

Valuing Health Workers is a VSO advocacy initiative, which supports the achievement of the Health related Millennium Development Goals, with a particularly focus on improving the quality of health care.

Health conditions for the poor in most developing countries are appalling, partly because of a chronic shortage of health workers. Fifty seven countries have unacceptably low numbers of health staff. An additional 4.3 million health workers are needed worldwide to eliminate the deficit. This includes 2.4m doctors, nurses and midwives, but also community health workers, lab technicians and health managers. The effects of the health worker crisis are especially damaging for the people VSO works with – the disadvantaged, especially those in rural areas.

Through our research VSO has found that many health workers are de-motivated and undervalued. We believe countries should place a higher value on health staff who are already employed – as well as training new health workers.

VSO is the world’s leading independent international development organisation that works through providing skilled professional volunteers to fight poverty in 44 developing countries. VSO tackles the crisis in human resources for health both through programmatic work on the ground, and through research, advocacy and policy work.

VSO HEALTH PROGRAMMES

VSO supports health, disability and HIV and AIDS partners among others, and places volunteers both with Ministries of Health and with civil society organisations. One hundred and twenty volunteers including doctors, nurses, midwives, community health workers, management advisers and other professionals are currently helping to deliver VSO’s health programmes in Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Malawi, Mongolia, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Tanzania and Uganda.



Lucy Benala, a recently trained nurse at Malawi Central Hospital.

Medical volunteers are also supporting disability programmes in 13 countries and HIV and AIDS programmes in 18 countries. In its policy work, VSO is in a strong position to raise the issue of health worker shortages with global institutions, because it has multi-layered health programmes, with skilled volunteers working at different levels of the health system.

Depending on the requirements of the partner, volunteers may work to:

- Train and support health workers, leading to improved standards of health care
- Strengthen health systems, for example by building management capacity
- Build the capacity of poor communities to have a greater influence in the provision of health services
- Strengthen research which can lead to in pro-poor health policy change
- Support civil society to lobby for improved health policies



Chris Muhunza, a clinical officer in Masindi hospital, Uganda, works alongside VSO volunteer doctors. But many hospitals in Uganda are 30% understaffed.



(Left to right) Getrude Nzaireki, Grace Namsukusa, Nurse Miriam, Gloria Adiru, Hadijah Tumwesige are nurses working with VSO volunteers to establish teams of community health volunteers in Uganda. These volunteers work in remote villages, educating the population in preventing malaria and diarrhoea and in reproductive health.

OUR ASKS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

- Increase long-term, predictable funding for the training and retention of health workers
- Provide technical support so that each country can develop a human resources workplan
- Implement ethical recruitment policies to slow 'brain drain' caused by migration of health workers
- Commit to an ambitious target on increasing the number of health workers and to reducing the internal inequities in health worker distribution, in particular between urban and rural areas

ADVOCACY ON HUMAN RESOURCES FOR HEALTH

VSO advocates for countries to move towards the threshold recommended by the World Health Organisation: 2.3 doctors, nurses and midwives per 1,000 people. We believe that donors need to increase their support for strong health systems. It is essential to build up the health workforce in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. A strong commitment to human resources for health should be part of the UN Accelerated framework for achieving the MDGs, to be agreed in September 2010 in New York.

Research is underway in four countries to provide a solid evidence base regarding the causes of health worker shortages and the success rate of innovative solutions. These countries (with more to follow) will each develop an advocacy strategy with local partners, to hold governments to account.

VSO works with other agencies to lobby collectively, or help source volunteers. In the UK we advocate alongside other agencies such as Merlin and AMREF, whilst internationally we work with Action for Global Health and the Health Workers Advocacy Initiative.



It is a long wait for the health worker in rural Sierra Leone. Health staff are reluctant to work in rural areas where housing and facilities are lacking.

RESEARCH AND RESOURCES

- **The IMF, the Global Crisis and Human Resources for Health** – this 2010 report, written with Stop Aids Campaign and Action for Global Health, shows how the IMF is constraining the fiscal space for developing countries and impeding the recruitment of much needed new health workers.
- **Participatory Advocacy: a Toolkit for Staff, Volunteers and Partners** – this manual is an easily accessible guide to lobbying and campaigning, and can be used by health activists or other campaigners for social justice.
- **Valuing Health Workers** – In 2010/11 VSO volunteers are working with civil society in four countries (Uganda, Cambodia, Sierra Leone and Malawi) to

research the issues affecting motivation and retention of health workers. Contact us if you would like to support this research or get involved.

- **Local Volunteering Responses to Health Care: Challenges and Lessons from Malawi, Mongolia and the Philippines** – this report looks at how community volunteers can be involved in delivering health services.
- **Brain Gain** – VSO is currently researching circular migration with a view to identifying ways to increase the exchange of valuable skills across countries. The report will be available in summer 2010.

To access any of these publications, please visit www.vsointernational.org/health

CONTACT US

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If you are a health worker and would consider volunteering, please visit www.vsointernational.org