

## Meet an Aid Worker (p. 24)



Tristan at work in Niger.

### An interview with Tristan Clements

**Name:** Tristan Clements

**Age:** 28

**Job title:** Program Officer, Niger Emergency Food and Nutrition Program

### How did you get selected to help with the 2005 food crisis in Niger?

My work is with the emergencies team of World Vision, so it's a part of my job description to be available for overseas work if needed. In this case, my manager knew that the Niger team needed somebody with my skills and asked me if I'd be willing to go. In Niger, they needed somebody with knowledge and experience in designing emergency relief projects, somebody with field experience in Africa, and somebody who spoke French.

### What were your first impressions?

I had travelled to Chad the previous year as part of the response to the Darfur refugee crisis. Niger borders Chad, and is geographically very similar, so I expected to find something along the same lines. Chad had been hard and dangerous but on arrival in Niger, I was pleasantly surprised. Niger is an incredibly poor country, but it was much safer and more stable than Chad.

There is one major road running east-to-west across the middle of the country, and I was impressed by what good state it was in compared to other places I had been. I was also, ironically, amazed by how green things were. Although the country was in the midst of a food crisis, the fields seemed to be growing well and it was hard to believe children were dying from malnutrition. Of course, when crops are in the field waiting for harvest, they look lush but that means that nobody's eating them at the time, which is why you can have hunger and starvation while the fields are still ripening.

Driving into the villages for the first time was like stepping into a time-warp. Life had changed so little in 2,000 years – it was almost like seeing pages from a Bible story come to life. The utter lack of anything resembling modern life was really striking – the only things you'd see would be plastic buckets or jerry-cans for carrying water, occasional bits of sheet metal or metal fencing wire. The living conditions were very basic.

### What was your role?

As the manager of the World Vision emergency relief team, I communicated with partner agencies like the UN (United Nations), negotiated with World Vision support offices like Australia for funding and assistance, made sure projects were being implemented, designed program strategies, monitored field activities, and managed the team of relief workers.

### What were the working conditions like?

Working conditions weren't too bad overall. When we were in the capital, Niamey, we worked from the pre-existing World Vision office. There was power (although regular power-cuts), internet (which improved after we installed a satellite uplink) and, depending on the power supply, air-conditioning. It could get pretty crowded sometimes. We were usually several people in one office, and sometimes sharing desks – we had to learn to get along with each other even when we were stressed. Most of us lived in the same team-house together as well. We had a cook called Ibrahim who was great and he kept us alive the whole time we were out there.

In the field it really varied. When we were in the field we were usually spending a lot of time travelling. That meant lots of time bouncing around on dirt and sand tracks in four-wheel drives visiting project sites and talking with community members.

## **What was the biggest challenge you faced?**

Probably the hardest challenge was to adapt to the culture of West Africa and trying to actually get things accomplished in a timely fashion. As a westerner I'm used to being very task-focused – I need to get something done and I need it done three days from now – and I'll work to that deadline. In West Africa it doesn't work like that. Time is not that important, people don't really understand deadlines. It's a totally different way of approaching problems and tasks, and it took a while to come to terms with this and learn a new way of doing things.

When you're in a stressful situation and trying to get stuff done, but the support system isn't working, it's pretty frustrating, especially when you're reminded that peoples' lives are at stake.

## **What motivates you to do this work?**

All sorts of things really. When things get really crazy, especially during the early stages of a response when there's so much to do and so much time-pressure, there's a certain excitement and adrenaline that kicks in that really keeps you going! There's a real satisfaction and enjoyment that comes from living and working in a place that's so different from the one you've come from which also helps. I have a real desire to help people practically, and when things are going well, that's a real driver and encouragement. When things aren't going well, it's that desire that makes you want to put more effort in and get things working right again. And my Christian faith is probably my number one motivation, and why I wanted to get into this sort of work, because I believe the Bible makes it very clear that we should be helping those in need and those who are suffering.

## **What are the advantages / disadvantages of using aid workers from other countries?**

The reality is that we are all 'aid workers from other countries' the moment we step into a relief setting. In the field we always work with a mixture of people from all around the world. There are challenges in learning to communicate across cultures, but it is an immensely rewarding experience and it's an opportunity to learn from people whose experience of life is vastly different from your own.

The advantages of sending in outsiders to help tend to be the fact that the people sent in often have a wealth of experience dealing with emergencies and therefore are not starting from scratch – they can draw on lessons they have learnt in previous responses to help them respond to this new crisis. They are outsiders and therefore more likely to be unbiased in their approaches to particular areas or people groups, and this lends them a certain neutrality, especially in conflict situations. Their international identity also helps in raising funds from international partners, essential to carry out the work.

Disadvantages include a lack of familiarity with the local context – something they may take a while to learn – and also that they may face challenges communicating across local cultures and languages. However, internationals we send to the field tend to be experienced professionals who are used to many of these challenges.

The other aspect to this question relates to the challenges of working with local staff, in this case the Nigeriens on the ground. In any operation we run, anywhere in the world, national staff make up the bulk of any relief response, from drivers to community mobilisers to technical specialists to food monitors to logisticians to finance staff and any other positions in the team there may be. Internationals are only flown in when there is a specific skill lacking among the national staff teams.

In the case of the Niger response, we had anywhere from 30 to 60 national staff from Niger and as little as four or five internationals supporting them, so they do the bulk of the work on the ground. They have the local knowledge and experience, they speak the language, and many of them will be from the communities we are supporting, so they are much better placed to engage with them.



The 2005 nutrition crisis in Niger impacted young children, thousands of whom died. It was triggered by a combination of poor harvests, a locust invasion, high food prices, and poor cultural practices.

The challenges that we sometimes experience include their lack of experience working with an international team context – particularly in terms of work ethics, the fact that they may resent the invasion of ‘outsiders’ and the fact that they may carry some cultural bias towards a particular group within the people we are trying to help.

### **What is your experience of humanitarian crises?**

My first experience outside of the West was two months spent in northern Kenya, in a small village made up mostly of people displaced by tribal warfare. It was a confronting, eye-opening experience that changed the way I looked at the world forever. Since joining World Vision, I have travelled to southern Sudan, to Darfur and to Chad.

### **What’s your advice for young Australians wanting to work in your field?**

1. First thing, good on you! It’s great to find young people who want to get involved and help the world around them that’s not as fortunate. There are far too many people in the West who are only interested in making money and a career for themselves, and if more people thought like you do, this world would be a very different place.
2. Make sure you get a reality check and know what you’re wanting to do. This isn’t an extended backpacker’s holiday, and it’s not all about romantic little villages in the middle of Africa either. When you’re in the field you work long hard hours in difficult organisational contexts, often stuck in an office for weeks at a time like any other job. When things get sticky, it can be a really unpleasant place to be. Mistakes can mean that people who might have been saved may well end up dying. That said, when it works, it’s an incredibly rewarding and exciting job to do, but it’s not just something you do during your gap year. What the relief world needs is not more short-term ‘warm bodies’ in the field to do the work, but enthusiastic people who are willing to commit their entire careers towards making a difference in the world.
3. If you’re really wanting to get involved, plan ahead, just like you would for a career in medicine. You probably want a bachelor’s degree and a masters degree in something relevant, so expect to spend four to five years in training. Ask yourself what you think you’d be able to bring to an overseas emergency context that somebody trained here in Africa, for example, couldn’t (and remember there are plenty of people with university degrees out here). Somewhere in there you’re going to need field experience, probably volunteering with a local NGO (non-government organisation) unless you’re very lucky and land yourself an entry-level NGO position in Australia or somewhere.
4. Network - getting to know people is the best way to get inside the international system. And persevere! It can be a long hard slog getting in there. Remember there are tons of other young people trying to get in as well, so try and think what you can do to set yourself apart. Best of luck!

If you have any other questions you would like to ask Tristan about working in humanitarian relief, send it via Contact Us at the School Resources website [worldvision.com.au/learn/schoolresources](http://worldvision.com.au/learn/schoolresources)