

Policy work in Parliament

Sophia Pickles has been employed as the Assistant Coordinator for the All Party Parliamentary Group on the Great Lakes Region of Africa for the last 9 months. We talked to her about her work and how she got the post earlier in 2009

What does the APPG do?

The group was set up in the wake of the Rwandan genocide because some Members of Parliament felt that the government's response to the disaster was not strong enough. The 220 member strong, cross-party committee is headed up of a Labour Chair (Eric Joyce MP who until recently had been in the government) a steering Executive Committee that comprises a Conservative and Labour Vice Chair and a Liberal Democrat Secretary. There are also Peers on the APPG's Executive, including the Bishop of Winchester. The Group as a whole is made up of the committee plus over 220 Parliamentarians who are all interested in the region.

The Group acts as a lynchpin between Parliament and interested organisations such as the media, ngos and think tanks as well as, crucially, Parliamentarians from the Great Lakes region. We do different types of work

- We receive information from a wide range of sources such as ngos- both UK based and those that are situated in Great Lakes countries - and brief our group with policy recommendations. Our members may then table an oral or written question in the House of Commons, initiate a debate, put forth an EDM or incorporate our work into their wider discussions.
- We act as an independent monitor of our own government's work in the region. For example when there were recent riots in Uganda which led to over 20 people being killed and we were able to produce a report that explained the context and prognoses of the violence. Uganda is a member of the Commonwealth which makes it of particular interest to our members. There aren't necessarily mechanisms within parliament who can reach and brief Members on topics such as these with the same facility as the APPG. We're fortunate to have a privileged position between the policy makers and those on the ground, observing and reporting on what is happening there. To that extent we are able to assist parliamentarians in holding the government to account.
- We also run a number of events that help keep Parliamentarians up to date with the region and this includes events that involve Parliamentarians from the region. We have had visitors from all of the Great Lakes countries and have exceptional relationships with both political and civil society in Rwanda, Uganda, the DRC and Burundi

How does the group work politically ?

We are funded externally and not by the house. Our funders have to be 'neutral' and so while we can approach ngos we aren't allowed to get money from businesses with economic interests in the region. Unfortunately the majority of neutral sources tend not to have much money and so we have a very small budget. In general there seems to be a large degree of political consensus about the region. There are occasionally issues whereby the major parties differ in their policy approach - such as on various aspects of Burundian foreign policy. In cases such as these there might be less political interest from one corner or another about certain issues pertaining to Burundi - but this varies.

How did you get the job ?

I started off as an unpaid intern with the Group - I did this for around 5 months for 3 days a week. When the paid job came up I was one of several candidates. Things in my favour included the fact that I had worked in the region and spoke French - a language I use a lot in the post. One other thing that really

helped was that one of my referees was a CEO of an ngo that was very involved with the Group's work. I had worked for this ngo at the beginning of my development career when they were quite small. It reinforced for me the importance of being willing to start with smaller, less well-known organisations. The interviewers were very impressed that this person was willing to vouch for me.

Incidentally I got the original internship through looking at W4MP web site which is fairly well known, I think. We still have interns attached to the committee though the intern system is coming under increasing scrutiny – we all agree that it's not fair for qualified individuals to work for free! I suspect that we'll soon be in a situation where we either remunerate interns or take on very short term cases within a 'work shadowing' framework

How have you benefited ?

Well it is paid work – pro-rata £23K and I work a three day week. More than that though it has really moved my skills set into a new arena. I have had a lot practical experience of working in development in India with UNICEF and Africa with GOAL but this work has supplemented my field-based knowledge and really helped me get to grips with policy. For example I have to be very familiar with, and brief the Group Members on, not just the reports received from contacts in ngos and in field based positions and other civil networks but also the political positions of allies in Europe and elsewhere. This helps ensure that we assimilate – or are at least aware of – individual countries' policy positions and so we can make informed recommendations. Before I had this role I didn't have such clear ideas on how and why policy is formulated and adopted.

The other aspect of my job obliges me to keep myself informed of the situation on the ground in the region. Having worked there really helps – I know where to look and who to ask but in general the role helps me get an overview of events.

It has also transformed my writing skills. I write a lot of 2 page summaries, as with the piece on Uganda (MPs really don't often have time to read longer pieces) but also more substantial reports running to around 30 pages or so. A recent one involved a regional report that was generated by a parliamentarian's visit to the Congo on the issue of gender based violence – you can see this on our website.

Communications – the role has allowed me to use and develop my communication skills. I meet a huge range of people – EU representatives, ambassadors, writers and celebrities – including Sting and Sandi Toksvig recently.