



CASE STUDY: Sarah Lester

Senior Energy Advisor



1. Did you always know what you wanted to do?

No not at all, which is why I took a wide range of A levels then chose a Geography degree at Edinburgh which was a broad programme and left my options open. Towards the end of my degree I focused on the 'sciency' bit of Geography and when we went onto learn about climate science it was like a light bulb moment and I thought 'That's what I want to do'. At that point and in my early career I had a real passion to help people understand climate change and how we can reduce the risks that it brings. That still really interests me but I have moved more into how having access to energy can really change people's lives for the better.

2. If you had the chance to change anything what would you do?

I'd be an engineer if I had my time again!! Knowing what I know now I would choose an undergraduate degree that linked electrical engineering and economics. The reason I am keen to do this case study is to help young people have more of an idea of what options are out there for them so they can make more informed decisions on what qualifications to do to help get the job they want. I was late to the party for maths and science, but now I love it – it's so interesting to always be finding out new things and how technology works.

Qualifications

A levels: History , Geography, Chemistry, Psychology

Degree: BSc Geography, Diploma in Economics

3. What made you interested in International Development?

When I was at school I got the chance to volunteer in Kenya, where I was inspired by the women there. Although they lived in a slum and in really poor conditions they were full of life, enthusiasm and happiness and I learnt a lot from them. I helped them set up a business running a sustainable ironing system, using briquettes from waste materials to provide heat for their irons rather than wood. From then onwards I knew that if I could I wanted to work in development and with inspiring women like that.

4. Did you have any role models growing up?

Not as a teenager, but at Uni I was really inspired by one female lecturer called Jan. She was Canadian, very outward looking and gave me some good advice which was to focus my energy on an area of work I really loved. She used that old phrase, 'You'll never work a day in your life if you do a job you love', but it really rang true with me and since then I've tried to do jobs I love.

5. Do you face any challenges as a woman working in STEM?

When I worked in climate science the gender balance was fairly even, but once I moved into working in energy I was really aware that I was often the only woman in a large group of men, and men were often surprised to see me there! But, thankfully this is changing and I really want to encourage more women to go into the engineering sector. My sister and I both work in energy now, and often speak at women in STEM events to promote women going into engineering and physical sciences – there is so much we can bring and often change the working dynamics of teams in traditionally male workplaces for the better.





6. What part of your job gives you the greatest job satisfaction?

When I am working with local people in a developing country on energy technologies such as a solar powered water pump, a clothes washer, or a solar lantern - I can see how excited they are about how it will impact their lives. I love the fact that we are not just giving them a piece of equipment and leaving them to it, but working with them to co-design it, training women's groups how to use technologies, and local people to maintain it so that in 10 years' time or more the community will still be benefiting from it.

7. What have you done that you found really exciting?

When I was 23 I spoke at a conference on climate change in front of 2,000 diplomats and international government officials!! It was terrifying and I was so nervous but it gave me huge boost of self-confidence, I thought if I could do that I can do anything.

8. What advice would you give to someone wanted to work in development?

Try and take a science or engineering degree, and a module in economics if you are interested in that as it is really useful. BUT if you don't do that there is always the opportunity to take

further qualifications down the line, for example through the Open University. If you are willing to work hard to get what you want - even if you don't do the right course straight away you can still get back on track. I re-trained as an economist after my degree in Geography and studying as an adult was much more fun than at school..

If you can go to a developing country so you can experience life out there for yourself. Organisations like VSO are great or you can join a fund-raising trip. If that's not possible then search on the internet to find stories from people who actually live there to get a feel for their lives. Ted talks are also great – for example Alexander Betts - <http://bit.ly/2a0SzFI>

9. What do you like to do in your spare time?

I'm a real book worm. I love Harry Potter and George M. Martin (who wrote Game of Thrones). I also love Toni Morrison, a black American author, who though her writing gives me a real insight into a world I have never lived in – she writes with the voice and accent of people from American deep south and you can feel the food, laughter, and love of the women in her stories. Her books 'Beloved' and 'The Bluest Eye' are two of my favourites.

Something not many people will know about me is that I am a huge fan of the Eurovision song contest! Over the years I have been to Eurovision parties in different countries in Europe, including in Berlin in Germany, Sweden and France - and had an amazing time with friends from all over the world celebrating our European friendship.



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