



**THE IMPACT OF RETURNED
INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERS
ON THE UK: A SCOPING REVIEW**

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CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Foreword	5
Executive summary	6
1. Setting the scene	8
2. Developing professional and personal skills and knowledge	9
3. Influencing employment, career progression and workplace practices	11
4. Raising development awareness and promoting social cohesion	13
5. Increasing civic participation	15
6. Conclusions and recommendations	17
Endnotes	19
Bibliography	24
Appendix	26

INTRODUCTION

At VSO, we've known for some time that the impact of our volunteers goes well beyond what they achieve in their host communities overseas. We've heard countless testimonies and accounts of how our volunteers have also achieved great things back home in the UK – inspired by, and resulting from, their experiences overseas. Over the last few years we've tried to understand, support and capture this.

To date, VSO's research on the impact of volunteers returning from international placements has focused on our education, business and youth volunteers. Particular attention has been paid to the skills our volunteers develop through their overseas experiences which they then use in their workplaces and communities on return to the UK. This scoping review was commissioned to bring together in one place what we know about the impact of the international volunteering experience on home communities in the UK and to help us identify where we, and other volunteering organisations, need to understand more.

VSO has turned the corner in beginning to understand the contribution that overseas volunteering can make on communities and individuals here in the UK. In a recent survey of our returned volunteers, we found that on average each individual had reached over 550 other people in the last year to challenge misperceptions and share realities about the developing world. Since 1958, VSO has sent over 33,000 volunteers overseas. These volunteers are crucial catalysts for building greater global understanding.

That's why VSO is now implementing new strategies to support our returning volunteers to use their overseas experiences to make a difference to people at home. And we are committed to measuring that impact in a systematic and robust way. We call on other volunteering agencies to join us and work with us so that we can maximise the benefits of international volunteering for home and host communities alike.

Judith Brodie
VSOUK Director



FOREWORD

It is particularly timely that this scoping review, looking at the impact of volunteers returning from international placements on home communities in the UK, should be carried out now. The UK government has recently announced a number of new initiatives that point to the growing interest in boosting involvement in international volunteering, including schemes to support young people and diaspora communities to volunteer overseas.

To date, most research attention in the field has been paid to the impact that international volunteering has on participating volunteers. This review highlights the growing evidence on the positive impacts of international volunteering on the personal development and professional skills of volunteers. Aspects such as confidence, communication skills and awareness of global issues are frequently noted within research findings. For some volunteers, this has been shown to affect their approach and methods of working when they return to their home communities in the UK. With limited systematic research in this area, VSO has taken a lead in driving this agenda forward.

This scoping review identifies a number of priorities for further research to help demonstrate the impact of international volunteering on the home communities of the volunteers back in the UK. Firstly, there is a need to develop the evidence base on the impact of returned international volunteers on employers, colleagues and service users. While evidence is growing on the impact of returned volunteers on the education sector, there is less research on the health sector, a key area of involvement for international volunteers.

Secondly, while anecdotal evidence is suggestive of the impact of returned international volunteers on promoting civic participation and intercultural understanding in local communities in the UK, more robust research evidence is needed on these issues.

Thirdly, the review reveals significant opportunities for volunteer-sending agencies to work more closely together on measuring and assessing the impact of international volunteering on UK communities. More collaborative research to help demonstrate this impact would be invaluable.

Joanna Machin
Institute for Volunteering Research

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This scoping review, commissioned by VSO and carried out by the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR), brings together research and evidence on the impact of international volunteering to help better understand the effect that international volunteers have when they return to the UK. The focus of the review is on the impact of international volunteering both on volunteers themselves and on their home communities when they come back from overseas placements. It has been produced to inform the work of VSO and, as such, focuses in particular on the impact of the agency's placements and on evaluations of its international programmes. With 33,000 returned overseas volunteers to date (many of whom are from the UK), the impact that these volunteers have when they return home is a key area of VSO's work.

The review draws together evidence on this dual impact of international volunteering under the following key themes:

- developing professional and personal skills and knowledge
- influencing employment, career progression and workplace practices
- raising development awareness and promoting social cohesion
- increasing civic participation.

Developing personal and professional skills and knowledge

There is growing research evidence that highlights the positive impact of international volunteering on the skills and knowledge base of volunteers. Research points to the development of a range of personal and professional skills through international volunteering, including interpersonal skills, communication skills and management, problem-solving, leadership and team-working skills. The development of skills among young international volunteers and among international volunteers in the education sector has been a particular focus. Less attention has been paid to the development of skills among international volunteers in the health sector and the transferability of these skills when they return.

More research is needed to establish the precise factors that influence the extent to which skills are developed overseas and transferred on return home and, indeed, the general 'durability' of these skills.

Although the link has been made anecdotally, less systematic evidence is available on the impact of returned volunteers on the development of skills and knowledge within their communities in the UK.

Influencing employment, career progression and workplace practices

The evidence base on the impact that international volunteering experiences can have on the work practices of returned volunteers is also developing. For example, research with returned teaching volunteers has highlighted the ways in which international volunteers in the education sector can develop new approaches to teaching, learning and classroom management, which can be put into practice when they return to their schools in the UK. This in turn can aid career progression and employment prospects among returned volunteers. International volunteering can also help to inform career decisions, particularly among young people by giving them experience of different roles and activities.

The extent to which the skills and experiences of returned international volunteers are recognised by employers is, however, variable, potentially limiting the extent to which the positive impacts are realised by returned volunteers. The perspectives and attitudes of employers towards international volunteering placements, and the best ways of supporting returned volunteers in their workplaces so that they can apply the learning from their placement experience, are both areas worthy of future research attention.

Beyond the individual volunteers, evidence is suggestive of the impact that returned international volunteers can have on employers, colleagues and service users. For example,

students in the UK who are taught by a returned international volunteer may have an enhanced learning experience. Employers may also benefit from improved retention among staff that have been on international volunteering placements. This, however, is very much an emerging area of research and one that warrants far greater attention.

Raising development awareness and promoting social cohesion

The development of international outlooks and of better understanding of development issues are identified as important areas of change arising from international volunteering experiences, and evidence is emerging to support these claims. International volunteering can facilitate a stronger sense of 'global citizenship' and 'solidarity'; it can lead to greater awareness and understanding of development issues, poverty and diversity.

However, the conditions under which such impacts are most likely to develop are less well understood. Further, evidence suggests that given these new values and attitudes, it can be difficult for some returned volunteers to re-assimilate into their home communities in the UK.

Beyond the individual volunteers, research suggests that the experiences and perspectives that returned international volunteers bring back to the UK can make a difference to wider attitudes within home communities, both towards international development and to levels of awareness on global issues. Again, however, evidence is limited in this area. Further, research has suggested that there are limits to the extent to which returned international volunteers are able to transfer this knowledge and perspective, as they may face resistance or indifference. Continuing to develop the evidence base within this area would help to clarify these issues.

Increasing civic participation

International volunteering can increase levels of participation in volunteers' home communities in the UK. Reports from returned volunteers suggest that many feel the international volunteering experience encouraged them to get more involved in their local, home communities through volunteering and other forms of civic participation. In addition, returned volunteers may go on to encourage others within their home communities to get involved through volunteering. While anecdotal reports support these propositions, more systematic research is, however, needed in this area to confirm the link and to provide evidence on the long-term impact of international volunteering on volunteering and community participation rates in the UK.

Key conclusions

There is a growing base of evidence on the impact of international volunteering on the UK, pointing, in particular, to the link between volunteering and skills development, career development, international understanding and civic participation among returned volunteers. The sector, however, would benefit from continuing to work to ensure that this evidence base is both comprehensive and robust. Impact evaluation and research with returned volunteers and their home communities would be an important element of this. It has some way yet to go.

1. SETTING THE SCENE

A key element of the government's vision for strengthening communities and civil society in the UK is building and investing in a "culture of volunteering" ¹. The contribution of volunteers to social and economic regeneration has recently been described as "enormous" ² and investment in national initiatives such as 'V' for developing youth volunteering and the Volunteering for All programme to boost participation among socially excluded groups are indicative of the growing support for volunteering within policy. Alongside this, it is also being increasingly recognised that returned international volunteers can make an important contribution to this agenda and vision, and that the benefits of overseas volunteering can be felt not just by communities in the host developing countries but also by communities in the UK. The International Development Secretary, Douglas Alexander, recently commented:

"Volunteering plays a valuable role in society, not just in helping to reduce global poverty, but in the wealth of experience volunteers will bring back to the UK and into public service" ³.

This review, commissioned by VSO and carried out by the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR), brings together existing research and evidence on the impact of international volunteering in order to understand better the effect that international volunteers can have when they return to the UK. For VSO, it will help the organisation to build on the value of international volunteering to the UK and inform its approach to channelling, capturing, promoting and researching the positive effects of international volunteering.

The focus of this review is on the impact that international volunteering has on volunteers themselves and on their workplaces and communities when they return to the UK from overseas. While the effect of international volunteering on host communities is recognised in many ways as the central issue ⁴ this review focuses on the impact of volunteers on return to their home communities in the UK. Specifically, it will look at the impact of international volunteering on:

- developing professional and personal skills and knowledge
- influencing employment, career progression and workplace practices
- raising development awareness and promoting social cohesion
- increasing civic participation.

Methodology

The evidence gathered for this review includes academic and practitioner-led sources on the impact of returned international volunteers. It focuses on evidence from the UK but draws on international literature, where useful. The scoping review should not be taken as a definitive account of all evidence on the impact of returned international volunteers and will need to be revisited as new research arises.

Literature, research, project evaluations and case studies have been provided by VSO to inform the review. As such, particular attention will be paid to the impact of the VSO experience. Discussions have also been held with key volunteer sending agencies in the UK and some have provided useful materials and case studies (see Appendix).

In general, a systematic evidence base on the impact of returned international volunteers on their home communities in the UK (and elsewhere) is lacking. It should be noted that some of the evidence presented in this review is based on programme evaluations and testimonies from returned volunteers that are likely to have a strong leaning towards the positive experiences of volunteers involved in international volunteering programmes. Much of the evidence is also based on small-scale studies and research carried out by individual organisations.

Structure of the review

The review explores the impact of international volunteering experiences both on volunteers themselves and on the UK communities and workplaces they return to. It also highlights areas for further research. Section 2 below discusses these aspects in relation to the professional

and personal skills and knowledge developed through international volunteering. Section 3 explores the ways international volunteering influences employment, career progression and workplace practices. Section 4 draws on evidence of the impact on levels of awareness of development issues and Section 5 looks at the effects of international volunteering on people's involvement in their home communities. The findings are drawn together in Section 6, conclusions and recommendations.

2. DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

Impact on volunteers

The potential for volunteers to develop personal and professional skills through international volunteering experiences is a central element of many overseas development programmes. Research with returned international volunteers supports the idea that experience gained on volunteer placements overseas helps volunteers to develop personally and professionally. Evidence both from the UK and overseas suggests that volunteers can develop a host of life skills, such as confidence, communication skills, problem solving, patience and tolerance and greater independence⁵.

Cook and Jackson's research⁶ with 100 returned VSO business and management volunteers, for example, found that those involved in overseas placements felt that they had developed skills to varying degrees. The skills that were identified included: working with different cultures (92 per cent), communication (74 per cent), problem solving (57 per cent) and influencing and persuading (46 per cent).

Opportunities for the development of young people through international volunteering have been particularly highlighted⁷. A report on the outcomes and impacts of Global Xchange, a programme managed by a partnership of the British Council and VSO,⁸ identified the key areas of learning among young volunteers to be the understanding of diversity, development issues, taking on responsibility, confidence, team working and leadership skills. Commenting on the benefits of their involvement in the programme, one youth volunteer, for example, said:

"I have been able to develop my personal strengths, minimise my weaknesses by developing new strategies to deal with particular situations, and develop confidence and assertiveness through being a member of the Global Xchange programme."⁹

Similar benefits have also been highlighted by Jones¹⁰ who emphasised the development of "soft skills" among young international volunteers. He argued that "the overseas dimension did serve to heighten the learning impact of the volunteers' experiences"¹¹. Further, an evaluation of Raleigh International's Youth Development Programme (Motive8) found that 96 per cent of participants said that their confidence and motivation had developed as a result of their involvement¹².

A number of commentators also note the 'transformation' or 'turning point' of volunteers through their international volunteering experiences¹³. These reports emphasise the ways in which international volunteering provides opportunities for volunteers to think about their own values and develop their sense of self-awareness and identity, openness to experience and understanding of their lives. VSO's survey with 392 returned volunteers and 489 overseas volunteers found that 90 per cent of volunteers reported that their values and attitudes had changed as a result of their volunteering experiences¹⁴. A returned volunteer, involved with the Global Xchange programme, commented on this impact:

"On a personal level I feel that I have become more open-minded in all aspects of my life. During the programme, I have become exposed to so many points of view and ideas that in my everyday life I would not have encountered or become involved with."¹⁵

More broadly, a number of studies highlight the contribution that experience gained while volunteering overseas can make to an individual's professional development¹⁶.

Bringing together research in this area within the education sector, Hutchings and Smart¹⁷ usefully summarise the main benefits of international volunteering to the professional development of teachers as:

- engaging in education in different contexts and environments
- interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds
- taking on higher level roles/responsibilities.

Unterhalter et al's study¹⁸ with 113 returned VSO teachers highlights how international volunteering facilitated professional development for some volunteers through reflection on practice (48 per cent of respondents) and the development of interpersonal skills (29 per cent). One of the teachers involved in the research, for example, said:

"[The VSO placement was] the most positive experience in my professional development. I would never have had the chance to run a department in a school in England. I was unsure that I could take on this role so have gained lots of confidence throughout this year."¹⁹

Schulz and Kelly's research²⁰, which involved interviews with 21 former VSO teachers and a survey with 87 returned VSO teachers, also revealed that volunteers had developed professional skills through their international volunteering placements. They noted that "professionally, the time spent overseas provided an opportunity for earnest and intensive professional development"²¹. Eighty-four per cent of returned VSO teachers involved in the same research said that they had developed evaluation skills through their international volunteering, and 74 per cent reported new management skills.

Thomas's research²² with returned overseas volunteers found that "the main benefits that they had gained as a result of their experience were improved ways of working and enhanced 'higher order skills'". According to returned volunteers and employers in the Thomas study, the top three skills developed and enhanced through international volunteering were global awareness, adaptability and interpersonal skills.

Within the business sector, anecdotal evidence suggests that volunteering experiences can affect the leadership and team-working skills of those involved in international corporate volunteering schemes²³. Cook and Jackson's study involving in-depth interviews and a survey with 516 managers, found that most reflected positively on their employees' volunteering experience. Two in three employers (67 per cent) who had employed a volunteer on their return from an overseas placement said that they brought different experiences and skills to their organisation compared to other employees.

Other research, however, suggests that transferring these new skills to the workplace can be challenging if they are not recognised by employers or indeed by the returned volunteers themselves²⁴. This raises questions about the importance of volunteers being well supported by agencies when they return home, so that they are able to use and apply their new skills effectively²⁵.

Impact on the wider community

Less research is available on the effects of international volunteering experiences on the personal and professional skills of those in the wider community. Considering the evidence presented above, it could be suggested that the skills developed by volunteers on overseas placements could be shared with, and transferred to, others such as work colleagues and service users (students or patients, for example). Some research has shown that returned education volunteers have been able to share their new knowledge and understanding about development and global issues with other teachers in schools, for example.

International volunteers may also provide their colleagues with personal and professional learning opportunities because they are encouraged to 'act up' in the volunteers' absence. Hutchings and Smart²⁶ argue that this enables them to develop confidence, learning and knowledge.

Areas for further research

This review has identified a number of topics for further research concerning the impact of skills development on volunteers returning from placements overseas and on the wider community. These include:

- the development of skills through international volunteering and their use in the organisations that volunteers work for in their home communities in the UK, including those in the health sector
- the factors that influence the extent to which personal and professional skills are developed through international volunteering experiences
- the 'fading factor' of skills development and how long the impacts of international volunteering experiences are felt.

3. INFLUENCING EMPLOYMENT, CAREER PROGRESSION AND WORKPLACE PRACTICES

Impact on volunteers

The research evidence suggests that international volunteering experiences can affect the employment patterns and career development of returned volunteers in a number of different ways, including commitment to jobs, their choice of career and career progression.

Firstly, it has been argued that involvement in international volunteering placements can affect returned volunteers' levels of commitment to specific careers or workplaces. Unterhalter et al's research with returned VSO teachers²⁷ found that most volunteers came back to work in UK education following their overseas placements. Over half (51 per cent) said that they returned to work as teachers and two-thirds (66 per cent) were employed in the education sector. Indeed, most of the volunteers (68 per cent) said that they planned to remain working in the UK education sector for the next five years. However, 13 per cent indicated that they had left education entirely. The researchers note that these retention levels compare favourably with national figures and that they "signal significant gains in teacher commitment and retention for the UK"²⁸.

Several studies have pointed to the influential impact of international volunteering on career decisions. VSO's 2005 volunteer survey found that 49 per cent of returned volunteers said that their volunteering experience had affected their career plans and 29 per cent were currently in or were considering a role in development as a result²⁹. Other commentators, however, note that the impact of the volunteering experience might be less significant than is suggested here. Hutchings and Smart³⁰, for example, state, "overall the impact on career plans has perhaps been to offer time to reflect, and to crystallise ideas that were already there rather than to radically alter plans".

However, for young people, the evidence suggests that international volunteering experiences can particularly influence their career plans. Jones³¹ argued that involvement in a gap year (which includes international volunteering) can help young people make better informed decisions about their education and employment, as well as improve their employability and career opportunities. However, he also noted that by volunteering, young people may lose ground on workplace experience, earnings and career development.

According to VSO's survey with returned volunteers involved in their Youth for Development programme³², the majority (88 per cent) felt that their volunteering with VSO had impacted to some extent on their choice of career. One-quarter (27 per cent) said that they went on to work in international development and two-fifths (42 per cent) reported they worked in social care. Commenting on these impacts, VSO volunteers have said:

"I always wanted to work in development but the placement was a vital first step in giving me relevant experience – my first job for DFID was in Bangladesh and I suspect I was given the role purely because of my knowledge of the context gained through [volunteering]."³³

"Volunteering with VSO has already given me job opportunities I never thought I would have." ³⁴

"I am certain that without my VSO experience I wouldn't have got my job with World Vision. The experience it gave me was invaluable." ³⁵

Research on the impact of international volunteering on career progression tends to focus on two main areas: the extent to which skills and knowledge learned through volunteering lead to promotion and additional work responsibilities; and the extent to which skills and knowledge are recognised by employers and thereby enhance or limit career advancement.

A number of studies have highlighted how international volunteering experiences have helped returned volunteers progress in their careers. Schulz and Kelly ³⁶ reported that more than half of the VSO returning teachers in their study worked in more senior management roles after their VSO placements. They note that "many [volunteers] stated that the experiences they obtained while overseas had equipped them with the skills and desire to take on more responsible positions" ³⁷.

Similarly, Unterhalter et al ³⁸ noted that many of the VSO volunteers involved in their research had been given additional responsibilities or leadership roles on their return to the UK. They stated that all of the employers they interviewed recognised the "depth of professional understanding teachers had developed during their VSO placements" ³⁹.

It has been argued, however, that "international volunteers find themselves in a 'skills trap' because, although they have the very skills the economy requires, employers do not recognise them" ⁴⁰. Thomas ⁴¹ notes that returning international volunteers often did not go back to the same position or pay on their return, particularly those working in the public sector. Similarly, in Schulz and Kelly's study ⁴² most of the volunteers said that they returned to jobs with the same pay scale or took on lower paying positions. These challenges could be further amplified if volunteers felt they had "lost ground", for example, due to changes in the education system or difficulty in being able to adjust to different ways of working ⁴³. Thomas ⁴⁴ also found that out-of-date skills, networks and knowledge were a concern among employers as well as returned volunteers.

Impact on the wider community

Taking 'community' in the broadest sense, the research discussed above is suggestive of the wider public benefit of returned international volunteers. For example, the retention of classroom teachers or the movement of returned volunteers into difficult-to-recruit positions could have much wider implications on the broader community.

At the more local level, research suggests that volunteering experiences can impact on workplaces and workplace practices. Unterhalter et al ⁴⁵ note that "reflection changing action" was "a key feature of what VSO teachers brought back to UK classrooms". They suggested that VSO teaching experiences can lead to the following 'actions' and changes:

- development of skills in classroom management
- new styles and methods of teaching
- reassessing approaches to teaching, the concept of education and their role as educators.

Similarly, Schulz and Kelly's research with VSO volunteers ⁴⁶ reported that 90 per cent of volunteers thought that their placements had impacted positively on their classroom management and practice. Of those participating in the research, 58 per cent said they had an improved range and awareness of resources for teaching and 37 per cent said their experiences affected the way they managed their classroom environments. VSO volunteers said that they were able to use their new experiences in the classroom through discussions, projects and assemblies.

In some cases, volunteers and their managers felt that international volunteering experiences had exposed participants to new ideas and experiences that better equipped employees for the workplace. One employer involved in Cook and Jackson's study ⁴⁷, for example, said:

"It pushes individuals outside their normal comfort zone and the experiences they get

from that can apply to their day job and they may also view the way they do things slightly differently in the future.”⁴⁸

In terms of impacts on service users, other research has hinted at the direct effect of international volunteering teaching experiences on the interaction of returned volunteers with students. Unterhalter et al⁴⁹, for example, highlighted how, in some cases, VSO teachers felt that they had developed their confidence and skills in communicating and working with students from multicultural backgrounds in their home communities.

Schulz and Kelly⁵⁰ report that some returned VSO volunteers adapted the way they viewed their students. Just under half (49 per cent) of teachers in their study said that their attitude towards students had changed. However, in many of these cases, returned volunteers said that they felt frustrated by the students they were teaching:

“I am less tolerant of students here. I think that they would benefit from seeing what education is like in places such as Africa. Students place no value on education and seem to take its provision for granted.”⁵¹

In general, however, there is little systematic evidence on the impact of returned international volunteers on service users that evaluates perceived or self-reported impacts or changes.

Areas for further research

This discussion has identified a number of key areas for further research concerning the impact of international volunteering on employment, career progression and on the workplace practices of returned volunteers. Topics include:

- the impact of returned volunteers’ new perspectives, attitudes and workplace practices on service users, including students and in particular patients
- the medium-term and long-term impact of international volunteering experiences on employment and career progression, particularly on retention and career development in the health sector
- the perspectives and attitudes of employers towards international volunteering placements, particularly in health
- ways of supporting returned volunteers in their workplaces so they can apply the learning from their volunteering experience.

4. RAISING DEVELOPMENT AWARENESS AND PROMOTING SOCIAL COHESION

Impact on volunteers

Previous research has found that international volunteering experiences can impact on volunteers’ understanding and awareness about other countries, communities and people. It can help to facilitate a stronger sense of ‘global citizenship’ or ‘global consciousness’ and solidarity⁵². In the US, it is claimed that programmes such as AmeriCorps help to “bring home to the US an understanding of foreign cultures that enriches [the] unity and informs policy choices”⁵³.

Schulz and Kelly in their research with returned VSO teachers found that the most important change arising from the VSO experience was the “international outlook and perspective”⁵⁴ of volunteers. They highlighted, in particular, how the immersion of volunteers in a new environment, specifically one with limited resources, was significant in influencing these changes. Similarly, Unterhalter et al⁵⁵ reported that many returned VSO volunteers felt that their volunteering experience had raised their awareness of issues such as poverty, health and access to education. Seventy-one per cent of those involved in this research said that they had more political awareness and understanding of policy developments. Further, the majority (95 per cent) of the returned and overseas volunteers responding to VSO’s 2005 volunteer survey thought that their awareness of international development issues had increased as a result of their volunteering experiences⁵⁶.

For some commentators, the ways in which international experiences encourage new understanding and values among volunteers is particularly significant⁵⁷. For Jones⁵⁸, activities such as international volunteering can help to develop “more sophisticated awareness” of cultural difference, as well as a better understanding of global links and issues. He argued that this is important, as volunteers are able to “understand their potential to effect change through volunteering”.

Sherraden, Lough and McBride note that “exposure to and interaction with people who are different may increase intercultural competence” and that this could help to facilitate “open-mindedness” in international volunteers⁵⁹. Intercultural competence is described as the ability of individuals to be able to interact effectively with other people who are different from themselves⁶⁰.

Anecdotally, testimonies from returned VSO volunteers suggest that some have developed a better awareness and understanding of others and intercultural difference. One volunteer, for example, has noted:

“I feel I’ve got further insight into inclusion, more than just as ‘disability’. I understand more about issues of indirect discrimination, the needs of minority ethnic students and, in some ways, social class issues and advantage. I recognise difference and its needs better, and I feel I can provide for this much, much better... I would now say I am passionate about equality and inclusion and trying to inspire this in my student teachers.”⁶¹

Researchers, however, have commented on how it can be difficult for some volunteers, with their new values and attitudes, to re-assimilate into their home communities on their return⁶². Evidence suggests that this can be particularly challenging for those who have been volunteering overseas for long periods of time⁶³.

Impact on the wider community

Research suggests that international volunteering and the experiences and perspectives that volunteers bring back to the UK can potentially make a contribution to developing global perspectives and raise development awareness in the wider community⁶⁴. As argued by Thomas⁶⁵ returned volunteers “possess a massive ability to shape attitudes, change mindsets, and give global perspectives to domestic situations”.

Evidence, particularly in the teaching sector, points to the ways that returned volunteers can use their experiences in their workplace environments in the UK. Within the classroom, volunteers and their colleagues felt that returned volunteers were able to use their knowledge, awareness and understanding of global issues and global dimensions in their teaching⁶⁶. Colleagues of returned VSO volunteers in one research study, for example, said:

“She is very aware of global issues and willing to bring her experiences of Africa into the work of the school.”⁶⁷

In Thomas’ study of international volunteers, one employer said:

“It was a good opportunity for that teacher to learn about the Bangladeshi culture and train other staff when they come back.”⁶⁸

The evidence is suggestive of the positive impact of volunteers bringing back global knowledge and perspectives to workplaces on those they work with, including colleagues and service users, but there is a clear need for robust research in this area. Further, the extent to which returned volunteers are able to transfer their global awareness to the workplace has been questioned. Thomas⁶⁹ reported that some volunteers faced “indifferent resistance” from their employers on this issue and identifies that “there seems to be a major opportunity for returned volunteers to help employers achieve their diversity objectives via communicating knowledge about different ways of life and pioneering a culture of open minds”.

Within the wider community, there is further evidence to suggest that volunteers are sharing their global and development awareness with others. In VSO’s 2005 survey of volunteers, 60 per cent of

returned volunteers said they had been actively using their volunteering experience in raising development awareness ⁷⁰. Four in five (81 per cent) of those involved in VSO's Youth for Development programme said that they felt that as a result of their international volunteering they had inspired other people to become more involved in global issues ⁷¹.

An evaluation of VSO's Global Educators' programme ⁷² found that returned volunteers played an important role in facilitating development education and raising development awareness. Tasked with supporting schools and teachers in bringing a development dimension to the classroom, the volunteers thought that their activities had the following effects on students:

- showed an increase in knowledge and awareness (77 per cent)
- demonstrated a positive change in values and attitude (44 per cent)
- developed skills through the activity (26 per cent)
- took some kind of positive action as a result (41 per cent).

It might also be argued that international volunteering can help to facilitate a better understanding of different cultures within UK communities. VSO notes that international volunteering "allow[s] the volunteers to bring their rich experience of volunteering back to their communities in the UK fostering cross-cultural understanding and cultural cohesion" ⁷³. Few studies have focused specifically on the views of local community members and how they feel the participation of others in international volunteering impacts on them. However, Boyd's ⁷⁴ review of an International 4-H Youth Exchange programme reports that both the participants and persons close to them identified that their sensitivity towards other cultures and their interest in global and community events increased as a result of involvement in the initiative.

The aspirational nature of much of the commentary on these issues points to the need for further research to demonstrate the impact of returned international volunteers on promoting cross-cultural understanding and awareness within home communities in the UK.

Areas for further research

This discussion has highlighted a number of areas for further research, in particular the need for studies with local communities and service users. Identified topics include:

- the ways in which volunteers develop their understanding and awareness of other people and places, particularly in terms of intercultural awareness and sensitivity, and how this impacts on social cohesion within home communities on their return
- the impact of development awareness activities and perspectives of returned international volunteers on colleagues and service users.

5. INCREASING CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Impact on volunteers

It is recognised that someone who participates in a volunteering experience is more likely to go on to volunteer in the future ⁷⁵. Anecdotal evidence on international volunteering suggests that this may also be true of returned volunteers and that they are more likely to get involved in their home communities following their return from their placement overseas.

VSO's survey with returned Youth for Development volunteers in 2005 reported that the majority of respondents (64 per cent) said that their involvement in the programme encouraged them to become more involved in community issues. Forty-five per cent reported that the experience inspired them to stay involved in development education projects.

In an evaluation of one of the Global Xchange (GX) programmes ⁷⁶ all of the respondents said that the volunteering experience motivated them to consider or continue volunteering in the future. Volunteers involved in the programme said:

"GX has helped me see that I can contribute to my community in so many ways and that I can become more involved in my community by volunteering." ⁷⁷

“Ultimately, this programme has renewed my spirit of volunteerism, and the importance of volunteering in societies all over the world. It has given me the confidence to believe that I have something to contribute, and to go and share what I have.”⁷⁸

“I understood how to play an active role in the community in a number of ways. I learned how to employ communicative techniques despite the language barrier, how I can fundraise, how I can organise and do capacity building in the community.”⁷⁹

Reports from VSO suggest that young people involved in their programmes planned to use the skills they developed while volunteering overseas in a number of different ways, including fundraising, promoting/campaigning on development issues and volunteering in the local community. Indeed, returned volunteers on VSO’s Youth for Development programme expressed considerable interest in staying involved with the organisation. Seventy-five per cent of respondents said that they would like to re-volunteer with VSO and 43 per cent indicated that they were interested in joining a VSO supporter group⁸⁰.

Unterhalter et al’s research with returned VSO teachers⁸¹ reported that, following their international volunteering experiences, some said they became more involved in community projects and initiatives, including those promoting female education and raising awareness of child sex abuse. They also voiced interest in VSO’s UK activities, local youth work, refugees and asylum seekers.

Research from overseas also suggests that international volunteering can impact on the involvement of volunteers in local communities on their return home. A survey of 549 returned volunteers in Canada (including volunteers with VSO Canada) found that individuals committed more hours to their volunteering and that “their experiences overseas simply solidified their commitment to volunteerism”⁸².

Impact on the wider community

It has also been suggested that, as well as developing their own volunteering ethics and practices, “returned volunteers often inspire others to participate”⁸³. There is a notable lack of research in this area, however, in particular in studies exploring the extent to which returned international volunteers encourage others to get involved in volunteering and community action.

Nonetheless, research with VSO volunteers suggests that they are keen to share their experiences with others. Eighty-nine per cent of volunteers in VSO’s 2005 survey said that they were motivated to do this⁸⁴. Some were also involved in VSO-related activities after their placement, including, for example, local community events, awareness-raising activities and media campaigns. Intuitively, it could be suggested that through these activities, returned volunteers will be promoting their positive volunteering experience and the concept of overseas volunteering.

In a VSO survey with returned Youth for Development volunteers in 2005⁸⁵ volunteers felt that they had gone some way to encouraging others to participate in volunteering. Eighty-nine per cent of respondents thought they had promoted volunteerism to other people.

Areas for further research

This review has identified a number of topics for further research in this area, including:

- research with local communities in the UK to explore the extent to which returned international volunteers encourage participation in volunteering and community action at home
- the long-term impact of international volunteering experiences on returned volunteers in terms of civic engagement and involvement in volunteering.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The positive impacts that international volunteering can have are widely acknowledged. Much has been made in recent years, for example, of the impact on the volunteers themselves, with VSO taking a leading role in evidencing these results. The effects on host and, increasingly, home communities is also recognised. There is an emerging evidence base to support these claims. Specifically, the evidence suggests impacts in the following areas:

- the personal development of returned international volunteers, including confidence building
- the development of professional skills, including communication and interpersonal skills
- the development of new perspectives, understanding and knowledge among returned volunteers, including increased awareness of development and global issues
- new methods and approaches in workplace practices used by returned volunteers, including the sharing of development perspectives and dimensions with service users such as students
- the development of more informed career choices and, in some cases, career progression among returned volunteers
- strengthened commitment of returned volunteers to community involvement and volunteering
- the promotion of development awareness and volunteering to the wider community by returned volunteers
- potential impacts on awareness of development issues and cross-cultural understanding in the communities that volunteers return to.

However, the review highlights the importance of a number of factors that can affect and mitigate the positive benefits of international volunteering to returned volunteers and their home communities. Without the right support for international volunteers, for example, before, during and after their placements, the positive impacts may be reduced.

The evidence base is growing and developing, however, it is far from comprehensive, systematic or robust. It suggests a need for further research into key areas, including the impact of returned volunteers on their home communities and workplaces. As part of developing a systematic evidence base, the review highlighted the need for:

- agencies to develop better ways of collecting data and feedback from returned international volunteers, so that the impact of placements on UK communities can be more systematically measured
- evidence on the factors before, during and after volunteering placements that contribute to the positive impacts of international volunteering to returned volunteers and their home communities.

Recommendations

The review makes the following recommendations to agencies and policy makers involved in international volunteering:

- The sector is encouraged to consider the ways in which additional independent and rigorous research could help demonstrate and enhance the impact of international volunteering on volunteers, workplaces, service users and the wider community in the UK, thereby supporting developments in policy and practice. Current research on these issues is limited and patchy and relies on self-reporting and evaluations. Research is particularly needed in the health sector, one of the key areas involving international volunteers, and on the impact of returned international volunteers from the perspective of their home and work community in the UK.
- The sector is encouraged to consider undertaking a review of existing tools and methodologies for measuring and assessing the impact of international volunteering on volunteers and their home communities. This should involve collaboration between agencies to identify areas of work in this field and priorities for the future.
- Individual agencies are encouraged to review the ways in which they currently collect, analyse and present evidence from returned volunteers about the impact of their volunteering experiences. This could significantly help organisations to demonstrate better the impact of international volunteering placements on the volunteers themselves, in the overseas community and back home.
- International volunteer-sending agencies are encouraged to develop further the ways in which they engage with and support returned volunteers. This includes ensuring that comprehensive

programmes of support are in place. It also includes developing ongoing monitoring procedures to enable organisations to capture more effectively the medium-term and long-term impact of international volunteering experiences on individuals and UK communities.

- The sector is encouraged to review the way it works with employers and with other stakeholders to promote the benefits of international volunteering experiences. This could include dialogue on the positive benefits found by existing research.

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APPENDIX

The organisations contacted as part of this review include:

Earthwatch Institute

<http://www.earthwatch.org>

International Service

<http://www.internationalservice.org.uk>

International Voluntary Service

<http://www.ivs-gb.org.uk>

Médecins Sans Frontières

<http://www.msf.org.uk>

Mercy Ships

<http://www.mercyships.org.uk>

Raleigh International

<http://www.raleighinternational.org>

Skillshare International

<http://www.skillshare.org>

Students Partnership Worldwide

<http://www.spw.org>

VSO

<http://www.vso.org.uk>



Cover image: Returned volunteer Vicki Clark is working with a project team to find long-term solutions to the problem of food shortages amongst refugees and asylum seekers in Leeds. Their current project is the launch of an allotment that will enable the refugee community to become more self-sufficient.

