

# Returned Volunteers and Engagement with Development

## Final Report for VSO Longitudinal study

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## **DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION RESEARCH CENTRE**

The Development Education Research Centre was established at the Institute of Education, University of London in 2006 with funding from the Department of International Development (DFID). It acts as the hub for knowledge generation, new thinking and quality output on development education. Its aims are: to embed development education within mainstream education policy and research, and to ensure the long-term impact of development education and its contribution to DFID. The Centre is responsible for organising a range of events and conferences, conducting research and consultancy, running a Masters degree course on development education, supervising a team of doctoral students and producing a range of reports, academic articles on books relevant to the aims of the Centre (<http://www.ioe.ac.uk/research/150.html>).

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Development Education Research Centre of the Institute of Education was commissioned by VSO to undertake a longitudinal study of how returned volunteers (RVs) take forward their enthusiasms, skills, passions and learning from their placement once back in the UK or Ireland.

Following an initial baseline study with 49 Returned Volunteers (RVs) in May 2009 via a questionnaire, 21 RVs were each interviewed three times between July 2009 and April 2010. In addition, the research team conducted a series of discussions over the course of the research with staff from VSO in order to compare data gathered with other known evidence. The main themes from these interviews are given below and compared with other existing published research on international volunteers.

### ***1. Diversity of RVs' experiences and interests***

One of the key messages emerging from the research was that each volunteer's experience is individual and there are many interesting personal stories to tell. The complexity of each individual's particular experience in relation to their expectations, their work and life situations before and after the VSO experience, contributes to a varied picture of how and whether the RVs are using their VSO experience in development awareness work. Comments from the interviews suggest that many RVs would like VSO to recognise and understand these diverse needs and interests.

### ***2. Prioritising development awareness through work***

Overall, the RVs in this study perceived that the emphasis at the RV weekend was on ways of engaging with development awareness outside of work (e.g. through presentations at schools or to community groups, or engagement in campaigns). However, many RVs stated that they are more interested in using their experience within their work. Some either did VSO with the explicit aim of entering a career in development work (e.g. some of the YfD volunteers) or have decided to work in this or a related area on their return. Those RVs now working for a diaspora group organisation or an international charity/ NGO, for example, feel that this is sufficient involvement in development awareness. They expressed little interest in getting involved in additional activities. Many also noted that they simply did not have the time to do so.

This strong link between VSO experiences and employment is partly explained by the reality that finding work is the main priority for many RVs on their return. It also seems to indicate a feeling that this is one of the best ways of using their experiences, as RVs are more confident about sharing their experiences using their professional skills and working within familiar environments.

### ***3. Complexity and challenges in development awareness work***

RVs consulted for this research overwhelmingly stated that they do not wish to simplify and stereotype the experiences of people in developing countries,

but rather to communicate the complexity of the people's lives that they lived and worked alongside. RVs know that poverty and deprivation are realities, but also say that this is not the full or only story. They also want to be able to stress, for example, that equality of opportunity is a key issue. Many RVs also felt that they needed time after returning to the UK to sort out their own feelings about and views on development before they would be able to effectively engage in development awareness activities. A few felt that they had still not come to firm conclusions about this by the time of the last round of interviews. As a result, many of the RVs interviewed were uncomfortable with being involved in fundraising or campaigns.

In many cases, these concerns were compounded by RVs' negative experiences of attempting to communicate with friends and family about their time as volunteers. They described how friends and family listened, but then asked questions which indicated that they had not really understood. RVs also pointed out that people often already have strong images of starvation and deprivation from the media which they associate with particular countries (for example, Ethiopia) which makes understanding harder to achieve.

#### ***4. Returned Volunteers and involvement in development awareness***

RVs mentioned a wide range of ways in which they are currently engaged. As indicated above, the list is more varied than those things that RVs believe VSO would define as 'development awareness'. In some cases there was uncertainty about what kinds of things would 'count' as development awareness. Examples of activities that RVs are currently doing (other than the professional activities outlined above) included (i) personal communication (with friends, family and colleagues, either face-to-face or online), (ii) working for charities and NGOs (including VSO) to fundraise and respond to appeals, (iii) helping friends and contacts back in their placement (e.g. fundraising and development for particular projects or sponsoring people through education), (iv) joining organisations or networks (for VSO and other organisations), (v) giving presentations to schools and community groups, (vi) undertaking further professional development (e.g. Masters' courses, etc.), and (vii) creative initiatives (e.g. writing a book about their experiences, organising a photo exhibition).

Most frequently, RVs expressed an interest in getting involved in activities for which they felt they had the right skills and abilities. Trained teachers, for example, were more likely to be willing to work with school groups than those who had limited experience of working in those settings. Those involved in other professional areas were more likely to see their contribution to development awareness as part of their work, for example, by talking about their experiences with colleagues, writing in academic journals or professional publications, or seeking funding to continue working on research projects with colleagues back in their placement. As noted above, some RVs were hesitant about becoming involved with campaigns (for VSO or other organisations) either because they are generally uncomfortable with this (and especially with fundraising) or because they want to have more settled feelings about international development and aid before doing so.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, this research indicates that RVs have a commitment to securing a more just and equitable world, as well as a strong sense of solidarity with peoples of the Global South. The individuals interviewed all wanted to make a difference and believed that their placements had not only been valuable and rewarding for them personally, but had also hopefully made a positive contribution to the communities where they worked. Many were prepared to be involved in VSO promotional events, and to help with training and support for other VSOs and RVs. A considerable number had developed informal networks with RVs they had met during their placement or via other VSO events. All of these points suggest that the RVs interviewed are good ambassadors for the work of VSO.

While the RVs engaged in this study had many positive comments to make about their experiences of working with VSO, the interviews also highlighted areas where VSO could consider altering or supplementing its work. In particular, RVs outlined a range of diverse experiences of working with VSO, as well as ways of wanting to put that experience to use. A number of those interviewed felt that VSO should provide more support for those who use their VSO experiences as part of their work and professional development, or who are interested in other, less recognised ways of engaging in development awareness (e.g. as outlined in section 4 above). RVs would also welcome guidance from VSO about how to more effectively communicate the complexities of development, as well as to help them develop deeper understandings of development and aid more generally.

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## 1.0 Introduction

There have been a number of research studies in the UK and internationally about the impact of international volunteering on personal awareness, increased social and political engagement, and skills development. However, there has to date been little work which looks at the impact on the volunteer over a period of time.

With regard to raising awareness of development issues, for instance, there is considerable evidence of the impact of volunteering in terms of promoting a more global outlook and a desire to make a difference upon their return (cf. Machin 2008). Evidence from research by Bourn (2007) and Thomas (2001) suggests that Returned Volunteers (RVs) possess a passion and have developed confidence to influence others to understand the global nature of our lives.

In VSO's 2005 survey of volunteers, 60% of RVs said they had been actively using their volunteering experience in raising development awareness (VSO 2006). Mackenzie's (2006) research showed that many volunteers participate in development awareness activities to share with others the understandings, perceptions and possibly also the values that they have gained from their VSO experience.

Machin (2008) in her important study for VSO suggests that volunteers return to the UK with greater awareness and understanding of cultural differences, which are often deployed through support for VSO's global education and advocacy initiatives or by sharing that learning in UK classrooms, work places or the local community. She also notes that there is a need for further research in a number of areas, particularly in terms of the ways in which volunteers develop their understanding and awareness of other people and places and the impact of development awareness activities and perspectives on colleagues.

From the range of studies conducted by VSO and others, therefore, there appears to be significant enthusiasm, motivation and desire for greater social and political engagement amongst RVs. We also know from anecdotal evidence that for many RVs the volunteering experience has resulted in changes in lifestyle and a desire to see a more just and sustainable world (Bourn 2007).

More widely, within the fields of development and global education and development awareness, there is today increased interest in the relationship of learning to action and behavioural change (Bourn 2008a, Vare and Scott 2008). There has been little research on the relationships between learning, experience and action in terms of building awareness and understanding of global and development issues (Scheunpflug and Asbrand 2006). What is clear, however, is that the traditional notion of moving in a simple linear progression from awareness to learning to action is not accurate. People's engagement in development issues may start in a variety of places – for example, from travel, contact with friends and family, training and professional



development at work, or informal learning. It may also start from the influence of media or personal action as a consumer. For VSO and the experience of RVs therefore a critical issue is: where and how does an increased understanding take place and where is it related to other factors such as lifestyle, work and broader learning? To what extent is personal motivation and enthusiasm an ongoing influence or are there other factors that come into play over a period of time?

## **2.0 Aims of the Research**

Given the lack of literature looking at how volunteers use their experience over a longer period of time after their return home, the aims of this research were to:

- understand RVs' changing motivations to raise development awareness in the UK (or Ireland) once they have returned from their overseas placement
- map the timeline and changing nature of their engagement in raising awareness and understanding of development and global issues over a period of time (1 year )
- identify trends and themes as to the profiles and forms of involvement from the RVs in development awareness activities.

This was done through a longitudinal study with an identified grouping of RVs from a range of ages, backgrounds and programmes in order to identify the framework and basis for indicators for long-term engagement in raising awareness on development.

The analysis outlined in this report provides insight into what happens to the RVs' enthusiasm and passion for global social change when they return home. It aims to look at the different themes and forms of engagement RVs take and to what extent these are influenced by their VSO placement compared to other influences in their lives.

The research also aimed to provide some pointers to VSO as to how to offer more tailored opportunities for RVs to engage with development awareness work in ways that match RVs' priorities, interests and time commitments. During the course of the study, VSO became increasingly interested in how the evidence gained could assist the organisation in identifying the most effective support to RVs in terms of building awareness of international development in the UK. From this it is also hoped that the study will help to identify specific competencies for RVs' engagement with development awareness and therefore provide potential frameworks and models for future UK programmes.

### 3.0 Methodology Undertaken

An initial baseline study was conducted via a questionnaire completed by 49 RVs at the May 2009 RV weekend at Harborne Hall. A profile of the respondents and a copy of the questionnaire are included in the appendices.

From these questionnaires 24 individuals were identified to take part in the follow up interviews. The group was mainly self-selecting in that 35 of the 49 who filled in the forms offered to take part in follow up interviews. Of these 35, the final 24 identified were chosen in order to ensure that the study covered a range of ages, ethnicities, skill areas, types of VSO programme and quality of responses within initial questionnaires. For example those who gave more detailed answers tended to be chosen over those who gave one word replies. In the end, we were able to interview only 21 of the RVs as two were travelling or overseas during most or all of the time of the interviews and one person did not respond to emails.

It also should be noted that it is likely that those RVs who came to the Harborne Hall weekend were more likely to be people who were more self-reflective and interested in follow up engagement from their VSO experiences.

The first round of interviews, each lasting approximately 30-45 minutes, were conducted over the phone in July and August 2009. At this time, the RVs had been back from their placements anywhere between 2 and 12 months. The second round of interviews was completed by the end of December 2009, and the third and final round of interviews in March and April 2010. Following discussions with VSO staff, a few specific issues were identified as helpful to include in the third round of interviews, so the questions were expanded slightly to accommodate these.

The interviews were semi-structured in order to allow the RVs to expand and comment upon their own personal and professional lives in ways that were relevant to them. Key areas of questioning were about RVs' perspectives on their VSO experiences, their current or planned engagement with development awareness raising activities, and the perceived impact of VSO on their personal and professional lives. (The full list of questions is provided in the appendices.) The telephone interviews generated a large body of valuable data and evidence. All of the participants in the research gave their time willingly and freely, and many of them also stated how much they valued the research and the opportunity to reflect upon the impact of their VSO experiences.

Notes were taken during each interview and sent to the RV for checking and additions, and each RV was also asked for their permission for the notes to be used in the final report. Those included in the following report are used with permission from the RVs concerned and every effort has been made to preserve their anonymity.

It is also worth noting at this point the social and economic context within which the volunteers returned to the UK and in which the interviews were

conducted, particularly because 2008 and 2009 witnessed the biggest economic crisis to hit the UK since the 1930s. Employment opportunities were limited, there was increased insecurity about the global economy, and above all there was widespread public disquiet with the global finance sector. This meant that for many of the RVs, the economic situation in the UK was very different when they came back to when they went away. The impact of this changed social and economic situation varied according to where individual RVs were in terms of their career. For the younger RVs interviewed, for instance, getting a job in development proved to be more difficult, while for older or semi-retired RVs this was much less of a concern.

Finally, the research team had a number of conversations with staff from VSO over the course of the project. This included discussions of the draft interim report and summary of the main themes report with a view to comparing evidence that had emerged with other known research within VSO and other bodies.

#### **4.0 Key Issues in Research on International Volunteering**

There has been little published material in the English language that is directly concerned with how those involved in volunteering overseas make use of their experience on their return in terms of development awareness. Machin's (2008) study for VSO in the UK on the impact of volunteering is therefore the main reference point for this research. There have also been other short-term studies in the UK (cf. Mackenzie 2006), however, it should be noted that these studies look only at evidence from a particular point in time.

There is, however, also a broader literature on volunteering, mainly from North America, which focuses on a range of issues which are also relevant to this study. This includes motivations for volunteering, the range of organisations involved in volunteering, different definitions of volunteering, and assessments of the impacts of volunteering on individual volunteers and their communities in terms of health benefits and other similar measures (cf. Devereux 2008, Dolnicar and Randle 2007, Lewin 2009, Lough, McBride and Sherraden 2008, Rehberg 2005).

Research has also explored the impact of international volunteering in terms of building social capital and international solidarity (Randel et al 2004). Research in Canada (CIDA 2005) has identified the impacts of volunteering on volunteers' values and beliefs. There is also research which suggests that volunteers develop knowledge, skills and experience that prepare them for living and working in a knowledge based global economy (Keesbury 2003), and that voluntary service can contribute to employability (Lough 2008).

There is also evidence that international volunteering helps with the development of technical skills such as language ability, as well as social skills related to communication and inter-cultural understanding (Machin

2008). This suggests that volunteering can and in some cases has challenged the individual to develop critical thinking skills. The research suggests that living and working in different social and cultural settings can challenge one's perceptions and understandings and ways of working with people. Finally, anecdotal evidence highlights that volunteering can not only enhance confidence, but actually be personally transformative (Bourn 2007).

However, literature from North America argues that international volunteering can also reinforce existing power relations between the Global North and the Global South, and encourage a continuation of paternalistic and colonial perceptions and a charity mentality (Jeffress 2009). The role and relationships between personal experience, international volunteering and post-colonialism is also being explored through a series of articles in the *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning* (cf. Davies and Lam 2010).

## **5.0 Key Issues in Research on Development Awareness and Social Engagement**

In addition to this literature on volunteering there is another key area of research which is relevant for this study. A wealth of material exists which explores understandings of development and global issues as well as what people do with this learning in terms of social and political engagement.

The traditions of development and global education that have emerged in UK and other countries such as Canada and Australia, have largely equated learning with forms of social and political action (Bourn 2008a, Cronkhite 2000, Fusswood-Tucker 2009, Hartmeyer 2008). In other words, the idea that the mere process of learning about power inequalities in the world can lead to the desire to seek change in the world. Key influences in these traditions have been the writings and ideas of people such as Paulo Freire.

It is important to recognise, however, that the key promoters of these approaches have been bodies that are seeking increased public support for aid and development, usually governments and non-government development agencies (Bourn and Issler 2010). The authors of this study suggest that in order to more fully understand and analyse the data from the RV interviews there is a need to relate and compare the evidence to a number of more recent traditions and perspectives that are related to but perhaps go beyond such 'traditional' debates within development and global education. These are briefly outlined below.

### *The process of learning and the role of personal experience therein*

A long tradition of educational research has shown that learning comes from a variety of experiences, not just within formal education or via the influence of family and peers, but also through wider social and cultural linkages. Jarvis (2007: 1) sees learning as a lifelong process that is a combination of processes whereby the whole person and mind experiences social situations 'the perceived content of which is the

transformed cognitively, emotionally or practically and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing person.'

*Social and ideological influences linked to colonialism / notions of aid and development*

There is evidence both in the UK and from other industrialised countries (cf. Hicks and Holden 2007, Lowe 2008, Serf 2009) that a dominant influence on perceptions of Africa are concepts of charity and of helping the poor, as well as a sense of paternalism. With regard to volunteers, this means that a key indicator of learning both during and after their return is the extent to which their perceptions of and relationships to poverty have changed.

*Skills required to live and work in a global economy and global society*

There has been recent research in the UK and North America on the skills people need to live and work in the global economy (cf. Bourn 2008b; Trilling and Fadel 2009). Key to the outcomes of this research has been the recognition by employers of the need to encourage the promotion, within all forms of education, of skills that address the challenges of globalisation, or 'global skills' as they have become known. These can be summarised as follows:

- an ability to communicate with people from a range of social and cultural backgrounds;
- an ability to work within teams of people from a range of backgrounds and other countries;
- openness to a range of voices and perspectives from around the world;
- willingness to resolve problems and seek solutions;
- recognition and understanding of the importance of global forces on people's lives;
- willingness to play an active role in society at local, national and international level (Bourn 2008b: 26).

This framework builds on evidence and comments from a variety of multinational companies who are recognising the importance of intercultural understanding and influences of globalisation on the skills needs of their workforce. One of these is the global auditing company Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) who in their professional development programme, Ulysses, make similar points. The company, for instance, puts a strong emphasis on global reasoning and positive world change:

'PWC's young people will have to take on some very complex global challenges in the years to come, and they will need more than business skills and an MBA – they will also have to be socially aware, possess intercultural communication skills, be thoughtful, committed to accountability and above all compassionate.' (quoted in Bourn and Neal 2008: 11)

### *Forms of engagement*

A number of NGOs in the UK, including VSO, have in recent years put a new focus on encouraging supporters to be 'actively engaged' in global issues. One of the reasons for this change of emphasis has been the success in the first decade of the twenty first century of a number of campaigns (e.g. on debt, trade, and Make Poverty History) that have galvanised sectors of the UK public in a form not previously seen. Linked to this has been the desire by governments to secure public support for development and progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. There is increased academic discussion, however, about what the term 'engagement' really means.

Trewby (2010) in his research on engagement around the global justice movement, for example, suggests that there are many routes and forms of engagement, including individual and collectivist involvement and whether it includes an element of risk or cost. He also suggests that key to engagement is the individual's beliefs. There is also some evidence from his earlier research to suggest that a volunteer's first-hand encounter with poverty may lead to a desire to take action for change (Trewby 2007).

Linked to this discussion is the importance of emotion, particularly in creating a belief in the duty of engagement. Guilt, sympathy and empathy can all play a part in building belief in the existence of the issues and sometimes move people towards a desire to engage in development or related area of social justice (Trewby 2010).

### *Global citizenship*

Finally, and linked to the issues raised above, is the increasing promotion of the term 'global citizenship' within the discourses in and around development and global education both in the UK and other industrialised countries over the past decade. There are various interpretations of this term from an ethical world view (Dower 2003), and also links to a sense of moral outrage and global social responsibility (Oxfam 2006) as well as political activism (Mayo 2005). However, underlying them all is a recognition of the changing impact of globalisation on how and in what forms people respond to and engage with the big social and political challenges of the twenty first century. A key question therefore to consider in taking forward the issues emerging from this research is the extent to which RVs are an example of 'good global citizens' in the context of these debates.

Underpinning all of these debates and their relevance to the research in this study is the need to recognise the importance of the individual learning journey that each RV makes during their placement and its impact upon returning to the UK.

The discussion in this report will look at these themes in more depth and relate them to both individual comments from the RV interviews and, where

appropriate, with reference to other existing research on these issues. It is divided into three main themes:

- The impacts of placements on RVs' views and perceptions
- Taking forward the learning and skills gained
- Becoming engaged in personal, social and political action

## **6.0 The Impacts of Placements on Returned Volunteers' Views and Perceptions**

### **6.1 Motivations for Undertaking VSO**

Before reviewing the impacts of placements on RVs, it is important to understand and look at their reasons for becoming VSO volunteers in the first place. Of the 49 RVs who filled in the initial questionnaire, the following emerged as the most commonly cited motivations:

- To give something back
- Because of an interest in development and a desire to develop knowledge and skills in development
- To do something different and take a different path
- To experience a different culture
- As a means of professional development related to broadening skills and experiences

These observations suggest a strong empathy with the issues and concerns of the peoples of the Global South. While the phrase 'to give something back' could be interpreted negatively as highlighting a patronising and paternalistic view of development, it can also be seen as a recognition of inequalities in the world.

Conversations with individual RVs suggested that it was often a combination of factors that motivated them to become VSO volunteers. One volunteer noted, for example, that she had been thinking about doing VSO for several years, but only decided to go in 2006 because she felt that she finally had sufficient professional expertise to make a contribution (RV12). On the other hand, a number of RVs also stated that they saw the VSO experience itself as an opportunity to enhance their professional skills and to develop better understandings of development.

Another frequent comment related to motivations was about a desire to gain different cultural experiences, to see 'other ways of doing things', or to obtain a 'broader world view'. These comments make sense in the light of evidence from the initial questionnaire, in which the majority of RVs stated that they had not had previous experience of working or living in developing countries. Those that had done so, however, mentioned that it was a factor in deciding to do VSO.

One particular question on the initial questionnaire asked the RVs whether they would describe themselves as overtly political. The majority said that they did not see themselves in this way, with only 6 individuals expressing deep political convictions. However, a majority did make reference to a strong sense of social concern and a desire to see greater global justice.

These comments resonate closely with other research undertaken by VSO as well as comments from VSO staff in response to an early draft of this report. For example, one member of VSO staff summarised the reasons why people undertake VSO as a combination of altruism, desire for adventure and new experiences, and an interest in the world and other people and cultures, and perhaps international development. She also commented that there are often push factors from 'UK culture/ work experience, such as materialism, stress, bureaucracy/ corporate culture, with pull factors including wanderlust, familiarity with international travel and people who have done VSO, and desire for firsthand development experience'. Finally she noted "people have variously described wanting to volunteer with VSO as 'something I had to do before I die' – a life-long dream – so it tends to fit with a person's life values and is a long-term aspiration"<sup>1</sup>.

## **6.2 The Value of Placements in Terms of Personal, Social and Professional Development**

All of the RVs interviewed stated that they valued and had gained a great deal from their placements. One commonly cited sentiment was that they felt more confident afterwards. One RV, for example, stated that she felt much more confident, whilst on a trip to a new place, to just go and find somewhere to eat and to chat to people than she would have done without the VSO experience (RV9). She also said that it gave her the ability to stop worrying about the things you can't change, a sentiment shared by another RV (21). She noted that she had learned a lot from being in a place where so much is out of one's control. Another RV commented that the experience encouraged a recognition of the need to be practical and that there is 'more than one way of doing things' (RV12).

Other statements were related to the extent to which many RVs felt that they had become less judgemental and less self-critical as a result of their VSO experiences. At least 30% said that their placement resulted in them thinking much more about their work/ life balance (e.g. RV6). This included re-thinking the clothes they wear, the food they eat, where they shop and a general consideration of their levels of consumption. Linked to this for several RVs was a conscious decision to focus much more on quality of life and to put less emphasis on material gain. One RV in particular stated that the VSO experience had been very important, and was still powerful for her now, in terms of living a more sustainable life. In some ways the experience confirmed her feelings and views, but it had also challenged her to question certain assumptions she had prior to doing VSO (RV4).

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<sup>1</sup>Personal Communication, VSO Marketing Advisor, 2 June 2010.



This sense of developing a more critical and less materialistic perspective has also been explored in other research (cf. Machin 2008) and reflects the depth of impacts which placements have on RVs' views both about themselves and their place in the world.

The confidence and more critical perspectives which some RVs felt that they had gained from their placements in some cases also influenced their professional development once back in the UK. There were several instances in which RVs chose to pursue a slightly different or entirely new career as a result of their placement. In at least two cases, RVs noted that the skills and learning gained from placements had a direct influence on securing a job. However, there were also cases in which RVs were frustrated by potential employers' lack of interest or understanding about VSO and the skills they had to contribute as a result of a placement (RV10, RV13).

In any case, it is clear from many comments made in interviews throughout the year that the confidence gained from VSO experiences was often carried over into the workplace. Two RVs stated that their placement had helped with planning and dealing with the stresses of a difficult overseas trip (e.g. RV9). Another RV, who worked in mental health in the UK previously and also during her placement, realised on her return that she was not happy simply handing out medicines as if she were a nurse, and that she would rather be working more closely with people. As a result of VSO, she was more comfortable raising these issues with her new team, and trying to find new ways of working (RV12).

These deep impacts, however, can also prove quite challenging for RVs, many of whom noted a sense of disorientation upon their return to the UK. Perceived levels of this disorientation varied widely depending on the specific experiences of volunteers in particular placements, as well as the varying circumstances to which they returned home. A few RVs commented particularly on the discomfort they felt when faced by the wealth of consumer choices that are available here in the UK compared to during their placements. Another RV recounted the deep emotional impact of her VSO experience in this way; 'It's a bit like a bereavement. You need time to acclimatise. I would have loved to stay longer in my placement, but family commitments led me to come home' (RV19).

These emotional responses were felt by RVs not just in the first few weeks upon their return, but also several months later. It is clear from the interviews that whilst some aspects of these responses dissipated over time, issues such as work/ life balance and changes in priorities often remained.

Another significant area of impact upon RVs is in regard to their relationships with friends and families. Several of those interviewed talked extensively about the changes their placement had on relationships and friendships, including with partners and children. In some cases these changes were seen as positive, while in others they were seen as negative. In particular, a number of RVs commented that they found it difficult to talk about their placement with friends (RV1, RV4, RV5, RV6, RV12, RV14 and RV16). This

was in part due to not wanting to 'bore' people with their experience by talking about it too much. In some cases, it was also because there was a sense of potential jealousy or lack of understanding about the nature and location of their placement. A frequent comment in the interviews was that it was difficult to find a meeting point for dialogue. One especially extreme example of this was one RV who had no communication with one of her friends during the entire two years that she was away. Although this friend met her at the airport upon her return, she behaved as if the RV had never been away, and has not once asked about the placement since (RV5).

Similar comments were made about relationships with family members, with placements in some cases resulting in significant changes to relationships. One RV, for instance, stated that her relationship with their husband had changed because he was much more independent and assertive as a result of her being away on her placement.

A thread running through several of the interviews was that placements gave RVs the personal space to reflect more about themselves and on their relationships with friends and family. In some cases this led to the changes in the nature of their relationships described above. In others to led to RVs dropping some past friendships and finding new ones. In fact, friendships gained during placements were seen as highly important by everyone interviewed. Many RVs had retained contact with people they had met on placement, including community members, colleagues and fellow RVs. Relationships with fellow RVs were often seen as important because they had been through similar experiences and could support each other both during placement and after returning home.

Another observation that RVs frequently made was that placements gave them a greater sense of the value of engagement in society, and of having a political voice. A number of RVs commented upon the challenges of the political situations in which they were working on placement. Once back in the UK, they recognised the value of the freedom they have here to access information, to discuss political issues, and to be politically active (e.g. RV12). As a result, many RVs become more active in local community issues at home. One YfD RV said that whilst she felt she was always socially and political aware, her experiences in India demonstrated to her the value of social action. She felt that this social and political action by communities is lacking in UK in contrast, and so she has been motivated to become more active here (RV4).

In terms of RVs' views about the wider world more generally as a result of their placements, many remarked that they had become frustrated with UK media upon their return, and in particular often perceived it as 'parochial' and lacking in coverage or debate about development issues (e.g. RV1). This is linked to the fact that over half of the RVs commented in interviews about the extent to which their placement had nurtured a thirst for more knowledge about international issues.

Over the period of the year of the interviews, the key overarching theme to emerge was that, in terms of personal and social development, the RVs continued to be heavily influenced by their experiences. It was still in their minds and certainly in their hearts. Most of those interviewed stated in one form or another that their placement had enriched them as individuals and that they believed this would be long-lasting. Interestingly, there were no discernable differences in viewpoints on this issue when comparing those who were involved with short-term or long-term placements or in terms of differing ages or genders.

## **7.0 Taking Forward the Learning and Skills Gained**

### **7.1 Communicating the Complexities of Development**

As noted above, a number of RVs identified a desire to develop a greater understanding of development as a factor in deciding to do a VSO placement. This thirst for more knowledge about development continued for many of them after their return from the UK, although this was frequently accompanied by a change of viewpoint. Several RVs stated in interviews, for instance, that they had become much more cynical or questioning about aid and the role of NGOs in development after having the chance to see what was happening on the ground (e.g. RV1, RV6, RV11 and RV13). Another frequent comment was that the placement had led them to see that development is much more complex than they had thought beforehand. This recognition of the need to better understand the complexities of people's lives and the everyday issues they face was a common message to emerge.

Linked to this was a concern from a number of RVs of the need to ensure that any messages that emerged from their experience did not simplify or stereotype the people they worked with. This meant that a number of those interviewed felt ill-equipped to clearly explain these complexities to friends and families. RVs know that poverty and deprivation are realities, but also say that this is not the full or only story. One RV, for instance, was reluctant to speak to large groups because of the dangers of reducing complex issues to slogans (RV8). Others emphasised the need to encourage learning about different viewpoints and perspectives. In most cases, RVs were keen to share both the negative and positive aspects of their experiences, including not only the problems they encountered but also funny stories, in order to both communicate the complexities of development and to encourage people to engage with important issues (e.g. RV8 and RV20). From conversation with the RVs, it also emerged that many wanted to be able to stress that inequality of opportunity, rather than poverty, is a key issue for development.

It is important to note that the RVs were in the main not being particularly critical of VSO with these comments. Indeed, the majority said that VSO is very often the exception, because it puts the emphasis on human development and sharing skills, rather than on providing charity. However, several stated that they felt VSO could play a bigger role in supporting RVs to learn about the complexities of development. In the absence of this, at least four of the RVs interviewed had decided to go out and learn more about

development on their own (RV1, RV9, RV11 and RV19). This included going to lectures and seminars or (in two cases) undertaking short courses. One RV described going to talks about topics such as critical views about aid (RV9). She noted that this exposure to different views about aid had made her re-think and reflect more critically on the issues and to relate them to her own experience.

These observations from the RVs suggest that both the placement and their follow up experiences had opened up their minds to different viewpoints about development. It had led them to question their own preconceptions and to seek ways to learn more. The comments from several RVs suggest a heightened consciousness of the importance of global social justice. They also highlighted that RVs would like more support from VSO to further develop their understandings of development upon their return in the UK, perhaps by providing information on opportunities for learning such as workshops, seminars and courses of study.

## **7.2 Continuing Support for Placement Communities**

Much of the research on international volunteering (cf. Machin 2008, Lewin 2009) has identified the strong loyalty and bonds people make with the communities and the people with whom they work. These often become quite deep relationships which last long after volunteers return home. Several RVs described the powerful emotional wrench that they experienced when they left their placement. For one, he reported that it seemed like a physical ache. He also had the sense that he had left something behind, possibly because he had to leave when some things were still unfinished (RV8).

During the year of the interviews, several RVs made return visits to their placement communities to visit with friends and in some cases to help with projects (RV7, RV9, RV15 and RV18) and others stated that they would like to return in the future (RV5, RV11 and RV17). Others established ongoing links with friends and colleagues via letters, the internet or Skype. Several RVs had also provided financial assistance, for example, to help someone in their placement community to complete a course of study (e.g. RV21). A few had also received requests for help from friends or contacts who wanted to come to the UK for work or wanted financial support. RVs were often uncomfortable with these requests and uncertain how to deal with them (RV1, RV11, RV16), and would have appreciated support and guidance from VSO. They were also highly conscious of the issues raised in terms of creating dependency, especially where sending money was involved. Nevertheless, a number of the RVs also said that they felt that developing ongoing local-to-local links was more effective than going through a national or international organisation.

For a number of the RVs, the country where they did their placement was not particularly high in the social and political consciousness in the UK. This was particularly noted by those whose placements were in countries such as Mongolia or Cambodia (RV2, RV6, RV7 and RV18). However, where the country is relatively well-known in the UK, for example Ethiopia or Sierra Leone, RVs said they felt they had an important responsibility to challenge the dominant images people might have of these countries, particularly from the

media, in terms of poverty, conflict or a sense of hopelessness (RV8 and RV10).

### **7.3 Using the Skills Gained through Placements for Personal and Professional Development**

The RVs interviewed frequently commented on the extent to which the skills they had gained from their placement were transferable after they returned to the UK. In some cases, these skills were useful in the context of work, in others in terms of community involvement, or just in terms of being able to adapt to a different way of life back in the UK.

One of the most common skills that RVs felt able to use after their return was inter-cultural communication and understanding. This finding builds on previous research in the UK (cf. Machin 2008) and in North America (cf. Devereux 2008). For example, one RV who now works part-time in a university supporting international students, said that her placement had given her the skills to understand what it was like to live and work in a very different culture and to recognise and respect different approaches and perspectives (RV1). Those who had lived and worked for VSO in Islamic societies felt that they had learned a great deal about the impacts of that religion on everyday life. They therefore felt able to use this experience in living and working with communities back in the UK (e.g. RV9).

A second transferable skill that several RVs identified was an ability to work with communities at a grassroots level, to develop confidence within communities and to enable them to make a difference. These skills were mentioned by several RVs in their discussions of becoming involved in community projects in their home towns (e.g. RV14).

Linked to this was an understanding of the positive impacts of having increased confidence as a result of completing a VSO placement. RVs identified this as being useful not only in terms of engagement with a local community, but also for career/ professional development. Being a stronger person and being prepared to stand up for oneself were also seen as important skills gained through VSO experience. Finally, and as indicated already, a number of the RVs commented upon how they had become more critical and reflective upon their return to the UK, were more questioning about development issues in particular, and were able to recognise the importance of listening to diverse viewpoints.

All of these skills bear a close resemblance to the framework for global skills developed by Bourn (2008) for the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (outlined earlier in this report). This suggests that more could be done to draw attention to the skills volunteers gain from overseas experience, in terms of both personal and professional development, and specifically how these might help to meet employment needs for the twenty first century.

Indeed, if there was one common theme to emerge from the interviews regarding applying the experiences and skills gained by RVs it was in taking them forward through their current or future employment. This was not the

case with the entire group of those interviewed, of course, because at least six of the RVs regarded themselves as retired or semi-retired (RV1, RV8, RV15, RV16, RV20 and RV21). However, for the majority of the group, employment was a key interest. The YfD volunteers in particular were often initially interested in VSO as a route to a career in development (RV9 and RV10). In some cases, however, the placement had resulted in them re-thinking what they would do upon their return (e.g. RV6 and RV10).

Working for an NGO or in a field that had a link to development became an interest for several RVs who had not worked in development previously. In one case, an RV was able to gain a job with an international NGO (RV9) and in another was able to find work in a government department looking at issues related to farming in Africa (RV11). An RV who had been part of the YfD programme, is now working for a government-funded volunteering programme for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (RV 17). Her practical experience and empathy with the issues and motivations of the volunteers was recognised as an important contribution to the initiative's work. Her colleagues commented that not only her knowledge of the issues, but also her practical experience of working in a developing country was an added bonus to her work.

Of course, a number of the RVs already had skills and experience in specific professions, especially including health and education, and the placements increased and diversified these skills. Upon their return, several RVs were able to secure either places on courses or jobs in these areas. Most believed that their VSO experience was very useful to this. One RV, who did not seek a job in development, but returned to her role as an academic, has nevertheless also continued to use her skills to stay involved in research and work with her placement colleagues overseas (RV2).

Many of the RVs noted that they had made a conscious decision to take forward the knowledge and skills they gained from VSO into the workplace. It was in these areas that they felt they had the largest contribution to give to development and/ or development awareness. This is in contrast to the perception by the majority of those interviewed that VSO expects RVs to use their skills and knowledge for development awareness activities outside of work (e.g. engagement in campaigns or fundraising). To many RVs, however, being involved in a caring profession, using the skills gained through VSO in their work, and maintaining links with friends and colleagues from their placement was a sufficient level of engagement. Also, for many RVs working in these professions is by its very nature demanding and fulfilling, and there was little time or space for much more in their lives. As a result, only a limited number of the RVs interviewed were either interested in or able to engage in other kinds of development awareness activities.

The links between volunteer placements, use of the skills gained, and future careers have been noted in the research by Machin (2008). However, the extent to which the skills gained are more than just 'generic' skills is clearly a more recent development. This may be because of the changing nature of work patterns as a result of globalisation and the need for many forms of

employment to require inter-cultural understanding and an ability to work with people with a diverse range of backgrounds.

All of this suggests that VSO could be doing more to show the potential value of VSO experience as a route to gaining marketable global skills for both personal and professional development.

## **8.0 Becoming Engaged in Personal, Social and Political Action**

### **8.1 Promoting Awareness of Development**

One of the key areas that VSO wanted this research to explore was the ways in which RVs were and could be even more involved in raising awareness of development issues after they return to the UK.

Whilst all of the RVs interviewed wanted to promote and share the learning they had gained, for many the whole process of their placement had raised many issues and concerns which made this a significant challenge. For example, as indicated previously, RVs often came to see development as a highly complex area which is difficult to adequately explain to friends, families and communities. For example, several RVs described how friends and family would listen to their experiences, but then ask questions which indicated that they have not really understood (e.g. RV4, RV12 and RV16). RVs also pointed out that people in the UK do not necessarily see the connection to their own lives of what is happening overseas, particularly during a period of economic trouble. These difficulties are further compounded by the stereotypical images that many people already have of countries such as Ethiopia and Sierra Leone.

Despite such challenges, however, the RVs interviewed provided a long list of ways in which they are currently engaged in development awareness activities, alongside the activities in their professional lives which were explored in the previous section. As indicated previously, however, the list is much more varied than those things that RVs believe VSO would define as 'development awareness'. In some cases there was even uncertainty about what kinds of things would 'count' as development awareness. Examples of activities that RVs were doing at the time of the last round of interviews included (i) personal communication (with friends, family and colleagues, either face-to-face or online), (ii) working for charities and NGOs (including VSO) to fundraise and respond to appeals, (iii) helping friends and contacts back in their placement (e.g. fundraising and development for particular projects or sponsoring people through education), (iv) joining organisations or networks (for VSO and other organisations), (v) giving presentations to schools and community groups, (vi) undertaking further professional development (e.g. Masters' courses, etc.), (vii) creative initiatives (e.g. writing a book about their experiences, organising a photo exhibition).

Several RVs used their knowledge and interest in development as a way of making connections with local minority communities, particularly refugees and asylum seekers. One RV, for example, referred to using visual art and film as mechanisms to communicate issues to public health workers and had also become involved in supporting other local NGOs (RV10).

Most frequently, RVs expressed an interest in getting involved in activities for which they felt they had the right skills and abilities. Trained teachers, for example, were more likely to be willing to work with school groups than those who had limited experience of working in those settings. Those involved in other professional areas were more likely to see their contribution to development awareness as part of their work, for example, by talking about their experiences with colleagues, writing in academic journals or professional publications, or seeking funding to continue working on research projects with colleagues back in their placement. As noted above, some RVs were hesitant about becoming involved with campaigns (for VSO or other organisations) either because they are generally uncomfortable with this (and especially with fundraising) or because they want to have more settled feelings about international development and aid before doing so.

Of the 21 RVs interviewed, three had direct experience and skills in education prior to placement. Upon return, one was involved in VSO's programme with schools by acting as an ambassador, trainer and advisor to linking programmes (RV8). Another was working more directly within higher education and was able to use the knowledge and skills gained from her placement in the courses she was running (RV2).

## **8.2 Addressing the Issues Encountered on Placement**

As indicated already, a number of RVs were keen to continue to retain contact with the people and communities from their placement. For many this took the form of merely maintaining contact and providing funding and access to materials from afar. However, for some the country and the issues they were involved in during their placement became the focus of their development awareness work back in the UK (e.g. RV13 and RV18).

The RVs interviewed were often creative in terms of how they did this. One RV has established a charity to support her ongoing link with Cambodia, for instance, and used the knowledge and experience she gained during her placement to publish a book on Cambodian food (RV18). Another has helped to support links with Ethiopia through a small, locally-based NGO and is considering writing a book about her experiences for her grandchildren and possibly for other children (RV16).

Most RVs stated they were more interested in focussed awareness raising around particular issues, rather than in giving general talks about their experiences to Rotary groups or similar bodies. Only five of the RVs interviewed mentioned they had undertaken or were planning to give such talks (RV8, RV15, RV17, RV20 And RV21). Where RVs were doing this it was often because these organisations were either supporting the communities where they had been working or had helped with raising money for their



placement. Those who did such talks and follow up activities were semi-retired people or those who felt that they had the time to undertake such work.

### **8.3 Taking Action in the Local Community**

Becoming active and involved in local community activities back in the UK was seen by a number of RVs as the best way they could take forward the skills and learning gained from their placement.

One RV, for example, is actively involved in a local climate change group. She noted that the skills and learning gained from their placement have been valuable to this (RV6).

### **8.4 Giving Something Back to VSO**

Whilst all of the RVs were largely positive about their placements and the role of VSO in development in general, there were mixed views about providing support to the organisation once back in the UK. Some of this was due to lack of contact from VSO after they returned. Several RVs noted that their placement had raised issues which they wanted to discuss in more depth, but found it difficult to find anyone who was prepared to talk to them. In one case, an RV had made extensive comments about these issues on a feedback form at the RV weekend, and had followed this up with several emails, but never received a response or acknowledgement from VSO (RV2). Similarly, of the 21 RVs interviewed, more than half said that they had indicated to VSO they were prepared to help the organisation in areas such as promotion and training, but only some of them had their offers taken up (e.g. RV13, RV14, RV15, RV18 and RV21). Others felt that the RV weekend itself created an overall impression that all VSO wanted from them was help with fundraising and to support its own campaigns. There was a generally held view amongst those interviewed that VSO did not recognise or value their individual skills and knowledge, or the contributions they could potentially make to development and/ or development awareness.

This disappointment from many RVs was because they had a strong sense of loyalty to VSO and many had valued the close support they had from VSO country offices whilst overseas. Several said they had felt like part of a family during their placement. Once they returned to the UK they had expected a similar culture of support, but felt they did not get it.

There were mixed responses about contacts with VSO local groups as well. A number of the RVs interviewed had attempted to make contact with their local group (e.g. RV4, RV5, RV9, RV11, RV18 and RV19), but only one said she had maintained ongoing links or involvement with them (RV11). One RV was involved in the establishment of a new local group (RV 19), and another said that she wanted to get involved with her local group in the future (RV1). This limited engagement with local groups was because either the groups were not particularly active or their areas of activity were not seen as relevant to RVs' interests. In a few cases, the wide range of ages involved in local groups was a potential challenge. One young RV, for example, said that she felt the activities of her local group – such as selling bric-a-brac – were 'old fashioned' and that she had little in common with the other members (RV17).

With regard to fundraising for VSO there was also a degree of ambivalence. A number of RVs talked about generally feeling uncomfortable asking people for money (e.g. RV15 and RV21). One said that raising money before going overseas had made sense as friends and family saw it as directly related to her placement. Since returning, however, she does not feel comfortable fundraising as she would inevitably be asking the same people for contributions for more general causes (RV7). Another RV noted that, based on her overseas experience, she was uncertain about the value and sustainability of the programme she was placed with, and therefore was not comfortable fundraising for VSO to continue supporting it.

### **8.5 Campaigning for VSO**

One of the key areas of interest from VSO staff was where and how RVs could be more actively engaged in the organisation's activities, and particularly its campaigns. This topic was particularly addressed during the final round of interviews when the RVs were more settled and clearer as to their future priorities in terms of taking forward their passion for development.

However, of all of the RVs interviewed only a few said that they were possibly prepared to become involved in campaigns promoted by VSO (e.g. RV8, RV9, RV17 and RV19). Those who were not interested in campaigning gave a number of reasons for this. Overall, the majority view was that they did not see campaigning on issues promoted by VSO as the most effective way of taking forward the interests and the skills they had gained. RVs were much more interested in making or maintaining connections and links to either the country where they undertook their placement or within their specific area of professional expertise. Secondly, there was some ambivalence about being engaged in campaigns when many RVs felt uneasy or unsure about the nature and process of development in general. Many of those interviewed noted that they valued what VSO was doing, but needed more time and space to clarify their own viewpoints on issues such as aid before being willing to support particular campaigns.

If one relates the viewpoints raised above with the comments of the RVs about their own social and political backgrounds, these observations are perhaps not surprising. Most of the RVs did not have experience of being actively involved in political activities prior to undertaking their placement. The few that had done some campaign work beforehand did make specific reference to being involved in campaigns upon their return, although these tended to be in areas such as climate change or more locally focussed issues. However, there was also one RV who had been an active campaigner before doing her placement, but had come back with a much more critical view of development and feeling much less certain about specific issues. This meant that she was much less interested in being active in campaigns than she had been before going overseas (RV10).

Some RVs noted that they frequently receive emails from VSO regarding campaigns and are supportive of the organisation's work in the area, while others said that they were not aware of VSO's current campaigns. Those that

were aware of VSO campaigns were often prevented from getting involved due to time commitments (e.g. work and family), but hoped to be able to do more of this in the future.

What is clear from the interviews is that there is a connection between RVs' views about development after their placements and their interest in campaigning. Specifically, the majority of those interviewed saw their commitment to the aims of VSO being taken forward primarily in other areas. RVs who are actively involved in development through their work, for example, often felt that this was enough of a 'contribution' to international efforts, and were not interested in taking part in campaigns as well. A few RVs also noted that by doing a VSO placement they felt that they had already given up to 2 years of their lives to working in development, and that they could not give more at this point.

VSO's own research has identified campaigning as a good way for getting RVs involved in development and development awareness after they return home. It is worth noting that, based on the interviews for this research, RVs' interest and willingness to support campaigns might potentially be greater as the placement experience recedes into the past than it is initially. This is perhaps an issue VSO could explore further.

## **9.0 Changes in Views, Behaviour and Actions Over the Year**

One of the key aims of the research was to monitor how RV's views, behaviour patterns and actions developed and changed over the year of the interviews as well as the extent to which they continued with the personal goals many had set themselves at the RV weekend.

The evidence suggests a highly complex picture. While it has often been assumed that RVs will be active in sharing the issues which arose during their placements with friends and family and perhaps the local community, the interviews show a much more diverse range of perspectives and ways of engaging. For example, over half of the 21 RVs interviewed had mentioned in their initial questionnaires their desire to share their experiences more widely. Some referred to wanting to do further study, or about getting involved in various activities that could support VSO.. In reality, for most of them this did not happen over the course of the following year. There were a number of reasons for this, including job insecurity, increased uncertainty about development and aid, mixed views about VSO, and simply a lack of time. A number of RVs spoke about the need to invest a lot of time in friends and families after their return to the UK. For older RVs, seeing grandchildren for the first time and in some cases also being involved in their care was an important personal commitment (e.g. RV1, RV 8, RV15, RV 16 and RV 20).

Linked to this was a concern from a number of the RVs about a sense of uncertainty about themselves and a need to re-think their place in the world. A

common comment in the responses to the initial questionnaire and in the first round of interviews was the need for time to clarify a number of thoughts, feelings and understandings about their experiences and the future. By the end of the year, most said they felt that they were much clearer about their relationship to VSO, but they were now often in a position where work or personal circumstances had now taken precedence over other things.

Also, as mentioned earlier in this report, a considerable number of the RVs interviewed had offered follow up help to VSO in terms of training and general promotional work. Those that did not get any follow up to this noted that their support for the organisation began to wane, and they often looked to other places and organisations to utilise their passion and enthusiasm.

## **10.0 VSO's Support for Returned Volunteers**

It is clear from the evidence from both the interviews and the initial questionnaires that many RVs came back to the UK in a state of uncertainty and confusion about their personal views, future plans and employment needs. Several expected support from VSO to help them deal with these concerns. A number of those interviewed would have welcomed more emphasis on this at the RV weekend, and several noted that they would have particularly valued careers advice since they had returned to a vastly different economic situation than was the case when they left (e.g. RV19).

While most of the RVs considered the RV weekend a suitable opportunity for VSO to alert them to the range of ways that they could get involved in VSO's work, many also felt that this should not be the main focus of that weekend. One RV in particular commented that the RV weekend she attended focussed too much on 'pressurising volunteers to continue supporting VSO in various ways. Not only did this mean there was minimal time and focus on reflecting on the actual VSO experience, but that it turned something I would have been pleased to have done, into a bit of a chore' (RV9). Several others emphasised that whilst VSO can inform RVs of possibilities for VSO involvement, the organisation needs to understand that not all RVs will want to respond as VSO might like, or will not be in a position to respond immediately (e.g. RV7).

RVs were asked during the final round of interviews when they thought would be the best time for VSO to contact them after their return about being engaged and involved in further development awareness activity, as well as what level/ frequency of contact would suit them. A number of RVs noted that an ideal time for VSO to contact them was 3 – 6 months after their return (e.g. RV7). This would give them a chance to find a place to live, find work, etc. before being asked to get involved in new and additional VSO activities. One RV also suggested that she would have appreciated it if VSO had contacted her immediately after she returned just to make sure that everything was OK (although not to ask her at that early stage about getting involved in new activities) (RV21). Several RVs also commented that they had previously sent feedback on their VSO experiences, but had not received any response to this and were not aware if their suggestions were being taken forward. This lack of

communication has certainly influenced a number of RVs motivations about further involvement in VSO (e.g. RV2 and RV9).

Overall, RVs interviewed commented that they would generally appreciate more contact from VSO. However, while some RVs were interested in more frequent and on-going contact, others preferred to have information available so that they could access it when they were ready to do so (e.g. information on the VSO website). RVs recognised that individual volunteers are likely to have differing preferences on this, but suggested that this could be addressed by allowing RVs to opt-out of any communications that were not appropriate to them (RV7).

In line with the timescale outlined above, a number of the RVs felt that three months after return is a good time to attend an RV weekend (e.g. RV9, RV15 and RV 21). Those that had attended one earlier than that had not had sufficient time to adjust to being home and so were not be able to really engage with the weekend. Those who had been back longer, on the other hand, had already started to process the experience and to make decisions about work and other issues without the benefits of attending the weekend.

RVs were also asked in the final round of interviews if there were any areas in which they would value support, advice and help from VSO, particularly in terms of taking forward their interest in development awareness. There were many positive comments about VSO's support for RVs in general, as well as a number of ideas about areas in which VSO could consider offering specific kinds of support. These included: helping RVs to acclimatize to being back in the UK, setting up a network for RV peer support with former VSO volunteers and international colleagues, and providing information on opportunities for further study, work and career development. Several RVs also noted that they would appreciate support in how to effectively communicate about the complexities of development that they encountered on their placements (as outlined in the sections above), either in support of VSO or as part of an engagement with development awareness more generally.

As noted previously, many RVs have also continued to maintain contact with individuals and organisations that they worked with during their placements, and to provide support for new projects and initiatives. Due to the personal and direct nature of these relationships, these activities often take precedence over more generalised activities in support of VSO. In some cases, however, these exchanges can be highly challenging, with individuals often requesting money or help to come to the UK, to find work, or to be sponsored for study. RVs would therefore appreciate advice from VSO on how to manage those relationships after returning to the UK.

However, it should also be noted that several RVs had more negative views about VSO since finishing their placements. In a number of cases, this was because RVs felt that the communication they had with VSO was not very well organised (e.g. RV2).

Overall, a number of the RVs interviewed commented that they would welcome greater clarity from VSO about what is expected of them once they are back in the UK. Perhaps partly due to this lack of clarity, many RVs responded positively to the idea of establishing more structured roles (e.g. VSO speaker, VSO Project Mentor, Global Educator, Media Ambassador) in support of VSO's work (RV7, RV9, RV11, RV19 and RV21). This was particularly the case for those who were unsure about how they could/ should engage in development awareness activities on their own, and so would value additional structure as well as possibilities for training and guidance from VSO. At the same time, some RVs noted that they would appreciate some degree of flexibility in any of these roles, so that they fit with individual needs and plans. One RV commented that offering these roles would also relieve the pressure on each RV to feel they had to be involved in some way as particular individuals could choose more structured roles (RV7).

## **11.0 Conclusions**

Overall, this research highlights a number of key themes.

Firstly, all of the RVs interviewed have a commitment to securing a more just and equitable world, and a strong sense of solidarity with peoples of the Global South. They all wanted to make a difference and believed that their placements had not only been valuable and rewarding for them, but also hoped that they had made a positive contribution to the communities where they were worked. Many were prepared to continue to be involved in VSO's work, including taking part in activities such as promotional events and training and support initiatives for other RVs. A considerable number had developed informal networks with RVs they had met during their placement or via other VSO events. All of these points suggest that the RVs interviewed are excellent ambassadors for the work of VSO.

Secondly, many of them learnt a great deal about development through their placements and also that the issues are much more complex than they may have originally thought. This resulted in a number of RVs becoming uncertain in their views about the value of aid and the work of some NGOs. This meant that when it came to follow up activities and engagement back in the UK, there was a degree of unease from a number of those interviewed about reducing debates on development to simple solutions and campaigns.

Thirdly, a lot of the RVs came back with a sense of disorientation and the recognition that they needed to run and organise their lives differently. For a considerable number this was the most direct outcome of their experience in terms of what they have done back in the UK.

Fourthly, for the majority of the RVs, the main focus of their continuing engagement with development has taken place through applying the learning and skills they gained from their placement within the workplace. For a few, this has been in a development related area or work, but in almost all cases it has been through using the skills, such as inter-cultural understanding or

training and capacity building, in other fields. This is significant because the majority of those RVs working now are in what could be summarised as the 'caring' and public sector based professions, such as education and health care.

Finally, the areas where RVs took their knowledge and enthusiasm forward outside of work tended to be in ways such as promoting the issues from their specific placement either in their local community, through the media or other national organisations. Engagement with VSO campaigns was not a priority for most of the RVs interviewed.

How therefore do these observations relate to the wider picture about volunteering, development awareness and public engagement?

It is clear that in terms of the process of learning and the role of personal experience, the comments from the RVs give us some valuable observations for development awareness and the work of VSO. The actual experience of working in a developing country has clearly had a profound impact on all of the volunteers. They learnt a great deal about development from working with people in communities. It also led them to reflecting more critically on their own assumptions and views about aid and their own lifestyles.

This leads on to the second point about views about development. All of the RVs interviewed were conscious of their roles as 'volunteers' going to a developing country and recognised the issues this raised. For some it led to a re-assessment of their views about aid and development. Those who engaged in follow up fundraising and support to the communities they worked with were also conscious of the issues this raised in terms of charitable giving.

Another clear outcome from this research has been the extent to which the skills and learning gained by RVs are valuable within the UK economy and society more widely. Skills gained around inter-cultural understanding, recognition of the interdependent nature of the world we are living in, and an ability to adapt and work in different environments are increasingly seen as important within the UK. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that RVs are a good example of putting 'global skills' into practice.

The research also highlights that what is meant by the term engagement needs to be further investigated. It is clear that the term can be interpreted in a variety of different ways, and there is a real need to better recognise the influence of personal motivation, values and beliefs in terms of how people choose to engage, or not, in specific kinds of activities.

Finally, there is a great deal of rhetoric in the development education community in the UK and other industrialised countries which suggests that one of its main tasks is to encourage people to be 'global citizens'. Regardless of the specific value of that term and its usage by NGOs and policy-makers, what this research demonstrates is that as a result of their experiences virtually all of the RVs have developed a more a global outlook,

recognise the need for global social responsibility and a continued support to combating global poverty.

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## **Appendix 1: Initial RV Questionnaire**

### **RETURNED VOLUNTEERS AND DEVELOPMENT AWARENESS**

This questionnaire is the first stage in a research project being undertaken for VSO by the Institute of Education, University of London. It aims to explore how returned volunteers (RVs) are engaged in development awareness raising activities following their overseas experience.

This questionnaire is confidential between the RV and the Institute of Education. All data will be stored in line with the Data Protection Act. Data from the questionnaire will not be quoted to specific individuals without their permission.

For each question we would expect an answer of no more than 50 words.

#### **PERSONAL PROFILE:**

**What type of volunteer were you for VSO (short term, long term, etc.)?**

**What particular skills area were you involved with?**

**If you were involved in a specific area/theme, please state which:**

**Country you went to:**

**Gender:**

**Age:**

**Location in the UK:**

**Ethnicity:**

#### **SECTION A: PRIOR TO GOING ON VSO**

**1. Why did you undertake VSO?**

2. What knowledge, skills or experience did you hope to gain?

## **SECTION B: BACKGROUND, KNOWLEDGE AND INTERESTS PRIOR TO VSO**

3. What involvement, if any, had you had in community, social and/or political action before going on VSO?
4. What involvement had you had in development prior to going overseas with VSO (e.g. membership or supporter of campaigns, etc)?
5. How would you summarise your own social and political views on international development prior to going overseas with VSO?
6. What were the influences on your views ? Did your own education play a role in this? And if so, how?

## **SECTION C: THE VSO EXPERIENCE**

7. Has your volunteer experience changed your views and perceptions on international development issues? If so, how?
8. What do you think are the main skills and knowledge you gained from your VSO experience?

## **SECTION D: DEVELOPMENT AWARENESS**

**9. How do you intend to share your learning from your VSO experience with:**

**a) friends?**

**b) work colleagues?**

**c) family?**

**d) community groups?**

**e) local media?**

**f) others?**

**10. Do you see yourself playing a role in building awareness of development issues in the UK? If so, in what areas (e.g. education, workplace, local community, media, etc.)?**

## **SECTION E: INFLUENCE OF VSO ON YOUR FUTURE PLANS**

**11. How do you see your VSO experience influencing your future employment and career plans, particularly in terms of the skills, knowledge and attitudes you have gained?**

## **SECTION F: SOCIAL ACTION AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT**

**12. Has the VSO experience encouraged you to take part in political action and/or campaigns linked to international development? If so, which ones?**

**13. Has the VSO experience had an impact on your political views? If so, in what ways have they changed from those given in question 5?**

## **SECTION G: PERSONAL GOALS**

**14. What are the 3 things you would like to take forward over the next 18 months from the learning and skills you gained through your volunteer experience?**

**15. In what ways would you like VSO to help you to achieve these goals?**

**ANY OTHER COMMENTS YOU WOULD LIKE TO MAKE:**

### **FOLLOW UP:**

**Would you be prepared to take part in the follow up to this survey? This would involve giving a short (30 minute) interview by telephone every 3 months over the next 9 months about how you are taking forward your enthusiasm, learning and skills gained from VSO. If you would like to participate, please provide your name and contact details below.**

**Name:**

**Email:**

**Telephone:**

## Appendix 2: Profile of RVs Interviewed

<b>Gender</b>	Male	2
	Female	19
<b>Age</b>	20-30 years	6
	31-40 years	5
	41-50 years	3
	51 years and over	7
<b>Type of VSO</b>  <i>Note: One of the volunteers participated in a Long Term followed by a Short Term placement.</i>	Short Term	1
	Long Term	17
	Youth For Development	4
<b>Country</b>	Cambodia	3
	Ethiopia	3
	Gambia	1
	Ghana	1
	India	1
	Mongolia	1
	Namibia	1
	Nigeria	1
	Philippines	1
	Sierra Leone	3
	Sri Lanka	2
	Tanzania	1
	Uganda	1
Zambia	1	

<b>Area of work</b>  <i>Note: Three participants were involved in two sectors, one did not indicate in which sector they were involved.</i>	Participation & Governance	8
	Education	6
	Health, Disability	6
	Nutrition	2
	Secure Livelihoods	2
<b>Total number of volunteers</b>		<b>21</b>

### Appendix 3: Codes for RVs Interviewed

	Gender	Type of volunteer	Skill Area	Country
RV1	F	LTV	Disability, Education	Ghana
RV2	F	LTV	Secure Livelihoods	Mongolia
RV3	F	YfD	Participation and Governance	Sierra Leone
RV4	F	LTV	Governance	India
RV5	F	LTV	Education	Namibia
RV6	F	LTV	Health	Cambodia
RV7	F	LTV	Nutrition	Cambodia
RV8	M	LTV	Education, Teacher Training	Ethiopia
RV9	F	YfD	Participation and Governance, Education	The Gambia
RV10*	F	YfD	Participation and Governance	Sierra Leone
RV11	F	LTV	Secure Livelihoods, Disaster relief	Zambia
RV12	F	LTV	Mental Health	Sri Lanka
RV13	F	YfD	Participation and Governance	Sierra Leone
RV14	F	LTV	Participation and Governance	Sri Lanka
RV15	M	LTV	ICT, Education	Tanzania
RV16	F	LTV	Education, Teacher Training	Ethiopia
RV17	F	YfD	Disability	Philippines
RV18	F	LTV	Project management, Governance	Cambodia
RV19	F	LTV	Education	Nigeria
RV20	F	Accompanying LTV partner		Ethiopia
RV21	F	LTV and STV	Disability, vocational training	Uganda

Key : LTV – Long term volunteer; STV - Short term volunteer; YfD - Youth for Development volunteer

\* - only able to be interviewed twice



## **Appendix 4: Interview Questions**

### **QUESTIONS FOR THE FIRST ROUND OF RV INTERVIEWS**

1. Any clarifications/ questions arising from the questionnaire.
2. What, if anything, have you been doing related to development awareness since you filled out the questionnaire?
3. What, if anything, are you planning to do in the near future?
4. If so, have you had any support to do this? From what sources?
5. If not, why not? What barriers have you faced?

### **QUESTION AREAS FOR THE THIRD ROUND OF RV INTERVIEWS**

1. General update. What have you been doing since last interview?
2. Now that more time has passed, what do you think have been the impacts of your VSO experience? Has this changed from what you thought previously (i.e. just after returning)?
3. How do you see yourself now and in the future in terms of the impacts of the VSO experience and your plans for the future? (e.g. some form of self-reflective review)
4. Would you be interested in using your experience more effectively in your workplace? For example, could some form of networks linked to specific professions or work areas be established?
5. When do you think is a good time for VSO to contact RVs about being engaged and involved in further development awareness activity? What timescale and level / frequency of contact would suit you? Who would you like to instigate that contact – yourself or VSO?
6. Are there any areas in which you would value support, advice and help from VSO, particularly in terms of taking forward your interest in development awareness? (e.g. study, professional development, etc.)
7. VSO are looking to develop more structured roles for RVs. Would you value this? Would you be interested in being, for example, an active communities supporter, a VSO speaker, a VSO project mentor, a global educator, a media ambassador, etc.?
8. VSO claims that campaigning and activism is one of the most successful ways of engaging supporters. What are your views at this point on being involved in campaigning and activism? Are they likely to change in the future?
9. Any final thoughts and observations on the experience?