Introduction

As an international relations student with a particular interest in development studies, I took it upon myself to find a charitable organisation for which I could work over the summer of 2016. Following a great deal of research, I settled for Emerging Voices, a local charity based in in Colombia. My reasoning behind the decision was that I wished to work for a sustainable programme in a developing nation, both of which were something that Emerging Voices could offer.

The Project

Just off the Caribbean coast, in the North West of the country, Cartagena is known as the Jewel of Colombia and is one of the most spectacular places I have ever been. It was here that Emerging Voices decided to set up their second base after their success in Bogota. Emerging Voices seek to empower people from underprivileged areas and help provide support in local communities. The project I worked on was divided into three different streams, one seeking to teach English to members of rural communities, another that worked in the rehabilitation of young drug addicts, and the last involved providing childcare at a cancer centre.

Members of the project were left to choose which stream they wished to work in,. I chose to focus my efforts on the education stream, due to my interest in social mobility through education. I would spend a great deal of my time planning the two and a half hour lessons I held each day, ensuring that they were suitable for the pupils language capabilities.

I was given the responsibility of working with an intermediate group of students, with large parts of my lessons geared towards ensuring that the pupils mastered reading and basic grammar. One of the key challenges here was the differing levels of ability within the class, with it important to ensure that no pupils were left behind. Furthermore, it quickly became clear that the language barrier would be an issue as I was not fluent in Spanish. This came as somewhat of a shock as the project said no proficiency was needed in the language; though one must question how it is possible to teach in this environment if a person cannot understand grammar or concepts in the mother-tongue of their pupils. With this in mind, it felt as though it was incredibly challenging to help the students progress. This was not helped by the fact that most volunteers were unwilling to take part in the Spanish learning opportunities that our charity offered as part of the programme.
Living in Colombia

All the volunteers and I lived in the same house, based in the impoverished quarter of Crespo. Whilst this was just ten minutes walk from the beach, it was a twenty minute bus ride from the historical and touristic centre of Cartagena. This gave us the chance to experience somewhat of a local lifestyle. On the programme, I was lucky enough to have food cooked for by a local lady named Rita – every day the food was different and included local delicacies such as arepas (corn pancake) as well as lots of exotic fruits and vegetables.

Living on a budget was relatively simple as you could purchase empanadas for as little as 6 pence (though this is all relative to my “Western” perceptions). What came as somewhat of a culture shock was the prevalence of drug dealers in our area. They would shout out ‘coco, coco who wants some coco’, playing on the fact that a lot of local vendors would sell coconuts (they were in fact selling cocaine – obviously). This is an endemic issue in Colombia with many tourists coming over for the ‘drug tourism', not caring for the local population and the impact this has on their life. Nonetheless, the city felt relatively safe despite the prevalence of drug dealers.

Travelling

Colombia as a country has incredible scenery to offer, and unfortunately I was not able to make most of it. From the beaches to the mountains, to the jungle, Colombia really cater to all climate and travelling needs. Yet the reality of volunteering is that you need to work through the week, and this what I was there to do. Furthermore, even thought we had our weekend free, Colombia is more stretched than expected, being twice as big as France for example. I did manage to go to Tayrona Park, which offered the most amazing wild beaches and jungle scenery. Yet I was unable to go and see the capital, as train and bus takes a long time, and flights are way too expensive. This left me with an unfinished feeling, as I did not manage to experience all the wildlife the country has to offer, such as whale spotting on the Pacific coast.

Challenges

As previously stated, one of the key issues was the language barrier. I was well aware that this could be the case, regardless of what the charity stated and so took it upon myself to study Spanish classes at the Instituto Cervantes. I also enjoyed taking Spanish lessons whilst volunteering, spending three hours a week with a local teacher. I believe that this gave me the opportunity to be a better teacher and to give more to the community than just the money I fundraised for my trip.

Another challenge I faced prior to my trip was fear. After being exposed to “Western” perceptions of the country over the course of my life, I had come to believe that Colombia was a country at war with itself where tourists were not safe or welcome. What I came to discover was an incredible country and a beautiful city, one I often felt safer in than where I currently reside - London.

In addition to the challenges I faced, I came to understand the challenges facing the project generally. The reality is that no matter how much money I could have raised, there was no continuity in the work I was doing there. Once I left, I knew the next teacher
would not pick up where I left off but instead work on the syllabus provided by the charity, even though many of the pupils had already been taught it. Childcare is another issue with many of the children forming strong bonds with volunteers before having to see them leave as little as two weeks after.

Whilst I believe that the work being done is incredibly important, the charity needs to analyse their strategy and make the necessary changes so as to ensure that lasting effects are seen in the areas they work.