities. I was, so to say, ‘immersed’ in Arab culture and language. For example, as entertainment on Friday evenings one could sit for long periods to listen to Umm Qalthum, a famous Egyptian singer. Lengthy storytelling and exaggeration was another cultural feature. We usually had lunch in a small nearby restaurant, where the cook claimed that he had been General Rommel’s cook when the German forces pushed towards Egypt in 1941. At most he could have been a dishwasher in Rommel’s headquarters. Exposure to the local language and culture later became an asset when FAO offered me positions in Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Tunisia. One dubious outcome: upon arrival in Tunis to take up my position as Project manager, I visited the national Project Director prior to contacting the UNDP resident representative, who, as I learned later, was dismayed about my apparent breach of protocol. In Syria, I helped to identify and formulate the second WFP “Food for Development” project (storage of barley for emergency feeding of sheep during drought years). The Director General, Dr Boerma, personally visited the main project site in the Syrian steppe.

In Iraq (1956-1960) I met my wife, who was an American teacher at the Al Mansour School for girls. The wedding ceremony was at the Dutch legation and the National Protestant Church. I did one year of additional studies in Davis, California, then returned to the “field” when FAO offered me a position in Syria. Our two oldest children were born in Damascus, the youngest in Alexandria, Egypt. In Tunis our children enjoyed participating in the Sinterklaas
celebration of the Dutch community. I was then interviewed for a position at the FAO/World Bank investment centre. Working in the investment centre gave me the chance to get experience in identifying and preparing agricultural investment projects (World Bank and IFAD) in the Middle East, North Africa and Central/Eastern Europe. After seven years at FAO, the Development Department in the Netherlands asked me if I would be interested in a position as agriculturalist at the WB. I was interviewed in Washington, D.C. Partly for family reasons (children’s education, closer to my wife’s parents) I accepted an appointment at the EMENA (Europe, Middle East, North Africa) Projects Department. This work required a considerable amount of travel, but there were special perks: after every 200 days of travel the spouse could come along. My wife thus joined me on missions to Yemen, Tunisia, Syria, Hungary and Bulgaria. After retiring in 1989, I did a few missions for FAO’s investment centre. While in Albania, I had to be hospitalized for a heart problem. The previous dictator had been a heart patient, and I was treated by his personal cardiologist.

After WWII, many countries previously ruled by colonial powers became independent. They were assisted by the UN (through UNDP) and through bilateral agreements, to strengthen administration, health, agricultural, educational and other infrastructure. Multilateral organizations such as the WB and IMF were established to provide financial support. Initially, expertise was available through specialists who had served in the former colonies. As fewer of them were available, and expertise in the host countries was still scarce, the Netherlands initiated the Associate Expert Programme to give young graduates the opportunity to gain experience in developing countries and then serve in the development programmes. Over time, more specialists became available from the newly independent countries. The specialists who had gone through the Associate Expert Programme, in general had less of a ’neo colonial’ stigma, as seen by the host countries, than their older predecessors. Furthermore, they sometimes were able to provide advice which was not in line with host country policies, and partially as a result of my AE experience, I sometimes disagreed with conditionalities imposed on the recipient country.
It is an honour and a pleasure for me to share my personal experience as a Junior Professional Officer with those who are interested. The value and importance of the Dutch JPO Programme cannot be emphasized enough, both for the organization I work in – the International Labour Organization (ILO) – and for my personal career development. The ILO has been able to benefit from the Dutch JPO programme for over 40 years and in that period numerous JPOs funded by the Netherlands government have enjoyed working for the ILO, and many have remained with the ILO (or with the UN System) throughout their careers.

As can be expected from the UN agency mandated to promote decent working conditions and human resource development, the ILO has always ensured that JPOs are fully integrated into the ILO workforce and as such participate in and contribute to ILO’s core activities. ILO JPOs have thus been able to make a valuable contribution to the work of the organization while acquiring useful professional experience and exposure to the UN system.

As for my own personal experience, from an early age onwards I always had a somewhat inexplicable and untameable desire to live and work overseas. I was particularly attracted to far-away exotic developing countries, and I could not stop staring at the map of the world, memorizing names of capital cities and countries and dreaming about them... I have never been able to figure out quite where my eagerness to live abroad stemmed from, but it probably was a mixture of idealism, curiosity and quest for adventure.

At a certain stage, I was mesmerized by the enthusiastic stories of a friend’s uncle who was working for an ILO project in the Gambia as a JPO through the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I could not believe that he was actually directly involved in helping poor people to set up small enterprises and build up livelihoods so that they could send their children to school! Realizing the central role of jobs and incomes in the lives of people worldwide, I knew from that moment that I wanted to work for the ILO as a JPO.

And so it happened; in early 1987, I successfully completed the JPO selection process and I was sent a couple of job descriptions with different agencies to choose from. Among the job descriptions there was one with the ILO: Programme Officer in the ILO sub-regional office for the South Pacific, duty station Suva, Fiji! That was as far away and exotic as it could possibly be, so my choice was already made. What followed were two fantastic, rewarding years in the South Pacific, albeit somewhat complicated by two coup-d’etats in Fiji within one year. The seemingly idyllic South Pacific experience actually offered me direct exposure to the serious development challenges that many small-island countries are struggling with.

The contrast with my next assignment could not be greater; from calm and serene Suva to one of the most vibrant mega-cities in the world: Bangkok. In 1989 I was assigned for a period of 2 years as JPO on social security in the ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. My task was to help my boss in his efforts to advise countries in the region on the design and/or improvement of their social security systems as a strategy to combat poverty; not an easy task in that part of the world, where over 60% of the population were struggling to get out of poverty.

Now, 25 years later, I still have vivid memories of some of my incredible missions from Bangkok; for example a trip to Mongolia, which had just opened up its borders to UN agencies. I was assigned for three weeks to Ulaanbaatar, to
assess with some government officials (through an interpreter) the scope and nature of ancient existing (Soviet) social security provisions vis-à-vis ILO social security standards. It was a fascinating adventure and it is hard to imagine an experience with a steeper learning curve. But perhaps that would have to be my mission to the run-down and destitute social security office in Rangoon, in what was still officially called Burma, only months after a bloody crack-down on demonstrations against the military regime. Soon after, a total ban on development support was imposed on the country, which lasted until political reform finally took place just two or three years ago.

My last assignment as JPO took me from incredible Asia to the social security department in ILO Headquarters in Geneva; ‘arguably’ the most ugly Office in Geneva, which is ‘unarguably’ one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Dutch JPOs at the time had the luxury of a fifth year as a JPO, conditional on the host agency providing resources for further assignments. The two-and-a-half year assignment in ILO HQ allowed me to gain invaluable professional experience in global politics, social security schemes, employment creation and poverty eradication strategies, child labour, social dialogue and the protection of basic workers’ rights. I realized that I was ‘hooked’ for ever to the ILO and the fascinating World of Work.

Nonetheless, after almost seven years of living abroad, I decided that it was time for me and my family to touch base in my home country again. I took up a position in the Netherlands Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment where, from 1994 to 2007, I was privileged to work on a wide variety of fascinating and inspiring national, European and global social and economic issues, and I was of course grateful to also be able to continue working on ILO and UN matters. I regularly formed part of delegations to the annual International Labour Conference or to the UN Commission for Social Development and I always continued to feel at home in the international working environment.

Perhaps inevitably, given my passion for the ILO, in 2007 I decided to accept a position as Director of Partnerships and Development Cooperation in ILO Headquarters, where I resumed working on the promotion of decent work through technical cooperation together with the international donor community. An internal move in 2011 to the position of Director of the Sectoral Activities Department has allowed me to work on most relevant issues such as decent work in global value chains in the textiles and manufacturing industries; social dialogue in the oil and gas sector; promotion of sustainable livelihoods in rural areas and many other interesting topics.

My experiences as Dutch JPO have had a direct positive impact on my entire personal and professional career development. In fact, the Dutch JPO Programme has contributed to me realizing my childhood ambitions of working on decent work and global sustainable development. I am grateful for this fantastic opportunity I was given, and I consider myself privileged to have benefitted from the generous programme. Now, as a director in the ILO, I acknowledge the invaluable contribution of the JPO Programme to UN agencies. Many colleagues in senior positions around me are former JPOs, and as such the programme has evolved into a source of potential future talent for the Organisation. The programme has contributed significantly to the important goal of ensuring adequate representation of Dutch nationals in UN agencies. I congratulate the Netherlands government with the 60th anniversary of the Dutch JPO programme and I hope that the ILO will continue to benefit from the government’s generosity in the future to help realize the important mandate of Decent Work for All.
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