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## Methodology of the ViCE Initiative

### Introduction

This paper describes the research methodology of the ViCE Initiative Listening Study. We outline the core principles and factors that shaped how the research was designed, how and by whom it was implemented, the issues and challenges that arose, and how we have analysed the material and started to draw conclusions from the data. It also outlines some of the ways in which the ViCE Initiative is using the data to foster debate and develop and improve practice.

### Research Principles

#### Volunteers at the Heart of ViCE

At the heart of the ViCE Initiative is a commitment to hearing the voices, perspectives and experiences of local volunteers in conflicts and emergencies. Whilst the roles of these volunteers is increasingly being recognised<sup>1</sup>, there remains limited work which fully foregrounds the perspectives of volunteers, instead emphasising policy frameworks, projects or particular interventions. Local volunteers are often assumed components of essential and localised service delivery, rather than being seen as having knowledge and agency themselves. The ViCE Initiative seeks to understand the lived experience of volunteers, and their views on the challenges they face. In this sense, the focus is on taking seriously the ways volunteers make sense of their experiences, and how it impacts on them. This does not fit with what often

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<sup>1</sup> Burns, 2015, Hazeldine and Baillie Smith, 2015, Devereux, et al., 2017

counts as data and evidence in the humanitarian and development sectors, where quantitative data dominate as part of efforts to develop metrics to demonstrate significance or enable the measurement of progress. ViCE makes no claim for being able to ‘measure’ or provide indicators, but sees individuals’ subjective views, the meanings they attach to things, and their emotions, as relevant and important data in building our understanding of the roles of volunteers in conflicts and emergencies.

### Iterative, Flexible and Exploratory Approach

Such understanding described above can contribute to both academic understandings of volunteering, humanitarianism and development, and can help shape policies to enhance the experiences of those volunteers. Reflecting this, ViCE has taken an iterative approach, allowing the research approach to flex and develop through dialogues between academics, practitioners and volunteers. A key part of this was to enable participants to understand and appreciate the diverse approaches and lenses being brought together, and to find ways to co-produce design, implementation and dissemination that did not retreat to the usual academic/practitioner silos, but rather worked across and between them.

### Fluid Roles and Valuing All Team Members’ Inputs Equally

The ViCE Initiative’s emphasis was placed on moving away from a linear approach to developing the Initiative, instead embracing movement back and forth between design and implementation as activities unfolded. Such an approach required the development of mutual trust and a willingness to compromise, such as around how and when material is written into ‘academic’ papers, or how long to give for data analysis. The outline of the research process and methodology below reveals the ways in which the approach was built over time through the development of an inclusive team ethos in which diverse voices are valued at all stages. A key part of this was a commitment to the mutual development of knowledge, skills and capacity

amongst the Initiative participants, for example through the exploration of evidence and co-design of the coding frame between academics and practitioners.

The ViCE Initiative team members consisted of the co-directors, local volunteer management staff and volunteers in the six countries that hosted the ViCE Initiative, as well as ‘listening’ teams; however, these roles were often dynamic and flexible. Certain team members functioned as both listeners and contributors to the larger development of the Initiative’s design and methodology. Through the ViCE Initiative, two local volunteer managers also went on to work as ‘listeners’ in another country context (Sierra Leone), beyond the ViCE focus countries, to gather data on volunteers’ experiences of a specific humanitarian challenge and set of interventions.

## Design

The ViCE approach was co-designed through a series of workshop discussions, bringing together diverse academic and practice perspectives. An initial meeting in Copenhagen between Stefan Agerhem (Swedish Red Cross), Matt Baillie Smith (Northumbria University) and Shaun Hazeldine (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) explored some of the core principles about working between academic and practice, and developing an approach that prioritised the voices of volunteers. Anderson et al.’s *A Time to Listen*<sup>2</sup>, which focused on the voices of people on the receiving end of aid, provided an important starting point for thinking about the importance of developing skills of listening across a team. This was brought into dialogue with wider social scientific efforts to enable participant voice in development research, such as life history approaches<sup>3</sup>.

A second meeting in London brought further voices to the table – Jessica Cadesky (Swedish Red Cross) who would lead the Listening Study team, and Cecelia Brunnström (Independent

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<sup>2</sup>Anderson, et al., 2012

<sup>3</sup> Caughey, 2006

Consultant) who conducted the pilot study in South Sudan, and as well served as part of the listening team in Honduras. By this point, participating RCRC National Societies were confirmed, offering diverse experiences and examples of conflict, emergency and violence: Afghanistan; Honduras; Myanmar; Sudan; South Sudan; and Ukraine.

This meeting particularly explored the challenges and opportunities of an open-ended approach, which did not seek to guide volunteers, but would rather allow them to speak as freely as possible. This centred on two key themes: 1) identifying a single overarching question to guide the listening processes; 2) creating spaces for volunteers to speak.

1) The question, ‘What is it like to be a volunteer here’, was identified as the broad frame of reference, to emphasise how volunteers experienced and made sense of their volunteering in their own language and on their own terms. To accompany this, a set of wide-ranging themes was identified to help frame the listening processes if needed. This was captured in an image of interlocking clouds, which grouped sets of themes around which listeners would be ready to probe and help stimulate conversation if needed. For example, under the ‘challenges’ cloud, the listeners could simply ask volunteers “what about the challenges?” – without giving any reference or guidance as to what those challenges may be or pertain to – which would give respondents in a listening session more to think about. It should be mentioned that whenever these cloud-words of categories were used to inspire vague probes, it was done either when respondents expressed that they were finished speaking on the previous topic and asked for more encouragement, or, when there was a prolonged silence in the narratives given that indicated to the listening team that the respondents were finished discussing a particular item. The design particularly focused on the challenges of working in a way that goes against the experiences and traditions of much academic and other research, which steers interviewees much more strongly. This presented challenges in the research process as listeners struggled to hold themselves back from ‘intervening’ too much. However, having two listeners at each listening session was valuable in that when one listener would be tempted to intervene too

much or too early, the other was often able to ensure that the respondents were given the space and time required for the methodology to be adhered to.

2) In seeking to create spaces for volunteers to speak, emphasis was placed on how to manage who would be in the space, and on agreeing how participants would introduce themselves and the Initiative. The Red Cross Red Crescent's capacity to facilitate the listening process provided a unique opportunity, in terms of access to volunteers and to contexts often too challenging for other researchers. But this also required sensitivity to the local politics of National Societies and branches and to the ways volunteers' voices and perspectives related to them. Discussion in London confirmed important principles around how anonymity could be ensured within and between the country settings. This is discussed further in the 'Implementation' section below.

### Pilot study

A pilot study was undertaken in South Sudan by Stefan Agerhem and Celia Brunnström in partnership with Alex Modoyi, the South Sudan Red Cross Volunteer Coordinator. This encountered logistical challenges, particularly in moving between sites, as well providing methodological insight, particularly around the skill and difficulty of listening. These insights were shared with the ViCE team in Sudan - Jessica Cadesky, Balthazar Bacinoni (Burundi Red Cross), Tarig Isaac (Sudanese Red Crescent) - and informed this team's approach to conducting the subsequent Listening Study in Sudan.

Reflection, learning and adaptation continued through the implementation process. The ways in which a space was created was adapted to country settings through dialogue with the ViCE team member from that country, who also facilitated and managed access as well as logistics, safety and security on the ground. Specific 'clouds' of themes would emerge in each setting, in response to what the listening teams were hearing, which often coincided with the theme

clouds discussed in London. These also expanded the team's anticipated scope, which was highly welcome.

The learning gathered from these initial Listening Studies was later shared across the whole ViCE Team (see Appendix) at a week-long workshop in Härnösand, Sweden. This event emphasised trust building and team development across the national and sectoral differences encompassed within ViCE. Through this, the approach for subsequent Listening Studies was refined, in partnership with the ViCE Team members, including those from the participating countries who helped facilitate and shape access within each setting. The workshop also sought to build capacity and capability for participants through experiential learning activities focused on listening and facilitation. The workshop participants also refined and adapted the overall Initiative plan, and confirmed co-productive approaches to the ways in which the data would be handled, coded, analysed and disseminated.

## Implementation

The ViCE team agreed that it would be paramount to have confidentiality, anonymity and safety be the foundational principles for the listening sessions. In order to put volunteers – and volunteer managers, for that matter – at ease and in a position to be honest and forthcoming about their experiences, the listening teams needed to ensure that participants would not be put in any reputational, physical or mental harm related to their participation. To that end, upon arrival, the listening teams in each country met with senior managers and officials with the Red Cross/Red Crescent society to communicate that the sessions would be closed, private, and that the transcripts or any country-specific input that was collected during the listening sessions would not be made available. Each National Society was aware of this as a first principle of their volunteers' participation in the study and were respectful of this approach. This is important since it demonstrates that despite not having any real expectation of gaining country-level findings from their volunteers, National Societies still valued the study enough to contribute their volunteers' time.

In each country, where possible, the listening sessions with volunteers began with an introduction from the National Society management staff, who introduced the listening team, explained the purpose of the study, and thereby recognized the ViCE Initiative as being approved by the management hierarchy. After this introduction, the manager or senior official would leave the session, and all efforts to ensure that voices could not be heard from outside the room were taken. This included closing doors and windows and setting up waiting areas further away from the room where the session was taking place. The listening team then introduced themselves and explained that the session would be recorded using an audio recorder. Each person was asked if they gave consent to be recorded, were informed that no one from their National Society would have access to the tapes, and that any subsequent quotations or use of what was spoken would be anonymized. Later, the ViCE team decided that the safest level of anonymization would include not only the name and location of the volunteer, but also the country. As such, all quotations that appear in the ViCE Initiative materials have been identified using only the respondent's role and gender. Lastly, in order to ensure safety and to uphold principles and best practices of violence prevention and response, it was agreed at the London meeting that upon arrival in each country, the listening team would consult the National Society on existing reporting policies, helping services and/or referral pathways in case of instances of physical, emotional or sexual abuse was raised during the listening sessions. Also, given the sensitive and often traumatic nature of the work of local volunteers in conflicts and emergencies, the availability of psychosocial support services – either offered by the National Society directly, or by partner or other trusted organizations – were identified to have on hand during and after the listening sessions. The need for this level of preparation and back up further underlines why there has been, to date, limited research on volunteers in conflicts and emergencies.

At the Härnösand workshop, a timetable of when the listening team(s) would visit each country was developed with the volunteer managers of each country. After that workshop, the respective National Society ViCE team members returned to their respective countries to begin

the preparations to host the ViCE study. This aspect was critically important, since the ViCE Initiative had local members on the ground in their own context who could design and organize the ViCE study according to the particular organizational and country culture and context to ensure a smooth implementation process. The local ViCE team members were supported remotely by the Team Leader (Jessica Cadesky) and co-directors (Stefan Agherham and Matt Baillie Smith) to arrange for the particular protocols and paperwork that so often accompanies international visits and activities. A listening team of two people were deployed to each country: Jessica and Stefan (Ukraine); Jessica and Balthazar (Sudan, Myanmar, Afghanistan), and Cecilia Brunnström and Pär Ivarsson (Honduras). The teams were selected based on language capacity, gender balance, as well as availability. Due to visa processing times, Balthazar was unable to conduct the listening sessions in Ukraine as planned, and Stefan did this in his place. In some contexts where age and seniority of elders is highly valued, particular attention was paid to the age of the listening team members.

In all countries except Honduras, local interpreters were hired to ensure that Red Cross Red Crescent volunteers and staff could participate in their own language. In each country, the interpreter would be given a short orientation to the ViCE Initiative, and would be instructed on the listening methodology. Careful attention would be paid to ensuring that the interpreter understood that they should only provide periodic ‘markers’ to keep the listening team on track with the conversation, but that the main point would be to ensure that the voices of the participants were clearly captured on the audio recording. This proved challenging in almost all countries, but for diverse reasons. In some instances, the interpreter would interject their own questions, which would need to be reined in by the listening team. In others, the interpreter would be used to providing simultaneous translation, which overlapped with the participant’s voices on the recording. In most cases, however, the process was quickly smoothed out and the interpreters proved to be vital members of the listening team. This was especially true during the debriefings that took place after each session, where the interpreter – himself or herself often a member of the local community – offered valuable insights and reflections on what he or she heard and observed during the sessions.

The choice to conduct the listening sessions using international listening teams (except in Afghanistan, see below) that were not based in the country promoted neutrality, and was a positive dimension of the process, given the sensitive nature of conflict. However, this meant that in some circumstances, it was difficult to understand the nuanced dynamics that were likely taking place particularly within group sessions. One such example was during a group session when a young male volunteer openly told the listening team that his young female colleague was not representing herself truthfully, which proved a challenging moment in the process. Without understanding the many layers of dynamics in the group – ethnic, religious, seniority, hierarchical, class, etc. – it was difficult to make sense of this intervention. However, such instances also revealed issues that have informed the key themes of ViCE, as well as being relevant to further research on volunteers in conflicts and emergencies in terms of both method and content, such as around intersectionality and the risks of being ‘local’.

Security considerations were anticipated far in advance, and the listening teams fell under the security umbrella of the appropriate Red Cross Red Crescent security lead in country. In some circumstances this was the ICRC, others it was the National Society, and in others it was the IFRC. All security protocols were followed by the team, who were given a security briefing upon arrival. In Afghanistan, security restrictions meant that the international listening team was unable to travel outside of the capital, Kabul. In order to capture experiences of volunteers outside of the country’s capital, a team of local consultants were hired to conduct the ViCE study in two locations outside of Kabul<sup>4</sup>. These two consultants met with the international listening team (Jessica and Balthazar), who designed and delivered a half-day training on the methodology, and included role-playing exercises. Since this was the only country in which local listening teams were used, it was imperative to ensure that the safety and security of the local team was assured, including psychological well-being. Thus, daily check-ins with the Team Leader in Kabul (Jessica) took place not only designed to answer any questions or concerns that the consultant team encountered, but also to allow for a psychosocial ‘check in’ and debrief

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<sup>4</sup> We would like to acknowledge the two consultants from Afghanistan who conducted this part of the research. However, due to potential security issues, we are not able to use their names in this report at this time.

where necessary. As mentioned above, the ViCE methodology is not a quantifiable science, and so while it is important to recognize that there were different variables at play in Afghanistan, the ViCE team members do not feel at this point that using external, local consultants had any notable impact on the process or results of the listening sessions conducted in these locations.

It should be mentioned that the local ownership of the ViCE study in each country was both a tremendous enabling factor, allowing a high degree of access and organization of volunteers, but also meant that the listening team was at the behest of the National Society, who selected which volunteers would participate in the listening sessions. However, given the exploratory nature of this research, these decisions in themselves provided insight to understanding the contexts, the roles of volunteers within them, and the organisations' relationship with those volunteers.

In addition to the formal listening sessions, the listening team was often invited to participate in other more social activities organized by the hosting National Society. These included a tour of El Geneina with volunteers in Sudan, skating with volunteers in Kharkiv in Ukraine, and a visit to Maidan Square on the anniversary of the uprising in Ukraine. Each of these encounters with National Society volunteers and staff added a richness and furthered the team's understanding of the wider context in which volunteers were working and living, as well as built further trust between the listening team and volunteers.

Lastly, the challenges that accompanied the large processes of translation and transcription of the audio recordings merit some discussion. As mentioned above, each listening session was recorded using an audio recorder, and informed consent was given by each participant to the listening team prior to switching on the device. The ViCE Initiative engaged an international private service to first transcribe the session's original spoken language(s) into one document, and then translate each into an English-only document. These were held under a password protected file by Jessica, and shared only with the Matt and Stefan, and later Nisha Thomas

(Northumbria University), who handled the coding process. These documents were later used as the base material to develop the coding process.

Recording the sessions was a learning curve, not only technically such as ensuring only person spoke at a time to ensure the transcriber would be able to differentiate voices, but also in terms of the language and dialects used. There was much back-and-forth between Jessica and the transcription company in terms of the level of detail and eventual product that would be most useful for the analysis stage. For example, at first the documents were transcribed word for word, instead of for overall meaning – which of course can be highly nuanced according to the context. A process for quality control was developed using the transcription of the interpreter, who often provided a good summary of sometimes detailed translation on the tape, and therefore the translation could be checked against this for meaning and accuracy. Also, each transcribed and translated document was subjected to a spot check, whereby the Team Leader (Jessica) would play back the audio tape at two to three random points in the listening session to ensure that the transcription captured all interventions, often using the English of the interpreter as markers.

Once all of the transcripts were produced and checked for quality, a process of ‘sanitizing’, or anonymizing, took place whereby it was decided that all identifying information would be removed and replaced with generic categories. As such, names, countries, villages or other place names, language, ethnic and religious groups were replaced with these markers. This was important since the coding process was co-produced by all ViCE team members, importantly by those working in the countries that hosted the ViCE Initiative. Thus, anonymity and protection of participants was paramount in order to avoid any possibility of identification by someone from volunteers’ own National Societies.

## Reflection and Analysis

Reflecting the emphasis on co-production<sup>5</sup> across countries and across academic and practitioners, the coding frame was co-designed between all Initiative participants through a 4-day workshop in Dubai in April 2016. In advance of the workshop, all participants were sent sets of transcribed and translated interview transcripts to read. Each transcript also had a set of questions that participants were asked to reflect on the following: “What things did I find surprising?”, “What themes/ issues were raised?”, “Which themes are found in more than one session?”; “What solutions were mentioned?”, “What solutions were not mentioned but that I can think of to address these issues?”, “What was not said and why might that not have been said out loud during the session?”. These were explored through a process in Dubai that focused on developing a shared understanding of what constitutes ‘data’ and evidence, and processes of reflection on what each person brought to the process as they explained and spoke about what they saw in the data. A key part of this was finding ways to allow participants to embrace their positionality – that is, the specific perspective that they brought to the data as individuals as a result of their roles, backgrounds, identities – as part of the process and not something to be ‘managed out’. A series of participatory workshops developed sets of critical themes, questions and issues across the different readings of the transcripts. A separate coding team drawn from across the participants then worked to develop these into a coding frame that would be used to do the first coding of the data. The main codes identified by the team were Context, Drivers/Motivations, Activities, Experiences, Human beings in Conflicts and Emergencies, Management, and Relationships/Networks.

These main codes were used by Nisha Thomas, the ViCE researcher at Northumbria, to code the data using the qualitative data analysis package NVIVO. Through this process, Nisha also identified a series of sub-codes relating to additional themes identified in Dubai (e.g. gender) as well as in relation to key humanitarian and development debates where the roles of volunteers are significant but neglected (e.g. leadership). A preliminary analysis of the data was then conducted by the Northumbria team (Nisha Thomas, Matt Baillie Smith and Mark Griffiths) along with Jessica Cadesky, through two processes: the grouping of data into sets for

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<sup>5</sup> Stevens, et al., 2013; Pohl, et al., 2010

exploration during pop-up innovation labs; and the development of preliminary thematic papers exploring initial critical issues.

Pop-up innovation labs were delivered in Honduras, Sudan and Mexico to explore key themes and issues arising from the data and from dialogues between the ViCE Initiative findings and participating National Societies existing strategic, policy and practical challenges and approaches. Each Lab was built around extracts of coded data broadly related to the Lab theme. These extracts were shared with participants to prompt debate and reflection, and facilitate dialogue between participants on the potential for volunteer-focused innovation to address key challenges. For example, the lab in Honduras focused on volunteer Insurance, whilst the lab in Sudan focused on Leadership. A further mini lab was delivered at the launch of the Global Volunteering Alliance in Nairobi to introduce and share the approach with multiple National Societies. This approach enabled multiple perspectives on the data, and its analysis in relation to specific experiences and dynamics within particular places, in ways that a more centralised and written approach doesn't allow. It also provided new analytical insight for the Initiative on the issues practitioners found significant in the material. In parallel, and informed by these processes, a set of thematic papers were developed which worked to both develop the analysis and provide the main focus of the first phase of communicating the results.

### **Communication of Results**

Indeed, the innovation labs, papers and wider engagement activities deliberately blur the implementation, reflection, analysis and communication/dissemination phases. The Initiative team decided not to produce a 'final report', since this would give the impression of a 'final word', when the emphasis throughout has been on shaping an ongoing dialogue. The data collected provided a rich resource that can be worked and re-worked in the context of diverse challenges in multiple settings, and a single report risks closing this down. Rather, the team chose to develop a series of thematic papers that reflect a first set of engagements with the data. These thematic papers reflect the coming together of diverse voices and perspectives,

rather than a definitive single institutional voice. In this way, the papers need to be understood as a dialogue between the codes developed by the participants in Dubai, the academic research on volunteering, development and humanitarianism of the Northumbria University team, the volunteer development and humanitarian knowledge and experiences of Jessica Cadesky and Stefan Agerhem, as well as others. In this way, the team sought to develop ideas that do not fit into particular categories but which can provoke conversations beyond the traditional policy, academic, practice, humanitarian, volunteering and development, silos that have contained much dialogue to date. Six initial themes were chosen – Everyday Humanitarianism, Unpacking the ‘Local’, Volunteers and Victims, Time and Temporality in Volunteering, Trauma and Psycho-Social Support, and Gendered Experiences of Local Volunteering. The data provide a rich resource from which multiple themes can be explored. However, a decision was made to identify areas where the data offer insight into issues hitherto neglected in volunteering, humanitarianism and development research, and which also speak to areas of humanitarian and development practice which rely on volunteers, even where their voices are largely absent.

The papers have been co-produced, and reflect the work not only of the core ViCE team and authors, but also the Field Team and volunteers. Individuals have taken a particular lead on each one, producing a first draft and revising in the light of comments and insight from the rest of the team at the London meeting (Matt Baillie Smith, Stefan Agerhem, Nisha Thomas, Jessica Cadesky, Delvin Varghese). Drafts of the papers were circulated at a ViCE meeting in London (Sept 17) to review content and tone.

These initial discussion papers provide a starting point for debate, and will be revised and updated through dialogue and reflection with wider stakeholders, including ViCE National Society participants, RCRC staff and volunteers, and stakeholders outside the RCRC movement. To enable this, short summaries and feedback/commentary mechanism will be prepared to facilitate dialogues with diverse stakeholders. In addition, an online platform has been developed to further facilitate and widen engagement with the data. Developed in partnership with Open Lab at Newcastle University, UK, the platform will be piloted with National Societies

and other stakeholders, in order to refine and explore the ways digital technology can help mobilise the data for volunteer development activity within and between places. Finally, a ViCE exhibition has been developed, which provides an opportunity to raise awareness of the roles and the experiences of the volunteers that have been listened to.

The platform, papers, exhibition and data more broadly will underpin a series of further pop up innovation labs during 2018 with National Societies and other stakeholders (e.g. volunteer engaging organisations, government bodies, volunteer managers) to foster sectoral debate, further research, and changes to policy and practice. The data provides an important source of data for academic research, which can also play a role in shifting debate and changing policy. Accordingly, a series of academic papers and conference presentations will be developing during 2018 to contribute to and expand existing scholarly debates on volunteering, humanitarianism and development.

## Conclusion

The iterative and co-produced approach of the ViCE Initiative reflects the fact that it is a starting point. The aim was to generate initial and open-ended data which creates a platform for building a new research and practice agenda. In this sense, the function of the data is as much to create dialogue as it is to offer ‘findings’.

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## Appendix

### List of ViCE Participants at Härnösand Meeting

Stefan Agerhem, Swedish Red Cross

Tarig Isaac Ahmed, Sudanese Red Crescent

Matt Baillie Smith, Northumbria University

Cecilia Brunnström, Swedish Red Cross/Independent Consultant

Jessica Cadesky, Swedish Red Cross

Malin Gawell, Swedish Red Cross

Maryna Kozhedub, Ukraine Red Cross

Mohammed Daoud Latif, Afghan Red Crescent

Alex Modoyi Alexander, South Sudan Red Cross

Bessy Valle Paz, Honduras Red Cross

Shwe Sin, Myanmar Red Cross

Khin Myo Myat Thein, Myanmar Red Cross