LSE International Organisations Day, 11 Nov 2017, World Food Programme

WFP’s aim is to eliminate hunger by 2030. Links to the second UN sustainable development goal <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300> (and the 17th). Currently 816 million still go hungry.

WFP is a 100% voluntarily funded agency of the UN (member states choose to contribute). There are 15,000 employees, mostly working in remote areas in direct delivery. They are always looking for people with a nutrition background.

Example career path to current role as Programme and Policy Officer at HQ in Rome (one of the speakers):

Started in peacekeeping in 2005. Had done a BA in Politics and Economics then six years in consulting and investment banking in Japan. Then a Contemporary War and Peace Studies Masters at University of Sussex. Then in 2005 joined UNV (United Nations Volunteers - in spite of name, these are paid positions) in Liberia as an electoral support officer. This involved identifying polling centres, negotiating to use them, recruiting and training staff. After this became head of the sub office for WFP in Liberia (accommodation was a room at the office, no running water or internet). All the other staff were Liberian nationals. Still working for UNV in this post, but a lot of responsibility. Located on the border of Sierra Leone where lots of refugees were returning at the end of the war. UNHCR would register the weekly convoy of people; WFP fed them.

After a few years went back to Japan and then to Egypt and studied Arabic; invited to interview for WFP job in Darfur, followed by posting to Afghanistan. In 2014 secured role at HQ.

In North Darfur 1 million people were being fed, including 300,000 IDP (Internally Displaced Persons). Lots of liaison with those doing the distribution and with the government, always liaising to establish the next month’s strategy. Lots of reports to produce for the country office and donors. Lots of travel to the field mission and looking after donor visits. Key skill needed: problem solving.

In 2010-11 distribution moved towards a cash system so people could buy food (rather than food distribution), with a ‘take home ration’ as an incentive for families to send their girls to school (where they received the ‘take home ration’). There was also a big programme of biometric registration. This took a year to prepare, with lots of difficulties in communications. People then had to register to get food.

There are different categories of duty stations, with different levels of restriction and privation. In categories A-C you can be accompanied by family members but not in D and E (list of classifications can be found here <https://icsc.un.org/resources/hrpd/mah/HC01012017.pdf>):

B – cities such as Nairobi

C – Cities such as Kathmandu

D – Cities such as Islamabad, Freetown

E - More remote locations in countries such as Yemen, Sudan.

In D and E movement is often quite restricted. You are living in a compound and can only go outside the compound in a convoy (compound can be quite basic, eg for posting in Sudan the compound was made up of a series of containers). However, you are given R&R (rest and recuperation) periods. Frequency varies according to nature of posting – in Syria you are currently given 5 days out of the country every 4 weeks. For some postings it could be every 6 weeks.

Working in HQ is very different. Programme and Policy Officer works on policies and strategies and inter-agency coordination, meeting with donor agencies etc. Still travel to country office operations and also still have TDA (Temporary Duty assignment) – can be deployed for emergency work.

The WFP is very operational and action is relatively quick compared to other UN agencies. You usually stay at a duty station for 2 years and in Rome for 4 years (which can be extended to 6 years).

Types of contract:

International Professionals – highly skilled, mid-career, fixed term positions, most competitive positions to secure, there are at least 100 of these per year

National Officers – usually in your country of origin, usually have a masters degree (national staff are the backbone of the organisation).

General Service

Consultants/Short Term Professionals (3-11 month contracts) – often people who don’t get in as International Professionals. Usually highly skilled with specialist skills.

Junior Professional Officers – they are sponsored by donor countries, are highly skilled and usually have at least three years’ experience in field areas. Unfortunately the UK is no longer sponsoring JPOs (which means UK nationals cannot apply for these positions). Stats about JPOs: more than 80% have 3-8 years’ experience; 90% have a masters degree, 2% have a PhD, in the past 6 years 70% have been women. You gain significant experience as a JPO.

WFP volunteers – apply through the website, these positions are mostly in Rome but there are some in country offices.

P3 positions need 5 years’ experience, P4 positions need 8 years’ experience.

3-8 month internships are available, with Feb and June starts (and they are paid – one of the few UN agencies to provide paid internships). It is possible to progress from an internship to become a junior consultant. To apply for internships you must be enrolled in a degree or have graduated within the last 6 months.

Most useful languages (English essential): Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, French. Japanese fluency is becoming useful.

In Spring 2018 the Future International Talent (FIT) pool will be launched. This is a pool of people ready for fast deployment and applications have just been launched. There is a critical need for people to work in security; nutrition and finance are also needs. If you are accepted into the pool, that lasts for 2 years, and you have to agree to be deployed anywhere.

Selection for WFP:

Online application (400 applications per position), phone interview/technical assessment, which is often a written assessment (top 15-20 applications go through to this), panel interview (around 5 people go through to this). 1 position offered and 2 names kept in reserve in case another suitable position comes along.

Responses to questions:

For category A duty station jobs probably 10% of successful applicants are external (remember there are internal consultants who could apply for these roles). There are occasional physician jobs in the WFP, but not many. A PhD counts for years of experience but only at a 50% ratio (a 4 year PhD counts as 2 years of experience).

The London office is extremely small and concentrates on communications.