

COVID-19 and the Future of Volunteering for Development

Part 3: Case Studies

Six IVCO country case studies produced for the International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum)

February 2021

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Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Acknowledgements | <u>2</u> |
| Introduction | <u>3</u> |
| Australian Volunteers International (AVI), Fiji | <u>5</u> |
| Cuso International, Peru | <u>14</u> |
| France Volontaires, The Philippines | <u>25</u> |
| Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), South Africa | <u>32</u> |
| The Norwegian Agency for Exchange Cooperation (Norec), Ghana, Rwanda, Uganda | <u>38</u> |
| VSO, Nigeria | <u>46</u> |

Note: The IVCOs documented in these case studies each provided the research team with a sample of up to 100 volunteers from across their country programmes for a volunteer survey conducted during September and October 2020. The survey results capture the volunteer perspectives on how their IVCO managed the COVID-19 crisis; the support they needed and what they received; whether and how they were repatriated; relationships with partner organisations; the prospects for remote/online volunteering; reflections on the likelihood of them volunteering in future; and their views on the future of volunteering for development. The survey results reflect the experiences of volunteers from a range of country programmes for each IVCO, whereas the case studies in this report focus on one country programme for each IVCO except for the Norec case study which looks at one programme operating in three countries.

The volunteer survey results for each IVCO are available in Annex 3 of the following report: Perold, H, Allum, CA, Lough, BJ & Mati, JM (2021). *COVID-19 and the Future of Volunteering for Development. Part 2: Survey Findings: Volunteers and volunteer involving organisations surveyed for the International Forum for Volunteering in Development*. International Forum for Volunteering in Development. <https://forum-ids.org/forum-survey-report-covid-19-and-the-future-of-volunteering-for-development/>

Cover image: A Cuso volunteer and colleague from partner organisation ASOMUPRO in Estelí, Northern Nicaragua. Photo thanks to Cuso International.

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Introduction

Lived experiences of volunteering for development in COVID-19 contexts are documented in the six case studies contained in this report. Through the voices and perspectives of IVCO country representatives, programme directors, partner organisation representatives, volunteers and community representatives, the reports offer ‘on-the-ground’ accounts of how the pandemic impacted on their lives and activities during September and October 2020.

In these narratives the actors relate how they responded to the sudden disruption with shock, anxiety, frustration and deep concern for programme partners and target groups, and how they demonstrated ingenuity and resilience in confronting new realities that produced immense challenges as well as opportunities.

Each case study documents how IVCOs and partner organisations in-country changed their ways of working, responded to community needs, and found innovative means to keep programmes running, albeit in a limited form. While many of the measures taken by the IVCOs and their partners tended to be short-term crisis interventions, they often generated longer-term opportunities for programme and operational adaptation. Volunteer involving organisations (VIOs) embraced digital technology as a means of maintaining organisational cohesion and responsiveness. Some reported launching online fundraising campaigns, organising morale-boosting digital music events and embarking on internet-based advocacy, among other strategies.

In the face of COVID-19, new cross-sectoral partnerships emerged and new relationships were fostered between partner organisations, civil society organisations, the corporate sector, and foundations in-country and abroad. These in turn gave rise to new sources of financial and human support,² and constitute an encouraging development which indicates that VIOs might possibly pursue diversified funding sources, even in countries where this has previously not been possible.

The most obvious finding from the study, and demonstrated in these case studies, is that community volunteers were able to continue in their roles when international volunteers did not. While international volunteering did not cease in the face of the pandemic³ the qualitative evidence shows that the ability of national and community volunteers to deliver programme objectives in a pandemic is significant. In the context of declining ‘supply’ of international volunteers, or closure of short-term programmes,⁴ growth in local, national and South-South volunteering is anticipated. COVID-19 appears to have accelerated the need to rethink the role and resourcing of local volunteers as an integral part of the volunteering for development infrastructure.

² Examples include strengthening relationships with stakeholders such as local authorities, local leaders, homeowners’ associations and companies; obtaining new funding from local and international donors; and collaborating with private sector organisations, including private media.

³ In the volunteer survey 182 respondents identified as international volunteers and 97 said they were not repatriated. Also see: Perold, H, Allum, CA, Lough, BJ & Mati, JM (2021). *COVID-19 and the Future of Volunteering for Development. Part 2: Survey Findings: Volunteers and volunteer involving organisations surveyed for the International Forum for Volunteering in Development*. International Forum for Volunteering in Development. <https://forum-ids.org/forum-survey-report-covid-19-and-the-future-of-volunteering-for-development/>

⁴ Particularly youth programmes.

While IVCO programmes have always worked with national and community volunteers, this change calls for a process of formally recognising the importance of national and community volunteers as central contributors to IVCO programmes, rather than as contributors outside of the IVCO system.

Taken collectively, our findings from these case studies⁵ suggest that organisations that work together are most likely to succeed in a disrupted environment. To continue being relevant, actors in international volunteering need innovations that include working in consortia; offering direct funding to partner organisations in the South; playing a bigger role in supporting ICT infrastructure within host countries and partner organisations; and engaging more closely with in-country VIO networks.



Cuso Volunteer Mary Thompson with Ma Cherry of Jeepyah Civil Society Development Organisation in Myanmar. Both have been instrumental in launching a sexual and reproductive health hotline. Photographer: Brian Atkinson. Photo thanks to Cuso International.

⁵ Synthesised findings of this study are available in: Perold, H, Mati, JM, Allum, C, & Lough, BJ (2021). *COVID-19 and the Future of Volunteering for Development. Part 1: Research Report. Findings from a study conducted for the International Forum for Volunteering in Development.* International Forum for Volunteering in Development. <https://forum-ids.org/covid-19-and-the-future-of-volunteering-for-development-research-report/>

Country Case Study

Australian Volunteers International's

Australian Volunteers Programme, Fiji⁶

Introduction

The Australian Volunteers International (AVI) programme in the Pacific is embedded in the imperatives of the Australian government's soft power diplomacy. AVI is the lead member of the consortium that delivers the programme on behalf of the Australian government through the Australian Volunteers Program (AVP).⁷ AVP has been running since the 1960s and the current programme in Fiji supports partners working on inclusive education for children with disabilities (CWD), livelihoods, and sports for development, among others.

Among partners interviewed for this study are Tennis Fiji, Rama Krishna Mission Fiji and Lautoka Special School. These organisations had long-term partnerships with AVP at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Lautoka Special School cumulatively had had an eight-year partnership with AVP, and had been very satisfied with the partnership. Their volunteers (repatriated at the time of the research) had done several long-term stints with them. Likewise, Tennis Fiji, whose partnership with AVP dated back several years, was hosting their third AVP volunteer who was helping the organisation deliver their sports-for-development programme. The other partner, the Rama Krishna Mission in Fiji had an AVP volunteer tasked with helping to develop the capacity of the local horticulture instructors and thereby support their ongoing improvement of the training curriculum for Certificates 2, 3 and 4 in production horticulture.

⁶ This country case study is based on the qualitative and quantitative research conducted for Forum between September and October 2020 to ascertain the impact of COVID-19 on the future of volunteering for development. One focus group was conducted on 3 September 2020 with four AVI partner organisations in Fiji. Another focus group was conducted on 18 September 2020 with the respective AVI volunteers who had been repatriated from Fiji. An interview was conducted with the AVI Regional Representative for Central and North Pacific on 23 September 2020. The case study also draws on the results of a survey carried out in August-September 2020 to which 11 AVI volunteers responded, citing their views about their experiences during the pandemic between March and September 2020. An analysis of the AVI survey responses can be found in Annex 3 of the following report: Perold, H, Allum, CA, Lough, BJ & Mati, JM (2021). COVID-19 and the Future of Volunteering for Development. Part 2: Survey Findings: Volunteers and volunteer involving organisations surveyed for the International Forum for Volunteering in Development. International Forum for Volunteering in Development. <https://forum-ids.org/forum-survey-report-covid-19-andthe-future-of-volunteering-for-development/>

⁷ The programme is funded by the Australian government and delivered in a consortium with Cardon Emerging Markets Pty Ltd and Alinea Whitelum.

Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on volunteers and programmes

At the direction of the Australian government, AVP repatriated all volunteers except for those working in the health sector who would be useful to the COVID-19 interventions. The repatriation affected partners in Fiji quite drastically, though some were able to cope better than others. For example, for some years the AVP volunteers working in inclusive education had been supplementing special needs schools such as Lautoka Special School. They supported the school by tailoring the curriculum learning plans to the specific needs of each child. Their repatriation due to COVID-19 had an enormous impact on the school's ability to continue offering such customised learning for their pupils.

Lautoka Special School had to find ways to cope with the extremely challenging situation in caring for the children with disabilities whilst ensuring that their education continued. Besides losing the support of the AVP volunteers, the Lautoka Special School programme was impacted further by COVID-19 when classes ceased during the initial lockdown period. Although classes resumed once some of the restrictions were lifted, the school principal described the challenges of working according to COVID-19 health protocols. For example, social distancing rules were difficult to adhere to when dealing with children with disabilities: *"If a child with epilepsy falls down, you cannot just leave the child. Though social distancing was there, we were following precautionary measures as much as we could."*

The Tennis Fiji programme addresses gender imbalances in the sport. The programme came to a complete stop immediately after the lockdown was imposed and the Australian volunteer was repatriated. As indicated by the president of Tennis Fiji, the effect of the pandemic was not limited to partners, but also affected the volunteers: *"Our volunteer has been directly impacted. Obviously physically, she's not here. That's obvious ... She's gone home."*

To further demonstrate the effects of the pandemic on their programme, the president of Tennis Fiji indicated that Fiji had been fortunate in that it had not been as badly affected by COVID-19 as other nations. This meant that, over a relatively short time, restrictions were lifted and the partner organisations managed to get back to some 'normal' programme operations. However, as the volunteer had already been repatriated, she could no longer provide support in person. He also noted that reinstating the tennis programme had not been easy:

**Our school's programme initially stopped in its entirety, and the restrictions were introduced in terms of the number of people that we could gather socially. We approached the schools to start the programmes up and a lot were reluctant because I believe there was a Director from the Ministry of Education that said extracurricular activities couldn't be done because the school was behind its terms of academic progress of the students.
(President, Tennis Fiji)**

Repatriation and support for volunteers and partner organisations

Both volunteers and the AVP Regional Director for the Central and North Pacific felt that at first there was panic and chaos as every foreigner, especially tourists, tried to leave at the same time. This made repatriation planning particularly challenging and a flight had to be chartered for some volunteers. Despite these trying circumstances, the volunteers interviewed for this study indicated that AVP had been very effective in their response to the pandemic especially in the way they handled the logistics of the repatriation. Their only negative comment was that they had no agency to choose whether to remain at their placement or to be repatriated; three out of the four volunteers interviewed indicated that they would have preferred to have stayed in Fiji. The decision to repatriate was taken jointly by the Australian government and AVP, and volunteers did not have much choice on the matter. However, one of the volunteers commented that under the circumstances, *“the duty of care overrode everything. It was dominant. And I think they made a good decision.”* The volunteers indicated that after repatriation they were given an opportunity to continue supporting their partner organisation remotely and the majority had chosen to do so.

The partner organisations interviewed held a different view, namely that given the comparatively low levels of infection in Fiji, it is probable that the AVP volunteers would have been safer in Fiji than back in their home countries:

We had a [tennis] coach returned to South Africa, a coach returned to France. I think both of those [countries] are nearly top 10 on the number of cases list. And then we had [name of volunteer] who returned back to Melbourne, who now in hindsight, they’ve had a lockdown, and obviously they had that outbreak. In retrospect, they would have been safer currently in Fiji... Lots of [the Fijian] government’s initiative and quick response to contain COVID obviously done a wonderful job. (President, Tennis Fiji)

Given this, the president of Tennis Fiji felt that had the volunteers stayed in Fiji (which quickly contained the spread of the virus), they would have been able to resume their work on the ground without any interruption after going through the initial two to three months of lockdown restrictions and curfew. He further noted that he hoped that there will be a time when AVP will see this positive turnaround in Fiji and bring back the volunteers, especially those who were not enthusiastic about being repatriated:

I noticed speaking to [volunteer], she wasn’t that keen to go back to Australia. I think she didn’t have a choice when the repatriation flight was put on. Obviously, for everybody at that time, it was unprecedented and maybe there was a knee-jerk reaction on how to move forward and obviously safety was paramount, but I think if she was given the choice, she would have stayed behind. (President, Tennis Fiji)

Volunteers reported that the main support they required after they were repatriated was financial. This is because volunteers were returning to an environment in which it was going to be much more difficult to get a job: “I don’t think anyone went back to a job...there was suddenly going to be a lot fewer jobs.” Ten out of the eleven AVP volunteers who participated in the survey felt that financial support was given both in the process of returning home and for a period afterwards. In addition, psychological counselling was offered to volunteers who may have needed it.

Does programme innovation and adaptation signal potential for growth?

Ten out of the eleven AVP volunteers who participated in the survey reported that they were offered the opportunity to continue to support their partners online (details of how this worked are covered below). Many took up the opportunity to continue offering remote technology-mediated support to partners. Nonetheless, there were differential experiences on the effectiveness of this support.

Evidence indicates that those partner organisations who generally had more positive outcomes, engaged volunteers in tasks that did not require close proximity to the workplace. Tennis Fiji for instance indicates that they tried to compensate for the volunteer's remote support by "*organising scheduled times, where she'll do a webinar on a specific topic.*" But there were technical challenges especially relating to the capacity of development officers in utilising these new technologies, or even the motivation of the staff volunteers meant to work with them. So the sheer physical presence of the AVP volunteers made a huge difference:

The biggest thing is technical challenges ... with the development officers themselves, as opposed to the executive structure of tennis. I mean, actually, we're talking everyday day, but I guess it's a reflection on the type of quality that you have. (President, Tennis Fiji)

While partners acknowledged that having a volunteer provide remote online support was better than not having any AVP volunteer, given a choice they would certainly have preferred the volunteer to be physically on-site.

The COVID-19 context also became an opportunity that forced Tennis Fiji to look at ways of imparting necessary skills to their local volunteer development officers. Specifically, they shifted their focus to make sure that every volunteer development officer had medical insurance of some form, further training through a first emergency responder course, and how to care for children.

The president of Tennis Fiji was of the view that the COVID-19 situation has made them more reflexive, something they had not been before.

Because of the COVID protocols that we have to follow, we reflected on the medical training of the staff. So that was one benefit. I think we had 10 people to a course a few weeks back to get medically trained. (President, Tennis Fiji)

Similarly the Lautoka Special School, another partner, analysed their needs, especially in the context of gaps left by the repatriation of their volunteers. As a result, they explored alternatives that could lead to better educational outcomes for the children they serve so that they are not totally dependent on international volunteers in future. However, the specifics and outcomes of the process had not been completed at the time of the interviews.

To deal with the challenge of remote support, Tennis Fiji opted for the repatriated AVP volunteer to assist by developing policies to ensure compliance with public health regulations in tennis once the lockdown was lifted and a return to tennis was allowed. In addition, Tennis Fiji utilised the volunteer to formulate a gender inclusion policy. In this regard, the president noted:

We never had a gender-inclusive programme and thought we were doing really well with the sport. But when we actually looked at the quantitative data, we realised that the split [between men and women] was not 50-50. We were way off into sort of 80-20 ... We sort of evaluated our focus, and we tried to find out why that was. (President, Tennis Fiji)

On the whole, Tennis Fiji and its AVP volunteer have had a positive experience with remote volunteering, helped by the development of operation manuals and protocols through online contact. Nonetheless, they were not sure whether, without the initial in-person contact and the establishment of relationships, things would have turned out as positively as they did. Other repatriated AVP volunteers reported more challenging experiences. The question then is whether this points to task-based remote support working better than other types of online volunteer support.

While Tennis Fiji acknowledged the benefits of continued remote support, a return to pre-COVID-19 normalcy is elusive. This is especially so because even after the lockdown was lifted, an added challenge for Tennis Fiji was the requirement to reduce the number of development officers (local volunteers) and participants due to social distancing regulations. Prior to COVID-19, they had volunteer tennis development officers who ran their own self-organised programmes for 200-300 children at a time. That changed by having to involve many more volunteers to work with a smaller number of children at one place. In addition, children do not easily adhere to strict social distancing protocols. This created the need to split them up into small groups to try and adhere to social distancing as far as possible. In turn, programme costs increased because more personnel were needed on the ground to deliver a single programme that conformed with COVID-related protocols. Nonetheless, a positive outcome here has been the need to engage more people as volunteer coaches, especially teachers whose capacity has also been built in the process.

Another challenge concerned scaling down the number of programmes even as they have tried to engage more with technology especially in offering more training:

There's a programme called tournament software. We recently had a webinar around it so we now have people that can run events and community competitions by logging in to that tournament software programme. So they can actually run online competition as opposed to staging everything sort of manually. (President, Tennis Fiji)

Tennis Fiji has tried to identify areas in which additional training can benefit other aspects of tennis. Examples include events management, coaching, refereeing, and physiotherapy.

The other AVP partner, Rama Krishna Mission, runs training on horticulture and food processing programmes. They indicated that they have embraced internet-enabled communication media such as Zoom to ensure that their volunteer continues training the programme instructors. They were of the view that the volunteer was “*doing a really good job*” and was getting good results. However, the remote support format has not been easy for the continued implementation of practice-oriented programmes for farmers. The result has been that farmers have lost out on certain aspects of their training. In the COVID-19 context,

support continued with the AVP volunteer delivering a weekly online session, or on a needs basis. However, this proved to be challenging and not always effective because of the connectivity challenges and distance.

Online remote support therefore did not work as well as Rama Krishna and the volunteer would have liked. However, part of adapting to the new form of working has been to draw up questions from the instructors being trained and forwarding them to the volunteer to enable her to tailor her preparation.

For Lautoka Special School, remote support could not work because, as emphasised by the principal, they need someone physically present to work with their students with special needs. He indicated that the AVP volunteers have been their champions, especially given the scarcity of relevant skills in special education in the Pacific region. The principal also indicated that remote support cannot work as well as face to face support because students are not able to interact with the volunteers nor utilise their expertise and skills to nurture their talents. In addition, for special education to work, there is a need for individualised educational plans for each learner. It is not easy to do this remotely. Given these challenges, the principal at the Lautoka Special School held that other forms of innovation were necessary in the case of education for children with disabilities. He was, however, not sure of what forms such specific innovations might take.

The withdrawal of volunteers affected partner organisations and volunteers in different ways. To begin with, all partners interviewed for the study indicated that the cost of delivering programme activities has increased. In this regard, Tennis Fiji noted:

What we've had to do obviously, is temperature checks before people can join the programme in the communities. We have sanitisers on hand. We sanitise prior to everybody starting and then we wipe down the equipment at the end and they all use the hand sanitiser when they leave. We ended up having to buy temperature guns. The initial aim was to buy for everybody (10 trainers). We didn't have the finances for that. So we ended up buying five, and we advise people that they would at least be working in groups of two. The most expensive thing actually wasn't the temperature guns. It's the hand sanitiser, and the wipes for sanitising the gear because, you know, you go to the school and you've got 100 racquets in at the end, you're wiping them down before they use, you're wiping down afterwards. (President, Tennis Fiji)

As already noted, a number of AVP volunteers took up the offer to provide continued support to their partners but to do so remotely. Operationally this meant the use of internet-mediated platforms, especially Zoom, for continued training or even having volunteers concentrate on specific tasks, such as policy development, as was the case with the AVP volunteer at Tennis Fiji.

A couple of issues were highlighted about the new modus operandi. Firstly, access to the internet comes with cost implications for both partners and volunteers. Two approaches were used regarding costs. In the first approach, AVP provided allowances to volunteers to cater for their internet costs and this helped them meet their immediate needs. The second approach saw AVP give grants to three of their Fiji partners to help cushion them or enable them to respond to new COVID-19-related challenges and opportunities in the communities. These can be cited as examples of good practice.

Secondly, both the AVP volunteers and partners experienced challenges with remote support such as time differences, technological gaps or failures, or simply the fact that it denies both actors the satisfaction of traditional face to face volunteering. As noted by one of the volunteers: *“working remotely is significantly less satisfying than being in the location where the things are happening.”* Another repatriated volunteer who had spent many years in Fiji and understood the local context well commented: *“In Fiji, if you’re not there, you’re not there. Working remotely is very difficult. We’re trying to keep the project alive... [but] being there is what gets things done.”*

Both volunteers and partners felt that an element of reciprocity was lost in online/remote working relationships. For example, it is difficult to experience and learn about other people’s culture and to gain their trust online/remotely but that is key to success:

I think gaining the trust and building the relationship is the key and that takes a huge amount of time. It doesn’t really matter what education you have, what experience you have, it’s all the kind of baggage you take along with you and you just have to start from the scratch of building the trust and relationship before you can actually get into doing some work. (Repatriated volunteer, AVP)

By contrast, the Rama Krishna Mission felt that the farmers needed to be digitally connected to enable rapid access to information and to ensure that online training worked better. In view of this, they plan to reactivate an online platform app that they had pioneered in 2018 but shelved because it was felt it was not necessary at the time. However, the circumstances due to COVID-19 now require them to reactivate the app. The importance of Rama Krishna’s experience is that if remote technology-mediated volunteering is to succeed as an alternative model, there will be a need to invest in digital infrastructure and connectivity.



A handwashing session for children, organised by Water and Life/Eau et Vie in the Philippines. Photo thanks to Water and Life and France Volontaires.

What does the future hold for volunteering for development (V4D)?

As can be gleaned from the discussion thus far, volunteer involving organisations and volunteers in the Fiji AVP programme have had differing experiences. For example, given Tennis Fiji's relative success with their AVP volunteer who supported them remotely, the president felt that it is possible to recruit new volunteers to work remotely. This suggests that for some programmes and projects, remote volunteering is definitely worth considering.

For Lautoka Special School, however, one aspect of their future is likely to entail seeking partnerships with local corporate social responsibility programmes to attract the resources needed to hire experts with specialised skills in the education of children with disabilities. They aim to transform the operational policy environment for children with special needs in a few years. This in no way underplays the value of the AVP volunteers the school has worked with to date:

**We are very happy because for the last eight years we had a very good relationship [with AVP], and the momentum was really increasing and we [were] able to provide quality services to our special needs students. Now we will try to find alternatives.
(Principal, Lautoka Special School)**

Generally, the outlook for the future of international volunteering for development in Fiji looks positive. Everyone interviewed was keen to get volunteers back into the field as soon as they can. Partner organisations felt that the Australian government should allow volunteers back into countries where it is safe to go. In addition, both the partner organisations and the AVP volunteers felt that in terms of capacity, there are many projects that still need support, be it remotely or physically. The President of Tennis Fiji, for example, indicated: *"We have a digitisation programme that we want to do and create a national ranking system and a structure for the organisation to build up that database. So that's something that could be done remotely."*

In the same time, AVP in-country staff in Fiji engaged closely with their partner organisations to source local opportunities they could tap into in the absence of the AVP volunteers. This involved facilitating contact between organisations doing similar work, and encouraging cooperation between them:

So sometimes ... it's just trying to link our partners together to say, hey you guys, both of you are doing similar work; maybe you should ... talk to each other and see what can come up. And sometimes we play that role to facilitate those discussions. And so, I find that we're having to do a lot more of that, because that's the sort of role that the volunteers used to play in-country. And we've really been doing more of that now. (Regional Director for the Central and North Pacific, AVP)

These COVID-related experiences have important implications for Australian Volunteers International (AVI) and similar International Volunteer Cooperation Organisations (IVCOs). The international volunteering model is designed to produce soft power benefits for Australia through relationships built between host country partners and Australian volunteers, and vice versa. However, it is not clear if this can be easily achieved through online/remote volunteering models. This signals the possibility of AVI repositioning itself in the entire spectrum of volunteering activities and locations (local, national and international) as

some of the other IVCOs have done. In the long run, any iteration of AVI's current model must involve trade-offs in terms of the possibilities and outcomes of volunteerism for AVI, government funders, partners and the volunteers. A final comment from AVP's Regional Director for Central and North Pacific provides food for thought:

I do think ... that the programmes will evolve. We do have capacity in countries now that we never had before ... and I see international volunteers playing more of a mentoring role with these local volunteers. So I think that's where the volunteers, you know, local volunteers and international volunteers meet: it's still playing that capacity development role, but I think it'd be more of you know, international volunteers and local volunteers. That's probably one direction we'll take. (Regional Director for the Central and North Pacific, AVP)



Two women waiting for their medical examination at the Walga Clinic in Walga, Ethiopia.
Photographer: Ernst Schulthess, Mission am Nil. Photo thanks to Mission am Nil and Unité.

COUNTRY CASE STUDY

CUSO INTERNATIONAL, PERU⁸

Introduction

Cuso International has been sending international volunteers to Peru for 51 years. Its Volunteer for Development (V4D) programme in Peru has supported partner organisations working in the fields of gender equality, climate change and the employment of disabled youth, among others. At the time of the research, Cuso International was running two programmes in Peru: an international volunteer programme entitled SHARE (Sharing Canadian Expertise for Inclusive Development and Gender Equality) which launched on 15 April 2020, and a bilateral programme, the Women's Voice and Leadership Project, which addresses women's rights and inequality, bringing together four women's rights organisations.

Cuso International's volunteers were formerly placed in Peru within the Volunteers for International Cooperation and Empowerment (VOICE) Programme, which annually received 20–26 Canadian volunteers to provide technical and specialist support to its partners.⁹ Although most of the volunteers were contracted for 12 months, approximately 60% chose to extend their contracts, some by a few months and others for two to three years.¹⁰ The contracts of the VOICE Programme international volunteers ended on 15 March 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, and the programme closed as planned on 31 March 2020.

Owing to the pandemic, the SHARE programme could not receive Canadian volunteers as planned. Nevertheless, the programme is being implemented with seven volunteers¹¹ who are supporting five partner organisations. Besides the technical support provided by the volunteers, Cuso has provided small grants to eight partners so that they can implement activities, particularly in response to the COVID-19 context.

⁸ This country case study is based on qualitative and quantitative research conducted for Forum between August and October 2020 to ascertain the impact of COVID-19 on the future of volunteering for development. An in-depth interview was conducted with the Cuso International country representative in Peru on 26 August 2020, and on 2 September 2020 a focus group discussion was held with five representatives from three organisations that involved Cuso International volunteers. The case study also draws on the results of a survey carried out between 1 September and 7 October 2020 to which 10 Cuso International volunteers responded, citing their views about their experience during the pandemic between March and September 2020. An analysis of the CUSO survey responses can be found in Annex 3 of the following report: Perold, H, Allum, CA, Lough, BJ & Mati, JM (2021). COVID-19 and the Future of Volunteering for Development. Part 2: Survey Findings: Volunteers and volunteer involving organisations surveyed for the International Forum for Volunteering in Development. International Forum for Volunteering in Development. <https://forum-ids.org/forum-survey-report-covid-19-and-the-future-of-volunteering-for-development/>

⁹ In 2020 funding from Global Affairs Canada for Cuso's volunteering programme was reduced (from CAD65 million over five years to CAD50 million over seven years), which has reduced the number of Canadian volunteers expected annually to 10–15.

¹⁰ In addition to sending Canadian volunteers, Cuso International has in the past supported some South-South volunteers from the region to volunteer in Peru, but at the time of the research, was sending Canadian volunteers only, but at the time of writing South-South volunteering in the CUSO programme had resumed once more. The Women's Voice and Leadership bilateral project does not involve international volunteers.

¹¹ Some of the volunteers are Canadians who are living in Peru and two are South-South volunteers also based in Peru.

This case study is based on an in-depth interview conducted with Cuso International's country representative in Peru and also draws on a focus group discussion in which three partner organisations participated: Movimiento Manuela Ramos, Movimiento Ciudadano Frente al Cambio Climático, and Kallpa's Youth Employment Centre in Cusco.¹²

It is important to note that in Peru international volunteers are known as *cooperantes* since the word 'volunteer' reflects negatively on international volunteers, particularly when they are skilled.

Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on volunteers and programmes

Following the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic and the departure of all except four Cuso International volunteers on 16 March 2020, the value of the international volunteers was immediately apparent. One volunteer had been working with indigenous organisations to increase the knowledge and skills of local women in relation to gender equity and gender-based violence. *"And that is not happening now, because we don't have the volunteer in place,"* according to the country representative. Another volunteer provided technical assistance to small producers growing vegetables in very poor urban areas in Lima. Her departure came at a time when the pandemic threw food security and livelihoods into crisis, and she could not be replaced owing to COVID-19 restrictions.

Among the partner organisations, however, the most immediate shock was the disruption caused by staff having to work from home and having to find new ways of staying in contact. In the Citizen Movement against Climate Change, the restrictions affected *"the closeness of the team"* according to a local volunteer, and paralysed its operations for many months. The National Coordinator said: *"It was shocking because we had a lot of plans with people, with organisations, with volunteers and activists. We just cancelled everything immediately. ... the deadlines of our initial plans were changed all the time."*

Movimiento Manuela Ramos runs programmes that include trainings, conversations and research, and lobbies congress officials as well as leaders in councils and municipalities. The director maintained: *"And now we do everything remotely. ... It is difficult to believe, but it is working."* For the climate change activists, however, it proved to be very difficult and costly to use social media to continue their advocacy and education activities.

In the Youth Employment Centre, job opportunities for youth with disabilities plummeted from approximately 200 a month to between two and ten. According to the Coordinator of the Youth Employment Centre, the young people with disabilities were *"afraid to go out because they don't want to become infected. They are really scared."* The coordinator reported that,

¹² Movimiento Manuela Ramos is a feminist organisation and movement launched 42 years ago. It focuses on the political participation of women, sexual and reproductive health education in schools, and runs a credit programme that supports women entrepreneurs in the poorest parts of the country. In the focus group it was represented by its founder and director who has worked with Cuso International for 27 years and by a volunteer who is a Gestalt psychologist and therapist working closely with women survivors of gender violence.

Movimiento Ciudadano Frente al Cambio Climático (Citizen Movement against Climate Change) is a network of climate change organisations and activists involved in advocacy projects and alternatives to climate change through the mobilisation of citizens for climate activism. Its director has represented civil society in the COP climate change negotiations and is a specialist member of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The volunteer participant is active in different environmental organisations that adopt varied approaches to climate change.

Asociacion Kallpa focuses on the employability of disabled youth and was represented by the coordinator of the Youth Employment Centre in Cusco and by a disabled youth participant involved with the centre.

in addition, employers “know that by hiring people with disabilities they are at a greater risk of infection.” In fact, the Centre discovered that of 20 of their young people with auditory disabilities, eight were infected by COVID-19, “because the information [about prevention measures] had not reached this population.”

And as was the case elsewhere in the world, COVID-19 laid bare the vast inequalities in Peru. As reported by the country representative “suddenly, we saw these queues ... we always knew there was inequality ... one very poor community right next to a very wealthy one. But we never thought about it in that way.”¹³ For the partners this deepened the urgency of finding ways to respond by every means possible:

They have been able to identify the gaps and the structural problems that Peru faces in inequality, poverty, access to connectivity, food insecurity. And so they have been identifying all these problems that are more evident with this pandemic, in order to tackle or address these problems once they have the opportunity to do it. And that is also something that Cuso International in Peru has been doing with some of the partners – identifying those problems and see if we can move on and find opportunities to address them. (Country Representative, Cuso International Peru)

Repatriation and support for volunteers and partner organisations

The Cuso International volunteers in Peru were due to return home having completed their contracts in mid-March, and the majority left Peru before the lockdown was declared. Strictly speaking, they completed their placements and were thus not repatriated. The remaining four Cuso volunteers (one with his family) were unable to depart before lockdown and stayed in Lima for some weeks until they were able to travel on humanitarian flights.¹⁴

During this time Cuso supported the volunteers with housing and a weekly stipend and made sure they had sufficient food and all their basic needs covered. The volunteers were covered by medical insurance and were provided with transportation to go to the embassy to make the necessary arrangements for their travel.¹⁵

¹³ “Knowing that some of the indigenous communities have a two-bed health centre and that they have the whole community affected by COVID; so they are using the church as a hospital. Another example is not having Tylenol, which is very basic to lower the fever, and things like that. So it is very shocking.” (Country Representative, Cuso International Peru)

¹⁴ “It was long hours coordinating with the embassy because I didn’t know [so] many Canadians lived in Peru at that time. But the embassy worked tirelessly until we could find a spot in those planes for the volunteers, and that wasn’t easy. We had to keep waiting for hours and hours on the phone. ... as soon as the flight was announced everybody wanted to leave on that flight. So I think our close connections with the embassy also made it easier for us to emigrate the volunteers. ... the embassy knows us, they used to call to tell me there is going to be a flight, you have to be ready. They gave me the code. And yes, I think we did what we could.” (Country Representative, Cuso International Peru)

¹⁵ “Even not being able to move ourselves from our homes, we were able to provide assistance to the volunteers through the emergency phone, sending drivers, making sure that we could transfer funds to their accounts so they could pay their rent and buy their food. So we were in constant communication with them.” (Country Representative, Cuso International Peru)

Previous experience of evacuating Cuso volunteers from Nicaragua during a political crisis in 2018 stood the Country Representative in good stead to manage the 2020 evacuation process in Peru:

Yes, yes, it gave me exactly what I needed in terms of my communication with Cuso International, my headquarters in Ottawa. Because of my previous experience, I also have a very good relationship with the safety and security manager who happens to be Peruvian and living in Canada. ... So I kind of knew what to do, who to inform, and what to request. So in that sense it was easy for me. (Country Representative, Cuso International Peru)

The repatriation of Cuso's volunteers impacted on their partners in different ways. The director of the climate change movement regretted the absence of the international volunteers: *"... now is the first time that we work for so many months without any international volunteers in our core team. So we can feel the lack of this kind of input in our team."* The organisation maintained limited contact with the international volunteers and included them in their first online campaign.

The connection with former Cuso International volunteers is also evident in cases where partners are reaching out to their global networks for funds and solidarity:

"... contacting very good Canadian volunteers that used to work in Peru that could help us. Actually, it was a returned volunteer from Cuso who helped us fundraise money for food baskets that we delivered a couple of months ago. We can go back to them again." (Director, Movimiento Manuela Ramos)

In the absence of the international volunteers, Cuso Peru started recruiting Canadian and South-South volunteers living in Peru to support the SHARE programme. They are working remotely from home to support the partner organisations.

Programme adaptation

In Latin America, we are very adaptable. So I know they [Cuso partners] will be able to thrive. But if it's going to be easier for them having the international volunteers, local volunteers or any kind of support that Cuso International can provide then definitely, it will be better if they receive the support. I will not tell you that the indigenous organisations will disappear, because they won't. They will continue working. They will miss the support. They always appreciate the support that they can receive from other organisations. (Country Representative, Cuso International Peru)

Despite the sudden shock of the pandemic, Cuso's partner organisations responded with passion to find creative ways of keeping their programmes alive within the COVID-19 restrictions. Although the women's and climate movements were sorely challenged to continue their activist work whilst not being able to hold demonstrations, both found solutions.

Manuela Ramos turned to digital technology: *“We have had to adapt ourselves. And we don’t go out to demonstrations. But right now we do everything through platforms like Zoom and we do a lot of activism through the internet.”*

In addition, the feminist activists and other networks devised new ways of putting pressure on the authorities – being very active on Twitter and mounting installations¹⁶ to get key messages across.

The director of the Citizen Movement against Climate Change explained that they have completely *“recreated”* their campaign strategies for activist advocacy, including reaching policy makers directly. He also stressed the challenge of growing the movement under such difficult circumstances:

Activism ... and volunteering is very important because it allows us to keep growing or expanding the movement. So right now that is one of the most difficult things to do because it is impossible to replace direct contact with online platforms. (Director, Citizen Movement against Climate Change)

The organisation approached partners in its network to help it access a variety of digital platforms¹⁷ to *“talk about what’s the meaning of this context and climate change”*. In this way, they ultimately succeeded in reaching more than half a million people each week. This represents a major adaptation using technology for mobilisation and activist participation, and by grasping these opportunities the members discovered new aspects of their own capability:

So we try to reorganise our communication system and try to give a space for activists to participate in them. So we were not prepared for this thing, but we think that we are engaging with it. ... And we’re discovering ourselves in our capacities. (Director, Citizen Movement against Climate Change)

He explained that September (when the focus group was held) is usually a critical month for climate demonstrations accompanied by an annual United Nations (UN) meeting: *“So we are rethinking even the most difficult part of our job that is the demonstration, putting people in the streets to say things.”* The solution involved different models. One of these was to hold five small demonstrations with very few people instead of one big one, and to advocate through *“extremely huge messages”*:

For example, put some drums with the projectors to show images on big walls in the city on one day. Maybe next week or two weeks, some photos, some extremely big flags in a different part of city or the country etc. So we have transformed completely the way we thought out the demonstration before, and tried to put them into the logic of our activists. (Director, Citizen Movement against Climate Change)

¹⁶ “They were complaining about the mayor [and erected a huge advertisement in the centre of Lima saying ‘the Mayor of Lima is wanted’]. So they built a very creative way of catching your attention. And they did it in the main block of the city and they took photos and put it on the internet. ... The visuality is something we were starting and now it is here and it will stay. We will continue attracting people. People will not be isolated.” (Director, Manuela Ramos)

¹⁷ These include Instagram, podcasts on Spotify, and a new educational online platform.

In addition to finding new strategies for advocacy, the Manuela Ramos movement adapted other aspects of its programmes. To reach women struggling under the increased load of domestic work at home,¹⁸ and dealing with gender-based violence, the organisation extended its counselling programme using phones and social media. The new approach enabled the movement to widen its reach and support women living outside Lima, across the provinces and in one case, as far away as Brazil. The director of Manuela Ramos reported that: *“I think we human beings adapt and the five psychologists established good relationships through the phone, through WhatsApp, and they got in touch [with the women] and they could talk.”*

This was particularly important in supporting victims of gender-based violence during the lockdown when the centres for abused women were closed. Once the restrictions were lifted, Manuela Ramos used its alliance with the Ministry of Women to integrate telephone counselling into the services offered by the centres for battered women, thereby institutionalising the innovation.

Manuela Ramos went further in responding to COVID-induced stress – it changed the content of its programme to reach out to men as well as women in respect of emotional distress and mental health support:

Men tend to not share what they feel inside, their emotions. That’s a very feminist issue right? But right now we human beings have to deal more with pain in our society and unrest. (Director, Manuela Ramos)

For the Youth Employment Centre, the departure of two Cuso South-South volunteers was a major blow. The volunteers provided vocational and entrepreneurship training to young people with disabilities and closely supported their efforts to build their businesses.¹⁹ Following their departure, the Centre used part of its budget to employ consultants to do the training. However, its budget for consultants runs out in May 2021, and this solution has proved to be less than satisfactory in a number of respects:

So as you know, consultants work with terms of reference; so they do very specific activities whereas the volunteers were permanently working at the Youth Employment Centre, and most of the times youth would go to the centre without previous announcement. So now] there is nobody there to support or provide guidance or clearly clarify the doubts that they [participants] might have. (Coordinator, Kallpa’s Youth Employment Centre)

¹⁸ “One issue that we have found that is very moving has to do with domestic work. Domestic work is a nightmare for women. Because right now there’s more domestic work and there is pain and there [are] headaches and there are mental problems because women have to do a lot of work.” (Director, Manuela Ramos)

¹⁹ In the case of a blind young person who is a masseuse, the volunteer helped him “write a cover letter and presentation letter. He also accompanied him to hotels and businesses to promote his services; because of that he had various clients. He felt that he was advanced and moving forward because of [the volunteer], so right now he is missing him a lot and he has not found support from anybody else.” The impact of COVID-19 restrictions made it impossible for the young person to continue running his business, forcing him to sell honey for an income instead.

Furthermore, the centre coordinator is not satisfied that consultants are the right ‘fit’ to achieve the organisation’s mission:

It’s very important for that person to carry some of the volunteer hours, a charismatic person that is able to provide technical support, but also support the theory of the project. (Coordinator, Kallpa’s Youth Employment Centre)

Despite such setbacks and hardships, the country representative is optimistic that with support, the partner organisations and local volunteers will be able to continue their work:

I know there is room for innovation in those organisations. And there are also other organisations in different stages that can be supported to advance. It’s going to need some work. But yes, organisations are adaptable. I have seen an indigenous organisation giving webinars on platforms with so many participants. And of course they experienced technology challenges ... [but] they are learning. And after this, I’m sure that they will be more equipped to thrive. (Country Representative, Cuso International Peru)

Impact on relationships

As is evident from the adaptations made by the three organisations, staying in touch with members of the movements and ensuring continued support to their beneficiaries (in the case of the Youth Employment Centre) were primary drivers for innovation.

In the case of the Citizen Movement against Climate Change, the impact of COVID-19 on relationships with its members and within the organisation also required particular attention. The movement works with young people to educate them about environmental issues, build their commitment and equip them with the tools for climate activism. But the Director feels that “*they need to have something else.*”

They really need to share experiences, but also to have this different kind of level of friendship and I think that’s actually one of the most interesting things for them. The youth are looking for something else in their life. So for us something that is really difficult is trying to fill this gap, and trying to fill it through Zoom is almost impossible. ... Also developing relationships with new activists, with new volunteers and have spaces to share friendships is difficult in this case. (Director, Citizen Movement against Climate Change)

They thus worked to create new spaces through which young people could interact with each other and have fun. This included holding a mobile concert in April. By the time the focus group discussion was held in September 2020, it was clear that the movement had found ways to reconnect with its membership, reaching over half a million participants each week through social media, as noted earlier.

The lockdown restrictions also impacted on the organisation's ability to maintain its operations and democratic decision-making processes. Its national structure is made up of six different organisations, five of which are located outside of Lima. Poor internet connectivity made engagement within the national structure a challenge and hampered efforts to strengthen its work during this difficult time. In an effort to retain organisational cohesion and provide emotional support, the core team held regular meetings *"to try to know how they are feeling"*.

Local volunteer involvement

The involvement of local volunteers as activists is clearly evident in the Manuela Ramos movement and the Citizen Movement against Climate Change. Also evident is the attention both organisations are paying to ensure that they remain connected with their members, look after their welfare, and continue recruiting new members to strengthen their work.

We will continue attracting new volunteers locally to make women embrace their feminism. That is our end goal and we will do it. We will reach them no matter how bad - local volunteers, international volunteers. (Director, Manuela Ramos)

... because it's really important for new volunteers to have contact, good personal contact and have a social life around. Right now it is extremely difficult. So I don't think that it will be something that can stop or really be a threat to the integrity of volunteering. But it's more just for us to try to put everything in context and have a very good process. (Director, Citizen Movement against Climate Change)

The impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of volunteers is of particular concern to a volunteer representative from the Manuela Ramos movement. She sees this not only as an opportunity to support the volunteers, especially women, but also to train them to replicate such workshops with other beneficiaries. In her view, the critical factor in staying connected with local volunteers is access to a mobile phone and internet connectivity: *"As long as we have internet connection or we have a phone we will keep networking. That's what volunteers need."*

Her view is echoed by a volunteer representative from the Citizen Movement against Climate Change:

Accompaniment ... is the support provided by the organisations that work with them [volunteers] because if they crumble emotionally, everything crumbles. So the accompaniment is very important. ... And if we ever come back to normality as we know it, it is important not to stop being connected.

What does the future hold for volunteering for development (V4D)?

Three key issues about the future of V4D emerged from the interviews and discussions held with the Cuso focus group participants in Peru: the expectation that international volunteers will continue to add value to partner organisations; the primacy of digital technology in future activities; and the complementary roles of international, regional and local volunteers.

The conversations demonstrate a strong conviction that international volunteering continues to be an asset in the development context, particularly in respect of reciprocal learning:

International volunteerism gives that tremendous opportunity both for the partner and for the volunteers that they can become more knowledgeable and conscious professionals for the country where they come from. ... I know there are other ways to do development. ... But I think that the exchange and the richness of a different point of view that comes to a developing setting, and then the learning that Canadian or international volunteers acquire from working directly with a global South community, that is very valuable. (Country Representative, Cuso International Peru)

Focus group participants amplified this view. According to the director of Manuela Ramos, *“I think that we at Manuel Ramos have changed the way the Canadian volunteers see the world. We have changed, [and] they have learned a lot from us ... I think we both can learn from each other.”* She also points out that international volunteers do not “set the agenda” for partner organisations because *“some of the agendas are global. Feminist ideas are global.”*

The expectation of ongoing involvement of international volunteers in national movements was expressed in this way by the director of the Citizen Movement against Climate Change:

We are already planning the arrival of some new international volunteers. Obviously it is more complex and ... right now it is extremely difficult. [But] I don't think that [COVID-19] will be something that can stop or really be a threat to the integrity of volunteering. (Director, Citizen Movement against Climate Change)

Partner organisations and their volunteer representatives were unequivocal about the centrality of digital technology in their work going forward:

Wifi and access to internet has to be at the top of our demands, we have to demand it from the municipalities, we have to demand it from the government at all levels. They cannot just say solve it individually. ... That is one thing. And on the other side, we need media training, we need training in communication. A person who is not able to communicate will not be able to be part of the community. So we have to enforce that. Those two aspects are important.
(Director, Manuela Ramos)

This view is echoed by the director of the Citizen Movement against Climate Change: “So right now our gap is around guaranteeing internet access for communication because 80% of our job right now needs strong internet. So, we have to guarantee that.”

In this regard, the Cuso Country Representative reiterates the importance of international volunteer support:

It would be great if they [partners] could have external support of people with experience, which is not abundant here. So I see a lot of opportunities for volunteerism – ICT literacy for example, or training. (Country Representative, Cuso International Peru)

Technology is also regarded as central to improving the livelihoods of unemployed youth, particularly youth with disabilities:

... [COVID-19 is] making more visible the need for youth with disabilities. During this pandemic, they have become more aware that they need to be more involved in technology and they have to promote technology within these people with disabilities in order to implement their programmes. So, there is a lot more articulation needed to coach these people. (Coordinator, Kallpa’s Youth Employment Centre)

Opportunities for V4D were cited by the Cuso representative and partner organisations who see great potential in the complementary roles played by Canadian volunteers, regional (South-South) and local volunteers in the development context:

Canadian volunteers, they have wonderful skills, they are excellent professionals. Some of them have the language barrier, which they overcome very soon after a few months of staying here. But also South-South volunteers are valued not only by local partners, but also by Canadian volunteers because they learn from South-South volunteers. They exchange knowledge and culture. It is great for me to work with a diverse group of volunteers formed mostly by Canadians, but with a small number of local and South-South volunteers. ... I think they complement the programme and they complement each other. (Country Representative, Cuso International Peru)

The country representative positioned regional volunteering within the international volunteering context by saying:

It's very easy to find South-South volunteers in Latin America. And I have been able to work with people from Honduras, Colombia, Peru, from Ecuador, from Costa Rica, from Nicaragua. It is a great opportunity to work in an international setting, learning more from their own region.

She went on to point out that both older and younger Canadian and regional volunteers have professional skills to offer in different sectors, and that intergenerational learning is an important outcome:

The one that we have from Bolivia, he's 55 years old. He's an economist with wide experience in development in the region. We have hired also volunteers in their late 20s, mid 30s. So it's a variety of ages, which also make it very rich because there are young people learning from more experienced peers, and also peers that are in their 50s [learning] from the views [of] millennial or young people.

This points to the opportunity for a blended volunteering approach, but the country representative points out that such a model depends on Cuso's mandate:

Cuso works with international volunteers, right? But they could be local volunteers to work with local volunteers. But the thing is that we are a Canadian organisation, and we will work with international volunteers, mostly Canadians.

When asked about the qualities that characterise the international/regional volunteers most suitable for placement, the Country Representative summed them up as follows:

They need to be very conscious of the needs of [the] other and also know the history of indigenous people in Peru, which is very rich. They would definitely need to be able to be put in the shoes of others and not have the North heart of development, never. Because indigenous organisations perceive everything that is outside their indigenous communities as colonialism. So you have to be very tactful with them. And you have to understand all the pain and suffering and resistance that these people have suffered. (Country Representative, Cuso International Peru)

Country Case Study

France Volontaires, The Philippines²⁰

Introduction

France Volontaires supports an international solidarity programme in the Philippines through twenty-one programmes – nineteen are private and two are public programmes.²¹ A focus group discussion was conducted with four organisations supported by France Volontaires in the Philippines: Water and Life (Eau et Vie)²² which runs a local social enterprise called Tubig Pag Asa (TPA) (Water of Hope); a local NGO called Water and Life Philippines (W&L); Passarelles Numériques;²³ and Life Project for Youth (LP4Y).²⁴

The four entities are run by long-term French international volunteers who have served in the Philippines for between seven months and three years.

20 This country case study is based on qualitative and quantitative research conducted for Forum between August and October 2020 to ascertain the impact of COVID-19 on the future of volunteering for development. An online focus group was conducted on 15 September 2020 with four organisations served by France Volontaires international volunteers in the Philippines and on 23 September 2020 an interview was conducted with the France Volontaires national representative in the Philippines. The case study also draws on the results of a survey carried out in August-September 2020 to which 18 France Volontaires volunteers responded, citing their views about their experience during the pandemic between March and September 2020. An analysis of the France Volontaires survey responses can be found in Annex 3 of the following report: Perold, H, Allum, CA, Lough, BJ & Mati, JM (2021). COVID-19 and the Future of Volunteering for Development. Part 2: Survey Findings: Volunteers and volunteer involving organisations surveyed for the International Forum for Volunteering in Development. International Forum for Volunteering in Development. <https://forum-ids.org/forum-survey-report-covid-19-andthe-future-of-volunteering-for-development/>

21 In the Philippines, France Volontaires works in various sectors such as Education, Agriculture, Social Service, Environment, Culture and Heritage, and Life Skills Training. France Volontaires main mission in the Philippines is to promote international solidarity through international volunteering. “We develop and create volunteering mission with different local organisations.”

22 The Water and Life Foundation (Eau et Vie) comprises two entities: The first is a local social enterprise Tubig Pag-Asa (TPA) (Water of Hope) that provides water, sanitation and solid waste management services to poor communities. TPA has been running for 12 years. It is headquartered in Manila and has four branches: one in the south of Manila, one in Tacloban City and two branches in Cebu. TPA has 80–90 employees and serves 5 500 households. In 2019, it broke even for the first time.

The second is a local NGO called Water and Life Philippines (W&L) which provides community support in hygiene, waste management, firefighting and community displacement. It is based in Cebu and is run by 25 international volunteers and a few local staff. The volunteers are sent through France Volontaires by different French partner-sending organisations like Catholic Delegation for Cooperation (DCC) and La Guilde Européenne du Raid.

23 Passarelles Numériques provides vocational training in IT and computer programming as well as work-readiness training and internships for young people from poor communities in partnership with the University of San Carlos in Cebu. The programme collaborates with a variety of companies in the Philippines. Based in Cebu, Passarelles Numériques runs two centres where students are housed and trained:

“We partner with [the university] for the scholarship of our students. We get special discounts there and we have a special strand and dedicated teachers who coach our students ... which is something they don’t usually do. So we have an official partnership of course. Then we partner with local global companies mostly to take our students for internships, but I also try to get pro bono involvement from their staff who come to teach and coach the students.” (IT and Training Manager)

24 Life Project for Youth (LP4Y) provides life skills, professional work-readiness training and job-search skills for excluded youth.

Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on volunteers and programmes

The data indicate that COVID-19 had three main effects on the four France Volontaires programmes and the volunteers working in them: (a) It closed, reduced and/or refocused programme operations; (b) It impacted organisational practices; and (c) In some cases, it changed self-perceptions of what it means to be a volunteer.

Three of the organisations spoke of how they attempted to maintain the partial delivery of their services to the communities in which they were working. Passerelles Numériques closed one of its centres in Cebu and sent two-thirds of its students home: *“It was decided by our top management and the board that we give back the responsibility of the students to their parents in the respective provinces.”* Given the absence of internet and computer facilities in their homes, these students were effectively cut off from the programme. One-third of the students were in the centre when the lockdown was declared and they continued their face-to-face training there because they could not leave.

LP4Y put some projects on standby but did not close any. Although its training activities stopped *“for the security of the volunteer and the youth”*, the programme maintained the distribution of food and financial allowances to the students (who are excluded youth) on the grounds that their families needed the support:

... we really wanted to continue to support our youth. So what we decided is to open only once a week. So the youth they came one by one and they receive the allowance that they used to receive, and we made the allowance higher because we knew that family members lost their jobs. (Country Coordinator, LP4Y)

TPA focused its operations on the provision of water to the 5 500 households it serves and stopped charging for the water because many people had lost their jobs and could no longer afford to pay for it. To maintain the water infrastructure, it created an emergency team among its community-based plumbers and set up a hotline for households to report emergencies. W&L relied on its community-based volunteers to hand out hygiene kits to help households maintain their safety.

COVID-19 impacted organisational practices and resources in different ways. TPA and W&L continued paying all their employees (80–90) despite the ‘no work no pay’ rule in the Philippines. Owing to its community-based operations, it was able to keep everyone working except for the fee collectors, given that water was free during this period. TPA and W&L also enabled administrative staff and project engineers to work from home by providing internet access and computers to staff who continued answering calls from communities and conducting business by Skype. As a result, the organisations improved their online banking and other processes, and are *“very ready to work remotely”*. These organisations used the lockdown as an opportunity to develop technical and other manuals for their training activities.

For one of the focus group participants, the lockdown provided time to reflect on what it means to be a volunteer during a crisis:

It was time to have introspection and to think what is the role of a volunteer, specifically ... you are on lockdown and you are stuck at home so your work does not really make sense, because when you are a volunteer you have to work with people. So when you can't do that anymore, what is the difference between doing that here and doing it in your country? But you have to find another way to make sense of being a volunteer in this country and having the best of the situation. (Programme Manager, W&L)

Repatriation and support for volunteers and partner organisations

As the pandemic took hold, the France Volontaires volunteers were given the choice of remaining on assignment or returning to France. The four international volunteers in the focus group all chose to remain in their placements. This enabled them to continue delivering their services, albeit differently, and their commitment was recognised by the government. They also found that despite the stress of lockdown within communities *“they don't need to panic ... they see how Filipinos are ... so resilient.”* (National Representative) Nevertheless, she mentioned that *“we have some issues with psychological instability of our volunteers.”*

These experiences correlated with the volunteer survey data from France Volontaires respondents (see survey report cited in footnote 20 for an analysis of this data). The data showed that three-quarters of the respondents stayed on assignment and the majority rated highly the way in which France Volontaires handled the situation. Sixty percent of the respondents required counselling, although only half of these said it was provided by France Volontaires.²⁵ For emotional support, the national representative and her remaining colleague²⁶ relied on monthly virtual meetings with their director in France and their regional colleagues in Asia: *“you can actually like, see what's happening in that country and you're not alone, you are not the only one experiencing the same thing. So, it's a good thing to share regularly.”*

Support for the partner organisations was rated between 'above average' and 'excellent'. This is evident in the Philippines from the increased interaction between the national representative and partner organisations around strategic priorities and pandemic-related action plans.

²⁵ The volunteer psychologists in the Philippines returned to France, which made it impossible for the remaining volunteers to receive face-to-face counselling if this was their preference. Online counselling was provided by the France Volontaires psychological services available in other countries.

²⁶ Two of the four France Volontaires volunteer country officers left the Philippines prior to the pandemic (the contract of the communications officer came to an end and the partner development officer resigned) resulting in the office being short-staffed throughout the pandemic. At the time of writing, their replacements were waiting to travel to the Philippines once travel restrictions are lifted.

Programme adaptation

According to the LP4Y Country Coordinator, COVID-19, “*taught us to be more flexible and how to adapt to a situation that ... we didn’t really have the choice. But yes, it affected a lot of things.*” The most prominent adaptation came with the need to work online – not only to deliver training in IT, life skills and work readiness to the young participants, but also to respond to the market in which COVID-19 has forced companies to work online, and which would, in turn, require interns to do so in future. LP4Y adapted its training to do live online training, conduct mock job interviews online and undertake virtual visits to shops for students to gain experience in the retail sector. While the need for compliance with the emergency regulations produced this shift, the implications for most of the programme participants are that they have already been left behind. In the words of one focus group participant, “*sometimes there will be 10 people in one room. So how you can manage to work online and to do your training when you have to take care of your five siblings and maybe also to help your mother to clean?*”

For TPA the decision to provide water free of charge was a major adjustment made in response to the pandemic. At the time of the focus group, they were also considering installing handwashing stations. Passarelles Numériques has recognised that in future it may have to broaden its scope to provide internet access to remote communities. This will help it reach more of its students who live in the country’s challenging mountainous terrain.

Impact on relationships

Three of the organisations reported that the pandemic strengthened their relationships with the communities they served. W&L realised how much they depend on voluntary community organisers to distribute hygiene kits and check firefighting equipment:

... it just showed us how much our volunteers were involved in our activities, because as were not able to go to the field, we were relying on them to continue providing hygiene kits to our community members, to check our [firefighting] equipment ... So we could see the results of this strong connection with the community that we had before the crisis and it helped us to continue to provide some support to the community. (Programme Manager, W&L)

Both TPA and W&L received many calls and text messages from community members expressing their appreciation for continuing their services as best they could and for supplying water free of charge.

The pandemic also strengthened relationships with other stakeholders such as local authorities, local leaders, homeowners’ associations and companies:

So the impact was that it has strengthened our relationship with our community but also our partners, and local authorities. For example, we worked closely with the Municipal Water Utilities to ensure the continuity of the water supply, since we are connecting our networks to their networks. (Country Director, W&L and TPA)

In some cases, these relationships produced fundraising opportunities with local and international donors. For example, a government ministry in the Netherlands provided the funds to subsidise water connections in Cebu; TPA managed to get discounts from some local authorities, reducing the cost of procuring water; the water utilities provided funds for hygiene kits in the communities; and LP4Y asked their partner companies for donations. Some new partnerships were established. For example, TPA received support from a civil

society group called Make Sense which mobilised civil society volunteers and allocated them to various NGOs for additional human resources. TPA also benefited from a fundraising music festival organised by Make Sense.

The experience of Passarelles Numériques has been less positive. The University of San Carlos has been its main stakeholder for some years. Under COVID-19, however, the university has put its courses online, and the restrictions on movement have made face-to-face interaction with university staff impossible. In light of these changes, the Passarelles Numériques IT Manager feels that the programme has to reassess the value that the partnership offers. No decision has been made at this stage but he points to the availability of online courses from universities around the world and is particularly concerned about the programme losing the university staff who coach students and provide technical input into the training.

Local volunteer involvement

Community-based volunteers in the Philippines have played a crucial role in enabling the programmes to deliver limited services during the pandemic. TPA has depended on local people to deliver its services and although they are employees, not volunteers, the organisation is now considering 'localising' important leadership functions in future:

... we are usually trying to recruit locally as much as possible. And only for positions like country director and programme manager we are still considering expats because there are a lot of relationships to have with France. But still, we are already looking at maybe localising the position but it's not that easy. (Country Director, W&L and TPA)

Passarelles Numériques reported that three of its five top management positions are held by local people, and the IT and Training Manager recognises that *"we would need to go bigger on local volunteering instead of bringing those foreign volunteers for two weeks."* This perspective speaks to one of the findings of this study, namely that increased involvement from local volunteers could reduce the prospects for short-term international volunteering. Despite local volunteering being the cornerstone of the organisations' responses to the pandemic, some of the French volunteers distinguished between the commitment of local volunteers and their potential to lead in the organisations which the French volunteers presently run. Referring to her own position as an international volunteer, one participant expressed this view:

Maybe 'volunteer' is not the right word because we come here to work with a proper working contract. It is the type of contract that is [a] volunteering contract. We commit to the work. ... local volunteers have the noble idea of volunteering by giving their free time, but not as a professional commitment in the long run. (Country Director, W&L and TPA)

Another participant had this to say:

I have noticed with some local volunteers that they have other businesses, they have families – it is usually difficult for them to commit in the long run ... [because of] the family and side business. So that is why I still like the foreign volunteer programme because really, they come here and they have nothing else to do basically. (IT and Training Manager, Passarelles Numériques)

These perspectives signal questions about how able the international volunteers are to build long-term capacity for local development and the likelihood of transferring programme ownership to local players. The national representative feels strongly that the involvement of the local community is very important for sustaining the programmes and adapting them to new conditions. That is why, in response to the pandemic, she has spent considerable time discussing organisational strategy with partner organisations as shown here:

... they invited one facilitator and ... a local leader to learn from the organisation and how to implement the projects, even if the staff of the organisation cannot go there ...they have to create another way of working ... they tried to prepare their students to be more independent and not to rely on ... normally being housed. (National Representative, France Volontaires The Philippines)

The Philippine National Volunteer Service Coordinating Agency (PNVSCA) registers and accredits international volunteers on behalf of the government. France Volontaires shares its deployment plans with the Philippines government, *“to see if the volunteers are really contributing to the development priorities of the country.”* (National Representative) France Volontaires also develops exit strategies for long-term partnerships, but local partners are not always able to take over the services provided by international volunteers. For example, the local authorities are not in a position to take over the TPA network and to supply water to the areas that TPA serves:

... they don't have the staff. They're not organised for that. So they're really relying on us to work in these communities. But yes, the idea is to, at some point, to exit. So we are still working on the best strategy along with water utilities, along with local authorities and with the community and so depending on how they see that. (Country Director, W&L and TPA)

Besides the regulatory function of the Philippine National Volunteer Service, it is not clear how France Volontaires is working with this organisation in designing and implementing its exit strategies in different projects.

What does the future hold for volunteering for development (V4D)?

Given COVID-induced constraints on face-to-face training, meetings, workshops and community-based service delivery, the prospect of online engagement looms large as a way of amplifying programme reach, mobilising volunteers and ensuring that no one is left behind. However, while the share of internet users in the Philippines increased to 64% in 2020 (the highest percentage to date), the digital divide in the Philippines is one of the largest in the world.²⁷

COVID-19 caused LP4Y effectively to lose contact with a large number of its participants and the organisation has been unable to use online facilities to reach them, given the lack of internet access in unserved and underserved communities. This has prompted LP4Y to use the Messenger platform to communicate with their participants who have mobile phones, and to partner with a French company (360 Learning) to launch a digital platform that can be connected via a smartphone and used for online as well as offline training. The search for new or additional delivery platforms represents a departure from the previous forms of engagement and will require the reconfiguration of programme content relevant to the needs of the participants and employers: *“So we are also trying to adapt, so we will slightly change the pedagogy and the business we are doing to adapt more to this new job market,”* (Country Coordinator, LP4Y).

The informants also mentioned other, emerging, forms of volunteering. Passarelles Numériques has had some interest from French NGOs for reciprocal mentoring and broadening the reach of internet access: *“... some other NGOs actually approached us to see how we can collaborate in the difficult times, in terms of mentoring each other’s beneficiaries and setting up internet in the provinces. [They are] French NGOs,”* (IT and Training Manager, Passarelles Numériques). And the entity called Make Sense mobilised volunteers from civil society to provide support to communities during the pandemic:

... there’s a lot of people who are willing to give their free time to help and they don’t know how to help and basically Make Sense is organising them, coaching them and so they can actually work for us. (Country Director, W&L and TPA)

For the four French international volunteers, onsite international volunteering remains an important component of the volunteering landscape in the Philippines:

I think some of the work could be done remotely, but there are some positions that cannot be done if you are in France or another country, and so it’s a big challenge for us. And that is why we are trying to do some lobbying in the French government and also in the government of the Philippines to allow us to come back. (Country Coordinator, LP4Y)

This finding confirmed the results of the online surveys conducted for the study, which showed that international volunteering did not stop because of COVID-19.

²⁷ Only 55% of Filipinos and only 26% of public schools have internet access and there are many unserved and underserved communities. See: Bueno, A & Pacis, J (2020). As COVID-19 forces life to move online, who is left behind? CNN Philippines Life, 20 May 2020. <https://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/2020/5/20/internet-access-pandemic.html>.

Country Case Study

Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), South Africa²⁸

Introduction

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is the implementation agency of Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) programme which operates through bilateral agreements with governments around the globe. The JICA volunteer programme forms a part of the agency's operations and collaborates with the agency's grant aid and technical support activities to foster cooperation between Japan and other countries. South Africa²⁹ annually receives between five and twelve JICA volunteers for periods up to twelve months (short-term assignments) and up to two years (long-term assignments).³⁰

In March 2020, Japan repatriated all its volunteers in South Africa and put a halt to sending volunteers who were expected to travel to their South Africa placements in April 2020. This meant that the research team was unable to convene a volunteer focus group as planned, but was able to interview JICA's Chief Representative and the Volunteer Programme Officer in South Africa. A subsequent interview was held with members of the Strategy and Programme Operation Division in the Secretariat of Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) in Tokyo.

²⁸ This country case study is based on qualitative and quantitative research conducted for Forum between August and October 2020 to ascertain the impact of COVID-19 on the future of volunteering for development. In South Africa an in-depth interview was conducted on 1 October 2020 with the JICA Chief Representative and the Volunteer Programme Advisor. On 6 October 2020 a further interview was conducted with two members of the Strategy and Programme Operation Division in the Secretariat of Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) in Tokyo. The case study also draws on the results of a survey carried out between 1 September and 7 October 2020 to which 21 JICA volunteers responded, citing their views about their experience during the pandemic between March and September 2020. An analysis of the JICA survey responses can be found in Annex 3 of the following report: Perold, H, Allum, CA, Lough, BJ & Mati, JM (2021). COVID-19 and the Future of Volunteering for Development. Part 2: Survey Findings: Volunteers and volunteer involving organisations surveyed for the International Forum for Volunteering in Development. International Forum for Volunteering in Development. <https://forum-ids.org/forum-survey-report-covid-19-and-the-future-of-volunteering-for-development/>

²⁹ The South Africa office also administers the JICA volunteer programme in Lesotho and Swaziland.

³⁰ In South Africa, JICA partners with the Department of Basic Education, the Department of Higher Education, the Ministry of Science and Technology, and the Department of Social Development to place volunteers in different provinces, typically in deep rural areas. Volunteers with professional skills help strengthen the skills of Foundation Phase teachers (Grades 3 and 4) in science, technology and mathematics (STEM); some JICA volunteers support science centres to build public interest in science; in various provinces others provide support to day care centres catering for young children with disabilities and children with special needs. JICA volunteers also work in the higher education sector providing technical assistance in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college courses in mechanics, electronics, building and other trades.

JICA does not provide grant aid to middle-income countries such as South Africa, but the Japanese Embassy administers a small fund to cover the costs of materials and other resources needed to support the activities of the volunteers in their partner organisations to support the achievement of planned outcomes, e.g. in the day care centres for children with disabilities.

Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on volunteers and programmes

The evacuation of the volunteers in late March 2020, brought JICA's volunteer programme in South Africa to a sudden stop. This had a negative impact on the volunteers and their host organisations, particularly where positive results were starting to emerge in partner organisations, and where newer volunteers were just starting to understand the local culture and to *“really see the results of ... what they're doing”* (usually after approximately six months in the field). For example, JICA had piloted a mathematics programme in two provinces (the Free State and North West) which the volunteer programme was to help bolster, but *“because of the pandemic, all that had to stop.”* COVID-19 not only halted this and other initiatives, but also the recruitment of volunteers in Japan who were meant to travel to South Africa to support the programme.

The value of the JICA volunteers is evident in partner organisation feedback to JICA about the volunteers who had completed their placements as scheduled: *“Most counterparts tried to implement the ideas of the volunteer, even in the volunteers absence.”*

Following the repatriation of the volunteers, JICA kept its partner organisations informed about its response to the pandemic and reassured them that despite an uncertain future:

The JICA programme is still there. And it will continue once everything is back to normal or we're given the go-ahead. I had to write the letters to say that, you know, this is what's happening and keep the organisations in the loop of what's happening. ... most of them, we've been working with them for some time. ... So because of our existing relationships, before the epidemic, they did understand what was happening and ... make them understand that ... even the volunteers themselves have got ... their own fears, because ... it's a worldwide pandemic, and so they have a right of choice. (Volunteer Programme Officer, JICA South Africa)

COVID-19 also impacted on the cooperation between the volunteers and JICA's technical experts in-country. Some of the volunteers used to draw on the experts for advice and expertise in specific fields. In turn, they would inform the perspectives of the technical experts by sharing their experience on the ground. While many of the technical experts were repatriated, those who remained no longer had the benefit of the volunteers' perspectives.

Repatriation and support for volunteers and partner organisations

The repatriation of JICA's volunteers was mandatory and the organisation treated this as a precautionary measure before the lockdown was announced. According to the South Africa office interviewees, *"[What we had] in mind that at that time, it was a precautionary; maybe it would be for two weeks."* The office followed the normal protocol used when volunteers complete their placements and wanted to avoid any panic. This contrasts with a comment from one survey respondent (possibly in a different country) who was critical of the speed of the repatriation process: *"I couldn't say good-bye to my colleagues or [prepare for them to] take over my job because of not enough time, so I think organisation could have announced us the repatriation probability earlier."*

In preparation for their repatriation, the volunteers in South Africa went through the normal process designed for those returning to Japan following their completed placements or for annual home leave. This involved the volunteers writing reports on what they had done during their placement, and debriefing with the South Africa office in Pretoria. They then travelled to Japan on a normal commercial flight as the repatriation was done before the lockdown was imposed. Here they were once again required to debrief the head office in Tokyo to inform them about the progress and outcomes achieved during their placement.

JICA's headquarters offered their volunteers three options post-repatriation: first, to continue their contracts and be on standby to return to South Africa once it was possible to travel; second, discontinue the contract and go on a waiting list so as to be first in line to be chosen to volunteer; and third, to terminate their contracts. The volunteer survey surfaced a number of comments from JICA volunteers in different countries about the process: *"They did not order me to repatriate and requested me, but I was not in a situation to refuse. It was virtually compulsory."* Another commented that, *"If I have a choice, I strongly wanted to stay at the place."* One of the volunteer comments points to the danger of xenophobia against Asian people, given that the virus had originated in China: *"Since me and my colleagues are Asian people, the country people started discrimination to us. So we have no choice but to evacuate from there."*

According to the senior officials in the South Africa office, the impact of the repatriation on the volunteers varied. Some of those who still had a year to serve on their contract remained positive, believing that *"they could give something back into whatever institution they're in."* Those who had a few months left on their contract were more likely to terminate their contract and move on to other things.

JICA provided some financial support to the repatriated volunteers for approximately 90 days and also assisted them with job searches. This correlates with the results of the volunteer survey which indicate that the majority of respondents received the financial support and counselling required, although fewer received ongoing medical and post-assignment support. By contrast, the volunteer survey results indicate that respondents were critical of the support that JICA provided to partner organisations (see survey report cited in footnote 28 for an analysis of this data).

Among the alternatives that JICA offered its repatriated volunteers, online support features strongly in the survey responses from its volunteers, with most having been offered opportunities for online support for their assigned partner organisation (11 responses), followed by online support for a different partner organisation (3 responses) and online support in a different context (7 responses).

Programme adaptation

After returning to Japan, some volunteers tried to stay in touch with their host organisations through online communication, provided the organisations were able to access the internet. Online support is particularly difficult in the TVET sector which is primarily focused on hands-on practical training such as fitting and turning, or at a university where a volunteer was involved in promoting the use of data in science, thus requiring face-to-face interaction with students. The seven-hour time difference between Japan and South Africa was a further constraining factor, but so was the hard lockdown which closed schools, colleges and day-care centres in South Africa for four to five months. In the South Africa office there is some scepticism that online volunteering will support one of JICA's main goals, which is to enable the volunteers themselves to benefit from their on-site placement:

One of the philosophies of JICA volunteers is not only for the people and the recipient countries, but also for the volunteers themselves. ... Japanese volunteers in the field ... touch the actual person, touch the actual culture or living ways ... to feel and to change their mind, accept another, different culture with different living standard[s] ... [For] online volunteers it's difficult to feel ... to touch ... the living or culture of the recipient countries ... It's a very big point. (Volunteer Programme Officer, JICA South Africa)

The Volunteer Programme Officer added that cultural exchange is a major attraction for JICA's on-site volunteers and that the government expects the returned volunteers *"to plough back what they've learned in another country. ... Without volunteers coming to the source, it defeats the whole purpose of it, really."*

Despite JICA's commitment to on-site volunteering in the long term – *"the importance of the on-site volunteers' programme will not be changed"* – the interviewees indicated that the disruption caused by COVID-19 is likely to necessitate some short-term adaptations. They suggest that the incorporation of local volunteers in the JICA programme could help it adapt to the new environment and view this as introducing *"three dimensions"* to JICA's volunteers: volunteers working on-site, volunteers working online, bolstered by local volunteers.



Big Sister Joya Parvin raising awareness on COVID at Langadi-4 in the Parsa district of Nepal. This project, supported by VSO, provided hygiene kits to 980 families. Big Sisters and Community Mobilisers provided orientation to the families on how to get the most out of the hygiene kits. Photo thanks to VSO.

What does the future hold for volunteering for development (V4D)?

According to senior JOCV leadership at JICA's headquarters in Tokyo, the organisation has been considering the inclusion of online volunteering for some time, and the impact of COVID-19 has fast-tracked its thinking in this regard:

COVID-19 seriously affected our volunteer programme operation. ... We gradually understood the importance of online volunteering, not only in these unprecedented times, but also post COVID-19. ... So we are considering ... how we can integrate this new concept into our present one year programme. (Senior leadership, JOCV)

JICA has also been thinking about including local people as national volunteers since the Japanese volunteers often work with local volunteers on the ground:

We are seriously interested in implementing [a] national volunteer programme, to ... have local people ... to operate our volunteer programme ... For a long time ... as far as I understand, they [JICA volunteers] worked together with local people. And some of them were national volunteers. (Senior leadership, JOCV)

This suggests that JICA is considering a hybrid approach to its volunteer programme which retains the centrality of on-site international volunteering whilst integrating online and national volunteers as and when it is feasible to do so:

Many things are uncertain, but this is very sure: online volunteering or national volunteering cannot be a replacement [for] on-site volunteers. ... we will continue sending on-site volunteers in the future too, but maybe sometimes we combine online volunteer[s] with on-site volunteer[s] or with national volunteering. So when we do so, the impact of on-site volunteer[s] or the assistance of JICA would be more effective. And stable. (Senior leadership, JOCV)

The interviewees were clear that integrating online volunteering into the current volunteer programme will involve some restructuring: *"... in that case we have to reconstruct our workflow too, to combine the current workflow with the new workflow."*

The inclusion of online and national volunteers may also help JICA deal with the challenge of recruiting Japanese volunteers from a *"shrinking number of candidates"* mentioned by the Chief Representative in South Africa. Furthermore, JICA plays a domestic role in promoting an international mindset among Japanese citizens in the face of growing numbers of foreigners who have found work and a new life in their country. Returned international volunteers play an important role in this respect, but the possibility of national volunteers travelling to Japan on exchange could help JICA strengthen intercultural understanding within Japan's fast-changing society: *"if we had a national volunteer programme, we could leverage our objectives more."*

The journey to reshaping the future of JICA's volunteer programme will involve consultation with organisations such as United Nations Volunteers (UNV) and Forum to tap their experience of online and national volunteering. For JICA this means recognising that *"each volunteering programme has different features. ... so that we cannot import their knowledge and experience directly; we have to customise it."*

JICA will survey partner organisations to assess the need and appetite for online volunteering and “*what type of speciality job is suitable for online volunteering.*” This will help it define the working conditions and task specifications of online volunteers, taking contextual factors into account:

[An online volunteer] cannot contribute for 24 hours since he is not [an] on-site volunteer. ... he’s in Japan and maybe he has other jobs also, and he can use only a part of his personal time, private time for online volunteering. In that case, we have to form a particular or special requirement for online volunteering, for example, ... he needs to contribute ... only three hours a week. (Senior leadership, JOCV)

In the early stages of online programme implementation, JICA is likely to work with its traditional and current partners:

To implement a new programme we need understanding from host organisations. ... if they know well what [a] JICA volunteer is, it will be easier for us to present a new programme ... and we can get understanding from them; help also. (Senior leadership, JOCV)

JICA’s country officers will be key in shaping and implementing a new volunteer programme strategy according to the terms of bilateral cooperation in each country. In the words of the Tokyo interviewees, “*We need their understanding and their help and their experience. Without that we cannot implement a feasible programme.*”



A nurse at the Walga Clinic in Walga, Ethiopia examines a patient. Photographer: Ernst Schulthess, Mission am Nil. Photo thanks to Mission am Nil and Unité.

Country Case Study

The Norwegian Agency For Exchange Cooperation (Norec), Ghana, Rwanda, Uganda³¹

Introduction

The Norwegian Agency for Exchange Cooperation (Norec) is an executive body under the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs tasked with implementing the country's overarching development policy goals as part of the 2030 agenda. Their model of working is through mutual exchange between international partners *"who want to use the exchange model to learn from each other and develop."*³²

Norec funds the partnership programme, enabling partners to exchange participants. Around 60% are volunteers, but all are exchange participants including those sent as paid employees of the participating organisation.³³ Norec supports the costs of exchange and training of participants, the monitoring of the programme activities and the administrative support costs.

The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) is one such partner. This case study focuses on the Youth Exchange South to South (YESS) Girls Movement programme, which forms part of the Norec/WAGGGS partnership. YESS is an international exchange programme that engages young girls across Africa and the Asia-Pacific region to live and work in another country for six months.³⁴ YESS girl volunteers receive a stipend, the value of which is determined by the partner (WAGGGS).

³¹ This country case study is based on qualitative and quantitative research conducted for Forum between September and October 2020 to ascertain the impact of COVID-19 on the future of volunteering for development. The Norec partner organisation is the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) and the focus group that was conducted on 22 September 2020 involved three WAGGGS member organisations in Ghana, Rwanda and Uganda. The focus group participants were all members of the Youth Exchange South to South (YESS) programme which forms part of WAGGGS and which hosts exchange participants in each of these countries. An interview was conducted with the Norec Head of Section NGO on 1 October 2020. The case study also draws on the results of a survey carried out in August-September 2020 to which 39 Norec volunteers responded, citing their views about their experience during the pandemic between March and September 2020. An analysis of the Norec survey responses can be found in Annex 3 of the following report: Perold, H, Allum, CA, Lough, BJ & Mati, JM (2021). COVID-19 and the Future of Volunteering for Development. Part 2: Survey Findings: Volunteers and volunteer involving organisations surveyed for the International Forum for Volunteering in Development. International Forum for Volunteering in Development. <https://forum-ids.org/forum-survey-report-covid-19-and-the-future-of-volunteering-for-development/>

³² <https://www.norec.no/en/about-norec/what-norec-does/>

³³ "All our programmes have participants. The reason why we [Norec] call them participants and not volunteers is because some of our skilled workers such as nurses, doctors, etc. receive salaries for being involved and they pay taxes. They are not volunteers. But within the participants that we fund, around 60% are volunteers, and 40% are paid staff ... We recommend that our partner organisations recruit internal candidates ... but maybe a bit less than 50% are external." (Norec Head of Section NGO).

³⁴ <https://www.wagggs.org/en/resources/yess-girls-movement-brochure/>

The case study is based on information gathered from a focus group held with coordinators and exchange participants from the WAGGGS YESS programme in Uganda, Rwanda and Ghana, and from an in-depth interview conducted with the Norec Head of Section NGO which oversees the programme. This case study is therefore one of Norec, as much as it is of the WAGGGS YESS programme in Uganda, Rwanda and Ghana.³⁵

Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on volunteers and programmes

COVID-19 affected both Norec and the WAGGGS partner in drastic ways. In Ghana, Rwanda and Uganda, the lockdown restrictions forced volunteers and programme staff to consider whether and how to continue in their roles in a very stressful context:

As the management team, we were worried about ourselves first, because this was something very new to us, but also very worried about the participants that we had, and knowing that they are girls very far from their families. They are living alone in the house and we were all not allowed to go to visit them. ... So that was the very first challenge; meeting the regulations of the country and the lockdown instructions. (Coordinator, YESS Uganda)

Nevertheless, support from various sources helped reduce anxiety among the exchange participants:

The WAGGGS supported us, Ghana Girl Guides Association supported us in any way possible. Norec, my home Association – Uganda Girl Guides – supported me, also my other colleagues, and even my parents give me a lot of courage to do what I’m supposed to do. (Exchange participant from Uganda serving in Ghana)

By keeping the families of exchange participants informed about developments during the pandemic, the YESS Programme Coordinators succeeded, for the first time, in increasing parental involvement in the exchange programme:

It’s made them to follow closely the activities we’re doing in the countries that are hosting the girls ... And we were sharing activities done so as to keep them in the loop ... It’s very positive because they understand the project more than the previous parents that ... gave us the girls. (Coordinator, YESS Rwanda)

The volunteer involving organisations had to make difficult decisions about adapting or closing their programmes. Some maintained essential services by embracing technology while others temporarily closed their doors. Despite online outreach, YESS Uganda soon found that this changed the audience they were trying to reach:

You find that originally, you had targeted to reach out to girls in schools, but with the pandemic we ended up reaching out to other people in the community, reaching out to older girls who were able to have mobile phones. (Coordinator, YESS Uganda)

³⁵ The YESS programme involves the Ghana Girl Guides Association, the Rwanda Girl Guides Association and the Uganda Girl Guides Association.

Once lockdown restrictions were eased, movement from one area remained difficult with staff having to get permission to travel to rural areas to engage with programme participants. Staff were very conscious of the risk of infection and to follow health protocols, they had to provide their programme participants with masks.

In this context, Norec decided to cover the expenses for allowances and stipends between March and July 2020 so that partners would not suddenly be left unemployed in the middle of a pandemic. They also agreed to amend partnership agreements so that partners could use funds for partnership development till the end of the year. In addition, partners were invited to apply for funding for new project ideas, which mainly included working through digital platforms, results management, and monitoring and evaluation.

Repatriation and support for volunteers and partner organisations

Norec's first response to the pandemic was to respond to the immediate needs of the participants on exchange and to help partner organisations get them home. Norwegian citizens were repatriated to Norway following a general directive from the Foreign Ministry. While the partner organisations managed the logistics of the repatriation process, Norec's contribution *"was to cover all the funds, but also to be a mediator of information between the embassies and the projects,"* according to Norec's Head of Section NGO.

Participants of other nationalities had a greater level of agency/control owing to the responsibility given by Norec to their partner organisations: *"It's the partner organisations that are responsible for everything to do with the participants since they are the ones that employ them,"* (Norec, Head of Section NGO).

According to the focus group participants, the YESS participants in Rwanda, Uganda and Ghana were not repatriated. They were offered the opportunity to choose whether or not to continue in their placements and the YESS programme staff consulted their parents about concerns for the safety of their daughters:

The first thing they did they communicated with our parents to give them like assurance: should we go or stay ... where we are? And I remember like most of our parents suggested because of our safety, we should just stay. (YESS Exchange participant serving in Uganda)

Programme adaptation

Adjustments had to be made in the way partners participated and delivered their services and programmes. In Ghana, Uganda and Rwanda, the WAGGGS way of working before COVID-19 was to undertake its YESS girls programme activities through face-to-face interactions with the programme participants. WAGGGS had not considered virtual ways of working even though they were promoting some of their programmes on social media platforms.

With COVID-19, WAGGGS had to devise new strategies for online interaction. This started with volunteer recruitment, where WAGGGS devised an online form that they posted on their social media platforms. Applicants had to click on a link and complete the form. Volunteers were also added to a WhatsApp group which enabled them to attend organised online training and webinars. WAGGGS Ghana was able to train more than 100 girls virtually.

In all three countries, the YESS programme utilised online mechanisms to reach young girls in schools with training on menstrual hygiene management. Essentially, they shifted all campaigns and training that had previously been done face-to-face to online provision,

and in the process were able to invite more people to join them through their social media platform, Zoom meetings, and Facebook live chat. In the view of the participants interviewed, even though they were no longer able to reach programme participants face-to-face, they at least kept them updated and gave them information of available mainstream services:

The lockdown was very, very tight. So we couldn't move around, but we initiated the sensitisation on internet and also on TV, like in media. We talked about that and radio and during our TV shows. Our non-formal education methods are also helping us to, you know, to be seen in the country to be known by new girls. (Coordinator, YESS Rwanda)

However, being restricted to online outreach represented loss of opportunity. For example, YESS participants in Rwanda used to go to a school and train about 500 to 1 000 girls depending on the size of the school. But now online, it has been hard to reach that number: *"You get some but online, it cannot even reach 100... the number is not the same, but at least we tried,"* (Exchange participant serving in Uganda).

This could be attributed to the cost of internet access, especially because participants also have to invest in devices and data. Nevertheless, the staff tried to stay in touch with programme participants in every way they could. For example, YESS Ghana created WhatsApp platforms to reach the girl participants by posting activities on their parents' mobiles: *"We are trying our best and they are really understanding even though they are eager for us to have our physical meetings again,"* (Coordinator, YESS Ghana).

Opinion was divided as to whether the new ways of operating (online) demand more or fewer resources for the YESS girls programme. In Uganda, for example, the Coordinator was of the view that they were expending fewer resources on programme activities because all that they needed was the internet that is cheaper than working face-to-face. However, once the lockdown was lifted, costs increased again because health protocols such as social distancing demanded that fewer participants be engaged at a single venue, with the result that training sessions had to be repeated two or three times to reach the same numbers of people:

In Rwanda, one of the restrictions is that a car that used to carry four people is now carrying only two people or three. It means that if we were going to the field we are now going to be using two cars. So this is also involving more money. (Coordinator, YESS Rwanda)

There was also the added difficulty of determining how many people are genuinely being reached, for example, through a radio, creating a challenge in monitoring impact.

Nevertheless, a YESS Coordinator argued that even though they had challenges shifting from doing face-to-face fieldwork, there were also positive developments because the pandemic helped them *"discover new potential"* which they had not anticipated, not only through internet/online media but also radio and television:

We learnt new approaches to keep impacting the world by doing online activities, but also the media. We got an opportunity to run four talk shows, two on TV and two on radio. So, it also helped us to secure new partnerships ... that helped us to run activities on radio [in cases where] we had to pay for the airtime. So, I would say that it affected us in a negative way, but also in a positive way. (Coordinator, YESS Rwanda)

The YESS Rwanda Coordinator went on to argue that with the development of new partnerships, especially with media houses, came other skills, involving rigour and precision:

We have a partner called ActionAid [and] we do [a] talk show every Saturday about menstrual hygiene management. We have this book and we had to adapt it in a way that you can run it on radio though it was not meant to be used on the radio at the beginning. But it was the only way to reach out to the girls. So, we had to sit down and review the book and design the talk shows into the number of airtimes that you have been given. (Coordinator, YESS Rwanda)

Other partnerships were struck with the media houses directly and according to the Coordinator of YESS Rwanda, *“To get free airtime on TV and radio, we had to negotiate with media houses. Some of them agreed to provide free airtime, which was a partnership between us and them, but others also asked us to pay.”*

YESS Rwanda also demonstrated how they developed non-digital methods of reaching their audiences, using mobile sound systems mounted on cars and pickups to broadcast health awareness and sensitising messages:

We go around the community ... then we stop around the markets, around hospitals and health centres, and in the centre where we know that most of the people in their houses can hear us. So this is a new approach we’re also trying to see if at least another number of girls ... can also be reached. (Coordinator, YESS Rwanda)

Impact on relationships

Within WAGGGS, the pandemic impacted relationships in different ways. Top of mind in all three countries was the concern that no matter how innovative, the YESS programme could not avoid leaving behind the majority of their beneficiaries. This created a significant gap in outreach and impact which threatened the relationship between the programme and its participants. According to an exchange participant serving in Ghana, *“We wanted to engage each and every girl. But then when COVID came in, we could not engage everyone. So we only engaged people who have internet access, which was hard.”*

Of particular concern were girls in rural areas who had no access to the internet, television or radio. The coordinator of YESS Rwanda said, *“I’ll say that they are feeling a bit left out, but they also know that we, we did not forget them.”*

Undaunted, they looked for other strategies to access these programme participants with sensitisation and other content. Post-lockdown, YESS Uganda contacted school teachers to mobilise girls in their villages:

We sent teachers in the rural areas to coordinate with the girls that we were previously engaging, to bring them together maybe in groups of 15, in groups of 10. ... So we ... meet them there ... in the morning, we engage them for like three hours, then they go back home. But ... we need to get permission from the authorities. We write to them, and then they give us permission to go and engage the girls.

... During the session, the girls are really excited, because .. the sessions help them leave home for some time and have an activity that is educative ... And we have some training for teachers. The teachers were like ‘we are so happy that you have gotten [us] out of our homes.’ (Coordinator, YESS Uganda)

Working together to develop solutions in the face of the pandemic also strengthened bonds within the YESS programme teams. *“So then COVID-19 has actually given me a bond, a relationship between me and my team. ... if like someone doesn’t know a particular thing, you have to help her,”* according to an exchange participant serving in Ghana. Relationships with the exchange participants were strengthened, given that they had been disconnected from their families. The Coordinator of YESS Rwanda stated, *“We also did our best keeping in mind that we are having volunteers with us that are not with their families. So we took care of them more than what we were doing before. We kept the relationship.”*

Norec strengthened its relations with partners by communicating with them more frequently. Firstly they supported partners to manage the new, more flexible financial processes *“because it’s a lot of administrative work for our partners to submit amended budgets, new applications.”* Second, there was more engagement about how to understand the impact of the pandemic going forward:

How should we understand the coming period? How should we understand having a partnership without exchange? So I think it’s led to some really good discussions. And I think the creativity that we’ve seen in some of the projects shows that those discussions have been quite fruitful. (Norec, Head of Section NGO)

Local volunteer involvement

The Girl Guides and Girl Scouts programme is a volunteer and volunteer-led movement through which its formal members reach out to more people. In Ghana, the Girl Guides Association has a total of 34 456 volunteers,³⁶ including young leaders who are between ages 20 to 25. Being embedded within its local context served to maintain the confidence of staff that the YESS programme remained connected with its members and that it would grow its numbers. They felt that the use of online activity, in particular, increased the visibility of YESS and supported the mobilisation of new members:

We shall be getting more people joining the Girl Guide movement. And then, of course, the ones that have not been reached, when the schools open we shall still find them. [They] are going to join ... because they’ve been reading about our activities, they’ve been following our online activities so they would be able to join. And I don’t think it [COVID-19] really affects our numbers. (Coordinator, YESS Uganda)

³⁶ Reported in September 2020.

The Coordinator of YESS Rwanda is convinced that volunteering is more important now than before COVID-19. She anticipates that things will get more difficult and that the financial resources for programme operations may shrink: *“I think we need more volunteerism, because ... as finances are going down, we might not be able to have paid staff to do everything. So we’ll need more volunteers to keep on going to keep on impacting the community and do even more than what they used to do.”*

Do programme innovation and adaptation signal potential for growth?

As already noted, the main adaptations relate to the use of social media and other online platforms to engage exchange participants and WAGGGS members. These include holding Zoom meetings or using similar platforms. In some cases, the transition was not easy but slowly picked up and even managed to reach out to non-Girl Guide members of the community. Another adaptation was in offering services that were not normally part of the original programme plan. In Ghana, for example, the YESS programme *“spread out to even non-Guides, even with meals, hoping that they could also reach out to the sisters.”* This helped them to recruit more people, and more young women to join the Girl Guides Association.

In the case of exchange participants, the new mode of working exposed them to skills such as managing databases and online communications through social media and Zoom meetings. One participant captured such skills development as follows:

In terms of doing things we were used to do, I remember going to the field [and] you just take pictures of the sessions [and] just post after that. But engaging people, young leaders or friends, or guiding in social media networks needs skills, for example, training through [a] Zoom meeting. I couldn’t do [that] before. Now I can organise meetings and the content of the meeting so that the meeting can’t be boring and people will be ready to learn more. (Exchange participant serving with YESS Uganda)

Another indicated how she had learnt to use social media such as WhatsApp to communicate with friends, as well as setting up her own Zoom meetings, live Facebook streaming, and doing live videos using YouTube. Participants were provided with funds to buy internet bundles monthly or routers for shared accommodation.

WAGGGS are hopeful that they will continue these online sessions even after COVID-19 abates, with a view to engaging more people who cannot come to them physically but can engage online. This signals possibilities for growing new ways in which the programme is delivered, with the potential to reach audiences previously not accessed.

What does the future hold for volunteering for development (V4D)?

Norec and its partners face a lot of uncertainty about the future of international volunteer exchange, which in the past has enabled volunteers and their hosts to learn from one another and embrace differences through their direct interactions. A YESS Rwanda Coordinator explained it like this: *“The exchange includes going and seeing what is happening exactly, or learning new things. And not only the official activities, but also part of social activities and culture, and, you know ...like the whole country ... is part of what makes an exchange a successful one.”*

Both partner organisations and volunteers feel that it is important to have people coming from one country to another and to retain the meaning of the exchange, as the YESS Rwanda Coordinator indicated: *“This is because when it’s about exchange, it’s something that can’t just be done remotely.”*

The YESS Coordinators are alive to the dangers of COVID-19, but remain hopeful that international volunteering will resume, particularly if health protocols are followed as they are in different countries:

We have COVID everywhere and we have norms or instructions to protect ourselves. So what she can be doing at her home country, she can ... do the same ... in the host country, and benefit from the real exchange: impact people on online but also go to the field where it is possible. (Coordinator, YESS Rwanda)

The YESS Coordinators described how international volunteer exchanges are beneficial and cannot be replaced by online international volunteering. One reason for this is that having international volunteers onsite helps them increase the reach of the programme. A Coordinator from YESS Uganda explained: *“We really need to keep the idea of international exchanges, because our girls learn a lot from the international volunteers, and it somehow attracts them to the activities that we are doing as Girl Guides.”*

Norec is hopeful that it can resume its international exchange programme and although it has had to postpone the restart several times, it has volunteers who, at the time of the research, were eagerly waiting to start their exchange: *“They were not withdrawing because of the pandemic.”* The Head of Section NPO echoed the enthusiasm of the partner organisations to resume international exchanges and identified two factors that would contribute to this: good insurance, and the exchange participants trusting in the partner organisations who have already proved their capability to manage exchanges within the constraints of the pandemic.

In the short to medium term, there is a likelihood of greater dependence on local/national volunteers as countries work to find the best way out of the crisis caused by the pandemic. The Head of Section NPO commented that because it will be more difficult and expensive to travel in the short term, *“north to south traditional exchange will need to be rethought.”* This may require a shift to long-term placements for international volunteers, which is already in line with Norec’s belief that *“long-term exchanges are more efficient and more effective than short term.”*

Another important factor in continuing international exchange is the need to demonstrate relevance in the context of COVID-19. The Norec Head of Section NGO emphasised, *“I think it’s important to show that you’re relevant, and that you’ve managed to rethink how your volunteering setup works. So the main challenge is whether or not an agency is able to be innovative in its model.”*

The ability of international V4D agencies to demonstrate relevance and innovation is likely to be a key factor in attracting funding from government and particularly private sector players who *“are still interested in contributing.”* The Norec Head of Section NGO stressed, *“I think that global solidarity will see a rise once the pandemic is more under control. And I think that volunteering can benefit from that.”*

COUNTRY CASE STUDY

VSO, NIGERIA³⁷

Introduction

This case study report summarises key findings specific to VSO Nigeria. According to the information on its website, VSO is an international development charity that works through volunteers. It concentrates on fighting poverty through the talents, energy and commitment of volunteers. VSO mobilises volunteers of different skillsets, from skilled overseas professionals to local youth, building trust, relationships, and passing on technical skills. VSO has been running since 1958. In 2018, working in conjunction with communities, local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), host-country government agencies and policymakers, VSO programmes reached 1.5 million people in 24 countries across Africa and Asia across health, education and livelihoods programmes. Though independent of the official United Kingdom (UK) government foreign aid imperatives, the VSO programme, like many other UK NGOs, receives substantial funding from the UK government.

Partners who were interviewed for this study are: the VSO Nigeria National Youth Engagement Network (NYEN) Abuja, YORDEL Africa,³⁸ the Adolescent Health and Information Projects (AHIP) Kano State, the Climate and Sustainable Development Network (CSDevNet) and the SDGs Thursday.³⁹ Volunteers in these organisations were also interviewed as well as the country representative for VSO Nigeria. Many other VSO volunteers took part in the survey we conducted for the main study.

37 This country case study is based on qualitative and quantitative research conducted for Forum between August and October 2020 to ascertain the impact of COVID-19 on the future of volunteering for development. A focus group discussion was held with VSO partner representatives and volunteers from YORDEL Africa in Enugu State, Adolescent Health and Information Projects (AHIP) in Kano State, and partner organisations that form part of the VSO Nigeria National Youth Engagement Network in Abuja and Kano states, including the Climate and Sustainable Development Network (CSDevNet) and the SDGs Thursday. On 22 September 2020 an in-depth interview was conducted with the VSO Nigeria country representative. The case study also draws on the results of a survey carried out between 1 September and 7 October 2020 to which 64 VSO volunteers responded, citing their views about their experience during the pandemic between March and September 2020. VSO has elected not to publish this data.

38 www.yordelafrica.org

39 The SDGsThursday is a youth-led platform in Nigeria that brings together youth who are passionate about the UN Agenda 2030. They meet on Thursdays “to design and develop programmes and projects around the 17 SDGs from the lens of advocacy, sensitisation, and awareness creation.” (Assistant Coordinator, SDGsThursday)

Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on VSO volunteers and programmes

The devolution of authority to state governments in Nigeria resulted in the COVID-19 lockdown being applied differently across different states.⁴⁰ Kano state, for example, had greater restrictions than Enugu. Nonetheless, the lockdown had similar effects in both Kano and Enugu.

Immediately after the pandemic was declared, some international VSO volunteers were repatriated, whereas national volunteers stayed in their stations but had to contend with the lockdown restrictions. The outcome was the cessation of VSO programmes for partner organisations for a while. The excerpt below is illustrative of these effects:

Mostly before COVID-19, we do school activities where we go to schools to educate young girls on personal hygiene and we do distribution of some sanitary pads, and so on. But due to this COVID-19, schools are no longer on session. So, we had to stop. Yeah, there is no way for us to get those girls. We had to stop because of the COVID-19 and we don't know when to go back to our activities. We don't know when schools are resuming. Yes, we had to stop it completely. (Team lead, VSON National Youth Engagement Network)

A national professional volunteer added:

The sign language training has stopped. But we are still communicating with the programme manager to see how could we find a way to continue to work around this question, how can we find a way to share online? Online sign language to those in need? And to the group of teachers?

This signalled attempts by organisations to ensure that after the initial stoppage, programme delivery activities resumed albeit in a limited form.

⁴⁰ Haider, N. et al. (2020). Lockdown measures in response to COVID-19 in nine sub-Saharan African countries. *BMJ Global Health*, 5: <https://gh.bmj.com/content/5/10/e003319>.

Even after the resumption of programme activities, COVID-19 continued to affect VSO Nigeria partners by way of slowing down the tempo of their work because they could no longer go out to the communities in the same way they did before the declaration of the pandemic. They had to observe lockdown guidelines and be mindful of safety measures which involved getting face masks and sanitisers. These came at a cost and not all partners had the resources to meet these costs since they are non-profit organisations with limited revenue. The issue of costs is reinforced in the words of the VSO country representative who said:

Some of the unique ways we are doing programming because obviously travel has become a challenge, communication has become a challenge. So, like now when we are doing training we have to weigh whether we should be there in person. Should we do a Zoom call? Travel, for instance, we have to pay for more than one seat because of social distancing. So, it has become more expensive. We have to look through all of those parameters and then ensure ... ok, how many people are we going to train per day? If our goal was to train 300 people, we need to stagger that into more days. So, more days becomes more expensive and that is a challenge. But we are not wavering on reaching as many people. We did not stop our programmes, we just became more innovative. (Country Representative, VSO Nigeria)

In addition, COVID-19 restrictions meant limited access to communities which in turn affected the level of impact. However, the reduction in numbers was a necessity to ensure programme continuity and adherence to state guidelines on COVID-19. This situation, as captured by one of the participating partners, required some level of re-strategising and engaging with smaller groups in the communities they serve:

For us to be able to reach a larger number of people, considering the importance of social distancing, we have to divide our community members into segments. So, we have different days to engage with men groups in different communities, engage with women groups in different communities, engage with children, engage with health officers – that is, help staff at different health posts or facilities in the communities. And then with religious leaders just bit by bit. We also have time with farmers. We were doing that because we realise that this period is not a period where you can call a meeting of entire community of people ... It was a period where people needed to come out in smaller groups. That was what helped us to succeed in our work in Enugu state. (Programme Coordinator, YORDEL Africa)

At the same time, programme activities saw a spike in costs because even as partners engaged with fewer beneficiaries, they had to meet them in smaller groups, thereby increasing the frequency of their activities:

You find that if we are supposed to work with a particular number of people, for instance, forty in a particular meeting, or in a training, you find that because of COVID-19, you have to reduce the number of people coming up for that programme, and then even those who are coming out, you see that themselves may not be very enlightened, about COVID-19. (National Professional Volunteer, Sign Language)

Nevertheless partners were of the view that despite these challenges, the fact that they continued to operate seemed to bring them closer to their partner communities:

We have fewer number of people working at any point in time at this point in time ... And there's a closer interaction: nobody's hiding behind anybody, people are free, you're seeing their faces, they're seeing your own, you're watching their reactions close. And we are able to quickly identify who is following you properly, and who is not And I also know that the house to house contacts is also very helpful. So, these are the areas that our work has improved. But it has increased our costs. (Programme Coordinator, YORDEL Africa)

COVID-19 therefore reduced the reach of volunteers and partner interventions because of limited access to communities. Also, social distancing regulations meant limiting the number of people in public gatherings and training sessions.

An added challenge was the number of people attending training events or meetings, something that continued even after some relaxation of COVID-19 lockdown levels. Rural people started shunning people from towns believing they were the purveyors of COVID-19. This stemmed from the view that there was no COVID-19 in the very remote areas of the country (where VSO volunteers usually work), and that it was people from towns, including volunteers, who were responsible for bringing the virus to the villages. This resulted in volunteers being stigmatised, but over time the persistence of partners and volunteers in reaching out to communities helped to change this view.

Impact on relationships

Communication and engagement featured large in accounts of how the pandemic affected relationships between VSO Nigeria, its partners and communities. The country representative described how it was important to communicate with DFID and FCDO⁴¹ *“about opportunities that we were talking about before, repositioning them and assessing their viability and getting to know what is it we can change.”* Although COVID-19 reduced VSO Nigeria's partner numbers, it was necessary to *“go back to all the ones we had previously worked with to check on each other and continue the reassurance that this is temporary, we hope.”*

Programme staff were concerned about sustaining their relationships with community members to support them in the face of the pandemic, *“because they are actually counting very much on us.”* (Programme Coordinator, YORDEL Africa) However, the lockdown slowed communication immensely and *“the confidence level for the community drops a little.”* (Project Manager, Climate and Sustainable Development Network)

⁴¹ UK Department of International Development and the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office.

As restrictions eased, staff prioritised communication with their primary actors and succeeded in explaining why they were no longer able to operate as before: *“We have to do some explanations to help them understand that this is why this is happening now, and not what used to happen before. ... And they have no issues because we found time to explain and to carry them along.”* (Programme Coordinator, YORDEL Africa)

The country representative also remained optimistic about VSO Nigeria’s ability to retain the confidence of its partners: *“They continued to see us as a viable trusted partner ... So we have not run into any situation of an adverse relationship. We have been there. We have supported communities during and before, and we have continued to be there.”*

Local volunteer involvement

Given the repatriation of foreign nationals, VSO Nigeria and partners relied on local and national volunteers to restart their programmes or to initiate new ones. Community service volunteers became critical linchpins. In the view of participants in the focus group, it was easy to use community volunteers:

Community service volunteers live within the community. So, it was possible for them to move around their communities. It was also possible for them to answer to a call when the need arises, and then refer to us quickly without much delay, because they are part of the communities. People know them very well... Community members understand at every point in time that we have people, their own children, members of your community living among them, that they can reach, for any reason at any point in time. And they also have free access to our own contacts. (Programme Coordinator, YORDEL Africa)

In essence, community volunteers are accepted in their communities which makes it easy for community members to contact them for information and assistance. In the view of the YORDEL Africa Programme Coordinator, under COVID-19 lockdown conditions, community volunteers are essential and ensure that children with disabilities are properly supported and continue taking their lessons using the transistor radio that VSO has provided and which partner organisations and volunteers distributed:

In Enugu state ... they went beyond having an activity at a team meeting or a team activity where they expect to pay for visits and supporting them directly in their homes. Which made it possible for the children to be able to receive the much needed support and be able to follow what’s happening in the states and make proper use of the learning materials and transistor radio service provided for them. (Programme Coordinator, YORDEL Africa)

The value of national or community volunteers, even in the more specialised areas of work, is reinforced by the country representative who described how they were able to bring a local health specialist into VSO Nigeria's operations:

We brought in a Public Health Specialist. She is local. We got her from an NGO called MSH. She has enough expertise. It was also cheaper because we did not have to get someone from overseas and pay for their ticket. It becomes logistically expensive. So, we are finding that more and more we can get national volunteers who are professionals. ... Right now, we have only one international volunteer who is helping us with the resilience programme and it is a programme that has been going on four years and it is coming to an end. He is supporting us virtually... we have moved away from the old VSO model where volunteers came from the UK exclusively or Europe. Now an international volunteer could be anyone who is not coming from Nigeria. So more and more within VSO we are having 50% in our office staff come from Ghana, East Africa, South Africa, etc. I think that is actually allowing for a very interesting knowledge exchange within south to south as you say. So, this is increasingly becoming the norm and it is at 50%. (Country Representative, VSO Nigeria)

Despite their utility under what seemed like very challenging circumstances, community service volunteers had an extra challenge in the sense that their allowances, initially paid for by VSO, were discontinued in the COVID-19 context. There is a need to revisit this especially given that national professional volunteers continued to receive their allowances. The implication is that this is likely to exacerbate volunteer inequalities. In addition, some partner organisations had to struggle to ensure they did not lose these volunteers:

We lost some who had dropped out and did not help us to achieve what we have to achieve. When we have little resources, we have to discuss with the volunteers, and they said, you know, remember that we are part of this community. And we wanted things to work well whatever resources is available, all of us who work as a team and we managed to accomplish our objectives. (Programme Coordinator, YORDEL Africa)

Programme adaptation and innovation

By restarting programme delivery, albeit in a limited manner, VSO signalled how its partner organisations and volunteers adapted to continue implementing volunteering for development (V4D). In the Nigerian context, a mixture of adaptations was noted. The first was the use of technology-mediated platforms for service delivery and planning/programming. This was especially evident with the use of radio and TV. Working with partners and national volunteers, VSO Nigeria was able to deliver programmes via transistor radios and so ensured continuity of learning.

Radio programmes were developed by state governments in partnership with other stakeholders. To ensure reach, VSO procured transistor radios which were distributed by partners and volunteers to communities (primary actors). Programmes delivered over radio or TV included those in education, adolescence health and livelihoods, as well as personal safety under COVID-19. Reflecting on some of these adaptations, the VSO country representative indicated:

The pandemic has made us innovate in very different way. For instance, in Kano state we trained 100 teachers on sign language and children with disabilities are in class with other children but there is someone in class enabling them to use sign language. As a result, 12 000 children with disabilities in Kano State were able to benefit and go back to school and be included. They didn't have to drop out of school because there was no one to teach them in a language that they understood. (Country Representative, VSO Nigeria)

These adaptations were made possible by partnerships (new or existing) between various actors in V4D in Nigeria. For example, while state governments offered education through different radio stations, VSO provided radios to support the children learning at home and volunteers and partners were active in communicating and working, particularly with marginalised children in the communities. In this regard, the country representative noted:

We also worked with the government in the Northern State to provide solar-powered radios. So, during lockdown, students have been able to continue their schooling until the year closes, through solar-powered radios. The way we did this was to work with community volunteers to empower the teachers to ensure that all stakeholders were participating, to ensure that all kids who should be in school can go somewhere and have access to a class programme. So, they were programmed with their curriculum. (Country Representative, VSO Nigeria)

Similar partnerships were utilised to deliver adolescent health programmes in both Kano and Enugu states, while others were implemented on a national scale. Another example was provided regarding sign language training, especially in the COVID-19 context:

VSO were to print materials, and they try to interpret these materials using sign language because before the COVID, parents, children and volunteers were trained, so to an extent, although not completely they were trained to an extent. So VSO have been able to print out materials in using sign language....So that's currently what's going on with the sign language, there's no physical training on sign language now since the COVID-19. Except the print. (National Professional Volunteer, Sign Language)

Partnerships offered opportunities for organisations to work in areas that they would normally not have engaged with. In the words of one partner organisation, COVID-19 “*became an opportunity for us since we don’t have anything to do with campaigns.*” It also produced more opportunities to volunteer:

We have more opportunities now ... As a volunteer, there is more opportunity now because most projects are coming out. The fact that we are now living with Corona virus the programme here in Kano, which is live with COVID-19, is a radio programme. So that is an opportunity to put something out ... there’s something you can do even in your community in your neighbourhoods. I believe there are more opportunities for volunteers now. (Team lead, VSON National Youth Engagement Network)

Other partnerships emerged in a new format in the sense of being inter-sectoral. In this regard, one partner organisation had found an opportunity to partner with a company in the distribution of hand sanitiser and other hygiene products in an effort to fight the pandemic. This partnership was not in place before the pandemic and suggests that some partners were able to translate COVID-19 into an opportunity. Most partner organisations that took part in the study indicated that they had to move quickly to offer public health information to their various constituency groups. Others repurposed their livelihood programmes from agriculture to the production and sale of personal protective equipment (PPE). VSO provided support to enable such shifts to happen and this sometimes entailed making new grants:

So, we have to take it in to modify the livelihood aspect and said, okay, this is an opportunity as well. So, the communities could also be trained for those into tailoring, for example, to produce more and also train other persons to help. ... So, it became a trend and other offices started producing this on their own and making income from it, even for the hand sanitiser. So, it was the kind of inclusion into the livelihood programmes we have. (Project Manager, Climate and Sustainable Development Network)

Another adaptation was the embrace of technology to implement V4D programmes in Nigeria. A participant from a partner organisation gave the example of adopting technology for “*conducting virtual meetings, and virtual way of planning, and virtual ways of discussion.*” (Assistant Coordinator, SDGs Thursday)

This, however, has not been without challenges including difficulties in getting data, poor network connectivity and the limited reach to communities. In this regard, one partner organisation participant noted:

Now we cannot even get the community to key into our programmes on our platforms. If we say we are having an advocacy intervention programme for the community and now want to tell the community we’re going to continue our programmes virtually some of them have difficulties even accessing internet facilities. (Assistant Coordinator, SDGs Thursday)

What does the future hold for volunteering for development (V4D)?

The volunteering for development ecosystem in Nigeria has been impacted by COVID-19 on multiple fronts. Due to health and safety concerns, the number of those volunteering is likely to fall, as is the amount of funding available to drive projects. The shrinking economy is impacting the amount of funding available to support programme delivery. The spectrum of areas of volunteer operation for volunteers has also shrunk. Some areas of work, such as climate change, have witnessed a substantial reduction.

Participants in the VSO Nigeria focus group, nonetheless, felt that despite the challenges of operating under the conditions of COVID-19 lockdown, volunteerism has been at the heart of humanity and central to the notion of prosperity for people and the planet. Volunteerism is therefore likely to continue flourishing:

Volunteers' passion and desire to make impact I don't think that will die because of COVID-19. And so volunteers are going to continue. Secondly, volunteerism is a part of humanity so we are now calling for even more volunteers and open it to more volunteers to try and do what they want to do best to save humanity. (Project Manager, Climate and Sustainable Development Network)

As such, partner organisations saw a bright future for volunteering for development in Nigeria. A participant indicated that COVID-19 has offered opportunities to reflect on new possibilities, for example, in harnessing and leveraging domestic funding sources. Also mentioned was the need to build sectoral solidarity and partnerships by unifying organisations or groups with common interests and mutual support for such groups, as well as accelerating the transformation towards online engagement. Another participant indicated that the future of V4D is bright because VSO's approach of engagement has a civil society or network perspective. This participant further indicated the need for "*partner organisations to be proactive instead waiting for VSO to come up with an approach for you to act.*" (Project Manager, Climate and Sustainable Development Network)

Even with their enthusiasm, there are pertinent threats to volunteerism because of COVID-19. The illustrative example here was that just before the outbreak of the virus in November, Nigerian V4D stakeholders had formulated a volunteering policy. Given the post-COVID-19 realities, participants indicated that the document did not capture all current aspects regarding where volunteers were engaged, for example, volunteers working online or virtually. In addition, all the necessary conditions and protections for volunteers working in pandemic situations are not captured in the policy. Participants also felt that the continuing fluidity of the operating environment due to COVID-19 restrictions is likely to result in a decline in the number of volunteers (of all categories) available to participate in programme activities:

The kind of work we do, we are involved in community engagements on site, volunteers go to the field, keeping track and take records. So, for now, volunteering activity has been affected, and if this continues, there'll be a decline in the number of volunteers you have getting involved in activities. We just hope and pray that this will be over soon because most of our members use these opportunities as a way of getting experience as a way of developing skills; some of them are involved in the visual skills. So, if you look at the nature

of work, you have to put volunteers now, most online virtual. You have to work with data, your laptop, your computer, just to have these tools to work with. So with that the future of volunteering has been affected. Volunteerism as whole is being affected by COVID-19 and there is a decline in those that are involved in it. (Assistant Coordinator, SDGs Thursday)

The quote suggests that those interested in a better future for V4D need to invest in infrastructural enablers, which in a post-COVID-19 context must include internet connectivity as well as the necessary hardware for digital operation.

Additionally, the success of emergent partnerships and collaborations between partners from various sectors have led to some within the sector in Nigeria – including the VSO Nigeria country representative – expressing the opinion that, “*working in consortia is going to become one of the most powerful tools going forward.*”

In the view of the country representative, this is driven by two key factors:

One is institutional donors or government. If they want to implement something on a grand scale, they know that they have to assemble and come up with an orchestration of multiple partners recognising that multiple implementing partners ... they recognise that each one brings a strength ...The other reason is the need for impact for scale. Working in a consortium allows the funding to have greater impact, greater scale and allows different partners to work to their greater strength. (Country Representative, VSO Nigeria)

The suggestion is worth considering as it has multiple benefits including economies of scale, reducing duplication and the building of intra-sector and cross-sectoral relationships.



As part of its COVID response, VSO Nepal supported the most marginalised girls in Dhading, Lamjung, Surkhet and Parsa districts of Nepal to access hygiene kits and receive training on how to use them. Photo thanks to VSO.