How to Prepare for International Development Work

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Introduction

International development workers tend to be above average adventure-seekers and risk-takers. Maybe “risk managers” would be a more apt description. They welcome change, and are adaptable to different living and working conditions. Successful international development consultants (IDCs) have self-confidence, a good sense of humor and they’re tolerant of poor roads and public transportation, interruptions in electrical or telephone service (if available), and can get by OK on the minimal number of products found in the store shelves in many developing countries.

The Soyouwanna.com Website http://www.soyouwanna.com/site/syws/peacecorps/peacecorps.html (2001) provides some insight into the rewards as well as the non-glamorous aspects of long-term overseas volunteer work. “Joining the Peace Corps is committing to spending two years and three months in a faraway land that might have big bugs and dirty water. …after you are already there and settled into your community is not the time to decide that you'd rather go back to the U.S. and begin the novel you've always wanted to write.”

IDCs tend to be creative, practical, innovative, resourceful people. They are inspiring to work and converse with. As the new president of Winrock International, Frank Tugwell (1998), puts it “We understand that for our work to make a difference, the ideas we carry forward must be practical, must help people make a living on a day-to-day basis. We have a long-standing and non-negotiable commitment to good science and economics and a rigorous appetite for innovation and new thinking, wherever it may arise.”

Overseas workers learn to cope with language barriers, but maintain respect for the local people and their cultural differences. Many frequent travelers find other cultures endlessly interesting, and today’s intertwining of global national and business interests is heightening the need for greater intercultural understanding. “In an increasingly multi-cultural world, learning about other cultures and developing cross-cultural survival skills is a critical need for tomorrow’s world citizens.” (Etling, 1994) IDCs develop interest and satisfaction from living in, and exploring, a different environment. Many enjoy the unusual landscape, climate, flora, and fauna. Traveling is a continuous feast for the eyes, for everything is curious and interesting. People that spend much time in other countries are energized by interacting with and learning about other cultures. Indigenous people are often quite friendly, yet their customs are mysterious and fascinating. Cultural insights help us understand and sometimes question our own conventions. For instance, when we experience life at a slower pace, we find it very enjoyable compared to the pressures of Western culture.

Working in another culture has substantial advantages over traveling as a tourist. When working on an international assignment you’re immediately plugged into a network of good people within that country. Over time, you gradually reveal your inner character to each other and make long-lasting friendships. Through co-workers, and their families, you eventually build your knowledge of each other’s cultural mores, traditions, and proprieties. As a tourist you’re more isolated from the people and the essence of their culture.

Gavin Mensah-Coker (2001), a researcher at Demos (U.K. research institution), says on the Website http://www.demos.co.uk/provolunteers.htm “…that volunteering overseas gives people new skills, helps confidence and self-esteem, encourages interaction with different kinds of people and creates new perspectives on work and life.” It’s a genuine privilege to assist people with very limited resources and positively impact their lives. They readily express a sincere gratitude for your effort, something that tends to be overlooked in Western society. And often, international development assignments provide more encouragement to focus on doing quality work, with less emphasis on quantity. That’s rewarding!

Attitudes and philosophy preparation

But how do you become an IDC, and how can you be successful in this role? No matter how bright you are, there’s no substitute for thorough preparation, including your subject
expertise, development work in general, and knowing how to make your way in a variety of international settings. The better you are at it, the more successful you become and the more fun it is. Increasingly, we see that success relies heavily on our understanding of the culture we are in. Our knowledge of their cultural character is closely tied to our ability to successfully communicate, educate, persuade, and motivate them.

Improve your international success by preparing yourself to work with other cultures. As an IDC, your challenge is to share your specialized knowledge in such a manner that people discover ways to improve themselves and their communities. This takes time and patience. Cultivate local ownership by helping the people become full participants in the development process. Anyaegbunam, et. al. (1998) define development communications as "...the systematic design and use of participatory activities, communication approaches, methods and media to share information and knowledge among all stakeholders in a rural development process in order to insure mutual understanding and consensus leading to action. People support what they help create.

A trusting relationship will grow as the local people become more involved in a team approach that focuses on solving the problems they have identified. Solutions are more sustainable when they're locally generated and supported, rather than bringing in a “fix” from outside. The local people are the experts on the local situation. It’s largely through their valuable help that important problems are identified and prioritized, courses of action are planned, and solutions are selected, adapted, and implemented. As an outsider, your role is to help guide this process. It’s a matter of “helping people help themselves.”

Due to an historical legacy of resource-poor country domination, you sometimes must deal with an anticolonialism barrier. Campbell, et. al. (2001) states that “For historical reasons, this [anticolonialism] pattern is fused with anti-Western-Europeanism, anti-Caucasianism, anticapitalism, and (from our point of view) anti-democratic-blocism...”. Arguing the pros and cons of this while people are emotional is not advised. As a rule, politics are to be avoided by outsiders at all times.

Successful IDCs have a sensitivity and curiosity about other cultures and see the differences between our’s and their’s. They recognize that their own developmental shortcomings aren’t technical as much as cultural. You can increase your effectiveness by attempting to understand how people think, how they obtain information, what motivates them, and why they do what they do. A good development philosophy is to place a high value on improving the quality of life of the poorer people, usually accomplished in both economic and human terms. Recognize and appreciate other people’s worth and potential and involve them in steering the development process.

Cultural preparation
If you’re a “wanna-be” and haven’t served on the international scene before, begin by preparing at home. Since you can’t acquire in-depth knowledge about a lot of places, try to focus on one country or a region. Many cultures within a region are closely related. Most colleges and universities have a variety of opportunities for you to learn about other cultures.

- **Participate in organizations** that have an international element. Search for networks with people and groups that have an international focus. Take an active part in them and develop mutually beneficial relationships. Attend internationally focused programs and listen with an open mind. Yes, people from other countries are often difficult to understand, and some of what they say will be “different” from your experience.

- **Spend time with people from other countries.** There are an increasing number of foreign nationals living and working near you, as neighbors, business people, employees, teachers, or students. Local contacts can be identified and developed. Once you develop a mutual comfort level, take them to lunch, or invite them to your home and learn about them as individuals, as well as their customs and beliefs. Talk, listen, ask questions. Look for ways to assist them; it usually becomes a give-and-take relationship. You’ll soon be introduced to friends of theirs from other countries.

- **Offer your assistance.** Whether on business or holiday, you often notice foreign nationals taking photos, looking at maps, or showing some confusion (as you will when you’re overseas). Ask them if you can help. You may get a chance to talk to them a bit, get their reaction to our country, learn about them. Show
some kindness by offering them a map or other orientation materials.
• Read about other cultures. Learn about international travel, and development work. Your library has textbooks and periodicals, and so do your local bookstores. Study maps of your target region until you “know your way around” geographically. If you’re planning a trip or developing an international “focus,” you’ll find travel and cultural information that will provide many insights about your country of destination. “The classic example is the ‘A-OK’ gesture which is positive in the USA and obscene in much of the rest of the world.” (Urech, Elizabeth, 1998)

Read your newspaper’s world events section on a regular basis. The Sunday edition of the New York Times always has special in-depth international articles that are very well-done. The National Geographic is a terrific source of information, particularly the super photographs. “A picture’s worth a thousand words,” as the saying goes. Our non-local television news provides increasing coverage of world events.
• The World-wide-web has an increasing amount of news and country-specific as well as activity-specific information available on the Web. For example, my region of focus is southern Africa and I have bookmarked the websites that offer the information I’m looking for. Here are some of my favorites:

Map sites:
- mapquest.co.uk
- nationalgeographic.com
- newafrica.com

Travel guides:
- amazon.com
- members.tripod.co.uk
- travelnotes.org

Currency exchange rates:
I. http://www.xe.net/ucc/convert.cgi
II. http://quote.yahoo.com/m3?u

General info./country profiles:
- travel.state.gov/ (US State Dept. travel warnings, foreign embassies, visa requirements, etc.)
- odc.gov/cia/publications/factbook/ (CIA country profiles)
- info.usaid.gov/ (US Agency for International Development)
- aboutmytravel.com/ (personal travel accounts)
- unsystem.org/ (United Nations)

Health/immunizations:
- who.int/ith/english/country.htm (UN World Health Org.; country immunization requirements)

News sites:
- cnn.com/world/
- washingtonpost.com/
- newyorktimes.com/
- africaonline.com
- mg.co.za/mg/jump/jump.html
- allafrica.com

Development organizations:
- unesco.org/ccivs/ (web site of 80 volunteer organizations)
- fao.org/va/employ.htm (UN Food and Agriculture Organization)
- www.infodev.org/ (World Bank)
- info.usaid.gov/ (US Agency for International Development)
- fas.usda.gov/ (USDA Foreign Agricultural Service)
- peaccorps.gov/home.html (US Peace Corps)
- adivoca.org/ (Agr. Coop. Development Int. and Volunteers for Overseas Cooperative Assistance)
- cnfa.com/ (Citizen’s Network for Foreign Affairs)
- wkkf.org/ (W.K. Kellogg Foundation)
- fordfound.org/ (Ford Foundation)
- rockfound.org/ (Rockefeller Foundation)
- winrock.org/ (Winrock International)
- chemonics.com/ (Chemonics International)
- aif.cargill.com/ (Cargill International Inc.)
- internationaljobs.org/ (International Career Employment Center)
- overseasjobs.com/ (Overseas Jobs)
- cob-net.org/ (Heifer Project International)
- afsc.org/ (American Friends Service Committee)
- mennonitecc.ca/ (Mennonite Central Committee)
- dai.com/ (Development Alternatives, Inc.)
- iie.org/ (Institute of International Education)
- iie.org/ (International Executive Service Corps)
- globalvolunteers.org/ (Global Volunteers)
- oxfamamerica.org/ (Oxfam International)
- councilexchanges.org/vol/ (International Volunteer Projects)
Subject-matter resources:
- nal.usda.gov/ (National Agricultural Library)
- card.iastate.edu/ (Center for Agr. and Rural Development)
- cos.com/about/ (Community of Sciences, Inc. database)
- http://agalternatives.cas.psu.edu/ (Penn State farm management resources)
- wisc.edu/ltc/ (Univ. Wisconsin Land Tenure Center)

Photos from around the world:
- see Websites listed under “News Sites” above
- un.org/av/photo/countries (photos from foreign countries)
- nationalgeographic.com/ (National Geographic)
- wildlifepics.co.za/ (African animals)

• Look in your university’s telephone directory for offices that offer international information or contacts. Check for the obvious under an “international” listing in both your telephone book and faculty directory. Ask if they have information on current or upcoming projects, or if they know someone from your country of interest. Call the language department, because there’s usually someone specializing in the language spoken by people in your target area. That person would know about that part of the world and possibly people from there that may be visiting here.

• Get appointments with experienced IDCs if you can. Most of them are enthusiastic about their international experiences and enjoy talking about them. They can provide a special insight into how you might fit into the international development picture and how you might proceed with preparation. Maybe they’ll share copies of project proposals, project plans, or consultant reports, and explain how the project development process works. You’ll find some new language and a bunch of acronyms, but look for structure and content.

• Talk with people who have visited other countries as tourists. Much of what they’ve experienced is more than merely “seeing the sights,” but relates to cultural activities, beliefs, and conventions.

• Visit travel agencies for information on travel and tourist attractions in your country of interest. Most promotional flyers will include the address of a tourist bureau where you can obtain further information.

• Travel as much as you can afford. For those of us on the U.S. mainland, Puerto Rico and Mexico aren’t far away, and you can see and learn about subtropical climates and cultures. Look for special air fare rates to stretch your travel dollars; it may be cheaper to fly to Europe than California. Check the Web, your Sunday papers, and travel agents for travel bargains. Many of these require that you book months ahead.

Landing an overseas job

Develop a résumé slanted toward international development work. Try to get some internationally-oriented experiences to show your aspirations and sincerity. Maybe you can take an international course or two, or learn a foreign language. Join an organization with an international focus. Host visiting foreign nationals or exchange students at your home. Read as much as you can about your subject specialty with a special effort to seek information beyond “Western” publications. Many international development-related agencies and organizations produce publications written by authors from throughout the world. Good sources are: The Bernan Press at: bernan.com/ or phone 1-800-274-4888; UNIPUB, PO Box 1222, Ann Arbor, MI 48106; and the World Bank, 1818 H Street, NW, Washington, DC 20433. Bernan Press (above) carries FAO publications and has the new Communications in Extension, a teaching and learning guide, ISBN 92-5-104357-4, written for FAO by yours truly.

Apply to many development organizations, because their needs for a particular specialty will vary considerably, depending on their current projects. Zero in on volunteer development organizations at first; your chances of gaining an assignment will be greater. The more experience and successes you have, the greater your chances of being selected for a paid consultancy (It’s sort of a which-came-first, the-chicken-or-the-egg thing). Most prospective employers would like you to send them an updated résumé each year. It’s good to have recent activities on there to show your ongoing interest.

There are many overseas employment opportunities in teaching and in the craft skills areas. For those with advanced degrees, there are
many positions at foreign universities listed in “The Chronicle of Higher Education.” One of the largest international sources of jobs is the tabloid “International Career Employment Weekly.” You can subscribe by writing to Rt. 2, Box 305, Stanardsville, VA 22973. Their phone number is 804-985-6444. Some positions are gazetted on their website at internationaljobs.org/. They advertise jobs ranging from construction work in Saudi Arabia, website developers for South Africa, to USAID chief-of-party in Nigeria. There were many jobs with locations here in the USA, also. Some were for directors of international institutes at universities.

Learn about potential employers or sponsors. Study their information and find out what they do, what they need and want; read about their projects. Talk to international employees or consultants. Learn as much as you can about their projects and try to see how you might prepare yourself to contribute to such projects. Fill in your weakness gaps. Keep learning.

Prepare psychologically
New international consultants often arrive at their destination in high spirits, taking great enjoyment in seeing a country and people very different from back home. They’re warmly greeted, and are soon beginning their work with great enthusiasm. Then, after a period of time, there is disappointment in how slowly people move on new ideas. Certain resources are difficult, if not impossible, to find. Some of the initial enchantment with the new environment begins to wear off and enthusiasm falls. Seasoned consultants understand this and prepare for it both professionally and personally. Anyone can succeed when things go well. Prepare yourself psychologically to push ahead when problems arise.

Technical preparation
Your advanced preparation should have you review the possible contributions you can make to the upcoming project. Don’t limit this to what’s listed in the scope of work, but try to anticipate possible requests for assistance in related areas. You can only carry so much, so prepare an organized assortment of concise materials that represent your expertise. It’s a good idea to carry both hard copies as well as electronic files of your anticipated most-needed material. Some of your information will probably end up being reproduced for handout materials to be used during training, or distributed directly to target audiences. So, they’re best if prepared with that in mind. Sometimes it’s possible to send materials ahead of time so they can be translated, if necessary, and reproduced before you get there.

Developing countries usually have severely limited resources, so study ways of accomplishing your recommended ideas with reduced resources, particularly using locally available materials. Be sure to prepare visual aids and other training materials, because they help overcome language and cultural barriers. They also increase student interest, long-term learning, and impel an audience to see you as more of an authority. You’ll be more persuasive. These materials can also be quite helpful for your counterpart’s use after you leave the country.

Take along photo prints of your community, your home, your work, your hobbies, and your family, for they are of particular interest to those of another culture. If they like you, they’ll be anxious to learn about your culture just as you want to understand theirs.

Computers
Many of today’s successful IDCs take their own laptop computers with them. Some development agencies even expect you to have one as part of your professional preparedness. If you travel a lot, portability will be an important consideration, along with speed, capacity, and battery life. Keep a daily log of your activities, including the people you meet and the topics of discussion. This will allow you to compile a comprehensive report at a later time. Find out what reports are expected of you; often your sponsor has a specific format that’s required. Enter the report format into your computer before you go, and build on it as you go along. It’s a nice feeling to find a place to print out your final report and hand it in before heading home, instead of trying to piece it together later. Employers love it, too.

Computer compatibility may be a problem, i.e. Macintosh versus Windows computers. I’ve installed the AppleFile Exchange/MacLink applications on my Macintosh PowerBook so I can save a document onto a DOS-formatted disk as a Windows file.
Then I just pop the disk into a local Windows computer and print. It’s one way I get around the compatibility problem. Both Mac and Windows computers can now operate each others’ applications if they’re set up properly. I use Virtual PC on my Mac to operate Windows applications and MacLink to work with PC documents (usually all I need). COPSTalk is the application for Windows machines to run Mac stuff. Oh yes, there are affordable lightweight portable printers, too.

I should also mention the value of a computer as recreation. A few times I’ve been in an area of a country that had little entertainment to offer and provided little opportunity to do my usual evening socializing with the local people. A tiny, rural community with nothing much to do. No place to go, no radio (in a language that I could understand), no television, no restaurants. No businesses open in the evenings. After the early dinner provided by the hotel, it was back to the room. When the day’s report was finished, I’d spend some creative time on writing (daily reports and about my day’s adventures) and/or graphics production. I also read quite a lot in the evenings, but sometimes I find it valuable to entertain myself on the computer - even with mindless computer games.

Email communication isn’t found everywhere, but I’ve had luck setting up accounts at university computer departments and local Internet providers where I use a Web-based email service, such as HotMail. It sure has improved my ability to stay in contact with folks back home.

Photography
For those using chemical photography, I find film and processing is pretty much available in most developing countries’ cities, though the quality of finished prints or slides vary considerably. People of some cultures object to having their photograph taken, so one should ask permission beforehand. Many government offices, official residences and embassies, airports, and police or military installations and activities will be off-limits.

As a longtime photographic enthusiast, I have finally switched from chemical to digital photography. I read quite a lot about digital cameras and looked pretty closely at 15-20 current models. Several friends allowed me to try out theirs to get a better fix on what I should buy. I chose a middle-of-the-road model with a 3.2 megapixel capacity. It allows good detail in 8 in. x 10 in. prints, and is more than adequate for computer projection or email photos. Certain Websites provide critiques of various electronic gear, along with consumer ratings, and a search of vendors for competitive prices. Extra photo storage capacity should be purchased, along with extra batteries, so you can continue taking photos for the greater part of the day when you’re away from your home base.

Electrical preparation
Much of the electrical current found overseas is 220 volts, so check your computer. If it says 110 to 220 volts, you’re probably OK. If not, you’ll need a transformer. Electronic, lightweight transformers are often short-lived, and the durable ones are extremely heavy and more expensive. I use an electronic transformer to power my printer and I’ve found they last much longer if I only plug them in when I print. Even then I limit printing to around 20 pages at a time, then unplug it for awhile.

You’ll need a set of electrical adapters to adapt the two-prong USA plug to foreign wall outlets. Kits can be purchased at an electronics stores, such as Radio Shack, or in certain hardware and department stores. Look around. Another trivial (maybe not) note - it’s better to buy a 220 volt hair dryer than to try to use a transformer, because their heavy current requirement is tough on electronic transformers. I recall a three-week assignment in Eastern Europe where my room was often less than 40°F Fahrenheit, and the bathwater about the same. Imagine a wet head at that temperature! I’d have caught pneumonia without my hair dryer.

Medical preparation
All overseas employers require a medical exam, and a doctor’s statement that you’re “fit to travel.” When you get your exam, your doctor can look up in a publication what immunizations are recommended for your country of destination, but you can also see them listed at the UN World Health Organization website: who.int/ith/english/country.htm. Don’t let me scare you, but sometimes there are quite a few that are necessary for your first venture into a tropical climate. I don’t take unnecessary chances and welcome all suggested shots. You’ll likely be asked to get anti-malarial tablets if you’re going to a tropical or sub-tropical climate. Most of those are to be taken once each
week, beginning a week or two before you leave. When you arrive at your destination, and plan to stay more than a few weeks, ask around and get an appointment with a reliable local doctor. They always know stuff that your back-home doctor doesn’t know, because they deal with different medical situations. And they’ll know the best anti-malarial tablets for the type of malaria they have locally.

Washing fruits and vegetables may not protect you from disease due to water quality. Some say, "If you can't peel it or boil it, don't eat it." Avoid eating raw leafy vegetables such as lettuce, spinach, and rape (hepatitis hazard). All meat should be well-done and avoid unpasteurized milk. Maintain your liquid intake at a higher level in a warmer climate. Use only bottle or boiled liquids. Avoid ice cubes because they may be made from unsafe water.

What to take

While you’re allowed two large check-in luggage pieces and two carry-ons on overseas flights, many experienced travelers get by with only one large piece and two carry-ons. You can hang a backpack over your shoulder and have your hands free for your large piece of luggage and your combination briefcase/laptop bag. With that, you can get around much better. And the backpack will hold your camera, film, a change of clothes if your big suitcase gets lost for awhile, and other materials you might want with you daily. Most novice travelers take many things they don’t need, often returning with clothing and other items that were never used. One of the best ways to reduce your luggage weight is to plan on doing your laundry often so you don’t need as many shirts, undies, socks, etc. Take some powdered laundry detergent (in zip-lock bags) and a few metal coat hangers and wash out a few things each night. Use the coat hangers to hang 'em up to dry. Casual clothes are mostly acceptable, except for a few times when you might meet a minister-of-something or other heavyweight. Then you’ll need business attire.

Make a list of people back here you expect to write to, and prepare sets of mailing labels. This will save precious time while you’re in another country, and maybe avoid overlooking some who expect cards and letters. If you don’t have a way to make peel-off labels, simply print the names and addresses out on paper and cut and tape them (clear tape) onto the envelope.

You’ll find some wonderful people overseas who’ll go out of their way to help you, both professionally and personally. Be sure to take some gifts to show your appreciation. They like items that are labeled with your university, city, country, or other names and logos they recognize, like professional sports teams. Hats, pins, ball point pens, key chains, coffee cups, and t-shirts are fairly easily carried.

A valid passport is required, one that’s valid for six months after your intended trip is over. For possible visa requirements, see the website travel.state.gov/. Your sponsor may also inform you of these requirements. Traveler’s checks are safer than carrying cash, but the ease of cashing them varies between countries. Usually, only banks and hotels cash them. U.S. money is valued around the world, so it’s good to have a few large bills tucked away. A money belt under your clothing is safest. It’s also a safe place for your passport and air tickets.

Part of being an informed international traveler is keeping an eye on currency exchange rates. Mostly, you’ll find these rates to be favorable to people exchanging U.S. currency. Remember to exchange some currency at the airport bank to get you by until you can get to a larger bank or exchange facility, which often have better exchange rates. See the forex rate site: http://quote.yahoo.com/m3?u for the latest rates.

As soon as you enter a new country

Exchange some money at the airport and buy bottled water as soon as you can find it. Carry a bottle with you, and avoid drinking unboiled water until you’re absolutely certain it’s OK. Also, the airport gift shop may also be one of the few sources of local maps. Here’s an abbreviated checklist for international travel:

- Passport; maybe visas, medical records, copy of birth certificate, drivers license
- Extra sets of passport photos to apply for unexpected government permits
- Traveler’s checks, credit cards, and U.S. dollars (New $50s and $100s)
- Resources to support your expertise, both electronic and hard copy
- Portable computer and electrical adapters
- Clothing for climate, comfortable shoes
- Backpack, money belt, fannypack
• Flashlight, umbrella, snacks
• Stationary, envelopes, addresses (or mailing labels)
• Phone and FAX numbers of personal and professional contacts both at home and abroad
• Small gifts from the USA
• Recreational reading material
• Laundry detergent, coat hangers
• Tissues, small packs (toilet paper is often not available)
• Required medicines, anti-malarial tablets, aspirin/etc., antacids, diarrhea tablets/liquids, sun screen, lip balm, rash/burn/bite cream, Band-Aids, antiseptic

News from the West
When starving for news from the outside world, recent issues of news magazines, such as Time, or Newsweek, are usually found in airport bookstores and in the larger hotel’s gift shops. Many expats are frequent listeners to BBC and the Voice of America radio broadcasts. You can get this information from your colleagues once you arrive.

Summary
Intelligent preparation can go a long way toward making your international development assignment successful and satisfying, both professionally and personally. This includes a proper attitude and philosophy, and doing your homework on the culture and how your expertise might apply. It’s also knowing what to take and what to leave at home.

Most paid international consultancies require previous international experience. The best way to get this is by serving as a volunteer. And the best way to understand the people, culture, and related problems and opportunities of a foreign land is to focus on a region. Web sites and Web searches can provide a wealth of information for your preparation. However, it’s still of utmost importance to talk to foreign nationals and people with international experience and learn as much as you can from them. Listen carefully, ask questions, and look at their pictures. Their enthusiasm will rub off on you.

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