

DEAR RETURNED VOLUNTEER....



Fiachra Brennan with 4 easy traps you should avoid as a returned volunteer

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SOCIAL MEDIA



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COMHLÁMH'S CODE



Comhlámh's Code of Good Practice and why you, as a volunteer, should work with agencies that have signed up to it.

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#VOLOPS

VOLUNTEERING FOR GLOBAL JUSTICE



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Participants on the 'What Next? Returned Volunteers Mobilising for Global Justice' training course in Czech Republic



ÁINE LYNCH
Comhlámh

“Volunteering for the future” was a project led by Comhlámh, in partnership with three organisations involved in international volunteering: finep from Germany, INEX-SDA from the Czech Republic and Volunteering Matters from the UK.

It was funded by the Erasmus+ programme, which is managed by Leargas in Ireland. One of the outputs of the project was the development of a training manual entitled “What Next?” which is aimed at development practitioners who work with returned volunteers, and one of the activities in this manual is called “The River of Experience”.

To mark the end of the project, Comhlámh’s Áine Lynch reflected on her time as a volunteer, using the activity described in the manual, “What Next?” She did this at a dissemination event held in the Temple Bar Gallery in Dublin in July 2018, where many of the participants of the project gathered to reflect on their volunteering experiences, and on their participation in the project.

This is what Áine said.

The first time I saw a skyscraper was in Bolivia. I was 18. I remember my absolute astonishment when I looked on the twinkling lights of the La Paz skyline, lit up against the backdrop of the impressive Illimani Mountain. This dashed my initial pre-conceptions of what my year volunteering in Bolivia in an afterschool club with children would be like.

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On the path to change.

MARK CUMMING
Head of Comhlámh

It’s a cliché to say we are living in challenging or changing times, when have things not been challenging or changing? When has there not been the need for ordinary people to come together and reflect on their reality and that of others and search collaboratively and in a spirit of partnership for solutions?

When has the actions of those who volunteer in their communities not been the catalyst for building social cohesion and lasting sustainable change.

This time is no different, the

pace of change and the nature of the challenges may vary, but the essential reality, around coming together, working with others to effect change stays the same whether that is taking on issues here at home or overseas.

This issue pulls together a range of Irish and international perspectives from those who have made a commitment to move from their comfort zone and connect with the issues facing their local and global community.

“Comhlámh is here to help you think through your interests and motivations to get involved in international volunteering.”

The articles highlight the need for critical reflection on our role as international volunteers, getting us to reflect on the motivations, values and the approaches we bring to our work.

There is also great advice on issues to consider when engaging with social media while volunteering and plenty to think about on how to continue your journey for a better and more just world when you return home to Ireland.

Comhlámh is here to help you think through your interests and motivations to get involved in international volunteering. We have a range of supports from the time you think about it right through to continuing your interest in global justice when you come home. Inside this issue, you will also find those organisations that are part of the Comhlámh Code of Good Practice which are committed to working for good practice in international volunteering.

I hope you enjoy this issue, thanks to all our contributors, and as one of the articles states, ‘Be the change you want to see in the world’.

Aine Lynch presents 'River of Experience' at an Erasmus plus dissemination event

#VOLOPS

VOLUNTEERING FOR GLOBAL JUSTICE

Comhlámh would like to thank everyone who contributed articles to the 2018 edition of "VolOps: Volunteering for Global Justice".

If you would like to write an article for our next edition of this magazine, please email ruth@comhlamh.org or telephone 01 478 3490 for guidelines.



Comhlámh is a signatory to the Dochas Code On Images and Messages. Feedback welcome to info@comhlamh.org



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VOLUNTEERING OVERSEAS

ÁINE LYNCH
Comhlámh

Before I left Ireland, I would excitedly tell people all about what I was going to be doing in Bolivia, about the organisation and project I would be working on. This was all based on the information I received from the (hosting) organisation of what to expect during my upcoming year volunteering. I coupled this with any news or articles I could find on the region.

However, the dominant narrative of Bolivia often portrayed images of alpacas and cholitas living a simple life on the vast and dusty Altiplano. I saw images of children shoe shining on the streets of the capital. This was also framed within the context of well-wishers from my town saying, "Aren't you great to be going over there to help". It was as if the stage was set and I had to fulfil a role to fit into that script.

Critically Reflecting

Since Bolivia, I volunteered in Tajikistan and Laos, both times in very different capacities, and each uniquely different to the other. Within these roles, I have been fortunate enough to go through well-structured pre-departure trainings and debriefings, which allowed me to unpack the experience both operationally and personally.

I found these useful, but there was always an element of who am I reflecting for? Are there certain things

they want to hear to better improve the organisation? Thus, sometimes the element of personal reflection and critical thinking can be lost and left up to the individual.

Recently, in my current position, I took part in an exercise outlining my volunteering experience to date through the medium of drawing. I obliged, as I had just completed a short course on graphic facilitation and wanted to try out the new skills I had learned. I was pleasantly surprised with what the creative activity brought out in my reflection process.

I had to reflect on my experiences through a different medium; there were no guidelines, no right or wrong, just simply reflecting and drawing my "River of Experience". This allowed me to tap into a different part of my brain and reflect solely for me, unpacking the negatives and the positives of my experiences volunteering abroad. What motivated me to volunteer overseas?

Could I not just volunteer in my own locale? Would my very existence volunteering there not be propagating existing power inequalities between Global North and South?

Questioning volunteering and development

These questions are all very personal but

necessary. Necessary to each individual who partakes in international volunteering, to help us guide and shape our actions in the larger aid and development system. It constantly goes back to checking our assumptions. What preconceived ideas and images do we have of peoples and places and are we willing to let these be challenged?

Organisations can have structures and guides to help guide volunteers to critically prepare and reflect, but ultimately the journey is quite personal. The reflection is always necessary, regardless if it is your first or fourth time volunteering or working in the Global South.

Continuing good practice
My personal experience has definitely shaped my understanding of what is needed within organisations to properly value and entice this element of critical learning and reflection within international volunteer programmes.

If reflection is not valued and encouraged, these programmes may only serve to propagate surface level, individualistic, self-indulgent engagement in international volunteering.

If you would like to know more about "Volunteering for the future" email info@comhlamh.org

"Would my very existence volunteering there not be propagating existing power inequalities between Global North and South?"



Volunteering & Social Media

Snap-happy volunteers need to be savvy in their social media use

DONAL BRADY

Returned Volunteer, SERVE

Does this impress or impact? Is this helpful to me or others... or anyone? Asking yourself some questions is the key to striking a healthy balance.

Once you post a picture on social media, other people are within their rights to decide what it is. These other people may be informed, uninformed or ill-informed on the subject of the picture but unfortunately their diverse opinions all hold equal weight.

Who are these other people? Just friends... followers, scrollers, trolls and creepers. Taggers, bloggers, screenshooters, and retweeters. Spammers, scammers and brand ambassadors. All viewing your picture, all forming their own opinions and all writing their own narrative – in their heads or otherwise.

This article is encouraging you to think about what you photograph and post on social media. It will give special attention to doing so as a volunteer where I believe we need to take extra care. A snap-happy volunteer can cause irreparable damage to their organisation's reputation. Finally, as I detest the term social media, I'll refer to it as FITS. (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat) and help you to strike that balance between abstaining from social media entirely and contributing to 'poverty porn'.

I spent nine months working on the Greek island of Samos. The organisation I worked with, Samos Volunteers, are committed to providing psychosocial support for men, women and children living inside and outside of the refugee camp. On my return home, people knew where I had been through my FITS but they were probably less aware of how carefully thought-out my pictures

were. That's because I helped to draft, implement and police our organisation's FITS policy. Our FITS policy was clear.

1. It is illegal to take photographs inside the refugee camp. If you do so you will be arrested by Greek police and compromise our access to the camp, hindering our mission. So don't do that.
2. If you are taking pictures of an activity to send to your donors, then photograph participants from an angle that they cannot be identified from. Many asylum seekers and refugees do not want people to know where they are so they may be reluctant to have their picture shared or circulated online.
3. Do not take pictures of kids' faces. (Yes, I concede that they are adorable and may love their selfies). Unfortunately, those brown eyes can evoke different feelings in different internet users and those range of feelings are so broad that it is just plain dangerous.

"But what if I ask them if I could take a picture and they say it is okay?"

That's a fair question. I'll spare you the legal definitions but instead encourage you to check out Wikipedia's page on 'Informed Consent'. As a volunteer, the people that you are helping are very appreciative of what you are doing for them. They want to thank you in ways more than just saying the two magic words. They may agree to have their picture taken because you've asked them for something and they've said yes to show you their gratitude. A favour for a favour. So while their spoken answer may be "yes, of course", their true, non-verbal response may be a "no thank you."

Have I frozen you in fear? Knowing this you may be very reluctant to take any pictures of your voluntary work in future. But don't plant your flag on either side of the spectrum. As mentioned above, it is about striking a healthy balance. Implementing or adhering to a black and white "No Social Media" ban is not the answer. Nor is posting incessant, personal pictures of 'Poverty Porn'.

We need to recognise that FITS are excellent platforms to raise awareness of your cause and generate those much-needed donations. That said, we use social media to impact not to impress. Ask yourself, does this picture really help those I am here to help? Apart from 'likes' and complimentary comments, what am I really achieving from this post? Could another picture without a human subject be equally impactful? A photo of a soaking wet sleeping bag can tell a tale just as well as a picture of its occupant.

I feel that asking and answering these questions before you take pictures of your voluntary work will help you to do what is best for you, your organisation and most importantly those that you are there to help. Happy volunteering

and happy savvy snapping!

"A 'No Social Media' ban is not the answer. Nor is posting incessant, personal pictures of 'Poverty Porn'."

Donal has a BA in New Media and English from University of Limerick and has recently returned to Ireland from Samos, Greece where he worked as Education Coordinator of Samos Volunteers (www.samosvolunteers.org) Like to get in touch? donalpbbrady@gmail.com

Comhlámh's 'Code of Good Practice'

The Comhlámh Code of Good Practice for Volunteer Sending Agencies is a set of standards for organisations involved in facilitating international volunteer placements in the Global South. Right now there are 42 organisation committed to implementing good practice through the Code. The organisations are either a signatory, have core indicator status or comprehensive compliance status. This shows the different levels of complying with the standards of the Code

| | |
|--|--------------------------|
| Action Lesotho | Signatory |
| AIESEC | Signatory |
| Brighter Communitites Worldwide | Comprehensive Compliance |
| Chernobyl Children’s Project International | Signatory |
| Christina Noble Children’s Foundation | Signatory |
| Development Perspectives | Signatory |
| Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) | Core Indicator |
| Edith Wilkins | Signatory |
| EIL Intercultural Learning | Comprehensive Compliance |
| Friends of Africa | Signatory |
| GIVE Ireland | Core Indicator |
| Global Schoolroom | Comprehensive Compliance |
| Habitat for Humanity, Ireland | Comprehensive Compliance |
| Habitat for Humanity Northern Ireland | Signatory |
| Haven | Signatory |
| Immunisation 4 Life | Signatory |
| Irish League of Credit Unions Foundation | Signatory |
| Irish Missonaries of the Sacred Heart | Signatory |
| Irish Rule of Law International | Core Indicator |
| Lámha Suas | Signatory |
| Mellon Educate | Signatory |
| Maintain Hope | Signatory |
| NUI Galway Draiocht | Signatory |
| NUI Galway Voluntary Services Abroad | Signatory |
| Nurture Africa | Core Indicator |
| Operation Smile | Signatory |
| Peace Brigade International Ireland (PBI Ireland) | Signatory |
| Salesians Ireland (SAVIO) | Signatory |
| Scouting Ireland | Signatory |
| SERVE | Comprehensive Compliance |
| Surgeon Noonan | Signatory |
| Suas Educational Development | Comprehensive Compliance |
| Tearfund | Comprehensive Compliance |
| The Hope Foundation | Signatory |
| The Umbrella Foundation Ireland | Comprehensive Compliance |
| University College Dublin Volunteers Overseas (UCDVO) | Comprehensive Compliance |
| Viatores Christi | Comprehensive Compliance |
| VIDES Ireland | Signatory |
| Vincentian Lay Missionaries (VLM) | Comprehensive Compliance |
| Volunteer Missionary Movement (VMM) | Comprehensive Compliance |
| Voluntary Service International (VSI) | Signatory |
| Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) | Comprehensive Compliance |
| Zamda | Signatory |



Chiara, EU Aid Volunteer, assists in the distribution of water filter kits © EU.

EU Aid Volunteers

EU Aid Volunteers
We Care, We Act



With the support of the **European Union**
for the "EU Aid Volunteers Initiative"

Check out the full-time and online volunteer opportunities
in humanitarian aid projects around the world.

<https://comhlamh.org/euvacancies>

http://ec.europa.eu/echo/news/eu-aid-volunteers-solidarity-action_en

Supports & Services For Overseas Volunteers & Development Workers



As the Irish Association of
Volunteers and Development
Workers, our vision is of volunteers
and development workers working
in solidarity for a just, equitable
and sustainable world.
We work to promote responsible,

responsive international
volunteering. This leaflet
highlights how we can support
you before, during and after the
volunteering experience, drawing
on our 40 years of experience.



40
years
of solidarity



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Want to learn more about International Development?
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or email Maria Heneghan at internationaldevelopment@mu.ie or
Paddy Reilly at paddy.reilly@mu.ie for information about how to apply.

The Department also offers short-term, open and distance courses
and a consultancy service for those interested in enhancing their
knowledge and skills in International Development practice. Email
Niamh Rooney at intdevcds@mu.ie for further details.

CODE OF GOOD PRACTICE

Dear Returned Volunteer....

An open letter with some food for thought to help you plan ahead

FIACHRA BRENNAN
Returned Volunteer, SERVE

“Be the change you want to see in the world”...and, if you can’t be that change, then either get out of the way of the person who wants to be that change or support the individual with your financial resources” – Attributed to Mahatma Gandhi.

To returned volunteers,

I am a serial volunteer, which also means that I am very familiar with the strange and complex emotions you feel after returning from a project. Ever feel so far away from the placement, unable to support it? I understand. This blog is about finding ways to tackle those strange emotions in a meaningful and productive way. Here are 4 easy traps you should avoid as a returned volunteer, and some of the many ways to transform your experience from a single life event, into a journey, centred around making the world a better place.

1. Action over Rhetoric

Your volunteering experience was life-changing? Prove it. Start making changes. You are constantly reminded throughout the volunteer program that the hard work starts when you get home. That is the major long-term challenge – How to channel your learning and experiences overseas into a conduit for effecting long-term and impactful lasting change in your own community and beyond? It sounds tricky, so start small. What did you see, hear, or experience in-country that made you angry, sad, disappointed, inspired, or motivated?

Angry about the long-lasting legacy that war and conflict has had on innocent civilians in Vietnam? – Start looking at your consumption choices, see what major companies and institutions have an involvement in the arms industry, start lobbying them to divest. Boeing, for example, are heavily involved in weapons production, and are also the largest commercial airplane manufacturer in the world.

Sad about all the plastic you saw polluting the rivers and oceans in the Philippines? – Embrace reusing, join a movement to campaign for governments and companies to take action to tackle this problem. Friends of the Earth have an ongoing “Sick of Plastic” campaign.

Disappointed that people with disabilities don’t have more opportunities to thrive in many societies? – Get involved in a campaign like #valuable, which calls for businesses to recognise the value and worth of the 1 billion people in the world with a disability.

Inspired by the success of SERVE and their partners in promoting gender equality and female empowerment? – Continue to support this work with your time, your money, and your advocacy. For example, a crucial funding stream for overseas development is the Irish government, through

Irish Aid. A government promise to commit 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) to overseas development was made in 2007, but has now been delayed until 2025. Put the pressure on your local TD to speed things up and fulfil this long-awaited promise.

Motivated to become a more active and engaged global citizen? – Get involved, take action, be the change you want to see in the world. And keep doing all the great things you were doing before as well!

2. #TakeMeBack

Instagram posts, endless messages, longing snapchats, all craving one magical thing – “Take Me Back”. Words are cheap and easy, start thinking about how to make your desire a reality and, crucially, why you want to do it.

Here’s a few important questions to ask yourself:

Why do you want to go back? – For a quick holiday to reminisce or for another volunteering commitment?

When do you want to go back? – Right now, in a year, or in some vaguely defined distant future?

What else do you have to offer and how best can you offer it? Will your return be beneficial to the host community? What skills can you offer? Is there anything new you can learn at home and then share with the people overseas?

Ask yourself these questions and then get serious about it. Don’t wait for life to drop this opportunity into your hands. Fight for it.

Be the change you want to see, and just do it.

Put a plan together. Do some research, start sending emails, see what the local community needs. Transform “Take me back”, from something hollow, into a meaningful desire to continue your journey as a global citizen and be the change you want to see in the world.

3. Saviour Complex

Sports Day Group Volunteering feels good. You return to your home country filled with positive thoughts. Embrace it, take pride in your work, speak about it with passion and fervour. And do not forget what was accomplished and how. Sustainable development is achieved through partnership; local and international stakeholders working together year-round to effect change. As a volunteer you make a small but substantial contribution to an ongoing effort. You work in solidarity with the local community, not imposing solutions, but instead following their lead, learning from their situation, and offering help in a way that is appropriate to their needs and desires.

Speak about the local heroes, share their stories, put them

at the centre of the development narrative. Recognise these changemakers. Start thinking about how your actions and opportunities at home affect them, see what actions you can take to be the change you want to see in the world.

4. Critique

The Irish voluntary tradition is long-running, well-established, and very well respected. It is not immune to criticism. Engage in debate, defend it, criticise it. The sector is bigger than one project or one organisation. Don’t be afraid to voice your opinion and offer solutions for how to improve it. Use your experience as a springboard for positive change and reform. You are no longer an outsider looking in. You are now a part of this tradition and can become an advocate for making it as impactful as possible. Volunteering should be about helping others without getting anything in return – Is that accurate? Join the conversation! Do you think the Global South benefits from volunteering in a meaningful way? Join the conversation! Do you fundamentally disagree with this blog? Join the conversation!

Be the change you want to see in the world!

These are the thoughts and opinions of one serial volunteer who appreciates the power and potential of the voluntary sector as a meaningful force for global change. It is dependent on individuals being willing to get involved, to give their time and money, to give their energy, and to open themselves up to experiences and perspectives that challenge their status quo. It shouldn’t be an easy journey, but it is meaningful, inspiring, and very worthwhile. Thanks for getting involved and keep up the good work!

Fiachra Brennan volunteered with Serve in South Africa & Mozambique 2013, Philippines 2016 & 2017, Vietnam 2018 and is a Silver Global Citizen Awardee



Health and Solidarity Matters

Health workers are central to much practical and skill based solidarity at the root of volunteering.



STEPHANIE GALVIN
VSO Ireland

Stephanie Galvin volunteered as a Paediatric Nurse with VSO Ireland in Jinka hospital, Ethiopia. Below she reflects on her experiences.

I arrived alone to Jinka, a remote town in South Western Ethiopia, in May 2015. It was the beginning of the most wonderful adventure of my life with VSO Ireland. Without doubt I was met with a fair amount of scepticism at first. But every day walking from my home to Jinka hospital I remembered what VSO had thought me - listen and build trust.

I spent a lot of my initial time in Jinka hospital assessing the environment, talking to the nurses, and trying my best to learn local customs and the main language Amharic - this became a huge advantage in the work. Once people got to know me and I could communicate better I was truly made feel at home. My spare time was spent with local people either at a coffee ceremony, eating Injera, celebrating one of the many Orthodox festivals or simply just trying to keep up at the local market with the 16 beautiful ethnic groups.

I went to Ethiopia alone but I was never alone. I was one of very few Westerners in the town but I do not have enough words to describe how well I was treated by the local people. Reflecting on this experience, I really believe if we could show just a fraction of the same warmth, love and compassion for those who move into our communities in Ireland, we would all benefit in great ways.

Amazing results in neonatal units

Although my initial time at Jinka hospital involved observation,

it was not always possible to stand back. Due to the nature of the environment, I found I often had to step in, especially in resuscitation situations. I was based in the paediatric ward and was given the task of helping to develop a neonatal unit dedicated to looking after the most vulnerable of children - infants in the first 28 days of life. Ethiopia has made huge progress with the Sustainable Development Goals, including reducing death rates in under five year olds. However, neonatal mortality rates are still unacceptably high at 28 per 1000 live births (this compares to 2 per 1000 in Ireland). The neonatal unit, which is now up and running as a result of VSO input, is one of 16 units established in Ethiopia over the past five years. Statistics have shown that these units have reduced neonatal mortality rates by up to 40%.

“it’s all about sharing skills.”

Sharing skills to bring about change.

In saying this, the challenges to overcome are still huge- infants are dying from absolutely curable diseases such as respiratory infections and sepsis, and from poor delivery and resuscitation practices. My role involved working with the nurses and midwives every day to help them improve all aspects of care, including infection control practices, monitoring, reporting, while also introducing up-to-date policies and protocols.

Remarkably, the doctors working in the hospital told me they had never been shown how to resuscitate a baby, child or adult. Therefore, while working alongside staff to improve practice, I was also in the position to hold several resuscitation training days for the nurses, doctors and other health workers and to carry out workshops on the management of the critically ill child.

These are practical skills that we use every day in the hospital that I work in in Dublin, however practical skills are not something that can be easily learned from a book, which is sadly the way

most health care professions learn in Ethiopia. Within weeks of the resuscitation training, many of the doctors reported back that babies had been successfully resuscitated in the delivery room, babies whom they had previously believed there was no hope for. This is why VSO works - it enables the volunteer to step back and allow local health workers to manage situations. I also observed a nurse training a junior nurse in skills I had taught! So the effect of VSO volunteers is far reaching - it’s all about sharing skills.

A brighter future

The neonatal unit is fully established now - it has running water, electricity, a mothers room and a room for the sickest of babies to be looked after in a more intense way. I worked very closely with the hospital CEO and the director of nursing to achieve this. We also received a huge donation of over €7,000 from the people of Moate, Westmeath and Offaly and a grant from Irish Aid, which allowed us to fit the unit out with essential lifesaving equipment such as oxygen concentrators, infant warmers, and phototherapy.

There was huge excitement in Jinka when all equipment arrived from Addis Ababa after a two day journey in a truck! Luckily I was there in the position to educate the nurses how to use, clean and maintain the equipment. VSO in Addis Ababa will also continue to support the unit into the future.

I once heard a long serving development worker in Ethiopia describe VSO volunteers as the catalyst to change. I think this is true in my experience. My time in Ethiopia involved me learning a lot more than I could have ever given. But I believe my presence allowed for change to begin, change that I know the local people will bring forward into the future.

If you are a doctor, nurse, teacher or any other profession, young, retired or otherwise you can get in contact with VSO

VOLUNTEERING FOR GLOBAL JUSTICE

Trisandhi Gosine hosts the Comhlámh stall at the recent Nepal Day held in Farmleigh House, Dublin



How to volunteer? It's as easy as one, two, three...



Ruth Powell of Comhlámh, Joanne Smyth of Irish Aid and Kevin Murphy of Nurture Africa at the 2017 Irish Aid Volunteering Fair

My name is Ruth and part of my role in Comhlámh is to provide people with information about volunteering overseas. I do this through emails, chatting on the phone, social media, attending volunteering fairs around the country or through our face-to-face information sessions here in the office, in Dublin.

The first thing I say to people is that they should only volunteer with a volunteer sending agency that has signed up to the Comhlámh Code of Good Practice for volunteer sending agencies. We currently have 43 groups in our network and you can see a full list of them on Page 4. At least 30 of these organisations will be at the Irish Aid Volunteering Fair on 29 September 2018 at the Hibernia Conference Centre in Dublin Castle, and I would tell anyone interested in overseas volunteering to mark this day in their diaries. They will be able to spend the day, going from stand to stand and meeting with staff from the different agencies and returned volunteers too. There will be a couple of interactive and participatory workshops and a panel discussion with key members of Irish Aid, so really a day to learn a great deal about the sector, in a very friendly atmosphere.

The second thing I say to people is to follow both Comhlámh and #VolOps on our social media platforms. We update our Comhlámh accounts with information about the development sector in general with discussion pieces, comment and analysis, while we update #VolOps with daily information about vacant placements from our Code of Good Practice signatories. We also update VolOps with information about volunteering with UNV programme or the variety of different EUAVI opportunities. There's also plenty of information about online volunteering, which is a growing and incredibly exciting new way of volunteering for development, from Ireland. I also suggest to people that they should keep their eyes on website such as Dochás and Activelink, which publicise information about events and activities throughout Ireland, and information about interesting seminars and lectures throughout the country.

Finally, when people have gathered all this information I suggest that they make an appointment to come into Comhlámh for one of our face-to-face information sessions, where a member of staff will help them examine all of their opportunities. We know that people who put time and energy into deciding what type of placement would suit them best, find the right placements for them. But this takes time and some careful consideration. Sometimes, the best decision of all is not to volunteer overseas at this particular time, for many diverse reasons. And to this end, we can then offer information about our various active membership groups or information about the different types of volunteering opportunities in Ireland, which support overseas development work.

We are here to help.

Making Volunteering Work

Reflections and experiences of an ongoing journey

TRISANDHI GOSINE

Comhlámh Intern

"To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition; to know that even one life has breathed easier because you have lived - that is to have succeeded"

After graduating with a degree in Earth Science and returning home to Trinidad and Tobago, I began my job hunt as any young graduate does. Numerous job applications and a disproportionate number of responses later I started considering my options and went down the rabbit hole to do some deep soul searching.

I questioned what I wanted to do with my life, what I was interested in and what I wanted to learn more about. I came up with three things that were important to me. Growing up on a Caribbean island and being a nature lover at heart, the sea and the earth always called to me. I have always wanted to make the world a little bit better in some small way, I have always wanted to help. I had some useful skills but I could always have more.

I took a couple of mapping courses at university and wanted to learn some more, I found out there was a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) certificate course at my local university and I enrolled, it became something I really enjoyed and wanted to keep doing. Later on, another opportunity to study came up, this time in Barbados at the Centre for Resource Management and Environmental Studies; a year later, I had a Masters in Natural Resource and Environmental Management.

For me, this took my appreciation and understanding of the environment to another level, it interlinked sustainable development on both land and one of the most precious resources we have in the Caribbean, the sea. Even more, it let

me incorporate my newfound GIS skills into my research.

At this point, I had hit two out of the three things that were on my list but I still was not helping to make a better world. I was on the job hunt again and found myself working for the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management in Trinidad and Tobago. Later on, I had a great opportunity to work in Jamaica on a project focused on Enhancing Knowledge and Application of Comprehensive Disaster Management practices in the Caribbean region. My experiences here opened my eyes to another world of possibilities and ways I could help.

I found ways that I could help by volunteering online using UN Volunteers online platform and locally with Habitat for Humanity Trinidad and Tobago. These opportunities helped me to build understanding and confidence in using the skills I have to create a positive impact and be useful.

However, as they say, you are always a student and never a master; you have to keep moving forward. As of September 2017, I started studying again. This time I enrolled into the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Programme in International Humanitarian Action (NOHA+). It's an inter-university multidisciplinary postgraduate programme geared to personnel working or intending to work in the area of humanitarian action.

Part of the programme involves being able to be very geographically mobile. The challenge of school and moving regularly made online volunteering a great fit for me as I could use my skills while I continued to increase my awareness and knowledge academically.

In January 2018, I joined the Standby Task Force, which is a global network of volunteers who provide volunteer online digital responses to humanitarian crises, local emergencies, and issues of local or global concern.

The Standby Task Force have responded to situations worldwide like Hurricane Maria and Hurricane Irma in 2017, floods in Peru in 2017, and earthquakes in Ecuador in 2016. Other networks such as Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team and Crisismappers are similar volunteer networks, which provide assistance in humanitarian crises and disasters using technology, crowd sourcing, and crisis mapping.

Training and seminars hosted by the networks are helping me to build on my previous knowledge and to better assist. Recently, I have joined two local Meetup groups; Tech for Good and Data4Good which are two groups focused on using technology to address social and environmental challenges. While going away to volunteer can be an appealing idea, sometimes it might not be the right fit; there are always different options to explore. Joining local groups or online networks can be an option to lend a hand.

Being able to volunteer online has helped me to work on achieving my goals, but bigger than that, volunteering is part of something bigger than the sum of singular moments and experiences. It changes your outlook, once you start helping, and seeing that your help is needed beautiful things can happen.

Trisandhi is currently interning with Comhlámh as part of her studies in Humanitarian Action

"you are always a student and never a master; you have to keep moving forward."