

# VSO AND PROGRAMME PARTNERSHIPS



Sharing skills  
Changing lives

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# INTRODUCTION

*For VSO, partnership is a mutual long-term commitment between VSO and another organisation to achieve common objectives focused on challenging inequality and exclusion. Partnership is based on a common set of values, equity within the relationship, a shared vision of success and a mutual commitment to working and learning together.*

VSO and Programme Partnerships outlines VSO's approach to working with organisations in Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific. This paper shows how, why and with whom we form partnerships and sets out a set of core shared principles.

We recognise that not all relationships VSO programme offices<sup>1</sup> have with partners reflect all core principles. However, we believe this paper clearly lays out the direction VSO would like to head towards in our programme partnerships. Globally, VSO is making partnership a priority and is looking to improve the quality of the relationships we have with local organisations by reflecting more of our shared values. An implication of this is that VSO will be increasingly directing its limited resources towards the most strategic of our partnerships over the long term, to deepen our impact.

Since 2002, VSO has been developing its approach to partnerships, resulting in this paper and a new Partnership Framework to be launched in 2009. These two resources will assist VSO and partners in setting the strategic direction of our work together and improving the quality of our programme work.

VSO's position on programme partnerships is evolving and is influenced by our ongoing reflection and learning. In November 2008, the integration of VSO and CUSO<sup>2</sup> programmes has provided VSO with opportunities to learn about different ways of working in partnership with Southern organisations. Thus, this paper and the Partnership Framework will be reviewed and updated to incorporate new perspectives and approaches as and when needed.

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- 1 Each country that we work in has a programme office. These offices determine areas of focus (known as programme areas). The broader term programme is used to describe an area of work such as disability or education that we are involved in, in a country.
  - 2 Formerly Canadian University Service Overseas, however, since the 1970s, with CUSO recruiting professionals, it has been known simply by its acronym.

# WHAT IS A PROGRAMME PARTNER?

Programme partners are organisations supported by VSO primarily through volunteers, who assist in the capacity-building and/or advocacy and influencing work of the partner organisation.

We use the term partner to describe organisations VSO is working with as part of a country strategy paper (CSP)<sup>3</sup> or programme area plan (PAP)<sup>4</sup> to achieve results in the areas in which we work. These VSO development goals are: HIV and AIDS, Disability, Health, Participation and Governance, Education and Secure Livelihoods. For more information on our goals, please see *Focus for Change*, VSO's strategic plan.

Addressing inequality and exclusion are themes common to all of VSO's work. Therefore, VSO works with a diverse mix of programme partners to increase the voice of marginalised people and to ensure their rights and perspectives are incorporated into basic services. The type of partner differs from one programme to another, but in general, VSO's programme partners include:

- parts of government ministries, departments and institutions at local, district, provincial/state and national levels (for example schools, training centres, district health services)
- non-governmental organisations (NGOs), National Volunteering organisations, community-based organisations (CBOs), membership organisations such as disabled people's organisations (DPOs) and peer support groups, such as, those living with HIV and AIDS.
- networks, alliances, coalitions, trades unions and other civil society consortiums
- private sector organisations such as cooperatives and small and medium business enterprises.

## OTHER WAYS OF WORKING

VSO also works with organisations to secure funding support (known as resource partners), to recruit international volunteers, and to build networks and coalitions for international advocacy work.

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- 3 A CSP, developed by programme staff and partners, sets out why VSO is working in a country and how we are making a difference to the development of the country over a five-year period.
  - 4 Each CSP is focused usually on a selection of up to three programme areas. The three areas are selected from our development goals; such as disability, health and education. The aims and objectives of our work in each programme area and the strategies for achieving them are detailed in a PAP, which is also for a five-year period.



In Northern countries, VSO works with organisations to support Diaspora volunteering initiatives, and to promote youth engagement through VSO's Global Xchange programme.

Although many of the same principles and methods may apply to these various forms of partnership, this paper is specifically designed to outline the processes for working with programme partners with whom VSO delivers its Programme Area Plans.





# WHY PARTNERSHIPS ARE IMPORTANT TO VSO

VSO cannot work without partners. They ensure a sustainable approach to development and are fundamental to how we work. In our experience, a commitment to joint planning and local ownership results in the most beneficial outcomes for the communities we aim to help, for our partner organisations and for us.

VSO is only one participant in the development process. We work in partnership with many others to maximise our collective impact. This ensures:

- there is local commitment, joint ownership and a strong Southern voice in our work
- we address inequality in a sustainable way by building the capacity of local organisations
- we are making the most efficient use of the limited resources available to VSO and other development actors.



# WORKING WITH PROGRAMME PARTNERS

## CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

Capacity development is one of our distinctive ways of working with partners. For VSO, this means supporting partners in:

- improving the quality of service delivery
- strengthening financial management, human resource development and management skills and expertise in general
- strategic planning and programme development
- monitoring and evaluation
- fundraising and marketing
- supporting partners' work to incorporate an awareness of disability, HIV and AIDS and gender
- developing advocacy skills.







# THE CORE PRINCIPLES OF PARTNERSHIP

VSO has a core set of principles that further define how we work. Although each partner is unique, VSO still identifies and promotes a common approach to partnership by using these principles.

## **WORKING WITH SHARED VALUES AND ETHICS**

Discussions are held between VSO and a cross section of the potential partner organisation at the beginning of a relationship about the core values of both organisations. VSO sees this discussion of values as the starting point to more in-depth discussions about what we might be able to achieve together as partners (see principle on page 12 about shared partnership objectives). The values of both organisations do not need to be identical, but discussion will help both parties ensure that there are not areas of significant disagreement. For example, VSO values diversity and cross-cultural understanding (for a summary of VSO's values and corporate positions, please see the Appendix). We would like to work with partners who also appreciate the value of contributions from a variety of different perspectives. Another example could be that a potential partner has a policy that states they would not accept funds from a particular source. It would be important for this partner to discuss this with VSO so we are aware of their values. An organisation's values and ethics can change over time, thus it is important to make time to revisit this discussion throughout the partnership as part of the annual review process.

### ■ PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION:

In the north-west region of Bangladesh, people living with HIV and AIDS, outreach workers and teachers have suffered harassment by local leaders and law enforcement agencies, severely hampering HIV and AIDS prevention activities. To confront this, VSO Bangladesh supported Light House, a local NGO that works in HIV prevention, to develop an advocacy strategy that would address these issues. Following meetings with the law enforcement agencies, where they were given detailed information about HIV and AIDS, the number of reports of harassment has decreased.



## RESPECTING THE RIGHTS OF PARTNER ORGANISATIONS

VSO respects the rights of organisations to be autonomous, independent and self-reliant in order to promote local ownership and decision-making.

VSO designs and implements programmes jointly with partners. We support partners to strengthen their own organisation's mission and vision.

Although VSO comes to the partnership with strategic objectives, we want our partner organisations to bring their own objectives to the table for negotiation and mutual agreement. In the pursuit of this principle, VSO promotes the use of discussion-based and participatory processes to build an atmosphere of openness, trust and mutual understanding.

### ■ PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION:

In the Far North Province of Cameroon, 46 school communities and councils, grouped into 12 clusters, have been assessing their schools and analysing the findings to draw up a plan for improvement. This was needed to enable the schools to offer pupil-centred education, make the running of the schools more efficient and inform students about key issues such as HIV and AIDS prevention and rights for women and girls. The school communities and councils used VSO volunteers to mobilise groups, such as parents' associations, religious leaders and local councils, to address the education issues they faced. The outcome has been greater support for the schools at local government levels, and school development plans that include addressing HIV and AIDS and gender.



## **GUIDED BY SHARED PARTNERSHIP OBJECTIVES**

At the beginning of a partnership, discussions are held between a broad cross section of the partner organisation and VSO to develop mutually agreed partnership objectives that we aim to achieve by working together. Every VSO programme is guided by specific aims and objectives set out in a five-year plan, developed according to the context of the country. VSO brings these programme objectives to the initial discussions with a potential partner, and the partner also comes with their strategic aims. The areas of overlap in our strategic aims are mapped and a shared set of partnership objectives are developed, to move both VSO and the partner organisation closer to achieving their aims. Volunteer placements and other forms of capacity development support are planned and reviewed within the overall context of these partnership objectives. During annual partnership reviews, these partnership objectives are revisited and updated.

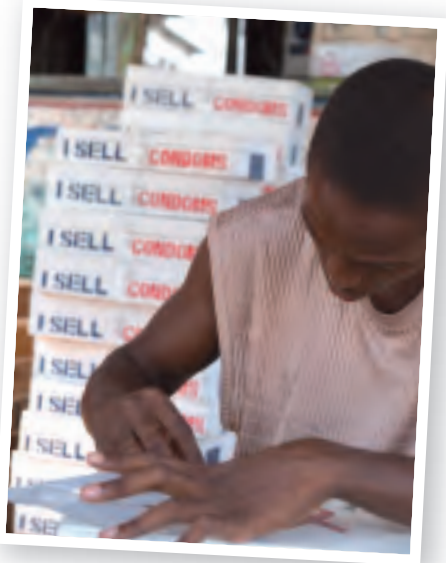
### **■ PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION:**

Fantsuam Foundation in Kafanchan, Nigeria, supports rural women to improve their ability to make a living and to increase their access to health care. After working with VSO to define a common set of objectives, the foundation, together with VSO, has implemented a community volunteering initiative called Gaiya, meaning 'gift of free labour'. This helps to train nurses and midwives in the area in health care as well as in HIV and AIDS awareness and prevention. To date, over 300 nurses and midwives have been trained and placed in rural health centres.

## **CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH VOLUNTEERING**

VSO considers developing and supporting the capacity of our programme partners to be the most equitable and sustainable way to realise the rights of poor and marginalised groups. VSO's approach to capacity development includes the strengthening of internal systems, staff skills, structures, policies and procedures. The purpose of this VSO support is to contribute to improvements in service delivery and advocacy capacity. Professional volunteer placements are the primary method of capacity development support that VSO provides. We believe this is a highly effective means for promoting sustainable and appropriate change within an organisation. As such, all programme partnerships will involve a volunteer placement at some point in time, and most likely will involve a number of consecutive or possibly even concurrent volunteer placements. Although other forms of capacity development support (such as small grants, study tours, exchange visits and specific workshops) are also available, we believe these tools are more effective at building capacity when applied alongside a volunteer placement.

- **PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION:**  
To fight the increase in HIV infection in the North-West Province of Cameroon, a local clinic established the NGO Community Partnerships Against AIDS Programme (COPAAP). VSO volunteers have worked with the NGO to develop its operations and have helped to develop a funding plan. The plan has ensured COPAAP can provide services for an extra twelve villages and increase the number of community volunteers, thus enabling hundreds more people to get help, advice and medical care.



### **UNDERSTANDING OUR IMPACT**

VSO considers its capacity development approach with organisations to be complementary to a focus on our impact in the target community. We strive to strengthen partner organisations to help them better respond to the rights of, and provide basic services to, marginalised communities. We believe that responsive and capable government and civil society organisations form the foundation of an equitable society. Therefore, strengthening organisations is a strategic and intentional aspect of promoting social justice and reducing exclusion. We also believe that through strengthening state and civil society organisations, VSO will be able to contribute effectively to upholding the rights of the most marginalised groups of people in the countries where we work.

- **PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION:**  
The Gambian Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (GADHOH) opened a new branch at Barra Village in 2005 with the support of a VSO volunteer. The volunteer trained staff in sign language and worked to include marginalised deaf girls who were not allowed to leave their family compound to attend sign language classes. NGO staff visited compounds and persuaded families to give their girls the opportunity to learn sign language. After initial shyness from the girls, they showed their families how they could communicate with others and are now actively encouraged to attend classes by their fathers.

## **LONG-TERM COMMITMENT**

Capacity development work is a process that takes time. Often many years of continued and varying types of support are needed before the partnership objectives are reached, and marginalised groups or communities experience sustainable benefits. To ensure that partnerships have enough time to grow and achieve their intended results, VSO will commit to a given partnership for at least five years. This is reviewed annually, and based on achieved results and learning together, VSO and the partner may together decide to extend the work beyond five years, or conversely to terminate their collaboration before the intended timeframe.

### **■ PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION:**

Nepal National Social Dalit Welfare Organisation (NNSDWO) advocates for and runs projects to improve conditions for Dalits.<sup>5</sup> The organisation, which is based in Kathmandu but has regional branches, has been a VSO partner since 2004. NNSDWO started with just one volunteer, who worked with them to build their funding base and improve their organisational systems. As a result, they were able to secure more funding and expand their work. More volunteers followed to continue the organisational development work and strengthen IT and advocacy. Another placement is planned to take forward the regional work to make sure the changes reach target communities. This is VSO's fifth year of working with NNSDWO.

## **STRIVING TO BE PARTICIPATORY AND INCLUSIVE**

VSO believes in the slogan 'nothing about us, without us'. In all our work, we seek to include the participation of individuals and groups that are typically excluded from decisions about development programming. This can include women and girls, people living with HIV and AIDS and disabled people, among others. We aspire to be participatory and inclusive within VSO's internal practices and also in our work with programme partners. In partnership planning and review discussions, we encourage our partners to consider the voices that may be excluded from their work, and support partners to develop inclusive working practices and strategies. Also, in a meeting or event held between VSO and a partner, we aim to practice what we preach by being as participatory and inclusive as is possible or relevant, given the situation.

### **■ PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION:**

Through the work of a long-term VSO volunteer, Badlao Foundation (BF) in Jharkhand, India, has developed gender, human resources and HIV and AIDS

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5 Dalits are an "artisan caste group" who are politically, religiously, socially, economically and educationally excluded by the institutions of state and society based on their caste, occupation and descent.





workplace policies. Since the implementation of these policies, BF has strengthened its profile and has become more inclusive of women, people with disabilities and people living with HIV and AIDS.

### **PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE LOCAL OWNERSHIP**

VSO believes that working in partnership with local organisations is necessary to ensure the long-term sustainability of the work. Therefore, it is vital for us that the partner organisation has ownership of the work we are engaged in together, for example, joint planning of partnership objectives and activities and management of the volunteer and other capacity building resources. VSO asks the partner to be responsible for the day-to-day management of the volunteer, including providing direction in the development of the volunteer's work plan and providing regular feedback to the volunteer about their performance. VSO can help the partner in this role, and as such, will provide training and/or support to the partner on volunteer management. The partner is also responsible for regular reporting to VSO on the effectiveness of the volunteer placement and/or other capacity-building interventions. Another feature of promoting local ownership is that VSO asks partner organisations to make a financial or in-kind contribution to help cover some of the expenses of the volunteer. This might mean providing a local allowance and/or housing costs. Although this helps VSO to use its limited resources more widely, it is primarily a mechanism for promoting local ownership and commitment.

#### **■ PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION:**

The Tonle Sap Environmental Management Project (TSEMP) in Cambodia works to organise communities to become more self-sufficient following a government reform of fisheries in 2001. VSO worked with TSEMP by providing long-term volunteers and small grants to support management capacity development and community development. The work has succeeded in not only getting community fisheries registered as community-based organisations, but communities are now piloting new ways of making a living, such as mushroom cultivation, cow banks and eco-tourism projects.



### **BASED ON MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY**

VSO is committed to equitable partnerships that empower our partners and are accountable to our target communities and funders. Partnership plans and objectives are agreed and reviewed together and both VSO and the partner

organisation are accountable to each other. The partnership agreement sets out what both VSO and the partner organisation are responsible and accountable for. For example, financial systems in both organisations should be transparent. As part of VSO's own accountability to the constituents of a country in which we work, VSO encourages and supports in-country programme offices to establish national boards or advisory groups to increase the local ownership of VSO's work.

■ **PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION:**

Yoni Community Bank in Sierra Leone suffered from a lack of accountability and transparency that meant it couldn't function properly. Due to its failure to work effectively as a microfinance provider, it lacked a broad client base. VSO worked with the bank by providing long-term and short-term volunteers. These volunteers ensured that the bank improved its transparency not only with its clients, but with VSO itself. The bank now has an increased client base and functions more effectively as a microfinance institution.

**COMMITTED TO LEARNING AND CHANGE**

All organisations, including VSO, must be open to change and transformation to ensure we remain relevant to the communities we are working with. VSO's planning and review system promotes several mechanisms for learning and opportunities to discuss change. For example, VSO facilitates an annual partnership review with the partner organisation involving the volunteer and, where possible, members of the target community, to reflect on progress made during the past year and to refresh joint plans for the year ahead. In addition, learning from all partnerships is fed into annual programme area reviews in order to shape future action by VSO, including our programme and advocacy work globally. VSO also offers support to our programme partners to develop and/or improve their own learning systems. A VSO volunteer placement within a partner organisation can often be a catalyst for greater internal reflection and learning. VSO encourages this process and will assist in the development of action planning to help a partner integrate this learning into their future work.

■ **PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION:**

In Malawi, the health service was in crisis due to the lack of skilled workers. VSO enabled five senior members of the Malawian Ministry of Health to go on a study tour to learn how the Philippines coped with similar problems. Subsequently, the Ministry now understands how medical professionals can be made aware of their community responsibilities and how the Ministry can support this. The members also saw how valuable on-the-job training is to staff retention as well as the importance of using preventative medical programmes and public health awareness initiatives.

## APPENDIX: VSO INTERNATIONAL'S VALUES AND CORPORATE POSITIONS

### VSO VALUE STATEMENT

Excerpt from *Focus For Change*:

"We believe that everyone must be able to exercise their fundamental human rights.

We believe that people working together can achieve positive and lasting change.

We value diversity and cross-cultural understanding.

We value partnerships based on honesty and respect.

We value the innovation and creativity generated by shared endeavour.

We value openness to learning.

We believe that we should be transparent about, and accountable for, development funding."

VSO has policies around equal opportunities, child protection and criminal practices, including corruption and fraud.

We have developed specific policies for our programme work, for example, in HIV and AIDS, VSO is not supporting partners who advocate for the criminalisation of people living with HIV.

Programme managers and partners need to discuss any specific programme policies with the VSO Country Director when developing a partnership.

VSO agencies in Canada, India, Ireland, Kenya, the Netherlands, the Philippines and the United Kingdom recruit volunteers from many countries. We use a range of delivery activities to strengthen the contribution of long-term international volunteering:

- other international volunteer placements (special assignments, youth and exchange visits)
- community, national and Diaspora volunteering initiatives
- workshops and training
- policy research and advocacy
- global education
- exchanges and study visits
- small grants
- school linking.

For a fuller description of our work in these areas, see VSO's strategy document, *Focus for Change* and additional material at [www.vsointernational.org](http://www.vsointernational.org)

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