

***"Open-door" opportunities that  
leave many young people on the doorstep***

**United Nations unpaid internships under the spotlight**

Marina Jiménez Melgosa

February 2023

*Powerful states exercise dominance in the international system through the world of ideas, not through the use of force.*<sup>1</sup> This powerful phrase captures one of the main consequences of unpaid internships in international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN): they are overwhelmingly crowded of graduates from wealthy families from the Global North, since they are the only ones who can afford living long periods without a salary in the world's most expensive cities.

As Secretary-General Antonio Guterres noted in Our Common Agenda, young people need to believe that they have a stake in society and a viable future, but they also need to see that society believes and invests in them, regardless of where they are born. In this respect, the issues of exclusion and under-representation of students and young professionals in International Organizations and International Courts' internships due to financial constraints have not received proper attention.

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), an internship can be defined as “*a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting. Internships give students the opportunity to gain valuable applied experience and make connections in professional fields they are considering for career paths; and give employers the opportunity to guide and evaluate talent.*”<sup>2</sup> But, what if “*talent*” depended on your race, gender, country of origin or family background? While internships tend to act as gateways, the lack of funding for living expenses during their duration makes “*talent*” dependent on sitting on a gold mine, creating a large bias towards the elite and well-connected youth.

Since its beginnings, the UN has consistently addressed the economic inequality issue, claiming that “*one of the greatest discrimination in this world today is discrimination by rich people against poor people*”<sup>3</sup>. Far from taking action to be a role model for paid and quality internships, the UN has opted for maintaining an alarming percentage of unpaid internships: 81%; and for the remaining 19%, low salaries make it difficult for interns to survive in places like New York or Geneva, where most of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Chimni, B. S. (2006). Third World Approaches to International Law: A Manifesto, 8 Int'l Community L. Rev, 3, 25.

<sup>2</sup> NACE (2018) Position Statement: U.S. Internships. A definition and criteria to assess opportunities and determine the implications for compensation. Available at: <https://www.naceweb.org/about-us/advocacy/.../position-statement-us-internships>

<sup>3</sup> J. Carter, B. Boutros-Ghali (1992), Conference for Global Development Cooperation: Meeting Report, DIANE Publishing, 9

opportunities are located.<sup>4</sup> According to the Employment Conditions Abroad (ECA) Cost of Living survey, New York and Geneva are the second and the third most expensive cities worldwide. If we attend to the Worldwide Cost of Living 2022 report, published by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), New York climbs to the first position, moving up five places since 2021. Given the location of UN office headquarters, only those whose families can provide sufficient funds, those who live near cities where the UN offers internship programs, and those who have the opportunity to obtain funding from third parties - such as the Carlo-Schmid Programm in Germany, have access to these second to none professional experiences in the world of international organizations.

For the goal of "*listen and work with the youth*" to be truly fulfilled, the UN cannot afford to maintain its current internship system. Although some UN agencies have taken initial steps to address this issue - like the World Health Organization (WHO), which provides medical and accident insurance coverage to all their interns during the duration of the internship period and provides living allowance to eligible selected interns who need financial support since January 2020<sup>5</sup> -, there is still a long way to go.

One of the first attempts to identify possible enhancements to ensure the best and most rewarding intern experience possible was the 2009 report by the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU).<sup>6</sup> A key finding was the possibility of offering support measures to alleviate resource constraints experienced by interns. However, the inspectors rejected the idea of providing any stipend arguing that the interns already receive returns of different kind, such as resume-building, professional networking, or the prestige of having been selected for the program. Even knowing that compensation is one of the deciding factors for many candidates in whether to apply for the position, the report supported it only in the form of daily meal vouchers, transport subscriptions and a contribution to insurance costs for only those who lack any other sponsorship and funding from other institutions or for fellows who are not from the local area.

As a follow-up of the 2009 review, JIU carried out a new report in 2018, which advocates for "*a consistent UN system-wide program of practices, with a common set of good practices based on a benchmarking framework, would enhance the effectiveness of*

---

<sup>4</sup> Cazeau, J. W., & Unit, J. I. (2018). Review of internship programmes in the United Nations System. Joint Inspection Unit. Available at:

[https://www.unjiu.org/sites/www.unjiu.org/files/jiu\\_rep\\_2018\\_1\\_english.pdf](https://www.unjiu.org/sites/www.unjiu.org/files/jiu_rep_2018_1_english.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> WHO Internship Programme, available at: <https://www.who.int/careers/internship-programme>

<sup>6</sup> Wynes, M., & Posta, I. (2009). Internships in the United Nations system. Joint Inspection Unit. Available at: [https://www.unjiu.org/sites/www.unjiu.org/files/jiu\\_document\\_files/products/en/reports-notes/JIU%20Products/JIU\\_NOTE\\_2009\\_2\\_English.pdf](https://www.unjiu.org/sites/www.unjiu.org/files/jiu_document_files/products/en/reports-notes/JIU%20Products/JIU_NOTE_2009_2_English.pdf)

*programs and the reputation of the organizations concerned*<sup>7</sup>. One of the most interesting recommendations it brought up is requesting the General Assembly to update of the UN human resource framework to include a specific category for interns, rather than remaining classified as “*gratis personnel*”. This measure would not only strengthen the organization's accountability for the use of non-staff and enhance respect for the important contribution interns do but would also be a first step towards the introduction of possible compensation for interns. Thus, UN internships would then come closer to its role as a door opener for all young people who believe that working at the UN is associated with the dream of contributing to build a better world.

By solving the problem of financial compensation for interns in UN offices, we would not only be solving a micro-level problem, but a macro-way of perpetuating inequalities worldwide. Leveraging the UN's role as a model in the international organizations arena may lead other key actors, like International Courts to adopt minimum wages to interns and young professionals. The most reliable way to ensure that these minimum compensation payments are stable and equitable is to make them part of the annual budget of the organizations instead of relying on donations from states, as in the case of the Trust Fund for the Development of Interns and Visiting Professionals of the International Criminal Court (ICC); or from the nominating university of applicants, as happens in the Judicial Fellowship Programme at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).<sup>8</sup>

The main consequence of relying on third parties, especially in relation to the ICJ funding program, is that most of the interns end up coming from Western countries: an overwhelming 95% out of 193 interns during 2000-2019 period were sponsored by universities based in Western European and other States group, whereas only one intern (0,5%) was sponsored by a university in Latin America and the Caribbean and eight (4%) were sponsored by universities in the Asia Pacific region.<sup>9</sup> This unequal distribution of internship positions biases the work carried out in international tribunals, ultimately affecting the construction of international law.

---

<sup>7</sup> Supra, 4

<sup>8</sup> Imran, M. (2021). Unpaid Internships at International Courts and Tribunals: An Instrument in Expanding the Gap between the North and the South. *Available at SSRN 3878026*.

<sup>9</sup> UN General Assembly (2020). A\_RES/75/129 Trust fund for the Judicial Fellowship Programme of the International Court of Justice. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 14 December 2020. Available at: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/363/68/PDF/N2036368.pdf?OpenElement>

Furthermore, there is also a threat of future generations perceiving international organizations as a way of reproducing current inequalities rather than advocating and fighting for their end, what can lead to a hazardous loss of trust towards these entities. If we add to this the fact that the UN administration frequently reports the departure of the most promising young interns - probably driven by the unpaid nature of the work,<sup>10</sup> it seems clear that urgent action must be taken to ensure that having a work experience at the United Nations is no longer a dream within reach of a privileged few.

As long as the UN and other international organizations privilege those who have the resources to be able to support themselves for six months in the most expensive cities in the world over those who cannot, the interns will continue to be those who can afford it and not necessarily the best. Making the UN accessible and attractive to all motivated and qualified young people must be a priority. We cannot waste all the potential they hide. We cannot slam the door in the face of so many talented youths who want to change the world.

---

<sup>10</sup> Novaković, M. (2017). United Nations internship programme policy and the need for its amendment. *Анали Правног факултета у Београду*, 65(4), 112-123.