

IVCO 2022 Think Piece

VOLUNTEERING FOR DEVELOPMENT AND RESPONDING TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Cliff Allum, Peter Devereux,
Rebecca Tiessen and Benjamin Lough



IVCO
SENEGAL 2022



INTERNATIONAL
BUREAU
FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

OFICINA
INTERNACIONAL DE
LOS DERECHOS DEL NIÑO

المكتب الدولي لحقوق الطفل

The International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum) has actively engaged in critical reflection on climate change and how it relates to Volunteering for Development for the past 15 years, with focused discussions taking place in [2007](#), [2010](#) and [2020](#)¹. The message arising from the Forum conversations is remarkably consistent: an urgent need for climate action. Has this message been heard and actioned by Forum members?

Climate change gained prominence at the 2020 IVCO conference when it was the central theme of the annual event. The main conference paper was supported by a survey of Volunteer-Involving Organisations (VIOs), including all Forum members. Some responses were detailed and transparent about the (lack of) progress VIOs had made on climate change. Overall, the concern was clear.

The results concluded that 'nearly half of the respondents indicate a serious concern that VIOs are doing too little, there is also a significant, if smaller, number who consider that VIOs are getting it about right on climate change.'

Climate change is an existential issue for life as we know it and the impacts are felt most acutely in the Global South, where resources for adaptation are limited, while the causes have been driven largely by the Global North². There has often been an implicit focus on climate action by individual behaviour change, but there is recognition that climate action requires collective action. Volunteers and organisations in the Global North, historically driving volunteering for development (V4D), occupy international spaces where arguably they have not only the responsibility but also the knowledge, resources, and opportunity to work for climate justice.

Achieving climate justice requires International Volunteer Cooperation Organisations (IVCOs) to be focused on **mitigation** in the Global North (action to prevent, reduce and resolve the causes of climate change) and **adaptation in the Global South** (action to minimise the damage of climate change already happening). While both approaches are needed to address the challenges of climate change, adaptation strategies align more with the traditional ways of working of IVCOs. Adaptation strategies tend to take place in the Global South, where IVCOs can support the localised efforts of partner organisations. As we heard in 2010, addressing mitigation takes IVCOs out of their comfort zone, and is frequently in conflict with the priorities of their main donors.

At one level agencies could try and impact on mitigation, i.e., reducing emissions. If agencies want to impact on the countries with the highest per capita emissions, then it would need to focus on advocacy in the Global North. (Mulligan 2010 p.8).

1. See: Brook, J. (2007). International Volunteering Co-operation: Climate Change. Discussion Paper, International Forum on Development Service: 16. Mulligan, B. (2010). Climate Change: A discussion paper for the 2010 IVCO conference. Discussion Paper. Melbourne, International Forum for Volunteering in Development: 18. Allum C. et al (2020). Volunteering for Climate Action. International Forum on Development Service.

2. This is commonly referred to as climate justice because of the fundamental injustice that those least responsible for causing the problem nevertheless suffer the most and have the least resources to respond.

What does this tell us about historical IVCO approaches and how it must change in the future? The conceptual and political separation between these approaches have potentially profound consequences for the focus of VIO programme activity, especially IVCOs.

Are IVCOs prepared to address climate justice by doing things differently? The results of the 2020 survey were not encouraging. Future expectations indicated a strengthening of current VIOs activity on climate change but addressing areas they already covered now. This would mean a continuing focus on adaptive approaches without properly addressing climate justice.³

Recognising the injustice and urgency of climate change, more of the same won't cut it. As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and 'business as usual' becomes more plausible, where is climate justice on the IVCO radar? What commitments are IVCOs ready to codify in terms of organisational practice, programme approaches and an advocacy/influencing agenda?

We support earlier recommendations for ways that IVCOs can move forward. These recommendations can be extended to VIOs:

- A focus on carbon footprints and emissions will enhance organisational practices, programme modelling and global education for climate justice. This focus is geared towards an advocacy agenda to influence those with power, especially in the Global North.
- Practising global learning and solidarity as part of an international movement including volunteer groups in the Global South can help tackle climate justice.
- Climate action may also offer new opportunities to develop a collective mentality within volunteer organisations. New ways of conceptualising climate action through a collectivist lens include widening the focus to consider values of extended family, community solidarity, mutuality, and human and nonhuman interrelationships for harmonious, peaceful, spiritual, and material coexistence.

In hindsight, these recommendations sound reasonable but limited success or uptake of these recommendations demonstrates a lack of urgency. That urgency is now more apparent with the impact of climate change also strongly experienced in the Global North, for example with devastating wildfires, heatwaves, and floods. IVCOs have a distinctive advantage in tackling climate change because of their work with volunteers and returned volunteers in both the North and South. This distinctive advantage can imbue volunteers with the lived experience and wisdom of Southern partners with climate change and climate injustice. But it also gives returning volunteers the opportunity to maintain connections that give voice to Global South partners' experience and wisdom with powerful governments and institutions. The expansion of climate change-related impacts and challenges around the world, combined with insufficient mitigation and adaptation strategies, requires innovative models, conceptual frameworks, and culturally relevant, Global South-driven policies and practices.

3. Allum C. et al (2020). Volunteering for climate action. Perspectives from a survey of Volunteer Involving Organisations.

As we argued in 2020, climate *justice* is central. It is not a programme area; it is not a trade off with other development activities. Climate justice is the context in which programs and activities can be accelerated. In the 2020 survey responses the term 'climate justice' was rarely mentioned. With the expansion of its membership to include VIOs in the Global South, Forum has a fresh opportunity to address climate justice by learning from and responding to the concerns of the Global South through genuine partnership. Future discussions may focus on ways that addressing climate injustice can overcome and move beyond traditional IVCO-VIO power relationships, so they are integral to the ongoing discussions about decolonising aid.

Dr. Cliff Allum is an Associate Research Fellow at the Third Sector Research Centre in the University of Birmingham's Department of Social Policy.

Dr Peter Devereux is Adjunct Senior Lecturer at Murdoch University

Dr. Rebecca Tiessen is Full Professor, University Chair in Teaching, Associate Director/Undergraduate Coordinator and Co-op Coordinator in the School of International Development and Global Studies at the University of Ottawa

Dr. Benjamin Lough is Professor of Social Work and Director of Social Innovation at the Gies College of Business, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign