



**VSO Tajikistan, Afghanistan
and Central Asia Strategy 2011-16**

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This strategy was developed with extensive participation and consultation with the communities we work in, our local and international partners, and includes input from all of our staff and volunteers.

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Foreword

About VSO

VSO is a leading independent non-governmental organisation (NGO). Our high-impact approach involves working with government, organisations and individuals to develop the practical and technical skills needed to improve lives. Providing food, infrastructure and machinery is important, but we believe people are the key to overcoming vulnerability and disadvantage.

That's why we work through professional volunteers. Drawn from many countries and all walks of life, they give their extensive experience, time and commitment and share their professional skills within carefully selected partner organisations, ranging from grassroots groups to government ministries. It's a powerful, cost-effective way to create lasting results.

Our work supports partners in improving access to high-quality services for all population groups, including the most vulnerable.

VSO Tajikistan

VSO registered in Tajikistan in 2009. In a short space of time the programme has built a strong reputation for high-quality delivery and partnership. VSO Tajikistan has invited more than 70 professionals to Tajikistan – most volunteer placements last longer than seven months as time is needed to adapt skills and experience to the realities of the local context and build relationships of trust. VSO Tajikistan also attracts some short-term specialists where highly technical expertise can be shared in a shorter period.

What we do

VSO Tajikistan partners with government, private sector and NGOs at local, national and international levels and acts as a credible broker of relevant, high-quality, practical and cost-effective technical knowledge and alternative perspectives, both locally and internationally. Emphasis is on skills and knowledge related to social inclusion, market analysis, quality of services, marketable skills development and viable business

development – all of which will improve the opportunities of marginalised youth and women from low-income households to participate in inclusive economic and social development.

In addition to international volunteers, local and regional learning visits and mini grants, VSO facilitates local professional volunteering and more sustainable developmental engagement of the international private sector in Central Asia.





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VSO in Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia

Since suffering a five-year civil war in the 1990s, Tajikistan has come a very long way. However, it remains the poorest of the former Soviet republics and poverty is concentrated mostly in rural areas. There are increasing concerns about income inequality, underpinned by social inequality. High levels of unemployment and underemployment of youth, particularly in rural areas contribute to approximately 1/7 of the population migrating overseas for what is usually insecure and low-skilled work. Dependence on migrant remittances is very high, making Tajikistan very vulnerable to economic shocks.

Since 2009, VSO Tajikistan has reached people living in poverty in Afghanistan, initially through its partnership with the Aga Khan Development Network. There are approximately 15 million youth in Afghanistan (44% of the population) and according to the Afghan government only 50% of these young people can write or read their own name. According to a survey of gender specialists (Reuters Foundation, June 2011) Afghanistan is the most difficult country in the world in which to be a woman.

VSO Tajikistan has also started to have an impact in Kyrgyzstan through partnerships with Welthungerhilfe, Act Central Asia and European Centre for Ecological and Agricultural Tourism (ECEAT). According to official figures, more than 70% of the Kyrgyz population are under the age of 35 and their most pressing challenge is economic opportunity. After a bloody conflict with ethnic violence in 2010, half a million people were displaced in the south of the country. Conflict and its aftermath mean that marginalised youth and women from low-income households continue to be very vulnerable economically. Kyrgyz women and girls in the south of the country are also at high risk of bride kidnapping.

Focusing on the same vulnerable groups, marginalised youth and women, VSO Tajikistan enables partners in all three countries to share learning in Tajikistan and so leverage an impact across borders in Afghanistan and wider Central Asia.

Quick facts:

Tajikistan

Population: 7.6 million
 HDI index: 127 out of 187
 GDP per capita: US\$1937

Afghanistan

Population: 29.8 million
 HDI index: 172 out of 187
 GDP per capita: US\$1416

Kyrgyzstan

Population: 5.6 million
 HDI index: 126 out of 187
 GDP per capita: US\$2036

Who we work for

VSO Tajikistan targets marginalised young people and women from low-income households. There are few opportunities for young people and women to develop marketable skills and access decent work in Tajikistan, Afghanistan and other parts of the central Asia region. Economic crisis, insecurity

(in Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan), visa procedures that restrict migration (for Tajiks and Kyrgyz) and a lack of inward investment to enable companies to expand workforces threaten to exacerbate the position of women and risk pushing young men to more radical beliefs.



Our focus: inclusive economic development

VSO Tajikistan works in the area of inclusive economic and social development, helping marginalised youth and women from low-income households to make a living. This ensures that vulnerable people and communities are benefiting from economic growth. VSO Tajikistan works with organisations that create decent work in areas where economic opportunities are scarce. It also helps groups that struggle to participate in the economy, like disabled people and their families, to overcome economic and social barriers through social work development and professional volunteering development.

We work through partners at local, regional and national level where they can contribute to the aims of creating decent work and ultimately increase the participation of marginalised groups in the economy. These partners include:

- The administrations of the Free Economic Zones (FEZ) under the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade of Tajikistan. These are areas of Tajikistan where tax and customs rules are liberalised to be more conducive to business, and to support businesses in developing and creating economic opportunities for the population. Two of the FEZs are also on the border with Afghanistan with the expressed goal of promoting cross-border trade and therefore creating economic opportunities in Tajikistan and Afghanistan.
- The National Association of Business Women of Tajikistan (NABWT) help give women the skills to make a decent living and support their families. They also support female entrepreneurs to set up their own businesses.
- The Institute of Entrepreneurship and Service trains young people in skills they need to find employment and start their own businesses.

- International NGOs including Mercy Corps, Welthungerhilfe, Caritas, Oxfam and Christian Aid who are working with local partners throughout the country to create economic opportunities and help marginalised groups overcome significant barriers to participation.
- Local tourism boards and associations and the national level Committee on Youth Affairs, Sports and Tourism who help promote tourism to some of Tajikistan's most remote destinations so that people in rural communities with few economic opportunities have a source of income to support their families.

Funders

VSO Tajikistan is grateful to all of the funders who have contributed to the work we are doing in Tajikistan. This includes UNICEF, who helped to fund our work with polio-affected children and rehabilitative work with juvenile offenders; Swiss Development Cooperation, who funded our work to develop experience tourism based on Ancient Silk Road crafts; the European Community (EC), who helped fund VSO and our partners to explore new models of social work for disabled people that are now being implemented around the country; and Accenture, who funded market research into agricultural markets and tourism in Tajikistan; The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe who helped fund VSO's support to the Free Economic Zones. VSO Tajikistan would also like to thank its major donor, the UK Department for International Development, who funded the majority of its activities through a core grant to VSO International.

Partnership: the way we work

We recognise that we are one small part of a process involving many diverse players. We believe our strength and uniqueness lies in our ability to collaborate and provide partners with the opportunity to develop relevant and practical skills and approaches to meet their objectives. We intend to continue to build and maintain strong working partnerships with government departments, institutions, the private sector and local civil society organisations that are developing and delivering initiatives that meet, or have potential to meet, the needs of our target groups.

VSO Tajikistan works with government and the private sector to improve the business environment, stimulate economic growth and promote job creation. Economic development will increase the capacity of socio-economically vulnerable groups to participate in economic development. In the long-term, it will also create a more vibrant economy and enhance the capacity of government to provide essential services, through improved tax yields, education and training that responds to market need.

VSO Tajikistan volunteer specialists with extensive practical experience in small business, investment climate, market analysis, tourism, hospitality, promotion and organisational development will support government, private sector and selected civil society organisations. By addressing problems of state and private sector capacity, and facilitating inclusive growth that benefits socially-excluded groups, VSO Tajikistan has the opportunity to tackle underlying factors which make Tajikistan, Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries vulnerable to economic shocks. While focusing on economic inclusion, VSO Tajikistan also supports social work and wellbeing activity, where it enables marginalised youth and women to access the market and take more control of their own lives.

VSO Tajikistan partners with tourism organisations, placing experienced and skilled tourism experts in different levels of the tourism sector with government, private sector and NGOs to have an impact. Since Tajikistan has competitive advantages in tourism as a result of its natural beauty, hospitality and Silk Road heritage, tourism offers a unique opportunity to become an inclusive and viable alternative to agriculture. Tourism will allow VSO to facilitate diverse job creation in Tajikistan, and ultimately become a 'demonstration sector' to other sectors of the Tajik economy.

VSO Tajikistan and partners will build the organisational capacity of the private sector and relevant state structures to recognise that inclusion is both good for business and essential for sustainable national and regional development. It should also reflect in the implementation of key policies.



Our impact

The overall objective of all VSO Tajikistan's activities is to improve the lives of marginalised people in Central Asia. We have designed the *Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia Strategy 2011-16* to help address the biggest challenges and risks facing the region. As a result of its implementation, we know that VSO Tajikistan will be making an important contribution to improving the lives of people in central Asia.

In 2011-12, the VSO Tajikistan programme reached 280,000 people directly through its inclusive economic development programme. This included people benefiting from new economic opportunities created by our partners, disabled people benefiting from physiotherapy and community-based rehabilitation, and people benefiting from access to water for production. In addition, our work with government in the areas of economic development, trade and tax is helping to improve the business environment and benefiting everyone seeking

employment in the region, particularly marginalised young people frustrated by a lack of employment opportunities.

The *Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia Strategy 2011-16* is ambitious but focused. It calls on VSO and our partners to build on our experience and strengths, while retaining scope for innovation and experimentation. We will continue to strengthen our partners' organisational capacity and increase the scale, reach and impact of their interventions through technical support, capacity-building and knowledge sharing. Monitoring, evaluation and research will help us understand which programmes and approaches are most and least effective, as well as why and how. Results, learning and implications will also be shared with our partners and form the basis for recommendations for further improvements in services to benefit vulnerable groups.



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