

Lindsay Clearly with YA teams from Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Botswana. PhotoCredit: Young Africa Zambia Facebook page



The road less travelled

From a short-term volunteer to coordinator of my own project.

LINDSAY CLEARY
Kimmage DSC Alumni

I am not one to believe in grand, life-changing experiences, but the decision to volunteer for a month with SERVE at Young Africa Mozambique six years ago certainly had a butterfly effect that would lead me to a career that I could never have imagined. Today, my partner Mark and I are coordinating the expansion of the international youth organisation Youth Africa into Zambia. It is a huge opportunity, massive responsibility and the biggest challenge of our lives so far. And I can honestly say it wouldn't be this way if it weren't for that short-term volunteer placement.

Of course, at the time I had no idea of the trajectory I was about to be on. I had just graduated from DCU, my Communications degree a testament to a long-time dream of working in the media. I was starting to doubt whether this was the right industry for me or not, but I had no idea what else I could do. So when I went to Beira, Mozambique, I was newly graduated and looking to spend an interesting summer learning a bit about life in southern Africa. Once I arrived, I realised pretty quickly that I loved it there. I really missed it when I got back to Ireland, and that's when I knew I definitely didn't want to pursue a media career anymore. Instead, I wanted to work in development.

So there I was, with a degree in Communications and faded journalism aspirations, looking for a way to break into an industry I had one month of direct experience in. With luck I was offered an opportunity by SERVE to join their team in Belfast as a Communications Intern. I could use my Communications degree and be a part of this world which was so new and interesting to me; supporting development programmes.

Interning, like volunteering, is such a great opportunity to experience different types of work. I learned so much about the intricacies of development while with SERVE.

After two years I wanted to do something to move away from communications and into the programme side of things. I decided to do my Masters in Development Studies at Kimmage Development Studies Centre. As I was submitting my thesis, there was an opportunity to join the team at Young Africa. So I became a volunteer again, back in Mozambique right where it all started, but this time on a Long Term Volunteer contract.

Fast forward to today, and I am working in a career I never imagined when I signed up to volunteer for the first time.

Volunteering is something that some of us never stop doing. Many people take the opportunity to volunteer overseas once in their lifetime; some carrying changed perspectives with them forever, others a paragraph on their CV and nothing more. Some regularly volunteer locally or internationally, while keeping their jobs separate. For some of us though, volunteering leads to a whole new profession. So what are the elements that took me from a short-term volunteer to coordinator of my own project within the same organisation?

Firstly, using the skills I already had as a way of breaking into a new sector. My qualification was seemingly unrelated to international development, but it was exactly what I needed to get started. Don't make the mistake of believing your qualifications and experience are irrelevant. Use your skills, do what you enjoy doing, and see where it takes you.

Secondly, the close partner relationship between sending organisation and host organisation. SERVE and Young Africa share the same values and work very closely. Without this, I never would have been able to build my own relationship with Young Africa in Mozambique. You cannot do development work without working at a local level, and this goes for volunteering too.

Thirdly, Young Africa is a volunteer-led organisation. Young Africa's founders started out on a voluntary basis, and now direct an international youth organisation with a presence in six countries. The spirit of volunteering is not just about using your time to help others, but a way of working that says that you are motivated by purpose, not your bank balance. Many of the staff at Young Africa started out as volunteers, and volunteers bring so much to the organisation every day.

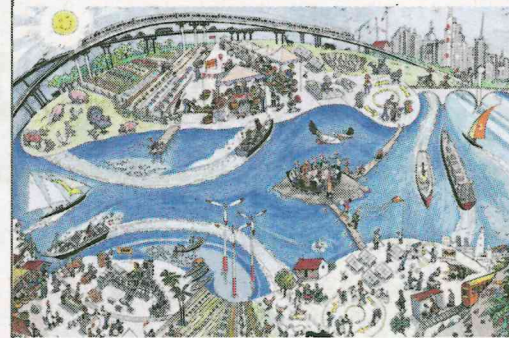
Finally, straightforward risk-taking and gumption. If Mark and I hadn't entered into our volunteer roles with the attitude of giving everything a go, we would not have this amazing opportunity in front of us now. If you're volunteering, open up. You never know where it'll take you.

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COMHLÁMH RESOURCES



TRADE JUSTICE GROUP

Comhlámh's Trade Justice Group is active on highlighting the damaging TTIP and CETA trade deals that will undermine our democracies by giving power to global multinationals to challenge public policies in secret tribunals. The group has played a leading role in raising awareness with the public while also engaging our elected politicians



VOLUNTEERING FOR THE FUTURE

Volunteered overseas and looking for ways to continue your engagement with development and global justice? Check out our Erasmus+ funded programme, Volunteering for the Future, to find out about residential courses, action projects, and learning events around active citizenship. You can find out more at <http://www.comhlamh.org/volunteering-for-the-future-erasmus/>



Before going abroad to volunteer, make sure to have a look at Comhlámh's Volunteer Charter. Developed by returned volunteers, it includes questions that will help you think about responsible, responsive international volunteering. And our free online "Volunteering Overseas: Where do I start?" course will help you explore these issues more, to help you be fully prepared before you go.



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