VOLUNTEERING TOGETHER:
Blending knowledge and skills for development

Northumbria University NEWCASTLE

VSO

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This research project is a collaboration between VSO and the Centre for International Development at Northumbria University.

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.

The Centre for International Development at Northumbria University, UK, brings together academics, practitioners and students to promote research, consultancy, teaching, training and public engagement on issues of global poverty and inequality, the communities and individuals who experience this, and the policies and practices that seek to address it. The Centre's work on volunteering addresses a range of key themes, including the roles and activities of local and international volunteers from global North and South, volunteer professionalisation, relationships between different types of volunteers and volunteering, and citizenship and activism.

This case study report was prepared by the Research Team at Northumbria University.

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CASE STUDY REPORT OUTLINE

ICS: "International Citizen Service". This was an overseas volunteering programme launched by VSO in 2011 and aimed at youth volunteers (18-25 years old). Despite the closure of the programme in 2020, the term 'ICS' has since then been used to describe the involvement of national and community youth volunteers in Tanzania.

NYEN: "National Youth Engagement Network". This is a platform created by VSO to support the continued involvement of ICS alumni in their communities' development, it is therefore typically part of post-placement activities for ICS national volunteers.

Primary actors: individuals and communities that VSO work with and that take part in or benefit from projects and activities. Since they are not seen as passive recipients of aid, but rather active agents at community level, they are not referred to as beneficiaries.

Projects: The following projects were part of the Tanzania country case study:

- **ICLP:** "Improving Children's Learning and Participation"
- **LZYE:** "Lake Zone Youth Empowerment"
- **RISE:** "Raise Income for Secondary Education"
- **SSLT:** "Safe Spaces, Let's Talk"
- **T-LED:** "Tanzania Local Enterprise Development"

1. INTRODUCTION

Blended volunteering is a flagship approach for VSO in the field, differentiating its work from other volunteer-involving organisations. The blended model is seen as providing opportunities for learning and beneficial exchanges among volunteers and between volunteers and primary actors, and through this, enhancing impact. Evidence collected in the study confirms the value that it can bring for VSO's programme outcomes and development impact, as well as revealing the dynamic nature of blended volunteering and the need for adaptive management strategies to maximise its effectiveness.

This study engages with policy and academic debates around how different volunteering modalities contribute to development. It combines analytical insights across projects, programmes and country case studies to deliver understandings of design, management, context and dynamics between different volunteering modalities through a participatory qualitative methodology. The research identifies trends and patterns across diverse projects, providing knowledge to address the following research questions:

1. *How do different volunteering modalities contribute value to VSO's work with primary actors?*
2. *How might different volunteering modalities be combined to maximise development impact?*
3. *What are the conditions that contribute to maximising the impact of diverse volunteering modalities, both as individuals, and as teams?*

In this report, we explore how and why the 'blend' works in the specific context of Tanzania. This is the first case study report from this research project, and is followed by reports examining our case study findings from Uganda and Nepal. The key findings and overall learning from the research in the three country case studies is consolidated in a final synthesis report. In our analysis, we identify key challenges/obstacles faced by volunteers, primary actors and other stakeholders in relation to their experiences of blended volunteering, and suggest areas for future consideration by VSO, to ensure blended volunteering can achieve optimal and sustained development impacts. Through this, we also consider critical issues for other volunteer-involving development organisations to reflect on and learn from.

The report is divided into four main sections. In section 2, we provide a short overview of the literature to situate this research in relation to existing research and the wider volunteering and development sector, as well as the research questions. In section 3, we provide a brief summary of the study's overall methodology and participatory approach, alongside an overview of the Tanzanian case study sampling and participants. The main sections of the report are found in section 4 in which we present the research findings from Tanzania. Finally, the conclusion in section 5 synthesises our research findings and reflects on what these might mean for VSO and development practitioners more widely, moving forward.

2. LITERATURE SNAPSHOT

This study examines VSO's blended volunteering approach to understand how it can improve development outcomes, and the factors influencing this process. In this section, we provide a snapshot of volunteer literatures to situate this research, identifying existing knowledge gaps in terms of understanding volunteer relationships, particularly in the South, and highlighting the contribution that a critical analysis of blended volunteering can make to scholarship and practice in the sector.

There is recognition across the sector of the challenges of building an integrated theory of volunteering (Hustinx et al., 2010; Wilson & Musick, 1997), therefore analyses and typologies have reflected on the multiple dimensions and forms of voluntary practice (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). Most of the existing body of evidence, however, has been framed by accounts from/within the global North, posing challenges for analysing volunteerism across contexts. Existing frameworks for analysing volunteering in the context of development frequently privilege the perspective of international volunteers emphasising global citizenship, cultural encounter, personal and professional development as well as development outcomes (Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2011; Brown, 2005; Laurie & Baillie Smith, 2018; Meneghini, 2016). Despite the potential for equitable and mutually beneficial relationships through North-South long-term volunteering models (Frilund, 2018; Perold et al., 2013), evidence also highlights the risks of top-down approaches and of reproducing power imbalances, especially with regards to short-term volunteering and 'voluntourism' practices (McGloin & Georgeou, 2016; Sin, 2010).

Despite often treating volunteers as "a unidimensional commodity" (Cnaan & Amrofell, 1994, p. 338) research has explored particular distinctions between structures of involvement, scope and kinds of volunteer-involving organisations (see Cnaan et al., 1996; Einolf & Chambré, 2011; Ellis Paine et al., 2010; Sherraden et al., 2006). Recent research on volunteering and development has questioned some of the dominant models and lenses that have been used. This has led to greater emphasis on more inclusive volunteering spaces in the global South being re-conceptualised as a locus of agency, action and learning. Critical studies on volunteer relationships emphasise the risks of unequal North-South encounters. Volunteering thus needs to be explored as "a relational field of discourse and institutionalised practice, and not as a bounded concept" (Shachar et al., 2019, p. 1438). There is increasing awareness in the literature of the importance of acknowledging power dynamics and hierarchies embedded in these spaces (Baillie Smith & Jenkins, 2011; Griffiths, 2018). These critical volunteering literatures signal the diversity and richness of volunteer experiences from and within the global South and point to the need to unpack the potential of collaborations across different types of volunteer engagement when discussing policy frameworks in the sector.

We emphasise, however, that the current focus on including perspectives from the global South should not be framed within traditional international volunteering approaches that risk perpetuating volunteers and organisations in the South as the 'hosts'. Understanding blended forms of volunteering in the South means questioning paradigms and ensuring that certain forms of volunteering are not prioritised over others, whilst also challenging the "tendency to assume that definitions and norms developed in the global North are universally applicable and relevant" (Hazeldine & Baillie Smith, 2015, p. 18). Rather than homogeneous, the community is also a space of dispute, hierarchies and inequalities (see Jenkins, 2009a; Thomas et al., 2018). In this process, we recognise the importance of self-organisation for community resilience (UNV, 2018) and how community volunteering and resilience can be strengthened through models of "supportive solidarity" (Fadel & Chadwick, 2020). Although attention to informal and community-based volunteer efforts has grown in recent years, there remain clear gaps in understanding the relationships between local volunteering and development. VSO has been a pioneer in highlighting the importance of the active involvement of volunteers in research efforts through participatory approaches (Lewis, 2015), and documenting learning that can "strengthen bottom-up programming by building on the role of volunteers as participatory practitioners" (Turner, 2015, p. 89).

Critical literatures also engage with the notion of volunteering economies and the need to understand remuneration more widely in volunteering spaces (Prince & Brown, 2016). However, it is essential to involve volunteers themselves in these debates, in order to identify strategies to prevent inequalities and also engage with debates around the professionalisation of voluntary work, including its gendered and uneven dynamics (Jenkins, 2009b). This calls for a livelihoods and capabilities approach to allow for a more nuanced way of accounting for volunteer remuneration in relation to the range of assets that communities have to build their lives and future (Baillie Smith et al., 2022).

Much of the available literature focuses on particular types of volunteers, their volunteering experience, and the emerging agenda of how volunteering may contribute to achieving development impacts – particularly related to the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda. Relatively little work has explored the relationships between the different types of volunteers, and between volunteers and other actors, as they emerge both within the field and in other areas related to volunteering. Furthermore, little research focuses on development outcomes, particularly in the context of these complex relationships. While some emerging research does explore the importance of unpacking relationships within volunteering, it notably focuses on the relationships between international volunteers and so-called 'host' organisations and communities, with some discussing how these relationships affect development impact (Chen, 2018) while others argue that the creation of these relationships in and of itself may be seen as a development outcome (Schech et al., 2018). This emerging research demonstrates that academics and policy-makers in volunteering spaces are only recently beginning to explore the role and potential of relationships (Burns et al., 2015), and that the research that does exist in this area is still predominantly focused on international, North-South volunteering. There are continued silences around the working relationships that occur between different types of volunteers 'in the field', as well as their engagement with primary actors in the context of project activities, and the role these relations may play in shaping power dynamics and outcomes within projects.
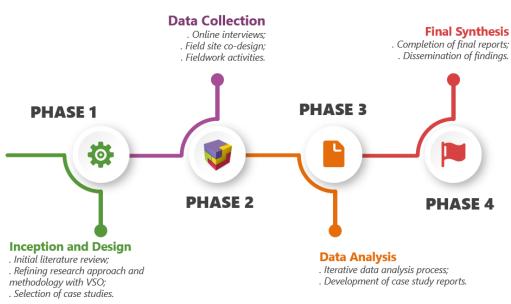
There is a significant gap in the existing academic and policy literature around capturing and understanding the interactions between different types of volunteers working together, whether by chance or design, and the ways in which these interactions may improve development outcomes. This gap reflects long-standing preoccupations with, and investments in, particular understandings and practices of development which derive from ideas and power rooted in the global North, and with particular kinds of volunteers, whose mobilities and interests have fitted this model (Laurie & Baillie Smith, 2018). These preoccupations are increasingly out of step with changing volunteering and development practices. VSO projects have long engaged different types of volunteers bringing their own sets of skills, knowledges, perspectives, backgrounds and strengths into their roles and activities. VSO's novel concept of blended volunteering emphasises these relationships, focusing on how combinations of volunteering modalities working together may contribute to a type of volunteering that is 'bigger than the sum of its parts' – and, by extension, how these combinations and interrelationships contribute to enhancing development outputs. Hence, this research interrogates VSO's innovative blended approach in order to understand the opportunities and challenges of bringing together different volunteering modalities across a range of global South contexts and programme areas, by addressing the following questions:

1. *How do different volunteering modalities contribute value to VSO's work with primary actors?*
2. *How might different volunteering modalities be combined to maximise development impact?*
3. *What are the conditions that contribute to maximising the impact of diverse volunteering modalities, both as individuals, and as teams?*

Answering these questions provides new insight and knowledge about the complex realities of volunteering and development. It also provides evidence to support innovative programming for blended volunteering in different settings and oriented to different development ambitions.

3. PROJECT OVERVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

This participatory and qualitative research project is a collaboration between VSO and Northumbria University working in partnership to define research methods, population of study and research priorities. The project has been co-designed in four main phases (**Figure 1**):

Figure 1: Overview of the research process

Source: *Northumbria University research team*

Phase one included an extensive literature review, discussions with key VSO stakeholders and the selection of the case study countries Tanzania, Uganda and Myanmar. This case study report focuses on activities carried out in Tanzania during the data collection undertaken in phase two. The production of this report concludes phase three for the Tanzania case study specifically. While the research is a collaboration between VSO and Northumbria University, data collection and analysis has been independently conducted by the Northumbria University team, to ensure objectivity of the data and research outputs. This data was collected by consulting key informants in the following categories:

- Current and former volunteers who have worked in the selected VSO projects, balancing representation of volunteering modalities (e.g. community, national and international volunteers)[1].

- Primary actors who have collaborated with or witnessed the activities of volunteers in selected VSO projects. Primary actors are the people and communities that VSO work with. They are the ones engaging in projects, helping VSO understand the community's needs, and working with volunteers (e.g., teachers, parents, hospital workers, etc.).

- Local partners who have collaborated with or witnessed the activities of volunteers in the selected VSO projects. Local partners guide support from VSO to be most effective at community level, collaborating in project planning, design and implementation (e.g., government institutions, community-based organisations, NGOs, etc.).

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[1] Here, we highlight place-based volunteering modalities: community volunteers are engaged in VSO volunteering in the same community where they come from; national volunteers are engaged in VSO volunteering in their own country but in a different community from their own; and international volunteers are engaged in VSO volunteering in a different country to their own, either in person or remotely.

- In-country VSO staff who have worked in the selected VSO projects, with experience in design and implementation of programmes, and who are the focal points for liaison with volunteers.

The following qualitative methods were used for data collection in the field:

- **Semi-structured one-to-one interviews** tailored to volunteers, primary actors, local partners, and staff members to ensure in-depth exploration of the research questions. This means they have covered various areas of stakeholder experience, such as the roles and activities of participants in the projects, how they have experienced the blended approach of different volunteers working together, challenges that were perceived and areas for future attention in the work of VSO.

- **Group workshops** involving volunteers and/or primary actors. Some were conducted in mixed groups, and some with primary actors or volunteers only, to account for a diverse range of voices and address potential sensitivities and power dynamics. The workshops were of a participatory nature, exploring with participants shared and relational understandings of volunteering modalities and their impacts, and mapping the interrelationship of activities, roles and impacts of the blended approach in practice. The core elements of these workshops were:

  - *Mapping activities:* participants were asked to work in small groups, to discuss and draw maps of sites and places important to the projects they were involved in, highlighting volunteering activities happening in the field and situating the blend locally. This exercise helped get conversations on blended volunteering started as well as shedding light on power relationships within the room, allowing the researcher to identify how to manage these accordingly (see **Box A** in section 4.2.1).

  - *Focus group discussions:* participants took part in a group discussion on a range of questions and topics related to blended volunteering and their experiences. The researcher ensured all participants were able to contribute their points of view.

  - *Scenario building:* participants worked in small groups to create their 'ideal VSO project'. This helped shed light on the aspects of blended volunteering that participants were happy with, and what challenges they had identified in their experience with VSO that they would approach differently going forward (see **Box B** in section 4.3.1).

3.1 VSO Tanzania Case Study

Projects and locations for the fieldwork were selected in consultation with VSO, based on the following criteria and considerations: prioritising districts where more than one project is/has been implemented by VSO, allowing for greater diversity of volunteer involvement; prioritising districts where projects are ongoing; possibility of comparing projects between districts; urban and rural balance; and aiming for a balance between VSO core programme areas: including health, education and livelihoods projects. Our sampling strategy was thereby designed to capture a diversity of modalities and geographies across the Tanzania case study. Based on these considerations, the following regions, districts and projects were identified for data collection:

- *Kagera region:*
  - Muleba District: concluded livelihoods project **'Raise Income for Secondary Education' (RISE)**. This project was wrapping up from its official conclusion in February 2021.
  - Bukoba Rural District: on-going youth and education project **'Improving Children's Learning and Participation' (ICLP)**.

- ◆ *Mwanza region:*
  - o Ilemela Municipal: concluded livelihoods projects **'Tanzania Local Enterprise Development' (T-LED)** and **'Lake Zone Youth Empowerment' (LZYE)**.
  - o Misungwi district: concluded youth and education project **'Safe Spaces, Let's Talk' (SSLT)**.
- ◆ *Shinyanga region:*
  - o Shinyanga Municipal: concluded livelihoods project **'Lake Zone Youth Empowerment'.**
  - o Kishapu District: concluded youth and education project **'Safe Spaces, Let's Talk'**.

Data collection activities consisted of face-to-face fieldwork in the above listed regions, conducted in March and April 2021, as well as remote interviews. **Tables 1 and 2** below show the stakeholder categories and total number of participants involved in interviews and workshops, and the volunteering modalities sampled on the projects, respectively[2]:

Table 1: Interview and workshop participants

Interview Participants	Volunteers	Primary Actors	Partners	Staff	TOTAL
25 face-to-face[3] and 9 remote interviews (r)	13 + 3 (r)	7	5	1 + 6 (r)	**35 interview participants**
Workshop Participants	**Volunteers**	**Primary Actors**			**TOTAL**
8 group workshops in total (4 volunteers only, 2 primary actors only and 2 mixed)	33	22			**55 workshop participants**

Source: *Northumbria University research team*

Table 2: Volunteering modalities explored per selected project

VSO Tanzania Project	Volunteering modalities[4]
RISE	*International; National; Community; ICS youth*
ICLP	*International; National; Community; ICS youth*
T-LED	*International; National*
SSLT	*National; Community; Youth*
LZYE	*National; Community; ICS youth*

Source: *Northumbria University research team*

The modalities sampled reflect the realities of fieldwork during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the modalities that were accessible to the research team in this context, either in the field sites or via remote interviews.

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[2] All volunteer workshop participants had worked with other volunteers included in the sample, as well as six out of sixteen interviewed volunteers, which means that nearly 80% of volunteer participants had worked with at least one other volunteer included in the sample at some point of their involvement on VSO projects.

[3] One face-to-face interview was carried out with two volunteers at the same time due to their preference and availability.

[4] The terminologies used here come from VSO Tanzania project documentation. Regarding the distinction between 'youth' and 'ICS' as modalities, all ICS are youth volunteers, but not all youth volunteers are ICS volunteers. Unlike the documents for RISE, ICLP and LZYE, which referred to 'ICS youth' volunteers, the documentation for SSLT referred simply to 'youth' volunteers, which is why the distinction is made in this table.

4. LEARNING FROM THE TANZANIA CASE STUDY

In this section, we analyse data from Tanzania to answer the three core questions for the research project. For each research question and in each section, we identify three core messages that emerge from the data and then present the data and analysis behind these, and conclude with a set of questions for future learning and practice.

4.1 Unpacking volunteering modalities

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: How do different volunteering modalities contribute value to VSO's work with primary actors?

Our analysis identified three key issues arising from the research question:

- ◆ **The blend of modalities and skills for development.** The contributions made by different modalities are dynamic, with overlaps between volunteer skillsets across modalities, complicating easy distinctions between volunteer roles within the blend.

- ◆ **The contrast between perceptions and practice.** The blended volunteering model assumes the combining of discrete modalities (international, national and community volunteers). In practice, distinctions between modalities are much blurrier, with both overlaps and disconnections, destabilising neat categories and preconceptions.

- ◆ **Capacity to adapt to changing circumstances.** Covid-19 has shed light on VSO's adaptability through blended volunteering, and demonstrated how the fluid nature of the blend of volunteers and stakeholders has enabled projects/initiatives to respond effectively to changing circumstances.

Each of these key issues is explored in more depth below. Finally, the section on **Looking Forward** raises a number of questions for future consideration in relation to understanding the ways in which volunteering modalities interact in order to further refine the blended volunteering model and maximise the value of VSO's work with primary actors.

4.1.1 The blend of modalities and skills for development

The contributions made by different modalities are dynamic, with overlaps between volunteer skillsets across modalities, complicating easy distinctions between volunteer roles within the blend.

Across the dataset, it is evident that VSO staff are cognisant of the process of blending volunteering modalities within particular projects. Staff pay careful and detailed attention to getting the 'mix' of a team right at the stage of project design, deploying their understanding of the particular strengths and skillsets that they perceive different volunteering modalities to bring. VSO staff seek to combine volunteer skillsets in order to make the greatest and most sustainable development impact.

> *"Community volunteers, we normally use them to cascade other technical aspects at the community level because we believe they understand the context, they know how we can engage much better with the community because there are a lot of challenges when it comes to somebody who is a foreigner, there's a language barrier, there's a context barrier, so the national volunteers are bridging that gap in terms of cascading and facilitation, when it comes to community level, so that's why we're using national volunteers and community volunteers."* (Interview, VSO Tanzania Staff member 3)

"You first design the project, then think about volunteer types depending on the nature of the activities." (Interview, VSO Tanzania Staff member 7)

"[Blended volunteering] has changed our own thinking when it comes to programme design. So initially, maybe everything would have been done by international volunteers. But from all the learnings that we have had, it's that, it's not necessarily that everything can be done by international volunteers." (Interview, VSO Tanzania Staff member 1)

In particular, our data shows that a partnering approach is adopted by VSO staff at the project design stage, where the pairing up of national and international volunteers is perceived to enable the delivery of an optimal set of outcomes.

"Because of different expertise, so the international volunteer will bring... her technical expertise, and the national volunteer had different expertise, but he also had the local knowledge. He had the contextual knowledge from Tanzania, and so they work together to deliver this project ... everyone had a role to play into that." (Interview, VSO Tanzania Staff member 1)

In this regard, several members of VSO staff reflected on their own experiences as a volunteer prior to becoming staff members, including the importance of this partnering approach:

"I think the blended style helps the national and the international because I believe also the international volunteer learned from me, what I knew according to the community context and the little experience I have about the community environment and everything. So when he went there, he went totally different and I remain different because I've also learned a lot of things from him." (Interview, VSO Tanzania Staff member 5)

Stakeholder interviews across the dataset indicate how both VSO staff, partners and primary actors identify that the blend of skills and overarching teamwork across different types of volunteer are essential to VSO's project outcomes and development impacts, and a clear strength of the blended volunteering model:

"R: I think they should continue to use different volunteers. Other youths in the community do not feel comfortable interacting with the volunteers who are not from here. I think they should continue to blend volunteers.
I: What do you think will not go right if only community volunteers are used?
R: They differ in terms of experience, national volunteers are more experienced, knowledgeable and understanding." (Interview, Primary actor, LZYE, Shinyanga Municipal)

"R: They worked with each other in a friendly manner despite coming from different areas. They always worked as a team when my expectation was that they would work individually.
I: Did you ever experience community volunteers collaborating with national volunteers? (...)
R: 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, Partner, LZYE, Shinyanga Municipal)

I: "Do you think it would be possible to carry out this project [RISE] by using only one type of volunteers?"
R: "No, it would not be possible. It had components that required different skills, you cannot involve only one type of volunteers in that regard. For example, you can blend national and international volunteers who have different skills, but the good thing is that they will be complementing each other. They share experiences which will help the project achieve its goals contrary to if you were to involve one type, which means, you miss out on that kind of ingredient." (Interview, VSO Staff member 7)

However, a key finding from our research in Tanzania is that volunteer skills are not fixed and do not map neatly onto particular modalities. There is significant overlap between the types of skills associated with different volunteering modalities, albeit with differences in the scales at which these skills are deployed. Our data demonstrates that skills and attributes are distributed *across* modalities, complicating assumptions embedded in the blended volunteering model, and underlining the diversity that exists within each modality.

Table 3. VSO Staff perceptions of volunteering modalities and skills for development

COMMUNITY	NATIONAL	INTERNATIONAL
Advocacy		
Behaviour change	Coaching and mentoring	
Peer support		
Understanding of policy, attitudes and behaviour at local level		Knowledge/best practice from other country contexts
Contextual knowledge		
Cascading skills & information	Technical & professional expertise	
	Training	
Translation skills		Capacity building
Understanding local context/ culture	Facilitation	
Local language skills	Bridging role	Brokering
	Monitoring	
		Managerial Skills

Source: Northumbria University research team

Table 4. Partner and primary actor perceptions of volunteering modalities and skills for development

COMMUNITY	NATIONAL	INTERNATIONAL
Behaviour change/sensitisation	Supporting	
		Creativity
Contextual knowledge		Specialist skills
	Technical & professional expertise	
Training youths	Training	
Cascading skills & information	Sharing skills	
Translation skills		
Understanding local context/ culture		
	Supervising	
Local language skills/communication	Recruiting participants	
Bridging role	Monitoring	
	Managerial skills	

Source: Northumbria University research team

Tables 3 and 4 above capture the key skills and roles perceived to be attributed to different volunteering modalities by VSO staff, and by primary actors and partners. VSO staff and primary actors and partners associate different skills with different modalities, underlining the fluid way in which skills and modalities intersect in practice. The dynamic nature of volunteer skillsets is particular evident in relation to the ways in which projects were forced to adapt in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, as we explore in section 4.1.3.

It is notable that there are significant overlaps between the skillsets attributed to national and international volunteers by both sets of stakeholders, though partners and primary actors identify fewer unique skills brought by international volunteers. This shows that the blended volunteering approach may contribute to decentring the international volunteer experience and foregrounding the contribution of global South volunteers. Although many skills overlap across volunteering modalities, there are key skills and attributes that are only identified with community volunteers, suggesting that community volunteers are not easily interchangeable with other modalities. This emphasises the centrality of community volunteers to the success of the blend, which will be further explored in section 4.2.2.

4.1.2 The contrast between perceptions and practice

The blended volunteering model assumes the combining of discrete modalities (international, national and community volunteers). In practice, distinctions between modalities are much blurrier, with both overlaps and disconnections, destabilising neat categories and preconceptions.

The blended volunteering model usually assumes the combination of three key modalities in programme design – community volunteers, national volunteers, and international volunteers. However, in analysing the key contributions of these modalities to VSO's activities, it becomes apparent that the ways in which these established categories are operationalised in the field – by VSO staff, partner organisations, primary actors and volunteers – are much blurrier. Volunteers themselves often use multiple categories – which are not always commensurate with each other – to describe volunteer identities and activities, challenging static categorisations and complicating straightforward distinctions between volunteer roles within the blend.

> *"We worked in several places based on our placement, as we have to do follow-ups and trainings. There were International Professional volunteers, National Volunteers, Youth Volunteers and later Theatre for change Volunteers thus were educating the community through drama."* (Workshop with volunteers, Community mapping exercise group discussion, RISE, T-LED and LZYE, Ilemela Municipal)

> *"I was Community volunteer as well as ICS volunteer."* (Workshop with volunteers, Focus group discussion, Community ICS volunteer, RISE and P4R, Muleba District)

These blurred and overlapping modalities were especially evident in relation to the International Citizen Service (ICS) programme, where volunteers were variously described as youth volunteers, ICS (national, international or community), or National Youth Empowerment Network (NYEN):

> *"I: Did you work with ICS?*
> *R: Yes, we also worked with NYE[N] (National Youth Empowerment [Network]) which was comprised of the former ICS volunteers, it supported existing projects.*
> *I: Did you work with ICS or NYE[N]?*
> *R: I worked with both. They helped us make business profiles. We involved them in our plans and let them know of the areas in which we needed support from them."* (Interview, National professional volunteer, T-LED, SSLT, LZYE, COVID-19 response and V4D, Ilemela Municipal)

Figure 2 below conceptualises these overlaps across three main ways of understanding VSO volunteering modalities in Tanzania:
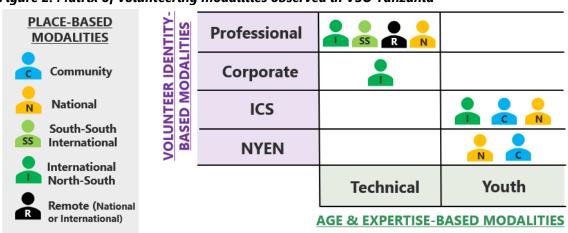
Figure 2: Matrix of volunteering modalities observed in VSO Tanzania

Source: *Northumbria University research team*

'Place-based modalities' were identified as the most stable categories mentioned by participants across the dataset, clearly perceived by stakeholders and relating directly to volunteers' geographical provenance:

> *"There are volunteers from outside Tanzania and volunteers from Tanzania. Volunteers who were coming from Tanzania were also coming from different regions of Tanzania. Others were coming from Dar es Salaam, Moshi and others were coming from the area where the project is operating. Those who are coming from outside the country most of them were coming from UK. So we were able to recognise that these are from UK, these are from Dar es Salaam, these are from Moshi or these are Tanzanians."* (Workshop with volunteers and primary actors, Focus group discussion, Primary actor, ICLP, Bukoba Rural District)

We also conceptualise remote volunteers as a place-based modality, and their particular roles during Covid-19 will be discussed in section 4.1.3. However, it is evident that these place-based modalities are not standalone and actually cut across other forms of differentiation, as is captured in the above matrix. **'Volunteer identity-based modalities'** represent the main form of self-identification of VSO volunteers in the dataset, often relating to their background and expectations for the VSO placement. Interestingly, in the Tanzanian case, after volunteers engaged in VSO's International Citizen Service (ICS) programme left the country in 2020, the term 'ICS' has also been used to describe the involvement of national and community youth volunteers. Moreover, volunteers who are part of the National Youth Engagement Network (NYEN), which has a strong presence in Tanzania, have often held different volunteer roles and their NYEN involvement may be described in different ways. In the Shinyanga region, for example, some self-identified as 'Supporter Volunteers'[5] acted as intermediaries between community and the national modalities during the COVID-19 pandemic which has demanded increased flexibility from volunteers in the field (see section 4.1.3).

Figure 2 also presents **'age and expertise-based modalities'**, which illustrate how 'youth' and 'technical' have been identified within the dataset as distinct ways of understanding the modalities and, importantly, how these modalities articulate with **'volunteer identity-based modalities'**. Although youth is understood according to the Tanzania definition (15-35 years old), the modality is not only marked by the age group, but it also delineates the kinds of 'less professionalised' expertise from volunteers:

> *"When you use these technical expertise of the technical volunteers, and you pair them with the young people who, who sometimes… less experience or have less expertise… so they gain that knowledge of… or it trickles down into their communities."* (Interview, VSO Tanzania Staff member 1)

Although the terms 'ICS' and 'youth' are sometimes used by VSO interchangeably or in combination (e.g. 'ICS youth volunteers'), not all youth volunteers identified as ICS. Therefore, there is value in differentiating these categories in the analysis, recognising that this distinction is often fuzzy. The creativity of youth volunteers and their resourcefulness in engaging with particular groups of primary actors, such as children, was highlighted by participants:

> *"When they were asked why they prefer youth volunteers, they said it is because they are very good at ensuring children participation in schools."* (Workshop with Primary Actors, Scenario building exercise, Primary actor, RISE, Muleba District)

Seemingly opposed to 'youth', the term 'technical' is used by participants to describe volunteering modalities with specific skillsets or educational backgrounds (e.g., finance, marketing, etc.) but not comprising language skills, local knowledge, etc. This differentiation highlights how the value of

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[5] The modality of 'supporter volunteers' was only referred to in the Shinyanga region where they have reportedly taken on a bridging role filling the gap of international and national volunteers that were forced to leave the areas due to COVID-19. Supporter volunteers were often from the same areas, although not always from the same communities, and have undertaken activities similar to those previously done by national or international volunteers, including connecting the remaining national volunteers to community volunteers.

community volunteering tends to be framed by participants in terms of geography/scale (e.g. place-based and contextual knowledge and understanding), whereas the value of national and international volunteers is framed by technical skills and particular notions of expertise.

As well as evidencing variation across volunteering modalities, the field research also identifies that across all modalities, some volunteers operate across projects or have worked consecutively over multiple projects. We identify this as a strength of the blended volunteering model, providing additional opportunities for sharing learning and avoiding the silo-ing of knowledge and expertise. Out of the 49 volunteer participants in this study, 21 reported involvement in more than one project (not necessarily at the same time) which represents nearly 43% of the total volunteer participants across interviews and workshops.

> *"I normally double, here and RISE. I would go there and assist them and also here."* (Interview, International professional South-South volunteer, RISE and ICLP, Bukoba Rural District)

> *"R: I have started volunteering with VSO from 2019, and I have supported three different VSO Projects. The first one was RISE Project (Kamachumu, Muleba), then Ilemela (LZYE project), somehow supported SSLT project and finally V4D project- Ilemela. We met different people where we exchanged experiences, learning from them and them learning from us. And through these projects we come across different matters that have built us professionally.*
> *I: Okay, What kind of volunteer were you?*
> *R: I have started as ICS Volunteer (Kamachumu), then Youth Volunteer and finally Community Volunteer."*
> (Workshop with volunteers, Focus group discussion, Community ICS and NYEN volunteer, RISE, T-LED, LZYE and V4D, Ilemela Municipal)

The dynamic nature of volunteering can also be illustrated by examples of VSO volunteers that have reported collaborations with 'independent' volunteer groups in delivering their work for VSO in the field, as well as those that have performed parallel volunteering activities, at a personal level, to support other organisations working in similar areas:

> *"I: OK and it was always in the RISE project, right? Or did you work also in another project?*
> *R: No, it was only the RISE project. [...] But then within that community there were other, outside the VSO, there were other organisations which needed some help from me, so sometimes they would ask for my help and I would come to coach their team on how to do work. There were also some other organisations handled the nutrition bits in the schools, so (...) once in a while I would be with them, you get it then yeah?*
> *I: So you would also do some, would it be volunteering as well for other organisations during your time there?*
> *R: Exactly, exactly, it was all volunteering, not employment."* (Interview, International professional South-South volunteer, RISE, Bukoba Rural District)

Our analysis therefore underlines the importance of paying attention to how conceptualisations of volunteering modalities work in practice, and how these also change over time and place. We emphasise that such complexity is not in itself problematic - and indeed can be considered a strength of the blended volunteering model – but nevertheless highlights a challenge in terms of building this into VSO's strategic planning and programme management.

4.1.3 Capacity to adapt to changing circumstances

COVID-19 has shed light on VSO's adaptability through blended volunteering, and demonstrated how the fluid nature of the blend of volunteers and stakeholders has enabled projects/initiatives to respond effectively to changing circumstances.

Whilst the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has clearly brought significant challenges to VSO, and to the ability of VSO Tanzania to continue to deliver its programmes and to engage with volunteers and communities, it nonetheless provides a lens through which to understand some of the ways in which a blended approach to volunteering can deliver better and more sustainable development outcomes.

In the case of Tanzania, as with most countries across the world, international volunteers were repatriated at the beginning of the pandemic, and projects were paused or ended earlier than planned. National volunteers also returned to the parts of the country that they came from.[6] Had projects been reliant on a single volunteer modality, many could not have continued, but across the different projects in our sample, we found examples of the adaptability that blended volunteering enables, with project structures and delivery mechanisms rapidly evolving in order to facilitate their continuation. In most circumstances this meant community volunteers taking on tasks/roles that were previously performed by international (and national) volunteers. Whilst this has been important to the continuity of VSO's projects, it is also especially interesting in terms of complicating some of the working assumptions made by VSO and by partner organisations, around the particular skills that different volunteering modalities bring to projects.

> "[VSO] said they used to recruit international volunteers and blend them with the Tanzanian volunteers. That changed due to COVID-19, they had to opt for community volunteers." (Interview, Community volunteer, SSLT, Misungwi District)

> "We had international volunteers at the beginning, not Tanzanians. Later on, when corona struck, we had ICS [national] volunteers. International volunteers' activities aren't that different, they were raising awareness in the community forming clubs in schools, they also engaged with tool designing in schools, as well as in the assemblies." (Interview, Primary actor, ICLP, Bukoba Rural District)

> "I: What volunteer type are you in the current project?
> R: I am a volunteer-supporter, community volunteer.
> I: Are you a native (from this area)?
> R: No, I am from Tanga.
> I: How did you fit in the community of which you are not a native?
> R: I have lived here for a long time." (Interview, Community ICS, NYEN and supporter volunteer, T-LED, LZYE and SSLT, Shinyanga Municipal)

While reflecting on the experience of delivering projects in the context of COVID-19, volunteers, VSO staff members and partners tend to agree that such projects would ideally have been delivered by a blend of volunteers. However, this example of community volunteers taking on responsibilities previously considered the domain of international 'professional' volunteers, underlines that the skillsets of different types of volunteer are not fixed, and that the right mix of skills is as important as a the right mix of volunteering modalities. This is also important in terms of problematising assumptions of international volunteers as the 'experts' in the blend, and de-centring the international volunteer within the volunteer experience.

The pandemic also illuminates VSO's use of remote volunteers as part of the 'blend' - some international volunteers who returned home continued volunteering for the project they had been involved in. The necessity created by COVID-19 provided a unique space for remote volunteering capacity to be harnessed, and both staff and volunteers reflected on the ways in which pairing remote volunteers with national volunteers can be particularly beneficial, enabling project continuity in challenging circumstances:

> "But we have the remote volunteers who will be working alongside the national volunteers who were already on the ground, continue coaching them, been planning with them, supporting them, until they successfully revived that project. So it doesn't really matter where a person is, what matters is the skill set that you need from that particular person." (Interview, VSO Tanzania staff member 1)

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[6] In many cases, national volunteers in Tanzania resumed work in their placement areas from June 2020.

"...when the international volunteers left including me, then I went back home, but when I was at home, I continued assisting them...Remotely from there, [I] prepared some work online with the mentor teachers, we could do discussions on WhatsApp platform because we have a group for the mentor teachers. So, we could do our activities there and everything was moving on, and when the situation was getting a little bit better and the [travel restrictions] were being lifted here and there in some of the countries, the entire office requested if I could come back and join the team so that I work with them physically rather than remotely." (Interview, International professional South-South volunteer, RISE and ICLP, Bukoba Rural District)

Whilst volunteers and staff members also noted that remote volunteering was less than ideal, it evidently provides a mechanism for extending the 'blend' over time and space, speaking to concerns about longevity and project sustainability.

The example of VSO projects and activities in Shinyanga provides an illustration of the way in which a blended approach allows for greater adaptability. In response to the challenges presented by COVID-19 and the departure of international and national volunteers, the research found that in Shinyanga, the National Youth Empowerment Network (NYEN) had spontaneously adapted to COVID-19 by effectively developing a new 'category' or volunteer role which they described as 'supporter volunteers'. The supporter volunteers are affiliated to the NYEN, and have taken on a bridging role, filling the gap left by international and national volunteers, and connecting the remaining national volunteers to community volunteers. Supporter volunteers reported undertaking activities very similar to those previously done by national or international volunteers. For instance, they recruited community volunteers and trained them, especially for the SSLT project; they linked SSLT groups to District officials for registering and formalizing groups and accessing loans; they attended and monitored group activities (saving groups, carpentry, tailoring, poultry, livestock keeping, etc.) in the community, as well as organising and participating in Community Action Days (CAD). Additionally, they undertook a monitoring role, reporting any challenges requiring prompt attention to national volunteers:

"In large part, everything went well. There weren't conflicts as such, for example, [the national volunteer] sent reports on what we did. She made inquiries if she felt that some issues required clarity. I could not communicate with the higher-up, so, I informed her of challenges that I encountered, be it financial or any other." (Interview, Community ICS, NYEN and supporter volunteer, T-LED, LZYE and SSLT, Shinyanga Municipal)

This innovation and rapid adaptation provides another example of the dynamics discussed in section 4.1.2, regarding the ways in which volunteering modalities are de-stabilised and re-worked in the field and are framed by volunteer perceptions as much as by programming categories and assumptions.

4.1.4 Looking forward

In exploring the ways in which **different volunteering modalities contribute value to VSO's work with primary actors**, the research raises a number of questions to consider in relation to understanding the ways in which volunteering modalities interact in order to further refine the blended volunteering model and maximise the value of VSO's work with primary actors.

- *How can understanding volunteer categories as dynamic and unstable, and working with volunteers to identify their own definitions and perceptions of particular modalities, contribute to shaping VSO's strategic planning and volunteer management?*

- *How might a recognition that volunteer knowledge and expertise do not directly align with particular volunteering modalities, inform strategies to build equity in project relationships?*

- *How can understanding the blend as dynamic and acknowledging diversity within categories, be incorporated into future programming and planning, rather than being seen as something to be managed out?*

4.2 Making the blend work

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: How might different volunteering modalities be combined to maximise development impact?

Our analysis identified three key issues arising from the research question:

- **Volunteer combinations add value to development outcomes.** The use of a blend of volunteers is beneficial to development programmes, with the 'mix' of volunteers recognised as a key factor in maximising project outcomes as well as in enhancing the personal and professional development of volunteers. However, different stakeholders perceive different value for different volunteer combinations, therefore finding the 'right' blend is an iterative, multi-layered and context-specific process.

- **The centrality of community volunteers.** Community volunteers are perceived by all stakeholders as contributing particular value to VSO's work – though many skills overlap across volunteering modalities, there are important skills and attributes that are only identified with community volunteers.
- **Recognising disconnections and hierarchies.** The differentiation of modalities is at the core of the blended approach, but it also leads to perceived or actual tensions and hierarchies between volunteers in a critical dilemma for the blended model. These tensions and hierarchies can be identified but not always flattened, thus adaptive management is central to the success of blended volunteering.

Each of these key issues is explored in more depth below. Finally, the section on **Looking Forward** raises some questions for future consideration on how the blended volunteering model might be refined further and on how to maximise the value of VSO's work with primary actors.

4.2.1 Volunteer combinations add value to development outcomes

The use of a blend of volunteers is beneficial to development programmes, with the 'mix' of volunteers recognised as a key factor in maximising project outcomes as well as in enhancing the personal and professional development of volunteers. However, different stakeholders perceive different value for different volunteer combinations, therefore finding the 'right' blend is an iterative, multi-layered and context-specific process.

All participants – volunteers, staff, partners and primary actors, involved in interviews or workshops in Tanzania – had positive observations about the value of blended volunteering. This lends further evidence to VSO's observation and assumption that blended volunteering is a net positive (Clark, 2020). A wide range of benefits, from the personal to the project level, were named as outcomes of different volunteering modalities working together. These benefits were often related to the blend of skill, the blend of culture and background, and the blend of different personalities working together on a project.

In terms of positive outcomes for individual volunteers, our findings in Tanzania establish that not only do all volunteering modalities sampled indicate they have had positive experiences and learning in working with VSO, but they often link these particularly to the blended model and working together.

Volunteers credit blended volunteering in particular with enhancing their confidence, expanding their horizons and understanding of different cultures, creating on-going friendships between different volunteer types, and enhancing their communication and public speaking skills, as well as other useful skills such as grant proposal writing. They explained they often developed a life-long passion for voluntary work. This is illustrated by some examples across volunteering modalities:

> *"My ability to work in a team has improved; I have gained knowledge and skills through them [international volunteers]. They know so many things; I have gained more confidence."* (Interview, National professional volunteer, T-LED, V4D and COVID-19 response, Ilemela Municipal)

> *"You may not know how to do something, but you learn more when you see other people do things that you never thought you would be able to do [...] My communication skills improved due to the interaction with different people sharing ideas and stuff. You can communicate with people better and get new ideas."* (Interview, Community volunteer, ICLP, Bukoba Rural)

> *"What it's made me do... what, where I'm at now I suppose is, in a better, much better position, I hope, to understand diversity, and to try to see that, you know, I have a western lens that I look through, and not everybody does."* (Interview, International professional volunteer, ICLP, Bukoba Rural)

> *"Since we volunteered with different people international, national volunteers, as an ICS, the ideas that we got enabled us to think about different things, they gave us ideas of thinking about different things, what to do and how to solve the problem. It's something that has built capacity to us as ICS volunteers and community at large."* (Workshops with volunteers, Focus group discussion, Community ICS volunteer, RISE, Muleba District)

These individual accounts highlight how volunteers reported increased confidence and skills as a direct result of working together with volunteers in other modalities. The final quote also indicates the wider benefits to communities. Overall, blended volunteering was also credited as a particular factor in the success of projects, and thereby the development impact for communities and primary actors. This was true for both the projects in the livelihoods and education programmes which were sampled for this case study. For example, a national volunteer involved in the livelihoods projects T-LED and LZYE discussed how he was responsible for linking small and medium entrepreneurs with financial institutions, to find loans and potential markets. This was successful, he reflects, due to national volunteers working alongside international volunteers:

> *"We did that very well with the help of the international volunteers learning different skills from them [...] We sat as a team in which they taught us, so we could train entrepreneurs in return."* (Interview, National professional volunteer, T-LED, V4D and COVID-19 response, Ilemela Municipal)

On an education project, a primary actor described how the varying roles of volunteers meant the project managed to reach different community groups:

> *"The training [led by international volunteers] helped us all at the same time because it involved the leaders who would go back to the community, educate and raise awareness on what was going on. On the other hand, they could go all the way to the community since they had ICS volunteers who would conduct meetings with parents and children and educate them in various ways."* (Interview, Primary actor, ICLP, Bukoba Rural District)

This is reflected in an observation by a member of VSO Tanzania staff, who spoke highly of the enthusiasm and creativity of ICS volunteers, highlighting that their involvement alongside national, international and community volunteers was key to a wide reach of education projects:

> *"If I look at maybe the number, the reach numbers sometimes, that we get, when you have that blended model. It's huge compared to what you might have planned."* (Interview, VSO Tanzania Staff member 1)

An effective blend, then, can be a cornerstone of a good and beneficial working relationship, harnessing benefits both for the individuals and the project. As volunteers reflect:

> *"We [different types of volunteers] differ in various aspects ranging from culture, language and others. We should have others who can be useful to the project. For example, international volunteers should work with local volunteers who can guide them and ease language barrier. We differ in terms of knowledge and skills."* (Interview, National professional volunteer, RISE, ICLP and COVID-19 response, Muleba District)

> *"It is known that "Unity is power". That the thing you have isn't the same with that I have, so joining ideas makes a best decision and continue bringing positive changes in the community. We also learn different things from each other for instance from [UK volunteers] we learnt different things that are not here in Tanzania."* (Workshops with volunteers, Focus group discussion, Community ICS and NYEN volunteer, RISE and SSLT, Ilemela Municipal)

BOX A. PARTICIPATORY MAPPING: SITUATING THE BLEND IN PLACE

Figure 3: Workshop with Primary Actors, Mapping Activity, Muleba District
Source: *Northumbria University research team*

*Participatory mapping was conducted in workshops with groups of volunteers and primary actors, both separately and in mixed groups, in order to facilitate our understanding of how blended volunteering has worked in practice across various projects. Data from across the mapping activities indicates that all participants were positive about the contributions of the blended volunteering approach, identifying that it contributes to improved outcomes for projects and helps to ensure the sustainability of the project beyond its formal life span. In **Figure 3**, we see an example of a map drawn during a workshop with primary actors (teachers and farmers) in Muleba District.*

The maps enabled us to capture the range and scope of activities being undertaken by different volunteering modalities, as well as providing an important stimulus for wider conversations within the workshop setting, for example around participants' perceptions of power relations between different actors involved in the project.

Our research therefore demonstrates that the process of blending volunteers draws together high-level programming as well as local level technical and political insights into which specific combinations can work in given community contexts and add value to VSO's development outcomes. Key considerations highlighted by participants, particularly staff members, as expectations for the 'right' blend encompass: promoting opportunities for volunteers to learn and share experiences and skills; delivering quality service to primary actors; meeting project targets and timeframes; and improving projects' sustainability.

These aspects are reflected in the overwhelmingly positive experiences around the blended approach, discussed earlier. How the benefits of blending volunteering modalities are realised is, however, dependent on a complex set of variables, including programming needs, past individual and project experiences, and local expectations. It then becomes clear that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the blend; different skillsets perceived for each volunteer modality (see section 4.1.1) can play more or less prominent roles depending on the context and project components:

> *"So we surpassed the targets after introducing other volunteer types and we go beyond even the target that we initially thought we could reach through international, one volunteer type. So likewise I can't see the survival or a better delivering of project without having the blended type and that is because of the approach, the programmatic package that we are using. Yes, unless otherwise if it is appending of one component [...] let's say if we also want to stick into sensitisation and behaviour change, yes, you can have one volunteer type. And you can have a design of that, but if you want to combine, and I don't think VSO can go into that route, they have to combine different approach, different pathways to deliver a particular programme so, either way, with that lens, they need different volunteer types."* (Interview, VSO Tanzania Staff member 3)

4.2.2 The centrality of community volunteers

Community volunteers are perceived by all stakeholders as contributing particular value to VSO's work – though many skills overlap across volunteering modalities, there are important skills and attributes that are only identified with community volunteers.

In the blending process, the particular value of international volunteers' presence has been highlighted according to their skillsets and experience (see section 4.1.1), as well as the 'exposure' they can provide to local counterparts, which have positive implications both for the blend and project outcomes:

> *"But when they [national volunteers] are blended with the international volunteers, even the motivation and everything changes because they're now eager to learn the culture, how things work, so I think it's kind of motivation to the national volunteer because they also get an exposure."* (Interview, VSO Tanzania Staff member 5)

> *"You get a taste of the historical background of a place you have never been to before. Likewise, you can meet someone who specializes in the same field as you're, but they are different due to the nature of their educational backgrounds."* (Interview, Community, ICS, and NYEN volunteer, RISE, LZYE, T-LED and V4D, Ilemela Municipal)

> *"We were able to create many tools, I am among the beneficiaries. Perhaps I will become an international volunteer someday, I had the opportunity to train people to make those kinds of tools in Kigoma. I taught educational officers in the refugee camps. I have benefited greatly and had a lot of experience in designing tools."* (Interview, Primary actor, ICLP, Bukoba Rural District)

Despite recognising their roles and contributions, this research shows how the blended approach provides an opportunity to de-centre the focus on international volunteers, particularly North-South, which has been long dominant both in academic and policy spaces within the wider development and volunteering sector. Data from this case study suggests a particular emphasis on the roles of Tanzanian volunteers for the success of the blend. This has been already evidenced by the resourceful ways in which national and, particularly, community volunteers have stepped in to support the implementation of activities during Covid-19 (see section 4.1.3). During scenario building participatory discussions in workshops (see **Box B** in section 4.3.1), in which participants designed their 'perfect VSO project', national and community volunteer were the modalities most often included on the imagined projects.

Community volunteers' centrality to the blend comes precisely from the realisation of the particular skills and attributes that are only identified with community volunteers and their unique position in relation to primary actors:

> *"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; they would not enjoy that luxury."* (Interview, Community volunteer, SSLT, Kishapu District)

First, their local embeddedness reveals how translation skills encompass not only the language, which has often been mentioned by participants as a barrier to the involvement of other modalities, but also culture and local norms. This leads to crucial responsibilities for sharing contextual knowledge and understandings which place community volunteers as 'connecting agents', effectively facilitating the implementation of project activities on the ground:

> *"We used local volunteers as connecting agents who acted as a link between entrepreneurs and primary actors, hence it was mandatory for each international volunteer to work with a local one who helped with translation to help them ease the language barrier between them and entrepreneurs who could not speak English. They were also responsible for acquainting international volunteers with important issues in the communities they were working in with respect to the way people behave, what clothes they wear and other cultural aspects."* (Interview, Partner, T-LED, Ilemela Municipal)

> *"...there were some local volunteers involved yes, and some of them were very experienced. It was good to get to know them because they were great sources of local information, good contacts to keep."* (Interview, International professional volunteer, ICLP, Bukoba Rural District)

Second, the continued presence of community volunteers in their communities, beyond the timeframe of a particular project's implementation, has been emphasised by stakeholders in the research as crucial to ensuring longevity and sustained impacts of VSO projects, aspects which will be further discussed in section 4.3.3:

> *"Community volunteers continue to perform their duties even after the departure of the national volunteers."* (Interview, Partner, LZYE, Shinyanga Municipal)

> *"Community volunteers worked in the community for hours on end unlike national volunteers who only came for a short while and left. Besides, community volunteers are from within the community, so they could communicate in their specific vernacular languages."* (Interview, Partner, SSLT, Kishapu District)

The benefit of sustained engagement with community volunteers was therefore repeatedly explained by their longer-term engagement, belonging and acceptance at local levels. Despite the recognition of community volunteers as bearers of attributes that are essential to the success of projects, the data demonstrates an underlying assumption that knowledge will be passed from national and international volunteers, to community volunteers, in a uni-directional manner. As will be discussed in section 4.2.3, these distinct perceptions around expertise, as well as the ways in which volunteer labour is rewarded, can contribute to the perpetuation of hierarchies and inequities within the 'blend', that tend to place community volunteers in less privileged positions in relation to their peers in the team. Furthermore, the participation of community volunteers in the blend as a key factor enabling development outcomes might be obscured by an assumption that 'they are always there', meaning there is risk they could be 'taken for granted' as part of the blend. The mobility of national and international volunteers produces particular demands in terms of relocation and logistics which can inadvertently make the blend exist 'around' them and not 'with' them, leading to perceived or real inequities in encounters and experiences across modalities. This reflects a critical dilemma which will be discussed in the next section in relation to the intrinsic differentiation that is part of the blending process.

4.2.3 Recognising disconnections and hierarchies

The differentiation of modalities is at the core of the blended approach but it can also lead to perceived or actual tensions and hierarchies between volunteers, creating a critical dilemma for the blended model. These tensions and hierarchies can be identified but not always flattened, thus adaptive management is central to the success of blended volunteering.

As discussed earlier, our data shows not only the added value of the blend in the individual experience of volunteers but also the ways in which the approach allows for increased effectiveness in the implementation of projects, particularly in that 'everyone has a role to play'. However, the specific roles and (often assumed) competencies that underpin the differentiation of modalities, are also at the very centre of a critical dilemma: the emergence of perceived or actual hierarchies and tensions in the field. We have thus identified four main challenge areas based on the issues raised by participants.

First is the perception of different status and/or levels of expertise of the varying volunteering modalities. This relates to the argument explored in section 4.1.1 about how the perceptions of skillsets, but also the language used in programming, may place particular emphasis on certain attributes to the detriment of others. Across the dataset, for example, key words such as 'expert' and 'specialist' were predominantly used to describe the roles of international volunteers, particularly from staff perspectives. As previously highlighted in **Figure 2**, while 'professional' and 'technical' modalities are attributed to national and international volunteers, community volunteers are rarely referred to in relation to their own unique expertise. This framing might contribute to hierarchical relationships, particularly between Tanzanian and international volunteers, in which the latter could be inadvertently seen as superior to the former:

> *"There are some cases whereby the international volunteer, due to the different thinking and experience, so they came here thinking that the national volunteer doesn't know anything. [...] So most of the time they make national volunteers feel uncomfortable and feel bad, you know? Because they feel like they're downgraded, do you understand?" (Interview, VSO Tanzania Staff member 5)*

> *"Those with international exposure need training when they come here. The only problem is that once they design something they do not want to be criticised. They do not tell us that, but we have a feeling they behave that way because their organisation sponsors our country, that means what they say should be final." (Interview, Partner, T-LED, Ilemela Municipal)*

Second, perceptions of differences in the benefits that each modality can access have also been raised by volunteers as a key area of tension (e.g., contracts, allowances, types of accommodation, access to equipment). Although all volunteer participants in the sample received allowances, these differ considerably, notably between international/national modalities on the one hand and community volunteers on the other. There may be clear rationales behind these differences, and they could reflect responses to feedback from volunteers about what works for them, but the differences could nonetheless be interpreted as a sign that 'less value' is being attached to community volunteers:

> *"The treatment that European or American volunteers receive is very different from the treatment the national or community volunteer receive. International volunteers are given high priority than national volunteers. Yes, we are local, we were born here and we are experienced with the environment but when you talk about humanitarian organisation and you are not treating people equally it is a very bad thing if you really understand the meaning of humanitarian organisation." (Workshop with volunteers, Focus group discussion, National volunteer, ICLP, Bukoba Rural District)[7]*

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[7] This quote reflects this participant's personal perception of VSO as a humanitarian organisation. Although the boundaries between humanitarian and development work might have been less clear during the COVID-19 response, VSO identifies as an international development organisation.

This also relates to expectations for the type of labour expected from different volunteering modalities[8], and an evolving understanding about volunteer economies that prompts the wider development sector to approach volunteer allowances as part of livelihood strategies, particularly in the Global South (Baillie Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, equitable resourcing and transparent and easy to understand communication are key to preventing the differentiation across modalities from negatively impacting volunteers' performance.

> *"I: What are the disadvantages of working with other volunteer types?*
> *R: Expectations are always high among the community volunteers, but the volunteering atmosphere may change everything. They do not receive any payment; they are not given money to buy lunch. It discourages some of them; I tell them to continue working since it is the path we have chosen. In a group of 10, only 6 or 5 understand what position they are in. We learned that first impression matters, so, we made sure we told them everything.*
> *I: Were there any dropouts?*
> *R: There were, they could come the first day and miss the next, or ask if there is any possibility of getting money." (Interview, Community, ICS, NYEN and Supporter Volunteer, LZYE, T-LED and SSLT, Shinyanga Municipal)*

The third main challenge area involves difficulties related to the culture and behaviour of volunteers from different backgrounds. Whilst cultural differences were often mentioned as an added value for learning and exchanges, they were then also raised as a potential source of tension. The language barrier was the most recurrent challenge mentioned by participants, particularly in the relationships with primary actors, therefore the role of community volunteers as facilitators was particularly highlighted. Another example of tension around cultural differences described was dress code:

> *"Let me give an example, for us it might be difficult to dress a trouser in front of students but for them it might be easier. So in order to cope with them it will need us to change our laws and then we tell ourselves that you are also allowed to dress trousers but it was not like that before. As long as the international volunteer has this that is why we also allow you, but for our culture and environment that is not allowed." (Workshop with volunteers, Focus group discussion, Community Volunteer, ICLP and COVID-19 response, Bukoba Rural District)*

> *"Sometimes we feared to welcome them [ICS international volunteers] at schools, the way they dress; as you know there are kids at school, the way they came dressed and shaved their hair. So it happened some of their things we didn't understand, their culture wasn't fitting us." (Workshop with primary actors, Focus group discussion, Primary actor, ICLP, Bukoba Rural District)*

The final challenge area mentioned by participants involves cases of interpersonal conflicts within and across modalities.

> *"…sometimes it's not the modality, sometimes it's a person, you know, personal. People might have some personality which cannot blend each other. In the sense that, I understand …, we have different cultures, but at the same time we have personal behaviours. But the more we work together, the more we understand each other." (Interview, VSO Tanzania Staff member 2)*

Groups of people working together in teams always implies potential tensions, and this issue is not exclusive to the work of VSO. However, the centrality of the team to a blended volunteering approach underlines the importance of VSO's adaptive management strategies in responding to the fluidity of the blended approach in the field, and continuing to promote sustained volunteer engagement.

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[8] VSO Tanzania "Job descriptions" for international and national volunteers tend to differentiate their expected labour (framed around skillsets: e.g., "performance indicators", "competencies", etc.) from community volunteering labour (framed around local presence for service-delivery: e.g., fulfilling "project implementation plans").

4.2.4 Looking forward

In exploring the ways in which **different volunteering modalities might be combined to maximise development impact**, the research raises a number of questions to consider in relation to understanding the ways in which volunteering modalities interact in order to further refine the blended volunteering model and maximise the value of VSO's work with primary actors.

- *What considerations might be made in programme design, monitoring and evaluation, to support the flattening of hierarchies and promote more equitable opportunities across different volunteering modalities, to maximise the development impacts of the blend?*

- *How can tensions around perceived and real differences in skills, status and reward for volunteers be managed to facilitate team integration and minimise power imbalances?*

- *How might we best manage primary actor and community expectations regarding differentiation of skills and modalities within the blend?*

4.3 Maximising development impact

RESEARCH QUESTION 3. What are the conditions that contribute to maximising the impact of diverse volunteering modalities, both as individuals, and as teams?

Our analysis identified three key issues arising from the research question:

- **Project phases and the blend 'over time'.** Factors outside the 'blend' impact its effectiveness: project phase can affect how volunteer combinations are developed and sustained because the blend is not static, consequently community and volunteer attitudes will change and develop as the teams mature and/or change.

- **Blended volunteering and community experiences.** The blend does not exist in a vacuum; diverse and sometimes longstanding relationships and experiences between different volunteers and stakeholders shape how VSO's work might be imagined, experienced and understood between different actors.

- **Shared ownership and project legacy in communities.** Blended volunteering has the potential to enhance legacy and sustained impacts for development of VSO projects, promoting a sense of shared ownership between stakeholders by drawing on the strengths of different modalities.

Each of these key issues is explored in more depth below. Finally, the section on **Looking Forward** raises some questions for future consideration on how the blended volunteering model might be refined further and on how to maximise the value of VSO's work with primary actors.

4.3.1 Project phases and the blend 'over time'

Factors outside the 'blend' impact its effectiveness: project phase can affect how volunteer combinations are developed and sustained because the blend is not static, consequently community and volunteer attitudes will change and develop as the teams mature and/or change.

While projects often last many years, most national and international volunteers stay on a project for six months, twelve months, or more. Placement lengths are often determined by both project needs and the volunteer scheme through which volunteers are engaged. Some modalities, including

corporate and ICS volunteers, may have shorter placements which start at two weeks. Community volunteer placements, too, have a range of durations. Overall, this means that volunteers come and go throughout the course of a project. While this is the nature of working with volunteers and not unique to the work of VSO, it influences their blended volunteering approach as it means that 'the blend' itself remains fluid, often changing over the course of a project; as a result, challenges may arise. For example, some participants mentioned that shorter durations could mean a lot of time would go into becoming accustomed to the volunteer role, the team, and the local context. A VSO staff member discussed three-month placements for some international volunteers being too short for successful blended volunteering, stating:

> *"Three months to me I think it's not enough because it's when a national volunteer begins to learn and begin to get used to the international volunteer and they begin to work well together and then he or she is leaving."* (Interview, VSO Tanzania Staff member 5)
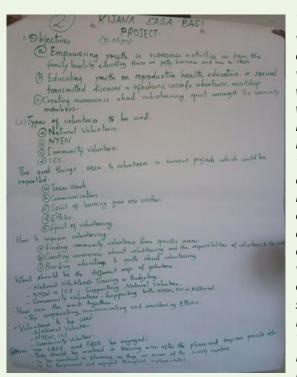
While three-month placements for international volunteers are the exception rather than the rule, such shorter placements do exist. Furthermore, successful handover from one cohort of volunteers to the next is a factor in project efficiency. An example of a challenge in this area can be found in the following account from an international volunteer who discussed reworking an existing business plan for a primary actor, made by a previous volunteer:

> *"Let's assume the business plan was done by another volunteer, uh, maybe eight months prior. [...] So even if I come in and I read some of those business plans, and I thought 'OK well is this still the same?' You know... so then you feel as a, as a volunteer, you feel like 'OK I need to push this aside I need to start a new one and start from scratch so that I can really immerse myself into the conversation and into helping out', so very hard for a volunteer to come in and say, 'OK, I'm going to follow through on what this person did'. Perhaps it can be done, and maybe there needs to be an overlap of, you know when one person leaves, another one comes in prior to that person leaving, that kind of stuff."* (Interview, International professional volunteer, T-LED)

Ensuring knowledge and skills are sustained throughout the project with no need to 'reinvent the wheel' might be achieved by focusing on 'blending' between coming and going volunteers, on top of 'blending' modalities.

Project phase may have additional influence on the potential for the 'blend'. All volunteers communicated an awareness of the stage a project was in when they joined it, and some highlighted particular challenges they faced associated with this. Toward the end of a project, for example, teams and practices are established and new volunteers may feel more difficulty fitting into existing teams and the project and/or less able to change and improve existing practices. Several interviewees reflected that at the early stages of a project, on the other hand, the 'blend' had not fully been integrated/designed; for example, where community volunteers were not originally envisaged to be part of a project. However, our interviews with staff members also indicate that VSO continues learning from their experiences with blended volunteering and their work across the range of volunteering modalities, recognising the importance of designing the blend into the project at all stages. Despite this, a range of participants still discussed being involved in a situation with a less than optimal blend – that means that either one or two of the 'overarching' modalities – international, national and community - were not present in the project, or that modalities were present within the project, but were not 'blending'. Sometimes, this was due to unforeseeable issues – e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic, which left many projects relying solely on community volunteers or community volunteers and national volunteers. However, in other instances, a 'less than perfect blend' was ascribed to factors such as: project design; volunteers who work in larger teams, making it easier to 'stick to their own'; individuals that do not like to work in teams and the shorter placements of particular international volunteering modalities.

Figure 4: Workshop with Volunteers, Scenario Building, Shinyanga Municipal. Source: *Northumbria University team*

*The scenario building exercise provided an opportunity for volunteers and primary actors to reflect on their ideal design of a new project for VSO, considering, how blended volunteering could be crafted, plus the elements that they would want to retain or change from their experience of working with various volunteering modalities. All projects hypothetically constructed during the workshops in Tanzania have reflected the value and the significance assigned to 'blended volunteering', as shown in an exemplar project from a workshop with volunteers in Shinyanga. In all the scenarios built around a 'perfect project', both volunteers and primary actors identified blended volunteering as a 'must have' approach for a successful project. This reflects the belief articulated in many interviews with VSO staff, partners, volunteers and primary actors that VSO projects in Tanzania could not have succeeded with only one type of volunteer (see section 4.1.1), a sentiment captured in the ideal 'KIJANA SASA BASI (lit. 'IT IS YOUTH'S TIME') project, pictured in **Figure 4**. The selected blend on this new project included the national, NYEN and community, and ICS [International] volunteering modalities, where participants envisaged replicating, many of the positives they had experienced in relation to the blend.*

The group also commented on the challenges they had faced in relation to the blend and how to solve them, producing a 'wish-list' indicating what they would improve in order to produce a good blend for an impactful and sustainable project.

All in all, then, it is important to recognise the blend as fluid and influenced by the contextual aspects of the VSO project it is a part of, including project stage, cohort overlaps and handovers and placement duration. Wider contextual aspects - such as those related to the different stakeholders and the local community – are of vital importance to the success of blended volunteering and the legacy of projects as well: we will explore this in the next section.

4.3.2 Blended volunteering and community experiences

The blend does not exist in a vacuum; diverse and sometimes longstanding relationships and experiences between different volunteers and stakeholders shape how VSO's work might be imagined, experienced and understood between different actors.

In section 4.2.1 we have outlined various ways in which the volunteer blend is essential to VSO's success. Our data indicates that good working relationships not just between different types of volunteers, but between volunteers and various stakeholders in the communities they work in, and between these different stakeholders themselves, are essential to the success of VSO projects. There are always practical risks of a disconnect between community expectations, VSO project design, volunteer activity and practical outputs.

The importance of managing these relationships, and the challenges they can present, of course is not exclusive to VSO, but reflect experiences and challenges faced in myriad international development projects and contexts. However, as these relationships are of key importance to the way blended volunteering is carried out and experienced, and therefore, to the success of a project, we reflect on them here in the context of blended volunteering and VSO's work.

Relationships between volunteers, partners, primary actors and other stakeholders were discussed in all interviews and workshops, with participants reflecting on both positive accounts and challenges in the relationships. Positive accounts were of good working relationships, mutual understanding of the project aims, and appreciation for all stakeholders involved on the project. Take, for example, the following account of a national volunteer highlighting good relationships and mutual understanding as the main positive outcome of their] volunteering involvement:

> *"The big [positive outcome] is relationship, I will start with a positive relationship between my colleagues and I but also the good relationship between I and the community, I was known by the community and also I knew their problems and worked together."* (Workshop with volunteers, Focus group discussion, National volunteer, ICLP, Bukoba Rural District)

In addition to the benefits of volunteers 'blending' with local community stakeholders, VSO were often credited with improving relationships between various actors in communities themselves:

> *"The VSO project have helped us to build trust with different offices, as previously we youth were not confident to visit any office. It happened when we hear that we have to visit District Community Development Offices, we started questioning what's wrong have I done as to be needed to visit such an office and what would I speak there. But after the coming of VSO have built trust and confidence to us that when we are needed to visit such offices, we don't have to fear as those offices are there to save us. For instance it happened when we were after loans we visited District Executive Director (DED), gives out our concern and it simplified the process for us being given loans.* (Workshop with primary actors, Focus group discussion, Primary actor, SSLT, Misungwi District)

On the other hand, when challenges were discussed, these were often related to a lack of understanding and/or communication between two or more stakeholders on the project. A notable example is the need for understanding of contexts and wishes of all stakeholders when it comes to the financial aspects of a project and its impact on the project's success. On the side of community understanding, a range of volunteer participants discussed that communities had financial expectations related to VSO projects, and that this was a challenge they had to overcome. Most of these volunteers reported they were able to resolve this issue by working to enhance stakeholder understanding of the project aims. However, in some instances this issue led to primary actors and community volunteers dropping out of a project, thereby negatively impacting outcomes and reach of VSO's work. On the side of design and planning, during one workshop, volunteers involved in SSLT, LZYE and T-LED noted that VSO had done very well in discussing and understanding community needs before designing projects. However, the volunteers still had faced difficulties in recruiting participants in practice, as another NGO was present in the areas, offering more resources. In another workshop, volunteers remarked on the need for a budget to compensate primary actors for travelling, lunch and/or time spent in workshops; this would secure their participation. This highlights the need for VSO to thoroughly understand immediate project needs as well as wider local contexts, in order to enhance the success of a project.

Indeed, a message emerging across both participants discussing positive relationships with other stakeholders, and participants describing challenges in these relationships, is that the recognition of diverse ways of understanding projects, project aims and desired outcomes between all stakeholders is key for projects to be successful. We therefore suggest that the key to successful blended volunteering is not just the 'blending' of various volunteering modalities, but that the blending of volunteers and communities, stakeholders and partners must be taken into consideration as an integral aspect of project design. In this way, the scope of the 'blend' is broadened beyond the volunteers working together. This is important if, as we discuss in the next section, blended volunteering is uniquely positioned to achieve successful relationships and sustained development impacts.

4.3.3 Shared ownership and project legacy in communities

Blended volunteering has the potential to enhance legacy and sustained impacts for development of VSO projects, promoting a sense of shared ownership between stakeholders by drawing on the strengths of different modalities.

Designing projects to ensure lasting impacts after VSO and some of its volunteers 'leave' the communities is, of course, key to maximising long-term development impacts of VSO's projects. In discussing the sustained impacts of VSO's work, the majority of respondents were positive, highlighting that blended volunteering has not only provided space within which various challenges requiring multiple skillsets can be solved but is also seem as an arena where long-term challenges are solved. On the other hand, just under half of the participants reflecting on project legacy mentioned concerns about the longevity of the project impacts – i.e. whether or not activities or impacts would endure beyond the end of a project, when VSO (national and international) volunteers leave and investments cease. Some examples of such accounts include:

> *"[W]hen we volunteers are in schools, club sessions become active but when we leave, they stop"* (Workshop with volunteers, Focus group discussion, Community volunteer, ICLP and COVID-19 response, Bukoba Rural District)

> *"I would be delighted if RISE continued to keep us in their hearts, that they should not forget us. They can start another project as the community still needs them."* (Interview, Partner, RISE, Muleba District)

Despite such concerns, overall our findings show that the blended approach to volunteering has particular potential for supporting VSO's sustained legacy at local level. Establishing a sense of shared ownership between all stakeholders is a key factor in this. Consideration of legacy and sustained impacts should begin all the way at the design stage of a project, by prioritising community needs and ensuring community involvement and participation. An example can be found in this quote from a volunteer:

> *"There are good things that a new project would preserve, such as making primary actors feel like they own their projects. That is what VSO has been doing, but I think they would not lose anything if they went a step further by involving them from the very first stage during the pilot study. They should be allowed to express their opinions on what should be done. Apart from that, they should use community natives to help in the implementation of the project even though it is difficult to attain that. Doing that will enable the community to have people who will continue to spread knowledge within it."* (Interview, Community ICS, NYEN and Supporter Volunteer, RISE, LZYE, T-LED and V4D, Ilemela Municipal)

This quote, furthermore, highlights the need for continuous engagement with stakeholders at a local level throughout a project. A wide range of participants emphasised this need for ongoing communication and working together, some remarking that a sense of shared ownership based on mutual understanding can make the difference between a project succeeding or failing. Our data shows that VSO recognise this and that within communities, there is a wide range of different stakeholders with different wants and needs, including in relation to factors such as gender, and age.

The data also shows that a blend of international and national professional volunteers with community volunteers encourages communication between actors. Community volunteers were particularly mentioned by a range of participants, as providing essential links between national and international volunteers and communities, stakeholders, and VSO. This reinforces our earlier points set out in section 4.2.2 on the pivotal role of community volunteers in the work of VSO. Community volunteers are credited with facilitating continued and effective communication between various actors, and play a pivotal role in enhancing and ensuring the mutual understanding and shared ownership between all stakeholders on a project. On top of that, many participants recognised that community volunteers' position in place means they are uniquely situated in having the greatest potential for ensuring lasting change. For example:

> *"In my opinion, just to be able to sustain these programmes you need the local people [community volunteers], they also help you with the trust factor."* (Interview, International professional volunteer, T-LED)

> *"Why we will need community volunteers? The reason is to ensure project sustainability, as this is the type of volunteers that would remain after the end of the project."* (Workshop with volunteers, Scenario building exercise group discussion, LZYE and T-LED, Ilemela Municipal)

> *"The project should use community volunteers instead of volunteers from outside of the community. They mentioned that this will benefit the community and the community at large because the learnings will remain in the community when the project is gone."* (Workshop with Volunteers, Scenario building exercise group discussion, RISE, Muleba District)

Community volunteers, through their own particular skillsets and knowledges, combined with their learning though blended volunteering as part of their involvement on a project, then, are particularly key to the longevity and sustainability of a project after its official duration has ended. On the other hand, it is clear that using only community volunteers on a project would be unlikely to work: community volunteers may be disregarded in their communities when they are not considered experts, as reported by a primary actor:

> *"People have a tendency disregard someone they know. They have a knack for paying attention to an unknown person expecting they will tell them something that will be of great benefit to them. It is not easy to listen to your neighbour whom you know everything about, they cannot tell you anything new."* (Interview, Primary actor, SSLT, Kishapu District)

Considering that different volunteers 'blend' differently with, and into, the project and the wider community is an essential consideration in project design, implementation and evaluation. The above participant described that this particular attitude regarding using only community volunteers on a project had led to primary actors no longer attending seminars. This, again, highlights the benefit of the *blend* for relationships with communities, as perceptions of modalities also influence project success and outcomes, and further reflects our findings described in section 4.2.1 that participants across our sample saw value in the *blended* approach to volunteering in particular.

Blended volunteering thereby demonstrates good potential for sustaining VSO's legacy at local level. By decentering the volunteering approach from the international volunteer to privilege balanced contributions from different members of a team, the blended approach can foster more horizontal relationships in development action that enhance the roles and ownership of local actors in development action.

4.3.4 Looking forward

In exploring what **conditions contribute to maximising the impact of diverse volunteering modalities, both as individuals, and as teams**, the research raises a number of questions to consider in relation to understanding the ways in which volunteering modalities interact in order to further refine the blended volunteering model and maximise the value of VSO's work with primary actors.

- *How can the potential impact of blended volunteering be further increased by more awareness of its 'temporal' dimension, recognising that the blend is fluid throughout a project, and that project stage influences 'the blend'?*

- *How can a wider understanding of 'blended volunteering', encompassing relationships with primary actors, partners and other stakeholders, contribute to further enhancing shared understanding and shared ownership of a project between all stakeholders?*

- *How can the insight that factors outside of 'the blend' shape its effectiveness, be incorporated VSO's strategic planning and programming, to ensure that blended volunteering produces sustained impacts for development?*

5. CONCLUSIONS

VSO has long been at the forefront of the development sector in utilising the range of skills, perspectives and knowledge that different volunteers can bring to programmes. To date, however, there remains a significant gap in academic and policy literature on how different volunteers interact and work with communities. Synergies might improve development outcomes, whereas the risk of friction in group dynamics, such as through a power imbalance, could inhibit progress. Understanding how the blends of volunteers assigned to projects work in practice involves seeking the views of the different volunteers and the primary actors with whom they work.

This case study of VSO's work in Tanzania represents the first phase of our research in this area. It analyses data gathered using participatory and qualitative methodologies, which have prioritised understanding the perspectives of the diverse volunteer types, primary actors and VSO staff who make the 'blend' work on the ground. This has enabled us to develop understanding of the complexity of the blended volunteering model and its potential to challenge existing norms and practices. It has also highlighted the particular challenges and opportunities the approach presents for programme design and management. The conclusions we set out below represent our analysis of the qualitative evidence we gathered and identify key points from which VSO and other volunteer-engaging development organisations might learn.

A. Utilising a blend of volunteers has added value, but there is no 'one-size-fits-all'

The utilisation of a blend of volunteers fosters a culture of learning from each other rather than an assumption that pre-conceived solutions can be readily applied to every local context. Respondents noted how different skillsets enable them to overcome long-term challenges. More significantly, the differences in experience and skills encourage communication within the blend and with primary actors that help to build trust, ownership and thus a greater likelihood that outcomes will be sustained after the project work was completed. This is best illustrated by the way national and community volunteers have stepped in to support the continued implementation of activities despite the global restrictions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is no single blend of volunteering modalities that represents the ideal combination for a project. The assumption that volunteers can be categorised as community based, national or international does not always reflect how they are operationalised in the field. Moreover, each volunteer's skills do not map neatly onto particular modalities. Local context is also critical, and the relatively short length of placements as compared to project duration means that volunteers will typically come and go throughout the project.

Each blend of volunteers in the different projects constantly changes and the dynamic environment in which the work is undertaken means that there is no specific combination of technical skills and personal attributes at any snapshot in time best suited to each stage of a project. Instead, the fluid nature of the blend should be embraced as a fertile ground for innovation and synergy. Making the most of this fluidity will require greater consideration of how knowledge can be retained, and relations maintained, each time the blend shifts.

B. Community volunteers are central to the effective engagement with primary actors

Continuous engagement with local stakeholders is critical to minimising the risk of any disconnect between community expectations, VSO project design, volunteer activity and practical outputs. There is typically a wide range of different wants and needs amongst stakeholders that can create complications or barriers to progress. Whilst the upfront design of projects by VSO can remedy known issues, participants explained how regular discussions between primary actors and the blend of volunteers enable previously hidden barriers to be surfaced and resolved.

Community volunteers are critical to engaging primary actors in each project. They have a pivotal role in facilitating shared ownership. This should not simply be attributed to language translation skills, but also to their understanding of local contexts and norms needed to overcome differences in stakeholders' perceptions or expectations. In addition, community volunteers are more likely to remain with the project throughout its duration and after its completion, proving continuity and a means of sustaining the outcomes achieved.

C. Empowering community volunteers is dependent on building horizontal relations within the blend of volunteers

Volunteers that bring expertise from elsewhere, whether those with professional skills or different national and international perspectives, act as a motive for others to learn and to challenge existing accepted practices. This is due in part to their wider experiences or their enthusiasm and commitment to tackling a new challenge. Yet there is a tendency for the discourse around project management to assign terms such as 'expert' or 'specialist' to these attributes, whereas local knowledge can be taken for granted and risks becoming an invisible element of the blend.

The community volunteers whom we consulted stated that they perceived that their views were more likely to be heard, and that their local knowledge was more likely to be seen as relevant, when the power balance amongst the volunteers was more horizontal. The extent to which the relationship within each blend of volunteers is horizontal is dependent, in part, on all volunteers recognising the different contributions everyone makes, including international volunteers acknowledging their own knowledge gaps.

Maximising the engagement of community and national volunteers earlier in the design of projects can help in this regard. Furthermore, an effective horizontal relationship within the blend is dependent on the prompt resolution of interpersonal conflicts when they arise. Bringing a diverse group together inevitably leads to tension at times in any setting, and VSO's adaptive management strategies are critical to identifying and addressing such instances where needed.

D. Minimising the risk of a power imbalance is dependent on addressing perceived inequalities

In addition to the tendency for 'professional' and 'technical' modalities to be attributed to national and international volunteers rather than community volunteers identified above, perceived differences in the financial or other visible benefits available also contribute to the risk of a power imbalance. There is an understandable rationale for why allowances and the provision of equipment, such as water filters, vary between international, national and community volunteers. Nevertheless, these differences can fuel a perception that primary actors and community volunteers are valued less.

E. All participants had a positive experience from working with others

Whilst much of our focus has been on how blended volunteering contributes to the effectiveness and sustainability of programmes, it is important to highlight the positive experiences of participants. All volunteering modalities we consulted confirm that they have had positive experiences and learning in working with VSO, and they often attributed this specifically to the blended model that enabled them to work as part of a diverse team. Such experiences are important in overcoming hegemonic perceptions that those in the global South are merely 'hosts' to 'experts' from the global North.

This is the first of three case study reports on blended volunteering, based on research in Tanzania, Uganda and Nepal. The analysis and conclusions in this report reflect data, collected in 2021, on the experiences and organisation of blended volunteering in Tanzania. Please also consult the other case study reports, as well as our final report, exploring diverse geographies, projects and modalities and further strengthening the body of evidence to support the design, development and programming of blended volunteering in different settings.

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