



# Personal development case study.

Alex Bullock, UK volunteer

**Cycle 1:** Machakos, Kenya

**Placement:** Blind and Low Vision Network (BLINK)

## What have I learnt?

Reflecting on what you have learnt, especially over a period as long as the three months I have been in Machakos is, is a tricky thing. Trying to put myself into the shoes of the person who stepped off that plane in Nairobi all those weeks ago, in order to identify what is different seemed, initially a very challenging concept. The more I think about it, however, the more the more ways I realise I have changed and grown. My time in Kenya has definitely been challenging but I am it glad has, I feel I would have learnt far less if it had not been.

One area in which I feel I have learnt a lot is leadership. Before coming to Kenya it is not an area I have had much experience in. When we started our placement, however, it soon became clear that my fellow volunteers were looking at me to take charge. Even the members of the self-help groups we worked with referred to us as 'Alex and his team'. I put this down to that fact that, with my large stature, beard and long hair, I looked several years older than the other volunteers. As much as I insisted to the others that we were a team and no one was the leader, I soon found that problems and questions were always brought to me and often jobs would be overlooked if I didn't specifically ask someone to do it, as the others assumed someone else was doing it, one of the perils of a large team. I also found that in my role on the media committee, myself and one other volunteer were being looked to as the leaders as well. Being in charge,



even reluctantly, has taught me a lot. I has given me invaluable practice in organising and prioritising work, negotiating disputes between team members, communicating between different groups and motivating disheartened colleagues. As a result of this experience I will be far more likely to put myself forward to lead groups in the future.

Another area in which I feel I have learnt a lot as a result of my time in Kenya, is networking and fund raising. Having never worked in an office environment making the connections necessary for community work and having the confidence to just walk into someone's office and ask them for something is new to me. As part of three of our projects for BLINK we had to visit the managers of many of the banks and large businesses in town to ask for sponsorship. it was definitely a challenge for me, adapting to new ways of communicating, working far more face to face than over the phone or email. It greatly improved my confidence however, and after a few days of walking around businesses I felt far more comfortable just walking up to someone, introducing myself and asking them for something.

Along a similar theme, VSO has helped my ability to say no. Before coming to Kenya I was very bad at being able to tell someone that I was too busy to do something for them or help them with something. This would mean I often found myself with so much to do at any one time that I had to rush jobs to get them all done. We have been so busy while we have been here however, that I have had to turn people down when they have asked for my help. I have also seen other people who are taking on too much, which is affecting their performance. This has taught me that sometimes you can actually help people more by not helping them, if you would not be able to do the job to a high enough standard.

I have also learnt that people with disabilities can do some incredible things. Some of the people I worked with have made remarkable achievements despite disabilities that, in many places where more financial support is available, would leave them extremely dependant. To take one example, when we had the CAD in Mitatuni we invited members of the BLINK baking group to attend to give a demonstration.



**My Counterpart Andrew and I visiting the Machakos Children's rescue center who we ran a clothing drive for.**

Unfortunately our supervisor from BLINK didn't provide the necessary materials and we had to cancel their involvement at the last minute. She didn't get the message to all the group members however, and an hour before he was due one member of the group, who is almost entirely blind, arrived, alone, in spite of the knee deep mud and pouring rain, in an area he didn't know, having travelled for several hours. The fact that he had made it to the event before any of the other speakers, some of whom were several hours late, despite the fact that he had much further to travel and far less means to do so as well as severely limited sight, made a real impact on me. I have met so many people through my

work with BLINK who, through sheer dedication and perseverance in the face of their disability, have proved, time and again, the saying 'disability is not inability'. They have also, almost without fail, been some of the nicest, most welcoming people I have ever met.

## Some of the everyday ways in which I have changed as a result of taking part in this programme;

- I am more confident about asking people for something.
- I have a profound new respect for people living with disabilities.
- I have a new confidence in my leadership abilities.
- I am less reliant on technology, especially when the power or the internet cut out. I now find other non-digital jobs that need doing rather than just thinking, 'oh well the powers gone, I'll just have to sit and wait for it to come back'.
- I have learnt to be more patient than I was, at first 'Kenyan time' drive me mad. People being hours late for meetings, events not starting till long after they were meant to and all the rest of it infuriated me to begin with, but with time I learnt to relax and enjoy a bit of a break while I waited.
- I find it easier to say no to people.
- I am more patient when people are struggling to achieve a task and more likely to help them complete it so they can learn, rather than just doing it myself.
- I will value the freedom I have at home far more, having lived in quite a restrictive host home environment.
- I can now cook some great Kenyan dishes which I plan take home with me. Especially chapatti and, controversially with the other UK volunteers, Ugali. I am also now a master at lighting a charcoal jiko.
- I am now a master at putting up marquees, having twice had to show the professionals who were being paid to do it how they go together.

## One memory from my experience that stands out...

One thing that this experience has really taught me is that you don't necessarily need to speak the same language as someone to form a bond with them. One of the self-help groups we work with only have two members who speak English, so with the rest of the members my only real communication was pointing, my very limited Kikamba and Kiswahili, and my counterpart's translations. However, when I arrived at the world disability day event in Machakos I was surrounded by an army of screaming, cheering old women who were genuinely ecstatic to see me. This is despite the fact that they had been sitting in the pouring rain for over two hours waiting for the event to start. The only conversation I had had with most of those women was the Kikamba greeting of 'wacha', to which I would respond, 'ah'. Regardless of the fact that we did it every time we met they were always delighted when I got it right. Other than that our friendship had been formed over baking cakes together with them chatting away to me in Kikamba, them showing me how to weave baskets and me trying to carry stacks of wood on a strap around my head. After I had repeated my long line of ahs and received hugs and handshakes from them all I returned to the other

volunteers who were setting up chairs. One of them turned to me and said “oh my god, those women really love you, did you save them from a lion or something?” I think the welcome I received from those women that day was warmer and more enthusiastic than the welcome I will receive from my own family when I get home. It really showed me that actions can speak as loudly as words when you are forming a relationship with someone and that the people here are some of the nicest and most welcoming I have ever met.



**My counterpart Dory and I with our friends at the Muvuti Challenged Self Help Group.**

## Personal Quote

**“My time in Kenya has been extremely challenging but I wouldn’t have had it any other way. It has allowed me to develop skills I never knew I had and grow in ways I never thought possible.”**