Volunteering at the United Nations (Without Leaving Home!)

Over the past several years, there has been a tremendous amount of energy building around social responsibility, prosocial I-O, and supporting humanitarian causes around the world within the field of I-O psychology. The United Nations (UN) offers one of the most visible forces for humanitarian work on the global stage, and SIOP’s NGO special consultative status with the UN since 2011 (Scott, 2011) has consistently energized members to try to find out how they can give back—how we can take “science for a smarter workplace” and apply it to the kinds of less traditional “workplaces” served by the United Nations. Hence, it is not surprising that probably the most frequently asked question posed to members of SIOP’s UN Committee is some variation on, “How can I get involved?”

Previous TIP articles from the SIOP UN Committee (e.g., Meyer, Carr, Foster, Lace, & Mallory, 2019) have referenced ways in which SIOP members can become involved with the work of the SIOP UN team. However, in this article, we want to discuss opportunities for SIOP members to volunteer directly with the UN.

Here’s the thing: Volunteering with the UN is easier than you think.

There are a lot of ideas people may have about volunteering with the UN.

1. Maybe you think it involves travel.

2. Maybe you think it requires being multilingual.

3. Maybe you think it’s hard to find opportunities.
To take those in order:

1. Only if you want it to.

2. No.

3. They’re just a few clicks away.

The UN has an online portal for volunteering managed by the UN volunteers (UNV), the UN organization that contributes to peace and development through volunteerism. You can find it at www.onlinevolunteering.org/en. Although there are certainly opportunities to volunteer around the world, many of the organizations the UN serves and works with have needs that can be met by remote volunteers. As their website says, “Become a volunteer from wherever you are with whatever you have.”

What does that translate into, in terms of the kind of I-O-related work that you might be able to help with, how to find it, and how to get started? We’ll tackle each of those topics in turn.

I-O Work

As Saari et al. (2018) reports, when describing the process of finding jobs at the UN, the positions that get posted rarely make explicit mention of I-O psychology. This, as we’ve all experienced, is because many organizations don’t know what they don’t know—they may not fully understand what I-O psychology is and what I-O psychologists do—hence, what they don’t know is that they need people with an I-O background!

In preparing this article, we visited the UN volunteer portal a few times. The first time we visited, the volunteer opportunities were incredibly varied, ranging from English proofreading of reports, assisting the director of the Kenya Association for Maternal & Neonatal Health in developing a fundraising strategy, and various forms of online teaching. Relevant to many academics (or prospective academics) were opportunities to engage in grant proposal writing on topics such as reproductive health and rights of women and girls and to produce data-driven reports. Then there was this:
Most of the opportunities referenced above have relatively little I-O relevance, but take a look at the second one in the top row—designing needs-assessment questionnaires plays right into one of I-O’s strengths.

Fast forward a few weeks, and the opportunities have changed. There are still opportunities to write grant proposals, edit articles about the business environment, and create infographics. But there are also opportunities that would appear to apply to the I-O psychologist’s skill set: for example, to volunteer to collect data for the 2020 edition of the UN E-Government Survey and to apply “a gender lens to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights,” in which—well, with this one, it’s easier just to quote the description:

(i) Conducting research about the adverse impact of business activities on women (ii) Identifying special barriers faced by women in accessing effective remedies for business-related human rights abuses (iii) Compiling good practices of integrating a gender perspective in implementing the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) (iv) [Compiling] existing standards that seek to adopt a gender lens to human rights (v) Going through stakeholder submissions and preparing summaries.

If you go and look at the list of volunteer opportunities now, you will find that this specific one is no longer available. As the UN volunteer site tells prospective volunteers, when opportunities are posted it’s because the organization needs assistance right now. So, the opportunities we’ve described will get filled quickly (just as previous opportunities, such as the chance to coach women in places like Nigeria on job-interviewing skills, have filled), but
more opportunities will come open.

In other words, if you don’t see anything that matches your skill set today, come back tomorrow. There are lots of UN organizations that need our help. We just have to look beyond the job titles sometimes to find the places where our expertise is needed.

Where Are These Opportunities?

From the main UN volunteering page we linked above, there are a couple of ways in which to find opportunities. First, as depicted in the screenshot below, partway down the page you will see a section labeled “Putting Skills Into Action,” where volunteering opportunities are grouped into several broad categories.
PUTTING SKILLS INTO ACTION

So many ways to volunteer

Clicking on any one of these categories will take you to another page with the specific volunteer opportunities listed. Each listing notes the anticipated time commitment in hours per week, the UN organization sponsoring the opportunity, and the region being supported. Hovering your mouse over the listing will also reveal to which of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) the opportunity is linked.

Clicking on the listing will provide more information about the opportunity, such as the task,
background and objectives, and requirements.

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Task  Background and objectives  Requirements

PEOL, a provider of university level courses free of charge, seeks authors with a background in teaching or work experience, who would like to join a group of colleagues developing a course in General psychopathology and numerous other courses in psychology and psychiatry. You are welcome to work on chapter text, cases, assignments, reading lists, summaries, class discussions, review and test questions, as well as research and add examples, statistics and citations. All PEOL’s course pages are in HTML. You will not be responsible for any HTML code, but only for the text in between. Content can be imported from open education resources, i.e. material that is not copyright restricted such as in wikipedia or courseware at major universities. You must have the skills to locate and import such material. Depending on your qualifications you may be called upon to grade assignments, monitor class discussions or answer student questions.

Writing and editing  Democratization, elections and governance
Task

✓ Show all
  - Writing and editing (35)
  - Translation (26)
  - Art and design (17)
  - Teaching and training (16)
  - Research (15)
  - Project development and management (12)
  - Outreach and advocacy (11)
  - Technology development (7)
  - Community organizing (2)
  - Leadership & strategy (2)
  - Healthcare services (1)
  - Volunteer management (1)
  - Administration (0)
  - Event organization (0)
  - Manual labor & skilled trade (0)

Region supported

✓ Show all
  - Global (36)
  - Africa (32)
  - Asia (25)
  - Oceania (4)
  - Europe (2)
  - Latin America and the Caribbean (2)
  - Northern America (0)

Show opportunities in

✓ Show all
  - English (94)
  - French (7)

Hours per week

✓ Show all

- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11-20
- 20+

Keywords

Enter Keywords to include

Submit

Language Skills

Enter language

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General enquires
Email: unv.media@unv.org
Tel: +49-228-815 2000
Fax: +49-228-815 2001

Partnership enquires
Email: partnershipsupport@unv.org
Tel: +49-228-815 2000
Fax: +49-228-815 2001
The second way to find volunteer opportunities is to scroll towards the bottom of the main UN volunteers page and click on the label “Find opportunities.” From there, all available volunteer opportunities will be presented; yet, by clicking on the “Filter List” link you are provided with several criteria on which to manually narrow your search of opportunities (e.g., task, region support, hours per week, language skills).

How Do I Get Started?

The application process is pretty straightforward, but there is some amount of vetting
involved. From the main UN volunteers page, click “Sign up now.” You’ll be taken to a registration screen. After providing some basic contact and demographic information (e.g., name, email, gender, date of birth, language) and creating a password for your account, you’ll be sent an authentication email link. Once you verify your email address, you can complete the registration process, in which you’ll provide information about your location, areas of expertise, current employment, and so forth. If you’ve ever created a profile on a professional website, it’s much the same. When you complete your profile, you’ll then be able to start applying for volunteer opportunities.

It Really Is That Easy

The UN makes it easy for people who want to help and find ways to give back but who are geographically restricted. As we’ve noted, although the UN volunteer opportunities might not make explicit the call for help from I-O psychologists, with a little digging you can find opportunities that leverage the I-O’s skill set. So, if you’ve been looking for opportunities to take your I-O KSAs and do something a little different with them, or if you have other non-I-O skills that fit the needs of the UN or one of its partner agencies, you can sign up today.

Then, Tell Us About It!

As if this article weren’t already a call to action, we’d love to hear from SIOP members and affiliates who take advantage of the opportunities the UN makes available for volunteering. It’s one thing, after all, for us to tell everyone how easy it is to get started. It’s another thing entirely for SIOPers to read about the experiences of other SIOPers; so, if you decide to volunteer with the UN (or if you already have), send us an email! We’d love to talk with you about your experience and, if you’re willing, interview you for a future TIP column. You can reach Morrie at mullins@xavier.edu, or Mark at mark@orsconsultants.com. We look forward to hearing from you!

The SIOP United Nations Committee is Julie Olson-Buchanan (Chair), Lori Foster, Ines Meyer, Aimee Lace, Dan Maday, Morrie Mullins, Mathian Osicki, Mark Poteet, Deborah Rupp, Walter Reichman, Lise Saari, John Scott, and Nabila Sheikh.

Note

1 Based in Bonn, Germany, UNV is currently active in 127 countries and is represented worldwide through the offices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Because of the breadth and complexity of the UN, the UNV is a primary, but not the only, means of volunteering with the UN. The experience of being a UN Volunteer may be very different going through the UNV as opposed to volunteering directly with the Secretariat, for example.
References


https://www.siop.org/Research-Publications/Items-of-Interest/ArtMID/19366/ArticleID/3168

• Online Volunteering • SIOP

Sustainable Development Goal: **SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals**