

Akbota Norzhanova

UN Volunteer in Communications

Hanoi, Viet Nam

Background



Me capturing photo of mountains in Ha Giang province

I was a UN University Volunteer in Communications in the Resident Coordinator Office (RCO) of United Nations in Viet Nam. There's a high chance that you have heard about other UN agencies such as UNICEF or UNESCO but have zero idea what RCO does: this was me when I first arrived to Viet Nam for my internship. In contrast to other UN agencies, RCO does not have its own programs or projects, and it mainly facilitates inter-agency related work. For me, as a UNV in Communications, it meant that I needed to highlight work of all 14 UN entities in Viet Nam and run main Facebook page of UN there. I liked my position a lot, because it allowed me to learn what all UN agencies do in the field and how the United Nations operate as a whole, which was one of my primary reasons to join UNV-Hong Kong Universities Volunteering Internship Program.

Journey begins



At the Human Library event organized with UNVs (I am on the right)

I was nervous before coming to Viet Nam, honestly. Coming from engineering background, I had little to no experience in communications, and I was already imagining how my supervisor will kick me out of the office and call Hong Kong to scold them for selecting someone this bad. It's not like I had confidence issues, but thinking about working with professionals from all over the world in the United Nations was a bit overwhelming.

However, when I arrived there, everything was fine. My colleagues were very supportive and understanding. I was given some time to learn about the United Nations in the country and gradually was given more and more work. It was weird to be a fresh graduate and one of the youngest people in the whole building, but yet to be treated with respect and having your voice heard. It was great to see people around proud of their work and passionate about same things as me. Of course, there were some challenges and issues during the journey, but I am grateful to have this experience. This is probably what every alumnus said about this program, but it is true.

What I did



Some of the photos I took during the service (from left to right: UN Day reception, Diversity Day, International Youth Day 2019)

As I have mentioned in the background, one of my main duties was to run a Facebook account of United Nations in Viet Nam. You could imagine that running a Facebook page only consists of posting photos and writing captions for them, and... it actually is, but it is more interesting than what it sounds like. I was working on various social media packages dedicated to important dates and events. The biggest one that I have worked on is the Sustainable Development Goals social media package, where every week we posted 3-4 posts dedicated to one SDG. There are 17 goals, so this media package lasted for over 4 months and is one of the major accomplishments of my assignment. I had to search for information, design and translate social media materials – all of this really upped my AI and emoji use skills.

I also took photos at the events, which I enjoyed a lot, especially because I was learning how to use DSLR camera along the way. It felt very important to catch the moment of history that could change lives of many people. Being a photographer also allowed me to join events that I wouldn't have access to if not the camera. I travelled to Ha Giang province as part of Communications team for International Youth Day and could join UN Day reception with government and embassies representatives. My favourite event to capture, however, was Hanoi Pride (pride parade held to support local LGBTIQ+ community) and Action Against Waste (the UN clean-up event). Taking photos of officials is cool, but capturing happy people in their moment is truly inspiring.

Additionally, I supported organizing events – designing branding materials, writing human interest stories for event promotion, drafting concept notes and sometimes standing and selling stuff for garage sale – not only as part of RCO or Communications team, but also as a UNV, because we were encouraged to promote volunteerism during our service. Working together for various events with other UNVs really brought us together, and we developed a strong bond creating many good memories.



With UNV family at birthday celebration

Reflection

There wasn't a second when I regretted joining this program. This experience was truly motivating and being surrounded by professionals made me enthusiastic about the path I chose (and showed me how much more I need to learn to reach their level). I learned a lot about myself, volunteering and other people and made some really good friends along the way.

If you are considering enrolling to this program, don't hesitate. This is a unique opportunity for you to challenge yourself and to gain experience.