

VALUING VOLUNTEERING - MOZAMBIQUE

'SPOKES OF A WHEEL' A COMMUNITY LED VOLUNTEER INITIATIVE

2015



VSO at a glance

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Credits

Text: Alexandra Picken
Research: Alexandra Picken
Editing: Elizabeth Hacker
Layout: marcomadruga.com
Cover photo: Katie Turner

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Abbreviations

VfD	Volunteer for Development organisation
CNV	National Volunteering Council, Mozambique
SDB	<i>Secretário do Bairro</i>
CDC	<i>Chefe de Casas</i>
CDQ	<i>Chefe do Quarteirão</i>

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Executive summary

The global study *Valuing Volunteering* investigates how and why volunteering contributes to poverty reduction and sustainable positive change, and the factors which prevent it from doing so. This case study looks at a community based project in a peri-urban neighbourhood of Maputo, Mozambique, which mobilised volunteers to support participatory community development. The project aimed to promote community volunteering to support livelihood and income generation activities that met community needs. The project design involved the inputs of a number of different types of volunteers including community based volunteers, student volunteers and international volunteers working with the international volunteering for development (VfD) organisation, VSO.

The *Valuing Volunteering* project used two research approaches to explore the question of how and why volunteering leads to poverty reduction and sustainable positive change: Participatory Systemic Inquiries (PSI) and Participatory Systemic Action Research (PSAR). Both approaches enable us to get under the surface of how communities operate and how change happens.

This case study focuses on the factors that affect the potential of participatory community led volunteer initiatives to devise and implement solutions to self-identified poverty needs. The experiences of the community volunteers involved in the initiative and their perceptions of the factors that facilitated or impeded the project's success form the basis of this study. The key findings are outlined below.

The impact of local governance structures on partner and volunteer selection

Valuing Volunteering Mozambique found that situating community led participatory initiatives within an environment of relatively rigid organisational frameworks and politicised local governance structures impacts on the participatory nature of such initiatives. Overarching organisational frameworks which prioritise formal bodies with official statutes often leave little space for community volunteers to self-organise in more organic ways as they respond to community needs. Furthermore, the choice of local partner can be influenced by local governance actors which in turn, can result in volunteers being selected from a narrower section of the community. This leads to subtle shifts away from the underlying participatory ethos of such projects and highlights the importance for organisations to be aware of how power and politics impact on the participatory nature of development initiatives, particularly in highly politicised contexts such as Mozambique.

Party politics in volunteer spaces

In addition to local governance actors' influence in community development projects, blurred lines between partisan politics and civil society can further exclude certain sections of the community from being involved in and feeling ownerships of community volunteering initiatives. Some volunteers felt that volunteer activities had been used to gain political and/or electoral advantage. This has implications for whether an initiative is owned by a cross section of the community or seen as a tool to further establish political interests. This can be particularly problematic in contexts where the ruling party is dominant.

The representativeness of volunteer structures

Community volunteer projects often require new organisations to develop or existing organisations to grow in order to mobilise and manage the volunteers required to implement the initiative. This case study shows that the organisational systems required to support and govern volunteers as organisations develop and change is something that can be easily overlooked by supporting volunteer organisations. It highlights the need for volunteers to be supported so that they have the capacity to self-govern and manage the organisations they develop and work through to deliver community based initiatives.

Power dynamics within community initiatives

Without appropriate organisational and management systems in place, there is the potential for power to be concentrated in the hands of relatively few individuals within the organisations used to implement community volunteering initiatives. This can undermine the participatory nature of such initiatives, making them less representative and community owned. In this case study, some of the community volunteers involved in the initiative felt that decision making power had become concentrated in the hands of few individuals. Without access to a statute that formalised their role and outlined the organisational structure of the volunteer body, the volunteers felt their ability to speak out about the power imbalances within the organisation were limited. This study shows the importance for VfDs of being aware of how community level power dynamics can influence the participatory nature of projects and points to the need for robust regulations, statutes and procedures so that volunteers have grounds to appeal should imbalances emerge. It also shows the importance of working with partners who share the same values and understanding of participatory working and are able to put this into practice at grassroots level.

Can volunteering make volunteers more vulnerable?

When volunteers have limited influence regarding the implementation of a project, decisions can be made which fail to take into account their perspectives and needs. In this case study, some community volunteers felt that their concerns were not addressed and that this resulted in their own livelihoods and wellbeing being adversely affected. VfD organisations need to be aware of the risks that increased workloads can place on volunteers. Importantly, volunteers need access to good channels of communication so that in cases where voluntary activities cannot be balanced with existing responsibilities, their concerns can be raised and action taken to ensure the volunteer's wellbeing is not jeopardised.

Making community volunteering initiatives accountable

Bottom-up development approaches often require associations to grow and develop organically, and for project plans to evolve as communities devise and test solutions that respond to identified needs. This case study highlights the challenges in ensuring projects are subject to robust organisational procedures that promote transparent and accountable ways of working. It shows the necessity of finding participatory ways to monitor and evaluate projects' progress and establishing good channels of communication so that stakeholders can raise concerns and hold decision makers to account. In addition, it shows how reporting procedures can overemphasise the role of official actors, which risks under representing the contributions of community based stakeholders.

Using international volunteers to support community based initiatives

There were examples where international volunteers were used effectively to support community volunteers to manage, implement and evaluate the community volunteering initiative. Their 'outside observer' status in particular allowed international volunteers to help ensure projects were implemented in a more transparent and accountable way. However, there is a risk that the 'outsider' status is overused or overemphasised, resulting in international volunteers' technical skills being underutilised as they are relied on to provide legitimacy to initiatives. Ensuring effective mechanisms to match international volunteers' technical skills with community needs is challenging given the relatively long timescales needed to mobilise and train volunteers, and the evolving design of participatory initiatives. However, finding ways for the community to have more say over how international volunteer resource is used is essential for initiatives to deploy human resources that respond to real and identified needs within the community and for initiatives to be truly participatory in practice.

1. Introduction

“The truth, we have will to work as volunteers but we want to feel engaged... we don't want to be volunteers because we are in a package. It's like we are the spokes of a bicycle that are eluding themselves that they are spinning in a bike wheel, while what is spinning is the wheel only. We want to be functioning and feel that we are giving our contribution... we have the right to be heard, give opinions and exercise the actions we have without limitations.”

(CBF Community Volunteer)

The global study '*Valuing Volunteering*' investigates how and why volunteering contributes to poverty reduction and sustainable positive change, and the factors which prevent it from doing so. This case study looks at a community based project in a peri-urban neighbourhood of Maputo, Mozambique, which mobilised volunteers to support participatory community development. The project aimed to promote community volunteering to support livelihood and income generation activities that met community needs. The project design involved the inputs of a number of different types of volunteers including community based volunteers, student volunteers and international volunteers working with the international volunteering for development (VfD) organisation, VSO.

The *Valuing Volunteering* investigation

Valuing Volunteering Mozambique was interested in how community led volunteering could lead to sustainable positive change in Maputo. It looked at whether, in practice, the community volunteering initiative explored in this case study responded to the needs of the community, and the factors that challenged or limited its ability to do so. The community volunteering initiative mobilised different types of volunteers (e.g. international and community based), and the *Valuing Volunteering* study wanted to explore the different roles of these volunteers and the benefits and disadvantages of using different volunteers in combination. Where possible, the case study aims to make some general observations about how VfD organisations could respond to some of the challenges that affect the ability of community volunteer initiatives to meet community needs.

Why focus on community volunteering in Maputo?

The Maputo community volunteering initiative that this case study investigates reflects broader trends in the development sector to promote more participatory, community led approaches to development (Hickey and Mohan, 2005, pp.237). VSO Mozambique supported the project and the community led approach and mobilised international volunteers to support community volunteers where necessary. VSO Mozambique was interested in understanding the project's impact and in sharing key learning emerging from the project's innovative approach.

Furthermore, corresponding inquiries conducted by *Valuing Volunteering* in Mozambique had begun to show that many volunteering initiatives tended to be less participatory in design and were based on the specifications of external actors such as donors or government actors. Therefore, there was interest in exploring whether the community volunteering initiative at the centre of this case study achieved more sustainable positive change than those projects with a less participatory design.

VSO and *Valuing Volunteering Mozambique* were also eager to explore the effectiveness of mobilising international volunteers alongside community volunteers. Because the project mobilised a combination of volunteers (student, international and community based), the project offered *Valuing Volunteering Mozambique* unique opportunities to explore how such partnerships could work in practice.

Community volunteering: the pathway to change

A collaboration between the National Volunteering Council (CNV) and the government's Ministry of Youth and Sport, the community volunteering initiative was based on research commissioned by the CNV and the Ministry of Youth and Sport in 2010. It is funded by an international privately funded initiative that finances similar volunteer projects in a number of countries. The project was managed by VSO Mozambique.

The project promotes a community defined and led approach to tackling development challenges. It aims to foster ownership by placing decision making power regarding how to achieve sustainable positive change in the hands of community based volunteers. Volunteers therefore decide the type of projects that are needed and the volunteer activities required.

In this particular community, at the project's inception, community volunteers undertook an initial community needs assessment and then developed five relevant project ideas. The five projects were based on proposals developed by community members that utilised existing skills held within the community. The project ideas were: chicken rearing, brick making, furniture making, carpet making and the development of a nursery. The community volunteers wanted to utilise existing skills and share these within the community, building other community members' capacity to begin income generation projects that would lead to positive and sustainable change.

In addition, part of the project's design was to use the skills of volunteers from the national Final Year Student Volunteer Organisation. This government supported voluntary scheme mobilises recent graduates and students in their final year at university to carry out service provision roles in a variety of government sectors, including social services, tourism, education and health. Student volunteers were included in the community volunteering project's design so that they could share technical skills with community volunteers that were not available within the community. The community would determine which skills were required to undertake a particular project, and then an appropriate student would be identified to share the relevant skills. For example, if the volunteers wanted to start a small businesses to meet development needs in their communities, the national student volunteers could be called upon to provide relevant training if such skills existed within the pool of student volunteers. In the focus community, student volunteers conducted training in small business management, community leadership and on issues around gender and discrimination.

Types of volunteers engaged in the project at different points:

Volunteers mobilised by the community volunteering initiative		
Community volunteers	Student volunteers	International volunteers
Mobilised through a local partner organisation. The organisation deployed volunteers mobilised prior to the start of the initiative, in addition to mobilising new volunteers specifically to implement the community volunteer project.	Volunteers mobilised through the national government supported Final Year Volunteer Organisation scheme.	VSO Mozambique international volunteers.

2. Theory of change

A participatory, community led approach was central to the community volunteering initiative. The theory of change was underpinned by the principle that the community should identify needs and devise locally led solutions to address these community needs. More specifically, the mobilisation of community volunteers was integral to this theory of change: volunteers had an important role in facilitating the process of need identification and devising solutions locally.

Following a process of identifying community needs, community volunteers would identify the areas in which they had skills and receive start up capital from the supporting volunteer development organisation (VSO) to share these skills with other locally based volunteers. Volunteers would then have the skills required to begin small income generating projects such as brick making, chicken rearing and child minding. These projects would be managed by community volunteers and other community members with whom they had provided skills based training. VSO (via a local partner) would also support them with any external training and start up capital required to initiate the income generation projects. The projects were designed to meet community poverty needs. One volunteer describes the project:

'One person said, "I have capacity to raise a chicken until the pot," and VSO said "Ok, it is a project, stay with this project and you are going to teach others." There appeared a person who said, "I know how to make bricks." VSO said, "It is a project, you can explain and teach others and you find a group that you can make it with." There appeared someone who said, "I can do a nursery," and another for carpets.'

Community Volunteer

The advantage of this design was that the skill sharing and income generating projects could be instigated within the community, close to volunteers' homes, allowing the volunteers to continue to attend to their own household and livelihood needs.

If support was needed for specific technical skills, community volunteers would be supported by qualified final year university students. The final year student volunteers involved in the community volunteering project are part of a Final Year Student Volunteer organisation (as outlined in section 1). In the project design, the student volunteers' role was to build the community volunteers' capacity in skill areas that would help them successfully implement the project. In addition, the idea was that these skills could also be usefully applied beyond the parameters of the project, contributing to the ability of the volunteers to generate viable livelihoods for themselves.

In reality, the student volunteers' involvement in the project was fairly limited. They provided training, for example on small business negotiation, and monitoring and evaluation some time after the project had begun. However, certain requests for training from community members could not be met (e.g. for childcare trainings).

3. Background

The community volunteering initiative is situated in a peri-urban neighbourhood in the capital of Mozambique, Maputo.

It is a semi-formal settlement with good access to the city. The population of Maputo City is 1,194,121 (2010). The HIV prevalence is 19.8% (individuals aged between 15-49yrs) (2009) and the poverty rate is estimated at 36.2% (2009). The location is affected by extremely poor sanitation conditions making large areas of the neighbourhood impassable during the rainy season. Further, due to poor rubbish collection services drainage ditches are often blocked, worsening the situation and increasing risks to health.

Politics

While Mozambique is a democracy with an electoral process, it is still considered to be a ‘one-party’ state. As the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa describes: *‘political pluralism is a very recent phenomenon in Mozambique and, ever since the first multi-party elections in 1994, there has been a clear two way split in the political arena between [the opposition] and [the ruling party]. However, while it is true that the Mozambican political scenario is still marked by bipolarisation, it is no less true that [the ruling party] has gradually expanded its domination and political hegemony’* (Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa, 2009, pp10).

Mozambique is strongly influenced by this political hegemony. This can at times bring in to question the autonomy of civil society spaces, given that *‘most of the organisations that comprise [civil society] are dependent on or tied to [the ruling party] and the government’* (ibid., pp67). In some circumstances this can have positive consequences because *‘interaction between political society and civil society can lead*

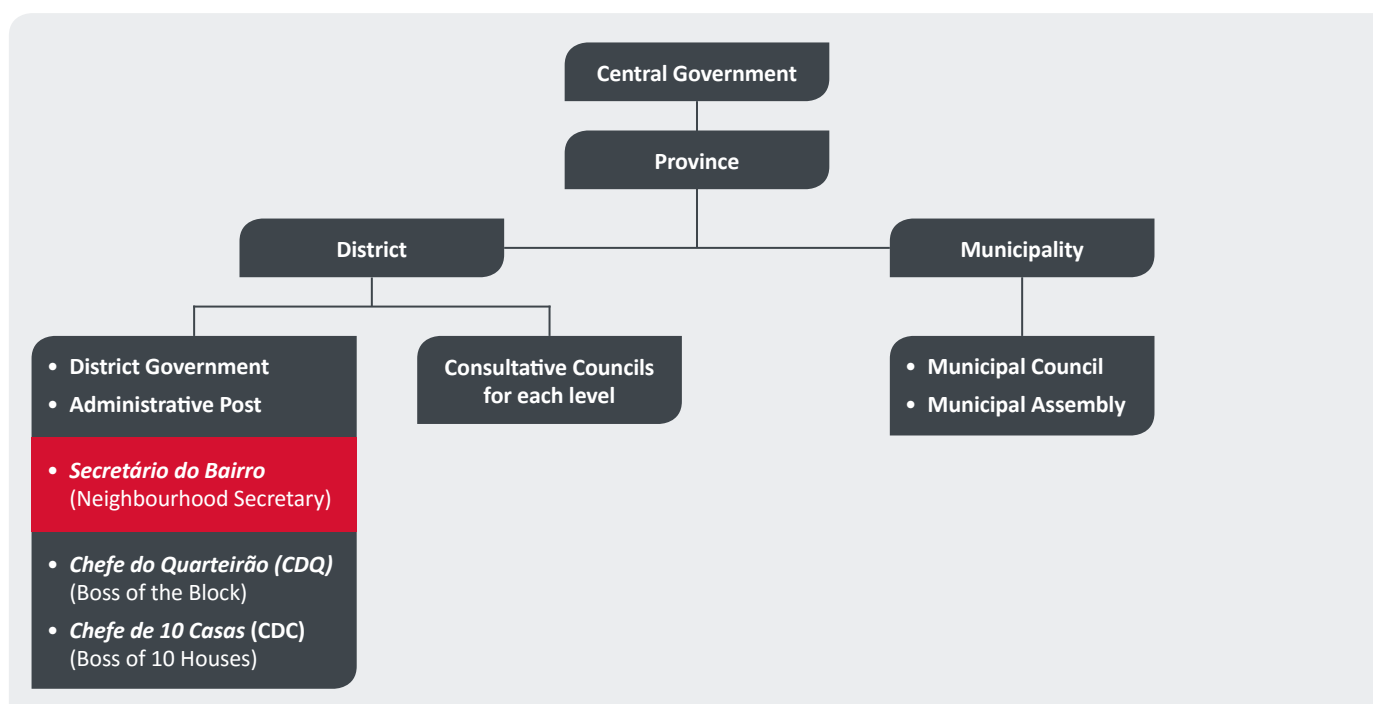
to greater participation of the latter in public matters’. However, it can also mean that *‘the autonomy of organisations can be affected by such ties [whereby] political parties [begin] making use of civil society organisations to advance their political interests.’* (ibid., pp.68).

The one party system, and the questionable definition between political and civil society spaces that results from this, has implications for volunteering even at the local level, which will be explored as part of this case study.

Figure 2 depicts the national to local level governance structure in Mozambique. The red box highlights an important figure in everyday activities in Mozambique. The secretary of the neighbourhood (SDB) is the local level authority. He is the focal point for the authorisation of community and volunteer activities, and information regarding such activities will always pass through him to the structures further up the administrative hierarchy. Usually there is also a leader for every ten houses, the *Chefe de 10 Casas* (CDC). The CDC will report to the leader of the block, the *Chefe do Quarteirão* (CDQ) who in turn feeds all information about the neighbourhood to the SDB.

When volunteers wish to take up an activity or have an idea for an intervention within their community they consult with these structures to seek the permission of the SDB. This case study explores the implications that local governance structures and the associated processes of authorisation can have on how, when and where a volunteer intervention in a community takes place and who is involved.

Figure 2. Governance Structures in Mozambique



4. Methodology

The *Valuing Volunteering* project used two research approaches to explore the question of how and why volunteering leads to poverty reduction and sustainable positive change: Participatory Systemic Inquiries (PSI) and Participatory Systemic Action Research (PSAR). Both approaches enable us to get under the surface of how communities operate and how change happens.

Participatory Systemic Inquiries (PSI) allow a system of actors, actions and contexts to be mapped as a baseline against which change can be assessed (Burns, 2012). When identifying the starting points (our baseline) for a project we might typically record those factors that have an obvious direct relation to our intervention. For example, if our aim is to increase girls' access to education, a 'traditional' baseline might record factors such as school enrolment, attendance and participation. PSI allows us to go deeper and reflect on how people, processes and the environment within which they are situated influence one another and the path to change. Doing this involves asking both broad and detailed questions which take us beyond the school walls and into the complexities of social systems, such as "Are girls supported by their family and the wider community to attend school?" "What are the power dynamics within the community and how might these influence girls' attendance in school?"

This data is then used to determine how different factors affect one another, with the aim of learning about why change is or is not happening. While causal links between each part of a system can be identified, they are frequently not linear relationships. By allowing us to observe volunteer practices as part of a wider system rather than in isolation, PSI challenges our assumption that if we do x it will automatically lead to y, and forces us to consider each intervention within the context in which it is taking place. For example, strengthening our understanding of the factors that impact on people's perceptions of volunteering was important in some inquiries to make sense of volunteers' effectiveness. A PSI mapping and analysis might take place over a 2–12-week period and can involve working with many different individuals and groups. In the *Valuing Volunteering* project we ran many different PSIs at the community, organisational and national levels. Where actors were motivated to respond to emergent findings, PSI formed the beginning of an action research process.

Participatory Systemic Action Research (PSAR) is an action research methodology which embeds reflection, planning, action and evaluation into a single process. The core principle behind action research is that we learn at least as much from action as from analysis. It incorporates iterative cycles of action and analysis, allowing us to reflect at intervals on a particular action or approach and adapt it according to what we've learnt. The action research used by *Valuing Volunteering* was participatory because it was led by individuals directly affected by or involved in volunteering-for-development initiatives, and they defined the action research process and questions. It was systemic because we assessed the impact of these actions by considering the knock-on effects for the actors, actions and contexts comprising the wider social system. PSAR typically takes place over a period of 18 months to three years.

Community volunteering initiative case study methodology

Valuing Volunteering Mozambique initially undertook an exploratory community inquiry in the neighbourhood where the community volunteering initiative was based. The aim of this inquiry was to understand the perceptions of volunteering in the area, the main poverty challenges the community faces and how much the community knew and understood about the community volunteering initiative supported by VSO.

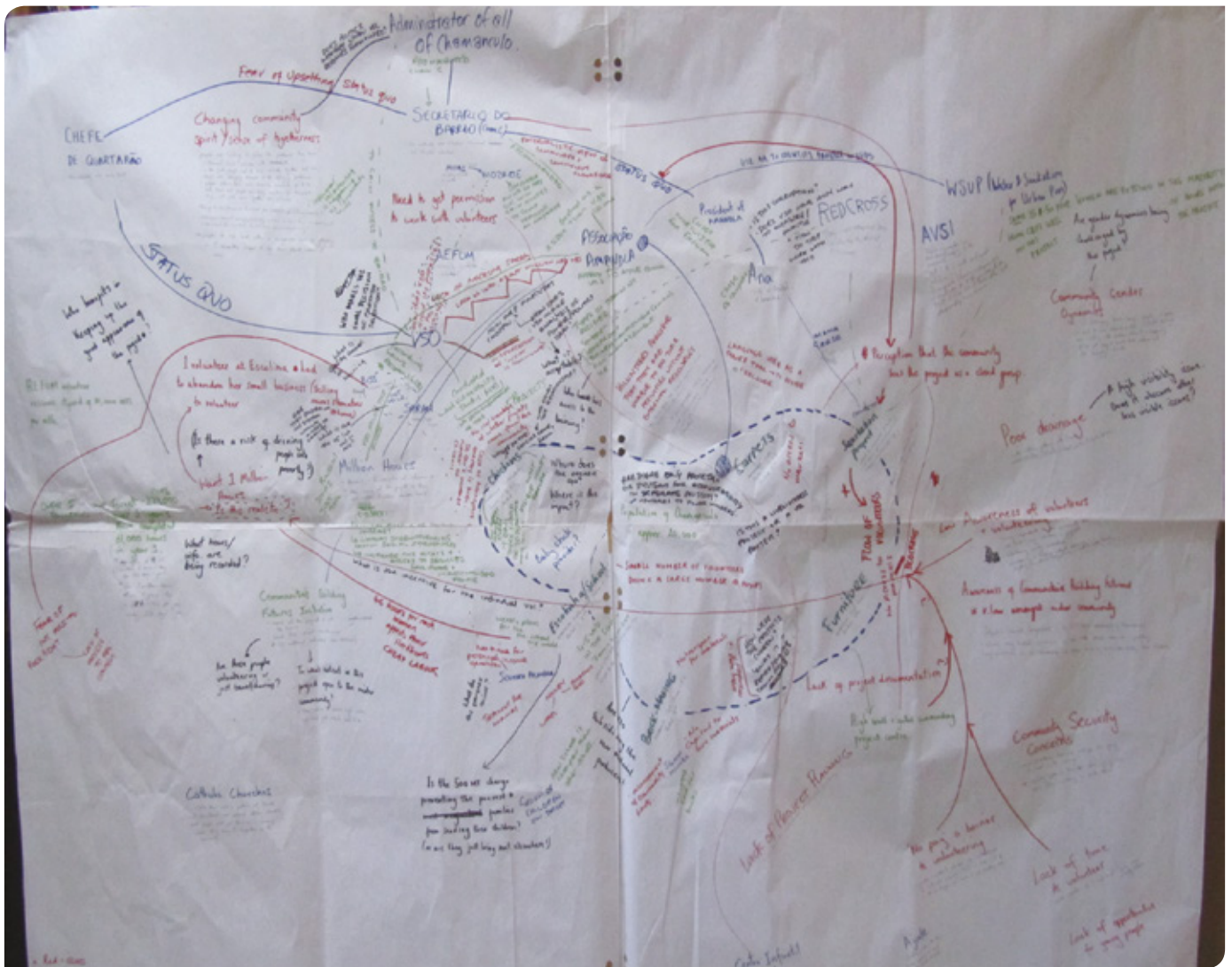
A follow-up workshop focusing on sustainability was conducted with community volunteers, one student volunteer and a recently arrived VSO international volunteer (whose placement was with the local implementing partner) several days after the initial investigation. The workshop gathered some background information regarding perceptions of how the project began, selection processes and how the different themes for the initiative were decided on.

Several participatory methodologies were used during the workshops including effect trees, and a large sustainability matrix exercise was conducted to try to understand how the community perceived the long term impact of the initiative. The workshop was undertaken approximately one and a half years into the two year project, making it an appropriate stage to analyse the sustainability of the initiative. Following the initial inquiry and sustainability workshop, *Valuing Volunteering Mozambique* developed a systems map to analyse the data (see Figure 1.).

Systems mapping is a technique used to better understand issues and relationships in complex environments by bringing together information and views from a number of participants onto one page. Below is the original systems map used to analyse the information from the inquiry:

The map was created by *Valuing Volunteering* researchers and includes key themes and issues that emerged during the initial inquiry and workshop (depicted in red). The different stakeholders in the project, and factual/ observational data are also included on the systems map (depicted in blue and green respectively). The map captures arising questions and themes that emerged during the analysis of the initial data (in black).

Figure 1. Systems map



This process generated numerous insights that are explored in the following section of this case study.

The *Valuing Volunteering Mozambique* inquiry was opportunistic. For example, the *Valuing Volunteering* researcher collaborated with the newly arrived international volunteer who was placed with the local implementing partner. The international volunteer had noticed a variety of challenges facing the community volunteering project and the *Valuing Volunteering* inquiry was a valuable opportunity to gain insights and support to begin community inquiries and systemic mapping. The collaboration culminated in increased interest and energy around the project which fuelled further inquiries.

One such collaboration between *Valuing Volunteering* and VSO international volunteers was the undertaking of a separate participatory evaluation workshop. This workshop captured community volunteers’ perspectives regarding: the relationship between different stakeholders and their degree of influence; where decision making power is held at the community level; and their understanding of project objectives.

Following this workshop, several participants requested a further meeting with the *Valuing Volunteering* researcher in confidence. Six community volunteer representatives met with the *Valuing Volunteering* researcher for a focused group discussion based on their concerns and requests. These concerns were then relayed to managers in the VSO Mozambique office.

This period of data generation was followed by period of reflection and analysis, in preparation for a final field visit to validate findings from previous inquiries.

It is worth noting that the case study focuses on the role of community volunteers and international volunteers in the community initiative. By design, student volunteers had a potentially important role in the project, sharing technical skills with community volunteers on request. However, in practice, due to the limited role of the student volunteers (with few workshops delivered and only two students involved in capacity building roles) and the volunteers’ lack of availability to take part in the research, this case study does not explore this aspect of the project design in depth.

5. Findings

This case study focuses on the factors that affect the potential of participatory community led volunteer initiatives to devise and implement solutions to self-identified poverty needs. The experiences of the community volunteers involved in the initiative and their perceptions of the factors that facilitated or impeded the project's success are explored. Contextual factors, such as how local governance structures influence the initial stages of such community volunteer initiatives and the implications of this are taken into account. In addition, the case study looks at the combinations of volunteers involved in the project, in particular, how international volunteers can complement community volunteers' efforts.

5.1 The impact of local governance structures on partner and volunteer selection

Local politics and governance systems can impact on the project initiation stage of community volunteering projects, leading to subtle shifts in the participatory and inclusive nature of initiatives that are designed to include a broad spectrum of community members.

Local governance actors' influence on project location

The community volunteering project in Maputo reveals how a project's location can be influenced by powerful local governance actors. For example, the community volunteering project was initially planned to take place in a district neighbouring the focus community. Training in problem identification and risk assessment had already been provided to volunteers in the neighbouring district and VSO had begun working in this locality. However, the project was relocated following the intervention of a local council official.

The rationale for relocating the project appears to have been sound; the new location had a large population and many development challenges. Furthermore, volunteers from the new location had participated in the training in the adjacent community and this training had included a risk assessment of the new location. This made the transition relatively unproblematic and the training easily applicable to the new locale.

However, this example shows the role and influence of local governance actors in deciding the project location. This may be positive, in certain circumstances. For example, local governance actors can have access to local level planning information, enabling them to make informed decisions regarding how to allocate resources to communities in most need. But in highly politicised contexts, as in Mozambique, such influence can be problematic. There is the potential for decision making to be influenced by a need for political control and/or for resources to be directed to areas where a successful development initiative could translate into political or electoral gains. This also reveals the limited degree that community level actors, such as local volunteers, are involved in key decisions at the project inception stage.

Partner selection

Both local governance actors and organisational system requirements impacted on how the local implementing partner was selected. The local council official involved in deciding where the project was based, was also responsible for directing VSO, the supporting volunteer development organisation, to the *Secretário do Bairro* (SDB). The SDB is the local level governance actor whose position sits below the council official in the local governance hierarchy. Community volunteers describe the SDB as a powerful actor locally: the SDB *'rules the population of the neighbourhood'* (community volunteer).

In this instance, community volunteers describe how the SDB influenced the use and selection of a local partner organisation, referred to throughout this case study as 'the local implementing partner', to carry out the initiative. One community volunteer describes how the process unfolded following the arrival of the supporting volunteer development agency (VSO) in the locality:

'[The VSO program manager] wants people to be volunteers to do the work that he wants to do. The *secretário do bairro* says no, we have an organisation here that is doing work here and it has lot of people inside'.

Community volunteer

Organisational system requirements also made it easier to collaborate with an established, legalised, formal structure rather than allow an informal, grassroots organisation to evolve organically as the project progressed. For example, the fact that the local implementing partner was endorsed by the SDB and had a legalised and recognised statute made it easier for VSO to partner with them to implement the project, particularly in terms of transferring financial resources. As one community volunteer points out: *'[VSO] did not come for the [implementing partner] organisation... [but] for VSO to be able to donate to this project they use the [implementing organisation] statute, because this is officialised'.*

In some respects, the SDB's involvement could be useful, helping to ensure that existing locally based resources are utilised and that the new project avoids replicating existing volunteer mobilisation structures. However, local governance actors' involvement has the potential to influence who is then included in the volunteer initiative and to whom volunteer opportunities are directed. In this instance, the local implementing partner specified by the SDB had only 15 members. This was an insufficient number of volunteers to carry out the community volunteering initiative, and local leaders decided that approximately double the human resource was required. A community volunteer describes the type of volunteers that were mobilised:

'...We are leaders of our associations. We were invited to be part of the group to also respond as volunteers there in our neighbourhoods... The leaders came to work as volunteers but in our capacity as bosses, we have some who are *chefes dos quarteirões* but are also volunteers. The *secretário* knows that these people have experience'

Community Volunteer

In some cases, it appears that participants were chosen as community volunteers because they had positions of standing in the community and were already linked to and known within local governance structures. The SDB and council official's selection of community volunteers from the pool of local leaders had some positive implications, for example, one community volunteer explained: *'The secretary of the neighbourhood knows that these people have experience'* (community volunteer). In addition, established community leaders may have had a track record of being active and respected in the community, and their position had the potential to legitimise the project within the community, helping to mobilise other community members to instigate activities.

However, these examples highlight that both at an organisation and individual level, involvement in the community initiative was dependent on pre-existing links with local governance actors and on having knowledge of local governance structures. Community volunteers were predominantly either existing organisation members (of an organisation endorsed by the SDB) or established local leaders, which raises questions about the inclusiveness of the volunteer selection process and the representativeness of the volunteers chosen to undertake the initiative.

Situating community led participatory initiatives within an environment of relatively rigid organisational frameworks and politicised local governance structures raises questions for VfD organisations about how they can maintain a truly grassroots approach in such contexts. Without an in-depth understanding of how these factors can influence the participatory nature of such initiatives, a shift away from the underlying ethos of such projects can occur. This highlights the importance, as proposed by Hickey and Mohan (2005), for organisations to be aware of how power and politics impacts on the participatory nature of development initiatives, particularly in highly politicised contexts such as Mozambique.

Key messages

- Maintaining a community led participatory ethos can be challenging in contexts where local governance structures and actors can influence how the project is set up, in particular, which organisations are chosen as local partners and who is invited to volunteer.
- Overarching organisational frameworks which prioritise formal bodies with official statutes, leave little space for community volunteers to self organise in more organic ways as they respond to community needs.

Implications

- Local governance actors' influence has implications for the inclusiveness and representativeness of community volunteering initiatives. Community members that do not have links to local governance actors or knowledge of the system of local governance could be excluded from participating in volunteering activities.
- This dilution of the participatory principles underpinning such initiatives has implications for the degree of ownership of the project felt amongst the community.
- Organisations implementing community volunteering initiatives should undertake stakeholder, power and political analysis before the project begins, in order to understand and work effectively within the local governance environment.
- Development organisations working through volunteers should be aware of the governance environment and understand how this may influence the participatory ethos of the initiative.

5.2 Party politics in volunteer spaces

In addition to local governance actors' influence in community development projects (as discussed in section 5.1) blurred lines between partisan politics and civil society can further exclude certain sections of the community from being involved in and feeling ownerships of such initiatives. It is important to note that the insights explored in this section are based on the perceptions of community members and individuals involved in the community initiative. It was not possible to explore these issues with the relevant local governance actors due to the SDB's limited availability.

During the initial stages of the community volunteering project, the municipal election campaign and elections took place. At this time, certain stakeholders involved in the initiative noted that volunteer activities such as drainage and street cleaning were being promoted as the work of the ruling party by certain individuals. In addition, some felt that this was affecting what activities were undertaken, because certain activities were prioritised in order to make political or electoral gains. One individual explains:

'Politics in the community impacted activities because certain things were driven by things like let's give credit to the... party for this project component during the election... so there was different politics that were pushing activities that shouldn't... or were offering credit where credit was not due'

Individual 2

In addition, during *Valuing Volunteering's* community inquiries, it was noted that some volunteers were seen campaigning for a political party in the community during the election campaign. It is important to note that volunteers should be free to express their political and party political views and to be involved in political and electoral activities. However, if volunteers are using their volunteering activities to promote specific political parties, this can add to the perception that projects are intertwined with local politics. This has implications for whether an initiative is owned by a cross section of the community or seen as a tool to further established political interests. This can be particularly problematic in contexts where the ruling party is dominant. The blurring of lines between political and civil society, and the implications this has for the ownership of community initiatives by a range of individuals, needs to be taken into account and carefully analysed by VFD who work in highly political contexts.

Key messages

- In highly politicised environments stakeholders may use volunteer activities to gain political or electoral advantage.
- Using volunteering activities for party political advantage is particularly problematic in contexts where the ruling party is very dominant.
- VFD organisations should be aware that volunteer activities may be used for party political means and understand how this may impact on the underpinning participatory ethos of the project.

Implications

- If community volunteer initiatives are perceived to be party political and intertwined with local politics, there are implications for the type of volunteers who will be involved in the project (and therefore the representativeness and inclusiveness of the initiative).
- Where community volunteer initiatives have close links with ruling party and governance structures, there may be implications for the type of volunteer activities undertaken. For example, activities which question the status quo or challenge existing power dynamics could be avoided.

5.3 The representativeness of volunteer structures

Community volunteer projects often require new organisations to develop or existing organisations to grow in order to mobilise and manage the volunteers required to implement the initiative. This case study shows that the organisational systems required to support and govern volunteers as organisations develop and change is something that can be easily overlooked by supporting volunteer organisations.

In this case study, an existing organisation (the local implementing partner), was used to carry out the initiative. This size of the organisation was augmented to meet the high number of target volunteer hours outlined in the project proposal at the initiative's outset. As a result, the number of volunteers mobilised by the organisation doubled from 15 to 30, creating a new amalgamated volunteer entity in the community. Many of the additional volunteers were drawn from the ranks of local leaders and other existing organisations (as discussed in section 5.1).

This created some complexity. The fifteen newly mobilised community volunteers who joined the implementing partner organisation were not covered by the organisation's pre-existing statute. The other 15 volunteers (who were already part of the implementing partner organisation) were covered by the organisation's existing statute. The newly mobilised volunteers and some existing volunteers felt that the new initiative demanded its own specific management structure, statute and regulations to guide the new amalgamated structure that had been set up to deliver the project. They felt that the existing statutes did not represent the new amalgamated entity appropriately. One community volunteer describes how the development of the organisation resulted in some volunteers being left outside of existing statutes and organisational systems:

'The volunteers were born, without regulations, without statute, without ruler of anyone, they are born. It is like a baby that has to be welcomed'

Community Volunteer

While these volunteers felt that the new volunteer structure needed new regulations to guide its functions within the remit of the new project, they also felt that the volunteers should be supported to do this for themselves. They made requests for their capacity to build so that they could develop a cohesive agreement that they could then self-govern by:

'the suggestion here is that [VSO] come to meet with us in the feeling to create a proper structure for [the new amalgamated volunteer entity], ... because this structure doesn't exist. We ask for help also for the elaboration of the regulations, that regulate the functions of the volunteers'

Community volunteer

This raises some important questions for VfD organisations which are supporting community volunteering initiatives. Where community based initiatives require the formation or development of new or existing bodies, how can these newly formed organisations be supported to ensure appropriate organisational, management and governance systems and processes are in place?

The volunteers' experiences in this case study show that this aspect of participatory community working can be overlooked.

Key messages

- Ensuring volunteers are governed by appropriate organisational and management systems and procedures can often be overlooked at the project initiation stage of community initiatives, as the organisations required to implement projects emerge or develop.
- Volunteers need to be supported so that they have the capacity to self-govern and manage the organisations they develop and work through to deliver community based initiatives.

Implications

- VfD organisations that support community initiatives need to ensure there are resources and capacity available to provide support to volunteers to create new community structures that have representative governance structures. Without this, the success of the community volunteer initiative may be limited.
- If VfD organisations do not make resources available to support volunteers to form grassroots organisations to manage community initiatives, there is a danger that working through existing organisations will exclude individuals who wish to volunteer, but have weaker links with formal governance structures/existing organisations.
- Without effective and open communication channels, the concerns of volunteers working at community level can be overlooked by VfD organisations supporting community volunteering initiatives.

5.4 Power dynamics within community initiatives

Without appropriate organisational and management systems in place, there is the potential for power to be concentrated in the hands of relatively few individuals within the organisations used to implement community volunteering initiatives. This can undermine the participatory nature of such initiatives, making them less representative and community owned. In this case study, some of the community volunteers involved in the initiative felt that decision making power had become concentrated in the hands of few individuals. Without access to a statute that formalised their role and outlined the organisational structure of the volunteer body, the volunteers felt their ability to speak out about the power imbalances within the organisation were limited.

A visual exercise undertaken with community volunteers shows clearly how volunteers felt power was distributed between the stakeholders involved in the initiative. Figure 2 shows the project situated (in purple) at the centre of the diagram. Those with most influence and decision making power are placed closest to the project, and those with least influence, furthest away.

Figure 2. Stakeholder mapping exercise



During this exercise, the community volunteers placed the local implementing partner (local vol organisation) within the project circle because they felt they controlled decisions about project activities. The community volunteers (depicted by the green circle), placed themselves at some distance from the centre because they perceived themselves to have little influence in relation to the project, despite the importance they placed on their role (indicated by the size of the circle).

Valuing Volunteering Mozambique's inquiry with community volunteers revealed that they felt a power imbalance had emerged between individuals (paid staff overseeing the project) closely associated with the implementing partner organisation and the community volunteers. The volunteers felt separated and distant from the local implementing partner.

'[they] don't give rights to anyone to say anything that has weight or that they give value. They don't give value to anything... that a person says. They are the only ones and the last ones that decide and tell people what to do. It's not easy.'
Community volunteer

The community volunteers' perceptions of being marginalised by certain individuals within the project framework were also compounded by a physical sense of isolation and separateness. The volunteers were based within the local implementing partner's grounds, in a closed off location surround by a high boundary wall. This may have contributed to the lack of awareness amongst community members about the community volunteer project and its location. In addition, community volunteers felt that the location of the project in the local implementing partner's offices, rather than at a more neutral, community based space, subtly changed power relations:

'Without asking, the leaders of [the local implementing partner] took all of us and placed us in the same place so that we can be there doing the work... And all that because they wanted what? Because they didn't want a person to do their work, controlling [their work] alone. They wanted to stay in the same place so that they could concentrate the power and that they are leading in the same place'
Community Volunteer

The perceived division between community volunteers and the local implementing partner and the disempowerment felt by volunteers is particularly problematic given the participatory nature of the project and its aims to 'create better community social structures' and develop 'community owned solutions'. The example reveals the importance for all stakeholders to be skilled and committed to participatory ways of working, and for initiatives to be based in carefully selected physical spaces, in order to avoid creating power imbalances that contribute to felt divisions between different stakeholders involved in community initiatives. It is important to note that such imbalances can emerge and sustain in environments where certain stakeholders are left relatively unprotected by organisational and management systems. For example, without a statute outlining volunteers' role it is more difficult for volunteers to raise their voice and appeal if they feel that their role has been maligned.

Such power imbalances can undermine an initiative's participatory ethos, and challenge volunteer's commitment to volunteer work. VfD organisations need to be aware of how community level power dynamics can influence the extent that grassroots initiatives are truly participatory. Developing robust regulations, statutes and procedures for volunteers and the bodies in which they work can go some way to ensure stakeholders have grounds to appeal should imbalances emerge. In addition, ensuring that partners are chosen, not just because they have the correct organisational infrastructures in place, but because they share the same values and understanding of what volunteers are there to achieve and are able to put this into practice, is essential for initiatives to adhere to participatory values on the ground.

Key messages

- Power dynamics within the organisations used to implement community initiatives can affect the participatory nature of a project. This may result in certain volunteers with less influence feeling marginalised and excluded from decision making.
- Different factors may influence internal power dynamics: individuals links to an existing organisation or to local governance actors for example. In addition, the physical space of where a project is based is important. If spaces of engagement are not 'neutral' or separate volunteers from the community, subtle shifts in the power dynamics within an organisation can occur, possibly making an initiative feel less community owned and led.
- How decision making power is held and distributed between stakeholders within community organisations can be overlooked by VfD organisations, who may view such organisations as relatively homogenous entities.

In some instances, the physical relocation of the volunteers made it more difficult for them to meet daily survival needs. For example, the women volunteers working in the nursery volunteered for approximately 45 hours per week. On numerous occasions, the volunteers stated that the voluntary activities they were undertaking as part of the initiative were affecting their ability to provide for their own families, with insufficient time to undertake the income generating activities they had previously relied on to provide for their own children.

In addition, volunteers felt that when they raised concerns that being involved in the initiative had increased their financial vulnerability, these were dismissed. They felt their concerns were seen as disingenuous, and that they were complaining because they wanted more financial support from donors and resource providers. VfD organisations need to be aware of the risks that increased workloads can place on volunteers. Importantly, volunteers need access to good channels of communication so that in cases where voluntary activities cannot be balanced with existing responsibilities, their concerns can be raised and action taken to ensure the volunteer is not placed in a financially vulnerable position.

Implications

- Without establishing organisational systems and communication channels that allow all volunteers involved in community initiatives to raise their voice and be involved in decision making processes, there is a risk that such projects fail to be representative and inclusive. Allowing power to be held by few individuals has implications for the extent that an initiative is owned and led by the community.

Key messages

- When decision making power is held by relatively few individuals within a community volunteer organisation, decisions may be taken that do not take into account the different needs and perspectives of the volunteers.
- Engagement in volunteering activities can result in some individuals' livelihoods being adversely affected, particularly if the volunteering conditions (e.g. project location) change following the start of the project.
- Volunteer initiatives need effective mechanisms in place that ensure volunteers can raise their concerns.

5.5 Can volunteering make volunteers more vulnerable?

When volunteers have limited influence regarding the implementation of a project, decisions can be made which fail to take into account their perspectives and needs. In this case study, some community volunteers did not feel that their concerns were addressed and that this resulted in their own livelihoods and wellbeing being adversely affected.

The community volunteers' initially proposed to conduct the five selected projects (which included brick making, carpet making and developing and running a nursery) from their own homes. This enabled them to more easily conduct voluntary project activities alongside existing livelihood activities and domestic duties. However, the decision taken by the local implementing partner to base volunteer activities at their head quarters, made it difficult for volunteers to carry out voluntary and livelihood activities simultaneously.

'Imagine the one who was doing the furniture. The person who is doing the furniture had a plan that I am going to be working here [close to home] to make furniture whilst also doing the things that I used to do for my daily survival. Now they have to leave everyday to go to a place [away from home] to do the work.'
Community volunteer

Implications

- Volunteering has the potential to negatively affect individuals' livelihoods when the vulnerability of the volunteer is not considered.
- If volunteers livelihood needs are not taken into account, volunteer opportunities may only be accessible to individuals with higher socio-economic status.
- VfD organisations need to recognise the potential vulnerabilities that volunteering can lead to, and implement strategies to mitigate these risks. Deviations from the project design should be collaboratively discussed and agreed and negative implications highlighted and mitigated at the community level.

5.6 Making community volunteering initiatives accountable

Bottom-up development approaches often require associations to grow and develop organically, and for project plans to evolve as communities devise and test solutions that respond to identified needs. This makes it challenging to ensure projects are also subject to robust organisational procedures that promote transparent and accountable ways of working. This case study highlights examples where a lack of robust management, planning and monitoring and evaluation systems made it difficult to accurately assess the project's progress and limited the channels available for stakeholders to hold decision makers to account. In addition, it shows how reporting procedures can overemphasise the role of official actors, which risks under representing the contributions of community based stakeholders.

Project management and accountability

Some stakeholders raised concerns regarding the management of the project and how this impacted on levels of accountability and transparency. For example, when the community volunteering initiative began, an international volunteer who had been involved in the research and proposal writing stage of the project, took on the role of 'distanced e-manager'. Using the international volunteer had some benefits: the volunteer had an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the project and the participatory ethos that underpinned it. However, the international volunteer's lack of physical presence – they were described as '*...officially 'directing' this project from the other side of the world*' (individual 1) – was problematic. With the volunteer no longer based in-country, their ability to find out information firsthand was limited. The volunteer (and the supporting organisation, VSO) were reliant on the accounts of a few community level actors. This highlights the high level of trust Vfd organisations need in partner organisations, particularly when organisational capacity to oversee such initiatives is limited.

In addition, certain stakeholders felt the project did not have an overarching project plan, or systems in place to measure and evaluate progress. This can make it more difficult to learn from challenges and expose poor practice, but also, as one stakeholder explains, it makes it harder to identify where actions have led to positive change, and to learn from this:

'There is no tracking, like there is no tracking of activities, there's no monitoring and evaluation plan so you can't communicate success because you can't prove anything because you haven't monitored anything'
Individual 2

Community volunteers felt that the systems in place to hold community level actors to account were also limited and put the local implementing partner in a position where it was difficult for them to be held to account. Furthermore, some volunteers felt that familial ties between stakeholders who held positions of power in the project made it difficult to report potential concerns. One volunteer explains how the influence of such relationships could be intimidating:

'You know it's a bit difficult to work on a project to be ruled by people who have a family relationship... If I am a boss and I take care of the finances and my husband is the president, if I divert funds is my husband going to report me?'
Community Volunteer

It is important to highlight that the existence of a leadership structure where individuals are connected by familial or friendship ties is not in itself problematic. However, in cases where individuals feel that they have no means to raise their voice and hold actors to account, such connections can serve to further alienate volunteers who wish to ask questions about how resources are allocated or how decisions are made.

In this case study, certain stakeholders did feel that a lack of transparent accounting, led to concerns about how project resources were being spent:

'It's like with the chickens, like paying for 1000 chickens and then only ever seeing 250... The money was all distributed for that and it was reported that all those chickens were purchased but the community never ever saw those... then when those chickens got sold that money never ever made it back into the community'
Individual 2

Some community volunteers reported to the researcher that a lack of funds was affecting their activities. For example, despite outlining the resources required in their project proposals, they had not received resources, such as bags of cement for the brick project, or the cooking utensils and mattresses needed for the child care initiative. The important point to note here, is that volunteers felt unable to access information or ask questions about how resources were being spent. This lack of transparency led to feelings of disempowerment.

Project reporting

There is the potential for mainstream reporting mechanisms to inaccurately portray community level realities, overemphasising the role of more formal actors or larger organisations at the expense of the activities and work of individuals and less formal organisations working on the ground. For example, the local implementing partner was rarely mentioned in the formal project reports, and instead the general term ‘community volunteers’ was used to describe how activities were implemented at community level. One stakeholder explains:

‘[In] 90 percent of the project reporting... up until the last quarter, the partners were always listed as [the final year student volunteer organisation], [national volunteer co-ordinating body] and the national youth institute. So it was like on that paper side of things [the local implementing partner] was never a partner. And... you know it was [the local implementing partner] who we were working the funds through...’

Individual 2

The failure to mention a specific local organisation leads to an unnecessary lack of transparency. Furthermore, it highlights how the role of community level actors can be underplayed at the expense of more formal and larger organisations. The failure to accurately report local level activities not only means that lessons can’t accurately be learned, but can also lead to the disempowerment of grassroots actors as they are excluded from formal communication flows and reporting procedures. This points to the need for VfD organisations to find appropriate reporting mechanisms that include grassroots level actors and ensure that their efforts are accurately described and measured.

Key messages

- Finding appropriate ways to project plan, and monitor and evaluate progress can be challenging for grassroots projects that have an evolving design. Such challenges can be exacerbated if sufficient resources are not allocated to ensure projects are managed by individuals with access to on-the-ground information and expertise in participatory community development projects.
- Community development initiatives require robust accountability mechanisms to ensure projects are implemented effectively and in accordance with the theory of change. Failure to ensure individuals involved in such initiatives can openly question key aspects of the project, such as how funding is allocated, can result in feelings of disempowerment and removes an important check and balance mechanism from the project.
- Reporting procedures can overemphasise the role of official actors, which risks under representing the contributions of community based stakeholders.

Implications

- VfD organisations need to ensure appropriate organisational systems and channels of communication are in place so that community volunteering initiatives implement projects in an accountable, transparent and effective way.

5.7 Using international volunteers to support community based initiatives

This case study raises interesting questions about how international volunteers can be utilised effectively to support community volunteering initiatives. It explores the challenges that face both VfD organisations and individual international volunteers when supporting grassroots initiatives. It shows that there are opportunities for international volunteers to add value to such projects, particularly by utilising their ‘outside observer’ status. However, there are also examples where international volunteers’ status can be overemphasised and used to make projects more credible to external actors, rather than bringing real benefits to the communities in which projects are based.

Who decides how to use international volunteers?

A key question for VfD organisations is how to facilitate a process where international volunteers are mobilised in response to requests for specific skills from grassroots level community volunteers. This can be challenging for VfD organisations because in the initial stages of a project, community volunteers may not know what skills are required (and indeed whether these are available from an international volunteer). A community development initiative’s needs may evolve as they devise solutions to local issues, and therefore their requests for specific skills may only be made once they understand the issue and what is needed to solve it. In contrast, VfD organisations often have relatively long timeframes for recruiting, training and deploying appropriate volunteers in-country. This can make it difficult to utilise international volunteers at the appropriate time at the community’s request.

Mobilising existing in-country international volunteers has the potential to minimise the challenge of matching project timescales with VfD organisation volunteer mobilisation timeframes. Indeed, a benefit of using international volunteers can be their flexibility and adaptability to changing circumstances. For example, one volunteer stated that their initial role was *‘not applicable to what was happening in the field and so my job changed very fast’* (individual 2). However, in this case study, those involved in the community volunteer initiative at grassroots level had a limited role regarding how and where international volunteers would be mobilised.

International volunteer roles and responsibilities

Without supporting the community volunteers and organisation working at community level to identify how international volunteers could be used to support the project, the international volunteers were being used to fill more organisational or managerial roles. Such roles could be important, for example an international volunteer’s technical skills were used to undertake research that was used during the proposal writing stage of the initiative. This helped secure the funding needed to implement the project. However, some international volunteers felt that they were deployed to undertake these organisation based roles to add legitimacy to the project, or to fulfil requirements for international volunteers outlined in the project proposal. One international volunteer outlines their understanding of why they were mobilised:

‘I don’t think that it was driven by [the local implementing partner] at all, I think it was [VSO] that decided it, and it was something to do with how this proposal was written and they had decided that they wanted a volunteer... and it didn’t fit with what the organisation needed or with where the project was in terms of its evolution.’

Individual 2

Some international volunteers felt that their involvement rested more on the credibility and legitimacy they brought to the project than on the skills and experience they brought. This could be particularly important in terms of reporting requirements: including international volunteers in the project could show that the community initiative was being supported by individuals with skills and expertise:

‘Every volunteer that worked [in that thematic area] at one point came in to the community volunteer initiative reporting... It was like a catch all project where it was like, well, I have all these people and I better put them all in this project so it looks like we are doing something’

Individual 2

Focusing on the legitimacy and credibility that volunteers can bring rather than their specific skill sets can lead to wasted opportunities for these skills to be used at community level. This also has implications for volunteers’ motivation, particularly if they were initially recruited for skill based roles. One international volunteer noted that they felt ‘disingenuous’ working on the project, and that *‘this... led me to leave the project and go back... two months earlier than planned’* (individual 1). While international volunteers are often skilled at adapting their roles to suit project needs, this does depend on them feeling that the new role is worthwhile and fits a genuine need in the community.

The 'outside observer'

At the same time, this case study does highlight examples where international volunteers' status has led to positive change at community level. This can be partly attributed to the legitimacy that an international volunteer can bring to a project, and their unique position as an 'outsider' working within the project framework. In this instance, international volunteers collaborated with the community volunteers to introduce appropriate information sharing and accountability mechanisms which the project previously lacked.

For example, one international volunteer (who had originally been assigned a different role) was able to begin mapping and investigating all the aspects of the project, including how finances were distributed at community level. The volunteer gained in-depth insights into the project and developed an accurate overview of the initiative. The volunteer acted as a valuable link between the community and VSO: they communicated the intricacies of the community level dynamics of the project, whilst maintaining an overarching understanding of the project set up.

It is important to note, that this role was not created by design but evolved as the volunteer tried to understand the initiative and responded to its organisational needs. Interestingly, the volunteer described how their role as an 'observing outsider' gave them the freedom to ask difficult questions:

'As an outsider, I faced very little repercussion in saying exactly what was going on. I was not scared... I didn't have the fear of other community members and so it was OK for me to be the bad guy. It was ok for me to do that and say things... or to give a picture that maybe the individuals in the community couldn't see or couldn't say'
(ibid.)

The volunteer used their 'outsider' status to their advantage: because they were not from the community, and had no pre-existing links with the associated organisations and stakeholders, they were less intimidated to question existing practices. As an 'observing outsider', the volunteer enjoyed a freedom from the social and cultural norms and power dynamics that 'insiders' that work and live within the community may be subject to.

With the support of a final year student volunteer focused on monitoring and evaluation and other VSO employees, the international volunteer was able to help the community volunteers to introduce mechanisms that gave them more control over the project. For example, one suggestion to make funding streams more direct, was to allow a lead community volunteer to open a bank account for each project. Previously, funding had been directed through the implementing partner organisation, but the new system prevented bottlenecks and streamlined the system allowing funding to reach the community volunteers implementing each project.

In this instance, the international volunteer opened space for community volunteers to voice their issues, provided a valuable link between the volunteers and the supporting volunteer organisation (VSO) and supported the volunteers to establish mechanisms that made the project more transparent and accountable.

Key messages

- Ensuring community level actors are involved in decision making about how to use international volunteers can be challenging for VfD organisations, particularly because of the long lead times needed to recruit and mobilise international volunteers.
- International volunteers can be used in managerial or organisational roles to support community initiatives. They can be well placed in some circumstances to undertake such roles because while they are part of the project, they enjoy freedom from existing ties and social norms which may prevent individuals from raising their voice and asking challenging questions.
- There is a risk that international volunteers' 'outsider' status is used to add legitimacy to community initiatives, and less priority is given to finding ways to share skills and capacity build community volunteers.

Implications

- There is a risk that international volunteers' skills are not fully utilised if VfD organisations do not find effective ways of facilitating community volunteers to voice their needs, and implement mechanisms to ensure these are met in a timely way.
- International volunteers may feel disempowered and demotivated if their skills and expertise are not fully utilised to build community capacity, and they are relied on instead to bring legitimacy to such initiatives.

6. Learning from the methodology

This case study presented a number of methodological challenges. Due to complex community dynamics, it was difficult to capture the perspectives of all stakeholders involved in the initiative. Gaining access to project documents, the spaces in which the project was based, and the individuals involved in the initiative was challenging.

Because of these challenges, the research primarily focused on representing the views and accounts of the community and international volunteers involved in the initiative and did not evolve into a systemic action research inquiry.

This highlights important lessons for volunteer organisations seeking to undertake systemic action research. At the organisational level, a thorough understanding of the systemic action research approach is required before adopting such an approach. This can help ensure that all stakeholders involved in the initiative understand how SAR can be utilised and the challenges of applying this experimental approach to projects which have very fixed objectives and rigid organisational requirements.

The case study also highlights the need for researchers to perhaps prioritise analysing and understanding the power relationships between stakeholders and the political environments that they operate in at the start of the project. This is important given that a key aspect of the SAR approach is to question and possibly disrupt power relations (e.g. through facilitating the sharing of information in different spaces) that may be preventing individuals and groups from achieving sustainable positive change.

Consideration should also be given to how SAR can be used in environments where certain stakeholders may feel unable to raise their voice and answer (or ask) questions openly. Analysing the power dynamics at play is an important part of understanding how this could be mitigated, in addition to ensuring neutral spaces for different stakeholders are made available.

7. Conclusions

This case study shows how participatory community volunteering initiatives' potential to devise and implement solutions to self-identified poverty needs are affected by the dynamics of the wider system within which the project sits, and in turn the organisational dynamics of the bodies utilised to implement such initiatives. The wider system, in particular the political environment and the influence of powerful local governance actors, can impact on key decisions regarding where projects are based and which individuals and organisations are involved in volunteering activities. There are also risks that volunteer activities are used to promote party political goals and/or are overly identified with particular political groups.

This poses a challenge for VfD organisations who need to find a balance between gaining and capitalising on the support of local governance actors and motivated existing volunteers, and ensuring that community initiatives appeal to and represent a cross section of groups and individuals in the focal area. In particular, it is important that groups or individuals who do not share the values or perspectives of those in positions of influence, feel they have the opportunity to participate in and have ownership of such initiatives.

Perhaps the first step for VfD organisations is to have in-depth knowledge of the specific local governance and political environment in which the initiative is operating, and to be conscious and of how this impacts on projects' set up and implementation, so that informed decisions can be made. In addition, at an organisational level, resources should be appropriately allocated to ensure that motivated individuals are supported to collectively self-organise, rather than prioritising existing organisations for reasons of logistical or financial expedience if these reflect wider power imbalances in the community or society.

Where community based initiatives require the formation or development of new grassroots bodies, there is a risk that power imbalances emerge within these organisations if support is not provided to ensure appropriate organisational systems are developed. How decision making power is held and distributed between stakeholders within community organisations can be overlooked by VfD organisations, who may view such organisations as relatively homogenous entities.

However, power imbalance may lead to some volunteers feeling that they are unable to raise their voice and being excluded from decision making processes within the very bodies designed to implement initiatives through securing community participation. When decisions are made by the few, and without consulting different perspectives and views, the needs and vulnerabilities of certain individuals or groups can be overlooked or ignored. There is a great need to have decision making processes which are inclusive and transparent, and proper lines of communication between

community volunteers and the VfD organisations supporting these initiatives. Furthermore, volunteers and other stakeholders may require specific trainings on working in participatory ways and of managing participatory initiatives so that they have the capacity to self-govern and manage the organisations they develop to deliver community based initiatives effectively.

In terms of implementing community initiatives, finding appropriate ways to project plan, and monitor and evaluate progress can be challenging for grassroots projects that have an evolving design. Such challenges can be exacerbated if sufficient resources are not allocated to ensure projects are managed by individuals with access to on-the-ground information and expertise in participatory community development projects. Resources are required to experiment with ways of effectively planning projects and measuring impact in participatory ways that include volunteers and ensure their contributions are accurately reflected. Involvement in such processes, along with creating an environment where volunteers can openly question the direction of a project can lead to gains in terms of the initiative's impact, as well as ensuring that volunteers feel more empowered and motivated.

International volunteers can be used effectively to support community volunteers to manage, implement and evaluate initiatives. Their 'outside observer' status in particular can allow international volunteers to help ensure projects are implemented in transparent and accountable ways. There is a risk that the 'outsider' status is overused or overemphasised, resulting in international volunteers' technical skills being underutilised as they are relied on to provide legitimacy to initiatives. Ensuring effective mechanisms to match international volunteers' technical skills with community needs is challenging given the relatively long timescale needed to mobilise and train volunteers, and the evolving design of participatory initiatives. However, finding ways for the community to have more say over how international volunteer resource is used is essential for initiatives to deploy human resource that responds to real and identified needs within the community and for initiatives to be truly participatory in practice.

8. Implications and recommendations

8.1 The impact of local governance structures on partner and volunteer selection

- VfD organisations need to be aware of the governance environment in which participatory community volunteering initiatives take place and understand how this may influence the participatory ethos of such projects.
- Organisations implementing community volunteering initiatives should undertake stakeholder, power and political analysis before projects begin, in order to understand and work effectively within the local governance environment.
- Local governance actors' influence has implications for the inclusiveness and representativeness of community volunteering initiatives. Community members that do not have links to local governance actors or knowledge of the system of local governance could be excluded from participating in volunteering activities. The dilution of the participatory principles underpinning such initiatives has implications for the degree of ownership of the project felt amongst the community.

Recommendations

- Guidance protocols regarding partner selection would be useful in contexts where local governance actors and structures may influence community based projects. This could help ensure volunteer managers make informed decisions, and consider strategies that enable individuals/organisations who are not linked to local governance actors and structures to become involved in volunteering.

8.2 Party politics in volunteer spaces

- If community volunteer initiatives are perceived to be party political and intertwined with local politics, there are implications for the type of volunteers who will be involved in the project (and therefore the representative and inclusiveness of the initiative).
- Where community volunteer initiatives have close links with ruling party and governance structures, there may be implications for the type of volunteer activities undertaken. For example, activities which question the status quo or challenge existing power dynamics could be avoided.

Recommendations

- VfD organisations to carry out political analysis before volunteer projects are undertaken in highly political environments.
- VfD organisations to consider guidelines for partner organisations and volunteers to help ensure volunteer activities are not used to promote party political causes.
- Volunteer development organisations need to question what their organisational boundaries are with regards to engaging in highly political contexts.

8.3 The representativeness of volunteer structures

- VfD organisations that support community initiatives need to ensure there are resources and capacity available to provide support to volunteers to create new community structures that have representative governance structures. Without this, the success of the community volunteer initiative may be limited.
- If VfD organisations do not make resources available to support volunteers to form grassroots organisations to manage community initiatives, there is a danger that working through existing organisations will exclude individuals who wish to volunteer, but have weaker links with formal governance structures/existing organisations.

Recommendations

- Where new community structures form to implement participatory community volunteering initiatives, there should be support from VfD organisations to ensure these structures are representative and inclusive.
- VfD organisations to find ways to reach out to individuals who have the motivation to volunteer but do not have connections with existing organisations or influential actors. VfD organisations to consider ways of providing support to such individuals (and less formal organisations) so that they can self-organise and create structures that can deliver grassroots initiatives.
- VfD to consider how organisational requirements may restrict the choice of partner, and find ways to support informal organisations to meet such requirements.

8.4 Power dynamics within community initiatives

- Without establishing organisational systems and communication channels that enable all volunteers involved in community initiatives to raise their voice and be involved in decision making processes, there is a risk that such projects fail to be representative and inclusive.
- Allowing power to be held by few individuals has implications for the extent that an initiative is owned and led by the community.

Recommendations

- Volunteer resource providers to set up and monitor systems which enable community volunteers to feel included in community initiatives' decision making processes.

8.5 Can volunteering make volunteers more vulnerable?

- Volunteering has the potential to negatively affect individuals' livelihoods when the vulnerability of the volunteer is not considered.
- If volunteers livelihood needs are not taken into account, volunteer opportunities may only be accessible to individuals with higher socio-economic status.
- VfD organisations need to recognise the potential vulnerabilities that volunteering can lead to, and implement strategies to mitigate these risks. Deviations from the project design should be collaboratively discussed and agreed and negative implications highlighted and mitigated at the community level.

Recommendations

- VfD organisations need to recognise the potential vulnerabilities that volunteering can lead to. Mitigation strategies should be discussed when self-determined community volunteer initiatives are introduced in a community.

8.6 Making community volunteering initiatives accountable

- VfD organisations need to ensure appropriate organisational systems and channels of communication are in place so that community volunteering initiatives implement projects in an accountable, transparent and effective way.

Recommendations

- Open communication channels between community volunteers and VfD organisations are greatly needed to ensure volunteers and community members are able to raise their voice, and hold the structures delivering development initiatives to account.
- VfD to consider how to manage, monitor and evaluate projects which may have a more evolving, community led design.
- VfD organisations to implement appropriate partner agreements and systems of accountability with partners when conducting community led volunteer initiatives.
- Community volunteers should be included in decision making processes regarding project's theory of change.

8.7 Using international volunteers to support community based initiatives

- There is a risk that international volunteers' skills are not fully utilised if VfD do not find effective ways of facilitating community volunteers to voice their needs, and implement mechanisms to ensure these are met in a timely way.
- International volunteers may feel disempowered and de-motivated if their skills and expertise are not fully utilised to build community capacity, and they are relied on instead to bring legitimacy to such initiatives.

Recommendations

- International volunteer training to outline the role and potential importance of the 'outside observer'. An understanding of this would be very useful prior to placement.
- International volunteers to have a period of time built in to their role to understand local power dynamics before beginning activities associate with their intended role.
- International volunteers to have access to relevant project documentation.
- VfD organisations to ensure thorough hand over periods between volunteers working on the same projects so that contextual and project knowledge is shared and organisational learning improved.
- VfD organisations to be open and transparent with international volunteers regarding changes to their role. This contributes to the maintenance of trust between the international volunteer and VfD organisations, and most importantly allows the international volunteer to direct their skills more usefully to meeting development needs.

9. References

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***Valuing Volunteering* was a two year (2012 – 2014) global action research project, conducted by VSO and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) to understand how, where and when volunteering affects poverty and contributes to sustainable development. This case study is part of a series of inquiries conducted in the Philippines, Kenya, Mozambique and Nepal which explore the role of volunteering across different development contexts and systems. Using Participatory Systemic Action Research it asks local partners, communities and volunteers to reflect on how and where volunteering can contribute to positive, sustainable change.**

For more information about the global *Valuing Volunteering* study please contact: enquiry@vso.org.uk

Alexandrea Picken is an experienced international development researcher with 7 years experience in research and evaluation with a focus on marginalised groups. Alongside an MSc in Social Development Practice, she has solid experience in learning, reflection and documenting practices and is experienced in utilising this to inform policy, programmatic and organisational aims. Alexandria has designed and managed research and evaluation projects in the UK and internationally mostly in Africa; Tanzania, Malawi, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa and most recently, lead researcher and project manager in Mozambique for the *Valuing Volunteering* action-research project. Alexandria has a particular interest in and experience of the application of participatory and qualitative research techniques. Alexandria is currently working as a research and evaluation officer for the Scottish Executive Agency; Education Scotland whilst also doing freelance development consultancy for an international consultancy research network.



VSO Mozambique

Caixa Postal 902
Maputo
Mozambique

+258 21302594/311572

VSO International

www.vsointernational.org

Institute of Development Studies

www.ids.ac.uk

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