

INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERS AT SOMAFCO

_Chairperson, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, comrades and friends....

I am speaking in my capacity as one of the international volunteers who worked at SOMAFCO, between the years 1985 – 1987.

INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERS

There was a substantial international volunteer presence at SOMAFCO over the years and it included people from far reaching parts of the world. They came from several European countries including Holland, Denmark, Sweden, England, Ireland, Poland and East Germany, African countries, including Nigeria and Zambia and amongst others, Cuba, Australia and the U.S.

People were motivated to come largely for political reasons and along with commitment and solidarity to the struggle they brought with them their skills and work experience. Some were members of anti-apartheid movements back home, sponsored by those and other NGOs and others had responded to a call from their governments, like the health workers from Cuba and the GDR. I for example, was funded by the Irish government through an Irish volunteer organisation called APSO, (the Agency for Personal Services Overseas).

Volunteers came with a broad range of skills and stayed on an average of 2 years. The majority worked as teachers in the Primary and Secondary schools teaching Maths, Science, Biology and English Literature and Language. However, SOMAFCO was made up of more than the schools, it was more like a large community which was situated in a place called Mazimbu.

Volunteers were 'deployed' to work in a variety of sectors of the community, offering specialist support and advice. These included:

- Agriculture, working at the farm which supplied the community with food;
- Carpentry and furniture making, which provided the community as well as being a source of income generation;
- Infrastructure which involved electricians, engineers and architects
- Health workers, including doctors, lab technicians and visiting dentists and psychologists.

MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE.

SOMAFCO was situated about 200 kms. away from Dar es Salaam in rural Tanzania, which was a far cry from Dublin which I left in the autumn of 1985. After several months of waiting for security clearance I arrived with mixed feelings of excitement and fear, with no idea of what to expect of the people and environment. One of my strongest

expectations was that as a white person, I would be met with initial resentment by black South Africans. This was dispelled quickly on my arrival and I was made to feel welcome and became integrated in the community quickly. From day one a steep personal and political learning curve began for me, and this continued throughout the two years of my stay in Mazimbu. This was about human-ness, tolerance, understanding, questioning and above all patience. These components of life at SOMAFCO have been an important part of my own development and remain with me to this day.

WORKING LIFE

I was recruited as a social worker to develop support systems in the community but specifically for the more vulnerable students and children at the SOMAFCO Primary and Secondary schools. My first challenge was to start counselling support from my allocated office at the ANC Holland Solidarity Hospital. This meant spreading the word that people could feel free to come to talk and that counselling entailed confidentiality. The two main obstacles in the beginning, were developing and establishing trust in me as a newcomer and outsider, and developing awareness that counselling did not mean 'selling out'. Because of the complexities of security and life in exile, in ways it was considered to be a weakness to have emotional needs.

Many of the students felt isolated and cut off from the support of family and their home community. The students who came to see me, were adults suffering from post traumatic stress related to experiences of torture in detention in South Africa. Others suffered deep feelings of guilt about leaving their families without support, going into exile or underground, not knowing for how long, with little warning and without being able to say goodbye. Because of security risks and the threats to families back home, their whereabouts needed to be kept secret. Communication with home was therefore out of the question, which made people feel even more frustrated. Later, some families were facilitated with visits to SOMAFCO and those reunions were very emotional.

Like most workers at SOMAFCO, I worked with few professional resources and it felt at times as though I was fumbling in the dark during some of our counselling sessions. Not only had we come from different countries and backgrounds, mine privileged and white, theirs oppressed and black, but I also struggled to come to terms with the reality and horror of some of the experiences that were related to me. These included cases of gang rape by police, of persistent beatings and torture in detention.

SOCIAL LIFE

We lived communally at Mazimbu in well designed cool airy houses of 4 – 6 people, and some included children. One of the challenges for international volunteers and South Africans was adapting to living with one another. Food was distributed equally amongst people and houses and tasks such as cooking and cleaning were shared. Differences of language, culture and practices had to be overcome through ongoing negotiation and compromise which was a learning process for everyone involved. The majority of South

Africans had not encountered people from other countries before they came into exile. So these experiences were new and meaningful for all those involved.

These relationships meant that there was exchange of life experiences and stories, so that international volunteers learnt first hand about living under apartheid - all of which made the struggle more apparent, heartfelt, personal and therefore more real. There were even romantic developments, some which resulted in partnerships and children of mixed nationalities, and this happened to me too! Relationships amongst the international volunteers could be competitive at times, with claims of some countries doing more than others to support the struggle. But by and large people pulled together and supported each other when times got tough, like the threatened air strike in the mid '80s.

The working environment of Mazimbu had an ethos of comradeship and this along with communal social life and living arrangements, offered South Africans and international volunteers the opportunity of developing unique, strong and long lasting friendships. Apart from day to day work, social life at Mazimbu was very busy. At weekends, students, staff and volunteers, women and men, would come together for regular environmental clean ups called 'letsema', or else there would be gatherings of the whole community to watch cultural events put on by the students.

Leaving Mazimbu and friends behind was about the hardest part and from my own personal experience. When I left in 1987, it was a huge wrench as the future of people in exile and their futures back home in South Africa was uncertain. It therefore felt at the time that we might never meet again.

When I asked comrades how I could contribute to the struggle after leaving SOMAFSCO, they told me to go and talk to as many people as possible about the struggle. Many other volunteers did this as well, becoming active in their local anti- apartheid movements, in lobby groups and fundraising, and some others worked underground supporting MK.

The life changing experience of living and working at SOMAFSCO and living in Mazimbu, clarified and crystallised ANC politics for international volunteers. This in turn strengthened the bonds of solidarity. Bonds which remain 20 years later and in present day South Africa when people from Mazimbu meet each other, it is like old friends coming together for a truly joyful reunion.

Thank you.