

Promoting Food Security at the UN World Food Programme in Panama City



Olivier Li
2017 McBurney Fellow
McGill Institute for Health and Social Policy

Project Overview

Student name: Olivier Xie Cheng Li
 Department: Sociology and Political Science
 Organization: United Nations World Food Programme (UNWFP)
 Location: Panama City, Panama
 Mentor: Dr. Amm Quamruzzaman
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About the McBurney Fellowship Program

Through McGill's Institute for Health and Social Policy, the McBurney Fellowship Program supports students in international service programs related to health and social policy in Latin America. McBurney Fellows serve abroad in organizations working to meet the basic needs of local populations. One key aspect of this fellowship is its mandate to make a significant contribution to improving the health and social conditions of poor and marginalized populations through the delivery of concrete and measurable interventions. Students and their mentors identify issues, make connections with local organizations, and develop a strategy for the fellowship. The views expressed in this document are the opinions of the fellow, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.

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Fellowship Rational

Partnered with McGill Internship Offices Network, the United Nations World Food Programme (UNWFP) offers us a three-month internship in Panama City, Panama - the Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean. UNWFP is the food-assistance related branch of the United Nations, and the world's largest humanitarian organization dedicated to fighting hunger worldwide and delivering assistance along with international communities to improve nutrition. Eradicating hunger, promoting food security, and advocating sustainable development for food have been the mission of the organization.

As the regional headquarters, Panama City is the home for many United Nations agencies including UNICEF, UNDP and UNDSS. Our office is located at Ciudad del Saber, a government-funded cluster of many non-governmental organizations and other large corporations. The Humanitarian Response Depot (UNHRD) within WFP is based in its bureau in Panama. UNHRD supplies resources such as non-perishable foods and equipment to anywhere in the region. This Bureau also oversees WFP's regional operations, provides guidance for country offices regarding any other administrative functions, and cooperates with governmental organizations in strengthening emergency response support for communities affected by disasters.

Our internship lies within the Communication and Knowledge Management Unit. We work alongside the Regional Communication Director and three other officers. The department is committed to facilitating communication within the organization and with external stakeholders. The Communications and Knowledge Management Unit has three main functions: internal communication and knowledge sharing, media and press, and social media. First, we have to gather information from country offices and draft reports regarding UNWFP's work products. For instance, we write about the best practices across the region and share these insights with colleagues. Second, we deal with media and press. We have to monitor media coverage and manage media relations. The unit intends to increase UNWFP's presence on media outlets. Third, given the emergence of social media, we intend to increase our exposure and have more interaction with end-users.

Objectives

In order to facilitate internal and external communication for UNWFP, our first objective was to help develop and implement relevant information management strategies and tools for the organization. As the regional hub, WFP Panama has a variety of information resources and data.

They need to be consolidated in close coordination with concerned divisions. All these data archives have to be collated into a comprehensive repository. Our second objective was to facilitate knowledge sharing about topics such as food security in the disadvantaged communities in Latin America through means of communications. Our third objective was to increase public exposure about UNWFP's public information and advocacy strategies on traditional and social media channels.

Background/Context

In the Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC) region, there has been an increasing trend of disasters for the past few years. Especially with the recent phenomena of La Niña and El Niño, the



region has suffered from a myriad of eruptions, tsunamis, earthquakes, storms, extreme floods, earthquakes and droughts. According to a study conducted by UNWFP, approximately 200 million people have been affected by these disasters. This is about one third of the population in the region. The living conditions of many disadvantaged groups such as indigenous populations are notably impacted. Food security and nutritional crises become worsened due to natural disasters. In order to help people living in areas of high vulnerability, UNWFP has partnered with local governments and committed to tackling challenges faced by local populations.

Furthermore, LAC region can be considered as one of the most socioeconomically unequal regions in the world. Hunger is widespread among more than 53 million people in the region. This triggers many nutritional and chronic diseases among children under 5. UNWFP has estimated that anemia, as the most severe problem in LAC, has affected 22 million children, 33 million women of reproductive age and 3.6 million lactating women. In addition to the natural disasters, these conditions are exacerbated among highly vulnerable groups. The increasing food price and the macroeconomic downturn aggravate the nutritional state of people.

UNWFP has implemented many micronutrient programs with local governments in order to provide vulnerable groups cash-based or food-based necessities and alleviate those aforementioned problems. These programs aim to build an efficient and effective safety net in the region.

For the Communications and Knowledge Management Unit, we have to report on those issues and raise awareness in the LAC region. We have to reach out to the local media outlets and address the severity of these worsened conditions. For the best practices in program design and policy implementation, we have to synthesize them and share them with our colleagues. Knowledge sharing is therefore important for both internal and external use. We also have to better utilize social media as a tool to address these issues.

Activities

During our time interning for UNWFP, we first assisted the internal communication officer finalize many articles and best practice reports. This entails many translation works from Spanish to English, English to Spanish, Spanish to French, and English to French.

In terms of external communication, we assist the officer in translating several press releases and short testimonial stories about UNWFP's programs in the LAC regions. Additionally, we assisted our director brainstorm on the title and main themes of several official reports. We also helped categorize and manage UNWFP's photo database that allows cross-functional information sources for internal use.

We helped our social media officer implement UNWFP's public information and advocacy strategy, including its preparation and dissemination. For instance, we conducted research and created content on social media that facilitate knowledge sharing for end users. We strategized outreach campaigns through WFP's social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and medium.

Challenges and Successes

We were able to help UNWFP LAC spread public information by creating many posters about nutritional knowledge, public health data, food-related programs. By utilizing the information and data from official reports and journal articles, we managed to make them more concise and share these knowledge with a broader audience. We followed a detailed schedule on social media and posted them accordingly.

Also, we managed to diversify our content on social media channels. We introduced our school feeding programs, El Niño humanitarian response and other cash-based initiatives. This allows UNWFP to increase public exposure on its commitments and programs.

WFP Haiti office is the only WFP office located in a LAC country where Spanish isn't the official language. There was a lack of information resources in French. As a French speaker, I helped trans-

late various articles and reports from Spanish and English to French. These helped local staff better understand the operations and programs in other countries. We produced some social media posts in French specifically for the Haiti office.



One of our initial objectives was to develop information strategies and manage data. We were able to categorize the photos and create an archive that facilitates search functions for the Unit. However, we couldn't find a sustainable solution for the contact list assignment. The Unit has a long and dense list of contacts such as journalists, politicians and media professionals. They need to be updated and categorized. We have done research and came up with some applications that the Unit could utilize. However, due to the limited budget, none of these applications could be installed. I was trying to make a new contact list manually, but the amount of work prevented me from completing it.

Questions Raised

At the end of my fellowship, we were able to help the Unit complete many tasks for internal and external communication. In terms of social media, we helped them increase the frequency and the amount of content on different outlets including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Medium. We were also able to increase the availability of information in different languages on UNWFP articles and other publications.

However, there are only three officers who are in charge of the Unit. Without our presence, many tasks will not be able to be completed such as the French translation. In the Unit, there are always discussions about the best way to spread knowledge and interact with people in the LAC region. Even though we helped create much content, there is still a lot of work to be done. How should UNWFP use media to promote healthy lifestyles and nutrition knowledge? How should UNWFP use social media to reach out to the most vulnerable groups in LAC region?

Training and Mentoring

In the first week of our internship, we received formal online training that were required by the UN. First, we completed the certificates for Basic Security in the Field I & II. They cover multiple modules that teach security information such as risks avoidance and safety issues for all UN personnel. Then, we received training in Prevention of Harassment, Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Authority in the Workplace (SHAP).

Our regional communication director gave us an orientation presentation regarding the daily operations and the division of tasks within the Unit. We were taught about UNWFP's mission and current projects in the LAC region. The three officers gave us presentations about the three portfolio: external communication, internal communication and social media.

The regional executive director gave us a welcoming meeting and talked about the presence of UNWFP in LAC region. The regional HR director talked about the divisions within our regional office and different responsibilities for our Unit. She briefly spoke about the hierarchy within the organization and available resources for interns and employees. The security officer told us about the things we need to take care of in Panama and the dangerous places we need to avoid going. We learned some basic security information.

Therefore, before we actually began to work, we received enough training and information for our position. At the beginning, it was difficult for me to provide accurate translation from Spanish. However, my supervisors were very supportive and provided me with useful tools such as terminology reference lists and past works.

Training/mentoring from McGill supervisor

Overall it was an unparalleled opportunity for me to have experienced the work environment within a UN organization and gotten a clear idea of working for the largest intergovernmental organization in the world. It is still beyond my expectations that the organization has a such cohesive and inter-agency structure supporting different kinds of operations in the region. Different units work together in order to help implement large-scale programs such as school meals, breast-feeding initiatives and disaster prevention training. It is very impressive to see the positive impact of these projects and how much work needed to be done with different departments in order to accomplish its initiatives.

Also, I have improved my written Spanish since I am dealing with social media posts and reports every day. I have to translate documents and proofread many communication materials. Even for English and French, I learned a lot of terminologies applicable in the field of international development. I had the chance to read several journal articles and UNWFP researches on public health, migration and nutritional education. I deepened my understanding about the food security and development in the LAC region.

Furthermore, during the lunch hour, I had the chance to talk with other UN staffs who work in other departments. Talking with them allowed me to broaden my horizons and get to know more

about a career in international organizations. I learned about the procedure for applying for a job in the UN, the expected lifestyle and the skills required for this career.

It was a very good opportunity for me to learn about my strengths and think about my career prospects. I found the fields of communications and media extremely interesting. At UNWFP, it is an indirect way to spread knowledge and address social problems such as hunger and nutritional education. We also managed to present our work results using social media and other outlets.

I wouldn't do anything differently next time, but I would surely improve my spoken and written Spanish before working in a Latin American context. Also, I would read more articles and research about Latin America to have a better idea of the social and political aspects of the area.

Community Implications and Further Work

In the short term, the fellowship allowed more people in the disadvantaged communities to learn more about food security through our official website and social media and increase awareness about nutrition. The implementation of information strategies such as targeted content for different regions on Facebook and Twitter will spread knowledge in the communities and create sharing-based interactions amongst themselves. By drafting outreach campaigns on social media



and other channels, the fellowship indirectly helped increase public exposure about food issues and create an environment conducive to a better livelihood.

In the long term, the fellowship will hopefully deliver a direct and powerful impact in the local communities. People will be more conscious about food security and the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. It will help new generations develop good habits and build resilience. Also, our reports about best practices and data will contribute to help the local government enforce policies in order to cope with the problems related to social stratification and health in Panama.

How might your fellowship make a difference for the people you worked with?

This fellowship entailed implementing information strategies and facilitating knowledge-sharing, which provides ongoing commitment to the LAC region. Better practices are always needed as current conditions change at any given moment. By presenting our current programs and addressing food-related issues, the fellowship betters the public information system in the region.

What would the next steps be to translate your findings into policy action (if not already happening)?

Within the Unit, there are always discussions about how to better reach out to the communities and interact with them on social media. We also found that sometimes there is a lack of interaction between the communities and our organization. We wanted to make more direct impact using media. During our internship, our director went the UNWFP headquarter in Rome and addressed the concern with other directors from different regional offices. They came up with a new initiative called “feeding dreams”. In that initiative, we will be in direct contact with local communities in the LAC regions. The beneficiaries will be sending us the videos and pictures they took about their experience with WFP programs including emergency response, cash-based transfer and school-feeding programs. Having interactions with our beneficiaries on social media will allow our audience to better understand the actions undertaken by UNWFP and help us evaluate our programs.

Program Evaluation

This internship will allow me to complete my course SOCI499, which is dedicated to completing my research project on the effectiveness of community development programs for international organization in developing countries. This internship has definitely shaped my career and education path. I have deepened my understanding about international development in practice and enriched my experiences in the field of international affairs. The opportunity is a valuable asset for me, since I am planning on pursue my graduate studies in the field of public policy.

What did you value most about the fellowship?

What I value most about the fellowship is that I enriched my knowledge about international development in practice and learned about how a UN organization utilizes media and communication tools to spread knowledge and raise awareness about food security.

Any advice for future fellows?

It's always a good idea to learn more about the socioeconomic and political aspects of the host country before going to complete the fellowship. Have a clear and detailed plan about what are you going to do and research on.

Any suggestions for how to improve the program?

Since the UNWFP LAC office has a partnership with McGill Internship Offices Network, approximately 2-3 interns are expected to intern at the organization each year. I would highly recommend this opportunity to students who are interested in international development and food security especially with a regional interest in Latin America. Also, this would help students learn about the work environments in the UN and consider a career in international organizations.