

# Globalising Volunteering: VSO's experience

International volunteering has traditionally been seen as something only done by 'rich' countries. In this article **Abigail Fulbrook** examines Voluntary Service Overseas' South to South international volunteering initiatives.

## Introduction

International development charity VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) believes that volunteers can and do build capacity and raise awareness of issues of poverty, development and global interdependence in ways that no other development intervention can. For nearly 50 years VSO has been the leading exponent of volunteering as a means of enabling sustainable change (VSO, 2005).

International volunteering has traditionally been seen as something rich countries do to poor countries. In 1998 VSO had about 1,400 skilled people working as volunteers in 40 of the poorest countries in the world. Most were British and all came from Western Europe or North America.

VSO wanted to break the stereotype that all volunteers come from the developed North. The charity wanted to internationalise in a way that was appropriate in a modern global society.

VSO developed two initiatives at the end of the 1990s: South to South volunteering; where volunteers from Southern countries could volunteer in other Southern countries, and national volunteering which would promote opportunities for skilled people to volunteer their expertise in their own country. This article will examine VSO's South to South volunteering and its impact on VSO, its volunteers and the wider society.

## Recruiting volunteers from the South

VSO has always been driven by requests for volunteers from our partners, who include government bodies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations and trade unions. The need for more experienced professional volunteers from our partners has seen VSO grow from a school-leavers volunteering agency to an international development charity with long-term insights and partnerships.

It was through these partnerships that we knew there was much informal volunteering in most of the countries that we work in. We also knew that

levels of available people with professional skills had risen steadily over the decades in many of those countries. In 1999 we began a pilot scheme recruiting volunteers from Kenya and the Philippines to work alongside volunteers from Europe and North America in VSO's 40 country programmes.

Kenya and the Philippines were chosen for the pilot on the basis of an in-depth study, which consulted governments, non-governmental organisations and VSO staff. The environment for volunteering was assessed against the criteria of: the availability of appropriate skills, the motivation of potential volunteers, the attitude of government, support from within VSO, the potential for funding, and practical viability (Rockcliffe et al. 1999).

Malou Juanito, Director of VSO Bahaginan, VSO's recruitment base in the Philippines explains:

*“Volunteering has a long tradition in the Philippines, whether it is helping out with farming or helping people move house. It has deep cultural roots. Because of this we found it easy to introduce our concept of volunteering and recruit volunteers. People in the Philippines understand what it is like to work with community organisations and NGOs, and many have had exposure to development work”.*

Like the rest of the VSO volunteers at the time, the Southern volunteers would be recruited for standard two-year placements. For Kenya the chosen professional skills areas for recruitment to focus on were business and social development, natural resources and technical skills, like engineering. From the Philippines recruitment concentrated on business and social development, natural resources and health professionals.

The first Kenyan volunteer was Rachel Okenye, a community development worker who had experience working with refugees in Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan. At the time Rachel said: “I am interested in working with vulnerable groups as well as gaining more professional experience. I would also like to be exposed to different cultures for my personal development” (quoted in VSO, 2000).

By the end of March 2001, 33 volunteers had taken up placements in 18 countries. The learning review carried out later in the year found that:

*“Volunteers posted to date are felt to be well qualified and to have valuable experience particularly of working in local communities in a developing country. Many programme offices and employers reported that the volunteers had found it easier to understand local culture, fitted in much faster, learnt what is usually a third or fourth language faster,*

*not got sick as often and been more tolerant and used to working with limited resources than most Northern volunteers” (Brown, 2001).*

However, we had to recognise that:

*“...there is also a risk that volunteers, employers and VSO staff will assume all Southern volunteers will adjust easily – which is not always the case. And whilst there seems to be a feeling that employers feel more comfortable with the idea of Southern volunteers from the same continent – there is also recognition that there is a need to guard against generalisations and exceptions, that Kenyans will fit in and be more accepted in Africa, and Filipinos in Asia, as does any assumption that the reverse is always true” (Brown, 2001).*

## **Skills from the South**

Increasingly, VSO’s philosophy of volunteering is concentrating on getting the skills from wherever they are, to wherever they are needed. By opening up to Southern volunteers VSO is able to help its partners access volunteers with skills relevant to their needs. Malou Juanito explains:

*“These include people with experience in community organisations and development work, capacity building for NGOs, rural organising, provision of support services, small enterprise development volunteers. We also have health professionals who are not only coming from institutions but also include those who have community based healthcare experiences. We have agriculturalists and natural resource people who are familiar with tropical agricultural methods”.*

Perhaps the unique thing is the different perspective Southern volunteers bring to partners. Ben Ngutu, director of VSO Jitolee in Kenya explains:

*“Southern volunteers have similar skills but different perspectives. For example in social work, volunteers will have different training and approaches. Southern volunteers bring a lot more hands on experience, having been born, lived and worked in developing countries, they are used to challenging environments”.*

Whilst the focus of recruitment for VSO Bahaginan and Jitolee remains in the same professional skills areas, recruitment is not limited to only professionals within these skills. VSO Jitolee also recruits Ugandan

volunteers, as it was recognized that their expertise in HIV, and the Ugandan experience of responding to the pandemic, could bring invaluable learning to other countries throughout Asia and Africa.

### **Brain drain or brain gain?**

“Some people might say that there is enough work for these volunteers to do in our own backyard. Well, if every society waited until it was perfect before helping others, if every individual waited ‘to get everything together’ before reaching out, the world would be truly a mess”. Tina Cuyugan of Filipino NGO Growth with Equity in Mindanao (quoted in VSO, 2000).

One of the main reservations highlighted by the initial research into southern volunteering was that VSO might be contributing to the brain drain, taking skilled workers away from the workforce for up to two years, or even encouraging permanent migration. As no research had previously been carried out, there was no way VSO could prove this might, or might not, be true. In 2004 a systematic review was carried out into the impact of VSO volunteering on Kenyan society (Popazzi, 2004). The research showed that the vast majority of Kenyans did return home after their VSO placement and nearly all of them felt they had gained skills that would be relevant to their ongoing careers.

The study showed one of the major impacts of being a volunteer was a shift in the volunteers’ own perception of what voluntary work could achieve. Returned volunteers (RVs) viewed voluntary work as a way to make a “contribution to sustainable development, through sharing skills, participatory approaches, and engaging people as resources”.

*“In addition to direct, formal involvement RVs have been promoting volunteerism within Kenya since their return, which will help to strengthen civil society... Almost all of the RVs who are living in Kenya see a practical role for themselves in contributing to community development, and link involvement at community level to national development, either through facilitation and participation in community projects, sharing skills, promoting volunteerism, working professionally or volunteering full time in development” (Popazzi, 2004).*

Popazzi found that while VSO RVs were involved in local voluntary work before and after their international placements, there was a discernable shift in the nature of their voluntary work after VSO. 26 percent of those RVs interviewed were using their professional skills such as writing funding proposals, or using project management experience to help community

organisations, after doing VSO placements, when they had not before.

The National Volunteer Network Trust (NAVNET) was founded by VSO RVs in Kenya who wanted to continue contributing to development in their home country. NAVNET is committed to developing volunteering in Kenya as a career option. Popazzi (2004) found that 74 percent of RVs had been promoting volunteerism since finishing their placement, mostly by encouraging others to volunteer internationally or within Kenya.

VSO supports RVs worldwide with a Global Education fund which gives small grants for projects that will bring new perspectives and enable volunteers to share their experiences. The first volunteer from VSO Jitolee to benefit from this was Sebastian Njagi. He used his experience as a volunteer in India to help two communities build a bridge together in Kenya.

Working at Gram Vikas, a rural development organisation in Orissa, Sebastian had been inspired by meeting an engineer who had helped the local community build canals for water. From this one project people were being empowered to initiate and manage community forests, food banks, health facilities, community schools, and community bridges amongst other projects. Sebastian says: “This particular experience inspired me so much that I resolved to challenge my people back home to use local resources and skills to uplift their lives” (Njagi, 2004).

The bridge between Nkumbutu and Ngage villages was long damaged and dangerous. Sebastian organised a meeting between the villages during which they resolved to rebuild the bridge. The local government, businesses and voluntary sector all got involved with the re-construction of the bridge. But most importantly the local community has embraced the project, as Sebastian says: “It is their bridge, their pride!” (Njagi, 2004).

Malou Juanito says:

*“Because of the kind of development experience volunteers are bringing back people see that instead of being a brain drain it is becoming a brain gain. Volunteers returning have more experience and awareness and are able to use that volunteering experience”.*

## **Changing perceptions**

VSO has witnessed a change in perception from our partners, the employers who request volunteers.

*“Partners have learned to appreciate the diversity that volunteers bring them, and new and different opportunities which follow. It’s*

*empowering. In Ethiopia, for example they see Kenyans volunteering and think if Kenyans can do it, so can we and they feel more empowered to do things themselves,” says Ben Ngutu.*

Malou Juanito continues:

*“In Ghana partners used to think that volunteers were coming not only with skills but also with money, but when volunteers from the Philippines came they only came as themselves and not with the monetary support. This changed the image of a volunteer and reinforced the notion that it is more about skills sharing than anything else. Also because we are in a developing country we have a natural feeling of empathy and it is easy for volunteers to settle in the community because it is almost the same environment and issues. In Ghana volunteers from the Philippines have introduced colleagues to participatory processes which have helped to break the cultural hierarchy”.*

*“The South has a lot to offer, VSO has reinforced that message by using different ways to tackle disadvantage, by bringing different skills. We’ve found it is good to look at a diverse pool of people. It is been good for the dynamics of VSO as well, we are more effective at promoting internationalisation, learning from each other, much more effectively than when VSO only recruited from the North” says Ben Ngutu.*

As the evidence shows, VSO and the volunteers have been changed by the volunteering experience. And the effect is growing: “In the Philippines most people believe that we are always a recipient of aid,” says Malou Juanito. “The Southern volunteering concept - although it is not financial aid - has shown us that we can share our knowledge and assist other developing countries. Self pity is being taken over by an appreciative and positive outlook”.

## **Conclusion**

In six years VSO has gone from having no Southern volunteers to having over one-third of placements filled by Southern volunteers. These have been as diverse as Filipinos helping an emerging civil society in Kazakhstan, Ugandans promoting community HIV awareness in China, and Kenyans working on livestock development just across the border in Uganda. Assessments from local employers, as well as VSO’s staff and other volunteers, have recognised the greater cultural affinity, speed of adjustment

and experience in working with modest resources that Southern volunteers bring. Southern nationals have shown the same commitment to voluntarism as their colleagues from the UK and are able to bring their enhanced skills and experience back to benefit their home countries. As Ben Ngutu concludes:

*“Given the opportunity, Southern countries can contribute to the fight against global disadvantage”.*

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