

Response to UK Parliamentary Inquiry into Food Security

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INTRODUCTION

VSO's Unique Approach to Development

About VSO

VSO is an international development agency with over 50 years of experience working in a variety of settings worldwide. In the last year, we have changed the lives of 26 million people around the world. We take a unique approach to tackling global poverty, by placing committed international and national volunteers with carefully selected local development partners - from grassroots groups to government ministries. By working closely over time with these partner organisations, our volunteers provide the right skills, knowledge and support to help increase the impact and effectiveness of local development efforts for poor and marginalised communities.

VSO works closely with approximately 110 local civil society organisations and government partners to provide agricultural development services and to support policy development that benefits poor and marginalised men and women in 15 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America/Caribbean regions. VSO's key strategies to achieve our objective of increasing food security for poor people include

- Promotion of environmentally sustainable, low cost, low input agricultural techniques and micro-irrigation techniques to improve yields and supporting adaptation to climate change;
- Building capacity of local government and NGOs to provide agricultural support services such as extension advisory services and access to microfinance services;
- Facilitation of improved dialogue and collaboration between communities, local NGOs and government to enable poor people to have more say in how services are provided and how natural resources are managed.
- Addressing linkages between food security, nutrition and HIV & AIDS in Southern African
- Increasing access to and participation in markets for disadvantaged agricultural producers
- Support to women to gain access to land by working with local traditional leaders alongside national level advocacy for pro-poor land policies (Zambia);

“VSO is a model part of what we have come to know as civil society.”

*Kofi Annan,
Former Secretary-
General of the UN*

Overview and Key Recommendations

- VSO believes that agriculture and food security have a critical role underpinning the potential to achieve the MDGs, not just MDG 1, as the majority of poor people in developing countries are dependent upon agriculture to earn a living.
- There is need for greater access to agricultural inputs and wider dissemination of low cost technologies to small holder farmers in developing countries to improve food security.
- Small holder farmers often identify problems with markets as contributing to poverty – more attention needs to be paid to ensuring markets are inclusive of poor people.
- Climate change poses a significant threat to food security – issues of land tenure, access to relevant information and HIV related concerns in areas of high prevalence need to be addressed.
- VSO has had successes in scaling up the dissemination of learning from action research and promoting new agricultural technologies and information through combining international and community volunteering to enable greater outreach at community level.
- VSO believes that smallholder farmers and developing nations want DFID to promote and support the development of climate-smart policies and strategies both in developing countries and in the UK and other developed nations.
- DFID should consider the role of civil society in promoting agricultural development and allocate resources to support the development of organizations that represent the interests of small holder farmers, such as agricultural producers associations and co-operatives.
- VSO believes that longer term sustainability will be driven by :
 - greater recognition of the potential of agriculture as a business, rather than as a way of life, by smallholders;
 - more emphasis and support to getting new technologies put into practices within a consistent policy environment;
 - recognition of different gender roles in agricultural production and ensuring both men and women receive appropriate support
 - greater focus on agricultural development from donors and developing country governments alike - donors should actively support their commitment to the Global Partnership for Agriculture and Food Security (GPAFS) and keep agriculture at the core of the international agenda.
- DFID should include support to agriculture as a key area of focus in their business plan for the next 4 years.

RESPONSES TO INQUIRY QUESTIONS

What is the role of Agriculture and Food Security both within the MDGs and beyond?

75 per cent of poor people live in rural areas and rely upon agriculture to earn their living – either through subsistence farming, as wage labourers on other farms or involvement in other agriculture related enterprises¹. Thus agriculture is crucial for pro-poor economic growth and the achievement of the MDGs. Progress towards achieving MDG 1 – reduction in poverty and hunger – underpins the potential to achieve sustainable progress towards other MDGs particularly those relating to education, health and gender equality.

Improvements in performance in agriculture have the potential to increase rural incomes and purchasing power for large numbers of people to lift them out of poverty. With the likelihood of population growth in many developing countries and potential for negative impact of climate change, investment in agriculture is needed to meet MDG 1 and MDG 7 to ensure that improvements to food security are achieved in a sustainable way. Thus DFID should include support to agriculture as a key area of focus in their business plan for the next 4 years.

Many small holder farmers in developing countries still lack knowledge of and access to low cost technologies and inputs that can bring about substantive changes in their levels of agricultural production. For example, in **Malawi**, the majority of smallholder farmers are dependent upon a single rainy season per year in order to cultivate food crops as they lack access knowledge and equipment to irrigate their crops outside of the rainy seasons. Working with Ministry of Agriculture staff, VSO volunteers introduced micro-irrigation techniques that enabled 4000 smallholder farmers dependent upon marginal lands to develop water management systems on approximately 50 sites. Being able to irrigate lands has meant that these farmers can now grow additional crops during the dry cool season to meet their own household needs during the year and in some cases, generate surplus for sale.

Poor people often rely upon agricultural production as a major source of income and food security. Very often, they identify

¹ World Development Report 2008

problems with markets (for purchasing inputs as well as selling produce) as a factor contributing to poverty. They are often excluded from markets because of the conditions governing participation, such as price, volume and quality requirements, distances to markets, a lack of market information or connections with influential traders. They may lack an understanding of how markets work and the ability to overcome the unequal power relationships that also govern participation. With support from one of our corporate partners, VSO is piloting the implementation of market chain approaches in 5 regional learning centres (Cambodia, Guyana, Malawi, Nigeria and Tanzania) to help poor and marginalized people to gain more access to markets and better conditions for participation. Our approach includes:

- researching and building understanding of markets with which our target communities have links,
- working with market actors to identify barriers to poor women, men and young people's participation in markets as well as opportunities for them to gain greater or more secure benefits
- developing partnerships with and building capacity of organisations working strategically within market chains, and through these partnerships enabling people within our target communities to access markets
- supporting partner organisations to be more able to respond to the concerns of poor people in target communities.
- facilitating increased cooperation and communications between market actors, private businesses, partner organisations, government service providers and other market stakeholders
- supporting, in collaboration with the private sector, the development of market initiatives that seek to increase the share of product value for poor people
- working with civil society organisations, private sector organisations, research institutes and governments to improve policies and practices and to advocate the removal of barriers that prevent poor and marginalised people from developing small businesses and gaining access to markets.

For example, on Zanzibar, VSO is working with local community farmers' organizations to address barriers to participation in more profitable market chains that supply fruit and vegetables tourist restaurants and hotels. By facilitating access to financial services

and storage facilities, agricultural training and facilitation of market linkages, farmers are now earning more as a result of better yields from applying new techniques learnt and the better prices that achieved through new market opportunities. Learning from our pilot work in this areas is informing the development of VSO's livelihoods work globally in 13 further countries.

What impact will Climate Change have upon agriculture and food security and how should donors adapt to this pressure?

Many of VSO's volunteers and staff around the world are witnessing the effects of climate change on the lives and livelihoods of the people they work alongside. Not least in Bangladesh, where 30 – 70% of the country is flooded each year². Shahana Hayat, VSO's Country Director in Bangladesh, says:

*'Climate change... is considered as posing the greatest threat to agriculture and food security in the 21st century. In fact Climate change will affect all four dimensions of food security: **food availability, food accessibility, food utilisation and food systems stability**. It will have an impact on human health, livelihood assets, food production and distribution channels, as well as changing purchasing power and market flows.*

People who are already vulnerable and food insecure are likely to be the first affected. Agriculture-based livelihood systems that are already vulnerable to food insecurity face immediate risk of increased crop failure, new patterns of pests and diseases, lack of appropriate seeds and planting material, and loss of livestock.

People living on the coasts and floodplains are most at risk. In Bangladesh, agriculture is already under stress as a result of population increase and urbanisation, competition over resource use, degradation of resources, and insufficient public spending for rural infrastructure and services. The impact of climate change is likely to exacerbate these stresses even further. Another dimension is water security – access to fresh water will be under increased pressure as a result of climate change, which will have a tremendous effect on food security and agriculture production. The amount of water allocated to agriculture and water management choices will

² "Development and Climate Change in Bangladesh", OECD, 2003

determine, to a large extent, whether societies achieve economic and social development and environmental sustainability.’

Among poor communities, access to information and adequate research is often a challenge. In Namibia, a VSO volunteer climate scientist (recruited through our partnership with the Welsh Assembly Government) undertook research on the likely impact of climate change and implications for VSO’s partners and beneficiaries. Her research highlighted critical concerns in a number of areas including agriculture due to the dependence on rain-fed agriculture and resulting implications for food security. Farm abandonment is a growing problem as is lack of awareness of climate change amongst farmers and vulnerable communities. Whilst there is a vast literature on climate change available in Namibia, very little of this is produced in forms accessible to groups likely to be most affected by climate change. Namibia also has a high prevalence of HIV infection and concerns are being raised about ability to maintain adequate nutrition for those taking ART treatment³ in times of food scarcity.

Agriculture and food security may also be affected by land access and tenure issues linked to climate change. As rainfall and agricultural fertility reduces in some geographical areas, there is and will be increasing competition of productive agricultural land. It is vital that the international community provides adequate protection to the rights of poorer people who will be disadvantaged by such practices. In many countries, women already face considerable barriers in gaining access to land, which then restricts their ability to produce crops and earn income to meet other basic family needs. Donors should ensure that their policies are sensitive to gender differences in this area.

VSO recommends that donors should maintain their commitment to the Global Partnership for Agriculture and Food Security (GPAFS) and keep agriculture at the core of the international agenda. Donors should increase investment in agriculture and boost aid efficiency in this area through in-country coordination, involving all relevant stakeholders. A key focus of donor support should be to work with civil society and governments of developing countries to revitalise extension services and develop new innovative models in order to

³ ART treatment is ineffective if a person’s nutritional intake is insufficient.

disseminate available research on new agricultural technologies and environmentally sustainable agricultural practices.

What are the success stories in terms of linking Research and Development?

VSO has had some successes in 'knowledge brokering' and making research accessible to smallholder farmers at a local level through 'living laboratory' approaches to action research. For example in Bangladesh, increasing salination of agricultural land due to sea level rises is increasing poverty levels. Recognising that local communities need to develop alternative sources of incomes, a VSO volunteer worked with them to identify viable options, which included adapting the cultivation of sweet water fish species to cultivation in salt water. The volunteer then worked with local fishermen, youth club members and the Fisheries Department to develop a model of cultivating sweet water fish in the saline water, which was appropriate to the local context. 80 community members and youth club members have now been trained on this model and are able to pass on skills for fish cultivation to other communities also affected by salt water intrusion.

In Ghana, the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MOFA) has insufficient agricultural extension agents to be able to disseminate agricultural information and advice to all farmers that need it and struggles to reach smallholder farmers. Women farmers find it particularly difficult to gain access to the agricultural advice they need to produce household food crops. A VSO volunteer based with a local agricultural organization developed a model for spreading agricultural advice to women in local communities by training community volunteers to pass on technical advice to others in the communities where they live. VSO is now working with MOFA in 3 regions of northern Ghana to apply this approach more widely. Last year, by facilitating collaboration between international volunteers, volunteers in local communities and MOFA, VSO enabled 6000 community members to gain access to improved agricultural advice.

What is it that smallholder farmers and developing nations want from DFID and the UK? How can smallholder farmers participate in, and help define, an agricultural agenda that is more in accordance with their needs?

VSO believes that smallholder farmers and developing nations want DFID to promote and support the development of climate-smart policies and strategies both in developing countries and in the UK and other developed nations.

This should be complemented by support to developing nations to develop tools and technologies needed for climate smart agriculture, including scaling up replicable models and financing for transformational change.

The focus of support should include mechanisms for the dissemination of information, training and marketing of improved agricultural inputs (such as seeds and fertilisers) to the smallholder level.

Smallholder farmers must be consulted in an empowering way so that they are the ones driving their own agenda. Their representatives should be included in activities that influence decisions that affect them. DFID should consider the role of civil society and allocate resources to the development of civil society organisations that represent the interests of smallholder farmers, such as agricultural producers associations and co-operatives.

For example, in Malawi, VSO works to strengthen the capacity of the Malawi Milk Producers' Association (MMPA) and 3 regional milk producers associations who represent the interests of 7,300 smallholder dairy farmers. Last year, an increase in the volume of milk imported into Malawi threatened to undercut local production due to the cheaper price of imported milk. By facilitating close collaboration between a range of private sector, government and civil society stakeholders, MMPA successfully lobbied government for an increase in duty on imported milk, making local milk more competitive on price and thus maintaining milk production capacity in Malawi.

DFID should also use its influence to support pro-poor land reforms, taking into account the need for support to ensure implementation at community level. For example, in Zambia, VSO supports the Zambia Land Alliance (ZLA), which campaigns for pro-poor land policy reform, to raise its profile through research, communications and campaigns work and so influence government as it reviews the current land policy. , VSO volunteers have had sustained involvement

with the ZLA and other civil society organisations advocating for pro-poor land reform which has enabled ZLA to increase recognition and support for their campaign from a range of stakeholders, including traditional rulers, civil society and international organisations and donors. Through partners at the district level, womens' groups have been provided with training on how to gain access to land and supported to negotiate with village elders.

How can long-term sustainability be achieved in this area and what are the critical path drivers for achieving it?

Agriculture as a business

'We need to move from agri-culture to agri-business!' Wilfred Kasitumu, Chairman, Msuadzi Smallholder Tea Growers Association, Malawi

VSO's partners in the range of countries that we work in talk frequently about the need for small holder farmers to make the transition from agriculture as a way of life to agriculture as a business in order for their agricultural production to increase and so that they focus on crops that make them a viable return. In order to do this, smallholder farmers need to develop basic business management skills. In a recent impact assessment study with agricultural producers in Tanzania and Malawi, VSO found that one of the biggest challenges in gathering information on what crops and income generation activities are most successful was the fact that very few farmers have the skills to keep records on costs incurred in production, yields and income achieved, so are not able to monitor which activities are the most profitable for them. VSO volunteers are providing training on basic business skills and record keeping but clearly there is much more that can be done.

Developing profitable small-scale business models is also vital for attracting young people to agricultural employment and maintaining their involvement – in many locations, young people do not see agriculture as an attractive long-term employment opportunity. For example, in Ghana, the average age of cocoa farmers is around 51 as young people are deterred from cocoa production as a livelihood due to the perception of low economic returns.

Putting new technologies into practice

More needs to be done to put new technologies into practice and to ensure that relevant locally appropriate mechanisms for dissemination are developed and maintained. For example, this can be achieved through developing action research initiatives and alternative approaches to agricultural extension such as promoting the use of community volunteers as extension advisors. It is vital that approaches are developed at a local level that allow scope for contextual understanding that informs farmers' decision making over time and enables them to benefit from new technologies. The process of facilitating adoption of new technology by smallholder farmers also needs to be supported by a consistent policy environment.

Recognising gender roles in agricultural production

In order for support to be sustainable, it is vital that the different gender roles in agricultural production are recognised. For example, women produce the majority of food for home consumption, yet women often have very little access to agricultural training and advice. In order to overcome this, VSO is working with the Ministry of Food and Agriculture in Ghana to train women community volunteers to provide extension advice to other women in the local communities. A VSO volunteer has worked with government staff to facilitate the recruitment and training of 75 women volunteers to provide much-needed extension advice. So far, 6000 community members, mainly female, are participating in the scheme and gaining access to new skills to improve their food and income security.

Consistent donor and government support

As already noted in the APPG Inquiry 'Why no thought for food?' earlier this year, DFID and other donors have neglected agriculture in recent years. Despite its critical role in achieving the MDGs, support to agricultural development is not mentioned in DFID's new business plan. DFID and other bilateral donors have a key role to play in kickstarting new investment in agricultural policy and development in order to increase global food security. Governments of development countries should also be paying more attention to this area and living up to pledges made on agriculture.