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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

Oct 2016 | Published By Comhlámh | Development Workers and Volunteers in Global Solidarity
www.comhlamh.org

Hands of Freedom mural, Chicago, Illinois. Photo Credit: Terence Faircloth CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Being Part of the Picture

MARK CUMMING
Comhlámh

All’s not well. We live in a deeply divided and unequal world. More than 2.5 billion people, or over a third of the world’s population, survive on less than $2 per day. Poverty, inequality and that sense of physical and psychological exclusion are not only manifested in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Despite the vast wealth in Ireland, exclusion of those on the margins, whether travellers, asylum seekers in direct provision or the growing numbers of homeless, is a painful reality.

The global financial crisis, the impacts of climate change, rising inequality, forced global migration, the rise of xenophobia are all pointers to a deeply flawed model of development.

Never before has there been such need for communities, ordinary citizens and people’s organisations, to become critically involved in the thought spaces required to plot a new future, to test alternative models and ways of being. There is a need to create a sustainable, equitable, and just society, both locally and globally.

Development at the most fundamental level involves the redistribution of power among members of society. For this to happen there needs to be a greater participation of ordinary citizens in all spheres of life. Recognising this, the global community has adopted the Sustainable Development Goals and have given a central place for the role of volunteering in mobilising ordinary people to bring about change.

Responsible volunteering is not about charity, giving a hand-out or a hand-up but about working in partnership on locally owned and driven programmes in a spirit of solidarity that values the sharing, the dialogue and intercultural learning that takes place. Your journey doesn’t end on your return to Ireland – in many ways this is the beginning. Comhlámh is there to support people through their journey in international volunteering from the time they think of getting involved right through to coming home and staying active in action for development. Get involved, be part of the picture.

“volunteering is not about charity, giving a hand-out or a hand-up but about working in partnership”

MARK CUMMING
Comhlámh

The following piece of fiction was written by Monica Corish, who has very kindly allowed us to republish it here.

In This One You Are Happy

A photograph, taking the year of the infamous Ethiopian famine of 1985. You are sitting on your mother’s shoulders, with your hands resting on her head, grinning fit to burst. Your mother is smiling too, on her back is a second child. Only the outline of the second baby’s head is visible, snug in a leather sling edged with cowrie shells.

You and your Ma are sharing some private, rib-tickling joke. Behind you are huts made of straw and canvas, and tall scrubby thorn trees, and people resting in the shade.

In the spring of 1985 I worked as a volunteer in Wad Kowli, a refugee camp in eastern Sudan. I had been teaching in a Sudanese school when the famine hit hard. You and your mother and your people began pouring over the border into Sudan in search of some hope to keep themselves and their families alive through the lean times. I went to work in the camp expecting to find a need so great that it would have erased all other needs. I went with the stock images of famine well established in my mind, of people reduced to nothing but hunger, nothing but survival.

And when I got there I saw the photographers and the reporters setting out to create exactly those stock images. They would arrive in the camp and head straight for the hospital to find the sickest, the most cliché ridden child: stick-limbs and a swollen belly, fly-ridden eyes, a lost and despairing look in the mother’s eye.

The global financial crisis, the impacts of climate change, rising inequality, forced global migration, the rise of xenophobia are all pointers to a deeply flawed model of development.

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Volunteering Skills
How we think and act as international volunteers shapes social change

ANNETTE O SULLIVAN
VSO

Volunteering overseas is undoubtedly a rewarding experience – you have the opportunity to support sustainable change and use your unique skills to positively impact on the lives of people in some of the world’s poorest communities.

That’s not to say that there aren’t challenges on each placement. Even veteran volunteers can find a completely foreign culture and work practices difficult to initially deal with.

No matter how much research you do about the country you’re going to and programme you’re working on, coming face-to-face with extreme poverty can be a big shock to the system. A lot of things you take for granted working in Ireland will not be available to you.

There may be power shortages and a lack of basic materials which make getting your job done all the more challenging. This is particularly true for health professionals. It can be very upsetting to see people with preventable illnesses or those who could easily be treated back home not being given the same chance of life. Take, for instance, the fact that in Tanzania, the neonatal mortality rate is about 12 times higher than in Ireland.

It is ultimately these professional challenges, however, that help you to develop new skills and grow as an individual. You are forced to tap into your own resources and think creatively about how to approach tasks.

You gain leadership and management experience as you provide advice and guidance to develop solutions with your local counterparts.

You surprise yourself as you pull up your sleeves and throw yourself into helping out. Building relationships with your new colleagues can also take longer because of language and cultural differences. Work processes may be initially difficult to comprehend.

In many African countries, for instance, everyone greets each other at the beginning of meetings. This is time-consuming but something volunteers come to really appreciate with time because it helps you to bond with your colleagues. Keeping an open mind and being ready to learn from those around you helps you to fit into the team.

It is through collaboration that you come to realise how to best benefit the school, hospital or office you are working in. And of course there may be extreme heat, unusual food and the odd creepy crawly to deal with. In general though, most VSO volunteers have been very surprised at how quickly they have adapted to living and working in a developing country.

You are amazed by how little you really need when there are more important things at hand.

If you’re ready to take on the challenges that international volunteering can offer you, get in touch with VSO Ireland. We’re always on the lookout for health, education and business professionals to work on our development programmes overseas and help in the fight against poverty.
Learning for the long term
How short term volunteering convinced me that I want to work in development long term.

JOANNE MULLIGAN
VMM International

Soon after beginning an internship with VMM International in April of this year, a short term volunteering opportunity arose and I jumped at the chance as I have been eager to experience development in Africa first hand.

Although the internship has, valuable knowledge and skills on international development so far, I truly believe that you need to experience development in the field in order to get a deeper insight into how it works.

Spending four weeks in Nansana, on the outskirts of Kampala, in Uganda was an incredible eye-opener for me. I split my time volunteering in two primary schools during my time overseas.

Both schools were dealing with very different situations, one being a severely unfunded school owned by the Catholic church, and the other a government run school with more access to resources but dealing with an issue of overcrowding.

My days at the two schools were spent assisting with the teaching of English through comprehension and dialogue sessions, in addition to carrying out art, music and physical education lessons. That is; I was an extra pair of hands to help relieve teachers.

The students I had a chance to interact with were some of the kindest and most polite children I have ever met.

What my experience taught me was this: Development and growth do not happen overnight, things take time. However, knowing that each step I take is working towards a bigger picture gives me the inspiration to continue with what I do.

I believe that in the long term the sharing of our skills with these communities and supporting them to carry out the work themselves can help so much more than merely throwing money and resources at them.

After spending a month immersed into Ugandan life, it frustrated me to see the misconception that the media gives the rest of the world about Africa.

There are charities and organisations who send out distorted, disrespectful images that do not clearly represent the communities.

These kind of images now make me wonder if that is what life is truly like for these people or whether it's what the organization feels it needs to portray in order to get donations; whether the people even know that their images are being used and for what purpose.

What I learnt overseas is that charities and organizations working in developing countries, in addition to volunteers who have experienced development first hand, have a responsibility to tell the story of these people and these communities in a respectful, appropriate and accurate way, especially in times when people do not have the ability to tell their story themselves.

My short experience in Uganda sparked a passion within me, left me with a feeling of determination and a motivation to continue this work, and convinced me that development is the right career path for me.

Seeing the work of development first hand made me realise that every little act that we perform can help in some way and every little thing we do has the potential to make a difference.

If more people got involved in development work, the change we could see could be astonishing. Uganda is only the beginning of my adventures to Africa as this first trip woke a desire in me to travel and explore more of Africa.

Joanne Mulligan teaching in Nansana, Uganda: Photo Credit VMM International
Laura Kennedy having volunteered in South Africa, then pursued a career in primary school teaching. She writes here about her time teaching in Nicaragua.

Choosing to leave the comforts of friends and family, a paid job, my own home and a way of life that I loved was never a difficult decision. I had spent six weeks volunteering in South Africa in my mid 20s and knew that it was something I always wanted to return to, this time with more skills to offer and for an extended period of time.

Having returned to college to retrain as a primary school teacher, inspired by my time in South Africa, and also having a fairly high level of Spanish, I found myself in a small fishing village in the northwest of Nicaragua, working at an after school club and also at the local primary school.

Arriving to what seemed like paradise, a small village on the Pacific Ocean with deserted beaches and the most beautiful sunsets, I quickly fell into the rhythm of life there. I chose to live with a local family so as to become a part of the community and share their way of life. The village has sporadic electricity and no running or potable water. Showers are buckets and toilets long drops. Water is drawn from the well to complete every task and nothing takes ‘just a minute’.

School begins at 7. There are four local teachers and roughly 100 children enrolled at the school. For there to be 50 or 60 there on a given day is a more accurate head count.

Most children drop out by 4th grade to help at home or to work and earn much needed money, living in a village where the majority survive on less than 2 dollars a day. Teaching styles are rather draconian and to cope with high numbers in the lower grades and falling numbers in the higher grades 1st and 5th grade share a teacher and classroom as do 2nd and 6th.

Working daily with the children in the school was incredibly rewarding but it was sharing methodologies with the teachers and watching them interact in a more child centred and interactive manner that will have the real lasting effect on the lives of the school children for years to come.

Watching the stern 1st grade teacher sing a song about the numbers with her class of 6 and 7 year olds was a pivotal moment for me, it was the first time the children had been taught with music and movement by their class teacher, and soon games of cards and bingo were understood to be of benefit in helping these children recognise their numbers up to 10, with which up to that point the majority had been struggling.

The heat was often times oppressive and the lack of basic facilities wearing in times of ill health or exhaustion. Spending 11 months with the one community and living with a local family ensured that I was welcomed in and made to feel a part of that community. However, I will always be the woman who had enough money to choose to live there.

We shared a present but our pasts couldn’t have been more different. Volunteering has many highs and lows, emotions are heightened and you return to the first world seeing life through new eyes. It is an experience I would never change and I look forward to the opportunity of sharing life with a community in the developing world again some time soon.

For anyone thinking of volunteering Comhlámh’s VolOps pages on Facebook and LinkedIn are an excellent place to find out about sending organisations and find the fit that is right for your skills, ensuring that both you and the project you work on benefit as much as possible from your volunteering experiences.
Want to use your skills in development projects overseas?

“…I’m annoyed at myself for not doing this sooner.”

Joanne, Uganda, Summer 2016

www.vmminternational.org
Call our Dublin office: +353 (0)1 8734 562

Short and long term programmes available with VMM.

Supports & Services
For Overseas Volunteers & Development Workers

Before You Go
Before going overseas, check out our web portal, Volunteering Options. We recommend that you sign up to Comhlámh’s Volunteer Charter, a guide for people who are going to volunteer. The Charter is guided by seven principles that aim to encourage responsible, respectful international volunteering.

We’re also harnessing the power of social media to help you link potential volunteers with volunteer opportunities. Use the #VolOps to connect with sending agencies and to find the latest volunteering opportunities.

Make sure the sending agency you’re considering volunteering with is a signatory to Comhlámh’s Code of Good Practice for Sending Agencies.

Protecting your social welfare rights while overseas

If you’re working or volunteering in the Global South, it’s important to consider your social insurance record while you’re away. Comhlámh can assist you with this through the Volunteer Development Worker (VDW) Scheme, which we administer on behalf of the Department of Social Protection.

Keeping your social insurance record active will ensure you have access to the range of short and long-term benefits that are available to people who have paid social insurance. This is especially important if you are going overseas for a long time, as it may be difficult to make up gaps in the future. Before you go overseas, check your eligibility for the VDW scheme with Comhlámh.

The Public Service Pension Scheme (PSPS)

If you are a public servant on an authorized career break volunteering overseas, you may qualify for your pension contribution paid while you are on assignment. Contact us for more information.

Coming Home

Coming Home Weekends

If you have returned home after being overseas for three months or more, our residential Coming Home Weekend could be for you. It will give you an opportunity to meet with fellow returnees, reflect on your experiences overseas, and to explore opportunities for staying involved in development issues from Ireland.

Counselling

Many returnees have found that appropriate counselling can be helpful in the process of adjusting to life back in Ireland. We can provide you with information and confidential advice to help you access counselling.

Career Guidance

If you’re interested in a career in international development, check out our jobs noticeboard or get in touch with us about the support services to help you with the transition back to life in Ireland. These include counselling, career guidance, and career coaching.

Join Comhlámh

Our members campaign and educate others on international development issues, working for global justice from Ireland. Members of Comhlámh can get involved in a host of member activities and groups, taking action on global justice issues.

www.comhlamh.org
www.twitter.com/comhlamh
www.facebook.com/comhlamh
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Global standard of volunteering

‘The highest-regarded set of guidelines, though, is developed by Comhlamh, an Irish organisation’.

PHILIP MUDGE
Volunteering Quality Project Officer

What is the Comhlámh Code of Good Practice?

Comhlámh’s Code of Good Practice (CoGP) for Volunteer Sending Agencies is a set of standards recognised as best practice in international volunteering for development.

‘The highest-regarded set of guidelines, though, is the Code of Good Practice for Volunteer-Sending Organisations developed by Comhlámh, an Irish organisation’.

The Guardian, Jan 13th 2016

The CoGP is based on a vision of volunteers working in solidarity for a just, equitable and sustainable world in volunteer programmes that:
• Are underpinned by a belief in global justice
• Are based in good development practice
• Address locally identified needs focused on the partner projects and communities.

To ensure overseas volunteering has a positive impact for the three main stakeholders – the local project and community, the volunteer and the sending agency – the CoGP is based on these core values:
• Cultural exchange and mutual understanding
• Development education and the importance of contributing to development
• Partnership
• Quality
• Solidarity
• Sustainability
• Valuing volunteering and encouraging appropriate volunteer attitudes

• Our volunteer programmes are based on realistic aims and objectives and provide volunteer roles that are appropriate and valuable to the host community.
• Our organisation provides potential volunteers with accurate and independent information about the organisation and volunteer placements.
• Our organisation uses equitable, consistent and transparent volunteer recruitment and application procedures.
• Our organisation ensures that volunteers participate in appropriate preparation, training and induction.
• Our organisation provides sufficient resources to local partners to run sustainable volunteer programmes.
• Our organisation takes all practicable steps to ensure the protection, safety and well-being of volunteers and partner community members.
• Our organisation provides comprehensive and effective debriefing for returned volunteers.
• Our programme development is informed by ongoing monitoring and evaluation.
• Our organisation supports volunteers to understand the wider context of development in which volunteering is taking place, and encourages continued learning and engagement.
• Our organisation accepts and celebrates the diversity and individuality of our volunteers and assists and provides for their varying support needs.
• Our organisation provides comprehensive and effective debriefing for returned volunteers.
• Our organisation provides potential volunteers with accurate and independent information about the organisation and volunteer placements.

What does it mean to be a signatory to the CoGP?

Signatories to the CoGP are organisations that have an established record of sending volunteers to the global south, and sign up to these 11 principles:

CoGP signatories undertake annual self audits and are externally reviewed to measure their programme quality against these standards. CoGP signatory organisations display the CoGP signatory logo on their websites and other promotional materials.

CoGP signatory organisations that have attained all the key Core Indicators and at least 85% of all the indicators for each of the 11 principles are awarded Comprehensive Compliance Status.

This is the highest quality standard for Irish volunteer programmes and is unique globally as an assurance for you as a volunteer, your family and any corporate or personal sponsors that your volunteer experience will be responsible, ethical and sustainable.

What to look out for and what to avoid when choosing volunteer sending organisations

If you are thinking of volunteering in the global south you should look for one of the three Comhlámh CoGP signatory logos on the websites and promotional materials of the agencies that you are thinking of volunteering with. This will ensure that your volunteering experience will be safe, responsible and focussed on real needs in the host community.

If you are considering volunteering with organisations that are not signatories to the code, both to protect your own safety and wellbeing whilst on your placement and to ensure that your volunteering experience will be focussed on the development needs of the partner project and community, be sure to check all aspects of their proposed projects against the principles and standards of the CoGP.
Development and Solidarity

“Organisations have a responsibility to their volunteers on placement and on return to ensure that their role is nourished, supported, directed in some way, channeling that energy and reflection into action.”

JANE MELLETT
Former SAVIO volunteer

Author JK Rowling made the headlines recently when she wrote a series of twitter take downs harshly criticising international volunteering.

She stated that she would not support “appeals that treat poor children as opportunities to enhance ‘Westerners’ CV’s. ‘voluntourism”

Rowling made some good points highlighting the dangers of organisations profiting from international volunteering. Another blog also went viral in July suggesting that volunteers to African countries should ask themselves the following four questions before they travel (I love number 4):

1. Would you volunteer abroad if you had no cameras with you?
2. Does the agency have the same values and intentions as you do?
3. Are you going to do more harm than good?
4. Would you trust yourself to do this job in your own country?

This debate is around a long time. I began volunteering overseas 16 years ago while in college. A programme for students offered summer placements in India and I jumped at the opportunity. Our Messiah complexes firmly packed in our backpacks, we spent 10 weeks working in Kolkata and it wasn’t long before that distinct feeling that we were in the way had sunk in.

I’ve had many further experiences of volunteering in India since then and each and every experience has been a beneficial one for me. Yes, for me! I wonder where I would be without those experiences and I cherish them all. Like Rowling suggests, it did my CV ‘the world of good, enhanced my world view, opened my mind to new cultures, religions, experiences, friendships and endless exciting and challenging experiences.

Criticisms of the volunteer experience are well documented and accuse volunteers of contributing to a type of ‘poverty tourism’ that reinforces colonial relationships of superiority. Critics question why volunteers think they can, and have the right to, meet the ‘needs’ of communities in the so-called developing world.

While the self-centered motivations are there, the motivation to ‘help’ and ‘do-good’ are considered not much better, creating huge power imbalances and promoting the idea that ‘we know best’.

However, I still believe that the international volunteer experience has the potential to be beneficial for everyone involved: host community, volunteer and sending organisation.

They, rightly, challenged unrealistic expectations around ‘saving’ and ‘helping’ and made it clear that while a volunteer’s presence may be useful to a host community, most often it is the volunteer who benefits the most. So how to move from this into a responsible experience for all?

I was encouraged to travel with BOVA as a ‘learner’ and a ‘guest’. It relieved me of my Messiah complex and encouraged me to reflect, reflect, reflect on everything. Travelling as ‘learner’ can overturn the power dynamic which an attitude of ‘helping’ and ‘doing good’ creates. A mutual relationship can be forged between volunteer, host community and sending organisation.

It opens up huge potential for what is called a “pedagogy of the non-oppressed” potentially allowing people to enhance their understanding of the world around them in order to transform it. While doing a ‘small’ piece of research on this issue I spoke to host communities in India who, above all, emphasised the effect of these placements on the volunteer.

Many local projects saw international volunteering

as capable of causing positive changes in an individual’s values and lifestyle. This, in turn, can promote international solidarity and raise awareness of global ‘development’ issues. I quote one participant who noted: “…it has changed people a lot, in their perspectives to life, to their own situations, their lifestyles and attitudes that they have back home. That is the biggest change they experience and I believe we contribute to them”.

Of course, this ‘conscientisation’ is not enough – all organisations have a responsibility to their volunteers on placement and on return to ensure that their role is nourished, supported, directed in some way, channeling that energy and reflection into action.

If this happens, the volunteer becomes a huge asset to the host community and to development organisations at home in terms of education & advocacy. A returned volunteer is an hugely useful resource as they are often extremely motivated and passionate about their experience.

JK Rowling won’t be the last person to criticise the volunteer experience, and it is good that we keep ourselves in check. It is easy to be cynical, but if we remain there, then nothing will be achieved. The volunteer experience has certain challenges and issues which must be continuously addressed and the Comhlamh Code of Good Practice goes a long way to address those issues.

Good development work needs alliances, fellowship, sisterhood, solidarity and straight forward, honest to goodness international co-operations across the board. The role of the international volunteer can play an integral part of this being a voice of solidarity while challenging systems of oppression which affect their brothers and sisters in so-called developing countries.

“If you’ve come to help me, you’re wasting your time…
But if you’ve come because your liberation is bound with mine, then let us go together.”

-Lilla Watson

The Volunteer Charter is a guide for people who are going to volunteer overseas in developing countries. It sets out seven principles that aim to encourage responsible, responsive international volunteering. Each of these principles contains a list of questions to help you make sure that you have thought about the issues raised, and to ensure that you know why they are important.

1. Reflect on my motivations for and expectations of my volunteer placement.
2. Familiarise myself with my role description and host organisation before departure.
3. Respect local customs and adopt the role of learner and guest.
4. Act always in a professional manner and be flexible and adaptable.
5. Take due care of my personal safety and physical and mental health.
6. Channel the experiences and knowledge gained while overseas into Irish society.
7. Accept and sign a copy of the Volunteer Charter principles.
The road less travelled
From a short-term volunteer to coordinator of my own project.

LINDSAY CLEARY
Kimmage CSC Alumni

I am not one to believe in grand, life-changing experiences, but the decision to volunteer for a month with SERVE at Young Africa Mozambique six years ago certainly had a butterfly effect that would lead me to a career that I could never have imagined. Today, my partner Mark and I are coordinating the expansion of the international youth organisation Youth Africa into Zambia. It is a huge opportunity, massive responsibility and the biggest challenge of our lives so far. And I can honestly say it wouldn’t be this way if it weren’t for that short-term volunteer placement.

Of course, at the time I had no idea of the trajectory I was about to be on. I had just graduated from DCU, my Communications degree a testament to a long-time dream of working in the media. I was starting to doubt whether this was the right industry for me or not, but I had no idea what else I could do. So when I went to Beira, Mozambique, I was newly graduated and looking for an interesting summer learning a bit about life in southern Africa. Once I arrived, I realised pretty quickly that I loved it there. I really missed it when I got back to Ireland, and that’s when I knew I definitely didn’t want to pursue a media career anymore. Instead, I wanted to work in development.

So there I was, with a degree in Communications and faded journalism aspirations, looking for a way to break into an industry I had one month of direct experience in. With luck I was offered an opportunity by SERVE to join their team in Belfast as a Communications Intern. I could use my Communications degree and be a part of this world which was so new and interesting to me; supporting development programmes.

Interning, like volunteering, is such a great opportunity to experience different types of work. I learned so much about the intricacies of development while with SERVE.

After two years I wanted to do something to move away from communications and into the programme side of things. I decided to do my Masters in Development Studies at Kimmage Development Studies Centre. As I was submitting my thesis, there was an opportunity to join the team at Young Africa. So I became a volunteer again, back in Mozambique right where it all started, but this time on a Long Term Volunteer contract.

Fast forward to today, and I am working in a career I never imagined when I signed up to volunteer for the first time. Volunteering is something that some of us never stop doing. Many people take the opportunity to volunteer overseas once in their lifetime; some carrying changed perspectives with them forever, others a paragraph on their CV and nothing more. Some regularly volunteer locally or internationally, while keeping their jobs separate. For some of us though, volunteering leads to a whole new profession. So what are the elements that took me from a short-term volunteer to coordinator of my own project within the same organisation?

Firstly, using the skills I already had as a way of breaking into a new sector. My qualification was seemingly unrelated to international development, but it was exactly what I needed to get started. Don’t make the mistake of believing your qualifications and experience are irrelevant. Use your skills, do what you enjoy doing, and see where it takes you.

Secondly, the close partner relationship between sending organisation and host organisation. SERVE and Young Africa share the same values and work very closely. Without this, I never would have been able to build my own relationship with Young Africa in Mozambique. You cannot do development work without working at a local level, and this goes for volunteering too.

Thirdly, Young Africa is a volunteer-led organisation. Young Africa’s founders started out on a voluntary basis, and now direct an international youth organisation with a presence in six countries. The spirit of volunteering is not just about using your time to help others, but a way of working that says that you are motivated by purpose, not your bank balance. Many of the staff at Young Africa started out as volunteers, and volunteers bring so much to the organisation every day.

Finally, straightforward risk-taking and gumption. If Mark and I hadn’t entered into our volunteer roles with the attitude of giving everything a go, we would not have this amazing opportunity in front of us now. If you’re volunteering, open up. You never know where it’ll take you.

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