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My assignment with UNESCO has been an eye-opener

Witnessing the current context from a close perspective has brought up many feelings going from fascination, frustration but also inspiration. It inspires me to excel further in my assignment and beyond, in order to give my small contribution towards more sustainable peace and development, because at the end of the day, that is the underlying essence of why we do what we do.

My assignment as an international UN Volunteer began in May 2015 as Education Officer with UNESCO Ramallah Office in Palestine. Looking back it has truly been an amazing rollercoaster on all levels.

I have a background in International Politics and Conflict and Development studies, so working in the field of Education was initially new to me. My assignment with UNESCO has been extremely varied, from supporting the Education team with the implementation of inclusive education programs in schools in the West Bank and Gaza, a program on supporting vulnerable higher education students through the establishment of Community Libraries, field visits, working on Education in Emergencies, involvement in UN processes, such as the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), to policy work supporting the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, resource mobilization and
It is very fulfilling being part of the Education team, supporting the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and being part of the national network where all aspects of education in Palestine are further discussed, developed and enhanced. After 1.5 years it is motivating to be familiar with the context. Working with professional and knowledgeable people in the field have been an inspiration to further specialize in education. All these experiences, in addition to occasional field visits confirm every time why I am doing this and why I love doing my job.

This assignment has been a great experience, from the interesting and challenging work, to my wonderful colleagues, the knowledge and skills I have gained, the fascinating context and the welcoming and warm Palestinian culture, which I feel has truly embraced me. I will never forget the smells and sounds of any city in Palestine, especially Ramallah, having a Palestinian coffee in one of the many café’s, the music of Fayrouz in the background, the hospitality and kindness of the people, the poetry and literature, getting lost in the historical places of Jerusalem, and especially the liveliness in the streets.

“It is both eye opening and heartbreaking to see that Palestinian boys and girls still facing challenges every day.

From all perspectives, this has been a great experience. Apart from the work, living in Ramallah, which is a diverse, cultural and cosmopolitan city and the social, cultural and political hub of Palestine, has been amazing. Being able to spend my free time in Jerusalem and all the other corners of the country are unforgettable experiences.

My assignment as a UN Volunteer will end next year, but I can already say that it has been a success. It has definitely given me a lot of tools and it prepared me for a further career in the international cooperation, maybe with the UN, especially in the Middle East region. In addition, it was also an opportunity to improve my knowledge of the Arabic language. The most prominent challenge of this assignment was the distance from my family and friends. Living away from home can be challenging at times, I think anyone working in this sector can assert that, but at the same time I have made new family and friends in Palestine too.

Sarah El Attar is a fully funding UN Volunteer from Belgium, that was assigned with UNESCO Palestine as Education Officer in Ramallah.
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Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 4: Quality education