Edward
MEAL Coordinator

Credit: Edward Tonkin

Name: Edward
Job title: MEAL Coordinator
Oragnisation: ShelterBox

What is your job role and what do you actually do?
I am currently the Emergency MEAL Coordinator at ShelterBox where I ensure Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) functions are fully integrated into humanitarian programmes. My role involves making sure affected communities' voices are heard and used to shape humanitarian programming. This can include supporting partners to strengthen their responses with evidence-based insights, to working with the project team to pilot innovative approaches, like climate-adaptive shelter. I work with Project Managers and our humanitarian partners to design data-driven projects, utilising needs assessments to try and ensure that our interventions meet the priorities and needs of the populations we look to support.

How did you get to where you are now?
It hasn't been a direct path, and I have been fortunate enough to follow what I am interested in. I studied Geography at Aberystwyth University, where I predominantly focused on physical geography, notably glaciology as well as natural hazards. From there I went on to complete a Master's degree in Risk, Disaster and Resilience at University College London. While at UCL I took a more pointed interest in the humanitarian sector, more specifically at the way in which humanitarian responses can be made more inclusive. After graduating, I worked briefly in the private sector before moving into the humanitarian sector – starting off with an unpaid internship for a data-collection NGO using GIS and conducting needs assessments. I then moved into humanitarian coordination on the Syria response, in the end working as the Camp Coordination Camp Management (CCCM) sector coordinator in Northeast Syria.

What skills and characteristics do you need for this role, apart from geographical knowledge?
For the role of MEAL Coordinator there is a need to have strong analytical skills, the ability to manage and interpret data, and have excellent communication skills. Equally important are adaptability, creativity, inquisitiveness and diplomacy - the humanitarian sector has so many roles that require so many different capabilities and skills. A drive to want to do good is equally important as you hope to support crisis affected communities in a meaningful way.

How does geography feature in your work/what difference does it make?

Thanks to the diverseness of geography, it generally underpins almost everything I do and shapes the disasters we look to respond to. Humanitarian crises are often complex whether it is driven by natural hazards or conflict, the geography of places, the people, politics and resources often all intersect to shape how a crisis unfolds and how we respond. Geography provides the tools to understand these connections, helping me look at not just the physical impact of disasters, but also the social and political dimensions that determine people's vulnerabilities and resilience. I'd say geography makes all the difference.

What do you enjoy most about your job? What have been your favourite projects?

There are many aspects to the job I enjoy; I get to work with great teams both within ShelterBox, as well as humanitarian partners across the world. I have had many favourite projects both in this role and previous roles. In my current role I have enjoyed the intersection of research and humanitarian programming as we looked at climate-adaptive shelter in Burkina Faso to improve the thermal comfort of displaced persons in the shelters we provided. While in previous roles while based in Syria, I enjoyed negotiating with authorities around humanitarian access in camps and informal settlements and having the opportunity to engage with the communities within them.

Why did you choose geography? Why should others choose geography?

I chose geography because I loved the way it connects people with places and offers a way to understand how human and environmental systems interact — knowledge that's vital in today's world of climate change and humanitarian crises. Others should choose geography because it equips you with critical, transferable skills and a global perspective that can open doors to diverse and meaningful careers, be it in the humanitarian sector or any other profession.

Do you get to travel for your role?

Yes — travel has been central to my humanitarian career. In my previous roles I lived and worked for several years in Jordan, Iraq and Northeast Syria. While more recently, while being based in the UK for ShelterBox, I've supported projects in countries such as Cameroon, Syria, Burkina Faso and Pakistan, which, when appropriate I have the chance to deploy to.

What does a typical day look like?

A typical day involves engaging with partners to discuss ongoing projects, designing data collection tools, analysing data, and writing reports. My work shifts between technical tasks to collaboration with stakeholders, ensuring that decisions are data driven and are evidence based. No two days are necessarily the same — one day I might be deep in data cleaning and analysis, looking at the needs and priorities of affected communities, while on another day I might be heading to another country with the team to support the development of a new project and work with local partners.

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

There are many paths into the humanitarian sector, and it is a challenging field to work in, especially given the recent humanitarian aid cuts. However, there will unfortunately always be a need for humanitarians. For the role of MEAL coordinator, I would encourage you to build your technical analytical skills while also developing communication skills. Being an all-rounder is often a real strength in this sector as you are often faced with a multitude of challenges, especially when in the field.