

Bangladesh 2012- Victoria Scudamore

This year I have been incredibly fortunate to take part in the International Citizen Service program (ICS). This program is funded by the British department DIFID (The Department for International Development) and I was given the opportunity to work with the internationally respected charity VSO. All of these organisations came together and helped me to have an absolutely amazing experience, which has really shaped me into the confident global citizen I am now, as I was able to volunteer in Bangladesh for 3 months!



Getting ready to board the plane in Heathrow

On September 10th 2012 I dragged my suitcase up the platform of the train station and before I knew it I was on my way to Bangladesh. Having lived in the English market town of Frome for all of my life I knew very little of the lives of those in the developing world, and this experience was definitely to be an eye opener.

Training

My trip started in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, a city full of traffic, dust and millions of people. Driving to the hostel we were surprised and amazed by the driving skills of Bangladeshis, as bumpers



After making our flags out of leaves we surrounded them with candles and sang our national anthems during training.

touched tail gates and rickshaws and CNGs (vehicles like tuktuks) weaved in any gaps left in-between. The sides of the roads were full of people and markets and I could tell just from my first impression that I was going to love Bangladesh!

We then spent two weeks training in Dhaka and got to meet the national volunteers, some from the villages where we would be working and some from Dhaka University. The training was very useful and we were able to learn about Bangladesh, its unique culture and the villages where we would be working. We also got to have some fun times and play football and traditional Bangladeshi games which really helped us to get to know each other.

Host home

After two weeks of training I got on a bus with one other UK volunteer and we headed on the bumpy roads to Dariumajuri village! When we arrived we were dropped off at our host homes and the real adventure began. I was living with a wonderful Hindu family in the centre of the village in a one story concrete house. I was greeted by incense and flowers and was able to meet my host family, which consisted off my host mum- a house wife, host dad- a farmer and the three children, Sampa- 13, Sumla-10 and Shouldjo-2.



Me and my host family

Living with a host family was a brilliant experience firstly because I got to try so much local food. I also learnt that Bangladesh's love rice! And during my time in the village I ate rice for all three meals of the day and I ate all my meals with my right hand as opposed to using cutlery!



Me enjoying rice and dhal at a local feast

I loved spending time with my host family and especially with the cutest two year old boy you could ever meet! Together my host family and I celebrated many Hindu festivals, attended many feasts and visited many temples together.

During my time in the village I learned the unfortunate news that my host family's great aunt had died that evening. Later that night I had a visit from Sampa, my host sister, who asked me to take a picture of her grandmother. I followed her out of the house and only halfway way there did I realise that she meant to take a photo of the lady who had just died! I then arrived outside the house where the lady laid on the floor dressed in a white sari with red and gold patterns being painted on her face. The family sat around her and as I was the only person in the village with a camera I was asked to take a photograph. It was definitely a surreal experience, but extremely fascinating and next came the burial outside the house and after much dancing around the grave with fire and bowing, she was buried. It was extremely interesting and I felt truly honoured to be able to witness such an event. But it was not over then; for 13 days after the family sat by the grave each evening and played music, and after 11 days there was a feast of sweet food. It was an amazing experience to watch the post funeral events and I was able to be part of the most amazing two day feast 13 days after the death, where I ate all three of my meals each day sitting on the floor, with hundreds of other people.



Family members dancing around the grave at the Hindu funeral.

The host family experience was amazing and it really taught me so many things. I was able to learn so much about give and take and also I was able to build really strong relationships with host family. It was truly amazing to see the value of family and community.

Work

Whilst in Bangladesh we also spent a considerable amount of time working in the village. I worked in a multicultural team consisting of me, another UK volunteer and two volunteers from Dhaka University who were able to translate and help us understand the culture and customs. The four of us then worked with local volunteers from the village who were members of the local youth club. There were about 10-15 regular members who we were constantly impressed by as they



Me and volunteers from Dariumajuri village at a presentation in Dhaka



Dhaka university volunteer Sifat completing surveys

were determined to improve their village and turned up to meetings almost every day for no benefit to themselves, rather for their village.

We were the first batch of three to work in the village so our work started with research to identify the main Primary Healthcare and WaSH (Water Sanitation and Hygiene) issues in the village. We did this in a number of ways- firstly we organised two focus group discussions with local community members and created discussion about issues which they faced. Also we surveyed 370 households in the village and asked them multiple choice questions about their lives, we then collated

this data and imputed it into a spreadsheet to create statistics which directed the projects we undertook.

In our research we discovered that only 50.14% of people in the village washed their hands with soap, and we decided that it would be necessary to educate people, especially young people, whose habits are easily changed about correct hand washing practices. We did this by organising hand washing sessions with 280 children at three schools, where did educational sessions on How? Why? and When? you should wash your hands and then we followed this by getting all of the children to practise their technique following the six steps of hand washing. We also ran toothbrushing sessions at two schools educating them on How? When? and Why? And then we gave the children the opportunity to practise.



Doing a handwashing session at a local school



A local volunteer refurbishing a water filter

Another key area we worked on was clean drinking water, as 42.55% of people in the village did not filter their water despite it coming from either a tube well or a pond. However in the village they did have the capacity to filter their water using 15 large expensive concrete filters built by the NGO World Vision. These filters had been aided to the village so there was little sense of ownership and responsibility and community members were not aware of the importance of drinking filtered water. Therefore we educated village people about the importance of drinking clean

drinking water during meetings and in a drama performance. And we decided to fix the water filters with the help of the youth club and community and set up committees of local people for each filter, who helped with the refurbishment and the committees collected money from local people for the work. This really helped to create a sense of ownership and hopefully helped the project be more sustainable and long term.

One of our main focusses was primary healthcare(PHC), as most Bangladeshis access PHC from local 'village doctors' who are often untrained men who run pharmacies and advise local people on which drugs they should take. However as they have little training this often leads to ineffective and dangerous drug dispensation. Therefore we wanted to improve local people's access to PHC, so we organised a 'health camp'- where a local doctor came and gave primary healthcare checkups to local people for free. We also tested 90 peoples blood group- and



Local volunteers acting a comical scene about the importance of cleaning your latrine

created a blood donation register. We also created a drama about PHC which we performed in front of almost 200 local people raising awareness of issues such as handwashing, how to clean your latrine, how to care for pregnant women, etc.

Another project we were incredibly interested in was birth attendant training. As we discovered that 44.78% of births were assisted by unskilled birth attendants. Therefore we researched how to organise a training course and arranged a venue, a trainer and contacted unskilled birth attendants who would attend the course.



Me teaching an English class to the youth club

We spent a lot of time with the youth club and had to overcome a lot of miscommunication. Therefore we decided to organise English classes for the youth club and we focussed on many areas including vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading and writing. We also ran computer classes and taught the local volunteers how to use many programs and the internet so they could use the laptop supplied to them by VSO.

I learnt so many things through my work in the village, including a

surprising amount of Bangla (the language of Bangladesh) and how to manage a cross cultural team who have many priorities.

What did I learn?

My time in Bangladesh taught me so many things. Firstly I learnt so much about the lives of people in developing countries and I have learnt the importance of family, religion and community in their lives. Since coming home I have really been aware of how fortunate we are as a society and how often we take this for granted, and my experience has helped me put perspective on my life.

I am now also more aware of the importance of international



Me in Dhaka

development and the true meaning of suitability in a practical environment, as giving aid will just make people dependant. However when you give education and certain simple tools a community can really start to help itself and develop a strong infrastructure. After this experience I am now keen to work more in the developing world, as the diverse cultures are so interesting and the lives of the local people so different to ours. When I finish Medical School I really hope to work in a country such as Bangladesh and use my skills to help people less fortunate than myself.

