
Simon McNorton

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Simon McNorton lives in Beirut, Lebanon, where he works for the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). McNorton heads a team that ensures effective delivery of the UK's £90m bilateral aid package to Lebanon. He has held roles with DFID as a researcher and evaluation adviser based in East Africa and in the UK, following two years as a Senior Research Officer at the UK's Department for Work and Pensions. McNorton graduated from the Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration in 2013 with a Master's in Public Policy and a concentration in International Development and Program Evaluation. His capstone team delivered an evaluation framework for Teachers' Without Borders global disaster response education. During his graduate study and earlier in his career, McNorton worked for the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce in DC as a Senior Policy Fellow, and spent two years in the Public Affairs Team at Stonewall, the UK's leading lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights charity. Immediately prior to his graduate study, McNorton spent a year working on social justice programs in Rajasthan, India. He completed his undergraduate study at the University of Salford in Manchester in the UK in 2006. In February 2020, Fania Jean interviewed McNorton for *Policy Perspectives*.

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

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Policy Perspectives: Can you tell me a little background on you, your job, and what your duties entail?

Simon McNorton: I studied the Master's in Public Policy (MPP) 2011-2013 and I was part of the Trachtenberg Student Organization as well, TSO until 2013. I had a few various jobs, but right now I work for the British government for the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). It's similar to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). I'm based in Lebanon. We have an office there that is mainly dealing with the Syrian refugee crisis and the response to that. I've been here for about a year and four months and I am head of a team called the Better Delivery Team, which focuses on program effectiveness and program delivery; making sure we deliver our aid budget in Lebanon in the best way possible. We abide by all the rules associated with the UK's official development assistance (UK aid). We manage risk well; we establish the best value for money. We are basically making sure all of the processes and all of our programs – everything we do – are running smoothly, effectively, etc. Prior to that, I was in Kenya. And a few other jobs in between there and when I left grad school.

PP: That's what I was about to get into. What were the steps to get into the position that you are in now?

SM: What I studied for my master's set me up for what I am doing now. It just took a while to get here. I focused on international development policy with a concentration in program evaluation, but I took a lot of statistics and economic classes. The main reason I did my MPP was because I wanted to get a set of skills that would help me. My undergrad was in political science and I didn't really leave with a set of skills that would really help me in analysis. And I found a lot of jobs in the international development sector were focused on having a strong economics, strong statistics, and a strong research background, especially the jobs I was interested in. So that's what my masters set me up for, with a focus in international development.

It took me a few years. I stayed in the US for a year after grad school. I was working for an NGO while I was in grad school in LGBT rights. Then, I got accepted into the UK's "civil service fast stream," which is a bit similar to the Presidential Management Fellowship program you have in the US. And so, I did that domestically in the UK for two years, as a researcher working at one of our domestic departments, called the Department for Work and Pensions. It's kind of a mix between social security and labor. Then I got onto another entry scheme for the international development department. It was a gradual progression to get me into the organization I work for now. Each step along the way was a step closer to it, but it was kind of my goal.

I guess one of the issues was every time I moved a step, I was moving laterally but not vertically until I got into DFID, and that took about 3 or 4 years. I moved across in 2016 to DFID, and I was there for about a year in London. Then I spent 20 months in Kenya, working across Kenya and Somalia in more of a regional role. And then I moved to Beirut about a year and half ago. In hindsight, knowing what I know now, I probably could have gotten here sooner had I known the right path to take and where to apply and who to speak with. But that's not to say the experience I had was not valuable, and it definitely did set me up better for the job I got and put me in a better place when I got it. I am happy with the path that I took to get to the job that I have now.

PP: Amazing! A lot of transitions! Did you know you always wanted to work for DFID?

SM: A bit of background on me: I didn't go to undergrad until I was 21. Between 18 and 21, I was a bit of a rebel, so to speak. I worked in coffee bars and I didn't go to university. I knew I had the potential to go university if I applied myself. And at 21, I did. I was studying full time but still working full time in coffee bars. I didn't go to a top university, but just wanted to get a degree so I had a little more opportunity for career options. I got the degree and continued working for the coffee shop for about another year to save money to move to the US, where I did an internship for 3 months over the summer in DC. I ended up getting employed by that organization for another year.

From there, my career started working out. I moved back to the UK, to work for an NGO. Then, I moved to India, worked for an NGO there for about a year, and then I moved back to the US for my master's and that's where it all connects. Before I did my undergrad, before I was 18, I knew I wanted to work in international development, but it was never something I ever thought would be accessible for me. I was from Northern England; my family wasn't doing that sort of thing, no one I knew was doing that sort of thing. We were nurses, teachers, etc. We lived close to home, we worked domestically. So, the idea that I would work in international development was never an option that I considered or something I would do. While I was interested in it, I didn't look into it. I think the gradual steps that I took opened up that possibility to me, that yes, I could work one day for DFID or in international development, and so eventually it worked out. My last few decisions, where I was taking small pay cuts to progress towards working in international development were really difficult because I was in my early 30's. Do I want to keep trying to get to where I want to be, or do I start to progress in a path that I'm already on, knowing I could be earning a lot more money fairly soon if I just did that? I'm in a really good place right now career-wise, and I'm very happy with myself and where I've ended up. Although, I'm 37 now so it's taken a fair amount of time to get here. At the same time, I could have had a different life if I chose to stay in the UK and worked in research for domestic UK government departments.

That said, the reason I want to work in international development is social justice. And the more I work in international development - and this is true for a lot of people - the more I feel that there is plenty wrong with my own country and plenty to work on in the UK, and it would probably be more fulfilling in a lot of ways if I was to do what I am doing, but back in the UK. I would see the reward of what I was doing and feel much more associated with it; it's my home country, it's where I'm from. I know the challenges much better; I know the context much better. Whereas what I'm doing now can feel a bit distant from what I really understand well.

PP: I understand that there is a personal connection with wherever you are, and that grows with the location or possibly decreases. How do you define effectiveness in the sphere of development and how does that influence the way you lead your team?

SM: I am a statistician and evaluation advisor by definition within DFID. My current team is built around effectiveness, ensuring effective delivery of the aid budget in Lebanon. The UK government spends about GBP £120 million a year on the aid budget to Lebanon, which is roughly about USD \$150 - 160 million. So it's a sizable budget and there's a lot of responsibility

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that goes with that. Our team is fairly small. It's about 20 staff members. I have four people on my team including myself.

For me, a lot of it is about understanding the context and making sure you know what you are doing. Obviously, we know you can take any kind of program or intervention out of context and it won't work the same way it did in the original. You can have the best designed program and it works in one situation and you take it somewhere else and you don't quite get it. We came to Lebanon to work on the Syrian response only five or six years ago. And when we arrived, we didn't understand the Lebanese context. We were responding to the Syrian refugee crisis, but we've never worked in Lebanon before. It's not a country where we had a presence, so we were trying to do intervention without properly understanding the context.

And I think a lot of the learning that we've done over the last five years - and I've seen it in the time since I've arrived - has been to understand the Lebanese context and what exactly the situation is for Lebanon, which is the host country. We're not only here just to deal with refugees; the host country has a huge burden. It's a country of 4 million Lebanese, one and a half million Syrian refugees, and 500,000 Palestinian refugees. A third of the country's population is refugees. We have a local staff; about half our office is local Lebanese who get the context much better. I think a case in point, in October last year, we had a start of a revolution: in Lebanon, there was an economic crash, a collapse of the government, anti-government protests day in, day out. And a lot of people didn't quite get what was going on. We leaned a lot on our local staff because they understood the context, they understood the politics. Even working with the Foreign Office, and our political counterparts there inside the embassy, it was really crucial to get ahold of that context and what was going on. We rely on local staff a lot and that's one way of ensuring effectiveness.

I'm an evaluator so it's also the usual metrics, impact, outcomes, understanding where your money is going in and what it's actually delivering in terms of outputs. But, in a longer term, how's that manifesting in outcomes and eventually impacts. And because it's a humanitarian response principally, a lot of our work stops short at program outputs. We're basically trying to meet the basic needs of refugees. We have to wait for the conflict in Syria to die down before it's safe for refugees to go back. So it's pretty hard for us to understand effectiveness over the long term. For us it's about making sure we reach as many people as possible, the hardest to reach, the people that need aid the most. At the same time, we're making sure the crisis is not ruining Lebanon's infrastructure and economy and that they're able to survive through A) the conflict next door and B) the massive influx of refugees as well. It's not the same as other development contexts where you're trying to achieve a development objective over a longer period. Here we're just trying to meet the basic needs of refugees until they are able to return. So it is slightly different but understanding local context is key to that, especially understanding dynamics between refugee populations and local populations.

In terms of working with my team, to go back to your question, I love my team. We get along really well. They are a fantastic bunch of people. I think the office as a whole and the team has had a stressful time the last 3 or 4 months since the protests started and during the economic crisis. For half of the staff who work with me, we're from the UK and can return there if we need, so we are quite far removed. What is happening doesn't affect staff who are

British – like me – as directly as it directly affects our local staff who are absolutely caught up in what's going on. And while they understand the context and we can lean on them for that, [we have to respect that] they are part of the context too.

PP: You addressed multiple questions I was going to ask regarding global changes and shifts in your priorities in your role, and the biggest challenges that you face as a leader and in the development sphere. What did you find the most valuable during your time as an MPP student that supports your role today and on the other side, what is something that you did not learn in school that you learned becoming the leader of your team?

SM: So, the first one first, I just wanted to throw everything into what I was doing while I was at TSPPPA. I was working 20-30 hours a week in a fellowship, I was studying full time, 3 courses a semester, and I was on the board of the student association as well. So my days were 8am to midnight every day, doing a various range of things, my google calendar was full, and I had no time for my partner who I lived with. At the same time, that absolutely drove me and that commitment to investing fully into everything I was doing. There was so much opportunity to do those things, to participate in the student union body, to excel in my coursework, to contribute to the work I was doing, and I enjoyed it. And while I didn't have time for my own pastimes during that period, I got absolutely maximum value out of everything I was involved in. I was able to push myself.

I think a lot of that, as Brit studying in America - and I lived in America before and I was happy to be back - there is an excitement as a foreigner studying in an American university and having that option to be in a different culture. I always say every time I move to a new country that it is an opportunity to reinvent myself and I think I probably did that again when I moved to GW. There is an opportunity to explore new things and try new things. With every new student who goes to grad school, that's something that they are looking for. So go somewhere new, try something new, put yourself out there and reinvent yourself a bit. And I think that's probably what I got most.

I already mentioned the numerous skills-related classes that I took that I never had the option to take in my undergrad in the UK. I absolutely fell over for that because I knew that was the only chance I was going to get to learn those skills. Things like econometrics, research methods, program evaluation, cost-benefit; I really, really valued all the skills-related classes. I think literally all my classes were skills-based, I maybe took one policy class on social policy with Professor Wiseman. And the option to take classes at different schools. I took a few economics and international development related classes in the Elliot School. I absolutely loved my time there and got a heck of a lot out of it.

Also the student organization. The student body tested me a lot. There was a lot of conflict at times, but we managed to keep it together through the year-long term. I am still best friends with a lot of the people that I was on the student body with. It challenges you because they are your peers. I was president of the MPP side; you're with peers but at the same time you need to exercise some authority and leadership; you need to exercise some ability to coordinate and manage and lead. I was the only candidate, so it wasn't like I faced competition, but I still had to prove myself. It wasn't like in a job where I am now, I'm the manager. The people who work

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for me are managed by me, that's kind of an accepted hierarchical system. I think when you are in the student body, it's very different where you have to earn that interest and respect and show your leadership because otherwise people don't have a duty to listen to you in the same way they might somewhere else.

The other question is what I did not get from it?

PP: Yes, one thing you learned in development that you did not learn in school.

SM: One thing I learned in development that I did not learn in school I probably learned before I went to grad school actually. I spent a year working in rural areas of India and a lot of the work was around trying to support local communities and cultural change, human rights aspects and social justice stuff. I was taking the skills I had from working in inclusive education for charity in the UK the two years before that and trying to apply that to rural India in a context where it didn't really work, because the culture there is completely different. I'm not white, but I went there with a bit of a white knight complex, you know, that western savior that is going to develop a different context. I knew a bit about that trap already, but I still had that in me when I went. It took me being out there to realize that it's stupid for me to expect that just because I'm Western-educated and from the West, I know how to make schools more inclusive in rural Rajasthan. It's a completely different environment and set of traditions and norms. I became a bit of a realist when it came to international policy and development. I became a realist in the perspective that there is probably a rational reason somewhere behind every decision that is made. I might not understand why Saudi Arabia has the repressive policies in place that they do or why Saudi culture exists like it does. Or why Russia decided to invade Ukraine. I may not be able to justify that from my own perspective and set of facts, but you have to understand that other governments and societies are often not acting irrationally - they are acting in their own set of facts and acting rationally in terms of what makes sense for them.

And when you're in grad school, it can be quite elitist if you think you have all the answers to everything or that you know better than everything. A lot of scholars go through life not having challenged their views and theories properly in the field, just having learned their views through study, and don't necessarily experience that in the real context. For all my beliefs of universal human rights and in all sorts of equality, when I get into a new context I have to understand that I'm working in a different culture and I have to respect that culture. While I can try to bring about the change that I or my organization wants, obviously I have to work within the reason, the logic, the rationality of the people that I am working with. You do study realist perspectives, but you don't necessarily experience it firsthand.

In British policy in Lebanon, we want refugees to be heard and to be supported. We don't want them to go back to Syria yet because it doesn't make sense and it isn't safe. We give a lot of support to Lebanon so that Lebanon can afford to host refugees there, because in an ideal world Lebanon would want them to go home, but if they go back to Syria they will be targeted or killed. We need to understand the reasons why Lebanon wants to send them back, why hosting a huge number of refugees is a burden on Lebanon. A lot of ministers and policy makers in the UK don't necessarily see it like that. I know that's a really basic example and not entirely fair, but people far away from decisions don't necessarily see the intricacies and

implications of foreign policy decisions and development decisions as they play out on the ground. Real world practical experience is very difficult to get in grad school. I'm glad I had a few years out between my undergrad and master's because it helped me appreciate that, and I would advise everyone else to do the same as much as possible. I think that helped me realize what I needed to study and what I didn't in my master's.

PP: You did answer part of my next question, which was advice for Trachtenberg students who have an interest in international development. More broadly, what would you recommend students as they finish up their time at GWU and plan the next step in their career?

SM: That's a good question. What would I recommend? Like I said, I am 37 and I've only been in this job the last year and a half and it's kind of where I feel I should be finally, after 16 years trying to progress to a level where I thought I was really challenging myself and in a good place. And I think that's not for waste. I've learned so much in those 18, 19 years since leaving college at 18, but I have bounced around. I've been all over the place. I've had jobs that haven't pushed me that I probably shouldn't have taken; jobs that tested me and were an experience, but it wasn't ideal. You should always be thinking about what path is going to get you to where you need to be, and what job do you have to take next, etc. I spent most of my life trying to figure out how I was going to pay the bills because I prioritized enjoying my job and trying to figure out what I should do rather than prioritizing income. I see that in a lot of Trachtenberg students, they are asking, "Okay, what job do I need? What do I need to study to get this job? Which person do I need to speak to to get this internship that's going to get me that job?" And yes, I guess you have to think like that to a certain degree because with some jobs there is a path to get there.

This is going to sound really cheesy, but I prefer to follow my own path because I know I'm an individual and I know I am different to a lot of people around me. If I try to focus on someone else's path, I'm probably going to fall over flat because it won't work for me. Maybe this is my ego, I'd rather just figure out what I want myself and what works best for me and pursue that. So my advice to Trachtenberg students is to take the advice of people around you, try and do what is best for your career, but at the same time don't feel like you need to follow what everyone else is doing. Don't be afraid to take a bit of a leap in the dark and try something that you are not quite sure is going to work out because the experience will add value to you regardless. And a lot of the time, the randomness from those encounters will put you in a better place and set you up better. I feel I've learned a lot more from my kind of random choices in life rather than from a focus on career development.

PP: I totally agree with you. All of us have to figure out what we are doing with our life because not everyone's path fits our life and what our skills are. I experience that myself sometimes seeing people with different internships when I work a full-time job. I totally understand.

SM: Joan Dudik-Gayoso was kind of my mentor at university. She was great – and still is, we still talk – but she was frustrated with me because I was working in LGBT rights during and after university, because it was a job that paid the bills. I knew I wanted to get into development, and she was always telling me, "you can't get into development while you're

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working in this.” But I cared about LGBT rights and I was getting paid and I couldn’t really afford to step aside and work in development, which was kind of the issue. But it worked out for me.

PP: Amazing. One last question: Where do you think your career path will take you next?

SM: Good question. I had that conversation with one of my managers today. I like what I am doing and I like working in international development, but I work for the government and this is the civil service. As a lot of people in the US know, if you work in the civil service, sometimes you are asked to do things you don't agree with and sometimes you get a political leader that comes in that you don't always agree with. I think that happens a lot in the civil service in the UK as well. Sometimes you're asked things that we don't want to do. So, if I were to progress further within the civil service, I would join what's called the senior civil service where you basically have to start making the case for what the government wants to do. You stop being able to challenge it so much in a way I still have a bit of freedom to do at a more junior middle management level.

I would love to go back and work for charities in the UK. If I didn't have to worry about money, I would be working in the charity sector in the UK just because going back to what I said earlier on, I understand the context so much better. It's a lot closer to home, I feel more strongly. Obviously, I care about Syrian refugees but I identify much more with people from the UK and the things they are going through. It's much more relevant to me and I feel like I can make a bigger difference because I do understand the context better. So yes, working in the charity sector somewhere in the UK would probably where I'd look to end up and where I would want to be. I'm an evaluation advisor, research advisor and statistician, but I think as I progressed in my role right now is a lot more... I don't want to say corporate, but I don't get to do the pure research that I used to do a few years ago. I don't get to do the pure evaluation or stats that I used to do. It's a more convoluted, complex realm now. I think if I move back to the UK, I would love to go into research but in reality, I'd probably stay in some management role, and try to make more of a difference at a senior level.

PP: Maybe one day you could do both - you never know.

SM: Fingers crossed. When I win the lottery!