

First Impressions; Lasting Impressions

My experience of International Development in Taita Taveta, Kenya



Team Taita!!

(L to R, top row) - Joyce (PA), Jan (TL), Lucy (TL), Cynthia, Caroline, Vicky, John, Hannah, Ruphina, Hafsa, Mercy, James, Florence, Ken, Sally, Helena, Nyambura,
(L to R bottom) - Amos, Ella, Alex, Aron, Izzi and Mary

Helena Lane

June – August 2018



Introduction

These past two months have been spent on one of the most amazing experiences of my life. Having never been to Africa, the VSO and ICS collaboration gave me an incredible opportunity, to volunteer in a developing country, and help address social issues. However, I would also have never made it there without the kind donations by family, friends and the community, and a very generous GIFT sponsorship.

I stayed with a host family in Birikani (a district in Voi) and worked in a wider group of twenty-three (7 UK volunteers (UKVs), 12 Kenyan volunteers or in-country volunteers (ICVs), two team leaders (TLs) and a project administrator (PA)). We then worked in smaller counterpart groups for our placement projects, of which I had two; Mwanjila Vocational Training Centre and Sote Hub. My small group was myself, and two Kenyans - Ruphina (from Nairobi) and Amos (from Kisumu).

All the placements in Taita Taveta county fell under the EYEE aspect of VSO's projects. EYEE stands for Empowered Youth for Employment and Entrepreneurship, seeking to fulfil VSO vision of a 'World Without Poverty' by ensuring the people of Taita Taveta have the best educational opportunities possible. My specific placements of Mwanjila VTC and Sote Hub, opened my eyes to the differences in culture, and in education. My first impression of the situations faced by the local community motivated both myself and the other volunteers to create, implement, and maintain sustainable projects, to generate a lasting impression for the community.

Arrival; First Impressions

My first impressions of Kenya were;

1. It wasn't as hot as I thought it would be for June – August (especially after the heat of a transfer in Dubai!), although apparently it gets very hot in September and October.
2. Pre-placement training set the bar really low for my expectations, so many aspects were a pleasant surprise – e.g. some places had indoor flush toilets (!), however, for me, this was only in my host home, so I had to get used to pit latrines in schools!
3. The dust!! It got *everywhere*. On several occasions when we were travelling, many of us wore handkerchiefs over our noses and mouths to try and limit the amount of dust we breathed in.

However, finally meeting the people I would be working with was a great experience. None of the UK volunteers really knew each other as we had all been seated separately on the plane, and obviously had never met the Kenyan volunteers before. The warm welcome we received made the transition from living in the 'bubble' of a UK perspective to that of a Kenyan much easier. I will admit to some culture shock upon my arrival. Whilst much was similar to the UK, such as the new train system, there were also aspects which were vastly different. For example, the number of stray dogs in and around the towns (and the lack of care shown

towards them) was upsetting for the UKVs. However, we soon had to adapt to the way of life, even though we might not have necessarily liked or understood it.

As mentioned above, I lived in a host home in Birikani, on the outskirts of Voi. I lived with another Kenyan volunteer – Nyambura, who was from Kiambu. She is 25 and was looking to do a degree in International Development, which is one of the reasons she applied for ICS. Our host baba (dad) Samuel picked us up in his car to take us to meet the rest of our host family. In addition to Samuel, there is his wife Grace (who works in Nairobi and so we sadly did not see her very often), his niece Rhoda (head chef at a primary school) and his granddaughter Wakio (who runs a cosmetics shop in town). We also had a cat and her kitten, several chickens and a turkey!! As we lived so far away from the other host homes and centre of town, the fenced compound did make me feel safer, but everyone in the town was very friendly. Nyambura and I were accepted into the family straight away, and I made friends with the neighbours quickly. Mwanjala is a motorbike driver (taxi) who lived nearby and consequently became my 'go-to guy' for my commute to work – I met his wife, who was also very kind. I also met and made friends with our closest neighbour, Esther – who ran a mini shop right by our gate, selling eggs and bread. The trust between families was so strong, that Esther even asked me to look after her baby, whilst she cleaned the house!

Community was obviously an important aspect of all the work we did, with knowledge imparted to attendees of volunteer projects being spread through the families – such as sexual health education and employability skills such as problem solving. However, as with any cross-cultural working, it took time adjusting from our Western perspective to learn the principles the community lived by. However, this also drew the UKVs attention to the hidden issues within the community. For example, the lack of knowledge about HIV is a real issue, both to Kenya and especially in Taita Taveta, and something we, as volunteers, felt very strongly about. The 40% unemployment rate also factored heavily into the topics we covered in our sessions with the wider community, such as on our visits to schools and the VTC.

Placements; the Lasting Impressions

As mentioned above, Ruphina, Amos and I had two placements - Mwanjila VTC and Sote Hub.

Mwanjila is a Vocational Training Centre - a sixth form equivalent where students learn skills and trades. It is based in Bura, near Mwatate; about an hour from my home in Voi.

Mwanjila VTC opened in 1975 as Mwanjila Youth Polytechnic. Today it provides technological training in Carpentry/Joining, Fashion Design and Garment Making, Building Technology, Electronics, Motor Vehicle Mechanics, Metal Works, Welding, ICT, Food and Beverage Technology and Agri-Business. Alongside the technological aspect, Mwanjila also provides training in communication, entrepreneurship and life skills to all students. We spent the month of July working at Mwanjila, consisting of two full days – Tuesdays and Wednesdays, both of which were packed with sessions on communication, life skills and ICT.

As there were three volunteers assigned to this placement, the work was split. I took the sessions on ICT, Amos ran the sessions on Communication Skills, and Ruphina facilitated the sessions on Life Skills. Leadership of the Guidance and Counselling Sessions was split between Ruphina and Amos (with one session each) and I supported both.

In the ICT lessons, I covered computer basics, such as Desktop (including icons, the control panel, and their uses) and the basics of Microsoft Word (such as opening, saving, copy, paste, bold, underline, italics etc). This proved both necessary and an issue as the students had had very few practical computer sessions.

Ruphina discussed empathy, stress management and effective communication with her classes, and Amos held sessions on communication skills, such as CV and cover letter writing, as well as reports, minutes and business letters.

The two Guidance and Counselling sessions were to each year group, and covered STIs and condom use. Ruphina led the first session, with myself and Amos supporting, and there was a large turnout of first year students (around 100). The second session for the second years was led equally by myself and Amos, but unfortunately the turnout was lower, perhaps due to the fear and stigma surrounding the topic.

Consequently, whilst we did not have long with Mwanjila (due to the school summer holidays), we left the placement feeling that we had actually learnt as much as we had taught. Whilst we had been essentially thrown in at the deep end in regard to teaching (with no formal training, or supervisor), and my limited Swahili, it did allow Ruphina, Amos and I to bond over our shared experiences. I believe that both students and volunteers left the placement with increased confidence.

Much closer to home, in Voi, my Mondays and Thursdays were spent at Sote Hub. In Swahili, 'Sote' means 'all of us' – and it was really seen in this case. Sote Hub is a place for young people to learn ICT skills, to help improve their interpersonal relations and prepare them for the workplace. Sote Hub also has an outreach programme, and so whilst the schools were in session, we often travelled to run similar sessions with the students. However, some of these schools were very far away, which often meant over an hour on a motorbike each way!! It also resulted in doing lots of stretching out my aching legs at the end of each day!

As well as the outreach programme, the VSO volunteers ran employability and life skills sessions each morning. These included self-confidence, problem solving and decision making, and as the sessions went on we gained a small crowd of regular students who always turned up to each session. When the schools closed in August, we continued the morning sessions, but Ruphina and I also began offering one-to-one sessions on computer programmes, such as Microsoft Office and email systems.

Despite occasional miscommunications (!), it was a very rewarding placement. Something that really touched me when working with Sote Hub, was the anonymous feedback of one of the regular attendees of our morning VSO sessions.

“You have given me confidence. I am going to go to school next year”

To read that was both incredibly heart-warming – that we had encouraged someone to make such a decision – but also moving. The young people coming to these sessions were over 20 years old; to be making the decision to go to school – when I have been so lucky to be able to access education from the age of 4 – really affected me.

Sustainable Development: ACD

The Sustainable Development Goals were *very* important to our placements. The main ones to our work were SGDs 3 & 4 – Good Health and Quality Education. Ruphina, Amos and I looked carefully at issues affecting Taita Taveta, and consequently we decided to focus our Active Citizenship Day (ACD) on HIV/AIDS, as there is a very high prevalence of HIV and AIDS in Taita Taveta (6.1%) – higher than the national average of Kenya (5.4%).

We arranged for it to be held at the Bona Youth Centre with the CAP Youth Empowerment Institute (CAP-YEI). In all, we had 143 attendees to our event! I am so proud of how many people we reached in the community, especially on such an important topic. We wanted to cover the following:

- What is HIV/AIDS?
- Why is awareness of the epidemic important?
- How does knowledge of S.T.I.s improve awareness of HIV/AIDS?
- How does the global issue of HIV/AIDS relate to individuals, and more specifically to the lives of those living in Taita Taveta?

We chose the topic because we felt that the high prevalence of HIV and AIDS in Kenya (and especially in Taita Taveta) was not being addressed by the youth and their peers. We felt that the impact of raising awareness around this issue, including causes, symptoms prevention and ramifications would be significant. In addition to this, we felt that we, as volunteers, were well-placed to discuss the pertinence of this issue, as the prevalence of HIV in Taita Taveta, is higher than the national average for Kenya as a whole, and affects the lives of many. The knowledge we provided on the day can hopefully be used (through peer education) to reach out to the wider community. Finally, our ACD allowed a global issue to be viewed through the community perspective, enabling both volunteers and community members alike to think about the impact of these illnesses, and how to influence those around them to reduce the spread through the making of good choices. The event had six activities to encourage learning:

ACTIVITY 1: True or False Game

Facilitated by myself, the game was to understand how much was already known about HIV/AIDS. From a list of 16 questions read out, the students and volunteers either had to put their hands on their heads if they thought it was true, or on their knees if they thought it was false. Both to our benefit and dismay, it was discovered that the students knew very little about HIV.

ACTIVITIES 2&3: Introduction to the Topic of HIV/AIDS

Ruphina first inquired on what the participants thought of, when they heard of Sexually Transmitted Infections. Later she familiarized participants with the definition of sexually Transmitted Infections. The next question to the participants was to name the different types of common STI's, and they gave examples of Gonorrhoea, Syphilis, Genital herpes, Human Papilloma Virus, HIV/AIDS and Chlamydia. The next activity involved looking at each of the STI's basic information, like ways of transmission, if it is treatable, how long it takes, symptoms and ways of prevention. Participants seemed to learn a lot from this activity since it was reflected in the feedback forms.

ACTIVITY 4: Roleplay

During the break, Amos spoke with six youth volunteers from CAP-YEI to help lay out the sense of stigmatization among people living with HIV/AIDS and other STIs. Despite the commonality of the diseases, the stigma remains an issue, which discourages or actively prevents them from accessing treatment and accounts for a high number of suicides. The main idea behind the roleplay was to teach about discrimination and discourage the students from participating in such behaviour.

Activity 5: Talk

Following the short notice that there would not be a guest speaker, I drafted a thirty-minute talk on the impact of HIV and AIDS on young people and other vulnerable groups, but also about the improvements being made alongside the Sustainable Development Goals which seeks to eradicate the AIDS epidemic by 2030. It included a number of statistics on the different stigmas vulnerable groups face, alongside the contrasting statistics of prevention and treatment improvement versus lack of access to HIV services.

Activity 6: Q&A

The Q&A session was facilitated by Amos, with questions directed at me following my talk on the impact and treatment of HIV. As my talk was a few minutes shorter than expected, the Q&A session could run for longer - which was necessary as there were several questions! These mostly involved the aspects of prevention and treatment such as PrEP and condom use. There were some extreme views, such as deporting all with a HIV positive status, but it generated an interesting discussion. It also allowed further elaboration on aspects of how HIV impacts vulnerable groups which was covered in my talk but due to potential time constraints

could not be covered fully. During this time, the evaluation forms were also handed out, allowing us to gain feedback but also run to time.

We had 143 attendees. However, there was no electricity at the venue, which meant that we could not use a projector to show PowerPoints, videos or images with which to engage the audience. However, as CAP-YEI offered the use of their hall for free, we developed ways around this issue.

Despite this, there were some definite successes. The size of the community group that was reached was especially significant - peer education is a key aspect of the project. Another success was how engaged they all were, especially with the length of some of the activities. The true or false game worked really well, and most people left feeling like they had learnt something that they could pass on to others. As a sustainable impact, I believe our talk was well received. It covered the SDG Goal 3 – Good Health, by encouraging the discussion of HIV/AIDS, which also helped reduce the stigma.

Postcards Home

It is difficult to effectively sum up everything I have learnt onto an A5 piece of card, so I didn't try to! There was also the fact that there was nowhere to buy postcards in Voi!! However, I can say that I learnt a lot about myself, and what I *can* do, when the only outcome of holding back is letting people down. I discovered more about cross-cultural working and what happens when you bring people with different viewpoints together on a project. I had the most amazing time, and heartily recommend ICS as an experience to any volunteers wishing to change lives abroad.

Useful Links

VSO Volunteering - <https://www.vsointernational.org/volunteering/where-do-volunteers-work>

ICS - <https://www.volunteerics.org/>

Sote Hub - www.sotehub.com/

Mwanjila VTC - <https://www.businesslist.co.ke/company/90044/mwanjila-youth-polytechnic>

Photos 1 -

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1wHuQCrDRUkqXELhszzT2Y13mJ77RbbXB>

Photos 2 – <https://drive.google.com/open?id=1G5tw2W8c5XXCc-D30019PYM8Nyo9wlW4>

Photographs



CAP-YEI takes part in an energizer during the ACD



Helena and Scholar (Esther's child)



(L - R) Rhoda, Helena, Wakio and Samuel



Ella (UKV) at the ACD, and Helena (by podium)



Elephant at Voi Wildlife Lodge



Amos and Ruphina (both standing) help with translations for Helena's ICT lesson



Our ACD (Ruphina teaching)



Amos (standing) teaches a class



Helena and Amos teaching at Sote Hub