



We've Got Your Back:

Interview with the
President of the
UN Field Staff
Union

Milan Dawoh

While he was here on a visit to MINURSO at the end of January, we sat down with Milan Dawoh, the President of the UN Field Staff Union, to ask him what motivates him in his work, and what he considers his main successes as an advocate for UN field staff vis-à-vis the Secretary-General and the UN system's management. Milan is an inspiring voice, have a read!

"I started at the bottom. This is why I feel driven to help people."



What motivates you to do what you do?

My motivation to help and advocate for people comes from the fact that I started at the bottom. I was first supposed to become a Catholic priest. I come from an extremely poor family [in Sierra Leone]. Starting from seven years old, I used to walk 15 kilometers each way to the nearest school—barefoot, no shoes. The only way I could go to a university was to study to become a priest, so I joined the seminary. Then, in the middle of my time in the seminary, the war in Sierra Leone erupted. The priests left the country, everyone left the country, and I came to the city [Freetown] for survival and to hide from the rebels who, as you might remember, became known for chopping off people's hands. As I didn't have a degree, the only job I was able to find was to wash cars, at the then UN peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone, UNAMSIL. That was a stroke of luck. This is how I came to work for Transport, which later took me to the UN mission in Afghanistan, UNAMA (2004-2005) and to UNMIT, in Timor-Leste (2007-2012) as a Transport Assistant. I was also a staff representative at UNMIT, and so when the Mission began to downsize, I volunteered to be downsized. People said that I was crazy, but by that point I knew I could land on my feet. I lost my job and returned to Sierra Leone and helped in my country during the Ebola virus crisis. Later though, I was offered a new job with the UN, with MINUSCA, in the Central African Republic. And I've been with the UN since.

Do you have time for any hobbies?

I was truly a miracle child in my village. My mother gave birth to me at the age of fifty, and in many ways, she was like both a mother and a grandmother to me. Before I was born, my father named me Milan after his boss, a man he greatly respected. One of the most powerful memories of my childhood happened while I was walking home from school. Every day, I woke up at five in the morning and walked long distances to attend classes. One day, after hitting my foot on a rock and losing a toenail on my way from school, the pain and exhaustion overwhelmed me. I sat by the roadside crying, saying I could not continue anymore.

At that moment, my mother found me. As she sat there trying to console me, an airplane flew over our village. She pointed to the sky and said: *"If you continue going to school and never give up, one day you will fly in airplanes like that and travel the world."* Those words changed my life. They gave me the strength to return to school and chase the dream of seeing the world.

Today, I am proud to say that dream became reality. I have visited more than 100 countries. But not just that. I am now in flight school, pursuing my pilot's license. Flying is my greatest passion, alongside cycling and swimming, activities that continue to inspire my spirit of adventure.

What made you come to MINURSO at this moment in time?

This is my first visit to MINURSO, and I am here at the request of your staff representatives. They reached out to me because they felt they were facing a challenging situation in light of the contingency planning process and requested my support and assistance.

What do you think is different about MINURSO compared to other missions?

MINURSO has been among the least affected missions, and I commend your SRSG for the bold and thoughtful approach he took in implementing the contingency plan.

In many other cases, section chiefs were tasked with deciding which positions would be downsized, and often the impact fell disproportionately on lower-ranking staff members. However, SRSG Ivanko took a different approach by starting at the top, thereby safeguarding the jobs of the majority of ordinary voiceless staff who could have been victims of this process.

I sincerely applaud him for his leadership and say kudos for putting staff welfare at the forefront during such a difficult process.



"SRSG Alexander Ivanko's leadership and commitment made a real difference. Through his efforts, many jobs were saved and many staff members and their families were spared significant hardship."



How do you see the UN emerging from the current crisis?

I went back to East Timor some years after I have served there; it's changed incredibly. The government has done an amazing job transforming the country, which was among the poorest in the world. They have built new infrastructure and developing the economy and opportunities for its people. You see, we have had many successes in UN peacekeeping – East Timor, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola, Namibia. Many times, where the UN has been asked to leave, this is reflective of a failure of UN leadership at the senior level, and I have said this in Townhall meetings and to the UN Secretary-General himself in my encounters with him. But our people and our work are behind many successes.

“There are peacekeeping success stories and we should be proud of them.”

The UN has changed a lot. These are difficult moments for the Organization. But I am sure it will make us better, that we will reform and become more efficient. Defending the Organization's spirit and values, not just staff entitlements, is also part of what I see as my job. We are very privileged as UN staff. With my first salary, I helped build a school in my native village. To date, I still support the teachers' salaries. I really believe that with all the privilege we have as UN staff, it is important to give back. So, in conclusion I will say, I see the UN emerging from this crisis stronger, more focused, and more united. Challenges bring opportunities for renewal, innovation, and a deeper commitment to serving humanity and building a better future for all.



Thank you, Milan. Thank you for the visit to our little corner for the world, and for your time! And to all our readers: Please join the Field Staff Union if you haven't already, and if you have, be active and proactive! You can reach out to Sam Conteh, the MINURSO Field Staff Union president, or check out the [UNFSU website!](#)