

The impact of foreign personnel on literacy development

Dilly Mtui, Project Manager, Village Education Project Kilimanjaro with Dr Anne Samson

Much development in Africa and other 'developing' regions is managed and directed by foreign organisations. Their help is often welcomed due to the additional funding which accompanies the support as governments are often unable to allocate sufficient resources, in particular, to all aspects of education and health. The relationship between the foreign organisation, invariably an NGO, and the local population is crucial to the success of the project. This paper explores the use of volunteers in the Whole School Development (WSD) programme to ascertain what makes partnership-work successful, in this case leading to improved literacy and teaching.

Village Education Project Kilimanjaro (VEPK) has been working with primary schools in the Kilimanjaro Rural area for over fourteen years. Since 1998, there has been a gap year programme where volunteers come from the UK for eight months to teach English in some of the schools. In addition to the gap year programme, specialist volunteers have come out for shorter periods of time, anything from two weeks to three months to focus on a particular aspect of development. In 2004, the Whole School Development Programme was started which has made use of teachers from the UK for research and input as well as long term support. Using these experiences, characteristics will be identified which are important for ensuring long term success and sustainability. A brief literature search suggests that not much, if anything, has been written on the importance of the relationship between the donor/NGO and local population. This paper will therefore take a practical approach identifying recommendations for best practice – much of which is likely to appear as 'common sense' but surprisingly is not practised or sufficiently valued for various reasons.

The long haul

One of the biggest factors impacting on lasting change is time. It is common to hear that many projects have only three or five years to run due to funding. A report on the Oxfam EQUIP programme in Shinyanga poses the question re sustainability once its involvement ends. This is an important question as without the external motivation and incentives, a project is unlikely to continue if it has not had time to be embedded.

Being in for the long haul should therefore be one of the successes of the WSD. The District Education Officer (DEO) has given permission for the programme to run for at least seven years and funding has been structured so that there are no short term constraints. This supports and coincides with VEPK's standing in the community – it has been involved with the same community for at least fourteen years. The villagers know that the WSD programme is not a fleeting thing and that VEPK is serious about improving the education of the children. Having worked with the community for this length of time and having villagers directly involved in the delivery of VEPK activities has meant that a wealth of insider knowledge was available to the team working on the WSD. This aided credibility and acceptance of the programme.

It is not enough, however, for the local population to know that the project is long-term to ensure sustainability. In order for change to be sustainable and continue without constant input from the NGO or overseas funders, the local population needs to be empowered with knowledge and skills and these cannot be developed or taught overnight. The use of case studies will help elicit factors which support local acceptance and how hindering factors are overcome. Manipulation of these factors is seen as crucial to the success of the WSD programme and the development of literacy which is the focus of this conference.

The gap year programme

Each year, a number of volunteers of varying ages come out to the project to teach English in some of the primary schools for a period of eight months. They live in rented accommodation in the village for the time they are on the programme and participate in aspects of village life as they feel appropriate, eg joining the church choir, or as necessary, eg going to market for food.

Before the gap years, as these volunteers are commonly referred to, arrive in the village, they undergo a two-week training programme in the UK on how to teach English as a foreign language to Tanzanian primary schoolchildren as well as Kiswahili language training in the 'immersion' method. They therefore have the foundations of the community's language before arriving. In addition, through this two-week training period, they are introduced to aspects of the culture they need to be aware of, such as respectful greetings, dress codes and acceptable behaviour. They are also prepared for the different facilities to be found in the classrooms including lack of electricity and text books. An important feature of this induction programme is for the new gap year group to meet the previous group so that they can find out more particulars about the schools and children they will be teaching. This meeting also serves to reinforce the different cultural elements and ensure the new group is as prepared as can be for their time in the village. The advisor on the WSD programme attended one of the training sessions early into the programme so that she was aware of what the gap year training consisted of and could add any additional information to that given to volunteers coming from the UK to assist in the initial research.

Age and gender

When the WSD programme therefore started, the community was not unused to white volunteers working amongst them and in the schools. In addition, the volunteers used on the WSD programme have generally been middle-aged. This has been crucial in that many Tanzanians still equate age with knowledge and experience. Where volunteers on the WSD programme have been younger than the teachers with whom they are working, an academic title has helped in one case and in the other, the volunteer struggled somewhat to be accepted as an experienced teacher although her knowledge of Kiswahili and previous teaching in a Tanzanian primary school worked in her favour. Even so, it has been apparent that access to certain information is more difficult for the younger female volunteer than a male. Although all the male volunteers involved in the WSD programme have been older, ie 45+, the same appears true for the younger males who have been involved in the gap year programme, namely that they are more easily accepted.

Learning to manage and deal with this change in status can be difficult for volunteers. However, it is becoming increasingly evident that volunteers who have worked or lived in a variety of settings outside their native country are able to manage the situation better.

Communication

Being transparent in the purpose of what the NGO is trying to achieve has been of great importance and asking about etiquette issues has helped in ensuring volunteers do not do the wrong thing. If they do, it can be rectified as soon as possible without causing offence. When the teachers have been asked for advice in rolling out the WSD programme to other schools, one thing that is consistently raised is the transparency of the programme. This means being up front with the teachers about the aim of the project and what will and will not be fed into the formal structure as well as listening to what the teachers want and need and saying whether it can be

incorporated or not. This open approach has worked as the community, which is not used to offering criticism, has started to analyse and comment when asked for ways to improve the programme. We are aware that not all teachers will contribute in these discussions, but rather rely on others such as head teachers or other intermediaries. Having said this, at the last meeting with the schools, all the teachers contributed one thing they had learnt since the start of the programme and one thing they would like to develop further. This is a major step evidencing greatly increased confidence, after four years.

In addition, the volunteers have access to the Tanzanian project manager for advice and input on how best to approach people in the community, what is likely to work and what changes should be considered. Where it is expected that misunderstandings can occur through language or other barriers, he is on hand to help with translations and smoothing things over. Also being of the community, he has access to information sources the volunteers are unlikely to have and through these means is able to clarify issues or bring concerns to the team for addressing. The use of formal and informal channels of communication is therefore crucial to the success of the project. More can be obtained through a casual chat in the school grounds or outside school than in the formal setting.

Supporting the project manager in this role is the Tanzanian Teacher Resource Centre Coordinator who often accompanies the volunteer/s in their work in the school. Her main role has been translating between the volunteer and the teachers and also offering advice on teaching methodology and alternative resources. In addition, she has played an important role in mediating between the cultures when offence has been caused unwittingly.

Another aspect which seems to have helped is that the NGO has not taken the approach of running the schools. The focus is to ask questions and make suggestions whilst emphasising that at the end of the day, the teachers themselves have to decide what is best for their environment. They are aware of a variety of factors that the volunteers do not know about, for example, the individual children and their backgrounds or the home pressures the teachers face. An example is the issue of the number of orphans in one school. An easy solution, albeit outside VEPK's remit, would be to set up a scheme for sponsorship or other means to pay for children's fees etc. However, this will undermine the current practice in the village which is to support them and assist them in becoming independent. Discussions with the Senior Management Team (SMT) which has been set up in each school, led to the issue being taken to the School Committee and Village Chairman as this is part of their remit. Had the volunteers not had the inside knowledge of the project manager in this regard and his assistance in discussing it with the SMT, a cultural value would have been undermined for a short term solution which would have resulted in greater dependency on western finance. This is an example of the unwritten rules governing society of which the teachers are very aware and they will not necessarily make these known unless it becomes an issue or they are asked directly.

In the same way that the teachers have been improving their subject and methodological literacy, so the volunteers have been developing their literacy of the community in which they work. It has been important that the volunteer is not seen as the 'expert'. They have specific strengths which they will use to help develop the teachers' subject knowledge and teaching methodology and in the same way, they rely on the teachers to help them, the volunteers, develop other aspects, for example fluency in Kiswahili and understanding of the community, including the school.

Managing the volunteers

An issue that has to be taken into account concerning the volunteer/s is their reason for wanting to work in Africa and on the project, especially those who come out for longer periods. Invariably it is to make their mark and to bring about change, not realising that change is a long term commitment. In addition, the time it takes the volunteer to settle into the community also needs to be taken into consideration as they need to build trust and rapport with those they will be working with. Ensuring that the underlying motive and settling in time do not prove harmful to the programme requires sensitive handling by the project manager and the director, who is aware of the community needs and the character traits of volunteers.

This has been of particular importance when volunteers have come out for an extended period, such as the two project facilitators. A combination of the difficulties they faced and the length of time it took them to settle in has led us to focus on finding ways to reduce long term volunteer input and to develop Tanzanians more rapidly in undertaking the facilitator role. In the first instance the facilitator roles will be undertaken by Teacher Resource Coordinators who already have a similar role and who are currently involved in VEPK projects in different ways, including one supporting the volunteer facilitator who leaves at the end of the year.

Other issues which need careful managing are volunteers' ideas of 'quick fixes' such as the use of computers in the schools. With no electricity available and the nearest computer centre at least fifteen minutes' walk away from the school, the demands are too great for teachers given all they have to do before, during and after school. Unless volunteers are in school all day, they are unaware of the teachers' workloads and the hurdles they face in embracing western ideas of teaching.

The other type of volunteer on the project is short term. These volunteers come out for between two weeks and three months. Two week volunteers are not really encouraged as they are not able to build the rapport with the teachers. However, where the same volunteer comes out a couple of times a year for a few weeks at a time, this seems to work as the teachers are able to build a relationship. Working in this way further allows the teachers to remain in control of their teaching situation and practise what they have learnt in the interim.

Conclusions

From the above discussion, the following lessons about working with foreign volunteers can be identified:

1. Projects are more effective when they are long term as changes can be embedded
2. The age and gender of volunteers can be an influencing factor in what is trying to be achieved, although there have been compensatory factors if the volunteer is younger and female.
3. Preparing volunteers for the different culture they will be working in and having a respect for the differences is crucial to developing the trust between volunteers and locals. Linked to this is having honest, local feedback from people involved in the project.
4. Ensuring that the volunteer is not seen as the expert but rather as a team member where everyone has a speciality goes a long way to achieving goals especially when they are transparent. Honesty is a fundamental value which allows trust to be developed.

In addition to the above, the British Teacher Development Agency has produced a *Six Point Planning Framework for Community Cohesion* which seems appropriate to how the NGO has developed its relationship with the local community.

1. *Preparing and engaging*

a. INITIAL BRIEFING

b. WORKING WITH THE RIGHT PEOPLE

This concerns obtaining permission from the right people to undertake discussions about the project. In VEPK's WSD case, this included initially the DEO and Inspectors as it was known the teachers would ask if they had given their consent. Following a briefing of the head teacher, a meeting was held with all the teachers in the school to explain the programme and obtain their approval. Later stakeholders included the school committee and indirectly the parents as well as the local primary Teacher Training College at Singa Chini and its controlling ministry.

2. *Identifying objectives*

a. INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS.

Over the first three years of the programme, information was obtained informally through discussion and teaching classes whilst observations were slightly more formal. In year four, a more systematic form of data collection was instigated – paired interviews which was successful as teachers understood their role and have recommended such interviews for early use in phase 2.

b. MAINTAIN THE EMPHASIS ON LEARNING AND OUTCOMES

The aim of the WSD programme is to support the teaching and learning so that the children have better opportunities in life. This means supporting the head teacher in the management of the school and the teachers in improving their methodology and attitude to teaching as many of them have been teaching for over 30 years and have become disillusioned with reduced standards and bureaucracy.

c. LINK TO THE WIDER CONTEXT

The WSD project aims, with the help of the teachers, to find the most cost effective way of supporting them to develop their skills to improve the life chances of their pupils. This has meant widening the context in which VEPK works to the Teacher Training College, central Ministry of Education, Inspectors, DEO training, and soon to embark on support to Ward Education Officers (WEO) and Teacher Resource Centre (TRC) Coordinators in their over-lapping roles.

3. *Developing solutions*

a. WHO IS INVOLVED IN THE DECISIONS?

Decisions are made at different levels. At school level, they are made at Senior Management Level now that those teams (SMT) have been established, or at individual level depending on the task at hand. The project facilitator and advisor might make suggestions or offer advice but ultimately it is the school which makes the final decision. Where it is deemed necessary or appropriate, ideas will be taken to the DEO or inspectors to ascertain their views before being put to the schools in order to reassure them that it is an acceptable solution.

b. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

To date, monitoring and evaluation has taken the form of bi-annual

visits by the WSD advisor and has been relatively informal through discussion with the whole school. The project facilitators have been required to write up weekly/monthly notes of what they have done, successes and difficulties they have encountered and these have been tested out gently with the teachers during the meetings. With the roll out of Phase 2, more stringent monitoring and evaluating systems will be put in place so that the costs and benefits can be more rigidly evaluated. Further, it is seen as important for the teachers to be able to see how far they have progressed as gentle change is not always obvious to the person undergoing the change. It has been identified that some teachers have taken advantage of the more informal evaluation system to appear to engage fully with the programme – as seen in the same lesson being delivered at different times of the year to different observers. By setting clearer and more individual targets, it is hoped that this will be overcome especially as the teachers concerned are already good at what they do and have shown their ability to engage in more participatory methods. It is also hoped to find an appropriate external evaluator to do an evaluation, although this will most likely be with Phase 3.

c. **TRAINING AND BUILDING INVOLVEMENT**

This aspect has been covered above through the DEO, Inspectors, WEO and TRC seminars as well as training and support for school committees. The focus of these seminars is to cover an aspect that either they or the schools feel is lacking, for example, the DEO's first seminar was on communication channels – where does the information go. The school committee training has been about their roles and responsibilities as well as how to conduct effective meetings. The WEO and TRC seminars which will be undertaken for the first time during the next year are likely to focus on the importance of planning and working together where there are TRCs to support the schools more effectively.

4. *Delivering*

a. **EXPAND PARTNERSHIPS**

Apart from the extended context mentioned above, the project is being rolled out to incorporate more schools. This is a slow process as it is dictated by available funding, proximity to the project base to ensure appropriate support and the finding of appropriate people who can undertake the work at local market rates. This latter aspect is a crucial one if a cost-effective means of in-service support is to be developed which government can implement across the country. A further consideration is the local knowledge and trust which is already inherent in using local people to support the schools. This is a priority consideration as phase 2 gets underway and phase 3 planning is started. A possible consideration is to identify teachers and TRC coordinators who are about to retire and who have a reputation for supporting others and being innovative. These teachers, although forced to retire due to their age, still want to contribute past the age of 60 and have a wealth of knowledge and skill to pass on. At present, those working on the WSD are paid an allowance. However, it is recognised that if the programme is to be rolled out on a larger scale, some other form of contract/funding will have to be obtained.

b. **A PORTFOLIO OF INFORMATION**

As identified under monitoring and evaluating, this has been done on a more informal basis to date but will be done more rigorously with the

roll out of Phase 2. Annual reports and regular updates given to the DEO and Inspectors so qualitative data is available.

5. *Personalising Progress*

a. PERSONALISATION MEANS IMPROVED ACCESS

Personalising the programme is and has been an underlying value of the WSD. It is recognised that each school is different and each teacher within each school is different. This means that within the global approach there needs to be flexibility to ensure that each individual (and school) can develop the areas they feel important. This aspect is one area which will be more rigorously focused on in Phase 2.

6. *Demonstrating impact*

a. The impact of the programme to date has been seen in the 'feel' of the schools. The teachers and pupils seem happier and comments from significant others in the market/town area and around the village have supported this. For example, children are reported as enjoying school more and it appears that teachers who were regularly absent are attending school more. More rigorous monitoring will help provide the hard evidence of this in future. One area which needs further attention is the use of school data in monitoring and evaluating, however, concerns about accuracy of the data need to be dealt with first.

The main differences between the WSD programme that VEPK is undertaking and many others which have gone before, concern the length of time the project is taking and the costing. Time has enabled the project to develop at a pace conducive to the individuals concerned so that they embrace the changes, and together with the limited funding, innovative and local solutions are found which maintain the community's underlying values.