

International Volunteer Service Exchange Conference (IVSEC) in the Belt and Road Era: Volunteering as a driving force to support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and South-South Cooperation¹

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1. About the IVSEC Conference

The second International Volunteer Service Exchange Conference was co-organized by the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme and the Beijing Volunteer Service Federation (BVF). The Conference focused on international volunteering as a driving force to support international and South-South Cooperation (SSC) in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In 2016, UNV, BVF and the China International Center for Economic and Technical Exchanges (CICETE) launched a joint project titled: Strengthening China's Involvement in the Development of International Volunteer Service through South-South Cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is an economic framework developed to increase connectivity between China and over 100 countries and international organizations, based on the ancient Silk Road land and maritime routes. Its stated goals are to promote mutually beneficial cooperation on policy coordination, facilities (i.e. transportation and infrastructure) connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds among countries. The UNV-BVF joint project seeks to support volunteerism cooperation along the BRI, integrating volunteers as key actors to promote people-to-people bonds and the mainstreaming of people-centred and people-led sustainable development. The project focuses on increasing opportunities for Chinese youth to volunteer internationally, strengthening the capacity of Chinese volunteer involving organizations (VIOs) to work internationally (particularly in countries along the BRI) and increasing research and knowledge exchanges on volunteering in the global south. The IVSEC 2017 Conference was a key activity of this joint project.

1 Held in Beijing, People's Republic of China, from 12–14 December 2017. This article is a summary of the conference report commissioned by UNV and BVF as part of their 2016–2019 joint project. It was written by Samantha Anderson.

2. IVSEC 2017 Conference Overview

- Over 230 participants from 126 organizations and 38 countries
- Three plenary sessions, four parallel sessions, a summing-up plenary of the parallel sessions and three fieldtrips
- Launched the Belt and Road Volunteer Service Alliance (BRVSA), a new platform for collaboration between VIOs and other stakeholders along the Belt and Road
- Key topics: youth volunteerism and South-South Cooperation (SSC), urban development and the BRI, youth volunteering, community engagement, monitoring and evaluation, and corporate volunteering

3. Key Themes and Recommendations

IVSEC I and 2 have provided a platform for discussion by multiple stakeholders, with strong representation from the global south about how South-South volunteering can contribute to more inclusive international development cooperation required to achieve the goals of the 2030 Development Agenda. The 2017 IVSEC Conference built on recommendations emerging from the 2015 IVSEC with a stronger focus on the mechanics of improving the effectiveness of volunteer experiences.

Volunteering not only supports countries in their efforts to achieve the SDGs at the domestic level, it is also of growing importance for strengthening people-to-people exchanges between southern countries.

The conference highlighted the important role volunteering plays in the delivery of basic services, localizing ownership and ensuring a participatory approach to development by providing community voice and input into the global development agenda. International volunteering also contributes to the transfer of skills and the exchange of best practices. Many speakers noted the importance of volunteering for fostering global citizens, regional identities and strengthening people-to-people ties—whether through platforms such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or through bilateral engagement between countries and civil society organizations.

The BRI is going to have a significant impact on development in the coming years and volunteer engagement can be one of the ways to support inclusive and sustainable development.

Aligned with the BRI goals, projects must be delivered in a way that supports broad-based sustainable development. The *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*, released by the

National Development and Reform Commission in 2015, outlines the overall concept and priorities of the BRI and explicitly refers to volunteerism as a mechanism for creating support for the BRI through people-to-people bonds. The people-to-people dimension of the BRI can adjust perceptions, increase understanding and communication between stakeholders and increase the potential for creating synergies between the infrastructure focus and aid-related support under the BRI. Volunteers play a critical role in aligning the BRI and the 2030 Development Agenda, contributing to the success of both.

Domestic volunteering is on the rise, but the challenges of scaling up to international volunteering continue in developing countries.

Volunteering programmes are rapidly expanding in developing countries. The public profile of volunteerism is expanding and the legal and policy environment is becoming more consistent. Youth programmes in particular appear to be growing and there is considerable interest in the potential of international youth exchanges to strengthen the ties between countries and regions. There continues to be concern about the ability of southern VIOS to scale up and internationalize their domestic volunteering programmes considering resource constraints, the time it takes to build trust and partnerships, the need to find appropriate placements, and selective concerns about international volunteers displacing local workers. However, participants acknowledged an increasing interest in and awareness of volunteering, strengthened regulation, and enabling environments and platforms such as the BRI are helping to foster strong support for accelerated volunteer engagement.

Linking international volunteering exchanges to national development goals remains a priority.

Many participants noted their national development goals such as poverty alleviation and environmental issues remain priorities. Participants discussed how middle-income countries (MICs) continue to face increasing and unrealistic expectations from the international community to take on more global responsibilities. However, it was acknowledged that MICs have many development lessons to share and that international volunteerism and people-to-people exchange is seen as a way to align domestic and international development goals because regional and international cooperation benefits participating countries. It was highlighted volunteer programmes and organizations need to ensure volunteer placements are win-win for sending and host countries, more specifically in cases where volunteerism is being used to support a country's international relations agenda.

Reciprocal exchange and strong commitment to the SDGs is especially well suited to SSC volunteering.

As in 2015, there was a general agreement that reciprocal exchange, focused on two-directional and horizontal flows of volunteers, is well suited for the “win-win” ideals of South-South Cooperation. However, concerns were voiced that some MICs are at risk of replicating the hierarchical patterns of engagement that have sometimes been characteristic of international volunteer engagement between developed and developing countries. This includes assumptions that international volunteers are more professional and have more expertise and knowledge than the people and communities they serve and the promulgation of negative stereotypes about people in lower income countries. Reciprocal volunteering, training for intercultural communication skills and the development of long-term partnerships were highlighted as ways to address and mitigate these concerns.

Broad-based engagement with all stakeholders is vital.

Many participants agreed VIOs must focus on the needs of local communities and co-create projects with local partners. Volunteer programmes that involve local and international volunteers who work together were highlighted as an effective approach and community engagement should also encourage volunteerism amongst community members. Understanding donor needs is also important to ensure sustainable funding. VIOs need to engage with and balance the needs of volunteers, recipient communities, host partners, donors recipient and sending countries. By fostering transparent engagement and establishing clear expectations, VIOs can make the case for and realize mutual benefits for all stakeholders.

Non-traditional partnerships are becoming more mainstream.

Partnerships with the corporate sector are of increasing importance to VIOs. Corporations are interested in engaging directly in projects, particularly in areas that align with their expertise and corporate mission, by providing opportunities for their employees to volunteer and engaging VIOs in partnerships that go beyond funding. VIOs that understand corporate priorities and funding cycles, provide timely implementation and reporting on projects, and speak the language of the private sector can leverage the growing interest of MIC- and global south-based companies in corporate social responsibility and volunteering. There is also interest in partnerships between southern countries to develop regional volunteering models that highlight reciprocal exchanges and in model programmes which bring volunteers from several different countries together in workshops, for research and to support delivery of basic services, whether in their own countries or regionally.

Research and knowledge sharing continue to be critical.

Capacity still needs to be built in VIOs to document and analyse their own experiences. Although significant strides have been made in recent years, there is still a lack of research into the specific experiences of South-South volunteerism. There is considerable interest in incorporating research and knowledge-sharing into the aims, working practices and tools for volunteer management that consider the unique experiences of the global south. The measurement of volunteering and its contribution to the SDGs remains a field largely unexplored. IVSEC and the BRVSA are providing new knowledge exchange platforms, while universities expand research into southern volunteer experiences.

Monitoring and evaluation is important but challenging for MIC and southern volunteering organizations.

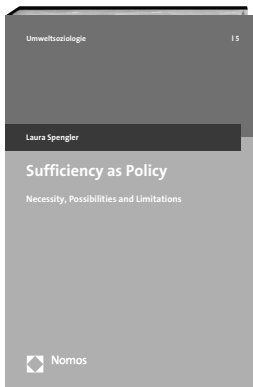
The capacity to measure, monitor and evaluate volunteer programmes is critical for accountability towards all stakeholders, attracting funding and fulfilling the reporting requirements of governments and donors. Good monitoring and evaluation (M&E) also helps to improve institutional capacity through feedback mechanisms. More and more VIOs in MICs have well-developed M&E procedures however, there remains a strong focus on inputs and outputs without a clear examination of the long-term outcomes and impacts of volunteer programmes. This is a key area for growth in research and more knowledge-exchanges. There is particular interest in developing M&E procedures specific to South-South volunteering.

Training and capacity building for volunteers is crucial and new innovations in training and engagement are increasing capacity.

Along with M&E, training and support for volunteers was acknowledged by all participants as very important. The importance of legal and security support to volunteers was recognized and participants noted the importance of strong recruitment processes and trainings that select and develop volunteers who are open-minded, flexible and culturally sensitive. Support during assignments and ongoing communication between the VIO and the volunteer is critical. Online matching of volunteers and organizations needing their help is effective but improves when host organizations receive training in how to create appropriate assignments and communicate expectations, and needs, effectively. Debriefing and post-assignment engagement is becoming more and more popular as an effective way of prolonging the engagement of volunteers in the work of the VIO, providing networks for the volunteers, using the volunteers experience to build capacity of the VIO, and strengthening support for volunteerism more generally.

4. Conclusion

Volunteering continues to be an important instrument of South-South Cooperation. It is well-placed to help realise the benefits of an approach to development based on solidarity, reciprocity, respect, and equality. As middle-income countries, such as China seek to scale up their international volunteering commitments to enhance overseas assistance, strengthen people-to-people bonds and create global citizens, it is important that other initiatives which have the potential for major impacts on development are considered. The BRI is largely a business-oriented initiative that offers scope for accelerating sustainable development through infrastructure construction and poverty reduction. Engaging volunteers to ensure the BRI and similar initiatives are participatory, mutually beneficial and aligned with the 2030 Development Agenda can create “win-win” situations for communities and businesses and help achieve the promise of south-south cooperation.



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