

# Recession sends volunteer numbers soaring

The voluntary sector may be the one industry benefiting from the economic downturn: as unemployment hits two million and redundancies are increasing, there is growing interest in taking time out to do voluntary work overseas, or to learn new skills on a short- or long-term project in a developing country. In the past three months, VSO has had twice as many inquiries about long-term volunteering as in the same period last year.

Projects Abroad, the biggest organiser worldwide of overseas volunteer work, has also seen a rise in inquiries in the last few weeks. "We are maintaining our normal level of student applications, but recently we've seen a noticeable increase in older people, or those with more skills and experience, getting in touch," says Dr Peter Slowe, Director of Projects Abroad.

"It seems to be people who, because of the current economic problems,

have taken early retirement or voluntary redundancy, and see this as an opportunity to do something they'd always had at the back of their mind."

Slowe believes that Projects Abroad appeals because its placements are for a relatively short period; the average time is three months although – on rare occasions – they can be as short as

a week. "Particularly for older people, living somewhere like Africa or India can be a challenge but a short-term placement means there's light at the end of the tunnel."

But longer-term placements are also proving attractive according to VSO, which has an average length of two years for its projects. "A while ago interest had slowed down because I think people felt they had to hang on to their jobs," says a spokesperson for VSO. "There's an increasing sense that now is a good time to get away, spend some time abroad doing something worthwhile, and then return when the economy is back on its feet."

The other motivation for taking a placement abroad is the chance to

gain experience and training that could help facilitate a career change. "I think people are definitely looking at volunteering as a stepping stone to furthering or changing their careers,"

says Neil Finnie of Global Vision International, which organises about 2,500 placements each year. "Our core group has always been 18- to 24-year-olds, but we have seen an increase in 30- to 40-something career-breakers. We do offer all sorts of training; from dive qualifications to teaching, to something like a Btec in biological surveying.

"We also offer training programmes for people who want to continue to work with us, and go on to run field expeditions or manage projects on the ground. It seems that rather than thinking of the credit crunch in negative terms, people are determined to turn it into a positive and use it to do something worthwhile."

■ *Global Vision International (01727 250250; [www.gvi.co.uk](http://www.gvi.co.uk)), VSO (020 8780 7200; [www.vso.org.uk](http://www.vso.org.uk)), Projects Abroad (01903 708300; [www.projects-abroad.co.uk](http://www.projects-abroad.co.uk)).*

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Inquiries to VSO have doubled.

