

## HERE TO HELP



Our range of supports and assistance for people thinking about, preparing for and returning from international volunteering  
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## FIRST TIME CODING



Katie Mahon from Engineers Without Borders explains why they joined our Code of Good Practice  
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## COMHLÁMH'S CODE SIGNATORIES



Your super handy guide to volunteer sending agencies in Ireland who have signed up to our Code of Good Practice. Use it well!!  
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# #VOLOPS

## VOLUNTEERING FOR GLOBAL JUSTICE



Oct 2019 | Published By Comhlámh | Development Workers and Volunteers in Global Solidarity

[www.comhlamh.org](http://www.comhlamh.org)



**MARK MALONE**  
Comhlámh Comms Officer

**Did you know that over 8 million children are living in orphanages around the world today?**

**And that research shows that over 80% of those children have at least one living parent?**

Many people thinking about volunteering might feel it takes little skill or experience to show comfort to a child, and to kick football or help with drawing. Volunteering in orphanages might seem a positive act from the perspective of a single volunteer experience rooted in goodwill.

Our evidence is clear though about the damage surrounding orphanage care, independent of the volunteers training. We would love for you to take the volunteering orphanages pledge linked below at the end of this article.

Responsible and responsive volunteering doesn't centre itself around the volunteer. And children's care needs to be child focused rather than volunteer focused. Visualise for a moment as your minds eye pulls back from

that individual volunteer with a child in a room of children in one orphanage. Slowly zoom up and out from that one orphanage on a map, to see more and more orphanages coming into your peripheral vision until finally you are looking down on the hundreds and thousands of orphanages around the globe.

In May this year we launched our 'Children First: A Global Perspective in Volunteering in Orphanages and Transforming Care' This research shows a global industry of orphanages that at best leads to poor emotional, educational and developmental outcomes for children. At its worst this includes organised trafficking and abuse of children for profit.

Children who have grown up in institutions often exhibit significant cognitive and developmental delays. Health issues and disabilities can be further exacerbated or result from institutional care.

Children with experience of orphanage care in early life are at further risk of developing

attachment disorders. Children living in institutions may be extremely vulnerable, not least because many experience ongoing trauma because of separation from their families.

Not only are children in orphanages denied the parental bond, but they are also often kept separated from their siblings and the wider family network, and experience high levels of social isolation.

International volunteering in orphanages is now recognised as increasing the harm caused by and perpetuating the problem of institutional care.

Children living in institutions may be extremely vulnerable, not least because many experience ongoing trauma because of separation from their families. Volunteers often do not have adequate knowledge and professional skills to respond appropriately to their needs.

Research also shows that the practice of international volunteering in orphanages in the

Global South has become so popular that it is creating a demand, leading to the unnecessary separation of children from their families and communities. Volunteering in institutions provides a funding stream, creating a market and a demand for children to populate orphanages to ensure the continued flow of international money.

International volunteering in orphanages presents significant child safeguarding issues. The majority of people have good intentions but may not realise that many of the institutions are putting the children at increased risk of abuse and exploitation by normalising access to vulnerable children.

Increasingly there is a global shift in policy and practice away from supporting orphanages and towards enabling family and community-based care where the best interests and rights of the child can be better protected.

You can play your part today.

**Take our pledge at [bit.ly/ChangingCare](http://bit.ly/ChangingCare)**  
(use the capital letters!)

**MARK CUMMING**  
Head of Comhlámh

**I hope you'll enjoy this issue, finding it informative and challenging, both at the same time. We want to inspire people, we want to give them hope in what it is they can achieve as active global citizens, but firstly we want people to think.**

To think of the world we are in and to ask, why is it this way, what assumptions am I making about how things are and what can and can't be done about things. We always need to think anew, historically international volunteering involved people of privilege, wealth and status, going to 'help' or 'serve' those with less. And yet, who is it that has more, and which 'more' do we consider valuable and worthwhile to be shared. Who is developed, who needs developing?

In this issue you will read of an experience of someone from the Global South who came to volunteer in Europe, the experience of a returned volunteer who struggles to tell their story to friends and family but whose life no longer looks the same on their return because of their experience. You'll also read about the experience of one of the newest agencies to the Comhlámh Code of Good Practice for Volunteer Sending Agencies. Engineers Without Borders describe how the process of engaging with Comhlámh's Code has supported them to create a better experience for all involved – for volunteers, staff and the partner communities.

This issue also sees the launch of our campaigning on volunteering in orphanages. It lays out our understanding of child-safe volunteering and the less than optimal outcomes for children.

Get in touch with us at anytime, as Comhlámh we can support you through all the stages of your journey from the time you start thinking of volunteering to right when you come home and stay active in global development issues.

## #VOLOPS

VOLUNTEERING FOR GLOBAL JUSTICE

Comhlámh would like to thank everyone who contributed articles to this edition

If you would like to write an article for our next edition of this magazine, please email [ruth@comhlamh.org](mailto: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](mailto:info@comhlamh.org)

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"I don't want to be in that category that says, 'This is that magical class that's going to bring about change.' It may come from all kinds of different places. It may come from the universities, the black community, the reservations; it may come from all of them rather than some pre-ordained class. We have to figure out how to create a world where it's possible for all different people to be who they are, to have a world where everyone fits." Ashanti Alston



Engineers Without Borders at a volunteer fair: Photo credit /EWB

# First time coding!

## Engineers Without Borders on joining our Code

KATIE MAHON  
Engineers Without Borders Ireland

**Are you sitting on the fence about signing your organisation up to the Comhlámh Code of Good Practice? Want to know a little more about what it's like to get onto the initial rungs of the ladder? Take a seat, grab a cup of tea, and have a read of this to learn a little more from an organisation that has just entered the Comhlámh Code network - Engineers Without Borders Ireland (EWB).**

For us at EWB, we recently signed up as first time signatories at the end of 2018. While only officially registered as a charity in 2018, we have existed in Ireland since 2010. Over the last 9 years we have had a number of overseas placements, generally small numbers of participants (sometimes just 1 person per year) and often with a longer term intern-style placement. Our most regular overseas trip is based on a student design initiative, "Where There Is No Engineer" where the winning team gets the opportunity to travel overseas to carry out market research and develop their concept further, with an aim to develop more self-sustaining and resilient communities.

Looking ahead to the next few years, our volunteer programme is evolving to cater to the unique skills and interests of engineers, scientists, designers and innovators. To do this in the best way possible we wanted to get ourselves signed up to the Comhlámh Code of Good Practice. So what is it all about?

You can think of the Code of Good Practice as a set of guidelines, a check list even, to compare your volunteer programme and note the

things about it that are good - and not so good - for encouraging the best experience for the volunteer, for the host organisation & community overseas, and for your own organisation. The best thing about this process is that the entire thing works as a pathway & series of supports to achieving those improvements, rather than a standard scoring system.

The process kicks off with some informal chats with the team in Comhlámh (thanks Sandra!)... which then moves onto an initial self-assessment process. Here you really get into the details of your volunteer programmes - why you picked that country, how you initiated the relationship with your overseas partner, how you select volunteers, how you prepare them before they go, how you interact with them when they return home. Are you developing a volunteer programme to meet the needs of the community, have you developed a list of goals & objectives in solidarity with your overseas partner? Have you asked what it is that the members of the local community need and want, and considered how your programme could best support that long-term goal?

Following this self-assessment you will get input from an external support who also goes through each section of the assessment with a representative from your organisation. This external member will issue a formal report which outlines strengths as well as the main areas for improvement.

Overall the goal of the Code of Good Practice is to support & facilitate your organisation to create a better experience for all involved - for volunteers, staff, and your partner communities. This creates an unforgettable experience for the volunteers that will last far

beyond the trip itself, and a much stronger partnership and greater long term impact on the local community where you are working.

So far for ourselves at EWB we have completed the self-assessment and external review which has given us a great insight into our volunteer programmes and how we can improve our own approach and processes. We have also attended & contributed to two Peer Support Meetings; these sessions aim to share knowledge & lessons learned within the Comhlámh network of over 40 organisations. We have also taken the opportunity to attend training sessions on Development Education facilitation and on Child-Safeguarding for Humanitarian Work, both organised by Comhlámh and available at reduced costs to all participating organisations.

Being welcomed into this wider network with such open arms has been a brilliant learning experience and has

**"you really get into the details of your volunteer programmes - why you picked that country, how you initiated the relationship with your overseas partner, how you select volunteers"**

opened a number of doors for our own learning and self-awareness - strengthening our organisation overall. This will help to improve our impact through increased solidarity with our overseas partners with shared goals & objectives, and deeper learning for all volunteers and the communities we work with. For the time & effort that we have contributed so far, we have received so much back already. Last year we made the decision to hop off that fence of indecision to get fully involved in the Code of Good Practice, and have started the journey down the path of self-improvement.

Here's to even more progress in all of our organisations and an even greater impact in communities all over the world!



*Hai Yen in Slovakia : Photo Credit, the author*

# Volunteering Reflections

*HAI YEN*

Reflects on her volunteering experience in Slovakia

**After four years in law school, 3 months of internship in a law firm and 7 months of working for my family business, I decided I needed to take a break from all of these expectations that my family and the “society” had had on me and to think about what I really want to do.**

Fortunately (or unfortunately), that break was not too long. 1 month after I got an internship in a NGO called CSDS and that was one of the best things that has ever happened to me. In CSDS, I was working in the Volunteering Programs department. We receive volunteers from all over the world, look for a place in Vietnam that might need their help and support the volunteers at the working placements. Being immersed in an diverse environment really helped to open my mind, to learn more about everything. And after 3 months of internship, the organization offered me an opportunity to go to Slovakia, a small country in the center of Europe, to volunteer for two months.

Since it was the first time for me to go abroad, everything was a new experience: spending 9 hours on a plane, having people check my visa, or being the last one to go on the plane cause’ the security guard kept scratching my visa to see if it’s faked or not (I found it quite funny), or using the ticket on the public transport. But the most memorable thing for me was the warmth of strangers.

When I got off the plane in Prague and was confused because the

bus I was supposed to catch was out of working hours, a strange man had helped to find the way to the hostel, waited there until I got on the right bus and waved goodbye. Or a woman had stood with me in the middle of the night, because she thought I would be lonely waiting for the hostel to open the door, or the lovely lady who woke me up to get off at my station or the flatmates who were so welcoming me to the flat. All of these kindness made me feel not strange at all to a totally strange place. My hosting organization was Keric, located in a small town called Cadca. They work to enhance the connection between their region to the whole world through educational activities.

**“Staying away from all the things that have been so familiar to me, I learnt more about myself”**

My project in Keric was to introduce my country, Vietnam, in schools and to teach English classes. I did this project with two young men from Honduras and Cambodia. Before we went to schools, Mirka – the coordinator in Keric had told us that we shouldn’t be upset if the kids here didn’t respond or talk to us, because they were all shy.

However, almost every school we went to, I personally was so surprised. The kids in school were really lovely, they asked a lot of questions, curious about a lot of things and really interested in us. They even lined up to get our autographs since we were the first foreigners that had ever been to their schools. And I felt kind of proud that we are bringing something new to these kids, making them know a little more about this world.

Another highlight of my volunteership was the lovely flatmates. There were 10 people living in the flat at that time: 3 from Spain, 1 from Italy, 1 from Finland, 1 from Turkey, 1 from Austria, 1 from Honduras, 1 from Cambodia and 1 from Vietnam. We came from so many different countries and that made our life in

Cadca more interesting. I know more about the unusual routine of Spanish people, or in Austria people also speak German (which I didn’t know before), or how cuisine in Cambodia is different from Vietnam and so many other thing.

Cadca is a wonderful town. For a girl like me, who grew up in the city, I always feel I am being rushed and the pollution and traffic drives me crazy. Sometimes I feel suffocated because there are people everywhere but no connection. But in Cadca, there is a lot of space. As we were surrounded by mountains, whenever I needed time for myself, I just got out, took a walk and let myself be embraced by nature.

Also here I saw snow for the first time. I remember running down the road in Zilina and laughing like crazy with my roommates when the first snow happened.

And the most important thing of this 2-month volunteering is the time for self-reflection. Staying away from all the things that have been so familiar to me, I learnt more about myself, what I really want to do and what is my next step after coming back to Vietnam.

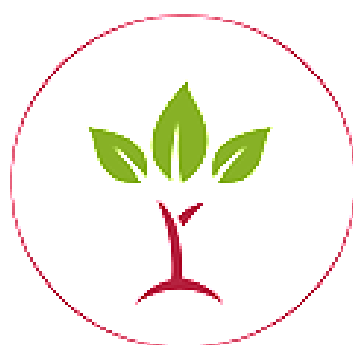
Thinking about international volunteering? Head over to [bit.ly/Volops](https://bit.ly/Volops)

# Comhlámh

Code of Good Practice Volunteer Sending Agencies  
August 2019



When you are thinking about volunteering in the Global South you don't want to just hope that you will be working in solidarity for a just, equitable and sustainable world. You want to feel equipped to make choices so that, as far as possible, you know that your volunteering is consciously geared towards a positive impact for the overseas project and community, as well as yourself and the sending agency. This is where our Code of Good Practice comes in. This leaflet lists the Volunteer Sending Agencies that have joined Comhlámh's Code of Good Practice.



Action Lesotho | AIESEC | CHEEERS | Chernobyl Children's Project International | Christina Noble Children's Foundation | Edith Wilkins | Engineers Without Borders Ireland | Friends of Africa | Habitat for Humanity Northern Ireland | Haven | Irish League of Credit Unions Foundation | Irish Missionaries of the Sacred Heart | Irish Rule of Law International | Mellon Educate | Maintain Hope | Operation Smile | Peace Brigade International Ireland (PBI Ireland) | Salesians Ireland (SAVIO) | Scouting Ireland | The Hope Foundation | VIDES Ireland | Voluntary Service International (VSI) | Zamda



Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) | GIVE Ireland | Lámha Suas



Brighter Communities Worldwide | Development Perspectives | EIL Intercultural Learning | Global Schoolroom | Habitat for Humanity, Ireland | Immunisation 4 Life | Nurture Africa | SERVE | Suas Educational Development | Tearfund | The Umbrella Foundation Ireland | University College Dublin Volunteers Overseas (UCDVO) | Viatores Christi | Vincentian Lay Missionaries (VLM) | VSO Ireland

For more information check out our Volops Facebook page and @VolopsRobot Twitter feed. Or give us a call on (01) 4783490.



## MASTERS IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT



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- Prepares participants for work in a variety of settings on issues such as poverty, inequality, governance, gender, conflict, food insecurity and climate change

**OPEN FOR APPLICATIONS TO START IN MARCH OR SEPTEMBER**

Find out more at:

<https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/international-development>

Or contact us directly for information about how to apply

Email: [internationaldevelopment@mu.ie](mailto:internationaldevelopment@mu.ie)

## 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

**IC4LOP**  
International Citizens for Local Perspectives

Interested in developing your skills to create collective action for global justice? Comhlámh's IC4LOP project is supporting young migrants and international volunteers to come together to create action projects on themes they're passionate about.

You can:

Download our Awakened Citizen app

Join one of our training courses

Get support and mentoring to work with others on a collective action.

For more info, check out [action4inclusion.eu](http://action4inclusion.eu) or contact Gareth ([gareth@comhlamh.org](mailto:gareth@comhlamh.org)).

Thinking about or preparing to volunteer internationally? Interested in reading and communicating our increasingly image and news saturated world more skilfully?

**E-TICK**  
e-learning platform on ethical communication 4 young volunteers



**E-TICK**  
e-learning platform on ethical communication 4 young volunteers

We're delighted to say that our new, interactive e-learning platform on ethical communication is almost here! Key e-learning topics include:

- 'Thinking critically about 'help' and volunteering'
- 'Who gets to communicate what?'
- 'Cultural appreciation or cultural appropriation?'
- 'Media literacy in the new media age'
- 'Digital wellness'.



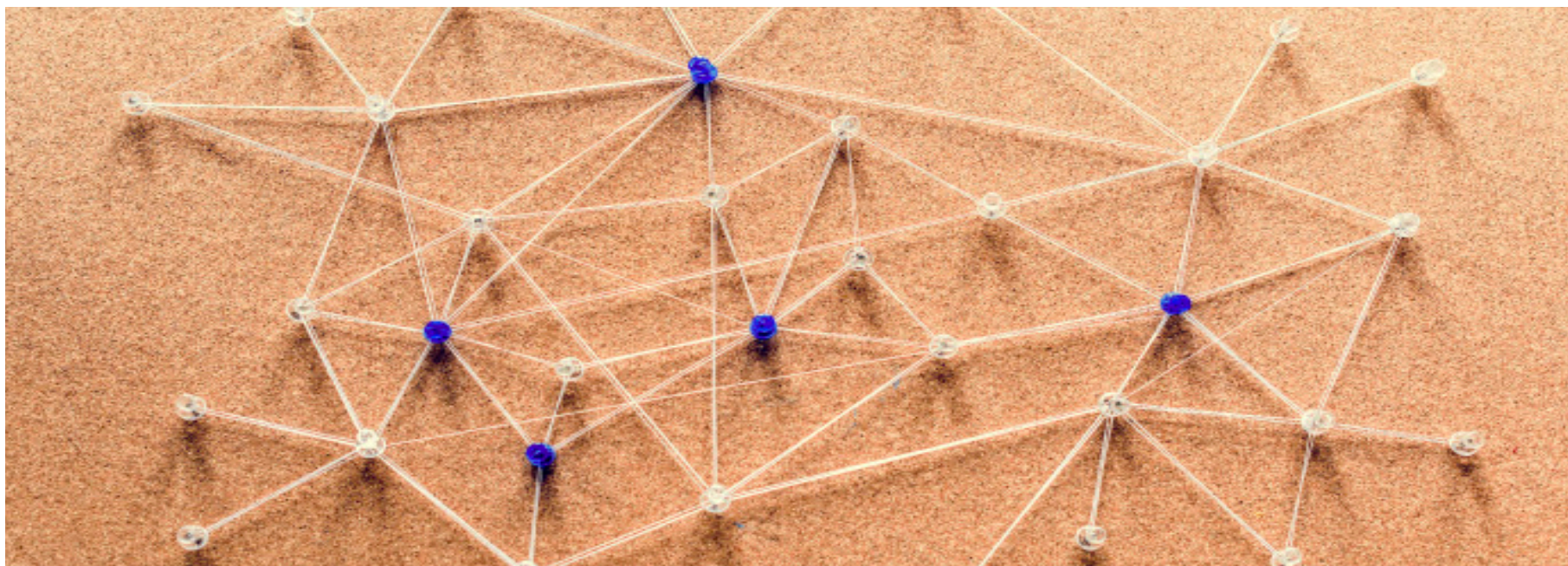
**E-TICK**  
e-learning platform on ethical communication 4 young volunteers

A collaborative effort between Društvo Humanitas (Slovenia), Zavod Volontariat (Slovenia), INEX-SDA (Czech Republic), FOCSIV (Italy) and Comhlámh and with the support of ERASMUS+. The platform will launch in early 2020. Contact [sive@comhlamh.org](mailto:sive@comhlamh.org) for more details



# North – South Volunteering

*Issues to consider to help you think through your choices*



SIVE BRESNIHAN

*Comhlámh Education and Training Officer*

**While most volunteers go overseas with the intention of making a positive contribution, it is important to consider critical issues before embarking on a volunteer journey. Within the context of North to South volunteering, reflection on privilege as well as motivations is crucial and irrespective of whether you are thinking about going for a short time or for an extended period.**

As far back as 1968, the educator and philosopher Ivan Illich delivered a challenging address to an assembly of American volunteers preparing to go to Mexico. Entitled ‘To Hell with Good Intentions’ his address cut to the heart of the deep dangers of paternalism inherent in overseas voluntary service activity:

“I am here to entreat you to freely, consciously and humbly give up the legal right you have to impose your benevolence on Mexico...I am here to challenge you to recognize your inability, your powerlessness and your incapacity to do the “good” which you intend to do. I am here to entreat you to use your money, your status and your education to travel in Latin America. Come to look, come to climb our mountains, to enjoy our flowers. Come to study. But do not come to help.”

50 years later ‘North to South’ volunteering remains entangled with the frames of ‘help’ and ‘doing good’ and Illich’s words still pack a punch.

We hear you cry (because we have also cried these words): ‘But my good intentions will be enough’; ‘He is overly negative and cynical’; ‘Small acts can change the world’; ‘That time has passed. We’re living in a globalised world now. We’re all one’

But consider the questions that his words raise for prospective volunteers. Do we shirk away from them? By facing into them, what do we risk losing? What might we have to let go of?

Global educator Vanessa Andreotti describes ‘the

post-colonial backpack’ that the global North inevitably carries. ‘The ways that we are living today are based on patterns that have been established by other generations,’ she writes. ‘So even though we might feel like we have nothing to do with the past, we (in the global North) still benefit from the structures that were created in the past.’ Thinking about the wider context for North to South volunteering remains critical.

## Motivations

As well as the wider context, there are your own personal motivations for considering this journey. Is there something in particular motivating you? Have you taken some time to dig into it?

Have a look at the motivations listed below. These are motivations that we have seen among volunteers with whom we have worked over the years and are motivations that we ourselves have also felt. To what degree does each of them resonate, if at all?

Have a go at rating them. Rate the motivation from 1-5, 5 meaning ‘strongly identify with this one’, and 1 being ‘don’t identify with this one at all’. The important thing is to be honest. There are no rights or wrongs here. The reflection is for you - nobody else

- To share my professional experience and skills
- To feel connected to something tangible and real
- To feel useful and appreciated
- To exchange with others
- To find more meaning and connection
- To stand by others as they struggle against injustice
- To see how I get on outside of my comfort zone
- To make a positive difference in the lives of others
- To be seen as good, to feel better about myself
- To experience living and working in another culture
- To feel like I’m giving something back
- To inject some excitement and adventure into my life

How did you get on? Was there a motivation in the list that got you thinking? Did you locate a motivation that runs deep for you, or a motivation that got you thinking afresh about context? How might the motivations you have (there is usually a medley of motivations) inform the expectations you would have as a volunteer? What do you think is important for somebody thinking about North-South volunteering to consider? Are there ways, as a prospective volunteer, to address the issues of privilege, status, and possibly short-term impact that inevitably play a role in this kind of volunteering endeavour?

**We are always learning in Comhlámh but here are some tips based on experience:**

- Consider the environmental impact of any related travel. Sign up to [www.footprintcalculator.org](http://www.footprintcalculator.org)
- Continually strive to understand the limits & scope of the volunteer role
- As a volunteer in a host community, actively position yourself as ‘learner’, being mindful always of your own and others possible expectations
- Tap into global development here at home! Get active on those community and social justice issues that you feel passionately about
- If you’re in the Dublin area, drop by our offices for a cup of tea or a chat – anytime. Or feel free to give us a call

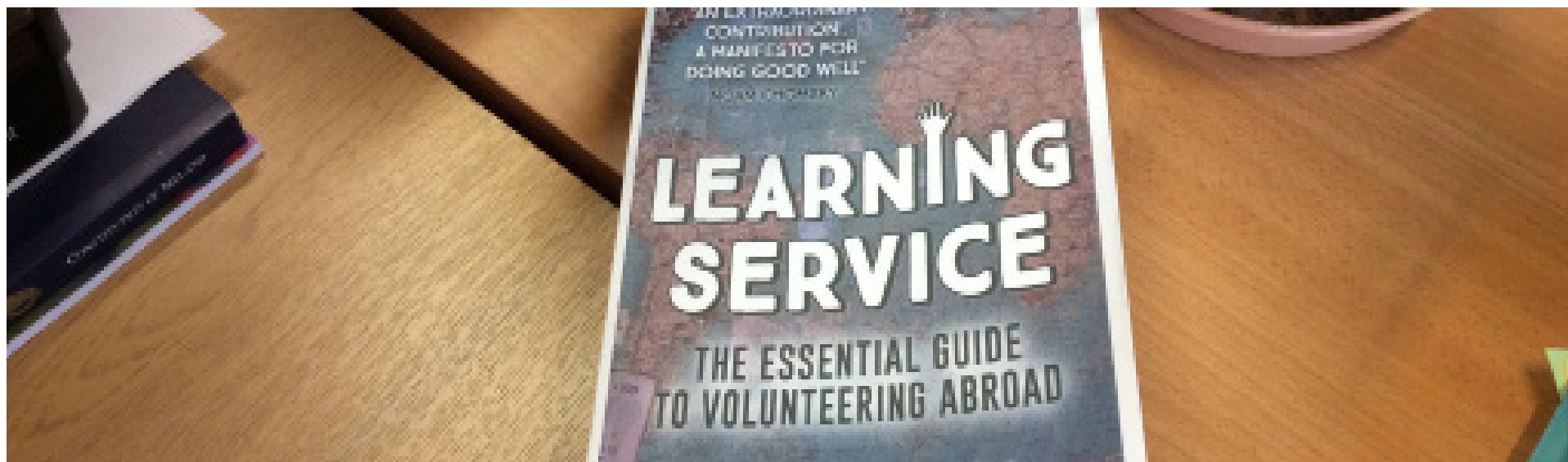
Check out HEADS UP Checklist by Vanessa Andreotti. An educational tool to help people engage critically with local and global initiatives created to address problems of injustice. <http://globalwh.at/heads-up-checklist-by-vanessa-de-oliveira-andreotti/>

Fancy reading more?  
Head over to  
[comhlamh.org/where](http://comhlamh.org/where)



# Book your 'Essential Guide'

*An extract from an invaluable resource for volunteers by Learning Service.*



RUTH POWELL

Comhlámh Information and Support Officer

**The first thing you notice about "Learning Service: The Essential Guide to Volunteering Abroad" is that it comes highly recommended by Noam Chomsky who states that it is "an extraordinary contribution" and "a manifesto for doing good well".**

The second thing you notice is the sheer size of the work. This guidebook has more than 350 pages of advice, anecdotes, information and suggestions for people thinking about international volunteering. What follows is a short extract from the book.

## Learn the Language

Feeling competent in a new language takes a lot of time and effort. No other single factor, however, can affect your international volunteer experience more profoundly than your ease in the local language. As your language proficiency grows, new worlds open up to you. You will be able to interact with people more directly, your conversations unfiltered by translators. Depending on how long you are staying for, taking a few months out for intensive lessons might not be a possibility. But as soon as possible after arriving overseas (or preferably before you leave!), try taking a class, find a tutor, or exchange lessons in a foreign language for lessons in your own native tongue.

Even just learning a few phrases can help show that you are making an effort and will create room for your co-workers to teach you more words each day. This strategy is more polite than expecting everyone you meet to speak to you in English; you may be surprised by how much more warmly people respond to you if you at least greet them in their own language. Rachel Springer, who volunteered in Lebanon, said "Taxi drivers were more friendly and accommodating when I would greet them and explain my destination in Arabic rather than English." By learning a new language, you will also be able to learn more about the local culture, as the words people use shed light on cultural as well as linguistic differences.

Be sure that the language you learn is the one that will be most useful to you. A volunteer who spent two months in Morocco reflected, "I thought that I could get by mostly by speaking French as it is the language of business and diplomacy. It turned out that I neglected two things: class dynamics and geography. French,

because it's a colonial language, is spoken by the upper class. This meant that if I wanted to grab a cab, the driver usually spoke broken French if at all and I had to get by on the Darija I had picked up.

Furthermore, a French friend found his language skills completely useless when staying in the Atlas Mountains as the main language there is Tamazight.

When using a new language, it's good to ask for occasional feedback to make sure you're not saying something that makes no sense, or worse, is offensive. Chris spent three years teaching English at a school for girls in Japan. Every Friday he'd ask the students if they were "excited for the weekend." On the last night of his time teaching, he complained to a local friend about how poorly he was treated at the school and explained that when he asked the girls if they were "excited for the weekend," no one took the time to respond to him. His friend pointed out that he had selected the incorrect version of "excited" and had actually spent the last three years asking his students if they were "aroused" for the weekend! He was embarrassed to say the least, and realized that it was his behavior that had resulted in his lack of integration. If you feel like you might be offending someone and don't know why, ask! The answer might be enlightening!

## Don't Be Afraid of Making Mistakes

Making mistakes is part of the process of interacting with a culture different from your own. Indeed, it is how you learned your own culture as a child—through a bit of trial and error. Don't let the fear of saying the wrong thing or breaking a cultural norm stop you from trying to connect. We heard countless stories of volunteers who looked back on their actions when they first arrived and noted moments when they felt foolish. Most mistakes were little ones, like eating with your left hand at a formal dinner in Egypt—then having a local friend explain that eating like this is seen as unhygienic.

Though you may be horrified at the time, often you can later look back on such an incident with a sense of humor. A volunteer who was in Senegal for more than a year had this advice, "Be prepared to laugh—at yourself, at others, and at the cultural misunderstandings that will inevitably come." Indeed, in some cultures everyone will burst out laughing at your mistake anyway as a way of papering over the faux pas – making it seem that, of course, you were making a joke all along – so you might as well join them!

Whenever you do make a social blunder, try to learn from it so you can avoid a repeat performance, but don't let the paranoia about trying to obey every rule of cultural etiquette stop you from going out and making friends. People in most cultures will be forgiving towards foreigners and understand that you are learning. There is often no better way to learn than from your mistakes.

## Eat Local

In our own experiences of working in volunteer travel, few things are more frustrating than a volunteer who refuses to try any of the local foods. "Eating insects is wrong" they might say, or "I can't eat a meal that doesn't have any meat," or "Rice, again?!" Remind yourself that if you wanted to eat the same foods you eat at home, you could have saved a lot of money and stayed at home! Engaging with a local culture means you need to be willing to try new things, and sampling the local food is one of the best ways to integrate into a culture and make friends. Susy volunteered in Nepal, where meals are flavored with a range of strong spices, and often served without a spoon. She dove in anyway, and told us, "I ate local food and immersed myself in a way of life I enjoyed...When you're out of your comfort zone you gain confidence and feel alive. At 54, I was so lucky to have these experiences."

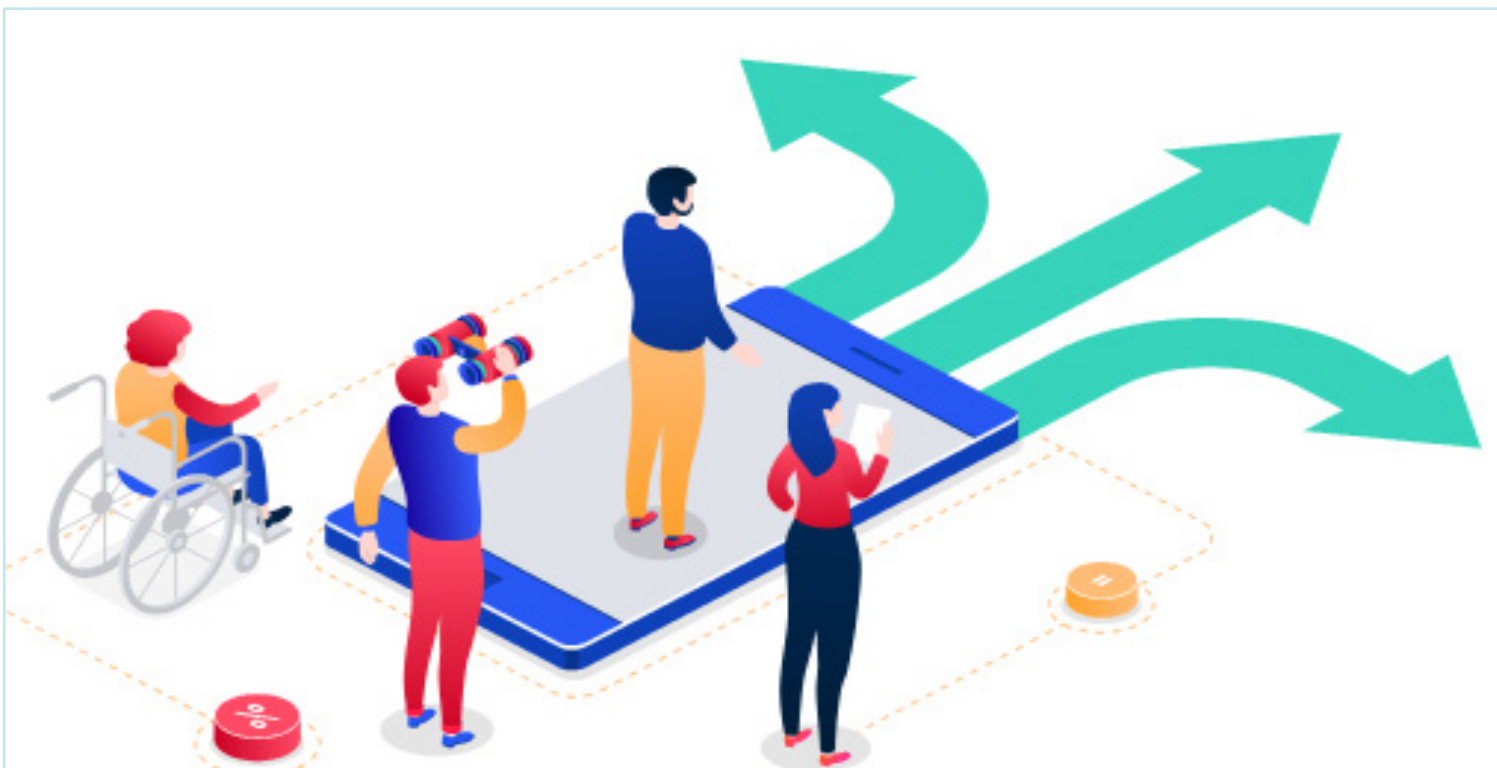
We're not saying that eating a delicious fried spider or boiled chicken feet is not going to feel weird or downright repulsive the first time. Our Cambodian friends are grossed out by cheese, saying something along the lines of "So, you are saying that you take the liquid that comes out of the breast of a cow, and allow it to grow bacteria, and then you let it go bad until you can even see the mold, and then you eat it?" Of course, we do not advise that a vegetarian volunteer should start eating shwarma, or an observant Jew or Muslim volunteer should start eating roasted pork, nor do we think you should eat food you suspect might make you sick, but we encourage you to push your culinary boundaries as far as your morals (and health) allow.

You can further your learning by viewing food choice through the lens of privilege. Local food may be repetitive out of necessity because there simply isn't access to a great diversity of food, or it is prohibitively expensive. In some families, people are genuinely grateful for their dal bhat or rice-and-beans twice a day. Rejecting food you are offered can be seen as a larger rejection of friendship or of the culture as a whole, and can cut you off from opportunities for deep learning about the challenges of poverty, or the joys of simplicity, or both.

*Learning Service: The Essential Guide to Volunteering Abroad*

By Claire Bennett/Joseph Collins/Zahara Heckscher/  
Daniela Papi-Thornton

**"By learning a new language, you will also be able to learn more about the local culture, as the words people use shed light on cultural as well as linguistic differences."**



# Coming Home Again

*Overseas volunteering can impact long after your return*

ROBERT JOHNSON  
Returned Volunteer

**Have you ever read a book so deeply engrossing, that when your eyes finally sink into the last full stop, the world in which you have become so deeply enraptured slowly dissolves away until you find yourself in the same room you've always been in though this time, none of it looks the same?**

This is how it feels to return home after volunteering overseas.

An appropriate response after an experience such as this, is the desire to share it with as many people as possible. Your friends and family, your co-workers, a friendly old lady at a bus stop perhaps. It's as if you feel obliged to let people know of this wondrous experience so that they too may share in its life-changing effects. Yet nobody listens. No matter the relationship that person has with you, whether a mother or motorist, their eyes seem to glaze over in just the same way.

Heads tilt, lips pout and polite nods become less polite the longer you talk. Eventually you'll realise there's nothing you can do. Nobody will ever know how it is you feel because that experience was so unique to you. Those words resonated so deeply, whispered to a secret sense of self and rearranged wires you didn't know you had in a way that's impossible to translate to someone else. This is why a film, book, song or volunteering

experience can feel so personal, it is uniquely your view that was changed in a way specific to you.

Which is why while you were ranting to that old lady at the bus stop, you failed to notice the person beside you talking on the phone to their friend about the latest Netflix series. "No like seriously Aido, oh my God, you have to watch it, honestly." It's likely that neither you nor Aido will have any motivation to watch that series. You have your own stories to share.

This is where the comparison of sharing volunteering experience and art recommendations end.

The existential void carved out by the ending of a film, book or series will soon fade or be filled by another film, book or series. The stories weren't real, their settings fictionalised and their characters imaginary. But the people you meet when volunteering are real. Their stories don't end when you turn the last page and return home. Yet their story is as hard to share. People's eyes glaze in the same way, their nods as sympathetic and distant as ever while accompanied by, "I know, terrible, isn't it?".

The story of global change, active citizenship, equality and development education is an ongoing one. A story that seems familiar us, its blurb often read on the news, its characters shown on advertisements. It's a story people pay the price for if it means not having to read it. But unlike the stories we so happily divulge in, our films, plays and songs, we are active protagonists in this story and yet most of the time we choose not to turn the

page to see that. So this stories sits on the shelf, bound by a cover so ill-representative of its content.

We must make a choice in the stories we share, and the stories we listen to. We must ask why it is a story attracts or repels us. When there seems to be in infinitude of books to read, films to watch and series to binge, it can feel as if the ones we find are meant to be found by us. Art can create a resonance so deep it can feel like an extension of self, a realised voice of a silence that wisps through each of us.

Perhaps those stories are best kept to ourselves. But we must share the stories of people we meet while volunteering, whose lives have been punctuated by the same pen we use to script our own. It is our responsibility, despite the sympathetic nods and glass eyed expressions, despite the competing narratives.

When there are so many stories to choose from we can be left with no choice but to judge by the cover, and so it is our responsibility to change how overseas volunteering is depicted. Until eventually we find ourselves with the same story, though this time, none of it looks the same.

Returned home and want to stay active?

Check out your options at  
[bit.ly/ReturnedHome](https://bit.ly/ReturnedHome)

## How to volunteer?

**It's as easy as one, two, three...**

My name is Ruth and part of my role in Comhlámh is to provide people with information about international volunteering. 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 45 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 09 November 2019 at the Hibernia Conference Centre in Dublin Castle, and I would tell anyone interested in international 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 network.s. We also update VolOps with information about volunteering with the 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 websites 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 international development work.

Contact us for details on our face-to-face information sessions, email [info@comhlamh.org](mailto:info@comhlamh.org) telephone 01 478 3490 or tweet to @volopsrobot #VolOps