



IPR2 Management response – February 2015

A first Independent Progress Review of the VSO-DFID Strategic Grant Agreement (SGA) was carried out in 2012. In response to the findings of the review VSO initiated a programme of strategic change (the VSO Impact and Effectiveness Programme or IEP). VSO decided to commission a second Independent Progress Review using the same evaluator, specifically to gauge the progress made since the first review two years ago, and inform the future focus of the programme of strategic change (the full Terms of Reference are included in the accompanying report).

VSO welcomes the findings of the review, many of which will be used to further strengthen our policy and practice as detailed in the table below.

IPR2 Recommendation	Accepted/ Partially Accepted/ Rejected	Action already taken	Action to be taken	Target
Recommendations on VSO's data verification				
The external data verification could be strengthened considerably by introducing data tracing and sample-based double-checking.	Accepted	The data validation exercise is grounded in a thorough process of internal quality assurance. We have furthermore revised the objectives and Terms of Reference for the external validation exercise for the data collected in 2014/15, to include the methodological suggestions.	The new validation exercise will take place in March 2015.	April 2015

IPR2 Recommendation	Accepted/ Partially Accepted/ Rejected	Action already taken	Action to be taken	Target
Recommendations on M&E (Monitoring and Evaluation)				
<p>VSO could do more to gain an explicit understanding of the types of VSO work that ‘work best.’ This means that three of the M&E-related IPR1 recommendations are still relevant. They are about prioritising evaluations that cover:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The sustainability of impact. This requires evaluations that are conducted a few years after a programme’s closure. 2. VSO’s most impressive successes. These successes could be learned from and could serve the purpose of strengthening VSO’s policy contributions and marketing material. 3. ‘Mystery failures’. These could provide a deeper understanding of the variables that make or break VSO’s programmes. 	Accepted	<p>We are finalising a post-closure evaluation in Sri Lanka, focusing on the long-term development impact.</p> <p>We have also finalised a new evaluation strategy and implementation plan that includes all areas of the recommendation.</p>	Implementation of evaluation plan for 2015/16.	Ongoing
<p>In the next few years, the Regional M&E Managers should also occasionally conduct evaluations. This will strengthen VSO’s programme-related body of evidence and feed into learning processes. It will also ensure that training work is grounded in VSO’s programme realities.</p>	Accepted	<p>Conducting more internal evaluations is part of the new evaluation strategy.</p>		

IPR2 Recommendation	Accepted/ Partially Accepted/ Rejected	Action already taken	Action to be taken	Target
Recommendation on accountability				
<p>In the past few years, VSO has invested much more in its accountability towards its donors than in its accountability towards the people and communities it aims to support and empower. In the next few years, this should change. In the case of VSO programmes that work on the basis of eligibility criteria and entitlements, this will mean (at the least):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus communities and people should know their rights and entitlements, have access to relevant information, and participate in decisions that affect them. • Focus communities and people should have access to safe and responsive complaint mechanisms. 	Partially accepted	Ensuring that focus communities can participate effectively is an organisational priority. It is an integral part of the People First Programme Architecture, whose principles guide VSO programmes and practice.	Completion of the exploration of effective mechanisms for direct complaints management.	April 2015 for an organisational decision about complaints management options.

IPR2 Recommendation	Accepted/ Partially Accepted/ Rejected	Action already taken	Action to be taken	Target
Recommendation on equity				
<p>VSO's draft Value for Money (VfM) position paper states that equity "is at the very heart of our work." In reality, this is not always the case. At the least, VSO should assess and be explicit about the equity implications of its choices. Currently VSO does not systematically conduct this type of analysis.</p>	Partly accepted	<p>All VSO country strategic papers have been designed to include exclusion analysis. However, these analyses have not been systematically reviewed. This practice is now an organisational priority, at the core of the principles guiding the People First Programme Architecture.</p> <p>The finalised VfM position paper now clarifies what VSO means when aiming to ensure our programmes work towards equity.</p>	We will work to further systematically conduct and document the process of exclusion and poverty analysis.	Ongoing
Recommendation on advocacy				
<p>In each country's next strategy development process, the country programmes should develop tangible evidence-based advocacy messages. Such messages would potentially strengthen:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VSO's contribution to removing root impediments, and to enhancing root facilitators to sustainable development. • VSO's image and influence in the various country-level development Sectors. 	Partially accepted	Advocacy and policy engagement work is a key part of VSO's Theory of Change, and we work towards ensuring it is embedded in all our strategies and programme design.	We will work to further systematically embed advocacy and policy engagement into our country strategies.	Ongoing

IPR2 Recommendation	Accepted/ Partially Accepted/ Rejected	Action already taken	Action to be taken	Target
Recommendations on partnership tools				
<p>VSO should ensure never to miss the initial tripartite meeting after the first three months of a placement [between the country office, programme partner and volunteer]. These meetings are crucial, as they review and could potentially redefine the placement. After this initial meeting, VSO should conduct at least biannual visits.</p>	Partly accepted	<p>Building relationships with volunteers and partners is central to the role of programme and project managers, and at the core of VSO practice in general. Regular monitoring visits and reviews are consistently conducted.</p>	<p>We will use VSO's annual volunteer survey to identify where this practice needs to be improved.</p>	January 2016
<p>As placement failure is often caused by discrepancies between the agendas and incentives of VSO and its partners, 'incentive mapping' should be a systematic and early step in a volunteer's placement. To map incentives and (hidden) agendas, most volunteers would require support and a few basic assessment tools.</p> <p><i>[continued below]</i></p>	Partly accepted	<p>Whilst some volunteers are highly effective at reading the power dynamics in relation to their work, the introduction of specific guidance and support will be beneficial.</p>	<p>VSO's training team is reviewing and updating pre-departure and in-country training and tools, to further support volunteers to understand the context within which they work.</p>	June 2015

IPR2 Recommendation	Accepted/ Partially Accepted/ Rejected	Action already taken	Action to be taken	Target
Recommendations on partnership tools (continued)				
<p>As part of VSO's risk mitigation, contracts with donor agencies must explicitly allow for disengagement from partners where volunteers do not stand a chance to achieve substantial progress. In the short run this may cause friction. In the long run this enhances VSO's effectiveness and strengthens the organisation's credibility in the eyes of donors and volunteers alike.</p>	<p>Partly accepted</p>	<p>VSO does maintain the legal right to disengage with implementing partners - as expressed in both our teaming agreements before an award is secured, and in sub-contract agreements.</p> <p>VSO maintains a direct line of communication with volunteers, to remain aware of the progress of their work so we can intervene if issues arise.</p>	<p>Across our full portfolio, we will work to better orientate volunteers within their funding context - the donor grant(s) they are attached to, or are critical to delivering. We will keep them updated on grant status throughout the grant cycle.</p> <p>To mitigate significant reputational risk, we need to further strengthen our partner assessments BEFORE we include them in a joint bid.</p> <p>We will compile a list of examples from country offices where this has compromised grant implementation, and record what was done.</p> <p>We will communicate guidance to all country offices and fundraising bid teams on the need to discuss this liability as part of proposal development and contract negotiations.</p>	<p>September 2016</p>

IPR2 Recommendation	Accepted/ Partially Accepted/ Rejected	Action already taken	Action to be taken	Target
Recommendations in relation to a shift in power in favour of the Global South				
<p>There is a shift in the power balance [in favour of the Global South] in which recipient countries and partners feel increasingly at liberty to scrutinise placements and partnerships. Implications for VSO are that, even more so than has been the case before:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> International volunteering should never be a costly form of labour market substitution. If a national can do the same job at the same quality and at lower costs, then the placement is inappropriate. Whenever considering international volunteer placements, VSO should make this assessment. Currently, this assessment is not a standard part of a project development process. <p><i>[continued below]</i></p>	Partially accepted	<p>We undertook review work to develop a more robust Volunteer Lifecycle (the complete timeline of a volunteer’s engagement with VSO), one that could be integrated into programme development. This introduced a programme needs/demand element, and removed the “finding a placement for a willing volunteer” mentality.</p> <p>The relevance and appropriateness of volunteering interventions is a key consideration in our programme cycle.</p>	<p>We will complete the work on programme design, tools and techniques for all programme teams to access (as part of the People First Programme Architecture work).</p> <p>We will improve volunteer-demand planning, including the deployment of tools on the Salesforce platform (<i>VSO Recruit</i> and <i>VSO People</i>).</p>	April 2015

IPR2 Recommendation	Accepted/ Partially Accepted/ Rejected	Action already taken	Action to be taken	Target
Recommendations in relation to a shift in power in favour of the Global South (continued)				
<p>VSO could align itself more to partners' systems and structures. For example, if a government's annual cycle starts at a different time to the UK cycle, VSO should embed its practice in the cycles of this partner, and not the other way around.</p>	Partially accepted	<p>Our partners' plans and requirements are one of VSO's primary considerations - for example, partners determine the arrival date of volunteers.</p>		
Recommendations on consortium dynamics				
<p>VSO increasingly operates in a funding environment where consortia are the norm. In consortium settings, the key risk is that VSO is seen to hold the HR function within the wider programme, and that its volunteers are essentially deployed to serve another organisation's agenda. If programme design is of poor quality, or if the lead organisation does not have sound monitoring and revisionary capacity, these volunteers will not be utilised in the best possible manner. To mitigate this risk, VSO should ensure that its role exceeds that of 'providing volunteers', and that the organisation plays an active role in any consortium's M&E processes.</p>	Partly accepted	<p>Strong shared programming is a key part of all VSO's consortium development practices; this is the cornerstone of our work when developing flagship frameworks and signature packages.</p> <p>VSO has established an internal bid matrix to help evaluate our positioning for bids, which includes reflection on the relative strength and strategic positioning of proposed partners. We have instituted a Top 10 Strategic Partner Engagement plan to coordinate our partnerships with key implementing partners.</p> <p><i>[continued below]</i></p>	<p>We will create an internal checklist to be completed when contemplating a joint implementation relationship. This will be utilised whether VSO is the lead partner or sub-partner in a consortium.</p> <p>We will sign at least 5 global MoUs by end of the 15/16 financial year.</p> <p>We will update the corporate capability statements with latest programme design thinking, which will emerge from the Flagship Framework processes.</p>	March 2016

IPR2 Recommendation	Accepted/ Partially Accepted/ Rejected	Action already taken	Action to be taken	Target
Recommendation on consortium dynamics (continued)				
		<p>By focusing on deeper relationships at global, regional and country levels with a targeted list of partners, we are able to negotiate Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), broad terms and ways of working that capitalise on VSO's core competencies.</p> <p>We have developed corporate capability statements and collateral materials to help articulate the value VSO brings to any consortium.</p>		