



Forum Paper on Evolving your Volunteering Programme for the COVID World

June 2020

Forum Webinar Evolving your Volunteering Programme for the COVID World

Wednesday 10 June 2020, 9am GMT

Staff and volunteers of Forum members can register
by emailing jobrien@forum-ids.org



Presenters



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Moderator



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The COVID-19 pandemic is prompting many Forum members to adapt and evolve their volunteering for development programmes. In this webinar, we will hear from organisations that have successfully evolved their programmes over many years, and those that are doing so in response to COVID-19.

Our aim with this webinar is to provide a space for Forum members who have been on this journey to share their experience, the lessons they have learned, and advice for our members in adapting their programmes to a post-COVID world.

Forum hosted a webinar on Evolving your Volunteering Programme for the COVID World on June 10, 2020. You can watch the recording of the webinar [here](#).

The purpose of this webinar was to learn how organisations are adapting their volunteering programmes to the current challenges presented by COVID-19. Volunteering for Development organisations have been at the forefront of providing services during crises and disasters in the past and have learnt a great deal from these experiences, which they are bringing forward to confront the current crisis. The presenters discussed how they have had to find new ways of working while ensuring community and volunteer safety and providing meaningful support to projects. This has largely meant more use of digital tools, a blended approach to volunteering, and a shift in the services they provide.

Context for the Webinar

Volunteering for Development is centred around people-to-people connections to build trust; often this means international volunteers engaging with local communities to work together. Due to COVID-19, travel, both nationally and internationally, is restricted and social distancing measures are in place in most countries. At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of international volunteers around



the world were repatriated, and millions of volunteers adapted to the new reality of restrictions imposed by COVID.

Some organisations are supporting local volunteers in-country to take up the challenge of delivering their programmes, in some cases with the help of remote international volunteers. Some have a long history of working with local volunteers to deliver their projects and some are making the shift. All organisations are relying on technology more than ever to make connections and develop new ways of working.

Overview

The future of volunteering will be about creativity, flexibility, innovation, and partnership, and the use of technology in volunteering was the common thread throughout the presentations. The COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique opportunity to try new platforms and reach more people. That being said, it was also agreed that there is no absolute replacement for in-person experiences and intercultural exchange.

International exchange and reciprocity are at the core of what [Norec](#) does, by facilitating South-South, South-North and North-South exchanges. Norec believes that everyone has something to provide and something to learn. Its original and fundamental mandate - the reciprocal exchange of staff - remains, but is temporarily paused. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Norec has been thinking more deeply about the purpose of exchange, as well as the model by which exchange is delivered. This includes considering how to achieve connections between participants at a time when physical exchange is not possible. Norec is calling this approach 'Exchange 2.0'. They have posited that they may be able to engage more people in international collaboration due to the lower costs associated with the use of technology, with not traveling internationally, and without the need for visas and time spent managing these logistical matters. They plan to test and verify this theory. There is a default positive equity of lockdown, allowing more people to have access to international exchange and partnership. Norec has made these connections by providing workshops and webinars, and by using low-tech digital platforms like WhatsApp. This has produced some achievements in organisational development and new institutional and technical skills in fundraising, communications, and advocacy.

The pause in international programmes has afforded Norec the time and space to review monitoring and evaluation systems and improve the volunteer programme, both for hosting and sending. It has also led to less travel, which leads to less pollution, and Norec is reconsidering how staff will travel in the future. While COVID-19 has made Norec programmes more creative and efficient, it recognises that in-person, reciprocal staff exchanges are invaluable and looks forward to being able to facilitate international exchanges again.



[VSO](#)'s approach to Volunteering for Development involves international volunteers and national volunteers working alongside community volunteers. This is part of their 'People First' approach. COVID-19 has increased the urgency of recognising the value of community volunteering and supporting remote volunteering. VSO is highlighting the importance of community-based volunteering approaches, supported and expanded by remote volunteers with experience and skills in pandemic response and broader development needs. This blended approach to volunteering brings together the contributions of unique volunteering groups and combines diverse skills and competencies to produce specific relationships and ways of working that support development outcomes for primary actors. VSO is supporting community and national volunteer efforts that work within local political and power dynamics, while maintaining its commitment to accountability and inclusion.

VSO is also working to change the conversation around Volunteering for Development and help integrate it as a serious approach across the volunteering sector. They believe we must set a certain standard which, when properly implemented, is a powerful driver for positive change. The time is now, with 2020 being a vital landmark for the 2030 goals. We must all redouble our efforts in this decade of action.

[ICYE](#) is an international youth exchange organisation with a base in Kenya. It is a founding member of VIO Society Kenya. All but two of their international volunteers had to be repatriated due to COVID-19. ICYE Kenya is living with this 'new normal', coping with new realities and developing opportunities for their communities. The harsh new realities for the communities include job losses, a shortage of basic necessities, the limitation of movement through curfew, the threat of the virus, a high incidence of domestic violence and child abuse, the erosion of cultural norms owing to the impact of social distancing on core community rituals such as large weddings and funerals, and psychological pressure. The realities for volunteers are that they are unable to travel and have no close contact with communities or peers. This has led to a reduction in community volunteer activities.

Because things will not go back to the way they were before, ICYE is rethinking how to approach its programmes. They had not previously worked with skilled professional volunteers, only youth. In a concerted effort to strengthen community livelihoods, the organisation is now engaging with local volunteers using phone and online connections to engage with projects, to support fundraising for projects and local communities, and to engage with professional volunteers like counsellors, marketing consultants, etc. This has enabled ICYE to focus its efforts where the need is greatest, like providing mental health care during this distressing time. They are finding that by using more local volunteers to support the community in strengthening livelihoods, they have helped communities to become more empowered.



Challenges

While there have been some positive outcomes for the volunteer involving organisations, there remain many challenges to delivering Volunteering for Development programmes during COVID-19. There is no doubt that face-to-face interactions are the most effective way to build relationships and trust, and to provide volunteers with invaluable intercultural experiences. Unfortunately COVID-19 has not only meant that travel is impossible, but has also resulted in fewer activities, meetings and workshops where people can engage with each other. This makes it difficult for volunteers and communities to feel connected, especially in cultures that are used to being more social. While digital solutions are cost-effective and can effectively reach more people than in-person volunteering, a lack of access to the internet or electricity in resource-poor communities remains an obstacle. It is crucial that communities facing these obstacles are not left behind.

Moving Forward

Volunteering is here to stay, but is having to adapt to a COVID world. There will be a greater reliance on local or community volunteers, especially while travel restrictions are in place. Virtual volunteering will become more common, and international volunteering may need to be limited. This hiatus could provide the opportunity for organisations to reflect more deeply on the purpose of their activities, and to develop strategies that enable them to continue their projects in new ways. Organisations will need to use funds more efficiently and consider the amount of travel that is actually required. In the context of COVID-19, volunteering involving organisations are increasingly looking at using a blended approach in which the digital aspect of volunteering could become a more central part of the volunteer experience. It is clear that the sector will need to evolve as the world around us changes.

Resources

Slides from the webinar: [Norec](#), [VSO](#), and [ICYE Kenya](#).