A Q&A session about Climate Action in VIOs

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Abstract: *The impacts of climate change are being felt all over the world. Global warming has risen to an alarming level and humanity will foreseeably overshoot the agreed targets to limit warming in the coming decade(s). In response to this, the volunteering for development sector has stepped up its response to the crisis, or has it not? What strategies does the sector apply to tackle the impacts? What are the issues the organisations are focused on? Are the organisations equipped with the right competence and resources? Answers to these and other questions will be discussed based on data from a recent climate survey in the volunteering sector (2023).*

Introduction

Discussions of how climate change is addressed in the Volunteering sector are not new and have been ongoing at least since 2007 (Brooks, 2007; Grene, 2014; Mulligan, 2010; Learnmonth, 2020; Allum et al, 2020; O'Connell and Bresnihan, 2022). But it is from 2022 that the International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum) opened a formal space for member organisations to discuss the topic on a regular basis in the Climate Action Working Group. **The mandate of the group is to provide a platform for member organisations to share ideas, methods and strategies on how to address the challenges climate change poses** both to the sector as a whole and the communities we serve around the world. Through monthly meetings the group has discussed varied topics and invited external experts to share their work on climate action. The Norwegian Agency for Exchange Cooperation (Norec) has chaired the Climate Action Working Group since its foundation, and many organisations have since then joined the small group of initial members. Through our discussions, there is no doubt that expertise, experience and the willingness to learn and do better are present, but how can we improve delivery of services in the face of such monumental challenges that climate change poses? What strategies do organisations apply? Where do they work? What conditions do the communities live in? And not least, what do organisations want to learn more off to provide better services? Inspired by the mandate of Forum's Climate Action Working Group, a survey was devised and circulated in 2023 to respond to these questions.

The survey

Called "*Climate action on the ground*", the purpose of the survey was to gather information and data about how organisations are delivering services related to climate action as close to the ground as possible. In other words, we sought to know what strategies people are implementing with local stakeholders or beneficiaries of the projects or activities they operate. The survey had 49 questions in total, divided into three main sections. The first section sought background information on the organisations. This was to provide a picture of the organisation's main attributes, such as size, location, core objectives and motivations to work on climate change issues. The second and third

sections were the body of the survey and were oriented to two distinct audiences, that is to say, organisations that **work on climate** (questions # 13-38) and organisations that **do not work on climate** (questions # 39-49).

The survey was open for respondents between June and October 2023 and was shared among three networks of organisations in order to maximise the outreach for Volunteering Involving Organizations (VIOs): The International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum) (https://forum-ids.org/member/), the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) (https://www.iave.org/about/our-members/) and the network of organisations that execute Norec grants (https://www.norec.no/en/overview-of-norec-exchange-projects/). In addition, respondents were encouraged to forward the survey to other relevant organisations or implementing partners. A total of 144 responses were logged, of which 131 were complete and valid responses. 8 organisations had double entries because the survey encouraged respondents to do so if they had different experiences they wanted to share. This was due to the nature of the survey that focused on the strategies that are being implemented on the ground and with local communities. In this discussion paper, all of the (131) entries will be presented, including those from the network of Norec partner organisations. The inclusion of these entries to the data set for analysis may skew results from earlier reports that only considered Forum and IAVE member organisations. For a summary and presentation of the results for the Forum and IAVE networks please refer to the report prepared by Forum in 2023 (insert link).

The amount of data collected is very large and can be grouped and analysed in different ways according to the attributes of the organisations or the themes one wishes to focus on. Regional analysis could be made by continent or by affiliation to a network or type of organisation. Trends could also be established between a similar survey conducted in 2020 (Allum et al. 2020). Nonetheless, for this paper, the focus is on one of the core objectives of the survey, which was the implementation of climate action strategies. A series of questions is used to lead argumentation in the following section.

Discussion: Q&A session about climate action in VIOs

What motivates us to work on climate action?

There is a wide variety of focuses the organisations have (see figure 1), although the "Promotion and development of volunteering" (18%) took the largest share, it was followed closely by "Development" (16%), "Human rights" (15%) and "Education" (11%). Environment, health and agriculture were close behind with 10%, 9% and 5% respectively.
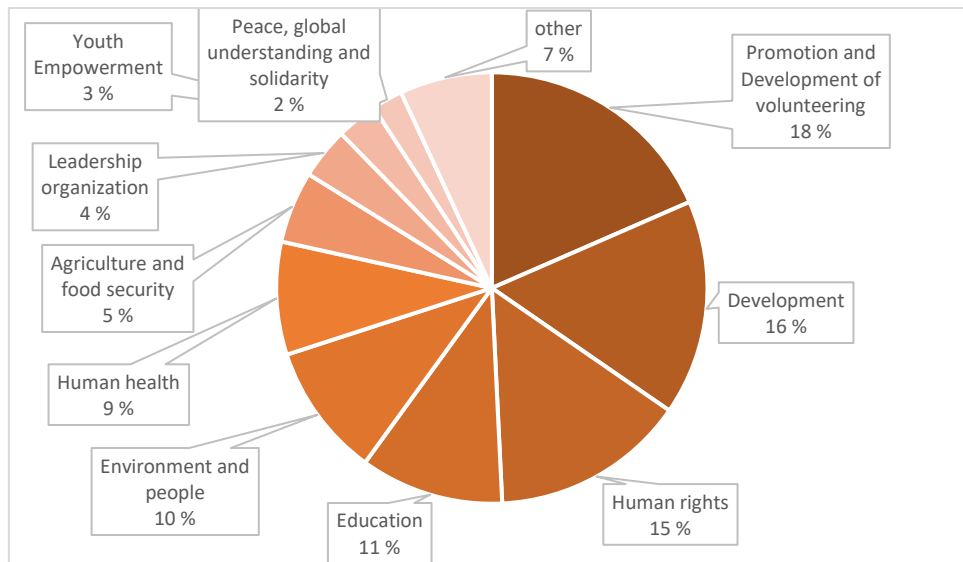
Figure 1: Main focus of organisations (mandate)

Roughly a quarter (27%) of respondents said that they do not work on climate action, while the rest do so. Only 12% of respondents that do work on climate agreed that their motivation to work on this issue is due to a "trend", a "petition from the donor" or a "funding opportunity". On the other hand, the overwhelming majority (86%) stated that they work on the issue because of its importance to either meet the needs and priorities of the communities they serve or, that the topic in itself has a high priority in the organisation and their country (figure 2). In other words, most organisations do focus on the topic in one way or another and find internal, local or national motivation to engage.
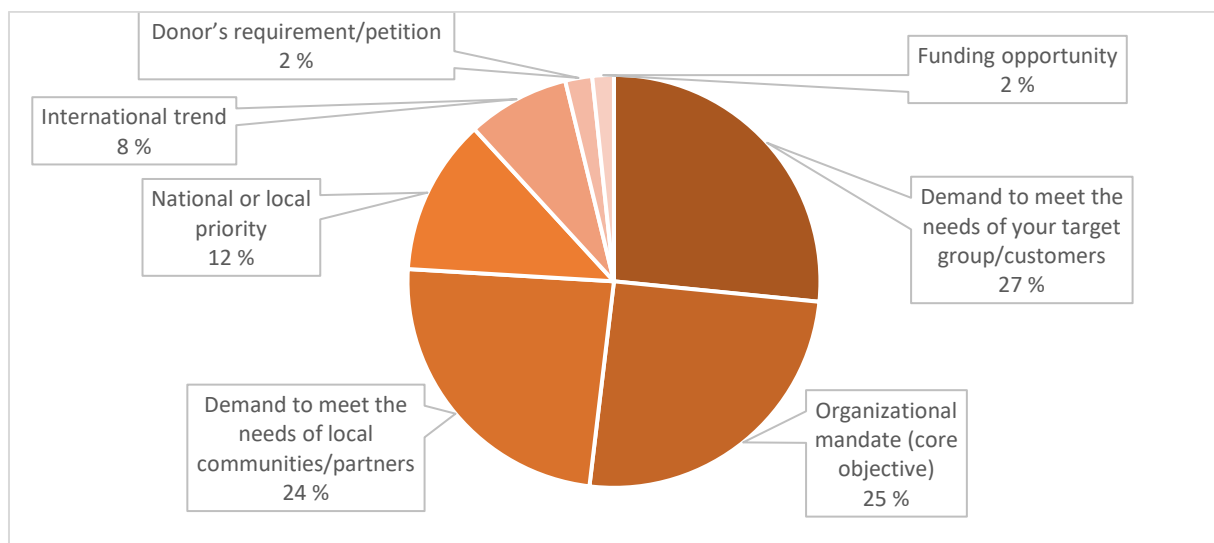

Figure 2: motivation to work in climate action

In addition, of the organisations that responded that do not engage in climate action now, many of them stated that they deal with the issue as a cross-cutting theme in their activities. So, almost all organisations surveyed are engaged with climate action and it does not seem to be a topic that is being imposed by funding agencies. This is of special consideration since 84% of respondents were from the global south (110 respondents) who usually seek funding from international donors. Just 6 organisations mentioned that they were not interested at all in engaging and this was mostly due to the mismatch with the organisations mandate. Not one respondent to the survey thought that climate change was a hoax.

Where do we implement our activities and what are the main livelihoods of the communities we provide services to?

64% of activities are implemented in rural areas while the rest (36%) in urban areas. Nonetheless, the majority of respondents stated that the livelihoods of the communities they work with are in one way or another based on farming or natural resources (85%) (figure 3). Agriculture took the major slice of responses with 60% while a mix a of agriculture, animal husbandry, fishing, forestry, natural resource extraction complemented farming with another 25% of responses. That is to say that 85% of communities we serve either farm, rear livestock, fish or extract natural resources, most likely a combination of all of these activities. 50% of urban dwellers have this type of livelihood base as well.
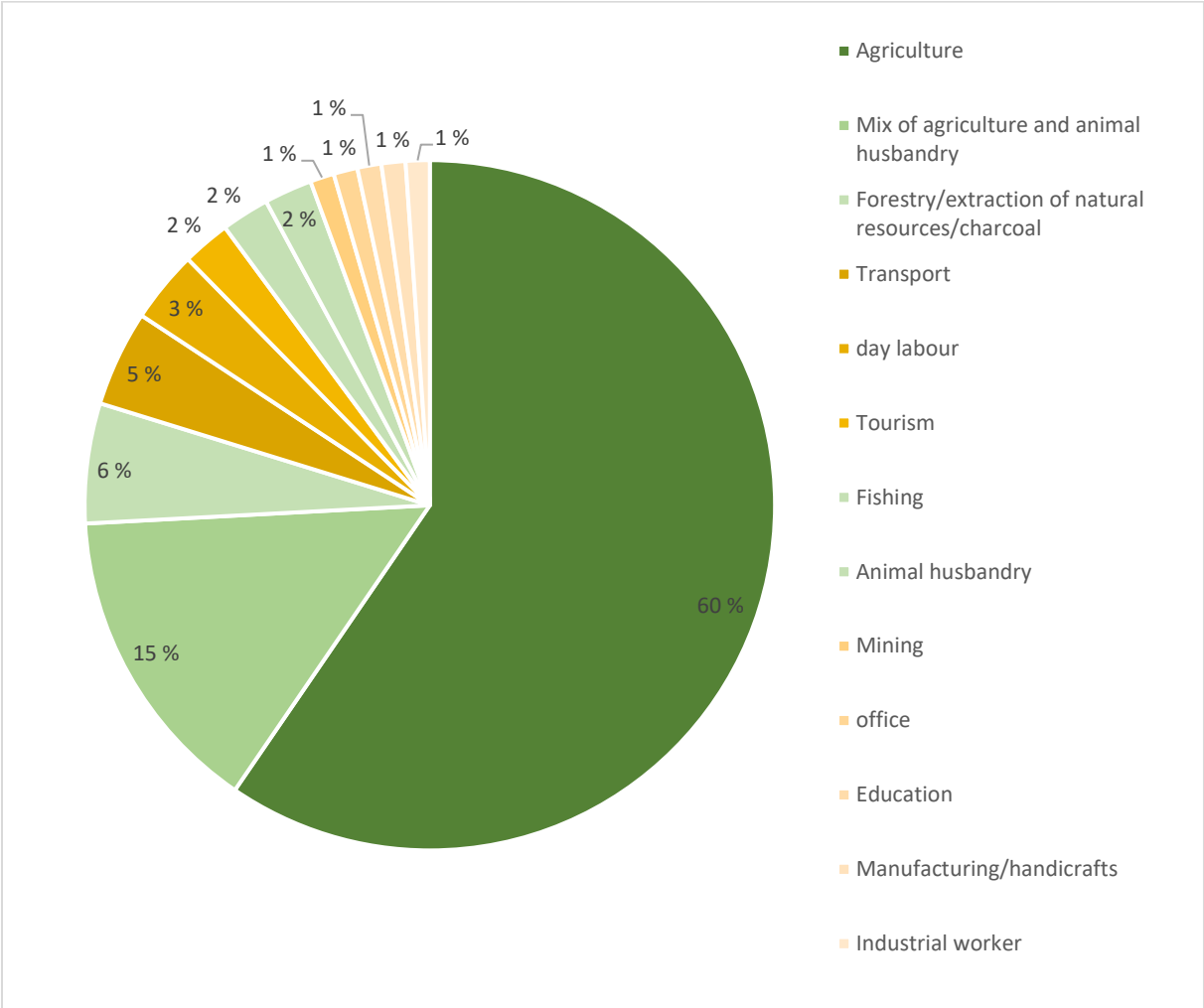

Figure 3: main livelihoods of target communities

What impacts do the communities suffer? Why do we engage in this topic?

People were asked to rank the top three degradation processes that have triggered their engagement, both in natural systems and in people. In natural systems (figure 4), deforestation and the loss of biodiversity were the top two as a first priority, by a good margin. Floods came in third place in the first priority. "Climate change (in general)" was mentioned by almost half of respondents as the top third priority. All other impacts were spread out with no clear trend (contamination/pollution; droughts; desertification; global warming; change in weather patterns; extreme weather events; change in land use; heatwaves and outbreaks).
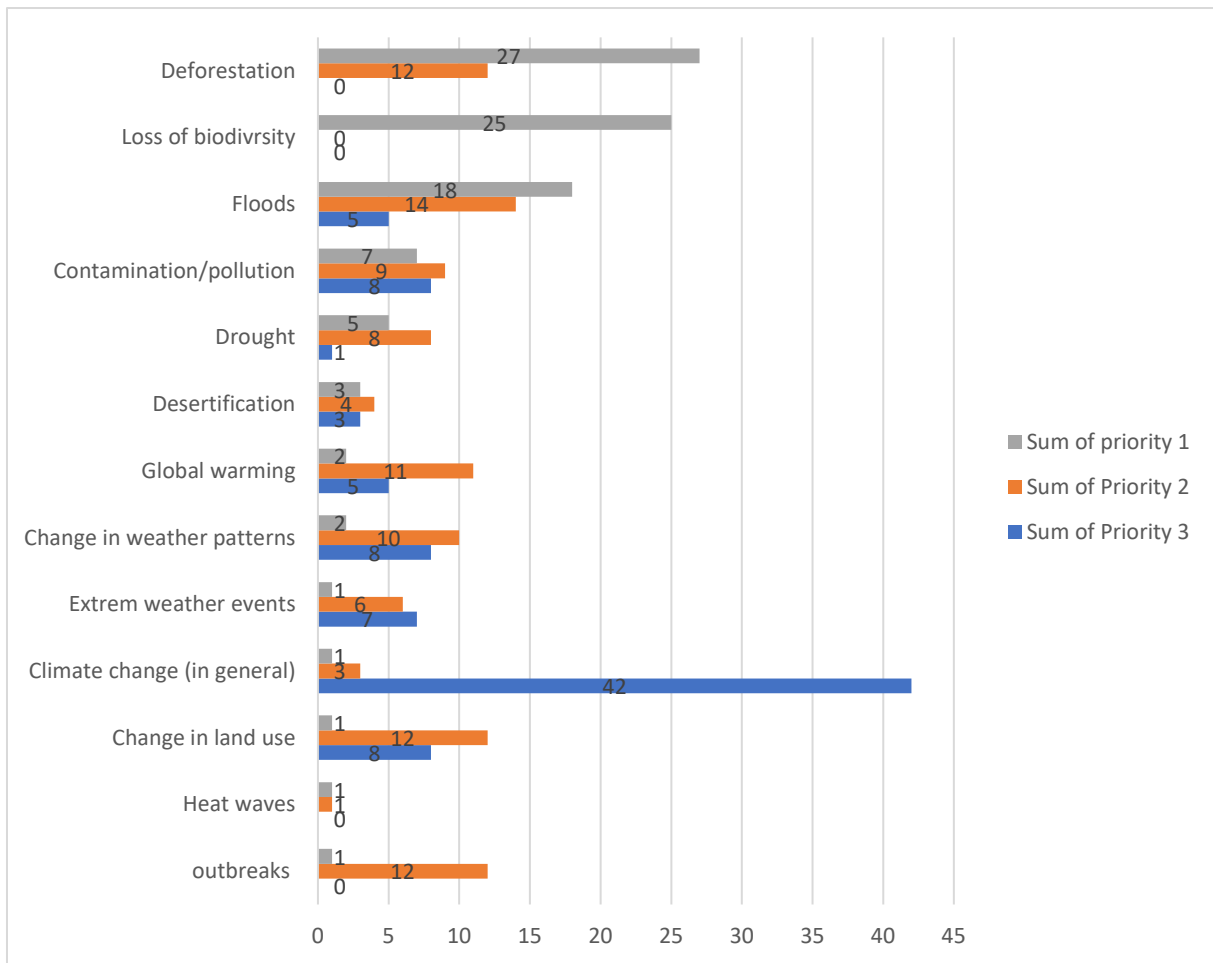
Figure 4: degradation processes felt local communities

Impacts on humans were also clear cut (see figure 5), hunger or food scarcity was the most relevant impact that motivated organisations to engage in climate action with 21% of respondents. A reduction or lack of access to natural resources, arable land, water and crop failure combined make up 58%. This corresponds well with the livelihood base of the communities that respondent VIO's serve. Other meaningful impacts of climate change are increased inequalities (14%) and displacement or emigration (7%).
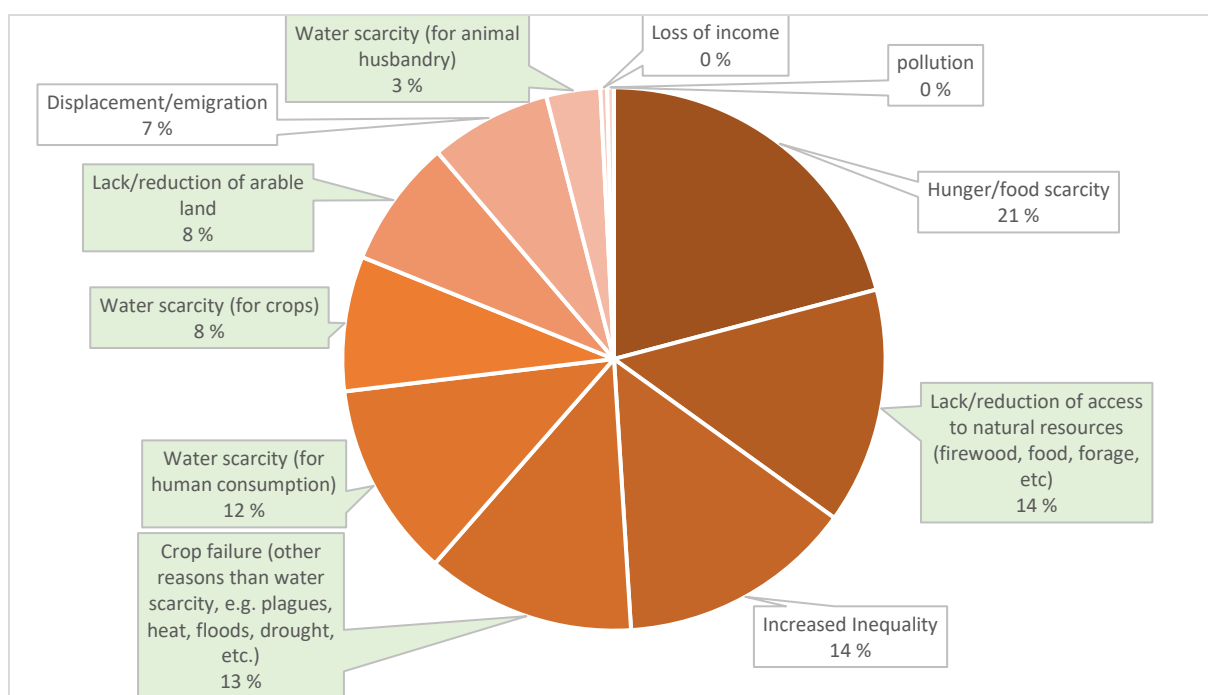
Figure 5: degradation felt by people due to climate change (compound results of the three top priorities). Impacts related to access to natural resources are highlighted in green (58% of total).

What type of strategies are being implemented to address climate action?

People were asked to rank the top three strategies they implement. These were summarised in 12 broad categories in order to try to engulf the myriad of possible activities. The strategies are presented and reclassified in table 1. Given the focus on climate change, a classification has been made to be either adaptation strategies, mitigation strategies or a mix of both. In addition, there is also one strategy (disaster response and recovery) that does not fall into these categories but is equally important to provide humanitarian relief after, for example natural disasters. An alternative way of classifying the strategies is also presented and it relates to the type of intervention. Interventions are grouped as either "soft" or "hard". Soft interventions are focused on people or institutions like for example building competencies, networking, advocacy and political reforms. While hard interventions will translate into physical or material changes, typically infrastructure, be it grey or green (Sovacool, 2011).

Strategy	Strategy type	Intervention type	count
Raising awareness of climate change (education)	Adaptation	Soft (social)	66
Collaboration and convening with stakeholders (civil society, NGOs, community-based organisations)	Adaptation	Soft (social)	53
Developing community resilience (development/adaptation according to local livelihoods)	Adaptation	Hard (social)	52
Advocacy and lobbying on climate change (activism)	Adaptation	Soft (social)	43
Disaster risk reduction or preparedness	Adaptation	Soft/hard (social)	33
Building capacity of partner organisations and/or communities to tackle the effects of climate change	Adaptation	Soft (social)	32

Strategy	Strategy type	Intervention type	count
Disaster response or recovery	Humanitarian relief	Hard (social)	29
Restoration of nature	Adaptation with mitigation benefits	Hard (environment)	15
Mitigation of GHG emissions (renewable energy)	Mitigation	Hard (environment)	14
Land use management/planning (to enhance ecosystem services delivery or the conservation of nature)	Adaptation with mitigation benefits	Hard (environment)	14
Nature based solutions to climate change	Adaptation with mitigation benefits	Hard (environment)	13
Enhancing natural GHG sinks	Mitigation with adaptation benefits	Hard (environment)	3

Table 1: List of strategies ordered by total count (sum of top three strategies reported by respondents).

Most VIOs focus on adaptation (76%) and soft interventions (62%), providing competencies and awareness raising among other things, specially at community level. On the other hand, work in environmental issues and mitigation of climate change is not widespread (16%). Work related to disasters, both in a pre-emptive (risk reduction) and reactive (relief) manner is a considerable slice of the pie summing up to 17% of strategies reported. Advocacy and lobbying make up 12% and it is mostly conducted by organisations based in the global south. Undoubtedly, organisations use a combination of strategies to support the local communities and reduce vulnerabilities. Be it a combination of soft and hard strategies or working with natural resources, raising awareness and building peoples competencies to tackle the impacts of climate change.

What strategies do we consider ourselves to be experts at implementing? What would we like to learn more off? And what do we think would benefit most the local stakeholders?

Respondents were asked three follow-up questions with the list of strategies from table 1. The only strategy that was not included in the list of options was "collaboration and convening with stakeholders". Results follow the same pattern pictured in table 1. That is to say that respondents feel they are more competent in the strategies that are more widely applied, e.g. soft adaptation measures like raising awareness, advocacy and capacity building. Likewise, respondents in general answered that their expertise levels were lower in environmental and especially mitigation strategies and that these strategies had a less significant benefit to the communities.

The interesting part of the responses is when we break down the results by classifying the respondent's self determination of expertise, learning potential and benefits to the communities and calculate the frequency of the responses per each of the classes. People were asked in a scale from 1 to 10 to evaluate the three variables (Likert scale). Responses were then classified in three categories where 1-3 was low (expertise/learning potential/benefit to communities), 4-7 was middle and 8-10 was high. In general, respondents are interested in learning about all strategies, but there are a some that stand out (figure 6).
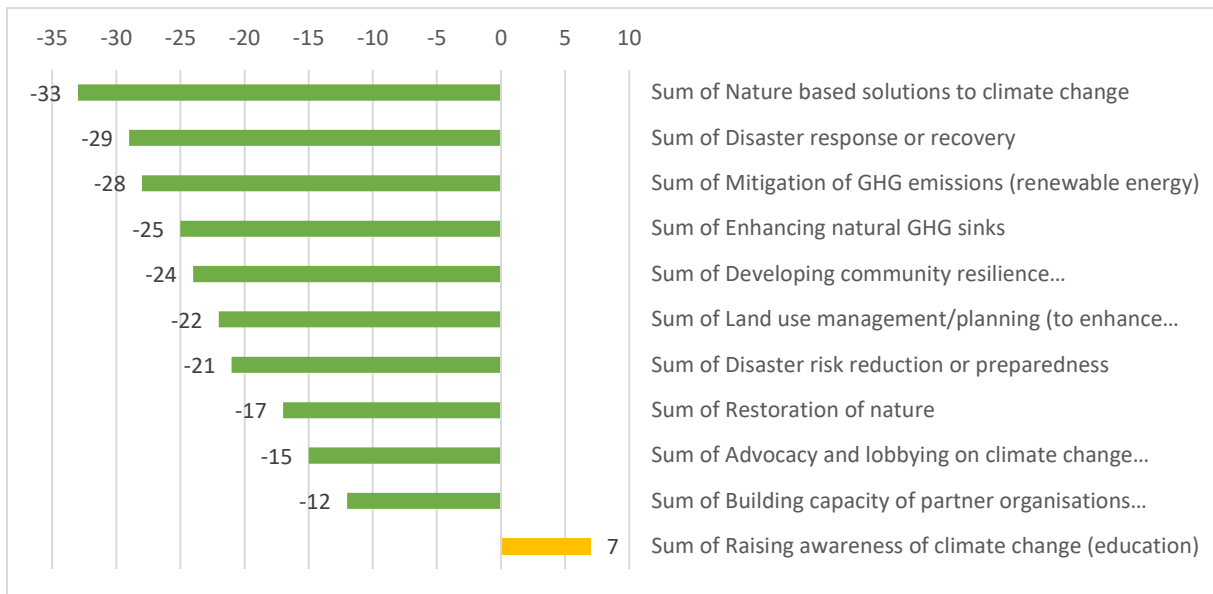
Figure 6: Gap (e.g. demand) between the reported "high" expertise class and the "high" learning potential class for each of the strategies. Numbers record the frequency in which respondents answered in the "high" class category (8-10) on the Likert scale. Negative numbers (green bars) demonstrate the gap between expertise and learning potential while the positive number (yellow bar) indicates the strategy where the expertise goes beyond the learning potential.

The most obvious observation is that the most popular strategy our sector implements (raising awareness) is also the only strategy where the potential for learning is surpassed. All other strategies demonstrate a gap, or a demand, for more skills and competencies to improve delivery of services. Unsurprisingly, the strategies that present the largest learning potential or demand for more knowledge are those that people implement the least, e.g. a combination of environmental mitigation and adaptation type strategies, like nature-based solutions to climate change. This means that even though our sector prefers to implement a small set of climate action strategies, we are well aware and curious to learn and implement other strategies.

An interesting find is that there seems to be a lot of demand to bridge the gap of expertise and learning potential in Disaster response or recovery, which is the only strategy that is not necessarily classified under adaptation or mitigation. Recovery from a disaster may well be classified under the umbrella of adaptation if climate smart/resilience criteria are used to plan and implement the recovery of the affected communities.

Another interesting result that supports the trend expressed above is the gap between expertise and potential benefits to the communities. Out of the 11 strategies, the top 8 largest gaps are of "hard" strategies and the bottom three are the most widespread "soft" strategies (see figure 7). This does not mean that the soft strategies are less sought after or that they provide fewer benefits, but it does indicate that VIOs would like more to bridge the gap between the potential benefits provided by "hard" strategies, e.g. those that seek to intervene in environment, land use and mitigation measures that impact local communities directly.
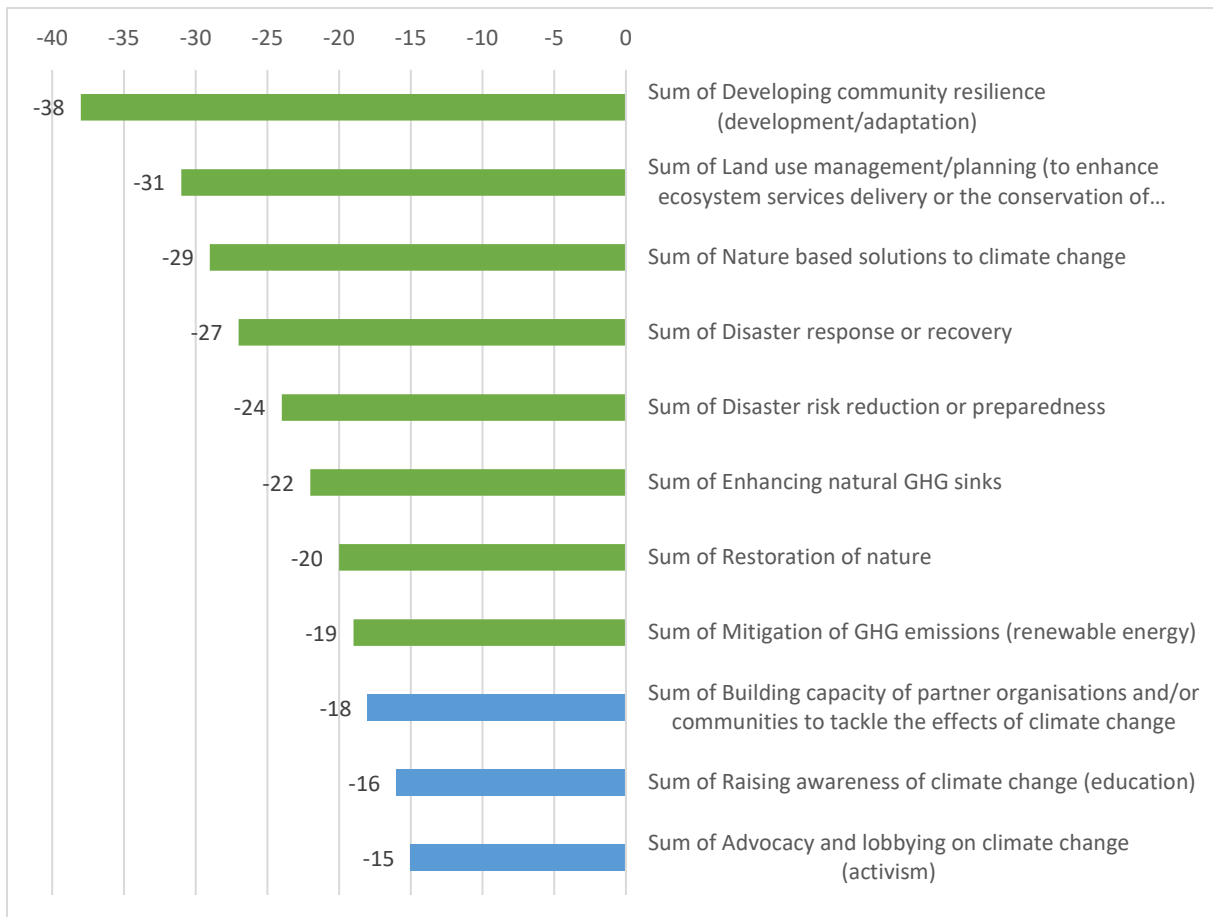
Figure 7: Gap between expertise and potential benefits to the communities in the reported "high" expertise class and the "high" benefit class for each of the strategies. Numbers record the frequency in which respondents answered in the "high" class category (8-10) on the Likert scale.

Conclusions

Climate change is often referred to in the news and in political forums as one of the biggest challenges humanity faces and according to the Climate Action survey, VIOs are well aware of this fact. Only a handful of respondents say they do not address the issue and it is mostly due to the incompatibility of their institutional mandate, and not because they do not want to address it. This seemingly inconsequential point is more important than one might think.

Organisations owe themselves to their missions and institutional goals, be it the promotion of human rights or any other topics VIOs focus on. They develop long term strategies to tackle the problems they wish to solve and best serve the communities they target. Many of them are deeply embedded in the local or regional contexts and work tirelessly to unravel the entangled threads of sustainable development. Organisations also seek to develop expertise in the fields they concentrate their efforts on, hiring personnel or recruiting volunteers that fit best the required necessities and participate in networks according to their thematic affiliations. These circumstances are shown in the responses of the survey. Respondents want to learn and specialise themselves in the strategies they already apply, but what is also shown is that, beyond the organisational mandates or know strategies, there is a willingness to work in a more holistic approach and learn new ways of working.

Organisations are increasingly aware that sustainable development is a complex and multifaceted issue, based on layers of overlapping and interconnected factors as the UN Sustainable Development Goals clearly reflect. Access to food, good education, health, decent infrastructure, a clean

environment, ecological resilience, political and economic opportunities among other factors are all stacked one on top of the other, influencing the lives of people and entire communities. No matter what topic an organisation decides to focus on, all others play a role in influencing their work. So, no matter what entry point your organisation uses to address development of a community, the intervention needs to consider the other factors. VIOs seem to be well aware of this, but the question remains of why a more balanced approach is not widely spread. As discussed above, organisations focus on their area(s) of expertise and the local contexts they operate in. A second possibility is due to the nature of volunteering for development, we invest in people and the competencies they bring to the table.

This is reflected in the type of interventions or strategies that we implement. We focus on adaptation and "soft" measures such as awareness raising, advocacy and capacity building because this is what volunteers can directly contribute with. Nonetheless, we are aware that this is not enough. We seek to bridge the gap between what we know and what the communities need. This becomes evident by the results of the survey where there is a considerable number of respondents that wish to learn about strategies that they themselves do not implement and believe that communities would benefit from them.

The last important conclusion in this report is to note that an increase in competencies within the environmental strategies is in demand, be it land use management and planning, nature-based solutions to climate change adaptation, or even the restoration of nature. Most VIOs that have responded to the survey work in rural areas and the communities they work with are dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods. Thus, there is a direct link between the demand of the communities and the sought after competencies needed to support them.

Fortunately, there are organisations that have these competencies and expertise and thanks to the survey it is now possible to link supply and demand of knowledge and competencies.

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