

Working in emergency relief

May 2009. Sophia Pickles worked for Goal, the Irish emergency relief NGO, in the Congo and Ethiopia, for two and a half years before returning to the UK in early 2009. Sophia was interviewed by Jeff Riley, Careers Adviser, King's College London

Jeff – *I always associate emergency relief with an older age group rather than someone in their mid-20s. How come you were able to work in the sector?*

Sophia – well it is true that I was, at that time one of the youngest 'Goalie's that had been employed and most of my colleagues working with GOAL - either as a volunteer like me or as an experienced professional- were older. It also helped that a lot of GOAL's work isn't classic disaster relief like Medecin Sans Frontieres who will exclusively employ experienced professionals. Where it shades over into sustainable development work as with Goal there is more space for those, like me, didn't have heaps of experience.

Jeff – *even so I know from when you were a student at SOAS though you had got some previous experience. What helped you get the 'goalie' position with GOAL?*

Sophia – I think a number of things came together. Firstly I had worked in Africa before with a small NGO (well, small at that time). It was in Rwanda which got me a few extra points as that was, and is, considered a 'difficult' country. On top of this I also had another significant overseas voluntary experience with a better known development organisation – UNICEF. I got a place on their annual internship programme in India (read Sophia's UNICEF diary at www.careers.lon.ac.uk/output/Page656.asp) Having large organisations like this or OXFAM on your CV is good, even if you have undertaken unpaid work, volunteering or internships only, because it provides some reassurance to smaller employers that you have been given some solid field training and experience. The other thing that made a difference is that I was prepared to go anywhere and without a lot of notice. In the end I had two weeks to get back from India and get to the Congo. Oh, and I also spoke French, which helped.

Jeff – *that raises the question of how you got work with UNICEF and, before that, your first work in Africa?*

Sophia – Getting the work in Rwanda was a good example of how networking can pay off. It started when I was a student and my group of friends were asked to sell some Christmas cards for an ngo. I was the only one that volunteered and that led eventually to another day's work at a development conference. So by the time the ngo, AEGIS, had a volunteer opportunity come up in Rwanda they knew who I was and what I could do. I had done some voluntary teaching and the project was about education research. So again a few things came together. The UNICEF project was also education related and the Rwanda experience gave me some credibility in terms of being resourceful and able to use my initiative. The thing about networking is really important I think. By the time I applied to GOAL I had already met the organisation at careers events and had had a good conversation with them. When they get hundreds of applications it's important that they know who you are

Jeff - *What was the work like with GOAL?*

Sophia – On the whole I loved the experience but it wasn't *glamorous* work. Goal do have professionals working as engineers and nutritionists but Goalies without this kind of technical qualification can quite often get work in 'softer' roles like logistics or administration. There seems to be a real shortage of logistics people in the field so I soon found

myself in the deep end. One example was when I was responsible for the receipt and distribution of about 80 tons of food; its reception, storage and eventual distribution. This is a job where you get lots of responsibility – I had a local staff of 60 for example. The problem with this particular shipment of food was that partly due to the lack of transport infrastructure it had arrived nine months late. It was typical in the sense that I was unexpectedly confronted with having to learn how to stack, sort and protect such a huge quantity of material. Unfortunately it was also infested with weevils but it couldn't be allowed to go to waste so I had to organise a roster of people to sieve the maize over three months while trying to beat the onset of the rainy season. This was a real learning experience in many ways. Including grappling with - and making mistakes with - budgets. Fortunately GOAL are a tolerant organisation who understand you will be learning a lot on the job and I was lucky to get fantastic support in the field from both colleagues and managerial staff. As I say though I learnt a lot about management. I was hiring, firing and evaluating staff and had a big budget to deal with.

To be honest sorting maize is monotonous. When I talk about what I loved it wasn't that and I'm fairly sure I don't want to pursue logistics in my next role. What I loved was working with the people. There is a phrase in development called 'capacity building'. These technical words don't at all express what it actually means. For example I taught one of my staff to write. Then, after a gap of a few months, I visited her home and saw that she was teaching her children to write and because she had been able to start reading accounts she was able to supplement her income through building a kiln oven to bake and sell bread. Another example was when I was teaching another staff member how to use a computer. He was a bright guy but he'd never used one before so didn't even know how to switch it on at first. Again after a few weeks I came across him when he was teaching colleagues how to do things like open Word documents. These basic skills can help transform people's lives and give them a massive head start when they are looking for work. In a logistics role you don't really work directly with the communities you are benefiting so this was how I created my own 'beneficiaries'. This included young women who I was able to teach about contraception. Unwanted pregnancies and having children can stop women saving and have them trapped in poverty. Regardless of the debate about the macro effectiveness of aid and development I know that at the micro level that this work enables me to make a real impact.

Jeff - *You'd been to Africa before this stint. What was different this time?*

Sophia – Well I was learning so much and working at a higher level with more responsibility. It underlined for me some of the reasons why I went back. It sounds like a cliché but it really was the most I'd laughed for a long time. One of the things I took from Africa was 'don't complain'. We have so much in the developed world

Jeff - *What's next?*

Sophia – Well after the Congo I took paid work with Goal in Ethiopia for a few months - a much more benign country to work in. I am now back in London and doing some voluntary work with the All-Party Parliamentary Group on the Great Lakes Region of Africa as well as helping out on the 'Getting into international development' course. Right now I'm applying for jobs and weighing up a job offer with Goal in Sudan but looking for a policy / research role. Ideally in the UK.

Links

More reports like this and links at www.careers.lon.ac.uk/development

Goal's headquarters are in Dublin but they have a London presence www.goal-uk.org