



## **Personal Development Case Study**

**Name:**Shanon Nicholson, 21, UK volunteer

**Cycle 1:** Machakos, Kenya

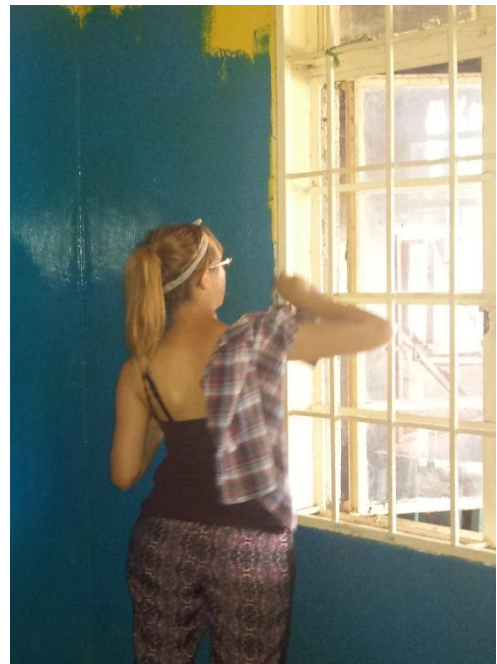
**Purpose:** Securing Livelihoods

**Placement:**BLINK (Blind and Low Vision Network); no.6, Ministry of Agriculture; Machakos County.

### **My VSO-ICS Machakos Journey**

My first memory of the programme was our stop in Dubai International Airport. Exhausted and overwhelmed with nerves, came the realisation that there was no going back! This is it! A VSO-ICS cross cultural development adventure, to Kenya! I have always been the person that, if I sign up to something, I must see it through. Travelling to Kenya, my first time in Africa too, was my first long distance, self-initiated leave from home. Many emotions and thoughts were up in the air (quite literally)!

Before VSO ICS, I studied as an Applied and Environmental Geology undergraduate and through my studies, I faced many issues, the main - saving my confidence. I chose this Youth Volunteer programme for two sole reasons: 1) To improve my confidence and interpersonal skills with people I had not yet met, and 2) to delve into the development field - discovering what it entails, the complexities it entails, the successes development can achieve, and to know I was somehow going to make a positive difference. My lack of confidence, especially vocal, and my previous mindset about my abilities, I felt there were many skills I could come here and achieve. Skills I wanted to learn, and believe I have really honed the past 3 months include some of the following: event management, scheduling meetings and workplans, partaking in debates and thus being able to solve problems, building a creative mindset, to understand and work well with others, adjusting to a new environment and different perspectives of others, listening and vocal and persuasion skills. This programme has helped me understand and to adapt to a new environment and to thus appreciate the environment I am in, such as working with others with different view from different backgrounds with different religions and values.



Most importantly, I feel this programme has emotionally strengthened me as an individual, as I have learned to cope with varying situations, both on programme and at home in the UK, and especially, I have learned to prioritise situations, tasks, goals and to use my own initiative, which I believe has been noticed by my amazing host family, work counterparts and team leaders, and believe that I have a passionate streak in working in the development sector, discovered by talking to others. I believe there are other skills and things I have learnt here that I have yet to realise. I have definitely, positively developed as a person and have reached new heights with my confidence.

Development is something that does not fall from paper into plan. Complexities are involved. I have been challenged here with my patience, understanding of time, and with others who may let you down when a project plan is nearly in full swing. As a team we have been able to take work into our own hands, our timetable and goals more effectively and personally, I feel I have strongly taken my own initiative into the workplace, and feel I have really learnt about team leadership skills, communication with my counterparts and that as a team, we have been able to draw up our own expectations and goals for the programme.

I have also been blessed. I have met amazing people and learnt to understand them well! Sometimes it is all too easy to be frustrated around the same faces for 3 months, but this really gives you the chance to understand others. Few bumps have come along the way, but this programme is also about adapting and problem solving. I am glad to say I have made friends in Machakos, and that I am great friends with all my fellow volunteers! Leaving will be hard, but knowing I have a family network in Kenya is humbling.

Cycle 1 has been all about networking, networking and networking. A lot of this programme has been based on finding new networks, scheduling meetings and policy making and facilitating – plus a lot learning about Machakos. Though frustrations have hit highs amongst the team at how slow things have been able to take place, it is most important to remember we have now put our name in the ground firmly and created a positive bond with many. Being able to meet and talk to government officials, youths and partner organisations such as the Red Cross has been a pleasure and something I would maybe not have achieved without this programme. Being part of 4 CAD's (VSO Drug Abuse and Youth Empowerment day; Light Of Hope/VSO charity clean up walk and youth empowerment day, World Aids Day and the International day for Persons with Disabilities) has been an amazing, challenging and



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Teaching the BLINK self-help baking enterprise group on improving their attitudes and marketing skills and tips for entrepreneurial success, with emphasis on account keeping.

**So I believe I have changed as a person – here are many things I believe have impacted me and things I should do more often:**

- Dancing: Kenyans love to dance and are super amazing at it! Everyone is in a feel-good mood and when we all dance we all smile! I love Kenyan dancing. This has persuaded me to get back into dancing at home, something I stopped professionally 3 years ago before university and now, I don't care who's watching!
- Practically, I have come to learn that I lack skills such as sewing, cooking and crafts and feel I should try to hone at least one of these skills.
- I have learnt not to be forgotten. During MPR a note was written on each volunteer about their strengths. A message told me to be myself more and let people in. I reflected on this and improved my social skills further. Having a naturally sarcastic nature, I found it a difficult line to tread at the beginning of the programme. I really feel my friendships with all volunteers have strengthened the past 4 weeks since MPR and I'm glad for that message.
- Being a geologist, I love nature. Machakos is beautiful and green with rather majestic hills. I appreciate natural beauty and environment much more now. I'm not keen to be surrounded by grey concrete when I return home.
- I have a new found confidence – being able to talk to 300+ people on a p.a. system is one of my biggest personal achievements.
- I want to be more culturally adaptable in terms of broadening my language skills and understanding of culture, tradition and religion and their impacts on development processes.
- I now appreciate friends, family and people I meet much more than prior to VSO. Having met amazing people and informing others of my whereabouts I feel a responsibility to act maturely in terms of my personal safety.
- I have learnt development is not a simple process. Things on paper do not always go to plan, and people can't always meet your expectations. Despite many hurdles and challenges, you can still achieve at least something that will make a huge difference, even if you don't think it has.
- I think I'll thoroughly enjoy a running shower when I return, after grabbing a basin and being confused at what a showerhead is! I appreciate running water and working appliances so much more, whilst learning I really can live without a lot at ease. Conservation of resources is important.

- I appreciate the UK government more than I did prior to the programme - such as benefits and medical care, and the costs that must be involved, to look after UK citizens.
- To live as a giver and not a taker.
- I feel like I can achieve more now than prior to this programme. I have done things I never had envisaged I could do, such as talking on a Public Address system at two CAD's, attempting to converse in Kiswahili rather, approaching people for the first time with confidence, introducing myself, taking my own initiative and much, much more.
- I have learnt to appreciate time and enjoy life more. With one week to go, I feel so blessed to have come here and spent 3 months with amazing people.

### **What situation struck me the most? How did I feel?**

Many memories stand out, some beautiful, some sad, some frustrating and some illustrative of ongoing development. Being on the CAD committee I had been opened up to many new situations and adaptations and most importantly learning new but crucial life skills. The first CAD took place on November 15<sup>th</sup> outside Machakos town, in a community heavily affected by youth unemployment, drug abuse, and other issues concerning Gender Based Violence, an aged population or a population with many PWD's (persons with disabilities), who face many day to day challenges. Approximately 2 weeks before the event, the committee travelled to the Mtituni community to visit schools to invite the youth, including those in scout groups. 30 bob from town and we arrived. The CAD theme was to promote drug abuse awareness and thus focus on the positive – empowering the youth. Magnifying the importance of youth empowerment was key. This visit took us to a particular school, sore with memories. Thought to have been caused by struggling youth, possibly inflicted with drugs, a dormitory sadly caught on fire, with many children, male and female, of all Standards, perishing in what was a national disaster. This story became more real when taken by a caretaker, to the memorial garden where they are protected and remembered. This sadly sore story however has created a more resilient, positive and future-focussed community. Students and the community, directly affected from this disaster, have stood together in the face of drug abuse and have begun to flourish in ways they may have not before. The community are more aware of such issues youth face today, and thus empowering the youth is the key to a brighter, more developed and educated community. The power of this story is hard to portray in words. But one thing I know, communities here have a much stronger and positive framework than communities back at home in the UK. The resilience and perseverance reflected by this community really struck. To see such a successful turnout, many youth be so enthusiastic, and the local community

coming to going on, and many happy hope and CAD has community term. This I forget.



see what was to see so faces, I truly believe this impacted the for the long will never

Planting kales with the Machakos Central disabled self-help group in their sack garden.

**LastQuotation:**

*Without challenge, you will not feel the rewards of success.*

**So...**

I wish the next cycle many best wishes and to remember to be patient, persevere, to take initiative and to focus on the positives amongst the many development hurdles you may face!

Asante sana VSO-ICS, team leaders, programme coordinator, Machakos, family and friends!Tuonane baadaye!

