



A week in Uganda

Greg Dyke's VSO diary

VSO is an international development charity that works through volunteers. For over 50 years, individuals from around the world have been sharing their skills and experience with communities in some of the world's poorest countries. In 1968 Sue Howes, partner of Greg Dyke, the ex-Director General of the BBC, volunteered with VSO in Uganda. Forty years on, Sue returned to see how things had changed and Greg went with her. This is Greg's diary

Monday

An exciting day, especially for Sue. We visited St Patricks, the Roman Catholic girls boarding school where she spent a year living and teaching back in 1968/69. It was her first time back and we all drove her mad asking her to remember details from 40 years ago. The principal, Sister Theresa, now has her office in the room which was Sues bedroom for a year. A friendly and jolly woman, there was much hilarity when Sue asked what she was doing in her bedroom. In all, there are 700 girls at the school and they arrive at the age of six and stay until they

are fourteen. Some come from the orphanage next door but the rest come from right across Uganda and their parents pay for them, although they don't pay a lot by British standards.

The girls were delightful. Dressed in smart uniforms in classes of up to 60 they were so pleased to see us. There were whoops of joy every time the flash on the camera went off and they were desperate to see the digital pictures. It was a very special experience for Sue, even if it was a bit weird after so long.





Tuesday

Visited the VSO office in Kampala. In reception we met a local who was just going off to work as a volunteer in Namibia. One of my pre-conceptions of VSO was immediately blown, as I thought it was

an organisation that sent

Brits abroad as volunteers, and I was surprised to discover just how many volunteers today come from different parts of the world. There are more than a hundred volunteers from Uganda alone working across Africa and other parts of the world and only half of all VSO volunteers are now British.

Later we met a remarkable Dutch woman called Natalie. Natalie was truly formidable.

She had arrived in Uganda nine years earlier, spent five years as a volunteer, and was now working alongside VSO running a programme called Silent Voices in the rural south west.

What made her formidable was what she had achieved in that time. Almost by chance she had discovered a disproportionate number of deaf children in her region and she believed it was a by-product of the anti-Malaria drugs widely in use, but others we met later had different explanations. Either way, deafness is a real problem, especially in rural Uganda where many parents are ashamed of disabled children as it stigmatises the whole family.

In nine years Natalie had persuaded many local schools to take deaf children seriously and to have a specialist teacher in sign language. But she had also persuaded parents that they could communicate with their kids if they too learned sign language. She had even created democratic organisations for the parents of deaf children. It was an inspiring tale.





Wednesday

Today we visited volunteers at two teacher-training colleges. In the first we met Danny, a former head teacher. He retired a couple of years back and, to quote him, quickly got bored, so he volunteered for VSO and ended up at the Bishop Stuart Training College in Kibingo. Meeting Danny reversed another pre-conception I had about VSO. I always thought VSO volunteers were young people and whilst that was true 40 years ago it's not so now. Today the organisation looks for experienced volunteers with relevant skills.

In both the colleges we visited that day, as in all the schools, we found widespread publicity about the dangers of HIV & AIDS. I had thought that Uganda had been more successful in dealing with AIDS than most African countries but discovered that, whilst this was true some years back, the indicators are now going in the opposite direction. Worryingly, Danny explained that because of AIDS a whole generation of teachers is missing. There are, he said, very few older teachers to pass on their experience to the younger ones as they had virtually all died of HIV & AIDS.



Thursday

A special day. We drove further to the South West and ended up in Kisoro, a town only a few miles from the borders of both Rwanda and the Congo. We were in the mountains, the scenery was spectacular, and we were only miles from the national park where the famous gorillas in the mist can be found.

We were in Kisoro to visit the Peace Education Trust (PET). PET's aim is to secure peace and education for Kisoro's most vulnerable and disadvantaged children, and one of the most important areas of their work is with the disabled. They estimate that there are 17,000 children with disabilities in Kisoro, and they are the only community based organisation working with them.

We met Craig who is volunteering with one of VSO's youth programmes, Youth for Development. He arrived straight after university four months ago. An impressive young man, wise before his years, he has already made an impact. Craig has a motorbike and bombs off to schools all across the region on mountain tracks that are, at times, so bad he has to abandon the bike and walk the last mile or so to the village. Most of these schools don't have electricity or running water. At one school we visited, he introduced us proudly to a little boy who, the week before, had had an artificial leg fitted thanks to Craig's determination. There is no secondary school in the region for deaf and blind children so PET has taken the first steps to get one started in a local secondary school. We met the first seven students, including one deaf boy who is already regarded as one of the cleverest kids in the whole school.

Friday

We went a few miles north to Bushenji. A trip which should have taken an hour took nearly three because of the state of the roads and a major accident involving a fuel tanker blocking the main road. I had to smile as the locals walked up and down the road with anything they could lay their hands on to fill with petrol from the overturned tanker.

We eventually arrived and met two older volunteers, Peter a special needs teacher from Sussex and Christine a maths teacher from the Midlands. Both were working at Bushenji Primary Teachers College but spending a lot of time supporting teachers in local schools. We asked the principal how much help he'd had from VSO over the years and he was full of praise.

Tanzania: a case study

In Tanzania, such is the stigma attached to deafness that deaf children are commonly rejected by their families and communities. Two years ago, five year old Phoebe Stanley was hidden away in a rural village near Dodoma in Tanzania. She is deaf, and people thought she was stupid. An embarrassment and a burden to her family, she stayed inside where no one would see her.

When staff from Dodoma Deaf School came to Phoebe's village asking for deaf children, her family willingly gave her up so that she could go and receive an education. When she arrived at the boarding school (her new home) Phoebe had no communication skills at all and was desperately shy.

Today, Phoebe is a lively seven-year-old. Every morning she races to meet VSO volunteer Saskia Tien as she arrives at school on her motorbike. "The difference in Phoebe is amazing" says Saskia, who has been giving Phoebe speech and language therapy and teaching her sign language. "When I got here there was no interaction, no communication, just staring. But now here she is, really excited, running up to tell me stories about what she did yesterday."

Dodoma Deaf School is providing Phoebe with a high quality primary education so that in a few years she'll be able to enrol in a local secondary school. In the meantime, Saskia is changing attitudes towards deafness by running sign language classes for parents and community members. "We want the parents to be able to sign at home and make their child feel like part



of the family," she says. "We're encouraging them to use signs in public, to understand that it's no problem to take a deaf child to market and sign with them there."

Currently, young deaf people in Tanzania are extremely vulnerable; getting a job or a driving license is impossible for most. But thanks to the foundations laid by volunteers like Saskia today, Phoebe and her peers will grow up to play a more active and equal role in society tomorrow.

Saskia's work at Dodoma Deaf School is one element of VSO's wider strategy to get more children with disabilities into school. As well as training teachers in working with children with disabilities and changing attitudes towards disability in the community, VSO is supporting mainstream schools to develop inclusive practises.

Some conclusions

So what did I feel after a week visiting a Uganda I would never have seen had I not gone with VSO? And in particular, what had changed since Sue was there forty years earlier - forty years which had seen the rise and fall of Idi Amin, the expulsion of the Ugandan Asians, two civil wars in Uganda itself, the coming of HIV & AIDS, refugees arriving in their hundreds of thousands from Rwanda and the Congo, and a population explosion.

Forty years ago most people in the rural areas didn't have running water and they still don't, and much of the water they do collect is polluted. The same applies to electricity supply. Most villages still don't have it and nor do some of the schools we visited. HIV and AIDS is still spreading at an enormous rate.

But, having said all this, I am told some things have definitely got better. There are more hospitals, many more primary schools

which are now free and available to all; teachers for those schools are now being trained in their thousands even though there is no certainty they can all get jobs when they qualify, and even if they do there is no certainty they will get paid. On a macro level there has been sustained economic growth for 22 consecutive years in Uganda, even this year there is expected to be seven per cent growth.

So having had a short snapshot view of a country, how did I feel when it came to leaving? In truth I left feeling upbeat and decided I shall go back. All the people we met were friendly, the students in schools and colleges were grateful for the opportunity to be there, and the kids we met in the villages were wonderful. I was left in awe of the work being done by so many agencies there, and particularly by VSO and their volunteers.



VSO and inclusive education

Disabled children in developing countries face severe discrimination and are often excluded from family and community life, including school. Most VSO volunteers working in this area will either be training local teachers or working as advisors to ministries of education. Roles vary but can include implementing national curricula, assessing the requirements of both individuals and integrated classes, developing suitable teaching and learning materials, training local teachers in Braille and sign language, or supporting local teachers to identify, assess and include children with special needs.

Penny Hollowell worked as an inclusive education adviser in the Oshikoto region of Namibia. A predominantly rural area, teachers work in isolated circumstances with few resources and little opportunity for training and peer support. Penny's school visits revealed that many children were not included

in classes because teachers did not understand how to cater for their different needs.

Within a year, 37 specially appointed inclusive education advisers had attended workshops and learnt a range of teaching techniques, such as making tactile resources from papier-mâché and how to use visual aids and games in teaching. These teachers represent clusters of schools, so each is now sharing their learning with colleagues in their area so that all 184 schools in the region are able to provide a better quality of teaching to all children.

If you are a qualified teacher aged between 21 and 75 and have experience of working with children with special needs then VSO would like to hear from you.

To find out more visit www.vso.org.uk