

## **TO VOLUNTEER, OR NOT TO VOLUNTEER? THAT IS THE QUESTION**

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In August last year I quit my well-paid full-time research job to volunteer overseas with the Voluntary Services Overseas International Citizen Service (VSO ICS) programme, a programme funded by DFID and launched in 2011.

Practically every person I relayed this too, asked me the same question: "Am I mad, in this economic climate?" Before departing for Tanzania (where I completed my programme between Oct-Dec 2012) this question replayed over and over again in the back of my mind, but now I have the answer to this question. "No, I am not mad and would do it all over again"... and here is why.

Having completed my Masters in International Development, I decided to pursue a career in Development Research; my search for employment in this field took me from working for a small grant awarding trust to working for a large international research consultancy. Working from the luxuries of a London office I felt disconnected and far-removed from the realities of working in international development which is why I decided to volunteer with VSO.

The VSO ICS scheme is unique and is aimed at 18-25 year olds (at 25 years old I still fit the criteria) who are keen to make a difference in development by supporting poverty reduction measures across the globe. The scheme is particular in that it follows a community model, in which groups of volunteers are placed in a community for three months, living in host homes and working in overseas and national cross-cultural counterpart pairs.

I found out I would be travelling to Kamachumu, a rural village in the Muleba district in the Kagera region in the North West of Tanzania (a 36 hour bus ride from Dar Es Salam, just to give you an idea). If you Google Kamachumu you don't get a lot of information, which initially scared me; I thought "what had I let myself in for?" The nearest town, Bukoba, is one and a half hours away on the daladala (an experience I will not be forgetting any time soon - think how many elephants can you squeeze into a mini!).

The experience was a revelation. I learnt so much about development and the different types of development, from international development to community development but more importantly personal development. Further, the community model enables volunteers to fully immerse themselves into a different culture whilst making a positive contribution to the overall goals of VSO ICS and making plenty of lifelong friends.

My host home was relatively small with just my host mother and father as my host brothers were living and working in Dar Es Salam. Other volunteers were placed in host homes with up to four generations living under one roof. During the placement we worked with a grassroots NGO called KAVIPE (Kamachumu Vision for Poverty Eradication) on different projects from agriculture, youth, environment, gender to

health. I was placed on the health programme. The two main goals of the health team were to 1) reduce stigma associated with HIV/AIDs and 2) to increase awareness of sound sexual and reproductive health practise amongst women. Kamachumu is home to Ndolage Hospital where the first HIV/AIDs cases in Tanzania were discovered in 1983.

The particular skills that I will take away include working cross culturally, facilitation, team work, critical thinking, adaptability, project planning and delivery. I believe this experience has given me a better insight into what it means to really work in international development and will provide me with a clearer perspective on what it entails and what we are actually hoping to achieve, so next time I am in the office, this experience will definitely provide food for thought.

The experience was not without its challenges. For example, I don't think any volunteer will ever get use to the chorus of Muzungu (white person/ foreigner) every time you take a step out of the comfort of your host home, nor the relaxed attitude to time keeping (a big issue for us Brits who are sticklers for ensuring meetings start in a timely fashion) and not knowing the local language but these are what you would call minor concerns in the grand scheme of things.

Prior to joining the scheme I wondered whether this would be my life changing experience. To sum up, yes, it has definitely opened my eyes and I think that all young people in the UK would benefit from taking part and should be encouraged to do it - not just to improve their CVs by enhancing their skills but to also experience something that will stay with them forever.

If you are considering volunteering abroad my advice would be to take the leap. Whilst I didn't get to see the Ndovus (elephants), twigas (giraffes) and simbas (lions) of Serengeti, it was a wholly worthwhile experience and one that I would do again in a flash.