Aida: Warm welcome Laura, this year the UN system staff college celebrates the 20th anniversary of the orientation program for junior professional officers, that we have organized in partnership with UN DESA member states. As a matter of fact, when we started 20 years ago, it was for Italian young professionals, and it's not a coincidence that this year also the Italian JPO programme celebrates its 50th anniversary, which is a big milestone, so we really are happy that we could honour this special edition of spotlight interview with you, as an honorary alum of 2004 edition in Turin back in the days, and have a chance to have a small talk on how your career has evolved since then.

So, my first question would be, Laura, you started your JPO journey in Egypt in IOM in 2004. Now you're leading 400 staff as IOM's sub-regional coordinator for the Western Balkans and chief of mission in the IOM Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina. How does it feel to have this great trajectory as a former JPO, and what do you enjoy and find most meaningful in leading the UN today?

Laura: Thank you so much, Aida, for having me, and for this great chance actually to speak about myself hopefully in an aspiring way for many new JPOs starting their career today. It was an incredible... and it is an incredible journey. Time has passed so fast, these 20 years have gone like the wind, I've been able after of course, the JPO springboard to serve in many duty stations, in both West, North and Central Africa, but also Geneva, and most recently in the Western Balkans. So I learned a lot throughout this year, I enjoy enormously both jobs, even though I work for the same organization for 20 years. It looks like I've worked in different organizations because every three to four years, I was changing and I'm changing duty stations, so it's a completely... a set of new challenges and opportunities. Now, yes, indeed, I have a big responsibility. I'm leading a very big team of more than 400 people here in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and an even bigger team in the Western Balkans, it's a challenging region and now very fascinating, especially working on such an important and evolving phenomenon, which is migration. So it has been a pleasure to start in the JPO, and I'm sure that things will continue to evolve for me as we go along...

Aida: That sounds like a really wonderful career and a lot of experience in different parts of the world. Now, going back to the orientation programme that we've organized in Turin 20 years back, could you tell us what you found extraordinary about your learning experience in that programme, like how you were impacted by this pre-placement learning in fulfilling your role as a JPO and beyond and what have you been applying from what you learned during the orientation programme since then?

Laura: So I remember 20 years ago, it was an extremely nice experience first of getting to know a lot of young new professionals which were starting their own careers, so plenty of new ambitions, dreams, expectations, and it was a very good and excellent, I would say, networking experience till today, I maintain, some of this network and relationship, which I built more than 20 years ago. I also cherished very much during that time, the good leaders that we were presented with, because I remember a number of key figures inside the UN and beyond were also teachers or panellists or speakers. And so at the time, I remember it gave me the chance of being inspired by other people who have gone up in their career, and also I remember a number of very good teams until today, presentation skills, public relation skills, a number of skills that I think I continue then to try to nourish and to try to evolve on... so very positive experience.

Aida: Ohh, that's wonderful. I'm happy that you had a good start into your JPO journey with the orientation programme! I would be interested to know how has the JPO Orientation program helped you in your career and leadership development? You have mentioned that you have sustained your... your learning from the programme, but also you have sustained the system-wide network of contacts, but what else has helped you in your career and leadership development?

Laura: Today, I don't know if you share my opinion, but being a leader, it's a difficult job because you need to be a compassionate leader, you need to be inclusive, you need to make sure that you care for diversity while also leading the way and provide a vision, provide a strategic direction. So sometimes it's a tough job to combine all those skills, and the JPO programme allows to start to work on some of the skills in terms of inclusive leadership, in terms of analysis, and analytical skills, and I remember some of the good sessions, still, of 20 years ago, allowed me then to see what where the air is, where I needed to develop more, which were my strengths. Afterwards, I was given chances to continue to develop those skills, some of them within the UN system, some others to coaching the opportunities that my organization gave me, so obviously, I think leadership skills are one of the most important areas of development, especially for women leaders, because we have to, unfortunately, confront a reality whereby there are not so many examples of women leaders, so we kind of need to build our own examples, our own models, and so we need to work the extra mile on this.

Aida: Thank you very much, and it's actually very, very helpful that you've mentioned the leadership content, in the JPO Orientation programme we do put a lot of attention on building up this agency of change and building up leadership, despite the fact that Junior Professional Officers come into the system in a junior position, but I'm happy that you actually confirmed that it's an important part of a good start into the system, especially for women leaders. So it's part of our content in the orientation programme. I'm happy you kind of reconfirmed its importance for the newly recruited JPOs. What would be one piece of advice or a message of inspiration that you would leave to all those new JPOs, Laura?

Laura: Well, I would say that there are some key characteristics that make you progress in your career, one of them is being humble and be ready to learn, another one is to be eager to learn and always interested in your challenges, and always get to know a new contexts, new reality, not having afraid of being deployed in various different operating context because that would then allow you to be a stronger professional with a stronger background. So, humility, learning, openness to others... I think these are some of the key characteristics that allow you to then progress in your career and hopefully become a leader and be an inspirational leader. Today, I can say sometimes that, for instance, I am leading a team where sometimes I'm even younger than some of the people are leading, and so you need to juggle age with somehow this sense of purpose, you have to transfer to everyone with whom you're working these goals that transcend the individuals, but unites us as people working under the same values. So these are key, important elements that need to be cultivated over the years, and obviously being exposed to different contexts allows this to happen more smoothly, I would say.

Aida: Thanks very much for sharing those learning wisdom as well, and as a learning professional in a learning institution serving the UN system, I'm particularly happy that you have put a lot of emphasis on learning, that's something that we cultivate in the orientation program targeted for the newly recruited JPOs. So thank you so much, Laura, for joining me in this small conversation and reflecting back to your start as a JPO. I wish you best of luck in your leadership role, not only in the region where you're serving now, but for your future positions. And I hope our paths will cross some time and Turin where you've started this learning journey with us, so thank you very much for joining again and best of luck.

Laura: Thank you so much Aida and everyone at the UN System Staff College, and good luck to every new JPO.

Aida: Thank you very much, bye bye!