



Online Volunteering:

A Comhlámh Discussion Paper

Background

The model of online volunteering has emerged in conjunction with the growth of the Internet and mobile and online communication tools and modalities. It offers unique possibilities in relation to inclusivity and diversity in volunteer cohorts, and broadens international volunteering opportunities to a potentially wider global audience.

In terms of a brief history and development of online international volunteering, the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme launched its Online Volunteering service in 2000 to address issues of extreme poverty and to mobilise volunteers for development. Since then, the UNV Online Volunteering service has expanded and grown. Irish Aid provided financial support to the UNV from 2007 to 2010 for the development and overall expansion of its Online Volunteering service.

The Irish Aid Volunteering Initiative, which launched in 2013, committed to promote both the benefits of online volunteering and related opportunities through its ongoing support for international volunteering from Ireland. Within the Volunteering Initiative, the cost-effectiveness and inclusivity of online volunteering are recognised as a means to share skills and expertise, and to achieve development goals.

In October 2014, Comhlámh hosted a seminar for volunteer sending agencies (VSAs) with Jayne Cravens, entitled Virtual Volunteering: Using the Internet and Networked Devices to Support and Engage Volunteers, as part of the launch event for Comhlámh's Survey on International Volunteering from Ireland 2013. The seminar allowed Irish-based VSAs to engage with Cravens' extensive international experience and expertise in relation to online volunteering and to learn how best to incorporate aspects of online functionality into their volunteering programmes.

During the seminar, participants learned that online volunteering is now standard practice for many VSAs, and it is expected by volunteers. Many organisations and VSAs are utilising aspects of online volunteering, but they are not necessarily articulating or promoting it. In the seminar, it also emerged that volunteers do not classify themselves as online, virtual, remote or on-site, but instead view themselves as volunteers, and they should be acknowledged as such. This discussion paper captures some of the content, comments and topics raised at the October 2014 Comhlámh seminar.

What is Online Volunteering?

Online volunteering, also called virtual volunteering, refers to volunteer activities using an online system or network accessed through a computer, mobile device, laptop, etc., in order to undertake or deliver tasks or projects. Online volunteering may be related to non-technology-based tasks, but it will harness information and communication technology and the Internet to deliver outputs. **The main feature of online volunteering is that it does not require in-person and on-site volunteers, but it does not replace on-site volunteers.** It does allow the volunteer to complete the task and project at a time and location that suits him/her.

According to the United Nations Volunteers, 'Online volunteering increases the capacities of development organizations while simultaneously providing space for many people to participate in development who would not otherwise have had the opportunity.'

Aspects of online volunteering can be used during all stages of the volunteering process, e.g. recruitment, screening, advertising placements and/or during the placement itself (including tasks that are happening online). This is invaluable in terms of support, mentoring, feedback and



responding to queries relating to the project. Following the volunteer placement, online mechanisms can be used as a means to stay connected with projects and host communities, and offer follow-up mentoring, support and advice. Online communication also permits volunteer alumni networks to begin and flourish. It can generate support for VSA fundraising activities and allows former volunteers to stay up to date with VSA activities and future volunteering opportunities.

Online volunteering tends to relate to short-term assignments with specific task-orientated outputs. Sometimes referred to as micro-volunteering, the tasks may only involve a brief commitment of a few hours, but the output may be invaluable to the VSA or host community. However, very productive long-term working relationships can also develop through online mentoring, communication and skills exchanges. Online volunteering can be individual or team based, depending on the needs of the project, task, VSA and/or host community. It has the capacity to allow for great diversity in relation to the ways volunteers can support international development and VSAs. For example, online communication has been used to mobilise, activate and support many campaigns and actions related to international development and solidarity, as it has the ability to link, connect and galvanise volunteers and citizens within very short time periods at a global level.

Examples of tasks and project areas undertaken by online volunteers include, but are not limited to:

- translation;
- training;
- mentoring;
- editing documents or website text;
- designing web pages and documents;
- providing medical, legal, project-management or other specialised skills sharing and advice;
- facilitating online groups;
- fundraising;
- designing research studies;
- researching and developing curricula;
- and providing technical support for online activities.

In addition to the extensive range of activities available through online volunteering, it also offers VSAs a mechanism for managing volunteers and documenting their achievements and project outcomes through shared online documents, databases and electronic communications.



Research on Online Volunteering in Ireland

A report by VOESVA examining the models of international volunteering (commissioned by Comhlámh in 2013) highlighted the model of online volunteering. The report suggests that online volunteering has the capacity to engage a wide range of professionals in volunteering activities in response to the specialised/specific skills required. The report outlines the advantages associated with online volunteering, such as better skills-matching between potential volunteers and host communities, and the cost-saving potential of using information and communication technologies for volunteer training and orientation, and continuous engagement on return from placement.

The report goes on to highlight the capacity to provide training support and online access to information and learning materials, which can be utilised by volunteers at a time and location that suits them. It states that online volunteering offers a more flexible approach to international volunteering, where the willingness to volunteer is not constrained by travel time, distance and expenses. Instead, volunteers can respond to tasks identified from anywhere. The report suggests that the disadvantages of online volunteering include the possibility that a lack of in-person contact and hands-on experience with host communities may reduce opportunities to dispel stereotyped perceptions of poorer countries. The report concludes that **online volunteering has great potential when the volunteer and the programme are well managed**, and it recommends that research and assessment be undertaken to understand the impact of online volunteering. It also recommends that quality standards be put in place for online engagement for the volunteer, the VSA and the host community, and that best practice be identified in the sector.

In Comhlámh's Survey on International Volunteering from Ireland 2013, an online survey of volunteer sending agencies based in Ireland, respondents were asked to identify the types of volunteering programmes offered by their agency. For the first time, data on online volunteering was gathered, and 11% of question respondents stated that online volunteering is included in their volunteering programme. This question will be posed in future Comhlámh VSA surveys, in order to monitor changes and emerging trends.

Barriers to international volunteering were examined as part of the survey, with the financial costs of volunteering and difficulty in getting leave from work to volunteer emerging as challenges from the perspective of the volunteer. Both of these challenges have the potential to be alleviated using online volunteering, as travel costs are eliminated and online volunteering can be done at a time and a location that suits the volunteer. However, it is important to note that not all volunteering placements and activities can be done remotely through online mechanisms. The survey respondents also raised the challenge of matching the skills needed in volunteer projects to volunteers with specific skill sets. In response to this challenge, online tools such as #VolOps, LinkedIn and social media can be utilised to reach out to potential volunteers with the required skill sets through highly targeted promotion and advertising, which can also be cost-effective and time-saving.

Benefits of Online Volunteering

Online volunteering allows greater numbers of people to participate in volunteering programmes and to contribute to international development. For volunteers, it allows for the completion of tasks and assignments off site, without travel, and enables volunteering activities to slot into the work, study or family schedule of the volunteer. It also provides the possibility of skills and knowledge exchanges in regions or areas where, for various reasons, it is not possible to send volunteers or travel is restricted. It also enables volunteers who cannot travel, or even possibly leave their homes, to participate in international volunteering projects. For returning on-site volunteers, online volunteering provides a route for continuous engagement, contact and ongoing support with their host communities, thereby adding value to their placement.

For VSAs, online volunteering can assist in changing or expanding the demographics of their volunteers by allowing for people with mobility issues or physical disabilities, and/or members of diaspora communities who may wish to volunteer in their country of origin or heritage, but who cannot travel for visa, legal-status and safety reasons, to participate in international volunteering programmes. It provides a mechanism for faster and more efficient communication with volunteers, through online groups and instant messaging. Online training and orientation can be offered to volunteers prior to departure, which may produce cost and time savings for VSAs.

Online communication enables VSAs to expand their reach into pre-existing social networks, which may increase fundraising possibilities, grow supporter numbers and attract new volunteers. The recruitment process can be very quick for online volunteers, due to the availability and rapid transfer of information through email and online communication, which can save on time, costs and effort, in relation to skills and task-matching from the perspective of the VSA. **However, VSAs need to be ready for this, as their responsiveness is crucial, in order to ensure a continuous and mutually beneficial relationship between the volunteer and the VSA, and volunteer screening must still take place.**

Barriers and Challenges to Online Volunteering

Essentially, online volunteering requires access to email and the Internet, via a computer (laptop or desktop) or networked mobile device (e.g. a smartphone), and the skills to use these devices. These requirements are needed by the volunteer, the VSA and the host project.

Despite the multiple benefits of online volunteering in relation to cost- and time-saving, specifically, **it still requires task identification, supervision, support, recognition and feedback for volunteers.** Other key challenges relate to inadequate or absent volunteer management policies, a lack of clarity on task assignments that suit the modality of online volunteering, and the assumption that online volunteering has no costs, replaces employees, and does not require time investment. Fortunately, many of these challenges can be alleviated through policies and protocols;

clearly developing, designing and defining tasks for online volunteers; and investing time in the initial set-up of online groups and volunteering programmes.

Confidentiality policies explaining what can and cannot be shared by volunteers online and via social media and complaints mechanisms are needed, especially for inappropriate content posted online by volunteers. It is imperative that any complaints, issues and enquires are responded to promptly and professionally by VSAs, as delays in responding to volunteers can be perceived negatively, potentially discouraging ongoing volunteering with an agency. It is also important that online volunteers are recognised and valued in similar ways to on-site volunteers, to avoid feelings of isolation, so building this process into online volunteering programmes is important.

Examples of Online Volunteering Programmes and Tools

Many global models of online volunteering programmes exist. The 2013 VOSESA report highlighted the United Nations Volunteers (UNV), Bankers without Borders, and the Kenya Red Cross Society as different examples of volunteering initiatives incorporating online components. In its 2013 annual report, the UNV noted that its Online Volunteering service had 11,328 online volunteers from 172 countries who, in 2013, undertook 17,370 online volunteering assignments. Of particular interest is that women make up 58% of the volunteer cohort, with 60% of UNV online volunteers from the Global South and 2% of its volunteers living with disabilities, demonstrating the diversity made possible through online volunteering.

In 2014, Comhlámh launched #VolOps, a suite of tools using social media to match VSA placements with potential volunteers through Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. The #VolOps suite allows multiple VSAs to post volunteering opportunities online, which can be viewed and responded to online by potential volunteers. It also allows VSAs to promote recruitment and information events and volunteering seminars to a wide range of social networks at no cost. By leveraging social media tools, Comhlámh is utilising online communication to facilitate skills-matching between volunteers and VSAs, and promoting online platforms for communication and networking in relation to international volunteering.

Recommendations

The first steps in relation to developing online volunteering programmes is to identify how online volunteers can support a VSA's work through suitable task and project identification, and how these tasks and projects will contribute to development. An initial mapping and documentation of how a VSA is presently engaging with its volunteers through online mechanisms may assist in identifying current activities that can be supported or expanded. It may also highlight projects and tasks appropriate for online volunteers, however, these tasks may need to be broken down into shorter and smaller tasks to attract suitable volunteers.

A VSA must be ready to provide prompt responses and rapid engagement, in terms of communication with online volunteers, as they tend to apply for volunteering assignments as their schedule allows, and present to a VSA 'ready to go'. Policies and procedures, especially in relation to volunteer screening, confidentiality, complaints and grievances, may need to be amended to include online volunteering, and consideration given to how accessible they are to a VSA's volunteers, both on-site and online. VSAs need to provide training, orientation, support, supervision and guidance, as well as feedback and recognition upon a volunteer's completion, regardless of whether the volunteer is in person, on-site or online.

Recording, capturing and documenting online volunteering activities and projects is important to enhance reflexive and ongoing learning for both the VSA and the volunteer. Finally, online communication and social media offer VSAs an excellent route to connect with networks of their current and previous volunteers. However, online volunteering has implications for how volunteers interact and engage with host communities and VSAs and may require changes in the terminology used to describe and define international volunteers, volunteering and VSAs. Online volunteering should be embraced by VSAs and international development organisations as a route to support, expand and diversify volunteering activities and volunteer cohorts within VSAs, and to promote inclusive, innovative and accessible international volunteering for development.

About Comhlámh

Established in 1975 in Ireland, Comhlámh (meaning 'solidarity' in Irish) is a dynamic, independent membership organisation working with development workers, volunteers and activists. Comhlámh is committed to advocating for a just and equitable world, setting standards and promoting good practice. Comhlámh promotes responsible, responsive international volunteering for global development, and monitors and supports the implementation of the Comhlámh Code of Good Practice (CoGP) among Irish volunteer sending agencies. Comhlámh also provides comprehensive information, training and supports to volunteers and development workers before their placements and when they return home.



An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála
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Glossary

- **Host Community:** These are the local people with whom international volunteers/staff work and live while undertaking overseas placements. They may include local residents and beneficiaries of the volunteer project.
- **Online Volunteering:** Volunteering in which an online system or network (accessed through a computer, mobile device, etc.) plays a primary role in the volunteer undertaking or delivering tasks. It may also be referred to as virtual volunteering.
- **Volunteer:** One who freely renders a service or takes part in an enterprise. International volunteering in development includes both long-term and short-term placements, which can be organised by both governmental and non-governmental agencies.
- **Volunteer Sending Agency (VSA):** This is an agency that arranges international volunteering placements, mostly in developing countries. The agency may or may not be for profit.

References, Further Reading and Information

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