

VALUING VOLUNTEERING - NEPAL

THE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT VOLUNTEER SERVICE OF NEPAL

National government volunteers
and their impact on poverty alleviation:
a case study

2014



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Abbreviations

CMA	Community Medical Assistant
FCHV	Female Community Health Volunteer
HDI	Human Development Index
MOGA	Ministry of General Administration
MoHP	Ministry of Health and Population
NDVS	National Development Volunteer Service
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
UNV	United Nations Volunteers

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Executive Summary

NDVS overview

This case study focuses on the National Development Volunteer Service's (NDVS) volunteer scheme. With the objective of assisting in the achievement of the poverty reduction goals outlined in the Government of Nepal's Tenth Five Year Plan, NDVS was established in February 1999 under the Secretariat of the Government of Nepal's National Planning Commission. Having started with 220 volunteers in 20 districts, the coverage of this scheme has expanded to cover almost all districts of the country. Over 9,000 individuals have now served as volunteers in rural and remote regions of Nepal.

NDVS have been mobilising around 600 volunteers annually for placements usually between one and two years in length, in the health, agricultural development, livestock services and engineering sectors. Currently volunteers mobilised by NDVS are 'technical' volunteers, holding the relevant qualifications for the post recruited for (as their permanent staff equivalents working in the public sector would). The vast majority of volunteers are currently mobilised in the health sector, and here, qualified volunteers occupy a range of roles such as health assistants and auxiliary nurse midwives.

NDVS's main objective is to provide assistance in achieving the goal of poverty reduction as outlined by the Government of Nepal in various periodic plans (National Planning Commission: www.npc.gov.np/new/uploadedFiles/allFiles/typeng13.pdf). By supplying the various government and social institutions with the manpower required for the delivery of key services in the sectors outlined above, NDVS aim to assist in improving the efficiency, effectiveness and reach of services to all districts of Nepal, which will lead to economic and social development.

Key findings

How volunteers work

Volunteers are to be found undertaking a variety of roles. Where it is difficult to recruit and retain permanent staff, they fill gaps. They are also deployed to augment existing staff, often where a local team is facing difficult demands, and, in the absence of other staff, volunteers allow for posts (e.g. a health post) to reopen. There is also evidence of volunteers going beyond the normal expectations of their designated role, e.g. undertaking more community outreach work that extends the reach of services.

In the health sector particularly, given the shifting disease profile of Nepal (from communicable to non-communicable disease), there is potentially a bigger role for volunteers in terms of updating existing practices and learning in line with these shifts. This is currently not being fully realised, but, with specialist training and a greater focus on a capacity-building role, NDVS could be more intentional about creating a resource for permanent staff to use given the disease transitions Nepal is facing.

Factors that affect volunteers' effectiveness

There is a great deal of variation in the quality of interaction between volunteers and their permanent staff colleagues, which, in turn, affected volunteers' ability to impact on poverty. Some volunteers found that they had relatively little influence in the internal professional hierarchy. There is evidence that some volunteers' impact could have been greater had they been given more support and guidance from permanent staff colleagues. The receptiveness and response of those the volunteer works alongside is often crucial for them to be able to carry out their duties. Volunteer organisations need to ensure that sufficient attention is given to supporting the development of good working relationships between volunteers and their colleagues.

Volunteer wellbeing and motivation

There is evidence that volunteers placed in the most remote regions of Nepal require additional support in order to tackle the particular challenges faced as a result of their placement. The realities of the most remote districts – low but highly dispersed populations and low levels of infrastructure – mean that in order to deliver key services to the hardest to reach, volunteers had to travel long distances, which could lead to additional expenditure that was not always taken into account. There were also implications for their wellbeing, with an additional burden sometimes placed on family members. For example, with volunteers often absent for long periods (three months or more), childcare responsibilities were placed in full on spouses or the extended family. Differences in the quality and difficulty of volunteer experience need to be recognised and taken into account.

Long-term impact on marginalisation

In terms of its ethnic and gender make-up, through implementing a reservation policy, NDVS is making steps towards becoming a positive model of inclusion (e.g. 47% of current NDVS volunteers are female). Although the visibility of this is diluted because of the deployment of volunteers across Nepal, there is evidence this has a positive impact on the volunteers involved in the scheme. The inclusive policies of NDVS could also have long-term benefits in terms of the composition of the workforce given that many volunteers may eventually become public servants. This somewhat unintended impact should not be overstated – further effort is required to promote gender equality in each of the sectors volunteers are recruited for (rather than relying on the domains that traditionally attract a higher proportion of females, notably health, to reach gender parity). Furthermore, in order to further capitalise on the gains of the reservation policy, NDVS need to ensure that opportunities for volunteers from marginalised groups can be better realised.

If NDVS can create and encourage an inclusive environment in practice, and focus on building the capabilities of those from traditionally excluded groups, this could help volunteers in their placements and also help them to translate their experience into positive future outcomes (e.g. obtaining the necessary qualifications, skills and experience to progress to a permanent position in the public sector).

Sustainability and dependency

NDVS was originally established to meet short-term manpower needs in remote communities. A major constraint on development in Nepal remains the shortage of technical manpower in rural locations. The deployment of national volunteers can help to supply the necessary manpower in the short term. However, it is important to note that without tackling underlying issues affecting the public sector, such as absenteeism and a market of transfers which makes it difficult to place permanent staff in remote locations, the scheme serves to satisfy a resource gap which will continue to challenge Nepal's system of service delivery.

1. Introduction

Why NDVS?

Since 1999 the National Development Volunteer Service (NDVS), a secretariat of the National Planning Commission (the government body responsible for formulating the development plans and policies of the country), has been assisting the Government of Nepal in the poverty reduction goals outlined in the Tenth Five Year Plan (NDVS, 2013). Since then, over 9,000 volunteers have been recruited in the effort to further the social and economic development of Nepal.

With NDVS's primary role to assist the Government of Nepal in tackling poverty, and *Valuing Volunteering's* rationale to investigate how, when and why volunteering impacts on poverty, it was crucial that the contribution of government-led volunteer schemes formed part of the research. Furthermore, because NDVS were the in-country partner for the *Valuing Volunteering Nepal* project, there were opportunities for close collaboration.

Currently, NDVS deploy around 600 technical volunteers annually in the health, agricultural development, livestock services and engineering sectors, and these volunteers are placed across Nepal, in 73 of its 75 districts. While a geographically based case study would be difficult due to the wide dispersal of volunteers both across Nepal and in the most remote areas of each district, there was opportunity to interact with, and learn from the experiences of, the volunteers and officials engaged in the scheme, and to gain insights into their perceptions of volunteering and its impact on Nepal's development.

NDVS's pathway of change

NDVS's main objective is to provide assistance in achieving the goal of poverty reduction as outlined by the Government of Nepal. By supplying the various government and social institutions with the additional manpower required for the delivery of key services in the sectors outlined above, NDVS aims to assist in improving the efficiency, effectiveness and reach of services to all districts of Nepal, which will lead to economic and social development. In this sense, NDVS provide complementary manpower to that used by line ministries, and are therefore part of a much larger overarching theory of change held and directed by the Government of Nepal.

NDVS's second objective is to increase employment for young people who meet normal selection criteria for government service and who are committed to nation building, providing them with the opportunity to assist in rural and local development works.

Finally, there is an objective to align Nepal's development with the spirit of volunteerism – by mobilising volunteers who are a visual and literal embodiment of the 'spirit of volunteerism' (i.e. they have made a sacrifice to volunteer for one or two years, often in remote areas). The intention is that awareness of the attributes and benefits of volunteering will be raised both among the government and social institutions within which they work and in the communities in which they serve. At the same time, NDVS promote volunteerism as an organisation through various programmes and events (e.g. promotion of International Volunteer Day and conducting seminars in schools about the value of volunteering) to sensitise the nation to the benefits of volunteerism.

Figure 1. Promoting volunteerism in a school in the east of Nepal



Valuing Volunteering and the NDVS theory of change

Valuing Volunteering Nepal's key questions were about NDVS's role in assisting the delivery of public services: whether and how NDVS assisted the government and service sector in meeting poverty reduction goals. It was beyond the scope of this research to interrogate the overarching theories of change in terms of whether and how the government of Nepal's objectives and goals would effectively lead to poverty alleviation and national development. The focus of this study was on how and whether NDVS facilitated this overarching theory of change. The study was also interested in exploring any unintended consequences of the national volunteering scheme at various levels.

The research firstly looked at how effective the volunteers were in assisting the delivery of services, and the factors that affected this. How were they impacting at the community level and were volunteers delivering services in a different way to permanent staff (i.e. is there a particular value or benefit in using volunteers in terms of service delivery?)? What was the interrelationship between the volunteers and the permanent staff whom they worked alongside, and what factors affect this? How did these relationships affect the volunteers' objectives and impact?

The research was also interested in the longer-term implications of the scheme, as well as looking at the service delivery gains themselves. For example, does the scheme affect the overall culture and social composition of government services? Are there underlying reasons why volunteers are needed as a continuous resource?

In terms of the goal of promoting volunteerism – how is this translated into long-term gains for development? Are volunteers and the organisation an effective vehicle for promoting volunteerism and what are the implications of this? Can the existence of the scheme challenge existing perceptions about volunteering, of the civil service and of ideas about 'the nation' and its development more widely?

Finally, the research was interested in the impacts on the volunteers. For example, how did the scheme negotiate some of the exclusionary tendencies of prevalent cultural norms in Nepali society? How inclusive was the scheme, both in terms of the organisation's discourse and operating procedures, and the implementation at community level? Given the scale and scope of NDVS's remit, and the diversity and geographical spread of the human resources at its disposal, a key question for the research was how placements were experienced by different volunteers. Were some volunteers more likely to have fulfilling roles which could lead to improved future opportunities (e.g. employment in the government services), whilst others were faced with more challenging circumstances, affecting the extent to which they could capitalise on the volunteering experience?

2. Background

Overview

With the objective of assisting in the achievement of the poverty reduction goals outlined in the Government of Nepal's Tenth Five Year Plan, the National Development Volunteer Service (NDVS) was established in February 1999 under the Secretariat of the National Planning Commission. Having started with 220 volunteers in 20 districts, now the coverage of this service has reached almost all districts of the country. Up until fiscal year 2011/12, 8,890 individuals had served as volunteers in rural and remote regions of the country.

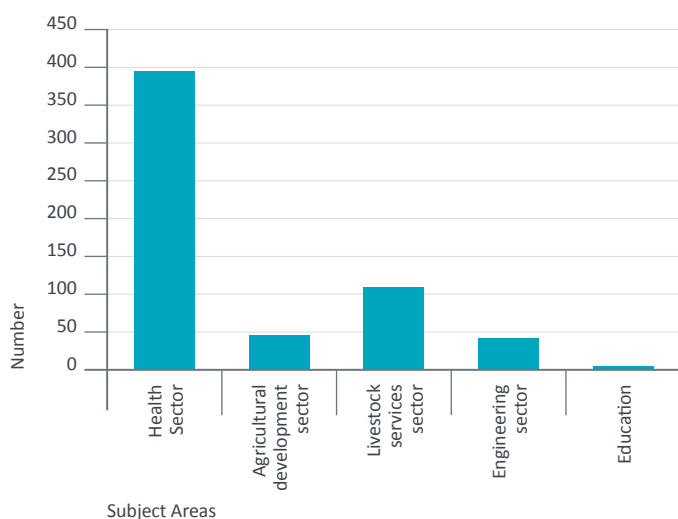
Since it was established, NDVS has been mobilising volunteers for placements usually between one and two years in length, as well as running various focused programmes. NDVS has also coordinated a range of activities and programmes that promote volunteerism, working with a variety of national and international voluntary organisations to implement these.

Mobilisation and recruitment

Currently, volunteers are mobilised on the basis of demand from the concerned line offices (e.g. health). Volunteers for different roles are mobilised from the health, agricultural development, livestock services and engineering sectors for placements of between one and two years. In fiscal year 2012/13, 589 volunteers for various roles and professions were mobilised in different government institutions in 72 districts.

At present the majority of volunteers are mobilised to volunteer in the health sector:

Figure 2. Subject areas of volunteers mobilised 2012–13.
Source: NDVS



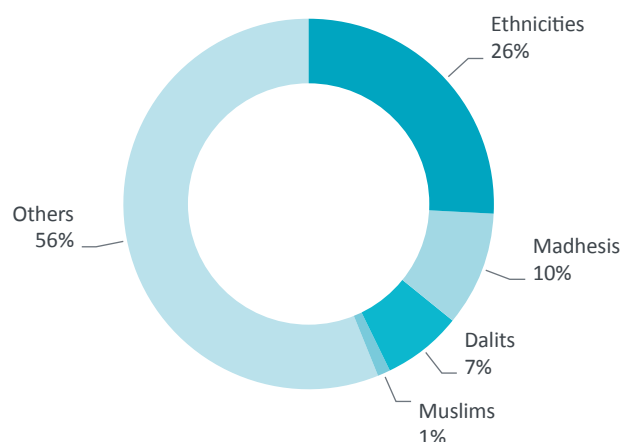
Who volunteers?

The scheme is open to individuals with the appropriate educational and vocational qualification required for the post. Each occupational family (e.g. health, engineering, agricultural development) covers a range of positions that require different qualifications and educational levels: for example, within the health sector, there are positions for auxiliary nursing midwives (ANMs), health assistants and certified medical assistants for those with the relevant qualifications.

As a result, within the scheme there is a range of qualifications held by volunteers, with some having achieved a Masters degree, and others holding a School Leavers Certificate (GCSE equivalent) only. Typically, volunteers are newly qualified in their field and may have had little prior experience.

Almost 7,000 applications for fewer than 600 places were received in 2012. This reflects the high demand for government service careers in a country where opportunities for qualified and educated young people are limited (particularly given the underdevelopment of the private sector). A meritocratic system is in place, although this is modified by a quota system to enable increased representation of groups that have traditionally not been included in government services. Like other civil service departments in Nepal, the scheme is required to adhere to a reservation system whereby 45% of places are reserved for women, ethnic minorities, regional and disabled people. This aims to ensure that the scheme reflects the overall ethnic and gender make-up of Nepal. In 2012/13, there were 310 male volunteers deployed and 279 females. Figure 3 shows the percentage of volunteers in terms of inclusion (note that 'others' in this context refers to the groups described as high Hindu castes, i.e. Brahman and Chhetri). Categorisation discrepancies make exact comparisons with the composition of the total population of Nepal difficult. However, as an example, just over 30% of the population of Nepal are *Janajati* (ethnic groups of Nepal), while 26% of NDVS volunteers are included in the category 'ethnicities' (Bennett et al, 2006).

Figure 3. The percentage of volunteers by ethnicity.
Source: NDVS



What do they do?

The functional responsibility of volunteers is to perform their role as stipulated in the terms of reference pertaining to their particular professional sector. In addition, they are tasked with raising awareness of volunteering in the community and workplace, and have a more general community outreach role, e.g. to assist with programmes that support the 'empowerment of individuals' and to facilitate the formation of groups for public betterment.

Where are they deployed?

The number of volunteers deployed per district is dependent on its Human Development Index (HDI): for example, Mugu, a district with a low HDI, was allocated 14 volunteers in 2012, whereas Kavre, a district with a higher HDI located near Kathmandu, was allocated 7 volunteers. Volunteers are deployed by the relevant line offices and district development committee on the basis of need. As such, volunteers are usually placed in the more remote areas of districts due to the persistence of low ratios of skilled personnel per head of population (Harris et al, 2013).

The majority of volunteers are placed in their resident district, but some have to stay away from their homes. In the districts with lowest-ranking HDI scores (mountain districts such as Mugu, Humla, Bajura), deploying domiciled volunteers to work in their home district was prioritised to help mitigate issues around absenteeism and the early cessation of placements. This policy of positive discrimination may have implications for the quality of the human resources deployed, particularly as the calibre of applicants varies depending on the educational opportunities available across Nepal.

Stipends

Volunteer stipends vary according to a volunteer's skill level and the remoteness of their post. For example, a volunteer working in a remote district receives an allowance of around \$100 per month, about \$20 more than a volunteer working in a less remote district. This equates to roughly half the basic salary of a permanent staff member in the equivalent role. However, permanent staff members receive additional allowances and facilities (e.g. clothing allowance, study leave, travel allowance). Generally, this allowance is sufficient to cover basic living expenses, particularly if the volunteer is able to live in their familial home. Because of limited formal employment opportunities in many districts, the allowance means that the scheme could be seen by some volunteers as a form of employment. The two-year limit on placements mitigates this to an extent.

The NDVS scheme in context

Public service delivery

The deployment and retention of essential health workers and other key service workers is a long-standing problem in rural and remote areas. For example, Harris et al argue that while "spatial inequalities in Nepal are overlaid on a complex web of ethnic and caste distinctions that have been associated with forms of exclusion in a number of dimensions (social, economic etc.), the spatial dimension retains importance", with geographic factors, namely, remoteness and terrain, a key determinant of access to health services and health outcomes (Harris et al, 2013).

Problems of difficult terrain can be exacerbated by the poor management of already inadequate infrastructure (Asia Foundation, 2012). To take the health sector as an example, problems of maldistribution of health workers, absenteeism and ineffective skill mixes persist, maintained by high levels of politicisation of the civil service, and irregularities including favouritism, nepotism and rent seeking which easily and often undermine the formal systems in place (Harris et al, 2013). Furthermore, there are issues around health workers having a conflict of interest, with the practice of owning either private clinics or medical stores, or working for for-profit institutions, common amongst practitioners (Asia Foundation, 2012). The consequence is a growing level of distrust of the state as provider of the basic human right of health (Asia Foundation, 2012).

Volunteering context

The practice of volunteerism (*swaymsaybak* – 'self-service') is deeply rooted in Nepalese society. Looking at traditional forms of volunteering, community-based tasks have been performed in Nepal for centuries. However, formal volunteering is a relatively new phenomenon in Nepal, dating from the 1990s when the end of absolute monarchy in 1991 brought about a sudden influx of funding from the international community, eager to endorse the achievement of constitutional democracy. This in turn led to the rapid growth of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (from 372 to almost 10,000 between 1990 and 1999), and the expansion of formal volunteering opportunities, with NGOs needing volunteers to implement projects at the grass-roots level (Aditya, 2002).

During this period, the nature of volunteer work changed in that it became more secular, technical, professional and developmental (Aditya, 2002). There are mixed perceptions of national volunteers in Nepal – the motives of so-called 'moneyed' volunteers (volunteers who receive a stipend) are sometimes questioned, partly because of the monetary and sometimes political gains that can be had from volunteer opportunities. Because of the high levels of youth unemployment in Nepal, and the number of relatively young international and national volunteers, volunteering can also be associated with being unemployed and inexperienced.

3. Methodology

The *Valuing Volunteering* project used two research approaches to collect and analyse insights about volunteering; Participatory Systemic Inquiries (PSI) and Participatory Systemic Action Research (PSAR). Both of these 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 that they are situated within 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, organizational 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 as much if not more from action than from analysis. It incorporates iterative cycles of action and analysis, allowing us to reflect at intervals on a particular action or approach and adapting 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. SAR typically takes place over a period of 18 months to three years.

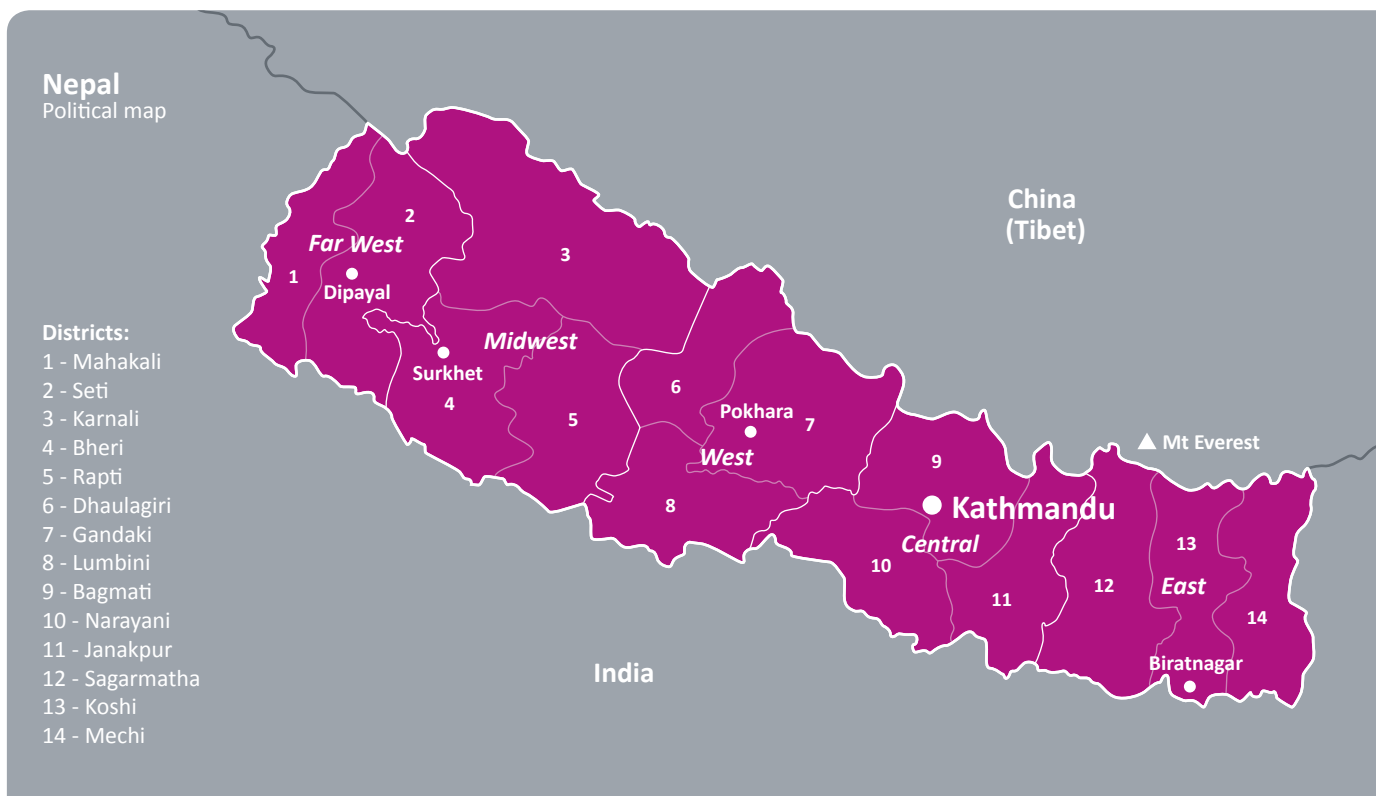
The Nepal research

The inquiry began in June 2012. NDVS were the host organisation for *Valuing Volunteering Nepal*. NDVS's scope and remit made it an important institution to include in the research.

A broad generic inquiry began in June 2012 with discussions with NDVS project officers and United Nations Volunteers (UNV) officers who were also at the time working with NDVS. Two large-scale programme and policy evaluation events in June and July 2012 provided the opportunity to speak with public servants, volunteers and programme officers and gain early insights into experiences at local level. To obtain a range of perspectives, as part of the generic inquiry, interviews were also conducted with key stakeholders in the national volunteering sector outside of NDVS – e.g. members of the taskforce who are drafting a national policy on volunteering. This initial inquiry gave insights into the work that the scheme did, the key issues volunteers faced in their placements and the challenges facing the volunteer sector in Nepal.

This was followed by a more focused inquiry regarding the perspectives of volunteers and their counterparts in September/October 2012. While a geographically based case study would be difficult due to the wide dispersal of volunteers both across Nepal and in the most remote areas of each district, it was still important to look at NDVS volunteers as part of the ecosystem of volunteering and how they related to the work of other volunteers in a specific context. Therefore, NDVS volunteers were initially included in *Valuing Volunteering Nepal's* investigation into education and volunteering in one district in the far west of Nepal. The education inquiry focused primarily on international volunteers, but including national and local volunteers in the initial stages gave insights into the different types of volunteer working in one locality, and how or whether there were (or could be) connections between different volunteers and volunteer organisations. NDVS volunteers were also included in a similar inquiry in a hill district in the mid-west of Nepal.

However, there were a limited number of accessible volunteers in the district in which the education inquiry was based. In order to understand the scheme and gain deeper insights into questions such as how experiences differ depending on the role and location of volunteers, the inquiry needed to be broadened to include a greater number of volunteers from different regions. In spring/summer 2013 this inquiry included: accompaniment on volunteer exchange programmes in the Bheri and Rapti zones in the mid-west of Nepal, and the Mechi zone in the east of Nepal; visits to the placements of volunteers and meeting with counterparts in five districts within these zones; attending volunteer trainings; speaking informally



with volunteers and their permanent staff colleagues; one-to-one interviews with volunteers; focus group discussions with volunteers from different sectors (health, agricultural development, engineering, livestock services) working in over ten districts covering the mountain, hill and *Terai* (plains) geographical zones; and continued discussions with NDVS colleagues. Over 50 volunteers from more than ten districts in the far west, mid-west, west and eastern regions of Nepal were included in the inquiry. Four days spent with volunteers from the Karnali zone – the most remote mountain/hill zone of Nepal, gave particular insights into the challenges of volunteering in the hardest-to-reach areas.

The main emphasis of the study is the perceptions and experiences of the volunteers. However, the views of permanent staff members were gathered wherever possible during site visits, and these inputs also provide useful insights, sometimes giving a different or competing perspective. A follow-up study focusing on other stakeholders that gives equivalent breadth and depth of coverage would be worthwhile.

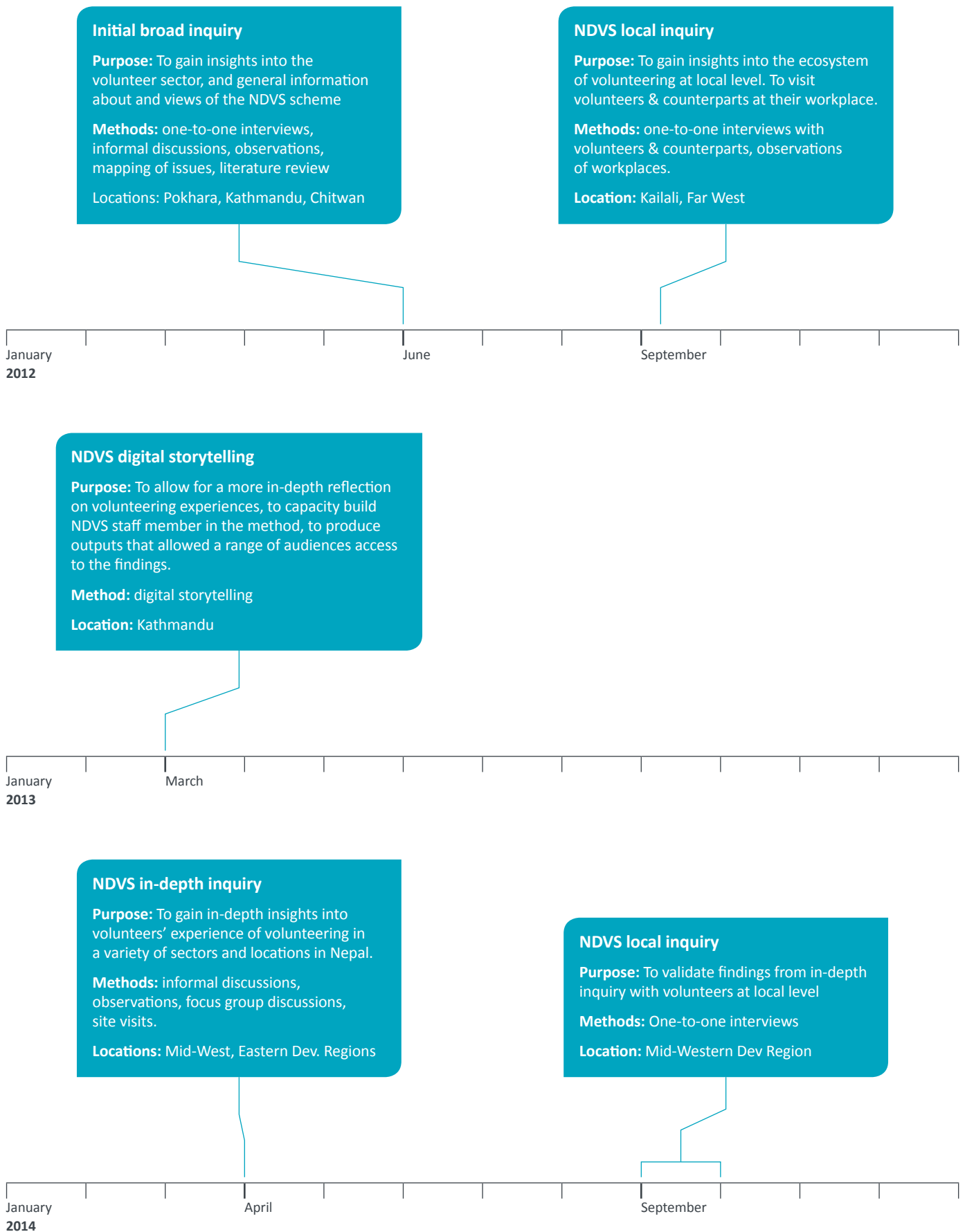
A digital storytelling workshop was planned with volunteers in order to show the realities of volunteering in remote districts, and to enable volunteers to reflect on their experiences. Due to time constraints at the end of the research project, this workshop could not be realised. Instead, a digital story was created with a volunteer who had been based in the Karnali zone but was now living in Kathmandu¹. This digital story could then be added to the stories of local volunteers that were collected during the *Valuing Volunteering Nepal* education inquiry workshop in Dhangadhi, broadening the picture of volunteering in Nepal. In addition, a member of NDVS staff assisted the education inquiry digital storytelling workshop in the far west of Nepal so that NDVS held knowledge of this method. A follow-up study that uses digital storytelling to capture a range of experiences from different regions of Nepal may be worthwhile.

Figure 4. An NDVS evaluation and training



1. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6AGo-Agx8U

Figure 5. Timeline of NDVS inquiry



4. How volunteers impact on poverty

On average, 600 NDVS volunteers are mobilised per year. This chapter looks at the way they work, their impacts in the long and short term, and asks whether there is added value in using volunteers in the provision of key services.

Supporting existing services

NDVS volunteers support existing services and allow permanent staff members to deliver services more efficiently and effectively to a greater number of service-users. For example, in one hospital visited in the Far Western region, the NDVS volunteer worked in an emergency room where she provided initial care for patients.

“The hospital is a very crowded place so when I work there, it frees up the other staff. There is not such a big queue for health care. There is lots of need for volunteers, because the level of work is so high.”

NDVS volunteer

The doctor working in the emergency echoed these sentiments: the volunteer allowed him to see more patients in a setting where demand is continuously high. At a health post in eastern Nepal, the health clinician in-charge explained what the value of volunteers was to him:

“Volunteers relieve my workload and mean that I can do more work and take more time with patients... the workload is very high so the volunteer enables people to be seen. The volunteer is hardworking, active and timely. I needed help because I was so stretched, so asked for a volunteer.”

Community Medical Assistant, health post

In this sense, in posts where volunteers work alongside active permanent staff members, there is little to distinguish volunteers from their paid colleagues. Volunteers allow for the short-term benefits of providing more care, more efficiently at that time:

“The community don’t know that he’s a volunteer, they think that he is staff. He is no different from other paid staff, he does the same kind of work.”

CMA, health post

It can also be an efficient way of ensuring an effective ‘skill mix’ which can be difficult, particularly in remote areas (Harris et al, 2013). For example, the junior nurse in the hospital in the far west freed up the time of more experienced nurses and doctors to deal with more severe cases.

A different way of working?

A strong theme that emerged from the inquiry was that many volunteers felt that the fact that they were volunteers affected their ways of working. Firstly, some volunteers felt their motivation and commitment was often different. The reasons for this were various, but particularly in the most remote districts (where priority is given to domiciled applicants), the sense that they were volunteering for their *own* community was very strong. This, combined with a sense of responsibility about being a volunteer and part of a broader volunteering movement, was highly motivating for some:

“First thing is that it is our *birthplace*. Also that we know each other and there is a good atmosphere/feeling (e.g. among the volunteers in trainings) this also motivates us.”

NDVS volunteer

“I’ve changed in my thoughts about volunteering. At first I didn’t know about it. Now I have the idea that it is about selfless volunteering. The thinking is good. Because others are concerned about money.”

NDVS volunteer

There was also a sense that at the beginning of their careers, the scheme was an opportunity for volunteers to prove themselves and gain experience:

“I am getting something, a small amount of money, the people of the community know me, I have some kind of prestige working with the public sector. And this motivates me.”

NDVS volunteer

“For me, I think that I got the opportunity to use my skills. If I wasn’t a volunteer I wouldn’t be able to use that skill.”

NDVS volunteer

This is not to claim that all volunteers are highly motivated; as with other volunteer schemes, there are issues around volunteer motivation which NDVS have been trying hard to address. Whether an individual is a volunteer or a permanent member of staff, what drives their motivation will depend on a whole variety of factors. Some motivating factors are more intrinsic to volunteering, e.g. the relatively short-term nature of posts; the connections to the community many volunteers have; the eagerness of relatively inexperienced volunteers to gain new skills and apply their training; and an appreciation of the values of volunteerism (particularly given NDVS inductions which highlight the importance of volunteering to Nepal’s history and future development).

Connections with the community

Volunteers usually work in remote areas for an extended period, many located in posts that are distant from their familial home even if they are working in their own district. This puts them in a position where they may be more able or more motivated to extend services both geographically and in terms of time. For example, in her digital story, one volunteer describes how she would remain at the remote health post during holiday periods and at weekends when permanent staff would travel to their homes in the district centre. The volunteer was unable to do so because of the prohibitive cost and duration of travel to her home district. Furthermore, volunteers have less access to trainings; given that participation in study and training programmes has been identified as a major cause of absenteeism, along with annual leave entitlements, this is significant (Harris et al, 2013)². One volunteer living in a remote district explains:

“The person in charge, most of the time they take advantage of any opportunities, for example, they request to go to trainings. But we (volunteers) never can.”

NDVS volunteer

This embeddedness can allow volunteers to provide services consistently: indeed several volunteers spoke of the emergency treatment provided during holiday periods which would otherwise have been unavailable. In her digital story, the volunteer describes how she attended to an emergency patient using a satellite call to a senior nurse in the district centre. It was during festival time when all the permanent staff had left the birthing centre.

In addition, their embeddedness, allowed volunteers to work proactively – e.g. increasing community outreach work. One volunteer explained that because she had few friends and no relatives to visit, at weekends she would visit remote communities to inform them about the importance of hand-washing, the causes of diarrhoea and to teach parents to conduct basic sanitary procedures such as nail cutting. A female volunteer working in the agricultural sector explains:

“Volunteers usually work pro-actively, visiting communities and farmers to let them know what is happening in the agricultural sector. But government staff don’t work in that way, they just work reactively. So that is the difference.”

NDVS volunteer

Some volunteers interpreted their role as being much broader than their permanent staff colleagues’. Their stories reflect an idea that volunteerism goes beyond the delivery of professional or technical skills:

“Supervisors supervise the project only. They don’t go anywhere, they don’t talk, sometimes they talk... but they go there and supervise the project only. They aren’t interested about the village, only about their project, how quick it’s finished. Only!... But I’m a volunteer, so I should talk... Volunteers have to go (to the community) and help solve their problems.”

NDVS volunteer, engineer

Interestingly, this reflects findings from *Valuing Volunteering’s* inquiry into education and volunteering, whereby international volunteers’ role encompassed much more than capacity-building counterpart teachers with new teaching methodologies (i.e. technical skills).

Even if volunteers were not from the particular community they were posted in, they were able to build relationships because they lived in close proximity to community members – often needing their help to get by when living alone in a new and isolated environment:

“At first they didn’t trust me. But after interacting with them and attending these (local) events they started to trust me and to be more open. It was helpful being in the community because they started to know I was a volunteer. When I started, the community didn’t know the difficulties I faced but afterwards, they would bring me vegetables and curries and things.”

NDVS volunteer

There have been many studies looking at how the social embeddedness of workers affects their motivation to provide good service. Where there is a social relationship between patient and service provider, care can be more empathetic (Franco et al, 2002). The closeness of volunteers to the communities in which they work – either because of pre-existing connections (e.g. they are volunteering in their own district) or because of the different working conditions of volunteers – helps to foster social relationships which can be important for the delivery of high-quality care.

Freedom to work with the community

Volunteers are in a sense ‘outsiders’ to the government’s system of service delivery – they are not permanent staff members so may be spared some of the bureaucratic constraints that their colleagues face. Interestingly, some volunteers felt that this gave them a degree of freedom to deliver services more quickly and effectively. A health assistant describes how the freedom from administrative burden facilitated the undertaking of community outreach and emergency healthcare:

“If there is an emergency, or someone has to go to a remote village, then the volunteer will go. Because I feel more freedom to do this, for example, I don’t have to record it in the same way, I can just inform another senior staff member.”

NDVS volunteer, health sector

Extending the reach of existing services

Volunteers play an important role in extending the reach of services. Many volunteers spoke of working in areas where there were no permanent staff posted, or where permanent staff were not in attendance, meaning that without them there would be no provision of services. Particularly in the Karnali region, the remotest region of Nepal, volunteers felt that they were the main service providers:

“I’m the only volunteer in the area, no one else is there. I have to look after nine places. There aren’t any permanent staff working alongside me.”

NDVS volunteer

2. Additional annual leave entitlements given under the Health Service Regulation 1999 (last amendment 2012) are also likely play a role, including: 30 days of home leave; 12 days of sick leave; and 12 days of casual/festival leave (excluding leave for Dashain and Tihar, which is additional) (SOLID, 2012)

A particular problem is obtaining the right 'skill mix' of staff in remote areas. For example, two-thirds of health staff live in Kathmandu or other cities, leaving rural areas under-staffed (Shrestha and Bhandari, 2013). In the absence of a suitably qualified permanent staff member, volunteers who meet the criteria for the post have taken on roles in remote locations where there would otherwise be a gap. In some circumstances, the volunteer may be the most qualified practitioner, with permanent staff in subordinate roles by default. Although volunteers may not have as much experience as their permanent staff counterparts, they are qualified, and using volunteers in this way can go some way to mitigating gaps in provision. On visiting one rural health post, the volunteer and official explained the huge difficulties of ensuring services are delivered in hard-to-reach areas:

"Previously this remote health post had been closed because there was no one to run it. Now it is run by the volunteer with two junior health workers. The volunteer is in charge of the health post because before it was closed. The CMA volunteer is [de facto] in charge of the health post."
Anonymous

This does raise issues around the level of responsibility that volunteers are sometimes required to assume, and around the underlying causes of maldistribution and absenteeism (these will be discussed in chapter 8). Nevertheless, volunteers' impact here can be crucial and allows a greater number of people to access services.

Up-to-date knowledge, information and new ideas

While many volunteers did not see that their role was to change or update existing practices, and some volunteers felt they were unable to do this because of their relationship with permanent staff (discussed in chapter 5), there were incidences where volunteers had updated the practices of permanent staff. This can be a particularly important function in remote areas, where training standards may be lower and, importantly, the skills of those serving may not have been updated in line with changing trends and technological advances. In the health sector for example, the epidemiological profile of Nepal has rapidly changed in the last two decades. There are now an increasing number of deaths from non-communicable diseases, but at the same time, in certain areas, increases in sexually transmitted diseases due to changing migration patterns (Shrestha and Bhandari, 2013; Vaidya and Wu, 2011). One volunteer described how she was able to update staff members in a remote district regarding sexually transmitted diseases because she had specialist knowledge from previous work with NGOs in Kathmandu. Another health volunteer felt that at her health post:

"Permanent staff do not have up to date abilities. Volunteers have fresh knowledge and skills with which they can serve the community volunteers better."
NDVS volunteer, health

She then described how she had changed antenatal practices at the clinic. Another volunteer described how working with the community can help realise new ideas:

"Prior to my posting there were problems relating to vaccination. All children have to be reported to the service centre. But some parents didn't manage to do that because of the geography, rainy season and so on. So I decided to make a mid-point somewhere between the FCHV (community health volunteer) and the community. I made a mid-point so that they can now more easily come."
NDVS volunteer, health

Thus, there is the potential for an enthusiastic and recently qualified volunteer to make a valuable contribution to the existing service provision. This potential is of course affected by both the quality of their interaction with staff and, indeed, whether there are permanent staff members working alongside them. Nevertheless, the short-term nature of volunteering has the potential to refresh and update existing knowledge and working practices.

Conclusion

There is evidence of volunteers taking on a variety of roles which, in the short term, enable services to be delivered more efficiently and effectively. There is also evidence of volunteers interpreting their role differently and more broadly than if their position were permanent, for example, including more community outreach work that extends the reach of services.

In the health sector particularly, given the shifting disease profile of Nepal, there is perhaps a bigger role for volunteers in terms of updating existing practices and learning in line with these shifts. This is currently not being fully realised, but with specialist training and a greater focus on a capacity-building role, NDVS could be more intentional about creating a resource for permanent staff to use given the disease transitions Nepal is facing. In this sense, volunteers could be seen more as a taskforce with a certain set of skills that are easily and quickly deployed to fill skill and knowledge gaps and ensure that the right mix of workers are available. There are barriers to skill sharing as will be discussed below, but perhaps having a greater focus on volunteers' unique assets could overcome these.

Implications

- Relieving the workload of permanent staff can enable more efficient and effective delivery of services to community members.
- Because of the different working and living conditions, and perhaps the different motivations of volunteers, the reach of service delivery can be extended to a greater number of community members.
- Volunteers give the opportunity to secure the right 'skill mixes' in service delivery. This can be effective both in terms of the quality and range of services provided to the community, and also the access to services (i.e. posts can be opened).
- Securing the right 'skill mix' may have implications in terms of the level of responsibility that volunteers are expected to assume.
- Volunteers could be a potentially useful resource to update permanent staff's knowledge and training. This has implications in terms of training and raises questions about whether this would be possible, given volunteers' relatively low position in the hierarchy (as perceived by some permanent staff). There could potentially be collaborations with international volunteers/volunteer organisations in terms of changing the image and expertise of volunteers.

5. How volunteers work with permanent staff

This chapter looks at how volunteers' impact was affected by their relationship with the existing system of service delivery, i.e. the permanent staff they work alongside. Understanding what affects the quality of the interaction between permanent staff and volunteers is complex. It is dependent on factors ranging from: the volunteer's ascribed role; their 'NDVS volunteer' identity; their qualifications, skills and capabilities relating to their professional discipline; individual characteristics such as their gender, caste and ethnicity; and the personal resources they are able to draw on (personality, strength, intelligence). How permanent staff react and respond to the volunteer, in turn, depends on their own identities, roles and characteristics in relation to the volunteer's.

With such a large volunteer force, distributed widely across the country, working in a variety of professional settings and varied roles, achieving anything approaching consistency in terms of quality and output is challenging. The experience of the individual volunteer will vary from place to place, reflecting the history, organisational culture and social dynamics of the setting where they are assigned. The role and personality mix is important to appreciate. Whilst further inquiry into how different aspects of volunteer and permanent staff identity (particularly gender and caste) affect the quality of the interaction would be beneficial, this research focuses on how the way volunteers and staff relate to each other affects volunteers' impact, revealing patterns and issues that can be usefully addressed in planning for improvement.

Working with permanent staff to improve service delivery

There were examples where volunteers were integrated into the team of existing permanent staff and their position in the work-based hierarchy accepted in accordance with their ascribed professional role. In some cases, being integrated and respected by permanent staff members provided opportunities either to directly share skills and knowledge, or for certain behaviours to be observed, reflected on and adopted.

Many volunteers who held a superior position in the work-based hierarchy (because of their role and qualifications), felt they were able to share knowledge and improve existing practices. For example, despite being an 'outsider' to the community and the local system of government, one volunteer from a traditionally marginalised ethnic group, working in the Himalaya, describes his work:

"I work in the Himalaya but I'm from the Terai. It was not difficult to gain the respect of the Sherpa people I work with because I give them knowledge. I go to the sites frequently with them to supervise road building..."

NDVS volunteer

For some volunteers, their role and resulting position in the hierarchy (e.g. as the most senior health worker at a post) led them to adopt an instructional role. Other volunteers felt able to suggest improvements to existing practices, despite their more junior role. For some, actually being a volunteer gave them the leverage and relative freedom (as an 'outsider' to the system) to provide an extended professional contribution, suggesting changes to staff practices if they felt they could be improved. In the example below, the volunteer, despite being junior to her colleagues, appealed to staff directly, highlighting her status as volunteer:

"Sometimes the permanent staff don't come on time. I say to them, "Even though I'm a volunteer, I come at the right time. You are the seniors but you aren't here on time. It's not good. The patients need you." When I said this, they came afterwards. Because of me a lot of change has taken place in my work. Now we clean more, change the dressings."

NDVS volunteer

Another volunteer felt that she had changed some of the unsatisfactory practices occurring at the hospital, by challenging permanent staff who were unnecessarily referring patients to private provision:

“Before they would leave the hospital and tell people they don’t have that facility so they would call the private medical. When I went there I talked to them about this and said, it is not good to send people to the private clinic, people can be served inside this hospital and not [sent to] the private clinic.”

NDVS volunteer

A motivated and capable volunteer can provide opportunities for professional reflection for permanent staff that can lead to improvements. This can happen in different ways: either by directly approaching colleagues (as above), or more passively. For example, one volunteer felt that his presence had changed the behaviour of the permanent staff he worked alongside:

“We have changed the regularity of permanent staff. Nowadays, I think they see us with less salary and we are working more than them. We are earning less salary than them, we are earning little money but we are being active. So (they think) we should help them... so I think this will be changed.”

NDVS volunteer

Indeed, when speaking with a permanent staff member in charge of the health post, he explained:

“I’ve learnt many things from the volunteer about being timely, regular, and other things. Permanent staff may be regular but not timely. But because of the volunteer they have learnt to come on time.”

Permanent staff

Whether the volunteer directly appeals to permanent staff or acts as a catalyst by modelling certain positive behaviours, a level of respect from and integration with permanent staff is required for this to have any effect. If this is there, volunteers can provide non-managerial opportunities for professionals to reflect on existing practice, which can lead to improvements to existing services.

In the above examples the altruistic aspects of the volunteer role made colleagues question their own practices and attitudes. But in other instances, volunteers felt that playing down their volunteer identity enabled them to integrate more closely with permanent staff and this could bring real benefits. For example, some volunteers delivering emergency care in hospitals and health posts faced negative reactions from community members distrustful of volunteers’ capabilities (discussed further below). If volunteers were embraced by permanent staff and therefore perceived to be part of the existing team, volunteers felt such negative reactions could be mitigated. As one volunteer explained, a more collegial approach brought advantages:

“I had a different experience. I was treated well by the other staff. I don’t have any negative experience. It depends on the place and the person and how they respond. We are all one staff. When people [service-users] see us as the same as other staff there is no problem. But if people see us as volunteers [separate] then it is a problem.”

NDVS volunteer

Barriers to delivering and improving services

For other volunteers, their volunteer identity was not so positively interpreted by the permanent staff they worked alongside, or they found integrating with permanent staff a challenge. As a result, opportunities were not fully realised.

Some volunteers did not see that their role extended beyond service delivery. For others, aspects of being a volunteer – relatively low pay, its temporary nature – left them at the bottom of the hierarchy in the workplace, with little power to influence their colleagues or to share skills, even if they had felt the need to. Some volunteers felt their volunteer identity worked against them:

“People see me as ‘just a volunteer’ so no respect is given. They just see me as someone who was unemployed and couldn’t get a job. They don’t know about volunteers and their role.”

NDVS volunteer

“Most of the time the permanent staff neglect the volunteers. They don’t care about us – ‘ah they are just volunteers, they are just coming for a few days’. People don’t support us.”

NDVS volunteer

As a result, their volunteer identity could be a barrier to sharing ideas:

“Permanent staff are supposed to have updated information so it is hard for them to take the information from the volunteers. They are reluctant to take on this information from volunteers.”

NDVS volunteers

In other cases, the impact of the volunteer was limited by insufficient support and assistance from permanent staff. For some volunteers, they could have operated more effectively had they received better guidance and support:

NDVS volunteer: **“They don’t listen to us, they don’t give us advice. Not all – some, some government workers they think ‘volunteers, what do they do?’ They don’t do anything, they don’t listen to us... I need their help.”**

Researcher: **“And does it make a difference..? (interrupting)”**

NDVS volunteer: **“Yes a big difference if someone supports us, yes yes, yes.”**

Researcher: **“Can you give me an example?”**

NDVS volunteer: **“(One supervisor) helped me with project estimation, and solving, and gave advice on how to do this. If I don’t know about this, I have no idea how to do it.”**

(Interview with NDVS volunteer)

Sometimes the volunteer’s potential was not fully utilised because insufficient attention was given to how to use the additional resource:

“We visited her service centre and the permanent staff member was also undermining her somehow. He had sent her somewhere to look after farming houses, he had not given any role to act proactively or use her full skills.”

Anonymous

Volunteers in the most remote region felt particularly strongly that their placements were made more difficult by the absenteeism of permanent staff. The challenges that volunteers placed in the most remote regions face are compounded by the fact that they are least likely to be supported by permanent staff (with absenteeism and recruitment problems rife in these areas (Harris et al, 2013)). This has implications for their workload (e.g. one volunteer covered nine posts), but too often they were left without direction or support:

“Everywhere where we work the permanent staff are neglecting their work and the volunteers are forced to do everything. I’m enjoying doing the work but I don’t get the necessary privileges.”

NDVS volunteer

“We did very hard work there (in the placement), but those who are permanent staff they neglect their work. Volunteers don’t get privileges. If the permanent staff work extra time they get a bonus but we never get this. Staff get four, five, six trainings per year but we never get this.”

NDVS volunteer

There may be a range of responses to this lack of support including frustration and demotivation.

Finally, volunteers felt that a lack of support from permanent staff could have a knock-on effect on service-users. Negative stereotypes which associate national volunteering with low-employability and amateurism affected volunteers, particularly those involved in delivering emergency care:

“Some patients complain about the volunteers, because we are volunteers (they don’t trust us). Once I treated a woman who had (a severe ear infection). I gave her ear drops, medication. But afterwards the woman complained to the supervisor just because I am a volunteer. Most people in the community say negative things, but some say positive things.”

NDVS volunteer

“Yes, and they say ‘call the doctor’. They would say call the doctor, they want to see a permanent CMA. We are also CMAs. If we want to change, first we should have to change our perception (of volunteers).”

NDVS volunteer

In some instances, without the endorsement of permanent staff (either directly or by including volunteers as part of the team of permanent staff), these misconceptions were left unchallenged, making it difficult to deliver services to unreceptive service-users:

“Permanent staff are sometimes good to us. Then other people (community members) don’t ignore us. But permanent staff never include us, they are always separate from us.”

NDVS volunteer

Mechanisms that monitor the quality of relationships with permanent staff are essential but a major challenge for a volunteer scheme with over 600 volunteers placed primarily in remote areas. Progress has been made in this area in recent years, e.g. there is now a volunteer in each district assigned as district coordinator and responsible for liaising with other volunteers in their area on issues such as their wellbeing. But some volunteers still felt that the complicated work-based hierarchy, and their position in relation to it, made it difficult for grievances to be voiced or acted on:

“Permanent members they don’t assist us. We have to see for ourselves... bring the water, do the arrangements... We used to share our complaints with our chief (of the post). But he is also permanent, so how could he order to the other staff?”
NDVS volunteer

Conclusion

As expected with a scheme that covers so many roles and disciplines and involves such a variety of individuals, there was a wide range in volunteer experience in terms of how they related with permanent staff and the effects of this. To an extent, this is unavoidable. Misplaced confidence in the ability of volunteers to manage their professional relationships with permanent staff goes a long way to explaining why some volunteers are unable to optimise their performance in their role. The receptiveness and response of those the volunteer works alongside is often crucial for them to be able to carry out their duties, but too often this is given limited attention. As a result there is a great deal of variation in the quality of placement experience and its impact.

Because of the multitude of factors involved in building positive working relationships, it can be difficult for volunteer organisations to know how to navigate and act on this. Nevertheless, there is scope for action. Firstly, there is a role in ensuring that permanent staff are well informed: at district and local level, permanent staff need to be provided with clear and full information about NDVS and the role of volunteers, and rules and guidelines that specify their role in relation to the volunteer. It is important that responsibility for the volunteer’s impact and wellbeing is shared by local partners and that support mechanisms are in place and subject to monitoring and periodic evaluation.

There is also a role in ensuring that NDVS volunteers are given legitimacy. NDVS are implementing an increasing number of activities that raise the profile of the organisation and celebrate volunteer achievements. In a hierarchical system, endorsement from high-level officers both centrally and locally is also important for the morale of volunteers and to ensure permanent staff give volunteers due recognition. In addition, ensuring that both volunteers and the scheme have a clear understanding of its role – being more specific about what it is that volunteers are adding, and ensuring that volunteers are given the skills needed to do this – may help to change perceptions of volunteers and foster more collaborative working.

This chapter also highlights issues around volunteer identity. Volunteers used their volunteer identity to advantage, e.g. highlighting their own sacrifices to change permanent staff’s practices. But at the same time they sometimes chose to underplay this identity in order to integrate into the team of permanent staff. This poses several challenges for NDVS: how can their role as change agents and innovators be consolidated, whilst they are also valued and supported as part of the team of permanent staff?

Implications

- Without sufficient buy-in from permanent staff, volunteers’ skills may not be fully utilised.
- Opportunities for sharing information can be lost – both for the volunteer to learn from staff and for staff to learn from volunteers.
- If volunteers have difficulties integrating into the existing team of permanent staff or are not fully supported by their colleagues, there are implications for volunteers’ motivation and wellbeing.
- NDVS, permanent staff and volunteers need to have a clear understanding of the role of the volunteers, and what the role of permanent staff is in relation to volunteers.
- Finding ways to improve the status or legitimacy of volunteers may improve relations with permanent staff, and increase potential for the sharing of skills.
- Ensuring that volunteers have a unique role, and stressing the importance of this (e.g. community outreach work, specialist knowledge) could give volunteers a distinctive presence and purpose, and avoid issues around permanent staff’s work being replaced or challenged by volunteers.
- A volunteer identity can motivate volunteers and help distinguish them from some of the less positive aspects of service delivery in Nepal.
- Because volunteering can also be associated with being untrained and inexperienced, a distinct volunteer identity can be difficult for volunteers when working with the community and with permanent staff.
- Continued promotional work on volunteerism and NDVS could lead to improved perceptions of volunteering. Continuing to work collaboratively with international volunteering organisations (including at local level) could enhance the standing of national volunteers.
- Attempts to distinguish volunteers from permanent staff (e.g. by introducing NDVS uniforms) need to be undertaken with care. Highlighting differences could make it more difficult for volunteers to integrate with permanent staff, which has implications for volunteer impact.

6. Volunteer wellbeing and motivation

NDVS have a key function in terms of reaching the most remote areas of Nepal and ensuring that these communities have access to essential services. A consequence of this is that demands on volunteers can be high, particularly for volunteers living in the most remote and inaccessible regions, and for volunteers, especially women, who may have additional domestic duties.

Volunteering in remote and inaccessible areas

Interestingly, volunteers from the districts categorised as the most inaccessible in Nepal (the Karnali region) showed a particularly high level of commitment to serving their community. Their posts were several days' walk from their homes even though they were placed in their own district (an indication of the area's remoteness). These volunteers stressed the importance of volunteering in their 'birthplace' as central to their motivation to volunteer. In Nepal, where identity and regionality are still closely entwined, it is understandable that motivation can be sustained when volunteers are doing something for their own community – it resonates with the idea of *swaymsaybak* (self-service), and of working together to help *afno manche*. One volunteer from the Karnali region described his motivations:

“Volunteers don’t want to lose their confidence in front of permanent staff, they really want to show permanent staff that they have the same power and ability and skill as them. And that this ability must be utilised by providing services to our community. Because many of the volunteers are serving in their own districts and communities and this is why they are motivated in a different way from permanent staff.”

NDVS volunteer

Their commitment was palpable. But it is important to remember the additional sacrifices, both in monetary and in wellbeing terms, that volunteers working in the most remote posts face. For example, because of the remoteness of their placements, some volunteers had additional expenses:

“Sometimes I have to stay in places on the way to the placement because it is several days walk. It is difficult to provide for my family because I have to use my own money for this.”

NDVS volunteer

Other volunteers talked of the additional costs they would have to cover if they needed to take transport to remote areas, or felt unsafe to travel by road to their placement. Furthermore, in some areas, volunteers faced additional costs because administrative procedures required them to travel to the district headquarters to receive their allowance:

“Still in some districts, rather than being paid the allowance automatically, the volunteers have to travel to the district office (in the district head quarters). This is difficult and costly particularly for volunteers who live in remote districts (no travel allowance is provided for this). The allowance is paid from NDVS to the district office and then to the volunteers. This means they are not paid for a long time. Some district offices do not want the automated system because they are not used to this.”

Anonymous

Furthermore, volunteers spoke of the demands that living in remote communities made on their families.

“Where I work, it is 3 days from my family. My family are not being cared for in the same way when I am away.”

NDVS volunteer

“My family live very far. I feel very bad because when my children get sick I’m not able to help them.”

NDVS volunteer

“Compared to the Terai (plane region) distances take four times as long to travel to. It takes 4 days to reach my placement. I only return home for Dhasain festival [major Hindu festival in October] only.”

NDVS volunteer

One female volunteer described how her parents cared for her 3-year-old daughter whilst she lived at a remote health post in a remote mountain district.

Volunteers in this region spoke of the positive reception received from service-users, who were grateful to volunteers for their efforts, particularly given the limited services they had been used to. This reception was in contrast to their experience with permanent staff who often left them with little support (see chapter 5).

Conclusion

The realities of the most remote districts – low but highly dispersed populations and low levels of infrastructure – mean that in order to deliver key services to the hardest to reach, volunteers have to travel long distances. While they do receive an additional allowance in remote areas (and there are currently plans for further allowance increases), allowances need to take into account the additional expenses that may be incurred when working in the most challenging districts.

Due to a huge rise in outward migration in recent years, one in four households now has an absent member (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Living away from the family home is a common occurrence in Nepali society. Nevertheless, it is important to note that volunteering may be a very different experience for those working in the most remote areas, or for those with additional domestic or childcare duties. It is important that these additional sacrifices are recognised.

As discussed in chapter 5, the challenges for volunteers in the most remote regions are compounded by the fact that they are more likely to face issues regarding the level of support from permanent staff, given that absenteeism and recruitment problems are highest in such areas (Harris et al, 2013). There can be great variation in the quality of placement experience for volunteers, and this raises important questions for volunteer organisations: What are the most appropriate ways to recognise the additional sacrifices and challenges faced? Given the wider systemic issues regarding human resource allocation in remote areas, how can volunteer organisations help to ensure all volunteers are able to gain experience and receive support from permanent staff colleagues?

Implications

- Some volunteers have to make additional sacrifices (e.g. monetary, familial) which can affect their impact if they are not adequately supported. Given that the weight of domestic duties usually falls to women, this can affect female volunteers with childcare responsibilities in particular.
- If differences in volunteer experience are not sufficiently recognised and taken into account, there is a risk that volunteers working in the hardest-to-reach areas will not have the same opportunities as those living in less marginalised areas. For example, their opportunity to learn and gain experience from existing permanent staff members could be limited.

Figure 6. A volunteer exchange visit: some volunteers need to balance domestic duties with volunteering



Figure 7. Promoting volunteerism through volunteer exchange programmes and school visits



7. Long-term impacts on marginalisation and exclusion

NDVS perhaps has a more subtle and long-term impact on the demographic make-up of the state apparatus and the civil service through its reservation system (outlined below) which promotes and models positive inclusive practices.

The reservation system means that NDVS is making progress in ensuring that the volunteers mobilised reflect the overall ethnic and gender make-up of Nepal. At the same time, there are opportunities where the inclusive policies of the organisation could be reinforced so that the gains made in terms of equality and inclusivity at policy level are translated into gains at the local level, with empowered volunteers who are able to meaningfully participate in their placements and can translate their experience into future long-term positive outcomes.

The civil service's demographic profile

There are currently approximately 80,000 civil servants working in the Nepali civil service (Paudel, 2013). Historically, the civil service has been dominated by males from high Hindu castes (Brahman and Chhetri) from the hill region, and the urban-based *Newar* (Paudel, 2013). In 2007, at the time of the interim constitution, drafted following the ten-year insurgency and which emphasised an inclusive Nepal, reform of the policy framework of the civil service began. A reservation policy was introduced which stated that 55% of the total vacant seats must be allocated for open competition, whilst 45% of seats must be reserved for women, ethnic minorities, regional and disabled people (Paudel, 2013).

Progress in making the civil service more balanced has been slow and the bureaucracy in Nepal remains gender-biased, religion-biased and caste-biased demographically (Dhakal, 2013). While figures were unavailable for the caste-wise distribution of the candidates for reserved seats, the fact that the male/female ratio of civil servants remains so imbalanced is indicative: despite a rise of over 3% since 2008, women still make up only 15% of the total number of civil servants (Dhakal, 2013; MOGA, 2013).

A step towards a more representative public sector?

NDVS recruitment is also based on a reservation system. However, a benefit of the short (maximum two-year) terms of the volunteers is that the representativeness of the volunteer scheme can be secured much more quickly than in the civil service. For example, in 2012/13, female volunteers made up 47% of the total number of NDVS volunteers, compared with just 15% in the civil service overall. The high number of health volunteers (a sector that traditionally attracts a high proportion of females) does work in NDVS's favour in terms of achieving near gender parity. Representation in terms of ethnicity however, does clearly show how the reservation policy is leading to a more inclusive scheme: in 2012/13, 7% of volunteers were *dalits* and 26% from ethnic groups. Although not a perfect comparison, it is interesting to note the status of inclusion at Ministry level in 2012 – with just 14 of 3,434 *dalits* in the Health Ministry (0.4%) and 336 (9%) from ethnic groups (which includes *Newar*) (Awasthi and Adhikary, 2012).

In the short term, the reservation system means that NDVS has been able to model very quickly an inclusivity that is much more difficult for the civil service as a whole to mirror. Given that 9,000 volunteers have been deployed by NDVS since 2000 this could have positive long-term implications for the inclusiveness of the government services. Many volunteers expressed their desire to work in the public sector in the future and felt that volunteering for NDVS had given them relevant experience which would help them to secure long-term employment:

“It is good to get knowledge (from working with NDVS), so when permanent staff vacancies come we will get a chance.”
NDVS volunteer

Therefore, as a scheme that helps to supply the public services with new recruits, NDVS's inclusivity could help with the long-term demographic shift that national level policies are intended (but currently finding difficult) to achieve.

NDVS's policies to recruit volunteers from their resident district where possible, and to meet certain inclusivity criteria, also mean that volunteers often have links with the communities in which they serve. One official felt that this sense of connection and the informal links volunteers generally have is a key difference between volunteers and public servants. This connection and its implications are discussed in chapter 4.

Inclusion, volunteering and social harmony

The inclusive policies of NDVS and the equalising potential of volunteering could play a role in promoting positive inter-caste and inter-ethnic relationships. It was interesting to observe volunteers during training sessions, field trips and volunteer exchange visits. There was a sense of being part of something that transcended caste, ethnic and regional boundaries. For example, when speaking with volunteers from ethnic minorities, volunteers felt that there were no divisions based on ethnic or caste lines between NDVS volunteers:

“No, we are all one family.”

NDVS volunteer

“No not at all, we are all familiar... why? Because we are all volunteers. We are in a different area and because we are all fresh and new.”

NDVS volunteer

Volunteer exchange visits also give volunteers the opportunity to visit different districts of the country and learn about different disciplines. Some *Terai* (plains of Nepal)-based NDVS volunteers interviewed had never previously been to the hill region. Such exchanges may foster a greater long-term understanding of the very distinct regional cultures and development challenges faced.

Given both the relatively large scale of the NDVS scheme, and the fact that ethnic and caste distinctions are still associated with forms of exclusion in various dimensions in Nepali society, the scheme's role in promoting inclusive practices among volunteers is significant.

Promoting an inclusive policy at all levels

Policies that govern NDVS recruitment and selection have had positive impacts in terms of making the scheme more inclusive and may have long-term implications for the public sector as a whole. However, while NDVS are working to make the scheme increasingly meritocratic and inclusive in terms of selection and recruitment, in practice the existence of exclusionary tendencies due to gender or caste can make it difficult for some volunteers to actively and meaningfully participate.

While further in-depth research into the extent to which exclusionary cultural norms impact on volunteers would enable a better sense of the scale and scope of the issue, in some cases such practices appeared to be affecting volunteers. For example, at one post visited, the female *dalit* volunteer had not regularly attended the post for almost a year. While her colleagues felt that her placement had been difficult because her manager was on sick leave, she had been given a role that did not fit her specialism, and there was a sense that it may have been easy to ignore a young engineer who had fewer networks and a lower place in the hierarchy because of her age, caste, gender, volunteer status and experience. In contrast, as the following extract shows, certain volunteers with connections to those in positions of influence may have a very different experience of volunteering:

“There is an influence of nepotism here. When you know your supervisor very well, or he is your relative somehow then the behaviour to you is very different. But if no one is there in the district head quarters, then the experience is very different.”

Anonymous

This is certainly not to say that all volunteers from traditionally excluded castes suffer discrimination. However, recognising that volunteers may not be treated equally, or may not have access to the same networks during their placements, is important.

While the response from counterparts and the community that volunteers work alongside is more difficult to influence and control, there is perhaps scope for promoting inclusive practices and enhancing the capabilities of groups that traditionally suffer discrimination. For example, during NDVS trainings and workshops there was sometimes a passive gender bias – apparent in the seating arrangements, allocation of roles, participation in discussions and group work, etc – which was not always actively addressed. NDVS could look at enhancing the capabilities of certain groups (e.g. specific trainings for female volunteers) and ensuring inclusive practices during NDVS trainings so that an inclusive policy translates into active participation of excluded groups at local level.

Conclusion

In its ethnic and gender make-up, NDVS overall is becoming a relatively positive model of inclusion. Although the visibility of this is diluted because of the deployment of volunteers across Nepal, it nevertheless may have a positive impact on the volunteers on the scheme, and as a model for other civil service departments. The inclusive policies of NDVS could also have long-term implications for the make-up of the state's apparatus of service delivery given that many volunteers may eventually become public servants. More can be done. In particular, attempts must be made to reach gender parity in each sector – not relying on the health sector, which traditionally attracts a high number of women, to achieve equal representation. If NDVS can create and encourage an inclusive environment in practice, and focus on building the capabilities of people from traditionally excluded groups, this could help volunteers in their placements and also help them to translate their experience into positive future outcomes (e.g. obtaining the necessary qualifications to progress to a permanent position in the public sector). This is important: as Dhakal notes, “entry of the marginalised community cannot be ensured by just allotting seats” and currently, reserved places in the civil service go unfulfilled because there are not sufficient candidates with the minimum requirements to be selected (Dhakal, 2013). NDVS could play a positive role in addressing this.

Implications

- NDVS could positively impact on the overall make-up of the civil service in future years.
- NDVS could extend its role to ensure volunteers from marginalised groups are able to actively participate both in their current roles as volunteers and in the future as servants of the state.
- Volunteer schemes can promote positive relationships between individuals from different castes, cultures and ethnicities, and give individuals a greater understanding of the unique challenges faced by the different regions of Nepal.

Figure 9. Volunteers participate in a training session (left); volunteers visit a hydropower project in the hill region where their peers were based



8. Sustainability and dependency – how do the volunteers affect the system of service delivery in Nepal?

The NDVS scheme overlays the public service delivery apparatus of Nepal. There are a number of complex and persistent challenges that the public service sector currently faces, including maldistribution of permanent staff and high levels of absenteeism. This raises questions about how the scheme relates to these challenges both in the short and long term. What are the implications of these challenges for the volunteers and for Nepal's poverty reduction goals, and what is the role of volunteers in relation to these challenges?

Permanent staff in remote locations

Understaffing and vacant posts remain a major issue in rural areas, largely due to long-term challenges in deploying and retaining essential health workers (Harris et al, 2013). There are formal systems in place to address such issues, but Harris et al note that 'other factors tend to easily and often strongly undermine the formal systems currently in place' (Harris et al, 2013). These factors include low levels of professionalism and high levels of politicisation of the civil service. There is a 'market for transfers' which contravenes the existing formal rules (e.g. required years of service in remote areas) and bases transfers on favouritism, nepotism and other forms of corruption (Harris et al, 2013). This, along with a lack of adequate incentives, and issues around the supply of appropriately trained staff in rural areas, has contributed to a major problem with deploying and retaining staff in the hardest-to-reach places.

Figure 10. The journey to a remote health post in Eastern Nepal



In the short term, this has implications for volunteers in terms of the support they receive and their wellbeing (as discussed in chapter 5). Additionally, there are implications in terms of the level of responsibility some volunteers have to assume. One volunteer describes her experience of managing a health post with junior staff in a remote area:

"At first, the permanent staff didn't obey. But after, they gradually began to listen. As the Health Assistant in charge of the post I had responsibility for the post – the authority to do programmes, to teach, for example, Polio programmes, vitamins programmes – I would conduct these. At first, in the first two or three months, I faced problems because the staff were not regular. But then things started to change. I advised them to be regular and on time. Being in charge is a tough job and everything that went wrong was on my shoulders."
NDVS volunteer

In addition, this raises issues around fairness: because volunteers may have less influence over where they are placed, they are sent to the remote areas where district officers find it more difficult to post permanent staff, even though permanent staff would receive increased benefits from working there. This extract refers to volunteers being "negatively sent" to certain areas (i.e. they are deployed in places where permanent staff do not want to be placed):

"The district officers are politically or administratively motivated to send volunteers to the remote parts where maybe permanent staff members are not there... (the volunteers) are negatively sent there, sent there intentionally."
Anonymous

The volunteers ensure that services are delivered, despite these problems. This may be acceptable in the short term, but in the long term it limits the impact of volunteers on improving services, and perhaps even allows staff to continue with poor and unprofessional practice:

"Permanent staff are there but not continuously. Some are busy in their own job, busy in their business. They just fill the register, get the money, but neglect their work. They pay the house rent for the office but no one is actually working there."
NDVS volunteer

Conflicts of interest and absenteeism

The low level of motivation among health workers has been identified as a key issue in the current human resource crisis in the health sector (Shrestha and Bhandari, 2013). The reasons for low levels of motivation are various and cannot be explored in depth as part of this report. Issues of motivation are also linked to a high level of absenteeism, but it is also worth noting the provisions available to permanent staff, such as a high study leave allowance and annual leave entitlement, which contribute to this (Harris et al, 2013). In addition, there is a problem of public servants having a 'conflict of interest', e.g. the practice of owning either private clinics or medical stores, or working for for-profit institutions was found to be common amongst health practitioners (Asia Foundation, 2012).

Some volunteers felt that permanent staff were engaging in such practices and that, as a result, the volunteers were fulfilling the roles of permanent staff members:

"I think if we (me and fellow volunteer working in same hospital) are taken from here, the Emergency will not be run. Because permanent staff are little and little staying there."
NDVS volunteer

"The permanent staff has his own private clinic so the permanent staff member wants to treat patients at the health post as fast as possible so he gives responsibilities to me, so that is why I stay longer than permanent staff."
NDVS volunteer

"For me the work is a duty – but I fulfil the work of permanent staff."
NDVS volunteer

Again, while in the short term the volunteers may have ensured that service-users had access to care and service, in the long term this raises the question of whether, in some instances, volunteers are replacing the work of permanent staff rather than adding to existing services.

Conclusion

NDVS was originally established to meet short-term manpower needs in the remote communities. A major constraint on development in Nepal remains the shortage of technical manpower in rural locations. While the national volunteers can help to supply this manpower in the short term, it is important to note that without tackling the underlying issues, the scheme in a sense serves to satisfy a resource gap which will continue to challenge Nepal's system of service delivery. In this context, NDVS's contribution to long-term development goals will be limited by wider issues in the system of service delivery.

It was interesting to note a certain degree of acceptance of the underlying issues and recognition of the scheme's place in the larger picture by some volunteers:

"Permanent staff have lots of privileges given by the law so they really don't like to stay in remote places. When the government sends volunteers to work in the remote areas, because volunteers are motivated from themselves, they are supposed to stay in these places and serve the community better than permanent staff, so this is why the government may deploy volunteers."
NDVS volunteer

But as discussed above, if volunteers are not supported by permanent staff, this can have implications in terms of volunteers' motivation, wellbeing and sense of agency.

It is unclear whether NDVS, indeed volunteering, could have a role in tackling these underlying issues. There are instances where the motivation of staff has been positively affected by volunteers, but in the long term, as Shrestha and Bhandari note, "ensuring a comprehensive strategy that maximises health worker motivation is crucial, particularly in remote areas where the low retention of health workers creates an enormous challenge within the health system". Unfortunately, often macro-economic issues are favoured by governments at the expense of focusing on motivation and performance (Shrestha and Bhandari, 2013).

Implications

- Without tackling the underlying causes of maldistribution, absenteeism and other unprofessional practices in the public service sector, the impact of volunteering on poverty goals will be limited.
- Underlying issues affect volunteers' wellbeing and motivation, and risk undermining the spirit of volunteerism.
- Underlying issues can affect the quality of the relationship between permanent staff and volunteers, and particularly the level of support given to volunteers.

Reflections on the process

Valuing Volunteering Nepal's NDVS case study had three key objectives: to conduct an investigation into NDVS, gathering evidence on volunteering which would inform NDVS and contribute to a better understanding of volunteering's impact in Nepal and globally; to start a process of evidence-based learning within NDVS, where lessons learned were acted on and evaluated; and to work with NDVS to establish systems where evidence-based organisational learning could continue beyond the parameters of the investigation.

The inquiry

This inquiry provided valuable insights into the challenges of conducting research into an organisation which is designed to primarily operate in the most remote and inaccessible geographical locations. NDVS volunteers are perhaps the most remotely placed of all volunteers in Nepal. This made it difficult and time-consuming to visit volunteers *in situ*, with distances between posts often at least a day's journey in hill and mountain areas. Because of the great variation in volunteer placement experience due to a range of factors (the geographical location, role, sector, etc. of the volunteer), it was important that the inquiry had sufficient breadth and was not overly focused on the experiences of a small number of volunteers in one or two locations. Therefore, opportunities for contact were taken whenever volunteers were brought together – e.g. during trainings, workshops and exchange visits.

Figure 11. Walking to a health post in Rolpa district



While this allowed for in-depth inquiries with a range of volunteers, it was more difficult to gain access to permanent staff members on a similar scale. The views of permanent staff members were gathered wherever possible during site visits, and while these inputs provide useful insights, the study remains primarily an investigation into the perceptions and experiences of volunteers.

Where possible, community members' perceptions of volunteers and of NDVS were also explored, but this remained very much at the general level. Practicalities and issues around the visibility of volunteers (often community members had little knowledge of the scheme or were unable to distinguish the volunteers from staff members) made it difficult to explore this in more detail.

Moving from inquiry to action

For the inquiry to move from a broad inquiry to an action-research process at either the local or organisational level, a number of conditions had to be met. Firstly, more opportunities to work with the volunteers and project managers to map and analyse the findings were needed. Several key individuals were identified who were eager to be involved in this process. However, the remoteness of volunteers made this difficult because of the cost of travel and the time they would need to take away from their posts, even if this stage took place in a district headquarters. Understandably, NDVS try to limit the travel demands on volunteers, so as to avoid the impact on the delivery of essential services.

Furthermore, NDVS's project officers (based in Baluwatar, Kathmandu) have a high workload: there are just three programme officers managing a scheme with nearly 600 volunteers. The project was supported by NDVS staff who were interested and engaged in feedback and findings. But given the day-to-day demands of managing a scheme with limited resources, there are genuine questions raised about how to manage change and introduce learning processes when, even without this additional work, it is a dynamic, challenging and busy environment.

An action-learning process requires experimentation, adaptation and the challenging of dominant discourses. In environments that are hierarchically organised, highly formalised and stratified, such processes present challenges. The process also requires a degree of continuity of personnel, particularly because of the complexity and sometimes contradictory nature of findings, but also because the approach is a departure from the more traditional research and evaluations commissioned (and therefore requires a higher level of explanation and induction). Engagement is more difficult if the entire process can't be followed from its inception, both because in an emergent inquiry decisions are taken as the process unravels, and because of the practical issue that new staff facing high demands in a new role may have limited capacity. Turnover in civil service posts is relatively high, and at NDVS there were personnel changes in all project officer posts during the course of the study.

In this context, the position of the researcher is important. The process raised interesting insights and dilemmas around how action-research processes are conducted, and by whom. In particular, the research raises questions around the benefits, challenges and ethics of occupying spaces that are within the existing system of the organisation, but at the same time having an identity that is external, or even alien, to it.

There were clear advantages in being part of the organisation and working alongside NDVS colleagues: it gave unique insights into the demands of running such a scheme, of working in a government bureaucracy and of coordinating with a range of international and governmental organisations. Relationships built with staff allowed for many informative informal exchanges. Being an 'outsider' was an advantage in some respects because the researcher enjoyed a relatively detached and therefore neutral position.

On the other hand, aspects of being an outsider, e.g. language barriers, time constraints (particularly as the NDVS inquiry is one of several case studies undertaken by *Valuing Volunteering Nepal*) and the fact that roles were split between working alongside NDVS but being a volunteer for a different organisation, meant that someone with a good knowledge and awareness of internal dynamics might have been better able to manage a process whereby research moved to action and organisation learning.

Overall, there were good opportunities to share key learning from the study both with NDVS and the volunteer sector more widely. NDVS staff have good knowledge of the research approach, and certain individuals have a more specific understanding of certain participatory techniques (e.g. digital storytelling). There is potential for findings and recommendations to contribute to future improvements to policy and practice, and for collaborations across the sector to realise these.

Figure 12. Visiting rural health and agricultural posts in the east and mid-western regions of Nepal



Conclusion

NDVS volunteers are able to achieve short-term impacts on service delivery and play a particularly important role in reaching the very hardest-to-reach communities. It is often their embeddedness, their connections with the communities they work with and/or their self-identity as a volunteer that leads many to deliver an extended professional contribution. As well as delivering short-term service delivery gains, the different ways of working that some volunteers employ may also impact positively on the permanent staff they work with.

There are issues in terms of ensuring consistency across placements. Some volunteers may have the qualities, skills and experience required to successfully negotiate the sometimes complex relationships with permanent staff. But there needs to be greater institutional involvement to ensure that there is clarity about the roles and responsibilities of all parties, and that these are being consistently fulfilled. Otherwise, there may be questions around quality, and opportunities for some volunteers to add value to existing service provision will not be capitalised on (e.g. if volunteers cannot fulfil their duties due to a lack of support from permanent staff).

In the long term, without tackling the causes of underlying challenges that government services face in Nepal, there is a risk that volunteers will be used to fill gaps that are there unnecessarily – not because of a shortage of manpower, but because of a failure of the system to properly implement its own policies and regulations in terms of human resource management. Taking a systemic view, the efforts of volunteers to promote a ‘spirit of volunteerism’ seem wholly inadequate at tackling the unprofessional practices that are too common in the public sector.

This in turn raises questions about fairness. This is not to say that all volunteers are highly motivated and committed – as with all volunteer schemes there are issues of low motivation for a minority. Nevertheless, for the volunteers who do fully commit themselves, and work beyond expectations in the spirit of volunteerism, it seems unfair if this is not always matched by efforts from permanent staff members even though they are better compensated. There is a danger of an over-reliance by volunteer organisations on altruistic values, and a commitment to working for your community – there are limits to this when sacrifices and benefits are unevenly shared.

In order to ensure that volunteers add value, rather than replicate existing service provision, NDVS need to be clear about what it is that distinguishes their volunteers. Basing volunteer identity on ideas of altruism may be effective in motivating volunteers, but the negative associations of volunteering need to be challenged to prevent them being alienated from those they work with or those they serve. Perhaps a more effective way of ensuring that they have a distinct but respected identity is to invest in volunteers, by providing them with appropriate, usable and relevant skills to tackle the needs of a country in transition. In this sense, the emphasis could be on permanent staff using volunteers as a valued resource.

Finally, in terms of NDVS’s long-term impacts on the public service sector, establishing a group of individuals who have roots in volunteering and have experienced the most remote areas of the country may be one way of tackling issues around absenteeism and unprofessional practice in the long term. This is impossible to predict, and depends on the quality of the volunteer’s experience and how they relate to and internalise this and act on it in future. Perhaps one of the potentially most important long-term roles for volunteers is in helping to ensure the inclusiveness of the sector, but NDVS need to ensure that this potential, particularly of those from marginalised groups, is nurtured so that they can actively and meaningfully participate both as volunteers and as the public servants of the future.

Key implications and recommendations

How volunteers work

Implications

- Relieving the workload of permanent staff can enable more efficient and effective delivery of services to community members.
- Volunteers give the opportunity to secure the right 'skill mixes' in service delivery. This can be effective both in terms of the quality and range of services provided to the community, and also the access to services (i.e. posts can be opened).
- Volunteers could be a potentially useful resource to update permanent staff's knowledge and training.

Recommendations

- Provide high-quality, up-to-date training in the relevant subject areas to volunteers to ensure a highly skilled volunteer resource. Consider collaborations with international volunteer organisations to provide this training.
- Ensure that permanent staff at each level are fully aware of the volunteers' role, and of their role in relation to it. Ensure that NDVS volunteers are seen as a valued and high-quality resource.

How volunteers work with permanent staff

Implications

- Without sufficient buy-in from permanent staff, volunteers' skills may not be fully utilised.
- Opportunities can be lost for sharing information and ideas between permanent staff and volunteers that improve practice, if sufficient attention is not given to supporting good working relationships.
- If volunteers have difficulties integrating into the existing team of permanent staff or are not fully supported by their colleagues, there are implications for volunteers' motivation and wellbeing.

Recommendations

- All stakeholders need to have a clear understanding of the role of the volunteers, and what their role is in relation to them. Clear guidelines and in-depth inductions are required for permanent staff.
- Ensure there are ongoing mechanisms to support volunteers and make sure that the additional resource is used effectively. For example, optimising the volunteer resource could be made to be part of permanent staff supervisors' continuing professional development.
- Highlight very good practice and continue to recognise volunteers who have made an exceptional contribution.
- Ensure that volunteers are given legitimacy by being visibly endorsed by high-level officials at national and local levels.
- Continue promotional work on volunteerism and NDVS, and continue to work collaboratively with international volunteering organisations (including at local level) to enhance the standing of national volunteers (e.g. by using digital stories).
- Ensure that volunteers have a unique role, and stress the importance of this (e.g. community outreach work, specialist knowledge).

Wellbeing and motivation

Implications

- Some volunteers have to make additional sacrifices (e.g. monetary, familial) which can affect their impact if they are not adequately supported. Given that the weight of domestic duties usually falls to women, this can particularly affect female volunteers with childcare responsibilities.
- If differences in volunteer experience are not sufficiently recognised and taken into account, there is a risk that volunteers working in the hardest-to-reach areas do not have the same opportunities as those living in less marginalised areas. For example, their opportunity to learn and gain experience from existing permanent staff members could be limited.

Recommendations

- Ensure that volunteers are adequately compensated for costs associated with additional travel.
- Consider additional leave allowance for volunteers who live long distances from their homes.
- Explore the possibility of joint working arrangements (e.g. two volunteers cover one placement) for volunteers with childcare responsibilities.
- Consider prioritising the most remote districts for site visits, trainings, etc, in recognition that there may be a lower level of support in such areas, or collaborating with other volunteer organisations (e.g. international) working in the area to help ensure there is some form of support.

Long-term impacts on marginalisation

Implications

- NDVS could positively impact on the overall demographic make-up of the civil service in future years.
- Volunteer schemes can promote positive relationships between individuals from different castes, cultures and ethnicities, and give individuals a greater understanding of the unique challenges faced by the different regions of Nepal.

Recommendations

- Ensure that recruitment policies work towards ensuring that volunteers are representative in all sectors (particularly in terms of reaching gender parity in the agricultural development, engineering and livestock service sectors).
- Ensure volunteers from marginalised groups are able to actively participate both in their current roles as volunteers and in the future as servants of the state. Consider targeted training for volunteers from marginalised groups to ensure they are able to translate their experience into positive current and future outcomes.
- Ensure that inductions and guidelines for permanent staff stress the importance of working inclusively with volunteers.
- Ensure feedback systems are in place that enable volunteers to report incidences of discrimination.
- Continue to use mechanisms such as volunteer exchange visits to promote good relationships, connections and shared learning between volunteers from different regions, ethnicities and professions.
- Highlight the inclusive policies in recruitment and promotional activities to ensure that NDVS attracts individuals from a range of backgrounds and has a positive image in the country more widely.

Sustainability and dependency

Implications

- Without tackling the underlying causes of maldistribution, absenteeism and other unprofessional practices in the public service sector, the impact of volunteering on poverty goals will be limited.

Recommendations

- Priority to be given to ensuring there are strategies that tackle human resource issues in the government services by high-level stakeholders.

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- Other outputs related to this case study:
- Hacker, E (2014). Education and volunteering in Nepal. A case study from the hill and *Terai* regions.
- In January 2014 the *Valuing Volunteering Nepal* Lead Researcher facilitated a digital storytelling workshop in Kailali District with some of the Early Child Development (ECD) facilitators and Accelerated Learning Facilitators that participated in this education inquiry. The question participants were responding to was, "How has volunteering affected you and your community?".
- Jyoti (2014) From Kathmandu to the mountains. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6AGo-Agx8U
- Tulsa (2014) I felt sad when I saw that village. www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcXd7qhUq18
- Shanti (2014) My Early Child Development class. www.youtube.com/watch?v=8JM0SDef3GE
- Padam (2014) I couldn't speak their language. www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4yvYCOC5rI
- Laja (2014) *The tree without leaves*. www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqOLxb0p4aM
- Hari (2014) *Working for my own community*. www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1cXY9kVarU
- Bitu (2014) *Our community's Early Child Development Class*. www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Z0X9XyY84U
- Dipendra (2014) *3 languages, 52 students*. www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_a4k7_gP4I

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

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