



Career and
Professional Development
Center

Tips for Students Interested Post Graduate Careers in International Public Interest Law

1. Overview

Unlike most domestic public interest opportunities, many entry-level legal positions with international organizations are not widely advertised and typically blend legal and policy duties in ways that often escape easy characterization. This tipsheet is designed to help students focus their search, introduce essential resources, and provide general advice on the application process and strategy.

2. Types of International Public Interest Opportunities

International public interest opportunities are broadly categorized along three distinct axes: (1) subject matter, (2) type of employer, and (3) type of placement. When looking at positions students must carefully evaluate all three in order to determine the right fit as well as the proper application strategy and outreach.

A. Subject Matter

While it is not possible to list every substantive topic in which public interest organizations operate, most entry level positions are clustered around the following three broad types of work: (i) **international development**, (ii) **international human rights/criminal law**, (iii) **international environmental law**. Generally speaking, international development relates to projects aimed at improving physical infrastructure, broadening healthcare access, developing rule of law, or increasing sustainability in developing countries. It tends to be the most transactional of the three fields. The International human rights /criminal law field generally entails working within the U.N. agencies or various international tribunals to provide humanitarian relief, prosecute war criminals, and assist in refugee resettlement and relocation. Outside intergovernmental bodies, most international actors engaged in this work are various NGOs whose work is less legal and more policy and advocacy oriented. Finally, international environmental law seeks to address environmental consequences of private and governmental actions with an adverse environmental impact.

B. Type of Employer

Most international public interest employers are: (i) **governmental agencies** that serve as charitable arms of their host government (i.e. USAID), (ii) **supranational organizations** or tribunals established by a treaty (i.e. the European Investment Bank), (iii) **U.N. agencies** (i.e.

UNHCR), and (iv) **not-for-profit organizations** with a specific mission or portfolio of issues (i.e. Amnesty International).

C. Type of Placements

Most organizations engaged in public interest work have two distinct types of positions: field and headquarters. Field positions are based in developing countries and entail working with local stakeholders in various capacities, often providing direct legal services to target populations. These positions are often of limited duration, typically six months to a year. By contrast, headquarters positions are often permanent and focus on donor reporting, policy development, lobbying, and stakeholder advocacy. As a general rule, it is easier to obtain a position in the field rather than in the headquarters.

3. Making yourself attractive to international public interest employers

Languages and cross-cultural experience: perhaps the single most attractive characteristic beyond one's legal education is an applicant's linguistic abilities and experiences living and working abroad. International employers often rely on those experiences to assess the likelihood of success in a foreign environment. Thus, students interested in pursuing an international public interest career are encouraged to develop cross-cultural experiences by pursuing international summer internships and study abroad opportunities.

Previous legal experience: while it may sound like a contradiction, the vast majority of entry-level positions with international organizations are filled by attorneys with several years of post-graduate legal experience. This is particularly true for employers who provide direct services because they rarely have the resources and willingness to train attorneys in the basics of legal practice. Thus, several years of legal experience at a law firm, a domestic governmental agency, or a U.S. based non-profit is frequently the best springboard for students hoping to eventually work overseas.

Sense of mission: similar to domestic public interest employers, international organizations often look to applicants' past experiences to gauge their commitment to the mission of their organization. Extra-curricular, summer, and academic experiences that reflect a student's interest in international human rights, environmental issues, project finance, or some other area relevant to the work at the target organization will significantly increase that applicant's attractiveness and chances of getting an interview.

4. Additional Reading Resources

- Guide on International Development: Public Service Careers and Opportunities ([link](#))
- Finding and Funding International Public Service Opportunities ([link](#))
- Finding Employment Opportunities with International Governmental Organizations and the UN ([link](#)); landing a job at the United Nations ([link](#))
- List of U.S. government agencies engaged in international work ([link](#))
- Yale Law School Guide on International Public Interest Careers ([link](#))

5. Selected opportunities/fellowships and online job resources:

A. Websites:

- ✓ Duke Law's International Database of Opportunities ([link](#)) – look for fellowships and jobs
- ✓ International Resources Section of the PSJD Portal ([link](#))
- ✓ Unjobs.org ([link](#))
- ✓ Reliefweb ([link](#))
- ✓ Idealist ([link](#))
- ✓ Hague Justice Portal ([link](#))

B. Subject-specific Fellowship Opportunities

- ✓ Amnesty International's Fellowships ([link](#))
- ✓ Human Rights Watch Fellowships ([link](#))
- ✓ UN Volunteers Program (paid entry level year-long positions) ([link](#))
- ✓ CDC Global Health Fellowship ([link](#))
- ✓ Peace Corps/Masters Degree Joint Program ([link](#))
- ✓ John Snow Inc. International Fellowships ([link](#))
- ✓ Center for International Environmental Law fellowships ([link](#))
- ✓ Democracy Fellows Program ([link](#))

C. Academic Fellowships

- ✓ Fulbright U.S. Student Fellowships ([link](#))
- ✓ Jennings Randolph Senior Fellowship Program ([link](#))
- ✓ Ford Foundation Grants ([link](#))
- ✓ Gates Cambridge Scholarship ([link](#))
- ✓ Institute of Current World Affairs Fellowship Program ([link](#))
- ✓ Woodrow Wilson Center Fellowships ([link](#))

D. U.S. Government Honors Programs

- ✓ State Department Office of Legal Advisor Honors Program ([link](#))
- ✓ Commerce Department, Office of General Counsel, Honors Program ([link](#))
- ✓ U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission Honor Law Graduate Program ([link](#))

For hundreds of additional fellowship opportunities, including many international fellowships, please review PSJD Application Deadline Calendar ([link](#))