

The other side of GPAC2



When organizing or participating in a dual career PhD programme, we all meet in Maastricht, having research in mind. During year one of the programme, we shortly inform each other on our “daily life activities”, and of course over lunch or drinks we generally share some of our experiences with our co-fellows. But still, on average the general life of the GPAC² fellows of all is far away with exception of a few weeks a year. This is a pity, for two reasons. Firstly, GPAC² fellows all have jobs that our full time PhD fellows dream off (which is why they work so hard to get their PhD), and information on the daily activities of GPAC² fellows is simply interesting. Secondly, GPAC² fellow’s daily work very often is located in the centre of global activities, and reaches us at the 8 o’clock news in any country in the world. This also means a GPAC² fellow is often more informed than even the best journalist we rely on for our information. So, I intend to share some information from “the other side of GPAC2 with you, using our Blog.

Greetings

Mindel van de Laar

November 2011: Ramanathan Balakrishnan

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The third contribution in “The other side of GPAC2” is easily chosen. With Khadafi defeated and killed, Libya and its development and future of the country is once more the center of the world. Not for the first time since in February 2011 the revolution moved to Libya. Ramanathan Balakrishnan, GPAC² fellow from cohort 2010, was living in Libya until February this year before being evacuated. He is working for the United Nations, as Deputy Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Programme in Libya. In his daily routine, at least until 2011, he was working with the Khadafi regime, with an aim to improve living standards in the region. The revolution disrupted his life rather drastically, moving to Egypt with just a single valise of belongings (limited by evacuation procedures), having to function from hotel rooms during those times when in fact presence in the country probably never was as important. Interacting with the “to be leaders” in Benghazi, but also managing operations in Tripoli to salvage as much as possible from the ransacked UN office, while ensuring that the national staff were paid regularly. Clearly, the last half year has been without doubt hectic. Some questions that I would love to hear Rama’s opinion on are the following.

Who will be leading Libya the next years, will it be UN led like Kosovo, or will there be a new government in the short run?

One thing that has come through very clearly in all fora on Libya is the strong commitment of Libyans to take national ownership and control of the recovery and reconstruction process. While the role of UN will be important from a technical cooperation perspective, it will be a supportive role rather than a leadership role

Are you back in Tripoli or do you expect to go there soon? What will the main priorities of the UN be?

I will be traveling to Tripoli in 3 days time to reestablish UNDP operations and handover the operations to the new management structure, before proceeding on a sabbatical/holiday, starting November.

How have you been able to combine this situation with your PhD? Are you even interested, after being so essential in the world basically the last months, to do a PhD? What do you think a PhD can add to your career, or is that not the aim at all?

This is perhaps the most interesting question for me from all the above. First, I must admit, the last 6 months have been drowned in work, viz., contributing to the formulation of UN/UNDP strategy for post-conflict engagement, managing national staff and their requirements during the conflict, witnessing the tight-rope walking of dealing with the Tripoli based government and the rebel (now the legally recognized) government.

Obviously, my planned research work for Ph.D has suffered a lot on account of this.

On the other hand, I noticed first-hand, the public services grinding to a halt on account of the departure of the expatriate labour, both technical and non-technical. In all the interactions, the authorities from both sides had drawn attention to the capacity gaps affecting public services on account of the exodus of expatriate nationals, who had contributed enormously to keeping the public services running until the conflict. My Ph.D focus, which is on pathways of national capacity development in order to reduce dependencies on expat labour appears even more important...

It is true that the country I work in has been the focus of the world for more than the last half-year. At a personal level, this resulted in a lot of adrenaline, encouraging me to observe crazy work schedules, impossible deadlines etc etc. It was almost like 2 'normal' years of work compacted into 6 months. Thus, I am all the more looking forward to my Ph.D engagement, where I can take a step back from the 'operations' and engage a bit more on the 'substantive' elements.

The above responses reflect the personal views of Mr. Ramanathan Balakrishnan and are in no way to be taken as representing institutional positions or view-points.