

Africatrust Networks Volunteer Report – Daniel Croft, CEJOCEP 2007

On January 4th this year, I flew out to Accra in Ghana with an organisation called Africatrust Networks, I was accompanied by 5 other volunteers, Laura, Francesca, Sarah, Becky and Russell. A few of us had met briefly before at our pre-trip meeting in London, but apart from that we were complete strangers to each other. We were all very excited as our plane landed at Kotoka Airport, and we were met by Joe Yawson, the Africatrust General Manager in Ghana, and Henry, who was to drive us around for our first few weeks induction course, and so our story begins!

The first few days were a complete shock to the system, from getting off the plane in the dust and incredible heat, to seeing the beggars who hang around near traffic lights in Accra, waiting for traffic to stop so they can look in the car windows and hope to be passed a few cedi's. We also experienced the power cuts during our first night in Accra, or just 'lights out', which we would all have to get used to. Due to lack of rain to power the Akosombo Dam, (which holds back the largest artificial lake in the world) Ghana was in the middle of an energy crisis.

After a day seeing a few sites in Accra, we all piled into Henry's tro-tro (like a small minibus) and headed west along the coast, to Cape Coast. We stayed in a guest house there for a few days, and then moved into the volunteers flat in Kakumodo, which is a village outside of Cape Coast, although



Kakumodo village

shanty town would be a better description. This was to be my home for the next 6 months. The flat was very luxurious in comparison to its surroundings, it was part of a big unfinished house, and was owned by a Ghanaian who is working in Italy. His sister was our landlady, who we would come to have an interesting relationship with! We were lucky enough to have comfortable beds, sofa's and a fridge, for water we would fill up buckets and a big barrel in the kitchen when the water was running (normally it was on for about an hour a day) to wash with and to flush the toilet. Drinking water comes in small see-through sachets, which you can buy in packs of 30 and put in the fridge, we also brushed our teeth with these to

be on the safe side. Bucket showers take a bit of getting used to, but when it's hot they are actually really refreshing!

It was a bit of a squash in the house for the 10 days or so we were all in there, Charlie was also there, she had come out 3 months earlier, so was well adjusted to Ghanaian life, then all of a sudden, 6 more volunteers turn up!

On our first day in Kakumodo, we were all taken to the centre to meet the people who set up and worked at CEJOCEP International School, a very grand title for a school with very humble beginnings. CEJOCEP, or the Centre for Job Creation and Environmental Protection was founded in 2003 by Lawrence, Sylvester (Sly) and Theresa and is a Non Governmental Organisation. Construction on the school was also started late that



Lawrence, Sly and Theresa

year, and it forms the base for the organisation. Volunteers from Africatrust have been working there for 2 years now, and every year a team of CrossRoaders from America help for 6 weeks. Our arrival at the centre had obviously been much anticipated, all the kids were very excited at having some new obruni's (foreigners) to play with!

For the next week we had lessons in Fante, the local language, and Ghana's history and culture, it was a bit like being back at school but it was very interesting.

In the afternoons we were taken around the Cape Coast area to see some sights, such as Cape Coast Castle, and the town of Elmina, an amazing beach called Brenu which we would go back to several times, and Kakum National Park, with its forest canopy walkway. The big white castles at Cape Coast and Elmina are World Heritage sites, they were built by the first European settlers in the area for trading gold (Ghana was known as the Gold Coast before independence), but turned into slave forts, and hundreds of thousands of slaves were locked up there after being forced to walk huge distances to get there. The ones who survived the appalling conditions were put on ships and sent to the Americas and to Europe.



All of us at Brenu Beach during our first week

At the end of our induction, we were split into two groups of three, it was decided that Sarah, Becky and I were to stay in Kakumodo, and Russell, Laura and Francesca were to move to the project in Jachie, with an organisation called TACCO. Jachie is near Kumasi, which is Ghana's second city. By the time the guys went up to Jachie, I was raring to go, and had already gone with John, a teacher at the school with some of the older boys to start football training, and also helped Charlie a few times in the afternoon working.

Our usual day was basically as follows; 8am-2pm the school was open, so we taught, and then 4pm-6pm we came back to the centre to help with whatever manual work was going on.



Charlie and I teaching KG2

It was decided that I would help Charlie teach KG2 (Kindergarden 2) for a few weeks, and would take over from her after that, and Becky and Sarah would teach a nursery class alternately between them, when they weren't in nursery, Becky would help John with Class 1, so she could start teaching them some French, and Sarah would help in KG2.

The teaching was really tough, especially at first, Sarah and Becky had it particularly badly teaching nursery, as the kids were so young, some of them just 1 or 2, they didn't speak any English, but somehow they managed to keep them under control and teach them the alphabet, numbers and colours etc, they did really well.

I taught KG2 for my whole time in Ghana, I was very glad to be able to learn from Charlie at first, as she had been teaching them on her own for 3 months, I soon learnt that disciplining them wasn't going to be easy! The age range in KG2 was from 5-8 years old, and there was quite a range of abilities.

Normally in Ghana, children are disciplined by being caned, at home and at school, this was very hard for us to get used to initially, but it is part of life there. We didn't cane the children ourselves, but if you didn't hold a cane it was very hard to keep their attention, the occasional tap on the head if someone wasn't paying attention normally worked. I soon made the decision that I would rather

hold a cane and teach them as much as possible, than waste time trying to hold their attention without one, and not really teach them much.



John, Francis and Lawrence digging the cess pit

When we started at the school, the classrooms were bare breeze-blocks with a tin roof, the children sat on planks of wood on more blocks, and the cess pit was still being dug for the toilet block, which was also just breeze-blocks.

Teaching materials we basically bought ourselves, and Charlie and Sarah went to Accra to buy a box of reading books, which were an absolute life saver because the kids would look at the pictures themselves and give us a break!

In the afternoons we started off digging in the cess pit and head carrying the dirt in pans to the otherside of the centre, most of the digging had been done, the pit was about 20 feet deep, and it was pretty humid at the bottom! When the digging was finished, we started moulding blocks for the masons to make the walls of the pit with, I really enjoyed block moulding but it was hard work!

By this time, the weather was starting to get really hot, the first month or so of our stay we were in the hamattan season, which is when dust blows down from the sahara, its makes things hazy, and so slightly cooler. But from February to April the

heat was amazing, it must have been around 30 - 35°C most days, and it never rained, doing anything out in the sun in the middle of the day was very tiring. For our last few months it was the rainy season, it didn't actually rain that much, but it was cooler and less humid, when it did rain it was usually a big storm, but most of the time this was at night.

We soon got into a routine with the work, and time started to really fly by, the teaching was getting slightly easier. We did Maths and English with the kids everyday, spelling was a big problem for them, because they hadn't been taught the phonetic alphabet, so that was a start, once they knew that we started building up words from there. Understandably Charlie was getting tired of teaching KG2 by this point so I took over, and when Sarah wasn't in nursery she taught KG2 with me. Becky also started teaching French to some of the adults one evening a week which I know they really enjoyed.



KG2

Outside of school we were getting more and more used to Ghanaian life, we could get around fine in the shared taxi's, knew the prices so we didn't get ripped off, and could walk around Cape Coast without getting lost! We were also getting used to Ghanaian food, a lovely girl called Hannah cooked our food for us at home, it was really nice. The staple foods are rice, yam and plantain really, normally with chicken or fish, sometimes goat. My favourite local dish was called Red-Red, which is beans and chicken in a thick sauce which was quite spicy, served with fried plantain. We weren't quite so keen on fufu, which is eaten a lot by Ghanaians, it's a kind of uncooked dough which is dipped in sauce and swallowed without chewing!

For snacks I'd eat groundnuts, bananas and bo fruit, which are balls of dough deep-fried, so they taste a bit like doughnuts.

It was Charlie's last few weeks in Ghana, but she still had time to catch malaria, she had been having headaches for a few days, but one Sunday afternoon she suddenly felt sick, we were at a spot watching a football game, so we headed home. That evening she gradually felt worse and worse until she realised she was going to have to go to hospital. I went with her in a taxi, luckily the regional hospital isn't far away (Charlie knew where it was from the time she fell in the cess pit, she was very lucky to only need a few stitches). It was quite late and there weren't many staff around, the ones who were weren't particularly enthusiastic. After about a half hour wait Charlie was hooked up to a drip and stayed over night, it was just in time really as she had started shaking badly,



Becky and Sarah sanding tables

I slept on the free bed next to hers. In the morning she had another drip, and then we were free to go. She soon felt better and then it was time for Charlie to leave, we had a little party at our house for KG2, and a palm wine party at the centre for all our friends. On her last night we had drinks at the spot near our house, she had worked really hard during her time in Ghana, and had been on her own for a month, which is no mean feat, her help and friendship was invaluable.

About this time Becky also told us that she was struggling a bit, she was missing her family and found teaching nursery difficult, so she arranged with David to fly home after 4 months, at the beginning of May.

We were also having a few problems with our house, things were going missing, first some money went missing from Sarah's room, and Charlie's CD player went, but we didn't kick up a fuss because they weren't worth much. But a few weeks later my mp3 player was stolen from my room (which was locked), so I went to tell the landlady that I was going to the police, so that night I went with Lawrence to report the stolen item. I went home, and the next morning when I woke up, I saw my mp3 player on the side, for a moment I thought I'd been an idiot and missed it when looking before, but I soon realised that my window was slightly open, someone had returned it through there, once they knew the police were involved.

We had suspected that it was someone in the compound taking the items, simply because the landlady and some of her relatives live along the side of the house, and when anyone goes in the front gate they normally are there watching. Also the landlady has spare keys to the front door and to our rooms, which we tried to lock as much as possible, but I know I locked mine before my mp3 player went.

We thought that now we had gone to the police once, we wouldn't have any more trouble, but a few weekends later, the landlady decided that an engagement party would be held at the house, and that our flat would be used, this meant our flat was full of family members, calling us 'bruni's in our own home, so obviously we went out for the day, as quickly as we could. Unfortunately, we completely forgot that the video camera David had lent us to film the centre with wasn't locked in a room, it had been put in a pile of stuff in the hallway. So as you can guess that also went missing, I think it was the same person as before, because it was out of sight, it would have taken someone going through our things to find it.

This basically resulted in me making about 10 trips to the police station with Sly, and our landlady was questioned as well, because she has keys she was the main suspect. She isn't the most mentally stable person it's fair to say, and wasn't very happy about this, she wasn't remotely concerned that someone in the compound was stealing things. In the end we could have taken her to court, but decided that it wouldn't be beneficial to anyone, and it certainly wouldn't get the camera back. It was a real shame, because videos of the centre would have helped encourage more volunteers to come in the future.

Meanwhile the football training had really taken off in a big way, we were now getting almost 100 boys from the village turning up to the field at Wesley Girls School, where we played, it's a big private school, and we had to go and see the Headmistress several times to get permission, unfortunately it wouldn't last long.

It was far too big for me to handle, luckily I had help from John, and from Walley and Dave, two English guys who were volunteering in Abura, the next village down. It took a while, but I slowly got a timetable organised so all the boys got some decent coaching time, and the Headmistress was happy! George also started helping coach, and would eventually take over, he was a huge help, and did a lot for the team, he also organised lots of friendly matches. He knew a lot more about coaching than I did too, which was great, it was easier for him to coach the boys in Fante, I wanted it to carry on after I left, so it was good all round.

March 6th was the 50th Anniversary of Ghana's Independence, Laura and Francesca came down to Cape Coast as it was a national holiday, and we spent the day in town. There were lots of people around, dressed in red, gold and green, and there were lots of street parties and carnivals going on, with lots of singing and drumming. The centre for the celebrations was Victoria Park, where a small stadium had been built just in time for the celebrations. There was a big party there later in the day with school children dancing in an almost organised way, and then lots of men dressed in crazy outfits took over, the music was basically one song played over and over again, but the locals all seemed to have a great time laughing and getting into the celebrations.

We went out in the evening at Oasis, one of the more touristy spots, with Emma, some of the volunteers in Abura, and a few guys from the centre, including Sly, and had a really good time!

At the end of March, the schools Easter holiday started, and went on for a month, it was timely as we all needed a break from teaching. For the first two weeks we did extra manual work like block moulding in the mornings, it was a walk in the park compared to teaching! For the last two weeks, we went on our tour around Ghana, it was a great opportunity to get to know other parts of the country.

Becky had been having a few problems with her foot, and the day before we left, she suddenly



Dorcas, Josephine, Alex and Aba



Sarah and I with KG2 before the Easter holiday

couldn't walk on it, we went to hospital, and it turned out it had become infected, she had it disinfected, and was told to rest it. Because her flight had been brought forward, we couldn't delay our travels because there wasn't time, and Sarah and I had to teach again in a few weeks, so we went, and agreed to meet Becky in Accra in a week.

So Sarah and I set off for Kumasi, and went to Jachie to see Russ, Laura and Francesca for our first night, I slept on the floor in their living room, I heard what I thought was a little mouse rustling around, but later found out it was a great big rat, I also got savaged by a resident mosquito, good start!

The next day we went into Kumasi itself, it felt strange being in a big city again, and we went to the Vienna City Pub in the evening, it was almost like being at home, there were pool tables and lots of white people, and I ate pork chops! It was a really fun evening. Sarah and I stayed in a hotel there which had a movie channel, so we watched Notting Hill, we hadn't seen a film for a while, I don't think I've ever been so happy to see Hugh Grant.

We moved on to Techiman to see a monkey sanctuary there, which turned out to be a bad move, because the next day we waited 7 hours for our bus to leave, transport in Ghana generally doesn't leave until its full, but this was ridiculous, unfortunately there was nothing we could do, we eventually arrived in a village called Sawla in the north about 9pm, so it was pitch black, rather than sleep at the tro-tro station we paid the only taxi driver in the village to take us to Mole National Park that night, it cost us a lot, but it was well worth it.

The next morning we woke up and looked out of our balcony over an amazing view, the lodge is up



At Mole National Park with the elephants



Wli falls

on a hill, and at the bottom of the hill were 2 huge watering holes, it was like being in a documentary, it sounds ridiculous, but I really felt like I was in Africa then. We went on a walking tour around and saw an elephant, warthogs, a water buck and antelope, but later that day about 15 more elephants turned up and decided to go for a bath in the watering hole nearest the lodge, so a group of us went back down and sat by the edge, watching them, with crocodiles swimming around too, it was a truly amazing experience, it made the whole tour for me.

After Mole, we went to Tamale, a city in the north for a bit, then back to Kumasi, and on to Accra to meet up with Becky, who luckily was better by then. Travelling in Ghana is not easy, and 4/5 days of the tour were spent purely travelling, in not much comfort, so when we went from Tamale to Kumasi (an 8 hour trip), we decided to catch the STC, the main coach company in Ghana. The coach left the obligatory hour late, drove 5 minutes down the road to the STC depot, where everyone had to get off the coach and wait for 2 hours while they fixed it. We eventually left, and made it to Kumasi at 6pm, we celebrated getting to Kumasi by driving into a van in front of us in a queue of traffic! So that day we were travelling/waiting from 5am to 6pm, not fun.

After meeting Becky we headed to the Volta region, saw the Akosombo Dam briefly and went on to Hohoe, near the Togo border, from there we went to see Wli falls, apparently the tallest waterfalls in West Africa. It was an amazing sight, and the lodge there was nice too, but Sarah was really ill now, we thought at first it was food poisoning, but it turned out to be malaria again, so we headed back to Cape Coast. It's not fun being ill at our house in Kakumodo, so it must have been even worse being in a strange place.

A few days after we returned, it was time for Becky's leaving do, it was a nice little event at the spot, and Lawrence made a speech (we were all used to hearing them by now!) and they gave Becky a really nice dress in the CEJOCEP cloth. It was a shame Becky was leaving, but she was in Kakumodo for 4 months, and got lots done.

A week later, Freddie and Graham arrived, Freddie had been here for 3 months already, last September, and had brought a friend this time! They came out for the last 2 months, but Graham had a tough start after finding out his card didn't work (and so had to borrow money off Freddie), and then having his camera and phone pick-pocketed in one evening.

The weekend after we had a football match against the Kakumodo village team, to welcome Freddie and Graham, we played for Team CEJOCEP along with some others from the centre and George and some of his friends, it was a close match, but we narrowly lost 3-2, and we should have had a penalty late on!

The match was a success though, it took a bit of organising, including asking the Headmistress for permission to play there on a Sunday, I went up twice with Sly the week before but she wasn't there, so Sly went back and got permission from the chaplain of the school. The week after the game, I was summoned to see the Headmistress and she bluntly told me we could not train there anymore, as we hadn't asked permission for the game on Sunday, I tried to reason with her to no avail, it was incredibly frustrating because at the moment there isn't another reasonable pitch in the village.

This issue didn't get resolved which is a shame, so the boys are still training on a very bad pitch in a nearby village, but there were plans to clear an area near our old house in the village for a pitch, I really hope this happens sometime soon.

When the guys arrived the teaching situation changed slightly, the school hired a new nursery teacher called Mercy, and so Sarah taught KG2 with me full time. Freddie helped John with Class 1 like he did last time, and Graham helped Stephen with KG1, so it worked out quite well.

Work wise, in the afternoons, we started digging out the cess pit again, the masons had finished their work building the walls, but Lawrence and John had had to widen the top with pickaxes, this meant a lot of dirt had fallen back in, so we dug this out. The carpenter had also finished a lot of the furniture for the classrooms, so we had also been sanding and painting them with wood primer, to protect them from insects.



Graham, Sarah, Seidu and Lawrence working on the pit

A few weeks later Freddie and Graham went on their tour, as Freddie hadn't travelled much last time, so they did a similar route to Sarah and I. The teaching was really starting to take its toll on Sarah and I by this time, but we knew that we wanted to get certain things done before we left. I went on several trips to Abura and to Cape Coast with Sly, to buy toilets and sinks for the toilet block, as well as wood for the doors and shutters and hinges.

Just after the guys returned from their travels I went with Freddie, and George and Rex to Accra, we met Joe in Accra and went to a market called Kantamantu to buy football kits for the teams. When we were getting close, Rex told me to 'watch my bag closely', apparently it has been known for bag straps to be cut and the bag disappearing there. Looking around the market, Freddie and I did almost have celebrity status, both being tall and white, lots of people were genuinely shocked to see a foreigner wandering around there, I think it was fair to say it wasn't the most 'touristy' part of Accra.

Joe knew a guy there who took us to someone selling football kits, and after much haggling we bought two sets of kits for the U12's and U14's, to go with Fred's kits. We also bought training vests, and some equipment for George. We bought all this for the price of perhaps 2 football shirts in the UK, it makes you think.

We said goodbye to Joe, and got on a tro-tro to go back to Cape with all of our purchases, it was a long day but it was worth it.

Things started to wind down, and we were really busy for our last week or so. Our last day teaching was really sad, we gave KG2 some light up Disney pens which Mum had sent over, as well as beads for the girls and mini footballs for the boys. The kids were all ecstatic with the gifts as you can imagine, some of them had more of a grasp that we were leaving than others, and were sad. We basically spent the whole day messing around and taking photos. We really felt like we knew all of the kids and their different personalities, and we were really going to miss them.

I'm very proud of the amount of work that was achieved during our time there, when we left the school was completely plastered, the classrooms all had chairs and tables for the children, the cess pit was finished, and the toilets and sinks were all plumbed in. As we left the carpenter was starting to fit the doors and shutters too.



KG2 with their presents

On Saturday, we hired a tro-tro and took everyone at the centre to Brenu beach to say thank you. It was a really nice day, the sun also came out which was great, it really hadn't been very hot for a while before that. We played football and had a picnic lunch, the kids had a fantastic time. I'd been teaching Sly and Seidu to play chess for a few weeks on a board I got in town, they both have very logical brains, and are both good at Ghanaian draughts (Seidu is apparently the village champion!), so I thought they'd take to it quickly and they did, I'm glad I left when I did, or they would have been beating me regularly.

On Monday we had our official leaving do at the centre, lots of people came, including a representative of the elders, and most of our friends we had gotten to know since we arrived, there were as always, loads of kids around too!

Seidu and John hosted, then I had to make a speech which I think went ok, I just said thank you to a few people and said how supportive and welcoming everyone had been. Freddie made a speech too, being the first volunteer to come back to CEJOCEP, and we were presented with t-shirts, and Sarah got a dress in the CEJOCEP cloth, and we were given certificates.



Freddie, Sarah, Graham and I at our leaving ceremony

Then Freddie and I presented the football equipment to George, which the footballers loved, it was great to see them so happy.

At the end, Emma's friend Ato sang a really amazing song, I had jokingly said to him that he should sing, not knowing how good he was, everybody got into it! The following night was Sarah and mine last night in Kakumodo, so we invited everyone to the spot, as was tradition by then. It was a fairly quiet night, I don't think that things had really sunk in for me, I was sad saying goodbye to Lawrence though, he works so hard it's unbelievable, he also manages the centre very well, and works tirelessly to make sure his volunteers are happy, he's a real hero.

The following morning we went to the centre one last

time to say goodbye to Sly, Theresa, Seidu and all the other people that had made such a huge impact on our lives.

Freddie escorted us to the STC station, and as the coach pulled away it started raining, which we thought was very fitting.

Freddie had been wiped out by malaria for the week beforehand, and as we left Graham was also sick, but luckily they were both ok for their flight, which was a few days after ours.

Sarah and I met up with Laura, Francesca and Emma in Accra, we stayed for one night before our flight, we were all really excited about going home by then, Emma was really sad to see us go, she's coming back from Ghana in September.

Joe took us to the airport and saw us off, when I saw the BA plane, I almost saluted, it was very surreal suddenly being on a plane hearing people with English accents.

The flight was fine, and Sarah and I met up with our families at Terminal 4, it was quite emotional, poor old Laura and Francesca had another flight to catch each, so they had to wait a bit longer to see theirs.

The last 6 months have been an amazing experience, I have so many fond memories. The people at the centre are a real inspiration to me, with their enthusiasm, selflessness and positive attitude. I miss the kids in KG2 already, I just hope that I have the opportunity to go back sometime in the future, and see how the centre has come on, and how all the people have changed, particularly the kids. I'm looking forward to it already!

If you would like to read the blog I kept whilst in Ghana, and to see more photos, please visit <http://ghana2007.spaces.live.com>



Sarah, Francesca, Laura and I at Heathrow