



From Service Delivery to Partnership: The Changing Face of International Volunteering

PANEL PRESENTATION, DEVNET 2014

"Volunteering 'can transform the pace and nature of development and it benefits both society at large and the individual volunteer.'" (United Nations Volunteers)

The panel members

Chair: Rev Fr Kevin Toomey OP, Editor - *Tui Motu*

Panelists:

Jane Banfield: Owner – At The Beach B & B, Paihia

Volunteer experience:

- Mahitahi Catholic Overseas Volunteers - *Strategic Planning & Organisational Management Facilitator* – Western Solomons 2013, 2014, PNG, 2012;
- VSA - *Human Resource Systems Advisor*, Bougainville, 2009-2010;
- VSO - *Agriculture Teacher*, Vanuatu, 1983-4;
- Church of Scotland *Youth Volunteer* – *Stuntzabad Agricultural Extension Project*, Pakistan, 1978.

Alice Banfield: Development Worker

Volunteer Experience:

- *Grants Field Officer* (Volunteer) – World Vision Solomon Islands, 2011-2013
- Plus experience managing teams with volunteers in them during roles as *Area Manager* and *Programming Operations Manager* with World Vision Vanuatu, 2013-2014

Christina Reymer: Director - Mahitahi Catholic Overseas Volunteers

Volunteer Experience:

- *VSA Volunteer - Vocational Centre Manager and curriculum development*, PNG 1986-8;
- *COVS Volunteer - In-service trainer*, PNG, 1983-84.

Sera Price: Business Analyst – Tuia International

Volunteer Experience:

- *VSA Volunteer – Assistant Planner, Division of Lands and Physical Planning, Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG)*, Bougainville, 2010 – 2011;
- Working with and team management of a VSA Partnership with Tuia International and the ABG, 2013.

Panel summary

1: What is your experience of capacity building and how is the concept changing?

Christina:

- Mahitahi has a 50+ year history of volunteering
- 2003 Mahitahi was established following closure of COVS, but with a significantly different focus:
 - Shift to primarily short-term assignments (<3 months) in response to partner needs/localisation
 - Long-term partnership relationships with a focus on capacity building
- 2013 Integration of Mahitahi into Caritas Aotearoa NZ, achieving synergies in governance and operations.

Mahitahi Model Today:

- Short-term skilled volunteers assisting with local capacity building in a wide range of areas in the context of long-term partnership relationships maintained by Mahitahi/Caritas.
- Focus is on meeting partner needs.
- Limited to Pacific community, strengthening New Zealand's Pacific identity.
- Reverse exchange - partners visiting NZ with Caritas sponsorship is becoming more frequent
- **Engagement for betterment of us all as one human family**

Jane:

This year in the Shortland Islands I worked alongside the Principal of a Rural Training Centre to develop effective financial recording and operational systems. Such systems are required by the Solomons Ministry of Education, and form part of their capacity building plans to provide better educational outcomes, but regrettably little has yet changed in remote areas, which lack access to professional development training and support. Whilst volunteers such as myself can play a useful role with skills exchange in helping to 'plug the gaps' to ensure faster and more effective widespread rollout of national capacity building strategies, I feel this is peripheral to the real value of volunteers, due to their unique entry-point within a host organisation. I see 3 unique roles, well-illustrated recently by Elizabeth Tongwe, Director of the Long Bay Conservation Organisation, speaking at the recent VSA Congress:

- **AS ALLIES** – working alongside colleagues, believing and supporting the goals of the organisation and its advocacy;
- **OPENING WINDOWS** (Elizabeth's own phrase) – to new ways of looking at things, and greater global understanding, which in turn enables more active participation as change agents in the local community and as citizens of the world;
- **BUILDING BRIDGES** – from the host organisation to other national and international organisations and communities, providing a much wider network both to find and to share solutions.

So, while skills exchange/plugging the gaps can still be of value, I see volunteers' unique value today may be in opening up alternative options and networks within which host organisations can interact as global citizens.

Alice:

I'd like to highlight two aspects of capacity-building, based on my own experience as well as others' research - in particular the evaluation of the Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) programme published in January 2014 by DFAT. The two aspects I'd like to highlight are:

1. The mutuality of capacity-building
2. The changing face of capacity-building

To address these two aspects one by one, let's first look at the mutuality of capacity-building...

The mutuality of capacity-building

I appreciate the terms "skills exchange" because it captures the two-way nature of capacity-building. For myself, when I did a two year assignment as a volunteer, I was young – having just a couple of years' work experience under my belt, and a masters degree recently completed with a 10-week internship abroad. So much of the capacity-building, especially in the first year, was my own.

As my mother (Jane) has suggested, volunteering is about being "allies:" coming alongside and showing a willingness to learn from others in the host organisation and wider culture.

And secondly, the term "capacity-building" is changing...

How the term is changing

I think people are becoming increasingly aware of the broader meaning of capacity-building. Traditionally, we might associate it with the counterpart model or training workshops. These both have their value – however there is a much wider range of ways in which capacity building can be done. For me, it's a lot about a long-term process of working alongside people – coaching and mentoring is a big part of it.

In the January 2014 evaluation of the Australian volunteer programme, they noted that only 9% of volunteers had strict "counterpart" roles. Team mentoring made up 27% of the roles, which technical advisers made up another 29%. The final 33% was made up of in-line positions. Which of these were most effective in achieving capacity-development, according to the evaluation's assessment? (Answer not discussed during panel, however team mentoring achieved the highest ratings, followed by technical advisers).

Sera:

Through my VSA experience I truly value the concept of 'skills exchange' because of its mutual and multi-layered benefits. Focus seems to be on technical skills but where I saw, or maybe appreciated the benefits the most was the exchange and growth of the softer skills. Building on Alice's point about the broader meaning of capacity building, here are some examples from my time in Bougainville:

During my *go pimis* (leaving party) my boss proudly announced to the assembly that we didn't always see eye to eye but that we would reach an outcome where we would both agreed. In Bougainville there is an aversion to confrontation; it didn't really happen and if it did it was usually at the point of explosion. Developing a relationship where we could engage in a healthy discussion and debate was a huge achievement, especially being young and female.

The second example was through my assignment, to facilitate the Bougainville Land Summit which was to be the first collective step in developing a land policy for Bougainville. Speakers were sought from throughout Bougainville with a couple of international guests. I managed to convince my colleagues that some younger people should also participate. I had found a Bougainvillean master student who had studied ecology and biology abroad and was working in the Highlands at the time, along with a young Bougainvillean woman who was very passionate about the

role and power of custom and local culture in today's society. At the Summit there was a bit of scepticism as to what they would offer but following their presentations they received significant praise from the mostly older crowd, and this continued for many months as their presentations were replayed on the radio. Their role has helped address prejudices and showed young people do want to be involved and have something useful to offer. They are now a part of the conversations are doing some pretty cool things.

One final example was through a conversation the VSA Country Manager had with one of the staff at an organisation a volunteer had just left. He had asked her what she had learnt from the volunteer. The response was "confidence"; for example, in welcoming people to the centre and making them feel comfortable. Again, subtle but really valuable.

2. Who benefits?

Christina:

There is a wide range of approaches that go under the name of volunteering sending agencies – Google "global volunteering" – with varying costs to the prospective volunteer –from "voluntourism" /ecotourism / etc. with questionable benefits to partner or host agencies. Partner needs are primary.

Jane:

We talk of 'partners' and 'partnership' when discussing volunteering these days, but I don't think we are there yet. There's still a colonial or post-colonial feel to the volunteer concept, as of people who are giving up something, to help 'the poor and needy'. Something I feel strongly is that we need to acknowledge the enormous benefit to volunteers. True partnership for me, within volunteering, will be the time when people from host organisations stand up and say proudly, "Look what we have achieved through our invitation to a volunteer – look at the positive difference we have made to that person, their workplace, their community".

At the recent VSA Congress, Returned Volunteers could repeatedly be heard sharing how they had benefitted in developing knowledge and understanding, for some it had opened career pathways, for many it led to life-changing involvement in advocacy, in leadership, in politics, local community involvement, refugee support and so on. I believe there is a need in NZ for more research into the quantitative and qualitative value of volunteering to NZ.

Alice:

It's an important question given the investment involved in sending volunteers. For example, the cost of an Australian volunteer under the DFAT-funded VIDA programme is around AUD\$70,000, so a large investment and often a sizeable component of project budgets.

Coming back to what we were saying earlier about mutuality, and the reciprocity of volunteering, for me it's important that benefits are mutual. Most of us here have experience with well-respected volunteer agencies with sound development principles, but there are many "voluntourism" agencies I am sure everyone is aware of, where you have to pay to volunteer, and while these may be helpful for the volunteer, there are times when this may be more burdensome to the host community than beneficial.

In my own experience, when I was studying in the US, I remember doing a one-week volunteer "house build" trip to New Mexico, where the amount of time the qualified builders spent trying to teach people like me how to hammer nails would have been much longer than the time taken for them to hammer the nails themselves.

However, having said that, as part of the trip we also had a fundraising component, in order to be able to take part, which I think was possibly the best value to the organisation – where people perhaps wouldn't be as willing to "just" give money, as they wanted more engagement. It's also perhaps, a chance to express solidarity or "alliance," which as mum (Jane) has said is another important aspect of volunteering, and this was the feedback we got from the people who we were building the house with and for.

It's also important that international volunteers are not replacing national staff positions – this can be a risk, and means that the volunteer placement may actually be detrimental rather than beneficial to the host organisation. For example, the DFAT evaluation stated: “The survey does ask whether a national could have done the job just as well as the Australian volunteer. It finds low response rates from Vietnam and the Solomon Islands, but finds that half of all Cambodian host organisations answer yes to that question.” This is obviously a concern, and something which sending agencies need to be very mindful of.

Sera:

I agree with the previous comments: that the partner's needs are primary, but what does partnership really mean where we need to be more open and acknowledge the reciprocity of benefits.

Being a young volunteer, at first I was very much about the adventure, learning new skills and putting something interesting on my CV. As the assignment progressed the true value of volunteering became more apparent; capacity-building through skills exchange, technical support and helping break down barriers / prejudices. And not just with my counterpart or the organisation that I was working with but within the community I was living. The benefits of volunteering can be much wider but, as noted by Alice, there can also be negative impacts if the assignment was not well thought out and / or managed.

I now work for a small consultancy who is working with the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) to develop a policy framework for 'Inward Investment' and assist with its implementation. Though a partnership with VSA, the project has been able to have someone on the ground for six months to develop an appropriate IT system, as well as work with local staff to test processes developed in the previous year. It has been a really successful exercise. The benefits were felt by all involved and were well balanced. I believe the success could be attributed to careful assignment development with all parties, relationship management and the personalities involved.

3. How do you see the future of volunteering over the next decade/longer term future?

Christina:

Reverse engagement and it may extend to engagement with tangata whenua in Aotearoa NZ. Perhaps the language changes –no longer talk about volunteering but engagement kanohi ki a konohi (face to face) as equals at a grassroots human level.

Jane:

In our changing and connected world, volunteer relationships are bound to change, and they are. I've been a volunteer Business Mentor for the past few years here in NZ and I am very interested in the model they have been using for their business mentoring scheme in the Pacific. Teams of mentor volunteers fly into a country and meet face to face with their designated businesses for just a week. Then, having set up some agreed actions, return to NZ and mentor by email, phone, Skype until it is time for a repeat visit six months later.

Last year there were over 10,000 UN Online Volunteer assignments carried out – and there's over 200 English speaking assignments posted as I speak, if any of you in the audience are looking... One example would be the Global Civil Initiatives Team where four online volunteers from four different countries joined with an NGO in the Issy-kul region of Kyrgistan to develop a project proposal on sustainable energy generation with the aim of enabling rural populations with no access to electricity to gain benefits from low-carbon technology and to increase community engagement in Sustainable energy solutions.

I would predict rapid growth in this type of structured online volunteer collaboration alongside the more traditional onsite volunteer models, and as well as these, here I pick up on what Christina has mentioned in terms of reverse

volunteering. There will increasingly be occasions where development of capacity can best be brought about by extending an invitation to a host organisation to send a 'counterpart' to work alongside someone in New Zealand. With valid win-win partnerships, a far wider volunteer base both onsite and online, and a much lower carbon footprint, I see an exciting and positive future for International Volunteering.

Alice:

At the end of the day – whether the assignments follow the traditional model, or emerging models such as virtual volunteering or “reverse volunteering” – at the core of it, I think the same thing will remain. And that’s relationships. Ultimately, at the core of international volunteering, are relationships. The success of a volunteer assignment hinges on the strength of the relationships involved.

Sera:

As noted above, there are many ways that volunteering can take advantage of evolving technology and ideas. With my volunteer hat back on, I have recently been involved in a project working with a cocoa grower in the Pacific to improve the quality of his cocoa beans, bring them to NZ and turn them into chocolate through a NZ artisan chocolate company. The project was funded by crowd-sourcing, a platform on the internet where people buy into the idea and vision and donate money or pledge for a reward. There is an element of private enterprise in this example but there are other platforms to raise money to support volunteers and project in international development.

I do see technology and enterprise being more involved in international volunteering. On the enterprise front, be it partnerships with private sector (such as VSA and Tuia International) or through small scale initiatives. In terms of technology, sky’s the limit really but the success of tried and true volunteering can be seen in the VSA model, still going strong since the 1960s – and it hinges on people and building relationships.

