

## ***Consulting to United Nations Organizations – Requirements and Opportunities***

***by Alison King***

***Random sample of three recent opportunities for international consultancies to the United Nations:***

- UNICEF: Child trafficking analysis, Sierra Leone (eight weeks)
- UNDP: Economic Development Consultant, Afghanistan (three months with possibility of extension)
- UNFPA: Monitoring and Evaluation Expert, Indonesia (seven months)

Consultancy opportunities within the United Nations (UN) in all areas of expertise are certainly not lacking given the broad range of activities of the numerous UN organizations (UNDP, UNICEF, WHO, UNEP, etc.) globally. But there are also an immense number of consultants out there worldwide and tremendous international competition.

Pertinent aspects of consulting to the UN are (i) appointment types, (ii) the necessary qualifications and competencies for a successful application or bid, (iii) timely access to information about vacancies, and (iv) the expected pay and benefits. There can be no single and simple guide to any of these three factors. Nonetheless, the following pages provide a general picture of the main professional, institutional and personal challenges facing consultants intending to work for the UN.

### ***(i) “UN Consultants”***

Apart from career staff members, UN organizations in general also operate with the notions of ***short-term employment*** on the one hand and ***consultancies*** on the other.

While short-term staff members are employed to support the regular work of an organization for a limited duration, consultants are commissioned for a limited period for very specific assignments. Consultants, in contrast to short-term employees, are neither staff members nor UN officials, but independent contractors.

However, it can be assumed on the whole that both recruitment modalities - short-term employment and consultancy - offer potentially interesting opportunities for freelance consultants and independent consultancy firms.

UNDP<sup>1</sup>, to give an example, uses so-called ALD (Activities of Limited Duration) appointments for ***short-term staff members*** (minimum six months, but lasting no more than three, or exceptionally four years). Such ALD contracts tend to be issued for specialized functions for a temporary or emergency activity, e.g. for special thematic advisors on HIV/AIDS. For ***consultants***, UNDP uses so-called Special Service Agreements contracts (SSA) or consultancy contracts. SSAs are issued for assignments of up to 11 months, e.g. for project

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.undp.org](http://www.undp.org).

activities. An SSA contractor will in general work exclusively for UNDP for the duration of the assignment. Consultancy contracts are used for assignments ranging from a few days to a few weeks, e.g. for evaluators or workshop moderators. In such cases, the consultant will have assignments with other clients in parallel.

Overall, UN agencies coincide on the range of appointment types; however, the modalities and formalities for selecting incumbents and issuing contracts can differ.

### ***(ii) Necessary Qualifications and Competencies***

Which qualifications and competencies lead to successful applications or bids? These will depend first and foremost on the particular job in question; but it is possible to extract a number of universal requirements applicable to consulting to the UN.

The following list of general requirements attempts to outline the profile to be met by potential consultants. It should allow practicing consultants to judge whether a consultancy with a UN organization is a valid option or not. First and foremost, however, flexibility and mobility are a great advantage as vacancies and opportunities can arise at short notice anywhere in the world.

- Education and experience:
  - University or advanced degree in international development, social sciences, public administration or other relevant field
  - Previous working experience in developing countries and with other international and/or UN organizations
  - Prior working experience with (or at least familiarity with) the UN organization in question
  - Prior experience working with governments and/or civil society
  - Previous working experience in area of specialization or related field
- Languages:
  - Fluency in at least one of the working languages of the UN (often English, French or Spanish) and a good working knowledge of at least one other
- Skills:
  - Good communication, interpersonal, liaison and negotiating skills
  - Ability to establish effective working relations in a multicultural team environment
  - Excellent computer, drafting and editing skills
- Health and work-life balance:
  - Fitness to work in the particular post (medical certificate)
  - Willingness to travel for longer periods (often to hazardous areas)

### ***(iii) Access to Information about Consultancy Opportunities***

It is most important to realize that not all consultancy opportunities are publicly advertised (especially those with a budget below a certain threshold that do not require an external bidding process). It should also be noted that different UN organizations handle consultancy opportunities and application processes in different ways.

To simplify access to information about consultancy opportunities, the Office of Human Resources Management of the UN has compiled a list of the various websites displaying employment opportunities and vacancies for contractual work.<sup>2</sup> UNDP, for instance, has decentralized the recruitment of consultants: "Consultants may wish to contact Bureaux<sup>3</sup> and Offices of UNDP directly according to their area of expertise".<sup>4</sup> The same goes for ILO, whose recruitment for short-term employment or consultancy opportunities has also

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.un.org/Depts/OHRM/indexpo.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the UNDP Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR) has established a Roster of Experts for small arms reduction, recovery, natural disaster reduction, mine action, justice and security sector reform, and conflict prevention (<http://www.undp.org/bcpr/others/roster.htm>).

<sup>4</sup> [www.undp.org](http://www.undp.org).

been decentralized to its individual departments.<sup>5</sup> Others, such as UNOPS<sup>6</sup> and UNIDO<sup>7</sup>, publish a list of vacancies on their website. Again others, such as FAO<sup>8</sup> and WFP<sup>9</sup>, utilize computerized rosters for qualified experts and consultants.

Most recently, in spring 2005, the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC) designed the UNSSC Consultants Database. As a registered consultant, you “have access to opportunities being advertised within the UN system and you will be able to apply directly to the agency concerned. At the same time, UN organizations and affiliated international organizations will have access to information about you and may contact you directly”.<sup>10</sup> The UNSSC Consultants Database gets the closest to a central roster for the UN system, and as of today, UNSSC manages profiles of some 500 consultants and 37 registered agencies.

However, experience shows that entries in consultant databases of international organizations are generally not sufficient by themselves. Thus, apart from including your profile in rosters, regularly surfing the human resources sections of websites for vacancy announcements and subscribing to newsletters, it is extremely important to establish and maintain good personal relationships and a professional exchange with potential clients, be that at the organizations’ headquarters or at the country level.

#### ***(iv) Benefits and Entitlements***

Staff members of the UN common staff system - depending on their employment status<sup>11</sup> - are provided with various benefits and allowances as part of their employment conditions (e.g. medical insurance, pension fund, leave, compensation for overtime). Consultants, e.g. under the SSA modality, are not entitled to anything but their consultancy fee (which is either already fixed in the job advertisement or which the consultant - depending on his/her expectations - needs to propose in his/her offer to the UN agency in question).

The following factors are generally decisive when negotiating consultancy fees: (i) prevailing market forces, (ii) complexity of the project, (iii) qualifications and experience, (iv) length of the assignment, (v) funds available, and (vi) capacity to negotiate. Swiss consultants, however, need to be aware that consultancies for the UN are not lucrative and that payments for consultants are generally on the low side compared with going rates paid by Swiss organizations for similar work.

When preparing to submit your offer and budget (in cases where no TOR have been advertised), it is also useful to know that UN organizations rarely pay additional overheads to cover office administrative costs of the consultant or consultancy, and that UN agencies are not legally required to pay Value-Added Tax (VAT).

***It is not easy but worthwhile the effort:*** To be clear, it is not easy to become a consultant for organizations of the UN system. Competition is high, application procedures are cumbersome, recruitment processes are not always transparent, demands on the consultant’s personal flexibility are high, and the financial incentives for Swiss consultants are limited. Therefore, in addition to more formal applications channels - and probably like in any other organization - personal contacts and personal introductions are of prime importance for success.

However, despite these obstacles, it is worthwhile making the effort. The experience of working for the UN can be highly rewarding and can open new personal and professional perspectives. Furthermore, as the number of Swiss consultants remains limited (also compared with other nationalities), providing consulting services to the United Nations is also an excellent opportunity to gain profile within Switzerland.

---

<sup>5</sup> [www.ilo.org](http://www.ilo.org).

<sup>6</sup> [www.unops.org](http://www.unops.org).

<sup>7</sup> [www.unido.org](http://www.unido.org).

<sup>8</sup> [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org).

<sup>9</sup> [www.wfp.org](http://www.wfp.org).

<sup>10</sup> [www.unssc.org/cr](http://www.unssc.org/cr).

<sup>11</sup> Career staff members or short-term staff members.