

A horizontal bar composed of three green rectangular segments. The middle segment is the largest and contains the text 'SURCOD'. The two side segments are smaller and are separated from the middle one by thin white gaps.

SURCOD

Volunteer report

Report on volunteer work at
SURCOD between September and
December 2013

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Introduction

Between 17 September and 16 December 2013, I, Chris Banning, worked as a volunteer for Sustainable Rural Community Development (SURCOD), a local Malawian NGO based in Nsanje, Southern Malawi.

In the beginning of 2013, I realised that it was time for me to go in the field in order to gain the experience that I need to get a job in the development arena. I had travelled earlier but never had I been in contact with an organisation that works directly with people in need. Thus, after looking for local organisations and volunteer opportunities in Southern Africa, I luckily managed to find SURCOD. Little after sending an email to January Mvula, the director of the organisation, offering my volunteer services for a period of three months, I received an answer in which he told me that he would be glad to receive me.

When I was sure it would be possible for me to go to Malawi, I bought a plane ticket to Blantyre for the 16th September, right after the Swedish summer. In this way I had the opportunity to work full-time during almost three months before departure which allowed me to sustain myself during my stay in Malawi.

In this short report, I will focus mostly on and discuss the work that I did for SURCOD and my impressions as regards the work itself and my general experience in Malawi.



Initial phase (1st month)

Before arriving in Malawi, I was regularly in touch with January which enabled me to feel safe about the new environment where I was going to spend three months. Nevertheless, what I have come to call my Western paranoia erupted from some of the conversations that I had with January. As a matter of fact, because I did not know much about the organisation and had a different communication style and cultural interpretation, I started to suspect the young director's intentions. However in the end, never giving up on the Malawian idea and talking to January gradually made me feel comfortable and I left Sweden without fears or worries.

As soon as I arrived in Chileka airport, Blantyre's international airport, I felt like home. The first people I encountered were friendly and I was extremely well received by January and his wife. On the 180-km way to Nsanje, I was amazed by the landscape. Especially as we drove down the hills between Blantyre and Chikwawa, the view was fascinating: the low mountains seemed to billow endlessly towards the horizon.

Workwise, the initial phase was slightly disorientating. Indeed, since my presence at SURCOD as a volunteer was not facilitated by any organisation and thus did not have a specific stated objective, I had no idea what my tasks would be. I understand that this explains partly the feeling that I have of having "lost" a bit of time and I admit that this issue could have been avoided if we had discussed beforehand the purpose of my visit.

Several introductory and briefing meetings with January helped me get a better picture of how I could organise my work and what was expected from me. Together, we wrote some terms of reference (ToR) that would guide my work. The ToR consisted of the following points:

❖ Organisational development

- Field visits
- Understand and identify gaps
- Monitoring, interviews with participants
- Communication work

❖ Fundraising

- Computer work, internet research
- Single out best ways to raise funds
- Look into creating organisation in Sweden

❖ Improve documentation

- Take pictures of all excursions
- Enhance website design
- Write reports about activities

❖ Design sport-focused project for youth

- Educational aspect (about early marriage/sex, HIV-aids)
- Integrate sport values

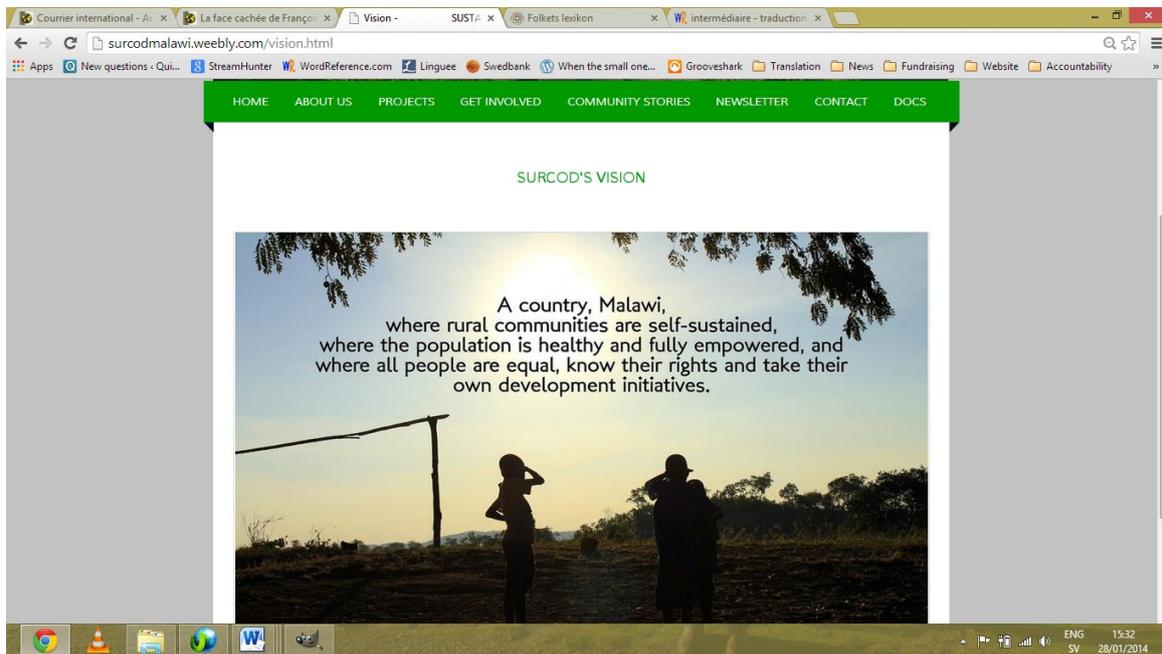
I dedicated the first month of my volunteer work to identifying how best I could help SURCOD and compiled the results in a guidelines document. Those guidelines could be integrated into the broader organisational development strategic document that SURCOD is developing. The focus of those guidelines was put on the organisation's communication strategy, its visibility and accountability, and new ways of fundraising. However, the last point was not developed too much since it appears that the most common and efficient way to fundraise is on a project-basis. Indeed, SURCOD, at least in its current situation, is most likely to succeed in raising funds if it applies for grants in the framework of specific projects.

The writing of the guidelines took about a month, which reinforces the sentiment that I have of having “lost” time. That said, it would probably not have been possible for me to have done much more since I had no knowledge whatsoever about the local context and very limited knowledge about SURCOD. That first month was obviously not wasted. I had the opportunity to go on various field trips, meet the participants of the organisation's main project and take lots of pictures which would later be used for communication purposes.

Second phase (1 and ½ month)

Website

The second phase of my volunteer work with SURCOD was characterised by the implementation of the suggestions highlighted in the guidelines document. I then started working on the website, redesigning it, modifying its pages, rewriting its content, creating new content, adding some pictures and so on. Since my volunteer commitment to SURCOD is not over, I am still currently improving the website and I may continue to do so until the organisation finds someone capable and willing to do it instead of me.



Screenshot of SURCOD's website

Some of the new features are for instance: a new header picture, a welcoming page which gives access to the currently main pages of the site, an online contact form with other contact details, an online subscription form to the Chididi Bulletin (SURCOD's newsletter), quality pictures on most pages, etc.

Logo

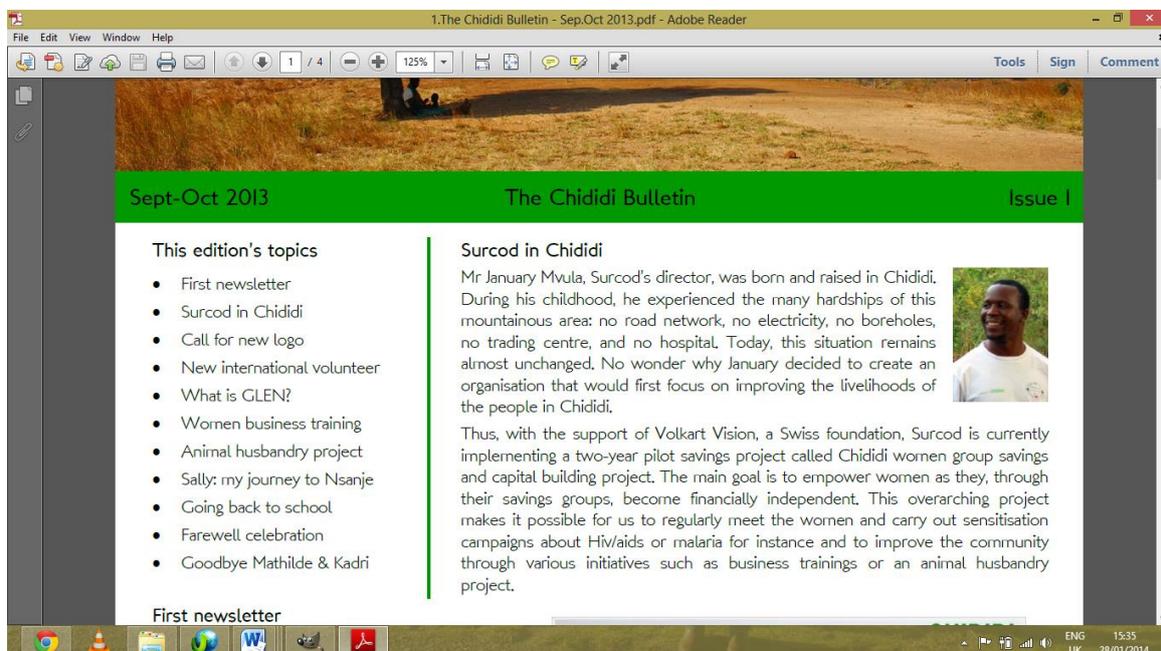


At the same time, I started thinking about the logo issue. In other words, I selected several fonts which were put together on a single document and published on Facebook for interested people to vote for their favourite font. We have now a font, Segoe Print Bold, which is used in a specific and characteristic green colour (HTML code: 009900)

for the name of the organisation: SURCOD. However, even though it looks fairly good left alone, the name SURCOD could benefit from having a special design around it to make it more attractive, easy-to-remember and modern. Despite the fact that I spent many hours on GIMP 2, a picture editing programme, my several attempts at creating different logos were not completely convincing and I came to the conclusion that we could gain from collaborating with a more professional graphic designer. Another solution is to go back to one of the first guidelines suggestions: post a listing on the volunteer platform “idealist.org”. The idea was initially abandoned because it seemed that it would take a while to get in touch with a relevant professional through this means and I wished for the logo to be done by the time I left Malawi. It now appears that this rush was unnecessary.

Newsletter

Another element, meant to improve SURCOD's visibility, professionalism and communication, was the launch of a newsletter. Indeed, I so far wrote and designed the first two editions of a newsletter which we called The Chididi Bulletin. The title was chosen thinking deeply about creativity and wishing to avoid the traditional and not appealing “newsletter” title. I spent a lot of time writing the content and creating an attractive and engaging design for the bulletin and as a result, it seemed that it was appreciated by those who read it. Nevertheless, a stronger effort needs to be made by the various actors within (staff, volunteers, board) and outside (friends, stakeholders) SURCOD to increase the interest for the organisation and thus the reader base. Options could be for those people to regularly speak about the organisation, publish links to the website and newsletter, ask their friends/communities to share the information, etc.



Screenshot of the first edition of the Chididi Bulletin

Just like for the website, I will be the one writing and designing the newsletter until someone else can take over.

Project development and research

It was also defined in the ToR that I would develop a youth project while in Malawi. Even though I barely knew what that would imply in the beginning, I gradually got excited by the idea and started to exert myself in order to create something significant for the youths of Chididi. The first thought, as indicated in the ToR, was to develop a sports-based project. It appeared later that more than that could be done for the youth and we decided instead to develop something more encompassing. The Chididi Youth Centre idea was born. I really applied myself to involve everyone in the organisation to make sure that all supported the idea and had a say in its development. And indeed everybody, from the director (who himself had such an idea in mind) to the other international volunteers, was thrilled and motivated by the idea and strongly contributed to its expansion.



Chididi youths at the secondary school

In a small committee, we started “planning” by answering some crucial questions such as: what problems we want to solve, how to do it, how, where and when to do it and who for, what prospects for the project and in terms of sustainability and how to evaluate it. Once those questions were answered and the idea became clearer in everyone’s head, we took several steps ahead. First, we planned time in a dateless fashion through a planning web. That way we knew what big steps would wait us: research, secure premises and funds, hire staff, etc. Second, we followed the standard procedure in development and involved the different stakeholders in the district. We went to the district assembly, handed out a document describing the project and discussed with the main interested parties: district commissioner,

district youth officer, or district education manager. And third, we undertook a broad research task. We conducted focused group discussions and individual interviews and we distributed a quantitative survey to the two main schools in Chididi. My role in this research was to design all the questionnaires and brief the interviewers. A research guidelines document was also devised to gather all questions and other valuable information. My colleagues were tremendously useful as they contributed to singling out the most relevant questions, translated those from English to Chichewa, and conducted the interviews.

Lake

Since my volunteer project was self-financed and I was not in Malawi through the intermediary of any volunteer agency, I allowed myself to take a two-week break in order to see what might be some of the countries' most beautiful places. In the beginning of November, I took a bus direction north to Lake Malawi. Even though I felt slightly guilty for abandoning the office, I have no regret whatsoever. The sceneries that I experienced while at the lake were literally marvellous. The water was exquisite and the further north I went, the cleaner and more transparent it got. In other words, this trip was a great opportunity.

Picture (right) taken in Nkhata Bay



Conclusion & future developments

Concluding comments

To be completely honest, I am very satisfied with my stay in Malawi. Several times have I had the sensation that I had not accomplished much for SURCOD. However, receiving some feedback from my colleagues and writing this report made me realise that I used my time there fairly efficiently. Three months is indeed a short period of time and since I knew very little about the local context before arrival, it took me a while to adapt.

I got really committed to SURCOD's cause and I truly felt like it was my duty to help the organisation. As a result, I did my best to improve those areas that I underlined in the guidelines document. Not everything that was part of the ToR may have been achieved, but this is mostly due to my ignorance as regards SURCOD's work as the ToR were defined. Nevertheless, the main points such as the development of a youth project, the improvement of communication and visibility and the search for fundraising opportunities have been thoroughly investigated.

Beyond the volunteer work, what happened is that I got some kind of a new family. Not only did I have very kind and supporting colleagues; I also made true friends. Even though the border between work mate and friend can be tricky to recognise or maintain (and sometimes it is important to maintain it), it rarely became an issue within SURCOD. Naturally, my working style, my ambitions or my European "mentality" could sometimes conflict with a different reality which I was not used to. But in the end, a mutual understanding always overcame those discrepancies.

Continued support and partnership

As implied earlier in this report, my commitment to SURCOD did not end when I left Malawi. On the other hand, it is meant to last. I am in charge of maintaining and updating the website as well as write the newsletter until otherwise decided. It is with great pleasure that I continue supporting SURCOD; however my personal plans could make it impossible for me to devote too much time for SURCOD.

Whether or not my help as a volunteer continues, a partnership with SURCOD will be created. As a matter of fact, my intention is to start a non-profit funding organisation in Sweden and the first partner of this organisation would naturally be SURCOD. This partnership would be based on the youth project that was developed during my stay in Malawi, but it will most likely lead to a long-lasting and diversified collaboration.

Thank you



For being so welcoming

For making me feel like one of you

For accepting my differences

For laughing at my particular humour

For inviting me in your homes

For teaching me your culture

For telling me your stories and listening to mine

And for your kindness, generosity, open-mindedness and friendliness