

Antonia De Meo Finds New International Challenges

As the World Turns

By Janay Haas



Antonia De Meo

justice and crime prevention. We apply action-oriented research to guide our specialized capacity building programs in emerging or niche criminal justice fields, such as environmental crimes, terrorism, the nexus with organized crime, and artificial intelligence in law enforcement.”

The work of the institute has the same sense of urgency as other challenges undertaken in the field of criminal justice. “UNICRI really makes a difference, with a level of analysis that is deeper than and ahead of other U.N. entities working in the criminal justice space,” says De Meo. “We are expert- and data-driven with the aim to impact what’s happening in policy.”

UNICRI is one of six research and training institutes of the United Nations. It has no mandate to confer a degree, De Meo explains. Affiliated with the University for Peace in Costa Rica, it does administer an

LL.M. program in transnational crime and justice. “There’s an online segment with self-study, followed by an in-person residency in Turin,” she says. “It’s one of the top 10 LL.M. programs in Europe,” she adds.

Making a ‘Real Impact’ at UNICRI

The fit has been a good one for someone whose skill set includes a background in environmental policy, dedication to the rule of law, fieldwork in combatting human trafficking, and experience monitoring human rights and atrocity crimes. “At UNICRI we make practical contributions to the criminal justice and crime prevention fields,” she says.

For example, she reports, “Ten years ago, UNICRI was already working on the nexus between organized crime and terrorism.” In another example, “Five years ago,

Sarajevo. Benghazi. Darfur. The Sahel. The Green Zone. Gaza. When these places were in the headlines, most people who had a choice weren’t willing to go there.

Oregon lawyer Antonia De Meo has experienced them all. Until recently, everywhere De Meo was stationed was a site of armed conflict or severe human rights abuses.

De Meo’s latest situation looks quite different. After more than 20 years in nine countries, she’s now in Turin, Italy, as the director of the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI). Find her these days on what looks like a college campus, with broad lawns and leafy trees, where she leads the institute and supervises a staff of 60.

Is De Meo working in academia now? Not exactly. As she describes her assignment, “UNICRI is the United Nations research and training institute for criminal



Antonia De Meo is pictured in Turin at the Ponte Umberto I, which was lighted that night in 2020 to celebrate 75 years of the United Nations.

Photo credit: Owen Carey, Markowitz Herbold

we founded the UNICRI Centre for AI and Robotics. We were there at the beginning of emerging technologies: analyzing how criminals are using it to further crimes, and how law enforcement can use it to combat crimes. We are involved in how artificial intelligence is affecting policy.” And UNICRI has a tight connection with Interpol, the International Criminal Police Organization, based in Lyon, France.

Counter-terrorism is another sphere in which UNICRI plays a role, a small but critical one. The United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) is the main U.N. entity leading and coordinating efforts to prevent and combat terrorism, while “we (UNICRI) implement projects,” says De Meo. She gives the example of in-depth research conducted by UNICRI on efforts to stem radicalization and violent extremism in the Sahel-Maghreb region, including Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Burkino Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. The idea was to work with grassroots organizations across the region to determine how communities can build resilience and what influences drive young people to join violent extremist groups. “We went in analytically, working with 80 civil society organizations over five years to test tools and approaches to counter radicalization. At the end of this project, we know which strategies work, and why.” (Readers can find the final report on the youth-recruitment project at unicri.it/sites/default/files/2020-11/Many_hand.pdf.)

This approach differs from that taken by organizations that seem to focus on exporting western ideas to other cultures. “If you want to be effective, you have to work with communities at the community level, and you have to appeal to values that will resonate with that community,” De Meo observes.

How does De Meo define success in her current role? “On a very large scale, I know I’m not going to stop terrorism,” she acknowledges. But the research, analysis and reports that UNICRI produces help agencies and governments around the world to recognize and combat instances of serious and systemic wrong-doing and threats to national security, and that makes a real impact, she says.

Challenges at Every Turn

This job is a continuation of De Meo’s long-running career with the United Nations. When she spoke with Cliff Collins a decade ago (“A Sense of Service,” *OSB Bulletin* August/September 2011), De Meo had finished her first two years of U.N. service in Amman, Jordan, where her work required her to travel to the Green Zone in Baghdad, Iraq, via armored bus or helicopter. There she worked on rule of law and economic development projects. Following that post, she worked with the U.N. Office for Project Services in Jerusalem, where she supported security sector reform. Her next stops were Sudan, during the period of the separation of South Sudan, and then Sri Lanka, just after its 25-year civil war, with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

Four years ago, De Meo was named chief of the Human Rights, Transitional Justice and Rule of Law Service at the U.N. Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL). For numerous reasons including risks to personal safety and an active armed conflict, the United Nations has designated Libya as one of the most dangerous places on earth to work. She agrees that it was her most challenging assignment.

“The political context in Libya was fragile and unpredictable,” she recalls. Armed groups violated human rights, the migration of desperate people overwhelmed aid agencies and children were forced into armed conflict, among other atrocities. Alongside a persistent flow of human tragedy, there were simple, mundane reasons that the post was difficult. “We lost access to the municipal water

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BRANDON JOHNSON

*J.D., University of Oregon 2014
B.S., Southern Utah University 2010*

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supply and had to shower in salt water for months; the food supply on the compound was limited; and we frequently lost power and internet," De Meo explains.

And the hours were long. Her schedule in Turin, in contrast, is fairly reasonable — about 50 hours a week, she estimates.

In Turin, there's enough free time to have a social life, but time is not the primary consideration. For U.N. diplomats, "Your social life doesn't depend on you or your personality. It depends on your level in the hierarchy. The higher your post, the more careful you should be. As a representative of the organization, you have to model responsible behavior."

COVID-19 has been another factor defining De Meo's social life — and her work environment. For UNICRI's researchers and its LL.M. students, the pandemic meant that, "UNICRI met increasing training needs through adaptable online modalities. It contributed and continues to contribute to efforts to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic, enhance resilience, and promote peaceful, safe and inclusive communities." In other words, her work went online.

One unexpected impact of COVID-19 and the move to online interactions has been the way in which women's images have been used, says De Meo. "Digital image control has become a big problem, because people are taking screenshots or recordings during meetings without permission.

"There's a difference between how men and women are perceived and the standards applied to their images. An unflattering photo has a greater impact on women. It's being used as a form of harassment, and it can undermine women especially." As a result, De Meo says she is persistent about controlling access to her online image, but it's very difficult. Although she informs professional peers that they need permission to post her image online, "many do not comply." Even something as seemingly innocuous as a tweet taken from an online meeting where a man is photographed live but a woman is shown only via a grainy screenshot can have an effect on image and credibility, she observes. "Who controls your digital image and how it is used online is a field we're (society) not looking at closely enough."

A Constantly Evolving Career

Looking back 25 years, De Meo was a new hire at Markowitz, Herbold, Glade

& Melhaf in Portland, where she litigated complex cases for business clients. Five years into practice, De Meo began to feel that she wanted to do more with her skills. A mentor suggested she look into a year in Eastern Europe with the American Bar Association's fledgling Central and Eastern European Law Initiative (CEELI). A few months later, De Meo was working with CEELI in Chişinău, Moldova.

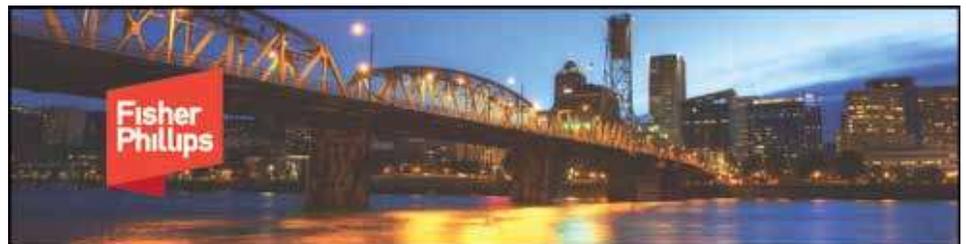
She admired her Portland colleagues greatly, she recalls, and stays in touch, even visiting the firm in summer 2021 to talk about her current activities. She was, by all accounts, a stellar attorney, but the call to make a broader difference pulled her away from private practice.

Firm partner David Markowitz invited her to give a presentation to the newer lawyers in the firm in July, he says, because of her extraordinary skills and trajectory. "I worked with her daily 25 years ago," he recalls, "and nothing's that happened in her career has surprised me. I couldn't have predicted the precise jobs she has held, or all the places she has been, but she has a huge-picture vision that very few people I've ever met have."

What made her well-suited for this very different application of her law degree?

De Meo says her skill set includes many typical attributes of other lawyers — logic, analysis, problem-solving and advocacy. But other skills she has developed don't fit into the profile of typical lawyering. For one thing, international work and life are invariably mired in heavy bureaucracy. Most U.S. lawyers don't have to deal extensively with bureaucracy in their personal lives, she points out, but her older brother has a serious disability. The family routinely had to negotiate regulations imposed by federal and state agencies as she was growing up. "I'm not afraid of rules or bureaucracy," she says.

Adaptability is another quality central to successful international work. One aspect of De Meo's childhood was the dichotomy she experienced between living fully in two American sub-cultures: Her school months were spent in wealthy suburban Palo Alto, California, the heart of the Silicon Valley, while her summers were spent in rural northwest Ohio in her mother's Mennonite farm community. She knew at a young age that the world consisted of more than one culture. "People who do international work need to adapt constantly, which is very



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A J.D. Can Be a Passport to Adventure

In high school, your parents and your guidance counselor probably said you could really go places with a law degree. It's truer than they knew.

Oregon maritime lawyer Kim Jeffries has been literally "Navigating Norway" (*Bulletin*, November 2021) for more than two decades, and fellow lawyer Antonia De Meo has worked in almost a dozen countries over that same period for the United Nations and other international organizations. Their trajectories have been challenging, fascinating and rewarding. And other lawyers, seeking adventure or greater fulfillment in practicing, want to know about opportunities themselves.

"People frequently ask me about how to get a job with the United Nations," says De Meo. "It's not easy." Even with her law degree, she had to obtain a master's degree before she would be considered for a position. "International organizations don't really recognize what a J.D. is." In addition, fluency in one or more of the six U.N. official languages (Russian, English, Arabic, Chinese, French and Spanish) is required, and dual citizenship is a strong advantage. Former international experience helps, too.

Lawyers who, like Jeffries, have transnational specialties (hers is maritime law) can find positions in private practice in urban centers worldwide. Intellectual property, international business and tax law are the most sought-after practice areas, especially for people with two or more languages. For those who want a role in shaping public policy or in directly helping individuals in dire straits, there's a wide range of possibilities in public and nonprofit sectors.

The United Nations is one of the more lucrative possibilities for those who would like to experience new challenges with their legal backgrounds. But it's hardly the only one, and many other positions — temporary and permanent — offer opportunities for those with the skill set most lawyers have acquired.

De Meo, for example, followed Portland domestic violence policy advocate Judith Armatta and Terry Rogers, from Multnomah County Legal Aid, to Eastern Europe for projects sponsored by the American Bar Association's Central and Eastern Europe Law Initiative (CEELI) in the 1990s as the Soviet Union disintegrated

and new European nations battled instability and each other. That effort to establish an accountable judicial system has become the ABA Rule of Law Initiative (ROLI), which now offers one-year placements (frequently renewable) for lawyers in dozens of countries — from Jordan to the Philippines to Colombia to Tunisia. The positions deal with human trafficking issues, economic development, and legal education reform, among other areas. While salaries tend to be modest (although not by local standards), ROLI finds comfortable housing for lawyers and their families and provides language training and often a driver and a translator to participants.

Numerous Oregon lawyers have obtained jobs with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which offers short-term positions as election monitors. That organization also has permanent positions available throughout Central and Eastern Europe. The Council of Europe, based in Strasbourg, France, is home to the European Court of Human Rights, another potential employer. United States embassies, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. Department of State offer postings worldwide. Positions are both temporary and permanent.

If comfort and a hefty income aren't part of your fantasy of working abroad, the Peace Corps (which still has its 27-month standard program) offers a program for professionals with advanced degrees (Peace Corps Response Volunteers) with short-term projects of 3-12 months.

For lawyers who want to share their expertise on a very short-term basis, the Fulbright scholarship program offers brief educational consultancies (14-42 days) and looks specifically for experienced professionals who can advise on topics such as environmental science and policy, political science, urban policy, law and conflict resolution, and business administration.

Not surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the number of positions available for would-be adventurers, but opportunities will increase. It might be a good idea to check the renewal date on your passport. ■

different from the day-to-day predictability and stability of life as a lawyer in a firm.”

There is also a sort of homogeneity in a typical law practice that is missing in international work. The profile of highly educated, smart professional colleagues in a beautiful well-appointed office bears little resemblance to the *mélange* of people from all over the world with different levels of education, different languages, religions, and cultures, often working in sub-standard office conditions, notes De Meo.

Markowitz points to other attributes — not just her “big picture, long-range thinking,” but also her persistence: When she identifies an important goal, she looks carefully at ways to achieve it. In addition, she is “remarkably detail-oriented and extremely thorough.” He says that “turn after turn in her work and her career is a natural consequence of those three characteristics.”

Thanks to her various posts over the years, De Meo’s skill set is constantly growing. While “I’m happy at UNICRI — it’s a nice fit for my experience — I’m always looking for the next position to use my skills and talents.” She says it can take as long as two years to find a new job, so it’s an ongoing process.

For that next position, whatever it is, location isn’t a factor for De Meo. “It’s the work that matters.” For the United Nations to fulfill its mandate of promoting international peace and security, staff must respond and take action wherever that mandate takes them. “The real work of the United Nations is taking place in the field, close to the people,” De Meo explains, “and that means working in very difficult but very rewarding places.” ■

Janay Haas is a frequent contributor to the Bulletin. Reach her at wordprefect@yahoo.com.

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