

Vision of Community (VOC)

Background

Since its founding in 1971, Food for the Hungry (FHI, FHA, FHIF) has always been a Christian organization doing wholistic (sympiotic, integrated) ministry. The challenge, however, was what does it look like? And how do we know when we have finished?

VOC emerged in 1993-94 as part of Food for the Hungry's first corporate identity to answer those questions. Developed by a multinational team of leaders, VOC started humbly as the last of the corporate statements, but according to many, became the most powerful because it affected what actually happens on the ground.

The next challenge was how to provide training and operationalize VOC with worldwide staff. The emphasis evolved from the original statement to three local partners essential to accomplishing VOC: churches, leaders, and families. These three institutions were not invented by Food for the Hungry, rather God designed them for healthy communities. FHI just opened our eyes to what was already there.

Vision of Community (Original Statement)

The community and its people are advancing toward their God-given potential by:

- Being equipped to progress beyond meeting their basic needs.
- Having a growing group of Christians: loving God and one another, manifesting the fruit of the Spirit, and reaching out to serve others.

How is VOC defined?

The Classic definition of VOC is:

- **Churches** increasingly reaching out,
- **Leaders** increasingly solving their own problems,
- **Families** increasingly meeting their own needs.

In other words, each program works with local communities to set goals that strengthen local churches, leaders, and families. The assumption is if a community's churches, leaders, and families are healthy, the community will keep growing all by itself. When we see this happening, FHI can begin to phase out (but ideally never break the relationship).

Need for Contextualization

VOC is not an imposition of our vision. Each community must create its own specific vision. Similarly, not every audience connects with our internal definition of VOC – especially the idea of churches. For that reason, VOC is best described in ways an audience can understand. There is nothing wrong with this as Jesus never gave a single definition of the kingdom of God. Instead, he gave different stories and parables to help us understand from different angles.

To a community: VOC is your dream community. It is not FHIF's dream.

To NGOs: VOC is a sustainable community that can keep growing without outside aid.

To Christians: VOC is God's Kingdom coming in all areas of life in a community.

Kingdom of God and VOC

When Food for the Hungry combined churches together with leaders and families as our operational goal, it brought new revelation to the connection between the Kingdom of God and VOC. The Bible and the Kingdom of God can now be our primary manual. This is exciting because, like an unfolding rose, we can continuously learn new things about VOC.

Why is VOC still relevant today?

1. If our understanding of VOC is truly linked with God's Kingdom, it should be timeless. It does not become outdated, but goes deeper and deeper. Tactics may change, but the essence never changes.
2. Community problems have always been too complex for one entity to solve. Mission organizations typically focus on churches. Development organizations typically focus on leaders and families. The power of VOC is to combine all three. Similarly, changing one sector in a community does not transform the whole community. What is more powerful is a transformational process that, like leaven, slowly changes everything it touches.
3. Most projects done with today's conventional methods are simply not sustainable. Once the outside funding or expertise is removed, the project gradually collapses.

What are key principles for successfully implementing VOC?

Shown below are some key principles of VOC. While not meant to be a formula, the further we drift from the VOC objectives and principles, the greater the risk that the initiatives will not be sustainable.

1. The transformational process must be consistent with the end goal of VOC (see next section).
2. Local leaders must be equipped and empowered quickly so they are the true owners.
3. Change primarily happens from the inside-out, especially mindsets.
4. Dream big, start small.
5. Root causes of problems, often not from lack of material resources, must be transformed.
6. Projects must be economically viable and connected to the marketplace.
7. A sustainable community must have sustainable food.

How Does VOC Advance? The VOC Process.

As our understanding of VOC continues to unfold, it is more and more evident that the process is just as important as the goal. Shown below are eight key steps of the VOC Process compared with conventional aid.

VOC Process	Conventional Aid Process
1. Community Relationship Building	1. Programming (Design by outside organization)
2. Community Leader Training	2. Identification (Find places that need the programs)
3. Community Strengths and Needs Analysis	3. Formulation and Financing
4. Community Vision Creation (VOC)	4. Implementation
5. Community Planning	5. Evaluation & Audit (Usually by Outside Organization)
6. Community Implementation	
7. Community Reviews Results	
8. Community Celebrates (and Repeat)	

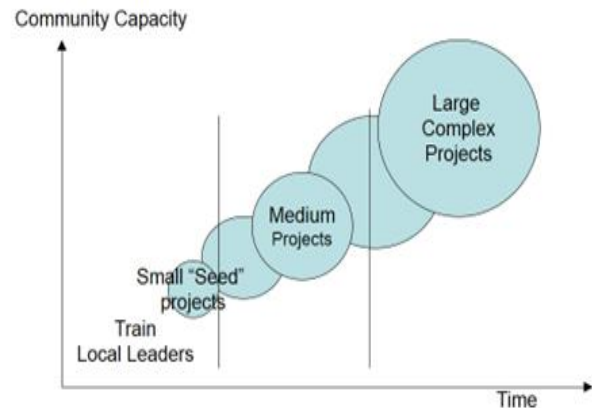
The VOC process is like a cycle that keeps repeating itself every year. It is ideally led by a diverse team of local leaders such as: government, faith, business, police, education, health, etc. FHIF is simply a facilitator at first.

The Conventional process, however, is typically like a line that is directed by outside experts.



Some key differences between the VOC Process and Conventional Aid Process include:

- In VOC, the community is the owner and we are the participants. In conventional aid, the community is just another participant in “participatory” programs.
- Each step of the VOC Process is community-led. In fact, it could be called the “Community-led Process”.
- The VOC process starts with local leader training. The conventional process typically starts with needs analysis and ends with leader training to maintain the project.
- The VOC process identifies strengths (assets) before looking at needs. The conventional process typically focuses on needs which reinforces a dependency mindset.
- As shown in the picture to the right, the VOC process starts small with local resources. The conventional process typically starts big with outside resources.

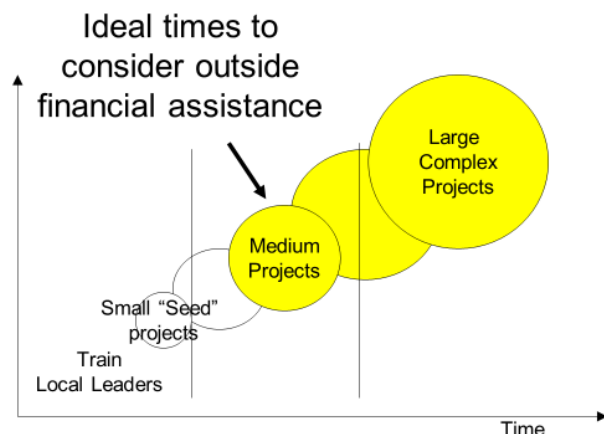


How is money used in VOC?

People sometimes make the mistake of thinking money is bad when doing VOC. It is not that money is bad, it is how and when money is used.

In the VOC Process, the ideal is for the community to do small projects with local resources at first. This helps build confidence and a “can-do” mindset. So money in the beginning of VOC is more for training.

Outside money for projects is best introduced later for medium and large projects. (See diagram to the right)



How do we measure impact and when have we finished?

The key indicators of VOC are based on the 3 key objectives that ideally the community can evaluate themselves:

- What evidence exists that local church(s) are increasingly reaching out?
- What evidence exists that local leaders can increasingly solve their own problems?
- What evidence exists that families are increasingly meeting their own needs (physical, spiritual, emotional, social)?

Ultimately, FHIF has finished when the community can keep doing the VOC Process itself.

This is a very different than conventional aid which typically aims for a level, not a sustainable process. For example, a level is 90% of children immunized. But the VOC mindset is if a community can immunize its own children, even if only 25% have been immunized, it is time for FHI to start phasing out.

Ideally, however, FHI never breaks the relationship with a community. Even if we phase out to work with new communities, we should still return periodically to encourage the original community.

How to integrate VOC with Child Sponsorship?

A common question is how to integrate VOC with Child Sponsorship. Shown below are possibilities.

1. One key to integrating Child Sponsorship and VOC is simply timing. Ideally, year's 1 and 2 of FHI's presence in a community is for training and small projects with local resources. Regular Child Sponsorship activities can begin in year 2 or 3 after the community has momentum with new mindsets and confidence.
2. Child Sponsorship provides a natural audience of children, parents, teachers, and leaders to learn about mindsets aligned with a Kingdom of God worldview.
3. If Child Sponsorship already started before VOC, it is still possible to begin the VOC Process parallel to the already existing Child Sponsorship activities. Simply recruit a team of local leaders and begin the VOC process.
4. Be disciplined. When starting a new Child Sponsorship center, first explain the VOC and VOC process. If a community is not willing to do the VOC Process, which starts small with local resources, it is better to look for a different community.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. If a country or region has no churches, does that mean we cannot do VOC?
Answer: VOC is for everywhere. In regions where there are no churches, it can start through families or leaders. At this stage, you are the church. But as relationships with families and leaders grow, they can provide natural opportunities to share the Gospel.
2. Is the full VOC still our goal even if we work in a difficult or persecuted context?
Answer: Difficult situations are ideal contexts for VOC because they force us to do things the right way - without shortcuts. It forces us to pray and exercise faith. It forces us to work in small groups. It forces us to earn the right to be heard and work holistically. But a local body of believers reaching out is still part of our end goal.
3. Are there models of VOC?
Answer: Yes and no. If you hear of a truly inspirational story of transformation, it probably used VOC principles whether inside or outside of Food for the Hungry. Often times relief situations force churches, leaders, and families to temporarily work together in ways they never did. But not every project, even in Food for the Hungry, has been designed for VOC.
4. Is VOC just for rural areas and the developing world?
Answer: VOC is for everywhere, including urban neighborhoods and developed nations. The problems are different, but the principles are the same. An entire city is generally too large of an area, but urban neighborhoods can be (and have been) transformed using VOC principles.
5. Isn't VOC over-simplistic, especially since so many problems are systemic in nature?
Answer: There are certainly systemic matters that go beyond a community's ability to solve. But in things that matter most – like health, happiness, peace, etc – there is no replacement for the local community or neighborhood. VOC empowers a community to start without endlessly waiting for others. Also, complex things in life do not multiply. VOC is purposely kept simple.