



Office of the Resident Coordinator  
in the State of Kuwait

مكتب المنسق المقيم  
في دولة الكويت

25 November 2008

Address of United Nations Resident Coordinator in Kuwait, Mrs. Valerie Cliff  
American University of Kuwait – Social Awareness Week

First of all thank you very much for inviting me to your Social Awareness event at the American University of Kuwait. Its my pleasure to meet with all of you and discuss a bit about the United Nations and its role in promoting social causes. I'll begin with some prepared remarks but then I'll try to keep the remarks as brief as possible so we can leave plenty of time for questions and dialogue as I'd really like to engage you in a discussion today rather than just a lecture from me.

First I'd like to say a few words about myself and my career with the United Nations – and I hope to inspire some of you to consider the United Nations and other organizations like it for your own careers.

I grew up in the United States – went to a small liberal arts college in New England called Amherst College and started working in the financial sector – first for one year at the Federal Reserve Board of Governors (the Central Bank of the United States) and then on Wall Street for two years – worked right across from World Trade Center twin towers in downtown Manhattan. I thought I was going to be a typical investment banker making lots and lots of money, living the high life. Somehow though, it just wasn't fulfilling or motivating for me. Still though I wasn't sure exactly what career I wanted to pursue and I knew I had to get a post-graduate degree because in the United States, its pretty much expected for your career to not only get a Bachelors degree but then also a graduate degree. So I followed the same path I was already in and went to Harvard Business School and got my MBA degree. And going to Harvard was a great, great experience. I enjoyed it so much. Certainly, if any of you are interested in knowing more about the business school there, I'd be happy to talk to you about it more later on.

But in any case, before I went to Harvard, I made a dramatic shift in my work and my life. I quit working on wall street and found an international volunteer organization that would take me on board. I didn't really care where I went or what I would be doing – I just knew I wanted to do something that mattered – something that made a difference to people. So I found an organization called the International Rescue Committee, and sure enough they were willing to take me on as a volunteer in Peshawar, Pakistan teaching English to Afghan refugees. I was paid \$300 a month – I had to pay for my own air fare from NY to Pakistan. And to this day, I will still tell you that that was the best job I ever had. I learned so much from these refugees, who were so dignified and strong despite the terrible circumstances of their lives. I can't encourage you all enough about the value of doing something like this – something that's a bit of a risk – that's contributing some way of your time, your ideals, your dedication to in some small way serve humanity – and do it while you are still young and have the opportunity to do so and don't have the financial burdens you'll have later in life. It was really a privilege to have this opportunity to volunteer

and I would encourage you so strongly to look for any such opportunities that you might find out there to do the same.

So anyway, at Harvard Business School, while all of my friends and classmates were being interviewed by one consulting firm and investment bank after another, I interviewed instead with organizations like the World Bank and the United Nations, and I ended up joining the United Nations right out of business school – with the United Nations Development Programme – and here I am 17 years later, and I'm still with the same organization.

Working with UNDP has given me the opportunity to live and work in places that I had barely even heard of before. So right after business school I went to Cambodia and spent 3 years in Cambodia, and then almost a year in Bosnia during the civil war where they sent me in to Sarajevo with a flack-jacket and helmet, and then I went to Jerusalem and spent 4 years working with the UNDP Palestinian programme in the West Bank and Gaza. I then took my first HQs assignment with UNDP in NY and actually stayed in NY for quite a long period – 8 years spent covered the Arab Region from HQs so travelled all over the arab world.

And then almost 2 years ago now, I came to Kuwait to head the United Nations development operations here in Kuwait as United Nations Resident Coordinator.

So that was a quick overview of the last 25 years of my life – and the only reason I wanted to mention it was hopefully to inspire some of you out there to consider the opportunities of an international development career – I've had a career which has been incredibly satisfying and rewarding and inspiring and I would be real pleased if anyone looks in the same direction.

Let me move now to discussing more about what the United Nations 'looks like' in Kuwait because its a bit different than what you would see in other countries. Kuwait of course is in economic terms a very wealthy country in terms of GNP per capita or really any other economic measure of success – Kuwait is at the very top. So, if you go to other countries in the arab region, you'll see a much broader UN presence, in Kuwait we are more limited in terms of the number of UN agencies present here.

In Kuwait we have two main types of Un organizations – we have those that are in Kuwait serving the people in Kuwait and we have those that are based in Kuwait but are actually performing services for Iraq

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Iraq programme organizations:

UNAMI – political mission – special representative of secretary general – about 300 staff based in Kuwait



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UNHCR – Iraq sub office – Refugees organization – but they are actually providing support and assistance to Internally Displaced persons in southern Iraq around Basra area.

Kuwait programme organizations:

UNDP – I manage the UNDP office – and I'll speak more on that in a minute because its the one I know best.

UNHCR – Iraq and other nationalities

ILO – employment issues

IOM – migrant worker issues

World Bank –

UNHABITAT at ATO

So let me go back to UNDP now which is the largest of the agencies represented in Kuwait – and explain a bit more what we do. First of all we work WITH the Government of Kuwait – so all of our work is coordinated with the SCPD – and in the context of Kuwait's national development objectives. If you follow the local news you'll know that the GVT of Kuwait is putting together a 5-year strategic development plan for 2009-2013.

Within the many national development objectives we work only in those areas where we can contribute – so you won't see the UN working in infrastructure or capital investments because we don't get involved in those areas – UNDP in particular and many other UN agencies are primarily focused on what we call the HUMAN side of Development – focusing on issues that improve the quality of people's lives – we focus in particular on the Millenium Development Goals – 8 goals defined in the year 2000 (hence 'millenium') to fight poverty around the world. So we are really defined by the common space between these two agendas – Kuwait's national development agenda on the one hand and the global development agenda (as defined primarily by the MDGs on the other).

in several main areas:

1. Environment – EPA project and KIEN project
2. Gender equality – project to look at last election results and why
3. Good governance – how ministries and gvt institutions function and provide their services in effective and efficient way.



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In all of these areas our goal is capacity-building – building knowledge, expertise and local sustainability.

So far, we don't have any kind of national volunteer programmes, but I am very interested in starting up such a programme in Kuwait and I'd love to hear from you whether you think people of your generation in Kuwait would be interested in volunteering their time in some kind of national programme.

I'll think I'll stop here now so that I could leave the floor open to more dialogue and see what things you would like to discuss further.