



Embrace the unknown

Volunteer Story

By Steven Chang – April 2018

Steven Chang was a WAGES Volunteer, as Green Economy Advisor, from 2017 to 2018. In his role, he developed training modules and environmentally relevant material for the project. He also developed sector-specific toolkits for palm oil, rice and cassava that are now integrated into WAGES trainings on green economy and environmental sustainability. Steven believes that with volunteering it is important to embrace the unknown and make the most of the opportunities available, whether it be in terms of food, travel, or other experiences. It is also important to take a step back to observe, be patient and to allow time for the transition process.

My story:

I am originally from Colorado, USA, and I am currently a student at the University of Toronto Scarborough, studying international development and environmental science. Aside from being compulsory to complete my degree in international development, being an international volunteer has always been a milestone for my career development. Having seen and been a part of several development projects in the past, working as a volunteer is a natural step towards a long career in development work.



Green Economy toolkits that are now integrated into WAGES trainings on Green Economy and environmental sustainability (Photo Credit: WAGES)

I work as a Green Economy advisor for the West African Governance and Economic Sustainability in Extractive Areas (WAGES) project – a joint initiative of the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) and Centre for International Studies and Cooperation (CECI). I work in developing training modules, and environmentally relevant content for WAGES activities. More broadly, I hope to contribute to developing new and environmentally sustainable enterprise opportunities in rice, cassava, and palm oil production

as well as provide training on how to cultivate a more sustainable economy in the coming months. The nature of WAGES is interesting in that it combines my interests in extractive industries with my background in environmental science, offering me an opportunity to apply my studies and develop new skills in a challenging and exciting environment.

My work:

Though I have spent time living and working in many developing countries, there is something peculiar about trash in Ghana. I have noticed a strange order to the heaps of trash that dot the landscape at several Ghanaian beaches and other popular destinations. There are seemingly separate, and designated piles for plastic bottles, clothes and fabric waste, paper waste, tires, and miscellaneous trash. This separation of waste is by no means a rule in Ghana, but there is certainly a trend to these trash piles and I am truly curious to know why it is this way. I mean, if it's not a proper landfill, then why bother sorting it at all, especially if there is no means of collection?

The most rewarding aspects of my work have yet to come to fruition. As with all things, anything that is worth doing is worth doing right. This means that laying the ground work for activities through collecting research and information, developing the right tools, and discerning strategic intervention areas is a slow and methodical process. Admittedly, I am a fiercely quantitative and technical thinker. While this is by no means a disadvantage, I am learning that numbers and figures cannot possibly make change on their own. It has been a challenge to step back from my own expertise and take the time to learn how to work with my feet on the ground, so to speak. I have struggled to slow down and

understand that the relationships that exist between organizations and individuals are the foundations on which growth and change are built.

Embrace the unknown:

Volunteering internationally is an intensely personal experience. Between the work that challenges us to grow in our professional life and the life experiences that push us beyond our comfort zones, each of us finds something that reshapes what we understand about ourselves and the world we inhabit. Working as a volunteer and joining an overseas development organization is not always a smooth transition. While

“For me, meeting new people and seeing new places offers a rare and beautiful opportunity to reflect on my own life and how it fits within a much larger human experience” – Steven Chang, Green Economy Advisor, WAGES

more experienced volunteers may find themselves well-suited for their new roles and are familiar with the transitional process, new volunteers may find that integrating into their new host organization is slow or uneasy. Actively seeking to participate in ongoing work activities or simply being observant and patient is a must if you are to transition well. Within reason and in consideration of personal safety, always be ready to try new things – food, events, travel, and other experiences. Cultivating a bold and open mind for trying new things can encourage us to take chances we may have otherwise forgone. Whether it is attempting to cook with unfamiliar ingredients, visiting a place you may have overlooked, or introducing yourself to someone new, embracing the unknown can be very rewarding and will almost certainly make an entertaining story in the future. No epic adventure tale has ever started with, “I decided to stay home.”

The WAGES project aims to break the vicious circle in which local communities, especially women and youth, are excluded from the benefits of mining investments. Through WAGES, **World University Service of Canada (WUSC)** and the **Center for International Studies and Cooperation (CECI)**, work in three regions of Burkina Faso, Ghana and Guinea impacted by extractive industries. The project works to empower local communities, and specifically integrate women and youth, to participate fully in local governance, economic opportunities and the sustainable development of these areas. The project collaborates with local and national governments, select mining companies, as well as small and medium-sized businesses and civil society organizations to attain those objectives. Global Affairs Canada funds the implementation of WAGES from 2016 until 2022. For more information on the project follow this link: <https://resources.wusc.ca/project/wages>