

PROFILE



STEPHEN GOODMAN

Volunteer Service Abroad has been active in providing development support through Africa, Asia and the Pacific since 1962. We ask the organisation's CEO about his former role in the military and the challenges of working across many countries and cultures.

56 years after VSA was founded, what is the current goal of the organisation?

We focus on sustainable economic, social and environmental development. Working with people in the wider Pacific and beyond, we help them achieve what's important to them, and that varies within different communities. VSA has placed over 3,500 volunteers throughout many countries.

Our volunteers help partners build their capacity at an individual level developing their skills, knowledge and confidence. At an organisational level they help organisations develop stronger management capabilities, processes, relationships and networks. And at a community level it's about promoting awareness of issues, encouraging participation and learning, and building social capital.

You have had a long and distinguished career with the New Zealand Defence Force. What is the main benefit that our Defence Forces bring to regional stability?

The NZDF's professionalism and capabilities plus their understanding of the region means that the NZDF is very effective at delivering humanitarian and disaster relief, training, search and rescue, or deploying appropriate capabilities in the event of a security breakdown, such as in Bougainville, Solomon Islands, and Timor-Leste.

Working with other nations and agencies, the NZDF has an important role in creating the stable conditions necessary for recovery. For example, in those three countries, significant societal improvements have occurred, and the VSA now has large and successful volunteer programmes in each.



You were part of the New Zealand Defence Force deployments in the Pacific region, including in Timor-Leste. From an investment perspective what are the main challenges for these developing nations?

They all have experienced, or continue to experience, a complex range of social, economic and environmental challenges. These are all interlinked and it's critical to address them all. These include gender inequality, lack of educational opportunities, poor access to health services, youth unemployment, and environmental change. The one that always stood out to me was the need for stronger governance. Reliable, informed and transparent governance exercised in the best interest of society as a whole is the foundation for progress. If it doesn't exist, then it is very difficult to address all the other challenging issues in a way that will see sustainable outcomes.

When you were deployed with the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), sensitivity to the needs of the local culture was paramount. What were some of the cultural challenges you faced while Senior National Officer there?

The cultural challenges I faced as a military commander were no different to what VSA now faces in its work. I'm sure it's the same for any organisation operating in the Pacific. There's a need to understand and respect the culture and the context of the country.

In the early days our job was to restore law and order, build confidence among the population, and create the conditions for on-going security. We weren't there to tell them what to do. We were the outsiders - we had to remember that at all times. Our responsibility was to support the Solomon Islanders to recover through respectful and open-minded engagement. The NZDF, and generally Kiwis as a whole, are reasonably good at that which made resolving any cultural differences a lot easier.

Following on from your time in the Solomon Islands, can you tell us about your recent experience with VSA in that country.

I recently returned to Honiara in the Solomon Islands to view the VSA programme there. There's no doubt that there has been a great deal of change and development. What struck me most was the change in atmosphere on the streets - the air of tension that existed when I was last there in 2004 is now replaced by a sense of normality. VSA has eleven volunteers working there on a range of assignments covering business development, sports, tourism, law, engineering, and one teaching jewellery making.

The Honiara Library really impressed me. Over the last two years a VSA volunteer has worked tirelessly alongside the Honiara City Council to develop what was previously a room containing a few books into a fully functioning library, and training local staff to manage it. To see it filled with children and youth pouring over books and clearly enjoying the opportunity to read and learn was very encouraging and encapsulated what people to people development is all about.

You have seen the effects of development programmes in many developing countries. How important are these programmes to regional stability and how important is New Zealand's role as a part of these programmes?

It's impossible to overestimate the critical impact that well-considered, adequately resourced and enduring development has on regional stability. The long-term stability of a region or country will only be achieved through the sustainable integration of social, environmental and economic initiatives and actions within a coherent plan of improvement. This is key, it must be enduring if it is to have a real impact.



As one of the larger countries in the region, New Zealand has a role working to assist smaller countries to develop across sectors in ways that work for them and allow them to grow themselves.

You were involved in a strategic review of New Zealand's defence estate organisation, including initiating a cultural change in this area. What are the main factors which create a positive and vibrant corporate culture?

I believe that you must have a clear and readily understood vision and sense of who you are and what you stand for. It sounds fairly fundamental, but unfortunately it's not always as strong as it could be, or as reflected in what people actually do, as it should be. I'm sure everybody will know 'what their job is', but do they always understand where it fits with their organisation's purpose and mission?

People need to be empowered to look for solutions. The most effective units that I was part of during my military career had a real culture of leadership, with staff regularly engaged about what we needed to do, why, and how we would work together to achieve that. There was a sharing of ideas. This mattered, because at the end of the day, irrespective of who you were, we were in it together. I believe this is absolutely key to a positive culture and effective performance at both individual and organisational levels.

With your professional background in strategy and planning, in your experience, what are the most important things to consider when investing your money?

Investing is a strategic activity. You need to be very clear about why you are investing and what you want from it in the future. Whether it be to grow as an investment, provide for a future lifestyle, or be part of a future legacy, it is important that you have a clear picture and comfort around your investment horizon, the level of risk you are comfortable with, and what you expect as a return. If you approach your investment decisions having followed that sort of thought-process, you will be far more likely to be successful.

As the newly appointed Chief Executive of Volunteer Service Abroad, what message would you like to share with New Zealanders about the importance of the organisation in 2018 and the future?

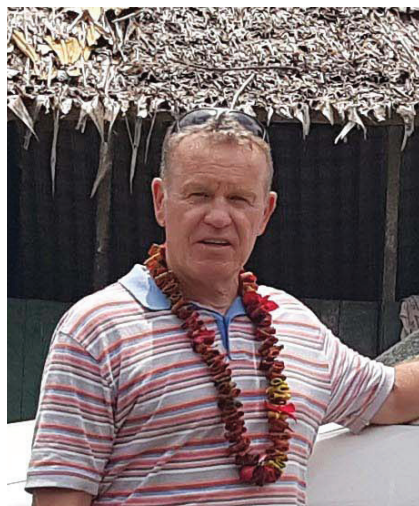
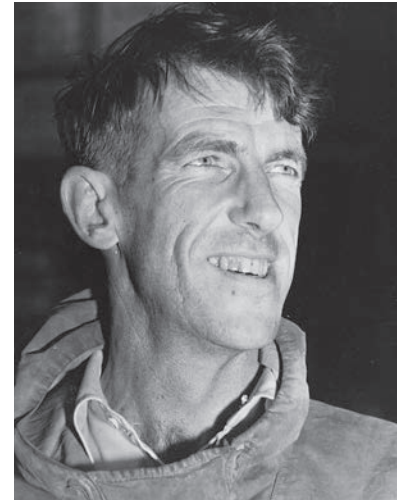
VSA's founding President, Sir Edmund Hillary, believed that great things can be achieved through partnerships, and that when some have little and others have more, you should try to do something about it.

As an organisation we believe that. New Zealand is part of the Pacific – the people are our close neighbours and our connections to it are strong. But unfortunately, the Pacific is a region with unique and challenging needs with people who often have little, and VSA believes that these needs can be best addressed through working alongside partners in country to create sustainable development.

Over the years VSA has contributed to some outstanding development across the Pacific, and that continues, especially in areas of climate resilience, youth opportunities, health and education, and stronger governance. During January and February this year alone, no fewer than 49 Kiwis are starting new VSA assignments across the Pacific.

That is 49 communities or organisations which will have someone joining and working alongside them on a voluntary basis to pass on their experience and bring about positive change. To me that is something to be proud of.

Looking forward, VSA seeks to grow how and where we engage development needs across the Pacific, and the range of Kiwis that we work with to do that. There are tremendous opportunities for individuals, corporates and many other groups to work alongside us to make a difference to others lives. I would really encourage people to be part of that and help make a difference.



Stephen Goodman
VSA Chief Executive Officer