

# International development case study

## Mark O'Donnell

I have worked for the Helm Corporation of Northern Ireland as an international consultant on the financial management reform project, in Dhaka, Bangladesh since October 2004. Our project covers economics, budgeting, accounting and internal and external audit. It is funded by the Department for International Development and the Royal Netherlands Embassy.

The transferable skills which I had from the UK largely came from social work finance where 'people skills' are extremely important, and where one has to reconcile the different disciplines involved. Negotiation skills and consensus building abilities are important in international work because one must balance many stakeholder interests. I had also had experience from social work of complex service restructuring, and helping to manage the financial and non-financial issues that arise.

The experience of living and working overseas is both challenging and enriching. In a different culture and environment some creativity is required to get ideas across and agreed, and these need to be balanced with the degree of capacity that exists for proposals to be sustained. Implementation of plans is challenging, as the communications infrastructure is often not well developed. This requires both local knowledge and teamwork.

The lessons I have learned are about being aware of environment and capacity in planning and decision-making. At home there is a set of assumptions you make about everyday life and work, which do not hold in a developing country. For example, the UK has a reliable power supply, whereas Dhaka does not.

The skills I have particularly developed are in negotiation and consensus building. There are many stakeholders in international development work, often with differing viewpoints. This kind of work develops your 'people' skills. Awareness of the context, realities and practicalities is probably my key learning experience.

I would recommend the challenge of living and working overseas to any CIPFA member. It has ups and downs, but you cannot fail to grow and benefit from the experience. There is visible and deep poverty all around which puts things in perspective. Working overseas is a worthwhile way to step out your 'comfort zone'. I came to Dhaka expecting 'something different', and I wasn't disappointed.

Dhaka is my first time overseas with my family so there are also challenges such as schools, housing and getting around. The interest and the challenges are there to be met and dealt with every day - at home and at work.