

Final Internship Report

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International Organization for Migration — UN Migration
San José, Costa Rica

At a glance

I interned at the IOM office in the capital city of Costa Rica, where Roeland de Wilde, Dartmouth '00 is Head of Mission. I received great insight into how the UN and similar intergovernmental bodies work and used my Spanish language skills in a professional setting. The project I focused on addressed exploitation of migrant workers, working with companies — both multinational and ones based in Costa Rica — to educate them about the potential for labor exploitation in their supply chains and how to eliminate it.

Overview of the Internship

I am Cecily, a '22 interested in Anthropology, Sociology, Government and Human-Centered Design. After my freshman year, I was looking for an opportunity to expand my work experience in a different sector while also furthering my Spanish fluency. I worked in San José, Costa Rica at the national office of the International Organization for Migration, which is the UN Migration agency. The office consists of a range of departments and its focus is overseeing projects mainly in Costa Rica. However, given the country's geographic and political position within Central America, the national projects are often closely related to nearby countries and their reach extends beyond CR. My focus was a regional initiative called EMPRO, or *Empresas, Migración, y Prosperidad*, (Companies, Migration, and Prosperity) that works with major corporations to reduce migrant labor exploitation by facilitating and promoting ethical labor conditions for migrant workers in company supply chains. More specifically, they help business identify when partners in their supply chain maybe involved in human trafficking or exploitation, why they should care, and how they can eliminate it.

Projects + Types of Work

During my time with IOM, I mainly worked as a part of a small team on a major, long-term project called EMPRO. This initiative is based upon a similar project already in place in Asia with the name CREST (Corporate Responsibility in Eliminating Slavery and Trafficking). The Costa Rican office is spearheading the effort to bring this initiative to Central America but given that the project must be adapted according to cultural and regional differences — as well as language — EMPRO is a region-specific version of CREST. My team consisted of four key people, although there was a lot of additional collaboration between co-workers across departments. Our “EMPRO” team consisted of a Dutch consultant who had launched the project and whose background is in the Dutch Foreign Ministry, a Venezuelan intern, and a Costa Rican consultant.

When I began working at IOM, the project had already been underway for about 6-8 months and the team of people working on it had expanded significantly. Long-term projects and a fair bit of movement with new people joining seemed quite typical of the organization. The EMPRO team reaches out to major companies — both national and multinational — that operate in Costa Rica, hoping that they will agree to have employees participate in the EMPRO training course, which consists of two categories: awareness and how to take action. At the time I was conducting my internship, the Costa Rican team was in the stage of refining the course material for the EMPRO training program and reaching out to prospective clients. My day-to-day work consisted of both independent and team tasks. I helped with outreach, preparing for and attending pitches of the EMPRO program to interested companies, as well as refining the training course modules.

My work was primarily desk-based, although I did not spend the entirety of my time in my office and my job involved frequent interpersonal interactions with colleagues. I am very pleased to report that IOM does not shy from giving interns real work and meaningful tasks, and from the beginning I could see that my contributions would have lasting impacts on the project. For example, in preparing the EMPRO course modules, the four of us gathered to run through the presentation together. Along with my two bosses and fellow intern, I suggested changes and improvements to the modules and direction of the training, many of which were incorporated. We worked as a real team, and as an intern I had the same responsibilities as others and was not relegated to mundane behind-the-scenes tasks or busy work.

Expectations vs. Experience

Much of my experience was unexpected, largely because I did not have a lot of information going into my internship as to my assignment, so I had very limited expectations. I had researched the organization and had information on the Dartmouth alum who had hired me and the office culture, but I knew very little about what my day-to-day work would look like and who I would work with on a regular basis.

As a result, my experience exceeded my expectations in many ways, particularly regarding the quality of the team I worked on. I worked with three extremely independent and motivated women, who had each arrived at IOM via very different paths. I learned so much from them beyond the scope of our project because they shared their personal life-experience — especially as successful women forging their own careers — that I could never have anticipated. Leading up to my internship, I didn't really know what my work would be and was under the impression that I might be moving between a few different projects. Instead, I was assigned to this one long-term EMPRO project. I really enjoyed working day after day with my teammates because it allowed me to develop more personal relationships as I wasn't being moved from project to project. I also found that working on the same assignment over the course of my eight weeks was extremely rewarding because I could see the direct results of my contributions and that we were making significant progress together as a team.

One major misconception of mine was regarding what it means to be a “related organization of the UN.” I thought that the International Organization for Migration was very related to and worked closely with the UN, but I didn't realize until getting to the office that the IOM is actually a UN agency, like UNICEF or UN Women. While it is distinct in that it is also a separate organization in many ways, I was really working for the UN Migration agency. I had to take mandatory online training courses for all UN personnel and had access to UN resources. Instead of just technically working with the UN, I was actually working for one of their organizations, which provided me with additional insight into how the system works.

Another way that my expectations varied from my experience was regarding the amount of Spanish I used. From my experience, the office is extremely international and at the time of my internship many employees had high levels of fluency in English. I absolutely used my Spanish a great deal in the office, but I found that there was more English in the mix than I had anticipated. I should add that my frame of reference was a previous three-month internship in Madrid, where I did not speak any English the entire duration of my time there. At IOM, however, many of my co-workers that I directly interacted with had worked internationally, and some even preferred to speak in English, or at least found it easier when working with a lot of English material. My Spanish certainly improved, and I would not have been able to do my job without the high level of Spanish I had going into the internship. Nevertheless, contrary to my expectations, a significant portion of my conversations and work were actually conducted in English. Again, I believe that can change depending on the people you are assigned to work with, so I would recommend anyone interning here be very proficient in their Spanish.

Work Environment + Work Life Balance

The office culture is extremely friendly and laid-back and about half local “Ticos” (Costa Rican natives) and half international. It was common for colleagues to bring in snacks to share and start off the day chatting with each other instead of heading straight to their desks to start working. The lively social environment of this particular office made it difficult to concentrate at times, but I really enjoyed the frequent interactions that built a sense of community between co-workers. For example, it is commonplace to ask office-mates for thoughts regarding what you are working on or invite them to join you

for a coffee out of the office or even just a break. They made me feel very comfortable and went out of their way to include me and value my opinions. The primary office language was Spanish, such as in the break room and kitchen, but the majority of employees do speak English. The Spanglish and frequent code-switching was definitely something unfamiliar for me given that my past work environments have been either entirely Spanish or English, but I adjusted quickly and enjoyed the freedom to choose which language to use based upon my audience and how comfortable I felt expressing what I wanted to say in either language.

I knew going into my internship that it would be challenging to find a social network abroad because I would be living alone in a place where I had no had connections (I had never even been to Costa Rica before). Given that my internship was not a part of a program, I did not have the safety net of fellow interns at work or at home and I was actually living entirely alone for the first time. As I had created my own internship opportunity, I had to find my own housing, so I expected that I would have to put “myself out there” to meet people. While it was difficult to build a social network over a finite 2-month period, the IOM office environment is very open, and I developed strong friendships with several of my co-workers that extended outside of the office. As many employees are international, there is an atmosphere of camaraderie outside of work between colleagues because many are also there as expats without social networks of their own. I was fortunate to connect with a few Dartmouth students and meet other students traveling around Costa Rica through extended social networks, such as a long-lost middle school friend who happened to be studying in the country. She in turn introduced me to her friends so I found students closer in age to socialize with that way which was a bonus.

One unexpected challenge was that the sun sets by 6pm, and it isn't safe to travel alone in the dark, so my options for how to spend my evenings were significantly limited. While I did go out and meet people for dinner, went to a few lectures, and found ways to explore the city, I also had to find ways to occupy my time while coping with my restricted night-time freedom. I developed a routine of making friends and deepening those relationships when I could, while also welcoming the opportunity to focus on myself. I spent a lot of time cooking, exercising, journaling, reading and more, and also maintained contact with people from home through facetime. It was an opportunity for me to create good lifestyle habits as I focused on my own “self-care”.

Personal Growth, Skills Learned + Cultural Differences Encountered

As already mentioned, one of my biggest challenges was living by myself, and this allowed for incredible opportunities for personal growth. I found it scary and yet exciting to be in an entirely foreign place with no safety net and the freedom to explore. Despite initial hesitation around being alone, I capitalized upon the opportunity to travel and made many friends and travel companions along the way. Beyond travel, the day-to-day of living alone also allowed me to learn a lot about myself.

While I have lived in other foreign environments before for extended periods of time, being there totally alone was a new challenge for me. In the past, I have lived with a host family or been culturally immersed through a program, but there was no one here making me explore the city, try local things, or go out of my comfort zone. So I learned how to get out and do that on my own. A few of the cultural differences I encountered that stood out to me was the dress code and schedule. I was in Costa Rica during the rainy season, which is their colder season, but by Northeast standards it was still warm at 70-80 degrees. I had expected some cultural differences in dress, knowing that I would stand out even more as a foreigner in a tank top, shorts and sandals, but I did not anticipate the extent of the difference. As I had anticipated in the city, at all times, women wore long pants and closed-toed shoes, but they also wore sweaters and boots

because it is their “winter” which certainly caught me by surprise. Another cultural difference I encountered in the workspace was the very social, talkative environment that was so established, socializing was highly valued alongside productivity and they went hand in hand as opposed to being viewed as a barrier to one’s productivity or output. The Costa Rican schedule is also certainly different, and the work day began later than in many American cities, with employees enjoying a far looser schedule. I remember one meeting in particular where half of the attendants arrived fifteen minutes late, which was not frowned upon at all but almost expected, and another attendant came almost forty-five minutes late to the same hour and a half meeting!

In terms of the internship work itself, I learned a lot of information specific to the project I was working on. I am now far more fluent in the issue of labor exploitation, human trafficking, modern slavery, and the role corporations have in knowingly, or unknowingly, facilitating these forms of exploitation. I gained great insight into Costa Rican culture and migration in the nation and region, and how this directly relates to immigration issues in the United States. I also enjoyed seeing the cultural differences between my previous work experiences in Madrid and Lima, and how they compared with my time in Costa Rica.

Lasting Impact

My time at the IOM will undoubtedly impact me academically, professionally and personally. Insightful conversations with Mr. De Wilde '00, the Head of Mission, helped reinforce my interest in Anthropology by demonstrating the discipline’s many applications to the real world, including but not limited to how he applies it in his own work and seeks to understand why people are doing what they’re doing when it comes to migration. I also learned a lot about working in an intergovernmental organization, and how there is often more funding available at the cost of increased bureaucracy. Furthermore, I pushed my comfort zones more than I ever have before this summer traveling and living alone, and I learned a great deal about myself through it. Going into the internship, I was skeptical about whether I would be traveling at all given that I didn’t know anyone, but I got over my fear of traveling alone and am so incredibly grateful that I was in a situation where I felt pushed to do that. I met so many wonderful people as a result and it was so freeing to create my own routines, do sightseeing I wanted on my own schedule, and have that time with myself for reflection. Traveling alone still scares me, with its very feeling of discomfort and vulnerability — but it is outweighed by the positive feeling of independence it gives me — making me want to travel alone more and do things more things that put me outside of my comfort zone!

I can’t say enough about what an overall wonderful and enriching experience it was for me to work with IOM and live in San Jose. I would highly recommend this internship.