

Changed by Exchange

In-depth interviews on the effects of an
international work-exchange





NOREC NETWORK FOR FORMER PARTICIPANTS: Former Norec participant Duncan Mutuku during a Norec Network gathering in Kenya. Photo: Tone Merete Lillesvangstu/Norec.

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Methodological Framework

Norec adopted the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique as a qualitative evaluation method to document personal transformations experienced by participants in a Norec work-exchange.

The approach emphasises storytelling to capture deep, meaningful change, often beyond what quantitative indicators can reveal. Over 70 interviews were carried out in the period from 2020 to 2024.

During the interviews, the participants were guided through a template that prompts reflection on their work-exchange experience, including:

- Background and role in the project
- initiated activities
- the most significant change experienced
- explaining why that change matters and lessons learnt
- contributions to host and/or home organisations.

Norec staff transcribed the interviews and transformed them into short stories using a question-based template to highlight participant changes. The interviews were grouped into categories based on how much time had passed since their work-exchange took place. Recent returnees focused on immediate experiences like skills gained and challenges faced, while those who returned years earlier described longer-term impacts of the exchange.

The stories were categorised by Norec staff in participatory workshops. Frequent skills gained by recent returnees were ethics, self-efficacy, technical competence, and teamwork. Long-term impacts were classified as human rights defenders, career development, global citizenship, and social entrepreneurship.

This paper examines 30 interviews with young people who returned from international work exchanges at least three years ago. Most participants were from Kenya, with a few from Tanzania and South Africa.

The Effect of a Norec Work Exchange

In this section, the stories are presented in four categories: human rights defenders, career development, global citizens, and social entrepreneurship. The stories are compressed and do not reflect the full interviews. Some stories may fit multiple categories.

Human Rights Defenders

Human rights defenders promote and advocate for the rights of vulnerable and marginalised groups. They often represent local forces working for change in their communities. Over 70% of Norec's portfolio goes to civil society organisations focusing on the protection of human rights. 84% of those who have participated in the work-exchange with Norec say that the work-exchange has inspired them to become more active in volunteer organisations.

Karen (31) shares the beginning of her commitment to sexual and reproductive health rights, which has become a lifelong project, stating that the work-exchange was *"[the] foundation of everything I have done for years."* Rogers (29) recounts: *"I was in the street, (...) I got the opportunity for this exchange, which lightened my life. When I came back, I continued working with the children in the streets."*

In Norec's user survey, 63% reported becoming more involved in their local communities after the exchange. Jeronime (34) describes how, after completing her work exchange, she continued with volunteer work and was elected to the local health committee. *"We became the ladder for them [the community] to use ... that to me is so big. I can meet with those people. I can influence change directly."*



Karen Ondwasi
SDG 5 Gender Equality

From rural Kenya to policy leadership, Karen's work-exchange shaped her advocacy journey. Karen grew up in a rural area of Western Kenya and moved to Nairobi for high school. After high school, she started a community initiative to donate sanitary products to schools and women's prisons. This led to an internship with the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE). In 2018, she went on a work-exchange to Uganda with FAWE, working on a communication and advocacy project. The work-exchange deepened her understanding of cultural practices and motivated her to continue working on policy changes and advocacy. Through FAWE, Karen was nominated to the youth network GMAC, where she has been the leader for the past four years



Jeromine Akinyi Obwar
SDG 3 Good Health and Well-being

Jeromine gained confidence and a strong voice during her work-exchange — now she's making a difference for young people. Jeromine, born and raised in an informal settlement in Kisumu, Kenya, joined YWCA in 2013 and went on an work-exchange to Norway. This experience gave her a strong sense of self-identity and confidence. Upon returning, she volunteered to inform young people about sexual health rights. Her impactful work in the schools led to her selection as a member of the Health Management Committee. This role allowed her to directly influence change in her community, a significant achievement she attributes to the skills and confidence gained during her exchange.

Career Development

In the user survey from 2019, 92% stated that their exchange experience with Norec was an inspiration for their career development. In interviews, respondents describe how the work-exchange *"opened new doors"* or *"propelled"* their careers. *"It is sort of a propeller. It propelled me to the heights where my peers were not in,"* says Walter (28).

86% say that the work-exchange has been recognised by employers as a positive factor on their CV in Norec's user survey. Patience (41) shares how she first got a job at the BBC and then as a communications officer in the department. *"She [Cabinet Secretary] was very categorical. She wanted people who had been outside the country."* Duncan (45) believes that the business ethics he learnt during his work-exchange to Norway have shaped his professional life. The need to build trust and be accountable to clients is important, especially since new clients come through recommendations from previous clients.

In the interviews, respondents also talk about how the work-exchange has prompted them to change their career choices and/or pursue further education. Isaac (36) states: *"I think it [the exchange] shifted something in me, that I would now pursue other things."*

For some, this has also been a social awakening. Ruth from Kenya describes how her stay in Norway made her reflect on how she could contribute to social change. She moved from an administrative job driven by profit to switching fields to chemical ecology in order to help farmers in Kenya achieve more sustainable agriculture and, in the long run, contribute to reversing climate change.

Norec's user surveys show that almost ¾ of the youth from african countries participating in a Norec exchange, believe that the work-exchange has made them want to learn more about social justice. In comparison, the share is ½ among the Norwegian youth who participated in an exchange.



Patience Nyange
SDG 16 Peace, justice and strong institutions

From NRK to BBC, Patience's work-exchange shaped her journey as a journalist and advocate.

During her work-exchange to Norway, Patience worked with the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation and Gimlekollen School of Journalism and Communications. She contributed as a journalist, among other things covering music festivals and interviewing African artists and creating an African feature segment for NRK P1. The experience opened doors for her, leading to employment at the BBC and as a communication adviser to the Cabinet Secretary in Kenya. The work-exchange also broadened her perspectives on LGBTQ+ rights and human rights, influencing her work at the Kenyan National Commission on Human Rights as an advocate for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. The connections she made while in Norway continue to impact her life and work, fostering international collaboration and personal growth.



Nahashon Maina
SDG 13 Climate Action

Nahashon works for a greener future, inspired by what he learnt about waste management on exchange.

During his work-exchange in Madagascar, Nahashon worked on processing electronic waste and developing waste management policies. He brought extensive experience in electronic waste processing from his job in Kenya, which was invaluable to the project. The work-exchange made him bolder in addressing issues, which has benefited his career by enabling him to get things done effectively and thoroughly. Additionally, being associated with Norec has opened up professional opportunities for him, making it easier to apply for international grants.

Global Citizens

About 70% of those on work-exchange have never had a longer stay abroad before going on exchange, according to surveys dating back to 2015. When they go on exchange, it is often the first time they meet people who have a different background or frame of reference than their own. In the user surveys, 78% of those who went on a Norec exchange report that their attitudes towards other cultures have changed. Many use phrases like "life-changing experience" to describe how the work-exchange has shaped their lives.

In interviews, they talk about how the work-exchange has made them more independent, bolder, more confident, and more open and resilient. This is confirmed in the user survey from 2019, where 71% say they are more resilient and 63% say they have gained more confidence. Evans, Martha, and Mercy from Kenya share how they work to provide young people with insight and understanding of how the world is put together, and how important it is for us to understand and respect one another despite our differences.



Mercy Karumba
SDG 5 Gender equality

Mercy fights for girls' rights, using her work-exchange experience to drive equality and justice

During her work-exchange in Kenya, Mercy engaged in climate change projects, while in Norway, she focused on gender and economic justice. This diverse experience significantly enhanced her adaptability and confidence as an advocate against female genital mutilation. She now also conducts training sessions and mentorship programmes for young girls. Additionally, as a programme manager, Mercy collaborates with various individuals, utilising the personal growth and proactive mindset she developed during her time abroad.



Martha Wanza
SDG 5 Gender Equality

From volunteer to changemaker, Martha's work-exchange made her into a global advocate.

In 2019, she joined a work-exchange in South Africa and helped set up a YWCA student group. With six years of volunteering in Kenya, she also launched youth activities in two districts. Inspired by the exchange, Martha founded a grassroots organisation to train young people in advocacy on sexual and reproductive health and rights. Today, she works at YWCA's Nairobi headquarters, supporting others in Norec exchanges. The experience strengthened her leadership, confidence, and project management, and showed her that her skills are valued worldwide.

Social Entrepreneurship

A key characteristic of social entrepreneurship is that this work is driven by a social purpose or unmet welfare needs. Often, it provides innovative solutions to challenges related to welfare and distribution, and in social entrepreneurship, the target groups are involved. Several of the stories from respondents testify that they have been inspired and drawn knowledge from the work-exchange to their social entrepreneurship.

Anne (41) describes how she modelled a centre for children and youth with disabilities in Taveta based on principles she learnt during her internship with Melhus Municipality. When Siah (34) was on work-exchange in Sri Lanka and Norway with other work-exchange participants, she worked on training youth in social entrepreneurship. Upon returning to Dar-es-Salaam, she continued her awareness-raising work but also needed to earn money herself. She saw that young mothers had a need for childcare. Siah contacted a few young mothers and rented premises for a day-care centre, thereby starting a service for parents in the local community.

Fredrick (31) was on work-exchange at the Tromsø International Film Festival. He is a photographer and runs his own production company. Inspired by the work-exchange in Tromsø, he has organised a film festival for youth from marginalised areas in Kenya for several years. Rosemary (32) talks about how she learnt good presentation and negotiation techniques during her exchange, as well as effective advocacy work. With these new skills, she has started a new platform to promote equality in her local community.

The work-exchange in Uganda became an important step in Maqulate's career at the Mathare Sports Club. She worked her way up from being a volunteer in her youth to becoming a permanent employee and eventually the deputy leader of the organisation. Today, Maqulate still works in the slum areas where she grew up, but now she runs her own organisation, the 'Mathare Girl Power Project.'



Anne Olubulyera
SDG 3 Good Health and Well-being

Inspired by Norway's inclusiveness, Anne is creating better opportunities for people with disabilities in Kenya.

Mercy gained diverse experience through her work-exchange – climate change projects in Kenya and gender and economic justice in Norway. This strengthened her adaptability and confidence as an advocate against female genital mutilation. She now runs training and mentorship programmes for young girls and, as a programme manager, applies the personal growth and proactive mindset she developed abroad.



Fredrick Ochieng
SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth

Inspired by his exchange in Norway, Fredrick built a platform for young filmmakers in Kenya.

Fredrick Ochieng is a filmmaker who joined an exchange in Norway in 2011. The experience inspired him to start a film festival in Kenya, giving young filmmakers a platform to showcase their work. He later set up his own production company, where he trains and employs youth. Fredrick values cultural respect and is committed to helping young people realise their potential.

Reflections and Learning from the Stories

The following sections provide results from the interviews regarding the consolidated effects for Norec.

Recruitment and Cultural Adoption in Work Exchanges

A key question for Norec's grant scheme has been whether it matters if a work-exchange participant is recruited internally or externally. We posed an open question around this to potentially see if there were any differences between internally and externally recruited individuals. In the interviews, participants shared how they experienced recruitment. Interviews showed respondents were chosen in different ways, often through personal contacts, and their reactions varied from surprise to hesitation. They were "spotted" or "handpicked". They heard about the work-exchange through acquaintances who had done it before them. They were surprised, happy, or hesitant when they realised they were going on exchange. One person told how the partner organisation was pleased that they said yes, as not many had applied. In coding the interviews, there were no findings that indicated a difference between internal and external recruitment. The interviews also revealed that many had experienced breaks in their employment relationships or connections to their home organisation before becoming attached to the organisation at a later time. Hence, the distinction between recruitment types remains unclear.

Several of the people interviewed reflected on their own age. Some had never lived away from their families before and felt as if they were being literally thrown into a new and independent life.

One person talked about how she had to share a house with a man, despite having never lived with anyone other than her mother and siblings. Some felt lonely, had time to contemplate their own lives, reflect on the future, while others prayed more, longed for home, and missed their families.

Stories of encounters with a new culture emerged in most interviews. Food was a common theme and an entry point into the culture, but the term intercultural competence was also used. Respondents shared how they became more patient, empathetic, and tolerant. Language was also a recurring topic. They talked about how they had learnt new phrases and sentences in a new language or improved their English, Spanish, or Portuguese, faced challenges in being understood, or experienced being more interesting due to a foreign accent.

A couple of respondents also explained that speaking a different language and being a foreigner made them a draw for the information and advocacy work in the project. In addition to patience, tolerance, and the ability to understand others, empathy, adaptability, equality, and greater openness were also mentioned as outcomes of encountering a new culture, with some specifically highlighting the relationship to power and religion leading to a deeper understanding of a culture and potentially new attitudes and values.

Personal Development and Education

Many of the findings from these interviews support the findings from the user survey. The Norec work-exchange has been important for career development, as confirmed by the stories of Ruth, Duncan, Thivhu, Alpha, Walter, and Fidel. The Norec work-exchange has inspired further education, supported by the stories of Isaac, Gregers, Ruth, and Maqulate. Personal development has been an important outcome of the work-exchange for Beth, Jeromine, Maqulate, Isaac, Shakwa, Martha, Wendy, Anne, Rosemary, and Evans.

In the interviews, we heard that respondents had become more independent, courageous, confident, and outgoing, and had a new perspective on people from other parts of the world.

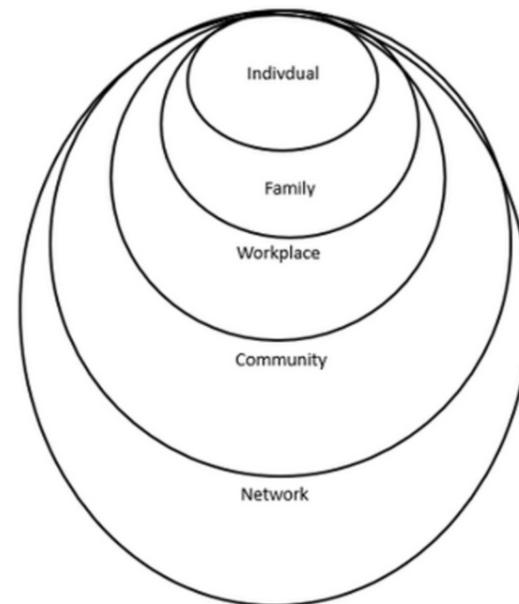
For example, Wendy and Olive talk about how the work-exchange has given them direction in life. And Karen mentions a shift in perspective. She tells how she has noticed similarities and differences between Kenya and Uganda. She sees that the same problems exist in Uganda as in Kenya, but the solutions differ slightly.

Ripple Effects

It became evident in the interviews with seven respondents that values they adopted during the exchange, such as a new perspective on the environment and gender roles, have impacted their parenting and their relationships with both their nuclear and extended families. Isaac talks about changing diapers and contributing to household chores. Bramwell states that he expresses love publicly. Grace explains that she raises her children to have their own opinions.

Increased engagement with the environment has been communicated to family and the local community. Anne also mentioned how she has started saving money after seeing how colleagues and friends in Norway saved, and she has passed this on to her children. (Interestingly, changed attitudes towards family is one of the 13 categories with the lowest response rate for personal development in the user survey.)

Maqulate, Rogers, Jeromine, and Walter shared how they sent money home during the work-exchange, and how the work-exchange contributed to financing various expenses and personal investments. Maqulate sent money home that was invested in goods for sale, new housing, and school fees. Rogers covered expenses for his father's funeral with his earnings from the exchange. Jeromine received money for her own education from a colleague in Norway, which she used for her sister's education. Walter got a new job with the skills acquired during the exchange. Part of his new salary was used for his sister's schooling.



Anne says that both towards her children and colleagues, she has gained the ability to listen, and that dialogue becomes important instead of giving instructions and orders. Siah talks about how he uses intercultural competence in his role as a leader for four hundred employees. Evans applies his knowledge from the work-exchange in teaching and in contact with students, particularly discussing the peaceful coexistence found in Norway.

Karen, Patience, Walter, Thivhu, Alpha, Anne, and Olive talk about how they have made good friends that they still keep in touch with after the exchange. Alpha, Thivhu, and Karen mention that this is also important for their professional networks.

Organisational Development and Learning

The interviews with respondents who went on exchanges over ten years ago show that they have taken positions within civil society where they — in various ways — have applied knowledge, values, or attitudes from the work-exchange in their positions. Rogers, Maqulate, Joseph, and Patience have been working for several years and are still working in their home organisations. Among those who were on work-exchange somewhat more recently, Martha, Wendy, Anne, Beth, Shakwa, Rogers, and Sharon remain active or hold positions in their home organisations.

Joseph talks about how he exercises a leadership role in Focus Kenya in a more open and less hierarchical way as a result of the exchange. One of the former Norec work-exchange participants works for V-Dem Institute with regional reporting on human rights violations, which is the same field he was engaged in during his work-exchange to Uganda. Alpha is employed by CARE in Nairobi, working with nine different countries.

He explains how the intercultural understanding he gained during the work-exchange helps him communicate with various nationalities. Patience discusses in the interview how she, alongside several others, created space for the Kenyan Human Rights Commission to respect the rights of sexual minorities and include LGBTQI+ organisations in its mandate and meeting arenas.

Gregers, Evans, and Shakwa narrate how knowledge and learning during the work-exchange contributed to strengthening their organisations. Inspired by the host organisation, Gregers introduced the sale of PCs and other ICT equipment and pursued further education in project management to secure more income sources and better governance of the organisation. Evans learnt about youth participation during the work-exchange and initiated a project to enhance youth participation and influence in politics. Shakwa's commitment to youth participation increased during the work-exchange and motivated the creation of new collaborative projects and fresh funding for the organisation.

Conclusion

The data collected through the interviews indicate that the Norec work-exchange programme has had significant impacts on the young professionals who went on a work-exchange, including personal development, career advancement, and contributions to civil society. Participants in the Norec programme have reported increased community involvement, career advancements, and a broader sense of global citizenship. The work-exchange has motivated many to pursue further education, engage in social entrepreneurship, and advocate for human rights and social justice

The experiences of individuals like Karen, Jeromine, Patience, and Fredrick illustrate the diverse ways the work-exchange has influenced their lives and careers. From promoting human rights and gender equality to driving environmental sustainability and social entrepreneurship, these young professionals have used their exchange experience to create positive changes in their communities and beyond.

Based on these findings, we will argue that the Norec work-exchange programme has proven to be a catalyst for personal and professional growth, as well as for strengthening civil society.



LEPROSY MISSION NEPAL: Resource person and Nurse Superintendent Mahima Bantawa from Leprosy Mission (TLM), a project between TLM organisations in Nepal, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Photo: Maiken Solbakken/Norec



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