



UN University Volunteer Habib Josue serves with OHCHR in Geneva, Switzerland.
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Promoting diversity and inclusion for youth in UN Human Rights

"For a young law student like me from a third world country, I could never have imagined that I would have a chance to work with the Human Rights Council," said Mona, a recent law graduate and human rights advocate from Kathmandu. Mona Sharma from Nepal and Habib Kouame Josue from Côte d'Ivoire are serving with the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) in Geneva as UN University Volunteers.

The two students were engaged through an innovative project entitled "Ditch UNfair internships" – an initiative of UN Human Rights to address barriers and create wider access for diverse students to receive entry-level working experience in Geneva.

Under the current internship system that provides placement for work experience at UN agencies in Geneva, the interns are mostly from economically advantaged backgrounds, because most applicants are unable to afford the extremely high living expenses in Geneva without some financial support.

As UN University Volunteers, Mona and Habib receive a settling grant of CHF1'100, a

monthly living allowance of CHF1700, air fare and a health insurance plan and get to work for the UN for a 6-month period while still finishing up their graduate studies.

“The project was designed to enhance diversity and dignity in the Human Rights Office in a concrete way,” said Saori Terada, the originator and project manager of the initiative. “Most of the students who intern with the UN in Geneva are from high-income countries. Many of them end up joining the organization down the line, reinforcing the lack of equal access to entering the UN and entrenching a lack of geographic diversity. This lack of equality seemed to me to be out of sync with our human rights mandate.”

“When you are interested in and study human rights, Geneva is THE place to go. However, internship opportunities are not affordable to most, especially to us Africans,” said Habib.

According to the first independent [Global Survey on interns](#) by [the Fair Internship Initiative \(FII\)](#), Africans constitute less than six per cent of interns in Geneva. The geographic distribution of interns by country of nationality is even more skewed than that of UN staff members: 64 per cent of the respondents were from high-income countries, mainly from Europe.

Recent years have seen a growing trend among specialized UN agencies to some form of compensation for interns (e.g. the International Labour Organization, World Health Organization and World Intellectual Property Organization).

In 2018, a [Joint Inspection Unit \(JIU\) Review of Internship Programmes in the UN System](#) highlighted that “reputational risks were referred to by a significant number of organizations, which noted that some situations faced by interns with scarce resources went against the core values of the United Nations and its overarching mandates, such as the right to decent work and inclusiveness.”

More recently, [a number of recommendations](#) were made to the UN Office in Geneva senior management by the UNOG 100-day internship challenge team, including [providing a reduced daily subsistence allowance for interns in Geneva](#). Among them, two were implemented on a trial basis in 2020 before COVID hit: dedicated slots in language and other training courses were offered to interns and free meals were offered to interns in UNOG cafeterias after hours.

With the administrative prohibition on direct payment of interns, the UN Human Rights Office sought creative ways to provide practical help to young human rights specialists from the Global South to gain access. The solution came by way of the UNV University scheme, which allows UN organizations to provide university students/graduates with a volunteering

opportunity and a basic stipend.

The project was submitted for OHCHR's Innovation Challenge in 2019. It won first place and received seed funding of US \$25,000 to conduct a pilot. For the first time, two such assignments were created in Geneva.

"A total of 1,664 applicants were received from 137 countries after only two weeks of advertisement. This is a much more geographically diverse pool of candidates than we see in any regular job openings for staff positions. I am delighted to see such interest!" said Kim Taylor, Chief of OHCHR Human Resources and mentor for the project.

"The UNV field network allowed us to advertise the UN University Volunteer assignments widely and receive a large number of qualified candidates from developing economies. The partnership with UNV was crucial in this process," said Emanuela Goerick, Human Resources Officer with OHCHR.

“ As young human rights ambassadors, we have a heavy responsibility to carry home the knowledge acquired in Geneva. I now have first-hand experience of how to make use of the human rights mechanisms to claim all rights for everyone. Fulfilment of economic, social and cultural rights, in particular for vulnerable people, is at the heart of challenges for Africa. So, I look forward to applying what I have learnt back home. --Habib Josue, UN University Volunteer with OHCHR

This diversity and inclusion project will be scaled up from a pilot to a full programme in the second half of 2021, bringing 10 UN University Volunteers from the Global South to OHCHR Geneva every year. Through this programme, OHCHR hopes to set the example in breaking the perpetuation of practices that disadvantage candidates from underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds and to promote a more diverse and inclusive work environment.

“ Working with OHCHR has been a life-changing experience. "The knowledge I have acquired and the network I have built will be for me a lifelong treasure that will help me in my future career. --Mona Sharma, UN University Volunteer with OHCHR

Hiring a University UNV is relatively inexpensive and something that any part of the UN could consider to help improve diversity and promote a modality that facilitates a fairer access to the UN. It is a small step for the Organization, but offers the beginning of journey for a student from an often underprivileged background – a journey to improve their own life and that of others. Isn't that what the UN is all about?



This article was first published in [News Special – the magazine of UN staff in Geneva](#) and has been edited.



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