

**Post-Internship Reflection Paper – Kate Oja
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My summer was spent interning for three months at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Rabat, Morocco. Morocco used to be considered a transit country for asylum seekers trying to reach Europe, but in recent years has become a destination country in itself for people fleeing a diversity of sub-Saharan African countries, and also other Arab countries both in Africa and the Middle East. The majority of people granted refugee status by the UNHCR in Morocco come from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, and Iraq. There is also a significant trend of Nigerian claimants. One of the aspects of my internship I found most valuable is that it provided me with specialized experience with regards to both North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa at the same time, and the intersection of these two regions in the cadre of refugee law.

I worked in the Protection Unit, which is the division dealing with all the elements of the refugee status determination procedure, follow-up of vulnerable cases, as well as resettlement procedures for refugees. In addition to providing support for these procedures, I conducted data compilation regarding monthly trends in arrests and deportations of persons registered with the UNHCR. I also helped assemble information on 'secondary mover' refugees – who were previously recognized in other countries – in order to facilitate the status determination procedure for the UNHCR in Morocco.

Working in the Protection Unit involved a high level of direct contact on a daily basis with refugees and asylum seekers. As an intern, one of my most important tasks was registering asylum seekers, a process that was done over the course of two days, every two weeks. During the 12 weeks of my internship, the UNHCR registered close to 200 asylum seekers, of which I likely completed a third. By virtue of the fact that my internship experience was largely hands-on, I was able to build on a set of practical skills that will transfer well into legal work in several different areas. Over the course of the summer and the many interviews I conducted with both asylum seekers and refugees, I developed very strong interview skills, often on very difficult subjects such as experiences of rape, torture, and other war crimes. The interviews I conducted often required recording very detailed information about atrocities experienced before, during, and after leaving their country of origin, while being sensitive to potential trauma. These types of interviews demanded striking a very delicate balance between sensitivity and professionalism, the importance of which was magnified when working with very vulnerable people. I think of this as a lesson that cannot be taught in the classroom, but only by experience, and a skill that will serve me well in solicitor-client relationships in both refugee and criminal law, particularly at the international level.

Other practical skills I built upon over the summer were negotiation and conflict resolution techniques. The UNHCR is an extremely large institution with a bureaucratic structure that can prove very frustrating for asylum seekers and refugees. From a client perspective, there are none of the practical advantages of working with, for example, a small NGO (although of course the benefit is, potentially, recognition by an international agency). Dealing with sometimes difficult, angry, and volatile individuals required a high level of patience and ability to diffuse situations that otherwise could have escalated very quickly. My experience in learning to navigate a large bureaucracy, on behalf of an at-risk client population, will be invaluable in future.

It perhaps goes without saying that I have come away from my internship with enriched knowledge of substantive refugee law as well as procedure, and the challenges faced by decision makers with regards to constantly changing country conditions. Through my involvement and observation of the status determination procedure, I was particularly sensitized to the dangers of stereotypes developing when

very few – or very many – claimants from a particular country are recognized. A major question in refugee law today – faced equally in Canada – is the issue of what are often referred to as ‘economic migrants,’ and the debate about how, and to what extent, refugee law should evolve to respond to what has previously not been considered as a ground on its own for refugee status: extreme poverty.

A challenge related to the issue of poverty, I learned, was the difficulty decision makers face when interviewing claimants who were suspected to be victims of human trafficking. I observed several status determination interviews with claimants of this kind, most of whom were minors. While being a victim of human trafficking is a ground for refugee status, there are often significant obstacles in identifying those individuals, who do not feel at liberty to disclose the reality of their situation in an interview, and may be under threat from their trafficker not to do so. In this kind of case the claimant may tell a story of voluntary migration for economic reasons, therefore inhibiting the interviewer from making a decision that would otherwise grant them status as a refugee. Through cases like these I was able to learn the UNHCR’s position on both economic migrants and trafficked persons on paper, and the challenges of applying them in practice.

This being my second summer since starting law school spent on an internship overseas, I was worried before going to Morocco about not having decided to take a job working in a more traditional legal environment in Canada. Instead, I found that my experience this summer was been precisely the reminder I may have needed as to the reason I came to law school in the first place – which was to pursue a career in international human rights. I found it exhilarating to be able to step outside of the regimental culture of law school and feel truly in my element in the fast-paced and sometimes unpredictable environment of my internship. My experience this summer reassured me that the combination of my legal education, organizational skills, ability to work under pressure and adaptability have prepared me to take my next steps as an unconventional law student, on an unconventional career path.