

## UN University Volunteer Post Assignment Report

### Into the unknown

Starting a brand new life in a foreign and exotic country was just like treading on an unknown territory, filled with both excitement and a bit of vigilance.

It was particularly challenging when you had no connections at the place, so everything needed to be built from scratch, solely by yourself.

I expected to fully dedicate my time and energy to the tasks and duties delegated to me from my office. Sounds easy right? But that's far from the reality. I still remember vividly during the beginning few days of work when I just arrived at my office in Jakarta, I needed to go to view properties to find a suitable place to settle. I needed to sign the contract, figure out how to complete transactions through an Indonesian bank without having one, learning how to pay water and electricity bills, while at the same time struggling with insidious diarrhea. Trust me: I have asked every single Chinese in Indonesia and they all have been through the same suffering, so, be mentally prepared 😊

There's so much about the country, the UN system, the people, and simply living in a foreign land. All unfamiliar. Yet very exciting indeed.



*I: When I arrived at Jakarta the first night it was too late so all the restaurants closed. I could only get food from this street hawker and unsurprisingly got diarrhoea the next day right away. I guess it's probably on me :0*



2: But I needa give them some credits, they tasted really good.

## My office & country context

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) works to mobilize and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with national and international actors, in order to alleviate human suffering in disasters and emergencies, advocate for the rights of people in need, promote preparedness and prevention, and facilitate sustainable solutions. It contributes to principled and effective humanitarian response through coordination, advocacy, policy, information management and humanitarian financing tools and services.

Indonesia is one of the most vulnerable countries to natural disasters, with an average of 2,500 annual disasters recorded and 650,000 people affected by disasters each year. The

Indonesian Government has established national and sub-national disaster management authorities and invested in national systems that are increasingly capable of managing disasters. OCHA Indonesia works with partners to ensure adequate preparedness measures and to deliver complementing supports as required, as in the case of a large-scale disaster that would overwhelm the capacities and resources of in-country partners. Furthermore, OCHA Indonesia strengthens institutional partnership with ASEAN to ensure that regional and international tools and services in the region are complementary and mutually-reinforcing in order to meet national response needs and gaps.



3: Breathtaking city view from office!

### **Duties performed**

Being a UN University Volunteer in Humanitarian Affairs, I undertook the following responsibilities and duties:

- Development of disaster preparedness, management, and response mechanisms: I partook in the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) meetings during which the national cluster was reviewed. I contributed to the development of tools such as contingency plans, humanitarian response plans, monitoring and reporting tools.
- Research and analysis: I conducted research on various areas pertinent to OCHA's operation, which included a study on Hong Kong's emergency response system, Islamic financing stakeholder analysis, and analysis on disaster frequency in 7 provinces.
- Meeting support: I assisted in note-taking and preparation of presentation materials during meetings participated by OCHA, such as the HCT meetings and meetings with



different NGOs and government departments. I also supported the follow-up on decisions consented in these meetings.

- Information management: I completed an analysis of information management for OCHA internal documents. I also compiled national data such as education and poverty level for further data processing for humanitarian information.
- Workshops: I attended numerous workshops to enhance my learning and working experience, namely the UNV onboarding workshop, the AccessMod software workshop, the human-interest writing training, the Health in Emergency Workshop hosted by the Ministry of Health.
- Events: I participated in World Humanitarian Day, the UN Day Celebration, etc.
- UNFPA: I had this co-working arrangement with UNFPA's humanitarian team where I was exposed to the work of UNFPA and obtained a MISP certificate.



## Learning experiences

I would say, having the privilege to work in the UN system, is truly once-in-a-lifetime.

Being a medical student interested in humanitarian work, there are not many learning opportunities in Hong Kong given the city's geographical location. On the other hand, Indonesia, located on the Ring of Fire, is a country prone to extreme natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, etc. Meanwhile, being the 3rd most populated country in the world, the Indonesian government has developed a sufficiently sophisticated disaster management system that coordinates the military, civic agencies, international and local NGOs as well as citizens to carry out a concerted effort in the face of emergencies. The National Cluster System for Disaster Management is truly incredible for me to learn how a country would deal with natural disasters on different levels effectively to alleviate human suffering.

Besides, I was really grateful for my supervisor referring me to UNFPA under a co-working arrangement, which was not offered in my contract originally. Since she knew my medical background, she believed that working with the humanitarian team at UNFPA for women and children's sexual reproductive health would be a superb opportunity to elevate my learning experience. Thus, I was able to get exposure from two different UN agencies during the 6-month period.

Moreover, I was provided with an array of learning opportunities outside of the workplace. For instance, I was selected by my supervisor at UNFPA to represent the office to participate in a health emergency workshop organized by the CDC (Centre of Disease Control, USA), UNICEF, and the Indonesian Ministry of Health, I represented UNOCHA in the celebration of UN Day to introduce to the general public about our office work, I attended the AccessMod workshop to study a disaster management data software, to name but a few.



4 UN Day







5 Got featured in Indonesia's National News Channel haha

## Challenges encountered

One of the biggest challenges encountered must be language barriers. My office's major role is as a bridge between the Indonesian government and the local and international NGOs for disaster preparedness and management. The majority of our office's work is to engage with different government agencies to re-evaluate the existing disaster response mechanism and incorporate international – UN – standards in the local context when there are no major disasters. Having said that, as you can imagine, most of the meetings are conducted in Indonesian, rather than English. Meanwhile, staff at OCHA Indonesia are all Indonesians, so understandably they would prefer using their language to communicate for convenience.

In the beginning, it was tough for me to catch up with all the meetings and tasks. However, I decided not to waste this precious learning opportunity and not succumb to this challenge. Therefore, I would dedicate 1 or 2 hours after office hours each day to learning Bahasa Indonesian. Luckily, the language system is not complex so I get to grasp the basics quickly. However, the impact was drastic. Not only was I able to understand part of the meeting content, but the act of learning Bahasa earned my colleagues respect and praise, which enabled me to build a closer relationship with them all, including my supervisor. I would say learning the local culture and language is definitely a game changer.

## Explore the world

And of course, as a hodophile, I would not miss the chance to explore this interesting country with a rich history and culture.

I hiked to Mount Bromo, crowned to be the place on Earth that assembles Mars the most by National Geographic and Lonely Planet, got my scuba diving license on the beautiful island of Gili Trawangan, visited the world's biggest Buddhist Temple in Yogyakarta, abseiled down a 50m deep natural cave...there were plenty of unforgettable memories in the country, let alone all the amazing people that I have met in the UN and outside of work!



*6 Borobudur Temple in Yogyakarta*



*7 Met another UN colleague at the diving centre!*



## **Last but not least, A story about volcano**

During my time in Indonesia, I was entrusted with this intriguing task of evaluating the existing disaster preparedness plan for the Merapi Volcano.

The volcano, erupting at irregular intervals of 2-5 years, inflicts colossal human and economic tolls. Its last cataclysmic eruption stands as a grim testament, claiming 353 lives and displacing over 350,000 individuals, with economic losses soaring beyond 200 million USD.

Yet, despite a decade of dormancy, an aura of trepidation pervades the populace, since the precise timing of the next eruption remains unknown.

After meeting government officials and villagers, one revelation left me utterly dumbfounded.

Despite the looming disaster, thousands of villagers defiantly cling to their ancestral abodes within the volcano's 5km radius, who need to be evacuated every single time. (\*Note: even the tiniest eruption will affect a radius of 10-20km around the crater.)

Meet Mr. S, a miraculous survivor of the 2010 catastrophe. I was transfixed by his unwavering resolve. Despite the government's free offer of alternative relocation sites, he rejected it but steadfastly rebuilt his home upon the ashes of the past. "Why persist in such peril?" I queried incredulously.

"This is my motherland. I must stay here, whatever it takes," he sternly declared.

I stood in awe of his fortitude, recalling one quote from The Little Prince, "But I, alas, do not know how to see sheep through the walls of boxes. Perhaps I am a little like the grown-ups. I have had to grow old."

Im pretty sure that most people in this world will deride Mr S's apparent irrationality, cuz they are all grown-ups.

In life's tapestry, each of us navigates a path with different choices. Some choose the allure of the moon, some opt for the sixpence. It's by large personal decision, meanwhile fate also has a role to play, hence no one is more nobler.

There's always one extremely fragile yet precious place deep in everyone's heart. Reality's gonna hit you hard, attack you fiercely, shatter your ideals, question your values and morals apathetically until you eventually yield to the pain. The world simply doesn't allow room for that place in your heart.

However, if it is something you hold dear, please protect it from the outside world, for whatever it takes.

I have witnessed some who have given their all to it, and some who have given their all to mock the former.

Coincidentally, one day right after I departed from the volcano, I received Mr. S' message: "It erupted."

I know for sure, when I return one day in the future, his house will still be there, right at the foot of the mountain, regardless of the ravages of time.



