

Introduction: What is the Unique Contribution of Volunteering to International Development?*

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Abstract This editorial article introduces this *IDS Bulletin* on the value of volunteering. The issue is based on the global action research project Valuing Volunteering, undertaken in partnership between Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) and IDS, which explored how volunteering contributes to poverty reduction and sustainable positive change in Kenya, Mozambique, Nepal and the Philippines, and the factors that prevent it from doing so. Two core research approaches were used to collect and analyse insights about volunteering; participatory systemic inquiry (PSI) and systemic action research (SAR). In total, some 3,700 people reflected on volunteering during the research process. While recognising the issues that many current forms of volunteering can create, this collection of articles highlights the potential of volunteering, when understood as a relational and collaborative endeavour, which is sometimes at odds with the pressures on the sector to professionalise and compete.

This *IDS Bulletin* is entirely based on the global action research project Valuing Volunteering, commissioned by Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), a UK-based international volunteer cooperation organisation, and conducted by researchers at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in partnership with VSO. The project explored how and why volunteering contributes to poverty reduction and sustainable positive change, and the factors that prevent it from doing so (Burns *et al.* 2015). The research took a participatory and action research approach and aimed to inform the learning and practice of both VSO and the volunteering for development (VfD) sectors on how to work effectively through volunteers to achieve sustainable change.

The research makes no claim to be a comprehensive study of volunteering practice from across the world – it is based on participatory research carried out by four international volunteer researchers – all from the UK – who spent two years in Kenya, Mozambique, Nepal and the Philippines. The data were gathered using participatory methods and so aimed to include and listen to the voices of people who are not regularly heard in non-governmental organisation (NGO)-led research. The research methods also facilitated participatory forms of data analysis. However, while the data reflect the views

of people in communities, the narrative voice and much of the analysis is that of the international volunteer. The perspectives expressed here are explicitly about volunteers' contributions and the research was motivated by the desire to identify what kind of approaches to working as a volunteer make a difference.

The research produced 12 rich and detailed case studies,¹ which cover a diverse range of expressions of volunteering: from international volunteers of different kinds – from the global North and South, short-term and long-term, young adults and professionals – through to community members engaged in informal self-help and community volunteering initiatives and national volunteering schemes.

VSO began in 1958 when its founders sent the first 16 volunteers to teach English in Borneo. It has evolved from a UK charity sending British volunteers to developing countries to an international NGO, which runs projects in education, health, livelihoods and governance, working with a range of volunteers (North–South; South–South; national; community-based; youth; corporate; political), and supports the development of an enabling environment for volunteering in the global South. VSO is now revisiting its way of working, and wanting

to understand better how and why volunteering contributes to reducing poverty and bringing about sustainable change – and what this learning means for the organisation and its practice.

The Valuing Volunteering project used two research approaches to collect and analyse insights about volunteering: participatory systemic inquiry (PSI) and systemic action research (SAR). These approaches were selected because they facilitate deeper participatory analysis with people in communities that enable us to get under the surface of how communities operate and how change happens. Using PSIs, researchers working with large groups of participants are able to map a system of actors, actions and contexts as a baseline against which change can be assessed (Burns 2012). It facilitates a conversation that goes beyond the immediate issues or concerns in the setting, and enables a deeper reflection on how people, processes and the environment that they are situated within influence one another. The data are used to determine how different factors affect one another, with the aim of learning about why change is or is not happening. While causal links between each part of a system can be identified, they are frequently not linear relationships.

PSI also encourages questions that help the group to identify paths towards change. The overarching research question was: ‘how and why does volunteering affect poverty?’ and through these methodologies, sought to observe volunteer practices as part of a wider system rather than the actions of an individual in isolation. Further, it was important to understand the factors that impacted on people’s perceptions of volunteering in some inquiries, in order to make sense of volunteers’ effectiveness.

A PSI mapping and analysis can take place over a 2–12-week period and can involve working with many different individuals and groups. The Valuing Volunteering research comprised many different PSIs at the community, organisational and national levels. In many cases, the collective analysis motivated participants to want to respond to emergent findings and take action. In this way, PSI formed the beginning of an action research process, which was further developed through SAR. Action research is a methodological approach which embeds reflection, planning, action and evaluation into a single process. The core principle behind action research is that we learn from action as well as from analysis, but that we need also to reflect on our action in order to learn. It thus incorporates iterative cycles of action and analysis, allowing us to

reflect at intervals on a particular action or approach and adapt it accordingly.

The action research approach taken in this project was also participatory, because it was led by individuals directly affected by or involved in volunteering initiatives (see Appendix, this *IDS Bulletin*) who themselves defined the local action research process and questions, and participated in the analysis. In total, some 3,700 people reflected on volunteering during the course of the project. The action research approach was also systemic, because the impacts of actions were assessed in terms of their effects and consequences for actors, actions and contexts in the wider social system. During the process, groups of participants analysed the data they had generated together, and identified where they could make the most effective interventions. Groups met regularly to assess the impact of their actions, refine them as a result and develop new interventions. SAR inquiries build in multi-stranded and multi-stakeholder processes and typically took place over a period of 18 months. SAR and PSI methodologies used in the research comprised many methods. These have included the generation and processing of systems maps (see Hacker, this *IDS Bulletin*); rich pictures; monitoring of workload patterns; surveys; rivers of life mappings, story collection and analysis, immersions, observation and transect walks; participatory photography and participatory video; and open discussions and dialogues.

The opening article by Jo Howard and Danny Burns situates this research in the evolving ‘ecosystem of development’, and asks us to consider the role of volunteering for development within the emerging agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While recognising the issues that many current forms of volunteering can create, they highlight the potential of volunteering when understood as a relational and collaborative endeavour that is a beacon of collectivism in an ever more individualising world. They identify critical characteristics of effective volunteering for development as: the insider–outsider relationship; participatory processes; long-term programming; and a sustained focus on the poorest and most marginalised. They also call for a reframing of volunteering that focuses on the perspectives and experiences of host organisations, of community volunteers and national volunteers. Through listening to and learning from the epistemologies of the South they argue, it will be possible to develop a better understanding of indigenous informal volunteering and how ‘outsider’ volunteers can support it.

The research is further contextualised with Erika Lopez Franco and Thea Shahrokh's contribution, which reviews the literature on volunteering to investigate how the theory and practice of volunteering interacts with the dynamics of development. They map the trends of both over the last 50 years, and reflect on how trends such as globalisation, change of consumption and leisure, education, technological change and growing demands for employability skills for youth have fostered the emergence of new short-term ways to engage in volunteering activities such as through voluntourism, clicktivism, corporate volunteering and youth volunteering. They draw attention to the historical lack of recognition of informal volunteering endeavours such as self-help initiatives, cooperatives, support groups and political movements where people self-organise to drive social change. They are encouraged by the explicit recognition of these diverse forms of volunteering as part of the post-2015 and SDG processes, but argue for deepening understanding about how formal (i.e. structured) volunteering programmes enhance rather than hinder these spontaneous endeavours.

Jody Aked finds that the Vfd sector lacks a coherent interpretation of the relational processes that link the placement of a volunteer to effective social action. Her analysis asserts that it is interpersonal processes developed through volunteer interventions that achieve outcomes such as ownership, participation and empowerment. Aked uses self-determination theory to argue that volunteering triggers feelings of relatedness, autonomy and competence which nourish the initiative, motivation and capacities which can become pro-social/'skilful social behaviour'. Her analysis encourages us to recognise development as a collective action problem requiring human-centred and collaborative design of solutions.

Elizabeth Hacker reflects on the Valuing Volunteering methodology, and explores the benefits of using participatory approaches (PSI and SAR), and the advantages of specific participatory tools, such as systems mapping. She outlines how these approaches reveal issues from the bottom up, and how volunteers need to be supported to reflect on the complexity of their contexts and understand how their volunteer efforts affect and are affected by this complexity. The approach enables volunteers to co-generate ideas that take this complexity into account, and build frameworks for action that are grounded in an understanding of local realities. The iterative nature of action research cycles means

that these solutions can be 'fine-tuned' so that they become more responsive to community needs and better able to achieve sustainable positive change. Hacker finds that participatory approaches are not integrated into the existing development strategies of international volunteer cooperation organisations (IVCOs), and therefore the creative approach and social mobilisation potential of volunteers is not well supported or linked into programming so that volunteer initiatives can access additional resources and expertise in order to 'layer change on change' (Burns 2007).

Hacker highlights some of the challenges for volunteers and for VID organisations in implementing a participatory research approach. These include: keeping momentum of an action research process when working with volunteers who receive little or no financial compensation; working with local volunteers and partners with limited literacy in change processes and participatory ways of working; and navigating between these emergent and experimental ways of working and the sometimes rigid monitoring and evaluation systems, project budgets and time frames of IVCOs.

In their article, Alexandra Picken and Simon Lewis draw on the Valuing Volunteering research in Mozambique and Kenya to explore the tensions of international, national and community volunteer engagement in politicised settings where political and ethnic cleavages are reproduced within local voluntary organisations. While identifying and analysing the challenges and complexities of volunteer engagement in these settings, they highlight the possibilities for international and national volunteers, when 'perceived as neutral', to play a bridging role as translator or even negotiator between power holders and excluded groups. The analysis also indicates a role for outsider volunteers to speak out on behalf of marginalised groups and to articulate their demands for representation and accountability. They call for greater acknowledgement by the volunteer sector of these wider structural, political and ethnic divisions, and concerted effort to counter their negative effects, in order to ensure that civil society volunteer spaces are effective, transparent and do not perpetuate inequality.

In his article, Simon Lewis attempts to reframe the volunteering for development debate by taking the Korogocho community – an informal settlement in northeast Nairobi – (rather than volunteering *per se*) as a starting point. He argues for developing

a locally rooted understanding of how volunteerism operates and is perceived within specific contexts. His analysis draws attention to the issue of volunteer stipends, and how their widespread use in formal volunteering has led to a problematic confusion surrounding the distinction between volunteering and low-paid work, especially in the setting of an informal settlement. He finds, however, that informal volunteer groups are not affected because they do not self-identify as volunteers, and so largely avoid the financial expectations associated with formal volunteering. Lewis calls for greater attention to be paid to these groups that emerge in direct response to community needs, and can signal the development needs in the locality. Lewis argues that the volunteering for development sector should look more carefully at how formal and informal volunteering initiatives could work better together to play mutually supportive roles in bringing about sustainable change, and to build on their complementary strengths to address a range of issues, and differing roles in perpetuating or challenging normative gender roles, power dynamics and social exclusion.

Notes

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This *IDS Bulletin* closes with an article by Katie Turner, the VSO lead for the project, who writes from an organisational perspective. For Turner, this *IDS Bulletin* and the Valuing Volunteering research form part of an ongoing process of collaboration stemming from VSO's demonstrated commitment to empowerment and not just to service delivery (Shahrokh and Wheeler 2014). She draws comparisons with community development theory to argue that a participatory approach is founded in the same values – dignity, respect, reciprocity – that are often associated with volunteering, but also highlights how volunteer interventions are sometimes constructed at odds with a participatory approach. She points to the pressures on the sector to professionalise and compete, which has led to the greater emphasis on the skill set of its volunteers. She highlights the learning from this research for VSO, and calls for the sector more widely to pay greater attention to how volunteers work. She also calls for the sector to introduce process monitoring that enables organisations to understand the volunteering approach and provide support for volunteers to reflect on how they are working during their placements.

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- 1 See www.vsointernational.org/fighting-poverty/what-we-do/volunteering-for-development/valuing-volunteering

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