

# Making a difference with VSO?

Julie Gemmill presents a very honest appraisal of her time spent as a volunteer teacher in Zambia

The watchword for Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) as an organisation, and for all its volunteers from initial training onwards, is sustainability. This necessarily depends on the establishment of a strong partnership with overseas colleagues, which in turn can only be formed where there are shared goals and mutual respect. Similarly, a willingness to learn and go on learning is stressed as crucial to the success of any volunteer placement. When I began my VSO journey it was easy to see how important these factors would be. However, my experience of two years in Zambia convinced me that they in fact represented a greater challenge than the more obvious issues of loneliness or practical hardship.



As a British teacher of many years' experience I had plenty of expectations in place, and I was arrogant (or should that be unwary?) enough to believe that I had something to offer to a school for deaf children in a developing country. I was immediately dismayed by the different attitude to teaching and learning and to the needs of deaf pupils, prevalent among my new

colleagues. The degree of cultural difference, in a professional context, was more than I had bargained for, and my frustration must have been obvious, because a senior member of staff once advised me that I should just accept things as they were.

I came to recognise that my colleagues' attitudes were conditioned by a combination of the relatively poor status of the job of teaching, a severe and persistent lack of resources to do the job and the negative view of disabled children still commonly held in some sectors of society. Another problem was the system of transfers operated by the education authorities; since teachers are civil servants on a national payroll, any one of them can be moved at short notice to a post in another area, and this can even mean the removal of a specially trained teacher from future contact with deaf children. In order to keep their families fed and secondary school fees paid, teachers at all levels had to supplement their salaries by growing food crops on the school site, which made significant demands on their time and energy. (On one occasion, looking for the headteacher with an urgent enquiry, I was directed to a field where he and his children were busily harvesting tomatoes.)



The decision to stay where I had been sent was not an easy one and had to be revisited more than once. In spite of a placement description which included contributing to the further training of teachers in the school, I found that I was simply required to teach classes with little advice or guidance, fulfil residential duties and use the donated computer to type a long succession of letters and lists. On this basis I came to accept that my involvement in the school represented the half-loaf of bread, which was better than nothing, and I settled down to do the best I could for the children. Of course, some days and weeks were better than others. Oddly enough it was my computer skills (no better than basic at that stage) that provided the best opportunity to contribute something sustainable to the situation. One committed and hard-working member of staff showed real interest in learning to use the computer, and quickly demonstrated aptitude and confidence. He is now completing an advanced diploma in information technology at a college in the capital city, and it is my hope that his new qualification will enable him eventually to work in an advisory post where he can influence future development for Zambia's deaf children. He astonished me once by saying that watching the way I worked had changed his life, and this echoes the VSO logo which was in use at the time of my placement: 'Sharing skills, changing lives'.

I would certainly have been happier if I could have seen my work in the school make a difference to the conditions of teaching and learning while I was there. I would not for anything have missed my time in Africa, or had it shortened. However, I would have benefited greatly from a better understanding of the odds stacked against my expectations from the outset.

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