Second Independent Progress Review of VSO's Strategic Grant Agreement with DIFD

Final Report
9 January 2015
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VSO

The second independent progress review of VSO's strategic grant agreement with DFID

Final report, 29 January 2015
Willem van Eekelen

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Acronyms

AIDS	Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DFID	Department for International Development
EU	European Union
GIG	Global Income Growth (one of VSO's change trajectories)
GLT	Global Leadership Team
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
HR	Human Resources
I&A	Impact and Accountability
ICS	International Citizen Service
IEP	Impact and Effectiveness Programme (one of VSO's change trajectories)
IPR1	First Independent Progress Review
IPR2	Second Independent Progress Review
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MMW4P	Making Markets Work for the Poor
MPS	Malawi Prisons Service
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
P4C	Partnership for Change
PFPA	People First Programme Architecture
PIP	Performance Improvement Plan (one of VSO's change trajectories)
PNG	Papua New Guinea
PoP	Path of Partnership
PPA	Programme Partnership Arrangement
Q&P	Quality and Performance (one of VSO's change trajectories)
RHAISA	Regional Health and AIDS Initiative of Southern Africa
SGA	Strategic Grant Agreement
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VfM	Value for Money
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas
WWF	World Wildlife Fund

Executive summary

This is the second of two Independent Progress Reviews (IPRs) of DFID's four-year £100 million unrestricted Strategic Grant Agreement (SGA) with VSO. The IPR1 covered the period from the SGA start in 2010 until October 2012. The IPR2 covers the period from November 2012 until November 2014. For the sake of continuity and consistency of approach, DFID asked VSO to contract the same external consultant ('I', from now on) to conduct both IPRs. This report draws on the findings of both reviews, and covers the entire four year SGA period.

Overall conclusions

In the past four years, VSO has utilised a significant portion of its SGA funding to invest in a number of change trajectories. Collectively, these trajectories have had a significant and positive impact on VSO's identity, culture and focus, as well as on its underpinning processes, policies and systems. The investments and their positive impact have accelerated in the IPR2 period, and are likely to outlive the pain and frustration that rigorous change processes inevitably cause.

Despite the progress made, it remains insufficiently clear what sustainable impact VSO is achieving, and there is very little evidence that VSO's innovative work is being replicated and scaled up by other stakeholders. In the next few years, VSO should consolidate its new systems and processes; more fully utilise the data it is gathering; strengthen its impact focus; and more thoroughly assess and communicate its achievements.

The sections below summarise the IPR2 findings in relation to each of the issues covered in the intervention logic of DFID's PPA-related Theory of Change.

VSO's programme-related evidence

In 2012, both the SGA logframe and the data that fed into this logframe were weak, and VSO had only just started to develop its M&E capacity. Then, in the past two years, VSO has invested heavily in its M&E function.

Among the results are an SGA logframe that is much stronger than the 2012 version had been, and the introduction of a data protocol that improved VSO's data quality (and that vastly reduced the number of reported beneficiaries.) This data protocol is supported by an internal data quality assurance system and an external data verification system, both of which require further development. The organisation is increasingly utilising its data to strengthen programme delivery, and its internal and external evaluations are no longer limited to, or exclusively inspired by, donor requirements.

Building on this progress, organisation-wide consultations could further strengthen VSO's data protocol, and VSO could more systematically utilise the insights provided by better data and evaluation findings. When planning for future evaluations, VSO could usefully prioritise post-closure evaluations ('what results are still visible five years after a programme ended?') and long term evaluations ('what have been the lasting results of 50 years of work with this ministry?'). Such evaluations, more than the standard mid-term and end-of-project evaluations, would enable VSO to identify the types of VSO work that 'work best.'

Accountability

At the time of the IPR1, large parts of VSO's reporting to DFID were vague, incorrect, unverifiable, exaggerated or misleading. Since the 2012-13 annual SGA report, this is no longer the case. DFID acknowledges this: "The [2012-13] report is more relevant, logical, focussed and gives a better picture of what VSO is doing and where. It is also easier to read, more technical and is overall a more professional report than that submitted last year."

Internal accountability has improved as well. Specifically:
- It has become easier for functions to be accountable, as it is clearer what these functions are accountable *for*.
- Strengthened data facilitate the verification of accountabilities, and such verification is happening more regularly.

In the coming period, VSO should prioritise its accountability towards the people and communities that VSO seeks to support and empower, so that:
- Focus communities and people know their rights and entitlements, have access to relevant information, and participate in decisions that affect them. Currently, this is not consistently the case.
- Focus communities and people have access to safe and responsive complaint mechanisms. I have not seen evidence that this is currently the case in any of VSO's programmes.

Value for money

The IPR1 report stated that "VSO's performance [in the field of Value for Money] is inconsistent, and not systematically monitored and documented." This has improved. In the course of this assessment, I have come across achievements in each of the 4Es. Specifically:

Economy. By far the biggest gain has been the move of VSO's Head Office from London to much more affordable premises in Kingston.

Efficiency. VSO's biggest gain has been VSO's closure of a number of offices, as a few substantial country programmes are likely to be more efficient than a large number of smaller country programmes. However:
- As a percentage of overall income, the 2010 and 2014 salary costs are roughly the same. This is unexpected and probably unnecessary, considering the various efficiency gains. It is also at odds with VSO's stated aim of working towards reducing the salary costs as a percentage of overall income.
- VSO would benefit from a formalisation and streamlining of a range of internal processes.

Effectiveness. During three brief country visits I have seen work that has been successful and inspiring; work that does not appear to be achieving anything at all; and work that is somewhere in the middle. At the moment, VSO has no evidence-based insight in the distribution of its programmes across this effectiveness spectrum.

The incomplete evidence I have gathered during the IPR1 and IPR2 processes suggests that VSO performs particularly well in areas where:

- VSO utilises its international volunteers to introduce country-level innovations that are strongly aligned with the interests of key decision-makers; provided that
- these innovations cannot be sabotaged by those with conflicting agendas; and that

- these innovations solve problems that are obvious and immediate, in ways that simplify or enrich rather than complicate the lives of the people who need to use the solution.

Equity. Some of VSO's work focuses explicitly and deliberately on the priorities of the most disadvantaged people and communities, but this does not (yet) happen consistently across all programmes. As a first step towards a more equity-focused programme portfolio, VSO should assess and be explicit about the equity implications of its programme choices. Currently, VSO does not systematically conduct this type of analysis.

Sustainability

Achieving sustainability is core to the philosophy of VSO, and volunteers go quite out of their way to maximise the potential for sustainability of results. And it is possible, too, as is illustrated by the incorporation of an HIV function within the staff structure of the Malawi Prisons System and today's teacher payment method in Cambodia.

Still, evidence that confirms the sustainability of VSO's impact is largely anecdotal. This is partly because not all work *has* sustainable impact (or at least partners I interviewed were rarely able to identify sustained improvements that previous volunteers had effected) and partly because VSO has never yet truly *assessed* the sustainability of the impact of its work.

Partnerships

VSO's approach to partnerships has changed in the course of the past decade. Seasoned volunteers and longstanding counterparts both see a strengthened sense of purpose to VSO deployments, and a better use of networks. In the best cases, this sense of purpose gives VSO credibility and influence, and enables the organisation to engage with stakeholders from the districts to the highest levels of national authority.

However, there is a countertrend as well. VSO's change trajectories and increasing reliance on restricted programme funding mean that VSO country offices face heavier and more diverse pressures than they have faced in the past. First, the sheer number of voices has increased. There used to be a partner and a head office. Now, there are also increasingly vocal host governments, regional offices, and a multitude of donor agencies. Second, the work is subject to guidance documents and manuals that are no longer easy to ignore. As a consequence, partnerships in general and the monitoring of volunteer placements in particular receive less attention than they have received in the past. In some countries, partners have very little contact with VSO, beyond the individual volunteers who have been placed with these partners.

In the next phase, VSO should shift its focus back to its relations with volunteers and partners. Minimum monitoring tools such as placement reviews after three months and biannual partner visits should never be skipped. These tools can make or break volunteer placements, which continue to be the fundamental building blocks of VSO's programmes and overall performance.

Learning

The IPR1 report noted that: "VSO has […] all the usual learning tools and systems such as staff surveys, appraisal processes […], some sector benchmarking, learning retreats and training. In addition, intensive learning underpinned a change programme that was fuelled by research, pro bono corporate support and new people with new fields of expertise and ideas." These observations still apply.

In addition, VSO has invested in a few new learning initiatives. The most prominent of these initiatives is the very participatory 'People First Programme Architecture' (PFPA). This initiative has achieved remarkable results:

- Within VSO Africa in particular (where the first PFPA workshops have taken place), PFPA has created a broad awareness of and consensus on VSO's direction of travel. I had seen no such awareness and consensus during the IPR1.
- PFPA links in with both VSO's fundraising (through the identification of flagship focus areas) and M&E functions, and has given direction to both.
- PFPA addresses two key organisational weaknesses which are that, traditionally:
    - Volunteers and local staff have considerable freedom to design their work but few opportunities to contribute to and benefit from organisational learning; and
    - VSO guidance has often been produced centrally, with limited local involvement in the development process and few grassroots-level incentives to actually utilise this guidance. Such centrally-produced guidance has often been ignored.

Innovation

VSO's key asset may well be its ability to bring new and helpful ideas to countries, and show their usefulness. I have come across several examples of a partner's uptake of such innovative ideas.

VSO's most impressive innovations amount to 'development shortcuts.' Such shortcuts do not *overcome* but, to an extent, *bypass* multiple and mutually reinforcing constraints. VSO's tablet-based learning programme in Malawi's primary education is a good example of this. This programme has the potential of making a positive difference, even in schools that suffer from large class sizes, low teacher motivation and abilities, non-interactive teaching approaches, an inability to work productively with diverse learning abilities, and all sorts of other challenges that many schools around the world are struggling with. In essence, teacher competency will never be *irrelevant*, but tablet-based learning is *less* dependent on competent teachers than traditional school-based forms of learning.
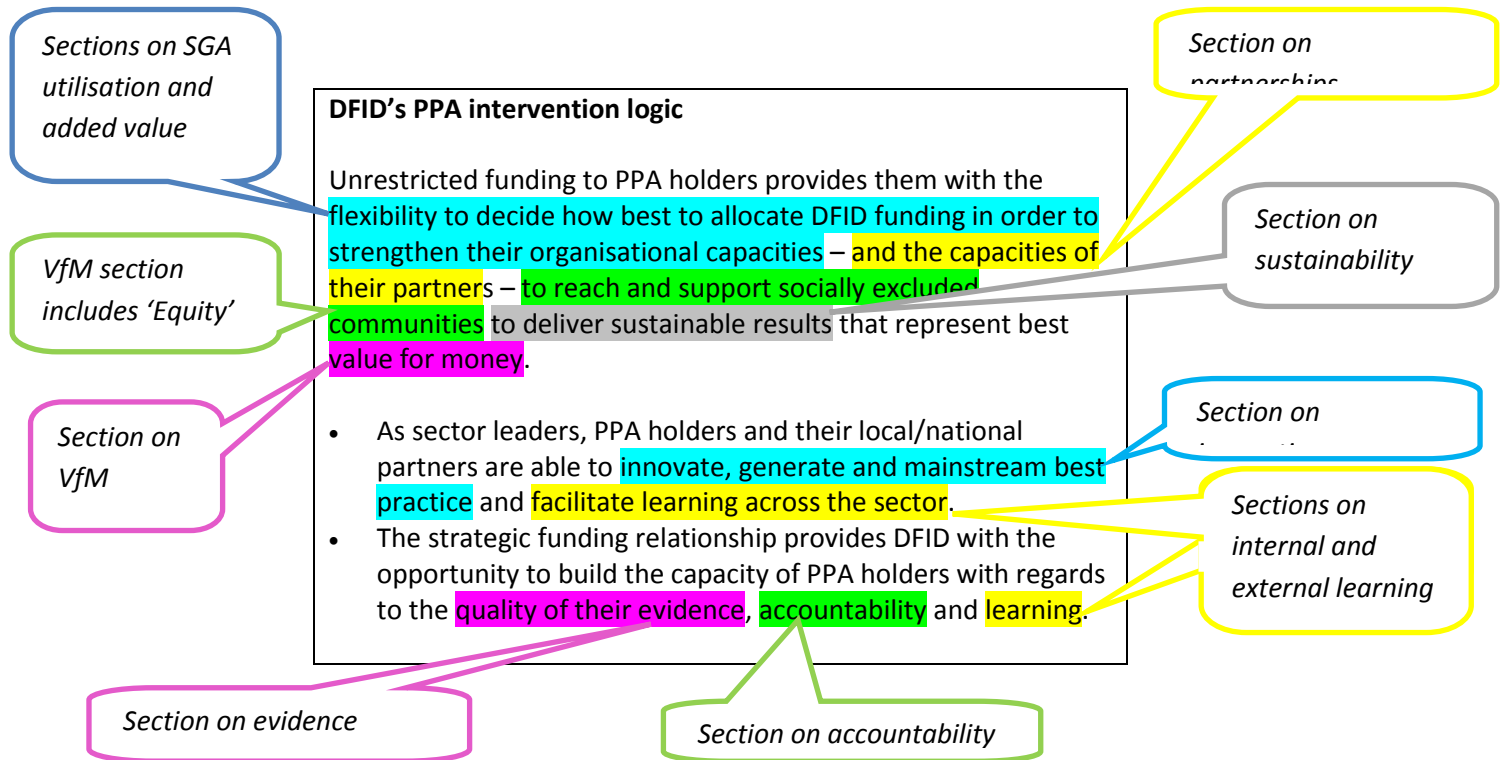
As VSO is too small to bring useful innovation to scale by itself, its ability to innovate is most powerful if VSO is able to inspire other stakeholders to replicate and scale up VSO's innovative practices. I have not come across examples where this has happened. However, I *have* seen a growing awareness of VSO's potential as an innovator, and of efforts to increase the visibility of VSO's work through conferences, publications and a range of other mediums. Such initiatives are not new, within VSO, but they are increasingly *encouraged* rather than *permitted*. When it is time to conduct the final Independent Progress Review, it will be clear whether this enhanced visibility leads to replication of VSO's innovative practices.

The role of SGA funding

For VSO, the SGA grant continues to be crucially important. This funding is being used to cover a broad range of costs (e.g. overhead costs, change trajectories, new functions such as fundraising and M&E, programme costs and pilots). Throughout the past decades, VSO's very existence depended on DFID's unrestricted contributions. This may no longer be the case, but without SGA VSO would certainly look very different and be very much smaller.

Introduction

This second Independent Progress Review (IPR2) covers the period from the start of the SGA in 2010, until November 2014, with an emphasis on the past two years. Its structure is inspired by the intervention logic of DFID's PPA-related Theory of Change.

Sections on SGA utilisation and added value

Section on partnerships

VfM section includes 'Equity'

Section on sustainability

Section on VfM

DFID's PPA intervention logic

Unrestricted funding to PPA holders provides them with the flexibility to decide how best to allocate DFID funding in order to strengthen their organisational capacities – and the capacities of their partners – to reach and support socially excluded communities to deliver sustainable results that represent best value for money.

- As sector leaders, PPA holders and their local/national partners are able to innovate, generate and mainstream best practice and facilitate learning across the sector.
- The strategic funding relationship provides DFID with the opportunity to build the capacity of PPA holders with regards to the quality of their evidence, accountability and learning.

Section on innovation

Sections on internal and external learning

Section on evidence

Section on accountability

Most of these sections report considerable progress. This progress is partly the outcome of change processes that had started well before IPR1,[1] and partly the consequence of work done once the IPR1 report had given the need for change a stronger sense of urgency and inevitability, and a somewhat different focus.

The organisation has achieved this progress, in part, through a number of demanding change trajectories. When interviewing VSO staff, each of these trajectories received a combination of praise and criticism. Most people recognise achievements, but also feel considerable 'change fatigue' ("we are up to our nose in change programmes"). This fatigue is partly caused by delays,[2] going around in circles[3] and occasional isolation,[4] but *mostly* it has been the consequence of the sheer depth and multidimensionality of VSO's change processes.

For somebody who left VSO in October 2012 and returned two years later, it is obvious that:

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[1] As noted in that IPR1 report: "VSO is midway through an ambitious and multidimensional change process […]. This change process already achieved significant progress, and many other improvements are imminent."

[2] Such as the volunteer cycle platform (delays were already noted in IPR1 – see its footnote 42 - and continued beyond that) and the Impact and Effectiveness Programme.

[3] This applies to VSO's positioning in relation to Value for Money in particular – a challenge that VSO shares with many PPA holders.

[4] As in the case of the initial stages of the development of VSO's data protocol.

- The massive investments in these change trajectories, on the side of VSO, its staff and its leadership, have had a significant and positive impact on VSO's identity, culture and focus, as well as on its underpinning processes, policies and systems.
- In several cases, processes that some staff members considered to be unnecessarily lengthy and convoluted were in fact exactly what VSO needed.
- This impact is likely to outlive the pain and frustration caused by the change trajectories, and by the initial sting of the 2012 IPR1 report.

This report assesses VSO's organisational capacity, its programme work, and the line of sight from the one to the other. It concludes that the evidence that underpins VSO's work and VSO's overall accountability have both improved significantly (chapters 1 and 2). This made it much easier than it had been during the IPR1 to assess VSO's Value for Money (chapter 3) and the sustainability of VSO's impact (chapter 4). The report then explores VSO's changing approach to partnerships (chapter 5), its various learning mechanisms (chapter 6) and its role as an innovator (chapter 7). Lastly, the report considers the utilisation and added value of SGA funding (chapter 8).

I agree with the often-expressed conviction that "the last thing we need is another 'to do' list," and was relieved to find that the IPR2 recommendations are far less dramatic than the IPR1 recommendations had been.

1. VSO's programme-related evidence

Data

In the past two years, VSO has strengthened its data-related work very significantly. Nowadays:

- The logframe is much stronger than the 2012 version had been.[5] Some of the remaining problems are unsolvable and are caused by the fundamental inappropriateness of the concept of a global logframe for an organisation such as VSO.[6]
- Programme data are more robust and more consistently defined, and they are underpinned by a global data protocol. This has been an impressive achievement, and one that dramatically reduced the organisation's number of beneficiaries. VSO Uganda, for example, presented an overall country programme's 'reach' number in 2013-14 that was a mere 6% of what it had been the previous year.[7]

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[5] At the time of the IPR1, VSO was struggling with a series of chanceless revisions of a fundamentally weak and problematic logframe. This logframe was populated with data that were not defined, inconsistent, occasionally untraceable, and used for reporting purposes only. Populating the logframe was a purely London-based affair.

[6] See the IPR1 report for an analysis of these fundamental conceptual problems. See also Acker, M. (December 2013) *Review of DFID M&E data collection and reporting*, for a good internal overview of these same issues. Two key observations from the latter document are that "we still add up numbers which may not be comparable" and that "the logframe output indicators assume that more is better [but] as VSO works in more difficult locations the output indicators levels will likely decrease."

[7] In 2012-13, VSO "reached 1,840,327 ultimate beneficiaries" (VSO Uganda Annual Report, April 2012-March 2013, page 4.) In 2013-14, VSO was able to "Reach 113,744 ultimate beneficiaries." (VSO Uganda - Annual Report FY13-14 - Mango Tree draft 1 MO, page 4.)

- VSO undergoes an annual independent verification of a random sample of data, which confirms that VSO's data are improving year-on-year.
- There is broad awareness, within country offices and elsewhere, of both the logframe and the data protocol. Conversations with programme staff and country directors no longer focus on the *desirability* of a global data protocol, as was the case in 2012, but on the *actual definitions within* that protocol.
- VSO has begun to actually *use* its data, for purposes other than reporting. This is not yet obvious to everybody within the organisation,[8] but:
  - Country offices are using data to redesign elements of their programmes;[9]
  - Country and regional offices are using quarterly data to frame their conversations about the country offices' support needs; and
  - Country programmes with comparable programmes compare data, and visit each other, in order to identify good and replicable practice.[10]

This progress has enabled VSO to strengthen its accountability. Next steps could be as follows:

Situation	However	Possible next steps
VSOs' reporting is based on a global data protocol. This is a step change for VSO and means that, potentially, the indicators of an education programme in Ghana and Nepal are measured in broadly similar terms.	In these initial stages of protocol development, VSO's Impact and Accountability group have developed this protocol without organisation-wide consultations. Programme staff in country offices sometimes mentioned that the implication is that the current protocol does not yet suit VSO as well as it could.	Improving the data protocol would require organisation-wide consultations. These consultations would amount to a significant investment, and would reduce the longitudinal comparability of data. VSO and DFID should jointly decide if the advantages outweigh the drawbacks, and are worth the investment.
Independent annual verification of a random sample of data confirmed that VSO's data have strengthened very considerably since 2012.[11]	The verification was based on process-focused interviews with partners. The consultants have not reviewed the protocol, and have not engaged in any data tracing or sample-based double-	Following a bottom-up revision of the protocol, further training on protocol adherence will bring the percentage of protocol-compliant reporting closer to 100%.

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[8] In a number of interviews, VSO staff said things along the lines of 'we are not actually *using* our data yet' and 'we are mostly gathering these data for the purpose of reporting only.' This lack of confidence was also apparent when a group of VSO staff reviewed the results of one of the change streams: in a document titled *Strengthening existing M&E – learning and recommendations – June 2014*, a conclusion was that using "data for its own use in improving future programmes […] is clearly not happening at the moment" (page 3.)]

[9] The country reports in the annexes provide a number of examples of this.

[10] Such as the neonatal programmes of Tanzania, Ethiopia and Uganda (with Malawi now getting involved in these exchanges as well.)

[11] The step change was from 2012 to 2013, when VSO moved from largely meaningless data to data based on protocol. The next change was from 2013 to 2014, when "Jigsaw found that, between two consecutive years, the percentage of partners that had submitted data of sufficient quality had increased from 52 to 84%." (Performance Improvement Plan DFID - 1 May 2014, page 7.) Note that this is an exaggeration: Jigsaw mostly tested whether partners "highlighted a process that had been carried out in accordance with the VSO guidelines" (see Jigsaw's 2013 report, page 4), which does not inevitably amount to 'data of sufficient quality.'

	checking.	**Recommendation** The external data verification could be strengthened considerably by introducing data tracing and sample-based double-checking.

M&E

At the time of IPR1, evaluations were the exception rather than the norm. The team found very little evidence that could help us understand what did and did not work well, in VSO's programmes. VSO did not yet employ any country-specific or regional M&E persons (neither project-funded or as core staff) and had only recently established a small M&E unit in London. There was no overview of evaluations, no M&E strategy, and no system through which an evaluation of Programme X could be of benefit to Programme Y or the wider organisation. We could not find a single post-closure evaluation (e.g. 'what results are still visible five years after a programme ended?'), or a single long term evaluation (e.g. 'what has been the sustained impact of 50 years of work with this ministry?'), conducted at any point in VSO's existence. VSO's Corporate Business Plan mentioned M&E a few times[12] and stated that VSO would "strengthen monitoring and evaluation capacity across the organisation",[13] but did not provide any details.

In November 2014, the situation is very different.

In the current Corporate Business Plan, M&E is clearly a priority: the first element of the first strategic direction starts by saying that "to deliver against our development objectives and to build programmes of quality we need to significantly improve our monitoring and evaluation (M&E) capabilities over the next two years. It is also clear that our future partnership with DFID and other key institutional donors depends on this."[14]

The plan states that VSO has "invested significantly in our M&E processes throughout 2013/14, and will continue to do so over the next three years." This is in part because of VSO's ambition to grow institutional funding, which is "dependent on M&E investment so that [the] organisation can demonstrate impact."[15] VSO is ambitious and not focused on "merely 'catching up' with others in the sector, but 'leapfrogging' forward to become a leading organisation."[16] By 2017, if all goes to plan, "VSO's programme quality is built on a culture of evidence and learning, supported by rigorous systems."[17] VSO accepts the far-reaching implications of the need to strengthen its M&E, including a reduction of its geographical presence: "As we aim to increase the effectiveness of our programmes, as well as invest in our monitoring and evaluation of these programmes, we will need to move to a smaller and more sustainable number of country

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[12] This was an improvement to the version of the year before, which had not given M&E any attention at all, except for a brief mention in the risk register, and the observation, on page 5, that "objectives […] will be monitored and reported annually."

[13] Corporate Business Plan from April 2012 until March 2015, fourth and last point of section 5.3 on 'Policy and Advocacy focus', on page 11.

[14] The Corporate Business Plan from April 2014 until March 2017, page 16.

[15] Ibid, page 38.

[16] Ibid, page 9.

[17] Ibid, page 12.

offices."[18] Other documents provide detailed plans to make it all happen. The investment is very considerable: VSO has recruited for a range of new functions (I understand there to be 10 full time M&E staff in the Impact and Accountability team, at the time of writing), and has allocated sizeable budgets[19] and a *lot* of time[20] of the organisation's management and leadership, to strengthen its M&E work.

The result of these various investments is that VSO's has strengthened its evaluative practice. Specifically: VSO has explicitly and deliberately learned from failed work,[21] built M&E-related staff capacity, and arranged a number of external evaluations over and beyond the ones required by donor contracts. During country visits, I have come across a number of good-quality evaluations (that VSO's Kingston Office does not always seem to be aware of) and an attitude that was much more M&E-friendly than what the IPR1 had found in 2012.

Other parts of the M&E agenda have seen less progress. With one or two exceptions,[22] VSO has not yet concluded post-closure or long term evaluations. Moreover, VSO has evaluated neither many of its most impressive successes[23] nor its mystery failures, and has not met the commitments made in the various country strategies.[24] Some of VSO's recent evaluations have been weak,[25] and one key evaluation was terminated prematurely.[26] Because VSO has not yet moved decisively on all IPR1's M&E recommendations, three of them re-appear in the recommendations below.

M&E-related progress is likely to accelerate in the coming period, because:

- Over time, the various changes in systems, processes and staffing are going to be accompanied by *cultural* change, which typically takes longer to achieve but which could eventually be a significant push factor.

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[18] Ibid, page 15.

[19] Page 12 of *Impact and Effectiveness Project Initiation Documentation V1* reports that, in the past two years, VSO's annual M&E budget has been in excess of £600k, with another £600k[+] for the closely related 'Impact and Effectiveness' budget.

[20] The document titled *Impact and Effectiveness Project Initiation Documentation V1* provides an overview of M&E-related 'leads' and 'suppliers,' and the time allocated to various M&E-related tasks. The total number of days per week that are expected to be dedicated to M&E related work is very significant: 7 staff members of the level of Regional Director and above are expected to dedicate a total of 13 days per week to work that is broadly related to M&E and accountability (see page 13).

[21] The failure of the Bangladesh evaluation led to an exercise that aimed to learn from this failure and to strengthen the way VSO contracted and managed external evaluators.

[22] Specifically: VSO has conducted an internal evaluation following the closure of the Mongolia office, and is in the process of conducting a post-closure evaluation of some of its work in Sri Lanka.

[23] Exceptions are the evaluations of VSO's Making Markets Work for the Poor and of VSO's CPD work in health. The reason that VSO has not yet evaluated more impressive successes, or any mystery failures, is that VSO's country offices did not identify programmes in either group – which illustrates the previous point about cultural change lagging behind changes in systems, processes and staffing.

[24] The Uganda strategy, for example, promises that 'our monitoring and evaluation plans [are] developed annually' – but in reality there are no such plans. Other country strategies make other M&E promises which are similarly unmet (see also footnote **Error! Bookmark not defined.**.)

[25] The regional RAISA evaluation was particularly weak. Essentially, it remains unclear what the report based many of its findings on. To a large extent, this 'evaluation' was little more than a series of unsubstantiated statements. . (See, for detailed feedback, the documents titled *Evaluation of VSO RAISA, GM, undated, with comments WvE, 130618*, *Review of RAISA evaluation, 130620*, and *Review of RAISA evaluation, 130723*.)

[26] On VSO's governance work in Bangladesh, because of the substandard nature of the evaluator's work.

- In the two years after the conclusion of IPR1, turnover in the management of the Impact and Accountability Team has been high and recruitment has sometimes been slow. By January 2015, this may no longer be a problem.
- VSO's evaluation strategy has only very recently been finalised and this, together with a new Head of the M&E team, may provide a stronger sense of direction.
- In the past two years, the organisation has not just been finding its way in the difficult field of M&E, but has been doing so whilst facing strong DFID pressure to prioritise the development of its strengthening of data capturing systems and processes over other parts of its M&E. In recent times, this pressure has become less intense.

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Recommendations on M&E
- 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:

  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 used to learn from and could serve the purpose of strengthening VSO's policy contributions and marketing material.
  3. 'Mystery failures.' This could provide a deeper understanding of the variables that make or break VSO's programmes.

- In the past period, VSO's Regional M&E Managers have spent much of their time training and advising people in country offices. This has been useful and appreciated. In the next few years, these 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.

- Evaluations are most useful if VSO learns from and acts upon their findings. Currently, there is not always a management response to evaluation reports; VSO does not always follow up on recommendations; and post-evaluation action plans are not always incorporated in wider action plans (and therefore risk being forgotten about.)

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2. Accountability[27]

The structure of this section reflects the relative importance of each type of accountability. It starts with downward accountability because an organisation that aims to address poverty is first and foremost accountable to those who are poor. This is reflected in the title of VSO's strategy: *People First.* The actual *attention* that the organisation pays to each type of accountability is the very opposite: VSO has invested a *lot* of time, money and energy to its accountability towards DFID, and to the various internal accountabilities, but is not yet systematically thinking about the downward accountability systems and processes that should underpin its in-country work.

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[27] I follow conventional definitions but note that I do not think that people and communities that projects aim to support and empower are in any way 'downward', or that donor agencies would be in any way 'upward.'

'Downward' accountability

VSO acknowledges the importance of engagement of and accountability towards its target communities. This is clearest in the 2012-15 strategy for Malawi, which states that:

1. "We will strongly engage with the targeted communities particularly women, children and youth to strengthen their capacity and their voice to demand and access […] services."
2. "We will be accountable to beneficiaries by ensuring they actively participate in planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of VSO's programme in Malawi."
3. "We will regularly share programme lessons and information with beneficiaries in their own languages. We will also establish community based Complaint and Response Mechanisms to enable programme beneficiaries to feedback on programme quality as well as report on any abuse of power by VSO staff or partner's staff."
4. "We will print the Annual Report of VSO Malawi including the annual budget and expenditure (not the detailed one) and share it widely with programme beneficiaries and other stakeholders in a simplified version (in local languages where appropriate)."[28]

In Malawi and elsewhere, I have seen evidence of work that incorporates the first two of these commitments in particular (see the text box).

Text box: Downward accountability in the Ntcheu Integrated Maternal Health Project

This maternal health project uses the CARE International score cards in a three day exercise. On the first day, VSO conducts separate sessions for health facility staff and community groups. Each group identifies what is working well and what is not working well for them, in terms of both the health services and the VSO's awareness-raising work. VSO then groups the issues and, upon return on the next day, asks people to score the different groups of issues on the basis of perceived importance. Then, on the third day, VSO is joined by a representative of the District Health Office and gets the community and health services groups together to discuss the issues and take them forward.

The result is a series of commitments, a timeline, and a person who is responsible for each issue. Fulfilling some of the commitments would mean a step change in the accessibility of health services. For example, in response to the reported difficulty that women faced to go to the antenatal clinic, a nurse agreed to visit villages once a month. One of the positives was, unsurprisingly, the level of empowerment that women felt they had.

More in general, where VSO's work takes the shape of the provision of distinct services, service users generally know the eligibility criteria. They also know what their entitlements are, and they find it easy to identify which of these entitlements are and are not being realised. Of the few service delivery programmes I have seen, this was most obviously true in the case of Uganda's informal vocational training programme.

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[28] The first quote is from page 18 of the 2012-15 VSO Malawi strategy. The other three quotes are all from page 25 of that same strategy.

Next steps could be the introduction of entitlement-enforcing systems, the systematic sharing of programme achievements, and truly participatory M&E (other than the common use of focus group discussions).

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Recommendation 7

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 case of VSO programmes that work on the basis of eligibility criteria and entitlements, this means that, at least:

- 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.[29]

Once VSO has built credibility in this field, the organisation will be in a better position to support the accountability systems of its partners.

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Internal accountability

In early 2014, Deloitte assessed the extent to which VSO's 'Quality and Performance' (Q&P) change programme had achieved "clear and consistent accountabilities, responsibilities and matrix management arrangements." Deloitte noted progress and presented a number of recommendations. I did not reassess the Q&P work but did note the two fields of significant progress:

1. It has become easier for functions to be accountable, as it is clearer what these functions are accountable *for*. To give just a few of many examples, and focusing on the finance function:

- There is now an updated and regularly refined audit manual. In addition, there is a self-audit manual, which some Country Directors have used and which prevents problems to continue undetected until VSO's internal auditors arrive.
- There is now a single finance manual, rather than a series of finance-related policy documents.
- VSO has recently rolled out a new finance system that, after considerable investments in the connectivity of country offices, significant improved the real time availability and reliability of financial information from around the world.

Other functions have seen similar progress, or (as is the case with the important issue of donor contract management) are currently working on it. The result is that functions are underpinned by anchors, guidance and reference points - hitherto largely absent or ignored - that outline what exactly people and functions are accountable *for*. Some of these documents have been

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[29] These two bullet points roughly equate to commitments 4 and 5 of the Core Humanitarian Standard, which has been launched on 12 December 2014, and which replaces the HAP Standard on Accountability and Quality that I would previously have referred to.

developed in the course of many painful months of committee meetings,[30] but this has had its advantages too: VSO has a history of guidance documents that are not in fact *used*,[31] and this risk is reduced by developing these guidance documents with a range of stakeholders – however much more convoluted the development process might be as a consequence.

2. Strengthened data facilitate the verification of accountabilities, and such verification is happening more regularly. Because VSO gathers data much more systematically than it has done in the past, and because the quality of a large portion of these data has improved very significantly, it has become easier to verify things. This progress is particularly noticeable in, but not limited to, VSO's programme work. Valuable examples from other functions include:

- The step change in VSO's internal audit systems and processes. They have increased in number[32] and quality, and there is much more systematic follow up on recommendations (see the text box in the 'Learning' section for some detail).
- The volunteer cycle platform, which automatically generates volunteer-related data that were, in the past, gathered on a piecemeal basis (and that were sometimes plainly incorrect).[33] These data are not merely gathered: they are also analysed and utilised, and this will probably resolve a number of bottleneck issues that are now much easier to identify.[34]
- The London office move, which was followed by a staff survey that generated suggestions that VSO followed up on and reported back on. Staff appreciated the survey initiative, the measures subsequently taken, and the feedback provided. VSO could learn from this experience in other parts of its internal communication.

> **Observation**
> Internal communications is insufficiently prioritised, in these times of rapid change. This shows in conversations (i.e. people feel insufficiently in the loop) and is illustrated in the risk register of VSO's Impact and Effectiveness Programme, in which the only risk with a 'low' impact is the risk

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[30] Such as the Agreement Management Form and the proposal development process document (*Africa Proposal Development Manual_Oct2013*, now bypassed by the *proposal development flow* document, and by the *AFT operational manual*).

[31] IPR1 mentioned the Path for Partnership and the procurement manual as two illustrations of the disconnect between guidance and practice.

Number of internal country office audits 2003-2015

[32]
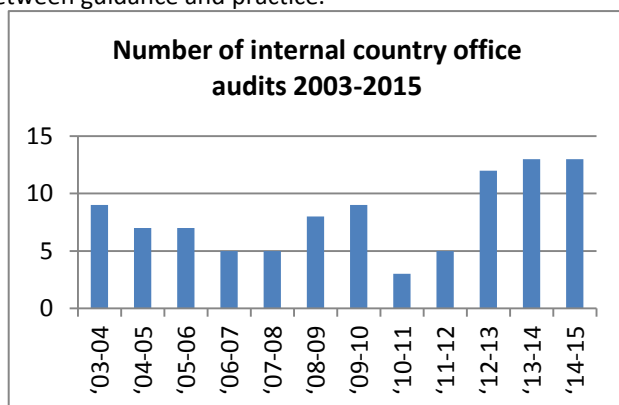
[33] An example provided in the IPR1 report was related to early return rates (i.e. in Papua New Guinea, the reported early return rate was 28%, versus an actual early return rate of 43% - see the IPR1's footnote 305 for the calculation.)

[34] Such as the bottlenecks in education-related recruitments, where the requests tend to be issued at a time at which education specialists are not looking for opportunities (in other words: demand and supply are being sparked by very different stages of the school year.)

that *"we do not communicate internally in a timely and consistent manner."* The risk owner is the Internal Communications Manager, who is of less senior grade than any of the other risk owners.

'Upward' accountability

On finances
Now, in 2014, all this is much clearer, and information is much more readily available. In the process, VSO has become fully IATI compliant.[35]

On programme work
Following rather critical IPR1 observations in relation to VSO's accountability towards DFID,[36] VSO stated, in an internal document, that "given the size of the task facing VSO, over the next 12 months we need to prioritise work which most readily enables us to move [from a 'poor performing organisation' to a 'well performing organisation']; this may involve some de-prioritisation and re-ordering of other projects within the programme or of business as usual tasks."[37]

One consequence of VSO's reprioritisation was that VSO's SGA reports for 2013 and 2014 were significantly better than the 2012 report had been. The organisation had moved from an 'all is well' report to reports that provide genuine overviews of the type of 'this is what we did well; this is what we did not do well; this is what we just do not know because of flaws in our data collection and analysis systems; and these will be our next steps.' DFID acknowledged VSO's progress in its response to the 2013 report, which starts by saying that "I would like to congratulate VSO for submitting a significantly higher quality narrative report than last year (although the quality isn't completely consistent). The report is more relevant, logical, focussed and gives a better picture of what VSO is doing and where. It is also easier to read, more technical and is overall a more professional report than that submitted last year. We appreciate how much effort VSO have put into this."[38]

VSO reports no longer systematically over-claim achievements.[39] Moreover, the 2012-13 report in particular is very clear on its own limitations, and the limitations of the organisation's data

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[35] And *over*-compliant in a few areas. For details, see page 109 of the 2013-14 annual SGA report and the subsequent VSO-DFID correspondence on the issue.

[36] The IPR1 report noted that large parts of VSO's reporting to DFID were vague, incorrect, unverifiable, or exaggerated. Some parts were, perhaps not deliberate but nonetheless, misleading. Much of this was caused by logframe weaknesses and data flaws, but it was also the consequence of poor report planning, and of the isolation and lack of seniority of the staff involved in the reporting. In the summer of 2012, DFID objected to VSO's reporting quality.

[37] *Worksheet in Impact and Effectiveness Project Initiation Documentation V1*, sheet titled 'introduction.'

[38] Jo Cooke (16 August 2013) *Feedback on VSO's 2012-13 SGA annual report*, page 1. On page 5, the same letter says that "[…] this is a significantly improved report. VSO are clearly headed in the right direction in terms of your ability to demonstrate development impact, but you still have a considerable way to go on this journey."

[39] There are still a few examples of over-claiming. To give just one very obvious example (and in the debriefing to the Steering Committee I have provided a few more): it is an exaggeration to assume that "More than 5,000 young people […] have become more assertive and aware of their community needs, as well as what role they can play in addressing local issues," simply because they "have taken part in active citizenship related activities – such as community peace day events and sanitation drives" (*2013/2014 VSO SGA report*, page 70).

gathering practices. In the light of this progress, DFID's request to get an external consultant to prepare the 2013-14 report was unnecessary and disempowering.[40]

I have not had the benefit of even a single conversation with a VSO counterpart within DFID, but VSO believes that the relationship with DFID has improved considerably in the course of the past year, and has moved on from an almost singular focus on reporting quality to other things.[41] This progress is attributed, in part, to VSO's much-strengthened reporting.[42]

Recommendations on SGA reporting

For the remaining two years, I recommend the following:

- Because VSO has strengthened its reporting capacity and underpinning evidence very considerably, there is no need for VSO's annual SGA reports to be written by an external consultant.
- DFID's guidance and instructions need to be clear, unambiguous and in writing. In the past period, VSO has spent too much time second-guessing what DFID wanted, only to be corrected later. (I note that this has not happened in recent times, and that perhaps this recommendation is no longer relevant.)
- DFID's request to change the logframe targets mid-cycle (i.e. in January 2014) has led to the duplication of work and has demoralised staff around the world.[43] In the future, significant changes should be requested to be made in the *next* annual round rather than halfway an *existing* one.
- In the coming period, VSO should be at liberty to set its own priorities. These priorities are likely to overlap only partly with the Performance Improvement Plan (PIP).

Observations

- The past two years have seen a strong emphasis on policies, processes and systems related to data measurement, documentation and reporting. This has come at the cost of focus on actual programming. This was temporary and inevitable, and the result is a better-equipped organisation that is now shifting its focus towards actually *utilising* data to strengthen programme quality.[44]

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[40] Though it did add credibility to the 'A' grade that this report awarded VSO, which DFID has accepted. This was quite an important achievement, and one on which the SGA continuation was said to depend.

[41] Most recently, VSO submitted its 'VSO discussion paper on the future of international civil society organisations (ICSOs) and the role of citizens and voluntary action (September 2014).' This was upon DFID's request: "[Nick Dyer] would welcome a paper from VSO on […] VSO's vision in 5-10 years time and how we expect to evolve, the specific added value of a volunteer organisation in today's world, including our perceived value of unrestricted funding from DFID." (*2014-15 VSO IEP Report for the IB (June) – Final*, presented at the International Board Meeting of July 2014, page 5.)

[42] Other contributors mentioned are the seriousness with which VSO has considered DFID's views and VSO's increased participation in 'the right events.'

[43] "Whilst nothing could be done with regards to the timing as this was a DFID request, it was difficult for Country Offices to comply in a timely manner to this request as January is typically one of their busiest months" (document titled *Strengthening existing M&E - learning and recommendations - June 2014*, page 4.) Without prompting, most Country Directors and several Programme Managers I have talked with in the course of this assignment mentioned this need to repeat work upon DFID's request as a key frustration.

[44] This shift is recent but already clear and institutionalised in the sense that key instruments such as the quarterly business reviews have been redesigned and now focus on impact. In the words of a GLT member: "In the past year or so, the GLT focuses much more time on our actual progress in programmes, rather than on internal processes. […] The overall tone in the organisation to learn about our programmes is just totally different. […] Last year, we were very focused, in the annual partnership reporting process, in getting the data

> - I expect that VSO's focus in the coming period will not be on a new range of change areas, but on finishing and consolidating newly introduced systems and processes, and on resolving teething problems.

3. Value for Money

The IPR1 report stated that "VSO's performance in the fields of economy, effectiveness and efficiency[45] is inconsistent, and not systematically monitored and documented." This has improved but, oddly, VSO's reporting to DFID does not do justice to the VfM-related improvements themselves, or to the verifiability of these improvements.[46]

VSO undersells its achievements by stating, in the latest SGA report, that "VSO's value for money focus has been largely on economy." In the course of this assessment, I have come across achievements in *each* of the 4Es, and saw a few change initiatives that have cut across the various VfM components.

The remainder of this section looks at each of the 4Es of economy, efficiency, effectiveness and equity, and then takes a brief look at two cross-cutting initiatives.

Economy

The IPR1 noted an inconsistent application of VSO's procurement policies, and an insufficient utilisation of potential economies of scale. I did not come across similar examples during the IPR2. I did see evidence of:

1. Cost savings, with the move to Kingston as the biggest and most obvious example.
2. 'Good economy,' such as the annual cost benchmarking test to ensure that VSO's medical insurance remains cost-effective.[47]
3. 'False economy,' such as email exchanges and phone calls that follow when volunteers exceed the 'guidance maximum' on accommodation expenses by even a single dollar.[48]

One particular 'economy'-related claim is core to VSO's proposition, which is that suitably qualified international volunteers are 'more economical than most equivalent interventions.' If

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in and improving the quality of these data. It was a numbers game. We did this, and this was good, because it was required by DFID but also because it got the entire organisation engaged. But the reflection and learning was missing – and it was clear that this was going to be the focus for *this* year."

[45] At the time of the IPR1, Coffey's VfM concept did not yet cover 'Equity' as the fourth E.

[46] The reporting is a bit clumsy too. Among other things, the VfM section starts by saying that "VSO provides good value for money by recruiting professional volunteers who offer expertise with no salary costs attached and bring additional skills to parts of the world where they are otherwise unavailable." This assumes that VSO still operates on the basis of the singular paradigm of deploying international volunteers, which is no longer the case.

[47] In the SGA annual report this has turned into "Annual re-tendering of large areas of spend, such as insurance," which is incorrect and would be unwise. A country office example of 'good economy': VSO Uganda reduced its daily fee for drivers to less than 50% of its original level, without subsequently facing a transport challenge.

[48] These guidance maxima are sometimes exceptionally low. In Cambodia, the guidance maximum for accommodation is $7 for Phnom Penh, and $6 elsewhere.

'equivalent interventions' are 'sending experts to other countries with capacity building remits' then this claim is probably accurate. A cost comparison with other 'expert'-sending organisations is beyond the remit of this IPR2, but I happened to have evaluated two broadly comparable expert-sending programmes in 2014, and their cost-per-expert-day amounted to some £500 and some £1,000 – compared with some £45 per day for an international VSO volunteer.[49]

Observation

Core to VSO's proposition is that suitably qualified international volunteers are 'more economical than most equivalent interventions.' If 'equivalent interventions' are 'sending experts to other countries with capacity building remits' then this claim is probably accurate.

Efficiency

VSO is getting more efficiency-minded. There is no better example of this than the evidence-based closure of a number of offices: a few substantial country programmes are likely to be more efficient than a larger number of smaller country programmes.[50] However, I also note the following:

- **VSO does not perform well on process design and adherence.** In the course of this assignment, I came across a wide range of processes that were not as efficient as they could be, or that have not been formalised at all. Process maps like strategy development plans or even just basic Gantt charts for programme implementation planning do not always exist. Neither the Head Office nor country offices consistently use master files that capture things such as partner and MoU expiry dates, reporting requirements and timelines for partner monitoring visits. Plans that do exist often face delays (e.g. data reporting, the development of the volunteer cycle platform).

- **The overall salary costs have increased year on year.**[51] Even as a percentage of overall income, salary costs are roughly the same as they were in 2010 (though lower than they had been in 2011 and 2012). It strikes me that:

  - The Kingston office seems rather generously staffed for an organisation that has significantly reduced the number of its country offices *and* beefed up its regional structure. There are probably gains to be made through better process engineering, and by finishing what seems to be a stalled regionalisation process.[52]

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[49] For a calculation of the £45, see *Volunteer costs, breakdown* (and note the definitional oddity of assuming that a volunteer works 365 days per year – something I understand will be changed in next year's figures, which will assume 242 working days per year). Both non-VSO evaluations were confidential. In the case of the costlier programme, one of my recommendations was that the organisation "might want to try out a small-scale pilot with an international volunteer organisation. Such cooperation would combine the model and expertise of [name of programme] with a cost-effective volunteering system."

[50] A document titled *2013 - Extract from GLT Minutes outlining strategic decision to close certain country offices and the rationale* suggests that the absence of restricted funding was a key determinant in the decision to close offices. From conversations, I understand this to be incorrect, but I have not received documentation that evidences the role of other considerations.

[51] From 2010, per year: £15.6m, 16.9m, 18.7m, 19.7m and 20.1m.

[52] A real assessment of VSO's regionalisation process is beyond the ToR for this assignment, but it seems obvious that now that the global organisation has developed its global systems, VSO needs to swap some of

- There seems to be some duplication and ambiguity in the distribution of mandates. For example: overall programme direction seems to be core to the mandate of the Strategy and Programme Effectiveness Group, but it is also covered by the two Regional Offices (with, respectively, the PFPA and the Programme Regeneration as the Africa and Asia vehicles).
- A document that visualises VSO's "key decision-making teams" lists a total of 86 teams in 6 categories.[53] This seems excessive for an organisation of VSO's size, and the matrix lines that prop out of these 86 teams seem unworkable.

Recommendations on processes
- VSO would benefit from a formalisation of a number of its processes.
- Many processes, within and across functions, could be streamlined.

Effectiveness

During three brief country visits I have seen work that has been successful and inspiring; work that does not appear to be achieving anything at all; and work that is somewhere in the middle.[54] At the moment, VSO has no evidence-based insight in the distribution of its programmes across this effectiveness spectrum. Similarly, VSO does not have an explicit understanding of which types of VSO work 'work best.'

In this regard, and using IPR1 and IPR2 observations, I would like to make the following tentative observations:

VSO brings innovation. In the field of education, for example:

- VSO texts lesson plans to rural teachers in PNG.
- VSO introduced tablet-based exercises that strengthen literacy and numeracy skills among primary school children in Malawi.
- VSO developed an app for English-teaching Cambodian teachers who do not speak English.
- VSO introduced a 'big sister' coaching concept to girl education in Nepal.

These are not examples of 'worldwide innovations,' but they *are* all examples of introducing new things at country level, and it is easy to see how each of them could make a positive difference in the lives of the people who VSO aims to support and empower.

The most profound innovations amount to 'development shortcuts' in the sense that they do not *overcome* but, to an extent, *bypass* multiple and mutually reinforcing constraints. These solutions may make a positive difference, even in schools that suffer from large class sizes, low teacher motivation and abilities, non-interactive teaching approaches, an inability to work

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the line management and matrix lines to empower the regional structure and enable, for example, the regional fundraising, M&E and HR staff to become more fully focused on the country offices and their programmes.

[53] This includes 25 country teams – see *VSO_Key_decision_making_groups_-_March_2014[1]*.

[54] I am unable to make statements about the organisation's overall effectiveness as I have not seen anything close to a representative sample of VSO's work. Moreover, I have not looked at programmes for more than a few hours each, so my observations are based on interviews and eye-balling rather than on systematic assessments.

productively with diverse learning abilities, and all sorts of other challenges that many schools around the world are struggling with. In essence, teacher competency will never be *irrelevant*, but tablet-based learning is *less* dependent on competent teachers than traditional school-based forms of learning.

The problem must be obvious and pressing. In Cambodia, the election-related instability has sizzled out and the sense of urgency in relation to Cambodia's decentralisation and democratisation processes is gone. This, in combination with unaligned agendas, means that progress is slow.

Conversely, HIV was causing absenteeism among prison staff in Malawi, and death among them and their partners. It was also affecting the health of prisoners. The Malawi Prisons Service (MPS) asked VSO for support. Three volunteers later, MPS felt sufficiently confident to take its HIV-related work forward without further VSO involvement. By that time there were, *and there still are today*, functioning VTC facilities and MPS had established an HIV-related function within its 'normal' staff structure (as in: not dependent on external salary payments). This is the core VSO model in actual practice: VSO helped build sustainable capacity through volunteering, and moved out. A very tentative 30-minute 'assessment' suggested that it worked because VSO supported the prison authorities in a field that these authorities saw as important and pressing.

Innovations will only work out if incentives and agendas are broadly aligned. VSO is not a powerful political force and does not give money. This means that the organisation has little leverage. If stakeholders do not like VSO's work, they can afford to ignore it (as is the case of some of VSO's governance work) or sabotage it (as has been the case in some of VSO's education-related work where commercial interests caused a competing curriculum to be selected over VSO's significantly superior curriculum).

Therefore, incentives and agendas between VSO and its partners must be aligned (see also the recommendation in the section on Partnerships). If this is the case, results can be profound and sustainable. The IPR1 report gave a few examples of this, and in the course of the IPR2 I saw a few new ones (see the text box for an example).

Text box

VSO successfully advocated for bank-based salary payments in Cambodia. This has meant that, since the summer of 2014, Cambodian teachers get their salaries in full and on time. Looking at this advocacy success, it strikes me that:

- The advocacy demand was evidence-based (as in: it offered a solution to a problem identified in the course of research conducted among Cambodian teachers).
- The advocacy work was well-targeted, both in terms of the message ('pay salaries through banks') and in terms of the advocacy targets (as only very few key decision-makers at a national ministry had to be convinced).
- The solution amounted to a quick win on the side of the key decision-maker (i.e. the Minister).
- The solution did not cause pain. It was budget neutral and did not require a lot of extra work (or rather: the work is done elsewhere, by banks, which have a commercial interest in doing this work).
- The people who 'suffer' (by no longer being able to take bribes) were unable to sabotage the new system, as this system simply bypassed them.

It is possible to map all these factors prior to an actual advocacy campaign, and doing so would give an indication of the achievability of the advocacy objective, and would help with the design of the campaign.

Even if all the boxes are ticked, a failure rate is inevitable. VSO attempts to introduce innovative development solutions to the world's poorest countries and weakest states, through partners with capacity deficits (or else they would not be VSO partners). With this choice, VSO takes a calculated but substantial risk which requires, from VSO and donors alike, a tolerance to failure and a focus on the success of the sum total of the organisation's innovative work, rather than on the results of its individual initiatives.

Observation

The incomplete evidence I have gathered during the IPR1 and IPR2 processes suggests that VSO performs particularly well in areas where:

- VSO utilises its international volunteers to introduce country-level innovations that are strongly aligned with the interests of decision-makers;
- These innovations cannot be sabotaged by those with conflicting agendas; and
- These innovations resolve problems that are obvious and immediate, in a way that simplifies or enriches rather than complicates the lives of the people who need to use the solution.

Equity

VSO's draft VfM position paper states that VSO views equity as "addressing the priorities of the most disadvantaged and addressing inequality within societies." This position paper states that equity "is at the very heart of our work."

In some countries, this is becoming increasingly true. In Uganda, VSO's current strategy explicitly and deliberately moved from a scattergun approach (lots of isolated volunteers throughout the country) to an organisational focus on particularly marginalised groups in the most disadvantaged regions in the country. The cross-country focus on neonatal health, and the choice to focus on lower-level health facilities, is based on a similar assessment: this is a priority among poor and rural women, and an area where, as a group, they are at a particular disadvantage.

Uganda's strategy might be an early sign of a trend. If it is, it is a hesitant one as, at the moment, not all countries prioritise equity. VSO PNG has not revised its 2012-15 strategy since its launch in 2012, which means that it is still an all-encompassing 'strategy' with millions of beneficiaries, in regions that were selected on the basis of a historical presence rather than a poverty analysis, and with a programme in and around urban hospitals (which is not typically where the poorest people are found).[55] The 2012-15 strategy of VSO Malawi has never been revised either, and identifies some 30 particularly marginalised groups – but it remains unclear what VSO aims to *do* or *achieve* with most of these groups. Such strategies need revision.

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[55] Security concerns may play a role, but it is also just a matter of being opportunity- rather than strategy- and equity-driven.

Whilst equity needs to be considered explicitly in Theories of Change, strategies and signature packages alike,[56] it should not necessarily be the first and foremost priority. In Cambodia, for example, VSO has successfully lobbied for teacher salaries to be paid by bank transfer to eliminate delays and losses-through-bribes. This was obviously very useful, and it was successful because it played into the country office's strengths (e.g. innovation, strong relations with people in positions of power and sound research). However, it was not very 'equitable' as community teachers (whose salaries are less than a third of the national teachers' salaries) are not part of this new arrangement. Other work, such as VSO Cambodia's direct work in schools, is very 'equitable', but VSO is much less well-equipped to do this work better than other stakeholders could (and indeed *do*) do it.

Recommendation on equity

VSO's draft VfM position paper states that equity "is at the very heart of our work." In reality, this is not always the case. At least, VSO should *assess* and *be explicit* about the equity implications of its choices. Currently, VSO does not systematically conduct this type of analysis.

There is very little evidence of VSO work in the field of the second half of VSO's definition of equity-focused programming: 'addressing inequalities within societies.' Addressing inequalities within societies requires country-level advocacy work. VSO acknowledges this, but does not yet *do* much of it.[57] This is illustrated by VSO's inability to list its key country-level advocacy messages in a concise and tangible manner. Ideally, such messages should be inspired by evidence-based lessons learned through programme implementation, should be formulated in country strategies, and progress should be monitored particularly rigorously (simply because monitoring advocacy work is difficult).

Recommendation on advocacy

In each country's next strategy development process, the country programmes should develop tangible[58] evidence-based advocacy messages. Such messages would potentially strengthen:
- 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.

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[56] At the moment, the theories of change pay due attention to the issue of equity (with a wonderful visualisation of its core position on page 3 of the education-related ToC); the strategies generally do not; and the issue is not mentioned at all in the current version of the *Signature package guidelines* (except for in the form of an example, on page 10).

[57] There might be an element of gains lost: a senior member of staff argued that, some ten years ago and under VSO's first-ever strategy titled *Focus for Change*, "In many respects we had better resourced and clearly focused advocacy work than at present." I have not explored this further but note that VSO does currently seem inclined to support INGO umbrella bodies that focus on advocacy (including the placement of international volunteers, as has been the case in Uganda and Malawi) rather than to develop its own advocacy messages.

[58] For example: 'pay teacher salaries through the banking system' is a tangible advocacy message, while 'treat teachers fairly' is not.

Cross-cutting change trajectories

The move from placements to programmes

This is a fundamental shift that started a decade ago. This shift had reached maturity (in the sense that it has become standard practice rather than a guiding principle) and this is likely to have strengthened:

- **Economy and efficiency.** Relatively large impact-focused programmes such as VSO's informal vocational training programme in northern Uganda are likely to achieve efficiencies and economies of scale that are beyond the reach of programmes that only cover a single partnership.

- **Effectiveness.** Placements are identified on the basis of expected impact rather than on placement offers, and shaped in order to have mutually reinforcing impact. This is not new (VSO has used 'vertical placements' for almost a decade) but:

    - Recent placements plans seem to be more integrated and impact-focused than what we saw during the IPR1, and there appear to be fewer exceptions.[59]
    - The move from a placement focus to a programme focus is not the end point: ultimately, VSO aims to move from isolated projects to a few streams of interdependent and regionalised sector work. And, most importantly:
    - The programme focus has enabled the 'Global Leadership Team' (GLT) to move, in its quarterly business review process, from operational metrics (e.g. volunteer delivery numbers, expenditure and pipeline issues) to a results framework. This is a very recent change and, in the words of one of the GLT members "a fundamental change in the organisation's identity".

- **Equity**, as the starting point of programme design is, at least in part, particularly marginalised communities in marginalised regions, rather than partners that welcome international volunteers.

There are two key risks:

- Aiming for vertical or horizontal integration in the case of VSO's smaller programmes is likely to cause these programmes to spread themselves too thinly.

- Most of VSO's larger programmes are funded by restricted grants from donor organisations with country-wide ambitions. These organisations want *coverage*. If they cover education, they require VSO to place a volunteer in 'at least X' of the provincial offices for education, rather than just 'in offices that are eager to receive one or more volunteers.' The implication is that VSO will increasingly place volunteers in partners that have not been 'hand-picked,'

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[59] The Country Director of VSO Ghana provided an example of a volunteer placement that he had refused on account of its lack of relevance to the VSO Ghana strategy. He felt that, as a consequence, many subsequent placement proposals had been thought through more rigorously. Similarly, the Programme Manager of the VSO Uganda health programme mentioned that he regularly declines placement requests for that same reason. Conversely, during the IPR1, I came across volunteer placements that did not benefit the country office's strategy, *and* that the volunteer felt were not useful in isolation (e.g. a city planner in Madang, PNG).

and that may lack enthusiasm. This may lead to higher failure rates. The section on partnerships elaborates on this point.

The new volunteer cycle

The IPR1 report noted that, sometimes, "there is significant discrepancy between volunteers' Terms of Reference and the reality they find upon arrival" and recommended "to reduce this discrepancy by initiating a three-way engagement prior to the actual deployment."[60] Since a year or so ago, this pre-deployment engagement is (a not-yet-fully-implemented) part of a fundamentally changed international volunteer recruitment and management process – and it is by no means the biggest change.

Since VSO's new volunteer cycle platform went live, prospective volunteers apply for a specific volunteer position rather than for a place in a 'Talent Pool' from which they will be selected as and when appropriate opportunities arise.[61] At the time of writing, this new method of working has not yet completed a single full two-year cycle, and there are many teething problems, but over time I think that this platform will not just be more contemporary and more empowering for and accountable toward VSO's international volunteers, but will also strengthen efficiency, effectiveness and equity.

- **Efficiency.** The SGA reports that the platform reduced the recruitment period from 9 to 5 months. This is an exaggeration, and the number of recruitments that this conclusion is based on is small, but in the longer run this platform *is* likely to reduce the recruitment period significantly. This will partly be because the efficiency of the system itself, and partly because the platform generates data that will enable VSO to identify and resolve bottlenecks – something that the previous system did not have the capacity to do.

- **Effectiveness.** Placement-specific recruitments are likely to get closer matches between requirements and profiles than a talent pool could ever get (and indeed the prevalence of insufficiently close matches has been a recurrent observation in IPR and other evaluation reports – see the annexed country reports for details and examples).

- **Equity.** In the new system, anybody can apply. In a sector that has a very strong bias in favour of 'Western' candidates,[62] this system is making a small but striking contribution to worldwide equity on the labour market.

Conversely:

- The Salesforce volunteer cycle platform might be bigger and more costly (and thus less economic) than what is needed for an organisation that deploys far fewer international

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[60] Recommendation 2, on page 30 of the IPR1 report.
[61] Although candidates that are good but not selected do end up in a reformatted talent pool, to be considered when volunteer placements prove hard to fill.
[62] The EU volunteering scheme deploys EU citizens; a number of Western countries fund UN positions for their nationals only; most Headquarters are in the Western world and require work permits that are hard to obtain for professionals from the Global South; and so forth and so further. Even within VSO, quite a few programmes conditionalise funding on the basis of the nationality of the volunteers.

volunteers, in fewer countries, than it has done before.[63] I do not have the expertise required to assess this in a meaningful manner.

- There are also counter-trends. The biggest one is ICS (which works with a volunteer pool rather than with specific placements, which recruits within UK and host communities only, and which does not require and is unable to offer specialised skill sets) and VSO Ireland (which has, as its core KPI, the number of Irish volunteers). These counter-trends do not seem to stand in the way of an overall direction of travel towards placement-specific specialist volunteers from around the world.

- I can see no *fundamental* problems with the new volunteer cycle concept and platform, but the many *practical* problems are frustrating country offices. For now, the teething problems are making people's work more demanding rather than simpler;[64] some of the functionality is not yet 'live'; the system is not yet consistently able to get the right volunteers to the right places at the right times; and there are complaints of a high pre-departure drop-out among recruits.

4. Sustainability

Achieving sustainability is core to the philosophy of VSO, and volunteers go quite out of their way to maximise the potential for sustainability of results. And it is possible, too, as is illustrated by the incorporation of an HIV function within the staff structure of the Malawi Prisons System and today's teacher payment method in Cambodia (which teachers confirmed actually *works*; both examples are covered in previous sections).

Notwithstanding the obvious efforts, counterparts in each of the three countries I visited were often unable to identify sustained changes that previous volunteers had made. This suggests that, at least in these three countries, a portion of the volunteer initiatives ultimately fail to achieve sustained results.

Limited evidence suggests that sustainable impact is particularly difficult to achieve when VSO works at grassroots level only (i.e. without policy advocacy work done at higher levels). Logic confirms this: VSO's local presence is generally too small to achieve behavioural change at a scale that is large enough to be sustainable (i.e. that reaches a behavioural tipping point). VSO stands more chance where it works with partners, but in such cases VSO is generally a minor actor in terms of grassroots presence, and is operating at relatively high costs.[65]

At institutional levels, chances are better, provided that interests and incentives remain aligned. This is not necessarily the case, as incentives are biased toward new and per diem-paying initiatives; and agendas change and are polluted by personal rather than institutional interests.

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[63] The IPR1 noted that "numerical targets in relation to volunteer deployment may not be appropriate targets, as they lead to pressure to find many partners to place many volunteers in, rather than pressure to make an impact." At the time, the management response was that "the number of international volunteer days delivered is a valuable performance indicator for a volunteering organisation but we are very clear that that must only be one in a basket of indicators against which to measure our work." By 2014, the number of volunteers has been de-emphasised as a performance indicator (though it still formally exists), and the number of international volunteers has dropped very significantly.

[64] A typical quote: "Salesforce is really challenging. There is a long way to go before it is easy to use."

[65] Both compared to government bodies and to NGOs that work at larger scale and with the use of national professionals that tend to cost less than the £45 per day that VSO volunteers cost on average.

One of the IPR1's most dramatic observations was that VSO had never yet verifiably assessed the sustainability of its own work. This observation still applies. VSO could do this, either by assessing the results of decades of work with many of its partners, or by revisiting a programme a few years after its closure. A good first step would be to get in touch with VSO's ex-volunteers who stayed in the country of their original placement. There are many of them (which confirms the life-shaping roles that some of these placements have had) and a portion of these ex-volunteers will have stayed in touch with their past VSO partner. They will know if their work has left a mark. If it has, an assessment of this legacy would be useful. VSO could gain insight into the sustainable impact of VSO, simply by inducting the findings of a few of these case studies.

> **Observation**
> There is very little evidence to confirm the sustainability of VSO's impact. This is partly because not all work *has* sustainable impact (or at least partners I interviewed were rarely able to identify sustained changes that previous volunteers had made) and partly because VSO has never yet truly *assessed* the sustainability of the impact of its work.

5. Partnerships

Partnerships form the very foundation of VSO's work. Through them, VSO seeks to achieve its mission of "bringing people together to fight poverty through the lasting power of volunteering."

Country strategies envision that "partners will be involved at all stages of developing [their] partnership with VSO including programme needs assessment, programme planning, programme designing, implementation, monitoring, review and evaluation."[66] Such promises are supported by a guidance document titled 'The Path of Partnership' and its successor, the rather shorter 'Partnership for Change.'

In reality, these formal commitments and framework documents are rarely used or referred to. Instead, partnerships are developed and maintained in many different ways, and with very different levels of rigour. In some cases VSO has credibility and influence, and engages with sector stakeholders from the districts to the highest levels of national authority. In other cases, partners have very little contact with VSO, beyond the individual volunteers who have been placed with these partners. I have come across partners where even the very basic periodic engagement between the partner and the VSO office is not taking place. Such partners do not know anything about VSO's wider work or ambitions, and would not know what action to take in case problems arise between the volunteers and their counterparts. The risk of such 'partnerships' is significant: the lack of engagement may cause partners to largely ignore their volunteers, or to use these volunteers almost exclusively to fill staffing gaps.

Although there is very little commonality between individual partnerships, there are a few broad trends:

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[66] VSO Malawi country strategy 2012-15, page 25.

VSO's approach to placements is changing. A counterpart in Uganda, who had been working with VSO for a number of years, could see the shift "from 'noble work' to 'health services development.'" Seasoned volunteers in Uganda and Cambodia could see a shift from 'scattergun' to more strategic deployments. Some could see a shift in volunteer support as well: "It is a different organisation now. Programme management has professionalised. They can support you more, in terms of providing contact, network, context, good relations with the ministry. […] The office has excellent networks, and they utilise them."

VSO's selection of partners is changing. In the past, VSO could select individual partners, and work with them. On the negative, these partnerships could continue *ad infinitum*, without meaningful assessment of their usefulness. On the positive, nobody imposed volunteers onto partners. If partners did not want to place volunteers, then no volunteers were placed.

With a rapidly increasing reliance on restricted funding opportunities, this has changed. Restricted programme funding often requires placing a volunteer 'in X provincial offices for Y.' The implication is that the risk of unreceptive partners is higher than it used to be when placements were judged on a case by case basis, and that there may be pressure to keep volunteers in their placements, even if these placements do not make a meaningful contribution to sustainable development.

Observation

VSO's change trajectories and increasing reliance on restricted programme funding mean that VSO country offices face heavier and more diverse pressures than they have faced in the past. Among other things but importantly, the sheer number of voices has increased. There used to be a partner and a head office. Now, there are increasingly vocal host governments, regional offices, and a multitude of donor agencies. In addition, the work is guided by ever-more guidance documents and manuals, and it is no longer easy to ignore them. As a consequence, partnerships in general and the monitoring of volunteer placements in particular receive less attention than they have received in the past.

Recommendations on partnership tools
- VSO should ensure never to miss the initial tripartite meeting, after the first three months of a placement. These meetings are crucial, as they review and could potentially redefine the placement. After this initial meeting, VSO should conduct at least biannual visits.[67] In cases where these meetings do not take place – and I have seen quite a few examples of this – the likelihood of volunteer isolation, and ultimately of ineffective partnerships, increases.
- 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.
- 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.

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[67] As is stated in volunteer placement outlines: "The volunteer will have a line manager at VSO's country office who will be able to provide support and who will visit the volunteer at their workplace at least twice a year."

The recipient governments' attitudes towards incoming 'experts' are changing. VSO is no longer the ever-welcome benefactor. Instead, it needs to explain why international volunteering positions could not be filled by national professionals (typically at lower overall costs) and it is increasingly less acceptable for VSO-type organisations to impose their own conditions and annual processes onto their partners.

Recommendations in relation to a shift in power in favour of the Global South

There is a shift in the power balance, 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:

- 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.

- VSO could align itself more to partners' systems and structures. For example, if a government's annual cycle starts at a different time than the UK cycle, then VSO should embed its practice in the cycles of its partners, and not the other way around.[68]

Partnering with other INGOs

With its increasing reliance on restricted programme funding, VSO is now regularly working as part of a consortium. To utilise the advantages of consortium-based work for a niche organisation such as VSO, and to avoid the pitfalls, VSO has learning to do.

Recommendation on consortium dynamics

VSO increasingly operates in a funding environment where consortiums are the norm. In consortium settings, the key risk is for VSO to be seen as the HR function of a wider programme, and for its volunteers to essentially be 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 the one of 'providing volunteers,' and that the organisation plays an active role in any consortium's M&E processes.

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[68] See the Uganda country report for a discussion of possibilities for better alignments.

6. Learning[69]

The IPR1 report noted that: "VSO has […] all the usual learning tools and systems such as staff surveys, appraisal processes […], some sector benchmarking, learning retreats and training. In addition, intensive learning underpinned a change programme that was fuelled by research, pro bono corporate support and new people with new fields of expertise and ideas." These observations still apply. In addition, VSO has invested in a few new learning initiatives, most of which focus on Africa.

This section looks at the learning initiative that VSO staff talk about most: the 'People First Programme Architecture' programme. The text box at the end of this section covers a hidden gem: the learning systems around VSO's internal audit function, which is not part of any formalised change process but which is very effective and which other VSO functions could learn from.

Recommendation on the utilisation of good practice
VSO employs a range of learning systems, processes and tools. The only gap VSO might want to address is that volunteers regularly develop surveys and tools that already exist, and that are freely available online. Perhaps the issue of 'finding good practice' could be part of the induction process.[70]

The 'People First Programme Architecture'

The 'People First Programme Architecture' (PFPA) is a participatory learning initiative that aims to get an organisational understanding of key things such as 'how we should collect and use evidence'; where to find 'spaces for reflection and learning', and how to 'make best use of volunteers and staff.' It is a resource intensive initiative, mostly because it involves a range of regional face-to-face gatherings. One staff member called PFPA a 'white elephant' and, in rather less strong words, other people criticised PFPA for being too process driven and drawn out, with too few tangible outcomes.

One could argue about the choice of priority focus areas, and it is probably true that a few of the issues could have been dealt with in less time, and could have used text books rather than bottom up sharing processes. However, these are small issues compared to the benefits of a

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[69] This section covers VSO's internal learning only. It does not cover:

- The learning within VSO's *partners*. Learning within partners is facilitated through a wide range of mechanisms (e.g. training, coaching, mentoring, role modelling, manuals, joint work, study trips) and has been VSO's bread and butter for many years.
- VSO's role in the various PPA-related Learning Partnerships. Coffey will be assessing these learning partnerships in their entirety (see page 1 of Coffey's *approach to identifying and evaluating learning*, which acknowledges VSO's role in these partnership, albeit as an 'interested stakeholder' rather than a PPA holder.)
- The way in which VSO uses learning from the wider sector in its work. I saw many examples of this happening, from replicating good practice (e.g. Helping Babies Breath and CARE's Score Cards) to learning from ongoing struggles (e.g. the WWF & British Red Cross attempts to progress on the VfM road, and the Oxfam efforts in relation to its knowledge management systems).

[70] Increasingly, this is simply a matter of Googling. A good working assumption for anything that does not require very specific cultural adaptation is that 'it probably exists already.'

culture shift that empowers country teams (including volunteers) and that generates guidance that is likely to shape practice for the years to come.

At least in Africa,[71] PFPA has created a broad awareness and consensus on VSO's direction of travel, which is something I did not see any evidence of when conducting the IPR1. Moreover, this broad awareness and consensus is cross-functional. PFPA links in with both fundraising (through the identification of flagship focus areas) and M&E, and gives direction to both. Most people I talked with found this participatory process to be refreshing. When reflecting on the usefulness of the PFPA process, they note that the process does not merely inspire learning but also addresses two key organisational weaknesses which are that, traditionally:

- Volunteers and local staff have considerable freedom to design their work but few opportunities to contribute to and benefit from organisational learning.
- Guidance was often produced centrally, with limited local involvement in the development process and few grassroots level incentives to actually utilise this guidance. In absence of a sense of shared ownership and clear encouragement, guidance was often for the bookshelf.

Text box: VSO's internal audits

Systematic learning does not necessarily require a formal change trajectory (and indeed a formal change trajectory does not necessarily lead to systematic learning).[72] The most impressive example of 'natural learning' I came across was in the internal audit function. Other functions within could learn from the way the internal audit function shares and institutionalises learning in real time.

The situation during IPR1

In the previous two years, VSO had conducted only 3 and 5 internal country audits respectively. VSO did not have a process that ensured systematic follow up on internal audit recommendations.

The situation in 2014

The number of annual audits has increased to over a dozen, and these audits are conducted by VSO employees within and outside of the organisation's finance function. There are 12 'lead auditors,' who appear to combine financial expertise with social skills, causing a Country Director to comment that the recent internal audit of its country office "was absolutely excellent" (which is rather an unusual response to an internal audit, in my experience.)

After each audit:

- Audit recommendations are followed up on regularly, until they have been actioned and are closed.
- Observations related to other functions (medical insurance, programme, M&E, funding) are flagged to relevant stakeholders, with whom the Head of Risk and Internal Audit meets regularly (and often virtually).

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[71] VSO Asia has not had something similar. Asia-based colleagues are aware of this and sometimes lament that "the lack of opportunity to give feedback into change trajectories [means] that country offices are reacting to change rather than feeling part of it."

[72] One of the threats captured at the end of the 'strengthening existing M&E' work stream was that 'nobody [had been] identified to hand over learning to.' (see *Strengthening existing M&E – learning and recommendations – June 2014,* page 6.)

- Every month, the Head of Risk and Internal Audit and a group of interested stakeholders meet virtually to analyse the most recent audit process (rather than the findings, which are confidential), and to extract implications for the audit manual, the finance manual and the self-audit manual.
- These implications are stored in a single file and actioned biannually.

The learning is interactive and shared widely: 35 VSO colleagues are invited into these monthly virtual meetings as "your participation helps by keeping ensuring consistency in our approach."[73] The learning is institutionalised in real time, in the form of frequently updated manuals; and a large and active internal network enables the internal audit function to share messages outside of the immediate scope of internal audits with people who would be able to follow up on these messages. This system around VSO's internal audit is effective, and so institutionalised and straightforward that it is likely to survive the departure of the person who developed it.

7. Innovation

The IPR1 noted that "Based on limited evidence, this IPR tentatively [concludes that] VSO is ideally suited for innovative work." (Pages 5-6.) In the course of the IPR2, this evidence has become a little more robust, as I have seen examples of innovative work during each of the three country assessments (see the innovation sections of the country annexes to this report). It led to three conclusions:

- VSO's ability to introduce innovation to countries might be the organisation's key asset (see the section on Effectiveness); and
- Innovations are most useful if they are scalable. VSO is too small to bring useful innovation to scale by itself, [74] but potentially credible enough to *inspire* the scaling up of innovation by other stakeholders. I have not come across examples of VSO innovations that have subsequently been brought to scale by other stakeholders.[75] This may change in the next few years, as I *have* seen evidence that VSO is increasing the visibility of its work, through conference, publications and a range of other mediums. Such initiatives are not new, within VSO, but they are increasingly *supported* rather than *permitted* (though probably less so in Kingston than in some of the country offices).[76]

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[73] From the covering note of the monthly invitation.

[74] Times are changing, so perhaps this observation will not be valid for much longer. An early indication of this is that VSO Malawi has received confirmation, in December 2014, of a Norwegian grant that will allow VSO to scale up the tablet-based literacy and numeracy programme that VSO and One Billion are currently piloting in Lilongwe. The new project will cover 53 schools. Two more proposals are pending, and would add a further 115 schools to the sum total.

[75] If these examples exist, then VSO does not highlight and celebrate them.

[76] By means of illustration: the most recent Corporate Business Plan says, on page 18, that "We are developing new performance indicators […]. These are likely to be based around: […] the number of development conferences in which we present our research on volunteering, or the number of INGOs asking us to support them in implementing our findings." Note that the IPR1 report still made the observation that 'In the international development sector, the voice of VSO is occasionally heard […] but much less loudly than it could be" (page 35).

- There is support from the top of the organisation. In the words of VSO's interim CEO: "If innovation and incubation are what VSO does, we need to provide an enabling environment for this."[77]

8. SGA funding

Utilisation

The details of VSO's reporting on the utilisation of its SGA grant are not consistently correct (as DFID's Jo Cooke has picked up in her follow up correspondence),[78] and there is some ambiguity because VSO does not distinguish its SGA funding from its other unrestricted funding.[79] However, the bigger picture is clear: *for VSO, the SGA grant continues to be crucially important*. This funding is being used for a wide range of purposes.

- **To cover overhead costs** in Kingston and the regional and country offices. The SGA funding has reduced, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of VSO's overall income but,[80] put bluntly, and as has been the case throughout VSO's existence: without DFID's unrestricted contribution, VSO would either not exist at all or, at least, look *very* different and be *much* smaller.

- **To cover the costs of internal capacity strengthening initiatives.** This is something that VSO has in common with most PPA holders.[81] What is surprising is the level of investments,[82] and the resultant intensity and speed of the change process. VSO staff may not perceive this speed in quite the same way, as they have had to cope with the day-to-day frustrations of change processes, but for an outsider who returned after two years of absence, the financial and HR investments have been very significant indeed,[83] and the resultant level of progress has been impressive (as is covered throughout this report).

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[77] Jim Emerson, Interim CEO, face to face conversation on 14 October 2014.

[78] Jo Cooke, *Feedback on VSO's 2012/13 SGA annual report*, 16 August 2013. Two other illustrations from the *2013/2014 VSO SGA report* are as follows:

- On pages 73-74, the report states that "VSO has used SGA funding to build capacity in new areas of work. For example [and this is the only example given]: VSO used a project – Making Markets Work for the Poor (MMW4P) with funding from the Accenture Foundation to build the capacity of its partners and Country Offices to increase poor people's participation in markets across its secure livelihoods portfolio." In fact, this programme is almost entirely funded by Accenture, with a contribution of only 9.7% unrestricted funding, only part of which is SGA funding (see the spreadsheet titled *MMW4P unres vs res analyis*).
- In the 'risk and innovation' section on page 62, the report states that "the SGA allowed VSO to take some risks on new large- scale programmes, such as International Citizen Service (ICS), where VSO is the lead contractor." In fact, VSO received pre-funding to cover these costs.

[79] I think this is wise. The problem with disaggregation is that all the 'cool things' would be categorised under 'SGA funded,' which effectively means that private donations would only cover 'unattractive' expenses. One day, a tabloid would make this a headline story ('*charity's fundraising merely funds salaries*'), causing reputational damage.

[80] From 65% (£28m) in 2007-08 to 28% (£22m) in 2013-14. See VSO (September 2014) *DFID SGA funding as a % of total funding year on year*

[81] A survey among 29 PPA holders reported that most PPA holders have utilised their PPA funding to strengthen their organisational capacity. See Phil Vernon (26th July 2014) *Institutional Effectiveness Improvements as Reported by PPA Grantees*, International Alert.

[82] See a spreadsheet titled *Strategic change costs for Willem.*

[83] See footnotes 19 and 20.

- **To build new functions**, such as VSO's M&E function and its individual giving function.[84]

- **To cover in-country programme costs.** VSO's country programme dependence on SGA funding ranges from 16% in Uganda (and most of SGA funding is covering overhead rather than programme costs) to 100% in Myanmar. With few if any exceptions, VSO does not yet feel able to negotiate contracts on the basis of genuinely full cost recovery, and SGA funding is regularly used as 'VSO's cost-sharing contribution.'

> **Observation**
> VSO is increasingly successful in attracting restricted programme funding. This type of funding has drawbacks that are already manifesting themselves (e.g. rushed starts, delayed starts, whimsical donors, need for visibility leading to disempowering usage of banners, heavy reporting requirements).
>
> In the coming period, VSO will need to strengthen its capacity to negotiate and manage restricted funding contracts. Work in this field is in full swing already,[85] which is why this is an observation rather than a recommendation.

- **To pilot innovative initiatives**, such as the Malawi-based tablet-related education programme covered before; or **to kick-start a country presence**, such as in the case of Myanmar, which explains the 100% SGA dependence mentioned in the previous bullet point.[86]

- **To bridge funding gaps**, such as in the case of VSO's HIV-related work in Southern Africa, where one funding stream had finished before another one had started (a period from March until December 2013).

Value added

Without the past decade of unrestricted funding, VSO would not have been able to achieve the transition from a volunteer-sending organisation that relies to unrestricted funding from the UK government, to a development-focused organisation that is increasingly able to attract restricted programme funding.

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[84] The annual SGA report claims that an "investment of £9.1 million into individual donor recruitment and cultivation in the UK and Ireland has resulted in a growth in VSO's unrestricted income during the SGA period of 54%: from £5.2m to £8.0m." (2013/2014 VSO SGA report, page 66.) The footnote seems unlikely and is not referenced: "This rate of growth falls within the top quartile for sector 'return on investment' indicators for individual donor recruitment."

[85] In addition to considerable work done in this field, it is also on the radar of the GLT, and the top 20 contracts are now a standard agenda item for their quarterly meetings.

[86] VSO has since managed to attract British Council funding to start an education programme in Myanmar.

Recommendations

SGA funding has enabled VSO to respond to DFID's and IPR1's recommendations and, more generally, to an operational context that has changed dramatically in the course of the past decade. VSO has done so with considerable success, and the recommendations made in this report are much less far-reaching than the recommendations of the IPR1 have been. Following up on these recommendations will probably not require new change trajectories.

Recommendations on VSO's data verification

The external data verification process is exclusively based on interviews. This process could be strengthened considerably by introducing data tracing and sample-based double-checking. This is likely to reduce the percentage of reported 'protocol adherence' (which was 84% in 2014, up from 52% in 2013). Any such reduction is likely to be the consequence of better measurement rather than deteriorating performance.

Recommendations on M&E

- 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:
    - The sustainability of impact. This requires evaluations that are conducted a few years after a programme's closure.
    - VSO's most impressive successes. These successes could be used to learn from and could serve the purpose of strengthening VSO's policy contributions and marketing material.
    - 'Mystery failures.' This could provide a deeper understanding of the variables that make or break VSO's programmes.

- In the past period, VSO's Regional M&E Managers have spent much of their time training and advising people in country offices. This has been useful and appreciated. In the next few years, these 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.

- Evaluations are most useful if VSO learns from and acts upon their findings. Currently, there is not always a management response to evaluation reports; VSO does not always follow up on recommendations; and post-evaluation action plans are not always incorporated in wider action plans (and therefore risk being forgotten about.)

Recommendation on accountability

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 case of VSO programmes that work on the basis of eligibility criteria and entitlements, this means that, at least:

- 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.[87]

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[87] These two bullet points roughly equate to commitments 4 and 5 of the Core Humanitarian Standard, which has been launched on 12 December 2014, and which replaces the HAP Standard on Accountability and Quality that I would previously have referred to.

Recommendations on processes
- VSO would benefit from a formalisation of a number of its processes.
- Many processes, within and across functions, could be streamlined.

Recommendation on equity
VSO's draft VfM position paper states that equity "is at the very heart of our work." In reality, this is not always the case. At least, VSO should assess and be explicit about the equity implications of its choices. Currently, VSO does not systematically conduct this type of analysis.

Recommendation on advocacy
In each country's next strategy development process, the country programmes should develop tangible evidence-based advocacy messages. Such messages would potentially strengthen:
- 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.

Recommendations on partnership tools
- VSO should ensure never to miss the initial tripartite meeting, after the first three months of a placement, to review the placement. After this, VSO should at least conduct biannual visits to each placement organisation. In cases where these meetings do not take place, the likelihood of volunteer isolation, and ultimately of ineffective partnerships, increases.
- 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.
- 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.

Recommendations in relation to a shift in power in favour of the Global South
There is a shift in the power balance, 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:

- 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 does not systematically happen.
- VSO could align itself more to partners' systems and structures. For example, if a government's annual cycle starts at a different time than the UK cycle, then VSO should embed its practice in the cycles of its partners, and not the other way around.

Recommendation on consortium dynamics
VSO increasingly operates in a funding environment where consortiums are the norm. In consortium settings, the key risk is for VSO to be seen as the HR function of a wider programme, and for its volunteers to essentially be 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 the one of 'providing volunteers,' and that it plays an active role in any consortium's M&E processes.

Annex 1: IPR2's Terms of Reference

Note: the IPR2 inception report superseded these Terms of Reference, and has a focus that is based on DFID's PPA intervention logic.

Background and Purpose

This is the second Independent Progress Review (IPR2) to be undertaken by VSO within the 5 year Strategic Grant from DFID 2011-2016. This is a formative evaluation taking place halfway through the strategic grant funding period. The purpose of the review is two-fold:

Performance and accountability: To analyse and demonstrate the efficiency and effectiveness of VSO's work by providing robust evidence that describes results and explains how this type of funding is spent to contribute to – and provide value for money across – VSO's work with poor / marginalised groups.

Learning and decision-making: To explore how strategic funding builds capacity and systems which support learning across VSO in terms of enhanced knowledge management, evaluative enquiry and performance improvement. Specifically, this review should evidence the ways in which improvements made in response to the 2012 IPR1 assessment will help VSO to make strategic investment decisions that ultimately achieve results for intended beneficiaries.

Findings and recommendations from this review will be used in three ways:

1) To inform improvements of the current systems to maximise the value of the strategic funding for the remaining two years;

2) To feed into the final Independent Progress Review (IPR3) which will be undertaken at the end of the strategic grant;[88]

3) To feed into a wider evaluation[89] currently being undertaken for DFID to assess the overall impact Programme Partnership Arrangements (PPA) between DFID and other civil society organisations benefiting from unrestricted funding. This wider evaluation has the same objectives: to establish the extent to which PPA funding has had an impact (in strategic, organisational and/or programmatic terms) on the capacity of PPA holders to deliver their results.[90] Therefore this assignment is framed by DFID's revised PPA theory of change which sets out the rationale and logic for DFID's investment in the PPA fund – see Annex A. It also fits neatly with the revised global theory of Change of VSO – see Annex B. [Note from the consultant: to keep this overall IPR2 report as light as possible, I have not included these annexes into this annex.]

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[88] VSO intends to commission a third review (IPR3) upon completion of the five year SGA period, to build on learning from IPR1 and IPR2, and review achievement with a summative focus.

[89] Coffey International (2014), Revised 2014 Programme Partnership Arrangements Evaluation Strategy.

[90] In line with OECD-DAC criteria, the wider PPA evaluation focuses on three key questions: What were the results of strategic funding through the PPA and did this investment achieve good value for money? (Impact and Value for Money); To what extent is there an effective and demonstrable link between the strategic use of funding (e.g. on activities to improve organisation effectiveness) and the benefits delivered for socially excluded communities? (Relevance and effectiveness); and, How and with what effects were plans for sustainability enacted to ensure that the benefits continue post-funding? (Sustainability)

Further the review should test the overarching hypothesis for investment through the PPA fund, which is that: "The unrestricted and flexible nature of PPA funding enables [VSO] to develop their capacity and systems in ways that lead to measurably improved results and value for money."

Key evaluation questions
This evaluation should cover the period since IPR1, such that IPR1 and IPR2 collectively cover the first three years of strategic funding received from DFID i.e. 1st April 2011 to 31st March 2014.

Performance and accountability
This component should comprise:
- Synthesis of what has been achieved and the role unrestricted SGA funding played in achieving sustainable development results that represent good value for tax payers' money;
- Evaluating the strategic value added of SGA funding at the global / organisational level based on the revised VSO global theory of change. For example, (how) has VSO used unrestricted funding to promote innovation and / or leverage restricted funding to achieve development results? and,
- Recommendations on how to maximise the impact of unrestricted SGA funding to further improve performance and accountability in the remaining two SGA years.

Learning and decision-making
This component should comprise:
- The role of unrestricted SGA funding in building capacity and systems which support learning across VSO in terms of enhanced knowledge management, evaluative enquiry and performance improvement;
- Evaluating the effectiveness of the strategic change programmes implemented by VSO in terms of delivering the required strategic and operational change set out in IPR1. What has been achieved so far, and (how) do / might these achievements ultimately deliver benefits for poor / marginalised groups?
- Recommendations on how to maximise the impact of unrestricted SGA funding to further improve learning and decision-making in the remaining two SGA years.

Methodology
The contractor is expected to use a mixed method approach. The proposed methodology should include at the minimum desk research, analysis of a sample of programmes and interviews with stakeholders. We anticipate the methodology comprises 4 key phases:

Phase One: Inception
The contractor will complete all scoping and preparatory activities during this phase in order to inform the design of a robust methodology to be proposed to, and agreed by, VSO. This should include consultation with Coffey International to discuss contribution to their wider PPA evaluation.

VSO currently works in 22 countries. VSO will work closely with the contractor to agree on clear selection criteria for programmes / country offices to be included for in-depth analysis and / or field visits. While priority should be given to geographical balance (an appropriate Africa – Asia Pacific split reflecting output / finance volume), other criteria to be considered includes:

- Substantive coverage of VSO's three core sectors – education, health / HIV – AIDS & livelihoods;
- Weighting by use of SGA funds – heavy / light, increasing / decreasing reliance on unrestricted funding;
- Partial overlap with IPR1 and Path of Partnership countries – at least 1 repeated visit alongside new countries / programmes;
- Country office / programme staff capacity to host a visit given other pre-existing commitments.

VSO will provide a range of documentation to inform the scoping process, including:

- VSO's global theory of change and results framework
- 2 x annual external verification reports (undertaken by Jigsaw Consult), 2013 and 2014
- Performance Improvement Plan
- Evaluation reports available for the 3 year SGA period
- VSO PPA Annual Report for Years 1 - 3
- Raw PMLT data (Year 3 accessible via VSO's online dashboard)
- Access to 2014 Annual Country Reviews and Guidance on Annual Country Reporting
- A number of evidence based case studies

The contractor is expected to deliver an Inception Report which clearly sets out: criteria for programme selection, a proposed stakeholder and programme visit sample, a finalised methodology, a work plan and a proposed initial structure for final report. The inception report should include a description of the methods to be used in undertaking the project with recommendations for the size and composition of the sample, justifying the approach and highlighting any risks. It should be clear, concise and unambiguous (no longer than 30 pages).

Phase Two: Desk based review
The contractor should carry out a desk based review of internal and external documents, with telephone consultation with a selection of strategic and operational stakeholders. This review should span all three key sectors in the revised VSO Global results framework – education, health and secure livelihoods. This phase will focus on assessing the extent to which results have been achieved, and what systems have been improved since IPR1.

Phase Three: Field work
Three country office / programme field visits, focusing on the key VSO sectors health, education and secure livelihoods (these three sectors are part of the revised VSO theory of change, and the revised logframe for the extension period 2014-16 of the strategic grant)[91]. Each visit should include consultation with key VSO country office staff, volunteers, key strategic stakeholders, local partner organisation staff and end beneficiaries.

Phase Four: Analysis and Reporting
The draft final report should include a) a summary of the methodology employed (as described in the inception report), including the limitations of that methodology, b) evidence based findings based on desk review and country visits, c) conclusions drawn from the findings and d) recommendations.

Timing and deliverables
The following milestones have been agreed for the review:

- The **inception meeting** held during the week commencing Monday 18th August 2014.
- **Deliverable 1: Inception report** – to be submitted by Friday 12th September 2014. Based on initial scoping and preparation, this should include a finalised methodology and work plan, criteria for country office selection, initial identification of stakeholders to interview and a proposed initial structure for final report.
- The inception report will be reviewed and signed-off by VSO by 19th September 2014.
- **Fieldwork** is expected to take place between mid October and end of November 2014.

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[91] Participation and Governance is a key sector which is part of the revised VSO global theory of change but is not covered in the revised logframe for the extension period 2014-16. It is subject to a separate review and hence outside the scope of this evaluation

- **A first presentation to Steering Group** on 4 Nov 2014, outlining and testing emerging findings from work completed to date and first country visit to Uganda.
- **Deliverable 2: Case study reports** with learning from country visits by Wednesday, 3 December.
- **Deliverable 3: Draft final report** due by 8 December 2014. This draft final report should include a) a summary of the methodology employed (as described in the inception report), including the limitations of that methodology, b) evidence based findings based on desk review and country visits, c) conclusions drawn from the findings and d) recommendations. The draft final report will be reviewed by VSO with comments sent to the contractor by 12 December 2014. The final report to be submitted by the contractor by 15 December and signed-off by VSO leadership by 17 December 2014.
- **Deliverable 4:** A second presentation of the evaluation's findings, conclusions and recommendations to be delivered to a wider group of stakeholders within VSO in early January 2015.

In addition, VSO will also require regular updates on project progress to be submitted to Project Manager via telephone / e-mail.

Reporting and accountability
The evaluation will formally report to Matt Foster. Day-to-day contact point and feedback on deliverables will be provided by Rebecca Murray and oversight by Caroline Guinard within VSOs Impact & Accountability team. Logistical support, facilitation and coordination will be provided by Angelica Gomer, and contract arrangements by Cassandra Grasso.

A cross-functional, senior-level Steering Group will be convened to oversee the evaluation and provide feedback on deliverables. This includes:

- Matthew Foster – Director of Strategy & Programme Effectiveness Group, Chair of the Steering Group
- Donne Cameron – Global Leadership Team, Director for Africa
- Angela Christie – Member of Impact & Effectiveness Board
- Caroline Guinard – Senior Manager, Impact & Accountability
- Rebecca Murray – M&E Manager, Impact & Accountability
- Jacqui Wilson – DFID Stakeholder Manager
- Faye Booker – Head of Change Programmes, Strategy & Programme Effectiveness Group
- Joe McMartin – Strategy & Programme Effectiveness Group
- Jenny Pryce – Special Projects Accountant

Insurance requirements
Contractors are required to have in place professional indemnity insurance cover for £1,000,000 and public liability insurance cover for £1,000,000.

Budget and payment schedule
The overall indicative budget for this study is […] exclusive of VAT.[92]
Payments will be made as follows, in line with receipt of key deliverables:
30% upon approval of the inception report.
30% upon approval of case studies.
40% upon submission and approval of final report.

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[92] Travel and expense costs will be covered directly by VSO, in addition to this core budget.

Annex 2: Methodology

Introduction

In two ways, the IPR1 and IPR2 have been two very different exercises.

- **The IPR2 remit was narrower than the IPR1 remit had been.** The IPR1 amounted to an overall organisational performance assessment. The IPR2 focus was mostly about changes made in the past period, and about the results of these changes. This was reflected in the number of days allocated to these two assignments (120 days for IPR1, versus 81 days for IPR2.)

- **By 2014, VSO had turned into a much more reflective and assessment-oriented organisation than it had been in 2012.** In 2012, getting information had been like pulling teeth. By 2014, VSO had become a lot more conscious, reflective and analytical of its own strengths and remaining weaknesses. Almost all information I asked for turned out to be readily available. This information was also more immediately understandable, and had often been analysed already, internally or externally.

The evaluation purpose

The stated purpose in the Terms of Reference (see Annex 1) was modified in the inception report, and became three-fold:

1. The extent to which VSO's key change processes have strengthened or will strengthen organisational effectiveness.
2. The extent to which the quality of VSO's programming in Africa and Asia has improved or will improve, in terms of delivering positive change for poor / marginalised people.
3. How SGA funding has enabled VSO to develop its capacity and systems in ways that lead to measurably improved results and value for money.

The inception report diluted the ToR's key focus on the IPR1 recommendations because VSO had planned to move well beyond these recommendations: "**The […] end goal [is] VSO both incorporating and looking beyond the IPR recommendations to fundamentally transforming itself into a results-led organisation.**"[93] With mutual consent, the IPR2 looked at VSO's broader changes, which encapsulate but are not limited to an IPR1 follow up.

The no-duplication principle

The IPR1 assessment amounted to some 120 days. The IPR2 was originally scheduled to be similarly intensive,[94] but we reduced it to an 80-day assignment on the basis that much of the IPR2 work had already been done and did not need redoing. The implication is that the IPR2 report has not attempted to critique the logframe itself (as VSO's internal auditor had already done this at a level of quality that I would be unable to surpass) or verify the logframe data (as Jigsaw had already done this). Similarly, the IPR2 has not re-assessed programmes that had been externally evaluated in the

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[93] *Impact and Effectiveness Project Initiation Documentation V1*, page 2.

[94] On page 13, *Impact and Effectiveness Project Initiation Documentation V1* foresees that the external evaluator would dedicate a total of 120 days to the IPR2. The initial IPR2 contract (later superseded with mutual consent) went further and foresaw a *minimum* of 120 days, plus up to 20 days for the purpose of preparation.

recent past; and has not scrutinised VSO's most recent annual SGA report to DFID with quite the same rigour as the IPR1 report had done, as this report had been written by an external consultant rather than in-house.

Methods used

Initially, I assumed that this IPR2 would be closely aligned with Coffey's overall 2013-14 PPA assessment, and that this would mean that it would follow Coffey's overall assessment strategy (as the IPR1 evaluators had been asked to do two years before). However, an inception-stage conversation with Coffey's PPA Project Manager and Project Director proved me wrong: this SGA assessment and Coffey's PPA evaluation are separate and complimentary exercises; there was no need to feed VSO's IPR2 findings into Coffey's analysis; and there was no need to follow Coffey's evaluation strategy or methods.

The methods followed in the course of this IPR2 were simple: I reviewed documents, and I talked with people, using a combination of formal interviews, informal conversations and focus group discussions (see annex 3 for a comprehensive list of people consulted). This was a much more limited methodological toolbox than the one we had used during IPR1. The reasons were that information was much more readily available, and that many other assessments had already covered the issues that required many of the IPR1 methods such as data trailing and process mapping.

Most interviews were open and most questions were broad, guided only by the documents that VSO had sent me and by previous conversations. Only towards the end of each country visit and the overall assignment did I start to work with lists of themes and questions, to fill the gaps in the analysis. Wherever possible, I have tried to triangulate statements. In a few cases, this showed that claims of impact, made by partners, were the consequence of a social desirability bias and crumbled under scrutiny. For example, a Resource Centre's Director praised a system that a previous volunteer had developed, which allowed distant secondary schools to borrow equipment from the central Resource Centre. When I asked to see the register of borrowed material, it turned out that none of these schools had ever borrowed anything.

I categorised all my notes of all interviews and documents, roughly on the basis of the structure of this report. This report was very easy to write: I looked at the notes of each theme, and the analysis presented itself.

Sampling

Country and sector selection: purposeful sampling
IPR1 had visited six countries for one week each, and had provided a report and recommendations for each of them. In a paper- and Skype-based exercise, IPR2 assessed the follow up on these country-specific recommendations. In addition, IPR2 made three new one-week country visits.

For the IPR2's country assessments, VSO selected seven countries that could be visited: Cambodia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Nepal, Rwanda and Uganda. VSO made this selection on the basis of six criteria, which were:

1. Geographical balance: VSO wanted there to be two African countries and one Asia-Pacific country, to reflect VSO's geographical division of funding and logframe contributions.
2. Coverage of VSO's three core sectors: education, health and HIV/AIDS, and livelihoods.
3. Variety in the dependence on SGA funds.
4. Capacity of country staff to host a visit, in view of other commitments.

5. Partial overlap with IPR1: there should be at least a single repeat visit.
6. Partial overlap with Path of Partnership (PoP) countries: there should be at least one PoP pilot country.

We then matched country office availability and my availability, and the outcome was that I would visit:

- Uganda, where the assessment would focus on livelihoods because Uganda's main livelihoods programme was thought to represent 'new style VSO.'
- Cambodia, where the assessment would focus on education, because livelihoods work had been covered in Uganda and Cambodia's health programme is closing down.[95]
- Malawi, where the assessment would focus on health, because it was the one remaining sector.

This is a reasonable selection of countries though, inevitably, it has drawbacks. Specifically:

- ***Representativeness.***
  - All three country offices receive visitors regularly, partly because they are all seen as relatively high-achieving offices.
  - All three country programmes have managed to significantly reduce their reliance on unrestricted funding in the course of the past three years (Uganda: 69-39-16%; Malawi: 70-55-38%; Cambodia: 60-53-35%).
- ***Timing.*** It would have been easier to complete this assignment within the timelines set if the country visits had taken place before the second half of November, but the Malawi and Cambodia country offices are fully committed until that time.
- ***Rigour of IPR1 country visits.*** Of the six IPR1 country analyses, the Cambodia analysis was the least thorough. This makes an IPR1-IPR2 comparison in Cambodia less useful than it would be in any of the other IPR1 countries.

Partner selection: a combination of blind pencil tip sampling and clustering
We selected initial partners on the basis of blind pencil tip sampling, with the restriction of travelling time (not more than 6 hours per day), and then we clustered around these initial partners. For example, I visited the Provincial Office for Education in Mondulkiri on the basis of the blind pencil tip, and utilised my presence there by also visiting the nearby Resource Centre.

Beneficiary selection: disproportionate stratified multistage sampling

- ***Multistage sampling.*** For examples: Programme X works with Y Vocational Training Institutes. I would first sample from Y (partly using blind pencil tip method, but only with schools that were located at no more than reasonable distance); then visit the school and sample once more when *in* the school.
- ***Stratified sampling*** because it is important to get representatives from different groups, such as girls and boys; and children who are and who are not part of a VSO programme.
- ***Disproportionate sampling*** because both VSO and DFID are interested in the extent to which programmes reach particularly disadvantaged groups. I focused more on girls than on boys, and on ethnic minorities if ethnic minorities were particularly disadvantaged.

Quality assurance

During the IPR1, VSO had used the services of:

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[95] Not a great argument.

- One external peer reviewer in the tender selection stage.
- Two external peer reviewers for the review of the inception report.
- One external peer reviewer to assess the draft IPR report, the way we had processed the external reviewer's and VSO's comments to this draft report, and the final report.

At the end of the IPR1 process, a Coffey panel assessed each of the 43 IPR1 assessments. The panel's conclusion was that the VSO evaluation had been 'very strong' and that 'the study itself, and the rigour with which the analysis is carried out would be of benefit as a model to the rest of DFID's PPA portfolio.'[96]

Perhaps this explains why there was not external peer review at all during this IPR2. Instead, I tried to ensure quality by:

- Sharing and discussing all tentative finding with the staff involved on an ongoing basis.
- Ending each country programme assessment with an immediate on-site face to face debriefing and discussion of findings and recommendations.
- Drafting country reports within two days after each visit, and submitting each of these reports to the office's Country Director. All three Country Directors shared this draft report widely, and provided me with consolidated feedback, which I processed.
- Presenting and discussing findings at an IPR2 Steering Committee meeting (halfway the assignment) and at the VSO 'Programme Summit' (towards the end of the process).

On one occasion and with prior written VSO approval, I have sub-contracted another consultant – Sue Enfield - for a single day of work, at no cost to VSO. This was because I found it hard to verify the extent to which VSO Ghana had followed up on the findings of the IPR1 country assessment, as I had not been the person who had conducted that IPR1 assessment.[97]

Limitations and choices

This was a well-organised (but not in any way orchestrated) assignment. During the IPR1, documents had regularly been untraceable, not mutually consistent, and inconsistent with raw data. During the IPR2, this was no longer a problem.

Because of the limited time spent in each countries (five working days, including ample travelling), I had to make choices. In consultation with VSO, these choices were in favour of partners and target communities, and the implication is that I have not spoken with any donor representatives, and only with a single consortium partner (Pachi, in Malawi).

The evidence base for this report is reasonably robust, though the analysis would have benefited from one or more additional country visits, and additional time for the triangulation of findings across programmes. This was not possible, because of the limited time available for this assignment (81 days, compared to 140 days in an earlier version of the IPR2 contract). Nonetheless, I note that

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[96] Coffey (November 2012) *PPA Mid-Term Performance Assessment*, pages 7 and 9.
[97] Eventually, the assessment of the IPR1 follow up at country level did not make it into this IPR2 report because of the 30-page size restriction and the mixed-bag nature of the findings, but Sue's conclusions were that "The Ghana team has taken systematic steps to address all of the weaknesses identified during IPR1. This has already delivered [improved] products (e.g. Country Strategy) and systems (e.g. MERKS system, partnership process). Some of these improvements made have yet to produce the level of data in reporting and learning that is desirable but this is a function of time."

the examples this report uses to illustrate critical observations merely serve as *illustrations*. They are never the only evidence that these critical observations are based on.

Because of the space restrictions (the core of the IPR2 report would be 30 pages or less) I chose to leave out issues that seemed relevant but are not part of the intervention logic of DFID's PPA-related Theory of Change (see the introduction to the report). This means that I discussed issues such as VSO's regionalisation and the follow up on IPR1 recommendations at country level on various occasions throughout this process, but not in the final report.

Confidentiality

For the purpose of quality assurance I keep a data base of all quotes used in this report. In case of requests to disclose the origins of any particular quote I will seek written approval, from the person behind the quote, to disclose his or her identity, before doing so.

Annex 3: Informants

Family name, first name	Employer	Role	F/M	Type of contact	Date
Abbe, Katerega	VSO Nigeria	Ex-volunteer	M	Face-to-face conversation (in Uganda)	25.10.2014
Acker, Marilyn	VSO	Head of Risk and Internal Audit	F	Face-to-face conversation and email exchanges	23.09.2014
Agea, Ogwang Kalisto	Human Technical Gateway Centre, Uganda	Central Manager	M	Group conversation	23.10.2014
Akena, Geoffrey	Youth Affairs, Uganda	District Community Development Officer	M	Group conversation	22.10.2014
Amanya, Francis	VSO Uganda	Sub-Grant Officer at Human Technical Gateway Centre	M	Conversation	24.10.2014
Andruga, Jimmy	Bobi Vocational Training Institute, Uganda	Manager	M	Group conversation	23.10.2014
Anek, Freda Bella	VSO Uganda	Programme Coordinator	F	Conversation	24.10.2014
Ashe, Andrew	One Billion		M	One-to-one conversation	19.11.2014
Awasthi, Sanjay	VSO Ghana	Country Director	M	Face-to-face conversation	14.10.2014
Ayoo, Phoebe	VSO Uganda	YDP Project Coordinator	F	Conversation	22.10.2014
Bassett, Patricia	VSO Malawi	Volunteer	F	Group conversation with Luciano Msunga present	18.11.2014
Bennell, Mary	VSO Uganda	International volunteer	F	Group conversation	23.10.2014
Booker, Faye	VSO Kingston	Head of Strategic Change, Strategy & Programme Effectiveness	F	Face-to-face conversations and email exchanges	04.09.2014 and 23.09.2014
Brauer Sluka, Stephanie	VSO Regional, Africa	Head of Fundraising Africa	F	Skype conversations	11&13.11.2014

Family name, first name	Employer	Role	F/M	Type of contact	Date
Buyten, Marouschka	VSO, for the National League of Commune and Sangkates in Cambodia	Policy Advisor	F	Dinner conversation	24.11.2014
Byrne, Yvonne	VSO Uganda	Deputy Country Director	F	Various face to face and email conversations	21.10 – 07.11.2014
Cameron, Donne	VSO Regional, Africa	Director of Africa	F	Several conversations	05.09.2014, 29.09.2014 and 02.10.2014
Carson, Carol	VSO Malawi	Volunteer	F	Conversation, together with Luciano Msunga and Angela Khonyongwa	19.11.2014
Cass, Kathleen	VSO, formerly for Sok Sabay, currently for VSO Cambodia	Organisational Management Advisor	F	Group meeting, dinner conversation and debriefing	24.11.2014
Chamveka, Redson	Positivo, Malawi	Communication Director	M	Group conversation	17.11.2014
Chandler, Alice	VSO, for the Provincial Office of Education in Mondulkiri, Cambodia	Primary Education Advisor	F	Conversations and school visits	25-26.11.2015
Chanthoeun, Sot	Po Long Village School, Cambodia	School Director and Teacher	M	Conversation	26.11.2014
Chea, Vantha	VSO Cambodia	Country Director	M	Conversation, group meeting and debriefing	24&29.11.2014
Chigeda, Rose	Ngwenya Primary School, Malawi	Head of School	F	One-to-one conversation	18.11.2014
Children (unnamed)	Various schools, Cambodia	Pupils	F&M	Focus group discussions	26-27.11.2014
Chimazuma, Angela	Biwi Primary School, Malawi	Head of School	F	One-to-one conversation	18.11.2014
Clark, Darren	VSO Malawi	Volunteer	M	Group conversation	17.11.2014
Confidential	Zomba Prison,	Prison Guard	M	One-to-one	20.11.2014

Family name, first name	Employer	Role	F/M	Type of contact	Date
	Malawi			conversation	
Confidential	Zomba Prison, Malawi	Prisoner	M	Conversation with him and Matthews, another prisoner	20.11.2014
Confidential	Zomba Prison Malawi	Prisoner	M	Conversation with him and John, another prisoner	20.11.2014
Custance, Mike	VSO, for the National Aids Authority, Cambodia	Strategic Management Advisor	M	Dinner conversation	24.11.2014
Davios, Olinga	Human Technical Gateway Centre, Uganda	Data Officer	M	Group conversation	23.10.2014
De Haan, Flip	VSO Malawi	Volunteer	M	Group conversation with Luciano Msunga present	19.11.2014
Dino, Lydia	Lalogi, Health centre 4, Uganda	Public Health Nursing Officer	F	Conversation	22.10.2014
Emerson, Jim	VSO	CEO	M	Face-to-face conversation	14.10.2014
Foster, Matt	VSO Kingston	Director of Strategy and Programme Effectiveness Group	M	Several conversations	Various
Friend-Pereira, John	VSO Cambodia	Head of Programmes	M	Conversation, group meeting and debriefing	24&29.11.2014
Garvey, Michael	VSO Uganda	Volunteer	M	Conversation	20.10.2014
Gates, Russell	VSO Tanzania	Programme Development Manager	M	Skype conversation, jointly with Jean van Wetter	09.10.2014
Gentili, Dario	VSO Malawi	Country Director	M	One-to-one conversations and conversations together with Steve Tahuna	17-21.11.2014
Gordon,	VSO Kingston	Director of People	F	Skype and face-	03 and

Family name, first name	Employer	Role	F/M	Type of contact	Date
Kathryn				to-face conversations	14.10.2014
Griffith, Simon	Coffey	Project Director, PPA	M	Inception conversation, together with Peter Mayers, Faye Booker and Rebecca Murray	04.09.2014
Grimaldi, Alex	VSO Kingston	Finance Manager	M	Face-to-face conversations, jointly with Jenny Pryce	22&23.09.2014
Group representatives	YELG, Uganda	Chair, Treasurer, Members	F&M	Group conversations	21.10.2014
Guinard, Caroline	VSO Kingston	Interim Head of Impact and Accountability Team	F	Inception meeting and occasional contact	02.09.2014
Hewitt, Dave	VSO Cambodia	Programme Manager Education	M	Debriefing	29.11.2014
Hoyle, Dawn	VSO PNG	Country Director	F	Skype conversation	30.10.2014
Hughes, Pamela	VSO, for the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, Cambodia	English Education Advisor	F	Lunch conversation	24.11.2014
Jansen, Eveline	VSO, for the Secondary Resource Centre at Hun Sen School, Cambodia	Science Laboratory Advisor	F	Conversations and lab visit	25-26.11.2015
Kachidowo, Aswell	Malawi Prisons Service, Malawi	National HIV Assistant	M	One-to-one conversation and conversation with him and Ibrahim Sindi, his line manager	20.11.2014
Kakande, Edward	VSO Uganda	Acting Country Director	M	Conversation and debriefing	20 and 24.10.2014
Kamdonuyo, Joyce	Nurses and Midwives Council	Nursing Officer for Examinations and Regulation	F	Conversation, together with Catherine	17.11.2014

Family name, first name	Employer	Role	F/M	Type of contact	Date
	of Malawi	and VSO volunteer's line manager		Sekwalor, a VSO volunteer	
Kandirikirira, Niki	VSO Regional, Africa	Regional Director, Horn and East Africa	F	Skype conversation	29.10.2014
Kapfitze, Thoko	VSO, for the Kartie Provincial Teacher Training College, Cambodia	Teacher Training Advisor	F	Conversation and dinner	27.11.2014
Kasakula, Temwa	VSO Malawi	Programme Manager Health	F	Conversation, together with Steve Tahuna	19.11.2014
Keiderling, Susanna	VSO Malawi	Volunteer	M	Group conversation with Luciano Msunga present	19.11.2014
Khanjiwe [No family name provided]	VSO Malawi	Programme Manager, Education	F	One-to-one conversation	18.11.2014
Khonyongwa, Angela	VSO Malawi	Project Manager	F	Skype conversation and conversation together with Luciano Msunga and Carol Carson	19.11.2014
Kolida, Soth	Provincial Office of Education in Kartie, Cambodia	Accounting Officer	M	Conversation	27.11.2014
Koma, Alenya	Human Technical Gateway Centre, Uganda	Head of Finance	M	Group conversation	23.10.2014
Komakech, Robert	Gulu District Youth Council,	Chair	M	Group conversation	22.10.2014
Kongkea, Tang	Secondary Resource Centre at Hun Sen School, Cambodia	Chemistry Teacher and Custodian of Chemistry Lab	M	Conversation	26.11.2014
Kongkear, Taing	Hun Sen High School and the Resource Centre, Mondulkiri, Cambodia	Chemistry Teacher and Caretaker at the Resource Centre	M	Conversation	26.11.2014

Family name, first name	Employer	Role	F/M	Type of contact	Date
Kotonya, Lilian	VSO Jitolee	Head of Business Resourcing	F	Face-to-face conversation	25.10.2014
Kraet, Terl	Po Til Village School, Cambodia	Bunong (minority) Teacher	M	Conversation	26.11.2014
Lanendam, Hans	VSO, for the 'Science Project', Cambodia	Science Education Advisor	M	Lunch conversation	24.11.2014
Leng, Heng	Chhloung District Council, Cambodia	Chief of Council	M	Conversation, together with the Governor of Chhloung District	28.11.2014
Lotte, Rene	VSO, for the National Council of Decentralisation and Deconcentration, Cambodia	Policy Development Advisor	M	Dinner conversation	24.11.2014
Magai, Dorothy, Dr	Nkhoma College of Nursing and Midwifery, Malawi	Principal	F	Conversation with Luciano Msunga present	18.11.2014
Mahone, Kerry	VSO Malawi	Volunteer	F	Group conversation with Luciano Msunga present	18.11.2014
Makwana, Chandrika	VSO Malawi	Volunteer	F	Group conversation with Luciano Msunga present	18.11.2014
Makwenda, Charles	Pachi, Malawi	Head of Programmes	M	Conversation with him and Gibson Masache	21.11.2014
Malata, Address, Professor	Kamuzu College of Nursing, Malawi	Principal	F	Conversation with Luciano Msunga present	18.11.2014
Marino, Heng	Kartie Primary School, Cambodia	School Director	M	Conversation	27.11.2014
Martin, Tracey	VSO (freelance)	Consultant for Partnership for Change	F	Inception conversation	03.09.2014
Masache, Gibson	Pachi, Malawi	Chief Executive Officer	M	Conversation with him and Charles Makwenda	21.11.2014

Family name, first name	Employer	Role	F/M	Type of contact	Date
Masi, Puong	Kartie Primary School, Cambodia	Grade 5 Teacher	F	Conversation	27.11.2014
Mayers, Peter	Coffey	Project Director, PPA	M	Inception conversation, together with Simon Griffith, Faye Booker and Rebecca Murray	04.09.2014
McMartin, Joe	VSO Kingston	Strategy and programme Effectiveness Group	M	Face-to-face conversations	02&23.09.2014 and 14.10.2014
Msunga, Luciano	VSO Malawi	Regional M&E Manager (Southern Africa)	M	Several one-to-one and group conversations	18-21.11.2014
Msunga, Luciano	VSO Malawi	Regional M&E Manager, Southern Africa	M	One-to-one conversation	18.11.2014
Mugenyi, Cleophus, Dr	Directorate of Education Standards, Uganda	Director	M	Conversation	20.10.2014
Mungonya, Brian	VSO Uganda	Project Officer	M	Conversations in car	22.10.2014
Murray, Rebecca	VSO Kingston	M&E Manager, Impact and Accountability	F	Conversations and email exchanges	Various
Ng'oma, Mellifa	VSO Malawi	HR Manager	F	One-to-one conversation	21.11.2014
Nkhalamba, Gillian	Ministry of Health, Malawi	VSO volunteer's manager	F	One-to-one conversation	17.11.2014
No names captured	Ngwenya and Biwi Primary Schools, Malawi	Teachers	F	One-to-one conversation	18.11.2014
No names captured	Biwi Primary School, Malawi	Pupils	F&M	Brief focus group discussion	18.11.2014
Novuth, Khiev	Mondulkiri Provincial Office of Education, Cambodia	Deputy Primary Chief Officer	M	Conversation, together with Primary Chief Officer	25.11.2014
Nyirongo, Daniel	VSO Malawi	Volunteer Communication Officer, seconded to education	M	One-to-one conversation	18.11.2014

Family name, first name	Employer	Role	F/M	Type of contact	Date
		programme			
O'Brien, Maria	VSO Regional, Asia	Geographical Finance Manager	F	Skype conversation	01.10.2014
Obong, Isaac	VSO Uganda	YDP Project Officer, Lango and Teso	M	Conversation	24.10.2014
Obong, Jacob	VSO Uganda	Project Assistant	M	Conversations in car	21.10.2014
Ocan, Geoffrey	Bobi Vocational Training Institute, Uganda	Management	M	Group conversation	23.10.2014
Odida, Laboke	Bobi Vocational Training Institute, Uganda	Management	M	Group conversation	23.10.2014
Odus, James Peter	Human Technical Gateway Centre, Uganda	Programme Officer	M	Group conversation	23.10.2014
Ojara, Martin	VSO Uganda	Project Officer	M	Conversations in car	21.10.2014
Ojok, Isaac Newton	Gulu District Local Government Secretary for Community-Based Services, Uganda	Secretary and Vice Chairman	M	Group conversation	22.10.2014
Okilamgole, Sister Rose	District Health Office, Uganda	Deputy District Health Officer	F	Conversation	22.10.2014
Olwenyi, Moses	VSO Uganda	Programme Manager Health	M	Various conversations	20-24.10.2014
Omona, Frank	Daniel Comboni VI Gateway Centre, Uganda	YDP Manager	M	Group conversation	21.10.2014
Onek, Rose	Lujorongole Health centre 2, Uganda	Nursing Assistant	F	Conversation, together with a colleague	22.10.2014
Oneka, Regina Apio	Lujorongole Health centre 2, Uganda	Head of the Health Centre	F	Conversation, together with a colleague	22.10.2014
Ongam, Robert, Dr	District Health Office, Uganda	Deputy District Health Officer	M	Conversation	22.10.2014
Orem, Joseph	VSO Uganda	Regional M&E Manager	M	Ongoing conversations and	20-24.10.2014

Family name, first name	Employer	Role	F/M	Type of contact	Date
				sparring	
Orem, Joseph	VSO Regional, Horn and East Africa	Regional M&E Manager	M	Face-to-face conversations	20-24.10.2014
Orinda, Caroline	Chhloung District Office of Education, Cambodia	Primary Education Advisor	F	Conversation, school visit and lunch	28.11.2014
Otim, Okello	Human Technical Gateway Centre, Uganda	Deputy Principal	M	Group conversation	23.10.2014
Ouma, Nancy	VSO Kingston	Global Resourcing Manager	F	Group conversation	14.10.2014
Patrick, Russ	VSO Uganda	International volunteer	M	Group conversation	23.10.2014
Peng, Reth	VSO Cambodia (freelance)	Interpreter and former Head of Programmes of VSO Cambodia	M	Sparring partner	25-28.11.2014
Phiri, Mbachi	VSO Malawi	Finance Manager	F	One-to-one conversation	21.11.2014
Pindani, Mercy, Dr.	Kamuzu College of Nursing, Malawi	Dean	F	Conversation with Luciano Msunga present	18.11.2014
Pirum, Pov	Kratie Provincial Teacher Training College, Cambodia	Trainer	M	Conversation, together with second trainer	27.11.2014
Powell, Bert	VSO, for the Chhloung District Council, Cambodia	District Council Advisor	M	Conversation and lunch	28.11.2014
Prestage, Penny	VSO Kingston	International Medical Manager	F	Skype conversation	30.09.2014
Proctor, Patrick	VSO Regional, Asia	Regional Director, Asia & Pacific	M	Skype conversation	29.09 and 01.10.2014
Pryce, Jenny	VSO Kingston	Special Projects Accountant	F	Conversations, mostly jointly with Alex Grimaldi	03, 22 & 23.09.2014
Reynolds, Rob	VSO Malawi	Volunteer	M	Group conversation with Luciano Msunga present	19.11.2014
Robinson, Phil	VSO Regional,	Geographical	M	Skype	03.10.2014

Family name, first name	Employer	Role	F/M	Type of contact	Date
	Africa	Finance Manager		conversation	
Rushforth, Sheila	VSO Uganda	International volunteer	F	Group conversation	23.10.2014
Saoum, Sam Moly	VSO Cambodia	Finance Manager	F	Conversation	24.11.2014
Sari, Mien	Chhloung District Office of Education, Cambodia	Chief	M	Conversation	28.11.2014
Sari, Som	Chhloung District, Cambodia	Governor	M	Conversation, together with the Chief of the Chhloung District Council	28.11.2014
Sayer, John	VSO Regional, Asia	Director of Asia	M	Skype conversation	14.11.2014
Sekwalor, Catherine	VSO Malawi	Volunteer	F	Conversation, together with Joyce Kamdonuyo, her line manager at the Nurses and Midwives Council of Malawi	17.11.2014
Setha, Puth	Secondary Resource Centre at Hun Sen School, Cambodia	Secondary School Director	M	Conversation	26.11.2014
Shrivastava, Neha	VSO Regional, Asia	Regional Recruitment Manager – Asia	F	Group conversation (joined by Skype)	14.10.2014
Sindi, Ibrahim	Malawi Prisons Service, Malawi	National HIV Coordinator	M	Conversation with him and Aswell Kachidowo	20.11.2014
Sith, On	Chhloung District Office of Education, Cambodia	School Director	M	Conversation and school visit	28.11.2014
Sittha, Port	Provincial Office for Education, Mondulkiri, Cambodia	Director of Lower and Upper Secondary School	M	Conversation	26.11.2014
Smith, Helen	VSO Malawi	Volunteer	F	Group	17.11.2014

Family name, first name	Employer	Role	F/M	Type of contact	Date
				conversation	
Socheat, Chea	Mondulkiri Provincial Office of Education, Cambodia	Primary Chief Officer	M	Conversation, together with Deputy Primary Chief Officer	25.11.2014
Tep, Socheata	VSO Cambodia	People and Operations Manager	F	Group meeting, conversation and demonstration of Salesforce	24.11.2014
Sokha, Eng	Kratie Provincial Teacher Training College, Cambodia	Administrative Chief	M	Conversation	27.11.2014
Sophannith, Pich	Kratie Provincial Teacher Training College, Cambodia	Trainer	F	Conversation, together with second trainer	27.11.2014
Steward, Jimmy	One Billion	Chief Technology Officer	M	One-to-one conversation	18.11.2014
Student representatives	Daniel Comboni, Human Technical and Bobi, Uganda	Current students and graduates	F&M	Group conversations	21, 23 and 24.10.2014
Sweeney, Judy	VSO Malawi	Volunteer	F	One-to-one conversation	17.11.2014
Tahuna, Steve	VSO Malawi	Head of Programmes	M	One-to-one and group conversations	17,19 & 21.11.2014
Taylor, Andrea	VSO Kingston	Global Recruitment Manager	F	Group conversation	14.10.2014
Tremmel, Konrad	Daniel Comboni VI Gateway Centre, Uganda	Director of Centre	M	Group conversation	21.10.2014
Urquizo, Cesar	VSO Kingston	Data Analyst	M	Skype conversation, together with Rebecca Murray	26.09.2014
Van Waes, Su-Anne	VSO, for the Provincial Office of Education in Kartie, Cambodia	Education Management Advisor	F	Conversations and lunch	27.11.2014
Van Wetter, Jean	VSO Tanzania	Country Director	M	Skype conversation, jointly with	09.10.2014

Family name, first name	Employer	Role	F/M	Type of contact	Date
				Russell Gates	
Viko, Lillian	VSO Uganda	Programme Manager Education	F	Conversation and an email exchange	20.10.2014
Williams, Kathryn	VSO Malawi	Volunteer	F	Group conversation with Luciano Msunga present	19.11.2014
Wilson, Jacqui	VSO Kingston	DFID Stakeholder Manager	F	Inception conversation	01.09.2014

Annex 4: References

(2014) *IDEVFARR10033GB PPA Learning - Evaluation Approach Paper- Revised 201411008*

Acker, M. (December 2013) *Review of DFID M&E data collection and reporting*

Acker, M. (September 2014) *Internal Auditor meetings - minutes Sept 2014*

Acker, Marilyn (2014) *Country Office Self Audit Tool Kit, update August 2014*

Carson, C. (Scheduled for publishing in 2015) *Using Continuing Profession Development (CDP) to improve maternal and neonatal health in Ntcheu District Malawi: Ntcheu Integrated Maternal Health Project (NIMHP)*

CCC (2013) *Voluntary NGO Certification System; Field Assessment Summary Report (*Cambodia)

Chambers, R. (3 September 2014) *Perverse Payment by Results: frogs in a pot and straitjackets for obstacle courses*, https://participationpower.wordpress.com/tag/organisational-learning/

Chandler, A. (2014) *BELL MoEYS KH - Eng. Oct 25, 2014; BELL1 Audio Linked to MoEYS* (Cambodia)

Chandler, A. (2014) *Cambodian Voices – Paving the Way* (Cambodia)

Chandler, A. (2014) *School Enrolment Campaign – a road less travelled* (Cambodia)

Chandler, A. (2014) *SEM English presentation June 18, 2014* (Cambodia)

Chattoe-Brown, A., Dobson, S. and Phillipson, R. (July 2014) *Health Partnership Assessment Report; Bringing together midwives and nurses to improve maternal health in Malawi through volunteerism and partnership*, VG17, HLSP.

Coats, S. (15 August 2014) *ToRs IPR 2 – Comments* (and subsequent emails)

Coffey (2014) *Revised 2014 Programme Partnership Arrangements (PPA) Evaluation Strategy*

Coffey (January 2014) *IDEVFARR10033GB Revised PPA Evaluation Strategy v4 SG 20130130*

Coffey (October 2014) *PPA and Learning Partnerships: Approach to identifying and evaluating learning* (*IDEVFARR10033GB PPA Learning - Evaluation Approach Paper- Revised 201411008)*

Cooke, J. (16 August 2013), *Feedback on VSO's 2012/13 SGA annual report*

CSEC (Undated) *New Education Act Campaign* (Malawi)

Daniel Comboni Vocational Institute (2014) *VSO Tender Document Return, proposal of the Daniel Comboni Vocational Institute*, Uganda

DFID (2011) *DFID's approach to Value for Money*

DFID (28 November 2013) *Annual Review of SGA with VSO*

DFID (2014) *Correspondence on VSO's IATI compliance* (sent to me in the form of an email from VSO's Alex Grimaldi, on 30 September 2014.)

Eekelen, W. van, Enfield, S and Patel, A. (October 2012) *Independent Progress Review of DFID's SGA with VSO*

Eekelen, W. van (June 2014) *Evaluation of VSO RAISA, GM, undated, with comments WvE, 130618*,

Eekelen, W. van (June 2014) *Review of RAISA evaluation, 130620*

Eekelen, W. van (July 2014) *Review of RAISA evaluation, 130723*.)

Ericsson (June 2014) *Sub-Saharan Africa; Ericsson Mobility Report Appendix*

Foster, M. (September 2014) *VSO discussion paper on the future of international civil society organisations (ICSOs) and the role of citizens and voluntary action*

Fregonese, D. (16 December 2011) *HPS Volunteering Grant; Full Application Form: Bringing together Midwives and Nurses to Improve Maternal Health in Malawi through Volunteerism and Partnerships*

Friends International (undated) *Myths and Realities about orphanages in Cambodia*

HAP, People In Aid and Sphere (December 2014) *Core Humanitarian Standard*

Hill, R (2014) *VSO Cambodia Volunteers' Views on their Placement Experience*

Hollow, D., Tanner, L. and Thomas, M. (2013) *VSO APR/PMLT field verification – final report*, Jigsaw Consult

Jigsaw Consult (2014) *VSO external verification 2014 country and partner selection*

Lee, S. and Stylski, G. (2014) *Report on an Audit of the Cambodia Country Office (draft version),* VSO

Majela, T.K. (November 2012) *Report on the Review of the Life Skills Education; secondary school curriculum*, UNICEF

Mandalazi, P. and Mac Donald, N. (March 2014) *Sexual and Reproductive Health Project, mid-term evaluation report,* VSO Malawi

Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, N° 48 OrYK.SNorN (undated) *Guideline on Institution Primary and Public Kindergarten Progress 2014-2015* (Cambodia)

Nova Business Consulting and Prime Health Consulting and Services (2014) *Mid-Term Evaluation of 'Bringing Together Midwives and Nurses to Improve Maternal Health in Malawi through Volunteers and Partnerships'*

PACHI (2014) *Ntcheu Integrated Maternal Health Project (NIMHP), mid-term survey report, March 2013 - April 2014* (Malawi)

Prew, Martin (May 2014) *UNICEF – Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports BRMS Mentorship Project Evaluation*, University of Witwatersrand School of Education

Tanner, L., Thomas, J. and Thomas, M. (2014) *APR-PMLT verification exercise 2014 – final report*, Jigsaw Consult

UNICEF (2013) *Final Document_good practice hand book*, on Quality Improvement in Primary Schools through BRMS Implementation Programme

Urquizo, C. (undated) *Comments on completing the grids* (This is a reflection on the way the initial data protocol had been used)

Vernon, Ph. (26th July 2014) *Institutional Effectiveness Improvements as Reported by PPA Grantees*, International Alert

VSO (19 July 2013) *Invitation to Tender for Gateway Centres, Northern Uganda*

VSO (2010) *2010 VSO Strategy - People First, full strategy*

VSO (2012) *2012-15 VSO Corporate Business Plan*

VSO (2013) *2012-13 VSO Year 2 SGA Report (DFID)*

VSO (2013) *2013 - Extract from GLT Minutes outlining strategic decision to close certain country offices and the rationale*

VSO (2013) *2013 - VSO Strategy - People First - Review and taking stock*

VSO (2013) *2013-14 Education Thematic Theory of Change*

VSO (2013) *2013-14 Health HIV and AIDs Theory of Change - Diagram*

VSO (2013) *2013-14 Livelihoods Theory of Change*

VSO (2013) *2013-16 VSO Corporate Business Plan*

VSO (2013) *Data changes note - SGA Yr3 analysis (3)*

VSO (2013) *Paper to map evaluation opportunities v1*

VSO (2013) *Working-Smarter-summary-of-results-2013*

VSO (2013) *working-smarter-table-2013*

VSO (2013) *Year 3 Report Writing – Process Map*

VSO (2014) *AFT operational manual final_Oct2014* (AFT means African Fundraising Team)

VSO (2014) *DFID SGA funding as a % of total funding year on year*

VSO (2014) *Proposal development flow*

VSO (2014) *Signature package guidelines*

VSO (2014) *Strategic change costs for Willem*

VSO (2014) *2013-14 VSO Year 3 SGA Report (DFID)*

VSO (2014) *2014-15 VSO IEP Report for the IB (June) – Final*

VSO (2014) *2014-17 VSO Corporate Business Plan*

VSO (2014) *519933_1* (this is an overview of internal audits 2003-2015)

VSO (2014) *Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ending 31 March 2014*

VSO (2014) *Country Office Audit PROGRAM - August 2014*

VSO (2014) *DRC Unrestricted funding* (This is a spreadsheet that lists the unrestricted costs incurred scoping the opening of an office in DRC)

VSO (2014) *Finance figs - restricted _ unrestricted by country* (this spreadsheet shows the overall decrease in the SGA part of VSO's country offices' funding)

VSO (2014) *HEART Organogram*

VSO (2014) *IELG capacity report july 2014*

VSO (2014) *IPR1 Desktop Review - Progress to date - 8_8_2014*

VSO (2014) *IPR2 – Country / programme selection*

VSO (2014) *MMW4P unres vs res analyis* (spelling error in file title)

VSO (2014) *Performance Improvement Plan DFID - 1 May 2014*

VSO (2014) *PMLT data for Years 1-3*

VSO (2014) *PMLT, Civil Society Education Coalition, 2013-14*

VSO (2014) *Programme costs development, Annex g (12-13 and 13-14)* (This document disaggregates some of the budget headings, explaining what headings such as 'pure programming' actually *mean*)

VSO (2014) *Q&P savings* (This is a spreadsheet that compares expected and realised savings in relation to the Kingston office move and a few major procurement items)

VSO (2014) *Salary costs, 2010-2014*

VSO (2014) *Self Audit Findings- Compilation of India findings*

VSO (2014) *Staff - Cambodia comparison report 2013*

VSO (2014) *Support cost percentage drop*

VSO (2014) *Update on PFPA for GLT_Nov 2014 draft v3*

VSO (2014) *Volunteer costs, breakdown* (This document is a table that is part of an email from Alex Grimaldi, of October 2014.)

VSO (2014) *VSO Cambodia audit recommendations draft 20 Nov*

VSO (2014) *VSO Ethiopia Internal audit report recommendations Final - update Aug 2014*

VSO (2014) *VSO_Key_decision_making_groups_-_March_2014[1]*

VSO (22 Sept 2014) *Improved data quality milestones* (This is an organisation-wide data process map)

VSO (22 Sept 2014) *Improved data quality milestones* (This is an organisation-wide data process map)

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VSO (August 2014) *Partnershhip 4 Change presentation 20aug2014* (spelling error in original)

VSO (December 2013) *Processes and plans for improving SGA reporting to DFID*

VSO (February 2014) *Global Income Growth - GIG - programme summary*

VSO (July 2013) *Y3 logframe - final 14 July 2013*

VSO (July 2014) *VSO-DFID logframe 2014-16 (SGA extension years 4-5)*

VSO (June 2014) *Managing for results – setting and meeting the targets in the DFID logframe*

VSO (June 2014) *Strengthening existing M&E - learning and recommendations - June 2014*

VSO (October 2013) *Africa Proposal Development Manual_Oct2013*

VSO (October 2014) *VFM position paper consolidated draft 29 10 14 CLEAN+cover sheet*

VSO (September 2014) *People First Programme Architecture; Summary of Meeting and Discussions*, Pretoria

VSO (September 2014) *VSO's aggregated budget by source and expenditure heading*

VSO (Undated) *PMLT-Aggregated_data_2013-14*

VSO (undated) *Quality and Performance programme summary*

VSO (undated) *SSO Quality - Final VSO response to Deloitte report*

VSO (undated) *VSO Logical Framework for VSO Global Baseline 2011–2014*

VSO (version of October 2013) *Impact and Effectiveness Project Initiation Documentation V1*

VSO and MoEYS (2009) *Project Agreement Between MoEYS and VSO for Improvement in Quality and Effectiveness of Basic Education Programme* (Cambodia)

VSO Cambodia (2012) *Minutes Volcom Meeting*, *16th February 2012*

VSO Cambodia (2012) *VSO Cambodia Strategy 2012-17* [document titled *IC13031_Cambodia_CSP_24Oct (Hi Res)*]

VSO Cambodia (2014) *Annual Country Review 2013-14* (document titled *FINAL__Cambodia ACR 2013-2014_17.4.14*)

VSO Cambodia (2014) *Cambodia Country Funding Plan - Nov 2014*

VSO Cambodia (2014) *Health Programme Exit Review Plan*

VSO Cambodia (2014) *IPR 2 Evaluation 24-28 November*

VSO Cambodia (2014) *Minutes Volcom Meeting, 13th September 2014*

VSO Cambodia (2014) *Regeneration Progress June to September 2014*

VSO Cambodia (2014) *Review: VSO Cambodia's Health Programme*

VSO Cambodia (2014) *VSO-Cambodia Pre-Arrival Briefing Pack for IPR2, Consultant*

VSO Cambodia (May 2013) *M&E presentationVSOC_APG_Delhi_7May2013*

VSO Cambodia (probably 2012) *Volunteer Report Version-Final*

VSO Cambodia *VR Data Master V1.0 with report workings_head of program*

VSO Malawi (11 November 2014) *Malawi Volunteer Case Management*

VSO Malawi (14 November 2014) *Concerns raised by volunteers for Executive Council Meeting*

VSO Malawi (2012) *VSO Malawi Strategy, 2012-2015*

VSO Malawi (2014) *Health Partnership Scheme Project Outline: Additional Support to HPS Grant Holders*

VSO Malawi (2014) *Placement Review, Salima District Council*

VSO Malawi (April 2014) *Annual Country Review, April 2013 – March 2014*

VSO Malawi (August 2012) *Revised Nurse Clinical Instructor placement objectives (Jenny Wright - Aug 2012)*

VSO Malawi (first created May 2013) *Country Office M&E Calendar of Events*

VSO Malawi (July 2014) *Management response notes 30th July 2014*, which is a management response to the THET mid-term evaluation recommendations.

VSO Malawi (May 2012) *M0522.0001.0006 - Malamulo College - Midwife Trainer.Preceptor.Clinical Instructor (Mariam Nanabawa)*

VSO Malawi (September 2014) *Monthly Bulletin Template (2)*

VSO Malawi (October 2014) *Status of Phone Calls to Volunteers*

VSO Malawi (Undated) *VSO Small Grant - Advocacy for Change; interim narrative report*

VSO Malawi (undated) *Logframe; WATERS (Water Futures: Towards Equitable Resource Strategies)*

VSO Malawi (undated) *Revised Logframe for NIMHP*

VSO Mongolia (2014) *Community Health Volunteering Programme, Final Evaluation Report*

VSO Uganda (2012) *Uganda Country Strategic Plan 2012-15 - Commencing April 2012*

VSO Uganda (2013) *Uganda's PMLT Form_updated_dec_2013 Educate!*

VSO Uganda (2013) *VSO Uganda 2012-2013 Annual Report*

VSO Uganda (2014) *2013/2014 VSO SGA report*

VSO Uganda (2014) *Country Strategic Plan 2015-2018 development process*

VSO Uganda (2014) *Focus groups October 2014 (2).* These are slides used for an October 2014 focus group discussion in the context of VSO's People First Programme Architecture in Uganda

VSO Uganda (2014) *Lesson observation form*

VSO Uganda (2014) *VSO UG YELG YR II Q3 2014 Report*

VSO Uganda (June 2014) *YDP Quarter 5 report April-June 2014 - FINAL COPY*

VSO Uganda (March 2013) *ICS - concept note - draft - 14 March 13*, with a suggestion on how ICS could be utilised in Uganda

VSO Uganda (October 2014) *VSO Uganda Country Programme Overview – Oct 2014*

Worksheet in Impact and Effectiveness Project Initiation Documentation V1

Note: this overview does not include the documents from PNG, Tanzania, Ethiopia and Ghana, unless I referred to them in the report.

Annex 5: Cambodia country report

Willem van Eekelen, 15 December 2014

Contents

Note: in this report, VSO means the global VSO family, and VSOC means VSO Cambodia.

Introduction

This report is part of the 'Second Independent Progress Review' (IPR2) of VSO's Strategic Grant Agreement (SGA). It is based on a one-week assessment. As such, it is inevitably partial. If the findings of this assessment are reasonably coherent, then I owe this to:

- The school children, VSOC partners, volunteers and staff I have met with. They all very generously shared their insights with me.
- VSOC's preparation for this visit, which was meticulous, without being in any way over-rehearsed or orchestrated.

During this week, I was accompanied by Mr Reth Peng, who is an excellent interpreter. He is also a previous VSOC Head of Programmes, which meant that he always understood *what* he was interpreting. This was very helpful indeed.

This document includes a number of recommendations. During the debriefing I learned that most of these recommendations are not new, and following up on a number of them is already part of the plans for the coming period.

VSOC and the wider organisation

VSOC had been ahead of the curve in several of the key change areas of the wider VSO. This has been a mixed blessing. VSOC's advanced position has sometimes made it easier to adapt to new realities, but has also meant that:

1. A disproportionate number of international visits and study tours chose Cambodia as a destination. This has probably been useful for the wider organisation, but has added pressure to the country office's staff.
2. On a few occasions, VSOC had to replace something that the office felt was already adequate with something new that required getting used to (e.g. its finance manual, programme-level theories of change and Volunteer Quarterly Report template).
3. On a few occasions, VSOC has invested considerable time in something, only to see it changed again. The most obvious example of this is the month spent on the development of a partnerships-related documentation trail, after which VSOC learned that the entire partnership process is being revised again.

In addition, and in line with other country offices' experience:

4. VSOC has found the various changes to be a lot to cope with. I have not assessed the extent to which VSOC's Conxtinuous Professional Development (CPD) has kept pace with the changes but I was told it is lagging behind, and this seems plausible.
5. VSOC is burdened by the teething problems that VSO's various new systems are inevitably facing. Salesforce, for example, has enormous potential, but currently this

potential has yet to be realised, while its many bugs and shortcomings are taking its users considerable extra time.[98]

6. There are considerable benefits too. VSOC mentioned strong regional support and the regional gatherings in particular (of which VSO Asia seems to have fewer than VSO Africa), both of which enable staff to learn and cross-fertilise.[99]

The people

Introduction

The IPR2 exercise aims to avoid overlap with previous assessments. In this context, I have not looked at the country office's structure, systems and processes, and merely note that:

- The CCC certification uses many organisational capacity indicators and VSOC has been 'fully compliant' with nearly every one of these indicators.[100]
- The November 2014 internal audit resulted in a (still draft) report that includes recommendations, as audit reports always do, but that essentially indicates that VSOC is a well-performing country office.
- The systems and processes that I have come across in the course of this week are not just 'good' but often had thoughtful and empowering elements built into otherwise standard procedures (from the daily fruit break to the rotational facilitation of the biweekly staff meetings).[101]

The remainder of this section focuses on VSOC staff and volunteers.

Staff

The various worldwide change programmes and the regional 'programme regeneration' (which included a restructuring of VSOC) cause a level of pressure that probably help to explain the high staff turnover that VSOC has been struggling with in recent times. This pressure also affects some of the office's good practice principles - such as the half day per month for 'capacity building,' which has not been allocated in the past six months.[102]

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[98] I saw this confirmed during a brief 'guided tour' through Salesforce, in which VSOC showed me a number of bugs related to data transfer and data entry.

[99] An example provided was the realisation that some country offices have sizeable programmes with very few volunteers indeed. At the moment, all VSO programmes in Cambodia are almost exclusively centred on the deployment of international volunteers.

[100] An exception was the M&E-related awareness of VSOC's staff.

[101] This IPR2 assessment itself serves as an example of this thoughtful professionalism as well. For example:

- This was the first office that presented me with a highly relevant 'information pack' upon arrival;
- VSOC had selected an interpreter who was independent (as in: not working for VSOC) but knowledgeable about VSOC's work; and
- The debriefing was scheduled for Saturday afternoon to allow me time to travel to remote places, return on Friday evening, and still have time to prepare myself for this debriefing.

[102] Feedback on a draft version of this report was that: "The Regional Team have been providing additional resources since the past few weeks and this will help the programme team to reduce their workload so that they can focus on programme implementation and APRs-PMLTs in the next 3 months."

Nonetheless, the global staff survey of December 2013 shows that VSOC staff was more satisfied than it had been a year before, and in both years Cambodia-based staff was significantly more satisfied with their VSO employment than the worldwide average on almost all indicators (except for pay). The positive work environment is confirmed in the CCC certification report,[103] where VSOC is 'fully compliant' with indicators such as "The NGO has good and supportive internal relationships" and "Management and staff roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and written."

In absence of warning signals, I did not assess this further.

Volunteers

Almost all volunteers are international volunteers (including ICS and 'Eminent' volunteers.)[104] 'Local volunteers' are occasionally mentioned in reports, but I have not come across any of them and understand that their 'use' is limited to ICS.

The remainder of this section is about long term international volunteers – noting that Cambodia could possibly do more to diversify its portfolio of volunteering types.

Recommendation 1
VSOC's programmes are almost exclusively centred on the deployment of international volunteers. In today's VSO, this is only one of several potential types of inputs. VSOC could probably benefit from a bigger 'toolbox.'

Recruitment of volunteers

Competing volunteering organisations, perceived risks in today's economic climate, fears for terrorism and Ebola, a changing macro mentality: they all make it difficult to recruit new and befitting volunteers.

For the time being, Salesforce has teething problems that make it even harder to recruit duly qualified international volunteers (an issue that the overall IPR2 report will elaborate on). Donor conditionalities further complicate recruitment (e.g. CUSO only accepts Canadians or south-to-south volunteers).[105] With candidates applying for multiple positions, there is cross-country competition.[106] These challenges contributed to VSOC's decision to phase out of its health programme. Another implication is that a number of volunteers who should start in the very near future have not yet been identified.

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[103] The CCC certification is a Cambodian certification for high-performing NGOs. See *Voluntary NGO Certification System; Field Assessment Summary Report*.

[104] VSOC noted that Eminent Volunteers have been successful on various occasions, but emphasised that such visits should always be based on the country office's advocacy and strategic needs, rather than Kingston's scheduling.

[105] These conditionalities hinder VSO's direction of travel, which is to recruit globally.

[106] In which, incidentally, VSOC is at an advantage because of its fast decision-making processes.

Most volunteers are positive about their relationship with the country office.[107] Often, office support appears to be:

- **Friendly.** Volunteers say that the office 'goes the extra mile' (e.g. "I always receive an answer to my emails within a few hours, and if this is not possible then I get a quick phone call to say that 'I don't have time for an email now but the answer is X and Y'"). This culture of thoughtful helpfulness extents to spouses as well: there is no formal spouse support, but two of the spouses I talked with[108] could mention support they had received (motor cycle training and a reference to a job opportunity). This is not 'VSO' but VSO *Cambodia*: volunteers with previous placements in other countries confirmed that "the office is more congenial than the offices in most other countries." A first-time volunteer mentioned that she had visited VSOC and two other VSO offices before starting her placement, and that VSOC was the only one that she felt comfortable with (and where a staff member took her for lunch – another example of that 'extra mile').

  This friendliness is no doubt genuine, but it is also *deliberate*. "It is a matter of prioritisation – **they** will eventually be the ones delivering the work. In the long run, this will lead to success. […] There is a loop here: the higher the level of the volunteer, the more goodwill you get, the better the image of VSO."[109] This deliberateness is illustrated by the June 2014 volunteer survey, which the country office conducted when VSO's Head Office declined to provide country-specific overviews of the findings of its worldwide volunteer survey.

- **Institutionalised.** Every two months there is a minuted 'VolCom' meeting to discuss both volunteer and programme issues. There is also a newsletter, a Facebook page, a 'VolConnect' website for the volunteering community in Cambodia, the occasional multiple-day volunteer gathering, and sub-groups of volunteers that look at specific areas such as the recent engagement survey and volunteer allowances. These are good things, and things that other country offices could learn from.

- **Reciprocated.** Several volunteers (and a spouse) mentioned that they are helping the country office with various things.

Programme support

Most volunteers were positive about the support they received from their programme manager,[110] and dinner conversations confirmed this in various ways.[111] When volunteers

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[107] In the June 2014 volunteer survey, 18 volunteers were satisfied; 6 neutral, and 6 dissatisfied with their relationship with the country office.

[108] They mentioned this during two volunteer dinners to which they were invited as well, which is another illustration of VSOC thoughtfulness.

[109] Programme Manager Education, during the debriefing.

[110] In the June 2014 volunteer survey, 22 volunteers were satisfied; 1 was neutral, and 7 were dissatisfied with the support provided by their programme manager.

[111] E.g. "It is a different organisation now. Programme Management is professionalised. They can support you more, in terms of providing contact, network, context, good relations with ministry. Good connections are vital for our work. The office has excellent networks and they utilise them."

mentioned problems and things that VSOC could have done better, they did this to show that 'not everything is perfect' rather than to illustrate fundamental problems.

Three things seem worth noting in particular, partly because I did not find these things in all VSO countries visited during IPR1 and IPR2:

- **Fulfilling commitments.** All volunteers have had the tripartite three-month placement conversation, for example.[112] This sounds like an open door, but it is not: I have interviewed many volunteers elsewhere who have not had the benefit of this key meeting.

- **Framing the work.** Volunteers appreciate the guidance: **"**I talked with the programme staff and we narrowed [the placement description] down to something relevant and specific enough" and "during my conversations with programme support, they ask questions that show that they are guarding the parameters within which I work."

- **Maximising high level support.** Some of the strategic support is possible because VSOC has developed, over the years, close relationships with 'people in high places.' Again, these relationships are deliberately fostered, and play a role in strategic decision-making (such as the decision to move out of the health sector).[113]

> **Recommendation 2**
> Pilot a single-person VSOC office in one or two of the most volunteer-dense provinces, to provide on-site support for a significant group of volunteers.
>
> This is not a new idea and has, in the past, been rejected on the grounds of costs. These costs are minimal if this person fulfils a virtual but regular country role in addition to this on-site support role. This would also help to ensure full utilisation of this person's time, and would be possible because of the good connectivity in all of Cambodia's provincial capitals.

The work

The work and the mission

According to the CCC certification report "the NGO's activities are consistent with its stated mission." The programmes that I have looked at are indeed consistent with VSO's mission, but they do not comprehensively cover it.

> **Observation**
> VSOC's work is in line with the organisation's mission, but does not cover it. Specifically,

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[112] Although not always after three months, and one volunteer said that this conversation had been strangely hostile (and that this staff member has since left the organisation).

[113] "[…] to be successful in particular programmes, VSO needs to have close relationships with important stakeholders in the sector such as ministries, ministerial agencies and large development organisations. It is harder to build and maintain close relationships in five sectors than in four." (*Review: VSO Cambodia's Health Programme*, section 8.4.)

VSOC programmes "bring people together to build the capacity of government and civil society," and VSOC engages in advocacy work *on behalf of* disadvantaged communities. However, I have not seen evidence that VSOC programmes engages in advocacy work *with* disadvantaged communities, which means that VSOC programmes do not currently "enable poor communities to influence pro-poor policies and access quality basic services."

The work and the strategy

VSOC's strategy is consistent with the organisation's mission. It is also short, clear and 'live.'[114] The big change made to date is the closure of the health programme, which is well-argued and deliberate decision, and which has come with an exit plan.

Observation
VSOC's health sector exit plan covers a final review, but nothing else. Ideally, it should also include plans for a well-managed exit that minimises efforts lost and maximises the chances for sustainable results. This is an observation, not a recommendation, as I understand that the exit plan is currently being finalised in line with the above.

The programmes fit comfortably within the strategy. The only thing that appears to be incomplete is the operationalization of two of the cross-cutting issues. Specifically: I have not come across work related to climate change, and none of the people I spoke with raised gender issues unless I raised them first.[115]

Recommendation 3
It is not obvious that gender issues and climate change adaptation are being integrated into VSOC's operations and programmes (as is envisioned in the 2012-17 strategy). It might be useful to make this mainstreaming an explicit and verified part of the responsibilities of the sectoral Programme Managers.

Implications of restricted funding

The unrestricted portion of VSOC's budget has moved from 60% in 2011-12 to 35% in 2013-14. This is a more significant reduction than the world's average, and the second largest reduction in Asia (after Nepal).[116] In today's VSO, this reduction represents 'success.'[117] However, it also means that:

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[114] This is not always the case: I have also come across VSO country strategies that are long, all-encompassing and remain unrevised in the course of the strategy period. These strategies are a lot of work, but they are not useful.

[115] This is not to say that gender issues receive no attention at all. In this context, feedback to an earlier draft of this report noted, rightly, that 'gender is well integrated into BEL' [i.e. VSOC's work in relation to English language reaching at primary school level.] Moreover, the need to mainstream gender issues *is* part of volunteer placement descriptions.

[116] In Nepal, the unrestricted portion of the budget reduced from 78% to 39% in the same period. This was largely because of its Girl Education Challenge (GEC) grant.

- **VSOC will struggle to fund some of its priorities.** Integrated cross-sectoral programming is unfundable and will have to be done 'on the side.' The school subject of English does not feature on the agendas of institutional donor agencies either. In part, this can be resolved through explaining contexts (e.g. showing that a focus on teaching English is as much about teaching methods as it is about English), credibility and negotiations.

Observation
VSO is a newcomer in the field of restricted funding mechanisms, and negotiating institutional contracts is something that VSO yet has to learn. I trust that the confidence required for this will grow in the coming few years.

Recommendation 4
VSOC should do what it can to get the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS) to cover the costs of one or more volunteers – and then make sure that stakeholders are aware of this decision. This would send a useful signal.

The work and VSOC's image

At national level, VSOC has a strong and positive image. VSOC has direct access to the Minister (not just the ministry) for Education, Youth and Sports. VSOC is one of very few NGOs with representation at Cambodia's annual Education Retreat. VSOC gets attention in the national press. Prominent figures have made public and positive statements about VSOC's role in Cambodia's education sector. VSOC wins awards.[118] When an EU media delegation visited Mondulkiri, they interviewed a VSOC volunteer. UNICEF utilises VSOC volunteers for what almost amounts to traditional Technical Advisor roles (which inspired me to make the observation about VSOC's scope to strengthen its contract negotiations, in the previous section).

The picture is very different at partner and school level. At these levels, Partners are not always aware of VSOC's broader picture. Consequently, the organisational 'image' depends on three things:

- The focus of the work, which is generally seen as worthwhile but not as 'more lofty' than the focus of other NGOs;
- The image of the individual volunteers, which differs per person and partner; and
- VSOC's rules and regulations around material support and per diems, both of which are seen as stingy and which compare unfavourably to other NGOs.[119]

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[117] This success might be temporary if the donor community moves out of Cambodia because of its growing income status.

[118] I have come across a national medal that was awarded for VSOC's work in fisheries, and a UNESCO award for a volunteer's education-related caption of 'innovative, interactive, and inclusive.'

[119] Currently, the government stipulates $34 to be the minimum per diem for an overnight stay, and it goes up by rank. Conversely, VSOC is paying $16, irrespective of rank. For day-long gatherings, Child Fund pays participants $10-$20, depending on location, while VSOC pays $4. VSOC's stance is laudable in principle but causes resentment in practice. The flip side of the coin: when people do attend VSOC events, they do this because they want to *attend*, not because they want the *per diem*.

As the current *programme* approach (as opposed to VSOC's previous *placement* approach) means that some volunteers are essentially imposed upon a partner (e.g. a volunteer is placed in *every* provincial office), it often takes long to build a positive image. The initial reception is sometimes cautious, and not particularly welcoming.

> **Observation**
> Currently, provincial and district partners do not always see 'beyond the volunteer.' I wonder if it might be possible to give more visibility, within provinces and districts, to VSOC's longstanding relations with MoEYS, its country-level standing, and the alignment between VSOC's and the ministry's agendas. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this might strengthen the perceived relevance of volunteer contributions.[120]

The work and VSOC's identity

VSO is not a large organisation, and it provides international volunteers rather than material or direct services. In this context, it seems to me that interventions should be strategic and high level, focused on key bottlenecks or opportunities that are best resolved or utilised with expertise that is not readily available in-country.

Governance is a good example. At the moment, the programme is facing significant problems at both national and district level, and some volunteers feel insufficiently (or not at all) utilised. Moreover, it is not yet clear if Cambodia's decentralisation and democratisation processes will work out, and it is too early to judge if VSOC's contributions to these processes are going to pick up pace and effectiveness.

However, Cambodia *does* appear to be at a crossroads, in terms of accountability. Decentralisation is key to strengthened accountability, and this means that this *is* an important issue. Moreover, because this is a new area for Cambodia, the processes *could* probably benefit from foreign expertise. I do not know if it will work out, but *if* it works out then the impact may be the difference between stability and turmoil. VSOC's governance work is high risk, but potentially high value, and this high potential value makes it worth the risk.

Similarly, I can imagine that international volunteers could strengthen the provincial's and district's **planning capacity**. Good operational planning is routine in many organisations but new in parts of Cambodia's education authorities. Capacity building seems possible and useful, and the deployment of international volunteers seems a plausible way of achieving success.

Conversely, I am not convinced that VSO is the best organisation to focus on **classroom-based activities**. Classroom-based activities can be very useful at classroom level, but VSO

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[120] An illustration of this: during a visit to a partner who by and large ignored its volunteer, a VSOC staff member referred to 'last week's meeting at the ministry' that 'confirmed the importance of X and Y.' After this meeting, the volunteer could see an instant change in the partner's appreciation of and responsiveness to her work.

seems less well-equipped for this than other, larger organisations that use national staff rather than international volunteers. Every new volunteer needs to familiarise her- or himself with the schools; build relations; and overcome a range of fundamental and practical barriers – and thus face inefficiencies and extra costs[121] that peer organisations do not have. If I were to provide funding for classroom activities, or for enrolment campaigns, I would give it to CARE, not to VSO.

Observations
- VSO's interventions should be strategic and high level, focused on key bottlenecks or opportunities that are best resolved or utilised with expertise that is not readily available in-country.
- Conversely, school-based work is not the best possible use of time of international volunteers, who are both costlier and less equipped than national professionals.

Partnerships

Initial reception
Depending on one's point of view, VSOC's proposition is attractive, or not. At its best, VSOC provides experts who help you achieve your goals. In such cases, and provided that a partner is relevant, international volunteers may be able to achieve a lot in terms of individual growth of key individuals,[122] institutional progress,[123] and resolving strategic bottlenecks.[124] In such welcoming environments, bottlenecks that volunteers may encounter are swiftly resolved.[125] At its worst, VSOC provides volunteers you did not ask for and do not know, who do not speak your language and do not know your culture, to support you, with your 30 years of experience, to build the capacity of your department / unit / organisation / function, without prior knowledge of what the capacity deficits might be, and without you necessarily accepting that there *are* any capacity deficits.[126] For some of the health partners, VSOC's proposition was unattractive, and this played a role in the decision to exit from this sector.

Relevance of partnerships
I felt that the partnerships I have come across are, in principle, relevant. In terms of interest and engagement, the picture is mixed. This has been the case in all other countries I have visited in the context of both IPR1 and IPR2.

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[121] In international volunteer is considerably more costly than a national education professional (at least at the level required for school-based support work).

[122] I could not confirm by direct engagement but heard a story, twice, about a not-very-functional provincial counterpart who metamorphosed into an inspiring leader as a consequence of a sequence of volunteer deployments.

[123] Regrettably, I did not come across actual examples of this, so I base this on volunteer predictions and reported success stories.

[124] The newly introduced system of teacher salary bank transfers resolved corruption issues, among other things (see later).

[125] A volunteer described the prompt and adequate response of her line manager, whenever she notified him of an obstacle to her work.

[126] Somebody who is 'unconsciously incompetent' would not normally see the need for support.

Appropriateness of partners

One partnership seemed inappropriate because basic work conditions are not in place (as in: it does not have an office, and the volunteer essentially works from the coffee table in one of the partner's Board member's home). Another partner was paralysed by the highly politicised context in which it operates, and a third one is mainly staffed by consultants who are of the opinion that there is no real scope for capacity building. In yet other cases, agendas and incentives might be so misaligned with VSOC's objectives that capacity building seems irrelevant.

In such cases, and after a period of time, VSOC occasionally arranges for a partners swap. I wonder if it might have been appropriate to have made this decision a few more times: some volunteers feel that they do not have a chance to achieve what they were meant to achieve, and this has probably added to VSOC's early return rates, which are high.

Utilisation of volunteers

In the past week, I have talked with volunteers who feel modestly or dramatically underutilised. I have also talked with volunteers who have identified roles that fit within their placement descriptions; that are appreciated by the partner; that are aligned with the government's priorities as well as the partners' agendas; that work on the basis of monthly and annual plans, and that are essentially 'working out' for both partner and volunteer. My 'sample' is much too small to make an overall statement. The June 2014 volunteer survey probably provides a more representative picture:[127]

	Excellent	Good	Neither good nor bad	Bad	Extremely bad
Do you feel that your placement is a good use of resources?	7/29 (24%)	13/29 (45%)	7/29 (24%)	1/29 (3%)	1/29 (3%)
To what degree do you feel that you are making good use of your professional skills in your placement?	Very good use	Moderately good use	Neither a good nor a bad use	Poor use	Poor use
	7/28 (25%)	15/28 (54%)	4/28 (14%)	1/28 (4%)	1/28 (4%)

Tentative recommendation 5

The three-month tripartite discussion around the placement description is typically preceded by a meeting between the volunteer and the VSOC staff member. In preparation for this meeting, it might be helpful to provide volunteers with a tool that helps to map the partners' incentives and (hidden) agendas. This is to avoid a focus on capacity development while capacity deficits are not in fact the impediment to progress.

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[127] *VSO Cambodia Volunteers' Views on their Placement Experience*, slides 8 and 9.

Value for money

Economy

I did not assess this as VSOC has *just* had an internal audit, which did not identify significant problems, and it is clear that VSOC is careful not to overspend. I do wonder though, if VSOC might be a little *overly* careful.

In principle, the volunteer expense policy is meant as guidance rather than prescription. In practice, I have heard of email exchanges and phone calls about single dollars. This seems unnecessary. Moreover, I cannot think of a good reason for expense policies between volunteers and staff members to be different.

> **Tentative recommendation 6**
> Staff and volunteers should probably be covered under the same expense policy.

VSO's bigger 'economy' issue is the use of international volunteers. If international volunteers do jobs that Cambodian professionals could do just as well then this is an expensive way (i.e. bad economy) to achieve results, ***and*** it prevents the creation of national job opportunities (i.e. labour market substitution). This issue will remain for as long as VSO's identity is largely based on the deployment of international volunteers (but note this footnote[128]).

> **Recommendation 7**
> International volunteering should never be a costly form of labour market substitution: if a Cambodian national can do the same job at lower costs,[129] then the placement is inappropriate. At the moment, VSOC only rarely explores input solutions outside of the context of international volunteering.[130] At the very least, the pros and cons of an international volunteer, compared to national recruitment, should be explicitly considered.

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[128] One volunteer with previous VSO volunteering experience noted that the move from 'a volunteer-sending organisation' to 'a development organisation' is a wrong choice that will cause VSO to lose its distinctiveness. Other volunteers with a previous history of volunteering agreed. An assessment of this perspective is beyond my Terms of Reference, but I would like to note that part of the 'traditional' VSO was centred on the volunteering experience from the point of view of the volunteer. In many cases, this experience has been profound, and even life-changing – as is evidenced by the many ex-volunteers who are still living and working in Cambodia. Not 'counting' this as a benefit of VSO's work possibly makes sense from a developmental perspective, which is why I make this recommendation, but it ignores the inherent benefits of international volunteering.

[129] VSO estimates the costs of an international volunteer to amount to £45 per calendar day. Note that these costs may be lower for volunteers who finish the full two years – but this is not something I have looked at.

[130] An exception is VSOC's science project, which is delivered by national trainers in each province, who also conduct follow-up classroom observations, with VSOC covering the experiment book, the training for trainers, the costs of training and follow-up, and the low-cost experiment resources for each co-operating school. This means that the international volunteer is only a relatively small 'budget item.'

Efficiency

A few inefficiencies could be reduced.

Recommendations 8-10

VSOC would benefit from:

- A few master files that capture partner and MoU expiry dates, reporting requirements and timelines for monitoring visits.
- A few standard process maps (e.g. 'this is the process protocol for meeting invitations to people from other provinces'.)
- A few standard analyses (e.g. these are the key documents and key constraints that you are likely to encounter in your provincial education work).

Much more significantly, there are a number of inherent inefficiencies to VSO's core operational model:

- Volunteers often need months to settle and become productive. Some volunteers describe their initial period in terms such as 'a terrible challenge,' and one volunteer mentioned crying at home, in these first six months. Some volunteers never reach the point of usefulness. One volunteer who had returned early wrote her successor: 'are you allowed to *do* anything?'
- There is a language barrier. At best, this causes inefficiencies. At worst, it leads to ineffectiveness. Sophisticated use of language is particularly important if you are in the business of persuasion, as VSO volunteers often are. In this context, I note that VSOC provides volunteers with 'volunteer assistants' who serve as translators and interpreters (and sometimes also provide logistical support and cultural advice). This dramatically increases the potential usefulness of some of the volunteers. It also compares favourably with an IPR1 assessment of VSO Laos, which did not provide such 'volunteer assistants,' causing some volunteers to be almost entirely unable to communicate with their counterparts.
- Volunteers may face gender and age barriers.[131]
- There is an element of 'making work,' in the form of overly lengthy reports and labour intensive but relatively insignificant activities.[132]
- There are many side-products required to get to the main issue (see the text box on the Trojan horse, in the section on effectiveness).
- Volunteers tend to be less 'busy' than they would like to be.
- New volunteers sometimes start again (with teacher observations etc.)
- There are sector-specific inefficiencies. Cambodia's NGO sector is a crowded market, where one NGO follows the next to focus on broadly the same issue. There are few

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[131] I have not come across overt sexism, ageism or racism among the partners I have spoken with. When asking a provocative question once ('but does this young woman really have skills that you do not have?!') and answer was immediate and without hesitation ('ah, she is young, but her knowledge is not young!'). Obviously, this is not to say that age, sex and/or race could, with some partners, amount to a facilitator or an additional challenge.

[132] I do not mean to be disrespectful and would do the same in the same situations – in general, it says something about the placement, more than about the volunteer.

economies of scale, and there is significant overlap. Even within the volunteering niche, there is ample 'choice' (e.g. VSOC, KOIDA, JICA, a few Australian schemes).

- There are issues related to partner staff turnover, the retention rate of learning, and a host of other well-known development impediments.

These are substantial drawbacks. However, as I write this text I recall the chemistry equipment boxes of the Asian Development Bank that schools never even unpacked; the two large unpacked telescopes in the Secondary Resource Centre, the Asian Foundation's school games that are not used because the descriptions are in English; the endless sequence of per diem-fuelled training weeks; and the many 'development professionals' that never leave their capital city offices to familiarise themselves with the country they work in. This is a profoundly inefficient sector, and VSO is certainly not amongst the organisations at the bottom of the scale.

Effectiveness

In a single week, one cannot hope to get a real sense of a country programme's overall effectiveness, and this section only covers two themes: VSOC's balance of success and failure; and the 'Trojan horse' principle that VSOC often seems to use.

The balance of success and failures

Through research, VSOC and its partner NEP found that there was a significant problem with teacher salaries. These salaries were low, and there was additional risk and loss because of the route through which these salaries reached the teachers. An advocacy trail shows that the research and advocacy work of VSOC/NEP have played a key role in the current Minister's decision to move to a system of salary bank transfers. This system is now operational and it works.

This is a success, and I understand there to have been successes in other sectors too (and perhaps particularly in VSOC's livelihoods work). In other cases, success has been partial,[133] potential,[134] or absent.[135]

Failure is not a problem, and an organisation that seeks to innovate must accept a significant failure rate or will often be disappointed. However:

- It would be good to know more about the *balance* of success and failure. I do not know what that balance is, and am under the impression that VSOC does not know either. This is partly because of the next point:
- In the long run, it is important to be honest about failures. Currently, this is not always the case (see the section on upward accountability).

VSOC's Trojan horse principle

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[133] E.g. BEL has great potential but has, for now, lost ground in the ministry's decision-making stage.

[134] E.g. I understand that an action plan and series of proposals from the MoEYS' Youth Department has been stuck on the Minister's desk for some time now.

[135] Many volunteers referred to failed attempts to achieve meaningful change, and I have seen a few examples of this.

When I asked volunteers about the one thing they want to have achieved by the end of their placements, the answers were diverse. Responses related to the behaviour of key individuals, people's approaches to teaching, institutional change, more efficient processes, better planning capacity, and more accountability towards Cambodian citizens. Whilst diverse, all aims were strategically meaningful.

Conversely, when I asked partners about the work of the volunteers, the answers were often focused on minor material contributions and the volunteers' most tangible bits of work. To an extent, this is VSOC's implicit Trojan horse principle. The text box provides two examples (with thanks to Thoko and Bert for reviewing and agreeing to this text box).

Text box: VSOC's Trojan Horses

Thoko says that her aim in Cambodia is to contribute to a change in Cambodia's teaching approaches, by working with a teacher training college. Her counterparts' perception of Thoko's usefulness is very different. They are enthusiastic about Thoko's presence, and talk about her excellent relations with the staff, and about hygiene training, garbage bins, gloves, painting walls, and bringing potential donors to look at the possibility of adding dormitory space.

- Worst case scenario: Thoko dusts the college, and after her departure the dust will slowly return.
- Best case scenario: Thoko's dusting leads to credibility, which leads to a receptive audience, which leads to a contribution to a change in Cambodia's teaching approaches.

Bert hopes to improve accountability within the Chhloung District Council. Connectivity is one of the steps. Bert arranged Wi-Fi for the office, in the hope that *being* online leads to an online *presence*, and ultimately to an online *responsiveness*. Ideally and over time, this will change the council's perception of accountability.

Conversely, Bert's partner thanks Bert and VSOC for having arranged this Wi-Fi connection, and seems to see this as an end product by itself.

- Worst case scenario: council staff spends a lot of non-work-related time online.
- Best case scenario: the council is on the road towards increased accountability vis-à-vis its constituents.

VSOC's Trojan horse principle might be the best possible route to sustainable development, but it is risky in the sense that the commonly expressed hope that 'maybe he/she will give us something' places VSOC in a league it cannot compete with (i.e. organisations that *actually* give things that are more meaningful than VSOC's occasional crayons and $30 contributions).

Overall, VSOC's Trojan horses probably stand most chance if:

- The volunteers need to influence a few people only. VSOC could help a small planning unit to plan better, but is unlikely to be able to single-handedly help Cambodia's thousands of teachers to teach better.
- Agendas are broadly aligned. Persuading the Government of Cambodia to lower the per diems standards would be wonderful – but the decision-makers benefit very directly from higher per diems, so it would be an aim that VSOC would be most unlikely to ever achieve.
- Longevity of the relations, and the opportunity to build on things. BEL was not produced overnight.

Equity

VSO's VfM position paper states that VSO views equity as "addressing the priorities of the most disadvantaged and addressing inequality within societies." This position paper states that equity "is at the very heart of our work."

In Cambodia, VSOC's most 'equitable' work is probably its indirect[136] and direct work in primary schools. I am not convinced that this is what VSOC should focus on because, in direct work with schools, VSOC is likely to be outperformed by other NGOs.

Conversely, the teachers' salary bank transfers could be seen as an 'unequitable' initiative, as VSOC could also have chosen to focus on community teachers, who earn less than a third of the 'state' teachers and to whom the bank transfer system does not apply. The same applies to teacher training colleges: only a relatively privileged portion of Cambodia's teachers is fortunate enough to have graduated from such a college.[137]

I would not suggest terminating work because it is insufficiently 'equitable.' Instead, equity should be *one* of the considerations. For example, the work of the volunteer who is operationalising the Resource Centre in Mondulkiri is not very 'equitable' at all, as it caters for pupils in upper secondary schools. However:

- It does fit within VSO's mission;
- It is in line with VSOC's strategy;
- The work appears to be picking relatively low-hanging fruit (as in: the equipment is on site, the students are interested, and the custodian I met was motivated); and
- The work is potentially innovative, as the volunteer cooperates with a Phnom Penh-based chemistry professor to introduce no-cost-little-preparation tests to Cambodia's chemistry lessons.

Not all work needs to perform strongly on direct short term equity, but equity *should* be one of the criteria on the basis of which programme decisions are made.

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[136] A good example of this: lower secondary education assumes prior learning of English in its grade 7 curriculum, but only those who could afford private tuition could access English language instruction during primary grades. BEL was developed because to tackle this barrier by preparing *all* children for grade 7.

[137] This is less the case now than it has been in the past, as the intake to teacher training colleges now includes students with lower grades, while high grade students and students of higher income families tend to focus on higher education.

> **Recommendation 11**
> VSO's work in Cambodia is not particularly strong on 'equity.' This is not necessarily a problem, but VSOC should assess and be explicit about the equity implications of its choices – and currently there is no evidence that such analyses are done.

Sustainability

Achieving sustainability is core to the philosophy of VSO, and volunteers go quite out of their way to maximise the potential for sustainability of results. And it is possible, too, as is illustrated by the changed teacher payment method, which is unlikely to be reverted any time soon (and which teachers confirmed actually *works*).

However, both conversations[138] and physical evidence[139] suggest that many volunteer initiatives ultimately failed to achieve sustained results.

At grassroots level, sustained behavioural change within communities is difficult to achieve and requires far more than awareness, knowledge or even attitudinal change. Alone, VSOC is too small to achieve sustained behavioural change. Together with partners, VSOC is a minor actor, operating at relatively high costs (both compared to government bodies and to NGOs that work at larger scale).

At institutional levels, chances are better, but the environment is profoundly aid dependent,[140] incentives are biased toward new and per diem-paying initiatives, and agendas are polluted by personal rather than institutional interests.

Sometimes, all VSOC can hope to achieve is a 'good dusting' (see the text box in the effectiveness section). For bigger successes, VSOC could look at lessons from the teachers' salaries' banks transfers, which seem to suggest that VSOC has most chance to achieve sustainable results if:

- The advocacy messages sit comfortably within the priorities of the Government of Cambodia;
- Only a few stakeholders need to be convinced;
- Solutions are simple and budget neutral; and
- Evidence *matters*, as there are no heavy incentives (at least not among the decision-makers and implementers) that are biased against VSOC's advocacy messages.

Simple tools – power and incentive maps, for example – help to find such opportunities.

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[138] Counterparts were unable to identify sustained changes that previous volunteers had made.

[139] In a provincial office, enrolment data were summarised on a large whiteboard – until 2010, when the volunteer left.

[140] And sometimes almost proudly so: in one school, the director had listed all minor and major contributions from NGOs and individuals, and seemed to consider this list to be a confirmation of success.

Innovation

The IPR1 noted that "Based on limited evidence, this IPR tentatively [concluded that] VSO is ideally suited for innovative work." (Pages 5-6.) In the course of the IPR2, this evidence has become a little more robust. In Cambodia, I have not seen examples of worldwide innovation, but there are certainly elements to VSOC's work that are new to the country – such as the BEL app, the low cost chemistry experiments for high school students, and the plans for online accountability of district authorities.

Accountability

Upward accountability

Upward accountability requires, among other things, functional M&E systems and good practice in data gathering. I have not looked at either, simply because this has recently been done by other assessors (CCC and Jigsaw). Similarly, I have not looked at 'upwards' reporting, as this issue received much attention in other parts of the wider IPR2. Instead, I merely have a single observation to make, about the long term need for truthful reporting.

VSO in its entirety has the tendency to claim successes without real justification. An illustration from VSOC is the country office's most recent Annual Country Review, which is the country office's key public report. In this report, two of the first three 'most significant achievements' in 2013-14 were stated to be health-related,[141] while an internal review of only slightly later date concluded that "during an analysis of VSOC, at the start of this process, the health programme was identified as being particularly weak."[142] In the long run, these discrepancies will be noticed, and they could affect the credibility of the country office.

Recommendations 12

It is best to recognise and acknowledge failures as well as successes, and to report on both of them. It is best to avoid significant discrepancies between external and internal reports.

Downward accountability

As explained elsewhere in this report, I do not think that VSO is the best possible organisation for direct work in schools. If VSOC does continue with school-based work, then it needs to sharpen its downward accountability practice.

Recommendation 13

If VSOC continues with school-based work, then it needs to sharpen its downward accountability practice. At the moment, school teachers and pupils alike are often unclear of the remit of the volunteer, unsure of the next steps, and unaware of any formal complaint procedures – all basic elements of downward accountability.

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[141] See the most recent Annual Country Review, page 2, which lists them to be:
- Improved immediate new-born care through training for 30 staff in 12 provinces, with follow-on support ensuring that trained staff are implementing their new skills.
- Improved emergency obstetric practices in Health Centres and Regional Hospitals.

[142] *Review: VSO Cambodia's Health Programme*, section 1.2.

Accountability to partners

The volunteers I have spoken with are accountable to their partners – or at least do what they can to be accountable. They often work on the basis of monthly and annual plans, and they submit reports on progress they may have achieved. They let their counterparts know where they are (and generally ask for permission). Similarly, the country office submits annual reports to its national counterparts (though not consistently so – hence the recommendation about a master file that lists reporting requirements and timelines).

There is little reciprocity in this accountability. Counterparts do not inform volunteers about their whereabouts or, sometimes, about their work, and no national authority has ever responded to any of VSOC's annual reports (beyond acknowledging receipt).

Partners are unaware of a formalised complaint procedure. If placements are not working out – and this happens – then the partners tend to either find ways to make these placements work without engaging with the country office, or to simply ignore the volunteers.

Accountability from VSOC to volunteers

VSOC conducted a volunteer survey[143] and the results are being followed up on by VolCom. This illustrates an overall attitude of the office that is focused on accountability in general and towards accountable relations with volunteers in particular. In addition, there are formalised volunteer accountability systems (VolCom meetings, newsletters). This does not mean that there are no problems, but it means that these problems are likely to be either isolated blips,[144] or things that will soon be resolved.[145]

Accountability towards the wider development sector

According to the CCC certification report, VSOC is fully compliant with "Standard 3.5," which says that "the NGO will participate in networks to improve coordination, disseminate information, share experiences and good practices." In reality, VSOC does much more than this: the office *and* the volunteers often pro-actively promote coordination and cooperation. This is good practice. It is not all that common in the development sector, and it is not always reciprocated by peer NGOs.

Learning

VSOC learns from:

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[143] This survey only covered themes that a previous worldwide volunteer survey had identified as problematic. The results identified a number of challenges, largely along the lines of volunteers wanting to be more involved in overall VSOC processes. These are meaningful challenges, but I note that they are of a different category from challenges I have found elsewhere, which had to do with volunteers finding VSO staff to be inaccessible.

[144] To give just a single example: one volunteer arrived in his place of work to find that there was a significant discrepancy between his Placement Description (which was mostly about capacity building) and the ToR between VSOC and the partner (which VSOC had not provided him with and which was mostly about hands-on gap-filling work).

[145] Such as the problem of the end-of-month allowance payment, in the initial month, which causes some volunteers financial challenges.

- **Its own experiences.** This is a very reflective and adaptive office, and I came across many examples of learning-based adaptations of the type of "we have added a partnership with the national level department of planning, which is different to the current programme."[146]
- **The wider organisation's realities.** This played a role in the decision to exit from the health sector, as VSO worldwide is facing challenges recruiting midwives (and to a lesser extent nurses) for long term assignments.
- **Its partners.** BEL does not provide lesson *options*, for example, as the Head of the MoEYS Training Department (at the time) suggested that many teachers do not have the capacity to make choices and that the method should be based on lesson *plans* instead.[147]

> **Recommendation 14**
> VSOC could learn more systematically from the wider sector. A few volunteers developed surveys and tools that already exist, and that are freely available online. Perhaps the issue of 'finding good practice' could be part of the induction. Increasingly, this is simply a matter of Googling. A good working assumption for anything that does not require very specific cultural adaptation is that 'it probably exists already.'

In addition and importantly, VSOC *contributes* to sector-wide learning, by:

- Actively encouraging sharing experiences. This happens in international conferences (e.g. both staff and volunteers contributed to a recent UNESCO conference in Bangkok). Impressively, it also happens at VSOC's own initiative: when VSOC organised an education-related office-based presentation, the room was full, and the audience included influential decision-makers.
- Actively engaging in – *initiating*, even – valuable research (such as in VSOC's partnership with NEP).

Such initiatives are not new, within VSO, but they are increasingly *supported* rather than *permitted*, and this is obvious in VSOC as well. This is important as such contributions are key to VSO's success. The organisation is too small to roll out useful innovation, but potentially credible enough to *inspire* the roll out of such innovation. Ideally, for example, VSOC's BEL-related app will end up in the pool of useful audio-based teaching aids, for a range of stakeholders to learn from and adapt for their particular context.

M&E

I did not look at VSOC's M&E practice as I understood that this practice has been covered by other assessors (from Jigsaw) already. Strikingly, I nonetheless have a few recommendations.

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[146] Quoted from *Regeneration Progress June to September 2014.*
[147] This example ticks quite a few good boxes: interaction, good relations, being receptive to good advice, the importance of a genuinely competent counterpart who is genuinely engaged (this was an unexpected half-day meeting), adaptation to local realities, etc.

Assessing the results of VSOC's advocacy work

VSOC's advocacy work takes place at all levels at which VSOC works. For example:

- At national level and through NEP, VSOC achieved success on the reliability of teachers' salary payments.
- At provincial and district level, volunteers are advocating to prioritise the development of good annual operations plans.
- At the level of education facilities, VSOC has messages such as 'use the lab.'
- At the level of the individual child, VSOC promotes school enrolment, and has ad hoc activities such as the gender stories competition.[148]

Recommendation 15

VSOC's advocacy work could potentially achieve powerful results, but VSOC will not be able to claim due credit for it unless it changes its M&E approach. End-of-pipeline tools such as the social accountability framework are useful, but do not capture intermediate results and are therefore at risk of underrepresenting progress. In addition to these end-of-pipeline tools, VSOC could use advocacy logs and attitude measuring tools to capture advocacy-related trigger, tipping and turning points.

Assessing the results of VSOC's governance work

The most recent Programme Regeneration paper says that VSOC will evaluate its governance work, in preparation for the next phase of this work. It is probably better not to do this yet. The work is young, progress has been slow and hesitant, and the findings are likely to disappoint. (This is in line with the bigger picture: the overall governance evaluation for the first three years of work essentially found that little had changed).[149]

Assessing the sustainability of VSOC's results

One of the IPR1 observations was that "we have not found *a single example* of a post-closure evaluation even though, for the type of contribution VSO aims to make, assessing the organisation's impact a few years after it exited from a programme is critical to demonstrate long-term, sustainable impact" (page 21, emphasis in original.) Two years later, this observation remains current. Ex-volunteers who are still living in Cambodia could help to change this.

Recommendation 16, to VSO's M&E function (rather than to VSOC)

Ex-volunteers who are still living in Cambodia could help to could contribute to VSO's worldwide knowledge base by:

- Formally assessing its past decades of working with the MoEYS.
- Asking ex-volunteers for examples of sustained success, and formally assess one or more of these examples.

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[148] A wonderfully non-imposing competition where children are invited to imagine life as a member of the opposite sex. The idea came from the mind of the same volunteer who came up with that award-winning education-related caption of 'innovative, interactive and inclusive.'

[149] The feedback to a previous version of this report was that 'this has been noted in changed ToR for consultant.'

Annex to the VSO Cambodia report: methodology

Approach

This one-week assessment consisted of a review of documents and other types of evidence; conversations with VSOC staff, volunteers and partners; on-site observations; a few focus group discussions with school-going children; and three dinners with volunteers.

Mr Reth Peng accompanied me for from the second day of this assessment onwards. As a previous senior member of staff, Mr Peng is knowledgeable about VSOC's work, and I found him to be a most helpful sparring partner.

Most interviews were open and most questions were broad, guided only by the documents that VSOC had sent me and by previous conversations. Only towards the end did I start to work with lists of themes and questions, to fill the gaps in the analysis. Wherever possible, I have tried to triangulate statements. In a few cases, this showed that claims of impact, made by partners, were the consequence of a social desirability bias and crumbled under scrutiny. For example, a Resource Centre's Director praised a system that a previous volunteer had developed, which allowed distant secondary schools to borrow equipment from the central Resource Centre. When I asked to see the register of borrowed material, it turned out that none of these schools had ever borrowed anything (something that VSOC was, of course, aware of).

I categorised all my notes of all interviews and documents, roughly on the basis of the structure of this report. This report was very easy to write: I looked at the notes of each theme, and the analysis imposed itself.

Choices and limitations

This country assessment amounts to an 8-day assignment. This includes preparation, reading, travel, meetings, data analysis, report writing and editing. The implication is that I selected rather carefully what I could and could not assess. Key choices are as follows:

- **A focus on VSOC's education work.** This is because the Uganda and Malawi assessments focused on, respectively, livelihoods and health. By focusing on education in Cambodia, each sector got covered once (except for VSO's governance work, which is not included in the IPR2's Terms of Reference, and which I spent very little time on).
- **Minimalizing duplication to the extent possible.** Where other assessors had already assessed a certain issue, I merely noted the findings and did not attempt to re-assess. This is why this report does not assess VSOC's M&E (assessed by CCC) or systems and processes (assessed by CCC and the recent internal audit).[150]

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[150] CCC concluded that "The NGO conducts regular monitoring and evaluation of its program/projects," with one exception, which was that staff could not always "explain their involvement in the implementation process." I also noted that the Country Director gave a presentation to other parts of VSO, in Delhi in 2013, about VSOC's work in M&E – and was invited to do so as a consequence of the observation that VSOC was ahead of the game. (This was also why VSOC's request for an M&E officer was not accepted by VSO Kingston.)

- **A focus on SGA ambitions.** This means that I did not follow up on an otherwise interesting observation that VSO's deliberate move towards the image of a 'development agency' is causing the organisation to lose its identity.

Note: key informants are listed in annex 3

Annex 6: Malawi country report

Willem van Eekelen, final report, 10 December 2014

Contents

Introduction

This report is part of the 'Second Independent Progress Review' (IPR2) of VSO's Strategic Grant Agreement (SGA). It consists of two parts. The first part looks at the way VSO's broader change processes are affecting VSO's work in Malawi. The second part is a broad-brush assessment of VSO's current work and programme portfolio.

This report is based on a one-week assessment. As such, it is inevitably partial and largely conversation-based. If the findings of this hasty assessment are reasonably coherent, then I owe this to the children, inmates and VSO volunteers and staff, who all very generously shared their insights with me.

Overall organisational change

The recruitment and utilisation of volunteers

In recent years, VSO's recruitment and utilisation of volunteers has changed dramatically. Three key changes are as follows:

1. **VSO has become a development-focused organisation.** Today's VSO is not a 'volunteer-sending organisation' and it no longer uses the number of international deployments as a key performance indicator. Instead, VSO focuses on development impact, and aims to achieve this impact with, among other things, 'the lasting power of volunteering.'[151] VSO Malawi takes this fundamental shift very seriously, and I have not seen any placements 'for the sake of placements.' Volunteer placements in Malawi are of variable quality and potential usefulness, but all of them are underpinned by a clear development-related rationale.

   This rationale is generally not limited to the immediate work of the immediate partner. Instead, work is designed with the aim of scalability[152] and/or the reinforcement of effects by addressing the same problem from different angles, either longitudinally[153] or across partners.[154] These reinforcing effects of, say, the various inter-partner linkages are not always evident in practice, but most placements are part of a bigger plan.

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[151] One of the projects of VSO Malawi – its tablet project in Lilongwe schools – does not use any volunteers at all at the moment. I have not seen this before in any other VSO programme, and I understood that this will change in the next phase, when this project is scaled up to include dozens of additional schools.

[152] Such as the use of tablets in primary education to strengthen literacy and numeracy skills. VSO is planning for a massive scale-up of the current pilots, and early donor feedback suggests that this may indeed be possible. The ultimate aim is the generalised use of tablet-based learning in primary schools across Malawi (and beyond). The scalability of this project is covered in some detail in the section on 'equity.'

[153] The agricultural work in the Malawi Prisons Service has nutrition-related links with previous HIV-related work with this same partner.

[154] A health programme links VSO's work with the Ministry of Health, the Midwifery and Nursing Colleges, and the Nurses and Midwives Council of Malawi.

2. **International volunteer recruitment is increasingly challenging.** VSO has been looking for two Scottish midwives[155] for its Ntcheu Integrated Maternal Health Project (hereafter called 'the Ntcheu project'), but failed to find them. One of the additional challenges is VSO's new volunteer cycle platform, which moved volunteer recruitment from the use of a general 'Talent Pool' to placement-specific recruitment. Among other things, this means that placement descriptions need to be sharp and up-to-date, and that the recruitment process includes pre-deployment tripartite contact between a partner, its prospective volunteer, and the VSO country office.

   VSO Malawi has taken steps to strengthen its placement development process. Nowadays, the process is supported by a recruitment specialist, and all programme staff have participated in training sessions on placement development and profile creation. Moreover, VSO Malawi is starting to interview prospective volunteers, prior to acceptance. Notwithstanding these encouraging steps, I note that the placement descriptions I have discussed with volunteers, throughout my visit, were often found to be outdated and partly irrelevant, and these vitally important tripartite conversations are not yet taking place consistently.

> **Recommendation 1**
>
> To compete in VSO's new volunteer cycle platform, to ensure close matches,[156] and ultimately to achieve better development results, VSO Malawi must strengthen its placement description development process and other pre-placement work. This is partly a matter of doing new things (such as institutionalising pre-deployment tripartite discussions) and partly a matter of doing things differently (such as developing placement descriptions together with a partner's current volunteers).
>
> Strengthening the pre-placement work should be focused on both partners (ensuring that partners fully understand the potential value of volunteers) and prospective volunteers (ensuring that they have truly assessed their ability to cope in very challenging environments).

3. **VSO no longer exclusively focuses on the use of *international* volunteers**. In this respect, VSO Malawi is lagging behind some other country offices, and behind its own plans. The 2012-15 strategy states that VSO Malawi "will effectively promote National Volunteering in Malawi to achieve our objectives," but I have not seen evidence that this is actually happening.[157]

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[155] Donor conditionalities added to the challenge: they had to be Scottish. These conditionalities are unhelpful and counter to VSO's overall direction of travel, but they are still common: THET volunteers had to be UK-based, VSO Ireland still has the use of Irish volunteers as its most important key performance indicator, and ICS links national with specifically British volunteers.

[156] Two of the partners I talked with expressed a level of discontent with the match between a partner's needs and some (former) volunteers' qualifications, and attributed this to an insufficiently rigorous recruitment process ('CVs do not give all the information that you need.')

[157] The only vaguely comparable example I came across was of 'village volunteers' of VSO's Ntcheu project.

> **Recommendations 2 and 3**
> - VSO Malawi could do more to utilise and promote the lasting power of VSO's various forms of volunteering. At the moment, VSO Malawi almost exclusively uses longish-term international volunteers (and, notably, very successful village volunteers).[158]
>
> - In all cases, VSO Malawi must assess if international volunteering might be an expensive form of labour market substitution and disempowerment. International volunteers are not meant to:
>   - 'Fill staffing gaps.' VSO Malawi estimates this to be a minority of placements in its programmes, and I have no reason to doubt this. I saw this problem mostly in Midwifery and Nursing Colleges, and I understand that the proposal for the next phase of this programme has greater ownership among partners and clearer capacity building roles; or
>   - Stand in the way of Malawi's national workforce development. This is particularly important in the case of the next phase of the VSO/One Billion tablet programme. Ultimately, VSO intends to generalise the use of tablets in primary schools across the country, and this would require the early development of a sizeable Malawian workforce in an entirely new set of skills and competencies. In this programme, no international volunteers should be used for roles that could conceivably be filled by well-trained Malawians (and VSO Malawi assured me that this is not the case).

The reliance on restricted funding

The move towards a dependence on restricted institutional grants has major implications for VSO Malawi and it programmes. The most important of these implications are probably as follows:

- **It affects the design of programmes.** VSO Malawi does not seem to be donor-driven, in the sense that all programmes are clearly relevant to VSO's People First strategy (at least conceptually). The country's Signature Packages will ensure that it stays this way. Nonetheless, the move towards restricted funding has major implications for project design, and the strategy's exclusive focus on 'holistic integrated area-based development approach' is no longer feasible in VSO's new funding environment.

- **It requires consortium partners.** Much of today's institutional funding is granted to NGO consortiums (which increasingly include non-NGOs as well). Recognising this trend, VSO Malawi is working in consortium settings already. This is not without problems,[159] but I have not seen anything out of the ordinary. VSO approaches this need for 'equal'

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[158] I base the 'very successful' on a mid-term evaluation that states that **"**On antenatal care (ANC), postnatal care (PNC) within 48 hours, facility delivery and family planning indicators, the study has registered remarkable increases compared to the baseline results." […] "The study points out that most women are getting information from village volunteers and it is more likely that the changes observed in the indicators above are due to efforts of these volunteers." (Mid-term survey report, NIMHP, March 2013 - April 2014, page vii and 49; evidence for these statements is provided on the same pages.)

[159] As is illustrated by the withdrawal of one of the consortium partners of VSO's Ntcheu project.

partners strategically rather than opportunistically, as is illustrated by the recent half day meeting in which VSO and CARE International compared their mandates and explored opportunities for strategic cooperation.

- **It adds to the staff's work load.** Donor-related work is taking a lot of the country staff's time. During the Monday morning meeting I had the pleasure of attending, most of the updates and plans were reporting-related, and VSO Malawi has a designated position for donor compliance. This is partly inevitable, but it is possible to reduce the amount of extra work. Specifically:

  o **VSO Malawi could resist unreasonable donor plans and requirements.** An illustration is THET's duplicate mid-term evaluation of a THET-funded project.[160] Such money-wasting duplication of effort is not acceptable. Plans should be sufficiently well-aligned that this does not happen, and if it still happens by accident then it needs to be resolved without going through the same exercise twice.
  o **VSO Malawi could more forcefully negotiate reporting requirements.** Just as VSO has managed to reduce the length and increase the impact-related relevance of its own Quarterly Business Reviews, it should be possible to negotiate more efficient reporting modalities with donor agencies as well.

> **Recommendation 4**
> VSO Malawi - and indeed VSO in general - should be more confident in its negotiations with donor agencies. Ideally, donor agencies accept reports that are similar to VSO's internal reports, and that are based on data that VSO collects at any rate, as part of good monitoring practice.
>
> Reducing donor demands is partly a matter of negotiations, but may also require well-informed choices, and a prioritisation of engagement with the more reasonable donor agencies (e.g. *yes* to Norway, *no* to the European Institutions).

- **Wider VSO support is needed – and forthcoming.** Both staff and volunteers were positive about the way the wider VSO's support in the development of both signature packages and proposals. People see this as one of the major benefits of the regional structure: "We are constantly engaging. We are meeting frequently, with the Regional Funding Manager [and others], looking at options... it is *far* more dynamic than it ever was before." Which brings us to the next major change within VSO: its regionalisation.

Regionalisation

For VSO Malawi, regionalisation is working. Being able to talk and meet frequently with the regional funding and the regional people functions changes the dynamics. It results in support that is both more forthcoming and more relevant than it had been when these

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[160] The "Bringing Together Midwives and Nurses to Improve Maternal Health in Malawi through Volunteers and Partnerships" project (in this report called 'the THET project').

functions were covered from the UK. VSO Malawi has created space for this, for both staff and volunteers. It is two-way traffic: VSO Malawi utilises available support **and** contributes to regional initiatives such as PFPA.[161]

The work of VSO Malawi

Strategy

The 2012-15 strategy commits to "review the objectives and action points in the new [strategy] on a yearly basis and take appropriate action for [their] effective achievement." This has not happened. The strategy is not a 'live' document and is rarely referred to. It is clearly outdated, and has never been reviewed. This is understandable, as the strategy is very wide, and has large parts that are fundamentally unachievable in VSO's current operational and funding environment.

VSO Malawi's strategy for 2012-15 does two things:

First, the strategy makes 'good practice' commitments related to things such as partner involvement, downward accountability, M&E principles and the utilisation of national volunteers. These commitments remain relevant and I have referred to them throughout this report.

Second, the strategy makes wide-ranging programme commitments. Together with a very large number of partners,[162] VSO Malawi commits to supporting three broad target groups in general (women, children and youths) and 30 more specific target groups in particular (e.g. child labourers, street children and young offenders). The strategy aims to reach a more than half the population of Malawi.[163]

In terms of partners and target groups, VSO Malawi could fit almost any VSO programme into this very broad programme strategy. However, in terms of *programme approach*, it could not.

The strategy's first 'key strategic choice' is to "target the poorest and most vulnerable people and communities [...] in 10 poorest districts in Malawi *through integrated and holistic area-based programming*." In VSO's changed funding environment, this is not realistic as restricted donor funds rarely allow for integrated and holistic programming.

All in all, VSO Malawi's 2012-15 strategy does not provide sufficiently focused and realistic guidance to the Malawi country office, and should be replaced. In this report, I have therefore not assessed programmes against the country strategy, and have instead looked at them through the general lenses of Value for Money, sustainability and innovative potential.

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[161] Both staff and a volunteer attended the initial PFPA meeting in Pretoria.

[162] The strategy mentions 60 partners by name and, additionally, commits to working with a wide range of generic partners such as 'research institutes' and 'NGOs at district and zonal level.'

[163] See annex 5 on page 46 of the VSO Malawi 2012-15 Strategy.

> **Recommendation 5**
> In the past few years, VSO Malawi has essentially operated without a relevant programme strategy. The development of a new programme strategy should start as soon as possible. This programme strategy should be considerably shorter and *much* more specific and realistic than the 2012-15 strategy has been.

Relevance

All recent project descriptions and proposals strike me as entirely relevant. This is an achievement, the magnitude of which becomes clear when comparing a 2014 VSO funding application with its 2011 equivalent, which still featured outcomes such as (and I quote the first two outcomes as defined in the 2011 THET proposal):

1. Increased recognition of the value of international volunteering, with a focus on nurses and midwives amongst health institutions and professionals in both the UK and Malawi
2. UK volunteers have improved their professional and personal skills, are satisfied with the volunteer experience and feel that they have made a positive contribution to maternal health in Malawi.

Such outcomes no longer exist. However, there is quite a difference between *potential* relevance and *actual* relevance. In practice volunteering positions do not always have much strategic value, and there is considerable gap filling. A few partners freely admitted to this: "If the government would approve our staffing requests, we would not need VSO volunteers."

Even in those circumstances, I have seen some potentially useful work, such as the new procedural checklists that may simultaneously improve and bring a measure of standardisation in clinical teaching in the Midwifery and Nursing colleges. However, results in such environments are hard to achieve. Moreover, in the experience of volunteers, such achievements may well get snowed under by the day-to-day frustrations related to their sense of under-utilisation and under-acknowledgement of their potential contributions. (See also the recommendation in the section on partnerships.)

Logframes

A previous evaluation of one of the programmes I looked at stated that "many of the outcome and output indicators of the project are overambitious for the scope and scale of inputs by the volunteers."[164] I recognise this as one of VSO's heritage challenges: VSO was not traditionally scrutinised on its development-related outputs and outcomes, and this has led to a tradition of pie-in-the-sky logframes (see also the section on data). Another limitation is the appropriateness of success indicators. For example, an indicator such as "improved examination pass marks" to verify "Students' improved clinical skills, knowledge and attitudes"[165] seems reasonable, but I understood that it is not, partly because of the very poor quality of the exams, and partly because marking these exams shows that many

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[164] HLSP's July 2014 Health Partnership Assessment Report.
[165] I got this indicator from a document titled *Revised Nurse Clinical Instructor placement objectives (Jenny Wright - Aug 2012)*. The same indicator is reported on in VSO's most recent Annual Country Review.

students provide the exact same answers, suggesting either memorisation or prior viewing of the exam questions.[166]

VSO Malawi is aware of VSO's traditional logframe-related weaknesses, and a very quick glance through two recent logframes suggests that the office already has achieved a step change in logframe quality.[167]

Data

VSO Malawi's data gathering has improved in the past few years. More than before, there are evaluation exercises and M&E initiatives that together produce a wealth of data and insights. In the particular case of the One Billion tablet project, the data that this project generates on a real time basis is absolutely sensational and, in the very long run, potentially transformative for Malawi's education sector.[168]

Still, it is easy to identify weaknesses in the data produced by any VSO country office. In VSO Malawi, I have come across the following key data-related issues:

- **Exaggerated numbers and false precision**. The 2012-15 strategy envisions reaching 7,526,477 'direct ultimate beneficiaries.' This is more than half the Malawian population, and the specificity of the number suggests that VSO knows who, exactly, they are. In more recent documents, the numbers have reduced significantly, but the reported numbers are only marginally less unlikely. In the 2013-14 Annual Country Report, for example, VSO Malawi reports that its Health and HIV&AIDS programme has benefited 302,288 beneficiaries. Nonetheless, there is significant progress. Specifically:

    a. The most recent documents show realism-in-numbers. The example I came across is VSO's regional *Detailed Implementation Plan for SIDA project*, of April 2014. This programme has a Malawian component that aims to reach people in tens, hundreds, and sometimes a few thousands – all wisely estimated in round figures. This is important progress: realistic aims lead to projects that are achieved in full, which leads to satisfaction all around (and to healthy long term relations with donor agencies, which VSO needs).
    b. It seems that VSO Malawi is broadly adhering to VSO's data protocol.[169] As an illustration: VSO's aggregated PMLT data show that VSO Malawi's work with the Ministry of Health reached '0 ultimate beneficiaries,' which is correct under VSO's data protocol, and far from what VSO would have reported in the past.

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[166] I got this from an email exchange with one of the volunteers I have not met with.
[167] I have taken a cursory look at the WATERS logframe and the revised NIMHP logframe (both undated, which might cause problems later, if and when these logframes are revised).
[168] In addition to measuring progress, the tablet project measures attendance, whether or not a school is actually open and the extent to which it adheres to its formal school hours. These data form a potential benefit but are also a risk, as schools may well resist this type of data being collected and attempt to sabotage the initiative.
[169] I base this on a quick eyeballing exercise of the *PMLT-Aggregated_data_2013-14*. I did not conduct a data verification exercise. Jigsaw did not include Malawi in its 2014 data verification assignment either, and only interviewed a single Malawi-based partner, and all this makes my observation quite cautious and tentative.

- **Unlikely matching numbers**: the 2012-15 strategy envisions 39,827 livelihoods-related beneficiaries, and the 2013-14 ACR reports 39,810 Ultimate beneficiaries in the field of livelihoods. I did not assess this further, but such close matches are often a sign of a superficial use of data registers.

- **Heroic assumptions**: An "external evaluation suggests that there is increased knowledge and understanding of sexual reproductive health by adolescents and youth in programme impact areas that has resulted in increased access to youth friendly health services. It is hoped that this will contribute to the reduction of incidences of HIV and STIs, teen pregnancies, early marriages, school dropout rates and early marriages in Malawi." I share this hope and am impressed by the approach used.[170] However, behavioural change is very hard to achieve. The assumption that knowledge and awareness, or even improved access to relevant services, lead to behavioural change is common but often naïve.

> **Recommendation 6**
> If VSO believes that its approach towards awareness raising work may have reduced the transmission of HIV and STIs, then it is worth investing in a thorough impact assessment. An evidence-based confirmation of the impact of the innovative work of Positivo in particular should make replication an organizational priority. In case of genuine success, replication by much larger HIV-related actors than VSO should be possible, as the field of HIV is probably the single most exchange- and learning-intensive sector in the entire field of international development.

- **Unlikely attribution**. VSO attributes the increasing proportion of clinic-based births to VSO's work in this field. In reality, VSO's work may well have *contributed* to this, but the change cannot be *attributed* to VSO alone. Other contributing factors are likely to be the outlawing of traditional birth attendants, the fines that traditional chiefs are charging (a goat if you give birth at home) and a Norwegian project that pays women to give birth in one of the clinics.

  To facilitate evidence-based project design (and to build and maintain healthy and long term relations with the various donor agencies), VSO should ideally eliminate unrealistic ambitions in its plans and proposals, and exaggerated data interpretation in the analysis and reporting stages of its project cycles. This is tough – not least because it is a very long way down from the vastly inflated numbers that VSO has traditionally used (such as the 7½ million ultimate beneficiaries envisioned in VSO Malawi's current strategy) to figures that actually make sense.

- **Methodological gaps.** The initial survey on VSO's Ntcheu project did not creatively search for externalities. Staff assertions that the project had already resulted in less domestic violence, more peer support, backhouse gardens, mother-baby restaurants,

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[170] Specifically, the programme targets underlying attitudes through music, and aims to create an environment where cultural beliefs and norms are challenged in a safe environment.

cleaner houses, the use of pit latrines, basic hygiene measures (hand washing, goats that no longer get into the house), village saving and loan schemes and a host of other benefits have not yet been assessed. A more comprehensive assessment is likely to be conducted in the final evaluation: Pachi, this project's M&E-focused partner, has proposed a methodology that seems very creative and thorough.[171]

- **Collection gaps.** I talked with volunteers who mentioned that they had not filled their reports, either because they were never asked to do so[172] or because they felt the form was too elaborate and irrelevant. Other volunteers mentioned that volunteers ended up filling templates that were meant for partners to fill. This quite defeats the purpose of partner reporting *and* raises questions about partner interest and ownership.

Recommendations 7 and 8
- Notwithstanding very significant progress, there is still considerable scope for strengthening the definition, gathering, reporting and utilisation of VSO Malawi's project data.
- VSO Malawi has designed and redesigned its forms together with VSO volunteers. I acknowledge both the effort and the volunteer involvement, but nonetheless think it would be useful to rethink some of the reporting forms with even fuller volunteer involvement (including virtual calls for feedback rather than only utilising volunteer representatives). One possible step forward would be to add the *rationale* of some of the not-so-obvious questions (as the college volunteers have done for the clinical procedure forms), so that the forms are not quite as alienating as they currently are.

Monitoring and Evaluation

An external evaluation notes that "weak monitoring and evaluation means it is difficult to assess impact of the programme to date." The report recommends that "VSO needs to work with volunteers and partners to work out how to measure the impact of the work that the volunteers are doing."[173]

My findings corroborate with this, but I also note that, during IPR1, I did not see any country that took M&E as seriously as VSO Malawi does today (and I did look for it rather rigorously). The observation quoted above and various data-related challenges covered in the previous section are far from trivial, but:

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[171] Or at least this is the impression I got when, during a visit to Pachi, the CEO and Head of Programmes talked about the plans for this final assessment.

[172] In actual fact, VSO Malawi has taken several steps to ensure that volunteers are aware of their reporting obligations. However, *conveying* messages does not necessarily mean that these messages are being *received* – and there appears to be a problem on the *receiving* of the messages.

[173] Chattoe-Brown, A., Dobson, S. and Phillipson, R. (July 2014) *Health Partnership Assessment Report; Bringing together midwives and nurses to improve maternal health in Malawi through volunteerism and partnership*, VG17, HLSP, pages 1 and 19 respectively.

- During VSO's IPR1, I did not come across *any* country office with a designated M&E staff member (either project-specific or as part of VSO's core staff). Similarly, I did not see VSO consortiums that included a designated partner for M&E purposes. Conversely:

    o VSO Malawi has a designated M&E Officer position. This M&E Officer took data-gathering initiatives that would otherwise probably not have been taken.[174] When the M&E Officer was promoted to the position of Regional M&E Manager, recruitment for his replacement proceeded relatively swiftly.[175]

    o VSO Malawi also has a designated M&E consortium partner that is responsible for conducting a baseline, mid-term and final assessments of the Ntcheu project. In addition, this Ntcheu project has its own designated and full time (Pachi) M&E person. To avoid conflicts of interest, care is taken that the partner does not involve itself in the implementation of the project.

- VSO Malawi maintains a 'Calendar of Events' that helps to ensure that M&E commitments are consistently met in a timely fashion.[176]

- VSO Malawi recognises its M&E-related weaknesses and is following up on them. In the previous section I gave the example of the proposed methodological richness of the Ntcheu project's final evaluation. This was inspired by the recognition that the mid-term evaluation had been thorough but partial.

- VSO Malawi has facilitated several good-quality evaluations in a very short span of time. Again, I have not come across anything similar during the IPR1. This is not merely the consequence of donor requirements: VSO Malawi is pro-actively planning for relevant research and research partners.[177]

- I have seen two genuinely impressive examples of real time grassroots monitoring, in the Ntcheu project and in Positivo (and a text box in the next section describes the first of the two).

Recommendations 9 and 10
To strengthen VSO Malawi's M&E-related work, it could:
- More consistently follow up on evaluation recommendations (provided that VSO Malawi actually agrees with them).[178]
- More consistently share the report with all relevant stakeholders, partly to improve a report's draft version and partly because somebody can only follow up on a recommendation if he or she knows what this recommendation *is*.

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[174] Such as focus group discussions with ultimate beneficiaries as part of the Annual Country Review process.
[175] Especially compared to VSO Uganda, where the position has been semi-permanently vacant for over 20 months.
[176] A document titled *Country Office M&E Calendar of Events.*
[177] And likes to talk about it, too: I have had many conversations about the involvement of the University of Nottingham in particular. (Just to be sure: I say this to illustrate genuine interest, not to indicate boredom!)
[178] I base this in part on the observation that "the impact of the CPD element is questionable and does not seem to be focused on recommendations generated by a recent evaluation" (Health Partnership Assessment Report, page 1).

Accountability

Downward accountability[179]

The commitments made in the 2012-15 strategy remain relevant. Specifically:

5. "We will strongly engage with the targeted communities particularly women, children and youth to strengthen their capacity and their voice to demand and access […] services."
6. "We will be accountable to beneficiaries by ensuring they actively participate in planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of VSO's programme in Malawi."
7. "We will regularly share programme lessons and information with beneficiaries in their own languages. We will also establish community based Complaint and Response Mechanisms to enable programme beneficiaries to feedback on programme quality as well as report on any abuse of power by VSO staff or partner's staff."
8. "We will print the Annual Report of VSO Malawi including the annual budget and expenditure (not the detailed one) and share it widely with programme beneficiaries and other stakeholders in a simplified version (in local languages where appropriate)."[180]

I have seen evidence of elements of VSO Malawi's programmes following up on the first two commitments, and no evidence at all in relation to the remaining two commitments. Effectively, the only examples of genuine downward accountability I have come across are from the Ntcheu project and the work of Positivo (see the text box, with an apology to Redson, Helen and Darren of Positivo, whose work on downward accountability also deserve a text box).

Text box: Downward accountability in the Ntcheu Integrated Maternal Health Project

This maternal health project uses the CARE International score cards in a three day exercise. On the first day, VSO conducts separate sessions for health facility staff and community groups.[181] Each group identifies what is working well and what is not working well for them, in terms of both the health services and the VSO project. VSO then groups the issues and, upon return on the next day, asks people to score the different groups of issues on the basis of perceived importance. Then, on the third day, VSO is joined by a representative of the District Health Office and gets the community and health services groups together to discuss the issues and take them forward.

The result is a series of commitments, a timeline, and a person who is responsible for each issue. Fulfilling some of the commitments would mean a step change in the accessibility of health services. For example, in response to the reported difficulty that women faced to go to the antenatal clinic, a nurse agreed to visit villages once a month.

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[179] I follow conventional definitions but note that I do not think that people and communities that projects aim to support and empower are in any way 'downward', and that I resent the notion that donor agencies would be in any way 'upward.'

[180] The first quote is from page 18. The other three quotes are all from page 25.

[181] As some of the latter groups are attended by over 100 people, VSO splits them in smaller groups.

One of the positives was, unsurprisingly, the level of empowerment that women felt they had.

Upward accountability

Because of time constraints, I had to make choices. I chose not to assess upward accountability as it is covered extensively in the overall IPR2 (see the methodological annex for an explanation).

Accountability to and from partners

There are three issues and they are all serious:

1. **There is insufficient accountability from VSO to the partner.** VSO told me that it provides each partner with placement-related information, and that this information includes a complaints procedure.[182] However, partners say they do not know about it. Clearly, messages that are conveyed are not always received and remembered. This lack of awareness might have to do with staff turnover within partners; with a lack of genuine interest on the side of the partner; or with a near absence of subsequent communication between VSO and the partner. Whatever the reason: it is a flaw in the system, and it should be rectified.

2. **There is insufficient accountability from the volunteer to the partner.** Appraisal and progress tracking systems are not fully (or sometimes not at all) functional. Perhaps more frustrating for volunteers and partners alike is the blind box nature of Partnership Fund applications. The process from the initial idea to the actual use of the funds is too lengthy, and volunteers are not sufficiently in the loop about the stage of the process.

3. **There is insufficient accountability from the partner to the volunteer and VSO.** I do not know if it is lack of professionalism or interest, but partners do not tend to keep volunteers fully in the loop on relevant issues. I came across a number of placements where volunteers are not invited into relevant meetings, do not know the whereabouts of their line managers or immediate colleagues, and are essentially seen as an extra pair of hands in case of need. Similarly, partners do not consistently and thoroughly report back to VSO (which they are meant to do through periodic partner reports).

Recommendations 11 and 12
- The three issues listed above are interrelated. It seems to me that the best way forward is much more regular contact between VSO and each of the partners. This contact should start before the placement, when communication should centre on the nature of

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[182] I have not seen this documentation. I have also not seen a complaint procedure, or reference to a complaint procedure, for volunteers. The placement outline includes a short paragraph that hints at, but that certainly not amounts to, a satisfactory complaint procedure (and that does not cover the possibility of complaints against VSO staff). This is all that I have found: "While volunteers are encouraged to deal with problems initially at a local level, if this does not produce improvements support is available from the programme office in various capacities. While VSO encourages volunteers to be independent and use initiative, it is important not to allow problems to build up to such an extent that the volunteer feels overwhelmed and unhappy in their daily work. The Health Programme is keen to hold on to good volunteers and would request that a volunteer seek support from them before any problems get to a critical stage."

> the placement and the potential value of the volunteer (a value that is not always recognised by the partners). The next and necessary step is a tripartite discussion about the placement description, within three months after a volunteer's arrival. This is part of VSO's paper process, but does not always take place in practice.[183]
> - VSO maintains a tracking system of all Partnership Fund Requests. If VSO allows volunteers access to this tracking system, then volunteers are automatically updated without any time investment on the side of VSO.

Accountability from VSO to volunteers

The perception among many of the volunteers is that VSO staff does not sufficiently care about them or their work. I think they do care, but recognise that this is not always obvious. This is partly caused by work pressure, and perhaps partly the consequence of much-reduced in-country training, which means that staff and volunteers no longer have the opportunity to build strong relations. However, even in absence of these strong relations, staff members do care, not just about the volunteers and their work, but also about their own role in ensuring that VSO is a well-functioning organisation. Moreover, there are several systems in place to track volunteers and the issues they may face. Specifically:

- Thrice per year, VSO staff and volunteers meet and discuss issues. Many issues are related to the overall sense that "volunteers still feel undervalued and at times dismissed."[184]

> **Recommendation 13**
> The notes made during the VSO-volunteer Executive Council Meetings include action points. These notes should be made available online, and be maintained as a 'live' document in which issues remain open until they are resolved and closed.
>
> Marilyn Acker, VSO's internal auditor, could no doubt advise on an accountable way forward.

- The admin function maintains a tracking system titled *Malawi Volunteer Case Management*. Parts of this document are a little outdated[185] but the case registration bit is up-to-date, and the system tracks the number of days taken to resolve each case. I looked at this list and noticed that volunteers collectively raise an average of roughly 1.6 'case' per work day,[186] and that:
  - 16% of the cases (66 of 418) were registered as 'solved' on the same or the next day.
  - 85% of the cases (355 of 418) are solved within one work week.[187]

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[183] In fact, all volunteers I asked about it said that this conversation had not taken place, with a single exception of a volunteer who said it had taken place too soon (i.e. two weeks after arrival).

[184] This is a quote from the minutes of the most recent Executive Council meeting, on 14 November 2014 (see *VSO Malawi (14 November 2014) Concerns raised by volunteers for Executive Council Meeting*).

[185] E.g. Dagrous no longer works for VSO but is still listed as the programme manager for a range of volunteers in the version that is dated 11 November 2014.

[186] There were 420 cases in the period from 1 October 2013 and 13 November 2014, and I assumed 230 working days per calendar year.

[187] I did not count the unresolved cases that were opened less than a week ago.

o 3% of the cases (13 of 418) took more than a month to solve.

o The oldest unresolved case dates back to October 2014 – which is last month.

Without any comparatives, I am intuitively impressed by the tracking and the speedy way in which the vast majority of cases are resolved. However, 'solved' is a rather strong word for what happens, in some cases, and a follow up email verification with one of the volunteers suggested that this volunteer did not feel that the issue had been 'solved' at all.

> **Recommendation 14**
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> In the volunteer case management database, 'solved' seems to be defined broadly as 'we have found a way forwards.' As such, 'solving a case' can mean that VSO is (and I quote randomly) "still working on finalising accommodation. House found though." It would be good to add a column for the final closure of cases, defined as 'all sorted, problem gone.'

- The admin function also maintains a document titled *Status of Phone Calls to Volunteers*. During these phone conversations, staff members ask volunteers to rate the admin and programme support that they have received. I have looked at the list for October 2014 (when 28 phone calls were made) and note that:

  o Programme support is rated 'good' (14) and 'excellent' (14).

  o Admin support is rated 'bad' (1), 'not good' (2), 'better' (2), 'supportive' (2) and 'good' (2).[188]

The review of these documents suggests that the volunteers I have met are not representative of the overall group of volunteers. This notwithstanding: there clearly *are* gaps. Specifically:

1. **There is insufficiently thorough placement preparation.** A volunteer found out, upon arrival, that the college's Board had asked both the Principal and Deputy Principal to resign, and VSO did not know about it. At least some placement descriptions are very outdated.[189] A volunteer arrived in a house without any furniture at all. Partners are not clear on the possible value added of volunteers. The Malawi Prisons Service thought that its most recent volunteer would focus on vocational training (it was agriculture) and that he would come with money (he did not). Most fundamentally, and as stated in a previous assessment: "There has been no specific assessment of the barriers to improvements at hospital/ institute level that links directly with the activities of the

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[188] I then compared this document with the Malawi *Volunteer Case Management* and noticed that the person who scored Admin support as 'bad' did not appear in the tracker at all. One of the persons who scored 'not good' had raised three issues, which had taken 1, 2 and 4 days to resolve. The other person who scored 'not good' was more immediately understandable, as this volunteer had raised an issue that had taken 120 days to resolve (and then it was still not really *resolved*). When I verified the scoring with two volunteers, one of the confirmed the scoring and the other volunteer could not remember being asked to score his level of contentment at all.

[189] I came across a placement description that had been 1½ year old by the time the volunteer arrived; and across another placement description that was only partly relevant upon the arrival of a volunteer, who then found another volunteer arriving more than a year later on the basis of that same placement description.

volunteers placed there. In addition, there are many confounding factors that the volunteers cannot hope to change."[190]

2. **There are insufficiencies in information.** Placement descriptions are inadequate. Volunteers arrived in a placement and found that they had to share their housing with two other volunteers. Volunteers and partners had not seen the HLST midterm evaluation report, in either the draft (for comments) or final version. Volunteers are unaware of a simple overview of 'this is what you can and cannot expect from VSO, and this is what we expect and do not expect from you.'

3. **There is insufficiently regular VSO-initiated communication.** Volunteers who are relatively inexperienced and volunteers who are operating in extremely challenging environments crave regular communication. With the exception of communication around reporting, volunteers feel (perhaps not entirely correctly) that contact between them and staff is almost invariably initiated by the volunteers. Some volunteers feel as if they are imposing upon VSO staff members when they get in touch. The tripartite placement descriptions review after three months is not always taking place. VSO commits in writing that "at a minimum, the volunteer will be visited on a quarterly basis to constantly review partner and volunteer progress towards the agreed objectives, challenges to meeting the objectives and possible solutions,"[191] but this is not consistently happening in practice. A volunteer heard that there was a VSO visit to his partner when the visitors had already arrived. When a volunteer sent a thorough situation report to several VSO staff members, there was no response from any of them. The Executive Committee Meeting minutes suggest that this was not an isolated incident.

4. **There is insufficient mentoring.** Volunteers are not development specialists and do not always have prior experience in Malawi, Africa, or indeed anywhere outside of their home country. Consequently, their expectations are not always realistic and their approach may not always be appropriate. VSO programme staff could probably mentor them. I think that this would reduce the challenges some of the volunteers face, and increase these volunteers' impact. You know: 'It's a great idea to develop new forms for these clinical procedures and try to roll them out across the CHAM colleges. Do make sure that all your tutoring colleagues feel ownership of these forms! Let us think how we could best ensure this will happen. It probably all starts with a few conversations and with sharing early drafts." Conceivably, this mentoring role could also be played by other volunteers – but it is unlikely to happen on a sustainable basis unless there is some sort of formalised mentoring system underpinning these contacts.

Recommendation 15
There is considerable scope for strengthening the relations between VSO staff and volunteers. The discussions on this are ongoing. I hope the observations made in this section might make a modest contribution to these discussions.

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[190] Health Partnership Assessment Report, page 1.
[191] This comes from the placement outline titled *M0522.0001.0006 - Malamulo College - Midwife Trainer.Preceptor.Clinical Instructor (Mariam Nanabawa)*

Learning

It was easy to find evidence of learning from direct project observations,[192] documents,[193] colleagues[194] and volunteers,[195] and other organisations.[196] I saw less evidence (which does not mean this evidence does not exist) of project design being influenced by VSO's experience in other countries (VSO's neonatal work comes to mind) or learning from the wider sector's good practice and innovation.

Some of VSO Malawi's work is easily interesting enough for the country office to *contribute* to the wider sector's learning. I saw two bits of evidence of this:

- VSO Malawi's presentation of its HIV-related work with the Malawi Prisons Service at the International Aids Conference in Washington.
- Carol Carson's spot-on publication titled *Using Continuing Profession Development (CDP) to improve maternal and neonatal health in Ntcheu District Malawi: Ntcheu Integrated Maternal Health Project (NIMHP)*, which she has (astonishingly soon after her arrival) submitted for publication in a peer-reviewed midwifery journal. A shorter paper Ms Carson wrote on the same project has already been accepted.

In post-visit correspondence, I learned that these are merely two of quite a number of examples.

Partnerships

The current strategy promises that "partners will be involved at all stages of developing partnership with VSO including programme needs assessment, programme planning, programme designing, implementation, monitoring, review and evaluation." (Page 25.)

I have not seen evidence to confirm that this is consistently the case. More worryingly, I have not seen evidence to confirm that all partners are sufficiently interested for this to *potentially* be the case. Rather the contrary: there is persuasive evidence that suggests that some partners consider VSO volunteers as little more than temporary (and sometimes not even particularly desirable) gap fillers that partly solve the problem of a government's recruitment freeze. This lack of strategic interest was illustrated by two line managers not

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[192] For example: Angela Khonyongwa, the Project Manager of the Ntcheu project, noticed that two hours of a facilitator's contact time was not enough to achieve results in the Safe Motherhood Task Force, and she redesigned the project to allow for multiple facilitators per task force.

[193] For example: the *VSO Small Grant - Advocacy for Change; interim narrative report* ends every section with an overview of 'lessons learned.'

[194] VSO Malawi's induction process must be very good. When talking with Temwa Kasakula, VSO's new Programme Manager for Health, who only started in September, it struck me that she had built up a lot of knowledge about her immediate programme and the wider VSO and sector work in very little time indeed.

[195] The peer support groups events are a wonderful learning vehicle, and VSO could be more pro-actively involved in the organisation of these events, and more responsive to invitations to attend (see the frustration expressed in the latest Executive Committee Meeting's minutes).

[196] For example: the use of CARE's score sheets and elements of UNICEF's safe motherhood publications.

making themselves available to meet with me, and a third partner showing up with considerable delay.[197]

The Annual Country Review says that VSO Malawi has made this same observation; that this has led to in-depth discussions with partners; and that these discussions have, in turn, led to "withdrawing volunteers from partnerships that do not value their contribution as opposed to monetary contributions." This is good practice. I have indeed seen evidence of one such withdrawal, though also of considerable scope for improving the regularity and consistency of such in-depth discussions, with each of VSO's partners.

Recommendation 16

It would be worth following up on the country strategy's promise to ensure that "partners will be involved at all stages of developing partnership with VSO including programme needs assessment, programme planning, programme designing, implementation, monitoring, review and evaluation."

One of the benefits of such involvement would be that it could possibly lead to more obvious commitment on the side of the partner or, conversely, to the decision to withdraw from certain partnerships if this commitment proves to be absent.

Whilst I believe that this is a sensible recommendation, I would like to add that I do not think the situation is as dire as some volunteers tend to think it is. I have met most volunteers twice: once at their place of work and once over dinner. In most cases, the first encounter was on the therapeutic side of the evaluation interview spectrum (as in: it was taken as an opportunity to poor one's heart out). When challenging volunteers, during the second encounter, to find *positives* to share with me, volunteers did manage to actually present reasonably convincing positives.

Value for money

Economy
I note that the Health Partnership Assessment Report says that "Management and volunteer costs for the programme are high" and I did not re-asses this. Very brief conversations with the Finance Manager and the Country Director showed neither remarkable achievements nor worrying negligence, and I decided not to assess 'economy' during this country visit (see the methodological annex for the rationale behind this and other choices).

Efficiency
As if often the case in VSO (and I will cover this in detail in the overall IPR2 report), simple process engineering could realise efficiency gains and more consistently timely action. Key issues are as follows:

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[197] A striking comparison: I recently visited Malawi twice, on behalf of two wealthy philanthropists, with the mandate to 'find good projects to fund.' Everybody always showed up during these two visits (and more than one person offered to cover my accommodation and food).

- The M&E section of this report mentions a calendar for its M&E requirements. Such calendars are good practice, and they are particularly important for an office that has seen a rather high staff turnover.[198] Similar calendars could be developed for other parts of VSO Malawi's operation (e.g. a calendar for partner monitoring visits). This would also help ensure that the various underpinning planning tools are actually used,[199] and that the office's soon-to-be-reactivated Monthly Bulletin,[200] with its 'Key Activities Planned for the Next Month,' does not overlook any of the office's commitments and deadlines.
- There are no process maps of significant pieces of work, such as the development of the VSO Malawi 2015-18 strategy, the process of which should have started by now.
- Some action triggers exist (such as in the form of the Partnership Fund tracking log) but other triggers are absent. This causes key actions to be missed (e.g. tripartite placement description reviews and requests for reports).
- Some processes take too long (e.g. the Partnership Fund decision-making process and the process that led to a consultant's report on VSO Malawi's overall baseline.)

The scope for efficiency gains strikes me as good news as VSO Malawi *needs* efficiency gains, as it needs to free up staff time to engage more intensively with partners and volunteers.

Recommendation 17

VSO Malawi could achieve efficiency gains and more consistently timely action by formalising and streamlining some of its processes.

There are probably one or more process engineers among VSO's Organisational Development Advisors, and it would be useful to ask for their support.[201]

Effectiveness

In the strategy section, I mentioned that it would be unwise to assess programmes against the country strategy, as this strategy is simultaneously too wide (working with everybody to reach everyone) and too narrow (all work would be based on the single approach of 'holistic integrated area development').

Unfortunately, it would be similarly unwise to assess all programmes against their own logframes, as at least some of these logframes are unrealistically ambitious. For example, the outputs and outcomes of the THET project – in relation to its colleges' element in particular – are not realistic, and if indicators such as increased enrolment *are* achieved then

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[198] Five (5!) different staff members covered the Ntcheu project in the first year. Only three members of staff had been working for VSO Malawi when I first visited the office in April 2003.

[199] The management response to the THET mid-term evaluation recommendations, for example, has actions and a 'tracking' column. This could have been a useful tool, but in reality the tool is inactive. (Source: the file properties of the document titled *Management response notes 30th July 2014*, which indicates that the document had been created on 30 July 2014, and has never been modified.)

[200] After a period of inactivity, VSO Malawi redesigned the template (see *VSO Malawi Monthly Bulletin Template (2)*) and intends to use it again before the end of 2014 (see email from Regional M&E Manager, dated 10 December 2014).

[201] This is not a new concept: VSO Malawi regularly calls upon its volunteers for support and input (e.g. the PFPA process, the objective setting meetings of January and May 2014)

they cannot be attributed to VSO. This is not a new finding, and I understand that the next phase of the project would have a better sense of reality.

None of this means that the college-based volunteers are not achieving important things – even though they often do not see it like this. A volunteer played a key role in the team effort that kept Nkhomo College open, and worked with her counterparts to develop a new budget, a new strategic plan, and new procurement and stock management systems. To me, this sounds useful. Volunteer nurses are developing new clinical procedure lists. This sounds useful too. It is often a step forward and half a step back; the results will not amount to higher enrolment or dramatically better exam results;[202] and I understand the day-to-day frustration of the volunteers… but I am not inclined to share some volunteers' dismissiveness in regards to their own achievements (though, as mentioned, I do think that these achievements would have been more impressive had these volunteers had received regular mentoring from a development practitioner.)

It seems to me that better results and more positive reporting require, for at least some of VSO's programmes:

- More realistic logframes, or evaluation findings will be perpetually disappointing.
- More useful and more regular tripartite contacts, that start before a placement, or partners will not recognise the potential volunteer contributions to the full.
- Better mentoring, or volunteers will not always be as effective as they could potentially be.
- More creative and less logframish evaluations, or many achievements will remain unreported.

Even if all this happens, VSO Malawi will have a high failure rate, as the organisation is doing difficult things in tough environments. The complexity of linked partnerships (e.g. the THET project aiming to achieve mutually reinforcing progress in a range of partners) adds to the risks.[203] This is not a reason not to pursue things, as most of VSO Malawi's programmes are of the high-risks-high-benefits variety, and if one in every few projects achieves sustainable improvements within partners' practice, and/or replicable innovation, then VSO's work is well worth the overall investment.

Equity
DFID does not define 'equity' in its document titled 'DFID's approach to Value for Money,' and instead says that it 'includes making sure our development results are targeted at the poorest and include sufficient targeting of women and girls.'

The 2012-15 strategy identifies groups of 'the poorest' but lacks focus by identifying too many of them (some 30, according to table 3 of the strategy). It claims to focus on the ten

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[202] In an email exchange with a volunteer I have not met, the volunteer stated that the Annual Country Review is probably incorrect to report that the upgrade of the skills lab, library and clinical practice manuals would have "contributed to an increase in the pass rate from 68% in 2011/12 to 98% in 2012/13."

[203] It is a mixed bag. The NMCM CPD fields are not yet incorporated in the MoH's IHRIS, for example, but there does seem to be a real chance that CHAM colleges are going to use the volunteers-initiated clinical procedure check lists, which would bring a level of consistency across colleges.

poorest districts, but it remains unclear in what way the selected districts are indeed 'the poorest.'[204] Instead, therefore, I looked for 'equity' in a few of VSO's actual projects.

That was very easy. VSO's work with Malawi Prisons Service focuses on prisoners, who are obviously some of the poorest and most disempowered people in the country. The Ntcheu project focuses on rural maternal and neonatal health and, in the process, empowers village volunteers and rural clinics.[205] The THET programme is meant to improve the quality, quantity and availability of nurses and midwives across the country.

Only Positivo left me wondering about equity, for two reasons:

- Positivo focuses on youths in secondary education. On the one hand, these are not the most marginalised youths. On the other hand, a 2010 UNICEF evaluation concluded that "the primary school learners seemed to have more knowledge in SRH/HIV and AIDS in comparison to their secondary school counterparts."[206] If the findings of this not-so-recent research still apply, then a focus on youths in secondary education might not be 'equitable', but it *is* appropriate targeting nonetheless.
- Positivo plans for an online youth magazine. With limited G3 and G4 coverage in Malawi's rural regions, an online youth magazine is inherently biased towards the relatively wealthier urban segments of society.[207] This may change in the course of the coming decade, because of a combination of Africa's ever-increasing connectivity and programmes that aim to bring internet to rural communities.

Unexpectedly, the most 'equitable' project of all is, at the moment, Lilongwe-based. Two primary schools are piloting the use of tablets for the purpose of strengthening learning processes related to literacy and numeracy. The next two pilot schools will be in Lilongwe as well, and my initial response was that this was not 'equitable' as the poorest people do not live in Lilongwe.

I was wrong. The choice for Lilongwe is sound and efficiency-based: this is a pilot, and is bound to have many teething problems that are best addressed in schools that are, essentially, close to the airport and the VSO office. Once these teething problems have been addressed, this project could be scaled up.[208] Eventually, the plan is to integrate the tablets in the national curriculum, and generalise their use across the country. The chances that this will all work out seem remote to me, but *if* this works, then the equalising effect, in terms of

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[204] Annex 1 of the strategy provides an overview of each Malawian district's population, percentage of poor people, percentage of ultra-poor people, and presence of other INGOs – and then identifies the ten poorest regions on the basis of criteria that I have tried but failed to recognise.

[205] VSO is discussing the possibility of expanding the project to Salima on grounds of Salima being a little poorer (see annex 1 of the strategy, on page 30, for a few district-level poverty figures.) I am not convinced that this is wise, but I mention it here to illustrate that 'equity' considerations drive choices.

[206] Reported on in Majela, T.K. (November 2012) *Report on the Review of the Life Skills Education; secondary school curriculum*, UNICEF, page 20.

[207] An Ericsson report on the future of internet in Sub-Saharan Africa envisions that "75% of mobile subscriptions in Sub-Saharan Africa will be 3G/4G by the end of 2019," but even if this happens, the poorest people and communities are unlikely to be included in the upsurge of connectivity, if only because (or so Ericsson predicts) connectivity will centre around Africa's urban areas.

[208] The current plans: replication in 15 (Scotland), 53 (Norway) and 100 (DFID) schools.

learning chances for children across the country, will be more powerfully 'equitable' than anything else I have ever seen in the broad field of international development.

> **Recommendation 18**
> For VSO to move to the next step of organisational maturity, its next generation of country strategies should prominently include concise and precise, equity-focused and evidence-based advocacy demands.

Sustainability

It seems likely that many of the initiatives that VSO is currently working on will not survive the test of time. I am worried about IHRIS, the Ministry of Health's health personnel tracking system that VSO and a few other agencies are involved in but for which I have seen no genuine ownership within the Ministry of Health. I am similarly worried about the partnerships with nurses and midwifery colleges, which are not utilising the volunteers to the full. Unless VSO gets much more pro-actively involved in these partnerships, and advocate for the uptake of the products, chances are that an evaluation visit in a few years will find mere remnants of their work – if that.[209]

The intelligent design of projects and initiatives helps. VSO's principle of capacity building leading to sustainable improvements is powerful but will often not be sufficient. The Ministry of Health must have a *reason* to populate the IHRIS database, such as pressure from stakeholders that insist on *using* IHRIS. Sometimes, these incentives exist already (e.g. the District Agricultural Research Centre has vested interest in the success of VSO's seedlings pilot with Zomba Prison) but often it is not immediately clear what would drive partners to push things forward.

I am worried about the sustainability of the various programmes of VSO Malawi, but I am not without hope. First, I accept that high-risk-high-benefit programmes come with a high failure rate, and that this should not be a reason to discontinue them. Second, VSO Malawi has evidence that VSO's approach can work (see text box.)

> **Text box: VSO and the Malawi Prisons Service (MPS)**
> A decade ago, the Malawi Prisons Service did not provide systematic HIV-related services and did not have an HIV function. In 2005, VSO and MPS agreed to place an international volunteer to develop MPS' HIV-related capacity.[210]
>
> Three volunteers later, VSO had built MPS' VTC and related capacity, funded a VTC clinic, and developed a structure within MPS to take over all HIV-related work for inmates, staff and spouses. VSO had also conducted very sensitive research related to abuse in prisons, and had seen corrective action in response to VSO's recommendations. After the third volunteers' time was up, MPS confirmed it no longer needed a VSO volunteer to support its

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[209] The last-surviving elements will probably be the skill labs, which are likely to outlive the various systems and processes, as well as the donated computers. The computers I saw at St Luke's college are currently placed next to their broken-down predecessors, just as they may well break down and end up next to the next generation of donated computers.
[210] A step that was not foreseen in the VSO Malawi 2004-09 strategy.

HIV-related work.

Today:

- The VTC clinic is still working, and the HIV-related staffing structure[211] has become part and parcel of the MPS overall staffing structure. VSO's work has sustainably built MPS' HIV-related capacity.
- When I had a few questions left after an initial interview and entered the office unexpectedly, the team was actually present and working (as opposed to sitting about, reading the paper or being absent). When I asked for an overview of the 2014 testing statistics, the Coordinator could instantly hand me a table with all testing activities of each of the 30 'stations' and mentioned, from memory, the only two stations that had not conducted tests this year. All this confirms that the structure actually *functions*.
- MPS invited VSO to join the HIV Steering Committee, which meets quarterly, for strategic oversight. This confirms VSO's image as a knowledgeable partner.
- MPS requested a VSO volunteer for its agricultural work. This confirms that MPS' previous experience with VSO volunteers had been positive.
- The MPS nutritionist, who is part of the HIV team, has approached VSO's agriculturalist (not the other way around) and together they have developed and are currently implementing plans in which the volunteer and the nutritionist cooperate with the aim to improve the inmates' nutritional status.[212]
- VSO presented the experience at the International Aids Conference in Washington. This illustrates VSO's ability to contribute to the wider HIV-related discourse.

Recommendation 19
An IPR1 recommendation was that "when planning M&E activities, […] prioritise […] VSO's most impressive successes. These successes could be used to learn from and for the purpose of strengthening VSO's policy contributions and marketing material." In this context, I recommend a post-closure evaluation of VSO's HIV-related work with the Malawi Prisons Service.

Innovation

The IPR1 noted that "Based on limited evidence, this IPR tentatively [concluded that] VSO is ideally suited for innovative work." (Pages 5-6.) In the course of the assessment week, this evidence has become a little more robust. Specifically, I have seen one or more examples of:

- **Internal innovation.** The multi-approach Ntcheu project works through village volunteers and village-based 'safe motherhood task forces' to promote maternal health. It focuses on both the demand and supply side and includes a thorough downward

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[211] A national coordinator with two assistants, four regional coordinators, and an implementing officer in each of Malawi's 30 prisons.
[212] Specifically, the nutritionist has requested the growing of soya, which the volunteer was able to arrange; and once the crops are ready the nutritionist is going to educate inmates on cooking methods that maximise nutrient intake.

accountability component through the score cards of CARE International. It works in partnership with Pachi, which covers the M&E role (and, appropriately, nothing else). If I am not mistaken, this project has several components that are new to VSO.

- **Partner innovation**. The clinical procedure list that volunteers have developed a first version of (and that I hope they will now follow up on with wide consultations among tutors, rather than printing it and hope for the best) includes the *reasons* for each of the steps of each procedure. Hopefully, students across all CHAM colleges will not only learn what steps to take but also why each of these steps needs to be taken. I understood this to be new to the colleges, and it seems to me that this is a very sensible innovation.

- **Country-wide innovation.** Positivo's programme is probably not the only music-based HIV-related awareness programme in Malawi, and certainly not the only one in the region. However, I have not seen Positivo's particular sequence of activities before, and am impressed by the very bottom up approach of identifying key issues, and by the downward accountability that has been built into the programme. Parts of this may well be new to Malawi, and are worth researching and, if the approach is found to be successful, promoting.

- **Worldwide innovation**. One Billion's tablets are much more radical than any education-focused programme I have ever seen before. They do not seek to realise a little more of this or a little less of that: their ambition is a transformation of the children's learning experience. The chances of success (defined as a country-wide government-owned roll-out) seem remote and I do not think that Malawi is the best possible pilot country because of its very challenging government environment. However, *if* it works then this single transformation would be well worth VSO's decades-long history of trial and error.

End of text.

Annex to the VSO Malawi report: methodology

Approach

This one-week assessment consisted of a review of documents and other types of evidence; conversations with VSO staff and partners; on-site observations; two very brief focus group discussions (one with a few children and one with a few inmates); and two dinners with volunteers.

Luciano, VSO's Regional M&E Manager, accompanied me on part of this trip. I conducted a few of the interviews by myself, and we conducted a few of them together.

Most interviews were open and most questions were broad, guided only by the documents that VSO had sent me and by previous conversations. Only towards the end did I start to work with lists of themes and questions, to fill the gaps in the analysis.

I categorised all my notes of all interviews and documents, roughly on the basis of the structure of this report. This report was very easy to write: I looked at the notes of each theme, and the analysis imposed itself.

Choices and limitations

This country assessment amounts to an 8-day assignment. This includes preparation, reading, travel, meetings, data analysis, report writing and editing. The implication is that I selected rather carefully what I could and could not assess. Key choices are as follows:

- **A focus on VSO Malawi's health work.** This is because the Uganda and Cambodia assessments focus on, respectively, livelihoods and education. By focusing on health in Malawi, each sector gets covered once.
- **Limit duplication to the extent possible.** Originally, we had agreed to a few visits to clinics and communities in Ntcheu, but this was before I had read Pachi's Ntcheu mid-term survey report. After reading this report, I decided that these visits would not be the best use of my time, and I asked these meetings to be cancelled and replaced by additional meetings with VSO staff members. On reflection, I regret this decision as I learned, during the conversation with the Project Manager and volunteer, that important benefits of this project had not been captured by the mid-term survey (and this was confirmed two days later, when I met with Pachi.) On the other hand, these additional meetings with VSO staff members did prove to be very useful, not least as a way to triangulate insights shared by volunteers.
- **No assessment of upward accountability**, because upward accountability is assessed at length in other parts of the IPR2 assessment.
- **No assessment of 'economy'**, as this would have taken rather a lot of time and, in absence of alarm bells, this did not seem to be a wise investment.

Annex 7: Uganda country report

Willem van Eekelen, final report, 7 November 2014

Contents

Introduction

At the time of IPR1, Uganda's change process was in full swing already. This process was driven by development-focused individuals and inspired by, or at least aligned with, VSO's People First strategy. Already in 2012, job descriptions and terms of reference emphasised the need for a shift towards a more strategic way of working. The IPR1 recommendations have not caused any of this, though they may have reduced resistance to this change process, and may have added to the momentum.

This is illustrated by VSO Uganda's first-ever strategy, which precedes IPR1 and covers the period from 2012 to 2015. This strategy moved VSO's work from scattergun placements to work that focuses on the most disadvantaged communities in the most disadvantaged parts of the country - the north.

This assessment report consists of two parts. One of the sub-headings – 'data' - are the same in both parts, but these sections do not overlap: the first part looks at the way VSO's broader change processes are shaping the work in Uganda, and the second part is a broad-brush assessment of VSO's current programme approach and portfolio. I make recommendations in both parts, but note that the most of the work I have seen is impressive already.

I would like to thank the team – including Joseph from the regional office - and the many others I have talked with, both for the insights and evidence they have shared with me, and for their patience.

In this report, 'we' are Joseph Orem and Willem van Eekelen. 'I' is Willem.

Overall organisational change

VSO Uganda uses volunteers and largely restricted funding in work that is designed on the basis of programmes rather than placements or partners. These programmes aim to achieve development impact in VSO's key sectors of education, health, and livelihoods.[213] The programmes broadly follow VSO's Theory of Change and are inspired, to an extent, by evidence and learning. The reports are much less fluffy than the reports I saw in 2012, and are broadly verifiable. It seems to me that this ticks the key boxes that today's VSO wants to be ticked.

VSO Uganda utilises VSO's new systems and models (e.g. VSO's regionalisation and data protocol). The country office copes as well as could be expected with the frustrations and inefficiencies that accompany some of the change processes, such as the volatility in data requests and requirements, and the teething issues of VSO's new volunteer cycle platform.

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[213] The IPR2 ToR does not cover VSO's fourth field of work of Participation and Governance.

The changing role and recruitment of volunteers

In recent years, VSO Uganda has moved its focus from volunteer numbers to volunteer impact. This transition is not the easiest as partner organisations still request random placements (to which the country office says no), while there still is occasional pressure from the VSO Federation to place a few more volunteers (to which the country office also says no).[214]

The new volunteer cycle platform takes some getting used to. The requirements on the side of VSO Uganda – such as embedded placements and JDs - are filled, but the recruitment of new and rather specifically qualified volunteers is proving to be a challenge. This is at least in part because candidate volunteers withdraw their candidacy more frequently than before, possibly because they now have the opportunity to have direct contact with their prospective partners, and this contact might be sobering.[215] I have no doubt that these are teething problems and that the new recruitment dynamics will, before long, be massively helpful.

The reliance on restricted funding

The proportion and sum total of VSO's unrestricted DFID funding has reduced globally, and continues to be under threat. Therefore, VSO is encouraging regional and national fundraising, and is investing in decentralised fund-raising capacity.

VSO Uganda has very successfully entered this market place. In today's world, this means that VSO Uganda is now regularly working as part of a consortium. To utilise the advantages of consortium-based work for a niche organisation such as VSO, and to avoid the pitfalls, VSO has learning to do.

The key risk for VSO is to be seen as the HR function of a wider programme, and for its volunteers to essentially be 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. This has happened in VSO's UNICEF-led project, which was "an intervention which lacks a unifying theme."[216] It happened again with the project led by Reading Triangle Initiative (RTI), where at least some of the volunteers "are deeply dissatisfied with their roles. They do not like the strategies that RTI wants to employ, and recently two of them just left because they felt that the project had not been thought through properly."[217]

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[214] The example provided is the one of VSO Ireland. During a visit that explored possibilities for short term placements, VSO Ireland was clearly interested in numbers of Irish nationals. This is in line with VSO Ireland's KPIs, which are still focused on volunteer numbers. However, VSO Ireland and Irish Aid are changing too, and the Country Director mentioned that Irish Aid is now funding work in the Karamoja region that does not involve any Irish volunteers.

[215] This does not mean that this contact is not very useful: pre-deployment refusal is better than post-deployment withdrawal.

[216] See this project's excellent external evaluation: Prew, Martin (May 2014) *UNICEF – Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports BRMS Mentorship Project Evaluation*, University of Witwatersrand School of Education, page 26. This evaluation then reports that the project had very considerable impact, and likely sustainability of this impact, but *less* impact both on schools and on national thinking and policy-making than would have been possible if UNICEF had not managed it poorly (pages 53-54). On page 46, the report narrates how VSO mentors cover funding gaps because of UNICEF's sloppy financial system – and states that "This is completely unacceptable."

[217] Conversation with VSO volunteer. From the feedback of VSO Uganda, I understood that the dissatisfaction is not shared by all: "some volunteers are also very happy in their placements."

I understood that VSO's role in a third consortium - the upcoming Goal-led programme[218] - goes beyond volunteer deployment. I hope this expanded remit includes a meaningful role in project design and project monitoring. Such monitoring should ideally build on the volunteers' on-the-ground presence, but M&E-related communication should ideally be organisational rather than individual. This is not a given: even in today's VSO paradigm, much of VSO's bottom line work takes the shape of direct communication between a volunteer and his or her counterparts, and volunteers will be inclined to use the same model of direct communication vis-à-vis a project's lead. The UNICEF project showed that such direct communication may not be heard.

> **Recommendation 1**
> VSO should consider the implications of consortium-based work. Even where VSO is not the consortium lead, VSO should ensure that its role exceeds the one of 'providing volunteers'; that is plays an active role in any consortium's M&E processes; and that it modifies its communication practices to befit consortium dynamics.

Data

The IPR1 made far-reaching recommendations in relation to VSO's data gathering and analysis. This has contributed to an environment in which ever-changing requirements are posing too much of a burden on the country offices. In part, this was inevitable, as the organisation needed to find a new and better data-related balance. In part, this was because DFID has posed unreasonable pressure on the organisation, which led to efforts to be repeated.

In the past two years, the data requests and the repetition of work that this entailed ('no, sorry, this is not what they wanted') has compromised both the actual programme work and staff morale. I hope that VSO's data processes will soon stabilise and consolidate, and that VSO will actually manage to follow its annual reporting flowchart. This would make the data collecting and analysis processes simultaneously better, easier, more singular, and more useful.

Already, things are improving. Staff reported that:

- The current PMLT forms are more user-friendly than the previous version has been.
- The Quarterly Reporting Packs are less wide than they have been before. And, importantly:
- Reports are discussed with the Regional Director rather than merely submitted to the Head Office, which means that data are increasingly used for analysis, learning and regional support, rather than merely for mind-numbing reporting.

> **Recommendation 2**
> To avoid duplication of data-related work, DFID and VSO's Head Office should ensure that their data requirements are unambiguous and do not change mid-year.

Regionalisation

The regionalisation process is not yet finished, and there is some dissatisfaction with the way the global demands by the Head Office have left insufficient country-driven time for the M&E Managers in particular. Nonetheless, the country offices are much more empowered than they were in the

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[218] Funded by Master Card, led by Goal, with VSO, Mercy Corps and Restless Development as partners.

past, and the linkages with the wider regional work are already obvious in the fields of M&E and purposeful learning (through PFPA and other mechanisms).

Recommendation 3

The post IPR1 period has been a period in which VSO's Head Office often had to impose its agenda in order to meet DFID's SGA-related requirements and drive forward VSO's own change priorities. In the next few years, the balance needs to shift towards the regional and country offices. There is already evidence of the benefits of such a shift.

The work of VSO Uganda

Identity and image

For VSO Uganda, its first-ever country strategy has been a step change. Its 2015-2018 strategy is currently being developed in a participatory fashion and is likely to be even stronger, if only because of the experience gained in the past few years.

VSO Uganda has manoeuvred itself into a positive spiral that is increasing its visibility as a viable partner in development. This positive spiral is fuelled by the increasingly strategic and impact-based focus of VSO Uganda, its intensified engagement with NGO platforms, its consortium-based work, its restricted funding, and the sheer growth and profile of some of its programmes. A bit of luck in the form of DFID's decision to discontinue its programme with the Prime Minister's Office helped too – but this 'luck' that was realised through quick and decisive action, which confirms the notion that VSO was gaining confidence. Today, the international stakeholders that work in northern Uganda regularly approach VSO for partnerships – something unheard of prior to 2012.

VSO is on the sector's map, but the sector's notion of what VSO *stands* for, beyond the use of international volunteers, is hazy. Similarly, VSO Uganda works with government authorities, but the government officials we talked with knew little of VSO's broader work and even its most central drivers.[219] Strikingly, there was no overlap at all between the education-related things that VSO staff identified as 'key VSO policy issues' and what VSO's government counterpart thought that VSO's key policy issues were.

Among VSO staff, there is an equal absence of consensus on what VSO's policy messages might be,[220] and I have not seen any evidence of clear VSO policy demands along the lines of, for example:

- Follow Rwanda's lead on valuing health workers.
- Do not phase out nursing assistants in absence of a viable alternative.[221]

Recommendation 4

As part of VSO Uganda's 2015-2018 strategy development process, the country programme should develop key evidence-based policy messages. Such messages would potentially strengthen:
- VSO's contribution to removing root impediments and to enhancing root facilitators to

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[219] A few of the observations made were along the lines of 'perhaps VSO could focus on girl education, too' and 'VSO should also consider people with disabilities.'
[220] And freely admits this: "We do not know why we are here."
[221] VSO does participate in FENU, a sector-wide policy platform in Uganda. VSO is the lead agency on one of FENU's four groups - the Early Childhood Development group - and has placed a volunteer in FENU.

> sustainable development.
> • VSO's image and influence in the wider development sector of Uganda.

Even in absence of well-phrased advocacy messages, VSO can be a driver of change. This struck me as most obviously true in the YDP programme. Other organisations (such as Windle Trust, AVSI, TASO and Acholi Education Initiative) have provided informal vocational training in northern Uganda for years. However, VSO is the first to have added counselling, life skills, literacy and numeracy, arts, sports,[222] community engagement, the opportunity to participate in research,[223] and a crèche for young mothers. These add-ons are 'effective' in the sense that students clearly appreciate them,[224] and are able to explain in what ways they benefit from them.[225] The programme is too young to really assess the retention of these benefits, but I strongly suspect that, ten years from now, these benefits will have been proven and that these innovative add-ons will have become the norm.

Relevance

The 'overarching goal' section of VSO's 'People First' strategy states that:

Analysis of social and economic exclusion in the countries and regions where we work, including progress towards the MDGs, will be used to identify the geographical areas of highest poverty and where marginalised groups exist. This in turn will help to inform the partners that VSO will seek to work with in each country. It will also help us in our discussions with government partners on the focus of our work together and provide a starting point for reviewing our partnerships with non-governmental partners.

In line with this statement, VSO Uganda has explicitly and deliberate refocused its work to Uganda's most disadvantaged region: the north. In this region, VSO Uganda focuses on the key sectors of education, health and livelihoods. In these sectors, VSO Uganda designs its programmes to reach the region's most marginalised communities through the capacity building of key duty bearers and service providers. VSO's work is in line with some of GoU's most sensible priorities[226] and in coordination with various stakeholder forums.

So yes, VSO Uganda's work is relevant to some of Uganda's most marginalised populations and to VSO's own strategy.

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[222] Some students *lóved* the football tournament among vocational training centres that YDP had organised.

[223] Students' participation in this research is not just useful for the sake of the research findings, but also as a formative activity. "We did a market survey. We talk with these people freely. We know what is happening and share many things and ideas with them. Others added things to my mind. That is the point with communication with other people – it is a very good thing. Like us, as a worker, leaving this place, I go with something on my mind: I know I am not alone and I need to know what is happening in the world around me. The business needs a lot of communication. You have to be busy all the time. You have to know what you are doing before you start doing it. You have to start with the knowledge."

[224] There were a few people who mentioned that these various add-ons distracted from the vocational training. As the vocational training component is not very time consuming (i.e. most students only spend some three hours per day in actual training), this seems to be a matter of good time management rather than an inherently overburdened agenda.

[225] There are direct effects: "The counselling helped a lot. When I came here I was having a lot of fear and I thought I would not have friends. Because of counselling I can speak to somebody like you (a white man). I can also speak in front of a group." Even more impressively, there appear to be spill-over effects: "The counselling also helped because I can now speak with somebody who has a problem. I say 'For this and that, you need this.'"

[226] E.g. 'Skilling Uganda.'

Logframes

While much of the 2012-2015 VSO country strategy is still sound, its logframe is not. The reason is that the data protocol has dramatically reduced the country programme's reach. VSO Uganda still follows this logframe in spirit but no longer populates it. I do not know what the wider VSO stance on this is – but I think this is a sensible decision.[227]

Instead, VSO Uganda feeds into the SGA logframe through the PMLTs, and has project-specific logframes. I have seen one example of such a project-specific logframe: the September 2014 version of the YDP logframe. This logframe is relatively strong and comes with a very useful 'indicator definition and analysis framework,' which is an example of VSO's significant M&E-related improvements. I understood that DFID's Results Advisor was impressed by this piece of work, and shared it with other DFID grantees.

Data

VSO Uganda seems fairly efficient in its data gathering. I have not seen evidence of duplication of work or of the collection of irrelevant data, and the data that are collected feed both the project logframes and the PMLTs at output, outcome and, sometimes, impact level.[228] Data gathering is intense[229] but not ridiculous. Some information rings of the past (e.g. number of volunteer days),[230] but other data seem quite sophisticated.[231]

On a more critical note:

- VSO still seeks 'credibility by numbers.' The 2013-14 annual report starts by stating that "VSO is now present in 55 districts, working with more than 60 partner organisations." This is not impressive. It is not an innocent idiosyncrasy either. If anything, this suggests that VSO Uganda is spreading itself too thinly, and the focus on this sort of numbers compromises the efficiency and effectiveness of operations (see recommendation 10).

- The numbers are certainly more realistic and more easily traceable than they were before, and it is a sign of courage that VSO Uganda presented a 'reach' number in 2013-14 that was a mere 6% of what it had been the previous year.[232] But it is not the end of the road yet. Once the long-

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[227] In fact, one the IPR1 recommendations was to abandon VSO's global logframe altogether, as it is better not to have an umbrella logframe than to have one that is fundamentally flawed.

[228] Several VSO staff members emphasised that this was very different from the way it was only a few years ago, when reports were narrative affairs about, mostly, the volunteering experience. I did not verify this.

[229] For each gateway centre, YDP requires monthly progress reports, a three-stage KAP survey, activity reports, monitoring reports, tracer Studies, student-specific data for the centre's MIS, quarterly reports and monthly financial reports. (Isaac Obong, Project Officer, conversation on 24 October 2014.)

[230] "VSO volunteer professionals have worked over **6,475** days." VSO Uganda - Annual Report FY13-14 - Mango Tree draft 1 MO, page 6, emphasis in original. Many other reports have similar bits in similarly prominent places.

[231] Such as the three-stage KAP survey that measures progress among YDP's vocational training students and graduates.

[232] In 2012-13, VSO "reached 1,840,327 ultimate beneficiaries" (VSO Uganda Annual Report, April 2012-March 2013, page 4.) In 2013-14, VSO was able to "Reach 113,744 ultimate beneficiaries." (VSO Uganda - Annual Report FY13-14 - Mango Tree draft 1 MO, page 4.)

overdue[233] M&E Officer starts his or her work, I expect the numbers to drop further, and I hope that VSO Uganda will rid itself of the tradition of 'false precision.'[234]

- Beneficiaries are traceable but the nature of the benefits is often different from what the logframe suggests it will be. This is the case of YDP in particular. YDP's vocational training will not achieve, or come close to achieving, the livelihood-related logframe ambitions (see the section on equity). At the same time, YDP has meaningful (*dramatic*, even) benefits that are not captured in the logframe – such as the building of friendships, confidence and self-esteem; the beginning of dealing with trauma; and even just the sheer impact of a young person's first-time experience with an educational institute.[235]

- When going through the various VSO Uganda documents, the reader gets the impression that VSO's concept of 'capacity building' is really just training (notoriously insufficient for behavioural change), with quite an emphasis on *hotel*-based training (even more notoriously insufficient for behavioural change). In reality, I found VSO's capacity building to comprise of a whole lot more than that.[236] This is a reporting flaw that I understand, as training is the easiest capacity building activity to report on, but this means that VSO's reporting does not do justice to the richness of VSO's work in northern Uganda. Another reporting flaw: reports never explain how VSO action is embedded in the wider development sector's initiatives, and this wrongfully creates the impression that VSO is working in isolation.

- The data gathering is based on templates, and these templates change *much* too often. The YDP financial reporting template has seen 13 iterations! This is embarrassing for VSO staff[237] and frustrating for VSO's partners.

Recommendation 5
VSO should not revise its templates more than, say, annually.

Accountability

Downward accountability. In a few programmes – and particularly in YELG and YDP - VSO is facilitating the provision of distinct services. The people who access these services generally know what their entitlements and the various eligibility criteria are, and found it easy to identity which of their entitlements were and were not realised.

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[233] The first attempt to recruit somebody was made in early 2013, and the various misfortunes do not entirely explain why there is still nobody in place more than 18 months later. This suggests that the recruitment of this position has not been prioritised to the extent required, and the implication is that VSO Uganda is probably one of the few organisations of its size that operate in the very difficult regions of northern Uganda without at least a single designated full time M&E member of staff.

[234] In the 2013-14 annual report, only the health programme moved away from false precision, with a reach of 24,000, rather than something like '24,316.'

[235] Volunteers talked with some passion about the transformation they had seen in some of the students, and about the tears in the eyes of graduates, on graduation day. Some of the students had similar messages. "Without this, no-one would know us."

[236] In fact, the BRMS evaluation points out that the "The basic hypothesis that the project was built on [was] that use of skilled mentors and coaches will have more impact on those mentored than workshops." (UNICEF – Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports BRMS Mentorship Project Evaluation, page 10.)

[237] "It makes us look like a fool."

However, downward accountability failed in the sense that there appear to be no formal and well-published complaint procedures.

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Recommendation 6

VSO programmes that work on the basis of eligibility criteria and entitlements would benefit from clear, widely known and functioning complaint procedures. These do not have to be built from scratch: the HAP standard and tools provide guidance.

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Sideway accountability. VSO engages in various forums and working groups, and seeks to ensure that relevant stakeholders are aware of VSO's current and planned work.

Upward accountability

- The unusually demanding financial reporting and governance arrangements are fiercely criticised by partners. In a few cases, VSO has made modifications to the requirements,[238] and this shows that VSO is strict but not deaf. Overall, VSO maintains strict oversight, and this is probably very useful as it minimises fraud[239] in an environment where fraud has taken a lot of time and energy from the organisation. At the time of writing, there are still a few cases in court; investigations are going on in four partners; and some funding is probably still being lost through shady food procurement and, possibly, ghost students. This is inevitable, and VSO seems to be doing all it can to minimise such losses.
- I have not come across problems related to donor reporting, but did not triangulate this with donor representatives (see annex 1, on methodological choices and limitations).

Internal accountability. People tend to know what their and their colleagues' responsibilities are, and have the authority required to fulfil these responsibilities. It does occasionally happen that a staff member is given the responsibility and authority to make a decision, only to then be criticised for this decision to have been wrong,[240] but this seems to be incidental rather than systematic.

Learning

VSO Uganda says that its "constant focus on learning is another key reason for the success of our programmes which all seek to embed input and unique local insights from our partners."[241] We saw evidence that this statement is, in fact, largely true.

VSO has always benefited from ad hoc learning and adaptation. Nowadays, these processes are increasingly deliberate, systematic, utilised and shared. We have seen evidence of four types of learning:

1. **Learning from internal observations.** We have come across many evidence-based iterations in programme implementation. This was confirmed in a recent external evaluation[242] and is

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[238] The most obvious example I have come across is the decision that YDP's Gateway Centres' expenditures are now allowed to exceed their line item budgets by up to 5% without permission, and up to 20% with prior permission, provided that the overall expenditures do not exceed the budget.

[239] When fraud was detected in one of the vocational training institutes, VSO's minor losses were incomparable to the massive losses of other NGOs – ICCO and KNH - that this institute had also worked with.

[240] For confidentiality purposes I cannot go into details, but it did not strike me as a major cause for concern.

[241] VSO Uganda - Annual Report FY13-14 - Mango Tree draft 1 MO, page 20.

[242] "As one DIS said "the [child centered learning and literacy] programme needs to be part of the PTC preset course". It is significant that VSO, one of the partners in this project, is implementing a pre-service training

generally a good thing.[243] How such learning then feeds into other programmes is less clear, and certainly not yet systematised.

2. **Learning from research.** VSO regularly conducts bits of research and gains tangible insights through this research. To give just two examples:

   a. VSO's research showed that breaking gender patterns requires broader community sensitisation work more than the persuasion of girls;[244] and
   b. VSO observed that some of the initial support provided to YELG groups – such as the distribution of free start-up kits and the frequent distribution of oxen – did not work out well. Consequently, VSO changed the design of the support in the second phase of the programme. Similarly, VSO noticed that several YELG groups did not stand a real chance of independent survival and decided to discontinue its support.[245]

   Some of VSO's research design – such as YDP's research on market relevance and on youth with disabilities - is impressively engaging and participatory. Staff and volunteers seem confident that such research will be put to good use.

3. **Regional learning.** Regional learning processes and the PFPA in particular are shaping some of the work and thinking of VSO Uganda.[246] In addition, there is more contact between country offices. Ugandans are visiting other countries in the region, and people from other countries are coming to Uganda. This, too, happens more and more deliberate, and is more explicitly institutionalised (e.g. the Technical Pot that is dedicated to regional themes) than was the case during the IPR1 assessment.

4. **Learning from external observations.** We have seen evidence of changes made on the basis of external observations. In some cases, these external observations are imposed - such as in the case of the audit report which led to the recruitment of an Operations Coordinator. In other cases, VSO Uganda *sought* external support at its own initiative, such as when it approached Restless Development to learn from its national volunteering system.[247] VSO is not inclined to

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intervention triggered by their experience with this project." *UNICEF – Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports BRMS Mentorship Project Evaluation,* page 56.

[243] But sometimes it is unhelpful, such as the frequent reporting template iterations. Also note that, in cases where overall programme management is not within VSO's control (e.g. BRMS), design modifications may have an impact on an individual partner but not on the overall programme.

[244] Note, in this context, a positive development: "compared to the last intake, the programme is seeing a greater number of females enrol in non-traditional courses. In Acholi and West Nile 30% of females are currently enrolled in non-traditional courses, whereas this figure is 60% in the Lango, Teso and Karamoja sub-regions." (VSO YDP Quarter 5 report April-June 2014 - FINAL COPY, page 8.) This is not at all in line with our observations in the three vocational centres we visited, where gender lines were still very pronounced, but these three centres may not have been representative.

[245] See the *VSO UG YELG YR II Q3 2014 Report*.

[246] The PFPA Pretoria meeting set the scene and identified seven key areas that needed work (e.g. 'where do we get our evidence from?'). Then, regional clusters identified key themes and action plans for each countries. In Uganda, the three themes were:

- Collecting and using evidence,
- Spaces for reflection and learning, and
- Making best use of volunteers and staff.

After this, iterative in-country consultations will be developing thinking and solutions. For a traditionally rather hierarchical organisation, this is all very new. (From a conversation with Mary Bennell, on 23 October 2014.)

[247] Restless Development is not the only source of information: I understood that Ian Ellis recently undertook a visit to Ethiopia for a study tour on the same issue of national volunteering.

reinvent the wheel: when developing the YDP gender toolkit, for example, "VSO […] explored the possibility of using a Gender toolkit produced by pathfinder International under a USAID funding"[248]

Partnerships

A partner who had been working with VSO for a number of years could see the shift in VSO's approach "from 'noble work' to 'health services development,'" and she liked it. Volunteers themselves could see a shift from 'scattergun' to more strategic deployments too, though they also mentioned that some volunteer positions still have a significant 'could-you-give-me-Excel-training-please' component,[249] and that VSO impresses upon volunteers that they 'need to be flexible.'

Still, partners are broadly positive about VSO's work, apart from the frustration caused by the frequent iterations of templates (mentioned above) and the following:

- There are the usual sources of frustration related to the level of funding, salaries and allowances. This is not a weakness on the side on VSO, but rather a sign of the wider development sector's harmful conventions on financial incentives.[250]

- YDP partnerships have been under pressure because of a very rushed start. From the Invitation to Tender, I understand that vocational institutes that wanted to serve as Gateway Centres had a mere 16 working days to develop and submit a proposal.[251] In this period, they needed to shape their thoughts on the sometimes entirely new concepts of informal training,[252] psychosocial training, a 50:50 gender balance (which the invitation presented as a requirement, not as a preference), a new vocational portfolio and the market relevance[253] of each of its components. They also needed to identify and agree with partner institutes, identify recruitment needs, prepare the beginning of a budget, and present an action plan for the first eight months. This type of rush is common in the sector, but should be avoided as it leads to poorly thought-through proposals, which lead to frustration later, of which we saw evidence.[254] Once implementation started, it would probably have been better to grow every next cohort, instead

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[248] VSO YDP Quarter 5 report April-June 2014 - FINAL COPY, page 10.

[249] When talking with partners about the roles of the volunteers, we got quite a range of answers. Some saw them as sources of knowledge and appreciated their roles in curriculum building, class observation, system building, training and coaching, among other useful things. Others felt that 'they bring tea and biscuits to the meetings' and that 'sometimes you need the white people to come to check on us.' More broadly, partners do not always 'get' what VSO does. When asked what they hope VSO will do in the future, the answers were often along the lines of 'better furniture', 'a bigger maternity wing' and 'something to fence the area.'

[250] It did strike me that the salary supplement for the vocational teachers was *very* low – the monthly compensation for this half-time add-on is considerably lower than the daily fee of a Ugandan driver I happened to know.

[251] This is less extreme than it sounds as this was not the first time the vocational training centres heard about YDP – it started some time before this, with a series of regional briefings that started eight weeks before the deadline for bids.

[252] The Daniel Comboni Centre, for example, had never delivered informal training prior to YDP.

[253] Note that the actual *research* on market relevance started much later. It would have been better to start with a bit of market research before sending out the invitation to tender. VSO had proposed this to DFID, but DFID had refused on the basis that significant work had already been undertaken. Alternatively, if YDP built on research previously done in the context of YDP's predecessor, then the research findings should have been summarised in the Invitation to Tender, as this would have helped the vocational training centres to focus their bids.

[254] "Would we do this again? Yes, but under conditions. Not like this."

of starting with all guns blazing and then face delays[255] and centres that were insufficiently prepared for YDP's large numbers of students.

Recommendation 7

VSO could align itself more to partners' systems and structures. This is particularly obvious in two fields:

- The Ugandan annual cycle starts at the end of June. While I acknowledge the internal problems this will initially cause, I recommend that VSO aligns itself to this cycle. VSO should be embedded in the cycles of its partners, and not the other way around.
- As part of the YDP programme, vocational centres got new staff for literacy and numeracy lessons, counselling and data processing. The salaries and allowances that these people receive should have followed the centres' own structure of salaries and allowances. This was not the case. The compensation of these new staff members was typically higher than of existing staff, and this has caused friction and resentment.

Value for money

Economy

VSO Uganda is following up on economy-related audit recommendations. The internal audit systems and processes I have seen give me confidence that issues will be kept pending and followed up on until they are resolved. This is good.

VSO's bigger 'economy' issue is the use of international volunteers. If international volunteers do jobs that Ugandan professionals could do just as well than this is an expensive way (i.e. bad economy) not to create job opportunities (i.e. labour market substitution). A few of the partners mentioned that there are occasions where a national would do a better job, and/or that linking international with national volunteers might be worth exploring.

This issue will not go away for as long as VSO's identity is largely based on the deployment of international volunteers, but the issue is much less pronounces now that VSO is much less focused on volunteer numbers, and is experimenting with non-traditional forms of volunteering.[256]

Recommendation 8

VSO encourages the development of more diverse forms of volunteering, and VSO Uganda could

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[255] "In general the quarter saw between 30% to 50% coverage of the curriculum across the various courses", *VSO YDP Quarter 5 report April-June 2014 - FINAL COPY*, page 8.

[256] The BRMS evaluation confirms that there is value in combined approaches: **"**While the project managed to recruit strong local and national educators it is interesting to note that the foreign mentors tended to focus on the classroom and school and few of them impacted on the systems within which schools work, while the local mentors tended to focus on these and the community involvement in schools and undertook much less work in classrooms and schools. Clearly a combination of both approaches is what is needed. This also goes for the innovations. On their own they are not transformative – it is the combination of these innovations with advancing child-centred practices which provided real impact." (UNICEF – Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports BRMS Mentorship Project Evaluation, page 53.)

more pro-actively pursue this. Restless Development has shown that there is potential for national volunteering[257] within Uganda, and there are probably things to learn from VSO Kenya's diaspora volunteering.

Efficiency

We did not come across wastage within VSO (other than the unnecessarily large catchment areas covered in recommendation 10) and from the 2013-14 annual report I understand that "Staff costs went down to 16% compared to 21% last year, which demonstrates that VSO was in a strong position to manage further projects without significantly increasing internal capacity.[258]

However, VSO is embedded in a wider development sector that, in the case of northern Uganda, is more inefficient than is the case in most other parts of Africa. Small health centres get small bits of support from a wide range of NGOs.[259] Good coordination limits the duplication,[260] but not the additional costs of working in such a fragmented sector.

Short of a dramatic 'give the money to X so that *they* give that training and achieve economies of scale,' I see no solution to these inefficiencies.

Effectiveness

A one-week visit is not sufficient to conduct a real effectiveness assessment, and in the case of YDP it is too early for such an assessment. Therefore, this section merely points at things that are likely to contribute to VSO's effectiveness, and things that are likely to weaken it.

Things that are likely to contribute to VSO's effectiveness

1. Operations are embedded into bigger things. In the past, medical volunteers who were sent to northern Uganda made useful observations (on the nodding syndrome, for example) and did useful things (such as mobilising resources to get health centres solar lamps). However, their success depended largely on the zeal and expertise of the volunteers, and on a measure of luck. There was no enabling environment. Nowadays, VSO volunteers are part of a wider programme and more plugged into the northern Ugandan coordination systems. This reduces the risk of wastage.

2. VSO replicates good practice. Often, being 'effective' requires people to recognise what works and to replicate it, rather than to innovative. This was most obvious with VSO's Help Babies Breath programme.

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[257] I base this on a Uganda-focused Restless Development evaluation I have previously conducted. VSO is aware of this and already engaging with Restless Development, with the aim of learning from Restless' national volunteering model.

[258] *VSO Uganda - Annual Report FY13-14 - Mango Tree draft 1 MO*, page 21.

[259] The examples we came across were of the type of X building a small building, then Y building a small building, then Z sorting out plumbing, with X, Y and Z all having their overhead and other costs, and insufficient economies of scale. Staff members of a 'type 2' (i.e. very modest) health centre could list eight different organisations that had provided them with support in the past few years, and showed us three different types of Mama Kits that organisations had provided them with.

[260] We noticed this also at the level of the ultimate beneficiaries: YELG group members said that VSO was the only organisation that supported them.

3. VSO coordinates with other stakeholders, to identify gaps and to avoid duplication. This is important in a crowded market where the government authorities – the stakeholder that is ultimately responsible for coordination - are not yet sufficiently thorough. VSO asks other NGOs which health staff they have trained on certain issues, and then asks the district authorities to invite people for VSO's training courses – and lists the people who should not be invited to avoid duplication.[261] It does not always work,[262] but the principle is sound and VSO's attempts to strengthen the district authorities' capacity to lead this type of coordination are potentially very useful.

4. VSO builds capacity in a very participatory manner. For example, "VSO developed and tested, in a very interactive manner, a new and more constructive way of classroom inspections, based on an observation checklist […] that was appreciated by teachers and inspectors alike, and the Ministry of Education and Sports "recognised the value of the new VSO-developed lesson observation tool and approved it as part of the appraisal process for teachers."[263]

5. VSO conducts action research and will probably modify programmes in line with the findings. Vocational students who had participated in this action research *loved* it. It built their confidence and insights. More broadly, bits of research such as the upcoming research on disabilities and the research on the market relevance of different types of vocational training are fundamentally useful for an organisation that works in these fields. I do not yet know what the findings will be but I have seen a lot of evidence of pro-active learning, within VSO Uganda and among its volunteers, and I have no doubt that these pieces of research will impact upon programme design.

This is an area that will cause VSO to strengthen its effectiveness in the coming years: away from showing how to make soap because the volunteer happens to know how to make soap, toward training on resuscitation techniques because relevant organisations noticed that this helped address the observed prevalence of unnecessary deaths among babies.

Things that probably weaken effectiveness

1. In the supply-driven development sector of northern Uganda, decisions must be evidence-based. This is not always the case and this may damage disadvantaged communities and individuals who will say yes to anything VSO may offer. Specifically, we have not seen strong justification for the following:
- **The distribution of oxen.[264]** They often died or were sold (which turns oxen into cash, which means that VSO has essentially given people cash in a roundabout and expensive manner).
- **The marketing of bicycles.** I have seen no evidence to suggest that the people who agreed to buy these bicycles need bicycles more than anything else, or that they will be able to repay the debts they incurred by agreeing to buy these bicycles.
- **Each of the vocational training options.** It seems to me that some of these courses – and particularly some of the gender-reinforcing courses for girls - are not market relevant, and

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[261] This particular example was related to training that had been provided by NU-HITES. VSO has had similar coordination moments with other NGOs.

[262] We came across a Nursing Assistant who participated in a three-day VSO training course on Helping Babies Breath, and a five-day UNICEF training course on the same issues, only months apart from each other.

[263] VSO Uganda - Annual Report FY13-14 - Mango Tree draft 1 MO, page 8; on 22 October 2014, VSO's Programme Manager for Education provided a number of quotes that confirmed the enthusiasm of the various parties.

[264] The decision to distribute oxen was made early in the project, by the Gulu and Lira District Local Governments, and reversed in a later stage.

introduced merely to achieve the desired 50:50 boy:girl ratio.[265] Claims that sweater weaving is profitable because local production could outcompete the Kampala-based production of school sweaters may or may not be credible – but I have not come across a single student who knew a single person who makes a living this way, and there is ample literature confirming that these types of courses reinforce both entrenched gender roles and poverty. The research on market relevance will provide evidence that may lead to a revision of the courses offered.[266]

- **The insistence on groups.** These groups may be attractive from the point of view of project monitoring, as they are easier to track then individuals. However, they are artificial as they get established in response to support that will not otherwise be provided. People do not like getting pushed into a group and these groups often break down.[267] Groups sell assets, or group members steal them, or a sub-group will exclude others from utilising these assets. It would be better to emphasise, in the entrepreneurship training, the potential advantages of groups (e.g. they allow for economies of scale in both buying and selling, for the procurement of bigger tools, and for contracts with larger customers such as schools) – and then leave the choice to the graduates. The ones who opt for group-based support *then* are much more likely to survive as groups than then ones who do so at the moment.

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Recommendation 9

In the supply-driven development sector of northern Uganda, VSO should design its programmes with more evidence ('what does the market tell us?') and less preconceived notions ('groups are the key to success.')

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2. In a very poor region, you do not need to travel far to find an eligible group of people. VSO's YELG project is a relatively small project that has provided support to 34 groups. It takes place in a few sub-counties of the Gulu and Lira districts. Although VSO had tried to limit the geographical spread, groups may be hours of travel time apart. These distances lead to infrequent contact and a high proportion of people's time spent on the road. This is inefficient and unnecessary: there are many areas within either of these districts where VSO could have found 34 groups within a few square miles. Moreover, support to groups in a small catchment area raises opportunities to mutually reinforce each other's progress – something that could never happen with groups that are hours of travelling apart from each other.

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Recommendation 10

Resist political pressure to spread out projects without strong justification. Instead and whenever possible, minimise catchment areas to maximise both efficiency and, potentially, impact.

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[265] Girls are strongly encouraged to break gender barriers, and VSO produced a gender check list to help training centres to achieve this. At least some training centres take this seriously (and use that check list). The Daniel Combine Centre, for example, says that 'if you, as a girl, apply for electronics, we will automatically grant you permission.' Nonetheless, reality is that vocational training is still largely separated in things-for-girls and things-for-boys. Interestingly, Mary Bennell (an international volunteer with a background as a plumber) noticed that stereotypes have not yet been formed in newish courses like electrical installation and plumbing, and the number of girls in these fields was somewhat higher.

[266] From VSO Uganda's feedback of 3 November, I understood that some VTIs are already revisiting their portfolio of courses: "There is also evidence that as a result of tracer studies some partners are dropping courses (including tailoring) and adding others – agric, electrical."

[267] In only one of the six focus group discussions we have facilitated did a student mention the possibility of advantages of groups, for certain vocations.

3. There is too much standardisation. I understand the attraction of symmetry, but framing every single type of vocational skill training in a six-month course is artificial and leads to some people graduating with the skills they need (bricklaying), and other people graduating with a level of skills that is not yet marketable (electrics).

Recommendation 11

In future rounds, YDP should move away from the one-size-fits-all six-month course duration, as different vocations require different training trajectories before skills become market relevant.

Consultations with students and training institutes, combined with the KAP results of the first group of graduates, will probably enable VSO to make evidence-based choices.

Equity

VSO has closed a number of offices in recent times, and most of them where in middle income countries. This is not a coincidence: VSO is deliberately focusing on fragile and particularly poor countries.

Similar choices are made *within* countries. To arrive at the work that VSO Uganda is currently doing, the country team went through a process of rethinking VSO's role and portfolio. This required starting new partnerships and ending or reconfiguring older partnerships.[268] The result is that VSO now really does focus on marginalised groups in Uganda's most marginalised region.

VSO's logframes suggest that VSO has not yet grasped that one of the inevitable implications of this refocus is large failure rates. Even the most recent iteration of the YDP logframe foresees that 75% of vocational training graduates will be able to earn a living with the skills they acquire. This is unrealistic because:

- Livelihoods in northern Uganda almost invariably rely on multiple sources of income.[269] At best, these vocational skills will turn into one of these sources of income.
- There will be losses along the way.
    a. The selection is based on levels of vulnerability, not on entrepreneurial spirit and stamina. This is appropriate, considering YDP's objectives, but it does mean that some of the students will never make it as a skilled labourer, simply because they do not have it in them. Some will drop out. Some others will graduate and then return to 'digging.'[270]
    b. Sometimes, the training is of relatively high standards, and sometimes it is not. Some teachers do not show up or do not teach whilst present;[271] some courses suffer from

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[268] An example of such a reconfiguration is with the International Health Sciences University in Kampala. Previously, VSO helped to strengthen the dynamics between patients and the Ugandan equivalent of GPs, which was of benefit to the wealthier segment of Ugandan society. The benefits were verified and confirmed, but did not trickle down to the marginalised communities that VSO aims to support. VSO will continue with this partner, but the focus shifted to work done in relation to the health system in northern Uganda. (Also interesting: this is the only example I have come across to date, of a partner that covers the full direct and indirect costs of the placement.)

[269] See the excellent action research-based Restless Development publication titled "Strength, Creativity and Livelihoods of Karimojong Youth."

[270] I.e. working on the land.

[271] Unless, some students pointed out, VSO's international volunteer was visiting the centre – a practice that the volunteer was aware of. Note that this students also reported on teachers who were 'very good' and 'inspiring.'

shortages in tools and/or material; electricity cuts cause welding students to sit idle for weeks on end; and some vocations simply cannot be learned in six months.

c. Sometimes, the skills are marketable, and sometimes they are not.[272] Market relevance is an important criterion in principle, but does not seem to play much of a role yet in practice.

d. Perhaps one day the post-graduation support will be helpful, but this does not seem to be the case yet. The concept is insufficiently developed, the action insufficiently planned and budgeted for, the people who are meant to provide this support are the 'entrepreneurship managers' rather than the vocational specialists (I would think there is a role for both types of support). We have seen no examples of useful engagement with construction companies (for bricklayers and the like), hotels (for catering students) or schools (for sweater weavers). The one person we got to know through the stories of 'his' students does not seem to be motivated and did not actually visit groups more than once in the six month period.[273]

e. Sometimes, groups will perform well, and often they will not. Sometimes, the tools will be sold or stolen, and people will fight or disappear.

YDP can expect an uplift, but not a livelihood, and not for 75% of its graduates. This is partly the consequence of teething problems and design flaws, but largely simply inevitable if you choose to focus on marginalised youth in northern Uganda, who have been dealt a raw deal in life to date, and whose challenges are therefore many and daunting. It is not a reason not to implement these programmes, but a reason to expect modest returns-on-investment.[274]

Sustainability

Northern Uganda is fundamentally aid dependent. When projects stops, a government partner, vocational training institute or self-help group will look for other projects to tap into, and priorities will shift accordingly.

The UNICEF project serves as an example. In this project, VSO volunteers worked with the Ministry of Education and Sports to strengthen the capacity of 'Coordinating Centre Tutors' (CCTs). The overall finding of a formative evaluation was that "the BRMS Mentorship Project was well conceived and, given the constraints affecting it, had significant impact and serves as a potential model for sustained school improvement."[275] Nonetheless, when we talked to VSO's counterpart, he felt certain that, when the project ends, the ministry will focus on inspectors instead, or on parent teacher associations, or on training of school directors – and the choice will be largely dependent on 'what's on offer.' CCTs will receive no further support and will no longer meet regularly. Their motor bikes will fall into disrepair or stay idle because there is no money for petrol (and a little extra). They will slowly slip back into apathy.

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[272] According to the Human Technical Gateway Centre's manager: "When we tried to get students in apprenticeships, the companies wanted money because they said that the amount of training was not enough and that 'they will not be useful and we will have to retrain them.'" If this is correct, VSO might want to consider piloting seed funding utilisation for this purpose.

[273] When asked, the school management said that the reason was probably the absence of 'petrol money.'

[274] YELG is even more challenging, as this project aims to support groups of people who do not benefit from YDP's massive skills-related investments. Indeed, in the two groups we have visited, we have not come across people whose lives had been changed significantly by YELG – over and beyond a little extra income that enabled people to pay school fees and the like.

[275] Prew, Martin (May 2014) *UNICEF – Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports BRMS Mentorship Project Evaluation*, University of Witwatersrand School of Education, page 5.

This partner's assessment is overly negative. For example:

- The BRMS evaluation found that "the intervention has made deep impact in many colleges and schools. Because much of this impact relates to behaviour change and fundamental changes in the way that educators go about their jobs there is good reason to think that many of the changes will be sustained. The recipients of the project believe that many of the innovations will be sustained as they make their teaching and school management more fulfilling and they are enjoying the sense of success."[276]
- One of the international volunteers - Mary Bennell - visited a vocational training institute that was not part of the YDP programme and found that they had been trained, some time before, by another NGO. Mary saw evidence that suggested that at least some of the training work had been retained.

However, this partner representative does point to fundamental challenges, and these challenges will not disappear until the Government of Uganda shifts its budgetary and other priorities. This has two implications:

- It reinforces the recommendation that VSO Uganda's next strategy should have clear policy messages. Ultimately, the problems of northern Uganda cannot be resolved with capacity building support and vocational training.
- Ambitions should be modest. Training on resuscitation techniques is useful and will hopefully help to save the lives of a number of babies in the coming few years. Vocational training for youth who would not have access to such training without VSO's YDP, is useful (and potentially life-changing) for many of these youths. But VSO cannot assume that it will find evidence of impact if it returns to these health centres and vocational institutes a few years after project closure. Even within the project period, motivation is fragile and depends in part on financial incentives - as is illustrated by low training participation if there are no 'sitting allowances'.

Notwithstanding the above:

- Intelligent design increases the chances of sustainable impact. VSO gives skills-based training rather than upgrading training, for example, and this significantly reduces the risk of brain drain (as upgraded nurses move from the north to Kampala, and from there to the UK).
- There is a chance that northern Uganda reaches a turning point. Conceivably, slightly better health and education, a slightly better skilled work force and ongoing financial insertions into entrepreneurial groups and individuals might create a positive spiral and may, one day in the coming decade, better enable northern Uganda to cope with the inevitable withdrawal of the international development community. In addition to the benefits for individuals there and now, it is this chance of reaching that turning point that makes these various VSO interventions potentially worthwhile.

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[276] UNICEF – Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports BRMS Mentorship Project Evaluation, page 53.

Annex to the VSO Uganda report: methodology

Approach

Joseph Orem, VSO's Regional M&E Manager, accompanied me on this trip. I conducted a few of the interviews by myself, but we conducted most of them together. Whenever we had focus group discussions, we split the group into two, and each facilitated one of the discussions.

Most interviews were open and most questions were broad, guided only by the documents that VSO had sent me and by previous conversations. Only towards the end did I start to work with lists of themes and questions, to fill the gaps in the analysis.

I processed all interview notes, shared them with Joseph who kindly reviewed and added to them, and then categorised all notes of interviews and document reviews, roughly on the basis of the structure of this report. This report was very easy to write: I looked at the notes of each theme, and extracted observations.

Choices and limitations

Key choices and limitations have been as follows:

- This assessment focused mostly on VSO Uganda's livelihoods programmes. This is partly because of the sheer size of YDP, and partly because I will conduct two other country visits (Malawi and Cambodia) in which I will focus mostly on health and education.
- I would have liked to talk with representatives from funding agencies and consortium partners. However, these conversations would have meant a full day in Kampala, which would have reduced the visits to Gulu and Lira to three days only, and this might have been too short to conduct a meaningful assessment.
- In a one-week visit that includes many hours of driving around, we can only have one or a few representatives of each of the various groups of stakeholders. I do not know to what extent these stakeholders are representative. For example, we have only visited a single Vocational Training Institute (in addition to two Gateway Centres), and I understood this to be a relatively weak implementing partner. Though I am confident that the assessment is by and large sound, I am also sure that my impressions have been coloured by the specific selection of people we ended up talking with.