

**Country:** Cameroon

**Programme Area:** Participation and Governance 2007-2012

**What is the aim of the programme area?**

To improve access to quality basic services for vulnerable groups in the North West and Far North provinces. We aim to achieve this through increasing participation in local decision-making processes and improving local governance.

**Why is VSO working in this particular programme area and region?**

After an extensive consultation and research process with civil society organisations, local councils and state institutions, looking at the root causes of disadvantage in Cameroon in general, VSO observed that in its current areas of focus (education and HIV and AIDS), disadvantage was mostly due to poor participation of the major stakeholders in development activities and poor management of resources available. This limits disadvantaged people's access rights to quality basic services. Girls, women and people living with HIV and AIDS were the most disadvantaged people. VSO therefore decided to use the opportunity of the current decentralisation process to develop a programme promoting participation in local decision-making processes.

There are governance challenges in the whole system of basic service provision, generated in part by factors such as the economic crisis, centralised government structure and culture. The government has taken some counter-measures, but their response is still not getting the expected results. In local councils, there is corruption, poor governance and lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities as decentralisation laws have not been fully implemented. Political interests are often considered above social development. Voices from the population are seen as opposition and there is a strong reaction. Due to disunity, competition for funding and lack of capacities, civil society is unable to constitute a strong voice to challenge poor governance practices that jeopardize development efforts and to demand decentralisation (a concept poorly understood by internal stakeholders). There is also limited collaboration between local councils, civil society and State institutions.

**Key beneficiaries and partners**

The key beneficiaries of the programme are children and youth (girls in particular), women, and people living with HIV and AIDS.

The key partners are as follows:

- Local human rights NGOs including NGOs promoting women's rights in the North West and Far North.
- NGO coalitions, networks and fora at both national and regional levels that can play a role in advocating for citizens' rights to access quality basic services and promoting good governance both in Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and at State level.
- Association of Councils at national and regional levels which provide advisory services to individual councils and support them in their advocacy activities and capacity building.
- Individual councils who are responsible for service delivery at local level and who can easily be integrated VSO current activities in their development plans.
- The Centres for Education and Community Actions (CEAC) from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. The mandates of the CEAC have been recently reformulated in order to support Local Councils and coordinate local development initiatives under the leadership of the mayors.
- National and regional CSOs advocating for decentralisation.

Currently there are 10 Local Councils in North West and Far North provinces and 15 CSOs and networks involved in advocacy activities for the rights of disadvantaged groups.

### **Key objectives of the programme and cross-cutting themes**

- Improve governance in Civil Society Organizations and strengthen their capacities to advocate for decentralization and the rights of vulnerable groups to quality basic services.
- Strengthening State and councils (local decision makers) to engage in transparent practices that promote good governance and increase access to quality basic services
- Promoting constructive dialogue and collaboration between Civil Society Organizations, local councils and State agencies for greater access to quality basic services.

While trying to achieve those objectives, VSO Cameroon aims to mainstream rights, gender, HIV and AIDS, IT and good governance in all the development sectors.

### **Current programme activities**

#### *Focus of International Volunteer Placements*

- From 2007 to 2012, VSO Cameroon will provide 15 long-term volunteers for partnerships in the Far North Province and North West with local councils and national organizations and networks. Skills required will include institutional and organisational development, networking, working with gender issues and advocacy. Other interventions will include 5 short-term volunteer placements to work on some aspects of programme development and implementation every year. There are ongoing discussions with the Canadian Federation of municipalities and the Welsh Assembly that will provide extra technical assistance.

#### *Workshops, training and conferences*

- Self-assessment workshops for all our partner organizations to come up with long term organisational and institutional development plans
- Training workshops on good governance
- Training workshops on decentralization
- Training workshops on lobbying and advocacy
- Training workshops on human rights and a rights-based approach
- ICT and volunteer training on the organizational and institutional development process
- Volunteer conferences to discuss programme strategy, monitoring and evaluation
- Skill share workshop for volunteers and partners to share the best practices in participatory management and the promotion of good governance.

#### *Research*

- Stakeholder consultations were conducted in order to analyse and understand the deep causes of disadvantage. Methodologies included individual consultations, focus group discussions, literature reviews and causal mapping workshops involving government representatives, international agencies, civil society organizations, local councils and VSO volunteers. Other research processes will focus on appropriate community issues in order to collect factual information for advocacy purposes.

#### *Advocacy and Global Education*

- National activities to mark International Volunteer Day on December every year
- Two advocacy meetings organized by local councils and civil society organizations with decision makers at national level

#### *Partner exchange visits/study tours*

There will be two exchange visits through out the programme implementation period:

- A national study tour with local councils and civil society organizations

- An international study tour in West to learn more about decentralization or in South Africa to learn about local government contribution in social development

*Support to national volunteering*

- The possibility of using council volunteers will be explored and VSO Cameroon is supporting national volunteering organisations to promote the activity.

*Providing grants and / or equipment for partners*

- Small grants are made available, pending on funding possibilities, mostly to support integration of learning from the trainings and workshops through implementation of related activities. For instance, after a training workshop on participation for local councils, a small grant could be provided to pilot innovative approaches aiming to increase citizens' participation in decision-making.

*Development of publications or other materials for training or communication*

- VSO will be developing and disseminating to partners materials on good governance and decentralization. These will include workshop proceedings and other formal publications. Apart from that, local councils are not always aware of laws and decrees published on decentralization so VSO will also make relevant documents available.

*Other partnership activities*

- Programme area review every year between 2008-2012
- Participatory partnership assessment (15 forecasted assessments with new partners between August and October 2007)
- Partnership reviews every year

**What makes VSO's work in this programme area special?**

The main feature of VSO Cameroon work in the governance sector is the systematic approach for organisational and institutional capacity building. In the past, VSO could not address deeper organisational issues as volunteers were not allowed to do so. Now there is more commitment for the promotion of good governance and, it is expected that well-governed Civil Society Organizations will be able to make demands for good governance in the development context.

The other interesting feature is the involvement of local Councils as the other side of the "VOICE and RESPONSE" model. The Local Councils are responsible for Basic Education and Health in their areas as stated in the framework law on decentralization. It is expected that well-governed schools and Civil Society Organizations, supported by local decision makers will create an enabling environment where everyone, especially women, can participate in the decision-making processes and provide more access to quality basic services.