



Forum Paper on Remote Volunteering

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Presenters

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Forum Webinar on Remote Volunteering
Wednesday 20 May 2020, 9am GMT

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

International Forum for Volunteering in Development
Forum International du Volontariat pour le Développement

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted renewed interest in remote or online volunteering as an effective way for volunteers to support partners and contribute to programmes. Amongst other approaches, skilled volunteers who have returned home from overseas placements are continuing to support their host organisations through online platforms, and volunteers whose deployment has been delayed are beginning their placements online.

Our aim with this webinar is to provide a space for Forum members with extensive knowledge and experience in this area to share with the network, and for members to ask questions and share their own experience.

Forum hosted a webinar on remote volunteering in May 2020. You can watch a recording of the webinar [here](#).

The purpose of this webinar was to showcase a diverse range of remote approaches to volunteering. Presenters addressed practical aspects - online volunteering platforms, how remote volunteers are managed, and how remote volunteering links with in-person volunteer placements. They also tackled the bigger question of how a 'volunteering for development' approach, based on building relationships and trust between volunteer and partner, can be achieved remotely. With Singapore International Foundation, we demonstrated a slightly different model – a Forum member that has pivoted their strategic model in response to digital disruption by leveraging digital storytelling to inspire volunteer action.

Context

As a result of COVID, remote or online volunteering has come into focus for many Forum members as an effective way for volunteers to support partners and contribute to programmes. Amongst other approaches, skilled volunteers who have returned home from overseas placements are supporting their host organisations through online platforms, and volunteers whose deployment has been delayed are beginning their placements online.

Some Forum members have a long track record of using online spaces and platforms to support volunteer efforts. Their approaches range from task-based placements to long-term online relationships with partner organisations, to story-telling and promoting activism.

Other Forum members have less knowledge and experience of supporting remote volunteering. With this webinar, Forum asked more knowledgeable and experienced organisations to share with the network.

Overview

Some common threads connected all of the presentations.

A number of presenters made the point that remote volunteering is not new, that there is a solid body of research, experience and good practice in remote volunteering, and that it can be a very effective way to support programmes. It was also agreed that the basic principles of managing remote volunteers, and of designing and running programmes for remote volunteering, are fundamentally similar to those of in-person volunteering.

The [Cuso International e-volunteering programme](#), for example, formalised something that was already happening – international volunteers were coming home and continuing to support their partner organisations remotely.

Organisations see remote volunteering as a way to harness new technology in an increasingly interconnected world. [UNV's online volunteering service](#) launched in 2000 following conversations about reimagining volunteering for the digital era.

In 2011, Singapore International Foundation asked – ‘how do we leverage digital to bring people together to do good?’ In answering this question, they developed [Our Better World](#) as an online platform to tell human interest stories that raise awareness of non-profits doing good work, reaching people through social media and inspiring them to support the featured causes such as volunteering.

Remote volunteering can provide opportunities to people who are motivated to volunteer but who are not in a position to volunteer overseas.

There is no one approach to, or type of, e-volunteering, that works. Organisations should be flexible in their approach, and tailor it to the needs of different partners in different contexts.

The range of placements for remote volunteers is as wide and diverse as it is for in-person volunteers. Cuso International offers short-term task-based assignments as well as semester-long research projects to year-long support to international volunteers addressing a range of programme areas from gender equality and climate change to supporting the rights of indigenous people. Their remote volunteers either support partner organisations directly, or they support an international volunteer based with a partner. In recent weeks, VIONet has mobilised and supported remote volunteers to spread awareness and information in Sierra Leone on issues related to COVID-19.

Remote volunteers are recruited to support different types of partner organisation. UNV, for example, places remote volunteers with UN Entities, Governments and civil society organisations.

Similarly, remote volunteers are themselves drawn from diverse backgrounds and have diverse skills and experiences. Indeed, remote volunteering can give volunteer-involving organisations access to volunteers with a wider range of skills.

UNV's online volunteering programme is open to a wide range of volunteers, from highly-skilled professionals to students with no professional experience. Volunteers are of all ages, but for UNV the average age of an online volunteer is 30 and 58% are women.

Advice for launching remote volunteering

Yvette Macabuag encouraged organisations to consider 'Fit, Form, and Function' before starting to engage remote volunteers.

Fit

Ensure a fit between what the partner needs and the volunteer. As with in-person volunteering, it is important for remote volunteers to know what their role is, what their purpose is, and their impact.

Form

Define the technical skills needed for the role, and the soft skills. Remote volunteers need to demonstrate, for example, that they can apply their technical skills in a resource-limited context, with a language barrier, with patience, flexibility and adaptability.

Function

Once the role is clearly defined and you have identified the necessary skills, consider what supports will ensure the volunteer is effective. This includes preparation, support in placement, and ensuring that they have access to and understanding of the technology the partner is working with.

Remote volunteering processes

Many of the same processes apply equally to remote volunteering placements and in-person placements. It is perhaps more important for remote volunteering that tasks and objectives are clear, because virtual volunteers do not benefit from the informal interactions over dinner or bus journeys that often help in-person volunteers to fill in details about their host organisation and their role.

Jayne Cravens recommends that a first step for organisations that are thinking about offering remote volunteering should be to review their policies and procedures for in-person volunteers and decide whether they apply to virtual volunteers.

Clear processes and policies are important for remote volunteering. This includes an assessment process, volunteer preparation, orientation and training, and a monitoring system. Organisations should ensure that there is a handover, a debrief and an opportunity for feedback, and that they acknowledge the work of remote volunteers. UNV offers a certificate to remote volunteers.

Host organisations also need support - to define their needs, manage challenges and monitor progress. There should be clear, signed agreements between host organisations and volunteers, stating objectives, roles, responsibilities and the outcomes you want to achieve.

Jayne Cravens recommends that organisations brainstorm with host organisations about what they need. This should not focus on what they need specifically from online volunteers, but broadly on what supports they need as an organisation. Then consider what virtual volunteers can do to address these needs.

Staff who recruit, prepare and manage volunteers also need clearly defined roles. Organisations should consider how they integrate remote volunteering into the programme and support in the roles of volunteer advisors and country staff.

Organisations should consider how they will communicate with their remote volunteers, both individually and as a group. An online group or collaboration space is critical, and there are many free options.

A clear monitoring and evaluation plan is essential. Remote volunteers should have agreed work plans, and organisations should carry out regular reviews against these. As with in-person volunteering, monitoring and evaluation should not be too close or oppressive.

Finally, remote volunteers should have a process for checking in with their supervisors, offering feedback and recommendations, complaining, and receiving feedback and recognition for their work.

Strategic Considerations

Singapore International Foundation suggested a number of high-level strategic considerations for organisations exploring pivots to their strategic models amidst COVID-19 -

1. The importance of being anchored in mission

Be clear about your true north and innovate with this core intact.

2. Identify opportunities and address barriers

To do this, understand the problem you are trying to solve, and understand the value you are providing to your customer. Recognise the barriers you will need to address.

3. Draw on the support of your key stakeholders

Seek out expert advice and refine your proposal to secure support from funders, Board and team.

4. Experiment, test and learn

Run a pilot to prove the concept and identify potential opportunities. Think of this as an iterative process where learnings are applied. Evolve, while keeping true to your mission.

Tools

Some organisations, including UNV, have dedicated remote volunteering platforms to manage collaboration between volunteers and host organisations, which allow them to effectively manage large numbers of volunteers in a seamless manner with a small footprint.

It is possible to run an effective remote volunteering programme without a dedicated platform. A system for tracking roles and assignments can be as simple as a shared spreadsheet, and volunteers can communicate with their host organisations through free online collaboration platforms.

Challenges

Some of the main challenges to effective remote volunteering are lack of internet access and unreliable electricity supply. VIONet has experienced these problems, especially in rural areas. These things are improving, and growing access to mobile technology is helping with this.

VIONet found that they had to educate volunteers and their partners in using online platforms such as Zoom. They advise that organisations plan preliminary information-gathering with participants before volunteering placements begin, to identify challenges and work with them to address them.

Organisations can offer lower-bandwidth options for volunteers and the people they work with, for example through strategic cloud solutions, or through offering access to remote volunteering from multiple types of devices.

It is important to understand the barriers that host organisations face in engaging with remote volunteers. Some organisations offer interventions to help overcome these barriers. For example, Cuso International offers small amounts of funding to improve internet connectivity. They also work to tailor volunteer assignments to the technical capacity of the partner organisation.

Remote volunteering can open up opportunities for people with disabilities – today 5% of UNV's online volunteers are people with disabilities. However, it can also be challenging for some people with disabilities, and it is important to create an online landscape that is as accessible as possible. UNV, through its digital transformation project, is working on making volunteering accessible to more people with disabilities.

Resources

Comhlámh blog post based on this webinar - [*Virtual, online and remote volunteering for international development*](#)

[Coyote Communication page on Volunteerism and Volunteer Management](#)

[Cuso International E-Volunteering](#)

[Our Better World Impact Report 2019](#)

[UNV Online Volunteering Service](#)