How to Get a Job in International Development

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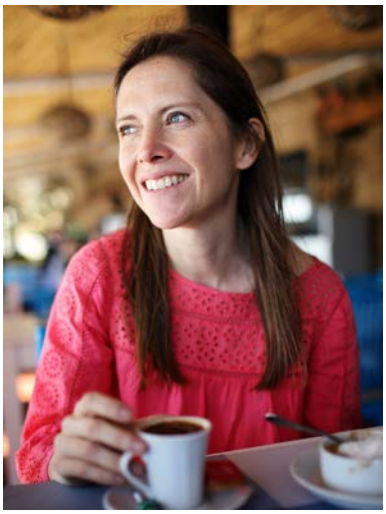
Introduction

Why I wrote a guide on getting a job in international development



International development is an amazing field. It gathers some of the smartest, most diverse workers, people willing to move to far-flung corners of the world to alleviate poverty. Working in this field is my life - I believe in what we do and want to see the best people work to achieve our goals.

I know, though, that getting a foot in the door in international development is hard. When I was in university, I didn't even know that this kind of work existed. And when I started to see how I could find a job, I found that there was no clear path to start out. Twenty years later, though, I now know the multiple paths to enter international development: I understand who does well in our field, and I would like to help those who would do well have happy, successful careers.

This is where this guide comes in. In a guide such as this one, it is impossible to describe every path into a field. Every experience is different, and the background of every applicant makes it necessary for each person to tailor their own job search. However, this guide aims to provide you with step-by-step guidance from an insider. The guide aims to provide you with what I find is the most successful approach to entering the field of international development, while at the same time developing a strong network that you can be in touch with for years to come.

Who is this guide for?

If you've read this far, this guide is probably for you. This guide is for people from any country in the world who are at the initial stages of a career in international development. The guide is both for those of you who have just started to look for work, and for those that have applied everywhere and gotten a lukewarm response. The guide is meant for those who are at the beginning of their career, and who either have never had a job or internship in the field, or who have worked for 2-4 years and are looking for a way to turn a set of experiences into a career.

Even if you are a bit further into your career, I hope this guide is useful to you. The advice it provides on how to understand organizations and sectors, how to decide where to apply, how to develop networks and apply to jobs can be useful to people regardless of the stage of their career.

One more thing: maybe you got this guide by email from a friend, and are wondering how you can get more content like this. If so, please do visit my website: http://www.internationaldevelopmentguide.com and sign up for my email list. When you do that, you'll also get as a bonus a list of forty of the top organizations in international development, the experience they require at entry level, their visa and citizenship requirement and the geographic and sectoral scope of their work. Hope this is useful for you!

And if you have any questions or comments on the guide, feel free to write an email to michelle@internationaldevelopmentguide.com. I will do my best to answer every single email.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 – Myths vs. Realities: What do you need to get a job in international development?

You've started looking for a job in international development. By now, you've probably heard every myth out there on what it takes. I'm sure you've heard people talk about the years and years that you'll need to work for free. Others have told you that there's no way you'll get in without a Masters, without a specific type of Master's degree and sometimes they'll even say you need a PhD. And of course, nobody will take you if you don't speak the right set of languages, right?

In reality, all of these are myths that only have partial grounding in reality. Let me break them down for you one by one.

Do you really need to speak several languages?

If you are reading this guide, you speak English. In reality, for the vast majority of jobs, that is all you need. Speaking English well and being able to write and communicate clearly in English might be all you need to get your first job outside your own country. Countless local organizations are constrained because they do not have staff that can write reports for donors and cannot write funding proposals or applications. Helping this kind of organization with these tasks is therefore a way to easily acquire experience and contacts.

Later in your career, languages other than English become even less important. You'll see that as you become more experienced and more technically specialized, you'll start to compete with others who have similar technical expertise or experience, and what will matter most is your professional reputation and your expertise. Some organizations will still care about your language abilities, and some jobs will require other languages, but many, many doors will remain open.

Speaking a language other than English is essential, however, if you want to work in certain parts of the world early in your career. I have never met anyone who works in Latin America in a mid-level management position or lower who doesn't speak Spanish. It is still the case that in Latin America business is conducted in Spanish, and even if you are applying for an organization that works with the private sector or high-level government officials (likely to speak English), you'll realize that you miss half of the discussions because people switch to Spanish.

Similarly, if you want to work in Francophone Africa or in Haiti, French is important. Again, in these countries there is an expectation that international staff would be able to speak French because business is conducted in that language. However, while to work in Latin America you need to speak and write in Spanish fluently, most jobs in Francophone Africa

or Haiti expect you to be able to communicate in French, not necessarily to write at a professional level.

For some jobs, you'll also see that languages like Russian, Arabic, or Chinese may be required. For a portion of these jobs, the languages are truly essential: jobs that require you to interact with local people on a daily basis require either the local language or would require the organization to hire a translator to work with you. I, for one, was lucky to always work with organizations that hired translators to work with internationals, even those working at entry level. Not all organizations can afford that though.

What I'll say, in summary, is that if you meet all other requirements of a job description except for the language one, if this is not your first job in this field, or if you know someone in the organization that can recommend you for the job, you should apply even if you don't speak the language. You might find that they consider strong applications that are missing the language 'requirement.'

What I'd like to emphasize is that languages can be useful, yes. But they are unlikely to be the reason you do or don't get a job in international development. Languages take a long time to learn to the point of professional fluency, and for your international development career, for the most part, it'll be better if you acquire great technical skills.

Oh, and if you're going to focus on a language, please focus on English. Being able to communicate well in English is a rare and very valuable skill.

Language	When it is required
English	Almost always. Some exceptions include: if you are local staff at lower levels in CSOs, NGOs; in Latin America, if your Spanish is native/fluent; in Francophone Africa, if your French is fluent; in Central Asia, if your Russian is native/fluent; in China, if you speak fluent Mandarin.
French	A good level of French is required for work in Francophone Africa and Haiti.
Spanish	Fluent Spanish is required for most mid-level and below positions in Latin America. Writing in Spanish is required.
Portuguese	Portuguese is highly recommended for Lusophone Africa and Brazil. However, I've met many Spanish speakers who work in these countries.
Chinese	There are very few international positions in China, and those are usually at higher levels, and do not require Chinese.

Arabic Most positions that require Arabic are reserved for locals. In much of Northern Africa you can get away with speaking French. In the rest of the Middle East it is possible to find jobs that only require English.

Do you really need fancy degrees?

This is probably the most common myth. I started in international development pretty much right out of college. I had a bachelor's degree in economics and art. Yes, art. I got master's degrees pretty late in my career, and still, I was able to find several great jobs.

In our field, in fact, we all know that experience is far more important than a degree. Nothing can substitute for the experience of working in the 'field' or understanding a beneficiary. Education, in reality, is used mostly as a way to cut down on the number of eligible applicants in cases when there are far more applications to review than time. I've seen very many exceptions made, in cases when someone has a great reputation or great experience, or even in cases where someone has made a good impression either through an informational interview, an introduction, or a great cover letter.

Again, though, there are exceptions. There are organizations that simply as a matter of routine screen out applicants that do not have the educational level required. This includes the multilateral banks (World Bank, African Development Bank, etc.), the UN, and in some cases, governments that are looking for people to work in projects funded by the multilateral banks and the UN.

If your goal is to work on this kind of project or this kind of organization, then you have three choices.

1) You can apply for administrative jobs within these organizations, where you are exposed to international development as a topic, but understanding that these jobs usually have extremely low ceilings and you are unlikely to be able to really move into a technical or managerial position within the same organization in the future.

2) You can look for specific programs in those organizations, such as Junior Professional Associate or Analyst positions which are open to people without Masters degrees. These positions often are limited in time and the expectation is that people would return to get a Masters immediately after holding these jobs.

3) In my opinion, the third choice is better - get the fancy degree.

When I say fancy, do I mean that the degree has to be from a certain set of internationally recognized institutions? I mean, doesn't everyone think that only people from Harvard and Oxford get into these organizations anyway?

In fact, I would say less than 5% of people looking through applications are looking for particular universities. The advantage of going to certain universities is that they have great alumni networks and that people who went to the universities before you are

usually happy to meet with you and find ways to help you. This is indeed an advantage, but you'll see later in this guide that there are ways of developing these networks without having the advantage of a set of alumni or friends and family.

One more thing: does the specific type of degree you get matter? Here, the answer depends on what specifically you want to do. If you want to manage international development projects for NGOs, your specific degree doesn't matter too much. You'll have an advantage to manage projects that are related to your degree, but having experience in the area again is more important than having a degree in it.

If you want to work in a more specialized part of international development, like road construction, water and sanitation, or public health, a degree in that field is certainly useful and sometimes required. A more specialized degree is also more likely to get you a foot in the door. People are more likely to speak to you, regardless of your level of experience, if you have a degree in a field that is directly related to the field they are working in.

How about degrees in International Development, Public Policy, Conflict Studies, etc.? These are useful to bypass the 'filter' and to meet many people who will one day also work in this field. So if you know that you want to work in international development, but don't know specifically which subsector you want to work on, these are usually good options.

And how about PhDs? In some cases, yes, you do need a PhD. PhDs are useful for jobs that require producing research, especially if the organization wants to publish that research. The PhD gives you skills on research methods and on standards for publication that are difficult to acquire otherwise. However, like always, I've seen plenty of exceptions. In fact, I've worked on several pieces of published research for the World Bank, despite not having a PhD.

For many jobs, a PhD is not necessarily an advantage. I've overheard several people who say they wouldn't hire someone with a PhD because their knowledge is theoretical and not practical. I've met several practical PhDs so I know this isn't the case, but not everyone agrees with me.

Degree	When it is required
Bachelors/ University degree	Almost always. Exceptions are made for people who have been able to get significant experience, either in government, with small local organizations, or as founders of their own organizations.
Masters	Usually required for the UN, multilateral banks, EU, and other bigger organizations. Also highly recommended for jobs that need to be vetted by donors.

PhD	Required for jobs that involve publication of research, but there are exceptions. Usually not needed or recommended for field or program management jobs.

In summary: You can get a job in international development with only a university degree, but depending on the type of organization you want to work with, a Master's degree may be required. The specific topic of the degree is not very likely to make a difference in whether or not you can get a job, but more specialized degrees can help when applying for jobs that require more specialized knowledge.

Do you need to have experience to work in international development?

Most job ads don't say "recent graduates are welcome to apply," but that doesn't mean that you can't get international development jobs without any experience. In fact, there are plenty of people who enter international development right after finishing their studies. What is happening here?

In fact, it's probably true that experience is valued in international development more than in other fields. This is especially the case for jobs in the field, especially if you're not from the country where the job is located. If you think about it, this makes sense. It costs an organization quite a bit of time to recruit you, train you and send you to a field post, and if you haven't worked in such a location before, you are more likely to leave your job early or not do well in it, costing the organization valuable time, resources, and perhaps having costs to their reputation.

In headquarters jobs, experience is also appreciated. The problem with trying to enter an organization through its headquarters is that competition is much greater. For headquarters jobs, you are competing with people with potentially quite a lot of experience who are applying for jobs they are overqualified for as a way to live in a particular city. This is especially the case for organizations headquartered in places like New York, Washington DC, Paris, London or Brussels.

But like all other of these 'myths,' it is of course possible to enter international development without having (much) experience. There are many things that you probably do, as someone interested in this field, that can be considered relevant experience for an employer. For example:

- Volunteering of any kind [activism, working with vulnerable groups, working with children, environmental campaigns, etc.] All type of volunteering is extremely relevant in international development. A lot of activities in our work rely on mobilizing local volunteers, on understanding how to work with vulnerable groups, on how to advocate for others, etc. If you have volunteered, you have some experience.

- Jobs of any kind [and especially ones such as tutoring, teaching languages, administrative jobs, research assistant jobs, etc., but also jobs in food service, construction, etc.] Although job descriptions often ask for years of 'relevant' experience, all experience is relevant.

    - You have tutored children? This means you know how to work with them, that you know how to break down information into manageable chunks, that you know how to work with parents.

    - You have worked in construction? You know how to work hard, in difficult conditions. You might have learned how to work with people who are very different from you. You may have also managed a process or two.

    - You have worked as a research assistant for a professor? You probably have learned a bit about how to gather information, organize and present data. There is a lot of work for you in international development.

And what if you've never held a job or you haven't volunteered? Yes, you will probably need to do something about that. Volunteering, for one, is something that can really show an interest in the issues relevant to international development. Volunteering opportunities are everywhere.

Do you need to have worked outside your country?

Many of you have heard that your experience in your own country doesn't count, even if the experience is in international development. Again, this is a myth. The majority of people working in international development work in their own country and most never leave their country.

But what if you are one of those people who have worked in international development in your country? How do you start working internationally? Let me say that your skills are very valuable. If you are able to effectively reach out and connect with people hiring internationally, they'll certainly want to talk to you, and they will know that if they hire you they are saving a lot of money on staff training. Your chances are great!

There is just one caveat: usually the easiest jobs to get are those in hardship posts – the locations that are either insecure, remote, or have few or no services. These positions are less available to you if you haven't worked in your country. Again, this is because those hiring are afraid that you'll get to the post and not adapt quickly. They're afraid they'll have spent money on your recruitment and you'll resign. If I were in your shoes, I would focus on other types of positions, even if those are harder to get. You could, also, try to start with short-term consulting jobs where you travel to these more difficult locations.

If you have worked inside your country, but not in international development, you can also improve your chances to get hired quite easily. You may have to do some thinking about transferable skills, and you may need to find a true entry level job but you'll get there. We all started somewhere…

Chapter 2 – The five-step guide to getting a job you love

Now you know how much of the myths are reality and hopefully you know where you stand. I'm sure you can get a job in international development.

What is the next step? Should you now apply for every interesting job posting out there?

The answer is a firm NO. As you have probably noticed by now, there aren't very many people who work in international development, and the community is very tight knit. Since you are reading this guide, I'd say there is probably a good chance that there is just one (ok, maybe two?) degrees of separation between us. This means that even if we have never met, you and I are likely to have a friend in common. Either that, or you and I have friends that are friends with each other. Take a look – I'm sure if you find me on Facebook or LinkedIn you'll see some common friends.

And what does that have to do with anything? It means that if you send your application to every available job post, by the time you apply to about 50 of them, someone is likely to notice what you're doing. And yes, we all would understand that you need a job and you are trying hard to find one, but people who are hiring want to know that you want the specific job they have open, not just any job.

Apart from this, if you go and apply for everything, you're unlikely to be able to put in the time and effort to understand each organization you're applying for, to create networks that can help you understand the position and possibly a connection to a hiring manager, and you're unlikely to put in the time on your application.

All of this means one thing: if you really want to improve your chances to get a job in international development, you need to narrow your options.

I know. This is counterintuitive. You'd assume that the more you apply the better your chances. But really – save yourself a lot of disappointment and be picky about where you apply!

Step 1: How do you know which organization is right for you?

Since you're now convinced that you need to narrow your search, you're probably wondering how to do that.

Narrow geographically

Narrowing geographically makes sense for you if:

- You are already a regional expert. If you have a degree in Middle Eastern studies, for example, it makes sense for you to focus on the Middle East at the beginning of your career (or your whole career, if that's what you'd like). If you have lived in a specific part of the world, it can also be useful for you to focus on that area of the world, since you can claim to understand the people and culture of that area.

- If you speak the local languages of a region or a particular country, you may also want to consider focusing regionally. Do note, though, that by specialized I mean languages that few other people speak. Spanish on its own won't get you a job in Latin America: it's a basic requirement. Chinese won't get you a job in China: you'd have to have skills that aren't commonly available there too. But, speaking Quechua could really be helpful if you want to work in the Peruvian highlands, and speaking Serbo-Croatian would be an advantage if looking for work in the Balkans.
- You may have expertise, either acquired through education or experience, in certain types of situations. For example, you may have a degree in conflict studies, which could help you more easily get a job in a country that has or has had war. The degree, in this case, shows that you have an interest in this kind of situation and you're more likely to do well despite the lack of security, services, etc. You could also have a degree on climate change, which could be very helpful for small island states that are vulnerable to this, or to countries that have issues with desertification, etc. In these cases, you could focus on countries that most need your specialty, and even if you find a position that is unrelated to your expertise, you'll be able to show how your particular knowledge will make you more effective at the job.

Narrowing geographically – some examples

Elias is a native Arabic and French speaker who studied public health. Elias could decide to narrow his search to francophone Africa and to the Middle East, where his language abilities could prove to be an advantage.

Andrea is a native Spanish speaker with some knowledge of Quechua. She has an international relations degree. She has decided to focus her search on jobs that require interacting with Quechua speakers.

Focusing geographically doesn't make sense for everyone. You may not have regional expertise, or speak very specialized languages, or technical expertise that is useful for a particular set of countries. If so, don't worry about narrowing down geographically. There are other ways for you to focus.

Narrow by technical specialty or technical area of interest

Another way to focus is by technical specialty. Just now I was just talking to someone who has great experience in banking but has been having a hard time finding a job in international development. This person, for example, would really benefit from narrowing her options to areas that really need her banking skills, such as business development projects, projects that improve access to finance, etc.

If you are a teacher, it certainly makes sense to focus on education projects, since you can easily make the case that you understand how to build teachers' skills, how to assess the needs of students, and you have insights into the management of schools.

An educational background in a specialized area, such as water and sanitation, will give you huge advantages in projects trying to make a difference in those areas. In fact, your degree may be required for some of these jobs, and you'll have a lot less competition.

Even with other, perhaps more general degrees, such as international development, engineering, or economics, it is worth considering narrowing by technical expertise. For example, you can apply to quite a few jobs as a civil engineer, including projects that work on rehabilitation of infrastructure, projects on urban development, roads, etc. But if, as a civil engineer, you become an expert on managing environmental impacts in construction projects, for example, you'll see employers come to you. There are few people that can take on such specialized work, and you'll find many interesting and well-paid opportunities.

Narrow by organization type

Many people have clear preferences for the type of organization they want to work for. I won't go into too much detail about the different types of organizations, since that in itself could be the topic of a separate guide, but they are vastly different in terms of types of work, work environment and pay. However, I also think that broadly speaking, you can probably find work that is interesting in any of these organizations.

In fact, when I started in this kind of work, I really didn't know how different the work was depending on the kind of organization I'd work for. I started out, for example, working for a small local NGO which had a small program working with refugees. The kind of work in that kind of organization was completely different to the work I did later at the World Bank, where I was supervising loans to of tens of millions of dollars to support IDPs. As you

can imagine, even if in both jobs I was working on forced displacement, the type of work was completely different.

I would recommend narrowing down by organization type based on these criteria:

- If you are looking to stay with one organization throughout your career and are willing to pay your dues you can consider larger organizations, such as the IFIs, UN, and bilateral donors. It is difficult to get a foot in the door in these organizations, and once you do have a chance, the work may or may not be very interesting. There is quite a lot of competition to enter into these organizations, especially for full time jobs. If you do get a first opportunity or two in these organizations, you definitely do get to work with key policy makers and decision makers around the globe, and you get a lot of insight on how the world works.
- If you're looking to work directly with beneficiaries, getting to know them and their needs directly and see the impact of your work, you may want to work for NGOs or CSOs. These organizations are often on the ground more than anyone else, including governments, and you can develop strong connections with communities. This can make working with NGOs and CSOs very rewarding. Salaries, however, are often (but not always) lower in these organizations and administrative systems and support to staff vary depending on the organization and your specific manager. On the other hand, it is quite easy to progress quickly in your career, and know exactly where your work did and did not make a difference.
- Working for the government of a country can take very different shapes, but what most work for a government has in common is the longer time horizons of activities, the long-term teams that form to address specific issues, and the bureaucracy. There are quite a few advantages of different government jobs. For example, if you are working for your own government abroad, in an international cooperation organization, you can develop a career that is partially based abroad but allows you to continue to work from your own country every few years. If you are from a country that has a lot of development activities, you can have a longer-term job and can sometimes rise quite quickly in terms of responsibility.
- It is also possible, regardless of where you're from, to work as a consultant for a government-led development project. In this case, you have the chance to really help build long-term capacity without becoming a development bureaucrat, perhaps combining the best of all worlds. These jobs, however, are rarely available at entry level.
- In the last decade or so, the private sector has also become quite involved in international development activities. Often framed as 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR) or 'community engagement,' these activities tend to have the dual purpose of doing something that is socially good and helping companies develop good relationships with communities where they work or other stakeholders. The biggest advantage to these jobs is that they often come with private sector paychecks and that work is private sector in style; i.e., less bureaucratic. And the capacity of the private sector to do meaningful work in international development is increasing, as they are recruiting away some of the best international development practitioners.

However, some of the private sector is not yet at that stage, and it is possible that you'd end up working for a company that is trying its best to do good, yet cannot really achieve sustainable results.

- The last major type of employer is the international development private contractor or consulting company. These companies vary quite a lot in style, size and programming, reflecting for sure the diversity of work in international development. It is hard to generalize when it comes to these companies, but you can find ones that pay as well as the private sector, and others that pay less than NGOs at entry level. There are some that hire only full-time staff 'consultants' and others that hire mostly people for short-term assignments and have tiny full-time staff. The type of work they do and their salary ranges tend to reflect their clients. For example, a company working mostly on World Bank contracts is likely to need people that can produce World Bank-style work and often this means their pay-scales are similar to what the World Bank would pay for similar work in that country.

One thing you should know, is that it's easier to move from certain types of organizations to others. For example, it is usually far easier to move from the private sector to the World Bank (and vice-versa), and from the World Bank to consulting companies, than from NGOs to the private sector, or NGOs to the World Bank. It is also easier to move from the UN to NGOs than vice-versa, although there is quite a bit of movement between the two.

Field or HQ

One easy way to narrow your job search is by deciding whether you want a field position or a headquarters position. Sometimes this decision is easy to make - sometimes you have restrictions or clear geographic preferences and the decision is pretty much made. If you don't have a clear preference at this point, however, consider the following:

1) The nature of these jobs is very different.

HQ jobs, even at middle-management levels, are in fact support positions. These jobs have the sole purpose of making sure what is happening in the field is successful. The jobs may then include quite administrative tasks, like helping with travel plans or logistics, and they can include reporting, coordination, or staff and consultant recruiting. In some cases, these jobs may also involve coordinating with donors or other organizations, and they can also include research or support to broader organizational policy-making.

Field jobs are usually (though not always), focused more on beneficiaries. In NGOs, CSOs, field jobs usually involve getting to know projects in detail and understanding the people benefitting from projects. Even when these jobs involve reporting and M&E, usually they require traveling quite a bit to project sites and getting involved in some way in activities.

Field jobs may also put you in touch with (other) local organizations or with governments, and could involve helping these institutions build their own capacity. It can be quite rewarding when you can see these long-term impacts.

2) **Visa requirements may limit your ability to decide which of these options is available to you.**

Most true, paid entry level jobs are available only to people who are legally authorized to work in a country. This makes sense, if you think about it - we are working in a field that aims to improve local capacity, and what better way is there to do it that to hire people locally? Hiring local people is better for the local economy (their salaries are usually spent in-country), if an organization is international, it helps ensure that it is taking local cultures and benefits from local knowledge and networks, and it builds the capacity of locals to later manage similar activities for others.

This is great news for you if you are from a developing country. It means that you can start your career at home. You can gain valuable skills, experience, and insight that will be valuable in your future, whether you decide to stay in your own country or work internationally. If you do want to work internationally after working at home, you excel at your work and you work in an organization with international staff, these international staff are a great resource for getting your first international position later.

But what if you're not from a developing country, or you just don't want to start your career at home? I, for one, am from Ecuador yet I started my career in Bosnia. It is certainly possible to do this. This, though, is when the definition of 'entry level' becomes blurry in this field. You'll probably need to volunteer or take internships to start working in this kind of situation, and even stipends in this situation are hard to come by.

The fact that entry level jobs are usually available for people legally authorized to work in a country also means that it is next to impossible to start in most organizations in their headquarters if you're not already a citizen or resident of the country where the organization is based. Organizations in developed countries often have to justify asking for visas for foreign workers, and have to prove that they have tried to recruit locally. The costs and bureaucracy of doing this are usually too much for most organizations, and they do not even look at applications from people without work authorizations. If you do have the ability to work in these countries, however, your options are open.

There is one exception to this - multilateral organizations (such as the UN) and development Banks (such as the World Bank) have agreements with most countries that allow them to get visas easily for anyone they want to recruit. If you don't have work authorization for a particular country and want to work in international development in that specific place, one option is to target specifically the few organizations that may be able to easily get you a visa.

On Visas – A summary

I've seen many people who are frustrated because the jobs they are applying for require that they have valid work permits. Below is some guidance on when you should and should not worry about visas.

- If you are applying to an international organization, like the UN, you probably do not need to worry about visas. This kind of organization hires people who are from member countries. This means that as long as your country is a member, visas are not likely to be a problem. However, if a position is advertised as a local position, you should check with their human resources department to know if you would need to arrange your own work permit.

- If you are applying to an NGO, consulting firm, or other organization that is not made up of member states, then visas and work permits matter.

    - If you are applying for a headquarters position, you probably will not be called for an interview if you do not have a work permit. Organizations are unlikely to even try to get you such a permit. There are exceptions, of course, but as a rule, it is very hard to get a job in the US or EU (or other developed countries) if you cannot arrange for your own visa.
    - If you are applying for a field / country office position, and the position is advertised internationally, you probably do not have to worry about visas. Organizations usually arrange those for you.
    - If you are applying for a field / country office position that is advertised as local or only advertised locally, visas and work permits may be required.

- For mid-to-high level positions in NGOs or contractors, citizenship of certain countries may be required. These are usually funder requirements and are not flexible. However, this kind of requirement is usually clearly stated in job descriptions.

Focus on organizations with a good reputation

In my opinion, this is the key to a successful career and a happy experience. Working in an organization that is not able to perform, that has poor systems or where the work environment is toxic is a career killer.

If nothing else, I highly recommend that you focus your job search on reputable organizations because not doing so could limit your future career growth. Hiring managers are far more likely to interview you if they know you are coming from a good organization - they'll just assume the quality of your work is higher.

So how do you know if the organization has a reputation? Well... you need to talk to people. Which leads me to Step 2.

Step 2: Meet the people you want to work with

You've heard this many, many times. Jobs in international development depend on your networks. And yes, there are many advantages to coming from a connected family, having financial resources, coming from a city where it's easy to make connections, having gone to the right schools, etc. There is really no doubt about it. But potentially the biggest advantage of having grown up surrounded by powerful people that help each other out is that you know how to reach out to this kind of person, whether that person is currently in your network or not.

Now, I don't think anyone can claim to guide you through to become a master networker in a few paragraphs, but in this section, you'll learn a bit about the key to developing strong networks in international development, even if right now you think you have no network at all.

Your network is already broader than you think.

My first point is exactly this. Whether you think you have a network or not, you have one. By the time you've started to look for a job, you've got friends from school, who have parents and sometimes co-workers. You've probably also worked or volunteered, and you probably met some people who are now in your network. If you play sports, participate in local events, etc., you have a network.

And with social media, I think we can safely say that now we all have instant access to thousands of people. Because yes, I think at least there are a thousand people who would be willing to talk to you and give you their insights on job searches if you tried. And if you've tried, you probably believe me. (And if you've tried and gotten few answers, please read below, or send me a note. I can try to help.)

Who is most likely to give you good information?

The key to getting advice from strangers, is to target the right person, in the right way. For example, one of the most common mistakes people make is that they try to network with the rich and famous (or their equivalent in international development: policy makers, heads of organizations, etc.). These people have very limited time and they probably get hundreds of requests per month. They would need to have a very strong reason to answer you.

There are, however, many people that you can talk to that can give you better information: these are people who are either at your same level, are more junior than you, or are one level above you. Reaching these people is far easier. If you contact them properly, they are likely to see that you have a lot in common with them and they are likely to answer you.

There is one more reason to talk to people at this level: they will give you the best information. People who are close to you in level may or may not be able to hire, but they will have the information you need on what exactly it's like to work in their organization, how people like them got in, what kind of work they do, what they're accomplishing and what they're not so good at. In summary, they can tell you everything you'll need to know to decide if an organization and type of job is right for you.

Why would they give you all this information? Well, these people don't often get a chance to talk about their work, and like most, they like to talk about their work. This is especially true in our field, since most of us are idealist and love our work.

The other people who are more likely to answer you are those that are introduced to you by friends. Friends of friends almost always agree to talk to you, *as a favor to the friend.* This means, then, that you really need to work hard to make a good impression, so that your friend is willing to introduce you to others. What is the best way to make a good impression? *Respect the person's time, prepare well, and focus the meeting on getting information about the organization and career path, not on yourself.* More details on this later in the guide.

How do you identify the people you want to reach?

Identifying the people to talk to is relatively easy. There are many ways to know who you would ideally like to talk to:

1. Blogs: Organizations often have externally available blogs on different topics. In some cases, more senior people write these blogs, but the majority of people blogging are relatively younger and more junior. Finding bloggers who are writing on your topic of interest, and reaching out to them after reading everything they've written is an effective way to establish contact. Few bloggers in international development get attention and I'm sure they'll be happy to talk to a reader.

2. Project documents and research papers: In today's day and age, with donor focus on transparency and accountability, a very large number of project documents are available publicly. In these documents, sometimes you find team lists or some other indication of who is working on specific aspects of the project. If you're interested in a particular type of project, you can search for those documents on line (it takes quite a bit of time to find them, but they are there…) and then you can google to find out the email addresses of people mentioned in the documents. I'd recommend you also do a quick search on linked in so you are sure you are writing to the right person.

3. Social media: People in international development started joining LinkedIn only about 3-4 years ago. A few years back I remember telling some friends that linked

in wasn't useful, that I just knew nobody on it. But now everyone is there and there are plenty of vibrant international development groups on the site.

How do you know you're reaching the right type of person on LinkedIn? You can go to your favorite job site (I'll talk a bit about those later on) and look up job ads that you find interesting. Then you look up the organization on LinkedIn and find people that work there, focusing on ones that are more or less at your level, sector, and geographic area of interest. These should be great people to talk to.

How do you connect? Most people send LinkedIn requests using the standard, LinkedIn invitation to connect language. By customizing your request just a bit, you are much more likely to get an answer.

But although linked in is now useful to connect with people, Facebook is where international development workers spend their time. Perhaps because Facebook is more popular internationally and we all travel so much, it's just a more common platform. And also in the past couple of years, a few different large Facebook groups have emerged where you can ask for advice and people answer. So, for example, you could write a post in one of these groups asking to be able to get advice from people working in your field. In some groups, you get an answer within minutes, depending on how you write your message.

Some of the best groups I've found for those interested in international development generally include:

- International Development Jobs for Young Professionals
- PCDN Network's Social Change Career Helping Line

For those interested in humanitarian aid and peacebuilding, you could also try:

- Fifty Shades of Aid (note that this group is specifically non-jobs focused, but can give you a great idea of the kinds of issues people face in the field.)
- Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding – Jobs and Internships

In some of the larger cities, you'll also find specific groups for people who work in, or want to work in those cities. A great example is the London International Development Network group.

4. Co-workers and professors: Your former co-workers and professors are probably your best allies in connecting with the right people. The key to getting great connections through these people is 1) to ask only those co-workers and professors that you have really strong relationships with (if not, their introductions may be lukewarm at best), and 2) to know what you're asking for.

Co-workers and professors who you get along with well will almost without exception be happy to connect you with their networks. But they need to know exactly what kind of contact will be useful to you and that you'll be prepared for the conversation with them. This means asking them for very specific help. See the example in the box below.

Example of an email reaching out to a co-worker or professor

Hi John,

I am writing to ask for your help and advice. My contract with Great NGO is over in June, and I'm looking for people I can talk to about opportunities in [your sector]. Right now, I'm just trying to determine what the best organizations are working in this area and who the best people are within these organizations. Would you happen to know people working in [type of organization] in [your sector or region]?

I know that your contacts' time is valuable, so I'll be well prepared for these meetings. I'm looking to discuss possible career paths, experiences working with [type or organization], some of the key skills necessary for this kind of work, and [something along the lines of 'cutting edge approaches to working in this field.]

Thanks a million for this. I really appreciate your help.

Best,

Your Name Here

5. Your friends and family: No matter how unconnected you think you may be, you do have friends and family. Each of your friends and family has at least 20 strong connections, which means that if you contact 20 of your friends and family, you'll probably be able to get at the very least a list of 2-3 people working on interesting things in international development.

   The problem with contacting people through friends and family, though, is that those people are less likely to take you seriously. Some of them may meet you only because they feel they have to. This means that you may have to prepare especially well for these meetings.

6. Events: I know many young professionals who spend a lot of money going to events, hoping to meet just the right contact that can lead to a job. And although some people meet their future employers at events, this is not very common.

   The reason most people don't get jobs through events is in part because it is hard for many people in international development to attend events. People who are not based at their organizational headquarters, in main world capitals, often have

to travel far away and spend significant amounts of time and resources to attend events. Unless attendance is supported by their organizations, people would have to spend their own leave time for events. This usually just doesn't happen.
Many events that are held by organizations at their headquarters are also 'by invitation only.' This is great if you are already a known expert in an area, and can get an invitation, but isn't helpful if you are a young professional trying to get a foot in the door.

If you do manage to go to an event, and do take into account that people there have different goals. For the most part, I think the best way for you to network is to help the people that are there meet their own goals: I'm sure that helps them remember you kindly.

I could write a whole guide on events and how to get the best from them, but one of my favorite coaches has already done this. Take a look at Primoz Bozic's Ultimate Guide to Attending Conferences here:

https://www.primozbozic.com/ultimate-guide-to-attending-conferences/

Once you're reached out to people, what do you talk to them about?

Hopefully, you have now been able to contact a few people who are willing to talk to you about their work and organization. What do you talk to them about?

My first piece of advice would be to not ask them for a job. Asking people to meet with you to talk and asking them for a job will just make the conversation uncomfortable. I can't actually think of a single example of someone who sat down with someone and asked them for a job and had the conversation go well. Please don't do it.

The main point of these meetings is for you to learn about the person you are talking to, understand how they've gotten to this point in their career, and what strategies worked and didn't work for them.

You can also learn about their work, the specific topics they work on and why they think these topics are critical, how their organization thinks of these topics, and the kinds of impacts their hoping to have.

In addition to all of this, you can find out a lot about the organization, how people get jobs in the organization, the kinds of skills the organization values, and the organization's structure. This is critical information for your job search. You can find out what the different job titles in the organization are and the actual experience is that they expect for people at different levels, you can find out the different roles (technical and managerial) and the labels people give those roles. This will help a lot when looking at job ads from this organization and will save time because you will be able to apply for jobs where you have a better chance.

These conversations are also critical for you to learn about the language people use in this particular type of organization. By language, I mean the terminology they use to describe different activities, processes or concepts, as well as the acronyms and overall the concepts, theories and values behind the organization's work. For example, at the World Bank in 2015, you would hear everyone talking about the 'twin goals' and as part of that, discussing what shared prosperity means. By 2017, the same conversation may include talk of the 'cascade' and 'agility.' Being able to understand what people mean by this and being able to use these concepts in the same way can really make a difference in the success of your networking meetings, application, and interviews.

Although this guide is based on the premise that most of the time you'll get a job by narrowing your search to the few organizations and job types that really need you, and that you'll know about openings through your networks, there are some cases where organizations require specific skills. This is something you can also find out through these conversations. Even though in some cases job ads are very specific about the skills an organization is looking for, interpreting what the job ads mean is hard. Through conversations with people, you can find out much more. For my type of job, for example, the key skill that nobody tells you is needed is writing. If through your application or interview it becomes clear that you aren't good at writing or don't like to do it, you're unlikely to get the job.

One last thing: It is important for you to get at least two names of people you can talk to during these conversations. The people you are talking to are potentially the best placed to introduce you to others. If you've had a good, professional, interesting conversation, do ask the person if they know of other people that they think would be willing to meet with you.

When you ask the person if they can introduce you to others, they may ask you: "What kind of person would you like to talk to?" Please be specific. For example, if you're a public health specialist, you may want to say: "I'd like to talk to people who can tell me about working on public health issues in emergency settings. I'd be interested in understanding what they do on a day-to-day basis, their challenges, and the different roles in the field."

You could also ask your new contacts to introduce you to their peers, if useful. You could say, for example: "The conversation I've had with you has been really great, and I'd like

to hear about similar experiences. I'd love to speak to the people that you mentioned are working on X project. Do you think that would be possible?" If people don't volunteer any names, though, please don't push. It may mean that they were not as comfortable with the conversation as you were, and they may not introduce you with as much kindness as you deserve.

How do you maintain a network of people you've only briefly spoken to?

After meeting people and getting useful information from them, it is key to keep in touch. These people, the ones that have agreed to talk to you and have shared their experience, will be at the core of your network during your first job search. You'll find that because these people work in areas that are closer to what you want to do, it is a far more valuable network than those of people who only know people through their family or friends.

Keeping in touch with people you have met with should be easy. First, you need to have kept very good notes of everything you discussed, including, most importantly, information on the specific interests of the person and what they're working on. You should write down as much as possible what you remember about the terminology they used and how they describe their work.

Your first 'keeping in touch' email should in fact come maybe 1-2 days after you meet with them. This should be a thank you email that is tailored to your conversation. In the email, you should mention your key takeaways from the conversation and letting the person know how you'll use their guidance. If you discussed your intention to get a job, you may want to include your CV, emphasizing that it is for their information only.

Even more important than the initial thank you email, is a follow up email 2-3 weeks after your initial conversation. This email is your opportunity to stand out. At this point in time, you should have already followed up on this person's advice, and can write to them about how useful their advice has been and how it has made a difference for you. It is also an opportunity for you to show them that you were listening, by forwarding articles or other information that you think they'd be interested in based on your conversation with them. Believe me, this is the email that makes a difference in the long run. The person will remember you as professional and detail-oriented, and it will make them comfortable recommending you to colleagues if a position were to open. Please don't forget this step.

Your networking does not end here, though. The best networkers keep their contacts updated, making sure you let them know how things are going for you. If you meet people who have a lot in common with each other, you may also want to connect them. Helping people establish these connections will put you at the center of their network. You'll be adding value to them, and they may even repay the favor by connecting you with people that they think you should know.

Step 3: How do you get the attention of hiring managers?

Now you've spoken to several potential peers and have good information about your target jobs and organizations. What you really need now is the attention of a hiring manager. This section explains how best to get the attention of hiring managers.

Why does a hiring manager want to talk to you?

You might find this surprising, but some hiring managers are even more likely to want to talk to you than more junior people.

The reason for this is simple: hiring managers need you. They need someone who is hard working, prepared, and who has specific technical skills. They usually need to spend thousands of dollars recruiting, so if you're the perfect candidate, they will want to talk to you.

Why not go directly to hiring managers? Well, because you're not the perfect candidate for all hiring managers, just for a select few. Talking to others in the organization is the best way of identifying the teams and projects that need you most. And also, if you go directly to hiring managers after having talked to others in their organization, and having more information on the types of projects they work on, you are far more likely to make a great impression. And that will be all you need to get a job!

How do you reach hiring managers?

The best introduction to a hiring manager is through another contact. Ideally, you'd always have someone who knows you from a professional setting (or a professor from a university) make the connection. The hiring manager would then know that they are talking to someone who is vetted, and they are more likely to make the time.

Asking professional contacts to introduce you to others can be quite intimidating, but it really shouldn't be. Asking professional contacts that know you well and liked working with you to help should be easy, and it can be a great opportunity to reconnect. I personally love hearing from people I liked working with, no matter what the reason. Even if you haven't reached out to them in quite some time, they are likely to have good memories of you and answer you. (And if they don't, I wouldn't push. It may mean that they may not be willing to say great things about you.)

The contacts you established in Step 2 can also introduce you to hiring managers. In fact, this is a great way to get an introduction: a manager is very likely to meet someone who has impressed one of their team members. It shows that you'd likely fit in well with their team.

Ideally, this type of introduction would happen naturally. After you've had a great conversation with someone, if they hear about an opportunity that's good for you, or if they just think you'd be a great addition to the team, they may put you directly in touch with their hiring manager or the hiring manager they think you should work with. If the

person doesn't volunteer to do this, it is ok to *gently and diplomatically* ask them if they would. Towards the end of your conversation with them, for example, you could say 'your team really sounds great. I would love to work with you guys. Is there any way you could introduce me to others on your team or to your manager?' If the conversation has gone well, they are likely to automatically agree. If they don't automatically agree, it might be that you didn't cause a great impression, and in that case after your conversation you may want to think through how things went and what you can improve next time. In fact, in Step 2 conversations you really need to do your best to make the person comfortable introducing you to others.

If you really want to meet a hiring manager that knows one of your Step 2 contacts, you can also email your contacts with the request. In your email, you want to remind them of your conversation, letting them know once again how much you appreciated meeting with them and letting them know how you are implementing what you learned. You can say that your conversation with them made you think that their team would be a great place to work and ask them if they'd mind introducing you to their manager.

If you'd like to speak to another manager that they know, you can also do that, letting them know why it is you really think that team would be a great match for you. Remember: people like introducing others, as long as they trust that the person they're introducing will make a good impression. I have regretted many times making introductions and then realizing that the person is not a great fit for a team, or that the

person is not able to hold their own in a conversation with a manager. Your email should reflect that you are professional and will be able to have a good conversation if introduced.

You don't have a contact that can introduce you to a hiring manager, yet you really want to talk to that person, you should feel free to write to them and make your case. Your email should be short – 1 to 2 short paragraphs maximum - and should invite that person for a quick coffee *at a time of their convenience.* Hiring managers are usually quite busy, and you should do your best to make yourself available when they are. It is best, though, if you give them a clear range of dates. For example, 'any day next week' so that they have a clear view of their schedule yet they don't put off answering you for when they have time. They may never get to it.

If you don't have a warm introduction to a hiring manager, please don't take it personally if they don't get back to you. Hiring managers often get hundreds of emails in a day and many of them have personal assistants that screen their emails and delete ones they may not think are relevant. Their lack of response may not be personal at all, they may never have seen your email. And even if they have, many of the people you want to reach may have endless meetings in their schedule and are prioritizing adding more meetings to completing other work and getting back to their family at a reasonable time.

If your emails are good, and you're reaching the right people, you can expect perhaps a 20% response rate. If you have more than that, you've either really picked the right people or you have a great background, or your emails are great (please share them with me!). If your rate is lower, again don't take it personally, but if you get no answers, you may want to look at whether you are trying to reach the right people in the right way.

What would you say in your email to the hiring manager?

Perhaps it's worth discussing what your request to the hiring manager is. The request depends on how and whether you've been introduced, and whether there is a specific opening you're interested in. In the case that you've been introduced by someone who has told the hiring manager they'd think you'd be great for their team, then your request to the hiring manager can say something about the conversation you've had with the person who introduced you and how you'd love to meet them to learn more about their team and work.

If you haven't been introduced to the hiring manager but you still want to talk to them, you should mention why you admire their work and ask them for a short meeting. If there is a specific job opening, and the hiring manager thinks you may know about it, you should mention it, since the conversation would be awkward if you talk to them and pretend you don't know about the opening. It'll eliminate their trust in you. (By the way, you will find that less hiring managers are willing to talk to you if they have an opening,

especially if they work in larger organizations. There are quite a lot of rules about transparency in hiring, and if they have an opening they may think that meeting with you could compromise the hiring process.)

You should aim for these meetings to last between 15-30 minutes, and mention the proposed length of the meeting to the hiring manager. 15-30 minutes is enough for you to get good insight into the hiring manager's thinking and it is also enough time for the hiring manager to know whether or not they think you'd be a good fit for their team (or whether you're someone worth recommending.)

What should the conversation with the hiring manager be about?

Picture yourself in front of the hiring manager. What do you think the conversation will be like?

The key to having a great conversation is to keep it light and to keep expectations low. Talking to a hiring manager with the expectation that the person will hire you on the spot is only likely to make the conversation uncomfortable. The hiring manager will know that they probably cannot meet your expectations and will not be forthcoming in their answers. You'll probably struggle to find the right question, given that the person is not giving you very long answers.

A better option is to thank the person for taking the time to talk to you, tell them that you're there to learn from them and their experience, and ask them about their work and career path. You can ask them about how they started, what skills they've found useful, or what they find most interesting or impactful about the work they're doing. You'll find lots to talk about if you stick to these topics.

If you want to be more forthcoming about your job search, you can also ask about specific skills that are needed in the organization, things that make or break a job search in that organization, country, or sector, and you can ask directly whether your background is good or whether there's any skills or experience you'd need to acquire. Having this conversation is harder, since it requires you to already be well-versed in a particular area, but if you're able to have this conversation with a hiring manager, you'll get really valuable information for your job search. Be ready, however, for hiring managers who tell you that you might not be right for an organization: don't take it personally, ask why and try to dig deeper to uncover areas of your background or the way you are describing yourself that you may need to work on.

Now most people that meet with you will understand that you're looking for a job and will also ask about you, so you should be ready. (I, for example, start every such conversation with "so how can I help you?" And if the person doesn't tell me about themselves, I will ask them later in the conversation.) Your description of yourself and what you're searching for should be as tailored as possible to the person you are talking to. If

you're talking to someone who you know you want to work for, you should talk about the work or studies you've done that have made you realize what you want to do, and talk about the general areas that you're interested in. It's important to show genuine interest in the area you want to work in, and some knowledge of the field.

One thing that's important is to really try to respect the time you've set. Some people may really only have 15-30 minutes but would find it difficult to cut a conversation short. As your meeting ends, let the person know a bit more about your specific career interests, and let them know you'd love to hear about any opportunities in your area, if any. You can ask them who they'd recommend you speak to.

Don't be discouraged if the hiring manager doesn't automatically say that you'd be a great candidate and of course they'd be in touch. What is more likely to happen is that the manager will keep you in mind (if you keep in touch like recommended in Step 2), and once something interesting opens, they'll think of you.

You could also ask them if you could share your CV with them at this point, if you haven't shared it with them before.

Talking to hiring managers who have job openings

In some cases, you'll be able to set up a meeting with a hiring manager who has a job opening you're interested in. You should treat these situations like interviews.

I cannot emphasize this enough. Regardless of what you said in your emails and what the hiring manager has said to you, the hiring manager will be evaluating your communications skills and your general fit for positions when you talk to them. By the time your meeting starts, you should have done extensive research on the organization, on the person you are talking to, and the specific position they're hiring for. Your questions should be to clarify and learn more things that can help you in the interview, but overall your goal should be to stand out as a star candidate. Every question you ask should show all the research you've done, and every question you answer about yourself should be tailored to the specific position they're hiring for. You never know, this could get you the job!

Your social media presence

There was a time, not long ago, when only younger people were on social media. This has not been the case for at least a few years, though, so you should assume that hiring managers and Human Resources staff will be using the same social media channels that you do.

What does this mean? For one, it means that hiring managers could be easily reachable through LinkedIn, Facebook, or perhaps other social media. It means that you can

engage with them by commenting on public posts or can reach out to them more directly.

It also means, though, that you should assume that your current and future managers are part of your same social media groups and can see everything you do online, and your social media presence should reflect that.

There are several things that you may be doing on social media that could help or hurt your chances of getting hired. Beyond the obvious photos of parties where you're acting irresponsibly or other posts that are clearly not going to be viewed well, posts that reflect disrespect for anyone or any group, posts that are critical of your current job or school, and sometimes government can be problematic for your chances of getting hired.

Other posts that are problematic include ones that reflect a lack of ability to deal with conflicts (such as fights with family or friends on public posts), a lack of ability to deal with hardship posts, or an overall lack of cross-cultural understanding. Apart from this, posts on social media that complain about hiring processes or that show your frustration with your job search can also lower your chances.

To use social media to improve your chances of getting hired, you may want to think of it as any other professional tool: you can post about things that are relevant to your field, ask good questions, engage positively when responding to other people, and overall showing the best of yourself. I know this may be limiting to some of you who want to be more open on social media. If this is you, I'd make sure you work on your privacy settings and are careful in what you say in more public spaces, such as Facebook groups.

Step 4: What does a successful application look like?

Some people at this point will have had some great conversations with peers and hiring managers, and some may have had a job created for them. For these people, first, congratulations! This is the easiest way to get a job in international development, and I am glad that worked out for you. If you've been asked to submit a formal application, or a CV, do read on. Most of what is below applies to you.

What is an entry level job in international development?

Before describing applications, it is probably useful to describe the many different 'entry' level jobs in international development. They can be quite different from each other. I've been surprised, for example, to find that in some cases people consider themselves to be entry level with 5 years of experience and a Master's degree. Why is this so?

International development is a bit different from other fields because it is international. Field, or on-the-ground experience is highly valued, and for some jobs, you aren't really considered if you don't have any field experience.

This barrier to entry is the most challenging. It is hard to get a true 'entry' level job, one that leads to a career, without field experience, yet people hesitate to take you for a field job without prior field experience. This makes sense from the employer's perspective: hiring a non-national is expensive and risky. The person you've hired needs to adjust to their new setting, both in terms of being comfortable with or without creature comforts and they need to adjust culturally. Sometimes, if the person has a family, their family also needs to adjust to a new setting, or needs to adjust to living at home without a key family member.

Field experience is therefore one barrier to overcome, but not all entry level jobs require field experience. Some, for example, require technical knowledge, or knowledge of a language. This kind of knowledge is easier to get through regular education, so if you have the education and not the field experience, this kind of job will be easier to get.

Let's get a bit more specific. **What are the jobs that don't require any experience?**

1. Volunteer work: Yes, many, many, many of us start in the field of international development as volunteers. Many of us started in our own countries, working on issues that are relevant in international development. I, for example, used my experience volunteering to teach literacy in high school as a way to show experience working with marginalized groups and get a volunteer position internationally.

   In my first international volunteering position, I also used my knowledge of English to support refugees and get exposure to refugee-related programming (I was teaching English and writing reports for NGOs). Other possible volunteer work that you can do in your own country that can be considered worthy experience for an international development career includes: working with any vulnerable group and supporting them in skills acquisition or empowerment; volunteering for local organizations that support either the needs of the vulnerable or work on international development programs or advocacy, or starting up your own initiative where you mobilize people or communities to drive change.

   Volunteering as a way to enter international development brings about several advantages. First, volunteering can be done part time, can be done locally, and often requires little more than good will. Second, volunteering often means that you have more leeway in deciding what you work on and how you choose to help. This can help you gain very valuable skills and experience in the area you choose. Third, volunteering internationally, although usually harder to arrange, is far easier than getting a job yet brings about great work experience.

   Now, I can hear your outrage about international development requiring you to volunteer as a barrier to entry. I'm not going to get into the ethics of volunteering,

and I do understand how unfair it is that people with less resources are less able to get experience because they cannot afford to volunteer. I was in that situation too, and paid for my volunteering by teaching English and Spanish on the side, in one case, and working an administrative type job to support myself in another. Volunteering isn't ideal, but it is really a good way to get experience.

2. Internships: There are three main types of internships.

- One is a disguised volunteer opportunity. In this case, the internship is rarely paid, it is unsupervised or very lightly guided, and lets you work with groups you are interested in supporting or institutions that need extra hands.

- The second type is a more formal arrangement whereby you provide light administrative support and perhaps some help with report writing or other communications. This kind of internship may or may not be paid and usually is relatively easy to obtain. The problem is that it often doesn't help build the skills that you would need to get a 'true' entry level job.

- The third type of internship is rare but golden. It is the type where you are supervised and mentored by a skilled and experienced international development expert and where there is a plan for the skills and experience you will acquire.

  The key with internships is to turn the first two types into the third: to get to know people in the organization you are supporting, find someone willing to mentor you and decide a set of tasks and work program that will help you grow. Once you are able to get this, it matters less if the internship is paid or unpaid, since the real value you'll get is the mentoring, skill-building, and relationships inside the organization you work with.

3. Some administrative positions: There are several administrative positions in international development that you can get without having international development experience. These are usually administrative assistant or program assistant type jobs where you work on general administration for a team working on a project or where you work on the general needs of an office or organization.

   This is the least recommended route. Often once you get this kind of position, you need to find creative ways of framing your experience so you're not pigeon-holed as an administrative person the rest of your career. The ceiling in this kind of position is low, and it is very hard to get more technical or management experience after this kind of job. However, these jobs are paid.

4. Short term jobs: You might be able to get some technical short-term jobs with little-to-no experience. Short term jobs are easier to get because the risk to the employer is lower, so they may take a chance on someone that they think could be good but has not yet worked (or hasn't worked much). Most of these jobs are advertised as 'consultant' jobs although you really wouldn't be doing the advisory

work normally associated with consulting. These jobs are especially common in the UN and World Bank.

All of these jobs have their headquarters and their field versions. Headquarters jobs usually have more applicants, since people have many reasons for wanting to be based in the developed cities where organizations are usually based. You'll find a mix of students, true entry level workers and people more advanced in their careers applying for the same jobs in headquarters. Don't be discouraged when you find out that you are applying for the same job as someone more experienced, though, since hiring managers often think those applicants are overqualified.

Field jobs are often easier to get, especially if the jobs are in more remote locations. These jobs usually appeal to a much narrower set of candidates. The problem with these jobs at true entry level (defined as above – internships, volunteering, administrative and short-term jobs) is that they usually require you to pay for your own travel and living expenses, and your pay, if any, may not be enough to cover even the basics.

So-called 'entry level' jobs

The real 'entry level' jobs in international development in fact usually require about two years of experience. This can vary by type of organization, with some requiring just some form of prior volunteering or internship experience, and others requiring five years. In general, the larger the organization, the more experience they require for their entry level positions. For example:

- A smaller, or local NGO is likely not to require experience but would need some form of proof that you are bringing skills that they don't have in their team. Report writing in English is usually a good one, as are skills in monitoring and evaluation, communications, or knowledge of specific sectors (such as water and sanitation, construction, etc.)

- A larger, or international NGO is likely to require at least two years for their non-internship/non-volunteer positions. (Internships and volunteering count as experience!) These NGOs are likely to be looking for experience carrying out similar functions, either as a volunteer or intern or social entrepreneur, and also good communications and language skills for the context. The skills you bring are often still more important than the number of years or months of experience, though, so if you feel you can do the work and don't have the minimum experience, it is a good idea to apply.

- The UN, World Bank, and other multilaterals have much stricter rules on who they can hire for certain positions and it is hard for them to make exceptions. Even when the hiring manager in these organizations wants to make an exception and hire someone with less years of experience than an advertised position requires, this usually would require the hiring manager to go through a lengthy process to get an exception. This is rarely done for an entry level job.

In general, these organizations require between 2 and 5 years of experience for their lowest level 'professional' or 'technical' jobs.

- The private sector does hire people directly from BA and Masters degrees for positions in Corporate Social Responsibility or for consulting jobs that advise governments or multilaterals on their international development work. Those hired for these positions, however, usually have either an impeccable academic record and references or they have a very good academic record and 2-4 years of experience.

Your application research

One of the most important aspects of a good application is that it is tailored to the specific job. The most common mistake made by job seekers is to submit the same application materials, or only slightly modified versions, to dozens of jobs. Most of these job seekers think that this allows them to save time and apply to more positions, which should lead to more interviews and opportunities overall.

However, application materials that are not sufficiently tailored are most often ignored. Most application reviewers can tell pretty quickly if someone really took the time to understand the job and the organization or if they are applying to many places. Again, remember that people want to hire someone who wants the particular job they're advertising, not just any job.

Applying therefore means doing a lot of research. I would estimate that you need to do at least 4-5 hours of research for every position you apply. This would mean the following:

- The organization: You should research the organization you are applying to, their mission, structure, scope of work. You should look at the kinds of projects they do, who their donors are, and try to understand where they are growing/shrinking. You should know where they're based and whether they are centralized (most of their staff works from headquarters) or decentralized (most of their staff and decision-making happens in the countries where they operate).
- The kinds of people they hire: You can take a look at the jobs that are advertised on their site, the skills they require, the level of experience they normally require for different jobs. Take a look at linked in, look at the profile of people working in those organizations, see what they did before working there and how they describe their own jobs.
- Technical terms, acronyms, etc.: Take a look at the way the organization describes its work. Look at job ads, reports, and its website, identifying acronyms it uses regularly, ideas that seem to underpin their work, etc. Write these all down.

Ideally, this research will only complement the work you've done while networking in Step 2. In fact, if you're applying to a job in an organization where you have developed a network, this is a good time to reach out to that network, let them know you've decided

to apply for the job, and ask them if they would have time for a short conversation to provide advice to you on the application. This may be the most valuable conversation in your whole job search.

An ID cover letter - more important than your CV

Perhaps you have read this far because you want to get to this section, and I've made sure this section is as complete as possible because I think most people think it is the most important. But plenty of people get jobs first and submit CVs later. I would propose that you don't skip the sections that help you find out who is doing the most relevant work in your area and develop networks there, and that you really don't skip doing the research on the organization and its people. These steps give you essential information to put together an application that stands out.

The most important part of your international development job application is your cover letter. Unlike what most people think, in any kind of recruiting that I've been part of, people do read your cover letter.

The cover letter is a great way for someone who is hiring to know whether you understand the job and why you specifically are the best candidate. I've read plenty of cover letters that let me know within a second that this isn't the right candidate. I can often tell from

the first sentence that the person is applying to every job in a job board and doesn't understand the organization they're applying to or the specific job requirements.

I am always a bit sad when I see this. Someone is spending their time applying to hundreds of jobs and they don't know why they're not getting interviews, and the reason is very clear. I actually think that there are many recruiters who also feel like these people are wasting their time.

It is hard to give specific advice on a cover letter, since people have such different backgrounds, but the type of letter I'd suggest has 5 parts:

1. Greeting: Most of you will have learned how to start a letter in school or in English courses. In general, you should try to find out who specifically is hiring and address the greeting to that person. This means starting out with "Dear Mr./Ms. [Hiring Person's Last Name]." If you can't find out who this is, you can try "To whom it may concern," although some people find that too impersonal. If you are applying to a position in an organization you are currently working or have worked before, "Dear Colleagues" is also acceptable.

2. Introduction: You'll see that most advice for starting a cover letter tells you to stand out from the very beginning. My advice to you would be different - you should sound human. I usually start my cover letters with a very simple version of "this is my application for [job name]," and then in 1-2 sentences I say why I'm applying for that position. I try to tailor this specifically to each job. For example:

"I am writing to express my interest in the job of Program Officer at Helping People NGO's office in Beirut. For the past years, I have closely followed the work of Helping People in Lebanon and have seen the difference of your programs make in the lives of Syrian children. My experience working with refugee programs in Europe has made me particularly interested in helping refugee children in the Middle East, and this position would be a great opportunity for me to contribute to this issue."

As you can see in this sample paragraph, I believe that an effective way of starting a cover letter is first, to explain why specifically that position is relevant, and to explain what you can contribute (experience working with refugees in Europe). In addition, given that we work in a sector where making a difference is important, I think it is a good idea to show alignment between your particular goals and mission and the job.

3. Why you?: The third part of the cover letter is also important. It is the section where you answer the question "why you?" I also tend to be quite straight-forward and say: "I believe that I am the right candidate for this position for the following reasons:" and then I list 3 reasons. I never list less than 3 and never more. I think those reading a cover letter can remember three good reasons and you should be able to find three things in your experience that make you a particularly good candidate. Some things that could make a candidate stand out include prior experience, education, regional knowledge, or language abilities. Below is an example of what this would look like:

"*I believe that I am the right candidate for the position of Program Officer for the following reasons:*

1. *Experience working with Syrian refugees in Europe*: for the past year, I have been volunteering at [name of organization] in Vienna, where I have had the opportunity to help refugees obtain housing and jobs. I have learned about the key concerns of adult refugees and their hopes for their children.

2. *Educational background in Middle East studies:* while studying international development at [name of university], I took courses on the Middle East, helping me understand the broader context of the refugee crisis. I was particularly interested in Lebanon, and understood how the refugee crisis is also affecting host communities in that country.

3. *Ability to write clearly and concisely in English:* my ability to write clear reports can assist *Helping People* communicate its results, making it possible for the organization to have clear lines of communications with donors, partners, and decision-makers within the organization."

As you can see from the example above, this part is also very tailored to the job. The key here is to find very specific links between your background and the job description, and to try to use the same words as the job description. This is where you can truly stand out.

What if you don't have any experience?

If you have started university, you have experience or relevant skills to highlight in some form. Most people have specific skills, such as writing, analysis, problem solving, that can be explained in a way so that cover letter readers can see clear links between the skills and the job. Courses can also be highlighted, as well as any kind of volunteer experience or extracurricular activities.

4. *Closing:* The fourth section of the cover letter closes it. Again, this one can be simple (I really think that when in doubt, it is better to write less.) Here, for example, you could say a few, very simple and standard things. For example:

"I look forward to hearing from you about this position."

"Thank you for considering me for this position."

"If you have any questions on my application, please do not hesitate to contact me."

I keep this section simple. The main message is to thank them for having read your letter.

5. The final section of your letter is your signature. I have strong feelings about keeping this one to Sincerely, [Your Name]. There are some people who like less formal ways of signing, but these people tend to be younger. Since you don't know who will read your application, 'sincerely' keeps it safe and simple.

Final sample letter

October 9, 2017

Dear Mr. Smith,

I am writing to express my interest in the job of Program Officer at Save the Children's office in Beirut. For the past years, I have closely followed the work of Save the Children in Lebanon and have seen the difference of your programs make in the lives of Syrian children. My experience working with refugee programs in Europe has made me particularly interested in helping refugee children in the Middle East, and this position would be a great opportunity for me to contribute to this issue.

I believe that I am the right candidate for the position of Program Officer for the following reasons:

1. *Experience working with Syrian refugees in Europe*: for the past year, I have been volunteering at [name of organization] in Vienna, where I have had the opportunity to help refugees obtain housing and jobs. I have learned about the key concerns of adult refugees and their hopes for their children.

2. *Educational background in Middle East studies:* while studying international development at [name of university], I took courses on the Middle East, helping me understand the broader context of the refugee crisis. I was particularly interested in Lebanon, and understood how the refugee crisis is also affecting host communities in that country.

3. *Ability to write clearly and concisely in English:* my ability to write clear reports can help Save the Children communicate its results, making it possible for the organization to have clear lines of communications with donors, partners, and decision-makers within the organization.

I look forward to hearing from you about this position.

Sincerely,

Applicant Name

Your CV

The majority of job seekers think that if they're not being called for interviews, it's because of their CVs. I think in the majority of cases that's not really the case, but some CVs can be quite problematic and almost all of them can be quite a lot better.

Again, here there is a large amount of advice out there, and the advice is very different depending on the organization you're applying to and where it is based. Some of the standard advice applies, and some does not. Here are some examples:

Advice that applies:

1. A CV should be tailored to each job. This doesn't mean changing your summary section only (although that's important), but it means changing the wording of each section, adding specific activities in each job that are relevant to the opening, removing activities that are less relevant, and trying to use the language the particular organization uses (from the job description or from your networking conversations).
2. A CV should include your education, experience, and relevant skills. Your experience should be listed in reverse chronological order, which means your most recent experience should be listed first. I know some people will recommend that you list experience by relevant skills (so for example, experience in management, or experience in health projects in different sections) when you have gaps in your CV or when you want to highlight transferable skills from another field, but to be frank I've never seen this done properly.
3. A CV should not have errors. This is especially important when the hiring manager is not the one screening. A hiring manager may overlook a mistake or two if the candidate's profile is strong, but a human resources staff probably won't.

Advice that doesn't always apply, or doesn't apply as much:

1. Length of CVs: I know there are several US based recruiters that very strongly believe that you should apply using a 1-page resume. I find 1-page resumes extremely useful for entry level applicants since they allow you to put in all your relevant experience in one page and avoid any distractions. However, I don't think this applies if you are 5+ years into your career (unless you are changing careers.) The best CVs I've seen are 2-3 pages long. *My advice would be to keep your CV to 2 pages regardless of your level, since that is unlikely to get you disqualified by those who believe in really short or really long formats.*

2. Explaining career gaps: We work in a field where career gaps are common. There are very few people who haven't taken years off either to travel, to unwind after a hard post, or to raise a family. I think it's also a given that in a field where you're expected to move around, you'll have gaps simply because you want to spend time in your home country or because sometimes it takes time to get a job when you're living in a remote location. When I have seen career gaps explained in a CV, it's never proven to be a good thing. It just makes them more obvious and I don't think many people really are looking to make sure you've worked all the time.

3. Listing basic tech skills: The days are gone where you need to list knowledge of basic office applications, like word processors, spreadsheets, etc. Knowledge of how to use social media is also assumed. I have seen CVs that include these, and although it doesn't hurt to mention them, it also doesn't help. I would leave them out.

The other piece of common advice that I only partly agree with is having an 'objectives' section. Many guides to writing CVs recommend having a clear objective section that is almost like a really condensed cover letter: it says what job you are seeking and why you're good at it. I recommend replacing the objectives section with a "Summary" section. Here you can highlight the most relevant skills for the specific job (it really needs to change every time) in 3-5 lines maximum. A sample summary section would say:

Public health specialist with 3 years of experience working on projects that increase access to health in remote rural areas. Experience working in sub-Saharan Africa. Study abroad experience in Latin America. Knowledge of Spanish.

There is also some other advice, that although relevant, I think is a not a main concern. I do think it is good to pick an easy to read format, which often means using bullet points, bolding, and underlining smartly. When recruiters and HR are looking at CVs they are often looking at hundreds at a time, and good formatting makes CVs stand out (and bad formatting can disqualify.) However, what is really important is to make sure that the content of your CV is tailored explicitly for a specific position (which does mean spending at least 2 hours on your CV every time you apply), that the CV focuses only on the most relevant experience, and that it makes you look like a standout professional.

One last piece of advice is to really avoid jargon. Although I do think it's important to tailor the language for the specific organization and job ad, I also think that if someone who doesn't work in your field can't read and understand your CV, the language needs to be clarified. In fact, I think this is a good rule of thumb for writing overall.

Other types of applications

Several organizations use specific forms for applications and some do not even encourage sending CVs separately. This is the case with UN P-11 forms but many organizations have similar requirements. In a way, this is a blessing in disguise: having to develop a specific application for a position helps you think through exactly what you need to communicate to stand out.

And that's exactly what I would recommend. You should treat every single application like a CV you are writing for a specific position, and make sure to use the language in the job description to describe my previous experience and education as much as possible. The application should focus on the most relevant parts of your experience.

Step 5: How to nail your job interview

Before discussing interviews, I'd like to congratulate you for getting this far. Getting an interview is quite difficult. Most positions get at least 40 applicants, and the most prestigious entry level programs get over 500 applications per slot.

If you've gotten an interview, then you know that you're qualified, and that your application materials are good! Now you just need to focus on making a great impression.

Before the Interview

You've applied, or networked, and now you have an email in your inbox inviting you for an interview.

The way you answer that email is important. Your response will probably be the first time some people in the organization 'hear' from you in a less scripted document than a cover letter or CV. Your email response should be upbeat, optimistic, and interested. This is the place to highlight your enthusiasm for the position, and to try to show that you're someone that people like to work with.

This is your chance to buy yourself a bit of time to prepare for the interview, while also not asking for so much time that the organization loses interest in your application. I'd recommend trying to set up the interview for the next week.

If the interview will be held remotely, also make sure:

- You have considered the time difference between where you are and where your interviewer(s) will be
- You know how you will connect and have tested that the technology (Skype, Zoom, Webex, etc.) work for you.
- You set up a quiet place to talk. If you'll have a video connection, make sure the background makes you look professional.

Preparing for the interview – What questions will you get?

If you've networked, done your research and put together your application, you are now better prepared for your interview than almost every other applicant. But there are still some things that you can do that can really help you stand out.

The best way to prepare for an interview is to make a list of about 10-15 questions that you think may come up during the interview. Coming up with this list is easy.

First, there is one question that starts out almost every job interview. It comes in a few different but in essence the question is:

Could you tell us why you applied for this job and why you are the best candidate for this position?

How you answer this question often determines whether or not the interview goes well. First impressions are always important, after all. But the good thing is that since you know you'll probably get this question, it is easy to prepare.

Again, like every other part of your job search, the key to answering this question well is to tailor it to the organization. In a way, your answer to this could be quite similar to your cover letter, but should include something a bit more human. You could, for example, start out with a memorable story that explains why you would be interested in the position. (But your story should not last more than 2 minutes.) Then you can list a few of the things that you particularly good at the position. The answer to the question should really never take more than 5-6 minutes. After that, it is hard to keep people engaged.

What I would recommend as a process to get a good question for this is to first write up a story and your key points, and to them practice saying your answer out loud until your answer is perfect. You should be able to answer this question in whichever form it comes, and you could even come up with a format of this answer that you can use even if the interview doesn't start this way.

One of the best ways to make sure your answer is good is to practice your answer in a mock interview with a friend or colleague. If a friend or colleague isn't available, or if you just want to practice on your own, you can also record your answer. I was surprised at how many 'likes' and 'umms' I had after the first time I recorded myself. I was quite glad I practiced after hearing my first try.

Other interview questions are likely to be somewhat predictable when reading the job description carefully. Take a look at each part of the job description and come up with a potential set of questions that could come up. For example:

- If a job description requires technical expertise in a certain area, make sure you can describe the specific area of expertise, where you acquired it, examples of

where you've used it, and potential examples of how you would use this expertise in the future. Some related questions would be:

  - Tell me about a time you have used this skill
  - Tell me how you would solve the problem in this country by using this technical skill.

  The more concrete examples you can come up with ahead of time, the better.

- If a job requires management skills, make sure that you have good examples of times when you have managed (it can be projects in school, volunteer work, events, etc.). Make sure you have examples of times when you've managed people, budgets, resources. Some questions include:

  - Tell me about a time when you managed a team and what you accomplished.
  - Can you give me some examples of times when you've managed difficult people?
  - Please tell me about a recent project you managed and how you addressed any challenges that came up.

- In most interviews, you can expect a set of questions about your people skills. Interviewers will want to know whether it is easy to work with you or not. In our field, they will also want to know whether you adapt easily to other cultures and whether you can work with people from different cultures. Some potential questions include:

  - Tell me about a time you had a difficult client/beneficiary/manager. How did you handle the situation?
  - Tell me about a time when you were part of a team where there were many disagreements. What was your role?
  - Have you worked in a culture that is very different from your own? What were the differences, and how did you adapt?

  These questions can be answered in two ways. One is to discuss your strengths in managing these difficult situations. The second is to describe something that you would do differently and what you learned. Both are valuable, and sometimes the second one more so, since it helps you seem more human and approachable.

You will also have the opportunity to ask questions during the interview. Many people have trouble coming up with questions during the interview itself, so it could be useful for you to prepare some ahead of time. Good questions show that you have done your research (i.e., don't ask about things that you can find out by googling the organization or reading closely the job description), that you intend to stay with the organization for a long time, and that you care about your work.

During the interview

Your interview may be in person or remote. Regardless, there are a few basic rules:

- Arrive on time: This means making sure you arrive early if the interview is in person, or working out the technology and connection early if the interview is remote.
- Dress professionally: Yes, it is important to dress and look professional even if the interview is held remotely (although perhaps only if you will have a video connection). Although in our field, many people dress informally, this is not a context where you should dress for the job you want. It's important to show you're taking the organization seriously by wearing a business suit.
- Listen carefully to introductions: Whether there is one person or more interviewing you, they're likely to introduce themselves. If you can, write down their names and what their roles are. This will be important when you follow up. Also, if you're very comfortable with the interview, you may be able to tailor your responses depending on the profile of your interviewers.
- Do not interrupt: No matter what the circumstance, make sure you don't interrupt the interviewers. If you need clarification, please wait until they're done speaking.
- Answer each question briefly but fully: Make sure you understand the question you're being asked, and give an answer that is complete but say it briefly. Your answers should never be more than 5 minutes.
- Remember to thank your interviewers: Regardless of how the interview goes, your last words in the interview should be thanking the interviewers and letting them know how much you look forward to hearing from them.

After the interview

At some point, it was standard practice to send interviewers hand-written thank you notes after the interview. I think this is quite outdated advice, now, especially since decisions are likely to be made by the time your thank you note is received.

It is good practice, however, to send a quick note to your interviewers thanking them again for the opportunity to interview. The email doesn't have to be complicated or long. One line is enough.

What is most important for you in the long-run, though, is to get feedback on your interview. The right time to ask for feedback is immediately after you've been told that you were not selected for a position. In response to the email or call, you can send a short email thanking them for letting you know and for helping you know more about the organization. In the email, you can gently and diplomatically ask for feedback on the interview, and let them know you'd still be interested in other positions with the organization. If you do get feedback, please do thank them once again.

Chapter 3 – Making future job searches easier

If you've followed the process outlined in this guide, you probably now have at least 20 more contacts in international development than you do before. This will make your future job searches easier, and can even help you do well in your current position.

Although this section could be a guide in itself (and at some point I will write that guide), what I would highlight here is that you should do your best to keep in touch with the contacts you've developed through your job search process. These contacts work in your field, have a bit more experience than you, and some can eventually become long term mentors. When you're looking for a job next time, they'll be warm connections that you can reach out to and who can introduce you confidently to others.

Thank you for reading this guide!

I hope you are now well on your way to getting a great job in international development. Nothing would make me happier than to see you get a job that you love and that lets you make a huge difference in the world. I tried to make sure this guide provided a step-by-step process for you to get a job and to set a foundation to a fulfilling career.

If this guide was useful for you, I'd really appreciate it if you could share it with others who are:

- Actively looking for work in international development
- Thinking that it might be the right time to move into international development; or
- Wanting to move from one international development job to another.

Eventually, I'm hoping those of you who have found this guide useful can form a strong network of people that are happy to share information on careers and together make a bigger difference in the world.

The easiest way to share the guide is through this link to the guide on my blog. Here's the link so that you can just copy paste it and send it to them via email or Facebook:

https://www.internationaldevelopmentguide.com/how-to-get-a-job-in-international-development

I would also be incredibly grateful if you:

● Shared a link to this guide on your Facebook wall and wrote a nice thing or two about it
● Shared it in any online communities you're a part of whose members would benefit from reading it
● Shared it with career offices at your university

You can also, of course, feel free to share it in any other way. Hopefully, by spreading the word about this guide, we can together help many more people have access to jobs in international development, increasing diversity in our field and making an even greater difference.

Here's the link to sharing the guide again:
https://www.internationaldevelopmentguide.com/how-to-get-a-job-in-international-development

Last but not least, I'd love if you left a comment on the blog post version of the guide with your #1 takeaway (or more takeaways) from it. If you have any questions for me, you can also leave them in the comments and I'll respond there, or you can send me a message at michelle@internationaldevelopmentguide.com.

Again, thanks so much for reading this guide!

-Michelle