



## Transforming Fragilities: Our approach to working in fragile contexts



# 1. Underlying causes and presenting problem

The core problem that the Transforming Fragilities approach is responding to is that: fragilities are becoming more prevalent and more intense in contexts in which VSO operates, affecting the most marginalized disproportionately, and eroding the resources and assets of communities and the systems upon which our development interventions are grounded.

Fragility is the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, systems and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks (OECD, 2020). Fragility can lead to negative outcomes including loss of assets and weakened state systems, grievances, conflict, poverty, and environmental and political degradation.

Fragility is complex, multidimensional, and dynamic. OECD (2020) frames fragility in five mutually impacting dimensions defining the root drivers of fragility as: political (unjust or weak governance systems, laws and policies are not inclusive, unequal access to resources and opportunities); societal (unresolved group-based grievances, negative social and cultural norms, absence of solidarity and common purpose, systemic exclusion and marginalization, discrimination and prejudice, lack of trust in government or institutions); economic (unfair and unequal access to livelihood resources and opportunities, livelihoods decimated after shock); environmental (natural disasters, climate change, pandemics); security (unstable situations, civil conflict, political instability, failed political system).

All countries in which VSO operates in are recognized as fragile, or at high risk and these drivers of fragility chime with our VSO context analysis. Fragile contexts are off-track to meet most of the SDG's and are further behind than non-fragile contexts – the furthest behind are being left further behind and Covid-19 has intensified these trends.

Tackling the causes of fragility and building stability is internationally recognised as underpinning the global fight against extreme poverty. The root causes of fragility need to be confronted because development results alone are insufficient to reduce them in fragile spaces and, without peace and safety, there cannot be sustainable development (OECD, 2020). In addition, development often occurs in contexts with sudden shocks requiring a humanitarian response.

Integrating development, humanitarian, and peace building efforts – the triple nexus – is recognized as essential to meet development goals in fragile environments. With this increased understanding there has been a collective shift across different types of organisations (humanitarian, development, peace-building) in how they approach their work in contexts which have multiple fragilities.

The shift to programming in fragile environments has required deepening our people first practice, adaptive programming approaches, partnerships, and collaboration. VSO is committed to increase its portfolio of work in fragile environments across all Practice Areas. The vision is for the Transforming Fragilities framework and tools to be socialized across all programs in fragile environments VSO implements and to continue the development of the Transforming Fragilities approach and tools.



## 2. Evolution of VSO's work in Fragile Spaces

In 2015-2016, the VSO Fragile Spaces working group recommended VSO develop its programming and capacity in fragile environments. A global framework for VSO's fragile space approach was developed in 2019 alongside programme investments to strengthen our programmatic evidence base and impact. Evidence and learning from these investments have informed this programme design alongside learning from Practice Areas, youth, humanitarian responses and recovery interventions and the peacebuilding sector.

The programme has been an early adapter of a global programme approach, supporting a clear programme process that is comparable but localised within multiple contexts (investments have been made in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Philippines, Pakistan, Myanmar and Nigeria – with additional investments in Sierra Leone, Uganda and Nepal). In each programme context, the interventions have worked at specific levels to address environmental fragilities such as climate change and natural hazards, the COVID-19 pandemic and societal fragilities such as group grievances, the absence of solidarity and common purpose, the absence of trust in government, and fragilities such as gender-based violence and safeguarding which are exacerbated in fragile contexts.



Implementing in fragile contexts requires a deep understanding of the context and how it interacts with the programme alongside a robust risk mitigation plan and response. Successful programme designs need to be localized and primary actor led. Operating across scales is essential because addressing fragility requires community-based interventions, while at the same time working to contribute to strengthen the systems that our primary actors rely on. Evidence to date from evaluations, impact assessments, partner & programme team consultations indicates that the approaches adapted within the Transforming Fragilities framework and piloted to date have been highly effective at building localised capacity and agency. And this underpins stabilization in a fragile context that can enhance Practice Areas to realise their development goals.

While initially peace and natural/climate resilience outcomes were articulated separately, as the programme has been implemented it has become increasingly evident that the risk landscape within our communities is multi-fragility and is changing rapidly between peace and conflict, disaster, and recovery and also that these fragilities intersect with practice areas. Conflict, for example, is a root cause of food insecurity globally and climate change can hinder livelihoods. COVID-19 recovery has been stalled in many countries due to misinformation and deliberate disinformation campaigns such as anti-vaccination messaging. Education and health services are disrupted during disasters and shocks. Looking forward deliberately including tools and expertise on social cohesion, building resilience to disasters and climate change to co-design practice area programmes will enhance and strengthen VSO programmes in fragile contexts.



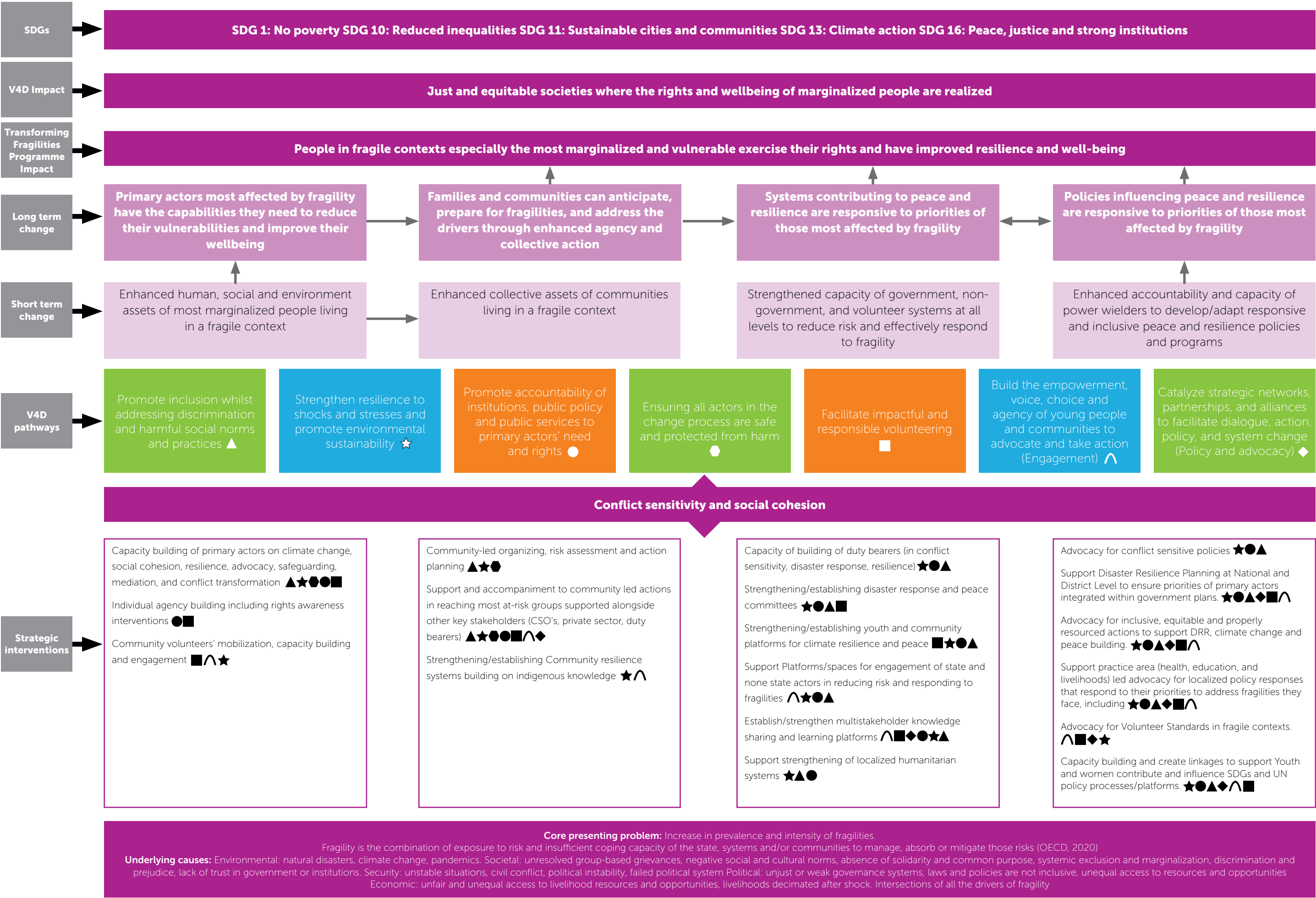
Programs have had to pivot rapidly to a humanitarian response in some contexts as disaster or conflict has struck. The resilience, peacebuilding, and humanitarian approaches, rather than being separate programme areas, have interwoven and, where relevant, been implemented in the same programmes and contexts to support more agile multi-fragility programming responses, enabling programme continuity and adaptive programming responses during sudden changes or shocks.

This has highlighted the importance of working at the nexus between resilience, peace, and humanitarian action – and led to the design of one global programme focusing on building multi-hazard resilience, with specific technical capacity and expertise on social cohesion, conflict sensitivity, disaster resilience including multi-sectoral resilience planning, and humanitarian response, all within the same contexts. The intensity of each lens will depend on the specific fragilities present in each context and the needs and priorities of primary actors.

A more recent learning from the Transforming Fragilities pilot initiatives over the last 18 months is that following humanitarian responses it laid the foundations for Practice Area programs to support the recovery phases to (re)build livelihoods or health and education systems. More generally, Transforming Fragilities provides an understanding of the contexts in which it operates, builds capacities, relationships and systems, and supports the enabling environment in which Practice Areas operate, which enhances their ability to succeed. The vision is for Transforming Fragilities to operate in the same fragile contexts as Practice Areas strengthening the assets and capacities to respond to fragilities that are prevalent in the context but would not be supported by Practice Area programmes on their own.

The Transforming Fragilities theory of change integrates these critical aspects into one global programme framework that can be applied across all fragile environments that VSO operates in to inform programme design and implementation.

Global Transforming Fragilities Theory of Change diagram





### 3. Analysis of Strategic Partners and key donors – articulating their relevance

The triple nexus approaches are leading to an increasing number and range of partnership opportunities as it is recognised that much closer cooperation and/or integration between sectors is required to maximise the potential of different interventions. VSO’s partnerships at programme level are expanding quickly as programme teams engage other NGOs in resilience planning, form strategic partnerships with national and district level agencies, and are engaged in technical partnerships with organisations such as UNFAO and ECOWAS. For VSO this strengthening and building strategic partnerships at all levels will continue to be a focus.

Partner	Objective
Global/Regional	
Conflict Sensitivity Hubs/Fragile States/Climate change forecasting	To keep current and connected on conflict fragilities. Enables proactive action and links to DoC especially security. Horizon scanning.
INGO Peace Building Organisation	Technical expertise in peacebuilding at community level, funding partnerships, extending VSO networks.
Humanitarian and Resilience Partnerships	Technical and capacity building partnership to support our Resilience and Volunteer platform capacity work
National and Local	
National Disaster Agency/Local DRM agencies	Implementation in emergencies, advocacy
Clusters (safeguarding, national disaster management)	Implementation, coordination and system strengthening
Peace Building Committees and structures	Implementation, advocacy

#### Funding

The funding landscape is diversifying and there are increased funding opportunities for programming in Fragile Environments as follows:

##### a) Fragile State Analysis by ODA

**FCDO** recognizes the role that state fragility and instability plays in chronic poverty and difficult development and has increased funding to improve the situation of fragile states and regions through the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF). Climate change mitigation and adaptation is also a priority.

**EU** budgets earmarked for humanitarian crises and fragile states increased following the 2015 refugee “crisis”. The relevant priorities include peace and security, resilience to climate-related stresses and shocks and ending Violence Against Women and Girls. Crisis/Post-Crisis Trust Funds have been created to make ODA more flexible, including the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF).

**USAID figures** in 2017 demonstrate the commitment to fragile states is with priority sectors of conflict, peace and security, emergency response, and government and civil society. Preferred approaches to improve fragility out of an emergency setting (disaster risk reduction and mitigation) are based on building accountable institutions and promoting peaceful-conflict-mediation strategies.

**Triple Nexus Funding:** In 2019, OECD’s Development Assistance Committee of major donors committed to increase funding for more collaborative and complementary humanitarian, development, and peace actions, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected situations. Funders have started to fund in an integrated way. E.g. Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Austrian Development Agency.

Donor funding is available for programming in fragile environments utilizing the Transforming Fragilities framework and VSO needs to continue to position with existing and new donors and to more donors.



## 4. Transforming Fragilities Theory of Change narrative

Overall, the Transforming Fragilities approach goal at the impact level is that People in fragile contexts especially the most marginalized and vulnerable exercise their rights and have improved resilience and wellbeing.

**Overall, the programme will seek to contribute to global frameworks including:**

- SDG: 1.5 Build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social, and environmental shocks and disasters.
- SDG 16 Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions
- UNDRR Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030
- UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and Paris Agreement
- UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security



**To achieve this goal, our short-term success will be seen in 4 interlinked domains:**

1. At individual level: Enhanced human, social and environmental assets of most marginalized people living in a fragile context.
2. At family/community level: Enhanced collective assets of communities living in a fragile context.
3. At system level: Strengthened capacity of government, non-government, and volunteer systems at all levels to reduce risk and effectively respond to fragility.
4. At policy level: Enhanced accountability and capacity of power wielders to develop/adapt responsive and inclusive peace and resilience policies and programmes.

For change to happen in the short term, VSO and its partners, guided by a robust conflict and fragility analysis, will primarily seek to build assets and capacities. The focus at this level will be on individual and collective assets at individual and family/community level, and system level capacities to reduce risk and effectively respond to fragility. At the policy level, focus will be on building the capacity and accountability of power wielders to develop and or adapt policies particularly those touching on peace and resilience, to be responsive to the priorities of the most marginalized.

In the asset and capacity building approach, contextual realities and needs as well as building on inherent indigenous knowledge and capacities will be central to the approach.

**What needs to change:** For the short-term change to be achieved, the most marginalized people within the fragile context need to have been effectively identified and engaged and have the requisite assets and capacities they need to reduce risk and respond to fragilities, individually but increasingly collectively. Additionally, an enabling environment both at system and policy level needs to begin to emerge, with key systems needed for peace and resilience (particularly local

government systems, non-government systems and volunteer systems) having the capacities needed to reduce risk and address the drivers of fragilities that affect them. At policy level, power wielders need to have deeper understanding of the peace and resilience priorities of the most marginalized and capacities to reflect these into conflict sensitive policies and programs.

**Underlying assumptions**

- Our relational volunteering approach will support in identification and engagement of the most marginalized people in fragile contexts.
- By using a participatory approach, we will identify the priority vulnerabilities and build the right assets and capacities.
- Primary actors and communities will feel ownership over resilience and peace processes and own actions.
- Primary actors and communities will identify and effectively engage the right stakeholders.
- System level actors and duty bearers at various levels are willing to utilize knowledge and skills gained to strengthen policies and systems.
- There will be continued support to volunteer systems for peace and resilience.

**Our contribution to the change**

We will develop a deeper understanding of the fragilities within the context in which we operate (both macro and micro levels) and how they intersect. Through our social inclusion and gender approach, we will seek to understand who is the most marginalized within the fragile spaces and how they experience the fragilities. This will be followed by a deeper understanding of their vulnerabilities and capacities, forming the basis of asset and capacity building actions. At community level, we will also support in building capacities to conduct risk assessment processes and develop action plans. We will also develop a deeper understanding on the systems and policies which the most marginalized depend on for peace and resilience, assess the capacity of these systems and implement bespoke

capacity building actions including training and accompaniment of disaster and peace systems at local level, supporting the strengthening of localized humanitarian systems, establishing, and strengthening multistakeholder platforms, among others. In all this, linkages across systems will be a key part of our strategy. As epitomized in our relational volunteering approach, delivery of these actions will be by a diverse range of volunteers, who will work alongside communities, staff, and other key actors within each context.

**At the long term, success will be seen by:**

1. At individual level: Primary actors most affected by fragility have the capabilities they need to reduce their vulnerabilities and improve their well-being.
2. At family/community level: Families and communities can anticipate, prepare for fragilities, and address the drivers through enhanced agency and collective action.
3. At system level: Systems contributing to peace and resilience are responsive to priorities of those most affected by fragility.
4. At policy level: Policies influencing peace and resilience are responsive to priorities of those most affected by fragility.

At this level, change will focus on one level at enhanced capabilities as well as collective agency and action of marginalized people in fragile contexts, as well as the responsiveness of the systems and policies to the peace and resilience priorities of the most marginalized.

**What needs to change:** For the long-term change to be realized, the most marginalized need to have the assets and capabilities they need, in the context of the changing realities within fragile spaces. Additionally, actions need to be increasingly collective, with the development and implementation of joint action plans to address the underlying drivers of fragilities communities have chosen to prioritize. From the supply side, systems and policies contributing



## 5. VSO's USP in Fragile Spaces

to peace and resilience need to be increasingly responsive to the needs of those most affected by fragilities. Effective spaces for power wielders and the most marginalized to engage on their priorities need to be in place. Systems at the various levels also need to continue to work more closely.

### Underlying assumptions

- Power wielders at various levels will utilize the skills acquired to develop/strengthen effective policies and programs in response to fragilities.
- Power wielders at various levels will continually prioritize the peace and resilience priorities of the most marginalized.
- By taking a multi-hazard approach, we will be flexible and adaptable to respond to changing contexts.
- Primary actors will be willing to engage collectively in social accountability.

### Our contribution to the change

We will play a critical convener role, ensuring both vertical (primary actors to duty bearers) and horizontal (across communities, across systems) connections are happening to enable the implementation of peace and resilience action plans. Continued resilience and cohesion building at all levels, continually leveraging on indigenous knowledge will also be a key focus. Generation of evidence and practical ways of bringing together the humanitarian-development and peace will

also be of key focus at this level. We will also ensure that actors in the change process are risk aware and conflict sensitive and that duty bearers are able to develop and implement conflict sensitive policies and programs.

### Key risks envisioned in the delivery of the program

- Security and safety risks to staff, volunteers and partners working in fragile contexts
- Safeguarding risks in working with vulnerable groups within fragile contexts
- Transforming Fragilities approach and analytical tools and expertise not embedded across the organization causing risks in responsiveness and sustainability of programs/ projects
- Insufficient human and financial Transforming Fragilities resources to deliver on Transforming Fragilities vision (resource risk)
- Funding gaps may lose continuity of team and momentum – outcomes may be longer term (resource risk)
- Weak capacity of VSO to respond – especially in emergency situations and expectations within communities and systems to respond beyond VSO's capacity and niche (resource and scope risk)
- Spreading available crisis modification resources (human and financial) too thin to respond to the diverse needs and scale of requests (scope and resource risk)

Resilience building: VSO has an advanced approach to resilience building that seeks to address the underlying causes of vulnerability and drivers of fragility through a volunteering for development approach that mobilizes and empowers community volunteers to plan interventions to address underlying vulnerabilities and priorities of most marginalized within their communities through a multi-hazard, multi-sector and multi-stakeholder approach.

Localizing peace/ resilience/ humanitarian nexus: This programming approach is unique because it places primary actors at the center of our programme design, and brings together the humanitarian, development and peace building nexus through building capacities of communities and volunteer platforms to create a multi-sector, multi-stakeholder and multi-risk interventions that are localized to the specific fragile environments in which they are designed. To further strengthen the nexus approach, as part of the set of tools and approaches Transforming Fragilities has developed to ground programming within the local context, embedding conflict analysis and social cohesion and humanitarian decision-making mechanisms to strengthen capacity to address sudden shocks and support integrated responses.

Blended Volunteer model – This gives VSO a unique added value in this space. Our volunteer model supports localization and sustainability of approaches through mobilization and agency building within community volunteers, while technical volunteers provide accompaniment to community volunteers while supporting system level responsiveness and capacity. Through the Transforming Fragilities approach process there is transfer of knowledge between volunteers at all levels leading to ability to reach scale and enact sustainable change. The interface between these volunteers, made possible through volunteer platforms and the Transforming Fragilities processes connecting community, service and policy level, enables transfer and localization of skills and capacities.



Harnessing technical value from VSO Practice Areas to support holistic responses: One of our unique selling points within our ability to reduce vulnerabilities within fragile spaces are VSO's technical Practice Areas of livelihoods, health and education, which have been evolving programme approaches such as emergency education, food security and agroecology, emergency health programming and health system strengthening which can support highly effective tailored responses contributing to the resilience of primary actors living in fragile environments, and contribute to resilient recovery in post disaster and post-conflict settings alongside the foundational Transforming Fragilities interventions such as resilience planning, peacebuilding, community organizing, volunteer platform strengthening and local government capacitation for inclusive humanitarian, resilience and peace interventions. At the same time, Transforming Fragilities tools and approaches can be incorporated into Practice Area programmes at design stage and throughout implementation to strengthen resilience, programme continuity, crisis modification and social cohesion to support them to adapt and respond to the specific fragilities, shocks and rapidly changing contexts in which VSO operates.





## 6. Scale of VfD outcomes at each domain of change level

Transforming Fragilities approach can work at scale and increase scale of reach quickly. This is achieved because:

1. Transforming Fragilities is reaching scale by working at community level on resilience and peace plans – as well as supporting targeted interventions for the most marginalized groups.
2. Transforming Fragilities influences government planning processes at local, municipal, district level, and national level – which increases scale, impact, and sustainability.
3. Our volunteer model enables us to expand reach quickly – reaching more communities. We have received partnership requests from disaster management agencies and partner agencies requesting expansion.
4. Volunteer platforms also enable us to scale, influence and visibility within our work, providing a mechanism to build local capacity effectively.
5. Humanitarian responses expand our reach and visibility quickly. Through a micro-grant emergency response in the Philippines in 2020 we increased reach to 15,000 primary actors through returned volunteer and partnership with the Philippines Coalition on Volunteerism.
6. Partnership: Transforming Fragilities interventions have increased our visibility and led to the development of new partnerships enabling us to reach scale. Due to our resilience assessment approach in Mindanao, UNFAO has approached VSO as a partner to build local government capacity to support risk and needs assessments which will expand our reach from 20 to 400 communities.
7. As we develop capacity across VSO programmes to adapt Transforming Fragilities framework alongside practice area approaches, we can further enhance scale and reach.

## 7. Strategic VfD research and learning questions the programme outcomes

Research and Learning questions fall into two categories:

- How the VfD approach has contributed to the Transforming Fragilities approach outcomes? e.g. How enhancing local capacities and community volunteering ensures rapid response and strengthen sustainability. Documenting the emerging learning from programming on the triple nexus, with a focus on the climate change and conflict nexus.
- What have we learnt about programming in a fragile environment? (operational) This is to support all VSO functional teams to evolve VSO systems, tools and processes to implement in fragile contexts. It is also an opportunity to enhance the Volunteer Standards on Programming to include volunteering in fragile contexts.

## 8. Resources for Transforming Fragilities approach

To achieve the ambition and full potential, additional resources will be needed to deliver:

- Refined and embedded conflict sensitivity tools and approach
- Increased awareness, capacity and competencies for Transforming Fragilities – this is a different lens and skill set than PA.
- The programme design of programmes in fragile environments and business pursuit.
- Technical support to and quality accompaniment of on-going Transforming Fragilities approach
- Rapid response and technical accompaniment of programme adaptation/ humanitarian response/ contingency during shocks (humanitarian/ conflict responses) in collaboration with DoC teams
- The management of data generated by primary actor and volunteer led engagement to strengthen programme responses, learning documentation and advocacy.
- The development of new analytical tools and modules (e.g. social cohesion and peacebuilding)
- The provision technical input for Practice Areas and to embed Transforming Fragilities framework across the organisation
- Further development of evidence-base through research and analysis.

The priorities are to:

- Socialise conflict sensitivity in all conflict-affected contexts
- Increase the technical capacity on social cohesion and peace building and resilience in the global and in country teams
- Build sustainable capacity and capability in countries on fragile environment programming and Transforming Fragilities approach and tools (different skill set to PA)
- Create organizational technical surge capacity to respond to disaster and to strengthen programme accompaniment (e.g. accompanying partners on safeguarding)
- Enhance DoC support in fragile environments
- Enhance technical understanding on Transforming Fragilities and support in Business Pursuit, Partnership Development and KEL







**VSO**  
**100 London Road**  
**Kingston upon Thames**  
**KT2 6QJ**  
**UK**

**+44 (0)20 8780 7500**  
**[enquiry@vsoint.org](mailto:enquiry@vsoint.org)**  
**[www.vsointernational.org](http://www.vsointernational.org)**

Voluntary Service Overseas is registered  
in England (number 00703509). Charity  
Registration 313757 (England and Wales)  
SCO39117 (Scotland).