

# COVID-19 and the Future of Volunteering for Development

Findings from a study  
conducted for the  
International Forum  
for Volunteering in  
Development (Forum)

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**Cover image:** Big Sister Muni Gupta at Bahubari 24, Parsa, Nepal. Big Sisters are raising awareness about COVID-19 among girls and communities. VSO, 2020. Photographer: Prakash Mathema.

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# Acronyms

|               |  |
|---------------|--|
| <b>AVI</b>    | Australian Volunteers International                        |
| <b>CCIVS</b>  | Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service |
| <b>FCDO</b>   | Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office                 |
| <b>Forum</b>  | International Forum for Volunteering in Development        |
| <b>IAVE</b>   | International Association for Volunteering Effort          |
| <b>ICS</b>    | International Citizen Service                              |
| <b>IVCO</b>   | International Volunteer Cooperation Organisation           |
| <b>IVSNs</b>  | International Volunteer Service Networks                   |
| <b>JICA</b>   | Japanese International Cooperation Agency                  |
| <b>Norec</b>  | Norwegian Agency for Exchange Cooperation                  |
| <b>SIF</b>    | Singapore International Foundation                         |
| <b>VGA</b>    | Volunteer Groups Alliance                                  |
| <b>VIO</b>    | Volunteer involving organisation                           |
| <b>VSO</b>    | Voluntary Service Overseas                                 |
| <b>V4D</b>    | Volunteering for Development                               |
| <b>WAGGGS</b> | World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts           |

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# Top-Line Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply impacted members of the International Forum for Volunteering in Development (hereafter 'Forum'), as well as the wider volunteering for development (V4D) community. The pandemic has fundamentally disrupted operations, volunteers and communities, programmes, and ways of working. Although volunteer involving organisations (VIO) and their partners quickly sought ways of adapting their activities, restrictions on movement and other safety required by governments created a climate of uncertainty which challenged programme operations substantially. Even with availability of a vaccine drawing ever closer, international volunteer cooperation organisations (IVCOs) and other VIOs confront an uncertain future and great challenges.

This report examines the lessons from the COVID-19 experience in 2020, the emergence of alternative programme models, and the future of V4D. The study was conducted with seven IVCOs, of whom six have programmes in eight countries. A mixed method approach was used: the collection of qualitative data (individual and focus group interviews involving 56 participants) and quantitative data through two online surveys – one with VIOs<sup>1</sup> and one with volunteers – each of which generated a response rate of 30%.<sup>2</sup>

## Immediate Responses to the Pandemic

Approximately 70% of all respondents (IVCOs, VIOs and volunteers) indicated that **their organisation had handled the crisis well overall**, particularly in terms of the pace of IVCO responses, communications, systems and processes, and proactive engagement. Negative responses from volunteers indicate a lack of consultation (20%), while 16% felt that their organisation had not handled the COVID-19 situation well.

The data sets confirm the range of **support offered to volunteers**, especially financial support to go home and/or post-repatriation financial support. In some cases, partner organisations were given new grants to support volunteers who stayed on assignment or were allowed to tweak budget lines within existing grants.

VIO **safety and security protocols** worked more effectively in some cases than others, with prior experience of disasters and epidemics enabling some organisations to better respond to the needs of vulnerable communities. Others found their plans deficient in certain respects, probably due to the scale and magnitude of the crisis across the globe. In their evacuation management, IVCOs tended to operate on their own with little cooperation and mutual support between them. Given these circumstances, the VIO survey revealed that 40% of organisations have since instituted reviews to learn from their actions and prepare for future shocks.

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<sup>1</sup> Here and elsewhere in the report IVCOs are a specific subset of VIOs.

<sup>2</sup> 39 VIOs responded to the VIO survey (30% response rate); 239 volunteers responded to the volunteer survey (~30% response rate).

## Repatriation, Duty of Care and Equity

International volunteering did not cease in the face of COVID-19. Following the declaration of the pandemic in March 2020, VIOs prioritised measures to ensure the safety and security of their volunteers. IVCOs adopted a range of approaches ranging from what was effectively complete repatriation of their international volunteers through bringing back volunteers on selected programmes, to arrangements where responsibility was assigned to the local organisation and the volunteer. This produced a complex situation in which state-contracted IVCOs were mandated to repatriate their citizen volunteers while non-governmental IVCOs had some autonomy to decide on the treatment of their international volunteers. This means that the 'DNA' of the IVCO was a determining factor in how it reacted to the pandemic and whether it decided to evacuate volunteers *en masse* or the decision was made elsewhere.

The volunteer survey and focus group interviews showed that in many instances duty of care was a driving imperative behind repatriation. Nonetheless our study revealed there were differences between and within organisations on the application of the duty of care principle,<sup>3</sup> depending on the type of volunteer contract and the passports of volunteers. The contradiction at the heart of duty of care was therefore exposed: why is it safe for some to remain and others to leave their assignment during a pandemic?

This raises **critical questions about equality** in the volunteer space. In applying the **duty of care principle**, what criteria did IVCOs use to determine who is consulted about repatriation or staying on assignment and who is not? Why does the duty of care apparently apply more to some volunteers than to others? Is the differential treatment a further reflection of inequalities in global volunteer labour? These are important questions for IVCOs to reflect upon. In relation to **financial support**, one IVCO reportedly stopped paying stipends to community volunteers, despite these actors being critical in continuing programme outreach in the COVID-19 context. The report indicates that COVID-19 prompted the realisation among international volunteers that **community volunteers** have been central to continued programme outreach.

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<sup>3</sup> In this case, 'duty of care' refers to an organisation's obligations to maintain volunteers' well-being, security and safety when posted on remote or international assignments. Organisations are expected to develop and implement workforce criteria and policies that would minimise any reasonable and foreseeable injury or harm to those under their care.

## Adaptive Capabilities of IVCOs and Other VIOs

Most IVCOs and VIOs have exhibited tremendous adaptive capabilities in the face of the shutdown of possibilities for **face-to-face international volunteering**. By ‘adaptive capabilities’ we refer to how organisations are able to adapt and reinvent their work in response to the sudden and disruptive impact of the pandemic. The report contains a variety of examples of how IVCOs, VIOs and partner organisations changed their ways of working, responded to community needs, and found innovative means to keep programmes running, albeit in a limited form.

VIOs embraced **digital technology** as a means of maintaining organisational cohesion and responsiveness. Some partner organisations had previously taken steps to strengthen their digital technology capacity, but this was not a priority owing to scarce resources and other pressing needs. In response to COVID-19, however, organisations reported launching online fundraising campaigns, organising morale-boosting digital music events and embarking on internet-based advocacy.

Following the repatriation of Northern international volunteers, online (aka remote or virtual) volunteering became a way for these volunteers to stay in touch with and support their partners as well as other organisations.

The use of digital technology confronted IVCOs and other VIOs with new issues, such as the need for infrastructural and financial support to partner organisations to build their technological capacity within the context of the digital divide. These organisations had to develop protocols for providing financial support to volunteers working online, manage the time online volunteers could provide in light of their need for income, and oversee their interface with partner organisations.

Interviewees mentioned the following opportunities as flowing from online volunteering: a means of continuing an international presence in partner countries; using online volunteering not as an alternative but as a stop-gap measure when the volunteer’s departure is delayed for a month or two; and using online volunteering as a short-term measure to open up programme opportunities in a country that borders the one they are already working in.

Respondents’ views about the most effective programme models for online volunteering were mixed. In the volunteer survey, when asked whether online volunteering would be heightened in the future, 37% of the respondents disagreed. This view was shared by some of the Unité member organisations, one of whom saw online volunteering as contradicting the principle of reciprocity. This view suggests there is a risk of online volunteering becoming a vehicle for exporting Northern expertise to Southern partners rather than creating a mutual learning relationship between the volunteer in the Global North and the partner organisation in the Global South. By contrast, one key informant in the Pacific pointed to growing levels of professional capacity in the Global South, which she believes signals the opportunity for South-North collaboration through co-production in areas of need or interest in Southern contexts.

Given the context of uncertainty brought on by COVID-19, the measures taken by the IVCOs and their partners have tended to be short-term crisis interventions. Nevertheless, the pandemic has clearly provided opportunities for **programme adaptations** through collaboration and innovation. Our findings suggest that organisations that work together are most likely to succeed in a disrupted environment. To continue being relevant, actors in international volunteering need to embrace opportunities for innovation such as: working in consortia; offering direct funding to partner organisations in the South; playing a bigger role in building infrastructure to support information communications technology (ICT) within host countries and partner organisations; and engaging more closely with in-country VIO networks.



Rinki Domin washes her hand using the Hygiene Kit provided to her during a campaign by VSO in Bahubari 24, Prasa, Nepal, through its Adolescent and Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (AYSRRH) programme. VSO, 2020. Photographer: Prakash Mathema.



## Resourcing for Continuity and Relevance

The findings show that resourcing has been a mixed experience for IVCOs and VIOs and is likely to continue in this vein. On the one hand, IVCOs and VIOs face the continued reduction of revenue from traditional sources, on the other we see potential areas of growth in raising revenue from new sources.

Four of the seven IVCOs involved in the study are facing reductions of between 7.5% and 35.0% in government support for 2020-2021. Declining opportunities for mobilising private sector funding are evidence of the impact of COVID-19 on the global economy, as is financial support from institutions and foundations. Nevertheless, COVID-19 has also created opportunities for harnessing philanthropic impulses. One IVCO established a Corona Fund to which some donors diverted some of their funding, and which grew strongly through large and small donations from individuals and various entities.

In the face of increasing fiscal constraints, the adaptive capability of IVCOs and VIOs is evident where they have been able to act on lessons learnt, have changed processes rapidly and have been able to reassure funders that programme changes can be made safely whilst maintaining quality. Relevance, creativity and innovation are probably the most important hallmarks of adaptation if VIOs are to attract new funding from governments and donors. In this regard, some IVCOs have worked closely with partner organisations and donors to devise strategies that meet their needs within an uncertain and rapidly changing context.

Donor perspectives on the contribution of volunteering to poverty reduction strategies and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) present as an important driver in aiding the provision of resources to support V4D, either as a direct volunteering budget or as part of project or programmatic funding.

The study produced important findings about potential **areas of growth** in raising revenue from new sources. COVID-19 triggered new cross-sectoral partnerships and relationships between partner organisations, civil society organisations, the corporate sector and foundations in-country and abroad. These in turn gave rise to new sources of financial and human support and constitute an encouraging development, suggesting that VIOs could possibly pursue diversified funding sources, even in countries where this had previously not been possible.

IVCOs and other VIOs can tap into these **emergent partnerships** as new growth areas, both for revenue and for the delivery of development outcomes. This is especially so in the context of a declining 'supply' of international volunteers or closure of short-term programmes, while there is anticipated growth in local and national and South-South volunteering. In addition, contextual factors such as continued restrictions on travel for international volunteering imply that COVID-19 is likely to harm the sector's new growth frontiers. There is need to rethink the role and resourcing of local volunteers as an integral part of the volunteering for development infrastructure.

## Looking to the Future of Volunteering for Development

The evidence points to an expectation that **national and community volunteers** will feature more strongly in the future of volunteering for development. While IVCO programmes have always worked with national and community volunteers, this change represents a process of formally recognising the importance of national and community volunteers as central contributors to IVCO programmes, rather than as contributors outside of the IVCO system.

The most obvious finding from our study is that **community volunteers were able to continue in their roles when international volunteers did not**. The qualitative evidence shows that the ability of national and community volunteers to deliver programme objectives in a pandemic is significant; and the surveys indicate that national and community volunteering for development is expected to expand in the future. National and community volunteering offers a model that can operate at greater scale with the same resources, which is relevant in a context of funding challenges and is compatible with the importance of generating social capital across the globe.

In what ways is the potential growth of national and community volunteers **adding to or replacing international volunteering**? Historically the evidence suggests that both are plausible, as shown by blended volunteering models. Indeed, this study suggests that an increase in national and community volunteers is also linked to the declining supply of long-term volunteers.

Furthermore, interview data suggest that the role of community volunteers in development now forms part of a **dialogue between governmental donors**. It seems clear that donors are interested in innovative ways of using the volunteer model to achieve the SDGs and are considering the use of national and community volunteers as a way of managing the risk of programme closures.

However, there is another side to this equation. The motivations of governments in relation to V4D programmes are complex and subject to change, and the significance of volunteers as an instrument of soft power tends to be premised on a model of sending nationals of one country to another. Notwithstanding these different policy objectives, COVID-19 appears to have accelerated the recognition of the importance of community and national volunteering. The potential of these volunteers to become a larger component of the IVCO offering needs further discussion and programmatic innovation.

The findings suggest that when cross-border volunteering and exchange is viewed as a form of international volunteering, a model emerges that reduces the risk of sudden programme closures in which **the North-South model ceases to operate**. In this scenario IVCOs may be challenged by not having returned volunteers to fundraise, advocate or publicise the value of their Global South programmes. COVID-19 thus calls into question whether this objective can be realised in the same way in the future. Perhaps it means that IVCOs from the Global North need to look elsewhere for learning exchanges about 'the other' that do not involve high levels of travel and risk in the duty of care.

The reality of refugee migration and the movement of people across the world produces opportunities for IVCOs to support **regional volunteering in the North** for humanitarian support, climate justice, racial and gender justice and other burning issues. **Investment in Northern and Southern regional programmes** could complement initiatives already in place, such as the European Voluntary Service and other Northern VIO networks and Southern entities such as the African Union volunteer programme and other Southern VIO networks.



When the pandemic hit, the Norwegian Solidarity Committee for Latin America (LAC) introduced an alternative way of working using online teaching and placement in farms through the Norwegian Farmers and Smallholders Union. Photo: Norec

# COVID-19 and the Future of Volunteering for Development

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused deep psychological, social, physical, and economic damage to people and communities. Negative impacts include deepening levels of poverty and disrupted education systems with millions of children likely left behind. The pandemic has debilitated health care systems, not just due to the economic doldrums, but often due to the loss of thousands of frontline health workers. Increased levels of unemployment, poverty, and hunger in the wake of COVID-19 will most certainly delay progress towards certain SDG targets. On the other hand, while this pandemic has unquestionably harmed human prosperity, its impact on planet-related SDGs remains less clear. For instance, travel restrictions provided short-term positive impacts in emissions and air quality as domestic and international air transportation came to a halt. Whatever the ultimate impacts of the pandemic on the SDGs, the pandemic has highlighted vital interrelations between natural and social systems and revealed longstanding flaws in contemporary methods of achieving human prosperity.

In pursuit of multiple SDGs, the pandemic has also revealed gaps, challenges and new opportunities for Forum members and the wider volunteering for development (V4D) community. COVID-19 has fundamentally disrupted their operations and ways of working in ways that reveal their existing capabilities, as well as their potential for innovative adaptations. Under lockdown, volunteers were dislocated from their communities and their partners owing to repatriation or having to work from home. For many IVCOs and VIOs, programmes effectively came to a temporary stop, while for a few, these stops linger. In the countries surveyed for this study, international volunteer cooperation organisation (IVCO) management located in-country worked tirelessly to get international volunteers home – not only repatriating Northern citizen volunteers (e.g. from AVI, Cuso International, JICA, Norec, and VSO), but also supporting those individuals who chose to go home voluntarily (e.g. from France Volontaires, Norec and Unité). These developments were extremely stressful for volunteers, partner organisations and programme staff. Although IVCOs offered counselling to volunteers who may have needed such support, it was not always an easy process.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For example, in the Philippines, France Volontaires' two international volunteer psychologists returned to France owing to the lockdown. The remaining international volunteers had to use online counselling services provided by the programme's psychologists based in other countries in Asia, which they did not always find satisfactory.

Even with the availability of a vaccine drawing ever closer, IVCOs and other volunteer involving organisations (VIOs) confront an uncertain future and great challenges to return to 'business as usual'. This study, commissioned by the International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum) addresses three key questions.

- What actions were taken by volunteers, partner organisations and programmes in the face of travel restrictions and health and safety limitations induced by COVID-19?
- What alternative volunteering models have emerged in response to COVID-19? Put differently, how did IVCOs adapt V4D in the face of COVID-19, working with partners and communities impacted by COVID-19?
- What lessons can be drawn from IVCO and VIO responses to COVID-19, and what do these signal for the future direction of volunteering for development?

In view of these questions, are there opportunities for international volunteer service

**Even with the availability of a vaccine drawing ever closer, IVCOs and other volunteer involving organisations (VIOs) confront an uncertain future and great challenges to return to 'business as usual'.**

networks (IVSNs) such as Forum, IAVE, CCIIVS or the VGA to develop strategies for COVID-19 induced reconstruction and development through volunteer action? For instance, does the Volunteer Groups Alliance (VGA) have a role to play in looking at ways of refocusing volunteering to repair and rebuild the COVID-19 downturn, especially in Southern communities? Can Forum and other IVSNs make complementary contributions through shared strategies and cooperation?

This report begins by describing the methodology used in this study. This is followed by a discussion of the immediate responses to the pandemic including repatriation, the approach to duty of care, and how these surfaced underlying inequalities. In the next section, we examine the alternatives and adaptation of IVCOs and other VIOs in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. This foregrounds the discussion in the next section which reflects on lessons from the COVID-19 response and the implications for the future direction of volunteering for development. Specifically, we ask the question whether these experiences offer opportunities for innovative change. Finally, the conclusion and recommendations pose some questions about the emergent opportunities for change indicative of lessons from COVID-19 responses. It also includes a six-point improvement plan for IVCOs in relation to future 'shocks'.

## 2. A Note on Methodology

The study was conducted among seven IVCOs: 1) Australian Volunteers International (AVI), 2) Cuso International, 3) France Volontaires, 4) Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), 5) Norec, 6) Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), and 7) Unité. The study used a mixed method approach involving both online qualitative (individual and group synchronous interviews) and quantitative data collection (surveys) methods.

In eight countries where six of these IVCOs operate, interviews were conducted separately with country directors/representatives, as well as with partner organisations and volunteers. The specific countries included in this study along with their participating IVCOs are: 1) Fiji (AVI), 2) Peru (Cuso International), 3) the Philippines (France Volontaires), 4) South Africa (JICA), 5) Ghana, 6) Rwanda, 7) Uganda (Norec), and 8) Nigeria (VSO). Additional interviews were conducted with selected heads of agencies in Forum, government departments and thought leaders in this field.

Two online surveys were administered using Survey Monkey during September and October 2020. The first was administered to volunteers serving with each of the seven IVCOs during the pandemic;<sup>5</sup> the second to the members of four international volunteer service networks (IVSNs): Forum, the International Association for Volunteering Effort (IAVE), the Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service (CCIVS), and the Volunteer Groups Alliance (VGA).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In total, 239 volunteers responded to the survey of which 70 were from Unité. Across the six IVCOs that participated in the fieldwork, there was an overall response rate of just over 30%. The final response rate of Unité volunteers is 29%.

<sup>6</sup> The sampling frame was estimated at 130 organisations. With 39 organisations responding to the survey, the estimated response rate was 30%.

### 3. Immediate Responses to the Pandemic: Repatriation, Duty of Care and Equity

Following the declaration of a global COVID-19 pandemic on 11 March 2020, VIOs prioritised measures that would ensure the safety and security of their volunteers. The most immediate responses bring out several issues, one being the agency of different actors, especially of volunteers. Another is the question of equity in how various categories of volunteers were treated depending on their passport.

IVCOs adopted a range of approaches from what was effectively complete repatriation of their international volunteers, through bringing back volunteers on selected programmes, to arrangements where responsibility was assigned to the local organisation and volunteer. In the survey of VIOs, 17 out of 38 respondents (45%) said they repatriated their volunteers and a further 13 (34%) said they partially repatriated volunteers. This left just eight (21%) who did not repatriate volunteers.<sup>7</sup> Five of the seven IVCOs who participated in this study were required by their governments to repatriate their citizen volunteers.<sup>8</sup> This produced a complex situation with some volunteers being repatriated and others remaining on assignment. Consequently, international volunteering did not cease even in the COVID-19 context.<sup>9</sup> 61% of the volunteer survey respondents reported that they remained at their place of assignment, though in some cases this was for a short period of time.<sup>10</sup> A majority of international volunteers stated they had not been repatriated.<sup>11</sup> Other volunteers chose to go home, but in some cases were not able to do so owing to border closures; and a number

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the VIO survey involved organisations who may not have had any international volunteers.

<sup>8</sup> AVI, Cuso International, JICA, Norec and VSO were instructed to repatriate their citizen volunteers. France Volontaires and Unité left it to their volunteers, managed by their partner organisations, to decide whether or not to go home. Norec left the decision about whether or not to repatriate their South-South exchange participants to their partner organisations. In the case of WAGGGS, the parents of the exchange participants were consulted about whether they should return home. Unité's long-term co-workers remained in their placements (many were local people) but short-term and youth volunteers were repatriated. France Volontaires gave their international volunteers the choice of remaining in place or returning, but following the escalation of infections, France closed its borders and international volunteers could not travel to or from placements.

<sup>9</sup> The survey of VIOs asked if they had repatriated their international volunteers. 38 VIOs responded to this question, with 17 (45%) saying they repatriated their volunteers and a further 13 (34%) saying they partially repatriated volunteers. This left just eight (21%) who did not repatriate volunteers.

<sup>10</sup> Of the 202 volunteers who responded to the question, 124 stated they remained at their assignment and 78 stated they did not. A more detailed review of the responses indicates some complexity in this finding: while 124 respondents stated they remained at their assignment, this did not exclude their subsequent removal from their place of assignment. It simply means that they did not leave immediately. In some cases, this was because their contracts ended, or were to end within months. In regard to national and/or community volunteers, 21 (65%) of VIOs reported that volunteers remained at their assignments; seven (22%) reported volunteers had been partially removed; four (12%) said their volunteers left their assignment.

<sup>11</sup> 182 identified as international volunteers and 97 stated they were not repatriated.

of volunteers were repatriated despite wishing to remain on assignment.<sup>12</sup> In this context, the extent of activation of *volunteer agency* was a factor in whether or not volunteers were given a choice in the repatriation decision. Some IVCOs and their VIO partners were more open than others in taking volunteers' sentiments on board.<sup>13</sup>

Some participants (volunteers) indicated they had wanted to stay at their placements but were unable to do so because state-dictated imperatives would have seen them lose their visas, medical insurance, and other benefits. Two long-term volunteers of many years in Myanmar and Fiji, respectively, were given some 48 hours to leave their homes and return to their home country where they had not lived for many years. One faced severe financial challenges as a result. In South Africa some of the JICA volunteers were reluctant to return to Japan, but one subsequently felt this was a wise decision because of emerging xenophobia against Asian people on the grounds that the virus had originated in China: *"Since me and my colleagues are Asian people, the country people started discrimination to us. So we have no choice but to evacuate from there."* So, while some volunteers indicated their uneasiness with the way the decision to repatriate them was made, others were of the view that *"duty of care overrode everything. It was dominant. And I think they made a good decision."*

With regard to how well VIOs performed in evacuating and supporting volunteers, results show some consistency between the volunteer and IVCO assessments. Approximately 70% of respondents indicated that their organisation had handled the crisis well in terms of the pace of IVCO responses, communications, systems and processes, proactive engagement, as well as an overall rating.<sup>14</sup> Negative responses from volunteers indicate a lack of consultation (20%), while 16% felt that their organisation had not handled the COVID-19 situation well. The surveys explored the extent to which IVCOs offered post-repatriation support (financial and other forms)<sup>15</sup> to the volunteers. In general, there was alignment between IVCO and volunteer responses. Findings from focus group discussions also confirmed the range of support offered to volunteers (especially financial support to go home and/or post-repatriation financial support). In some cases, partner organisations were either given new grants to support volunteers who stayed or were allowed to tweak budget lines within existing grants.

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**12** In cases where governments mandated IVCOs to repatriate their citizen volunteers, volunteers faced strenuous consequences if they opted to stay in-country: they would lose their visas, work permits, health insurance, and would no longer receive an allowance. Furthermore, the IVCO would no longer take responsibility for their safety.

**13** For example, in the volunteer survey, nearly all of the Unité co-workers who had been repatriated indicated they had a level of choice in this decision; whether co-workers stayed in-country was often a matter for the co-worker and partner organisation.

**14** VIO respondents were slightly more optimistic than the volunteer respondents.

**15** Options posed in the survey were: support for post-assignment plans, medical support due to the risk of exposure to COVID-19, counselling, financial support to return home, and financial support after returning home.



In assessing the adaptive capabilities of VIOs at the start of the pandemic, particularly in respect of the safety of volunteers, evidence suggests that the safety and security protocols worked more effectively in some cases than others. Prior experience with disasters and epidemics (for example Ebola in West Africa and the cyclone Idai disaster in Southern Africa) stood some organisations in good stead and enabled them to retool and adjust their processes. This strengthened their response to the needs of vulnerable communities under COVID-19.

However, others found coping with the COVID-19 pandemic very challenging or found their plans deficient in certain respects, probably due to the scale and magnitude of the crisis

**Prior experience with disasters and epidemics (e.g. Ebola and cyclone Idai in Southern Africa) stood some organisations in good stead and enabled them to retool and adjust their processes.**

across the globe. The qualitative data also indicates that in their evacuation management, IVCOs tended to operate on their own with little cooperation and mutual support between them (e.g. sharing flights or working together on coordinating other evacuation arrangements). However, in the general panic that ensued, it may have been difficult to foresee the need for such logical action, and this has only become clear with hindsight. Given these circumstances, the

VIO survey revealed that 40% of organisations have since instituted reviews to learn from their actions in the repatriation and to ensure better preparedness in the future.



The sewing workshop of this training centre for persons with a physical disability in Ethiopia, supported by Unité member organisation Mission am Nil International, switched to the production of face masks. Photographer: Therese Ramseier/Mission am Nil.

In many instances the “duty of care”<sup>16</sup> was a driving imperative behind repatriation. Nonetheless, our study revealed differences between and within organisations on the application of the “duty of care” depending on the type of volunteer contract and the passports of volunteers. Most, though not all, volunteers from the North on North-South programmes were repatriated while many of those involved in South-South programmes were not. The contradiction at the heart of duty of care was therefore exposed. The critical question here is on application of the duty of care principle. Why, for example, is it safe for some to remain and others to leave? Critically, what criteria did IVCOs use to determine who is consulted about repatriation or staying on assignment, and who is not? Why does the duty of care apparently apply more to some volunteers than to others? Is the differential treatment a further reflection of what Prince and Brown (2016) term as inequalities in global volunteer labour? These questions arise out of the research data and are important for IVCOs to reflect upon.

The COVID-19 experience further highlighted inequalities in the volunteer experience in other ways. For example, in the curtailing or withdrawal of financial support. In one case an IVCO reportedly stopped paying stipends to local community volunteers, yet these actors are integral to the success of volunteerism as a model of development. IVCOs need to reflect on the implications of this to volunteerism in general, especially given that these community volunteers are likely to be the most under resourced.

In summary, the main shortcomings highlighted in IVCO emergency responses was that there was no in-country cross-IVCO cooperation in evacuation arrangements, volunteers were not consulted despite their knowledge of host country circumstances, and safety protocols did not always work and need to be rethought.

**Volunteer agency was important in decisions about whether volunteers would stay on assignment or return to their home country. Where volunteers had the option of choice, many seem to have remained on assignment. But for community volunteers there was no real choice – they had to remain in place, no matter their safety concerns.**

<sup>16</sup> In this case, ‘duty of care’ refers to an organisation’s obligations to maintain volunteers’ well-being, security and safety when posted on remote or international assignments. Organisations are expected to develop and implement workforce criteria and policies that would minimise any reasonable and foreseeable injury or harm to those under their care.

## **4. Adaptive Capabilities of IVCOs and Other VIOs**

Having looked at repatriation as an initial response, we next examine other responses, developments of alternative volunteering models, as well as the extent to which these signal resilience and creativity among the IVCOs and their partners with a view to remaining relevant and resourceful V4D actors in the context of the pandemic. More specifically, this section answers the question, what alternative volunteering models are now being applied and explored in the absence of international volunteering? Secondly, how effective and practical are they?

Withdrawal of volunteers through lockdown, social distancing, repatriation and other COVID-19 related regulations provided opportunities for VIOs to catch up on outstanding programming work, such as the drafting of protocols and policy documents (AVI partner in Fiji), strengthening monitoring and evaluation systems (Norec partner in Ghana, Rwanda, Uganda), and strengthening the use of technology (France Volontaires partners in the Philippines). Others used the opportunity to retool their organisational operations. Consequently, most IVCOs and VIOs have exhibited tremendous adaptive capabilities in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. By ‘adaptive capabilities’ we refer to how organisations are able to adapt and reinvent their work in response to the sudden and disruptive impact of the pandemic. Each organisation did so to create continuity and some form of order out of the seemingly chaotic environment and situation.<sup>17</sup>

In a nutshell, IVCOs and VIOs had to look for ways to ensure continuity of support to partners and volunteers and find the resources and methods to remain relevant in the context of the pandemic. These adaptive capabilities can be gleaned from their actions in the immediate aftermath of the declaration of the pandemic in each of the countries. In what follows, we provide a detailed analysis of these issues.

### **4.1 Technology-Mediated Processes and Practices**

A number of partner organisations reported that, prior to the pandemic, they had taken steps to strengthen their capacity in the use of digital technology (AVI Fiji partner, Cuso International Peru partner). Nevertheless they did not view digital technology as a primary means of programme delivery. Consequently, their digital capability remained a low priority for uptake, owing to scarce resources and other pressing needs.

With the mandatory lockdowns, however, VIOs started using digital technology to work from home, support their staff and volunteers, and maintain organisational cohesion. They rapidly embraced mobile and digital technology to keep contact with their international and local volunteers, partners, and communities as best as they could. Volunteers who remained in-country used social media platforms both for communications and for continued programme operations. Consequently, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Zoom and other platforms

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<sup>17</sup> For detailed exposition of complex adaptive systems, see among others Burkley, 1968; Frej and Ramalingam, 2011; van Nuland et al, 2020; Gribbin, 2004; Törnberg, 2014; and Dickens, 2012.

became essential tools for communication and conducting meetings. For repatriated volunteers, such platforms provided a channel for continued support for their placement partners.

In several cases, country directors and head office managers stayed more closely in contact with partner organisations and individual volunteers/co-workers through weekly phone calls and/or online discussions. Numerous examples show that holding online team meetings also offered new opportunities to widen participation. For example, by holding its annual

**By holding its annual consultative meeting online, Comundo was able to include not only its country managers (who traditionally attended the consultation in Switzerland), but also co-workers and partner organisation representatives from across the world.**

consultative meeting online, Comundo was able to include not only its country managers (who traditionally attended the consultation in Switzerland), but also co-workers and partner organisation representatives from across the world. This was notwithstanding the challenges of time zones, languages, unstable connectivity in host countries and some participants' inexperience with digital platforms.<sup>18</sup>

Other strategies for maintaining contact with beneficiary communities drew on previous development communications strategies (from the 1970s and 1980s)

such as educational radio and TV programmes. Under COVID-19 these were once again explicitly used for development purposes, e.g. for broadcasting messages in relation to VIO programmes and to spread information about COVID-19 safety precautions. In many cases, online relationships and support proved an inadequate substitute for on-site engagement.<sup>19</sup> When lockdown regulations eased, programme operations continued to be hampered by COVID-19 related guidelines and protocols, including restricted movement. VIOs nonetheless found ways of providing support, solidarity and hope through messaging in local languages and using indigenous networks to reach out to programme participants. For example, organisations reported using technology to hold online concerts, organise fundraising campaigns, and conduct internet-based advocacy.

<sup>18</sup> This year Comundo held its annual consultation with country managers online. "It was a huge challenge because of time differences between Latin America, Africa and Asia. Language was also a problem, because some of the country managers only understood Spanish, some of them only German, etc. - that was a really a huge problem. So we worked in three sections - in the morning with Africa, and late afternoon with Latin America. ... And then also we had one block in the middle with all of them - Africa and Latin America at the same time. So that turned out very well. ... I can say that it has strengthened the relationship between headquarters here and the country managers in the South."

<sup>19</sup> Two AVI volunteers who had been working in Fiji described their online experience as follows: "In Fiji if you're not there, you're not there. Working remotely is very difficult. We're trying to keep the project alive. And the Ministry of Education is too." (AVI repatriated volunteer) "The motivation of the staff back in Fiji is extremely low. ... being there, you can get a lot of things done outside of your time, you are actually talking with them. Many things happen informally; the capacity development also happens outside of face to face meetings. So the motivation level of the concerned staff ... is extremely low. That is what is affecting the programme. So the amount of work getting achieved through remote volunteering is way less than what we would achieve through physical presence." (AVI repatriated volunteer)

Following the repatriation of Northern international volunteers, online (remote) volunteering became a way for most volunteers to stay in touch with and support their host organisations. In the volunteer survey, 80% of repatriated volunteers stated they had been offered the opportunity to support their assigned partner organisation online. Furthermore, nearly one-third stated they were offered the opportunity to provide remote support to a different partner organisation. Others, such as the UK ICS volunteers, were offered opportunities for online learning but not for online volunteering.

While some IVCOs have not had a great deal of experience with online volunteering before COVID-19, they embraced digital technology to stabilise and support their programme operations. For example, since their staff are no longer able to visit partner countries to conduct evaluations and assessments, some organisations are moving to remote contact for this purpose, although this is by no means a preferred solution. Other IVCOs are building their capacity for online volunteering partly as a way of compensating for falling recruitment and placement levels under COVID-19. For example, since March 2020 AVI has developed a substantial online volunteering system through which its Australian Volunteers Program (AVP) has supported 156 remote volunteering assignments in 22 countries. The Australian Volunteers Program also extended the opportunity to volunteer online to the Australian public.<sup>20</sup>

UNV's online volunteering track record was cited by a number of informants who see the organisation as a leader in the field and an important resource for developing their online volunteering operations. Collaboration and mutual learning is perceived as a way in which Forum members could support each other in the strategic use and practical implementation of online volunteering as an area of growth. Informants from JICA and Cuso International (Peru) both expressed interesting views in this regard.<sup>21</sup>

Interviewees mentioned the following opportunities as flowing from online volunteering: a means of continuing an international presence in partner countries; using online volunteering not as an alternative, but as a stop-gap measure when the volunteer's departure is delayed for a month or two; and using online volunteering as a short-term measure to open up programme opportunities in a neighbouring country.

**“We will rather think about opening in a new country in the region where they are near and try to set up a new partner network in this country which is linked with the same issue that we are targeting in the region. But it will be used mainly as a short-term solution.”  
(Eirene-Suisse, Unité member organisation)**

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.australianvolunteers.com/remote-volunteering/>

<sup>21</sup> Implementation issues include: how to compensate online volunteers for their time and for their infrastructure (devices, connectivity cost and data), how to manage the volunteers, and how much time can be expected from them. According to an interviewee at JICA's headquarters, “[an online volunteer] cannot contribute for 24 hours since he is not [an] on-site volunteer ... he's in Japan and maybe he has other jobs also, and he can use only a part of his personal time, private time for online volunteering. In that case, we have to form a particular or special requirement for online volunteering, for example, ... he needs to contribute ... only three hours a week.” Another concern is how to develop relationships between partners and online volunteers who had not previously spent time in their country. This is a critical factor for Cuso International's country representative in Peru: “The personal relationship is hard to build digitally ... just the fact of not living in the same place, not experiencing the same challenges, the same weather, the same political context ... if it's going to be people living in different worlds, I can tell you, it's possible, but it's not going to be as rich as if they were here.”

Nevertheless, there are mixed views about the programme models in which online volunteering is likely to be most effective. In the volunteer survey, 37% of the respondents disagreed that online volunteering would be heightened in the future. This view is shared by some of the Unité member organisations who emphasise the importance of face-to-face work from a humanitarian or faith-based perspective. One organisation saw online volunteering as contradicting the principle of reciprocity:

**“I cannot see what would be the benefit of a remote volunteer because our strategy is really written to enhance or to support reciprocity in the sense that not only people from Switzerland go to other countries, but also people from other countries can come to Switzerland.”**  
(DM-échange et mission, Unité member organisation)

This view suggests there is a risk of remote volunteering being considered a vehicle for exporting Northern expertise to Southern partners rather than creating a mutual learning relationship between the volunteer in the Global North and the partner organisation in the Global South. If this is the case, the online volunteering model

**If remote volunteering is to achieve its potential in the international arena, IVCOs need to confront the elephant in the room: the digital divide.**

runs the risk of adopting a deficit approach which sees Southern contexts as devoid of skills, imagination, and the capability to harness digital technology for their own development. Research has demonstrated the vitality of digital innovation in Southern contexts where ICT for development (ICT4D) sees local communities creating digital solutions designed within their own context, such as an app that enables community volunteers to collect evidence of gender-based violence using smartphones.<sup>22</sup> Projects such as these and others may provide a basis for exchange and reciprocity between Northern and Southern online volunteers. In another example, the Omprakash organisation prioritises reciprocal learning through interactive technology as a critical component in preparing students for service-learning placements in Southern social justice organisations.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Success factors include drawing on indigenous knowledge and consulting local volunteers about which design will work best. For example, a Cambodian community worked closely with a Cambodia-based company called Web Essentials to develop the Prey Lang anti-deforestation app that enables volunteers to collect evidence of deforestation using smartphones. It is designed for literate and illiterate community members and was trialled by local communities prior to its release (Perold, Haas & Goodrow 2020:11).

<sup>23</sup> “Interactive technology might indeed be a useful tool for facilitating the sort of learning and collaboration that ‘critical service-learning’ would seem to require. Further research should investigate not just what students are learning via the digital platform, but also how they translate this learning into their work on the ground while volunteering abroad and into the rest of their lives upon returning home.” (Oppenheim, O’Shea & Sclar 2015)

**Donors, IVCOs and governments will need to support programmes that increase women's access to the internet and mobile technology platforms.**

The use of digital technology for the delivery of short-term professional training courses is already well established in organisations such as SIF. Given growing levels of professional capacity in the Global South (according to AVI's Regional Director, Central and North Pacific), the opportunity arises for South-North collaboration that

customises professional training through co-production according to specific areas of need or interest in Southern contexts. A one-size-fits-all approach minimises opportunities for innovation in human resource development in poor countries. These perspectives offer IVCOs and other VIOs opportunities for breaking new ground beyond conventional online volunteering, through relationships built on the basis of reciprocity and mutual learning using digital technology for development. If remote volunteering is to achieve its potential in the international arena, IVCOs need to confront the elephant in the room: the digital divide. Southern partner organisations may now be investing in acquiring online capability, but in many countries their efforts are hampered by the limited reach of telecommunications networks, poor connectivity, unreliable power supplies, poor access to digital devices, the high cost of data, and the uneven distribution of ICT skills. Gender norms are in evidence when men prevent women from using ICT at home and when mobile phones with tracking devices are used to restrict their mobility. By contrast are the examples of South African women in poor communities using mobile technology to produce evidence of gender-based violence that has escalated during the pandemic.<sup>24</sup>

Donors, IVCOs and governments will need to invest in digital infrastructure in partner countries<sup>25</sup> whilst simultaneously supporting programmes that increase women's access to the internet and mobile technology platforms. VIO networks need to provide leadership about the support they require from Forum members to ensure that online and digitally enhanced volunteering becomes a meaningful and equitable means of development cooperation. This is important especially because even within challenging circumstances, digital technology has been widely utilised. This suggests that with the right investments, digital technology is an area with great potential in V4D.

<sup>24</sup> Perold, Haas & Goodrow (2020)

<sup>25</sup> In this regard the study encountered an example of digital innovation by 360 Learning, a French company working with one of the France Volontaires partners in the Philippines. The online platform will be available as an app on smartphones and enables the user to download data (e.g. training material) using Wi-Fi, and then to use the content offline.

## 4.2 Programmatic Adaptations

In a number of IVCOs and VIOs, we saw a shift in programme focus. For example, instead of livelihoods programmes relying on agriculture,<sup>26</sup> there was diversification such as the production of sanitiser and personal protective equipment by some Nigerian partners. This means that the livelihoods project was not frozen but shifted from its original focus. This demonstrates that COVID-19 offered different opportunities for innovation.

Many VIOs reported switching their activities to providing COVID-19 related support such as hygiene awareness campaigns and hygiene kits. For example, in partnership with companies, some VSO Nigeria partner organisations provided soap and other products to communities; VSO revitalised its livelihoods programme by assisting communities to produce sanitisers and masks for sale. In the Philippines, a partnership between a France Volontaires partner organisation and the water utilities in two cities resulted in the provision of water to poor under-served communities free of charge during the strict lockdown.

Significantly, community volunteers proved to be central in enabling VIOs to stay in touch with participants and to draw target groups into the adapted programmes (VSO Nigeria).<sup>27</sup> Using mobile phones and the internet, a feminist movement in Peru (supported by Cuso International) extended psychosocial support to victims of gender-based violence to women who would not previously have had such access.<sup>28</sup>

**The adaptive capability of VIOs is evident where IVCOs and VIOs have been able to respond quickly to find alternative sources of financial support, albeit on a limited scale.**

In short, the findings indicate VIO partnerships with local authorities, funders and the corporate sector in the various countries have helped strengthen relationships, create or enhance solidarity, and generate the much-needed revenue for these interventions.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> COVID-19 prevented farmers in the VSO Nigeria livelihoods programme from accessing markets to sell their produce. An example was reported of crops harvested but going to waste owing to restrictions on movement. “They had all this food supply that they were not selling and obviously not consuming enough. So the biggest problem became storage. It became a supply chain problem.” (Country Director, VSO Nigeria) Ultimately the programme found ways of supporting farmers with storage and small loans to mitigate their difficulty to some extent.

<sup>27</sup> VSO Nigeria runs a sign language education programme, but under lockdown schools were closed and the programme could no longer continue. “So during lockdown, students have been able to continue their schooling until the year closes, through solar powered radios. The way we did this was to work with community volunteers to empower the teachers to ensure that all stakeholders were participating, to ensure that all kids who should be in school can go somewhere and have access to a class programme.” (Country Representative, VSO Nigeria)

<sup>28</sup> Through the use of online support, Movimiento Manuela Ramos (in Peru) extended counselling to women beyond Lima to the other provinces in Peru. The organisation has managed to coordinate these activities more closely with the state and other partners. Movimiento Ciudadano Frente al Cambio Climático in Peru has been running its environmental and climate justice advocacy campaigns online. These include use of online concerts for advocacy and to lift people’s spirits in a time of despair.

<sup>29</sup> Online music concerts were held in Mexico to thank COVID-19 frontline workers, and in the Philippines to fundraise for Eau et Vie partners.



Given the context of uncertainty, the measures taken by the IVCOs and their partners have tended to be short-term crisis interventions. Nevertheless, the pandemic has clearly provided opportunities for collaboration and longer-term innovation. Our findings suggest that continued relevance in international volunteering will rely on new approaches to V4D that include:

- working in consortia to draw on the strengths of the various partners, extend the scale of operations, and increase funding impact;
- offering direct funding of partner organisations in the Global South;
- playing a bigger role in support for ICT infrastructure within partner organisations and in host countries (this might include lobbying and direct support);
- partnering with in-country VIO networks.



### 4.3 Resourcing for Continuity and Relevance in the Post-COVID-19 Context

The findings highlight three trends in the resourcing of international volunteering in the COVID-19 context. The first is the reality of declining public and private funds for IVCOs. The second is evidence of how the COVID-19 context has produced new partnerships which in turn gave rise to new sources of financial and human support. We argue that these partnerships offer possible new frontiers for growth in V4D. The third is financial and operational flexibility in ensuring that partner organisations are able to repurpose and access financial resources for activities in the context of COVID-19.

#### **Resources**

The research produced a mixed picture in respect of financial resources going forward. We see changes in governmental financial support, with some IVCOs reporting that they are facing reductions in government support for 2020-2021. In one example, Norec experienced a significant budget cut in 2019-2020, while having to return unused funds to the central aid budget to contribute to Norway's aid support for international COVID-19 vaccine development.<sup>30</sup> The Swiss Development Cooperation co-funding is being reduced,<sup>31</sup> impacting on Unité's member organisations. The recent announcement by the UK Government<sup>32</sup> that it intends to reduce expenditure on international aid and development from 0.7% to 0.5% of GDP creates some further uncertainty on future funding available to volunteerism. Nevertheless, the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) in the UK is currently committed to volunteering for development.<sup>33</sup>

Declining opportunities for mobilising private sector funding is also evident in the context of COVID-19 impacting on the global economy. For example, Comundo (a Unité member organisation) had to cancel a major donor event this year and is concerned that this may impact on the relationship with its donors. Funding from institutions and foundations is also in decline.

However, COVID-19 has also created opportunities for harnessing philanthropic impulses in various countries across the globe. SAM Global (a Unité member organisation) established a Corona Fund into which some donors diverted some of their funding, and which grew strongly through large and small donations from individuals and various entities.<sup>34</sup> Another view is that solidarity is increasing owing to COVID-19:

<sup>30</sup> "We contributed as much as we could and it didn't affect our programmes, because most of our programmes were cut short in some way. We had leverage to still be able to support the projects until the end of the year and also repay the funds." (Norec Head of Section NGO)

<sup>31</sup> This reduction is a function of the Swiss government's aid policy, not of COVID-19.

<sup>32</sup> Statement by Rishi Sunak, UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, to the House of Commons 26 November 2020.

<sup>33</sup> The recent merger between DfID and the Foreign Office may impact on volunteering for development in due course, but it is understood that within the UK government a volunteering strategy is in the process of being developed. Following the impact of COVID-19 which saw the effective closure of the ICS programme, there is an intention to restart when conditions allow. Also, as a result of COVID-19, on the basis of a revised plan submitted by VSO, the FCDO has continued its support through a multi-year grant, a funding mechanism which gives VSO greater flexibility during the period of the pandemic.

<sup>34</sup> 90% of the Corona Fund went directly to partner organisations and 10% was used for repatriation flights and other administrative expenses.

**“A lot of the funders [particularly] corporate funders are still interested in contributing. So [it is important] to offer them platforms where they can contribute ... digital volunteering is a really good opportunity and a good way to get funds easily.” (Norec Head of Section NGO)**

In the face of increasing fiscal constraints, the adaptive capability of VIOs is evident where IVCOs and VIOs have been able to respond quickly to find alternative sources of financial support, albeit on a limited scale. Our data suggest that factors impacting on adaptive capability include acting on lessons learnt, changing processes rapidly and being able to reassure funders that programme changes can be made safely whilst maintaining quality and staying focused on outcomes. Additionally, relevance and innovation are probably the most significant factors in adaptive organisational behaviour, particularly if VIOs are to attract new funding from governments and donors. In this regard, some IVCOs have worked closely with partner organisations and donors to devise strategies that meet their needs within an uncertain and rapidly changing context.



Unité member organisation Mission 21 supported its local partners in the distribution of hygiene products to members of different ethnic groups in South Sudan, including the Dinka people pictured here. Photo: PCOSS/Mission 21

## Partnerships

Relatedly, COVID-19 triggered new cross-sectoral partnerships and new relationships between partner organisations, the corporate sector and foundations in-country and abroad; in turn these gave rise to new sources of financial and human support. Examples include establishing or strengthening relationships with stakeholders such as local authorities, local leaders, homeowners' associations and companies; obtaining new funding from local and international donors; and collaborating with private sector organisations, including private media, to fundraise through virtual music festivals and concerts designed to instil hope in the public.<sup>35</sup> This is an encouraging development that indicates that VIOs could pursue diversified funding sources, even in countries where this has not been possible before.<sup>36</sup> Even then, there are fears *“that it will be very difficult next year, when funding is not enough for these partner organisations.”*

**IVCOs and VIOs can tap into emergent partnerships as new growth areas both for revenue and the delivery of development outcomes.**

This notwithstanding, IVCOs and VIOs can tap into these emergent partnerships as new growth areas both for revenue and the delivery of development outcomes. This is especially so in the context of declining ‘supply’ of international volunteers, or closure of short-term programmes due to, for example, FCDO withdrawing ICS volunteers and Unité members withdrawing or stopping the youth ambassador programme because of being too costly. There is also anticipated growth in local, national and South-South volunteering. In addition, contextual factors such as continued restrictions on travel for international volunteering imply that these COVID-19 related cuts are likely to harm the sector’s new growth frontiers. There is a further need to rethink the role and resourcing of local volunteers as an integral part of the volunteerism for development infrastructure. One scenario is to think about resource mobilisation in a more innovative way, e.g. embed volunteers in project funding proposals.

<sup>35</sup> In the Philippines, the pandemic strengthened partner organisation relationships with stakeholders, such as local authorities, local leaders, homeowners' associations and companies. In some cases, these relationships produced new funding from local and international donors. In Mexico, Peru (Cuso International) and the Philippines (France Volontaires), VIO collaboration with private sector organisations enabled them to organise virtual music festivals and concerts through which they raised funds. In Nigeria, VSO partnered with Unilever to obtain hygiene supplies for distribution in communities. In Peru, Movimiento Manuela Ramos, a feminist movement supported by Cuso International, reached out to Cuso volunteers worldwide as well as other international organisations for solidarity, support and funding. In the Philippines two youth work readiness programmes supported by France Volontaires asked their partner companies for donations. In a special interview, Professor Jacqueline Butcher from Universidad Iberoamericana, Ciudad de México shared her recent survey findings that showed how in the context of COVID-19, high levels of solidarity in Mexico meant that “individuals have taken helping others into their hands”. Individual support to neighbours and others included donating money and helping them find jobs.

<sup>36</sup> The VSO Nigeria country director emphasised the importance of IVCOs forming consortia with other stakeholders as an effective means of securing funding for projects operating at scale.

## Financial and Operational Flexibility

IVCOs responded in different ways to the financial and operational impact of COVID-19 on their partner organisations. For example, VSO swiftly provided the FCDO with a reworked plan that helped boost procurement thresholds and speed up the acquisition of PPE for their volunteers so that programming could continue. In some cases IVCOs provided partners with grants for COVID-19-related project activities and helped them acquire the resources needed

### Future V4D activities are likely to embrace different volunteering models which will impact on directionality, length, and the nature and objectives of the volunteer intervention.

for online work processes. Similar support was extended to volunteers who continued offering online support after repatriation, or for the cost of in-country accommodation during the severe lockdown periods.

There was also evidence of financial flexibility: Norec enabled its partners to redirect unused funds into food and accommodation for on-site volunteers and exchange participants and amended

partnership agreements to facilitate funding flows. Unité member organisations provided examples of redirecting activities and finding ways of ensuring that objectives were met, especially through the project-based model. Some IVCOs invited partner organisations to submit new grant proposals for 2021, creating new templates for applications and budgets, new agreement documents, and revised selection criteria.

With regard to operational flexibility, the key point is that the crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has offered some organisations the opportunity to improvise, to accelerate changes they were planning to make and to highlight areas for improvement and change. In some cases, this meant employing more local staff (a process that VSO Nigeria had already started) or finding alternatives to in-country programme assessment(s).

Adaptive capability is evident in the extent to which organisations developed practical solutions that enabled partner organisations to retool and to keep contact with their target communities. Useful illustrations include the use of internet mediated media and mobile phones that proved particularly effective in community outreach, as did older forms of media such as radio and television cited earlier.

But a contrary insight about organisational creativity comes from Norec's Head of Section NGO who reflected, "*we've seen both very little creativity and very, very interesting and innovative creativity.*" In her experience, grassroots partner organisations working 24/7 to respond to their target groups simply didn't have the time to think creatively about the future. Unfortunately, this would impact on these organisations' ability to formulate new proposals for funding.

## 5. Lessons from the COVID-19 Response: Opportunities for Innovative Change?

In this section, we reflect on lessons from the COVID-19 response and the implications for the future direction of volunteering for development. First we deal with the changing profile of V4D volunteers to argue that COVID-19 has accelerated this change. We then look at the implications for building resilience.

### 5.1 National and Community Volunteering: The Changing Profile of V4D Volunteers

Outcomes of the surveys of volunteers and VIOs, plus further evidence from focus groups and interviews, point to national and community volunteers featuring more strongly and expanding in the immediate to long-term future of V4D.<sup>37</sup> Four factors are at play in influencing this shift. First, future V4D activities are likely to embrace different volunteering models which will impact on directionality, length, and the nature and objectives of the volunteer intervention. For example, intensification of remote technology-mediated volunteering is likely to require greater involvement of national and community volunteers as critical participants given supply-side constraints of international volunteers, as well as continued restrictions on movement. This might entail pairing of remote or online professional international volunteers (North-South, South-South, South-North). In this scenario, professional international volunteers would offer technical support to their on-the-ground national or community volunteers. Second, it is important to recognise that IVCO programmes have always worked with national and community volunteers - not necessarily as part of their own programme, but as an add-on component of the contribution of local partners and communities.<sup>38</sup> The future calls for formal resourcing of national and community volunteers and their organisations as

**Community volunteers were able to continue in their roles when international volunteers did not, even in cases where they were not repatriated.**

<sup>37</sup> There is some discussion amongst the IVCOs about “hybridity”. While this may be a new direction for some IVCOs, the idea and practice of a mixed offer of volunteer contributions within a single development intervention is not new. What appears to be a feature of the “new” hybridity is a combination of national, community and variable international volunteering models. COVID-19 experience suggests this could now embrace digital volunteering interventions.

<sup>38</sup> UNV have always had a programme on national volunteering for UN volunteers. International youth programmes do not necessarily make the international/national distinction. In VSO, who have become arguably the most significant IVCO to cross over to a national volunteering programme in host countries, the origin of equality can be tracked back to their Global Exchange programme and then to ICS, both youth programmes, where the intention of equality in exchange was a strong driver (see Allum 2012). The introduction of national volunteers in the long-term volunteer programme can be tracked to repositioning following the UK Government’s change in policy on funding UK volunteering (see Allum 2012).

a recognition of their core importance to IVCO programmes.<sup>39</sup> This opens up the question as to why national and community volunteering might become part of the IVCO portfolio of activities.

The most obvious finding from our study is that community volunteers were able to continue in their roles when international volunteers did not, even in cases where they were not repatriated. Findings further illustrate instances where community volunteers had been trained through the volunteer programme and were in situ.<sup>40</sup>

This signals that the ability to deliver programme objectives in a pandemic by national and community volunteers is significant. In conclusion, the repatriations occasioned by COVID-19 have helped highlight the risks associated with relying on international volunteers. In the ensuing circumstances, the potential and actual contributions of community volunteers have become more apparent: *“We’re mobilising our established networks of community volunteers and learning champions to raise awareness of how to keep children safe and well, focusing both on mental health and child protection.”*<sup>41</sup>

Third, better resourcing and utilisation of national and community volunteers offer a model that can operate at greater scale with the same resources, perhaps relevant to a context of funding challenges, and it has greater compatibility with mainstreaming responses to climate change, disasters, poverty reduction, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in general. Donor perspectives on the contribution

**Better resourcing and utilisation of national and community volunteers offers a model that can operate at greater scale with the same resources.**

**Is the potential growth of national and community volunteers adding to or replacing international volunteering? Historically the evidence suggests both are plausible, and a hybrid model might be a viable option.**

<sup>39</sup> There is a long history of community volunteers as a programme outcome, e.g. the development of volunteer community health workers or rural motivators.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with FCDO. “The pandemic has definitely accelerated the role and scale of the community volunteers. And it’s accelerated that a lot because of the global scale. But I don’t think it’s been a unique catalyst because the cyclone [Idai] also kind of propelled that work forward. And I think different things have happened, you know, every time there’s a flood or another shock, it pushes us a bit further along, so I think the pandemic has just really sped that up because it’s been so far-reaching and it’s affected kind of all people.”

<sup>41</sup> VSO website. It also states in the context of the response to COVID-19: “Our volunteers form deep relationships, built on trust, with the people with whom they work. It’s through these strong relationships that we’re working to tackle the crisis together – ensuring that our response plans are driven by the needs of the people we serve, and using our existing networks to share essential messages. Most of our community and national volunteers have been able to continue their work since the crisis began.” (<https://www.vsointernational.org/COVID-19>)

of volunteering to poverty reduction strategies and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), climate change and disasters as opined by one major funder, present another important driver in aiding the provision of resources to support national and community volunteering, either as a direct volunteering budget or as part of project or programmatic funding.<sup>42</sup>

From an IVCO perspective, in what ways is this potential growth of national and community volunteers adding to or replacing international volunteering? Historically the evidence suggests both are plausible.<sup>43</sup> Indeed with some of the increasing challenges of the supply of long-term volunteers reported in the study, a hybrid model might be a viable option. An accompanying study points to the potential transition amongst Unité members into a greater usage of local co-workers on their programmes. This is linked to their experience of COVID-19 in terms of the risk of repatriation or interruption in the case of their international volunteers. But it is also linked to the declining supply of long-term volunteers.<sup>44</sup> The impact of repatriation on programme activities also appears to have impacted on the thinking of some IVCOs going forward. One example of this is JICA who are “seriously considering” a national volunteer programme, recognising that national volunteers have in the past connected with JICA volunteers.<sup>45</sup>

Fourth, our study also indicates that IVCOs and partner organisations recognise the importance of generating social capital which is sustained and enhanced using national and community volunteers. A good example is found in France Volontaires’ Philippines programmes which showed that community volunteers became a key resource in delivering programme activities, while simultaneously strengthening bonds with the community.<sup>46</sup> Given the congruence between governmental donors and IVCOs and VIOs on this matter, it seems clear that donors are interested in innovative ways of using the volunteer model to achieve the SDGs. National and community volunteers offer a potential way of managing the risk of programme closures.

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**42** A distinction drawn by donors and IVCOs alike tends to separate volunteer budgets from development project budgets. There may be some overlap and some flexibility between these budgets.

**43** The introduction of ICS in the UK was piloted as entirely UK volunteers but then developed into a programme of both matched UK and national volunteers.

**44** Variations in models away from North-South volunteering may tend to be connected to the reduction in participation of nationals from the Global North in the same programme (e.g. Norec and VSO).

**45** “We are seriously interested in implementing [a] national volunteer programme, to ... have local people ... to operate our volunteer programme ... For a long time ... as far as I understand, they [JICA volunteers] worked together with local people. And some of them were national volunteers.” (Key informant, JICA Tokyo).

**46** The Water and Life NGO realised how much they depend on voluntary community organisers to provide hygiene kits and check firefighting equipment: “it just showed us how much our volunteers were involved in our activities, because as we were not able to go to the field, we were relying on them to continue providing hygiene kits to our community members, to check our [firefighting] equipment ... So we could see the results of this strong connection with the community that we had before the crisis and it helped us to continue to provide some support to the community.” (Programme manager, Water and Life NGO)



However, there is another side to this. The motivations of governments in relation to volunteering for development programmes are complex and subject to change. The balance of these policies will likely impact on the potential support for how IVCOs engage with national and community volunteering. Inhibitors include: policies mainly focused on what happens when volunteers return to their home country, such as being part of a leadership focus or public engagement in the Global North, the extent to which diversity is a criterion for volunteer sending, or using volunteers to build a professional development service.<sup>47</sup> The significance of volunteers as an instrument of soft power tends to be premised on a model of sending nationals of one country to another, and so might mitigate against a model of using volunteers from the host country.<sup>48</sup> While the likely outcome will depend on the balance of these different policy objectives, COVID-19 appears to have accelerated the recognition of the importance of community and national volunteering, and this potential needs further discussion to become a larger component of the IVCO offering.

**While COVID-19 has driven a focus on local volunteers in the Global South, this is diminishing the contribution of returned volunteers to public engagement and fundraising in the Global North, which is a priority for the funding many IVCOs receive.**



Shireen Joseph, a grade 4 student in Lilongwe, Malawi with her mother, Olivia Makison Joseph, and her father, Cosmas Joseph. VSO, 2020. Photographer: Craig Mawanga.

<sup>47</sup> Allum 2012; Baillie, Smith and Laurie 2011.

<sup>48</sup> Lough and Allum 2013.

## 5.2 Implications for Building Resilience

Earlier in this paper we discussed the issues of repatriation and agency. We return to those issues here to consider factors that might build resilience relevant to future pandemics, which can be connected to future models of volunteering for development.

One way to approach the drivers of change on the nature of V4D is to consider the contextual nature of volunteer models and how this has affected the impact of COVID-19 on V4D. What emerges from our study is the extent to which international volunteers, notably on youth programmes or short-term assignments, were repatriated while long-term international volunteers, as well as national and community volunteers, tended to remain in placement. The extent to which volunteers and partner organisations had agency in the decision to remain was found to be important, though other factors such as the circumstances of border closures were found to contribute. Agency was clearly important, and where volunteers had the option of choice, many seem to have remained on assignment. But for community volunteers there was no real choice.

We found the context of agency also appears to have been important. This is central to the outcomes of the long-term co-workers in Unité, most of whom remained on assignment in-country. In the analysis of the Unité experience, it becomes apparent that the values between partner organisations in the Global South and their Northern-based partners in Switzerland, taken together with the values of the co-workers, have framed a faith-based 'closed system' that shapes the role of both partners. This is reinforced by their relatively distanced relationship with the Swiss Development Cooperation. This appears to have facilitated a level of resilience in the system to sustain support in the Global South, but also a framework within which programme objectives could be met during the pandemic by means other than using international volunteers. This thinking also links to current and future approaches to increase locally recruited co-workers within this system of shared values.<sup>49</sup> Such a model is not without challenges. There is recognition within Unité that while COVID-19 has driven a focus on local volunteers in the Global South, the impact on the contribution of returned volunteers to public engagement and fundraising has diminished in the Global North. How this balance is resolved post-COVID-19 remains to be seen.

In contrast, VIOs operating more 'open' systems – which arguably proved less resilient during the pandemic – utilise a framework of volunteers who may tend to be more individualistic with a variety of motivations and interests. This manifests as a historic disconnect in Global North and Global South partnering which is mediated by the IVCO, often at country level. This seems to provide a model more vulnerable to the challenges of episodic pandemics such as COVID-19, since it arguably does not have the same connectivity in shared values and purpose. The study found interesting examples of how adaptations were made in respect of volunteers. In Peru, the partner organisations' requirements for volunteers were partially met by recruiting a few former Cuso International volunteers who had chosen to settle in Peru after their contracts ended.

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<sup>49</sup> This is more fully developed in the report produced for Unité member organisations.

Arguably, COVID-19 demands that IVCOs play a different role in host countries with reduced international volunteer intervention. This is evidenced by VSO Nigeria's interest in developing, with their partner organisations, volunteer infrastructure which in turn would encourage volunteering from within the country. In that sense, COVID-19 offers an insight into the future roles of IVCOs as potential partners in the development of national and community volunteering within and outside of the IVCO itself.

### **5.3 Rethinking the International Volunteering Model**

Our research provides important insights into how international volunteer placements were impacted by Covid-19. The repatriation of volunteers from the Global North appeared widespread for specific kinds of volunteer programmes, especially those involving youth and short-term placements for cultural learning. Longer-term volunteers appear more likely to have remained in place. And we have seen how South-South exchange participants appear to have a greater degree of agency in their decision to remain in their placements or to leave.

These insights suggest that when South-South cross-border volunteering and exchange is viewed as one form of international volunteering, a model emerges that reduces the risk of sudden programme closures. It also provides the sustainability and resilience required for V4D programmes to contribute to the SDGs.

The experience of WAGGGS partners within the Norec programme indicates how international volunteers from the Global South – by choice and/or force of circumstance – remained on-site and adapted to the prevailing situation. While COVID-19 forced the WAGGGS partnership to make significant changes in ways of working, this example of South-South exchange demonstrates what is both technically and politically possible in situations where the North-South model ceased to operate.

The importance of IVCOs supporting South-South volunteer and exchange programmes<sup>50</sup> is captured in the following comments from the Cuso country director in Peru:

**“I think that would provide some solution to the lack of or impossibility of Canadian volunteers traveling to these regions ... All the South-South volunteers that we had in the past programme would love to continue working with Cuso, but because this program is solely for North-South, we have to tell them no, it's not possible.”**

She goes further to describe how, despite a shared understanding of colonialism, culture and language, the process of immersion for South-South volunteers requires learning and respect which bears some similarity to that of North-South volunteers:

<sup>50</sup> In this study Norec and Cuso International are two IVCOs that have done so.

**“Our volunteer working with this indigenous organisation was an international volunteer, but she was South-South. She was a Costa Rican volunteer and she had to go through the process of learning – first about the organisation to be able to be effective, but also [to be] accepted by the organisation. ... [You] gain their trust by showing that you care and you respect and you are willing to learn; [that] you are an equal and you don’t have any prejudice.”**

International volunteering has traditionally emphasised the role of volunteers returning to their home country, and the WAGGGS exchange programme demonstrates a similar aim: a participant in Ghana returns to her home country (e.g. Rwanda) and to her organisation that partnered with WAGGGS in Ghana. In both Northern and Southern countries the objective of this component tends to embrace an exchange of learning shared by returned volunteers from different parts of the world, leading to different kinds of actions in their home countries.

Our research indicates that IVCOs may be challenged by not having returned volunteers to fundraise, advocate or publicise the value of their programmes in the Global South. COVID-19 calls into question whether this objective can be realised in the same way in the future. Perhaps it means that IVCOs from the Global North need to look elsewhere for learning exchanges about ‘the other’ that do not involve high levels of travel and risk in the duty of care.

One focus is closer to home for many IVCOs. The reality of refugee migration and the movement of people seeking economic opportunities across the world is changing the social fabric of European and other countries. These developments produce opportunities for regional and domestic volunteering in the North for humanitarian support, climate justice, racial and gender justice and other burning issues. IVCO investment in Northern and Southern regional and domestic programmes would complement initiatives already in place, such as the European Voluntary Service and other Northern VIO networks and Southern entities such as the African Union volunteer programme and other Southern VIO networks.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper contributes to a fuller understanding of how COVID-19 impacted on V4D, and how IVCOs responded and adapted to the challenges presented by this pandemic. By understanding these responses and adaptations, it draws out several lessons learned that can help to frame the future of V4D. During the course of this study, we noted how

### COVID-19 offers an insight into the future roles of IVCOs as potential partners in the development of national and community volunteering.

dialogue changed concerning COVID-19. Respondents' immediate concerns were driven by duty of care and the subsequent repatriation of many international volunteers. Practice then shifted to the potential "new normal" of technology-mediated remote volunteering and working. As we conclude the study in January 2021, the availability of vaccines has, for

some, signalled a return to programming the provision of international volunteers in host countries. This perception raises perhaps the biggest risk for IVCOs. Even with the vaccine, we are not likely to return to the pre-COVID-19 models. In addition, IVCOs have also been forced to reckon with the clear benefits of reduced international travel, such as lower carbon emissions and better air quality – thus realising real trade-offs in achieving SDGs targeting both natural and social impacts.

Attending to these risks and realisations, the study highlights several opportunities for IVCOs to reposition their operations and strategies for the future as they continue their commitments to learn from their own and others' experiences. Four key areas for that learning highlighted in the paper include:

- COVID-19 has surfaced the central role of national and community volunteers in development. These should not be considered additional components to the core international volunteer programme. They should therefore be adequately resourced.
- Equity is a key challenge in the ways the duty of care is exercised. IVCOs should ensure that the agency of volunteers and partner organisations, with regards to their activities and safety and security, is equitably respected under similar circumstances.
- Funding and resourcing must start with addressing the issues and aspirations partner organisations face and how IVCO responses can be more flexible and adaptive with national and community volunteering as core components. The COVID-19 experience provides an opportunity for IVCOs to engage in meaningful dialogue with donors and policy makers in resourcing strategies that support partner organisations. Particular attention should be paid to hybrid models.
- IVCOs should consider how they can work better together in consortia to address the immediate challenges of pandemics, to enhance future resourcing opportunities, and to devise more innovative programme activities.

These issues are interconnected and raise several key questions with regards to the future of international volunteering that IVCOs need to consider. These include:

- **How does the emergence of a vaccine** affect the IVCO approach to duty of care and the donor/host governments' appetite for risk in returning to international volunteering and V4D? While a vaccine removes one supply side barrier, it may well pose challenges in equity between volunteers from the Global North, duly vaccinated, working alongside national and community volunteers and local communities who have not been vaccinated. In any case, will countries that would be hosts to international volunteers be prepared to open their borders and allow such movement? The duty of care may be exercised better in respect of international volunteers, but this does not mean it is equitably applied. IVCOs face a choice: do they return to the days of using international volunteers to provide health and education or develop national and community volunteering support alongside recruitment of local staff? Should IVCOs seize this moment to focus on supporting and building volunteer infrastructure to enable national and community volunteering as a central element of V4D?
- How will COVID-19 impact **programme focus** in terms of content (e.g. health, livelihoods, environmental sustainability) and against volunteer models (e.g. capacity building, skills substitution etc.)? How effective and practical are the alternative models now being applied and explored in the absence of international volunteering? It is interesting that the surveys did not bring out changing programme priorities as such a significant trend in the future as other factors. Nevertheless, interviews indicated how programme interventions were being adapted. There is every reason to expect a revision of priorities as the impact of COVID-19 is experienced widely.
- How can VIOs innovate new **areas of growth** in their programmes to deliver volunteering for development in the months and years ahead? Put differently, how can the volunteering for development sector better position itself to respond to the distinctive challenges and opportunities resulting from COVID-19? How will volunteer models change in the context of partner demands, environmental impacts, available funding and cost-effective/values-based volunteer models, e.g. blended volunteering? These are important questions requiring serious reflections by IVCOs and VIOs.

Other important issues surfaced by the study requiring further reflection include the sometimes obvious contradictions between donor governments' soft power objectives, and international volunteering and development outcomes, such as poverty reduction and climate change mitigation. This study showed that in COVID-19 contexts, some – not all – government policy makers are open to fresh ideas and the potential for funding community volunteers, providing funds for partner organisations, and supporting innovative ways of working. IVCOs have an opportunity to engage with donors and policy makers based on the experiences and aspirations of partner organisations. To do this effectively may require a significant level of collaboration, building partnerships within the IVCO sector, but also outside for resourcing and programming. It also requires a strategy for proactively influencing policy makers, including collaborations through bodies such as the VGA.

The overall lesson from our study is the importance of IVCOs being ready to learn and address challenging questions, such as equity, preparedness and flexibility, responsiveness and adaptability, and explicit recognition of the role of community volunteers. The COVID-19 experience cannot be seen as a “one-off.” Similar pandemics are likely, perhaps inevitable. It is likely that different IVCOs will follow different paths, depending on their priorities. Those that focus on poverty reduction may pursue the path of blended learning, which may well ultimately place national and community volunteering, along with South-South volunteering, at its centre. Those that are interested in global learning may find opportunities closer to home as a way of governments and citizens experiencing ‘the other.’ COVID-19 has given an important insight into what different futures there might be and that there are choices to be made.

How IVCOs take forward such discussions is the focus of our final **recommendations**:

- Recognising that Forum will use webinars to share the findings of this paper and promote discussions on how IVCOs are positioned in the future, we recommend that this is developed into a series of thematic discussions, based on the key issues raised in this paper and by IVCOs themselves in response to this paper.
- To optimise the dissemination of these findings, we recommend that Forum work with the authors of this paper to enable a wider dissemination of the data and findings emerging from this study, through conferences, journal articles, online forums – thus enabling inputs from IVCOs in and outside Forum.
- To understand the longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on IVCOs, we recommend that Forum plan a follow-up study which looks at how IVCOs respond to the pandemic over the next two years, focused particularly on the changes that IVCOs make with particular reference to the findings in this paper.
- The study points to areas that IVCOs should explore to prepare for future ‘shocks’ of the pandemic kind. We propose a six-point plan for IVCOs to consider. This list is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, it represents a checklist for IVCOs in areas where potential improvements could be made in preparing for future pandemics.

## A Six-Point Plan for Addressing Future Pandemic-Style Shocks and Stresses

1. Review and develop more inclusive communication strategies in terms of the volume and mechanism of engagement. This includes fail-safe mechanisms to ensure that two-way communication takes place and is acted on within VIOs, and between VIOs, volunteers and partners.
2. Clarify policies on repatriation and/or removal of volunteers from assignment, including the approach to volunteer and partner organisation agency in that decision.
3. Clarify how duty of care is applied to all volunteers and how this is equitable, and ensure this is transparent in its implementation.
4. Develop strategies and lines of communication with donors to facilitate rapid adaptation in the use of funds in support of volunteers and partners/communities for pursuing both programme objectives and specific pandemic related activities.
5. Build risk assessment and risk management into the volunteering model, reducing exposure to the impact of the closure of the international volunteering programme by adapting to hybrid volunteering models within an IVCO or in partnership with other volunteer organisations.
6. Ensure that effective support is provided for volunteers who remain on assignment since they may have a higher demand for personal and logistical support.



10 million girl guides in 150 countries were affected by lockdown restrictions. The YESS Girls participants therefore decided to develop a COVID-19 survival strategy handbook for girl guides.  
Photo: Norec



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