

Oliver Day

Project: Youth Development Organisation – Network of Zambian People living with HIV/AIDS – setting up support groups, waste disposal project

Oliver was studying Geography at University College London and heard about ICS through his step-mum who works in the charity sector.

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“I want to work in the not-for-profit sector and saw ICS as an opportunity to develop myself and get a real taste of development work in some of the world’s poorest communities. The team of volunteers I was part of worked across ten projects in a town called Choma in the southern province of Zambia. Our host organisation was the Youth Development Organisation (YDO) and their HQ served as our base in the community for getting together, doing our assignments and planning our community events. My specific placement organisation - where I worked every day - was NZP+ ([The Network of Zambian People \(NZP\) Living with HIV/AIDS](#)).

“We were aiming to educate people and improve health through youth participation. We targeted our efforts at the more vulnerable people in the community, going out to villages to create support groups to help people living with HIV/AIDS, visiting children in compounds (like slums, although much more beautiful and welcoming than that word sounds), and going out to people’s workplaces to try and reduce the stigma of HIV/AIDS in people’s everyday working lives. Forming support groups was my main task, and they were all about sharing advice and knowledge as well as being emotional support. We also helped support groups to generate funding so that they could meet their everyday needs, grow and continue to spread the word after our time there was over.

“We also took on an environmental task that wasn’t part of our initial goals. The areas we were working in were in need of a more consistent waste clearing system. We saw that the way rubbish was being cleared was not structured so we took on an initial clean-up operation but also linked in with the national government scheme, Keep Zambia Clean. We worked with an older VSO volunteer working on a separate project and that proved to be a crucial connection. Through her we managed to secure EU funding for new bins that we placed in a network across the main marketplace of the town of Choma. We made it a community effort by getting a local special school involved in the clear up, helping them to show they really were just as capable as anyone else in the community. We also held several high profile events to get people using the waste system properly and learning about collections. This was a fantastic achievement for us and something that is having a lasting impact as everyone in the community saw the benefit and is committed to keeping it going.

“Being able to work alongside local people who know the needs of their community was really important. I worked with a local person who was also a volunteer, we supported each other in our

work and gave each other insight into our cultures and the real issues our communities were facing. This was essential to understanding more about the development work we were taking on. The lady I worked with, Theresa, bridged the language and cultural gap for me. I learnt a lot of the language from her and she also knew the history of the local impact of HIV and AIDS in Zambia which meant we could plan our work to meet the needs of local people, and not just what we thought they might need.

“My host family also had a huge impact on my time overseas, and still do today. It really was like having another family, we had our own in jokes and because I was from somewhere completely different they would open up to me on a different level. This really will be a lasting relationship; I’m still in touch with them and even manage to confuse my mum when I talk about ‘my mum’ in Zambia!

“As part of my placement I picked up lots of new skills. Learning how to organise and manage events, writing detailed plans for activities and working in big teams, were all really valuable. It’s also been a fantastic opportunity to build confidence. I found myself being thrust into a number of public speaking roles and whilst it was nerve wracking at times, the more practice I got the better I became.

“I think development work in poor countries can sometimes be seen as a caring role. People might associate females to this kind of role so that could mean guys aren’t as forthcoming about volunteering. The reality is very different though, the variety of projects means there’s lots of things you can get involved in and often the guys had some great ideas and were really central to our projects. The waste management project, for instance, came from Sam, our resident environmentalist!

“Since I’ve been back in England I’ve been completing my UK action, promoting ICS to 16 and 17 year olds currently on the National Citizen Service. It’s going really well and it’s great to see the reaction you get from young people. There’s a whole team of us feeding back to them about our time overseas, the challenges and the results. A lot of them are telling us they are inspired by our stories and are considering doing the same.

“ICS has helped me secure work in a local charity in Islington, where I’ll be working for the next 6 months before going back to university to finish my final year. After that, I hopefully will have saved up enough money to travel to Zambia in October to travel, meet old friends, and most importantly, go to Rinah’s wedding – my Zambian team mate – with the rest of the UK and Zambian volunteers.”

Nushrath Khandoker

Project: Working in a rural village to conduct a needs assessment, help develop a dairy co-operative, improve sanitation and waste disposal services, and increase hygiene education. The ICS programme fits into VSO’s country strategy for Bangladesh. This focuses on groups who are most excluded from social and economic growth and who are the least resilient to economic and environmental shocks. These include: extremely poor and marginalised women, adolescents and youth, and focusing on those in poor rural communities facing un/underemployment.

Nushrath is a Londoner of Bangladeshi descent who chose ICS because it was one of the few volunteering programmes that did not cost anything. She went to Bangladesh in part to reconnect with her family’s culture. She found it an amazingly rewarding experience.

“I learned so many different skills – communication, planning, working in a team. But you also learn about a different culture and a different way of life. Living and working abroad makes you so much more grounded as a person, and makes you appreciate what you have here. And this programme is unique in how much responsibility and independence it gives you – it really is what you make of it.”

“Before going on the programme I was studying for my A Levels and had planned to take a gap year. I knew I wanted to go abroad but most of the volunteering programmes were just too expensive for me – a thousand pounds for flights just to start with. As soon as I saw ICS in a newspaper, I applied for it, because there was no cost to me.

“I chose to go with VSO because I knew they were such a trustworthy organisation. Most applicants leave the choice of country open but I chose Bangladesh because I suppose I wanted to reconnect with the culture and my wider family – I had been there once before but did not really feel I knew it.

“We had two weeks in-country training and then we went to a small village in the north of Bangladesh, where VSO were already working with long-term volunteers. In our team there were three UK volunteers and a Bangladeshi supervisor, and for the first month we also had two Bangladeshi volunteers from Dakar university.

“The first thing we did when we got there was invite all the villagers to a community dialogue meeting to introduce ourselves and discuss with them how we might be able to help them.

“VSO were already working in the village, helping the farmers to develop a dairy co-operative so they could make their cows more productive and get a fair price for their milk, and sell it to larger factories. The long-term professional VSO volunteers acted as our mentors, and set our objectives directly with the local community.

“We carried out a detailed assessment of the village, interviewing all 345 households, about the size of their families, jobs, income and livestock. That was a really big job, as each household took 30-40 minutes, but we know that all the data we gathered will be used by the following groups of volunteers to help determine what they do. The Dakar University students and our team supervisor helped translate during our interviews, and I also understand Bangla, though not well enough to speak it.

“We also discovered there was one part of the village where out of 16 houses, 15 had no latrine, so people were using the areas to the sides of their houses, or going behind bushes. You can imagine what this smelt like and also it meant they were very vulnerable to disease.

“In consultation with the villagers, we decided to build a latrine for these households. They had some of the materials, like bamboo, available locally, but they could not afford the concrete which was needed to complete the latrine. So we worked with the village youth club – which was really a group of active villagers of all ages – to build the latrine. The youth club provided the physical labour and we helped get the right materials and planned and managed the construction.

“We also held a community action day on waste disposal – because there was not a single litter bin in the whole village, so everyone just threw litter on the ground. We built a concrete litter bin for the village. And we also taught the school children about the importance of washing their hands, and left resources like posters for their teachers to continue doing this after we had left.

“We also got involved in helping teach the farmers how to improve the productivity of their livestock, providing cows and goats with different diets, feeding them the best things to make the most milk. We analysed statistics from the household assessments which included detail on livestock ownership, milk/egg production and livestock mortality. This helped us to spot where we needed to target our efforts. We identified problems including poor diet, poor standards of livestock wellbeing (no shelter for the livestock) and various plagues and diseases, leading to a high mortality rate in the village.

“A healthy animal leads to increased productivity so this was our first area of work. We called the livestock office in the local district and set up a meeting with the livestock officer. Here we told him about the work of ICS in Mominpur village and asked for his help in providing field staff to run training sessions in the village on the importance of a varied diet. He agreed and dates were fixed. Preparations for the training sessions then began, and at a second meeting we requested leaflets and pamphlets that we photocopied and then distributed to villagers on the training days. At one of the training sessions a qualified vet led the day, which was fantastic because it meant that villagers were being educated by the experts. We got good feedback from the training sessions and most importantly, villagers felt more informed about how a good animal diet and treatment can lead to increased produce, meaning more money.

“To tackle the huge problem of livestock disease we held two community actions days, both involving livestock vaccinations. Both community action days were incredibly successful; over 400 goats and 300 chickens were vaccinated. The livestock owners were given information about the diseases, how to identify symptoms and seek help on the day. To help us understand the diseases, we worked closely with the long term VSO volunteers during a number of planning meetings before the community action days.

“The most important part our work in Mominpur village was the sustainability of the project, allowing the village to progress after the departure of my cohort of ICS volunteers. So how did three young girls from the UK manage work with local volunteers and teach hundreds of villagers how to improve the productivity of their livestock? Well the answer is we provided them with a service they didn't know was at their disposal. We established links within the livestock and agricultural sector. We spoke to government officials and we brought them to the villagers. We made endless phone calls, sent emails and set up meetings. Most importantly we worked tirelessly to pass on these skills to the youth club members.

“One of the other rewarding things we did was hold a gender focus group for the women of the village, as they were very discriminated against and brought up to expect to be housewives. We asked them what they wanted and many of them said they wanted support to help start small businesses. We were not able to do that but the information we got will be used by future volunteers to move the project forward.

“Listening to the women was a very powerful moment – they were very clear they were asking for a helping hand, not a hand out. That was very much what the whole programme was about – we were not there to throw money at a problem, we were there to work with the villagers to help them.

“We lived in host families in the village – two of us in one home and the other girl just a couple of minutes away. That was an amazing experience – these families had never had a foreigner staying with them; most of them had never met a foreigner before. Everyone wanted to see what we looked like!

“Now that I’m home I will tell the girls at the Tottenham Islamic Cultural Centre, where I volunteer, about my experiences and try and encourage them to volunteer with ICS. I also plan to go back to my old school and tell them about it.

“In early January (2013) I applied to study Biology in London. I’m also working as a tutor at home and I’m volunteering at the Natural History Museum entomology department. A TEFL qualification is something I would like to work towards in the next few months, allowing me to develop my skills in teaching English which I know will be an invaluable skill to have when I volunteer abroad in the future.

“I do hope the future involves many exciting opportunities, like the chance to volunteer abroad, meet new people, exchange skills and become more globally conscious.

“ICS was an incredible experience. I have made friends from across the world, and you get so much out of it in such a short amount of time. The whole experience is really daunting, you will be very apprehensive before you go, but by the end of it you will be amazed that it ended so quickly.

“I would say to anyone, if they really want to do something worthwhile and make a difference, they should do ICS.”