Where did you go?
I travelled to Malawi and stayed in a town called Mzimba Boma in the northern region of Malawi.

Was your trip organised by a third party?
I went as part of International Citizen Service, which is a government-backed programme that allows young people to volunteer overseas in developing countries. ICS works with 10 partners who each work in different areas of development. I was lucky enough to be placed with Progressio, an international development charity who champion people powered development to support marginalised people, especially women in 8 different countries.

What did you do?
We were partnered with a Malawian HIV/AIDS charity called Tovwirane, a local NGO working in the Mzimba district supporting those infected and affected with HIV/AIDS. As part of a team made up of UK and Malawian volunteers we carried out a wide range of work including educating communities on HIV/AIDS, Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights and associated issues (gender based violence and harmful cultural practices) and business management amongst others. We also did a lot of work with the youths on self-esteem, peer pressure and decision-making in the hope that targeting the younger generation would lead to safer sexual practices and consequently reduce HIV transmission.

How long did you go for?
10 weeks!

How did you find out about the opportunity?
When I was 16 I was part of National Citizen Service, a similar youth volunteering programme but instead based in my local hometown where they advocated the ICS programme.

How was it funded?
The UK government’s Department for International Development funds 90% of the programme, I had a fundraising target of £800. ICS covered all expenses from flights to visas to accommodation and food. The only money we were expected to bring was a maximum of £100 as spending money
for extras like souvenirs. The University travel bursary gave me £600, which was a massive help, and I raised the rest through donations from friends and family and doing the live below the line challenge.

**What was the best thing about your trip?**
There were so many amazing moments but I would have to say my UK teammates were the best! We definitely encountered a lot of problems during our placement and it was difficult at times and so it was great to have such a lovely team who became great friends, we found a great café to relax in during the weekends and afternoons and they made the best samosas which was a nice change to Nsima! (The Malawian staple dish which is a paste of maize flour and water).

**Were there any negatives?**
It was certainly a culture shock to start with. When we arrived at the hotel we in the capital we were due to stay at for the first few days of orientation there was no running water or electricity in our rooms. The living conditions in my host family were certainly basic with intermittent running water, a bucket “shower” and lots of power cuts but over the 10 weeks we quickly got used to it and it became normality.

**Did you learn anything new about yourself as a result of this trip?**
I learnt to appreciate what I have, it’s easy to take things for granted but when you don’t have access to simple things like a shower or a washing machine for 10 weeks you soon realise what a luxury they actually are. The experience made me think about what I want to do in the future after I finish university. I always thought I wanted to be a clinical psychologist but now I really want to work in international development, particularly women’s rights as visiting Malawi really highlighted the significant gender inequality that still exists.

**Any advice for other York students thinking of doing something similar?**
Definitely just apply! ICS is a really good way to volunteer sustainably, for example Mzimba and the communities our team worked in are going to be helped further by a subsequent cycles of volunteers with the same team leader to ensure the work we did will produce a notable long term impact. Although it sounds so clichéd it is a life changing experience. Whilst it certainly isn’t easy and you’ll undoubtedly come across a lot of challenges throughout your time there (our team certainly did!) it gives you the chance to be immersed in a culture so different from your own, meet some brilliant people and have some unforgettable experiences.

*International Service* is an international development charity protecting and promoting the rights of the most marginalised people around the world. They offer volunteer placements overseas in Latin America, the Middle East and West Africa, and work in areas such as female empowerment, disability rights and child poverty.

[www.internationalservice.org.uk](http://www.internationalservice.org.uk)