



# VOLUNTEERING AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP 2023 Conference

What role does volunteering have  
to play in supporting young people  
become good global citizens?

## CONFERENCE REPORT

The McConnell International Foundation  
in partnership with  
The Scottish Government



**McConnell**  
International Foundation



**Scottish Government**  
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

# INTRODUCTION



**Since its inception, more than a decade ago, The McConnell International Foundation has had a strong interest in international volunteering.**

Volunteering has a long standing role in international development and can help prepare young people understand the challenges and opportunities of an interdependent world. But the landscape has changed in recent years, not least through the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the climate emergency, and de-colonisation debates. The foundation recognised that now is a good time to consider what volunteering means in 2023 and beyond, and how we can all work together to build a better world.

This conference, held in partnership with the Scottish Government, looked at how best volunteering can support young Scots to think deeply and critically about equity and justice, and how they can minimise harm to our planet.

Hosted by David Lee and co-chaired by Rt Hon. Lord Jack McConnell and Hon Vera Kamtukule, Malawi's Minister for Tourism, the conference heard a keynote address from Christina McKelvie MSP, Scotland's International Development minister, who emphasised that all volunteering activities, whether educational trips, school partnerships, or individual volunteers, should be built on the principle of "do no harm".

Frances Guy, CEO of Scottish International Development and Anne Kahuria of VSO International both reinforced that principle, with Frances sharing five key tenets of volunteering, including that it should promote human rights and equality.

Two panel sessions, one on school partnerships and the other on early career development, stressed the importance of mutual respect, while the final session, a presentation by Challenges Worldwide, offered a signpost for the future of international volunteering.

The conference provided an excellent platform for an informed and lively discussion with delegates from across the UK and the Global South on the role of volunteering in sustainable development, and offered some very useful pointers for future discussion. The conversation will continue into 2024, with surveys and meetings which, together with recommendations from this conference, will help inform the production of best practice guidelines.

## Acknowledgements

This report is based on a conference organised by the McConnell International Foundation, in partnership with the Scottish Government. We would like to say a special thanks to the invited speakers who joined us from across the world, as well as the 150 people who participated, from Scotland, the rest of the UK, Malawi, Rwanda, Zambia, Cameroon, Kenya and elsewhere.



Watch the full  
conference on  
YouTube



Rt Hon. Lord Jack McConnell, chair The McConnell International Foundation

Lord McConnell opened the conference by setting out the three principles he believes should underpin volunteering. He said: “First of all, volunteering is a very good thing. Secondly, it should be conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect. And thirdly, opportunities to volunteer must be equitable.”

He also pointed out the three factors that must influence any discussion about the future of volunteering in 2023: the cost of international travel and its impact on the climate; valid concerns about ‘voluntourism’ and whether it is of mutual benefit; and the significant cost of volunteering – opportunities must be available to people from all backgrounds.



Hon Vera Kamtukule, Minister for Tourism, Government of Malawi

Hon. Vera Kamtukule impressed on delegates that all volunteer activity needs to be rooted in the development priorities of the host country. She explained, “Mutual respect demands that you need to understand the fundamentals of what development looks like to the people that are involved. So you cannot just come from Scotland and say we’re going to build a school block when a school block is not really what they want.” And she reminded delegates that Malawi has a blueprint for development – [Malawi 2063](#) – which all volunteers, including school partnerships, should follow.

She also pointed out that the sightseeing aspect of educational visits does have a positive impact on economies such as Malawi, and that tourism has a role to play in promoting global citizenship, but that tourism and volunteering are two distinct activities.



Christina McKelvie MSP, Minister for International Development, Scottish Government

In her keynote address, Christina McKelvie noted that “even prior to the impact on travel by COVID-19, we were thinking about the future of voluntourism - about climate change, safeguarding issues, the purpose of youth volunteering, and models for voluntourism”. The Minister followed this with a key question: “How do we harness the enthusiasm and energy of young people who want to travel to Africa and other continents to broaden their horizons, to experience a way of life different to their own, to help others and to do that in a way that ensures they do no harm?”

She emphasised that good global citizenship is central to much of the Scottish Government’s work, both at home and internationally, adding “As a government, we are committed to partner country-led and inclusive development, to equality, to amplifying global south voices, to inclusion and diversity, and to designing programmes that are innovative, adapting and sustainable, all set out in the new [international development principles](#).” And she said that future international development work will include a focus on strengthening civil society and grassroots linkages with Scotland’s partner countries: Malawi, Rwanda and Zambia.

# THE PRINCIPLES OF VOLUNTEERING: WHO BENEFITS? WHAT WORKS?



In response to a question from Ruth of the Malawi Scotland Partnership about school partnerships post-Covid, the minister acknowledged some links did not survive the pandemic, and that a recent scoping assessment by the Scotland Malawi Partnership will hopefully identify the “magic ingredient” that kept some going. And she stressed again that partnerships must be of mutual benefit, adding that we did not need to go overseas to be a “good internationalist,” citing the [Scottish Fair Trade Forum](#) as an excellent example of global citizenship, and she exhorted people to join their local fair trade group.

# THE PRINCIPLES OF VOLUNTEERING: WHO BENEFITS? WHAT WORKS? continued

She ended her contribution by emphasising the need to “do no harm”, whether that is by ensuring proper safeguards are in place for young volunteers, or that there are no unintended negative consequences to volunteer activities. “Participation and collaboration is the key,” she finished.

Frances Guy picked up the theme of mutual benefit and respect, sharing five key principles of volunteering, applicable in Scotland as well as in international work:

- Volunteering benefits the community and the volunteer;
- Volunteering is not a substitute for paid work;
- Volunteers do not replace paid workers, nor constitute a threat to the job security of paid workers;
- Volunteering respects the rights, dignity and culture of others;
- Volunteering promotes human rights and equality.

She suggested that we look at volunteering through a similar lens to that adopted by [Scotland's International Development Alliance](#). What does a truly decolonial, anti-racist, feminist approach to sustainable development look like? And there are three basic questions always worth asking: Do both the community and the volunteer benefit? Is it undermining someone else's work? And is it based on mutual respect?

During the Q & A session, Frances emphasised that there are many examples of volunteering that we can learn from for the future, but stressed that we have to be very careful about volunteers displacing paid work. “It is back to Jack McConnell's point about who participates. If it is only those who can afford, then it is not in the spirit of volunteering. We have to keep that in mind.”

The final speaker in this session was Anne Kahuria, speaking from Nairobi. She described how, over its 60-year history, VSO International has developed its thinking about volunteering. She said, “To be clear, volunteering should never be about imposing another way of doing things or another culture. It's about the reciprocal sharing of ideas...and expertise between community and national and international volunteers”.

She stressed that it is critical that all international volunteering activity takes account of the the difference in power dynamics between the Global South and the Global North. “One of the ways that VSO have been able to do this is by ensuring that there is strong community ownership in whatever is being done as you bring in international volunteers,” she explained.

She said it was critical to have a set of standards for volunteering. “VSO are proud to have been involved in the development of the [Global Standard for Volunteers](#), developed in collaboration with over 150 civil society organisations.” She concluded by saying that volunteering, if done with mutual respect, has a unique and powerful role to play in the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals.



Frances Guy, CEO,  
Scottish International  
Development Alliance



Anne Kahuria,  
Global Youth  
Engagement Officer,  
VSO International

# SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS:

## LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER



Irma Arts, researcher,  
Raboud University,  
Netherlands

Irma Arts opened the first panel discussion which looked at the benefits – and challenges – of school partnerships and educational visits – with a short summary of her [2020 report on school partnerships](#) for the Scottish Government. She said that while the partnerships are rooted in good global citizenship, they can sometimes be counter-productive. She cited the impact of air travel on climate change and added that some partnerships might “unconsciously promote stereotypes of poverty or other cultures.”



Ian Mitchell, Youth  
& Schools Officer,  
Scotland Malawi  
Partnership

She said that young people should be supported in thinking about, and challenging, global problems in a critical way, by considering social justice and questioning power, and suggested a really positive way of doing that is through peer to peer conversations which did not necessarily involve travel. When planning visits, she stressed it was “really important to think about the mutuality and enforce local voices and desires of the young people within the visiting country.”

Ian Mitchell used his extensive experience of a school partnership between Scotland and Malawi to explore how in-country visits challenge young Scots’ perceptions of the Global South. He said, “These change quite dramatically when they’ve actually been there. They come back with a very different perspective on both their own lives and the lives of others. On our first trip, we actually had three of the youngsters come back who changed the courses they were applying to through university to do international law and international relationships and justice.”



Emma Wood, Senior  
Lecturer, Queen  
Margaret University

Emma Wood introduced her contribution with a [short film](#), based on her report An Alternative to Voluntourism, which examined how young people can empower themselves and bring about social change through dialogue. She said, “It is very difficult for teenagers at that particular stage in life to feel brave enough to say what they really think about things. But if you read the report, both the Malawians and the young Scots talk about this as being absolutely life changing.”

Emma also pointed out the power imbalance exists within countries like Malawi as well, describing how dialogue groups between schools in Malawi exposed this. “The secondary school we ran it in had exactly the same misconceptions about poverty... and the life of poverty experienced by young people in Malawi as the Scots had.”

Gift Thompson from Malawi took part in the first of the dialogues and found them very useful, but there needs to be purpose to them. “For example, if we were talking about environmental issues, when they (Scots) do go back, it’s about changing some of their behaviour that impacts the environment.”

He added, “It’s not just about having a discussion and learning.” For him, the key thing is what actions young people are going to take as good global citizens. As Ian Mitchell said, “The bottom line for global citizenship is to try and make the world a better place.”





Oyiza Momoh,  
Office of the Chief  
Scientific Officer, GSK



Dr Stuart Fergusson,  
Consultant Surgeon,  
Shetland Islands



Peace Ambaro,  
Product Development  
Manager, Challenges  
Rwanda



David Adair,  
Head of Community  
Investments, PwC

The panellists on the second panel were very positive about the impact of early career volunteering, but all four stressed the need to prepare volunteers before their placement, to understand the expectations of the volunteers and the host, and to anticipate the impact of the volunteer experience.

Speaking from her experience with First Aid Africa, Oyiza Momoh, who now works for GSK was clear about the three areas where people benefit from volunteering in the early stages of their working life.

“The mutually beneficial relationship that you get from volunteering, particularly around empathy and global citizenship. There are organisational benefits. I was able to bring back new skills to the organisations that supported me in volunteering, and learn a lot about how my own organisation could benefit from that experience, and hopefully, also the partner organisation that I was volunteering with.

David Adair of PwC spoke of how the company’s local offices encourage their young staff to volunteer, He explained “if we’re going to be more representative for our clients and a more diverse organisation, we need to represent the communities in which we operate. Volunteering is a good way for young people to get a broader sort of training on global and local issues and cultural differences. He said that 75% of PwC’s volunteers say they could not have gained ‘soft’ skills, such as empathy, in any other way than through volunteering. And he stressed the very real benefits of volunteering, describing it as “social action, with a social impact”.

Dr Stuart Fergusson, the co-author of [Global Citizenship in the Scottish Health Service](#) said that the volunteering can play a positive role at different stages of a person’s career development, but that it should given the same support as academic work. “As surgical trainee it would be much easier for me to get time away from my surgical training to do academic work such as a PhD than spend a year in Malawi or Rwanda.”

He suggested that, in the health context more value is placed on academic work than practical experience gained through volunteering. He added, “We need to recognise the international work brings tangible benefits to individuals, organisations, and countries”.

Peace Ambaro, speaking from Kigali in Rwanda described how as a young volunteer, her host company had given her the freedom to implement ideas, which resulted in a 90 per cent increase in sales. She stressed the need for proper safeguarding to be in place for volunteers, who are often working away from home, in different cultures.

Heather Cubie, chair of the Scotland Malawi Partnership pointed out in the comments that volunteering is not just for young people in the early stages of their working life – it is something that people can do throughout their working life, and beyond.

# EARLY CAREER VOLUNTEERING: MUTUAL RESPECT AND BENEFIT



# THE FUTURE: CAN VOLUNTEERING HELP TRANSFORM THE WORLD?



Ross McKenzie and Amy Earnshaw Blake of Challenges Worldwide presented their organisation's thinking on a new model of international volunteering, or Volunteering 2.0 as they have dubbed their work.

Ross explained that Challenges is aware that, at its worst, international volunteering can be deeply harmful, rooted in white separatism and neo-colonialism. However, he went on, "At its best, and what we've seen, and what we're proud of, is that it can be transformative and empowering and hugely impactful."

Ross described how he and Amy have boiled their approach down to one simple question: Is there a role for international volunteering post-Covid? If so, what should it look like?

They are clear that any model that Challenges decides on is based on what the host organisation, community or country requires, and not what suits the volunteer. As Amy explained, "We really want to make sure that we're flipping this on its head so that we are providing skills into the organisations that they have clearly identified themselves, rather than the other way around."

And they want to apply the lessons that they – and many others – have learned over recent decades, so that the future of international volunteering is a locally-led, meaningful exchange; that it has a long term focus and a global perspective; that volunteers – and hosts – learn new languages and develop skills; that it promotes career opportunities and sustainable development; and is rooted in tolerance, empathy and partnership.



Amy Earnshaw Blake,  
Associate Consultant,  
Challenges Worldwide



Ross McKenzie, Director  
of Venture Support,  
Challenges Worldwide

Challenges are looking at three areas of work:

- Global Youth Entrepreneurs;
- University placements; and
- Corporate programmes.

They are different in scope, but all are underpinned by the Global Volunteering Standard and have the same framework:

- designing & delivering projects;
- duty of care;
- safety & security, safeguarding & protection, health & wellbeing;
- managing volunteers;
- measuring impact.

"We want to unite individuals and organisations with a shared purpose and empower them to be catalysts for change," explained Amy. "We want to resource civil society with exceptional individuals' expertise, provide skills training, to accelerate community-led change."

Challenges Worldwide is working on sustainable, equitable and impactful models for international volunteering and is keen to hear from others who share their ambition. "We are very keen for collaboration," said Amy. "So if anything we've said has piqued your interest, whether you just want to give us an opinion, or share your insights, or we could work together on this, please do get in touch."

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# INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERING: WHAT NEXT?



Scotland has a proud record in international volunteering and global citizenship, but we can strive to do better. The conference stimulated valuable discussions that helped us better understand each other's experiences and perspectives. And it highlighted a number of areas and key principles that merit further discussion, to feed into the production of best practice guidelines for intentional volunteering and global citizenship in 2024 and beyond.

## Building mutual respect

**Working together** How do we better prepare volunteers and their host organisations/communities so that volunteering is a reciprocal sharing of ideas and experiences?

**Ensuring mutual benefit** What does this look like?

**Locally led** How do you ensure volunteering activity meets the needs of the host community/country and not just the volunteers?

**Do no harm?** Do we need a definition of this?

## Shaping the future

**Promoting equity** How do we ensure that volunteering is open to all, regardless of background?

**Safeguarding** What framework is required to ensure those involved in volunteering, including host individuals and communities in-country are properly protected?

**Respecting our planet** How do we mitigate the worst aspects of international travel on our fragile climate?

**Preparing volunteers** What is the minimum support/training a volunteer should expect before travelling abroad?

**Social impact** How do we ensure that any proposed initiatives involving young people are designed and delivered properly; and how do we define and measure the impact of volunteering?

**Critical thinking** How do we best support young people to think deeply and critically about equity and justice, and to challenge social injustice?

**School partnerships or exchanges** What is the difference? And does it matter?

**International volunteering at home** How can we promote the equal value of contributing to a just, equitable and sustainable world without leaving Scotland, through "active global citizenship"?

There will be further meetings and discussions early in 2024 to discuss these questions. If you have any comments or ideas, please share them with us. Email [mcconnellintfoundation@gmail.com](mailto:mcconnellintfoundation@gmail.com) with the subject field **VOLUNTEERING GUIDELINES**. Thank you.