

# **The Role of Volunteers in International Development**

## **VSO Position Paper**



# Introduction

VSO is a leading exponent of volunteering as a means of enabling sustainable change. VSO has promoted and adapted this approach to fight global poverty and disadvantage for over 40 years. This paper aims to draw on VSO's practical experience to articulate what we believe to be the value of volunteering in international development at the start of the 21st century.

## VSO's perspective on international development

VSO sees development as a continuous, multi-dimensional process that empowers individuals, organisations and communities to tackle poverty, take control of their future and realise their potential. Contributing to development requires a commitment to learning, humility and respect.

Every development context is unique. Kaplan<sup>1</sup> maintains that development is about 'enabling people to become more conscious, to understand themselves and their context so they are better able to take control of their own futures'. Kaplan sees development as 'facilitating resourcefulness' and outlines how an effective development practice 'accompanies' partners through their developmental changes.

VSO endorses this perspective. We understand the term international development to describe the power of all members of the global community to support the aspirations of poorer communities. This belief is the cornerstone of all our work. It has been translated into a number of approaches and methodologies as described below.

## The distinctive contribution of volunteering to international development

We believe that volunteers can and do build capacity and raise awareness of issues of poverty, development and global interdependence in ways that no other development intervention can.

- **The creative power of shared endeavour.** Working in a cross-cultural partnership towards a common goal generates new learning and solutions. Bringing about positive change often requires considerable time, so we are careful to establish close links with local partner organisations with similar values. These links provide a greater chance of continuity, consistency and sustainability. Together we aim to match the most appropriate volunteer for the job, assess progress and map out a development journey which may involve a number of volunteers in a range of roles, and other support over a period of time.
- **Reciprocity generates cultural understanding and trust.** The reciprocal nature of volunteering is particularly valuable. Living and working within communities over an extended period of time encourages sensitive and appropriate responses and a sense of equality that increase the likelihood of a successful outcome. The average two-year placement period allows for volunteers' roles to evolve and ideas to be tested and adapted to changing circumstances and demands.
- **Participation is key.** Sustainable development requires participation, leading to ownership by the communities involved. We seek to incorporate participatory approaches in many facets of our work through volunteers. Technical cooperation may be viewed as a 'top down' approach, but volunteering as

<sup>1</sup> Kaplan, A (2000), *Understanding Development as a Living Process*, Kumarian Press

practised by VSO is recipient led. We receive requests from local partners. We work with them to identify appropriate roles that volunteers can play before recruiting appropriate people. We work together to develop these roles.

- **Volunteers are effective agents of change in diverse settings.** The range of placements undertaken by VSO volunteers, together with their interpersonal skills and capabilities, means that volunteers work and communicate with people at a range of levels in society, including government (national and regional level), community-based groups, civil society organisations and geographically-isolated communities.

Volunteers' activity at all these levels puts them in a unique position to support networking and work collaboratively with different partners to influence development strategies. The collective experience and insights of volunteers and their colleagues can inform decision-makers and contribute to long-term planning by national governments.

- **Volunteers are successful advocates.** Volunteers appreciate first hand the aspirations of communities and the constraints on them. They can strengthen the voice of their local colleagues both during their placement and crucially on their return. Both VSO and individual volunteers use the experience of volunteers and colleagues to inform development learning, action and policy change. For example, VSO's 'Treatment for Life' campaign drew on such experiences to contribute to policy changes which affected the internationally set prices of key pharmaceuticals. We also participate in advocacy-based coalitions where local and international NGOs work together.
- **VSO volunteers support the growth of civil society.** Civil society engages people in social action and gives them a practical stake in their own communities. It therefore has an important role in sustainable development. Volunteering is the foundation stone upon which much civil society is developed worldwide. A strong civil society is recognised as essential for good governance and tackling poverty. More than a third of VSO volunteers work directly with civil society organisations, helping strengthen them (for example through IT or fundraising support) and delivering services (for example in NGO schools and hospitals). Many others support civil society organisations as part of their roles in government bodies.

VSO also supports the development of local and national volunteering in countries where we work. Across Africa and Asia, people offer their services to their extended family and community in ways true to the spirit of what the North terms 'volunteering'. Indigenous volunteering initiatives often build on these less formal, longstanding approaches to community activity.

### Case study: VSO Philippines

The VSO Philippines TOSCADAR programme involves international volunteers working alongside locally recruited volunteers to rebuild self-esteem and deliver much needed services to refugees from religious conflict in Mindanao. Christian and Moslem volunteers from VSO and the Xavier University, Year of Service (YOS) scheme work with Moslem communities to challenge and change perceptions and rebuild broken lives and communities. VSO supports YOS with training, organisational support and advice.

- **Volunteers are strong proponents of global education.** Volunteers gain a better understanding of their role within the global community as they directly experience the connections between international policy agendas and life at grass-roots level. This motivates many volunteers to increase public knowledge of development issues and challenge aspects of their own society, which help to maintain inequality, such as inequitable systems of trade. This is particularly relevant in the present climate of suspicion and fear surrounding people from different countries and cultures. Volunteers also bring back skills and experience, which contribute to developing corporate social responsibility. VSO supports serving and returned volunteers to establish networks between communities, schools, organisations and individuals to reinforce the wider global community.

## What makes VSO volunteers distinctive?

Volunteers have distinctive qualities and characteristics that make them particularly effective at working in partnership to share skills and learning with disadvantaged people. The key characteristics common to all volunteers are set out below.

- **All VSO volunteers live and work within the community.** They receive a salary and accommodation comparable to local colleagues. This enables them to work alongside their colleagues in a culturally sensitive way, which is vital to build mutual trust and understanding between volunteers and the community they work in. It helps foster willingness to work in partnership to conceive innovative solutions. Feedback from partners also tells us that the presence of an international volunteer living within a remote community can boost local self-esteem and offer significant psychological support in regions of conflict or repression.
- **Volunteers want to share their learning and learn from others.** Volunteering is a two-way process which involves much more than transferring 'hard' technical skills. Volunteers embrace the opportunity for mutual learning because they see personal growth as a key element in effective skill sharing. This attitude is highly valued by VSO's partners, who believe shared endeavour is a powerful force for change.

"If you are here because you pity us, if you came because you think you have the answers to our problems, if you expect that after two years you can look back on a project which you have established, there is no place for you here. But if you are here because you have unanswered questions of your own, if you have come to receive as well as to give, if after two years you will be happy to leave behind friends who have become more self-confident and proud as human beings and as farmers because of the friendship you have shared with them, then please stay with us."

*Romy Tiongco, VSO partner in the Philippines*

- **VSO volunteers focus their work on requests voiced by the community.** VSO responds to local demand for volunteers. Volunteers act as facilitators, encouraging creativity amongst partner agencies and disadvantaged groups. Volunteers participate in cross-cultural teamwork rather than managing projects. They bring an alternative, external perspective that can galvanise and facilitate change. This may result in slower action but VSO favours this approach as we believe it leads to greater sustainability.

- **Volunteers bring passion and commitment to the work they do.** Volunteers are motivated by the desire to help disadvantaged communities improve their quality of life. They usually dedicate between nine months and three years of their lives to working and living within a community.
- **Volunteers set aside the importance of financial reward.** As volunteers forgo financial gain and job opportunities, remuneration is not their primary motivation. However, volunteers' 'marketability' on return may well be enhanced by the skills and knowledge acquired during their placement.
- **Volunteers are skilled professionals.** VSO contributes to development through volunteers with a wide range of skills and experience, working with a variety of partners, from central and local government to local NGOs. The majority of VSO partner do not request 'development workers' they want professional people with commitment and the right interpersonal skills. The contribution volunteers make to development is facilitated by well researched, focused country strategic plans and well-researched placements. VSO staff work with local partners to develop and monitor these.
- **Volunteers possess refined 'soft' skills.** VSO selects volunteers on the basis of their personal qualities and approaches to working with others as well as their professional expertise and experience. We believe these characteristics are crucial to help achieve lasting change. Our volunteers and partners receive training to help them adapt and hone such skills, for example using participatory approaches.
- **Volunteers aspire to be global citizens.** Many volunteers are driven by the desire to help others while deepening their own understanding of developing communities. VSO believes in the power of each individual to make a difference. This is fundamental to the idea of volunteering and increasingly relevant to the notion of global citizenship.
- **Volunteers believe in an international approach towards development.** Volunteers working in communities in all regions of the world are testament to the existence of a global society. VSO's volunteers are international. They are recruited in the UK, the Netherlands and Canada, but also increasingly in the Philippines, Kenya, and Uganda via our Southern Volunteer Programme. This reflects our understanding that skilled people, regardless of the country they are born or live in, are able and eager to share skills wherever the need arises. International volunteering also challenges the myth that knowledge has to flow from the more developed North to the less developed South.

## What roles can volunteers play?

VSO focuses on working with other organisations to tackle specific needs in each country. Each VSO country programme works towards achieving three to four strategic aims, such as improving the quality of education or increasing awareness of HIV and AIDS.

To do this we have to understand the range of factors to be addressed if both *symptoms* and *causes* of any element of poverty or disadvantage are to be tackled. We must then seek to respond in an appropriate way, whether the need is for individual capability building, improving access to or quality of services at community level, capacity building at organisational level, or initiatives that address the causes of disadvantage at a higher level. A combination of all of these is often required. For individual volunteers' contributions to be most effective, they must be part of a linked strategy.

In order to realise this aim, programme staff develop partnerships with key organisations that are geographically and/or thematically focused. Volunteer placements may be geographically clustered and focused. This enables more holistic support for development across sectoral boundaries and within a more tightly defined area such as a district. VSO staff seek to build linkages between partners and placements through a range of ongoing practical support.

VSO sees four main types of role that volunteers may play in tackling disadvantage. In many placements individual volunteers may contribute to more than one at any time or over the life of a placement. The potential roles are:

Service delivery	Improving service quality and/or availability
Building individual capabilities	Improving the skills and confidence of beneficiaries and/or colleagues
Building organisational capacity	Strengthening systems within an organisation
Supporting institutional development	Strengthening partnerships between organisations and strengthening and strengthening national policy frameworks

- **Service delivery.** The goal of much development effort focuses on improving basic services and systems such as health, education and communication networks. Many VSO volunteers support this improvement or availability, for example by teaching in secondary schools or supporting health care provision. But even where volunteers work to improve management capacity within an organisation, volunteers often gain the credibility they need by supporting direct service delivery.

This type of work most obviously and directly benefits disadvantaged people. The effect can often be dramatic and long term for the individuals involved. In Ethiopia it is estimated that VSO support has enabled the Ethiopian government to teach an extra 8,000 students a year who would not otherwise have gained a place at secondary school.

There are many ways in which VSO and partners can capitalise on the closeness of these placements to grass-roots level and increase their potential impact. This can be done by:

- adding secondary roles to a volunteer's objectives such as raising gender or HIV and AIDS awareness;
- supporting people at grass roots in making their voices heard by policy makers;
- developing geographically or thematically linked placements.

There may be many reasons why adequate basic services are not available to disadvantaged people: the destruction of services by war or disaster, lack of availability of national funds, or poor or corrupt administration. In order to ensure VSO contributes to sustainable change, any work to improve the delivery of services that addresses the *symptoms* of disadvantage must be clearly linked to initiatives that tackle the *causes* of disadvantage.

### Case study: VSO Ghana tackling symptoms and causes of disadvantage

VSO has been supporting educationally disadvantaged communities in the North of Ghana for the last 40 years by providing secondary school teachers where they are in short supply. More students have been taught than otherwise would have been and many have received a higher quality of education than would otherwise have been available. But without linking VSO's support to those agencies/government ministries who are, or should be, tackling the causes of this disadvantage, VSO would be creating a dependency by service provision rather than resolving any longer term issues. Therefore VSO Ghana has built on its partnership with the Ministry of Education and looked creatively at issues that help to address the causes of disadvantage. VSO Ghana is lobbying the government for increased resources for the North and supporting a national volunteering scheme to address the shortage.

VSO supports the improvement of service delivery where:

- ❑ there are opportunities for individual capability building;
- ❑ there is a close and direct link to disadvantaged communities;
- ❑ governments are committed to long-term programmes for tackling local skill shortages;
- ❑ VSO or other development actors are working to address the causes of the skill shortage.

- **Building individual capabilities.** The distinctive characteristics of volunteering influence the way volunteers build the capabilities of the colleagues and beneficiaries they work with, often on a one-to-one basis. The individuals benefiting from this experience are most often at grass-roots, community level where alternative opportunities for personal development and cross-cultural sharing are extremely limited. Such experiences can affect the attitudes, behaviour, approaches, values, aspirations and self-esteem of partners (as well as those of volunteers). This depth of personal change is unique to volunteering.

VSO partners highly value this people-to-people approach. VSO champions this strength as a valid and valued contribution to sustainable development. Over the past 40 years we have accrued considerable learning about the conditions needed for skill share on a one-to-one basis to work effectively, and we are always learning more about how we can add value to this core role that all volunteers play.

VSO believes that increasing the skills and confidence of colleagues and beneficiaries can facilitate larger, broader changes within communities and organisations. This type of intervention can improve the quality or availability of services and can strengthen systems within organisations.

- **Building organisational capacity.** Organisations are made up of people. VSO can build on its strength at enhancing the individual capabilities of people within an organisation. We can go beyond this to strengthen an organisation's ability to develop and maintain effective systems that will empower the organisation to deal with future change.

Such roles involve facilitating major change in organisational behaviour. Many interventions in this area have failed because insufficient time and effort are invested in working with the people involved. This is precisely where VSO volunteers' strengths lie. We work alongside people to understand an organisation and the context it is working in. We then develop ideas for longer-term change with the organisation's staff, in a participatory and creative way. Outcomes may include improved management capacity or financial systems, increased IT, fundraising or strategic planning capabilities.

As Rick James<sup>2</sup> recognises, “We need a broad vision of capacity building as an ongoing process designed to help organisations adapt in a world made uncertain by globalisation. Southern NGOs attach more importance to individual capacity building than international NGOs. This needs complementary interventions at societal, inter-organisational, organisational and individual level.”

If this type of work is to be successful, we have learnt that it requires:

- ❑ an in-depth assessment of an organisation’s requirements;
- ❑ a basic level of organisational stability;
- ❑ an openness to change on the part of key staff;
- ❑ a willingness to prioritise time for staff to work on change agendas.

Such roles may need a succession of placements over a longer period.

Volunteers often collaborate with a few key colleagues within an organisation that works for the benefit of disadvantaged people. In this way, the direct effect of their work may be limited, but the indirect ‘multiplier’ effect may be great.

### Case study: VSO Ethiopia

VSO volunteer, Chris Jordan, worked in a peripatetic team of in-service teacher educators in Beneshagul Gumz, Ethiopia, for two years. By bringing together primary teachers from across the region for skills training, self-help cluster groups were formed and supported by the Regional Education Bureau. Chris was able to forge links between the Bureau and education programmes funded by USAID, UNICEF and the British Council. Drawing on her practical experience in the remotest villages, Chris was able to advise education programme managers on curricula, programme design and logistics.

Chris has now moved to Addis Ababa to coordinate eight VSO volunteer members of a federal level task force on teacher education policy reform. This is building on research initiated by a VSO policy adviser working in the Ministry of Education, now supported by DFID.

● **Supporting institutional development.** As the case study above illustrates, volunteers can also play an effective role in supporting change beyond the boundaries of a single organisation. They may do this by:

- ❑ supporting NGO partners to network with other organisations to share learning and work more constructively together, for example to advocate for change. For donor-dependent NGOs, building alliances, networks and coalitions is a vital part of the process towards developing independence;
- ❑ building local capacity to implement legislation or public sector reforms. These may include decentralisation or supporting the design, for example, of legislation and delivery systems relating to land reform or child protection at a national level.

These roles often emerge through long-term partnerships. In order to make a successful contribution, volunteers need to have considerable experience to draw on and to work with local colleagues to ensure appropriateness and sustainability.

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<sup>2</sup> Rick James (1998) ‘Demystifying Organisational Development: Practical Capacity Building Experiences of African NGOs’ INTRAC



## Conclusion

Volunteers are special people. They come from all cultures and walks of life, driven by passion and commitment to set aside the financial reward they could command as skilled professionals, to live and work sensitively amongst a community, sharing learning to nurture sustainable development and global citizenship.

Volunteers make a unique contribution to development, reaching beyond what money and other forms of technical assistance can accomplish. The emphasis on shared learning plays a powerful role in enhancing appropriate solutions, international cultural understanding and respect.

There is an ongoing need to learn about how we best balance our contribution to building individual capabilities, delivering services and increasing the capacity of organisations and institutions. While as an agency we strive to do more at the organisational and institutional level, we must also recognise that supporting service delivery gives VSO direct and appreciated contact with and learning from those at the grass roots. In our partners' eyes, it is this willingness to work amongst those that are poor that gives VSO a legitimacy to challenge and change the policies that keep people poor.

Volunteers' hands-on participation in sustainable change is invaluable to their credibility as advocates and agents of change at a variety of levels and settings. VSO's role is to shape, complement and build on this contribution.