

Comhlámh's
Volunteering
Options

The Impact of International Volunteering on Host Organisations:

**A summary of research
conducted in India
and Tanzania**



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1.0 Introduction

Since the start of the decade, the number of Irish people interested in volunteering overseas in developing countries has increased. Although there are no comprehensive figures available about the numbers of people who volunteer abroad annually, evidence of this trend is provided by the growing number of Irish-based organisations that arrange placements¹, as well as by the increasing numbers of queries that agencies are receiving about going away to volunteer. In contrast to the more traditional two-year postings, many people are now considering volunteering for periods from several weeks to a few months. This may be done as part of a career break, a gap year, annual leave, or post-retirement, amongst other possibilities.

Comhlámh's Volunteering Options programme was established in 2004, in order to respond to this growing interest in shorter-term volunteering. Funded by Irish Aid, it aims to encourage good practice in the overseas volunteering sector, and to support volunteers in a longer-term commitment to development. A part of the Volunteering Options programme has been the development of a Code of Good Practice for volunteer sending organisations and a Volunteer Charter for volunteers. The consultations that resulted in the initial development of the Code and the Charter involved discussions with Irish volunteer-sending organisations and with returned volunteers. Discussions did not take place with organisations or communities that host international volunteers, however, due to both financial and time constraints.

In order to more fully represent the views of all the key stakeholders involved in volunteer placements, Comhlámh received funding from Irish Aid in 2006 to conduct research into the impact of international volunteering on host organisations and communities. Field research into the topic was undertaken with organisations in both Tanzania and India by FRONTERA, a UK-based management and development consulting company.

To date, there has been a dearth of information about the perspectives of host communities that are involved with international volunteers, despite the fact that volunteer placements are set up with the aim of working to further their development. While this research concentrates specifically on the responses of host organisations and communities to the Volunteer Charter and the Code of Practice, it is hoped that it will provide some useful and thought-provoking information that will encourage broader studies and research collaborations with these key groups.

¹ A mapping exercise conducted by Dóchas (2007) indicated that, since 2001, 24 organisations that place volunteers overseas have commenced operations in Ireland.

2.0 Scope and objectives of the research

The research aimed to include a minimum of 10 host organisations² each in Tanzania and India that have links to Irish volunteers and/or sending organisations. The research also aimed to address the specific issues highlighted in the draft Code of Practice and Volunteer Charter³, thus facilitating the input of the host organisations and the communities into the development of the documents.

The objectives of the field research in both countries were to examine:

- The involvement of the host organisations in the establishment and operation of programmes that involve international volunteers;
- The effectiveness and value of volunteering projects for the host organisations and the communities they serve;
- The contribution of international volunteering to furthering local development agendas; and
- Any ways the host organisations felt the content of the Code of Practice and Volunteer Charter needed to be amended in order to reflect their viewpoints.

3.0 Methodology

Initial briefings by Comhlámh and a number of related documents, including the Terms of Reference, the draft Code of Practice, and the draft Volunteer Charter provided the background information for the research. With the assistance of Irish sending organisations, Comhlámh compiled a list of host organisations in Tanzania and India to enable the establishment of initial contacts, and the researchers identified additional organisations. Appropriate interview schedules were developed by FRONTERA, and these were then vetted and confirmed by Comhlámh.

Data collection: Using these interview schedules, primary data were collected through face-to-face interviews with representatives of 12 host organisations in Tanzania and 10 in India. Further data were collected by conducting four focus group sessions in India (Delhi, Kolkata) and Tanzania (Dar Es Salaam, Moshi). Two volunteers also participated in the focus groups. Secondary data were collected from a range of sources that included relevant volunteer networks and consultants to NGOs and INGOs.

² Please see the acknowledgements for the list of host organisations that participated in the research.

³ These documents have since been finalised, incorporating the findings and recommendations of the research with host organisations. Both are available to download at <http://www.volunteeringoptions.org/index.php/plain/volunteercharter>

4.0 India and Tanzania: The cultural context of volunteering

Although the Euro-American concept and practice of volunteering has influenced the conceptualisation of volunteering in the developing world, it is important to recognise that volunteering exists in a variety of forms in all developing countries including India and Tanzania. Despite the differences in the development trends in India and Tanzania, the survival of many poor rural and urban communities depends on mutual self-help communities and groups in these countries during times of social and economic necessity.

The roots of volunteerism in Eastern society are completely different from its origins in Western society. In India for example, *Aparigraha*, a Sanskrit word, implies the value of non-accumulation or of not keeping anything more than is necessary for one's minimal needs. Volunteerism based on *Aparigraha* has another dimension, which is the willingness to receive knowledge from whoever is knowledgeable. The Sanskrit word *Tyaga* refers to giving away something for one's own self-purity and not for someone else's well-being. Thus, giving something away, *Pradana*, is accompanied by the inculcation or assimilation of humility and duty toward others when they accept what was given, *Graha*. Therefore, traditionally, voluntarism in India has a religious and philosophical significance.

In many parts of Africa, voluntarism in terms of mutual self-help and co-operation goes back to the time of non-monetised economies. For example, the Kiswahili word '*Harambee*' literally means 'pulling together'. It reflects a way of life that was common in Tanzania, Kenya and other parts of Africa, before the colonial era, which was centred on families and groups of people helping each other. The African Socialism experiment in Tanzania in the 1960s and the concept of '*Ujamaa*' are also based on self-help and self-reliance, or the idea that it is people, not things, that need to be developed, and that people can only develop themselves.

It can be argued that perhaps industrialisation, globalisation, the generalisation of money as a means of exchange, and the 'de-socialisation' and anonymity that accompanied urbanisation have undermined such values as social capital, solidarity and mutual assistance in many developing countries. Although a more in-depth examination of the cultural context of volunteering is outside the scope of this study, it is suggested that both sending and hosting organisations should give the issue consideration when setting up volunteer placements, in order to make international volunteering as participatory and contextually relevant as possible.

5.0 Host Organisations and volunteers: Background information

As noted, 12 host organisations in Tanzania and 10 host organisations in India participated in face-to-face interviews for the study. The participating Tanzanian organisations were located in three areas, namely Dar Es Salaam, Arusha and Moshi. The participating Indian organisations were located in New Delhi and Kolkata. The host organisations ranged from community-based organisations to branches of international organisations, both secular and religious, which were engaged in a wide range of activities. These included working with children (including child protection and sponsorship), women's groups (including gender awareness programmes), health programmes, community development, education and training, income generation and livelihood programmes, drinking water and sanitation initiatives, and capacity building. The organisations also varied in their resources and the scale of their operations.

International volunteers engaged in projects related to all the above-mentioned activities, and related skills were in great demand among the host organisations. The data gathered revealed that the majority (80% – 81%) of the international volunteers in both Tanzanian and Indian host organisations were short-term volunteers, i.e., with placements of less than three months. Approximately 11% of international volunteers in the host organisations in Tanzania and India were medium-term volunteers, that is, with placements between three and twelve months. Long-term volunteers with placements over twelve months were the least common, at an average of 8% in both the countries.

6.0 Volunteers and Volunteering: Host organisations' views

The research found that both groups of respondents (host organisation representatives from India and Tanzania) defined volunteers as unpaid workers who dedicate themselves to a cause in which they believe. Their international volunteers generally came from Europe and North America, although some organisations reported receiving small numbers of volunteers from other parts of the world. Short-term volunteering was popular with international volunteers in both India and Tanzania: as noted above, only a minority of the organisations received volunteers for medium- and longer-term placements.

Respondents from Tanzania had a mixed reaction when asked about the knowledge of the volunteers about their organisations' work on arrival, whereas in India, the response was that volunteers' knowledge was 'above average'. In relation to the cultural sensitivity of the respondents, the same pattern emerged, with Tanzania having a mixed response and India giving the 'thumbs up' to volunteers. According to one respondent in Tanzania, "volunteers need to be more flexible, and cultural sensitivity needs to be taught to [people] as a prerequisite to becoming volunteers". When asked about any difficulties relating to international volunteers, the responses indicated that language appeared to be a major barrier. As noted by one respondent in Tanzania: "Language is the number one limitation and yet, quite unfortunately, some of the volunteers don't even try to learn the language, they are just satisfied with having a translator every time." Seven of the ten Indian organisations also noted that language difficulties could pose a major barrier between volunteers and locals.

Some of the other problems noted by Tanzanian respondents included volunteers' lack of contributions to projects with which they are involved. One respondent stated that "we see many short-term volunteers here in Tanzania as it is a popular country to be in with lots of tourist places to see and experience, but the amount of work they actually do is questionable, mainly due to lack of experience and language skills". This was echoed by several respondents in India, one of whom said that "we have some volunteers who really want to be tourists. Many are hard workers, though, but some lack any real objective". The main benefits of international volunteering, as identified by both groups of respondents, were 'skill sharing' and 'improved cultural awareness'. Additionally, the financial resources brought by volunteers were welcomed as being very beneficial to the development of work outside volunteer programmes. According to one respondent in Tanzania, hosting volunteers brought advantages by helping to "link host communities with sending organisations or other development partners... eventually, the latter may become a donor or sponsor for some development activities".

"Some of these volunteers would come and be with us, but just [as] we start to get used to working with them they are already very tired and bored, and need a break in Zanzibar. So they tell us they will work for two weeks, but after three days they want to go on safari. Given a chance, we would screen them to make sure they are the enduring type." Host organisation representative, Tanzania.

"Having volunteers from a different cultural background has always been an enriching mutual learning experience for [our organisation]. The perspectives of people from a different background help in understanding problems differently, as well as planning strategies in a structured way. Volunteers also bring with them new perspectives and learning." Host organisation, India

7.0 Volunteer Programmes: Structure and operations

Development of volunteer placements: A majority of the organisations had active involvement in the development of volunteer roles with respect to specific placements. These role descriptions were reasonably flexible and took into account the volunteers' inputs. Only a small minority of the organisations had their own structured marketing programmes (2 out of 22), although six of the respondents reported that they had "some involvement" in their sending organisation's marketing programme. An overwhelming majority of the organisations stated that they had no involvement whatsoever in the recruitment of international volunteers, and they agreed unanimously that more involvement on the part of the hosting organisation is essential.

Pre-departure/in-country training for volunteers: Structured training for volunteers, with defined objectives based on the needs of the projects and the volunteers, was not common in either of the countries. All but one of the respondents in Tanzania did not deliver any structured training to the volunteers, while none of the Indian organisations did. In general, only an informal orientation was provided by the hosting organisations. Despite the fact that both this informal orientation and some field training were provided by a majority of the organisations, structured training with clear objectives and formats was identified as one of the key areas to be addressed to develop and support programmes involving international volunteers. In Tanzania, the need for pre-departure training to increase volunteers' awareness and understanding about the host countries, organisations and their projects was emphasised.

"More training should be given to volunteers before they arrive. The sending organisations can do this by working closely with their respective hosting organisations. This would make it easier for everyone." Host organisation representative, India

Nearly all of the organisations said they had no contact with their international volunteers prior to the placement. One organisation did correspond with their medium-term and long-term volunteers before their arrival and found the interactions to be useful. Both sets of respondents stated that more involvement in the selection process and better communication between the volunteer, the sending organisation and the hosting organisation would benefit all parties.

“Lately, most of the volunteers have been sent to the host countries more to cater for the demand from the public for volunteer placements, rather than actually sending volunteers to address the local needs for development of the host country. This is also giving an opportunity to the volunteers to make it a holiday trip rather than actually contributing to the host country. This has to be discouraged, and hence it should be the responsibility of both the sending organisation and the host organisation that the volunteers are placed and assigned to appropriate projects with realistic objectives.” Host organisation representative, Tanzania

Monitoring and evaluation of volunteers: Nineteen organisations reported that they provided a supervisor at all times for the volunteers, and that mentoring was provided on an informal basis. None of the organisations received any support from the sending organisations for these initiatives. Only one of the organisations received any health and safety guidelines from their sending organisation, while all of the respondents agreed that guidelines developed jointly between the sending organisation and the hosting organisation would be very useful. Thirteen of the organisations had a formal monitoring and evaluation process for volunteer programmes, whereas seven organisations reported that they only ‘monitor’ and do not ‘evaluate’ their volunteers.

General comments: The main benefits of working with sending organisations were identified as: “exposure to complementary organisations and people to increase funding for projects” through further funding from the sending organisations; the development of new contacts; and direct contributions from the volunteers and the “knowledge sharing” that takes place as a result of placements. In India, the respondents highlighted the need for more skilled volunteers, particularly in the areas of HR development & training, IT, engineering, and organisational development experts, in order to “improve the standards of work that is carried out”. This demand for more highly skilled personnel was echoed in Tanzania.

All of the organisations agreed that the Code of Practice and Volunteer Charter were useful documents. Particular suggestions for the future included: the development

of a Code of Practice for hosting organisations; more emphasis on the training and preparation of volunteers; and, specifically, more emphasis on the need for volunteers to be culturally sensitive.

8.0 Focus Group Discussions: Supplementary findings

The data collected in the face-to-face interviews were supplemented by focus groups, which were held in Kolkata, New Delhi, Dar Es Salaam and Moshi. While many of the same issues were raised in these groups as were highlighted in the face-to-face interviews, the focus group setting encouraged participants to go into greater detail. The findings, therefore, provided very useful supplementary information on topics including pre-placement preparation, the demand for volunteers, and volunteers’ accountability.

Pre-placement preparation: As in the face-to-face interviews, participants highlighted the need for better communication between all stakeholders, a more open exchange of information, and for volunteers to be better informed about their host country on arrival. According to one participant, “the mindsets of the volunteers need to be made before they come. Orientation has to be realistic. The sending organisations can refer to the host country organisations for further updated information, which is required. A clear picture has to be depicted to the volunteers before they leave their countries”.

“The organisations sending volunteers should organise an orientation programme for volunteers along with the host organisation prior to their selection. Such an orientation programme will help volunteers and the organisations formulate a good volunteer programme. The host organisations should also be actively involved in the selection of volunteers.” Host organisation representative, India.

The host organisation members called for a rigorous, non-partisan, selection process to look at the real motivations and the skills of the volunteers being sent. One suggestion was that an independent observer, who could be an ex-volunteer, could be involved in the selection process. It was also agreed that the terms and rules regarding leave and other HR matters should be included in volunteers’ contracts, which would help to ensure that volunteers adhere to certain rules and regulations concerning their leave and other travel activities. Again, concerns were raised about the cultural

sensitivity of first-time volunteers, and it was recommended that sending organisations promote a realistic assessment of the objectives of the project and the working conditions involved.

Demand for volunteers: It was repeated that longer-term, skilled volunteers were in high demand among the host communities and projects. However, it was frequently mentioned that such volunteers are in short supply. One respondent stated that “we are a school and we need more teachers. We need volunteers with expertise in IT, primary education skills, and English. Yes, we would like more of those”. Another participant echoed this demand for particular skills: “More expert volunteers will be more useful, like engineers, doctors and teachers. The experience now is that some volunteers just come for a tour with nothing to offer, so they spend most of their time touring.” The benefits of volunteers, in terms of their ability to create links with organisations in their home countries, were reiterated in the focus groups: one respondent in Tanzania stated that short-term volunteers “have the capacity to link host organisations or communities with organisations in their own countries, which have objectives similar to ours and may assist host communities financially”.

Volunteers’ accountability: The accountability of volunteers during their placements was also discussed: one respondent called for “monitoring and evaluation - whatever reports are made by volunteers to the sending organisation, the same should be checked by the host organisation. Host organisations/host communities should also evaluate volunteers and send reports to the sending organisation as confidential documents. There has to be a way to present this... so that volunteers understand the measure of their accountability”. Another stated that sometimes there needed to be more of a spirit of partnership between volunteers and host communities, commenting that “while it is true that some volunteers come with skills to use for development, they tend to forget that they are supposed to share skills and that learning is a give-and-take situation”.

Regarding child protection, participants stated that they had never had concerns about this issue with any of their volunteers. However, respondents noted that precautions should be taken to protect children: for example, one participant stated that “both protection of volunteers as well as protection of the people with whom the volunteer is working is required and is important. In fact, volunteers working very closely with children should [be made to] take a lot of precautionary measures”.

Risks of creating a dependency culture: Two significant comments were noted regarding the threat of a dependency culture being created through certain actions of volunteers. As volunteering aims to promote the virtues of self sufficiency, participants

highlighted that gifts and personal donations may not be the right way to show one’s commitment. It was noted that “some volunteers do things that create a sense of dependence in the communities – small donations in monies, clothes and any other gifts may be a hindrance to self-reliant attitudes”. According to one participant, “it is not proper to give monies to members of the host communities, especially while in placement. It is feared that it may create an attitude of dependence, while volunteerism is expected to promote self-reliance. Many receiving organisations prohibit volunteers from dishing out monies to individuals”. In general, it was felt that placing restrictions on volunteers’ donations was a positive approach.

Recommendations for the future: Finally, in terms of recommendations for how volunteers can continue to remain involved with their host communities on their return home, several respondents called for them to continue to fundraise to support the projects they worked with, thereby contributing to the sustainability of the work. Some participants felt that although volunteers were frequently asked to share their “rich experiences” in the host countries on their return home, many failed to do so.

“Be good ambassadors for host communities. Be objective, even in presentation of the things that seem to be negative about the host communities. Share their experiences in a positive way. There is always a brighter side of everything.” Host organisation, Tanzania

9.0 Recommendations arising from the research

9.1 Sending organisations should ensure the participatory involvement of host organisations in the selection, recruitment, development education, and training of international volunteers.

The responses indicated that international volunteers need to be much better informed before they arrive in the host country. A good knowledge about the country and the community of placement should therefore be a prerequisite for volunteering. Volunteers should have access to development education, training with defined objectives and structures, and a comprehensive induction at the host location that provides clear guidance on their roles and responsibilities. This will help to ensure that potential volunteers are made more aware of the people, culture, work environment, and health and safety issues of the relevant country and the community in question. It will also facilitate the selection of the right volunteers for the host organisations, according to their specific needs.

9.2 Sending organisations should ensure the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of volunteering by developing policies that include standardised processes and evaluation tools, based on the principles and indicators in Comhlámh's Code of Good Practice and Volunteer Charter. Consultation with the host organisations/communities can provide critical input to this process.

Monitoring and evaluation are crucial as they will facilitate learning and provide feedback to all parties. Volunteers should also be made aware that their performance will be evaluated, which will emphasise the importance of their role. Additionally, they should undertake to abide by child protection guidelines and other policies. Consideration should be given as to whether a coordinated approach between the sending and the host organisation is workable and whether a monitoring and evaluation tool should be made readily available for the host organisations, in order to formalise the process. Training in the application of any such monitoring and evaluation tools would be essential.

9.3 Sending organisations should publish case studies of successful volunteering to guide and motivate new volunteers.

The provision of such information can help to inform volunteers about how and why volunteering placements can be successful, and remind them of the important role they can play in helping a host organisation to achieve its objectives.

9.4 Sending organisations should place volunteers with relevant skills as required by the host projects.

Skills that are in great demand among the host organisations include engineering, medicine, teaching, project design, HR, IT, primary education, health, and English language and presentation skills. Sending organisations should select volunteers with relevant skills.

9.5 Comhlámh should incorporate the findings from the research with host organisations into the Code of Practice and Volunteer Charter.

The incorporation of the data and feedback would help to reflect the viewpoints of these key stakeholders in the development of standards of good practice for sending organisations. Topics to be considered for incorporation into the Charter included: observing local dress codes, showing efforts to learn the local language, acting as an ambassador to the host community, and avoiding interference in the administration of the host organisation. For the Code, it was suggested that organisations should: conduct background checks on volunteers, to ensure the protection of children and vulnerable adults; involve host organisations in developing volunteers' role definitions; provide training and induction to develop volunteers' cultural sensitivity; and develop country-specific health and safety manuals in conjunction with host organisations.

9.6 Comhlámh should facilitate the development of a Code of Practice to be adopted by the host organisations.

Host organisations have responsibilities towards international volunteers and they should also have a Code applicable to them. This would help integrate the process adopted by Comhlámh through its Code of Practice and Volunteer Charter and would facilitate meaningful communication between the sending and host organisations. Comhlámh should facilitate the development of such a code and collaborate with host

organisations in different countries where volunteer placements are being organised by Irish sending organisations. The research indicates a need to bring representatives from sending organisations, host organisations, and a number of committed returned volunteers together in a workshop to provide inputs to the process of developing such a code and to align it to the Volunteer Charter and the Code of Practice.

9.7 Future research should be considered on a number of topics, to increase awareness of all aspects of international volunteering.

Possible areas of research include: assessing the scope of online international volunteering, for which no travel would be necessary and for which host projects could utilise the internet to receive expert advice from volunteers; and examining intercultural communications in the context of international volunteering.

Notes

Established in 1975, Comhlámh is a member and supporter organisation open to anyone interested in social justice, human rights and global development issues.

Our Volunteering Options programme works to encourage responsible, responsive overseas volunteering and aims to support volunteers in an ongoing commitment to development. The Volunteering Options publication, *Working for a Better World: A Guide to Volunteering in Global Development*, has information and advice for volunteers before, during and after a placement. It also contains a searchable directory of over 115 organisations that arrange volunteer placements in developing countries. This information is also included in the website www.volunteeringoptions.org. We also offer workshops for volunteers before they go overseas and after they come home, as well as one-to-one information and advice for people thinking about volunteering.

To find out more about joining Comhlámh and supporting our work, please visit www.comhlamh.org or call +353 1 478 3490. Your membership can help us campaign for a better and more just world.



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