

How international volunteering can contribute to the development of Africa

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Abstract:

International volunteering has an unquestionable role in global development, but its complexity and contribution is yet to be widely emphasised. Working to implement humanitarian and/or development aid programmes initiated by the UN and other transnational bodies, international volunteering supports global change in general, and offers concrete benefits for both the recipient and donor societies. Africa is the biggest beneficiary of global support, with approx. 30% of all international development assistance (ODA) allocated to the continent, worth USD 38 billion annually. Africa also has the biggest concentration of international volunteers: approx. 45% of them work in the continent supporting the implementation of social, educational, health, economic, or agriculture development programmes. The economic value of volunteers' labour amounts to several billion USD worldwide every year.

Keywords:

International volunteering; volunteers; development of Africa; global change; social, economic, and political benefits; humanitarian and/or development aid programmes.

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Introduction

International volunteering has a long history of contributing to global development through its complex support potential. It helps local communities and countries by providing enthusiastic manpower to implement development projects, and it also offers the necessary skills and knowledge transfer to achieve social and economic sustainability. Volunteers take part in global, regional, or national aid programmes and work hard to force change. By doing so, they also undergo a positive personal development that will promote mutual understanding and cultural exchange in their home countries. This is the complex interpretation of international volunteering that creates benefits for both the donor and the recipient societies; the hard and soft advantages include social, economic, and political opportunities. Africa is the biggest host continent and beneficiary of international volunteering, but it suffers its major drawbacks as well. It must face, manage, and regularly overcome many cultural barriers and conflicts of individual volunteers as well as differing voluntary programmes.

In this paper I will first introduce international volunteering, then discuss the different opportunities and challenges regarding development in general. Finally, I will present and evaluate the positive impacts of a completed international volunteer programme. Through this, I will argue that not only global and regional bodies, but smaller independent projects can also achieve recognised results.

International volunteering: historical overview

International volunteering, by definition, is an activity where volunteers contribute their time to work without financial compensation in a foreign country with the objective to help other people or communities to achieve dedicated social, economic, or political goals (Devereux, 2008a; Harkin, 2008a, Palmer 2002). This is the traditional or functional interpretation of volunteering that historically originates in the faiths, ethics, and religions of ancient societies, which include helping other people in need to ensure the survival and development of their community (Salamon–Papp, 2012; Zentai, 2006a). This attitude has a long history in African tribal culture as well where individuals are an inseparable part of their community, and where community unconditionally supports needy individuals (Aihiokhai, 2017; Celucien, 2018; Turnbull, 1966). This social worldview includes the “*generous expansion of hospitality*” and a “*readiness to share if needed*” approach (Gathogo, 2008: 3) as embodied in the well-known traditional *Ubuntu* or *Harambee* philosophies as well (Modise 2006, Moga 1984, Oppenheim 2012) that still have a long-lasting acceptance in modern African societies. It was based on this community–based altruistic approach (Feischmidt, 2018) how volunteering historically started and lasted until the 20th century through different human and organisational forms such as tribal, communal, religious, or, later, governmental. After the 1st World War, volunteering was expanded to international level with the objective of taking common responsibility for poor and underdeveloped countries (Lewis, 2005a; Smith – Laurie, 2010). Although the first

volunteer-sending non-government organisations (NGOs) were already formed in the 1930s to offer emergency assistance and economic relief to developing countries¹, most of the largest and most reputed international volunteer cooperation organisations (IVCOs) were established only after WW2. These included, among others, the British Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) in 1958, the US Peace Corps in 1961, and the German Development Service (DED) in 1963, followed by the United Nations Volunteer (UNV) programme in 1971, and the Médecins Sans Frontières in 1971. They targeted the newly independent countries of Africa to bring social understanding and economic development to the post-colonial era. Since the 1970s, public awareness around global issues (fighting famine, social injustice, lack of education, inadequate health situation, or climate change) has increased and opened ways for dedicated UN development programmes², which also rely on international volunteering as an instrument of implementation (Lough, 2015; Mikesy – Molnar – Reicher 2011). Most volunteer programmes support global development goals initiated mainly by the UN, the EU, or other international bodies, by providing young and enthusiastic manpower, and social and/or economic skills to implement organised development programmes in the host countries. Today, international volunteering is institutionalised and professionalised and has a wider focus from targeting individuals and social groups to entire countries. It has also started to engage volunteers from developing countries, as part of the transformation thereof. The traditional “*from North to South*” way of volunteering³ has been supplemented by “*South to North*” and “*South to South*” directions. The idea is to encourage participants from traditional host nations to work in international projects in other countries to gain experience, widen their perceptions and improve their skillset that they take home to foster local development. More than 70% of UN volunteers are currently from the Global South and many of the volunteer agencies recruit participants regularly from 3rd world countries (Devereux, 2008b).

International volunteering, on the other hand, offers benefits not only to the host countries but to the donor societies as well, including personal and social development of the volunteers, business opportunities for companies, as well as geopolitical and diplomatic advantages for the governments concerned. Former American volunteers report increased intercultural understanding and change of attitude towards foreign cultures (95%) as well as to international social and economic development (Lough – McBride – Sherraden, 2009a). According to a German survey, international volunteers feel that their life satisfaction level has risen compared to non-volunteer peers (Meier – Stutzer, 2004a). Returned volunteers experienced that even their employment possibilities have improved due to their new skills and competencies obtained through volunteering (Wilson, 2000). In general, international volunteering contributes to a happy lifestyle, and to the fulfilment of personal identity (Hustinx – Lammerty, 2003, Meier – Stutzer, 2004b), it strengthens responsibility for other people, and builds mutual trust and civic commitment (Zentai, 2006b, Wu, 2011). The corporate sector can also take advantage of volunteering as part of their CSR activity or engaging in direct business opportunities in the host countries. At a national level, donor

governments can use volunteer programmes to fulfil their international development obligations or to build awareness and political reputation.

This approach is the complex and postmodern interpretation of international volunteering that unites the mutual interests of all participants – individuals, communities, social and political institutions, and business entities– of both the donor and recipient societies. It is built on the belief that global development can be achieved only with close cooperation, common understanding and appreciation of each other.

Contribution to development

As discussed earlier, international volunteering is a multidisciplinary instrument to bring social change and economic improvement to host countries. Volunteers turn humanitarian and/or development aid programmes into local development gains (Lewis, 2005b) by sharing their ideas, transferring their knowledge and education as well as supporting in physical activities. They contribute to human security, international development, and sustainability (Devereux, 2008c) in social, agricultural and economic terms alike.

International humanitarian and/or development aid is a global sector that includes government investments, economic, health or social development programmes, and direct assistance and relief to countries in need. Within this professionalised framework of combined efforts of international bodies, such as the UN, the EU, the OECD etc., volunteering plays a definite but important role. Although it may be an exaggeration to state that “*without volunteers, many development programmes would cease to exist*” (Burns et al, 2006: 81), the value of international volunteering value is undeniable. A European Parliament (EP)⁴ report states that volunteering is not only an important business driver but also a social capital that strengthens solidarity and supports community development and interpersonal relationships (Harkin, 2008b). The United Nations proclaimed 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers⁵, while the European Council called 2011 the European Year of Volunteering⁶, because “*voluntary activities reduce racism and prejudice and contribute to intercultural and inter-religious dialogue*” as well as to the “*social cohesion of societies*” (ibid.).

International volunteering has, therefore, a very complex framework of mechanism of impact on global development, including all direct (e.g., dissemination of aid, physical execution of development and humanitarian projects etc.) and indirect (global education, public outreach, change of attitudes etc.) effects. Africa is the centre of international development, as it is the largest recipient of all aid programmes in per capita terms (see *Table 1.*).

	Net ODA USD million	Population million
AFRICA	37,844	1,309
Asia	40,373	4,199
America	7,936	618
Europe	4,518	158
Oceania	1,901	11
Unspecified by region	34,843	-
All ODA recipients	127,415	6,285

Table 1. Net ODA⁷ and population of aid recipient countries by region in 2019
(Source: OECD, 2021)

Africa receives almost one third of all international financial and aid support in net value, while the amount of its aid per capita is USD 28.9, compared to the average of USD 20.2 across all developing countries (USD 12.8 in America and USD 9.6 in Asia)⁸. According to OECD statistics, the biggest beneficiary of international aid is the social sector, including education, health, and civil society (44.2%) development, followed by the economic and production sector (22.3%) and humanitarian projects (18.9%)⁹.

Below the paper examines the regions of deployment, and sectors of volunteer activities, to see whether they are in line with the structure of global financial support to development. Different NGOs report between 45% and 50% of their volunteers deployed in Africa, followed by 25% – 30% working in Asian countries. *Chart 1* shows the combined figures of 16 volunteer-sending organisations worldwide (FORUM, 2018).

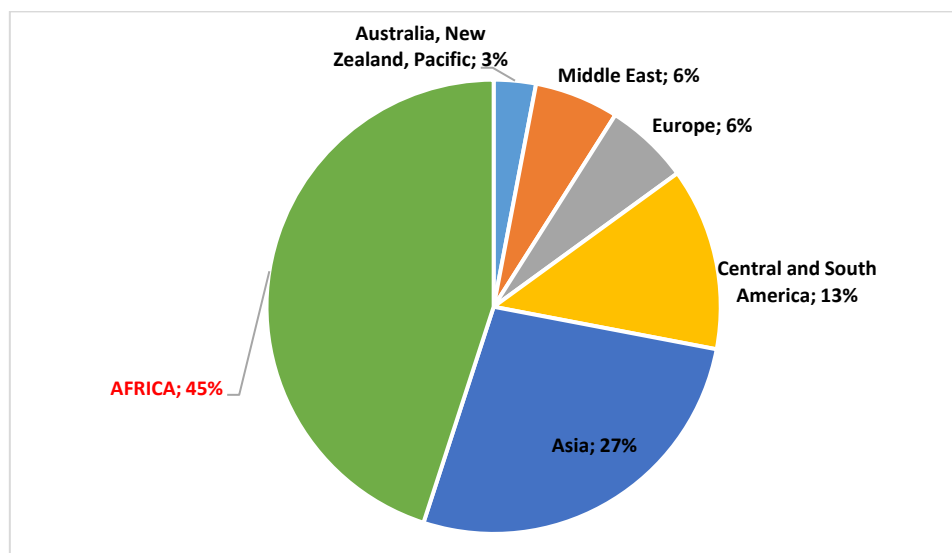


Chart 1. Regions of volunteers' deployment
(Source: FORUM, 2018)

There is also a very strong correlation as regards the sectors: most volunteers work in programmes targeting social (including education) and health improvement (30% – 49%), children's programmes (22%), economy and agricultural modernisation (21% – 29%) as well as the development of civil societies (15%) in African countries and communities (see *Table 2*).

Sectors (FORUM statistics, 2018)	Ratio	Sectors (US data, 2004-2010)	Ratio
Education	19%	Culture & education	9%
Economy	20%	Economy	21%
Agriculture	9%	Agriculture	
Government	15%	Political development	
Civil society		Social & community service	18%
Reduce inequality	2%		
Health	11%	Health	22%
Environment	6%	Environment & animal care	8%
Water sanitation	6%		
Other	12%	Children's programme	22%

Table 2. Sectors of volunteer activities
(Sources: FORUM, 2018; Lough, 2012)

As one can see, the geographical and sectoral deployment of international volunteers is very similar – almost identical – to the global allocation of humanitarian and aid support to developing countries, and to Africa in particular.

Unfortunately, international volunteering in general is a very under-researched area (Lewis, 2005c; Lough – McBride – Sherraden, 2012): very little reliable data is available as only the largest volunteer-sending NGOs provide statistics or get involved in surveys. This paper, therefore, collects and analyses the available information of several volunteer-sending organisations and associations to estimate the total number of international volunteers (see Table 3) assisting development programmes in Africa every year. Among the biggest NGOs, British VSO had approx. 4200 international volunteers working overseas in 2019¹⁰, the European Voluntary Service (EVS) had approx. 5000¹¹, the US Peace Corps had 7500¹², while the umbrella association of 30 different international volunteer-sending NGOs, the International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum), reported about 18,000 of their volunteers being on global assignment in 2018¹³. As a comparison, the number of international volunteers in Hungary is estimated between 300 and 500 annually. On the other hand, a large-scale survey involving approx. 60,000 households in the US between 2004 and 2010 revealed that the number of Americans volunteering internationally amounts to 800,000 – 1,000,000 annually, and this amount was typical for every year in the research (Lough 2012).

Organisations	Numbers
International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum) with 30 NGO members (survey incl. 16 member organisations, 2018)	appr. 18,000 / year
US Peace Corps (2019)	appr. 7500 / year
EVS (European Voluntary Service) ¹⁴	appr. 5000 / year
British VSO (2019)	appr. 4200 / year
Hungarian volunteers	appr. 300 – 500 / year
Americans volunteering internationally (large-scale survey incl. 60,000 households 2004-2010)	800,000 – 1,000,000 / year

Table 3. Annual number of international volunteers (Source: own compilation)

Considering that there are a multiple number of volunteer-sending organisations in almost every developed country, including humanitarian networks, e.g. the Danish Humana People to People that has 30 member organisations alone, the overall number of international volunteers engaged in global development programmes annually can be estimated between hundreds of thousands to over a million.

Africa benefits from international volunteering through a variety of development programmes. This amount of help is measured by the economic value of the volunteers that, according to a study, may amount to approx. USD 2.3 to 2.9 billion, based on US volunteers alone¹⁵ (Lough – McBride – Sherraden, 2009b).

Contradictions and challenges vs. results

These findings support that international volunteering is a powerful and effective mechanism to pursue development in Africa, but only when it is organised and managed properly. It is often argued that international volunteers on short-term placements have a limited or even questionable impacts on their host communities (Brown, 2015), primarily because their cultural adaptation is not yet completed, and they still suffer from cultural shock and stress due to being in a foreign and unknown environment (Lough, 2010). This cultural shock is a scientific phenomenon (Oberg, 1960) that is practically inevitable for most volunteers. They must pass the psychological stages to get to the full adaptation level called “mastery stage”, enabling the volunteers to behave appropriately according to the cultural norms of the host country and function effectively in the new environment (Black – Mendenhall, 1991: 226). The efficient cooperation is based on a mutual understanding which needs tolerance and openness from both parties. Many European habits and cultural behaviour¹⁶ are unfamiliar to some local communities (Mezei 2019), which volunteers need to be aware of and find the right approach to bridge the differences. In many cases, they must change first to be able to generate change in the host societies, but this is not easy and needs time. That is why several American volunteers reported that *“their presence in the community have caused some problems or challenges”* (18% of respondents), *“they did not share similar goals with local staff / they were sometimes in competition”* (16%) or *“the community did not want or request their services”* (6%). The main reasons for cultural difficulties included *“cultural imperialism, gender and racial tensions”* between volunteers and host community members. They also faced other problems, such as *“challenges resulting from differences in power and privilege”* and *“concerns over local labor replacement, local conflicts, resource consumption and dependence”* (Lough – McBride – Sherraden, 2009c). On the other hand, adaptation is also challenged by the cultural heterogeneity in African countries with several hundreds of different tribes and cultures living together; making it hard for the volunteers to adjust easily (Neszmelyi, 2016).

On many occasions, communication is what lies at the root of most misunderstandings. Usually, language barriers are the biggest challenges for volunteers but the difference in style and structure of communication according to the context (Hall, 1976) is equally a standard



problem. In most parts of Africa, communication is typically high-context, indirect and implicit (Tick, 2007). This makes it hard to get on with European or American volunteers, who are accustomed to an originally low-context communication with more direct approaches.

More serious and harder to overcome is the orientalist perception (Said, 1978) which is the West's stereotypical patronising attitude towards the "East" (i.e., the former colonised societies). Even though, in most cases volunteers are not even aware of it, but it is nonetheless recognisable by local community members. A similar aspect and consequence of the colonialist past is that many local people still subconsciously suffer from a deficit in their self-esteem feeling that white men are superior to them (Fanon, 1952). Even Nelson Mandela sorrowfully realised that when he boarded an airplane with a black pilot (in Ethiopia in 1961), he was in panic and shock because his first reaction was that "*a black cannot fly a plane*" (Mandela, 1994: 69). This perception and attitude may still result in severe psychological barriers between the parties that block the application of the notion of cultural equality that is subject to mutually efficient cooperation.

Luckily, the above-mentioned difficulties were experienced by the minorities of the volunteers only, 95% of them reported high levels of intercultural understanding. The majority of US volunteers agreed that volunteering was very successful, as "*they made a lasting contribution to the host organization or community*" (76%), "*they transferred a useful skill to the host organization*" (70%), or "*they had a specific skill needed by the host organization*" (69%) (ibid.). This supports the conclusion that despite occasional cultural difficulties on an individual level, international volunteering is needed and important to the development of Africa.

Case study: volunteers successfully fighting HIV/AIDS¹⁷

Besides the general achievements and contributions of volunteering, this chapter introduces a specific humanitarian programme, the Total Control of the Epidemic (TCE), as a case study. This programme was immensely supported by volunteers during its implementation between 2000 and 2017 by the Danish *Federation Humana People to People (Humana)*.

The Humana is a world-wide non-profit organisation established in 1996 but with an additional 20 years of charity activity started by a couple of enthusiastic Scandinavian youth in the 1970s. Today, it comprises 30 member associations active in 45 countries in all five continents. With nearly USD 90 million spent in 2020 on development projects globally, it is one of the biggest charities in the world.

Confronted with the shocking death toll of AIDS sweeping through Sub-Saharan Africa, and the similarly fatal social and economic consequences of the global epidemic since the 1980s, Humana designed a thorough prevention programme with the philosophy that "*Only the people can liberate themselves from the epidemic*". The programme was based on the idea that people should change their own attitude and behaviour to be able to fight the disease;

but for that they need education, behaviour guidance and ongoing personal support. Since in the rural parts of Africa the mass media is not widely available or is non-existent, people should be reached through extensive and intensive personal visits. The TCE (Total Control of the Epidemic) programme ran systematically for 3 years in every country, whereby each community member was visited regularly and repeatedly by a TCE professional with structured information on HIV/AIDS. The countries were divided into geographical areas of 100,000 inhabitants, each covered by 50 local TCE field officers supported by international volunteers from all over the world. One TCE officer oversaw, therefore, 2000 people or approx. 350 households, providing face-to-face information to families about HIV/AIDS to raise awareness, get attention, educate, and activate people to be able to avoid the infection.

The international volunteers trained the TCE officers, localised the campaign, created ideas, raised awareness for the programme and supported their teams. The programme started in Zimbabwe in 2000, then in Mozambique a year later, followed by other African countries. During its 17 years of activities, altogether 10 countries (Angola, Botswana, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Guinea-Bissau, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe) took part in the programme that was unique by its conceptual approach, military-like structure, and disciplined implementation. In every country, strong government support was established, and the success of the programme was acknowledged by its important financial sponsors of global international funds including e.g., the Global Funds, UNICEF, UNAIDS, World Bank etc.

After the completion of the programme in a specific country, Humana assigned an independent monitoring agency to measure and evaluate the outcomes. The programme reached 18.5 million people overall and the result was noticeable everywhere. Community members' level of information and knowledge have risen, their attitudes have changed, and they have become more conscious about the disease and/or improved their sexual habits according to the guidance. The number of tests taken has also increased; and the nationwide statistics' results of positive cases has started to decline. In the Republic of South Africa (RSA) and in Namibia in-depth interviews and surveys were conducted to explore the inhabitants' and the stakeholders' awareness level and opinion about the programme (see *Tables 4 and 5*).

Major findings, HSRC survey (2010)	
80%	Participated actively in the TCE project
85,3%	Were visited by someone to talk to them about HIV
92,9%	„They made lasting changes in their lives in relation to HIV&AIDS“
94,4%	„TCE was helpful to people“
93,8%	„TCE increased their resolve to know their HIV status“
94,2%	„The one-to-one approach helped them take total control of the epidemic“
90,2%	„TCE had impact on their sexual behaviour and practice“

Table 4: Results of the TCE programme in South Africa¹⁸
(Source: Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), 2010)

Major findings, KIT report (2008)
86-100% of people living in regions covered by the TCE programme were aware of the programme.
89% of inhabitants participated actively in the programme.
In 2008, 9% of pregnant women tested positive, down from 21,1% in 2006.
Over 10,5 million condoms were distributed (TCE-covered regions have a population of approx. 780 000).
84% of the respondents mentioned condom as an effective prevention method, with prevention knowledge on the rise.
84% of women and 85% of men agree that children of 12-14 years should be taught about the use of condoms to avoid AIDS.
Almost all people reported a high level of acceptance towards people living with HIV (over 90% would care a family member with AIDS; 75% would buy food from a vendor infected with HIV; and 87% would allow an HIV positive female teacher to continue teaching), being an important result against stigmatisation.
The majority of people in the survey told they had been tested or planned to go testing.

Table 5: Result of TCE programme in Namibia¹⁹

(Sources: Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), 2008 and Demographic and Health Survey, 2006-2007)

In most of the aspects, there are significant changes in the awareness level of people reached by the TCE programme compared to people living in other regions and not covered by the programme. The South African impact evaluation compared the results of one of the intervention areas with data collected in a randomly chosen control area with similar demographic characteristics (Table 6). The results show that the TCE programme resulted in a noticeable positive difference in the community members' opinion and their attitude regarding HIV/AIDS and the main prevention methods.

Comparison study, HSRC survey (2010)	Intervention area	Control area
Have thorough knowledge of the virus	93,5%	90,9%
Know how to avoid being infected with HIV	90,7%	83.1%
Ever tested for HIV	62,3%	55%
Ever visited to talk about HIV	85,3%	65,3%

Table 6. Changes in people's attitude and awareness in intervention vs. control area

(Source: Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), 2010)

Conclusion

International volunteering is a complex social instrument that can unite different, and sometimes opposing, parts of the world creating hard and soft benefits for all participating societies. Host countries and communities gain access to valuable information, education, skills, and knowledge needed for sustainable social, economic, and political development. Volunteers, on the other hand, gain substantial experience and can develop their personal and interpersonal competencies that contribute to their social and personal development. The

donor countries can also benefit from volunteering by incorporating the shaped attitude of the volunteers, including their improved value on the labour market.

The donors and recipients have mutual interests in supporting volunteering: besides the increased cultural understanding and tolerance, they can develop precious economic, agricultural, or other advanced forms of cooperation. On the long run, volunteering finds its place within the network of global development, bringing positive change to local communities and societies.

Africa is a huge and heterogeneous continent with countless different ethnic groups and local cultures, but they are all open for international cooperation (Neszmelyi, 2017) provided by volunteering. Despite local misunderstandings and difficulties, voluntary programmes are active and vigorous in the continent. Not only international development projects initiated by the UN, or the EU can achieve change, but even small independent humanitarian campaigns can take stand in serious cases as illustrated above. Common to that is the effective involvement of international volunteers. When volunteering is based on a mutual agreement and common participation, advantageous results will be inevitably evident for all parties involved.

Conflict of interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on contributor

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Notes

- 1) Service Civil International is believed to be one of the oldest international volunteer-sending organisations, established in 1934 (Lough, 2015)
- 2) MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) in 2000, and SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals 2015 – 2030
- 3) The „developed” countries in the North provided help to the „underdeveloped” nations in the South
- 4) The European Parliament’s report on the role of volunteering (2007/2149(INI))
- 5) The United Nations General Assembly in its resolution 52/17 of 20 November 1997
- 6) Council decision on the European Year of Volunteering (2011) {SEC (2009)725}
- 7) Official Development Assistance (ODA), defined by OECD as government aid to help developing countries
- 8) Aid at a Glance Charts, 2019 (OECD) (<https://www.oecd.org/development/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-data/aid-at-a-glance.htm>, accessed: 13.12.2021) and OECD.Stat, 2021 <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=Table2A>, accessed: 13.12.2021)
- 9) Same OECD references as above
- 10) VSO annual report 2019-2020
- 11) Averaged per year, as they had appr. 100,000 over their 20 years of working
- 12) US Peace Corps annual report 2020
- 13) This number contains only 16 member NGOs’ statistics out of 30, the others did not provide their volunteers’ number (FORUM Basic Measurement Data Survey January-May 2019)
- 14) Replaced in 2017 by European Solidarity Corps (ESC)
- 15) This number refers to all US volunteers working overseas and not only to those working in Africa
- 16) Especially tribal or religious habits or sexual-related behaviour or education
- 17) Sources: www.humana.org; www.tce-aids.org; Humana Progress Report 2020; Human Sciences Research Council, RSA, 2010; Royal Tropical Institute, Netherlands, 2008
- 18) The TCE programme was active in South Africa between 2002 and 2010. Data depicted in this paper were collected by mixed quantitative and qualitative research conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 2010.
- 19) The TCE programme started in Namibia in 2005 and lasted until between August and December 2005 (depending on the regions). Data used in this report include the Demographic Household Survey’s results (measuring behavioural change) collected in November 2006 – February 2007; and the National HIV Sentinel Survey’s results (monitoring HIV prevalence among pregnant women) collected June – October 2006.