

ENG

IVCO 2024 THINK PIECE

BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE: THE POTENTIAL FOR BUILDING SOLIDARITY BETWEEN VOLUNTEER- INVOLVING ORGANISATIONS AND ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

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The terminology of 'volunteering for development' has taken on many different meanings for stakeholders working in this sector over the years. In this context, there has been much research focused on the international volunteer experience, and much less on local and national volunteers, particularly those who may be faced with limited resources and working in complex environments. Evidence is therefore central to support volunteer-involving organisations understand the impact of our work, and how we can enhance systems and processes for volunteer management, including duty of care, effective planning and monitoring of volunteer activities, and measuring the impact of volunteer efforts. Having these conditions in place can enable a more rapid scale-up and response in fragile contexts, while maximising the potential for volunteering impact. This highlights the need for holistic metrics and indices that are able to benchmark volunteering practice from diverse perspectives and in different contexts, understanding the practices of volunteer-involving organisations, identifying gaps and supporting the development of effective steps to address existing challenges.

As one of the leading organisations in the field of volunteering and development, VSO finds great value in working with universities and academic institutions in different regions to improve the evidence base for our volunteering programmes, policies and ways of working. This has included flagship research with the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) to better understand the role and value of volunteering in promoting sustainable development through case studies in Kenya, Mozambique, Nepal and the Philippines.¹ More recently, we have partnered with researchers at Northumbria University actively collaborating with in-country teams in Nepal, Tanzania and Uganda to provide new evidence and insight on how different types of volunteers work together (blended volunteering) and their contribution to development impact in different settings.²

Partnering with academic institutions can bring theoretical knowledge to bear on assessing the depth and quality of volunteering practice, becoming a valuable way of strengthening cross-sectoral solidarity. Academic institutions are also able to disseminate knowledge beyond volunteer-involving organisations, and assess the value and impact of volunteering practice in independent ways. Currently, we are undertaking a learning partnership with Thammasat University, an academic institution in Thailand with its own volunteering programme.

The evidence generated through this new collaboration is improving our overall understanding of volunteering practice in VSO-supported projects, and the knowledge generated can help in reaching broader conclusions and recommendations as to what is needed to improve the depth and impact of volunteering practice in lower-resourced and highly dynamic environments. This recent assessment of volunteering practice in VSO across seven projects found that the main gap where organisations need preparedness is in duty of care. These seven projects were selected on the basis of partners being familiar with the Global Volunteering Standard; working diverse types of organisations including youth networks, government-funded volunteer projects, and community-based organisations; and working with a range of volunteering typologies.³ This is particularly

[1] 1 Burns, D., Picken, A., Hacker, E., Aked, J., Turner, K., Lewis, S., & Lopez Franco, E. (2015). *Valuing Volunteering: The role of volunteering in sustainable development*.

[2] Baillie Smith, M., Jenkins, K., Adong, C., Anguan, G., Baniya, J., Baskota, P., Boudewijn, I., Fadel, B., Gibby, P., Kamanyi, E., Mademba, S., Okech, M., & Sharma, R. (2022). *Volunteering Together: Blending Knowledge and Skills for Development*.

[3] The report 'Responsible and Impactful Volunteering Index' [can be accessed here](#).

urgent and important when volunteers are working in contexts that are fragile and affected by crises (e.g. climate change, conflict). Through using standardised metrics it is possible to better identify what areas of work require urgent attention and to track progress in addressing capacity gaps over time.

As the volunteering ecosystem increasingly promotes collaboration between international, national and community volunteers, the capability to respond to rapidly changing circumstances also needs to be improved. It is therefore essential to implement appropriate systems for managing volunteers and understanding the impact of their efforts on primary actors, that is the people and communities that we work with. Across contexts, it is crucial to strengthen capacities of organisations, particularly those of smaller scale and more limited resources, to emphasise the importance of these systems and processes and ensure they are functioning effectively.

The combination of working with national and community volunteers to undertake assessments of VSO-supported projects and partners has helped Thammasat University to bridge gaps between theory and practice. Research results have been contextualised, and at the same time can offer a broader view of key trends and recommendations to improve both the quality of volunteering practice and the administration of a standardised contextualised assessment tool to achieve more responsible and impactful volunteering. Adopting a strengths-based approach with partners, and building an understanding that the ongoing review of practices intends to build capacity at community level, has also been strengthening solidarity among volunteers and partners. This strengths-based approach has created opportunities to build a body of knowledge as to how volunteering is delivered in practice, and to move the narrative beyond individual volunteer trajectories to considering the conditions that are needed for volunteering to be most impactful for the communities' volunteers work with.

Research institutions also have potential to progress practice-based research into new areas of thinking within academic and policy-focused spaces of global development, demonstrating that there is also opportunity to consider and interrogate trends in volunteering 'for' development practice and potential implications for the broader global development agenda. In the absence of capacity, learning, and ownership, capturing effective inputs of volunteering becomes more challenging. This in turn hampers the ability to make more meaningful contributions through volunteering for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The ongoing partnership and collaboration between practitioners (e.g. VSO) and researchers (e.g. Thammasat University) have shown that this iterative approach can be effective in realising the Global Volunteering Standard,⁴ as demonstrated by VSO's experience in the area of Responsible & Impactful Volunteering.

[4] International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum). *The Global Volunteering Standard*.

About the Author

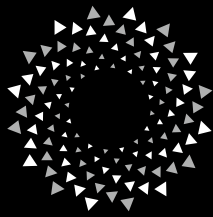


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Rebecca Pursell-Gotz is a Research Specialist within the Knowledge, Evidence and Learning Team at VSO. She has been working in the field of volunteering for development for the past seven years. She is responsible for undertaking and managing a range of research partnerships at VSO. Her research spans Africa and Asia and has included how community volunteering contributes to development change, the role of youth networks in combating COVID-19, and the role of youth networks in addressing community development issues in Malawi. She was also responsible for overseeing research conducted by the University of Northumbria into how different volunteering typologies work together (blended volunteering), and their own unique contribution to development change. She is currently overseeing research into active citizenship, and the outcomes that are being achieved through working with and building the capacity of primary actors to engage with duty bearers in relation to their own rights to access services and opportunities. Rebecca holds an MPH, MA and BA (Hons) from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa.

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