

Isabel Bottoms—the second interviewee in my [chain interview experiment](#)



Isabel was suggested by my first interviewee, [Kirsti Davies](#). This is what she said: 'Isabel comes from the same part of Wales as me and our paths have collided at various stages and projects along the way. I really admire her energy and enthusiasm to get stuck right into issues and her passion for justice is inspiring. Serious and lovely in equal measures is Isabel!'

Now in her mid-twenties, Isabel has already achieved a great deal such as writing an energy policy for Egypt, taking a group of Welsh unemployed youths to Mongolia on the Trans-Siberian Express and setting up a FoodCycle scheme in Bristol. I caught up with Isabel at the end of a working day near London Bridge and spent a fascinating hour finding out about the things that motivate, excite and frustrate her.

Can you take me back to the beginning, Isabel, and tell me how you got interested in environmental issues?

Well, environmentalists often say that they had a 'lightbulb moment' that made them engage and remain engaged. I didn't really have that. It was a gradual process. I think the first thing that happened was when I was sixteen and I had to come up with an idea for a talk at school. My mum had a book on ethical consumerism and I read my way through it and thought it was fascinating. It had all kinds of tables in it, showing, for example, how brands of jeans compare in terms of ethical production. That kind of data really appealed to me. And it also tied in with suddenly realising how beautiful it was where I lived. My family home is in a harbour in Wales. I spent a lot of time walking our dog and I'd sit and watch the sea. And from that I started to think about sustainable development. I got involved in the Welsh Youth Forum for Sustainable Development (WYFSD) which was funded by the Welsh Government as a youth voice. We did things like workshops, assemblies and presentations to other young people.

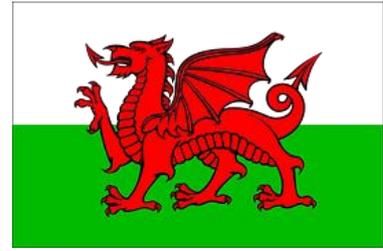
Photo: Isabel Bottoms



It was mostly about raising awareness of climate change. And thinking about solutions. Things like using geothermal energy. We set up a committee and I realised that I had a skill for organising and for communicating ideas. I took on more and more responsibility until I was the Chair. I did that for over three years. There were lots of interesting opportunities that came out of being involved with that and the first major one was the chance to go to the UN Climate Negotiations in Poland in 2008. It was the first time that

there had been a UK youth delegation to the negotiations. My friend and I were the youngest on it and it was very exciting.

I was the only person from Wales. That was important because Wales is very different from the rest of the UK and deserves its own representation. Our culture is based on the land. There are the music and traditions. And then there's the language—I spoke Welsh at school, I did everything in Welsh. But actually more than anything, I think it's a people thing. The people are very friendly. I



went to university in Bristol and when I used to go home, I'd notice that as soon as the bus crossed the border and took on passengers in Cardiff, the volume in the bus would change dramatically. I didn't go into the delegation thinking 'I'm representing Wales and I'm going to act as Welsh' but after they started saying things like, 'Wales is no different from England,' then I stood up for us as being part of the UK but having an identity that's separate as well. As soon as you leave a country you are forced to define yourself as who you are and where you're from. I'd never had to think about that before but it was a starting point in defining myself as Welsh.

What happened at the UN Climate Change Negotiations in Poland?

It was my first time at the climate negotiations and it wasn't a good experience. Our facilitators had said to us beforehand that we were going to have a lot of influence. But we got there and it was clear that we couldn't impact the process in any way. There were thousands of people there. Our expectations were very high and it was impossible to meet them. That was a learning curve. It taught me that creating expectations that we just couldn't meet was disempowering. But this didn't make me feel that I shouldn't engage with the process at all, I just felt that in the future we would have to do things differently.

I spent the rest of my gap year living in London and established a group of young people who wanted to go to the next UN Climate Negotiations in Copenhagen. We all wanted to feel that we could make a difference rather than just participating in lobbying. Some of us had noticed that many governments had tiny, tiny delegations. And they are all the ones that are most affected by climate change. This means that the voice of climate change is massively under-represented whereas those who are less vulnerable to climate change are disproportionately represented. But it wasn't just about numbers; it was also about the quality of the involvement. So, for example, the head of the delegation for Togo didn't speak English; unless there was a translator in every room then he couldn't participate. So in response to that we started UN Fair Play. The idea was to go to the negotiations and be as useful as possible to small delegations. This could be taking notes in a meeting that they couldn't attend because there were only two delegates and there were five meetings going on at the same time, or it might be just buying them a sandwich. We worked primarily for Kiribati which is an island in the Pacific under threat from sea levels rising. We got a lot of attention because nobody else was doing this and we were raising the issue of equity in the process. In the end this has to be a long-term process, not a one-off thing. We worked on this for several years and we also produced a well-received report highlighting some of the issues and solutions.

I know that after that, you went to university in Bristol and got involved in other projects, there...

One of the main things that I did was to get involved with FoodCycle. This was an existing charity but they had never had a node outside London. So I joined some friends in building a node for Bristol. The way it works is that you collect food on bikes with trailers from outlets such as supermarkets; whoever wants to donate to you. Then you cook a three-course vegetarian meal for anyone in the community, but especially trying to target those suffering from food poverty. We did that in a community centre every Sunday with students volunteering to do the cooking and the transporting. I

was the community lead for that first year, so my job was to get people to come along to the meal. We had homeless people, refugees, asylum seekers, travellers and just people living locally who may or may not have been suffering from food poverty. It was very interesting; we gained a lot of trust because we were there every single week without fail for years and it's still going. The second year I took over as coordinator and had a really good team.



The numbers fluctuated but on average we would have about forty people along. And there was always way too much bread, for example, so people could take that away with them. There was a piano and it was a space to just hang out in, and we saw people really develop. There was this punky lesbian woman who started out like 'nobody touch me' and this homeless guy who just liked to read his newspaper. And they became the best of friends. We also did a similar meal every two weeks, but this time for students and we charged them for it. This helped the project to be self-sustaining.

In the house where I was living that year we did skipping in a non-official way to get food for our personal consumption. Basically, we didn't buy any food for the whole of the year as a result. There would be things like a freezer breaking at Waitrose, and if you happened to go at the right time there would be a trailerful of Ben and Jerry's ice cream. And we had scallops and lobster—you name it—it was an interesting time. But by the next year it had changed. I haven't tried for a while so I don't know what it's like now.

At the beginning of the third year I went as a delegate to the UNESCO Youth Forum and this turned out to be a horrible experience. I thought, naively, that it would be participatory, but that turned out to be a huge lie. The idea was to make the adult UNESCO forum look like they are involving young people in decision making when in fact they formulated all the decisions they wanted ahead of time. They'd say 'You guys said that didn't you?', and I would say 'No'. Many people that were coming to it just wanted to have the prestige of coming there and getting the certificate that said they had participated in a fully democratic experience, and having their photo taken with a couple of famous people. They could put it on their personal statements and CVs. And I hated all of that. The dominant people there were those who were clearly on their way to becoming diplomats and this was just one more box they had to tick.

I hear that you went to Mongolia by train. What was that about?



The idea started at the UN Climate Negotiations in Copenhagen where I fundraised for a young person from the global south to attend, and I was allocated a young woman from Mongolia. She was really fantastic and we became great friends. We talked about things and she said that she would really like to set up something like WYFSD in Mongolia. I said that I could support her online in doing that, and we did that for a year. And then I started to think, 'Hang on, why don't we take a group of young people to Mongolia, do some skill sharing, and we'll go

there and back by train on the Trans-Siberian Express.' I thought it was a bit crazy but we managed to get funding for it as the WYFSD, from GwirVol - a Welsh funding pot that aims to connect Wales to the international sphere and promote cultural exchanges. They agreed to give us funding provided that half the young people we took were from the WYFSD and the other half were NEET's (Not in

Education, Employment or Training). So that's what we did. It was challenging. And it wasn't made easier by the fact that the second I got off the train, I twisted my ankle and couldn't walk properly for the whole time we were there.

What were your impressions of Mongolia?

We spent some time in Ulaanbaatar. It's an interesting city; very built up but then on the outskirts there is a growing band of nomads who move because of disruption to their nomadic cycles. Mining is really taking over and that disrupts their ability to graze the land and to make money from it. It's really terrible what is happening to them. Also they burn coal in their gers (tents) and this creates a lot of smog that pollutes the city.



But Mongolia is a fantastic and beautiful country and we went into the countryside several times and stayed in gers.



I had an interesting experience with one of the team, who was 'NEET' at the time. He was a really tough nut but as soon as I twisted my ankle, he offered to carry me even though he was a little skinny guy. We did that for a couple of days, wherever we went, and we had to make a lot of conversation during that time. It was something he could offer and gave him a role in the group, which he'd been lacking. It was harder for him when I got crutches. What

we were asking of him and the rest of the group was to learn about sustainable development and to give presentations in schools. But there were too many foreign things at once: they had to cope with changes in food, surroundings, language, mode of transport...

The idea of the trip was that we would help the Mongolians in setting up a version of what we were doing in Wales. We planned to show them how to facilitate meetings, how to lobby, do presentations in schools, and run campaigns. But they saw it as something different: 'Oh, you're coming here to do presentations on sustainable development to schools' and we were trying to get the message across that we wanted to help them learn how to do that themselves. So it was quite trying but very interesting. I loved observing how our group related to what was happening. A couple of the NEET young people really developed and their minds opened in new ways. I was fascinated by one particular guy. I was aware that when you're not in work or education you get labelled and this is a horrible thing. He knew this and transcended it. When there were Mongolians who didn't speak English, he would just sit next to them and somehow find a way to have a conversation and make a connection. It was incredible.

How did you get involved in your work in the Middle East?

Photo: Isabel Bottoms



The year after I graduated, the UN Climate Change Negotiations were going to be in Qatar. There was some frustration because there had never been any Arab youth voices in the process and Qatar would be a good place to do this, because it is the home country of Al-Jazeera and so could hope to get a lot of attention. I volunteered to work with an organisation called IndyAct who are

based in Lebanon. I went to Lebanon and lived in Beirut for two months to help establish the Arab Youth Climate Movement. While I was there I dealt with the logistics of getting over fifty young people from the region, to Qatar. Things like getting visas from all over the Arab world, UN accreditation, t-shirts and banner printing, organising hotels, and so on.

I was very naïve when I went there. Before I left, there had been a kidnapping of fourteen foreigners in Beirut and I was going all by myself. I wasn't even being picked up from the airport. I was really scared I might be next but in the end I wasn't! I had a quirky landlady and the food was amazing. The language was fine too because everyone speaks English or French. It's a tiny country and they think they are the best at everything and want the best of everything. Fast cars, expensive bars, designer clothes. And there's lots of peer pressure to drink. It's all very glossy and I felt I looked very plain.

There were some uncomfortable moments, too. A car bomb went off very close to my house and killed one of the ministers. Suddenly it was very scary. No one knew why it had happened. There was speculation that Syria was behind it with Assad trying to stir up tensions in Lebanon. My parents were demanding that I went home but there were burning tyres around the airport and there was no way I could have flown. I stayed in the house for a couple of days until tensions died down, and remained there despite the safety issues, until we all went to Qatar for the UN Climate Negotiations in December 2012.

Then after that I went to Egypt. When I was at the UNESCO forum the year before, I'd met an Egyptian delegate. He was my age and he told me stories about being involved in the uprisings and being on the front lines. The protests in Egypt had started in January and it was October by then. I didn't know anything about what was going on in Egypt and we talked for a couple of hours. His whole face lit up and his stories were incredible and not something that anyone in this country would have experienced—like being shot at. We stayed in touch and he challenged me on so many levels: history, politics—all kinds of things. I went to Egypt to follow up on that and to try and establish a Zero Carbon Egypt project. I took a lot of ideas from the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales, with me.

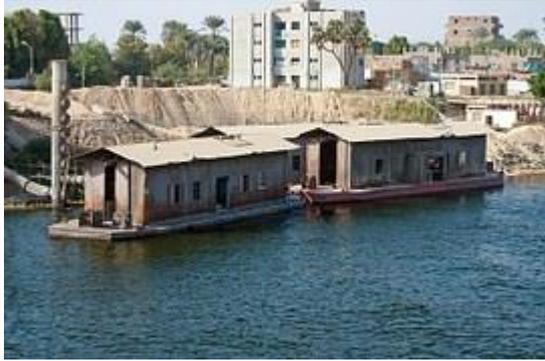
Photos: Isabel Bottoms



I love Cairo. It's like a Middle Eastern London in the middle of the desert. Everything is grand: it's just beautiful and fascinating. The people are so nice and I really like the vibe

What is the Zero Carbon Egypt project?

Well, after the uprising the country needed detailed proposals about how to develop. I proposed researching into the impact that all the different energy sources have on the environment and communities and jobs and all sorts of other things. We know, for example, that coal impacts by causing huge amounts of lung disease and water pollution and water scarcity. All this research has been done elsewhere but not in relation to the Arab world. So that's what I did for a year and a half: I coordinated the Environmental Justice Programme which is centred on energy, coal, and water pollution. It includes both environmental concerns and ideals for social justice. The two are not often put together.



The UK's rivers are polluted but in comparison to other places they are quite clean. It takes a lot of regulation and enforcement to even get them to this state. Egypt has regulation but it doesn't have enforcement. The major polluters are industries that are deeply connected to the Government so a blind eye is turned to what they do. In Egypt the population centres follow the course of the Nile. The poorer you are, the more reliant you are on that Nile water whether for fishing, cleaning, washing,

agriculture or drinking. And that stuff is so filthy: it's full of pollutants from tanning, the chemical industry and food processing. Agriculture, too. They use so much pesticide. There are no instructions and they just douse the crops. The pests die so they just assume that's a good thing. It's a huge problem and there's no monitoring so no-one even knows the extent of it. So we tried to start a map with citizen reporting as a way of trying to gauge where there are problems that need further investigation. It was also a way of engaging with people on a local level so they take responsibility and ownership for what they do. We challenged the Government and if we hadn't pushed so hard there wouldn't be any regulations for coal usage at all, and now there are.

You've done so much, Isabel. What are you proudest of?

That's a good question. I'm proud of the fact that I went to a Middle Eastern country. Most environmentalists won't touch the Middle East with a bargepole because of the oil production. And Egypt is massive. And also that I managed to engage average Egyptians who thought I was crazy for caring about this kind of stuff. They all thought I was just a stupid foreigner and an idealist. Now many of them see that decarbonised development just has to be the way to go. And now after two or three years, even the World Bank is funding this. And I'm happy that I was able to go to a country where there is little capacity but lots of enthusiasm. To be able to say, 'This is what's being done in other places in the world and this is how you can make sure that what you're doing is progressive so that you don't fall into the same potholes as other countries.' And I've tried to find young women to replace me. Sometimes in ways that they may not have thought of before. When I left Egypt I got my best friend there to take over as head of the Environmental Justice Programme. She is younger than me and was convinced that she couldn't do it. I said she could.

Who are your heroes and your inspiration?

Well, not anyone high profile but my personal heroes are the group of strong women who brought me up: my mum, my grandmother, my aunt and my godmother. All of them have been completely essential to me. My grandmother lived next door and was a very cultured woman. She was a designer and never did anything conventionally. She refused to wear beige, had perfect taste and always looked fantastic. She was very selfish in lots of ways and very dominant but also fascinating. I connected with her and we shared lots of stories. Then there was my aunt, my mum's younger sister, and she was always the one who would give you a massive hug. She was wonderful and warm. My mum is fastidious and always on time and very sensitive and kind. And she was the one who ran the family restaurant business for years so she is very strong. My godmother is a tiny woman and for much of her life she has been a nurse. She is very open and interested in everybody.

What do you think are the main things that people can do to have less impact on the environment?



I don't think that people understand how much impact flying has. Basically it's one of the worst things you can do. If you are a vegan and you cycle everywhere for a year and then you take one flight you will have negated all the good that you've done. So I think flying is still one of the major cultural things that we have to tackle in developed countries. People are doing it without thinking, when there are other options like going to Europe using bus and train connections. Even driving a car is better than flying. So I really emphasise that as one major damaging activity.



Food waste is another one. I believe in buying local and organic but not at terrible inflated prices. I want us to get to a place where it's just a given that those things are readily available. And I also believe in not just about cutting back but instead putting your money into the right things. So, for example, going with a renewable energy provider or spending money on public transport. Lots of those things are positive and exciting.

Thank you Isabel. And who are you going to suggest as my next interviewee?

I suggest my housemate, Mala. She'll be a great interviewee because she's active on a number of fronts, particularly immigration and feminism - two things I'm not much involved in yet. She's always very open minded and good at facilitating when talking to people much less experienced or knowledgeable than her: a great trait. She's also very enthusiastic and engaging, so you can be sure of having a good chat that might lead you both to unexpected places....

You can find more about Isabel and her work at www.isabelbottoms.com