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## Development charity says 'volunteer tourism' is bad for Africa

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Photo  
Stephanie  
Greenwood,  
VSO

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*Richard  
Hawkes,  
International  
Programmes  
Director, VSO*

VSO, a leading development charity, has criticised the commercialisation of overseas voluntary work as it launched a major appeal to recruit volunteers in the five least popular countries, which includes Nigeria and Eritrea.

Yesterday, as the appeal was launched, VSO admitted that they are struggling to find volunteers willing to work in Nigeria, Eritrea, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Mongolia and blame negative media portrayal which has led to the public perception that these countries are dangerous.

VSO is concerned that unless volunteers can be found to work in these countries then it will be unable to fulfil the needs of its overseas partners. VSO is one of few volunteer charities whose development agenda is driven by the needs of developing countries as opposed to running its own projects.

Many organisations run commercial programmes that are little more than gap year adventures where the preferences of volunteers over ride the requirements in developing countries. Richard Hawkes, VSO's International Programmes Director said:

**“The ethos of VSO is that we get the volunteers to where they are needed, but with the rise of consumer driven volunteer tourism, increasingly people are coming to us with a clear idea of where they'd like to go, as if it's a holiday. We're concerned this attitude is not good for development. If people are encouraged to pick and choose where they give help, instead of making the choice based on the community's need for their skills, some countries will inevitably suffer.”**

As part of their urgent appeal VSO are looking for people with skills in the areas of health, education and business management to work with partners in the five least popular countries with government bodies and small charities. It stresses that VSO volunteers only work in countries where security risks are unlikely.



Deborah Gabriel

There is a real possibility that if volunteers are not found, some of the development programmes in Nigeria and Pakistan may have to close. Nigeria is one of VSO's most long running programmes. Current areas of work are in the field of HIV/AIDS, education and enterprise development.

Aine Lynch is currently working in Niger state, in northern Nigeria which has Shari'a law. She says: **"At first I did have concerns about living in a state with Shari'a law because I didn't really know what to expect. But I chose the job that fitted my skills and interests, rather than the country. Living in a Shari'a state has been a great experience and very positive for me, and being here everyday I don't feel unsafe or threatened. I'm glad I took the negative images of Nigeria with a pinch of salt."**

VSO Eritrea volunteers are working in the area of education. There are three areas of focus to their work: to improve the quality of English language teaching; address needs in pre-service and in-service teacher training; and institutional development support for vocational learning centres and selected departments of the Ministry of Education.

For further information about volunteering with VSO follow the links below.

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