

Developing skills through disaster relief work



International aid and development agency, GOAL UK forges partnerships with UK-based engineering companies to help save lives in the developing world – and it can help retain staff, explains Media Officer Olivia McGill

GOAL UK's Human Resources manager, Laura Byrne explained the approach of the organisation: 'GOAL is looking for skilled staff that can commit to 1 or 2 years in the field. The advantage of GOAL's partnerships with companies in the UK or Ireland is that their employees are still supported by expert knowledge from head office while they are in the field.'

She added: 'We hope companies will build up knowledge about a particular country so that there is a flow of engineers to that country. It's not just those in the field who benefit. People back in the UK will be getting involved with the project from here. They are still under contract with their company so their career progression is still being managed by their boss in the UK plus all the benefits that come with that, such as pension contributions and any relevant bonuses staff receive.'

Working in the field

UK based consulting engineer Buro Happold has pledged four engineers a year to work in the field with GOAL.

Its chairman, Rod MacDonald, worked in Malawi in his youth and has had an interest in the country since. Already the firm has sent out one of its engineering team, Rachel Battilana, to work as an engineer with GOAL in Malawi, with another due to go out at the end of April and Rod hopes to visit GOAL's engineering programmes in June.

A deadly combination of chronic poverty, bad weather, a bad harvest, and a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS left almost 5M people in Malawi in need of food aid in the early part of 2006. GOAL distributed maize, oil and beans monthly to over 34 000 households in Nsanje district where Rachel is based. GOAL also provides technical support to the Ministry of Health Supplementary Feeding Programmes in Nsanje and Blantyre districts.

Rachel is working for the Nsanje Education, Water and Sanitation (NEWS) project. It is a 4-year programme which has three main components – school rehabilitation and construction, improving access to water and sanitation facilities and improving

awareness of healthy behaviour through hygiene promotion and training.

Rachel is also responsible for the GOAL funded orphan housing project, providing technical input to other engineering works funded by the organisation in addition to working as a technical advisor to the NEWS Construction Coordinator and WatSan Coordinator. 'I will be providing technical support to the guy who is heading up the NEWS project. He's from an engineering background, but I'm from more of a structural background,' explained Rachel.

Rachel has been working for Buro Happold for 5 years, but has been interested in going back to the developing world since she was in Uganda more than 10 years ago on a school exchange, teaching maths and physics. 'I really enjoyed it', Rachel enthused. 'We were staying in a guesthouse with people who were working on a water programme and I was really interested in what they were doing and wanted to get involved. In August last year an email landed in my inbox from the development group here at Buro Happold and I knew straight away I wanted to get involved.'

She added: 'I am more interested in development as opposed to emergency relief so the length of this post is ideal for me. For a final year project in university I went to Uganda to work on a cold climate emergency programme for refugees, as well as having a long-standing involvement with projects in Malawi.'

'There is a strong link between Scotland and Malawi. Blantyre is just down the road from me and almost everyone I've told that I'm going to Malawi has a sister or aunt or someone working there. David Livingstone was the first missionary out there and most of the British people to go there were Scottish. Since then there has been good relations between the two places.'

Staff retention

Today social responsibility goes far beyond the philanthropy of donating money to good causes at the end of the financial year. Instead it is an all year round responsibility; companies are really getting involved and it's not just



Al Matheena female Muslim students, Sri Lanka

about having a good image. David Dalton, head of Human Resources in GOAL headquarters in Ireland explained: 'One of the main benefits of companies initiating partnerships with NGOs like GOAL is to reduce staff attrition. If companies encourage staff to go away for a year, it gets travelling out of their systems, and they might get 2-3 years out of their employees.'

'It also helps with corporate social responsibility. Companies like Buro Happold have a strong social conscience when it comes to their staff. Staff at home can help with fundraising or provide advice on the projects the company is running in the field; companies don't want to limit it to the people who are actually there.'

Mr Dalton said: 'Sending staff to developing countries helps develop their skills as they are open to a broader range of responsibilities there. They are expected to manage people as well as build staff capacity. CEOs hope people go out as engineers and come back as managers. Buro Happold in the past has won a contract through the UK Department of International Development (DFID) and has worked in slum areas in the developing world with the United Nations Human Settlements programme (UN Habitat) in the hope of winning commercial contracts in the region, so there are good business opportunities to getting involved with the NGO sector.'

Giving aid post Tsunami

Buro Happold isn't the only engineering company getting on board. After the tsunami in Sri Lanka in 2004 Arup UK committed engineers to GOAL UK, as well as to Pakistan after the earthquake in October 2005, which left 80 000 dead and nearly 4M people without shelter. GOAL spent almost £3.5M and distributed a further £1.5M worth of non-food items to help the most vulnerable rebuild their communities from scratch, ensuring that basic shelter and food were provided in the Bagh region of Pakistan where 90% of infrastructure was destroyed.

Arup earthquake engineer, Kubilay Hicyilmaz, worked with the relief operation, helping to shelter the thousands of homeless people in the area, as well as earthquake engineering, education and damage assessment. He set up a training programme to teach earthquake engineering principles to the people of Pakistan. GOAL funded a series of 4-day workshops in Bagh District aimed at training masons and carpenters in safe building practices.

He explained: 'The disaster in Pakistan had roots in the lack of earthquake engineering, as the cliché goes – earthquakes don't kill people, buildings do. The disaster was due to a failure in the infrastructure of the housing, but GOAL kindly gave me money to set up a training course and nearly 300

Earthquake engineer Kubilay Hicyilmaz in the Bagh region of Pakistan



craftsmen across six union councils were trained in earthquake-resistant design.'

'We went to each union council where GOAL is operational as well as Bagh and Islamabad', continued Kubilay. 'We told them we were coming and that we needed masons and carpenters, as well as steel fixers for more urban areas. GOAL's logistics team came with 7500 bricks and a huge amount of timber and reinforcement bars. We started by setting up a classroom and taking down everyone's details, and while we weren't interested in those without basic skills, we had enough to get things up and running. The workshops included morning seminars where workers critiqued photos of local structures and hands-on afternoon exercises where they recreated what they had learned.'

'Craftsmen first learned the causes of earthquakes, then how to select the proper site for a home and how to safely align a structure on that site. The second day of the workshop was devoted to timber construction, the third to masonry and the fourth to reinforced concrete construction. This continuum ensured that workers developed a well-rounded understanding of safe practices.'

Those who completed all 4 days received a certificate and 1000 rupees, slightly above prevailing daily wage. Host communities offered trainers a large, flat site with visibility from a main road so that earthquake-safe models erected during the workshops remained standing for others to study.

'The workshops were later offered to the wider NGO community' said Kubilay. 'I don't think any of the agencies except GOAL and a Nepalese NGO called NSET had a single engineer with earthquake engineering experience in Pakistan. There were only two NGOs that addressed the cause of the problem rather than just dealing with the fallout. All in all, there were 8 weeks of training before I left Pakistan.'

He has kept an active interest in the

NGO community and in Pakistan. He also works regularly for an NGO based in Indonesia where he reviews construction and design projects being implemented post tsunami. 'There is a lot of good work being done but often these NGOs don't have the technological skills to implement it properly,' he said. 'A lot of NGOs are acting as construction companies so they need plenty of encouragement; people need to insist on correct specifications and materials to be used in the reconstruction process. There has been shortsightedness from governments in terms of the overall response to the disaster in Pakistan. Reconstruction takes years; governments need to pay engineers who are able to implement it properly.'

Seconding engineers

Arup's positive relationship with GOAL UK has existed as far back as 1997, based around seconding engineers to GOAL to teach technical expertise to staff in the field, as well as assisting with emergency responses. 'It's usually for a period of 6 months and is incorporated as part of the training toward their professional qualifications and is viewed by the company as a highly effective learning experience', explained Jo da Silva, who leads Arup's work in relief and development.

'They come back with a different perspective. They grow up faster and gain good leadership and management skills, and work well in a team, skills they don't necessarily learn as easily in a group in the UK. It contributes greatly to the individual and we're enthusiastic as a private sector organisation to make this contribution. GOAL having the use of one of our engineers for 3 months is much better than donating funds because of the level of expertise that one of our engineers can provide.'

'The value of technical skills in a humanitarian situation is enormous. During the tsunami alone we had seven engineers seconded to various

relief organisations doing a variety of important work including surveys, programme design and management training – engineers are very adaptable people.'

She continued: 'Most organisations are reluctant to offer people in the field in a post disaster situation unless they've been before. GOAL is amazingly enlightened in that they take people without disaster relief experience as they recognise their professional skills. A 26 year old engineer who has spent 4 years in the workplace has a great deal of technical and organisational skills to offer.'

Arup Ireland is in partnership with GOAL Ireland and they have done a lot of work in Uganda. Marina Hand, Finance Director, Arup, explained: 'For Arup's 60th anniversary we wanted to give something back. In 2004 Arup went with GOAL to Uganda to do an infrastructure needs study.'

'Arup's initial visits to the region identified a clear lack of reliable data or mapping on physical infrastructure. After 2 years of data collection and analysis, a report has now been produced providing a comprehensive overview of the physical needs of the district. District authorities and NGOs operating in Pader are using these maps as a means of coordinating and planning further development programmes in Pader.'

'The needs study has helped us identify a capital project to undertake – we have committed to upgrade a secondary school in the town of Pajule. In terms of our own engineers' contribution, we are encouraging them to go back to first principles and understand the existing natural and built environment. Hopefully we can then provide some innovative designs that will be appropriate and sustainable, working with local engineers and architects.'

Working in Sri Lanka

Ex-Royal Navy officer Mark Ford is working as a Reconstruction Programme Co-ordinator in the Ampara region on Sri Lanka's east coast. Thousands lost their lives when the tsunami swept in, and many of those who survived found themselves

homeless, devoid of a livelihood, and living in villages where bridges, roads, schools and public buildings were destroyed.

Mark has been working in Sri Lanka since being seconded from his employers – engineering giant Kentz, Tipperary, Ireland, to GOAL, one of the key non-government agencies helping to rebuild Sri Lanka.

'I came here in January 2005, and started working on GOAL's huge programme' he said. 'I manage the teams reconstructing schools, Vocational Training Centres and fisheries buildings in this area, and I also oversee the Education Resources Programme implemented by GOAL.'

'We took on an ambitious programme to rebuild 65 schools, so that some 35 000 children can return to their education after one of the most devastating years of their lives. Sri Lankans place great store on education, and rebuilding the schools was top priority after the tsunami.'

'Our target was to have all work completed by December 31 2006 but with the poor standard of contractors this date has been extended until May 2007. We have had every problem, from holidays not accounted for in programmes, material shortages, security problems, manpower shortages, fevers and the never-ending, low-quality work which has to be done again.'

'The benefit is immeasurable for the children, teachers and the community who will now have buildings with facilities that they could only ever see in larger cities like Colombo and Kandy, and if we improve the quality and quantity of education in this almost-forgotten district by a little then it will all have been worth it.'

Mark packed up working in Germany inside a week when Kentz asked him if he would go to Sri Lanka to help with GOAL's post-tsunami relief programme, and he has derived great satisfaction from his work. 'The job satisfaction comes from knowing that we are all making a difference. It may be large or small depending how you look at it but it is a difference,' he said.



A new house being built on the original site of a destroyed house in Sri Lanka.

'I have been involved from the emergency relief stage and I saw the fantastic achievements of the early GOAL workers. It makes you kind of proud when you see the kids kitted out with uniforms supplied by GOAL, or the farmers using the roads we built, and even the little old man selling his baked Roti from a hand cart supplied by our livelihood team.'

Mark expects to leave Sri Lanka when the GOAL projects are completed in June 2007, but he would like to work in the humanitarian relief area again.

Engineer Neil Jebb is working as a Team Leader in the Matara and Hambantota regions on Sri Lanka's south coast. He arrived in July 2005, and started working on GOAL's huge programme. 'I am responsible for the two southern districts where GOAL works, and I oversee a budget of almost \$4M,' he explained.

'Our projects include 400 transitional shelters, 300 permanent houses, fisheries buildings, waste management, water supply, and irrigation.'

'We also run a sustainable livelihood programme for over 4000 beneficiaries – this means helping them replace the assets they lost in the tsunami, and getting back to work. This is my third time to work overseas with GOAL – I was in Afghanistan and Sudan prior to this. Each job seems to get bigger and better and more rewarding.'

Neil worked in industry in the UK for 12 years before volunteering for some humanitarian work, and this led to his career with GOAL.

GOAL works in 13 developing countries implementing development programmes and projects in response to humanitarian disasters, HIV/AIDS and street children. GOAL UK regularly holds information evenings for engineers, health professionals, accountants, logisticians, administrators and others interested in working with our overseas programmes.

• If you would like to find out more, email Laura (lbyrne@goal-uk.org). Further information on GOAL from the website: (www.goal-uk.org; tel: 020 7631 3196).



GOAL Schools Project Manager Mark Ford and GOAL Project Engineer Stephen McElheney reviewing details with a contractor, Sri Lanka