The ICS Programme

International Citizen Service (ICS) is an international youth volunteering for development programme that brings together diverse teams of youth volunteers to contribute to ending poverty in some of the world’s poorest communities. To date, the programme has enabled over 36,000 young people to volunteer in 33 developing countries. ICS is funded by the UK government and led by VSO alongside a consortium of well-respected development organisations.

ICS volunteering placements last 10–12 weeks, and seek to make a positive contribution to:
1. Poverty reduction and sustainable development outcomes in the host country;
2. The personal and social development of the volunteers;
3. Building the skills of each volunteer so that they better understand international development and act as agents of social change within their own communities and beyond.

The second phase of the ICS programme (ICS2) began in September 2015 following a pilot in 2011 and the first phase of the programme which ran from 2012-2015. This evaluation was undertaken to learn from the ICS programme to date, with an overarching objective of developing a better understanding of how and to what extent the programme facilitated the development of volunteers and host communities.

The Evaluation Questions

The evaluation was guided by three main questions:

**EQ1** What difference did ICS2 make for the involved communities?
To what extent do the ICS interventions lead to change across the eight identified dimensions of change?

**EQ2** How sustainable are the positive changes to which ICS2 contributed?

**EQ3** What changes, if any, do ICS alumni experience as a result of their participation in the programme?
Methodology

Evaluation Question 1 and 2
A two-stage process was used for EQ1 and EQ2:
1. Fieldwork conducted across 14 sites to generate case-by-case evidence presented across 14 case study reports;
2. Synthesis analysis of the case study reports conducted.

The 14 case studies covered six different countries, with six ICS delivery agencies represented. The ICS2 ways of working and broad expected outcomes outlined by the ICS Theory of Change (TOC) (below) represented the overarching framework guiding data collection. Fieldwork was conducted by volunteer researchers with a background in research and/or evaluation. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, validation workshops and interviews, observations and participatory visual methods.

The synthesis analysis reviewed the case study reports to extract data across three different categories:
- Observed changes
- Influencing factors
- Factors affecting sustainability

Evaluation Question 3
EQ3 used both surveys and interviews to explore the changes experienced by ICS volunteers in terms of personal development and active citizenship. Responses from more than 19,000 volunteers formed a comprehensive and robust dataset to identify and establish the extent of changes experienced by ICS alumni and how these vary by demographic.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted remotely by the evaluation team with a selected group of alumni to support the analysis of how changes were experienced by volunteers.

ICS Theory of Change

[Diagram of ICS Theory of Change]

- Program Outcomes:
  - Volunteer Personal Development
  - Active Citizenship
  - Sustainable Development

- Project Outcomes:
  - Individual Development: Knowledge, Attitudes & Practices
  - Thematic Outcomes: Education, Livelihoods, Health, Environment, Civic Participation

- Impact:
  - Increased capacity of local communities and young adults from the UK and selected developing countries to actively contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals and wider social issues.
Findings

EQ1: What difference did ICS2 make for the involved communities?  
EQ2: How sustainable are the positive changes to which ICS2 contributed?

The synthesis analysis of the 14 case studies found that there were many changes observed in communities as a result of the ICS programme. Programmatic changes included changes in knowledge, skills and attitudes of primary actors, plus some deeper behavioural changes, as well as changes in the capacity of local organisations and community structures. Changes were also observed at the relational level: in fact, instances were found in which partners and other stakeholders adopted, as a result of their exposure to ICS2, more participatory, inclusive and innovative practices. It was unclear, however, how these changes were evenly spread and instances were found in which project delivery was not conducive to achieving the expected relational outcomes.

The following aspects were also found to influence the achievement of positive outcomes and, in some cases, the sustainability of positive change:

- Volunteers living and working in the community: this key design feature was found to enable the achievement of positive results, allowing the volunteers to develop quality relationships with the people they interacted with. Volunteer behaviour (both positive and negative) was found to impact on the effectiveness of volunteer activities and relationships.
- Length of placement: in the view of most consulted stakeholders, the length of placement (between 10 and 12 weeks) was too short for the volunteers to meaningfully engage with the community and achieve the expected results.
- Pairing UK and in-country volunteers: there is some indication that this key design feature of ICS enabled peer-to-peer sharing of knowledge and skills, with positive results both for the volunteers themselves and for the host communities.
- Young age of the volunteers: The good relationships generally formed by ICS volunteers with children and youth thanks to their similar age acted as an enabler for the positive outcomes experienced by this group. Conversely, the volunteers’ young age in some cases represented an obstacle in ensuring the engagement of adult members of the community.

Unsurprisingly, the achievement and sustainability of positive outcomes was also seen as having been influenced by the quality of the design of ICS projects. One aspect of this was the extent to which project design adequately reflected contextual features; for example, some projects maximised their impact through delivering the same messages delivered by other actors (as was the case in Bangladesh around child marriage). Yet, instances were found in which project design had not adequately taken into account the features of the local context; for example, some of the livelihood training participants complained about their inability to put into practice what they had learned due to lack of access to capital, markets and other resources.
EQ3: What changes, if any, do ICS alumni experience as a result of their participation in the programme?

The analysis of volunteer survey data and accompanying interviews found that the ICS experience is associated with positive changes in volunteer personal and social development, as well as ongoing active citizenship. The clearest changes appear to be those relating to personal attributes such as resilience, adaptability and confidence. There is also strong evidence of ICS having led to positive changes in volunteers’ abilities to solve problems, communicate and collaborate, as well as in their sense of responsibility to the world around them and their belief that they can make a difference.

Further areas of change include volunteers’ understanding of poverty and development. Measurable increases in academic knowledge appear comparatively small, but are supported by a much larger apparent increase in volunteers’ confidence in their understanding. Alongside data from interviews, this suggests that the contribution of ICS to this area is to help “bring to life” knowledge that had previously been theoretical.

Significant changes are also seen in alumni’s attitudes and practices around volunteering, including their motivations, the causes they support and the types of activities they undertake, as well as the frequency and depth of their volunteer engagements. These changes are reflected in the overall increase in alumni’s civic participation after their placements, seen across a wide range of activity types but perhaps clearest in the numbers of ICS volunteers who go on to:

- Promote volunteering, e.g. speaking at events, report writing.
- Set up new groups or initiatives, e.g. support groups, campaigns or charities.
- Work in grassroots or local community organisations.

The changes reported were found to have not been experienced evenly by all ICS volunteers, although changes were consistent across different groups of volunteers:

- Increases in confidence (especially around decision-making and leadership) appear greater for female volunteers, whose ICS experiences appear to help them close a previously existing gender gap. This may be seen alongside greater increases for female volunteers in their feelings of connection to their various communities, and their belief that they can make a difference within them.
- The socio-economic background of UK volunteers has also been considered, and in general it appears that ICS is succeeding in providing equal personal and social development for individuals of all backgrounds.
- Differences between UK and in-country volunteers were also seen in a range of areas, including positive changes in confidence, resilience and adaptability and increases in understanding of poverty related issues which were higher in UK volunteers, and effect on attitudes towards social action in their own communities, which was higher for in-country volunteers.

For recommendations and more detailed findings please check out the full ICS Evaluation (2019) report, available at www.volunteerics.org