

## An analysis of volunteer motivation: implications for international development

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Through an analysis of VSO volunteers' motivation, this article contributes to debates on the implications of individuals' behaviour within the international development context. The relevance of understanding why individuals 'do VSO' is emphasised, in view of VSO's role as a major agency through which the UK contributes to overseas development objectives. The article reveals that issues of power and powerlessness between the volunteer and their host community in-country may underlie individuals' intentions to become a volunteer. However, individuals' motivation for change in their own life, as well as their wish to build their understanding of the world, might help overcome these issues once in-country. It is suggested that the relationships volunteers establish with local people in-country motivate volunteers to remain active participants within the development process on their return to the UK. In terms of volunteer management, the study reveals not only that it is relevant to contemplate the implications of VSO volunteers' motivations in the context in which they act, but also that the context itself influences their motivation. Of particular relevance is the strength of the partnership between VSO and partner organisations in-country.

### Introduction

#### *Volunteers and volunteering*

*In a purely economic definition volunteering means to work, help or assist for little or no financial compensation (Ehrichs, 2000:2).*

Whilst the economic definition of volunteering covers all volunteers, a distinction can be made between 'domestic' and 'international' volunteers (for the purpose of this study, international volunteers are understood as those from Northern countries that live and work within an overseas community of a Southern country, usually for two years or more). Although neither is primarily working for financial gain, the domestic volunteer fits volunteer work around day-to-day real-life commitments. On the other hand, international volunteers:



*make a total commitment to another culture for a specific term, so that their contribution is not a solitary act or a voluntary donation of their time but rather a distinct period in that individual's life* (Thomas, 2001:22).

Beyond the economistic definition there is actually little consensus on the term 'volunteer' (UNV, 2001). Watts (2002) argues that many definitions of volunteering are value-laden. For example, Ehrichs (2000:2) claims that volunteering 'incorporates a spirit of service, of altruism, of doing good for the sake of it, if not for material reward or even necessarily for recognition or praise'. However, such a claim does not fit with findings of volunteer motivations that suggest it is incorrect to assume that altruism is the main or only reason why individuals volunteer (Wilson and Pimm, 1996) and that motivations relating to personal benefit underpin an individual's decision to volunteer.

The lack of consensus on the term, as well as the difference in opinions about volunteers, reflects a lack of understanding as to why people volunteer. Yet, as will be considered next, it is of particular importance to understand why individuals volunteer.

#### *Volunteers in development*

Volunteers are central to global social and economic development (Korten, 1990). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) cites volunteers as critical partners involved in community empowerment and as 'valuable knowledge brokers, linking know-how with community needs' (UNDP, 2003:4). It is argued that voluntary organisations are among the main agents of grassroots, people-centred and participatory approaches in development work (Ehrichs, 2000).

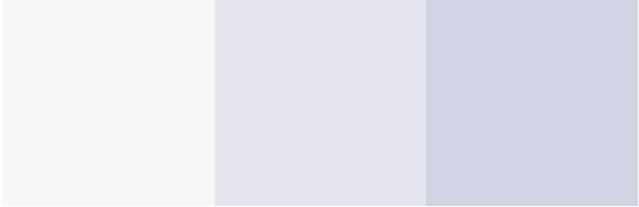
The UK's Department for International Development (DfID) has contributed nearly £30 million to the UK's largest volunteer-sending organisation, VSO, over the last three years (DfID, 2008). On average there are 1,500 VSO volunteers in placement at any one time, with an estimated cost of £15,000 to recruit, train and equip a single volunteer (VSO, 2008). With such considerable investments and because VSO is a major agency through which the UK realises its overseas development work, it is of particular relevance to ensure that VSO's major resource (its volunteers) is understood. Consequently, this study aims to build understanding of international volunteers, specifically of why individuals 'do' VSO.

#### *Defining volunteer motivation*

Before going any further it is important to determine what is meant by the term 'volunteer motivation'. In simple terms, motivation is defined as 'the need or reason for doing something' (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2005*). If, as defined earlier, to volunteer is to work, help or assist for little or no financial compensation then 'volunteer motivation' is understood as the reason for doing that voluntary act.

With deeper consideration, Snyder et al (2000) propose that analyses of motivation need to recognise contextual influences and cite the importance of recognising different phases within the volunteer process. They argue that volunteer motivation should be considered in terms of a potential volunteer's need or reason for seeking out volunteering opportunities, and then their need or reason for committing to and





sustaining that activity. This acknowledges that motivations to start volunteering might differ from motivations to remain a volunteer. The distinction is important as it underlines the necessity not only of recruiting volunteers, but of ensuring they stay – from ‘doer’ to ‘stayer’ (Gaskin, 2003).

Consequently, in this particular study, volunteer motivation will be considered in terms of individuals’ need or reasons for wanting to become a volunteer, and for remaining so once in-country.

#### *Individual volunteers within the broader development context*

A post-modern critique argues that if volunteering is to contribute to transformational change, then voluntary action must recognise that within general motivations to ‘do good’ there are issues of power and powerlessness. It is argued that social responsibility is the ‘soft underbelly of a weird sense of power through which we think ourselves capable of making the world better’ (Illich and Rahnema, 1997:108). In other words, if volunteers are motivated by the idea that they can change the lives of others, this is embedded in the idea that the members of the community they want to work with are powerless to change their own lives without outside help.

Ehrichs (2000) suggests that voluntary action which transforms rejects the notion of an ‘other’. This is characterised by minimum differentials between the volunteer and the local community (that is, integration of the volunteer into the community) and encourages a balance in power between the locals and the volunteer. Ehrichs (2000) argues that changes in organisational discourse are not enough to shift these power imbalances – *individuals’* commitment to truly reciprocal learning relationships are critical.

This suggests that individuals must want to be a part of the process of change if they are to be a valuable part of the development process itself. As Freire (1970:42–43) stated: ‘those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly’. He calls for a process of ‘conscientisation’ that is needed not only to overcome poverty and oppression in the South but also ignorance and ethnocentricity in the North. The idea that personal transformation is a key issue is supported by Watts’s (2002:68) suggestion that international volunteers’ own personal development is essential in overcoming the challenges they face whilst on assignment: ‘[VSO volunteers] should begin the process of empowering the local community by first empowering themselves’.

#### *VSO’s position*

At a strategic level, VSO responds to these debates. Its strategic plan outlines a ‘partnership’ approach in which ‘people of all cultures are seen as equal, learn from each other and share a common sense of rights and responsibilities’ (VSO, 2002:11). It argues that:

*we [VSO] must be willing to listen, learn and collaborate ... this joint endeavour leads to new solutions in achieving shared goals ... we build upon the experience and learning of volunteers to raise awareness of development and global justice*



*issues and achieve policy change in developed countries where much of the power lies (ibid:5).*

Within this, VSO states that its 'volunteers embrace the opportunity for mutual learning because they see personal growth as a key element in effective skill sharing' (VSO, 2003:4).

VSO's discourse recognises the importance of individuals within a development relationship characterised by a balance of power and the value of reciprocal learning and changing. Ehrichs (2000) points out that all too often practice within an organisation does not reflect its own discourse. If this is the case with VSO, its strategies would remain irrelevant. Consequently this study aims to consider whether such values and motivations of wanting to learn and change are reflected throughout the organisation through to the 'front-line' volunteers carrying out VSO's work.

Despite the necessity of considering individuals in development, there is a dearth of research assessing individuals and their motivations within development (Watts, 2005). This has been criticised by Ehrichs, who builds on Edwards's (1999:205) argument that 'the intertwining of the personal, the institutional and the political is as obvious as it is neglected' and suggests that ignoring 'the personal' within 'the array of discourse on development leaves a kind of gaping hole' (Ehrichs, 2000:12).

Understanding why people volunteer is not only important in terms of broader development debates, but also for the effective management of volunteers. Mott (1972) argued that organisational effectiveness results from an organisation's ability to fulfil its members' occupational needs. Where motivations are not rewarded, individuals may become frustrated (*ibid.*). Clarity as to why people volunteer is needed to ease misunderstandings that can compromise effective volunteer management (Liao-Troth and Dunn, 1999). This suggests that VSO would benefit from understanding its volunteers' motivations at management level as well as at strategic level.

## Methodology

This section outlines the overall strategy used to gather and analyse the primary data needed. Reference is made to Unstead-Joss (2005), which provides additional in-depth explanation of this study's sampling, interviewing and analysing procedures.

### *The sample*

Certain factors determined the sample of volunteers available for this study. In view of the importance of looking at individuals' motivations to become as well as remain volunteers and the fact that time constraints ruled out a longitudinal study, in-depth interviews were needed with volunteers who could reflect on their motivations before and during their placement. The most accessible volunteers were those that had completed their placement and returned to the UK – that is, VSO's returned volunteers (RVs). A sample of RVs would also allow volunteers who served in a number of countries to participate, thus controlling for bias that might have occurred otherwise. In total there were twelve interviewees (four female, eight male). One interviewee



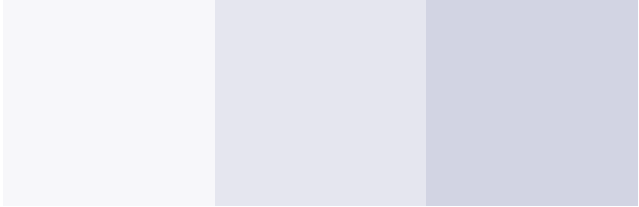
had completed two VSO assignments. Table 2.1 gives the details of the interviewees including the date they were interviewed and the region of the world they served in.

*Table 2.1: Interviewee details*

RV	Date of interview	Gender	Interview location	Obtained through	Region of overseas placement	Age at beginning of placement	Years since placement completed
1.	27.6.05	Female	University	Personal contact	Africa	28	1
2.	28.6.05	Male	University	Personal contact	Asia	25	19
3.	29.6.05	Female	University	Personal contact	Asia	33	5
4.	4.7.05	Female	Own office	RV Network	Africa	27	2
5.	5.7.05	Male	University	RV Network	Africa	25	14
6.	5.7.05	Male	University	RV Network	SE Asia Asia	37 46	14 6
7.	6.7.05	Male	University	Personal contact	SE Asia	37	2
8.	6.7.05	Male	Own office	RV Network	Africa	31	4
9.	7.7.05	Male	Own office	RV Network	Africa	30	1
10.	7.7.05	Female	Home	RV Network	Asia	50	3
11.	8.7.05	Male	University	RV Network	SE Asia	30	2
12.	8.7.05	Male	University	RV Network	Africa	30	2

Asking no-longer-active volunteers about their thoughts and feelings concerning their experiences as a volunteer some years previously could affect the research's validity (Punch, 2001). In drawing conclusions from the analysis the reader needs to be aware that the interviewees' reflections on their motivations to become volunteers might be affected by hindsight. For instance, outcomes from the experience might influence volunteers' memories of their motivations prior to departure (for example, the fact that a volunteer's self-esteem grew through the experience might lead them to think this had been an original motivation to become a volunteer, even if this was not the case). The issue of the reliability of memory could be a particular problem for volunteers who had returned some time ago.





Even though RVs' reflections might be influenced by hindsight, there is particular benefit arising from the time they have had to reflect on their experience and the fact that they are partially removed from the responsibilities they had in their placement. Individuals who no longer need to demonstrate their competence and abilities to do a job might be able to reflect more 'honestly' on their motivations than individuals who still have responsibilities within VSO.

### *Interview*

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were held of roughly an hour in length. Each interviewee consented to having their interview tape-recorded. Notes were made during the interview. To gain interviewees' trust, they were told that the data would be used in a manner that would respect anonymity and confidentiality. Owing to time constraints interviewees could only be interviewed once.

Interviewees were told that the interview 'aimed to capture an honest reflection of their motivations to become volunteers, their motivations to remain once in-country and their suggestions for volunteer management in maintaining volunteer motivation'. The interview fell naturally into these three sections. Unstead-Joss (2005) provides a comprehensive account of how the interviews were managed.

### *Analysis*

The systematic and disciplined analysis was guided by Miles and Huberman's (1994) Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis. Transcribing key elements of dialogue from each interview allowed RVs' thoughts and feelings to be represented in their own words and encouraged transparency in the analysis. To counteract the criticism that data reduction can sometimes lead to a disjointed view that fails to recognise the whole story (Punch, 2001), whole segments of dialogue were transcribed rather than small sentences.

During the transcription process the data was coded. This meant that, where possible, aspects mentioned by the interviewees were categorised into the motivational functions outlined by Clary et al (1998) (as shown in Table 2.2). Unstead-Joss (2005) provides an in-depth analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of using these functions.



*Table 2.2: Definitions of motivational functions (Clary et al, 1998)*

Function	Distinguishing elements of the function
<b>Values</b>	To express important values Feeling it is important to help others
<b>Understanding</b>	Seeking to learn more about the world A chance to exercise skills and abilities that might otherwise go unpractised
<b>Social</b>	To be with like-minded people To be engaged in an activity viewed favourably by important others
<b>Career</b>	To explore different career options To look good on one's CV
<b>Protection</b>	To reduce guilt over being more fortunate than others To help address personal problems
<b>Enhancement</b>	For personal growth To develop 'psychologically'

During the transcription process, memoing took place. This involved recording ideas that came to my mind as they occurred, such as making notes on how easy it was to categorise dialogue into functions. As Miles and Huberman (1994) explain, coding and memoing allowed meaning to be generated through the data and helped patterns to emerge.

Miles and Huberman (1994) stress a meticulous process of data reduction, data display and developing propositions. Generating and analysing through data displays as described in Unstead-Joss (2005) allowed systematic examination of similarities and dissimilarities between interviewees. Not only did the process draw out certain themes, it also highlighted the complexity of the findings. Consequently, over-categorisation could remove the data from its rich context. In turn, it was necessary to present an analytical dialogue that recognised and retained the context as it drew out major themes, commonalities and differences among respondents. This dialogue forms the main body of the analysis in the next section of this article.

## Analysis: VSO volunteers' motivations

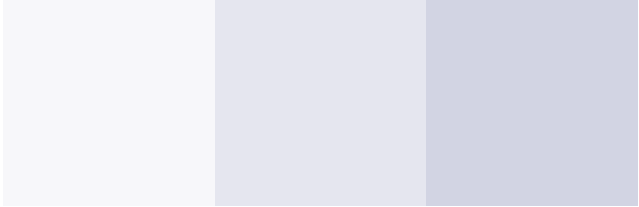
The following analysis is organised into three sections: motivations to become a VSO, motivations to remain a VSO, and suggestions for volunteer management.

### *Motivations to become a VSO volunteer*

#### **Values and wanting to get away**

The interviews showed that people were motivated to volunteer due to inherent values such as wanting to help people. However, reasons why people wanted to help through VSO varied. For some, values related to the way VSO conducts its development work:





*What motivated me to join VSO was the fact that they responded to requests by countries themselves. There are many organisations I wouldn't work for because they have this pre-set agenda of what they think development should be (RV7).*

RVs mentioned wanting to reject a surrounding context into which they felt their values did not fit. The following RV referred to a rejection of Western materialism:

*I think there was rejection and escaping of Western materialism ... I feel a bit semi-detached from life here. I think a lot of the concerns and values we have are a bit skewed (RV6).*

Whereas RV5 referred to a rejection of a particular political climate:

*If you look at the date: 1989, Thatcher. I suspect for a lot of people Britain wasn't a very nice place to live in at that point. So I think part of my motives were that I just didn't want to live in Britain for a while, because it was quite oppressive and not particularly pleasant in many ways (RV5).*

For others it was a rejection of the corporate culture in which the individual was originally working:

*I felt an enormous sense of guilt ... I wanted to give something back in a different way rather than lining the corporate pocket. I think that was a key motivation (RV4).*

From this, it is noticeable that, for some people, values relate to a philosophy of effective development practice; for others it is a rejection of a governmental policy; and for yet others it is a way to work in a climate in which they felt more comfortable. Despite the different values and ideals, in these instances motivations were forcing people away from the UK rather than pulling them overseas.

For some, leaving the UK and wanting a change was stronger than a feeling of wanting to help others:

*I suppose you could say I was running away actually ... this seemed like an ideal way to do it, and to use my skills and do something useful at the same time (RV3).*

It is difficult to determine whether some motivations were stronger than others. It might be a combination of motivations at one time that propels someone to apply to volunteer. For example, the following RV was responding to the question: 'Which do you think was a stronger motivation, personal reasons or the desire to help other people?':

*I don't think the two are entirely distinct. There are some personal reasons which are to do with wanting a change etc; some personal reasons which are to do with wanting to help other people; there are some non-personal reasons which are to do with wanting to help other people. The two shade and merge into one another. I think everybody has complex motivations for doing something as radical [as VSO] (RV5).*



## Career change

Some volunteers wanted to do VSO because it would help them with future careers within the development sector:

*I basically wanted to get into international development ... I don't know whether I went thinking this was the start of a career, I just wanted to see if it was something I was interested in doing (RV1).*

For some it was a 'career break', providing time away from the situation in which they found themselves working within the UK. This suggests that, for some volunteers, dissatisfaction with a current job was a motivation to volunteer:

*It came at a time when I was dissatisfied with my job, when I was looking for a new challenge ... it was part of a career change (RV1).*

## Personal growth

Although dissatisfaction with ideals and jobs were reasons why people wanted to leave the UK, why did they want to go to a 'developing' rather than a 'developed' country? People's wish for personal growth underpinned their decision on where they went overseas. By going to a developing country, as opposed to another developed country, RVs explained that this would satisfy their wish for a 'challenge' and/or an 'adventure':

*I needed a new challenge. Life where I was living in a pleasant little village in Devon was too easy. No challenges (RV10).*

*... a sense of adventure as well. In that if you're going to do that [work overseas] you might as well do that in the most challenging way possible (RV12).*

A particular reason RVs mentioned as important in motivating them to volunteer was a wish 'to travel'. When asked what they thought travelling would give them, as described above, learning more about the world was important and this was linked to personal development:

*I felt that by learning about the world, about gaining understanding of other cultures, other ways of living, I could improve personally. It gives you ideas about a way of living with different priorities that you might not have been exposed to before and you can take the good of other cultures and take them into your own life to make you a better person (RV2).*

## Seeking to learn more about the world in a particular way

All twelve RVs mentioned that one motivation to become a volunteer was a wish to be immersed in a local community. They felt that VSO allowed them to be more immersed than if they went overseas as a tourist or as a highly paid expatriate worker. This motivation was related to two key values: one was the moral issue of earning a lot of money in a developing country; the other related to wanting to learn about a new culture and a different way of life:



*You could see even then that British expats going to work in a different country, earning huge amounts of money wasn't going to be very good for the developing country ... that's not terribly moral ... that was undeniably a big factor (RV5).*

*I find it very hypocritical to go and work for an organisation in the development sector and to expect to be paid UK wages ... You're doing something to learn. With VSO, I kind of quite like the idea, they use the word 'sharing' - 'sharing skills, changing lives'. The fact that it wasn't just a one way thing ... I felt I was going there to learn as much I would give (RV7).*

## **Social**

RVs disagreed with suggestions that they might apply to VSO in order to be held in high regard by others:

*I guess you do what you think is right and in some sort of way there is a selfish element in there that you want to be recognised as somebody who does things that they think is right ... but it wasn't a major thing (RV8).*

*No, not before I went. If there were any thoughts like that before I went it was the opposite. Fear of when I came back [to the UK] it would be detrimental to my career (RV12).*

It was only when RVs were asked if meeting people was a reason for becoming a VSO that they agreed it was. It was not something they mentioned voluntarily. This is in contrast to those elements of the social function that were voluntarily mentioned under the heading of motivations to remain a volunteer, as discussed next.

### *Motivations to remain a VSO volunteer*

The following section considers volunteers' motivations in-country. As part of the analysis it considers the frustrations that RVs faced in-country and the motivation that lay behind their commitment to remain a volunteer.

## **Social**

All RVs reported motivations to remain a VSO that reflected 'social' factors. For instance, RVs felt a sense of responsibility towards the local community, as one interviewee who had been teaching explained:

*As well as the original motivations, I think that you add some about feeling a responsibility to your colleagues and your students in the school. So you get personal links and connections, you don't want to let people down (RV5).*

Of particular importance to the motivation to stay was being with like-minded people – in this case, other Westerners. This was reflected in the difficulties volunteers had integrating with the local community and the closer relationship they had with other expatriates:



*I think there are always limits on how close you get to local people and the relationships can be a bit strange ... Sometimes you can be denigrated, treated like nothing or ridiculed, and at the other end of the scale you can be treated like royalty. And really you want something in between in which you have respect but not awe nor something much much worse (RV11).*

*You need someone that you can communicate with, someone from a similar country. With all the will in the world it was not possible to communicate at that level with my two friends in [the village where she lived] ... there's something important about talking to people in a similar situation that you can relate to (RV3).*

Despite the difficulties in integrating with local people, motivations to remain did involve friendship with the local community, something RVs suggested they had not expected prior to departure:

*I actually stayed there for six years ... by the end of the placement I actively wanted to stay in Bangladesh because of the friends I'd made mainly ... Yes, I wanted to meet new people, but to be honest, in my head I'd never expected to make such good friends with Bangladeshi people in the village (RV3).*

Friendship with locals was not only important in keeping volunteers motivated whilst in-country, but kept RVs motivated to remain in contact with communities and projects after their return to the UK:

*In the first six months they [her colleagues] didn't know me and I didn't know them and the culture is very different and it takes a long time ... but they were a great support and a great help. By the time we left we were great mates. And I've been out since to visit them all ... In fact it's still ongoing [the project she set up] and that's because I became very fond of everybody (RV10).*

### **Motivation in the face of frustrations**

Motivations that had been important in an individual's decision to become a volunteer remained evident in-country and were valuable in dealing with the frustrations they faced. The following RV described the difficulties of living in the overseas community and how she had remained motivated through a sense of determination related to pride:

*For the first three months, I kept weighing up whether I should go home or not, and I kept thinking, 'What am I doing here? I'm in this town, people are telling me to f--- off, they're throwing things at me, I don't really know anybody, I feel really lonely.' I got quite sick, I got intestinal parasites and felt a bit sorry for myself really ... and thought well maybe I should just go back and put this down to experience, but I think it was pride. I didn't want to admit defeat (RV4).*

The above RV's reference to pride was linked to her self-esteem. For others, pride related to the judgements of other people at home:



*[We stayed due to] partly stubbornness really. We'd decided we were going to stay for two years and so we were going to ... I think if I'd gone after three months, I would've felt embarrassed by the whole thing (RV8).*

One particular frustration was when placements turned out to be very different from what the volunteer had expected:

*At nine months my enthusiasm had slipped slightly, because I felt that my colleagues didn't quite understand why I was there. It seemed to me that VSO hadn't prepared them or explained the purpose of me being there (RV7).*

This particular volunteer maintained motivation as he began to understand cultural differences and recognised that his work as a teacher was of value:

*The longer I stayed the more I began to understand why ... I tried to put myself in their shoes ... so my attitude changed towards them ... Plus students seemed to be getting a lot out of my work. They found my teaching style interesting, useful for their purposes (RV7).*

This suggests that a volunteer's commitment can be regained once they begin to recognise and understand the local organisation's own motives, thus underlining the importance of wanting to learn. One response to the question 'Was there a motivation to stay to find out more?' was:

*Yes definitely, and to try and understand it really ... I just couldn't believe that we were part of the same planet ... It really shocked me to see the state of Ethiopia which is only a nine hour plane ride away ... I think that was another motivation to stay (RV4).*

Volunteers also remained motivated by the wish to stay away from the UK:

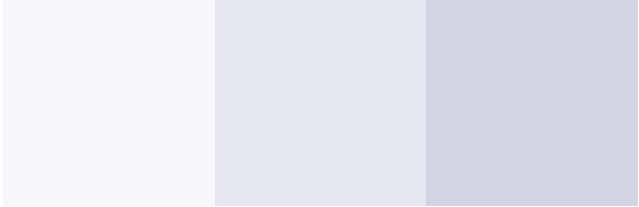
*I felt for life in Britain to be sustained, it abuses many countries around the world and I didn't feel like I wanted to go back to Britain to lead a comfortable life in Britain on the back of suffering around the world, so that was another motivation for me to stay longer (RV7).*

Particularly demotivating for some volunteers had been a feeling that their work was not of value:

*Local people had particular expectations that weren't really met [through my placement]... In that sense I didn't feel like I was providing something that they wanted, which was a bit demotivating (RV8).*

*I think that's one of the main reasons why people go home, because they think they're wasting their time and believe that their time could be spent better somewhere else (RV4).*





RVs suggested that this frustration was due to mismatches in motivation between the local organisation and the volunteer. Such frustrations were difficult to solve through RVs' own motivation and it was this mismatch between the local organisation and the volunteer that RVs referred to in their suggestions for volunteer management, as will be considered next.

### *Suggestions for volunteer management*

In response to the question 'What can be done to help maintain volunteers' motivation in-country?' interviewees suggested that VSO London's management practice worked well:

*I think VSO do a lot of the right things. They hold a lot of preparation sessions, a lot of workshops before leaving to make sure that you realise what you're letting yourself in for. And in the interview process they question your motives. So I think they do most of that pretty well (RV7).*

Suggestions for improvement focused on in-country practice, and consequently the following section responds to this. It draws on themes from the data, looking first at the importance of social reasons and leading from this, at practice that could ease the frustrations experienced in-country.

### **Matching organisation and volunteer motives**

In maintaining motivation, RVs found an annual conference organised by in-country VSO offices particularly useful. Its value lay in its ability to bring volunteers together, responding to the fact that relationships with other Westerners are particularly important. In countries where local organisations were not involved in the conference, RVs saw this as a missed opportunity through which the local organisation could have begun to understand VSO and its volunteers' motives. The following volunteer reflected on the benefit of conferences jointly run by VSO and the local organisation:

*I found them [co-run workshops] much more useful in conveying what VSO volunteers were about and it helped the local organisations and VSO to work together rather than having separate agendas (RV7).*

The relationship between VSO and the partner organisation was seen as integral to reducing the mismatches in motivations between partner organisations and volunteers. VSO's understanding of the local organisation's priorities, as well as the local organisation's own understanding of VSO, was seen as important:

*It's about VSO working with the organisations rather than the organisations having something done to them. I think it needs to be seen as more of a collaboration, rather than these people [VSOs and VSO staff] being flown in and flown out (RV4).*

Aside from changes in policy and practice, RVs have their own responsibilities in contributing to local organisations' understanding of volunteers' motives:



*By talking to them, informal feedback with your line manager, your colleagues, the person who actually set up the placement or more formal feedback through the placement reports and through VSO Programme Office (RV8).*

Personal and professional qualities other than motivation also need consideration if placements are to be effective:

*I'm not sure if it's motivation that's a factor in being effective in volunteers' work, I think it's a lot of things. I think a lot of it is your preparation for it ... and your ability to adapt, and your confidence in yourself and your professional skills (RV3).*

### Summary

The analysis shows that people's motivations to volunteer are mixed. Motivations involve expressing important values, learning about the world, personal development, seeking an 'adrenalin rush' or challenge, as well as escaping negative feelings. There are distinctions between individuals within these main themes.

Although people did not say that they were initially volunteering for social reasons (either to be viewed favourably by others or to meet like-minded people), social reasons underpinned their motivation to remain a volunteer once in-country. Although there were difficulties in integrating with the local community, friendships with locals did emerge and have lasted after the volunteers' return to the UK. The original motivations that had triggered people to volunteer remained evident in-country and kept volunteers motivated in the face of frustrations.

In terms of volunteer management, RVs feel that VSO already does a lot to help maintain motivation but that more could be done to address the key frustration of mismatched motivations between the local organisation and volunteers. Suggestions for improving understanding between VSO and the local organisation focused on the relationship between the two organisations, as well as the responsibilities of volunteers themselves.

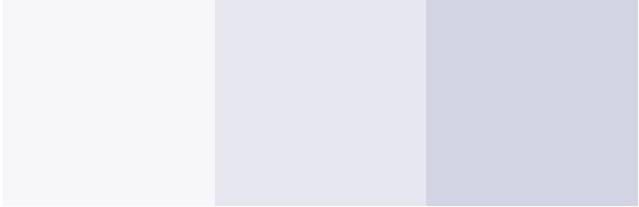
Now that the analysis has determined what the motivations of volunteers are, the final part of this article considers these findings within the context of international development.

## Discussion: motivations in context

### *Implications of motivations to become a volunteer*

The analysis suggests that issues of power may be evident in people's initial motivations to volunteer. For example, the fact that one aspect of wanting to volunteer relates to feelings about being more fortunate than others might indicate the sense of power associated with thinking oneself capable of making the world better (Illich and Rahnema, 1997). Furthermore, the analysis showed that prior to volunteering, volunteers did not expect to become good friends with local people. Is this evidence of a volunteer's notion of an 'other', which Ehrichs (2000) claims has no place in voluntary action that transforms? This might indicate a volunteer's sense of detachment from the host community before they arrive.





In addition to these findings, however, the analysis indicates that VSO volunteers want to learn and change through their experience. Evidence of volunteers wanting to learn more about the world and to grow personally suggests that Ehrichs's (2000) assumption that volunteers are solely driven by altruism is inaccurate. The motivations found in this study correspond with Ehrichs's (2000) and Freire's (1970) call for reciprocal learning relationships within the process of change and 'conscientisation'. In turn, whilst there might be issues of power in people's initial motivations to volunteer, the fact that people want to change might indicate that they can still be effective agents of change.

#### *Implications of motivations to remain a volunteer*

Once in-country, volunteers found it hard to integrate, and differences between themselves and the local community and local organisation affected their commitment. The findings reflect those of Watts (2002) and suggest that volunteers feel a sense of detachment from locals and that this affects their motivation.

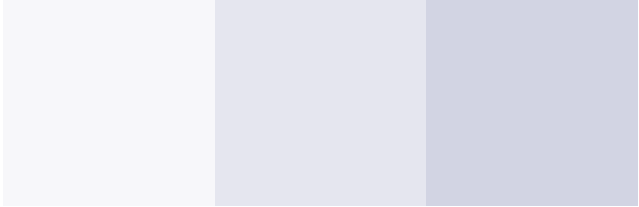
The analysis shows that volunteers' initial motivations to learn and grow help them in-country. Indeed, the frustrations volunteers face in-country appear to satisfy their search for a challenge. The value of VSO's two-year placements, as opposed to a shorter time frame, perhaps lies in the opportunity they provide for volunteers to face the challenge of understanding the perspective of local organisations and of people within the community. Is it only with time that these volunteers could truly become an effective part of the process of change and conscientisation that Ehrichs (2000) and Freire (1970) call for? If so, this may have implications for the way VSO manages its shorter-term volunteering programmes and further research would be needed.

The retrospective nature of this investigation provided a valuable insight into the motivations of volunteers after their return to the UK. The analysis indicates that despite difficulties in-country, volunteers do make friends with locals and remain in contact with them once they have returned to the UK. This would correspond with the importance Freire (1970) places on overcoming ignorance and ethnocentricity in the North and with VSO's own emphasis on the influence volunteers have on their return to the UK (VSO, 2002).

#### *The influence of the context on motivation*

RVs' suggestions for volunteer management practice focused on the frustrations they faced in-country. Although individuals' drive to grow and change helped them overcome frustrations, RVs felt that VSO and the partner organisation also had a role to play in tackling these issues. The analysis indicated that the key frustration volunteers faced was a mismatch between their own motivations and those of the partner organisation they were working with. This suggests that within the process of change, organisational practice influences individuals' reciprocal learning relationships. Consequently, whilst this study's original intention was to consider volunteers' motivations in the context within which they act, it has revealed that the context itself has implications for volunteers' motivation. The relationship indicates that, as Edwards (1999) suggests, the personal and institutional are intertwined.





As Fowler (1998) suggests, effective partnerships are characterised by a balance of power between partner organisations rather than individuals alone, and like other relationships in development are characterised by mutual learning and changing. Consequently, for VSO, which consistently refers to its partnerships with local organisations (VSO, 2002; VSO, 2003), not only is it important to determine whether individual volunteers' behaviour is in accordance with the reciprocal learning relationships necessary for transformational change, but future investigation is needed to consider the strengths of its organisational partnerships.

### *Conclusion*

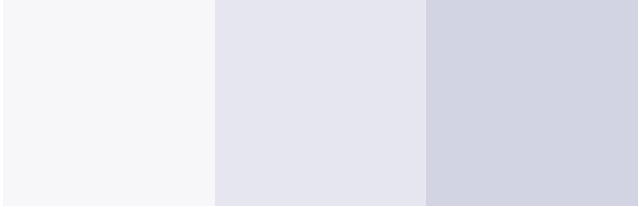
It was the aim of the study to build understanding of what motivates individuals to become and remain VSO volunteers, and to contribute to the understanding of international volunteers' motivations within the context of a post-modern critique of development. This study's findings revealed that although motivations prior to departure are in accordance with the reciprocal learning relationships and mutually enabling relationships called for within development, the volunteers' sense of detachment from the communities they are going to could reinforce issues of power and powerlessness between themselves and the local community. Although volunteers have difficulty integrating with the local community, their prime motivation to change and learn helps them overcome the difficulties they face. Consequently, volunteers do build lasting relationships with locals and in turn the volunteers' role within the development context continues on their return to the UK.

The study has revealed that it is not only relevant to contemplate the implications of volunteers' motivation within the context in which they act, but that the context itself influences their motivation. Suggested themes for future research include the importance of acknowledging the influence of organisational policy and practice on individuals within the development process.

In terms of volunteer management, the study shows the value of a volunteering programme that challenges volunteers to learn and grow. Further discussion is needed to consider the practical value of these findings in terms of how VSO recruits prospective volunteers, and how it supports volunteers before, during and after their overseas placement. It is relevant to note that, as the RVs stressed themselves, other personal qualities aside from motivation, such as professional skills, underpin the impact of a volunteer. Volunteer management practice would benefit not only from understanding motivation, but also the relevant personal and professional qualities.

Future research would benefit from drawing on different samples and research methodologies. For example, the findings from this study were generated from a sample of volunteers who looked back on their VSO experience fondly, had completed their placements and wanted to share the experience as part of the study. The transferability of these findings to all volunteers is limited by the fact that the motivations found here might solely relate to individuals who remained involved with VSO on their return to the UK. Future research would benefit from a comparison of this study's findings with the motivations of volunteers who were unhappy or left their placement early. Additional research would also need to control for any age, gender





and ethnicity biases that might be evident in this study. Consideration also needs to be paid to VSO's increasing work through volunteers who go overseas for less than two years, as well as to South-South volunteers. Unstead-Joss (2005) considers further relevant research that involves different stakeholders within the development partnership (such as partner organisations and beneficiary communities) and uses perspectives other than the largely socio-psychological one that has informed this study.

Finally, the study's importance lies in its ability to provide a new depth of understanding of international volunteers' motivation; and its relevance in reminding us of the centrality of individuals within the broader development context.

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