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### **UNODC Internship Experience 2015**

The United Nations Office for Drug Control (UNODC) was established in 1997 with the purpose of working with the government to enhance national anti-drug trafficking capacities. The UNODC field office was set up in the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1999. Since then, its operation has been guided by the Country Program, a strategic framework which is developed every 4- 5 years and is structured around three Sub-Programs. The first one is focused on illicit trafficking and border management, the second on drug demand reduction and HIV control and the third on crime, justice and corruption. The Country Program 2015 is expected to include a new subprogram focused on alternative development. However, it has not yet been approved.

Out of the three sub-programs, I had the privilege to collaborate in the Drug Demand and HIV Reduction Unit which works closely with non-governmental organizations and supports the implementation of scientific-based practices in the areas of drug prevention, rehabilitation, advocacy and HIV treatment. The topics addressed by the unit are broad. However, my research was focused on drug prevention and harm reduction programs for children due to the current upward trend of drug consumption in the country among this targeted population.

The assigned desk research was my central activity but not the only one. I was also involved in the drafting of country case studies, web-stories and the budget for the regional program. As well, I participated in field visits to drug communities with the NGO "Rebirth", a close partner of UNODC Iran and to educational centers for Afghan children and vulnerable groups. In these field visits I could witness the implementation process of the projects as well as the conditions, challenges and realities that the drug users face. Finally, I also attended briefing sessions by senior staff officers on HIV prevention and gender equality. The combination of desk research and field activities made the learning experience a great one. Adding to this, the constant group discussion among interns and UN staff was helpful to share knowledge and expertise.

The organizational dynamics championed the discussion of core topics among experts and interns, which was really rewarding and motivating. This constant communication and feedback allowed me to deliver a good job and to build close networks with my colleagues. As well, other factors that contributed to the delivery of a good job was the knowledge acquired during the master's degree, specifically, the research methodology learned while working on the "mini PAE" for the Policy Challenges module and lessons from the comparative case studies class. Both were really useful in the research of preventive programs and for the construction of country case studies.

The learning experience went far beyond my tasks. The exposure to the daily work of my colleagues brought me insights about how the organization operates. It was particularly interesting to realize that issues that ranged from the terminology used like the human rights concept, to the recognition of social problems like drug consumption among children, required intense negotiations with government counterparts and sometimes compromised the implementation of core programs. I found that I wanted to get involved in the discussion of these challenges, as they provided much information and insights. Hence, it was fundamental to play an active role to get immersed in the job.

The overall experience at UNODC was remarkable. However there were some aspects that could be improved regarding the provision of logistic information for foreign interns. It was challenging to find

accommodation and there were several aspects that interns needed to take care of before beginning the internship. Despite doing extensive internet research, writing to my embassy and trying to get as much information as I could, I experienced a lot of uncertainty before arriving, just like the other interns.

For students that might want to take an internship at UNODC I would suggest asking for contacts of previous interns, and then asking them for practical tips. As well, bring enough money in cash because it is not possible to withdraw money from the ATMs with a foreign card. I hope that this suggestion becomes obsolete soon due to the nuclear agreement and consequently release of the bans. Also, be aware of Muslims observances like Ramadan and the code of conduct. There are still many conservative sectors that expect you to follow certain rules - for example, women do not extend the hand to greet men, women wait until the men extend their hand and then they can shake hands. Some men do not shake hands with women so, to avoid uncomfortable situations, they expect you to follow this rule.

Always carry a copy of your passport; if the police ask you to go to the police station during random street checks, you should call the UNODC office immediately. For me, it was very surprising that around five or six in the afternoon the *Basij* police started picking girls randomly from crowded commuting points with flimsy excuses even though the girls were following the dress code and did not seem to be infringing any rules. This is an intimidation measure that is conducted on a daily basis and something I learned about only when I experienced it. At the end of the day it was an interesting experience that opened a window of great talks with my colleagues, but it would have been nice to know about it before that actually happened.

Notwithstanding, it was one of the most exciting and interesting learning experiences I have lived so far. The internship gave me valuable insights and good tips to keep pursuing a career in the United Nations system. My advice after the internship could be summarized as: network as much as possible, learn from your colleagues' experience while joining the UN system and ask for constant feedback. The learning experience will surpass your expectations if you play an active role to get involved in the daily tasks of the Unit and if you are curious enough to dig into the core topics being addressed.