

## **KUNGARAVA IBITEKEREZO (SHARING IDEAS): GLOBAL EDUCATION – A STRATEGY FOR THE SOUTH**

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Voluntary Service Overseas, Rwanda (VSOR) has been operational in Rwanda since July 1997, and has two programmes in the sectors of Education and Disability.

“VSO Rwanda recognises the importance of seeing the world from different perspectives and aims to create the space for views to be expressed and challenged. We are committed to activities based on greater understanding that will lead to positive social change both in Rwanda and in volunteers’ home countries.”

Throughout 2004, Voluntary Service Overseas Rwanda was involved in a strategic planning process that aimed to define our objectives and the strategies for meeting these. VSOR was one of the first of Voluntary Service Overseas’s (VSO) international programmes to ensure that global education was integrated into this process. The result was the vision statement quoted above; a seemingly simple statement which this article aims to unpack a little, to outline how we came to adopt it and what challenges there are in realising it.

VSO is committed to empowering people through global education to act as catalysts for positive social change by raising awareness of the realities of life in poor countries. We believe that in our increasingly interdependent world this has the potential to build just communities that are open to learning and working in partnership to tackle disadvantage. Global education is not just about learning, therefore, but about enabling people to take action that can address disadvantage. Active citizens are more likely to be aware of and deploy their rights and responsibilities.

In practice, the main emphasis has been on the VSO volunteer themselves and the networks and initiatives that can build on their development experience once they return to their home country. VSO's single Global Education Advisor is based in London, and the close links with the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) ensures that our UK initiatives are in the organisational 'front line'. VSOR wanted to develop a local strategy that would see global education firmly placed within the Rwandan context. The importance of the work of returned volunteers in their home countries is not underestimated.

However, the increasingly diverse and international nature of the VSOR volunteers (which has included up to fifteen different nationalities at any one time) means that for the majority there will not be an opportunity to engage in UK based activities. Most importantly of all, it was strongly felt that if our global education agenda is to be one that enables views to be robustly expressed and rigorously challenged, more needed to be done to ensure that Rwandans, and not expatriates, are driving it.

In a country like Rwanda where concepts of history, community, culture and human rights are shaped by recent experiences of war and genocide, the philosophy and ideals of our vision statement are not an 'add on' to our core programmes, but are at the heart of the reason why VSO is here. The schools VSO work with in Rwanda often comment on the value of having a different window on the world in the form of international teachers, and there has always been an assumption at the heart of our Education Programme that this is generally a 'good thing'. A global education strategy will enable this to be articulated more clearly, and lead to the creation of activities and resources that will ensure that this 'window on the world' is actively looked through, rather than simply assumed to be there.

The strategy is not primarily about what goes on within Rwanda's classrooms, however. There are other ways in which we are seeking to 'create the space for views to be expressed and challenged'. The model for our current programme comes from the experience of the last one to two years, where a

range of different activities focussing in on the same area was developed around the issue of Fair Trade, which led to a workshop, field trips and the production of an education resource book and website on 'Coffee, Fairtrade and Rwanda' in collaboration with Rwandan coffee cooperatives.

In 2005, our global education Magazine has been re-born as 'Amakuru' (Kinyarwanda for 'news') which is tri-lingual (English, French and Kinyarwanda) and which is pursuing an active editorial policy of seeking a diverse range of articles that may stimulate debate within and between publications. The existing website devoted to the issue of fair trade and coffee in Rwanda is being expanded into a site that can include articles and debate around a wider range of development and global issues. There will be two workshops each year whose aim is to bring together a diverse range of the interested and the expert to investigate and debate an issue. For example, the next one, scheduled for September 2005, will focus on Disability and Mental Health. This focus on disability and development is being carried through into planned field trips that will enable participants to visit disability centres and sports programmes. Finally, the programme will include the sponsoring of a formal, national debate on the topic of the role of volunteering in Rwandan society, to coincide with the International Day of the Volunteer, in December.

The 'greater understanding' of the global education vision is intended to take in two different trends. The first is that part of global education that seeks to present and explore the intrinsically 'human' facets – celebrating difference, affirming similarities, breaking down stereotypes with positive stories, allowing people to present themselves as they choose rather than as how others choose to present them. The second is that part which aims to provide an analytical framework with which to examine development issues and debates. There is sometimes tension between these two aspects, particularly as global education explicitly seeks to engage with many different types of people, the majority of whom are not development professionals. VSOR teachers, for example, are often alienated by the (overly) technical language of much of the development debate in Rwanda. It can be tempting to rely on the human interest stories at the expense of more structured

investigation and analysis. It is our hope that the range of activities will ensure a good balance between the two.

Our interest in global education is not some dry, academic exercise. In a speech on 23rd June, marking the run up to Independence Day on July 1st, Paul Kagame, the President of Rwanda, said the following:

“What type of independence was it? What did we achieve from it, and of what significance does it bear on us? ... I wonder why people don't talk their mind in public but instead go behind the scenes to whisper. I have to question (those) who have made it a habit to secretly tell me their positions on some issues, why don't they spill the beans in public so people can debate? That is 'backwardness' (ubutindi).” (quoted in 'The New Times' June 24-26, 2005)

VSOR is avowedly non-political (with a capital 'P') and Kagame was referring to a political culture of whispers. However, in order to speak out publicly and with confidence, safe and formal spaces for debate have to be in place, and our global education strategy is aiming, in a very modest way, towards this same goal.

### **Notes**

The VSOR global education magazines, educational resources and further tools and information are available from: <http://www.vso.org.uk/thecoffeeproject>

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