

Oli Bowler

Innovation Fund Consultant at Coffey (currently working for the *Africa Challenge Enterprise Fund*)



About the role

1. Can you give a brief overview of your career to date?

I started working in international development through an internship at Coffey 1 month after I graduated from QMUL. The next job I had involved working directly on several DFID funded projects in a project management role; this involved work on education, economic growth, and health and gender projects across a variety of countries including Ghana, Pakistan, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo. After that I continued working in Project management but for a variety of other donors including the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), World Bank, EU, African Development Bank, European Bank of Reconstruction and Development and the Asian Development Bank; during this time I travelled to India, Japan and Macedonia.

In my current role I am an independent expert consultant for fund management and solar energy; I work in a team disbursing grants from a \$10 million DFID fund to deliver solar energy to rural off-grid areas of extreme poverty. Through this consultancy I have so far been working in Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Rwanda and Kenya where I am currently writing from!

2. What does your current role involve?

On a daily basis I have been working with my colleagues to manage the fund application process (typical duties are interacting with major stakeholders such as donors and writing reports/ briefing packs to demonstrate the efficacy of solar energy in 4 countries (Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Sierra Leone) to have huge impacts with regards to female empowerment, energy freedom, economic growth and several other major social impacts. Key tasks have been working in challenging rural environments across Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Rwanda to visit villages and speak with users of solar to understand what works and what doesn't (I have attached some photos); which has been incredibly rewarding because normally the impacts are huge.

3. What attracted you to your job?

The general career I have had in international development was a goal of mine since I was 16 and experienced poverty first-hand in northern rural India. I knew then that I wanted to ensure my compass was always set to creating positive change in the developing world. I have also always been passionate about climate change. Through my time at QMUL I was able to see how these two issues are tied at the source.

More specifically, for my latest role, the consultancy was a dream option; I greatly enjoyed project management but the opportunity to work on a solar energy project with so many huge impacts across some of the worst-developed areas on the planet was too good to turn down.

4. What does a typical day/week look like?

Most recently a typical week has been quite untypical in contrast to the rest of my career before. Travel has almost been a weekly fixture with 36 flights since June alone to Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Rwanda and Kenya. Throughout this period I have mostly been visiting villages to understand how solar technology works and changes lives whether it's through increased quality reading time for children to study, female economic empowerment through access to skilled jobs or potential climate change mitigation opportunities through the removal of black carbon caused typically by the kerosene and diesel lamps people normally use.

5. What do you most enjoy about your current role?

The ability to see remote areas that are incredibly difficult to reach has been so illuminating, especially villages in northern Rwanda and Sierra Leone; two countries with a very awful recent past for civil wars, genocide and the e-bola crisis. The way people in these areas have bounced back is inspiring to observe and to see who solar technology is quite literally transforming their lives in a multitude of different ways has been awesome.



6. What do you find most challenging / least enjoy about your current role?

Always flying and missing quite a few big events back home; although I never forget how lucky I am that I get to do such an amazing job and travel to amazing places.

7. Do you need any specialist knowledge or skills to do your current role?

A general level of experience in international development is pretty necessary to reach a consulting position. Other positions I have held mostly start with other experiences in development which will usually begin at internship level. For those internships a relevant degree is helpful, but otherwise it's all about demonstrating strength in character as someone who is compassionate, committed and really enthusiastic about one or several sectors of the international development sector.

8. What's the working environment like in your role/sector?

In my role long periods of solitude are quite common so it's helpful if you are happy with that or have a very good catalogue of books with you. The role involves long periods of not much happening interspersed with short periods of everything happening (so organisation and time management is absolutely key). This unfortunately has an effect on the working hours; I can sometime be working 9.30 to 4pm in London and the next week be working from 6am to midnight every single day whilst in the field.

9. What experience do you need to get into international development?

Beyond academic qualifications the most key experiences are those which are extra-curricular; when I have hired staff the first thing I normally looked for was the activities they did outside of the ordinary. I was always especially taken by people who had worked throughout their degree (from pubs to shops, anything to show they worked alongside studying which is great for time management). I was also impressed by people who had started, led or been part of several societies in their spare time with brownie points for those that were linked to international development or charity such as Amnesty International etc.

10. What do you wish you'd known about your job/sector before you started?

Everyone dreams about the travel in this sector, including myself. When it starts it never stops and very much accelerates! So it's odd to think that this was once the most attractive part of the dream. Knowing that it becomes the new-normal and something that is quite tiring would have been helpful; although I probably wouldn't have believed anyone who told me that.

Career and experiences to date

11. Did you know what you wanted to do before you left university? How did you arrive at this?

I was always 110% sure that this was the sector I wanted to work in before I even started university which in the wider scheme of things is a lucky place to be. I don't think everyone who is going to succeed in this sector also needs to feel that way but they should certainly realise that if they do want to cut it they will need to make their mind up and commit 100% eventually. It's an incredibly competitive sector to break into and if someone thinks that they can wander into it or just "try it" to see how it goes then they may have a very difficult time. Generally it is quite easy at interview level to see those who are genuine and desperate to work in the sector versus those who still haven't made their mind up and want to try it out.

12. How did you find your first job after university?

I found the email of one of the Managing Directors for a large development company in London. Once a month I would email and let them know I was available and desperate to work for them (not too often and politely). Luckily when I finished university they happened to be facing crunch time with several work priorities and needed a pair of junior hands; they thought immediately of the person always emailing who was available the next day and took me on for an internship. Everything else in my career followed on from that.

13. What was the most useful thing you did before you graduated that you think helped you get your current job/first job after university

When writing my dissertation I decided that most of my primary research would be collected through interviews with people who worked in the development sector. It helped me write a good dissertation but importantly I started building network before I even left university. There are so many great opportunities to network in London at events hosted by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI - www.odi.org) or monthly meet-ups organised by the London International Development Network group on Facebook. I would certainly suggest that building a network as soon as possible is the most useful thing someone could do whilst they are at university.

Advice to students

14. What tips would you give to current students wanting to get into international development?

Now is the time to start preparing. Breaking into the sector is very difficult and highly competitive. By leading societies, learning languages and building your network now whilst you have free-time you can really set yourself apart. Recruiters love to see people who take the initiative and do all the above of their own volition and not because they were made to by their course requirements (etc.)

I would also say patience is a huge part of it. Patience now, to commit, work hard and hope eventually you get that first job to break into the sector. After that break patience is even more important. You won't be going to many places (or any) until you have been in the sector for a few years. Everyone has to work up to that level. I have quite often seen people grow impatient with this fact and it has certainly caused issues in their careers and ironically delayed progress to that level even further. If the travel part is really that key then it may be worth considering whether you want a job in international development or just like the idea of being somewhere exotic with your sleeves rolled up; if it's the latter then it may be worth considering other options such as a gap year.

15. How can students find out more about this sector?

There are several online areas that run really interesting stories on the sector, the most notable is www.devex.com. To speak to people in person it's best to attend the excellent events put on the by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

Further information

- Careers & Enterprise industry guide on 'Getting into the Charity Sector, Human Rights and International Development: www.careers.qmul.ac.uk/media/careers/docs/Getting-into-the-Charity-Sector-FINAL.pdf
- Overseas Development Institute: www.odi.org (events, networking, vacancies, etc)
- Devex: www.devex.com (information, stories, etc)
- London International Development Centre: <http://www.lidc.org.uk> (news, events, resources, etc)
- International Aid/Development Worker profile on the Prospects website: www.prospects.ac.uk/job-profiles/international-aid-development-worker
- 12 tips for getting into International Development on the Guardian website (Aug 2014): <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2014/aug/26/international-development-career-advice-tips>
- Bond: www.bond.org.uk (advice on getting a job in International Development, job opportunities, etc)

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