

Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-1-108-82700-3 – Volunteering in Global Mental Health  
Sophie Thomson , Peter Hughes , Sam Gnanapragasam  
Frontmatter  
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# Volunteering in Global Mental Health

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“This book is a valuable contribution to anyone considering community support in mental health on a global level. This guide will serve many volunteers along the path of mental health support in the community for many years to come.”

*Nasser Loza  
President, The World Federation for Mental Health (2021–2023)  
Director, The Behman Hospital, Maadi Psychology Center,  
and the International Clinic London*

“Volunteers in global mental health, whose expertise, skills and understanding of local contexts, is a valuable asset to everyone giving and receiving services and programs. I believe that this textbook will equip clinicians with the right tools to make a real and positive impact on the communities that need their help. The Global Mental Health Peer Network fully endorse and highly recommend this book.”

*Ms Charlene Sunkel  
Founder/ CEO: Global Mental Health Peer Network*

“I am delighted to have a book that address unmet needs of volunteering in global mental. This book will be a good guide for anyone interested in engaging volunteering both home and abroad. The practical case studies illustrated good examples of sustainable volunteering.”

*Dr Anis Ahmed MBBS MRCPsych PH Cert  
Consultant Forensic Psychiatrist  
Chair, Volunteering & International Psychiatrists  
Special Interest Group (VIPSIG) at RCPsych  
Clinical Lead in Psychiatry, Aston Medical School*

“This is a book to be read at last three times, whilst preparing for the attachment, during the placement, and reflecting after return home. It covers a wide range of issues from the context and ethics of volunteering in countries much less well-resourced than the UK through to the practicalities of what to pack in the suitcase (the list is already rather long but should include this book!). It is thought-provoking and supportive, contains the experience of both seasoned volunteers and their hosts, and emphasises the importance of training rather than direct clinical work, of working within the existing health system structures, of not aggravating brain drain, and of reducing the personal risk of road traffic accidents-probably the biggest hazard of working in low and middle-income countries.”

*Rachel Jenkins, Professor Emeritas and former Director  
of WHO Collaborating Centre for Mental Health,  
Kings College London 1997–2012*

# Volunteering in Global Mental Health

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## A Practical Guide for Clinicians

Edited by

**Sophie Thomson**

World Psychiatric Association

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**Sam Gnanapragasam**

South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust

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314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India  
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108827003](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108827003)

DOI: 10.1017/9781108920728

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First published 2023

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*A Cataloging-in-Publication data record for this book is available from the Library of Congress*

ISBN 978-1-108-82700-3 Paperback

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# Contents

*Foreword* vii  
 Professor Sheila the Baroness Hollins  
*List of Contributors* ix

---

**Introduction** 1  
 Sophie Thomson, Peter Hughes  
 and Sam Gnanapragasam

## Section 1 Key Principles, Theory and Concepts

- 1 **Background and Principles  
 of Volunteering in Global Mental  
 Health** 9  
 Peter Hughes and Sam  
 Gnanapragasam
- 2 **Humanitarian Emergencies** 22  
 Peter Hughes
- 3 **Ethical Issues in Global  
 Volunteering: An Ethicist's  
 Perspective** 28  
 Ayesha Ahmad
- 4 **Ethical Issues in Global  
 Volunteering: Practical  
 Considerations** 32  
 Sophie Thomson, Peter Hughes  
 and Sam Gnanapragasam
- 5 **Benefits of Global Volunteering  
 to the United Kingdom** 39  
 Peter Hughes

## Section 2 Practical Guide and Toolkit

- 6 **Preparation for Global Volunteering:  
 Professional, Personal, Psychological  
 and Practical** 47  
 Sophie Thomson

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7 **Onsite: Working in Another  
 Country** 62  
 Sophie Thomson and Peter Hughes

8 **Implementing and Delivering  
 Training as a Global  
 Volunteer** 68  
 Sophie Thomson and Peter Hughes

9 **Psychological Techniques  
 Toolkit** 85  
 Bradley Hillier, Peter Hughes  
 and Sophie Thomson

10 **After the Trip: Coming Home  
 and Sustainability** 102  
 Peter Hughes

11 **Monitoring, Evaluation  
 and Research** 110  
 Sam Gnanapragasam and Dinesh  
 Bhugra

## Section 3 Reflective Accounts and Perspectives of Global Mental Health Volunteering

12 **Myanmar: Mental Health Training,  
 Recipient Perspective** 120  
 Sai Kham Thaw

13 **Myanmar: Mental Health Training,  
 Trainer Perspective** 124  
 Sophie Thomson

14 **Somaliland: Mental Health Training,  
 Recipient Perspective** 132  
 Djibril Ibrahim Moussa Handuleh

- |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>15 <b>Somaliland and Malawi: Mental Health Training, Trainer Perspective</b> 136<br/>Mandip Jheeta</p> <p>16 <b>Zimbabwe: Diaspora Perspective of Volunteering</b> 145<br/>Dorcas Gwata</p> <p>17 <b>Sierra Leone: Capacity Building, Trainee Perspective on Volunteering</b> 153<br/>Dawn Harris, and Anna Walder</p> <p>18 <b>Chad, Darfur, Haiti, Sierra Leone and Bangladesh: Humanitarian Field Experiences</b> 165<br/>Peter Hughes</p> <p>19 <b>Sudan: Mental Health Training, mhGAP Trainer Perspective</b> 176<br/>Jane Mouny</p> <p>20 <b>Kashmir: Mental Health Training, Royal College of Psychiatrists' VIPSIG Training Programme</b> 183<br/>Sally Browning</p> | <p>21 <b>Ghana: Supervisor Perspective, Royal College of Psychiatrists' Volunteer Programme</b> 188<br/>Peter Hughes</p> <p><b>Section 4 Future of Global Volunteering</b></p> <p>22 <b>Digital Possibilities for the Future</b> 193<br/>Ruairi Page</p> <p>23 <b>Global Volunteering in Mental Health Moving Forward</b> 200<br/>Sophie Thomson, Peter Hughes and Sam Gnanapragasam</p> <hr/> <p><i>Appendices</i></p> <p><i>Appendix 1 Volunteering Opportunities</i> 205</p> <p><i>Appendix 2 Practical Preparation Checklist</i> 206</p> <p><i>Glossary</i> 208</p> <p><i>Index</i> 210</p> |
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## Foreword

The editors have brought together their own and others' experiences of volunteering over the past 15 years in a practical manual designed to support people who want to join the ranks of volunteers in the future. They hope that the historical brain drain of professionals from low- and middle-income countries to the UK could be reversed with more UK-trained mental health professionals supporting the development of services through training projects internationally, both with remote and face-to-face partnerships. Stories from volunteers in this book consistently report learning a great deal themselves as well as often having profound personal experiences.

The word 'transformative' repeats in the accounts of the lived experiences of volunteers. Most of the volunteers' stories have the following in common:

- taking a leap into a new world armed with goodwill, good preparation and some courage
- adapting to new cultures demanding flexibility and an open mind
- being grateful for all that is offered with humility and honesty
- living away from familiar supports allowing for reflection on what is really important
- finding as a welcome surprise personal resources and skills previously unexplored

My own experience of international volunteering started by working with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) in Nigeria as a young woman. I experienced first-hand the value of volunteering and this helped me to persist with developing international work throughout my career.

As a member of the Board of International Affairs at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, I explored the different options open to the College, including trialling a VSO-led programme for trainee psychiatrists. There were quite a few hurdles to overcome for the College to establish and run its own volunteer programme, including resistance from some in the College but particularly the need for a start-up fund. I arranged a fundraising trek in India for a week, which ended with a visit to mental health services in Kerala.

As president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, some of my proudest moments were visiting all of our six international divisions, testament to the College's large international membership of psychiatrists who had trained in the UK. Some of course had stayed and made invaluable contributions to mental health services in the United Kingdom. On a visit to Northern Pakistan in 2007 to attend a World Psychiatric Association (WPA) regional meeting, I was surprised to learn that there were around 350 psychiatrists in the whole of Pakistan but, at the same time, a similar number of Pakistani psychiatrists were working in the UK. Many of the latter returned to their home country regularly to visit family and friends and often to share their skills and resources too. One such person was Dr Afzal Javed, now president of the WPA. In 2007, Dr Javed arranged a tour for myself and colleagues to visit earthquake-stricken parts of Northern Pakistan, including meetings with senior government ministers, the National Mental Health Taskforce, international development agencies as well as academic and other leading psychiatrists to think about their mental health response. When the earthquake happened in 2005, very large numbers of children had been bereaved and traumatised, but there were no mental health services available to them or to those supporting them. A child psychiatrist from North London

volunteered to spend a year in Rawalpindi training and mentoring local psychiatrists and health workers to reach out to these children. I remember conversations with this volunteer's medical director in North London to support her requested period of unpaid leave, and on her return to enable her to continue her mentoring role remotely. There were three or four other year-long placements around this time to other countries too. Another success was signing a MOU (memorandum of understanding) with the Iraqi regional government in Kurdistan to deliver some training in Iraq.

In 2009, in a memo to my successor as president, who was considering outsourcing the programme, I advised that:

‘the unique aspect of the College programme is its ability to respond to requests from members for a particular technical support or training, and /or to support diaspora members to make a sustainable and targeted contribution in their home country. I see it primarily as being a service to our overseas members. This is what distinguishes it from any other agencies’ volunteer programmes.’

Projects have been undertaken in highly challenging contexts such as Iraq and Myanmar as well as in Malawi, Ghana and elsewhere, supported as needed by the Volunteering and International Psychiatry Special Interest Group (VIPSIG). At the time of writing, a growing number of College members and other mental health professionals are donating their time to mental health and intellectual disability services in low- and middle-income countries, with VIPSIG hoping that the programme will grow to support 100 volunteers annually. Of course, the pandemic may have changed some of our ideas about how training and volunteering can best be offered. For example, does volunteering still necessarily involve travelling? By empowering people from afar and helping people to adapt ideas for their own culture, their own organisational reality may prove as or more effective. And the wider availability of mobile technology to provide virtual supervision/consultation and our growing familiarity with webinars and hybrid conferences changes a lot.

Having been part of getting the volunteer programme at The Royal College of Psychiatrists off the ground, I am thrilled to read that volunteering is now an integral part of the College's international strategy. This is entirely due to the energy and commitment of so many people, either as volunteers themselves or as leaders who have been determined to develop a sustainable College led volunteer scheme.

In this book you will read about how to prepare and carry out volunteering and training internationally as well as how best to support service development. This is brought to life by hearing inspirational stories from several volunteers about their own unique experiences of volunteering. A common theme is the realisation of how much a volunteer brings back to their everyday work. As one volunteer said: ‘I certainly learnt as much, if not more, than I taught’ – a sentiment that many volunteers share. I hope you will be inspired to join the global community of volunteers and to encourage others to volunteer too.

*Professor Sheila the Baroness Hollins*



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