UNPACKING RECIPROCITY IN INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE COOPERATION

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FOREWORD

For decades, financial assistance from countries in the Global North to countries in the Global South have been given as a gift with demands, often without knowing enough about the context in which the gift was given.

It is not in the nature of the gift to come with requirements. If so, it isn't a gift. It is in the nature of the gift that the one receiving it should be able to give something back. A gift is reciprocal in its nature, and one of the common denominators of the gift is that it must be reciprocated.

Many of development aid's shortcomings are linked to the absence of reciprocity, yet it is a fundamental anthropological insight that reciprocity is something that makes life and societies meaningful. In 1999, the Norwegian Peace Corps was closed, partly because it had a one-sided focus from north to south. The volunteer service re-emerged in 2001 following a decision by the Norwegian Parliament with an aim to facilitate mutual exchange of personnel between organisations in Norway and countries in the south. Since 2001, Norec has facilitated more than 10,000 young professionals across borders in the Global South, and between countries in the Global South and Norway. Reciprocal exchange has become a fundamental principle in our partnerships. Skills are shared, knowledge is acquired, and new competencies contribute to personal and organisational development.

In 2018 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs changed our name to Norec – Norwegian Agency for Exchange Cooperation, which express exactly what we do: Facilitate the exchange of personnel between organisations across borders. Reciprocity in practice and a meaningful sharing of knowledge. Ben Lough's paper presents a sound analysis on various forms of reciprocal relationships and how they are necessary to fully engage multiple agencies in equitable and sustainable partnerships for our common development.

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INTRODUCTION

"Reciprocity" has become a buzzword in international development cooperation. Practitioners tout its virtues with little critical reflection on the depth of the concept or how they can truly implement the principles of reciprocity in organizational policies and practices. Likewise, many scholars and practitioners have noted a meaningful lack of precision about the fundamental concepts constituting reciprocity.[1] This paper intends to untangle critical assumptions behind this term—asking the readers to stop and consider how this concept, along with the underlying values and ideas associated with it, are understood, expressed, and valued in international development cooperation.

This discussion paper situates discussions of reciprocity within the context of international volunteer cooperation as a historical framework for development exchange. Because reciprocity is performed within a system of mutual exchange and cooperation, some have argued that international volunteering was an innovation that offered a valuable alternative over conventional forms of aid—with the ultimate goal of achieving legitimate reciprocity between Southern and Northern partners.[2] Indeed, volunteers often expect to receive new knowledge, abilities, friendships, and résumé-building experiences in exchange for their gifts of time.[3] Nonetheless, several studies have found comparatively low levels of reciprocity from the perspective of volunteer hosting-organizations based on the supply-driven nature of many volunteer placements.[4] The low levels of reciprocity embedded in historically dominant North-South models of international volunteering raise critical questions about the moral dimensions of international volunteering. When reciprocity is low, volunteering as "service" tends to reinforce power differences in the minds of both giver and receiver—often in similar measure to other conventional aid relationships.

Recognizing the challenges inherent in the conventional North-South volunteer cooperation model, international volunteer cooperation organizations (IVCOs) have made incremental (and occasionally radical) changes to their programs. For example, a review of the early Norec (earlier FK Norway) North-South model of volunteer cooperation led to its eventual closure in 1999, relaunching in 2000 under a new model of mutual exchange with an aim: "to promote contact and cooperation between individuals, organizations and institutions in Norway and in the developing countries, based on solidarity, equality and reciprocity."[5] In 2018, the program was further rebranded to emphasize its focus on mutual exchange.

With the spread of COVID-19 and subsequent shutdowns in 2020, Norec further innovated to support digital exchange as a substitute for international travel. During the pandemic, the switch to digital cooperation exchange unveiled new challenges and questions about reciprocity. Further questions emerged about how exchange in the virtual environment might challenge or alter the implementation of reciprocal partnerships. Concerns about reciprocity initially targeted the historical model of unidirectional 'aid' to post-colonized countries. However, because exchange is more easily multidirectional in virtual space, some have questioned whether concerns about reciprocity are germane in digital exchanges, where the direction of aid can be fully reoriented without an explicit connection to 'place.'[6]

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[1] Dostilio et al., "Reciprocity: Saying What We Mean and Meaning What We Say."
[2] Devereux, "International Volunteers: Cheap Help or Transformational Solidarity toward Sustainable Development."
[3] Polonijo-King, "In Whose Words? Narrative Analysis of International Volunteer Stories from an Anthrological Perspective."
[4] Perold et al., "The Colonial Legacy of International Voluntary Service"; Heron, Desire for Development: Whiteness, Gender, and the Helping Imperative; Tiessen and Huish, Globetrotting or Global Citizenship?: Perils and Potential of International Experiential Learning.
[5] Tjønneland et al., "Chasing Civil Society? Evaluation of Fredskorpset."
[6] Steckley and Steckley, "E-Volunteering as International Experiential Learning: Student and Community Perspectives."

On the other hand, challenges with resourcing that emerged during COVID-19 raise new questions about reciprocity. For instance, the curtailing and withdrawal of financial support during the pandemic emphasize that multilateral exchange is only one dimension of reciprocity. In some cases international cooperation organizations in the North stopped paying stipends to Southern community volunteers.[7] In other cases, partners in the South found that indirect financial resources they had previously received through volunteers' fundraising efforts or connections to Northern philanthropy dried up during the pandemic. Many of these organizations were forced to shut their doors as a result. When resourcing depends on the direction of exchange, what does this dynamic say about reciprocity?

Finally, the pandemic unveiled potential differences in organizations' duties of care between partners in the North and South. For instance, nearly all Norwegian participants on exchange returned to Norway in early 2020 when the SARS-CoV-2 virus began spreading. However, approximately 70% of the South-South participants continued their exchanges, as did most South-North participants living in Norway.[8] Organizational willingness and commitments to repatriate volunteers in different global geographies suggest that duties of care may be inequitably implemented across the North and South.[9]

Recognizing these concerns, this paper begins by exploring reciprocity as a concept, drawing from a wide body of literature on international cooperation and exchange.[10] It also explores several hidden and unintended consequences that might emerge from reciprocal relationships. The discussion then considers whether IVCOs and volunteers acting together with host-country organizations can embrace an authentic expression of partnership — being mutually empowered to make and act on targeted development priorities. This question draws on many diverse dimensions of reciprocity that contemporary IVCOs practice. Finally, acknowledging that full reciprocity may be problematic in some instances, the paper explores the potential strengths of reciprocity within modern systems of international development cooperation.

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[7] Perold et al., Covid-19 and Volunteering for Development. Part 1: Research Report.
[8] Tetra Tech, "International Volunteer Programs in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, and United Kingdom."
[9] Mati et al., "Leadership for Volunteering: The COVID-19 Experience."
[10] It's worth noting that service-learning literature discusses the concept of reciprocity with far more regularity and rigor than can be found in literature on international volunteering. Perhaps this is due to a common expectation in service learning that students should receive tangible benefit from hosting organizations. Although the product is different, the exchange of services justifies the need for reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships.

The Challenge of Reciprocity

Genuine reciprocity is extremely difficult to achieve in traditional aid relationships. On a practical level, reciprocity is a condition where two or more groups evenly met their needs—creating an equal partnership between mutually-empowered parties.[11] In contrast, the very concept of 'aid' implies a helping relationship between giver and receiver, creating an implicitly asymmetrical relationship. As a result, most conventional aid relationships embody concepts of patronage, power, and inequality.[12] The partner with greater resources will nearly always exercise more power and control—even when they are explicitly conscious of these inequities. Therefore, to accomplish objectives of reciprocity, the conventional role of the higher-resourced "giver" aiding a lower-resourced "receiver" must be turned upside-down and re-conceptualized. This reorientation requires an authentic valuing of bottom-up views and contributions and an earnest effort to modify and shape otherwise top-down development objectives.

Administering programs consistent with the value of reciprocity is a noble goal, and there are many pathways to achieve it. In search of greater equity in international partnerships, IVCOs have employed a mix of diverse practices. For instance, Norec has focused on reconfiguring the direction of exchange between the Global North and the South. As will be explored later, other IVCOs use different modalities in their reach for reciprocal partnerships. Regardless of the method, the common unifying principle of reciprocity is a movement away from a unidirectional model of charitable giving—from privileged to underprivileged—and toward a multi-beneficial model of mutual giving and learning by all parties.

In support of the practical application of reciprocity-targeted practices, scholars have produced rich theories that examine and explain the concept of reciprocity. Central to these theories are boosters to reciprocity, including face-to-face communication, trust through mutual cooperation, symmetry of priorities and resources, and the sustained duration and continuity of relationships. These concepts each play significant roles when reaching for reciprocal exchange.[13] Research on volunteering for development has identified additional variables linking program practices to development outcomes.[14] Such connections between theory and practice are important because they help to explain why the principle of reciprocity is central to practical international volunteer cooperation.

Reciprocity Boosters:
- Face-to-face communication
- Trust through mutual cooperation
- Symmetry of priorities and resources
- Sustained duration and continuity of relationships

- Ostrom and Walker, 2003

Why Reciprocity?

For more than half a century, advocates have touted the potential for international volunteering to enhance reciprocity in international development cooperation.[15] In many ways, the ideal of reciprocity embedded in volunteers' relationships with communities is a defining feature that makes international volunteering and exchange different from other forms of international aid. Without the relational component, volunteers could be viewed as just another resource to be deployed to accomplish the goals of development agencies. Therefore, a discussion of reciprocity is important to understand the added value or distinctive contributions of volunteers to development.[16]

[11] Stirrat and Henkel, "The Development Gift: The Problem of Reciprocity in the NGO World."
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ostrom and Walker, "Trust and Reciprocity: Interdisciplinary Lessons for Experimental Research."
[14] Sherraden, Lough, and McBride, "Effects of International Volunteering and Service: Individual and Institutional Predictors."
[15] Lough, "The Evolution of International Volunteering"; Henderson, Development in Voluntary Service.
[16] Lough and Matthew, "Measuring and Conveying the Added Value of International Volunteering."

On the surface, the value of reciprocity is difficult to dispute. Reciprocity is founded on time-honored values of social and distributive justice, equity, and fairness. It is necessary for lasting solidarity, social cohesion, and unity. Social scientists have found that the reciprocal exchange of gifts is a core feature of longstanding social ties and human solidarity.[17] Cooperation is built on a foundation of trust, and reciprocity is the key moderating condition that generates trust between different parties.[18]

As a development practice, international volunteering models that lack reciprocity are often viewed as paternalistic, neocolonial, and even oppressive.[19] Some argue that unidirectional aid relationships are, by nature, built on a foundation of inequality that "ultimately robs the recipient of self-respect using altruism as a form of social oppression."[20] In cases where the unidirectional

> "Social ties are created, sustained and strengthened by means of reciprocal gifts. These acts of gift exchange are at the basis of human solidarity."
>
> *-Komter, 2007, p. 103*

aid mentality is embodied in less-reciprocal models of international volunteer service, there is ample precedence for active opposition from Southern countries. Their primary concern is that the North-South service model may create dependency and reinforce power dynamics that privilege the leisured classes and disempower recipient identities.[21]

Most IVCOs assume that reciprocity is a legitimate and virtuous goal. Therefore, they primarily focus on making the concept work in practice. However, few people stop to consider whether reciprocity is a worthwhile aspiration in all aspects. Deconstructing the concept reveals critical challenges that may be worth confronting. Struggling with the concept of true reciprocity is not a mere exercise in semantics, nor is it of minor concern. Falling short of reciprocal relationships in international cooperation can create real dependencies, disempowerment, and other harms. The challenges that may arise when partners strive for reciprocity but do so without a sufficient "critical consciousness" of their unexplored assumptions are just as real.

First, it is important to consider how the term is understood and interpreted as a general principle. Anthropological, sociological, social-psychological, and economic disciplines all conceptualize reciprocity as the fair exchange of real or symbolic goods or services.[22] Any truly reciprocal relationship requires intangible services and tangible gifts to be matched tit-for-tat. In principle, true reciprocity cannot be achieved without fair exchange.

As one form of international assistance, volunteers offer their services and skills as gifts of time to hosting organizations and communities.[23] Operating within a system of true reciprocal exchanges, IVCOs and volunteers would not expect to give without a comparable expectation of fair return from partner organizations and communities. Therefore, partner organizations would be obligated to provide equivalent value—ideally matching volunteers' "gifts" with an alternative measure of worth.

In practice, such reciprocal relationships are rarely achieved. Although volunteers gain much from their service experiences, few would claim that they expect equally valuable gifts from recipients. A literature review from the Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) "Valuing Volunteering" research supported this point by referencing the less-reciprocal nature of many volunteer partnerships:

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[17] Komter, "Gifts and Social Relations: The Mechanisms of Reciprocity."
[18] Ostrom and Walker, "Trust and Reciprocity: Interdisciplinary Lessons for Experimental Research."
[19] Perold et al., "The Colonial Legacy of International Voluntary Service."
[20] Polonijo-King, "In Whose Words? Narrative Analysis of International Volunteer Stories from an Anthrological Perspective," 109.
[21] Hautzinger, "From Direct to Deferred Reciprocity: Service- versus Community-Based Learning in International Anthropology Training."
[22] Komter, "Gifts and Social Relations: The Mechanisms of Reciprocity"; Mauss, The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies.
[23] (Polonijo-King, 2004)
[24] Franco, Valuing Volunteering: Literature Review, 12.

> *"In the particular case of volunteering, there is no expectation of reciprocity. The giver and receiver do not expect the latter will ever have the possibility to pay back; therefore, the volunteer's time and effort become an unreciprocated gift."[24]*

As this passage suggests, neither the volunteers nor the hosting organizations expected that the lower-resourced partner would have the capacity to reciprocate. This is not an uncommon expectation in systems of international development cooperation, despite its contradiction to reciprocal partnerships.

Anytime volunteers go abroad with the intent to "serve" or "help" the meanings implicit in these concepts presume that volunteers have skills, ability, knowledge, or resources to offer—some gift to offer. Beyond this, research with hosting communities has found that intended recipients often describe the volunteers' ideas as "better" or more advanced than those generated locally.[25] Many people from the North also assume that Southern volunteers have less to offer. For instance, early debates of volunteer cooperation asserted that, "As most foreign technical assistance assignments are designated to provide skills not available in the receiver country, finding a counterpart [from the receiver country] is like seeking a person who does not exist."[26] While such assumptions of unbalanced contributions may be incorrect, they are not uncommon. International volunteering is often marketed as unidirectional helping by knowledgeable and skilled volunteers to less able or less qualified populations abroad.[27] On the other hand, returned volunteers consistently assert that they received more than they gave during their time abroad and learned new and better ways of working and living.[28] If volunteers benefit from their hosting organizations in significant and meaningful ways, then how might the value of this reciprocal giving be more clearly understood and communicated to all partners?

Furthermore, should IVCOs and volunteers categorically expect equal value from their partnerships? If so, should they explicitly communicate this expectation to partner organizations? Such questions are not typically asked or addressed at a strategic level. However, the consequences for failing to engage in true reciprocity are problematized from the perspective of both the "giver" and the "receiver." First, from the perspective of the giver:

> *By means of abundant gift-giving we are putting ourselves in a morally superior position, and we may cause the recipient to feel indebted… Giving gifts may serve to dominate, humiliate and to make others dependent upon our benevolence and our willingness to share valuables and resources with them.[29] There is a propensity to give, but before doing so an inner calculus is made about the respective participants' position on the 'debt-balance.'[30] Feelings of being morally obliged to return a gift, and not purely altruistic motives are the main psychological impetus to reciprocal giving … As long as the recipient of a gift has not given back, the giver holds a certain power over the recipient.*

According to such assertions, if partner organizations do not view themselves as having the resources or the capacity to give back to volunteers in fair measure, they will be locked in a disempowered position. When one partner does not expect to reciprocate, they are effectively left in a state of indebtedness. As a result, the recipient—recognizing an informal contract to reciprocate—may either reject the service or choose

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[25] Lough and Carter-Black, "Confronting the White Elephant: International Volunteering and Racial (Dis)Advantage"; Kothari, "Critiquing 'race' and Racism in Development Discourse and Practice."

[26] Pinkau, "Serving Human Needs: A Study of the Role of Development Services and Their Cooperative Relationships."

[27] Simpson, "'Doing Development': The Gap Year, Volunteer-Tourists and a Popular Practice of Development."

[28] Lough, McBride, and Sherraden, "Perceived Effects of International Volunteering: Reports from Alumni"; Machin, "The Impact of Returned International Volunteers on the UK: A Scoping Review."

[29] Komter, "Gifts and Social Relations: The Mechanisms of Reciprocity."

[30] Schwartz, "The Social Psychology of the Gift."

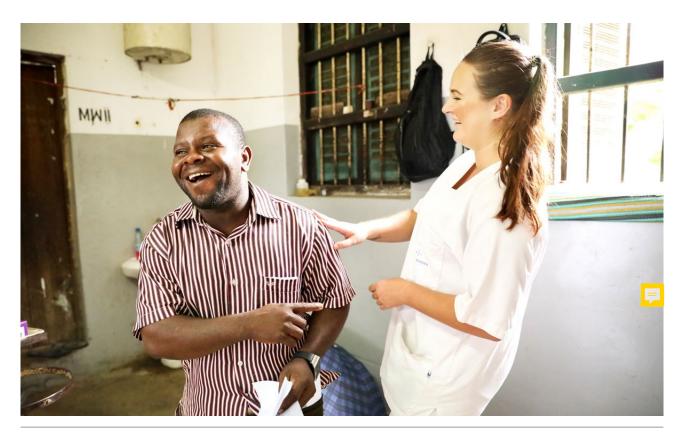to accept the service along with feelings of indebtedness and obligation. As one recipient described this challenge: "We cannot always refuse from a gift. On such occasions, we land in the sphere of exchange, and we end in the lower position than a donor. We can return our position only by donating a return gift."[31]

Although reciprocal exchange may promote equality in principle, the implicit conditionality of reciprocity also raises concerns that an expectation of return may place an added burden on the 'indebted' partner organization. The phrase "obligation of reciprocity" is often used when discussing mutual exchange because the cyclic burden of returning gifts is unavoidable in reciprocal relationships.[32] Aiming for reciprocity in international development cooperation, to what degree do Northern IVCOs and volunteers expect that Southern partners will feel obligated to them? Most stakeholders would agree that such conditionality is at odds with the spirit and values of volunteer service. Likewise, they would likely agree that dependency and indebtedness are inconsistent with ideals of development partnerships.

The following section explores different modalities of reciprocity in international volunteer cooperation. Looking across these different modalities it advances the argument that reciprocity is a worthwhile goal and can be achieved to some degree. However, to achieve this ideal, all partners should expect to bring different but relatively fair and complementary benefits to the relationship—though this can be difficult to accomplish without explicit recognition of the comparative equity between tangible and intangible contributions. As a sector, far greater consciousness and intentionality are needed to understand and strategically program for reciprocal international exchange cooperation.

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[31] Ilmonen, "The Problems of Disinterestedness and Reciprocity in Gift Economy."
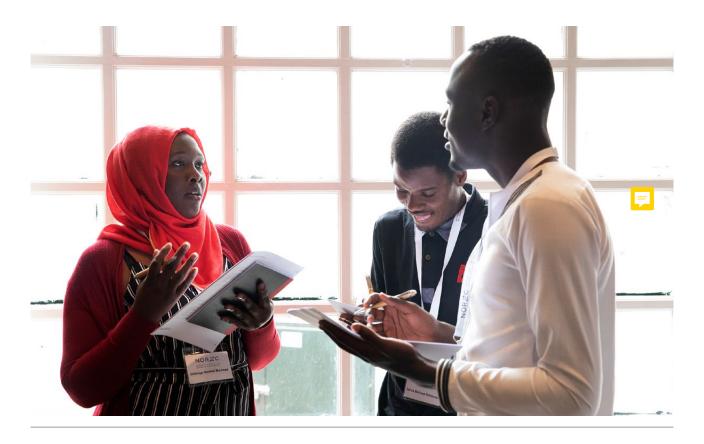[32] Komter, "Gifts and Social Relations: The Mechanisms of Reciprocity"; Stirrat and Henkel, "The Development Gift: The Problem of Reciprocity in the NGO World."

MODALITIES OF RECIPROCITY IN INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERING

Given the relational nature of international volunteering, nearly all development oriented IVCOs claim to practice reciprocity in some form or another. However, different IVCOs have a distinct way of interpreting the concept. Diverse organizational policies and practices reflect these different definitions and interpretations of the concept. This diversity is also reflected across different levels of partnerships and through an assorted mix of development actors.

Perhaps the most frequently discussed mode of reciprocity fits within the partnership between volunteers and hosting organizations and communities. This conception of reciprocity counters person-to-person interactions that position volunteers as "experts" and local actors as "beneficiaries." The goal of *relational reciprocity* at this level is to disrupt the helping narrative by recognizing the mutual sharing and giving of experiences, expertise, and culture-specific knowledge and capabilities between people.
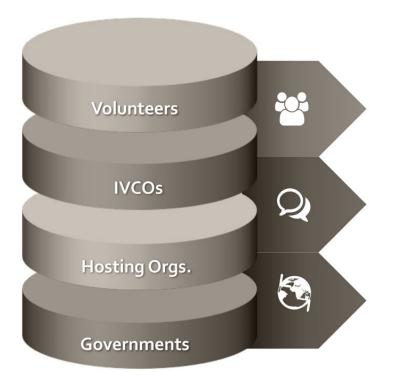
The next level of *partnership reciprocity* is between local partner organizations and IVCOs. Reciprocal partnerships aim to ensure that both organizational partners meet shared goals and priorities within this relationship. IVCOs aim to ensure that the "supply" of volunteers meets partner organizations' "demand" for volunteers with a specific skill set. As another expression of reciprocity at this level, local partner organizations may agree to provide safe and secure working and learning environments for volunteers in exchange for specific services provided by volunteers. Whatever the practice, both partners are engaged in mutual decision-making to jointly determine negotiated project priorities.

Further down the decision tree, IVCOs' relationships with donors determine the degree to which reciprocal volunteer exchange is possible. For example, funding from governments in most countries is limited to supporting bilateral North-South volunteer placements. For many IVCOs, decades of such funding priorities have normalized the acceptability of limited reciprocity in their volunteer cooperation programs.[33] Although there are several obvious exceptions (including Norec), the goal of reciprocity at this level is to move policy and funding from bilateral volunteer sending to *multilateral volunteer exchange and cooperation*. In this case, reciprocity reflects a value-based concern for global equity; North-South volunteering would ideally require a match of resources to support South-North exchange.

Scholars have described these various levels of volunteer cooperation as situated within the geopolitical, political, and learning environments that involve multiple actors and complex relationships.[34] In theory and practice, a concern for reciprocity has been acknowledged and discussed at each level of these relational arrangements (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Types of reciprocity among diverse volunteer cooperation actors

Relational Reciprocity
Mutual sharing and giving between volunteers and communities / organizations.

Partnership Reciprocity
Organizational partners participate in joint decision making and mutal benefit.

Multilateral Reciprocity
Governments and other donors support mutilateral volunteer exchange and cooperation.

Relational Reciprocity: Strengthening Trust and Solidarity

The form of reciprocity described in this first section is perhaps the best understood notion of reciprocity associated with volunteering. Reciprocity is touted as one distinctive benefit of volunteering associated with trust, solidarity, and mutual interdependence. This form of reciprocity is embodied in the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) program description as a core method of volunteers' contributions: "Volunteerism benefits both society at large and the individual volunteer by *strengthening trust, solidarity and reciprocity* among citizens, and by purposefully creating opportunities for participation." [35]

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[33] Lough, Balancing Donor Priorities and the Civil Society Function: A Challenge for Modern IVCOs.
[34] Schech et al., "New Spaces of Development Partnership: Rethinking International Volunteering."
[35] Leigh et al., State of the World's Volunteerism Report: Universal Values for Global Well Being.

New relationships are inherently fragile and insecure. To grow fruitfully, they require trust and solidarity strengthened through repeated positive reciprocal exchange. Scholars have theorized that gifts and intangible forms of giving are remarkably useful at fortifying insecure or unstable relationships because they initiate a moral bond based on enduring patterns of exchange.[36] This bond produces an ongoing circular expectation to return in kind and fosters mutual reliance, trust in continued benefit, and social commitment. Reciprocal giving is particularly well-suited to developing sustainable relationships:

> *Gifts have the superb characteristic of being at the same time free and obligatory, altruistic and self-oriented. It is exactly this double-sidedness of the gift that makes it such a fortunate solution for the fragility and insecurity inherent in any newly developing social relationship.*[37]

Such relational forms of reciprocal exchange are the basis of biological and social symbiosis.

Perhaps more than most social interactions and other forms of aid, volunteering can quickly build trust and stabilize new relationships. Volunteer service can initiate feelings of gratitude in the hearts of recipients to respond in reciprocal fashion. By initiating and maintaining this reciprocal circle of giving => receiving => giving =>... relationships are founded on mutual contribution. Such relationships can establish trust more quickly than comparable relationships wherein gifts of gratitude are not regularly expected and exchanged. However, to reap the benefits of this pattern, both parties must perceive that they can give and return in fair measure. Therefore, the relative equality of contribution emerges as a key precondition to effective relational reciprocity.

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[36] Caplow, "Christmas Gifts and Kin Networks."
[37] Komter, "Gifts and Social Relations: The Mechanisms of Reciprocity."

Preconditions of Reciprocity

Relative equality

Many international volunteering policies that shape "effective practices" are intended to function as an equalizing force. Such practices include living in the homes of local populations, embedding volunteers in community-level projects, working face-to-face with local populations, and maintaining volunteers' stipends comparable to the living wages of domestic workers. A VSO position paper alluded to this connection:

> *The reciprocal nature of volunteering is particularly valuable. In this model volunteers will often share housing with community members and they will cooperate together in labor projects. Living and working within communities over an extended period of time encourages sensitive and appropriate responses and a sense of equality that increase the likelihood of a successful outcome.[38]*

Although such practices may have inherent merit based on their alignment with core values of equality and fairness, they may also be necessary preconditions to achieving relational reciprocity as people live and work side-by-side. In this way, digital exchange cooperation may alter the nature of relational reciprocity. In comparison with face-to-face engagement, to what degree do digital interactions enable people to challenge power hierarchies and narratives? On one hand, digital interactions could disrupt conventional colonial narratives and level cross-cutting ties of affiliation; basing their relationships on shared interests rather than on differences in socio-economic characteristics, gender or geography. Likewise, participants in digital space may not comprehend the hierarchies that structure the relationships between the several anonymized faces that appear as black boxes on their screen.

On the other hand, the comparatively low intensity of volunteers' cultural immersion in virtual space can diminish intercultural learning that might otherwise occur. When a volunteer lives as a minority in a foreign culture, she is often compelled to confront psychological isolation and discomfort head-on. In a virtual setting, it can be easier for each party to ignore or withdraw rather than challenge their perceptions. Volunteers may more easily attribute confusing intercultural differences and idiosyncrasies of "the other" as strange or inferior; with fewer opportunities to resolve and understand these cultural differences. In addition, much of the intercultural learning that can challenge power dynamics and break down relational hierarchies occurs through informal conversations.[39] If digital interactions are primarily task-oriented rather than relationship-oriented, are people carving out space for dialogue and conversation? Can they successfully resolve dissonance about whether one path is "better or just different"? Resolving such differences can help nurture relative perceptions of respect and equality between people.

Incidentally, highly balanced power relationships and equal social status are not always possible in either virtual or in-person exchanges—and may not actually be desirable in some circumstances. When more privileged volunteers leverage their comparatively high social standing, influence, and networks with other power holders, this may be one of the most efficient routes to meaningful social change.[40] However, social, and economic equality are not theoretically required for effective reciprocal relationships—if all parties can act autonomously according to the strengths they bring to the relationship and bring these strengths to bear in *fair measure*. [41]

Repeat interaction

Another precondition for effective relational reciprocity is repeat interaction. Theory and research predict that parties in a partnership often fail to reciprocate in fair measure when the relationships are of short

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[38] Voluntary Service Overseas, "The Role of Volunteers in International Development," 2.
[39] Chen, "Understanding Development Impact in International Development Volunteering: A Relational Approach."
[40] Aked, "What's Different about How Volunteers Work? Relationship Building for Wellbeing and Change."
[41] Chia-An Tsai and Kang, "Reciprocal Intention in Knowledge Seeking: Examining Social Exchange Theory in an Online Professional Community."

duration or composed of "single-shot" interactions.[42] When people do not expect meaningful future interactions, they can more easily justify taking advantage of the other party.[43] However, partnership models that include longer time perspectives and repeated interactions will build trust and adopt norms of reciprocity and fairness in the expectation of long-term returns.[44] In all longstanding partnerships, the thought of ending the relationship (i.e., the "grim trigger") is a sufficiently rational incentive to encourage enduring reciprocation from all parties.[45]

This theory has obvious implications for policy and practice in volunteer cooperation. Among the most obvious is to structure international volunteer placements for longer durations. Ideally, this practice allows volunteers and IVCOs to establish reciprocal relationships built on norms of trust and mutual contribution through continued and sustained engagement with local populations. When volunteering for the long-term is not possible, relational reciprocity can be encouraged through repeat visits by shorter-term volunteers. This model is common practice for many "professional" volunteer cooperation programs facilitated by organizations such as the Singapore International Foundation and the USAID Farmer-to-Farmer program.

Evidence suggests that repeat visits by volunteers significantly influence the ultimate quality and equality of the relationships, as perceived by partner organizations.[46] At the organizational or "partnership" level, IVCOs and host-organizations can greatly enhance these partnerships by establishing a memorandum of understanding (MOU). Having a clear MOU in place can help cultivate a "shadow of the future" for repeat interaction and can provide a level of security and assurance necessary for sustained partnerships.[47]

Communication

Research also indicates that communication substantially increases the likelihood that people will reciprocate.[48] For international volunteering, communication depends on volunteers' proximity to community members in shared physical space, uninterrupted communication in digital space, shared language capacity, and a level of cultural understanding that can foster effective communication. Studies of select prior Norec projects cited the critical role of communication with partners. As an evaluation of one of these partnerships noted, shared language was critical for reciprocal collaborations:

> Both partners recognize that there are challenges to establishing a good collaboration, and that they have very different views on the purpose of the partnership ... The language barrier is believed to be the main cause of the lack of reciprocity in the exchange.[49]

Conditions of relative equality, repeated interactions, and effective communication are not the only preconditions for reciprocal relationships. However, they are likely the most common conditions observed and discussed in research on international exchange cooperation. These conditions also lay the foundation of alternative understandings of reciprocity in practice. The following section expands on importance of mutual benefit and joint decision within the context of relational and partnership reciprocity.

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[42] Ostrom and Walker, "Trust and Reciprocity: Interdisciplinary Lessons for Experimental Research."
[43] Ostrom, "A Behavioral Approach to the Rational Choice Theory of Collective Action."
[44] Ostrom and Walker, "Trust and Reciprocity: Interdisciplinary Lessons for Experimental Research."
[45] Ibid.; Fudenberg and Maskin, "The Folk Theorem in Repeated Games with Discounting or with Incomplete Information."
[46] Lough, "Global Partners for Sustainable Development: The Added Value of Singapore International Foundation Volunteers."
[47] Umoren, James, and Litzelman, "Evidence of Reciprocity in Reports on International Partnerships"; see Axelrod, The Evolution of Cooperation.
[48] Ostrom and Walker, "Trust and Reciprocity: Interdisciplinary Lessons for Experimental Research."
[49] Scanteam, "Study of the Results of Selected Projects of Fredskorpset Primary Programme 2004," 89.

Partnership Reciprocity
Mutual Benefit

Discussions of partnership reciprocity often focus on a "community driven development" approach, which prioritizes the needs of host organizations. In practice, development approaches often privilege volunteers' contributions while undervaluing the capabilities of hosting organizations. These approaches tend to position local partners in the role of passive recipients. However, a truly reciprocal exchange model recognizes and prioritizes mutual benefit; neither partner is given primary concern or exclusive benefit; *give and take is expected from both sides*.[50]

In line with this principle, effective program logic models should be organized with "dual purposes" that explicitly outline benefits to local partner organizations, volunteers, IVCOs, and all partnering countries.[51] Because the partners often have different capacities and resources to contribute, discussions of how reciprocity can be achieved in practice often focus on the relative economic versus non-economic exchanges provided by Northern and Southern partners.[52] To the degree that volunteers can contribute knowledge, skills, or resources, IVCOs also expect partner organizations to reciprocate with comparable contributions. This notion of mutual benefit has been called "strategic reciprocity" wherein volunteers' motivations are structured around the strategic returns they expect from their volunteer experience.[53] For example, when the FK Youth program began in 2002, a primary objective was to bring young people from different parts of the world together to share ideas, activities, and work experiences. A proposed benefit of the program was merely to "offer an inspirational means of reciprocal learning."

[50] Hartman, Paris, and Blache-Cohen, "Fair Trade Learning: Ethical Standards for Community-Engaged International Volunteer Tourism"; Palacios, "Volunteer Tourism, Development and Education in a Postcolonial World: Conceiving Global Connections beyond Aid."
[51] Hartman, Paris, and Blache-Cohen, "Fair Trade Learning: Ethical Standards for Community-Engaged International Volunteer Tourism."
[52] Dostilio et al., "Reciprocity: Saying What We Mean and Meaning What We Say."
[53] Manatschal and Freitag, "Reciprocity and Volunteering."

Articulating and making the expectation of dual benefit explicit offers several advantages, particularly to community partners. For one, they empower community partners to expect compensation for any services provided. As is often the case, compensation may come in the form of volunteer assistance. However, when volunteers are comparatively unskilled or unhelpful, partner organizations might legitimately expect compensation in the form of resources and tangible supports in exchange for hosting volunteers.

The blurring of the conventional boundaries between giver and receiver is another advantage of recognizing the different ways both parties contribute. Strengths-based dialogue has been used to articulate mutual advantage—empowering local partners to better identify and capitalize on the beneficial aspects of their distinct contributions. By emphasizing the significant benefits that volunteers receive as they live and work in host communities, local partners may more accurately recognize these relationships as reciprocal rather than unilateral aid.

In addition to working with hosting organizations to recognize the value of mutual contributions, the "sending side" of the partnership also needs a higher awareness. Not all volunteers stop to recognize the strengths inherent in communities and the benefits they are likely to receive as they volunteer. For instance, IVCOs may alter expectations by more accurately portraying the strengths of partner communities in the Global South and more realistically communicating the contributions of, and benefits to, volunteers. When discussions about reciprocity and asymmetries in power are an explicit component of volunteer orientation, these conversations can challenge volunteers to reflect on their own unconscious or unobserved helping biases and consider how they might avoid perpetuating inequities through their work.

Reciprocity as mutual benefit can also break down the common division of international volunteer programs as "demand-based" (i.e., driven by the needs of the host community or organization) or "supply-based" (i.e., driven by the needs of the volunteer, IVCO, or sending-country).[54] When partners prioritize reciprocity through mutual benefit, international volunteering operates on market principles, thereby maximizing utility through the balanced and mutually beneficial principles of supply and demand.

In situations wherein the IVCO/community partnership fails to clarify dual contribution, local partners may be unable or unwilling to participate in decisions about the direction of projects. Research with VSO found that:

> *"... beneficiaries are reluctant to give criticisms or reject initiatives because it would seem that the only symbolic repayment possible is the acknowledgment of the support, and the statement of shared commitment with the volunteering [nongovernmental organization] in its effort to promote development."[55]*

This statement assumes, as is common in development cooperation, that the only meaningful contribution Southern partners can provide is a "symbolic acknowledgment of support." This assumption is not only inaccurate, but it clearly falls short of the ideal of reciprocal partnerships.

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[54] Perold et al., "International Voluntary Service in Southern African Development Community (SADC): Host Organisation Perspectives from Mozambique and Tanzania"; Lough, "Participatory Research on the Contributions of International Volunteerism in Kenya: Provisional Results"; see Brassard, Sherraden, and Lough, "Emerging Perspectives on International Volunteerism in Asia."
[55] Franco, Valuing Volunteering: Literature Review, 21.

Joint Decision-Making

Related to the idea of mutual benefit, practicing reciprocity in international cooperation is expressed through the locus of decision-making power.[56] For example, joint decision-making is a primary way the Swiss Unité program defines and discusses reciprocity in their reports; the volunteers' value is best realized when Northern and Southern partners share common motivations, visions, and objectives.[57]

Key questions relevant to this conception of reciprocity include the following: Are hosting organizations and communities jointly involved in creating and critiquing projects? Who has more substantive power to determine the activities and priorities assumed by volunteers? Who ultimately decides which projects to support or fund?

Engaging partners in participatory and consultative decision-making is perhaps the most basic and "thinnest" conception of reciprocity. Some have described this as "working with a partner instead of doing something to or for a partner." In one example from UNV, volunteers helped change local government practices as they brought together Roma community representatives and Albanian government actors by "adopting participatory consultations, negotiations and mediations [and] achieving consensus regarding priorities and needs in cases when interests of many stakeholders are different." [58]

Beyond arranging for community members to participate in a consultative role, arranging for all stakeholders to share ownership of the project is a higher level of reciprocity.[59] When done correctly, this type of reciprocity has been conceptualized as "thick reciprocity" because it substantively equalizes power between stakeholders.[60] This conception of reciprocity is also closest to the spirit of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 16.7, which aims to "ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels." In this arrangement, partner organizations are equally involved in selecting, allocating, and mobilizing volunteers according to mutually negotiated strategic objectives.[61] Training of volunteers includes joint supervision and instruction—trusting partners to manage and direct the work of volunteers.[62] Similarly, the timing, duration, and continuity of volunteer-supported programs meet the needs of both partners. In addition, there is clear transparency in budgeting and program design.[63]

A review of the North-South component of the FK program completed in 2006 found several barriers that limited genuine reciprocity with partners. In particular, the review stressed the inequality of resources and decision-making power inherent in the management model, which is common in many North-South international volunteer cooperation programs.

> *In the North-South partnerships the driving force is the Norwegian partner... in many cases there are significant differences in resource endowments between North and South partners, for instance in terms of financial and human resources and in terms of communication technology. This makes it even harder to achieve balanced partnerships. In general, the North-South partnerships cannot be assessed as equal.[64]*

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[56] Sherraden, Lough, and Bopp, "Students Serving Abroad: A Framework for Inquiry."
[57] Unité, 7 Exemples de Partenariats Vécus Nord-Sud-Nord.
[58] United Nations Volunteers, Empowering the Vulnerable Communities in Albania: Support to the Implementation of the National Strategy for Improving Roma Living Conditions.
[59] Hautzinger, "From Direct to Deferred Reciprocity: Service- versus Community-Based Learning in International Anthropology Training"; Reardon, "Promoting Reciprocity within Community/University Development Partnerships: Lessons from the Field."
[60] (Jameson, & Jaeger, 2011)
[61] Perold et al., "The Colonial Legacy of International Voluntary Service."
[62] Haarberg, Dale, and Whist, Review of the Norwegian Esther Program (The FK Health Exchange Program): Final Report.
[63] Hartman, Paris, and Blache-Cohen, "Fair Trade Learning: Ethical Standards for Community-Engaged International Volunteer Tourism."
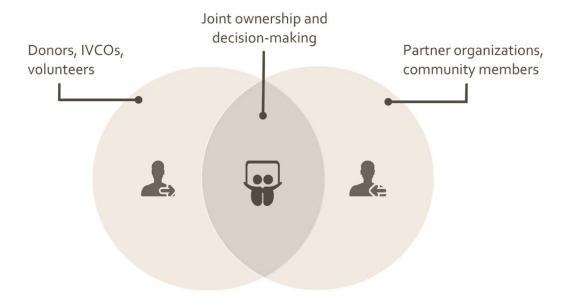[64] Norad, Evaluation of Fredskorpset, 33.

Such imbalances in partnerships from top-heavy management decisions and resource inequities is often more common than not in international volunteer cooperation.

Joint decision-making is compared to unilateral processes in which the strengths and assets of people in poverty are overlooked—and therefore undervalued, under recognized, and under-appreciated. As one Valuing Volunteering researcher concluded, "when volunteers are regarded as 'expert' and local actors as 'beneficiary,' reciprocity is rarely a feature of [these] volunteer networks." In contrast, when volunteers are not viewed as experts but rather as team members, notions of competition and paternalism from volunteers can be substantially reduced through reciprocal decision-making.[65]

A moderate deconstruction of *joint* decision-making is of relative importance to this discussion. Many advocates of sustainable development assert that efforts should be "community-driven." However, at the conceptual level, a community-driven model is not necessarily more reciprocal than a volunteer-driven model. Under the reciprocal approach, projects and priorities should be mutually negotiated and agreed. Although power differences cannot be ignored, project decisions should aim to occupy the space that fulfills the interests of all stakeholders, including the IVCOs, their donors, and volunteers (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Negotiated project priorities in reciprocal volunteer cooperation

Seeking to integrate the priorities of donors, volunteers, IVCOs, and other development cooperation organizations may contradict ideals of community-driven development, which aim to devolve power to the community to drive project priorities.[66] On the other hand, positioning community representatives as the primary decision-making actors could also result in poor consequences at the collective level. For example, community partners may not take environmental impacts into account if they believe that embracing such concerns may have detrimental effects on local livelihoods. In addition, projects focusing too heavily on the priorities of local partners have been criticized for being ignorant of the power differences inherent in local groups and civil society organizations, which can also be highly detrimental to marginalized groups.[67] Although joint decision-making is difficult to achieve in practice, it is a key objective for reciprocal partnerships.

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[65] Rockliffe, "International Volunteering: An Evolving Paradigm."
[66] Wong, What Have Been the Impacts of World Bank Community-Driven Development Programs? CDD Impact Evaluation Review and Operational and Research Implications; Nkonya et al., "Impacts of Community-Driven Development Programs on Income and Asset Acquisition in Africa: The Case of Nigeria."
[67] Mohan and Stokke, "Participatory Development and Empowerment: The Dangers of Localism."

Multilateral Reciprocity

For some IVCOs, reciprocity primarily implies an exchange of volunteers from the Global North and Global South. For example, Norec places a heavy emphasis on multilateral exchange in their conceptualization and discussion of reciprocity. Although reciprocity has been a component of the Norec model since its establishment as Fredskorpset in 1963, the policy change to strengthen multilateral placements and prioritize North-South and South-North exchanges was "only partly integrated into the original concept". Nearly four decades after its founding, Norec ultimately changed its modality to enhance reciprocity through multilateral exchange. In this model, volunteers from a Southern CSO travel to work within a partner CSO in a Northern country, and vice versa. Both volunteers aim to learn new skills during their work with the organizations, and they bring this new learning back to the CSO and their home country.[68]

All told, alternatives to traditional North-South models of international volunteering are following a clear growth trend.[69] Northern governments are increasingly willing to fund exchanges from other countries—primarily for youth. Over the past 20 years, several IVCOs have begun to facilitate South-North exchange models as a small fraction of their overall portfolio.[70] Despite this trend at an administrative level, many Northern governments remain reluctant to admit people from the Global South into their country and the rejection of visa applications is a not uncommon challenge.[71]

Despite promoting South-North exchange as a reciprocal model, it is sometimes still viewed as an unequal partnership given a normally heavier investment of resources by the Northern organization.[72] Because volunteers typically pay a higher fee to cover costs of Southern volunteers, the exchange is often viewed as a gift from the Northern IVCO or volunteer. As one respondent to an Norec partner survey commented: "Since the North partner has the money, there will always be inequality."

[68] Norad, Evaluation of Fredskorpset.
[69] VOSESA, Models of International Volunteering: Trends, Innovation, and Good Practice.
[70] Schreiber, Pasantías – Una Contribución Innovativa Dentro de Un "Partnership" Dinámico Recíproco Entre El Norte y El Sur (Balance y Perspecti-Vas de Una Nueva Forma de Inter-Cambio Dentro Del Voluntariado); Norad, Evaluation of Fredskorpset.
[71] Allum, The Potential for the Norec Youth Programme: Some Perspectives from Other Youth Volunteer Programmes.
[72] Mati and Perold, "Youth Volunteer Exchange Programs in Southern and Eastern Africa: Models and Effects."

For South-North exchange to be considered reciprocal, both parties need to view the level of giving as equally valuable. To accomplish this, stakeholders must challenge the respondent's perception that disparities in money and resources (which are inevitably a component of any North-South cooperation) do not ultimately determine the level of giving and benefit. In the end, Northern partners and volunteers need to value the contributions of the Southern volunteers equal to the level of resources expended. Likewise, Southern volunteers need to value their level of contribution in justification for any extra scholarship or fees paid by Northern volunteers.

Though equitable exchange is legitimate in theory, how might IVCOs and their partners accomplish it in practice? If reciprocity is a sincere objective, how do partners equalize the relationship in contexts where financial resources are inevitably unequal? Should Northern CSOs expect different results from Southern volunteers? Perhaps exchanges can be justified by recruiting volunteers with different skill levels from Northern and Southern contexts? These questions might touch a nerve for some readers, but such methods are already being implemented to a certain degree in some organizations. For example, in a review of Norec's youth program partnerships, the consultants identified that their partners "specified separate objectives and indicators for the North and South partners," which were viewed as consistent with the ideals of partnerships embedded in Norec's youth-based programs.[73]

South-South triangular cooperation is yet another expression of partnership reciprocity. Only a handful of IVCOs have developed and operated functional South-South or triangular cooperation programs. Some notable examples include Norec, Canada World Youth, VSO, UNV, SayXchange, America Solidaria, and Reach Out to Asia.[74] In recent years, Norec has substantively strengthened it South-South collaborations. Although pairing North-South with South-North exchanges is relatively easy to distinguish as a reciprocal model (excluding the nuances discussed in the previous paragraphs), many would argue that South-South and North-North volunteer cooperation models have an even stronger degree of reciprocity.[75] Why might this be the case? With vertical (i.e., North-South, South-North) exchanges, both parties have implicit dichotomies between privileged/underprivileged, lucky/unlucky, giver/receiver, developed/underdeveloped, etc. Some scholars have argued that horizontal volunteer exchange models (i.e., South-South, North-North) balance and blur differences in status—which promises a greater likelihood of mutual benefit and shared learning— and thereby more reciprocal partnerships.[76]

While South-South exchanges promise substantial opportunities for reciprocity, involving a third party in triangular cooperation can complicate this arrangement. A recent Norec report on South-South engagement acknowledges this challenge:

> *"Norec is keenly aware of potentially skewed power relations in triangular cooperation activities. There can be a strong alliance between the financing party and the party sharing the knowledge, which can weaken the recipient's position in the partnership and undermine the effectiveness of the project."[77]*

[73] Borchgrevink and Skard, Norway's Fredskorpset Youth Program: Study of Selected Exchange Projects, 35.
[74] VOSESA, Models of International Volunteering: Trends, Innovation, and Good Practice.
[75] Leigh et al., State of the World's Volunteerism Report: Universal Values for Global Well Being; Fulbrook, "Globalising Volunteering: VSO's Experience."
[76] Donahue, Bowyer, and Rosenberg, "Learning with and Learning from: Reciprocity in Service Learning in Teacher Education."; Norad, Evaluation of Fredskorpset; Plewes and Stuart, "Opportunities and Challenges for International Volunteer Co-Operation."
[77] NOREC, "South-South and Triangular Cooperation In Action."

Although discussions about partnership arrangements frequently equate the terms *South-South* and *triangular cooperation*, the role played by third-party donor agencies in triangular cooperation can substantially impact the dynamics of reciprocity.

How do South-South collaborations play out in practice? Although research on the comparative effectiveness of different multilateral reciprocal approaches is rare, a 2009 evaluation of the FK Norway program found that the South-South programs appeared better at capacity building and transferring skills because Southern volunteers tended to spend far less time adjusting to cultural differences and could begin working almost immediately after arriving in their partner agency.[78] A more recent study completed during the COVID pandemic found that, "While formal volunteering generally represented a unidirectional transfer of skills, labor and resources, informal [South-South] volunteering often embodied a more reciprocal form of giving and receiving".[79]

Previous evaluations of Norec's programs found additional benefits of South-South cooperation. Participants in the South-South program believed that they benefited more significantly from networks developed during the placements and were more satisfied overall than participants in the North-South program.[80] However, evaluation results from Norec's partner organizations somewhat contradicted these results. Surveys with these organizations, conducted over multiple years, consistently indicated that Southern

partners working within Norwegian volunteer coordinating organizations (i.e., South-North) ranked the highest in their level of satisfaction with the equality, reciprocity, and transparency of placements.[81]

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[78] Nordic Consulting Group, Assessment of Results--FK in Nepal, Norway and Ethiopia: Final Report.
[79] Lough et al., 2018 State of the Worlds Volunteerism Report. The Thread That Binds: Volunteering and Community Resilience.
[80] Tjønneland et al., "Chasing Civil Society? Evaluation of Fredskorpset"; Nordic Consulting Group, Assessment of Results--FK in Nepal, Norway and Ethiopia: Final Report.
[81] (Norec, 2013, 2016)

Volunteer Counterparts

Related in principle to South-North volunteer exchange, some programs aim to enhance reciprocity by pairing international and national volunteers in a "counterpart" or "twinning" model of volunteer cooperation.[82] This was the first mainstream method that IVCOs attempted historically when striving for reciprocal cooperation.[83] Although several bilateral IVCOs experimented with this form of reciprocal programming in their early years, they eventually abandoned the idea because of ongoing disparities that ultimately prevented reciprocal cooperation.[84] In the end, inequalities in stipends, insurance, and other fringe benefits provided to international volunteers and their local counterparts quickly hampered feelings of equity and reciprocity between counterparts.[85] In addition, it was difficult for volunteers to overcome the often "rural/urban, educated/uneducated, wealthy/poor" divisions between volunteers from high- and low-income countries.[86]

Despite historical challenges with implementing the counterpart model, several modern organizations practice this form of reciprocal engagement. For example, in Sweden's Sida Exchange Programme (currently reconceived as the International Training Program), the concept of *ömsesidighet* (i.e., reciprocity) was a key guiding principle. In the Sida model, young people from the North and South are matched together for at least four weeks—spending time in pairs for at least two weeks in each country.[87] In Sida's model, however, participants do not necessarily engage in volunteer action or aim to contribute to development in their exchange country. In contrast, the UK's International Citizen Service program explicitly pairs young volunteers from the UK with young volunteers in the Global South. Volunteer action is a centerpiece of the young people's experience.[88]

Several commentaries have emphasized that encouraging and strengthening national youth volunteering is critical for any international volunteer partnership that claims to prioritize objectives of reciprocity—even when IVCOs do not formally follow a volunteer counterpart model.[89] As one researcher articulated: "Organizations aiming at developing and/or strengthening youth volunteering actions must put greater emphasis on encouraging national youth volunteering with elements of reciprocity."[90] According to this perspective, reciprocity between countries justifies investing in equitable volunteer opportunities for all young people.

Reciprocity in Digital Exchange Cooperation

The rapid shift to digital exchange during COVID altered how partners perceive and practice reciprocity. Digital exchange alters the meaning and importance of 'place' in partnership arrangements. This dynamic was articulated in several reports evaluating the effect of COVID on exchange cooperation. As a coordinator with the Unité program asserted:

> *"I cannot see the benefit of a remote volunteer because our strategy is… to support reciprocity in the sense that not only people from Switzerland go to other countries, but also people from other countries can come to Switzerland."[91]*

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[82] Scott-Smith, Youth for Development: External Review of VSO's Youth for Development (YfD) Programme; Beigbeder, The Role and Status of International Humanitarian Volunteers and Organizations: The Right and Duty to Humanitarian Assistance.

[83] United Nations Volunteers, United Nations Volunteers: History and Concept; Lough, "The Evolution of International Volunteering."

[84] Lough, "The Evolution of International Volunteering."

[85] Gillette, "Aims and Orgaization of Voluntary Service by Youth."

[86] Woods, "The University and Voluntary Service."

[87] Norad, Evaluation of Fredskorpset.

[88] ITAD, "Evaluation of DFID's International Citizen Service (ICS) Pilot Stage."

[89] Scott-Smith, Youth for Development: External Review of VSO's Youth for Development (YfD) Programme; Lopez Franco and Shahrokh, "The Changing Tides of Volunteering in Development: Discourse, Knowledge and Practice."

[90] Franco, Valuing Volunteering: Literature Review, 19.

[91] Perold et al., Covid-19 and Volunteering for Development. Part 1: Research Report.

According to this view, reciprocity is contradicted in remote volunteer exchange because physical place is removed from the equation. However, by focusing solely on multilateral engagement, this perception represents a surface interpretation of reciprocity commonly tossed around as a "buzzword" in development cooperation. Recognizing that reciprocity is relevant for all relationships and partnerships, this section unpacks how reciprocal dynamics change when migrating from physical to virtual exchange.

Several qualities of the digital environment may positively influence reciprocity, such as increased accessibility and scale, greater flexibility, anonymity, and the comparative resilience of triangular cooperation during global crises. On the other hand, the digital environment can also complicate reciprocity due to inequitable access to digital technologies, communication challenges, reduced cultural immersion, and difficulties maintaining meaningful engagements and commitments.

Perhaps the most significant advantage of adapting volunteer exchanges to an online environment is greater accessibility. The high costs of travel combined with the political and bureaucratic challenges of obtaining a visa can significantly limit who can participate in exchange cooperation. From an equity perspective, this not only has the potential to increase the scale of participation, but it can also encourage those from lower social strata or rural areas that might not otherwise participate. In addition, power dynamics between old and young may shift as younger people appear better equipped to use new technologies and social media.[92]

Other advantages include disrupted power hierarchies, anonymity and the possibilities for 'atemporal' communication introduced in digital exchange. While anonymity comes with clear communication challenges, it also diminishes contextual factors that can benefit relational reciprocity. For example, when discussing sexual and reproductive rights, anonymity can enable people to feel more comfortable and participate with fewer feelings of personal risk or exposure. In addition, the "atomized nature" of digital

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[92] "Personal Communication with Norec Staff."

interactions can introduce third parties to exchanges that can disrupt relationships -- for good or for bad.[93] As described earlier, relative equality and effective communication are critical boosters to reciprocity. This is complicated in digital space where single points of communication can represent multiple simultaneous conversations and relationships (see Figure 3 below). The visible and invisible third parties who gain access to digital networks may significantly alter power dynamics. In addition, digital exchanges can introduce temporal communication delays that do not exist in physical space.[94]

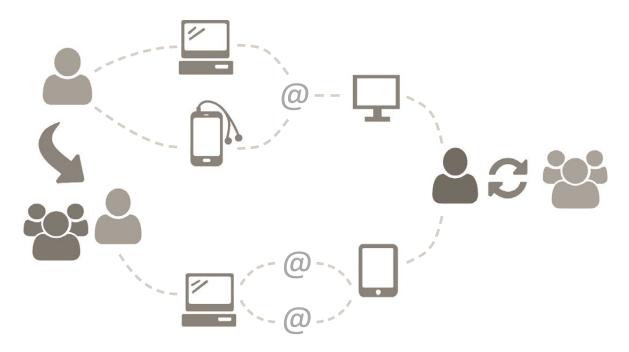## Figure 3: Third-party and Simultaneous Communications in Digital Space

Figure 3 also illustrates how the flexibility of 'space' in the virtual environment opens new opportunities for multilateral exchange. Moving from bilateral to multilateral exchange allows for the simultaneous engagement from multiple parties. This dynamic has implications for scale but also enables different stakeholders to relate in innovative ways that can enhance the relative depth of their contributions. For instance, Norec partners in the South reported activating and revitalizing previous members to participate in digital projects. In some cases, this unlocked the potential for partners to engage several times more people than were activated through in-person exchanges.[95] Likewise, less *effort* is required to participate in digital exchange (e.g., simply taking out a communication device), thus creating lower participation commitments than traveling physically to a location. Costs associated with engagement obligations (both real and symbolic) have important implications for the give-and-take expectations embedded in reciprocal relationships. [96]

A final benefit of digital exchange cooperation has been a revaluing of recommitments to South-South and triangular cooperation. A comparative analysis of international volunteer cooperation models found that, "The volunteer programs that use alternate methods to North-South volunteering didn't have to scale back operations to the same extent [during the COVID-19 pandemic] as those countries that only use this model"[97] For many IVCOs, the pandemic required them to rely more heavily on local partners to deliver on

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[93] Lewis, "Digital Networks: Elements of a Theoretical Framework."
[94] Ibid.
[95] "Personal Communication with Norec Staff."
[96] Lewis, "Digital Networks: Elements of a Theoretical Framework."
[97] Tetra Tech, "International Volunteer Programs in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, and United Kingdom."
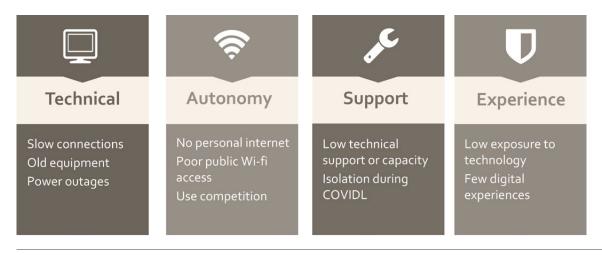
commitments. Several IVCOs began supporting South-South cooperation for the first time during the period of travel restrictions. One advantage of this pivot towards triangular investments was greater demonstration and adherence to a localization agenda. In addition, IVCOs found that supporting local interventions through triangular cooperation was more resilient to shocks than either North-South or South-North exchanges.[98]

Challenges to Reciprocity in Digital Exchange Cooperation

As the section above illustrates, digital exchanges offer many potential advantages for reciprocity at each level of partnership arrangements—from personal to institutional. On the other hand, the qualitative differences between virtual exchanges and physical exchanges pose new challenges. An independent evaluation of digital exchanges during COVID-19 concluded that, "most donors acknowledge that remote volunteering cannot be the sole long-term solution as it is no replacement for face-to-face engagement."[99] Compared to face-to-face exchanges, digital exchanges are limited in social presence and "still cannot exactly replicate the experience of another human standing in front of you."[100] Reflecting on the importance of "the human factor", one exchange concluded that, " ... being in their country living with their people, is a huge source of learning ... it's not the same online. We would lose a huge part of the reason why we're doing this."[101]

Perhaps the most obvious challenge that digital exchange brings to reciprocity commitments is inequitable access to technology. While digital communication promises to connect people across the globe at unprecedented levels, the digital divide reveals that significant inequalities remain.[102] Projects designed to meet the greatest need (e.g., among rural and grassroots organizations) are often limited by unreliable power, poor access to digital devices, high cost of data, digital illiteracy, and an uneven distribution of language and ICT skills.[103] In the end, IVCOs often design partnerships with large organizations where staff have the language skills, technical capacity, and equipment to host digital exchanges with comparative ease.[104] At the personal level, differences also emerge in the autonomy of internet use. Some people can access the internet from home, while others must rely on public Wi-fi spaces and hotspots, libraries, internet cafes etc.[105] Figure 4 below summarizes several challenges from digital inequalities that may influence the balance of partnership arrangements.

Figure 4: Digital Inequalities Affecting Reciprocal Partnership

Technical	Autonomy	Support	Experience
Slow connections Old equipment Power outages	No personal internet Poor public Wi-fi access Use competition	Low technical support or capacity Isolation during COVIDL	Low exposure to technology Few digital experiences

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[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Lewis, "Digital Networks: Elements of a Theoretical Framework."
[101] Perold et al., The Impact of Covid-19 on the Unité International Volunteering Network.
[102] Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service, "CCIVS Activity Report: 2019-2020."
[103] Beaunoyer, Dupéré, and Guitton, "COVID-19 and Digital Inequalities: Reciprocal Impacts and Mitigation Strategies."
[104] Steckley and Steckley, "E-Volunteering as International Experiential Learning: Student and Community Perspectives."
[105] Beaunoyer, Dupéré, and Guitton, "COVID-19 and Digital Inequalities: Reciprocal Impacts and Mitigation Strategies."

Earlier discussions in this report discussed how the comparatively low intensity of participants' cultural immersion in virtual space can diminish their intercultural learning. In addition, lack of immersion may reduce the effectiveness of projects. As one Norec coordinator reflected:

> *"It is very easy to use your own ideas and assumptions as the starting point when deciding on project priorities. Not knowing context, it is very hard to really understand how things work or don't work, and context cannot be easily transferred in virtual settings. Compared to physical exchanges, where participants can sit in and observe, everyone's reality doesn't match up as well and the community challenges are impossible to understand."[106]*

True reciprocity in project management requires joint decision-making, co-ownership, and the mutually beneficial design of projects. When community challenges are misunderstood or misrepresented, the more influential party can easily dominate projects with top-heavy design and ownership.

Recognizing that communication is a necessary precondition for reciprocal interactions, the challenges communicating in a virtual setting can result in several additional challenges. Without the added benefit of body language, linguistic differences can greatly complicate misunderstandings. In addition, virtual settings introduce challenges cooperating across time zones, which can limit the frequency of communication. Program managers also remarked how difficult it can be for participants to engage meaningfully in virtual conversations. Technology glitches and disconnections frequently punctuate online meetings. Likewise, participants can easily get distracted, multitask, or otherwise divide their attention online – particularly when they mute their mics and cameras. Such communication challenges can all negatively impact the quality of relationships.

Lastly, physical advantages and disadvantages between the North and South are less prominent in virtual settings. Southern participants have described how free access to libraries and research services are some of the most valuable benefits of being physically located in Northern countries.[107] Likewise, all participants describe the transformational personal growth that can result from being an outsider in a different system and culture. Furthermore, to the degree that exchange provides participants with new skills to enhance their employability, research suggests that "from the employer perspective, [remote volunteering] is not on par with in-person experience." [108]

All told, it is unclear whether the various benefits and drawbacks of digital exchange have a net positive or negative influence on reciprocity. Regardless, IVCOs can mitigate many challenges to reciprocity that are inherent in digital exchanges by reducing communication barriers, strategically enrolling participants with low digital capacity and literacy, and remaining humble enough to ensure joint decision-making and mutual ownership, even in the absence of clear contextual understanding.

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[106] "Personal Communication with Norec Staff."
[107] Rashid, "Canada-Global South Two-Way Student Mobility : Challenges and Inspiring Practices."
[108] Steckley and Steckley, "E-Volunteering as International Experiential Learning: Student and Community Perspectives."

CONCLUSION

As illustrated above, diverse conceptions and practices of reciprocity depend on a variety of actors—stretching from macro geopolitical partnerships to micro interpersonal relationships. The metaphor of the simple saw and the complex kaleidoscope has been used to illustrate the concept of reciprocity. The saw represents a give-and-take or tit-for-tat conception of reciprocity. In contrast, the kaleidoscope represents the variety of practices that embody values of equality and multidirectional giving and learning.[109] Reaching for a more explicit understanding to "say what we mean" when discussing the principles of reciprocity in international volunteer cooperation, Table 1 summarizes the spectrum of reciprocal partnerships and practices discussed in international volunteer and exchange cooperation.

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[109] Dostilio et al., "Reciprocity: Saying What We Mean and Meaning What We Say."

Table 1: Spectrum of Reciprocal Partnerships in International Volunteer Cooperation

ÅR	LESS RECIPROCAL	MORE RECIPROCAL
Relational reciprocity	- Conditions of privilege (e.g., living and working with other international volunteers, high stipends) - Shorter durations of service - One-off volunteer placements - Lack of continuity in IVCO and partner relationships - Inability to communicate effectively due to language, physical distance, cultural misunderstanding, or other barriers	- Conditions of equality (e.g., living and working with community members, low stipends) - Repeat interactions: longer duration of service; multiple volunteer placements - Continuity in IVCO and partner organization relationship (including a memorandum of understanding) - Ability to communicate effectively
Mutual benefit	- Supply orientation (supply of volunteers > demand for volunteers) - Uneven gains by volunteers, hosting-community, or organizations - Volunteer-centered learning - Unbalanced costs and benefits	- Market balance of volunteers (supply = demand) - Mutually strategic gains by all stakeholders - Reciprocal learning - Balanced costs and benefits (including compensation if needed to hosting organizations)
Joint Decisions	- Top-heavy ownership and design of projects - One-sided selection, allocation, mobilization, and supervision of volunteers - Undisclosed budgeting and spending	- Joint ownership and design of projects - Joint selection, allocation, mobilization, and supervision of volunteers - Transparent budgeting and spending
Multilateral reciprocity	- Unidirectional North-South volunteer sending - International volunteers only, without national volunteer counterparts	- Reciprocal North-South and South-North exchange - South-South or North-North volunteer coordination - International / national volunteer counterparts

It may be unrealistic for all IVCOs to practice fully reciprocal international volunteer exchange and cooperation at all levels. Indeed, at the geopolitical level of partnerships, few IVCOs have enough flexibility with their donors to realize multilateral South-North volunteer placements or practice largescale volunteer counterpart placements. Despite limitations, however, all IVCOs can work towards more reciprocal relationships with partners at lower levels of partnership—such as between volunteers and local actors.

Some solutions may be relatively independent of resources or donor priorities. All IVCOs could likely enhance the spirit of reciprocity through strengths-based dialogue and encourage critical consciousness in volunteers, partner organizations, and communities. Through such dialogue, disparities in power and resources can be acknowledged as constant and present, and organizational policies can be implemented to minimize the effects of differences as they are recognized. If reciprocal relations are truly a valued ideal, even small differences in power and partiality can be acknowledged, made explicit, and translated into creative and innovative policies and organizational practices.

Target 17.16 of the SDGs aims to "Enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology, and financial resources, to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals."[110] The spectrum of partnerships described above illustrates the potential for volunteers, IVCOs, and local partner organizations—together with governments and donors—to support the aspirations advanced in the new global goals. Reciprocal relationships are necessary to genuinely engage these multiple partners in equitable and sustainable partnerships for development.[111]

Although achieving full reciprocity will remain a demanding challenge, programs that prioritize mutual exchange and cooperation between Southern and Northern partners can overcome many of the complications inherent in conventional aid relationships. To the degree that diverse international volunteer partnerships strive to embody principles of reciprocity, they offer meaningful alternatives over less equitable forms of aid.

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[110] See also SDG Target 17.17: Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships.
[111] SDG Target 16.7: Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels.

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