

VOLUNTEERING TOGETHER: Blending knowledge and skills for development



BRIEFING PAPER

Whose knowledges count?

The complex realities of blending knowledge and skills between volunteers

Volunteers with different backgrounds, skills and experiences have always worked together, yet there is little evidence about how ‘volunteering together’ can be utilised to improve development outcomes. This briefing paper is the first in a series highlighting key findings from a **collaborative research project between Northumbria University and Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO)**, interrogating how a ‘blend’ of different types of volunteers working together can create greater impacts for development. Using a multi-case study participatory approach in **Tanzania, Uganda and Nepal**, this research analyses experiences of different volunteer modalities collaborating in VSO’s work with primary actors (individuals and communities who take part in or benefit from VSO’s development projects). This briefing unpacks how knowledge and skills are distributed across modalities in complex ways, while also highlighting the particular roles and importance of community volunteers in the ‘blend’.

This briefing paper is written for international volunteer-involving organisations and policy-makers in the volunteer sector interested in addressing development challenges through blended volunteering.

Key message 1: The contrast between perceptions and practice of modalities

The blended volunteering model assumes a range of distinct volunteer modalities. The most commonly used ones are place-based: ‘international’, ‘national’ and ‘community’ volunteers. **This research complicates assumptions embedded in the ‘blend’, by demonstrating how skills and attributes are distributed across modalities and underlining the diversity that exists within each modality.**

The ways in which modalities and skillsets are operationalised do not always follow neat, presupposed categories. **The types of contributions made by different modalities are dynamic**, and volunteers themselves often use multiple categories to describe their identities and activities, complicating straightforward distinctions between volunteer roles within the ‘blend’. There are significant overlaps between the skillsets attributed to national and international volunteers, but the data also reveals **there are important skills and attributes that stakeholders associate exclusively with community volunteers.**



“They worked as one, you would not tell the difference if you were not told that there were two volunteer types. They shared ideas and collaborated in so many ways.”

(Interview with VSO Tanzania partner)

“I think when it’s blended, it addresses the changes at the different levels that we want at the same time.”

(Interview with VSO Uganda staff member)

Key message 2: The centrality of community volunteers



“I saw a young girl who was involved in her community work, and the community had a lot of faith and trust in her because they could see her grow in front of their eyes, and she acted as a role model. So, unlike the staff who go there from other places and deliver the activities, the volunteers were there inspiring their communities. And the volunteer was somebody’s sister, daughter or someone from their own community.” (Interview with VSO Nepal staff member)

“We are community natives, people in the community knew us, so it was easy for us to gain access anywhere in the community. We knew our community very well; international volunteers would not enjoy that luxury.” (Interview with VSO Tanzania community volunteer)

While the research shows how skills often overlap across volunteer modalities, it also suggests that **community volunteers are not easily interchangeable with other modalities**. All stakeholders identified them as crucial to the **blended volunteering approach**. They play a pivotal role in facilitating shared ownership of projects and activities, explained by their knowledge, sustained local engagement, belonging and acceptance at local levels. However, the data also shows an **underlying assumption that knowledge will be passed from national and international volunteers, to community volunteers, in a unidirectional manner**. The value of local knowledge as a key factor enabling development outcomes risks becoming obscured if the presence and unique expertise of community volunteers are ‘taken for granted’ as part of the blend.

These research findings lead to the following recommendations:

1. The diversity within modalities, in terms of skills, behaviours and attributes needs to be identified and incorporated into the resourcing and planning of each project. The fluidity within the ‘blend’ should be harnessed to ensure resilience of projects, particularly in times of crisis and shock.
2. Understanding the unique roles of community volunteers is crucial to developing an effective ‘blend’ and ensuring sustained impacts for each project. This requires organisations to compile more in-depth information on the skills and experience of such individuals likely to be involved in each project.
3. Empowering community volunteers depends on building horizontal relations within each ‘blend’ when establishing the structure and management strategies for project teams. This involves stepping back from stereotypical views on the roles of modalities and focusing on the characteristics of individuals.

Research team

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TANZANIA, UGANDA & NEPAL

460 participants in:
103 interviews
24 group workshops
199 survey respondents

With special thanks to all participants; VSO Knowledge, Evidence and Learning Team; and VSO Country Office staff members in Tanzania, Uganda and Nepal who have made this study possible.

