

Comhlámh's  
Volunteering  
Options

# Volunteer Charter



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**“Encouraging good practice in  
volunteering for global development”**

## **Comhlámh's Volunteer Charter**

### **What is the Volunteer Charter?**

The Charter is a guide for people who are going to volunteer overseas in developing countries. It sets out seven principles that aim to encourage responsible, responsive international volunteering. Each of these principles contains a list of questions to help you make sure that you have thought about the issues raised, and to ensure that you know why they are important.

### **Who developed it?**

The Charter has been drawn up by Comhlámh, the Irish Association of Development Workers. Comhlámh has over 30 years' experience of engaging with overseas volunteers and development workers.

### **How was it developed?**

Through extensive consultations with the three main groups involved in volunteer placements: volunteers, sending organisations, and host projects.

### **Why has it been drawn up?**

In recent years, there has been a growing interest among Irish people in volunteering in developing countries. More and more people are going overseas as volunteers, sometimes for very short periods. Although there can be many differences between the work done on short-term and longer-term volunteering placements, all international volunteers will be engaging with the same broader issues. These include having realistic expectations about what volunteering can achieve, and adopting the role of learner and guest while overseas. The Charter encourages people to think about these issues and to place their volunteering experiences within the wider context of global development. By doing so, it aims to contribute to the improvement of the volunteering experiences of international volunteers and, ultimately, to the quality of life for host communities affected by volunteering. It does not replace sending organisations' and host projects' specific guidelines and rules for volunteers, but rather complements them.

### **What about the responsibilities of sending organisations?**

A Code of Good Practice for Sending Organisations has also been developed. This sets out the responsibilities of organisations that arrange volunteer placements, including some of the steps they take to support the Volunteer Charter. Organisations that have signed up to the Code will be willing to provide copies of this Charter to volunteers, and to discuss the Code in exchange.

### **Why should volunteers support the Charter?**

By agreeing to sign the Charter, you will be showing your support for the principles it sets out. As a volunteer, your attitude to your placement and to your host project and community will be crucial to the success of the work you will be involved with. Your support will help to ensure a spirit of partnership, solidarity and respect between you, your sending organisation, and the host project and community with which you volunteer.

- **partnership**
- **solidarity**
- **respect**

## **Glossary of terms**

### **Developing countries**

We have many different names for those countries that are not as wealthy as ours, and all of them are problematic! These include “Third World”, “poor countries”, “Global South” or “South”. In this Charter, we use the term “developing countries” because it is the most generally accepted term and because we encourage volunteers to focus on issues of development when thinking about overseas volunteering.

### **Development**

Development is a complex issue, with many different and sometimes contentious definitions. A basic perspective equates economic growth with development. The United Nations Development Programme uses a more detailed definition: according to them, development is “to lead long and healthy lives, to be knowledgeable, to have access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living and to be able to participate in the life of the community”.

Achieving human development is linked to a third perspective of development, which views it as freeing people from obstacles that affect their ability to develop their own lives and communities. Development, therefore, is empowerment: it is about local people taking control of their own lives, expressing their own demands and finding their own solutions to their problems.

### **Host communities**

These are people with whom volunteers work and live while undertaking their overseas placements.

### **Host projects**

These are organisations or community groups in the destination country that receive volunteers.

### **Sending organisations**

These are agencies, organisations or commercial companies that arrange volunteer placements in developing countries. All have offices outside the destination country and recruit volunteers through these.



# 1

Principle

## Volunteers agree to:

### Inform themselves about all relevant issues relating to their placement

#### Have you:

##### Spent time considering your motivations for wanting to volunteer overseas?

Before making a decision about whether to volunteer overseas, it's important to consider your motivations for wanting to go. Motivations can have a big impact on your expectations for what a placement will be like and, therefore, on what your experiences will be when you go overseas.

##### Thought about the issues that will inform the context in which your placement will take place?

For example, have you considered issues of global inequality and poverty, and how these might impact on the work of your host project? The idea of development is a complex one that is affected by a wide range of issues. While these can sometimes appear to be abstract and theoretical, the impact that they have on people's everyday lives is very real. Having some knowledge of the bigger picture will help you to understand the forces that might shape events at the local level of your placement.

##### Made contact with former volunteers, with the help of your sending organisation?

Talking to former volunteers can help you get a better idea about the ethos of the organisation you'll be volunteering with, the type of work you may be doing, and some of the issues that you will encounter while in your placement.

##### Examined the information resources provided or suggested by your sending organisation?

This may include information about the project you will be working with, the area or country where you will be located, the history and development of the project that you will volunteer with, etc. All of these resources will help to give you a better idea about the work you will be doing and the area in which you will be volunteering.

##### Spent some time researching other information about your placement?

For example, this could be information sourced through using the internet, books, and newspapers.

“ **Get to know the area you are visiting through the internet or books. In particular try to get to understand the people, their traits and cultural differences. Know what you are going to be doing and why you are doing it. Ask others who have been in that particular country what to expect. Know the organisation that is arranging your placement.** ”  
Ryan, volunteer in Belarus

“ **The potential volunteer might want to think about what impact their presence in a community/orphanage/school for a period of one month to one year will have on the lives of the supposed beneficiaries. In the case of short term placements, how does it feel for them to have a foreigner come into their lives for such a short period of time? It is something that volunteers should be prepared for, i.e., not to necessarily expect open-armed warm welcomes at every turn and so to think of what ways they can**

engage people, be prepared to be patient and give people time to accept them.

Fionuala, volunteer in Guatemala and Timor Leste

”

“ Sending organisations vary hugely with regard to their core values and aims, their motivations in sending volunteers overseas, their commitments to host organisations and the resources they are willing to invest in training and preparation of volunteers. Research the sending organisation fully before you commit yourself and ensure that you are happy about how the money you contribute will be spent and what sort of training and support you will receive at home and overseas.

Suzie, volunteer in the Dominican Republic

”

## 2

Principle

Volunteers agree to:

**Familiarise themselves thoroughly with their role description before departure**

Have you:

**Read and signed the role description provided by your sending organisation?**

Familiarising yourself with the role description will help to give you a better idea about the exact aims of the work and the amount of time each week you will be expected to commit to the project. The presence of a detailed job description may also help to ensure that your work has been planned, and that there is a need for your presence.

**Asked the organisation any questions that you have about the role?**

Ensuring that you have as much information as possible about the role can help you to make certain that you are prepared for all aspects of the work. For example, find out as much as possible about what your living conditions will be like overseas, what your working hours will be, whether in-country support will be available, etc.

**Taken part in all training and induction for your role that is provided by the organisation?**

Participation in training and induction provided by an organisation is a very important part of a volunteer placement. Training may be provided pre-departure and/or in-country. Useful training topics that have been highlighted by former volunteers include language skills, training on working with children and vulnerable adults, an introduction to development issues, country and programme orientation, health and safety briefings, and anti-racism training.





## Have you:

### **Taken part in training or induction about intercultural issues provided by your organisation?**

Participation in any training and induction on intercultural issues that your sending organisation provides can give you further insights into important topics to be aware of while in your placement.

### **Agreed to try to learn some of the local language?**

Former volunteers and host projects have repeatedly stressed the importance of trying to learn at least some of the local language of the host community. Being able to communicate with your hosts will help you to make the most of your time in a placement.

### **Agreed to respect and work to uphold the aims of your host project?**

As a volunteer, you may be very involved in the day-to-day life of your host community, and you need to be willing from the outset to assist with achieving the project's aims. You may be seen as a representative of the organisation with which you are working and, as such, will need to be familiar, and in agreement, with the aims of the project.

### **Agreed to respect staff and other volunteers who work with your host project?**

Some host organisations have stated that problems can arise from the fact that volunteers may not realise that differences exist between the way of doing things in the host country and what they are accustomed to at home. Respecting the expertise and experience of other staff and volunteers, and accepting that things may be done in different ways, are a very important part of the volunteer experience. Organisational structures and management systems may be different in other cultures, and volunteers may need to bear this in mind throughout a placement. It is vital to work with the community you go to – there can be disastrous results if local communities and organisations are not asked for their input.

“ Some volunteers refuse to eat our local food; we have had some volunteers demand more than what they signed up for; some volunteers try to go outside the agreed /chosen programme, interfering with the hosts' activities; some volunteers refuse to adhere to the rules and regulations in the host family. ”  
Jubilee Ventures, host organisation in Ghana

“ In my time in Guatemala, all our relationships and fondest memories were made while sharing meals. This could never have worked without being prepared to eat tortillas, beans and chilli three times a day for five months. ”  
Mark, volunteer in Guatemala

**Travel with the open-minded attitude that you are 'here to learn' rather than the narrow-focused 'here to help'. This will make you ask the questions from which you will learn, rather than assuming that you always know the answers.**

# 4

Principle

## Volunteers agree to:

### **Act always in a professional manner and be flexible and adaptable while in their placement**

#### Do you agree to:

##### **Always approach your placement in a professional manner?**

Returned volunteers have pointed out that some volunteers may take a less than professional attitude to their placement. For example, they may turn up late, leave early, not respect local dress codes, or behave in a manner that is more appropriate for a holiday than for providing a service to a local community. By agreeing to have a professional attitude towards your placement from the beginning, these issues can be avoided. It is also advisable to be aware of your organisation/host community's procedures for raising issues of concern, should any arise during your placement.

##### **Stick to the role description that you were given?**

A good role description will have been developed following consultations between the sending organisation and the host organisation, with inputs from previous volunteers. It should therefore reflect what a volunteer is most needed for, and how she or he can best contribute to the aims of a project. Attempting to change this description, without proper consultation with and permission from the relevant people, could affect the project's outcomes.

##### **Fulfil the minimum working hours, agreed at the start of your placement?**

Sometimes, volunteers may not complete the hours that they consented to at the beginning of their work. This can lead to problems in terms of work not being completed, and also of lowering morale amongst other volunteers and

staff. Be aware of what is requested within any placement that you are signing up to, and consider whether you are willing to undertake this before making a final commitment.

##### **Within reason, be flexible in response to needs as they arise throughout your placement?**

While it is very important to adhere to your role description, one essential characteristic emphasised by former volunteers is the need to be flexible when undertaking a volunteer placement. There can be a number of reasons why you may need to be flexible: it could be to fill in if there is nobody else available for the job; to adapt to changes caused by a lack of resources; or simply to respond to the changes in a project's objectives that take place over time.

#### “ Reasons why volunteers have made an impact are:

- **long term commitment that they are willing to give to the organisation;**
- **patience to understand and assimilate the development context and responses;**
- **openness and initiative in identifying areas of work and making positive contributions; and**
- **cultural adaptability.**

Gram Vikas, Host Organisation, India

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“ We as volunteers should be honoured to be invested with the responsibility organisations delegate to us, and as such we should always treat our volunteering placement with the utmost professionalism. We are ambassadors for ourselves, of course, but also for our country and will set a precedent for any volunteers who may follow us. And, of course, we would all like to be remembered as hardworking, dedicated, fun, and a very helpful addition to the team. It's important

not to underestimate what can be achieved with the right motives, energy, enthusiasm, open-mindedness, common sense and a willingness to learn from others.

Andrew, volunteer in India

”

### Key qualities of the volunteer:

- patience
- openness
- adaptability
- energy
- enthusiasm

## 5

Principle

Volunteers agree to:

### Take due care with their personal safety and physical and mental health

Have you:

#### **Made certain that you have relevant health and travel insurance for your overseas placement?**

Some sending organisations will provide this insurance, while others will not. Find out whether you need to make arrangements yourself, and ensure that you have proper coverage before going abroad for a placement. Be aware of what your insurance covers, and how to access assistance, if necessary.

#### **Made certain that you have all the relevant vaccinations for the area in which you will be volunteering?**

Again, these will be provided by some organisations, while others will require that you make your own arrangements. Be sure that you receive all the relevant vaccinations for the area to which you will be travelling – avail of expert advice about this topic to ensure that you have the most up-to-date information.

#### **Thought about how to protect your financial interests while abroad?**

In the excitement of preparing for volunteering, it is not uncommon to place low priority on thinking about protecting your financial interests while overseas, including your social welfare rights. Issues to consider include continuing your pension payments, ongoing PRSI contributions, and tax rebates.

## Health and safety

While sending organisations can provide volunteers with guidance and training on this topic, it is also your responsibility as a volunteer to abide by that advice and to use your common sense. Additionally, your general research into your placement should include finding out about the local health and security situation. In a situation where you are volunteering with other people, you also need to consider the impact of your actions and whether they will have an effect on the safety and security of those around you. Ask yourself the following questions to help you decide whether you are thinking about the relevant issues.

### Have you:

- Made certain that your sending organisation/host community has details of your next of kin in case of an emergency, and that your next of kin has your overseas contact details?
- Participated in any health and safety training provided by your organisation?
- Familiarised yourself with the organisation's health and safety guidelines, and agreed to uphold these?
- Agreed to take due care while overseas to ensure that your actions will not affect the safety and health of the people that you will work with?

**“ Personal health can't be stressed enough. You are no good to anyone when you are sick for months when a good rest could have cured you initially. I was amazed at how fragile my body was in Africa. I was more prone to illness and I could feel my immune system weaken even if I had sufficient sleep. Also,**

**it is good to know what to do and who to call in the event of an accident, where you will be treated, whether you will have to be flown to another location, etc.**

Jane, volunteer in Zambia

**“ [My placement organisation] provided excellent backup and training in the months before departure in the areas of fundraising, the medical/immunisations issues involved, language training, conflict resolution, etc. Once in Tanzania, there was a further week of training to help the volunteers adjust to life on a camp in rural Tanzania, language training, how to relate to the local population, health issues and so on. The summer finished off with a feedback weekend in the UK, where the successes and failures of the summer were analysed and noted for further improvement of the programme.**

Declan, volunteer in Tanzania



# 6

Principle

## Volunteers agree to:

### Channel the experiences and knowledge gained while overseas into Irish society

#### Do you:

##### Agree to participate in any debriefing available after your placement?

Debriefing can offer you the opportunity to reflect on your experiences, and to provide any comments or suggestions you may have for the future development of a programme.

##### Commit to being available on your return to correspond with potential volunteers about your overseas experiences?

As a volunteer, you have the privileged position of being able to learn about your host community and experience what it is like to work in a developing country. These experiences can provide an invaluable source of information for people who are considering the possibility of volunteering overseas. Many organisations look for returned volunteers to talk to potential volunteers, either on a one-to-one basis or in groups. By agreeing to provide information to potential volunteers, you will have the opportunity to assist them and to provide them with personal insights into what their experiences might be like.

##### Agree to consider participating in events arranged by your organisation that relate to your placement?

Sending organisations often look for returning volunteers to participate in events such as information events or group talks. Again, by agreeing to participate in these, you will have the opportunity to discuss your experiences with a wider audience and to raise awareness in Ireland about issues affecting the developing world.

##### Agree to examine and consider the various opportunities available to remain involved in global development issues on your return home?

As one returned volunteer has stated, “commitment doesn’t end at the airport”. Volunteering overseas forms part of a continuum that encompasses the point when you first decide to go to a developing country, to your activism when you get home. There are many different ways in which you can remain engaged in working to effect change. Some examples include:

- Joining a solidarity or campaigning group;
- Becoming a volunteer fundraiser for your sending organisation or the projects you worked with in your host country; and
- Supporting fairer trade through your purchases.

If we only go overseas to help, but do not work to challenge the root causes of global injustice, our actions will not help to prevent the recurrence of present problems.

**“ I believe that those who were working in a volunteering capacity should pass on the small bit that they may have learned. I feel lucky to have experienced what I did and feel I owe it to the people there to promote awareness of their everyday difficulties. ”**  
Jane, volunteer in Zambia

As a returned development worker (RDW)/volunteer, Comhlámh provides free support, advice and guidance to facilitate your return to Ireland, to deal with reverse culture shock and to assist you with settling back in. This support ranges from social events to careers advice, information on social welfare, pensions, health, etc, to engaging you in ongoing debates on development in Ireland.

As an RDW/volunteer returning from a short or long-term assignment, you are entitled to 12 months’ free membership of Comhlámh from the date of your return to Ireland. Simply contact the Project Officer for RDWs to activate your membership ([rdw@comhlamh.org](mailto:rdw@comhlamh.org)) or register via [www.comhlamh.org](http://www.comhlamh.org).



## Volunteers agree to:



### **Accept and sign a Code of Conduct embodying these principles**

#### Have you:

##### **Provided your organisation with a signed copy of this Charter?**

By doing so, you are signalling your support for the aims and values that it sets out.

## **Resources**

### Useful print resources

*Working for a Better World: A Guide to Volunteering in Global Development*, Comhlámh, 2005

*The Coming Home Book*, Comhlámh, 2006

*How to Live Your Dream of Volunteering Overseas*, Penguin, 2002

*80:20 Development in an Unequal World*, 80:20 and Tide, 2006

*The Rough Guide to a Better World*, Rough Guides and the UK Department for International Development, 2004

*Understanding Globalisation*, Sage, 2003

### Useful web sites

#### General information on international volunteering

[www.volunteeringoptions.org](http://www.volunteeringoptions.org)

*[Comhlámh's Volunteering Options site contains comprehensive information and advice for volunteers before, during and after an international placement. This includes a searchable database of over 115 organisations that arrange overseas placements]*

[www.ethicalvolunteering.org](http://www.ethicalvolunteering.org)

#### Development information

[www.comhlamh.org](http://www.comhlamh.org)

[www.dochas.ie](http://www.dochas.ie)

[www.unifem.org](http://www.unifem.org)

[www.roughguide-betterworld.com](http://www.roughguide-betterworld.com)

<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

[www.eldis.org](http://www.eldis.org)

[www.developmenteducation.ie](http://www.developmenteducation.ie)

[www.irishaid.gov.ie](http://www.irishaid.gov.ie)

#### Country information

[www.dfa.ie](http://www.dfa.ie) (The Department of Foreign Affairs website, which includes information on Irish embassies and some travel advice)

[www.fco.gov.uk/travel](http://www.fco.gov.uk/travel) (The British government's Foreign and Commonwealth Office site, which includes travel advice and planning tips).

[www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)

[www.oneworld.net](http://www.oneworld.net)

[www.reliefweb.int](http://www.reliefweb.int)

[www.alertnet.org](http://www.alertnet.org)

#### Working from Ireland

[www.comhlamh.org](http://www.comhlamh.org)

[www.volunteeringireland.ie](http://www.volunteeringireland.ie)

[www.activelink.ie](http://www.activelink.ie)

#### Bulletin boards

[www.aidworkers.net](http://www.aidworkers.net)

<http://thorntree.lonelyplanet.com/>

#### Protection of interests

[www.comhlamh.org](http://www.comhlamh.org)

Comhlámh's

# Volunteer Charter

(My copy)

I've read the Volunteer Charter, and agree to do the following:

- 1) Inform myself about all relevant issues relating to my placement;
- 2) Familiarise myself thoroughly with my role description before departure;
- 3) Respect local customs and adopt the role of learner and guest;
- 4) Act always in a professional manner and be flexible and adaptable while in my placement;
- 5) Take due care with my personal safety and physical and mental health;
- 6) Channel the experiences and knowledge gained while overseas into Irish society; and
- 7) Accept and sign a Code of Conduct embodying these principles.

Name of sending organisation: \_\_\_\_\_

Volunteer's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Comhlámh's

# Volunteer Charter

(Return to my sending organisation)

I've read the Volunteer Charter, and agree to do the following:

- 1) Inform myself about all relevant issues relating to my placement;
- 2) Familiarise myself thoroughly with my role description before departure;
- 3) Respect local customs and adopt the role of learner and guest;
- 4) Act always in a professional manner and be flexible and adaptable while in my placement;
- 5) Take due care with my personal safety and physical and mental health;
- 6) Channel the experiences and knowledge gained while overseas into Irish society; and
- 7) Accept and sign a Code of Conduct embodying these principles.

Name of sending organisation: \_\_\_\_\_

Volunteer's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



Established in 1975, Comhlámh is a member and supporter organisation open to anyone interested in social justice, human rights and global development issues.

Our Volunteering Options programme works to encourage responsible, responsive overseas volunteering and aims to support volunteers in a long-term, ongoing commitment to development. The Volunteering Options publication “Working for a Better World: A Guide to Volunteering in Global Development”, has information and advice for volunteers before, during and after a placement. It also contains a directory of over 115 organisations that arrange volunteer placements in developing countries. This information is also included in the website [www.volunteeringoptions.org](http://www.volunteeringoptions.org). Additionally, we offer workshops for volunteers before they go overseas and after they come home, as well as one-to-one information and advice for people thinking about volunteering.

To find out more about joining Comhlámh and supporting our work, please visit [www.comhlamh.org](http://www.comhlamh.org) or call [01-478 3490](tel:014783490). Your membership can help us campaign for a better and more just world.



**Irish Aid**

Department of Foreign Affairs  
An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha