

Comhlámh's  
Volunteering  
Options

# Research into Barriers to Continuous Engagement

as Experienced by Returned Volunteers  
and Returned Development Workers

October 2009



# **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to the returned volunteers and development workers who took the time to participate in the online survey and focus group. For many it was the first step back into global development issues after their return home.

Comhlámh is also very grateful to the representatives from the volunteer sending organisations who assisted us in the preparation of this research by distributing the survey to their returned development workers and volunteers and/or who participated in the telephone interviews despite their busy schedules. The organisations who participated included EIL; Habitat for Humanity; i-to-i; International Service Ireland; Link Community Development; Suas; Skillshare; UCD Volunteering Overseas (UCDVO) United Nations Volunteers (UNV); Voluntary Missionary Movement (VMM) and Voluntary Service International (VSI).

Particular thanks to Kate Byron, Siobhán Sleeman and Anne Reilly in Comhlámh for all their support and encouragement. Report prepared by Nicki Flynn and Dawn Walsh (Comhlámh).

## **Acronyms**

RV – Returned Volunteer

RDW – Returned Development worker

UNV – United Nations Volunteer

NGO – Non Governmental Organisation

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# **1.0 Introduction**

A key element of the Comhlámh strategic plan is to build the will to change the structures that cause global injustice. Contained within this is a specific strategic objective to encourage volunteers and development workers to place their experience within the global context, and to support volunteers in a longer term commitment to development. Returned development workers are those who were on professional placements and received remuneration for their services. Returned volunteers are those who went overseas to provide a service on a non-paid basis and did not receive reimbursement.

The Volunteering Options Programme in Comhlámh was set up in 2004, with funding from Irish Aid. The Programme aims to promote responsible, responsive overseas volunteering and to develop good practice standards among volunteer sending organisations. Volunteering Options encourages and supports volunteers and development workers to view their volunteer experience as part of a long-term commitment to development.

This research looks at what barriers, perceived or otherwise, are in place to prevent returned volunteers and development workers from becoming actively engaged in development issues upon their return from a volunteer placement.

It is hoped that by documenting the push and pull factors and also the enablers for continuous engagement it will assist Comhlámh and other organisations in the volunteering sector to channel returned volunteers more effectively post-placement, and to formulate relevant methods of support.

## **2.0 Aims and objectives of the research**

The research aimed to obtain data from returned volunteers, returned development workers, and volunteer sending organisations on: the current level of engagement in development issues; the barriers to continuing engagement; and recommendations as to how these barriers could be overcome.

### **The research objectives were to:**

- 2.1** Investigate how and to what extent RDWs and RVs continue to be active in community or international development through work, volunteerism or fundraising upon their return to Ireland;
- 2.2** Identify if there is a particular time period in the pre-departure / on placement / return home cycle when a decision to remain continuously engaged is made;
- 2.3** Identify information sources used by RDWs and RVs as part of the decision-making process to remain continuously engaged;
- 2.4** Identify the reasons for choosing to remain engaged / continuing to volunteer, and investigate if there is a link between the level of engagement upon return and the gender, age and length of time spent on placement (i.e. long or short term volunteer);
- 2.5** Identify the barriers to remaining active, rating the importance given to specific factors, and identify any other reasons why RDWs and RVs are no longer actively involved in development issues / volunteering
- 2.6** Identify what methods, if any, sending organisation use to keep their returned volunteers engaged and their success rates;
- 2.7** Recommend ways in which Comhlámh can help RDWs and volunteers to remain continuously engaged.

## 3.0 Research methodology

This research explores the barriers to continuous engagement experienced by returned volunteers and development workers. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was used to gather data. Non-probability self-selection sampling was used for both the online survey and also the focus group. Non-probability quota sampling was used for the telephone interviews.

Research methods	Participants
Online questionnaire	129 participants <sup>1</sup>
1 Focus group of RV's	6 participants – all RV's
6 telephone interviews	3 short-term volunteer sending orgs 3 long-term volunteer sending orgs

Completion of the online questionnaire was done anonymously. Assurances were given to the focus group participants that quotes used in the final report would not be attributed to them personally and that the information gathered would not be used for any other purpose.

### Participants in the focus group

The focus group and the telephone interviews were conducted in November 2008. Participants in the focus were invited from a range of sending organisations, via online fora and from the Comhlámh membership. The online questionnaire was available over a 5 week period in 2009. The questionnaire was disseminated as widely as possible, by approaching a wide range of sending organisations and requesting their assistance in distributing the survey to their returned development workers and volunteers. The sending organisations were chosen with the aim of facilitating variation in a number of key characteristics: duration of placement abroad, home location of the RDW or volunteer and the age profile of the RDW or volunteer.

Telephone interviews were also held with representatives of six volunteer sending organisations, to ascertain whether organisations included a specific objective around the continuous engagement of RDWs and RVs in their programming and if so, how they track their success rates in this area.

A limitation of the research is the difficulty in estimating the population size in question. While there are figures for volunteering rates for domestic volunteering<sup>2</sup>, despite efforts, there is no widely accepted figure of how many RDWs or returned volunteers there are among the general population. Consequently while efforts have been made to select a representative sample of sufficient size it is not possible to calculate the confidence intervals of the findings in the absence of a conclusive sample size.

**6** <sup>1</sup> While 129 respondents began the survey 104 completed it. This means N=104.  
<sup>2</sup> Donaghue, Freda, Prizeman, Geraldine, O'Regan, Andrew & Noël Virginie, 2006, "The Hidden Landscape - First Forays into Mapping Nonprofit Organisations in Ireland", Centre for Non-profit Management, School of Business, Trinity College Dublin

# 4.0 Research Findings

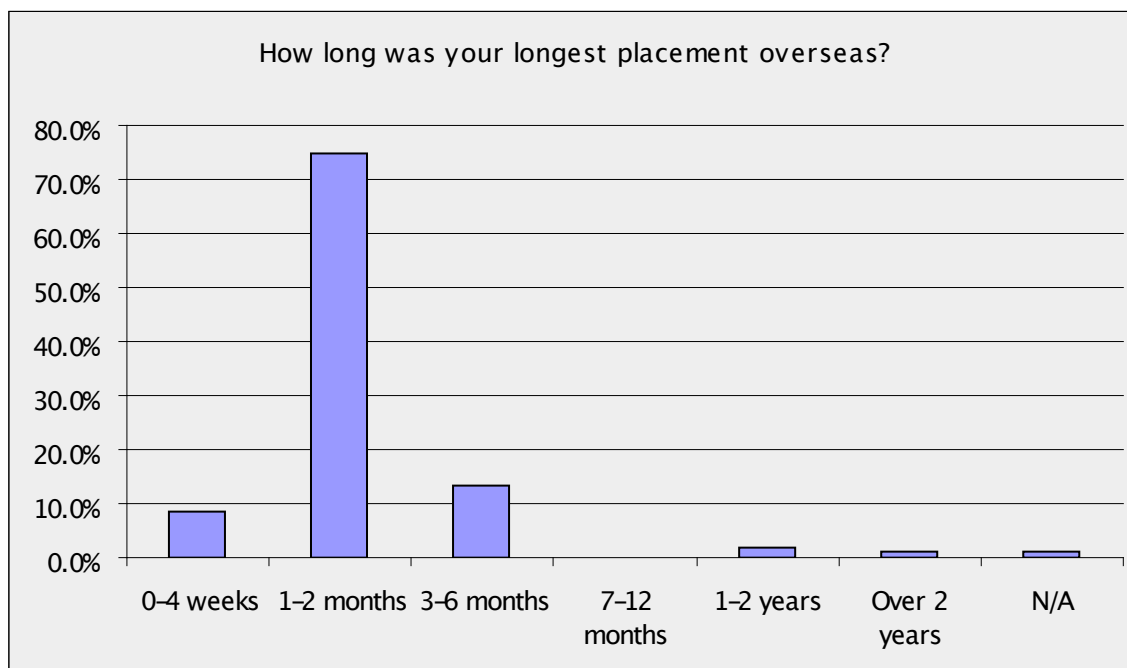
## 4.1 Current level of engagement of research participants

### Profile of research participants:

Of the 129 people who participated in the online survey, 104 completed the survey. Therefore for the purpose of analysing the results N=104. Of these 104, 72 were female and 32 were male. This would seem to confirm the anecdotal evidence that there are more females attending courses, seminars and other Comhlámh events in the last number of years.

103 participants had been RVs or RDWs in the last 5 years. The respondents were more frequently engaged in short term placements, with the most common length of time on placement of 1-2 months (74.3%), followed by over 3-6 months (14.3%) 0-4 weeks (8.6%) and 1-2 years (1.9%). The most common countries for placements were India and South Africa.

**Table 1. Length of placement of respondents**



*The respondents were mainly from the 25-34 years old age group, followed by the 16-24 years old age group.*

**Table 2. Age of Respondents**

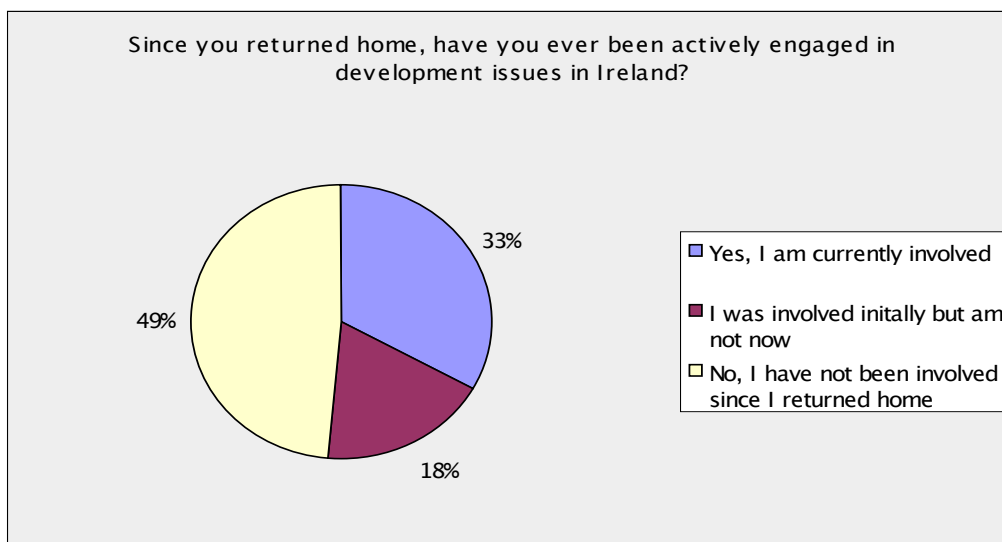
What age group are you in?	% of respondents
16 – 24 years	39
25 – 34 years	48.6
35 - 54 years	10.5
55 – 64 years	1.9
65 years or more	0

**Current level of active engagement in development issues:**

All of the participants were asked if they had been actively involved in development issues since they returned home. 33.7% responded that they are currently involved with development issues, while 18.3% were initially involved but are now currently inactive. 48.1% never became involved in development issues after returning home from their placements.

In 2006 The Centre for Non-Profit Management at Trinity College Dublin produced a report called ‘Hidden Landscapes’ which presented the findings of research into volunteering in Ireland. It found that there were 1,570,408 volunteers in Ireland, using the Census statistics from 2006 this converts to a volunteering rate of 37% among the general population<sup>3</sup>. So an involvement rate of 52% of RVs (taking into consideration both those currently involved and those who have been involved since their return from overseas) is well above the national average.

**Table 3. Level of involvement of respondents**



**Activities and organisations currently involved in:**

Of the 33.7% of participants currently active in development issues, the most common activities are:

**Table 4. The most common activities respondents are involved in**

What Activities are you engaged in	% of respondents
Development / intercultural education	44.1%
Fundraising	44.1%
Administrative or Office Work	32.4%
Organising or supervising activities such as volunteer pre-departure training	29.4%
Unpaid member of a Board or Committee	26.5%

Other activities included community organising, religious organising, working with immigrant and minority groups and political campaigning/lobbying. Participants were undertaking these volunteer activities in a range of organisations.

**Table 5. Issues respondents were involved in**

<b>What issues are you involved in?</b>	<b>% of respondents</b>
International Development / Global issues	67.6%
Community Development / Poverty	58.8%
Education/ Literacy/ Research	50%
Human Rights / Gender Issues	47.1%

**Continued involvement with a particular organisation:**

The majority of respondents who remain active are active through their sending organisation (62%), others are involved with an organisation for which they worked or volunteered before they went overseas (41%) and others remain involved with their host organisation (23%). Others set up their own NGO or became involved with an organisation in the country/region where they volunteered.

***“The sending organisation invited you to continue involvement with them because they do their own training and need volunteers to help out at the training weekends”***

**Reasons for remaining engaged:**

There were a number of reasons for remaining involved. These included: wanting to share their experiences with others;

***“Having learned and received so much myself I wished to open up possibilities to others.”***

To continue doing work already started;

***“Initially it was because I did not feel I had accomplished a whole lot during my initial placement and I wanted to “finish the job”. Since then I have developed a big interest in the field of development issues and development education in particular.”***

***“I want to get a chance to do more because this last summer simply showed me what needs to be done; I don’t feel I actually DID anything. In hindsight I look on it more as a reconnaissance trip rather than a volunteering trip.”***

***“I felt that it would be a bit of a waste of all of the learning/experiences I went through in India to not remain engaged in trying to change things/make a difference (as naff as that sounds) upon my return. I also was really impressed with the work of the partner organisations I worked with in India and wanted to continue to support them while in Ireland.”***

To know more about development;

***“To support the group I was working with and remain informed about development issues more generally.”***

***“I think most of us that go away to Africa, thinking that we know everything and they know nothing and in fact that’s when you realise... the reason I will be doing the development work is so that I have something to hang the skills on.”***

But overwhelmingly the main reason for staying engaged is to fight inequality and injustice;

***“A concern with the major inequalities and injustices of the world”***

***“I wanted people to know what was going on overseas. It is so unfair... I had to do something”***

**“Anger at inequality and injustice, interest in politics and current affairs”**

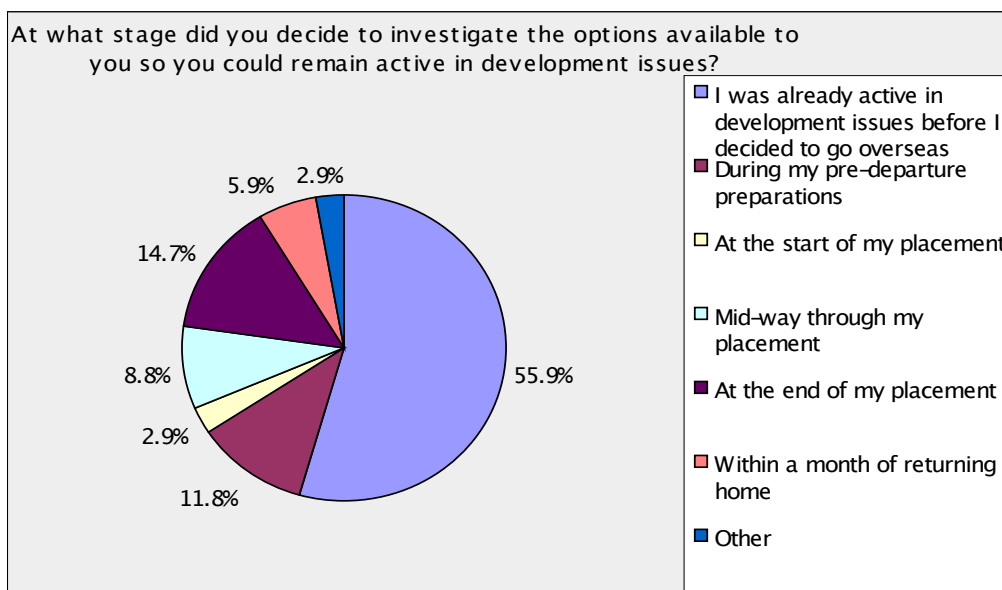
**“Seeing how good we have it in Ireland and the inequalities and unjust world that we live in”**

**Time period when decision to remain active was made:**

The decision about remaining active was at an early point of the volunteer experience, with the vast majority of those who remained active making the decision before returning to Ireland. 67.7% of participants had decided before they departed Ireland (55.9% were already active and 11.8% decided during their pre-departure training). A further 14.7% made their decision at the end of their placement.

These findings are a strong indicator that the decision to remain active in development is made early in the volunteer experience and go even further than existing Comhlámh research<sup>4</sup>, which found that all respondents who are currently engaged became involved in volunteer activities within six months of returning to Ireland with 82.8% getting involved within three months.

**Table 6. When respondents decided to remain active.**



**Information sources:**

When investigating ways to stay involved, 67.6% of participants used the website of the organisation that they are currently involved with as an information source. 50% of participants spoke to friends / colleagues who were already involved with the organisation. Again this is not surprising considering the number of participants who were involved before they went overseas.

Other sources include The Comhlámh *Index Contact List of Development Education Organisations*, recommendations from their sending organisations, a website related to volunteering in Ireland and Comhlámh’s E-Link newsletter.

**Link between level of engagement and gender, age, or length of placement:**

Of the 32 male participants, 29% are currently active, 22.6% were initially active but are no longer active and 48.4% had never been active since their return. Of the 72 female participants, 34.7% are currently active, 16.7% had been active and 48.6% had not been active since their return. This suggests a small variation in tendency to remain involved dependent on gender. However given that the demographics were skewed towards females and the small size of this variation it is unadvisable to draw firm conclusions from this indicator. However past research into volunteering by RV carried out by Kelly & Case in Canada is broadly supportive of these findings, showing that there is typically no difference between how females and males volunteer.

<sup>4</sup>Leahy, Alison (2008) *Research into Support Services Offered by Comhlámh’s Support services Team 2005-2008*, Comhlámh internal report.

In the 16-24 year age group 19.5% of volunteers have continued to be engaged, 39.2% of 25-34 year olds were also engaged, 50% of 35-54 year olds remained engaged and 100% of 54-65 year olds remain active in development issues. This finding correspond with the research done by Kelly & Case , which found that RVs in the 16-24 year and 25-34 year age groups were least likely to continue to be involved in volunteering at home. Though a note of caution should be applied to the 54-65 year old age group; there were a very small number of participants in this group (2) making it inappropriate to draw broad conclusions from this figure.

**Table 7. Involvement by gender.**

Status of Involvement	Male	Female
Currently involved	9	25
Was but is no longer involved	7	12
Has not been involved since his/her returned to Ireland	15	35

The length of placement with the highest tendency to remain active was the 3-6months group with 60% currently active. The 0-4 week's placement included a significant number who were engaged initially but not currently (77.8%).

**Table 8. Involvement by time of longest placement.**

Status of Involvement	0-4 Weeks	1-2 Months	3-6 Months	7-12 Months	1-2 Years
Currently involved	2	23	9	0	1
Was but is no longer involved	0	18	1	0	0
Has not been involved since his/her return	7	37	5	0	1

## 4.2 Barriers to continuous engagement

### Perception of ease or difficulty of remaining involved: respondents who are currently actively engaged

When asked if they found it easy or difficult to remain engaged, not surprisingly, the currently engaged respondents found it easy to stay involved. For some participants this was due to choosing global development as a career:

***“Easy, it was a career choice”***

***“Remaining involved is easy. It is simply an expression of who I have become. That doesn’t mean I don’t agonise over the “how” of that involvement.”***

Several respondents noted that actions and encouragement by their sending organisations prompted and facilitated their continued involvement.

***“The organisation which sent me to India also ran college societies and had various***

***projects which returning volunteers could get involved in.”***

***“I found it easy enough as the information is readily available. The only thing holding people back I think, is time and the ability to commit. First impressions are very important when one gets involved and I think if you can socialise easily, then it’s an incentive to return (as well as being passionate about the issues of course)”.***

However, some of those who have remained engaged had difficulties doing so. Lack of time was cited as the biggest barrier:

***“Difficult mostly due to lack of time and I moved abroad with work for a year”***

***“It is difficult to find the time to give a significant contribution”***

Some respondents felt they needed more support and encouragement:

***“My enthusiasm to gain more knowledge has not been encouraged as much as I would have hoped”***

***“It’s hard to turn good intentions into useful actions.”***

***“When I returned home nearly a year and a half ago, I became inexplicably apathetic towards the work that I had been involved in abroad. I find it difficult to motivate myself - again very unusual for me - especially as I know there is even more I can do for the organisation from here than I even could when I was there. I’d love to become involved with the amazing projects they are trying to achieve there but feel strangely detached.”***

Some respondents felt that geography was a barrier:

***“Difficult in the sense that I was living in the countryside and most activities happened in cities, especially Dublin.”***

***“Not enough organisations of this type in my area.”***

### ***Importance of barriers to remaining active: respondents who are not currently engaged***

Of the respondents who had been engaged but were no longer engaged (19) new demands on time (68.4%), a change in personal circumstances (26.3%) or a move away from the area (26.3%) were the main reasons for no longer being involved. 57.9% of these participants intended to get involved in development again in the next 12 months.

The respondents who were never involved were asked if they actively decided not to become involved in development issues when they returned home. Only 8% had made an active decision to not be involved.

Respondents (who were not active) were asked to rate the importance of certain barriers to continuous engagement from on a fourfold scale (not important, somewhat important, quite important, very important). The most important reasons for not remaining active were (1) Lack of time; (2) Financial Limitations; (3) Lack of information on volunteer opportunities and (4) Have not found volunteer opportunities of interest.

**Table 9. Reasons for ceasing to be involved in development issues.**

<b>Reasons for ceasing involvement in development issues</b>	<b>(%) of respondents</b>
New demands on time	68.4%
Became disillusioned with the issues	10.5%
Change in personal circumstances	26.3%
Moved way from area	26.3%
No longer needed	5.3%
Stopped when particular project was finished	5.3%
Other	5.3%

### Finding the time....

Participants mentioned that working on postgraduate research, training to be a teacher, in final year of college, family commitments, job-seeking were all factors impeding them from remaining engaged in development issues..

***“I fully intended to on my return home but found myself taken up with work and other commitments – it’s really a matter of making the time for it.”***

***“First time I went volunteering, I found this idea (continuous engagement) really daunting. It’s so hard to make it happen. When you’re overseas you feel visceral with the issues, but when you get back you’ve got exams, job hunting, etc, so it’s really difficult.”***

***“Work and study commitments”***

### Getting information...

Accessing information, particularly for RVs or RDWs who did not go through an Irish sending organisation seemed to be an issue.

***“It’s difficult to know where to look, what to do exactly, but I have spoken to some people and I intend to start attending the Bewleys debates and hopefully attend some workshops when I have some more time.”***

***“No knowledge of a local group”***

***“To be honest I would love to be more actively involved I am just not to sure how to find out more information on how to help.”***

***“So many good causes doing good work, not knowing what to choose.”***

***“I went on to work in different countries overseas and got out of the loop of volunteering / development.”***

### Working in a similar field...

***“I am not involved in development issues as my volunteer placement inspired me to work in the area of disabilities and I am currently working in this field as a career and also as a support worker in homeless services.”***

The wide disparity in the time period when a person feels ready to take the next step...

Long-term volunteers often need more time to adjust when they arrive home, with many needing to initially concentrate on practical issues such as job-hunting, flat-hunting, or applying for a post-graduate place.

***“I am home just over a year. I found the whole year very hard, very stressful so I think that took up all my energy last year.”***

***“I’m home 6 months, I was sick as well so just exhausted and then getting work. I have just started a post-grad as well so I’m settling into that. Its only just around now that I have felt that I’m not manically trying to feel settled again and feel I have more time to get involved in things.”***

***“I have been completely broke since I came home. I don’t know if it is a barrier to getting involved in development things per se but certainly been a barrier to settling in which I suppose is a barrier.”***

However short-term RVs generally don’t have these issues. One participant felt that after a couple of weeks he was ready to engage again:

***“I had a few weeks down time... to sleep and recover.. .then I was ready”***

This was the general agreement among short-term sending organisations:

***“... as soon as possible after they come home is best as the passion is still there”***

### **Geographical focus...**

A number of respondents considered living outside Dublin a barrier to continuous engagement. This reason may increase in importance as more people go on short-term volunteer placements and as many sending organisations actively recruit these volunteers in a number of universities outside Dublin.

Influence of sending organisation / volunteer experience...

The importance of the volunteer sending organisation continuing a relationship with the RV was a significant influence on the decision to remain engaged upon return to Ireland.

***“I think the biggest surprise or disappointment when you do return was that there was absolutely nothing, Comhlámh was the only one I saw who reached out at all. You finished your placement and then you were a used item and I think a lot of people would be put off by that.”***

***“I think that’s one of the reasons for a drop out, the sending organisations, and it’s unfair on Comhlámh to try and go picking up on things because some people come back with a sour taste in their mouth”.***

***“I’d be the kind of person that if the sending organisation prompted me I probably would say yes to something and would be interested, but I’m so busy I wouldn’t actively have the time to go looking and get involved.”***

***“I felt that the organisation were very willing that I would get involved so in particular in the first few months after I came home there was lots of contact.”***

***“In my experiences, any volunteer that remains involved has had a successful well-planned and implemented placement. Those that become frustrated with their placement lose interest on returning to Ireland and put the trip down as “An experience” but not much else.”***

### **Importance of providing an opportunity to suit each people’s needs:**

One focus group participant suggested that:

***“Getting people involved is difficult.... Giving them passive opportunities, also lots of opportunities. Finding out what an individual is interested in and then directing information to them. Sending personal emails rather than a group email makes a huge difference.”***

### Another suggested:

***“The Bewleys debate is a good one, kind of passive without having to sign up to things. If you have a number of events requiring little involvement like the debates you can slot in when the time is right for you.”***

### Ways to encourage continuous engagement:

The participants were asked to rate which activities they like to be involved in (not interested, somewhat interested, very interested, NA). For the participants who are not currently active, the most popular activity is speaking to potential volunteers, followed by speaking to schoolchildren/public and meeting returned volunteers socially. It may be that these activities would generally be once-off events requiring little ongoing commitment which is the appeal. The least popular activity is political campaigning/lobbying.

For the currently engaged participants, the most popular activity is also speaking to potential volunteers, followed by speaking to the general public / schools, and RV social events. The least popular activity was political campaigning/lobbying closely followed by fundraising.

The research participants were also asked to suggest ways in which RVs could be encouraged to remain involved after they returned home. These suggestions included:

### Ensuring ongoing contact with returned volunteers

It was clear that ongoing contact with RVs is to be welcomed. This could be related to the fact that there seems to be no definite time when each person feels ready to continue their interest in development issues. While the majority of participants decided to remain active early on in the volunteering cycle the time at which they felt able to act on this decision appears to vary. Participants suggested ongoing contact so that they can get involved when they are ready

***“Emails are good. Even if you can’t go to the particular event, it’s nice to know about it. I’ve been busy but it’s kind of nice that I will still have the information for when it quietens down a bit.”***

***“All the emails with all the events that could possibly be on, I think they are fantastic”.***

***“Keep regular contact when they return”***

***“Part of signing up for volunteering could include giving Comhlámh my contact details so that I could be emailed about stuff after returning. That way one can’t miss learning about what the options are.”***

A number of participants suggested that specific invitations by email were preferable to a general flyer and that a range of levels of engagement could be offered:

***“For me, sending personal emails rather than a group email made a huge difference”***

***“Posting publications and also asking me to come along and discuss things”***

***“Help via the internet or talking to others that might be going to an event”***

***“The enthusiasm is there but the prospect of commitment can be overwhelming. Make any commitments sound as light, enjoyable and do-able as possible”***

### Employing effective methods of communication

Ensuring that all volunteers receive information about sector-wide events and solidarity groups in the way that suits them:

***“I would like to receive news and updates about how to stay connected with the global south.”***

***“Better use of the website to explain the ways to get involved to people.”***

***“The best way Comhlámh, or any organisation, to keep people involved or engaged proactively is ensuring that the issues remain at the front of everybody’s mind.”***

***“If they are not interested in continuing their involvement with the organisation they went out with, they should be made aware of solidarity groups or lobbying groups, which means they could help to effect change without having to go away themselves again.”***

***“I prefer the printed copies of your publications as I can read them on the bus and don’t have to sit at a screen.”***

### **Ensuring support for sending organisations**

In the focus group, 66% of the participants were disappointed with how their sending organisation dealt with them on their return to Ireland. It was clear that participants felt that it was the role of the sending organisation to encourage RVs to stay involved. Therefore it is vital to support the sending organisations to do this.

***“Even though my sending organisation had shunted me off I wanted to stay with who I knew, but they said go to Comhlámh.”***

### **Encouraging continuous engagement for the individual’s personal development and career benefits**

It was suggested that emphasising the benefits of staying involved in voluntary organisations could benefit RVs for personal development and skills enhancement reasons:

***“Give people positions of responsibility that they can achieve while still working full time. Show them that there are professional benefits.”***

***“Give them an opportunity to work in your office for a time and to experience its diversity and scope. Invite those who participate in returned volunteer weekends to give some input at other volunteer weekend.”***

### **Organise events throughout Ireland**

A number of participants emphasised the need to have activities outside Dublin.

***“Run less midweek events for those faraway from Dublin”***

***“Comhlámh seems to be very active, but is Dublin centric. The smaller working groups that would have appealed to me are based in Dublin city centre and I’m living in the south of the country”***

***“Organising events outside Dublin”***

***“List activities that are happening outside of the main cities e.g. Dublin”***

***“Connect returned development workers to each other according to geographical location in Ireland and see where the energy and synergy of those connections take us”***

### **Other suggestions**

Closer ties with community groups in Ireland, tax breaks for employers and mentoring opportunities were also suggested:

***“Being allies of the “new Irish” would be a great cross cultural contribution.”***

***“Time is my biggest problem, I work in a very demanding professional job, I would love to***

***give one day a week or one week every couple of months to something, like mentoring youths or running summer camps for disadvantaged children. It would be great if employers generally recognised this benefit and allowed unpaid leave for voluntary work without it taking from your precious annual leave. Perhaps you could work on getting a framework in place for employers to adopt....get the government to offer tax breaks to the employer!"***

***"Create opportunities for returned volunteers to "mentor" young people in appropriate partnerships with NGOs in the Developing World and in development education."***

One participant summarised why we need to encourage continuous engagement very eloquently by saying...

***"The greatest threats to world stability and peace are poverty, exploitation and injustice. I think that reminder needs to be kept among those who have gone and seen. Perhaps some want to forget. Perhaps some get so consumed in the task of making a career that they put the issues on the back boiler. Just don't let us forget."***

## **4.3 Interviews with volunteer sending organisations**

Telephone interviews were conducted with representatives from a number of sending organisations, both Irish NGOs and International NGOs with offices in Ireland.

### **The importance of keeping returned volunteers continually engaged:**

All of the sending organisations that were interviewed considered continuing engagement by RVs as an integral objective of their volunteer programmes.

***"One of the objectives of our volunteer programme is to create networks of young people to affect social change. We believe that volunteering can be a catalyst into further engagement in development issues."***

***"We feel this is just a starting point, it is an opportunity for our volunteers to be active as global citizens."***

***"They are credible and convincing spokespeople who have worked with communities / stakeholders / grass roots... they arrive back with direct experience, which can feedback into development planning to improve effectiveness."***

Keeping RVs engaged in development issues was recognised as a significant challenge for the sending organisations and many would welcome suggestions as to how they could do this more effectively.. It was interesting that in research conducted for UNV by Hodgson<sup>7</sup>,70% of the respondents found the biggest challenge upon returning home was finding opportunities to stay involved and 96% want to, or are staying involved. The sending organisations in Ireland mentioned that:

***"One of the biggest challenges is how to keep returned volunteers involved... the overseas bit is just a small part of the bigger picture."***

***"It will be great to see the results of this research, as it will be interesting to see what other sending organisations do."***

It was also recognised that having returned volunteers continued involvement was valuable for operational reasons, so it is in the sending organisation's best interest to encourage this involvement.

***"From the organisational side, it takes about 200 people to run the volunteer programme each year and 50% of them would be returned volunteers"***

<sup>7</sup>Hodgson, Alan (2007) Former UNV Volunteer Re-engagement survey  
UNV Partnerships & Communications Group [www.UNV.org](http://www.UNV.org)

***“For our organisation it means that we have continued support, they are our ambassadors out there. They also sustain our projects overseas with ongoing fundraising.”***

RVs can be a valuable asset for the sending organisations and are utilised in many ways including:

***“They are involved in pre-departure training, selection of volunteers, marketing and campaigns.”***

***“It’s also an investment for a volunteer sending organisation...if they are not utilised it is an otherwise wasted rich resource.”***

### **Ways to keep returned volunteers involved:**

Organisations use a variety of methods to encourage continued engagement. All of the sending organisations incorporate information about continued engagement in their pre-departure training.

***“We run a one-week pre-departure training course before they go and Comhlámh are invited to talk about their services and what they can do when they come back.”***

***“We put a lot of time and effort into pre-departure training so the trip is a thoughtful experience and volunteers can see the big picture.”***

However, a focus group of returned volunteers suggested that during the pre-departure stage wasn’t necessarily the best time for a volunteer to absorb and deal with this type of information.

***“I was just thinking about going away when going away... but now it is really important to me.”***

Some sending organisations focus on encouraging continuing involvement while the volunteer is overseas. One volunteer spoke about the effect the mid-placement training had on him...

***“My organisation put... a huge emphasis on continued engagement. About mid-way though the placement they really hammer it home during a global perspectives week - a series of talks and discussion on bigger issues, why there is poverty... so that when we get back we’re able to understand the broader issues. Since then I’ve joined a society and am trying to get involved.”***

After they return home most volunteers attend a de-briefing session run by, or on behalf of the sending organisation, though in some cases this is optional and in others it is primarily an operational de-briefing:

***“We strongly encourage people to attend our de-brief days but it is not a requirement. We are strongly thinking of making it a requirement.”***

***“At the de-briefing we deal with the practical issues with PRSI and also give a pack which includes the Comhlámh Coming Home book and other information.”***

The methods of encouraging continued involvement range from providing printed information and a recommendation to join Comhlámh during de-briefing, to organised events in which the RV can get actively involved.

***“At the de-brief weekends we have no formal list of ways they could get involved but we give out Comhlámh leaflets and encourage them to join.”***

***“We give all RVs a flyer from Comhlámh and recommend they join”***

***“We provide packs for each returned volunteer. These include information leaflets from Comhlámh and other organisations. They give information on how the RV can become involved in fundraising, advocacy and hosting debates. We distribute the packs about two months after the volunteer arrives home.”***

***“The ways we encourage people to stay involved are re-rostering for another assignment, advocating for volunteering for development – through communities/media, and encouraging former volunteers to mobilise volunteers in their own community.”***

Some sending organisations utilise electronic methods such as regular emails to keep in touch with their RVs:

***“We send emails regularly about things that are happening with our organisation and other***

**organisations.”**

**“We have just started a newsletter which will be emailed to all our RVs.”**

Most organisations organise social events throughout the year and use these to encourage RVs to stay involved:

**“We organise two residential weekends each year centred around public action. This year it was on the declaration of human rights.”**

**“We have a social event in November and have a guest speaker. This year we had Frank Flood from Irish Aid as we wanted to show how our government is supportive and it really shows that bigger picture of development.”**

**“I hope to organise three or four weekends away next year where RVs can meet and we can build up relationships with them all.”**

As 82% of RVs responding to the survey used the organisation’s website as an information source, it is an important tool. A review of nine websites of sending organisations, some of whom participated in this research, showed a range of different emphasis put on continuing engagement. Two websites included no mention of continuous engagement at all. One purely emphasised opportunities for continuing engagement with the sending organisation. However the majority of the websites offered the RVs an opportunity to become involved in development education to some extent, though it wasn’t clear in some cases exactly how this would happen:

**“You will attend a debriefing interview and will also be encouraged and given the opportunity of staying involved in development work - at home, tackling the causes of poverty as well as the symptoms, by getting involved in global issues such as Third World debt, Globalisation and Trade.”**

**“Prior to departure and post-return, volunteers speak in local schools, colleges, universities, parishes, voluntary groups. Leaders and Volunteers in each of the six project countries are asked in conjunction with local communities and groups to plan a development education initiative to be launched in the autumn of 2008 on their return to Ireland.”**

**“On their return to Ireland we ask our volunteers to be the voice of the people they worked with and to highlight their experiences of poverty and inequality. Then together we campaign to make a difference by promoting global justice and greater equality and respect among the peoples of the world. The Global Awareness Programme is a training, volunteering and awareness raising project focusing on HIV & AIDS.”**

One website in particular outlines a number of options for RVs. There is a detailed and extensive programme of events, opportunities to volunteer in Ireland (organised through the sending organisation) and an evening course in Global Issues.

**“Our network of twelve societies provide opportunities to volunteer (e.g. mentoring) in the local community, fundraise for the overseas schools and raise awareness about development issues.”**

### **Data on how many of their returned volunteers remain involved:**

None of the sending organisations interviewed had a formal way of measuring how many RVs remain active. Two organisations said that it is something that they plan to do next year.

**“I have just sorted out the database. Having some form of measurement or statistics is something that I would like to do. I hope to do it next year.”**

**“No, but it is in our plan for 2009. We plan to send out surveymonkey questionnaires to see what the RVs are doing and how it has impacted on them. We are also re-vamping the database so that we are more connected and have access to this sort of information easily.”**

### **Barriers to continuous engagement:**

The interviewees were asked to suggest reasons why some volunteers do not remain engaged after their return. Replies included that most events and courses related to overseas development happen in Dublin and this can in effect exclude RVs living outside Dublin and the commuter belt.

***“Our RVs are all over the country so the fact that most events are in Dublin can be a problem.”***

***“Structural mainly, it is hard for people living outside Dublin. Comhlámh is very Dublin-based. We should be looking at creative ways to engage with the One World centres and KADE (Kerry Action for Development Education) for example.”***

It was also recognised that it is difficult to provide the right opportunity to suit the needs of the individual RV unless a relationship is built up:

***“They need to find an opportunity that suits them and that can be hard. It is also difficult for us to have the capacity to support them. It takes a lot of hard work to make sure the word is out there.”***

***“Depends what you are asking them to do and in what life-stage they are at. For example, mid-life career professionals/those with young families may be willing to donate/fundraise but not to give talks or write articles.”***

The type and amount of information about ways to stay engaged can be off-putting, especially for a short-term volunteer.

***“I find the literature about further engagement can be information heavy which puts a lot of people off. People need active engagement such as peer encouragement”.***

***“I think it is mainly the age profile we deal with, they are mainly college students. For some it is just a bit of an adventure, they come back with good intentions but they can go out the window when they get back into real life.”***

***“I think that people who want to stay involved can be overwhelmed by so many different groups and campaigns out there.”***

Other barriers suggested were the RV having had a bad experience, poor resettlement support – bad relationship management, they feel they have already contributed / sacrificed, and a lack of time.

### **Time when returned volunteers are most receptive to suggestions of continuous engagement activities:**

There seems to be a difference between when the short-term and long-term volunteers are ready to engage after returning home. The sending organisations dealing with short-term volunteers all agreed that within the first three months of returning home was the best time to engage them:

***“Yes, for short-term volunteers, as soon as possible after they come home is best as the passion is still there.”***

***“1-3 months after they return, they have had a huge experience and are wondering where to go next.”***

***“We distribute the packs about two months after the volunteer arrives home.”***

Whereas, the sending organisations dealing with long-term volunteers felt that while it was important to keep in contact with the RV or RDW, it usually takes a few months before they are ready to engage meaningfully:

***“We have found it takes 3-6 months before people feel like doing anything.”***

***“For the first few months they are busy job searching and dealing with re-entry culture shock.”***

***“In general, the earlier the better. But some people need their space when they return. But it is critical that we and Comhlámh keep in contact with RVs.”***

## What can Comhlámh as an organisation do to encourage continuous engagement?

There was an overwhelming response that Comhlámh are very effective at the moment and there is a good sense of Comhlámh and the organisations working together.

***“We really look on Comhlámh as partners, they are the beacon of light that we turn to a lot. We are very aware of what they are doing and feel they really have their fingers on the pulse.”***

Some practical ideas included:

***“They will be receptive ultimately if the ‘ask’ correlates with their profile = time, skills and interest, so opportunities need to be significantly ‘user’ (i.e.: former volunteer) owned and driven – very time consuming/resource heavy for an organisation to ‘persuade’.”***

***“Maybe more informal things as a sector, specifically for returned short-term volunteers. A lot of Comhlámh support is aimed at long-term RVs, although there are a lot more short term RVs returning each year.”***

***“The debates are great, they are real issues that people can engage with. I think these days there is an information overload, we need to find more meaningful ways to give people guidance on political and global issues.”***

***“I think the monthly email thing could be improved. It could have more graphics and be more like a newsletter. I read it because I am interested in it but it is not very readable and people might just read a few lines and click somewhere else.”***

***“There is no need for any more events as we find that our RVs only come to our own volunteer event.”***

***“Providing information on initiatives / networks etc and developments in corporate volunteering.”***

## **5.0 Key Findings**

- 5.1** The most important barrier to continuing engagement was ‘No extra time’. Time pressures are inherent in modern life in Ireland with a number of other commitments such as family, education and work competing for priority. The increase from 19.5% of 25-34 years olds who are involved to 39.2% of the 35-54 year age group suggests that despite probable increases in family / work commitments people can be encouraged to remain engaged. It is therefore vital to come up with creative solutions to this situation, whereby people can continue their involvement in the sector. Alternatives may include undertaking projects remotely and some form of online volunteering.
- 5.2** The second most important barrier was ‘Lack of information on volunteer opportunities’. This was a clear in order to capture the interest of RVs and RDWs. A number of volunteer sending organisations have been effective at retaining the involvement by RVs within their own organisation by offering attractive, fulfilling and relevant opportunities in Ireland. This needs to be replicated across the sector and promoted as something that can benefit the organisation, the sector and the individual (win-win for sending org). The research has found that RVs welcome ongoing communications.
- 5.3** A significant number (67.7%) of respondents made the decision to stay involved before they went overseas. Therefore the pathways to continuous engagement need to be communicated widely to include potential volunteers, politically active third-level students and members of all development-related organisations in Ireland.
- 5.4** Volunteer sending organisations have a vital role in keeping RVs engaged. The research found that the volunteer sending organisation’s continuing relationship with the RV was an importance influence on the decision to remain engaged upon return. The sending organisations have shown to be very effective at this already as 61.8% of respondents continue to be involved with their sending organisation. The sending organisations need to be supported in order to maintain this trend and also helped to encourage RVs to become involved in development issues outside of the sending organisations in an attempt to encourage long-term continuous engagement.
- 5.5** Events and continuous engagement opportunities need to be available for people living outside Dublin. These should be promoted with an emphasis on continuous engagement of RVs. There is already a network of development education organisations and other NGOs active outside Dublin, which could be utilised to organise joint events, both educational and social, with Comhlámh or other Dublin-based organisations on a regular basis.
- 5.6** An attempt should be made to match the person’s profile with activities that would suit them. There needs to be a system whereby RVs can opt-in to certain activities such as speaking to potential volunteers, research participation, social events, and debates / talks. A regularly updated database should be designed for use by Comhlámh and other development-related NGOs. This is to ensure that the energy, enthusiasm and skills of RVs and RDWs can be effectively utilised.

## **6.0 Recommendations arising from the research**

- 6.1** The sector needs to produce a clear, concise publication (in hard copy and in electronic form) showing the options available to people who wish to remain involved. Comhlámh could possibly take the lead on this due to their current position as the main support service providers for returned RVs and RDWs. Within the publication include case studies documenting experiences of RVs who have stayed involved, similar to those featured in Comhlámh's *The Coming Home Book and What Next?: a practical guide to continuing development work from Ireland*. Profiles of a selection of solidarity groups and development education organisations (e.g. KADE, One World Centres) could also be featured. Include a significant amount of content from and relating to, short-term RVs.
- 6.2** Encourage volunteer sending organisation to utilise Comhlámh as a vehicle to promote all events such as courses and talks that are open to the general public. Encourage all organisations based outside Dublin with a primary focus on development issues to organise joint events (educational and social) with Comhlámh on an annual basis. Promotion of these needs to emphasise the continuous engagement of RVs.
- 6.3** Investigate the possibility of developing an online database of events and opportunities to remain engaged to compliment the current online database of overseas volunteering opportunities. Comhlámh may consider partnering with Irish based volunteering organisations that share its aims and ethos in order to avoid replication of services and ensure cohesion between the overseas and Irish based segments of the volunteering continuum.
- 6.4** Create a system whereby volunteer sending organisations can opt to provide Comhlámh with the email address of all volunteers deployed overseas for addition to electronic mailing lists regarding Comhlámh events and activities in which they may be interested. Comhlámh will guarantee that the email address will not be used for any other purpose and will create an easy and visible opt-out system.
- 6.5** Comhlámh needs to actively promote its membership services to all people with an interest in development issues. RVs (from placements of two months or longer) are currently entitled to a year's free membership of Comhlámh, however this is not the case for shorter-term volunteers. It should be investigated if a nominal fee per person to cover a year's membership could be charged to the short-term volunteer sending organisations, which they could include in the volunteer placement fee.
- 6.6** Create a system whereby sending organisations regularly provide Comhlámh with a list of all RVs who indicate an interest in speaking to potential volunteers, participating in research.
- 6.7** Organisations working in Ireland need to be creative about providing opportunities for people wishing to stay involved but who have constraints such as location, family commitments or mobility issues. These could include online volunteering, remote working and project-based opportunities which don't need regular attendance in Dublin.



**Irish Aid**

Department of Foreign Affairs  
An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha

*This research was conducted as part of Comhlámh's  
Volunteering Options Programme, with funding from Irish Aid.*