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Position: Communication Support Officer

Agency: The United Nations Volunteers

Duty Station: Timor-Leste

A LIFE-GROWING ASSIGNMENT

I would describe this UNV assignment as a life-growing experience. It is not easy living in the tough environment in Timor-Leste but it is full of happiness and excitement. First I am very grateful to the Agency of Volunteer Service giving me this opportunity and providing a week-training and more support from the beginning to the end. And I am grateful to be accompanied with three Hong Kong girls who have become my close friends and spiritual sisters.



Photo: Four UNVs from Hong Kong took part in the celebration of UN day.

WORK

Since the beginning, I think it is my very pleasure and honour to serve in the United Nations and be a volunteer. I feel proud of being one of the UN staff members and helping this young country development.

I enjoy my work a lot! I am grateful to encounter many friendly colleagues and

inspiring people, and get chance to explore this country. Actually my hosting organization was changed from UNV office to UNDP communication office once I arrived at country office, since I rather fitted in the communication office which was seriously lack of people. Being a communication support officer, I had various works, usually are media coverage for events including shooting, writing, and posting online. I also helped communication between units or projects and administrative work, and made presentations. Responsible in managing social media and website, the most significant achievement of my job would be nearly doubling the number of fans on UNDP Timor-Leste Facebook page. With journalist background, my post perfectly suits me as I can apply and improve the skills I have learnt from school.

However, I had been busy most of the time and always worked overtime. In addition to lack of staff, our office was also lack of equipment such as camera, so I had to use my own camera and phone for all shooting. My latest time to leave office was 8pm since a colleague suddenly asked for my help to edit videos. Although field trips could be tiring, I enjoy a lot because I can go directly to the districts and villages to see what is going on and how people's lives are.

On the other hand, I am very glad that the atmosphere in my office was very friendly and sometimes fun. I really like my colleagues in UNDP, both Timorese and international. Most of them have passion, knowledge or even dreams. While there was some pressure, such as long working hours, full schedule and pressure from some seniors, but it is the people and the job that give me much motivation.



Photo: The communication team in UNDP.

OBSTACLES

Life in Timor-Leste is not easy but full of challenges and loneliness. As a developing country, infrastructure and service are of course much backward than Hong Kong.

Two things obstruct me to live comfortably: not knowing driving and being a young female. First, it is very inconvenient to go around. Microlets only operate at day time and the only transport at night is taxi. Microlet is safe though sometimes crowded with people. Riding a bicycle back and forth office every day is dangerous and tiring on the road without discipline. Second, it is lack of security and safety. From the beginning, I got very annoyed by the men on street yelling and even harassing me. I felt so bad after unknown male pinched my hip in two occasions. Though, I tried to adapt since being enthusiastic is part of their culture, and the sense of women respect and gender equality is rather low.

For housing, I got many difficulties at the first place and when moving to a new place. At the beginning, the UNV staff made big mistake to put me and my friend in a motel without security assessment. I felt uncomfortable living there. Later my friend and I moved to a better room. But when she decided to move out, I was panic to find a new place. In short, I moved to the house of a church mate but I didn't feel well until I finally got settled with all basic facilities.

For health issues, I got sick a few times which are the times I miss home the most. I had flu, fever and stomach-ache which lasted for a long period. I get recovered naturally or with medicine I brought from Hong Kong. The good international medical service here is very expensive.

For eating and drinking, I adapt my life as a Timorese, eating in the warung and buying food in markets. But, the local food here is usually fried and not so healthy that I sometimes feel bored while international food is expensive. I did cook but don't get much nutrients since it's inconvenient for me to buy fresh food regularly. Fortunately because of the foreign investment, supermarkets have gradually provided more choices.

For language, I learn the local language Tetun at a school. It is only a big barrier at field as I cannot interview and talk to people much. But in daily life, I felt closer with the local people using simple Tetun. I always love language though it takes lots of time and I didn't get to practice in the English-speaking office.



Photo: I received a tais, representing welcome and gratitude from local community in a field trip. After the event, I joined their local tebe-tebe dance.

NEW PERSPECTIVES

Difficulties and challenges make one grow stronger and more mature. Therefore, I learn to live as a confident, courageous and respectful woman. It is a dignity, not a mistake being a female. I have to protect myself from harassment. So I am grateful to join a self-defense class organized by UN Timor-Leste which taught us practical skills and raises our self-confidence. Also it is very important to change the Timorese mindset that female deserves rights and respect as male. In many villages bearing strong traditional belief, female is to give birth and do housework, not go to school and work. Only a few would think and take courage to run to the capital city for different lives.

In addition to gender issue, I understand a lot about developing countries. I have learnt to adapt and immerse into their developing environment and culture; stop complaining and focusing on the difference from my hometown. I also see how the government, UN, NGO and individuals could help develop the country. I believe the best cooperation between foreign and local parties is that the locals take the main role to develop and work out the projects with foreigners' financial and technology support. For example, as a bridge between foreign and local, UNDP helps manage certain global fund and selects local construction company to build road in the village with discussions throughout the progress. As foreigners, we are giving them choice to develop their way, not forcing them to accept our way. It is difficult to attain the equilibrium of development without changing traditional living but we aim to improve their lives.

It is a great blessing to be born in Hong Kong, and able and capable to study university and choose my career. But this is not the case for most of the Timorese youths. Many youths could neither afford to study university, nor find a job in capital city due to excess labour supply. So they either stay at home to do housework, or wander on street. However, some of them grab the huge possibilities and advantages in a developing country. They turn themselves to entrepreneur and start their own business. I appreciate UNDP social business project, encouraging and equipping youths to start business. After chats or talks with several friends and successful people, I am very inspired to start imagination and act; especially it's time for me, a fresh graduate, to look for my future path.



Photo: I love the beautiful and unpolluted nature in Timor-Leste.
