



ENGINEER HARNESSSES SKILLS TO HELP THE DISPLACED

After working for environmental engineering consultancy URS in Brisbane for two years, travelling in South-East Asia was something of an epiphany for Nicola O'Hara.

“I had been interested in humanitarian and development work for a long time. But seeing conditions on the ground in lesser-developed-countries really spurred me on. I went back to Ireland, worked for one more year with URS in Cork. I took a course on environmental health and sanitation with Red R, an agency which trains personnel and services engineering needs for humanitarian programmes worldwide.

“This course was a good link, harnessing my own technical and employment history to the realities of working in the field in a developing country.”

On the ground

“I applied for the job as Goal’s Watsan Co-ordinator in northern Uganda. Five weeks later, I was on the ground out there, opening a well in a camp for people displaced by conflict, and seeing a real impact on people who had endured a traumatic two decades of war.”

After a B.Sc. in Geology at NUI Galway, and a M.Sc. in Hydrogeology at Reading University O’Hara spent two years in Dublin with URS, where she was doing “mostly contaminated land investigations and site remediations”.

“We worked on a wide range of sites particularly for the pharmaceutical and petroleum industries. We conducted site

investigations to assess the impact of on-site activities on the surrounding environment and if required devised and oversaw site remediation programmes,” she explains.

Although the objectives of Goal’s Water and Sanitation programme are very different to those she was used to in her previous career, she found that many of the technical skills she had acquired during her studies and while working with URS stood her in good stead when she came to Uganda.

After twenty years of an on-off insurgency, northern Uganda has seen almost two million people displaced. People have crowded into camps in and around towns in the region, in fear of a rebel movement that abducts women and children for use as soldiers and sex slaves.

Learning new things

Assessing the technical differences between working for URS and the field-based humanitarian needs serviced by Goal, she says; “I learn new things technically. The physical resources I work with are less sophisticated than in the west. But here I have a good learning curve. Goal is implementing some innovative projects in northern Uganda including waste management programmes, accessibility (improving disabled access to Watsan facilities), and innovative new ways of increasing the production of water by mechanical means from



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boreholes and shallow wells. These things are all new to me, and are projects that are not done so often by NGOs in the humanitarian sector. “Moreover, I am learning management and programme development skills, in an environment where planning cannot take certain things for granted, as is the case when planning and managing in Ireland or Australia. So there’s more to this than just hands-on engineering work. There’s ample scope for Goal staff to move into programme development and strategy, or field project management, in a wide variety of humanitarian contexts – be that HIV-AIDS work, locating and counselling street children, devising and implementing non-formal education projects for refugees, to give a few examples.”

Northern Uganda has been beset by war, and this is the context within which Goal works. “We have to do a lot of remote management. Due to insecurity we cannot access our

project sites from time to time. So we have to work hard and contingency-plan to ensure quality control even when we might not access a particular project for weeks on end. Visible benefits

“With Watsan, and in a situation like northern Uganda, the visible benefit if what Goal does is immediately seen. You have people who have lost their land and their homes, who have seen family killed and abducted, who have been in camps for many years. But with a small investment of time and money, we provide access to clean water, latrines, efficient waste disposal. In a camp for displaced people these small things make an incredible difference.”

Goal is seeking engineers to contribute to poverty alleviation and humanitarian relief in 15 countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America. For more information, see www.goal.ie or call 01-2809779. ☎

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