



VOLUNTEERING TOGETHER:

Blending knowledge and skills for development

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



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



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

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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.

NYEN: [“National Youth Engagement Network”](#). This is a platform created by VSO to support the continued involvement of ICS alumni in their communities’ development, it is therefore typically part of post-placement activities for ICS national volunteers.

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

Projects: The following projects were part of the country case studies:

In Tanzania:

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

In Uganda:

- ◆ **DYNAMIC:** “Driving Youth Led Agrobusiness and Micro Enterprises”
- ◆ **YEPP:** “Youth Employment Enhancement Project” supported by Randstad and Citi Foundation
- ◆ **Nefkens:** “Improving the Lives of Mothers and Newborns in Gulu” supported by Nefkens Foundation
- ◆ **A-PLUS:** “All Pupils aligned for Ultimate Success”
- ◆ **VI-GREAT:** “Volunteer Initiative for Girls: Retain, Achieve and Thrive”
- ◆ **V4D Health:** “Volunteering for Development - Maternal and Neonatal Health”

In Nepal:

- ◆ **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** (This term means ‘co-travel’ in Nepali)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Volunteering has long been a key part of development programming, but research, policy-making and popular debate have been dominated by a focus on international volunteers and the systems supporting them. This has meant that the interests of volunteers and communities in and from the global South have not been prioritised. This needs to change if volunteering for development approaches are to provide a demonstrable contribution to development outcomes.

Blended volunteering is a flagship approach for VSO in the field, differentiating its work from other volunteer-involving organisations. It brings together volunteers from the local community and other parts of the global South alongside volunteers from the global North with the aim that their collective experiences can be synergised on projects to maximise impact. Volunteers working together is not new, but VSO's blended approach aims actively to maximise the opportunities such blends can offer.

This collaborative research project examines how such blends have operated in three case study locations: Tanzania, Uganda and Nepal. A participatory approach has been utilised to gather qualitative data through workshops and semi-structured interviews with volunteers, community representatives and VSO staff. The findings have been supplemented by a quantitative self-completion questionnaire for volunteers in the three case study countries.

This summary sets out our key findings, and the implications these have for policy, practice and our knowledge base.

Key findings

The research confirms the value that blended volunteering can bring to development projects. The presence of international volunteers brings energy and donor attention to projects, whilst community and national volunteers enable effective engagement with local communities and increase the likelihood that impacts can be sustained due to their particular knowledges and longer-term involvement. However, there is no simple *one-size-fits-all* approach that can be applied to constructing a blend of volunteers, as the combination is dependent on the individuals within each blend, the environment around the project and the phasing of the work itself. Therefore, we have identified three sets of key findings for understanding and designing blended volunteering that can improve development outcomes.

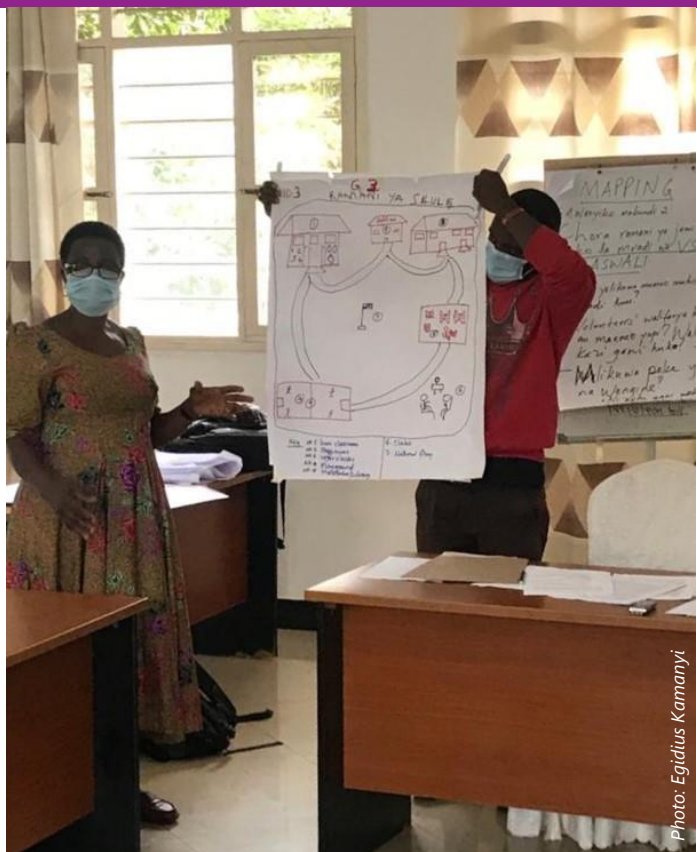


Photo: Egidius Kamanyi

Participatory workshop with volunteers and primary actors, Tanzania

1) There is no single prescribed blend applicable to all projects

The expansive nature of the blend

The blended approach to volunteering is predicated on bringing place-based volunteering modalities to work together: international, national and community volunteers. However, our data show that this categorisation does not reflect the full range of ways the blends are experienced and made sense of on the ground. Our research reveals how participants recognised and used a wider diversity of modalities, and that volunteering modalities often overlap. This varied between contexts, and also between international and other modalities; there was greater clarity around the different modalities within the 'international' than there was within the 'community' category. Recognising how participants understand modalities, and the ways they can be fluid and overlap, responds to and challenges the ways research on volunteering has often used institutional and project languages rather than those of volunteers and participants themselves.

Mapping skills and modalities

Our research shows that VSO staff are committed to finding the 'right' blend at the start of project design, based on their understanding of the different skill sets and knowledges that particular modalities bring. However, the data shows that skill sets and knowledge do not always map neatly onto volunteer modalities. Importantly, across all country contexts, the skill sets of international volunteers are not as distinct from other modalities as has sometimes been assumed. This supports wider critiques of the ways development thinking has been characterised by assumptions about the global North's possession of unique knowledge and skills to guide development. Therefore, our research shows the importance of recognising the skills and attributes of volunteers beyond their geographies to avoid the risk of community volunteers' roles being framed solely around their contextual knowledge in contrast with the technical expertise of international volunteers, for example. This points to the importance of identifying the skills for delivering the project, rather than reproducing assumptions of what particular place-based modalities might bring.

Modalities emerge organically in response to context/circumstances

Our research shows how volunteer modalities can emerge on the ground in response to project needs and particular country contexts. This reveals a bottom up emergence of role-based as opposed to geography based modalities, which reflect both operational demands, but also the ways that participants may wish to be recognised and understood. This can even include not being referred to as a 'volunteer', confirming wider and emerging evidence on the instability and contested nature of what being a volunteer means in particular places, something that adds a further layer of complexity to defining the blend in different contexts.

The blend as agile and dynamic

Our findings show that a blended approach can enable flexibility and adaptability to circumstances to support more effective delivery of development outcomes. The value of the emergence of modalities to suit a changing context was starkly revealed during the Covid-19 pandemic, but is also relevant to ensuring programme design reflects local knowledges, needs and priorities. The fact that some volunteers work across projects and that skills do not necessarily reflect the expectations often attached to geographic modalities is consequently a strength of blended volunteering in practice.

2) Community volunteers are crucial to the effectiveness of each blend but their contributions risk being sidelined

Steering the blend from the community level

The research identified diverse positive benefits from the blended approach, with the opportunity to share ideas and knowledge across backgrounds as particularly important for both individuals and projects. While the blend is important, community volunteers were identified across the country case studies as critical to the blended approach due to their knowledge and expertise, including context specific experiences, which can hold the blend together; acceptance and embeddedness, ensuring strong relationships with primary actors and their needs steering the blend; and longevity and sustainability, with their sustained involvements supporting long-term impacts and legacy. The research reveals the importance of local actors and community volunteers driving a blend, supported by inputs from external actors as appropriate.

Challenging hierarchies of knowledge and practice

The distinctiveness of volunteer modalities which can be complementary in application is central to the blended approach, but it can also lead to perceived or actual hierarchies between volunteer modalities. Differing mobilities, contracts and conditions, and expectations on and from volunteers can be particularly significant. National and international volunteers are supported with re-location logistics, and role descriptions often characterise these volunteers in terms of skill sets, and community volunteers in terms of geographic presence and contextual knowledges. Outsiders can also be perceived as 'managers' and community volunteers as doing the delivery, exacerbated when interactions were confined to institutional settings and meetings, rather than working together over time to deliver activities. Further inequality can be seen in the pressures sometimes felt by community volunteers given their centrality to making a blend work and deliver. At the same time, there are also hierarchies within modalities, including in relation to gender and wider social norms, underlining the importance of not homogenising any volunteer categories within a blend, and recognising how the blend is entwined with its particular context.



Photo: Social Science Baha

Participatory workshop with primary actors, Nepal

3) The success of the blend is dependent on contextual factors

Placement lengths and handover

How the blend works over time is a critical aspect of understanding what makes a successful blend. The research shows how volunteers come and go throughout the course of project, meaning the blend changes over time. It also reveals how the working together that is at the heart of the blend tends to improve over time. However, because some volunteers may have shorter placements, particularly international and national volunteers, this can mean extra time is needed to bring them on board within an existing blend. Project phase is important to this, with volunteers joining towards the end of a project sometimes finding it harder to fit in, when working practices in the blend are already established. The blend may also not always contain all the planned modalities, or some modalities may not blend as easily. The research suggests that as well as blending modalities, blending between 'coming' and 'going' volunteers could help ensure the right skills and knowledge are sustained through the project.

The roles of long-term volunteers

Very long-term volunteers (over one year) are particularly important for the blend. They can support the smooth transition of other volunteers into a project, acting as a 'glue' that holds the blend together. The long-term commitments of community volunteers can be particularly important for maximising impact and building relationships within the blend and with primary actors and stakeholders over time. However, very long-term volunteers can also shoulder a disproportionate responsibility for delivery given their range of connections and knowledge.

Community experiences and expectations in the wider blend

When understanding the blended approach, particular consideration needs to be given not only to the relationships between volunteers in a blended team, and the various stakeholders and communities they work with, but also to the relationships between those stakeholders and the primary actors. The wide range of actors involved in a blend means it is particularly important that there is recognition of the diverse ways projects, project aims and outcomes are understood by different stakeholders. Developing a sense of shared ownership across this complexity is important, particularly with primary actors and key stakeholders. This demands strong communications, something that the research identifies is enhanced by blending international, national and community volunteers to work together.

Integrations and overlaps

As well as volunteer modalities being fluid and role specifications within modalities also being emergent, the research reveals movement between the categories of 'primary actor', 'volunteer' and 'partner'. This movement can help foster community buy-in, such as when volunteers are recruited from primary actors, bringing existing project knowledges and skills. How this fluidity works varies between contexts, and is shaped by the particular ways development organisations, and VSO in particular, work in a place. This means that categories such as 'partner' can mean different things for a blend, highlighting that each blend needs to be understood in its particular context.

Implications for policy and practice

Our research confirms that incorporating locally based volunteers into a project delivery team offers clear benefits: such blends foster a culture of innovation and adaptability, and their longer-term presence increases the likelihood of sustained impact.

Such arrangements are not without challenge; the process of blending cannot be specified top-down and instead the onus is on facilitating and empowering the development of such relations. This involves addressing perceived inequalities so that local volunteers can be confident that their contribution is valued.

Implications for research and knowledge

This research has addressed a significant gap in knowledge on volunteering for development by focusing on the volunteering assemblage that is produced through a blended approach and conceptualising how this generates a more de-centralised and sustainable approach to development. It is important, however, that the longitudinal impacts are examined further and that potential barriers to progress are explored.

Longitudinal analyses are needed to examine the ways different volunteers and primary actors evolve over time in response to changing circumstances. Furthermore, it is important to understand how the facilitation of such blends might be developed to overcome other potential barriers that might arise, such as gender inequalities.



Participatory workshop with volunteers and primary actors, Uganda

INTRODUCTION

Volunteering has played a role in development programming and interventions in the global South for many decades, and recent years have seen the increased mainstreaming of volunteering in development policy making. Our research has confirmed how international volunteers from the global North and their experiences have dominated research and policy, reflecting the colonial legacies and power imbalances that continue to shape global development thinking and practice.

International volunteering has been subject to significant critical academic attention for prioritising the needs and interests of volunteers and donors over those of communities in the global South. Calls to decolonise development alongside shrinking aid budgets have informed further interrogations of the efficacy and efficiency of international volunteering for delivering development outcomes as a standalone modality. However, these critiques have often remained contained within global North to global South frameworks, meaning other kinds of volunteering and volunteers have received relatively limited attention.

Our research has identified work that has counter-balanced this emphasis through attention to issues including South-South volunteering, community health volunteers and experiences of community volunteers within global South settings, including crises. But despite recognition of the relational way that volunteering can shape development, research and programming has tended to abstract particular kinds of volunteers, relationships and projects for attention. This has meant we have limited understanding of the ways different kinds of volunteers, staff and primary actors come together across project lifetimes and how this impacts development outcomes.

This research has addressed this gap by analysing how different volunteering modalities work together in the context of VSO's 'blended' approach to engaging them in the planning and implementation of projects, particularly in the case studies of Nepal, Tanzania and Uganda. Volunteers, whether international, national or community, have never worked as isolated individuals. The blended approach takes the understanding of volunteering as relational, and widens the lens further, prioritising the ways different volunteering modalities can work together for improved development outcomes. Doing so means recognising how the impacts of volunteering result from ideas, histories, knowledges and individuals coming together in particular ways at particular moments. This coming together is shaped both by programming decisions and development and socio-cultural norms in the places where VSO works. As a result, the blend can be understood both as shaping relationships, but also shaped by historical relationships and practices.

As the blended approach seeks to bring together international, national and local volunteers, it can be seen as reflecting an understanding of volunteering as an assemblage of "bodies, ideas, languages, histories and power relations that may emerge through and across national borders" (Baillie Smith, Thomas, et al., 2021, p. 1356). This brings new complexity to our understanding of volunteering, and presents particular challenges for curating and managing a 'blend' for particular programmatic purposes, since the blend does not exist in a vacuum and is not static in time. But a blended approach does reflect the long-standing realities of overlapping, changing, and sometime unequal, relationships being at the centre of how volunteering, and development, operates. While the coming together of different volunteers and development actors is often as a result of happenstance and coincidence, the 'blended' approach seeks to program an effective 'coming together' for improved development outcomes. This then raises the question of whether a better understanding of the dynamics and nature of the blend of volunteers at a moment in time, and in a particular place, can give us a better insight into the likelihood of a project delivering the outcomes anticipated.

This was the focus of this research, which set out to explore:

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?*

To answer these questions, the research focused on three case study countries – looking at different projects within each one. The blended approach, and recognition of the volunteering assemblage more broadly, presents methodological challenges. A focus on individual volunteers, projects or actors is more straightforward in data collection terms than exploring a complex and shifting coming together of diverse actors over time. Our approach sought to capture multiple perspectives from different participants in diverse blends across the three country contexts. The team, made up of researchers in Nepal, Tanzania, Uganda and the United Kingdom, undertook 103 interviews, 24 group workshops, including participatory mapping of volunteering activity, and also surveyed 199 volunteers who had worked in our case study countries in the last 5 years. In total, 460 participants took part in the research. This report consolidates key findings and overall learning from the three countries, which are also explored in the separate case study reports (Baillie Smith, Jenkins, et al., 2021; Baillie Smith, Jenkins, Baniya, et al., 2022; Baillie Smith, Jenkins, Okech, et al., 2022). In this report, our findings regarding the research questions are explored in three key themes: (1) Understanding volunteer modalities and skill sets, (2) Centrality of community volunteers and (3) Scope of the blend.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research project examines VSO's blended volunteering approach to understand how it can improve development outcomes, and the factors influencing this process. Here, we provide an overview of relevant mainstream and critical volunteering literatures, bringing together academic, practitioner and policy-focused literatures, to understand the key gaps that currently exist in relation to the concept of blended volunteering and to frame the contribution that a critical analysis of blended volunteering can make to scholarship and practice in the sector.

Given the extensive attention to volunteering within both the academic and practitioner literatures, we necessarily limit ourselves here to a discussion of the key areas related to volunteering and development that are most relevant to VSO, and to developing a theoretical framework through which we can better understand what the blended volunteering approach might mean for development practitioners more widely, moving forward. We have sought to engage with literatures from global South scholars and practitioners throughout and wherever possible, but acknowledge how being situated within Northern institutions informs some of the team's positions, as well as the biases that exist within the academic literature on volunteering more broadly, especially in relation to a widespread lack of racial diversity amongst authors and the dominance of anglophone scholarship.

The literature review is split into three main sections. We begin with an overview of relevant aspects of the mainstream volunteering literature, which has tended to be characterised by a focus on motivations and typologies, particularly North-South, before moving on to explore the contributions of critical volunteering literatures which provide insight into the changing dynamics and power relations across diverse types and contexts of volunteering, as well as identifying critical issues within the volunteering for development sector. Finally, we explore what is already known about VSO's concept of 'blended volunteering', setting the scene for the questions with which this research is concerned.

MAINSTREAM VOLUNTEERING LITERATURES

Given the challenges of building an integrated theory for volunteering (see Hustinx et al., 2010; Wilson & Musick, 1997), much mainstream literature has focused on analyses and typologies which capture the multiple dimensions and forms of voluntary practice (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). Most evidence, however, has been framed by accounts from/within the global North which then poses a challenge when analysing volunteering in the global South and across contexts.

This section is organised into three parts. We start by discussing volunteering motivations to understand the reasons behind voluntary engagement, including enabling environments. The second part focuses on volunteer types and typologies, and the ways literatures have tended to focus on distinguishing volunteer modalities and types of activities, rather than looking at relationships and collaborations. We then present the literature around North-South international volunteering in more detail, a model that has been dominant within the volunteering for development sector but which has been accused of reproducing power imbalances, especially with regards to short-term volunteering and 'voluntourism'.

Volunteering motivations and frameworks

In mainstream literatures, “motivations for volunteering is an area that has received significant academic study, both generally and in relation to specific types of volunteering” (Clark & Lewis, 2017, p. 5). This has resulted in an emphasis on understanding why individuals decide to volunteer, rather than on how volunteering is performed in different contexts or which relationships are built/reinforced through voluntary action. Various models have focused on understanding volunteering motivations (Clary et al., 1998; Omoto & Snyder, 1995). Clary et al. (1998)’s functional approach has led to the development of the ‘Volunteer Functions Inventory’ which comprises values, understanding, social, career, protective and enhancement elements to identify sustained motivations to volunteer. Volunteer motivations are, therefore, “a highly personal combination of different motivational functions” (Georgeou, 2012, p. 101). Key motivation themes in volunteering literatures have been mapped by Rutherford et al. (2019), as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Volunteering motivations themes

Themes	Contents
Values & Altruism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Altruistic (Akintola, 2011; Anderson et al., 2018; Chareka et al., 2010; Claxton-Oldfield et al., 2012; Holdsworth, 2010; Kerschner & Rousseau, 2008) - Religious faith (Holdsworth, 2010) - To give back (Kerschner & Rousseau, 2008) - Concern for community needs (Currie et al., 2016; Gates et al., 2016)
Instrumental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To increase knowledge (Anderson et al., 2018; Holdsworth, 2010) - To gain skills and experiences (Chareka et al., 2010; Currie et al., 2016; Holdsworth, 2010) - To enhance CV in general (Holdsworth, 2010) - To help job search (Chareka et al., 2010)
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Connectedness / socialisation (Gates et al., 2016)
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Something to do or to get out the house (Currie et al., 2016) - To do something different or to escape from study or work (Holdsworth, 2010) - To stay active (Kerschner & Rousseau, 2008) - Being asked (Kerschner & Rousseau, 2008) - Circumstantial opportunities, e.g. programmes organised by school, church or other organisations (Holdsworth, 2010)

Source: Rutherford et al. (2019)

Existing frameworks are frequently based on evidence primarily focused on global North contexts or privileging the perspective of Northern international volunteers who seek an opportunity to experience a different cultural way of life (Meneghini, 2016; Rehberg, 2005), or to gain reward from personal development and social exchanges (MacNeela, 2008; Tiessen, 2012). In disaster management contexts, motivations are linked to fulfilling basic human needs of affiliation, certainty and control (Holwitt et al., 2017). Unstead-Joss notes that “it is not only relevant to contemplate the implications of volunteers’ motivation within the context in which they act, but that the context itself influences their motivation” (Unstead-Joss, 2008, p. 18). Volunteer-involving organisations understand that an enabling environment for volunteering takes into account contextual, actor-based, relational and system-wide elements, and that trust relationships are essential for successful volunteer placements

(O'Brien et al., 2017). Underlying principles for such enabling environments include the freedom to volunteer, gender equality, safety and security conditions, and the voice and recognition of volunteer groups (Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda, 2020b). In analysing particular motivations of VSO volunteers, Unstead-Joss (2008) indicates mixed motivations to volunteer which involve "expressing important values, learning about the world, personal development, seeking an 'adrenalin rush' or challenge, as well as escaping negative feelings" (Unstead-Joss, 2008, p. 16). VSO also recognises that motivations vary in relation to different types of volunteer as well as volunteers' ages (Clark & Lewis, 2017, p. 9).

Volunteering types and typologies

Analyses of different types of volunteers and voluntary action form a substantial part of mainstream volunteering literatures, rather than exploring interconnections and impacts. On one hand, distinctions between structures of involvement (formal and informal), scope (local, national, international, online, etc.) and kinds of volunteer-involving organisations (sending, host, etc.) have prevailed in the literature over time (Cnaan et al., 1996; Einolf & Chambré, 2011; Ellis Paine et al., 2010; Sherraden et al., 2006). On the other hand, volunteers are often treated as "a unidimensional commodity" by scholars and practitioners who combine all types of volunteers into one group irrespective of unique differences (Cnaan & Amroffell, 1994). Although seemingly contradictory, these considerations intersect in the sense that even when the 'format' of involvement is distinguished, volunteers are often referred to as 'service-deliverers' (Boesten et al., 2011; Sherraden et al., 2006). This risks positioning volunteering as a form of cheap labour and "a significant feature of service delivery and development as the role of the state is rolled back in many countries and the ambition of the coming Sustainable Development Goals makes it clear that volunteers will be required for most of the targets to be achieved" (Hazeldine & Baillie Smith, 2015, p. 54).

While the vast majority of volunteer engagement across the globe tends to occur informally (UNV, 2018, 2021) – a term that remains weakly defined and evidenced – most of the documented practices are linked to formal associations such as through non-profit organisations or associations. Volunteers themselves, however, do not necessarily see boundaries between different types of involvement, which suggests that any theoretical categorisation will be more fluid in everyday practice. The United Nations has developed its volunteering typologies (UNV, 1999) to reflect complementary volunteering categories involving mutual aid, service, campaigning, participation and leisure (UNV, 2020) and has also recently placed emphasis on volunteering as civic participation (UNV, 2021).

A review of previous VSO studies shows different types of volunteer involvement within the organisation, ranging in scope from international volunteers – including South-South and diaspora – to national and community volunteers (Burns et al., 2015; Lopez Franco & Shahrokh, 2012). Community volunteering has become a primary focus due to its connection with active citizenship, "working with local organisations to support people within communities to act individually and collectively to shape their own development" (VSO, 2014, p. 5). VSO has also recently acknowledged that the majority of volunteers are working in their home country and that the duration of involvement may vary from short, targeted placements to several years of sustained commitment (VSO, 2019a, p. 9). In its latest annual review, VSO has also acknowledged the critical roles of community volunteers engaging with trusted leaders and communities in health-related activities, for example across Africa (VSO, 2021, p. 12). Youth is represented at all levels, whilst corporate volunteers are identified as a specific group, and online volunteering (also called 'e-volunteering') is becoming an increasingly common form of involvement, especially in light of the current Covid-19 pandemic (Chadwick, 2020;

VSO, 2020a). However, this is proving more challenging in South-South volunteering where access to the required technology is more limited (VSO, 2020b).

Mainstream literatures are inclined to focus on the need for research “to keep track of how many volunteers are involved and what kind of impact their involvement has to prove that volunteerism can make a difference” (Seelig & Lough, 2015, p. 10). However, “the diversity of volunteers’ experiences contrast with the limitations of quantitative measurement tools that do not fully capture the value of their community involvement” (Fadel, 2020, p. 9), while “the spread of neoliberal practices of governance in aidland, which focus on measurable and predictable outcomes, poses challenges for evaluating the development impact of volunteering” (Schech, 2017, p. 9). The notion of ‘aidland’ (Apthorpe, 2011) refers to the particular norms, ideologies and languages in the ‘world’ of international development work which also shape, to different extents, the meanings and practices of volunteering.

North-South international volunteering

Literatures on volunteering in humanitarian and development settings have predominantly assessed individual experiences of volunteers from the global North temporarily placed in global South contexts, a model known as North-South international volunteering. This is a loaded model which “seems to both exemplify neoliberal ideas of individual autonomy, improvement and responsibility and at the same time allies itself to notions of collective global citizenship, solidarity, development and activism” (Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2011, p. 545). Evidence suggest that individuals most likely to engage in international volunteering tend to have attained post-secondary education, come from high-income households and often rely on self-employment (Lee & Won, 2018). The duration of placements range from “voluntourism (1-2 week) to short-term (3-6 months) to long-term (1 year or more) programmes” (Tiessen & Kumar, 2013, p. 417) and usually require affiliation with a formal organisation (Sherraden et al., 2006). Perceptions from partner organisations that host international volunteers, however, are often under-valued (Chen, 2021; Lough et al., 2018) and perspectives of host communities under-researched (Sin, 2010). Among the challenges of short-term volunteering acknowledged in the literature is the “perpetuation of stereotypes suggesting that international volunteers possess superior knowledge or skills” (Loiseau et al., 2016, p. 1). There is also a need for critical caution with regards to claims of international volunteering creating global subjectivities as “international volunteering may serve as a vehicle for people to exercise existing subjectivities, with implications for the ways global South spaces are used in this process” (Baillie Smith et al., 2013, p. 133).

When it comes to the concept of ‘volunteer tourism’ or ‘voluntourism’, “while caring relationships may very likely be welcome and accepted by both volunteer tourists and hosts, it is still important to highlight the possibility that volunteer tourism may simply be another form of ‘aid’ that continues to perpetuate and re-produce existing power and social hierarchies between the rich and privileged, and the poor and less privileged” (Sin, 2010, p. 991). Voluntourism can thus reinforce top-down paradigms and is often communicated as a useful addition to the curriculum vitae (McGloin & Georgeou, 2016). Some research has focused on unpacking motivations and benefits of the practice in terms of ‘traveling with a purpose’ (Brown, 2005), but global citizenship as a result of volunteer tourism has been seen as a questionable normative goal (Butcher, 2017).

When control and the ability to set agendas lie with local people, there is evidence of community empowerment and potential for equitable and mutually beneficial relationships through North-South long-term volunteering models (Frilund, 2018; Perold et al., 2013). Devereux argues that solidarity and

mutual learning are key elements of impactful long-term international volunteering and that, at its best, “international volunteering brings benefits (and costs) to individual volunteers and the organisations with which they work, at the same time as providing the space for an exchange of technical skills, knowledge, and cross-cultural experience in developing communities” (Devereux, 2008, p. 358). Schech echoes that by suggesting that “long-term volunteering for development, supported by government aid budgets and aligned with development priorities, holds the greater potential of benefitting both host organisations and the volunteers” (Schech, 2017, p. 9). These benefits, however, should not be expected as natural or automatic outcomes but rather need to be nurtured in close dialogue with local communities (McLennan, 2014).

Finally, little research has been undertaken on post-placement volunteer experiences. Some claim that international volunteers who return home may become key actors for “meaningful change in North-South relationships and structures required for enabling equitable development in our complex, interdependent, and globalised world” (Devereux, 2008, p. 368), while others question “prevailing assumptions about the transformation of returned volunteers into global citizens by virtue of their experiences” (Ong et al., 2018). VSO’s post-placement report suggests the existence of a correlation between primary motivation for international volunteers’ placement and impact in post placement action, meaning that “those who had primary motivations to make a difference before undertaking their placement were more likely to be engaged with community, social or political action post placement” (Clark & Lewis, 2017, pp. 16–17).

CRITICAL VOLUNTEERING LITERATURES

Appropriately accounting for informal and grassroots experiences – recognisably the majority of volunteering activity worldwide – requires new conceptual lenses and data. This section explores how critical volunteering literatures have started to focus on building inclusive volunteering spaces and on conceptualising the ‘South’ as a locus of agency, action and learning.

This section is divided into four parts. The first revisits traditional North-South approaches by detailing volunteer voices from the South, beyond service-delivery or receiving aid from the ‘North’. We then examine the current literature and the existing gaps in understandings of local or community-based volunteering involvement, and its links to resilience literatures. We do this by discussing informality and self-organisation in everyday volunteering, as well as suggesting how grassroots efforts can be supported to strengthen community resilience. The third part presents a discussion of volunteering economies and the impacts of volunteer remuneration. We conclude by briefly introducing key debates related to youth and gender – cross-cutting themes that help deepen our understanding of volunteer experiences, that will later contribute to unpacking intersections in blended volunteering approaches.

Revisiting North-South relationships in volunteer studies

Critical studies on volunteering 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 on the importance of acknowledging power dynamics and hierarchies embedded in these spaces (Baillie Smith & Jenkins, 2011), where “the meeting of (relatively) rich Northern constituents with (always) poor Southern constituents is *always already* delineated by broader uneven processes of historical (colonial) and contemporary (neoliberal) globalisation” (Griffiths, 2018, p. 115).

These relationships can be inadvertently harmful and entrench paternalism: evidence shows that many 'voluntourists' tend to ignore underlying issues related to power and privilege (McLennan, 2014, p. 163). Blum and Schäfer note that "racism plays a significant role in the construction of relationships between privileged aid-giving countries and poor aid-receiving countries, mostly former colonies, which raises the question of whether so-called 'voluntary service' contributes to neo-colonial practices which in turn are in a relation of interdependence with other categories of difference" (Blum & Schäfer, 2018, p. 2). The representation of 'volunteering' as an "all-inclusive aspiration" can obscure managerial approaches which "promote a particular, liberally inspired construction of 'volunteering', while universalising it as a professional, a-political and consensual realm" (Shachar, 2014, p. 1417). Relatedly, "in policy framings of volunteering's values as universal, the meaning of volunteering in the South is constructed as diverse, but fixed in particular places" whilst "openness to difference, dynamism, agency, transnationality and expert knowledge are too often located in the global North" (Baillie Smith, Thomas, et al., 2021).

Literatures in recent years have, therefore, started to question traditional North-South models of international volunteering, highlighting "how the continued privileging of northern mobilities, temporalities and biographies has segregated particular settings and types of volunteering and obscured other, often shared and sometimes co-produced development processes, relationships and spaces" (Laurie & Baillie Smith, 2018, p. 95). Transnational understandings of concepts such as development and decision-making processes in volunteering need to overcome postcolonial power structures as "stakeholders in the South have started to claim such opportunities for participation and organise their own spaces of knowledge production and networking" (Haas & Repenning, 2018, p. 34), whilst Georgeou (2012, p. 14) highlights that the literature tends to ignore existing models of cooperation from/within the South. Laurie and Baillie Smith (2018, p. 95) call for work to "reveal different rhythms and routines of volunteering, and different identities, biographies and forms of career and life-making connected with volunteering and development". They, on one hand, draw attention to the "hidden geometries of volunteering and development" and, on the other hand, introduce the concept of 'flattened topographies of development volunteering' in order to "construct a geography of volunteering and development across biographies, distance, inequality and national and international approaches" (Laurie & Baillie Smith, 2018, p. 106). Overall, these critical volunteering literatures signal the diversity and richness of volunteer experiences from and within the South, and point to the need for unpacking the potential of collaborations across different types of volunteer engagement when discussing policy frameworks in the sector.

Breadth of volunteer voices from the South

Literature on volunteering in the global South has traditionally focused on community health promotion, exploring motivations and incentives for community health volunteers in the South (Aseyo et al., 2018; Balabanova et al., 2018; Bhattacharyya et al., 2001; Cherrington et al., 2010; Singh et al., 2016; UNV, 2011), whilst also exposing the ways in which the historically poor provision of health services to the vulnerable has been ameliorated through significant voluntary efforts (Jenkins, 2009b). Jenkins' research reveals the "uneven and gendered nature of such voluntary activity" and calls for "recognising the global South as a key site for understanding the patterning of geographies of health voluntarism" (Jenkins, 2011b, p. 17).

More recently, research on experiences of volunteers from and within the global South has expanded beyond the health sector. Our country case studies engage with some of these literatures in the respective contexts, as well as wider scholarship related to volunteering and development. Haas and Repenning (2018, p. 34) argue that “unequal power relations lead to structural underrepresentation of perspectives and knowledge of stakeholders from the global South, despite the good will of numerous stakeholders in the North”. Baillie Smith et al. (2018, p. 165) have broadened the account of development volunteers in the literature by looking at South-South flows which “turn the focus away from North-South models, and consider instead the growing number of volunteers who travel within the South to embark on development work”. They argue that “South-South volunteering works, re-works and contests established imaginaries of development, and their construction and ordering of sameness and difference” (Baillie Smith et al., 2018, p. 158). South-South volunteering is one of the key categories within VSO’s volunteering portfolio. Programme officers and employers have praised the fact that, overall, “volunteers had found it easier to understand local culture, fitted in much faster, learnt the language faster, did not get sick as often, and had been more tolerant and were more used to working with limited resources than most Northern volunteers”, but VSO also acknowledges the need to avoid generalisations (Lopez Franco & Shahrokh, 2012, p. 10).

Blum and Schäfer (2018, p. 13) warn against the tendency found in social work volunteering to be “often too uncritical in respect of the way cross-border movements result in the creation of difference and unequal power relations”. Uneven relationships are thus not exclusively tied to North-South flows but also need to be understood in South-South exchanges and within communities in volunteering spaces in general, something that is of particular significance in exploring ‘blended volunteering’. Research on local experiences of volunteers in conflicts and emergencies in the South has shown that “the complex relationships, exclusion and cleavages that shape societies within and between different scales, present a more complex context than the label, ‘local’, allows; [thus] being from a locality alone does not guarantee local volunteers an automatic ease or ability to provide effective humanitarian services” (Thomas et al. 2018, p. 7).

As highlighted in the IFRC Global Review on Volunteering Report, “the dominant ‘culture’ of volunteering has been largely assumed or taken as a given, despite being rooted in the histories and traditions of Europe and North America” which then requires “greater recognition of diverse volunteering ‘cultures’ and how they come together” (Hazeldine & Baillie Smith, 2015, p. 10). Similarly, Butcher and Einolf advocate for endogenous volunteering lenses that focus on cultural and contextual realities of the South, highlighting in their work “both the specific institutional forms of volunteering in developing nations and volunteering that is more loosely institutionalised, often considered informal, being part of solidarity and collective spirit” (Butcher and Einolf 2017, p. 3). We emphasise that it is important that the current focus on including perspectives from the global South is not framed within traditional international volunteering approaches that risk perpetuating ideas of volunteers and organisations in the South as the ‘hosts’ (Tiessen et al., 2018). 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). Finally, we note that within the current volunteering literatures there is a persistent lack of evidence of South-North volunteering experiences apart from particular accounts from donors’ perspectives (Scheller et al., 2017; Stewart, 2017).

Local volunteering and community resilience

The recent focus on local or community-based efforts represents a shift in volunteering literatures, especially where global South experiences are concerned. Dominant academic and policy discourses have led to “a tendency to overlook the wealth of volunteering practices in the global South and local volunteering at the community level or to see them as legitimate contributions to development” (Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda, 2020a, p. 11). By local or community-based, we refer to voluntary action performed by and among individuals who identify as part of the same locality, which can involve aspects such as place and belonging (Dallimore et al., 2018). Rather than homogeneous, the ‘local’ is also a space of dispute, hierarchies and inequalities; “unpacking what local precisely means in diverse settings, and developing a critical understanding of local [...] is central to the boundaries of safety, remit and authority that shape how volunteers’ activities are organised and structured” (Thomas et al. 2018, p. 3).

Informal volunteering, although poorly conceptualised and evidenced, is roughly defined as volunteering that is not linked to any particular organisation or action plan, and generally occurs at local levels, sometimes referred to as ‘self-help’ or ‘mutual aid’. Butcher and Einolf argue that, despite the universal nature of informal person-to-person helping, participation varies according to different factors, such as locality, wealth, education, values, religion and social capital (2017, p. 4). As highlighted by UNV (2020, p. 7), “recognising that volunteering goes beyond a ‘service-delivery mechanism’ and is in fact a regular part of many people’s everyday lives and livelihoods means acknowledging that volunteering practices can shape and are shaped by social issues at the community and individual levels”. Moreover, it is recognised that strict definitions cannot capture the many and diverse volunteer practices that people engage in, which can vary considerably according to each context (UNV, 2021, p. 19).

In the literature around disasters and emergencies, local and informal or spontaneous volunteers are often recognised as first responders (Holwitt et al., 2017; Paciarotti & Cesaroni, 2020; Twigg & Mosel, 2017; Whittaker et al., 2015). The Ebola outbreak in West Africa showed that the leadership and action of community-based volunteers was essential to contain the spread of the virus (Oosterhoff & Wilkinson, 2015), and the current response to Covid-19 has drawn attention to the importance of voluntary community mobilisation at local levels across the globe. Voluntary action can, therefore, “enhance community resilience in difficult times by bringing together people from different ethnicities, political parties and socio-economic positions to work together to achieve shared goals” (UNV, 2018, p. 33). Local volunteering is thus thought to be crucial in strengthening community resilience and contributing to development in fragile contexts as “people living under conditions of vulnerability are assuming much of the responsibility for the welfare of their community by staking their survival on shared voluntary contributions” (UNV, 2018, p. 26). There is a risk, however, of the instrumentalisation of local volunteer efforts by government and donor agendas. This has been discussed in the current Covid-19 response (Baillie Smith, 2020) and evidenced by critical studies that examine the appropriation of community voluntary efforts by neoliberal agendas resulting in additional burdens to already stretched communities (Jenkins, 2008; Perold & Graham, 2017). In order to promote sustainable community volunteering, “governments and relevant stakeholders must care for the conditions in which local volunteers act, so that they perform their roles as auxiliaries and not substitutes to public services” (Fadel, 2020, p. 9). Hence, efforts “supporting community resilience through volunteerism [need] to recognise that local ownership is not a substitute for the role and responsibilities of other actors” (Fadel & Chadwick, 2020, p. 9).

Despite the increasingly common framing of resilience in academic and policy development spaces (IFRC, 2014; Lough, 2019; Thorén & Olsson, 2017; UK Cabinet Office, 2019; UNV, 2018) the term is open to multiple interpretations and caution is needed to avoid its use as a 'label' in volunteering spaces (Fadel & Chadwick, 2020). It is therefore important to understand volunteerism and resilience in relation to the context, and to engage with historical and social factors and issues of power and responsibility at community level. One of the recommendations of the IFRC Global Review on Volunteering involves focusing on policy, organisational and donor attention to local volunteerism to prioritise "investments into building enabling environments for volunteering to flourish and to address barriers to further and deepened engagement" (Hazeldine & Baillie Smith, 2015, p. 12). Research has also highlighted the importance of listening to local volunteers' needs for increased safety, security and wellbeing (VICE, 2018). Current policy analyses indicate the lack of attention from policymakers and researchers towards local volunteers, with "experience show[ing] that aid donors hesitate to fund investments in safety infrastructure and systems for volunteers and are even more reluctant to support organizational change processes" (Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda, 2020a, p. 43).

Local volunteering and community resilience can be strengthened through models of 'supportive solidarity', in which "the role of external actors and agencies is to listen and take time to understand existing community-based models of social support and voluntary action and learn from community members about what types of support would amplify or strengthen these approaches" (Fadel & Chadwick, 2020, p. 7). Providing this kind of support to existing local volunteer efforts fosters the sustainable provision of local services, reportedly reaching almost every community in the case of Burundi (IFRC, 2012). Findings from Kenya have also demonstrated that the engagement of volunteers in their residential neighbourhoods has "created a sense of ownership in the project, empowering communities in service delivery, and enhancing community participation in finding solutions to local problems" (Africa Development Alternatives, 2008, p. 7).

These studies reinforce the importance of self-organisation for community resilience (UNV, 2018) and corroborate the argument that, when appropriately supported, volunteerism "can ensure that development agendas are owned at the local level, that they are developed appropriately in line with cultural and social contexts, and that initiatives reach those who are living in the hardest to reach areas" (Hazeldine & Baillie Smith, 2015, p. 3). 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 in the global South, notably in changing contexts marked by migration, urbanisation and inequalities (Hazeldine & Baillie Smith, 2015, p. 90). 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).

Volunteering economies and livelihoods

Critical literatures have also increasingly engaged with the notion of volunteering economies. At the core of most common definitions of volunteering is the idea that material or financial rewards should not be regarded as its main motivating factor (Cnaan et al., 1996; IFRC, 2011; UNV, 2018). However, the nature of 'stipends' for international volunteers, as well as different models of financial 'reimbursement' or 'incentive', notably promoted by donors for project implementation in the global South, suggests that "remuneration of volunteering is more complex than headlines sometimes allow, and needs to be explored in its specific contexts" (Hazeldine & Baillie Smith, 2015, p. 11).

The literature on volunteers' remuneration across global North and South is particularly focused on health promotion. In analysing community health volunteers' experiences, studies have noticed how cash incentives are used to ensure continued voluntary participation, although at the risk of setting precedents that might not be sustained or sustainable over time (Bhattacharyya et al., 2001; Cherrington et al., 2010; South et al., 2014). Jenkins' research discusses the professionalisation of voluntary work, particularly in relation to the economic remuneration for volunteers involved in health promotion in Peru, indicating the gendered and uneven dynamics of financial compensation for women involved in long-term voluntary efforts (Jenkins, 2009b). Further research in the health sector in Iran, Ethiopia, India, Bangladesh and Nepal identified five main approaches to community health work (CHW) programmes: (1) part-time volunteer CHWs without regular financial incentives, (2) volunteers selling health-related merchandise, (3) volunteers with financial incentives, (4) paid full-time CHWs and (5) a mixed model of paid and volunteer CHWs (Singh et al., 2015).

The need to understand remuneration more widely in volunteering spaces has been increasingly acknowledged in academic and policy literatures, however open debates involving volunteer-involving organisations, relevant stakeholders and volunteers themselves remain necessary to identify strategies to ameliorate its negative impacts across different contexts (Hazeldine & Baillie Smith, 2015). Ethnographic studies around the politics and ethics of voluntary labour in Africa (Prince & Brown, 2016) have shown that "relations of obligation – traditional and social, expectations of financial gain in contexts of poverty and unemployment, and political interests that inform development practice – all shape the agency and actions of volunteers" (Graham, 2016, p. 514). Volunteering hierarchies are discussed in relation to the impact of financial incentives in social norms – for example with international volunteers' stipends in Lesotho being higher than the remuneration of local employees (Wig, 2016), and local volunteers in Tanzania receiving minimal stipends to work far more than their salaried supervisors (Kelly & Chaki, 2016).

Baillie Smith et al. (2020) therefore call 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. Livelihoods approaches should not bypass issues of inequality and exclusion (Hazeldine & Baillie Smith, 2015), however it is argued that "when oriented towards catalysing community assets, and away from rewarding particular kinds of individual labour, remuneration has the potential to enable rather than undermine sustained volunteering activity by and within marginalised communities" (Baillie Smith et al., 2020).

Youth and gender debates

Youth

While there is no universal definition of what constitutes 'youth' (Rath, 2018), they are a priority in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda and a group considered to harbour substantial potential for (volunteering for) development, constituting a considerable percentage of volunteers worldwide (Graham et al., 2013; Perold et al., 2013; Rath, 2018; United Nations, 2018; UNV, 2018; Wijeyesekera, 2011). Volunteering programmes involving young volunteers have noted positive outcomes for communities – such as increased cohesion and social capital – as well as for volunteers themselves (Burns et al., 2015; Caprara et al., 2012; Rath, 2018; UNDP, 2016; United Nations, 2018; VSO, 2019b; VSO Bangladesh, 2015), further noting that the engagement of young people on these projects may act as a catalyst towards long-term active citizenship (VSO Nigeria, 2014). The positive contributions of youth volunteers are particularly felt where they work alongside long-term volunteers, receive good training, and feel a sense of ownership over the project (Clark, 2020b), again

emphasising the importance of understanding the impacts and dynamics of 'blended' forms of volunteering. Obstacles to youth volunteering include access to resources, bureaucracy, pressure from family to find paid work, and social factors such as gender and class (VSO Bangladesh, 2015; VSO Nigeria, 2014).

Youth volunteers may be local, national, or international. The VSO Valuing Volunteering study has highlighted that "young people seem to be particularly effective at building and connecting with others through networks" (Burns et al., 2015, p. 25). Their early connections are often based on friendship, and these relationships have been found to be very important for project sustainability. In VSO Bangladesh's case study, youth volunteers (local, national and from the UK) worked with long-term professional volunteers and corporate volunteers in the health pillar (VSO Bangladesh, 2015). The perceived relative and complementary strengths of the different types of youth volunteers are understood to have led to greater success in project outcomes. Wijeyesekera (2011) argues for the need to highlight the positive contributions of African youth volunteers in age-hierarchical societies, and to allow young people to drive how volunteering is shaped, while ensuring their needs and interests are linked to wider development priorities as well as personal development. Young people's involvement in the International Citizen Service (ICS) programme has been noted to lead to a wide range of benefits, including increased access to services and resources, social capital and active citizenship (Rath, 2018). Simonet (2005) notes how civic service programmes blur the lines between 'work' and 'volunteering', with socio-economic status playing a key role in shaping young people's perceptions of participation ('super volunteering' versus 'poorly compensated employment'). However, she also found that all volunteers considered their experience positive overall and had increased their sense of global citizenship.

Finally, VSO has also highlighted the role of youth volunteers in responding to the Covid-19 crisis, noting that their specific engagement has been important in working on- and offline to provide accurate information about Covid-19 and hygiene to their communities. VSO argues that this provides further evidence of the value of youth volunteering for development overall, stating that young people's specific experiences and knowledge must be built upon to think about alternative approaches to face-to-face volunteering programmes in the future (Chadwick, 2020).

Gender

Women are estimated to make up the majority of global volunteers and constitute the majority of volunteers active in the informal volunteering sector (UNV, 2018, 2021). While there is a growing recognition of women's participation in volunteering worldwide, as well as the potential for volunteering to focus on gender-related inequalities (United Nations, 2018; UNV, 2018, 2021; VSO Bangladesh, 2015), gendered dynamics in volunteering remain little understood (Cadesky et al., 2019). Furthermore, focusing on situations of conflict and emergencies, Cadesky, Baillie Smith and Thomas (2019) highlight how academics, policy makers and practitioners continue to overlook gender as a factor in the division of labour within volunteering, as well as the associated risks in situations of conflict and emergency, even though addressing the role of gender within volunteering could potentially contribute to achieving wider aims of empowerment, equality and humanitarian assistance. However, some literature does explore key aspects of gender and volunteering, identifying both under-utilisation and over-utilisation of women volunteers in development based on gender roles and expectations. It is important to note that gender intersects with many other factors – such as class, race, ethnicity and age – in determining volunteering obstacles, outcomes, interactions and possibilities (Blum & Schäfer, 2018; Cadesky et al., 2018; Neustaeter, 2016).

Culturally determined perceptions of gender roles and norms can be a key factor inhibiting women and girls from becoming active as volunteers (Burns et al., 2015; VSO Bangladesh, 2015), and women volunteers also have more difficulty advancing to more senior positions (Cadesky et al., 2018). However, volunteering and volunteer-involving organisations may also provide an opportunity to challenge such gender roles, and volunteers are in a good position to challenge widely held beliefs and 'lead through example' (Burns et al., 2015; Cadesky et al., 2019). Nevertheless, Cadesky, Baillie Smith and Thomas (2019) argue that although volunteering in situations of humanitarian crisis may provide an opportunity to challenge and change gender roles, relationships and norms in the moment of shock, this may be reversed after crisis and should therefore not, by itself, be seen as evidence of long-term change.

There is a long-standing association between women and an 'ethic of care' in their gender roles and expectations, which can underpin over reliance on women's voluntary labour. This is often reflected in women's reasons for taking up volunteer work in the first place, and also translates into the types of roles they undertake as volunteers (Cadesky et al., 2018, 2019; Einolf, 2011; Jenkins, 2008, 2009b; Karniol et al., 2003; Musick & Wilson, 1997). Research from communities across the global South raises concerns about communities becoming over-reliant on women's voluntary participation over the long-term (Jenkins, 2009b, 2011b, 2011a), and to an unsustainable extent, often based on problematic assumptions of women's time availability. As Jenkins (2009a) notes, in the context of peri-urban Lima, women may also juggle multiple volunteering roles across a number of different organisations, such as community kitchens, health promotion activities, and church-based activism. In these situations, women's unpaid work is often an extension of their traditional care roles, and remains under-recognised and under-valued (Cadesky et al., 2019; Jenkins, 2008, 2009b), whilst placing the burden for delivery of essential services (such as in relation to healthcare, education and nutrition) onto the shoulders of women in some of the poorest communities (Jenkins, 2011a). Such reliance on women's unpaid work is likely to grow in times of crisis (Cadesky et al., 2018, 2019).

BLENDING VOLUNTEERING

Much of the available literature focuses on different 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 (SDGs). However, 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. There also remains relatively little research focusing on development outcomes, particularly in the context of these complex relationships.

VSO's concept of 'blended volunteering' emphasises these relationships, focusing on how planned and unplanned combinations of volunteering modalities 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. Here, we begin by considering some preliminary academic work related to this topic, highlighting the significant gaps in knowledge that VSO's blended volunteering approach can feed into, before moving to VSO's notion of blended volunteering, and existing research in this area.

Preliminary academic work

In the context of the considerable – but under-recognised – global contribution of local and/or ‘informal’ volunteering to development, alongside a slowly growing emphasis on South-South and diaspora volunteering, the absence of academic work on the interactions between different types of volunteers in ‘the field’ is notable. As highlighted by Hazeldine and Baillie Smith (2015, p. 23), “if local volunteerism is to continue to play a major role in engaging and mobilising communities within the SDGs – as well as in local community well-being and development agendas – greater care and attention is needed to the interactions and interconnections of different definitions of volunteering”.

However, some research does explore the importance of other kind of relationships within volunteering; notably between international volunteers and so-called ‘host’ organisations and communities. Schech et al. (2018) highlight the importance and centrality of relationships between long-term, international volunteers and host organisations, and the ways in which these relationships may influence the potential development outcomes of volunteer work. They highlight that volunteering works by bringing together skills, knowledge and experiences of different partners, and argue that relationships of inter-cultural dialogue, mutual trust and learning between these different partners are crucial to ensuring mutual benefits. Considering these relationships themselves, as well as the development outputs of the project, as jointly owned and part of a mutual learning makes skill- and knowledge-sharing possible. They argue that the creation of these relationships *in and of itself*, then, may be seen as a development outcome. However, in spite of their importance, these relationships do not tend to be clearly, or explicitly, strived for, or imagined as part of, volunteering projects and organisations.

Chen (2018, 2021) also discusses how relationships affect development impact, arguing they are an overlooked aspect in international development volunteering. Focusing on temporality and the role of the ‘host’, she argues good relationships contribute to mitigating unequal power relationships between hosts and volunteers. Furthermore, discussing relationships allows us to frame ‘host’ communities in a more active light – as people with agency, rather than as passive recipients of development interventions. She argues sustainability of development outcomes and impact is more likely related to long-term volunteering projects (Chen, 2018, p. 145). At the same time, there is a trend towards volunteer placements becoming shorter (also Shachar et al., 2019). This development is widely regarded negatively due to, for example, the problems associated with voluntourism (Rath, 2018) and the fact that short-term volunteers do not have the same opportunity to build up positive relationships contributing to long-term sustainable development impacts. However, Chen suggests that short-term but repeated volunteering, i.e. intermittent volunteering, can promote the same kind of positive relationships and long-lasting effects generally associated with long-term volunteering.

VSO’s previous research revealed that local actors were often frustrated with external organisations assuming they knew how an issue should be approached, or for only speaking to community leaders and not community members, thereby setting up development projects that did not meet or understand the needs of the poorest and/or most marginalised community members (Burns et al., 2015). VSO’s research has also highlighted differences in the way in which international, South-South and local volunteers are perceived and valued. Across different case studies, the work of the poorest volunteers tended to be least valued across the spectrum, a problem that clearly needs to be addressed in order to strengthen bottom-up voluntary efforts (Burns et al., 2015).

Problematizing the idea of international/national and local volunteering, Baillie Smith, Thomas and Hazeldine ask us instead to think of how “all volunteering is intrinsically constituted through assemblages of bodies, ideas, languages, histories and power relations that may emerge through and across national borders” (Baillie Smith, Thomas, et al., 2021). Furthermore, as Laurie and Baillie Smith (2018) note, the coming together of different volunteers and development actors is often as a result of happenstance and coincidence, rather than planned.

Overall, this emerging research demonstrates that academics and policymakers in volunteering spaces are only recently beginning to explore the role and potential of relationships, and that the research that does exist in this area is still predominantly focused on international, North-South volunteering. Furthermore, we identify continued silences around the relationships that occur between different types of volunteers ‘in the field’, including relationships with primary actors, and the role these may play in shaping power dynamics and outcomes within projects. As we now explore, analysing and exploring blended volunteering can offer a uniquely important contribution to advancing understandings of volunteer practices and relationships for improved development outcomes.

VSO’s approach

VSO’s novel concept of blended volunteering is based on their observation that, when different groups of people work together, this tends to add great value to the outputs of their volunteering programmes (Clark, 2020a). Defining blended volunteering simply as “different types of volunteers working together” (Clark, 2020a, p. 2), various VSO projects have long relied on different types of volunteers bringing their own set of skills, knowledges, perspectives, backgrounds and strengths into their roles and activities. From the initial set of case studies informing VSO’s study on blended volunteering in the ‘health’ pillar, the following advantages of the approach have been highlighted to date (Clark, 2020a):

- ◆ Different types of volunteers working together led to a stronger sense of local ownership, particularly where community volunteers continued to lead the work, enhancing the sustainability of the projects;
- ◆ Working with long-term volunteers led to capacity-building for short-term youth volunteers and community volunteers, through training, support and supervision;
- ◆ The reach of the projects may be extended as different volunteers take up different, supporting roles.

By aiming to address marginalisation and poverty through volunteering, VSO considers volunteering to be the most efficient and long-lasting tool to positively impact people’s lives (VSO, 2014). Furthermore, VSO emphasises that despite the potential for community-led volunteering to lead to longer-term, more sustainable outcomes, there is a lack of research on community-led (versus organisational-led) volunteering. For this reason, expanding understandings of community volunteering has become one of the main aims of VSO’s development approach (Burns et al., 2015; Lopez Franco & Shahrokh, 2012). Clark explains that “community volunteers are familiar with the local context, the language, local traditions and taboos and, also the challenges faced by young people in their communities. ICS volunteers bring additional knowledge and skills in communicating messages, working creatively and in a participatory way and, skills in planning and organisation. Long-term national and international volunteers bring specialist knowledge and ideas from working in different contexts” (Clark, 2020a, p. 5).

Looking particularly at relationships between different types of volunteers, VSO notes how national and international volunteering are interdependent, and combining the two may lead to increased development impacts, particularly when other differing types of volunteering – e.g. long-term, short-term, youth, etc – are included. The combination of different types of technical knowledge, people with local specialist knowledge, and individuals who could contribute different perspectives and networks, leads to the creation of teams that are able to respond to complex problems (Burns et al., 2015). VSO has long highlighted the benefit of bringing together the skill sets, connections and knowledge of international and national volunteers with the local knowledge and expertise of other community actors. Across different settings and contexts, VSO works in partnership with local organisations and primary actors, emphasising that all types of volunteers are acting alongside professionals (in health, education, etc), policy-makers, activists and community leaders (VSO, 2014). VSO argues that as volunteers become immersed in the communities in which they work, equitable relationships are formed, where the knowledge of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' merge (Burns et al., 2015). By bringing these various actors, their diverse skill sets and levels of expertise together, VSO aims to achieve more innovative solutions and development outcomes, and encourage wider active citizenship (VSO, 2014). This is part of volunteering's unique contribution to development work, as these reciprocal, informal relationships may not arise in many other development contexts (Burns et al., 2015).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

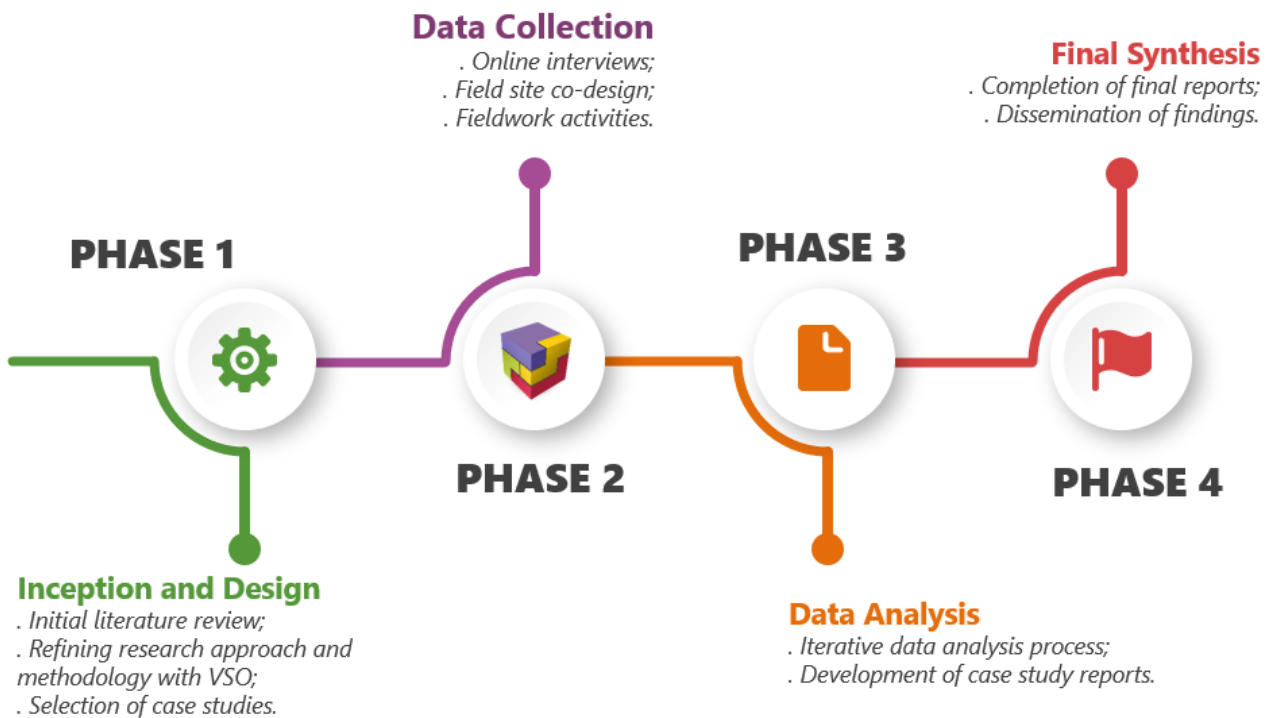
In this review we have outlined the main schools of thought in volunteering and development that provide the context for exploring blended volunteering. We have developed a synthesis of key ideas and developments across the extensive literatures, drawing together relevant academic, practitioner and policy research to highlight the ways in which particular types of volunteering – in particular places – have received disproportionate attention, whilst other aspects remain under-explored. In this regard, we have shown much of the existing literature focuses on the experiences and trajectories of individual volunteers, and single volunteering projects, alongside an overwhelming focus on the experiences of international global North volunteers who travel to the global South to volunteer. We then analysed a range of critical volunteering literatures that have, more recently, emphasised the need to understand a much wider range of perspectives, experiences and modes of volunteering, particularly emphasising the need to problematise North-South relationships and continuing power inequalities, and to pay attention to the ways in which gender, age, race and other aspects of identity intersect and shape experiences of volunteering. These critical literatures especially foreground community-led volunteering, as well as highlighting the importance of engaging with the perspectives of 'host' communities and organisations. Our review suggests that this work remains relatively limited, in comparison with the mainstream volunteering literature, and there is significant scope to expand our knowledge across these key areas.

There remains a significant gap in the existing 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. These preoccupations are increasingly out of step with changing volunteering and development practices. Volunteers of different types have always worked together, but we know little about what works well and why. This is the gap that this research project aims to address, interrogating VSO's blended volunteering approach in order to understand the opportunities and challenges of bringing together different volunteer modalities across a range of global South contexts and practice areas.

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: 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). Phase two consisted of fieldwork in the case study countries, alongside online interviews and an online survey. Phase three was concluded through data analysis and the production of three individual case study reports, one per selected country. The production of this report is part of the fourth and final phase of the research.

RESEARCH METHODS

While the research is a collaboration between VSO and Northumbria University, data collection and analysis has been independently conducted by the Northumbria University team and in-country research teams, to ensure objectivity of the data and research outputs. The research gained full ethical clearance from Northumbria University and the respective ethics committees at national level in Tanzania, Uganda and Nepal. This data was collected by engaging with key informants in the following categories:

- ◆ **Current and former volunteers** who have worked in the selected VSO projects, balancing representation of volunteer modalities (e.g., community, national and international volunteers).¹
- ◆ **Primary actors** who have collaborated with or witnessed the activities of volunteers in selected VSO projects. Primary actors are the people and communities that VSO work with. They are the ones engaging in projects, helping VSO understand the community's needs, and working with volunteers (e.g., teachers, parents, hospital workers, etc.).
- ◆ **Local partners** who have collaborated with or witnessed the activities of volunteers in the selected VSO projects. Local partners guide support from VSO to be most effective at community level, collaborating in project planning, design and implementation (e.g., government institutions, community-based organisations, NGOs, etc.).
- ◆ **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 (see **Appendix 1** for the interview schedules used for different participants).
- ◆ **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 (see also **Appendix 2** for a description of the activities undertaken during workshops):
 - ◆ **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 also **Appendix 3** for examples of some of the maps produced during the workshops).
 - ◆ **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.

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

- ♦ **Online Survey:** A quantitative survey was open between September 2021 and January 2022 for any volunteers whose voluntary commitment in one of the three case study countries took place over the previous five years. The survey covered experiences of working on VSO projects, in terms of personal experiences, skill perceptions, working with various stakeholders, and of working in volunteers, exploring successes and challenges. The survey was circulated in English, Kiswahili and Nepali (see **Appendix 4** for the questionnaire used in the online survey in its English version).

SAMPLING STRATEGY

Locations

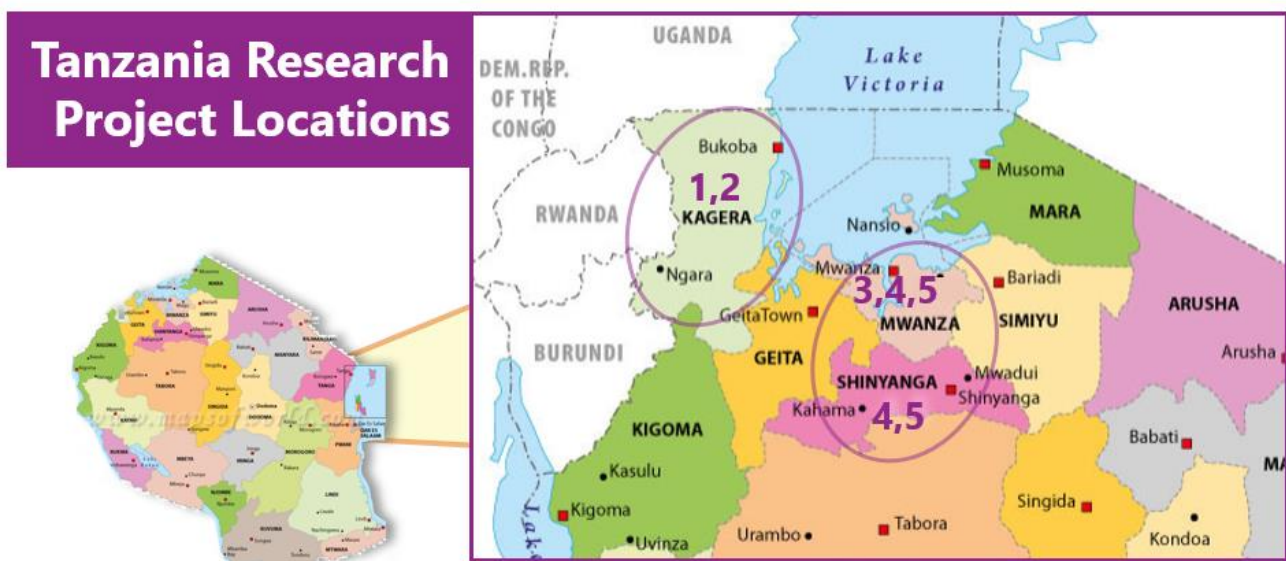
Based on the mapping of ongoing and concluded projects, specific regions and districts were identified as sites for fieldwork, taking into account the need to capture urban-rural experiences; the same projects happening across regions/districts; and locations where more than one project is/has been implemented.

TANZANIA

In Tanzania, the following projects were identified in the selected locations:

1. **Raise Income for Secondary Education (RISE)**, in Kagera region (Muleba district)
2. **Improving Children’s Learning and Participation (ICLP)**, in Kagera region (Bukoba Rural)
3. **Tanzania Local Enterprise Development Project (T-LED)**, in Mwanza region (Ilemela Municipal district)
4. **Safe Spaces, Let’s Talk (SSLT)**, in Mwanza region (Misungwi district) and Shinyanga region (Shinyanga Municipal and Kishapu districts)
5. **Lake Zone Youth Empowerment (LZYE)**, in Mwanza region (Ilemela Municipal district) and Shinyanga region (Shinyanga Municipal district)

Figure 2: Location of VSO Tanzania sampled projects in three regions (Kagera, Mwanza and Shinyanga)



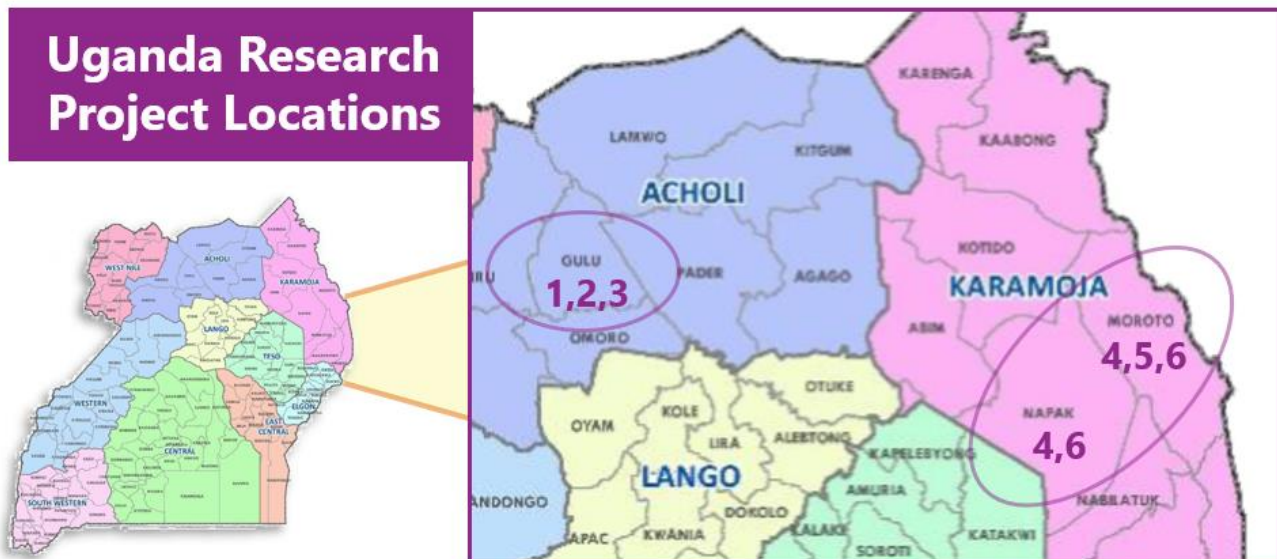
Source: Northumbria University research team

UGANDA

In Uganda, the following projects were identified in the selected locations:

1. **Driving Youth Led Agrobusiness and Micro Enterprises (DYNAMIC)**, in Acholi region (Gulu district)
2. **Youth Employment Enhancement Project (YEEP)**, in Acholi region (Gulu district)
3. **Improving the Lives of Mothers and Newborns in Gulu (Nefkens)**, in Acholi region (Gulu district)
4. **All Pupils aligned for Ultimate Success (A-PLUS)**, in Karamoja region (Napak and Moroto districts)
5. **Volunteer Initiative For Girls: Retain, Achieve and Thrive (VI-GREAT)**, in Karamoja region (Moroto district)
6. **V4D Maternal and Neonatal Health (V4D Health)**, in Karamoja region (Napak and Moroto districts)

Figure 3: Location of VSO Uganda sampled projects in two regions (Acholi and Karamoja)



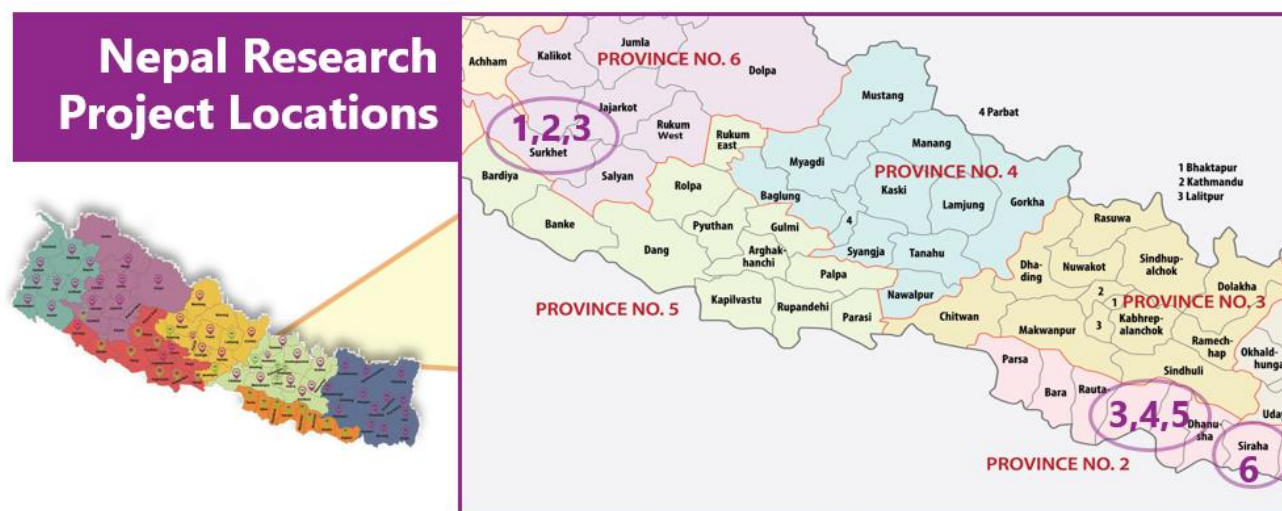
Source: Northumbria University research team

NEPAL

In Nepal, the following projects were identified in the selected locations:

1. **Promoting Inclusive Resilience and Accountability through Youth Association Strengthening (PRAYAS)**, in Karnali Province (Surkhet district)
2. **Sisters for Sisters' Education (S4S)**, in Karnali Province (Surkhet district)
3. **Safe to learn (S2L)**, in Karnali Province (Surkhet district) and Madhesh Province (Sarlahi district)
4. **Empowering a New Generation of Adolescent Girls' with Education in Nepal (ENGAGE)**, in Madhesh Province (Sarlahi district)
5. **SAHAYATRA**, in Madhesh Province (Sarlahi district)
6. **Strengthening Access to Holistic, Gender Responsive, and Accountable Justice in Nepal (SAHAJ)**, in Madhesh Province (Siraha district)

Figure 4: Location of VSO Nepal sampled projects in two provinces (Karnali and Madhesh)²



Source: Northumbria University research team

Participants

Participants in this study were selected in coordination with VSO local staff. All participants were adults (18+) that fit into the following categories:

- ◆ **Current and former volunteers** that work/have worked in the selected VSO projects.
- ◆ **Primary actors** that have collaborated with or witnessed the activities of volunteers in the selected VSO projects (e.g., community members, teachers, parents, etc.).
- ◆ **Local partners** that have collaborated with or witnessed the activities of volunteers in the selected VSO projects, also supporting in project planning, design and implementation (e.g., government institutions, community-based organisations, NGOs, etc.).
- ◆ **Local VSO staff** that work/have worked in the selected VSO projects, with experience in design and implementation of programmes, and who are the focal points for liaison with volunteers.

In recruiting participants for both interviews and participatory workshops, we applied the following sampling criteria:

- ◆ Project involvement (i.e., balanced number of participants across the different projects sampled for the study).
- ◆ Gender (i.e., balanced number of male and female participants across projects).
- ◆ In the case of volunteer participants, volunteering modalities (i.e., aiming for a balanced sample of study participants who fit under the different volunteering typologies used by VSO, e.g., community, youth, corporate, national, international, remote volunteers, etc.).

Overall, we have engaged with all volunteer modalities identified and present in-country for the selected projects in Tanzania, Uganda and Nepal, and engaged remotely with former international volunteers according to the sampling capacities (see Tables 2, 3 and 4 for an overview).

² Karnali province was previously called 'Province no.6', and Madhesh province was known as 'Province no. 2'.

Table 2: Interview participants per case study

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS	Volunteers		Primary Actors		Partners		Staff		TOTAL	
TANZANIA (34 interviews)	16		7		5		7		35 interviewees*	
	6 F	10 M	3 F	4 M	2 F	3 M	3 F	4 M	14 F	21 M
UGANDA (32 interviews)	18		5		4		5		32 interviewees	
	10 F	8 M	1 F	4 M	0 F	4 M	2 F	3 M	13 F	19 M
NEPAL (37 interviews)	19		8		5		6		38 interviewees*	
	16 F	3 M	7 F	1 M	3 F	2 M	2 F	4 M	28 F	10 M
Total of 103 interviews	53		20		14		18		105 interviewees	
	32 F	21 M	11 F	9 M	5 F	9 M	7 F	11 M	55 F	50 M

*In both Tanzania and Nepal, 1 face-to-face interview was conducted with 2 participants simultaneously.

Table 3: Workshop participants per case study

WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS*	Volunteers		Primary Actors		TOTAL	
TANZANIA (8 workshops)	33		22		55 participants	
	9 F	24 M	11 F	11 M	20 F	35 M
UGANDA (8 workshops)	29		15		44 participants	
	10 F	19 M	8 F	7 M	18 F	26 M
NEPAL (8 workshops)	34		23		57 participants	
	25 F	9 M	23 F	0 M	48 F	9 M
Total of 24 workshops	96		60		156 participants	
	44 F	52 M	42 F	18 M	86 F	70 M

*In each country, there were 4 workshops with volunteers only, 2 with primary actors only and 2 with a mix of volunteers and primary actors. Due to Covid-19 restrictions in Uganda the maximum capacity of workshops was of 6 participants compared to a maximum of 8 participants per workshop in Tanzania, and 9 in Nepal.

Table 4: Survey participants per case study

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS	International Volunteers		National Volunteers		Community Volunteers		TOTAL	
TANZANIA	34		20		12		66 survey participants	
	21 F	13 M	6 F	14 M	6 F	6 M	33F	33 M
UGANDA	23		11		4		38 survey participants	
	11 F	12 M	5 F	6 M	2 F	2 M	18F	20 M
NEPAL	32		50		13		95 survey participants	
	22 F	10 M	30 F	20 M	4 F	9 M	56F	39 M
Total	89		81		29		199 survey participants	
	54 F	35 M	41 F	40 M	12 F	17 M	107F	92 M

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

460 research participants in total across Nepal, Tanzania and Uganda

- ✓ **261** participants in 103 interviews and 24 group workshops
- ✓ **199** participants in the online survey

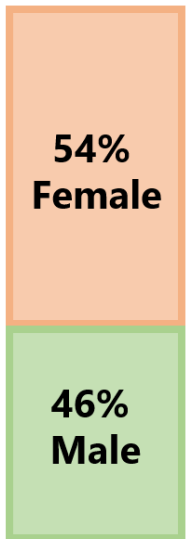
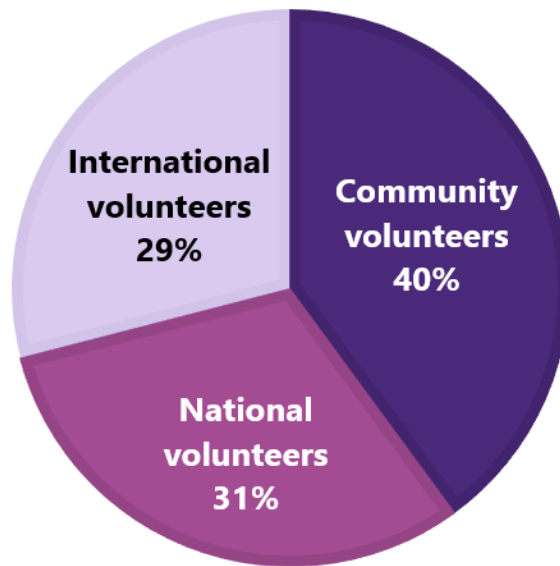
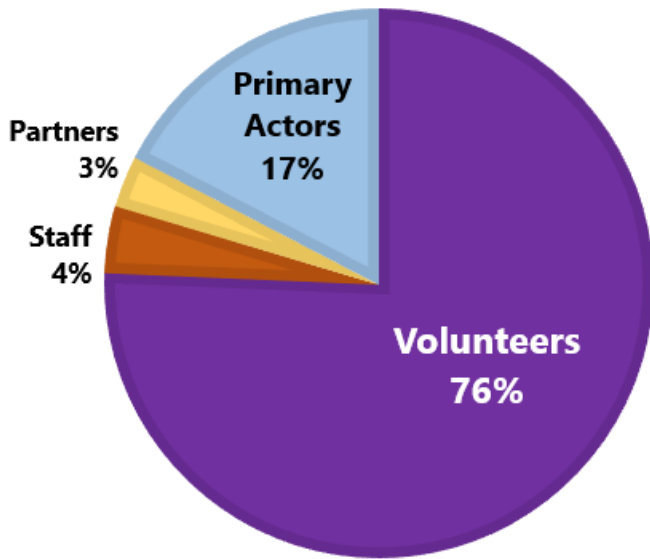


Photo: Gina Mary Angatun

Uganda



Photo: Social Science Baha

Nepal



Photo: Egidius Namanyiti

Tanzania

KEY THEME 1: UNDERSTANDING VOLUNTEER MODALITIES AND SKILL SETS

The blended volunteering model assumes a range of distinct volunteer modalities. In this section we explore how the blend of volunteer modalities is operationalised on the ground, and analyse the ways in which skill sets and volunteer modalities interact. We explore the conceptualisation of modalities in the blend, as well as the fluidity and dynamism of the approach as it is operationalised in the different country contexts. We identify key areas for future attention in relation to understanding blended volunteering within projects and shaping the wider sector's approach to designing volunteer-based development interventions.

Conceptualising modalities in the blend

Below we analyse the multiplicity of ways in which the blend is conceptualised by different stakeholders, and consider the ways in which skillsets and modalities interact, complicating the assumption of straightforward distinctions between the skill sets associated with different modalities.

The expansive nature of the blend

Our literature review and key conversations and interviews with VSO staff members at the outset of the research, identified that the blended volunteering model is usually assumed to be primarily based on combining three key place-based modalities – 'international', 'national' and 'community' volunteers – within a particular project. However, across all three country contexts where the research took place, it became apparent that it was necessary to conceptualise the blend in a more expansive manner, in order to capture the complexity and diversity that exists within it. Across Tanzania, Uganda and Nepal, our research identified a multiplicity of volunteer modalities that make up 'the blend'. Drawing on the data collected in interviews, workshops, and in the survey, we can identify a wide range of different volunteer modalities that are recognised/used by participants and stakeholders across these countries. In this regard, **Figure 5** provides a visual representation of the diversity of volunteer modalities identified in Nepal, Tanzania and Uganda.³ Whilst these modalities can all be considered as distinct categories, we also found that there was often significant overlap and blurring across and between these modalities and how they were understood.

Additionally, volunteers themselves often use multiple categories – which are not always commensurate with each other – to describe volunteer identities and activities, challenging static categorisations and complicating straightforward distinctions between volunteer roles. This is also clearly seen in the survey data, where in addition to the place-based modalities (international, national and community), all survey participants identified with at least one other way of describing their roles, underlining the ways in which people's experiences of volunteering within the blended model cut across the geographic modalities that are foregrounded in project design. Furthermore, 43% of the respondents selected two or more additional modalities, highlighting how experiences of the

³ Although the size of words in this visual cloud is not related to the exact frequency of mention of each modality in the dataset, larger words represent those that were identified in more than one case study. Rather than focusing on the frequency of mention, the figure aims to emphasise the diversity of understandings of modalities across the dataset.

modalities are flexible and are also related to volunteers' different durations and types of involvement, sometimes in different capacities in more than one project, depending on the specific context and needs. This finding, which is evident across the three countries, also responds to a recognised gap in previous research in this area, which tends to focus on institutional and project languages, rather than on the ways different forms of volunteering are experienced in practice amongst, particularly, global South volunteers (Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2011; Boesten et al., 2011; Hustinx et al., 2022).

Figure 5: Word cloud of volunteering modalities identified in Nepal, Tanzania and Uganda



Source: Northumbria University research team



Focus Group Discussion during workshop with primary actors, Tanzania

Across all contexts, we found that volunteers' and other stakeholders' perceptions of modalities varied. In Nepal and Uganda, the categories of international, national and community level volunteer were not widely used or recognised. Stakeholders were often unable to distinguish between modalities or 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, further contributing to the 'blurry' nature of the blended model:

"I: Did VSO explain to you the different types of volunteers?"

R: We did not get that opportunity to know about those. I think they had a tight programme so we were not told all those various types of volunteers that do exist, we did not get that opportunity, this one I'm talking about I am also [saying] because the other lady comes from another country so I could say that now, that is an international volunteer, it is just by instinct that I learned about that... maybe she's an international volunteer but getting time to talk about it, that these are the categories of volunteers that we have – local or youth or political or international, we did not have that opportunity..."

(Interview, Community Volunteer, DYNAMIC project, Uganda)

Whilst the place-based modalities were clearer for the participants in Tanzania, a noticeable blurriness and overlap was apparent there in relation to the involvement of youth volunteers. National, international or community volunteers aged 15-35 years old were variously described in youth-based modalities such as 'youth volunteers', ICS (International Citizen Service), or NYEN (National Youth Empowerment Network). This blurriness also delineates how the expertise from volunteers in this age group was perceived as 'less professionalised' in contrast with more technical understandings of other modalities, as we will explain later. Our analysis therefore underlines the importance of paying attention to how conceptualisations of volunteer modalities work in practice, and how these also change over time and place. Volunteering modalities were often perceived beyond volunteers' geography, particularly in relation to their distinct roles and responsibilities when working together.

These multifaceted perceptions affected not only the types of relationships created through the blend but also the development outcomes emerging from the blended approach at community level. Whilst the data suggests that there is widespread understanding within VSO of the multiple modalities encompassed within the 'international' element of the blend, there is less recognition of the diversity of modalities and complexity that exists at the 'community' level, a point we return to in Key Theme 2 where we focus on the centrality of community volunteers. We emphasise that such complexity is not in itself problematic – and indeed can be considered a strength of the blended volunteering model – but nevertheless highlights a challenge for volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs) in terms of building this into strategic planning and programme management.

Mapping skill sets and modalities

This complexity and overlap of volunteer modalities is important to consider when it comes to understanding the ways in which different modalities might contribute particular skillsets to the blended volunteering model, and how this is built in to project design and operationalised on the ground. Across the dataset, it is evident that VSO staff pay careful and detailed attention to getting the 'mix' of a team right at the stage of project design, deploying their understanding of the particular strengths and skillsets that they perceive different volunteer modalities to bring.

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

(Interview, VSO Staff member, Tanzania)

However, we have found that volunteer skills are not fixed and do not always map neatly onto particular modalities. Drawing on data from interviews and participatory workshops across all three countries, we highlight that there is significant overlap between the skills that VSO staff and stakeholders associate with different volunteering modalities, albeit with differences in the scales at which these skills are deployed. Skills and attributes are recognised as being distributed *across* modalities, complicating the assumption of straightforward distinctions between the skill sets associated with different modalities, and further underlining the diversity that exists within each place-based modality. The key skills that staff attributed to these different modalities also varied across country context, further suggesting that it is difficult to generalise about the specific skills that each particular modality effectively contributes to the blend (see **Figure 6** below).

For example, in Tanzania, VSO staff emphasise community volunteers' place-based and contextual knowledge and understanding, whereas the value of national and international volunteers was framed in terms of technical skills and particular notions of expertise. In contrast, in Nepal, where the international presence in the blend was less prominent, fewer skills were attributed uniquely to international volunteers, compared to the findings from the other country contexts in this research. Relatedly, we found much less emphasis on the role of community volunteers' local language skills and understanding of cultural context in Nepal, with skills of mentoring, capacity building and awareness-raising more likely to come to the fore. Finally, in Uganda, we found that whilst stakeholders were overall less likely to attribute skills to particular geographic modalities, national volunteers played an important bridging role in the blend, working across and between international and community volunteering modalities.

Figure 6: VSO Staff perceptions of volunteer modalities and skills for development

VSO Staff perceptions of volunteer modalities and skills for development			
	COMMUNITY	NATIONAL	INTERNATIONAL
NEPAL	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	
TANZANIA	Advocacy		
	Behaviour change	Coaching and mentoring	
	Peer support		
	Understanding of policy, attitudes and behaviour at local level		Knowledge/best practice from other country contexts
	Contextual knowledge		
	Cascading skills & information	Technical & professional expertise	
		Training	
	Translation skills		Capacity building
	Understanding local context/ culture	Facilitation	
	Local language skills	Bridging role	Brokering
	Monitoring		
		Managerial Skills	
UGANDA	Peer support	Supporting	
		Coaching and mentoring	
	Contextual & cultural knowledge		Training the trainers
		Technical & professional skills and expertise	

Source: Northumbria University research team

Moreover, when we consider how volunteers characterise their own skills and abilities, as shown in **Figure 7** below, we again see how skillsets are distributed across volunteering modalities. Volunteers across all modalities were most likely to identify capacity-building as one of their main strengths, followed by leadership and project management. Rather than suggesting that these strengths are associated with particular modalities, the survey data therefore reinforces that these are in fact core skills for volunteering. This data also provides an example of where VSO staff perceptions – applied at the project design stage – may not always match up with how volunteering is experienced on the ground by volunteers themselves. For example, ‘liaising with local community’ was the third most common skill international volunteers assigned themselves, but was not widely identified by staff as a key skill for international volunteers, who highlighted instead that international volunteers bring skills and best practices from other contexts.

Figure 7: Top 5 answers to the multiple-choice survey question about volunteers' perceptions of their own main strengths

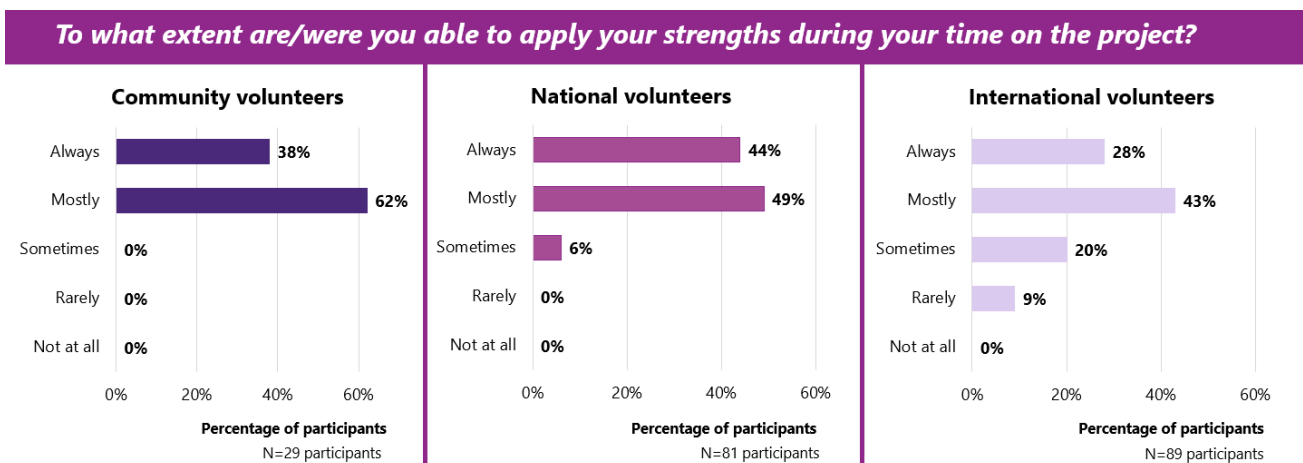
Main strengths self-identified by volunteers in the online survey			
	Community volunteers	National volunteers	International volunteers
1	31% Capacity Building/Training others	21% Capacity Building/Training others	17% Capacity Building/Training others
2	16% Leadership/Project Management	16% Leadership/Project Management	17% Leadership/Project Management
3	13% Motivation/team building	14% Motivation/team building	12% Liaising with local community
4	9% Liaising with local community	9% Creativity	12% Motivation/team building
5	6% Mentoring	8% Understanding the local context	11% Mentoring

Source: Northumbria University research team

On the other hand, whilst community volunteers were most likely to identify capacity-building and training as one of their main strengths as seen in the figure above, the skills mapping in **Figure 6** shows that staff less commonly identify this skillset with community volunteers. Conversely, across all country contexts stakeholders have emphasised community volunteers' language skills as crucial to project activities (see also Perold et al., 2011). However, in the survey this was less often identified as a main strength by community volunteers themselves (only 4% of community volunteer respondents identified knowledge of national/local language as one of their main strengths). This point highlights that certain skills, particularly those traditionally associated with community volunteers may be 'taken for granted' as an element of the blend, and could more clearly be framed by VSO as an asset. This is particularly pertinent in the context of VSO's blended volunteering approach where community volunteers usually make up the largest share of the blend and, therefore, their unique skillsets and contributions need to be continually valued and recognised accordingly.

Furthermore, when asked about the areas of improvement that they considered most important for VSO, 47% of survey respondents identified the need for enhanced communication on VSO's expectations of volunteers' involvement in projects. This suggests that although staff have a clear sense of how the skills of the different modalities relate to the aims and outcomes of particular projects, this is not always clear to volunteers themselves, which has implications for how effectively the blend can be operationalised on the ground. Furthermore, when participants were asked to what extent they felt able to apply their skills during the placement, nearly 30% of international volunteers said that they were only rarely or sometimes able to do so, as shown in the graphs below.

Figure 8: Volunteer survey answers to the question "To what extent are/were you able to apply your strengths during your time on the project?"



Source: Northumbria University research team

This perception was not shared with community and national volunteers who felt overwhelmingly that they *were* able to apply their strengths during their time on the project. We hypothesise that this scenario might reflect the different levels of expectations of the modalities in relation to their involvement in the project. These observations are also reflected in the survey data, which shows that 36% of volunteer survey respondents think that managing the skills and contributions of all volunteer team members is an aspect of VSO's practice that could be improved.

"...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."

(Interview, International volunteer, S4S project, Nepal)

Across all country contexts, it is evident that the skill sets of international volunteers are not as distinct from other modalities as might previously have been assumed (a point we explore further in relation to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on volunteering activities). This was particularly evident in Nepal, where we found that international volunteers' relative absence at the community level meant that international 'expertise' and knowledge was de-emphasised, becoming much less of a focal point for how the blend is understood and operationalised. Though this results from navigating a particular set of political priorities around where international volunteers are located, 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, the knowledge of other volunteering modalities can more readily be recognised as 'knowledge', and not provincialized as 'local' knowledge. This is also important in terms of questioning hierarchies and enabling the blend to emerge in a more bottom-up manner (see also Key Theme 2).

Therefore, our findings suggest that the right mix of skills does not automatically, or necessarily, emerge from simply mixing different place-based volunteer modalities. In the next section we will discuss the dynamic nature of the blended approach, and how the model can benefit from an expanded understanding of the modalities when these are conceptualised not only on the basis of volunteers' place of provenance, but also their distinct roles and expertise. This is also important in terms of problematising any assumptions of international volunteers as the 'experts' in the blend by de-centring the focus on their presence and increasingly enabling the different blends to emerge in a more bottom-up manner.



Photo: Social Science Baha

Volunteer participant during group workshop activity, Nepal

The blend as dynamic and responsive

Overall, our data emphasises that the blended volunteering model is a dynamic model that allows modalities to emerge in response to particular requirements. It can also enable volunteer-involving organisations to be responsive to change, crises and uncertainty.

Modalities emerge organically in response to context/circumstances

In our field research, we found some modalities that were commonly used amongst stakeholders did not always fit within the categories of volunteer that we were initially aware of based on literature review and scoping discussions. Some such modalities emerge organically in response to particular country or context-specific needs – for example, many respondents talked about the category of ‘supporter volunteers’ in Tanzania, that emerged in response to the particular circumstances of the pandemic – whilst other modalities reflect the ways in which projects and activities are organised on the ground – most notably what we have identified as ‘role-based modalities’ in Uganda and Nepal:

“At PRAYAS, we have national volunteers, media volunteers and community volunteers, three types of volunteers. The national volunteers were mobilised 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 project, Nepal)

“I’ve been working basically as a peer mentor, a peer educator, mentoring the youth that were enrolled for the projects, different training projects.”
(Interview, Community volunteer, Peer educator, YEEP project, Uganda)

The category of role-based modalities reflects the ways in which volunteers identified themselves in relation to the particular roles they carried out (e.g., peer educator; big sister; media volunteer), rather than situating themselves as ‘community volunteers’. Indeed, some volunteers chose not to identify themselves as volunteers at all:

“Please, don’t call us volunteers. We are known as social mobilisers.”
(Interview, Community volunteer, Social Mobiliser, SAHAJ project, Nepal)

This problematisation of the notion of the ‘volunteer’ should be situated within broader understandings of volunteer hierarchies, calling 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 volunteer tasks but also their volunteer identity (or the lack of such identity) which may be determined by wider meanings and/or inequalities associated with different types of work in the global South.

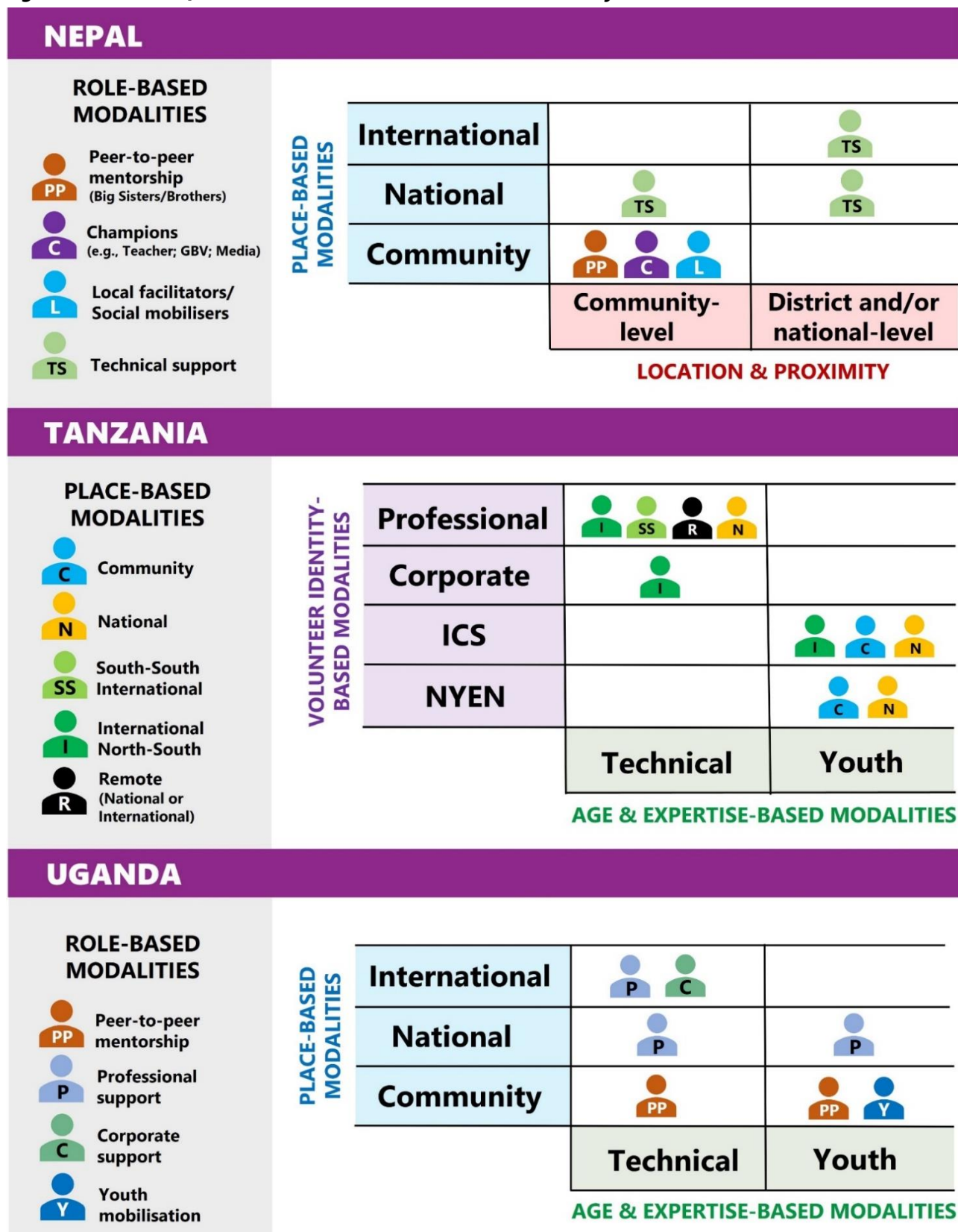


Photo: Gina Mary Angaun

Volunteer participant during research activity, Uganda

As we began to understand more about these diverse modalities that make up the blend, we developed a series of matrices to capture the context-specific ways in which the modalities are operationalised in each country.

Figure 9: Matrices of volunteer modalities observed in the country case studies



Source: Northumbria University research team

The matrices capture the diverse factors that shape how the modalities land and are operationalised in each country context, foregrounding elements such as the location and proximity of different modalities in Nepal, and modalities characterised by age and expertise in Uganda and Tanzania. In each context, we can see how geographic modalities intersect with other ways of conceptualising volunteer contributions to the blend. Whilst these varied modalities were very apparent in our discussions with diverse stakeholders, the more traditional geographic modalities predominated in the survey – international, national and ICS were the most common modalities that survey participants identified with. This also highlights the added value of the participatory methods used during fieldwork, which have allowed research participants to explore their understandings and perspectives of the modalities in ways that would likely not have been captured otherwise.

The blend as agile and dynamic

Taken together, the matrices in **Figure 9** help us to make sense of the ways in which the blended volunteering model can enable volunteer-involving organisations to accommodate a high degree of flexibility, giving space for volunteer roles to develop organically in response to conditions on the ground. This was seen, for example, in Uganda, where we identified that the flexible approach of national volunteers enabled projects to respond in an agile manner to the unexpected changes and uncertainties brought by Covid-19, enabling a rapid response, repositioning and project continuity.

“Like in Uganda right now, we actually, we survive with the situation. But now, if [international volunteers] were to come to Uganda right now you would have a lot of fear, for example, this Covid here, we know that once you have like other complications, it is actually easier to be more vulnerable, than when you don’t have such complications. Now imagine a situation where you have come with a complication from your country. You can’t adapt easily to the current situation, if anything you will be more vulnerable than me, here in Uganda. So a national [person is] adapting quickly, and actually able to work. We’re working, actually, with volunteers quite well with the situation, the situation right now.”

(Interview, VSO staff member, Uganda)

Similarly, in Nepal, we found that a blend of different types of 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 brings.

“Big Sisters continued to teach us even during the Covid-19 pandemic. I appreciate that effort from them the most.”

(Interview, Primary Actor, ENGAGE project, Nepal)

In Tanzania, the example of VSO projects and activities in the Shinyanga Municipal district provides an illustration of the way in which a blended approach allows for greater adaptability. In response to the challenges presented by Covid-19 and the departure of international and national volunteers from that district, the research found that the National Youth Empowerment Network (NYEN) volunteers had spontaneously adapted to the pandemic context by effectively developing a new ‘category’ or volunteer role which they described as ‘supporter volunteers’. The supporter volunteers were affiliated to the NYEN, and have taken on a bridging role, filling the gap left by international and national volunteers, and connecting the remaining national volunteers to community volunteers. Supporter volunteers reported undertaking activities very similar to those previously done by national or international volunteers.

Additionally, they undertook a monitoring role, reporting any challenges requiring prompt attention to national volunteers:

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

This innovation and rapid adaptation provides another example of the ways in which volunteering modalities are re-worked in the field, often transpiring in unanticipated ways that are framed by volunteer perceptions as much as by programming categories and assumptions. In all three countries, the backdrop of the pandemic – which has characterised the period in which we have undertaken this research – provided a scenario in which the responsive nature of the blended volunteering model was brought to the fore, and we discuss this in more detail below.

A further aspect of the flexibility that the blended approach enables is apparent in our finding that, across all modalities and countries, some volunteers operate across projects or have worked consecutively over multiple projects. This was not necessarily expected at the outset of the research, and underlines another way in which blended volunteering creates spaces for flexibility, innovation, and initiative, enabling volunteers to maximise their contribution and to overcome local level challenges. In Tanzania, for example, 43% of volunteer participants in workshops and interviews reported involvement in more than one project (not necessarily at the same time). While highly specialised skills and background knowledge may be project specific and not necessarily translate easily between projects in different practice areas (e.g., technical expertise in health or education), our evidence suggests that volunteers' skills associated with creativity, project coordination, mentoring and leadership can be transferred across projects and practice areas. We identify this as a strength of the blended volunteering model which provides additional opportunities for sharing knowledge and expertise amongst volunteers.

Whilst overall we characterise the fluid, responsive and dynamic nature of the blended volunteering model as an important asset for volunteer-involving organisations to be able to respond in an agile

manner in a context of global uncertainty and rapid change, we also recognise the significant challenges and tensions that are inherent in this. In particular, we identify a challenge for VSO in managing the tensions between the strict demarcation of core place-based modalities (international, national and community) that may be needed in programme design phase, versus an ability to embrace and reap the benefits of what we identify as the 'productive messiness' of the blend in practice – the organic and mostly unanticipated outcomes of the blend as it emerges in a bottom-up manner on the ground.

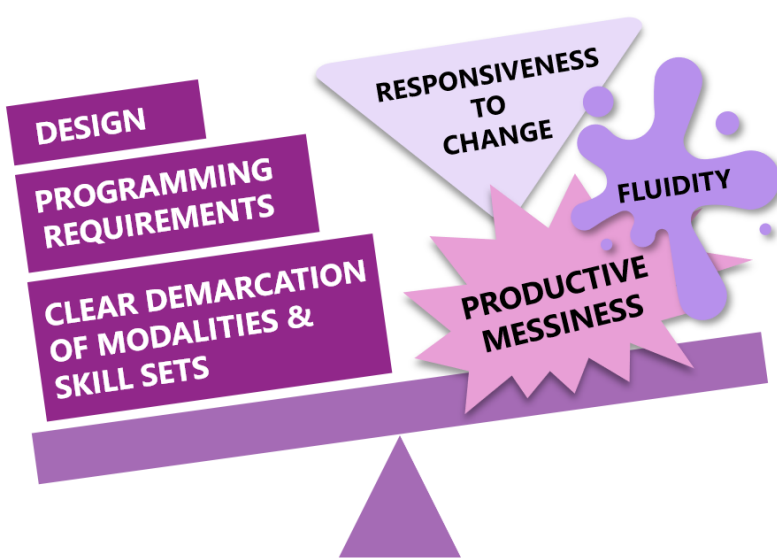


Figure 10: Programme demands x blurriness of the blend
Source: Northumbria University research team

Learning from blended volunteering during the Covid-19 pandemic

Whilst the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has clearly brought significant challenges to VSO, and to its ability to continue to deliver programmes and to engage with volunteers and communities, it nonetheless provides a lens through which to understand some of the ways in which a blended approach to volunteering can deliver better and more sustainable development outcomes. Data collection in our three country case studies was undertaken at different moments during the pandemic, and this is reflected in the varying ways in which the impacts of Covid-19 are evident across the data we have collected about blended volunteering. In Tanzania, the pandemic was still in its relatively early stages when we undertook our field research, meaning volunteers' and stakeholders' lived experience of the pandemic was extremely present in many aspects of their reflections. In Uganda, the 'gaps' created by Covid-19, and the responses that emerged, were still something that participants recalled but with less immediacy. Our data from both these countries therefore clearly evidences the impacts of the pandemic and how the blended volunteering model was forced to adapt at speed. In contrast 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. This scenario gave us more of an insight into a possible post-pandemic blended volunteering model, where international volunteers continue to be less present in the blend.

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

"...the pandemic is teaching us how to, you know, to use what we have." (Interview, VSO staff member, Uganda)

The pandemic also opened up an opportunity for VSO to expand the use of remote volunteers as part of the 'blend' – some international volunteers who returned home continued volunteering for the project they had been involved in, whilst national and community volunteers also undertook virtual activities. The necessity created by Covid-19 provided a unique space for remote volunteering capacity to be harnessed and more fully explored:

"...even our community volunteers are using their mobiles and making the social distance, [...] masks and other safety protocols, 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, Nepal)

Across all three countries, it was evident that the fluidity of the blended volunteering model enabled projects to be more resilient and less susceptible to shocks, able to respond in an agile way to the demands and restrictions created by the pandemic. Overall, the reflections and experiences of volunteers, VSO staff, partners, and primary actors in relation to the pandemic, across three countries, underline the scope that we identify for the blended volunteering model as an international programming approach, identifying the value of blended volunteering as an effective model in the context of crisis and stress in contrasting settings, and 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.

KEY THEME 2: CENTRALITY OF COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS

Across all three country contexts, not only do volunteers and stakeholders report on predominantly positive experiences in volunteering with VSO, but they often relate them particularly to the blended model and working together. In this section we explore the unique roles of community volunteers in sustaining the blend, and the added value of a locally-driven blended approach. Our data also emphasises how the roles of volunteers in the blend are not uniform across contexts but rather shaped by socio-cultural dynamics and relationships that can lead to actual or perceived volunteer hierarchies. In this section, we discuss findings in relation to making the blends of volunteers work in optimal ways through recognising the centrality of community volunteers' involvement and underlining the importance of challenging hierarchies of knowledge and practice.

Steering the blend from the community level

This research identified a wide range of positive outcomes as a result of different volunteer modalities working together, both at the personal and project levels. Key considerations highlighted by participants as the outcomes of an efficient blend include promoting opportunities for volunteers to learn and share experiences and skills; delivering quality service to primary actors; meeting project targets and timeframes; and improving projects' sustainability. At a personal level, these benefits were often related to the value of combining different skills and personalities for improving learning pathways. The most common personal impacts of working on teams with different volunteers mentioned by volunteers who took part in the survey range from improving interpersonal and teamwork skills to expanding knowledge of wider development challenges, as shown in **Figure 11**.

Figure 11: Top 3 answers to the multiple choice survey question "How has volunteering with VSO as part of a mixed team of volunteers influenced you?"



Overall, sharing ideas and knowledge with people from different backgrounds to solve challenges was identified as a key asset facilitated by the blended approach. The survey responses from volunteers show that 72% of respondents perceived that when the team was working well together they always or mostly managed to deal with unexpected challenges effectively. Volunteer participants in interviews and participatory discussions have also credited blended volunteering with enhancing their confidence, expanding their horizons and understanding of different cultures, creating friendships, enhancing their communication and public speaking skills, as well as other skills such as monitoring and documenting project activities.

Source: Northumbria University research team

An effective blend, then, can be a cornerstone of a good and beneficial working relationship, harnessing benefits not only for the individuals involved but also the project. In Tanzania, Uganda and Nepal, blended volunteering was recognised as a particular factor in the success of the health, education, governance and livelihood projects sampled in our research. Accordingly, this has positively affected the development impact of VSO work with communities and primary actors in the respective locations.

“So we surpassed the targets after introducing other volunteer types and we go beyond even the target that we initially thought we could reach through international, one volunteer type. So likewise I can’t see the survival or a better delivering of project without having the blended type.”

(Interview, VSO staff member, Tanzania)

Although the blend of geographies can add value to the volunteer workforce, our wider analysis of the model across different countries and projects highlights the centrality of local agency and knowledges to sustaining and realising the full potential of the blended approach. Importantly, all stakeholders in the country case studies identified community volunteers as crucial to the blended volunteering approach. This echoes current thinking in the volunteering sector that emphasises the centrality of local actors in volunteer programming in the global South, a shift in thinking that has been particularly triggered by the effects of the pandemic on the ways of working of VIOs (Chadwick El-Ali, 2021; Perold et al., 2021). Here, we identify three key areas that exemplify the unique roles of community volunteers in facilitating and sustaining the blend on the ground in their communities:

- ♦ **Knowledge and expertise:** skills and knowledge, including context-specific experiences, hold the blend together and also support the effective local engagement of other volunteer modalities.
- ♦ **Acceptance and embeddedness:** relationships with primary actors are key for informed decision-making on the directions of projects and the ways in which the blend can be driven by bottom-up interests/needs.
- ♦ **Longevity and sustainability:** sustained involvement over time, including beyond projects’ duration, allows for longer-term development impacts and legacy of the work undertaken through the blended model.

Knowledge and expertise

Although many skills overlap across volunteer modalities in the blend, our research shows that there are key skills and attributes that are only associated with community volunteers, suggesting that they are not easily interchangeable with other modalities. However, the data also shows an underlying assumption that knowledge will be passed from national and international volunteers to community volunteers, in a unidirectional manner. Across the dataset, keywords such as ‘expert’ and ‘specialist’ were predominantly used to describe the roles of international volunteers, particularly from staff perspectives (as discussed earlier in Key Theme 1). Such distinct perceptions around expertise, as well as the ways in which volunteer labour is rewarded, can contribute to the perpetuation of hierarchies and inequities within the blend, that might place community volunteers in less privileged positions in relation to their peers in the team. The importance of questioning assumptions in relation to knowledge and expertise was emphasised by the evidence from partners and primary actors in the country case studies, particularly Nepal, highlighting that they often do not identify specific skills and attributes as being attached to international volunteers, as much as VSO staff do in project design.

Moreover, the research shows that, beyond their own contributions to the blended model during project activities, community volunteers are essential to support the effective participation of other volunteering modalities in the blend, as well the overall engagement of VSO with primary actors.

"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 project, Nepal)

Even though national volunteers perform their volunteering in the country they come from, the fact that they are placed in communities different from their own means that they are often considered – by others but also themselves – as 'outsiders'. This is because specific attributes needed for the effective implementation of activities were identified as being things that, most of the time, could only be offered by community volunteers, such as local engagement and awareness raising, but also language skills. 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' from the perspective of their nationality. The diversity of expertise and roles that community volunteers can play in project implementation has been particularly evidenced by the resourceful ways in which they have stepped in to ensure the continuity of VSO activities during Covid-19.

Acceptance and embeddedness

The centrality of community volunteers' roles also derives from their unique position in relation to primary actors. However, the participation of community volunteers in the blend as a key factor enabling development outcomes might be obscured by an assumption that 'they are always there'. There is, thus, a risk that their presence and unique expertise could be 'taken for granted' in the blended approach.

"We are community natives, people in the community knew us, so it was easy for us to gain access anywhere in the community. We knew our community very well; they [international volunteers] would not enjoy that luxury."

(Interview, Community volunteer, SSLT project, Tanzania)

This strengthens the argument that the embeddedness of volunteers is a key aspect of how the blend is operationalised on the ground. It also reflects an expectation or ideal that was often expressed by participants, particularly in Nepal, in relation to the value of having a greater number of community volunteers present in the blend, compared to other modalities. This can be explained not only by their local embeddedness but also the multiple roles assumed by community volunteers in the blend. Their unique positionality is thus determined by their proximity and close relationships with primary actors, which allows for stronger bonds to be formed. This, however, does not mean that the acceptance of community volunteers is always a 'given'. We have identified instances in which this needs to be negotiated and handled carefully, such as when tackling issues such as gender-based violence or child marriage, and when volunteer modalities perceived as 'outsiders' might actually benefit from a different level of legitimacy. 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 strategy which provides multiple avenues for the development of trusting relationships in each context.

Longevity and sustainability

Finally, the continued presence of community volunteers in their communities, including beyond the timeframe of a particular project's implementation, has been emphasised by stakeholders in the research as crucial to ensuring longevity and sustained impacts of VSO projects.

"Community volunteers continue to perform their duties even after the departure of the national volunteers."

(Interview, Partner, LZYE project, Tanzania)

The joint learning and co-development that emerge from the blend are thus related not only to the improvement of development outcomes in the context of specific projects, but also strengthening individual and collective capacities that can also sustain development outcomes in the longer-term. The togetherness that both results from, and is facilitated by, the blend is not restricted to volunteer relationships but extends to the wider stakeholders in each project (see Key Theme 3). In this sense, community volunteers are credited with facilitating continued and effective communication between various actors, enhancing the mutual understanding and shared ownership between all stakeholders involved on a project over time. Participants recognised that community volunteers' position in place means they are uniquely situated in having the greatest potential for ensuring lasting change.

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

(Interview, VSO staff member, Nepal)

Overall, we emphasise the importance of having local actors and community volunteers driving the blend, and steering it in directions that might then also benefit from external contributions – rather than the other way around. Reversing this narrative is key for understanding the ways in which different volunteering modalities might be combined to maximise development impact. Nonetheless, data from Tanzania, Uganda and Nepal is also shedding new light on the wider hierarchies and volunteer economies against which such relationships in the blend are developed, to which we now turn.



Participatory workshop with community volunteers, Nepal

Challenging hierarchies of knowledge and practice

The blended model is conceptualised on the basis of differentiating between volunteering modalities that can be combined for the design and implementation of development programming. Whilst this differentiation is the core of the blended approach, our research also shows it can lead to perceived or actual hierarchies between volunteering modalities. This creates a critical dilemma for the blended model, that requires volunteer managers and key stakeholders to balance differences without (re)producing inequalities.

Our research identifies how the design of a blend combines volunteers from different backgrounds and demographics, as well as different skill sets, promoting opportunities for them to work together in VSO projects and practice areas. In this process, data from our case studies in Tanzania, Uganda and Nepal suggest that socio-cultural dynamics, different resourcing, and specific programmatic requirements, amongst other factors, can lead to volunteer hierarchies that are particularly noticeable at the community level. Although such hierarchies and inequalities can potentially take many shapes or forms, the learning gathered from the country contexts in this research has allowed us to identify some key areas requiring attention, including mobility, conditions and contracts, and expectations of/from volunteers in the blend.

As discussed earlier, whilst we recognise the specific roles of international volunteers, we also highlight that the blended approach provides an opportunity to enhance volunteer relationships that are more horizontal and less centred around the presence of international actors. However, we also notice that the mobility inherent to international, but also national, volunteers in the blended model produces specific demands in terms of relocation and logistics which can inadvertently make the blend exist 'around' them and not 'with' them. In this regard, the research shows how the different types of knowledge and multiple roles of community volunteers need to be further recognised in the planning and design for the blend – and not just framed as contextual knowledge in contrast with other specific types of 'expertise'.

Currently, most descriptions of volunteer roles tend to differentiate between the expected labour for national and international volunteers (framed around skill sets: e.g., performance indicators, competencies, etc.) from community volunteers' labour (framed around local presence for service-delivery and contextual knowledge: e.g., fulfilling project implementation plans). Moreover, when national/international volunteers are perceived as 'outside people', they may also be inadvertently seen as the 'managers', 'staff', or the ones determining the direction of projects, something that we identified across country case studies. This in turn entrenches even starker hierarchies that can distance community volunteers from the other volunteers in the blend.

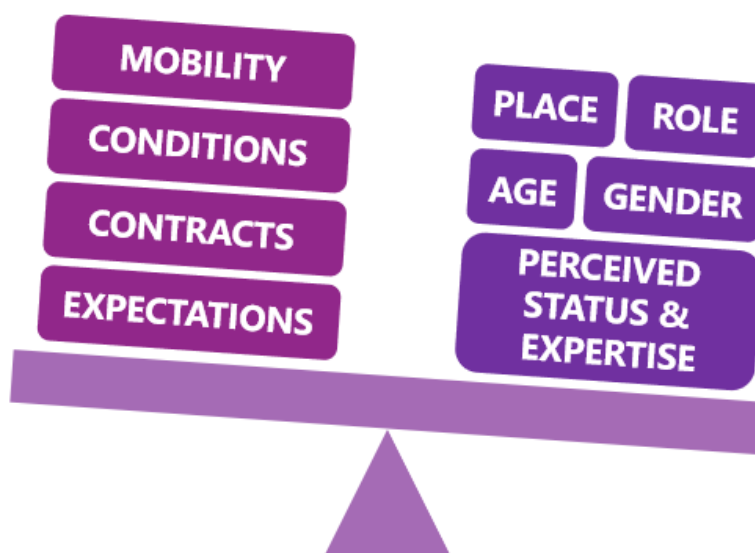


Figure 12: Finding the balance in a blend of volunteers

Source: Northumbria University research team

From a broader point of view, this also means that local actors can be perceived as solely focused on the delivery of pre-determined activities rather than also actively shaping the decision-making during projects – which is something that the blended model aims to facilitate. In this process, although both national and international volunteers were perceived as outsiders, our dataset shows that there were significant differences in the participation of international volunteers that question the horizontality in the blend. This is also related to North-South divides in the sector, evidenced when the presence of international volunteers from Northern countries affects relationships and working dynamics more broadly (Laurie & Baillie Smith, 2018). These imbalances risk positioning local actors as 'hosts' (Tiessen et al., 2018) when the involvement with international volunteers is not perceived as *working together* but rather *interacting* for particular purposes and in specific moments in time during project implementation.

"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 project, Nepal)

Volunteer participants in different countries have explained how, despite being involved in the same project, their opportunities of effectively interacting with international volunteers were limited to workshops or meetings, for example – and therefore constrained in time and space to more institutional settings. In instances where volunteers are working 'alongside' each other in this way, we cannot strictly speak of 'blended' volunteering.

"...I think the idea was that international and national volunteers would work together; whereas in reality the activities were quite different. So, the international volunteer was implementing activities and the national volunteer was implementing different activities, so rather than working together on one activity [it happened] through two separate activities."
(Interview, International professional volunteer, A-PLUS & VI-GREAT projects, Uganda)

When analysing the blended approach we also recognise the different status and responsibilities between community volunteers that play different roles in the blend, particularly in Uganda and Nepal (e.g. peer educators, champions, social mobilisers). The emphasis on the community level, however, does not imply this sphere is homogeneous, as mentioned before. Volunteer participants explained that different types of hierarchies were perceived not only between community volunteers and national/international volunteers, but also among community volunteers who play different roles in their everyday routines in the blend. This is likely related to the personal status of individuals recruited as volunteers (e.g., level of education, professional experience, local leadership roles), 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 can lead to perceived or real inequities in encounters and experiences across modalities. Moreover, although the participation of community volunteers is often praised by stakeholders and other volunteers in the blend, participants have also explained how it often entails higher expectations on them. 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, particularly in relation to the hierarchies that it can create.



Photo: Eaidius Kamanvi

Participatory mapping during workshop with volunteers, Tanzania

Hierarchies can also be reinforced by differences in the resourcing and the types of benefits that different volunteers can access (e.g. in terms of contracts, allowances, accommodation, equipment). This was raised by nearly one third of the volunteer respondents in the survey as an important area of improvement in their volunteer experience. Although all volunteer participants in the sample received allowances, these differ considerably, particularly between international/national modalities on the one hand and community volunteers on the other. In Uganda, the types and amounts of financial support received by community volunteers, as well as the timeliness of their disbursement, had important effects not only in maintaining the teams' morale, but also in their ability to cover the subsistence costs related to their volunteering activities. In Tanzania, participants expressed concern that the distinct access to allowances and rewards is a sign that 'less value' is attached to community volunteers' engagement when compared to others in the blend. There may be clear rationales behind these differences, but nonetheless differences in, and resulting perceptions of, financial and material rewards had important implications for the ways volunteer relationships were built, often distancing national and international volunteers from their community peers in the blend. This is part of a wider sectoral debate about volunteer remuneration in the global South (Baillie Smith et al., 2020; see also Jenkins, 2009b) and the ways in which volunteering and employment are often entangled (Hunter & Ross, 2013; Prince & Brown, 2016).

On the one hand, financial compensation is increasingly recognised as part of an enabling environment for organisations to support volunteering among and within marginalised communities; on the other, it needs to be handled carefully to prevent the potential creation of dependencies and hierarchies (see also Hazeldine & Baillie Smith, 2015). Financial support is thus not only about what volunteers *do*, but also who volunteers *are*, both of which have implications for then creating a blend that is as effective and inclusive as possible. Therefore, equitable resourcing and transparent communication are key to preventing the differentiation across modalities from negatively impacting volunteers' performance.

Finally, we also identify volunteer hierarchies in relation to gender and social norms, which were particularly important when analysing volunteering experiences in Nepal. These were mostly related to gendered roles in the volunteer activities performed by men and women, as well as gendered expectations of the roles of women volunteers, in particular, in the blend.

"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]". (Primary Actor, Workshop with primary actors and community volunteers, SAHAJ project, Nepal)

This relates to critical research in global South contexts that has also identified the gendered implications of volunteering which can reproduce hierarchies, such as the over-reliance of communities on women's volunteer involvement, often based on assumptions related to women's time availability (Jenkins, 2009b, 2011b) and the gendered dynamics that can emerge from volunteering during conflicts and emergencies (Cadesky et al., 2019). Our learning about gender hierarchies that can emerge in different contexts also reflects wider policy debates that have been increasingly advocating for gender-sensitive measures to address inequalities in volunteer spaces (UNV, 2021).

Overall, adaptive management remains key to developing context-specific strategies to supervise and balance the roles and responsibilities of different volunteer modalities in the blend. It relates to the importance of expanding the focus of project managers beyond the types of activities performed by each volunteer to also encompass the multiple dynamics of the blend. This can then facilitate the building of more equal relationships across modalities, as well as promote and/or strengthen existing communication channels 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 wider blend with communities – which we will discuss in the next section.



Scenario building activity during workshop with volunteers and primary actors, Uganda

KEY THEME 3: SCOPE OF THE BLEND

While the previous sections have highlighted the roles of volunteers and the blend of volunteers in practice, in our research in the three case study countries we have also found significant evidence of the importance of the context in which this blend of volunteers is situated. This section focuses on this wider context, highlighting those contextual aspects we found are of vital importance to the success of blended volunteering. We will explore how the blended model evolves over time, as well as the types of relationships and stakeholders that form the 'wider blend' as an enabling environment for different volunteers to thrive when working together.

Temporal aspects: the blend over time

Our analysis of the temporal aspect of the blend across the three country case studies reveals the importance of understanding the blend of volunteers 'over time' as an important part of the contextual aspects of what makes a successful blend. While our findings indicate that VSO's design of blended volunteering on projects is adaptive and can be adjusted to reflect realities in the field, our research also indicates the potential for further engaging and appreciating the complexities of the blend in the field over time, to ensure optimisation of development outcomes. In this regard, we highlight below the roles of placement lengths and handover, as well as the roles of very long-term volunteers.

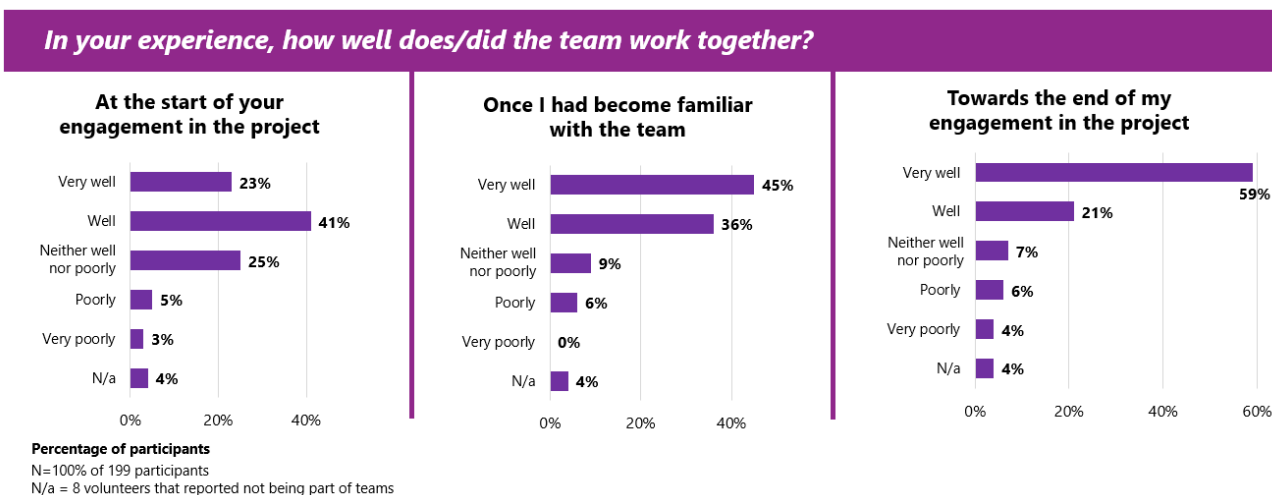
Placement lengths and handover

Our research sheds light on the significance of duration of volunteering engagements for the sustainability and resilience of projects⁴. While VSO's projects often last several years, most national and international volunteers stay on a project for three, six months or twelve months (see also **Figure 14** later in this section). Placement lengths are often determined by both project needs and the volunteer scheme through which volunteers are engaged. Some volunteering modalities, including corporate and ICS volunteers, may have shorter placements which start at two weeks. Community volunteer placements also at times have a set range of durations, although we found that this varies widely between countries. Overall, this means that volunteers 'come and go' throughout the course of a project, and this affects the blends in different ways.

In the survey, volunteers were asked how their team of volunteers worked together at the start, middle, and end of their volunteering engagement (see **Figure 13**). These graphs show a clear progression from working 'neither well nor poorly' or 'well' with others at the start of their engagement, to working 'very well' with others as their volunteering engagement progresses. Furthermore, data collected in workshops and interviews shows how inclusion and participation are enhanced over the course of project implementation, based on learning from the blended volunteering model. This further underlines the way blended volunteering creates learning and development opportunities.

⁴ We reiterate that when discussing resilience in volunteering and development settings, attention is needed to avoid the use of the term as a 'label', which calls for situating it in relation to individuals and communities, the types of shocks or adversities they face, and the transformative potential of resilient approaches – rather than simply an emphasis on 'bouncing back' (Cretney, 2014; see also Fadel & Chadwick, 2020).

Figure 13: Volunteer survey answers to the question “How well does/did the team work together?”



Source: Northumbria University research team

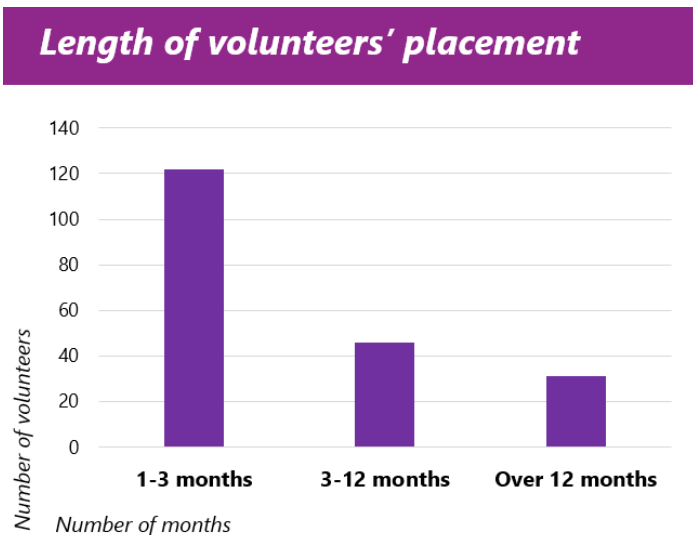
While it is perhaps not surprising that volunteers start to work better in their teams as they get to know others better in the blend, our findings also highlight how every time a new volunteer enters a team, a new ‘blending’ process begins. While this is the nature of working with volunteers and not exclusive to the work of VSO, it further underlines how ‘the blend’ itself remains fluid, often changing repeatedly over the course of a project and, as a result, challenges may arise. For example, various participants, including staff members and volunteers themselves, mentioned that shorter durations for international and national volunteers in particular also meant that additional time and efforts were needed to nurture the blend, and ensure that all volunteers are (re)accustomed to their roles, the team, and the local context. Furthermore, successful handover from one cohort of volunteers to the next was also raised as a factor impacting a project’s efficiency. To varying extents, we found issues were often highlighted regarding handover between volunteers ‘coming and going’ on projects in all three case study countries, and identified that this could be handled more efficiently to improve project outcomes. Hence, the research highlights the need for attention to the ‘blending’ process between coming and going volunteers, on top of ‘blending’ modalities, to ensure knowledge, impacts and skills gained through the blended model are sustained throughout the lifetime of projects.

Our research also shows that the project phase may have additional influence on the potential for the blend to be sustained. All volunteers communicated an awareness of the stage a project was in when they joined it, and some highlighted particular challenges associated with this. Toward the end of a project, for example, when working practices are already established, new volunteers raised the difficulty of fitting into existing teams and the project and/or improving existing practices. On the other hand, several interviewees reflected that at the early stages of a project, the blend had not yet been fully integrated/ designed, for example where community volunteers were not originally envisaged to be part of a project. However, our interviews with staff members also indicate that VSO continues learning from their experiences with blended volunteering and their work across the range of volunteering modalities, recognising the importance of designing the blend into the project at all stages in iterative ways. In spite of this, a range of participants still discussed being involved in a situation with a less than optimal blend with either a limited number of different modalities in the project, or a lack of ‘blending’ among the existing modalities, which is also related to the potential hierarchies and disconnections among volunteers that were discussed earlier (see Key Theme 2). Although sometimes, a ‘less than perfect blend’ was explained by unforeseeable issues (e.g. Covid-19), in other instances it was ascribed to factors such as: project design; geographies of volunteer placements; volunteers who work in larger teams, making it easier to ‘stick to their own’; individuals that do not like to work in teams and the shorter placements of some volunteers.

The roles of long-term volunteers

VSO considers volunteering commitments of under three months as 'short-term' volunteering, and volunteering commitments of longer than three months 'long-term' volunteering. While most volunteers that took part in interviews and workshops would be considered long-term volunteers, the survey captured a different demographic in terms of volunteer placement lengths (see **Figure 14**); and overall, a trend has been noted towards volunteer involvements getting shorter (Chen, 2018; Shachar et al., 2019).

Figure 14: Volunteer survey answers to the question "How long is/was your most recent volunteering assignment with VSO?"



Source: Northumbria University research team

"We also worked with the national volunteer who was always [Name], he was there all the time, he also was there for phase one in the project, so he had the continuous knowledge of everything." (Interview, International corporate volunteer, YEEP and DYNAMIC projects, Uganda)

Very long-term volunteers were found in all three case study countries, but played important roles in Uganda and Nepal in particular. Accounts both from these volunteers themselves, as well as others who worked with them, indicated the important role of these established volunteers within teams. In Uganda, a core presence of one or a few 'very long-term' volunteers in projects ensured smooth transitioning of new volunteers into the project, thereby becoming the 'glue' that held the blend together over time and across team transitions, being knowledgeable about the ins and outs of the project over time. In Nepal, many volunteers remain on the project for a very long time, particularly community volunteers, who sometimes remain involved for a project's entire duration. Such very long-term volunteering commitments of community volunteers ensured stability in projects and contributed to successful outcomes, and perhaps not surprisingly, the aforementioned issues of handover were mentioned far less in this case study context than in the others. We identify this long-term involvement of community volunteers as being of vital importance to maximising development impact and building relationships within the blend of volunteers, as well as with communities and stakeholders involved on the project. In the context of Nepal, where the blend of modalities is sometimes less easy to identify and is stretched across scales, the presence of multiple very long-term volunteers across international, national and community modalities is especially important to successful volunteering engagement. In particular, our data shows that very long-term community volunteers are a key factor in the success and longevity of VSO projects, due to their presence in communities and relationships with various stakeholders.

Prioritising and formalising longer-term volunteer positions may bring benefits for the resilience and sustainable outcomes of VSO projects. This speaks directly to the issue identified above, of potential challenges arising from the loss of continuity in blends as different volunteers inevitably 'come and go' across a project cycle. While this dilemma is hard to solve in a blended model, the Uganda case study highlighted the value of even a single longer-term volunteer in supporting the blend. However, we also emphasise that this very long-term volunteering is not without its challenges, especially in relation to individual community volunteers who can end up shouldering a disproportionate responsibility for delivering projects and managing higher expectations, without always receiving sufficient recognition or support for this (see also Jenkins, 2009b). It is thus important that assumptions are not made only on the basis of geography and length of placement, which could lead to undue pressure on volunteers, so a degree of caution is needed here in operationalising these benefits for projects whilst balancing individual volunteers' needs.

Therefore, it is important to recognise the blend as fluid and influenced by the contextual aspects of a project, including project stage, cohort overlaps and handovers, and placement duration. Furthermore, the context of relationships with other stakeholders play an important role in the success of blended volunteering, which we will discuss now.



Participatory mapping during group workshop with primary actors and volunteers, Nepal

Photo: Social Science Baha

Relationships and the 'wider blend': rethinking who is in the blend

Our data from Nepal, Tanzania and Uganda indicates that good working relationships, collaborations and blending not just between different types of volunteers but also in relation to the wider stakeholders, are essential to the success and long-term impacts of projects. Some literature on volunteering highlights that when the agendas of volunteering-based development interventions are driven by local actors, this can lead to solidarity, mutual learning and more equitable relationships, and mutual understanding of project aims plays a key role in achieving this (Devereux, 2008; Fee & Mdee, 2010; Frilund, 2018; Perold et al., 2013). However, these relationships are both context-dependent and complex, and in spite of their importance, remain under-researched (Devereux et al., 2017). Relationships between volunteers, partners, primary actors and other stakeholders were highlighted in the survey, as well as discussed in all interviews and workshops, with participants reflecting on both positive accounts and challenges in the relationships. As we will discuss in this section, participants' positive accounts referred to good working relationships, mutual understanding of the project aims, and appreciation for all stakeholders involved in the project, whereas accounts of challenges included misunderstandings and differing expectations of project aims, concerns about sustainability and lasting impacts, as well as issues around policy and management.

The importance of managing these relationships, and the challenges they can present, is of course not exclusive to VSO, but reflects experiences and challenges faced in myriad international development projects and contexts. However, as these relationships are of key importance to the way blended volunteering is carried out and experienced, and therefore, to the success of a project, we reflect on them here in the context of blended volunteering. Indeed, scholars have suggested that these relationships may even be considered development outcomes in and of themselves (Schech et al., 2018). Before doing so, it is also important to note the development landscapes and contexts differ between case study countries, influencing the way relationships take shape and the roles of the various stakeholders within the project. One notable difference between our case study countries is VSO's ability to be physically present in the 'field' to implement projects. VSO Tanzania and VSO Uganda are able to operate within communities, and often have regional offices and staff overseeing projects on the ground. They also work with partner organisations at the regional level. VSO Nepal, on the other hand, implements projects at the community level through partner organisations due to government regulations. VSO Nepal therefore work through partner organisations on the ground; in this context, then, the partner organisations play an increased role in the successful implementation of projects.



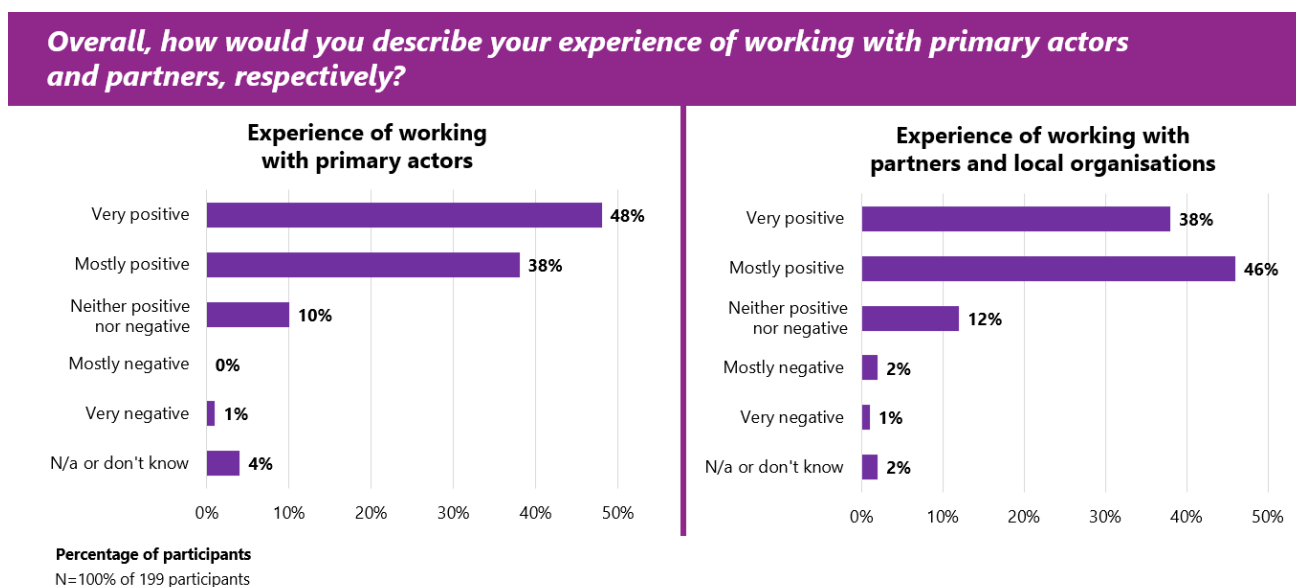
Photo: Egidius Kamanyiri

Introduction of group workshop with national and community volunteers, Tanzania

Community experiences and expectations

A message emerging across both participants discussing positive relationships with other stakeholders, and participants describing challenges in these relationships, is that the recognition of diverse ways of understanding projects, project aims and desired outcomes between all stakeholders is key for projects to be successful. There are, of course, always practical risks of a disconnect between community expectations, project design, volunteer activity and practical outputs. However, before we explore these, it is worth noting that volunteers in the survey overwhelmingly rated their working experiences with primary actors and partners as 'mostly positive' or 'very positive' (see **Figure 15**).

Figure 15: Volunteer survey answers to the questions "How would you describe your experience of working with primary actors?" and "How would you describe your experience of working with partners and local organisations?"



Source: Northumbria University research team

Overall, then, as seen in the graphs above, 86% of volunteer participants had a mostly positive or very positive experience working with primary actors, and 84% had a mostly or very positive experience working with partners. However, over half of volunteers who took the survey also reported that attitudes or contributions from partners and primary actors negatively affected the project; either sometimes (31% for primary actors and 26% for partners), mostly (15% for both categories) or always (9% for both categories). When asked about important areas for improvement for VSO, 46% of volunteers selected the option 'Encouraging enhanced communication with local partners and primary actors'; this was the second most selected option, highlighting its importance from the perspective of volunteers. Community volunteers were most likely to indicate a 'very positive' working relationship with primary actors (69%), whereas international volunteers were least likely to do so (38%), indicating that where difficulties occur, these may be due to misunderstandings due to language or cultural barriers, aspects that were also raised in interviews and workshops. Furthermore, different types of volunteers highlighted in workshops and interviews that building relationships with other stakeholders takes time. In Tanzania and Nepal in particular, shared ownership and understanding of project aims and outputs, as well as community integration were highlighted by participants as important paths for project improvements, including further establishing links with primary actors and powerful people in communities, as necessary for project success. In these country contexts, there were some key concerns raised in relation to community expectations and local ownerships.

When research participants discussed challenges in relationships with other stakeholders and/or achieving the project aims, these were often related to a lack of understanding and/or communication between two or more stakeholders on the project. Volunteers explained they sometimes faced difficulties in convincing primary actors of the importance of the projects, particularly in Nepal, where this issue has also been noted by previous VSO research (Hacker et al., 2017). In some instances, notably in Nepal, stakeholders sometimes seemed to lack an understanding of VSO projects or were unaware of VSO altogether.

"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 project, Nepal)

We suggest this reflects a lack of local ownership, occurring when stakeholders at the community level do not feel sufficiently involved, engaged or responsible for the projects. In Tanzania, this issue was often also related to financial expectations and the realities of primary actors' lives. A range of volunteer participants explained this was a challenge they had to overcome in their work, which in some instances led to primary actors and community volunteers dropping out of a project, thereby negatively impacting outcomes and reach of VSO's work. Volunteers also remarked on the need for a budget to appropriately compensate primary actors for travelling, lunch and/or time spent in workshops; this would secure their participation. Most of these volunteers reported they were able to resolve this issue by working to enhance stakeholder understanding of the project aims, which points to the importance of considering not only the immediate project needs but also the wider local contexts and primary actors' everyday realities, in order to enhance the success of a project (see also Fadel & Chadwick, 2020).

In Tanzania and Nepal, VSO projects often target regions where other development interventions are also taking place. As a result, at times the volunteers reported difficulties in securing primary actors' participation and recruiting community volunteers. In Tanzania in particular, other NGOs were reportedly able to offer more resources to the same stakeholders. These concerns stand in notable contrast with Uganda, where there was little evidence of 'competition' between development organisations present on the ground, and VSO was praised for working in difficult to reach communities, that would often be overlooked by other projects and organisations, reinforcing VSO's embeddedness in these communities in that country context.

"...that project [Nefkens], how it was designed, it was basically to go and meet the direct beneficiaries directly, because we used to go to some deep places that many of the partners never reached; and I don't think if they're going to reach because when we talk of ..., when you talk of ..., talk of ..., there's deep places whereby at times you leave your vehicle more than the distance [that] you walk and meet the community deep there. [...] I've seen people walking barefooted so very few of them visit such a place or such places." (Interview, VSO Partner, Nefkens project, Uganda)

In Nepal, participants noted the relationships 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. In Tanzania and Uganda, VSO were often credited with improving relationships between various actors in communities themselves. Accounts from partners in the field in Uganda highlight how VSO Uganda actively engages with local leaders, and is considered embedded in local communities to the point of being understood as a community-led organisation. This approach of targeting overlooked communities has substantial benefits for local buy-in, and as a result, sustainable development outcomes.

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

The data also shows that a blend of international and national professional volunteers with community volunteers encourages communication between actors. As noted in Key Theme 2, community volunteers were particularly mentioned by a range of participants as providing essential links between national and international volunteers and communities, stakeholders, and VSO. This reinforces our earlier points on the pivotal role of community volunteers. However, considering that different volunteers ‘blend’ differently with, and into, the project and the wider community is an essential consideration in project design, implementation and evaluation. In Nepal and Tanzania in particular, some participants explained that using *only* community volunteers on a project may lead to a decreased involvement by primary actors, due to perceptions of knowledge and expertise. This highlights the benefit of the *blend* for relationships with communities, as perceptions of modalities also influence project success and outcomes, and further reflects our findings that participants across our sample saw value in the *blended* approach to volunteering in particular.

Hence, there is an identified need for continuous engagement with stakeholders at a local level throughout a project to allow for optimal results of the blended volunteering model. This not only has the potential to improve development outcomes of VSO projects, but also to ensure VSO’s goals of inclusiveness are achieved, and primary actors are further enabled to assert their agency and negotiate power relationships between different stakeholders (see also Chen, 2021). A wide range of participants emphasised this need for ongoing communication and working together, with some remarking that a sense of shared ownership based on mutual understanding can make the crucial difference between a project ultimately succeeding or failing. Our data shows that there is a wide range of different stakeholders with different interests and needs within communities, including in relation to factors such as gender and age. This recognition of diverse ways of understanding project aims and desired outcomes among all stakeholders is key for projects to be successful, as well as for maintaining good working relationships in the blend – not just among different types of volunteers, but between volunteers and various stakeholders in the communities they work, and between these different stakeholders themselves.

Integrations and overlaps

This research finds that not only can volunteer modalities be fluid, but other stakeholders move between categories, meaning the categories of 'primary actor', 'volunteer' and 'partner' themselves are at times fluid rather than strictly delineated. Across our work, we have seen evidence of some primary actors becoming involved as volunteers, some community volunteers going on to become national volunteers in subsequent VSO projects, and some volunteers being hired to work at VSO or partner organisations after their volunteering placements. Furthermore, we have found that some partners also contribute voluntary work on VSO projects alongside their regular positions. We found this moving between categories to have positive implications for the success of projects in all contexts, however the shape this took differed between countries. In Uganda, for example, we saw various accounts of training provided to young primary actors as part of livelihoods projects, and then recruiting those who had shown excellent commitment to be community volunteers (i.e., peer mentors or peer educators).

"... the community, they used to call us youth, because we were once built from the project, we grew up, we gained experience and now we are going back again to teach these fellow youth enrolled into the project. So we would teach them, the different experiences we gained, the different life skills, challenges to overcome, basically entrepreneurship skills was core [...] those are the things that we could teach them as youth champions volunteering in the community."

(Interview, Community volunteer 2, YEPP, Gulu district, Uganda)

In this context, community volunteers were generally young people who had excelled in the projects and respective training courses as primary actors. This approach of recruiting volunteers from existing primary actors, who have first-hand project experience, and are willing to enhance opportunities for others in their own communities, appears to play a key role in further enhancing community buy-in, resilience and embeddedness of activities in Uganda. We consider this a further step to community engagement and creating shared understandings of project work.

Furthermore, VSO often work side by side with local partners in communities, as seen in Tanzania and Uganda, and volunteers overall reported positive or very positive working relationships with partners (see **Figure 15** earlier). On the other hand, in Nepal partners play a particularly important role in the success of VSO project activities on the ground, as due to the aforementioned regulatory circumstances in the country, VSO relies on partner organisations to deliver projects 'in the field'.

"[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, S4S, Nepal)

As a result, in Nepal partners often carry out the role that local VSO staff would play in other countries. Therefore, we found that partners that are embedded in the project's specific locations played decisive roles in ensuring the success of projects in the Nepalese context. Furthermore, partners also work closely with volunteers across modalities, sometimes working together with volunteers in a 'blended capacity'. At times, volunteers and primary actors are not able to specify if partners are 'staff' or 'volunteers', highlighting the key roles and important embeddedness of partners in the blended approach, as well as the fluidity that is inherent to the conceptualisation of the blend.



Group activity with volunteers and primary actors during participatory workshop, Uganda

Alongside their embeddedness in projects and close work with community volunteers, data furthermore suggests partners (often identified in the field as ‘community mobilisers’), national, and international volunteers work very closely together and may also fulfil similar roles. In fact, international and national volunteers often work more with community mobilisers than they do with community volunteers, again indicating the vital importance of the ‘wider blend’, and particularly of partners, in the context of Nepal. Furthermore, there is also evidence in Nepal of partners actively 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 ensures successful outputs of a project. Overall, partners’ strong involvement, and these overlapping roles, are both extremely valuable, and there is extensive evidence of excellent ‘blending’ between different volunteer modalities and partners, ensuring project impacts are achieved. Nevertheless, some challenges remain in local contexts. For example, the approach of working through partner organisations has limitations when partners are located away from local communities and still unable to have a constant presence in the field – 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. We therefore note that, although the importance of partner organisations cannot be overstated, they do not 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.

Based on the data collected across the case study countries and in the survey, we can see that the key to successful blended volunteering is not just the ‘blending’ of various volunteering modalities, but that the blending of volunteers and communities, stakeholders and partners. In order to do so, the local context and development landscapes must be taken into consideration as an integral aspect of project design, and understanding the various roles various stakeholders can play is crucial. The blended approach can land differently in different places, requiring subtly different work to operationalise it and secure its effectiveness. In this way, the scope of the ‘blend’ is broadened beyond the working together of volunteers to encompass a wider range of key stakeholders that are present in the development landscape.

Learning on resilience and sustainability

To varying extent, across the three country case studies, participants voiced both concerns about long-lasting impacts and sustainability after VSO projects ended, as well as hopeful accounts and success stories. Overall our findings show that the blended approach to volunteering has unique potential for supporting sustained legacy of development work at local levels, and that the wider blend of volunteers with communities and their aspirations can enhance project resilience and lasting outputs. This is dependent on the selection of the right stakeholders and promotion of a sense of shared ownership between them, drawing on the strengths of different modalities. Some of the key areas of success and further attention for sustained impacts of the blended model are the following:

- ♦ **Shared ownership/understanding and blended volunteering for sustainability:** blended volunteering is uniquely positioned to achieve successful relationships and sustained development impacts, demonstrating good potential for sustaining VSO's legacy at local level. By privileging balanced contributions from different members of a team, the blended approach can foster more horizontal relationships in development action that enhance the roles and ownership of local actors in development action. However, establishing a sense of shared ownership between all stakeholders is a key factor in the success of projects, and broader engagement of a wider range of stakeholders in the community were identified by participants as a strategy towards ensuring further legacy and sustained impacts of projects in communities. Considerations of legacy and sustained impacts should begin all the way at the design stage of a project, by prioritising community needs and ensuring community involvement and participation.

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

- ♦ **Resilience and relationships for sustainability:** evidence from the case studies suggests that a combination of factors contributes to the resilience of projects, and of the blended approach within such projects. In particular, the wider blend with local communities, combined with the experience of 'very long-term' volunteer commitments, as well as inclusive approaches for reinforcing local capacities in hard-to-reach locations, were key elements in ensuring resilience is at the heart of the blended volunteering model. Furthermore, across the three countries, we consistently found evidence that the ongoing involvement and place-based nature of community volunteering brought particular advantages for sustainability, lasting impacts and resilience. Overall, successes in terms of project outcomes as well as potential for sustained impacts through blended volunteering is often connected to the strong relationships between partners, volunteers and primary actors in the community, and the embeddedness of very long-term community volunteers within their communities and projects.

"And also under this, there are many changes that they brought into the community. For example, we have financial sustainability, self-dependence. People are able to create their own jobs, start their own life through this training because one is able to know how to move on with a business and all those and as a result an individual is able to live independently." (Workshop with primary actors, DYNAMIC, Nefkens and YEEP projects, Uganda)

"...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 project, Nepal)

CONCLUSION

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 this research reveals the dynamic nature of blended volunteering and the need for adaptive management strategies to maximise its effectiveness, and confirms the value that it can bring for VSO's programme outcomes and development impact, as well as to wider volunteering for development practice and scholarship.

In this report, we have explored how the 'blend' works in three country contexts – Nepal, Tanzania, Uganda – and identified critical issues for understanding and enhancing blended approaches for improved development impacts in wider contexts. We have engaged with the diverse actors involved in multiple project blends to understand how different stakeholders experience the blended approach. Participants in the research have identified significant positive benefits to a blended approach for both projects and individuals, particularly in the opportunities it gives for learning and the exchange of ideas between different volunteering modalities, and hence, between different histories and experiences.

Volunteers working together is not new, and the blended approach reflects a recognition of the complex realities of how different people come together to make change. Consequently, the findings presented here are of relevance not only to VSO, but to wider organisations who engage volunteers for development outcomes at different scales. We have identified three key sets of findings with implications for understanding and enhancing the blended volunteering approach:

1) Understanding volunteering modalities and skills

- ♦ **Conceptualising modalities in the blend.** The research argues for an expansive conceptualisation of volunteer modalities, recognising that these modalities are often overlapping and may not always be perceived in the same ways by all stakeholders. Skill sets do not map neatly onto modalities but rather are distributed across them.
- ♦ **The blend as dynamic and responsive.** Volunteer modalities can emerge organically in response to particular requirements or circumstances on the ground. We characterise the blended volunteering model as fluid and dynamic, and adaptable to the requirements of diverse contexts, including responding to crises and unexpected changes. We identify tensions in balancing the fluid and dynamic nature of the blend with the requirements of development programming and project design, and highlight the importance of harnessing the 'productive messiness' of the blend in practice.

2) Centrality of community volunteers

- ♦ **Steering the blend from the community level.** The presence of a blend of volunteers is beneficial to development practice areas and recognised as a key factor in maximising projects' outcomes and the personal development of volunteers in iterative ways. The research shows how the model can benefit from prioritising the engagement of community volunteers who play a pivotal role in facilitating shared ownership of projects due to their knowledge, sustained engagement and acceptance at local levels. Blending them with other modalities according to locally-driven and context-specific needs can then enhance legacy and sustained impacts for development.
- ♦ **Challenging hierarchies of knowledge and practice.** The differentiation of modalities is at the core of the blended approach but it can also lead to perceived or actual hierarchies between volunteers, creating a critical dilemma for the blended model. We identify the importance of recognising these multiple levels of hierarchies and how they affect the relationships among volunteers playing different roles within the blend, particularly community volunteers.

3) Scope of the blend

- ♦ **Temporal aspects: the blend over time.** This research emphasises the importance of temporal context for the blend of volunteers on a project. Project phase can affect how volunteer combinations are developed and sustained because the blend is not static, consequently community and volunteer attitudes will change and develop as the teams mature and/or change. The research has also highlighted how long-term knowledge and project-based expertise of key volunteers can improve the workings of the blend throughout a project cycle, where long-term community volunteering commitments in particular may be essential for primary actor engagement in certain contexts.
- ♦ **Relationships and the wider blend: rethinking who is in the blend.** The research highlights the importance of recognising that the blend does not exist in a vacuum; diverse and sometimes longstanding relationships and experiences between different volunteers and stakeholders shape how VSO's work might be imagined, experienced and understood between different actors. The embeddedness of the blend in local communities, and the ways it helps understand and navigate priorities of different stakeholders, will play a key role in the success of ongoing projects.

Implications for policy and practice

The research has a range of implications for maximising the impacts and efficacy of a blended approach to volunteering. As such, they extend beyond VSO's work, and highlight how the significance and potential of a blended approach provides an important new way of thinking about and programming of volunteering for development. Two key attributes of blended volunteering stand out:

- a) **Utilising a bespoke blend of volunteers on a project adds value and enables adaptability to changing circumstances.** A blend of volunteers can foster a culture of learning and an innovative environment that offers the opportunity to overcome long and short-term challenges and improve development outcomes.
- b) **A blended approach has the potential to de-centre global North actors and knowledges thereby increasing the likelihood that the outcomes of projects can be sustained in the longer term.** Placing community volunteers at the heart of processes of change, recognising their knowledge and skills, can help unsettle long-standing inequalities and exclusions.

Achieving this potential is not without challenges, particularly for staff seeking to create and nurture blends that shift and change over time. Nonetheless, we can identify some key issues that need to be acknowledged and addressed to enhance the value of the blended approach:

- ♦ **The blend does not exist in a vacuum, and can reflect as well as challenge norms and expectations.** Realising the potential of blended volunteering to challenge hierarchies is dependent on empowering all those involved to specifically and deliberately challenge inequalities within and between volunteer modalities and within the contexts in which the blend is located.
- ♦ **The differentiation at the heart of the blended approach can also foster perceptions and experiences of hierarchies between volunteers.** The research identifies the importance of addressing hierarchies both in terms of resourcing and contracts, but also in the expectations on different volunteers. How these are managed will have a direct impact on effectiveness.
- ♦ **The refinement of the blend should be based around skills and expertise rather than place-based modalities.** 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
- ♦ **Determining the perfect blend cannot be found by identifying the constituent parts and specifying the ideal recipe mix given a specific situation.** The onus has to be on NGOs to embrace the fluidity and dynamism of the blend over time, and for organisations to find ways to reconcile this with their expectations and requirements around reporting and accountability.

Implications for research and knowledge

This research has addressed a significant gap in knowledge on volunteering and development by focusing on the volunteering assemblage that is produced through a blended approach. In particular, the research has moved knowledge and understanding forward by:

- ♦ *Developing a conceptualisation of volunteering that de-centres individual volunteers and international volunteers from the global North;*
- ♦ *Foregrounding the experiences of community volunteers, and understanding volunteering amongst/by marginalised groups and primary actors;*
- ♦ *Exploring community-led and international volunteering together, reflecting the realities of volunteering on the ground while recognising the different ways they are resourced and recognised;*
- ♦ *Analysing how the blended volunteering approach contributes to the resilience and success of development projects in the context of unexpected shocks and crises, as evidenced in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic;*
- ♦ *Understanding the importance of the perceptions and experiences of diverse types of volunteers working together to create enabling contexts in which to volunteer effectively;*
- ♦ *Identifying the ways specific contexts shape ideas and experiences of volunteering and how this impacts different kinds of volunteer and how their knowledge and skills are valued;*
- ♦ *Highlighting the importance of looking beyond project timelines when analysing the relationships and discourses that shape volunteering relationships and hierarchies.*

The research has also confirmed the value of equitable collaborations between global South and global North scholars in building knowledge of volunteering and development, and of the value of collaborations across academic and policy and practice sectors in co-developing knowledge. Through the research and these dialogues, a number of areas where further research is needed have been identified:

- ♦ *Longitudinal analyses of the ways different volunteers and primary actors come together to bring about change are needed to capture how 'blends' change over time and how this affects the kinds of changes that are achieved. This requires the development of appropriate low-cost methodologies, which could include peer research and visual approaches to both document change and build capacities;*
- ♦ *Attention is needed to relationships between different kinds of volunteer blends and modalities, and primary actors and partners in diverse contexts, in order to deepen understanding of the roles and potential of volunteering to improve development outcomes;*
- ♦ *Gender inequalities underpin volunteering relationships and ascriptions of knowledge and skills, and need further analysis in order to identify strategies to challenge them;*
- ♦ *The importance of community volunteers to development outcomes demands research that better analyses their experiences of volunteering over time and in different projects and contexts, in order to better challenge the hierarchies that often instrumentalise and parochialise them.*

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 – INTERVIEW SCHEDULES

Interview - Volunteer

1. Can you tell me what project(s) you are working/have worked on and how long you have worked there?
 - a. What was your role/what activities did you undertake in the project that you are working/have worked on?
 - b. Do you know what stage the project is/was in at the moment of your involvement? (E.g. was it a new project or had it been going for a while? Did you have to catch up on ongoing activities?)
2. Can you tell me about your background/previous experience/training and the ways in which you think it has equipped you for volunteering?
3. 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?
 - a. Can you talk about the activities you undertook together with other volunteers?
4. Did VSO explain how they expect different types of volunteers to work together before you started your work on the project?
 - a. If yes, how?
 - b. If yes, did it work this way in practice? If not, what has gone differently? (probe for examples of unexpected challenges, successes, etc)
5. Did you ever work with other types of volunteers in a way that was not planned beforehand/that you did not expect? If yes, can you give an example?
6. How would you describe your experience of working with other volunteers?
 - a. What would you say are benefits of working with different types of volunteers? Any specific type in particular?
 - b. Were there disadvantages to working together with different types of volunteers? Any specific type in particular?
7. Can you give us an example or a story of when something went wrong in your activities? What did you learn from it?
8. Do you think you would have been able to carry out this project with only one type of volunteers?
 - a. If yes – how so/what would that have looked like?
 - b. If no – what areas could not have been carried out/why not?)
9. Could you talk a bit about your experience working with primary actors?
10. Could you tell us a bit about your experience of working with VSO's partner organisations in the field?

11. If you were to give advice to VSO about designing projects, what would you suggest they do differently? (Probe for relationships with volunteers, partners, primary actors)
12. Can you tell us what you have learned from your volunteer experience?
 - a. *For current volunteers:* How you think this experience will impact your future?
 - b. *For former volunteers:* Would you say your volunteer experience has changed the way you think and act in your everyday life?
 - c. *For former volunteers:* Do you continue to engage with VSO and/or other volunteers you have worked with?

Interview - Partner

1. Can you tell me a bit about what projects have you worked on with VSO, your position and role within the project, and how long you worked on it?
 - a. Can you tell us a bit about the project(s) you are working/have worked on?
2. Could you differentiate between the types of VSO volunteers you were collaborating with and what were their roles?
3. How would you describe your experience working alongside VSO volunteers?
 - a. Probe for benefits/disadvantages
 - b. Was there a particular type of volunteer/modality that you found it easier or more difficult to work with?
4. Did VSO explain how they expect you to work alongside different types of volunteers before you started to collaborate with them on the project?
 - a. If yes, how?
 - b. If yes, did it work this way in practice? If not, what has gone differently? (probe for examples of unexpected challenges, successes, etc)
5. Did you ever work with, or witness, volunteers working together in a way that was not planned/envisaged beforehand/that you did not expect? If yes, can you give an example?
6. Do you think you would have been able to collaborate with VSO in this project with only one type of volunteers?
 - a. If yes – how so/what would that have looked like?
 - b. If no – what areas could not have been carried out/why not?
7. Could you talk a bit about your experience (or your institution's) working with primary actors?
8. Do you collaborate with other organisations and volunteers? If yes, how do these collaborations differ from your work with VSO?
9. If you were to give advice to VSO about designing any new projects, what would you suggest they do differently? (Probe for relationships with volunteers, other partners, primary actors)
10. What did you learn from your experience working in partnership with VSO?

Interview - Primary actor

1. Can you tell me a bit about the VSO project that you/your institution/ your community was involved in?
 - a. When did it take place?
 - b. Did you and your community benefit from it? If so, how?
2. Do you know if there were different types of VSO volunteers (modalities) working on the project? Can you differentiate between their roles in the community activities?
3. Could you talk a bit about your experience with volunteers?
 - a. Probe for benefits/disadvantages
 - b. Was there a particular type of volunteer/modality that you found it easier or more difficult to work with?
4. Did VSO/local organisations explain how different types of volunteers would be working in your community for this project?
 - a. If yes, how?
 - b. If yes, did it work this way in practice? If not, what has gone differently? (probe for examples of unexpected challenges, successes, etc)
5. Was there anything that surprised you about the ways in which volunteers worked?
6. *If the primary actor has a shown an understanding of volunteer modalities:* Do you think you this project could happen with only one type of volunteers?
 - a. If yes – how so/what would that have looked like?
 - b. If no – what areas could not have been carried out/why not?
7. Could you talk a bit about your experience with local organisations working on this project?
8. What impacts would you say VSO's work has had on you/your community/your institution?
 - a. Positive/negative/examples?
9. If you were to give advice to VSO about designing any new projects, what would you suggest they do differently? (Probe for relationships with volunteers, partners, other primary actors)

Interview - Staff programme manager/monitoring and evaluation lead

1. Can you tell us a bit about the aims and outcomes of the programme(s) you are working/have worked on, and your own role within the programme?
2. What types of volunteers (modalities) work(ed) on the programme(s), and what were their roles?
3. How did VSO decide which volunteering modalities to use on this programme(s)? (probe for design stage/role of primary actors)
4. What was the aim for combining volunteering modalities?
5. Has blended volunteering worked as intended? If not, what has gone differently? (probe for examples of unexpected challenges, successes, etc)

6. Do you think you would have been able to carry out this programme with only one type of volunteers?
 - a. If yes – how so/what would that have looked like? (e.g. what volunteer modality?/do you think blended volunteering added any value?
 - b. If no – what areas could not have been carried out/why not?)
7. Did you see any unplanned/spontaneous blended volunteering happening? (examples?)
8. What do you think were the overall impacts of blended volunteering on the programme outputs?
 - a. Were there any impacts that were particularly unexpected/surprised you?
 - b. Were there any negative or unwelcome outcomes of blended volunteering?
9. What have you learned from your experience with blended volunteering to date?
 - a. What would you do differently in the future?
10. How do you work together with other VSO staff members to share experiences of blended volunteering across programmes/countries?
11. Are you responsible for volunteer recruitment and/or maintaining contact with past volunteers?

Interview - Staff member responsible for recruitment and appointment of volunteers

1. Can you tell us a bit about the aims and outcomes of the programme(s) you are working/have worked on, and your own role within the programme?
2. What types of volunteers (modalities) work(ed) on the programme(s), and what were their roles?
3. How did VSO decide which volunteering modalities to use on this programme(s)? (probe for design stage/role of primary actors)
4. What was the aim for combining volunteering modalities?
5. What particular qualities and skills are you looking for in the different types of volunteering modalities?
6. How do factors such as age, nationality and gender factor into the selection of the different types of volunteering modalities?
7. How does recruitment for different types of volunteers differ?
8. What do you think were the overall impacts of blended volunteering on the programme outputs?
 - a. Were there any impacts that were particularly unexpected/surprised you?
 - a. Were there any negative or unwelcome outcomes of blended volunteering?
9. How will your experience with blended volunteering influence how you will plan for blended volunteering in future projects?
10. How do you work together with other VSO staff members to share experiences of blended volunteering across programmes/countries?

Interview - Staff responsible for maintaining contact/networking with past volunteers

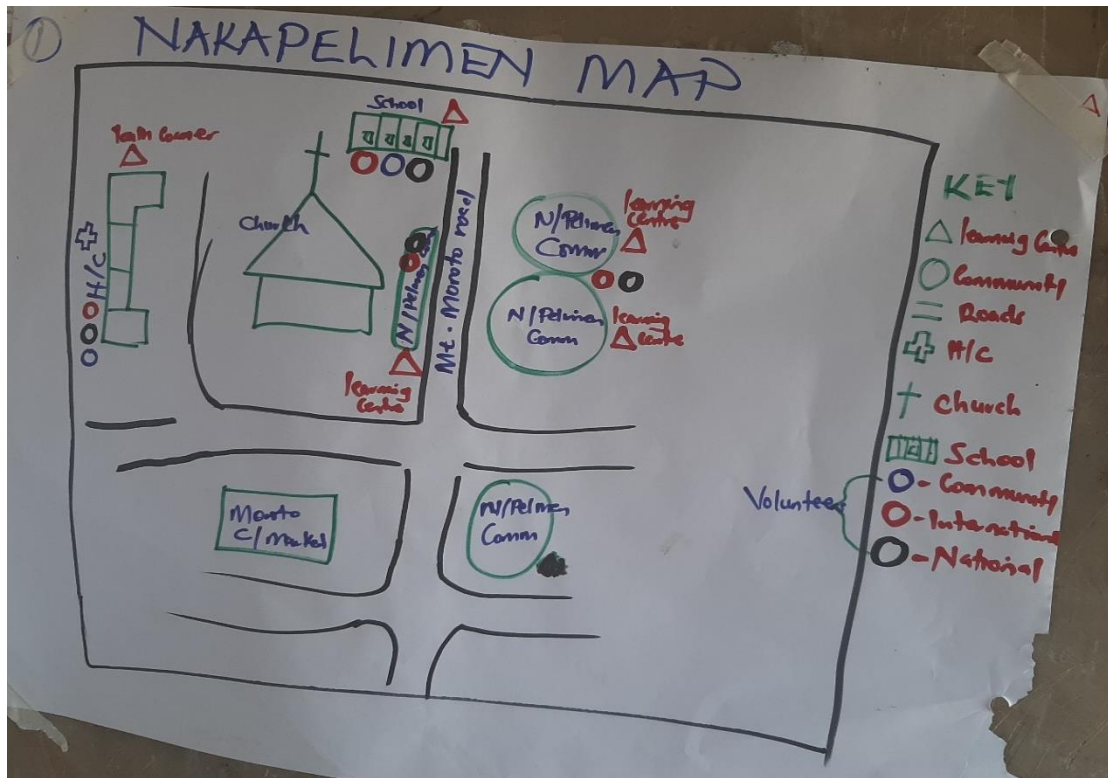
1. Can you tell us a bit about the aims and outcomes of the programme(s) you are working/have worked on, and your own role within the programme?
2. What types of volunteers (modalities) work(ed) on the programme(s), and what were their roles?
3. How did VSO decide which volunteering modalities to use on this programme(s)? (probe for design stage/role of primary actors)
4. What was the aim for combining volunteering modalities?
5. What do you think were the overall impacts of blended volunteering on the programme outputs?
 - a. Were there any impacts that were particularly unexpected/surprised you?
 - b. Were there any negative or unwelcome outcomes of blended volunteering?
6. How do you keep in touch with former volunteers, and what does this on-going contact entail?
7. Are there any volunteering modalities that you find it is easier to stay in touch with? If yes: which ones/how so?
8. Do you think working in a blended volunteering setting has an impact on volunteers' long-term engagements with VSO/active citizenship? If no: why not? If yes: how so?
9. How has your ongoing engagement with volunteers shaped your perception of best practices for blended volunteering going forward?
10. How do you work together with other VSO staff members to share experiences of blended volunteering across programmes/countries?

APPENDIX 2 – PARTICIPATORY WORKSHOP SCHEDULE

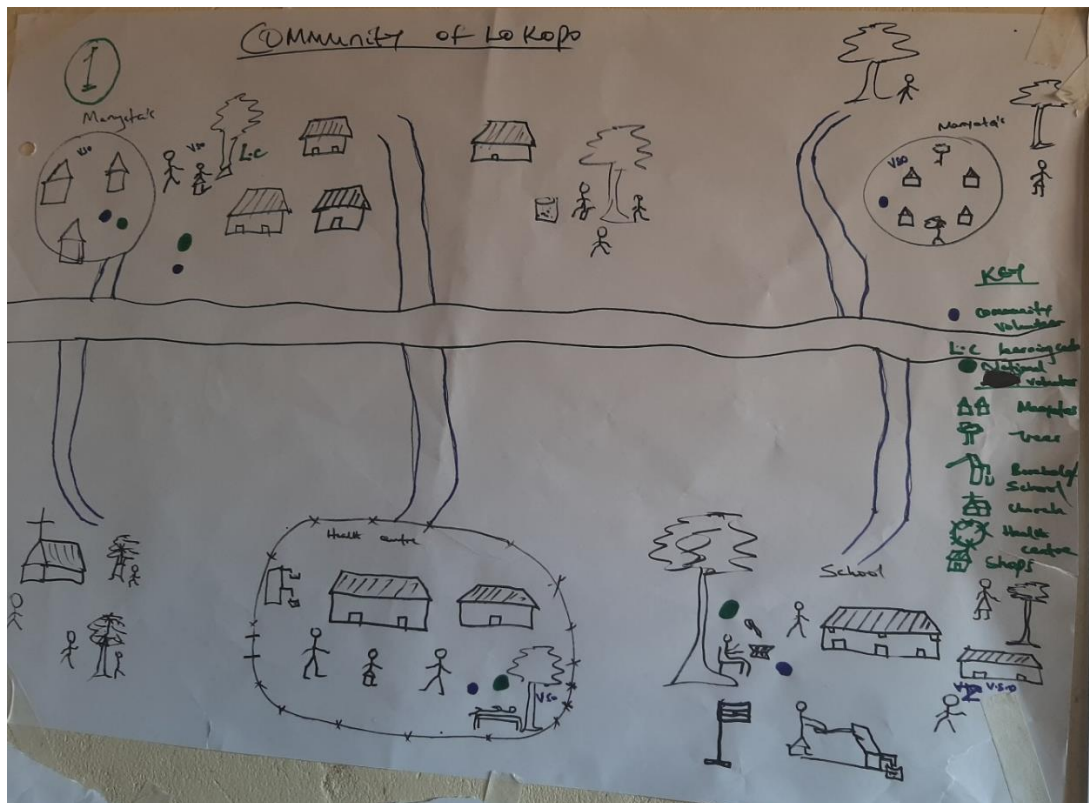
- **Introductions (10-15mins)**
 - Names and experience with VSO
 - Discussing the aim and structure of workshop with participants
- **Short interactive task/icebreaker (15-20mins)**
 - Draw a picture of something unexpected that happened to you in the context of the VSO project, and have others guess what it is - discuss
- **Mapping (30-40mins):** In two groups: draw a map or diagram highlighting VSO's activities in the community and how and where different types of volunteers worked together. *Probes during the activity and for discussion:*
 - Can you draw your community?
 - Can you draw in the VSO project/s there?
 - Can you draw in where the different types of volunteers were working? Were they together/alone? What work did they do there?
 - Were there places in the community that some types of volunteers did not go? Why was this?
 - Can you draw in other people that were there/partners, etc.
 - Can you highlight the changes seen to your community?
- **Break (10mins)**
- **Short interactive task (10-15mins)**
 - Write your best moment related to this project on one post-it, and the worst moment on another. To be hung on a board and discussed/commented on in the group: are there similarities, shared experiences?
- **Focus group discussion about the project (30-45mins)** covering a range of the following topics:
 - Outcomes/positives
 - Challenges on the project + how challenges were dealt with
 - Open discussion about experiences of working together. Probe questions:
 - *For volunteers:* How and at what point of the project were you working together with other volunteers in this project (e.g. specific tasks or stages of the project)? Has it changed during your volunteer placement? What are the benefits of working together? What is a challenge you faced because you worked in a group of volunteers? Who else did you work with (primary actors/partners) and how was this experience?
 - *For partners/primary actors:* how many volunteers did you work with in this project and in which stages of the project? Could you differentiate between the volunteers (e.g. community, national, international) or how did it work in the practice? What do you think are the benefits/challenges of working with different types of volunteers? What is a difficult experience you faced because of the collaboration with different volunteers? Who else did you work with (primary actors/partners) and how was this experience?
- **Break (10mins)**

- **Scenario building (30-40mins)**
 - Use your experiences discuss what a new project for VSO would benefit your community/the community you worked in. Consider and discuss:
 - What would you want to achieve?
 - What different types of volunteers should work on your project?
 - The good things you have seen on the current/former project regarding volunteer work and the ways in which volunteers work together, that should be repeated;
 - How you think the outcomes of volunteering work could be further improved upon;
 - What should the roles of the different types of volunteers be?
 - How should volunteers work together?
 - Reflect on the lessons you have learned from working with VSO volunteers and other partners when it comes to the types of volunteers you would select for your project.
 - How should the community and local organisations be involved?

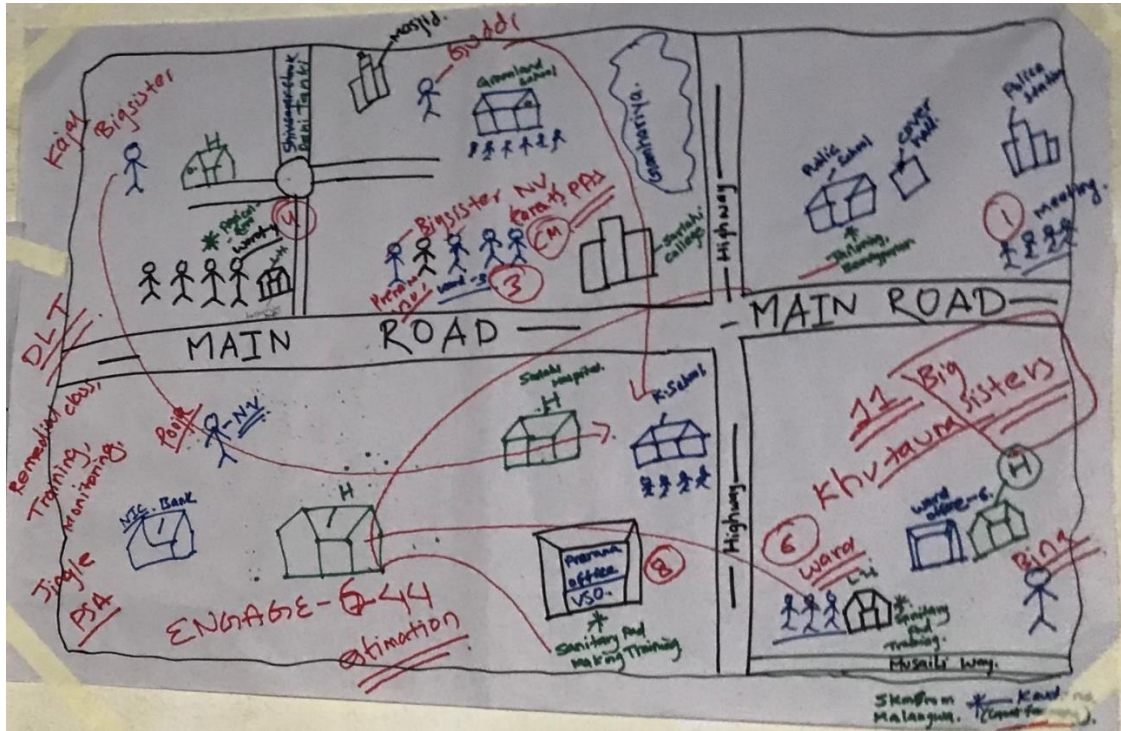
- **Round up: final comments/questions from participants and thank you (10-15mins)**



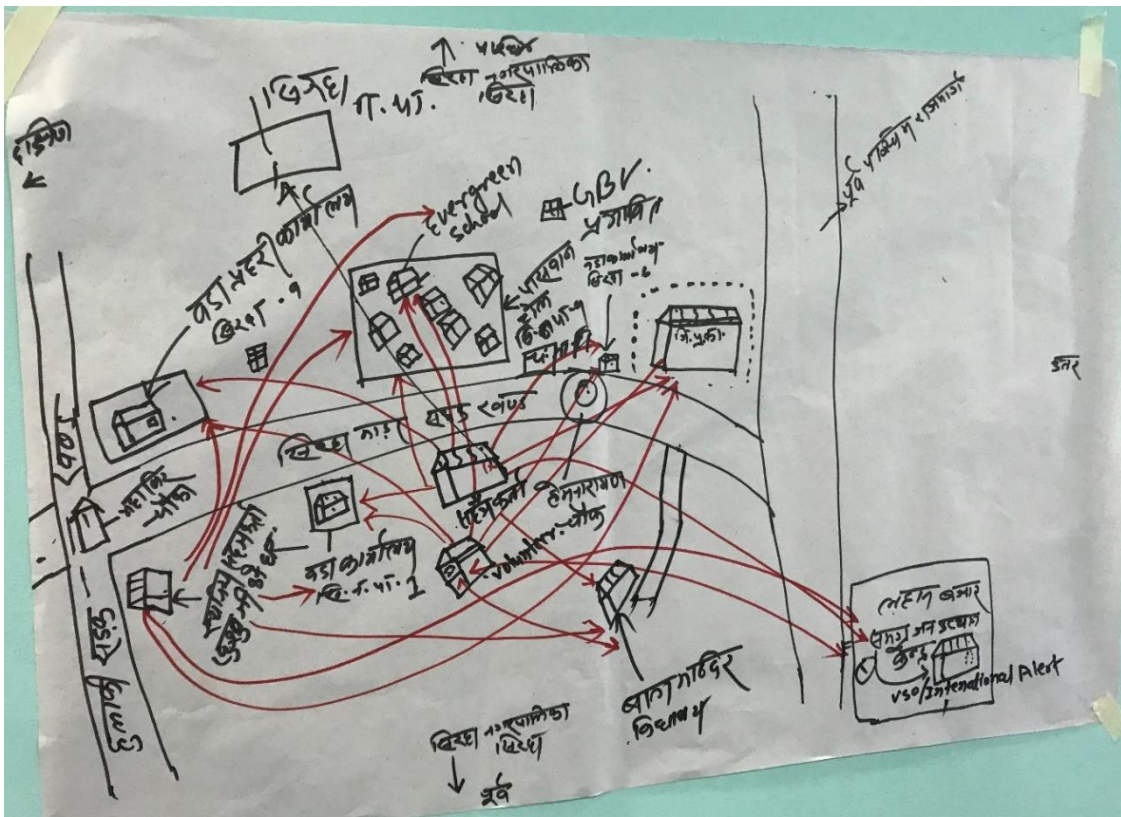
Workshop with community volunteers and primary actors, V4D and A-PLUS projects, Moroto district, Karamoja, Uganda



Workshop with community volunteers and primary actors, V4D and A-PLUS projects, Napak district, Karamoja, Uganda



Workshop with community and national volunteers, ENGAGE and S2L projects, Sarlahi district, Madhesh Province, Nepal



Workshop with community volunteers, SAHAJ project, Siraha district, Madhesh Province, Nepal

APPENDIX 4 – ONLINE SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

About you

1. What country are you from? *(N.B. dropdown box was available with all countries listed)*
2. How would you describe your gender?
 - Female
 - Male
 - Other
 - Prefer not to say
3. Are you a current or former VSO volunteer?
 - Current
 - Former
4. If you are a current volunteer, how old are you? If you are a former volunteer, how old were you when you finished your most recent volunteering for VSO?
5. What is your current employment status? (By employment, we are referring to paid work that you might be engaged in. This does not include volunteering.)
 - Full-time employed
 - Part-time employed
 - Self-employed
 - Casual employment
 - Full-time student
 - Prefer not to say

About the work you do/did

6. Which of the following best describes your involvement as a volunteer on the project?
 - Community-based (your VSO volunteering happened in the same community where you come from)
 - National (your VSO volunteering happened in your country but in a different community from your own)
 - International (your VSO volunteering happened in a different country to your own)
7. What type(s) of volunteer would you describe yourself as during your involvement with VSO? (Select all that apply)
 - Corporate
 - Diaspora
 - ICS
 - NYEN (National Engagement Youth Network)
 - Parliamentary
 - Professional

- Remote
- Technical
- Youth
- Other

7a. If you selected Other, please specify:

8. In which country is/was your most recent VSO volunteering project based? *(N.B. dropdown box was available with all countries listed)*

9. How long is/was your most recent volunteering assignment with VSO?

- 1-3 months
- 3-12 months
- Over 12 months

10. If you are a former VSO volunteer, in which year did your most recent volunteering assignment end?

- It doesn't apply because I am a current volunteer
- 2021
- 2020
- 2019
- 2018
- 2017
- 2016
- Other

10a. If you selected Other, please specify:

11. How would you describe the focus of the project that you are/were involved in? (Please select all that apply)

- Education
- Health
- Livelihoods
- Other

11a. If you selected Other, please specify:

12. Which of the following do you see as your main strength(s)? (Select up to 3 options)

- Capacity building
- Monitoring/evaluation
- Mentoring
- Motivation/team building
- Leadership/Project management
- Recruitment
- Understanding the local context

- Knowledge of local/national language
- Liaising with local community/local partners
- Political/advocacy
- Financial/legal
- Scientific
- Creativity
- Other (please specify)

12a. If you selected Other, please specify:

13. To what extent are/were you able to apply your strengths during your time on the project?
(Always / Mostly / Sometimes / Rarely / Not at all)

14. How many other volunteers are/were in your team?

- None, I work/worked alone
- 1-2 people
- 3-5 people
- 6-10 people
- Over 10 people
- I don't know

The team with whom you work/worked

Blended volunteering: the next sections will focus more specifically on your experience working together with other types of volunteers in a team which is defined by VSO as 'blended volunteering'.

Primary actors: this term will be used in the next sections to refer to the individuals and communities at the heart of VSO's work and that take part in or benefit from projects and programmes. Since they are not seen only as passive beneficiaries/recipients of aid, they are better referred to as 'primary actors'.

15. Can you identify the other types of volunteers on your team? (Select all that apply)

- Community based
- National
- International
- Corporate
- Diaspora
- ICS
- NYEN (National Engagement Youth Network)
- Parliamentary
- Professional
- Remote
- Technical
- Youth
- Short-term (up to 3 months)
- Long-term (more than 3 months)

- Other
- Not sure
- Not applicable

15a. If you selected Other, please specify:

16. Thinking of those in the team with whom you worked, how would you rate the contribution of the **COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS** for each of the following:

	<i>Very high</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Neither high nor low</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Very low</i>	<i>Don't know/ Does not apply</i>
1. Understanding the needs of the community						
2. Working together with partners and primary actors/beneficiaries						
3. Project management and leadership						
4. Working with other volunteers						
5. Mentoring						
6. Addressing unexpected situations and issues						
7. Sharing expertise based on professional/ educational specialist knowledge						
8. Mobilising/recruiting the local community to engage with the project						
9. Organising who needed to do each task						
10. Keeping everyone focused to complete their tasks						
11. Dealing with unexpected events when they arose						
12. Maintaining team motivation						

17. How would you rate the contribution of the **NATIONAL VOLUNTEERS** in your team for each of the following:

Same table from question 17

18. How would you rate the contribution of the **INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERS** in your team for each of the following:

Same table from question 17

Experiences of delivering the project as a team

19. In your experience, how well does/did the team work together?

- At the start of your engagement in the project (*Very Well, Fairly Well, Neither well nor poor, Fairly Poorly, Very Poorly, I would rather not say*)
- Once I had become familiar with the team (*Same options from above*)
- Towards the end of my engagement in the project (*Same options from above*)

20. To what extent are/were each of the following **CHALLENGES** applicable to your volunteering assignment?

- Mobilising/recruiting the local community to engage with the project: (*Very large extent, large extent, some extent, rarely, not at all, not applicable*)
- Organising who needed to do each task: (*Same options from above*)
- Keeping everyone focused to complete their tasks: (*Same options from above*)
- Dealing with unexpected events when they arose: (*Same options from above*)
- Maintaining team motivation: (*Same options from above*)

21. If there are/were tensions within the team, to what extent are/were the following a factor?

- The facilities available to each volunteer (e.g. accommodation, transportation, etc.): (*Always / Mostly / Sometimes / Rarely / Not at all / Not applicable*)
- The working conditions: (*Same options from above*)
- The remuneration available to each volunteer: (*Same options from above*)
- Amount of work to be done in the time available: (*Same options from above*)
- The way the roles were assigned: (*Same options from above*)
- The phase that the project was in (i.e. beginning, middle, end): (*Same options from above*)

22. To what extent does/did each of the following have a negative impact on the working of the team?

- The attitude/contribution of international volunteers: (*Always / Mostly / Sometimes / Rarely / Not at all / Not applicable*)
- The attitude/contribution of national volunteers: (*Same options from above*)
- The attitude/contribution of community volunteers: (*Same options from above*)
- The attitude/contribution of VSO staff: (*Same options from above*)
- The attitude/ contribution of primary actors/beneficiaries and the local community: (*Same options from above*)
- The attitude/contribution of local partner organisations: (*Same options from above*)

23. Thinking of when the team was working well together, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?

- We were focused on the task and getting the work done on time. (*Always / Mostly / Sometimes / Rarely / Not at all / Not applicable*)
- We understood each other's roles and communicated well. (*Same options from above*)
- We enjoyed socialising outside work. (*Same options from above*)
- We managed to deal with unexpected challenges effectively. (*Same options from above*)
- We worked well with local communities and organisations. (*Same options from above*)

24. How has working with different types of volunteers impacted on you? (Select up to 3 options)

- I have a better understanding of development challenges
- My teamworking skills have improved
- I am better at dealing with different types of people
- I am better at resolving conflict
- I am more able to manage unexpected situations
- My leadership skills have improved
- My communication skills have improved
- It has had a negative impact on me
- Other
- Not applicable
- It has not had an impact on me (please do not click here if you have selected any of the options above)

24a. If you selected Other, please specify:

25. Overall, would you describe your VSO experience of working with different types of volunteers as: very positive/mostly positive/neither positive nor negative/mostly negative/very negative/ Don't know or Does not apply

Final perceptions

26. Overall, would you describe your experience of working with primary actors (i.e. community members that VSO collaborates with) as: very positive/mostly positive/neither positive nor negative/mostly negative/very negative/ Don't know or Does not apply

27. Overall, would you describe your experience of working with partners and local organisations as: very positive/mostly positive/neither positive nor negative/mostly negative/very negative/ Don't know or Does not apply

28. Overall, would you describe your experience of working with VSO staff as: very positive/mostly positive/neither positive nor negative/mostly negative/very negative/ Don't know or Does not apply

29. How has your volunteering with VSO changed your perception of volunteering overall? I feel a lot more positive/I feel more positive/I feel neither more positive nor more negative/I feel more negative/I feel a lot more negative / I don't know how I feel about it

30. What would you consider the most important areas of improvement for VSO? (Select up to 3)

- Encouraging enhanced communication between volunteers
- Encouraging enhanced communication with local partners and primary actors (i.e. community members that VSO collaborates with)
- The division of tasks within the volunteer team
- Conflict management

- Distribution of resources within the volunteer team (e.g. remuneration, accommodation, transportation, etc.)
- Managing skills and contributions of all volunteer team members
- Communicating expectations and plans for the project
- Other
- None (please do not click here if you have selected any of the options above)

30a. If you selected Other, please specify:

31. Have you stayed in touch with other volunteers, VSO staff or primary actors (i.e. community members that VSO collaborates with) since your involvement in the project came to an end? (Select all that apply)

	Yes	No	It doesn't apply because I am a current VSO volunteer
Other volunteers			
VSO Staff			
Primary actors			

32. Are you currently involved in other volunteering beyond VSO, or planning to be involved in more volunteering in the future?

- Yes
- No

33. To conclude, please use this space to share any other comments or considerations about your volunteering experience with VSO? *[Open-ended optional answer]*

Thank you so much for taking the time to share your views and experiences.

Updates on the project will be disseminated online by VSO and Northumbria University.

[Click here for more information.](#)