


You are here ▶ Home > Reflection > The troubling comfort of aid work in Geneva



THE TROUBLING COMFORT OF AID WORK IN GENEVA

 FEBRUARY 11, 2016  GUEST AUTHOR/S

February 11, 2016

 [Share](#)
[Like 862](#)

By Peter Fremlin

“We’re happy here. We have to leave.”

Being comfortable is surprisingly uncomfortable. A friend and I are in Geneva after a few years of working in developing countries. Our careers took a big step forward, and we’re loving life in an international city, full of young, bright nomads like ourselves.

It’s easy to be happy every day. Everything works as you expect, you go do your job, and there’s easy entertainment or the rest of Europe on your doorstep. We’re having a great time, and we don’t know if that’s a good thing.



Within a few days of being in Geneva, I couldn’t imagine Bangladesh, where I’d lived the previous four years. Where are the people on the streets? Where is the chaos? Why is everything on time? I ache for uncertainty and start to miss arguing with strangers. I’m a bit surprised about what everything costs, but I was also quite surprised at what I’d be earning. The UN daily expense allowances are mentioned frequently in my gratitude journal.

My response to culture shock is disbelief, but I try to pretend everything is normal. A colleague complains he had an “infernal” commute because there was a delay and his bus was crowded. I remember a colleague in Bangladesh who said he and his extended family call each other each morning to check they all arrived safely at work, worried about violence on the streets. Actually, I soon forget all that. I have a physical disability, and the ease at which I can use public transportation in Geneva is a minor miracle of infrastructure, efficiency and accessibility. I get used to it pretty fast. Comfort closes in.

SIGN UP FOR OUR WEEKLY LAST WEEK TODAY NEWSLETTER

Email Address

MISSIONCREEP EPISODE 11

 MissionCreep Podca... 
MissionCreep 0...

33:39

[Cookie policy](#)

In Episode 11, Brendan, Carly and Weh discuss badges, roads and snark. Join the conversation on Twitter #missioncreepdev or email the team with your questions to info@whydev.org

A few months into my stay, the bus is a few minutes late, and I catch myself frustrated. I too am experiencing the “infernal” Geneva commute of minor inconvenience and a slight interruption of the minute-by-minute schedule. When you’re getting soft, does that mean it’s time to leave or time to stay? My friend and I worried it might be time to leave, because of the distance growing between us, what we wanted to work on and the ways we wanted to work on it. Clearly, the discomfort and the challenge and the sadomasochism of it all drives the psychology of the international development junkie. I also worry that Geneva is a terrible place from which to imagine other places. If your bus being a few minutes late is a shock, how can you possibly understand the rest of the world?

The sprawling bureaucracy of the United Nations is a rule-based fantasy built in a land of rule-based fantasies. Switzerland loves rules, which is efficient, expensive and often extremely rigid. Good luck if you want to change the way something is done. The UN has proliferated this tendency even further, with agencies and funds and committees and related organisations. It will take a long time to forget what I scrambled to learn about protocols and departments and standards within my agency.

On good days you learn about the entire world and engage on how to change it. On bad days, you’re only talking about internal department structure, reshuffles, politics or how to get the attention of someone’s boss.



United Nations sign in Geneva. Photo by Ingmar Zahorsky.

Even though there’s a lot of privilege in the UN system, it keeps a lot of people insecure. A whole range of younger or more junior interns, short-term staff, consultants, etc., don’t get access to the benefits. But even those who do have great positions and salaries are often kept insecure by some means or other—by short-term contracts, by reshuffles, by organisational politics, by humiliations meted down to them by their bosses, by their own ambition for career advancement. The uncertainty keeps people looking inwards, caught up in the vortex.

As a summer evening slowly extended in one of the parks by Lake Geneva, I jokingly ask someone what their dream is. “To find a job,” they replied, all too seriously. Geneva brings together an amazing set of people together—highly educated, multilingual, often well-travelled and wanting to make the world a better place. You can sit down for a coffee with someone and instantly find a deep connection because of all you share.

But I’m worried that we talked more about employment prospects than we talked about values. We talked a lot about how we could work better within the systems we were in, and how we could do better for ourselves. We didn’t talk so much about whether there are better ways to use our skills or who we are to make more change outside the systems we’re currently in.

Geneva is an intense and condensed site for international development. Many of its riches provide tremendous inspiration—the people, the platforms, the

discussions, the passion. I left Geneva with more knowledge, skills, networks and clarity than I arrived with.

Yet it also is a place that has more than enough to distort or suffocate your motivations, understanding and goals. The privilege, the navel-gazing, the self-congratulatory and self-important chasing-one's-own-tail. Many people and places are excluded from the conversations and the universalising perspectives. This seat of global government isn't a model of social justice; there are many areas where the UN doesn't practice what it preaches.

It's addictive, it draws you in, and you become dependent on it. I didn't apply for any further work in Geneva, but it would have been very hard for me to turn down an opportunity if one had come. It was sad to leave so many fantastic colleagues and friends behind, and I'll certainly be back sooner or later. But there's an excitement of going forward to different challenges: understanding national and local complexities; being connected to grassroots development while contributing at a policy level; and, trying to live closer to the values we advocate.

Peter Fremlin is a consultant in international development, with a speciality in disability inclusion. After having worked in Bangladesh and Geneva over the past several years, he is preparing to head to Cairo for an Arabic language course You can also follow Peter [on Twitter](#) and check out his blog, [Desibility](#).

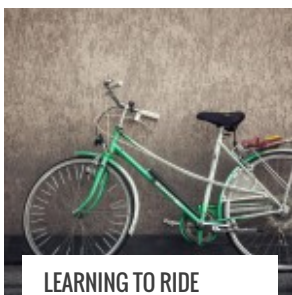
Featured image shows the Palace of Nations in Geneva. Photo from [United Nations Photo](#).

Bio	Latest Posts
 GUEST AUTHOR/S	

« [Help mentor the next generation of development!](#)

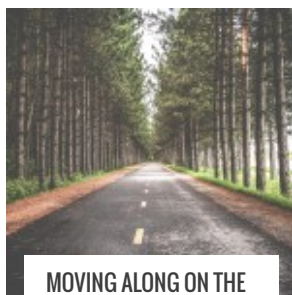
[An update from the WhyDev Fellows in Cambodia »](#)

RELATED POSTS



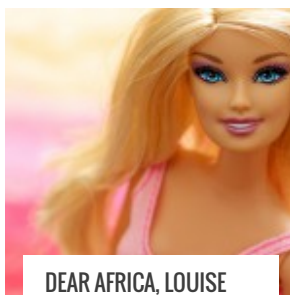
LEARNING TO RIDE

 GUEST AUTHOR/S



MOVING ALONG ON THE DO-GOODER JOURNEY

 JENNIFER LENTFER



DEAR AFRICA, LOUISE LINTON IS ON US

 GUEST AUTHOR/S

4 THOUGHTS ON "THE TROUBLING COMFORT OF AID WORK IN GENEVA"



Haiko

 February 18, 2016 at 4:36 am

Great reflection! This is actually what I feel now and just perfect time to read this while having a break from packing my bag preparing to go back to the field.

[Reply](#)

The troubling comfort of aid work in Geneva - Global Health Hub: news and blogosphere aggregator

🕒 February 13, 2016 at 3:45 am

[...] The troubling comfort of aid work in Geneva [...]

Reply

My time in Geneva: troubling comforts | Desibility

🕒 February 13, 2016 at 1:54 am

[...] wrote about the troubling comfort of aid work in Geneva over at [...]

Reply

The troubling comfort of aid work in Geneva | W...

🕒 February 12, 2016 at 3:51 pm

[...] Working in developed countries like Switzerland can be pretty comfortable for development workers. But Peter Fremlin questions when too much comfort becomes dangerous. [...]

Reply

LEAVE A COMMENT

Comment

Name

Email

Website URL

ADD COMMENT

