



People First
VSO strategy

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VSO's challenge: the global fight against poverty

Our world is rich enough for everyone to live free from poverty. Yet vast inequality remains – much of it based simply on where someone lives. In 2009, more than 1.4 billion people survived on or below US\$1.25 a day. Rising food and energy costs have resulted in a further two billion people living perilously close to the poverty line.

Poverty means chronic hunger and malnutrition, suffering preventable diseases such as malaria, measles and tuberculosis, and not being able to go to school or a clinic. It means not having land to grow food, a job to earn a living, or access to credit. It often means susceptibility to violence and living in marginal or fragile environments without clean water or sanitation.

But poverty runs even deeper. It's a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity which robs people of the basic capacity to participate effectively in society. It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion – whether of individuals, households or communities.

VSO believes such poverty is unacceptable. That's why we've created our new global strategy to fight it: *People First*.

Signpost to a world without poverty

People First sets out six strategic directions that will enable VSO to channel our energies and significantly increase our impact against poverty. The first three directions help us build on the best of what we do, so we can have a wider reach through better-quality programmes. The remaining three will enable us to be more effective as an organisation, so we can best achieve our aims.

Based on the diverse experiences of VSO stakeholders worldwide, our strategy was developed through an in-depth 12-month consultation process. Implemented through detailed operational plans, it will include regular monitoring and evaluation to ensure we're on target. *People First* isn't a rigid plan – VSO will always remain flexible – but it gives us clear directions for working towards our ambitious goal: a world without poverty.

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Our role: bringing people together

People First is based around VSO's distinctive role in international development. We're a leading independent charity which places committed volunteers with carefully selected organisations, so their skills can generate maximum results. We deliver relevant and cost-effective programmes that fight poverty around the world.

Since it was founded in 1958, VSO has encountered poverty in countless forms and contexts, and worked to combat it. In response, we've evolved into a modern, international organisation: one global VSO.

Our international volunteers transfer knowledge and experience not locally available, while the national volunteers who we support use their skills and cultural understanding to make an impact in their own countries. We also create specific opportunities for young people and those with origins in developing nations but who now live elsewhere in the world ('diaspora' communities), linking them to their country of heritage. So far, more than 40,000 VSO volunteers of 94 nationalities have brought about lasting change by sharing their skills in over 90 countries.

Partnership is a key feature of the way in which we work with local and national agencies, as we know that this helps bring about lasting change. The two-way knowledge exchange between volunteers and our partner organisations has a life-long impact on both. Through programmes shaped by poor people's needs, we develop individual people's strengths, helping them change their lives and transform their communities. The energy and insight our volunteers inject into their own communities on

their return inspires others to help improve poor people's lives – meaning double momentum in the fight against poverty and double value for every pound VSO spends.

Through working across the world with partners who share our goals, from grassroots organisations to governments, we have expanded our reach – not only geographically but also in how we work. In response to our partners' needs, VSO recruits volunteers globally and deploys them in a range of ways, from short-term assignments to long-term placements.

In some locations, our staff work alongside local organisations to place international volunteers. In others, we work with partners to increase the impact local people can have as national volunteers in their own communities. These partnerships bring inside understanding of local cultures and challenges, increasing our ability to bring about lasting long-term change in the most cost-effective way.

In short, we are one global network, unified behind a common goal:

Our vision is for a world without poverty.

Our mission is to bring people together to fight poverty.





By linking people together in unique ways, VSO enables them to share life-changing ideas, perspectives and practices – knowledge we harness for policymakers and all those with influence (from communities to the media) so they too can achieve maximum impact in the fight against poverty. Together with our supporters, we also campaign for global justice, share knowledge across our networks and help raise awareness of crucial development issues. We are passionate about bringing people together for lasting change.

By 2010, VSO's work with our partners had reached over 26 million people's lives. Together, our impact includes:

- improving the quality of life of over seven million people living with HIV and AIDS (especially women) by delivering access to better quality healthcare services;
- helping more than 12.2 million children (almost half girls) escape the poverty they were born into by giving them a better education;
- giving more than three million people, particularly women and girls, access to better quality health services, focusing on maternal, sexual and reproductive health;
- helping around two million poor and marginalised people sell their goods so they can earn an income, through our support for 138 partner organisations;
- raising over a million disabled people's awareness of their rights and helping them access education or health services, through strengthening the capacity of 75 partner organisations;
- helping almost a million people develop inclusive policies and governance systems, so disadvantaged people can participate in decisions affecting their lives.

We are constantly adapting and exploring new ways to build a global volunteering movement that meets the needs of an ever-changing world. Our new strategy, *People First*, defines the unique contribution we make in the global fight against poverty and highlights the directions we are taking as an organisation to best achieve our goals.

Our values underpin and support our strategy and guide us in our everyday work:

People are the best agents of change

We are passionate about putting the right people in the right place at the right time. Our people transform lives and communities, including their own. We deeply respect the courage and commitment such profound change requires.

Knowledge is our most powerful tool

Change is best brought about by people sharing knowledge. This is why we are committed to ongoing, reciprocal learning. Using knowledge in the right way helps us engage people, advocate and influence others at all levels.

Progress is only possible through working together

We always work collaboratively with our partners. Our aim is to be as inclusive as possible, listening to all our stakeholders. We understand that diversity makes our projects and our organisation stronger. Working closely with developing communities helps narrow the distance between them and our donors, and is the best way of ensuring our projects continue transforming lives over the long term.

By thinking globally, we can change the world

The more we act like a global movement, the more influential we will be on the international stage and the greater our ability to eradicate poverty. Local contributions from VSO and all our partners come together with a common goal and one voice that is confident and consistent across the world.



How will we fight poverty?

VSO's *Theory of Change* explains how we make a distinct difference to poor communities and ensure our contribution is a lasting one.

Our main resource is, and has always been, the people we work with – those in our partner organisations and the volunteers who support them. While our volunteering programme has become more complex and diverse, we remain an organisation that focuses on the contribution that people make to development.

VSO's contribution

To end poverty, the relationship between socially excluded women and men and those who hold power must change. Poor people must have access to essential services. They must be able to work together to improve their lives, and have access to information and ideas that link them to the wider world.

By bringing people together through a global volunteering movement, we contribute to change from the ground up. Organisations of, and for, poor people can make a greater impact when their staff gain new skills and create ideas for working differently. Communities can change things for the better when ordinary people are motivated to step forward and offer leadership. By working with our partners and volunteers, VSO helps bring about such change:

- by improving the skills of one individual, we can increase the effectiveness of a local organisation;
- by bringing fresh perspective to a problem, we create new approaches to finding solutions;
- by making a lasting difference to an individual's aspirations, we can, over a lifetime, help transform an entire community.

How we work

Our development experience has led us to concentrate on four main dimensions of change – conditions necessary if poor and marginalised people's capabilities to improve their lives are to be strengthened and their rights realised:

- improving poor people's access to quality services;
- promoting the development and implementation of policies to support poor people;
- ensuring the participation of socially excluded groups in determining their own path to development;
- building organisational capacity to support these aims.

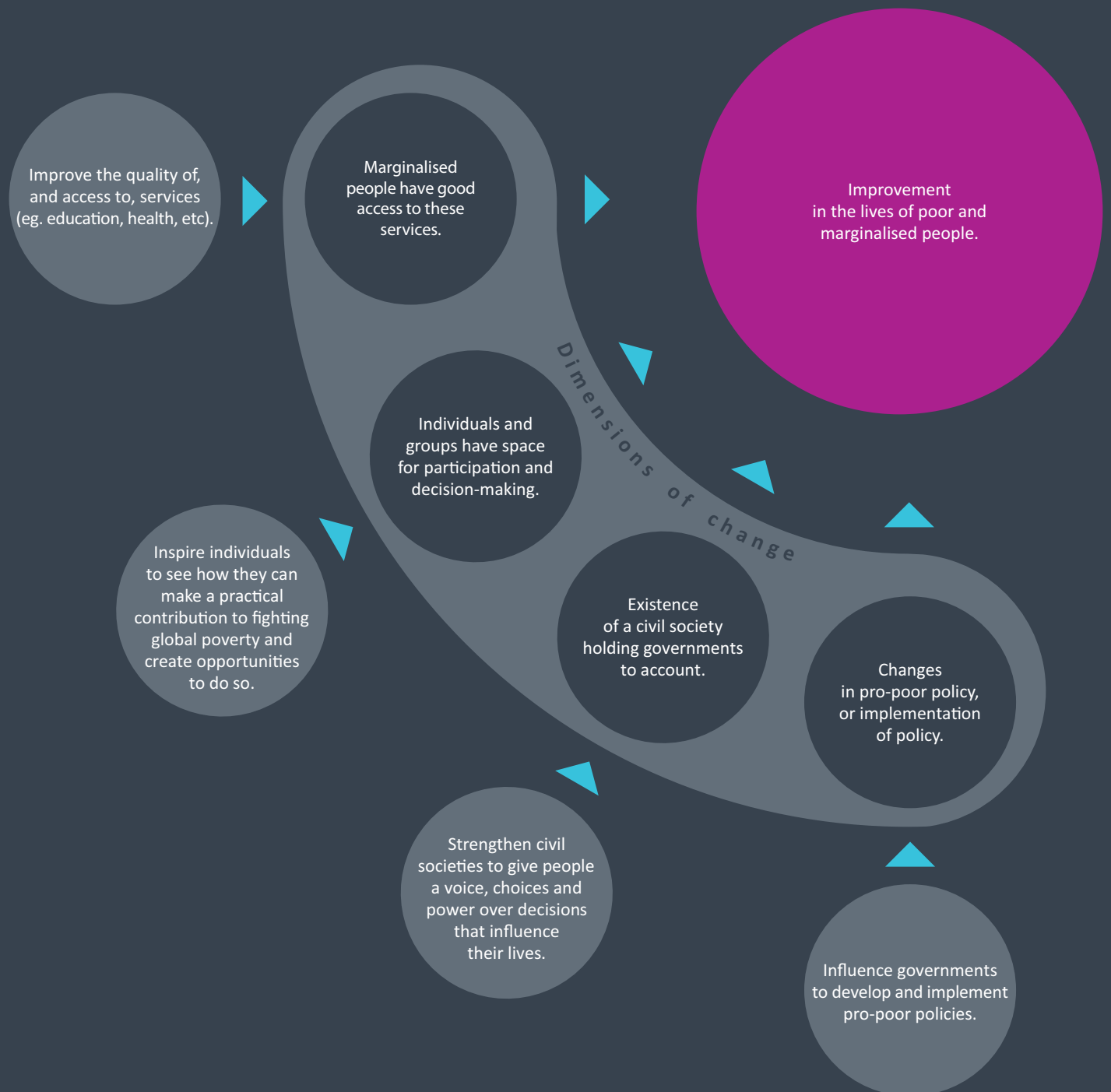
Our programmes focus on improvement in one or more of these change dimensions.

Bringing people together

By giving people an opportunity to volunteer within or outside their communities, VSO helps them become the drivers of change. Poor and marginalised people can become active citizens, able to shape their own development. We bring people together to achieve lasting change in the following ways:

- we motivate people to contribute in the local or global community to fight poverty;
- we understand organisations and work with them to progress towards their aims;
- we recruit and supply people who can deliver essential services;
- we bring knowledge to help those responsible to decide on and implement policies;
- we share learning and experience between people, organisations and governments.

VSO's Theory of Change



By bringing people together
we contribute to change
from the ground up.



Our strategy: People First

The worldwide debate about how globalisation can benefit poor people has raged for 30 years. VSO's experience shows that lasting poverty reduction takes place when poor and marginalised people are empowered to take ownership of their own development process. We know that a country's economic growth does not necessarily filter down to its poorest citizens, and that there is need for growth policies that specifically reach poor people and emphasise human and social development to reduce inequality.

Given the right opportunities, and by learning and working together towards a common goal, people will work their way out of poverty. Our strategy, *People First*, brings together the best of our work in many different circumstances around the world and builds on it, so we can help everyone access the opportunities they need to change their lives.

Our programmes have taught us that to have the greatest success in fighting poverty, we need to simplify our organisational structures, value and listen to our partners and volunteers, expand our range of interventions and grow our funding base. Only by doing this can we work collaboratively as a team to build a connected, agile and global network, responsive to changing needs and maximising our contribution to the fight against poverty. Across our sector, development assistance and aid efforts also need to be carefully co-ordinated.

People First is designed to align and engage everyone involved with VSO to address these challenges. It sets out our six strategic directions, which will enable us to work towards achieving our ambitious goal: a world without poverty.

Direction one

Putting people at the centre of our work

Poverty is a complex issue that reaches beyond simple economics. It is about the quality of the lives of poor women, men and communities, their dignity and the opportunities they have. To fight poverty effectively, it is essential for us to understand fully the factors affecting each community we work for. By listening to poor people, partners, volunteers and other stakeholders we put the community at the centre of our work.

To achieve this we will:

- identify the people we should be working for. Our analysis will determine all the factors contributing to poverty in each country or region, such as discrimination and access to services, so we can see where our work would have the strongest impact;
- identify the partners we will work with collaboratively. Together with our partners, we will commit to delivering the most appropriate services to the local communities we've identified as most able to benefit from our help;
- understand that poverty does not have one simple solution. To appreciate fully the needs of poor people, we need to listen to all our stakeholders (volunteers, partners, staff, local communities) and take into account existing research. We can then plan the best services, depending on each individual context;
- work through people at all levels. We will encourage people to adapt in order to deliver the right solution for each situation. Our volunteers will build relationships and learn from others.

Direction two

Providing partners with a wider range of support

We will make available an increased range of support to our partners, building on our strength – bringing people together to fight poverty.

To achieve this we will:

- reinforce our relationships with partners, to better understand their needs and progress together towards our common aims;
- offer our partners a wider range of support, including working with international and national volunteers, and identifying when creating links with other partners may be the best response;
- build our ability to connect our staff, volunteers and partners to share knowledge, perspectives, ideas and practices across the VSO network;
- make better use of advocacy in our unique position, using our in-depth understanding of issues at the local level to influence those responsible at national and international levels.



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Direction three

Strategically managing our country portfolio

To ensure VSO works where we can make the biggest difference to fight poverty, we will proactively manage where our resources are placed. We will assess the situation in each country in terms of poverty levels, how effective VSO's work can be in that country and the investment needed.

To achieve this we will:

- focus on supporting the least developed and most fragile states;
- develop transparent and flexible processes to respond to changing situations in individual countries. We will be clear about how to best allocate money and resources to maximise the outcome;
- promote joint programming with other organisations to increase the value for money and reach of our work.



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Direction four Being an agile and cost-effective organisation

We will develop into an organisation fully responsive to changing circumstances and needs in the countries where we work, providing timely and cost-effective services.

To achieve this we will:

- focus our resources where they are needed most to fight poverty;
- reduce our operational costs by investing in technology and simplifying processes in all our interventions (managing volunteers, building partnerships, raising funds, etc). This will enable staff, volunteers and partners to work more efficiently;
- devolve decision-making as closely as possible to the point of impact, helping ensure a timely response. These decisions will be guided by our values and aims as a global organisation.

Direction five Measuring our performance and accountability

We will fully align the VSO network behind our objectives and priorities, to allow people to make the right decisions. To do this, we will measure and evaluate the effectiveness of our work through one global framework that assesses our performance and how transparent and accountable to stakeholders we are in everything we do worldwide.

To achieve this we will:

- develop practical processes in which everyone has a clear understanding of how their work helps achieve our goals;
- give our people clarity in their roles and contributions so we can measure our impact as an organisation and be truly accountable to our partners and the people we serve;
- develop a nurturing environment where VSO people are able to grow and excel in a culture which values transparency, inclusion, flexibility and mutual respect;
- use technology to create and improve connections across the VSO network, sharing knowledge and strengthening one global VSO.

Direction six Growing our global income

We already know the difference we can make to the lives of poor women, men and children, but with the right resources, we have the potential to do much more. To increase our impact in the fight against poverty we will expand our existing fundraising work, to broaden and double our income base.

To achieve this we will:

- win financial support through the quality and distinctiveness of our work, and the assurance with which we talk about it;
- nurture and invest in our fundraising activities, making use of our alliances with donors and partners, and co-ordinating global resources;
- increase funds raised from individuals, the private sector, governments and institutional donors;
- explore the possibility of mergers, acquisitions and commercial income generation where we are confident they will contribute to our overarching goal and help us build our strengths;
- support a culture where VSO staff and volunteers are excited by the part they can play in raising income for VSO's work and are encouraged to get involved in income-generating activities.



Our programmes have taught us that to have the greatest success in fighting poverty, we need to value and listen to our partners and volunteers.

Our unique expertise

Over the years, VSO has concentrated our work across six goal areas, based on the priorities of our partners and needs of the communities in which we work.

As a result, we've developed specialist knowledge and learning in:

- disability;
- education;
- health;
- HIV and AIDS;
- participation and governance;
- secure livelihoods.

Through the implementation of *People First*, we will build on our expertise across all these goal areas and focus our future work on areas most relevant to the people we are working for. Putting people at the centre of our work is our first strategic direction.



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Rising to new challenges

Our new strategy also commits us to strengthening our capabilities in two critical global issues that cut across all our work – ones which cannot be ignored if as an organisation we are to remain relevant to the needs of poor people and win the fight against poverty:

Gender

Women bear a greater burden of poverty than men – 70 per cent of people living in poverty are women. Due to systematic discrimination, women are at greater risk of hunger as they are less able to access education, healthcare, land or credit. Their quality of life is likely to be worse and they are more likely to be victims of physical and sexual violence.

Yet gender biases can also create problems for men, and some groups (for example gay or transgender men) may also be victims of discrimination.

VSO is committed to fighting all types of gender inequality and to challenging discrimination in all areas of our work. In practical terms, this means addressing the needs of groups facing discrimination, by focusing on access to education, healthcare, representation, earning a living, advocacy and giving people a voice. We will choose partners from, and who work with, these groups and whose values on gender match our own.



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Climate change

Our recent experience shows that the impact of climate change, major disasters and a gradual deepening of environmental stresses is placing additional pressure on the lives of poor people. These are the very communities who are least responsible for the cause of the problem, yet with the fewest resources to respond.

As this new challenge unfolds, our programmes will assess the current impact of climate change for poor and marginalised people, analysing their vulnerability to it and the help they need to adapt to its effects. We will do everything possible to prevent climate change from undermining our work, sharing the knowledge we gain with all relevant stakeholders. We will also identify and create opportunities to build local and national government capacity to develop and implement policies that help local communities adapt to new environments.

In addition, we will build our knowledge of the climate change work of other agencies, including governments, donors and non-profit groups. This will allow us to identify opportunities for VSO's involvement that draw on our expertise and unique approach.

Achieving extraordinary change

One global VSO

People First applies across VSO's global federation structure, bringing members together in a network of shared excellence and expertise. Our federation members form international teams to recruit volunteers and raise funds, so we can deliver innovative programmes in countries across the world. To see where VSO is working, visit the map at www.vsointernational.org/map.

People First sets ambitious goals, and in the lifetime of our strategy, we want to triple our impact and improve the quality of what we do. Our reach will increase over time as we grow our network to reach the most disadvantaged people, in places where we believe we can make the greatest difference.

When individual people work together, they can bring about lasting change.

People First: achieving together

VSO knows that when individual people work together towards a common goal, they can bring about lasting change – for themselves and for others. Our strategy firmly puts people first, as we know that through working for, alongside and in partnership with others, we can help eradicate poverty.

That's why we're passionate about bringing people together – because together, we can achieve the extraordinary.



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VSO is a registered charity in England and in
Wales (313757) and in Scotland (SC039117).

UK/March 2011