

Astrid Mandl
Returned December 2005
VSO Volunteer in Kenya

September 2005
"We are as poor as church mice"

"In Kenya," Astrid Mandl sighs, "you need a lot of distance, tons of humour and strong nerves." The 35 year old marketing specialist of Randstad is currently on a voluntary assignment in Nairobi. She was assigned there by the relief organisation VSO, a cooperation partner of Randstad, and her task is to support a help association for handicapped people. Her experience up to now however, is rather depressing. In the association, home-made chaos rules. Rivalry, tensions, nepotism and financial bottlenecks – everything is debated in never ending meetings. Now that sponsors left, there is not enough money for concrete relief projects. In the office too, it is almost impossible to make ends meet. "We share 2.5 computers here. Last Friday, we did not have the money for the telephone. We are as poor as church mice" A small ray of hope was a visit to the local TV and radio station KBC by Astrid Mandl and her boss. There was some success at least: The station promised to take up the issue of handicapped people more frequently in the future.



Randstad with her colleagues at work at the UPDK in Kenya

Meanwhile, Astrid Mandl has come to terms with circumstances in Kenya. "I know, I can't save the world", she writes. "But to sit around for nine months, drink coffee and learn Swahili is not quite up my alley either." And so she listens to her colleagues, tries to mediate, to guide, teach and motivate. She also wants to win some of the former sponsors back. And for this, she promises, she will put on her Sunday's best, switch on her "Sunday's" face and present herself from her most charming side.

Return of Astrid Mandl, December 2005

Monday December 12, Astrid Mandl, the second Randstad International Volunteer, arrived back home. She came back from Nairobi where she worked as a Marketing- and Management Adviser for UDPK, an umbrella organization for disabled people.

Unfortunately, Astrid had to leave her placement early, because of major issues in the employing organization, UDPK, which came to the surface when Astrid was in her placement. Because of these issues, it was not possible for Astrid to keep performing her duties and fulfill the objectives as agreed. After Astrid's resignation the partnership that VSO has with UDPK came under review. At this moment it seems unlikely that VSO will continue to work with UDPK, although the organisation has established a new board since Astrid's departure and promised to improve it's performance. Astrid feels that even though she had to leave the placement earlier than expected she still learned a lot and the experience was worthwhile.

Astrid about her experiences:

Since Mid December I am back from Kenya. I was working as a VSO volunteer for United Disabled Persons of Kenya (UDPK) in Nairobi for 6 months. UDPK is an umbrella organization focusing on advocacy and lobby work for persons with disabilities (PWDs) on local and national level, providing information for the disability community on issues about health, education, employment, and creating awareness in the community and public to integrate and include PWDs in all spheres of life.

My task was to advise UDPK in all management areas such as Marketing, Human Resources, and Finances. Working in and for the disability community wasn't always easy. In Kenya many types of disabilities that exist are not common in Europe like polio, trachoma, river blindness. It can be quite

touching and emotional sometimes. Nairobi itself is not a nice place to live: a lot of pollution, crime, poverty and the biggest slum area in Africa. But if you go outside Nairobi up-country it's so beautiful: Ngong Hills, Maasai Mara, Samburu National Park, Mount Kenya, Lake Nakuru... There is so much to see.

I am very glad that Randstad gave me the opportunity to live and work in a developing country - despite all the difficulties and tough times during my stay. I learned a lot about myself, life, different cultures, values etc. In Kenya you have to be patient and have a good sense of humor to deal with daily life. Everything works 'pole pole' (slowly). Altogether it was an exciting and interesting time. I would do it again anytime. It's an experience that will change your personality and life.