

Volunteer SARAH JOHNSON

Partner organisation SHARANA | INDIA

After winning a competition jointly organised by the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland (ICAS) and Accounting for International Development (AfID) Ernst & Young auditor Sarah Johnson quickly found herself travelling to southern India. Having previously volunteered in Africa, India appealed as a fresh challenge and a three month assignment took her to picturesque Pondicherry to work with a small local charity. Sharana run a number of community development initiatives that include a schooling programme that enables underprivileged children to pursue a formal education and a community development programme that focuses on improving living conditions for poor families.

THE ASSIGNMENT

Sarah's role was to assist *Sharanya*, one of the permanent employees, to improve the financial management and performance of the charities income generating projects; an on-site bistro and a recycled newspaper products division. The Bistro employs two local women full-time, who are being trained by a local chef to prepare breakfasts, lunches and snacks. The paper products division employs three more women full-time who are skilled in making products such as bags, bowls, placemats, plates and even window-blinds from recycled newspaper. It is hoped that whilst providing vital training and employment to vulnerable women these projects would ultimately become self-sufficient and generate surplus revenue to help fund Sharana's other community programmes around Pondicherry.



"I have definitely enjoyed the variety of work and the feeling that I am contributing towards something real, tangible and long lasting. Not that the life of an auditor wasn't of course full of excitement!"

Sarah Johnson, AfID

"It was a real pleasure to have Sarah with us. She was absolutely fabulous and an immense support, helping us in many areas which required urgent attention. Her assimilation into a new culture was also phenomenal."

Rajkala, Director of Sharana

WHAT WAS ACHIEVED?

After Sarah's assignment the Sharana staff were clearly more confident with basic finance and able to carry out their daily activities more effectively. The need for good accounting and is now seen as an integral part of the organisation's success. However, working in an NGO also requires the volunteer to be open-minded and flexible; Sarah had to embrace a variety of tasks from negotiating with local shop owners to stock cookies and explaining Sharana's operations in French to a Belgian tour group to moulding shapes from dough with the children at Summer Camp. She even helped to devise new recipes for bistro sandwiches, helping staff with costing, margins and prices.

LOCAL IMPRESSIONS

Sarah: "In what little remained of my free time, when I wasn't practising yoga, working at Sharana or attending my Tamil class, I visited the hotspots of Pondy, including the beach front promenade & Gandhi statue, the botanical gardens and the government park. It was here that I was mobbed by a gang of schoolgirls demanding to know every detail from my mother's name to my favourite shampoo. It's the closest I'm going to feel to being a celebrity!"