JPO Story: improving maternal and newborn care with WHO in Malawi

Background

I have two bachelor degrees, one in Public health with health economics and one in Global development studies. I also have a Masters degree in infectious disease control.

I finished my studies and started gaining work experience in the field of global health in both development and humanitarian settings; I knew the JPO scheme would be a great opportunity to gain more experience and develop my knowledge further. As my position is with WHO, it is very interesting for someone with my background in global health to get an insight and learn how WHO works, but also to be able to contribute to their work and mandate.

Assignment

I mainly work on an initiative to improve the quality of care for maternal, newborn and child health in Malawi, which aims to reduce maternal mortality and improve the experience of care for women. Malawi is one of 11 countries in a global network trying to find ways to improve the quality of care for mothers, newborns and children. The job involves providing the government with technical assistance, guidance and advice, but also to coordinate the work among various partners to make sure there is a harmonized approach to the quality of care improvement work in the country. My day to day work includes almost daily contact with people from the Ministry of Health and other partners, such as UNICEF, GIZ, UNFPA, etc. However, being placed at quite a small country office with no other international staff there are a lot of other tasks that I am involved in which is very satisfying. It can be everything from preparing new proposals, support planning for a health accreditation system, organizing workshops and training, producing guiding documents, or preparing policy briefs, just to mention a few.

As with any other job, the first few months were challenging - as you would expect before you get to know the context and people you work with. It takes some time before you build relationships with the Ministry people and other stakeholders you work with, which is very important as WHO is an organization mainly providing technical assistance to the government rather than implementing things on our own.

Martin Dohlsten is a Swedish-sponsored JPO working with WHO in Malawi.
I would say that the overall experience of this job opportunity is very rewarding. I am in Malawi with my wife and 2-year-old son and we all love living in Malawi. As the office I work in is quite small with a limited number of staff, I have been given a lot of responsibility and have been leading several initiatives and coordinate a lot of the work which has been great. Another challenging experience was during the floods in Malawi due to the Cyclone Idai, when the country office went in to emergency mode and I was sent out to support and help coordinate the health response for the affected districts in the country. It was of course very sad to see the destruction, but also very interesting to learn and contribute to WHO’s role and responsibilities in case of an emergency.

Advice to prospective candidates

Being a JPO is a great privilege and a unique possibility to “fast-track” into the UN system. I can only talk about my own experience and I think I was a competitive candidate as I had work experience both from resource-limited contexts in a development and humanitarian setting, but also on health systems strengthening work in a high resource setting. Before I applied, I knew it was very competitive but once I was called for an interview, I tried to be as prepared as possible and enjoy the process.

My JPO experience has truly been wonderful. I have gained a comprehensive understanding within the field of my work and my learning curve has been extremely steep.

Most importantly, I have been able to contribute to the work of WHO and make a difference.