Comhlámh’s Coming Home Book

A guide for returning overseas volunteers and development workers
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A guide to returning home for overseas volunteers and development workers

Reverse culture shock/ Back in action/
Health/ Job-hunting/Further studies

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Comhlámh is the Irish Association of Volunteers and Development Workers. We are a membership organisation open to anyone with an interest in contributing to global justice from Ireland. Our vision is of volunteers and development workers working in solidarity for a just, equitable and sustainable world. Our work is driven by the experience and passions of our members and supporters.

Here are some key areas of our work:

• We support best practice in volunteering for development through the Code of Good Practice for Volunteer Sending Agencies, the Volunteer Charter, our range of pre-decision and pre-departure training courses, and our #VolOps resources.

• We support volunteers and development workers on their return to Ireland through debriefing, counselling and career guidance referrals, PRSI and pension scheme supports, Coming Home Weekends and courses.

• We respond to the needs and ideas of our members. Our member-led groups work on issues including Trade Justice, Options and Issues in Volunteering, Focus Magazine and Creative Writing for Development.

• We run a series of ‘First Wednesday Debates’ where speakers and the public are invited to discuss current burning questions about international development. #firstWedsDebates

• We support members of the public to build their knowledge and expertise through our Skills in Development Education course and Trade Justice course. These courses are offered at a discounted rate to our members.

Find out more about our work throughout this book and if you would like to become a member, we would be delighted to welcome you on board. You can do so at www.comhlamh.org or drop us a line at info@comhlamh.org or (01)4783490.
I found it hard to relay the experience with friends and family. They did their best to listen but I realised quickly that people have to get on with their own lives and often don’t have time to sit and listen to one’s thoughts, reflections and feelings after living in a developing country and working with people that have starkly different living conditions than we do.

My Nepal experience began to not feel real. I came across the coming home book and it immediately made me feel like I wasn’t alone. I thought the sense of disorientation and lostness I felt were specific to my experience.

The coming home book was the beginning of my realisation that many people find it difficult to reintegrate back into their old lives after volunteering. It’s been three months since coming back from Kathmandu and I’m finally starting to find my feet in terms of work, social life and my mental and emotional health.

I wish somebody would have warned me that it would be difficult to come home but now that I am out the other side of it, I’m glad to be part of something that can help other people understand their experiences and make a smoother transition back to life than I did.”

Brian Kingston is a returned volunteer from Nepal, where he spent three months volunteering with a children's education charity. Since being inspired by the passion of so many Nepali people to make a positive change in their country he has become involved in working for social justice and reform in Irish society. He is currently applying for PhD programs to further his goals of partaking in social change.
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Welcome Home!

Congratulations on completing your overseas assignment and welcome back home!

Coming home from an overseas placement has its highs and lows. There is the excitement of meeting up with family and friends again or sharing your favourite meal together or of enjoying the slightly cooler climate perhaps.

But, as many returning volunteers and development workers know, there can also be struggles in re-adjusting to our home environment; where life moves at a faster pace, where consumerism is inescapable, and the little things that preoccupy the minds of our friends and family can seem trivial.

Often, we are returning from an experience that has had a very deep and profound impact upon us; one which we are determined to ‘do something with’, to keep with us and never forget the lessons we learned or the experiences we had.

This process is often confusing and troubling as we struggle to balance the mixture of emotions, memories and experiences as life moves on at its own pace.

This book aims to help you make sense of some of that confusion.

But as the Irish Association of Volunteers and Development Workers, we have been listening to the experiences of returning volunteers and development workers since 1975.

Their experiences have informed our work and the ideas outlined in this book reflect their collective wisdom. Comhlámh’s Coming Home Book is here to support you as you find your feet again in the practical matters of social welfare, career guidance and taking care of your psychological wellbeing.
We are also here to help you find your voice in speaking out on issues of global and local justice; to learn, and to lend your skills to express solidarity with those struggling against global injustice around the world.

We look forward to welcoming you to our community of fellow returnees and activists! We hope that you will enjoy reading this book and that it will offer some guidance to you as you prepare to come ‘home’.

Do let us know if you have any thoughts or feedback as we would be very happy to hear it.

Mark Cumming
Head of Comhlámh

Mark has been a member of Comhlámh since 1991 before he headed off to Kenya to work as a community worker with VMM. On return he worked with APSO for several years preparing people for their assignment and re-entry back into Irish life. Subsequently with Trócaire, he lived in Rwanda working on their Peace Building and Civil Society programmes and then back in Ireland on supporting Governance and Human Rights programming across their programme countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. He became the Head of Comhlámh in 2013.
Reverse Culture Shock

“There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered”

- Nelson Mandela

Just as it is highly important to thoroughly prepare oneself before going overseas it is also essential to spend time preparing for returning home. In the rush of preparing to come home it is easy to overlook our own wellbeing. No matter how long we are away for, travel and re-entry stress can affect everyone.

In pre-departure trainings volunteers and development workers learn about culture shock, and learn to anticipate feelings of disorientation, homesickness or being out of place and frustrated upon first arrival. To prepare ourselves for this challenge we find out about the local culture, learn a few words of the local language and try to flex our muscles of patience and flexibility until we find our feet.

Reverse culture shock is similar to culture shock in many ways; we cannot necessarily prevent ourselves from experiencing it (nor, some might argue, would we want to) but there are strategies that we can use to try to manage the experience and prevent it from becoming a more serious condition.

For some people it can take a couple of years before they feel ‘at home’ again in their home country; but no matter how long or short it takes, it is important to remember that reverse culture shock is a process that has a beginning, middle and end.

When we come back home from an overseas placement we need to integrate our experience overseas and the changes it has made to our person into our old familiar life at home, even though it might not be feeling so familiar anymore.
The physical, mental, emotional and spiritual challenge that is presented by this process is referred to as reverse culture shock.

It is experienced differently by every person; whether feeling disconnected from family and peers, a loss in self confidence, lacking a sense of purpose, feeling guilty towards those left behind, experiencing negative thoughts about oneself, work, family or the future and the world, having difficulty sleeping, a loss of appetite or tearfulness. The symptoms may not always be the same but the cause is.

Frequently returning volunteers and development workers cite the return process as the most challenging aspect of their overseas experience. It is now recognised that re-entry shock is more severe than the shock of meeting a new culture for the first time.

If you notice these symptoms, you may need to take some steps to address them as you continue to transition back home.

My initial happiness about returning home soon turned to shock. On my return I was constantly asked what China is like. Words cannot adequately describe my experience there, the culture, the environment, the people, the mindset, the attitudes. Having been away for three years, I had left all talk of recession behind me. Suddenly, I found myself in an environment mired by disillusionment, disenchantment, and apathy with our political system and life in general. I found myself overwhelmed with the choices on offer in shops, and restaurants here. I struggled with the alcohol culture. My family, and many friends, couldn't understand my feelings or perspective. Close relationships disappeared while, fortunately, others strengthened.’

Evelyn Donohoe was a teacher in China for one year. She returned in 2013 and since then she has been interning with Boardmatch and volunteering as a co-ordinator of Child Aid Ireland-India
STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK:

• Look after your physical health – as well as getting a check up, ensure you are eating healthily and getting some exercise.

• Share your experiences – if you feel your friends or family have got bored listening to you talk about your experiences, meet up with other returnees or get in touch with us in Comhlámh to help you make those connections. The Coming Home Weekends can be a great space for doing this. Alternatively, you may find writing a blog or keeping a diary is a rewarding outlet for you.

• Avail of, or seek out, a personal debriefing from your sending agency. Research shows that a debriefing can help to relieve symptoms of reverse culture shock.

• Take time out to reflect on your experiences.

• Be patient with yourself as you process your feelings and adjust back to life at home: it is normal to experience symptoms of reverse culture shock on your return.

• Be patient with friends and family: their lives have carried on while you were away and although they may be interested in your experiences, they may also struggle to relate to them.
• Keep in touch with friends from overseas.

• Look after your mental health – many people find mindfulness, meditation, journaling, yoga or reconnecting with nature to be important ways to support their mental well-being.

• If your symptoms do not slowly begin to improve, consider seeking out additional supports and help. More information on this is available on page 24 or from www.comhlamh.org.

FURTHER RESOURCES ON REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK

Comhlámh’s Support Services including Coming Home Weekends, Moving Forward Days, Debriefing and Counselling Information Service. See page 24 for more details.

Burn Up or Splash Down: Surviving the culture shock of re-entry by Marion Knell (2007)

The Art of Coming Home by Craig Storti (2001)

Understanding and Coping with Travel Stress – an online course from the Headington Institute www.headington-institute.org.

There is a wide range of resources available on this website covering many topics that may affect volunteers and development workers while overseas or on their return.

See also resources for self-care listed on page 21.
Matt’s Coming Home Story

Matt York spent three years working as the Director of the Khuphuka community development project in Mqatsheni, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. He is also the founder and current trustee of the Mandala Trust, a UK based charity supporting grass roots children’s projects internationally. Since returning to Ireland he has been working as the Health Coordinator for the Offaly Traveller Movement.

It’s now been two years since I returned to live in Ireland after a period of three years directing a community development project in rural KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. It was an amazing journey which involved the development and implementation of a wide range of programmes responding to the needs of a deep rural Zulu community in the epicentre of the AIDS pandemic.

The courage, dignity, resilience and humour I found there had a profound impact that will live with me always.
Stepping out of the community and handing over to an entirely local team was a very proud moment for me, but also an experience of fear and uncertainty as to how I would find a meaningful role upon returning to Ireland. In the weeks and months following my return I found myself struggling to align myself with the values and priorities expressed around me in light of the reality I had left behind. I felt increasingly isolated and cynical of the culture I had returned to and had difficulty in finding meaning in my new situation.

In retrospect I can see that this reintegration period offered an opportunity to pause and see the world around me through fresh eyes. I was lucky enough to find a role in another community development project, this time working within the Irish Traveller community.

I rapidly discovered that many of the skills developed in Africa were easily transferable to my new role in Ireland. I was reminded that inequality, discrimination and the marginalisation of minority groups is not unique to communities in the global south.

The similarities I have found between the experience of institutional racism upon the Zulu community in apartheid South Africa and the experience of the Traveller community in contemporary Ireland are striking, as are the shared social impacts of dramatically poorer health, education, accommodation and economic outcomes.

I have also been able to channel energies into completing a master’s degree in development practice which I hope will aid future work both in Ireland and overseas.

My advice for anyone returning from development work overseas would be to realign themselves towards equality and social justice work as rapidly as possible. There are many opportunities to work or volunteer for groups and organisations within Ireland, as well as a great number of solidarity groups whose focus is overseas. In any case, Comhlámh is a great place to start and I am very grateful that they were there to support me upon my return.
Health Matters

One of the most important things you can do on your return from overseas is to ensure you are in good physical health. Once you are sure that you are fit, healthy and well rested, you will be better prepared to deal with the many other challenges of transitioning to life at home.

The following information has been supplied by Dr. Simon Collins of the Travel Health Clinic in Dublin www.travelhealth.ie. Dr. Collins spent several years working as a doctor across Africa in South Sudan, D.R. Congo, Sudan (Darfur), Congo-Brazzaville, Central African Republic and also in Haiti. Since returning to Dublin, he established the Travel Health Clinic to promote better health among tourists, volunteers and development workers travelling overseas.

A tropical medical check-up following a period spent abroad is done in order to detect and treat any infections which the traveller might unwittingly have picked up. It is of greatest relevance for those who:
- Travelled/lived in basic conditions for at least 3 months;
- Were significantly unwell while abroad;
- Swam or walked in fresh water in sub-Saharan Africa (Schistosomiasis/’Bilharzia’ risk).

In those who feel well, the ideal time for a check-up is three months following return to Ireland. A check-up should consist of a detailed questionnaire/history-taking by the doctor, a physical exam, some blood tests and stool
A FEW WORDS ON SCHISTOSOMIASIS/’BILHARZIA’:

This is a fresh-water parasite that is common in Africa (it can also occur in the Cambodia/Laos border area of the Mekong River but is less common there).

The parasite penetrates intact skin and more often than not, the traveller is unaware that they have become infected. The most common testing method involves blood testing. Blood testing is not accurate until at least 3 months since the last possible exposure to fresh water has passed.

*Self-treatment (using the medicine ‘Praziquantel’) without having first had blood testing performed is not a good idea, medically speaking.*

‘Praziquantel’ sourced in developing countries should not be used for treatment of Schistosomiasis – you have no way of knowing if it is partly or fully counterfeit, or inactive due to being poorly stored at high temperatures. It should instead be accessed via a chemist in Ireland, using a prescription written in Ireland.

Money saved in obtaining it abroad is a false economy in the case of a condition that needs to be definitively treated so that it does not linger in your system and cause complications in the future.

(Dr.) Simon Collins
FFTM (RCPS Glasg) DTM
Irish Medical Council Reg. No: 016473.
TROPICAL MEDICAL CHECKS - CLINICS

Tropical Medical Bureau, Gorey, Letterkenny, Limerick, Sligo and Waterford.  
1850 487 674 / www.tmb.ie
The TMB has a comprehensive website with information on many aspects of travel health.

Travel Health Clinic, Dublin  
(01) 663 4977 / www.travelhealth.ie
A General Practice clinic that specialises exclusively in Travel & Tropical Medicine.

International Society of Travel Medicine  
The ISTM has a database of all their members who provide medical checkups for returning travellers.  
www.istm.org

Kerrsland Surgery, Belfast  
The clinic provides vaccines, immunisations and expert medical advice on all travel-related health issues  
(028) 9065 7138 / www.kerrslandsurgery.com
TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

“The individual whose vision encompasses the whole world often feels nowhere so hedged in and out of touch with his surroundings as in his native land”

- Emma Goldman, Political Activist

It can sometimes seem hard to make the time to look after yourself. Volunteers and development workers who are used to prioritising others’ needs over their own can be particularly at risk of neglecting their own well-being.

Burnout is very common, both overseas and on return. On your return home, it is important to prioritise self-care for two reasons; because your well-being is highly important and because you need to be energised and refreshed in order to continue to be of service to others.

Sometimes it is inevitable that on returning home, there are a million and one things to do and that you are thrown straight into a job or a course of study and it can be hard to make time for yourself.

However, it is often the case that if you don’t take the time when you come home initially, your thoughts will catch up with you at a later point.

Alternatively you may find yourself with too much time on your hands; whether because of unemployment or finding that many of your close friends are no longer living nearby.

It can be a challenge to keep motivated and to find something purposeful to invest your time in. No
matter what your situation, your mental, emotional and spiritual health is just as important as your physical.

Every person will find different ways to look after themselves holistically. For some it is getting out and about in nature and getting physically active; this has amazing benefits for one’s mental health.

For others it can be spending time alone in quiet meditation or journaling. Others will practice yoga, others will talk through their emotions with those close to them, and others will find an artistic expression for their emotions.

Others still will find it most beneficial to throw themselves into some form of meaningful work. Most returnees find that some combination of the above works best for them – finding their own means of connecting with themselves, with their environment and with a purposeful task.

Take care of yourself on your return. You will likely need to relax, recharge and refocus. Taking time to look after yourself on your return might seem like the last thing you want to do when there are so many seemingly greater issues in the world deserving your attention; but it is one of the most important and selfless things you can do to ensure that you integrate your overseas experiences and ideas into life at home and continue to be of value to others.”

Janet Horner is a returned volunteer from Malawi, Ethiopia, Uganda and India. She is currently working as Comhlámh’s Information and Support Project Officer supporting volunteers pre-departure and on their return to access the support and information they need.
TALKING ABOUT YOUR OVERSEAS EXPERIENCE WITH OTHERS

It is important to talk about your overseas experience, to share what you have learned and what you were challenged by. For many returnees, they experience their friends and family ‘glazing over’ after a few minutes of relating their tales. It can feel as though no-one is really interested in or cares about their experiences.

Sometimes people can struggle to relate to or understand stories about a place so different than the ones they know, or else they may feel intimidated by stories of adventures and feel as though their lives are boring in comparison. They may, also, feel as though they are being judged for their own lifestyles and for not making more of a contribution. Inevitably, if friends or family feel like this they will not want to engage in conversations about your time away.

It can be useful to prepare a few sentences to respond to the question ‘How was it?’ Those that are interested will ask further questions and for those that aren’t you can drop it for the time-being; they might show more interest at a later point.

Returnees often find it useful to talk to one another. Even though their experiences might be very different, fellow returnees are more likely to relate to your stories and empathise with your feelings of being a returnee.

Comhláimh offers several opportunities for returning volunteers and development workers to make connections with one another. Find out more about these on page 51.

FURTHER RESOURCES FOR SELF-CARE

Mindfulnext is an online resource for organisations and individuals working in the field of aid and development. There are lots of interesting discussions and useful resources on the website. www.mindfulnext.org

The Centre for Humanitarian Psychology provides information, training and support for humanitarian aid workers to support their mental health and well-being. www.humanitarian-psy.org

The Sanctuary offers courses in mindfulness and meditation along with a variety of other creative ways to take care of ourselves. www.sanctuary.ie

Capacitar Ireland is part of the worldwide Capacitar network that promotes healing and well-being practices particularly with communities and individuals affected by violence, poverty and trauma. www.capacitar.org
Michelle’s Coming Home Story

Michelle Griffin volunteered as a teacher with Nurture Africa in Uganda in the summer of 2012 and 2013. Since returning home she has continued to teach full time and, since completing the Comhlámh ‘What Next?’ course in 2013 she has been writing a blog to inspire people to change their day-to-day habits to have a better impact on the planet and people around the world. www.letsliveconsciously.wordpress.com

My short time working in the primary schools of Nansana, Uganda, changed me in ways that even now I find it difficult to satisfactorily explain. I don’t believe a person can spend time in a country where most people’s day-to-day concerns differ so much from that with which so many of us concern ourselves here in the western world, without such change occurring.

However, I have been surprised by how lasting the impact has been of last summer in particular (the second summer I spent there) on my worldview. To say working overseas opened my mind would be a major understatement.

I knew after my first trip to Uganda in the summer of 2012 that working in the area of overseas aid in some capacity would remain a major feature of my life for the foreseeable future. It fascinated me that some friends and family-members found it difficult to understand why I wanted to go to Nansana again in 2013 to work as a volunteer coordinator. They wondered how I hadn’t yet “got it out of my system”.

Obviously, I’d “had it in my system” from a young age. Of
course, my time in Uganda only deepened this desire, embedding “it” more deeply “in my system”. So I didn’t question, on my return at the end of last summer, my impulse to immediately begin to think about and look into what I would do in summer 2014. As it happens, my plans involve volunteering in a school in Peru.

Comhlámh’s “What Next?” course last autumn was extremely important in helping me process my feelings and convictions about the work of overseas volunteers. While the “it” of which I speak is still a definite presence in my value system, its nature has developed.

I have been humbled by my experiences. I never thought I “knew it all” but I realised just how little I really know. I have gained infinitely more than I have shared in my time overseas, and I am sure the same will be the case on my upcoming trip.

News stories that once moved me now cut me to the quick. I argue with people and shed tears of anger when debating issues like global trade, rather than ending discussions with a lame “Oh sure, isn’t it awful really, whatever way you look at it?” or “each to their own, I suppose.”

I thought I had passion for equality before. I was wrong. I do now. Interacting, during Comhlámh’s course, with returned volunteers who’d had a variety of different experiences really helped me work out some of the changes in my mindset and gave me confidence in values I was inclined to start questioning prior to that.

Regarding this coming summer, I am really looking forward to working in South America. It is somewhere I have always wanted to go. I feel it is important to say that I no longer feel guilty for wanting to travel to places I’ve never been.

There is no give and take, when someone travels from a ‘developed’ to a ‘developing’ country, to ‘help’; there is a sharing of experiences, beliefs, knowledge and skills.

I always viewed people all over the world as my brothers and sister but this is now a steadfast belief of which I am painfully certain.

Volunteering is not martyrdom and should not even begin to resemble it. If one does not gain from the experience, it is not sustainable. As the saying goes, we are here for a good time, not a long time. But my addendum to that is that we have a duty to do what we can to make it an equally good time for everyone, regardless of geography.
Comhlámh’s Support Services

Comhlámh offers a number of supports for people to help with the transition back to life in Ireland.

Accessing support during the time of transition can be a valuable resource in supporting the re-entry process. Useful supports can include debriefing, counselling, career guidance services and reconnection events with other returnees.

It is also important to connect with other returnees and others who are passionate about similar issues.

Through our membership groups and events we offer opportunities for returnees to connect with one another and to share their experiences. More information about these groups and activities is available on page 51.

COMHLÁMH’S COMING HOME WEEKENDS

If you have returned home after a period overseas of three months or more, Comhlámh warmly invite you to attend our next Coming Home Weekend. These informal and relaxed weekends are held twice a year and provide an opportunity for returning volunteers to meet with fellow returnees, to reflect on their experiences overseas, to share mutual experiences (successes and challenges) of being overseas and to explore opportunities to use their skills and stay involved in development issues from Ireland. Previous participants have commented on how heartening it is to discover that others have felt similar fears, joys, frustrations and hopes.

The Coming Home Weekend has been described by previous participants as

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- “As good as counselling but less formal”
- “A chance to reflect, discuss, listen in a peaceful, relaxed environment”
- “The only thing of its kind that could have filled the gap in my life right now”

Find out when the next Coming Home Weekend is taking place or find out more about the weekends at www.comhlamh.org. You can also get in touch with us at 01 4783490 or info@comhlamh.org

I found it very difficult being back in Ireland when it felt that nothing had changed but I just couldn’t seem to fit back in. Being unemployed certainly didn’t help and all I wanted was to leave again – voicing this opinion to anyone that would listen naturally upset my friends and loved ones. I wasn’t able to attend my own volunteer debriefing and totally underestimated how important it was. Comhlámh’s Coming Home Weekend gave me a chance to put some of my frustrations into perspective and meet with other returned volunteers who shared similar stories. I felt so much more positive afterwards.”

Emma Dwyer volunteered in Malawi with UNV and participated in a Coming Home Weekend on her return. Since then she has worked in New York in Ireland’s Permanent Mission to the UN and recently began her current role as the Coordinator of Irish Rule of Law International in Dublin, a non-profit working with members of the Irish legal profession to implement projects in developing countries.

MOVING FORWARD DAYS

These are one-day courses specifically developed for people returning from placements of three months or less. The course is a chance to have a personal debriefing in a group setting. Whether you have already had a debriefing through your volunteer sending agency, or whether you went overseas independently, the space is open to anyone who wishes to have the opportunity to unpack experiences, meet other short term volunteers and identify next step options from Ireland. Keep an eye on our website and e-Link for details of this course, or get in touch with us in the office to find out more.
The opportunity to discuss and share our experiences was great. It re-enforced positive aspects of my time away and helped clear up and resolve negative ones. It was also extremely encouraging to hear other volunteers’ positive experiences.”

Anonymous feedback from a Comhlámh group debriefing participant

DEBRIEFING

Debriefing may take place individually or in a group setting and can be operational (relating to the work performed) or personal (providing a sense of closure and reflection on the experience as a whole). In certain incidents, a critical incident debrief may also be required where a traumatic incident was experienced. This type of debrief is designed to help individuals cope with post traumatic stress.

Comhlámh recommends that every returning volunteer and development worker should have access to both a personal and operational debrief. Regardless of how long you have been overseas for or whether you feel positively or negatively about your experience and your return home a debrief is highly recommended; many returnees comment, after having participated in a debriefing session, that they were surprised by how valuable they found the opportunity.

If you cannot, or choose not to, access a debriefing through your sending agency, Comhlámh can arrange an individual personal or critical incident debrief for you. The debriefing sessions are one-to-one meetings and generally last 2-3 hours. They are held in private and are totally confidential. Comhlámh can offer a limited number of debriefings free of charge. For more information contact us on 01 4783490 or email info@comhlamh.org. Emails marked with ‘FAO: Information and Support Officer’ will be treated in the strictest of confidence.
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Further Reading on Debriefing

Debriefing Aid Workers and Missionaries (2012), People in Aid

Effective Debriefing (Information Notes), Debbie Lovell-Hawker

Both of the above resources are available from the People in Aid website www.peopleinaid.org/resources

COUNSELLING INFORMATION AND ADVICE

The period after the return from an overseas assignment can be a fruitful time to engage in counselling. It provides an opportunity to work through some ‘old’ issues which may have come to the fore while overseas or to talk out crises relating to the assignment, such as security problems, stress, trauma or illness. Appropriate counselling can be helpful in the process of re-adapting.

If, after participating in a debriefing session, you feel you would benefit from some further psychological support, then
Comhlámh can provide you with information and advice to help you access appropriate and affordable counselling wherever possible. This information service is offered in the strictest confidence. Contact Comhlámh in confidence for information and advice on finding an appropriate counsellor and therapy: 01 478 3490 or email info@comhamh.org. Emails marked with ‘FAO: Information and Support Officer’ will be treated in the strictest of confidence.

CAREER GUIDANCE SERVICE

Many returning volunteers, inspired by their overseas experience, want to find professional employment in the development sector. Comhlámh offers general guidance to returnees, including our online jobs notice board. We can also provide referrals for returnees to a career guidance professional with experience of the development sector. This service is highly recommended for those seeking a little extra support in making decisions regarding their career and finding opportunities. In some cases this service can be offered at a subsidised rate. Please get in touch for more details. Contact us on 01 478 3490 or email info@comhamh.org to find out more about this service.

Some words of advice to get you started on your search for a career in the development sector can be found on page 35.

SOCIAL WELFARE

It is important to keep your social insurance record active while you are overseas. Having a complete social insurance record helps you to access many different social welfare supports on your return including jobseekers, maternity and illness benefit. Your record will also contribute to your entitlement to a State Pension.

Comhlámh administers a PRSI Scheme for volunteers called the
Volunteer Development Worker Scheme. This scheme is normally the best option for volunteers to protect their social welfare entitlements while overseas.

**How the VDW Scheme Works:**

Volunteers and Development Workers meeting certain criteria can qualify for ‘VDW PRSI Credits’ for a period spent working in a developing country (including preparation period beforehand) up to a maximum of 5 years. These VDW Credits are normally “fully reckonable”, which means they are effectively treated as paid contributions by the Department of Social Protection (DSP).

The application form for the VDW Scheme is available through Comhlámh and at [www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie). It must be completed by you as the applicant, your sending agency and Comhlámh. On your return from overseas it will be submitted to the Department of Social Protection.

It is important that either you or your sending agency inform Comhlámh immediately on your return from assignment. If you do make a claim for a social welfare benefit, remember to identify yourself as a Volunteer Development Worker when you lodge it in your local Social Welfare Office. A list of Social Welfare local offices by county can be found at [www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie).

More information about the scheme is available at [www.comhlamh.org](http://www.comhlamh.org).

**Voluntary Contributions**

If you are ineligible for the VDW Scheme, you may be eligible to pay Voluntary Contributions. Voluntary Contributions provide cover for long-term benefits such as pensions, but not short-term benefits such as those for illness, unemployment, maternity, occupational injuries and dental and optical treatment. For more
While Comhlámh offers support services tailored to the needs of returning volunteers and development workers, other information see booklet SW 8 downloadable from www.welfare.ie or phone Voluntary Contributions Section of DSP on (051) 356000 / (01) 704 3000.

There are strict time limits to paying voluntary contributions, so you should look into this option as soon as possible on your return.

**Posted Workers:**

A third option to protect your social welfare rights while on assignment is to be a ‘posted worker’, which means that you are retained on the Irish social welfare system and remain subject to Irish social insurance whilst serving overseas.

This scheme needs to be arranged pre-departure and in cooperation with your sending agency. If you are planning to go overseas again or if you have any questions on this scheme you can find out more at www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Social-Insurance-PRSI-for-Persons-while-Working-Abroad.aspx

**Public Services Pension Scheme for Volunteer Development Workers**

If you are a public servant volunteering overseas under certain qualifying conditions you may be entitled to have your pension contributions paid for your time overseas. If you have applied for this scheme, contact Comhlámh immediately on your return to process your application.

For further information please contact Comhlámh on (01) 4783490 or info@comhamh.org.

**Further Support Resources:**

While Comhlámh offers support services tailored to the needs of returning volunteers and development workers, other
organisations have information available for all kinds of returnees. You may find it helpful to connect with these organisations.

**Crosscare Migrant Project**
CMP is an information and advocacy organisation working with emigrants, returning emigrants and migrants coming to live in Ireland.
www.migrantproject.ie

**Citizens Information**
The Citizens Information provides information on public services and entitlements in Ireland. The information provided here is relatively extensive and covers various aspects relevant to returning from overseas. There are local drop-in centres as well as an online service www.citizensinformation.ie
Jodie Neary was a volunteer and worked in Bolivia for two years from 2008 – 2010 in the area of education. Upon returning to Ireland, she got involved in Irish politics and social justice issues. She is currently working as a Personal Assistant to a serving T.D. She continues to be interested in overseas development issues, contributing to Comhlámh’s Focus magazine and volunteering whenever she can.

Comhlámh has brought me full circle as a volunteer.

I went to Bolivia, alone, without the help, assistance or guidance of an NGO or organisation. I
was being brave and naïve but fascinated by the opportunity of raw experience as well as development issues. Call it personal and global development but I ended up working for a local NGO teaching English among other things and staying there for two years.

I was disadvantaged because I didn’t have institutional support or the array of services host organisations may offer and I encountered situations I was totally unprepared for.

Upon my return to Ireland, I was even more confused about the complex issues surrounding development and poverty. It was when I started experiencing symptoms of ‘reverse culture shock’ that I attended Comhlámh’s Coming Home Weekend. The weekend activities made all of us there feel normal for the first time since returning.

It was also a weekend that launched my continued interest in the area of development education through Comhlámh. Whereas other organisations deal with only one aspect or a defined period of time during your volunteership, Comhlámh deal with the whole spectrum, ensuring that volunteers have opportunities to continue their interest in development education which they find interesting and rewarding and which continue to offer benefit others.

My many activities of engagement with Comhlámh includes writing for its development magazine Focus, attending debates in various venues and helping at Irish Aid events. Comhlámh have also fully trained me as one of their facilitators to help other volunteers upon their return to Ireland.

This is what I mean by Comhlámh bringing me full circle as a volunteer. I started alone, came back to reassuring company, encouraged by Comhlámh to continue my development work at home in Ireland, and trained by them to encourage others to do the same. My advice is to have Comhlámh as your support team before, during and after a volunteer placement and to enjoy the good company it brings!
Once you have had time to find your feet again on return, to look after yourself, and to reconnect with friends and family, the next step is to seek out ways to use the experiences you gained overseas. There are many issues to consider when you are working out the best way to continue to contribute to global development. You may find yourself drawn to a career in the development sector, or possibly hungry to learn more about development issues. Maybe you would like to get stuck into tackling injustices and inequalities in your own community, or lobbying our government and businesses here about global issues; or possibly you want to educate friends and family about the issues, people and communities that you worked with overseas.

Whatever means of engagement you are interested in, we hope to be able to support you in getting involved. You may find these Comhlámh resources to be a useful starting point:

**What Next: A Toolkit for Returned Volunteers**

**Be the Change: A Toolkit for Taking Action against Poverty and Injustice**

In the history of Comhlámh, returned volunteers and development workers have been at the forefront of change making and activism from Ireland. This is continuing even today, and whatever you are interested to do, there are many ways in which you can continue your engagement in development from Ireland. From personal lifestyle changes to raising awareness and campaigning, each returnee has their own unique path of action.”

Grainne O’Neill Comhlámh’s Volunteer Engagement Officer and debriefer. Grainne volunteered in Zambia.
If you’ve arrived back to Ireland after volunteering overseas you may be exploring options for working in development here at home. Although the job market has contracted considerably in recent years, some of that resilience that you drew on overseas may be needed in finding a job in the sector or further afield.

**Step 1: Getting ready – know yourself**

The first thing is to try to **get some clarity on what you are looking for**? Ask yourself, perhaps inspired by your recent experience, **what are you really looking for**? Dream a little. There’ll be plenty of time to ‘get real’ but for now describe your ideal job? What would you like to be doing and in what type of organisation (INGO, NGO, public, private sector, multilateral organisation, international organisation, etc.)?

Some people only want to work for an NGO, others see themselves working at multilateral level. What are you setting your sights on? Is there a particular **size of organisation** you see yourself working in? Remember if you work for a small organisation you are most likely to get greater **breadth of experience** whereas if you work for a larger organisation you are most likely to get a greater **depth of experience**. What are you looking for?

Now jot down your **favourite skills** (what are you good at; put modesty aside and record your top 5 skills). If you’re unsure, ask a few colleagues or a former
boss - someone whose opinion you value. And remember when considering your favourite skills, think about what you’re good at as well as what you enjoy doing. For each of your top skills come up with an example to show the depth to which you have this skill - beginner, intermediate, expert, i.e. could teach this skill to others.

If you really don’t know what you want, jot down what you do know and explore, test and research until you get clarity. Begin and you never know what may happen. Without paying attention to discovering what it is you’re looking for you are likely to be like a mushroom and remain in the dark! Remember what we pay attention to grows.

So now hopefully, you have some clarity of what you want, you have described the type of organisation you want to work with and your favourite skills. There are other elements but that’s enough to get you started.

**Step 2: Getting ready to put yourself out there**

**Update you CV** – make sure you highlight **your achievements** as typically employers want to know what you’ve done more so than what you were responsible for. Remember achievements have three elements, i.e. describe:

1. What you did;
2. How you did it and
3. The result or benefit or outcome or impact or value of what you did (or simply put the ‘so what’).

**Put your name in lights.** No need to say Curriculum Vitae as everyone knows it’s your CV, instead insert your name: **YOUR NAME, BA (Hons) Social Policy, MSC International Development**

**Include your Linkedin address** on your CV as it’s becoming increasingly common.

**Get social media savvy.** Follow potential employers on different social media channels and contribute to online discussions. Try to make yourself visible: raise your profile.

**Network:** If you’ve been away a while you may need to update or build your network of contacts. Take a blank page and list everyone in your network who’s useful to you in terms of finding employment. Are there any gaps in your network? Who should you be connecting with that will enable you to learn more
about the job you have set your sights on? Let as many people as possible know that you are searching for work.

Make contact with prospective employers and get to know their organisations. The Dóchas Wednesday News (www.dochas.ie) and the Comhlámh events calendar (www.comhlamh.org/events) are great resources for finding out about events.

You should set yourself a target of attending 2 or 3 networking events each month. The message is to be proactive; as job searching is quite a solitary activity, getting out and networking can help keep you motivated. Talk with people in the sector. Learn about their job, how they got started, have they any tips for you but don’t put them on the spot and ask them for a job. Have your ‘elevator speech’ ready for when you have to introduce yourself. By having this prepared it will give you confidence to start conversations at networking events.

Upskill: Brush up on a language. If you’re aiming at UN level make sure you’re brushing up on UN languages. Languages are becoming more and more important and can be a distinguishing factor in recruitment.

Volunteer: Participate in voluntary work in order to keep your CV current and to expand your interests and skills. Sometimes if we can’t get the experience in a paid capacity, seek it out on a voluntary basis.

Further study: Consider taking up further education, whether a long-term or short course. If you have to complete a dissertation or thesis as part of your study, choose the topic wisely - it may get you an interview if the topic appeals to an employer. Increasingly at multilateral level, organisations are looking for evidence of early specialisation so your thesis could be one way of demonstrating this.

Six minutes of inspiration: Finally, on days when you need to be motivated and inspired - check out this six minute video. I hope it will inspire you and keep you focused on finding that job. It may take time but have faith, be patient, connect and stay focused.

www.evancarmichael.com/Human-Resources/3807/How-to-Explain-your-Achievements-in-your-Resume.html
FURTHER RESOURCES FOR JOB HUNTING

Comhlámh’s jobs notice board lists available roles in the development sector in Ireland and internationally: www.comhlamh.org/jobs-board/

The Dóchas Wednesday News is an essential source of information about events and jobs in the development sector. Sign up for it at: www.dochas.ie. There is also a very informative section of their website entitled ‘About Working in Development’.

Activelink lists jobs in the community sector as well as the development sector. It also has a wide range of volunteering opportunities and training opportunities listed. www.activelink.ie

Environmental roles are listed at www.greencareersireland.com

Other non-Irish websites listing opportunities are:

Relief Web - www.reliefweb.int
Charity Job - www.charityjob.co.uk

Bond - www.bond.org.uk/jobs.php
Eldis - www.eldis.org/go/jobs
Dev Net - www.devnetjobs.org
Idealist – www.idealistcareers.org

THINKING OF VOLUNTEERING AGAIN?

Volunteering overseas can sometimes be required experience for getting work in the development sector. If you feel you would benefit from further overseas experience, you may be contemplating volunteering overseas again.
For many returnees experiencing reverse culture shock there is a strong appeal to go away again immediately. This is a normal feeling when resettling so it is advisable not to make any hasty decisions and to explore other options before deciding on a further volunteering trip.

Comhlámh have a wide range of resources to support volunteers to make an informed decision to volunteer. Consider carefully your placement options and the different best practice supports there for you: have a look at our Volunteer Charter and Code of Good Practice.

Check out www.comhlamh.org/volunteering-options, join our LinkedIn Group #volops and follow #volops Sharing Volunteering Options on Twitter to keep up to date with current volunteering opportunities.

Volunteering at home can also be worthwhile for many returnees; it can offer the opportunity to get involved in social justice issues here, to share the skills developed overseas and may also boost employability.

**Volunteer Ireland**
Comprehensive information on volunteering in Ireland is available from Volunteer Ireland along with a database of opportunities www.volunteer.ie

**Volunteer Now**
Volunteer Now promotes and supports volunteering across Northern Ireland. You can find a database of opportunities on their website www.volunteering-ni.org

**DEVELOPMENT-RELATED STUDY**

Spending time in the global south can often inspire an interest in finding out more about development issues. There is a huge
variety of courses offered throughout Ireland to help you do this. As well as short courses providing an overview of and an introduction to development, there are lots of options to undertake a formal course of study. While there are fewer options at undergraduate level, there is a wide variety of options for studying development at postgraduate level.

Before making a decision to take up a course of study, consider what you hope to achieve from your course; is it for personal fulfilment or to further your career? If you are hoping to further your career, consider which course is best suited to you; choosing a specialisation may be a good idea.

Shop around for the right course and speak to those in the know: current students, former students, employers, course directors etc. A course of study can be a life-enhancing experience so it is important to make an informed and considered decision.

A list of development studies and related courses available in Ireland can be found through the Development Studies Association of Ireland: www.dsaireland.org/courses

**FUNDING**

If you are applying for a higher education or maintenance grant, there is a requirement that you must be resident in the state prior to applying. If you are ineligible on these grounds Comhlámh can support your application by verifying your assignment as a volunteer or development worker overseas and requesting an exemption to this requirement. Contact Comhlámh on 01-4783490 or info@comhlamh.org for more information.
COMHLÁMH COURSES AND WORKSHOPS

Comhlámh organises forums, workshops, weekend and night courses on a variety of development-related topics, depending on members’ interests. Courses are currently available in the following areas:

• **Skills in Development Education** - for trainers and facilitators to learn about the participatory methods used in development education

I loved the Skills in Dev Ed course, I got to meet like minded people, got to share stories and skills, made friends and realised how easy can be to communicate your beliefs to others if you have the right tools.”

Ana Barbu, a retuned and repeat volunteer in Zambia, currently working as a development education facilitator and a passionate social justice advocate.

• **Trade Justice** - a course for anyone who wants to know more about international trade, development and globalisation.

The speakers and facilitators, all experts in their fields, were both insightful and challenging. The Trade Justice course was very professionally organised and stimulated debate. Having completed the course, I feel the need to keep myself informed on issues surrounding global trade, an activity which affects us all in today’s interdependent world.”

Jim Kirwan volunteered in Lesotho for two years in the 1980s. Having retired in 2010, he obtained a Masters in Development Studies from Kimmage DSC and since then has been facilitating development education workshops in secondary schools for Self Help Africa.
There was a great vibe on the course I participated in. It was a fusion of people of various ages with overseas experience who had come to share and learn. Two thumbs up from me and a recommendation to any who might want to consider this course in future.”

Colin MacLean is a returned volunteer from Haiti and Malawi. Since returning to Ireland he has been active as a member of the Clowns For Haiti group helping to administer their social media and website.

• **What Next?** - this course is designed for anyone interested in practical ways in which to contribute to global justice and sustainable development in their everyday lives.

• **Options and Issues in Volunteering for Development** - a one day workshop for anyone considering volunteering overseas in a development context. Previous participants have said that after the course, they “feel more prepared, more capable of making an informed decision. I know where to look for organisations and what to look for”.

All upcoming Comhlámh courses are listed on our events calendar [www.comhlamh.org/events](http://www.comhlamh.org/events) and our social media pages, as well as being listed in our e-Link newsletter.

For other courses available take a look at the weekly Dóchas Wednesday News ([www.dochas.ie](http://www.dochas.ie)) or check in with your university or college to see what evening or short courses are available there (many of these are open to non-students too).

**DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION**

Development Education refers to certain participative and interactive methodologies of education about global issues. It challenges how we understand and engage with the world, in particular with the Global South. It focuses on critical thinking and analysis.
and aims to challenges injustices and inequalities in our world. Development education is an important first step in taking action for change. Whether you wish to educate yourself further or educate others about issues you are passionate about there are plenty of opportunities to do so.

Returnees have the opportunity to share some of their learning from overseas with others at home; through raising awareness about global justice issues and offering their support to social justice issues locally. There are many organisations working in development education in Ireland, and various courses and events going on which are open to interested individuals – a great opportunity to share learning on your return!

**FURTHER RESOURCES FOR DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION**

**RESOURCE CENTRES**

**Centre for Global Education**
The CGE is a Belfast-based development education centre
[www.centreforglobaleducation.com](http://www.centreforglobaleducation.com)

**Galway One World Centre**
The GOWC promotes development education and action on social justice and human dignity
[www.galwayowc.org](http://www.galwayowc.org)

**Kerry One World Centre**
The KOWC promotes development education and action on social justice and human dignity.
[www.kade.ie](http://www.kade.ie)

**Kimmage Development Studies Centre**
KDSC facilitates education and training courses for development professionals.
[www.kimmagedsc.ie](http://www.kimmagedsc.ie)
Waterford One World Centre
The WOWC promotes development education and action on social justice and human dignity
www.waterfordoneworldcentre.com

LEARNING MORE

The Guardian Global Development Section
An extensive and informative section of the guardian website that has a fortnightly email newsletter
www.theguardian.com/global-development

World and Media
World and Media aims to make it easier for journalists to produce high quality and nuanced coverage of international development issues.
www.worldandmedia.com

Developmenteducation.ie
An extensive collection of Irish development education resources
www.developmenteducation.ie

Irish Development Education Association (IDEA)
A membership organisation of organisations and individuals involved in development education in Ireland
www.ideaonline.ie

DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION COURSES

Comhlámh’s Skills in Development Education Course
This course aims to equip participants with the skills and methodologies to work effectively with groups on global development and social justice issue in a friendly, informal group environment. www.comhlamh.org

Suas Educational Development Global Issues Course
Suas run this 8 week course at colleges and universities around Ireland. These are short courses open to all who would like to learn more about global development
www.suas.ie
Voluntary Missionary Movement (VMM) The World is Your Oyster Course
VMM run this course to provide an introduction to global development and promotes action on important issues.
www.vmminternational.org

CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES

When you arrive back to family and friends, all the TV images of the so-called ‘developing world’ are being thrown at you and tested against your particular experience. People want to know “is it really like that?” ‘That’ in most cases being some version of the latest media horror story, or, perhaps, the ‘poor but happy’ cliché. Your own images of the developing world will have changed drastically since you left. You need time and understanding to begin to process it.

The popular portrayal of developing countries in our media has been a long-standing concern among Comhláth members; we recognise the importance of seeking to portray our former host communities with dignity and respect and reflect the diversity and nuances of different cultures. In Ireland, we are fortunate to have many of our leading NGOs committed to these principles as well.

Through the umbrella organisation for development NGOs, Dóchas, a Code of Conduct was developed for images and messages in development. This really useful resource provided the basis for our own ‘Guidelines for the use of Social Media in Volunteering’. It can be very challenging to find an appropriate way to accurately portray the inspiring, challenging and fascinating people and places you encountered overseas without enhancing stereotypes or simplifying your experience.

There are no straight forward answers but you may find these resources helpful in navigating the hazards and in compiling your Facebook album!
African countries have a lot to offer volunteers and development workers from the developed countries. The learning experiences of volunteering can give them better understanding of how communities live their lives, which they can share with friends and family. It is always good for volunteers to look at a two-sided approach to development; a process of learning from communities and implementing what they want or building on projects communities already have which are in line with local cultures and norms. Without looking at either of these approaches, our well intended projects will end up as white elephants."

Mbemba Jabbi is a returned volunteer with GOAL in North Sudan (Darfur). Since returning to Ireland he has been working in the Africa Centre Dublin facilitating the meaningful inclusion of African people in all social, political and economic aspects of life in Ireland and promoting a balanced and fair representation of Africa and her people.

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**RESOURCES**

**Comhlámh’s Guidelines for the use of Social Media in Volunteering: a guide for volunteers and sending agencies** – downloadable from the Comhlámh website: [www.comhlamh.org/resources](http://www.comhlamh.org/resources)

**The Dóchas Code of Conduct on Images and Messages** – downloadable from [www.dochas.ie](http://www.dochas.ie)

**CAMPAIGNING**

Returned volunteers and development workers often return home full of inspiration and motivation to tackle injustices in our global systems. Many of the issues of poverty, injustice and inequality in the global south are connected to our governments, corporations and lifestyles in the global north. One way to challenge this inequality is through campaigning;
to lend your voice to ask those in a position of power to make the global systems fairer. Campaigning is an essential part of bringing about lasting change. You can campaign through Comhlámh’s Trade Justice Group (see page 52) or you can get involved with one of the many organisations seeking to bring about a change in Ireland and around the world. Campaigning can be fun and social and give you an opportunity to develop your skills and confidence and learn more about issues you care about.

SOME CAMPAIGNING GROUPS IN IRELAND

Afri
Afri is a group of committed and creative people who seek to promote debate and influence policy and practice in Ireland and internationally on human rights, peace and justice issues.
www.afri.ie

Africa Centre
The Africa Centre facilitates the meaningful inclusion of African People in all social, political and economic aspects of life in Ireland and promotes a balanced and fair representation of Africa and its people among people in Ireland.
www.africacentre.ie

Age Action
Age Action campaigns for positive ageing and better policies and services for older people. It currently has a specific campaign on ageing and development.
www.ageaction.ie

Amnesty International Irish Section
Amnesty International Ireland is the country’s largest human rights organisation whose sole concern is the protection of the fundamental human rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
www.amnesty.ie
Debt and Development Coalition Ireland (DDCI)
DDCI is composed of organisations and individuals who share a deep concern about debt injustice and the injustice of the global financial system.
www.debtireland.org

Fairtrade Ireland
Fairtrade awards a consumer label to products which meet internationally recognised standards of Fairtrade. They are active throughout Ireland via supporter networks promoting Fairtrade, the Fairtrade Towns project, and FAIRTRADE Mark products.
www.fairtrade.ie

Friends of the Earth Ireland
Friends of the Earth campaigns for environmental justice and sustainability. They believe in sustainable development - meeting the needs of the current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.
www.foe.ie

Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign
IPSC is a group deeply concerned with the current situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. In partnership with Palestinians now living in Ireland the IPSC was formed to provide a voice for Palestine in Ireland.
www.ipsc.ie

Irish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
The Irish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament campaigns for the abolition of all nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction; the abolition of military alliances; a policy of active Irish neutrality and the transfer of military spending towards ending world poverty.
www.irishcnd.org

Irish Congress of Trade Unions’ Global Solidarity Project
This project works within trade unions on development education projects for their members in Ireland and on
campaigns to demonstrate solidarity with trade union movements worldwide.
www.ictu.ie/globalsolidarity

Irish Feminist Network
The IFN advocate for feminist issues and promote gender equality in Ireland
www.irishfeministnetwork.org

Latin America Solidarity Centre (LASC)
LASC is an initiative for development education, campaigning, solidarity and cultural promotion linking Ireland and Latin America
www.lasc.ie

Migrant Rights Centre Ireland
MRCI is a national organisation working to promote justice, empowerment and equality for migrant workers and their families www.mrci.ie

Oxfam Ireland
Oxfam is a world-wide development organisation that mobilises the power of people against poverty. They run frequent anti-poverty campaigns
www.oxfamireland.org

Ruhama
Ruhama supports women affected by prostitution and human trafficking
www.ruhamai.ie

Stop Climate Chaos
A coalition of civil society organisations campaigning to ensure Ireland plays its part in preventing runaway climate change.
www.stopclimatechaos.ie
SUSTAINABLE LIVING

Sustainability is an increasingly important issue for those committed to social justice principles. Our average lifestyles in the global north are living significantly in excess of what is sustainable for our planet. Climate change is an issue that disproportionately affects those living in poverty in the global south. In seeking to live more sustainable lifestyles, we can reduce in our own small way our footprint on the planet and we can inspire and invite others to do likewise.

It can be fun and interesting to look for ways to live more sustainably. Everything from where and how we shop, what we eat and what we grow in our garden, to where we go on holidays and where we invest our money impacts on the wider world. There are many projects and initiatives out there to encourage more sustainable living: below are a few to get started with!

RESOURCES FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVING IN IRELAND

The Dublin Food Co-op sells organic and Fairtrade food and household products
www.dublinfoodcoop.com

The Happy Pig
The Happy Pig is a permaculture & gift economy based small-holding in Galway.
www.moneylessmanifesto.org

The Village, Cloughjordan, Tipperary
Ireland’s first eco-village in Tipperary offers a programme of learning and emersion events throughout the year to allow everyone to sample innovative sustainable living
www.thevillage.ie

Transition Towns
Building resilient towns to challenge climate change and environmental crisis
www.transitiontownsireland.ning.com
COMHLÁMH MEMBERSHIP AND WAYS TO GET INVOLVED

Comhlámh is a membership organisation whose work is informed by the experiences and perspectives of our members. Over the years, many exciting things have emerged from within our membership; a women’s health group helping to bring a new law into effect in Ireland on FGM, a coffee group introducing Ireland’s first Fairtrade sales, a refugee support group and more recently avid work on trade justice in the EU. What will this current generation of members work on?

There are currently several member-led groups active within Comhlámh. Get in touch at info@comhlamh.org or 01-4783490 if you are interested in getting involved in any of these groups or have an idea for a new group you would like to start – we are here to support you! Keep up to date with our current activities via our events calendar www.comhlamh.org/events or through our social media pages.

Comhlámh membership

Comhlámh membership is open to anyone with an interest in global justice, whether a returned volunteer/ development worker or not. Becoming a member offers you the chance to be part of a community of committed individuals in Ireland, to have your say through our member groups and AGM. You will also receive discounts on any of our courses that you are interested in attending. On becoming a member you will receive a welcome pack with all the information you need to get involved.

Membership is available at the following rates:
€45 for those in full-time employment in Ireland; €25 for those based
overseas; €10 for those that are unwaged; and €1 for those currently seeking asylum in Ireland.

**Focus Magazine Group**

Focus Magazine is written, produced and edited by our members. It is Ireland’s leading publication on global development issues. Since 1978, Focus has been making links between issues in Ireland and in the global south, with a view to challenging assumptions and promoting understanding, interest in and action on development issues among the broader public. New members are always welcome to get involved in Focus magazine and to contribute an article or their editing talents to the team.

**Options and Issues in Development Volunteer Group**

The Options and Issues in Development Group aims to promote best practice in volunteering and to encourage a greater awareness of the issues that prospective and returning volunteers ought to consider to ensure that volunteering is a positive experience for both the volunteers and the host communities.

The Options and Issues group are currently revising, updating and developing activities around the Volunteer Charter to make it a more reflective, engaging and interactive tool for volunteers throughout the continuum of volunteering. Activities include developing creative resources and methodologies on the principles of the Volunteer Charter for the delivery of Volunteering Overseas: Where Do I Start? course and for the Pre-departure Training of Trainers.

**Trade Justice Group**

The Trade Justice Group has a particular interest in understanding and challenging the inequalities and injustices of the global trading system. Many of the members took part in the Trade Justice course run by Comhlámh and were inspired to take further action on this important issue. The group has been involved in various
activities, including organising campaigns and petitions to influence multilateral trading agreements, to support the Clean Clothes Campaign Ireland, to promote the Alternative Trade Mandate and to inform the public of the current trade issues.

I have found the trade justice group to be a great place to meet like-minded people, to learn more and to encourage one another to start taking actions – both day to day and collective – to challenge the injustices we see.”

Deirdre Kelly is a returned volunteer from India, where she worked to highlight the stories and voices of workers in the garment industry. She is passionate about the role of citizens and individuals to demand and realise societal change. She is currently working in development education.

Creative Writing Group

Creative Writing is a means of ‘telling our story’, of putting ourselves in others’ shoes, of drawing others into the complexities of development and of finding our own voice on issues of global justice. This group is formed by Comhlámh members at all stages of writing confidence. It takes place in a peer-supported environment to encourage one another to get writing and to offer useful feedback to one another.

It was both inspiring and uplifting to attend the writing groups at Comhlámh for putting order onto my memories and feelings of my time overseas and for meeting other returned development workers living in Dublin.”

Ruth Powell is a returned volunteer from Mongolia. She spent two years in Mongolia teaching and training other teachers in a university. Since returning to Ireland she has remained committed to global development through volunteering at home and overseas, development education and working with new immigrants.
Members’ meet ups

Members of Comhláth organises regular social meet ups; whether to meet with an invited speaker or watch a movie, or discuss an issue of particular interest. These meet ups are listed on our website and all are invited to attend or to help organise.

The Comhláth First Wednesday Debates – #FirstWedsDebates

We run a series of debates during the year exploring current contentious issues in development. The debates attract a diverse crowd interested in finding out more about particular topics and in expressing their views. They are sociable events and a great opportunity to meet like-minded people or engage in some spirited discussion!

Comhláth AGM

Our AGM normally takes place in the Spring. Members get together to have their say about the direction of the organisation. We often have a development forum to accompany the AGM, inviting speakers to provide insight into a particular development issue of interest.

International Volunteer Day

IVD takes place on the 5th December and celebrates the contribution of volunteers to the global development agenda. We host a celebratory event every year which takes different forms; sometimes a primarily social event or alternatively a seminar on a particular aspect of volunteering and continuous engagement.

Keep up to date on the latest happenings via e-Link, our monthly email newsletter. You can sign up on at www.comhlamh.org or else follow us on Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn. Our events calendar lists all events, courses and activities currently going on www.comhlamh.org/events
Walking through the barrios* of Luena, with Carlos, to the old engine yard, the old engines all rusting magnificence and brittle yellow weeds tall between the tracks.

Meeting the squatters who live in the carriages brewing dinner and hooch with nothing to do on a sleepy Sunday but squabble and drink and wait for oblivion.

Among them, Rosalina Silva, gap toothed and gleaming, old before thirty. I ask to take her photograph - Carlos translates - she asks, Why? I say, Because you are beautiful.

She says, I’m not beautiful. Oh but you are, I tell her. The others gather around, again someone asks,

Why? What’s in it for us? Nada. Nothing, I say. Only friendship. They all laugh and applaud. This is a good answer.

* Suburbs or Shanty-towns

Monica Corish is a writer, poet, artist and a returned development worker. She spent several years working in North and South Sudan, Kenya, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia and Angola. She published her first collection of poetry in 2012, and is trained as an AWA writing group leader. She offers creative writing workshops tailored to volunteers and development workers who wish to write about their time overseas and issues close to their heart. Some have attended her workshops to write memoir, others poetry or short stories, others simply for the joy of writing and sharing with like-minded others.
More information about these workshops is available at www.monicacorish.ie.
Johnny Sheehan spent two years volunteering with SELVA, a local environmental organisation in Nicaragua, Central America. He subsequently worked for 14 years promoting development education in the youth sector and most recently with Fairtrade Ireland. He is currently serving as the Chairperson of Comhlámh.

On my return to Ireland from Nicaragua, my head was bursting with experiences that I was willing to share at the drop of a hat. There wasn’t a situation that I felt couldn’t be improved
by the phrase ‘When I was in Nicaragua…’. The trouble was most people I talked to had little patience for my stories.

I contacted Comhlámh to avail of some of the services to returned volunteers - at the time I didn’t even have access to a computer to update my CV - and was cajoled into coming along to an open evening at which various members’ groups pitched for new members. Though I wasn’t aware of it at the time, that open evening was to alter the course of my life.

Coming home, I was quite critical of the role of volunteer development workers and so was drawn to the Options and Issues group.

I began attending group meetings and engaged in courses being delivered, first as a participant and then as a facilitator. Being able to apply the skills that I had developed in Nicaragua in an Irish context really helped my confidence as the weeks passed and the job offers weren’t flooding in.

Then, six months after coming home, an opportunity arose to turn my passion into a paid job. During the interview, I was able to draw on my voluntary work with Comhlámh to show how I was right for the job.

Over the years I continued to be an active member of Comhlámh and was delighted more recently to join the Board of the organisation, which was both a massive challenge and a great opportunity to learn.

My advice to anyone interested in volunteering overseas is to make links with organisations here in Ireland and even look to do some voluntary work before you go overseas.

At the end of the day, I think community development is community development whether in Ireland or India or Nicaragua and the skills you learn are transferable to a wide range of situations.

The other thing I’d say is that when you come home, make links with other returned volunteers and take the opportunity to share your experiences with as many people as possible. Programmes run by sending agencies and by Comhlámh help you to do this.
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Image of “Dublin’s river Liffey bridges” by Mark Wiewel.

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