

WANT A MOMENT OF CLARITY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN AFRICA?

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Neil Jennings reports on an initiative that's tackling development problems by importing accountancy skills



After 10 long years commuting into the City, I had a moment of clarity. I promptly left my role as the director for an international accountancy recruiter to volunteer as the overseas development director for a small Rwandan NGO, set up by orphans and refugees of the 1994 war and genocide. I'd always wanted to "make a difference" and Africa seemed the ideal place to start.

While working closely with these amazing people, it became apparent that while they'd achieved amazing results with little or no resources, the survival of their worthwhile activities hung desperately in the balance due to a lack of basic financial planning and management. But with little or no access to these vital skills and services, there was no solution in sight. In a country of 9m people, Rwanda has only 60 registered accountants. When I returned to the UK, so many skilled people have said to me they'd love to volunteer abroad but couldn't spare the time from their business or family commitments.

This inspired me to create Accounting for International Development (AfID), a social enterprise placing experienced accounting professionals with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) across Africa. Assignments from two to 12 weeks support long-term strategies designed to strengthen financial management and planning among small grassroots projects such as street child centres, health clinics and rural co-operatives. This means volunteering can now become a realistic prospect for tenured professionals, either as part of a staff development programme or simply taken as part of their annual leave.

To help volunteers prepare for the challenges and complexities they are likely to encounter, they will receive a full-day's induction by Mango, specialists in the sector. Travel costs will be the responsibility of the volunteer but living costs are low, and hopefully many will receive support from their employer.

The interest from the international development sector has been huge with more than 40 UK charities, supporting more than 250 NGOs, keen to adopt the voluntary programme. But with more than 200,000 operating in Africa alone, this is just a fraction of the real need.

I wouldn't say that volunteering overseas will change your life, however, I can guarantee it will change the way you think and in these so-called challenging times, a sense of perspective, or rather a moment of clarity in my opinion, can only be good thing.

NEIL JENNINGS is director of AfID. ICAS supports the aims of AfID. If you are interested in volunteering or want to find out more, contact Patricia Gallacher, director, members services, ICAS on 0131 347 0242 or by email at pgallacher@icas.org.uk For more information about AfID visit their website www.afid.org.uk or call Neil Jennings on 0207 4077610.

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