Alasdair Gordon-Gibson is a Research Postgraduate in the School of International Relations at the University of St Andrews. He graduated from St Andrews University with an honours degree in Arabic and Islamic studies in 1982, then joined a shipping and insurance agency working in Beirut. The civil war in Lebanon brought him into contact with several of the international and non-governmental aid organisations, such as the United Nations agencies and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. He joined the British Red Cross Society following the conflict in the Gulf in 1991, when he was seconded to work with the delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Baghdad. This was followed by a series of international assignments, including Ethiopia, Somalia, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Russia, the Balkans, India, Sri Lanka, Jordan and Syria, in a range of positions beginning with administering emergency relief and logistics and culminating in representing the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in its field missions as Head of Delegation (Moscow, Damascus, Sri Lanka) and Head of Operations (Burma, Syria).

1. How did you end up in the humanitarian aid sector?

I graduated from St Andrews University with an honours degree in Arabic and Islamic studies in 1982, then joined a shipping and insurance agency working in Beirut. The civil war in Lebanon brought me into contact with several of the international and non-governmental aid organisations, including the United Nations agencies and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. I joined the British Red Cross Society following conflict in the Gulf in 1991, when I was seconded to work with the delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Baghdad to assist their logistics capacity during the early stages of its humanitarian response.

2. What countries have you served in?

My initial appointment in Iraq was followed by a series of international assignments, including Ethiopia, Somalia, Rwanda, The Democratic Republic of Congo, Russia, several of the Balkan countries, India, Sri Lanka, Jordan and Syria, in a range of positions beginning with administering emergency relief and logistics, and culminating in representing the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in its field missions as Head of Delegation (Moscow, Damascus, Sri Lanka) and Head of Operations (Burma, Syria).

3. What does a typical year look like for you?

One of the most attractive features of working in this sector is that there is not even such thing as a ‘typical’ day! This is especially the case when working in an emergency response or in an early post-emergency environment, where the urgent demands will require a good degree of flexibility as to the scope and nature of the job assigned to you.

4. What main types of humanitarian aid workers are there?

The profiles of work in humanitarian aid within the contemporary setting range along a broad spectrum from ‘classical’ emergency response, concerned primarily with saving lives and protecting livelihoods, to recovery, rehabilitation and long-term development, and extending towards more politically-framed work concerning advocacy and human rights. A good overview of the profile of work at the classical end of this spectrum is provided in ICRC Delegate Job Opportunities.

5. What characteristics and qualities are necessary in a humanitarian aid worker?

Whilst individual motivation, enthusiasm and acquired expertise in the chosen area of work (for example, in health-care, logistics, administration), is important, an over-riding quality is an ability to work comfortably and inter-actively as part of a team. A career in the international humanitarian sector will mean working within multi-cultural teams, often in difficult and challenging environments. An ability to cooperate, communicate and inter-act in a supportive and positive way is always a huge advantage, and teamwork is an essential characteristic of a successful operation.
6. There isn’t a clear-set path for entering into the humanitarian aid sector—what do you advise as a starting point?

The career avenues for work in humanitarian assistance are many and varied. Most high profile are the UN Agencies, specializing in fields such as assistance to refugees, the provision of food, the development and management of agriculture, and international humanitarian organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as OXFAM, Save the Children, Merlin, Médecins Sans Frontières etc.... Entry points to work with the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement are normally through the national society of your country of residence (for example, the British Red Cross Society, and will require a basic training course before inclusion on a roster for international assignments. For the UN agencies, national governments often sponsor resources to work as Junior Professional Officers, or entry can be made through engagement as a UN Volunteer.

7. Is a Masters degree necessary and, if so, what types of Masters degrees would you advise?

Owing to the growing interest in work with the humanitarian sector, and the increasing demands of the role, a Masters degree seems to have become a baseline for entry. For many employers, this is a method used to ‘filter’ the huge number of applications they receive on a weekly basis for the limited places available in order to short-list candidates for consideration. It is at this latter stage, and any subsequent interviews, where appropriate technical skills and personal characteristics are identified.

For students who have a clear and decided idea as to which area of the humanitarian sector they want to engage, then postgraduate study in a related field (for example, International Relations, Sustainable Development, Humanitarian Law and Ethics) might be a desirable option. However, considering the variety of skills and expertise in demand within the sector, my advice is for students to take the opportunity to spend time after graduation working in some capacity with one of the aid agencies either at headquarters or in one of their field offices. This will help determine which area of the sector is of most personal interest, and in which they might show the most skills and aptitude.

Of course, the immediate question then arises as how to get a position without a postgraduate degree?! One solution is to be quite creative about your options and entry profile. From my experience of working in the areas of emergency response within the humanitarian sector, one of the attractions is the broad range of skills and characteristics required to implement a successful operation, and enable its supporting resources to function. These include the specific, technical skills within medical care and public health (surgery, nursing, the control of water-borne and vector-borne diseases, the supply and maintenance of clean water and sanitation etc), logistics (warehouse management, vehicle and fleet management, import/export controls etc), the reconstruction of livelihoods and income generation schemes (micro-finance, cash-based income generation projects etc) and shelter (the provision of temporary shelter, longer-term reconstruction of housing and public infrastructures etc), which often obtain the highest-profile of attention and prioritized identification of needs in a situation of humanitarian crisis.

However, another critical aspect which usually has lower profile and public recognition relates to management and support to the national and international staff working in some very difficult circumstances. Skill and expertise in this area can range from issues around security (personal security, premises and assets), to welfare (the provision of good food, accommodation, hygiene and opportunities for rest and relaxation), and general office/operational management (administration, finance management etc). Therefore, students might want to consider obtaining some work-experience during their undergraduate years in any of the related areas: work in a warehouse, a hospital or with the public health offices or departments of the environment within their municipal authorities, or work within the hospitality and catering industry.

Academic diplomas and related post-graduate courses include the International Diploma in Humanitarian Affairs, and sector-specific qualifications from institutions such as the University of Cranfield. As well as the postgraduate courses offered with the School of Management at St Andrews and Masters courses in humanitarian affairs include those being offered through the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and related courses in law, ethics and humanitarian affairs at Oxford Brookes University.
8. Are there any languages that are particularly useful for humanitarian aid?

The six official languages of the United Nations are Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish, so expertise in any of these additional to your native language is an advantage. Depending on the location of the head office of the organization with which you are working, or the countries in which it has a particular operational profile, then an employer might express a preference for certain languages, such as French in parts of west Africa and the Caribbean, and Spanish in much of South and Central America. Arabic is in particular demand for several agencies responding to the current crises in the Middle East.

9. Do you have any other advice for students aspiring to work in humanitarian aid?

I often say that the three main characteristics you need for a successful career in the complex and multi-faceted world of humanitarian affairs are those of patience, flexibility and a sense of humour: nothing is ever as the ‘Job Description’ describes! In my opinion, this breadth of cultural and professional diversity is one of the main attractions of a career in this sector. In addition to any particular technical skills specific to the role assigned, then together with these key characteristics, you can be assured of a successful, fulfilling, motivating and inspiring career ahead – whichever of the routes you take, and whatever the final destination may be!