

# Becoming an International Aid Worker

An Experienced Professional Explains How It's Done *by Matthew Bolton*

I have an incredible job. Initially as a volunteer and later as a consultant to international nonprofit aid agencies, I have worked in ten countries, including Bosnia and Iraq...

I have worked alongside a former Marxist guerrilla, arranged financing for landmine clearance, helped organize relief convoys to conflict zones, talked with some of the poorest people in the world, and watched international diplomats dancing to folk music in a garden surrounded by minefields.

It is a great opportunity for people who don't want to spend their lives pecking at keyboards in cubicle farms. However, be warned: it is not a traditional career path. Being an aid worker requires an ability to adapt to intensely challenging situations and withstand emotional strain.

Aid work is also unlike any other profession in that it is often very difficult to get your foot in the door. Since aid agencies' work is global, they have truly international workforces; one competes for one's job with intelligent, skilled, and well-motivated people from all over the world.

It is highly unlikely that you will get a well-paid position with significant responsibilities straight out of university. However, if you work at shaping yourself into an ideal candidate, you will start getting good job offers two to three years into your career.

Here are the elements I have found most important in getting started in the aid work field:

**Know your motivations.** It is said that in job interviews for the International Committee of the Red Cross, one of the world's most important humanitarian agencies, sometimes applicants are asked "What are you running away from?" Indeed, one has to have pretty strong (and perhaps strange) motivations to want to leave one's home, family, and friends and go live in war zones and situations of poverty.

In Helen Fielding's great satirical novel about aid workers, *Cause Celeb*, one of her characters wears a T-shirt "set out like a multiple choice questionnaire for relief workers. It reads: (a) Missionary? (b) Mercenary? (c) Misfit? (d) Broken heart?"

The missionary's earnestness can be a sustaining factor but can be damaging when their ideology surfaces. While the mercenary types are often talented and pragmatic, it is morally questionable to exploit human suffering for material gain. Misfits think outside the box but sometimes an inferiority complex or just plain weirdness can get in the way of a successful team. Finally, broken hearts may be willing to take risks and may be less easy to fool, but their "issues" become tiring for others to hear about.

In reality there are good humanitarians with all kinds of motivations. What is important to think carefully about how your motivations might sometimes be a hindrance to your work.

**Have something to offer and market it.** This may sound obvious, but it is important to have skills, knowledge, or abilities that aid agencies need. Ideals cannot feed people. As the adage says, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

Engineers, agronomists, environmentalists, logisticians, linguists, and medical professionals are always in high demand because of their highly technical knowledge. Persons with other less obvious niche skills are also regularly hired. Nonprofits have computer networks that need maintaining and so hire IT specialists. They handle enormous amounts of money and thus look for business and accounting professions. As large organizations they require experienced and skilled managers.

That said, social science majors and liberal arts students need not be discouraged. I was a history and religion major, which on the surface seems rather unhelpful. However, the skills that got my foot in the door were writing and research.

The big nonprofits are usually funded by government or UN agencies that require reams of documentation, reports, and proposals. Someone has to write these. Moreover, projects and programs need the support of social research to measure their impact and appropriateness. Such tasks require good social scientists.

Finally, it is important to describe your skills to these agencies. If you never tell them, they will never know. Get your resume out there and begin talking to people "on the inside."

**Attributes.** Aid workers come in all shapes and sizes and have widely variant personality types. However, there are some attributes that tend to be in common with the best humanitarians.

Integrity and accountability are very important as one handles large amounts of money and commodities. At the same time, an ability to compromise and diplomatically adapt to challenging situations is essential. Plans rarely work out perfectly.

It helps to be tough and adventurous. Being able to roll with the punches and live in poor conditions will take you a long way. Whiners are not appreciated in a field office.

Finally, savviness and quickness to learn enable one to adjust to new cultures and languages rapidly.

**Connections.** For better or for worse, the old cliché, "It's not what you know; it's who you know," is just as true for aid work as for any other profession. In fact, it is probably even more true. Working in complex and stressful conditions of poverty and conflict, aid agency administrators want a team they can trust—thus there is a tendency to hire people they know well and have seen in action. It is essential to network and build contacts. Go to conferences, use mutual friends to get introductions, and save business cards. Most importantly, bringing us to the next point, get good international experience.

**International and Cross-Cultural Experience.** It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of experience in getting a good position in humanitarian organizations. As noted above, employers want to hire people with a track record, someone they can trust. Experience in a wide range of cultures and contexts shows that you are able to adjust and perform in difficult circumstances. It also means you are more likely to have the chance to learn new languages.

Of course, this brings up the paradox that you can't get a job without experience and you can't get experience without a job. With humanitarian work, one usually has to start from the very bottom as an intern or a volunteer. This means you have to be willing to work for little or nothing when you start out.

Programs like the Peace Corps are the best starting places because they provide good training, language classes, support, and are well known. In addition, they provide a post-assignment network of contacts—returned Peace Corps volunteers tend to look out for each other.

My start was a little unorthodox. A friend of mine helped me arrange a stipendiary volunteer assignment with a nonprofit working in Bosnia. This way was a bit more difficult than a structured volunteer program, but it taught me to be a self-starter.

If you have difficulty getting into aid work programs for medical or other reasons, study abroad or even local cross-cultural experience (for instance working with immigrant communities or teaching in a school whose students are of a different culture than your own) can be a good start.

# SELECTED ALPHABETICAL LISTING OF TOP INTERNATIONAL NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

Academy for Educational Development  
Accion International (AITEC)  
ACORN- Reform  
The Africa Fund  
African Medical & Research Foundation  
African Wildlife Foundation  
The African-American Institute  
Africare, Inc.  
Aga Kahn Foundation  
Agricultural Cooperative Development International  
AIESEC U.S., Inc.  
Alan Gutmacher Institute  
America's Development Foundation  
AMIDEAST  
American Council for Nationalities Services  
American Enterprise Institute For Public Research  
American Friends Service Committee, Inc.  
American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee  
American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA)  
American ORT Federation (Education for Life)  
American Red Cross International Services  
American Refugee Committee (ARC)  
American-Scandinavian Foundation (ASF)  
Americas Society  
Amnesty International U.S.A.  
ANERA  
Appropriate Technology International (ATI)  
Arms Control Association (ACA)  
The Asia Foundation  
The Asia Society  
ATA (Aid to Artisans)  
The Atlantic Council of the United States  
Baptist World Alliance  
Overseas Development Network (ODN)  
Bikes Not Bombs  
Bread for the World  
Brethren Volunteer Service  
Church of the Brethren General Board  
The Brookings Institution  
Brother's Brother Foundation  
CARE, Inc.  
Caribbean Conservation Corp.  
Catholic Medical Mission Board, Inc.  
Catholic Relief Services (CRS)  
Center for Defense Information  
Center for International Development & Environment  
Center For Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)  
Center for Third World Organizing  
Centre for Development and Population Activities  
Children's Survival Fund, Inc. Relief  
China Institute In America  
Christian Children's Fund  
Christian Foundation for Children- Poverty  
Christian Reformed World Relief Committee  
Church World Service  
Citizens Democracy Corps (CDC)  
Commission On Security And Cooperation In Europe  
Compassion International  
Concern America  
Cooperative Housing Foundation  
Council For a Liveable World  
Council For Inter-American Security (CIS)  
The Council On Foreign Relations  
Delphi International  
Dental Health International  
Direct Relief International (DRI)  
Dooley Foundation/INTERMED-USA, Inc.  
East-West Center (EWC)  
Ecumenical Development Cooperative Society  
Environmental Defense Fund  
Episcopal Church of the U.S.A.  
The Episcopal Migration Ministries  
Episcopal Church Volunteers For Mission  
Family Health International  
Farmer to Farmer  
Farmworker Health Services Inc.  
Father Wasson's Orphans  
Fellowship of Reconciliation- Fellowship for Freedom  
Food for the Hungry, Inc.  
Food for the Poor  
Foreign Policy Association (FPA)  
Foster Parents Plan International  
Foundation for International Community Assistance  
Foundation for the People of the South Pacific  
Fourth World Movement  
Freedom From Hunger Foundation  
Freedom House  
Frontiers Foundation Inc./Operation Beaver  
Goodwill Industries of America  
Habitat for Humanity International  
The Hansard Society For Parliamentary Government  
Heifer Project International  
Helen Keller International  
The Heritage Foundation  
HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society)  
High/Scope Educational Research Foundation  
Hudson Institute  
Human Rights Watch  
The Hunger Project  
International Association of Exchange Students for Technical Experience (IAESTE)  
Institute for East-West Studies  
Institute For Food and Development Policy/Food First  
Institute for International Cooperation and Development  
Institute for International Development, Inc.  
Institute For International Economics  
Institute for Policy Studies  
Institute of Cultural Affairs  
Institute of European & Asian Studies  
Institute of International Education  
Interaction  
Interchurch Medical Assistance, Inc.  
International Agricultural Exchange  
International Aid, Inc.  
International Catholic Migration Commission  
International Center for Research on Women  
International Christian Youth Exchange  
International Development Enterprises  
International Executive Service Corps (IESC)  
International Eye Foundation  
International Foundation For Electoral Systems  
International Institute of Rural Reconstruction  
International Medical Corps  
International Planned Parenthood Federation  
Western Hemisphere Region, Inc.  
International Reading Association  
International Rescue Committee  
International Voluntary Services  
Interns For Peace  
Japan Information Center  
Jesuit Volunteer Corps  
Joint Baltic American National Committee (JBANC)  
Language for Eastern European Development (LEED)  
Laubach Literacy International- literacy  
Los Ninos- adoption international  
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service  
Lutheran Volunteer Corps  
Lutheran World Ministries  
Lutheran World Relief  
MADRE  
MAP International  
Marin Interfaith Task Force on Central America  
Maryknoll Lay Missioners  
Mennonite Central Committee  
Mennonite Economic Development Associates, Inc  
Mennonite Voluntary Service  
Mercy Corps International  
Meridian International Center  
Middle East Institute  
National Audubon Society  
National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA)  
National Council of Negro Women  
National Council On International Health  
The National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations  
National Wildlife Federation  
Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC)  
The Nature Conservancy  
Near East Foundation- Poverty in Africa and Middle East  
Operation Crossroads Africa, Inc.  
Operation USA-  
Opportunity International  
Overseas Development Council (ODC)  
Overseas Education Fund  
Oxfam America  
Pan American Development Foundation  
Partners of The Americas  
Pathfinder International  
Peace Brigades International-North America Project  
Peacework  
The Pearl S. Buck Foundation  
People to People Health Foundation, Inc (Project HOPE)  
Health Sciences Education Center  
Phelps-Stokes Fund  
Planned Parenthood Federation Of America  
Plenty US  
Population Action International  
Population Connection  
Population Council  
The Population Institute  
Director of Future Leaders Program  
Population Reference Bureau, Inc. (PRB)  
Program for Appropriate Technology in Health  
Project Concern International  
Proyecto Libertad  
Salvation Army World Service Office  
Save the Children Federation, Inc.  
Service Civil International  
Innisfree Village  
Sister Cities International  
Technoserve, Inc.  
The Lisle Fellowship, Inc.  
The Seva Foundation-  
The Training Exchange  
Thomas A. Dooley Foundation/Intermed-USA  
Tolstoy Foundation, Inc.  
The Trickle Up Program  
U.S. Committee For Refugees  
U.S. Committee For UNICEF  
U.S. Feed Grains Council  
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee  
United Farm Workers  
United Methodist Committee on Relief  
United Nations Headquarters Internship Program  
United Nations Volunteers  
Urban Institute  
Ursuline Companions in Mission  
Visions in Action  
Voices on the Border  
Volunteers For Peace (VIP)  
Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance  
Volunteers in Technical Assistance, Inc. (VITA)  
Volunteer Workcamp Association of Ghana  
Washington Office On Africa (WOA)  
Washington Office On Latin America (WOLA)  
Witness for Peace  
Women's International League For Peace and Freedom  
World Association of Girl Scouts  
World Concern  
World Council of Credit Unions  
World Education  
World Learning, Inc.  
World Neighbors, Inc.  
World Policy Institute  
World Rehabilitation Fund, Inc.  
World Relief Corporation-  
World Resources Institute  
World Vision International  
World Vision Relief and Development, Inc  
World Wildlife Fund  
WorldTeach, Inc.  
Worldwatch Institute  
YMCA International Program Services  
Youth For Understanding (YFU)