

VSO VOLUNTEER REFERENCE

Completed in the country of placement by a programme office staff member, based on reference(s) from the employer(s), volunteer reports, regular discussions and visits to the workplace

ADMINISTRATIVE DETAILS

Volunteer name:	Mariska Westdijk	Volunteer ref:	N30597
Volunteer's job title:	Child Friendly Schools Officer	Job ref:	M0702/0001/0001
Name and address of volunteer's employer:	Salima District Education Office	Country:	Malawi
Name/job title of PO Staff member completing reference:	Towela Nyika / PM Education	Date of completing reference:	13 November 2013
Dates of volunteer's placement:	31 - 5 -2008 until 15-7- 2013		

DETAILS OF SERVICE

State your relationship with the volunteer, length of time known and frequency of contact

I have worked with Mariska initially in my role as Teacher Development Center Programme Coordinator from July 2009 and later as Programme Manager for Education until March 2013. I have had regular contact with her in various ways i.e. Regular phone calls, quarterly reporting, bi annual visits to her placement site, volunteer support meetings and in various stakeholder meetings.

Describe the main duties undertaken by the volunteer, the level and breadth of responsibility and the specific skills and experience required for the job:

Mariska has worked in two roles with VSO Malawi:

1. As **Continuing Professional Development Facilitator (CPDF)** in the Teacher Development Center (TDC) Project funded by DFID, she:
 - Worked alongside Primary Education Advisors (PEAs) within two districts of Rumphi and Mzimba North in order to deliver and improve continuing professional development activities to teachers; and in the later part of her placement her work was focussed in Mzimba North only.
 - She delivered workshops on Special Needs Education and supported the introduction of ‘The Disability Toolkit’, a reference to help teachers assist children with Special Educational Needs in the classroom;
 - Facilitated training sessions to improve TDC management in the two districts.
 - Worked with Assistant Centre Coordinators (ACCOs) to establish model libraries capable of demonstrating how to teach reading and how to promote a reading culture in Rumphi and Mzimba districts;
 - Facilitated training sessions to enable PEAs to provide more effective interventions when supervising, guiding and supporting teachers;
 - Encouraged PEAs to think critically and reflectively about their own performance through the provision of training on monitoring and evaluation practices;
 - Worked to improve networking by providing computer training to members of editorial boards to support the development of district newsletters for schools and TDCs and to support the PEAs to use computers for various activities including writing reports.
 - She also was instrumental in organising exchange visits for various stakeholders to enable the sharing of best practices in areas such as Continuous Professional Development (CPD), TDC management, resource development and Special Needs Education.
 - In this position, Mariska also supported in the establishment of a viable Monitoring and Evaluation System for the TDC Project.
 - She also piloted a project on ‘Kusambila Kwizira Mumasebero’ Learning through Educative games in Mzimba North and shared learning on this project with Malawi Institute of Education which resulted in her involvement with the Institute as a valuable resource person to support curriculum review for Primary Schools.
2. As a **Child Friendly Schools (CFS) Officer** at Salima District Education Office in Yambe Zone.

Mariska has been given professional support to Primary Schools in Yambe Zone. She has undertaken different activities and her main duties included the following:

- Designing and facilitating trainings-workshops for the Primary Schools in her zone on Child Centred Learning Methodologies, Practical Activities in Maths and English, Continuous Assessment, effective use of TALULAR especially in teaching languages and Maths, and CPD-related topics on improving classroom practice, School Self Assessment, and Leadership and Management.
- Apart from the training activities stated above she was instrumental in training of teachers in teaching students to improve in reading and supported the Read Malawi Project in all the schools in her zone.
- Planning and coordinating Mother Groups, School Management Committee (SMC) and Parent Teacher Association (PTA) Trainings to support in school development activities and learn income generating activities and use part of the funds to support in school development. They also learned about development and implementation of action plans in her trainings.
- She also supported in supervision of schools including advisory and post-observation meetings with school head teachers and section heads and provided support and training to the PEA in the zone.
- Meeting with SMC and PTA, Village Chiefs to resolve issues in schools and mobilise involvement of other parents to support in school development activities
- Supervision of SMC and PTA action plan and school development projects and School Progress Assessment Meeting which involved various stakeholders.

Apart from her main duties mentioned above, she has also conducted baseline survey in all of the schools in the zone she was working to identify professional needs of teachers, and leadership and management gaps in school operations thus, results helped her to design relevant training programme for the schools and implemented the plan accordingly. She also helped the PEA in drafting Zonal CPD Training Session Plans and facilitating CPD sessions.

SKILLS, ABILITIES AND PERSONALITY TRAITS

Please rate the volunteer in the following areas, in each case using the space below the boxes to provide evidence and/or examples:

Headings	Excellent	Good	Average	N/A
Level of professional / technical competence	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Comments:

Mariska demonstrated outstanding level of professional competence. Her ability to organize, manage activities, and communicate her objectives effectively ensured the involvement of the PEA, school heads, teachers and members of Mother Groups, SMC and PTA in the delivery of CFS activities. During the period that she worked in the zone most of the schools mobilised themselves to mould bricks and constructed classrooms, toilets and teachers houses to increase enrollment of learners in schools and to ensure that they are learning in a better environment. She also mobilised Mother Groups to start Income Generating Activities (IGAs) to make bags from plastic bags which had multiple benefit to support schools with part of the proceeds, support their families and also support improving the environment.

Ability to work as part of a team	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Comments:

Her ability to share her skills, knowledge and experience and work in a very conducive and supportive atmosphere resulted to high degree of support to primary schools, at all levels, and improvement in the leadership and management capacity of the school heads. Her work in Yambe demonstrated enthusiasm, professional competence, adaptability, initiative and ability to work in a multi-cultural environment. She worked with various groups of people in her zone including chiefs and was a well known member of the community to a point that the schools wanted her to extend her placement.

Ability to adjust to new tasks, situations and challenges	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Comments:

Mariska displayed a receptive attitude to all things new and different. On both a professional and a personal level, she settled in to Malawian life quickly and with liveliness. Programmes were occasionally postponed or cancelled at short notice. Mariska had shown the ability to respond quickly to such changes and to adapt to new circumstances. She possesses a clear willingness to meet and overcome challenges and is acutely aware of both the benefits and limitations of working in a developing country. She was able to modify her plans according to situations and needs of people, to accommodate other priorities. A notable fact is that she has managed to work in three different districts in Malawi which have different culture and way of doing things. She was able to learn the different languages (Chichewa and Tumbuka) very quickly and communicated with the local people very well.

Ability to accept personal responsibility and work on own initiative	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Headings	Excellent	Good	Average	N/A
<i>Comments:</i>				
Even though the objectives and outputs of both roles of CPDF and CFS officer were carefully designed, the day-to-day running of the projects required implementation of various activities including planning, reporting, monitoring and evaluating, visiting schools, TDCs and District Education Offices, meeting with colleagues, communicating with stakeholders and facilitating workshops and training sessions. These activities require effective time-keeping, an ability to organise one's own work schedule and a great deal of responsible autonomy. Given the successful implementation of project activities that Mariska has been able to achieve in the districts that she worked, it demonstrates that she is responsible, shows a great deal of initiative and was very proactive.				
Ability to lead and motivate others	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Comments:</i>				
Educators in Malawi face numerous challenges that affect the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. Through her commitment and dedication, Mariska has encouraged her colleagues including members of the community to overcome these difficulties and to adopt new approaches to improve their practice. For example, schools in Malawi are poorly resourced and often contain very large classes. Mariska worked with teams of teachers to overcome these difficulties by developing teaching and learning resources, which support the new curriculum, using materials that are readily in the community, she encouraged parents to use their energy looking at themselves as resources to support construction of school blocks, toilets and teacher houses. She was a role model in the District Education Office, Zones and Community on punctuality and demonstration of hard work ethic.				
Ability to communicate effectively	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Comments:</i>				
Mariska usually consulted colleagues at various levels in the District Education Office, PEAs Head Teachers and community members including the VSO Programme Office whenever she needed to implement activities. She informed the individuals concerned ahead of time whenever there's a sudden change in the plans. She confidently handled trainings, meetings with teachers and school heads and members of the community very well. Her ability to listen to others' point of views and respect their ideas helped her to learn new ideas and perspectives about working effectively. Because of her outstanding interpersonal relationship she was highly regarded as a respectable member of the surrounding community where she worked.				
Ability to negotiate and persuade	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Comments:</i>				
Mariska showed perception and sensitivity in the areas of negotiation and persuasion, particularly when agreeing upon financial reimbursements with participants of development and training activities. She also showed initiative in gaining support from colleagues for her ideas during meetings and trainings. Notable examples are: her contribution in the review of the primary curriculum at the Malawi Institute of Education, Construction projects in the community.				
Commitment, enthusiasm and positive attitude	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Headings	Excellent	Good	Average	N/A
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Comments:

Mariska was a hard-working, proactive and enthusiastic individual in the districts that she worked, she had a positive attitude to all challenges, ideas and initiatives and often worked long hours and sometimes in the weekends to ensure that things are done. When faced with disappointments, Mariska was keen to reflect on the experience, learn the lessons and make changes so that future progress can still be realised. She also showed a willingness to assist with tasks beyond her formal responsibilities, helping various schools in fundraising for resources with various NGOs to support their development projects.

Resilience and determination

Comments:

Mariska's work required a great deal of travel to remote part of the districts that she was working in, poor communication networks and road conditions made worse during the rainy season but she showed her determination to ensure that the project objectives and outputs were realised and that Teacher, Learners and Community members received the support they needed to improve education conditions.

Reliability

Comments:

One of the areas in which Mariska provided leadership was in demonstrating the quality of reliability. She consistently maintained engagements, despite numerous difficulties, and has proven herself to be punctual. She has encouraged others to plan their activities and their time more efficiently so that development activities are not restrained by lateness or lack of attendance. Mariska was always extremely well-prepared for any meeting or training that she attended or facilitated, often having conducted advanced reading and research to improve her knowledge and understanding.

KEY STRENGTHS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Please use this box to highlight the volunteer's key strengths and achievements in and beyond the placement including, for example, notable areas of personal and professional development, significant changes brought about by the volunteer and areas of real impact. This will help a prospective employer gain a clear sense of who the volunteer is and why they should consider employing him/her.

Overall Mariska is a self-starter and works with very minimal supervision. She is very creative in ensuring that the work is done making sure that the few resources that are available are utilised to full potential and making do of locally available resources thereby encouraging the people she worked with to be resources. Below are some areas of strength, achievements and impact:

Strengths:

- Competent and enthusiastic
- Willingness to work under very difficult conditions
- Adaptable and accommodative
- Effective communicator
- Cooperative, approachable, committed and instrumental CPDF and CFS Officer.

Achievements:

- Innovative facilitation skills through trainings and community mobilisation for teachers and communities.
- Improved network through exchange visits, newsletters, community meetings, school assessment meetings

- Frequent sharing of experiences through quarterly meetings and reports
- Piloted successfully the 'Learning through Educative games' project and shared the best practices with Malawi Institute of Education.
- Supported in the Review of the Primary Education Curriculum with Malawi Institute of Education.
- Supported in construction of School Blocks, Teacher Houses and Toilets for learners and teachers to improve school conditions.
- Successfully implemented school debate and quiz competitions that have improved the learning achievement of students and their interest in Education.
- Successfully implemented IGAs with women which are supporting their families, surrounding schools and improving the environment.

Area of impact

- Professional growth of PEAs, Head Teachers and Teachers
- Good classroom practices implemented by Teachers which has improved reading ability of learners and overall learning achievement
- Improve Management of TDCs and Zones and schools

More examples of her pro-activeness and ability to take initiative are given in the points indicated in the Section on Skills, Ability and Personality Traits above.