

# Virtual service overseas: a new way to volunteer

You can now volunteer your engineering skills to help developing and disaster-hit countries without having to put your life or career on hold. **Simah Khalid** introduces EngineerAid, a new engineering charity where the help is provided solely online.

EngineerAid is a new UK-based charity which provides technical problem-solving for developing and disaster-hit countries. The difference is that it provides specialist assistance around the world by linking engineering experts with technical problems via the internet.

Launched in October 2005, the charity already has a network of more than 200 volunteer engineers. These are employed by wide range of companies (including Arup, Network Rail, National Grid and Thames Water Utilities), are qualified in a diverse range of disciplines and spread across 22 countries. They offer their advice and expertise online to assist with development projects or relief operations in disaster-struck regions.

The charity covers all engineering sectors, including health, transport, agriculture, energy, water, sanitation and construction. All volunteers are accredited by at least one of the 40-plus engineering institutions worldwide and have an average work experience of 10 years.

The charity is seeking more volunteers to join the executive team, whatever their professional background, and additional funding.

## Answering technical enquiries

EngineerAid is based at and partly funded by the Moffat Centre of Napier University in Edinburgh, and Scottish Institute for Enterprise provided start-up funding. It is the brainchild of engineer John McKeown, who previously worked for several multinational engineering groups and currently works as an engineering manager in a start-up company. His desire to use his engineering skills to aid the work of development projects while maintaining commitments in his career was the inspiration for the EngineerAid concept.

'Many organisations in the third world do not have the means or specialist skills they need to solve their problems, either due to lack of money or resources,' says McKeown.

'EngineerAid engineers can help solve problems by volunteering some of their time to help with advice over the internet. Volunteer engineers are only asked to answer an enquiry if they have the time—but they find it enormously satisfying because they can do something to help without travelling overseas and putting their work or personal commitments on hold.'

Many queries come through aid organisations working in a particular region although questions are also fielded from individuals. They could be building a hospital or a school and have a civil engineering problem, or alternatively, they may be trying to keep a dilapidated piece of equipment working or need help on a design project.

## Internet considered most effective

Help is given and received via the internet. This method was established after consultation with aid agencies, which confirmed that the internet was the easiest and most stable way of transferring information, even in the most remote areas.

When a query is posted, an EngineerAid volunteer will make an initial response within 48 hours. In some instances, if the first engineer does not know the answer, he or she will know of someone who does.

The charity—which is working with Voluntary Service Overseas and Tools for Self Reliance—has recently established links with the Pakistan High Commission, Pakistan Engineering Council and Pakistan relief teams following the earthquake in October 2005 to incorporate its assistance into the reconstruction phase, which started in April 2006.

EngineerAid will offer advice to organisations working to restore the infrastructure in the country.



EngineerAid enables aid workers in developing or disaster-hit countries to get technical support online

### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT

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