



Johanna Harjunpää is a 27-year-old Finnish university graduate with a Master's Degree in Ethnology. At the beginning of 2011, she left Finland for Nicaragua to spend six months as an ETVO volunteer. ETVO is a Finnish volunteer programme that is organized by KEPA (The Service Centre for Development Cooperation). Johanna spent six months volunteering for an environment education project of an NGO called Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense in Matagalpa, Nicaragua. The project organized a course in environment education, nursery gardens and recycling operations at six schools in Matagalpa. Now she works as a programme assistant for ETVO in Helsinki, Finland. Here are some of her thoughts about volunteering.

### **What made you do volunteer work?**

It had been on my mind for some time already. For a long time, I had dreamed of doing volunteer work in a developing country. In the final phase of my studies, I got a good opportunity when I was looking for an internship and it suited the Department of Ethnology for me to do my internship as a volunteer worker.

### **Why the ETVO programme? Were there any other opportunities?**

I know other volunteering programmes but ETVO was the best option for me because I was particularly interested in development cooperation and NGOs and I wanted to work for six months.

**What kind of work did you do? What was your “normal” day like?**

I did quite a lot of project management and general assisting tasks. I helped with follow-ups by writing reports, for example. The tasks varied quite a bit. There were often visits to the countryside, meetings and so on. On a regular day, I'd go to the office at 8 am, did some work on the computer, then visited some of the schools taking part in the project to discuss things with the principal. Lunch was between 12 and 2 pm and I did the things in the afternoon, sometimes there were meetings, running errands, and writing reports and memos.

**Had you volunteered anywhere else before?**

I have volunteered in Finnish NGO's and the multicultural center in Jyväskylä, Finland.

**What makes you interested in volunteering?**

When you volunteer, you experience things at the grass root level and really see what development cooperation is like in practice.

**Who would you recommend volunteering to and why?**

I recommend the ETVO programme to all independent and brisk people who are interested in development cooperation and NGOs!

**How can you become a volunteer worker?**

In Finland, in addition to ETVO, there are a few other NGOs through which you can volunteer

for work in developing countries. These include, among others, Allianssi, the World Exchange ICYE and the International Volunteer Work KVT. Of course there are also some commercial actors.

### **What advice would you like to give to those who are planning to go do volunteer work?**

Think about what you want from your volunteering experience. What are your aims? Do not plan too much, though, since you never know what may be waiting for you... Once you get there, do not forget who you are, keep your hobbies and keep in touch with your loved ones. Your whole life does not have to change even though you are going to a place that is very different from what you are used to. Oh, and those who are planning... Well, check your vaccinations and get good insurance.

### **Do you need to have good language skills?**

Well, if I had been fluent in Spanish, I would not have been able to work as efficiently. In Nicaragua and in Latin America you need to know Spanish well so that your work input is beneficial.

### **What has volunteering taught you?**

The power of grass root level NGO work. It may not show in the statistics but you can see it in practice by the increase of people's possibilities to influence. I have also received practical work experience from a development cooperation project. I had done development cooperation projects from Finland before, but it was great to see how a project plan becomes an actual project, how the local NGO workers and people make the project plan reality.

### **Would you do it again?**

I could! Africa is still an unknown continent to me and I am also drawn to Latin America...

### Why you should do volunteer work?

I learned a great deal during my volunteer work period and I believe that my input also benefited the Movimiento Comunal's project.

Additional information about ETVO programme: [www.etvo.fi](http://www.etvo.fi) ( in English [www.etvo.fi/english](http://www.etvo.fi/english) )