



June 2011

## Yacht volunteer Sylvia in Cambodia



Me, a volunteer? Ha! If you would have said that to me a year ago I would have laughed and said: 'No, that would damage my career'. But now I say: 'Yes, it's very good for your own personal development as well as your career.'

I always wanted to work or study abroad but never got around to actually doing it. Then I met a colleague who volunteered in Rwanda for a year. She told me about her experience and her personal and professional development, and I thought Yacht is offering me a good opportunity to finally put my words into action. So let's do it!

VSO offered me a placement as communication and information advisor in Cambodia with NEP (NGO Education Partnership). NEP is an NGO with a network of 104 education NGOs throughout the country. NEP is the voice of NGOs active in the field of education and works closely with development partners and government in policy reform and implementation. The placement completely exceeded my experiences and expectations for a job in a country abroad. Upon accepting the placement I started VSO training to prepare me to work in a third world country. I was pleasantly surprised by the expertise and professional approach of VSO and was well prepared for my placement. The further into the process I got, the more confident about working as a volunteer and of VSO I became.

I'm at the end of my six-month placement and I can say that in Cambodia, VSO's local partners in the field of education form a tight network. They have volunteers working at every decision making level in education: policy makers at Ministry level, advisory NGO's, at Provincial and District level, in teacher training colleges and in schools. We work closely together, share information and have fun doing it. We are making a difference here.

Cambodian culture is fantastic and people are kind and helpful. Working here is very different compared to a Western country. Generally Asian culture is very hierarchical and polite, colleagues would not directly say they disagree or express what they truly think. So you need to take that into consideration and take your time working with them and asking them about their ideas.

Prior to leaving Holland, I was focused on my placement and about what it would do for my personal development. I was anxious to get to know more about myself: how would I react or function in a whole new environment, in a different culture, with a different language? And how would I cope when things didn't go as planned? Trust me, a lot of things didn't go as planned!

The placement has been full of learning experiences. I have learnt more about how to manage changes, be flexible, be patient, and communicate directly so my Cambodian colleagues could learn from me. It was a time of facing myself, my own faults, experiencing life abroad, travelling, and also having fun. Me being here in Cambodia certainly built the capacity of my Cambodian colleagues, and I have also had a lot capacity building and experiences myself.

It's a beautiful win-win situation, an experience never to forget!

Sylvia