



VALUING VOLUNTEERING

# A SUMMARY: THE ROLE OF VOLUNTEERING IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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 **IDS** Institute of  
Development Studies

 **VSO**

# A summary: the role of volunteering in sustainable development.

Valuing Volunteering is a groundbreaking research project initiated by Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) to strengthen our understanding of how and why volunteering affects poverty. The research explores how and why volunteering contributes to poverty reduction and sustainable positive change, and the factors which prevent it from doing so. It looks at both the intended and unintended impacts of

volunteering interventions.

Whilst a wealth of research has explored how volunteering affects volunteers themselves; there has been very little research exploring how volunteering actually brings about change for communities on the ground. Valuing Volunteering seeks to address this gap.



Mombasa research group, Kenya



Research group, Mozambique

## About the research

The research was conducted over a two-year period (2012–2014) in four countries: Kenya, Mozambique, Nepal and The Philippines. Led by four VSO volunteer researchers and drawing on participatory action research methodologies, the research engaged more than **3,700** people, including local volunteer groups, community leaders, young people, teachers, health practitioners, community leaders, government officials and staff and volunteers from local, national and international NGOs. These individuals were actively involved in collecting data, analysing it and generating action from it that would inform volunteer activities on the ground.

Although the project was commissioned by VSO, its aim is to inform learning and practice across the development sector; four of the 12 case studies that inform this research relate specifically to VSO projects and between them they cover a diverse range of volunteer interventions: from self-help and community volunteering through to formal national and international volunteering programmes supported by different organisations and institutions. The case studies explore the contribution of volunteering across different contexts and issues including: access to education and health, governance and the environment.



Community inquiry, Mozambique

## Findings: the unique contribution of volunteering to development

The findings from the research demonstrate that volunteering contributes to sustainable development in the following ways:

### **Inclusion: extends the reach of public services to the poorest and most marginalised**

Volunteers can reach places and people that others are not able to, providing an important bridge between communities and formal service provision. They play a key role in strengthening the capacity of the existing workforce and can provide a flexible resource to respond to emergencies. By addressing gaps in public service provision that disproportionately affects the poorest and marginalised, they not only provide critical and valuable interim support until the state is able to improve its services, but also demonstrate how those services might be delivered:

“They [the volunteers] are mobilising people to get to hospital because the nurses are not able to go to the community” (Hospital staff, Mozambique)



National Development Service Volunteer (NDVS), Nepal

### **Innovation: creates new forms of collaboration that lead to social innovation**

Volunteers can be simultaneously on the “inside” and the “outside” in a way that few other development practitioners are. By acting as intermediaries, they can broker access to information, networks and resources within and beyond the community, encouraging new forms of collaboration. The merging of outside and indigenous knowledge and skills can help generate new solutions to existing problems that are locally appropriate and sustainable:

The local research group in the Korogocho, Kenya, found that by linking up with volunteer networks and local NGOs across the community they were able use their collective expertise and networks to strengthen and scale up the impact of their activities. These included; a series of local radio show programmes discussing and providing accurate information on volunteering and plans for piloting a participatory budgeting exercise where local groups can pitch ideas for small-scale volunteering initiatives to their peers.

### **Ownership: strengthens local ownership of development processes**

A key value of volunteering is not just what volunteers do but how they work with organisations and communities to support change. The direct immersion of volunteers within the communities and organisations in which they are working enables them to forge strong personal as well as professional relationships. This helps build trust, solidarity and a connectedness with others, which are important requisites for change to be instigated and sustained. These soft outcomes are as important as the imparting of technical skills or delivery of hard outcomes:

“We already had the ideas in ourselves but we weren’t using them...At first the teachers feel shy, there’s a lack of confidence. But after some time, their confidence grows. It is important for a longer placement for this trust to grow.” (Head Teacher, Nepal)

### **Participation: creates a pathway to people’s participation and active citizenship**

Volunteering is often one of the first routes through which individuals become more actively engaged in their community. It provides individuals with the initial opportunity to practise social action and take on new roles and responsibilities within a more informal environment. Volunteers’ active interest in an issue can also serve as a catalyst, encouraging others to take action and sparking a more collective spirit. Over time, this can strengthen or reinvigorate notions of contributing to community and country:

“I saw farmers really needing help, I saw government agencies trying to help and somewhere they just don’t connect. Their [the farmers] stories really got to me... For me that’s when I opened my eyes to another world [referring to when they started volunteering].” (Student volunteer, Philippines)

### **Inspiration: modelling different norms**

In addition to instigating social action, volunteering can inspire new ways of thinking and being. Exposure to people from different cultural contexts can make individuals more reflective of their own culture, and their personal aspirations and relations with others. Volunteering has been shown to be powerful in supporting peer-to-peer learning, particularly within the context of gender and youth participation:

“The thinking changes. Someone from another country is here and she is living alone. You think if you are well educated then you can go anywhere. Why does our culture stop our daughters from being free to do things?” (Pre-school teacher, Nepal)

## Implications: creating an enabling environment for volunteering

Volunteering provides the means through which some of the essential pre-conditions for sustainable change – inclusion, innovation, ownership, participation and inspiration – can be realised. In order to harness the power of volunteering, the research has identified the following implications for development programming:

### **Inclusion: supporting the role of volunteering to reach the poorest and most marginalised**

Volunteers working in some of the poorest and remote areas are often themselves from poor and marginalised communities. It is therefore important to consider duty of care issues, such as ensuring volunteers are provided with the right resources and support to do their work and are not disadvantaged further by engaging in volunteering. Training, supervision, suitable stipends and allowances, and opportunities for formal progression should be provided.

The ability of development organisations to reach the poorest and most marginalised is largely determined by the partners they work with. Partners are often selected because they have a history of working with volunteers or because they have the right organisational infrastructure, rather than because they focus on poverty reduction or share the same principles and approach to volunteering as the development organisation. Partnerships therefore need to be identified more explicitly on the basis of alignment to the vision, mission and values of the organisation and their ability to reach the target groups of its programmes.



Volunteers in Kilifi, Kenya, taking part in systems mapping exercise

### **Innovation: focusing on volunteer interventions that strengthen collective action and collaboration**

Volunteering largely focuses on individual action rather than collective endeavour. There are many different forms of volunteering, from informal to formal, from local to international, but very few instances of joint working and co-ordination across different volunteering initiatives. Organisations should therefore look for ways to design programmes around multi-disciplinary, team-based interventions that strengthen links between their own volunteering initiatives and those already operating within the communities in which they are working.

Championing collective voluntary action and collaboration requires an understanding of the local volunteering 'ecosystem'. This entails developing a comprehensive picture of who volunteers (and who does not), what types of volunteering – formal and informal – are undertaken in the community as well as local perceptions of volunteering in its myriad forms.

### **Ownership: ensuring relationship building is integral to the design and delivery of volunteer programmes**

Embedding volunteers in communities is crucial to relationship building and network development. Organisations should consider ways in which to strengthen where and how volunteers can be embedded within communities. Approaches need to be designed carefully so as not to place additional burdens on the community.

Relationship and network building skills should be considered core competencies for volunteer recruitment and selection, essential components of volunteer training, along with equipping volunteers to assess and respond to the political contexts in which they work. Volunteers must be provided with sufficient time and space to build relationships and understand the needs of those with whom they work. The development of relevant language skills is critical.

### **Participation: empowering communities to take action themselves**

In any community some individuals have more access and opportunities to participate in non-institutionalised volunteering than others, and sometimes those volunteers determine what voluntary activities take place. Development programmes aimed at supporting community and national volunteering initiatives need to be able to ensure they are not reinforcing existing power structures or being co-opted by volunteers with elite agendas.

Volunteering is a gendered activity that can serve to reinforce stereotypes about what are female and male activities and the value ascribed to them. Female volunteers – who undertake most home-based caring – often put themselves at personal risk as a result of their activities. Volunteering initiatives need to be grounded in a gendered analysis of volunteering. It is important that

relevant protocols are in place to ensure duty of care to volunteers.

Participatory approaches to programme design and implementation can ensure local actors decide what and how programmes are delivered. Volunteers are well placed to facilitate community-led research and action. Organisations should therefore consider ways to draw on volunteers as a key resource to support participatory development.

**Inspiration: rooting volunteer interventions in long-term community programming**

Long-term relationships with partners and local actors can aid sustainability, providing the time-frame in which to develop local capacity and ownership over development processes, and the relationships needed to facilitate social change – outcomes that short-term, project-based interventions simply do not allow.

Volunteering is well placed to provide this continuity of support to communities by providing a flexible resource that can respond to changes in local needs, drawing on combinations of long-term and short-term volunteering initiatives as appropriate.

While volunteering can provide an important bridge between formal and informal service provision, it is important that it is not seen as a long-term substitution for services that should ultimately be provided by the state. Programmes need to be consciously designed to navigate this tension and mitigate dependency on volunteer delivery at the expense of investing in delivery by paid professionals.



Education volunteers, Nepal

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## VSO at a glance

VSO is the world's leading independent international development organisation that works through volunteers to fight poverty in developing countries. VSO brings people together to share skills, build capabilities and promote international understanding and action. We work with partner organisations at every level of society, from government organisations at a national level to health and education facilities at a local level.

[www.vsointernational.org](http://www.vsointernational.org)

## IDS

The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) is a leading global organisation for international development research, teaching and communications. The Valuing Volunteering project is being conducted in partnership with the IDS Participation, Power and Social Change Team.

[www.ids.ac.uk](http://www.ids.ac.uk)



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