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An African-centred approach to quality in practice?

Insights from East African volunteer involving organisations

At St. Josephs Vocational Training Institute in Hoima, Uganda, junior welding instructor Emmanuel Aliguma teaches a group of students how to make a cooking stove. He is supported by Nobert Sebastian, a VSO volunteer vocational training advisor.

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forum

Abstract

Using examples from in-country and international volunteer involving organisations in East Africa, this paper examines emergent efforts at quality improvement, standards setting and accreditation in the African context. A central observation in this analysis is that there is some dissonance between quality practices in indigenous volunteer involving organisations[1] (indigenous VIOs) and international volunteer cooperation organisations (IVCOs). This is because quality enhancement models rarely offer room for local or indigenous innovation and adaptation. Despite IVCOs consulting VIOs and communities in developing quality performance standards, such consultations are usually based on preset definitions and parameters designed to meet donor interests in monitoring and aggregating volunteer contributions to development. The risk is that quality standards and accreditation systems are reduced to tick-box exercises that have little meaning for local communities and indigenous VIOs. It is therefore argued that successful quality improvement models require a relational partnership approach that expresses solidarity, mutual accountability and reciprocity. IVCOs and African VIOs have a mutual interest in incorporating culturally embedded norms and practices into quality assurance models and could in this process start redressing the traditional power imbalances often inherent in international volunteering schemes.

[1] The term 'indigenous volunteer involving organisations' (indigenous VIOs) is used in this paper to denote organisations and institutions that are community-based and consist of members of poor communities who cooperate voluntarily to meet their own needs. This is in contrast to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which are non-profit agencies external to the communities, be they local, national or international. 'There is a clear need to multiply the number and to improve the quality of CBOs [community-based organisations]. However, it is important that they retain their autonomy and accountability to their community' (Asian Development Bank 1991, p. 768-769).

Introduction

The notion of quality in volunteering practice, especially in the context of international development, is complex and laden with multiple questions. For example, how is quality defined? Who determines what constitutes quality performance and sets standards and processes for measuring quality? What are the drivers for quality assessment? And to what extent are quality practices in IVCOs aligned with those in indigenous VIOs?

The paper starts with an analysis of the diverse volunteering contexts in East Africa and outlines the key features of volunteering for mutual aid, prevalent in African communities. These are presented with a view to illustrating how solidarity, reciprocity and mutual accountability define the character and practice of quality assurance in these institutions, and how this provides opportunities for IVCOs in the changing context of development aid. This is followed by illustrative examples of quality practices adopted by a number of VIOs in East Africa and East African quality management institutions, as well as IVCO quality improvement processes in the region. Finally, the conclusion offers reflections on the issues raised while posing questions for discussion.

The African volunteering context

East African Community countries started their decolonisation in the early 1960s, with South Sudan being the last to declare independence from Sudan in 2011. Their collective postcolonial self-determination period is therefore a relatively short one for sustained development outcomes, particularly given that political violence in some countries has had a disruptive effect on development processes.

As is the case elsewhere in Africa, the region's cultural, socioeconomic and political context is characterised by the reality of colonial disruption of traditional precolonial forms of leadership, community practices and the institutions for sustaining social wellbeing. The region is also characterised by community adaptations to survive vulnerabilities produced by colonial and postcolonial socioeconomic and political conditions (Fowler and Mati 2019).

Significantly, each of the countries in the region exhibits a rich hybrid of volunteering cultures that blend indigenous volunteering with hosting volunteers from the 'developed' world. Indigenous volunteering manifests in mutual aid and self-help organisations, depicted in practices such as *ikibiri*[2] in Burundi, *harambee*[3] in Kenya, *umuganda*[4] in Rwanda, and *ujamaa*[5] in Tanzania. These long established practices are culturally embedded in strong cultural obligations of cooperative behaviour, solidarity and reciprocity that promotes collective wellbeing (Kaseke & Dhemba 2006; Moleni & Gallagher 2006; Rankopo, Osei-Hwedie & Modie-Moroka 2006; cited in Patel et al. 2012, p. 13).

Besides influencing prosocial human behaviour and norms, these practices operate with a logic of mutual accountability: adherence to this principle serves to maintain one's standing with the community, share risk and ensure self-reproduction (Mati 2016a; Fowler and Mati 2019). Depicted in African philosophical worldviews such as *ubuntu*[6], the norms and practices stress human interconnectedness and the value of interpersonal relationships, and therefore favour the wellbeing of the collective as a means to ensuring

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[2] *Ikibiri* means 'a duty carried out together for a needy person' in Kirundi (Fransen and Ong'ayo 2010).

[3] *Harambee* means 'all pull together' in Swahili (Wanyama 2002).

[4] *Umuganda* is one of the traditional tools of mutual help rooted in Rwandan culture. This practice was reinvented after the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi by the Government of Rwanda (GoR) as one of Rwanda's Home Grown Solutions (HGS) to address societal challenges (Rwanda Governance Board 2017).

[5] *Ujamaa* in Swahili refers to a socialist system of village cooperatives based on equality of opportunity and self-help. The system was established in the 1960s in Tanzania as the basis for equitable economic production and distribution, self-reliance and non-exploitative development (Ibhawoh and Dibua 2003).

[6] *Ubuntu* is a Nguni term used widely in Southern Africa (and in other parts of Africa) to denote the interconnectedness and interdependence of humanity. It derives from the phrase 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' which means 'a person is a person through/because of other people'.

the wellbeing of an individual. The Kenyan philosopher John Mbiti (1969, p. 106) aptly captures this:

> **Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people. When he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours and his relatives whether dead or alive.**

The result of this worldview is a rich culture of solidarity, mutual aid and reciprocity which underpins community-based institutions and organisations designed for sustainability. In postcolonial contexts some governments and indigenous VIOs have invoked these culturally embedded traditions in designing local community and national volunteer schemes. Additionally, there is a contemporary resurgence of age-old traditions and practices such as community granaries in Burundi[7], which help to deal with increasing vulnerability due to food insecurity.

As noted above, communities in East African countries also host thousands of IVCO volunteers from the 'developed' world, including through Forum[8] members such as VSO, United Nations Volunteers programme (UNV), Norwegian Agency for Exchange Cooperation (Norec), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) and non-Forum members such as the Peace Corps and Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV). Below we examine the nature of indigenous volunteering more closely and then look at how IVCO discourse and practice is responding to changes in the global sphere of development aid. Together, these conditions may provide opportunities for innovation in quality practice in the African volunteering context.

The value of indigenous volunteering in East Africa

Communities in East Africa value volunteerism. This is evident in the extensive institutionalisation of volunteering in indigenous relational and welfare practices, and voluntary community-based structures. In a study of African gifting and giving practices, Fowler and Mati (2019) argue that existing institutionalisation has occurred over several generations and has significance for the prevalent relational behaviour in Africa. Specifically, society works by selecting, reinforcing and institutionalising what

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[7] See for example Burundi Red Cross (2018); FAO (1997). See also Patel et al. (2007, p. 24) and Ringson (2017) for similar examples of revival of community (kings') granaries e.g. *Zunde raMambo* in Zimbabwe.

[8] Forum is the International Forum for Volunteering in Development which 'is the most significant global network of international volunteer cooperation organisations (IVCOs). Forum exists to share information, develop good practice and enhance cooperation across the international volunteering and development sectors'. https://forum-ids.org/about/

works well for most of the people for most of the time (Walker and Ostrom 2007) while what does not work well is 'eventually selected down or out of the human relational repertoire' (Fowler and Mati 2019, p. 5).

> **"The miracle of urban poverty is that poor people meet most of their needs and supply most of their services themselves. No matter how inadequate their ways of meeting needs and providing services may appear, that is what guarantees their survival in a hostile environment. … Any scheme for poverty alleviation should start with a recognition of the centrality of poor people in meeting their own needs and of the fact that government and NGOs are still secondary, if not minor players, in the provision of services for the poor in most countries of this [Asia] region."**
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> — Asian Development Bank 1991, p. 768

Further, citing North (1990) and Ostrom (2005), Fowler and Mati (2019) argue that there are various levels of institutions evident in communities. The various 'presences' of such institutions, they propose, are relevant for helping us understand the role of culture in African relational contexts. The institutions are characterised by deeply embedded values, habituated rules and normative expectations lived as second nature, not requiring conscious thinking (Fowler and Mati 2019, p. 5; Kahneman 2011). Such values and habits are captured for example in the practices of *ubuntu*, *ujamaa* and others cited earlier and are fostered by solidarity, mutual accountability, reciprocity and trust which are key in community building. Every society has such cultural norms, values, habits and mores that shape social institutions in which rules and sanctions are '"formal" for those belonging to them, while remaining "informal" in the sense of not seeking public recognition or registration and functioning according to their own rules' (Fowler and Mati 2019, p. 5). While these two layers suggest a division between 'formal' and 'informal' institutions there is, to the contrary, 'nested layering' which explains the durability of culture in shaping both formal rules and informal norms.

The quality of volunteer interventions and outcomes can be fostered when volunteer programs build on the values, rules, norms and practices in the communities in which they operate (UNV 2018, p. 96-99). One example of how these positively affect quality is provided by a study of community home-based care (CHBC) in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The study by Morton, Mayekiso and Cunnningham (2015) found that communities were central to the success of both caregivers and CHBC programs because the support of the community and communication between community members ensured that people living with AIDS (PLWA) were referred to caregivers and therefore received the care they needed. Factors at work here included the level of trust between the caregivers and the community which gave PLWAs sufficient confidence to let the volunteers into their homes, while volunteers felt safe because they knew their community. Community support also helped volunteers deal with the stigma that accompanies their work, while community solidarity helped families overcome the financial and other burdens they face

when a family member is a caregiver. Morton et al. (2015, p. 107) concluded: 'the positive effects of this power are evident in the impact that community involvement has on social capital, which in turn may also improve quality care'.

This evidence significantly challenges the dominant professional managerial approach where modern interventions are brought into local communities by external agents, often at the behest of international donors, without linking them to indigenous community-based activities (Patel et al. 2012, p. 13). The implication is that there is a need to strengthen local people's ownership of volunteer interventions, which in turn affects quality and outcomes.

> **"Strengthen people's ownership of the development agenda…"**
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> — UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action (UN General Assembly 2015)

Specifically, this calls for a conscious effort to learn from communities about systems and practices that work best and to incorporate these in program plans and implementation. Additionally, it calls for IVCOs and NGO-VIOs to move away from token community representation in spaces where the discussion about quality practices is constrained by preset parameters and agendas. Lastly, it calls for moving away from an overreliance on donor requirements in setting quality standards without taking sufficient account of local contexts, since this risks closing off opportunities for innovation. At the same time, drawing on local community-based cultural and ethical practices does not necessarily mean abandoning what IVCOs believe works in the contexts in which they operate. Rather, it is a call to incorporate an arguably important variable in the success of development interventions, but one which that is largely ignored in designing and implementing volunteer involving programs.

Opportunities for IVCOs in a changing development context

IVCO discourse and practice has been responding to changes in the global and development spheres by reducing their reliance on volunteers from Northern countries. This has resulted in a resurgence of community-based volunteering and the emergence of national volunteering schemes alongside international volunteering.

Emergent partnership and participatory approaches adopted by some IVCOs suggest that they are already responding to an evolving development agenda by moving towards such quality improvements. According to Devereux and Allum (2016) this has informed strategic shifts in several IVCOs. The first is a shift from skills-based service delivery to capacity building. Second is a focus on specific volunteer groups, for example, youth. Third is increased alignment of the IVCOs' and VIOs' development agenda. Fourth is the

redefining of organisational purpose and/or pursuing ways to demonstrate impact. Lastly is a move by IVCOs from just sending volunteers, to a stronger development policy and advocacy role. In volunteering for development some of these changes have found expression in the move from unidirectional international volunteering (North-South) to multidirectional international volunteering (South-North and South-South) (King 2018, p. 3).

These shifts are taking place in the context of changing notions of development aid effectiveness which started with the first High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in Rome in 2002, followed by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The HLPF agreed that donors, governments, aid agencies and recipient countries should harmonise their work to make aid efficient, focused and accountable. Since then in several other forums the notion of accountability in development has taken centre stage with different countries and aid organisations taking a variety of implementing approaches.

The increasing emphasis on accountability suggests that there are opportunities for IVCOs to respond to earlier criticisms of the neglect of indigenous community agency and to work more extensively with traditional community-based volunteering institutions, recognising the value of 'Southern capacity' in their development interventions (Mati 2016b; Devereux and Allum 2016, p. 32).[9]

At the heart of progressive efforts to establish quality improvement processes in the volunteering context lie two critical values: mutual accountability and reciprocity. Effective mutual accountability is in place when actors in volunteering relationships, in our case IVCOs, VIOs, host communities and volunteers, have a shared responsibility and commitment towards a particular development agenda. Further, mutual accountability requires spaces for dialogue and decision-making about the development of shared responsibility, defining goals/agendas and determining 'how' quality is conceived, monitored and reviewed. More fundamentally, mutual accountably requires 'being open to external scrutiny for assessing results in relation to goals and objectives' (Accra High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness 2008, p. 1). Reciprocity on the other hand represents the general idea that 'giving and receiving are mutually contingent' (Gouldner 1960, p. 169). Mutual accountability and reciprocity have multiple benefits especially for building social capital and trust as well as embedding common values in relational partnerships.

[9] For a detailed critique of the historically dominant North-South volunteer model, see Mati (2016b). Citing among others Devereux (2008); Roberts (2004), Perold et al. (2012); Ouma and Dimaras (2013) and Green (2000), Mati (2016b) argues that the North-South model is condemned for its imperialistic paternalism and is marred by hierarchical relationships and the failure to acknowledge the agency of communities and organisations in the South.

With the above framing in mind, a consideration of mutual accountability and reciprocity in volunteer involvement returns to the questions surfaced at the start of this paper: who determines what constitutes quality performance? Who sets standards and processes for quality? How and by whom is quality in volunteering assessed – both in relation to the volunteers and in relation to development outcomes?

IVCOs and VIOs have both opportunities and challenges in their efforts towards continuous improvement of quality of their services with a view to delivering better outcomes for the wellbeing of the people they serve.

> **"International (and national) volunteer contributions need to "adapt to the specific contexts of communities and changing external circumstances, making use of volunteerism in different ways."**
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> — Aken 2015, cited in Devereux & Allum 2016, p. 32

The critical question is how the adaptations mentioned above are influencing quality improvement in the delivery of national and international volunteering for development interventions, and how traditional power imbalances between communities and national and international agencies are being addressed. Within emerging partnership and participatory models, the concepts of reciprocity and mutual accountability are critical in helping IVCOs and local VIOs embrace each other to find consensus about quality benchmarks and quality management processes that work for local communities. Such embrace requires that both IVCOs and VIOs abandon labels such as 'informal' which are frequently used to characterise traditional community-based volunteering. Essentially we are of the view that to be effective, IVCOs need to tap into the rich relational approach in African contexts. This is because, as argued above, culture is probably more powerful than a formal agreement on quality improvement.

Organisational examples of quality improvement approaches in East Africa

In this section we provide two types of examples of quality improvement practices in East Africa: first, practices evident in three different VIOs; second, two institutions focused on quality assurance in the voluntary sector. These examples suggest improvements in quality practice, albeit at formative levels, but also demonstrate a lack of engagement with the so-called 'informal' mutual aid practices prevalent in East African communities. Not all these examples are focused purely on volunteering. Some draw from the voluntary sector of which both IVCOS and VIOs are a strong component, and provide a lens on quality assurance institutions founded within the East African context.

Organisational quality practices in individual VIOs

Nipe Fagio, Tanzania

Founded in 2013, Nipe Fagio (Swahili for 'give me a broom') is a Tanzanian VIO aiming at empowering individuals (especially youth), civil society, private sector and government to build lasting change towards a clean and sustainable Dar es Salaam. It does this through education and action that creates economic value to improve waste management and reduce urban pollution.

Nipe Fagio works through youth volunteers (Youth Ambassadors) who are recruited and trained to be change agents by playing essential roles such as building environmental and waste management awareness, teaching best waste management practices and inspiring community action. In so doing youth volunteers are expected to develop leadership skills.

Nipe Fagio ensures quality in their program by incorporating feedback from volunteers and community members. Specifically, the recruitment process, training and induction, as well as the volunteer operations in the Community Action Groups that they help establish and work with, involve different stakeholders giving feedback at every step of the process. Such feedback is collected through interviews, end of term reports, monthly Friday meetings and multi-stakeholder annual planning meetings, among other mechanisms.

Nipe Fagio staff use this feedback to assess the volunteers' performance every six months, using criteria such as the volunteers' professionalism – for example how they communicate, how active they are in the community and how they are developing personally. For Nipe Fagio 'this is a way to looking at whether the volunteer is going in the right direction, and whether they need support to improve life skills such as time management and financial literacy'[10]. Activities are planned annually and Nipe Fagio uses the community feedback to inform focus areas for the following year, and to determine the financial and human resources required. Unfortunately, no information was available about Nipe Fagio's funding sources, how the organisation accounts to these parties and how outcomes are assessed.

[10] Skype discussion with program staff member, June 2019.

VSO Tanzania

VSO, an IVCO, was established at the tail end of British imperial colonialism in 1958. For a long time VSO practised a purely North-South model of volunteer recruitment and sending. This has changed extensively in the last 20 years with the introduction of a South-South international volunteering model and local/community volunteering programs. Today, VSO defines itself as an 'international development organisation that delivers development impact through the relational power of volunteering'. It places different categories of volunteers including 'professional international volunteers, national and community volunteers, and ICS youth volunteers from the UK and placement countries, with partner agencies, ranging from government ministries to civil society organisations and communities, in countries where VSO works.'[11] Placements vary in length up to approximately two years, and focus on three program areas: healthcare, education and strengthening livelihoods.

VSO's programing and delivery is centralised, even as it is decentralised. Centralisation is reflected, for example, in a global strategic plan to which all partner organisations in the countries in which it operates are bound. At the same time, individual country programs choose specific focus areas for volunteer support from a menu of available options in the global strategic plan, which illustrates decentralisation. For example at national and local levels, VSO Tanzania utilises participatory research processes involving 'primary actors' – host organisations and communities who define their needs and aspirations, and/or government – to identify development priorities in which volunteer support can add value.

Over the years, like many other large development organisations, VSO has perfected its use of monitoring and feedback in its operations. As an IVCO that positions itself in the development space, VSO aims to 'embed a culture of learning and evaluation throughout the organisation and its programs, in order to drive VSO programs' relevance, effectiveness, impact and sustainability and to increase VSO's understanding of the distinctive contribution of volunteering to sustainable development'[12]. Of relevance here is VSO's commitment to increase 'the number of collaborative internal evaluative and learning exercises'; conducting rigorous internal and external evaluations that will improve its work; and building an evidence base to 'be accountable to different stakeholders, including donors, partner/peer organisations and (most importantly) the poor and marginalised communities [they] serve.'[13]

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[11] https://www.vsointernational.org

[12] https://www.vsointernational.org/sites/default/files/VSO%20Evaluation%20Strategy.pdf

[13] Ibid.

In Tanzania, VSO's programs incorporate a number of mechanisms to gather feedback from their primary actors, some of which are not too dissimilar from approaches reported by Nipe Fagio, although the scale of implementation in the two organisations are not comparable. Given its extensive resource base, VSO Tanzania uses a system of formal feedback mechanisms that include weekly youth volunteer Friday meetings, monthly project meetings, a volunteer committee that collects feedback four times a year, senior management feedback, mid-term reviews, annual reviews, an annual survey, and a whistle blowers' policy[14].

DENIVA, Uganda[15]

The Development Network of Indigenous Voluntary Associations in Uganda (DENIVA) provides an example of how a network of indigenous voluntary organisations created institutional support for accountability and quality assurance to strengthen their struggle against government intimidation and shrinking civic space. Three key strategies were used.

The first was the Global South Support Program for Civil Society (2016-2017) which sought to build the capacity of six civil society organisations in the areas of advocacy, monitoring and evaluation, internal operations and resource mobilisation. According to the DENIVA website, 'monitoring and evaluation skills are critical for project success and the organisations are enabled to develop M&E frameworks and track progress while learning and documenting progress'.[16]

[14] Skype discussion with VSO Tanzania Country Director, June 2019.

[15] In preparing this paper the authors relied on information posted on DENIVA's website. Only two annual reports are available (2012 and 2013) and time constraints made it difficult for the authors to conduct interviews with the organisation for more recent and in-depth information. There is therefore the need for further research to validate these observations. This could take the form of a regional or Africa-wide study of initiatives such as Viwango, the QuAM and others to explore how these mechanisms contribute to the quality of volunteering in the African setting.

[16] http://deniva.or.ug/partners.html

The second was the launch of a 'global standard for civil society accountability' in 2018. Information on the DENIVA website indicates a direct linkage between stakeholder feedback and the decision to embrace the global standard:

> **Feedback from our stakeholders needs to inform our decisions so that we can both continuously improve our performance and build trusted relationships. … the Global Standard for CSO Accountability … transforms accountability into an ongoing dialogue which drives learning and change, develops trust with our stakeholders and enhances the legitimacy and credibility of CSOs, all of which are critically important in these times of shrinking civic space.**[17]

This statement articulates how these indigenous civil society organisations see the value of stakeholder feedback as a means of strengthening accountability in their operations and building trust with their stakeholders. It is particularly interesting that they describe accountability as a function of 'an ongoing dialogue that drives learning and change'. Like Nipe Fagio and VSO, DENIVA sees feedback from participant primary actors as a critical resource for quality improvement. DENIVA goes beyond the technical aspects of this process through its notion of 'ongoing dialogue' which suggests constant engagement and signals the motivation to develop these processes as a key organisational value.

Third, DENIVA used the launch of the global standard for civil society accountability to announce reforms to the Quality Assurance Certification Mechanism (QuAM), an NGO which it helped establish. This suggests a relationship between DENIVA's commitment to accountability and its capacity to strengthen evidence for quality improvement in civil society organisations. This role is particularly interesting in the context of increasing government interference in and intimidation of civil society organisations, and the loss of credibility and transparency in civil society due to the mushrooming of rogue organisations (Anthony n.d.).

[17] http://www.deniva.or.ug/news-events/211-in-partnership-with-gscsoa-to-transform-accountability-and-enhance-impact.html

Sector-wide quality certification institutions in East Africa

Across East Africa there are no national or cross-national structures dedicated to quality assurance and the standardisation of volunteer quality in IVCOs and VIOs. The closest we get to this are national volunteer policies in Tanzania, Rwanda and Kenya (UNV 2011)[18]. While there is no national volunteer policy in Uganda, several VIOs across the country have developed their own volunteer policies prominently displayed on their websites. VSO Uganda, through its global grant for volunteering for development from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) is currently working with stakeholders to develop a national volunteer policy.

Nevertheless, voluntary sector organisations in Kenya and Uganda have established institutions for quality assurance and certification. These are the Quality Assurance Certification Mechanism (QuAM) in Uganda and Viwango in Kenya.[19]

According to its website the QuAM is concerned with enhancement of accountability (including to the general public, members, donors and government), governance, ethics, resource management and standards for improved performance in indigenous voluntary sector organisations. In this regard it has developed an 'appropriate M&E system' which can be used in a range of NGO programs/projects to assess the achievement of an organisation's mission. It helps organisations define and measure program outcomes, and assists NGOs to assess their impact.

Of particular interest is the relationship between the QuAM and DENIVA. DENIVA was instrumental in the establishment of the QuAM and still hosts its secretariat.

In Kenya, Viwango is an independent standards setting and certification organisation for civil society organisations. However there is very little information on Viwango's website that could be used in this research. In the absence of an interview with the directors, it is thus difficult to say what standards are used for certification. The little information on the web indicates that Viwango, like the QuAM, stresses the importance of governance, resource management and continuous improvement in strengthening voluntary organisations through standards setting.

Both the QuAM and Viwango have cooperated with the global standard for CSO accountability in developing their standards. Among the 12 accountability commitments under this global standard is an 'empowered and effective staff and volunteers'. The relevant question then is: to what extent do these commitments reflect the mutual

[18] We were not able to determine the presence or lack of a national volunteer policy in South Sudan and Burundi.

[19] Viwango is the Swahili word for 'standards'. (http://www.viwango.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1&Itemid=7).

accountability prevalent in African mutual aid reciprocity and solidarity? Additionally, how are these emergent structures for standards setting and accreditation affecting quality performance of VIOs and other voluntary organisations?

Available information makes it difficult to assess how these certification mechanisms have impacted on quality improvement in voluntary organisations. Nevertheless, it appears that in both countries, standards setting for quality improvement is evident through the institutionalisation of quality assurance mechanisms in the sector. The QuAM cites considerable reach in having awarded quality certificates of various types to 154 Uganda voluntary organisations. However, this may be a tiny fraction of civil society, given that Uganda has thousands of NGOs.

While information currently available on the websites of both the QuAM and Viwango are silent on who funds these initiatives, there is no doubt that these institutions, as well as the emergent national volunteer policies, are responses to developments in the civil society sector in other parts of the globe.[20] Existing efforts are mainly aided by donors whose search for success stories and a quest for homogeneity and risk aversion has resulted in the enthusiastic embrace of models that facilitate monitoring rather than innovation and adaptability.

Comparing institutional and VIO program approaches to quality improvement

Are quality certification institutions such as the QuAM and Viwango the most effective means of improving the performance and outcomes of VIOs? The prioritisation of standards deemed most significant and how they are applied and assessed may change over time. The critical question for these quality assurance systems is how learning from practice will enable them to respond to changing notions of quality over time.

A relevant example of learning and change over a long period of time is offered by a 2012 review of a Norec (formerly FK Norway) South-South Exchange project in East Africa. Media Women's Associations in Uganda, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya and Zambia entered the program in 2002 and exchanged 98 participants, while 96 participants in the African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) were exchanged across national chapters in 14 African countries, four of which are in East Africa. The program aimed to create changes 'on the ground' and 'in our minds'.

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[20] Specifically, the purpose of quality standards setting and accreditation in voluntary organisations has been evident for over two decades in a variety of countries including Australia, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Cambodia and the United States of America (Ehsan, 2013). This forms part of second generation self-regulation and industry best practice in areas such as results measurement (Mati in press).

'Change on the ground' focused on facilitation of development skills, knowledge, and technical capacity in institutions for improved service delivery. 'Changes in our minds are intended to be achieved through promoting a set of values and relationship: [sic] with individuals where there is equity in the relationships – both on individual and institutional level' (Mentor Consult Ltd 2012, p. v).

The review found that the South-South Exchange program produced the following benefits in the partner organisations: institutional strengthening; adoption of good practices; closer interaction among partner organisations; acquisition of physical resources; and the creation of new partnerships and strengthening of weak partners.

At community level anecdotal evidence indicated general performance improvement. Better services were attributed to improved organisational governance, management systems and programming, as well as 'the introduction of new interventions based on best practices adapted from the host organisations and those introduced to the host organisations by the foreign participants' (Ibid, p. 16). The review found that one of the major factors to which the program's achievements can be attributed was the preparatory activity carried out before and during the volunteers' placement and after their return to the sending organisation (Ibid, p. 20).

In the absence of research that provides greater insight into the impact of quality assurance institutions such as the QuAM and Viwango, it is difficult to make the comparison between outcomes from these institutions and the efficacy of the Norec South-South exchange program. Clearly quality assurance institutions have the capacity for greater reach and the uniform application of quality improvement standards. In addition, when developed through cooperative approaches that value equity in the relationships, they can be instrumental in building alignment between the sectoral aims and the quality standards required to meet them.

An African-centred approach to quality improvement?

As is perhaps well known, the international voluntary sector has spawned various initiatives to develop codes of good practice. For example, the European Union Aid Volunteers program developed an extensive certification system for sending and hosting organisations (EUAV 2019).[21] Between 2015 and 2019 the EUAV certificated 174 hosting organisations of which 70 are in Africa. Twenty two of these organisations operate across East Africa.[22] Another example is the Comhlámh 2015 Code of Good Practice. The proposed launch of the 'global standard for volunteering for development' at the IVCO 2019 conference adds to a growing list of quality standards in the sector.

Two critical questions about these initiatives arise: to what extent do these standards reflect African realities? And how are international standards setting initiatives perceived among African VIOs?

With regard to the first question, the Comhlámh 2015 Code of Good Practice makes no specific mention of mutual accountability. Nonetheless it is explicit about the need for indigenous VIO programs, projects and volunteer roles to be based on solidarity. As for the perceptions of African VIOs of international standards setting initiatives, emergent quality standards mechanisms are received with some support, but also apprehension. In this regard a study by VOSESA (2014) of 13 indigenous VIOs (located in Ghana, Mozambique, South Africa and Zambia) is instructive. The study gathered indigenous VIO responses to the EUAV's proposed standards for certification at that time and the results revealed a tension between positive responses to the proposals and concern about their implementation and impact.

The overall argument in support of quality standards was that these increase the VIOs' credibility with individual donors, private foundations and government agencies, and enhance public trust. The main concerns were related to VIO eligibility for certification[23] and time frames for certification[24] .

Considering that volunteerism is culturally complex and diverse (Leigh et al. 2011; United Nations Volunteers 2015) those agencies promoting standards setting need to ensure that local/indigenous contexts and needs are sufficiently incorporated

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[21] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/eu-aid-volunteers/actions/certification-mechanism-for-sending-and-hosting-organisations_en

[22] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/eacea-site/files/hosting_organisations_06_2019_0.pdf

[23] Respondents felt that some VIOs may not be ready to go through a certification process and may not be able to meet the minimum criteria to qualify for capacity building support.

[24] It was suggested that certified host and sending organisations should recruit volunteers for a minimum of three months.

in the standards instead of taking a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. This is achievable through stakeholder dialogue aimed at embedding reciprocity and mutual accountability in the standards and their implementation. Such an approach is critical in helping parties find consensus about the most appropriate and effective ways of defining quality benchmarks, and consequently developing a shared agenda and deepened commitment to enhanced capacity for quality assurance.

In the absence of this type of approach, the risk is that quality standards setting and accreditation will exacerbate the power hierarchies often associated with North-South volunteering in Africa (Mati 2016b; Lough and Carter-Black 2015; Perold et al. 2012). This is essentially because even when such standards are developed collaboratively and involve both IVCOs and indigenous VIOs, in some cases VIOs come into these spaces as invitees to an agenda that is already set – either by IVCOs or by their funders.[25] In case of dissonance between the interests of indigenous VIOs and IVCOs, the high road tends to be that of the IVCOs even though this may not necessarily deliver quality for VIOs and local communities. In these situations, indigenous VIOs and communities grudgingly do what is required of them because, as the African proverb goes, 'If your hands are in somebody else's pockets, you have to keep on moving wherever he moves'. An added risk is that like all standards and certification mechanisms, there is often denigration of those that decide to not participate in such initiatives, thereby hurting not just these organisations but what they do and the communities they serve (see for example Tully and Wright 2002 on fair trade certification of carpet manufacturing industry firms in India).

The essence of quality improvement in volunteering contexts in Africa is highlighted in Graham et al. (2013) who argue that effective methods of quality improvement require a holistic approach. Specifically, they argue that quality improvement depends on components such as volunteer training; integrating assessment into volunteer management; and strengthening management capacity to develop, implement and evaluate VIO programs. They also point out that delivering quality service depends on the recruitment and retention of volunteers, as well as learning and gender sensitivity. As far as international volunteers are concerned, they suggest that priority should be to manage international volunteers to the benefit of all.

In another study Patel et al. (2012) note significant examples of social innovation in the growing recognition of mutual aid VIOs by governments in Southern Africa that draw them into the formal infrastructure for community development. This has strengthened

[25] Refer to the IVCO 2019 framing paper entitled 'Developing the Forum global standard for volunteering for development'. Note that only one VIO from the global South is part of the Forum Leading Standards Working Group (Forum LSWG) – the Nepal Friendship Society. Yet the Forum LSWG sets the agenda for standards. This is not to indicate that in the standards development process the Forum LSWG has not consulted a number of Southern VIOs. Nonetheless, a little more than consultation is expected if the standards are truly to reflect Southern community voices.

the quality of service delivery to the poor. East Africa has many such mutual aid groups because these indigenous VIOs are often the only resources poor people can turn to. They therefore deserve to be embraced and supported by development actors since they are instrumental in building community capacity, solidarity and social capital (Patel et al. 2012).

Of importance to learning from practice here is that while such mutual aid associations are not necessarily part of the dominant VIO infrastructure, they speak to ways in which community-based institutions in fact serve as formalised systems of welfare for many people in these contexts. IVCOs and VIOs that are serious about affecting development in these communities need to look for ways of embracing partnerships with such organisations. Such embrace needs to come complete with lessons on how mutual accountability and reciprocity, imprinted in the DNA of these types of indigenous institutions, are key to their success and durability. Sociocultural lessons on how and why this works are important in developing effective partnership models between IVCOs and community-based institutions as well as local communities in the region more generally.

Conclusion

This paper makes six concluding observations in answering the questions posed at the beginning. First, given the hybrid of volunteering cultures and practices in East Africa, **what counts as quality performance is contextual**. In the context of international development for example, donor and IVCO parameters predominantly define quality performance even as local communities and VIOs provide inputs and feedbacks into monitoring and evaluation processes. For indigenous VIOs customary relational values might be the dominant frames for looking at quality performance. This means that standards and processes for quality practices in IVCOs and indigenous VIOs might not always be aligned.

Second, specific program requirements mean that what IVCOs offer VIOs tends to be portfolio driven and can constrain responsiveness in different contexts. Nevertheless, while there are different perspectives at work, there are **certain universals**. For example, volunteering interventions are intended to improve the quality of what VIOs do, especially in delivering services to communities. The Forum global standard for volunteering for development has made attempts at defining such universals such as volunteer management; duty of care; designing and delivering projects; and the definition of volunteering for development.

Third is the need to ensure that partners and host organisations be treated equally to sending organisations.[26] In essence, this is a call for **mutual respect and accountability**.

Fourth the discussion suggests a critical absence of discourses about what quality means in a context where solidarity, mutuality accountability and reciprocity are paramount in indigenous forms of volunteering. The implication is that those seriously interested in quality enhancement in African contexts have to find ways of **marrying contemporary donor driven processes with customary mores**. Indeed, examples of the adaptations in development processes in Southern Africa point to movement towards this. What is not clear at this point is how quality performance is defined in these situations.

[26] For detailed coverage of the content of the global standard for volunteering for development, see the IVCO 2019 framing paper 'Developing the Forum global standard for volunteering for development'.

Fifth, it is clear that there are valuable lessons that IVCOs and VIOs can look to in **designing standards** in the context of evolving quality assurance mechanisms in East Africa. In this regard the Forum global standard for volunteering in development provides an opportunity to incorporate the values of solidarity, mutuality accountability and reciprocity as bedrocks of volunteering quality in Africa. In the absence of this, quality and standards remain abstract and their enforcement a mere box-ticking mechanism, rather than informing how practices are changed and improved.

Sixth, existing models of formalised standards such as those developed by the QuAM and Viwango with the support of NGO networks have been **influenced by Northern donors, NGOs and their quality standards**. The critical question is how these standards connect with IVCOs' expectations of compliance to internationally developed standards. Furthermore, how do the QuAM and Viwango recognise indigenous approaches to quality which may or may not be related to IVCO or NGO models of standards?

Finally, are quality standards the most effective means of improving the performance and outcomes of VIOs? Put differently, **further research** is required to gauge the extent to which IVCOs have taken on board the interests and perspectives of indigenous institutions so that volunteering benefits all. In the absence of research that provides greater insight into the impact of quality assurance institutions such as the QuAM and Viwango, it is difficult to gauge their efficacy. Although these institutions have the capacity for greater reach and the uniform application of quality improvement standards in partnership with the voluntary sector, we wonder whether organisation-to-organisation exchange – carefully prepared for and managed with learning and reciprocity at its core – may not produce more sustained results for individual organisations.

Questions for discussion

1. If IVCOs are becoming more cognisant of indigenous community agency, the extensiveness of traditional community-based volunteering institutions and 'southern capacity', how are such changes influencing quality improvement in the delivery of their interventions?

2. How are IVCOs and VIOs incorporating communities as decision-makers in quality improvement systems, drawing on indigenous cultural norms, values, habits and mores?

3. How can the quest for improved quality assurance help address traditional power imbalances between communities and national and international agencies?

4. How are IVCOs and VIOs incorporating culture into formal agreements about quality improvement?

5. To what extent do emerging quality improvement standards embrace mutual accountability, reciprocity and solidarity?

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