

ENG

## IVCO 2024 THINK PIECE

# UNPACKING THE VĀ OF INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERING FOR DEVELOPMENT: GIVING-AS-RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

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Current international volunteering for development programmes are dominated by a Westernised service-delivery models, even though people in different sociocultural and religious contexts often understand volunteering differently. Sociocultural concepts, such as the idea of *seva* in Indian culture, the principle of *Tatawwu* in Islam, and *Ubuntu*, as a way of life in some African societies, shape people's understandings and participation in international volunteering, as well as the nature of the relationships formed. This think piece draws on the Pacific notion of *vā* to rethink international volunteering for development and solidarity.

## Volunteering as a Social Construct

Volunteering as an idea developed in the 19th century from Victorian practices of benevolence, when people became more aware of the disadvantaged and came forth to help.<sup>1</sup> Thereafter, ideas of active citizenship and altruism formed the basis of formal voluntary programmes set-up for those who 'have' to help the 'have-nots'. This 'flat-earth view'<sup>2</sup> of non-profit organisations often do not consider informal activities to help one another as voluntary work. In contrast to formal volunteering, indigenous notions of voluntary action are largely based on spontaneous helping, caring and responsibility.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, ideas such as character references and relevant work or voluntary experiences that characterise criteria for formalising relationships between the helper and the helped are unfamiliar to indigenous volunteers. Instead, indigenous communities understand volunteering as informal and communal practices which enable self-reliance and mutual support.

## Why a Pacific Concept?

A relevant Pacific sociocultural concept that can help International Volunteering Cooperation Organisations (IVCOs) rethink volunteering relationships is *vā*, which refers to relational space. In using a term and concept put forward by Pacific people(s) to think about international volunteering, we seek to honour the Pacific people and communities we are involved with and show how sociocultural worldviews influence understandings of volunteering acts and relationships.<sup>4</sup> We acknowledge that linguistic and sociocultural differences embedded in worldviews can make some concepts untranslatable. Therefore, the meanings of *vā* may be lost or changed when we write and share about the concept in English. However, we believe that building cross-cultural understandings of volunteerism is crucial to a volunteering for solidarity approach that is inclusive of all peoples and can enrich our approaches to international volunteering.

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[3] Lukka, P., & Ellis, A. (2001). An exclusive construct? Exploring different cultural concepts of volunteering. *Voluntary Action-London-Institute for Volunteering Research*, 3(3), 87-110.

[4] Finau, S. P. U., Paea, M. K., & Reynolds, M. (2022). Pacific people navigating the sacred *Vā* to frame relational care: a conversation between friends across space and time. *The contemporary pacific*, 34(1), 135-165.

## The Pacific Notion of Vā

Different Pacific traditions of thinking understand vā slightly differently. Nonetheless, vā is commonly understood as a space that relates, connects and holds separate entities and things together.<sup>5</sup> *Le vā* connects all things and gives them meanings, including behavioural codes, and provides an invisible language to organise space and things positively. The notion of different spaces connecting and being connected is central to an integrated Pacific worldview, where everything is in “an endless state of interconnectedness and interdependency”.<sup>6</sup>

Vā is especially valuable when considering international volunteering spaces in the Pacific. In the Pacific, relationality is not optional; it is always present.<sup>7</sup> Vā is an imagined space where people ‘feel’ closeness/connection and distance/separation as opposed to ‘seeing’.<sup>8</sup> In this relational space, the meaning of things emerges through relationships involving spiritual, social and physical domains rather than of themselves. Every relational space has its own vā and everyone is obliged to value and nurture the relational space between people and entities, and when needed, tidy the vā.<sup>9</sup> Samoans call this *teu le va* and the Tongans, *tauhi vā*. In a well-cared for vā, conflict is minimised.<sup>10</sup>

Within the Pacific world, volunteering as unpaid work is related to the ethic of *teu le va* and a cultural obligation. Pacific peoples see unpaid work as an expression of community, cultural participation, and humanitarian conscience. It is so natural and embedded in their everyday lives and value system and practice that they don’t regard it as ‘volunteering’. People do not have to be ‘qualified’ to volunteer. Rather, volunteering for a family, friend, colleague or compatriot is a way of respecting and recognising their connections with each other. It demonstrates one’s care and responsibility to and for another, as well as one’s intent to nurture closeness and harmony. In other words, volunteering is part of the relationship building dynamics.<sup>11</sup> It is a cultural obligation related to belonging and identity, not a question of free will and choice.

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[9] Anae, M. (2016). Teu le va: Samoan relational ethics. *Knowledge Cultures*, 4(03), 117-130.

[10] Mila-Schaaf, K., & Hudson, M. (2009). Negotiating space for indigenous theorising in Pacific mental health and addictions. *Le Va*.

[11] Doerr, N. (2015). Volunteering as othering: Understanding a paradox of social distance, obligation, and reciprocity. *Partnerships: A Journal of Service-Learning and Civic Engagement*, 6(2), 36-57.

## Implications for a Volunteering for Solidarity Approach

Just as *vā* is a relational space of connection and separation, international volunteering is a space that simultaneously connects and distances people. A volunteering for solidarity approach needs to frame international volunteering as cooperation and collaboration and as an obligation to help (socially close) rather than a desire to help (socially distant). Thinking about international volunteering as obligations re-imagine parties involved in the relationships as members of the same (global) community, while cooperation and collaboration may materialise the relationships on more equal terms.<sup>12</sup>

*Vā* calls on IVCOs to recognise and respect volunteering relationships. Relationship practices are the key mechanisms of change in international volunteering, with the power of transformation embedded in the lived experiences of volunteering relationships. We need to reciprocally act in and respect these relational spaces, but there is no one-size-fits-all formula of strategies to enhance relationships. Volunteer roles, the timing of volunteer assignments, the volunteer space and wider geopolitical relationships all influence the ways relatedness can be nurtured. However, we know that successful *vā* relationships require nurturing warm relationships and sharing responsibilities and collective achievements. Just as volunteers need to care for the diverse strengths team members bring to the workplace, IVCOs also need to show appreciation for the diverse value and gifts their local partners bring to the volunteering partnerships. This could be done by crediting the role of local partners in communications with supporters, donors and media.

*Vā* also reminds us that international volunteering relationships are multilayered and not limited to the individual-level. IVCOs cannot only consider the development impact we wish to achieve through volunteer assignments but also need to consider the multiple histories that occupy volunteer spaces, including past colonial relationships. International volunteering is located in wider geopolitical, historical and social spaces. These wider contexts influence patterns of interaction between volunteers and their counterparts. When reading local partners' and people's interactions with the agency, IVCOs need to "walk backwards into the future while facing the past" to consider how wider relations and historical interactions may affect their relationship dynamics before deciding how to act.

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[12] Doerr, N. (2015). Volunteering as othering: Understanding a paradox of social distance, obligation, and reciprocity. *Partnerships: A Journal of Service-Learning and Civic Engagement*, 6(2), 36-57.

## About the Authors



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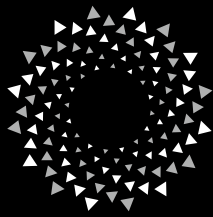
Kia ora! I am **Dr Aarthi Srinivasan**, a Monitoring Evaluation Research and Learning (MERL) Advisor at Te Tūao Tāwāhi Volunteer Service Abroad in Aotearoa New Zealand. As a development practitioner, storyteller and avid traveller, I am deeply humbled learning about the Pacific culture and lived experiences of volunteering across the Pacific.

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Talofa lava, my name is **Alofa Lopati**, Samoan born, and Aotearoa New Zealand raised Pacific islander. I work at Volunteer Service Abroad as an Operations Coordinator. I am grateful to work in the volunteer space as it enables me to give back to my people in the Pacific and in Aotearoa.

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