

Interview – Victor Khodayar-Pardo

Written by E-International Relations

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/05/10/interview-victor-khodayar-pardo/>

E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, MAY 10 2021

Victor Khodayar-Pardo is a Spanish civil engineer currently serving as a Partnerships and Business Development Associate at the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) within Europe and Central Asia in areas such as infrastructure, climate change adaptation and mitigation, health strengthening, environmental protection, economic empowerment, and gender equality. He has been serving at the United Nations for more than five years on partnerships and programme management, advocacy, business development, and project management capacities. He also serves as a strategic adviser and public speaker, developing programmes and initiatives between governments, UN Agencies, other International Organisations, NGOs and academia.

Previously, he served at the European Union within the European Investment Bank as a Strategic Policy Consultant providing advisory services on infrastructure, education, and healthcare to EU Member States. He started his career working in the infrastructure private sector both in Spain and the United Kingdom. He holds an MSc in Civil Engineering from the Polytechnic University of Valencia and the Technical University of Delft, an MSc in International Leadership from the Polytechnic University of Madrid and the Rafael Del Pino Foundation, and the European Union Diplomacy Certificate from the College of Europe. He can be found on Twitter @_VictorKP

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

In recent years, there has been a constant need for public servants like me to defend multilateralism. Multilateralism is, and has proven to be, the only solution to the triple crisis we are currently facing. This triple crisis has three interconnected dimensions that need to be solved, leaving no one behind, that are currently being led by the United Nations, these are public health, climate change, and socio-economic challenges. On public health, the UN System needs to coordinate the overall COVID-19 response strategies with national governments as efficiently as possible, particularly in countries lacking adequate resources. On climate change, climate adaptation measures are at the forefront of our UN joint activities to protect our environment and our lives. And finally, we are currently undertaking cross-cutting socio-economic recovery efforts to increase sustainability and inclusiveness at a global level within all our projects.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

We live in a fully interconnected global society where, in order to improve standards of living for people in need, initiatives must establish efficient value chains from donors to implementing agencies and the final beneficiaries, to strengthen positive impact on a large scale. After many years of working on different projects in multiple geographic contexts, I have fully realized that establishing synergies is key. Synergies at all levels: with national governments, within the UN system, with other international organisations, and, of course, with civil society, practitioners, and academia. In addition, it is important that all completed projects have a lasting impact targeting local inclusion. The objective is to shape and develop more sustainable, inclusive, and empowered societies through a paradigm shift that is fostered through implementation. Implementation is, without a doubt, the key pillar to ensure a project's success and build stakeholder coalitions under a common agenda to move forward for the benefit of people in need.

Gender equality considerations for more inclusive societies and sustainability efforts to protect our environment

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should always be fostered within our United Nations projects. These efforts are indeed a catalyser for the economic empowerment of societies on a global scale. More inclusive and sustainable societies are also the most successful in economic and financial terms.

How did you transition from your engineering background into economics and political work?

I have always been committed to the transformation of societies from a social, environmental, and economic point of view. I decided to study civil engineering due to my interest in connecting societies and fostering economies through transport, energy, and water management projects with due respect to people's environment and way of living. At the same time, I was always interested in the areas of international relations and geopolitics.

I had the opportunity to start working at the European Union within the European Investment Bank as a consultant, working on some of the EU Programmes that provide the largest financing to EU Member States to empower their economies and to create opportunities for growth. My continuous experience engaging with EU Member States and understanding how the EU works from the inside enabled me to transition my career into economics, geopolitics, and international relations.

After working within the European Union, I have continued my work within the United Nations, consolidating my international relations, economics, and political background, working with governments, other UN agencies, and international organisations to develop specific projects and initiatives in the areas of infrastructure, climate change, gender equality, health, economic empowerment, and environmental protection at a global scale.

What role does the United Nations play in the governing and mediation of environmental issues? Practically, how does the UN work with national governments, NGOs, and other organizations?

The United Nations has the ability to work with multiple stakeholders to align priorities and work toward the same goals. That is one of the main objectives of the United Nations and is the reason why the UN manages multi-stakeholder initiatives in many different areas. Within the environmental sector, national governments, NGOs, other international organisations, and the private sector work together under the UN management umbrella to achieve the largest impact with increased efficiency on the ground. These multi-stakeholder partnerships align multiple parties under a single initiative with a unique programme of work and a common governance mechanism that is facilitated and moderated by the UN. There is no other player in the international arena that is able to bring everyone to the table to discuss and solve transboundary issues such as environmental challenges. These challenges need dedicated policies to protect biodiversity as well as the common management pathway that is needed for large marine ecosystems for example, that can form a complex context from a political perspective.

How does the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development combine environmental and development goals? What does Agenda 2030's "sustainable development" look like in practice?

The 2030 Agenda is, without a doubt, our generation's global social contract. There is no other agreement at the moment that has achieved the same level of acceptance globally, both at the governmental level and at other levels of society. The 2030 Agenda is about equality, liberty, solidarity, and peace. It's our global pact, and contains key goals focused on issues such as achieving zero poverty and equal access to education for all.

The 2030 Agenda is implemented through its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that combine developmental and environmental priorities, health and social goals, and economic and innovation objectives into very specific KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) that govern all United Nations' work and engagement with other stakeholders, mobilizing political and economic willingness to create impact with projects that change and improve people's lives. To implement this 2030 Agenda in line with my daily UN work, I have had the honour of working on many projects that have a clear impact such as providing electricity to rural areas, protecting large marine ecosystems in danger, re-building communities affected by an earthquake, developing climate financing schemes for local societies, sending medical equipment for COVID-19 treatment, and ensuring gender equality when it is at risk.

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What does COVID-19 response and recovery look like at the United Nations? Can the UN serve as a facilitator for multilateral efforts to recover from COVID-19?

We are currently living in an unprecedented crisis that we need to solve as soon as possible, protecting the most vulnerable sections of our societies. Since the COVID-19 outbreak started, I have been mostly dedicated to the COVID-19 response, supporting national governments and ministries of health in Central Asia by procuring and delivering medical equipment and PPE to dedicated hospitals in-country and enabling capacity building activities for healthcare professionals so items can be used accordingly.

To implement these efforts, the United Nations serves as a catalyser, working at the institutional and civil society levels with governments and Ministries of Health to efficiently deliver necessary medical equipment and PPE as quickly as possible. After our current COVID-19 response efforts, COVID-19 recovery remains an integral part of our daily work, ensuring societies return not to their previous state, but to an improved greener and more socially aware state, where environmental protection and socio-economic rights are at the forefront of progress for everybody.

Our COVID-19 recovery efforts from the United Nations will be focused on ensuring the continuity of health services in fragile settings, scaling up social protection systems, providing support to SMEs (Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises) to stimulate the economy and employment overall, strengthening environmental resilience and supporting good governance, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law.

What multilateral projects or agreements have been most successful in combatting climate change? Are there any ongoing projects that have particular promise?

The climate emergency is our generation's fight, and we need all possible synergies to protect our lives and our environment, our home. Without a doubt, the Paris Accord is, and will be for a long time, the common framework against which we will measure implementation progress on our fight against climate change, our key generational challenge. This global agreement to set-up long-term goals, national contributions, financing, and MRV (Measurement, Reporting, and Verification) commitments established a clear strategy for the future.

Beyond the Paris Accord, it is important to highlight the UN Conferences of the Parties on Climate Change. I had the great opportunity to attend the last COP 25 in Madrid and it was enriching to discuss and exchange ideas not only with other government's officials, but also with NGOs and civil society members who are fully committed to moving forward on our climate change measures, as a way to build and secure the international consensus on the matter. One of the key initiatives is the EU Green Deal, which will mobilize at least €1 trillion in sustainable investments over the next decade, including the Just Transition Mechanism, that will be targeted toward a fair and just green transition. Moreover, the synergies between climate financing mechanisms, hydrogen technologies, and the international emissions trading system with the development of carbon pricing schemes will completely change the context of our fight against this climate emergency and will accelerate and widen its impact.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

I started working with the European Union when I was 25. Therefore, I managed to understand at an early career stage how the EU works both at internal and external levels by participating in the internal definition and with external EU Member States engagement to implement some of the EU Programmes that are still fostering the European Union economies nowadays. High motivation and willingness to change things and to create impact has been my constant attitude when I started working at the EU and it remains present within my work at the United Nations.

My main piece of advice to young scholars would always be that you should be curious and eager to constantly learn without losing the bigger picture of how specific programmes and initiatives fit within the international agenda. Overall, perseverance is essential to get things done and to achieve the best possible results on the ground for those who need it. It is important to only accept excellence in project performance and nothing lower than that. Because when you truly fight for excellence, then the long-term impact is created. And that is the only goal: a long-term positive impact to improve people's lives.

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