

Dr Jonathan Stone

Team Leader

**Royal
Geographical
Society**

with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning



Job title: Team Leader

Organisation: Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Location: London, UK

How did you get to where you are now?

I started out as a geologist, working on volcanoes in Latin America and the Caribbean. As I met people affected by risk I wanted to understand more about the interaction between people, science and governments, so I did a human geography PhD at University of East Anglia. Since then I've worked for NGOs (including the Red Cross), and then became a civil servant. Inside government I've worked on domestic resilience and national security in the Cabinet Office, then moved to DFID (now FCDO) to lead a humanitarian team and work on Climate Change policy initiatives.

Was there anything particularly useful that helped you get into this role?

When I started in the Cabinet Office, I was thrown in the deep end learning how to make processes and meetings run well. I found myself, almost 10 years into my career, printing papers and putting them around tables, arranging seating plans or harassing other departments to come to meetings. I'd never learnt how to do these things before and had to backfill a lot of 'basic' skills that I'd not really seen others have/champion in NGOs or academia. These skills were fundamental to my ability to then go on and lead larger teams and organise large scale responses to humanitarian emergencies. I'm now no longer a 'technical' expert (as the PhD could suggest), but a generalist who knows how to get things done. A well planned agenda, accurate minutes and an action tracker are my most effective tools now!

What are you responsible for? What might you do in a typical week?

I'm currently on paternity leave to support my wife in an overseas posting, which is the best and most challenging role I've ever had! Shortly before this I was leading a large international policy initiative focussed on early action to climate disasters. For the role I regularly had to engage with large international organisations such as parts of the UN, other governments and civil society. Nothing in 2020 was typical, but we as a team had to regularly convene discussions, set and achieve ambitious targets and get ministers of various nations to publicly support the initiative during the time of COVID-19. Most of the job was managing relationships and expectations.

What skills and characteristics do you need for this role, apart from geographical knowledge?

My training as a geographer has helped me enormously in all of my roles. Being able to think critically about people and place, see various systems and their interactions, is always important. I hope that an appreciation of geography makes me a little more circumspect and appreciative of other cultures and what factors are driving the choices people have to make. I think these are essential skills in diplomacy. I rely a lot on participatory leadership approaches in my job. The problems that we're trying to solve, especially with climate change, require a lot from leaders in terms of empowering others to do more together.

How does geography feature in your work?

Geography is an everyday feature in my work. You can't work for an organisation that has 'Foreign, Commonwealth and Development' in its name and ignore geography. An appreciation of geography helps me to better understand the nuances in different situations and makes me appreciate the depth and breadth of specialities that can help solve problems.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

I really enjoy working with new teams in high pressure situations. For example, last year I led the field team for the UK Humanitarian response to Hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas. I got to work with some fantastic partners from UK military, regional experts and the Bahamian Government. There was a lot of loss and suffering, particularly for migrant workers there, but we managed to deliver a lot of support too. The situation and context aren't enjoyable, but seeing a team form, agree to a joint set of objectives and then go above and beyond what individuals thought they could do, is what excites me about my work.

Do you get to travel for your role?

I travel a lot with work, although not so much during COVID-19! In the last 5 years alone, I've been to work with rural communities in Zimbabwe on Climate Change Adaptation; UK Embassies in Indonesia or the Philippines during big disasters; and into the field by helicopter, armoured car or taxi. Travelling with work is always a privilege (even though it means long tiring days), and as a fellow of Royal Geographical Society I'm always conscious of the rich history of travelling fellows before me. At the moment I've been able to travel to live in Barbados because of my wife's job, who also works for FCDO (but sadly is an engineer rather than a geographer).

inequality, social justice etc...then geography will probably choose you!

What are the opportunities for career progression?

The wonderful thing about being a civil servant is the opportunity to progress as far as your skills and approach to work can take you. I'd hope that in five years time I would have developed further as a leader and be able to work on some of the biggest challenges/issues of the day. These will almost certainly be a mixture of climate change, continued poverty and inequality, and protecting UK citizens' interests at home and abroad.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to go into this career?

There's no single route to take. Weigh up all of your options, factor in family choices, and keep learning. It can take a while to figure out what you are really good at and for me this grew and developed over time. Don't be put off by how well you did at school or university. In my first degree I got a 2:2! I'd highly recommend thinking about joining the UK Civil Service Fast Stream, or applying for a direct entry job. There aren't so many in FCDO, but you can join anywhere in UK Government and work your way here if you want to do international work. Finally...reach out to people in where you'd like to work and ask them for advice. Ask them if you can intern or focus some study project on something they're working on. My best jobs/opportunities have come from when I've overcome self doubt and made connections with new people.

How do you maintain your knowledge and interest in geography outside of work?

The transition from researcher to NGO, then to Civil Servant was really hard for my continued learning of geography in an academic sense, I don't have enough time to read as much as I'd like. I'm really lucky to work with some fantastic experts though, so I try and challenge myself to ask for them to explain the background to me. For example I learnt a lot in the last year about flood risk modelling from some UK meteorologists and geographers. My PhD supervisor said that one of the most important things in life is curiosity, so I try to remain curious about 'why' something is happening.

Why did you choose geography?

I chose geography because it's a bit of everything! When should you choose geography? I don't think it matters too much whether it's at university or afterwards. If you want to work on the biggest challenges of our time: climate change, poverty and