

IVCO 2022 Think Piece

'BLENDED VOLUNTEERING' – a decolonised Volunteering for Development approach to achieve SDGs

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IVCO
SENEGAL 2022



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When Delavignette (1977, p131)¹ said ‘decolonization fundamentally meant rejection of the civilization of the white man’ it centred during a time when countries in the Global South were getting liberated in clusters from Western rule. Significant energy and thinking have gone in the 21st century to expand the debate to decolonising the sphere of knowledge and skills (e.g., *Rhodes must fall/Why is my curriculum white?*) That debate and thinking have expanded to the volunteering sector too ([IVCO2021](#)). These debates revolve around the dichotomy of ‘white-non-white’, ‘West-East’, ‘Global North-Global South’ and so on.

We argue that the findings from a recently concluded collaborative research study on ‘blended volunteering’² by VSO and Northumbria University add a new dimension to thinking on decolonisation, particularly within the volunteering for development space.

The independent primary research study, carried out with communities, volunteers, and VSO staff in our Nepal, Tanzania, and Uganda programmes, identifies important considerations for strengthening a volunteering for development methodology to maximize outcomes for the most marginalised communities, and support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

BLENDING TO LEVERAGE GREATER IMPACT

For far too long, international volunteering has tended to be the most dominant modality, funded by Global North governments and international development organisations, focused on skills and knowledge transfer to individuals and organisations in the Global South. There was little thinking around recognising the skills and knowledge that volunteers based in their own country and community can add in tandem. This perspective also assumed that skills and knowledge are fixed and pre-determined, and individuals can be placed in a specific role within projects based on where they come from.

The research challenges this parochial assumption through demonstrating the significant **value leverage** of a **blended model**, where different volunteering modalities work together in a planned yet dynamic way, and that the value of combining interdependent knowledge and skills enables far greater impact and sustainability of development results in the lives of marginalised and vulnerable communities. It finds that skills and knowledge are not fixed across modalities. The research also shows that the complex and disruptive development challenges that marginalised and vulnerable communities face today require a well-crafted blended volunteering team as an important programme design element for sustainable development results.

1. Delavignette, R, W.B.Cohen & A.Rosenzweig (1977). Robert Delavignette on the French Empire: Selected writings. University of Chicago Press. Chicago.

2. Volunteering Together: Blending Knowledge & Skills for Development. 2022. VSO & Centre for Development, Northumbria University. <https://www.vsointernational.org/our-work/research-and-evaluations/our-research/blending-knowledge-and-skills-for-development>

MOVING THE VOLUNTEERING EPICENTRE

Programmes that privilege technical skills do not recognise the importance of having volunteers in communities that can anchor programmes, can bring an understanding of context, and enable sustainability after the programme has ended. How different modalities come together, especially community volunteers within a blended volunteering model, has a strong influence on project outcomes. Community volunteers add contextual expertise, embeddedness and trust to projects, each of which are crucial to project outcomes. The research also finds that the blend works best when external actors and partners are suitably designed as part of the broader community system. In VSO projects, an ecosystem approach networks primary actors (marginalised and vulnerable people) with community volunteers and partners, along with national and international volunteers.

The research identifies that the biggest risk to the enormous potential of a blended volunteering model lies in perceptions among volunteers that some modalities may be more important than others. It finds that the widely-held perception of international volunteers bringing 'tangible' technical skills, while community volunteers bring 'intangible' competencies such as embeddedness, contextual understanding, and credibility, presents a risk to decolonising mindsets and unleashing the potential of blended volunteering as a powerful development methodology.

DECOLONISE THE MINDSET FOR BLENDED VOLUNTEERING TO FLOURISH

For blended volunteering to work most effectively in development projects, two critical factors emerging from the research need consideration. The tendency for top-down volunteer planning and placement must give way to the emergence of a blended model that acknowledges that each modality is as critical as the other, and that a blended model is designed based on an informed understanding of specific primary actor (marginalised community) contexts. This is the biggest lesson we are learning in VSO programmes and, hence, we are inspired by the research outcomes to improve our own programmes.

In conclusion, the value of international volunteers may indeed be better realised when we recognise the value of local volunteers through a blended model of volunteering – a value addition to the volunteering for development methodology for sustainable development.

Dr. Alok Rath is VSO's Global Head of Knowledge, Evidence & Learning function. He strives to focus on research on the complex relationship between different forms of volunteering, development themes, and operating contexts in order to understand patterns and models that may work more effectively for sustainable development results in the lives of the most marginalised and vulnerable communities.

Rebecca Pursell-Gotz is a Research Specialist in Volunteering for Development at VSO. Her research interests are in community and blended volunteering, and how the combination of volunteering modalities contributes to stronger project outcomes. She has particular interests in understanding how diverse volunteering models and projects contribute most effectively to the achievement of the SDG