

# An army of altruists

## VSO boosted by record rise in recruits

Organisations offering voluntary work in developing countries are being inundated by applications from middle-aged professionals, says **Emily Dugan**

**A** volunteer army is marching to enlist for development projects around the globe as professionals seek fulfilling ways to ride out the recession. The number of enquiries about long-term projects with the development charity Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) doubled in the last quarter of 2008, compared with the same period in 2007.

There has also been a dramatic rise in the proportion of prospective volunteers applying from the business and management sector, following last year's round of job losses in the City. In November 2007, 24 per cent of applications were from people working in business and management; by November 2008 this had risen to 43 per cent.

At any one time, VSO has around 1,500 volunteers working in 42 of the world's poorest countries and now the demand for these placements has reached a fever pitch. Between September 2007 and January 2008, VSO received 1,346 enquiries about long-term volunteer placements in developing countries. In the same

period a year later, 2,813 people enquired about these.

Michele Turner, head of volunteering at VSO, said she was excited by the renewed enthusiasm. "When there's a recession there's always an increase in the number of people applying, but now we have had double the applications, which is great. VSO is something that people will think about doing for many years and then an event in their lives makes them take the plunge. We are over the moon to have so many applicants because there is always a demand for more volunteers."

While VSO has historically been made up of students teaching English, the charity's development projects are now geared to experienced volunteers in a wide variety of professions. The average age of today's VSO volunteer is 41 and this shift has fitted in well with redundancies in the professional sector, as people with many years' experience are more useful to the organisation.

Ms Turner said: "When we started we only used to send young people

to teach English, but now we recruit from a wide range of jobs. One minute we need a manager and the next it could be someone to work with a local council. Management makes up 30 per cent of all our placements and the majority of applicants are now from that sector."

The boom is being felt beyond VSO. Ian Birbeck, recruitment director at the global volunteering company Projects Abroad, said his organisation had introduced 1,000 extra placements this year: "We sent about 4,000 volunteers last year, and this year we anticipate sending 5,000. We're getting a lot of calls from people who have been made redundant. We're working on developing more professional volunteering schemes so people can use their skills."

Organisations offering gap-year projects are also reporting a rise in older graduate applicants who are finishing university and finding the job market inhospitable. Africa and Asia Venture has seen a 9 per cent increase on last year in the numbers of graduates applying for its projects.

Andrew Mackenzie, managing di-



rector of Africa and Asia Venture, said: "We have always had graduates on our projects but we have seen an appreciable rise this year. It appears that the main reason for this is that, with a tougher employment market, many who have not previously taken a gap year feel that there is that added reason for doing so now."

**'Management makes up 30% of all our placements'**

MICHELE TURNER, VSO

### 1. Debbie Philpott, 39

A lawyer and former management consultant from London, she is going to Nepal as an organisational development adviser.

**"The market in the UK hasn't been fantastic and my area of expertise is specialist so there aren't generally lots of jobs around, anyway. I wanted to make a difference in people's lives, so it seemed like a good idea to apply. It's a lifestyle choice as much as anything. There's all the pressures of normal life, such as the recession, and this is just such a different way of life. It's also a chance to do something really worthwhile."**

### 2. Lynette Savings, 56

A former policy head for a health charity from Birmingham, she will provide management support for an HIV clinic in Vietnam.

**"I've been hankering to do VSO for a couple of years now but never got round to filling in the form. When I got made redundant last year it**

**seemed the right time. I wanted to give something back while still using my skills. It will also look good on my CV. In the current economic climate it is a good idea to be out of the country for a few years while I wait to see what happens. I can't wait to get out there."**

### 3. Mark Henderson, 47

A former pharmaceutical company manager from Dublin, he is going to Indonesia to work as a hospital project manager.

**"I worked for the same company for 23 years. After losing my job I started figuring out what I wanted to do next. I've always been involved in voluntary work in some way and it seemed like a good time to go away. The economy has gone down the tube and the chances of me getting a job are remote, so it's not a bad time to be spending 18 months out of the country. When I get back I think I'll probably be a different person with a different set of interests."**

### 4. Celia Stubbs, 31

A physiotherapist in the health service in Bristol, she is going to Namibia to help develop community rehabilitation projects.

**"It was quite a hard decision because it's quite competitive to get jobs in the NHS, but VSO is something I've always wanted to do. I'm happy in Bristol and I have good friends, but I don't have commitments such as a mortgage or children, and I thought if I don't take the**

**opportunity now I might not in the future. I'm concerned about getting a job when I get back, but I've weighed up my options and I'm really excited about going."**

### 5. Alex Mayers, 27, and Lucy Buckingham, 28

The couple, from Leamington Spa, are off to the Philippines. Lucy is to be a natural resources manager and Alex an English teacher.

**Alex says: "Trying to find anything relevant here in Britain is tough, and we were both looking for extra experience to make our CVs stand out. One of the big advantages of going now is that when we return we will probably have missed the worst of the recession. It's a good time to avoid the slowdown and spend some time with each other."**

### 6. Tom, 32, and Julie Sorensen, 29

Charity project managers in Wales, they are going to Yaounde in the Cameroon to help develop local charities.

**Julie says: "We've always wanted to do something like this and we just wanted to make sure the circumstances are right. We think it's a fantastic thing to do as a family and my 18-month-old daughter, Mia, is really adaptable now. There's a misperception that volunteering is a career break but it's not; it progresses and fast-tracks it. If you can deal with the demands of work out there, then you can deal with anything in the UK."**



## 7. Charlotte Beauvoisin, 41

Formerly with a London investment firm, she is going to be a marketing development manager for the Uganda Conservation Foundation.

**“I’ve wanted to do VSO since I was 20, but when I applied they said to come back when I had more skills. So last year I did. People who take a career break often then get better work when they come back to the UK, so you’re not putting a career on hold, or taking a step back, which is what a lot of people think. When I got promoted last year I did think, ‘Should I be giving up a well-paid job in a recession?’, but I think I’ll actually come back with more skills.”**





The contents of the publications from which these extracts have been taken are copyright works and without prior permission of the relevant collecting society or save as permitted by statute may not be copied or otherwise reproduced (even for internal purposes) or resold.

