



Education, Health and Livelihoods

Summary report of ICS Sector Reviews

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1. Introduction

Since 2011, ICS volunteers have been working together with communities around the world to create positive change through education, health and livelihoods projects. ICS has led the way in creating responsible volunteering opportunities for young people that are inclusive, meaningful and impactful. To support continuous improvement and learning in ICS programmes, and to make wider recommendations for the youth volunteering for development sector, VSO commissioned reviews into each thematic area (education, health and livelihoods). This summary presents the headline findings from these reviews and highlights the key strengths and contributions of ICS volunteers in each area.

2. Methodology

Three standalone reviews were undertaken by external researchers between 2017 and 2020 to understand the role and contribution of youth volunteers to VSO's global programmes. Each review combined:

- desk-based literature reviews (wider academic literature on youth volunteering for development, sector-specific literature on each thematic area and internal ICS reporting mechanisms such as team debrief reports and project documentation)
- key informant interviews with global and national staff from VSO, Raleigh International and Restless Development and returned volunteers.
- focus group discussions with host homes, community members, partner organisations and local government representatives.

3. Limitations

The reviews were intended to produce a series of recommendations for good practice for youth volunteers in international programmes, rather than quantitatively measure the extent to which ICS volunteers have contributed to the achievement of wider programme outcomes.

The review of health focussed specifically on Adolescent and Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (AYSRRH), as this is the focus of the majority of ICS health projects.

The COVID-19 pandemic meant that the final review to be completed (Education) was undertaken remotely by the researcher; interviews and focus groups with staff and returned volunteers were conducted over Zoom, while ICS staff in each project location gathered

feedback from host families, community member and local partners to overcome barriers to technology.

4. The role of youth volunteers in international development

Feedback from project communities, partners and ICS staff recognised that cross-cultural, diverse teams of youth volunteers have a unique role to play in development. Their creativity, passion, open-mindedness and unique 'outsider' perspectives on issues allowed them to question the status quo and rally the community around change-making initiatives.

The reviews showed that ICS volunteers (and young people more broadly) bring specific and meaningful contributions to international development projects. These include:

- Working directly with communities, rather than via partners or other mechanisms
- Building the knowledge and confidence of other young people
- Creating networks and opportunities for young people
- Mobilising communities to demand improved health, education and livelihoods services
- Creating safe, inclusive spaces for young people to access support, advice and information
- Increasing the reach and scale of wider programmes
- Role modelling behaviour that promotes girls' rights, the inclusion of people with disabilities and the meaningful participation of traditionally marginalised groups
- Challenging long-held norms and practices that create barriers, and working with local people to find creative solutions

The reviews have produced a series of thematic area-specific recommendations alongside broader suggestions for a future ICS programme and the youth volunteering for development sector more broadly, which will now be explored.



A VSO ICS volunteer welcomes the children of the community for the Community Action Day in Lindi, Tanzania.

5. Programme Integration: youth volunteers in the bigger picture

All of the reviews support the purposeful integration of ICS programmes (and young people more generally) as part of wider organisational programme design. This means that rather than ICS volunteers working on a project in isolation, their efforts are directly contributing to a larger effort as part of a volunteer 'ecosystem'. Particularly successful projects created linkages between ICS teams and other types of volunteers, including community volunteers (who can provide long term project sustainability), and skilled long-term volunteers with technical knowledge on a particular subject. Projects that have identified ICS teams as being a strategic part of a larger whole have been able to utilise their unique creativity, innovation, and energy to engage young people, train peer educators and reach marginalised groups traditionally excluded from community decision making processes. An example of this can be seen in Nepal, where VSO ICS teams had common project goals with wider Inclusive Education programmes and worked in shared project locations alongside common local partners. As part of a wider project called 'Sisters for Sisters' ICS volunteers supported initiatives to build the confidence of

female students to speak out about the challenges they face in safe, school-supported clubs, empowering them to mentor their peers and challenge traditional attitudes and practices that impact their education. ICS-led innovations, such as menstrual hygiene management rooms and reading fairs in schools have been scaled up, trialled in other regions of the country, and in some cases, adopted by local governments and rolled out to new schools, in the context of VSO's country-wide approach to improving education services.

Youth volunteers are still often pigeonholed into 'information delivery' roles in many international volunteering schemes, resigned to questionable activities like delivering English lessons in the place of trained teachers. This approach not only fails to recognise the potential of the volunteers themselves, but also of the young people in the project communities. Well-integrated ICS projects, such as those in Bangladesh, have invested volunteer time in building the capacity of local young people, training them as peer educators who are better placed to lead local dialogues on sensitive issues such as menstruation and child marriage. ICS volunteers built their confidence, provided encouragement and created youth-friendly spaces for discussions, while the wider programme context meant that specialist knowledge on these topics can be readily drawn on, rather than being provided by the ICS teams themselves. This is a far more sustainable approach to youth volunteering, as it puts young people at the heart of making change in their community.

A note on peer education: peer education is young people influencing others in their own networks, building their knowledge, and changing their attitudes and behaviours. The development sector often uses it to describe young people teaching other young people, but this is misleading; not only is peer education not the same as teaching, neither is a 21-year-old volunteer from an affluent suburb of Nairobi is **not** the peer of a 15-year-old student from a rural village in Kenya. Peer education activities in youth development programmes should use volunteers to build the capacity of other young people, enabling them to take on facilitation and leadership roles, rather than the volunteers themselves being front and centre. This increases long term sustainability of interventions and builds ownership of projects within the community itself.



Students taking part in a Peer educators and volunteers' sharing session at the school. Shree Bir Bhakti Secondary school. ICS / VSO project in Lamjung, Nepal, March 2020

6. Training, support and tools: setting teams up for success

Situating ICS teams in a wider programme context not only makes the most of their unique skills, but clearly identifies any project-specific training, support, or tools they might need to succeed during their placements. ICS volunteers' academic and professional backgrounds do not form part of the selection process, nor are they matched to projects based on any previous experience in a given professional sector. All volunteers receive standardised training pre-placement, followed by further training as a whole team during the first week of placement.

All of the reviews highlighted the benefits of providing project-specific information before and during the placement, to help volunteers understand the wider context of their project (community attitudes, social norms, political environment) as well as equipping them with skills such as facilitation to support their work. This was more likely to happen in projects that were well-integrated into wider programmes, and where the organisation had developed strong partnerships based on shared values. Embedding ICS in this way gives volunteers access to experts in their project theme, both from partners and the organisation itself. ICS teams in Samfya, Zambia, contributed towards VSO's TALK adolescent health programme, and were

directly engaged and supported by a long-term health volunteer who recognised the potential of ICS volunteers to extend the reach of TALK's activities. The team benefitted from her professional background and received ongoing training and support from her on AYSRHR that would not have been available if ICS teams were working alone.

A key recommendation of the Livelihoods Review was the development of a series of 'implementation guides' designed to accompany ICS teams delivering employability and entrepreneurship projects. These were completed in 2019 and tested by teams in Uganda and Kenya in early 2020. Crucially, they are not 'how to' manuals; they guide processes and activities for volunteers to interpret using their own creativity, and tailor to local needs. This builds on the model used by Raleigh International teams in Tanzania, where volunteers structured guided entrepreneurship sessions in an engaging, youth-friendly way. Providing volunteers with guides such as this ensures that they are able to contribute their own strengths and creates a shared foundation for teams to build upon over the course of their placements.

7. Responsible volunteering

Central to ICS projects is the emphasis on responsible volunteering. Responsible volunteering means that projects are centred on the needs, priorities and aspirations of communities they take place in; delivered in collaboration with the community; and with sustainability in mind. Projects are also managed responsibly to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the community as well as the volunteers.

Key to ensuring that projects are responsible is a strong network of partners who share common values and approaches to both the project focus and wider duty of care and safeguarding responsibilities.

The reviews reinforced ICS learning that some practices common to the youth volunteering sector are at best unsustainable, and at worst, causing harm. This includes unqualified volunteers teaching English or other subjects in schools in place of a paid, trained teacher. The Education Review highlights not only the lack of sustainability of volunteer substitute teaching, but also the longer-term damage this approach can have on the perceptions of teachers in the community, and the legitimacy of their role, as well as the child safeguarding risks posed by leaving volunteers 'in charge' in a classroom. This is where a responsible volunteering approach (strong project design; safeguarding considerations integrated from the outset; mutual understanding between project partners and meaningful integration of youth volunteers into a wider programme context) can make a significant difference.

8. Safeguarding

One of the strengths of ICS volunteers has been their track record of building strong relationships of trust with the communities they are working in, which makes considerations around safeguarding extremely important to keep both the volunteers and those they are interacting with safe. Comprehensive risk assessments are undertaken for each project, and clear support systems and referral mechanisms are in place in every country to ensure that disclosures are handled appropriately. The ICS reviews make some key recommendations for the youth volunteering sector as a whole:

- The development of sector-specific 'do no harm' frameworks for youth volunteering
- Integrated safeguarding and partnership inductions which identify potential risks and agree a shared approach to mitigation and the handling of disclosures. This should cover inductions and ongoing training and support for volunteers, staff and community members, and include procedures such as obtaining consent from children and young people to participate **and** opt out of sessions run by volunteers, as well as back up support where situations do arise.
- Preparing volunteers for project-specific challenges and situations they may encounter, such as witnessing corporal punishment in schools; common treatment of people with disabilities; or local attitudes and beliefs around reproductive health. Both international and national volunteers can experience culture shock during their placements, and they should be well-prepared for what to do if they witness something upsetting.
- Ensuring that support and guidance is also available for peer educators on youth programmes, including training on working with young people, preparing for sensitive conversations and how to handle disclosures.

9. Partnerships

Having the right partnerships in place at the local, regional and national level is key in determining the approach of a programme and the youth projects within it. It is critical for all stakeholders, including all partners, to have an understanding of the project and the unique role of ICS volunteers from the outset to avoid poor practice creeping into projects, and ensure that the roles given to youth volunteers are appropriate. As mentioned above, ICS volunteers are not recruited based on technical skills or experience, so strong partnerships at the project level are

critical to identifying the most effective interventions for diverse teams, as well as brokering relationships within the community to help deliver the programme.

Partnerships need to be built on a solid foundation of shared understanding and common values to ensure that there is a mutual goal and culture developed between both sides of the partnership. This is especially important in projects that touch on sensitive issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights, where the wrong choice of partner can lead to tensions between the values of the volunteer programme and the values of a local partner organisation; the Health Review highlights attitudes to abstinence as an example of this in more conservative contexts.

Strong partnerships not only provide a foundation for building good relationships within the community and contributing to wider work on a specific issue but are also a reliable source of technical expertise for volunteer teams. For example, Restless Development worked closely with Marie Stopes International as part of their adolescent health ICS projects, bringing in experts for volunteer training and engaging them in campaigns and other events, increasing credibility and the accuracy of information provided through ICS channels.

Specific partnerships recommendations for the youth volunteering sector from the reviews include:

- Where schools are identified as a key point of contact, early engagement with school leadership and teaching staff is critical. Integrating schools meaningfully into volunteer projects helps move institutions beyond fixed ideas that 'education means teaching', and explore wider opportunities for volunteer support (outlined in the Education section below)
- Partnership assessments should be conducted to ensure prospective partners share the implementing organisation's values, approach and methodologies on both project-specific expertise and working with young people. This should be accompanied by ongoing quality assurance.
- Partnership agreements should be in place for all partner organisations, with specific criteria around the technical elements of the project (health, education or livelihoods), which should be specifically discussed and agreed with the partner and monitored on an ongoing basis.
- Strategic partnerships with local government, national experts or other technical programmes are critical for both policy influencing and ensuring sustainability of

interventions. This is especially important in contexts where there may not be a 'local' partner with strong technical knowledge to support volunteer teams.

10. Education, Health and Livelihoods: Making the most of ICS teams

10.1 Education

The Education Review found that ICS teams made the greatest contribution when working with the wider 'school community', rather than in activities attached directly to the school itself. ICS volunteers are not education experts, and their true value lies in addressing community barriers to education. This includes building understanding of education's importance; increasing the demand for education amongst parents and caregivers; promoting and advocating for the inclusion of marginalised groups and ensuring that children and young people have a voice in decision making processes that affect them.

The Education Review identifies 4 areas where ICS volunteers are best placed to support wider education work:

1. **Inclusive mentoring and coaching through volunteering:** establishing and supporting safe child-centred spaces in schools (such as girls clubs and child rights clubs); building peer educator capacity on topics such as child marriage and menstrual hygiene management; supporting peer education programmes
2. **Responsive and accountable leaders and governance in education:** building the capacity of School Management Committees; supporting community dialogues between schools and local education governance structures that identify issues and actions to resolve them
3. **Engaged parents and communities that include children's voices in decision making:** community awareness and advocacy activities on the value of educating girls, children with disabilities and other marginalised groups; creating and supporting community platforms for discussion (such as Inclusive Neighbourhood Spaces); supporting networks and workshops for parents; mapping community support systems for people with disabilities; supporting children to have a voice in community decision making through community platforms

4. **Catalysing strategic networks and partnerships to create change:** e.g. ICS teams in Kenya working with Deaf youth groups and networks, building their confidence and knowledge, resulting in a petition for sign language provision at government buildings being lodged by the youth groups to local government.



Deaf VSO ICS volunteers practising Kenya sign language together with students in Nandi, Kenya.

10.2 Health

ICS volunteers working on health projects were found to be particularly impactful where they supported peer education initiatives and built youth understanding of reproductive health and rights. The unique cross-cultural nature of ICS teams helped young people explore long-held views on taboo topics like menstruation and build the confidence of peer educators to run sessions on sensitive topics. Having volunteers who are themselves in a youth age bracket helped them relate to the challenges being faced by other young people; and their energy and enthusiasm has enabled teams to create community demand for better health services and information, particularly for traditionally marginalised groups.

The AYSRHR Review identifies 4 key areas where ICS volunteers are best placed to support wider health work:

1. **Creating an enabling environment for AYSRHR:** Community sensitisation, community research, social accountability and advocacy around the rights of young people to sexual and reproductive health
2. **Providing comprehensive sexuality education:** school and community-based sessions on skills and knowledge, including social skills in communication, assertiveness, decision making, managing consent and sexual rights, with content defined by young people
3. **Providing sexual and reproductive health services, and creating demand and support for their use:** promotion of youth-defined and youth-friendly services; research with young people on their preferences; promoting understanding of rights to services; improving access and quality through monitoring
4. **Promoting youth participation and leadership:** working **with** young people, mobilising them across the different strands of AYSRHR work; engaging them in research, design and delivery, monitoring and accountability; supporting them in advocacy and leadership in AYSRHR

10.3 Livelihoods

VSO's global livelihoods approaches aim to include interventions on both the supply and demand side of the labour market. Supply side interventions are about preparing people to enter the job market or begin their own business, equipping them with the relevant skills and knowledge they'll need to succeed. Demand side interventions focus on growing existing micro, small and medium enterprises to create jobs that will absorb those being upskilled by supply side training.

The Livelihoods Review identifies six key areas where ICS volunteers are best placed to support wider livelihoods work:

1. **Soft skills for a changing world of work:** equipping young people with the skills needed to be successful in a future, increasingly uncertain, labour market: spotting opportunities, taking informed risks, career resilience and transferrable skills to stay relevant in the job market. ICS teams can take a leading role in bringing innovative ideas to young people and giving them the support and motivation to keep going on their chosen path.

2. **Career guidance:** preparing young people for employment or starting enterprises, linked to their longer-term career aspirations.
3. **Employability skills:** providing top-up training on communication, time management, interview skills and CV writing for young people who have already been through employability skills courses delivered by specialists.
4. **Entrepreneurship skills:** providing follow up support on the skills, tools and information that young people interested in becoming self-employed need to succeed. As with employability skills, ideally ICS volunteers would provide this ongoing support **after** training from an entrepreneurship specialist.
5. **Business development services:** ICS volunteers working alongside business development experts and local government partners to bring energy, ideas and insights to young entrepreneurs and small businesses, complimenting the technical support provided as part of a wider package of approaches.
6. **Asset building and empowerment through group formation:** supporting in- and out-of-school youth to set up or strengthening existing empowerment groups (like youth groups) where members can provide peer to peer support.



Enterprise session, VSO ICS Loitoktok, March 2017