



VOLUNTARY SERVICE OVERSEAS (VSO): VSO's approach to working in health

Founded in 1958, VSO is the world's leading independent international development organisation that works through volunteers to fight poverty. VSO is a Federation, with seven member countries – the UK, Canada, the Netherlands, Ireland, Kenya, the Philippines and India. VSO has 42 programmes in developing countries in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean.

Health is one of VSO's six development goals. VSO acknowledges the critical linkage between poverty, poor health and development and has a five-year health strategy (2009 – 2014) that provides a road map to guide the direction of VSO's health goal. VSO views health in a holistic sense using the WHO definition: *"the state of complete physical, mental and social well being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity"*

VSO's strategic aim – Health Systems Strengthening

The aim of VSO's health work is to support the development of stronger, more inclusive and accessible health systems so that the poorest and most vulnerable populations in the countries in which VSO works can realise their right to health.

VSO believes that urgent action is required now to strengthen the health systems of the world's poorest countries. Without this, there is no chance that the health related Millennium Development Goals can be reached. The need to focus on health systems strengthening is paramount if maternal and child health are to improve and the devastating impact of illnesses such as HIV and AIDS, TB and malaria is to be reduced.

VSO's health strategy has four objectives:

- *Increase the number of skilled, supported and motivated health workers* and so improve standards of health care delivery in the countries where VSO works.
- *Strengthen management capacity at all levels of the health system* so that the most disadvantaged receive appropriate, accessible and quality health care.
- *Build the capacity of the most vulnerable communities* to have greater influence in the planning of community, district and national health services.
- *Strengthen local and national health research* through increasing involvement of vulnerable communities, resulting in pro-poor health policy change both at national and international level

The extent of VSO's Health Systems Strengthening work

VSO currently has 10 dedicated health programmes in **Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Malawi, Mongolia, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Tanzania and Uganda**. In addition to this work, 18 HIV and AIDS programmes and 13 disability programmes are also making significant contributions towards improving the health of people in developing countries.

Programmes work in partnership at different levels within national health structures but also with civil society. All VSO health programmes are engaged in some form of health systems strengthening,

including building the human resource capacity of the health sector and engaging at community level with vulnerable and/or hard-to-reach populations.

Many programmes feed into national health planning and policy and regularly attend national health coordination, planning and review meetings. Others are involved in health education and promotion. Several focus on maternal and child health and sexual and reproductive health.

VSO's international health advocacy strategy 'Valuing health Workers' advocates for countries to move towards the threshold recommended by the WHO: 2.3 doctors, nurses and midwives per 1000 people. The strategy aims to bring increased attention to the importance of the human resource crisis in developing countries and pressurise for increased resources and innovative solutions that will strengthen human resource capacity.

How do VSO volunteers support the delivery of VSO's health strategy?

Over 120 volunteers including doctors, nurses, midwives, community health workers, management advisers, and other professionals are currently delivering VSO's health programmes.

VSO Volunteers are engaged in a wide range of work:

- Training other health professionals and developing improved curricula in health training schools.
- Acting as clinical mentors to provide on-the-job continuous professional development training to health workers post qualification.
- Giving technical support to health service delivery at community and district health level.
- Improving health management through supporting the development of financial, health information and human resource management systems.
- Carrying out participatory research to strengthen health information gathering and to inform health advocacy activity.

Examples of VSO's Health Systems Strengthening work.

- **In Malawi:** VSO's health programme is an important implementing partner of the national health Sector Wide Approach (SWAp). VSO doctors and nurses are working in medical training institutions and district hospitals across Malawi to improve the quality of patient care. Over 1,000 health workers are being trained in the colleges where VSO volunteers work and over 600 medical and nursing students and interns are mentored and supervised by volunteers based in district hospitals. VSO is also offering support to improve the development of community based health services including building the capacity of village health committees. VSO has also placed volunteers with the Central Ministry of Health to develop a national human resource management information system.
- **In Cambodia:** VSO focuses on maternal, reproductive and child health. The programme works mainly in the North East provinces of Stung Treng and Kratie. Interventions focus on improving the quality of midwifery services within government hospitals with an emphasis on pre-natal services, safe delivery and improved nutrition. Improving the management of reproductive and child health services is an important component of the work as well as training health workers. A VSO volunteer carried out and presented the first research on the effects of maternal depression on child survival to the Cambodian Ministry of Health.
- **In Sri Lanka:** VSO's mental health programme is strengthening the national mental health system and service provision. VSO volunteers build the skills of mental health staff through carrying out training needs analyses, developing and delivering training courses in eg. the treatment of mental illness, managing violence and aggression and how to develop client centred care plans. VSO volunteers also role-model client centred approaches. The programme also undertakes advocacy work aimed at de-

stigmatising mental illness and inputs into the development of national mental health policy. VSO and partner organisations have developed national guidelines for medium stay mental health rehabilitation units.