On June 2019 I embarked on an adventure with the NGO Volunteer Service Organization (VSO) through their International Citizen Service (ICS) program. When I applied in early March I expected to embark on a life changing journey, one that would teach me to better understand international development and to be more appreciative of the luck I have had in life. In many ways I accomplished this, and also both much more and much less. But I get ahead of myself.

VSO ICS is a program funded by the Department for International Development to engage young people from the UK in meaningful, sustainable volunteering in some of the world’s most deprived communities. In contrast to youth programs that focus on charging people and then putting them through a poverty safari, VSO ICS is a 12 week commitment where volunteers are paired with a counterpart from the receiving country, and then both are sent to a remote area to live with a host family and engage in community sensitization on relevant issues. I spent my 3 months in a village of Zambia called Nyimba, living in a three room house with a family of ten and more often than not cooking over a fire. I woke up at 6am every morning to help with house chores, and then headed with my team to hospitals, schools and isolated villages to deliver sessions on sexual reproductive health and gender equality. I met young girls who went from wanting to be mothers to wanting to be doctors. I met women who desperately needed contraception but couldn't look me in the eye when I handed them a condom. I learned that privilege is about people's right to access the tools to basic human dignity. I learned that what we take for granted, an open conversation about our rights to our own bodies, is a luxury for far too many people.

Most rewarding, however, were our visits to the prison and the so-called sex compound of the town (a multitude of houses used as moonshine-bars and brothels where the price per hour was 50p). These people lived in the most horrible possible conditions, but taught me to laugh and smile and care without prejudice. They taught me something very basic about non-judgement
and shared humanity: that no one is born wanting to be a convict or a prostitute or an alcoholic, but rather that rather the unfair systems around us push some towards success and some into the darkest of corners. We are all just human, with more in common than what divides us.

I also learned about friendship. My counterpart was a young Zambian girl trying to make a way for herself in a country where youth unemployment is nothing to trifle with. She was orphaned at the age of 3, and is one of the most inspiring people I have ever met. At first glance, she has nothing in common with a young Venezuelan girl that went straight from private school to a university in London. But we were both just young girls doing our best to help those with less, complaining about food and gossip and the heat through 12 weeks of shared difficulty and reward. She taught me about strength, resilience and friendship like no one has before.

I suppose I did learn about international development, as well, if only through difficulty and exasperation. I learned that in some places the only way to submit an application is through a bribe, that sometimes money sent is not money received. I learned about Zambian time and power cuts and water shortages and a famine that doesn't make the headlines. I learned that the work people do to help goes way beyond what comes up on any plan, or any report. I learned that the ever shrinking attention span of people with the means to help is a major challenge for places no one has heard about or has time to care about. I learned about the complexities of race politics, and did my absolute best to be as acknowledging and sensitive as possible about Zambia’s past with Europeans. I learned that the line between cultural sensitivity and oversight of cruelty is a fine one, and that sometimes people have to make tough choices about what is right and wrong. I learned that even if it is difficult to work as a woman in a place where we are at best second best, sometimes it takes a sister to help a woman see past constraints placed upon her. But international development is a broad and difficult field that one could spend a lifetime studying. In that sense, I know now simply the breadth of all I don’t know.

Has my experience in Zambia helped me on my degree? Most definitely. I renewed my interest in small-scale interpersonal power dynamics generally, and in race and gender politics specifically. Seeing development on the ground has broadened my understanding of politics, international relations, diplomacy and the work of NGOs. Will this experience help me on my career? I guess that depends on what is meant by the question. Whether ICS helps on my CV is still to be seen. However, it will most certainly help in my career to becoming an interesting, well rounded, globally aware and perceptive person. Fundamentally, I guess everyone’s career is becoming a better person in some sense of the word, and living in Zambia has most certainly helped me with that. If I do dedicate myself to development, or someday return to Venezuela to try to make a difference, I can only hope ICS helps me carry out this work with the realities on the ground in mind, and not simply from an air conditioned office where the true problems are sanitized onto a spreadsheet. I also hope ICS gives me the courage to embark on similar adventures in the future, because the world is too large and interesting to be left unseen.