

What an Enabling Environment means for volunteering for development¹

James O'Brien

Volunteering for Development Leadership Advisor (former) | VSO
obrienjamesj@gmail.com

Bonnie Learmonth

International Projects Co-ordinator | AVI
BLearmonth@avi.org.au

Shaleen Rakesh

Head of Engagement and Partnerships | VSO
shaleen.rakesh@vsoint.org

Goopy Parke Weaving

Program Quality and Impact Manager (former) | AVI

Abstract

A version of this paper was created for the IVCO conference 2017 as one of a series of context setting papers for the conference.² It was therefore intended as an intervention to prompt thinking amongst practitioners. The paper focuses on the theme *enabling environment* and what this means for international volunteering for development/volunteering for development and its role in the implementation of Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Following a brief literature review, the paper explores four elements related to an enabling environment: contextual elements, actor-based elements, relational elements and system-wide factors.

The paper demonstrates that there is no consensus on the essential elements for an enabling environment, or how these elements are connected to the contribution that volunteers make. Nor is there agreement on how such an environment comes about or what power volunteer involving organizations and volunteers have to create and shape it.

The paper concludes with some considerations, questions and challenges for the volunteering for development sector to consider in respect of enabling environment.

Keywords: *Volunteering, Development, Enabling Environment, SDGs, Forum, Inclusion*

1 This article is an adapted version of the original paper and was one of a series of papers exploring the conference theme *Implementation of the SDGs through transformative partnership in volunteering*. The other papers were on *measurement and innovation*.

2 The annual *IVCO (International Volunteering and Co-operation Organisations)* conference is run by the *International Forum on Volunteering for Development (FORUM)* is a global network of IVCOs bringing together multi-lateral, governmental and NGO organisations involved in volunteer programming.

1. Introduction

It is recognized that both the extent and nature of volunteering will be affected by the societal context in which it takes place. The development of an appropriate environment and volunteer infrastructure can be tracked back in recent times to the beginning of this century and the policies of United Nations Volunteers. The purpose of this article is to frame and inform conversations about the concept of an enabling, or conducive, environment for volunteerism. The paper identifies and explores some essential elements of an enabling environment for volunteers as a collective, volunteerism and volunteer involving organizations (VIOs)³ to work effectively, and in some cases considers disabling factors.

The concept of an enabling environment runs through the work of VIOs, from the International Forum on Volunteering for Development's Strategic Plan to the Volunteer Groups Alliance's national-level advocacy efforts and the UN's Plan of Action, as well as the work of individual organisations.⁴ VIOs face some of the same enabling (and therefore disabling) factors as those of other actors, for example civil society space, the operational challenges of international cooperation, security and safety risks, but there are some factors that are distinct to VIOs. These will be the focus of this contribution.

The paper focuses on volunteerism – “the use or involvement of volunteer labour, especially in community services” (Oxford English Dictionary 2017) – as a core and collective activity of VIOs, as opposed to the more singular and individualistic concept of volunteering, being “of a person; freely offering to do something” (Oxford English Dictionary 2017).

We begin with a brief overview of the literature to reflect, at a high level, the literature on enabling environments. This literature informs the elements of enabling environment as:

1. contextual elements – understanding and recognition of volunteerism; political, social, cultural and economic factors; social inclusion
2. actor-based elements – state, civil society, and private sector
3. relational elements – relationships and power dynamics between actors
4. system-wide factors – partnerships, technology and funding; factors shaping volunteerism operations from a whole-of-system perspective.

³ Note on terminology: both *volunteer involving organisations* (VIOs) and *international volunteer cooperation organisations* (IVCOS) are used in this article. IVCOS can be understood as a specific group or type of VIO.

⁴ The *Volunteer Groups Alliance* (VGA) was established to promote the contribution of volunteering in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The UN Plan of Action is a high level implementation plan concerned with the SDGs and Agenda 2030.

In practice, the above elements interconnect and influence each other. We have not addressed every element in detail, nor have we given equal weight to every element. This does not reflect the relative importance of different elements, but rather limitations of time and literature.

VIOs have contributed substantially to the literature on enabling environments for volunteerism, with academic publications exploring selected aspects in depth. The literature shows a wide and complex web of enabling factors from which we can draw some key themes.

VSO's *Valuing Volunteering research* focuses on how and why volunteering contributes to poverty reduction and sustainable positive change, and what prevents this (VSO/IDS 2015; Lopez Franco/Shahrokh 2015). The State of the World's Volunteerism Report (UNV 2015) looks at the role of governance in creating enabling environments and identifies the legal and institutional support for civic engagement needed to enable volunteerism to contribute to improving governance. United Nations Volunteers (UNV) has published reports calling for action to understand and create enabling environments, including government support (UNV 2000) and volunteer infrastructure (UNV 2014a; 2014b), and the role of volunteerism in implementing the SDGs (UNV 2016). The *International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies* (IFRCRCS 2010, 2015a) and national Red Cross organisations (for example, ARC 2014, 2016) have published extensively on lessons learned from their volunteers, touched on below, with a focus on humanitarian and crisis relief (IFRCRCS 2011; 2015b) and the impact of local and global changes on enabling environments (IFRCRCS 2015a).

Several reports and conference summaries at the country and regional level provide insight into enabling and challenging environments for local, national and international volunteerism (EAV 2011; UNV 2011; Southern Africa Conference on Volunteer Action for Development 2011; Comhlámh 2013; ARC 2014; Schech/Mundkur 2016; UNV and the National Youth Council of Fiji 2015; NMVO/ UNV/VSO 2015; British Council 2016).

Common themes that emerge in the literature include: the need to measure and promote the impacts of volunteering, and to reach a common understanding of what volunteering means in different contexts; the need for sustainable funding, legal and policy support, and locally led and appropriate volunteer assignments; and the need for collaboration and coordination between VIOs and with government, civil society and other local actors. Online volunteering and technological advances, South-South volunteering and corporate volunteers were identified as growing factors in enabling environments.

2. The elements that constitute an enabling environment

We will now focus on four elements that contribute towards an enabling environment – contextual, actor-based, relational and system-wide elements. We will explore different aspects within these elements.

2.1 Contextual elements

This section explores some contextual elements in which volunteers and VIOs operate, including understanding and recognition of volunteering, the political landscape and inclusion. Other factors that could be considered but are not addressed in detail here are economic and other social and cultural considerations.

2.1.1 Public understanding and recognition of volunteering

The work of volunteers and VIOs can be enabled or impeded by how volunteerism is understood and valued in a particular context (Hvenmark/von Essen 2010; UNV 2014b; IFRCRCS 2015a). Volunteerism is universal, and while people in most societies have some knowledge and understanding of it, there is no broadly shared understanding or positive recognition of its value. Some authors (UNV 2011; British Council 2016) call for a common understanding of volunteerism, recognizing that the term is value-laden (Lough/Matthew 2013) and understood differently in different contexts. VSO's *Valuing Volunteering* research found a range of perceptions of volunteering across and within countries and concluded that “[n]egative perceptions of volunteering can erode community trust in volunteers, which can severely reduce their effectiveness” (VSO/IDS 2015: 27). Conversely, positive perceptions of individual volunteers can increase trust and therefore demand for volunteerism.

As well as well-documented cultural differences in the understanding of volunteering, and even differences between VIOs and the wider development community (Dekker/Halman 2003, Lopez Franco/Shahrokh 2015), we should be especially conscious of how volunteerism is understood by the people and communities that volunteers aim to support, as well as by the volunteers themselves. Lough and Matthew's discussion paper for *IVCO 2013, Measuring and Conveying the Added Value of International Volunteering*, provides an insight into this perspective. A survey of 19 field studies found that the most commonly cited contributions made by international volunteers included capacity building and skills transfer (89 % of studies), innovation and ingenuity (74 %) and social capital (instrumental) (58 %). Areas of concern included a sense that some international volunteer programs or models are “imperialistic, volunteer-centred, neo-colonial, or otherwise ineffective at tackling the real challenges of development”.

Volunteerism is, of course, a two-way exchange, and Lopez Franco and Shahrokh (2015) call on the volunteering sector to recognise and promote the fact that volunteers themselves gain knowledge and develop skills through their placements. If volunteers have an open attitude, and a focus on learning rather than helping, there is potential for co-creation and co-generation of knowledge (Chambers 2012, in Lopez Franco/Shahrokh 2015).

Beyond understanding, enhancing public recognition of volunteerism can affect its impact. As well as formal recognition of volunteers and volunteerism, recognition by influential people in society, in politics and beyond, can raise the status of volunteerism. “Public recognition of volunteerism for development can be a powerful means of motivating citizens to volunteer [and] expression of recognition needs to take place at different levels to encourage volunteerism for development across the board” (UNV 2014b: 16). Various actors can be incentivized to engage with volunteers if VIOs succeed in measuring and demonstrating the value of volunteering (Chowns 2017).

2.1.2 Political landscape

Support for volunteering from political leaders and other decision-makers is one way in which the political landscape impacts on the enabling environment. This can lead to greater public recognition of volunteering, and to partnerships and collaboration between political and other actors.

Since 2000, there has been a trend towards legislation and policies on volunteerism (see Role of the State, below). At the same time, a worldwide trend towards restricting civil society space and rights, including freedom of assembly, is shrinking the formal and informal spaces in which volunteers operate, limiting volunteerism’s effectiveness (Allum 2016; CIVICUS 2016).

Political strife and conflict have a major impact on the risks faced by volunteerism and can limit the ability of volunteers to operate and achieve their goals. The Red Cross (IFRCRCS 2015a) identified that in many countries experiencing conflict and crisis, the Red Cross, Red Crescent and local NGOs and faith groups are among the very few remaining VIOs with formal structures providing aid, medical care and other services. Despite this, and the increasing role of volunteers in these situations, little attention has been given to the needs, experiences and lessons of volunteering in conflict settings, major emergency responses and other complex environments.

2.1.3 Inclusion

Volunteerism can act as an enabler for social inclusion, encouraging marginalized and excluded people, groups and communities to become involved. The act of volunteering can thus promote the enabling environment for volunteerism.

Volunteering can lead to improvements in feelings of self-worth, development of skills, competencies and networks, and feelings of well-being within volunteers, and community cohesion and trust in the communities in which they work. In this way, volunteerism can help address underlying causes of exclusion, including lack of employment, education, health, resilience and changes in policy that may prevent inclusion (UNV 2011).

We should recognize barriers to volunteering. For young people in Jordan, for example, lack of time, material support, financial incentives and appreciation of the importance of volunteering have been identified as key barriers (British Council 2016). In Fiji, lack of information about volunteering as well as lack of organizational support for organizations hosting volunteers are barriers (UNV/the National Youth Council of Fiji 2015). Some of these barriers may be overcome by technology and innovation in volunteer financing and resourcing (Allum 2016), or through social inclusion policies and implementation of programs by VIOs in ways that address particular barriers to volunteers participating effectively in their programs.

3. Actor-based elements

The environment for volunteering is influenced by actors including the State, civil society and the private sector. As we consider each of these actors, we should ask what is their understanding of the role and value of volunteering in development, and what is the nature of interactions between these actors?

The 2015 *State of the World's Volunteerism Report* rightly concludes that “[c]ollaboration, alliances and building multi stakeholder partnerships are essential for volunteerism to succeed” (UNV 2015: 85). As the IVCO 2017 theme suggests, we should not think of these categories of actor in isolation. They collaborate, compete, and sometimes do both at different times and in different contexts (Devereux/Learmonth 2017).

3.1 Role of the State

The 2015 *State of the World's Volunteerism Report* finds that governments provide two types of support for volunteering – action to create a conducive environment for the act of volunteering (and for civil society more broadly), and responsiveness to volunteer-led initiatives. It notes that “[s]ome governments recognize the value of systematic legislation, policies, structures and programmes for volunteer engagement and have structures to enable more people to realize the opportunity to volunteer (UNV 2015: 110).”

Governments can create environments conducive to volunteering through laws and policies on volunteering, protections for the rights of volunteers, and laws and standards in areas such as civil society and labour regulation which can impact on

volunteering (UNV 2015: 34). The *United Nations Secretary General* report on integrating volunteering identifies a trend towards volunteering legislation and policy at national level, with “[m]any Governments [...] establishing and diversifying national volunteering schemes, approving and revising supportive policies, laws and regulations and including volunteering and community engagement in national strategies and programming” (United Nations General Assembly 2015: 5).

The State can also create and support volunteering infrastructure and organizational structures and support mechanisms that encourage and reinforce volunteer involvement by sharing good practice, creating opportunities to volunteer and building the capacity of VIOs.

More directly, a significant proportion of international volunteer programs now receive the majority of their funding from government. Support can come in the form of funding individual volunteer involving NGOs, funding streams to support volunteer interventions, or more directly through government volunteering programs operating at national, regional and international level.

Finally, governments support volunteering by being responsive to volunteer-led initiatives and receptive to the voices of volunteers in influencing policy and practice, and in monitoring implementation and holding decision-makers and service providers to account (UNV 2015: 85). This can take the form of support for local and national volunteers like community health workers, and willingness to host national and international volunteers in positions of influence in state bodies such as ministries, national-level civil service bodies and district health or education offices.

The 2015 *State of the World's Volunteerism Report* (UNV 2015) considered the role of volunteering in promoting citizen participation to influence the creation and implementation of government policy without supportive governance frameworks and policies. The report includes examples of volunteerism supporting communities to operate in claimed and less formal spaces, with volunteers supporting communities to create demands for change and supporting the development of skills and networks that can be drawn on when opportunities for civic engagement arise. Aked (2015) identified that volunteers can actively support citizens and state actors to come together and practice new ways of participation for democratic governance, including in post-conflict, sensitive and high poverty contexts.

3.2 Role of the private sector

Corporate volunteering has emerged as a prominent trend in volunteering for development (UNV 2011), and there is evidence to suggest that, in the right conditions, it can have significant impact on outcomes for beneficiaries, reaching marginalized people and driving development outcomes (Lough/Matthew 2013). Corporate

social responsibility (CSR) and private sector volunteering are relatively new phenomena, both for humanitarian and crisis response and longer-term development cooperation. Their effectiveness depends on companies' openness to serious engagement on development issues, on their commitment to CSR, and on their understanding of the role of volunteers in development. The Uniterra programme is an example.

For over a decade, the *World University Service Canada-CECI Consortium* has engaged with corporations to support employee participation in their *Uniterra* international development volunteering program. The skills sought by *Uniterra* program partners in Asia, Africa and the Americas are identified and then recruited in Canada. In conjunction with its corporate partners, *Uniterra* recruits corporate volunteers to participate in short-term assignments where they share their skills and expertise with *Uniterra*'s partners; volunteers from the corporate sector participate in three to four-week assignments with very specific objectives. Their short assignments allow them to contribute effectively to larger development goals, given they are part of a larger structured program. They often work alongside or precede longer-term volunteers, optimizing their shorter assignments. In addition, the pre-departure preparation and the supports provided to volunteers during their assignment by local staff and the local partner contributes to an enabling environment. The *Uniterra* program has seen mutual but different benefits arise: the corporation increases its employee engagement and retention, the employee develops professional and leadership skills, the overseas partner witnesses an increased capacity, and the *Uniterra* program experiences a contribution to its development outcomes.

As well as directly supporting volunteer-based projects through financial contributions, and by supporting employees to take part in volunteer programs, private sector corporate volunteers bring reciprocal benefit to their corporate employers. Their openness to receiving returned volunteers, and to taking on board these volunteers' views, is a determining factor in the ability of VIOs to contribute to secure livelihoods and other areas.

The contribution of the private sector to effective volunteering is also connected to the wider policy environment, which can indeed support private sector engagement in volunteerism, as demonstrated below.

3.3 Role of civil society

Civil society has a significant role to play in the success of volunteering. First, it is a host for volunteers. The *2011 State of the World's Volunteerism Report* found that across 36 countries, volunteers comprised 44 per cent of the work force of civil society organizations (CSOs), representing the equivalent of 20,8 million full-time workers (UNV 2011: 20). Volunteers support CSOs to implement high-impact

development activities, including in the face of significant government/core funding cuts (Howard et al. 2014).

A paper by UNV (2015b) explores the relationship between VIOs and CSOs in the context of the 2030 Agenda, noting that the engagement of volunteers in the work of civil society is often not referred to as volunteering, partly reflecting a mixed perception of volunteers by CSOs, including negative stereotypes of volunteers as unprofessional, inexperienced and unqualified.

Changes to such negative perceptions are occurring, for example, in the explicit recognition of volunteerism and volunteer groups as part of CSOs' approaches to sustainable development in the International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness. The framework explores the importance of VIOs and CSOs working together for implementation of the 2030 Agenda and calls on CSOs to encourage volunteering. It also calls on VIOs to work more closely with CSOs to learn from each other in the measurement and implementation of the *SDG* agenda.

We might ask how well wider civil society understands and values the role of volunteering in development, and how open it is to innovation and new ways of working that involve volunteerism, collaboration alliances and multi-sector and -stakeholder partnerships. The role of civil society will be explored further under system-wide partnerships.

4. Relational elements

Recent research has made it clear that relationships of trust are crucial to the success of volunteer placements, and that these relationships rely on volunteers' soft relational skills and on the embeddedness of volunteers within communities over the long term. Turner (2015) emphasizes that when creating networks, volunteers need self-reflection skills to identify and understand power imbalances, including their own role, within their networks (Lough/Matthew 2013).

VSO's *Valuing Volunteering* research found that “[t]he need to navigate complex politics, engage people who are highly marginalized, and achieve results makes the work of volunteers highly relational”, going as far as to say that “relationships and relationship building between volunteers and their counterparts [are] as important as technical skills and hard outcomes” (VSO/IDS 2015: 24). The literature focuses on local networks as an element of the enabling environment for volunteers. Volunteers play a key role in creating and working within complex and diverse networks and alliances (UNV 2000; Lough/Matthew 2013; ARC 2014; Turner 2015; UNV 2015; VSO/IDS 2015). With their ability to access networks both within and outside of communities, volunteers can create locally applicable innovations, reaching marginalized people who might otherwise have been left out of established networks (Howard/Burns 2015; VSO/IDS 2015).

Beyond attributes of volunteers and programs, *Valuing Volunteering* identifies factors related to the wider environment – “access to and the support of trusted local networks or decision-makers” and “volunteers being able to connect into established local networks and function as part of a collective local effort rather than in isolation” as important foundations for relationship-building (VSO/IDS 2015). This is determined in part by the volunteer and their program, but it is also connected to two questions addressed earlier in this paper – the role of the State and other actors, and perceptions of volunteering.

We should consider, then, the factors that enable the types of relationships that make volunteering successful, including levels of openness to engage in relationships spanning the personal and professional spheres and the access that volunteers, as outsiders, have to these types of relationships (VSO/IDS 2015: 25).

5. System-wide factors

This section will focus on system-wide factors, including partnerships, technology and funding. These factors, like context, shape the operations of volunteers, volunteerism and VIOs from a whole-of-system perspective.

5.1 Partnerships

Volunteering is most effective when volunteers work as part of multidisciplinary teams, and when interventions connect with local networks and organizations (Turner 2015). Transformational and systemic change requires interventions across systems, and this in turn requires a collaborative, co-created approach and partnership with multiple actors while maintaining focus on locally-developed and locally-led solutions (Kelly/Roche 2014; UNV 2015; Devereux/Learmonth 2017).

In a world of increasingly complex systems, it is challenging to understand power and political dynamics in communities (IFRCRCS 2015a). There are calls for VIOs to provide volunteers with local connections (Lough/Matthew 2013), and training in building relationships and supporting participation (Turner 2015). Aked (2015) reports that volunteer support systems are currently focused on individual volunteers, not on how volunteers can sustain networks. Even if volunteers can build networks, how do we support the people within them to participate, and ensure that they maintain engagement in the long term?

There are also calls for coordination between VIOs (British Council 2016; Turner 2015) in areas including centers for coordination of volunteer effort, partnerships and multi-stakeholder engagement and better coordination of interventions within communities, including with local volunteers (IFRCRCS 2015b). VSO's *Valuing Volunteering research* recommended project design based on a deep understanding of local volunteer resources and how to support them, and then work to

see how outside volunteers can connect with this system (VSO/IDS 2015; Lopez Franco/Shahrokh 2015; Turner 2015). Coordination between volunteer programs is particularly important for short-term volunteering, which can limit the ability of volunteers to discover and build networks (Howard/Burns 2015; Lopez Franco/Shahrokh 2015; Turner 2015).

5.2 Technology

Technology is a key enabling factor for volunteering raised in the literature. The opportunities are significant and broad, including digital volunteer engagement and management, such as with online communities of practice, and new roles for online volunteering.

Online volunteering was cited as a way to expand volunteer demographics and skills (UNV 2014b; Comhlámh 2013). It is increasing in many middle-income countries and in most high-income countries (IFRCRCS 2015a). Online volunteering expands the volunteer base and overcomes the considerations of time and cost that can be barriers to conventional volunteering (UNV 2014b; Comhlámh 2013). Access to technology also opens up new networks, for example helping *Red Cross* and *Red Crescent* volunteers become more connected across countries, building unity and enabling the sharing of ideas (IFRCRCS 2015a).

The first *State of the World's Volunteerism Report* (UNV 2011) highlighted the potential of online volunteering. UNV has a large online volunteering presence, formalized in 2004, which was found to have played a marked role in expanding global volunteerism and promoting the mainstreaming of online volunteerism around the world (Broers 2015: iii). UNV lists opportunities for online volunteers such as tracking food insecurity, monitoring violent conflict, providing early disaster warning and reporting election fraud (UNV 2011: 26). An evaluation of the online volunteering program (Broers 2015) revealed it enabled a wider range of volunteers to engage, including specific target groups – persons with disabilities, women, youth and volunteers from low-income countries. It also offered opportunities to bridge and expand South-South volunteering. In turn, volunteers registering or completing assignments reported they were encouraged to engage in other forms of volunteerism.

For host organizations, online volunteering offers opportunities to leverage development outcomes offered by volunteers that otherwise might not be possible due to limited resources, with cost effectiveness and technical expertise offered by volunteers being key factors affecting host organizations' demand. The report also found that online volunteering contributed to changing practices and perceptions of volunteerism. Of the host organizations surveyed, 87 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that the online volunteering positively affected the organization's

commitment to volunteering, and 84 per cent that it led the organization to take positive action in favour of volunteerism.

5.3 Funding

Donor trends impact on the types of volunteering that are funded. Funding is currently a factor in driving multi-sector partnerships, with VIOs having to diversify their funding sources (Kelly/Roche 2014), and joint management being seen as a way to mitigate risk. Donors are historically and generally country government core donors (with the exception of the UN). Donors increasingly emphasize the cost-effectiveness, scalability and value add of programs (Howard/Burns 2015; Turner 2015) and focus on new (Aked 2015) and short-term (ARC 2014) projects, and in many countries there is a downward trend in funding.

This trend may threaten VIOs' emphasis on deep understanding of local contexts to enable systemic, transformative change, and lead to partnerships based on infrastructure rather than shared values (Turner 2015), linear pre-designed outcomes that do not consider complex local systems or collaboration (ARC 2014; Turner 2015) and the programmatic flexibility and innovation needed to navigate these effectively, and failure to build on and learn from past projects within existing networks (Aked 2015).

5.4 Remuneration

The question of financial compensation has become a major issue for VIOs. It is now an integral component of the landscape of volunteering (IFRCRCS 2015a), albeit a very divisive one (British Council 2016). Failure to recognize the importance of different forms of remuneration (payment, coverage of expenses, training) can affect the capacity of volunteers to engage, reinforce or challenge existing inequalities, and create new hierarchies within the communities where they operate, working against volunteerism for international development's social justice and human rights goals by reinforcing wealth, access and opportunity disparity. Remuneration can also create competition between VIOs (IFRCRCS 2015a).

5.5 Volunteering in humanitarian crises and disaster relief

With reduced government funding and an increase in disasters, volunteering in emergency and humanitarian relief becomes increasingly important and in demand (Comhlámh 2017; IFRCRCS 2015a). The enabling environment for volunteering in such settings is distinct, and we should consider commonalities and differences with long-term development approaches.

Commonalities include the need for measurement and active promotion of the value of volunteers (IFRCRCS 2015a; 2015b). This can keep volunteers engaged longer,

after crisis has subsided, and encourage governments to provide sustainable funding and supportive policies for emergency relief volunteerism (IFRCRCS 2015a; UNV 2016). Importantly, this also plays a role in supporting volunteer safety in the field (IFRCRCS 2015a).

Crisis situations demand that international volunteers work well with local volunteers (IFRCRCS 2015a; 2015b) and supplement national capacities, not supplant them (Disaster Response Dialogue 2014; see also volinha.eu). To ensure that volunteer support is locally driven and locally owned, VIOs must work with governments and humanitarian agencies to plan for potential volunteer support, and ensure that volunteering is reflected in emergency response plans (IFRCRCS 2015b; UNV 2016; Comhlámh 2017). To ensure longer-term outcomes, there are calls for volunteer intervention before, during and after crises to ensure that local organizations better manage crises when they arise and rebuild after most international organizations have left (IFRCRCS 2015b; UNV 2016; Comhlámh 2017).

5.6 Volunteer-focused elements in humanitarian crises and disaster relief

Technical and relational skills are important for volunteers in humanitarian settings, as is experience in humanitarian crisis relief (Blanchet/Tataryn 2010). Local volunteers are often the first on the scene, and have particular knowledge and connections within affected communities (IFRCRCS 2015a; 2015b; UNV 2016). Volunteers in humanitarian settings have particular needs due to the risks they face and the work they undertake. These include insurance, and psychological support before, during and after an event (IFRCRCS 2015a). While in the field, adequate communications, coordination and support is crucial.

6. Considerations for VIOs

This paper provides a snapshot of some of the key enabling factors for volunteers and VIOs. We acknowledge the limitations of what we have been able to cover, and the complexities and considerations left unexplored. Nevertheless, we believe the paper generates a number of key questions for VIOs.

It is important for those involved in volunteering activities to address whether an enabling environment is more or less significant in different contexts and indeed whether it may change from one context to another. It is not clear we can assume an enabling environment for long term development co-operation will be the same as one for volunteering in natural disaster areas or fragile states. Furthermore, are some elements more important than others and how do we analyze which ones to focus our attention on? We need to understand which conditions are most important to maximize our contribution to the 2030 Agenda.

It is also important to recognize that volunteers are not passive in this process of creating and sustaining an enabling environment and VIOs could consider how their volunteers understand how they can shape or create environments around them. What roles are appropriate for volunteers in this area and do VIOs have clarity on the boundaries that apply?

Finally, we do not operate in a closed system and the roles of development actors have and will change. VIOs need to consider the implications of the increased intervention of the private sector in development, the changing position of civil society and how VIOs might effectively promote the role of volunteering in this changing environment.

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