



# Personal Development Case Study

TakyiwaDanso, UK Volunteer

## Cycle 1 Machakos

**Placement:** Kenya Red Cross Society, Machakos Branch, working on Securing Livelihood projects

### What have I learnt?

During my 3 months here in Machakos, I learnt many things about myself, Kenyan culture and of the realities of working in community development. I joined this ICS programme fresh from a degree in International Development, with the intention of wanting to gain experience of working with NGO's. However, I wasn't prepared for the challenges I would face in working in a completely different environment, but I feel that I have become a stronger and more independent person because of it.

I initially thought that working at Red Cross would see me out in the field most days, doing a lot of hands on work. But being the first cycle here in Machakos, it took a while for us as volunteers and as VSO, to establish ourselves in the community, so the first few weeks were quiet in that we weren't able to do much. I found that difficult to deal with, since after four weeks of being there, our team still weren't able to do much since there were many bureaucratic issues in the organisation and we depended on other people for information. I became worried that I would



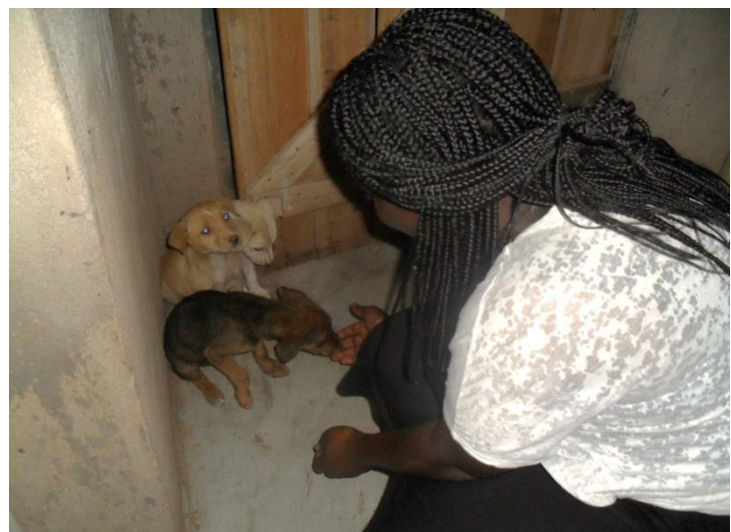
The Red Cross volunteers before the membership drive launch procession through town.



Planting a kale nursery bed at Machakos Boys School greenhouse

leave this experience without having achieved anything. After discussing my concerns with my counterparts, we decided to take the lead for ourselves to do as much as we could despite the restrictions. We planned our blood drive campaign in Machakos in lead up to an open-air blood session, tried out new agricultural techniques at the greenhouse and initiated a waste management research project. As our work picked up, it became easier to achieve our goals and integrate more with the Red Cross volunteers. Collaborating with the other VSO placements helped me develop my networking skills and event managing skills as I was able to use my contacts to help organise CAD's, GCD's and other Red Cross events. This experience has enhanced my knowledge on how vulnerable people in the community can support themselves through small innovative projects e.g. school kitchen gardens.

I have lived with host families before, but living with my family here in Machakos has been the best experience by far. I was lucky enough to live with a wonderful family who were so welcoming and generous to me and my counterparts, making sure that we were always comfortable and well. They taught us many things from how to cook Kenyan food such as chapatis, to how to speak Kamba and Swahili (though we didn't catch on very well!), as well as making us feel very much part of the family by regularly introducing us to their neighbours and extended family members. Living in a home like this made it easier not to be homesick and I can leave this house with many happy memories. When I first arrived here, I was terrified of travelling alone and anxious about whether people would accept me, but over time I lost those fears and am now very comfortable in moving around Machakos. I hope to take that same confidence with me wherever I travel next in the world.



Me with the puppies in our host home - each named after my counterparts and I

Personally, I have learnt a lot about myself, especially in how mature I have become as I person. Initially I was nervous about meeting the Kenyan volunteers as I didn't know how they would react to their UK counterparts, and whether we would get on. However the Kenyan team were so enthusiastic and welcoming upon our arrival, that I knew that I would have an exciting three months ahead of me. Naturally, there were some difficult moments amongst the group, especially as some of our personalities, values and cultures clashed. As a team, we eventually learnt to communicate and work out our problems and I am grateful that this programme has shown us the appropriate ways to do this. Before I came here, I used to lack the confidence in speaking out my mind if I had a problem, but working in close

proximity with twenty-three people as has taught me how to be diplomatic and not afraid to confront people about certain issues. This has come up amongst the different social circles in our group as well as during committee meetings. Planning events such as the MPR and debrief has been stressful as it is difficult to please so many



My team during our MPR at Paradise Lost

people, which is something I always strive to do. But I have learnt that I can't always do that, and must learn to be practical and make tough decisions. However, these events were successful in the end, and I am proud to have been part of the team who organised such events.

### **How I have changed as a result from taking part in this programme**

As a result of working with different people, I have become more patient and understanding when expecting things from people, since the timing here is much more relaxed than that of the UK. I've also become more confident in introducing myself, and become more self-aware in the way I speak and interact with new people, such that I can better express myself in ways which everyone can understand regardless of their background i.e. language barrier or cultural difference.



Working at the blood drive CAD in Machakos

I am also more confident in networking with new people, as unlike the UK where a lot of interaction is via the phone or online, here in Kenya I had to actually meet people, whether for 5 minute or hour long meetings to ensure things would get done. Through this I was able to bring more people and lesser-known charities together and help make connections between them. I hope to use these skills as I continue to forge my career in development work.

On an environmental level, I've realised how much water and electricity is used and wasted in the UK, and how much we take it for granted. I've learnt how easy it is to be resourceful with water and how to make a little go a long way. I'm now more appreciative of running water, a constant flow of electricity and a strong Wifi connection!

### **My memorable moment...**

I have many memorable moments from my time here in Machakos, from going horse riding for the first time during MPR, to having a crowd of school children laughing at my accent during a blood donor drive. However, my favourite memory was on the eve of my 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday, where for the first time I managed to get home early enough to sit on our water tank and watch the sunset. As I lived on a hill, I was privileged enough to enjoy the amazing views of Machakos and its many surrounding hills. I returned to that spot during the evening when there happened to be a power cut, so the whole of Machakos town was dark except for a few car and street lights in the distance. I really loved sitting there with my UK counterpart sister, appreciating how bright the stars were in the darkness, and how it felt like we were really experiencing Kenya at its finest. It was a nice time to reflect on our journey so far, since it was so peaceful and silent – a contrast to our normally busy hectic days in and around the town!



The amazing view from my host home!