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VSO - working through demand-led partnerships

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VSO – working through demand-led partnerships

Laurence O'Donnell, UK

VSO IS AN international development charity that works through volunteers. VSO enables people aged 17 – 70 to share skills and experience with communities and organisations across the developing world. We passionately believe we can make a difference in tackling poverty by helping people realise their potential.

VSO is a 'people to people' approach to development, promoting and encouraging the way people from all over the world learn from each other. We are realistic in our expectations, working to long term objectives where volunteers can make a difference, focusing on sustainable development rather than short term relief.

The VSO concept is to provide help where it is most needed – in local communities, sharing knowledge and different ways of working, respecting cultures and traditions and providing training in specific skills – all in the spirit of mutual growth. Through these ideals we aim to make a visible improvement to people's lives overseas – whether in education, health, income and employment opportunities, or their ability to contribute to society.

But what does this mean in real terms? Who are the volunteers? Which organisations? What skills are being shared and with whom?

One specific aspect of VSO's technical Programme is water supply / sanitation. There are currently more than 10 volunteers overseas working within this field in either rural or urban environments, in Guyana, Vanuatu, Ghana, South Africa, Mongolia, The Phillipines, Nigeria and Papua New Guinea.

In Guyana we have worked closely for some years with the Guyana Water Authority. We have sent volunteers to assist in the training of local staff in the rehabilitation of their sewerage system in Georgetown.

The range of requests we receive are diverse and therefore some flexibility is sought from both potential volunteers and our overseas partners. We have for example placed plumbers in Papua New Guinea as Rural Water supply engineers. This highlights the transferable skills that a volunteer can bring to an employer. Through volunteer demonstration it became apparent that this was a very appropriate use of available resources.

Throughout Africa water-borne disease is a major debilitating factor in the development of human society. The challenge then is to facilitate a health education programme which runs in tandem with the construction of appropriate sanitation facilities, in a culturally sensitive way.

Yetunde Adegoke went overseas as a volunteer working on a water supply project in the south of Nigeria. Although

a large part of the project was the construction of appropriate latrines and setting bore holes, health education was a significant feature.

Yetunde says that it took time to devise a methodology which would facilitate local community members to come up with solutions to their own problems. Getting it right was crucial in preventing her from being seen as directive whilst at the same time actively helping in correcting social habits in order to enhance community health care.

Yetunde helped to devise a scheme where schools, in which they had built pit latrines, became part of a 'competition' to see which school maintained the highest standard in hygiene of their latrine. Working with children is one of the ways that VSO works toward sustainability.

Yetunde worked with local Nigerians in an NGO called Partners. VSO have been working alongside this organisation since 1996 helping to build their capacity in delivering a community service as well as working with the local community. Partners has refurbished or built 15 wells and introduced hand pumps providing potable water to several thousand people.

VSO has clear aims and values and as an organisation has sent men and women to share skills overseas at a local community level in urban and rural environments.

But the reality is that it is a two-way process by which the volunteer learns a great deal both professionally and personally. Working through volunteers, VSO enables people throughout the developing world to identify community needs in order to facilitate sustainable growth.

Since 1958 VSO has been sending volunteers to share skills in order to strengthen institutions of development, building capacities whether in individuals or non-government organisations.

VSO seeks to work toward the advancement of a more equitable world and believes sustainable growth will happen more effectively when developing communities have better access to facilities which ensure a healthier environment. As such we are committed to the continued recruitment of water engineers as and when requested. We will continue to seek ways in which we can identify transferable skills and experiences in order to facilitate the needs of our overseas partners and other beneficiaries.

LAURENCE O'DONNELL, UK
