

VALUING VOLUNTEERING - THE PHILIPPINES

## RIDING THE WAVES OF CHANGE

The challenges of volunteering  
in highly complex poverty contexts

Reporting on action research among volunteers  
in Mangisda, Palawan

With Tubbataha Management Office 2014

2014





# VSO at a glance

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VSO brings people together to share skills, build capabilities and promote international understanding and action. We work with partner organisations at every level of society, from government organisations at a national level to health and education facilities at a local level.

## IDS

The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) is a leading global organisation for international development research, teaching and communications. The *Valuing Volunteering* project is being conducted in partnership with the IDS Participation, Power and Social Change Team.

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# Acknowledgements

In memory of David Quisquirin

This report was written by Jody Aked. The research team comprised Jody, three local volunteers – Helen Grace H Salico, Gerlie Gedoria and Ethel Lebante – and a national volunteer, Efren Empot. The constituency of resident volunteers changed over the course of the research, but the latest records indicate that the following 15 residents are persisting with their plans:

**Chairman:** Fredolyn Auza

**Vice-Chairman:** David Quisquirin

**Board of Directors:** Romy Borrromeo and Melcha Victoria

**Secretary:** Estrellita Bayeta

**Treasurer:** Mrs Nilda Lastimoso

**Officers:** Francisco dela Rama, Charlita Roque, Edeliza Tannagan, Grace Armeña, Nelda Lastimoso, Josephine Doria, Connie Nillas, Lorilyn Fresnillo and Delyn Espartero

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- Dr Lut L Tolentim and Ms Claudio Binondo at WorldFish, Philippines.

# Abbreviations

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**BFAR** Bureau for Fisheries and Aquatic Resources

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**DRC** Development Research Centre

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**IEC** Information, Education and Communication

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**NGO** non-governmental organisation

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**PSU** Palawan State University

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**TMO** Tubbataha Management Office

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**VV** *Valuing Volunteering*

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**WPU** Western Philippines University

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**WWF** World Wildlife Fund for Nature

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# 1. Executive Summary

The coastal ecosystems of the Philippines are some of the most heavily fished areas in the world. The impacts on poverty are great. The 2 million small-scale fishers represent 85% of the fishing population and are its poorest members. However, most government subsidies are aimed at aquaculture and commercial fishers in order to increase production, leaving few options for small-scale fishers, especially when limited education denies them opportunities to engage in other livelihoods.

In 2013, *Valuing Volunteering Philippines* carried out a participatory systemic inquiry with Tubbataha Management Office (TMO) under the guiding objective of the *Valuing Volunteering* project to understand how, where and when volunteering affects poverty. The inquiry revealed that volunteer work to educate communities on the links between marine ecosystem conservation and socio-economic security has successfully improved awareness and understanding (Aked J, Reporting on the impact of volunteering for environmental education in coastal communities of Palawan), but behaviour had proved difficult to change. An unanswered question for the TMO staff working group in this research, was “Where people are all aware, what next?”

This question prompted a more detailed action research inquiry in one coastal community, Mangingisda in Palawan, by a group of international, national, local and resident volunteers. Our collectively generated framework for action had three main components:

- ecological (to protect the fish stocks)
- livelihoods (to provide alternative ways of generating income)
- volunteerism (to direct human resources towards the first two).

## The action research inquiry

This piece of action research set out to do two key things:

1. Support further learning for TMO’s volunteering and environmental education programmes and assist the community of Mangingisda to overcome barriers to development (see above).
2. Generate learning about the practicalities of adopting action research as an approach that can identify and respond to strengths and limitations of volunteering for poverty alleviation and development at the community level.

For the first objective, the aim was to infuse a range of participatory methodologies with a systemic perspective to support a situated understanding about what to do and how to go about it. The idea was to provide a learning architecture for TMO and the community of Mangingisda to consider what the next steps should be for volunteering programmes that have successfully achieved awareness-raising objectives on the links between environment and poverty.

For the second objective we were interested to answer questions like:

- What can systemic learning processes bring to the organisation of volunteer efforts?
- What value do volunteers bring when working in a participatory way?
- Are experimental learning cycles a useful way to structure volunteering for development?

The action research inquiry took place over 18 months, beginning in September 2012 and ending in April 2014. Research took place over four stages. Participatory systemic inquiry (stage one) and a multi-stakeholder analysis (stage two) enabled us to ground the research in local concerns. Stages three and four involved continuous cycles of learning in which reflection informed action, and action informed the next round of reflection. This written account is therefore different to other reports that make up the *Valuing Volunteering Philippines* research because it emphasises what was learned from the action research process. It is written as a practical learning tool, documenting our journey as action researchers in Barangay Mangingisda, trying to leverage the power of volunteering to support poverty alleviation. A stage-by-stage account of our approach and the decisions we took is provided in the methodology section. The report details the key practical learning points in our process and also the findings that have implications for the contribution a volunteer-led action research approach could make to development. It captures what we learned about the enabling characteristics and limitations of volunteering as a tool to support people in high-poverty environments to “ride the waves of change”. More general findings about volunteering for development are also included.

## Process learning

### Seeing the whole

Participatory systemic inquiry created a clear picture of the community's context and challenges to inform a collectively generated framework for action and next steps. Mapping the insights of multiple stakeholders helped all the volunteers to see a good proportion of the whole social, ecological and economic system – and the links between them. At times this meant intentionally moving information on the map from one stakeholder to the next to try to unearth blockages preventing transformative change for the community of Mangingisda. This systemic analysis grounded our framework for action in an in-depth understanding of the local context.

### Supporting people living in poverty to participate in volunteering

We followed some emergent lines of inquiry around the reticence of resident volunteers to get involved and the reasons development initiatives had failed in the past, which provided new insights into the factors that would contribute to project success and sustainability. Financial instruments seemed to be an important complement to the capacity-building and social mobilisation work of volunteers in high-poverty contexts where the risks of experimenting can be deemed too high. There is not a direct link, however, between being able to see potential levers for change and having the individual or organisational capacity to construct a course of action that is responsive to local realities. In our experience, proper compensation to resident volunteers in the early stages of engagement was difficult to find. This has implications for the design of volunteering interventions and accompanying project budgets if people living in poverty are to be properly supported to participate in their own development.

## The challenges of turning ideas into action

Having ideas and acting on them are two different activities, which require different capacities and levels of commitment. Transitioning to a different livelihood has an inbuilt complexity which requires a steadfastness that has to be learned. In these contexts, volunteers coming from the outside have the potential to take on a role as social mobilisers within wider multidisciplinary teams. This presence can support communities to translate different ways of seeing the world into a determination to do something about it. Everyone is capable of change but some are more practised than others. We all need a set of experiences that we can draw from to believe our efforts will prove productive in the end. This is where platforms for volunteering can add value, by creating opportunities to practise change and learn about change processes.

### The need for change in our relationships and networks

Developing individual capacity was important for infusing energy into the change process, but for cultural reasons it came with limited guarantee that this would spill over to improve collective capacities. Volunteers may have to work at the individual and collective level to support capacities for change. Similarly, change for Mangingisda was dependent on extending the boundary of volunteer work to institutions outside the community. The use of our own capital as 'outside' volunteers to connect the community to local organisations highlighted how connections to institutions can serve communities in poverty only in so far as they can respond to local realities. Otherwise, they can perpetuate community problems, reducing local capacity for change rather than adding to it. This raised implications for the way partners and volunteers are selected, as well as important questions about where volunteer efforts are directed

## Findings about volunteer effectiveness

### The value of different volunteers

Different volunteers bring their own strengths to the change effort, hence the value of having multidisciplinary volunteer teams. By mixing different educational backgrounds, cultural perspectives and life experiences we were able to increase our chances of finding a solution that worked. The overall contribution of volunteers to the change process intersects with individual variability in terms of commitment and approach to participatory and collaborative working. The poorest volunteers were most undervalued in the change effort, both in terms of financial support and in their own assessment of their capabilities.

### The length of volunteer engagements

Volunteers supported by the *Valuing Volunteering* project have been able to support social mobilisation at the community level, but the learning opportunities and resulting capacities have not been able to overcome the financial barriers to economic advancement that resident volunteers still face. The long-term nature of change has implications for the length of volunteering placements.

### A social mobilisation role for volunteering in the wider development landscape

Through our work as volunteers, we were able to work alongside people in poverty and experience first-hand the barriers that local institutions have created through their approach to development. While volunteering, like any development intervention, is not a silver bullet it did provide a platform for mobilising human resources to realise ideas and collective plans.

## Key implications

### 1. Use systemic analysis to inform programming

We were able to demonstrate how important clarity about a community's context and associated challenges was to the change process, and how quickly this data can be collected and analysed locally. Systemic analysis can be used to generate locally situated insights about the levers for change that will be most effective for volunteers to pursue in placement.

### 2. Use volunteering to create momentum in change initiatives

It can be difficult to create and sustain a momentum that will carry people over the hurdle between ideas and action to grapple with the complexity of change issues. Volunteers provide a social mobilisation role that could be used more strategically in development initiatives.

### 3. Share the risks of experimentation

Our action research with people living in poverty highlighted the level of risk that accompanies change initiatives. Volunteering efforts, like any development intervention, do not come with iron-clad guarantees of success. Supporting communities to make transitions involves sharing the risk. Social mobilisation and capacity building needs to be accompanied by adequate financial resources to strengthen volunteer-led efforts to support communities to learn through their own practice and experience.



## 2. Introduction

The coastal ecosystems of the Philippines are some of the most heavily fished areas in the world. Increased demand for fish from an expanding population; destructive and unsustainable fishing practices; and poor management are among the causes of fishery decline and collapse. The impacts on poverty are great. The 2 million small-scale fishers represent 85% of the fishing population and are its poorest members. Children of fishermen struggle to go to school because the family cannot pay for uniforms, books and materials for school projects. It is common for them to stay at home and help with income-generating activities. Sometimes they become illegal fishers themselves. This intergenerational poverty is compounded by non-economic drivers like the cultural significance of fishing to communities.

Most government subsidies are aimed at aquaculture and commercial fishers in order to increase production, but to the exclusion of small-scale fishers. This leaves few options for small-scale fishers, especially when limited education denies them opportunities to engage in other livelihoods. They will continue to fish even when it is not cost-effective, usually adapting by working longer at it. A recent study looking at willingness to exit fishing revealed over half the fishers surveyed will continue fishing even when catches fall to 0.5kg a day. This would amount to less than US\$1 gross income, which is about 15% of fishers' daily household expenses in the coastal towns studied.

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) are commonly used in the Philippines in efforts to revive fish stocks, but as an intervention they still leave fishermen 'on their own' to figure out an appropriate response to a reduction in fishing grounds over the short term. This is where non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like Tubbataha Management Office (TMO), World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) and the WorldFish Centre have extended ecological efforts to encompass community development approaches, acknowledging the importance of education, alternative livelihoods and a role for local communities in the stewardship of resources.

A systemic action research approach is suited to supporting change in socio-ecological systems. To borrow the organisational tagline of TMO, it should help people "riding the waves of change". Its commitment to multi-stakeholder and open-bounded inquiry helps to reveal drivers and path dependencies that can explain poverty incidence in a given context. Its participatory action–reflection–learning process supports people to work with the complexity of relationships, feedbacks and incentives which organise and structure people's circumstances and possibilities for action. The aim is to enable people living in poverty – and their allies – to adapt and respond purposefully in order to shift situations towards more desirable outcomes.

In 2013, *Valuing Volunteering Philippines* carried out a participatory systemic inquiry with TMO under the guiding objective of the *Valuing Volunteering* project to understand how, where and when volunteering affects poverty. The inquiry revealed that volunteer work to educate communities on the links between marine ecosystem conservation and socio-economic security has successfully improved awareness and understanding (Aked J, *Reporting on the impact of volunteering for environmental education in coastal communities of Palawan*), but behaviour had proved difficult to change. An unanswered question for the TMO staff working group in this research was "Where people are all aware, what next?"

The question prompted this more detailed action research inquiry in one coastal community, Mangingisda in Palawan. A group of international, national, local and resident volunteers were involved in this piece of action research, which set out to do two key things:

1. Support further learning for TMO's volunteering and environmental education programmes and assist the community of Mangingisda to overcome barriers to development (see above).
2. Generate learning about the practicalities of adopting action research as an approach which can identify and respond to strengths and limitations of volunteering for poverty alleviation and development at the community level.

For the first objective, the aim was to infuse a range of participatory methodologies with a systemic perspective to support a situated understanding about what to do and how to go about it. The idea was to provide a learning architecture for TMO and the community of Mangingisda to consider what the next steps should be for volunteering programmes that have successfully achieved awareness-raising objectives on the links between environment and poverty.

For the second objective we were interested in answering questions like:

- What can systemic learning processes bring to the organisation of volunteer efforts?
- What value do volunteers bring when working in a participatory way?
- Are experimental learning cycles a useful way to structure volunteering for development?

## About Barangay Mangingisda

Puerto Princesa was home to 161,912 people in 2000. It is a popular destination for migrants from other provinces of the Philippines. The original inhabitants are the Cuyonons, whose language is widely spoken along with Tagalog, Visayan and English. Three-quarters of the population of Puerto Princesa lives in the city and on the surrounding shores of Puerto Princesa Bay.

Barangay ng mga Mangingisda is one of 66 *barangays* (a term used to describe the smallest administrative division in the Philippines, usually a village) of Puerto Princesa. Puerto Princesa mainly depends on agriculture, tourism and commerce (due to increasing tourism). In 2009 it received 268,942 national and foreign tourists, predominantly visitors to the Subterranean River, which is considered one of the New Seven Wonders of Nature, and coastal/island beach areas.

Mangingisda is classified as a rural *barangay* in Puerto Princesa Bay, 30–60 minutes by boat from the port in Puerto Princesa. It has 4,317 residents according to the 2010 census. Its public elementary school enrolled 855 students in 2013-14, and the public high school has 545 students. *Barangay* officials indicated that the population may be as high as 6,000, with approximately 60% working as fishermen. Despite being a pretty spot, with a good reef and close to the city centre, it lacks a developed tourism infrastructure.

Figure 1. Case study location – Barangay Mangingisda, Palawan, Philippines.



In 2004, informal settlers were transferred from the city proper to Mangingisda after fire destroyed their houses. Some of the fishermen in Mangingisda migrated from Cebu about 20 years ago because their grounds were over-fished. A large fish sanctuary was established in 1991 which has an ordinance prohibiting fishing on some local reefs, but this restriction is difficult to implement day-to-day.



In January 2012, TMO's volunteers visited Barangay Mangingisda and carried out two Information, Education and Communication (IEC) sessions on Tubbataha reef, on marine resource management and environmental issues. 283 students at Mangingisda Elementary School and 149 residents, mostly fishermen, took part.

*Valuing Volunteering Philippines* began its research in Mangingisda by investigating the impact of this environmental education on people's awareness, attitudes and behaviours, with a focus on changes to fishing practices in Tubbataha and local fishing grounds. This was linked to a bigger multi-sited inquiry into volunteering in Palawan which has been written up as a separate case study (Aked J, *Reporting on the impact of volunteering for environmental education in coastal communities of Palawan*). But it was also the starting point for a more detailed action research inquiry to consider what the next steps should be for volunteering programmes that need to shift awareness of environmental issues into behaviour change in high-poverty contexts.

## The focus of this case study

This case study documents our journey as action researchers in Barangay Mangingisda, trying to leverage the power of volunteering to support poverty alleviation. It is written as a practical learning tool, incorporating practical reflections about the action research process for those looking to adopt a similar approach with findings that have implications for development work using volunteers. A stage-by-stage account of our approach and the decisions we took is provided in the methodology section. The report details the key practical learning points in our process and also the findings that have implications for the contribution a volunteer-led action research approach could make to development. It captures what we learned about the enabling characteristics and limitations of volunteering as a tool to support people in high-poverty environments to "ride the waves of change". More general findings about volunteering for development are also included.

## 3. Methodology

The Valuing Volunteering project used two research approaches to collect and analyse insights about volunteering; Participatory Systemic Inquiries (PSI) and Participatory Systemic Action Research (PSAR). Both of these approaches enable us to get under the surface of how communities operate and how change happens.

Participatory Systemic Inquiries (PSI) allow a system of actors, actions and contexts to be mapped as a baseline against which change can be assessed (Burns 2012). When identifying the starting points (our baseline) for a project we might typically record those factors that have an obvious direct relation to our intervention. For example, if our aim is to increase girls' access to education, a 'traditional' baseline might record factors such as school enrollment, attendance and participation. PSI allows us to go deeper and reflect on how people, processes and the environment that they are situated within influence one another and the path to change. Doing this involves asking both broad and detailed questions which take us beyond the school walls and into the complexities of social systems such as, 'Are girls' supported by their family and the wider community to attend school?' 'What are the power dynamics within the community and how might these influence girls' attendance in school?'

This data is then used to determine how different factors affect one another, with the aim of learning about why change is or is not happening. While causal links between each part of a system can be identified, they are frequently not linear relationships. By allowing us to observe volunteer practices as part of a wider system rather than in isolation, PSI challenges our assumption that if we do x it will automatically lead to y and forces us to consider each intervention within the context in which it is taking place. For example, strengthening our understanding of the factors that impact on people's perceptions of volunteering was important in some inquiries to make sense of volunteers' effectiveness. A PSI mapping and analysis might take place over a 2–12-week period and can involve working with many different individuals and groups. In the Valuing Volunteering project we ran many different PSIs at the community, organizational and national levels. Where actors were motivated to respond to emergent findings, PSI formed the beginning of an action research process.

Participatory Systemic Action Research (PSAR) is an action research methodology which embeds reflection, planning, action and evaluation into a single process. The core principle behind action research is that we learn as much if not more from action than from analysis. It incorporates iterative cycles of action and analysis, allowing us to reflect at intervals on a particular action or approach and adapting it according to what we've learnt. The action research used by Valuing Volunteering was participatory because it was led by individuals directly affected by or involved in volunteering for development initiatives, and they defined the action research process and questions. It was systemic because we assessed the impact of these actions by considering the knock-on effects for the actors, actions and contexts comprising the wider social system. SAR typically takes place over a period of 18 months to three years.

### The action research process

#### The scope

The systemic action research took place over 18 months, beginning in September 2012 and ending in April 2014. Inquiry was grounded in the concerns and insights that emerged through participatory sessions with residents of Barangay Mangingisda. This doesn't mean that all the action took place within Mangingisda. At several points in the process it was important for actors to meet with individuals and organisations in locations outside the *barangay*. All community level meetings were held locally, usually at the *barangay* Hall.



#### The actors

The action research had six groups of actors, which were involved at different stages and for different lengths of time (see Figure 2):

**Valuing Volunteering (VV) volunteer (Jody):** As Lead Researcher for the *Valuing Volunteering* project, Jody was a VSO international volunteer. She instigated contact with TMO to carry out the research. She was responsible for sharing the principles and methods of the systemic action research approach. She was involved throughout but some activities happened without her.

**Local volunteers:** Jody worked with three TMO volunteers over the course of the research in Mangingisda. They became engaged in the process one after another. First Ethel helped out, then Gerlie and, for the longest time, Helen. They worked alongside Jody to facilitate sessions.

Sometimes they did their own research. Helen independently carried out work with the community.

**National volunteer:** Efren had been a VSO volunteer in other countries twice before. He had joined VSO Bahaginan’s National Volunteer roster. He joined the team in Mangingisda in January 2014 for the last three months.

**Resident volunteers:** – This group comprised the community members who gave their time to the process. We describe them as ‘resident volunteers’ because they described their attendance at meetings as a form of volunteering. The motives for resident volunteer involvement ranged from using the process to gain a livelihood for the immediate family to wanting to see change in other people’s lives. Membership changed over the course of the research but, as a homogeneous grouping, resident volunteers were involved throughout. During the systemic inquiry and participatory analysis (refer to stages 1 and 2 below) we worked with 41 fishermen, 60 women, 1 female teacher, 3 male high-school students, 9 female high-school students, 6 *barangay* officials (1 of whom was female) and a group of 14 residents (9 of whom were female).

Over time, and as the action research process became more demanding of people’s time and resources, the numbers participating in meetings, etc, reduced. The latest records indicate that the following 15 resident volunteers, who took steps to organise as a cooperative, were persisting with their plans:

- Chairman:** Fredolyn Auza
- Vice-Chairman:** David Quisquirin
- Board of Directors:** Romy Borromeo and Melcha Victoria
- Secretary:** Estrellita Bayeta
- Treasurer:** Mrs Nilda Lastimoso
- Officers:** Francisco dela Rama, Charlita Roque, Edeliza Tannagan, Grace Armeña, Nelda Lastimoso, Josephine Doria, Connie Nillas, Lorilyn Fresnillo and Delyn Espartero

**TMO staff:** This group made the research possible in the first place. Emma connected us to Barangay Mangingisda and accompanied us on initial visits. A group of staff stayed engaged through formal reflection sessions and informal updates.

**Peripheral actors:** This group comprised individuals and organisations who engaged in the research at specific points through meetings or informal interactions. Their contribution was not a steady presence but they provided (often timely) insights to support our learning. They included World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF), Western Philippines University (WPU), Palawan State University (PSU), City Agriculture, the Bureau for Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), WorldFish, tourism agencies and the global *Valuing Volunteering* research group.

Figure 2. Involvement of actor groups



## The pattern

The overall shape of the research involved continuous cycles of learning in which reflection informs action, and action informs the next round of reflection (see Figure 3 and Section 9 - References for relevant references). We used the planning, action, observation and reflection stages to learn about the impact of our efforts so we could adapt over a second cycle of action–reflection, and so on. The cycles were infused with a systemic (multi-stakeholder, multi-sited, multi-level) perspective to support a situated understanding of how and why things happen.

The aim was to model a process for the community to move from insights and ideas to action.

Rather than take a static snapshot, the form of the research was a journey, creating practical knowledge and capacities among actors as we went. The cycles were defined by group sessions, individual actions and group actions. We aimed for the group sessions to be approximately six weeks apart.

While any research process has to start *somewhere* and grow from *something*, the aim of systemic action research is to keep the process open, ongoing, iterative and responsive. This is why the overarching research question for the *Valuing Volunteering* project – how, where and when does volunteering affect poverty? – is broad. To hold the space for methods to complement the energy, interests and issues of the actors involved, very little was planned or specified at the outset.

However, we used a set of prompts in reflection sessions to guide next steps:

- Are we still ‘on track’ with our underlying research purposes?
- What new questions do we need to ask?
- What new inquiries do we need to open up?
- What new data do we need to collect?
- Which new organisations and people do we need to involve?
- What practices and methods do we need to use at this stage?
- Do we need to produce any outputs or feedback from our work at this stage?

## The form

We had a broad idea that the form of the research should enable resident volunteers to:

- connect to new stakeholders and feel comfortable in those relationships
- be active in their development by having ‘doing roles’ and responsibilities at every stage of the process – design, implementation, review, analysis, etc
- take notice of the changes that happen with themselves, within their technical working group and within the wider community/ environment
- keep learning as part of an iterative process of action and reflection
- give their energy, strengths, skills and knowledge to the change process.

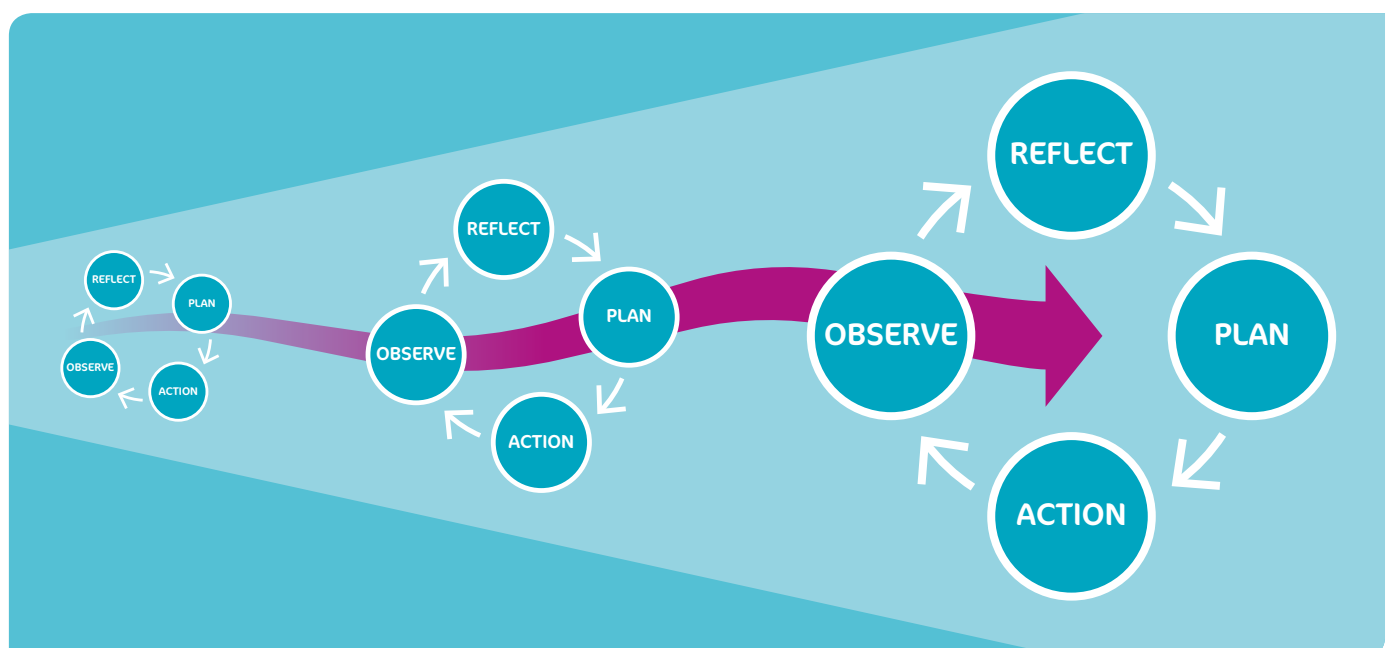
This meant that volunteers coming from outside Mangingisda had to be mindful of the way they worked with resident volunteers to:

- ask more questions than they provided answers
- intentionally blur the boundaries between outsiders as ‘expert’ and insiders as ‘recipients’ so every contribution was valued equally
- build from assets and what is working well
- design spaces to consider the systemic impacts of ideas and suggestions, from multiple stakeholder perspectives.

The action research process in Mangingisda began its journey as part of a participatory systemic inquiry taking place in different coastal communities in Palawan. This inquiry broadly set out to understand:

1. What changes for communities and the environment because of volunteer action on environmental education? What mechanisms and pathways support the changes?
2. Does awareness on environmental issues lead to behaviour change?
3. What can be learned from this study to inform the involvement of volunteers in other environmental and conservation initiatives?

Figure 3. Continuous, iterative cycles of experimental learning



At the end of this inquiry, questions emerged which required more data collection, especially to support participants to explore resource management and poverty issues from multiple perspectives. This process enabled more clarity on where opportunities for change might lie. At this point, we began to focus the inquiry around actions we could take to improve the situation of fishermen and their families in Mangingisda. *Valuing Volunteering Philippines'* documentation of the process and the learning it generated came to an end in April 2014. It is hoped that the group of resident volunteers will continue on their journey.

## The moving parts

It is possible to organise the emergent research design into four stages:

- Stage 1:** Participatory systemic inquiry
- Stage 2:** Multi-stakeholder analysis of early findings
- Stage 3:** Action–reflection cycle 1
- Stage 4:** Action–reflection cycle 2

Here we outline what we did, the methods we used and the decisions we took at each stage.

## Stage 1: Participatory systemic inquiry

### OBSERVE

This stage comprised two visits by VV volunteer, local volunteer and TMO to Barangay Mangingisda on 13 September 2012 and again two months later between 6 and 9 November 2012. It was focused on the “observe” phase of the experimental learning cycle.

The aim of the first visit was to introduce ourselves and the research project. We had a meeting with the *Barangay* Captain and the *kagawad* (the officials) including representation from the Committee on Environment, the Committee on Fisheries and the Committee on Agriculture.

We talked through the realities of conserving marine resources while also maintaining livelihoods. The TMO visit earlier in the year had made them think about introducing a Marine Protected Area but there were a number of barriers. We agreed it was good for us to revisit to carry out the research.

The second visit comprised a three-day inquiry with different groups (see Table 1). We either carried out participatory workshops or *chika chika* (informal) discussions.

**Table 1. Resident volunteers joining the initial systemic participatory inquiries**

Community group	Method	Participant numbers
Fishermen	Participatory workshop	41
Women	Participatory workshop	60+
Teachers – Mangingisda National High School	<i>Chika chika</i> discussion	1
Students (12-to-16-year-olds) – Mangingisda National High School	Two participatory workshops	9 girls, 3 boys

### Participatory workshops: Drawing and describing relationships

We asked participants to draw a picture representing the community’s relationship to nature and the environment. In the case of adults, groups were split into three groups: (1) Past – 10–20 years ago; (2) Present – now; (3) Future – 10–20 years from now. Young people only took part in the latter two groups. Participants were encouraged to discuss in groups how they wanted to depict their community in relation to the environment and to specifically focus on detailing the characteristics of:

- Who/what is in your picture?
- How do they behave/think?
- What is positive and what is negative?
- Who/what else influences the community’s relationship with the environment?

Groups took turns to explain their picture to the wider group in the order of past–present–future using one or several spokespeople. Listeners were encouraged to ask questions. The explanations of the drawings provided insights into how the interrelationships between human and environmental ecosystems were understood locally. They allowed researchers to ask specific questions and facilitate productive discussion and feedback.

Photo set 1. Photos of the participatory systemic inquiry (Stage 1)



### Chika chika discussion

We used informal chats to engage people in conversation about the research topic. With the teacher at Mangingisda National High School this took place before our participatory workshops with students.

As we moved round the groups we took the opportunity (with permission) to share workshop outputs. At the end of the session with women, we showed them the fishermen’s drawings. At the end of the sessions with students we showed them the adult drawings. People were interested to see how other people had depicted the past, present and future of their community.

After the participatory workshops the VV volunteer, the local volunteer and TMO staff member discussed and documented the findings. We spent several hours creating a systems map of the issues. Unfortunately a local *barangay* official couldn’t join us as planned.

### Systems mapping

Systems mapping is a technique used to better understand issues and relationships in complex environments, bringing together information and views from a number of participants onto one page. At the end of the participatory workshops and chika chika discussions we carried out an initial brainstorm of emergent issues. We then organised the data according to standard colour coding agreed by researchers in the global *Valuing Volunteering* project:

- RED = Issues
- BLUE = Stakeholders
- GREEN = Factual Information/Observations
- BLACK = Possible Solutions/Actions or New Questions

We entered the data onto a map. Lines between any entries were drawn to indicate a relationship. We discussed whether the links should be one-way or two-way, depending on what issue influenced what.

We added quotes that illustrated issues, in ballpoint pen. We tried to identify:

- possible links or causal pathways between entries on the map
- realities that challenge assumptions
- barriers and opportunities to change
- ideas for action
- what information is missing.

### Reflection: Participatory systemic inquiry

Collating all the findings across all the participatory workshops was too big a task to accomplish in a large group given our timescales. So we did this as a smaller group, involving the VV volunteer, the local volunteer and TMO staff member. A local village official was invited but they cancelled at the last minute.

In abstracting the issues from the rich data we wanted to feel confident we had not missed anything, and that the links we had drawn between issues were accurate. We took the decision to run a multi-stakeholder session to validate and make sense of the map, which formed the basis of Stage 2.



## Stage 2: Multi-stakeholder analysis of early findings

### OBSERVE

This stage took place over two visits, with a focus on the 'reflect' phase of the experimental learning cycle. We arranged for a multi-stakeholder validation session at the end of the November visit to look at the findings as one group. This single session turned into a series of sessions with different stakeholder groups.

#### Validation sessions

At the validation sessions the VV volunteer and a local volunteer talked through the map, explaining the connections and asking if people were happy with the assumptions. We asked what was missing and what we should add.

The VV volunteer led the explanation of the map, with translation support from the local volunteer when necessary. At each session we added new information and links to the map to strengthen analysis of the local situation and its contributing factors.

In the first of our validation sessions in November, we organised a gallery of all the drawings and took the issues map along. Two fishermen and two *kagawad* were present. There was a lot of resonance with the links between the continuation of unsustainable fishing practices and the lack of alternative livelihoods. This reflected previous discussions with community members and *barangay* officials. So we decided to try and get a meeting with City Agriculture, one of the government departments responsible for livelihood initiatives.

During this stage we were able to identify two potential community leaders who could help us generate enthusiasm for a follow-up session with residents. The two fishermen said they would encourage other fishermen to volunteer by advocating and sharing the information they learnt on the day. At a later date, the two fishermen accompanied the VV volunteer, local volunteer and TMO staff member to a meeting with City Agriculture.

We also shared the map with a group of six TMO staff in November, who emphasised the importance of showing *barangay* officials the map to gather insights into where to focus energy and follow-up activities. We also thought it would be important to report back to absent residents about the discussions and additional information validation sessions had generated.

We got back in touch with the community through a *kagawad* in June 2013 and they were happy to set up a session with *barangay* officials and one with residents again. The Treasurer of the *barangay* was particularly animated about certain links which mapped a connection between low fish catch and an increase in family breakdown in the community. He went on to infuse the action research process with a lot of energy, encouraging residents to take part.

We decided to use the resident session in June as an opportunity to move from insights to ideas for action, beginning our first action-reflection cycle. We are particularly interested in how to mobilise/enable local volunteers to take more of an active role in the management of their natural resources.

#### Reflection: Multi-stakeholder analysis of early findings

Stage 2 didn't go entirely as expected, so it is worth reflecting on the challenges we faced as potential hurdles to look out for when conducting a systemic action research process.

- **Low participation at the first validation session.** Unlike the participatory workshops in Stage 1 where many people had attended, nobody turned up at the designated hour at the first validation session we organised in November. We were told this was because we did not offer a livelihood (e.g. a project with funding attached to establish a new income-generating activity). While we were really disappointed that only two fishermen attended, we were encouraged by the fact that they had come straight from fishing all night without sleeping. They said it would be really nice for the other fishermen to see the map because they would appreciate the results of the activity. In this reflection, we had identified two potential leaders at the community level who could help champion the action research process. The fishermen helped with attendance at the next validation session with residents in June 2013.
- **Unexpected disturbances to momentum.** Stage 2 actually ended up happening over a period of seven months from December 2012 to 18 June 2013. There was a long delay because of the Christmas break, and the difficulty aligning schedules between the *Valuing Volunteering* project and TMO's workload dealing with the destruction of Tubbataha reef following two ship groundings and preparations for its 25th anniversary. These scheduling challenges couldn't be avoided but it did mean that our plan for one big group validation session actually became a series of separate validation sessions with fishermen, TMO, City Agriculture, *barangay* officials and a group of residents which included some out-of-school youth. So, moving from 'observe' to 'reflect' in the experimental learning cycle was not one meeting, but several connected sessions. Using the map as a living document helped us to document the learning from each validation session and feed it into the next. This in some way compensated for missing out on the discussions that would be generated from a multi-stakeholder session. But there was little we could do to offset the extra time and resource it took to work in this way.

Photo set 2. Photos of the multi-stakeholder analysis (Stage 2)



### Stage 3: Action–reflection cycle 1

#### PLAN

#### ACTION

This stage took place over approximately six visits and actions on 17–18 June, 22–24 July, 16 August and 5, 11 and 19 September 2013. It involved the ‘plan’, ‘action’ and ‘reflect’ phases of the experimental learning cycle.

During the first visit, in June, we ran a session with about 15 community members (mostly women who were wives of fishermen), some of whom attended the participatory workshops in Stage 1. The two fishermen shared the results of the City Agriculture meeting. The VV volunteer shared the systems map and we strengthened this. This review of issues and the links between them set the context for planning and action.

We used a Plugging the Leaks exercise to explore in more detail the ningas cogon situation which the community felt explained why new initiatives had not led to enduring change. Ningas cogon is a Filipino term used to explain how development initiatives start with a lot of activity but result in nothing. We had noticed a possible link between ningas cogon and the prevailing community narrative around why change hadn’t happened, which was about what outside help had failed to achieve for the community. Community members looked to *barangay* officials, purok (village) leaders, us or anyone from the government to steer them. We were interested in supporting residents to see leadership qualities in each other, so we used Plugging the Leaks across two sessions in June and July to explore a local role in the change process.

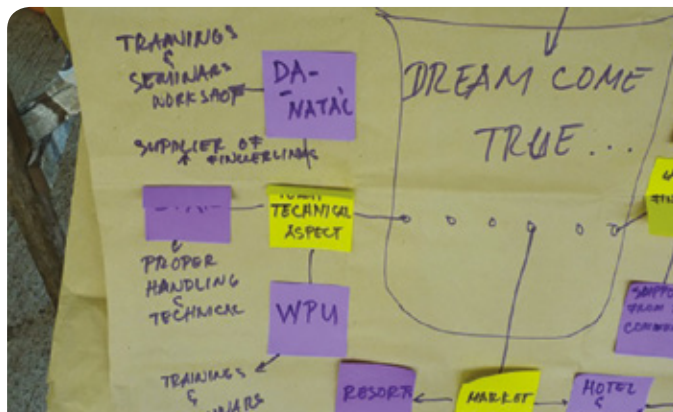
#### Plugging the Leaks

Plugging the Leaks was created by the New Economics Foundation to support people in communities to take a different approach to local economic development, which starts from their own ideas and their own resources.

We began the exercise with a bucket. We use a bucket filled with water to represent wellbeing in the community, where everyone has enough to live a good life. We then brainstorm all the things that come into their community that help to make this possible (e.g. fish in the sea, inward investment in livelihoods, etc). We then look at what happens when we try to fill up a bucket with holes drilled in it. The water leaks out. We brainstorm what the holes represent – leakages of resources (e.g. the community mentioned the closing of the WPU courses; time lost in *chismes* (“gossip”); diseased crops).

We brainstormed ideas (e.g. potential projects) that could plug the leaks. We discussed the concept of irrigation – how to make investments into the community travel further and more fairly across the community – and thought about whether we wanted to add any ideas.

Photo set 3. Photos of the Plugging the Leaks exercise (Stage 3)



For the second Plugging the Leaks session in July we had about 10 community members, a mix of men and women, who stayed for the duration of the workshop. At the end of this session we voted on the priority ideas to take forward. We had three project ideas:

- fish cages for suno culture
- cages for abalone culture
- development of a snorkelling site.

Participants self-selected onto the three working groups depending on the idea that interested them most. The groups nominated a leader. We discussed the commitment to meet and begin work, and what the agenda of the first meeting might be.

A date of 28 July was set for these groups to meet by themselves. The VV volunteer and local volunteer provided follow-up encouragement over the phone to group leaders. The date for the meeting came and went. The leaders felt unsure about what to discuss at the meeting. Through phone support we referred them back to their materials to think about the first steps for putting ideas into action, but it was becoming clear that more local level support was required. We were also aware that *Valuing Volunteering* did not have too many visits left, so we were keen to strengthen ties locally between the community and local institutions that could help. City Agriculture had been defensive on our first visit. They were more interested in showing us what had been done in Mangingsida rather than listening to why

things were not progressing. Another organisation that came up in community discussions was Western Philippines University (WPU). A staff member at TMO secured the VV volunteer and the local volunteer an introduction.

WPU were able to help resident volunteers in the snorkelling working group. WPU staff mobilised students to carry out the reef assessment to provide an ecological assessment of the viability of a snorkelling site. On 16 August, members of the snorkelling group worked with staff and students from WPU to carry out a reef check and site assessment in front of the port of Mangingsida. This activity was supported by the local volunteer.

By the time the VV volunteer and local volunteer met up with the resident volunteers again on 5 September 2013, the group leader for abalone culture explained that they had conducted a meeting and the group was no longer interested in abalone. They wanted to change the project to prawns. The group looking into suno culture did not meet, but one of the members of the suno culture group went with his nephew to meet with BFAR to understand about fish cages. The leader of the snorkelling group reported that they had met but were not able to come up with a plan without someone to preside. They didn't want to do it alone.

Photo set 4. Photos of the reef check and community action (Stage 3)



## REFLECT

This reticence on the part of the community to progress their learning into concrete actions without the support of the VV volunteer and the local volunteer raised some concerns about the direction and feasibility of the action research process. Low levels of activity among the group either revealed a lack of interest or a lack of confidence to initiate action and work as a group. Either scenario presented challenges given that both volunteers were only able to visit intermittently. Following some online research to gather inspiration and ideas, the VV volunteer decided to call into the WorldFish office on 11 September to discuss their approach on a similar action research project taking place in the Philippines.

Staff at WorldFish had been trained in May 2013 in a Community Life Competent Process developed by a consultancy called The Constellation. They were yet to go through the whole action research process with their partner communities but they had begun with a 'visioning' exercise to construct a community dream, which aligned to our starting place in Mangingisda drawing and debating the future. The next step in the WorldFish process was action planning and the organisation of an event with wider stakeholders to share community dreams and catalyse support. On a lesser, more piecemeal scale we had been trying to link the research findings of community members to other institutions who could help in Mangingisda. It was reassuring to find a similar action research process in operation on a different island group in the Philippines.

We scheduled another visit to Mangingisda to encourage reflection on the previous six to eight weeks and lend more support to the technical working groups around action planning. On 19 September 2013 we met with about 12 members of the technical working groups for the whole day. In the morning, the VV volunteer and local

volunteer did a recap on the whole action–reflection cycle. We then ran a community self-assessment tool with each technical working group, identifying key achievements and challenges.

## Community self-assessment

We used the WorldFish Centre process to help community members to assess where they are now in relation to realising their plans. It has a very simple 1–5 scale which groups use to discuss and reflect the progress they have made:

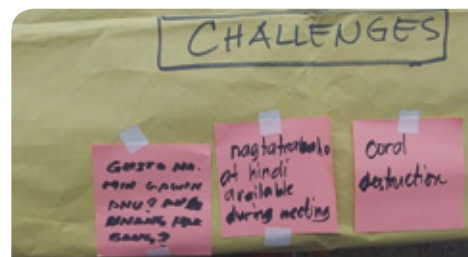
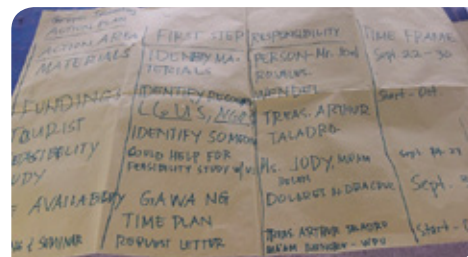
1. you do not know your dream
2. you know your dream but you have not done anything yet
3. you know your dream and you have started
4. you are taking action and getting results
5. you have realised the dream

We translated this into Tagalog and added a further activity to encourage members to brainstorm the key achievements and challenges which explained their position on the scale. To encourage cross-team support we then invited each group to visit the other groups and provide words of encouragement, ideas or advice to overcome challenging areas.

## PLAN

Before the end of the session, each group shared their progress with the whole group, where tips and advice were given. We had lunch to celebrate our first action-research cycle, then we ran an action-planning exercise in the afternoon, which was much more targeted in its direction, encouraging resident volunteers to identify key action areas for their projects, first steps, responsibilities and timeframes.

Photo set 5. Photos of recap and community self-assessment (Stage 3)



### Reflection: Action–reflection cycle 1

This stage of the research process generated important learning about linking to other stakeholders who could assist the community.

When we decided to approach WPU, we requested a meeting. The VV volunteer, local volunteer and a staff member of TMO went to the university to learn about their work in Mangingsida. We requested a member of the community to join but they were unable to attend. On realising we had a good values fit with WPU and a shared interest in using volunteering to support livelihood development and environmental sustainability, we explored if we could join forces with them, as a partner that has a longer-term commitment/remit to support the community. We shared the systems map with them and had a discussion around that. We explained the Plugging the Leaks tool, our interest in creating action from local ideas and the centrality of a participatory approach to achieving this. We suggested we wanted to run a second Plugging the Leaks workshop with more members and discussed plans for doing this together. A member of WPU joined our Plugging the Leaks workshop in July. This provided an opportunity to see our way of working in action.

It seemed like a good opportunity to bridge WPU with the community through the reef assessment. It was something resident volunteers responsible for the development of the snorkelling site needed to know and it was a skill that students at the university

had. The results of the assessment were good but the process was not so effective at galvanising local enthusiasm for the project. This is because community engagement in the activity had been low. Not many resident volunteers were involved, because of the limited space available on the boats. The purok leader, the leader of the snorkelling group and the leader of the suno culture group who joined stayed in the boat. This meant that none of the resident volunteers got to see the reef or learn how to conduct a check.

For the meeting in September with resident volunteers, the VV volunteer took the decision to print three copies of all the photos that had been taken. We put them into folders so the technical working groups and *barangay* officials could see what students of WPU had seen under the water. This feedback did raise energy levels and went some way to involve resident volunteers in the learning process. But the whole engagement with WPU did highlight the challenges involved in bringing other partners on board, especially if they take a top-down approach rather than a bottom-up approach to carrying out activities with communities. We thought we had explained the ethos of the approach and demonstrated our way of working at the Plugging the Leaks workshop, but events highlighted that we had not done enough to enable WPU to complement the action research process already underway.

## Stage 4: Action–reflection cycle 2

### ACTION

This stage involved two community visits on the part of the VV volunteer on 21 November 2013 and 30 January 2014 as well as multiple visits on the part of the national volunteer and local volunteer between February and April 2014. The focus was on the ‘action’ and ‘reflect’ phases of the experimental learning cycle.

Between September and November, we recorded these main actions, derived from the action planning:

- more visits to BFAR – but only of one member of the suno culture group
- fact-finding by the VV volunteer on community organising training
- fact-finding by local volunteer at City Tourism and Palawan State University about the possibility of a tourism feasibility study.

### REFLECT

During the November visit we worked with about 10 resident volunteers. We carried out a self-assessment of action again and had a sharing. We also took an impromptu visit to the BFAR fish farm with eight participants because people couldn’t “visualise” the project. We reflected on the project limitations for the VV volunteer to keep visiting Mangingisda and discussed the placement of a national volunteer in the community for two months to support the technical working groups with advancing their plans. We discussed what it would be like to host a national volunteer and what it could be like in practice. We discussed the job title, the role and community counterparts.

### ACTION

We also had an informal meeting with staff from City Agriculture, who were there to deliver a livelihood training on sea cucumber and rabbit fish. While they waited for residents to show up, we showed them what we had been doing in Mangingisda and talked through community plans for how they would like to move forward.

We took a decision to recruit the national volunteer through VSO Bahaginan’s processes. After a lot of searching through the databases of returned overseas volunteers who had signed up for national volunteering, we eventually found a volunteer whom we considered a good match. A previous volunteer with facilitation experience and a background in business and finance, he had worked on livelihood projects before. He came on board in January 2014 when the VV volunteer and the national volunteer visited Puerto Princesa to introduce him to TMO and the community. Despite having about 30 community members who had been active or interested in the work, nobody from the technical working groups turned up to the meeting. We were able to secure a meeting with one of the fishermen who had been involved throughout and who was happy to host the national volunteer. Over lunch we discussed how the placement would work and explored accommodation options for the volunteer. The VV volunteer and the local volunteer spent the rest of the time orienting the national volunteer on the history of our involvement with Mangingisda. A plan for the national volunteer and local volunteer to continue working together was decided upon.

At the end of January, the national volunteer and local volunteer took the decision to buy a whiteboard that the volunteers could use at every meeting. They decided to officially invite resident volunteers by letter to formalise the work and hopefully people’s commitment to attend. Between February and April 2014 the national volunteer and local volunteer met with Mangingisda numerous times during informal visits to the community and at designated meetings. The main engagements included:

- Meeting on 7 February with nine existing technical working group members and new people. The local volunteer did a recap on the process so far and the national volunteer introduced himself and the idea of a cooperative as a next step forward. This was based on his knowledge of how to attract funding and government support for community-based initiatives. This did mark a shift in focus from working on project ideas to working on roles and capacities for formally organising as a group. Based on previous experience in the Philippines, the national volunteer felt that resident volunteers would only be able to raise the material inputs needed for their project ideas by leveraging financial resource into the community. This would only be possible by establishing a cooperative and the design of projects that would be immediately financially viable (e.g. buying rice wholesale) as a means for raising extra capital for the projects they really wanted to implement (e.g. development of a snorkelling site).
- Meeting on 11 February between the national volunteer and Palawan State University’s Research and Extension Office, as well as conversations with *barangay* officials and the City Planning Office.
- Meeting on 14 February with 33 new and old members of the Technical Working Group (5 men and 28 women). They discussed old ideas and generated new ones before focusing on the need to become a fixed group with officers.
- Meeting on 21 February with three core group members to discuss project ideas. This was followed by a meeting of 15 (4 men, 11 women) prospective members of “Mangingisda Cooperative”. They presented two projects – dress making and goat fattening – and looked at election of officers and proposed by-laws and articles of cooperation.
- Meeting on 28 February with the five members of the Board of Directors to discuss every section in the by-laws and respond to queries about the role of the Board of Directors.
- Meeting on 3 March between the local volunteer and five members of the Board of Directors and officers to write a first draft of the by-laws and cooperation.
- Meeting on 13 March between the local volunteer and five members of the Board of Directors to discuss shared capital and the 15,000 pesos needed to register the cooperative. Other officers did not turn up, despite the aim for perfect attendance to vote on some decisions.

During these meetings, planning and action was formulated around the use of the fish bone exercise.

Photo set 6. Photos of meetings with prospective cooperative (Stage 4)

### Fish bone exercise

The fish bone diagram was used to help community members think through viable projects. It explores the problem/issue, the resources and manpower needed, the financial input needed, the method/ machinery required, the environment and any other concerns.

In March, the local volunteer mostly went to the community alone. The national volunteer didn't attend the 13 March meeting.

### REFLECT

At the end of March, the VV volunteer was unable to travel to Mangingisda due to poor health. The local volunteer visited on 28 March to do a follow-up with the community to find out:

1. What happened with the volunteers?
2. What changed for you, individually and as a community?
3. How do you feel now about yourself and the future of the community?
4. What could have gone better?

At this stage, members were still seeking the money required for registering the cooperative. They thought this might take until May 2014. The national volunteer came to the end of his placement, and the formal engagement between *Valuing Volunteering Philippines* and Mangingisda came to an end. On 13 May 2014, the vice-president of the cooperative was invited to present in a national forum in Manila based on his experiences of volunteering. The vice-president was hoping to meet up again with the national volunteer at the forum, but the national volunteer cancelled at the last minute due to poor health. According to the vice-president, further progress in establishing the cooperative or realising any of the project ideas had not been made.

The local volunteer was very keen to continue supporting the community of Mangingisda and had just been appointed to a part-time position supporting a member of staff at the WWF responsible for a project bringing together volunteering, mentoring, environmental education and action in coastal communities. The local volunteer was exploring whether it would be possible to include Mangingisda as one of the focal communities for the work.



## Reflection: Action–reflection cycle 2

Over the course of the action research process, sustaining momentum continued to be a challenge. Around October 2013, the VV volunteer, local volunteer and TMO staff agreed we had so far managed to engage people in decision-making about their local economy and generate enterprising ideas. But the challenge to convert these insights into action remained. In particular, the VV volunteer was keen to see residents:

- experience greater self-direction in their actions
- feel they have something to contribute and are effective with their time/energy
- feel they can trust in one another to leverage local and non-local resources to realise their plans.

We didn't want to give up before we had seen more mobilisation of local human resources as a basis for a community-based and community-driven response to environmental issues. We perceived one of our limitations to be a lack of a continuous presence in the community to support members of the technical working group in moving from ideas to action. Given that this project was about volunteering, one option available to us was the placement of a national volunteer for two months via VSO Bahaginan. A meeting

with the global *Valuing Volunteering* team in the Philippines in October confirmed interest in placing a national volunteer with Mangingisda. From a project perspective, it provided a good opportunity to learn about how volunteering affects the wider social, ecological and economic landscape that we know and understood well.

The increased presence of a national volunteer and local volunteer did help resident volunteers to push through with their plans with more pace. But the national volunteer did not end up as embedded in the community as initially planned. Despite encouragement, he did not take up residence in the community, preferring to stay with family members in the city proper, which is about 30–60 minutes' boat ride away. In his home village, he got involved in other projects, which may have taken up more of his time than he initially anticipated. When the national volunteer began to visit the community less in the second month, his absence was keenly felt by the community. The local volunteer stepped up and maintained momentum with her visits, highlighting one of the benefits of working in volunteer teams, but the resident volunteers did miss the national volunteer's specific expertise.

## In summary

The action research process encompassed all four phases of the experimental learning cycle – observe, plan, action, reflect. The VV volunteer, local volunteer, resident volunteer and national volunteer all worked to generate insights in the participatory inquiry stage that could inform actions which could link the needs of the environment with those of residents to provide a sustainable income. As it unfolded, the action research process ran over 18 months and involved purposeful linking of resident volunteers to actors outside the community, highlighting both the lengthy and relational nature of livelihood and environmental change in high-poverty contexts. Our engagement with the community was not sufficiently long to arrive at a point where transformative change to the lives of people in Mangingisda feels imminent. The future direction of the community's story will likely depend on the links they cemented with other organisations like WWF and WPU through their connection to international, national and local volunteers.



## 4. Practical insights

This section focuses on some of the practicalities of carrying out systemic action research as an approach to organising and structuring volunteer-led efforts in high-poverty contexts. Emerging from the unexpected surprises and challenges we faced, the insights may be useful for volunteer programmes and volunteers thinking of adopting a similar approach.

### Putting issues on the map

The issues map was a hugely valuable tool. It was a complex map, but explaining it told a story of the wider system which identified visible connections, sticking points, as well as the internal and external drivers that structure action. While it does require a bit of preparation to think through how to explain all the arrows, as well as delivery time to provide important context for the abstractions, it was one piece of paper that we could share with lots of different stakeholder groups. This made it easy to move insights between people, helping to surface multiple realities and perspectives.

The other interesting finding that its use in Mangingisda illustrated was that once you have made visible the relationship between different issues, people can reach consensus on the need for action even if their starting points are completely different. The fishermen's concerns were about protecting their way of life. The women wanted to see progress and a role for themselves in it. The Treasurer, who became a strong community advocate for this project for a time, was motivated by family breakdown. As a tool it was able to help turn differences into shared decisions.

### One inquiry at a time

It is quite common practice for systemic action research to have multiple working groups, opening up and closing down multiple lines of inquiry all at once within the boundaries of a single project. Quite quickly groups can be left to go off and experiment in between group reflection sessions (e.g. designated meetings). For example, staff at TMO were able to pick up and run with some of the techniques like Plugging the Leaks in other areas of their work after one exposure.

Where literacy about change processes and direct experience of participatory working is limited, facilitation of systemic action research has to be more hands-on. For example, resident volunteers were not practised at thinking ideas through to the planning stage, they were not accustomed to organising and documenting group meetings and decisions, and they did not know how to facilitate discussions. They told us that even if they met they didn't know what they were supposed to do together. As a consequence our first attempts to leave resident volunteers to move plans along in our absence were not very successful. We lost valuable time and momentum before we realised we had to scale back our ambitions significantly to work with two or three groups (which later became one) at every step of the process.

This did not mean that we had to revert to leading or directing. We just needed to create more space for the process and provide a reassuring presence at each key stage. For example, instead of telling participants about the importance of doing a recap at the beginning of each new meeting, we would show them how to use previously generated material as a springboard for progressing thinking.

## Less than six weeks of separation

The need for a more consistent presence in the action research process called for less than six weeks of separation between visits. As the *Valuing Volunteering* project was working across multiple locations in the Philippines, we had to do some upfront planning of the work. We used 'six weeks of separation' as a heuristic for scheduling the action research case studies. In hindsight this timeframe was based on previous models of facilitating systemic action research in organisations. It had to be much shorter in the change context in Mangingisda. In fact, we would go as far as to say that it required a consistent presence in the community to bridge group learning sessions with individual coaching support.

The other thing to mention is that rigidly sticking to six weeks (even if it had been the right timeframe) was a challenge in the Philippines. Disasters strike. Schedules get moved frequently. Really important things appear in the diary at the last minute. All this makes the context for volunteer-led action research with communities more challenging than projects where there are fixed agreements and deliverables between partners (e.g. the action research facilitator and an organisation). The emergent nature of the process, combined with external or unexpected disruptions, contributes to a feeling of uncertainty about the overall direction of the activity. This makes it difficult for people living in poverty to have the confidence required to commit and prioritise meetings over other commitments, for example.

## Teaching others

The process benefited when there was more than one actor with facilitation skills and an understanding of the action research process. Towards the end, the local volunteer had become this person. One approach other initiatives could take is to train peer researchers or use a cascade model to facilitate the process when the Lead Researcher cannot be there. This was a challenge in the context of Mangingisda because the VV volunteer (also the Lead Researcher) benefited from being involved in the process. For the purposes of the *Valuing Volunteering* project it was much more difficult to track learning remotely in the last few months when the VV volunteer was less actively involved. Despite good documentation reports provided by the local volunteer there seems to be little substitute for learning through being part of the process. This has implications for the way some volunteer programmes are run, where programmatic staff rarely visit or become part of action on the ground.

The local volunteers were great at picking up the techniques. This was partly because they didn't have to un-learn traditional approaches to community development or research to do so. This makes it easier for people to align with the ethos of the approach. It was more difficult with the national volunteer. He was an experienced community development worker, having volunteered before. For example, there was no evidence that he took resident volunteers with him to meet government officials and power holders, despite his reports that these meetings took place. This purposeful linking so resident volunteers could gain practice in these arenas was part of the job description. *Valuing Volunteering* has learned several times over in the Philippines that systemic action research is hardest to teach people who already have a set idea of how development or research is done. People have their own approach and techniques and cannot necessarily see the value of adopting a different change framework, even when it is integral to the project. This would suggest the need for a more immersive training and orientation process than we allowed for when bringing the national volunteer on board, especially as he was only in placement for a short time.

We worked with three local volunteers, consecutively, over the course of our engagement with Mangingisda. As one left because they got paid employment, we recruited another, usually a friend from their environmental degree course at university. It is important not to underestimate the time a project needs to allow in order for people to build their confidence using the techniques. The best way to learn is through doing them, which is why a team approach seemed to work in Mangingisda. It gave the different volunteers opportunities to learn new things together and play to each other's strengths.

## Feedback as a tool for change

In *Valuing Volunteering Philippines'* experience, feedback at the community level is often seen as a 'nice-to-have' in change efforts. It is the thing people know they should do but it often slips off the things-to-do list. We learned how important feedback can be, especially when you are trying to galvanise momentum for social mobilisation. In Mangingisda, people experienced how insights deepened in feedback and validation sessions, taking thinking further than it had gone before. Energy levels shot up in one of our meetings when we presented the community with pictures of their coral reef and accompanying verbal reports that it was much healthier than a popular tourist spot further north on the island. In these sorts of ways, creating feedback loops was integral to the change process. It was not just about respectfully keeping people informed. It was about giving people a reason to feel their contribution is important and that progress is being made.

## 5. Process learning

This section offers a more detailed account of some of the process learning we encountered as volunteers adopting a systemic action research approach to facilitating change. It highlights some of the benefits of working in a participatory and systemic way and discusses implications that relate to the role of volunteers in development efforts.

### Seeing the whole

As volunteers seeking to support change, we needed to understand the context we were working in. This section highlights what we learned from carrying out a participatory systemic analysis about the dynamics of natural resource degradation and poverty in Mangingisda.

**Participatory systemic inquiry created a clear picture of the community's context and challenges to inform a collectively generated framework for action and next steps. Mapping the insights of multiple stakeholders helped all the volunteers to see a good proportion of the whole social, ecological and economic system – and the links between them. At times this meant intentionally moving information on the map from one stakeholder to the next to try and unearth blockages preventing transformative change for the community of Mangingisda. This systemic analysis grounded our framework for action in an in-depth understanding of the local context.**

### Generating a framework for action from the systems map

The systems map shows how information on environment has come into the community, including through TMO's volunteers delivering environmental education (see Photo set 7). The middle of the map shows that behaviour is difficult to change, so illegal activity continues. This contributes to dwindling fish stocks, which has a number of effects (off to the left), including fishermen going further afield, which means less quality family time, or failed seaweed farming. At a community session we added the use of more dangerous fishing practices, which have implications for fishers' health. The economic and social implications were deeply felt by some members of the community. We also added a direct positive (e.g. enhancing) feedback loop between low fish catch and the continuation of illegal activity. Residents made the point that fewer fish was not just a consequence of their predicament: it is actually a powerful driver, encouraging fishers to fish illegally.

The continuation of illegal practices and over-fishing is being reinforced by a number of factors including:

- high price paid for endangered species
- limited alternative livelihoods
- low household income
- lack of fairness at different levels of the system. This refers to the inequality between small-scale and larger, more commercial fishers as well as the discord between community members when previous cooperatives failed because of loan repayment defaults
- laws/sanctuary ordinances not strictly implemented
- no allowance for volunteer patrol.

City Agriculture 'corrected' the map with examples of numerous livelihood projects that have taken place within the community. They also informed us that farm lots had been provided before but many residents chose to sell them. We added this information to the map. A distinction was made between agricultural livelihoods and livelihoods for fishers.

There was a strong connection between low household income and sanctuary laws not being implemented, mediated by the fact that there was no money available to support fishermen to patrol the area by way of a stipend or volunteer allowance.

There are a few important community resources listed on the map:

- high levels of understanding/knowledge about the link between healthy marine ecosystems and a good fish catch
- women wanting to help their husbands through a livelihood that generates household income
- community members being actively engaged in pro-environmental behaviours (e.g. volunteering for mangrove planting, coastal clean-ups)
- willingness of some fishermen to volunteer for patrol of Marine Protected Area.

We noticed a disconnect between local volunteer activity and the drivers of unsustainable fishing. All the volunteer efforts (next page) are 'one time, big time' efforts that do not tackle any of the causes of the illegal activity.

The way the issues on the map linked to one another made up a framework for action. It was clear that to effect change in a way that dealt with challenges and maximised local resource, solutions would need to combine three main components:

- ecological (to protect the fish stocks)
- livelihoods (to provide alternative ways of generating income)
- volunteerism (to direct human resources towards the first two).

A number of questions were generated from the documented discussions when the VV volunteer, local volunteer and TMO staff member generated the map. The question about whether livelihoods on fisheries are available came directly from a resident volunteer. The others were placed on the map in response to how the link between issues evolved, either as points of clarification with the community or as possible lines of future inquiry:

- Is there a plan for the sanctuary?
- Would another Marine Protected Area help?
- Are livelihood programmes on fisheries available?
- Do they have a livelihoods feasibility study?
- Can volunteers be used to change attitudes and behaviour?
- Can volunteer efforts be used in different ways?

Further discussion on components of the framework for action revealed a number of challenges facing us in our efforts. They are detailed in Table 2, as articulated by the community.

Photo set 7. The evolving systems map exploring Mangingisda and its environment

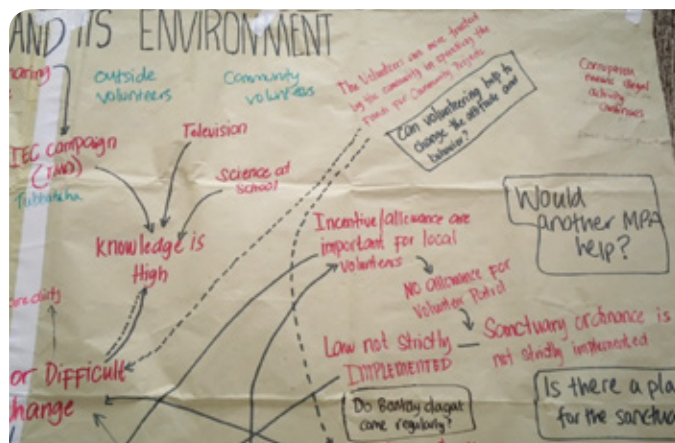
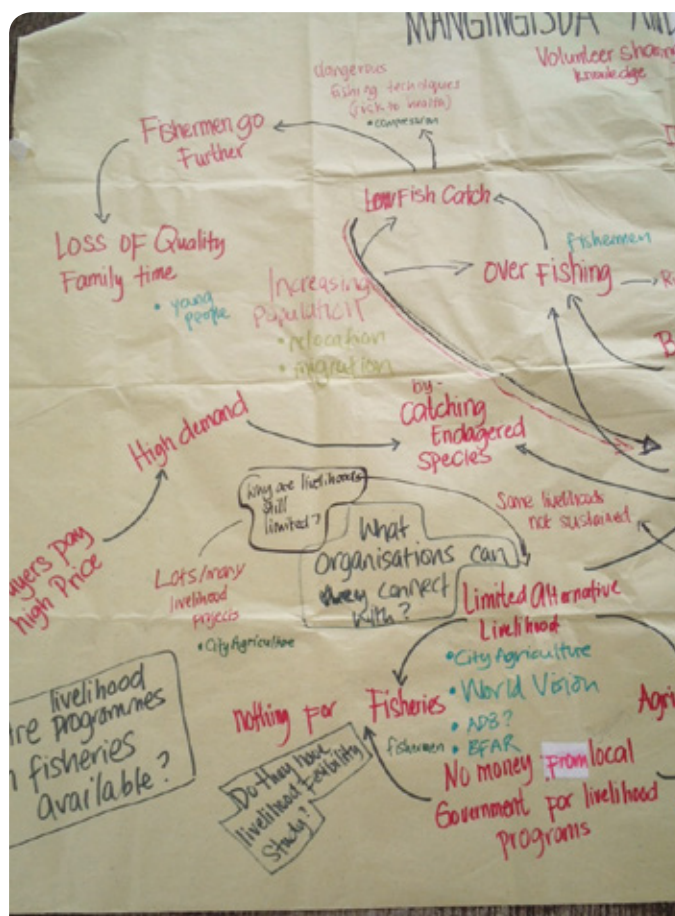
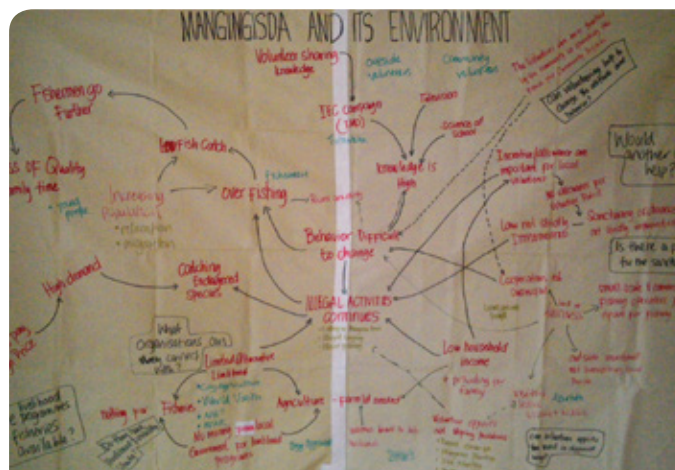


Photo set 7. The evolving systems map exploring Mangingisda and its environment

Challenge area	Challenges 'internal' to the community	Challenges 'external' to the community
<b>Implementation of marine laws</b>	<p><i>Kagawad</i> (local official) pointed out that they already have 18 hectares sanctuary and existing laws and they have an ordinance but the law and implementing team is very poor at checking it. For example, the use of stones on the coral to get the fish out is illegal but it continues. Can we [TMO and me] help them to implement the law?</p> <p>Other fishermen mentioned that they are not allowed to use the small nets (as this catches the small fish). One fisherman mentioned that in another country he saw they could use small nets but if the fishes are pregnant/ spawning they put them back in the ocean. Can they do this here?</p>	It was said that if the government do not implement the law it will not work.
<b>Demand for endangered species</b>	Changing attitudes towards endangered species remains a challenge.	Other fishermen mentioned that if you catch endangered species, people will buy them. If it is illegal, they shouldn't buy it.
<b>Poverty</b>	<p>Fishermen pointed out that when they have no money and no rice and they make an illegal catch they will sell it rather than surrender it. In a time of economic crisis they do not have money to buy food to feed their families.</p> <p>Fishermen were willing to volunteer to protect the marine resources, but this was seen as contingent on external support for livelihoods. They can then surrender endangered catches.</p>	
<b>Livelihoods</b>	<p><i>Kagawad</i> made the point that if the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) put a MPA around the whole of Mangingisda the fishermen would not be allowed to catch fish. What about people's livelihoods?</p> <p>If they extend the fishing areas they need support for livelihoods – e.g. to support wife of fisherman with paper making, bags, basket making.</p>	<p>This was raised with BFAR but they did not come back with an answer about livelihoods.</p> <p>External funding is needed to sustain livelihoods – for a “proper livelihood programme”.</p>
<b>Limited reach to other NGOs</b>	<p>They have received visits from World Vision about scholarships for kids going to school. But they have not received much support on the environment.</p> <p>TMO have visited. And City Agriculture. They brought a series of trainings and seminars on organic farming as part of a long-term livelihood programme. It is a form of self-help where individuals need to pay money for membership. It takes time but is focused on farming and agriculture.</p>	They are also waiting on the Asian Development Bank and a cooperative for a farming association. But they do not have anything on fisheries.
<b>Discrimination</b>		The <i>kagawad</i> mentioned that there is discrimination because the licence for small-scale and large-scale fishing costs the same. He is attending an upcoming meeting on costs of permits.
<b>Volunteerism</b>	<p>TMO encouraged them to volunteer their time – a few hours to patrol; time to clean the bay.</p> <p>One participant mentioned that their presence at the meeting was a form of volunteering.</p> <p>The <i>kagawad</i> said they couldn't continue after the meeting to join another session because they had work to go and do.</p>	
<b>Community cooperation</b>	<p>They mentioned interest in cooperatives, as the fishermen thought the farmers may have one.</p> <p>But when we asked if they would like a cooperative they raised issues that “each might think just for themselves”. Of 10 cooperatives, only two still exist, because of a lack of cooperation from members. When the money comes in it is a big issue. And they have different views. For example, there was a perception that some members have good intentions and others do not.</p>	

## Moving information around the system to understand blockages in change efforts

“*Ningas cagon*” is a Tagalog phrase describing what happens when people burn native grass on the land. It goes up in flames, and ... then ... nothing. It is used in the context of development by communities to describe how development initiatives start with a lot of activity but result in nothing. It became clear we needed to unpack why this had happened to previous change initiatives in Mangingisda.

In our first iteration of the systems map we summarised one of the drivers of illegal fishing behaviour as being limited livelihoods. When we took this to City Agriculture, as one of the organisations highlighted by the community responsible for government-led livelihood initiatives, they were surprised. They had been operating projects in Mangingisda for some time. It was City Agriculture’s view that the projects had not been successful because of some community deficit. We took these insights back to the community. They were able to talk about livelihood projects, such as giving of buffalo and farming initiatives. But they did not feel that the investments were equally shared among people. Projects went to people who knew people, not necessarily to those people who needed them. And even when they were implemented, the timescales were short. Initial trainings were conducted but there was limited follow-up beyond two months to support implementation.

While we haven’t seen the full portfolio of City Agriculture projects in Mangingisda, there seemed to be little tie-up between the predicament of fishermen and the livelihoods on offer. More seemed to be focused on agriculture than those suited to fishers. The format seems to be that a project – and associated training opportunity – is presented to the community. They spare the time to attend but if it doesn’t capture their imagination or feel doable then they give it up. The projects are not designed by community members, based on local energy and interests, so they do not have much of themselves invested in the initiatives. It was quite striking how low capacity was on the community’s part to initiate and coordinate this start-up process, which was an indicator of how little it had been encouraged or practised among residents in previous attempts to reduce levels of poverty. This served as an early indication for how the action research process was going to go against the grain of more conventional approaches to development, which the community and other stakeholders like government were accustomed to. For example, the engagement was likely to be a lot longer and require more of residents than attending trainings or receiving resources (e.g. money, seeds, fishing materials) in the context of short-term projects.

### Summary of implications: Seeing the whole

- Our use of participatory systemic inquiry was a rapid way of gaining clarity about the community’s context and challenges. It furnished outsiders with a deep level of understanding and helped residents to discuss linkages and connections between issues.
- Connecting more stakeholders in the system to the issues on the map helped uncover some of the barriers to increased participation and social mobilisation among residents.
- Working in the participatory way may feel markedly different to communities and relevant stakeholders more accustomed to conventional development approaches. This is likely to affect the trajectory of volunteer interventions, slowing down progress where expectations and ways of working have to be redefined.

## Supporting people living in poverty to participate in volunteering

**We followed some emergent lines of inquiry around the reticence of resident volunteers to get involved and the reasons development initiatives had failed in the past, which provided new insights into the factors that would contribute to project success and sustainability. Financial instruments seemed to be an important complement to the capacity-building and social mobilisation work of volunteers in high-poverty contexts where the risks of experimenting can be deemed too high. There is not a direct link, however, between being able to see potential levers for change and having the individual or organisational capacity to construct a course of action that is responsive to local realities. In our experience, proper compensation to resident volunteers in the early stages of engagement was difficult to find. This has implications for the design of volunteering interventions and accompanying project budgets if people living in poverty are to be properly supported to participate in their own development.**

The participatory systemic inquiry process had quickly given us a clear picture of the issues and their interrelationships and we had collectively generated a framework for action. But the community still felt the challenge was insurmountable. Their problems were very real but so was their reticence to work with the complexity to find a solution. The map supported the findings of other research indicating the extent of the barriers facing small-scale fishers and the limited opportunities for accessing support. For the community, they needed finance or something tangible to be able to start with planning. And they were expecting this would be provided by an external actor. When it was clear we didn't have money – either as TMO or volunteers – the kagawad asked whether we could give a livelihood training, emphasising this is what they are hoping, otherwise “what do we get in exchange for this meeting?”.

We didn't run a livelihood training, because we were not convinced it would get to the root causes of persistent project failure. Instead, we ran the Plugging the Leaks exercise to encourage reflection on the part of the resident volunteers about the local and non-local dynamics that had influenced project sustainability previously. The resident volunteers identified a number of reasons why they thought previous initiatives had failed:

- lack of financial resources
- lack of food
- lack of market
- lack of technical knowledge
- diseased crops
- ill-thought-out projects by external organisations
- projects where construction had stopped (e.g. street lighting)
- time spent playing cards
- time spent gossiping.

Some of the leaks focused on the lack of material resources to sustain projects, including access to food and money. Some of the leaks were specific to the original design of projects and some were honest reflections about how residents direct their energies. The point was that attracting more projects does not guarantee change will happen, especially if the resources that come into a local economy leak out. There is an important role played by the community in assessing whether a project will work for them. Building this capacity to participate critically in development is very different to encouraging communities to accept what comes along.

In exploring the leaks in a bit more detail, we realised how current models of community development were working against small-scale fishers. For example, without an MPA or without an organised community group (e.g. cooperative or association), it is very difficult for fishers to access government or NGO funding. But to get organised takes a lot of time. It is almost impossible to find start-up financing to do the preliminary community organising and paperwork that has to take place to arrive at an MPA or organised community group. This raised important questions about the structure of the *Valuing Volunteering* project and the use of volunteering for development. As volunteers, the VV volunteer and local volunteer had money to cover their costs. But we did not have any provision in place for residents willing to volunteer and there was no support from the *barangay* officials to provide this finance. An argument could be made that a stipend is not necessary for resident volunteers because the benefits of time spent were going to accrue directly to the community.

At the same time, we learnt that for fishers and farmers time is money. The opportunity cost of contributing to a collective good is that your family goes with less. This is why residents view attendance at the meeting as a form of volunteering. They are laden with financial incentives to keep fishing illegally in the short term but have no financial incentive to make the transition to a more sustainable option. They shoulder the risk that time spent away from fishing is not going to result in something equally or more productive. In a poverty context where people's source of livelihood is directly under threat, how realistic is it for community development practitioners to expect transitions are possible by mobilising human resource alone?

A similar question has been asked in other work on the role of citizenship in development. A review of development initiatives to strengthen livelihoods found that a combination of financial instruments (e.g. micro-lending schemes) and support for social mobilisation among citizens have had the greatest success in enabling change to happen (see reference in Section 9). The time we took to explore with stakeholders the challenges that had disrupted previous change efforts clarified what needed to happen. We needed to find a way of making the transition to better livelihood and environmental outcomes financially doable alongside our capacity-building efforts to strengthen a local role in the design and implementation of projects. Unfortunately, being able to see this didn't mean we were in a position as volunteers to respond to this reality. We were not in a position to design a response that had a financial component at the outset without committing time the project hadn't allowed for fundraising and proposal writing. We decided that actively connecting the community to local institutions that may be able to provide financial support was going to be important. But we had no prior knowledge that this approach was going to turn up anything. As volunteers who had just begun our work with the community, we didn't have a ready set of actors in place who could provide finance once we started the process. TMO could help us access some of the organisations and institutions mentioned on the community map. But we had no guarantee any of them would be receptive. We were not even sure how they operated.

In fact, as it turned out, one of our biggest constraints as volunteers trying to facilitate a change process was the way the other development partners (e.g. City Agriculture, WPU) were set up to work with poor communities (see section in this paper on The need for change in our networks and relationships for more on this). They had pre-designed projects but no available mechanisms to resource community-driven initiatives. We could see that changing the way organisations worked was going to be a long-term endeavour.

We sometimes assume that being able to understand community needs will automatically make a development project responsive to them. But volunteers – and organisations – face their own constraints in how they can go about supporting people in poverty to participate in their own development. These can disrupt good intentions and render them ineffective.

### **Summary of implications: Supporting people living in poverty to participate in volunteering**

- Exploration of emergent issues around the reticence of resident volunteers to get involved and the reasons development initiatives had failed in the past raised fundamental questions about the importance of financial incentives for livelihood and environmental transitions in high-poverty contexts, where the risks of engaging in new initiatives can be perceived as too high.
- Good systemic analysis can identify potential levers for action, but volunteers and organisations can still face constraints which impact the extent to which their initiatives respond to community needs.
- Adoption of an experimental learning approach will likely require that volunteer interventions – and their accompanying project budgets – are designed and organised differently.



## The challenges of turning ideas into action

Volunteers are often used to bring new perspectives, ideas or approaches to communities. But what makes it possible for a new way of seeing to become a new way of doing?

**Having ideas and acting on them are two different activities, which require different capacities and levels of commitment. Transitioning to a different livelihood has an inbuilt complexity which requires a steadfastness that has to be learned. In these contexts, volunteers coming from outside have the potential to take on a role as social mobilisers within wider multidisciplinary teams. This presence can support communities to translate different ways of seeing the world into a conviction to do something about it. Everyone is capable of change but some are more practised than others. We all need a set of experiences that we can draw from to believe our efforts will prove productive in the end. This is where platforms for volunteering can add value, by creating opportunities to practise change and learn about change processes.**

It is easy to convince ourselves that change amounts to seeing things differently. Being able to look at an issue from a different perspective is an important ingredient in a change trajectory, but our experience taught us that shifts in perception, knowledge or attitudes do not always make acting differently any easier. It is still hard to make new ideas real, even when we have generated them ourselves.

One of the principles of action research is that it is open-ended. Cycles of action and reflection are repeated so long as they are useful. We learned in this case study that the completion of action-research cycles takes a long time, especially when people don't have a ready set of experiences that they can draw on for working in this way. People don't always know what change means until they have gone through the process of achieving it themselves. Straddling the gap from ideas to action means each stage of the process needs to be modelled.

As volunteers we made an effort to bring tools into the community that helped them to see the links between issues and possible avenues for change. The fishermen and TMO encouraged us to share more widely the issues map we had created. Our participatory approaches encouraged people to think for themselves and generate their own insights. A systemic analysis modelled the importance of recognising other people's perspectives to unearth blocks and ways forward. We used different approaches to make sense of the local economy. We shared knowledge about how to set up a cooperative. But the process of supporting community action on these insights was much more challenging. We came up against a number of hurdles.

There is a tension between starting with what resident volunteers have energy for and what is feasible or doable within a short enough timescale to be racked up as a success to build from. Small, easy-to-conceptualise projects, such as making improvements to the *barangay* hall, build a sense of can-do and energy for progress. Transitioning to a different livelihood has an inbuilt complexity which requires steadfastness. Practice (e.g. as learned through previous experiences) is needed in order to feel confident that if you try long enough at something it will work. In some ways, the national volunteer was pragmatic about this. He encouraged community members to be realistic about the purpose of their change efforts. And they need a community structure that will make them eligible for inward investment from government agencies and NGOs. They needed to begin with an idea that would generate income to fund more aspirational projects. The national volunteer came up with an idea that would instantly benefit people and begin generating an income: the bulk buying of rice. This way the price is cheaper and people don't have to go to the city centre to buy it. They can sell it at a price that creates a saving for the individual buyer and an income for the cooperative. It was a good idea but the problem for our way of working was that it came down to the 'outsider' providing the idea to the community.

This felt more like a one-way exchange between the national volunteer providing the idea and the community responding than a potential solution that was reached collaboratively. The risk was that this reinforced a community trend to construct the volunteers coming from outside as experts. This was evident when technical working groups did not meet by themselves and expressed a desire to have someone presiding over them. They were defaulting to a relationship structure that defines most of their interactions with outside agencies: themselves as recipients in need of training and capacity building and the interveners as knowledgeable, educated and professional.

It can be especially difficult for community members to get behind an idea if it sits outside their specific set of experiences and reference points. The Treasurer created a technical working group on the fish cages and people got behind the idea because he was charismatic and probably perceived as competent. He made personal visits to a BFAR farm to see how the project could work and tried his best to describe what it would look like with diagrams, etc. But it wasn't until a bit later in the process that another resident volunteer admitted that "he just couldn't visualise it". He explained, for us, "seeing is believing". We realised it was going to be difficult to move forward before everyone was clear what we were talking about, including the VV volunteer and local volunteer. So we took a visit to the BFAR farm. We were lucky it was close by and the cost of transporting 10 people to the site was minimal. It was a clear example of how changing mindsets may be an intellectual exercise but making change happen is experiential. It relies on engaging people's senses and even their emotions.

We tried to create a supportive culture within the community to evaluate ideas without killing the energy required to sustain commitment. The self-assessment tool created a platform for self-reflection and modelled a process where resident volunteers could see how they could rely on one another (rather than outsiders only) to strengthen ideas and enthusiasm. In hindsight we could have strengthened these efforts with an easy-to-use desirability/possibility matrix to help community members organise their ideas into shorter-term and longer-term projects. And other local economic development projects (refer to Section 9 – References to see how Plugging the Leaks has been used elsewhere) combine ideas generation workshops with coaching support. The remit of the coach is to ask questions, not provide advice, so technical working groups have a sounding board to work through their ideas. This was difficult to do with such intermittent visits to the community but it was partly the idea behind bringing the national volunteer on board who was billed as a 'mentor' and 'resource person' for the technical working groups in the volunteer placement descriptions.

The scheduling of our visits to the community impacted the practicalities of moving from ideas to action in another way. The process we took to support ideas generation and discuss project design based on the ideas, interests and existing knowledge within the community took much longer than the one-way approach adopted by the national volunteer to suggest an idea and push ahead with positive feedback. The comparative length of our process was further hampered by the infrequency of our sessions. This meant it took a lot longer to reach a point where we were working with something tangible when you compare it to the expert-led approach that communities in the Philippines are used to.

The lack of momentum in our action research process may explain why it was difficult to maintain the interest of participants. We had some regular faces at each session but we also had a lot of people come and go, which made it difficult for us to build on the thinking of previous sessions in current ones. Heterogeneous interests meant that new ideas would be introduced and old ones would go out of favour. The flow of people in and out of the sessions also hampered a sense of belonging and trust building, which was another issue facing residents. Previous attempts to spread risk and responsibility with cooperative models had failed because of default loan payments. There was a suspicion that people would use collective efforts for personal gain. We did not have positive experiences of cooperation to build from. We just had a series of failed initiatives that created a reticence to commit to this one.

This context taught us that in some cases momentum needs to be created initially. Our assumption that community meetings every six to eight weeks would be sufficient in the beginning proved incorrect, especially once meeting delays were factored in. The complexity of the challenge and the prevalent incidence of ningas cogon meant we probably needed to move from research to the generation of ideas and then to project design much faster. It took many months for us to work through one experimental learning cycle. We felt it was possible for momentum to be more effectively built into the structure of engagements and development work. We looked to other volunteering initiatives that had placements with volunteers locally embedded in the community for inspiration. For example, our findings in Bohol (Aked J, *Views from the watershed: how citizens and actors describe volunteering for development: Reporting on the impact of volunteering for natural resource management in Carood watershed, Bohol*) indicated the energy and support volunteers from outside could provide local actors. This informed our decision to bring a national volunteer on board who could be based in the community of Mangingisda.

### Summary of implications: The challenges of turning ideas into action

- An approach that builds from community interests, energy and knowledge takes time, especially when people are reticent and not practised at the process of initiating.
- Volunteer platforms structured by experimental learning cycles can create opportunities for individuals and communities to practise change and learn about change processes. The potential value of using volunteering in this way should be captured in measurement and evaluation frameworks. For example, the impact of volunteering in these scenarios should be based on what people do differently. Changes to knowledge, attitude or perceptions are useful intermediate indicators but they do not signify that opportunities for people to be active in their own development have been created.
- As volunteers we should resist the temptation to tell people what change could look like and provide opportunities for communities to experience it, through their own practice.
- To create momentum in the change process, more attention should be given to the timing of volunteer engagements with communities to support quick succession from insights to action.
- 'Outside' volunteers embedded in the community may play a particularly valuable role providing hands-on support that should be able to speed up the change process.

## The need for change in our relationships and networks

Our participatory systemic analysis had highlighted the importance of building capacities among resident volunteers and establishing links between the community and local organisations that may be able to help. We learned that the impact of our efforts in these areas was dependent on change taking place in our relationships and networks.

**Developing individual capacity was important for infusing energy into the change process, but for cultural reasons it came with limited guarantee that this would spill over to improve collective capacities. Volunteers may have to work at the individual and collective level to support capacities for change. Similarly, change for Mangingisda was dependent on extending the boundary of volunteer work to institutions outside the community. The use of our own capital as 'outside' volunteers to connect the community to local organisations highlighted how connections to institutions can serve communities in poverty only in so far as they can respond to local realities. Otherwise, they can perpetuate community problems, reducing local capacity for change rather than adding to it. This raised implications for the way partners and volunteers are selected, as well as important questions about where volunteer efforts are directed.**

## Ways of working to strengthen capacity

When 100 + fishermen and women at our very first engagement with the community became two fishermen and two members of the *barangay* council in a follow-up session during the participatory systemic inquiry, it immediately became obvious that we needed some local champions to help create energy at the community level for our efforts. The two fishermen became very important to us. They told us they were not community leaders, but they did possess one important criterion for a community leader: passion for the issue. We requested that they attend the meeting with City Agriculture with us and provided opportunities for them to feedback to other members. One of the fishermen really helped us out with organising communities, but he participated less in discussions, at least initially. The other participated, but slowly his attendance dropped off. His wife nearly always came in his place, explaining that he was busy working. The third really important person locally was the Treasurer. He had been a fisherman in the past and was particularly concerned about the connection between a dwindling fish catch and family breakdown. The Treasurer was key in establishing one of the technical working groups, but around January, as the national volunteer came on board, he dropped off the radar. Reports were that he had been discouraged by what was required from BFAR to organise the fish pens for the project and also that he was spending some time in the capital, Manila.

It was always difficult to balance the time spent encouraging and nurturing the capacity of individuals versus improving collective capacity of the groups. For example, members of the *barangay* had more practice at initiating projects, by virtue of their position in the community. This meant we sometimes had to tread carefully in sessions so as to provide platforms for the fishers and their wives to practise in leadership positions while not undermining the position or enthusiasm of people with positions of responsibility in the community. To improve collective capacity we tried to use activities that got people into the habit of seeking advice from one another. We tried to change people's idea of what 'leadership' was.

For example, the snorkelling group included a young person who signed up during one of the Plugging the Leaks sessions. He had been a snorkelling guide for a business in Honda Bay, one of the major tourist destinations in Palawan, a few hours up the coast from Puerto Princesa. It was clear to us that he would have a lot of knowledge the snorkelling group could tap into to realise their plans. After much encouragement he offered a few thoughts, and during one meeting we invited him to join to help with the planning. But his expertise was never actively sought on the part of residents. We had to actively encourage this process.

In our attempt to improve collective capacities we were going against a strong cultural norm. As people gain in confidence and credentials it is typical for them to relish this responsibility rather than think about nurturing and sharing with others. This was the downside to having the Treasurer so involved. As inspirational and energising as he was, he could also take over participatory group processes with long monologues about the need to protect the resources and develop new livelihoods. This cultural default can mean the impact of building the capacity of a few is limited, as people's individual capacities do not spill over into group capacities. And individual capacities like confidence and knowledge are not the same as the set of capacities people need for collaborative working. What is probably required of a volunteer is to work across both simultaneously.

We found that as membership of the technical working groups and attendance at meetings continued to fluctuate, and change remained elusive, we made a pragmatic decision to consolidate our efforts with a few. It was a good move on the part of the national and local volunteer to enforce a bit more structure to the group, which would denote membership and belonging. It corresponded with the advice the VV volunteer received from another international volunteer working in livelihood development in the context of terrestrial resource management on another island in the Philippines. It was a culturally relevant progression in our approach, so we didn't just direct efforts to anyone who turned up but focused on those who had been elected to positions of responsibility in the groups.

These positions were more formally recognised with the national volunteer and local volunteer efforts to create a cooperative of interested individuals. Resident volunteers were assigned roles, responsibilities and credentials (e.g. Member of the Board) in line with the by-laws for establishing a cooperative in the Philippines. Five members regularly attended sessions in February to learn how to set up a cooperative.

## Linking the community to local institutions

Making the connections to organisations like City Agriculture and the university was easy thanks to TMO and their reputation. But the meetings we had didn't take us to transformative places. The leader in the relevant division in City Agriculture was very defensive of her office's efforts, beckoning members of staff to talk about projects they had instigated in Mangingisda. Right at the outset, she was rude, as people in positions of responsibility are allowed to be to people perceived to be lower down the ladder. After introducing the project and activities I asked if it was OK to begin talking through the map. The response was "get on with it already". As someone coming from outside the culture, the VV volunteer was surprised but not discouraged by the display of power. It was enough, however, to silence the fishermen with us for most of the meeting. Afterwards, they said they wanted to express how the livelihood initiatives had only benefited a few but they didn't want to in the meeting.

When it became clear that we were taking their comments seriously, and requesting if we could add their points to the map, the leaders' attitude towards us softened. But they were still insistent that long-term change for the community remained elusive because there was some deficiency within the community – they are expecting a dole-out. We were told, "if you knew of all the livelihood projects that have taken place in Mangingisda you would also be asking yourself 'why is this community not flourishing?'" We asked a different question back, "If the projects have not led to sustainable change, does the fault lie with the community or our approach?" As one of the officers admitted, how many water buffalo would the government need to hand out for it to make a transformative difference to a community? We weren't sure, but certainly more water buffalo than are available.

The meeting with WPU was more optimistic. They had a remit to work with Mangingisda through research and extension. Activities had included setting up an agro-fisheries school as a technology learning centre, but not enough students enrolled. The students had conducted trainings in local villages, but people would only attend if there was food. WPU were also of the opinion that the community wanted a dole-out. Following a reconnaissance survey in front of the port which turned up positive results for a Marine Protected Area, WPU made the proposal to the community. But they ended up

**"feeling disappointed because nobody was interested in the proposal ... for me, in terms of protection the residents are not so responsive ... they are listening but maybe looking for something to really convince them ... they want to see somebody who can invest something".**

Staff member, WPU

WPU was also interested in seeing more commitment on the part of communities to give their time to change efforts, so we agreed to partner up.

However, subsequent contact was difficult. Despite emailing the meeting notes and agreed action points, we had to work hard to get a representative from WPU at one of the workshops (because of last-minute changes to diary commitments on the part of WPU). And WPU did not connect us as promised to a locally run farming cooperative that was doing well following its revival of three previous dead ones. Our hope had been that they would have experiences to share with the fishermen. WPU did come and help with the reef check for the snorkelling project but this was not done in partnership with the community. It was an activity the students did. We got the pictures through a staff member at TMO, but as far as we could tell there was no effort to communicate back the positive findings to the community. From a change perspective we couldn't understand why it was not deemed essential that the community understood the results.

Both organisations were keen to come up with ideas for the community, but neither was geared up to respond to community aspirations. The activity of City Agriculture seemed to be organised by top-down programming and specific projects which became available for them to offer to communities. For example, we bumped into city agricultural workers waiting for participants for training sessions on new livelihoods centred on the cultivation of sea cucumber and rabbit fish. In all our engagements with the community over a year-long period neither was mentioned, but at least they were aquatic livelihoods and not terrestrial ones. Typically these projects are attached to quotas and performance frameworks, so communities are encouraged to take them up, without concurrent support for managing the risks associated with investing time in a completely new endeavour. Within WPU their contribution can extend to training and technical transfer of knowledge but not financial input. When we discussed where we could go to access money to support volunteer patrols, WPU confirmed,

**“At first maybe we cannot get money. The sanctuary itself cannot earn money but it could be transformed into a project that could earn money ... for example for tourists that cannot go to Honda Bay.”**

Staff member, WPU

A lack of money for patrols is exactly the same initial condition that was in place when the existing sanctuary was declared, and subsequently did not materialise. Wouldn't the same problem exist with implementing rules around a new sanctuary? What would be different?

In summary, the partners we connected to were not really set up to truly represent communities in poverty. Options are long-term without being able to address the immediate income concerns within the community about diverting their time to other projects. They don't come with any iron-clad guarantees of success. And the approach they took to engaging the community undermined our efforts to make change more locally led. Our learning from our attempts to create partnerships with local institutions has implications for how volunteering organisations choose their partners. In certain cultural contexts it might in fact prove very difficult to find institutions that align with more participatory approaches to doing development.

The same can be said of the selection and training process for volunteers. Despite writing it in the job description, emphasising it in dialogue and following up with specific questions, it was still difficult to get the national volunteer to take any of the resident volunteers to meetings he was having during his placement with government departments and Palawan State University. These were missed opportunities for the members to gain an understanding of how these institutions work and increase their own confidence in dealing with them. Why this happened is unclear because in earlier discussions the national volunteer reflected on how difficult it is for the average citizen to assert themselves in government offices. Through his experience, he had developed tactics for handling this, so why didn't he make it possible for people in Mangingisda to practise in the same way? We were unable to ask this question directly to the national volunteer because he dropped off the radar towards the end of his placement and didn't avail himself of opportunities to engage with the findings of this report. Funding was not a limitation because the *Valuing Volunteering* project had provided him with a budget for this. One hypothesis is that the training we provided in the ethos of the approach was insufficient for him to translate these ideas into action.

Our experience also raised an important question about where we were focusing efforts as volunteers. We had assumed that working at the community level was an important route to change. We were in effect plugging a resource gap around bottom-up community participation in change efforts. But our collective efforts could only go so far in tackling poverty without also influencing the default way that local institutions (e.g. government departments) work with communities.

**Summary of implications:  
The need for changes in our relationships  
and networks**

- Volunteers may need to develop individual capacities alongside collective capacities if they are to lay the foundations for collaborative working.
- Connections to local institutions are only any help to the change effort if the organisations are set up to respond to community realities, rather than push top-down agendas.
- Volunteer placements seeking to strengthen capacity to work in participatory ways may have to work with a range of institutional actors who are situated outside the geographical boundary of the community in poverty. Being able to map who the influential institutions are and review their practices seems to be an important starting point for targeting volunteer efforts.
- In certain situations it might in fact prove really difficult to find institutions that align with more participatory approaches to doing development. This has implications for volunteering programmes that specify the need to work through local partners, without provision for significant training and capacity building.

## 6. Findings about volunteer effectiveness

This section summarises findings on volunteer effectiveness, which emerged through the action research process.

### The value of different volunteers

We had four distinct volunteer groups (ie international, national, local, resident) working for change in Mangingisda. Did they all contribute something different?

**Different volunteers bring their own strengths to the change effort, hence the value of having multidisciplinary volunteer teams. By mixing different educational backgrounds, cultural perspectives and life experiences we were able to increase our chances of finding a solution that worked. The overall contribution of volunteers to the change process intersects with individual variability in terms of commitment and approach to participatory and collaborative working. The poorest volunteers were most undervalued in the change effort, both in terms of financial support and in their assessment of their own capabilities.**

*Valuing Volunteering Philippines'* more in-depth case study into volunteering and environmental behaviour change (*Aked J, When there are no fish left in the sea. Does environmental awareness translate into positive action?: Reporting on the impact of volunteering for environmental education in coastal communities of Palawan*) suggested that initiatives looking to lay the foundations for more pro-environmental behaviour require multidisciplinary teams. We found that in order to explore the feasibility of community ideas in our local scenario we needed to draw in:

- people who knew about marine sanctuaries (e.g. TMO, WWF)
- people who could make ecological checks for livelihood assessments (e.g. TMO, WPU students conducting reef checks)
- agencies that knew about the livelihood projects available (e.g. City Government)
- local knowledge (e.g. about tides, tourist initiatives)
- experts in community organising, livelihoods and financial management (e.g. national volunteer)
- facilitators who could sustain community momentum (e.g. international and local volunteers)
- people who knew about volunteer management and programming (e.g. TMO, international volunteer).

Taking this *Valuing Volunteering* inquiry as an example, enabling different sorts of volunteers to work on the same project should increase the likelihood of success.

The VV volunteer introduced new techniques and approaches to facilitate a change process that was community-led. Some of the visual techniques were adapted by TMO in their own project planning. And the drawing and Plugging the Leaks activities were incorporated into IEC sessions with Local Government Units. The VV volunteer was also able to leverage the partnership she established with TMO to connect to other experts like City Agriculture (e.g. livelihoods) and WPU (e.g. ecological assessments). The learning from these engagements was fed into wider *Valuing Volunteering* projects and national forums exploring the contribution of volunteering to development.

The local volunteers in the *Valuing Volunteering Philippines* research team made the work of the VV volunteer possible. Facilitating participatory approaches requires careful translation so the principles and values of a different way of working are not lost. Otherwise everyone reverts to business as usual. People can be quite unsure initially when you ask them to draw a picture or drill holes in a perfectly serviceable bucket. The ability to hold open the inquiry space, allowing time for community members to arrive at their own meanings and interpretations, requires abilities we were lucky our local volunteers possessed.

In the latter stages of the action research the local volunteer demonstrated a level of commitment and initiative that was needed to sustain momentum when the VV volunteer could not travel to Mangingisda and the national volunteer was out of contact. She became a reliable presence in the change process. This was recognised and appreciated by resident volunteers:

**“We actually always contacted ma’am Helen and we always talked to her.”**

Resident volunteer; Mangingisda Cooperative member



As the local volunteer's confidence increased, she was also able to establish contact with tourist agencies, the city tourism department and Palawan State University to follow up on community queries. And her knowledge of environmental science helped the VV volunteer in interpreting and imagining projects.

Neither the VV volunteer nor the local volunteer had much experience of business administration and livelihood development within a Filipino context. The VV volunteer could not travel to Mangingisda as frequently as the change process required and the local volunteer did not feel confident to facilitate the process by herself. The national volunteer was brought on board to assume a mentoring role, acting as both an ally and resource that the resident volunteers can tap into to realise their ideas. Coming from Puerto Pincesa himself originally, the national volunteer had an understanding of the culture that he could meld with his work and overseas experience. This made him very effective at establishing relationships and trust in community members. He did this very fast, which is important given that VSO national volunteer placements are only funded for two months. The length of his placement may ultimately have been a disadvantage. He was able to gain momentum around the idea of establishing a cooperative but this was not fully realised before the end of his placement. But the level of activity also mirrored his own level of enthusiasm, with visits to the community and attendance at meetings with resident volunteers dropping off in the second month.

Resident volunteers provided the energy that ultimately determined whether the change effort persisted. The section on process learning has already identified how certain resident volunteers were instrumental in galvanising people to attend meetings and push ahead project ideas. The ecological knowledge of resident volunteers was also important at certain stages of the project. For example, resident volunteers guided university students to the area in front of the port where they thought the reef was best. There were detailed discussions about where fish pens could be put given local tides and the preference of certain fish to be in pure salt or brackish water. One member knew the site of the BFAR fish pens and could take us there straight away. Another member had been a snorkelling guide at another site and could impart some knowledge. More generally, it was their community, their vision and their interest that shaped the project ideas that got developed.

The resident volunteers were the least valued, both by the *Valuing Volunteering* project and the resident volunteers themselves. The resident volunteers did not receive a stipend to participate. In their view this made consistent participation difficult because other concerns had a prior claim on their time. They conceived volunteers from outside as experts and themselves as novices, even though we tried to put the ball in their court through our processes as much as possible. Where outside volunteers could provide specific assistance in fact-finding or networking, we were happy to help, but the idea was that it was a collaborative effort to which we were all contributing.

These typologies of volunteer (international, local, resident and national) interacted with individual differences to determine the extent of the contribution that volunteers made. Resident volunteers showed differing levels of personal commitment as did the national volunteer. For the first month he was active in Mangingisda but he didn't take residence there, which was part of his placement agreement. He lived with family in the city centre. This meant he was not around regularly to play the mentoring/coaching role. As time went on, the community reported his visits were fewer and farther between.

**"[He] is okay, he helped us organize the group but sometimes I think he is quite lazy attending meetings and I know he supposed to live here but not happen."**

Resident volunteer; Mangingisda Cooperative member

**"He's not active in his work. He supposed to be here to help and to talk to people but he wasn't. Communicating and or contacting him is difficult even texting us is not in his priority. He always told us that he will come but not and we expect and wait for nothing."**

Resident volunteer; Mangingisda Cooperative member

His contact with the VV volunteer and the local volunteer became even more irregular. His plans were not followed through. We have still not managed to connect with him to understand what happened in the second month. At the beginning, the fact that the volunteer was from the province seemed to be an asset, but as time went on we think it became a disadvantage. From what we can tell, he spent a lot of time visiting relatives, his hometown and doing the things he had missed doing for so many years. By his own admission he started a mangrove project in his own *barangay* which in hindsight may have been ambitious given his VSO placement was only for two months and the scale of the challenges in Mangingisda were significant. It may have meant he didn't give enough commitment to change initiatives in Mangingisda. In addition, there is little evidence from update reports by the local volunteer that he integrated the action–reflection methodology into his way of working. The local volunteer made efforts to bridge the work of the national volunteer to the cycles of experimental learning that had gone before, but more effort on the part of the national volunteer could have helped bridge the transition.

After over a year of work it is hard not to see it as a missed opportunity because when the national volunteer was present he was effective.

**“He discussed and explained clearly the topics during meetings. He is funny and because of him the group was formed.”**  
Resident volunteer; Mangingisda Cooperative member

Like recruiting for any job, decisions on hiring can have positive or negative outcomes. We were all so hopeful when we met the national volunteer and we all thought we had made a good choice.

What was particularly striking was how difficult it was to manage the volunteer and their progress remotely. This may have implications for volunteering programmes whose staff sit in central head offices. The VV volunteer didn't pick up on his absences, believing his messages citing technical difficulties. Despite their long working relationship, the local volunteer didn't feel comfortable reporting absences, so it was not until the end of the placement that TMO reported that he had missed community meetings. We didn't do community feedback until the end of the two-month process and VSO did not pick up anything in their monitoring processes. We would definitely have benefited from collecting feedback from the community at a midpoint, but we cannot be certain this would have revealed anything. There was evidence that he was active until the last few weeks.

To a certain extent the local volunteer was able to respond by visiting the community alone to encourage resident volunteers. In this sense the local volunteer acted as an important buffer. The team dynamic meant we were not reliant on the national volunteer alone. But by the local volunteer's own admission she did not have the specific expertise of the national volunteer to support the community to make the next steps in registration of the cooperative.

### Summary of implications: The value of different volunteers

- Different sorts of volunteers can work as multidisciplinary teams, which can help the change effort along.
- The poorest volunteers were the most under-valued in the ecosystem of volunteers. Should volunteering projects put money aside to compensate the time of resident volunteers?
- It takes a concerted effort on the part of outside volunteers to shift community perceptions of the value and importance of resident volunteers. Participatory approaches which provide a central role for resident volunteers can help.
- Volunteering programmes may need to re-think mechanisms to monitor the engagement level of volunteers to mitigate the risk of personal attributes negatively affecting the change process.
- Combinations of volunteers (e.g. working in teams) may go some way to limit the negative disturbance of any single volunteer in the change process.

## The length of volunteer engagements

A youth volunteer once told us that what matters about change stories is that they have a positive ending. This section summarises what we learned about how long engagements need to be to have an impact.

**Volunteers supported by the *Valuing Volunteering* project have been able to support social mobilisation at the community level, but the learning opportunities and resulting capacities have not been able to overcome the financial barriers to economic advancement that resident volunteers still face. The long-term nature of change has implications for the length of volunteering placements.**

The international, local and national volunteers on *Valuing Volunteering Philippines* research team spent over a year with Mangingisda and we didn't feel we created a dependency among the community. In May, the Vice-President, David Quisquirin attended the final *Valuing Volunteering* forum in Manila in the Philippines, along with a local volunteer and a staff member from VSO. He was asked to speak about the experiences and challenges the resident volunteers had faced. He shared,

**"We are all widespread and there are very many of us and it's hard to get together. We depended on the volunteer. Like Efren Empot. We were organized by the national volunteer but the focus was different. There was lack of follow up. The real problem is money. It's so easy to draw and identify the challenges and what we can do but when it comes to the application it's very difficult."**

Reinforcing the point made earlier about the challenges of turning ideas into action, the anxiety in the reflections of resident volunteers (see Box 1) arises from not having yet experienced the whole process – from idea through to implementation – for themselves. In analysing their responses, it is clear that resident volunteers believe the project of establishing a cooperative will help them. They are less confident that they can make this happen, either in terms of the financial requirement or the next steps of registration.

What these reflections reiterate is the length of time required to facilitate enduring change. It is not that we worked with resident volunteers for too long. It is that we haven't worked with them for long enough. Despite the human resource that we managed to mobilise through the action research process, the community did not achieve their cooperative before the *Valuing Volunteering Philippines* research and the national volunteer's placement came to an end. We were not successful in brokering a relationship between the community and a local institution that they can rely on for support going forward. And we have been unable to secure financial input to sustain local efforts.

Importantly, we are not ceasing activity in Mangingisda because the project has reached a place where this makes sense. We have stopped because placements and funding have come to an end. There is an inherent power imbalance in this dynamic which means we, as outside volunteers, can exit and move on with our lives while the resident volunteers are left with a half-baked project to decide what to do with. This predicament raises questions about how volunteering programmes make sensible predictions for planning purposes at the beginning of placements as to how much support is likely to be enough.

### Summary of implications: The length of volunteer engagements

- Volunteer projects and placements are not always long enough to tackle the problems (e.g. capacity of local institutions, practice at the change process) that will unlock transformative change for communities living in poverty.
- Development organisations working through volunteers may need to refine methods for making sensible predictions about the speed of change and the contribution of volunteers to this process.

## Reflections from resident volunteers

At the end of March 2014, the local volunteer was able to visit the houses of 9 of the 15 resident volunteers who were trying to form into a cooperative to seek feedback on the following questions:

1. What changed for you, individually and as a community?
2. How do you feel now about yourself and the future of the community?
3. What could have gone better?

They mainly reflected on the work they had done in the preceding few months with the national volunteer and local volunteer to organise into a cooperative as a stepping stone to realising projects to improve economic and environmental outcomes.



### Edeliza Tannagan

1. "I'm okay; but some of us were not cooperating and participating."
2. "I really want the project, to help us."
3. "Start the project."



### Francisco Dela Rama

- 1 "No changes to me. I just want to have development here. As a community, at first they were active and more attending the meetings until get low because people here want those that they can get something – talking about money."
2. "It's okay; if the project will start I'm good. If not, I've nothing to do but much better if it will implemented because many of us will benefit."
3. "Continue the project, the cooperative and hopefully there will be someone to fund."



### Fredolyn Auza

1. "I am active now especially when they voted me as chairman. As to our community, I think they change a little; they now interactive unlike before and they usually come to our meetings."
2. "I can see that when the project starts it will help me a lot. And I can see a better future for Mangingsida when the project will be implemented. The residents will have source of income."
3. "It will be better if the cooperative will be registered and later can receive fund donor to start the projects."



### Charlita Roque

1. "New experience to me. The community agreed to the discussions always but financial is the main problem."
2. "I'm okay; I want the project to start because it will help us especially women."
3. "Much better to register the cooperative so that project may start that will help us all here."



### David Quisquirin

1. "We became organized specially the officers. We came up with a goal and function of every member. At least we did something."
2. "Better if the project will start but the problem in here, not all the members has source of income, where to get money for the contribution to register the cooperative."
3. "Start the project and let someone to fund."



### Melcha Victoria

1. "I learned new things. This was my first time to know about cooperative and how to handle a cooperative. The community now showed interest seeing a finalized plan."
2. "If there's cooperation and unity maybe many will be interested to join the group."
3. "Register the cooperative but before that we need to have first 15,000."



### Estrellita Bayeta

1. "I am always active in things like this but I don't know why it always not lasts or continuous. During the first meetings there are many people present but when they realized that there's no money, they disappeared."
2. "If cooperative will become real here many are interested to join because people here are 'to see is to believe'."
3. "Continue the project it will a great help to us."



### Grace Armenia

1. "I'm still active even having many things to do. If the project will start, it will help us a lot."
2. "I want the project to start. It will help us here in Mangingisda to develop and us residents will benefit."
3. "Sir Efren let us borrow 15,000 to register the Cooperative."



### Romy Borromeo

1. "We are now interested of having a cooperative. But when they know about the capital – the shared capital, seems they now not sure if they want to join and continue. I think if it will start many will be interested."
2. "There will be development, people here are very realistic. They want to see it to believe."
3. "The cooperative must carry out, be registered."

## A social mobilisation role for volunteering in the wider development landscape

What our systemic analysis showed is that the barriers facing residents of Mangingisda are multifaceted, ranging from the environmental to the economic, political and social. Volunteering is unlikely to be able to address all the barriers, but where do its strengths lie?

**Through our work as volunteers, we were able to work alongside people in poverty and experience first-hand the barriers that local institutions have created through their approach to development. While volunteering, like any development intervention, is not a silver bullet it did provide a platform for mobilising human resources to realise ideas and collective plans.**

Volunteers from outside Mangingisda were able to work with resident volunteers to provide some of the support needed to enable a community-led approach to development. This was mainly manifest in platforms to practise change and learn about change processes. Some resident volunteers talked about having new experiences, learning new things and staying active, despite a wider social context of inactivity when money is not attached to new initiatives (see Box 1). For example, we learned that the government requirement that people living in poverty formally register organisations, without associated financial support to do so, closes down the possibility that people will give things a try.

It is important to recognise this context in analysing the progress volunteers made in mobilising and sustaining people's interest in working for change. It is possible that the learning people have had – e.g through being part of a participatory process, organising and documenting meetings, training on how to register cooperatives – has strengthened the possibility of action in other areas of people's lives, even if this initiative fails to be a success. This was a finding of work reviewing the benefits of citizenship for development (see Section 9. - References for reference to the Citizenship DRC).

But it remains the case that none of the volunteer efforts was able to address the financial barriers facing resident volunteers, at least not in the time available. These barriers persist and may prevent the resident volunteers from advancing with the cooperative. And we have no way of knowing whether this cooperative will manage to address livelihood issues as well as impact wider environmental concerns that are partly the cause of local poverty. This raises an important question about whether we were too ambitious to think that a volunteering intervention could have a meaningful impact in a context marred by such complexity without a pre-existing tie-up to a government organisation or micro-finance organisation which could leverage investment into the community.

An early step in the WorldFish project is to link community aspirations into a regional stakeholder engagement meeting of NGOs and government organisations. The aim is to bridge, catalyse and broker support. WorldFish are using their political capital to bridge grass-roots concerns with bigger conservation and environmental initiatives. This raises questions about organisations that specifically use volunteering as a tool for development. Can they get better at balancing investment in the development process which extends beyond the recruitment, placement and management of volunteers? Could they be more strategic and creative about where and how volunteering fits into a wider development strategy for a community? Is it possible to intentionally connect volunteer placements into the work of other development partners, so the social mobilisation roles that volunteers play fit into multidisciplinary teams and programmes to tackle entrenched problems?

### Summary of implications: A social mobilisation role for volunteering in the wider development landscape

- Volunteers can play an important role fostering the social mobilisation required to initiate and sustain change processes.
- Financial barriers are likely to disrupt the impact of social mobilisation in high-poverty contexts if they are not taken into account in development programming.
- A more strategic and creative approach to volunteer programming may integrate the social mobilisation role that volunteers play into existing development strategies. This may mean linking up with other development partners to fund a role for volunteers in their initiatives.

## 7. Conclusions

The learning from this action research case study will be relevant to volunteer organisations and volunteers looking to use experimental learning in their approach to community development. Systemic analysis helped the volunteers in this study to recognise barriers to change at the local level and make decisions about what to do and how to go about it.

Using volunteers with different strengths helped with the creation of a multidisciplinary team, which went some way to minimise the disruption caused by individual volunteer characteristics and unforeseen limitations (e.g. reluctance on the part of the community to devote time to change efforts; personal distractions; illness). These disruptions particularly affected the momentum of change, which we found volunteers from outside the community could initiate and have a better change of sustaining when they were locally present. In particular, this presence was important for supporting and accompanying resident volunteers as they practised making the transition from ideas to action.

Achieving the balance between the ecological, livelihoods and volunteerism components of our framework for action was a challenge. Over the course of our participatory sessions the focus migrated from the ecological to livelihoods, which may be indicative of the way change (even environmental change) has to start in high-poverty contexts. The action research process helped us to feel confident that our volunteering efforts were responding to a community-led agenda, no matter how often that switched and changed. It gave us the tools to support individual and collective capacity development to take ideas into spaces for collective action.

Our efforts were frustrated by a falsely held assumption that we could leverage our connections to local institutions to secure technical and financial investment in support of this social mobilisation. We learned how ill-equipped policies, protocols and financial requirements are to meet citizens halfway in their efforts to overcome poverty. And we learned the importance of blending social mobilisation efforts with financial instruments if people living in poverty have a chance of transitioning to better economic and environmental outcomes in a viable way.

The jury is still out on whether we laid the foundations of change or reinforced a locally held perception that change is a risky business which on balance is not worth the effort. This will require a longer-term view of impact. But at this stage we can probably conclude that the structure and length of the volunteer engagement did not befit the scale and complexity of the development challenge the community was facing. In particular our length of stay and frequency of visits were not sufficient. This does raise questions about how development organisations can make more strategic use of the social mobilisation and capacity-building role of volunteers in development efforts.

## 8. Recommendations

This section identifies some general implications for volunteer development programming, volunteer action and wider community participation. They fall into four categories which raise questions and ideas about how to: use systemic analysis to inform programming, create momentum in change initiatives, and share the risks of experimentation.

### 1. Use systemic analysis to inform programming

#### Implication

We were able to demonstrate how important clarity about a community's context and associated challenges was to the change process, and how quickly this data can be collected and analysed locally. Systemic analysis can be used to generate locally situated insights about the levers for change that will be most effective for volunteers to pursue in placement.

#### Recommendations

- Volunteer programmes should make sure they have enough information to make sensible predictions about how much and what type of volunteer support will be sufficient to enable impact. This should inform fundraising functions in development organisations.
- Volunteer programme and partnership strategy needs to be informed as much by individual and organisational constraints as the additional value of volunteers to support the change process.
- Volunteers – and the organisations that support them – may have to go beyond the community to realise participatory approaches to development. This may involve working with influential local institutions struggling to respond to citizen-led efforts to overcome poverty.

### 2. Use volunteering to create momentum in change initiatives

#### Implication

It can be difficult to create and sustain a momentum that will carry people over the hurdle between ideas and action to grapple with the complexity of change issues. Volunteers provide a social mobilisation role that could be used more strategically in development initiatives.

#### Recommendations

- Volunteers and their support organisations need to be realistic about the length of time it takes to build from community interests, energy and knowledge when willingness and previous experience of initiating at the community level is not high.
- The social mobilisation role of volunteers should be highlighted in fundraising strategies and in partnership talks with other development agencies about the value they can bring to change teams.
- Volunteers that are able to embed themselves in the life of communities may be more effective at supporting quick and iterative succession from insights to solutions.
- Volunteer placements may need to be accompanied by appropriate financial resources (e.g. project activity budgets) to enable communities to visualise an alternative reality through their own practice and experience (e.g. through visits, peer-to-peer learning exercises).



### 3. Share the risks of experimentation

#### Implication

Our action research with people living in poverty highlighted the level of risk that accompanies change initiatives. Volunteering efforts, like any development intervention, do not come with iron-clad guarantees of success. Supporting communities to make transitions involves sharing the risk. Social mobilisation and capacity building needs to be accompanied by adequate financial resources to strengthen volunteer-led efforts to support communities to learn through their own practice and experience.

#### Recommendations

- **Development organisations working through volunteers should be clearer in their predictions about how long the process of change may take and what role volunteering can play in this journey.**
- **If volunteering wants to claim its value in the development space, it needs to be more explicit about how the social mobilisation roles that volunteers play fit into the ecosystem of development efforts to tackle entrenched problems.** This may mean thinking more in terms of interdisciplinary teams and programmes, rather than by individual volunteer placement.
- **Development organisations working through volunteers should re-assess the balance of financial resources allocated to the process of facilitating change vs the costs associated with volunteer recruitment, placement and management.** For example, the poorest volunteers were the most under-valued in the ecosystem of volunteers in Mangingisda, and some volunteer and community-led initiatives need some financial resource to make investment in them viable.

## 9. References

For more information on:

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### **Mangingisda:**

#### **Population:**

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#### **School enrolment:**

[http://data.gov.ph/infographics/education/2013/es/reg/Region+IV-B/PALAWAN/PUERTO+PRINCESA+CITY+\(Capital\)?school=m](http://data.gov.ph/infographics/education/2013/es/reg/Region+IV-B/PALAWAN/PUERTO+PRINCESA+CITY+(Capital)?school=m)

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJOrktt2eCI&feature=youtu.be>

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### **Adjoining case studies (part of the Valuing Volunteering Philippines research)**

Aked J (2014), *Views from the watershed: how citizens and actors describe volunteering for development: Reporting on the impact of volunteering for natural resource management in Carood watershed, Bohol*

Aked J (2014), *When there are no fish left in the sea. Does environmental awareness translate into positive action? - Reporting on the impact of volunteering for environmental education in coastal communities of Palawan.*



*Valuing Volunteering* was a two year (2012 – 2014) global action research project, conducted by VSO and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) to understand how, where and when volunteering affects poverty and contributes to sustainable development. This case study is part of a series of inquiries conducted in the Philippines, Kenya, Mozambique and Nepal which explore the role of volunteering across different development contexts and systems. Using Participatory Systemic Action Research it asks local partners, communities and volunteers to reflect on how and where volunteering can contribute to positive, sustainable change.

For more information about the global *Valuing Volunteering* study please contact: [enquiry@vso.org.uk](mailto:enquiry@vso.org.uk)

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She is a Doctoral Researcher with the Institute of Development Studies, exploring how interpersonal well-being influences the effectiveness of volunteering as a strategy for managing natural resources. She is Associate to the consulting arm of the New Economics Foundation (nef) and previously worked for nef's award-winning centre for well-being.

Jody's passion is the design of socio-economic contexts that support greater human well-being, social justice and environmental sustainability. She has lived and worked in the UK, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, the Philippines, Malaysia and China, alongside fishermen, farmers, factory workers, young people and organisational leaders to understand and influence how change happens.



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