

Working in the Third World with a degree of scepticism

Idealists leaving university and hoping to make a difference in a developing country may find the experience — and pay — is not as rewarding as they think, warns **Peter Griffiths**

YOU are passionately dedicated to "making poverty history". You want to work in the Third World. You are bright, competent, enthusiastic and energetic. You have a good degree from a British university. How can you fail?

Easily. The Third World does not need recent graduates who want to learn their job by experimenting on its population. It needs world experts.

Forty years ago it was different. Zambia, for example, had only 50 black graduates at independence and the country desperately needed educated people for a booming economy. Anyone with secondary education could make a big impact. It was easy to conclude then that Zambia needs white people if it is ever going to develop.

Today, Zambia, like most developing countries, has a huge graduate-unemployment problem. It has tens of thousands of people with qualifications desperately looking for a job. Their degrees are more suited to the country than are those of British graduates — and they are street smart. They are cheaper, too: in much of the Third World a graduate would be delighted to get £1,000 a year. So why would aid agencies or anyone else want to employ inexperienced westerners?

These countries need world experts, people who are at the top of their professions, who have wide experience and a proven record of achievement.

I started out in Zambia as an economist in the ministry of agriculture and

quickly realised that I did not know enough to make a difference. I went back to Europe after 15 years, spent the next 15 years getting an international reputation in my branch of economics, and only then returned to Africa, again as an economist in the Ministry of Agriculture, but this time employed by the UN. I never felt that I was overqualified for my job: I needed all my economics to handle the complex markets I worked on.

However, there is another reason why you should think twice about working in the Third World straight from university: the career prospects are terrible. If there are 1m unemployed graduates in your speciality, it is only a matter of time before your salary level falls to theirs. It has not happened yet, because there is a certain cachet in a white face, but it will.

Consultancy firms are already putting in team members from India and Africa at a tenth of the fee rate of westerners. As these people get experience and a track record they will take over the profession.

Moreover, exchange-rate changes can hit westerners working in the Third World badly. When I was on a UN salary in the 1980s, I was paid in dollars at \$1.1 to the pound and was very well off. Today the rate is \$1.94, so the same salary would produce less than half the pounds.

And job security is nil. Western graduates may work on one- or two-year contracts, with no assurance of another contract when that finishes. They may work on short-term con-

tracts of one to four months, again with no assurance of another job. Sometimes you get a lot of offers while you are busy, then none when you need them. And you do not get a pension.

It is particularly risky if your goal is to achieve something. If you want to change things, you are going to have to stick your neck out. You have to propose unpopular courses of action. You have to fight corruption. And this does not make you popular with the corrupt or incompetent in the Third World — still less with aid agencies, which do not want to rock the boat.

What do you do if you are working on an irrigation project and the local project director steals the only water pump? If you do nothing the project will be a complete failure and the money wasted. I saw someone complain. The project director asked that he be fired because, claimed the project director, he could not get on with the locals. The aid agency agreed.

What do you do if you are working on a famine early-warning system and the rains fail? Steve Lombard, working in Tanzania, reported it to the right people in the ministry. They did nothing. Steve was very naughty. He bypassed the ministry and told the World Food Programme in Rome, which started preparing food shipments. He also told a friend in the BBC. The World Service interviewed the permanent secretary.

"So, please tell me, Mr permanent secretary, is it true that there's

going to be a famine in Tanzania?"

"Yes."

"Mr permanent secretary, what have you done about it?"

"Nothing."

So the president intervened and there was no famine. But the government insisted that Steve be fired. Neither the UN, for whom he was working, nor the World Bank, which was funding his project, lifted a finger to help. He drank himself to death over the next three years.

If you are a western graduate, you will not be able to resume your career in Britain if you decide you have done your bit for the Third World, or you leave for health or family reasons. Your special expertise in tropical med-

‘The UN and the World Bank didn’t lift a finger and he drank himself to death over the next three years’

icine, tropical agriculture, building bush roads, appropriate technology, etc is not in demand. Worse, your foreign experience counts against you in Britain, an insular country.

I have found it impossible to convince business people or civil servants that economics is the same the world over, that there is no difference between the economics of maize and the economics of wheat. I have found it difficult to convince mediocre economists that my long string of papers in western economic journals means that I know anything at all about western economics.

And all my colleagues find the same. The response is always: "But Britain is not a Third World country."

I tried to get a full-time job in Britain after five years, in 1985, found it impossible and was forced to stay in international consultancy (though not in the Third World).

Slowly I started to get consultancy jobs back at home, but have never got into the mainstream.

So what should you do? First, go out and get the best job you can. Put 25% of your salary into providing a Third World professional with a job. Spend the next 20 years trying to get to the very top of your profession. Keep paying the 25%.

Peter Griffiths is the author of The Economist's Tale: A Consultant Encounters Hunger and the World Bank, published by Zed Books