

Allison Howard, Peace Corps Volunteer, South Africa (2003–2005)

Biography

I spent the first 22 years of my life in New Hampshire, beginning in the small town of Bedford, and then attending the University of New Hampshire for a BA degree in political science and English



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literature. I first became interested in nonprofit organizations during several internships in college and, after graduation, I moved to London and found work with a small nonprofit working to promote the arts in healthcare.

There, I learned the basics of nonprofit organizations, but I knew that I wanted to work internationally. As so many people experience, once I began traveling I found I couldn't stop. I left England for travel in Eastern and Central Europe and to the Southeast Asian peninsula. This exposure to developing and transitional societies made clear for me the connection between my studies and human faces in the world.

My time in Vietnam in early 2000 broadened my understanding of the challenges to development and the threats to social justice in societies burdened by violence, war, and poverty. As an American, I felt an acute connection to the people—past and future—of Vietnam.

I returned to the United States and took a job with an international NGO (nongovernmental organization) in Boston whose mission centered on war prevention, public health, and the promotion of a peaceful global order. The primary work of the organization, IPPNW, is to advocate for the abolition of nuclear weapons and land mines and to control the devastating global trade in small arms and light weapons. I learned about fundraising, program development, NGO management, and social justice activism and advocacy. The dialogue of war prevention is concerned with the root causes of war and violence—the poverty, disease, and inequity that destabilize communities. It was this consideration that led me to the Peace Corps—that we cannot work toward more peaceful societies if we do not work to alleviate the burden of poverty that engenders violence.

Peace Corps Volunteers work at the grass-roots levels, and when I was accepted for a program in South Africa in NGO capacity-building, I felt it was a perfect fit. I was right. South Africa is a fascinating and complex country, progressing slowly toward a new democratic order. It is a transitional society in every way and the scourges of poverty and violence are rife, only 10 years after the end of apartheid. I'm a long way from Bedford, New Hampshire, and I'm exactly where I want to be.

Site Assignment

As a Peace Corps Volunteer in South Africa in the NGO capacity-building

program in HIV/AIDS, I have been assigned to an NGO (nongovernmental organization) in Limpopo Province. Tsogang Water & Sanitation brings water, sanitation, and health and hygiene training to the poorest of the poor in Limpopo. Based in the town of Tzaneen, Tsogang engages in water and sanitation projects in rural villages, delivering basic water services to the underserved. The new South African constitution, adopted just 10 years ago, guarantees all citizens access to a free basic water supply and basic sanitation facilities. But decades of underdevelopment have left millions of people without essential services.

Tsogang's work ethic is participatory; we train communities and villagers to help themselves, to choose, manage, and maintain their own water systems. Tsogang requested a Peace Corps Volunteer to "mainstream" HIV/AIDS education into its existing projects. I'm working with Tsogang's management and staff to build a knowledge base and strengthen training skills in HIV/AIDS issues. As the pandemic rages in South Africa, development organizations have a responsibility to bring information and assistance relative to HIV/AIDS to the communities they serve. My work is to build this capacity within Tsogang. My tenure is finite; two years passes more quickly than I could have imagined and it is my job to support Tsogang in its capacity to serve the poor, rural communities in the province.



Local transport and traditional dress in Ga-Madiba Village, Limpopo Province.



Kidney beans, lima beans, and lentils are all staples in South Africa and can be purchased at local markets.



Allison (far right) working with villagers to maintain sanitation facilities.