PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH ON THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERISM IN KENYA:
PROVISIONAL RESULTS

Cover image: VSO Jitolee volunteer and colleagues. Photo: Lowell Traiso / VSO Jitolee

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The value of international volunteer-driven development is a question of debate and occasional scepticism, and contrasting viewpoints each have merit. The impacts of international volunteer service as a development strategy ultimately depend on whether programs recognise and implement effective institutional practices based on the outcomes they desire to achieve.[1] Studies linking practices to impacts are still rare, and are only beginning to emerge as a priority for the field.

The purpose of this research is to explore the impacts of international volunteerism, with a focus on answering three key questions. First, what are the perceived contributions of international volunteers to discrete development goals in Kenya? Second, what are the "value added" contributions of volunteers to development projects and programs beyond other technical and managerial approaches? Third, what program components and practices seem to be associated with achieving these outcomes?

Research Design and Methods

Researchers conducted primary research at 12 different placement sites across three locations in Kenya: Nairobi, Kisumu and Lari. Researchers spent one month in country speaking with volunteers, program staff and intended beneficiaries. Meetings with stakeholders were a combination of structured interviews, participatory workshops and quantitative surveys.

Staff members who had frequent interaction with international volunteers were asked to provide their feedback to questions on a semi-structured interview guide. In total, researchers conducted 24 staff member interviews, and administered an equal amount of surveys to participating staff.

Participatory workshops with community members were conducted at seven different placement sites. The format of these workshops largely followed the UNV *Assessing the contribution of volunteering to development* methodology (UNV, 2011).[2] The workshops lasted for three to four hours, followed by an interactive lunch discussion. Participating community

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[1] Sherraden, M. S., Lough, B. J., & McBride, A. M. (2008). Effects of international volunteering and service: Individual and institutional predictors. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 19*(4), 395-421.

[2] UNV. (2011). Assessing the contribution of volunteering to development. Bonn, Germany: United Nations Volunteers: Evaluation Unit.

members also received a short survey, resulting in a total of 59 interviews (in workshop format) and surveys.

Qualitative analysis had only just begun in preparation for this provisional report. Although some quotes were lifted from the translated transcriptions of digitally recorded interviews, findings are based mainly on coding of fixed interview questions along with field notes taken after each staff interview and participatory workshop.

Findings and Discussion

Outcomes of international volunteering are assessed at the individual, program and project levels. In addition, the research seeks to link individual and institutional practices to outcomes in order to better understand how projects and programs can be structured to achieve these outcomes. Findings describe volunteers' key contributions to development projects and programs as articulated by the staff members of partner organisations and the hosting communities. They further explore the added value of international volunteers to development programs in comparison with full time development staff or local partner program staff members. Finally, findings review contributing causes or helping factors that seem to affect these outcomes.

Key Contributions

Only key outcomes—those that were mentioned in at least six (25 per cent) of the 24 interviews and at least two of the 7 focus groups—are reported. These fall under the general categories of capacity building, resource acquisition and the achievement of development goals. Because qualitative data analysis is still under way, additional themes may yet emerge.

Capacity Building

International volunteers reportedly help to develop human capital and skills in communities and organisations; they promote a culture of professionalism and "time management" that appears to have value to hosting organisations; and they contribute resources directly or act as "bridges" to link people or organisations with external resources. Nearly 70 per cent of community members agreed that international volunteers teach skills that would not otherwise be available in their community. The most frequently cited contributions of international volunteers at the program level were instilling stronger expectations for "professionalism", "time management" and "financial management" among program staff. Perceptions about the utility of volunteers for skills differed significantly between shorter- and longer-term volunteers.[3] Nearly 85 per cent of community members interacting with long-term volunteers agreed that volunteers taught new skills, while only 56 per cent of those interacting with short-term volunteers agreed with this statement. Short-term volunteers were perceived as mostly effective when they had a specific technical skill to teach during a training session or workshop.

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[3] A number of additional attributes are closely correlated with the duration of volunteer service placements, including the age and educational/skill level of the volunteers, the funding policy of donors, etc. Thus, time length is not the only effect of difference when considering placement duration.

Capacity building was viewed as particularly valuable in rural areas where expertise in needed areas was low.

Resource Acquisition

An oft-cited contribution of international volunteers was their ability to attract tangible and intangible resources, including money and aid, networks of support and concrete opportunities for collaboration. Many recalled receiving at least minimal resource support from volunteers, particularly from those who were only in the country for a short time. In addition to resources donated directly, volunteers often used their "social capital" to leverage additional resources while in country and after they returned home. Despite the perceived value of volunteers as generators of resources, only 33 per cent of staff members believed they had greater access to resources than paid development workers. Thus, resource contributions from volunteer service were not necessarily viewed as offering greater value than standard development programs without volunteers. However, many respondents recalled contributions made by volunteers after they returned home, which was not mentioned when describing the benefits of paid development workers.

Participants consistently asserted that many of the contributions of international volunteers cannot be measured monetarily. In fact, staff members stated a general preference for international volunteers over development aid as financial resources (although actual amounts of aid disbursements were not indicated).

Organisations also reported some challenges allocating staff time to support volunteers, as each new volunteer requires orientation, training and greater attention—particularly shorter-term volunteers.

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

Community members were asked to subjectively rank volunteers' contributions to the Millennium Development Goals. Despite limitations in the methodology used, findings suggest that volunteers contribute the most to promoting gender equality and empowering women (73 per cent) and developing a global partnership for development (66 per cent). Apart from specific MDGs, volunteers also contribute to peace building initiatives in Kenya. Additional contributions will likely emerge following in-depth qualitative analyses of data from participatory workshops.

Poverty and hunger

Although volunteers' contributions to poverty reduction came up frequently, it was typically couched within a discussion of capacity building or resource acquisition. It was also frequently linked to one or more of the other development goals. It was customary for community members to associate international volunteerism with receiving additional resources from the outside, thereby helping to address poverty and deprivation. While such resources are viewed as helpful, their contributions to "development" are suspect.

Primary education

Teaching children in schools was commonly referenced in relation to volunteers' contributions to primary education. However, many of the comments in this area also referred to volunteers' abilities to garner resources to support schools and students. Overall, volunteers' contributions to primary education seem to be direct—as educators and helpers in schools—as well as indirect—as patrons/sponsors of schools or school-aged children.

Gender equity

Volunteers seem to promote gender equity by both instruction and by example. In addition to affecting opinions and perceptions about gender roles and capabilities, the work of volunteers may also change behaviours as volunteers advocate for gender equity. There was some concern that volunteers' emphasis on equity for women might unbalance gender equity for boys and men. Further investigation may be needed to better understand how international volunteers teach and portray gender equity.

Health

Health impacts appeared to be the lowest area of contribution by international volunteers among the sampled programs. This finding may reflect the programs sampled in this study or it may be associated with volunteers' training, skills and priorities. Volunteers seemed to prioritise HIV/AIDS, malaria, hand washing, sanitation and drug use/abuse. A few respondents commented on how volunteers from outside the community were helpful in confronting cultural issues or traditions that often prevented people from getting tested for HIV/AIDS or other communicable diseases.

Environment

Respondents cited volunteers' contributions to the environment via tree planting, forest management, community trainings on environmental issues, and community clean-up campaigns. However, it was not clear how the efforts of international volunteers were different from other paid staff or development workers. Some respondents stated that they learned about the importance of environmental issues from the examples and actions of international volunteers.

Global partnerships

Partnerships were often viewed as important for the bridging social capital they provide, and their close connection to resources. Volunteers often serve as a link, communicating the interests and needs of communities at the grassroots level to governments or other funding organisations. Many also believe that having an international volunteer increases external trust of programs and projects, and assume that funders are more likely to support projects and programs that involve volunteers. However, partnerships between volunteers and their hosts also reach beyond the instrumental value of social capital. They appear to provide a feeling of global solidarity, international understanding, and a tangible connection that has real value to host communities and organisations.

Peace and conflict-resolution

Volunteers' contributions to peace and conflict-resolution were most evident in discussions on the post-election violence in 2008. Quantitatively, peace building was not a major contribution

compared to other development goals, particularly for shorter-term volunteers. However, around 40 per cent of members working with longer-term volunteers agreed that international volunteers help to solve ethnic disagreements in their community. Volunteers' promotion of, and engagement in, sports were described as potential avenues for peace building. In addition, they were seen as contributing to global peace as people from diverse nations come together.

Added-value of International Volunteers

Findings in this section report on the contributions isolated as unique to volunteers by directly asking intended beneficiaries to compare the work of volunteers with the work of full-time development workers or full-time staff. The volunteers' main contributions include greater trust, accountability, ownership, creativity, optimism, an increased motivation for local volunteers to engage, greater diversity in project management and administration, a stronger human rights orientation, relative cost-effectiveness of development projects, and slightly higher sustainability of their work.

Trust

Greater trust was one of the most frequently referenced contributions of volunteers. Nearly half of the community members indicated having more trust of international volunteers than paid development workers or local project staff. Paid development workers are perceived as preferring to work in offices and with programs, rather than directly with community members. Likewise, some community members believe that local workers may be more prone to petty corruption.

Accountability and Ownership

Because paid workers are often part of a development infrastructure with specific mandates, nearly 90 per cent of community members viewed long-term volunteers as being more accountable to their community than paid development workers. However, this finding was dampened significantly among community members working with short-term international volunteers (56 per cent); short-term volunteers were more often cited as following their own agenda. Paid workers were perceived as caring less about relationships and more about accomplishing a given task, or about producing a specific product. In addition, many believed the volunteers had more frequent interactions and maintained stronger relationships with local people, thus heightening their knowledge of local needs and interests.

Creativity

Volunteers are highly valued for the new ideas they bring to programs and projects, as well as to community-led interventions. 70 per cent of community members working with long-term volunteers strongly agreed that international volunteers bring new knowledge that would not be available in community, compared to 20 per cent working with short-term volunteers. An additional 26 per cent of those working with short-term volunteers strongly disagreed with this statement. As for value added, 82 per cent of community members believe that the ideas presented by international volunteers are more creative than the ideas presented by paid development workers.

Optimism

Although previous studies have hypothesised that short-term volunteers may be more optimistic than long-term volunteers, based on the newness, excitement and novelty of their experience, this study did not find a significant difference in perceived optimism by duration of service. Across the board, 73 per cent of staff members believed that international volunteers are more optimistic than development workers. International volunteers may also exude a level of optimism and commitment beyond what local volunteers can provide. However, because international volunteers often receive a stipend and may have higher personal resources to draw upon compared to local volunteers, they may have cause for greater optimism and commitment.

Civic Engagement

Local volunteerism and engagement seem to be directly inspired by the involvement of an international volunteer in development projects. Nearly 80 per cent of staff members agreed that community members seem more interested in the organisation's activities when international volunteers are involved. Many community members participating in focus groups were local volunteers, and provided examples of how they were personally inspired to engage in their communities following the example of international volunteers.

Sustainability

Less than half of staff members believed that the contributions from volunteers are more sustainable than the work of paid development workers. On the downside, some asserted that the work of volunteers is seasonal and lacks continuity. Others viewed volunteers as falling outside of formal development programs, and thus believe there is lower institutional commitment and resources to sustain their work. On the upside, the work of volunteers often continues well beyond their return home. This did not emerge as a common behaviour for paid development workers, although this question was not directly assessed.

Cost-effectiveness

Responses were evenly mixed regarding perceptions of the cost-effectiveness of international volunteers. Slightly more than half of local staff agreed that using international volunteers reduces the total costs of development projects. The 20 per cent who disagreed remarked that substantial amounts of time and money are used to train, orient and host volunteers, in addition to travel and other logistical costs.

Diversity

Because international volunteers come from outside the community, they tend to increase the diversity of organisations and communities. As such, volunteers contribute new ideas but they may also bring diverse perspectives that contribute to increased tolerance and respect for difference. Only 42 per cent of staff members believed that international volunteers include more minorities in projects than local staff, while 55 per cent believed they were more likely to include women in development projects. An even higher 62 per cent believed that international volunteers promote gender equality generally.

Human Rights Orientation

About 65 per cent of community members believed that international volunteers promote human rights more frequently than local staff members. However, when volunteers hold different values and perspectives on human rights, they are not always able to connect as well with community members as are local staff members.

Contributing Causes

Consistent with prior research on the outcomes of international volunteering, respondents listed a number of "contributing causes" or "helping factors" that ultimately affect the impacts of international volunteer service on intended beneficiaries. Various dimensions of the service activity, along with individual and institutional attributes, help to explain "what works for whom, why and under what circumstances".[4]

Service Activity

International volunteer service is not a monolithic activity. Because volunteers engage in widely differing activities under different service "models", it is not possible to make firm conclusions of impact without considering how these differences affect outcomes. Variations in duration and directionality emerged as differences that seem to affect outcomes.

Duration

Duration of service was the most widely cited variable affecting the contributions of international volunteers. With the exception of short-term professional volunteers, one of the most obvious contributions of shorter-term volunteers to development was the resources they bring to the organisation and community. However, many respondents mentioned less-tangible, but still important, contributions from young, short-term volunteers such as mutual learning, cross-cultural understanding, relationships, diversity, inspiration, greater engagement of local volunteers, and a more enthusiastic working environment.

Shorter-term volunteers were more commonly engaged in direct work with community members while longer-term volunteers appeared to work in organisations at the program- or project-management level. If volunteers came to teach or practice a specific skill, to hold a training workshop, or to otherwise share their expertise, then short-term service was perceived as quite helpful. However, for other capacity building or program-level interventions, one year or more was preferred.

Directionality

Most staff and community members did not perceive any substantial differences between volunteers from the Global North and the Global South. However, many asserted that they would prefer a volunteer from the North if given the choice—though two staff members from one organisation asserted that they would rather host a volunteer from the South. The chief reason for preferring Northern volunteers is a belief that volunteers from higher-income countries may have greater access to resources. Indeed, 91 per cent of staff members believe

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[4] Pawson, R., & Tilley, N. (2004). *Realistic Evaluation*. London: British Cabinet Office.

that hosting an international volunteer from outside of Africa increases their likelihood of receiving funding, while only 53 per cent believe hosting an international volunteer from another country in Africa increases their likelihood of receiving funding. Although having an international volunteer from any country tends to increase the trust others have of the partner organisation, trust is slightly higher among volunteers from the North (96 per cent) than the South (82 per cent).

Institutional Attributes

Theoretically, different attributes of the sending and hosting organisations—as well as the partner programs—would affect outcomes.[5] This area has received the greatest attention in previous research as it relates to the "management cycle" and monitoring and evaluation of specific programs. Hence, these attributes were not featured highly in the research. Few staff members brought these issues up spontaneously. However, when discussions of institutional attributes did arise, they focused mainly on the importance of language preparation, in-depth cultural orientation, and screening of volunteers with potential personality issues. Some of these issues will be covered below under the discussion of volunteer attributes. Others will be covered in greater detail following further analysis of qualitative data.

Volunteer Attributes

Along with service activities and institutional attributes, interviewees discussed a number of individual volunteer attributes associated with development impacts. Although some of these attributes, such as personality, motivations and cultural competence, are often difficult to control, other attributes can be intentionally selected to better meet the needs of partner programs and communities. Among these, high skills and education, and the capacity to speak in the host-country language, emerged as important qualities linked to effectiveness. In addition, demographic attributes such as age, gender and race seem to make a marginal difference. In the Kenyan context, racial issues seem to have a particularly strong effect on the perceptions of volunteer impacts.

Skills and education

Staff and community members indicated a strong desire for volunteers with specialised skills and high education. References to the need for higher-skilled volunteers were particularly evident during discussions about the impact of short-term volunteers. Non-skilled short-term volunteers are openly welcomed and are valued for the resources and relationships they provide, but they are often viewed as recipients of service rather than substantive contributors to "hard outcomes".

Language

Language barriers were perceived to be a significant challenge, particularly for older community members and those located in rural settings where people have infrequent exposure to English. Even if staff and community members are relatively fluent in English, native fluency in the

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[5] Sherraden, M. S., Lough, B. J., & McBride, A. M. (2008). Effects of international volunteering and service: Individual and institutional predictors. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 19*(4), 395-421.

English language also seems to be helpful for writing grants and framing proposals to Northern organisations.

Cultural competence

Community members, in particular, expressed a concern about volunteers who lack cultural knowledge or who have a fear of, or discomfort with, local settings. Staff and community members asserted that volunteers who are not culturally competent are more difficult to manage and are perceived as less effective in the community.

Race

There appears to be a strong association between (1) race and resources, (2) race and knowledge or expertise, and (3) race and trust. According to surveyed staff members, 81 per cent believed that having a White volunteer work in the organisation increases the trust others have of their organisation, while only 38 per cent believed the same of Black volunteers. Future research may need to consider the relevance of volunteers' contributions in light of race-based perceptions.

Gender

With a few exceptions, staff and community members did not believe that the gender of international volunteers had a substantial effect on outcomes. Overall, no findings related to gender were consistent enough across interviews to make firm conclusions. However, the gender of the volunteer may have a role in programs aiming to promote gender equity—at least in the Kenyan context.

Age

The age of volunteers seems to matter slightly, but usually in conjunction with project activities and the duration of service. Young volunteers were often perceived as more open to change, including changes in ethnocentric attitudes and "assumptions that their way is the best way". In contrast, older volunteers have likely completed educational degrees, and were often thought to "act more mature".

Key Limitations

A pleasing bias may be pronounced in this study, given the organisations' stated interests to retain volunteers in the programs and the researchers' perceived connection to sending organisations. The small *n*-size and the focus on a single country does not allow for textbook generalisations. Future studies that span multiple countries and contexts will likely uncover many new findings or conflicting results.

Conclusion

Initial findings indicate that volunteers can and do contribute to development goals as valued human resources in development projects. They contribute notably to capacity building; they leverage their social capital; and they engage in advocacy to provide "bridges" to resources. However, this is not what reportedly makes international volunteers unique. Organisations and communities in Kenya assert that they value volunteers for their labour, expertise and the

resources they contribute to development goals. However, they also strongly emphasise other contributions that would not otherwise be available without the presence of international volunteers. Organisations and communities value the trust, local accountability, creativity and optimism of volunteers. They value the increase in civic engagement and local volunteerism that accompany international volunteerism. They value the diversity and new ideas that international volunteers bring to development projects and program management. These are the contributions that organisations and communities identify as adding unique value to development projects. Such outcomes are often difficult to assess in logic models, and may be overlooked in organisational theories of change. Nonetheless, they are highly valued.

If ownership and alignment—key principles of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness—are to be respected, donors and other stakeholders must widen the lens to capture outcomes perceived to be international volunteers' most valuable contributions to development. Also in keeping with the principle of alignment, not all models of international volunteerism contribute equally. Measuring development effectiveness requires considering various service models, along with the attributes of volunteers serving within these models. Findings indicate that outcomes may differ depending on the duration, directionality and continuity of service placements. Likewise, characteristics of individual volunteers such as their educational and skill level, their nationality, race, gender, and language and cultural competence, all affect outcomes in different ways.