

# UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERING IN VSO PROGRAMMES

AN EVIDENCE-BASED  
CASE STUDY FROM  
CAMBODIA IMA4P  
LIVELIHOODS  
PROJECT



**Project** Community volunteering in a livelihoods programme in Cambodia  
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**Date** May 2020

## Table of Contents

<b>Executive summary</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Context</b> .....	<b>2</b>
Community Volunteering and VSO.....	2
The Cambodian volunteering context.....	5
About IMA4P.....	5
<b>Methodology</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Limitations.....	8
<b>Findings</b> .....	<b>8</b>
Mapping Community Volunteering - IMA4P.....	8
Contribution of community volunteers.....	11
Contribution – connecting attributions to outcomes.....	15
Sustainability and support for community volunteering.....	16
Discussion Points.....	18
<b>Learning Points&amp; Conclusion</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>25</b>

### Figures

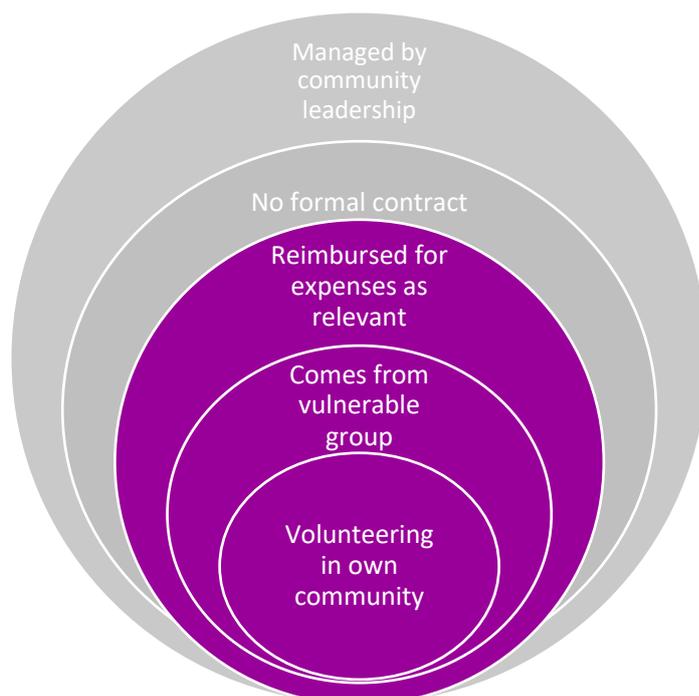
Figure 1: Research questions.....	2
Figure 2: VSO’s working definition of community volunteering.....	3
Figure 3: The revised definition of community volunteering.....	4
Figure 4: Description of volunteer roles in IMA4P.....	6
Figure 5: Research process.....	7
Figure 6: Contribution of community volunteers,.....	12

## Executive summary

This evidence-based case study was undertaken to be able to understand the unique contribution of community volunteering in VSO-supported projects. It was initially intended to be a comparative case study with one other VSO programme with a high level of community volunteering. Due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the second case study was put on hold. This case study is focussed on mapping community volunteering within a livelihoods project in Cambodia; understanding volunteering contribution; how volunteering impacts community volunteers; and challenges and support required to ensure community volunteering is sustainable.

This case study is informed by the role of community volunteering within the Improving Market Access for the Poor (IMA4P) project. IMA4P focussed on improving market linkages and the quality of rice produced through multi-stakeholder platforms. The project worked with lead farmers to cascade knowledge and training on climate smart agriculture practices to farmers in identified communities, and establishing the Sustainable Rice Platform as a key market linkage to improve the quality and price of the rice produced. The project engaged professional international volunteers as part of the inception phase and has engaged national and community volunteers on an ongoing basis throughout implementation. These volunteers were formally recruited and contracted by VSO to deliver on a specific set of technical skills and tasks. The case study provides details about the project itself, the volunteering modalities, contributions and raises some questions and learning points for consideration.

After conceptualising the case study, VSO has developed an organisation-wide definition of community volunteering which articulates the various roles and responsibilities of community volunteers. This is captured below, and articulates the changes that have emerged in the working definition.



## Methodology

The case study utilised a combination of primary and secondary data which included a review of the IMA4P evaluation report, interviews with VSO staff, community volunteers and primary actors, one private sector partner and one government official. Other data collection included focus group discussions with formal and informal community volunteers. It was informed by a working definition of community volunteering that differentiated between formal and informal community volunteers. This working definition acknowledged the overlap between community volunteers and primary actors, and that community volunteers may already be volunteering in other projects that are not necessarily affiliated to VSO.

## Findings

IMA4P was informed by a blended volunteering approach which engaged junior and senior national volunteers, community volunteers and international volunteers. The distinction between formal and informal community volunteers is evident in the project. Formal volunteers were responsible for training lead farmers in agricultural practices and assisting with the reporting tasks required for the Agricultural Cooperative (AC). Lead farmers, also known as informal community volunteers, transferred skills to other farmers. Notably, these informal community volunteers did not see themselves as volunteers but identified the formal community volunteers as volunteers.

Informal community volunteers also had a lower level of education, whereas formal community volunteers tended to have post-school training.

### Inclusion of marginalised groups

Community volunteering has been viewed as a way to extend reach to the poor and marginalised as requirements and barriers to entry are less. In this way, this modality is said to facilitate inclusion. In this project, inclusion was not a significant emphasis on the selection of community volunteers or primary actors, though it had been assumed that the act of being located in the community would mean that volunteers would be trusted, and better able to engage with marginalised groups. The ongoing presence of community volunteers did enable the inclusion of women in the sharing of information about farming methods. Additionally, the project had engaged predominantly female community volunteers who reported that people respect them more and they have more self-confidence as a result of the role they had in the project, and the way the community looked up to them.

### Local and technical knowledge as insiders

The case study notes that community volunteering does make a unique contribution to programme implementation, and that the various aspects of this contribution do not differ significantly between formal and informal community volunteers. While not consistently identified as a major factor; trust,



proximity and ownership of project success are key contributions which are crucial to project success. Other identified factors include a consistent presence in the community that is aligned to the planting and harvesting season for rice. This includes having insider knowledge of context, culture and community practices and being able to work with local stakeholders. This relates to community volunteers being from the communities where they are volunteering, and so it takes less time to mobilise and initiate project activities as compared to if they had come from outside of the communities where IMA4P was implemented. Proximity to the community is also a major factor for project buy-in and sustainability. Factors and examples identified include that community volunteers were able to assist farmers late at night during harvesting season, that their ongoing presence gave them knowledge of where rice paddies were located and possible participants, and that a level of trust existed with volunteers having an ongoing presence in the community and available for any training or assistance on an ongoing basis.

The requirement to also have technical knowledge and/or experience in agriculture is also different to many other VSO projects, and with community volunteers joining IMA4P in the second phase, they were not involved in programme design. The payment of a stipend was a significant motivator for volunteers in a resource-constrained environment with few income opportunities, and this motivator was far greater than that of making a difference in the community. Consequently, it can be said that the transformative journey of volunteering may not have been fully realised.

#### Contribution – connecting attribution to outcomes

Community volunteers have made clear contributions in building the skills and knowledge of lead farmers. These include in teaching modern, climate smart agriculture practices that has contributed to improved quality of rice and a better price secured through the Sustainable Rice Platform. These community volunteers have been based in communities and able to provide ongoing mentoring and guidance. The training has also contributed to improving the functioning of the ACs and improved recordkeeping required to participate in the Sustainable Rice Platform. The community volunteers have also been successful in creating collaboration between the private sector, ACs and government. Community volunteers have strengthened the functioning of ACs and assisted with developing relationships with millers through the Sustainable Rice Platform. The work of community volunteers to develop the skills and knowledge of ACs has been able to fill a gap in agricultural extension services typically provided by government. The volunteers benefitted in that the ACs were already in place and provided an entry point for the project making it easier to establish these networks and connections.

#### Sustainability of project outcomes

The case study also found that sustainability of project outcomes was likely greater due to the proximity of community volunteers to the ACs and lead farmers, where providing ongoing support was not resource-intensive and did not present an opportunity cost. Formal community volunteers would be available to reinforce skills and knowledge, and this would not depend on resources from VSO. One risk identified was that without ongoing reinforcement and guidance, it was possible that lead farmers may forget the new agricultural practices or may not be able to meet the recordkeeping requirements of the Sustainable Rice Platform. As the formal community volunteers come from farming families that are AC members, there is a direct incentive to continue to assist farmers to maintain the quality of rice required for the Sustainable Rice Platform to function optimally and for farmers to continue to get a good price for the product.



Community volunteering has many benefits for community volunteers. These include recognition within their own communities, being perceived as a role model within their communities, and acting as an example for other young people. The importance of role-modelling for young people is significant in Cambodia where there is a young population who find it hard to gain formal employment. There has been a government programme to encourage youth volunteering.

The volunteering journey also provides an opportunity to develop self-confidence, leadership and organisational skills. Continuing the volunteering role within their own community provides a means to demonstrate active citizenship, encouraging others to do same.

While volunteering provides many opportunities to volunteers, it is also important to note that the value of working with community volunteers enables VSO to deepen understanding of context, culture and practices and enables entry to communities that would otherwise not be possible. In this way, community volunteering is mutually beneficial.

### Support for and sustainability of community volunteering

As mentioned, volunteering provides an opportunity for people to develop skills and networks that may position them better for future opportunities. Through IMA4P, one of the community volunteers had been able to secure a job with a local miller. This relationship enabled the community volunteer to demonstrate a set of skills that enabled the volunteer to obtain paid employment with the miller.

Volunteering was also perceived as a possible route to employment for some of the formal community volunteers. This could include progression to becoming a national volunteer or becoming a VSO staff member, bringing an increase in their income. Lead farmers do not see their engagement as a route to employment, as they see their livelihoods rooted in farming, and that involvement in IMAP has improved their own financial circumstances.

For the formal community volunteers, there was a desire to make a contribution to the development of their community, to act as a role model for youth and to receive the stipend which was well received for a part-time role.

This project engaged community volunteers to deliver a technical intervention, which may have limited its capacity to capitalise on the transformative potential of community volunteers as leaders of their own development and active citizens. A better understanding of the community context and existing social support and development activities, alongside training for volunteers in community mobilisation, development and advocacy may have impacted how this project was able to support community volunteers to become 'active citizens' beyond their engagement within the project cycle.

### Is the unique contribution of community volunteering determined by when community volunteers became involved?

Individuals based in the communities where VSO supports projects have been engaged in project activities over several years, without any kind of definition or distinction between these individuals and others, or the nature of their contribution. For this reason, whilst community volunteering is newly defined, it is not a new feature to VSO programmes. Very little difference in outcomes were noted where community volunteers had been engaged in the inception of a project, or where the modality had been incorporated at a later point in programme design. That being said, community volunteers can play a valuable role in taking projects to scale, and in responding to a need identified during implementation that may not have been in initial project design. Community volunteers can

make a valuable contribution to project design during the Theory of Change process as they can contribute their own contextual knowledge of communities, practices, power dynamics and what has or has not worked. It is not clear that the absence of this step in IMA4P has influenced project outcomes.

### Learning points for further consideration

The report identifies several learning areas that require further consideration.

- **Contribution to working definition**

Many community volunteers are also participating in VSO-supported projects – through which they would be described as a primary actor. Becoming a community volunteer is a demonstration of active citizenship, one of VSO's key objectives. Though the formally adopted definition has removed the distinction between formal and informal community volunteering, IMA4P embodies both formal and informal aspects of community volunteering and contains elements of VSO's adopted definition. There is some need to consider that livelihoods interventions may require more technical roles and skills which do differ from the stipulations included in VSO's formally adopted definition.

- **Overlap between community volunteers and primary actors**

Many community volunteers are also benefitting from VSO projects. There is a lack of consensus in a project such as IMA4P as to whether lead farmers are regarded as community volunteers or lead farmers. This dilemma needs to be resolved at the point of project design.

- **Understanding motivation and benefits**

Community volunteers are motivated by the desire to help their community, the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge, earn a stipend and the opportunity of a possible route to employment. Motivations to improve one's community or to strengthen skills while earning an income do not need to be binary and community volunteers may be motivated by both. There is a need to understand the intersection between community volunteering and contextual perceptions about NGOs as a source of employment.

- **Language of formal and informal volunteering**

While the formally adopted definition of community volunteering has removed the distinction between formal and informal volunteering, the terminology poses the risk of creating an impression that formal community volunteering is more valuable and important than informal volunteering. However, informal community volunteering may be more constant over time, and these volunteers may themselves be involved in other development work. Even though the distinction has been removed, formal and informal community volunteering each make different contributions. The case study demonstrates that this definition will need to be customised for different programme contexts. Consideration should be given to identifying a set of core attributes for community volunteers, and then some customisation per practice area.

- **Challenging social norms and attitudes**

It is widely acknowledged that community volunteers contribute contextual knowledge and trusting relationships which enable VSO to understand and respond to the needs of primary actors. This is not always the case, and in some instances, young volunteers are perceived to know less or lack credibility to be able to do this. This is the case in Cambodia where there are cultural perceptions that position older people as more knowledgeable and credible than youth.

- **Embedding the definition across VSO**

The formalised definition encompasses characteristics that are atypical to many of VSO projects, and introduce complexity to programming. These need to be carefully considered as the definition is operationalized. One of these is that community volunteers should be accountable to community

structures and leadership. This is not ideal when community volunteers are volunteering in VSO-supported projects.

- **An outlier of community volunteering**

- There are many aspects of community volunteering within IMA4P that differ from those in other projects. These include the technical roles that community volunteers are responsible for, the duration of their involvement and the payment of a stipend for time. The livelihoods role which entails training and capacity-building is also more technical than the mobilisation and awareness-raising that would typically form part of the role of community volunteers in the health and education practice areas. **Lack of involvement in programme design and capacity-building**

Community volunteers became engaged after project design, and training focused predominantly on being able to perform their technical role. The case study also notes that the feedback and reflections of community volunteers were not systematically incorporated into implementation. This limited the ability of community volunteering to be a means of supporting community ownership and leadership. In addition, the training community volunteers received largely related to the programme's technical content, which meant volunteers were not fully equipped with the community mobilisation skills to support them to take on a more active role in broader development challenges in their communities. This is something that needs to be considered more carefully in programme design.

- **Proximity needs to be seen in a nuanced way**

The case study notes that while proximity provides several benefits to community volunteering, it is not a proxy for trust or credibility. Community volunteers also need support and guidance to be able to take up their role in the project, both in terms of establishing networks; training and capacity-building. It was also noted that even though a person comes from the community where they are volunteering, their credibility is not determined by their location, but about how they communicate with others.

- **Prioritising inclusion of marginalised groups in programme design**

Projects that engage community volunteers need to be conscious of criteria which may exclude people from volunteering. These include requirements for specific levels of education and training, and consideration given to barriers to entry, particularly as community volunteering provides a valuable way for marginalised groups acquiring skills and knowledge as barriers to entry are lower than in other volunteering roles.

## Introduction

Community Volunteering is becoming an increasingly important modality of VSO-supported programmes. To date, VSO has developed a working definition within the organisation as a means of trying to understand this model of volunteering, and differences between community volunteers as opposed to other people involved in VSO supported programmes. This has recently been formalised and includes a combination of attributes outlined in the working definition. Currently, there is evidence of the role of community-based youth volunteers in Bangladesh<sup>1</sup> and emerging evidence of the role of community volunteers in disaster risk reduction and response for example during Hurricane Idai in Mozambique and the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone. However, the absence of a consistent and applied definition with a lack of evidence around the various dimensions that community volunteering can take means that the contribution and challenges associated with community volunteering are not yet fully understood.

There is an urgent need for VSO to better understand, define and communicate the role of community volunteering in development. This agenda has been gaining global momentum over the last few years as shown by UN Volunteers 2018 State of the World's Volunteerism report's focus on volunteerism and community resilience<sup>2</sup>. The shift was also evident at Forum's annual IVCO conference in Kigali in November 2019, organised by VSO, which had dedicated sessions exploring research and practice relating to community volunteering and saw the launch of The Global Standard for Volunteering for Development<sup>3</sup>, which is committed to putting community members at the centre of programme design. A better understanding of the unique contributions and challenges of community volunteering will enable VSO to follow-through on its commitment to doing development differently by putting communities at the heart of development practice. This agenda is timely given the COVID-19 pandemic, which is further shifting programmatic response towards the mobilisation and engagement of community volunteers to both respond to the COVID-19 crisis and deliver on-going programming and recovery.

As part of this, VSO initiated a research study to better understand community volunteering across various programming contexts. This involves selecting diverse examples of different forms community volunteering can take and learning from them. Looking at VSO's formally adopted definition of community volunteering, the case study approach selected examples that didn't neatly fit the working definition, with the aim of trying to advance the working definition through evidence gathered from cases that challenge it. Figure 1 shows the research questions guiding this agenda.

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<sup>1</sup>VSO Bangladesh. (2015). *Evidence based case study Youth community volunteering*.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Volunteers. (2018). *State of the World's Volunteerism Report - The thread that binds: Volunteerism and community resilience*. Bonn. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.unv.org/publications/swvr2018>

<sup>3</sup> FORUM 2019 *The Global Standard for Volunteering for Development* [Online]. Available from: <https://forum-ids.org/about/standard/>

This paper outlines a case study of the role of community volunteering within Improving Market Access for the Poor (IMA4P), an agri-based value chain project that has been implemented in Cambodia over the past five years. The paper maps the role of community volunteers within the project; discusses the contribution of community volunteers; and explores avenues of sustainability and support. It also considers the working and formal definition of community volunteering, and their applicability to IMA4P.

Nine learning points arising from this case study are presented, to further this research agenda adding to VSO's existing knowledge about community volunteering and identifying areas that require further consideration.



Figure 1: Research Questions

## Context

### Community Volunteering and VSO

VSO recognises that people are active agents in making decisions about their own lives and can contribute their own insider knowledge to be able to overcome development problems. This has led to recognition of the value of community-driven development that is not solely reliant on the presence of outside people or resources. Community volunteers can provide this insider knowledge and community ownership to achieve locally led development.

During 2018, VSO began developing a definition that would provide a means of capturing the role of community volunteers, and a means for distinguishing them from national volunteers.

This working definition distinguished between formal and informal community volunteering, based on the relationship they have with VSO and their role in VSO-supported community-based projects and programmes<sup>4</sup>. VSO Cambodia has continued to apply this definition, though VSO has since finalised a formal definition that contains elements of both, and in the process, removed the reference to ‘informality’.



Figure 2: VSO's working definition of community volunteering

Figure 2 shows some of the distinctions between formal and informal community volunteers, with similarities highlighted. Formality is linked to a contractual relationship with VSO which is accompanied by a set of monitoring and administrative tasks. The final definition has removed this reference entirely.

<sup>4</sup> This working definition has subsequently been reviewed and a definition formalized but is not yet fully implemented. The definition has incorporated elements of formal and informal community volunteering. Ways to measure contribution are still to be developed.



Figure 3: The final definition of Community Volunteering

Based on the figure above, the purple circles above are consistent across the working and final definitions, whereas grey shaded circles differ from the working definitions and do not hold true within IMA4P and other VSO programmes. The two grey shaded circles are different to the final definition, but are also not consistent with *practice across VSO*, reaffirming the need to socialise the definition across the organisation and to understand that the definition will still need to be refined based on the role of community volunteers and programme objectives.

The nature of formal responsibilities can sometimes be the basis for paying a stipend to compensate for a volunteers' time as opposed to just expenses in programmes such as IMA4P. However, when used as a defining criterion stipends risk creating volunteer hierarchies within a community where those that are paid are considered more valuable and important or equated with employment.<sup>5</sup> Based on VSO's working definition, an informal community volunteer is someone involved in a VSO-supported programme who is not formally affiliated with the organisation by means of a contract but may assist on an 'as needs' basis. These volunteers live near where the project is being implemented and may bring a contextual knowledge to the project which assists the project to achieve its objectives. They are likely to be involved with other community development activities, whether or not they are regarded as volunteering.

Whether formal or informal, involvement as a community volunteer is not linked to a pre-defined technical skill set and may be influenced by a commitment to one's own community and the spirit of volunteering. Community volunteering roles often interact and intersect with national and international volunteers in a blended approach. A question that remains concerns the distinction between informal community volunteers and primary actors: the case study approach will explore how communities and VSO staff are understanding the contribution of different volunteering roles within projects which will advance this research agenda within VSO. With the COVID-19 pandemic,

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<sup>5</sup> Chadwick 2020



VSO has come to regard community volunteers as primary actors, but this is not universally understood or agreed across VSO.

The formally adopted definition developed by VSO does not reflect the possible overlap between the role of community volunteer and primary actor.

### The Cambodian volunteering context

In Cambodia volunteering has typically focused on issues related to employability and youth unemployment and has become recognised as a means for youth to be able to develop technical, professional and social skills.

There are a range of volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs) that are currently active in Cambodia, and a strong volunteer network, VolCam<sup>6</sup>, that is comprised of both national and international volunteers. To date, the role of national and community volunteers has not been differentiated, and VolCam describes their focus as local and international volunteers. Local volunteer refers both to national volunteers who are not necessarily living in the area of project implementation, and community volunteers that are based within the village<sup>7</sup> where the project is being implemented on a long-term basis. The network provides a structured means to share ideas and practice, and to coordinate activities and programmes. VolCam also sees volunteering as central to the development of communities and acts as an important tool for mobilizing communities to achieve social change. Within VSO, the roles of community volunteers, junior and senior national volunteers is determined by technical skills, education background and work experience. These volunteers are recruited based on project needs and the geographical area where the project is implemented.

UN Volunteers notes that there are people who hold essential roles within rural communities which embody the characteristics of volunteerism but may not be defined as volunteering by VIOs. Nevertheless, these essential roles are reciprocal and contribute to the overall improvement of the community, and to date, have been described as traditional volunteerism. The traditional aspect refers to something that has been in place for a long time, and to a long-established need. It is important to be aware of these traditional volunteering roles as they may overlap with VSO's definition of informal community volunteers.

### About IMA4P

IMA4P was set up as a means of improving market access through creating and supporting Agricultural Cooperatives (ACs) and developing market linkages under a multi-stakeholder platform, in the form of the Sustainable Rice Platform (SRP). The cooperatives organise farmers that are currently producing rice and need assistance with improving the quality of the rice they were producing and a means of accessing the market at a fair and competitive price. This was in response to the problem of over-supply in a very saturated market. The creation of the SRP, the key market linkage created through IMA4P, provided a way for farmers to negotiate and access a good price for their rice yield and to begin to practice climate smart agriculture. Through existing ACs, improved knowledge and market linkages, farmers have been able to improve their yield and their own livelihoods. IMA4P was formally closed during 2019, then continued as part of the portfolio of rural livelihoods' projects supported with additional VSO funding.

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<sup>6</sup>UN Volunteers 2017

<sup>7</sup> Community and Village are used interchangeably to describe where the community volunteers are based and implementing project activities

## Volunteers in IMA4P

The project used a blended volunteering approach, meaning it worked with farmers through engaging both international, national and community volunteers, both formal and informal.



Figure 4: Description of volunteer roles in IMA4P

## Methodology

This research was qualitative focusing on questions of ‘how’ or ‘why’ rather than to ‘what extent’. The case study method was used. There are different approaches to case study selection, including focusing on extreme cases, typical cases or those with most variation. To achieve maximum learning, cases within VSO where the role of community volunteers was not clear or distinct were selected, as identified by programme and the Knowledge for Impact team’s staff. A retrospective case study approach was used to consider an example that challenged VSO’s definition of community volunteering. The rationale for this approach was that this would allow for critical interrogation of VSO’s definition of community volunteering in a context, which is considered (by VSO staff) to be atypical. Exploratory conversations with VSO staff and existing evaluations informed the research questions and the focus of this study which forms part of a broader research agenda around understanding community volunteering.

At the point of planning, two country cases were planned, and a comparative synthesis of evidence was to be written up. However, due to COVID-19, the second case study has been postponed. This case study acts as a starting point for exploration of other iterations of community volunteering within VSO and will inform future research design and case study selection.

This case study is based upon a synthesis of primary and secondary data sources – see figure 5. Primary data collection was through fieldwork in Battambang province during March 2020 and included interviews with VSO staff, national and community volunteers and project partners<sup>8</sup>. This was combined with participatory group discussions with community volunteers and primary actors<sup>9</sup>. Table 1 shows the methods used to collect primary data and the 41 stakeholders involved.

Stakeholder	Interview	Participatory Discussion	TOTAL
VSO staff	4		4
National volunteers	2		2
Community volunteers (Formal)	4	13	17
Community volunteers (Informal)	5	5	10
Primary actors (farmers who took part in IMA4P)	6		6
Ministry of Agriculture	1		1
Private sector partner	1		1

Table 1 Stakeholders involved in data collection

Secondary data included the Impact Evaluation of the IMA4P Project for Cambodia and Nigeria (2018-19) along with other project documentation.



Figure 5: Research Process

<sup>8</sup>This included the Ministry of Agriculture and a rice miller (private sector partner)

<sup>9</sup>In-depth interview and discussion guides were developed for research respondents, and ethical consent requested prior to initiating any data collection. Follow up interviews were undertaken with VSO staff after field visits.

## Limitations

### Study design – case study and comparison

This case study was limited by the data collection tools being designed for use in a comparative study. This meant that some of the data collected was harder to analyse without a point of comparison. To address this limitation this case study is being presented as one example of community volunteering within a larger research agenda, and the data collected will input into a comparative synthesis at a future point.

### Length of discussion guides

During data collection the research team found that the discussion guides were too long and took a long time to deliver with translation. This meant that it was not possible to cover all the planned areas. Future case study design will think carefully about the time available and the time demanded of research participants.

### Participation and input

The process of data collection could have been more participatory and inclusive. The discussion guides were focused on eliciting participants to share their views and perceptions. An alternative format of data collection, such as pictorial methods or transit walks, may have provided a better avenue for participants to share their views. Data collection was limited by the fact that the project was already completed and that the venue for the meetings was some distance from homes and rice paddies, the primary agricultural product. Community volunteers were also not familiar with the relational model making it difficult to use it as a reference point for participatory discussions.

## Findings

### Mapping Community Volunteering - IMA4P

IMA4P used a blended volunteering approach working through the existing community structure of the Agricultural Cooperative (AC). The need for community volunteers was identified as a means of deepening impact for participants. National volunteers, who were not based in the project location provided oversight and training for formal community volunteers, who in turn provided training and support to informal community volunteers (lead farmers). Each of these roles are looked at in more detail to understand their role in the project and any challenges or tensions related to them.

### National Volunteer



National volunteers for this project were based in a field office at Battambang not in the project community. The project engaged both junior and senior national volunteers, and their activities and responsibilities were defined according to their technical skills and level of education. The national volunteers receive a stipend (higher than the formal community volunteer). The local wage comparison suggests that the stipend is lower than that earned in government, though volunteers are earning a stipend for volunteering in communities with very little other income-generating activities outside of the agricultural sector. In Cambodia, many long-term volunteers (over two years) expect to move on to become a staff member and may apply for employment after completing time as a national volunteer.

National volunteers have responsibilities for project coordination and monitoring. These are activities that, in other programmes and countries, may sit with project staff employed by VSO. Literature addresses the role and influence of stipend rewarded volunteering on employment in

contexts where employment is low and economic opportunities are limited.<sup>10</sup> The opportunity to earn a stipend can outweigh any other long-term intention or aspiration, which may negatively influence sustainability.

### Community Volunteer – Formal



Formal community volunteers are young and predominantly female. This was not part of the programme design but is how it materialised after completing the applications process. Many have not worked before, a small number may have volunteered before, but some are continuing to volunteer beyond their placement in IMA4P in a new livelihoods project. These formal community volunteers come from farming families, and this was a requirement for becoming a community volunteer on this project. They were recruited as part of a structured applications process with a job description, eligibility criteria (including being able to read and write) and having to undergo screening by VSO. Their role at VSO is part-time, and they are paid a small stipend to compensate them for their time. They are contracted by VSO with a clear individual development plan that should foster their growth and skills development during their volunteering placement.

The technical design of IMA4P was established before the introduction of community volunteering, and so formal community volunteers were entered into a pre-defined role which required knowledge in the subject matter. The induction process focused on the knowledge and skills, although there was an introduction to elements of VSO's relational approach<sup>11</sup> that were relevant to their role and to the core approaches<sup>12</sup>. Eight of thirteen community volunteers were aware of the concept of inclusion and engaging the most vulnerable. Very few of the volunteers were aware of the relational model or saw any difference in the way a volunteer and a staff member may behave within the IMA4P project.

Formal community volunteers are supported by national volunteers and their role was to provide training for informal community volunteers (lead farmers), assist with record keeping and some mobilisation.

Community volunteers acknowledge that the stipend is a major motivator to taking on their role. This has contributed to an aspiration for community volunteers to move to become national volunteers, despite the gap in education attainment.

### Community Volunteer – Informal



Lead farmers are viewed as informal community volunteers, and by some in the project team as primary actors. They receive training and assistance from the formal community volunteers and then they in turn provide training and support to farmers and members of the Agricultural Cooperative (AC). Lead farmers have an ongoing presence in the village, are much older, have lower levels of formal education and, in the communities visited are mostly male. These informal volunteers are identified through the AC based on their experience in farming and reputation in the

<sup>10</sup> See Banerjea, 2011a; Brown & Prince, 2015; de Wet, 2012; Jenkins, 2009; Wig, 2016.

<sup>11</sup>VSO staff explained that they do not spend extensive time on the relational model as some of its elements are not directly relevant or easy to communicate, and that more attention is given to specific concepts such as inclusion and gender.

<sup>12</sup>Inclusion; Social Accountability; and Resilience



community. They had been farming for an average of 15-20 years. They do not receive a stipend from VSO but do benefit from the training and capacity-building provided through IMA4P.

The rationale for identifying lead farmers was that it is easier to work with smaller groups who can disseminate information, as compared to all members of the AC. The lead farmers were identified through a voting process within the AC, and this is informed by their own experience and knowledge in farming and stature in the community. While they come from the community where they are based, they are not recruited based on coming from a historically marginalised group.

When speaking to informal community volunteers, their reference point for community volunteers is that of the formal community volunteers who assist them with training and record keeping. These lead farmers do not define themselves as volunteers but can acknowledge that their role in the project has benefitted themselves as well as the village overall.

This is also because improving the quality of rice production and successfully implementing contract farming benefits the lead farmers as well as other farmers they are working with, all of whom are members of the local ACs.

### Definitions of Community Volunteers in IMA4P

The form community volunteering takes in this project maps onto the informal/formal distinction within VSO's working definition to some extent and has some alignment with the formal definition identified in 2019, especially concerning the level of connection with VSO and the provision of stipends for formal community volunteers. The lead farmers are closer to VSO's definition of informal community volunteer or primary actor, as they received training and information which they disseminate to other farmers, but do not have a formal affiliation with VSO. The training they have received is project-specific, and they do not receive a stipend through VSO. The lead farmers live in the community and have a pre-existing role within the AC prior to the IMA4P project<sup>13</sup> and are recognised as experienced and knowledgeable farmers willing to assist others. Aspects such as gender, age, disability and ethnicity which can be the basis for exclusion are not a factor in the selection of lead farmers.

While the lead farmers are supporting a VSO project, they may also be benefitting financially from these activities directly through the improved quality of rice and the SRP developed as part of IMA4P. They were not involved in training others before VSO. Their involvement in IMA4P was very explicitly about the financial benefit that would accrue through improving the quality of yield, increased market linkages and contract farming achieved as part of IMA4P. These improvements would be of benefit to all members of the AC. On this basis the volunteers could also be regarded as primary actors.

Although the characteristics of the lead farmers map onto the emerging definition of informal community volunteering in VSO the definition is not consistent across livelihoods projects within VSO, where lead farmers may be considered as primary actors. This is the practice in other livelihoods programmes, with one example being in Tanzania<sup>14</sup>. In IMA4P, the lead farmer was designed to provide support to a smaller group of farmers as a team leader. Community volunteers

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<sup>13</sup>Roles within Agricultural cooperatives including: Chairperson, Secretary, Treasurer and so forth are not remunerated and so, on that basis, may be described as traditional volunteerism in-line with Cambodian context. Although, as noted participants themselves may not describe themselves as volunteers.

<sup>14</sup> Conversations with country office teams suggest that in Tanzania lead farmers are described as primary actors not community volunteers.

are working with lead farmers in principle. If lead farmers are not active or require additional support, community volunteers work directly with farmers.

This overlap in roles can make it difficult to distinguish between primary actors and community volunteers. In occupying these dual roles, benefitting from IMA4P would be a natural extension and a long-term motivation to remain involved in strengthening the project. Part of this may come down to the depth and regularity of providing support to other community members as an 'active citizen', which may be linked to having an existing role in the community prior to the VSO supported project. Another aspect concerns benefit; it may be harder to draw a distinction in a livelihoods project that aims to improve incomes of all community members involved in the farming activity. The inverse is also possible, where a primary actor is not necessarily a community volunteer. In IMA4P, there are a far greater number of primary actors within each AC than there were roles for either formal or informal community volunteers.

Mapping volunteering roles in IMA4P revealed a gap in programme design and training. The role of community volunteers in this project was a technical one regarding communication of improved farming practices. This model meant that community volunteers themselves were not involved in programme design, although the proximity and knowledge of community volunteers was seen as a benefit, the transformative aspect of community volunteering as a relational practice linked to community ownership and leadership of the development process was not fully realised.

### Contribution of community volunteers

Community volunteers were found to provide unique contributions to programme success. Figure 6 below shows the interaction of different attributions of formal and informal community volunteers towards project outcomes within IMA4P. As the graphic shows, a lot of these attributions are interrelated. A connection between proximity, trust and working through existing structures, and presence in the community are all a factor in ownership of project outcomes through improved agricultural incomes. Each of these areas is now looked at in more detail.



Figure 6: Contribution of community volunteers, and in IMA4P specifically

#### Local and technical knowledge as insiders

Informal community volunteers noted that formal community volunteers' combination of technical and local knowledge was an important contribution to the project's success.

*"By knowing context, they know the local farming situation and how to approach others"* - Male Informal Community Volunteer

These farmers felt that if volunteers may come from outside the village it would take time for them to develop an understanding of local context. These same lead farmers noted that communication is influenced when a person knows and understands the local context. Formal community volunteers also had knowledge about where the paddies are located, who they belong to and which of the cooperatives are working where. This insider knowledge was said to contribute to the success of programme activities.

#### Trust and existing relationships

Formal community volunteers' contribution was not just attributed to the technical knowledge of context but also related to their ability to work with and approach the farmers involved in the project. The formal community volunteers are known in the village and have an existing relationship

with community members which gives mutual trust and credibility to their volunteering role. Based on being known already, it is expected that the community volunteers should be building social networks within the community, contributing to technical sharing platforms at village level.

#### *Availability due to proximity*

An official from the Ministry of Agriculture noted that proximity was identified as the major benefit of having community volunteers (both formal and informal). This is because government does not have the capacity to provide agricultural extension services to established ACs, and that the presence of community volunteers assisted with bridging that gap. The lead farmers (informal community volunteers) recognised that the formal community volunteers can contribute in ways because of their *geographical proximity* to the village. This is because they can stay late and reach places where travel costs would be expensive for anyone located outside of the village. The duration of preparation for planting to the point of harvesting rice can last up to six months, and the consistent presence of community volunteers in that time assists in establishing trust which differentiates these community volunteers from other organisations who may visit communities briefly to provide training and inputs, and leave soon after. The consistent presence also means that these young people are available for any questions as and when the need arises. Their location in the community does allow for a continuity of services that would not otherwise be possible.

The proximity of community volunteers to the communities where they are volunteering has also contributed to improved functionality of the ACs. These Cooperatives were in place prior to establishing IMA4P but the engagement of formal community volunteers in training informal community volunteers (lead farmers) and assisting with the record keeping required to become part of the Sustainable Rice Platform (SRP) are two key contributions, which without the assistance of literate community volunteers would have been much more difficult to achieve. Though there is a requirement to be able to read and write to become a lead farmer, some of the lead farmers were not able to read and write well, and it was for this reason that they needed much assistance in record keeping.

However, one informal community volunteer noted that geography was not as important as how the formal community volunteers worked (conduct themselves). This suggests that disposition may be just as important as proximity.

In this instance, the value of a volunteer coming from the community where they are volunteering may be about familiarity, knowing how to get things done, who key players are, just as much as the convenience of the geographical proximity. This project used proximity (location) as a proxy for connection to the community, whereas the feedback from farmers suggests that geographical proximity alone is not enough but it is rather the knowledge of local context and trusting relationships that ensure success.

#### *Working with existing community structures*

An important strength of community volunteering within IMA4P was the formal community volunteers' association with the ACs in their community. These structures pre-dated the project and were set up to organise farming activity and organise production so that farmers can improve the quality of the yield and achieve the best price. This association with the AC has also assisted with sustainability, where volunteers that are now involved in the most recent livelihoods project have been associated with the AC, rather than VSO. The AC is now at the forefront of implementation.

At the end of IMA4P, two of the 13 formal community volunteers had taken on more senior roles in the ACs. These positions would include involvement in decision-making processes related to contract

farming undertaken by the cooperative, but there was no indication that the formal community volunteers participate or are engaged in leadership and decision-making processes that are not related to IMA4P outcomes.

### Inclusion of marginalised groups

A significant motivation for involving community volunteers had been the view that the trust and credibility they already had would enable the project to reach marginalised and isolated groups that may otherwise not have been identified. Community volunteers' local knowledge included understanding who may have large plots of land, those with smaller plots and others that may not have enough land to be able to do any rice cultivation. This in-built knowledge could assist in being able to identify and engage more vulnerable and marginalised groups.

Cambodia government policy places significant emphasis on the empowerment and inclusion of women. In addition, the ACs within their own documents and constitution had clear guidance as to how many leadership positions should be filled by women and other stipulations. Formal community volunteers were given responsibility to try and ensure that information provided through training is cascaded to women who may have responsibilities at home and are thus unable to attend the workshops. When asked about the value and contribution of community volunteers, one formal community volunteer noted:

*“The project has shown that women can speak out when they are given access to information and build their own capacity”-Formal community volunteer*

It is not clear the extent to which this may have been achieved by another kind of volunteer, but it is important to note that these women, who may otherwise be marginalised, have been engaged through the community volunteers they know in the community. Where marginalised groups (such as landless people, elderly and those that are sick) were not actively engaged, this was due to the focus of the project being rice production which requires large tracts of land to be viable, rather than being excluded due to their identity or personal circumstances.

Interestingly, the volunteers themselves do not report that they think their own presence has contributed to inclusion, but perceptions of VSO staff and some of the AC members recognise that the project has contributed to inclusion. IMA4P by design had a horizontal approach to reaching diverse groups of people, within their own village. The target groups for the project had been identified at the outset, and the opportunity to improve one's own livelihood was a strong motivator for people to try and engage in the project.

VSO staff and volunteers report that they think that the project has been successful in engaging the marginalised, and that this is through the presence of community volunteers.

As the community volunteering role does not require the same level of education as other volunteers, the barriers to entry are lower. Evidence shows that this fosters inclusion of otherwise marginalised young people.<sup>15</sup> With the limited work opportunities in the formal sector, and the large number of people engaged in primary activities, it is possible that these young community volunteers would not otherwise have access to income-generating opportunities. On this basis, while the formal community volunteers themselves do not perceive their own role to have contributed to inclusion, evidence may suggest that adopting an inclusion lens in project design has engaged marginalised young people through the formal community volunteering role. Stipulating a

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<sup>15</sup>Kuma and Clark 2016

set of skills for a formal community volunteer role has the potential to exclude the poorest and most marginalised. This limits their opportunity to learn, grow and develop skills themselves that would potentially position them for a future opportunity.

### Ownership of project success

Formal community volunteers report that they wanted to join the project to help farmers, which would also benefit their own families who are also farmers. These young volunteers can see the impact of what they have been able to achieve through the benefits of contract farming to their communities and families, which has given them connection to the project outcomes and an interest in supporting activities beyond the period of IMA4P.

### Contribution – connecting attributions to outcomes

The next section maps some of the unique attributes of community volunteers as outlined above onto the outcomes of IMA4P, connecting the role of community volunteers to programme success.

### Improvements in Agricultural Cooperative functioning

The training and record-keeping provided by formal community volunteers was identified as their main contribution to the project. In the instance of IMA4P, the formal community volunteers have higher levels of formal education, which has made these volunteers well placed to assist with administrative tasks that are necessary for the SRP to function effectively. The proximity of formal community volunteers to the communities where they are volunteering has also contributed to improved functionality of the ACs. These Cooperatives were in place prior to establishing IMA4P but the engagement of community volunteers in training lead farmers (cooperative farmers) and assisting farmers with the record keeping required to become part of the SRP are two key contributions, which without the assistance of literate community volunteers would have been much more difficult to achieve. Additionally, IMA4P has been successful in that it has been able to grow the number of members in ACs which leads to increased yield and income.

### Adoption of new and improved agricultural practices

The training and continued support provide by the formal community volunteers to the project has assisted farmers to establish Contract Farming, an improved agricultural practice that was a crucial outcome for project success. Community volunteers' primary contribution within IMA4P is knowledge and administrative skills to assist farmers (through cooperatives) to improve market access and their own income. In this instance, the knowledge that the formal and informal community volunteers have shared has influenced the adoption of new and improved agricultural practices which have become more widely adopted across cooperatives.

### Collaboration between ACs, government and private sector

Formal community volunteers noted that some of the significant contributions they had made include that they had facilitated greater collaboration between the ACs, government and the private sector. Assistance provided to cooperatives through IMA4P has facilitated improved market access, which takes shape through contract farming and work with millers. The SRP was also established to assist with the coordination and organisation of farmers in a way that would assist them to move from being a lone farmer, to part of an organised business. In the words of one AC member:

*“This project has taken me from being a farmer to a businessman”*- Informal community volunteer (lead farmer)



### Sustainability of project outcomes

With community volunteers being part of the community in which they live, there is greater opportunity for more frequent interaction. This supports relationship-building and sustainability in a way that would be less possible if volunteers were in communities to deliver a specific service or activity and then leaving, to return on a sporadic intermittent basis. Each of the formal community volunteers indicated they will continue to provide some support and assistance that is not necessarily time-intensive or costly, which will assist with ensuring sustainability of project outcomes. Their ongoing participation in the Cooperative, SRP and Contract Farming also has direct financial benefits for themselves and their families.

Knowledge and changed farming practice are one of the key outcomes that has potential to be sustainable, and this change is not in any way influenced by VSO providing resources. However, a formal community volunteer noted that sometimes these alternative farming practices are more time-consuming and so people may decide not to do them and will forget, unless there is ongoing support from a community volunteer. This formal community volunteer indicated that they were willing to continue to answer questions and support farmers to try and avoid this situation. The other risk to sustainability is that some of the farmers are unable to read or write, and without reinforcement or revision may forget what they have learned and revert to the practices that they have been doing for many years.

Sustainability is possible in contexts where the community volunteering role is not resource-intensive and there is no opportunity cost for continuing to support primary actors. In rural areas, where people are isolated from economic opportunity, and have seemingly extra time, there may be less opportunity cost. However, once the opportunity cost exceeds the benefit, activities become less sustainable. In the instance of IMA4P, these community volunteers (both formal and informal) will continue to have an interest in ensuring the success of the SRP, and so may continue. However, the loss of the stipend could be a significant factor for formal community volunteers continuing their work. This question needs more research and understanding.

### Formal community volunteers acting as role models

Another contribution that was identified was that formal community volunteers are able to act as a role model to the community and come to be seen as a teacher. This will contribute to creating a positive mindset and expand opportunities for the next generation which contributes to a greater consciousness of social development and community contribution. This is in line with active citizenship, one of the key outcomes of volunteering for VSO. The notion of being an active citizen includes becoming involved in activities that improve the wellbeing of primary actors through ensuring a more just and equitable society.

### Sustainability and support for community volunteering

An important aspect of understanding the role of community volunteers and understanding their contribution to sustainability especially concerns their motivations for involvement, and the benefits they get through volunteering. As already discussed, motivations to volunteer were shaped by direct benefits of IMA4P's success through the formal community volunteers who came from farming families and the informal community volunteers who were farmers themselves. In addition, for the formal community volunteers the provision of a stipend for the duration of the project was an important consideration.

### Supporting community development

The personal benefits of volunteering for the formal community volunteers cannot be seen outside of the context of their desire to support their community. Formal community volunteers indicated that they wished to develop their communities and act as role models for other youth.

*“As I come from the community, and I am a young person, I can inspire others to participate in improving their community”*-Formal community volunteer

The contribution of volunteers from the same community is recognised by ACs as being that these volunteers inspire others to participate in community activities, and to become involved in community upliftment activities. Although these outcomes are noted and acknowledged, none of the formal community volunteers had gone on to take on additional leadership or volunteering roles outside of those related to IMA4P objectives, and none were involved in decision-making structures outside of the AC with which they were supporting. One formal community volunteer had taken on a more senior role within the AC since participating in IMA4P – this role is not remunerated.

### Building skills, gaining work experience and a route to employment

For the formal community volunteers, gaining skills and employment experience were common motivations. They noted that they were able to develop skills that make them more employable and can be used beyond their role in IMA4P. These soft skills include improved self-confidence, improved self-motivation and communication skills. IMA4P focused on rural communities where young people may have limited opportunities to develop these skills and have been able to do so through their role as a community volunteer.

In one case, a community volunteer has gone on to be employed by a local rice miller. While this miller was not aware of volunteering, and his decision to recruit and employ the community volunteer was not related to his volunteering practice, the volunteer demonstrated a set of skills and attributes learnt through the volunteering experience which made him more employable.

Volunteering is seen by formal community volunteers as a possible route to a more permanent job. This may be an opportunity within VSO or being to make one more marketable to be able to find a job. The skills gained through their volunteering placement may have improved formal community volunteers' ability to work within their community and to look for a job in the formal or informal sector. It is not clear the extent to which this may hold true for all formal community volunteers who are typically located in a remote, isolated rural area some distance away from organised economic or administrative and government opportunities. Regardless, the volunteering opportunity provides people with an opportunity to develop hard and soft skills, and in this instance, to improve personal command of English.

With volunteering being a route to employment, the pattern has emerged that once someone finds a paying job or other income they do not continue to volunteer. This pattern may be less prevalent in rural districts located some distance away from formal opportunities but may be more prevalent where people are located closer to peri-urban or urban areas. While this leads to volunteer turnover, it also assists people to progress within their own circumstances, such they have greater control over their own circumstances, are more self-sufficient and in a better position to assist others.

On the other hand, informal community volunteers do not see this as an entry point to employment as they regard their livelihood as farming and are not motivated by the desire to volunteer or to improve their skills. Their own motivation is one to develop knowledge through IMA4P, facilitated through the work of formal community volunteers.



### Improved farming outcomes

For the informal community volunteers, the most significant factor motivating their involvement was the opportunity to improve one's own livelihood, with volunteering through coordinating and sharing information secondary to that. Only one of the lead farmers interviewed had volunteered with other organisations, and this volunteering was not in any way related to agriculture.

For the formal community volunteers, they wanted to join the project to help farmers, which would also benefit their own families that are also farmers. These youth volunteers can also see the impact of what they have been able to achieve through the benefits of contract farming, and so it is in the interest of volunteers to continue to support activities beyond the period of IMA4P. This speaks to the long-term interest in the success of the project in developing smart agriculture and climate smart practices that reduce food insecurity.

Both types of community volunteers were motivated to some extent by the improved farming outcomes and livelihoods arising from the success of the project. However, this was a primary concern for informal community volunteers. Formal community volunteers were also benefitted by other factors such as stipends, gaining skills and work experience and contributing to community development as role models. This draws attention to the convergence in definition between what VSO defines and regards as a community volunteer and being identified as a primary actor benefitting from VSO-supported programmes. In the instance of IMA4P, both formal and informal community volunteers are benefitting from the activities and changes achieved through IMA4P, in addition to the benefits in hard and soft skills developed through the volunteering experience.

When looking at volunteering inside a community it is hard to disentangle individual benefits from those that accrue to the community. Volunteers have a vested interest in project success beyond a personal commitment to volunteering. It is important to note here that the activities of volunteers need to be looked at beyond the time-bound project cycle to better understand how volunteers are leading and contributing towards their community's development. This project engaged community volunteers to deliver a technical intervention, which may have limited its capacity to capitalise on the transformative potential of community volunteers as leaders of their own development and active citizens. A better understanding of the community context and existing social support and development activities, alongside training for volunteers in community mobilisation, development and advocacy may have impacted how this project was able to support community volunteers to become 'active citizens' beyond their engagement within the project cycle.

### Discussion Points

#### Social norms – age and cultural perception of capacity and credibility

Formal community volunteers tended to be young and female whereas informal community volunteers were older and male. National volunteers noted that the age of formal community volunteers was a barrier to their work with informal community volunteers, as despite their presence in the community it still took a long time for trust to be developed between the volunteers involved with the project. The same national volunteer indicated that it was premature to assume that trust and credibility existed at the outset because the person was from the local village.

*"Trust and credibility take time to establish and is vital to being able to do the job well."* -

National volunteer

In Cambodia there is a cultural perception that younger people are less well informed, and that the contribution of older people is regarded as more credible, which is likely to have impacted the

relationship between young formal volunteers and older informal volunteers. One community volunteer noted that while the community may know him and his family, the community were initially sceptical of his ability. Although, he did say that this improved as they came to see him working, and that being a local person made it easier and more practical to be able to convene meetings and training. Awareness is needed of context dependent barriers related to social norms to support community volunteers' work. The influence of age and gender on community volunteering needs to be further understood through further research.

### Skills and competency of formal community volunteers

One national volunteer indicated that while community volunteers are located in proximity to the village, it would be unrealistic to assume that they would be able to fulfil all of the tasks set out for them, and that they do require support and guidance in settling into their role, and that it was a problem in instances where community volunteers had not received the necessary support to be able to carry out their job description.

Other views included that community volunteers needed a lot of support and capacity-building to be able to plan and engage with stakeholders, and that one of the risks is to overestimate their capability. This view was also held by VSO staff interviewed as part of the research study, who noted that formal community volunteers need to develop the necessary soft skills and confidence to be able to convene community members together, deliver training and follow-up with primary actors and so it cannot be assumed they are ready to implement at full speed at the point of project inception.

*"We need to be conscious of their status. If we treat them as community-builders, we need to understand that they need more coaching, and consider how we develop their development plan and know their capacity gaps" -VSO staff member*

The existence of these skills and capacity gaps has affirmed the value of engaging both national and formal and informal community volunteers in the implementation of IMA4P. National volunteers bring a higher level of education and a better grasp of English to the project, which supports the formal community volunteers to fulfil the role as defined within IMA4P. The formal community volunteers' role is more technical as compared to other community volunteering roles, and while these volunteers may be located in closer proximity to the primary actors the project is working with, the volunteers also need ongoing guidance and support to be able to perform their role in the project, and for their placement to provide the personal development opportunity associated with volunteering.

While duly acknowledging the need to have a specific set of skills to perform the role, the reciprocal contribution of community volunteers by way of respect for local knowledge needs to be recognised. This is a contribution that is necessary to project success, and in enabling VSO's long-term work with communities.

VSO's formal definition of community volunteering references that community volunteers should be managed by a traditional structure or mechanism. This is contrary to IMA4P and has potential to introduce complexities within VSO-supported programmes. This is also influenced by the nature of the role, its duration and scope. Where community volunteers have a long-term role (such as IMA4P), it is valuable to have accountability at community level, which increases credibility but accountability to VSO is important. This is because community volunteers may be responsible in initial project design activities and have responsibility for collecting monitoring data and completing records of project activities.

### Power and Resource Distribution

Research on the role of community volunteering suggests that proximity may even create bias as local power dynamics/community structures play out<sup>16</sup>. However, it seems that this was not a big consideration within IMA4P. Although, there is evidently power at play in the relationship between informal and formal community volunteers in relation to perceptions of gender, age and capability as outlined above, this did not seem to have an impact on resource distribution within the project from the data collected to date. This is likely because volunteers within IMA4P, irrespective of their role, have no command over resources or their distribution due to their elevated status. None of the volunteers that participated in group discussions, or were interviewed individually, indicated that they felt any pressure about the distribution of resources. This may be because their role is predominantly technical in nature (information-sharing) and does not extend to the distribution of resources or aid that may emerge in other development projects.

However, interestingly the specificity of this intervention as a technical exercise also may have meant that volunteers did not see their role as a platform for involvement in other development activities within the village which would provide an opportunity to influence decision-making. This may be different to other community volunteers in VSO programmes who may already be linked into other organisations and decision-making structures (faith-based, local government, other NGOs and relief organisations, other community services).

### Community volunteers – transformative role not fully realised

The role of community volunteers, both formal and informal within IMA4P was seen more as a means of delivering the project rather than part of a broader development transformation. The involvement of national volunteers meant that community volunteers did not have a major role in interfacing with key stakeholders and government, which limited their ability to enhance their role in decision-making and expand their networks.

The limitations of community volunteers in terms of their understanding of project delivery was seen as a barrier, but it seems they were not given adequate support to see their role as an active citizen beyond their engagement as a community volunteering within the project cycle. This is likely due to the demand of the project on technical nature of their training as opposed to a focus on community mobilisation skills.

*“There are some particular challenges which we could understand and solve. Community Volunteers are usually new to how a project is delivered. We need to understand about their limited knowledge and experience and use those limitations as opportunities to let them learn and grow. With lots of coaching, mentoring, and follow-up, they could deliver what is required” -VSO staff member*

Support through training in social mobilisation, accountability and sustainable development could improve the ability of community volunteers to contribute to their community beyond the project cycle and prepare these volunteers to take leadership and contribute to their communities’ development.

Another aspect in which community volunteering was not fully realised within this project was the lack of inclusion of community volunteers in design and evaluation. Feedback from VSO staff stated

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<sup>16</sup> See Boesten, Mdee & Cleaver 2011; Mohan 2001

that community volunteers were not fully embedded in the learning and reflection processes undertaken by country teams. This created a missed opportunity whereby their own reflections and experiences of the IMA4P implementation were not systematically incorporated in project design and implementation. This has potential to negatively affect the sense of belonging and incorporation of community volunteers into VSO. There remains a need to create some kind of feedback channel for community volunteers into other parts of the country team processes. It seems that this project design challenge could stem from seeing volunteers as delivering a project, rather than actively participating in their own development through forming part of a livelihoods' intervention. In addition to this, engaging community volunteers during programme design, and in the articulation of a Theory of Change assists with confirming the plausibility of assumptions and the likelihood that the proposed project will respond to the identified need.

### Inclusion as a tag on to project design

IMA4P was a livelihoods project that as a prerequisite involved those who had access to land. This meant that the project was structurally constrained from being able to engage some of the most marginalised groups and then there may also be social barriers to engaging these groups. In traditional rural contexts, men are typically regarded as the most powerful, and that women may take on subordinate tasks in the home (such as cleaning and childcare) while the men are involved in the farming activities. Although, some literature on community volunteering finds that proximity can contribute to increased inclusion<sup>17</sup>, the evidence in this area is weaker than the assumptions often built into log frames and project designs. Formal community volunteers had an explicit responsibility to ensure that information was cascaded to women to ensure that these women were not isolated from possible benefits but the extent to which they managed to achieve this is inconclusive.

### Are project outcomes influenced by when community volunteers are engaged?

One of the key areas of interest for this case study, and for other projects implemented by VSO, is whether there is any difference in the contribution and outcomes of community volunteering between projects where community volunteers are engaged from inception, or compared to those where community volunteering is incorporated at a later stage.. IMA4P successfully achieved the desired project outcomes, but it is hard to say now whether this could have been improved with the involvement of volunteers in project design

Within IMA4P, community volunteering was incorporated as part of the second phase of IMA4P. Key lessons emerging are that community volunteering provides a powerful means to scale projects, but that not all projects are suitable to scale. Projects in the livelihoods sector which typically engage extension officers as a means of supporting smallholder farmers in hard to reach areas mean that these volunteers provide an opportunity to scale once implementation is underway.

In other examples, a project may evolve during implementation and new needs are identified which are best responded to through community volunteering. In this instance, community volunteers are responding to a need that may not have been initially envisaged, and with a clear scope of work, there is no influence on outcomes. It is important to acknowledge as noted earlier, that the role of community volunteers within IMA4P is different to other projects. In other VSO projects where community volunteers are doing mobilisation, education and awareness-raising, these can be done as part of inception or during implementation to mobilise interest and engagement. The presence of community volunteers themselves can also enable projects to meet a specific need which may

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<sup>17</sup>See Guinard, Trapani, & Zhang, 2016 and Lewis 2015 for evidence contesting the assumption.

otherwise not have been possible. This can include youth engagement activities where community volunteers may become engaged in youth engagement networks and take on engagement activities that were not part of project design.

The study recognises that community volunteers play different roles and that different kinds of projects require different types of volunteers. In many projects, community volunteers have an important role to play in catalysing and obtaining ownership of the community in which VSO-supported projects are implemented, achieve behaviour change and challenge social norms. This is particularly the case in health and education projects; and in the case of livelihoods, challenging exclusion faced by women and the disabled, and ensuring that marginalised groups were included in project activities. Past research and project experience in Tanzania has shown that community volunteers are more effective than other volunteers at catalysing behaviour change, challenging social norms and working to address structural issues faced by primary actors.

The value and importance of this contribution is not in any way influenced by whether community volunteers were engaged from design or became involved at a later point, but it is clear that there is a valuable role that community volunteers can play in the project design process. As part of project design, it is imperative to understand the typology of volunteers, programme and skills required before defining a specific volunteering role.

The practice of incorporating community volunteers after project design is not commonplace across VSO's programme portfolio, as many projects have engaged individuals in a similar role albeit with a different title. These could be field assistants or animators. It had been thought that it was enough to define national volunteers in line with their roles and responsibilities, but VSO viewed the work of community volunteering as supporting activities, without a need to formally define this contribution. This is a significant barrier to establishing the unique volunteering contribution.

The language and terminology of community volunteering has become more prominent as programmes have grown, and as the differentiation between types of volunteers have also become clearer. This includes a greater link with understanding the unique contribution of various volunteering modalities, and in understanding the role of already active citizens in VSO-supported projects. Prior to defining community volunteering, it was thought sufficient to define national and international volunteers, without formalising a definition of what constituted community volunteering. The process of defining community volunteering, has also assisted in understanding unique contribution.

## Learning Points & Conclusion

The paper has mapped the role of community volunteers within the IMA4P project; discussed the contribution of community volunteers; and explored avenues of sustainability and support. To contribute to VSO's broader research agenda – to build the evidence-base around community volunteering - nine learning points have been identified to guide future research and programme design.

1	<p><b>Contribution to working definition:</b> the role of the formal community volunteer and the lead farmers (informal community volunteers) to some extent map onto VSO's working definition of informal and formal community volunteering. The evidence from this case study suggests that these roles were perceived quite differently by volunteers and VSO staff. Formal community volunteers were an opportunity to develop skills for young people from the programme community. Whereas, informal community volunteers (lead farmers) did not see themselves as volunteers but rather as participants in the project. Both roles were conceived of as a technical means of project delivery, which may have limited the transformational potential of community volunteering as a means of realising locally owned development and active citizenship. While the formally adopted definition merges aspects of formal and informal community volunteering but key gaps remain and IMA4P has elements which differ from both the working and formally adopted definitions.</p>
2	<p><b>Distinction between community volunteer and primary actors:</b> the evidence from this case study questions the distinction between community volunteers (especially informal) and primary actors. In IMA4P, there is a lack of consensus whether lead farmers who are themselves benefitting are in fact regarded as community volunteers or primary actors. These lead farmers do not receive any training or support from VSO for their volunteer role, and the training provided is specifically focused on agricultural practices and climate smart agriculture. The overlap in role contributes to this lack of clarity as to how to define this kind of engagement and creates complexity when defining the role of volunteers at the point of project design.</p>
3	<p><b>Understanding motivations and benefits:</b> community volunteers are likely to be themselves participating as primary actors in VSO programmes, and benefitting from these interventions and services. This may be particularly the case in livelihoods programmes, where community volunteers are themselves participating in training, cooperatives or voluntary savings and loans associations. This is not to say that volunteers should not benefit, as shown by this case study the livelihood benefits to both formal and informal community volunteers were a key motivation but were also part of the collective benefit as volunteers are community members. The distinction between motivation to develop oneself and to develop one's own community is not binary, and community volunteers may be motivated by both. More careful consideration of volunteer motivations and benefits is needed when looking at community volunteering, especially across different programme areas and contexts. Awareness is also needed of how community volunteering interacts with contextual perceptions of NGOs as source of employment.</p>
4	<p><b>Language of formal versus informal: Care must be taken on how the language of formal and informal community volunteering is used.</b> The language can contribute to a perception that formal volunteering is seen as more valuable and preferable, and that informal volunteering is less valuable to VSO-supported projects, when in many instances, it is lead farmers that may typically provide more ongoing contribution to development in their communities. The formally adopted definition has removed this distinction, recognising that both roles should not be regarded as equally valuable but needs to go further with addressing the aspect of community volunteers also being primary actors. To avoid the formal/informal distinction will also require that the definition is contextualized. This will need to be done while maintaining a core essential set of attributes. One suggestion is to identify a set of core characteristics that should be in place and then secondary that may vary per project.</p>
5	<p><b>Embedding the definition across VSO:</b> The formal definition has combined elements of both informal and formal community volunteering but has some distinctions that are different to practice. These need to be resolved. This is of particular importance where</p>

	community volunteers should be reporting to a traditional structure/mechanism but are working on VSO-supported programmes.
6	<b>An outlier of community volunteering:</b> this case study may be an outlier to many other VSO-supported programmes where the role of a community volunteer is less technical and has a much greater emphasis on supporting programme activities through advocacy, mobilisation and awareness-raising. This may also be a difference between livelihoods project as opposed to health and education. The role of formal community volunteers in IMA4P differs from the role of community volunteers in many of VSO's other projects. The formal role entails technical skills and is formalised, creating personal development plans, objectives and key performance indicators for volunteers. It is also different because it is a structured long-term role that relies on having technical knowledge and experience. Apart from the difference in educational qualifications, the formal community volunteers are responsible for tasks that, in many projects, would fall to national volunteers.
7	<b>Lack of involvement in programme design and limited development of active citizens:</b> community volunteers on IMA4P (both informal and formal) were delivering a technical aspect of a livelihoods programme. They were not involved in programme design and were also given limited opportunities to offer feedback. This limited the ability of community volunteering to be a means of supporting community ownership and leadership. In addition, the training community volunteers received largely related to the programme's technical content, which meant volunteers were not fully equipped with the community mobilisation skills to support them to take on a more active role in broader development challenges in their communities. The content and scope of training and capacity building provided to community volunteers is an important area for future programming to consider.
8	<b>Proximity needs to be seen alongside other contextual factors:</b> this case study highlights how proximity was taken as a proxy for trust and community knowledge in the programme design of IMA4P. However, the evidence suggests that this relationship needs to be looked at in a more nuanced way. Although, trust and knowledge are much more likely based upon proximity as a member of the community they cannot be assumed as other factors such as age and gender, linked to societal social norms, may have a bearing on relationships between community volunteers and primary actors.
9	<b>Prioritising inclusion of marginalized groups in design.</b> Projects that engage community volunteers need to be aware and manage potential power dynamics which could exclude people based on age, gender, education, economic status or ethnicity during recruitment. This is particularly important where a community volunteer role may require a set of specific skills, resulting in the most marginalized are excluded from the opportunity to gain from the transformative experience of volunteering.

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