

International Social Work III: Rising to the Challenge

Contributed by Ann McLaughlin, MSW, ACSW, LICSW

The intention of this article is to help build a foundation for doing international social work. It is the third in a 3-part series on international social work written by Ann McLaughlin, MSW, ACSW, LICSW, who has 25 years of social work experience and now directs nGoAbroad: Custom-Fit International Service .

How do you snag an international social work job? That is the \$64,000 question!

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My background

{mosgoogle right}So you know where I'm coming from, I learned about international social work by doing it. I worked in Vranje, Serbia, which was, at the time, the epicenter of international humanitarian work. After the war in the Balkans, Kosovo and the bombing of Serbia, international organizations swarmed to the region. Many NGOs (non-governmental organizations) were headquartered in Vranje, because Vranje is located in the corner of Serbia, which borders Macedonia and Kosovo. Because Vranje was crawling with expatriates, I learned a tremendous amount by osmosis and schmoozing over pizza. Subsequent to working in Vranje, I got job offers in Vietnam and Scotland, which I did not take because of my father's failing health.

Upon return home, I was hammered with questions about how to get into international work. I realized that there is a collective longing--an unmet need--as many people want to work internationally. So I established nGoAbroad, which custom-fits your skills, needs, and goals to international humanitarian service. Many of my comments below are based on the variety of questions posed to me by people who contact nGoAbroad.

Attitude

Attitude is critical in getting into international work. At nGoAbroad, I get bushels of inquiries about both paid and unpaid international service. The first factor that I look at is attitude. If I smell any condescending, I'm-better-than-others (especially the people that they will serve), then that candidate doesn't get past the front gate. Such condescension is extremely rare. But an attitude of condescension will clearly backfire in other countries. People who work well as respectful partners will do well in international work.

That foundation of respect is emphasized in social work. Respect seems really basic, but you may wrinkle up your nose disrespectfully when you encounter customs and ways of thinking that are foreign to your own. When they are passing around bowls of blood soup in Ghana, will you flinch? How will you handle it if people are mistreated--whether they are women, sexual minorities, Roma, or untouchables? What will you do with your opinions about the ethnic conflict that has just erupted in the region?

The recipients of foreign aid are usually very sensitive to receiving help. You are touching their pride, just in offering assistance. You might say that we are touching transference and counter-transference issues writ large. Like in a clinical relationship, giving and helping can get complicated and tangled.

Other attitudinal factors? Most helpers go charging in with big hearts and altruistic motives. Especially in places where many foreign faces come and go, a nurse midwife who has worked in many corners of the globe says, "Don't expect a big welcome or thank you. Their lives will go on without you." They need to keep their pride and culture intact. If there is big fanfare about your contribution, then it implies that they could not have done it without you--that they needed you.

You have done a good job if you have empowered people; taught them skills, perspectives, and strategies; and made it so they truly don't need you.

Responding to needs

Some of the people who contact nGoAbroad have a very distinct agenda. "I want to go to Eastern Europe to work with AIDS." Important questions: Does Eastern Europe want or have a need for AIDS workers?

I know that I wanted to work with child soldiers. I wanted to take all the clinical skills that I had gained in working with sexual and physical abuse and contribute those skills where they were really needed. There is definitely a need for work with child soldiers. But over the years, I have realized that counseling needs are not as pressing as poverty needs (see my previous article, Poverty is a Grind). In the same way that you would ask clients what their goals are, you ascertain from a community or culture what its needs and goals are. This is the foundation of good social work.

John Boyles's book, *What Color is Your Parachute?* has been the best book about job hunting for 30 years. What is Boyles's formula for how to find a job? You ascertain, often through an informational interview, what the needs of the organization are. Same principle applies to international work. If you can plug holes where their organization is hemorrhaging, you will be someone they want on their team. Bear in mind, most international organizations will not grant you an informational interview; they are just too busy.

Social work experience

Get a lot of solid experience on the home front, so you have solid skills to contribute internationally. You need to have your social work foundation well established, because then you can enter situations in other countries where there are fewer resources. You will know what is essential and how to wing it.

The nurse midwife mentioned above emphasized this point. I consulted with her when a midwifery student wanted to do her internship in Africa. The motive for the student was: There is such an urgent need for midwives; women are dying in childbirth. True enough.

The seasoned midwife's comment was: "Get your clinical internship in the States in the best possible setting. Learn everything you can in school and then get at least ten years experience as a midwife. You need at least that much experience to work in other countries. International nurse midwives will be stepping into situations [and this is analogous to social work] where the 10 best midwives in the country will come to train with you. There is a pride factor at work. They're thinking: Who is this foreign woman who thinks that she knows so much that she is the trainer? They know far more about midwifery in Zambia or Zimbabwe than I do. I am there to show them how to prevent women from dying in childbirth. Women can bleed to death and you need to be able to demonstrate how to put pressure on with every muscle in your body. In my 30 years of midwifery, I have had to stop the bleeding only several times. African midwives encounter uncontrolled bleeding all the time. They haven't learned the technique—that's what I am there to teach them—but they know far more about birthing outside a sparkling hospital than I do. We make a trade in what we teach each other. I come in with a humility and respect. Without that, the project would fail."

International experience

International experience equals cultural experience plus attitude plus international savvy.

What do the big international organizations mean when they say, "You need to get international experience"? It is usually a combination of the above factors, but oftentimes "international experience" means attitude. Because America is the richest nation in the world, Americans have a reputation for our arrogance—that we think we are better than others. Whether we are arrogant OR people are projecting that onto us is a big question. The important point: as an American, you will have to go way out of your way to gracefully fit into a culture. You want to get in sync with the people where you are. Live as simply as they do.

People who have roots in other cultures have a distinct advantage. If someone is from Vietnam and wants to work in Vietnam, he is a "shoo in." They can speak the language and they know the culture. They know how to present ideas and interventions that are consistent with the culture.

But what if you weren't born with "cultural background"? Immerse yourself in other cultures: for example, work with immigrants and refugees, go to the Cambodian temple, visit Somali restaurants, or work with Ukrainian carpenters. I get a huge number of e-mails from people in New York and Toronto. These cities are so multi-cultural that people of NYC and Toronto absorb this cultural savvy.

You don't need to leave your native country to have valuable experience. There are many people who cannot afford to be buzzing around the planet. Actually, these folks are often well-equipped to work internationally. It's a class thing. One man called me and said, "The only time that I have ever been outside this country was during the Gulf War."

I asked about his life background, and he had come a hard road and was doing good things with his life—a great model. "Hmm, you can probably relate to a lot of people who have also come a hard road."

How to find international work? Finding the contacts

That's probably worth more than \$64,000.

You find international work in the same way that you find work at home. You connect to people who need your services, whether paid or unpaid.

I have spent ten years amassing resources and contacts. I'm a social worker. Social workers have earned their reputation for knowing the resources.

You learn international resources the same way that you learn those in your own community. You keep your ear to the ground. You read the newspaper (the Christian Science Monitor is my favorite for international coverage), because the newspaper not only has resources listed, but you learn what the needs are in different countries. You learn that 300 street kids were shot in Honduras in one year and that street kids are considered target practice in Rio. Okay, what are the organizations working with street kids in these areas? You learn that in many countries, there are no services for people with disabilities. (Most countries are too poor to afford social services.) Okay, how can I help? Do I have the necessary skills?

I worked with a social worker who wanted a paid social work job in Thailand. I said, "I don't think that there will be many openings there." Remember: in Africa there is one doctor per 10,000 people, so how many social workers? How many social workers in Thailand? Thailand does not have the means to have many paid social work positions. I said to this woman, "If you want a paid position, there might be some tsunami-related work, but you do not have experience with PTSD. There might be volunteer or work with AIDS, trafficking of women, or other social work related to the sex trade. These jobs will go first to social workers from Thailand."

You cannot just decide that you want paid social work somewhere. Most countries are too poor to have paid social work. That is why I believe some of the most vital social work is with grassroots organizations.

First things first, and second things second

It is wise to pursue international social work in an incremental fashion. It sounds axiomatic, but start at the beginning or where your skills match the needs. Don't aim for something over your head, because in international work you will have the added challenge of learning another culture's beliefs, behaviors, and interaction patterns.

There will likely be hilarious cultural snafus because you "don't get it" yet. (This is why nGoAbroad has a team of "cultural consultants" to teach a culture either before or after you have put your foot in your mouth.)

I get many e-mails requesting contacts for working with AIDS in Africa. I appreciate the intention and that people understand the urgent need there. My first question is: "Have you worked with AIDS here? Do you have skills and experience to contribute?" Some people have had experience; they were strategic and plotted their course. Some people are not stepping in over their heads—they will say, "I want to start with AIDS education. That's a mild enough beginning and I have been doing that here." Bravo, that's the idea!

There are a number of ways to incrementally get international social work experience.

Volunteering in a grassroots organization is exciting. Personally, I think that it's where the action is—assisting with initiatives that are rooted in the community there.

Why do I like this indigenous approach? Because I think that it makes the most difference in addressing pressing social problems. As elaborated in previous articles, I believe social work must be an important leader in addressing poverty, slums, hunger, unemployment, immigration, domestic violence, and the treatment of women and children.

If I were going to recommend a route for new social work graduates to make a difference in the international arena, I would say: Volunteer with international grassroots organizations. Form a connection and strong bond. Then, if you are helping with an ongoing project, go back again and again, a consultancy of sorts. The advantage of volunteering is that it is not as disruptive to your own life as paid international social work. You could have a paid job in the U.S. and volunteer in an organization in Guatemala, Romania, Tajikistan, Tibet, or Bolivia.

Some of the most exciting voluntary organizations are those that were started in response to a need. Canadian Ben Peterson founded Journalists for Human Rights, where he cultivates writers in African nations and teaches them how to investigate and write about important social issues. He is shifting the focus from political, top-down coverage that prevailed under dictators to teaching people how to have a voice.

This is really a big deal because people were silenced, imprisoned, and killed for speaking out against Idi Amin in Uganda or Mobutu in the Congo. I believe the next generation of social workers will do amazing things in responding to the needs of our time.

Another good starting place for international social work is the U.K. The U.K. is crying for social workers. You are likely to be hired. It is culturally similar to the U.S., so your work will be similar and you will not have to make so many cultural translations. You can get your feet wet in a relatively safe country, gain confidence, and then try a more challenging next step.

After two or three posts as a volunteer and decades of clinical experience, you might want to approach the big international NGOs (non-governmental organizations). Most people think that paid work with an international NGO is the plum. But do they know the following?

First, the paid positions are very competitive, because applications are now coming in from all over the world. You must have extensive domestic experience and international experience to be of value to them. Second, most posts are "unaccompanied," so you must kiss your loved ones good-bye. Third, international posts are time limited—usually six months, and occasionally a year. So if you want to make a career of international work, you are always applying for the next post. My agronomist friends who have worked for 30 years in international work had this applying-for-the-next-post down to a fine science and would occasionally have to vacate a position to step into the next! Fourth, international NGOs swarm to conflict or disaster—the tsunami, Darfur—and neglect other regions entirely. South America and the Caribbean have few of the heavy hitters helping out. Central America does not have very many of the big NGOs, but it has more programs with foreign funding than South America. Fifth, often they will ask you to train your counterparts, and you have to know it before you can teach it.

Getting your foot in the door: Writing a culturally appropriate cover letter and résumé

It is one thing to have an amazing set of contacts (that is what I provide when I make an nGoAbroad List for someone). It is another thing to get your foot in the door.

In the U.S., cover letters generally flaunt one's own skills and accomplishments. They essentially say: "Me big kahuna that can jump tall buildings. Me big kahuna who has worked for big important companies and organizations." To get a job in the U.S., you wow people.

If you write such a letter to a peasant in Ecuador or to Cambodia or Swaziland hoping to work with their organization, what do you think will happen? They will show it to their colleagues and snicker and shake their heads at the snobby Americans and toss it in the garbage. "We don't need big kahunas, in fact they give us a headache. We need people that don't whine at squat toilets—that don't get lost finding their way to work and that have the humility to actually pitch in and help."

Also important in a cover letter: tell how your skills match their needs. Speak to every item on their qualification list. Often each item is critical. If they ask for Africa experience and you don't have it, you had better provide a compelling argument showing how you are truly qualified.

I had a great conversation with a teacher from Philadelphia.

Me: "In schools in the wilder (vs. polite) parts of the world, they are going to be looking at you wondering, Who is this guy? Who does he think he is?"

Him: "Hey, I deal with that every day in the classroom here in Philadelphia."

Me: "So you want to work somewhere kind of challenging. You know it could be dangerous."

Him: "Well, I deal with that in Philadelphia, too. I've dodged gunfire. I know how to walk down the street without getting killed."

Well said. That's why they want five years of experience in the Great Lakes region of Africa (Rwanda, Burundi, and the Congo)—it's potentially dangerous. You have to have street smarts. But realistically, if you have grown up or lived in some of the more dangerous parts of America, you could make a compelling argument. America is one of the most dangerous places on Earth. When you are in other countries, they'll ask: "So I hear your kids shoot each other at school"; It is in these types of conversations that you learn so much about your own culture and another culture.

Don't find international work, make it

Jane Addams did not apply for a job at Hull House; she carved Hull House as a sculptor hews stone. She saw urgent and pressing needs in the slums of turn-of-the-century Chicago with Italian, Greek, Polish, and other immigrants who had just arrived in this country.

I know that the next generation of social workers will advance what has already been done. Admittedly, it is wise to get experience with existing organizations. But the needs are so pressing and urgent, as I have outlined in previous articles, that I hope that many of you will be thinking beyond, "How do I get an international job?" to "What is the work that needs to be done in partnership with the people of other countries?"

Just the other day, I was e-conversing with a colleague in Cameroon, in preparation for the probable placement of a volunteer. I asked my Cameroonian friend about resources, because I could find absolutely no record of any programs for alcoholism, rape, or domestic violence. He confirmed the dearth of programs and said there is a dramatic need for services in all these arenas. I hope that such realities will inspire you to step up to the plate.

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The Journey Across the Great Divide

Jane Addams left the comforts of well-heeled Chicago to create Hull House. Most people reading this article are American, so come from the privileged elite of the world.

The rich one eighth of the world uses seven eighths of the world's resources. Thus seven eighths of the world lives on the meager one eighth of the world's resources. The real journey that you will make in international work is not getting on the plane, but making the journey from the world of "haves" to "have-nots." The real stretch is not understanding another culture, although that is fascinating, but understanding another class.

This journey across the Great Divide is your job as a social worker. Social work is the only profession that addresses "class" so squarely. Never before has it been so critical to address the whys and wherefores and what-can-we-dos of this yawning gap between the world's rich and poor. We live in a world where a quarter of the human race lives in shanty towns and half the world lives in abject poverty.

Are there existing jobs addressing these pressing needs? A trickle, just a few. Do we need fireballs addressing the causes and cures of this disparity or designing new programs to address the pressing needs? Yessss, we do! We need people who can step-by-step move beyond present international job opportunities to real international social work.

Ann McLaughlin, MSW, ACSW, LICSW, a psychotherapist and social worker by trade with a passion for world cultures and international affairs, founded and directs nGoAbroad, which matches your skills, interests and goals to international humanitarian needs. For more information, e-mail: info@nGoAbroad.com, or call 1-877-237-1965 (Pacific time) toll free in Canada, the US, and the Caribbean.

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