

Should they be committed? Motivating volunteers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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Expatriate volunteers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, work in a country where many of their fellow expatriates are paid considerably more than they are. Such volunteers often find that the financial disparities affect the perceptions that people have of them. This paper explores the self-perceptions of volunteers working with Voluntary Service Overseas in Phnom Penh, and sets these perceptions within current theories of motivation and commitment. Two issues are then raised: whether these volunteers are willing and able to deliver quality assistance; and how perceptions of their status can affect their ability to deliver such assistance.

Introduction

In 1998, the British NGO Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) launched its report *Where's Everybody Gone?* (VSO 1998a). As the title suggests, the organisation that has sent more than 25,000 volunteers to work in 117 different countries since its inception over 40 years ago had been suffering a severe recruitment crisis. The report claimed that people are becoming more selfish and less caring about the developing world. Thatcherite self-interest, as one volunteer later suggested to me, appeared to be back in business.

At the time the original research for this article was carried out, there were some 30 volunteers from VSO working in Cambodia. As volunteers they were working in the education, health, and agriculture sectors of a country that has been torn to pieces by three decades of civil war and genocide. As volunteers they were working alongside representatives of more than 100 NGOs and other agencies, and alongside other expatriates who can earn more in a day than they do in a month and who 'think we're mugs' because of it (Chris).¹ There is, they claimed, 'a majority of people who still cannot understand why anybody would want to do anything without being paid fat sums of money to do it' (Frances).

This article sets out to explore the experience of being a volunteer in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. The initial research raised issues of professional performance and, more particularly, the potential limitations the perceptions of others can impose upon that performance. The findings touch upon several aspects of development practice and beg the question: are volunteers committed, or should they be?² Although the purpose of this article is to explore some of the concerns expressed by volunteers working in Phnom Penh, perhaps the questions these raise should be looked at in a wider context. In the light of current rumours that some NGOs have considered introducing performance-related pay, should we be asking whether those who work in development are sufficiently motivated to perform to the best of their abilities?

The research

This question of commitment had occurred to me in 1993–1994 when I was working as a volunteer at what is now the Royal University of Phnom Penh.³ In seeking to answer it in the light of the VSO report, I interviewed a small cohort of volunteers working with VSO and other volunteer organisations on return visits made to Phnom Penh during 1998 and 1999. A qualitative approach (e.g. Denzin and Lincoln 1998) was used to carry out the research. In-depth interviews were based loosely around the question ‘Why volunteer?’ and were otherwise left unstructured. The concerns and perceptions that were raised were pursued and validated through a series of further interviews. The data were then analysed and examined in the light of currently accepted theories concerning the commitment and motivation of workers. This article draws heavily on the data arising from those interviews for two reasons: to illustrate the concerns expressed by these volunteers; and as a reminder (not least to the author) that these concerns are of greater importance than abstract theorising. To further ensure validity, the research participants were invited to comment upon the analyses. It is upon their approval that the legitimacy of this article ultimately rests.

It became clear during the course of the research that the issues of motivation that were raised pertain to volunteers from other organisations as well, such as the Irish APSO (Agency for Personal Services Overseas) and the Australian OSB (Overseas Service Bureau). So, although the genesis of this paper is to be found in the issues facing VSO, a composite picture of volunteers working in Phnom Penh has been sketched. Volunteers working with VSO tend to refer to themselves as VSOs (as, to a lesser extent, do those volunteers working with APSO and OSB) and I have adopted this habit here. Bearing in mind these shared concerns, the terms ‘volunteers’ and ‘VSOs’ may be freely exchanged except where reference is made to information that is clearly specific to VSOs.

Of course, interviews mean that the data are self-reported. In her study of unpaid volunteers in the USA, Pearce notes that

as a practical tool in volunteer-staffed organisations, this kind of self-report instrument is less useful simply because dissatisfied volunteers were quick to voice their concerns to anyone who would listen. . . With no fear of reprisal, volunteers gladly complained.
(Pearce 1993:91)

Pearce’s volunteers are not mine, but the point is well made and should be considered. As the research was concerned with the attitudes and perceptions of the volunteers, the views of their employers were not sought. Given the issues raised, the extent to which such views may have been corroboratively useful remains open to question. Two final limitations must be recognised: the research was conducted with volunteers working in Phnom Penh, which is not necessarily representative of the country as a whole; nor is Cambodia necessarily representative of other countries in which volunteers work.

What is a volunteer?

It is apparent from both the available literature and the current research that there is little consensus on the definition of ‘volunteer’:

The concept of volunteer continues to be much abused and misunderstood in many countries, where it is often equated with amateur, unpaid effort on a casual, charitable basis. Popular thinking about international volunteers frequently equates the concept with youthful idealism from rich countries, in the service of the poor in far-off societies.
(Dey and Westendorff 1996:7)

Such concepts of unpaid ineptitude do not apply to these VSOs working in Cambodia: they receive a total allowance of US\$630 a month (US\$300 each for rent and living, and US\$30 for utilities); they work full-time; and the typical overseas posting lasts for two years.⁴ Moreover, although this was the first development posting for most of those taking part in the research, they are qualified and experienced in their various professions.⁵ Yet they still consider themselves to be volunteers. Unfortunately, because of underlying preconceived ideas about what being a volunteer represents, many other people attach negative interpretations to it. In the absence of any clear definition, attributes are piled upon the term 'volunteer' and there is a conflict of characteristics: the volunteers see themselves as qualified professionals while others sometimes see them as unqualified amateurs. That these attributes are often value-laden and emotive does not help, as they pertain directly to what VSOs hold dear. These misunderstandings can have a considerable effect upon their motivation.

So what is a volunteer? And what do these volunteers represent? In an attempt to determine this I have turned to VSO's own mission statement.

VSO enables men and women to work alongside people in poorer countries in order to share skills, build capabilities and promote international understanding and action, in pursuit of a more equitable world. (VSO 1998b:2)

These are the aims to which volunteers aspire. As one of them put it, 'if I feel that I've got certain skills that I can offer, I'd like to do that in an organisation that has an ethos that I can relate to' (Chris). The extent to which these values are internalised can perhaps be judged by the self-referent use of the organisation's name: the volunteers refer to themselves as VSOs. Such aims, though, are not necessarily exclusive to VSOs or other volunteers. So what is it that sets them apart?

In short—money. Or, rather, lack of it. Their salaries, low by expatriate standards, shape their expectations and help determine what motivates them to volunteer in the first place. Although none of the volunteers interviewed was naïve enough to equate their allowances with the pay of their Khmer counterparts, they consistently expressed the opinion that maintaining a modest lifestyle by choice gave them a greater opportunity to realise their aims through integrating with the local community. There are 'personal and professional advantages of empathy with ordinary Cambodians. . . afforded by [my] status as a volunteer' that are simply not available to the 'overpaid ex-pats with NGOs' whose wealth alienates them 'unless a lot of effort is made' (Diane). Empathy requires more than just a low salary, and an important caveat here is that '[it's] not the amount you get paid but the degree to which you're willing to assimilate with the local community' (George). Volunteers are not alone on the moral high ground, but their allowances often leave them stranded there.

Attitudinal and behavioural commitments

'Some day', Andy said, 'I want to line up all the foreigners and ask them, "Why are you here?"'. . . For some it's the chance to make big money. Some want to play all day and all night. Some really believe in the cause they're working for.' The first of these options does not apply to volunteers because they are not paid 'big money'; and this tends to preclude the second. This leaves the third option. But how much do they believe in the causes they are working for? And why are they working for them as VSOs in Cambodia?

Helen's comment that 'nearly every volunteer has some personal or professional trauma that pushed them into becoming a volunteer' may appear extreme, but changed circumstances consistently forewent the decision to volunteer. Among the volunteers taking part in this research those changed circumstances included retirement, job dissatisfaction, and simple

opportunity. However, none of these explains why the volunteers chose to travel 6000 miles to work in Cambodia for two years rather than organise a charity raffle or help out in the local branch of Oxfam on their afternoons off. 'These decisions about being a volunteer are personal ones' (Beth); and, as far as this current research is concerned, so they shall remain. One thing appears to be clear though: altruism does not enter into the decision. 'Altruism you'll only find in the dictionary. . . But as a result of my perceived altruism, I'll do something for other people and hopefully I'll do something for [me] as well' (Chris). Exactly what being a VSO will do for 'me' must remain open to speculation here: it was 'something I was looking for that I couldn't really find' (Diane). How being a VSO may help—and hinder—the search is explored below in terms of their commitment.

In their analysis of commitment in the workplace, Meyer and Allen (1997) draw attention to the distinction between attitudinal and behavioural commitments. Attitudinal commitment typically examines the individual's relation of his or her own values and goals to those of the organisation, whereas behavioural commitment examines the extent to which people become committed to a course of action. Such a distinction can be usefully employed to examine the motivation of these volunteers in that it distinguishes between the antecedents to, and the consequences of, their becoming volunteers. At the risk of oversimplifying the matter, these forms of commitment set expectations against experience.

Attitudinal behaviour and expectation

As suggested above, VSOs believe that the maintenance of a modest lifestyle appropriate to their comparatively low allowances fosters a greater sense of empathy with their counterparts. They consistently reported job satisfaction arising from this empathy: 'I [am] very much the colleague with colleagues' (Beth) and 'We're partners' (Chris) were typical comments. Moreover, this empathy is seen as allowing for better personal and professional relationships: it is 'a totally positive experience. From both sides' (Frances). Such empathy suggests the possibility of expectations being realised in action (see, for example, Anderson 2000). By integrating with the local community and working alongside their counterparts, VSOs feel that they are able to go some way towards overcoming the potential conflation of development and the condescension towards others because they are not Western that Said (1978) has termed 'Orientalism'. Or, 'what I perceive as the biggest problem, namely that the Western way of doing things is the "right" way' (Edward).

Charya et al., in their examination of rural development in Cambodia, signal the dangers of such a paternalistic approach to development when they explain that 'villages where there seemed to be the highest degree of dependency were also the ones where people most often complained that they did not know what was happening' (Charya et al. 1998:25). External dominance can deny local participation, responsibility, and ownership. Such dangers are recognised by VSOs who 'don't feel enough time and effort has been spent by NGOs looking at the ways Khmers do things and seeing if they need to be altered at all, or attempting to work alongside Khmer practices' (Edward). These volunteers feel that they can avoid these domineering attitudes through their close involvement with the local community.

Volunteers see VSO as a vehicle for allowing them to realise their aspirations—and to realise these aspirations free from what they perceive as the financial shackles of a well-paid job. 'I don't think anybody here [at VSO] is doing it for the money. Otherwise you wouldn't be here. Period' (Chris). '[What I was] looking for was somewhere interesting to live with a satisfying job. And, basically, that's why [I] chose to do VSO' (Beth). There is a strong correlation between the values and goals of the individual VSOs and VSO as an organisation: the expectations and attitudinal commitment of individual VSOs are high. They are motivated

to share their expertise working alongside their Khmer counterparts in accordance with the ethos of VSO. They are also motivated to integrate with the local community. VSO actively encourages this independent integration through providing language training courses, something that was appreciated both professionally and personally (see Abbott 2000, for example, for a recent plea to expatriate development workers to learn the local language). As the comments above suggest, they also encourage it by not giving their volunteers much money.

Behavioural commitment and experience

VSOs set out to work alongside their counterparts 'in pursuit of a more equitable world' (VSO 1998b:2) and see their low salaries as a way of carrying out their expectations. As such, these salaries become representative of their attitudinal commitment and help them to realise their expectations. The volunteers typically found that their motivation remained strong as they worked with their Khmer counterparts.

However, these volunteers in Phnom Penh also have to work with expatriate colleagues and in these working relationships the same volunteer salaries are seen in a very different light. All the VSOs taking part in this research reported encountering negative interpretations of their salaries. Beth's comments sum up the frustration they all felt:

I have had people working with me who think they should be working on top of me—so to speak. They have no more qualifications or experience than I have. In fact, in one or two cases they've had less. And I've had to make that very clear. That I'm not here to be someone's minion or dogsbody. . . They've brought with them the baggage of the world's presumption that if somebody's paid a lot of money they must be a lot better qualified.

Such a statement indicates the extent to which the expectations of these VSOs can be undermined by experience. The assumption by such expatriates that they are better than VSOs simply because they are paid more is an assault upon the VSOs' very commitment to being volunteers. Behavioural commitment modifies the volunteers' attitudinal commitment as they take up their voluntary posts; and to understand how this undermines their motivation I want to look at the implications of this financial assault.

Financial dis/satisfaction

Although one-third of VSOs in Cambodia are retired, a typical pattern emerges of professional and experienced people giving up or taking leave from often well-paid (and sometimes lucrative) jobs to work as volunteers. Given that the allowance is accepted as part of the posting, it should come as no surprise that none of these volunteers considered it to be a source of dissatisfaction in itself; but at the same time it seems intuitively ridiculous to suggest that not getting much money should be a source of satisfaction. However, while acknowledging that we can all be tempted to justify our actions after the event—what Meyer and Allen (1997:49–50) call 'retrospective rationality'—and that this may cause VSOs to overrate their allowances so much that 'the absence of pay itself causes positive attitudes among [volunteers]' (Pearce 1993:92), I want to suggest that intuition is mistaken here.

It should be remembered that for the VSO 'my job, my colleagues are what matter to me' (Beth). Moreover, this particular source of satisfaction is seen to arise from the empathy engendered by the modest lifestyle that has been adopted by choice. Throughout this research VSOs expressed this lack of money in positive terms when they considered it

in relation to their professional activities and to their understanding of, and empathy with, the local community. Although they were not blind to the effects this could have on their work within the local community and with their counterparts, they generally perceived this lack of money as being beneficial to them and to their work. However, none of them stated that this lack of money was satisfying in itself; and, indeed, it can be extremely dissatisfying.

There are, as it were, two sides to this particular coin; and these are best addressed with reference to Herzberg's work on job satisfaction and dissatisfaction (1966). He concluded that those aspects of work that lead to job satisfaction (which he categorised as 'motivators') are not simply the opposite of those aspects that lead to dissatisfaction (which he categorised as 'hygiene factors'—because they have to be 'cleaned up' as a prerequisite for job satisfaction). It is not possible, therefore, to provide job satisfaction by simply removing any causes of dissatisfaction. Motivators are typically related to job content and tend to be intrinsic: they include achievement, responsibility, and recognition. Hygiene factors, on the other hand, are typically related to the work environment and tend to be extrinsic: they include supervision, working conditions, and salary. So, someone may be dissatisfied with their salary, but paying them more will only stop them from being dissatisfied with that aspect of their job. It will not automatically lead to job satisfaction. The recognition that goes with the pay rise can be internalised as a motivator that leads to job satisfaction, but the money itself cannot. It is rather like the adage 'money can't buy you happiness'. No, money can't buy you happiness, but it can buy lots of things that do make you happy. Causing only dissatisfaction, then, salary is typically a hygiene factor for Herzberg.

However, I want to suggest that salary is both a hygiene factor and a motivator for VSOs. That is, it is both dissatisfying and satisfying. Although this would initially appear to confound Herzberg's argument that you will not make people satisfied simply by removing causes of dissatisfaction, this can be explained by the dual roles experienced by volunteers in their working relationships with their expatriate and with their Khmer colleagues. In relation to expatriate colleagues, the VSO's comparatively low salary is a cause for dissatisfaction. That is, it is a hygiene factor; and, as such, it is extrinsic and related to the job environment. But the same salary is simultaneously a source of satisfaction in relation to Khmer colleagues because it is seen as a way of seeking parity with them. It prevents the VSO from entering the stereotypical expatriate world of big money, big houses, and big four-wheel-drive vehicles. This same relatively low salary is a symbol of their commitment and, as such, it becomes as intrinsic as a motivator can be.

In respect of these volunteers (and with due respect to Herzberg) I would, therefore, posit a modification of these motivators and hygiene factors and suggest that the absence of what is usually experienced as a hygiene factor should be seen as a *temperance* factor. This is not satisfaction at having something (typical motivators such as independence, job satisfaction, or recognition) any more than it is dissatisfaction at having something (typical hygiene factors such as control from above or not enough money). Instead—and importantly—the satisfaction is expressed indirectly as a sense of rationalised satisfaction in not having something. This temperance is a form of rational self-restraint by which something that is usually desired (in this case, a salary) is voluntarily given up in pursuit of that which is perceived to be yet more desirable (in this case, the motivating factors that directly pertain to being a volunteer). Such a modification allows the VSO's lack of money to be simultaneously satisfying and dissatisfying: it mediates the indirect satisfaction of allowing greater empathy with the local community and the dissatisfactions examined below. It is not altogether unlike giving up chocolate for Lent—not a particularly nice thing to do in itself, but apparently good for you. And, of course, like Lent, a VSO posting does not last for ever.

Perceptions of pay and power

This idea of salary as a temperance factor helps to explain the uncertain status of these volunteers as they struggle to keep up their motivation more than 6000 miles and several time zones away from home. VSOs are given a comprehensive account of their position as a part of their pre-departure programme and training and, as Chris pointed out, 'once you've applied for VSO you must have researched and identified what the situation is'. However, several volunteers suggested that it is simply not possible to prepare volunteers adequately for work in Cambodia given the peculiar nature of the country. So what do they find when they step off the plane and into their posting?

One thing they find, within the bounds of this research, is that they occupy a constantly shifting position in which they seek parity with both their Khmer and their expatriate colleagues. The VSOs taking part in this research are typically qualified and experienced professionals who are paid more than their Khmer counterparts and considerably less than some of their expatriate colleagues. These relative levels of pay, which are so important to the motivation of these volunteers, tend to make their position more difficult because, as Pearce points out, 'incomes have become surrogate indicators of the importance of our labour' (1993:166). The problem for these VSOs is not what they are paid, but the interpretations that others attach to their pay packet.

This problem manifests itself to the VSOs in a mix-up between what Hales (1993:17–46) terms economic and technical power resources. Power relationships essentially revolve around some people having resources that others want or need. Where economic and technical assistance is needed or requested, those who have the necessary money and skills have power. For those working in the world of development such power is, quite simply, part of the job, and the necessary assistance cannot be delivered without it. However, as Hales explains, the key issue is not usually the possession of power itself but whether those subject to it recognise that power as being held legitimately.

This can, and should, be taken a step further in a development context. I take it as axiomatic (although perhaps naively so) that power relationships in the world of development are in a state of intentional flux—for development, surely, is ultimately concerned with the abdication of power by those who possess it. Cambodia is a country in need of considerable international assistance in the form of multi- and bilateral aid (RGC 1995) and those who work in development there have power whether they like the idea or not. In such a context, those who possess power must also recognise that possession as legitimate. And it is here that VSOs experience difficulties as they seek parity with both their Khmer and expatriate colleagues.

Perceptions of power in relation to Khmer counterparts

VSOs, because of the very nature of development work, have technical power resources. Put simply, they have skills that are needed. At the same time, there is an acknowledgement of (albeit limited) economic power in relation to their Khmer counterparts which can have an effect upon working relationships. Estimates of the average Cambodian income vary, but those of the VSOs' Cambodian counterparts can be as low as US\$200 a year; and second and even third jobs are not only common, they are vital. Volunteers recognised that their own incomes, compared with those of their counterparts, can have an effect upon working relationships: 'full empathy', it was suggested, cannot be achieved as '[our] pay is considerable relative to that of most ordinary Cambodians' (Edward).

It is important to recognise the VSO link between skills and salary: the volunteers consider that their attitudinal commitment to sharing their skills is facilitated by their relatively low

salary. Yet these volunteers essentially have more skills and more money than their counterparts—that is, they have both technical and economic power resources. The power relationship is therefore weighted in their favour but, with their attitudinal commitment and their financial temperance, they are motivated to share their skills. By sharing their skills and by working alongside their counterparts VSOs seek to ensure that, even though there may be a disparity in power resources, the power relationship between volunteer and counterpart is recognised as legitimate on both sides.

Perceptions of power in relation to expatriate workers

However, these same volunteers consistently made the point that they were looked down upon by many other expatriate workers because of this same low salary. Beth's comments sum up the frustration that many of these volunteers feel about the relationship between VSOs and other expatriate workers,

[some] of whom are being paid a lot more and sort of who feel that status is greater because of being paid a lot more. Some of whom feel that VSOs here must be mad for doing what they do. Or possibly letting the side down. I've heard that. . . You're doing it for nothing when they're trying to make a living out of [it]. You're 'queering the pitch for the rest of us'. . . And the idea of VSO, you know, giving your services for just a living allowance is total anathema. One of my best friends at university puts that viewpoint very strongly. . . You know, 'You pay peanuts, you get monkeys.' And that VSOs are monkeys.

Beth makes an explicit link between incomes and perceived abilities here. For the volunteers, too many expatriate workers 'think if you're working for one tenth of the money you're only one tenth as good' (Ian).

Too often, expatriate colleagues assume that they have power over volunteers simply because they are paid more. Using Hales' terms, such expatriates believe that they have more technical power than the VSOs simply because they have more economic power than they. The VSOs, however, believe that they have a comparable amount of technical power: they see themselves as professional equals who are simply willing to do the same work for less money. So, if expatriate workers assume that they have power over the volunteers on the basis of having more technical power resources, then the volunteers are likely to see that assumption of power as being non-legitimate. Clearly, this view is not held by all expatriate workers—but it is held by too many of them as far as most volunteers are concerned because, as Frances pointed out, 'We're only volunteers, after all. Aren't we.'

In these instances, the value of their work as VSOs is liable to be tainted by its voluntary nature. If we remember that the relatively low salaries are important to volunteers, such assumptions leave them susceptible to attacks on their experience and professionalism. They are caught between two sets of beliefs: their own, that their low salaries facilitate their work with Khmer counterparts; and those of their expatriate colleagues who dismiss their abilities because of those same low salaries. For Pearce (1993:151–168), this fundamentally uncertain position extends to the mixed messages volunteers are sent about the value of their work: they may be praised for it or denigrated for the voluntary position they adopt in order to realise it.

What does this do to the commitment of the VSOs? How does this experience impinge upon and modify their expectations? It means that, as Diane suggested, 'professionally it can be difficult being a volunteer'. Perceptions that some expatriate colleagues assume non-legitimate power have an impact upon the VSOs' commitment. The 'very good symbiotic relationship'

that should exist between VSOs and their expatriate colleagues can be displaced by ‘attitudes [that] create resentment’, where there is the ‘assumption that volunteers need supervision from experts’ (Edward). The manifestation of this non-legitimate power in the impression that ‘we’re not up to the job because of our volunteer status’ (Diane) undermines the professionalism of VSOs. And where this power is explicitly related to pay, and where this pay is explicitly related to perceptions of professional ability, it becomes an attack upon the temperance that symbolises their values. It is, in short, a source of considerable demotivation.

Behavioural commitment and experience

The attitudinal commitment of VSOs is high when they become volunteers. Why else would they volunteer? Once they are in their posting, however, this attitudinal commitment becomes influenced by behavioural commitment; and, as their expectations become modified by experience, they may be caught between the desire and the duty to remain volunteers. Meyer and Allen (1991) call these psychological components of commitment ‘affective’ and ‘normative’. In the current research, affective commitment situates VSOs as *wanting* to remain as volunteers, and normative commitment engenders a sense of *obligation* to do so.

Although it may seem that there is a point at which experience sufficiently tempers expectation for a desire to stay to become an obligation to stay, the actual point at which this happens is not necessarily as important as the recognition that the transition can take place. It is not easy to distinguish affective from normative commitment in volunteers because their desire to remain as volunteers (that is, their affective commitment) is so closely bound up with their sense of obligation (that is, their normative commitment). However, it is worth recognising that the process of change is likely to parallel the transition from expectation to experience. Attitudes, according to this psychological interpretation, therefore begin to change almost as the plane touches down in Phnom Penh and coincide with the beliefs of some expatriate workers that VSOs are only worth as much as they are paid—that is, not much.

There are important ramifications to such a psychological interpretation of attitudes because the behavioural consequences of these different forms of commitment can be quite different (Meyer and Allen 1997:105–111). On the one hand, the emotional attachment of affective commitment is more likely to lead to a greater motivation to make a meaningful contribution; on the other, a stronger normative commitment could result in resentment about the sense of obligation that is felt. The job is likely to be done either way, but these two forms of commitment can influence how willingly or grudgingly it is done. It would seem sensible, then, to foster a greater sense of affective commitment. It would also seem that this is not necessarily difficult. Speaking of a previous posting, one VSO commended the support of the Programme Director who ‘made a special journey every few months [and] called in giving us Mars Bars and taking us out for a reasonable meal and passing along the news’. Mars Bars cost 80¢ in Phnom Penh and talk, if not easy, is free.

Voluntary empowerment

The point is not facile. The greatest expressed source of dissatisfaction was the failure of others to recognise the experience and professional qualifications of volunteers; and this view echoed continually through the uncertainty experienced by VSOs working in the fluctuating world of development that was the focus of this research. Whereas VSOs are unambiguous about their experience and professional status, others foist ambiguity upon them. Without a clear sense of

definition in this matrix of uncertainty, perceptions become critical. Again and again, volunteers expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the perception that their volunteer status was equated with a lack of experience and qualifications. Yet comparatively few said that they had replied to such charges (which is not to suggest that they had not tried, although no one expressed further frustration at having such overtures rebuffed). Those who had done so reported improved working relations as a result. Although there is no guarantee of success, it would appear that VSOs should begin the process of empowering the local community by first empowering themselves.

The irony is that, from polite suggestions that independence and maturity should be respected to the more robust freedom where '[at] the bottom line you can say, "Up yours!" [to the boss]' (Beth), VSOs consistently reported their expectation of autonomy as a motivating factor in becoming volunteers. I would argue that the strength of this claim to autonomy lies in their temperance: in being able to forego economic and positional power they can rightly make these claims to independence. Yet, too often it seems, the uncertainty and ambiguity that is foisted upon them is also adopted by them and too few of them say 'Up yours!' For too many volunteers the genuine empowerment that was assumed by their claims to autonomy got lost on the way to Phnom Penh. Instead of being built upon their genuine abilities, it is silently built into the assumptions of others. Mere complaints, no matter how loudly voiced in the local bar, are effectively no more than whispered acquiescences to this defensive reasoning.

It takes place in a world where boats are not for rocking nor apple-carts for upsetting. Nor, indeed, are mere qualifications and experience for recognising. It seems somewhat strange that VSOs are able to speak the language of their Khmer counterparts but too often fail to speak that of their expatriate colleagues. This silence lies like an interdict over the abilities and, through those abilities, the motivation of VSOs. The quiet dissonance between the perception and the reality will remain there until it is focused upon—and it appears extremely unlikely that many non-volunteers are going to focus on it. But there is nothing to be defensive about: VSOs have a justifiable pride in their qualifications and experience. They should not allow false modesty to hinder their potential by serving to undermine their commitment. It is even possible that, by giving voice to their professional abilities, others may recognise that they are indeed committed, not that they should be.

Conclusion

These volunteers working with VSO in Phnom Penh are qualified and experienced in their various professions. They are prepared to accept lower salaries than many of their expatriate colleagues because they believe it allows them to work more closely with their Khmer counterparts in 'pursuit of a more equitable world'. Yet many of their expatriate colleagues equate their poor pay with poor performance. When the reported experiences of these VSOs are analysed within a framework of motivational theories, their volunteer pay packets are seen as a source of both satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Although VSOs remain committed to working alongside their Khmer counterparts, expatriate perceptions that they are amateurs are very demotivating and can have negative effects on their commitment. However, there is a solution to this: these volunteers need to empower themselves by speaking up for themselves. They have nothing to lose but their claims. Those who do not recognise the legitimacy of the volunteers' commitment need to be reminded of it. As they say in Cambodia: *Mngai neung cheh aoey ké kaot mngai neung chhaot aoey ké anet*—'If you know a lot, know enough to make them respect you; if you are stupid, be stupid enough to make them pity you.'

Notes

- 1 I have quoted these volunteers extensively in this paper in an attempt to capture their feelings. However, anything tending towards identification has been removed: if working relationships are to be upset, it is not the place of the author to upset them.
- 2 In this sense, *to commit* means to send someone somewhere under force of law. It is often used in the phrase ‘to commit to prison’; but here it is used idiomatically to suggest that volunteers might be crazy and should be committed to a mental institution.
- 3 Although the research was initiated by the VSO report, and most of the interviewees were from VSO, it was not conducted on behalf of VSO or any other organisation. Nor has the author worked for VSO.
- 4 Expatriate salaries in Cambodia are typically paid in US dollars; and the US dollar runs alongside the riel as a second currency. At the time of the research, the exchange rate was approximately 3700 riel = US\$1.
- 5 This, and further, information concerning the work practices of VSO and VSOs was provided by the VSO Programme Director in Cambodia.

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