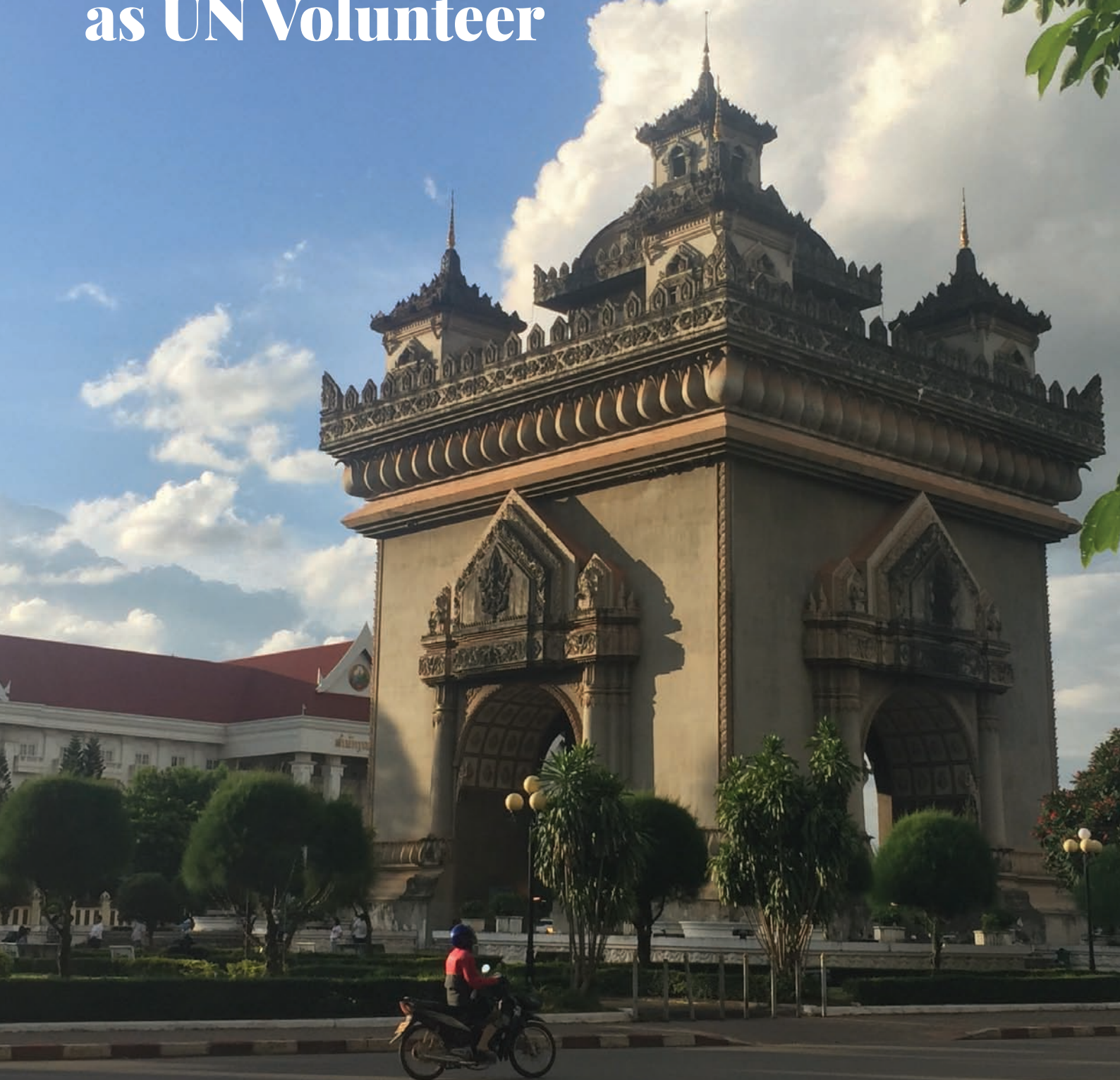




# My 180-day journey in Lao PDR as UN Volunteer



## This is how I started this journey

### About my wish to serve the global community with my profession

Throw back to the day when I took International Journalism as my major, the decision more or less was made based on my enthusiasm in photography and video production, but also about my passion in addressing global issues and contributing to development agenda through words and pixels. I did realise my goals by joining different volunteer tours to serve in developing countries such as Sri Lanka and Southern Thailand, where I enjoyed so much in sharing my technique and knowledge to impact others' lives while bettering my understanding towards foreign cultures and most pressing developmental issues. Having tasted the joy of serving the community with my profession, along with my curiosity how the United Nations co-work with the government to enhance local development, I'm motivated to join the United Nations Volunteers programme.

I still remember on my first day of work, my then-supervisor, Aijamal, has asked me what does volunteerism mean to me. My answer was, 'volunteerism is to give what the vulnerable needed'.



We attended UNV welcoming dinner on our second working day, where we have our very first conversation with other international UN volunteers.



Every UN volunteer will take a photo on her first working day for her introduction post on UNV in Lao PDR Facebook page. So do I!

## Work

### More than expected: Engaging in all-rounded communication tasks with UNV and UNDP

Originally I was assigned to serve the UN Volunteer Program Office in Lao PDR. With some personnel arrangement, I got chance to be one of the team members in the Public Information Unit under UN Development Programme as well. This unexpected move has sparked extra joy and fulfilment throughout my whole volunteer journey in Laos.

As UN Volunteer in Communications and Event Management, my major responsibilities and duties are to develop communication materials, support in planning, organizing, promoting and reporting on awareness event and workshops, produce and edit films, support in social media management and assist the implementation of UN Communications Group activities and events. During my term, my major contributions to the team included producing communication materials for United Nations Day event, organizing workshop and coordinate the event to celebrate International Volunteer Day (IVD) and to raise awareness on volunteerism, as well as expanding the readership of UNV Facebook page.

In the preparation of UN Day, I was responsible for the design of online invitation, pull-up banner, event banners and photo frames for the public event targeting Lao youth. In addition to producing communication materials, I helped launch a behavioural change campaign on UN Facebook page, encouraging the community to adopt healthy and responsible lifestyle by reducing plastic use, taking climate actions and adopt healthy eating habit. Three promotional videos demonstrating possible actions were produced with scholarship awardess who were also working on plastic-reduction awareness campaign. Through this event, I understand a lot more about the serious environmental issues faced by Laos and how we can alleviate the problem thorough public awareness events in Lao context. I'm happy to see that some of the teenagers did start bringing their own bags when go shopping and bring reusable bottles for water refills.

Apart the youth event and social media campaign, the PIU team and I have filmed and edited a short video describing how the UN country office promotes plastic reduction by supporting a boat-racing team in Laos. My teammates and I were facilitating each other in order to get quality photos, shots and interviews for future publications. Although the shooting videos on a hot and humid day was uneasy, it was one of my best working days in Laos as I could feel the strong team spirit and have enjoyed my very first filming experience on a 60-seat wooden boat. The film attracted more than 300 reactions and received more than 7,200 views organically on the the Facebook page of UN in Lao PDR.



The video demonstrating environmental friendly practices



Lao youths were taking photos with the the photo frames to help promotes healthy lifestyle on the UN Day.



Filming on a speedy boat wasn't easy yet I had so much fun on that shooting day.



Moving on to the 2018 Round Table Meeting (RTM), this year UNV Office was invited to incorporate part of the IVD celebration to RTM's side event, Development Exhibition, showcasing how volunteers' efforts help communities in Laos get well prepared to deal with existing problems and issues. A set of 9 pull-up banners, featuring volunteer stories shared by six international and national non-profitable organizations, were showcased in the booth of Department of International corporation under Ministry of Planning and Investment in Laos. With another UN Volunteer Olga, we stationed at the booth and introduced UNV's mission and answered visitors' questions about volunteerism. More than 400 guests, including Lao government counterparts, delegates and development partners have visited the booth, showing their appreciations to their efforts on local development agenda. I also assisted the event set-up, photo-taking and live broadcast on YouTube during the main sessions.



Another part of the celebration on IVD set on an event showcasing volunteers' contributions to building resilient communities in Laos. I managed tasks ranging from forming partnership with development partners and coordinating preparation of the event, to producing promotional materials, event planning and set-up. During the preparatory stage of the event, I have worked with representatives from different international agencies, including Korean International Cooperation Agency, Japan International Cooperation Agency, France Volontaires, Cuso International and etc. In our discussions, I learnt how people from different countries see volunteerism and how their scope of work delivers direct impact Lao development. They also inspired me on furthering the impact of volunteerism by designing workshops where international and local volunteers can work and learn on specific issue together.



Lastly, one of my responsibilities is to manage UN Volunteer in Lao PDR's Facebook by publishing posts, producing graphics, social media cards and videos regarding volunteerism. Events and UNV-related campaign and workshop. such as UNV booth at Vientiane Annual Education Fair, UNV workshop in partnership with American Centre, promotions for national and online volunteers, IVD celebrations and more were covered.

## Challenges and reflections

### Cultural differences and self-doubt issue

The foremost challenge I faced were some cultural differences between Hong Kong and Laos. Hong Kong is renowned of its fast-paced living style, which people usually have tight schedule, sometimes have to rush for the next appointments and work quickly. In the first month of my assignment, I was a bit surprised by the slow-paced, relaxing work style in Laos even I have had mental prepared for it beforehand. I have also doubted why my national colleague was conservative on proposals that involves partnership with local institutes.

Later I realised working slow (living slow too) is a norm in Laos (Some people even joke that Lao PDR stands for Lao, Please Don't Rush) and I adjusted myself to fit into the new working environment. When I asked more about how the UN works with local government, such as the relevant procedures and documents needed, I understood that holding a simple workshop with local institutes also requires various approvals from different agencies. Looking back at those times, I do think that her conservativeness indeed has given me space to bring up another wiser plan to avoid extra setbacks. From this experience, I believe being humble, active communication and self adjustments are the keys to help embrace the cultural differences.

Although my duties were quite relevant to my initial studies, at some point I still doubted whether my work or capacity fits my team's expectations. To help relieve stress from this temporary self confidence issue, I chose to have open-hearted conversations with my supervisor and teammates to keep myself clear on my role and make sure my tasks were on the right track. One thing I appreciated about my team was that we practiced to exchange opinions on our communication products. With collected comments, I can refine my work in a different, and probably a better perspective. I'm glad that I have found myself a comfortable working style. Most importantly, keeping good and clear communication with team members not only can enhance work efficiency, but also creating better bond with one another which can keep you motivated all the time!



## Life

### Simple, well-ordered and inspiring

I can sum up my life in Laos easily with three words: simple, inspiring and relaxing. And I truly believe I have lived my life healthiest, physically and mentally, in those six months. And most importantly, Laos has exposed me to the simplicity of life which I love it very much.

Frankly speaking, my six-month life in Laos is well-ordered (unexpectedly). After working hours we usually got off at 5.30- my leisure activities were either attending Lao class, French class, yoga class or resting at home. For foodie who enjoys trying out new cafes, or spending a quiet afternoon with a book and a cup of premium coffee, the downtown area in Vientiane should be able to fulfil all your similar wishes! It is one of my favourite weekend activities with my roommate Emily.

I usually spent my weekend exploring the cultural heritage with other UNVs and bonding with neighbours. With my roommates, Emily and Cherry, who were also UNVs from Hong Kong, we have checked most of the prominent architectures, such as Patuxay, That Luang the temple and Buddha Park, where we acted like tourists, sharing the moment with our peers and family through photos and video calls. One of our favourite cultural experiences was having weaving lessons at Houey Hong Vocational Training Centre. By practicing the weaving procedures and talking to local Lao women there, we gained thorough understanding on how traditional weaving helps empowering women and enhance their role in family in Lao context.

Another fascinating part of my leisure life was building new friendships. I have met a number of interns and UNVs deployed from other countries, serving different agencies. Apart from monthly UNV gathering where we chatted things happened around us, we also hanged out on different festivals or celebrated birthday together. My UN colleagues and supervisor were my all time significant companions. I would like to send my heartfelt thanks to all of them who make my volunteer journey extra warm-hearted.



## Highlights

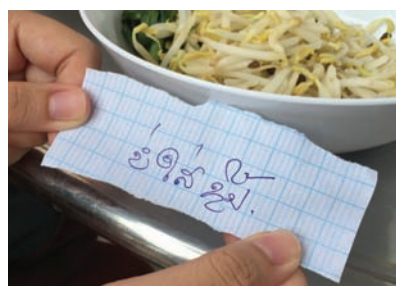
These are some of my favourite moments in Laos!



Living independently wasn't as challenging as I thought. The experience even helped me understand more about myself. It was hard for me to say goodbye to my beloved home!



Sunset in Laos seldom upsets me. It was taken in a restaurant near the Mekong riverbank on a random day in September, 2018.



I have enjoyed so many great dishes in Laos. The Lao script shown in the picture on the right hand corner means 'don't put meat' - which is a phrase I, as a vegetarian, always say before ordering any dishes.

This is how I usually spent my weekends: exploring the city together with other UNVs and interns.



All the colleagues and friends I met in the UN House have given me so much support in my six-month journey in Lao PDR. I can't thank them enough for the love and care they have given me!