

# Focus For Change

VSO's strategic plan

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EMPOWERMENT PARTNERSHIP COMMITMENT TO LEARNING

EDUCATION HIV AND AIDS DISABILITY HEALTH AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING  
SECURE LIVELIHOODS PARTICIPATION AND GOVERNANCE

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Working to achieve specific **goals:**

- education
- HIV and AIDS
- disability
- health and social well-being
- secure livelihoods
- participation and governance.

Adopting three **approaches** in all we do:

- empowerment
- partnership
- commitment to learning.

Using a **range of activities** including:

- international volunteering
- networking and alliance-building
- awareness-raising and advocacy
- exchanges and linking programmes
- support for local and national volunteering.

**Being more programmatic: focusing all our work to achieve specific development aims.**

**VSO promotes volunteering to fight global poverty and disadvantage.**

# preface

Over the last year, we have been reviewing VSO's role and aims. Many people, both within and beyond VSO, have contributed to this reflection and learning. This strategic plan, **Focus For Change**, sets out our conclusions.

The plan defines VSO's distinctive competence: the contribution of international volunteering to development. It sets out our change agenda, at the heart of which is working more programmatically. This means focusing all our efforts on achieving specific development priorities within the framework of six development goals. These goals reflect internationally-agreed development targets, our partner organisations' priorities and areas where we know that VSO can be most effective.

The plan also sets out three approaches which will be central to the way we work:

- **empowerment:** we will work to empower the people, communities and organisations with whom we work
- **partnership:** we will work in partnerships in order to maximise our impact
- **commitment to learning:** we will actively learn so that our work builds upon the skills, knowledge and understanding gained from experience.

VSO has over 40 years' experience in international volunteering. Our contribution has continually evolved as the development environment has changed. In preparing this plan, we also drew on our experience of implementing two previous strategic plans. **Focus For Change** should remain relevant for five years, but it does not have a fixed life span. It will be revised and built on as circumstances change and we all learn.

The plan is primarily for VSO staff and volunteers worldwide. It should enable you to understand VSO's vision of the future and to make decisions and take action on that basis. We hope it will also be useful for our partners, supporters, donors and other stakeholders.

**Focus For Change** is a guiding framework which will enable us to make more detailed plans so we can focus all VSO's efforts to achieve our purpose. Ultimately, I want everyone connected with VSO to be able to see and feel a connection between their role and our joint effort to fight disadvantage and build a fairer world.

**Mark Goldring**  
Chief Executive

# VSO's vision, purpose and values

## Vision

- A world without poverty in which people work together to fulfil their potential.

## Purpose

- VSO promotes volunteering to fight global poverty and disadvantage.  
We bring people together to share skills, creativity and learning to build a fairer world.

## Values

- We believe that everyone must be able to exercise their fundamental human rights.
- We believe that people working together can achieve positive and lasting change.
- We value diversity and cross-cultural understanding.
- We value partnerships based on honesty and respect.
- We value the innovation and creativity generated by shared endeavour.
- We value openness to learning.

# the international development context

Recent decades have seen significant improvements in health, education and living standards for many people around the world. But while economic growth and globalisation have the potential to bring many benefits, inequality and disadvantage have also grown. In the 21st century, a quarter of the world's population, including a disproportionate number of women, still lives in extreme poverty. Many people never have the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

Many developing countries have succeeded in training larger numbers of educated and professional people, but there are still shortages of skilled people in areas where they are most needed. Robust institutions and strong organisations which can deliver effective and accountable services are also often lacking.

Inequitable international policies, as well as war, poor governance, scarce resources and disease, notably the HIV and AIDS pandemic, have limited progress and even reversed development achievements in many parts of the world.

International development continues to have a role to play in supporting national efforts to overcome these enormous challenges. The moral case for action is as strong as ever and there is positive experience to build on. A key opportunity is provided by the Millennium Development Goals which set challenging targets for eradicating

extreme poverty, achieving universal primary education, reducing child mortality and making substantial progress in other vital areas by 2015<sup>1</sup>. Effective action to meet these internationally-agreed goals becomes ever more urgent.

Another step forward has been the move away from individual projects, each supported by a different donor. Governments, donors and the development community have learnt that effective interventions need local ownership and participation and a policy context that supports poverty reduction.

As a result, the international community has supported governments in developing national and/or sectoral frameworks for reducing poverty. Development agencies and donors need to work within these nationally-owned frameworks, in partnership with government, civil society organisations and the private sector. The development community also has a role in supporting local initiatives that complement these national programmes and in working with people who are excluded from them.

The ongoing challenge for VSO is to ensure that our contribution remains effective within the broader development context. This plan sets out our response to that challenge.

# vso and development

## Defining development and disadvantage

VSO sees development as a complex and continuous process that empowers people and communities to fight disadvantage, take control of their future and fulfil their potential. Human rights, including an education, a livelihood, health care, a safe environment, a say in the future and equal access to opportunity, are all vital for development.

VSO describes lack of access to these fundamental human rights as disadvantage. We work with many partners to fight disadvantage within the framework of the six development goals set out in this plan.

## Volunteering: VSO's distinctive contribution to development

International volunteering is at the heart of VSO's contribution to development. Our distinctive competence is working with our partner organisations to bring together people from different cultures and backgrounds, enabling them to share skills and learning.

Neither VSO nor VSO volunteers deliver development. We join a process involving many diverse players and we must be willing to listen, learn and collaborate. The creativity generated by this joint endeavour leads to new solutions in achieving shared goals and has a greater impact than transferring skills or other resources.

***What makes VSO different is the fact that volunteers live and work with ordinary people...they become part of a community, sleep in the same type of houses, eat the same type of food, share the happy times as well as the sad. While they can never become one of the people because they have that return air ticket, they show that they are willing to try to help a community to improve their lot.***

Martin Wall, returned VSO volunteer, selector and trainer.

***It's valuable having people coming from a different country and from a different work situation. They bring a new perspective to our work but they're also learning from us.***

Maurice Shakwamba, Prison Fellowship: VSO partner in Zambia.

VSO recruits volunteers from an increasingly wide range of countries, through national agencies in Canada, Kenya, the Netherlands, the Philippines and the UK. This international approach enriches our work by allowing us to combine and learn from the different perspectives of volunteers and staff.

At any time, we expect to work with 1,500–2,000 volunteers, several hundred staff, and tens of thousands of returned volunteers, supporters, donors and other stakeholders. As part of our contribution to tackling disadvantage, we build upon the experience and learning of volunteers to raise awareness of development and global justice issues and to achieve policy change in developed countries where much power lies.

### VSO volunteers

- work together with local colleagues, sharing skills, creativity and learning to achieve shared goals
- live and work alongside colleagues with cultural sensitivity, respect and trust
- bring an alternative, external perspective that can galvanise and facilitate change
- bring passion and commitment to their role as a volunteer
- work from community to national level in rural and urban settings
- are usually employed and managed by local organisations on terms and conditions similar to their colleagues
- gain and provide unique insights into the reality of life in other countries and societies, helping to build a global community.

## Volunteering in action: VSO's country programmes

VSO works in the poorest countries where we can make a significant contribution and where it is safe for us to have programmes. In each country, our programme staff work with our partners to develop a country strategic plan (CSP). The CSPs set out how VSO will work to increase the ability of disadvantaged women and men to exercise their rights.

The people whom we seek to empower are disadvantaged both within their country context and in absolute terms. In less developed countries, in which disadvantage is widespread, our work is likely to benefit a wider range of the population. In more developed countries, VSO's efforts are more tightly focused to benefit the most disadvantaged people in society. As part of

our analysis of disadvantage, we will develop our understanding of how gender determines power relations in the countries and communities where we work, so that an awareness of gender equity underpins our work more strongly.

VSO's partners include a wide range of organisations, from government ministries to community-level women's groups, from small enterprises to local, national and international non-government organisations. We seek partners who are committed to change and who can provide the organisational structure and resources needed for volunteers to be effective. For this reason, VSO is rarely able to work directly with the very poorest people in society. Instead, we work with partner organisations that work with or for the benefit of disadvantaged people.

### Volunteer roles

**Depending on the requirements of the partner organisation, volunteers may work in some or all of the following areas:**

- **service delivery**, in order to improve the quality and availability of vital basic services to those people in greatest need. VSO supports such placements only if there is scope for enhancing individual capabilities, for example, by teaching pupils or training staff, and where there is real commitment to addressing the underlying causes of the skills shortage. However, we also respond to service delivery needs in post-conflict or trauma situations, for example, the staff and skill shortages caused by the HIV and AIDS pandemic.
- **strengthening individual capabilities**, working with colleagues to share skills and build confidence and capacity.
- **organisational capacity building**, working with colleagues to strengthen partner organisations' systems, leadership, planning, management and sustainability.
- **institutional development**, working with colleagues to increase partner organisations' ability to collaborate, network and influence policy at local, national or international level. Volunteers can also help strengthen national policy-making and legislative frameworks.

Volunteers' roles often change as the placement evolves and working relationships develop.

In 2001, VSO had programmes in nearly 40 countries. Over five years, we will reduce this to nearer 30 so that we can focus our work and resources more effectively. As programmes close, we will devise exit strategies to maximise our impact and ensure we meet our responsibilities to our partners.

The overall shape of VSO's programme is determined by the types of role requested by country programmes, taking account of VSO's ability to recruit suitable volunteers. A vital part of a programme office's role is to identify partner organisations that are committed to promoting change, and in which volunteers can make effective use of their skills to facilitate development. In these situations, volunteers can have a development impact without necessarily having a background in international development, as long as the expectations of partner organisation and volunteer are well-defined and realistic.

### ***Strengthening the capacity of organisations***

When democracy returned to Nigeria in 1999 after 16 years of military rule, many civil society organisations had disappeared and those that remained were poorly run, with limited ability to work with the people they aimed to serve. With funding from the European Union, VSO undertook a survey in a number of northern states which aimed to identify emerging organisations with which we could work to build their capacity.

***'Shortly after we hit the ground and began to study the situation, it became evident that no single organisation had the capacity to host and manage a volunteer. So, instead, we identified groups of organisations and we now have eight volunteers working with 43 small organisations'***, explains Alan Knight, the director of VSO's Nigeria programme.

Pat Tajanlangit, for example, a Filipino VSO small business adviser, is helping four organisations working on health and livelihoods in Kebbi State to develop their finance and management systems. VSO also supports opportunities for these organisations to network and share information, and administers a small fund which enables members of the consortia to get projects up and running.

# our change agenda

## Focusing our work: being more programmatic

Becoming more programmatic is central to VSO's work in the future. It means focusing all our efforts on achieving local priorities identified in CSPs within the framework of the six development goals set out in this plan.

Volunteer placements will become part of a more strategic approach based on thorough and ongoing analysis and longer-term thinking. This will require deeper, more dynamic relationships with partner organisations, defined by shared agendas and learning, rather than by individual volunteer placements.

Crucially, this programmatic approach will include increased efforts, whether by VSO or by others, to achieve sustainable change by addressing causes as well as symptoms of development needs. Our aim is that, ultimately, partner organisations will have the capabilities and capacity they consider they need to be self-sufficient and so will no longer require VSO support.

We will be innovative and flexible in our work with our partners, using different interventions, as appropriate, to address shared aims. Volunteers will support change by working with our partners at different levels from community to policy level. Placements may be geographically clustered or linked in other ways to increase their impact and to provide opportunities for networking between partner organisations.

VSO continues to be committed to two-year placements, but the options for our partners will also include shorter placements, involvement in awareness-raising and advocacy initiatives, exchanges and linking programmes, secondments, study visits, grants, and support for volunteering initiatives run by local organisations.

VSO programme staff will network and build alliances with other practitioners and policy-makers in the development arena, and work to influence decision-makers. It is vital that VSO's country programmes complement national development agendas and the contribution of others to development.

Linking all these activities is paramount in building country programmes focused on fighting disadvantage. We should be able to explain clearly the role of every initiative in achieving the development priorities set out in the programme's CSP. The success of country programmes will then be judged on their impact in achieving these development aims.

Measuring impact is not easy, given that VSO's work is only one contribution to the development process. We are currently developing monitoring and evaluation tools so we can assess changes in the capacity of our partners, establish whether disadvantaged people consider their situation has improved, and identify VSO's contribution to that improvement.

Becoming more programmatic is a substantial part of our change agenda and it will require more staff and funds. We will secure these resources by:

- reducing the number of country programmes to allow greater resourcing for a smaller number of programmes
- streamlining VSO's management systems and processes to release the time of programme staff
- increasing our income: the programmatic approach brings clear opportunities for our programme staff to work more closely with donors to obtain funding.

## **A programmatic approach: building peace in the Philippines**

**'We had to cross mountains to get here. Some travelled two days straight walking, others three days. We had nothing except our clothes. We ran for our lives'**, says Ustad Taha Romiminbang. He is chairman of the Kilala group of people who were forced out of their homes in western Mindanao by fighting between rebel groups and government armed forces in 2000. Romiminbang heads one of 75 families now housed in temporary accommodation, which they built with the help of VSO's TOSCADAR programme.

TOSCADAR is an innovative programme to help people and communities displaced by fighting and who are still at risk. Deep-seated mistrust, fear and prejudice, combined with unequal access to resources and lack of basic services, has led to conflict between communities. The programme aims to break this cycle by encouraging greater understanding between Christian and Muslim communities.

Not only does TOSCADAR bring together international and national volunteers and local non-government organisations, it also has a cross-sectoral approach. Volunteers skilled in social welfare and therapy are training local NGO workers in counselling, while marine biologists and agriculturists are helping communities build sustainable livelihoods to minimise the risk of conflict over scarce resources. Filipino volunteer Jojo Rom exemplifies the integrated approach of the programme: **'My role is to establish sustainable livelihoods so they can feed themselves three times a day.'** A Christian, Rom is working with a Muslim community and his work is supported by conflict resolution training offered to volunteers and their colleagues.

## The future of volunteering

VSO is committed to an inclusive approach to international volunteering that enables people from a range of countries, backgrounds and ages to contribute to our development goals and respond to locally-identified priorities.

Recruiting volunteers with the right professional skills and personal qualities will remain a major challenge as we seek to respond to the changing development context. One of the successes of the development process has been the growth of a larger pool of skilled people in many countries. This means that the types of volunteers requested by our partners have changed. At the same time, in some developing countries, there are more trained professionals in certain fields than may be needed nationally, and this is an opportunity for recruitment.

We will enhance the service we offer to partner organisations by extending our successful programme of recruitment in developing countries. We expect to increase the number of national agencies and double the number of volunteers recruited in developing countries by 2005. We will continue to recruit volunteers from our national agencies in the UK, Canada and the Netherlands, and maintain our commitment to raising development awareness in these countries.

To support this international recruitment programme, we will develop the structures,

systems and organisational culture to become an international partnership of national agencies sharing a common purpose, set of values and volunteering programme. We will also sustain our efforts to appeal more widely to volunteers from all backgrounds. This will be supported by ongoing efforts to increase the diversity of VSO staff, particularly in terms of ethnicity and disability.

We recognise the power of young people working and learning together and we have implemented different models of youth volunteering. We will conduct reviews to learn how we can most effectively involve young people in contributing to our development goals. In particular, we will learn from and build on the World Youth exchange programme's strengths of reciprocity, partnership and commitment to learning, as we develop a broader range of options for working with partner organisations.

VSO will increase its support for local and national volunteering programmes focused on addressing disadvantage in developing countries. These often build on long-standing and less formal approaches to community activity and mutual support. VSO will not run these volunteering programmes but will support local agencies in doing so where such programmes provide an effective way of addressing shared development aims.

### ***Equal partnerships, equal benefits***

Indian non-government organisation Pravah was established as a response to conflict between Muslim and Hindu communities. It works for social change by encouraging socially responsible and active citizens. VSO works in partnership with Pravah to organise World Youth exchanges, in which teams of young people from India and the UK work together on community projects in both countries. Aditya Pant from Pravah valued the ***'intense discussion on the various problems facing Burnley, such as post-industrial adjustment, race tensions, poverty etc and the relationship between blacks and whites. These factors gave me a clearer and deeper understanding of Burnley and in some ways relate these to problems back home.'***

Our partnership with Pravah exemplifies the benefits of the exchanges. When young people from developed and developing countries work together, this can benefit disadvantaged communities in both countries, while enhancing the participants' own understanding and their commitment to a fairer world.

## Building on the experience of volunteers: working for global change and global community

We live in an increasingly interdependent world. This demands greater understanding between people and greater respect for our differences. More than ever, we must build a sense of community where people of all cultures are seen as equal, learn from each other and share a common sense of rights and responsibilities as global citizens.

VSO can make a uniquely powerful contribution to these challenges. At any time, up to 2,000 serving VSO volunteers are working and learning together with their colleagues. In addition, there are 30,000 returned VSO volunteers in all walks of life and in many countries of the world. Their experience of international volunteering can break down barriers and provide the first-hand, personal perspective which puts a human face on abstract policy issues.

We will build upon volunteers' experience and commitment to create a worldwide network of highly-motivated people working together for positive and sustainable change, whether through direct advocacy, personal example or sharing experience with others.

### Global education

We will work with key global education partners to maximise our potential to build awareness and understanding of development issues. We will:

- build lasting relationships with volunteers so that they see action on their return as a continuation of their work and as part of an ongoing commitment to development
- create national and international networks of returned volunteers and voluntary supporters that increase our impact

- support and encourage people-based initiatives that build lasting links between individuals, schools and communities in developing and developed countries
- promote the integration of global perspectives into national education systems to generate better understanding of global issues and different cultures.

### Advocacy

In order to tackle disadvantage effectively and sustainably, we will seek specific changes in policy, process and practice vital to the achievement of our development goals. We will concentrate initially on education and HIV and AIDS. We will identify these changes — in both developed and developing countries — through ongoing learning alongside our partners, volunteers and staff. We will draw on their voices and, in particular, the unique testimony of serving and returned volunteers in identifying and seeking these changes. We will:

- work with a range of decision-makers and stakeholders, including national and local government, policy-making bodies, multilateral institutions and private sector enterprises
- use a range of working methods including influencing, constructive engagement, working in networks, coalitions and alliances, media work, direct lobbying, policy research and public campaigning
- strengthen the ability of disadvantaged people to influence the decisions that affect their rights and their lives.

## **Education for all? Valuing teachers**

**'A motivated teacher will give 200 per cent more'**, says a secondary-school teacher from Papua New Guinea. But, despite their pivotal role in ensuring that children receive an effective, relevant and empowering education, the voice of teachers is rarely heard. **'There are no bottom-up communications. As a teacher, I have not been consulted on anything in nine years about what teachers feel. They just do it in the top offices and then send it down'**, says another teacher from Papua New Guinea.

In many countries, teachers' salaries are on or even below the poverty line, often forcing them to take second jobs. **'I get 198,000 kwachas. I have six children, need to send two children to school and that takes up 144,000 kwachas per term. The children of my sister now depend on me as well, so when I come to school, I know I have not solved the problems in my family and that bothers me'**, explains a Zambian teacher.

One of the International Development Goals is basic education for all by 2015. Yet volunteers and partner organisations voice strong concerns about the impact of under-resourced education systems and fragile and declining teacher motivation and performance on the quality of education. This has stimulated VSO to commission research which provides a powerful insight into the reality of life in the classroom.

Together with our partners, we will use this information to press national and international policy-makers and donors for changes which are vital if the education development goal is to be achieved: fairer terms and conditions for teachers, improved support and management systems, reduced bureaucracy and a greater say in decision-making for teachers.

## VSO's development goals

VSO's six development goals link the priorities of our partner organisations, international development targets and VSO's distinctive competence. They are high-level, long-term goals and will require sustained effort by VSO and many others if they are to be achieved.

Our goals reflect the key aims and priorities set out in the country strategic plans (CSPs) developed by each VSO programme. They reflect our understanding of the context in which we work and how we can best contribute to development in these overlapping areas. As our experience and understanding evolve, we will revise and strengthen them. In particular, we will learn from other organisations' experience of rights-based and sustainable livelihoods approaches in order to develop programmes which more strongly tackle disadvantage.

In future, all of VSO's work will be focused on our six development goals. As programme staff work with partners to develop the next generation of CSPs, they will prioritise a small number of the goals that are most relevant to the local context. The CSPs will identify specific aims, objectives and strategies within the framework provided by the goals, and will set out how these will be evaluated. Volunteers with many different skill backgrounds will be needed to meet the objectives of each goal.

While individual country programmes will identify which goals they prioritise, VSO will initially focus any additional organisational resources on education and on HIV and AIDS.

## education

**VSO aims to increase the accessibility, gender equity, relevance and quality of education for disadvantaged people in poorer countries.**

Education is a fundamental human right. It enables women and men to realise other rights and fulfil their potential. It is also a powerful tool in the fight against poverty. Yet around 125 million children worldwide do not go to school<sup>2</sup>. Drop-out rates are high, and those children who are in school often receive an inadequate education, with poor teaching, scant resources and inappropriate curricula.

VSO will work with our partners to enable education institutions and systems to provide high-quality education for all, and to overcome the barriers that currently prevent this.

- **Quality teaching:** highly-motivated, well-trained and professionally-supported teachers are crucial for an effective education system. VSO will help to improve the quality and effectiveness of teachers by working at all levels of the education system, from teacher-training to policy-making. Teachers are often undervalued and poorly remunerated: we will support efforts to improve their situation and advocate better conditions.
- **Basic education:** the value of basic education, particularly for girls, is well established. VSO's contribution focuses on training and supporting more and better primary school teachers

through pre-service teacher training and, increasingly, continuing professional development for teachers already in schools.

- **Secondary education:** secondary education is vital for the development of personal and professional skills and produces the future generation of skilled personnel. In countries where there is a serious shortage of trained teachers, we provide classroom teachers if genuine efforts are being made to address the causes of teacher shortages, or if school systems are being devastated by HIV and AIDS, conflict or other traumas. Volunteers teach key subjects, including English where this is the language of instruction. They also teach English as a foreign language if knowledge of English significantly improves livelihoods for disadvantaged people. VSO also works in capacity-building roles and at a strategic level, for example, by supporting local staff in strengthening school management and by advising on curriculum development and education policy. Our work will reflect the increasingly important role of information and communications technology in education. We will contribute to the current debate on how to make post-basic level education more relevant to disadvantaged people by drawing upon our experience of the value of secondary education.

# VSO's development goals

- **Girls' education:** two out of three children not attending school are girls. Yet educating girls is the single most effective means of reducing poverty and key to empowering women. VSO will promote gender equity in education by placing volunteers in specific gender-related roles and by encouraging all volunteers working in education to address gender issues.
- **Non-formal education:** many children and adults have little or no access to formal education. Increasingly, VSO will support initiatives which provide learning and development opportunities outside formal education, such as community schools, vocational training and peer-education programmes.
- **Education and other rights:** education is a natural arena for promoting other rights and responsibilities, in areas such as gender, disability, and HIV and AIDS. VSO will encourage volunteers to address these issues and provide training where necessary so that they can do so confidently and with cultural sensitivity.

## Getting girls into school

As in many developing countries, gender equity in education is a key challenge for The Gambia. ***'Girls drop out because they are encouraged (and sometimes forced) into early marriages, they become pregnant or their grades drop — perhaps because they have so much domestic work to do'***, explains Michaela Hendriks, a British volunteer who is a Girls' Education Adviser at The Gambia's Department of State for Education. Michaela, together with colleagues at the Girls' Education Unit, organises national campaigns and local workshops to encourage more parents to send their daughters to school. She and colleague Aminata Jaiteh pioneered the Taking Your Daughters to Work scheme, in which rural schoolgirls accompanied professional women to work and visited higher education colleges.

***'She encouraged girls to see themselves as unique and who could perform equally with boys'***, says one of Michaela's colleagues. Michaela had first-hand experience of the pressures on schoolgirls: before taking up this placement, she spent two-and-a-half years teaching at a secondary school in rural Gambia. As a result of her visits to girls' families to discuss the value of education, many of her female students were able to continue their schooling.

# HIV and AIDS

**VSO aims to combat stigma, support prevention, and increase the availability of treatment, care and support for those infected and affected by the HIV and AIDS pandemic.**

The HIV and AIDS pandemic affects the lives of millions of people, devastating families and economies, and reversing hard-won development gains. Worst affected in 2002 is sub-Saharan Africa, but infection rates are rising rapidly worldwide. Many countries are now facing acute shortages of teachers, health workers and other professionals. As a result, it will be difficult — and in some cases impossible — to achieve the progress in health, education and other areas set out in the Millenium Development Goals<sup>3</sup>.

VSO has experience of working in HIV and AIDS through a major regional programme in southern Africa, and through advocacy in the UK. We will build on this experience throughout all our programmes, supporting innovation and sharing good practice. The aim is to support civil society and governments in providing the greatly increased and cross-sectoral response that is needed to fight the pandemic. VSO seeks to address the issues raised by the pandemic in all the sectors in which we work.

- **Prevention:** In 2001, five million people were newly infected with HIV<sup>4</sup>. VSO will help prevent the spread of HIV by raising people's awareness in ways that seek to lead to behaviour changes, such as delaying the onset of sexual activity, reducing the number of sexual partners and increasing condom use. We will also help to create environments that support behaviour change.
- **Treatment and care:** We will strengthen the provision of treatment, care and support for people living with HIV and AIDS, for example, voluntary counselling and testing, home-based care and appropriate medical care.
- **Orphans and vulnerable children:** VSO will support services, care and support for the huge and increasing number of orphans and vulnerable children created by the HIV and AIDS pandemic. We will respond flexibly and creatively in our education work, particularly in non-formal education.
- **Gender:** VSO will support efforts to redress the unequal power relations between men and women. Gender inequality makes women more vulnerable to contracting HIV and leaves them shouldering the burden of care. VSO is committed to empowering girls and women and raising awareness amongst boys and men about gender issues and their impact on the spread of HIV.
- **Stigma:** Misunderstanding and prejudice are major obstacles to combating HIV and AIDS. Together with our partner organisations, we will undertake advocacy to reduce stigma, protect the rights of people with HIV and AIDS, and increase governments' compliance with local laws and international conventions.
- **Inclusion:** People living with HIV and AIDS are key stakeholders in the fight against the pandemic. VSO is committed to greater involvement of people with HIV and AIDS and has developed inclusive policies for staff and volunteers. We welcome those living with HIV as active and equal participants in our work, as partners, volunteers and staff.

# disability

**VSO aims to support disabled people in exercising their rights, and to promote their full inclusion and active participation as equal members of their families, communities and societies.**

At least one in 20 people has a physical, sensory or learning impairment. Over 75 per cent of disabled people live in developing countries, and many face a double burden of practical difficulties and discrimination. Disabled girls and women in particular experience multiple discrimination<sup>5</sup>.

VSO has begun to adopt a rights-based approach in its disability work, increasing our support for community-based work, advocacy and awareness-raising. We will continue to increase our focus on empowering disabled people, individually or collectively, to overcome the barriers they face and to gain independence and inclusion. Our disability work will be sensitive to power issues, particularly gender.

● **Independence:** VSO will support disabled people and their families in overcoming the practical barriers they face as a direct result of their impairments. This will include work in child development, education, daily living skills, mobility assistance or employment training. VSO will work with care providers, such as institutional and residential services, only if

there is an opportunity to contribute to positive sustainable change that increases disabled people's independence and inclusion in the wider community.

● **Social inclusion:** VSO will support disabled people and their families in challenging the obstacles that prevent them from participating fully in their communities. These obstacles include lack of access to information, services or the physical environment, and discriminatory attitudes, policies and practices. Much of this work will involve strengthening the capacity of organisations of disabled people. We will promote disabled people's access to services and benefits, for example, by supporting education which is inclusive of disabled people. We will support the reform of discriminatory practices, laws, policies and structures, and the efforts of disabled people to gain a stronger voice in decision-making.

● **Disabled people and VSO:** Volunteers living and working within communities have opportunities to challenge stereotypes, particularly if they are themselves disabled. VSO is committed to including more disabled people as active and equal participants in our work, as partners, volunteers and staff.

# health and social well-being

**VSO aims to support disadvantaged people in fulfilling their rights to physical, mental and social well-being and to good quality essential services.**

There is a vicious circle of ill health, poverty and social exclusion. Inequalities in wealth and access to essential services impair people's ability to maintain their health and well-being. This prevents them from fulfilling their potential and from participating fully in their communities and nations. Millions of people in developing countries lack access to adequate basic services including clean water, sanitation, food security and health care, a situation exacerbated by the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Inadequate mental-health and welfare services reduce individual well-being and exacerbate social exclusion. If disadvantaged people could exercise their rights to these services, much poor health and social exclusion would be prevented.

- **Health and social services:** VSO will improve the quality and availability of these services by strengthening the capabilities of health and social work professionals. We will also work

with government and non-government partners to improve management and delivery of services. We will support, where possible, community-based services, including primary health care, and outreach work in both health promotion and treatment.

- **Addressing causes:** we will increase our work to tackle the underlying causes of social exclusion and ill health. This will include work on the provision of clean water and sanitation, health promotion in areas such as the recognition and management of malnutrition and support for the development of appropriate social services.
- **Securing rights:** VSO will promote the voice of disadvantaged users when health and social services are being planned and delivered. We will expand our work on improving legislative systems to enable disadvantaged children, women and men to secure their rights to these services and challenge practices which discriminate against them.

# secure livelihoods

**VSO aims to strengthen the ability of disadvantaged people to make a viable living.**

A secure livelihood depends on a combination of factors such as personal skills and knowledge, physical assets and social networks as well as on functioning government institutions, policies and laws. People use a dynamic and diverse range of strategies to make a living, depending on gender, experience and context, often combining both subsistence and commercial activities. VSO will seek to understand the strategies which disadvantaged people in rural and urban communities use to survive, and to empower them in securing their livelihoods. This will include influencing the policies and structures that prevent disadvantaged people from securing a living.

- **Capability-building:** VSO wants to enhance the range and strength of the strategies which disadvantaged people can use to make a living by working in all the diverse areas of the socio-economic context and at all levels. For example, we will work in agriculture, community-based initiatives, business development, access to credit and the management of land and water resources, so that productivity and livelihoods are sustainable. We will increase access to vocational training and enhance its quality and relevance, so that trainees can gain material

benefit and take advantage of available employment opportunities.

- **Enterprise development:** VSO will strengthen the productivity and competitiveness of non-government, private-sector or producer-based organisations where this will create employment for disadvantaged people. VSO will support partner organisations that promote employees' rights and the social responsibility of employers.
- **Resource conservation:** VSO will promote the rights of disadvantaged groups to the resources upon which they rely, and encourage the sustainable use of those resources. VSO will work with partners to identify and address the causes of environmental degradation. In some cases, this is caused by disadvantaged people's own activities but often results from the activities of more powerful groups. Where it is not possible to address the causes of environmental degradation, VSO will work with partners to minimise the damage caused and devise other, more sustainable, ways of securing livelihoods. VSO will support conservation and environmental education only where these are likely to improve the livelihoods of disadvantaged people.

# participation and governance

**VSO aims to strengthen the ability of people to participate in their communities and influence decisions that affect their lives.**

Too often, the voices of disadvantaged people are muted by those of rich and powerful groups. If governments and the international community cannot hear their voices — or do not heed them — people are unlikely to have access to basic services or be able to exercise their rights. Empowering disadvantaged women and men requires democratic governance and popular participation, so that people can influence the decisions which affect their lives. Governments must promote the development of strong administrations which respect human rights and allow civil society to flourish. Civil society organisations representing disadvantaged people must be well governed and accountable to those they serve.

- **Good governance:** VSO will support government departments and public institutions committed to strengthening their responsiveness and accountability. Where appropriate, VSO will promote access to justice, for example, by supporting the provision of legal education and advice and stronger juvenile justice systems. We will also support organisations advocating the rights of poor and marginalised people.

- **Civil society:** civil society organisations working to benefit disadvantaged people can play an important role in promoting social inclusion and creating popular demand for good governance and policy change. We will enhance the inclusiveness and accountability of organisations which are committed to community participation. For disadvantaged people to have a stronger voice, they need better access to knowledge, influence and resources. VSO and both serving and returned volunteers will facilitate networking, knowledge-sharing and collaborative action between organisations and communities locally, nationally and internationally.

- **Voluntarism:** community involvement and voluntary action can play a major role in strengthening civil society. VSO will share its expertise in volunteering with organisations that want to set up or expand local, national or international volunteering programmes where these address shared development aims.

- **Peace-building:** VSO will support initiatives to bring together communities that have been affected by conflict so that they can tackle shared problems and increase mutual understanding and respect.

### **Promoting local volunteering to tackle teacher shortages**

For many years, VSO has supplied secondary-school teachers to improve the quality of education in northern Ghana. But the shortage of teachers remains critical. VSO is now supporting the creation of a domestic volunteering programme that will provide rural and disadvantaged schools with committed and motivated Ghanaian teachers. By recruiting unemployed graduates, it will also help mitigate unemployment and promote cultural understanding within Ghana. ***'This is a really exciting concept, because many parts of Ghana are like foreign countries to each other'***, commented the director of one Ghanaian non-government organisation.

The programme will be run by an independent Ghanaian organisation. VSO will provide support during the programme's pilot phase, sharing our expertise in volunteer selection and training and in fundraising.

## VSO's approaches

**The way in which VSO works to pursue our development goals is as important as achieving the goals themselves. In reflecting on our values, we identified three areas which will be crucial to how we tackle our work. These approaches, like the development goals, are closely linked, as are the changes required to ensure that they are reflected in all we do.**

# empowerment

Empowering women and men, communities and organisations is essential for sustainable change. This means strengthening the capacity and confidence of individuals and communities to take control of their futures, and addressing the structural inequalities and barriers that prevent people from exercising their rights.

Empowerment is central to VSO's distinctive competence: volunteers live and work alongside local colleagues and are managed by the organisations for which they work. We will motivate volunteers to see themselves as facilitators of change and participants in a process owned by the organisations and communities with whom they work.

We will support our programme staff in empowering our partners to share in decisions about programme priorities and ways of working. We will use participatory approaches to involve partners and other stakeholders, at all levels of seniority, in shaping our programmes and placements. We will ensure that our programmes are underpinned by an understanding of gender and other power issues. We will explore the establishment of national boards or advisory groups to increase the ownership and accountability of VSO's work in the countries where we have programmes.

We will also work to address the power imbalance between rich and poor countries. We will create an environment that supports change by using our networks of serving and returned volunteers and supporters to raise awareness of development and global justice issues. We will work for changes in policy and practice — in rich and poor countries — that reduce disadvantage.

These aims will be supported by decentralising VSO so that our programme staff can work more closely with partners in a programmatic way: strategically, creatively and flexibly. We will reduce centralised control, streamline reporting requirements and explore a regionally-based approach to programme management.

In order to realise our vision of VSO as an international partnership of national agencies, we will implement structures and ways of working that share power and responsibility, and maximise the contribution of each partner to our shared programme.

We will find ways to share power, as well as responsibility, more effectively with staff across VSO and will continue our efforts to become a more diverse organisation.

# partnership

VSO is only one participant in the development process. We have to work in partnership with many others if we are to maximise our effectiveness and impact.

Working more closely with partner organisations is at the heart of our effort to work more programmatically. We will encourage our programmes to move beyond individual volunteer placements and to forge closer and sustained partnerships with fewer partners. We will undertake transparent, two-way organisational assessments with potential partners, and establish written agreements that reflect a joint understanding of the issues and how best to address them, and set out respective commitments and responsibilities.

We will work more flexibly with partners by developing a broader range of options for achieving shared development goals. For example, we will expand our secondments programme, in which staff are released by their permanent employers to work on specific assignments which may be shorter than the standard two-year placement. Not only does this offer us more flexibility to work with our partners, it also offers more people the opportunity to volunteer.

We will work to improve our partnerships with volunteers and hence the effectiveness of our contribution to development. We want volunteers to be full members of a professional team alongside partners and VSO staff. We will sustain these partnerships when volunteers return home and encourage them to continue their

commitment to development through global education and advocacy.

VSO is well placed to provide practical opportunities for others to engage in development. We will build strategic partnerships with public, private, and civil society organisations in order to engage additional resources, expertise and influence.

The UK government's Department for International Development (DFID) is one of VSO's key partners. A three-year Programme Partnership Agreement (PPA), starting in 2001, underpins this relationship. It outlines areas of common interest in tackling disadvantage and provides for substantial financial support for VSO. Focus For Change builds on the directions agreed in the PPA and provides a strong basis for VSO's ongoing partnership with DFID.

VSO enjoys substantial financial support from a broad constituency of private individuals, community and professional groups, the corporate sector, government agencies, trusts and foundations, trade unions and many others. Along with their funds, these partners bring their interest and concern. This is a key opportunity to engage people in VSO's development work, and we will identify new and better ways to maximise this engagement. Our worldwide networks of voluntary supporters, including voluntary selectors and trainers, and members of local and other support groups, are partnerships which we value and will encourage.

### **Partnerships: AIDS is everybody's business**

***'My little sister and my elder sister died of AIDS. I saw it with my own eyes. I saw them lying in their beds with pain because of AIDS.'***

Sophie has lived in Okahandja, a community in Namibia with a high incidence of HIV and AIDS, all her life. She was one of the participants in a workshop on gender and HIV and AIDS run by the Namibian Women's Network, where Christine Nganga, a VSO organisational development adviser from Kenya, works. This is part of VSO's Regional AIDS Initiative of Southern Africa (RAISA), which focuses on effective prevention, treatment, care and advocacy for those infected and affected by the HIV and AIDS pandemic.

VSO's partners in its HIV and AIDS work include DFID, the UK's National Lottery, the Elton John AIDS Foundation and Barclays Africa. Many of them are keen to go beyond financial support for VSO's work in contributing to the fight against HIV and AIDS. For example, Barclays Africa has formed a three-year partnership with VSO and is encouraging its employees to form local, direct links with VSO and our partners to advise on income generation and small business development projects and to become involved in other ways.

By linking the corporate sector and civil society, VSO is taking up the challenge posed by Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General, in his message of support for our work: ***'More and more people are coming to understand that AIDS is everybody's business. That no government and no organisation can take on the challenge of AIDS alone. That we need partnerships combining all available resources, public and private, local and global. In that partnership, NGOs and the corporate world both have their own distinctive role to play.'***

# commitment to learning

Learning is essential for development. Change is more sustainable when it builds on the skills, knowledge and understanding acquired through experience. VSO will improve its ability to learn actively, systematically and continually from our own and others' experience so that we can increase our effectiveness and impact. We will share this learning with our partners and others working in development.

Working more closely with our partners will increase our ability to learn with and from them. Making participatory approaches integral to our work will enable us to analyse problems together, find solutions and shape common plans. We will continue to develop effective monitoring and evaluation methods so that we can learn from our own and others' work, identify good practice, maximise our impact and make effective use of limited resources.

When volunteers' specific skills, different experiences and perspectives are combined with the skills, experience and greater contextual understanding of their colleagues, a powerful learning experience for all can be created. Our selection, training and support of volunteers will continue to emphasise the importance of commitment to learning. We will build on volunteers' increased understanding of the interdependent nature of our world as a basis for global education and advocacy.

VSO will build a diverse staff team that is open to and enthusiastic about learning. This will be supported by continuing investment in staff training and development and by making VSO an environment in which learning can flourish.

# funding

Maintaining and increasing our funding will be central to realising VSO's change agenda. On top of the funds we receive from DFID under the Programme Partnership Agreement (PPA), we aim to boost the additional income we raise by 50 per cent by March 2005. This will increase the proportion of non-PPA income from one-quarter to one-third of our total income. In order to achieve this, we will:

- work more collaboratively with other agencies and with major multilateral and bilateral donors in order to develop, fund and implement programmes
- increase the income raised by all our national agencies
- use our development goals as well as our distinctive competence in international volunteering as a basis for charitable fundraising
- increase the involvement of volunteers and staff in fundraising.

We will continue to reduce the cost of our fundraising and will measure and report on this.

VSO's principles of good practice in fundraising ensure that we raise money in accordance with our values. We aim for clarity and transparency and to be balanced in our use of images. This means that we present the challenges partner organisations face in order to explain the need for VSO's work, but also their commitment and efforts to resolve their own problems and the many positive elements of volunteers' experience.

Like VSO and our partners, donors are increasingly concerned that we measure the impact and cost-effectiveness of our programmes. Our efforts to achieve more outcome and impact-oriented monitoring and evaluation will strengthen our accountability to our donors as well as to our partners.

# implementing focus for change

This plan is a broad framework for VSO's work. The next step is to identify objectives, milestones and indicators for our change agenda.

To become more programmatic, we need to strengthen our expertise in the development goals we have identified, beginning with education and HIV and AIDS, and to embed the three approaches of empowerment, partnership and learning in everything we do. This will be supported by our work to build a more international volunteering programme.

More detailed plans will enable us to identify and implement the organisational changes needed to deliver **Focus For Change**. We will raise funds and allocate resources accordingly. We will ensure that we can evaluate our work and, ultimately, assess whether we have increased our contribution to development and fighting disadvantage.

To discuss ways of working together with VSO or for further copies of **Focus For Change**, please contact the Chief Executive's office on:  
+44 (0)20 8780 7200  
email: [chief.exec@vsoint.org](mailto:chief.exec@vsoint.org)

## Acronyms and abbreviations

<b>CSP</b>	The country strategic plan, produced by each VSO country programme
<b>DFID</b>	The UK government's Department for International Development
<b>NGO</b>	Non-government organisation
<b>PPA</b>	The Programme Partnership Agreement between VSO and DFID. This strategic-level agreement sets out the overall framework for DFID's work with VSO and funding arrangements.
<b>RAISA</b>	VSO's Regional AIDS Initiative of Southern Africa
<b>TOSCADAR</b>	A VSO programme in Mindanao in the Philippines: Technical and Organisational Skills for Civil Society Action for the Displaced and At Risk.

### Notes

**1:** [www.paris21.org/betterworld/](http://www.paris21.org/betterworld/)

**2:** DFID Children out of School, DFID, 2002.

**3:** [www.paris21.org/betterworld/](http://www.paris21.org/betterworld/)

**4:** UNAIDS Report on the global HIV/AIDS epidemic 2002. p22.

**5:** E. Helander, *Prejudice and Dignity: An introduction to community-based rehabilitation*, UNDP, 1992; DFID, *Disability, Poverty and Development*, DFID Issues Paper, 2000.