



**VOLUNTEERING  
TOGETHER:  
Blending knowledge and  
skills for development**

**NEPAL CASE STUDY REPORT**  
**MARCH 2022**



**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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***Acknowledgements:***

With thanks to all the VSO volunteers, staff, primary actors and partners who generously shared their time and reflections and contributed to the development of this research. Particular thanks are due to the following VSO colleagues, whose input has been important in shaping the research methodology and findings – Rebecca Pursell-Gotz; Alok Rath; Bikash Koirala and all the staff at VSO Nepal. We would also like to thank Dr Owen Boyle, Project Officer in the Centre for International Development at Northumbria University, for his support in the research.

***To cite this report:***

Baillie Smith, M., Jenkins, K., Baniya, J., Baskota, P., Mademba, S., Sharma, R., Boudewijn, I., Fadel, B. & Gibby, P. (2022). *Volunteering Together: Blending Knowledge and Skills for Development, VSO Nepal Case Study Report*. Northumbria University/VSO.

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## KEY TERMS AND ACRONYMS

**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 some country contexts.

**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 Nepal country case study:

- ◆ **S4S:** “Sisters for Sisters’ Education”
- ◆ **S2L:** “Safe to Learn - Ending Violence Against Children”
- ◆ **PRAYAS:** “Promoting Inclusive Resilience and Accountability through Youth Association Strengthening”
- ◆ **ENGAGE:** “Empowering a New Generation of Adolescent Girls with Education in Nepal”
- ◆ **SAHAJ:** “Strengthening Access to Holistic, Gender Responsive and Accountable Justice in Nepal”
- ◆ **SAHAYATRA**<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This term means ‘co-travel’ in Nepali.

# 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 Nepal. This is the third and final case study report from this research project, following the previous reports examining our case study findings from Tanzania and Uganda (Baillie Smith et al., 2021; Baillie Smith et al., 2022). 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 Nepalese case study sampling and participants. The main sections of the report are found in section 4 in which we present the research findings from Nepal, building on our findings from the work completed in Tanzania and Uganda, and reported in our earlier case study reports. 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 & Amroffell, 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 (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, Fadel, 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 practice areas, by addressing the following questions:

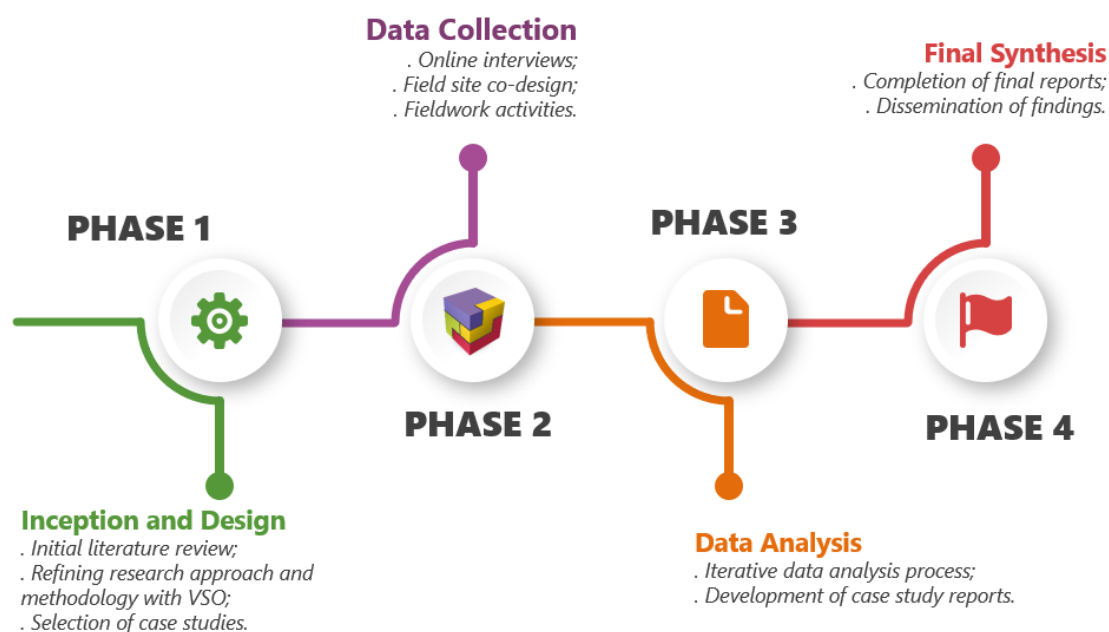
1. *How do different volunteering modalities contribute value to VSO’s work with primary actors?*
2. *How might different volunteering modalities be combined to maximise development impact?*
3. *What are the conditions that contribute to maximising the impact of diverse volunteering modalities, both 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 Nepal (replacing the originally selected case study in Myanmar which had to be dropped due to the ongoing political situation in the country). This case study report focuses on activities carried out in Nepal during the data collection undertaken in phase two. The production of this report concludes phase three for the Nepal 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. The research gained full ethical clearance from Northumbria University and the Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC). 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).<sup>2</sup>
- ♦ 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.).

<sup>2</sup> 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.



- ◆ 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.).
- ◆ In-country VSO staff who have worked in the selected VSO projects, with experience in design and implementation of projects, 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 researchers 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 researchers 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 Nepal 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 Nepal's programme areas: inclusive education and inclusive governance.

Our sampling strategy was thereby designed to capture a diversity of modalities and geographies across the Nepal case study. Based on these considerations, the following regions, districts and projects were identified for data collection:

- ◆ *Madhesh Province:*
  - Sarlahi district: Concluded inclusive education project **Safe to Learn - Ending Violence Against Children (S2L)**; Ongoing inclusive education project **Empowering a New Generation of Adolescent Girls' with Education in Nepal (ENGAGE)**; New inclusive education project **SAHAYATRA**.
  - Siraha district: Concluded inclusive governance project **Strengthening Access to Holistic, Gender Responsive, and Accountable Justice in Nepal (SAHAJ)**.
- ◆ *Karnali Province:*
  - Surkhet district: Ongoing inclusive governance project **Promoting Inclusive Resilience and Accountability through Youth Association Strengthening (PRAYAS)**; Concluded inclusive education project **Sisters for Sisters' Education (S4S)**; concluded inclusive education project **Safe to Learn (S2L)**.

Data collection activities consisted of face-to-face fieldwork in the above listed regions, conducted in December 2021 and January 2022, 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<sup>3</sup>:

**Table 1: Interview and workshop participants**

Interview Participants	Volunteers	Primary Actors	Partners	Staff	TOTAL
27 face-to-face <sup>4</sup> and 10 remote interviews	19	8	5	6	<b>38 interview participants</b>
Workshop Participants	Volunteers	Primary Actors			TOTAL
8 group workshops in total (4 volunteers only, 2 primary actors only and 2 mixed)	34	23			<b>57 workshop participants</b>

**Source:** Northumbria University research team

**Table 2: Volunteering modalities explored per selected project**

VSO Nepal Project	Volunteering modalities
<b>S4S</b>	Community, International
<b>S2L</b>	Community
<b>PRAYAS</b>	Community
<b>ENGAGE</b>	Community, National, International
<b>SAHAJ</b>	Community, National
<b>SAHAYATRA</b>	National

**Source:** Northumbria University research team

<sup>3</sup> Most of the volunteer workshop participants and volunteer interviewees had worked with other volunteers included in the sample at some point of their involvement on VSO projects. 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.

<sup>4</sup> One face-to-face interview was carried out with two participants at the same time due to their preference and availability.

## 4. LEARNING FROM THE NEPAL CASE STUDY

In this section, we build upon our learning from the case studies in Tanzania and Uganda, analysing data from Nepal to add further depth and generalisability to our answers to the three core questions for the research project.

Overall, the data from Nepal confirms and supports the key findings from the previous case studies in Tanzania and Uganda, illustrating the importance of the blend of skills and overarching teamwork across different types of volunteers for VSO's project outcomes and development impacts. This is reflected in comments from all stakeholders working across districts and projects in Nepal:

*"I think there are many benefits. For instance, the national volunteer has many experiences of volunteering and in another if we are collaborating with a national volunteer at community level. The community people will also give proper attention to the national volunteer. Similarly, the youth and participants from the community will be encouraged by interacting with different levels of volunteers. In volunteering alone, I have felt that the people didn't value your effort. In collaborating with other volunteers, your work gets noticed and acknowledged." (Interview, Community volunteer 1, PRAYAS, Surkhet district)*

*"I feel great working with them [other volunteers]. We went together, worked together and we shared our experiences with each other. We both [national volunteers] are in the learning process. We organised literacy and numeracy training together. We also worked out on how to facilitate training when either of us was absent. The experience with community volunteers is also good. [...] I have not come across any weakness so far." (Interview, National volunteer 2, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)*

*"The initial benefits were the network and personal relations among us. In working in a group and discussion in a team, many of us have developed speaking skills during the project. I realise that there is a vast difference in working alone and in a team. For example, I may have one process to do that work but others may have diverse ways to do the same thing. So if we work together we can work in many alternative ways. And working in a team is appropriate in this type of project and it is more effective than working alone." (Workshop Participant 2, Community Volunteer, Big Sister, Workshop with community volunteers, PRAYAS, S4S and S2L, Surkhet district)*

*"Working with different types of volunteers made my work easier. Whenever I asked the primary actor about something, the community volunteers would add something to it. Community volunteers helped us probe primary actors for further details which made our work easier." (Interview, National volunteer, SAHAJ, Siraha district)*

*"I have got a good opportunity to work with national and community volunteers. [...] I saw two kinds of advantages of working with the national volunteers. They got the opportunity to develop their capacities. It contributes to the development of intellectuality. And the community also received advantages from them. The project staffs' work became easier because of national volunteers. Our staff would never have done the things with so much of efficiency as national volunteers did." (Partner, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)*

*"We got an opportunity to know each other, work as a group, it was helpful and comfortable to work in a team." (Workshop participant 3, Primary Actor, Workshop with primary actors, PRAYAS, S4S and S2L, Surkhet district)*

Data from Nepal provides particular insight into the ways in which the blended volunteering model is influenced by the broader development landscape and thus 'lands' in particular ways in different places. This highlights a potential key strength of the blended volunteering model – it is not 'one-size-fits-all' but has the capacity to be sufficiently flexible to allow programming to respond to the specificities of country contexts.

## 4.1 Unpacking volunteering modalities

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

Our analysis of the data from Nepal, builds on learning from the Tanzania and Uganda case studies. We identify three key issues related to this research question:

- ◆ **The blend of modalities and skills for development.** In Tanzania, we identified that volunteer contributions were dynamic and shifting, thereby complicating easy distinctions between modalities. The same was found in Uganda, although in this case the skills and knowledge that national volunteers bring were particularly identified as key to project success. In Nepal, we found that international volunteers were less consistently engaged in the blend, with community volunteers playing more strategic roles. The blend in Nepal was notable for being particularly inclusive, with a strong focus on women volunteers and on the inclusion of volunteers with disabilities.
- ◆ **The contrast between perceptions and practice.** The blended volunteering model assumes the combining of discrete modalities (international, national and community volunteers). Across all three countries, these geographic distinctions are less clear cut in practice. In Nepal, we found the blend was principally made up of multiple 'types' of community volunteer. Data from Nepal also emphasises the benefit of different modalities being co-located to enable them to be combined most effectively.
- ◆ **Capacity to adapt to changing circumstances.** Covid-19 has shed light on VSO's adaptability through blended volunteering. Findings from Tanzania and Uganda reaffirmed how the fluid nature of the blend of volunteers and stakeholders enables projects to be more resilient in the face of uncertainty and change. In Nepal, this resilience was evident in the way in which projects were able to continue functioning during the pandemic, despite the absence of international volunteers, due to strong established networks and the presence of multiple types of community volunteers. This further established the operationalisation of the blended volunteering model in Nepal as being predominantly a blend across community and national level volunteers playing different roles.

Below, we explore our findings from the Nepal case study on each of these issues in more detail, deepening elements of the previous analysis from Tanzania and Uganda, and strengthening our evidence around how the blended volunteering model works. In particular, data from Nepal foregrounds the diversity that exists within the blend at community level, including in the relationships with partners and primary actors. As in Tanzania and Uganda, the data from Nepal complicates assumptions of straightforward distinctions between different elements of the blend, and identifies that although international volunteers can add particular value to the volunteer combinations, their presence is not necessarily essential for a blended approach to succeed. This underlines the point that the flexibility that the blended volunteering model brings is key to ensuring positive development outcomes in diverse contexts.

#### **4.1.1 The blend of modalities and skills for development**

*In Tanzania, we identified that volunteer contributions were dynamic and shifting, thereby complicating easy distinctions between modalities. The same was found in Uganda, although in this case the skills and knowledge that national volunteers bring were particularly identified as key to project success. In Nepal, we found that international volunteers were less consistently engaged in the blend, with community volunteers playing more strategic roles. The blend in Nepal was notable for being particularly inclusive, with a strong focus on women volunteers and on the inclusion of volunteers with disabilities.*

Data from Nepal demonstrates that the adaptability of the blended volunteering model to the particularities of country contexts and development landscapes is central to the way in which it delivers positive development outcomes. While notions of voluntary civil society engagement and self-service are widely recognised in Nepalese society (Bhatta, 2012; Bhattachan, 2002), the VSO Valuing Volunteering study previously identified how volunteering in Nepal is entangled with wider socio-political relations (Burns et al., 2015, p. 34). This was evident during our data collection in Nepal, when stakeholders discussed the need to navigate national government agendas which shape the blend in particular ways, influencing where different volunteering modalities are physically located and how the blend materialises in particular contexts:

*"I feel that the approach that VSO is taking right now to use the international volunteers is questioned by the government, and government is saying that VSO need to provide international volunteers where government requires the particular skills. [...] The one thing is that we are working for the government schools, however we are providing and supplying international volunteers where our projects is implementing, in the area where we are supplying. However, government intend to provide international volunteers to other area as well, not the project area, VSO's project area. 'This is not good, only providing international volunteers in VSO's project area, so VSO need to revisit your policy, so that international volunteers expertise can be utilised in other areas as well, not only the VSO's project area.'" (Interview, VSO Staff member 2)*

*"[The] government also doesn't prefer to have the international volunteer until and unless there is the expertise not present within the country. So, we also, we also feel we need to be very strategic on the level of the expertise we require from the international and the remote volunteer these days, because these are also the things that we need to convince to our government counterparts having for having the visa. So we have, we just identify the expertise that is not so commonly available or the area that requires a bit of the innovation or the insights from the global expertise." (Interview, VSO Staff member 1)*

A particular issue in this regard is that (pre-Covid) international volunteers initially arrive in Nepal on tourist visas and are required to remain in Kathmandu whilst they wait for work permits to be issued, which can take several months. Whilst outside the control of VSO, this is identified as a particular barrier to effectively implementing the blended volunteering model, as (pre-Covid) international volunteers were unable to be located in the communities where projects were taking place for substantial periods of their placements:

*"Sometimes, you know that getting the visa, or visa process and approval of the visa is also another challenge for utilising international volunteers, I mean the, some of the process is very lengthy. I mean, the visa approval process is very lengthy and sometimes you know that we, we have to consult different, we have to reach different organisation, different ministries and different organisations, so getting timely visa approval from the government is also another challenge for the international volunteers, that is second part, second challenge, I would say." (Interview, VSO Staff member 2)*

*"Day to day in the office, because we weren't allowed to work, we didn't always have things to do everyday, so it was more about finding our own things to do in the office. Like maybe it's kind of, going on YouTube and watching some Nepali language videos or something else, sometimes because the project team are really busy doing their part of the project, it's sometimes, it's difficult for them to find time with us. [...] So I think this isn't necessarily the office's fault, but like, they do know there's a long wait for a work permit, so more things should be planned out so that we could feel useful to the project in some kind of way without us breaking any immigration rules about the not working. Maybe kind of visiting schools, getting to know the education system, or something more practical than... what we actually did for example. Because, when we apply for VSO, the job advert normally says you're there for a year, and if I'm spending close to six months not really doing that much... you kind of think: 'is it a good use of my time, their time, resources... that this would happen?'" (Interview, International volunteer 1, in-country and remote, professional, ENGAGE)*

*"...we were taking quite a while to get our visa through, so I was out there for probably nearly two months before they actually sent my visa through where I was allowed to actually be actively involved." (Interview, International volunteer 2, professional, ENGAGE)*

This dislocation is also particularly significant in the context of our identification of the importance of 'on boarding' processes for different volunteers joining a blend that is already in existence. Our data and conversations in the field suggest that international volunteers have typically spent much of their time in Kathmandu and after their work visa has come through, at partner headquarters in regional hubs. Our data shows they occasionally visit communities to take part in training sessions with community and national volunteers, rather than being integral to the day-to-day activities of projects within local communities:

*"I did not have to work directly with international volunteers, however I had met them a couple of times during my visit to the head office and a couple of times during the field visit. I had asked these international volunteers about their role and responsibilities in the course of our conversation." (Interview, National volunteer, SAHAJ, Siraha district)*

*"...some of the international volunteers are located at the district headquarter and central level, they are developing materials, and community volunteers are disseminating the education materials and messages and they are regular, supporting for mentoring and coaching." (Interview, VSO Staff member 4)*

*"In school some foreign volunteers used to come especially during the Friday's programme, and Big Sisters [community volunteers] were there throughout the year." (Interview, Primary actor, S4S, Surkhet district)*

*"No, I didn't work with the Big Sisters directly, no." (Interview, International volunteer 1, professional, S4S)*

International volunteers themselves also questioned how effectively they were able to contribute to the blend:

*"And I do wonder if like for VSO Nepal, perhaps they should have had... more of a heavier balance towards national volunteers, rather than international ones because, even though all of the international volunteers, you know, we're all kind of highly qualified, lots of experience and everything else, I feel like we're probably underused during our time here." (Interview, International volunteer 1, professional, in-country and remote, ENGAGE)*

*"...they called us 'international volunteer experts', and you know I used to joke, 'But if I'm that much of an expert, why are you not asking my opinion?' You know, I didn't call myself an expert. They called me an expert, you know, so if I'm an expert, then use me. So, uh, I felt that VSO in-house... there was a period anyway, in particular, where it was quite a frustrating place to work." (Interview, International volunteer 1, professional, S4S)*

Thus, as much through circumstance as design, it appears that international volunteers are less central to the blend as it is operationalised in Nepal than in other country contexts we have explored in this research. However, we also identified a different area of involvement of international volunteers in Nepal which relates to VSO's relationships with policy stakeholders in the country. Staff members noted that despite not always being able to deploy international volunteers at the implementation level of projects, international volunteers have often been placed in Kathmandu at a 'policy level', within different parts of the government. Whilst this practice pre-dates Covid, staff members also noted that it has recently resumed:

*"...because of COVID we don't have [international volunteers], I mean at the implementation level. However, in policy level we do have some international volunteers. Those who are sitting at the federal level and they, I mean in the capital city. Otherwise, in the implementation level right now we don't have international volunteers."* (Interview, VSO Staff member 2)

*"...one international volunteer stays still continuing with the project and in the VSO. She is based inside Nepal's women commissions and National Women Commission, she supports the legal counselling and other support to, particularly to the survivors who approach to National Women Commission."* (Interview, VSO Nepal staff member 3)

These international volunteers have therefore been employing their particular skills to perform advisory roles often broader than a particular project's implementation activities, as described by an international volunteer placed within the Ministry of Education:

*"...my role was a bit different from some of the other volunteers. I worked in a policy role and was embedded within the government. So although my position was funded under the Sisters for Sisters project, I mostly, I worked on a whole range of different things that were sometimes related to Sisters for Sisters and sometimes completely unrelated and much broader and much more a kind of high-level policy role. [...] This is quite a long-standing position for VSO. I think for 15, possibly more, years, they have placed a volunteer in the Ministry in a particular section, which deals with the development partners and coordinating the development partners. And it was very much a role that they [the government] valued very highly and, you know, immediately I [was] sort of invited to quite high-level meetings."* (Interview, International volunteer 2, professional, S4S)

The roles and expertise of international volunteers in such roles suggest that, although not necessarily blending with other volunteering modalities at this policy level, their presence can add particular value to VSO's work in terms of strengthening engagement between VSO staff and local government officials. This, however, has impacts for how international volunteers are perceived in Nepal, what the blends look like and how far it stretches. It also has implications for the ways in which Covid-19 has impacted programme design in Nepal, as we go on to explain below in Section 4.1.3.

In Tanzania and Uganda, we explored the ways in which different skills were attributed to particular modalities, in relation to both project design and implementation. In Nepal, the relative absence of international volunteers at the local community level is also evident in the ways in which the skillsets of different modalities are understood and identified by different stakeholders. Overall, fewer skills were attributed uniquely to international volunteers, compared to in the other country contexts we have examined. The absence of international volunteers from the day-to-day activities of projects at a local level can be seen when we look at the skills mapping diagrams below, which illustrate the perceptions of VSO staff (**Table 3**) and primary actors and partners (**Table 4**). Whilst VSO staff do identify international volunteers as bringing particular skills and expertise, primary actors and partners rarely identify international volunteers as contributing specific skills to projects. Indeed, international volunteers were mentioned very rarely by primary actors or partners during research activities.

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

COMMUNITY	NATIONAL	INTERNATIONAL
Supporting	Supporting & Motivating	
Counselling and mentoring	Coaching and mentoring	
Contextual & cultural knowledge		Knowledge/best practice from other country contexts
Awareness raising/Providing info		
Service delivery	Sharing expertise	
Community Liaison	Coordinating & facilitating	
Training & Capacity Building		
	Technical & professional skills and expertise	
	Local language skills/communication	Communication skills
	Monitoring & Reporting	
Organising	Managerial skills	
	Documenting	

Source: Northumbria University research team

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

COMMUNITY	NATIONAL	INTERNATIONAL
Supporting		
Counselling and mentoring	Coaching and mentoring	
Awareness raising/Providing info		
	Sharing expertise	
Community Liaison		
Training & Capacity Building		
	Technical & professional skills and expertise	
	Monitoring	
	Documenting	

Source: Northumbria University research team

So, whilst in relation to project design, VSO staff recognise the sorts of skills they expect international volunteers to contribute to the blend, the realities of working within particular parameters in Nepal, mean that in practice these contributions by international volunteers are not able to be realised on the ground, meaning that local stakeholders do not often identify specific skills and attributes as being attached to international volunteers. Indeed, on the occasions when international volunteers are spoken about by stakeholders, it is often in terms of their *lack* of relevant skills and experience, and a particular need for them to be 'looked after', and the management challenges this can create for the wider team:

*"I have a very short experience with international volunteers. He could not go to the community alone. Therefore, whenever he needed to go to the community, he needed to be accompanied by another staff member. Apart from assisting the international volunteer, the staff member would have his/her own responsibility too. Hence, whoever would assist the international volunteer, s/he would end up hampering his/her own duty."* (Interview, Partner, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)



*"I mean how to maintain safety and security and duty of care to them while they are traveling. [...] So if the international volunteer gets some problems in their health, then again they need to travel from local community level to the capital city, that is again a challenge how to manage them because they are working in the field and the remote area. [...] And a final problem is that sometimes international volunteers [...] sometimes they intend to go beyond their catchment area. You know, beyond the catchment area because of the sightseeing, because you know that the foreigners enjoy Nepal very much, because of adventurous sites and other, I mean the greenery and other part as well. So sometimes, you know that they intend to go and cross their catchment area and traveling without information, that will also create some sort of problem for us from the duty of care perspective as well."* (Interview, VSO Staff member 2)

An interesting impact of this scenario is the way in which international 'expertise' and knowledge is displaced and de-emphasised in Nepal, becoming much less of a focal point for how the blend is understood and operationalised, compared to what we found in Tanzania and Uganda. Though this results from navigating a particular set of political priorities, and is not solely a programmatic decision by VSO, it does nevertheless reflect calls within the literature to de-centre the roles and experiences of international volunteers in relation to understanding the volunteering for development landscape (Laurie & Baillie Smith, 2018). Furthermore, without the counterpoint of *international* expertise and knowledge, we hypothesise that the knowledge of other volunteering modalities can more readily be recognised as 'knowledge', and not provincialized as 'local' knowledge. This is also evident in the skills mapping, where there is much less emphasis on the role of community volunteers' local language skills and understanding of cultural context than we saw in Uganda and Tanzania, with skills of mentoring, capacity building and awareness-raising more likely to come to the fore.

A particularly striking aspect of how the blended volunteering model was operationalised in Nepal was the careful and explicit attention to inclusivity across all projects sampled. We identify this as a particular strength of the blended volunteering model in Nepal. Overall, there was a strong emphasis on gender equality – including tackling gender-based violence and promoting girls' education – in the projects in our sample. In particular, the ENGAGE, SAHAJ and S4S projects have focused on gender and inclusion with women and girls as specific target groups in the implementation of activities, and this was thus accompanied by sustained participation by women and girls as volunteers, as explored further in Section 4.3.2.<sup>5</sup>

However, this inclusivity extended beyond inclusion of women and girls and was also evident in relation to the involvement of people with disabilities as both volunteers and primary actors, including recognition of the extra support that such volunteers might require in order to ensure they are able to contribute effectively to the blend:

*"I: Did the VSO explain how they expect different types of volunteers to work together before you started your work on the project?"*

*R: They are not physically disabled but I am a physically disabled person, though I have good experience working with other volunteers. They support me. For example, in the field, we should work together and we all three [National volunteers] have our own responsibilities. We need to work for the whole day long, during the session we have to draw the picture to make it easy to understand for participants, but, for me, it is not possible to do. Therefore, I only conduct programmes and other recreational activities. They handed the class over the entire day. They do not complain that I did not do much work compared to them [...] I wrote questions for quiz content in braille script, I read it and they typed in the computer. I also drafted local stories. We worked according to our ability.* (Interview, National volunteer 1, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)

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<sup>5</sup> Our sample in Nepal reflected these high levels of female participation, with strong representation from women in all research activities.

*"The national volunteers are experts of different subjects, some are education experts while others are experts of sign language and braille scripts." (Interview, Partner, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)*

*"...we do have also national interest from disability and inclusion part, because the issue is, I mean the implementing disability and inclusion project, and disability and inclusion is the core area of our project intervention in different projects. So we do have also a national volunteer from the field of disability, for instance, to support the teachers on, on developing Braille language skills and developing materials on Braille language, developing materials on sign languages. [...] Right now we are using two types of national volunteers, who are having some sort of hearing impairment, or some sort of vision, I mean, the vision impairment. These two types of national volunteers are also, are also working in the field of disability and inclusion. [...] The volunteers are also equally providing mentoring support to the disabled children on the one hand, on the other hand, empowering parents to create enabling environment for communications, livelihood and other parts through developing their language and other skills as well." (Interview, VSO Staff member 2)*

This emphasis on inclusion also extends into VSO Nepal's engagement with remote volunteers:

*"And we are taking support from VSO Global experts. One is visually impaired, he's based at Delhi, India, so he also provided us, he's himself blind, so he also provided technical support. And we have also some e-volunteers from VSO Global, so as and when required we contact with them and we have also practice, community of practice area meeting, so COP, Community of Practice, yeah, it's a virtual meeting." (Interview, VSO Staff member 4)*

VSO Nepal's inclusive approach to engaging with volunteers and primary actors is thus identified as a particular strength of the blended volunteering model, and a key feature that delivers particular value in terms of VSO's work with primary actors.

#### **4.1.2 The contrast between perceptions and practice**

*The blended volunteering model assumes the combining of discrete modalities (international, national and community volunteers). Across all three countries, these geographic distinctions are less clear cut in practice. In Nepal, we found the blend was principally made up of multiple 'types' of community volunteer. Data from Nepal also emphasises the benefit of different modalities being co-located to enable them to be combined most effectively.*

As in Uganda and Tanzania, VSO staff in Nepal clearly distinguish between the different modalities in relation to project design. However, in our fieldwork in Nepal, we found that other interviewees (i.e. not VSO staff members) had little awareness of the various modalities involved in implementing projects. The categories of international, national and community level volunteer were not widely used or recognised – a scenario we also found in Uganda, but which was even more pronounced in Nepal. Stakeholders were often unable to identify particular categories of volunteer, and tended to know people by name rather than by volunteer modality. This made 'seeing' the blend, and how it worked in practice, more difficult for the research team and for stakeholders themselves:

*"I: Do you have any ideas on the different types of volunteers?"*

*R: I have an idea on the community level volunteers. And regarding the other types of the volunteers I don't have any idea." (Workshop Participant 6, S4S and S2L, Community volunteer, Big Brother, Surkhet district)*

*"I: Have you been working directly with other volunteers in this project? And indirectly? Do you know which types of volunteers they are and what they do?"*

*R: There were only two of us in the school, I only knew [Male name 1], [Female name 1]. I don't know about the other volunteers. I also know [Male name 2], [Female name 2]. I met with them in meetings." (Interview, Community volunteer, GBV Champion, S2L, Surkhet district)*

*"I: Do you know what type of volunteer [Name 1], [Name 2], and [Name 3]? And, what type of volunteer you are?"*

*R: All are volunteers. We all are helping each other. [Name 3] helps deaf children." (Interview, Community volunteer 2, Big Sister, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)*

*"I: Did VSO explain how they expect different types of volunteers to work together before you started your work on the project?"*

*R: They'd explained things to us. I had met [Name 1] at Kathmandu twice. In the meeting, I came to know about [Name 2] who too was in the district. It was previously said that the three of us would be collaborating in this district.*

*I: How?"*

*R: They did not explain any method of working together. Out of four, we are three volunteers, one is a VSO staff member. And, as I told you, we were told that four people needed to work together. Except that they did not explain anything." (Interview, National Volunteer 2, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)*

*"I am working with [Name 1], [Name 2], [Name 3], and [Name 4]. Mostly, I work with [Name 3] and other Big Sisters. Similarly, I work with [Name 5] [National Volunteer], and recently I met [Name 6] too." (Interview, Community volunteer 1, Big Sister, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)*

The quotes above show participants explaining their collaborations with each other in different ways, and highlighting they often did not perceive a blend across international, national and community volunteers while working on projects on the ground. Moreover, in some contexts, more spontaneous ways of collaborating with each other might mean that such relationships are not always recognised as 'teamwork', and therefore the 'blend' becomes less distinguishable in practice. The relative absence of international volunteers at community level, compared to Uganda and Tanzania, is also a factor in understanding this scenario. Indeed, it could be argued that it is the presence of international volunteers in a blend that renders the blend visible or noteworthy, given histories of development practice which have constructed actors in ways that often separate the 'international' as being different by virtue of greater knowledge, skills and authority. Whilst VSO staff presume international volunteers to be part of the blend, the fact that (pre-Covid) they are predominantly located in Kathmandu or regional headquarters means that in practice they are not able to work together much with other volunteering modalities, particularly community volunteers, effectively becoming 'remote' volunteers despite being located within Nepal:

*"The international volunteers are also important. We have not seen the international volunteers come and work on the community level but I saw in the previous project I worked at that international volunteers had come and supported our works. That was a different experience. Therefore, the international volunteers had their own importance. [...] It's not that they are very much required, but as national volunteers have been coming and training us, so if international volunteers come at the local level then it would be better." (Workshop Participant 3, Community Volunteer, Local Facilitator, Workshop with community volunteers, SAHAJ, Siraha district)*

*"I have got a good opportunity to work with national and community volunteers. I don't have long experience of working with international volunteers though. So, it is not relevant to talk about it." (Interview, Partner, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)*

*"Actually I wasn't really engaged that much with the national volunteers. I think the people that were posted at district [level], they worked very close, closely with them, especially the Nepalese ICS volunteers. I think they worked very closely with them, and I always heard such great things about them, but unfortunately I never got to, to work directly with them." (Interview, International Volunteer 2, S4S)*

*"I: How did you work with VSO, could you please share about your experience?"*

*R: It has provided us training, VSO Sir/Madam comes from Kathmandu and at that time we were given training. At the community level we meet them in training but have less experiences of working with them at community level- only during training." (Workshop Participant 4, Community volunteer, Workshop with community volunteers, S2L and S4S, Surkhet district)*

These reflections from research participants across a range of different modalities, further strengthen findings from Uganda that underlined the need to differentiate between different modalities 'working together' versus 'working alongside' each other in conceptualising how blended volunteering works. In Nepal, examples of modalities actively 'working together' across international/national/community volunteers were less often identified. The 'blend' is instead configured somewhat differently, with the mix of modalities most evident in the ways that stakeholders and volunteers themselves differentiate a range of 'types' of community volunteer in their discussions. When asked about their experiences of different types of volunteers working together, volunteers, primary actors and partners identify a range of role-based categories of volunteer, differentiated by the type of task that they carry out within the project and the community. These categories include 'big sisters', 'big aunties', 'big brothers', 'GBV champions', 'teacher champions', 'adult champions', 'local facilitators', 'social mobilisers' and 'media volunteers' as captured in the quotes below:

*"At PRAYAS, we have national volunteers, media volunteers and community volunteers, three types of volunteers. The national volunteers were mobilized by VSO only, we don't have experiences of mobilising them, and in case of media volunteers we have occasional collaboration and we have our community volunteers, and we mobilise them according to the objective of the project." (Interview, Partner, PRAYAS, Surkhet district)*

*"I found that it would be easier to work by cooperating with everyone like schools, parents, Little Sisters, etc. We had a team while working like Big Aunty, Big Sister, Big Brother, Teacher Champion. So whenever one of them could not provide their time or had an emergency, others in a team can solve such problems, while working in a group. Working alone, it would be difficult." (Workshop Participant 3, Community volunteer, Big Sister, Workshop with community volunteers, S2L and S4S, Surkhet district)*

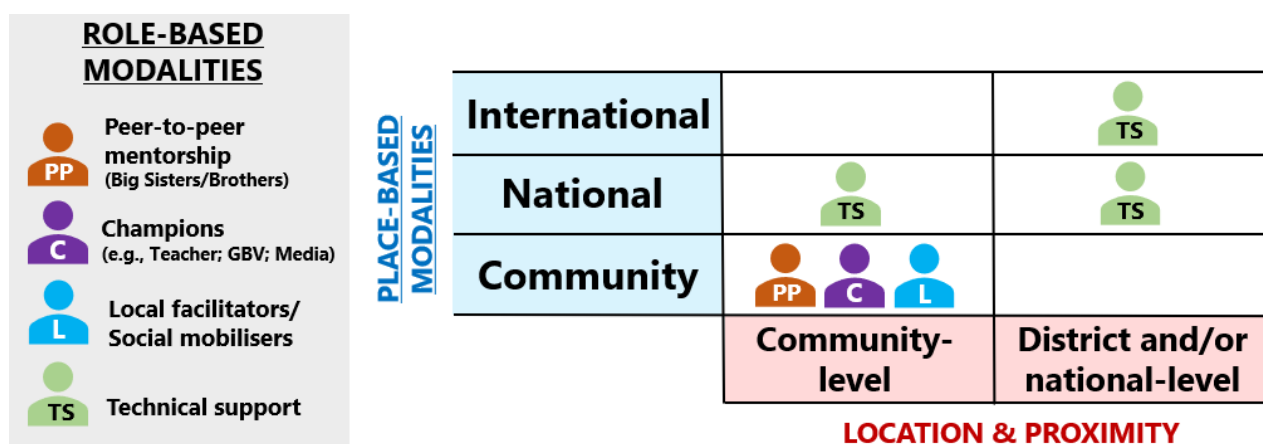
*"In SAHAJ, I have worked with [Name], who was from a community centre. We had provided support to each other during the process. [Name] too was a social mobiliser, and there were four other sisters and brothers [community volunteers] who were also from the family centre." (Interview, Community volunteer, Social Mobiliser, Local facilitator, SAHAJ, Siraha district)*

*"In this project S2L, we worked as Adult Champions." (Interview, Community volunteer 4, Big Brother, Adult Champion, S4S and S2L, Surkhet district)*

*"The blend will be more effective [for volunteering]. For instance, if we [the media volunteers] were given any work or project, we will definitely approach the media volunteers only. We just try to bring the issues in the media, hoping to spread mass awareness. In the same situation if we mix the media volunteer and the community volunteer, the community will focus on the community level interaction whereas the media can bring this issue to the radio/media. Both the volunteers were right from their perspectives. This can be done as the community volunteer will conduct the programme in their community and the media volunteer will make the radio programme of that programme. Their [the volunteers'] own community and the other community will be benefited at the same time through the radio. I think it will be more effective than the single volunteer model." (Interview, Community volunteer 2, Media volunteer, PRAYAS, Surkhet district)*

These elements are captured in the below matrix where we identify both the different role-based understandings within the category of community volunteer, as well as illustrating the crucial role of **place/scale** in the blend. The axis of 'Location & Proximity' has replaced 'Age & Expertise-Based Modalities' which was used in the matrices we developed for Tanzania and Uganda. In Nepal, age and expertise were less salient categories in the data.

**Figure 2: Matrix of volunteering modalities observed in VSO Nepal**



Source: Northumbria University research team

Whilst at first glance this might seem to be dissonant from how the blend unfolds in other country contexts, it does echo findings from Uganda which also emphasised the importance of role-based modalities as opposed to geographic modalities, in terms of how the blend is understood and operationalised. However, geography does come into play again here, not in terms of volunteers' provenance but in terms of underlining the importance of volunteers being co-located in the same place, in order for the 'blend' to occur and be sustained over time. This absence of co-location affected not only the dynamics of the blends, but also the ways primary actors and partners perceived the skills that each modality contributed to the projects, especially as they lacked the opportunity of interacting with international volunteers (see Table 4 in Section 4.1.1). However, this has not prevented the implementation of projects by the volunteers that were present at community level, highlighting how different blends emerged according to the multiple roles played by community volunteers. Moreover, given the challenges of operationalising the co-location of different volunteering modalities in Nepal, VSO staff also underline the value of having volunteers involved at multiple scales and across different geographies:

*"...the rules are different and we have work at different levels. We have work at community level, we have work at district level with local governments and also the policy advocacy work is very much associated with the national level actors as well. So these different volunteers having different roles and different geographic presence is a kind of value addition for the project implementation. So being just volunteers there in community and not having volunteers at district or local government level would not have any meaning because then again we might have a need to have full time staffs instead of having these volunteers. So being their roles complementary, but at different levels is a value addition for this project and for all the projects that are implemented by VSO." (Interview, VSO Nepal staff member 6)*

*"So these are the international volunteers, they are supporting at the individual level, system level and the community level as well." (Interview, VSO Nepal staff member 2)*

*"We needed international volunteers at the national level, because that would give the opportunity for the national institution here to learn from, from international perspective, the best practices that are happening in other countries." (Interview, VSO Nepal staff member 3)*

This points to a need to strike a balance between enabling a blend of volunteering modalities to be present at a community level whilst also facilitating the blend to work across multiple scales and locations rather than being a static construct located solely at the local level. As in Uganda and Tanzania then, this suggests the blend needs to be fluid and responsive to local context and requirements, and able to adapt to particular circumstances. This fluidity is evident in the role-based conceptualisations of community volunteers discussed above. The way in which stakeholders identify themselves with these categories also illustrates the instability of the category of 'volunteer' which was itself much less visible at community level in Nepal. Whilst national and international individuals are clearly designated as 'volunteers' according to their VSO job descriptions, this understanding is not as strong at community level, with individuals not necessarily identifying themselves as volunteers:

*I: Are you called a volunteer or not?*

*R: Please, don't call us volunteers. We are known as social mobilisers." (Interview, Community volunteer, Social Mobiliser, Local facilitator, SAHAJ, Siraha district)*

This scenario further supports our earlier findings from Uganda, which also problematised the notion of the 'volunteer' and situated this within broader understandings of volunteer hierarchies, as we discuss in Section 4.2.3. Overall, this calls for more attention to the conceptualisation of volunteers' roles and experiences in the global South, and a 'multi-scalar geography of volunteering' (Baillie Smith, Mills, et al., 2022) that goes beyond the unidirectional mobilities of international volunteers. Such a nuanced approach encompasses not only the tasks that volunteers *do* but also who volunteers *are* and how their volunteer identity (or the lack of such identity) may be determined by wider meanings and/or inequalities associated with different types of work in the global South.

#### **4.1.3 Capacity to adapt to changing circumstances**

*Covid-19 has shed light on VSO's adaptability through blended volunteering. Findings from Tanzania and Uganda reaffirmed how the fluid nature of the blend of volunteers and stakeholders enables projects to be more resilient in the face of uncertainty and change. In Nepal, this resilience was evident in the way in which projects were able to continue functioning during the pandemic, despite the absence of international volunteers, due to strong established networks and the presence of multiple types of community volunteers. This further established the operationalisation of the blended volunteering model in Nepal as being predominantly a blend across community and national level volunteers playing different roles.*

Our three country case studies have been undertaken at different moments during the pandemic, and this is reflected in the varying ways in which the impacts of Covid-19 are evident in the data we have collected about blended volunteering. In Nepal, our fieldwork took place nearly two years from the beginning of the pandemic, meaning that the pre-pandemic 'normal' was relatively distant from participants' memories and experiences. Indeed, many volunteers had not experienced blended volunteering as it was conceived pre-pandemic, having only volunteered during the period since March 2020. So, whilst in Tanzania, and to some extent Uganda, our data evidenced more clearly the impacts of Covid-19 and how the blended volunteering model had adapted, this was not something that many participants in Nepal reflected upon. In Nepal, there was much less sense of a 'gap' that had been left in the blend with the departure of international volunteers at the onset of the pandemic, a particularly prominent discussion point in our Tanzania fieldwork in early 2021.

We also hypothesise that the particular ways in which international volunteers were positioned pre-Covid in Nepal, may also help to understand this scenario. As international volunteers were less likely to be based in local communities, their 'absence' during the pandemic was perhaps less noteworthy than it may have been in other contexts.<sup>6</sup> In a sense then, Covid-19 has provided a set of circumstances in which an already existing situation – of international volunteers being relatively detached from the blend – has been legitimised, or has become the norm, rather than being considered problematic in terms of implementing the blended volunteering model.

What is notable about the ways in which the blended volunteering model has played out in Nepal post-Covid is that there is a strong sense of continuity, suggesting that the blend of different *community* volunteers has enabled projects to be resilient in the face of the pandemic, and less susceptible to shocks, lending further weight to data from Uganda and Tanzania that also emphasised the resilience that the blended volunteering model delivers.

*"Big sisters continued to teach us even during the COVID-19 pandemic. I appreciate that effort from them the most."* (Interview, Primary Actor 1, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)

*"We do have two types of volunteers. I mean the national volunteers and the community volunteers. So during COVID, yes, they are doing very good and, we called them, I mean they, they are acting as a role model in the community. So you know that they are doing very excellent job. Even though schools are closed, and instead of teachers' capacity development part, other things that they are doing very well. In terms of teachers' capacity development, we are using the virtual mode of capacity development and through utilising e-volunteers. So that is one of the alternatives that we have used during this COVID."* (Interview, VSO Nepal Staff Member 2)

The circumstances of the pandemic provided an opportunity to further enhance the skills of community volunteers, in particular to develop their use of technology to enable them to continue to undertake their activities:

*"COVID messages and learning messages, that even those who do not have, I mean the access to, I mean the digital technology, even our community volunteers are using their mobile and making the social distance, and other safety protocol, masks and other safety protocol, they are also displaying using their own mobile, and displaying audio-visual materials and communicating, and also providing counselling support to the primary actors, they are doing very, very, very well and very, I mean, good, I mean the work during this, I mean, the COVID crisis as well. Yes, we highly appreciate them and acknowledge them, their contribution, yes, really they did very well, well up during these crisis."* (Interview, VSO Staff member 2)

*"Yes, uh, what we observe in the pandemic, this was the only accessible approach because when due to [the] pandemic access was restricted by the government, our volunteers used the distance model, distance teaching learning and through the mobile communication, through the group messenger and some phone calls and the regular mentoring and coaching, and some developing the education materials during this pandemic was the great achievement in our project."* (Interview, VSO Staff member 4)

*"I used to take updates from these community volunteers about the activities from the community volunteers on a weekly basis. Mostly, I had a telephone conversation with these community volunteers. I got to meet these volunteers during my field visits once a week. During the lockdown we communicated via Zoom. I had a lot of conversations with community volunteers. Their help was essential particularly in the process of writing case studies."* (Interview, National volunteer, SAHAJ, Siraha district)

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<sup>6</sup> VSO Nepal was unable to recruit international volunteers for the S2L and PRAYAS projects due to Covid-19 and international travel restrictions.

The pandemic also galvanised VSO Nepal to explore the opportunities that remote volunteering presents, and the ways in which remote volunteers might contribute effectively to the blend:

*"Remote volunteers, we, we haven't done that much, but we have just used the remote volunteer of the other project for the documentation and the editing of our work. So not much more on the project work, but yes we do, there are technical inputs on the documentation work, yes we have done, but it was a very, for a very brief period of time."* (Interview, VSO Nepal staff member 1)

*"I: So can you tell me a bit about what it was like to do the remote volunteering when you were back home?  
R: Uhm... it was interesting. Because... by the time we had all gone to our districts, we hadn't actually done that much work in the field, [...] so it was difficult to do work remotely because we didn't have those kind of relationships with the communities that we were working in, to be able to support them remotely, and from my time in the district, the internet was quite poor, there was infrequent electricity and then there was coronavirus, so it wasn't necessarily everybody's first priority to be continuing the project, so... when I was working remotely, we didn't do that part of the job. What the head office in Kathmandu decided that, 'we'd like to keep you kind of within the project', with the expectation that you would return at some point to Nepal. So we started to do some kind of, what did we do? We did hand-over notes to other volunteers to kind of, say what we were doing and everything else, and kind of tried to build up kind of a joint approach across all districts, we got to give some handbooks, we did a little bit of research, we joined in some of the VSO meetings, and whatever they asked us to do, but eventually they decided that because of like lockdowns and things that, they would just terminate the placement because they were unsure whether or not we would ever be able to return to Nepal to continue the project."* (Interview, International volunteer 1, professional, in-country and remote, ENGAGE)

*"I: Do you have any example of a kind of activity that you involved an e-volunteer in the ENGAGE project, so this remote type of volunteer?  
R: Yes, we have, some extracurricular activities [that we] need to implement at community level, because nowadays schools are closed. So we requested [them] to provide some extracurricular activities like the games, so international e-volunteers provided us [with] curriculum and manual guidelines, particularly guidelines on how to teach and coach with the primary actors and children with disability and our national volunteers even got one day orientation from them. And based on the orientation from the e-volunteers and documents, guidelines, they cascaded the activities at field level."* (VSO Nepal Staff Member 4)

This is one sense where we can see that elements of the blended model were actually strengthened or enhanced during Covid, with technology being harnessed to a greater extent than previously. Such experiences have also provided an opportunity to think about the new ways in which blending across modalities might happen in future.

*"I would recommend including e-volunteering in a blended volunteering model because our earlier idea of the blended volunteering model was somehow guided by the physical presence of the volunteer. So I think now it's time to also consider the impact of e-volunteering."* (Interview, VSO Nepal staff member 3)

*"...we also have the review of the remote volunteering approaches and the new approach of the working when we had the global pandemic."* (Interview, VSO Nepal staff member 1)

However, it is worth noting that greater use of remote volunteering in future would need to take account of the impacts of the frequent remote location of international volunteers to date, as discussed above, the degree to which this impacts how they are seen as part of the blend and the ways their expertise or knowledge is understood or used. Overall, these reflections and experiences from Nepal in relation to the pandemic reinforce the scope that we identify – now across three countries – for the blended volunteering model as an international programming approach, identifying the model as one that the sector more widely can learn from in the context of crises and – unexpected and/or planned – changes in the involvement of international volunteers.



#### 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 in Nepal, Tanzania and Uganda raises a number of questions about the interaction of volunteering modalities that can help refine the blended volunteering model for VSO and other volunteer-involving organisations, and strengthen development outcomes for primary actors and their communities.

In particular, the Nepal case study foregrounds the following question:

- ♦ *How can role-based modalities be better incorporated into the blended volunteering model, and how might this in turn enable blended volunteering approaches to be more visible to stakeholders at a community level?*

The research in Nepal also further underlines the relevance of the questions that emerged from the Tanzania and Uganda case studies:

- ♦ *How can programme planning effectively capture individuals' roles and expertise in order to facilitate a greater focus on these attributes and de-emphasise geographically defined modalities, in order to strengthen the blended approach and enable greater adaptability in contexts of reduced international mobility?*
- ♦ *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 of blended volunteering in Nepal strengthens findings from the Uganda and Tanzania case studies on the added value of the blend to development outcomes. In this regard, we identify three key issues arising from the research question:

- ♦ **Volunteer combinations add value to development outcomes.** As we found in Uganda and Tanzania, the use of a blend of volunteers in Nepal also contributes particular value to development programmes in context-specific and iterative ways. The blended approach in Nepal reinforces the importance of different types of roles and skills that are combined not only across but also *within* geographies to maximise project outcomes.

- ◆ **The centrality of community volunteers.** The Nepal case study places particular emphasis on the roles of community volunteers in the blended model due to their roles and closer relationships with primary actors in their localities. Across all three countries, community volunteers are perceived by stakeholders as key actors allowing the blend to thrive – though many skills overlap across volunteering modalities, there are important skills and attributes that are only identified with community volunteers.
- ◆ **Recognising volunteer hierarchies.** The differentiation of modalities is central to the existence of the blend, but it also leads to perceived or actual hierarchies between volunteers, such as those related to the types of volunteer roles and gender dynamics. As identified in Uganda and Tanzania, this points to the importance of adaptive management to the success of blended volunteering.

Each of these key issues is explored in further depth below, deepening and building upon learning from the Uganda and Tanzania case studies. In particular, the Nepal case study reveals how volunteer combinations not only reflect particular project strategies, but the ways those project strategies might both challenge and reinforce power relations that derive from wider humanitarian and development discourses and practices as well as social hierarchies and norms. While, as elsewhere, community-based volunteers are centrally important, this has to be seen in the context of their position in relation to humanitarian and development spaces in each context.

#### **4.2.1 Volunteer combinations add value to development outcomes**

*As we found in Uganda and Tanzania, the use of a blend of volunteers in Nepal also contributes particular value to development programmes in context-specific and iterative ways. The blended approach in Nepal reinforces the importance of different types of roles and skills that are combined not only across but also within geographies to maximise project outcomes.*

The blended volunteering model in Nepal happens against a landscape of humanitarian and development work affected by wider social and power relations. Community-based volunteers engaged with volunteer-involving organisations have also previously reported negative attitudes towards them from community members (Hacker et al., 2017, p. 62). This provides important background for understanding the ways in which the combination of volunteers within the blend unfolds in context-specific ways in Nepal. To a certain extent, our research reflects these previous findings, as explained by the following participants:

*"I work to prevent child marriage in the community so, I am perceived in a negative way. Some individuals accused me of being a family breaker in the community."* (Workshop Participant 1, Community Volunteer, Workshop with community volunteers, PRAYAS, S4S and S2L, Surkhet district)

*"The local people did not believe what these [community] volunteers said/suggested as those were the people from the same communities and/or villages."* (Interview, Partner, SAHAJ, Siraha district)

Whereas the community volunteer mentions the complex juggling between their volunteer role and its impacts on the perceptions of some community members, the partner quoted above raises the difficulty of building trust at a community level (we will further discuss these relationships between community volunteers and other local stakeholders in section 4.3.2). Interestingly, the challenge of building trust among primary actors in project implementation and promoting local change was also raised from a different point of view by national and international volunteers, such as those involved in education activities in the ENGAGE project:

*"If only one type of volunteer had worked in this project, though the programme can be run, it would not get any achievements. Without community volunteers, we can't run the project. The local persons who are educated play an important role to educate the other local people according to their local social contexts. [...] We are outsiders, they have never seen us before or even not heard about us, so they don't believe it when we appear suddenly in their community."* (Interview, National volunteer 1, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)

*"I don't think internationals could go in and just fix it, if I can put it that way, but at the same time I think... it's like anywhere when you've done the same thing for so long, it's really hard to break that, and you kind of need someone external to come in to snap it out of the ordinary pattern. I think that's where the internationals became more helpful."* (Interview, International volunteer 2, professional, ENGAGE)

In this regard, we can see how the blended approach provides a way forward that enhances project implementation through enabling a more agile and dynamic volunteering economy which provides multiple avenues for the development of trusting relationships. Through working together, different combinations of volunteers within the blend have been enabling change at different levels:

*"I think there are many benefits [of the blend]. For instance, the national volunteer has many experiences of volunteering and if we are collaborating with a national volunteer at community level the community people will also give proper attention to the national volunteer. Similarly, the youth and participants from the community will be encouraged by interacting with different levels of volunteers. In volunteering alone, I have felt that the people didn't value your effort. In collaborating with other volunteers, your work gets noticed and acknowledged."* (Interview, Community volunteer 1, PRAYAS, Surkhet district)

*"To run this project there are several types of individuals needed. Several people, including parents, did not believe us. For example, adolescent girls and their parents did not believe us. At that time, we sought support from [Name] [Community mobiliser] to convince them. We needed a CM [Community mobiliser] sister along with [community] volunteers. In order to stop child marriages, we need support from other people."* (Interview, Community volunteer 2, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)

In both the excerpts, we see community volunteers highlighting particular benefits of working together with different volunteering modalities, such as national volunteers, as well as partners (often referred to as community mobilisers). The fact that the blend in Nepal was not only perceived as a way of combining volunteers from different places but also facilitating collaborations among individuals from the same areas who assume distinct roles (see Section 4.1.2) hence becomes one of the particular strengths of the model in Nepal. As discussed earlier, the blend of these unique roles at the community level has allowed VSO's development work to be sustained in the absence of international volunteer placements during Covid-19. This shows how different skills and expertise can also be combined in diverse local teams to potentialize collaborations and learning in line with a project's aims:

*"First of all, it is the nature and objectives of the project that determines what kind of and how many volunteers we require. At first, we had to identify the actors responsible for GBV [Gender-Based Violence]. If we had not facilitated for collaboration between different types of volunteers, we would not have been able to achieve our goal in a short period of time. Had we have only one type of volunteer in our project, we would not have produced such results."* (Interview, Partner, SAHAJ, Siraha district)

*"All volunteers had the responsibility of monitoring the little sister (individually) at least four times a month and had to coordinate with others as well for the same objectives. [...] Big Aunty, adult champion had to coordinate with Big Sister if some issues come which can't be handled singly by the Big Sisters."* (Interview, Partner 1, S4S and S2L, Surkhet district)

These findings are coupled with a wider recognition of the value of blended volunteering expressed across the sample of volunteers, staff, partners and primary actors in Nepal. It reinforces our previous findings from Uganda and Tanzania that identified the value of 'working together' both in terms of volunteers' personal experiences, as well as in the skills that can be blended for the most effective project implementation:

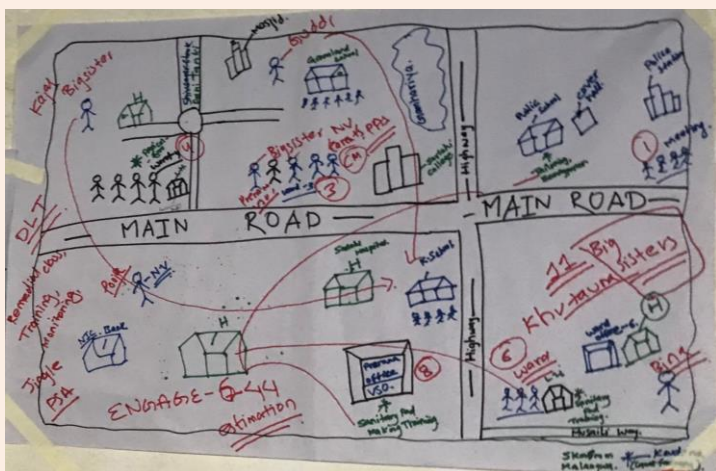
"The most important aspect was that the documentation part became easy mainly because of the support from the national volunteers. Our local community volunteers had less knowledge about it. The national volunteer had shared her knowledge about documentation with local volunteers as well." (Interview, Partner, SAHAJ, Siraha district)

"So we do have also national volunteers, and they are also providing support, mentoring support to the teachers, along with international volunteers, meaning that we have national volunteers and international volunteers because of the learning transformation, I mean, some of the international volunteers' learning will be transformed to national volunteers. And some of the learning from the national volunteers will also transform to international volunteers. That is the cross-learning process." (Interview, VSO Nepal staff member 2)

"We came in with different ideas, different perspectives and we could see things fresh, and go 'well, if that is happening, then this needs to change to help with that'. Whereas there's a lot that was going on that was just happening because it's always happened, and it wasn't very helpful... but the internationals certainly couldn't do without the locals and community volunteers." (Interview, International volunteer 2, professional, ENGAGE)

The excerpts above illustrate how the blend of geographies adds value to the volunteer workforce, notably by exposing individuals to different perspectives and cross-cultural learning. Yet, our wider analysis of the model across districts and projects in Nepal recognises the centrality of local agency and knowledges to sustaining and realising the potential of the blends, as we will discuss in the next section.

### BOX A. PARTICIPATORY MAPPING: SITUATING THE BLEND IN PLACE



**Figure 3: Workshop with national and community volunteers, Mapping Activity, Sarlahi District. Source:** Northumbria University research team

The mapping session enabled us to identify that the strength of the blend between community and national volunteers was dependent on the nature of the project and local social context. The national volunteers were usually found to be experts in some sectors like inclusive education or inclusive governance depending on the programme types. Their crucial role was to provide training to the community volunteers, who would then conduct different activities focusing on the primary actors at the community and school level. In this case, there was a strong blend. Similarly, while conducting capacity building and livelihood trainings, DTL (Distance Teaching Learning) classes, bridge classes, transformation classes and

awareness programmes at the community level, a strong blend between the national and community volunteers was identified, with participants indicating sites on the map where the work was carried out jointly. In **Figure 3**, we see an example of map produced by national and community volunteers who worked together in Sarlahi District. Through the different colours and arrows that suggest movement, we can see the presence of Big Sisters (community volunteers) reaching different places in the communities. They were also pictured more closely with national volunteers, community mobilisers and parents in school settings, considering the involvement of workshop participants both in the ENGAGE and S2L projects. Overall, community volunteers in the workshops spoke about how they frequently faced particular social challenges (e.g., child marriage, gender-based violence), problems they initially tried to solve on their own. If they were unable to do so, they described how they would usually consult community mobilisers or other project staff from the partner organisations. In this context, the blend with national volunteers was less central. Similarly, regarding the blend amongst community volunteers, the mapping session shed light on the ways that volunteers within the same local unit frequently shared their activities and helped each other in case of any issues, but also highlighted that volunteers from different local units knew little about each other's roles and this meant they were not always able to incorporate such information into the maps.

#### 4.2.2 The centrality of community volunteers

*The Nepal case study places particular emphasis on the roles of community volunteers in the blended model due to their roles and closer relationships with primary actors in their localities. Across all three countries, community volunteers are perceived by stakeholders as key actors allowing the blend to thrive – though many skills overlap across volunteering modalities, there are important skills and attributes that are only identified with community volunteers.*

As discussed earlier, one of the key strengths of the blended approach to volunteering is its adaptability, opening up innumerable possibilities of combining volunteer skillsets and roles in tailored ways, to account for the particular needs of each locality. Although the diversity of modalities is at the core of the blended model, in Tanzania and Uganda we previously identified the particular role of community volunteers in sustaining the blend due to their embeddedness and continued engagement. In this section, we build upon such findings to explain how the Nepal case study adds new layers to our understanding of community volunteers' key roles in sustaining the blended model and maximising its development outcomes. A distinctive characteristic identified in the work of community volunteers in Nepal relates to their roles in influencing the 'flow' of the blend in their localities:

*"The community volunteers' main role was to establish coordination between different actors." (Interview, Partner, SAHAJ, Siraha district)*

This can be explained by two main factors: their local embeddedness and the multiple roles assumed by community volunteers in the blend. First, their unique positionality is determined by their proximity and close relationships with primary actors, which allows for stronger bonds to be formed. This was particularly recognised by national volunteers across projects/locations:

*"The main role is played by community volunteers as they know the local social environment more precisely. Based on community volunteers' knowledge and understanding about local issues we make further plans. Community volunteers help us find gaps in our strategies and we sit together to identify potential intervention strategies on each of the social issues. That is why community volunteers are sorely needed to run the project." (Interview, National volunteer, SAHAYATRA, Sarlahi district)*

*"...if there were no community volunteers, it would be difficult to communicate with primary actors. Primary actors would have never opened up with national volunteers. These primary actors had more faith over community volunteers as those volunteers belong to the communities of primary actors." (Interview, National volunteer, SAHAJ, Siraha district)*

*"It is hard to work without community volunteers as we as outsiders are not aware about the actual reasons and obstacles that prevail in the community. [...] In the community, sometimes adolescent boys and girls themselves do not want to go to school, and in some other cases their parents do not allow them to. It might not be possible for outsiders or national volunteers to engage with these community people on a daily basis. Only community volunteers can do that work. They can visit individuals' homes and can convince them about the importance of education. Parents also trust the community volunteers more than they do to outsiders." (Interview, National volunteer 2, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)*

Even though all the national volunteers quoted above are from Nepal, the fact that they were performing volunteering in communities different from their own meant that they were considered – by others but also themselves – as 'outsiders'. This is because particular attributes needed for the effective implementation of activities were identified as being things that could only be offered by community volunteers, such as local liaison and awareness raising (see earlier Tables 2 and 3), but also language skills<sup>7</sup>:

<sup>7</sup> According to the last census, there are 123 major languages spoken in Nepal (Yadava, 2014).

*"...the sister [National volunteer] spoke in Nepali language and the people in the community don't understand Nepali. In this situation, how could they explain the thing to the community? Whenever they spoke, all [primary actors] remained silent instead of interrupting them [national volunteers]. I asked the primary actor 'Did you understand what they were explaining?' And, when they said no, I told the national volunteers that people didn't understand what the conversation was all about. Later, these national volunteers asked me to translate their words into Bajjika [local language of the community people]." (Interview, Community volunteer, GBV Champion, S2L, Sarlahi district)*

*"...there are some challenges for international volunteers. That is the language barrier, international volunteers cannot speak the local languages and neither our primary actors and parents can understand." (Interview, VSO Nepal staff member 4)*

If, on the one hand, these unique skills and local knowledge are often praised by stakeholders and other volunteers in the blend, on the other it also entails higher expectations on community volunteers, as explained by one of the international volunteers as follows:

*"In some ways, more is expected [from national and community volunteers] because I think they show you grace when they go, you're a foreigner, you don't understand. But in some ways more was expected from them, and at the same time less was forgivable because they should know better. I think that was one thing I noticed, the expectations on them were higher in some ways." (Interview, International volunteer 2, professional, ENGAGE)*

The assumption that 'they should know better' can thus become a burden for community volunteers in the blend as an inadvertent consequence of their 'localness' – an expectation that needs to be handled accordingly by volunteer managers, particular in relation to the hierarchies that it can create (see next Section 4.2.3). This further underlines the importance of care when viewing a blend through broad geographical lenses linked to modalities, which can conceal the ways different scales of activity or affiliation impact volunteers' lives, activities and the ways they are blended.

The second key factor in understanding the value of community volunteers in connecting different actors in the blend, is related to the many distinct roles in the implementation of VSO Nepal projects. Rather than a static category defined only by their place of provenance, we have already discussed how community volunteers play different key roles in the work with primary actors according to their types of involvement with VSO, such as peer-mentors, champions of particular themes and local facilitators (see also earlier Section 4.1.2):

*"...there are other volunteers as well [in the S4S project], like Adult Champion, Big Aunty, Big Brother Teacher Champion. We used to share our learnings, problems with the Teacher Champion in our monthly meeting. Big Aunty has the role to convince or counsel the parents/guardians. Sometimes along with a Big Sister, Big Aunty, Adult Champion and Big Brother used to visit the Little Sister's house together. So it was like a complete family (we have brother, sister, aunty)." (Interview, Community volunteer, Big Sister, S4S, Surkhet district)*

This speaks to the notion of 'radical localism' (Engeström, 1999) in wider literatures and the need to account for the complex social dynamics *within* so-called local spheres of action (Titz et al., 2018), and not only between those perceived as 'locals' in relation to the 'outsiders'. Often, the 'working together' expressed by community volunteers referred to their volunteer work in collaboration with their peers, rather than necessarily engaging with national and/or international volunteers on a frequent basis:

*"I: Did VSO explain how they expect different types of volunteers to work together before you started your work on the project?*

*R: They explained to us. They said, we have to work together and we have been working together. We are a group of eight. Eight Big Sisters are working together." (Interview, Community volunteer 1, Big Sister, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)*

*"We didn't need to work with different types of other volunteers. Most of the time we [two GBV champions] worked together. [...] It's good to have everyone working together. Not everyone knows everything. When you don't know about any topic, you get a chance to know by asking." (Interview, Community volunteer, GBV Champion, S2L, Sarlahi district)*

This seeming 'lack' of blend actually reveals the need for expanding our understanding about the ways different local blends effectively happen in practice, and particularly in remote areas where VSO is present in Nepal. This reinforces the argument that the placement location of volunteers is a key aspect of how the blend is operationalised. It also reflects an expectation or ideal that was often expressed by participants, in relation to the value of having a greater number of community volunteers present in the blend:

*"The volunteers must be from the community level as in the S4S, S2L projects at first. If we assume in numbers, more community level volunteers, and national, whereas few international volunteers will be best for the upcoming projects." (Interview, Community volunteer 4, Big Brother, GBV Champion, S4S and S2L, Surkhet district)*

*"...if we have a good number of community volunteers, the project will be successful compared to the number of international volunteers." (Interview, Partner 1, S4S and S2L, Surkhet district)*

Overall, and building upon previous findings from Uganda and Tanzania, participants in Nepal particularly emphasise the roles of local actors and community volunteers in driving the blend, and in steering it in directions that might then also benefit from external contributions – rather than the other way around. This is nonetheless entrenched with wider hierarchies and volunteer economies that we will explore in the next section.

### **4.2.3 Recognising volunteer hierarchies**

*The differentiation of modalities is central to the existence of the blend but it also leads to perceived or actual hierarchies between volunteers, such as those related to the types of volunteer roles and gender dynamics. As identified in Uganda and Tanzania, this points to the importance of adaptive management to the success of blended volunteering.*

The blended model in Nepal needs to be situated in the context of wider humanitarian and development work in the country, which has been one of the highest recipients of foreign aid in the global South for several decades (Dangi et al., 2021). This affects not only the types of development work that happen in the districts where VSO is present, but also the overall perceptions about development workers and volunteers in each locality, potentially leading to hierarchies and unmet expectations. Previous VSO research in Nepal already suggested that the perception of volunteering is entangled with wider perceptions of the development sector and the risks of perpetuating dependencies (Hacker et al., 2017, p. 61). Here, we identify that the embeddedness of the blended approach at community level and the wider relationships sustained by VSO with partners and primary actors, have been enhancing projects' legacy and resilience through strong collaborations among volunteers who play different roles in the blend (see Section 4.3.2). However, as we have previously explored – especially in the Tanzania case study – the distinction of roles and volunteer competencies, often assumed to correspond to volunteers' place of provenance, underpin the differentiation of volunteering modalities. At the same time, this poses a critical dilemma: the emergence of perceived or actual hierarchies and tensions in the field. In Nepal, we have identified three levels of hierarchies.

First, as also mentioned in the previous section, both national and international volunteers are often perceived as 'outsiders' at community level. Their positioning within the blend, including the fact that they are mainly based at district/national level, coupled with some of their activities (e.g. monitoring and reporting on field activities) have meant that primary actors inevitably perceive them through vertical, managerial lenses:

*"...Big Sister's job is to take us to school. If any little sister did not go to school she would ask us the reason and tell us to go to school. Their [National volunteer] role is to check on the Big Sisters. The Big Sisters are working under the [Name of national volunteer]. Everyone has their own role."* (Workshop Participant 3 Primary Actor, Workshop with primary actors, community and national volunteers, S2L and ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)

*"I: What types of volunteers would you select [if you could design a new VSO project]?"*

*Primary Actor: Experienced community people, who have already worked with us before.*

*Youth community volunteer: Outside people as well for checking if the work is done properly or not."* (Scenario building discussion, Workshop with primary actors and community volunteers, SAHAJ, Siraha district)

When perceived as 'outside people', national/international volunteers may inadvertently be seen as the 'managers', 'staff', or the ones determining the direction of projects, something that we also identified previously in the Uganda case study. This in turn entrenches even starker hierarchies that can distance community volunteers from the other volunteers in the blend. In this process, although both national and international volunteers were perceived as outsiders, there were also particular differences in the participation of international volunteers that affected the dynamics of the blend:

*"In our community, we only worked with local [community] volunteers. They [international volunteers] came for observation in the school. They asked about challenges and accomplishments of the programme."* (Workshop Participant 6, Community Volunteer, Workshop with community volunteers, PRAYAS, S4S and S2L, Surkhet district)

*"I did not work with international volunteers. However, during their field visits to the community, I had accompanied them as a translator."* (Interview, National volunteer, SAHAJ, Siraha district)

Here we see two examples where international volunteers' involvement with national/community volunteers was not perceived as 'working together' but rather 'interacting' for particular purposes and in specific moments in time during project implementation. From a broader point of view, this also means that community volunteers can be perceived as solely focused on the delivery of pre-determined activities rather than also actively shaping the decision-making and design of projects. In this regard, participants in Nepal have spoken about their expectations of increased engagement of local actors in designing future volunteer projects:

*"...why don't we think from the local lenses? The projects were always finalised at central [level] and implemented at the local level. When are we going to change this culture? The project must be decentralised from the district headquarters."* (Interview, Partner 1, PRAYAS, Surkhet district)

*"Also in the project planning period, I don't know whether the primary actors were consulted or not, in our case the media volunteers were incorporated after the inception of the project, similar was the case with the community volunteers and the local people."* (Interview, Community volunteer 2, Media volunteer, PRAYAS, Surkhet district)



The emphasis on the community level, however, does not imply this sphere is homogeneous. When analysing the blended approach in the sampled districts and projects in Nepal we have also recognised the different status and responsibilities between community volunteers that play different roles in the blend. This constitutes a second level of hierarchies in this case study:

*"The local community volunteers are not highly educated and they are not the well-known people in the communities. Hence, we had hired other volunteers too. For example, we had hired champions, who were well-known persons. This was necessary as some local people would not listen to these less known volunteers."* (Interview, Partner, SAHAJ, Siraha district)

*"I: [D]id you work, at any point, directly with primary actors, the people in the field?"*

*R: Not necessarily, I mean in the field, the way the programme works is, what you have in the field you have, say community, community volunteers who are paid a small salary, and then they would work with what were called Big Sisters, and the Big Sisters were paid a tiny, tiny amount and they were mentoring them [primary actors] directly."* (Interview, International volunteer 1, professional, S4S)

Across the types of involvement, volunteer participants explained to the research team that different hierarchies were perceived in their everyday routines. As explained by the participants quoted above, this is likely related to the personal status of individuals recruited as volunteers, as well as the types of involvement they are expected to have in the project. If, on the one hand, this situation might be informed by decisions related to the activities in the project, on the other it needs to be handled with care to maintain equal relationships in the blend. This level of intra-community volunteer hierarchies was more evident in Nepal than in Uganda and Tanzania, where there was a stronger presence of national and international volunteers in the communities. We hypothesise that this does not mean that hierarchies among community volunteers were necessarily absent in those case studies, but that hierarchies related to the multiple roles played by community volunteers can be overshadowed by starker differences perceived between them and national/international volunteers.<sup>8</sup> This highlights again that international, national and local hierarchies are not the only ones that are critical to the blend.

The third level of hierarchies in Nepal involved gender and social norms, which were particularly important when analysing volunteering experiences in the country. These were mostly related to the gendered roles in the volunteer activities performed by men and women, as well as gendered expectations of their roles when engaging with primary actors:

*"I: [Male community volunteer] and [Female community volunteer] had the same role or different?"*

*R: It was different. [...] Bringing logistics from outside, management was done by [male community volunteer], while female related works were done by Madam [female community volunteer]".* (Workshop Participant 6, Primary Actor, Workshop with primary actors and community volunteers, SAHAJ, Siraha district)

*"During the COVID-19 crisis, it was difficult to communicate with community volunteers, most particularly with female volunteers who lacked technical skills."* (Interview, National volunteer, SAHAJ, Siraha district)

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<sup>8</sup> In the case of Tanzania, for example, we saw the emergence of the modality of 'supporter volunteers' in the Shinyanga region when most international and national volunteers were forced to leave the areas due to the pandemic. Supporter volunteers were identified as community volunteers who stepped up to play a bridging role between the remaining national volunteers and other community volunteers, undertaking activities very similar to those previously done by national or international volunteers. This has, therefore, 'differentiated' them from the other community volunteers in the blend not only in terms of their responsibilities and activities, but also the status and recognition gained from their volunteer roles.

*"One thing I did find really hard, including as a volunteer, was that women are not heard and that includes if you're white... [laughs] So an example could be my male colleague... I could say something and it would be shut down, he could say exactly the same thing and it accepted like it's the greatest idea ever... [laughs] Culturally, that was part of my experience and it is cultural, like I was able to talk to one of the local [primary actor] ladies about it and she kind of went 'Yeah, we just have to respect the men because they're in charge'. And she was an older local lady, so I figured she had a fair bit of wisdom and experience and she was very helpful for that and would also be the one to guide me when it was a good opportunity to speak up a little bit more."* (Interview, International volunteer 2, professional, ENGAGE)

Such concerns point to the need to pay attention to socio-cultural expectations and norms that can also influence the ways in which the blended volunteering model is operationalised in particular contexts. The strength of these norms can mean that the relational dynamics at the heart of the blended volunteering approach can exclude some volunteers. As these comments from a focus group discussion reveal, the participation in the blend of someone who identifies as having a disability does not in itself erase the discrimination they might face:

*"Sometimes, I feel all are physically able people while I am the only person with a disability. Society still does not trust people with disabilities, even in this place. [...] I also feel that my group may not believe in my ability. For example, they [other volunteers] would not allow me to do challenging work, when there are other physically able people who are there to do such tasks. That's why I feel, they don't believe in my ability. [...] In the group, one won't be able to learn the local language as he/she will be assured that the other who knows will assist. While, if a person works alone, he/she has to learn the language forcefully."* (Workshop Participant 9, Workshop with primary actors, community and national volunteers, S2L and ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)

Finally, it is worth noting that, although volunteer allowances were mentioned by participants in Nepal, they do not assume such a central role in the discussion about inequalities as we saw in the Tanzania and Uganda case studies. Here, it rather shows how volunteers might also be filling staff 'gaps' against a wider landscape of development work:

*"And rather than selecting many community volunteers, it would have resulted in more outcomes if we have two full-time well-paid volunteers for the same roles."* (Interview, Community volunteer 2, Big Sister, S4S and S2L, Surkhet district)

*"In my experience, the JD [Job Description] of volunteers is huge but payment is low. We provide [amount] for each volunteer engaged in volunteering. I think it is less compared to their roles and responsibilities. Due to which we were unable to get the best candidate for this volunteering [position]. Because of this, the implementation of projects at community level is facing problems."* (Interview, Partner 2, SAHAJ, Siraha district)

*"This is a voluntary work as we are not appointed as staff. Yet I call it a job because they [VSO] paid me. The volunteering service would open further opportunities for me in the future."* (Interview, National volunteer 1, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)

The national volunteer quoted above who considers their volunteer placement as a job went on to explain how being perceived as a staff member also made a difference in their relationships with primary actors:

*"...every organisation has its own rules, sometimes we [volunteers] are not included in meetings. These activities remind me that I am a volunteer. [...] But I feel like it makes a difference to introduce to them [primary actors] as the staff of this office."* (Interview, National volunteer 1, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)

This suggests that volunteering is not detached from, but is intrinsically connected to, the wider humanitarian and development systems in Nepal which, nonetheless, are experienced differently by community and national/international volunteers in the blend. It also provides a contrast to the example of Uganda, where volunteering's relationship to paid work was closer; while in Nepal the label of volunteer pointed to a difference to being a staff member, with an attendant reduction in status and responsibility, in Uganda, the label of volunteer does not offer such a stark distinction and indeed, is often perceived as synonymous with an idea of being a paid staff member.

Overall, as we identified in Uganda and Tanzania, adaptive management remains key to developing context-specific strategies to supervise and balance the roles and responsibilities of different volunteering modalities in the blend. The focus of volunteer managers not only on the types of activities performed by each volunteer, but also on the multiple dynamics of the blend can then facilitate the building of more equal relationships across modalities, as well as promote and/or strengthen existing communication channels (i.e. communities of practice) for volunteers to share experiences and learn from each other. Stronger teams can then allow volunteers to support each other more and strengthen the long-lasting development impacts of the blend in the communities – which we will discuss in the next section.

#### **4.2.4 Looking forward**

When analysing the data from Nepal, Tanzania and Uganda on the ways in which **different volunteering modalities might be combined to maximise development impact**, the findings from both contexts raise a number of pertinent questions for academics, practitioners and policymakers working in these spaces. In particular, the Nepal case study highlights the following question:

- ♦ *What mitigations are needed to ensure a blended approach increases community volunteers' capacities and agency without placing an unfair burden on them or reinforcing the roles they are traditionally ascribed within the wider humanitarian and development landscape?*

The Nepal case study also reaffirms points raised in Tanzania and Uganda for practitioners to reflect upon how the ways in which volunteering modalities interact can further refine the blended volunteering model:

- ♦ *How can different stakeholders reach a shared understanding of what counts as volunteering in order to achieve equal forms of recognition and treatment across volunteering modalities?*
- ♦ *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 of data from Nepal validates our previous findings from Tanzania and Uganda, while also identifying new elements to strengthen the analysis on three key issues arising from the research question:

- ◆ **Project phases and the blend 'over time'**. Supporting key findings from Uganda, the Nepal case study provides further evidence for the central role of very long-term volunteers in project sustainability and impact. Particularly, in this context, long-term community volunteering roles are essential for primary actor engagement.
- ◆ **Blended volunteering and community experiences**. The Nepal case study highlights how the embeddedness of volunteers in local communities is even more important in the context of VSO not being able to deliver projects on the ground, highlighting the roles, contributions and limitations of different stakeholders in this vacuum.
- ◆ **Shared ownership and project legacy in communities**. The Nepal case study sheds new light on how the wider blend of volunteers with communities and their aspirations can enhance project impacts and lasting outputs, particularly in ensuring the selection of the right stakeholders.

As with the previous research questions, our findings in Nepal support the findings from Tanzania and Uganda, although there are some differences that we explore in more detail. In this section, we build on previous learning in relation to the importance of conceptualising the wider blend between volunteers, VSO and communities, and explain how the Nepal case study further emphasises the contribution made by very long-term volunteers, particularly community volunteers. Furthermore, the case study highlights the vital role that partners can play in ensuring projects are successful and have sustained impacts for development.

#### 4.3.1 Project phases and the blend 'over time'

*Supporting key findings from Uganda, the Nepal case study provides further evidence for the central role of very long-term volunteers in project sustainability and impact. Particularly, in this context, long-term community volunteering roles are essential for primary actor engagement.*

In both Tanzania and Uganda, we reported on the importance of overlap of volunteer placements, as well as the relevance of project phase for the success of the blend. In Uganda, we discussed the important contributions of 'very long-term' volunteers – which we defined as those who have a volunteering commitment of over one year – to the success of the blend and the overall sustained impacts of VSO projects. The case study from Nepal sheds new light on these observations, sharing both similarities and differences with the other country contexts explored.

In Tanzania and Uganda, we found issues were often highlighted regarding handover between volunteers coming and going on projects, and identified that this could be handled more efficiently to improve project outcomes. Some similar issues were occasionally remarked upon in Nepal as well:

*"...what happens is the project's been running for quite a few years, so by the time I arrived, you know, other [international] volunteers had arrived three months previously, some had arrived a year previously, so you never had the full volunteer team all arrived together, you know?"* (Interview, International volunteer 1, professional, S4S)

*"...in our case also the problem is with Big Brothers changing frequently. Due to them being replaced by new big brothers, we have faced many challenges. As the previous Big Brother left the project, the new Big Brother who doesn't know details about the project would come. It would take a few months for him to learn and the cycle repeated like this. This problem was solved by mobilising teachers from the same school."* (Workshop Participant 2, Community Volunteer, Big Sister, Workshop with community volunteers, PRAYAS, S4S and S2L, Surkhet district)

In spite of these examples, overall issues around transitioning between volunteers were far less remarked upon in Nepal than in either of the other country contexts. We hypothesise that this is because many volunteers remain on the project for a very long time, particularly community volunteers, who sometimes stay involved for a project's entire duration, and because of the relative detachedness of shorter-term international volunteers. The below quotes are just some examples of community volunteers reporting multiple year commitments; overall, these are evident across projects, as community volunteers often speak of their personal involvement over different project phases:

*"I worked in the project of VSO called Sisters for Sister's Education (S4S), as Teacher Champion for almost six years."* (Interview, Community volunteer 1, Teacher Champion, S4S and S2L, Surkhet district)

*"I was involved with the S4S project for almost five years, in both phases, I and II as a Big Sister."* (Interview, Community volunteer, Big Sister, S4S, Surkhet district)

*"In July, I will have completed three years of my involvement in this project."* (Interview, Community volunteer 2, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)

Such very long-term volunteering commitments of community volunteers ensured stability on projects and contributed to successful outcomes. Many of the community volunteers reported that they initially faced problems and difficulties when working with primary actors, due to not being taken seriously or the primary actors not seeing the value of the project. We did not come across this concern in Tanzania and Uganda, however, it has also emerged in previous research in Nepal (Hacker et al., 2017; see also sections 4.2.1 and 4.3.2). Volunteers reported that they were often able to make significant strides towards the successful implementation of projects over time, due to establishing relationships within communities and convincing primary actors of the importance of the project aims:

*"Little Sisters at the initial phase were not so serious in this project because at that time they were also frequently absent in the school. And I think that at that time achieving the goals of the project was challenging. But in the later phase of the project due to constant engagement with Little Sisters, parents and community, it was easier than before."* (Workshop participant 4, Community volunteer, Workshop with community volunteers, PRAYAS, S4S, S2L, Surkhet district)

The importance of wider relationships with the communities and other stakeholders will be explored further in the following sections; what matters here is that long-term durations were of vital importance in building relationships with primary actors, in order to make an impact. In Nepal, we identify this long-term involvement of community volunteers as being of pivotal importance to maximising development impact.

## BOX B. SCENARIO BUILDING: INSIGHTS ON A 'PERFECT PROJECT'

The scenario building session revealed that it is challenging to conduct VSO projects with only one type of volunteer. Most of the participants identified working together as a team as a strength of the project. In a team, volunteers can support each other, share ideas, and also divide their work responsibilities. Overall, workshop participants emphasised that existing projects are based on a blend of volunteering modalities and that this should continue in future projects. The majority of participants suggested that they need international as well as national volunteers in their project. Community volunteers stated that people are usually convinced by the views or opinions of outsiders or people apart from the local community



**Figure 4: Volunteers discussing VSO projects, Surkhet District.**  
Source: Northumbria University research team

(in this case, national/international volunteers) because they think outsiders are wiser compared to community volunteers and can create a bigger impact. Despite this observation, almost all the participants agreed that the participation of community volunteers is essential as they have a better understanding of the local context than national and international volunteers. In all workshops, participants were interested in collaborating with the community, school, local level government, etc, underlining a continued appetite for engaging with VSO's blended volunteering model in future.

International volunteers also identified the importance of building relationships over time. Some of them spoke of a desire to stay longer than their initial volunteering commitment, and many of them reported doing so in practice, including multiple year commitments. This was due, in part, to the relatively long time spent in the main office in Kathmandu, addressed in Section 4.1.1, which left a shorter time in the field to make an impact if placements were not extended. Various international volunteers reflected that a longer timeframe was necessary for them to make connections in the field and feel they had made real impacts:

*"...I had six months in Kathmandu before I could go near the schools, because of a delay in Nepal around getting working visas for volunteers. So you know, for the for at least 20% of my placement, I couldn't actually go anywhere near the schools. You know? So, so you know you have that, then you have trying to develop relationships, and then you have the language issues, and then you're trying to get used to the infrastructure. So if I had stayed for another year, and seen out the end of the programme itself, yeah, perhaps that would have been the opportunity then to put things in place, but I'd almost committed two years at that stage and it was it was time to come home, you know?"* (Interview, International volunteer 1, professional, S4S)

*"...I know VSO often, have the idea that, 'yes, but we kind of expect you to stay a bit longer'. But there were people, such as myself, and a couple of other people, that did think it would just be for a year [...] in which case, we're gone by the time you've built the relationships in the field to really make any kind of small change or small difference by the end. [...] it's not an expectation that's ever forced on you, but they kind of hope that you'll stay a lot longer, and lots of the other volunteers, there was another project called Sisters for Sisters and..., I think there was one lady from Scotland, she'd been there for like 6 or 7 years. Uh, yeah, there's the volunteer, that said to us that, 'you know they kind of hope that you will enjoy it so much that you'll stay longer', he might be in there for about two years, so, and there's another volunteer that's stayed for three so, it wasn't kind of uncommon for people to stay a lot longer than a year."* (Interview, International volunteer 1, professional, in-country and remote, ENGAGE)

In Uganda, we recognised the presence of a few ‘very long-term’ volunteers as beneficial to the success of blended volunteering, and thereby, projects. In the context of Nepal, where the blend of modalities is sometimes less easy to identify and is stretched across scales, the presence of several very long-term volunteers across international/national/community modalities is especially key to successful volunteering engagement. In particular, our data shows that very long-term community volunteers are a dominant factor in the success and longevity of VSO projects, due to their presence in communities and relationships with various stakeholders. We will further explore these relationships now.

### **4.3.2 Blended volunteering and community experiences**

*The Nepal case study highlights how the embeddedness of volunteers in local communities is even more important in the context of VSO not being able to deliver projects on the ground, highlighting the roles, contributions and limitations of different stakeholders in this vacuum.*

In our reports on Tanzania and Uganda we have discussed the importance of ‘the wider blend’ – the blend between volunteers and the communities they work with and in. Similarly, in Nepal, relationships between volunteers, VSO, partners, and/or primary actors were discussed in all interviews and workshops. Indeed, in this country context, we found evidence of the importance of this blend with communities and partners on a more extensive scale compared to the other country contexts, particularly due to the key role partners play in the work of VSO Nepal. This is related to the fact that in Nepal, VSO implements projects at the community level through partner organisations due to government regulations, as staff members explained:

*“[I]n Nepal by law, international and non-governmental organisations cannot have right and authority to implement a project intervention directly at the field level [...] we often select the implementing partner before the project design, and involve them as a partner of the, as a partner of the consortia of the project design team, since the concept note preparation. So, during the engagement of primary actors, these implementing partners, who are working in the field, who are working in the proposed districts, the project area and this site, they initiate several rounds of discussion. They initiate consultation process with the key stakeholders including primary actors.” (Interview, VSO Nepal staff member 2)*

*“As per our government rule, we do not, as INGO we are not able to implement any project interfaces directly, so we work via implementing partner organisations. So, implementing partner organisation will have better access to the primary actor.” (Interview, VSO Nepal staff member 1)*

In this context then, the partner organisations play an increased role in the successful implementation of projects. While, as we will explore, this approach was at times very successful, there were also instances of challenges as stakeholders sometimes seemed to lack an understanding of VSO projects, or of their roles within projects, or were unaware of VSO altogether. We suggest that this reflects a lack of local ownership, when community members do not feel sufficiently involved, engaged or responsible for the projects:

*“VSO didn’t explain in detail about the project, its objectives and working modalities. I learned step wise step after engaging in this project, learned by doing activities and attending training. [...] Big Sisters were also in the same dilemma. After attending the training, I hope they have gained the information about the projects and their roles in the project.” (Interview, Community volunteer 1, Teacher Champion, S4S and S2L, Surkhet district)*

"Interviewer: *Have you heard about VSO?*

Primary actor 2: *No.*

[...]

I: *Did you hear about volunteers or work volunteers?*

Primary actor 2: *Yes*

Primary actor 1: *No*

I: *Who are they?*

Primary actor 2: *Eh! No ... (laughs)*

I: *Are Big Sisters called volunteers or not? Do you have any ideas?*

Primary actor 2: *No*

Primary actor 1: *No.*" (Interview, Primary actors 1 and 2, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)

At times, this issue was also related to a perceived lack of communication between the different types of stakeholders:

*"One bitter fact while coordinating with the ward office is managing the time of the ward chair and other ward members. Organisations like this are associated with the ward office and it is hard to coordinate and get their time. Sometimes, we felt like few of the primary actors were reluctant to take the ownership of the programme, they behaved as if it is only the programme of PRAYAS."* (Interview, Partner 2, PRAYAS, Surkhet district)

This scenario contrasts with our findings in Tanzania, and especially Uganda, where VSO Uganda's ability to reach, and be known in, very remote communities was remarked upon by many stakeholders as key in the success of their projects. As identified in previous case study reports, it is clear that primary actors and community stakeholders play a vital role in the success of the blended volunteering model, and shared understandings of project aims and desired outputs are vital in achieving this success. As discussed above, both community and international volunteers mentioned that building relationships with primary actors takes time, and they highlighted difficulties in convincing primary actors of the importance of VSO projects, obstacles that were not present to the same degree in the other country contexts. In Nepal, community volunteers in particular played a big role in highlighting the importance of project aims to primary actors, and were often successful in doing so given enough time:

*"As a challenge, we saw that the parents from the village community lack awareness. They used to have less participation in meetings. They used to think why to waste time in those meetings leaving the household work. We used to call them in programmes applying various techniques, and counsel them about the objective of the meeting. In this way, after sharing knowledge, compared to before, they have been more concerned about their child's education and come to school once a month to learn about their children."* (Workshop participant 6, Community volunteer, Big Brother, Workshop with volunteers only, S4S and S2L, Surkhet district)

*"[A]fter frequently visiting them [primary actors] they realised the importance of education and gender discrimination is also decreased. We also showed street drama for awareness. Now parents do not pressure their children for marriage."* (Workshop participant 1, Community volunteer, Big Sister, Workshop with volunteers only, S4S, S2L and PRAYAS, Surkhet district)

*"At the initial phase of this project as being the Big Sister, we have experienced certain challenges in the community. Because we used to have the uniform for the Big Sister (pink kurta), community people used to tease us by calling us 'thul didi' [Big Sister] but later we were able to convince the parents and the community by our work. Finally, the parents used to show curiosity regarding their child when we used to visit their home. They used to ask us questions such as, how is the progress of their daughter (Little Sister) and so on."* (Interview, Community volunteer, Big Sister, S4S, Surkhet district)



The challenges around primary actors' interest in and willingness to participate with VSO projects were not only related to time and project phase, but were also, in part, gendered. As already mentioned, due to VSO Nepal's strong focus on gender in its programming, many volunteers as well as many primary actors (notably, Little Sisters) were women and girls. Women volunteers were vital for the success of the 'wider blend' in terms of their ability to understand and have access to primary actors who are women:

*"In the village, women are not allowed to talk freely. None of the families would allow females to talk to males, most particularly strangers. So, we had hired female volunteers. These survivors (women) could share their experiences easily with women volunteers. The female volunteers could easily understand the real problems of the women in the community."* (Interview, Partner, SAHAJ, Siraha district)

*"...female primary actors did not feel comfortable communicating with male volunteers as well as male primary actors were hesitant to talk to female volunteers."* (Interview, National volunteer, SAHAJ, Siraha district)

However, as explored in section 4.2.3 on volunteer hierarchies in operationalising the blend, women volunteers, including international volunteers, also reported facing challenges related to gendered roles and primary actors', partners' and other stakeholders' expectations of women's behaviour. This issue also influenced their relationships and ability to work with and alongside community members, highlighting a need to think through supporting women volunteers' inclusion in the blend:

*"I feel that the community people have prejudice against me, they may have perceived that the young lady alone cannot work."* (Interview, Community volunteer 1, PRAYAS, Surkhet district)

Notwithstanding these challenges, participants noted that the wider blend with important stakeholders in communities – such as local government and the police – was very successful. These connections are extremely important to ensure local buy-in and sustained impact. As already touched upon, it is particularly partners that play an extremely important role in the success of VSO Nepal activities on the ground. While VSO will often work side by side with local partners in communities, as also seen in Tanzania and Uganda, in Nepal partners often carry out the role that VSO's local staff would play in other countries. This means the role of partners here becomes even more vital in implementing projects and ensuring their success:

*"[The partners] were very nice, friendly showing me around town showing me, introducing me to everything in the office uhm... yeah, they were really good with everything actually, like even things that probably they shouldn't do, they helped with."* (Interview, International volunteer 1, professional, in-country and remote, ENGAGE)

*"The collaborative aspect was good in the SAHAJ project. Mutual ownership makes the project successful and it is relatively easier to put such projects into practice."* (Interview, Partner, SAHAJ, Siraha district)

The 'wider blend' can be inhibited, however, when partner organisations themselves are not located in the communities involved in VSO projects, either:

*"Our office is in [location]. There are some limitations. Not everything can be done/performed from here. We had to depend on community volunteers. These volunteers are the key persons who had worked as front liners for the project. They were unaware of financial and many other technical aspects facing the project. In addition to that, we were not able to provide them equipment for timely reporting."* (Interview, Partner, SAHAJ, Siraha district)

This quote highlights both the importance and the role of community volunteers as well as the limitations this approach brings when partners are located away from local communities and still unable to be on the ground – a vacuum that in other country contexts, notably Uganda, would have

been filled by VSO's own presence on the ground. Furthermore, as partners were involved in other development projects with other funders and organisations, VSO projects were only part of their portfolio, rather than their sole focus. While partners played key roles in ensuring the success of VSO projects, sometimes working together with volunteers in a 'blended capacity', we should note that partner organisations cannot replace the overarching role played by VSO in other country contexts. This is perhaps particularly significant in the context of the need for adaptive management approaches that look across multiple factors and scales for programming a blend. Nevertheless, partners play a pivotal role in the success of VSO projects in Nepal. While partners fulfil some of the roles that in other contexts would be fulfilled by local VSO staff, they also work closely with volunteers across modalities. In the field, partners often hire staff from communities directly, to support community volunteers in implementing the projects. These members of staff are referred to as 'Community Mobilisers' (CMs) and community volunteers directly report any issues to them – rather than to national volunteers, for example – highlighting the close ways in which CMs and community volunteers work together in the case of the dispersed blend of volunteers found in Nepal. At times, volunteers and primary actors are not able to specify if CMs are partners/staff or volunteers, an aspect that highlights partners' important embeddedness in the blended approach, as well as the fluidity that is inherent to the conceptualisation of the blend:

*"I: Do you know if there were different types of VSO volunteers working on the project?"*

*R: No, but I know about Big Sisters and Community Mobilisers (CMs) only." (Interview, Primary actor, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)*

*"I: Do you know which types of volunteers they are and what they do?"*

*R: Yes, I am working with Ms. [names of Community Mobilisers]. Mostly, I work with [Name] and other Big Sisters. Similarly, I work with [National volunteer]." (Interview, Community volunteer 1, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)*

*"[I]n our team we have CM, Big Brothers, Teacher champion, Big Sisters... We used to have monthly meetings, where the overall progress, lessons learned etc. were shared. Where all of us used to share our experiences." (Workshop with volunteers only, Participant 6, Community volunteer, Big Brother, S4S and S2L, Surkhet district)*

Alongside their embeddedness in projects and close work with community volunteers, data furthermore suggests CMs, national, and international volunteers work very closely together and may also fulfil similar roles. In fact, international and national volunteers often work more with CMs than they do with community volunteers, again indicating the vital importance of the 'wider blend', and particularly of partners, in the context of Nepal:

*"I would say that there is indirect involvement with community volunteers. Our direct involvement is with the community mobiliser (CM), who are the staff of the partner organisation." (Interview, National volunteer 2, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)*

*"So the national volunteers, who are from Kathmandu mainly, went to those programme areas, work very closely with the partners and help in the documentation of the work." (Interview, VSO Nepal staff member 1)*

*"[The partners] were great. They were really, really supportive. [...] I worked quite closely with them, they helped a lot with things like translating, you know, organising meetings and stuff like that. And so I had a sort of direct... the roles themselves didn't overlap, but they were sort of assigned the role of supporting me in my work, you know. Yeah, and they were very helpful." (Interview, International volunteer 1, professional, S4S)*

Furthermore, there is also evidence in the context of Nepal of partners taking on volunteering responsibilities. This partial blurring of the roles and responsibilities of partners and volunteers in the field leads to strong connections and a sense of working together that improves successful outputs of a project:

*"I think [Partner 1] supported us to engage with the PRAYAS project. We have long experience of partnership with [Partner 1]. [Partner 2] is also the member organisation of [Partner 1]. In my case, I was selected from my organisation to volunteer in the PRAYAS project as a Youth Leader."* (Interview, Partner 1, PRAYAS, Surkhet district)

*"To run this project there are several types of individuals needed. Several people, including parents, did not believe us. For example, adolescent girls and their parents did not believe us. At that time, we sought support from [Female volunteer name] to convince them. We needed a CM [Community Mobiliser] sister along with volunteers. In order to stop child marriages, we need support from other people. However, I and CM can convince adolescent girls to study. For that we don't require help from other people."* (Interview, Community volunteer 2, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)

*"[The partner]'s nine board members too had worked as volunteers. They had supported us to run the project."* (Interview, Partner, SAHAJ, Siraha district)

Notably, one volunteer had gone on to find work at a partner organisation. Overall, partners' strong involvement, and these overlapping roles, are both extremely valuable, and there is extensive evidence of excellent 'blending' between different volunteering modalities and partners, ensuring project impacts are achieved. Nevertheless, some challenges remain in local contexts, including the aforementioned disconnection between geographical volunteering modalities in the field. Collaborations and blending between VSO stakeholders are central to the success and long-term impacts of VSO projects. While similar conclusions on the importance of collaboration and blending were drawn in the reports on Tanzania and Uganda, what makes the Nepalese context unique is that local VSO staff themselves are not involved in this 'wider blend' on the ground, due to the limitations set by the Nepalese government. Likely as a result of this, the role of partners is more important in this context than in the other contexts that we have seen.

### **4.3.3 Shared ownership and project legacy in communities**

*The Nepal case study sheds new light on how the wider blend of volunteers with communities and their aspirations can enhance project impacts and lasting outputs, particularly in ensuring the selection of the right stakeholders.*

As we found in Uganda and Tanzania, stakeholders in Nepal had an overall positive perception of the development outcomes and sustainability of the VSO projects sampled. However, like in other case study countries, these impacts are not uniform or universal across projects and contexts. In Nepal, a notable number of participants voiced sadness or disappointment at an inability to fulfill project outcomes. This is likely exacerbated by the strong focus of VSO Nepal on gender-based projects where individual cases play a central role in stakeholders' sense of success or failure in practice. Some level of frustration and disappointment of community volunteers and primary actors over these challenges is understandable, highlighting a wider challenge in the development sector: managing individual expectations on how particular projects can address structural issues, such as cultural norms and dependencies; for example, in relation to dowries. This relates to the main example of an area of concern voiced by participants who explained that, despite their best efforts, they were sometimes unable to prevent Little Sisters from entering child marriage:

*"...many adolescent girls got married who were previously involved in our project. It is not adequate to remind them about the harms of child marriage. One should be able to stop their marriages. It is possible to stop such marriages only by bringing the police. I had tried to stop many but I could not."* (Interview, Community volunteer 2, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)

*"In cases of child marriage, the challenge was that, there were Little Sisters who even while attending our programmes, got married and went away. While conducting any programme, there was no situation of being 100% successful." (Workshop Participant 6, Community volunteer, Big Brother, Workshop with community volunteers, S2L and S4S, Surkhet district)*

Furthermore, as explored below, successes are noted across projects, including in individual instances of preventing child marriage. In terms of areas for improvement on gender-based programming, participants commented projects may be more successful if they also include a focus on the education of men and boys:

*"Involving the victims [women] is not adequate to fight against GBV. Hence, we had included potential perpetrators which included in-laws and husbands in the project for awareness." (Interview, Partner, SAHAJ, Siraha district)*

*"The little boys need to be incorporated in the project. Even on reproductive education, it is not related to females only, male do need such education." (Interview, Community volunteer, Big Sister, S4S, Surkhet district)*

Engaging with a wider range of stakeholders in the community is then identified by participants as a strategy towards ensuring further legacy and sustained impacts of VSO's projects in communities. These comments were shared not only in relation to the project content (e.g. in this case, gender-based content), but also in relation to a wider sense of shared ownership between the many different types of stakeholders present in communities. The previous section has already explored the fact that participants highlighted community involvement in and engagement with VSO projects as challenges and limitations for project success. Similar to our findings in Tanzania, shared ownership and community integration were highlighted by participants as important paths for project improvements, including establishing and strengthening links with primary actors and powerful people in communities, as necessary for project success:

*"...more than two teachers must be included (male and female teacher) and in the community, some influential people/people's representatives need to be included. The upcoming project needs to collaborate with ward, community, and people's representatives [...] The project has its one objective and partner, but in my understanding they need to collaborate with school, local level government. If the project is related to education, the district level mechanisms need to be consulted and collaborated." (Interview, Community volunteer 1, S4S and S2L, Surkhet district)*

*"Currently, VSO runs the project focused on adolescent girls. In future, VSO should bring parents focused projects (existing primary actor and adolescent girls' parents). We focused only on adolescent girls, but their parents do not know the importance of education and skills. Girls' parents should be provided adult education, after that if parents want to receive skills-training, we should teach them and also facilitate school visits for them so that they would be able to understand the school environment." (Interview, Partner 1, S4S and S2L, Surkhet district)*

*"The community must show their interest in the project in which their community is selected. The locals should cooperate with the community volunteers. Similarly, the focal peoples such as the chairman of the development committee, and others have to be very active to make their people participate. The ward office itself has to be very active in facilitating such projects at community level." (Interview, Community volunteer, PRAYAS, Surkhet district)*

*"This programme is going to end next year. Even after ending this programme, the adolescent girls should be able to continue their studies, otherwise they will be married and they'll drop out. I think VSO needs to design a parent-focused programme as well. For example, an awareness campaign on violence. If parents understand the underlying problem, they will definitely support adolescent girls." (Interview, Community volunteer 2, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)*

While some participants thus voiced concerns about sustained impacts of VSO projects, notable successes were remarked upon across projects as well, both in terms of development outcomes and in terms of personal growth and successes:

*"Because of the self-defence training, confidence has been increased in girls because of which their participation in school has been increased, and they have been regularly attending classes. With the conduction of extracurricular activities and the establishment of child clubs and complaint boxes, girls have been attracted more to go to school and share their problems, they have become outspoken."* (Workshop participant 7, National volunteer, Workshop with volunteers only, ENGAGE and S2L, Sarlahi district)

*"We gave note copies and pens to those who opted to study. Seeing that other adolescent girls, who had opted not to go to school earlier, too came to us and asked for copies and pens and started to go to school."* (Interview, Community volunteer, S2L, Sarlahi district)

*"I am looking after four primary actors who are living with hearing impairment. All of them use sign languages. In the beginning, it was difficult to talk to them. I am a well-trained sign language trainer and they are beginners. When I asked them their names, they could not reply. They had never used sign languages before. [...] Gradually, they started to talk to me. They started to ask me to join them in their homes. Now things have completely changed."* (Interview, National volunteer 2, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)

*"[Little Sister] always used to show low interest in school education. If we counsel her continuously, she used to come to school and from the next day she remained absent. After this we tried to identify her reason, why she was not willing to come to school. Later we found that her peer used to tease her about the affair. By game, role play we were able to create the environment where all have realised their weakness and after this the same girl continued her school. This is the best experience, which still gives me the satisfaction of volunteering."* (Interview, Community volunteer, S4S, Surkhet district)

*"We too have changed after implementation of Sisters for Sisters' education programme. I not only give priority to our Little Sister's education, but prioritise my own education as well and my capacity has also developed."* (Workshop Participant 2, Community Volunteer, Big Sister, Workshop with community volunteers, PRAYAS, S4S and S2L, Surkhet district)

As in other country contexts, the role of community volunteers in ensuring sustained impacts was considered crucial:

*"...the project is always short-term and it ends after a certain time. But whatever community volunteers learn during the project implementation period, they can apply that knowledge in the community even after the project is over. I have a good faith in them. It has also benefited the community."* (Interview, Partner, ENGAGE, Sarlahi district)

The Nepal case study reinforces findings from case study countries Tanzania and Uganda, while simultaneously highlighting what works and what can be improved in this unique context to ensure project legacy at local, regional and national levels and a sense of shared ownership across these scales. As explored throughout this section, where VSO Nepal's projects evidence significant successes in terms of project outcomes as well as potential for sustained impacts through blended volunteering, this is often due to the strong links between partners, volunteers and primary actors in the community, and the embeddedness of very long-term community volunteers within their communities and projects.

#### **4.3.4 Looking forward**

When analysing the data from Nepal, Tanzania and Uganda on **the conditions that contribute to maximising the impact of diverse volunteering modalities, both as individuals, and as teams**, the findings from both contexts raise several important questions. In particular, the Nepal case study highlights the following question for practitioners:

- ♦ *How can the blend of volunteers and VSO with community actors and stakeholders best be integrated for engagement and sustained impacts, in a context where VSO staff are not always present in the field?*

Finally, the Nepal case also re-affirms the challenges for practitioners that were identified in Uganda and Tanzania in terms of maximising the development impacts of a blended approach to volunteering:

- ♦ *How can the factors that enhance the resilience and lasting impacts of projects, such as community embeddedness and learning from key stakeholders, be supported through programming in a wide range of contexts to maximise development impacts?*
- ♦ *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 into VSO's strategic planning and programming, to ensure that blended volunteering produces sustained impacts for development?*

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

To date, there has been a significant gap in academic and policy literature on how different volunteers interact in their collaborative work with communities. Synergies might improve development outcomes, whereas the risk of friction in group dynamics, such as through power imbalances, could inhibit progress. This third report concludes our country level analysis of the case studies in Tanzania, Uganda and Nepal, where we have worked to understand how the blends of volunteers assigned to projects work in practice.

This report, covering Nepal, is based on the same participatory and qualitative methodologies that we used for our data collection in Tanzania and Uganda. It prioritises the perspectives of the diverse volunteer types, primary actors, partners and staff who make the VSO blended approach work on the ground. This has enabled us to enhance our understanding of the complexity of the blended volunteering model, as well as 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 in the volunteering for development sector. Our conclusions are set out below.

### A. The key conclusions from the case studies in Tanzania and Uganda also apply to the case study in Nepal

There is a commonality in our conclusions across Tanzania, Uganda and Nepal that demonstrates a consistency in the added value that volunteering for development can offer, and how a blend of modalities enables adaptability to the different circumstances between locations and over time. In particular, we found that:

- ♦ **Utilising a bespoke blend of volunteers on a project adds value and enables adaptability to changing circumstances.** Our two earlier reports concluded that the utilisation of a blend of volunteers can foster a culture of learning and an innovative environment that offers the opportunity to overcome long-term challenges. The wider social and power relations in Nepal can lead to negative attitudes towards development workers from community members, but the blended approach to volunteering helped build collaboration between volunteers, VSO staff, partners and primary actors engaged in the projects we examined in Nepal.
- ♦ **The refinement of the blend is based around the skills and expertise that each individual can offer rather than place-based modalities such as 'community' or 'national' volunteers.** Focusing on the skills that individuals can bring to a project rather than potentially hierarchical place-based modalities helps to break down boundaries and encourages the fluidity required for adaptive management. Similar to findings in Uganda, interviewees at times had little awareness of the various modalities involved in implementing projects, and the categories of international, national and community volunteer were not widely used or recognised. Instead, the emphasis in Nepal was more on the role that each volunteer could bring, such as 'teacher champions', 'media volunteers' or 'Big Sisters'.

- ♦ **Adaptability is crucial and dependent on empowering all those involved.** We highlighted the importance of local knowledge in our earlier reports on Tanzania and Uganda, such as the need to understand local contexts, systems and norms in order to overcome differences in stakeholders' perceptions or expectations. The volunteers with these skills have a pivotal role in facilitating shared ownership. This was especially true in Nepal where international volunteers are rarely located in local communities and thus a much greater onus is placed on more local volunteers to operationalise projects.
- ♦ **All participants had a positive experience from working with others.** As we found in the other two case study countries, diverse volunteers 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. This reaffirms the conclusions in our earlier reports that such experiences are important in overcoming hegemonic perceptions that those in the global South are merely 'hosts' to 'experts' from the global North.

## **B. The physical absence of international volunteers in the local vicinity of the projects examined in Nepal provides an interesting insight into the benefits and drawbacks of their contribution to the blend**

A crucial difference in Nepal compared to our other two case study countries was that international volunteers were typically geographically separated from the other volunteers, particularly community volunteers. This is due to legal and logistical challenges, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic, rather than any deliberate policy set by VSO Nepal. Nevertheless, the physical separation has inevitably affected the blend and how volunteering modalities are perceived. In particular:

- ♦ **The physical separation of international volunteers does not mean they are not valued, but impacts the degree to which they are part of the blend.** While the roles and locations of international volunteers in Nepal are different to what we observed in Uganda and Tanzania, other volunteering modalities and stakeholders were positive about their engagement, as also identified in the other countries. Their engagement in the work and the periodic communications with others in the blend appear to have acted as an energising factor within the blend, and it is likely that the external interest exhibited by the international volunteers helped to motivate those in the local community to implement the projects. However, as explored in this report, to be able to speak of a truly 'blended' volunteering approach and reap the benefits of this approach, international, national and community volunteers would need to be co-located and work together, rather than alongside each other, throughout their placements.
- ♦ **The presence of international volunteers in policy roles strengthens engagement between VSO staff and government officials.** The presence of international volunteers tends to act as a focal point for officials and VSO staff. The deployment of international volunteers to work in government offices, such as the Ministry of Education for example, has led to a much greater strategic focus on influencing and navigating national government agendas. This is part of the wider blend of VSO volunteers with key stakeholders. The engagement of international volunteers in such advisory roles within government offices is seen as critical to the successful implementation of wider policy objectives within projects. For example, in Nepal, we found a much stronger emphasis on gender equality and inclusivity in the projects being undertaken.



- ♦ **The absence of international volunteers in the blend of volunteers operating within local communities has enabled others to flourish.** Community volunteers have had to work with representatives from partner organisations, primary actors and others to steer projects and build an effective blend. The physical presence of international volunteers can lead to perceptions of wider expertise and thus expectations of leadership. Their limited engagement in local projects in Nepal, however, leads to increased expectations on other volunteering modalities to take responsibility for delivery at community level.
- ♦ **The empowerment of community volunteers in Nepal is also due in part to considerably lower perceptions of inequality in benefits received.** Although volunteer allowances were mentioned by participants in Nepal, they do not assume such a central role in the discussion about inequalities as we saw in the Tanzania and Uganda case studies. This was largely due to the absence of international volunteers in the local vicinity, which means differences in allowances would not be as evident to different types of volunteers in Nepal. This leads to a perception of more commonality in how volunteers are treated. However, there were still hierarchies identified between community volunteers playing different roles in the blend that need to be managed accordingly to enable equal relationships among different volunteering modalities.

*This is the third 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 Nepal. 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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