



## **Merlin profile- Irena Spencer - April 2009**

Attending the Careers Group's Getting into International Development conference while studying for my Masters in International Peace and Security confirmed to me that it was a career area I wanted to pursue. Since my working background was mainly in government policy research and my overseas work experience was not in development I knew I needed more experience. Given the competitiveness of the field, I signed up for the three-day *Introduction to Relief and Emergencies* course at Merlin, a UK based international charity working in emergency medical response and health service rebuilding. I was impressed with the organization and was fortunate to work for five months as a Learning and Development Volunteer having applied for the position and been successful at interview.

The role of the Learning and Development Volunteer was support of the Learning and Development Officer and Manager. The time commitment was three days per week and I received a stipend to help with travel and lunch expenses. In a typical day I dealt with general correspondence regarding training courses including answering questions, handling payments, and sending visa letters for participants coming from overseas. I also helped out with Merlin's monthly information evenings and the running of courses. Being a volunteer required flexibility and a willingness to help out wherever needed.

During my final months of volunteering I was also responsible for organizing two weeks of workshops and talks for staff for an internal learning event. I planned activities ranging from excel clinics to talks by speakers from Chatham House and the Overseas Development Institute. It was a great opportunity for me to take on and shape my own project.

While some of the administrative tasks, like photocopying course materials, were more mundane, being a volunteer in the training section was an excellent opportunity to increase my knowledge not only of Merlin's work but also of the larger issues and challenges in international relief work. A huge benefit for me was the exposure to the training courses. I was able to attend Merlin's seven day *Public Health in Crises and Transitional Contexts* course as a participant and as a volunteer. While this definitely made for some exhausting days, it was very valuable as I gained in-depth knowledge of the practical aspects of meeting public health needs in conflict, natural disasters, and other crises.

Overall, volunteering was a great practical complement to my studies. Perhaps the best part for me was being in a very integrated, open office. Since all the departments work in one large room it was easy to learn about the work of other departments such as programmes, logistics, finance, and communications and how everything fits together, whether through the bi-weekly 'flash' updates where everyone gathers and highlights key issues and news, in lunch-time presentations or during chats in the café. At the same time it was fascinating to be part of such a dynamic office. In a field of work where the operating environment can change so rapidly one of the highlights was definitely learning about the resulting challenges and hearing news from people working on the ground in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Myanmar.