



# Diversity in Development

## A profession for the privileged?

Towards a more inclusive  
international development sector

Launch report and evidence review

February 2025

## Who we are

Diversity in Development is a new UK charity. We aim to promote awareness of international development, identify barriers to involvement in the sector, and advocate for measures to overcome these.

International development should involve all areas of society. A particular need exists to provide opportunities for those from lower socioeconomic groups. An accessible sector would be more equitable and better placed to secure public and government support for its work. Greater inclusivity will help ensure that those working in the sector do not reproduce inequality in their work.

How inclusive is the sector? This report brings together new and existing evidence, whilst recognising gaps in the available data. Research for the report was undertaken in Spring 2024. We appreciate that other evidence may have emerged since then, and that some sources may have been missed. Contributions that allow us to better understand the situation are welcome.

The report takes a ‘critical friend’ approach to the development sector by **asking questions** about the lack of diversity, **provoking debate** about the reasons for this, and **suggesting measures** to change the situation. We hope it will be a catalyst for change and help the development community to work towards a more inclusive profession in future.

Diversity in Development welcomes engagement with all sections of the international development community, and those trying to access it. Feedback and suggestions can be sent to our Chair, [Dr John Kirkland](#). Alternatively, you can join our [LinkedIn discussion group](#) to share your thoughts.

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## Executive summary

International development is a critical area of UK policy, but surveys regularly show that levels of public engagement are low, and unevenly distributed across society. This report highlights significant socioeconomic disparities in engagement, potentially limiting the sector's effectiveness and inclusivity.

Development is delivered by NGOs and charities, government, the private sector and educational institutions. Individuals can engage in multiple ways: volunteering, employment, study, donating money, or adding their political support. Our report looks at several of these areas, bringing together new and existing evidence.

Underrepresentation of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds is a constant theme in the available literature. There is evidence that:

- **Lower socioeconomic groups are more sceptical about the effectiveness of government and NGO interventions in development.** 60% of those from higher socioeconomic groups support government spending at current or higher levels on development, compared with 40% from lower socioeconomic groups.
- **NGOs are less likely to monitor the socioeconomic composition of their workforce than other characteristics.** Only 26% of those surveyed collect data on socioeconomic background, compared with 96%, 84% and 61% for gender, ethnicity and sexual preference.
- **Lower socioeconomic groups are underrepresented amongst those employed in international development within the Civil Service.** 22% of staff in the former Department for International Development (DFID) came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, 67% from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. This gap was larger than for most government departments.
- **Those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to study international development at university.** 64% of international development students have parents in the highest two occupational categories. For all social science courses, the figure is 45%.
- **International development volunteering and international travel opportunities are more widely available to those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.** Those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were 65% more likely to take part in university outward mobility programmes.

Addressing these issues would make the sector more equitable, legitimate, and capable of addressing the global challenges that it faces. However, this requires a concerted effort – from government, NGOs, private sector providers and educational institutions. Our recommendations propose actions for individuals, organisations, and the sector as a whole.

# Introduction

International development has been seen as the ‘pursuit of a better world for all through the elimination of poverty, discrimination and injustice’.<sup>1</sup> This has been conventionally pursued through the ‘benevolent flow of expertise and resources from developed to developing countries’.<sup>2</sup> However, the nature of development is changing, with recognition that equitable partnership and local leadership are more effective routes to long-term change.

International development can address key global challenges, but strong, effective partnerships locally, globally and trans-locally are essential. Without a considered and community-led approach to international development, the challenges of poverty, inequality, climate and epidemics will continue to shape our future.

International development extends beyond governments and national boundaries. It needs to be delivered throughout society – in the UK, through charities, government, the private sector, and those who work in education. International development will be most effective when it enjoys wide support and involvement. Such support also helps to ensure that the sector attracts public and private funding.

A sector that seeks to deliver global equity has a particular obligation to ensure that its own opportunities are accessible. International development can offer great opportunities for career or personal development, alongside the ability for people to make positive impacts globally.

So how accessible is international development in the UK? There is no single source of data on employment or volunteering within the sector, but many perceive that it draws disproportionately from more ‘privileged’ sectors of society. In the sections below, we examine this view.

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<sup>1</sup> [What is International Development?, The Salvation Army](#)

<sup>2</sup> [International Development, Pardee School of Global Studies, Boston University](#)

## Who supports international development?

International development programmes require engagement and support from the whole population, both in the UK and overseas. Formalised means of international development have historically relied on donations and political support in order to influence government priorities and funding decisions. The public may not be experts in development, but their perceptions matter – and the UK public is sceptical of the benefits of aid.

A 2023 report by the British Foreign Policy Research Group found that while 55% of respondents believed that the UK has a moral duty to contribute to a more secure and prosperous world, only 14% believed that the UK should restore its commitment to spending 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) on development.<sup>3</sup> There is a disconnect between the moral imperative and the costs of international development. 61% believed that international aid spending takes away money that should be spent on domestic needs.

Results from the Development Engagement Laboratory's 2024 survey provide further insights. Funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, it continues the work of the Department for International Development (DFID)-funded Aid Attitudes Tracker in the UK, creating a historic database of public opinion, which has remained broadly consistent over time.

Their findings indicate that the public is divided over the principle of aid, and sceptical about its effectiveness. The January 2024 survey showed 53% were concerned or very concerned about the level of poverty in low-middle income countries.<sup>4</sup> A slight majority (52%) felt that the present level of aid should be maintained or increased. This represents an increase from 44-46% support in 2019-20, although the baseline on which people are being asked to judge fell over the same period following the ending of the UK commitment to spend 0.7% of GNI on international development from 2021.

There is limited confidence that aid works. Across the last five surveys, 17-21% believed aid to be effective or very effective, with 38-43% feeling that government aid can make a difference. There is scepticism about the role of charities and NGOs, too, with only 28-33% expressing either some or a great deal of trust in charities or the NGO sector. Only 12% believed that they could make a difference personally, although the surveys consistently show that around one in five contribute to international causes.

Demographic data reveals significant variations in support. While women and men show similar levels of support (51% of each supported aid at current or higher levels in June 2023), support for aid was stronger among younger age groups and those with higher formal qualifications. Among those whose highest qualification was at undergraduate or postgraduate level, support was 68% and 67% respectively; for those without a graduate-

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<sup>3</sup> [2023 Annual Survey of UK Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and Global Britain, British Foreign Policy Group \(2023\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [The Development Engagement Lab project](#)

level qualification, the figure was 47%. Support was 63% in London and the South East of England, 46% in Yorkshire and Humberside.

One of the biggest differences was social class. The January 2024 survey showed 60% of those from socioeconomic groups ABC1 (the highest three of the six social groups identified by the UK Office of National Statistics) supported government spending on aid at current or higher levels. The equivalent figure for groups C2DE was just 40%.

A 2012 report from the Royal Institute of International Affairs found a stark divide between 'elite' groups and the general population.<sup>5</sup> While 50% of policy and government insiders in the 'elite' group supported protecting aid from spending cuts, only 29% of the wider public shared this view. This division was said to highlight the need for better communication and engagement to bridge the gap between elites and the general public.

In 2021, the Coalition for Global Prosperity surveyed voters in traditionally Labour constituencies who had switched to supporting the Conservatives in 2019.<sup>6</sup> They concluded that:

The most interesting outcome of the poll was that when asked about Britain supporting low-middle income countries directly, 30% said that Britain should be supporting these, 37% oppose supporting them and 33% are undecided. This incredible split demonstrates that the argument around UK aid is not final and there is a third of voters who could still be persuaded on the issue.

This ambivalence echoes findings from a 2012 study by the Institute of Public Policy Research.<sup>7</sup> Their work, based on discussions rather than quantitative surveys, noted similar public scepticism but also identified an 'appetite for practical examples of how aid can lead to change'. It painted a picture of practitioners primarily talking to others within the aid sector, and presenting their case in a 'paternalistic' way. This contributed to:

A two-dimensional discourse around development and aid issues. This was characterised by firm, categorical statements that did not reflect the detail of people's lives and experiences, and often relied on 'them versus us' comparisons.

In 2024, the Charities Aid Foundation looked at charitable giving by region for the first time.<sup>8</sup> They found that 'some of the most deprived areas in the UK were amongst the most generous', when giving is calculated as a proportion of household income. This suggests that scepticism about the value of international development does not correspond with attitudes towards charitable giving and supporting 'good causes' more widely.

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<sup>5</sup> [Hard Choices Ahead: The Chatham House–YouGov Survey 2012 British Attitudes Towards the UK's International Priorities, Royal Institute of International Affairs \(2012\)](#)

<sup>6</sup> [The Future of Aid: Development in the 2020s, Coalition for Global Prosperity \(2021\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Understanding Public Attitudes to Aid and Development, Institute of Public Policy Research / Overseas Development Institute \(2012\)](#)

<sup>8</sup> [UK Giving: Mapping Generosity Across the Country, Charities Aid Foundation \(2024\)](#)

Much of the above evidence is survey based, and has limitations. We also know little of the reasons behind such perceptions, for example, the influence of media coverage. Pending more sophisticated analysis, however, we draw four conclusions:

1. Public support comes with conditions: while there is support for the principle of international aid, the public remain sceptical of its effectiveness.
2. Socioeconomic divide: significant differences exist between socioeconomic groups in terms of their support for international aid.
3. Potential for persuasion: a substantial portion of the public remains undecided, presenting an opportunity for effective advocacy and education.
4. A need for dialogue: our target audience needs to be actively involved in development debates, rather than simply provided with information about them but without meaningful access to participate.



## Who works in development organisations?

Data on the socioeconomic backgrounds of staff in international development charities is limited. However, a Bond analysis of charity sector sources suggests reasons for concern:<sup>9</sup>

- In a sector that is roughly two-thirds female, Third Sector found that only 32% of charity CEOs were women. Men outnumbered women by two to one on charities' boards, according to government-commissioned research. In April 2018, Devex revealed a gender pay gap of 12.6% in average hourly pay in favour of men across 17 large international NGOs (with more than 250 employees).
- Only 9% of the (charity) sector was non-white, compared to 12% of the private sector and 11% of the public sector, according to the UK Civil Society Almanac. Charity Job's survey found that 54% of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) candidates said that they had experienced discrimination on account of their race and ethnicity. The figures rose even more for women who are Black and over 50.

More recent studies confirm this. A 2021 survey by Bond found that 89% of people of colour working for NGOs did not feel their organisations were committed to diversity.<sup>10</sup> Research by the recruitment agency Inclusive Boards reinforced the picture of charity trustees as being 'pale, male and stale', while recognising some progress in recent years.<sup>11</sup> A 2024 report from the EY Foundation concluded that working-class people are less likely to be hired by charities than by employers in the public or private sector, and find it harder to progress once they are employed.<sup>12</sup>

How do NGOs working in development relate to this wider picture? As a starting point, do they even know the characteristics of their own workforce? Diversity in Development joined with Bond – the major UK membership organisation for international development organisations – to survey their member organisations in this area.<sup>13</sup>

The Bond/Diversity in Development analysis was based on 124 survey responses, and suggested mixed levels of commitment to data collection. 57% of respondents said that their organisation collected information on the diversity of its staff, with a further 21% not sure whether this was done. Of those whose organisations did collect such information, 60% collected the information periodically. The remainder did so at the time of recruitment only, although some offered the opportunity to self-amend.

In terms of action taken to improve diversity when recruiting, 66% included an EDI statement in their job advertisements, with 61% stating that they had removed exclusive language that reinforces stereotypical (for example, gender specific) attributes.

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<sup>9</sup> [We must celebrate diversity in our sector to drive inclusion, Bond \(2018\)](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Racism, power and truth, Bond \(2021\)](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Charities Inclusive Governance Report, Inclusive Boards \(2022\)](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Social Mobility in the Charity Sector, EY Foundation \(2024\)](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Diversity reporting in international development NGOs, Diversity in Development \(2025, unpublished\)](#)

**Table 1: Types of EDI data collected by responding organisations collecting any diversity data, by organisational size (n=69)**

	Small >£20m annual income		Medium £2-20m annual income		Large >£20m annual income		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Gender</b>	23	88.5	23	100.0	20	100.0	66	95.7
<b>Ethnicity</b>	17	65.4	22	95.7	19	95.0	58	84.1
<b>Age</b>	16	61.5	20	87.0	19	95.0	55	79.7
<b>Sexual orientation</b>	8	30.8	19	82.6	15	75.0	42	60.9
<b>Religion</b>	7	26.9	20	87.0	13	65.0	40	58.0
<b>Disability</b>	14	53.8	21	91.3	18	90.0	53	76.8
<b>Socioeconomic background</b>	6	23.1	6	26.1	6	30.0	18	26.1
<b>None of the above</b>	1	3.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.4
<b>Total</b>	26	100.0	23	100.0	20	100.0	69	100.0

Table 1 shows striking differences in the categories for which information was collected. Of 69 respondents who said that their organisation collects diversity data, 95.7% collected data on gender, 84.1% on ethnicity, 79.7% on age, 76.8% on disability, 60.9% on sexual orientation, and 58% on religion. However, only 26.1% claimed to collect information on socioeconomic background. When seen as a proportion of the entire survey sample, barely half of respondents' organisations collected data on gender, and under half on ethnicity, age or disability. Just 14.1% of the entire sample worked at organisations that collected data on socioeconomic background. Large organisations were only slightly more likely to collect such data than small or medium sized ones.

Only 10 respondents said that their organisation collected 'data on the socioeconomic background of your staff in the UK' specifically. This very small base was also divided on which criteria to use when monitoring socioeconomic background; the single most popular method was parental occupation at the age of 14 (4 examples), followed by use of free school meals and attending private school (3 each).

When asked why socioeconomic background was not included in EDI monitoring, the most common responses were that this is not a legally protected characteristic defined by the 2010 Equality Act, and that organisations were unclear about how to measure socioeconomic status or how to ask about it. Some argued that the very small size of their organisations meant that results would not be meaningful. At least two respondents were against collecting this data in principle, arguing that it would be 'intrusive'. The evidence suggests that if socioeconomic background became a protected characteristic, with clear guidance about what criteria and questions to use, then collection would increase significantly.

## Who makes development policy?

The public sector is a significant employer in development, primarily (but not entirely) through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

Government departments regularly review the composition of their staff, in response to the requirements of the 2010 Equality Act. The FCDO annual report 2022-23 emphasised that 'Diversity, inclusion and belonging matter because people perform better when they feel valued and respected at work'.<sup>14</sup>

Their analysis showed some movement towards diversity, but continued underrepresentation at senior levels. 51% of UK-based staff were women, 43% at senior management grades. 18% of staff were Minority Ethnic (10% senior management). Staff with a declared disability comprised 13% (9% senior management) and LGBO (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and 'Other') staff 8% (7% senior management). The FCDO recognised the continuing gap between overall numbers and senior level appointments, reinforcing their commitment to 'make sustained progress in increasing diversity at more senior grades'.

Socioeconomic background of staff is not included in the FCDO analysis, since it is not listed as a protected characteristic. A separate analysis produced by Sam Friedman for the Social Mobility Commission in 2021, however, provides insight into their representation across the Civil Service generally, and the former DFID in particular.<sup>15</sup>

Friedman's report identified barriers faced by those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, suggesting a level of exclusion even greater than those experienced by the categories whose progress is currently surveyed:

We also find that those from advantaged backgrounds dominate the Senior Civil Service; 72% are from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Tellingly, this is higher than in 1967, the last time such data was collected. This contrasts strongly with gender and ethnic-minority representation, where the Civil Service has become significantly more representative over time. The percentage of senior civil servants who are women, for example, has grown steadily from 17% in 1996 to 45% in 2019 (and to 46% in 2020), and the representation of Black and minority ethnic senior civil servants has grown from 4% to 8% from 2006 to 2019 (and to 9% in 2020).

Across the entire Civil Service, 34% of staff were identified as from low socioeconomic backgrounds and 54% high socioeconomic backgrounds. For the then Department for International Development, the equivalent figures were 22% and 67%. This is particularly disappointing, as the report found that London-based posts were generally more exclusive than those based in other locations, yet DFID had a high proportion of staff based in Scotland. The subsequent merger between DFID and the Foreign and Commonwealth

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<sup>14</sup> [FCDO annual report and accounts 2022 to 2023, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office \(2023\)](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Navigating the labyrinth: Socio-economic background and career progression within the Civil Service, Social Mobility Commission \(2021\)](#)

Office is likely to have increased exclusivity further. The pre-merger FCO was even less representative than DFID; just 19% of staff came from low socioeconomic backgrounds, 69% from high ones.

The report also looked at divides between grade levels within the Civil Service. It distinguished between:

**Policy roles:** the policy profession designs, develops and proposes appropriate courses of action to help meet key government priorities and ministerial objectives, such as how the education and health and care system should work.

**Operational roles:** civil servants who run the front line services that citizens use, such as processing visas, passports and driving licences, and job centres.

For operational roles, the proportion of staff from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds was relatively evenly matched, at 40% and 47%. For policy roles, the gap widens markedly, to 19% compared with 70%. The report notes that:

The Civil Service gets consistently more socioeconomically exclusive at every grade; at the lowest grade, Administrative Assistant/Officer (AA/AO), 45% of staff are from high SEBs [socioeconomic backgrounds], but this rises to 72% among senior civil servants (SCS).

These findings underscore the need for targeted efforts to improve socioeconomic diversity within the FCDO and the broader Civil Service, particularly in policymaking roles and senior positions that shape international development policy.

## Who studies development?

International development is often regarded as a graduate profession. Opinions vary about the relative importance of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Some argue that those wanting to enter employment in international development should prioritise obtaining degrees with relevant skills (for example, in health, economics or engineering), perhaps moving to international development at postgraduate level.<sup>16</sup> There is no published data on the proportion of international development undergraduates who subsequently enter employment in the sector.

University international development courses can offer a route to learn more about the subject. Study can also have an impact beyond the specific course content. Most advisers attach strong importance to networking, volunteering, travel and internships as ways of engaging in international development. Students in higher education are better placed to access these than their peers outside the system. Universities also have access and inclusion programmes and are judged on their success in attracting disadvantaged groups. Fees are regulated (at least at undergraduate level) and study is typically supported through loans.

Diversity in Development obtained access to student admissions data from the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) – the agency that collects UK higher education data – for those studying international development courses in the 2021-22 academic year. We have examined the demographic profile, socioeconomic background and other characteristics of these, and compared them to figures for the wider cohort of social science students.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> [12 tips for getting a job in international development, The Guardian \(2014\)](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Background of international development students in UK universities, Diversity in Development \(2025, unpublished\)](#)

**Table 2: Comparison of undergraduate international development and social science students, by indicators of class background/deprivation**

	International development students		All social science students		Difference	Total	
	N	%	N	%	%	N	%
<b>Parent/s went to university</b>	823	65.9	52,168	48.6	<b>17.4</b>	<b>52,991</b>	<b>48.8</b>
<b>IMD quintile 1</b> Most deprived	141	11.1	22,799	20.7	<b>-9.6</b>	<b>22,940</b>	<b>20.6</b>
<b>IMD quintile 5</b> Least deprived	365	28.7	19,745	17.9	<b>10.7</b>	<b>20,110</b>	<b>18.1</b>
<b>SEG 1</b> Higher managerial and professional occupations	349	30.9	20,660	20.4	<b>10.4</b>	<b>21,009</b>	<b>20.5</b>
<b>SEG 2</b> Lower managerial and professional occupations	370	32.7	24,844	24.5	<b>8.2</b>	<b>25,214</b>	<b>24.8</b>
<b>Attended non-state school</b>	221	17.1	11,577	9.8	<b>-7.4</b>	<b>11,798</b>	<b>9.8</b>
<b>Attended state school</b>	1,068	82.9	107,143	90.2	<b>7.4</b>	<b>108,211</b>	<b>90.2</b>

Four measures were used to indicate socioeconomic background: whether at least one parents had attended university; parental occupation at the age of fourteen (socioeconomic group, SEG); index of multiple deprivation (IMD) classification; and type of school attended.

65.9% of international development students (for whom data was held) had at least one parent who had gone to university, compared with 48.6% of all social science students. 17.1% of international development students were attending a non-state school before university, compared with 9.8% of all social science students.

When asked about the occupation of their parents, international development students were significantly overrepresented among the two highest categories (for example, 30.9% in SEG1 compared to 20.4% of all social science students) but underrepresented in all of the lower socioeconomic groups. A similar pattern emerges when looking at the index of multiple deprivation; 28.7% of international students come from the 'least deprived' category, compared with 17.9% in social sciences generally.

Further work is needed to understand the motivations of those seeking to study international development, the barriers they may face, and the value of such courses in later employment. This is especially the case at postgraduate level, which may be less

accessible due to financial constraints and pressures to enter employment, but for which socioeconomic data is not readily available. Nonetheless, our analysis suggests significant underrepresentation of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds on international development courses, even compared with those studying other social sciences.

In our recommendations below, we propose that those universities offering international development courses should work together to address this, perhaps utilising the wider programmes to promote access and inclusion that are now available in UK higher education.



## Who volunteers in development?

'Volunteering' is often regarded as an important route into a career in international development. According to one university careers website:<sup>18</sup>

Relevant work experience is essential for securing a role in the international development sector. Volunteering is a great way to gain the relevant skills which you will need to enter the sector, both in the UK and overseas.

There are many forms of volunteering, both within and between countries. There is also much debate about its value. Successful volunteering must be based on equitable relationships, between volunteers and recipient countries as well as between volunteers and the organisations that engage them. Questions have been raised about whether some forms of overseas volunteering – with agendas led largely by the needs of the volunteer and sending country, and focusing on simplistic, palatable and ultimately 'do-able' notions and tasks that can be performed by unskilled, though enthusiastic, tourists – should be regarded as a genuine form of development. One study of gap year programmes found that:<sup>19</sup>

gap year organisations remain rooted in an essentially externalised conception of development. This model is based on the assumed value of the enthusiastic western volunteer, who becomes the central, and even only, agent of development. In this sense 'active' participation is perceived as predominantly limited to the external, visiting volunteer, rather than being a local prerogative.

Solutions to these concerns need to be developed jointly between practitioners in the Global South and Global North. One such attempt has been made by the International Forum for Volunteering in Development, which has established a 'global volunteering standard' to guide the planning, operation and monitoring of programmes.<sup>20</sup> It is important to ensure that channels for volunteering thrive but focus on equity and development outcomes rather than the needs of the volunteer.

The question of who volunteers receives less attention, but there is evidence that volunteering is unrepresentative of society. In 2018, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) found that 'volunteers are more likely to be from white, middle-class backgrounds, and charities need to think about what barriers they may be creating'. Their most recent study shows that the problem persists.<sup>21</sup> While 73% of volunteers in 2018 said that there were people from a wide range of backgrounds and cultures in their groups, by 2023 this had dropped to 66%.

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<sup>18</sup> [Careers in international development, LSE](#)

<sup>19</sup> [Doing Development: The Gap Year, Volunteer-Tourists and a Popular Practice of Development, Kate Simpson, Journal of International Development \(2004\)](#)

<sup>20</sup> [The Global Volunteering Standard, International Forum for Volunteering in Development \(2021\)](#)

<sup>21</sup> [Time Well Spent: The National Survey on the Volunteer Experience, National Council for Voluntary Organisations \(NCVO\) \(2023\)](#)



In 2021, the UK Civil Society Almanac reported that ‘there is a significant gap in volunteering levels between people living in the most deprived areas compared with those from the least deprived areas’.<sup>22</sup>

There was an equally interesting gap in who engaged with different types of volunteering. This was more pronounced in high-profile, formal volunteering (giving unpaid help through a group, club or organisation) than informal volunteering (giving help as an individual to people who are not a relative). Among those volunteering for formal roles, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were also less likely to undertake leadership or organising roles, such as becoming a trustee.

The benefits of volunteering may also be unequal. Volunteering can have a positive effect on earnings and career progression, but this is largely confined to people in professional and managerial occupations, while those in white and blue collar jobs do not benefit to the same extent.<sup>23</sup>

The development sector needs to better understand the background of its volunteers, their needs and motivations, the barriers they can face – especially involving travel and financial commitment – and the impact of these. Failure to do so will not only limit the market for volunteering (at a time when all voluntary organisations face a shortage of helpers) but its impact. One volunteer described her experience as follows:<sup>24</sup>

Most of the time these people have no experience of hardship or just no life experience at all. And so, whilst completely well-intentioned, they are out of touch with what asylum seekers are experiencing, or even practically what they might need, making some of their work just plain stupid.

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<sup>22</sup> [UK Civil Society Almanac, National Council for Voluntary Organisations \(NCVO\) \(2021\)](#)

<sup>23</sup> [The Economic Benefits of Volunteering and Social Class, Wilson, J., Mantovan, N and Sauer, R.M, Social Science Research \(2020\)](#)

<sup>24</sup> [Is class the missing dimension in the aid sector's search for diversity?, Lauren Anderson, LSE International Development blog \(2023\)](#)

## International experiences

Involvement in international development does not require experience of visiting or living in a low or middle-income country. This might, however, be a motivating factor, and be taken into account by employers when selecting candidates for roles.

Opportunities to travel are not distributed equally among socioeconomic groups. This may reflect time and confidence, as well as economic factors. Even for those studying in higher education, a study by Universities UK found that:<sup>25</sup>

In 2015–16, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were 65% more likely to participate in outward mobility than their peers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (2.5% participation rate compared to 1.5%). Students from low-participation wards. In 2015–16 the participation rate was 1.8% for students from areas with high-participation in higher education and 1.0% for students from low-participation areas.

A potential route to extend travel opportunities is the government-funded Turing Scheme, established in 2021 to replace the Erasmus+ programme.<sup>26</sup> The Erasmus+ programme had demonstrated unequal levels of participation. Department for Education figures show that students from more privileged backgrounds were 1.7 times more likely than those from underprivileged backgrounds to travel abroad under Erasmus+.<sup>27</sup> These figures are within the cohort of higher education students, in which students from less advantaged backgrounds were already underrepresented.

The Turing Scheme has been criticised for being less generous and non-reciprocal. Unlike its predecessor, however, the new scheme is global in nature. Though largely confined to those within education, it extends more widely than its predecessor to schools and colleges outside higher education.

The Turing Scheme awards funding in the first instance to educational institutions, rather than individuals. Applicant institutions are required to demonstrate how their project will support widening access, with the assessment criteria weighted towards this criterion. Additional support is available to those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the scheme is actively promoted in geographical areas of disadvantage. A reduction in the minimum length of projects, and removal of language barriers by increasing the proportion of visits to English speaking countries are also cited as removing barriers to access. Criteria for disadvantage vary slightly between sectors but include participants from households with an annual income of £25,000 or less, receiving universal benefit, with caring responsibilities, receiving free school meals, or who are refugees or asylum seekers.

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<sup>25</sup> [Widening Participation in UK Outward Mobility, Universities UK \(2018\)](#)

<sup>26</sup> [Turing Scheme](#)

<sup>27</sup> [What's the difference between the new Turing Scheme and Erasmus?, The Education Hub \(2021\)](#)

At face value, the Turing Scheme has potential to increase global exposure, particularly amongst those from disadvantaged backgrounds. An evaluation of the first year of operation suggests that 39% of beneficiaries came from disadvantaged backgrounds, against a target of 45%, although actual numbers of placements were less than half the target figure, due to the slow build-up of the scheme generally.<sup>28</sup> For 2022-23, 52% of placements approved were for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, although figures for actual placements were not available at the time of writing.

The same evaluation highlights potential barriers to participation from lower socioeconomic groups. Most placements remained in higher education settings, rather than further or vocational education or schools. Unsurprisingly, higher education placements were significantly longer: an average of 109 days compared with 26, 16 or 7 days. Higher education institutions were also more likely to select destinations outside Europe for their placements. Financial and logistical issues also impacted those from disadvantaged backgrounds:

Generating interest among participants from disadvantaged backgrounds was not a main challenge – in qualitative interviews, providers indicated that barriers related to the initial lack of guarantee for funding, the amount of funding and the timing that it was delivered. These issues were felt to disproportionately impact participation among disadvantaged groups. HE providers in particular attributed difficulty recruiting this group to the level of funding provided.

The Turing Scheme is not a form of volunteering. Only a small proportion of visits are to low and middle-income countries – 69% of the first cohort visited Europe or North America, but only 7% went to Africa and 2% South America. It was not conceived as an international development programme. The benefits are more likely to be expressed in terms of improving job prospects, learning about a specific subject area, or experiencing a new country. However, a stronger international development strand could be established over time.

Further opportunities for young people to gain international exposure were provided by the government-funded International Citizen Scheme (ICS), which ran from 2011 to 2021.<sup>29</sup> The programme enabled over 40,000 individuals to volunteer on projects ‘designed to support some of the worlds most marginalised people’. Around half of these were from the UK.

The ICS had multiple objectives, encouraging participants to be more active citizens at home as well as addressing international development challenges. Some argue that this approach diluted development objectives. By placing international development as a

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<sup>28</sup> [Turing Scheme: Year 1 evaluation, Department for Education \(2024\)](#)

<sup>29</sup> [International Citizen Service opens, GOV.UK \(2011\)](#)

subset of wider societal obligations, the scheme was criticised for underplaying fundamental causes of inequality.<sup>30</sup>

Any notion of global citizenship and attendant rights and responsibilities between the constituents of North and South, if it is serious about reducing inequality (or as the ICS programme puts it: ‘fighting global poverty’), must make a genuine attempt to lay bare and address reasons for uneven levels of development. It is hardly revelatory to point out that powerful actors such as the UK Government and its DfID routinely ‘write out’ critical perspectives from development imaginaries and versions of global citizenship through programmes such as ICS.

As with the Turing Scheme, the ICS included social inclusion amongst its objectives. Analysis commissioned by DFID found that participation had been reflective of society as a whole,<sup>31</sup> while its final report states that:<sup>32</sup>

Our efforts to ensure inclusion for all have paid off. We reached young people across all demographics and met all our diversity targets. For example, 30 percent of ICS applications were from BAME backgrounds, and 37 percent met two or more indicators relating to socioeconomic diversity, such as having accessed free school meals, or living in a household with an income of less than £20,000 per year.

Marketing and recruitment materials were developed to reach and appeal to different target groups, including sign language recruitment videos for Deaf candidates. An Access Fund also provided additional support for volunteers and provided adjustments to allow volunteers to participate. Adjustments have included purchasing specialist laptop equipment or software to support volunteers with visual impairments and the shipping of necessary medical equipment.

These figures may exaggerate the level of inclusion, as they were based on applications, rather than completion of placements. A report from the Fidelity Foundation highlighted a significant dropout rate for those from lower socioeconomic groups between application and completion, and recommended an approach more focussed on their needs.<sup>33</sup> A subsequent review by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) also questioned the robustness of the figures based on the nature of the sample used.<sup>34</sup>

Similar to the Turing Scheme, the ICS experience suggests that demand for international exposure from young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds can be generated, with appropriate support. Supporters and critics also agree that ICS had an impact on the

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<sup>30</sup> [‘It’s all bollocks!’ and other critical standpoints on the UK Government’s vision of global citizenship, Mark Griffiths, Identities \(2017\)](#)

<sup>31</sup> [Evaluation of DFID’s International Citizens’ Service \(ICS\) pilot programme, Department for International Development, \(2012\)](#)

<sup>32</sup> ICS Final Programme Review Report, VSO (2021)

<sup>33</sup> Engaging and Supporting Hard to Reach Young People in the UK to Access the International Citizen Scheme, Fidelity Foundation (2018)

<sup>34</sup> [VSO International Citizen Service: Social Return on Investment Evaluation, NEF Consulting \(2019\)](#)

attitude of participants, although in different ways. The NEF study sought to quantify the impact of the scheme on its UK participants. They were significantly more likely to engage in voluntary work following their placement and reported increased levels of confidence and ability to engage in a multicultural environment. Overall:

The ICS programme is estimated to have created benefits equivalent to £176,962,812 for UK volunteers at a total cost of £38,166,808. The SROI ratio is 4.64:1, meaning that for every £1 spent on the programme an estimated £4.64 in social value is created. Female volunteers derived a higher estimated impact from ICS than male volunteers, with an associated SROI ratio of nearly 5:1 for female volunteers compared to 3.22:1 for male volunteers. This was due mainly to the higher proportion of female volunteers stating ICS had improved their confidence 'a lot'. 4 UK volunteers from lower income households who had received free school meals saw a much greater impact on confidence and active citizenship relative to those who had never received free school meals, resulting in a 5.68:1 SROI ratio compared to a 4.17:1 SROI ratio.

Participants interviewed in Griffiths' more qualitative study were impacted in a different way, adopting a more critical and independent view than that embodied in the scheme's objectives:

The volunteers do not simply reiterate dominant discourses: they 'voice' Government silences, enter polarised debates on colonial and neocolonial practices, simultaneously historicizing and politicising matters of global inequality and development. These are not the soft global citizens envisioned by Government policymakers. What this means remains to be seen, but this is a crucial part of the story: these volunteers are not co-opted by neoliberalism, they resist. And their futures remain open.

The combined experience of the Turing Scheme and the ICS suggests four points. First, potential demand for international experiences exists across all segments of society. Second, there is a need for specific support measures and links to be in place to support participation from lower socioeconomic groups. Third, programmes need to be clearly framed in a development context. Finally, when such schemes are done well, they can make a real and lasting difference to participants.

## Conclusions, barriers and next steps

To fully understand how representative the international development sector is of society, we need more data about its composition, and the experiences of those within it. This should include the private sector, a major provider of international development services which we have not been able to cover in this report.

From the information presented, engagement appears to be uneven across society. This imbalance is most clearly seen in socioeconomic background, the 'hidden dimension' of inequality in the development sector. We therefore believe that this should be a priority for future work, while recognising that a degree of intersectionality exists between class and other potential areas of disadvantage, such as gender and ethnicity.

Evidence exists that those from lower socioeconomic groups are keen to engage with international development if opportunities arise. The studies from the Institute for Public Policy and the Coalition for Global Prosperity cited above point to such demand, as do the experiences of the Turing Scheme and the ICS.

There is no conclusive evidence on the barriers to greater participation among lower socioeconomic groups. From our discussions and work to date, however, the following might be relevant:

- International development is regarded as a **graduate-only profession**. Junior positions are likely to attract highly-qualified applicants seeking a way into the sector.
- **Awareness of opportunities** at all levels may be higher among those with access to existing networks, role models, or higher education support services.
- Some employers highlight a preference for candidates with **postgraduate degrees** in international development, which are beyond the reach of some students.
- **Unpaid voluntary work**, often through internships, is widely seen as a route into international development. While attractive for small organisations operating on limited budgets, these discriminate against individuals with fewer resources.
- **International travel and experience** may be regarded as advantages in seeking work in the field. These are less accessible for those from lower socioeconomic groups.
- Those from lower socioeconomic groups are significantly less likely to have access to **role models** who have worked in the sector.
- Those from lower socioeconomic groups are less likely to have the time, opportunity or incentives to **volunteer**, and are less likely to generate career benefits when they do.
- Programmes designed to improve participation need to **develop specific partnerships and approaches** with organisations that involve key target groups.

We hope to extend this work to a survey of individuals engaged in the sector, to better understand their experiences. However, the challenges identified above require a response by the whole development sector. In the section below, we suggest some priorities for wider action.



## Recommendations

The need to engage with all areas of society represents a serious challenge for the international development sector. Failure to address this will result in missed opportunities, inequitable operations both domestically and internationally, and diminished support from donors and the wider public. Socioeconomic inclusion is a moral imperative, and essential for sustainable development and economic growth.

Responding to the challenge requires a concerted effort across the entire sector. We must aim to **better understand** the extent and nature of the problem and **actively prioritise** socioeconomic diversity. The goal should extend beyond informing or educating those from underrepresented groups, to securing their active engagement and involvement. The sector needs to **listen** to their views, rather than expect unquestioning support of existing development models.

Our report aims to be a starting point for discussion across the sector. We welcome practical suggestions for future actions, and propose the following as a starting point:

### For government

- **Recognise the importance of socioeconomic diversity** by including this as a protected characteristic, along with other forms of disadvantage.
- **Establish a new research programme** to better understand the current composition of those working in the international development sector, the experiences of those from underrepresented backgrounds, and the barriers they face.
- **Embed international development and socioeconomic inclusion in existing mobility schemes** – for example, through establishing a development strand within the Turing Scheme – recognising the particular value of links with low and middle-income countries and supporting these with development-focused materials.

### For the international development sector

- **Explicitly recognise the problem** by creating a sector-wide initiative, involving government, NGOs, and the voluntary, education and private sectors.
- **Develop a national inclusivity plan**, in collaboration with all parties, encompassing strategy, events, research, resources and advice for organisations seeking to develop and benchmark their diversity and inclusion practices.
- **Standardise definitions** by agreeing on specific definitions of socioeconomic background, based on recommendations from the Social Mobility Commission.



- **Create a network** of identifiable individuals committed to driving forward inclusion, for example, through developing a mentoring initiative.
- **Create a focal point** by establishing an annual Diversity in Development conference to monitor progress, recognise initiatives, and agree on future needs.

### For sector organisations:

- **Make a clear statement** recognising the need for socioeconomic inclusion in relevant policy, strategy, and reporting documents.
- **Review recruitment requirements** to consider the skills and experience required, and ensure that non-graduates are not excluded unnecessarily.
- **Establish activities specifically to promote socioeconomic inclusion**, dependent on the size of and resources available to the organisation.
- **Participate in sector-wide initiatives** to promote socioeconomic inclusion.
- **Monitor and report on socioeconomic inclusion**, in ways appropriate to the size and nature of the organisation.

Diversity in Development, as a new charity specifically concerned with inclusion and access to the sector, would be happy to provide a focal point for these discussions and would welcome suggestions and offers of involvement.



# Diversity in Development

[www.diversityindevelopment.org.uk](http://www.diversityindevelopment.org.uk)  
Charity registered in England and Wales (1198040)