

Researcher:

**Dr. Phil Grunewald –
Postdoctoral Researcher
at the Environmental
Change Institute**

Business:

**National Grid, Pilio,
Energy Storage
Association, Moixa,
Siemens, BP, Carbon
Trust**

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The project idea

During his PhD, Phil came across the UK Energy Research Centre (UKERC) Meeting Place, whose remit was to support the creation of workshops bringing together different players and academics interested in the energy sector. At that point in time, he had come to the realisation that there was not yet a community working on energy storage, which was his area of expertise. Moreover, he was in need to run a workshop to collect data for his research project. Therefore, he decided to apply to UKERC for funds.

At that time, the prevailing narrative was that energy storage was too expensive and therefore not feasible. His research, however, was showing the opposite and he was curious to explore what the actual reasons holding back the development of storage technologies and facilities were. He found it surprisingly humbling, rewarding, and, admittedly, a bit overwhelming, to hear experts and policy makers, all with “phenomenal authority”, debating an issue close to his heart at a high intensity level. Overall, the small workshop he organised was so successful that it led to research funds for a project to develop a whole-system model to explore the value of storage and to the creation of a community of stakeholders.

Given his first successful experience, as soon as he started his postdoctoral appointment at the Environmental Change Institute, a research centre in the School of Geography and the Environment, Phil kept organising around a workshop a year with key energy sector stakeholders and academics. In some cases, he did it out of his own initiative. In other cases, given his experience in workshop organisation, he worked for Sir Chris Llewellyn Smith as Energy Network coordinator and organised events in that capacity. While the first workshop had been set up for data collection purposes, his subsequent workshops have had dissemination and networking purposes and have been invaluable in terms of refining and advancing his research thanks to the comments received from experts and policy makers.

Phil has now organised several workshops bringing together academics and stakeholders of the energy sector and he keeps enjoying this part of his work, with new challenges and unexpected issues always around the corner. ▶

From conceiving a workshop idea to executing it, it usually takes him around four months. Once a clear idea is there, he sends an email to those who might be members of an advisory panel and keeps contacting them until he gets a response, dropping those who do not reply after multiple attempts. Phil found that more often than not it is likely to get positive replies when contacting the right people. They accept in part out of a sense of academic duty, but mostly to advance their own knowledge on a topic of interest. In Oxford, assembling an advisory panel is sometimes complicated by the separation of departments, especially across divisions. To overcome this issue, Phil tends to leverage personal networks to reach out to those academics who might be relevant advisers but are not an immediate point of contact.

A workshop advisory group is usually made up of 4-5 academics who have contacts and ongoing work on the topic of the workshop. The advisory group is key to complement the “list of usual suspects” – the community attending the workshop every year – with new attendees and speakers, and to help elaborating the theme and topic sessions for the workshop. Members of the advisory group are the first port of call for identifying potential participants to contact in organisations of interest, both academic and non-academic. If they have ongoing working relations, that is the ideal case scenario, as they might be able to suggest specific people to reach out to. If they don't, the following step is usually to start leveraging personal networks to identify new contacts. While this step might be scary at first, Phil found that there are approaches that are generally successful in attracting participants. In large organisations, it is often possible to find someone who can refer you to a key contact. For small organisations it is usually a matter of identifying the founder or CEO and reaching out directly.

Key success factors when attracting a group of people with diverse, complementary knowledge and expertise is to ask in any invitation to signal a person who might attend, in case the first recipient is busy or not interested, and to send the invitations as soon as possible. According to Phil: “the more in advance you invite people, the more they feel that they will have the time to come”. In his case, Phil also benefited significantly from his connections to Sir Chris Llewellyn Smith and the event coordinators at ONE networks, who have frequently provided invaluable advice and contacts without which it might have been impossible to attract some of the prominent speakers that raised the profile of the workshops.

The first round of invitations is key to set the date for the workshop. Phil normally selects key speakers and

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participants and sends them the first invitations, asking them to specify dates when they might be free in a given period of time. In any workshop, participation is strongly influenced by the speakers. For this reason, it is always safer to handpick them and ensure their participation first and let the rest follow. Once a general consensus is reached and a good amount of key speakers is secured for a given date, the next challenge becomes finding a venue and accommodation. Phil is quite lucky because small workshops can be held on University premises. However, he had to deal with the difficulty of booking venues whenever policy-focused events had to be hosted in London. In those cases, booking rooms required timely planning and, often, the involvement of corporate sponsors in order to obtain appropriate locations for high profile events. When a venue is secured, the last preliminary task is to detail the content for the workshop, making sure that its different sessions are in line with the core aims and coherent with each other and that there are fun activities included to favour informal networking. Phil, whenever he can, likes to add to his workshops a walk in the park or the usage of tech applications that enable live interactions and questioning during the event.

Invariably, things become very hectic just before the workshop. Phil arranges the introductory material and circulates it to all speakers and attendees the week before the workshop, to help them understand the context and who other participants will be. Moreover, he sends questions to the speakers, so they can think about them in advance and have helpful and clear answers on the day, and he takes care of printing the name badges, an activity that he always finds more time consuming than he would like. Running a workshops repeatedly makes the organisation easier, but, at the same ▶

time, creates a risk. As Phil puts it: “you tend to invite whom you know, such that you can end up with the same attendees. In some lucky cases new people reach out. In some cases, you just invite people or organisations that might be interesting and that you hope might bring a different angle. In most cases, this happens through serendipitous or personal connections”.

With time, Phil has realised the importance of collecting as much material as possible during the event. He always makes sure to have helpers - usually students interested in the subject or looking for some extra money - to take pictures, videos and notes. The helpers are also vital to deal with emergencies or to provide help and instructions if needed. A workshop is one of the most effective ways to gather opinions and information and this is all precious data. Having many experts in the same room means that you can get a sense about which ideas fly and which do not and this can shape current and future research as well as help non-academic attendees to spot issues and opportunities in their own area of interest. Phil makes sure to always attach a summary report to his “thank you” email after the event. This includes the key findings and action points that emerged from the workshop.

Since paying for accommodation, travel and catering is necessary to be able to attract people, Phil includes in most of his large funding proposals (e.g. funds to sustain his postdoctoral activity or multi-year research projects) some small amount to organise workshops, which also helps to show the potential to deliver impact. In some cases, business participants themselves

might help to fund workshops, by providing in kind support, such as rooms or catering. This usually happened to Phil when they launched as key topic for the workshop a challenging and pressing question for the industry and asked business partners if they wanted to host an event answering it. Half-day events are not very expensive to organise and can still be beneficial in terms of collecting data and creating or cementing a community of practice. However, having longer events with dinners helps significantly with networking and with community-building and therefore it is important to have at disposal a proper budget to be able to organise something like that too. The real conversation happens outside of the sessions, in the more informal parts of the event.

In every workshop, and especially for those involving both academics and industry stakeholders, it is ideal to bring together groups that wouldn't meet. Based on his experience, Phil would say that to make people engage with each other, it is helpful to have small groups, inviting maximum 20-30 attendees or to organise plenty of breakout sessions. While Phil still sees data collection and research validation as important benefits of organising workshops, as he did when he organised his first one, he would now add networking as a key outcome to look for. People, and especially businesses, can be approached for a collaboration more easily after meeting them in person and they can provide new ideas for research projects and insights that support or reject research ideas.

His first workshop was yet his best. It probably pushed others and led to policy change. Now, it is a bit daunting to always find something good and new to offer to the different stakeholders that he invites. Workshops are like a co-creation process and it is hardly possible to control the buzz in the room on the day, which makes planning always a bit tricky. Phil finds it very helpful to have a facilitator because they can act as neutral person, keeping friendliness in the group while dealing with contrasting views, and can also provide ice breakers, bringing people out of their comfort zone.

What Phil enjoys about workshops is that he does not have to know everything to still be able to contribute with his own little piece. He discovered that listening is a useful skill, too. As organiser and researcher he often felt the pressure of having something to share. It can be even more interesting to observe the give and take in interactions between industry stakeholders and other academics.

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Key benefits & challenges

Setting up a social enterprise for data collection has brought several benefits to Diana both from a personal and a professional point of view. On a personal level, experiencing through Policéntrico that there are many different ways to have an impact in the world, Diana felt that part of the burden associated to her DPhil was lifted away from her. The stress of successfully completing a DPhil, ideally with an interesting and valuable project, diminished as she realized that her research, beyond providing a valuable certification on her CV, would not have made a large difference to the world, while she had much more to give in other ways to support the peace process in Colombia. This realisation enhanced her self-confidence, helped her to see ways of combining her academic knowledge with the delivery of impact, and made her appreciate how she could realize in practice an action research project, a methodology that she was hoping to adopt as a researcher.

On a professional level, Diana believes that this experience helped her to develop several key skills and capabilities, such as managing different commitments, dealing with banks and administrative duties, setting up a team, taking hiring decisions, negotiating, administering a budget, and convincing potential funders that they should support her project. Most importantly, it made her realize the importance of two key skills that she thinks will be vital in any profession she will end up undertaking: the ability to help people to perform at their best and the ability to understand how to build up a knowledge body out of what happens with her enterprise and research, in order to make it replicable in different contexts and throughout time.

Obtaining these benefits and insights required the overcoming of several challenges, the main one being understanding how to balance research commitments with commitments connected to running a social enterprise. In her first year of combining these two streams of work, Diana put too much effort into Policéntrico and ended up lagging behind with her DPhil milestones. In order to compensate for that, the following year she was forced to give up good opportunities for Policéntrico in order to get back on track with her DPhil. While Diana feels that she has

not found the perfect recipe yet, she has developed several ways of dealing with this issue. For example, she improved her time management skills and she has created for herself a daily schedule that sees her working on her research in the morning, when she is more awake and productive, and then switching into looking after Policéntrico and its projects once she gets tired or is not productive anymore research-wise. Additionally, she has learnt to say “no” to projects and requests that are not strictly necessary or strategic and she has improved her communication with her supervisor in order to be supported in and encouraged to remain focused on her DPhil work while being a social entrepreneur.

Other challenges were more strictly connected to her experience as a social entrepreneur. She had to learn how taxes, administrative duties and banking worked; how to create relationships with different stakeholders; how to manage payments when these were not coinciding with her funding cycles and how to translate her knowledge into something that she could put into practice for and through Policéntrico. Dealing with these different challenges made Diana appreciate the importance of remaining open to whatever happens, while keeping the focus on the end goal. Since it is impossible to foresee the final outcome and most problems that will arise out of a DPhil as well as out of a collaboration or a social enterprise, it is important to remain optimistic, flexible in solving problems and to accept that there is a part of uncertainty that will never disappear, no matter the approach taken. In this way, the stress will become manageable and challenges something that can be faced, although not always necessarily successfully. In some cases, the best approach might even be to give up, for example when health and wellbeing might be compromised by trying to do too much on different fronts.

Advice for other researchers

According to Diana, the journey into social entrepreneurship is a real rollercoaster – very challenging and stressful at times but also very rewarding. Most of the time, it is difficult to envisage the end result of entrepreneurial endeavours and they are likely to require a significant dose of multi-tasking and flexibility. To make the most of working on a social enterprise while continuing to be a professional researcher, it is important to enjoy the process and remember it is a learning experience, like a DPhil or research project, but also to be ready to quit whenever it becomes too much of a burden. Based on her experience, Diana believes that, for those who will follow her steps, there will be many times when frustration and stress will be the main feelings – and it is in those moments that it will be fundamental to keep seeing the bigger picture. Moreover, it will be important to remain patient – setting up an enterprise or social enterprise is already difficult on its own so it is bound to be very challenging when combined with the need to complete a DPhil. However, with persistence, humility and remembering that going through the process is a success in itself, results will eventually come and the time taken and sacrifices made will be rewarded at some point in the future.

It is also important to remember that there is no need to think or start “big” when setting up a social enterprise. Most social enterprises start very small, with no office and just one founder/employee and then take it from there. What is required is commitment, passion and to manage well priorities. Additionally, it will be helpful to understand the different languages, norms and expectations attached

to each role that a researcher-entrepreneur needs to play. For example, the language and visual information that are appreciated in academic contexts will not be appropriate for convincing a funder to finance an entrepreneurial project or to deal with partners such as, in her case, a local council. In these instances, presenting a concrete, operational and inspiring idea, which proves to work, will be more relevant than talking about the underlying theory. A good way to wear multiple hats without overdoing it might be to hire a desk in a shared working space like a local hub, in order to separate even physically the work spent on the social enterprise from that spent on research. This has the added benefit of having the opportunity to organize professional meetings in a neutral setting and to get in touch with different entrepreneurs and learning opportunities.

In the end, however, the most important bit of advice that Diana would like to share is to prioritize always the completion of the DPhil or the research project. The credibility of any other project and the possibility to continue in other endeavours in the medium to long term is likely to be based, at least in part, on academic credentials. Therefore working towards them should never be put in second place, even at the cost of missing opportunities on other fronts. These opportunities or similar ones will come back and will be more valuable once the DPhil work will be done. Learning what to engage in and what to postpone for when the DPhil is over is a very delicate balance, but prioritisation is also part of the skills needed to run a social enterprise.