

ANALYSIS OF CHALLENGES IN INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTARY SERVICE IN THE COVID-19 ERA ON EXAMPLE OF SLOVAK DEVELOPMENT VOLUNTEER PROJECTS



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Abstract

Background: International or development volunteering is recognized as an important tool for overcoming challenges of international development. In 2012 development volunteering has been defined and used as one of the tools of Official development assistance (ODA) of the Slovak Republic. In 2019, twenty-one applications by seven Slovak development organisations were approved and selected persons were sent on missions to thirteen low-income countries. However, in March–April 2020, after a strike of global pandemic COVID-19, ten of them returned immediately due to the country lockdown or closure of the project locations (schools, community centers), rendering them impossible to continue in volunteering activities. Therefore, year 2020 is presenting significant changes and challenges in volunteer management of nonprofits (IVCOs) because of an impact of COVID-19.

Methods: A qualitative study design was used to collect data from development volunteers and their coordinators from particular Slovak development nonprofits in March–August 2020. After the content analysis of eighteen media products, eight semi-structured interviews and two focus group (FG) discussions followed. Collected data was analyzed thematically.

Results: Three thematic areas where a different impact on the actors of volunteer management (including host and sending nonprofits, as well as donors) were identified: 1. Changes in delivery of Official development assistance (at institutional level impacting donors–IVCOs relations); 2. An importance of new remote approach to volunteering (at individual level impacting volunteers' experience); 3. An occurrence of internal issues within the nonprofits (at interpersonal level impacting IVCO–employees/volunteers relations). Two new approaches to volunteering came to the fore: online volunteering and support to local, community-level volunteers.

Conclusions: This study shows how the COVID-19 affected particular missions of development volunteers: their field work, communication and contact with beneficiaries from vulnerable communities in low-income countries. Sending and host organizations are testing new online models and approaches to international volunteering (recently implemented to practice) while trying to get volunteers back into the field to make an impact. Stakeholders need to cooperate and share intelligence on risks, travel, and other restrictions to make this work. This requires

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continual following and comparison of up-to-date empirical research results in the field of international volunteering in the light of constant updates on prevention and elimination of the pandemic COVID-19.

Keywords: Development volunteers. International voluntary service. Volunteering. Pandemic COVID-19. Vulnerable communities.

Introduction

International voluntary service or development volunteering consists of implementing activities for the benefit of other people and organisations in low-income countries, formerly referred to as developing countries, without the right to remuneration. Through their volunteering, young people pass on their expertise, a combination of knowledge, skills and experience, directly in the field⁴⁰⁶. Volunteering is uniquely flexible. People from all backgrounds sign up to support a wide range of organizations across social, economic, and environmental development. The approach is universal and adaptable; it works in every context and adds value to every type of program, from training medical staff to mentoring small-business owners. Skilled international volunteers build relationships – with communities, organizations, and governments. These relationships form a solid foundation on which volunteers can create positive change and improve the skills and abilities of their local colleagues⁴⁰⁷.

International Voluntary Service Organizations (IVSOs) or International volunteer cooperation organisations (IVCOs) are the national organizations and programs that send and/or receive international volunteers⁴⁰⁸. In case of Slovak development volunteer program these nonprofits just send volunteers abroad. An existing typology⁴⁰⁹ of International voluntary service (IVS) addresses duration, nature of service, and degree of 'internationality'. IVS for development and relief recruits skilled and experienced professionals who provide expertise to communities and nations where skill-based assistance is needed. This type of service is usually long term and tends to be performed by individual volunteers rather than groups. Funding usually comes from national or international governmental sources, and programs are more likely to be unilateral (linked to foreign policy as national government initiatives)⁴¹⁰.

Different forms of international voluntary service or development volunteering as a form of assistance to those in need abroad have been operating in Slovakia for decades. The pioneering organisations (IVCOs / IVSOs) among the members of Ambrela – Slovak platform for development organizations include eRko – Christian Children Communities Movement, SAVIO, St. Elizabeth University of Health and Social Work, and others. Based on Ambrela's recommen-

406 UNV 2018, *Current Estimates and Next Steps – The scope and scale of global volunteering*, "Background research for the 2018 State of the World's Volunteerism Report: The thread that binds," accessed September 19, 2020, <https://www.unv.org/sites/default/files/The%20Scope%20and%20Scale%20SWVR2018%20final.pdf>

407 James O'Brien, "Opinion: The future of volunteering in the coronavirus era", *devex*, May 14, 2020, accessed September 19, 2020, <https://www.devex.com/news/opinion-the-future-of-volunteering-in-the-coronavirus-era-97194/amp>

408 Margaret Sherrard Sherraden et al., "The Forms and Structure of International Voluntary Service", *Voluntas* 17, (2006): 163–180.

409 Sherraden et al., "The Forms and Structure", 163–180.

410 Sherraden et al., "The Forms and Structure", 163–180.

dations⁴¹¹ (still entitled the Slovak NGDO Platform⁴¹² at the time) in 2011, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic (MFEA SR) launched an official, state-subsidised programme for sending junior and expert volunteers to the so-called developing countries within the framework of official development assistance (ODA) of the Slovak Republic at the beginning of 2012. Since then, development volunteering has been defined and used as one of the tools of ODA SR⁴¹³. The purpose is to support the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals in the so-called developing countries, namely the goals such as: reducing poverty, helping to transform society, raising educational attainment, etc. This particular program of the MFEA Slovakia for sending volunteers provides a financial contribution that can be applied by Slovak IVCOs. In 2017, the SlovakAid program financed the volunteer stay of 34 volunteers, 31 volunteers in 2018 and 21 in 2019. The main goal of this volunteer program is to support SlovakAid's interventions in partner countries in accordance with the current Medium-Term Strategy for Development Cooperation of the Slovak Republic for 2019–2023⁴¹⁴, whilst also keeping in mind the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The whole volunteer stay – a cycle of development volunteering, led by Slovak non-governmental development organizations, is described in the manual 'Slovak Guide to Development Volunteering'⁴¹⁵. It consists of a preparatory, implementation and evaluation phase, while the return home to Slovakia does not mean an end of volunteering cycle.

Young people sent to low-income countries by the members of Ambrela – Slovak Platform for development organisations work on their missions for three to twelve months (six months in average). Hence, they focus on long-term development volunteering. They are sent to the field where they are really needed⁴¹⁶ – based on consistent communication between the sending and

411 Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Challenges of Development Volunteering – Sending Slovak Volunteers to Developing Countries," *Development and Democracy International Scientific Conference Booklet: Development Ecosystems in V4: Opportunities for Cooperation of Non-Governmental Organisations and Companies After the Millennium Goals* (Bratislava: Pontis Foundation, 2014). 58-68. [In Slovak language].

412 SLOVAK NGDO PLATFORM, 2012, "We have published the Slovak Guide to Development Volunteering," 60. (Bratislava: Slovak NGDO Platform) [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, <https://ambrela.org/spravy/vydali-sme-prirucku-slovensky-sprievodca-rozvojovym-dobrovolnictvom/>

413 Božena Markovič Baluchová, "In the multicultural Turkish metropolis, Life fell silent but did not stop", (interview) [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, <https://mediaaboutdevelopment.wordpress.com/2020/05/04/dobrovolnik-martin-pavelka-tvarou-migracie/>; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "A volunteer stay in Lebanon terminated due to the COVID-19 Pandemic," (interview), [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, <https://mediaaboutdevelopment.wordpress.com/2020/05/09/dobrovolnicka-ana-hrubonova-tvarou-migracie/>; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Examples of Humanitarian Aid Projects of Slovak Organisations in Lebanon," (Case study), (Bratislava: Ambrela, 2020). 13. https://ambrela.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Ambrela_Case_Study_Humanitarian_Aid_projects_Libanon_2020.pdf

414 SAIDC 2019, "List of Grant Applications Under the Call SAMRS/2019/D – Sending Volunteers and Experts to Developing Countries," [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, <http://www.slovakaid.sk/sk/novinky/958-schvalene-ziadosti-vysielanie>; SAIDC 2019: "Medium-Term Strategy for Development Cooperation of the Slovak Republic for 2019–2023," accessed September 19, 2020, https://www.slovakaid.sk/sites/default/files/strednodoba_strategia_rozvojovej_spoluprace_eng_2019-2023_644_stran_final.pdf

415 SLOVAK NGDO PLATFORM, 2012, "We have published the Slovak Guide,"

416 Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Humanitarian volunteering in developing countries and how to prepare volunteers for it," 2018, [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, <https://mladez.sk/2018/11/21/humanitarne-dobrovolnictvo-v-rozvojovych-krajinach-a-ako-na-neho-pripravit-dobrovolnikov-a-dobrovolnicku/>; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Get to know the motivations of humanitarian volunteers before their development to the mission", *Charita* 26, 3, (2018): 16–17. [In Slovak language], https://www.charita.sk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Charita-3-2018_web.pdf; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "How to Strengthen the Capacities of Organisations in the Management of Humanitarian Volunteering", 2018, (Interview with the director of ADRA Slovakia) [In Slovak language], accessed September 19, 2020, <https://www.prohuman.sk/rozvojova-pomoc/ako-posilnit-kapacity-organizacii-v-manazmente-humanitarneho-dobrovoln%C3%ADctva>

host organisations, as well as the needs of the local communities⁴¹⁷. Ambrela as the national platform for development organisations is considered as an International Voluntary Service Support⁴¹⁸ (IVSS) organization that supports, conduct research, and advocate for international voluntary service. However, it is not engaged directly in coordinating or managing volunteer placements, nor in directing the work of member organizations sending volunteers abroad.

Motivational indicators and logistical feats of voluntary service

The projects of Slovak development organisations are financially supported mostly by the SlovakAid scheme. Most volunteer projects could be included in categories such as the field of social development, social work, health care and education, all in the provision of services to the local (very often migrating) community, including sharing of know-how and the transfer of experience.

For example ADRA Slovakia is training and sending volunteers abroad through the MFEA SR programme administered by SlovakAid⁴¹⁹ or through the EU Aid Volunteers⁴²⁰ initiative. It has sent out almost thirty development volunteers in the last six years⁴²¹. Some went to help typhoon victims in the Philippines or socially excluded families in Kenya, budding activists in Ukraine, traumatised people after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, internally displaced women in Georgia, Roma children of returnee parents in Albania, and refugee communities in Lebanon. The actual sending of a volunteer abroad is preceded by an orientation, a series of pre-departure trainings and a two-month internship in ADRA Slovakia⁴²². On other hand, SAVIO NGO sends Slovak volunteers aged 20–30 to support development projects' implementation and work with vulnerable communities in Angola, Azerbaijan, Kenya, Tanzania and Ukraine. It has

417 Božena Markovič Baluchová, "In the multicultural Turkish metropolis, Life fell silent but did not stop", (interview) [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, <https://mediaaboutdevelopment.wordpress.com/2020/05/04/dobrovolnik-martin-pavelka-tvarou-migracie/>; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "A volunteer stay in Lebanon terminated due to the COVID-19 Pandemic," (interview), [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, <https://mediaaboutdevelopment.wordpress.com/2020/05/09/dobrovolnicka-ana-hrubonova-tvarou-migracie/>; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Activities of Slovak Development Volunteers in Places Affected by Migration", (Case study), (Bratislava: Ambrela, 2020) 14. accessed September 19, 2020, https://ambrela.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Ambrela_CaseStudy_Slovak_Development_Volunteering_2020.pdf; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Examples of Humanitarian Aid Projects of Slovak Organisations in Lebanon," (Case study), (Bratislava: Ambrela, 2020). 13. September 19, 2020, https://ambrela.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Ambrela_Case_Study_Humanitarian_Aid_projects_Libanon_2020.pdf

418 Sherraden et al., "The Forms and Structure," 163–180.

419 SAIDC 2020, "Sending Volunteers and Expert Volunteers to Developing Countries as Part of Official Development Assistance," [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, <https://www.slovakaid.sk/sk/ako-pomahame/vysielanie-dobrovolnikov>; SAIDC, 2020: "Annual report of SAIDC 2019," [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, https://www.slovakaid.sk/sites/default/files/samrs_vyroca_sprava_2019_final_do_tlace_20.07.2020.pdf; SAIDC 2020, "Approved applications: Sending volunteers and expert-volunteers abroad," [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, <https://www.slovakaid.sk/sk/novinky/1058-schvalene-ziadosti-vysielanie>; SAIDC 2020, "Guidelines for grant recipients to send volunteers and expert-volunteer to developing countries (SAMRS/2020/D/1)," [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, https://www.slovakaid.sk/sites/default/files/usmernenie_samrs_2020_d_1_final_dobrovolnici.pdf

420 European Commission 2020, "EU Aid Volunteers," accessed September 19, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/humanitarian-aid/eu-aid-volunteers_en

421 ADRA Slovakia 2019, "Global Volunteering," [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, https://www.adra.sk/globalne_dobrovolnictvo/

422 Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Humanitarian volunteering in developing countries," ; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Get to know the motivations of humanitarian volunteers"; ; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "How to Strengthen the Capacities,"

sent out more than thirty development volunteers so far. Volunteer's travel to the host country is preceded by the fulfillment of particular requirements (covering travel expenses, previous experience with the organization and a ten-months long preparation in the form of group meetings during the weekends)^{423, 424}.

Motivation is an internal state of a person that activates or sets in motion all the internal forces of human being. It is the desire of a particular volunteer to do the work performance abroad. To examine the motivation of volunteers, one can use various approaches. Several authors in Slovakia (Mydlíková⁴²⁵, Brozmanová Gregorová^{426, 427}, Matulayová^{428, 429}, Markovič Baluchová^{430, 431}, Kráľová⁴³²) have already identified motivational indicators that play a key role for people in their decision-making whether or not to engage in voluntary activities. For Slovak volunteers, the most important motive for volunteering is their values. People are motivated especially by a strong belief that it is important to help others. Social interaction was another significant motive, especially in international voluntary service. This means that the desire to meet new people through volunteering and to make friends is also a very strong factor for becoming involved in volunteering.

In 2019, twenty-one applications by seven organisations (mostly Ambrella members) were approved, and selected persons were sent on missions to thirteen low-income countries⁴³³. However, in March–April 2020 (after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic in mid-March) ten of them returned immediately, the rest came later or decided to stay and work online remotely. Early returns were from Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya, Ethiopia and Lebanon. The reasons were obvious: the total lockdown in the country due to the COVID-19 or even closure of the schools, community centers and the impossibility to continue in activities due to the COVID-19⁴³⁴.

In recent weeks, the pandemic has seen international volunteer cooperation organizations (IVCOs) repatriate thousands of volunteers from hundreds of countries. It has been an unprecedented logistical feat in unprecedented times. COVID-19 pandemic is also presenting very

423 SAVIO, 2019, "Apply for a Salesian missionary volunteering," [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, <http://dobrovolnici.saleziani.sk>

424 Kráľová et al., "Motivation to volunteering in developing countries", *Acta Missiologica* 13, no. 2, (2019): 239–245. <https://www.actamissiologica.com/>

425 Eva Mydlíková, *Volunteering in Slovakia, or 'What to do with a volunteer'* (Bratislava: Ipera, s.r.o. 2002).

426 Alžbeta Brozmanová Gregorová et al, *Analysis of volunteering in Slovakia* (Bratislava: PDCS-Panet, 2009). [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, http://dobrovolnictvo.sk/_subory/PDCS_Analyza_dobrovolnictva_SK.pdf

427 Alžbeta Brozmanová Gregorová et al., *Volunteering – When Help Is Fun and Fun Helps* (Bratislava: Iuventa, 2011).

428 Tatiana Matulayová et al., *Volunteering in Slovakia - research reflections* (Bratislava: Iuventa, 2012).

429 Tatiana Matulayová et al., *Motivation for volunteering* (Olomouc: UP, 2017).

430 Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Motivation of community health workers and the influence of conflicts on work performance within the Slovak development project in Kenya", *Acta Missiologica* 9, no. 2, (2015): 51–65. <https://www.actamissiologica.com/>

431 Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Humanitarian volunteering in developing countries," ; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Get to know the motivations of humanitarian volunteers," ; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "How to Strengthen the Capacities",

432 Kráľová et al., "Motivation to volunteering", 239–245.

433 SAIDC 2019, "List of Grant Applications," ; SAIDC 2019: "Medium-Term Strategy for Development Cooperation,"

434 Noemi Nálepková, 2020, "Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sending SlovakAid volunteers abroad in 2020," (E-mail communication) (unpublished).

real challenges for well-established approaches to international volunteering. Moving overseas, living and working with local communities, creating mutual respect and trust by building relationships, and developing capacity according to local needs are now much more challenging⁴³⁵. In this study, we will show how the global pandemic COVID-19 affected volunteer management and particular missions of Slovak development volunteers working with vulnerable beneficiary communities in low-income countries.

Methods

The aim of the paper is to analyse an immediate impact of the global pandemic COVID-19 on Slovak development volunteers and their projects abroad. This study utilized qualitative research methods to collect data in Slovakia between March and August 2020. Content analysis of particular media products was followed by focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with volunteers, as well as their coordinators from particular Slovak nonprofits in the field of international volunteer management (IVCOs). This kind of research⁴³⁶ is considered to be flexible because changes in research design are possible.

The material for content analysis consisted of online media products (blog posts, social media posts, reports, reportages, news interviews) published by Slovak broadcasting companies and IVCOs in six months period after the strike of global pandemic (March-August 2020). Media products must contain the following keywords: 'COVID-19', 'SlovakAid', 'development cooperation', 'volunteer'. Eighteen articles met the criteria. An important step in the content analysis is to clearly define the research sample and unit of analysis. An open coding (code generation and categorization) was the primary procedure for this type of qualitative research method. Subsequently, the search for contexts and connecting particular categories by using axial coding followed⁴³⁷. All the media products have been analysed sequentially according to this method.

The second method implemented during this qualitative research was the use of semi-structured interviews. Eight online interviews were conducted, guided by prepared open-ended questions. In this study they were the main source of collected data. Qualitative interviewing is very flexible and brings rich data⁴³⁸. Also the Focus group (FG)⁴³⁹ method was used during the research. It allows continuous discussion and it strengthens the creation of new ideas and topics that could have been omitted in the semi-structured interviews. The group is supposed to collect more ideas than a single interview session. The transcribed data from two conducted focus group discussions was read and re-read multiple times to immerse in the data. In doing so, the key categories / theme were identified and data were summarized under appropriate categories⁴⁴⁰. The research sample in this study is purposive and is set up from current and former volunteers (labeled according to their sending organizations: adra1–4, caritas1–3, erko1–3, savio1–3) and volunteer coordinators from Slovak IVCOs.

435 James O'Brien, "Opinion: The future of volunteering",

436 Jan Hendl, *Qualitative research: Basic theories, methods and applications* 2nd Ed. (Praha: Portál, 2008).

437 Lenka Dušková and Šafaříková, Simona. *Qualitative research methods for International development studies* [In Czech language]. (Olomouc: Palacky university, 2015).

438 Simona Šafaříková, *The influence of sport and physical activities on youth development within the context of developing countries (The Kids League, Uganda)*, (Olomouc: UP, 2013).

439 Monique M. Hennink, *International focus group research: A handbook for the health and social sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

440 Julie Green et al., "Generating best evidence from qualitative research: the role of data analysis," *Australian and New Zealand journal of public health* 31, no. 6, (07 December 2007): 545-50. DOI: 10.1111/j.1753-6405.2007.00141.x

All three methods (content analysis, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions) were focused on the field work and volunteer management of six Ambrela members hit by COVID-19 measurements and restrictions. Among the IVCOs participated in this study were: Christian Children Communities Movement – eRko, SAVIO NGO, St. Elizabeth University of Health and Social Work / Jua NGO, People in need Slovakia, Caritas Slovakia and ADRA Slovakia.

Results

The global pandemic of COVID-19 may, even more than previous humanitarian crises, point to the validity and importance of development cooperation, solidarity with low-income countries and Global goals (SDGs) such as poverty reduction, the elimination of inequalities and conflict resolution. In the face of lockdowns and social distancing, Slovak development volunteers and their sending organizations (IVCOs) are mobilizing, moving online, and finding entirely new ways to play a crucial role in the coronavirus response.

Analyzed data gathered by three qualitative research methods (content analysis of eighteen media products, eight semi-structured interviews and two focus group discussions with volunteers, as well as their coordinators from particular nonprofits) identified three thematic areas where the immediate impacts of COVID-19 on the actors of volunteer management (including host and sending nonprofits, as well as donors) were the most significant.

Changes in delivery of Official development assistance (ODA)

Organizations that receive funding from SlovakAid grants are aware that the system of Official development assistance (ODA) will be one of the areas that will be hit hardest by economic cuts in next year's state budget of the Slovak Republic. The COVID-19 crisis shows several very specific consequences for the ODA of the Slovak Republic (including the SlovakAid volunteer program). Therefore Donors–IVCOs relations at institutional level could be affected.

The pandemic affected the whole world and did not take into account the divide between developed and developing countries. In contrast to the already mentioned financial crisis or migration crisis, the Slovak Republic has experienced only a fraction of the effects of the crisis. A large part of inhabitants in low-income countries has lived for most of their lives under the much more intense effects of social conflicts and repeated natural disasters, resulting in humanitarian crises. As expected, in recent months the health sector has been given priority over other equally important sectors such as food safety, safe water and sanitation, but also within health sector itself, the main focus of activities was on preventing and combating COVID-19⁴⁴¹. It is evident that urgent nonprofits' response reacting to the immediate needs (such as medical supplies) of the vulnerable communities had to be adopted by the organisations on the account of their long term programs (such as livelihood programs, family planning, wells digging etc.). Online sessions of volunteers and other field workers with projects' beneficiaries to promote health risk prevention strategies or distribution of health materials were among those activities⁴⁴². The situation in the field is changing very fast and for an efficient response a high flexibility from SlovakAid is needed.

441 Daniel Kaba, "A pandemic must not stop development cooperation," *Zahraničná Politika (Foreign policy affairs)*, Bratislava: SPPA, 30 June 2020. [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, <https://zahranicnapolitika.sk/pandemia-nesmie-zastavit-rozvojovu-spolupracu/>

442 Ambrela – Slovak Platform for development organisations 2020, "Adaptation of Slovak NGOs and their partners operating in the Middle East to the COVID-19 situation (Meeting Minutes from Focus Group)," Bratislava: Ambrela. (unpublished). ; Ambrela – Slovak Platform for development organisations 2020, "COVID-19 pandemic and the activities of Ambrela's members and observers (Slovak NGOs)," [In Slovak language].

However, the Slovak government did not provide new source of funding to help fight the COVID-19 pandemic, but only redirected about ten million euros (originally intended for other development goals' implementation) to this cause. For example, the government redirected five million euros from a project in Libya and sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine in the amount of 200,000 euros. It also adapted projects under the SlovakAid brand in the total amount of 3.5 million euros (implemented mainly by Slovak non-governmental development organizations – mostly Ambrella members) for the needs of prevention and COVID-19 solutions. At the 'Global Goal: Unite for our Future' summit, Slovak government pledged 750,000 euros for vaccine development. Several large donors are doing the same, although it is clear that these funds will be lacking elsewhere (e.g. to combat malaria and Ebola, to provide food and livelihoods for the most vulnerable communities in low-income countries). This shortcoming in the form of redirection of resources, together with COVID-19 measures (closed schools and markets, rising food prices, rising social tensions and domestic violence, increased violations of fundamental human rights by law enforcement agencies) has far-reaching effects on the poorest⁴⁴³.

Importance of new remote approach to volunteering

Perhaps the most significant manifestation of the pandemic COVID-19 is the closure of borders and measures aimed at restricting movement. As a result, non-governmental development organizations (IVCOs) and the development volunteers sent by them, implementing development cooperation projects in low-income countries, then have limited opportunities to operate. It also complicates the implementation of many (usually simple) operations and their financing. For this reason, too, donor governments even more favor the multilateral part of development assistance.⁴⁴⁴

It became increasingly difficult to plan any domestic or even international travels of nonprofits towards their beneficiaries. *It is very unpredictable how much it will cost, what are the security risks or even if there will be any possibility to return back. The nonprofits are not able to send volunteers anywhere, hence losing direct contact with the field*⁴⁴⁵. According to the information from Slovak agency for international development cooperation (SAIDC), *ten out of twenty-one Slovak volunteers were immediately withdrawn from the mission in March-April 2020, the others followed later. Slovak IVCOs used big part of granted financial support from SlovakAid agency for the repatriation flight tickets*⁴⁴⁶. For example, *three out of the four volunteers (samples erko1, erko2, erko3 sent abroad by Christian Children Communities Movement – eRko thanks to the support of SlovakAid) were withdrawn earlier from the mission in mid-March 2020. The entire*

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accessed September 19, 2020,

<https://ambrella.org/spravy/koronavirus-a-aktivita-clenov-i-pozorovatelov-nasej-ambrelly>

443 Ambrella – Slovak Platform for development organisations 2020, "Adaptation of Slovak NGOs and their partners operating in the Middle East to the COVID-19 situation (Meeting Minutes from Focus Group)," Bratislava: Ambrella. (unpublished). ; Ambrella – Slovak Platform for development organisations 2020, "COVID-19 pandemic),"

444 Ambrella – Slovak Platform for development organisations 2020, "Adaptation of Slovak NGOs and their partners operating in the Middle East to the COVID-19 situation (Meeting Minutes from Focus Group)," Bratislava: Ambrella. (unpublished). ; Ambrella – Slovak Platform for development organisations 2020, "COVID-19 pandemic),"

445 Ambrella – Slovak Platform for development organisations 2020, "Adaptation of Slovak NGOs and their partners operating in the Middle East to the COVID-19 situation (Meeting Minutes from Focus Group)," Bratislava: Ambrella. (unpublished). ; Ambrella – Slovak Platform for development organisations 2020, "COVID-19 pandemic),"

446 Noemi Nálepková 2020, "Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sending SlovakAid volunteers abroad in 2020," (E-mail communication) (unpublished).

communication between sending and host organizations, volunteers, and the donor was done remotely. SAIDC responded to the electronic request for early termination of the volunteer stay very quickly – within 48 hours of the request, the donor had electronically approved all the changes and eRko could buy flight tickets. The subsequent reduction of the granted budget and the return of unused funds to the agency went without a problem⁴⁴⁷.

Organisations were able to continue some of their originally planned activities, but not all of them. *They were forced to shift their educational programs or counselling programs to an online environment^{448, 449}. One particular organisation created COVID-19 hotline, another got volunteers to provide guidelines that were sent by UN agencies: WHO, UNHCR. It has proven important for the organisations to keep in touch with their beneficiaries in this way⁴⁵⁰. Research results show two (not entirely new) approaches as the best ways for international volunteers to continue supporting communities – online volunteering and support to local, community-level volunteers.*

Several story patterns of logistical feats, communications under the pressure and stressful departure back home due to COVID-19^{451, 452, 453}, came to the fore during the rereading and analysis of the data obtained from three qualitative research methods. For example, one female respondent (sample adra1) worked as support staff in the educational project for the children of Syrian refugees at host organisation ADRA Lebanon⁴⁵⁴ in Beirut at the turn of 2019 and 2020. She helped in writing project applications to the various donors' grant calls to gain funding for a full renewal of the training centre. She also *prepared a vocational course for young people from poorer backgrounds, who had experienced difficulties finding employment or paying for university education. However, she was not able to experience the implementation of this project due to her early departure to Slovakia (related to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020)*⁴⁵⁵.

447 Jozef Magda, 2020, "eRko's insight: Slovak development volunteering in the COVID-19 / post- COVID-19 era," (E-mail communication) (unpublished).

448 People in need Slovakia, 2020, "Coronavirus and Our Projects Abroad," [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, <https://clovekvohrozeni.sk/koronavirus-a-nase-projekty-v-zahranici/>; People in need Slovakia, 2020, "The Increasing Fear, Poverty and Children's Grief. What Does the Life of Families on the Run in Lebanon Look Like During the Pandemic?," (Survey results) [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, <https://clovekvohrozeni.sk/zivot-v-libanone-v-case-pandemie/>

449 Anna Hruboňová, 2020, "ADRA Slovakia's insight: Slovak development volunteering in the COVID-19 / post- COVID-19 era," (E-mail communication) (unpublished).

450 Ambrela – Slovak Platform for development organisations 2020, "Adaptation of Slovak NGOs and their partners operating in the Middle East to the COVID-19 situation (Meeting Minutes from Focus Group)," Bratislava: Ambrela. (unpublished). ; Ambrela – Slovak Platform for development organisations 2020, "COVID-19 pandemic),"

451 SAVIO 2020, "Salesian Missionary Volunteering – Tanzania: We are home in quarantine (SAVIO volunteers' update)," [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, <http://dobrovolnici.saleziani.sk/2020/03/19/sme-doma-v-karantene/>; SAVIO, 2020: "Salesian Missionary Volunteering – Kenya: And now what? Or: A human aims, the coronavirus changes," (SAVIO volunteers' update), [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, <http://dobrovolnici.saleziani.sk/2020/03/18/a-co-teraz-alebo-clovek-mieni-korona-meni/>

452 SAVIO 2020, "Salesian Missionary Volunteering – Tanzania," ; SAVIO, 2020, "Salesian Missionary Volunteering – Kenya,"

453 Christian Children Communities Movement – eRko, 2020, "Dobrá novina united against coronavirus in Africa," [In Slovak language]. accessed 19 September 2020, <https://www.dobranovina.sk/s-dobrou-novinou-proti-koronavirusu-v-afrike/>

454 ADRA MENA, 2020, "ADRA Lebanon," accessed September 19, 2020, <http://adramena.org/office/lebanon/>

455 Božena Markovič Baluchová, "In the multicultural Turkish metropolis,"; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "A volunteer stay in Lebanon,"; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Activities of Slovak Development Volunteers,"; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Examples of Humanitarian Aid Projects,"

Lebanon had gone through a civil war and a conflict with Israel in the past, has a population of only 6.8 million. Before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the country experienced a political, financial and refugee crisis, all at the same time⁴⁵⁶. Three female volunteers (samples caritas1, caritas2, caritas3) experienced similar situation in Uganda during the project implementation of Caritas Slovakia. They should *work at the Center of the Immaculate Heart of Mary for HIV positive children as educators and project assistants for six months, but it was possible for them to stay in the country only for two months*.

After five months, the Salesian missionary voluntary service of SAVIO volunteers was interrupted by the coronavirus strike⁴⁵⁷. Two girls were withdrawn from Don Bosco Seminary in Mafinge, Tanzania⁴⁵⁸ (samples savio1, savio2) and one girl from Bosco Boys Langata centre in Nairobi, Kenya (sample savio3)⁴⁵⁹. They experienced a complicated transfer from Tanzania and Kenya to Slovakia and a mandatory state quarantine.

However, there were also a few volunteers who have decided to stay⁴⁶⁰ in their host countries (e.g. samples adra2, adra3, adra4). They *wanted to continue in project management and to provide counselling to local people in online regime wishing that the global COVID-19 pandemic does not slow down the well-started social change in their beneficiary communities*^{461, 462}. They felt *devoted to find means of supporting their target groups: people currently affected by additional emergency situation*.

The pandemic affected volunteers' experience primarily at individual level. Most of the participated volunteers professionally fulfilled their *motivations and desire to get an insight into the world of humanitarian and development work, learnt how non-profit organisations operate abroad and how projects are prepared and adjusted in practice*. Some of returned volunteers are *open to the idea that they would travel out again and finish their missions when the situation of the global COVID-19 pandemic calms down a bit*⁴⁶³.

Occurrence of internal issues within the nonprofits (IVCOs)

All participating organisations in volunteer management have taken various measures to adapt to the new COVID-19 situation and they had to manage communication towards beneficiaries, donors and towards their own staff in addition. This required immediate introduction

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456 Božena Markovič Baluchová, "In the multicultural Turkish metropolis,"; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "A volunteer stay in Lebanon,"; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Activities of Slovak Development Volunteers,"; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Examples of Humanitarian Aid Projects,"

457 Štefan Kormančík, 2020, "SAVIO's insight: Slovak development volunteering in the COVID-19 / post- COVID-19 era," (E-mail communication) (unpublished).

458 SAVIO 2020, "Salesian Missionary Volunteering – Tanzania,"; SAVIO, 2020, "Salesian Missionary Volunteering – Kenya,"

459 SAVIO 2020, "Salesian Missionary Volunteering – Tanzania,"; SAVIO, 2020, "Salesian Missionary Volunteering – Kenya,"

460 Božena Markovič Baluchová, "In the multicultural Turkish metropolis,"; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "A volunteer stay in Lebanon,"; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Activities of Slovak Development Volunteers,"; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Examples of Humanitarian Aid Projects,"

461 Anna Hruboňová, 2020, "ADRA Slovakia's insight: Slovak development volunteering in the COVID-19 / post- COVID-19 era," (E-mail communication) (unpublished).

462 Božena Markovič Baluchová, "In the multicultural Turkish metropolis,"; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "A volunteer stay in Lebanon,"; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Activities of Slovak Development Volunteers,"; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Examples of Humanitarian Aid Projects,"

463 Božena Markovič Baluchová, "In the multicultural Turkish metropolis,"; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "A volunteer stay in Lebanon,"; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Activities of Slovak Development Volunteers,"; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Examples of Humanitarian Aid Projects,"

of new approaches and changes in their regular work as well as the communication with their beneficiaries. Nonprofits IVCOs are reimagining their models and pivoting to new ways of working. All organisations are reporting higher workload and increased communication traffic with less immediate or visible outputs⁴⁶⁴. IVCO—employees/volunteers relations at interpersonal level have been affected.

The need of the nonprofits to respond immediately to the emergency issues resulted in a various adaptation towards their own team. Immediate measures had to be taken for health and safety reasons (obtaining hand sanitizers, wearing face masks, working during restricted office hours, reducing or stopping field work, working from home) or learning new skills (online lectures, online counselling). The workload has increased and the staff had to deal with loads of stressful issues and pressure. Many activities were not financially covered, so people worked for free or with reduced pay although the workload was the same or more.

To help vulnerable communities, the organisations adopted various strategies, e.g. vouchers for beneficiaries. Due to their poor financial situation, the beneficiaries needed elemental assistance to cover their fundamental survival needs and to get sanitary products. They could use the vouchers to purchase basic items like food. The organisations also purchased mobile phone credit to enable the beneficiaries to join remote education programs. Some organisations were able to receive smaller funding for emergency response. Some organisations were unable to use existing funds as they had to cancel planned activities⁴⁶⁵ due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Some of the organisations have a contingency plan mainly for implementation of education activities few weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic situation started or use existing support of UNICEF especially in WASH programs. While others have no crisis management plan in disposal for such specific situation, partially due to difficult conditions in which they are providing assistance (e.g. in Syria or Lebanon). They need to adapt on daily basis not only the implementation of projects but also internally, e.g. organisation of work, communication within the nonprofit.⁴⁶⁶

As nonprofits (IVCOs) pivot to new online volunteering models, they are also tackling the challenges of getting volunteers back into the field and of helping volunteers navigate social-distancing restrictions so that they can do their jobs and make an impact. Organizations will need to cooperate and share intelligence on risks, travel, and visa restrictions to make this work⁴⁶⁷.

Recent pandemic hit hard the volunteer management and volunteering project cycle for the period 2020–21. For example, SAVIO conducted *the preparation of ten new candidates for the Salesian missionary volunteering online. None have traveled yet, because even the host organizations in low-income countries are not sure about the whether they could accept volunteers at all. Therefore SAVIO didn't apply for funding to SlovakAid due to constant changes related to COVID-19. At the turn of December and January the first two candidates might be able to travel*

464 Ambrela – Slovak Platform for development organisations 2020, “Adaptation of Slovak NGOs and their partners operating in the Middle East to the COVID-19 situation (Meeting Minutes from Focus Group),” Bratislava: Ambrela. (unpublished). ; Ambrela – Slovak Platform for development organisations 2020, “COVID-19 pandemic),”

465 People in need Slovakia, 2020, “Coronavirus and Our Projects Abroad,” [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, <https://clovekvochrozeni.sk/koronavirus-a-nase-projekty-v-zahranici/> ; People in need Slovakia, 2020, “The Increasing Fear, Poverty and Children’s Grief. What Does the Life of Families on the Run in Lebanon Look Like During the Pandemic?,” (Survey results) [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, <https://clovekvochrozeni.sk/zivot-v-libanone-v-case-pandemie/>

466 Ambrela – Slovak Platform for development organisations 2020, “Adaptation of Slovak NGOs and their partners operating in the Middle East to the COVID-19 situation (Meeting Minutes from Focus Group),” Bratislava: Ambrela. (unpublished). ; Ambrela – Slovak Platform for development organisations 2020, “COVID-19 pandemic),”

467 O’Brien, “Opinion: The future of volunteering”,

to Kenya or Tanzania⁴⁶⁸. Caritas Slovakia published an open call for six new volunteers for their centers in Rwanda and Uganda; People in need Slovakia is looking for three volunteers willing to travel to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova and Lebanon; St. Elizabeth University of Health and Social Work is planning to send abroad at least six volunteers. ADRA Slovakia didn't get funding from SlovakAid for their volunteers to be sent abroad⁴⁶⁹, so its focus has been shifted on the volunteer management under the EU Aid Volunteers brand.

It is more difficult to get funding from donors for educational projects, nonprofits are not sure whether new funding will be available. However, activities such as child protection, psychosocial support or educational projects are still very important for beneficiaries.

Discussion

All young people (Slovak development volunteers participated in the research) worked in very diverse, international teams. They could communicate with their colleagues effectively mainly thanks to having studied and understanding the context from which their counterparts came and in which they lived. All of them attended pre-departure training with focus on intercultural sensitivity and verbal and non-verbal communication in order to successfully implement their volunteer activities and build relationships in the new communities – professional as well as personal⁴⁷⁰. However, nobody prepared them for the pandemic scenario. For some volunteers, COVID-19 has meant returning to their home country if there was time to leave before the borders closed and flights ceased. For others, it has not been possible to return and these volunteers have stayed in host country, working in online regime. The adaptation to COVID-19 measurements, safety restrictions and constant changes caused a lot of pressure on all the actors of volunteer management. In the past few months, all those people have made the switch to working from home as countries have gone into lockdown. And this is not a unique situation only for Slovakia.

The Peace Corps (volunteer program run by the United States Government) conducted its largest mass evacuation of more than 7,300 American volunteers from 61 countries in mid-March 2020, as nations closed their borders and international airlines canceled flights. The agency had completed regional and country evacuations before, such as during the Iraq War and the Ebola outbreak, but had never withdrawn all of its volunteers at once⁴⁷¹.

Because volunteers are part of the communities they support, they develop a deep understanding of local needs and the challenges. Volunteers, and the in-country teams that support them, are uniquely placed to gather and share intelligence with head offices and home governments as to how foreign nations, businesses, and civil society partners are faring during the health crisis and what support they need⁴⁷². Therefore, they need to be placed in the field.

However, many international volunteers sent abroad by European IVCOs (e.g. VSO) are now 'working remotely', giving online support to vital projects around the world, despite having

468 Štefan Kormančík, 2020, "SAVIO's insight: Slovak development volunteering in the COVID-19 / post- COVID-19 era," (E-mail communication) (unpublished).

469 SAIDC 2020, "Sending Volunteers and Expert Volunteers,"; SAIDC, 2020, "Annual report of SAIDC," ; SAIDC 2020, "Approved applications," ; SAIDC 2020, "Guidelines for grant recipients to send volunteers,"

470 Božena Markovič Baluchová, "In the multicultural Turkish metropolis", ; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "A volunteer stay in Lebanon," ; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Activities of Slovak Development Volunteers," ; Božena Markovič Baluchová, "Examples of Humanitarian Aid Projects",

471 Amy Lieberman, "After COVID-19 evacuations, volunteers fear for future of Peace Corps," 14 April 2020, accessed September 19, 2020, <https://www.devex.com/news/after-covid-19-evacuations-volunteers-fear-for-future-of-peace-corps-96862>

472 O'Brien, "Opinion: The future of volunteering,"

had to return home due to COVID-19. Despite these different circumstances facing volunteers, many are still finding ways to make an impact – carry on fighting poverty in spite of lockdown⁴⁷³.

More safety restrictions were imposed on projects' beneficiaries – vulnerable (mostly migrant and refugee) communities in respect to COVID-19 situations. They were more controlled respecting local population, e.g: could not leave informal settlements, high security was deployed⁴⁷⁴. So during the first few weeks of pandemic outbreak, many projects were put on hold and it was virtually impossible to directly access volunteer projects' target groups.

Two approaches are coming to the fore – online volunteering and support to local, community-level volunteers. South-South volunteers may have been a very important part of successful managing the COVID-19 pandemic the Asia-Pacific region. This South-South cooperation and volunteerism will be critical means to chart a pathway for this region's inclusive, resilient and green recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic⁴⁷⁵.

The COVID-19 crisis has shown that even strong ODA agencies can act quickly, flexibly and still effectively. For example, the evaluation of SlovakAid call for a delivery of humanitarian aid took ten days instead of the usual 60-90 days. Moreover, field workers and volunteers from Slovak organizations were able to use their know-how from development cooperation projects also at home. For example, St. Elizabeth University of Health and Social Work, People in need, MAGNA, Caritas Slovakia and ADRA Slovakia used their expert experience from foreign missions and transformed them operationally into the fight against COVID-19 in Slovakia^{476, 477}.

Conclusion

Recent pandemic hit hard the volunteer management in Slovakia for year 2020 and it is already impacting the volunteering project cycles for year 2021. The authors of this study are planning to follow similar researches conducted across the Europe and compare the results, as well as the types of impact on relations between main actors of volunteer programs. They are aware that occurred trends described by them can be identified in neighboring countries where similar projects for sending volunteers abroad are running.

Every crisis can be seen primarily as an opportunity for growth and the implementation of change, which would normally be complicated, bureaucratized and long. This also applies to the attempt to improve the Official development assistance (ODA) system in terms of faster remote communication and evaluation of new calls, changes in funding, adapted strategies for work with particular communities, contingency plans for implementation of agreed activities, as

473 VSO International 2020, "Meet the volunteers fighting poverty from their living rooms," accessed September 19, 2020, <https://www.vsointernational.org/news/blog/meet-the-volunteers-fighting-poverty-from-their-living-rooms>

474 Ambrela – Slovak Platform for development organisations 2020, "Adaptation of Slovak NGOs and their partners operating in the Middle East to the COVID-19 situation (Meeting Minutes from Focus Group)," Bratislava: Ambrela. (unpublished). ; Ambrela – Slovak Platform for development organisations 2020, "COVID-19 pandemic,"

475 UNV 2020, "Volunteering at the heart of South-South cooperation UNV & UN Office for South-South Cooperation," 18 September 2020 Bangkok, accessed September 19, 2020, <https://www.unv.org/News/Volunteering-heart-South-South-cooperation>

476 Daniel Kaba, "A pandemic must not stop development cooperation," *Zahraničná Politika (Foreign policy affairs)*, Bratislava: SPPA, 30 June 2020. [In Slovak language]. accessed September 19, 2020, <https://zahranicnapolitika.sk/pandemia-nesmie-zastavit-rozvojovu-spolupracu/>

477 Ambrela – Slovak Platform for development organisations 2020, "Adaptation of Slovak NGOs and their partners operating in the Middle East to the COVID-19 situation (Meeting Minutes from Focus Group)," Bratislava: Ambrela. (unpublished). ; Ambrela – Slovak Platform for development organisations 2020, "COVID-19 pandemic,"

well as mental health support and wellbeing programs for volunteers and field workers experiencing higher workload and potential burnout. Not only MFEA Slovakia together with SAIDC / SlovakAid, but also other European donors can take the study results into account while making decisions about the next call for grant proposals and planning the budget for future aid interventions.

In May 2020, eighteen applications from six organisations to ten low-income countries were approved and supported by SlovakAid grant⁴⁷⁸. However, in view of the COVID-19 situation, a new guideline was launched in September 2020 regulating the Manual for Sending volunteers and Expert volunteers abroad. The changes concerned grant rules related to date of deployment, signing the contract and potential change of country of volunteer stay⁴⁷⁹. Trained volunteers are very uniquely qualified to support the work with target groups (vulnerable communities), through their language and cultural skills. They can really assimilate and adapt into any environment. Those volunteers do not bring financial assistance with their arrival and stay in low-income countries. However, in addition to determination and expertise, the symbolic and social capital of volunteers is also important and credible.

Together with their sending and host organisations, the volunteers represent their own (direct or indirect) role – to contribute to the Global Goals and to ending global poverty, often linked to human-caused conflicts and subsequent humanitarian crises (including the COVID-19 crisis), which unjustly keep millions of people in need. Slovak development volunteers' future deployments together with other international volunteers' missions will certainly play a crucial part of recovery processes of low-income countries in the post-COVID-19 era. All the actors in volunteer management just need to cooperate and share intelligence on risks, travel, and other restrictions to make this work.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All the mentioned authors significantly, directly, and intellectually contributed to the work and approved its publication.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All the authors declare that the research involved in the article and the publication of the article were carried out without having any business, financial or other relations and/or circumstances that could be considered as a potential conflict of interest. At the same time, all the authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to this article or its review.

478 SAIDC 2020, "Sending Volunteers and Expert Volunteers,"; SAIDC, 2020: "Annual report of SAIDC"; SAIDC 2020, "Approved applications,"; SAIDC 2020, "Guidelines for grant recipients to send volunteers,"

479 SAIDC 2020, "Sending Volunteers and Expert Volunteers,"; SAIDC, 2020: "Annual report of SAIDC"; SAIDC 2020, "Approved applications,"; SAIDC 2020, "Guidelines for grant recipients to send volunteers,"

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