



VOLUNTEERING OVERSEAS

IDC JANUARY 2007

ESME GAUSSEN

INTRODUCTION

Aim of talk:

- *To explore the issues associated with volunteering overseas*
- *To challenge some common misperceptions about volunteering*
- *To look at common difficulties encountered and discuss solutions*

Your expectations

- ❑ Probably the most frequent reason placements don't work out
- ❑ Be satisfied with small achievements, especially given short timescales
- ❑ Don't have too many expectations or overly high expectations
- ❑ Find out as much as possible so that you are suited to your placement

The host's expectations

- Previous volunteers may have set a precedent
- Fundraising, resources, computers
- That you are well-connected & influential
- That you will know the answers

“I wish I’d known about knickers on the clothes line”

- ❑ Avoid classic gaffs by learning about cultural differences
- ❑ Observe similarities as well as differences – a positive focus
- ❑ Challenges of living/working with communities who are not used to outsiders
- ❑ Joining in (e.g. carrying water, grinding maize)

Cultural difference (2)

- ❑ Responding to requests for money from individuals
- ❑ Understanding the culture surrounding money & transactions
- ❑ Try to understand your novelty value from other people's perspective

Cultural difference (3)

- ❑ Not judging too quickly – e.g. animal welfare/ environmental standards
- ❑ Finding yourself in situations where you don't agree with practices – e.g. beating children in schools
- ❑ The tomato example

“I’m broke, but I’m going on holiday to Zanzibar” !

- Understanding the degree of wealth disparity and its implications
- (It’s boring but....) Broaching all financial issues before departure
- Getting a volunteer contract

Money (2)

- ❑ Having some self-awareness of how you will be perceived in your placement
- ❑ The woman who introduced herself to everyone as a volunteer when she was getting paid more than many local staff
- ❑ It sounds obvious but.....

Being female

- How might you respond seeing women treated as second class citizens
- How men might perceive you if you are traveling/ living alone
- Dressing modestly can help reduce unwanted attention

Language

- ❑ A little goes a long way!
- ❑ Affects how you are received and perceived
- ❑ Benefits of understanding what people are saying about you!
- ❑ Numbers useful for bargaining

“Why won't they use the beautiful long drop I built”

- ❑ Important to discuss your experiences
- ❑ Just discussing with other volunteers can breed cynical & negative attitudes
- ❑ Also discuss with local staff, community members & other internationals to gain broader perspective

Understanding of development (continued)

- ❑ Common reasons why development interventions are perceived not to work by vols (and staff)!
- ❑ Common reasons why development interventions don't work
- ❑ Volunteers who do damage – to a project, to themselves, to future volunteers, to reputations

What can you contribute?

- Flexibility & creativity e.g. non-formal education activities
- Being innovative with limited resources
- Challenging the norm & being critical
- Insight into different lifestyles e.g. women being independent
- Language exchange – everyone wants to learn English!

Benefits to the volunteer

- Development education, influencing career path
- Very interesting to live in a different environment
- Communication skills (all those transferable skills employers like to hear about.....)
- www.spw.org

