



VSO Position Paper on Social Inclusion and Gender

2021

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1. Introduction

We strive to build a fair, just and equitable society, challenging the remnants of decolonisation and the hegemony of power and discrimination.

We believe that every individual has the equal right to fully participate, without limitation, in all areas of life. Our continued investment in social inclusion and gender equality throughout all of our development programmes is strong evidence of our commitment to advancing the rights and equality of marginalised groups in all the areas in which we work.

This document details our position and strategy on social inclusion and gender, including key policies and commitments. It builds upon our earlier position paper developed in 2018 and our work throughout the past three years. This paper is an outcome of VSO organisational diversity analysis, social inclusion and gender reports, the intersectionality lens of our interventions, qualitative data from our scale and reach, social inclusion and gender training, and social exclusion and gender analysis across 21 countries. We held a series of consultations with various functions of the organisation to hear their opinion and to receive their feedback on the earlier position paper and we continue to hear from our stakeholders and primary actors as we build on our work and evidence.



A group of community volunteers trained on interactive theatre for justice to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence as part of SAHAJ project in Nepal.

2. Purpose of the position paper

This paper lays out how we position Social Inclusion and Gender (SIG) within our organisation and programmes. Through this guide, we are committed to transforming the organisation's policies and practices internally and externally to achieve social inclusivity and gender equality. Social Inclusion and Gender is one of VSO's core approaches, along with resilience and social accountability, that ensures no one is left behind. Our core approaches underpin everything we do, both programmatically and organisationally, ensuring that we continuously take a "People First" approach to development within the volunteering for development framework.

SIG is a crucial integrated approach cutting across all programmatic interventions to eradicate injustice, inequality and marginalisation.

We believe inequality and marginalisation of specific social groups arise as a consequence of the power and privilege some sections of society hold over others. There is an innate feeling of superiority and inferiority associated with any such relationship. Compounding this problem are the many harmful social and gender norms in certain societies and cultures. Systemic patriarchy, that perpetuates structural inequalities, resulting in structural poverty and discrimination and leading to exclusion of certain groups. Social groups and individuals face discrimination based on various factors and many, at times, lose their dignity and self-respect. There is often denial of rights, opportunities and services, thereby effectively leaving them behind from accessing any form of development. In the most extreme cases there is a loss of the right to freedom of expression, and, in the worst-case scenario, it can also result in actual threat to personal safety and security. The intersectional identities of age, caste, colour, citizenship, descent, disability, ethnicity, gender, geographic location, HIV status, language, migrant status, non-binary identity, political opinion, race, religion, or sexual orientation, and any other factors of marginalisation, create multiple forms of discrimination and injustice.

Poverty is a cause and consequence of social exclusion, gender inequality and marginalisation based on the factors of age, caste, citizenship, descent, disability, ethnicity, geographic location, gender, HIV status, language, migrant status, non-binary identity, political opinion, race, religion, sexual orientation, and others. Marginalised groups often suffer multiple layers of discrimination that occur based on these various factors. For instance, a Dalit living in the Terai region of Nepal faces double marginalisation based on caste and geography. If the Dalit is a woman, the gender dimension adds a triple layer of marginalisation. This can go on based on, for example, age, disability, health status, sexual orientation, etc. effectively multiplying an individual's vulnerability and marginalisation.

Legal exclusion in numbers

72 countries criminalise same-sex relationships

10 countries legitimise domestic rape

127 countries do not explicitly condemn marital rape

60 countries HIV transmission

ILGA, 2017; Equality Now, 2015; GCHL, 2017

Being discriminated against means that individuals and social groups are denied something – sometimes concrete, such as goods, services, and opportunities – but more often denied self-respect and dignity. At its most extreme, discrimination is experienced as exclusion through the denial of rights, justice, protection, participation and quality of life.

Discrimination is a denial of human rights. By preventing certain people from contributing to and benefiting from development, discrimination limits progress on poverty reduction and reduces economic growth. Grievances associated with discrimination, exclusion, and gender inequality are one of the key causes of conflict. Socially excluded groups are often the most vulnerable during a humanitarian emergency and may have specific needs that must be met in emergency responses.¹

To promote social inclusion and gender equality, we need to recognise the impact that societal hierarchal and patriarchal structures, stereotypical social and gender inequitable norms, and attitudes have on individuals, families, institutions and policies. These structures and norms have the potential to privilege certain social groups over others and lead to oppression and exclusion of marginalised groups. We must also recognise that the systems of production and consumption, the way that economies and societies are organised, and governance structures contribute to the regression of human rights, injustice and inequality.

At VSO we recognise the factors of exclusion of individuals and groups based on caste, citizenship, descent, ethnicity, geographic location, HIV status, language, migrant status, non-binary identity, political or other opinion, race, religion, colonial culture or any other factors of power and sexual orientation.

Age, disability and gender intersect across all the above.

¹ Humanitarian Policy Group, 2021

3. Our position

At VSO we understand social inclusion as a systemic and complex process. It ensures no one is left behind, and that everyone's rights to resources, opportunities, and self-respect are upheld. It seeks to enhance the lives of individuals and groups by ensuring their full participation in social, economic, cultural and political life, regardless of differences in their age, caste, colour, citizenship, descent, disability, ethnicity, gender, geographic location, HIV status, language, migrant status, non-binary identity, political or other opinion, race, religion, or sexual orientation.

VSO understands gender equality to be the situation where women, men, girls, boys and those who do not identify as male or female, enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities and protections.

Social Inclusion and Gender is a holistic approach that captures the diverse elements of identity that lead to marginalisation, social exclusion and gender inequality. It enables people who are marginalised and excluded based on their identity to access services, participate meaningfully in decision-making processes, and enjoy a dignified life. Gender equality is a core part of social inclusion, through which women and girls, non-binary identity and LGBTQI+ individuals, who are often socially, economically, politically and environmentally excluded by patriarchal norms, are provided equal access to resources, opportunities, voice and respect for rights.

SIG is a process of identifying and recognising different dimensions of systemic exclusion and inequality by design or omission, challenging stereotypes and addressing harmful social and gender norms, attitudes and behaviours, to address power inequalities and discrimination. SIG is a continuum that ultimately results in equality, justice, rights and dignity for all.

We are particularly committed to equally addressing the intersectional elements of identity that lead to social exclusion, inequality and marginalisation.

Gender cuts across all other identities that have the potential to lead to exclusion. We recognise the intersectionality of gender as women, girls and non-binary people experience multiple forms of discrimination due to the multiple layers of identities based on age, caste, colour, citizenship, descent, disability, ethnicity, gender, geographic location, HIV status, language, migrant status, non-binary identity, political opinion, race, religion, or sexual orientation. Therefore, we examine all aspects of gender in our programmes, including concepts of masculinity and other gender identities.

Disability is a cross-cutting issue and cuts across all vulnerable groups; therefore, we prioritise both gender and disability in all of our interventions. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) explains disability as:

“Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”²



National volunteer interacting with a peer educator as part of the interventions of the Comic Relief project, that promotes information and service to People Living with HIV.

©VSO/Peter Caton

² UN General Assembly, 2007.

4. Our approach

- Promote the Volunteering for Development approach, which puts people and communities at the centre of their own development and enables voluntary action as a catalytic force to inspire change.
- Promote social inclusion, gender equality and advocacy efforts across all our programmes.
- Contribute to the Leave No One Behind Agenda by encouraging innovative ways to continue delivering development to those most excluded.

4.1 Volunteering for Development

Volunteering for Development (VFD) is VSO's operating framework for how we work with poor and marginalised communities and organisations to bring people together globally to find creative solutions for transformative change.

The three key components make the VFD approach work

1. People First Principles
2. Relational Volunteering
3. Core approaches of social inclusion and gender, social accountability and resilience

VFD delivers on:

- A deeper understanding of systems and communities.
- Addressing the root causes of inequalities and injustice, and working to transform norms.
- Increased skills, experience, knowledge, and agency for all people.
- Diverse perspectives that generate new insights, and innovation.
- Improved confidence and capabilities of individuals, communities and governments to bring about change and transform power relations.
- Wider ownership and sustainability of the development process.

VFD's Impact:

- Public services are inclusive of the most marginalised groups and harmful social norms are addressed.
- Decision-makers are held to account, and better able to respond to primary actors' needs and rights.
- Individuals, communities and governments can manage vulnerability, conflict and disaster.
- Changes in policy and practice to better tackle poverty and exclusion.



National volunteer is facilitating orientation and mobility training to a girl with visual impairment, as part of the ENGAGE project in Nepal.

Below is a brief introduction to the three components of our VFD approach in the context of our aspirations

4.1.1 People First Principles

The People First Principles are at the centre of our VFD approach. They enable us to build trust and participation of primary actors at all stages of the development process, to design appropriate and effective programmes and nurture a culture of reflection and collaboration.

People First Principle	Description
People-Centred	We use participatory practice to engage and listen to the primary actors and a range of stakeholders at different levels to ensure our work is pro-poor and we are contributing to positive social change.
Evidence-Based	We design interventions based upon quality research and evidence, and seek to understand the complex dimensions of poverty and power. This informs decisions and enables us to monitor how we are contributing to change.
Effective and Appropriate	We provide adequate and appropriate resources to ensure that the right people are in the right place at the right time, investing in our Volunteering for Development approach as a powerful and practical way to tackle poverty and inequality.
Reflective Practice	We invest in and nurture a culture of learning, create space and time for reflective practice, and respond and act upon our learning to constantly improve our programmes.
Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing	We create opportunities for collaboration and knowledge sharing to promote good practice across VSO and improve our approaches to programming.
Accountability	Our decisions are driven by the voices and evidence from primary actors to whom we are accountable.

4.1.2 Relational volunteering

The relational volunteering model is how we mobilise and manage diverse communities of volunteers effectively across the whole system to develop effective and trusting relationships within and across communities and institutions and inspire and mentor individuals and organisations to be a part of the change.

It is built on empirical evidence about how diverse volunteers working alongside communities, contribute to change across 5 important, interrelated areas of inclusion, innovation, ownership, participation and inspiration.

In sourcing and placing volunteers, we will particularly encourage volunteers from vulnerable and excluded groups to engage in programmes and policy, as we believe that they have a lived experience of exclusion and discrimination and are therefore better able to bring about change by reaching out to and working alongside marginalised people in communities. We will also commit to ensuring that any adjustments and additional support needed to facilitate an impactful volunteering placement are facilitated.

4.1.3 Core approaches

The core approaches enable us in all our work to identify and address the systemic issues of poverty and exclusion, through a focus on resilience, social accountability and social inclusion and gender equality.

In the delivery of our social inclusion and gender aspirations, we commit to understanding and working on the intersections between social inclusion and gender and the other two core approaches of resilience and social accountability through interventions that will:

- Address existing power imbalance
- Enhance foundational assets of primary actors across the five asset capitals (Human, Social, Economic, Environment and Technological)
- Support rights awareness especially of those most marginalised and capacities to claim rights among many other interventions

[Click here for more information on VSO's Volunteering for Development framework](#)

4.2 Rights-based approach

A human rights-based approach draws upon United Nation human rights conventions. It means that all forms of discrimination in the realisation of rights must be eliminated. It also requires the prioritisation of those in the most marginalised situations who face the biggest barriers to realising their rights. A human rights-based approach requires the recognition of rights as legally enforceable entitlements and is linked to national and international human rights law.

Our work is centred on creating spaces for marginalised groups to participate in development and decision-making processes and hold duty bearers to account through a process of critical engagement. We have equitable processes for all individuals and people across our programmes and encourage allyship with leaders from grassroots campaigns, self-help groups, advocacy or pressure groups, movements, and networks. We believe that the state and duty bearers are the custodians of the provision of basic essential services, and we will continue to align with marginalised groups to empower them to advocate for their rights and entitlements and to strengthen investment in and delivery of gender-responsive, climate-resilient public services.

Inclusion

Volunteering extends the reach of public services to the poorest and most marginalised by working on power dynamics

Innovation

Volunteering generates new ideas and creates new forms of collaboration that lead to social innovation through a mix of inside/outside perspectives

Ownership

Volunteering enhances trust and strengthens local ownership of development processes

Participation

Volunteering creates a pathway to people's participation, active citizenship and social action

Inspiration

Volunteering exposes communities to different cultural norms and ideas

4.3 Inclusion, gender and intersectionality

We recognise people are often disadvantaged by multiple sources of oppression: their age, caste, colour, citizenship, descent, disability, ethnicity, gender, geographic location, HIV status, language, migrant status, non-binary identity, political opinion, race, religion, or sexual orientation and other identity markers. Intersectionality recognises that identity markers (e.g. "woman" and "black") do not exist independently of each other, and that each informs the others, often creating a complex convergence of oppression. We recognise that certain groups are not adequately recognised and are marginalised due to their identity. For instance, people from the LGBTQI+ community are left out of many campaigns, including the women's and the disability movements. Therefore, the intersectionality of identities and status is essential to consider.

Evidence from VSO's programmes suggests that the intersection between gender and various vulnerable groups is not adequately addressed in the

development process. Gender-based violence (GBV) is an issue that cuts across all of VSO's core programme areas (health, education and livelihoods), and affects women and girls, non-binary and LGBTQI+ individuals disproportionately.

GBV is based on several factors, most prominently on social norms and power dynamics. Women, children, non-binary people and LGBTQI+ individuals in any thematic context are at increased danger of experiencing violence.

We are conscious that the intersectionality of vulnerabilities and GBV, as well as other key issues or factors, needs to be explored and considered from the project design stage, and regularly monitored and reported to ensure our programmes effectively address and respond to the reality of all vulnerable groups.

For example, the risk of violence against children with disabilities in residential settings is known to be high.³ This must be explored from the project design stage and regularly monitored and reported to ensure abuse does not take place or is immediately addressed appropriately.

We have also rolled out the safeguarding protocol, **Safeguarding SharePoint page**, which is mandatory for all project offices to complete, which has a GBV survivor-centric lens.



Youth volunteer, facilitating a participatory discussion with young applicants on their aspirations as part of the youth entrepreneurship project in Tanzania.

4.4 Policy influencing and advocacy

We will continue to advocate for the rights and voice of vulnerable groups, pro-poor and non-discriminatory policies and legislations. We will align with processes and structures that work on influencing policies in favour of the poor and marginalised. We encourage project teams to identify policy asks based on the local context and geopolitical scenario.

We will advocate for the formulation of laws and policies protecting the rights of vulnerable people. We recognise that certain groups have been denied adequate representation in policies, have been excluded from societal participation, perpetually face harmful social norms and stigma.

Based on our experience and focus on gender equality we have identified potential areas for influencing policies and advocacy in areas related to domestic violence, all types of rape (e.g., marital rape, male rape, "corrective" rape of lesbian women, rape of male and female sex workers, rape of children, etc.), child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), women trafficking, and girls' school dropout due to pregnancy. Our research and experiences have shown that many countries have passed legislation on these issues, however, there is a huge gap in implementation. We will scale up our interventions surrounding male engagement, as we believe that ending gender-based violence against women and girls will not be possible without the active involvement of men and boys, including family members and whole societies to change patriarchal attitudes, behaviours, practices and norms.

We will put our efforts towards advocating with governments for ensuring community-based rehabilitation services for persons with disabilities. Our focus on rehabilitation will be around assessments, therapy and access to assistive devices, which are critical for persons with disabilities to be included in education, health and livelihood opportunities. We will continue influencing governments to integrate the Washington Group Questions in their census and other survey tools to facilitate better counting of and planning for persons with disabilities.

³ UNICEF, 2013.

5. Our commitments

Certain SDGs directly promote greater social inclusion, specifically Goal 5 on Gender Equality and Goal 10 on Reducing Inequalities.

Our commitments are closely aligned with international priorities. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been crucial in promoting the fight against inequality, injustice and exclusion. Certain SDGs directly promote greater social inclusion, specifically Goal 5 on Gender Equality and Goal 10 on Reducing Inequalities. The Leave No One Behind (LNOB) agenda has bolstered this work by recognising that particular efforts are needed to prioritise populations that were at risk of being left behind to significantly reduce inequalities. Our People First approach and Volunteering for Development framework are aligned with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and directly contribute to the SDG and the LNOB agenda and support the most marginalised to participate and influence this work.

We are committed to ensuring accountability and resilience are embedded as part of our Social Inclusion and Gender core approach.

5.1 Programmatic commitments to SIG

We are committed to:

5.1.1 Education

We will continue our efforts to promote inclusive education that addresses barriers to education for disadvantaged groups, especially girls and children with disabilities, mainly through raising parental and community awareness, enrolment, retention and transition. Gender stereotypes act as a barrier for girls to access quality education. Stereotypes about the role of women as confined to the domestic and family sphere underpin many obstacles to girls' equal to access to quality education.

We will ensure that our teacher professional development promotes diversity, inclusion, child protection and gender-responsive pedagogy. We will continue to work towards bringing about systemic and structural changes in education systems by partnering with governments, teacher unions, and engaging with children, parents and other stakeholders to adopt social inclusion and gender curriculum and interventions, focusing on building capacity and awareness of agency.

5.1.2 Health

Our sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health (SRMNCAH) and rights-based programmes will have a greater emphasis on reaching out to women, adolescent boys and girls, children and other marginalised and excluded populations. We will continue to ensure community level sensitisation on the importance of SRMNCAH, including the importance of immunisations, safe and appropriate family planning practices (use of contraceptives), safe pre-delivery and post-natal practices, safe motherhood, healthy menstrual hygiene management and inclusive comprehensive sexuality education. Our volunteers work with local partners to equip communities, especially adolescents and youth, including those experiencing multiple disadvantages, with the skills, knowledge, opportunities and services they need to lead productive lives. They focus on helping young people gain confidence and receive information about SRMNCAH and rights to reduce the risk of early marriages, early sexual debut, multiple concurrent partnerships, teenage pregnancy, HIV, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), FGM and sexual and gender-based violence.

Our volunteers in many parts of the world have worked to build the capacities of frontline health workers on how to deliver more inclusive and patient-centred maternal, prenatal and neonatal care to the poorest women and their children.

Our volunteers also advocate for the implementation of more inclusive health policies at a local, national, regional and global level.

5.1.3 Livelihoods

We recognise that there is structural exclusion – as part of global economic structures involve large companies wielding power and squeezing workers in the supply chain. Women in particular often bear the brunt of power in supply chains. Women also bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work, which are time-consuming and often physically demanding in nature and impede their access to decent work opportunities, as well as basic rights to education, political participation and leisure.⁴ We will strive to work at the global and national level to develop appropriate partnerships with state and non-state actors to be nurtured in specific areas of decent work, employment, food security and agriculture. We will align with interventions that promote or ensure social safety nets, social capital and market resilience. We will look at and participate in broader campaigns for policy advocacy and engagement, for instance in the food security lobby working on livelihoods. We will take a collective approach towards building the capabilities of vulnerable social groups, particularly youth, women and persons with disabilities, to get engaged in economic activities to improve their livelihood. We work with institutions and movements to address harmful social and gendered norms. To recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid care and domestic work.

5.1.4 Disasters and emergencies/Safe, peaceful and resilient communities

We will continue to build capacities for communities to prepare, respond to and mitigate the shocks they confront, with a focus on disaster risk reduction (DRR), climate change and conflict. We will promote preparedness planning and risk mitigation to these shocks and ensure our programmes reach and engage with the most vulnerable communities and individuals as part of any intervention. We will take into consideration the intersectionality and the different layers of marginalisation of individuals and engage with them to ensure their needs and access requirements are met.

5.1.5 Gender and social inclusive programming

We will work towards embedding social inclusion and gender into the programme design of our health, education, livelihoods and Sustainable, Peaceful and Resilient Communities (SPARC) programmes, and recognise that this is a key and necessary step to ensuring that identified marginalised people become part of the programmes and own the process. We will identify barriers and take affirmative action to overcome those barriers to create an enabling environment for marginalised primary actors to participate on an equal basis. We work with people's organisations and constituency-based networks and groups on institutional building, leading to sustainability. We believe that strengthening their own organisations, networks and institutions will make the interventions more transformative and sustainable.

Examples of gender and inclusive programming:

- Our Ethiopia programme engaged with internally displaced people through education and livelihoods interventions.
- Programmes target lower caste groups and poor people across programme interventions in Nepal, wherein interventions are focused on education for girls and learners with disabilities and creating livelihood opportunities.
- Our work with Rohingyas in Bangladesh has enabled us to improve education outcomes through the home-based Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) intervention in the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazaar and has been able to ensure reach to more children and improve their education levels. It has achieved an average International Development and Early Learning Assessment (IDELA) score of 50% (Early numeracy 66%, motor skill 50% and early literacy 47%). Other research suggests 90-95% in parents' satisfaction with big sisters/mothers' qualification resulting in learning and behavioural changes.
- Our work on prisons interventions in Lesotho, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe had positive outcomes as they enabled the strengthening of systems and support of juveniles to develop the desired positive behaviour, enabling their successful

⁴ According to the ILO, decent work involves opportunities for work that are productive and deliver a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, as well as better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organise and participate in key decisions and provide equality of opportunity and treatment for all. See <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm>

reintegration into society on release. Inmates gained skills and knowledge to demand sexual and reproductive health services within the prisons, resulting in increased sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, which included voluntary testing. Women inmates were part of the activities and some also took part in the Technical, Entrepreneurial, Vocational Education and Training (TEVET).

- The Living with Dignity initiative in Rwanda, which is an adaptation and learning from Nepal's Gender Transformative Norm programme, reaches poor and marginalised people in rural Rwanda, cutting across gender and disability identities in addressing issues of GBV, and gender stereotypes and prejudice.

5.1.6 Participation and leadership

- We are committed to enhancing gender equality and recognise that disadvantaged women and non-binary people (including LGBTQI+) are extremely vulnerable, and their needs must be addressed as a priority. We will continue to target women and non-binary people (including LGBTQI+) as our primary actors and will also ensure we reach out to them through specific interventions. We will also scale up some of our interventions, including building the leadership of women and creating interventions that empower women by challenging patriarchy, for instance in Nepal. We have evidence of interventions in Kenya, Malawi, Myanmar, Nepal, Tanzania and Zambia that have targeted and contributed towards women's empowerment in some of the most marginalised communities.
- In Kenya, the consultation with primary actors (adolescent girls) helped the Education for Life project team identify catch-up learning centres that address concerns, including distance, security, availability of water, toilets for the girls, adequate space, proximity to health facilities, and police stations. The adolescent girls feel that their issues are given importance and are being addressed.
- In Malawi, the solar irrigation intervention encouraged farmers in the central region of Malawi to complement rain-fed farming with irrigation to increase food availability. Additionally, women called Solar Mamas, benefiting from the solar electrification programme, are running small businesses with solar batteries to earn money that can be used to buy food. This has enabled their economic independence.
- In Myanmar, VSO, in partnership with MIGS

(Myanmar Institute of Gender Study), has created a cadre of 350 peace volunteers to find the solution to create a harmonious community by transforming conflict into peace in the community by raising the voices of women. This is an example of women's leadership and active participation.

- In Tanzania, 40% of 200 young women graduates secured income-generating activities within six months of completing their vocational outreach training.
- In Zambia, all International Citizen Service (ICS) project sites established SHE Clubs (girls only clubs). These clubs, aside from sharing information on SRH and life skills development, support girls and provide mentorship opportunities to girls by women mentors in the community. This mentoring motivated and inspired young girls to be empowered and become leaders of their communities. Also, mother and daughter networks are established that have created favourable relationships between mother and daughters under the SHE Club. This intervention has created a positive platform for discussions on issues that mostly affect girls, especially SRH related, and is proven to be an opportunity to strengthen relationships between mothers and daughters by finding ways of dealing with problems.

All of the above examples work towards building independence, leadership and participation of girls and women by enhancing their access to and control of rights and opportunities.

5.1.7 Response to emergencies – COVID-19

During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, we learned that it is the most vulnerable and marginalised who are most adversely affected. For instance, we have identified migrant families who have left villages to work in urban areas and are left to fend for themselves during lockdowns. Daily wage earners and labourers in most parts of the world have lost their livelihoods. Small businesses and ventures have been negatively affected. Women are increasingly prone to GBV as perpetrators and abusers are at home and are constantly increasing their abuse. Studies have shown that there is a 30% increase in domestic violence since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, resulting in households that are unsafe for girls. Children who were going to school have now been forced to stay at home and have had their learning process interrupted.

Immunisations and family planning interventions have stopped in many countries. People living with HIV have faced increased hardship when it comes to accessing essential medical treatment. Pregnant women have been unable to access essential health services, increasing maternal mortality.⁵

The dimension of exclusion is broadening with more challenges arising, which are largely affecting poor and marginalised people. Some of the notable gaps include:

- While few sections of the population are receiving information due to access to media and information, a majority of them are not receiving full information, creating a digital divide.
- Inaccessible communication: certain populations, like deaf people, blind people, adolescent girls, women and elders, are not able to access information as it is not in accessible formats or there is a language barrier.
- Internet: the World Wide Web or internet is not accessible by all. In most of the places where we work, the bandwidth is not enough for streaming content, is expensive and limited.
- Women, girls, children, non-binary persons, LGBTQI+, people with underlying health conditions, and persons with disabilities are amongst the vulnerable groups who face disproportionate risk and are among the most excluded. VSO is committed to ensuring social inclusion and gender equality as part of all of our interventions in our COVID-19 response, placing emphasis on reaching out to the most marginalised communities where the intersection of gender and disability exists.

Our experience has put us in an advantageous position to adapt and work during a pandemic scenario in areas such as, building the capacity of stakeholders, spreading awareness that is accessible for all, strengthening systems and structures to continue delivering education and health services, strengthening inclusion of informal workers within social protection systems, provision of an income generation activity (IGA) to a few, strengthening systems to address issues of GBV, and provision of essentials including dignity kits for women and girls.

Our experience and evidence of interventions across many countries have given us the confidence to intervene at the time of the pandemic and we will continue to:

Ensure accessible communication: Ensure that all information related to protection and prevention is in accessible formats and languages. Tailor messages for specific groups as required.

Ensure access to services: Ensure vulnerable communities have access to basic services, including health and wellbeing, social protection, education and livelihood opportunities.

Improve resilience: We will endeavour to support and prioritise people facing multiple marginalisation, specifically women and girls and people with disabilities, as part of any relief and rescue efforts.

Improve protection and address gender-based violence: Create awareness on safeguarding and duty of care amongst all stakeholders. Provide linkages for referral and counselling.

5.2 Organisation commitments

We are committed to:

5.2.1 Social inclusion and gender training

Social Inclusion and Gender (SIG) training is part of the induction and ongoing capacity building of all of our volunteers, staff and partners, allowing individuals to understand the concepts of power, superiority and inferiority, discrimination, equality, and more, and enabling them to identify factors of exclusion and plan interventions to address relevant challenges. We also train staff members and volunteers on how to use the intersectional approach and People First Principles in designing and delivering inclusive and gender-responsive programmes.

The SIG training is an opportunity for all of us at VSO, and our partners, to reflect and acknowledge that we have power and privileges and to take affirmative action to change this disparity, injustice and inequality. Our volunteers work with marginalised groups,

⁵ RCCE, 2020.

stakeholders and communities to make society more inclusive for vulnerable and marginalised people by providing them with the necessary skills and knowledge to help them access rights, resources, services, protection, and opportunities.

We promote social inclusion of all vulnerable and marginalised communities by ensuring their participation in our health, education and livelihoods interventions. We recognise that causes of poverty and exclusion are not limited to national geographies, but there are global causes of exclusion (e.g., climate, unjust economic systems and the global rise of the religious right).

5.2.2 Social Exclusion and Gender Analysis (SEGA)

Across programmes, we conduct a Social Exclusion and Gender Analysis (SEGA), a mapping process that enables the identification of power differences, exclusion and vulnerabilities within a given context. This identifies excluded and marginalised groups and looks at how exclusion manifests in different parts of a person's life, as well as what drives and sustains it, including socio-cultural norms and formal and informal institutions and policies. This evidence informs our programme design so we can best address the root causes of exclusion and inequality. The evidence from SEGA reports has been used to support targeted and mainstreamed interventions, as well as programmes that focus on specific groups, such as the capacity building of internally displaced populations, including women in refugee camps in the market chain, and awareness-raising on reduction and prevention of GBV at the community level.

Over the past two years, 21 countries have completed SEGA and the key highlights are:

- Across all countries, excluded and marginalised primary actors are women and girls, people with disabilities (especially women and girls with disabilities), children and youth, ethnic/religious and other minorities, people affected by HIV/AIDS, LGBTQI+, prisoners, internally displaced people, sex workers and older people.
- The main barriers and challenges resulting in discrimination, inequality and exclusion are perpetuated and sustained by harmful social, cultural and gendered norms (e.g., early marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting, violence against women, girls, and LGBTQI+, child labour, stigmatisation of LGBTQI+ and persons with disability) that promote patriarchy as a system at all levels from the individual, family, state and in public domains.
- Evidence of issues and challenges to enable programmes to develop and or redesign more holistic programmes that address the root causes of gender inequality and social exclusion.

Country-specific learnings include:

- **Malawi:** SEGA findings in the Youth Engagement Project informed the training needs and project focus areas targeting youths, such as adolescent and sexual reproductive health services and social inclusion and gender.
- **Nigeria:** SEGA learning helped in identifying and supporting out of school children and children with disabilities with alternative learning platforms in the Inclusive Neighborhood Space (INS) project.
- **Zambia:** SEGA learnings highlighted the lack of access to health, education, and livelihoods information and decision-making for persons with disabilities.
- **Sierra Leone:** SEGA findings facilitated advocacy with the government to create space for women's representation and promote male engagement in husband schools.

We understand that social exclusion of marginalised groups is a structural issue and involves an interplay of power relations between various actors in society, thereby denying these groups opportunities to access basic services, as well as social, economic, political and civic participation. This lack of opportunity and access is a violation of fundamental human rights and is a political issue. We are committed to taking an in-depth look at these issues through SEGA involving our programme and project stakeholders. Particularly we want our programmes to reach the individual, family and community level, reflecting on the system of social exclusion and gender equality in their context and looking at how that relates to marginalisation and poverty. This allows us to fully understand the power dynamics at play and the causes and consequences of exclusion in the societies and communities with which we work. This then becomes the pivotal force for programme design and the mechanism of delivery. For example:

- Understanding the context and challenges of transgender individuals enabled our programme in Pakistan to reach out to the transgender community by engaging them in training and building awareness on GBV.
- Our programme in Nepal recruited two youth volunteers from the LGBTQI+ community as part of the national volunteers who contributed to the ongoing work on GBV in the Strengthening Access to Holistic, Gender Responsive, And Accountable Justice project (SAHAJ).

5.2.3 Challenging harmful social norms, gender stereotypes and decolonising development

We acknowledge there are anti-discrimination policies that are often poorly implemented and upheld and that we need to look at policies, institutions, programmes, attitudes and mindsets. Other laws, both official and customary, continue to legitimise and institutionalise exclusion. We understand that efforts are still needed to abolish these laws and practices, and take them into account in our programming and work with local actors to advocate against them and address social exclusion.

It is important to dismantle power dynamics, and challenge hierarchies and patriarchy in the countries where we work based on multiple identities in formal and informal social institutions. Harmful gender stereotypes are one of the root causes for discrimination, abuse, violence in multiple areas and can lead to violations of a wide array of human rights. We strive to ensure the inclusion of gender and other forms of social diversity into our interventions of policy influence, awareness raising and capacity building. For this, a strong understanding of social inclusion and gender, which is anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory in its approach, is necessary. Individual identities and an understanding of feelings of superiority or inferiority, along with the various privileges that stakeholders hold, need to be challenged. This approach is strong and emerges as part of our Social Inclusion and Gender training.

It is also important to decolonise development and, therefore, we need to learn and understand the cultural differences across the regions where we work and challenge existing legislation or norms which are part of the fabric of society. This process is long-drawn and will take time. We are committed to learning and reflection through these processes and the existing fabrics of society and cultures.

At the same time, we believe embedding anti-racism learning processes and individual and community identities is crucial to this process and will contribute to the quest for equality. For example:

- Our inclusive education programme in Tanzania identified that children go through corporal punishment. This is highlighted, and awareness is spread amongst children and teachers on the ill effects.
- Our prison interventions in Southern Africa have enabled a cordial dialogue between inmates and the administration for favourable services, specific information and care related to SRH and HIV prevention.

We will:

- Prepare our volunteers, staff and partners through training and ongoing mentorship and development on social inclusion and gender equality, which have embedded aspects of anti-oppression, anti-racism, anti-discrimination and understanding biases and norms.
- Safeguard volunteers and manage their experiences as they strive to work in communities that have deep-seated harmful social norms and beliefs.
- Develop guidance documents on how to tackle oppression, discrimination, racism and inequality.
- Create platforms for conversations and dialogue with various communities and stakeholders for creating a better society.
- Engage in campaigns and build community-level collectives and align with grassroots movements.

5.2.4 Partnerships

Our approach to partnerships will continue to be through collaboration, coalition, and networking. We will work to build partnerships with vulnerable and marginalised people, including, for example, youth, women, non-binary people, LGBTQI+, people of colour and black people, and with their networks and organisations. We will strive to build alliances and coalitions with like-minded organisations to augment our reach and scale of interventions. We will continue to emphasise building partnerships with government stakeholders at national, regional and local levels to leverage on our reach, emphasising our approach to bring about systemic change across our programmes. We will also build alliances with community-based collectives, movements of people and grassroots

campaigns to help them voice their concerns and to create opportunities for dialogue, learn from their struggles and thereby strengthen engagement through our programme design and interventions. For example:

- Our partnership in Rwanda with the Ministry of Education has enabled us to reach out to all 20,000 schools across 30 districts.
- Our partnership with the Ministry of Education in Myanmar has enabled us to roll out inclusive education pre-service and in-service training for teachers on inclusive education across the country through the Towards Results in Education and English (TREE) project intervention.
- Our membership of the Delivering Sustainable and Equitable Increases in Family Planning (DESIP) consortium in Kenya where VSO's role is to ensure that improved family planning delivery undertaken by consortium partners and the Ministry of Health includes addressing the rights and needs of people with disabilities to ensure they are not left behind.

5.2.5 Knowledge evidence and learning

Our programme interventions have started to look into the issues of vulnerability and exclusion as interventions are more focused on addressing challenges, harmful social norms, behaviours, attitudes and stereotypes. We will further strengthen these interventions with specific vulnerability indicators targeted at specific vulnerable groups. We have been collecting case study best practices and disaggregated data through our scale and reach data process every quarter and will continue to gather more information and specific data. We are committed to using the Washington Group Questions in all of our analyses. We will use the research evaluations and learnings to reflect on and feed into our ongoing work. The knowledge, evaluation and learning team will support SIG integration in global programming.

5.2.6 Inclusive and gender-responsive disaggregated data

We have started to collect disaggregated data on age, disability and sex as part of our scale and reach, which is used to inform our programmes and policies. To create a better understanding of VSO's impact on vulnerable people, it is compulsory for our programmes to continue to capture disaggregated data and we are committed to ensuring that 60% of our primary actors are girls and women and 5% are

persons with disabilities. We also commit to capturing data that reflects gender issues and inequalities and that highlights the realities and diversity of the lives of our primary actors' intersectional identities.

5.2.7 Harnessing technology for inclusion

We recognise the potential of technology and will ensure we use appropriate and accessible technologies to break the digital divide throughout all of our work, as well as to collect robust and accurate data to inform our programming. We recognise there are challenges people face in accessing technology due to availability, affordability, access, disability and language. The digital divide refers to the difference between groups with access to technology and the internet and those without.⁶ The factors behind the gender digital divide are often linked to social norms and gender stereotypes as well as discrimination offline. We will identify the causes of some of the gaps and seek to address them. COVID-19 has pushed us to think about new ways to engage through technology and address these gaps. For example, we have started to use online platforms for meetings, training and workshops and ensure there are language interpreters through our training and workshops so that people who have limitations in understanding English can fully participate and contribute meaningfully to the process. We continue to translate training materials and concepts related to social inclusion and gender equality into local languages. We are using mobile applications for collecting data on disability, using the Washington Group Questions in Kenya. We are promoting the use of radio for people to access information in Nigeria and Rwanda.

5.2.8 Inclusive management and recruitment policies

We will:

- Ensure the promotion and practice of existing policies on safeguarding, sexual harassment, and zero tolerance to abuse of power and discriminatory behaviour.
- Widely share the social inclusion and gender equality policy as part of all induction and training.
- Adhere to a fair and transparent approach in all our recruitment and retention processes;



Deaf volunteer interacts with Community Health Workers in sign language, to ensure that SRHR information and services reach deaf people in the communities, in Rwanda.

equality and equity will guide our processes to ensure marginalised populations have the same opportunities. We are committed to ensuring that our recruitment processes are inclusive, and we will continue to encourage equal opportunities for all.

- Ensure that all our job adverts will have the statement "VSO is an equal opportunity employer and people from marginalised communities are encouraged to apply".
- Endeavour to make recruitment processes inclusive and accessible, and we will ensure reasonable adjustment to accommodate specific needs as required throughout the process.
- Take action to reduce the gender pay gap and achieve gender equality by:

⁶ UN, 2020.

- Monitoring our gender pay gap per country.
- Analysing the gender pay gap in each country and determining the causes.
- Assessing the impact of our annual salary review on our gender pay gap.
- Participate in diversity & inclusion forums to share best practices and foster innovation.
- Take accountability for our role as an actor and employer in society by challenging the status quo.
- Be aware of the differences in communication across the different countries in which we work and work towards making communication simpler and in local languages.
- Invest in continuous learning and development of all of our staff, volunteers and partners on social inclusion and gender equality.
- Enable inclusive ways of working and seek to overcome barriers to inclusion as much as possible.

Examples:

- We were awarded the BOND diversity award in 2020 for the diversity in our ICS volunteering programme.
- We continue to highlight that VSO is an equal opportunity employer in all our adverts for employee and volunteering roles.
- We ensure reasonable adjustment for all vulnerable groups through our application, interview and selection processes.
- We provide assistive devices and speech software for persons with disabilities who are staff or volunteers to enable them to participate to their full potential.
- Our HR policies are contextualised to the local context and aim to be inclusive.

5.2.9 Diversity data

We are committed to capturing data on diversity across staff and volunteers and identify areas of concern that will enable us to reach out to vulnerable groups and plan for providing necessary support and creating barrier-free environments in the workspace. Our diversity data was launched in December 2020 across the organisation, and we are capturing data on age, disability, ethnicity, geography, religion and sexual orientation, that will enable us to:

- create a baseline to understand the nature and extent of diversity in our workforce and help define appropriate support for our diverse population of employees and volunteers
- start an organisational conversation on inclusion, understanding how inclusive we are, the experience of the VSO workforce and what areas we need to improve
- take action to better represent diversity in our organisation and programmes
- take action to reduce the gender pay gap and achieve gender equality

6. Monitoring and evaluating our progress

We will work towards designing indicators for compliance and encourage all our project offices to follow minimum standards towards inclusion and conduct social inclusion and gender audits (SIGA) for ensuring this process. We will design a social inclusion and gender framework for all of our programmes to follow in the areas of health, education, livelihoods and SPARC. We will ensure that SIG is implemented in a relevant, efficient, effective and sustainable way in our programmes.

We are committed to conducting social inclusion and gender audits within the organisational system. This is a process that entails identifying diversity within the organisation and looking at power differences. Findings from a recently held internal Feminist

Leadership Survey highlights that 72% felt that leaders in their team always or often provide them space to lead & make decisions, compared to 14% who experienced inequality based on hierarchy and patriarchal attitudes.

We will also create a task force with SIG champions identified across the organisation who will be our forerunners in ensuring the issues of social exclusion and gender inequality are highlighted and addressed at the right level. These champions and task force will be critical in deepening knowledge and achieving the commitments laid out in this paper. We will also ensure that there is quarterly reporting of progress on these commitments.



Community volunteers in the field after Cyclone Idai, in Mozambique.

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Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DESIP	Delivering Sustainable and Equitable Increases in Family Planning
DRR	Disaster risk reduction
ECCD	Early Childhood Care and Development
ENGAGE	Empowering a New Generation of Adolescent Girls with Education
FGM	Female genital mutilation
GBV	Gender-based violence
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
ICS	International Citizen Service
IDELA	International Development and Early Learning Assessment
IGA	Income generation activity
INS	Inclusive Neighbourhood Space
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex
LNOB	Leave No One Behind agenda
SAHAJ	Strengthening Access to Holistic, Gender Responsive, And Accountable Justice
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEGA	Social Exclusion and Gender Analysis
SIG	Social Inclusion and Gender
SIGA	Social inclusion and gender audits
SPARC	Sustainable, Peaceful and Resilient Communities
SRH	Sexual and reproductive health
SRMNCAH	Sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health
STI	Sexually transmitted infection
TEVET	Technical, Entrepreneurial, Vocational Education and Training
TREE	Towards Results in Education and English
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights



Portrait of a newly married woman from Nepal who is part of family-centred approach interventions in SAHAJ.



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