



**CTI**

# Communication Therapy International



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**Volunteers  
Advice  
Pack 2008**

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# Introduction to the Advice Pack

The purpose of this pack is to help you prepare to work in a Communication Disability focused project in unfamiliar cultural settings, particularly in countries where speech and language therapy is not within the reach of the vast majority of the population. If you are interested and are planning to work in such a project, or are looking to find a job or have or have already found one in such a project, this advice pack is for you.

The resources available in the countries and projects you are placed in may be quite different to what you are used to; attitudes, approaches, relationships, social and institutional structures, and facilities could vary hugely from those in your home country. Living conditions, lifestyles, languages spoken, and customs too could be different. If you are unprepared, these differences can prove to be challenging, and may become a barrier to a fruitful partnership forming between you and the organisation receiving you.

Keeping this in mind, this pack has been drafted by SLTs who have worked in Communication Disability focused projects all over the world, with the express purpose of sharing their rich experience and knowledge to help you prepare yourself better for your undertaking and to make your experience of working in such situations successful and enjoyable.

The pack is divided into four sections. The first section focuses on the project and what you need to find out about the project before you leave. The second and third sections give you ideas for preparing yourself personally and professionally for your new job. Finally, you are given some points to think about when you are actually there. You might find that a number of points pertaining to cultural sensitivity, flexibility, partnership and sustainability keep reappearing in slightly different forms in each of the sections. The more times a point appears the more important it is! The advice pack can be used to get a general sense of how you need to prepare yourself

attitudinally and practically as well as a guide to work through before you start your project and as a reference during your project.

Take this advice pack with you when you go to your project. And if you have any further questions or need advice, you can contact CTI and they will put you in touch with a member who may be able to help!

Good luck, have a great experience and have fun!

## 01

# Personal Preparation

It is essential that you give yourself enough time to prepare yourself before you leave your home country or region. This involves doing some practical things as well as preparing yourself mentally. Going through the questions and points below can be the starting point of your preparation.

## Know yourself

- Ask yourself why do I want to work in a different region or country and what do I want to achieve? For example, is it because I want to travel or is it because I want to experience working as an SLT in a different country? It is important that you are aware of the underlying motivations that have led you to take up this opportunity. Being aware of yourself will enable you to be sensitive to the needs of others and to prioritize the needs of the people/organization that you are called to work with.
- What sort of person are you? Are you resilient? Can you cope by yourself?
- What sort of support will you need to sustain yourself away from home?

## Health Issues

Make sure you:

- visit a travel clinic/GP for advice
- don't leave your vaccinations to the last minute
- take necessary medication with you e.g. paracetamol, malaria tablets, etc., and make sure you stock up on rehydration sachets in hot countries
- investigate prevalence of tropical diseases in the area you are going to
- buy a good 'health in tropical climates' book
- investigate health facilities in the area you are visiting and how you will get to them in an emergency

- have an action plan for emergencies e.g. if you are sick or if you have to rush back to your home country

## Visas, Financial Issues, Legal Documentation

- make several photocopies of all your personal and legal documentation and keep separately from the originals
- what are you going to do about money? E.g. local banks, money transfers
- make sure you know what the value of the currency is e.g. how much should you be paying for goods
- think about your finances in the home country e.g. pensions etc.
- get comprehensive health and travel insurance

## Local Facilities

Find out about:

- living accommodation including bathroom, toilet facilities, sleeping arrangements
- your communication links i.e. internet, post, phones
- local shopping facilities e.g. can you buy batteries, medicines, sanitary products?
- local transport and travel possibilities (NB. Be aware of the hazards of traveling – e.g. overloaded ferries, cars that are not serviced properly, drivers who have never passed a driving test, travelling at night on roads where few vehicles use lights etc. and think how you will plan journeys in ways to minimize risks).
- local entertainments e.g. do you need to take lots of books, crosswords etc.

### Family and Friends Support

- establish how you are going to keep in contact
- take photos of where you live and of your family and friends (people will be fascinated)

### Cultural Awareness

Find out about:

- daily routines e.g. hours and days of work
- dress code e.g. will you need to cover up?
- also consider language and food
- think about social rules e.g. greetings, house rules, (look at Culture Shock books)

### Language

- learn the language before you go or make arrangements to attend a course when you arrive
- if a formal course is not possible, find someone who speaks good English to help you learn the basics of the language – some essential phrases to start with
- get an idea of the phonology, structure and vocabulary

### Contact with sending organization

- are there pre departure training sessions or meetings?
- are there e-mail links with host?

### Knowledge of organizations in area you are visiting

- try to establish if there are NGO's, health services, educational services and who the key people are
- try not to ally yourself to one group too strongly at first, be friendly and appreciative of everyone's work (however good you think it is!)

### Resources

- investigate free transportation of excess baggage with your airline
- take favourite music/books etc with you to ward of homesickness
- prioritise which SLT resources you should take to link with your project - its generally not a good idea to take a lot of therapy materials from home – better to help people make them and or buy locally available toys and picture books when you get there
- skill-up on areas you may need e.g. audiology

### Mentoring/Supervision with another SLT

- seek the opinion of another trusted SLT or (other person who has been doing the job in the area) on the ground to ensure your project goals and action plan are on the right track
- maintain contact with colleagues at home while you are away
- be clear about what you can do and what you can't
- don't take on too many extra work projects that will mean you have no leisure time

## 02

# When you get there

- Rest, acclimatize and take stock before you start
- Make your accommodation your 'home'
- Arrange a guided tour of your local area
- Accept invitations from local people to have dinner, go on an outing – might feel like hard work at first but will definitely help with the process of fitting in, learning the language and making friends
- Pace yourself and be realistic – expect not to achieve anything for the first few weeks at least (or the first few months on a longer project)
- Watch and listen e.g. learning people's names
- Be aware of cultural and communication issues e.g. passive audience/ lack of feedback
- Be positive about speaking and learning the language, it all takes time
- Find a mentor who will help and advise you about cultural, work and personal issues
- Be discreet with expensive possessions e.g. take time to introduce camera, laptop, ipod etc.
- Treat yourself to luxuries sometimes – but be discreet about doing things that cost a lot in a poor context
- Keep positive and be patient – it can be very hard to appreciate why things are done a certain way but it is important to reserve judgment and remember that you are a visitor.
- Look after your physical and mental health; seek help earlier rather than later.
- Have fun! Make sure you plan some time to take a break and travel while you're there
- Enjoy life! You are so lucky to be a wanted visitor with skills that are needed in another country!

## 03

# Professional Preparation

## What to do and what not to

Personal expectations may be high when anticipating a trip abroad either for a short or long duration but what you can do may be over estimated. Local needs may be very different from what you expect and therefore not all forward preparation may be successful. While professional knowledge is a valuable asset, the most important mind set is to be flexible and adaptable to local needs.

Many health and educational services in under-resourced or remote regions follow a Western model, but may actually be inadequate or inappropriate in local contexts. Try to focus on mutual learning and participation and offer your knowledge and skills where appropriate rather than attempt assessment of needs and interventions based on external models.

### The following points will help you focus on some basics in your preparation

- Firstly, you need to consider how you will communicate with people if you do not speak a common language. Is there someone locally who speaks reasonable English and who can volunteer as a translator for a while? Maybe someone who has finished school and is waiting to go to college? Someone who is known to the organisation where you will be based (e.g. a family member of one of the staff)? Never underestimate the value of learning basic phrases of greeting and introduction in the local language even if you are going to need translation for your work.
- Talk to previous visitors to gain information on the local area and previously identified needs.
- Find out about the local services and any useful contacts both within and outside the organisation you will be working with. This will enable you to take a broader approach and a number of differing ideas may emerge. This may lead to cross organisational links and facilitate referrals where appropriate and thereby strengthening existing local networks.
- Gain information about the people you will be working with, with regard to their professional background and/or level of experience in your field. This will enable you to plan at an appropriate level of training if that is what you are there to provide, or appropriate levels of collaboration and discussion if you are there to help with service provision.
- Try to gain some understanding of your organisation – the internal structures and hierarchies; knowing this in advance will make your work easier. If you start to learn about this on arrival, don't be too quick to judge what you hear, see and are told. Sometimes the real situation takes a while to emerge !
- Identify your target group as much as possible before setting off and skill up in any unfamiliar skill/knowledge area. However be prepared to check out and revise on arrival.
- Take any basic literature that can be of practical use rather than academic.

Visit the ICH Library  
[http://www.ich.ucl.ac.uk/service\\_and\\_facilities/internal/library/source](http://www.ich.ucl.ac.uk/service_and_facilities/internal/library/source). This has many links to organisations, references, books and other relevant resources. You are more likely to need information on community development and community based rehabilitation , than high tech SLT textbooks.

- Be ready to transfer skills 'on the job'. Demonstration and learning 'in situ' often has greater effect. Often the most sustainable thing you can do is teach someone else how to do your job or selected parts of it. You need to make sure they can do this well before you leave !
- Take with you teaching materials that you might use to deliver participatory learning.
- Find out from local people about child rearing customs and traditional views on disability. Look at approaches to play and adult/child interaction styles before embarking on a play based programme. Find out which stages of development or social competencies are particularly noted in this society and will therefore be points of concern for parents, teachers, medical staff or clients.
- Don't take too many assessment/treatment materials. Try to use local objects/toys in the market or local shops. If you have access to funding think of using it to commission local artisans to make equipment or toys to your specifications.
- Find out about the local level of literacy and drawing style: What is the literacy rate and what style of drawings are people used to. This will inform how you design your materials. It is always better to get a local person to draw pictures than to draw them yourself.
- One could take assessment materials as examples e.g. Derbyshire Language Scheme or STAPP from which to develop locally and culturally appropriate versions.
- Avoid using a medical (purely impairment focussed) model or too much technical vocabulary. Consider the whole needs of the client in a more holistic approach using a social model of care. Remember that many of your clients / clients' relatives may not have received much schooling and may not understand concepts of anatomy or psychology let alone speech and language. Find out how the speech process is described in the local language and how communication difficulties are traditionally explained. Use this information as a starting point when talking about speech and language.
- Take into account other potential factors affecting priorities in the community that may influence the delivery of your programme (eg gender, poverty or power issues, stigma, local politics etc).
- Prepare potential practical means of evaluation and prepare for ongoing monitoring of your own progress and needs.
- Don't be prescriptive, needs will change and evolve.
- Likewise – be patient and flexible with regards to working practices, work ethics, appointment systems etc. as well as people keeping to appointment times. Remember the potential cultural differences and that a lot of people may not be literate, let alone keep a diary or even be able to read the time.
- You also need to be able to respond to what is being asked of you even if you do not agree that this is the best idea / approach. Diplomacy is of the essence.
- Don't worry about teaching in a 'cook book' approach. In other words you may sometimes need to teach someone what to do in a practical way, without too much of the detailed theory. Try to think of a local analogy for what you are suggesting. Help people to design a service and materials that are easily replicable and easy to pass on to others. Complication will lead to things being done incorrectly or not done at all.
- Be prepared to develop ideas on a day to day basis.
- Take a laptop to store and adapt materials as you go (if access to power)

Eg. Focus on helping others to promote communication development with children Facilitate communication with an adult, total communication / conversation partner principles etc., the principles of safe and responsive feeding practices.

## 04

# When you are there – Making your work worthwhile and sustainable

To make your trip both useful and enjoyable you will want to feel that what you are doing is worthwhile. It is also important to think about how the work that you carry out will continue after you have left.

## **The key to a lot of this depends on your attitude and approach.**

- Wherever you go you will be working alongside local colleagues who are more knowledgeable than you would be about the local situation. Take advantage of this and learn from them.
- Find out who has been doing the jobs relevant to your work. Be careful not to undermine them by stepping in and taking over. Your job is to support them and help them and their colleagues / bosses to value the skills they have, as well as to help develop them further.
- Try and learn some of the local language. No one will expect you to be perfect. But they will appreciate you making an effort.
- Be prepared to broaden your focus beyond speech and language therapy or even broader disability and health issues. You may have to take on different roles and tasks that you had not anticipated. Although it could be daunting at first, it will enrich your experience. You will probably be asked to take on responsibilities that you have not had before.
- Being flexible in your approach will help you to be accepted and work more effectively as a team member.
- Be sensitive to disparities in income and opportunities between you and co-workers, families, etc.

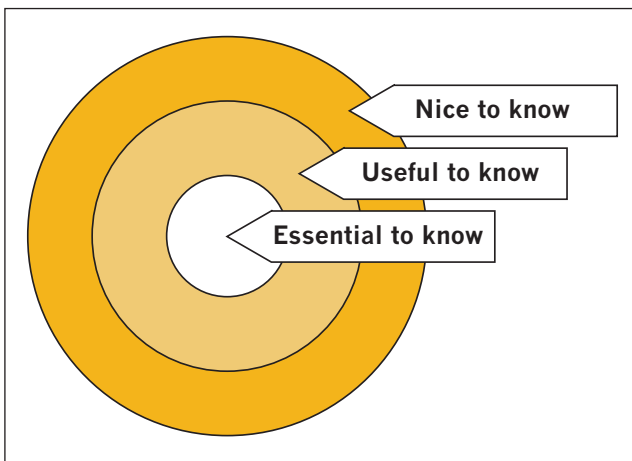
- Be prepared to say 'I don't know'. Don't feel you have to be an expert all the time. But show that you can think on the job and try to find out the answer or try out possible solutions!
- Remember to seek advice from your colleagues. Try to find someone you can be honest with and who will be honest with you.
- Be guaranteed you will take away more than you leave behind.

## **Hopefully you will be working in a team, or at least with one other person. You would obviously have prepared yourself for the project. But it is important to remember the following.**

- Take time to observe, find out; don't jump in!
- Try to ascertain the needs of the project and the people involved
- Be prepared to modify your goals and activities and be flexible.
- Keep learning, keep listening and discussing. Remember you are in a partnership.
- Start where the organisation is and try to move forwards together;

**A major part of making your efforts sustainable will involve transferring skills.**

- Make sure you have a co-worker or a team to transfer skills to.
- Ensure that everyone is clear that transferring skills is a priority.
- Think carefully about the appropriateness of what you teach and transfer. Ask yourself, is it relevant to the local situation, and is it likely to be used when I have gone. The following diagram can be useful to help you remember this.



- It is very important that the methods, content and materials you use are culturally appropriate. E.g., some cultures may not be as familiar with using pictures, or toys.
- Be practical. It may not be possible to carry around a lot of equipment or to carry out formal assessments.
- Use local resources; develop resources with your co-workers.

**From day one you should be thinking about what will happen when you leave. The project needs to be able to continue without you.**

- Don't work in isolation. Talk about what you are doing and use every opportunity to transfer skills.
- Include your co-workers in everything you do, e.g., attending meetings, meeting doctors and other professionals, linking with other organisations etc.
- Understand what local facilities and resources already exist and make sure they are being utilised; help people to access them and to lobby for improvement.
- Strengthen existing links and make new ones with other local organisations and individuals who will be useful to the project.
- If they do not exist already, set up networks between local groups
- Don't promise to do things for the project after you have left that you don't think you will realistically be able to ( e.g. very long term financial support), do the things you do promise – e.g. sending materials or information etc
- Try to ensure that local long term financial support is in place
- Try to make sure that disability services are linked in with other types of services locally such as health and education and social services, employment and inclusion programmes

## 05

# Once you get back...

**Once you have gone home, your work does not have to stop. You can maintain links and provide continued support through organisations such as CTI. You could sponsor your co-workers' membership to CTI to keep them up to date with relevant issues and resources available. Look at the membership details for more information.**

Other organizations, such as VSO, provide returned volunteers support groups. To find out more, look on

<http://moodle.vsoint.org/mod/wiki/view.php?id=762> and

[http://www.vso.org.uk/groups/supporter\\_groups/index.asp](http://www.vso.org.uk/groups/supporter_groups/index.asp)

You don't have to have worked for VSO to join and it can link you up with people worldwide.

Try not to keep the knowledge and experience you've gathered through your time abroad to yourself. There are plenty of other people who would like to hear about your experience. Try contacting local charitable organizations or trusts interested in donating money to developing projects overseas, talk to special interest groups, submit articles to relevant newsletters and magazines or just talk to friends and colleagues at work – they may not realise that working in the South can be so rewarding for both their personal and professional development.

Most of all, think about what you've learned and how you can apply it to your own work – the transfer of skills is often more south to north than you might expect.

