

IAIA Paper

Navigating Fieldwork and Training Through the Pandemic and Gaza Crisis

Fraser Wilkinson - Biodiversity Consultant, RSK International Projects Group

Introduction

In the presentation I gave at the conference, I discussed the impacts of the covid pandemic on our working practices through my own experiences as a young professional that was still new to the world of consultancy. To do this, I gave a little background to myself and my journey through the pandemic, discussing how I felt about the changes that had happened and trying to provide a different perspective to those events. I then discussed a project I had been working on in Gaza that was impacted by the violence there in May 2021.

So firstly, a quick introduction to myself. After graduating in September 2019 with an MSc in Environmental Policy and Management, I began working as a graduate environmental consultant for RSK's International Projects Group. We work on ESIA's for large infrastructure and energy projects across Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. I was getting exposure to these projects, learning my trade, and growing in confidence.

And then there was a pandemic...

Impact of the pandemic

Putting the wider issues of the time to one side, the impacts of remote working and the economic slowdown did provide an interesting challenge to navigate as a young professional. I found the transition to working from home a challenge, being someone who prefers to be in a room with other people, but before long I was placed on "furlough". This was the system implemented by the UK government whereby individuals would be paid 80% of their salary for a period of time if an organisation's income had been cut by the pandemic.

At first, this was quite fun! Getting paid for no work and having time to spend with my housemates (whom I liked) when the weather was nice was a nice break. However, this went on a bit too long and the boredom definitely started to creep in. From the start, I had aimed to keep myself productive by using Duolingo to improve my French and Spanish and enrolling in some free virtual courses through the Open University.

Whilst this was useful for improving my knowledge and skillset, it wasn't tailored for my career goals and so I enrolled in an IEMA¹ certificate in environmental management aimed at providing the fundamentals for an environmental professional and achieving membership. This was a great way to learn about environmental and sustainability issues and how to apply them in various contexts to improve organisation's environmental performance. The course wrapped up just as work slowly began to pick back up again and so I felt better prepared than maybe I had done before.

As we got busier again, I began helping with the biodiversity team, as opposed to the more generalist environmental team I had been a part of before. I really enjoyed this work and so decided to pursue it

¹ Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment – UK-based professional body

further but was now faced with a fresh challenge and trying to learn my trade in a team that was spread out and working remotely.

Trying to develop myself through this was certainly a challenge, which coincided with uncertainties about how much work we had, whether the government's furlough scheme continued, and of course general concern for the world. But ultimately, I am glad that I persevered and got in training where I could, because when we were busy again (and we got very busy!) I was ready to face the challenge head on instead of simply being thrown into the deep end.

I tried to progress myself in a number of ways. On the job experience was key. I would start with easier tasks, such as formatting and sorting spreadsheets, and use this as a way to learn the processes.

One noticeable gap was that the projects we work on are international; that is to say that I don't live anywhere near them and, with the covid travel restrictions, getting out on site was simply not an option. One of the ways I tried to fill this gap was to take advantage of the global scale of RSK and to help out with local ecology teams. This provided me with much-needed insight into how field surveys work and the ways development can impact ecology. Although the context is different in England than, say, Uganda, the principles are still valid. Now that the world is opening up again, it seems that opportunities to conduct and support surveys on the international projects may present themselves. When they do, I know I will be very grateful for the lessons and skills learned through this process.

Lessons learned

One of my main aims with my conference presentation was to present some lessons I had learned and to provide the perspective of an early careers professional navigating this strange new world. So, what did I learn?

I don't have an established "normal" in the same way, and people of my generation will forever be impacted by the pandemic, which will I'm sure be reflected upon as something that separates generations. I feel that this is important to point out as, whilst there are positives to these changes, it is important for people to understand the negatives.

There are positives to working from home. The flexibility and comfort, the lack of commute. These are all good.

There are also some negatives. It is harder to develop relationships with people, especially those you don't work with directly. It can be a bit awkward to ask quick questions or to have random chats that are so easy when you're in the same room. Those new an industry rely on those in their team to learn and develop. Remote working can make this harder for many people. There are also conversations that happen in offices, often with people in very different roles, that can spark new ideas.

With this in mind, I set up an Early Careers Employee Network for my team to try and connect those of us in the early stages in order to try to counteract the potential negatives. I also use my role as a mental health first aider to promote good wellbeing practices within the team.

The main lesson from the pandemic, was the importance of maintaining personal development and training, even when things are quiet, because I was prepared for the busy period rather than being thrown in at the deep end. I also think that the importance of personal connections cannot be overstated. They are key to a team's functioning, people's development, and the team's wellbeing. I believe we work better together when we have stronger interpersonal connections.

Gaza

Following the completion of that section of the report, I went on to discuss a project I had been working on that was located in Gaza. Given the sensitive nature of the project, I won't discuss it in detail here, but will use this as an opportunity to reflect on some of the lessons I learned.

I was assisting with the biodiversity aspects for an impact assessment on this project, which was something that I found incredibly interesting. The socio-economic and political situation, the densely packed population, and unique ecological context made this a challenging project. I was working on this in the first half of 2021, which was another period of lockdown in England, and so I felt very distanced from the project.

However, it all felt a lot more real as of May 2021 when violence quite suddenly erupted in the Gaza region. We'd been working with some local ecologists, who were thankfully fine and not on duty when the violence began. But we didn't hear from them for several days.

This really put things into context and changed the project from something I looked at on a screen in my own comfortable flat in Bristol, to something very real. This was my first experience of such an incident, but unfortunately, I fear it won't be my last. I think the key thing I learned, was that on the other end of our ever more virtual world, are real people with real lives. In the world of international impact assessment, for those of us used to working remotely, the projects can seem just that, remote. It's important to remember the real-world context.

There were also some practical lessons from the violence experienced in May 2021. We updated our risk assessment to include measures such as using an armoured vehicle in certain areas, liaising even more closely with the local authorities, and keeping an eye on news outlets.

Conclusion

Certainly, my first two years working in impact assessment taught me a lot. A global pandemic and working on a project in a conflict zone were not things I had thought about before starting work and there are things to reflect on being on the other side of those.

Firstly, it is important to maintain personal connections. I understand there is always a need for a level of professionalism, but there is also a need for a level of humanity. The better we know each other, the better we can work together, and the better equipped we are to support each other.

Secondly, it's important to maintain training and progress. Consultancy can come in fits and starts and new challenges present themselves all the time. Training and developing staff ensure the team is well-placed to handle any situation.

And finally, you never know what's around the corner. You can't be prepared for everything, but having the previous two points in place will really help.