

Interview – Zoë Windle

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Zoë Windle is a Project Coordinator at CDC Group, the UK's Development Finance institution. After her post-graduate studies in International Development at Sciences Po she has gained experience around the world in Analyst and Project Management roles focusing on the International Development sector. Her current focus within CDC is on inclusive and sustainable development across Africa and Asia.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of work?

I studied French and Spanish at university and had the opportunity in the summer of my first year to volunteer on a community project in Cameroon. As a majority French speaking country, I saw the 10-week programme as a great opportunity to put my limited French skills to the test. However, this experience opened my eyes to the at times problematic nature of international development projects. Notably, when interventions are not fully sustainable and have not been put forward by, or do not have full buy-in from, the communities ultimately affected by such interventions, which are partially run by westerners with little knowledge of the local area. It also highlighted to me that International Development often narrowly focuses on the idea of a 'Global North' imposing western-centric ideas on a 'Global South' of 'developing' nations. Regardless of where we live on the planet and our level of economic development there are many common challenges faced by countries all over the world, in particular climate change which despite being a global issue, is something that is being exacerbated largely as a result of activities in the 'Global North'. Yet the impact of rising temperatures and sea levels disproportionately impact the world's poorer nations.

This experience and the questions it raised prompted me to pursue a Master's in International Development at Sciences Po's Paris School of International Affairs, which allowed me to dig a lot deeper into the intricacies of International Development and led me to the career I am in today in international development project management. Being a generalist, I have had the opportunity to work for a consulting firm managing a sustainable livelihoods project based in Laos, for a research and policy institute supporting a large scale climate change programme and now at CDC, the UK's Development Finance Institution and impact investor.

How does CDC Plus function in its approach to international development, and what is their focus?

CDC focuses on supporting overseas economic development by investing in companies across Africa and South Asia with the dual objectives of achieving impact and making a financial return which is then reinvested into more businesses. CDC aims to create jobs and accelerate economic prosperity. It focuses on sectors that will do this, manufacturing, food and agriculture, infrastructure, financial institutions, construction, health, and education.

In 2018, CDC established CDC Plus, CDC's technical assistance and support facility which aims to make a lasting difference to the lives of under-served groups – by increasing economic opportunity, improving standards of living

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and creating a more sustainable environment. CDC Plus provides support to deepen the development impact of the companies in which CDC invests, supporting them to become more inclusive and sustainable. We do this by providing technical expertise and in some cases, co-funding, for activities including improving workforce job quality, gender equality and diversity, climate change, reaching underserved groups through distribution support or developing new products and services. Whilst there is overlap, our work is quite unique given the proximity we have to the companies we work with (often being our own investees) and focuses largely on the private sector and therefore differs somewhat from other areas of International Development.

What challenges are you anticipating in relation to projects within Africa and Asia?

The uncertainty surrounding Covid poses both challenges and opportunities for International Development across the board in both the short and long term. In the short term, Covid has meant that activities are being delayed, put on hold, or funding is diverted to address the pandemic with a strong focus on supporting healthcare efforts or helping to support organisations and companies carry out business as usual within the ‘new normal’ often having to transition to operating online or remotely where possible.

In the long-term, the impact of Covid is uncertain but also presents an opportunity to do things differently and more sustainably or to “build back better” as is often heard within the sector. A key part of this will be looking at how to build greater resilience and adaptation as well as focusing on mitigation in the face of the climate crisis which threatens to have an even greater detrimental social and economic impact globally than the current pandemic.

What longer-term shifts in the priorities and practices of those involved in International Development do you expect to see?

We are already seeing a shift in the short-term towards navigating the Covid- 19 pandemic and recovery, and a continued focus on climate change which in both the short and long-term presents one of the greatest challenges to humanity as we know it. The impact on many countries as natural disasters become more prevalent is already evident and climate change poses a real threat in increasing food insecurity in many parts of the world, as well as conflict over diminishing resources including water. Across the sector, the knock-on effects of aid cuts across donor countries will force International Development efforts to become much more targeted and this could have detrimental effects on many existing initiatives that will no longer receive funding.

What are you currently working on?

Over the past year, beyond our existing portfolio of projects, CDC Plus has focused its efforts on setting up two new programmes to respond to the pandemic. The first, the “Covid-19 Business Response Facility” has provided grants and advisory to our investee companies to help them to adapt or scale- up in response to the pandemic. This facility prioritises healthcare businesses, and other businesses adapting to provide basic goods and services. The second facility, the “COVID-19 Emergency Technical Assistance Facility” supports the development of specific guidance and support for companies on how to respond to the crisis. Examples of CDC Plus’ Covid support include a project to help digitise the route to market in a Ugandan distribution company so it can deliver basic goods to some of the more remote parts of the country, and another to support a garment manufacturer to pivot into producing PPE.

What is the most important advice you could give those interested in pursuing a career in international development?

Be open minded. Don’t be afraid to challenge the status quo when it comes to international development. The sector has evolved greatly since its post-war and post-colonial beginnings but is far from perfect and even now issues around white supremacy, safeguarding and aid dependency continue to plague the sector and must be addressed.