



Gaining Professional Development Skills as an Extension Agent Overseas Is It for You?

By

Basil Bactawar, County Extension Director & Agent
Union County Extension Services

One of the desirable skills of an Agricultural Extension Agent is the ability to work with people of different cultures. Volunteering internationally gives you the opportunity to explore and learn about cultures in different parts of the world. It helps you to increase your knowledge of farming in different countries thereby enabling you to develop professional skills in international agriculture. In addition, you are helping people to solve some of their agricultural problems. The internet and globalization have made an abundance of agricultural information available for the use of all. But there are limitations to the use of this information. Farmers in some developing countries do not have access to the internet while others are unable to read and write. This is when your expertise in extension education (helping underprivileged adults learn improved farming practices, proper nutrition etc.) becomes valuable to people overseas. Almost all overseas volunteers are selected based on their area of expertise such as food preservation or pest control etc. To be successful in accomplishing what you set out to do, it is important to accept an assignment that matches your expertise. You will find the project interesting and you will be most likely to be motivated to carry it out. If you are now getting interested in working overseas, keep reading.

Some suggestions to get started

If you decide to do some international volunteer work, then there are probably many questions on your mind, the foremost being how do I start? The first thing to do is to research nonprofit organizations and international development agricultural organizations that have volunteer programs. These organizations are referred to as VOs in this document. The following are some websites that can help you to get started:

<http://www.heifer.org/about-heifer/careers/view-all-jobs.html>

<https://www.rescue.org/volunteer>

<http://farmertofarmer.crs.org/>

<http://www.mercycorps.org/volunteer>

<http://www.winrock.org/opportunities>

<http://www.acdivoca.org/volunteer>

<http://www.cnfa.org/opportunities/>

<https://lol.avature.net/Careers>

You may be required to register online with the VOs that may be of interest to you, providing them with your biographic information and a résumé. The websites may list volunteer opportunities and assignments. The next step is to make contact with the VO to express your interest in the assignment(s). After reviewing your resume the VO is expected to send you a scope of work before or after you have been accepted for an assignment. The scope of work provides information about the country, the people, the culture and the details of what you are expected to do. Most of these volunteer assignments last between 2-4 weeks.

Funding

Many of these organizations will fund the cost of your trip including travel, accommodation and per diem associated with the assignment. Some VOs will advance approximately 80 percent of your expense, and the rest will be paid to you upon submission of your volunteer expense report and out of country report. You may be able to find more information in a VO volunteer travel expense guideline if there is one available. It is advisable to carry additional money if you plan to do extra travels and buy gifts not associated with the assignment.

Protecting your health

It is always comforting to know you are protected with health insurance as a volunteer. Some VOs will provide health insurance during your assignment. Some countries require proof of vaccination against certain diseases which should be noted on your health/immunization certificate. You may wish to check out the following website for health and vaccination information <http://www.cdc.gov/>. Some VOs will require medical clearance from your healthcare provider before you leave for your assignment. Do not forget to pack any medication you may be using on a regular basis. You may want to pack any other health care products. It can be difficult to buy these products if you are traveling in the country where medical supplies are limited in quantity and quality. Anti-diarrheal and mosquito repellent are a must.

Emergencies and visa

In case of emergency, most VOs have an emergency plan. If you are employed with the University of Florida, you may be able to benefit from its emergency information. The detail is found on this website <http://www.ufic.ufl.edu/travelregistration.html>. Faculty members who are undertaking international volunteer work are required to fill out a Travel Authorization Request (TAR) form and seek permission from your supervisor. If you work for a county, you need to seek permission from the county administration. With respect to immigration requirements, find out if there is a visa requirement for the country you will be visiting. Normally your VO will handle a visa application before you leave. You may be able to obtain a visa at the port of entry when traveling to certain countries, but confirm this before you leave. Application for a visa at the port of entry may require visa fees.

Getting there

Now that you have been selected for an international assignment, the following advice may be useful. Leave home well in advance for your flight and keep the telephone numbers of a few hotels nearby in case your flight is delayed. It is recommended that you be extremely careful and vigilant in protecting your personal articles including camera, cell phone and computer. Most VOs are not responsible for the loss of your personal effects including baggage that have been lost or damaged. You may arrive in your host country ahead of your baggage, especially if you have connecting flights. Consider packing some extra clothes in your carry-on bag. Traveling to a foreign country can be a bit stressful especially if your flight is late or arriving at night. Most VOs will arrange for you to be picked up at the airport and be taken to your place of accommodation. Have with you the telephone numbers of the person who is picking you up and that of your host or VO's local office.

Key Points

- Research on the internet will lead you to volunteer organizations.
- You are more likely to be offered an assignment if your skills and experience match the scope of work or assignment.
- Your health is important while travelling abroad. Ensure you have the vaccinations required by the host county, and keep a copy of your vaccination history (International certificate of vaccination). Do not forget any medication you are using.
- Ensure you have the necessary visa for the host country.
- Protect your personal articles.
- Do not forget to have fun!!!