

SUMMARY OF EXPERIENCE GAINED WITH FUNDING THROUGH THE PLASTINO SCHOLARS PROGRAM

International Organization for Migration Internship – Freetown, Sierra Leone

September 2007 through January 2008

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Picture 1: Field meeting with TRQN volunteer Hassan Jalloh and representatives of various Farmers' Organizations in Makeni, Bombali District

Pursuing the opportunity to take a semester off and conduct a five-month internship with the International Organization for Migration in Freetown, Sierra Leone (IOM Freetown) as an undergraduate was the best decision I have ever made. The responsibilities that I was assigned, the people who I was surrounded by, and the skills that I was able to gain combined to become the most ground-building, intensive, and practical learning experience that I will probably ever have. The work that I did to improve IOM Freetown's Migration and Development Program proved further that I

would like to spend a significant part of my professional life doing much of the same and expanding upon it.

Maximizing the benefits of migration for both host countries and countries of origin—while minimizing negative effects and repercussions on migrants—will prove to be one of the most important policy and management issues on local, national, and international agendas for many years to come. My practical training in Freetown—with returned migrants of various backgrounds, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, diplomats, civil society organizations, government ministers, and laypeople—will make me a valuable candidate for work in the migration field in the future, and I want to contribute to the well-being of the international community by bringing my experience to the table.

After securing funding from the David A Plastino Scholars Program, finishing eight months of African migration research with Dr Mark Miller, and bolstering my cache of information on African Affairs with significant attention into Sierra Leone, I left for Freetown on 2 September 2007. I arrived and settled in very nicely with help every step of the way from my Chief of Mission, Dr Andrew Choga, and other IOM Freetown staff. Then I braced for the excitement of the run-off Presidential election on my first Saturday in the country.



Picture 2: Field meeting with Bombali District Council in which plans for my proposed project, "Bombali District Diaspora Trust Fund," were discussed with community members



Picture 3: Meeting with the newly appointed Minister of Employment and Social Security, Dr Minkailu Mansaray, his Deputy Minister, Ms Kadja Sesay, and his Permanent Secretary, FR Kamara, to discuss plans for a circular labor migration project

In the election, I experienced every Political Scientist's and African Affairs scholar's dream firsthand, with the ability to view a polling station during Election Day, listen to the National Electoral Commission's daily press briefings reporting ballot counts on neighbors' shortwave radios, and view the city's uproarious celebrations the day that Ernest Bai Koroma was declared the clear victor. Moreover, I attended his overcrowded Inauguration Ceremony at the National Stadium; met with a few of his new Cabinet Ministers, Deputy Ministers, and Presidential Advisers, and had a Project Proposal conceived of and written entirely by me presented to The President—which he fully supported!

After the clamor of the election's success was over, I began my full immersion in the Migration and Development Program. My experience was very "sink or swim"—being thrown into a program with only one staff member, two projects, and several projects in the planning stage. As a result, my 60-hour weeks were characterized by frequent meetings with the Chief of Mission, out-of-the-box field visits, and impromptu meetings with individuals from all sectors of society. In these, each day brought many new lessons learned, questions asked, answers given, ideas produced, and professional skills gained.

I mostly worked on a project called Temporary Return of Qualified Nationals (TRQN) with IOM The Hague. This project was a pilot in which Sierra Leoneans residing in The Netherlands were assisted by its government and facilitated by IOM to return to their homeland temporarily to transfer their skills and occupational knowledge acquired abroad by volunteering with host organizations and capacity building. To most easily demonstrate the progress the project made while I was there, its participants went from numbering two when I entered the country to nineteen (and climbing) when I left! Due to the swift increase in interest, the government of The Netherlands is expected to extend the project's funding from its original ending date of April 2008 through to July of 2012!

Being around these returned migrants was one of the best parts of the experience for me. They became my friends and provided me with incredible insight into the innovative types of things which we could work on to develop the country by way of its Diaspora long into the future.

My temporary posting in the office was not just beneficial for me, but for everyone employed in the office and for all those that the Migration and Development Program worked with. I clearly learned the most, but my presence provided others with the opportunity to see



Picture 4: Field visit to Songo Loko village with TRQN volunteer Abu Bakarr Mansaray to assess the feasibility of creating an agricultural training farm

new life. Almost all employees of IOM Freetown are National Staff and the two International employees are African, from Zimbabwe and Senegal respectively. Similarly, I assume that IOM Freetown's employees have been employed by IOM or in another profession for quite some time. Proximity, culture, age, and experience often contribute to individuals becoming jaded. As a young, motivated, intelligent, American woman, I was able to bring to the office innovation, excitement, curiosity, relative detachment, Western work ethic, up to date African migration knowledge, and a keen ability to be socially accepted by individuals from various walks of life.

There is no denying that I have much more to learn, but there is little doubt that I am far ahead of other individuals my age when it comes to international work and migration management. I was told that I was the youngest International employee throughout Sierra Leone for the duration of my internship, and I was able to network with hundreds of people—Sierra Leoneans, UN staff, and various NGO employees—despite that fact. I will use those contacts now and in the future as I spend the last sixteen months of my college career working to conduct a survey of the Sierra Leonean Diaspora in the United States and creating a demand-driven proposal for a Diaspora Skills/Capital Transfer Project between the



Picture 5: Meeting some of the children in Koya Rural District who will benefit from the construction of a secondary school which IOM's TRQN program is facilitating

two countries. The groundwork for this project has already been laid and the support I am receiving is phenomenal.

I now know that I am a natural for international work, and I hope that this internship helped to pave the way for me to work long into the future to facilitate and enable Africans, within and outside the continent, to develop their home countries without such dependence on international aid and foreign governments. If the Plastino Scholars Award had not been awarded to me for this experience, I would never have been able to afford it. I am forever indebted to Mr Plastino and the College of Arts and Sciences, and I will never forget how their generosity helped to launch my success.