VALUING VOLUNTEERING - **NEPAL**

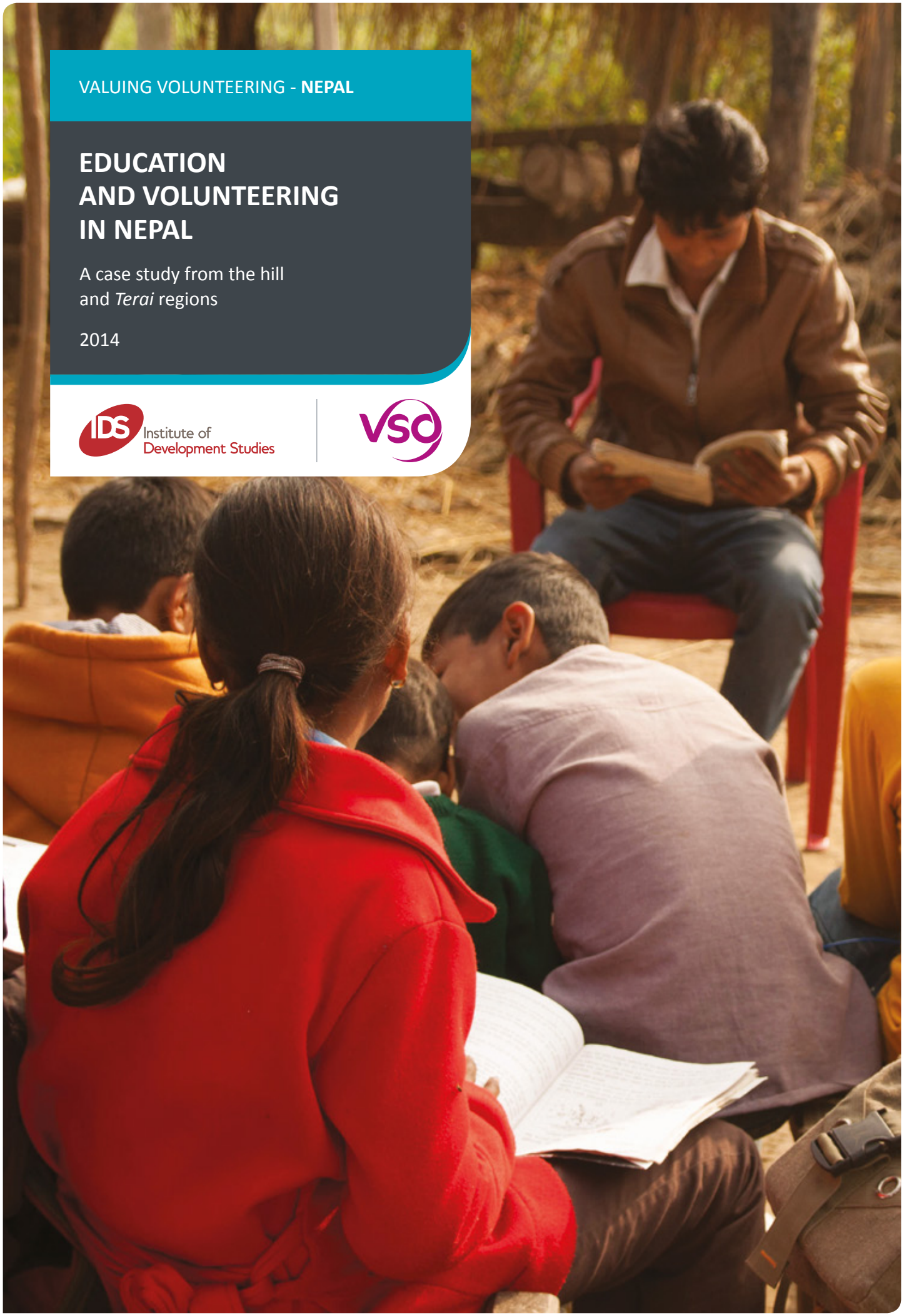
EDUCATION AND VOLUNTEERING IN NEPAL

A case study from the hill and *Terai* regions

2014

IDS Institute of Development Studies

VSO



VSO at a glance

VSO is the world's leading independent international development organisation that works through volunteers to fight poverty in developing countries.

VSO brings people together to share skills, build capabilities and promote international understanding and action. We work with partner organisations at every level of society, from government organisations at a national level to health and education facilities at a local level.

IDS

The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) is a leading global organisation for international development research, teaching and communications. The *Valuing Volunteering* project is being conducted in partnership with the IDS Participation, Power and Social Change Team.

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Abbreviations

ALF	Accelerated Learning Facilitator
DEO	District Education Officer
DoE	Department of Education
ECD	Early Child Development
ICS	International Citizenship Service
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
KOICA	Korea International Cooperation Agency
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SAR	Systemic Action Research
SMC	School Management Committee
SSRP	School Sector Reform Plan

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Glossary of terms

Accelerated Learning Facilitators (ALFs)

Local volunteers mobilised by VSO's non-governmental partner organisation to work in the communities of selected intervention schools. ALFs support the enrolment of out-of-reach children from marginalised and disadvantaged communities, through activities such as out-of-school monitoring surveys, enrolment campaigns and accelerated learning programme classes (often referred to as 'bridge' classes) to ready these children for mainstream education. They are paid a monthly stipend.

VSO international volunteers (early child development and basic education)

In this case study, VSO international volunteers are those working in the education sector to improve the quality of teaching and the inclusion of marginalised children in government schools. Volunteers are education professionals who work with early child development (ECD) facilitators and primary school teachers in selected schools to build their capacity to provide quality, inclusive and child-centred learning.

VSO international volunteers (management level)

International volunteers working at management level with the district education office (DEO), and the school management committees (SMC) and head teachers of the VSO intervention schools to implement the Government of Nepal's school sector reform plan (SSRP) and build their capacity to support teachers in delivering child-centred and inclusive education.

International Citizenship Service (ICS) volunteers

ICS is a UK Government-funded development programme that brings together 18- to 25-year-olds from all backgrounds to work on projects tackling poverty in the UK and overseas communities. Volunteers include Nepali and British nationals.

Executive Summary

The global study *Valuing Volunteering* investigates how, when and why volunteering affects poverty. Improvements to education are seen by most development organisations as critical to overall improvements in the lives of the poor and marginalised. Therefore, this case study looks at the impact of volunteering in the education sector. In particular, it explores volunteering's impact on improving the quality and access to education for the poor and marginalised, focusing on two locations in the hill region and *Terai* (plane region) of Nepal.

This case study focuses on a particular intervention that mobilised local and international volunteers to increase marginalised and out-of-reach children's access to and retention and participation in quality inclusive education. It looks at its impact, but also explores the needs of the communities affected by this intervention, and whether and how it was responsive to these needs. In doing so, it highlights aspects of volunteering that led to change, but also looks at issues that challenged or limited the impact of volunteering and suggests how development organisations working through volunteers may tackle these.

Volunteer approaches and their impact

When looking at how, where and why change happened in specific contexts, there were a number of features of volunteering that were at the centre of the change process. In particular: the embedded position of the volunteer in the community and schools they worked and lived in; and secondly, the volunteer's identity as an individual separate from existing social and professional structures. How this led to change at the individual, school and community level is explored. Particularly at the community level, this embeddedness was shown to put volunteers in a position where they were able to build trusting relationships, which allowed for skills to be transferred, but importantly, also led to an increase in teachers' confidence, and even their sense of agency. At the same time, there were examples where volunteers' separate identity allowed them to bring wider changes, for instance, by providing legitimacy to certain roles or institutions, or leveraging funding from communities or organisations.

Collaboration and the co-construction of knowledge

Counterpart and community expectations, organisational systems and programme design, and volunteers' interpretation of their placement affect how an intervention is implemented. This case study explores how dominant cultural norms regarding assistance and development, and aspects of programme design and implementation affected the type of interaction between volunteers and the teachers they worked alongside. It argues that there can be challenges to collaborative working and co-constructing knowledge, such as: widely held perceptions about the value of external compared to native knowledge; volunteers' own interpretation of their role; and organisational systems that focus more on what has been achieved rather than how. These factors can, often inadvertently, lead to a shift of emphasis, where collaboration takes place within narrower parameters (e.g. implementation) and there are fewer opportunities for the co-construction of knowledge in terms of the design, implementation and evaluation of the intervention.

Power dynamics in sharing, sustaining and replicating change

Education practitioners responded to the volunteer intervention in a variety of ways. This case study suggests that sharing ideas and knowledge could be challenged in cases where there were uneven power dynamics between the volunteer and the individuals they worked alongside. In turn, power relations between different actors within a school (particularly affected by professional hierarchies, but also by individual characteristics such as gender), and power relations between different schools have implications for the replicability and sustainability of an intervention.

Volunteer combinations

Particularly for large-scale projects, volunteers are used in combination rather than deployed individually. This case study shows there are real benefits in using a combination of local and international volunteers, especially because of the local knowledge and networks that national volunteers have access to that can lead to change. Combinations allow for different skill sets and sources of knowledge to be drawn on, but the research also highlights the very different perceptions of the different types of volunteers, and the challenges that exist to more collaborative working between international and national volunteers.

Partners

Working with national and local level partners is essential for the design and implementation of interventions. In highly politicised contexts, this can throw up challenges for development organisations who may need to work with partners that have (either officially or in practice) contrasting ways of working, and different aims and/or priorities. This case study looks at the consequences of the disturbances surrounding the 2012 constitution-signing deadline, and suggests that factors at the macro political level may have implications for international development organisations in terms of their choice of partner and the type of projects undertaken.

The impact of politics

In Nepal, the education sector is highly politicised (Asia Foundation, 2012). While VSO's volunteers are positioned to be politically 'neutral', they are operating in highly political environments. Party-political or inter-ethnic divisions limited the impact of volunteers in certain situations, particularly where these divisions affected teacher motivation and teacher–teacher relationships. Despite their neutrality, volunteers could at times inadvertently act politically in their desire to progress the specific objectives of the intervention.

Responsiveness to the schools' needs

There were examples where the infrastructure of schools and the general school environment was improved during the two-year intervention. This was often due to the collective action of community members or the networks that the volunteer was able to draw on – but was not specifically part of the intervention by design. However, infrastructure issues could pose additional challenges for teachers attempting to use child-centred learning methods, particularly where the number of students was large relative to the size of the classroom. Such issues could be exacerbated by a growth in student numbers; this growth was due to the enrolment of previously out-of-school children, but also due to the displacement of children from private schools.

Responsiveness to wider trends in education

The programme aimed to promote child-centred and inclusive learning, in order to reach the most marginalised children. However, there is now an 'education marketplace' in Nepal, which has implications for marginalised children's long-term learning outcomes and prospects. Evidence suggested that schools' priorities may be affected by the increasing role of the private sector in education, for instance with an increased desire to move to English medium in order to compete with English-medium private schools. The study highlights how the 'language footprint' of English-speaking international volunteers has implications for how counterparts respond to the intervention, particularly in terms of using volunteers to legitimise a move to English medium. This raises questions around whether such developments would lead to improved learning and access to education for the poorest and most marginalised.

Responsiveness to communities and the needs of the most marginalised children

Children's enrolment, retention and learning outcomes are affected by broader issues affecting students, teachers and communities in Nepal such as poverty, rapidly changing migration patterns and the marginalisation of certain castes and ethnic groups. In some communities, even when the intervention led to gains for the majority of children, such issues could make it more difficult for the intervention to reach the most marginalised. This raised questions around whether a different type of intervention is required (i.e. multidisciplinary, multi-partner) for the very hardest-to-reach.

Investing in volunteer wellbeing

International volunteers' relationships with other volunteers in their locality, ongoing support from community members, and contextual factors (such as geography, connectedness and dominant socio-cultural norms) were important contributors to volunteer wellbeing. This raises important questions and dilemmas for development organisations working with volunteers. For example, how is the need to maintain volunteer wellbeing at local level balanced by organisational/donor aims to reach the very hardest-to-reach? And what is an effective strategy for recognising and fostering good organisation–community relationships (given that these can be so important for volunteer wellbeing)?

This case study reveals patterns and issues affecting volunteering and education in two localities, the key implications of these, and makes some suggestions for how they can be usefully addressed in planning for improvement.

In summary, the issues highlighted above have important implications for:

How development organisations use volunteers to facilitate change:

In particular, there are implications for the 'depth' of interventions, given the type of changes (transference of skills, growth in confidence and agency) that can take place when volunteers are in a position to make strong collaborative relationships with the individuals they work alongside.

How development organisations and volunteers engage with the individuals they work alongside (e.g. teachers) to deliver interventions:

If volunteers are to co-construct knowledge and engage in joint meaning making, there are implications for the way that programmes are framed, monitored and evaluated, and the tools that volunteers require.

How development organisations use volunteers to reach the poorest:

There are implications for the type of interventions required to respond to the poorest and most marginalised, and the type of education or educational institutions which fit their needs.

1. Introduction

Education in Nepal

Education is at the forefront of the development agenda in Nepal.[1] Like other major international development organisations, education is a central focal area for VSO Nepal, with the majority of international volunteers allocated to this programme. Because of the centrality of the issue both to VSO Nepal and the country more widely, education became a key theme of the *Valuing Volunteering Nepal* research.

In the last few years, Nepal has made significant progress in education, especially in terms of access and equity in school education and gender parity (the enrolment rate is now 95.3% at primary level) (DoE, 2012/13). Despite this, major challenges remain: over 5% of children from hard-to-reach groups (including Dalit children, migrating communities and ethnic minorities) are still out of school; quality is an issue, with more than 65% of children in Grade 4 and 5 unable to comprehend age-appropriate tests; and many schools have poor environments with unsuitable buildings and no drinking water, toilets, libraries or playground (DoE, 2012/13). The politicisation of teachers, particularly in terms of teacher recruitment, deployment and motivation and of school management committees (governing bodies), makes it difficult for issues around quality and inclusiveness to be tackled (Asia Foundation, 2012). The failure to address these issues results in government schools continuing to have a poor reputation. If economically viable, parents send children to one of the growing number of private schools, resulting in the intake of government schools being drawn from poorer and more marginalised backgrounds.

A case study in two sites: the hill and *Terai* regions

Nepal is a country of three diverse geographical regions: mountain, hill and plane (the latter known as the *Terai*). Each region has distinct cultures and customs, and a very different set of development challenges. To make a crude comparison for explanatory purposes: the high population and economic inequality of the *Terai* (the backbone of Nepal's agricultural and (small) industrial economy), compared to the geographical complexity and scattered populations of the hill region, require diverse development approaches. *Valuing Volunteering Nepal* provides a combined in-depth case study focused on education and volunteering in two areas of Nepal (a *Terai* and hill district) in order to explore and understand the different challenges of the regions and how volunteering responds to these.[2]

1. Three Year Plan Approach Paper, 2011–2013, Government of Nepal, 2010.
2. The mountain regions are far less populous, and their remoteness and inaccessibility mean that few international volunteers live there permanently (and for the purposes of this research, the practicalities and expense of field visits to these areas would not have been possible).

The *Terai*

Since malaria was eradicated in the *Terai* in the 1950s, the region has been in a state of flux. Rapid, government-sponsored inward migration from the hills saw a 2.5 times increase in population between 1961 and 1981 (Guneratne, 2002). The culture, semi-nomadic lifestyle and economic security of the *Terai*'s aboriginal inhabitants, the *Tharu*, has been greatly affected by the influx and its consequences. Deforestation, land reform policies (which were taken advantage of by literate migrants from the hills who shared the same language and dominant cultural traditions of the state), and government policies aimed to unify Nepal (e.g. 'one-state-one-language') served to culturally and economically marginalise the *Tharu* (Guneratne, 2002). In recent years, as Nepal embarked on a process of state restructuring following the cessation of the Maoist insurgency (1996–2006), groups like the *Tharu* have organised to demand better representation politically (e.g. federal states based on ethnic or identity criteria), and a more equal distribution of and access to resources between ethnic and caste groups.

The specific *Terai* district was chosen for both organisational and wider contextual reasons. Firstly, it presented a significant challenge for VSO compared with other districts undertaking the same education project. VSO felt it was valuable to understand the reasons for this in more depth.

Secondly, in terms of the wider context, the district is particularly interesting because it reflects the prevalent issues affecting much of the *Terai*: the effects of rapid inward migration; the marginalised position of particular ethnic and caste groups; and the resultant fractures, particularly on political, ethnic and identity-based grounds, that were displayed most spectacularly in a month-long strike in the district headquarters in 2012. All public services (including schools) were closed during the strike, and there were violent outbursts. This case study gave the opportunity to explore how political and economic challenges that were testing the very fabric of society were impacting on volunteering, and how, or indeed whether, volunteers could respond to these challenges.

Figure 1. The *Terai* region.

Figure 2. Rana women in the *Terai* – culture, language and customs are distinct amongst groups collectively known as *Tharu*.

The hills

A comparative district in the hill region was chosen to explore issues around education and volunteering in a very different context. Volunteers in the hill district had been undertaking the same education project as in the *Terai* district since 2012, and in addition there had been VSO volunteers working on livelihood projects until 2013.

During the insurgency, the rural areas of the district were a Maoist stronghold, and it is often described as a politically active locality. Nevertheless, it is a relatively stable district, demonstrated by the fact that at least four major international development organisations have volunteers deployed there (VSO, Peace Corps, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA)). In common with many hill districts it has a scattering of Nepal's different ethnic groups, making it racially and ethnically mixed. However, the fact that 90% of the population speak Nepali as their first language, compared to 52% in the *Terai* district, is indicative both of how the district is less divided on ethnic grounds, and of the cultural dominance of the hill districts (Poudel, 2012).

The district is ranked 24th out of 75 (in terms of the Nepal Government's Priority Districts) whilst the selected *Terai* district is ranked 40th and is located in the region that continues to have the weakest Human Development Index due to both climatic factors and a historic lack of investment in the region (a higher rank means the district is a lesser priority) (Poudel, 2012). The hill district has one of the highest rates of overseas migration in Nepal (Central Bureau of Statistics 2012). As a result, the economy has been bloated by remittances sent from migrant workers in the Gulf States and Malaysia.

The major tourist city of Pokhara is relatively nearby and there are good connections to volunteers in other neighbouring districts. The two districts therefore offered interesting comparisons in terms of how the level of development, ecosystem of volunteers and relative stability could affect volunteering.

A multi-level education intervention

In 2010, a project to promote quality and inclusive education for out-of-reach children began. It was undertaken in six districts by VSO Nepal in partnership with a variety of partner organisations. In the *Terai* district, VSO Nepal worked with the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Aasaman Nepal to deliver the project, which was carried out in two phases between 2010 and 2014. In the hill district the district education office was the partner organisation.

The projectised intervention worked with the state education system at multiple levels. During each phase, VSO deployed a cluster of international volunteers in each focus district. International volunteers, the partner organisation or the district education officer (DEO) then selected 6 to 12 government schools. International volunteers then worked to capacity-build early child development (ECD) facilitators and primary school teachers in the selected schools to provide quality, inclusive and child-centred learning (e.g. using techniques such as improved classroom layout, low-/no-cost materials and paired/group work). The cluster also included a management education volunteer, working with the district education office, and the school management committees (SMCs) and head teachers of the VSO intervention schools to implement the Government of Nepal's school sector reform plan (SSRP).

Figure 3. The hill region of Nepal

The partner organisation and the local volunteers they mobilised (called Accelerated Learning Facilitators (ALFs)) worked with the communities of the selected schools to support the enrolment of out-of-reach children from marginalised and disadvantaged communities, through activities such as out-of-school monitoring surveys, enrolment campaigns and accelerated learning programme classes (often referred to as 'bridge' classes) to ready these children for mainstream education.

The education theory of change

The project was designed to use international volunteers to improve the quality of teaching and the inclusion of marginalised children, in order to achieve MDG2 'Achieving Universal Primary Education' and the Government of Nepal's objective of a 98% enrolment in Grade 1 and 80% retention to Grade 8.[3] In the districts where there was an NGO partner organisation (i.e. in the *Terai* district) the project mobilised local ALF volunteers to identify out-of-reach children, work with community members to encourage parents to send children to school, and prepare the identified children for mainstream education. By giving specific attention to educationally disadvantaged groups, the project aimed to use local volunteers in the community, and international volunteers in the classroom, to enrol, include and thus retain the most marginalised children. At the same time, at the management level, international volunteers would be used to strengthen the school institutions, so that the DEOs, SMCs and head teachers had improved capacity to support teachers (i.e. in delivering child-centred and inclusive education) through better school management.

The programme aimed to create 'model' schools and for the changes to be replicated by other schools in the districts.

Additionally, the project included volunteers placed at the Ministry of Education (central government) and another volunteer with the umbrella education NGO, the National Campaign for Education – with both placements in Kathmandu. The multi-level design of the programme, with volunteers placed from central government to remote communities, was designed to achieve structural and system-wide change as well as micro-level changes in the focus schools and communities.

The focus of the *Valuing Volunteering Nepal* case study

Valuing Volunteering's overarching question is how, when and why does volunteering affect poverty? This case study looked at the impact of volunteering on improving the quality of, and access to, education for the poor and marginalised (with improvements in this sector seen by VSO as one of the key conditions for overall improvements in the lives of the poor and marginalised).

To investigate the overarching question in depth, key sub-questions for the *Valuing Volunteering Nepal* education inquiry included:

1. Can education development interventions delivered through volunteering reach the most marginalised children? If so, what impact do they have and how?
2. How do different types of volunteers work together?
3. How can volunteer interventions be replicated and sustained?
4. What impact do contextual factors (i.e. the social and political environment in Nepal) have on the implementation of a programme?
5. How can programmes be designed and implemented in ways that ensure they are responsive to the different needs of the communities involved?

Figure 4. The VSO–Aasaman education project used both local and international volunteers

3. UN and Government of Nepal Millennium Development Goal Progress Report 2005.

2. 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 focused on two sites, one in the hill region and one in the *Terai*. In both, systemic action research was the overarching approach that guided the inquiry. Within this approach, different methodologies were deployed during the inquiries in the *Terai* and hill regions, depending on the needs of the investigation and the groups involved.

Terai inquiry: methodology overview

The *Terai systemic action research inquiry* spanned 18 months between October 2012 and March 2014. The reasons for selecting the inquiry site are discussed in chapter 1.

A two-week independent broad *initial inquiry* was undertaken. This process underpinned the selection of a focus theme for the case study: education (discussed further below). The broad initial inquiry began by mapping stakeholders in the *Terai* district with international and national volunteers. The insights, links and entry points that international VSO volunteers provided at this initial stage were extremely useful and enabled a wide and in-depth inquiry that generated a great deal of data.

A variety of methods were used to conduct this exploratory initial inquiry with the stakeholders identified. As well as generic interviews and focus groups (e.g. with NGOs, international NGOs (INGOs) and local volunteers) other methods were used for both practical reasons and to aid the process of reflection. Sorting and ranking cards were useful whenever a translator was not available. Visual methods, such as asking local volunteer and youth groups to draw in groups their idea of a typical international and national volunteer, gave insights into perceptions of volunteers, which would have been difficult to gain from traditional interview methods.

Beginning with the independent initial inquiry, but continuing throughout the systemic action research, was the critical importance of methods, which allowed insights into the more subtle/hidden aspects of far western Nepali society. Informal conversations, observations and ethnographic methods (e.g. living with both an international volunteer and a local government school *Tharu* teacher during field trips) were crucial for understanding the subtleties of caste, ethnic and gender relations. For example, observing female teachers' usually heavy load of domestic duties, or which teachers were most vocal during workshops and the language used to describe different caste and ethnic groups in general conversation – such interactions would usually not be discussed openly yet revealed underlying realities in those communities.

Figure 5. Sorting and ranking cards and a pictorial representation of an international volunteer drawn by members of a local youth volunteer group

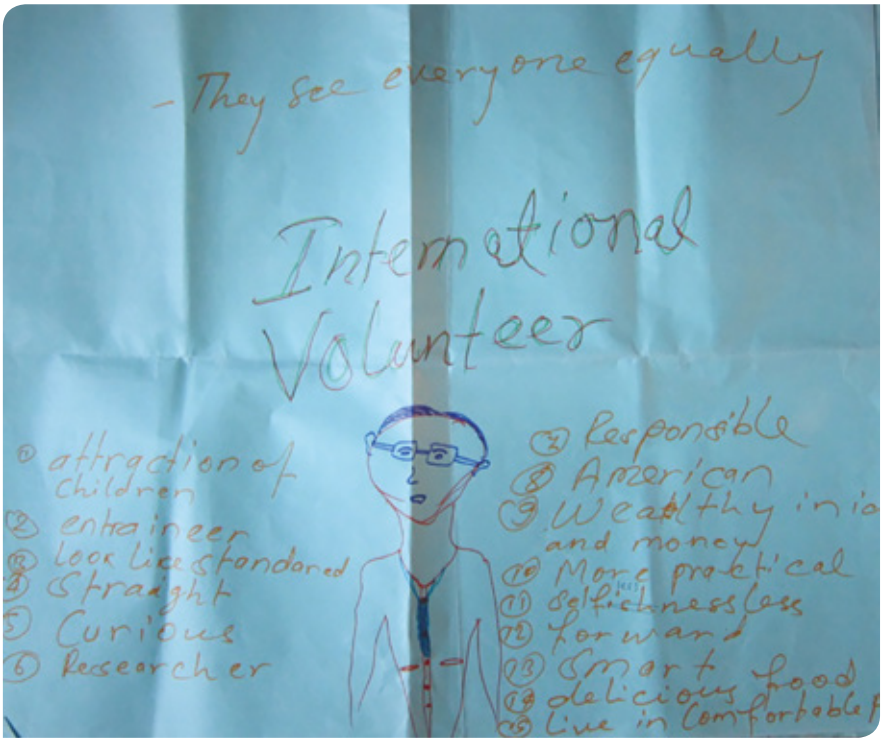
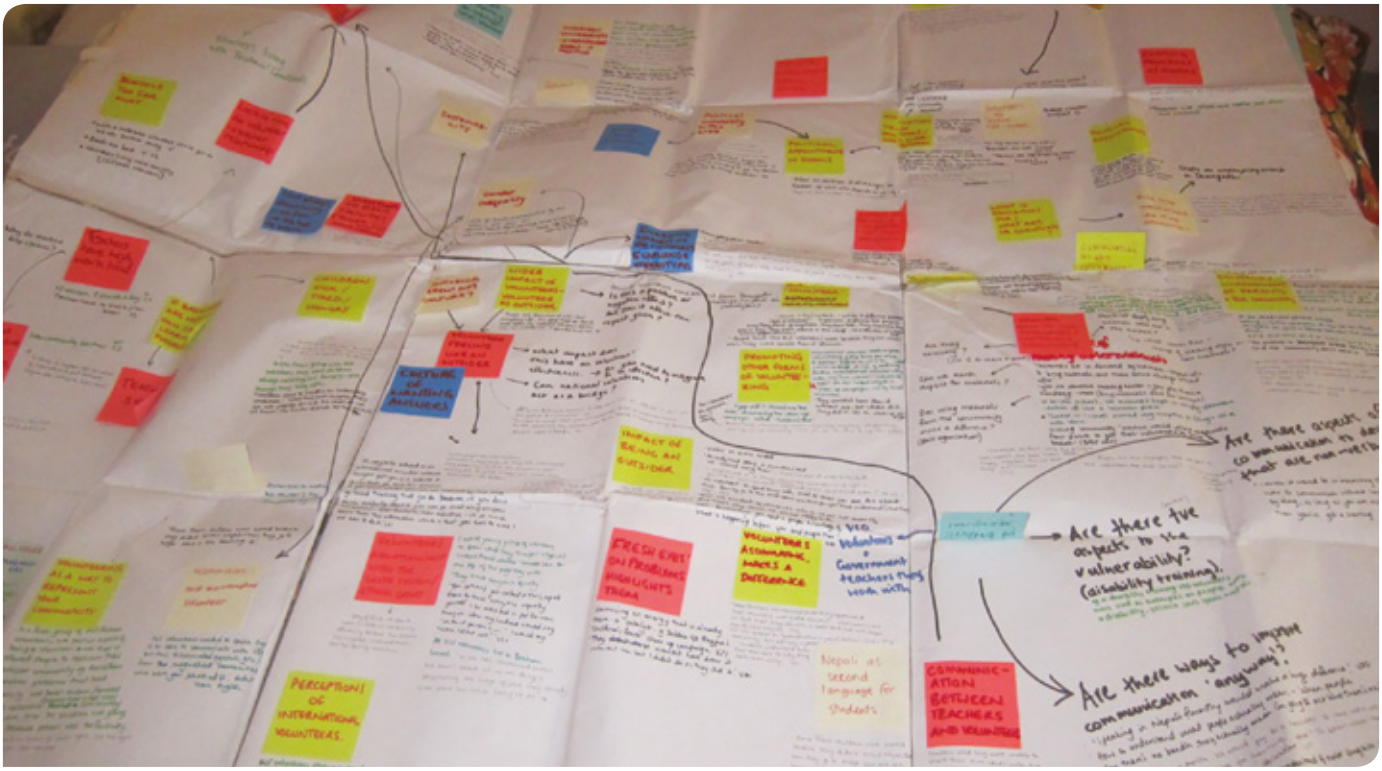


Figure 6. From bottom left (clockwise): observations, informal conversations, visual and ethnographic methods

Figure 7. Mapping of issues from the initial inquiry



Emergent issues from the *initial inquiry* were mapped onto an *issue map*. This enabled connections between issues to be observed and was added to as the inquiry progressed. As well as mapping out many of the broad issues, the initial inquiry began to explore issues around volunteering and education, which became a central focus of the map. This was in part because of the dominance of international volunteers working in education in the area, but education also resonated as a major issue more widely.

The VSO education project offered opportunities for a broad and in-depth investigation into the effectiveness and responsiveness of volunteers. It deployed both international and national volunteers, providing opportunities to explore the experiences and impact of the two groups and look at how or whether they complemented each other. It also mobilised volunteers at different levels (from community engagement to central government), in districts with different levels of development and, importantly, at different times, allowing for valuable insights into what makes interventions sustainable.

During the second visit to the *Terai* district, a *focused education inquiry* began. Two schools from the second phase (2012–14) of the VSO education project were selected: one semi-rural and one semi-urban. The semi-rural school was a primary school in an almost exclusively *Rana Tharu* area, whilst the semi-urban school was larger (ECD to class 10) and based in a more mixed, although predominantly Chaudhary *Tharu*, area.

In both schools, the *focused education inquiry* used a variety of methods: in-depth interviews with volunteers and teachers; focus groups with teachers, community members and students; classroom and training observations; and continued informal conversations with all stakeholders. While interviews and focus groups were needed to give in-depth information and a range of perspectives on issues, particularly useful were 'street-walking' sessions where time was spent in the community talking informally with residents. This method enabled parents to be reached who might not have felt comfortable attending a focus group in a more formal setting – particularly those whose children were not regularly attending school.

With the students, methods such as storytelling, daily activity mapping and observations of lessons were used. This inquiry continued over several visits – important given the changing nature of, and response to, the volunteer programme as it progressed.

The two schools remained the focus of the inquiry, but in order to investigate more thoroughly some issues that had emerged, the parameters of the inquiry were broadened. For example, interviews and focus groups were conducted with another VSO second-phase school in an urban area, to investigate issues around mother-tongue learning and the receptiveness of teachers to the intervention. An inquiry with two first-phase schools (2010–12) was undertaken to explore issues around the sustainability of interventions. In addition, interviews with local volunteers (ALFs) working on the VSO education programme who worked in areas close to the Indian border were conducted to validate and further explore findings regarding the challenges of education for indigenous communities and communities with a high level of migration.

Establishing an action-research process

However, the central concern of the case study remained the two focus schools of the second programme phase (2012–14), and it was here that the *action-research* element of the study was centred. An action-research process is where an inquiry moves beyond observation, instead developing into continuous cycles of observation, reflection, planning and action with multiple (and potentially different) stakeholders involved at each stage of the process.

Following the initial education focus inquiry, a *participatory mapping* exercise was undertaken in each school. In both schools, between 20 and 30 community members, school governors, teachers and volunteers attended sessions where issues from the *focus inquiry* were discussed. A causal map was constructed and discussed in detail. The exercise was designed to: validate findings from the inquiry so far; engage stakeholders in looking in detail as a group at the issues and their causes; generate new insights; and look for opportunities for action. The issue that had resonated most strongly during the focus inquiry became the starting point of the session: in the semi-rural school – 'children not attending or regularly attending school'; and in the semi-urban school – 'how classroom learning is affected by physical conditions (e.g. sanitary issues, hunger and sickness)'.

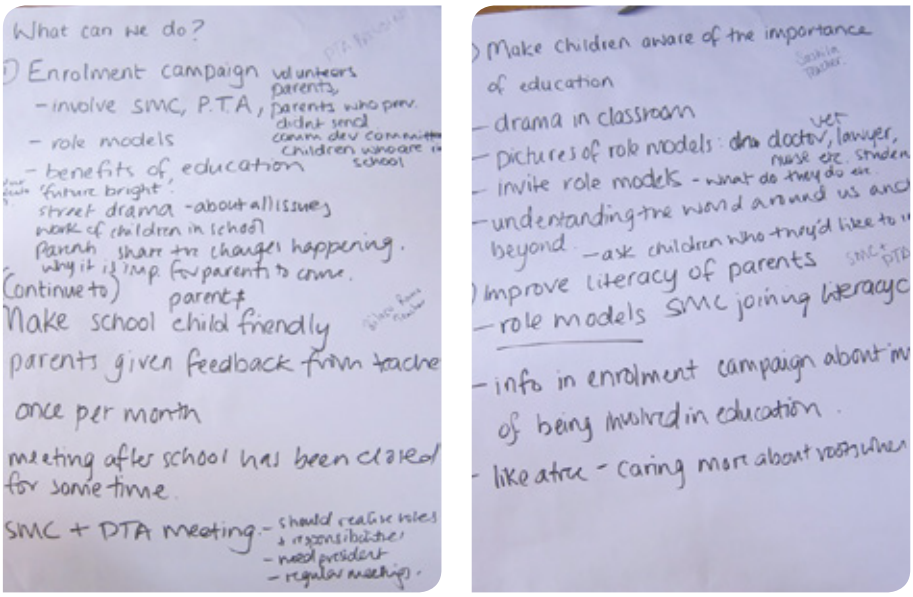
At the first meetings participants were very engaged and discussed the issues in detail. The causal maps were added to: for example, in the semi-rural Rana community parents felt that as well as livelihoods affecting children's attendance, the insularity of the community resulted in a culture where parents wouldn't send their children to school if they saw other parents keeping their children at home. Reasons for change being 'blocked' were also shared: for example, there were deep divisions and distrust based on ethnic lines in one school, particularly amongst the school governors, parent–teacher group and teaching staff.

The groups did feel there was opportunity for change, and participants suggested actions which were then discussed as a group. Actions included: tackling adult illiteracy; holding a meeting with all school stakeholders to improve relations; improving the school infrastructure (e.g. classroom windows); and an enrolment campaign which would highlight the benefits of education. Figures 8 and 9 outline the key actions discussed in each group.

In each school, the main points and actions from the meetings were displayed clearly in the school office so that there was a record of what had happened, which could be seen by parents, teachers, students and volunteers. Follow-up workshops were held at two-monthly intervals. At these meetings, the actions and maps from previous meetings were referred to and the group reviewed what had or hadn't happened and why. The successes of the workshops will be evaluated in chapter 5.

Figure 8. Participatory mapping exercises

Figure 9. An example of the areas for action identified by participants during an action-research meeting



The final phase of the systemic action research inquiry was the participatory digital storytelling workshop and sharing sessions. Participatory digital storytelling was chosen as a method for a number of reasons:

1. Using a different method and a wide group of participants allowed for the validation/testing of some of the findings from existing inquiries.
2. The participatory nature of the method allowed participants who had already been involved in parts of the inquiry and action-research process, to reflect on their experiences, develop new skills, and increase their ownership over the process.
3. It allowed for some of the most interesting and important stories from the inquiry to be interpreted in an engaging and authentic way. This could lead to the voices of the research participants being heard more widely, be that at the local, district, national or global level.
4. There were a number of important and far-reaching issues such as the difficulties faced by ethnic minorities who are unable to learn in their mother-tongue, which needed to be heard beyond the confines of the meetings and beyond the boundaries of the schools and communities. The digital storytelling method could give opportunities for these stories to be heard more widely and for action on a different scale.

ECD facilitators who had worked with international VSO volunteers for more than 15 months, and local ALF volunteers (mobilised through the Aasaman organisation) who worked on the same project were invited to take part in the workshop. Three ECD facilitators from the two focus schools, and the respective ALF volunteers were invited, along with ALFs from three of the other intervention schools (representing urban, semi-rural and rural schools). The workshop lasted six days. Participants reflected on the framing question *'How has volunteering affected you and/or your community?'*[4] and over the course of the workshop were given the space to reflect on this question, tell their stories and create a digital story using film, photographs, drawings, music and their recorded narrative.

A follow-up week, six weeks later, supported participants in showing the stories to audiences of their choice. Screenings took place in the communities and schools where the stories were based and at a meeting held with local stakeholders (INGOs, NGOs, head teachers and the district education office) where the stories were also shown and discussed.

Figure 10. The digital storytelling workshop allowed participants to reflect on their experiences and use different media to tell their stories

4. *Valuing Volunteering Nepal* Digital Stories: www.youtube.com/results?search_query=valuing+volunteering+nepal

Figure 11. Timeline of activities in the *Terai* district

- Analysis
- Methods
- Activities

Big system maps

- Focus Groups
- Semi-structured interviews
- Visual methods
- Observations
- Informal conversations
- Sorting/ranking cards (if language problems)

- VSO volunteers & partners
- Phase 1 & 2 VSO teachers
- Non-VSO volunteers
- Local volunteer groups
- Community based organisations
- NDVS volunteers
- NGOs
- Informal conversations with community members

Causal Maps

- Focus Groups
- Semi-structured interviews
- Informal conversations

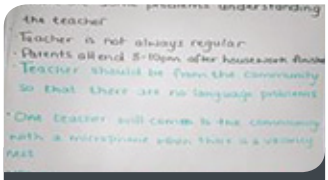
Focus on two schools in two different communities:

- Focus groups with teachers, students, parents
- Head teacher interviews
- Informal conversations with VSO volunteers and partner

Reflecting on causal maps

- Semi-structured interviews
- Informal conversations
- River of Experience
- SAR Workshops: teachers, parents, volunteers

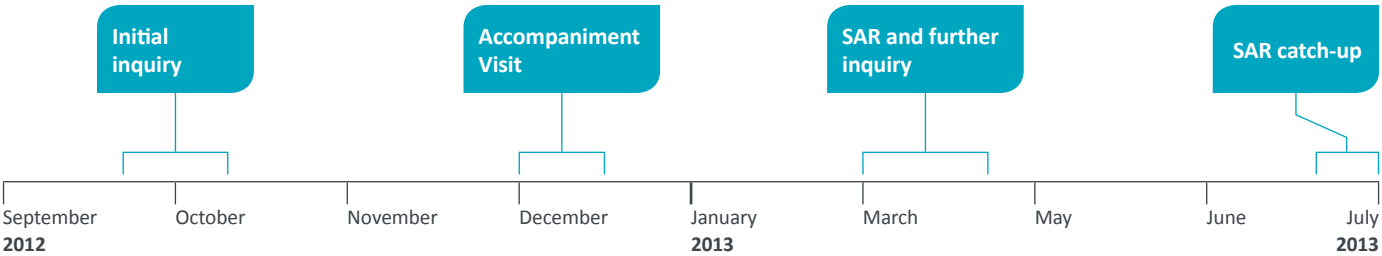
- VSO Ed Workshop observations
- EU Project Funders meeting
- INGOs (Red Cross, Mercy Corps)
- Health Volunteers (FCHVs)
- **Focus schools:** informal interviews with community members, SAR Workshops in two focus schools: feedback of research, causal mapping & action planning



Reflecting & Action

SAR Workshops: teachers, parents, volunteers, female health volunteers

Focus schools:
SAR Workshops in two focus schools: review of actions, further action planning

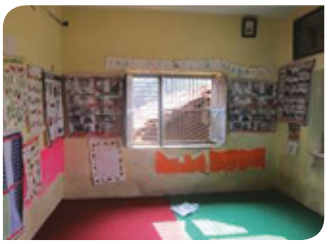


Analysis
Methods
Activities

Reflection on final experiences of volunteering/ working with volunteers

Validation of previous inquiries with stakeholders & communities

- Focus Groups
- Observations
- Informal conversations
- Depth interviews



- Meetings with teachers and Head Teacher in focus schools
- Sustainability inquiry: Focus group with teachers in two first phase schools (2009-11) and depth interviews with Head Teachers

- Observations
- Informal conversation
- Depth interviews
- Focus Groups

- Depth interviews with Aasaman NGO
- Depth interviews with Phase 2 teachers who were 'less collaborative'
- Depth interview with Phase 1 Head Teacher
- Depth interview with remaining VSO volunteer
- Depth interviews with local ALF volunteers

- 6 day digital Storytelling workshop with 4 local volunteers and 3 ECD teachers who worked with VSO volunteers
- Included community visit to 4 communities

Screenings & discussions about the digital stories in schools, communities and with local stakeholders

SAR Follow up & Sustainability inquiry

Sustainability inquiry & Marginalisation inquiry

Digital Storytelling Workshop

Digital Storytelling Sharing

September **2013** | October | November | December | January **2014** | February | March **2014**

Hill region: methodology overview

The inquiry in the hill region spanned eight months between September 2013 and April 2014. The reasons for selecting this site as a case study are discussed in chapter 1.

A two-week independent broad *initial inquiry* was undertaken. The broad initial inquiry began by mapping stakeholders in the district headquarters with international VSO volunteers working in the district. It was designed to draw comparisons with the education inquiry in the *Terai*, and test whether the emerging issues resonated in other districts. To avoid its being too narrowly focused on education and comparing findings with the *Terai* district, the inquiry remained exploratory and included a wide variety of stakeholders, related not only to the education sector.

The inquiry primarily used in-depth semi-structured interviews, focus groups, informal conversations, observations (particularly of classroom teaching and schools) and some visual methods with students. Stakeholders included: locally based NGOs, INGOs, national volunteers, local volunteers, international volunteers from Peace Corps, KOICA and VSO, community members and the landlords of international volunteers. The education inquiry included observations, focus groups, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and informal meetings with students, teachers, ECD facilitators and head teachers in four VSO intervention schools. The schools ranged in size and distance from the centre of the municipality. Two schools were primary schools: one located two hours' walk above the district headquarters, and the other based in the district headquarters itself. Two were secondary schools (from ECD to secondary level students): one located 30 minutes' walk from the centre, and the other located in the centre of the municipality.

Figure 12. A rural school visit in the hills

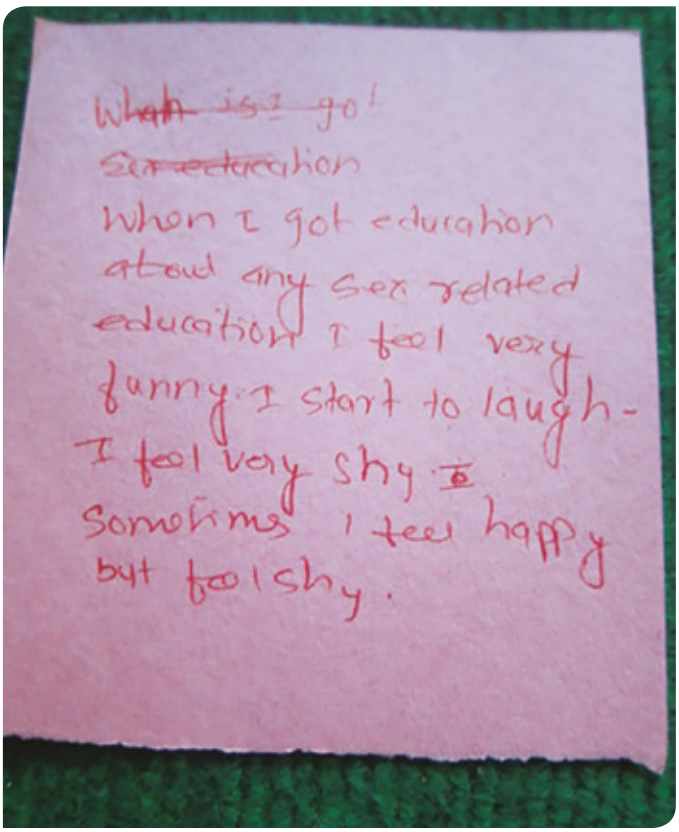
Emergent issues from the *initial inquiry* were mapped onto an *issue map* and this was contrasted with the issue map from the *Terai*. Two months later, a *participatory systemic action research* workshop was conducted with 20 Nepali and UK volunteers, at the start of their International Citizenship Service (ICS) placement in the hill district. ICS is a UK Government-funded development programme that brings together 18- to 25-year-olds from a range of backgrounds to work on projects tackling poverty in the UK and overseas communities. The *Valuing Volunteering Nepal* researcher facilitated the workshop. As part of this workshop, one day was spent collecting data in a generic and exploratory inquiry that used a variety of methods including street-walking (informal conversations in the community), in-depth semi-structured interview, focus groups and observations. Participants also experimented with asking community members about more sensitive subjects – e.g. using sticky notes during focus groups where young people could write down concerns, thoughts and questions.

Figure 13. ICS volunteers discuss their issue maps

ICS participants then created *issue maps* in four groups. Issues across the maps were compared, and issues that resonated or were contradictory and further inquiry questions were drawn out. The inquiry generated a lot of data which was useful both for the *Valuing Volunteering Nepal* research and for the ICS volunteers who then went on to complete their three-month placement (which included a systemic action research element and the use of participatory approaches) in a remote part of the district. For example, it gave insights into issues around access to services, which varied greatly depending on location, and helped to validate and expand emerging insights into migration trends and their impacts.

The final stage of the inquiry involved interviews with VSO volunteers on completion of their placements. There had been certain inquiry lines that deserved further exploration, e.g. with returned migrants who were now volunteering on projects in various remote communities. Unfortunately, the geographical complexity of the region was a real challenge – villages can take several days to walk to and between – and it was also difficult to arrange visits with local NGOs, with plans and times invariably changing. Nevertheless, this is an area that deserves further inquiry.

Figure 14. Issue maps and methods used to collect sensitive information



3. Findings

Volunteer approaches and their impact

This chapter looks at where change happened and what the key features of the change process were. How change happens is of course highly dependent on what each volunteer brings to the role, how they apply this in a specific context, and how this is received and responded to by the counterpart ECD facilitators and teachers they work with. However, when looking at how, when and why change happened in specific contexts, there were a number of features of volunteering that were at the centre of the change process. In particular: the embedded position of the volunteer in the community and schools they worked and lived in; and secondly, the volunteer's identity as an individual separate from existing social and professional structures. How this led to change at the individual, school and community level is explored in this chapter.

Volunteer embeddedness

Government teachers receive over 250 hours of subject training per year, but this does not necessarily lead to improved classroom teaching. As a local education NGO noted: "they learn more, but the training keeps in their minds and not in the classroom". An ECD facilitator who had received some previous training describes her experience:

> **"I was blind in my work. I'd look at my watch all the time. My role was just to stop the children when they started fighting."**
> ECD facilitator

Why don't teachers always apply the training in class? There are numerous reasons for this, but a key factor noted by international volunteers was a lack of confidence. Mainstream education in Nepal is often described as 'traditional' and 'theoretical', and so, for teachers themselves, testing out methods in the classroom that were learnt during training can be a daunting and alien endeavour. This takes confidence, particularly in school environments which haven't traditionally fostered an atmosphere of experimentation. One VSO volunteer, from a different district, describes his experience:

> **"Often in Nepali culture (although not always) there is value placed in knowing what you're talking about... in a school setting, with the status divide between children and teachers, this is accentuated... So teachers here want to feel really secure *before* they even think about using (a new method) in the classroom. This makes it difficult to employ new methods at this risk of what is seen as failure."**
> VSO volunteer

The way volunteers worked with their counterpart ECD facilitators and teachers enabled many to overcome individual barriers, such as a lack of confidence. Volunteers shared spaces with their counterparts: they lived and/or worked alongside them, usually visiting their classrooms on a weekly basis. This embeddedness was important because it allowed the ECD facilitators and teachers to absorb and utilise the training provided by the volunteer. It gave the volunteer sufficient time to deliver training and carry out weekly follow-up visits, enabling the ECD facilitators and teachers to try things out, and discuss with the volunteer if something didn't work. Volunteers became mentors, creating safe spaces for teachers to reflect on their practice, but also, during joint trainings with the teachers from the six schools, to generate ideas together (indeed one VSO volunteer commented that at training sessions, "I always think that they learn more from each other than they do from me").

ECD facilitators describe how they were able to move existing and acquired knowledge from theory into practice, comparing this to previous training which had been more instructional:

> **"They weren't new ideas (the volunteer brought), they were the same kind of things. The VSO volunteer started to work from the base though. The other teacher, she said 'you have to do this, do that'. But the volunteer taught me *how* to do it."**
> ECD facilitator

> **"The volunteer was not here to observe, she always participated in every activity. She would watch an activity and if I made a mistake she would say. It was quite easy because there were two people in the classroom."**
> ECD facilitator

Embeddedness is important in creating safe spaces for more experimental learning. It plays more than a functional role, however. Time spent in the community, the intensity of the placement where the volunteer visits each week, provides a symbolic display of an investment in the teachers as individuals and in their community. There is a sense of the volunteer and their counterpart being in this together, of having a shared investment in the project. This helps to build trust between the volunteer and counterpart, encouraging the teachers' engagement and making them feel more at ease with the volunteer:

> **"If I didn't know something it was easy then to try to do that thing. I didn't feel any hesitation, when she (the volunteer) had been coming frequently for some time. The volunteer would come regularly to school and then meet me in the market. And our objectives were matching. She loved coming and playing with the children, that's the main thing."**
> ECD facilitator

Sharing spaces, and other aspects of a volunteer's embeddedness such as a high level of assimilation to cultural norms can lead to the formation of good relationships between volunteer and counterpart. The importance of sharing culture and respecting cultural norms in relationship building should not be underestimated. Teachers have frequently commented on the fact that the volunteers ate with their hands or wore Nepali dress. Although it seems simplistic, such displays can be a very visible sign of respect and of a willingness to work together and are often commented on during interactions with teachers, for example:

> **"There's no wrong influence, everything is right. (The international volunteer) wears the same thing, wears local culture dress. The volunteers used to have food with a spoon, now they have it with their hand."**
> Teacher

Building good relationships can amplify feelings of trust and increase some teachers' confidence. For some, relationships that extended beyond the professional sphere were important. One volunteer explained "personal relationships in (teachers') homes can give some confidence" and that with one teacher, it wasn't until she had begun visiting her at home that she realised that progress had been difficult because she lacked confidence. Making personal connections with colleagues can help create a more balanced relationship: the power relation is very different between a volunteer eating in the home of the teacher they work with, in the informal sphere, for example, and in the classroom, where the volunteer is often seen as the 'expert' (to be discussed further in section ii). One volunteer explains how personal relationships could change the nature of the relationship with teachers:

> **"They wanted to share their family life with you... getting to know their family made it easier to be like guiding and supporting a friend. It made it a lot easier for me."**
> VSO volunteer

In some respects, volunteers enter the communities and workplaces where they are placed in a disempowering position, being unable to speak the language fluently, and having to rely on their colleagues for help. Particularly when working with those who are from marginalised groups or professionally have a low status, this disempowerment and interdependence can lead to a unique kind of relationship that builds the confidence of counterparts and creates neutral spaces for personal development. One teacher described the VSO volunteers as "very close, like family", and said this was important because people learn more easily from their family. In Nepal, where family-based relationships are integral to the way society works, this is significant. One head teacher who had been involved in the project during the first phase of the education programme (20010–12) describes the experience of teachers at his school:

> **"We already had the ideas in ourselves but we weren't using them... At first the teachers feel shy, there's a lack of confidence. But after some time, their confidence grows. It is important for a longer placement for this trust to grow."**
> Head teacher

Adaptability

As well as building trust, the embeddedness is important because it gives volunteers the opportunity for their approach to be more collaborative and responsive to the needs of those they work with. It can allow the volunteer to adapt *their* approach. One VSO volunteer describes how her approach changed from when she first started:

> **"I would stay up for ages and prepare things – I realised then that teachers don't have the time to do that, the materials etc. Anything that involves more than 5 minutes preparation, well the teachers won't do it. You have to lower your expectations."**
> VSO volunteer

Receptiveness

It is important to note that volunteers' ability to capitalise on the benefits of this unique position depends on the response from the individuals and institutions they work with. In the two focus schools in the *Terai* district, the ECD teachers were community teachers (accountable to the community), who lived in close proximity to the schools where they worked, or were from the same ethnic group as the students they taught (and so spoke the mother tongue of the children). The commitment of the teachers was noteworthy despite the many educational and livelihood challenges of this area. One VSO volunteer described the school: "The teachers, they like the children and they like work, they are kind. The atmosphere is good. Connections are stronger, compared with others where it is more anonymous" (VSO volunteer). Although there were issues around confidence and a lack of training, the teachers were all engaged in the process and receptive to the volunteer. As one ECD teacher explained: "The main thing was the willpower – without that you can't do anything". Issues affecting teacher and school engagement will be explored in greater depth in later chapters.

Going beyond the classroom: impacts on perceptions and agency

As described above, the long-term and embedded nature of the volunteer allowed for some ECD facilitators and teachers to move from theory to practice – to be confident enough to test and use new ideas in the classroom, and to work together with the volunteer. Importantly though, the combination of being integrated in the school and community, whilst at the same time having a separate or different identity, had more far-reaching effects. There is evidence that the programme went beyond the acquisition of professional expertise and skills, with facilitators' and teachers' sense of individual agency increasing.

This was important for some ECD facilitators and teachers. For example, issues around gender inequality, or fatalistic attitudes towards development could have been real barriers to change had existing norms not been reflected on or reassessed. These were sometimes directly tackled by volunteers: one volunteer addressed issues around female empowerment during an ECD training, highlighting the importance of International Women's Day, and the need to be vocal and active for change to happen.

There are other examples where the reappraisal of existing norms was an unintended impact of the volunteer living and working closely in a community. These less tangible qualities are difficult to describe and their effect more difficult to pinpoint. However, there was evidence that the volunteers' presence made some individuals reflect and change their perceptions, for example, about the role of women in society:

> **"The thinking changes. Someone from another country is here and she is living alone. You think, if you are well educated then you can go anywhere. Why does our culture stop our daughters from being free to do things?"**
> ECD teacher

> **"Yes, my ideas about the role of women has changed. Last year I thought that we girls are unlucky, we can't go outside, and do what males do. But my thoughts are changed. Now I think that if women get the chance to do something they do it better than men."**
> Community member

It is difficult to fully understand or identify these very personal, internal impacts, particularly in a culture where people are less used to being reflective. Nevertheless, one facilitator's digital story suggests a greater depth of transformation as she describes the change within herself using the metaphor of a 'tree without leaves'. She says: "before I felt like I was a tree without leaves, but now, because of the volunteer, the tree became green and grew new leaves and gives shade to all those underneath".

Whether the ECD facilitators or teachers feel that they have the power and ability to change things can be important given the wider challenges faced by the education sector. These may mean that personal and professional development is not fully supported in the future by the school and wider teaching community. One ECD facilitator described feeling more able to deal with issues that had emerged after the volunteer left. On several occasions, including during an action-research meeting with the community, the ECD facilitator described how she used to be nervous and unable to speak in front of others but now she was confident and had a voice. She was proud of the change that had taken place during and since the intervention, and had gained experience in speaking out. She describes an instance where the tiffin programme (lunch-time snacks) had been stopped for ECD and how she planned to deal with this:

> ECD facilitator: **"Now I feel that I can call the parents about this. But I also need to talk to the Head Teacher. In the coming meeting I will talk to the SMC (governing body) and Parent Teacher Association (PTA)."**
> Researcher: ***"Do you feel more able to do that now?"***
> ECD facilitator: "**Ekdam (very much so). Now, I will ask for it straightaway. Because, for example in trainings we have to share, prepare and speak in front of others."**
> (Interview with ECD facilitator)

The gender of the international volunteer seemed significant in this context: both in building the relationship (indeed, in informal conversations with teachers in the district it was suggested that female teachers could find it difficult working with a male volunteer because spending extended time alone with a man would be cause for comment in the community) and possibly in making the facilitators reflect on gender roles and their own agency.

In other examples, volunteers' presence led to a re-evaluation of communities' resources, natural assets and capacity for collective action as dominant stereotypes regarding race and nationality were challenged. For example, one volunteer, previously known as 'America Miss', gave an example lesson during a training about the history of her country. The lesson highlighted similarities between the history of Nepal and that of the volunteer's country, including the relatively late achievement of democracy and the level of poverty experienced in the last 50 years. Six months later during an observation of a school where many improvements had been made to the school environment and teaching methodologies, the head teacher discussed the most significant changes. He referred to the model lesson and the change in perspective that this had brought:

> **"The main thing is responsibility. The volunteer said that [her country] and Nepal got democracy in the same year. I loved that comparison because this community is like her country, and yet her country has done a lot of development. Like this community [now]. It comes to my mind every day. Teachers have to take responsibility... if not nothing will happen."**
> Head teacher

Debunking myths, challenging stereotypes and (often unintentionally) provoking individuals to reflect on dominant cultural norms is often an unrecognised part of the volunteer's role. But these socio-cultural exchanges can offer fuller and more realistic narratives about developed countries, which may lead to a change in perspective about what development means, and a reappraisal of communities' resources, natural assets and capacity for collective action. This of course depends on the individuals involved, their relationships with the volunteer and how they interpret and act on new knowledge and perspectives. The effect may not always be 'positive', but it is important to recognise the traction that socio-cultural exchanges potentially have.

Community engagement and action

In both case studies, volunteers were catalysts for change, often using the power, novelty and networks they had as individuals from outside, to bring real changes that reached into the community.

For example, having an international volunteer based in an ECD class, assigned to the ECD facilitators for two years, sent a powerful message about its value and helped to legitimise both the ECD facilitators and the particular education sector (ECD – an often undervalued area in Nepal):

> **"People would say, who is that? What is happening? They saw a foreigner and were interested. After they became aware of ECD. I heard so many times people ask about ECD, and I would then explain what it is. Now parents have an awareness that they should send children to ECD. Now when children go to ECD, there is a big difference when they go to school."**
> ECD facilitator

> **"When they see the volunteers they think there is something. It created interest. Forty children came when the volunteer was here."**
> ECD facilitator

As this extract shows, the 'otherness' and perhaps status of the volunteer generated interest and raised awareness, their novelty amplifying the effect because their presence was talked about and widely discussed in the community. In the short term, this raised awareness, and coupled with the improved quality of teaching inside the classroom, this led to ECD being seen as a valuable asset to the community, demonstrated by better attendance of early years children in class, and in one school, the formation of a separate ECD management committee (governing board) to support ECD and ensure that these children's needs would not be neglected.

This also led to instances where the community worked together to realise improvements to, for example, the school environment, particularly where funding was needed to improve classrooms and facilitate the use of child-centred learning methods (e.g. a fixed roof so that teaching materials could be displayed). One ECD facilitator describes how she used the example of the volunteer when appealing to the community: "when the volunteer came to help, (the local community) think if someone can come to help us we can also help each other".

At the same time, volunteers used their links in the community to lever funding or support from local NGOs, or to alert the district education office if allocated funding had not been received. This led to tangible changes for some schools, important given the poor school environment of many:

> **"The main positive change at this school is that feedback goes to other organisations so they are ready to help us."**
> Head teacher

With the volunteer in the position of ally, this could also help to strengthen the relationships with their counterpart teachers or ECD facilitators:

> **"I used my position as a volunteer, as a foreigner, to get things – like Room 2 Read (library resources INGO) in the schools. I would complain to the DEO... I got them money for ECD. So maybe they saw that as me on their side... then there was a more friendly attitude, I was more accepted."**
> VSO volunteer

In these examples, where 'one-off' changes were required for the longer-term aims of improved quality learning, working with the volunteer was useful in giving them a powerful ally, who was able to challenge existing hierarchies or appeal (either directly or indirectly) to individuals and the community to act. Having the volunteer as an ally is an important role but its impact should not be overstated. For changes to be sustained, this increased agency needs to be transferred to the teachers/facilitators, and other key stakeholders need to continue to value their work and view them as a valuable asset. In one school, during an observation visit five months after the volunteer had finished the placement, an ECD teacher explained why it had been difficult to continue with some of the changes since the volunteer left:

> **"There is not so much support. The [district education official] said he would give 2,000 rupees for storage [for materials] but it still hasn't been given. The head teacher isn't around to ask. It is hard to ask the head teacher for things. Before we would tell the volunteer and she would talk to the head teacher (e.g. for resources)... she could talk to the head. We would tell her and things would happen. Like in this classroom, half was full of old furniture but it was removed. [We] don't know how to ask for the resources – the volunteer was giving them to us but we don't know now."**
> ECD teacher, *Terai* district

Conclusion

This chapter describes how features of volunteering – the fact that volunteers are embedded within communities and institutions yet have a separate identity – can be key to the change process. The embeddedness of volunteers puts them in a position where they are more able to build trusting relationships where counterparts feel confident to put learning into practice. It can also lead to a reassessment of norms which are a barrier to change and to an increased sense of individual or community agency. Through relationships, volunteers can tap into the foundations – the underlying assets and abilities – that some teachers need to draw on in order to implement different teaching practices.

Working with teachers in this way, developing relationships, requires great investments of time. International volunteers are often very vocal about needing to work in a small number of schools. This is understandable given that less depth can undermine the key elements of volunteering that make change happen – an adaptive capacity and the ability to build relationships.

There is a risk that too much emphasis is placed on observing the changes that happened – whether teachers are using certain techniques, for example – rather than looking at whether the facilitators or teachers felt that they had the power and ability to change things. This change is important, especially given the wider challenges that the education sector faces, which may mean that personal and professional development is not fully supported in the future by the school and/or wider teaching community (discussed further in section iii). This type of change is often less quantifiable, less tangible and less recognised but still crucial.

There were very real changes that occurred in the focus schools during the research period: the classrooms display children's work, there are resources, there are carpets and a fixed roof in one class and new windows in another. During observation visits, the ECD children were singing or doing group work. Shoes were lined up outside the classrooms. In one school there was a newly devised School Improvement Plan and the school environment had been generally improved, and now includes a kitchen garden that grows vegetables for the school. At the same time, in both districts, there were also schools where change was less observable. For example, in several schools during visits, teachers were using rote learning methods, or classes were frequently left unattended.

This chapter details primarily how change happened in one small area: i.e. how teachers and ECD facilitators began to develop professionally and personally. Change did happen in this area, but, as one volunteer noted – "the foundation stone is whether the (teacher) wants to do it". Volunteers can be key in giving teachers the belief that innovation is possible and sustainable. But the next chapters look at what challenges this, and importantly, whether this change led to an improvement in the quality of learning for the most marginalised.

Implications

International volunteers need time and space to develop relationships and understand the needs of those with whom they work. Without paying attention to teachers' confidence and sense of agency, the transference of technical skills, techniques and methods may not be fully utilised.

- Pressure to expand the reach of volunteers may undermine the quality of the relationships they are able to build, and ultimately the long-term success of the intervention.
- Given the importance of 'softer' skills such as relationship building, mentoring, understanding and reflecting on contextual issues, it important that organisations working with volunteers consider these skills during selection processes (as well as 'hard' or technical skills).
- If international volunteers can be embedded in a community, they can use their assets and skills to bring changes beyond their remit. They can also take on multiple roles – mentor, ally, facilitator, networker.
- For volunteering organisations, focusing only on the changes that happened may be misleading – widening the gaze to include changes outside of the classroom or beyond the professional sphere may give a more realistic picture of how change happened.

Collaboration and the co-construction of knowledge

Counterpart and community expectations, organisational systems and programme design, and volunteers' interpretation of their placement all affect how an intervention is implemented. This chapter looks at how dominant cultural norms regarding assistance and development, and aspects of programme design and implementation can affect the quality and type of interaction between volunteers and the teachers they work alongside. In particular, it explores the extent to which an environment was created that supported the co-construction of knowledge between volunteers and the teachers they worked with, and the factors that made this challenging. The implications of the different emphases of approaches (i.e. co-construction, imparting of knowledge) are considered both in terms of the specific intervention, and of social and cultural norms more widely.

Community and teacher perceptions and expectations

Dominant cultural norms regarding development and assistance can affect how volunteers are received. Low self-esteem about Nepal's level of development is revealed at different levels of discourse, and features most strongly in remote or less developed regions of Nepal. Accompanying this low self-esteem, those who fulfil stereotypes of 'developed' nations are frequently held in high regard and shown respect.

> Teacher: **"I expected the volunteer to be from the West."**
> Researcher: ***"Why?"***
> Teacher: **"Because that is the trend. All the time they are from the West. We expect people to come who are rich in money and resources. And they want to come for social work. They are more practical, wealthy, resourceful."**
> (Interview with Teacher, hill district)

In the *Terai* district, a group of youth volunteers' picture of an international volunteer, and the language they use is illustrative: 'wealthy in ideas and money'; 'responsible'; 'forward'; 'smart'; 'responsible'.

Nepal's history as an aid-receiving nation, and the fact that VSO usually works in poor and remote areas, with marginalised groups, means that international volunteers are often seen as 'experts', particularly as VSO volunteers' race, nationality, relative wealth and/or professionalism often fulfil the existing stereotypes.

In both the hill and *Terai* districts, in focus schools and communities, there was often an expectation that knowledge would be imparted, and that the volunteers were there to 'fix' things or to check on them, as the following examples show:

> Researcher: ***"Why do the international volunteers come?"***
> Parent: "**They come to see if the children are attending school regularly and to check on what the teachers are doing."**
> (Interview with Parent, *Terai* district)

> **"One head teacher describes the expectation teachers have: When they think about international volunteers, people think, oh they are international, they know how to do it, the schools are so good in their community so they will make this school better."**
> Head teacher

One VSO international volunteer in the *Terai* district explained that "the idea of joining knowledge is a big change of mindset for the teachers". Another volunteer felt they were perceived as the 'magic bullet' that would be able to solve the school's problems and that this could lead to the teachers they worked with having too high expectations of the volunteer. Another volunteer said that many teachers would say "we're so looking forward to you making us good teachers" at the start of the placement.

The fact that such perceptions and expectations exist amongst practitioners and the community highlights the importance of in-depth orientation, particularly important given that language limitations (discussed further below) may make it difficult for volunteers to explain processes in detail at a later stage. There were both district and school level orientations outlining the project aims and objectives and skill-share aspect of the programme. But the breadth of such orientations could be wider – for example, early child development (ECD) facilitators were not always included, and neither were parents or community members. One ECD facilitator gives a teacher's perspective of what it is like to be selected to work with a volunteer in her digital story – where she describes being scared and confused when she found out she would be working with a volunteer. While the ALF volunteers undertook a household survey in the school catchment areas, there was still a lack of understanding amongst parents spoken with in the *Terai* district, about why the international volunteers were there, with many thinking they were teaching English or there to check on teachers. In discussion with the partner organisation, they agreed that:

> **"The orientation could be wider, to include parents, a meeting at the community level, otherwise they will think 'why are we sending them to boarding school when they can learn the same from the volunteers here?'."**
> Partner organisation

Challenges to collaborative working

As discussed in the previous chapter, there is evidence of collaborative relationships being formed that were important for implementating new methodologies. But there were also factors that made collaborative working more difficult and sometimes led to a shift in emphasis, where a less balanced relationship existed between the volunteer and the teachers they worked alongside. Firstly, limited language training could prevent the two-way flow of ideas and information, making it more difficult for teachers to make contributions if the volunteer had limited Nepali skills:

> **"There is a communication problem so we can't talk to her very much. The volunteer can tell *us* things but because of the language problem, we can't share much."**
> Teacher, hill district

> **"There is a problem because I can understand but not reply. So it is not a conversation."**
> Teacher, *Terai* district

One volunteer describes the limitations she felt language placed on working collaboratively and encouraging a reflective practice (rather than being instructional):

> **"I want to make them think about things. Not just give them things. To know how they think about these new activities, how they perceive them, what they feel."**
> VSO volunteer, *Terai* district

VSO Nepal has improved language provision, but it is still important to note the generally very different levels of Nepali that VSO volunteers have, compared with, for example, Peace Corps, JICA and KOICA. These organisations provide up to three times the language provision of VSO, and put such high value on the ability to communicate effectively with counterparts, that volunteers cannot begin their placements without reaching a certain level.

Secondly, certain methods used to monitor and evaluate the programme could inadvertently set up an imbalance in the relationship between volunteer and teacher. For example, the requirement to observe lessons and complete baseline data reports from the first stage of the programme (which involved the volunteer observing teachers during lessons and giving a mark from 0 to 5 against a number of criteria) – was a process which one international volunteer described as "demoralising and non-participatory" for teachers. Another international volunteer explained that with ECD facilitators, it was difficult to work on the baselines in a collaborative way because they were "too complicated for some teachers to understand". Even though some volunteers tried to use them in a participatory way, the observations of classroom teaching that the baselines required made divisions between observed and observer, and arguably reinforced ideas around 'experts' and 'learners'. A teacher and student describe their experience:

> **"The volunteer observes the teacher. She writes notes. She doesn't talk to us until afterwards. She has noted the positives and negatives while we are teaching."**
> Teacher, *Terai* district

> **"She sits with and supervises the teaching. And then she goes outside and says 'this is not good, you should not do this'."**
> Student, hill district

In one school, the teachers described how one international volunteer would observe their classes but give little feedback: "we felt judged by that volunteer" (teacher, *Terai* district). The teachers went on to describe how they had a good relationship with another volunteer and had not felt judged in the same way, particularly because the volunteer encouraged them to observe his teaching and make comments. Good relationships with counterparts and using techniques to lessen the distance between 'observer' and 'observed' can make it easier to fulfil such requirements. Nevertheless, this is dependent on skilful navigation by volunteers.

Thirdly, a challenge of working across different levels (e.g. management, school, teacher) and with sometimes quite powerful partners (such as the district education office) is that there can be a misperception about the role and influence of volunteers. For example, several volunteers felt that collaboration could be difficult with teachers, especially in the early stages of the project, because teachers would "think that you're an inspector and that you're reporting to the District Education Office". One volunteer felt that the relationship with teachers changed drastically, and teachers became more willing to work with the volunteer, once they understood that this was not in fact the role.

Finally, both volunteers and teachers were vocal about the limited length of time in each school. In Nepal because of the large number of holidays and festivals, as well as political strikes, the actual number of visits per school over two years is surprisingly low (with the early cessation of placements exacerbating this).[5] Some volunteers felt limited time in schools, combined with monitoring and evaluation requirements, could lead to them adopting a more directive approach, where they felt pressured to 'get things done'. For example:

> **"If you're limited in time and resources then you're going to direct your time and attention to the areas covered by the baseline [assessments]. There is a drive to show improvements. So volunteers can be a bit pushy, e.g. doing a gluttony of trainings, but it is much too much for the teachers."**
> VSO volunteer, hill district

Sufficient time in schools can allow volunteers to understand the context and build in spaces for collaboration and the implementation of a project responsive to the issues in each classroom, school or community (important given issues around mother-tongue learning explored in later chapters).

Volunteer approach

Volunteer approach is highly individualised: there were examples described and observed of volunteers working in highly participatory ways, and also of volunteers working in very resource-based and directed ways. Volunteers interpret their roles and responsibilities very differently depending on a wide range of factors (their cultural, educational and professional background, personality type, view of development, Nepali proficiency, etc).

It is difficult to accurately compare the implications of the range of different approaches applied given the many contributing and overlapping factors that affect an intervention's impact. Nevertheless, this does highlight the need for the monitoring of process outcomes that look at *how* change happened, in addition to the evaluation of *what* has been done. As outlined in the previous chapter, adaptability can be a positive aspect of volunteering. But given the internal and external pressures volunteers are under to perform, the challenging contexts they face and the expectations that can be put on them by counterparts and community members, ensuring there are sufficient mechanisms for volunteers to reflect on process and for this to be monitored is key. International volunteers commented on the way that volunteers' own deep-seated values, their response to the reception from counterparts, and aspects of the programme design could influence their practice, making them potentially act in more directive ways. One volunteer explained that it can be difficult to not "tell everyone the answers" and adopt an instructional approach when volunteers are "put on a pedestal" and seen as the people with the solutions. Another volunteer speaks candidly about his own experience in the classroom:

> **"The teachers saw us as an expert, not that it was a two-way thing. But also, I came into a classroom and think, 'I'm so much better than you'. So there's that barrier too that reinforces their ideas that they can't share."**
> VSO volunteer

> **"In this context, processes of reflection are important: My [volunteer] placement is creating this attitude and language of superiority... You have to take such a self-reflective look at yourself as a volunteer and an individual... but we are not provided with enough training where we know to constantly reflect."**
> VSO volunteer

Pre-placement training, joint planning requirements and orientations certainly emphasise relationship building and skill sharing, but organisational systems also tend to focus on what has been done, and are not balanced by process monitoring that looks carefully at the approach. It is important to note that although volunteers are professionals, they are not usually development workers and may need additional and ongoing support in terms of working in participatory ways.

5. Approximately 30% of VSO Nepal international volunteers do not complete their placement.

Effect on ways of working

There were a range of relationships described and observed between volunteers and teachers. The quality of interaction between volunteer and teacher is dependent on a great number of factors, including motivation, personality mix, individual characteristics (also explored in later chapters). What is important to note here is what type of relationship do dominant cultural and organisational norms support and foster.

There were many examples where cooperative or collaborative relationships could lead to new skills being developed and used, and increases to the agency and confidence of teachers. But it is interesting to note the language used by many teachers and ECD facilitators to describe their experience. Teachers often felt that they had little to share with the volunteer, and descriptions of the process focus on the skills they learnt from the volunteer and the transformation they underwent (from a teacher using 'traditional' or 'bad' methods) because of the techniques taught by the volunteer (rather than from implementing a successful project together). For example, in one digital story, the ECD facilitator described how the project was explained to her by a colleague and her experience of working with the volunteer:

> **"[Another teacher said] 'International volunteers are going to come and they will observe your class while you are teaching and look at what the children need and teach you methods that will make it easier to teach'. The volunteer came and taught me how to teach the children, how to use games, songs, textiles."**
> ECD facilitator, *Terai* district

In this sense, relationships were collaborative in terms of working together on implementing child-centred methods, rather than being based on joint intellectual effort in co-constructing a child-centred learning approach that was responsive to needs.

This is unsurprising in some respects. Co-design or co-construction is challenging, particularly if counterparts have pre-existing expectations about the way that external assistance is provided. Additionally, working in this way is difficult when focusing on areas where teachers have least training (especially in the case of early child development facilitators who sometimes had no previous training) or are not confident in the use of this. Discussions with teachers revealed that they rarely felt that they had skills to share with the volunteers in the professional sphere:

> **"The volunteer is an inspiration, we have nothing to teach her... we don't have much knowledge I would have nothing to teach her because she knows more."**
> Teacher, hill district

This is not to devalue the importance of volunteers having professional expertise and skills that are valuable to share. Volunteers' professionalism gives them credibility and also the technical or 'hard' skills which teachers need to draw on. But is there a more effective approach to join up knowledge and encourage teachers to use the volunteer as a resource? Skill sharing in the area where counterparts feel least confident and volunteers most, feels unfair (even if this is countered to an extent when the volunteer has to a degree been disempowered by entering a new community).

There were examples where volunteers intentionally challenged dominant understandings about what they were there to do: for example, one volunteer in a different district was intentional about breaking down the idea that they were an expert, instead focusing on language learning and building relationships with teachers until they were confident to use his skill as a resource; in the hill district one volunteer found that working on a school garden, a project with more tangible outcomes, brought a different response from teachers:

But in (one school) with the school garden project – well there was a whole different attitude. I had been struggling there with simple things in the classroom. Then we start talking about the school gardens and everything starts happening: they made the ground ready, the fence went up.

> Researcher: ***"Why do you think there was this difference?"***
> VSO volunteer: **"There's an incentive – even if it just vegetables. You know, the baselines are all about praise to the students, but where is the praise for the teachers?"**
> (Interview with VSO volunteer, hill district)

Conclusion

International development organisations can underestimate the salience of the idea that the outsider is expert and the effects of this, particularly when working at the community level. Furthermore, they can overestimate counterparts' understanding of collaborative work or skill share. At the same time, volunteers are left to negotiate a balance between providing professional skills and meeting pre-defined programme outcomes, with working in a way that is participatory and responsive to the varied needs of each specific community.

It is difficult to assess the impact of different types of approach. A more instructive approach may still lead to teachers adopting child-centred techniques and improving their practice, and gaining confidence as a result. However, accepting (often inadvertently) a shift of emphasis away from collaboration based on joint intellectual effort is accompanied by risks. It can mean that teachers underestimate what skills they have and what they bring, making them less vocal about the suitability and appropriateness of new methodologies in a specific context. It has implications for the sustainability of interventions – without understanding *why* an approach is used there is a risk that new methods become a set of activities to be implemented and may be abandoned if unexpected challenges are faced. As one volunteer describes:

> **"Other volunteers are very directed, determined and had very tangible outcomes. But I'm not sure if the teachers can carry that on. They taught activities and the teachers then rote learnt those activities but there's no progress from doing those activities. It is then set in stone, it is regimented. The change inside the head is important."**
> VSO volunteer

It also risks reinforcing (or failing to challenge) dominant cultural norms, which can undervalue native knowledge and overvalue external ideas and values.

There are a number of aspects of programme design and implementation that are important for development organisations working with volunteers to consider in order to foster an environment which emphasises and facilitates the mutual exchange and co-construction of knowledge. Firstly, ensuring that volunteers are equipped with the appropriate tools: for example, adequate language skills and mechanisms to support reflective practice. Secondly, ensuring that volunteers have an in-depth understanding of the philosophy underpinning the project – why is a child-centred approach used? – and situating this in the context of current global debates in education development (e.g. global movements promoting the inclusion of indigenous learning in mainstream curricula) to avoid ideas of one particular education methodology being superior to others. Thirdly, making sure methods used to monitor and evaluate do not inadvertently set up power imbalances, but are participatory and include measures that look at *how* change happened (i.e. process outcomes). Finally, allowing for sufficient time and engagement in each school and community with wider programme parameters to include projects that lend themselves to collaborative or community-led working (e.g. school gardens).

Implications

- If international development organisations consider co-construction and intellectual collaboration valuable and worthwhile for the long-term sustainability of interventions, the process of implementation should be carefully monitored to ensure participatory discourse translates to participatory working at grass-roots level. Volunteers need to be provided with the appropriate tools to continuously reflect on their practice, and support to use participatory tools and approaches.
- Framing programmes in a way that emphasises it as an exploration with teachers about finding what works in specific contexts may lead to more sustainable outcomes, but presents a challenge to volunteers and development organisations working through volunteers because this is often not what counterparts are expecting.
- If international development organisations emphasise (or inadvertently allow) processes or approaches which reinforce a distance and power imbalance between volunteer and the individuals they work with, there is a risk that existing cultural norms which undervalue native knowledge will be reinforced.
- The duration of placements and the time spent in each school has implications for the type of approach adopted by the volunteer. Demands for a 'wider' reach need to be balanced by an appreciation of the depth required for collaborative working.
- Widening the parameters of programmes may be needed in order to include projects that lend themselves to joint or community-led working.

Power dynamics in sharing, sustaining and replicating change

In some cases, supportive and trusting relationships led to the transference of knowledge and skills and the growth in self-esteem and confidence required to experiment with and implement child-centred learning methods. However, during observations of phase one and two schools and discussions with volunteers, partner organisations, teachers and head teachers, it was clear that some teachers were not able to adopt, or did not continue with, child-centred learning methods in the same way. Volunteers in both districts also reported that they faced challenges when working with some teachers and schools (although they were able to overcome these challenges in some cases). What makes sharing skills and implementing these skills in the long term challenging is explored in the chapters below.

This chapter looks at issues affecting how the volunteer was received by the education practitioners they worked alongside. Understanding what affects this, and the resulting interaction and relationship between volunteer and teachers is complex and dependent on many factors (some of which are explored in later chapters). Here the power dynamics between the volunteer and teacher, the teachers and their fellow teaching staff and different schools are considered, along with the implications of this for the success, replicability and sustainability of the changes made.

Power and teacher relationships

Some volunteers felt that the receptiveness of the teachers and ECD facilitators to the volunteer intervention was often linked to the counterparts' position, particularly in relation to the school and community. Although there were exceptions, in both the hill and *Terai* districts, the teachers who were most receptive to the volunteers were often those who, because of their gender, caste/ethnic group, position within the school, or limited links to those with influence, had less power or status.

This may be because a lower-status teacher has more to gain from working with an international volunteer. As discussed above, for a lower-status teacher, working alongside a volunteer perceived as having a high status can give legitimacy to them and their work. One volunteer described them as having 'less to lose' than volunteers with a higher status position:

> **"With higher status teachers they are less open. New and less confident teachers will try anything."**
> VSO volunteer, *Terai* district

Highlighting the relational aspect of power, several female volunteers described the difference between working with female and male colleagues: "working collaboratively inside the classroom was difficult (in the large schools)... because of ego maybe. Most of the teachers in the big schools are men" (female VSO volunteer); "men are a bit more resistant, they're used to being in authority" (VSO volunteer, other district).

In some cases, teachers in less influential schools, had a greater connection with their students and were therefore more conscientious and motivated. Particularly in urban areas, competition from private schools means that there is an increasing concentration of children from low socio-economic status households in government schools. Current education discourse points to this as a major factor in the lack of motivation and accountability amongst teachers, who, arguably, increasingly have less of a connection with their students. In the *Terai* district, the school where the partner organisation and volunteers felt most change occurred was the semi-rural school where the community was relatively cohesive and all students and most teachers lived locally and were from the same marginalised ethnic group, its position away from the district headquarters meaning that a much lower proportion of children attended private school than in the urban area. In fact, most teachers were appointed by the community, and while, as a local NGO pointed out, this does still mean that they may have been favoured by those powerful in the community, there is a higher degree of accountability to the community and those they teach.

The schools with less power arguably stood to benefit most from the volunteer intervention. With fewer connections to the district education office and to local NGOs, the VSO project brought both physical and human resource:

> **"You do warm to the smaller schools. You get to know them better. And because in those schools, the district education officers never go, they never get to the outliers, so partly it is good for their morale."**
> VSO volunteer, *Terai* district

> **"Most of these schools (with the most change) are primary schools and they are usually the ones not given the most attention or budget."**
> VSO volunteer, hill district

The head teacher in the semi-rural school in the *Terai* district explained that the school had not been visited by the district education office for over 20 years.

Replicability and sustainability

Power relations in schools and between schools affected whether changes made at the individual level translated to change at the school level and beyond. Both in the hill and *Terai* districts, volunteers felt sharing new ideas and methods in the larger (and often more influential) schools was more challenging for teachers. There are very obvious practical reasons for this (e.g. with more teachers, it could be more difficult to share ideas widely with all staff members), but sharing was also complicated by the hierarchies that existed and were more dominant within these schools.

In the *Terai*, in one large secondary school where an individual teacher (a female teacher of relatively low status in the school) had made a major change, there were difficulties in sharing ideas more widely:

> **"There is a power struggle between who has been here the longest and who has a connection with who. The children's wellbeing is not a priority. It is more about whose idea is being implemented."**
> Teacher, *Terai* district

In the hill district, one volunteer felt that "in the big schools, (sharing) is not going to happen". This can be due to individuals' level of confidence, expertise or experience that affects their position in the hierarchy, as these extracts explain:

> **"We are only working with one or two teachers, and we are working in lots of schools. We are trying to make that teacher a trainer of other teachers, but for example, take (teacher name). He's great, but he hasn't got the presence to instruct and give confidence to others… (trainings out of school) failed to spread around… Many teachers didn't feel confident enough to tell other teachers that are older than them or more senior than them how to do it."**
> VSO volunteer, hill district

> **"The basic thing is child friendly methods. I did this with my class... It is difficult to share the ideas with other teachers when they are more experienced. They were my teachers when I was young, so they are more respected [than me]."**
> Teacher, hill district

Professional hierarchies in schools can be overlaid by caste and gender dimensions. During group discussions and training observations, the dominance of certain teachers from traditionally dominant castes or genders was apparent. This is highly contextual; for example, in a group discussion in one school, female teachers looked to their male colleague (as if for permission) before speaking, whereas in another school nearby (with teachers from a different ethnic group), gender dynamics were very different, with female teachers equally as vocal as their male counterparts.

In the *Terai* district, in informal conversations a female *Tharu* teacher described how she and the other *Tharu* teachers tended to be separate from the other teachers in the school who were primarily of Brahman caste. Caste relations were rarely openly discussed, but in the *Terai* district there were suggestions that this could affect the transference of knowledge and skills between teachers and schools. The head teacher in the semi-rural school in *Terai* district explained why it was easy for ideas to be shared at their school:

> **"All the teachers are new, so it is easy to share, and they are all from the same (*Rana Tharu*) community."**
> Head teacher, *Terai* district

This school, where the majority of teachers are *Rana Tharu*, emerged as the strongest example of best practice. However, there had been no exposure or learning visits to the school by other teachers in the district. Although it is difficult to draw firm conclusions, its rural location and possibly caste prejudice may have prevented this school from being used as a model and learning shared more widely. One volunteer reflects on this:

> **"Cascading never really got to work because the teachers are too busy... and would it make a difference that the best teachers are *Rana Tharu*? Would a teacher go there to learn from her?"**
> VSO volunteer, *Terai* district

In the hill district, the demands placed on schools by the privatisation of education have tended to fostered a non-collaborative environment between schools, whereby the larger, more powerful schools and smaller, less influential schools battle to enrol children to secure funding. In this environment, the volunteers felt sharing would be difficult:

> **"Sharing is not going to happen. And driving this is the falling school rolls. (One large school) went to the (primary) school village to get children. They lost 15 children to them because they changed to English medium."**
> VSO volunteer, hill district

In the long term, transferring the knowledge, skills and approach from the individual to school level is essential if the individual level changes are to be sustained. Without support from peers and superiors it would be difficult for individual teachers to continue, not least because of the difficulty in teaching students in different ways (e.g. if some teachers are rote learning, and others using child-centred learning). One teacher I spoke with had worked with international volunteers over ten years previously and described the difficulties:

> **"It was difficult to use those methods because the environment of our country is totally different. Other teachers taught differently. Other teachers were hesitant [about the new methods]… If you use the new methods, the other teachers are not negative but they can't be applied. If it is just one teacher [with new methods] it is difficult."**
> Teacher, hill district

Furthermore, sharing can build momentum and lead to institutional changes. For example, in the *Terai* district, despite the disrupted management volunteer placements, school-based changes such as a thoroughly researched and devised school improvement plan and the set-up of a school garden project were introduced.

Power relations at different levels

Research in this area was limited by the lack of long-term management volunteers in the two districts included in the case study. Nevertheless, power relations seem to become increasingly complex when working with those with more power, including at district and central government level. This is in part because of the additional demands on the time of senior officials, the nature of their work and the level of Nepali or English required for communication of more technical or specialist information (which was a barrier in more remote districts like the *Terai* district).

Conclusion

While the receptiveness to the volunteer and the quality of the volunteer and teacher interaction is dependent on many factors, there are reasons why teachers of a lower status (or schools with less influence) may be more likely to be receptive and amenable to change. They potentially have most to gain from the intervention, and are under less pressure to maintain a certain position in the professional hierarchy. Furthermore, there may be a greater affinity or reciprocity of perspective between teachers and their students if the teacher is from the same community, caste or ethnic group as their students.

Of course, there are exceptions both at the individual and school level. For example, in the *Terai*, a large well-connected secondary school was the school that made most progress in phase one of the intervention. At this school there was a dynamic and driven head teacher with a vision for the school, and a united staff. Leadership was an important factor in driving forward with a new approach and ensuring staff were on board with the intervention.

Leadership is clearly important and its absence makes change more difficult to sustain. A tension for development organisations is that while the schools or individuals with least status may be most amenable to change, other practitioners or schools may be less likely to look at them as 'beacons'. This has implications for an intervention's sustainability and replicability: momentum can be difficult to build where change at the individual level happens more quickly than change at the structural or system level. In the absence of strong leadership, there may be more merit in focusing on a smaller number of counterpart teachers but with a greater emphasis on developing the capacities of these individuals, and supporting them to continue to share the ideas with others in their own and other schools. There are interesting opportunities for this to be supported by the use of participatory tools such as digital storytelling – where the experiences of the 'first' individual or school could be shared more widely. This approach would require individuals to be clear of the rationale behind new methodologies, so that they could successfully transmit these to others. But importantly, it would help build momentum, so that a sufficient number of individuals can be collectively involved in following a new approach.

Implications

- The status of the individuals volunteers work with may affect how they respond to the intervention, and ultimately its success.
- The influence of actors or institutions within the educational 'system' can affect how learning is shared and replicated.
- A sophisticated approach is required whereby volunteers are prepared and able to adapt their approach according to the type of counterpart they work with.
- Development organisations need to consider existing power relations, how they affect an intervention and, if necessary, how individuals or schools with less status or influence can be supported so that an intervention's successes can be built on. This may require, for example, working with fewer schools, but placing an emphasis on setting up stronger networks between teachers and continuing to nurture and support individuals who are able to innovate and change – particularly if they are from marginalised groups themselves.

Volunteer combinations

Particularly for large-scale projects, volunteers are used in combination rather than deployed individually. In the *Terai* district, the education programme utilised both local volunteers (ALFs) and international volunteers. While this combination meant that different skill sets and sources of knowledge could be drawn on, the research highlights the very different perceptions of the different types of volunteers, and shows that working in combination does not necessarily lead volunteers to work collaboratively. Furthermore, the combinations, whether of local and international volunteers in the *Terai* district, or North–South and South–South volunteers in the hill district, can expose or even reinforce existing power dynamics and stereotypes.

National and international volunteer combinations

The proliferation of NGOs in Nepal following the achievement of multi-party democracy in the early 1990s was accompanied by a huge rise in formal volunteering opportunities for local people as NGOs deployed volunteers to carry out their projects (Thapa, 2005). In the *Terai* district, where there are a significant number of NGOs mobilising volunteers, it is worth noting a widely held suspicion of individuals described as 'moneyed' volunteers, who are associated with a post-1990s period of corruption, the mushrooming of (often politically aligned) NGOs and a rapid influx of donor funding. Informal forms of volunteering, described as 'social work' or 'pure' volunteering, are still seen positively. However, Nepali volunteers associated with NGOs or with the government often described how they were regarded as opportunistic or even politically aligned:

> **"Before, there was a negative feeling about me because people felt that I corrupted money for the government... it was very difficult for three years. I thought 'I'm serving society, but why aren't they trusting me?' "**
> Female community health volunteer (Government of Nepal)

In terms of the education programme in the *Terai* district, priority was given to individuals who were from the same village or ethnic group as the selected school – important given the number of languages spoken in the area, general perceptions regarding national volunteers, and inter-caste relations. However, due to the level of qualification required by ALFs, this was not always possible, especially in the most marginalised communities. This approach was important and allowed the volunteers to build trust quickly. One *Tharu* volunteer spoke about volunteering in the community where he lived:

> **"The community was supportive. No one was negative. It would be difficult for someone outside the community to do this because they don't know everyone and because the language is different."**
> ALF, *Terai* district

In one digital story, the volunteer describes the difficulty of working in a community where the language is different. While he and other volunteers were able to learn the language after several months, this required time, relationship building and joint working with another teacher. Another benefit of recruiting volunteers from the same villages was that several volunteers from marginalised ethnic groups felt that this was a positive way for them to represent their community.

Links with community members were important. Volunteers often worked with mothers' groups to inform parents of the importance of education. Local knowledge and networks were key to one volunteer's experience: in her digital story she describes how she became aware of a nearby village (a new settlement of migrants from India and Nepal) which few people knew about. She surveyed it and found over 70 children who had never previously been to school. Villagers (predominantly the traditionally semi-nomadic *Rana Tharu*) had only settled there a number of years before and there were few facilities and little contact with those outside the village. She worked with her village's 'social mobiliser' (a government volunteer role) and a local head teacher to set up 'bridge' classes in the previously out-of-reach community. The bridge classes have continued, with older children now attending the nearest school.

> **"At aged seven or eight they would start to go to India. Now not all go. Villagers don't take the children with them now that they started to go to school. We talked to the parents at a parent–teacher meeting and with the mothers group. The social mobiliser helped me. Ten per cent still go to India – 99% used to go but now it is changed."**
> ALF, *Terai* district

The volunteer's story shows how local volunteers are in a position to respond to local needs and link with individuals and groups which can widen their impact. Although not specifically related to this case study, a Nepali ICS volunteer gave insights into the benefits of working with mothers' groups:

> **"In my experience, we would go to mothers groups, and actually, they have a lot of power you know. I think women's groups are a powerful tool in society because women have a lot of (internal) power, they have very strong emotion. So if you have a plan to implement in the community, it will be from mothers groups."**
> ICS national volunteer, Kathmandu

There are definitely benefits to using local volunteers, in terms of their knowledge, trust and links. But in terms of the ecosystem of volunteerism, it is important that potential opportunities for joint working and collaboration with international volunteers are capitalised on. There were examples where ALF volunteers and the international volunteers worked together, but in some cases closer collaboration was hampered by language barriers. For example, one ALF volunteer describes his experience, including the benefits of working on a project with both international and local volunteers:

> **"Sharing ideas, knowing how they teach in foreign countries and then by adopting that maybe things will change. There were some joint trainings with the volunteers. But there are language problems which mean that we can't work more closely on a day to day basis."**
> ALF volunteer

The partner organisation reflects on the difficulties of creating teams that can work together collaboratively:

> **"It would have been good if ALF and international volunteer roles were closer. Because the ALFs know everything in the community: why people aren't coming to school, the type of people etc. But language meant that the relationship was never developed. Just one middle man is needed in each community. But that person also has to come from that particular community, for example (in one community), other people couldn't understand the language. I couldn't understand!"**
> Partner organisation

The comment from the partner organisation (p33) points to a common tension in Nepal: Local volunteers are needed because they can work effectively with marginalised communities (particularly if they are part of those communities). At the same time, they are not always able to communicate in English and so collaborating with the international volunteers is more difficult. Some organisations in Nepal use a combination of local, national (who can speak English) and international volunteers. There is then a 'middle person' designed to bring the three types together. This can be successful, but issues around status and power (related also to caste, ethnicity, gender, perceptions of volunteers and economic status) that may make it difficult for a national volunteer to work at certain levels if they are an outsider to the community need careful consideration. In the example below, an international volunteer describes working on a project that utilised all three types of volunteer. Combinations can be effective, but careful matching is required:

"On a previous project they had really good national volunteers. They can do so much more, they know the language, the context, and they worked with the community. It made a huge difference there that the national volunteer was [from a marginalised ethnic group]. The teachers (were from the same ethnic group) so could relate to him – it used to be Brahman or Chhetri people turning up and giving ideas... but he built a relationship quickly and it was so good for people's self-esteem, particularly because [ethnic group name] are usually at the bottom of the pile."
VSO volunteer

The final point is important, especially as volunteer combinations risk reinforcing rather than challenging stereotypes of existing elites. For example, in the *Terai* district there was a divide between perceptions of local volunteers and international volunteers. The local ALF volunteers were uncritical of their relationship with international volunteers:

"International volunteers make more difference because we think ok, they are from another country, they have more knowledge. We have a saying here 'People don't count people from their own house', you know, we have rice and lentils everyday but chicken is special but if you were to eat chicken everyday it would become like lentils."
ALF

Nevertheless, the difference felt between them and the international volunteers in terms of their relative positions was highlighted when, during group discussions, local volunteers revealed that they thought the others were paid an international salary (roughly 15 times more than the actual VSO allowance). That volunteers on the same project view themselves so differently is illustrative of a general trend where individuals providing external assistance are seen as much wealthier, more educated and from countries at a higher position in the global economic hierarchy. One international volunteer felt that closer links between the different volunteers could challenge these perceptions:

"If you had a Nepali and a foreigner working together in a district the impact would be better because (a) translation and language problems... and (b) it breaks the elitism and shows local people that they can do what foreign people are doing. That's another reason why change doesn't happen: 'you're Nepali and you're foreign, you can do it but we can't'."
VSO volunteer

International volunteer combinations

Such issues are not confined to national and international combinations. The combination of North–South and South–South volunteers revealed similar issues. The respect and reverence automatically given to those who fit stereotypes of people from 'developed countries', means that volunteers who do not fit this stereotype can be treated differently. There are exceptions, and of course other characteristics affect this (including gender, age, professional experience and personality) – it is not only South–South volunteers who are treated differently, and it is not all South–South volunteers that experience such discrimination. Nevertheless, the unequal way that international volunteers can be treated, particularly because of their ethnicity or country of origin, is worth noting, particularly as this can be exacerbated by the combination of North–South and South–South volunteers.

"First, the (south–south) volunteers felt they were treated differently from the white volunteers. Teachers wanted the latter to come to the schools for the kudos. The south–south volunteers felt the schools only wanted them there if the European volunteers also came."
(North–South) VSO volunteer

"The head teacher looked disappointed when he saw me. Why? I guess it was because I don't look foreign and the (north–south) volunteer (who did the orientation) was white… I remember when (another north–south volunteer) visited the schools for the first time, one of the schools was very excited when they heard where she came from... they just sort of ignored me for a while."
(South–south) VSO volunteer

The volunteer quoted above found that perceptions did change once a good relationship was established, and the head teacher did eventually ask for ideas and input. But this does reveal the additional challenges that volunteers who differ from stereotypes associated with 'international volunteers', 'developed countries' or 'international experts' may face when working in combination with other volunteers.

Conclusion

ALF volunteers often used local insights and knowledge to work in a way that was responsive to the needs of the communities they worked with. There were advantages for volunteers working in their own communities, particularly because they knew the specific local language and could capitalise on links with existing groups or individuals.

There are challenges (particularly in terms of language) for international and local volunteers to work together closely. However, such combinations have the potential to allow for a powerful combination of interventions. How collaborative relationships between local and international volunteers can be developed and supported needs to be carefully considered, taking into account issues around language and different stakeholder perceptions. This could be an effective way of challenging stereotypes, particularly those that are based on ideas that assistance is primarily from external sources, and those that question national volunteers' motivations.

Implications

Opportunities are missed (for the volunteers, and in terms of community impact) if consideration isn't given to the practicalities of how different types of volunteers can work together.

- A greater recognition of the different contributions of different types of volunteers, and their limitations, could lead to more sophisticated programming.
- There are challenges for international development organisations working with international volunteers and national volunteers. How can the benefits and opportunities (e.g. monetary, professional) be shared evenly without distorting notions of altruism?

Partners

Working with national and local level partners is essential for the design and implementation of interventions. VSO aimed to improve the quality of provision for and inclusion of out-of-reach children from the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities in Nepal. To do this they worked with a variety of partners, including the Government of Nepal, and national and local level NGOs. In highly politicised contexts, this can throw up challenges for development organisations who may need to work with partners that have (either officially or in practice) contrasting ways of working, and different aims and/or priorities.

Partner aims and priorities

Working with the powerful to help the powerless can throw up many contradictions. International volunteers now primarily work with government partners in Nepal, with permission for visas for working with NGOs difficult to obtain, particularly since the unrest that surrounded the 2012 constitution deliberations. Both government partners and NGOs can be politicised institutions. This may affect the way that they operate. In the hill and *Terai* districts, where there are very real struggles for resources and power, this can affect whether the hardest-to-reach are the priority.

Power, influence and political (or other) networks can greatly affect how partner organisations distribute resources and prioritise work. Both more overt political alliances or implicit networks, e.g. based on familial or caste ties (known as *hamro manche* or *aphno manche*), are very much part of the Nepali context (Bista, 1991). This is inevitable but can be a frustrating part of working in Nepal when resources aren't distributed as expected according to greatest need.

The type of partners that development organisations like VSO can work with is becoming increasingly restricted in Nepal. Following the widespread disturbances in 2012 in the run-up to the deadline for the finalisation of the constitution (which was again postponed), questions surfaced about the role of donor organisations and NGOs in the disturbrances, with accusations that they had stirred inter-ethnic conflict through their support of marginalised communities.[6] There was widespread comment on the perceived hypocrisy of the international community, who on the one hand called for Nepal to finalise the constitution and, on the other, had supported programmes which some thought had increased tensions that were paralysing the process. Although a direct link is difficult to establish, since 2012 there appear to have been responses on both sides: for example, visas for international volunteer placements are now permitted in the main only for placements that work with government partners. At the same time withdrawal of support for institutions such as the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities by one of Nepal's largest bilateral donors, due to their participation in the national strikes, is illustrative of the response from certain key players in the international community.

6. 'Duncan stands behind aid for ethnic groups'. E-Kantipur, 3 July 2012.

Conclusion

Because of factors at the macro political level, international development organisations may be increasingly restricted in their choice of partner and the type of projects undertaken. Aims and objectives of partner organisations may differ from those of the development organisation or volunteer. Organisationally, they may have a different idea of how to achieve development outcomes and a different idea of the type of development being striven for. Organisations may also be subject to more subtle influences such as the exclusionary tendencies of certain cultural norms or political allegiance, which may distort these aims (see also section vi).

Implications

- International development organisations' and volunteers' attempts to reach the most marginalised may be affected and even undermined by the partners they work with.
- International development organisations are restricted in tackling the root causes of poverty if they are unable to focus on projects which disrupt existing power relations or empower the most marginalised.
- International development organisations may focus on less contentious political areas (either due to restrictions or by choice). This could then mean that existing programmes are undermined because issues around the unequal distribution of power and resources are not tackled (which may be the root cause of issues in the first place).

The impact of politics

In Nepal, the education sector is highly politicised (Asia Foundation, 2012). While VSO's volunteers are positioned to be politically 'neutral', they operate in highly political environments. This can affect the outcomes of their placement, but also challenge their neutrality, bringing into question what neutrality actually means in political contexts.

The impact of political divisions

In the hill and *Terai* districts, the influence of politics and political divisions in certain schools affected both the teachers' and schools' capacity and willingness to change. At the teacher level, patronage politics (or as termed in Nepal, appointment by 'force and source'), in both rural and urban areas was felt to affect the motivation of teachers:

> **"There's political interference in schools. That is why they can't change. So the teachers are accountable to the party and not to the parents... They are engaged in other activities and act as if teaching is a part-time job."**
> Education official, hill district

In one school in the hill district, political divisions seriously affected the school environment and motivation of the staff. One teacher from the school explains why teachers were not motivated to work with the volunteers:

> **"(There are) different people with a different philosophy between teachers and the school governors. The salary of the teachers has been frozen for the past nine months – conflicts about personal rivalries and political conflicts. The performance is decreasing. There is no motivation. There is a lack of manpower, political factors are behind this. Different people belong to different parties. The head teacher and the school governors are against each other... First the conflict needs to be solved and then the volunteers will be more effective."**
> Teacher, hill district

Volunteers eventually stopped visiting the school because of the political divisions which were overshadowing their work, with teachers generally not engaged with the project. The volunteers felt that politics was stronger at the larger schools, where teachers were more likely to have links with political parties, NGOs (which in the hill district are predominantly politically aligned) and government officials. This did not always mean that there was division – indeed, one volunteer described how the strong political influence in the school actually made the staff more united because they were from the same political party and could use links with local NGOs to raise funds for a new teacher.

While, in the hill district, political divisions were based on party lines, the *Terai* district had the added complexity of ethnic-based tensions entering the school arena. In some schools, school management committees and parent–teacher associations (PTAs) have become proxy forums for local politics and the expression of ethnic tensions. In the *Terai* district, it is difficult to draw clear conclusions about how the management volunteer role would have been affected, or affected the politics in the school because of the early departure of both management volunteers. Nevertheless, the systemic action research workshops at one focus school revealed insights into how identity politics is affecting this sphere.

During one meeting, some parents who were part of the PTA began to criticise the head teacher and the school management committee chair. They said that they couldn't trust them because they were both from the same ethnic group and they were conspiring together. The PTA was dominated by upper-caste Hindus from the hills, and it became clear that the underlying distrust of the different groups was causing real problems at the school, with none of the groups willing to work together. Although at the end of the workshop the participants were grateful for having a neutral space (i.e. facilitated by an individual without pre-existing links to the school or community), the tense discussion was illustrative of the underlying tensions in the area. Indeed, a political expert in the district felt that the issues emerging in our Systemic Action Research (SAR) workshopwere being experienced elsewhere:

> **"Some schools are very politicised... Before, the SMC was party political. But from last year (the protests around the signing of the constitution), SMCs became more identity based. People were saying, oh this person is *Tharu*, and he is representing *Tharu* interests, he is *Pahadi* (from the hills) and supporting those interests etc."**
> INGO, *Terai* district

Management volunteers are tasked with bringing these bodies together to implement the school improvement plan. However, in highly politicised contexts, and when working across six schools with different languages, this is a formidable task. The partner organisation felt that:

It is very difficult for the volunteer to bring these three together. If they are only short-term, they can't really understand this context.
Partner organisation

Volunteer position in highly politicised contexts

In the *Terai* particularly, where identity-based politics are to the fore, and tensions in recent years high, working with the marginalised in society is not a neutral position to be in. There are questions about how volunteers work in this context. At present, the volunteers are perhaps either unaware of the issues, purposely ignore them, or are frustrated by the results of the politicisation of everyday institutions. Being politically 'neutral' is challenging, particularly when opportunities to further the aims of the volunteers' specific programme are lost:

> **"One volunteer was trying to work with schools to get them to open during the bandh (strike), because elections are coming and the schools will be closed a lot. I think this is really tricky ground. Even though the volunteer is being apolitical, actually in this context, that is a very political act."**
> VSO volunteer (other district)

> **"In the hill district, this extract shows the difficult position of volunteers who wanted to use the strike days for training teachers, so that lessons would not be disrupted.**
> **(The teachers) thought it was a good idea. But we were told we had to pull out... (because we were putting ourselves at risk). I thought, that all you are doing is allowing those people to win. There's a lot of opportunities missed in this way."**
> VSO volunteer

Conclusion

In the education sector, party-political or inter-ethnic divisions can undermine the work of the volunteers and limit impact. At present, aside from the relative neutrality of volunteers, there are not strategies for dealing with these divisions directly and, as a result, volunteers found it difficult to engage with these issues. Given that generally, this is a major issue affecting education in Nepal, unless interventions also effectively tackle such divisions, progress in overall standards of education will be limited. Whether volunteers' relative neutrality could be used more effectively in such contexts, or whether a different type of intervention is required, is a subject for further exploration. Certainly, the type of volunteer, their area of expertise and the need for in-depth understanding of the issues at play would be key considerations.

Implications

- Interventions can be disrupted or influenced by political divisions. Educational outcomes in certain contexts can be related to the politics of the local schools, as much as they are to teaching methods and curricula. Unless development organisations engage with these realities their impact may be limited.
- Volunteers are working in highly politicised and sometimes divided environments but are given few tools or strategies to work in these contexts.
- Volunteers are faced with a challenge – working with marginalised groups can be highly political or require political solutions and yet volunteers are positioned as 'neutral'. Whether volunteers' relative neutrality could be used more effectively or purposively in highly political or divided contexts, or whether this should be avoided is worth further exploration.

Responsiveness to the schools' needs

There were many examples where the infrastructure of schools and the general school environment was improved during the two-year intervention. This was often due to the collective action of community members or the networks that the volunteer was able to drawn on (explored in section i). This was important: in certain contexts inadequate infrastructure (e.g. a missing roof) made it challenging to use techniques often associated with child-centred learning methods (such as displaying children's work). However, while infrastructural improvements could be a consequence of the intervention, improvements were not directly part of the programme by design. As a result, large class sizes, poor infrastructure and limited resources presented additional challenges to teachers experimenting with child-centred and inclusive learning methods for the first time. In addition, increased enrolment – a consequence of the intervention – could exacerbate problems regarding infrastructure and class size.

Infrastructure

In the *Terai* particularly, inadequate infrastructure presented a challenge for teachers experimenting with new methodologies. Large class sizes (50+) and poor infrastructure (exacerbated by the effects of climate change, with increased seasonal winds damaging school buildings) are the norm. One teacher describes the difficulties of using the techniques shared by the volunteer:

> **"There are 57 students in one class. There is not enough space in class to play, the desks are at different heights, there is only a small space between the children and the blackboard."**
> Teacher, *Terai*

Although international volunteers had expertise in child-centred methodologies, some found applying techniques associated with child-centred learning a challenge in a Nepali context where large class sizes could be the norm:

> **"Walking into a class and there are 90 children. Group work is good but how do I put 90 kids into groups and make sure they are working?... I would have really struggled to teach that class."**
> VSO volunteer, *Terai*

Three of the digital stories describe class size and inadequate infrastructure in the ECD classes, which made displaying work and storing resources and materials impossible. Although in some cases volunteers were able to adapt their methods of working, in order (with colleagues) to secure funding for small infrastructure projects, this is not always possible. But interventions' long-term impact on class size and the resulting teaching and infrastructural needs is important to consider. In one school in the *Terai* where volunteers made a positive impact, teachers reported that pupil enrolment increased by 10–15%. Teachers felt that increased enrolment was a result of the focus on out-of-school children, but also because some parents chose to send their children to the government school rather than educate them privately.

> **"Children left the boarding [private] schools and came to the government school because of the progress in the VSO period. Grade 1 has 105 students, but there was no funding for a new building."**
> Head teacher, *Terai* district

> **"It is difficult because the volunteers bring materials, but there are so many students and you can't always use them with 71 students. It means that with a class you can't check... the volunteers attracted students and the classes got much bigger."**
> Teacher, *Terai* district

Conclusion

Child-centred approaches can be broad, and can be adapted to different contexts, including large class sizes. However, this does present another level of difficulty for both the volunteer and teacher, particularly as some volunteers have not had previous experience of working in such contexts. Interestingly, there are other organisations which undertake in-depth training on Nepali teaching methods so that there is practice and learning about what can be realistically applied in the context.

Teachers face challenges to continue to use child-centred methodologies, particularly if resources and infrastructure are inadequate. Organisations such as Mercy Corps recognise the importance of architecture in the provision of child-centred learning, and make infrastructure improvements at the same time as providing training. More radically, projects in Ladakh have looked at how non-school buildings can be used for learning, e.g. traditional houses, which are much more adapted to the climate than concrete school buildings.

Implications

- Volunteers may not always have the experience and knowledge necessary to develop child-centred learning strategies for very different contexts, and additional training may be required.
- If there is a focus on the techniques of child-centred learning, rather than the aims or philosophy that underpins it, challenges of infrastructure or a lack of resources may be a major barrier for teachers in using this approach.

Responsiveness to wider trends in education

Underlying trends in the wider economy and education sector in Nepal may mean that it is becoming increasingly difficult for development organisations to reach the most marginalised children. The effects of these trends, and the way that schools respond to them, mean that the aims and priorities of the school may be different from the project's, with implications for the responsiveness of counterparts and most importantly, the ultimate aim of reaching the most marginalised.

Rural to urban migration and the privatisation of education

In the hill district, remittances from migrant workers (mainly in the Gulf states and Malaysia) have distorted the economy, resulting in massive migration from the rural villages to the district headquarters. This has been accompanied by a rapid growth in private education as parents use remittances to educate their children in English-medium private schools in the urban centre. The trend is affecting government schools near to the centre in different ways – for example, one teacher reported a drop of 50 or 60 children in the last two years. But hardest hit were the rural schools visited, located two hours from the district headquarters:

> **"People from the lower class, many went abroad. People migrated towards the (district centre). There were 127 students, but now there are around 40. This has happened in the last 4 or 5 years."**
> Teacher, hill district

With funding partly on a per student basis, schools need to maintain numbers in order to be able to retain staff, and indeed continue to exist. At the rural school mentioned above, three teachers were sharing one salary and in each class there were only between three and ten children. Teachers described the effect of this on their motivation and morale:

> **"Teaching large numbers is motivating but with low numbers... it doesn't mean anything."**
> Teacher, hill district

> **"It is hard working with so few children. There is no motivation and the students are not regular. Forty minutes seems a long time."**
> Teacher, hill district

The teachers at the school were described as "cooperative but not collaborative" by the volunteer and while they gave many examples of child-centred methods, the wider issues that affected the current and future prospects of the school were evidently affecting their motivation and engagement with the project.

English-medium education and international volunteers

Given this context, it is unsurprising that the priority for teachers at this school was to increase student enrolment. With competition from both private English-medium schools, and, in this school's case, larger and more influential government schools that had recently converted to English medium, an international volunteer had valuable currency:

> **"Having a volunteer gives a good image to the community. We can say there is a volunteer from (English speaking country).We can persuade people to send their children here. The volunteer is from (English speaking country) so it gives a positive image to them... People now look at the school in a different way because we have a new person here."**
> Teacher, hill district

In the *Terai* district, the hill district and other districts, volunteers felt that their presence had been seen by some head teachers as a way to move to English-medium education:

> Partner organisation: **"Schools always expect that the volunteers come to teach English. If foreign people come they think a lot of people will enrol in our school, we will get more money, children will be more regular."**
> Researcher: ***"Why do they think that?"***
> Partner organisation: "**They think this because there will be a good quality of education. Parents think there will be education like in boarding schools, that they will speak English."**
> (Interview with Partner organisation)

In discussions with parents in the *Terai*, their perception that volunteers were there to teach English was clear, as this extract from a community meeting at one of the focus schools shows:

> **"Parents and teachers think if volunteers come to government schools and speak English, then the children can learn English. People think if someone knows how to speak English they are perfect. If it is English they can learn a lot – so they will give this priority because it helps with jobs and everything."**
> Parent, *Terai* district

In the hill district, although advising against the move to English medium, the volunteer felt that: "definitely (the large school) wanted me as a figure to convince the parents to move to English medium – a way to say they were ready for change" (VSO volunteer, hill district). The benefits and downsides of English-medium education cannot be fully explored here. There are implications for the sustainability of the schools that volunteers work with if they are unable to attract sufficient students, and for the students' future outcomes. There is clearly a growing divide in the education system affecting both staff and students (many government school students spoke of vandalism and abuse from other school students regularly taking place), and some teachers felt that converting to English medium would help restore balance:

> **"It would really uplift the students (to be taught in English medium) because government students would not be backwards compared to boarding school children."**
> Teacher, hill district

However, while this could benefit some children, there is a risk that education would become less accessible for the most marginalised. Below a volunteer describes what happened after one of the intervention schools moved to English medium (which had been advised against):

> **"They could charge 400RS per month if it is English medium. It is the equivalent of a boarding school. I blew up on that one. I checked and VSO Nepal and the DEO said that they couldn't do that and they said that it wasn't happening, just that the children had to buy books and the children that couldn't were let in class but that there were no free (English medium) books."**
> VSO volunteer, hill district

Whether the assignment of English-speaking volunteers encourages the move to English medium deserves further exploration, as do the implications of this for the education outcomes of marginalised children. The extracts above suggest that the volunteer's presence may inadvertently sanction English-medium teaching and therefore risk undermining the very aims of the project they were there to undertake.

Unintended consequences

This along with the expectation that the quality of learning in schools would improve led to an unintended consequence in some of the intervention schools. For example, the head teacher of one *phase one* school said that enrolment increased by 10–15% – but felt that many of the children had come from private schools, attracted by the presence of the international volunteers. Some classes now have more than 80 students. Further, in both of the focus schools, following the enrolment campaign, the number of children increased, but half of them were from private schools. Again, the school already had class sizes of over 50 students. When we discussed this with parents during an SAR meeting, they noted some positives about this – it relieved a financial burden on parents who were trying to send their children to private school, and was also a positive sign that the school was improving. However, in terms of reaching the hardest to reach, larger class sizes may not be helpful, particularly for teachers trying to use child-centred learning methods such as group work or using materials (see section vii).

Conclusion

There is now an 'education marketplace' in Nepal, which has implications for marginalised children's long-term learning outcomes and prospects. Volunteer programmes are part of the system and therefore cannot avoid influencing and being influenced by these wider trends. Evidence suggested that schools' priorities may be affected by the privatisation of education, and this in turn can influence how counterparts at different levels relate to an intervention. This raises an important contradiction: even if there are overall improvements to the quality of teaching and management of a school, it does not necessarily mean that the poorest and most marginalised children will be able to benefit from these changes.

Implications

- If government schools are unable to compete in the education marketplace, the distance between marginalised children and those who are able to access private education will increase. This has implications for the student intake of government schools, the relationships of teachers with students, etc.
- The growth of the private sector may make it increasingly difficult for marginalised groups to access quality education. In response to the 'education market', school managers may prioritise measures which make it more difficult for marginalised children to be included (e.g. English-medium education).
- In this context the 'language footprint' of volunteers may be amplified. How this effects the response of different stakeholders and the aims of the intervention needs consideration.
- If programmes are led according to the needs expressed only by the partner there is a danger that these are not necessarily aligned with the needs at community level.

Responsiveness to communities and the needs of the most marginalised children

Children's enrolment, retention and learning outcomes are affected by broader issues affecting students, teachers and communities in Nepal: for example, the fact that less than 45% of the population speak Nepali as their mother tongue (despite schools teaching in Nepali medium); or that one-quarter of Nepali people live below the poverty line; or that with one in four households with at least one absent member, migration patterns disrupt continuity of education for many children (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012). In some communities, such issues made it more difficult for the intervention to reach and positively impact on the most marginalised children. In the long term, particularly for the most marginalised, these issues may pose a challenge to gains made from the implementation of child-centred methodologies or measures to increase enrolment.

Mother-tongue learning

In communities like the *Rana Tharu* community in the *Terai*, language is a major issue affecting children's education. Nepali is the language of the hill region, and still less than 45% of the population of Nepal speak Nepali as their native language (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Indeed, in Kailali district, *Tharu* is the native language of 42% of the population (Poudel, 2012). While the Education For All programme recognises the importance of mother-tongue learning, Nepali or English is the language of instruction, with the curriculum's books in either of these media in government schools (The Dakar Framework, 2000). This has major implications for some districts, particularly in the *Terai*, where the majority of the population's native language is non-Nepali (Poudel, 2012).

In the urban centre of the *Terai* district, where government school students are generally drawn from different ethnic groups, teachers felt that this was less of an issue: living in mixed communities, children are more exposed to Nepali from a young age (although some *Tharu* teachers still said that they would use *Tharu* language to explain a concept to their students if they didn't understand). But in the semi-rural focus school of this study, most children could not speak any Nepali before they were taught in Nepali medium at school, presenting a serious challenge to teachers and students. In the digital story "52 students, 3 languages", a *Rana Tharu*-speaking teacher describes the difficulties:

> **"Because their mother-tongue is *Rana Tharu*, it was very difficult to teach them and to make them understand. For example, when I taught English, I had to first translate from English to Nepali, and then from Nepali to *Rana Tharu*. I talked about these problems with my teacher friends, and the head teacher, but didn't find any solutions."**
> Teacher, *Terai* district

At this school, the majority of teachers are *Rana Tharu*-speaking. However, problems for non-Nepali speaking students are exacerbated in schools where teachers cannot speak the same language as the students. In another digital story, a Nepali-speaking volunteer teaching classes to Chaudhary *Tharu*-speaking out-of-school children explains the difficulties:

> **"When I taught them, they didn't understand. I would ask them if they understood and they said 'yes' but when I asked them something later, they didn't know anything. It was very hard, I felt very down. I didn't know what to do."**
> ALF volunteer, *Terai*

There are issues in such communities about how the medium of instruction affects children's ability and willingness to stay at school and to learn effectively. There is a mother-tongue learning debate currently in Nepal, and a growing body of evidence showing the importance of teaching in mother tongue, at least in the first years of schooling. Indeed, recent discussions with an education minister suggested that there may be a plan to bring mother-tongue learning to the forefront of education in the first years of schooling.

Such debates have major implications for how teachers engage and implement child-centred learning methods. As this teacher points out, using resources and child-centred methods is made more difficult by language issues:

> **"We have resources, but because of our skill we are not using them in class – 95% of the students are *Rana* but all the materials are in Nepali."**
> Teacher, *Terai* district

The complexities of teaching in multiple languages were not directly addressed by the intervention. In fact, the project had little variation in terms of design across the six districts, despite certain districts (and indeed certain communities within districts) facing very distinct teaching medium challenges. Furthermore, with volunteers working in six schools, such issues could not be explored in great depth. There were certain volunteers who saw the importance of this issue and attempted to begin to address it: in the *Terai* district, one volunteer conducted a survey of the six intervention schools' localities to highlight the issue after realising its impact. The volunteer was unable to complete the placement; and a lack of time and resources meant that no further action was taken on this issue.

Indigenous knowledge

The mother-tongue learning debate is perhaps the most obvious of the contextual teaching–learning challenges that face many schools and students in Nepal.

Figure 15. Many *Rana Tharu* communities have had litle or no previous exposure to formal education

However, particularly for indigenous communities like the *Rana Tharu* in the *Terai* district, there are questions around what education should look like for these children and whether a school-based, mainstream curriculum will ultimately improve their learning outcomes and prospects. How mainstream education impacts on indigenous and marginalised communities is much debated. There are arguments that centrally controlled state-administered education systems risk creating 'rural failures' unable to compete in systems that undermine indigenous pedagogies that have been crafted over generations (Black, 2012). In Nepal, where children of marginalised communities like the *Rana Tharu*, who have never previously been exposed to Nepali, and whose parents have not had any formal education, are tested in a system designed and delivered in the language of the country's elites, these debates are pertinent. One example, from the systemic action research element of the study, is illustrative of the complexities in reaching the most marginalised:

During the systemic action research workshops parents and teachers identified that one of the key reasons for children not attending school was that there wasn't a culture of formal education in the village. Because parents were not literate, they did not see how they could be involved in their children's education, and also felt that the undervaluing of education by many in the community was linked to children remaining out of school to work in the fields or at home with their parents. We talked about whether it would be possible to improve parental literacy – and in fact, the translator knew of a government scheme that would soon start in the locality. Some of the parents agreed to attend, hoping to set an example and encourage others in the community to do so. Two months later at a follow-up meeting, four parents had attended, but they complained that learning had been difficult because the literacy teacher only spoke Nepali which they did not understand. Furthermore, some of the mothers' husbands did not allow them to leave the house so could not attend. One of the mothers asked: "if we can't get them to send their children to school, how will we ever get the parents to go to school?" For the hardest to reach, it seemed that our original theory of change needed to be re-thought.

In hindsight, with a better understanding of the context, a better way of including parents in the school may have been to think about the indigenous knowledge held in this community outside of the school and how this could have been incorporated into the school curriculum (there are weekly lesson periods set aside for local curriculum in schools but this is usually used for teaching English). For example, the *Tharu* historically have a wealth of knowledge about the forests and natural medicine – could we have thought about projects that incorporated this knowledge with children's learning? Did this need to take place in the school?

Figure 16. Traditional *Tharu* baskets

There has been investment in incorporating indigenous knowledge into education by various organisations in Nepal to different degrees since the insurgency. For example a Multi Language Education programme was implemented by the Finnish Government and the Nepal Federation of Nationalities in 2007 (Taylor, 2010). One NGO in the *Terai* district, BASE Nepal, which works particularly with *Tharu* communities, used a number of strategies that increased engagement in education in the community and helped to ensure that traditional customs and language became part of mainstream education. For example, parents made traditional baskets to be used for counting and storage in class, and reading books were translated into *Tharu* to help parents who were learning to read, read with their children.

It is important to note global shift towards recognising the importance of indigenous education, and debates around the extent to which indigenous pedagogies should be included in or allowed to underpin education systems in certain contexts.

Poverty, migration and insecure livelihoods

In both the hill and *Terai* district, children's education is disrupted by complex migration patterns and poverty. Migration trends, their causes and their consequences are quite different in the two districts, but they both impact on the education sector. Without looking at livelihood issues and how these drive complex migration patterns, in some communities there is a danger that in the long term the most marginalised are not reached, newly enrolled children may experience disrupted school attendance and children's learning outcomes are adversely affected.

In some communities in the *Terai* district, particularly those close to the Indian border, both seasonal and daily migration to India has grown in the years since the insurgency. Increased demands on land due to continued migration from the hills, and the affects of climate change on productivity, have meant that increasingly those unable to sustain themselves on their own land must find alternative employment across the border. In one digital story, the local ALF volunteer described the issues around migration and long-term enrolment.

(From digital story): Of the 12 children in the village who didn't go to school, some help their parents, for example, cutting grass for animal feed, some look after siblings or their parents' house and the rest go with their parents to India.

Researcher: ***"Why do people go to India?"***
ALF: **"Poverty. So they have to move to India. So they are illiterate and if they don't go to India, they can't make a living. In India they wash dishes, guard houses. Here they are farmers. But this doesn't make enough for them to stay here all the time… In this village every household has someone working in India. Here, in this part of the village, they have more land (so they don't move to India). Some (children) had parents who would go for 6 months to India and then live for 6 months here, so they would follow their parents to earn money."**
(Interview with Accelerated Learning Facilitator [ALF], *Terai* district)

In the hill district meanwhile, the poorest children have to follow their parents as they work – particularly between labour work in the bazaar area, and agricultural work in their rural village, the lack of manpower due to outward migration adding to the need for increased child labour.

"The main challenges are the students outside the school remit. These children have to stay up high (in the hills) and then six months in the lower parts (urban centre). Poverty is a problem – parents are working here and there so the children have to go with their parents when they move to work."
Official, district education office

Reaching out-of-school children

In the hill district, the intervention focused primarily on international volunteers and improving classroom teaching and learning. In the *Terai*, the local volunteers (ALFs) did work with out-of-school children in the communities of the schools where VSO international volunteers were working. These children were provided with nine months of accelerated learning programme classes (often referred to as 'bridge' classes) . The volunteers (who have at least SLC (Grade 11 equivalent) qualifications and are provided with ten days' training by the partner organisation) conduct classes out of normal class hours with a maximum of 25 children. Classes are designed to get children to a level where they can successfully integrate in their appropriate class age group, so focus on teaching literacy and numeracy at the necessary level.

This certainly led to previously out-of-school children re-enrolling in the local schools. For example, in one community close to the Indian border, 12 children attended bridge classes and were then enrolled at the local school or began vocational training. In another community, where the local volunteer found over 70 students who had never attended school, bridge classes provided basic education to the community for the first time, and now the older children are attending the nearest school (even though this is one hour's walk away).

Certainly, it is not always economic reasons that affect why children do or don't go to school – a lack of understanding of formal education (particularly for girls), poor-quality teaching and the use of authoritarian methods in school were mentioned as contributing factors. The local volunteers' awareness-raising and schooling function were key in these respects.

However, in both communities, the underlying causes of migration and poverty remain. This has implications for the long-term retention of these children in education. One volunteer explains why some of the children who had enrolled may have to leave in the future:

"Sometimes it is because of financial reasons. In some families the boys aren't sent because of financial reasons. Two thirds might have to leave (school) because of that. Sometimes it is peer group influence and they have to work with their fathers in the field."
ALF, *Terai* district

Without measures that improve livelihoods and change or adapt to migration patterns, it is difficult to enrol and retain those children who have to either travel with their parents to work, or remain at home and undertake the household or farming duties:

> **"I am very happy to see (the out-of-school children) attending school regularly. If the parents were provided with skill based training, like vegetable planting, agriculture... they will be able to work in their own country (Nepal) and then the students will have more chance of attending school regularly."**
> ALF, *Terai* district

In the community where the local volunteer established a bridge class for over 70 children, she estimated that there are still around 10% of children who have to migrate with their parents to India. Furthermore, there are some children that were never reached by the intervention. In the community where nine children were enrolled in school, the volunteer explains that not everyone could be reached:

> Researcher: ***"The children that didn't go to Bridge class, why didn't they go?"***
> ALF: "**So they weren't going to bridge class because it was monsoon, so they were in India. There were 10 to 15 households with one to three children. So possibly 30 more children who weren't going to bridge class."**
> (Interview with Accelerated Learning Facilitator [ALF], *Terai* district)

Although surveys were conducted to find out-of-reach children, the children who had migrated to India for the season were not included (the initial survey was conducted in March when many migrant workers and their children had not yet returned from India for the planting seasons at the start of the monsoon). When discussing this with the partner organisation, this was clearly a complex issue because the migration patterns varied depending on each community. For example, in some villages, particularly *Rana Tharu* communities where cross-border marriages are commonplace, there is frequent movement between the countries for festivals, farming and labour. It was suggested that for all the children to be included, surveys would need to be repeated on a monthly basis.

There are organisations that are recognising the impact of changing migration trends and responding to these. Local NGOs in the hill district have found that returned migrants are eager to volunteer in community development projects: they have broader experience, new skills and knowledge, which can be used to, for example, set up model farms and give advice on farming techniques to other villagers. As well as sharing technical skills, the volunteers share experiences with young men who have not yet migrated, providing a realistic picture of life overseas. These young men are also given access to micro-finance schemes so that they can invest in small-scale farming in their own community, rather than feeling that the only option for a more secure livelihood is in India or the Gulf states.

Other impacts on education outcomes

The impact of high alcohol use emerged as an issue during both systemic action-research meetings and informal discussions in the community. Parents felt that this contributed to absenteeism at school, with parents setting a poor example to younger members of the community. Alcohol use also led to less secure livelihoods, which could have implications for children needing to work to contribute to a household's income:

> **"The main problems are drinking and playing cards. So parents show a bad example. [The children] need role models. The main problem is drinking between 4pm and 9pm. Every day some people look for work in the community just to get some money so they can start drinking and then fighting."**
> Community member, *Terai* district

Parents described a strong association between high alcohol use and poor education outcomes: children were less likely to go to school if their parents drank alcohol, and, if individuals were not educated well, they were more likely to drink alcohol. Tackling issues around alcoholism in such communities would need in-depth research into causes, including links to the loss of traditional semi-nomadic lifestyles and the rapid establishment of new migration patterns. It is interesting to note that these issues reflect wider global and national trends whereby the epidemiological profile of low- and middle-income countries is shifting from communicable to non-communicable diseases (such as cancer, cardiovascular disease and diabetes) which are associated with lifestyle-related choices (as well as environmental and genetic factors) such as tobacco use and harmful use of alcohol (Bhandari et al 2014).

Conclusion

With the number of dropouts particularly high among indigenous/minority groups (in 2007 there was a 50% dropout rate at Grade 1, compared to a national rate of children remaining in education until Grade 5 of nearly 80% by 2004), and a mainstream education system that risks putting minority children at a disadvantage, it seems less likely that enrolment, retention rates and learning outcomes for these children will significantly improve in the long term unless important questions around the medium and type of education that they need are engaged with and addressed by development organisations and state institutions (Taylor, 2010). There are important questions for international development organisations around how they engage with current global debates in education development, particularly in terms of their stance on what education should 'look like' for indigenous and marginalised communities.

At local level, ensuring that volunteers are aware of the global debates in education, such as non-school-based education, mother-tongue learning or education that incorporates indigenous knowledge, is important to ensure volunteers are given tools to reflect on the appropriateness of their approach and assess the specific needs of different communities.

Volunteers may be able to work flexibly in such contexts, responding to the specific needs of the communities they are based in. However, the contextual complexities and variances across schools and communities raise important learning points. Firstly, the need to build in an adaptive capacity to interventions, so that emerging issues can be tackled and not treated as an aside, even if they are not part of the original programme design. Second, the need for sufficient time and depth to allow for the often very specific and different needs of marginalised communities to be responded to. And finally, the need for a holistic approach, that takes into account complex social, livelihood and migration issues, and uses a combination of interventions that cut across disciplines and use a variety of expertise to tackle these.

Implications

- Without tackling fundamental questions about the content and medium of education, there is a risk that the long-term learning outcomes of certain groups will be limited.
- Socio-economic barriers remain for children in some communities, which have implications for the long-term enrolment and retention of the hardest-to-reach. The link between these barriers and migration add further complications.
- Programmes with a wider educational focus (i.e. non-school based education) and a wider overall focus (i.e. that engage with livelihood issues) could be more adaptive to these challenges and tackle underlying issues that prevent the hardest-to-reach being educated.

Investing in volunteer wellbeing

In Western discourse, wellbeing is often described as the sense of doing well and feeling good (Aked et al, 2009). What contributes to wellbeing encompasses both people's circumstances (e.g. their material situation and social context) and their own personal resources (e.g. physical health, self-esteem). This chapter explores factors that can affect volunteer wellbeing and how volunteer organisations respond to these. Given the high number of international volunteers who do not complete their placement (at around 30% for VSO) and the implications of this at community level, questions are raised about the role of organisations working with volunteers in investing in volunteer wellbeing.

Wellbeing vs reaching the most remote communities

It is often difficult for organisations working through volunteers to predict what will affect wellbeing: there is a lot of interaction between people's circumstances (e.g. social context and cultural norms) and their own personal resources, meaning that some individuals flourish in situations that others may find challenging. However, it is worth noting the contextual factors that volunteers working in the *Terai* district felt made it a relatively difficult place to live in. For example, there is the extreme climate, relative isolation (Kathmandu is a 20-hour bus journey or US$300 flight away), small international community, low level of spoken English, sporadic episodes of political unrest and lack of open space to get away from it all (unlike in the hills where walking is possible, the area is too hot for most of the year). In contrast, the hill district has a temperate climate, is a three-hour bus journey from Pokhara, Nepal's second largest city (and popular tourist destination), and has a significantly larger international volunteer presence, including VSO volunteers based in adjoining districts.

Factors affecting decisions to leave a placement early are highly individualised, and the relatively small numbers of volunteers in different districts make it difficult to accurately compare the contextual affects. However, the higher rate of early leavers from the *Terai* district, where most of the the international education volunteers did not complete their placement, is of note. In the second phase (2011–14), four of the six international volunteers placed in the district left before completing 75% of their placement (in the hill district, one of three international education volunteers did not complete the placement). In informal discussions with the *Terai* district volunteers, they described how aspects of the location, such as a lack of anonymity, could bring other (more personal) issues to the surface.

Organisations' objectives (and donors' preferences) for working in the hardest-to-reach or most marginalised areas need to be balanced against the challenges of living in communities such as the *Terai*, particularly when a project is designed to work with multiple volunteers at different levels (the absence of one volunteer having implications for the effectiveness and sustainability of the work of the others).

While consideration is given to issues around security and accessibility, wider factors that may affect wellbeing also need to be taken into account when placing volunteers. For example, the effects of being a young, unmarried female volunteer in a conservative, remote district, or how a low level of Nepali can be isolating in communities where little English is spoken. For example, even though VSO has mechanisms in place to ensure major incidences are reported and dealt with effectively, and a volunteer network to give support and advice, it can be the low-level, frequently occurring incidents which can become a strain, and limit the options available for everyday living. One volunteer describes how during a previous placement, a younger female volunteer had experienced ongoing unwanted attention:

> **"I think it is more difficult being a young, single, female here. [One young female] volunteer envied my freedom. It is so much easier for me – I could go out and have a drink, there was no hidden agenda but with her it was not possible, almost all of the time she got hassled, telephone calls etc."**
> VSO volunteer, *Terai*

> **"It was hard, men would run on the street and just ask for my name, some married men also would approach me. It was a bit risky… at first it was scary actually."**
> VSO volunteer (other district)

At the same time, there is a risk that concentrating volunteers in districts where their wellbeing is more likely to be maintained or fostered may result in international development organisations failing to reach the remotest and most marginalised communities. While it is difficult to accurately map the geographical location of international volunteers, this tendency can be observed at local and national level. For example, four major international volunteer organisations have volunteers placed in the hill district which is ranked 24th out of 73 districts in Nepal, compared with only two in the *Terai* district despite its lower ranking of 40th. At the local level, for security and practical reasons (and for wellbeing), VSO volunteers are usually based in the district headquarters, –which can be vastly more affluent than the rest of the district, especially in the hill district, which has benefited from an influx of remittance in recent years.

Volunteer–volunteer relationships

Another factor that international volunteers reported affected wellbeing was the relationships with the international volunteers they worked with. Where relationships were good and supportive between volunteers, this could greatly affect wellbeing, as one volunteer from a different district explains:

> Researcher: ***"How important was the team for you?"***
> VSO volunteer: **"Ridiculously important. We worked so well together, we were all very good. I would have left a lot earlier if we didn't have that."**
> (Interview with VSO volunteer)

However, where good relationships were missing, this was an often unanticipated strain on volunteers. In both the hill and *Terai* districts (and other districts) relationships between other volunteers were cited as a major cause of illbeing. One volunteer commented: "difficulties in the team can make things unbearably difficult" (VSO volunteer). The causes of poor relations between volunteers are many and varied: different professional approaches and/or approach to and understanding of development; conflicting dominant cultural characteristics; difficult personality mixes; different (perceived) motivations for volunteering; different reactions to a new and different environment with possibly challenging conditions; and competition between volunteers trying to make impact in a relatively short time-frame were some of the underlying issues observed over the two-year period of this project. Constructing a functioning team that will flourish in a testing environment poses a major challenge for organisations working with volunteers.

Long-term relationships with communities

The role of partner organisations and local individuals (e.g. the language teacher, landlords) is often overlooked but can be hugely important for volunteers, particularly in communities with a small international community. Observations in communities have shown how indispensable certain individuals can be in helping the volunteer to make links in the community, to assimilate culturally and maintain their own wellbeing. A language teacher in the *Terai* district for example, has been informally helping volunteers from a number of international organisations for over ten years.

Informal relationships can be a lifeline for volunteers, but these networks can take a long time to develop in a community, and are often based on long-term trust in the organisation as well as in the individual volunteer. During *Valuing Volunteering Nepal* fieldwork for example, community members often gave access to spaces and resources, which may not have been possible had there been no connection with an organisation that had been working in the district for a number of years and was well known. For example, during digital storytelling sharing sessions, local communities made their own homes available for screenings, ensured there was an electricity supply and provided refreshments. Yet, such contributions can go unrecognised. In the most challenging areas, relying on the goodwill of partner organisations and local individuals above and beyond their terms of agreement is not conducive to ensuring volunteers are fully supported emotionally, practically and professionally at the local level. In recognition of this, VSO Nepal is currently recruiting permanent staff members to be based in the districts to support programmes on the ground.

Perceptions and receptiveness

Generally in Nepal, there is a welcoming attitude to international volunteers, particularly away from the more touristic districts where there are high numbers of 'voluntourists'. While volunteers may have very personal reasons for leaving early, it is important to note that this may not only impact on the programme, but can also lead to a change of perception about volunteers and the volunteer organisation more widely. The community's reaction to early leavers in the *Terai* provides a cautionary tale for organisations like VSO. Although the work of individual volunteers has been highly praised and valued, questions have been raised about the intentions of volunteers and volunteer organisations. As one teacher explains:

> **"The volunteers take two or three months introductions, become familiar, and then start (properly) for another one month and then go back to their country. We believed in the volunteers so much but now the faith in them has gone. They should come with that feeling that they will be here for 2 years. Not that they come here to visit the tourist places and then leave."**
> Teacher, *Terai* district

Faith in the altruistic values of volunteers can be a key feature of building trust and mobilising the community. International development organisations face challenges in maintaining communities' faith in areas where there are a high number of early leavers.

Conclusion

While there are many different factors that affect volunteers' wellbeing and their decision to continue or leave their placement, international development organisations need to ensure that they have sufficiently invested in volunteers' wellbeing, and carefully considered what factors (e.g. contextual factors, relational factors) may affect this. If international development organisations are not pro-active in maintaining volunteer wellbeing, there are implications for the success of current and future interventions. When working in particularly challenging regions, a different strategy may be required to ensure that volunteers can live and work effectively there.

Volunteers usually work in teams. Finding ways to foster teamwork, for example by shifting to an emphasis on placing teams rather than individuals, and increasing training on how to work in inter-cultural teams, may be necessary, yet challenging given the limitations placed on international development organisations in terms of available volunteers.

Volunteers often rely on an informal network of community members that allows them to live full and engaged lives. Maintaining good relations with communities and finding ways to recognise their ongoing support, and realising the traction that having an organisational presence can have, is important. Such informal networks take time and trust to develop, which calls into question, how long should international development organisations focus on certain districts?

Implications

- Volunteer selection processes need to consider key factors that affect wellbeing – for example, the ability to work in multicultural teams with a variety of professionals, the ability to learn a language.
- Whilst recognising that early cessation of placements can be due to personal reasons, if international development organisations do not take a holistic view of wellbeing, sufficiently understanding its contributing factors and invest in these, impact may be limited due to a continued high rate of early leavers.
- A high rate of early leavers can affect community perceptions of volunteers and their buy-in to projects.

4. Reflections on the process

This section explores lessons learned from the inquiries undertaken in the *Terai* and hill districts and the action-research process in the *Terai*. It highlights aspects of the process which may be useful for future planning.

What did it achieve?

The broad *initial inquiry* and *education-focused inquiry* enabled the gathering of in-depth information in a short time frame. The workshops enabled the volunteers to understand issues that were affecting the communities that may not have been known before. For example, volunteers later said they had not known about the strict hierarchy that existed in the semi-urban school among teachers, or the alcohol problems that were affecting livelihoods and therefore school attendance in the semi-rural community. Prior to placement, volunteers receive in-depth information about the local context they will work in. However, this inquiry process raised questions around the need for mechanisms that allow volunteers to gather specific and relevant information from the *community* and the tools needed to do this during their placement. It is interesting to note that organisations such as Peace Corps require volunteers to conduct a *village situational analysis* at the start of their placements which includes community profiling, and an analysis of existing activities and interventions, and areas of opportunity.

There were a number of positive outcomes from the *action-research* aspect of the process. Certainly, providing a space for discussion and reflection on findings generated many new insights and deepened the inquiry (as shown above). Providing a neutral space, facilitated by an individual (the writer) who was relatively neutral and detached from the setting, was in some ways useful in terms of discussing issues around ethnicity and caste, and in encouraging parents (who at one school had previously reported feeling that they were not welcome) to actively participate. At the follow-up meetings, the number of participants continued to increase and the communities' engagement in the project was positive, with between 30 and 40 participants returning after the first meeting. The reasons for this increase in attendance are unclear – it was perhaps that by this stage parents and teachers were more aware of the forum and the facilitator better known in the community.

Given that most parents did not know about the VSO education project prior to their involvement in the research, their willingness to be involved in the process and the positive spin-offs from engaging with the community should be noted. For example, although not fully attributable to the action-research process, following one meeting an early child development parent–teacher group was formed and they were able to work with the VSO volunteer and Aasaman organisation to make infrastructure changes to the ECD classes. Indeed a key aspect of the groups was that a wide variety of stakeholders could be included.

On reflection, it was important that there were tangible outcomes to some of the inquiry lines. An example is the infrastructure project which was first discussed at the action-research meetings and led to the establishment of a separate group that included the partner organisation, international volunteer and community and that went on to raise funds and lobby local officials. This grew beyond the boundaries of the process, but it is interesting to note the role of the meetings as catalyst for this longer-term project.

The *action-research* process also allowed us to test assumptions and adapt theories of change in real time. For example, in the semi-rural school, at the first meeting one point discussed was that parents who were illiterate seemed less likely to send their children to school. Parents and teachers felt that they could encourage parents to attend literacy classes as a long-term aim to improve the culture around valuing education in the community. Coincidentally, there were literacy classes beginning shortly after the meeting and several members of the group agreed to attend and encourage others to join them. At the next meeting, while four of the participants had attended classes, they reflected that learning outcomes were mixed. The literacy teacher could not speak *Rana Tharu* and the participants found Nepali difficult to understand and learn without being instructed in their mother tongue. Furthermore, the parents reported that some women's movement was restricted by their husbands and they were not allowed to leave the house to attend the classes. We discussed how our theory of change could be adapted in light of these insights. The VSO management volunteer who worked closely with the district education office agreed to speak with his colleagues about the need for literacy teachers who could speak languages other than Nepali. It was more difficult to tackle issues around gender relations in the community, particularly as this relates to long-established cultural norms, but had the action-research process continued long-term, this could have formed a further inquiry line.

From the digital storytelling workshop and sharing sessions, the central achievement was lessons learnt in how to effectively evaluate a volunteer programme in a way that gave participants the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and for their participation to be valued and their learning and insights shared. The process encouraged participants to be open (although there are some caveats to this which are discussed in the digital storytelling paper), and also arguably challenged existing power dynamics, something that is not usually central to evaluation processes. The process gave the participants a voice in spaces where it would not usually be heard in full, if at all. For example, by showing the stories at the meeting attended by government officials, NGOs and INGOs, their experiences and issues could be shared and their voice given strength, even though it was difficult for the participants to be involved directly in the discussion. Indeed – at the end of the meeting, one participant approached the government official, asking about provisions for her school.

The digital stories also led to the start of action. At the digital storytelling workshop, exposure visits were arranged with the district education office, NGOs and INGOs after the stories and discussion had highlighted the change that had taken place at the schools, and the lack of the sharing and learning from this experience that had occurred in the district. This recognition could be important for morale, further investment and the sustainability of the project.

Finally, the method was also useful in informing the community about changes that had happened, and engaging them in the evaluation and learning.

Figure 17. Screening and sharing sessions in communities and with local stakeholders

What was learnt?

The process provided many insights into the challenges of establishing an action-research process and using a participatory approach – learning points are outlined below.

In terms of the action-research process's role in tackling identified issues, as discussed above, this worked best when there was a tangible and achievable outcome that could be met through community mobilisation. Where issues were more complex and/or touched on underlying tensions and discrimination, progress was more difficult. For example, issues around alcoholism and caste relations were complex and related to the wider political, economic and historical context of the area. Such issues required long-term engagement, the capacity building of community members to tackle them, and the expertise of relevant professionals (e.g. health workers) who were not available. Community members were engaged, but their high workloads given the rural location and agricultural nature of their work made it difficult to develop leaders. Given that the existing VSO education programme was clearly defined and established, focused on a specific area (education), used volunteers with clearly outlined roles and responsibilities, and had its own monitoring and evaluation requirements, there was understandably little flexibility or space for volunteers or the partner organisation to fully engage with the action-research process in addition to their existing workloads.

In addition, the fact that the action-research facilitator (i.e. the writer) was not embedded in the local community or even district was challenging, and further exacerbated by other aspects of the researcher's identity such as nationality and ethnicity. This was useful in some respects – for example, being separate from the existing programme and locality helped to ensure neutrality, allowing for an openness when discussing sensitive issues, particularly around caste and hierarchies, which might have been difficult for participants to discuss had the writer been working full time in the community. However, it took at least five visits to the community to build relationships with community members, and to gain a fuller understanding of them and their communities. Unfortunately, shortly after this stage both the VSO education projects in these districts and the *Valuing Volunteering Nepal* research process were ending. Prior to this, there was an expectation amongst both the community members and schools that involvement in the process would bring investment. For example, at one session the head teacher had listed all the infrastructural changes the school needed and presented them, despite having previously clarified that the project would bring no funds directly.

There were issues and actions that did overlap with the existing VSO education programme such as the enrolment campaigns. In such cases the process did perhaps support and strengthen the programme: for example, the enrolment campaign involved parents in the planning and implementation stage, and an action-research meeting following the campaign allowed the group to evaluate the campaign and become aware of any unintentional side effects (such as its appeal to private school children's parents). However, the overlap sometimes caused difficulties, particularly for the international volunteers permanently placed in the district. One international volunteer, who began the placement after the start of the action-research process, expressed some concerns that the action research overlapped with their work and that it might be difficult for them to negotiate their new role. Indeed, for the volunteers, despite assurances that the process was not an evaluation of their individual efforts, the process may have felt like a judgement or evaluation of their progress. A lack of anonymity given the small number of international volunteers exacerbated this. Some international volunteers said that having another individual (the writer) involved in the process, but only periodically, could make them feel left out or discouraged, because they felt attention was given to the facilitator at the expense of those dealing with the day-to-day issues in the community.

The inquiry and action-research process also raised issues more directly related to *how* volunteering is 'done', such as the way that volunteers and their counterparts worked together (e.g. issues around language and communication and the transfer or imparting of knowledge rather than its co-production). While the action-research process had begun as a way to see how volunteers could be or were being responsive to community needs, and the impact of volunteer programmes on the community, moving towards action around some of these arising issues was difficult because of the high number of early leavers. By the third action-research meeting, all four of the original volunteers had left and only one volunteer remained, who had begun their placement just a month previously.

Finally, the **digital storytelling** aspect of the action-research process had some positive outcomes in terms of community engagement with the VSO project, widening the boundaries of and deepening evaluation, and enabling experiences to be shared beyond the boundaries of the focus schools. However, there were insights around the timing of undertaking such an exercise – those involved in the project felt that there would have been benefits of creating digital stories at an earlier stage. Both the issues raised in the stories, and issues raised when sharing the stories offered insights that would have been valuable. When sharing the stories with the communities for example, community members discussed the difficulties of making change happen – one participant commenting that despite many livelihood trainings, the new skills never led to anything. Community members also felt that they had more stories to tell, the female community health volunteer in one village commenting: "I like (the story) a lot, but we have more stories to tell. I want to tell the story of how we don't have toilets and water..."

The digital storytelling's full potential was not realised because both the *Valuing Volunteering Nepal* and VSO education project were ending imminently in the district. Further support to either create stories, or explore further the issues raised, or implement actions could not be provided. Although the workshop built participants' capacity, there was not the technological expertise, equipment or sufficient time to train them as trainers which would be required for the method to be fully owned by the community and used again. This raised questions such as: Would it have been possible to create such stories at the midpoint of a programme? Does this point to the value of longer-term engagement with communities by the volunteer and development sector in order to tackle problems holistically?

Overall, the action-research process raised major questions about how such a process 'fits' in terms of programming and what it is there to achieve. As discussed, there were certainly challenges from 'layering change on change' – with the action-research process a disruption or intervention, sitting atop an existing intervention (Burns, 2007). There were also benefits, given the unique entry points and legitimacy given by working alongside existing volunteers and an existing programme. However, ultimately, the action-research process could have been more effective and far-reaching had it been fully integrated with the programme from its inception. One long-term legacy of the action-research process may be that in-depth analysis and learning from this experience was provided during the programme design stage of a new VSO Nepal integrated project, highlighting the systemic issues identified by the inquiry stage and the benefits of using an adaptive approach to tackle these.

Conclusion

This case study attempts to understand how, when and why volunteering impacts on poverty. In doing so, it highlights aspects of volunteering that were important in bringing about change, and also issues that challenged the impact of volunteering. The study points towards how development organisations working through volunteers may tackle these.

Central to this is to try to understand the conditions and processes required to successfully implement child-centred inclusive learning practices which improve the learning outcomes for the most marginalised children. This case study has highlighted a number of contradictions in the application of this policy, and a number of assumptions underpinning the endorsement of this approach by international development organisations, donors and the education sector more widely.

One contradiction is that while at the heart of child-centred learning is a constructivist education philosophy – where students are viewed as active participants in their own learning, and the teacher as a guide to help students discover their own meaning – certain aspects of the intervention, and the way that some volunteer and counterparts interpret their roles, risk contradicting these principles. Basing the implementation of capacity-building teachers in child-centred learning methods on a foundation that emphasises the need for teachers to be full and active participants in their *own* learning is vital if they are to be able to do this with their own students.

The *process* is key, and without organisational systems that support, monitor and evaluate this process, there is a risk of a subtle shift in emphasis, whereby a hierarchy of knowledge is set up between volunteer and teacher. This is not to undermine the capacity that many volunteers have in overcoming these power imbalances, particularly through building trusting and supporting relationships with the teachers they work with, which can lead to the development of a more reflective approach and the perception of the volunteer as a resource to use, rather than an expert who trains. Furthermore, it is important to recognise organisational systems which foster this, such as pre-placement training and orientations with the individuals and institutions the volunteers worked with. Nevertheless, without an organisational shift to ensure that interventions are founded on more constructivist principles, the collaborative relationships operate within narrow parameters and may ultimately only serve as very effective conduits to transfer information and build individuals' confidence, rather than allowing for joint meaning to be explored and an approach to be jointly devised.

What is misleading is that the outcomes of the two approaches may look the same – e.g. group work taking place in the classroom, children's work displayed on the walls, resources being used – but the implications for long term sustainability are very different. If the child-centred learning approach is reduced to a set of techniques, or tools, that are taught to the teachers to use in the classroom, there is far less scope for progression, and a far greater risk that new techniques won't be used once challenges (e.g. a lack of resources, a growth in class size) are encountered.

There has to be meaningful engagement with what is meant by child-centred learning and why it is used at every level for it to move beyond a set of activities to be implemented. VSO, like many other organisations, seems to have made a major assumption about what education for the poorest should look like. As Sriprakash (2012) notes, there has been "little engagement by reformers and researchers with the social, economic and political assumptions underlying such models of education". Pedagogy is not neutral, and there are critics that see such interventions as a "process of westernization disguised as quality and effective teaching" (Sriprakash, 2012). Is there an understanding at all levels of the organisation of the philosophical underpinnings of child-centred learning? And most importantly, is there an understanding of what its relationship is with development for the poor?

There is an argument that if such interventions are implemented in a way true to child-centred learning principles, that accusations of 'Westernisation' might be irrelevant. For example, a child-centred approach is not necessarily at odds with approaches that focus on indigenous learning – it sits well with constructivist principles of discovering learning and cooperative learning. Perhaps more of an issue then is the way that these principles are interpreted by the development sector and government, and implemented in the mainstream education system.

This study highlights an important tension for development organisations to consider: that even in cases where change happens, and there are positive outcomes in terms of the quality of teaching and access to school for the majority, this does not necessarily mean that these gains will be enjoyed by the poorest and most marginalised children. There is a difference between improving school effectiveness and the learning outcomes of children that are able to attend school, and addressing the very different needs of the hardest-to-reach groups. For such groups, different strategies may be required that take into account the systemic drivers, such as insecure livelihoods, complex migration patterns and socio-cultural behaviours (e.g. alcohol abuse), that may continue to keep them from school. Such strategies require a broadening of intervention parameters: a multidisciplinary approach which uses multiple expertise to tackle these issues holistically.

Importantly, however, this also raises questions about how responsive or appropriate mainstream education can be to the needs of these children. Is a more creative approach required that recognises the unique needs, language, culture and traditions of certain communities and develops an education system responsive to these? For example, there may be scope in exploring alternative methods of schooling, e.g. non-school based, for these disadvantaged groups.

Finally, the research shows that assuming there is a correspondence between the priorities and aims of the different stakeholders involved is not always accurate. There are issues in terms of the different levels of engagement from certain education practitioners – reflecting wider issues around, for example, teacher motivation, the impact of politics in education and teacher recruitment. However, even when stakeholders are responsive to an intervention, the motivations for engaging may be different: their priority may be to improve overall school effectiveness and be responsive to the wishes of the majority. This means that interventions may have unintended side effects (e.g. a move to English medium) which has implications for the inclusion of the most marginalised children.

The contextual complexities and variances across schools and communities raise important learning points. Volunteers have a unique role in the development ecosystem, particularly because of the combination of being embedded, whilst at the same time occupying an external identity. Development organisations working with volunteers need to ensure that the unique aspects of volunteering are fostered so that they can work *with* this complexity: understanding the specific context, engaging with power imbalances, and being aware of and adapting to the particular needs of educators, communities and learners (even when these may be conflicting) to ensure that impacts are enjoyed even by the very hardest to reach.

Key Implications

Volunteer approaches and their impact

- Given the importance of 'softer' skills such as relationship building, mentoring, understanding and reflecting on contextual issues, it important that organisations working with volunteers consider these skills during selection processes (as well as 'hard' or technical skills).
- Development organisations need to ensure international volunteers have sufficient time and space to develop relationships and understand the needs of those with whom they work.
- Development organisations should adopt a wider gaze that includes changes that occurred outside the classroom and beyond the professional sphere when monitoring and evaluating interventions. This may give a more realistic picture of how change happens.

Collaboration and the co-construction of knowledge

- Development organisations should ensure that volunteers are themselves aware, and are able to emphasise to other practitioners, the underpinning aims and philosophy of child-centred learning (this has implications for language training, time spent in schools, the programmatic approach, etc).
- Volunteers should be made aware of the wider debates in global education development policy and research. This could facilitate reflection on their own approach and understanding of child-centred learning in relation to current global discourse.
- Organisational systems should focus on process outcomes and look carefully at the unintended power imbalances that may affect programme implementation.
- Widening the parameters of programmes may be needed in order to include projects which lend themselves to joint or community-led working.

Power dynamics in sharing, sustaining and replicating change

- Interventions to place sufficient focus on the ability of individuals and schools to cascade new ideas and learning. This could be supported by incentives for both 'beacon' and 'follower' schools.
- Development organisations to investigate opportunities for this to be supported by the use of participatory tools such as digital storytelling – where the experiences of the 'first' individual or school to be impacted by an intervention could be shared more widely.

Volunteer combinations

- Development organisations to consider how different types of volunteers (international, national, local) can practically work together. This may require additional travel expenses, additional language provision, or the inclusion of intermediaries (e.g. national volunteers) who can liaise between local and international volunteers.

The impact of politics

- Development organisations to consider whether international volunteers' relative neutrality could be used more effectively or purposively in highly political or divided contexts.

Responsiveness to schools' needs

- Impact may be limited if improvements in teaching practices are not accompanied by improvements to the school environment. Opportunities to work in collaboration with the community, other donors or organisations to improve infrastructure could be part of the design of child-centred learning programmes.

Responsiveness to wider trends in education

- Development organisations to ensure programme design includes mechanisms that enable volunteers to understand system dynamics, and the impact of the intervention in relation to these. For example, the initial stage of the intervention could include a multi-stakeholder inquiry which investigates the different needs and aims of each group of stakeholders.

Responsiveness to the needs of the most marginalised children

- Development organisations to ensure there is a clear understanding of the relationship between a child-centred learning approach and development for the poor.
- Development organisations to widen programme parameters so that interventions include the necessary measures and expertise to ensure issues are tackled holistically.
- Development organisations to consider alternative approaches that accommodate difference and recognise the unique needs, language, culture and traditions of certain communities.

Investing in volunteer wellbeing

- Volunteer selection processes to consider factors that affect general wellbeing – for example, the ability to work in multicultural teams with a variety of professionals, the ability to learn a language.
- Development organisations working with volunteers to consider the length of engagement with communities and how community members' ongoing support of volunteers can be recognised.

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Other outputs related to this case study:

Hacker, E (2014). The National Development Volunteer Service of Nepal. National government volunteers and their impact on poverty alleviation.

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?".

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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