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# EXPLORING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE CAPABILITY APPROACH TO THE PEOPLE FIRST STRATEGY

## The Case of VSO's Livelihoods Programmes





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# 1 – INTRODUCTION

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The University College London Development Planning Unit (DPU) and VSO collaboration has focused on developing strategic and methodological inputs which support the application of VSO's 'People First' Strategy. This strategy aims to structure VSO's contribution to the fight against global poverty and to put people at the centre of VSO's work.

The focus of DPU's collaboration with VSO is to develop and test tools and methods based on the Capability Approach (CA), drawing on the work of Amartya Sen and others, as a means of operationalising the 'People First' strategy in the livelihoods programmatic work of VSO. Essentially, the capability approach explores people's aspirations, both as individuals and as collectives, in terms of, for example, expansion of income, dignity, lifestyle, values and people as agents of change. Crucially, the approach also explores people's freedom to achieve these aspirations, that is, whether they have the opportunities to use their abilities and capacities to achieve these aspirations.

VSO and DPU created volunteer placements for DPU Masters' alumni, for the first half of 2017, to work on VSO livelihoods programmes in Bangladesh, Zambia and Uganda. The DPU volunteers were: Alun Cledwyn, who went to Bangladesh to work with the Growing Together project; Rose Ziaei, who went to Zambia to work with the Integrated Youth Empowerment project, and; Natasha Menon, who went to Uganda to work with the SCOPE project.

These placements looked at how to bring a people-centred perspective to livelihoods programming, through the development of applied research methods and activities based on the application of the capability approach. The placements were envisaged to be part of a collective learning process, designed to draw lessons on, and document, how existing VSO livelihoods programmes have incorporated people-centred principles, as well as to develop and pilot tools designed to ensure that people's values, aspirations and experiences are at the heart of VSO's livelihoods programming and strategy development. The focus of these placements was defined in collaboration with the respective country office teams (see boxes 1, 2, and 3, in section 3 of this report, for an overview of the scope of each of the placements).

This report captures the learning generated by this initiative, with the objective of supporting the application of VSO's People First strategy. The main question that this report addresses is 'how can the capability approach be used to expand VSO livelihoods programmes in order to improve the well-being of marginalised people?' After introducing some of the core elements of the capability approach and the methodology adopted in each of the three placements, the report will address the learning question by responding to three sub-questions:

- 1) How the CA can support a better understanding of the VSO people first methodology and the implementation of people first programmes?**
- 2) Under which conditions could the CA support impoverished and marginalised people?**
- 3) How can participatory tools and approaches be used to work with marginalised people to gather information on capabilities?**

The information used for this report comes from the literature review and analysis of key VSO policy documents, reports and presentations given by volunteers, and notes from discussions with VSO team that engaged in this work. The concluding section of this report provides some key recommendations on ways that VSO could draw on the Capability Approach to enhance the application of the People First strategy. It also outlines some of the existing gaps to make the Capability Approach more relevant to the practice of development NGOs, as well as making recommendations on how VSO could support in addressing that. Therefore, this report captures the contributions of the Capability Approach to VSO practice, while also providing insights on how VSO's effort in this field could be making a contribution to the wider sector of development thinking and practice.

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## 2 – METHODOLOGY

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The methodology of this research was based on applying the capability approach in the field of development planning and practice, and, in particular, relating it to the values and programming principles that underpin the People First Strategy as a model for development intervention. In doing so, this research builds on existing work which focuses on the application of Amartya Sen's work through participatory action research methodologies, with particular attention to issues around social diversity and gender equality.

In this section, the main concepts and applications of the capability approach are reviewed, and linked to ideas that underpin the People First Strategy. This section also reviews some of the key ethical and methodological considerations that guided the work of the volunteers. Then, the process of data analysis is also explained, particularly the Web of Institutionalisation tool used to analyse the implications of the findings from the field placements to VSO's institutional practices.

### 2.1. The Capability Approach in Development Planning and Practice

The capability approach has been developed as an evaluative framework drawing on the work of Amartya Sen, with the purpose of examining people's real freedom. Sen's initial elaboration of the concept of capabilities had the objective of moving away from income-led definitions of development. Instead of focusing on income as a measure of development, Sen argued that the focus should be on a "person's achievements and freedoms in terms of his or her actual ability to do the different things a person has reason to value doing or being" (Sen, 2009: 16). The capability approach has played an important role in the field of development, contributing to a paradigm shift, encouraging a people-centred perspective and addressing poverty as capability deprivation, rather than lack of income.

According to Robeyns (2017), the capability approach is "generally understood as a conceptual framework for a range of evaluative exercises, including most prominently the following: (1) the assessment of individual levels of achieved wellbeing and wellbeing freedom; (2) the evaluation and assessment of social arrangements or institutions; and (3) the design of policies and other forms of social change in society" (2017: 23-24).

From a development project perspective, the overall contribution of the capability approach is the potential of linking development actors' theory of change to a comprehensive theory of justice. As articulated by Frediani, Boni and Gasper (2014), in practice, a capability perspective to development projects would require initiatives to 1) undertake a deep diagnosis of the context of initiatives, revealing diverse needs and aspirations of marginalised groups; 2) define outcomes in a multidimensional manner, capturing different aspects of people's valued aspirations; 3) involve project partners as active agents of change, rather than merely recipients or beneficiaries of development initiatives. This framework leads to the reframing of three key concepts often embedded in development planning and practice: capacities, needs, and participation.

#### 2.1.1. From capacities to capabilities

One way to start unpacking the contributions of the capability approach to development planning and practice is by reflecting on the distinction between capacities and capabilities. Capacities are normally related to people's abilities or skills to conduct certain activities. Often the fishing analogy is used to illustrate the importance of capacity building:

**'Give a man or woman a fish, and you feed him or her for a day. Teach a man or woman to fish, and you feed him or her for a lifetime'.**

Capacity building activities can enhance access to resources (such as fishing equipment) as well as skill-sets needed to perform this practice. These aspects of access to diverse set of assets to perform an activity is one of the key components shaping people's real freedom. However, apart from them, a capability assessment would require understanding the context and conditions of such practice. It would require understanding the extent to which the new skills and access to resources are able to be used and appropriated towards the improvement of well-being.

Using the fishing analogy, moving from capacities to capabilities, would require understanding the conditions of the lake where people are fishing: what is the ecosystem of the lake? Who else is fishing? What are people's real opportunities to use the new skills and equipment? What are these expanded freedoms used for? If in parallel to capacity building activities, new industries are encouraged to be set up

in proximity to the fishing lake without the necessary pollution control and leading to degradation of the lake and its surrounding environment, capabilities will be compromised. Furthermore, it is important to interrogate fishing not merely as an economic activity, but as a livelihood associated to various dimensions of well-being. An initiative focused on improving fishing practice can simultaneously improve economic opportunities while deteriorating other valued dimensions, such as environmental sustainability, or maintenance of social networks. A capability approach calls for an explicit engagement with these complexities, interrogating them and creating the conditions to address them through public reasoning.

### 2.1.2. Beyond needs, towards aspirations

Sen's writings call for development to focus on the various things people value doing and being. This means engaging with the various dimensions of wellbeing. This focus on people's aspirations, is a direct critique to the concept the threat of paternalism implicit in basic needs approaches, predetermining the notion of what is 'need' and what is 'basic'. Such approaches have the danger of assuming that some aspects of life are more immediate than others. For example, in Maslow's theory of needs, food, water, warmth, security and safety are prioritised over self-actualisation or self-esteem needs. A capability perspective would call to approach these dimensions not hierarchically, but in an interconnected and interdependent manner. Martha Nussbaum goes a step forward by proposing a list of 10 valued dimensions of well-being (see table across).

Sen has not identified a list of valued dimensions of well-being, as in his writings he argues that this should take place through public deliberation. Sen's main preoccupation has been with the threat of universalising notions of the good life. Drawing on this open-ended character of Sen's writings, Alkire (2008) and Frediani, Clark and Biggeri (2018) have suggested a variety of methods to reveal and identify valued dimensions through different processes of public reasoning.

With the focus on aspirations and notions of the good life, the capability approach encourages development initiatives not to assume or predetermine development outcomes. The focus on revealing aspirations through public reasoning as well as encouraging project participants to critically reflect about them is a key characteristic of a capability approach to development intervention (Frediani, Boni and Gasper, 2014).

### 2.1.3. Participation as agency

One of the key foundations of the capability approach is the understanding of 'people as agents of change'.

In a similar vein to Paulo Freire, Sen's writings articulate the importance of individuals and groups to define aspirations and play a central role in the processes of expansion of their freedoms:

**Political and civil rights, especially those related to the guaranteeing of open discussion, debate, criticism, and dissent, are central to the process of generating informed and considered choices. These processes are crucial to the formation of values and priorities, and we cannot, in general, take preferences as given independently of public discussion, that is, irrespective of whether open interchange and debate are permitted or not (1999: 253).**

Therefore, the capability approach literature has been approaching participation not as a means for more effective and responsive development project implementation, but as a mechanism to expand people's abilities to reflect critically about their living conditions and to act upon their values. These abilities associated to critical awareness and action is understood in the capability approach as agency. Furthermore, the CA articulates that agency is embedded and conditioned by social relations shaping the experience of diverse identities. This agency oriented approach to participatory spaces requires the engagement with the power asymmetries being played out in practices of deliberation. Not all participants have the same ability to engage in participatory processes, and therefore the capability approach requires project planning processes to create strategies to proactively reach out to marginalised voices, thinking about the conditions that would allow them to express and expand their agency. According to Walker, Berekshvili and Lomidze (2014), a capability approach to the project planning process would require making it into a process of exploratory discussion and research that helps to expand the agency of participants, and to change attitudes about the gendered nature of time uses and control over time, creating spaces for critical reflection and exposure of alternative practices and norms.

<b>Life</b>	Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living.
<b>Bodily Health</b>	Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.
<b>Bodily Integrity</b>	Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.
<b>Senses, Imagination and Thought</b>	Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a “truly human” way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid non-beneficial pain.
<b>Emotions</b>	Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development).
<b>Practical Reason</b>	Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance).
<b>Affiliation</b>	Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other humans, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech).  Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of non-discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin and species.
<b>Other Species</b>	Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.
<b>Play</b>	Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
<b>Control over one's Environment</b>	Political. Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association.  Material. Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.

## 2.2. The People First Strategy and the Capability Approach

The VSO People First Strategy supports its mission to 'bring people together to address marginalisation and poverty'. It is based on four core values, focused on: thinking globally to promote change; making progress by working together; drawing on knowledge as our most powerful tool, and; recognising that people are the best agents of change. This broad mission and set of values resonates strongly with the vision of development at the heart of the capability approach, with its emphasis on ensuring that development is

defined in terms of improvement in people's lives, rather than in terms of economic growth, as well as the CA's focus on fighting poverty by expanding people's real freedoms.

The central organising logic for the practical application of the People First strategy is based on six 'Programming Principles'. Figure 2 below outlines these principles and reflects on how the ideas that underpin the CA could link, and/ or add focus to these.

**Figure 2:** Table comparing People First and Capability Approach principles

Principle	VSO's explanation of principle	Potential contribution of the CA
<b>People-centred</b>	We use participatory practice to engage and listen to the primary actors and a range of stakeholders at different levels to ensure our work is pro-poor and we are contributing to positive social change.	The CA shares this focus on putting people's values at the centre of development strategies through participatory practice. It also has the scope to inform the specific analysis of what constitutes positive social change, specifically shifting the analysis from the satisfaction of people's <b>needs</b> , to identifying and pursuing their <b>aspirations</b> .
<b>Evidence based</b>	We design interventions based on quality work and evidence, seeking to understand the complex dimensions of poverty and power. This informs decisions and enables us to monitor how we are contributing to change.	The CA, and the capability map, represent a broad <b>Theory of Change</b> about how poverty and power relations are reproduced and challenged. This can be used to structure and systematise the different <b>types of evidence and data</b> (people's aspirations, abilities, assets, structural drivers) that need to be collected to conduct strategic poverty analysis.  In addition the CA is coherent with the People First strategy in emphasising that the evidence used in supporting strategy development should put <b>primary actors' evidence, experiences and views at the centre</b> .
<b>Effective and Appropriate</b>	We provide adequate and appropriate resources to ensure that the right people are in the right place at the right time investing in our Volunteering for Development approach as a powerful and practical way to tackle poverty and inequality.	Complementing this VSO focus on the appropriate <b>expertise</b> for effective development work, the CA also offers the analytical framework to ensure that the <b>framing of the development problem</b> in question means that effective solutions are proposed.  In particular the CA emphasises that, to be effective, the analysis of poverty, and proposed support strategies, need to go beyond a focus on people's assets and livelihood strategies, to also engage with the wider structural drivers that constitute people's <b>capability space</b> – i.e. shifting the focus of support strategies from <b>capacities</b> to <b>capabilities</b> .

Principle	VSO's explanation of principle	Potential contribution of the CA
<b>Reflective in our Practice</b>	We invest in a culture of learning, create space and time for reflective practice, and respond and act on our learning in order to constantly improve our programmes.	The emphasis of the CA on <b>participation as agency</b> highlights the need to work to expand people's abilities to reflect critically about their living conditions and to act upon their values.
<b>Collaborative and Knowledge Sharing</b>	We create opportunities for collaboration and knowledge sharing in order to promote good practice across VSO and improve our approaches to programming.	This implies that the VSO focus on critical reflection should encompass both VSO volunteers and staff and primary actors in a relationship of co-production of critical knowledge.
<b>Accountable</b>	Our decisions are driven by the voices of, and evidence from, primary actors to whom we are accountable.	<p>The CA approach's similar emphasis on participation and creating spaces to expand the agency of primary actors is intended to increase the control over development processes.</p> <p>In terms of the nature of accountability that People First programming should deliver, the emphasis of the CA on capabilities (i.e. wider freedoms coherent with the aspirations of primary actors) rather than capacities (i.e. a narrower focus on access to resources of skills) would imply the need to focus on wider strategic accountability about outcomes, rather than narrower programmatic accountability about outputs and inputs.</p>

### 2.3. Methodology

Building on the conceptual debates, presented above, this research project used an analytical framework called the 'Capability Map' that draws on the key concepts of the capability approach and intends to help in the implementation of Sen's writings in process of designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating development projects, in a way that is coherent with the People First programming principles. The following section explains how the capability map has been used for the analysis of livelihoods programmes. This is followed by a reflection on some of the ethical considerations of the investigation as well as an outline of the process used to analyse findings.

### 2.3.1. The Capability Map

The capability map has been developed to help guide a process of using Sen's capability approach in development initiatives. It draws on other similar types of visualisations within the capability approach literature (i.e. Frediani, 2010; Biggeri and Ferrannini, 2014:57; and Robeyns, 2017:83). For the purposes of this research, Frediani's capability map (see figure 3) has been adapted to focus in particular on livelihoods programming, incorporating elements of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) model (Scoones, 1998), in particular the livelihood assets pentagon.

The first element of the map are the **livelihood practices**. This calls practitioners to explore the various existing models and types of livelihoods currently being undertaken in a particular context, as well as interrogating about potential practices. These could be defined according to the determining factors in each context, and could relate to individual vis-a-vis collective practices; productive and reproductive practices among others.

Building on the distinction between needs and aspirations (as discussed above in section 2.1.2) the second element of the map are the **livelihood outcomes**. These are values associated with livelihood practices – i.e. what those who are participating, aspire to achieve through their livelihoods, and what they are actually able to achieve? The map identifies the need to explore the diverse set of livelihood aspirations by local communities, as well as values underpinning relevant policies and international agreements (i.e. International Labour Organisation (ILO) notion of decent work). The importance of reflecting about livelihood outcomes is to approach livelihoods beyond a financial activity, and address the various dimensions of well-being that relate to livelihood practices.

The third element of the capability map are the abilities people have to draw on livelihood practices to achieve particular livelihood outcomes. Drawing on the SLA model (Scoones, 1998), the map approaches these abilities as **livelihood assets** that can be financial, natural, social, political or human. It also recognises the importance of interrogating the relationship between livelihood practices and people's access and control over these assets. These assets condition livelihood practices, while they can also be expanded or hindered by particular livelihood practice or development intervention.

The fourth element of the map are livelihood opportunities conditioning the transformation of livelihood practices into livelihood outcomes (a focus which resonates with the distinction between capacities and capabilities, as discussed above in section 2.1.3). The map interrogates these in terms of the **policy and planning environment** shaping the opportunities of local communities to achieve their livelihood outcomes through current or potential livelihood practices. The policy and planning environment relates to the formal and informal norms, regulations and relationships among institutions shaping the livelihood opportunities. The importance of this element is to explore not only the formal and informal institutions, but also take into account the interactions between them and reveal the relations of power being produced.

Furthermore, the map outlines the need to identify **structural drivers** that shape the elements of the map and their interactions. These drivers are composed by wider relevant societal and environmental processes. These are external occurrences in the landscape that expose risks and opportunities, obstacles and leverages for change.

While these components are important entry points to unpack the relationship between livelihood practices and expansion of capabilities, it is key to use the map through the relationship between these different elements. In this sense, the map calls for the understanding of the **livelihood trajectories**, examining the pathways people go through when engaging in a livelihood practice, revealing enabling and constraining factors affecting their practice, as well as the outcomes these practices generate.

In the context of livelihoods programming, the capability map can be used to deepen the diagnosis around needs and aspirations that can be addressed through livelihoods initiatives. It can also support processes of designing projects, by being used to systematise existing information in a way that facilitates a discussion on entry points for action. The map can also be used to monitor progress and changes of particular interventions or wider societal changes. Finally, the map can be applied to evaluate outcomes of livelihoods programmes.



## 2.4. Analysis and Web of Institutionalisation

A final part of the methodology for the research employed involved the volunteers exploring the spaces for implementing the participatory vision of the People First methodology, as well as the ideals associated with the CA, given the institutional landscape in which VSO and its partners operate in the three case study countries and sectors.

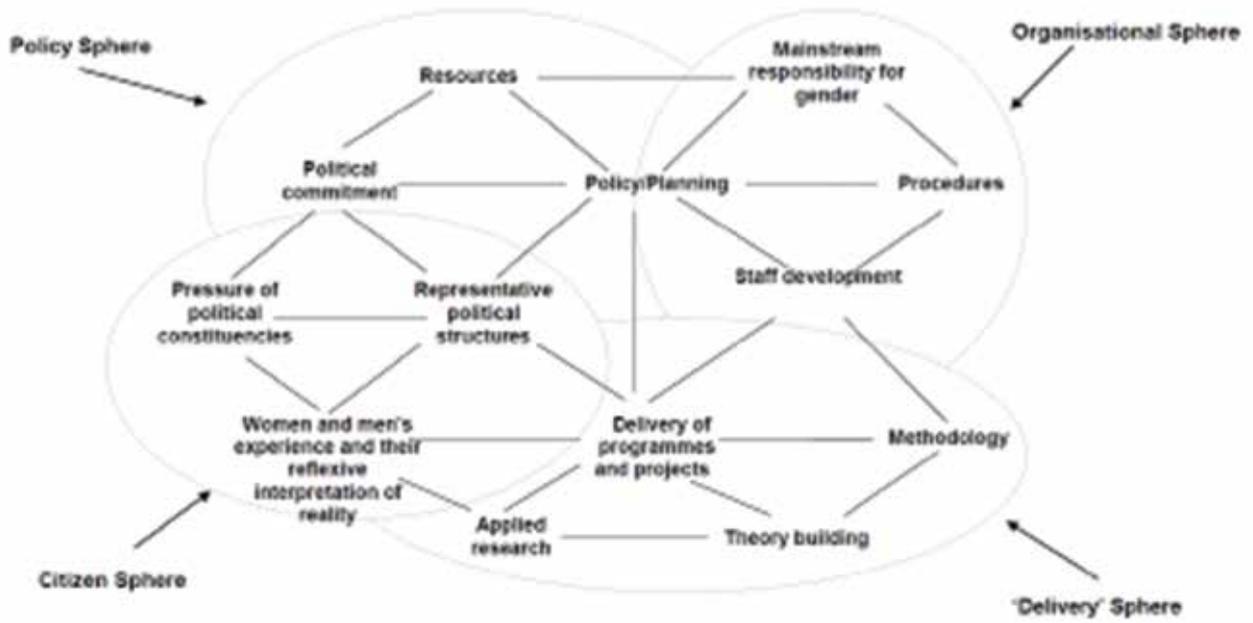
To undertake this analysis, a tool was used, developed by Levy (1998) called the Web of Institutionalisation. The Web is used to undertake diagnosis and strategy development for efforts to incorporate normative aims into the everyday practices and workings of development organisations and sectors of intervention. In doing so the Web aims to promote the 'institutionalisation' of these norms – i.e. that they become a normalised, regular and sanctioned part of routine work in a given sector or organisation. The Web was developed, specifically, in order to support the mainstreaming of gender equality into the work of development organizations, but it can equally be used to support the mainstreaming of other normative values (in this case the People First and CA values).

The Web identifies 13 'elements', each of which is a site of institutional power, which need to be supportive if a set of normative values are to be effectively mainstreamed (see Figure 4 below). The construction of these elements into a 'web' rather than a list reflects the understanding that these elements are mutually reinforcing and cannot be understood, or engaged with, in isolation of each other. These 13 elements can be grouped into four broad 'spheres'.

These spheres include the following:

- The **Citizens' Sphere** encompasses those elements related to the lives and values of primary actors (women and men citizens), and the citizen practices that they engage in to promote these, in conjunction with (and/or in opposition to) political actors and civil society organisations.
- The **Policy Sphere** encompasses those elements related to the work of policy actors at a range of levels, in developing, supporting and resourcing development policy across different sectors, and the extent to which these policy actions are supportive of people-centred values.
- The **Organisational Sphere** encompasses those elements related to the different organisations responsible for enacting development interventions in different sectors, including planning staffing and everyday procedures and the space that these give to participatory and people-centred processes.
- The **Delivery Sphere** encompasses those elements related to the implementation of policy commitments in practice – i.e. the delivery of projects and programmes on the ground that reach and respond to the expressed needs of primary actors, and the participatory methodologies and applied research needed to support and evaluate them.

**Figure 3:** The Web of Institutionalisation



Source: Levy, 1998

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## 3 – LEARNING

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This section of the report draws on the findings generated by the collaboration activities to address three of the main learning questions outlined by the VSO/DPU partnership. Firstly, this section outlines the role that the capability approach can have to support safeguarding and implementing the participatory principles of the people first strategy in VSO livelihoods programmes. Secondly, it identifies the VSO institutional entry points to support the

implementation of the contributions of the capability approach to VSO activities. Then, the report shares methodological learning generated by this implementation of the capability approach through participatory methods.

However, before addressing these three questions, below is a brief overview of the three volunteer placements which generated the research findings.

### Box 1: Bangladesh (Capability Impact Assessment)

#### The Project

The Growing Together project has been working with farming communities in the Mithapukur region of Bangladesh to build assets and capabilities in farmers' groups through bespoke agronomic training modules and facilitating market systems collaboration. The project facilitates farming communities to self-select and self-organise the poorest farming households into farmers' groups. Those groups receive organisational capacity building and elect lead farmers to receive intensive agronomic training in rice intensification and crop diversification (potato, vegetables, and fruit). Lead farmers then cascade that knowledge within the groups through small demonstration plots and then across the whole community through farmer field days.

The project links VSO long term volunteers with senior-level employees from the agricultural services/products company Syngenta who volunteer on short-term assignments together with VSO's local partner, RDRS. Each year, two teams of fifteen Syngenta volunteers travel to Bangladesh for four weeks to share their expertise around a specific aspect of the programme. Central to the success of the project has been the piloting of for-profit farmer centres, learning from an approach introduced to Bangladesh by the Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture. Centres within a 5KM radius of Growing Together farming communities provide physical spaces where farmers can access quality inputs (seeds, crop protection products), rent simple farming equipment and aggregate crops.

The intention of the project, once Syngenta's input completes in June 2018, is to create structures for the sustainability of the project approach including the establishment of a Social Franchise. There is also the intention to eventually reach 30-40,000 farming households (as opposed to 10,000 at the time of the DPU volunteer placement), supported by a franchise of up to fifty entrepreneurial farmer centres. It is intended that this will bring opportunities for other development initiatives in health, nutrition, education and economic development in the wider communities of up to 800,000 people.

#### The Volunteer role

The project team envisaged that the role of the volunteer would be to work with the VSO Bangladesh project team and global Monitoring, Evaluation and Research Team to develop protocols and tools to capture and assess economic and social impact data relevant to the lives of Growing Together communities, which could be used during the second and third year of the Syngenta partnership to produce empirical evidence which could be published but also from which the organisation can further learn and develop its Agricultural Based Value Chains capability approach and its alignment to the organisation's People First Programming Principles.

### **Proposed application of the CA**

To undertake the proposed TOR we suggested focusing on a small sample of farmers' groups and conducting a series of participatory research activities, involving personal and household activities as well as focus group discussions. This would allow the volunteering engagement to focus on the generation of qualitative data that unfolds in-depth and comprehensive sets of information. From a Capability Approach perspective, we felt that there could be some key research questions to address during the volunteer's engagement:

What are the aspirations of different groups as part of the Growing Together communities associated with their livelihoods activities? Do aspirations go beyond income generation? If so, what are the other livelihood outcomes valued (for example, building solidarity, increased mobility, access to public spaces or improved status in the household and community)? How have projects understood and supported the abilities of different groups of women and men to participate in the project? How did the project enhance access to assets of different groups of women and men?

How has the project affected the opportunities to achieve valued livelihoods outcomes? Have the project activities been able to affect a wider set of relationships between different stakeholders? In terms of relationship with local government, how has

the project affected the opportunities to influence decision making processes or policy making? Do the livelihoods activities enabled/supported by the project affect other capabilities? For example, does it affect aspirations or access to different services? After a series of activities focused on the questions above, it might be useful to organise a specific workshop to convey the main lessons learned in a way that would enable a conversation between different stakeholders that can generate recommendations for future projects focused at the Growing Together communities.

### **Key Findings**

The research reveals that climate change is a key structural driver threatening access to assets and livelihood practices of farmers of the Growing Together Project (GTP), pushing them to adopt often unsustainable and costly cropping practices. Within this context, GTP is still enhancing conditions of primary actors to pursue a series of social and personal aspirations. Group formation has been particularly successful in expanding a variety of assets. However, farmers have also outlined lack of opportunities to influence the design and implementation of GTP. The research also revealed that young people face specific challenges to benefit from GTP.

## Box 2: Zambia (Capability Impact Assessment)

### The Project

The project that the VSO/DPU volunteer role linked to was a proposed (pipeline) integrated youth empowerment initiative falling under the VSO Zambia livelihoods Core Programme Area in Serenje district. Its main goal is to boost entrepreneurship development through agricultural production, processing and packaging, marketing cooperatives, vocational skilling, sexual reproductive health (SRH) services, technologically driven initiatives, and literacy and life skills. It further aims to address associated poverty issues such as HIV/AIDS and other STIs, early pregnancies, child marriages, malnutrition, etc. by addressing youth unemployment and increasing opportunities for income.

At the time of the volunteer role being launched, initial research to establish poverty levels and potential programmatic areas for intervention had been completed and programme design was ongoing. The period of the volunteer placement was intended to be the period of programme set-off and development.

### The Volunteer role

The intention of the Zambia VSO team was to work with the volunteer to ensure the “integration of the capability approach (CA) right from the early stages of the programme”. This is placed within the wider focus of the ToR, which is on contributing to the baseline research/needs assessment for the new Integrated Youth Empowerment Initiative. Accordingly, the research project in Zambia primarily aimed to explore: 1) The application, use and support of the CA at all stages of VSO’s livelihoods programme cycle, in particular in the design, development and implementation stages of the Empowered Youth in Entrepreneurship and Employment (EYEE) programme in Zambia; 2) The extent to which participatory methods can be used to gather information on assets and capabilities of marginalised people, in this case – Serenje youth; 3) The different ways in which operationalising the CA through participatory methods might support marginalised people, in this case – Serenje youth.

### Proposed application of the CA

It was considered helpful to think about how the CA could be integrated into some of the needs assessment activities, which relate to the ‘scope of assignment’ as outlined in the ToR (such as ‘stakeholder mapping and relationships, groups’ concepts formulation and reviews’). From the point of view of the CA, we suggested that some relevant

areas of focus to bring a CA perspective to these baseline research activities, could include:

Understanding the aspirations of different categories of youth regarding entrepreneurship projects – i.e. what is it that young women and men wish to achieve through their involvement in this programme? The ToR focuses on ‘entrepreneurship as way of increasing opportunities for income and better livelihoods and providing necessary health and education information and services’. Scoping of youths’ aspirations would therefore be a critical way of ensuring that this focus reflects youth’s aspirations in practice and/or whether there are other/additional motivations for young women’s and men’s participation in the project that should be understood and reflected in the project strategy.

Mapping out the abilities of different groups of young women and men to participate in the project – what are their skills and capacities to participate in entrepreneurship and what areas of support do they need?

Mapping out the opportunities of youth to participate in the project – understanding the ways in which the project context (e.g. social norms, environmental factors, policy environment) affects the space of different groups of youth to realise their aspirations through entrepreneurship activities. A critical issue here is to link the micro-level project context with the wider macro-level development context.

We suggested that these would best be achieved through participatory research activities, primarily built around qualitative research, to supplement (and interrogate) other baseline data collection for project planning.

### Key Findings

Corruption and lack of power to affect decision making process have been some of the key structural constraints identified by young people that took part in this research. Youth groups identified livelihood practices as means to bring about a good life, which included access to good education, decent work, adequate housing and being part of youth group. Research participants have identified access to social equipment such as youth centres and markets as of key importance to expand access to assets. Lack of accountability of government institutions have been main barrier impeding youth groups from having access to livelihood support opportunities, such as the Youth Empowerment Fund.

## Box 3: Uganda (M&E Framework Development)

### The Project

The Skills and Capacity for Organisational Productivity & Employment (SCOPE) project is funded by GIZ under the Employment for Sustainable Development - Skills for Oil and Gas Africa (E4D/SOGA) programme in Uganda. The overall aim of the programme is to improve access to jobs in the oil and gas related sector and increase income for men, women and young people in Uganda, through access to market relevant, industry accepted, international recognised standard of skills and work readiness training. The project was in the pipeline at the time of the VSO/DPU volunteer placement.

### The Volunteer role

The primary focus of the volunteer's role was to bring a People First/Capability Approach perspective to the development of the baseline M&E framework for this pipeline project. This was to be done in part through factoring in learning on how People First/CA relevant issues have been addressed in the existing portfolio of Uganda secure livelihoods projects (and documentation of this learning may also be used to contribute to a wider Secure Livelihoods programmatic review which is currently in development).

### Proposed application of the CA

It was suggested that some of the questions that the CA would bring to the M&E of secure livelihoods projects could include the following:

What are the aspirations of different categories of youth (including young women and men with disabilities) regarding livelihoods programming? Do these aspirations go beyond increased income or access to employment (also including, for example, factors such as increased mobility, access to public spaces or improved status in the household and community)? This can then be used as a baseline to explore through M&E the extent to which these other aspirations expressed by youth have also been realised by livelihoods projects.

How can the M&E framework map the extent to which a focus on increased income/employment has led to unexpected (negative or positive) consequences for other capabilities of young women and men? For example, has participation in livelihoods projects increased time poverty or exacerbated conflict between household members? Or, on the other hand, has it increased young people's voice in public decision making?

How to measure the extent to which projects have understood and supported the abilities of different groups of young women and men to participate in the project? – What are their skills and capacities to participate in entrepreneurship and what areas of support do they need?

How have the projects identified and addressed the opportunities of youth to participate in the project? This requires understanding and responding to the ways in which the project context (e.g. social norms, environmental factors, policy environment) affects the space of different groups of youth to realise their aspirations through livelihoods activities. How can changes in this operational context be measured?

How can we factor in constraints to young people's opportunities that they may not be in a position to identify themselves (e.g. internalised social norms around gender or disability which may limit their opportunities but which they may not question or challenge)?

### Key Findings

The research in Uganda raised the importance for further research about the environmental and economic sustainability issues affecting the Oil and Gas sector, which the SCOPE project relates to. Vocational Training Initiatives (VTIs) were valued as a means not only for employment purposes, but also wider educational goals. Most students that participated in the research feel that the institutes will give them practical skills to become employed but they lack resources and support to give them the quality of training necessary. The research revealed the need to improve quality and work conditions of instructors of government run vocational training institutes. Furthermore, primary actors have argued that VTIs have reinforced unjust gender norms, leading to exclusionary patterns particularly to young pregnant women.

### 3.1. The Capability Approach and VSO People First Strategy

**Learning question:** How can the CA support a better understanding of the VSO people first methodology, and the implementation of the people first strategy? The findings from the case study research activities have revealed the importance of supporting VSO livelihoods programmes to implement the people centred and participatory principles embedded in the people first strategy. The capability centred research activities have suggested that there is a need for VSO livelihood programmes to put more emphasis on: recognising the diverse aspirations of project primary actors; recognising the role that livelihood projects play in their political assets; and recognising the role that social diversity plays in the livelihood capabilities of primary project actors.

#### 3.1.1. From needs to the recognition of diverse aspirations

The activities undertaken with project primary actors across the three placements has revealed a variety of dimensions of well-being associated with livelihood practices. The analysis of the Growing Together Project (GTP) in Bangladesh has revealed the implication of the project in advancing various dimensions of well-being. For example, the research revealed the positive impacts of GTP on enhancing social and personal aspirations, such as community cohesion, training and professional recognition, sense of autonomy and access to good education (see box 4).

The capability needs assessment with youth groups in Zambia revealed a series of dimensions of the 'good life' which included access to good education, decent work, adequate housing as well as being in a good marriage (non-violent) and part of a youth group. The monitoring and evaluation research of the SCOPE project in Uganda, identified that the aspirations of project primary actors go beyond income and employment. Financial credit and a secure job are often seen as key paths to educating children which is regularly at the top of people's priority when it comes to spending. Most people also aspire to support their family and to have a better status in their community. Many youngsters want to help others and support those less advantaged.

While the research revealed a diverse set of values and aspirations associated with livelihood practices in the three contexts, the practice of VSO livelihood programmes has mainly focused on project design and monitoring and evaluation on the expansion of income. Even when other well-being dimensions are

recognised as important by VSO staff in livelihood projects (such as in the case of Bangladesh), they are understood in terms of their instrumental value in relation to the expansion of income, and not as an end in themselves. Therefore, VSO staff have raised the importance of capturing the impacts that increased income has had on different dimensions of well-being, but not necessarily recognising that livelihood projects could also focus on their role in well-being dimensions valued by primary actors such as enhancing sense of autonomy, social cohesion or education opportunities. Furthermore, the expansion of income might not always be conducive to expanding people's freedom to realise these other well-being dimensions.

#### Box 4: Well-being impacts of GTP

**Community cohesion:** The Although rarely explicitly mentioned as an aspiration, all groups stated a major advantage of the project was the formation of farmers' groups that provided an opportunity to collaborate together.

**Training and professional recognition:** one of the major reasons participants joined the programme was to have professional recognition and an increased sense of pride in their livelihood. This is coupled with improved working conditions and also an end to exploitative and poor market and financial practices.

**Autonomy:** Regarding the above, there is a desire for residents to become more autonomous custodians of their own future. Although little concern was mentioned over the already high level of NGO intervention, with more support consistently requested, there was a consistent demand for people to become more secure over their own livelihoods and command over resources income.

**Education:** This was consistently mentioned as an area where people invested increased income. Community members are keen to see children receive further education, with the more successful and wealthy families encouraging children to migrate to cities to find work. This is part of a wider structural driver, with the majority of young adults struggling to find meaningful employment in either rural or urban communities. Many families are indifferent about their children 'taking over' their families mode of business, whereas those with financial capabilities to expand into other income generating activities are more likely to work with them. Working rurally is beginning to be seen as a social stigma and with individual ownership of land typically too small to be divided further to support younger residents.

### **3.1.2. From capacities to capabilities: The recognition of political assets**

The research activities have identified a series of factors affecting primary actors' and communities' access to assets, enabling or hindering their capacity to transform livelihood practices into well-being outcomes. In particular, across the three cases, political assets were identified as a key area that VSO livelihood programmes could be addressing more explicitly.

In Zambia, youth groups focused particularly on issues around corruption within government authorities is creating barriers to access government benefits (such as youth empowerment fund and community development fund). They mentioned that their lack of representation at the district level is hindering their capacity to hold government to account and address such institutional challenges. Therefore, one of the participants' main recommendation has been to get support from VSO to lobby government authorities to open a branch of the Ministry of Youth at their local constituency, from example in Serenje district. Similar frustrations with government authorities were raised during research activities in Uganda. Groups mentioned that access to human assets were a particular challenge to them, as government allocates insufficient resources to government run Vocational Training Institutes (VTIs). This has led to a lack of opportunities and deterioration of the quality of instructors.

In the case of Bangladesh, group formation was identified as a useful strategy to expand and support access to a variety of assets. For example, groups have become a nucleus for discussing and implementing social change. In Bahanni, a farmers' group successfully lobbied local authorities to build a much-needed bridge. In Boldipukur a group used collected savings to construct a community building. These decisions show both an ability of these groups to act as an organised catalyst for social change to deliver structural and political change and to enhance their own livelihoods. However, project primary actors have also mentioned the lack of opportunity to influence the design and implementation of the Growing Together project. The conflict over access to finance illustrates this challenge well in current project implementation. While VSO has strongly encouraged farmers to use Bank Asia finance system, farmers have argued that a large private bank is not where they want to place their money. Yet, VSO is not supporting them to find alternatives. Similarly, particular aspects of the project design has been driven by Syngenta aims, rather than farmers' priorities. For example, research

activities revealed that Syngenta officers understand the setting up of farmers' centres as a strategy to sell Syngenta products, as well as to trial, patent and replicate entrepreneurial models implemented by the project. These reflections imply that political assets to influence decisions with private sector institutions has been overlooked by the VSO livelihoods project design.

### **3.1.3. Recognition of social diversity**

Research activities have revealed a series of issues associated to how social diversity affects livelihoods practices, as well as the impact of livelihoods projects and their livelihood outcomes. Throughout the three cases, there were particular reflections that highlight the importance for VSO Livelihoods Programmes to engage with such social complexities and be more pro-active in trying to reach out to marginalised groups.

The research in Zambia revealed that youth groups were very diverse in their composition as well as in their capacity to convert goods/services into valuable achievements due to personal as well as locational factors. Furthermore, social arrangements have also placed certain groups in a better position than others. For example, the better off and educated youth groups have started savings, but there are other groups who are struggling with food security, and saving for them was very difficult. This diversity meant that groups have different capacities to interact and to benefit from trainings, requiring training institutions to plan activities in a manner that responds to such uneven personal and contextual conditions. Otherwise, there is a threat that the most marginalised groups are left behind, reinforcing patterns of inequalities. The research also revealed that participants seem to associate themselves more strongly to their 'rural' rather than 'youth' identity. However, VSO programmes are targeting the formation and support of youth groups. This observation can have implications for more grounded strategy of group formation, in a manner that responds to groups processes of self-identification.

In Uganda, the research has revealed similar threats of the role of training programmes in reproducing patterns of inequalities. Primary actors have argued that VTIs have often reinforced particular gender norms, where young men are often encouraged to engage on entrepreneurial and sustainable employment opportunities, while women are driven towards particular technical training. Furthermore, the programmes provide a series of disincentives and obstacles for young pregnant women to attend

training activities, leading to many drop outs. This reinforces a series of gender norms related to women's lack of access and control of their education.

Meanwhile, the research in Bangladesh has revealed particular challenges for young people to benefit from the Growing Together project. Despite the strong focus on youth development, the success of the youth groups seems uncertain. Many of the participants invest limited effort into the project and are clearly unsure of the project's direction. It provides an excellent opportunity to develop agricultural and business skills, however the opportunities to develop and practice these skills in a professional sense are lacking, with groups saying they need more support and finance to be in a position to implement their acquired skills.

Furthermore, in all the three cases the research findings have demonstrated the importance for livelihoods projects not to predetermine or prioritise particular livelihood practices over others. In all the three cases, there seems to be a bias of VSO initiatives towards entrepreneurial livelihood practices, rather than securing pathways for sustainable and decent work (including employment). The threat of such a focus is to benefit particular entrepreneurial primary actors, who already have some access to the assets needed to secure such practices, and leaving behind more marginalised and vulnerable groups. The prioritisation of entrepreneurial livelihood practices can also potentially miss out the opportunity to support other pathways for sustainable and inclusive economic development.

### 3.2. Conditions for Implementation of the Capability Approach

**Learning question:** Under which conditions could the CA support impoverished and marginalised people?

This section of the report focuses on the institutional and contextual issues that were identified by the partnership activities as important to take into account for the application of the capability approach into VSO livelihood programmes. This section also identifies particular entry points within VSO existing practice where the contributions from the capability approach can be reflected and introduced.

#### 3.2.1. Context and structural drivers

The research activities have identified a series of key contextual processes and conditions that affect the capacity of livelihoods initiatives to enhance the capabilities of its primary actors. These political, social, economic as well as environmental wider drivers

are impacting availability and incentives of particular livelihood options, distribution of assets in society, policy and planning norms, as well as aspirations and the definition of the intended outcomes of livelihood practices and interventions.

Three overarching structural drivers, in particular, were highlighted across the different country projects – these related to environment (climate change), political structures, and finally to regimes of economic development.

In terms of **climate change**, in Bangladesh this issue was a key driver threatening access to assets and livelihood practices of farmers of the GTP. Unusual and extreme weather events have caused crop losses to tall growing produce such as maize with increased rainfall, diminishing rice production. Seasons are now less predictable with the rainy season arriving three months early effecting the cultivation calendar and agro-economics. The intensified agricultural model being used is also detrimental to protecting natural resources with three to four cropping seasons per year and intensive mechanical and chemical inputs diminishing soil quality, causing soil erosion and being detrimental to surrounding environmental capital i.e. eutrophication of still water bodies used for washing and fish production. Changes in season patterns has resulted in farmers adopting an unconventional fourth cropping season to offset climatic losses, putting further strain on ecological services, financial sources and labour.

In Uganda, primary actors have also been affected by the impacts of climate change as well as its linkages to economic opportunities. The research revealed a series of issues of long term sustainability when it comes to project participants gaining employment in Oil and Gas related sectors but having little knowledge about the environmental impacts as part of life skills relating to their specific sectors. Although the SCOPE project will support holistic training in practical and life skills, there is a lack of research and engagement with the environmental issues and long-term sustainability of employment in these sectors (e.g. 80% of jobs created will be short term).

The **political context** was particularly reviewed as a determining issue affecting the livelihoods of youth groups in Zambia. Beyond their allegations of corruption issues affecting access and control over assets, the research has revealed the lack of power of youth groups within their communities as well as in negotiation with other stakeholders. The research revealed a general lack of trust between youth groups and local leaders. This context substantially hinders

the youth groups' ability to cope with an extremely unstable and uneven political climate. Similarly in Bangladesh, while the project focused on farmer productivity and access to markets it did not explicitly engage with the political economy of land which is a crucial backdrop to farm-households' livelihood strategies and their position to negotiate economic outcomes.

In terms of the **economic regimes**, the cases all highlighted the problematic landscape that wider processes of economic development create for youth, or pro-poor employment and for balancing employment creation with issues of sustainability. For example, in Bangladesh, wider national as well as international discourses of livelihood practices seem to be associated predominantly with economic productivity and efficiency, in ways which have directly affected the aspirations of farmers on the ground. Many farmers participating in the research prioritised new farming machinery as a key aspiration which at times compromised a discussion on wider livelihood aspirations. Although these concerns are justified, it compromises a holistic analysis, with debate sometimes stagnating on how mechanisation can improve labour conditions and productivity. When discussing wider structural issues such as health and public services, improved economic opportunities, market linkages and access to finance there was a general reluctance to reflect about improvements, with meaningful change seeming unattainable or not relevant to the discussion.

In Zambia the research found that the approach to livelihoods for impoverished youth often did not take their economic and social position into account. For example the language used during the training included ideas such as the statement that 'risk is 50/50', which did not take into account participants' position of (high risk) disadvantage and there was a practice of encouraging vulnerable young people to become entrepreneurs without taking full account of the risks that they face and the choices and capabilities that they have access to, which in practice, might make employment a more relevant livelihood strategy than entrepreneurial activity. The neoliberal formula of individual responsibility within a free-market economy must be tempered with attention to the wider set of forces that undermine the success of those trying to work their way out of poverty.

How VSO interventions might position themselves in relation to such structural drivers is a tricky question. Clearly many of the underlying, structural, environmental, political or economic processes which characterise the contexts in which the projects

operate are outside the sphere of influence of VSO. However while VSO interventions might not be in a position to transform such structural drivers, it is nonetheless crucial that VSO interventions factor them in to their strategies. This could be by:

(a) taking them into account in their problem analysis and strategy development to ensure that strategies are relevant given the wider context of primary actors' lives, and;

(b) challenging rather than reinforcing problematic structural relations which generate poverty and disadvantage, including by using VSO projects as a space to expand critical agency of primary actors in relation to such issues (in line with the People First commitment to Reflective Practice).

### 3.2.2. VSO Practice

Each of the case study research activities have outlined particular issues related to the practice of VSO within country offices that have hindered the possibility of livelihoods projects to implement particular principles of the People First strategy, as well as dealing with the findings from the capability analysis.

In all of the three contexts, field researchers have identified the need for a **deeper diagnostic practice** to take place, establishing a holistic and relevant baseline measurement (as highlighted in the previous section, often failing to deeply explore the wider structural context in which projects operate). The current baseline measurements, often focusing on living standards, provide a descriptive analysis of livelihood practices before the project begins, but does not provide capability relevant analysis. There is a lack of documentation and analysis around primary actors' aspirations, or how contextual issues have affected changes in livelihood practices over time and across groups of different social identities. In Bangladesh for example, the GTP did not carry out a vulnerability analysis and its selection process did not include the most marginalised. Although work is being done to improve this, a capability approach would suggest at a minimum, a deeper understanding of social structures and inequalities so as to ensure these are not being exacerbated and how they can be improved. Furthermore, for this deeper diagnostic exercise to impact on project design, it would be important to detach it from project delivery, and make sure they inform processes of livelihoods programme and project design.

Secondly, the findings also reveal the need for livelihood projects not only to engage and respond to diverse aspirations of primary actors, but also to

**open up spaces to critically reflect about what people value.** Given the findings articulated in the previous section on how structural drivers shape particular world views and values, there is a need for livelihood project activities to create mechanisms to critically reflect about those relationships. Also, livelihood projects could play a role in supporting primary actors in questioning, reconfiguring and/or expanding aspirations. Additionally, the place of power and the dynamics of place identity e.g. location in influencing young people's aspirations, requires deeper analysis. Social diversity and intersectionality are key aspects in understanding how aspirations are formed and therefore VSO projects need to work with primary actors from the point of this deeper level of understanding. The research has emphasised that the context of the place is not only about the sector or the location but also about the history, policy environment, social practices and norms which affect relationships, aspirations, freedoms and opportunities.

Thirdly, the findings from this research raises the need to **approach participatory development in a more meaningful as well as political manner.** In all of the three contexts, primary actors have raised issues around the lack of their participation in the design, implementation as well as discussion of future directions of livelihood initiatives. The fact project planning has often failed to genuinely include participants means there is a potential vacuum in ownership during post VSO interventions. Discussing long term project outcomes can contribute to widening/deepening aspirations, in contrast to providing participants with a pre-defined list of options for solutions which they have limited control over, or understanding of. In Bangladesh for example, farmers are not being consulted or are aware of many significant changes in the Growing Together project that may impact them and the planning/design of this project. Similarly, the Integrated Youth Empowerment project in Zambia has been designed and implemented in a conventional top-down strategy. In Uganda, there is a lack of interaction between students and the vocational training institutes compromising the possibilities to shape content and methodologies of programmes. Meanwhile, in all the three cases there was also expectations from primary actors for VSO to support their engagement with 'duty bearers', in this sense supporting them in mobilisation as well as advocating for a particular set of rights. The experience of the volunteer placements linked to pipeline projects (Uganda and Zambia) suggested that part of the problem for engaging with a deeper participatory development of interventions, giving voice to primary actors, is the funding modality and, in particular, the reliance on donors whose priorities

may differ to those of VSO and whose funding commitments are insecure and project specific. This means that it is very difficult for the VSO team to develop and maintain meaningful relationships with primary actors outside the remit of specific and predetermined project engagements.

A recommendation that came from the Bangladesh research is for the creation of clear participatory indicators of progress and capability attainment. As the capability approach posits, capabilities are dynamic and will change over time and as such there should be regular evaluation. For example, after attaining a basic and secure income, people's aspirations will change and the project can be orientated differently. From the Zambia research, there was a recommendation to focus on meaningful participation of youth in the project through the application of action learning cycles as part of programme implementation. Finally, the research on capabilities has raised the importance of **embracing diversity** and moving away from projects with a 'one size fits all' character. Drawing on the findings of this research, it becomes important for VSO interventions to be designed and implemented in an adaptable manner, with the capacity to respond to different contexts and conditions.

### **3.2.3. VSO Institutional analysis and entry points**

During the final research workshop, the VSO and DPU team carried out an institutional analysis of VSO to identify potential entry points for VSO to respond to the findings from the research carried out in Bangladesh, Zambia and Uganda. This section summarises the main findings that came up from that discussion, according to the different institutional spheres represented in the 'web of institutionalisation' tool: citizen, policy, organisational and delivery spheres.

In terms of the way **VSO relates to its constituencies**, the analysis revealed the importance for VSO to have a clearer mechanism to incorporate people's aspirations and experiences in the various programmatic activities of VSO. Currently, wider VSO practices tend to focus on needs, rather than aspirations.

In terms of **VSO's policy**, the discussion has identified that there is already a substantial amount of organisational policy that outlines many of the issues raised by the researches in the three case study countries. One gap identified was on the lack of policy guiding the types of partnerships VSO establishes. This has left the country offices to negotiate on a case by

case basis, leading to potential problematic positions, especially when negotiating agreements with large private sector partners. An institutional policy on partnership could set a standard that could assure consistency with the People First Strategy.

The institutional analysis also revealed a series of **organisational challenges** in the implementation of current People First Strategy and relevant policies. While there is a lot of demand from country offices to apply the people first strategy in their practice, there is still a lot of confusion and misunderstandings on what it actually means. Especially in relation to the potential contribution of the capability approach, notions such as 'capabilities' are applied next to assets, without clear articulation or recognition of the overlaps and complementarities. As a consequence, planning of projects and programmes are not always aligned with the overall people first strategy. Therefore, VSO would benefit from having internal mechanisms to assess proposed programmes, creating spaces that can help to facilitate the alignment between policies with programmes.

The organisational analysis similarly highlights the need for staff training in ways that can incorporate principles and values of the people first strategy and notions of the capability approach. This could be addressed for example through the revision of staff induction process as well as creating mechanisms to support staff in applying training in practice. Furthermore, the increasing reliance of VSO on consultants is compromising its capacity retain and develop staff internally. The analysis also revealed the need to develop job specifications for hiring consultants in a way that reflects the expertise for operating through a people first strategy and capability approach.

Therefore, VSO is facing a series of challenges in the **delivering** on its existing People First Strategy. While there are a series of methodologies available to VSO teams to implement the people first strategy, more guidance could be given on their use. VSO staff often feel there are too many of them, and difficult to assess how to select a combination of instruments that can help to build on a comprehensive and effective methodological pathway. At the same time, tools are not reflecting capability components, and more could be done to include methodologies that address issues embedded in a capability analysis. Signature programmes could be used to demonstrate more clearly how procedures and methodologies can be used to implement VSO's wider strategies.

The analysis of VSO's delivery sphere also highlights the importance of research and the need to conduct

more contextual analysis, so that project planning and delivery can reflect and address the wider social conditions affecting primary actors. A deeper contextual analysis through research activities could also support VSO in having a stronger negotiating power with donors to shape calls and funding conditions in ways that allow them to respond to the challenges affecting primary actors.

After analysing these different institutional spheres, the workshop identified **staff development as a key potential entry point** to support VSO in mainstreaming more effectively the values and principles of the People First Strategy and notions of the capability approach. Apart from the induction process already discussed, the analysis identifies a series of other training entry points that could be considered to be strengthened, for example, the livelihoods hub training and the social inclusion and gender analysis training. VSO could also be developing further coaching and mentoring skills that can support staff in implementing and advancing on their learning while in the organisation.

### 3.3. Participatory tools and Capability Approach

**Learning question:** How can participatory tools and approaches be used to work with marginalised people to gather information on capabilities?

As described in the methodology section of this report, the participatory action research principles of this partnership aimed to create spaces for learning that could deepen the understanding of VSO practice while also creating opportunities to encourage personal as well as collective critical awareness. This section reviews some of the methods used in this research, reflecting about some of their outcomes and applicability to address issues of capabilities.

#### 3.3.1. Uganda

In Uganda, fieldwork activities were composed by focus group activities as well as in-depth interviews.

**Participatory photography** was a key method applied in the research about the SCOPE project in Uganda. This method was used to understand livelihood options, current situations and values. After taking pictures about their options, participants used the images to have an interactive and visual discussion about their living conditions, assets and aspirations.

Another visual method used in the research was **drawing activities to dream about the future**. This method was particularly useful to explore aspirations and future imaginings. Participants were

asked to draw or write about their dream future by responding to the following questions: what do you want to do/be? What would your future community look like? Some groups did this together in small groups and others chose to them individually.

Assets were explored through a focus group discussion where participants used the analogy of a **'bridge'** to reflect about the enabling factors needed to connect livelihood practices to their aspirations about the future. Participants were asked to think about what different supporting factors would enable them to reach their dream future. Post-it notes were used to describe factors between the current situation discussed during the photography activity

and their dream future. Each factor represented a way to achieve the things they value but also to open discussion around access to and control over assets.

Finally, individual interviews were facilitated through a **life story activity**. Participants drew on a large sheet a river of the key stages of their life, drawing tributaries to represent positive experiences and influences and rough waters to represent challenges. This was a visual method helped to break barriers between the interviewer and interviewee. It allowed the participant to talk freely about their lives, and helped to gather an understanding of their context and constraining factors to reaching aspirations.

**Pictures 1 and 2:** Uganda field trip activities



Source: Natasha Menon

### 3.3.2. Zambia

In Zambia, the researcher developed a workshop of 2.5 days, which included a series of participatory activities and was replicated in different youth groups. The first activity implemented was a **participatory introduction**, which was aimed to explain the research project, gain consent from participants, co-create rules of the workshop and build trust between participants and with the workshop facilitator. Activities included a general introduction and expectation exercise. Participants were asked to identify objects that would help to represent themselves, and they used items such as flowers, leaves, water, stones, sand, and branches. Then participants were divided into groups to think about rules and principles for the duration of the workshop.

The second activity of the workshop was the **rivers of life**. Participants were asked to draw their journey of life using the symbol of a river. Similar to the activity in Uganda, tributaries were used to represent positive experiences and influences, and rough waters to represent challenges. This was a useful tool in creating bond and trust between participants and facilitators and shedding light on the diversity of the group and some of the factors that have influenced their current situation and abilities.

This was followed by **one-to-one interviews** between participants. The objective of this activity was to start defining together key notions of the research, which included well-being, participation, aspirations and assets. After defining what these terms meant to each one of them, this was shared in a plenary session and common definitions started to be put together. The facilitator used a series of prompts to get the discussion going and help participants to have a more concrete as well as holistic discussion on these topics.

The third activity used a **participatory photography** method to get participants to talk about access and control over assets. Firstly, participants were divided into groups to capture pictures on things that help or hinder the well-being of young people. Then the top two pictures were selected from each group and participants developed a short description about what the picture represented. These were displayed and a discussion was facilitated on what participants learnt through photography about the community, their place in it and possible opportunities for change.

Livelihood practices were reflected through an activity called **10 seeds technique**. The group identified a list of livelihood practices in the community they live and wrote them on flipchart paper. Then participants used seeds to start prioritising the activities that were

most common in their community and explaining the reasons for this. After reviewing the output of the exercise collectively, the group had a discussion about which livelihood practice they would like to engage in as a group if they had a chance. While the individual part of the exercise was able to capture everyone's perspective, in the group discussion some dominant voices started to become more apparent and guided the direction of the discussion.

This activity was directly followed by a **matrix ranking** activity to develop criteria for 'decent work'. The group developed together a set of criteria to assess the quality of the livelihood practices identified in the 10 seeds activity. Using the elements of the agreed criteria, the group attributed ranks to each practice according to each element. In the end, participants would be asked to compare the results with what would have been the top income generating practice. In this way, activities captured groups' livelihood aspirations beyond income generation.

The workshop continued the discussions on aspirations, linking them to enabling factors through an exercise that used the analogy of a **bridge** to facilitate discussions. In small groups, participants drew or listed characteristics of their current situation in terms of livelihoods on one side as well as the policies and institutions that supported or influenced them, including VSO. Then, participants visualised the ideal livelihood condition they would like to have, and represented this with words, symbols or drawings. A bridge was then constructed between the two situations and participants identified key supporting/enabling as well as disabling factors.

The findings of the workshop were then summarised through a **storyboard exercise**. Participants were asked to bring together the main learnings from activities and to use them to develop a storyboard for a drama task. A series of prompt questions helped to guide participants in the development of the storyboard and to create a structure for them to work through. The storyboards were then performed by participants through a **tableaux activity**. Divided into groups, participants would identify an issue of their choice depicted by the storyboards developed and impacting on particular well-being dimensions. Then they would dramatise it in its worst possible condition, followed by a dramatisation that would end up in the most desirable outcome. These scenarios were then performed to each other.

Then, drawing on all the different issues that emerged through the storyboard and tableaux activity, participants conducted a **forum theatre activity**.



### 3.3.3. Bangladesh

The research in Bangladesh used particular methodologies with the objective to apply the capability approach: poverty baseline matrix as well as participatory activities.

The **poverty baseline matrix** was used as a piloting tool to better understand who VSO should work with and how to work with them. It serves as a participatory multi-dimensional analysis of how people view deprivation and creates clear capability based dimensions that can be used to monitor and design progress. By providing a household-by-household analysis and matrix of deprivation it allows programme designers to understand who they should be working with and can also create a scoring index and cut-off point of who to work with. This allows VSO to help evaluate the most vulnerable in society and later evaluate how successful they have been at distributing support. It can be coupled with a vulnerability analysis and 'opportunity gap' based monitoring and evaluation. Elements of this tool can be applied to different areas of project design. Crucially, it creates an idea of graduation that goes beyond simply increased economic security to clearly illustrate what the objectives of the project are and where the project can be re-evaluated or concluded i.e. when all households are above the agreed ranking of deprivation.

In terms of **participatory activities**, the research in Bangladesh used a participatory timeline based tool and asset based resilience planning which were both practical attempts to explore capabilities in line with participatory action research principles. The participatory timeline aimed to facilitate project ownership with primary actors. It also hoped to facilitate a discussion on the achieved as well as potential outcomes of the growing together project. The asset based resilience planning activity was implemented to explore project planning and livelihood resilience from a capability lens. Both tools were difficult to implement and perhaps a more people orientated cultural shift in how VSO engages with stakeholders is required. This could also involve, using 'problem solving' and 'appreciative enquiry' based methods of facilitation to encourage reflective thinking and agency.

Lastly, from the research in Bangladesh it was identified that the opportunity gap methodology can provide a useful theoretical lens for development planning that explores the relationship between potential capabilities, agency, assets, conversion factors and structural barriers. Regarding the latter, an area for future exploration could be the provision of lobbying and collective action support and tools.

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## 4 – CONCLUSIONS

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This report explores the contribution of the capability approach to the application of the VSO People First Strategy in its livelihoods programmatic work. Drawing on the action research undertaken by volunteers in Bangladesh, Zambia and Uganda, this work proposes a methodological framework as well as reflections on tools to implement the capability approach. The work also provides insights on VSO's livelihoods programmes in case study countries that reveals the added value of the capability approach to livelihoods project design, implementation and evaluation.

### 4.1. Methodological Contribution

In terms of the application of the People First Strategy, the capability approach overlaps and helps to advance on the strategy's six key principles:

- from a capability perspective, **people-centred** requires engaging not only with people's needs, but their freedom to pursue their valued aspirations;
- the capability approach provides a broad theory of change that helps to analyse how power and power relations are reproduced and challenged, contributing to the design of interventions that are **evidence-based**;
- the capability map emphasises that to be **effective and appropriate**, the analysis of poverty, and proposed support strategies, needs to go beyond the focus on assets and livelihood strategies, and engage with wider structural drivers that constitute people's capability space;
- by focusing on participation as agency, the capability approach highlights the importance of establishing relationships of co-production of critical knowledge, that expands people's abilities to reflect critically about their living conditions and act upon their value, in this way supporting mechanisms for VSO to be **reflective in its practice and support collaborative and knowledge sharing** opportunities;
- in terms of the nature of **accountability**, using a capability approach implies focusing on wider strategic accountability about outcomes (related to capabilities to pursue valued aspirations), rather than narrower programmatic accountability about outputs and inputs.

The report proposes a capability map that can be used to operationalise the capability approach, which articulates the relationship between livelihood practices, well-being outcomes, assets, policy and planning environment and structural drivers. It argues that by understanding the relationship between livelihoods and well-being from this perspective, VSO would deepen its understanding of livelihood trajectories of primary actors and design initiatives that are strategic to expand their capabilities. Drawing on the work carried out by the volunteers, this report proposes a series of participatory tools to implement the capability map. The work in Uganda used a series of visual methods for focus group facilitation, such as participatory photography and diagramming through activities focused on analogies such as rivers and bridges. It also involved doing qualitative individual interviews elicited through life stories and drawings. The research in Bangladesh piloted a poverty baseline matrix as a quantitative method to reveal and weight capability dimensions. And in Zambia, the volunteer developed an innovative 2.5 day workshop to implement the capability map involving one-to-one interviews, group discussions and a forum theatre activity.

### 4.2. Research Findings

In terms of findings for VSO livelihoods programmes, the research has revealed that initiatives need to engage in a deeper process of recognition of needs and aspirations of primary actors. Firstly, projects need to engage with the various dimensions of well-being associated to livelihood practices. In the case of Bangladesh, primary actors have outlined the relationship between livelihoods and community cohesion and a sense of autonomy. In Zambia, the work revealed the role of livelihood practices in shaping access to good education, decent work and adequate housing. In Zambia, primary actors talked about the relationship between livelihoods and social support systems and status. Most importantly, the report argues that VSO needs to approach this relationship between livelihood practices and well-being dimensions beyond the instrumental value that income expansion has on them. Enhancement of financial assets is one of the mechanisms to explain these relationships, but not the only or always the determining one. In fact, there are cases in which financial assets can be enhanced, but have a detrimental impact on people's freedom to achieve these valued dimensions of well-being.

Secondly, projects need to have a more explicit recognition of the role that primary actors' political assets have to expand their livelihood capabilities. In Zambia and Uganda, youth groups have called for initiatives to support their ability to lobby government authorities to improve accountability and quality of services. In Bangladesh, farmers' groups have called for more decision-making power within VSO projects, and getting support to better negotiate with private sector institutions.

Thirdly, the research shows that VSO livelihoods programmes could be engaging more proactively with issues of social complexities and reaching out to more marginalised groups. In Zambia, youth groups have different capacities to interact and to benefit from trainings, requiring training institutions to plan activities in a manner that responds to such uneven personal and contextual conditions. Otherwise, there is a threat that the most marginalised groups are left behind, reinforcing patterns of inequalities. In Uganda, primary actors identified similar threats of VTIs, especially as they tend to reproduce unjust sets of gender norms. In Bangladesh, the success of the youth groups of the Growing Together Project seems uncertain at the moment, as young people have outlined the lack of opportunities to apply acquired skills.

Furthermore, the three cases have revealed the need for VSO to engage beyond the strengthening of livelihoods practices, and address wider sets of processes, norms and relationships shaping pathways for sustainable and inclusive economic development. Many of the underlying structural, environmental, political, social or economic processes identified by this research are outside the sphere of influence of VSO. However, it is critical for VSO to factor them into their strategies by taking them into account in strategy development and focusing on mechanisms that challenge rather than reinforce problematic structural relations.

### 4.3. Organisational Recommendations

In terms of VSO practice, this report outlines some key organisational recommendations that can support VSO's livelihoods programmes to address the findings generated by the capability analysis:

- The research reveals the need for deeper diagnostic practice, establishing a holistic and capability relevant baseline analysis.
- Livelihoods projects need not only to engage and respond to diverse aspirations of primary actors, but also open up spaces to critically reflect about what people value.
- Participatory development needs to be approached in a more meaningful, inclusive and political manner.
- Interventions need to move away from 'one size fits all' character and embrace social diversity, becoming more adaptable and better able to respond to different contexts and conditions.

The research has identified processes and procedures around staff development as a key potential organisational entry point to address the recommendations outlined above. Livelihoods hub training as well as social inclusion and gender analysis training activities are identified as existing mechanisms through which VSO staff could reflect about the application and contribution of the capability approach. Learning from this report can inform a comprehensive coaching and mentoring strategy with the objective to support the mainstreaming of the People First Strategy. This could inform the revision of staff induction processes as well as creating a mechanism to support staff in applying training in practice. Furthermore, having an internal mechanism to comment and assess proposed programmes could also create a space that could help to facilitate learning in the organisation and ensure the alignment between policies and programmes.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that by bringing together VSO's People First Strategy and the capability approach, this initiative has the potential to inform not only VSO's practices, but also contribute more widely to the development thinking and practice attempting to bring about human development.

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