

Simon Cope

Programme Budget Manager

**Royal
Geographical
Society**

with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning



Job title: Programme Budget Manager

Organisation: UNICEF

Location: Denmark

How did you get to where you are now?

I have a Geography BA from Cambridge University and am a UK Chartered Accountant. I currently work as a Programme Budget Manager with UNICEF in Denmark. I previously worked with UNICEF in New York and prior to that with Concern Worldwide in Uganda and “Big 4” accounting firms in Uganda, Tanzania and Malawi.

What are you responsible for?

I currently head the Unit responsible for funds management and reporting in support of procurement activities for Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. This includes correct and consistent reporting of funds received, protection of UNICEF’s interest and controls of spending against budgets.

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

A solid accounting background and internationally recognised qualification are required; but also important are critical thinking and the ability to collaborate across different workplace units. The ability to communicate financial issues to non-finance staff in a clear and understandable manner is also important.

How does geography feature in your work?

Geography is critical in all areas of international development. This includes political, economic and development geography as well as the fundamentals underlying the UN Sustainable Development Goals. An understanding of the impact of climate change on the

geography and development of many countries is becoming clear. The geographical aspects of the current COVID-19 crisis are also in the news every day as the planet struggles with an overwhelming demand for COVID-19 vaccines which outstrips supply.

Do you get to travel for your role?

Not currently due to COVID-19. However, in the last few years I have been on assignments to Uganda, Kenya, South Sudan and Belarus.

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

From geography to accountancy may seem like a significant change of direction. However, a professional accounting qualification continues to open doors to many international assignments. There is still a shortage of qualified professional accountants in many countries of the world and both the United Nations and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) have many vacancies. Within the United Nations system, it may be easier for an accountant who does not have significant work experience to be recruited into a temporary appointment. Once these appointments expire there is then significant opportunity to be recruited for a full-time position. In addition, INGOs continue to have a shortage of qualified finance staff. This is an ideal starting point since many UN agencies and more senior positions require experience gained in “the field”.

What opportunities for career progression?

The United Nations career system is very formal, hierarchical and structured compared to the private sector. Therefore, a linear and logical career progression is not as easy to achieve. However, this is balanced by a common United Nations human resources structure which makes it possible to transfer skills to other UN agencies.

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

I stay involved with the RGS-IBG which is often a source of inspiration. In “normal” times I travel widely. When I was based in New York I had several independent hiking trips to the Canadian Arctic which were logistically challenging and physically demanding but well worth the effort involved.

Why did you choose geography?

Geography and a sense of place have always been critical to our understanding of the planet we live on. As our planet evolves geography also evolves. But more importantly, geography is fun! It also is such a wide topic that a degree in Geography really opens



the doors for a wide range of opportunities which other disciplines cannot. The crises facing our planet mean that geographers are more in demand than ever before. As an example, I never thought that glaciology would be as relevant to the future of the planet as it is today with the projected rise in sea levels being one of the critical issues of our time.

This interview was undertaken in 2021 and was correct at the time of publication. Please note that the featured individual may no longer be in role, but the profile has been kept for career pathway and informational purposes.