

Juliet Bruce

Humanitarian Operations Manager at Save the Children

Tell us about your current role and organisation.

In my most recent role I was the Humanitarian Operations Manager for Save the Children in Yemen. Save the Children are an international child rights focused organisation working in both development and humanitarian contexts in 120 countries. They have been working in Yemen since the 1960's and are currently playing a leading role alongside the UN in supporting the response to the humanitarian situation in the country.

As the Humanitarian Operations Manager, I was one member of a large Operations team responsible for getting Save the Children's emergency response efforts off the ground and keeping them running as smoothly as possible, reaching those most in need of assistance across the country. Our work covered health and nutrition programmes, food and livelihood assistance, water and sanitation services, child protection and education.

How did you move from academia to your current role?

Through writing my dissertation I had begun focusing my area of interest on children's rights, but after graduating in 2013 I felt that my background and experience was still quite generalist. At this point I did not have extensive relevant work experience so I felt that realistically to get my first role within the NGO sector I should begin by looking at the more junior level administrative positions.

Being London based, I had the advantage of already living in a city with a large international NGO presence, so I started applying for jobs here. I was aware that many of these organisations offered great training resources to employees which I really wanted to be able to take advantage of. Many people who I studied with already had extensive overseas work or voluntary experience with NGO's, but for me I felt that a HQ level role in one of the larger organisations would allow me to build up my knowledge and skills further before venturing to a field posting.

The first role I had was as a department Administrator in the International Division of Save the Children UK. It was primarily a team admin role, so while it didn't really utilise much of the knowledge I'd acquired from my Masters, it was the foot in the door which enabled me to see all of the career paths within the sector, and establish professional connections which have stood me in good stead throughout my career.

What does a normal working day look like for you?

As Humanitarian Operations Manager in Yemen my role mainly involved managing what we referred to as “spikes” in the chronic emergency. In Yemen this was happening constantly, so day to day tasks generally involved working with logistics teams to move resources for disease outbreaks or sudden displacement of people, getting permission from authorities to move stock or staff into or around the country or working with technical advisers to design emergency projects. I would also run training and planning exercises with our team to try and improve our preparedness for future spikes, all with the aim of cutting down the wasted time so we could respond quickly in an emergency and with the right activities.

What are the best things about working in your role?

A career in Humanitarian Operations essentially is a career in problem solving. I love the fact that the job requires lateral thinking, communication skills, and a lot of drive and energy as it keeps me hugely motivated. Though the job can at times seem insurmountable, I feel a great sense of humanity, purpose and achievement from humanitarian work which I just don't know I would get from any other career.

It goes without saying that being able to work in so many different countries and seeing many different cultures is also an amazing part of the job!

What are the biggest challenges you face in your work?

Though you are just one part of a whole team working on a response, at times the level of pressure and responsibility working in complex emergencies can get quite overwhelming. Being adaptable and accepting that perfection, though the aim, is often impossible to achieve particularly in such rapidly changing environments is I think essential.

Getting used to operating with a near permanent level of underlying stress was and continues to be a bit of a challenge for me and I found I have needed to develop healthy coping mechanisms early on in my career or risk burning out very quickly. The other huge challenge I have found is being away from my friends and family, and often having to put up with poor internet connection often making it difficult to call home.

What's the progression like/where do you see yourself going from here?

Quick career progression within the NGO sector is achievable in both small and large NGOs alike, and one of the perks (or flaws – depending on which way you look at it) is that you are often given quite considerable responsibility quite early on in your career. For example, there is often a high turnover of staff in emergency responses (particularly in the early stages) so vacancies and opportunities regularly come up as well as chances to step up into more senior roles.

After nearly five years abroad, I am just about to start a HQ based position in London again, but in the future I know I would like to return to a field based role as this is where I feel the most useful and where I also learn the most. Beyond that, and as I gain more experience in a wider range of contexts, I have an interest in moving further into the policy and advocacy side of humanitarian work.