Achieving the SDGs through crises and disruptive times – A Case Study of VSO’s innovative 'Volunteering for Development' Methodology for effective and sustainable development results.

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Abstract:

Although the role of volunteering in community development and overall progression of societies is long known, recognition of its contributions to planned development agenda happened with the adoption of the resolution for sustainable development goals (SDGs) by the UN General Assembly in. Around the same time VSO’s research in its programmes revealed a ‘Relational Volunteering’ model which influenced VSO to frame its development methodology to ‘volunteering for development’. It combined three interrelated determinants to sustainable development such as, 1. Voice and participation of marginalised and vulnerable groups of people as communities in decision making process; 2. Analysis and design of programmes on three core structural causes to poverty & inequality covering social inclusion & gender, social accountability, and resilience; 3. Relational and blended volunteering teams intervening and work with communities and partners. When the Covid-19 pandemic struck in early 2020, VSO’s programmes swiftly adapted and responded to the needs of marginalised communities, with the strength of its volunteering for development methodology. At the same time, the macro evidence of impact of the Covid-19 pandemic suggested reversals to the SDG gains. The paper uses empirical evidence from VSO projects and macro analysis of relevant literature to argue the vital role and contributions of the interwoven ‘volunteering for development’ methodology to support active, empowered engagement of marginalised and vulnerable communities in local, national and international efforts to put the SDGs back on rails.

Key Words: SDGs, Volunteering-for-development, Innovation, Empowerment, Policy

Introductions:

The world is experiencing more frequent and massive socio-political and environmental disruptions, especially in the last two decades. While natural disasters such as droughts (Horn of Africa & Sahel in Africa), floods (South Asia), and cyclones (Southeast Asia & Caribbeans) have recurred in some parts, human conflict in regions such as Middle East & North Africa (MENA), Central Africa, and Afghanistan have persisted. Around the same time, global inequality in income and wealth has grown manifold with the top 10% rich people owning 76% of the total wealth with the bottom 50%
poor people owning only 2% (World Inequality Report 2022). Poor and marginalised groups of people, thus, kept losing their capabilities to successfully remain part of the market-centred development approach to overcome poverty and reduce inequality. Put together, the world increasingly looked unsustainable and required the United Nations to bring in a radical shift in world development thinking. The ambitious seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were, thus, ratified by the UN General Assembly on 25th September 2015 and wherein the importance and role of volunteering to SDG achievements was specifically articulated (UNGA A/RES/70/1) (UNGA A/RES/70/1). Called the 2030 Agenda, National governments committed to achieving them by Leaving No One Behind.

The Sustainable Development Goals Report (2019) warned about slow progress against some goals and being offtrack on crucial goals such as no poverty and zero hunger, in the first 4 years of its implementation (SDG Report, 2019). The Covid-19 Pandemic between 2020 and 2022 found national health and economic systems grossly unprepared with highly unequal access to vaccines amongst poorer countries and vulnerable communities, leading to not only loss of 6.6 million lives (World Health Organisation Coronavirus Dashboard, November 2022) but exacerbated the already global income and wealth inequality between countries and between wealth groups as analysed by a VSO blog (Rath, A 2020). A multi-country rapid assessment carried out by VSO between July and September 2020 among marginalised communities it worked with across Africa and Asia, showed a heightened food insecurity and increased gender-based violence among other indicators (VSO 2020).

Volunteering and Sustainable Development Goals

VSO responded to the Covid-19 pandemic by swiftly pivoting 85% of its existing programmes primarily due to the strong network of community volunteers it had helped develop over the years through its work in Africa and Asia-Pacific. The national and international volunteers, who had to be evacuated from the projects and countries they worked in, continued to support, and work in a remote volunteering role with the community volunteers assuming the role in several cases that international volunteers played. The adaptive volunteering during the pandemic demonstrated the strength of a ‘blended volunteering’ model in VSO programmes, as a robust research study by VSO later established (VSO-Northumbria University 2022). VSO’s post Covid-19 response study (IVCO 2021, Session 9B, P17) showed e.g., a significant reduction in gender-based violence cases because of the orientation, campaign, support, and facilitation the community volunteers provided to women and girls to raise their voice and register their gender-based violence cases.
The UN Secretary General, in his report of 2021 for progress against the 2030 Agenda of SDGs, draws attention to the importance of fully integrating volunteering into national development strategies, plans, and policies to expand and mobilize constituencies and engage people in national planning and implementation of the 2030 Agenda (UNGA A/76/137 P1: 2021). The State of the World’s Volunteerism Report (UNV 2022) highlights how volunteering can effectively engage, partner and advocate with governments and contribute to building equal and inclusive societies (UNV 2022).

**Emergence of Volunteering for Development:**

In 2015 around the time the SDGs were ratified, VSO completed seminal research with Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, across four of VSO’s programme countries in Asia and Africa on the contributions of volunteers to community development (VSO-IDS 2015). The research concluded that volunteers make five significant contributions as in Fig. 1 below:

![Fig.1. ‘Dimensions of Change’ (Source: VSO-IDS study 2015)](image)

- **Inclusion:** volunteering extends the reach of public services to the poorest and most marginalised by working on power dynamics
- **Innovation:** volunteering generates new ideas and creates new forms of collaboration that lead to social innovation through a mix of inside/outside perspectives
- **Ownership:** volunteering enhances trust and strengthens local ownership of development processes
- **Participation:** volunteering creates a pathway to people’s participation and active citizenship and social action
- **Inspiration:** volunteering exposes communities to different cultural norms and ideas

The research established that these five dimensions are intertwining pathways that volunteers use in building relationships with communities, local authorities, and other stakeholders, in advancing community development. It was framed as it ‘relational volunteering’ (VSO-IDS 2015).

Learning from and using the research findings, VSO recalibrated its development strategy to include three mutually reinforcing components such as: 1. Voice & participation of marginalised & vulnerable people (derived from VSO’s six People First Principles) in development solutions, 2. Core Approaches (social inclusion & gender, social accountability, resilience) that define and perpetuate
structural causes of poverty & inequality, and 3. Relational and Blended Volunteering, as described earlier.

Through several experimentations and learnings between 2016 and 2018 using the three interconnected components in its programme cycle (design, implementation, learning), VSO sharpened its core development methodology as ‘volunteering for development’ and made it part of its 3-year operating plan (2019-2020) to apply it across its programme portfolio. It was positioned as VSO’ core value offer to development partners and actors. Rath (2020, 2021) building on Amartya Sen’s capability theory (Sen 2000), argued further that the volunteering for development methodology is indeed suitable to build ‘human capability’ especially at a time when the impact and management of the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed a huge capability gap not just between nations but made marginalised social groups (Rath 2021:1).

Rath (2020) presents this example on the wider capability gap: According to UNESCO, a total of 1.75 billion children’s education were affected due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This required a massive response with countries swiftly switching to offer remote learning opportunities to their children. While developed countries managed to put systems in place to allow many children continue with their learning, resource-constrained and unprepared countries struggled to respond effectively. Only 11% learners in the Sub-Saharan countries could receive online learning, while 90% learners in the developed countries could provide the same service to their students (Vegas 2020 quoted in Rath 2020). To arrest any further marginalisation during the Pandemic, countries such as the UK could afford to provide free laptops and tablets to vulnerable and disadvantaged young people to continue learning online. In a major economy like India, where over 390 million students' learning was affected during the Pandemic, only about 24% of households had internet access (Kumar 2020 in Rath 2020).

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Fig.2: The Volunteering for Development Methodology (Adapted from: Rath, A 2020)
The volunteering for development (VfD) methodology as embodied in the above diagram (Fig.2) and applied in VSO programmes has resulted in building of ‘structures of solidarity’ of marginalised and vulnerable groups of people at local level, improvement to accountable service delivery by local authorities, and broader social outcomes for marginalised and vulnerable communities. The Below two case studies are examples, summarised from individual project evaluations, are empirical evidence of how does the VfD methodology work:

**Project Impact 1. SDG 5,8,13,16** (qualitative mid-term internal evaluation report May 2022):

In Tanzania, VSO runs a project called CLARITY funded by the European Union. The project that runs from 2021 to 2024 across 45 villages, aims to improve justice for local communities including mine workers, especially women and persons with disability, in the extractive gold mining sector in Geita and Mara regions. By building the collectives Through sustained accompaniment of volunteers in the form of community leaders, paralegals, and gender champions, the project has built young people’s collective that has influenced setting-up of structures of referrals e.g., district level gender cells that have started to register and tackle issues of gender-based violence, employment, and land rights within the gold mining activities, not raised by the local people before the project. Due to the blended volunteering model (6 national + 140 community volunteers working in tandem in the project) has enabled transfer of knowledge and skills of community facilitation and it has resulted in enhanced awareness on issues like GBV, human rights, workplace exploitation and barriers to access to justice mechanisms, women and youth entrepreneurship development. A spider web tool used in Focused Group Discussions with a mixed youth group found out significant change felt in areas of rights awareness in gender-based violence, increased income (employment), and increased trust amongst the local communities. The young people’s collectives and local communities ultimately have a mission of holding the extractive industry to account for their socio-economic and ecological impact in the regions by enforcing and improving legal frameworks. From the evidence, the young people’s structures of solidarity built, appear well poised to progress towards their mission.
Project Impact 2. SDG 3,5,10 (Mixed method external end evaluation report August 2022):

This project called ‘Tackle Africa’ (TA), was implemented in Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Zambia. The project worked with 2,700 prisons inmates and reached 7,200 people in communities with an aim to improve their sexual reproductive health & rights (SRHR) within the prison setting. Dubbed ‘Football for Health’, the project aimed to empower prison inmates with knowledge that would inspire positive sexual health knowledge, behaviour and attitude change. Applying the VfD methodology, the project drew on the skills of a network of international and local volunteers with skills and experience on SRHR and Health interventions, especially in prison settings. The project intentionally engaged a youthful volunteer workforce suitable to work with the prison inmates. These volunteers were intensively trained in facilitation skills for the TA model, which they used to good effect in prisons as testified by inmates. The advantage of young volunteers, according to inmates, was they easily understood and identified with them. Over a three-year period, the project empowered the inmates to gain increased awareness on HIV-related knowledge, attitudes, and service-seeking behaviour (an average 22% improvement to baseline). Further, the evaluation showed 88% of respondents reported that they would visit a clinic for help and 32% reported that they would look for post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) after exposure to HIV. 94% of the respondents felt that women need better protection against gender-based violence and on SRHR. The recommendation of the evaluation was that the football for health using a volunteering for development methodology is scalable.

Limitations, Challenges & Scope:

A body of robust evidence related to how ‘Volunteering for Development’ works as an innovative and effective methodology for sustainable development results exists within VSO projects and programmes through research, evaluations, and learning documents at both project and programme level, over the past three years. They are available in VSO’s SharePoint platform called ‘Knowledge Hub’. For the purpose of this paper for the conference and publication, the evidence was limited to two most recent study findings to highlight how does the methodology work.

The evidence in these two studies as well as in others point to the risk of projects and programmes failing to build systemic capability at community as well as at public service providers level for sustainable change if the three mutually interconnected components don’t work in tandem in design and delivery of SDG programmes. More than resources, they point to the need for better bottom-up planning with marginalised communities that VSO calls primary actors. Primary because it is from their viewpoint that VSO tries to define the development challenges and solutions that deliver sustainable and locally led change. Actors because they are the key agents of their own change. It is
their organisations that get built through their voice and participation, paving the way for change in their own practice and their effective engagement with public service authorities. The challenge is a mindset shift while, the scope to create a movement led by marginalised people for SDGs is significant. National Frameworks and Development Plans could test and pilot them. VSO is working with some of the local government agencies in Asia and Africa to plan, pilot and evidence them to see how Volunteering for Development could be framed and scaled in government policies.

**Conclusions:**
The UN’s sustainable development goal report 2022 makes an alarming observation that “for the second year in a row the world is no longer making any progress against the SDGs” and that the average SDG index score declined slightly. Although the SDG report and others (Zhao et al. 2022) emphasise on the need to re-evaluate the SDG strategy including financing, this paper argues that the best chance of us achieving the SDGs is to prioritise building empowered and resilient people’s structures at community and sub-national level through a ‘volunteering for development’ approach that brings in to force and action over 1 billion people who volunteer in different forms (UNV-SWRV 2018) The secretary general in the SDG report (2022) appeals for “an urgent rescue effort for the SDGs” while the UN Human Development Report (2022) highlights increased ‘political polarisation’ as an emerging crisis and threat to human development. Could those be effectively managed by building human capability and active citizenship through a volunteering for development methodology in nation building?

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**References:**


