

# Initial Research Impact



## VOCAD: Key stats

Since February 2023, VOCAD in Indian Sundarbans has worked in


 **7 Community Development Blocks** with


 **137 Research Participants** &

 **40 Stakeholders** through

 **1 Introductory Workshop**


 **3 Orientation Workshops**

 **3 Sense-making Workshops**

 **9 Focus-Group Discussions**

 **48 Interviews**

 **352 Photos**

 **126 Diary Entries**

to produce findings which were showcased in

 **2 Exhibitions** in March 2024

& published in

 **1 Bilingual Photobook**

## Introduction

As a part of the UKRI-GCRF Living Deltas Hub, the VOCAD project explores the everyday ways that delta dwellers in the Indian Sundarbans undertake voluntary or unpaid work to respond to disasters and adapt to their changing environment, and how this work is organised. It reveals how volunteering is not only oriented to addressing climate change but is itself impacted by climate change.

The research team have worked in collaboration with organisations and community volunteers. A range of participatory methods were used and for three of the organisations, it included Photovoice, and diary writing to document and explore voluntary and unpaid work. Sense making workshops with the participants following the completion of the fieldwork, and two exhibition events with a range of stakeholders have been used to explore some initial insights on research impact for those involved.

The feedback shows that the research question and processes have contributed to some shifts in perceptions about volunteering, support for challenging gender norms, development of new skills and confidence, increased networks, solidarity and reflective practice and for one participant a change in career direction.

The main focus of this summary is on insights from the research participants themselves, but there are also insights from the representatives of the organisations taking part in the research and others attending the introductory workshop and exhibitions.

# How did VOCAD impact research participants?

## 1. Shifts in the value and perception of voluntary labour

Being asked to document day to day volunteering through photographs and diary writing, created a greater sense for the participants that their work has value. The fact that their work was of interest to outsiders was unexpected to those participating and some talked about how the process of documenting had helped them to reflect more on their work and express their feelings in a way they had not done before.

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*“I really liked the process where we are collecting all this information. It means at least somebody is thinking about us. Volunteers like us who are very poor and who are doing this kind of work along with their household work like knowing that at least some people are caring about us. This is a wonderful feeling. We can't compare this to anything else.”*

[Research participant]

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*“All the women in our area, senior ladies, everyone is working, toiling for the betterment of our own area, for development, but keeping some photos of this, speaking about them to highlight them, this never mattered. With this project, the project where we are working, somewhere we are sharing our work, their work through our photos, you have given us a platform to express ourselves, a chance to show what we are doing, I feel that it is a very noble thought.”*

[Research participant]

Some of the participants working on women's right based activities were particularly positive that this type of work was of interest to outsiders.

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*“All women want to come out from our household work and want to get out of the control of our families. Even though we are not getting anything from this volunteering but through this work we could establish our rights that they are doing something. In this journey at least somebody thought that we are doing the work, this really matters for us as volunteers.”*

[Research participant]



Photo courtesy: Sumana Banerjee

Local women volunteers seeing the photographs taken by other volunteers

# How did VOCAD impact research participants?

## 1. Shifts in the value and perception of voluntary labour

The exhibition and the publication of a book were described as inspirational by some volunteers. It helped them to consolidate their experiences of taking part in the research and gave them insight into the value of their contributions and this acted as a form of motivation.

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*“...all those who wrote in the diaries, we were inspired that we were able to write in the diaries and attend the exhibition. Nobody thought we would go [to the exhibition], as we weren't told of the plan..... All we knew is that we had to write in the diaries. Everyone was chatting on their way back about how good their experience was and how good they felt, that our diary entries were published.”*

[Research participant]

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*“I have gained experience in doing this work. I truly had not thought that my writing will be blown up and displayed somewhere, that my work will get this much importance.”*

[Research participant]

For one participant seeing their work being consolidated with the work of others helped to give greater context and understanding.

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*“Initially, I wrote the diary singularly [on my own], could not explain everything well. Today after coming here I understood that the problems of the people of Sundarban can be solved in many ways.”*

[Research participant]

## 2. Increased networks, peer support and solidarity

One participant said that she had often felt as if she was working in isolation when volunteering in the community and by participating in the research, she felt some solidarity as others came forward to share their volunteering experiences. Through her participation in the research, she has now found a group of experienced older women who she can approach for support and advice. This has increased her confidence as she now knows when to ask for support and who to go to.

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*“Now, there are lots of Didis around who stand by me. When I ask, I get help immediately. There are women in higher posts than mine... They also come forward to help. Now, this is what happens.”*

[Research participant]

Another talked about gaining insight into the benefits of working alongside others.

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*“Earlier I used to work by myself as a volunteer for the society. Now I have come to understand through your organisation that [one has to] work with every person in the society and solve all the problems, only then society's development will happen.” -*

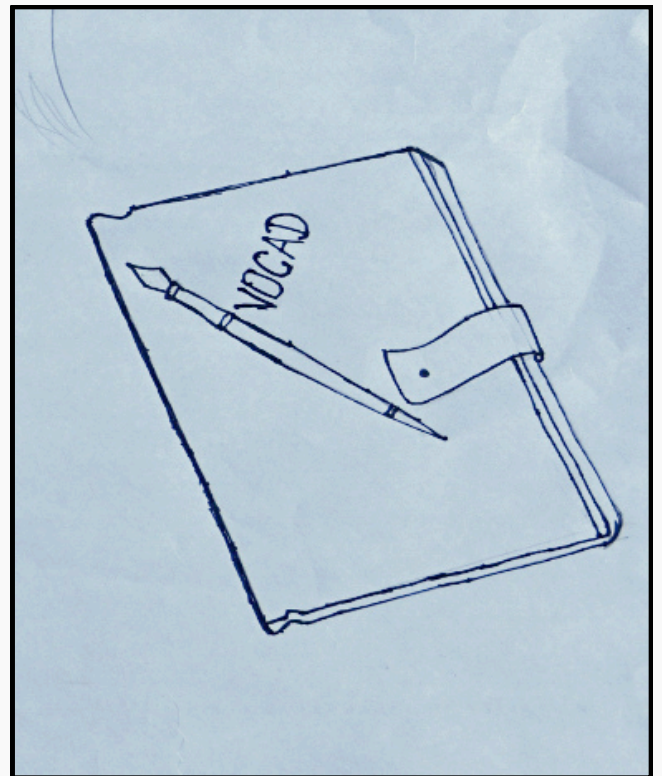
[Research participant]

# How did VOCAD impact research participants?

## 3. Challenging gender norms

One of the advantages of the Photovoice method is its inclusivity for participants who may not have strong literacy skills as once the participant is shown how to use the camera, they then use it to document their lives in a very similar way to those writing diaries. When the cameras were allocated to women, some participants commented that this had challenged community perceptions and assumptions about women's ability to use cameras.

“So many people were jealous that we were using a camera. They thought these type of girls are not capable of using a camera and how somebody could give them a camera?”  
[Research participant]



**Participants' hand-drawn sketches of women using cameras and the VOCAD diary**

This dynamic of challenging gender norms was mirrored by many of the images that some of the women took, which showed women undertaking activities and tasks that may not typically be carried out by women such as driving a toto (battery operated 3-wheeler vans), preparing roof materials and playing football and some images of men cooking and carrying water.

Some women also commented on how using the camera elicited a different dynamic with their family which enabled them to have more respect and privacy than they were used to. They said that family members or guardians would typically expect to see images taken on their personal mobile phone, but this did not happen when they used cameras for the Photovoice project.

# How did VOCAD impact research participants?

## 4. Development of new skills and experience

A number of the Photovoice participants had never used a camera (other than a mobile phone camera) before participating in the research and they valued the opportunity to learn how to use a camera.

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*“Whether we would be able to operate the camera at all? How to bring it near, how to click a photo? If there’s a mistake? But later we found that we could do it slowly.”*

[Research participant]

*“I went to sleep at 12 o’clock night [on the day of the orientation workshop, when cameras were given]! If you ask why? Because I was so excited with the camera, once I was zooming it to click pictures, again taking it back to normal. After going on like this, I found that it was past 12!”*

[Research participant]

*“How low can I angle the camera? How much can I zoom and the photo would still be clear and be understood? I slowly began thinking about these aspects while aligning them with your instructions, and that’s how I took those photos. That I am a good photographer, is something I have never heard. I feel very good to hear this from all of you.”*

[Research participant]

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Diary writing was also a new activity for many of the participants and one that some planned to continue beyond the project.

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*“Yes, so I’m almost starting a new life. With a new beginning to a lot of things. It feels good. I’ll learn some more new things. A lot more. The more I visit other places. Learning to write diary from you people... this has become a habit for me. I’ll do it no matter if I’m told to write or not.”*

[Research participant]

Others talked about the increased confidence that they have gained from taking part in the research and the opportunities in offered them to interact with other people. One also mentioned gaining greater insight into the needs of others in the community.

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*“After writing the diary there has been a change in my thinking. Earlier I used to hesitant to speak but now there is no hesitation and especially now there is more acquaintance with people than before. Now I am better placed to explain the matter of “wants and needs” and can stand beside people.”*

[Research participant]

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*“..we’ve been able to interact with the outside world and state our points confidently in front of other people; this has been a great achievement for us, housewives, at least I think so.”*

[Research participant]

# How did VOCAD impact research participants?

## 5. Increased reflective capacity

Participants felt that the process of documenting their voluntary work through diary writing and photography had helped them to be more reflective about their work and it highlighted what they have achieved.

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*“My interest grew a little bit more. That I am being able to share the work... and we are doing the work, not evaluating it much... but when I wrote it down in the diary and read it, I could evaluate our work a little, understanding how much we are succeeding.”*

[Research participant]

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*“...it’s not just a photo, or a particular photo, but there are sometimes big stories behind those pictures, but we explain that in a point. Now what we are doing, we have remembered it like a story, we have also been able to express that.”*

[Research participant]



**Local women volunteers during a VOCAD workshop**

Others commented of the value of documenting and having a written record of their voluntary work.

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*“Moreover, writing down our activities in this diary will help us preserve the memories, even if we tend to forget the events, we can just turn the pages and relive them later. With your help this has been possible. I have written down exactly the things that I’ve done on each date, irrespective of good or bad..... I like doing all this work and I want to learn new things and... I hope I’m learning as well.”*

[Research participant]

# How did VOCAD impact research participants?

## 6. Informing career direction

One participant spoke about how the process of diary writing had shifted her thinking about the Sundarbans away from the challenges and limitations of the area and much more focused towards the positive aspects.



*“...while writing and through discussion I felt that. We are writing only about being backward, we are writing about our work, but we should think differently. I felt that I didn't want to talk about the negative aspects. Our environment, all the things we get from nature, in Sundarban, I want to talk about those. I felt this after writing in the diary. I didn't think this before. ...Yes, the positive aspects struck me after writing in the diary.”*

[Research participant]

She has continued to carry a diary with her and document her thoughts and her work and she also now encourages others to write. She described how her experiences of volunteering had inspired her to switch career direction and begin studying for an MA in social work. This change happened during the period of her diary writing and she described how the process of reflection during her diary writing had helped to consolidate this decision. She also emphasised how volunteering had given her experience of the reality of the day-to-day challenges people face in the Sundarbans and experience of solving problems and meeting the challenges within this context. She felt that this experience of being alongside people may not have been possible or may not have been so grounding in a salaried role and this is something she will take with her as she pursues her career. Gaining an MA in social work will support her voluntary work by increasing her credibility if challenged in her voluntary work by members of the Panchayat.



Photo courtesy: Janet Clark

**Lush green fields of Sundarbans which the participant now values more as a positive aspect of life in Sundarbans**

# How did VOCAD impact participating organisations?

## 1. Recognition of the importance of voluntary labour

Some of the organisations involved directly with the research reflected that engaging in the research had caused them to shift their perspectives of the work carried out by those that volunteer with them. It had illuminated the importance of ensuring staff value the work undertaken by volunteers.

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*“Actually their [volunteers] work sometimes was not recognised by the team. So the research team has helped...to recognise their work. ...we [will] always recognise our volunteers and their free volunteer hours.”*

[Representative from participating organisation]

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*“Volunteering is a less discussed topic in the development sector. But this research work actually opened a new dimension for me to understand volunteering in detail. How the work, effort are unheard/unseen to the mainstream people. This research helps us to increase our curiosity to know more about volunteers and volunteering.”*

[Representative from participating organisation]

## 2. Greater insights about volunteers' experiences

The research provided organisations with greater insights about volunteers' perceptions, thoughts and motivations. It also highlighted for them the role that volunteers can play in solving problems in the community.

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*“By coming to this event I learned how one can work with the grassroots level and give priority to grassroots workers. If small problems are highlighted positively then [solutions for those can be] 100% achieved.”*

[Representative from participating organisation]

## 3. Need to recognise voluntary labour in policy design

There was also an acknowledgement that voluntary labour needs to be recognised and fed into policy design at a higher level.

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*“We have learnt how the volunteering work in Sundarban have been recognised and how it can be used in government or state level policy making. The research team will share the information to the higher authority for the policy design.”*

[Representative from participating organisation]

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*“...give awareness that volunteering work and its results are far-reaching with the overall development of the society.”*

[Representative from participating organisation]



# How did VOCAD impact other organisations attending the exhibition?

## 1. Insight into the importance of voluntary labour

Those attending the exhibitions highlighted that they had gained insight into the importance of the informal sector and the need to support and incentivise voluntary labour to support sustainable approaches for climate action. There was recognition that support needs to come from local and central government as well as NGOs.

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*“We have learnt the role and the importance of the volunteers of the Sundarban. Their efforts must be recognised and addressed by the local and higher levels of government which will eventually impact positively the socio-economic development of Sundarban.”*

[Exhibition attendee]

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*“I will try to find ways to incentivise such work so that more people take such sustainable approaches for climate action”*

[Exhibition attendee]

## 2. Greater insights about volunteers' roles and responsibilities

They said that they had learnt about the roles that volunteers undertake in the Sundarbans and the value of the work they undertake. They also had learnt about the challenges faced by those volunteering in the delta.

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*“Listening to the local people it has occurred to me that courage and will to do something for the place you live should be encouraged. I will definitely think about climate change and its effect more seriously now.”*

[Exhibition attendee]



Photo courtesy: Janet Clark

**Bilingual exhibition of photographs and narratives from local volunteers of Indian Sundarbans**

# How did VOCAD impact organisations attending the introductory workshop?

## 1. Novel research objective

Organisations who were learning of the research question for the first time felt the research objective was novel and it made them see volunteering and volunteers in a new light and how the research should explore how volunteering can be sustained for the Indian Sundarbans.

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*“Got a chance to think about volunteering work in our organisation and community.”*

[Workshop attendee]

Research should explore *“how volunteering can be strengthened and made sustainable for the longer run with special reference to Sundarbans”*.

[Workshop attendee]

*“How they [volunteers] are important in our daily life, in our community.”*

[Workshop attendee]

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## 2. Opportunity to meet new people and co-learn

The introductory workshop also set a space for organisations to meet new people. It gave them an opportunity to realise that there are others who engage with volunteers, but their modes of engagement maybe different. The workshop gave the participants opportunity to co-learn the benefits and challenges they face while engaging volunteers in different areas in Sundarbans and beyond.

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*“How easy or difficult it is to volunteer in other areas.”*

[Workshop attendee]

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*“By sharing our experience, listening to others, it seems like we are on the same with the same progressive thought.”*

[Workshop attendee]



Photo courtesy: Sumana Banerjee



Photo courtesy: Souvik Shil

**VOCAD exhibition and workshop providing a platform for organisations to interact and co-learn**

# Quick Wins

## 1. Seeing volunteers in a new light

The research idea and question have prompted people to think differently about voluntary labour in the context of climate change and disasters in Indian Sundarbans. Organisations who engage volunteers acknowledged the importance of their contributions.

## 2. Importance and diversity of local volunteers

For the first time, research has been conducted where the research processes have highlighted the importance and diversity of the role played by community members undertaking voluntary labour in the Sundarbans to respond to disasters and adaptive work to protect the ecosystem. Participation in volunteering can challenge inequalities and build individual and community resilience through reimagining traditional gender roles and power dynamics, promoting skills development and livelihood opportunities and linking some of the most vulnerable in the community to services and support.

## 3. Lesser-used research methods

Photovoice and diary writing methods are used less in research in Indian Sundarbans. The use of these methods has unearthed the experiences and perspectives of community members involved in volunteering, including insights into the challenges and inequalities that they experience as they carry out their day-to-day volunteering.

## 4. Importance of iterative engagement

Reflecting findings back to participants has been affirming and motivational for participants. The research has also offered insights to the organisations involved working alongside the volunteers, amplifying the value of role that their volunteers play.

## 5. Reaching a broader audience

One of the research exhibitions was held at the British Deputy High Commission Kolkata office which targeted a broader audience and dialogues from this event are ongoing.

## Way forward

Further dissemination of the research has the potential to target resource holders, strategists and policy makers with a view to increasing their understanding of the importance of voluntary labour for sustaining the future of the deltas and addressing some of the inequalities within the voluntary labour landscape in the Indian Sundarbans.

### Contributions

**Conceptualization of brief:** Matt Baillie-Smith (MBS), Janet Clark (JC), Sumana Banerjee (SB); **Fieldwork and data collection:** SB, Yagnaseni Mitra (YM), JC, MBS; **Translation:** YM, SB; **Original draft:** JC, SB; **Review:** MBS

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 <https://hosting.northumbria.ac.uk/vocad/>

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