

**The impact of international volunteering on returned volunteers' engagement with social action in relation to international development.**

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Compare: a journal of comparative and international education on 28 October 2020, available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/03057925.2020.1837612>.

## **Abstract**

International development volunteering is a potential route to returned volunteers' engagement in social action on development issues after placement. Using data from a two-stage qualitative study with returned Voluntary Services Overseas volunteers, and by considering the pre-conditions and motivations for social action, this article shows that although returned volunteers commit to social action, they face challenges to engagement. Motivated by deepened, critical understandings of development, they reject some forms of action, whilst other action they value proves problematic and does not sustain. Barriers include how others respond and the lack of meaningful opportunities provided by organisations at home. Despite these challenges, some returned volunteers develop alternative, sustainable ways of engaging that have greater direct impact on development. This is significant in informing how organisations support returned volunteers (RVs) in taking action.

**Keywords: international volunteering, international development, social action, social engagement**

## 1. Introduction

This article examines the impact of international volunteering on returned volunteers' (RVs) engagement with social action for international development, focusing on the findings of a two-stage qualitative study with Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) RVs.

International volunteering is 'an organised period of engagement and contribution to society by volunteers who work across an international border, in another country, or countries' (Sherraden, Lough, and McBride 2008, 397). Although it takes many forms (Sherraden et al. 2006), I focus on international long-term volunteering as development aid, for decades part of the aid landscape (Sobocinska, 2017). This type of development aid is not without controversy. Westerners volunteering to 'help' developing countries can be considered an extension of the colonial project, cementing paternalistic notions of the 'Other' (see Devereux 2008, Green 2012, Heron 2007, Perold et al. 2012) and reinforcing 'racial power relations' (Lough 2015, 208). Some also question whether it serves the donors' neo-liberal agenda, rather than the needs of developing countries (Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011; Georgeou and Engel 2011).

In addition to being promoted, however controversially, as development aid, this type of volunteering is regarded as a potential route to engagement in social action around development issues after placement (Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011; Diprose 2012; Machin 2008). Organisations and funders hope volunteers' experiences are transformative, motivating them to become the 'public face of development' (Smith and Yanacolous 2004, 658), particularly with the current focus on the sustainable development goals (Haddock and Devereux 2015; UNV 2018).

There is no guarantee of volunteering leading to social action. However, where it is documented, the influence of that experience on RVs' decisions about social action is under-researched. Exceptions include a study for VSO (Clark and Lewis 2016) and for CGE (2011)

on RVs in Northern Ireland. I therefore focus on exploring this influence, where it occurs, by identifying how the experience influences choices around social action, what challenges to action arise within the home context, and whether that action is sustainable.

I firstly consider theoretical frameworks on the volunteer process, motivation, volunteering and social action, pre-conditions for social action, and relate these to the literature on international volunteering. Then I outline the research questions, data collection and analysis. Finally, I present and discuss the findings and their implications.

I define social action as any individual action involving others, which is meaningful to the individual, involving specific intention or motivation (Trueman 2015) and in which individuals modify their actions depending on the perceived effects on others. Social action in this article relates specifically to action around international development.

## **2. International volunteering and social action on development issues**

Various theoretical frameworks offer insights into volunteering, motivation and social action and shed light on potential links between individuals' experience of international volunteering and their subsequent engagement in social action.

The Volunteer Process Model (VPM): 'antecedents', 'experiences' and 'consequences' is one model (Omoto and Snyder 1990, 155). Antecedents encompass personal characteristics, including motivations and 'life circumstances', that influence someone to volunteer (Omoto and Snyder 1995, 673). Experiences include the experience of the volunteer and their colleagues, and consequences include consequences for the volunteer, those they work with and wider society.

The model's stages are linked. For example, personal dispositions and motivations for volunteering, such as empathy, can predict levels of satisfaction with volunteering. Similarly,

the relationships that develop between volunteers, the organisation and recipients influence continued engagement. The volunteering experience therefore affects volunteers' attitudes and behaviour, including their willingness to continue volunteering, potentially leading to changes in volunteers' sense of their identity, with consequences for further social action (see Omoto, Snyder, and Hackett 2010). Moving from antecedents to consequences of further engagement requires a satisfying volunteer experience, for volunteers to be integrated into the volunteering organisation (Omoto and Snyder 1995), and for subsequent activities to match individuals' motivations (Stukas, Snyder, and Clary 2016).

The antecedents include a range of motivations. Batson, Ahmad, and Tsang (2002) identify motivational forces for community involvement of egoism, altruism, collectivism, and principlism and Clary and Snyder (1991) identify motivational orientations for pro-social behaviour of self-esteem enhancement, knowledge, social relationships, community concern and affirming values. Ocejja and Salgado (2013, 128) summarise these as motivations for 'one's own welfare, another individual's welfare, a community's welfare, and personal principles', and suggest a fifth: 'the welfare of the world'. Some motivations have longer impact, such as personal principles related to social justice (see Jiranek et al. 2013), as these goals are less quickly met. All motivations may be present at different times, supporting each other or conflicting (Ocejja and Salgado 2013), and may change during volunteering, with resulting consequences for decisions about social action.

To investigate this further, Trewby's (2014, 41) pre-conditions for social action are useful: 'belief in the existence of the issues, belief in the possibility of engagement, belief in the value of engagement and belief in the duty of engagement'.

Although research suggests volunteers hold some beliefs about development issues prior to volunteering (see Clark and Lewis 2016; Henry 2019; Scheinert et al. 2019; Simpson 2004),

there is evidence the experience can positively affect those beliefs. International volunteering can deepen understanding and change attitudes towards development issues (CIDA 2005; Brown 2015; Clark and Lewis 2016; Lough et al. 2014) and prepare volunteers for living in a globalised world (Campbell and Warner 2016). It can generate a greater sense of global solidarity (Lewis 2006), and global responsibility (Machin 2008), more interest in development related careers (Hudson and Inkson 2006; McBride, Lough, and Sherraden 2010) and sustained interest in international affairs (Lough, Sherraden and McBride 2014). It may lead to ‘notable shifts in awareness of development, poverty, equality and injustice, community challenges and needs’ (Clark and Lewis 2016, 6).

However, these effects are not guaranteed (Bamber and Hankin 2011; Henry 2019; Kiely 2004), as volunteering may also engender negative views about development (see Clark and Lewis 2016). International volunteering may reinforce volunteers’ attitudes which are not supportive of further action (Brown 2015; Diprose 2012; Simpson 2004; Tiessen and Heron 2012). It cannot therefore be assumed that an encounter with ‘difference’ is sufficient to develop the beliefs about the importance of development issues (Simpson 2004), a pre-requisite for social action.

A positive influence from volunteering on individuals’ beliefs in development issues is also no guarantee of social action (McBride, Lough, and Sherraden 2010; Pantea 2013), though the VPM suggests it increases its likelihood. There is evidence that RVs do engage in social actions (Clark and Lewis 2016; CGE 2011), such as advocating on global issues and providing resources for their placements (Lough, Sherraden, and McBride 2014), and individual behaviour change and awareness-raising activities (Scheinert et al 2019). However, there is less evidence of this being sustained (McBride, Lough, and Sherraden 2010). For sustained action the volunteering experience needs to create a ‘disjuncture’ and offer the conditions for volunteers to reflect critically on that disjuncture (Coghlan and Gooch 2011; Hudson and

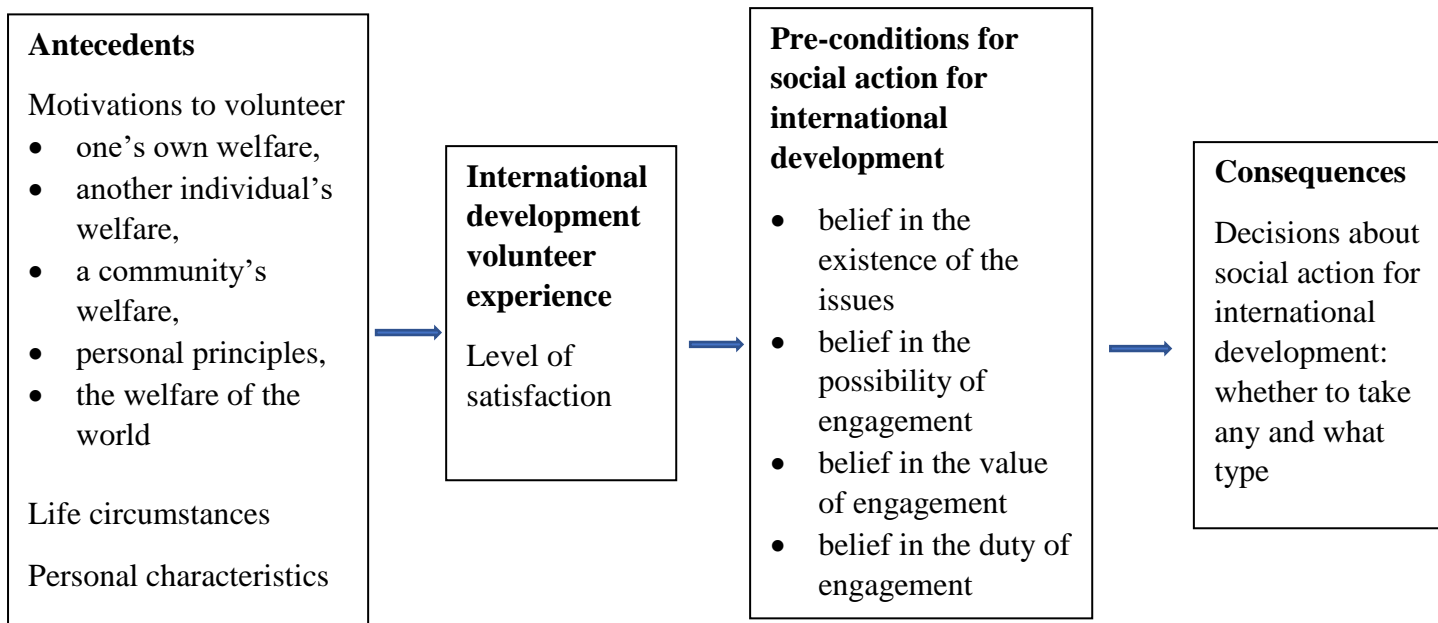
Inkson 2006; Ngo 2014). Long-term placements are more likely to have this effect (Devereux 2008).

There is also less evidence on RVs' beliefs about the possibility of engagement, ie. how equipped RVs feel to embark on social action; their 'biographical availability' (McAdam 1986). The CGE (2011) study shows RVs need time re-adjusting, before acting, and face challenges with the opportunities sending organisations provide. Henry (2019) notes the volunteer experience can seem quite separate to usual life, making action on return more difficult. Individuals also can resist attempts to encourage them to activism (Bentall and McGough 2013), meaning beliefs in the issues may not translate into beliefs in the possibility or value of engagement.

As the VPM suggests, the level of satisfaction with the volunteering experience, which enhances beliefs about the value of engagement, is important for a sustained social action. RVs often feel a sense of responsibility (Lewis 2006; Machin 2008), or belief in the duty of engagement, which is unsurprising given international volunteering is premised on a sense of responsibility to the other (Jefferess 2008). However, it matters whether the experience matches the volunteer's motivations. Though Clark and Lewis (2016) show no predictable correlation between positive experiences and engagement or negative experiences and lack of engagement, Jiranek et al. (2013) suggest volunteers with strong social justice orientations can experience frustration if their volunteering experience does not fulfil expectations, thereby reducing their belief in the value of continued engagement.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the interrelationship of these theoretical perspectives, with Trewby's (2014) set of beliefs providing a lens through which to analyse the stage in the VPM between experience and consequences.

**Figure 1: Conceptual framework**



Sources: Omoto and Snyder (1990), Oceja and Salgado (2013), Trewby (2014)

### **3. Methods**

Here I set out the research questions, describe the RVs, and discuss data collection and analysis.

#### ***3.1 Study design and research questions***

This was a two-part, interpretivist qualitative study, prioritising individuals' perceptions of their experience (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The first part, commissioned by VSO and conducted with two colleagues, comprised a) literature review, b) survey questionnaire, c) 3 semi-structured telephone interviews with RVs over a year, and initial report (Bentall, Blum, and Bourn 2010). I then conducted a second un-funded stage of follow-up interviews with RVs after 5 years and additional literature review<sup>1</sup>. This longitudinal design allowed the

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<sup>1</sup> This article is single authored at my colleagues' request, as they were not involved in the second part. I have acknowledged them at the end of the article and refer to us collectively as 'the research team' where appropriate.



documentation of the developing and lasting effects of the volunteer experience, taking account the time RVs require to re-integrate (McBride, Lough, and Sherraden 2010).

The original study posed questions about RVs' motivations to volunteer, what social action they took on their return, if any, how VSO could support them, and questions on how the volunteering experience influenced their social action choices. We documented what type of social action RVs took in our initial report (Bentall, Blum, and Bourn 2010). Given all our sampled RVs took social action, I focus here on how the volunteering experience influences their decisions about that social action, with these research questions:

- In what ways does the international volunteering experience influence RVs' choices about taking social action on development issues? (RQ1)
- What challenges to taking social action arise from the home context? (RQ2)
- How sustainable is the social action they take? (RQ3)

### ***3.2 The RV cohort***

Our research team attended a VSO residential event for 49 RVs (2 – 12 months after placement) and gained consent for the research. Of the 49 surveyed, 34 agreed to be interviewed, 24 were selected and 4 subsequently withdrew. We selected RVs from the full range of volunteer placements, areas and countries in which VSO worked, and both older and younger RVs. Initially, 1 RV from each placement country represented was selected randomly and then additional RVs added, ensuring each of VSO's thematic areas and types of volunteer placement were included (see Table 1). In 2009-2010, VSO worked in Africa, South and South East Asia, through different volunteering routes: Youth for Development Programme (YfD), 1-year volunteering for young people between 18 – 25 (since replaced by International Citizen Service), and VSO's main 2-year volunteering opportunity.

**Table 1: Profile of RVs**

<b>RV</b>	<b>Placement type</b>	<b>Career stage (age)**</b>	<b>Thematic area</b>	<b>Region</b>
Anne*	LTV	Retired / semi-retired (58)	Disability, Education	Africa
Lucy*	LTV	Mid-career (35)	Secure Livelihoods	South East Asia
Kerry	YfD	Early career (25)	Participation and governance	South Asia
Ursula	LTV	Mid-career (49)	Education	Africa
Theresa*	LTV	Mid-career (37)	Health	South East Asia
Aileen*	LTV	Mid-career (33)	Health	South East Asia
Mike*	LTV	Retired / semi-retired (59)	Education	Africa
Patricia*	YfD	Early career(28)	Participation and governance; Education	Africa
Sara*+	YfD	Early career (24)	Participation and governance	Africa
Cynthia	LTV	Mid-career (41)	Secure Livelihoods	Africa
Cathy*	LTV	Mid-career (48)	Health	South Asia
Anika	YfD	Early career (25)	Participation and governance	Africa
Monica	LTV	Mid-career (53)	Participation and governance	South Asia
Steve	LTV	Retired / semi-retired (62)	Education	Africa
Sue	LTV	Retired / semi-retired (58)	Education	Africa
Maggie	YfD	Early career (24)	Disability	South East Asia
Mary*	LTV	Mid-career (34)	Participation and governance	South East Asia
Harriet	LTV	Mid-career (37)	Education	Africa
Laura	(accompanying LTV partner)	Retired / semi-retired (61)		Africa
Sally*	LTV and STV	Retired / semi-retired (61)	Disability; Education	Africa

Key: LTV – Long term volunteer, STV - Short term volunteer, YfD - Youth for Development, \* - participated in both parts of the study. + – interviewed twice in the first part and participated in the second part, \*\* age at the time of initial survey

All but two RVs were female. All but two self-identified as White, but I have not indicated which, to avoid identification. Being 'White female' is a common profile in international development volunteering. Though Heron (2007) argues this profile influences motivations to volunteer, analysis of our data did not suggest that either ethnicity or gender was specifically influential in the RVs' decisions about social action. The RVs' motivations for volunteering were to learn about development, to 'give something back' or 'make a contribution' (see Campbell and Warner 2016, Sherraden, Lough and McBride, 2008).

### ***3.3 Data collection and analysis***

After the survey, 3 semi-structured 45 mins phone interviews were conducted with each of the 20 RVs (July 2009 - April 2010). In the second stage, all 20 were contacted, and 10 consented to be re-interviewed (July – September 2015). Phone interviews were chosen, given the geographical spread of the RVs. Though they prevent body language being read (Novik 2008), evidence shows the slight distance can encourage respondents to share (Lechuga 2012).

The initial interview questions were informed by the literature review and initial survey. Each interview followed the preceding one, focusing on issues or plans RVs had previously mentioned. Interviews notes were sent to RVs for verification.

Each set of interviews was analysed before the next were conducted (Merriam and Tisdell 2015). The written notes, including short verbatim quotes, provided an initial interpretation, which were coded. Each interview was coded separately and then compared with interviews with the same RV and across the group. Previously coded interviews were checked against emerging themes. The second stage interviews I coded separately, and compared with the initial interviews, which I re-analysed, allowing a move from description to explanation (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011).

RVs and VSO commented on draft publications, so the findings are presented in terms they would recognise (Maykut and Morehouse 1994). Confidentiality is preserved, with individuals given pseudonyms (see Table 1).

Reflexivity was important, ie. being cognisant of the team's experience and avoiding imposing interpretations on the data. I am a VSO RV and was a VSO trainer. My colleagues had volunteered in the USA and researched other volunteering organisations. These insider perspectives required a 'critical self-awareness' of the influence of the team's views on volunteering on the research (Finlay 2009, 17). They also provided genuine understandings of RVs' experiences, something they did not encounter elsewhere (see findings below).

#### **4. Findings**

The first findings section concerns the direct influence of the overseas experience on RVs' decisions about social action (RQ1). Here I illustrate how RVs' more critical views of development shape their choices of social action. The second section covers the challenges to engagement that arise from their home context (RQ2). This starts with delays to engagement from reverse culture shock and the time RVs need to re-adjust. Then there are challenges posed by their individual life circumstances, other people's responses, the difficulties of maintaining a connection with the overseas context and the lack of opportunities for the social action they value. Finally, I summarise which actions are sustainable (RQ3).

In discussing the findings, focusing on the stage in the VPM between volunteering and consequences (see Figure 1), I consider both Trewby's (2014) pre-conditions for social action and Ocejja and Saldago's (2013) motivations, which apply not just to volunteering but also, as the data shows, to other social action.

The RVs considered a range of potential social action for international development (Table 2): awareness-raising, fundraising / campaigning, career-focused action, other volunteering, action

linked to volunteer placements, and setting up initiatives (see Clarke and Lewis, 2016; CGE, 2011 for similar findings).

**Table 2: Types of social action for international development taken by RVs**

Social Action	Informal awareness raising (friends and family)	Formal awareness raising (invited talks or meetings)	Fundraising	Campaigning	Career focused action	Volunteering for international development organisations at home	Action linked to original volunteer placement	Setting up own initiatives
Number of RVs	18	12, plus 2 who offered but got no response	3 as occasional activities	3, plus 3 who had engaged once	6	8	9, plus 7 who stayed in touch socially	7

I refer to the examples of social action where they illustrate specific findings. In the first section, I discuss which social actions RVs reject or value, based on their understandings of development, highlighting the more successful examples. In discussing challenges to social action, I highlight the types of action they value, but which prove to be problematic. I then refer to all actions in summarising which are sustainable.

#### ***4.1 Influence of international volunteering experience on choice of social action***

The volunteering experience influences RVs' choices about social action, what types they value or reject. The main influences here, in Trewby's (2014) terms, are their beliefs about development issues. These inform RVs' beliefs about the possibility, value and duty of engagement and are underpinned by a 'welfare of the world' motivation (Oceja and Saldago 2013, 128).

##### *4.1.1 Critical views on development*

Although they held beliefs in the existence of development issues prior to volunteering, RVs report an increased disquiet about development aid, having developed deeper, more complex,

understandings of international development. Reflecting Kelly and Case's (2007) findings, 19 of the RVs discuss returning better informed, but critical.

Some emphasise the negative aspects of development work, particularly by development agencies. For example, Sally talks of development having 'helped Africa fail' and Cathy describes Westerners wanting to develop others to be like them: 'there is one way to do things, which is our way'. Steve and Cynthia comment on the unsustainability of development interventions. A couple of RVs feel it would almost be better to do nothing. For example, Theresa describes NGO work in contexts suffering trauma as 'sticking plaster' and Sue complains of development agencies 'treading on each other's toes'. This experience of being involved in work which they now critique means that, though their perspectives may have been transformed, they struggle with turning these critical beliefs into meaningful action (see Kiely, 2004).

#### *4.1.2 The value of different forms of engagement*

These critical forms of beliefs about development lead to a favouring of some forms of social action, but a questioning of others, thereby affecting, in Trewby's (2014) terms, their beliefs about the possibility and value of engagement. The informal and formal awareness-raising social action is the most common among the original sample of RVs (see Table 2). Around a third focus on international development careers and a similar proportion engage with their placements, volunteer locally, or set up their own initiatives. To illustrate how their understandings of development influence their choices, I focus specifically here on the least popular social action and the most ambitious.

In contrast to other findings (Clark and Lewis 2016), fundraising or campaigning are less popular, with 6 RVs being particularly critical of fundraising. These RVs cite discomfort in asking people for money (Sally), and prefer fundraising through activities, 'like ... having a

curry night' (Harriet). RVs see money being wasted overseas. Sally says 'it is easy to fundraise if you are not directly involved in spending the money yourself. You can still have the optimism about it'. Sue explains that 'the culture of giving money' by development organisations and diaspora in her placement 'has meant that many people simply don't work and aren't motivated to do so. Even the...church endorses a similar view, that overseas charities are sent by God to give aid'. These RVs are concerned about a culture of 'dependency' and Cathy explains, people need 'support and new opportunities, not charity'. RVs want to have a positive, direct impact on development, which, they argue, fundraising does not offer.

By the second part of the study, the journey from more critical beliefs in the issues to beliefs in the possibility and value of specific forms of engagement (Trewby 2014) results in more ambitious social action, such as volunteering or setting up own initiatives. The 3 examples below illustrate this.

Sally, semi-retired, concludes that in development 'small is beautiful' and has volunteered, for 5 years, with a small, locally based, development charity, working on long term projects with direct impact, originating in developing countries. She is continually troubled about 'old fashioned ideas of development', where Westerners identify needs and provide them without local involvement. Finding an organisation offering an alternative model, she willingly offers her skills, allowing her to stay 'hands on'.

Initially, Aileen prioritises her career, and local social action. However, 5 years on, her interest in nutrition and development, informed by her volunteer experience, has grown, accompanied by a concern about inadequate university and NGO provision in this area. In her spare time, she undertakes a scoping exercise on what universities offer, making the final report publicly available, and runs workshops for anyone interested.

5 years on, Mary has set up a social enterprise in an African country to offer an ‘alternative to the traditional model of technical assistance’, focusing on capacity building and project management. Her VSO experience has developed her understanding of the importance of community and participation, so the aim of the self-financing social enterprise is to build local capacity, using local resources. Mary’s concern is responding responsibly. She wants to ‘live comfortably without doing damage’, focus on ‘supporting others’ professional development’, and not try ‘changing the world’.

For these RVs, their beliefs in the possibility and value of engagement (Trewby 2014) lead to social actions reflecting their changed beliefs about development and ‘welfare of the world’ motivation (Oceja and Salgado 2013, 128). All 10 RVs in the second stage of the study describe realising how best to use their skills without compromising their views on development and effective social action. Reflecting a belief in the duty to engage (Trewby 2014), Mary says, ‘it is not whether to act, but how’.

#### ***4.2 Challenges to social action arising from the home context***

RVs’ beliefs in the possibility and value of engagement (Trewby 2014), based on these understandings and motivations related to development, can be undermined by the challenges arising in the home context.

##### ***4.2.1 Culture shock and readjusting***

The first challenge is dealing with readjusting and reverse culture shock (see Gaw 2000; McBride, Lough, and Sherraden 2010). In the early interviews, 15 RVs describe needing time to process their experience, so delaying any social action. They struggle with, and underestimate, readjustment, and therefore prioritise their own personal welfare (Oceja and Salgado 2013). For example, Steve says reverse culture shock was ‘devastating’ and ‘took 3 months to get over it. One of the worst things was Waitrose. It was scary. I used to spend 2 or



3 dollars in the local market and get all I needed'. Monica gets 'angry about parochialism of UK news'. Sally finds the 3 months she allocates to 'feel vague and confused' insufficient. Missing their placements is common. Maggie says, 'I try not to think about it at all because I miss it and it's a bit painful' and Mike explains, 'I often go to bed thinking of (African country) and wake up with it still on my mind'. For Ursula, coming back is 'like a bereavement...you need time to acclimatise.' In these circumstances, RVs find focusing on social action difficult.

#### *4.2.2 Life circumstances*

Accompanying the difficulties in readjusting are the practical considerations of RVs' life circumstances - their 'biographical availability' (McAdam 1986). Essentially, those with the greatest availability for social action are (semi-) retired or work full-time in international development. Their beliefs in the possibility and value of engagement (Trewby 2014) are strengthened. In contrast, the younger RVs aiming to work in international development find prospective employers, for reasons that are unclear, seem not to value their VSO experience. Their enthusiasm for this social action is challenged, and their beliefs in the possibility of engagement diminished.

#### *4.2.3 Other people's responses to RVs' volunteering experience*

There are other emotional challenges to RVs' beliefs in the possibility and value of engagement (Trewby 2014).

Although talking about their experience would seem an easy way of engaging with development issues that could help RVs readjust, 14 RVs describe difficulties in communicating their experiences, particularly in informal settings (see Scheinert et al 2019). Given the critical nature of their beliefs about development, RVs want to ensure they do not simplify the issues or stereotype people they worked with, whilst also not overwhelming other people's abilities to understand. For example, Mike and Laura want to share negative and

positive aspects of their experiences, to communicate the complexities of development, to humanise the issues and to encourage others to deeper engagement.

RVs encounter sometimes extreme responses. For example, Ursula hears nothing from one of her friends whilst overseas. On Ursula's return, the friend behaves as if she never left, even asking to change rooms if pictures of Ursula's volunteer experience are displayed. Patricia also describes a UK friend's reaction of 'I didn't realise you were a suicide bomber', when she includes him in a text greeting to mark Id al Adha.

Even when others are interested, it can be difficult to communicate the complexities of development issues, without dampening people's enthusiasm to act. For example, Sue's colleagues discuss shipping old books to schools near her placement. She has to explain that good local books are available, and the government will resist imported, often inappropriate, materials going into schools.

RVs also self-censor. They do not want to 'be a bore' (Anne) or to 'blather' on (Lucy), see people's 'eyes glaze over' (Sue). Some find it easier only when invited to speak, such as at events (Mike and Laura), advising students (Lucy) or prospective volunteers (Harriet). They still struggle to communicate the complexity of development, but it is easier with permission. 3 RVs find alternative communication methods that provide distance from people's reactions, such as a self-published book (Mike), and photos for personal and public display (Anika and Sue).

The need, and therefore the dilemma of how to talk about their experiences diminishes over time. By the later interviews, all 10 report only occasionally sharing their experience, and most have stopped actively trying to persuade others about development, unless through formal projects. Clearly, their focus on their personal welfare (Oceja and Salgado 2013) has receded as they have readjusted. But also, in Trewby's (2014) terms, their specific beliefs about

development lead to beliefs in the possibility and value only of social action that has more direct impact than awareness-raising activities.

#### *4.2.4 Dealing with the realities of development context at a distance*

In attempting to act on their beliefs in the possibility and value of engagement (Trewby 2014) in social action with direct impact, 12 RVs try maintaining contact with their placement overseas, helping individuals financially, supporting existing initiatives or setting up charities / projects. These choices demonstrate ongoing concern for the welfare of individuals – friends and colleagues - and communities overseas (Oceja and Salgado 2013). Such social action involving the original volunteering context can support RVs' transition from placement to home. It also has potentially more direct impact in the development context (see Lough, Sherraden and McBride 2014). However, RVs find that maintaining communication with placements is difficult and, without regular contact, beliefs in the possibility and value of this type of engagement (Trewby 2014) also wane.

For example, Lucy reports trying, unsuccessfully, to secure research funding for a project involving colleagues in her placement, giving up as her contacts also leave. Similarly, Mike tries maintaining contact over 5 years. Without being able to visit regularly, his gives up and looks for alternative organisations to support.

Sally set up a charity to support her placement, but it ceased because of communication difficulties. Eventually, she discovered her key contact was dying. She describes this as 'an awful time'. Her growing reluctance to consider social action involving her placement is compounded when a young man she has been sponsoring is killed just before his university finals. She decides to protect herself 'from any further emotional stress' by avoiding this type of social action. Her concern for her personal welfare (Oceja and Salgado 2013) competes with her concern for the welfare of her placement.

For these RVs, social action linked to their placements proves too difficult to sustain, despite their motivation for the welfare of individuals and communities overseas (Oceja and Salgado 2013) and their commitment to action that reflects their beliefs about development.

#### *4.2.5 Opportunities offered by different organisations*

RVs' beliefs in the possibility of engagement (Trewby 2014) also depend on what opportunities exist. 9 RVs not working full-time for development NGOs describe a mismatch between their priorities and opportunities offered by development organisations.

When offered opportunities to engage by VSO, RVs' beliefs in a duty to engage (Trewby 2014) in the issues facing the people they lived alongside, rather than those identified by VSO, prove challenging. Although the RVs were largely satisfied with their volunteering experience, as the VPM suggests, this is not the only influence on action afterwards, as integration into the organisation is also important (Omoto and Synder 1995). However, the RVs no longer need integrate with VSO, so it is their concern for the welfare of individuals and communities overseas (Oceja and Salgado 2013), coupled with their beliefs about development, which take priority.

As they value their volunteering experience, some RVs do offer to help VSO recruit new volunteers through awareness-raising activities and with local VSO support groups. However, though they regard these social actions as less problematic than the fundraising they feel is VSO's priority (Anika, Monica, Sue and Sally), expectations on how best to help differ (Patricia and Anika). For example, Anika agrees to speak at VSO events, but her desire to be an ambassador for the country of her placement, rather than for VSO, is not shared by VSO staff. Others express frustration with unsuccessful attempts to engage with local groups, again citing differences over priorities (Kerry, Sara, Sally and Harriet).

This mismatch of expectations happens with other organisations. In the second part of the study, Anne describes how she and other retired professionals found a local support group for another international NGO. They offer their experience and skills, but the organisation only wants them to fundraise. The group wants to work in a consultative capacity, and feels the organisation is ‘missing a trick’ in not exploiting their expertise. For example, one of them is an engineer with relevant field experience, but is limited to operating telephone lines, and Anne offers her expertise to encourage artists to donate original artworks for new charity cards, but this suggestion is rejected.

These examples suggest a lack of organisational capacity, or unwillingness, to have RVs and local supporters involved (see CGE 2011). Fundraising, campaigning, awareness-raising activities are important for organisations, but are not the types of social action these RVs most value, particularly over the longer term. As a result, 19 of the RVs were no longer regularly in contact with VSO by the end of the first stage of the study, and none by the second. Instead, of those engaged in social action 5 years on, most have found organisations where they can work directly on development related projects or have started their own initiatives. RVs’ beliefs in the possibility and value of engagement (Trewby 2014) only sustain if accompanied by real opportunities for social action that use their skills and critical understandings of development. As Stukas, Synder, and Clary (2016) suggest, continued engagement requires matching opportunities for action to volunteers’ motivations. For these RVs’, this means matching their critical and informed ‘welfare of the world’ (Ocejda and Salgado 2013) motivation.

#### ***4.3 Sustainability of social action***

The findings illustrate that not all social action is sustainable. Firstly, there are social actions that RVs do not value as sufficiently reflecting the nature of their beliefs in the issues (Trewby 2014) and therefore reject, such as fundraising. Then there are other social actions,

such as informal and formal awareness-raising, action linked to their placements that RVs do value, at least initially. However, when faced with challenges from the home context, RVs' beliefs in the possibility and value of engagement (Trewby 2014) in these actions diminish over time. The social actions that ultimately sustain are those that reflect these RVs' beliefs about development, their concern for the 'welfare of the world' (Oceja and Salgado 2013) and have direct impact overseas. Alongside careers in development, the most sustainable actions are longer-term volunteering with development organisations at home, or the setting up of their own initiatives.

## **5. Discussion**

These findings provide greater understanding of how and why some RVs engage in social action after international volunteering, particularly in relation to how their motivations develop on return, how these and their understandings of development affect their choices.

In terms of Trewby's (2014) pre-conditions for social action, the RVs' deeply held beliefs about development issues remain constant and frame their responses to social action throughout the period of the study. However, it is not just the existence, but the nature of these beliefs that influences the type of social action undertaken, with actions not reflecting their more critical beliefs in development being rejected.

In relation to Trewby's (2014) beliefs in the possibility, value and duty to engage, though present, these can diminish as RVs encounter challenges to action in the home context. These beliefs can be undermined by the responses from others, the emotional risk of trying to stay connected to the placement context, whilst readjusting, or by the mismatch of opportunities offered by organisations wanting to support their engagement.

RVs' beliefs and motivations are characterised also by an emotional commitment to their volunteering experience and the people they worked and lived alongside, particularly initially.

This, coupled with the nature of their beliefs about development, make engagement with some types of social action more complex than anticipated. This is partly explained by level of cost or risk, in McAdam's (1986) terms, associated with the action. The lowest risk actions are rejected as not fitting RVs' understandings of development, whilst other seemingly low risk actions, such as speaking to friends, or maintaining contact with placements, are actually high risk, emotionally speaking. The social actions that appear easier are in reality more challenging.

It is interesting, therefore, that those RVs still engaged 5 years on have often chosen higher cost, potentially high-risk forms of action, requiring great levels of commitment, showing beliefs in the possibility and value of quite complex social action. The difference over time is that the emotional risk of social action has receded as they have readjusted to being home, and have some distance from the volunteer experience, leaving a sustaining motivation to engage in development issues directly (see Jiranek et al. 2013).

In terms of Oceja and Salgado's (2013) motivations, the unexpected experience of reverse culture shock (see also Gaw 2000 and McBride, Lough, and Sherraden 2010) motivates RVs initially to address their personal welfare, so delaying social action. Given each RV needs varying amounts of time to adjust, it is difficult to predict how long after return RVs can be expected to engage. RVs also have to address their personal welfare in finding work, unless they are retired, so their availability affects their motivation and beliefs about engagement.

RVs' focus on the welfare of individuals and communities (Oceja and Salgado 2013) in their placements reflects a principled motivation to express solidarity with real people in developing countries, which also complicates engagement in social action. RVs want their action to respect the realities of the experience, highlight issues such as equality of opportunity, rather than simplistic stories of poverty, which is a message that people do not necessarily want to hear.

The findings therefore suggest that although RVs may consistently maintain a ‘welfare of the world’ orientation, as Oceja and Salgado (2013) point out, other motivations can compete or come more into focus. Their primary concern initially is for their personal welfare. Even when focusing on their concern for individuals and specific communities overseas, the need to address their own emotional needs undermines those motivations. It is only when the need to focus on themselves and their placements diminishes over time, that RVs seem to have the space to act fully in line with their beliefs about development.

What is encouraging is that the international volunteering experience can reinforce RVs’ commitment to long term, substantial, engagement in social action (see also Clarke and Lewis 2016). Particularly as their choices to volunteer long term locally, or set up their own initiatives, are arguably more effective responses to development aims of poverty alleviation than other forms of action. This also suggests that, contrary to some critiques, international volunteering is not necessarily only a vehicle for the volunteer’s and the sending country’s education (see Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011; Tiessen and Heron 2012).

## **6. Implications**

These findings have implications for how volunteer organisations work with RVs and how RVs respond to the expectation that they help educate the public on development issues. Firstly, giving RVs time to adjust to being home is important. Offering the right possibilities for RVs to engage is even more crucial. Given these RVs’ commitment to organisations like VSO and their satisfaction with their volunteering experience, which is an important motivation for further action (see Omoto, Snyder, and Hackett 2010), it is disappointing that organisations struggle in ‘allocating the resources required to give strategic effect to their intentions’ in relation to RVs’ subsequent engagement (CGE 2011, 4). Prioritising social action that RVs are unmotivated to support (see VSO’s current opportunities:



<https://www.vsointernational.org/support-us/former-volunteers>), undermines funders' and sending organisations' aims for RVs to become 'the public face of development' (Smith and Yanacopulos 2004, 658). This is particularly concerning given the increasing rhetoric in many Western contexts of intolerance and exclusion, and the ineffectiveness of media campaigns in shifting attitudes, deepening understandings of development, or encouraging sustained, informed and meaningful engagement with development issues (Glennie, Straw, and Wild 2012; Hogg 2011; VSO 2002).

Organisations need to understand that RVs are motivated initially by a concern for the welfare of individuals and communities whose lives are deeply connected to their own, and in the longer term by a 'welfare of the world' orientation (Oceja and Salgado 2013, 128). They are not motivated by a concern for individual strangers, yet development campaigns often centre on stories of (nameless) individuals' suffering. RVs' strongly held beliefs in the issues are informed by their experience of living alongside those in more disadvantaged contexts and generate a desire for social action that has direct, meaningful impact. As Oceja and Salgado (2013) imply, if organisations align their appeal for social action with the motivation of the target audience, it is more likely to generate engagement.

Although the lack of exploitation of RVs' skills and knowledge and ebbing of their direct support is a missed opportunity, it is encouraging that some RVs still find ways to take social action. Organisations like VSO could therefore consider their role as providing the experience, leaving subsequent choices on social action as RVs' responsibility. Maybe this suffices, as the alternative would require organisations to blur the distinction between their core work and supporters' roles, finding new mechanisms, for example, to involve RVs in policy making or strategic decisions.

## **7. Limitations and further research**

The limitations in this study relate to sample selection. The VSO RV residential events are voluntary, attended by those wanting to feedback and meet other RVs, therefore the respondents were self-selected. Contacting RVs not interested in further social action is difficult given they are unlikely to attend such events or respond to requests to participate in research. Incorporating requests for consent for research from the outset of the volunteering experience might increase the potential sample willingness to share their views on their return.

Opportunities for further research relate to the application of theory and greater understanding of specific motivations, such as personal welfare, and their effects on social action. The theoretical frameworks used here could be applied to other research into international volunteering, as could the social psychological approaches to understanding motivations used in other sectors (see Ocejka and Salgado 2013). Also, considerations such as the effect on beliefs about engagement of the responses of others, which definitions of social action suggest are important (Trueman 2015), could be further examined. Finally, there is scope for further research in understanding how this international experience influences social action in RVs' home communities.

**Acknowledgements:** I extend my thanks to my co-researchers from the first part of the study: Nicole Blum (UCL IOE) and Doug Bourn (UCL IOE), VSO, and the returned volunteers.

**Declaration of interest:** The original research was funded by VSO and the subsequent follow up study was un-funded. Although the corresponding author had previously worked as a VSO trainer, at the time of conducting the research this work had ceased. There are therefore no potential conflicts of interest reported on the part of the author or co-researchers.

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