

# Reciprocity in International Volunteer Cooperation



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## Foreword

Reciprocity has always been a core value within international volunteering for development. Today, this ideal is considered a cornerstone in most initiatives within international development cooperation. But what does reciprocity entail in practice?

When the Norwegian Parliament transformed FK Norway (Fredskorpset) into a model of mutual exchange in 2000, it took a bold step to redesign and modernize the Norwegian model of international volunteer service. Through the last 15 years, FK's understanding and implementation of reciprocity has evolved through the people-centered development instrument it represents, wherein individuals and institutions creating relationships across borders are themselves the change agents.

However, issues of global injustice and unequal distribution of power are factors through which stakeholders continuously must navigate when striving to maintain cooperation based on the values of reciprocity and solidarity. Thus the exchange of volunteers across countries, as a humble contribution to the fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals 16 and 17, prepare a cadre of global citizens ready to make the world a better and more just place.

FK Norway has commissioned Dr. Benjamin Lough to provide a knowledge base that may contribute to further developing the ideological fundament of FK's work. This paper outlines preconditions, pitfalls, and benefits of reciprocity, and looks at some of the criteria defining good practices and equitable relationships.

FK Norway trusts this paper will be a platform for informed dialogue with its partners, on a theme that is relevant to everyone working within the field of international development cooperation.



A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Nita Kapoor'.

Nita Kapoor  
Director General,  
FK Norway

## Introduction

“Reciprocity” has become a common buzzword in international development cooperation. Its virtues are often touted with little critical reflection on the depth of the concept or how the principles of reciprocity can truly be implemented in organizational policies and practices. Likewise, many scholars and practitioners have noted a meaningful lack of precision about the fundamental concepts constituting reciprocity (Bringle & Clayton, 2012; Dostilio et al., 2012). The intent of this paper is to untangle critical assumptions behind this term—asking the readers to stop and consider how this concept, along with the underlying values and ideas associated with it, are understood, expressed, and valued in international volunteer cooperation.

Genuine reciprocity is extremely difficult to achieve in traditional aid relationships. On a practical level, *reciprocity* is a condition where the needs of two or more groups are evenly met—creating an equal partnership between mutually-empowered parties (Stirrat & Henkel, 1997).

However, the very concept of aid implies a relationship of giver and receiver, which tends to create an implicitly asymmetrical relationship. As a result, concepts of patronage, power, and inequality are embedded in most conventional aid relationships (Stirrat & Henkel, 1997). The partner with greater resources will nearly always exercise more power and control—even when he or she is explicitly conscious of these inequities. To accomplish objectives of reciprocity, the conventional role of the higher-resourced “giver” aiding the lower-resourced “receiver” must be turned upside-down and re-conceptualized. This requires an authentic valuing of bottom-up views and contributions, and an eagerness to modify and shape otherwise top-down development objectives.

Reciprocal Relationship



Aid Relationship



Given that it is performed within a system of mutual exchange and cooperation, international volunteering may offer a valuable alternative over conventional forms of aid—perhaps even achieving legitimate reciprocity between Southern and Northern partners. Indeed, volunteers often expect to receive new knowledge, abilities, friendships, and résumé-building experiences in exchange for their gifts of time (Polonijo-King, 2004). Nonetheless, a number of studies have found comparatively low levels of reciprocity from the perspective of volunteer hosting-organizations based on the supply-driven nature of many volunteer placements (Heron, 2007; Perold et al., 2013; Tiessen & Huish, 2014).

Low levels of reciprocity embedded in historically dominant North-to-South models of international volunteering raise critical questions about the moral dimensions of international volunteering. When reciprocity is low, volunteering as “service” tends to reinforce power differences in the minds of both giver and receiver—often in equal measure to other conventional aid relationships. Recognizing the challenges inherent in the conventional North-to-South volunteer cooperation model, some international volunteer cooperation organizations (IVCOs) have begun to make incremental

(and occasionally radical) changes to their programs. For example, a review of the FK Norway North-to-South model of volunteer cooperation led to its eventual closure in 1999, reopening in 2000 with a new model of mutual exchange and an objective: “To promote contact and cooperation between individuals, organizations and institutions in Norway and in the developing countries, based on solidarity, equality and reciprocity” (Tjønneland, Helland, Kruse, & Norbakk, 2016).

Administering programs consistent with the value of reciprocity is a noble goal, and there are many pathways to achieve it. In search of greater equity in international partnerships, IVCOs have employed a mix of diverse practices. Although IVCOs use different modalities in their reach for reciprocal partnerships, the common unifying principle is movement away from a unidirectional model of charitable giving—from privileged to the underprivileged—and toward a multi-directional model of mutual giving and learning by all parties.

In support of the practical application of diverse reciprocity-targeted practices, scholars have produced rich theories that examine and explain the concept of reciprocity. Central to these theories are the concepts—face-to-face communication, trust through mutual cooperation, symmetry of priorities and resources, and the sustained duration and continuity of relationships—that play significant roles in reciprocal exchange (Ostrom & Walker, 2003).

Research on volunteering for development has identified that similar variables link program

practices to development outcomes (Sherraden, Lough, & McBride, 2008). Such connections between theory and practice are critical, as they help to explain why the principle of reciprocity is central to effective international volunteer cooperation.

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### ***Reciprocity Boosters:***

- *Face-to-face communication*
- *Trust through mutual cooperation*
- *Symmetry of priorities and resources*
- *Sustained duration and continuity of relationships* —Ostrom and Walker, 2003

This paper begins by exploring reciprocity as a concept, drawing from a wide body of literature on international cooperation and exchange.<sup>1</sup> It also explores some of the hidden and unintended consequences that might emerge from reciprocal relationships. The discussion then considers whether IVCOs and volunteers acting together with host-country partners can embrace an authentic expression of partnership—being mutually empowered to make and act on targeted development priorities. This question draws on many diverse dimensions of reciprocity that contemporary IVCOs practice. Finally, with an acknowledgment that full reciprocity may be problematic in some instances, the paper explores the potential strengths of reciprocity within the contemporary system of international volunteer cooperation.

### **Why Reciprocity?**

For more than half a century, advocates have touted the potential for international volunteering to enhance reciprocity in international development cooperation (Henderson, 1971;

students should receive tangible benefit from hosting organizations. Although the product is different, the exchange of services justifies the need for reciprocal and mutually-beneficial relationships.

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<sup>1</sup> It's worth noting that service learning literature discusses the concept of reciprocity with far more regularity and rigor than can be found in literature on international volunteering. Perhaps this is due to a common expectation in service learning that

Lough, 2015b). In many ways, the ideal of reciprocity embedded in volunteers' relationships with communities is a defining feature that makes international volunteering different from other forms of international aid. Without the relational component, volunteers could be viewed as just another resource to be deployed as a means to accomplish the goals of development agencies. Therefore, a discussion of reciprocity is important to understand the added value or distinctive contributions of volunteers to development (Lough & Matthew, 2013).

On the surface, the concept of reciprocity is difficult to argue against. Reciprocity is founded on time-honored values of social and distributive justice, equity, and fairness. It is a necessary condition for lasting solidarity, social cohesion, and unity. As social scientists have noted, "Social ties are created, sustained and strengthened by means of reciprocal gifts. These acts of gift exchange are at the basis of human solidarity" (Komter, 2007, p. 103). Cooperation is built on a foundation of trust, and reciprocity is the key moderating condition that generates trust between different parties (Ostrom & Walker, 2003).

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*"Social ties are created, sustained and strengthened by means of reciprocal gifts. These acts of gift exchange are at the basis of human solidarity."*

-Komter, 2007, p. 103

As a development practice, international volunteering models that lack reciprocity are often viewed as paternalistic, neocolonial, and even oppressive (Perold et al., 2013). Some argue that unidirectional aid relationships are, by nature, built on a foundation of inequality that "ultimately robs the recipient of self-respect using altruism as a form of social oppression" (Polonijo-King, 2004, p. 109). In cases where the unidirectional aid mentality is embodied in

unreciprocal models of international volunteer service, there is ample precedence for active opposition from Southern countries that argue that North-to-South models of service, in particular, may create dependency and reinforce power dynamics that privilege the leisured classes and disempower recipient identities (Hautzinger, 2008).

Because most IVCOs assume that reciprocity is a legitimate and virtuous goal, they primarily focus on how to make the concept work in practice; few stop to consider whether reciprocity is a worthwhile aspiration in all aspects. Deconstructing the concept reveals critical challenges that may be worth confronting. Struggling with the concept of true reciprocity is not a mere exercise in semantics, nor is it of minor concern. Falling short of reciprocal relationships in international cooperation can create real dependencies, disempowerment, and other harms. Just as real are the challenges that may arise when partners strive for reciprocity, but do so without a sufficient "critical consciousness" of their unexplored assumptions.

First, it is important to consider how the term is understood and interpreted as a general principle. In anthropological, sociological / social psychological, and economic disciplines, reciprocity is conceived as the equal exchange of real or symbolic goods or services (Komter, 2007; Mauss, 1990). Any truly reciprocal relationship requires that intangible services and tangible gifts must be matched tit-for-tat. In principle, without equal exchange, true reciprocity cannot be achieved.

As one form of international assistance, volunteers offer their services and skills as gifts of time to hosting organizations and communities (Polonijo-King, 2004). Operating within a system of true reciprocal exchanges, IVCOs and volunteers would not expect to give without a

comparable expectation of equal return from partner organizations and communities. Partner organization would, therefore, be obligated to provide equivalent value—perhaps matching volunteers’ “gifts” with an alternative measure of worth.

In practice, such reciprocal relationships are rarely achieved. Although volunteers certainly gain much from their service experiences, few would claim that they *expect* gifts of equal value from recipients. This point was supported in a literature review from VSO “Valuing Volunteering” research, which explicitly referenced the unreciprocal nature of many volunteer partnerships: “In the particular case of volunteering, there is no expectation of reciprocity. The giver and receiver do not expect the latter will ever have the possibility to pay back; therefore, the volunteer’s time and effort becomes an unreciprocated gift” (Franco, 2012, p. 12). As this passage suggests, neither the volunteers nor the hosting organizations expected that the lower-resourced partner would have the capacity to reciprocate. This is not an uncommon expectation in systems of international volunteer co-operation.

Any time volunteers go abroad with the intent to “serve,” “help,” or “provide assistance,” the meanings implicit in these concepts presume that volunteers have skills, ability, knowledge or resources to offer—some gift to give. Beyond this, research with hosting communities have found that intended recipients often describe the volunteers’ ideas as “better” or more advanced than those generated locally (Kothari, 2006; Lough & Carter-Black, 2015). Many people from the North also assume that Southern volunteers may have less to offer. As Pinkau (1978) asserted: “As most foreign technical assistance assignments are designated to provide skills not available in the receiver country, finding a counterpart [from the receiver country] is like

seeking a person who does not exist”. While these assumptions may be incorrect, they are not uncommon. International volunteering is often marketed as unidirectional helping by knowledgeable and skilled volunteers to less-able and deprived populations abroad (Simpson, 2004). On the other hand, returned volunteers consistently assert that they received far more than they were able to give, and clearly learned new and better ways of doing things (Lough, McBride, & Sherraden, 2009; Machin, 2008). If volunteers also benefit in a significant and meaningful way, then how might the value of this reciprocal giving be more clearly understood and communicated to all partners?

Furthermore, should IVCOs and volunteers categorically *expect* to receive equal value from their partnerships? If so, should they explicitly communicate this expectation to partner organizations? Such questions are not typically asked or addressed at a strategic level. However, the consequences for failing to engage in true reciprocity have been problematized from the perspective of both the “giver” and the “receiver.” First, from the perspective of the giver:

*By means of abundant gift-giving we are putting ourselves in a morally superior position, and we may cause the recipient to feel indebted.... Giving gifts may serve to dominate, humiliate and to make others dependent upon our benevolence and our willingness to share valuables and resources with them (Komter, 2007, p. 99). There is a propensity to give, but before doing so an inner calculus is made about the respective participants’ position on the ‘debt-balance’ (Schwartz, 1996). Feelings of being morally obliged to return a gift, and not purely altruistic motives are the main psychological impetus to reciprocal giving (p. 100).... As long as the recipient of a gift has not given back, the giver holds a certain power over the recipient (p. 103).*



According to such assertions, if partner organizations do not view themselves as having the resources or the capacity to give back to volunteers in equal measure, they will be locked in a disempowered position. When no return is expected, one partner is effectively left in a state of indebtedness. The recipient—recognizing an informal contract to reciprocate—may either reject the service or choose to accept the service along with feelings of indebtedness and obligation. As one recipient described this challenge: “We cannot always refuse from a gift. In such occasions we land in the sphere of exchange, and we end in the lower position than a donor. We can return our position only by donating a return gift” (Ilmonen, 2004, p. 16).

Although reciprocal exchange may promote equality in principle, the implicit conditionality of reciprocity also raises concern that an expectation of return may place an added burden on partner organizations. The phrase “obligation of reciprocity” is often used when discussing mutual exchange because the cyclic burden of returning gifts is unavoidable in reciprocal relationships (Komter, 2007; Stirrat & Henkel, 1997). In aiming for reciprocity in international volunteering, to what degree do Northern IVCOs and volunteers want Southern partners to feel obligated to them? Although most stakeholders would agree that such conditionality is at odds with the spirit and values of volunteer service, they would also likely agree that dependency and indebtedness are inconsistent with ideals of development partnerships.

The following section explores different modalities of reciprocity in international volunteer cooperation. Looking across these different modalities advances the argument that reciprocity is a worthwhile goal, and can be achieved to some degree. To achieve this ideal, however, all partners should be expected to bring *different* but relatively equal and complementary

benefits to the relationship—though this can be difficult to accomplish without an explicit recognition of the comparative equity between tangible and intangible contributions. As a sector, far greater consciousness and intentionality are needed to strategically program for reciprocal international volunteering partnerships.

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## Modalities of Reciprocity in International Volunteering

Given the relational nature of international volunteering, nearly all development-oriented IVCOs claim to practice reciprocity in some form or another. However, different IVCOs have a distinct way of interpreting the concept. These different definitions and interpretations of the concept are reflected in diverse organizational policies and practices. This diversity is also reflected across different levels of partnerships and through an assorted mix of development actors.

Perhaps the most commonly discussed mode of reciprocity fits within the partnership between volunteers and hosting organizations and communities. This discussion of reciprocity counters the person-to-person interactions that often position volunteers as “experts” and local actors as “beneficiaries.” The goal of relational reciprocity at this level is to disrupt the helping narrative by recognizing the mutual sharing and giving of experiences, expertise, and culture-specific knowledge and capabilities.



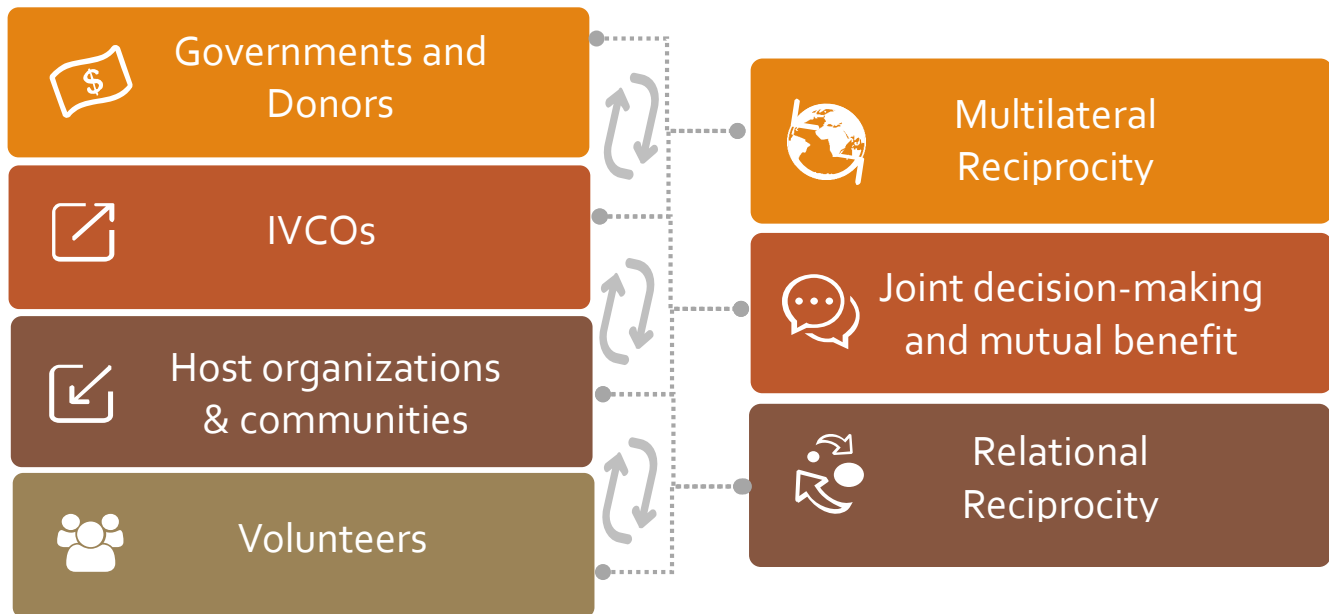
The next level of reciprocity is positioned between local organizations and IVCOs. Within this relationship, reciprocal partnerships aim to ensure that the goals and priorities of both organizational partners are met. IVCOs aim to ensure that the “supply” of volunteers meet partner organizations’ “demand” for volunteers with a specific skill set. As another method at this level, local partner organizations may agree to provide safe and secure working and learning environments in exchange for specific services provided by volunteers. Whatever the practice, both partners are engaged in mutual decision-making to determine jointly-negotiated project priorities.

Further down the decision tree, IVCOs’ relationships with donors determine the degree to which reciprocal volunteer exchange is possible. For example, funding from governments is typically limited to supporting bilateral North-to-South volunteer placements. For many IVCOs, decades of such funding priorities have normalized the acceptability of limited reciprocity in their volunteer cooperation programs (Lough, 2015a). Although there are a number of obvious exceptions, the goal of reciprocity at this level is to move policy and funding from bilateral volunteer sending to multilateral and multidirectional volunteer exchange and cooperation. In this case, reciprocity reflects a value-based concern for global equity; North-to-South volunteering would ideally require a match of resources to support South-to-North exchange.



Scholars have described these various levels of volunteer cooperation as situated within the geopolitical, political, and learning environments that involve multiple actors and complex relationships (Schech, Mundkur, Skelton, & Kothari, 2015). In theory and practice, a concern for reciprocity has been acknowledged and discussed at each levels of these partnership arrangements (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Different types of reciprocity among diverse volunteer cooperation actors**



### Relational Reciprocity: Strengthening Trust and Solidarity

The form of reciprocity described in this first section is perhaps the most commonly understood notion of reciprocity associated with volunteering. Reciprocity is touted as one distinctive benefit of volunteering associated with trust, solidarity, and mutual interdependence. This form of reciprocity is embodied in the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) program description as a core method of volunteers' contributions: "Volunteerism benefits both society at large and the individual volunteer by *strengthening trust, solidarity and reciprocity* among citizens, and by purposefully creating opportunities for participation." (Leigh et al., 2011).

New relationships are inherently fragile and insecure. To grow fruitfully, they require trust and solidarity, which are strengthened through repeated positive reciprocal exchange. Caplow (1982) theorized that gifts and intangible forms of giving are remarkably useful at fortifying

insecure or unstable relationships because they initiate a moral bond based on enduring patterns of exchange (Caplow, 1982). This bond produces an ongoing circular expectation to return in kind and fosters mutual reliance, trust in continued benefit, and social commitment. As Komter (2007) describes, reciprocal giving is particularly well-suited to developing sustainable relationships:

*Gifts have the superb characteristic of being at the same time free and obligatory, altruistic and self-oriented. It is exactly this double-sidedness of the gift that makes it such a fortunate solution for the fragility and insecurity inherent in any newly developing social relationship.*

Such relational forms of reciprocal exchange are the basis of biological and social symbiosis.

Perhaps more than most social interactions—as well as other forms of aid—volunteering has the capacity to quickly build trust and stabilize new relationships. Volunteer service can initiate feelings of gratitude in the hearts of recipients to

respond in reciprocal fashion. By initiating and maintaining this reciprocal game of giving–receiving–giving, etc., relationships are founded on mutual contribution. Such relationships can establish trust more quickly than comparable relationships wherein gifts of gratitude are not regularly expected and exchanged. To reap the benefits of this pattern, however, both parties must perceive that they are able to give and return in equal measure. Relative equality of contribution, therefore, emerges as a key precondition to effective relational reciprocity.

## Preconditions of Reciprocity

### Relative equality

Many international volunteering policies that shape “effective practices” are intended to function as an equalizing force. Such practices include living in the homes of local populations, embedding volunteers’ in community-level projects, working face-to-face with local populations, and maintaining volunteers’ stipends comparable to living wages of domestic workers. Although such practices may have inherent merit based on their alignment with core values of equality and fairness, they are also necessary preconditions to achieving relational reciprocity. An allusion to this connection was articulated in a VSO position paper:

*The reciprocal nature of volunteering is particularly valuable. In this model volunteers will often share housing with community members and they will cooperate together in labor projects. Living and working within communities over an extended period of time encourages sensitive and appropriate responses and a sense of equality that increase the likelihood of a successful outcome (Voluntary Service Overseas, 2002, p. 2).*

Incidentally, highly balanced power relationships and equal social status are not always possible—and may not actually be desirable in some circumstances. As Aked (2015) asserted, when

volunteers use their comparatively high social standing, influence, and networks with other power holders, this may actually be the most efficient route to meaningful social change. However, social and economic equality are not theoretically required for effective reciprocal relationships—as long as all parties can act autonomously according to the strengths they bring to the relationship, and bring these strengths to bear in *equal measure* (Komter, 2007).

### Repeat interaction

Another precondition for effective relational reciprocity is repeat interaction. Theory and research predict that parties in a partnership often fail to reciprocate with equal measure when the relationships are of a short duration or composed of “single-shot” interactions (Ostrom & Walker, 2003). When people do not expect meaningful future interactions, they easily justify taking advantage of the other party (Ostrom, 1998). However, partnership models that include longer time perspectives and repeated interactions will build trust and adopt norms of reciprocity and fairness in the expectation of long-term returns (Ostrom & Walker, 2003). In all longstanding partnerships, the thought of ending the relationship (i.e., the “grim trigger”) has been shown to be a sufficiently rational incentive to encourage enduring reciprocation from all parties (Fudenberg & Maskin, 1986; Ostrom & Walker, 2003).

This theory has obvious implications for policy and practice in volunteer cooperation. Among the most obvious is to structure international volunteer placements for longer durations. Ideally, this practice allows volunteers to establish reciprocal relationships built on norms of trust and mutual contribution through continued and sustained engagement with local populations. When volunteering for the long-term is not possible, relational reciprocity can be

encouraged through repeat visits by shorter-term volunteers. This model is common practice for many “professional” volunteer cooperation facilitated by organizations such as the Singapore International Foundation and the USAID Farmer-to-Farmer program.

Evidence suggests that repeat visits by volunteers has a significant influence on the ultimate quality of the relationships, as perceived by partner organizations (Lough, 2016). These partnerships can be greatly enhanced through a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between IVCOs and host-organizations. An MOU can help cultivate a “shadow of the future” for repeat interaction, and can provide a level of security and assurance necessary for sustained partnerships (see Axelrod, 1984; Umoren, James, & Litzelman, 2012).

### Communication

Research also supports the conclusion that communication substantially increases the likelihood that people will reciprocate (Ostrom & Walker, 2003). For international volunteering, communication depends on volunteers’ proximity to community members in physical space, their language capacity, and a level of cultural understanding that can foster effective communication. The critical role of communication with partners was cited in studies of select FK Norway projects. As an evaluation of one of these partnerships noted, shared language was critical for reciprocal collaborations:

*Both partners recognize that there are challenges to establishing a good collaboration, and that they have very different views on the purpose of the partner-ship. . . The language-barrier is believed to be the main cause of the lack of reciprocity in the exchange (Scanteam, 2005, p. 89).*

Conditions of relative equality, repeated interactions, and effective communication are not the only preconditions for reciprocal relationships. However, they are perhaps the most common conditions observed in research on international volunteer cooperation. In the following sections, these conditions also lay the foundation of other alternative understandings of reciprocity in practice. The following section expands on the idea of mutual benefit and giving from all parties in a partnership.

### Mutual Benefit

Discussions of reciprocity often focus on a “community-driven development” approach, which prioritizes the needs of host organizations. Other approaches privilege volunteers’ contributions while undervaluing the capabilities of hosting organizations. These approaches tend to position local partners in the role of passive recipient. A truly reciprocal exchange model, however, recognizes and prioritizes mutual benefit; neither partner is given primary concern or exclusive benefit; give and take is expected from both sides (Hartman, Paris, & Blache-Cohen, 2014, p. 110; Palacios, 2010).

In line with this principle, effective program logic models are organized with “dual purposes” that explicitly outline proposed benefits to both local partners and volunteers (Hartman et al., 2014). Because the partners often have different capacities and resources to contribute, discussions of how reciprocity can be achieved in practice often focus on the relative economic versus noneconomic exchanges that can be provided by Northern and Southern partners (Dostilio et al., 2012, p. 22). To the degree that volunteers are able to contribute knowledge, skills, or resources, partner organizations are also expected to reciprocate with comparable contributions. This notion of mutual benefit has been referred to as “strategic reciprocity”

wherein volunteers' motivations are structured around the strategic returns they expect to receive from their volunteer experience (Manatschal & Freitag, 2014).

Reciprocal learning is one expression of strategic reciprocity. If both parties perceive the primary benefit from volunteering is interpersonal exchange and communication, then this is a comparatively easy objective to achieve. When the FK Norway Youth program began in 2002, a primary objective was to bring young people from different parts of the world together to share ideas, activities, and work experiences. A proposed benefit of the program was merely to "offer an inspirational means of reciprocal learning" (Borchgrevink & Skard, 2004, p. 8; Slagman, Thiis-Evensen, & Olsen, 2005). Although the mutual contributions provided by each partner need not be motivated by a modernization (i.e., economic) paradigm of development, they do need to be articulated.

Articulating and making the expectation of dual benefit explicit offers a number of advantages, particularly to community partners. For one, community partners are empowered to expect compensation for all services provided. As is often the case, compensation may come in the form of volunteer assistance. However, in situations where volunteers are comparatively unskilled or unhelpful, partner organizations might legitimately expect compensation in the form of resources and tangible supports in exchange for hosting volunteers.

Another advantage of emphasizing the different ways both parties contribute is a blurring of the conventional boundaries between giver and receiver. Strengths-based dialogue has been used to articulate mutual advantage—empowering local partners to better identify and capitalize on the beneficial aspects of their distinct contributions. By emphasizing the

significant benefits that volunteers receive as they live and work in host communities, local partners may more accurately recognize these relationships as reciprocal rather than as unilateral aid.

In addition to working with hosting organizations to recognize the value of mutual contributions, a higher awareness is also needed on the "sending side" of the partnership. Not all volunteers stop to recognize the strengths inherent in communities and the benefits they are likely to receive as they volunteer in the Global South. For instance, IVCOs may alter expectations by more accurately portraying the strengths of partner communities in the Global South, and more realistically communicating the contributions of, and benefits to, volunteers. When discussions about reciprocity and asymmetries in power are an explicit component of volunteer orientation, these conversations can challenge volunteers to reflect on their own unconscious or unobserved helping biases, and to consider how they might avoid perpetuating inequities through their work.

Reciprocity as mutual benefit can also break down the common division of international volunteer programs in scholarship as "demand-based" (i.e., driven by the needs of the host community or organization) or "supply-based" (i.e., driven by the needs of the volunteer, IVCO, or sending-country) (see Brassard, Sherraden, & Lough, 2010; Lough, 2012; Perold et al., 2011). When reciprocity through mutual benefit is prioritized, international volunteering operates on market principles whereby utility is maximized through the balanced and mutually-beneficial principles of supply and demand.

In situations wherein the IVCO/community partnership fails to clarify dual contribution, local partners may be unable or unwilling to participate in decisions about the direction of projects. As Franco (2012) asserts, "...

beneficiaries are reluctant to give criticisms or reject initiatives because it would seem that the only symbolic repayment possible is the acknowledgement of the support, and the statement of shared commitment with the volunteering [nongovernmental organization] in its effort to promote development” (Franco, 2012, p. 21). This statement assumes, as is common in development cooperation, that the only meaningful contribution local partners can provide is a “symbolic acknowledgement of support.” This assumption clearly falls short of the ideal of reciprocal partnerships.

### Joint Decision-Making

Related to the idea of mutual benefit, practicing reciprocity in international cooperation is expressed through the locus of decision-making power (Sherraden, Lough, & Bopp, 2013). For example, joint decision-making is a primary way that the Swiss Unité program has defined and discussed reciprocity in their reports; the volunteers’ value is best realized when relations between Northern and Southern partners share common motivations, visions, and objectives (Unité, 2007).

Key questions relevant to this conception of reciprocity include the following: Are hosting organizations and communities jointly involved in the creation and critique of projects? Who has more substantive power to determine the activities and priorities assumed by volunteers? Who ultimately decides which projects to support or fund?

At the most basic, and perhaps the “thinnest,” conception of reciprocity in decision-making is engaging partners in a participatory and consultative process. Some have described this as “working with a partner as opposed to doing something to or for a partner” (Sandmann, Kliewer, Kim, & Ommerikwa, 2010, p. 5;

Sherraden et al., 2013). In one example from a UNV report, volunteers helped to change local government practices as they brought together Roma community representatives and Albanian government actors by “adopting participatory consultations, negotiations and mediations [and] achieving consensus regarding priorities and needs in cases when interests of many stakeholders are different” (Baken, Taho, & Tepelena, 2010, p. 3).

Beyond arranging for community members to participate in a consultative role, a higher level of reciprocity is arranging for all stakeholders to share ownership of the project (Hautzinger, 2008; Reardon, 2006). This type of reciprocity has been conceptualized as “thick reciprocity” when done correctly because it substantively transfers and equalizes power between stakeholders (Jameson, & Jaeger, 2011). This is also the conception of reciprocity closest to the spirit of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 16.7, which aims to “Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels”. In this arrangement, partner organizations are equally involved in the selection, allocation, and mobilization of volunteers according to mutually negotiated strategic objectives (Perold et al., 2013). Training of volunteers includes joint supervision and instruction—trusting partners to manage and direct the work of volunteers (Haarberg, Dale, & Whist, 2011). Similarly, the timing, duration, and continuity of volunteer-supported programs meet the needs of both partners. In addition, there is clear transparency in budgeting and program design (Hartman et al., 2014).

A review of the North-to-South component of the FK program found a number of barriers that limited genuine reciprocity with partners. In particular, the review stressed the inequality of resources and decision-making power inherent in the management model, which is common in

many North-to-South international volunteer cooperation programs.

*In the North-South partnerships the driving force is the Norwegian partner who...is responsible for monitoring and accounts for the funds received from Fredskorpset.... Furthermore, in many cases there are significant differences in resource endowments between North and South partners, for instance in terms of financial and human resources and in terms of communication technology. This makes it even harder to achieve balanced partnerships. In general, the North-South partnerships cannot be assessed as equal. (Norad, 2006, p. 33)*

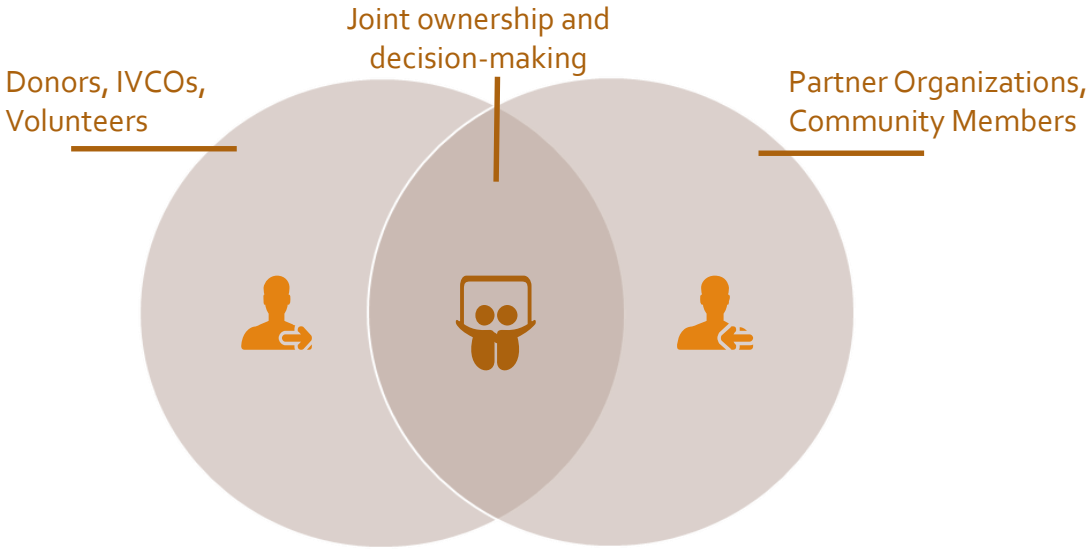
Such imbalances in partnerships from top-heavy management decisions and resource inequities is often more common than not in international volunteer cooperation.

Joint decision-making is compared to unilateral processes in which the strengths and assets of people in poverty are overlooked—and therefore undervalued, under recognized, and under-appreciated. As one Valuing Volunteering

researcher concluded, “when volunteers are regarded as ‘expert’ and local actors as ‘beneficiary,’ reciprocity is rarely a feature of [these] volunteer networks” (Aked, 2015, p. 37). In contrast, when volunteers are not viewed as experts but rather as members of a team, notions of competition and paternalism from volunteers can be substantially reduced through reciprocal decision-making (Rockliffe, 2005).

A moderate deconstruction of *joint* decision-making is of relative importance to this discussion. Many advocates of sustainable development assert that efforts should be “community-driven.” At the conceptual level, however, a community-driven model is not necessarily more reciprocal than a volunteer-driven model. Under the reciprocal approach, projects and priorities should be mutually negotiated and agreed. Although power differences cannot be ignored, project decisions should aim to occupy the space that fulfills the interests of all stakeholders, including the IVCOs, their donors, and volunteers (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Negotiated project priorities in reciprocal volunteer cooperation**





Seeking to integrate the priorities of donors, volunteers, IVCOs, and other development cooperation organizations may grate against some ideals of community-driven development, which aim to devolve power to the community to drive project priorities (Nkonya, Phillip, Mogues, Pender, & Kato, 2012; Wong, 2012). On the other hand, positioning community representatives as the primary decision-making actors could also result in poor consequences at the collective level. For example, community partners may be less concerned about the environmental impacts of a program if they believe that embracing such concerns may have detrimental effects on local livelihoods. In addition, projects focusing too heavily on the priorities of local partners have been criticized for being ignorant of the power differences inherent in local groups and civil society organizations, which can also be highly detrimental to marginalized groups (Mohan & Stokke, 2000). Although joint decision-making is not easy to achieve, it is a key objective for reciprocal partnerships.

### Multilateral Reciprocity

For some IVCOs, reciprocity primarily implies an exchange of volunteers from the Global North and Global South. For example, the multilateral exchange of volunteers is a key way that FK Norway has conceptualized the practice of reciprocity. Although reciprocity has been a component of the FK Norway model since its establishment in 1963, the policy change to strengthen multilateral placements and to prioritize North-to-South and South-to-North exchanges was “only partly integrated into the original concept” (Borchgrevink & Skard, 2004, p. 6). It was nearly four decades after its founding that FK Norway ultimately changed its modality to enhance reciprocity through multilateral exchange. Alongside FK Norway, Canada World Youth was also a pioneer in both South-to-North and South-to-South exchanges (Volunteer and

Service Enquiry Southern Africa [VOSESA], 2013).

A related model aims to foster mutually beneficial partnerships between volunteer-supported civil society organizations (CSOs) in the North and South. A few programs that follow this type of reciprocal exchange includes Canadian Cross-roads International, the VSO Global Exchange programs, and smaller regional programs such as the Kölner Freiwilligen Agentur e.V. In the Canadian Cross-roads International model, for example, volunteers from a Southern CSO travel to work within a Canadian partner CSO, while volunteers from Canada do the same in the Southern country. In Kölner Freiwilligen Agentur e.V., young adults from one of Cologne’s sister cities volunteer in a German nonprofit organization for at least six months, while a young person from Cologne volunteers in the sister city.

In the South-to-North exchange models, both volunteers aim to learn new skills during their work with the organizations, and they bring this new learning back to CSO in their home country (Norad, 2006). Although FK Norway and VSO Global Exchange programs also support these types of exchanges, their volunteers typically serve for a longer duration (ITAD, 2011). A few other noteworthy examples of South-to-North exchange include the Kenya Global Peace Youth Corps—a partnership between East African and Korean volunteers (Caprara, Mati, Obadare, & Perold, 2013), and a small three-year pilot of the German weltwärts program that aims to foster more equitable global exchanges (AKLHÜ, 2015; Weltwärts, 2013). The UK Department for International Development supported International Citizen Service also has a model of “reciprocal visits to the UK by staff from host organisations” (Hawkins, Verstege, & Flood, 2013, p. 38).

All told, alternatives to traditional North-to-South models of international volunteering are following a clear growth trend (VOSESA, 2013). Northern governments are increasingly willing to fund youth exchanges from other countries. Over the past ten years, a number of IVCOs have begun to facilitate South-to-North exchange models as a small fraction of their overall portfolio (Norad, 2006; Schreiber, 2001). Despite this trend at an administrative level, however, many Northern governments remain reluctant to admit young people from the Global South into their country, and the rejection of visa applications is an not uncommon practice (Allum, 2013).

Despite the promotion of South-to-North exchange as a reciprocal model, it is sometimes still viewed as an unequal partnership given a normally heavier investment of resources by the Northern organization (Mati & Perold, 2011). Because volunteers typically pay a higher fee to cover costs of Southern volunteers, the exchange is often viewed as a gift from the Northern IVCO or volunteer. As one respondent to FK's partner survey commented: "Since the North partner has the money there will always be inequality" (FK Norway, 2007, p. 55).

For South-to-North exchange to be considered reciprocal, both parties need to view the level of giving as equally valuable. To accomplish this, stakeholders must challenge the respondent's perception that disparities in money and resources (which are inevitably a component of any North-to-South cooperation), do not ultimately determine the level of giving and benefit. In the end, Northern partners and volunteers need to value the contributions of the Southern volunteers equal to the level of resources expended. Likewise, Southern volunteers need to value their level of contribution as justifying any extra scholarship or fees paid by Northern volunteers.

Though equitable exchange is legitimate in theory, how might IVCOs and their partners accomplish it in practice? If reciprocity is truly a goal, how do partners equalize the relationship in contexts where financial resources are inevitably unequal? Should Northern CSOs expect higher results from Southern volunteers? Perhaps the exchanges can be justified by recruiting volunteers with different levels of skill from Northern and Southern contexts? These questions might touch a nerve for some readers, but such methods may already be implemented to a certain degree. For example, in a review of FK's youth program partnerships, the consultants identified that their partners "specified separate objectives and indicators for the North and South partners," which were viewed as consistent with the ideals of partnerships embedded in FK's youth-based programs (Borchgrevink & Skard, 2004, p. 35).

Although pairing North-to-South with South-to-North exchanges is relatively easily to distinguish as a reciprocal model (excluding the nuances discussed in the previous paragraphs), many would argue that South-to-South and North-to-North volunteer cooperation models have an even stronger degree of reciprocity (Fulbrook, 2007; Leigh et al., 2011). Why might this be the case? With vertical (i.e., North-to-South, South-to-North) exchanges, both parties tend to have implicit dichotomies between privileged/underprivileged, lucky/unlucky, giver/receiver, developed/underdeveloped, etc. Some scholars have argued that horizontal volunteers exchange models (i.e., South-to-South, North-to-North) to balance and blur differences in status—which promises a greater likelihood of mutual benefit and shared learning—and thereby more reciprocal partnerships (Donahue, Bowyer, & Rosenberg, 2003; Norad, 2006; Plewes & Stuart, 2007).

Only a handful of IVCOs have managed to develop and operate functional South-to-South volunteer programs. A few notable examples include FK Norway, Canada World Youth, VSO, UNV, SayXchange, America Solidaria, and Reach Out to Asia (VOSESA, 2013). Among the major IVCOs, UNV easily has the largest and longest-standing South-to-South volunteer cooperation program (Lough, 2015b).

Although research on the comparative effectiveness of different multilateral reciprocal approaches are rare, a 2009 evaluation of FK Norway found that the South-to-South programs appeared better at capacity building and transferring skills because Southern volunteers tended to spend far less time adjusting to cultural differences and could begin working almost immediately after arriving in their partner agency (Nordic Consulting Group, 2009). Evaluations also found that participants in the South-to-South program believed that they benefited more significantly from networks developed during the placements, and were more satisfied overall than participants in the North-to-South program (Nordic Consulting Group, 2009; Tjønneland et al., 2016). However, these results were somewhat contradicted with survey results from FK partner organizations. These surveys, conducted over multiple years, consistently indicate that Southern partners working with Norwegian volunteer coordinating organizations rate the highest in their level of satisfaction with the equality, reciprocity and transparency of placements (FK Norway, 2013, 2016).

### Volunteer Counterparts

Related in principle to South-to-North volunteer exchange, some programs aim to enhance reciprocity by pairing international and national volunteers in a “counterpart” or “twinning” model of volunteer cooperation (Beigbeder, 1991; Scott-Smith, 2011). This was the first


mainstream method that IVCOs attempted historically when striving for reciprocal cooperation (Lough, 2015b; United Nations Volunteers, 1985). Although a number of bilateral IVCOs experimented with this form of reciprocal programming in early years, they eventually abandoned the idea because of ongoing disparities that ultimately prevented reciprocal cooperation (Lough, 2015b). In the end, inequalities in stipends, insurance, and other fringe benefits provided to international volunteers and their local counterparts quickly hampered feelings of equity and reciprocity between counterparts (Gillette, 1972). In addition, it was difficult for volunteers to overcome the often “rural/urban, educated/uneducated, wealthy/poor” divisions between volunteers from high- and low-income countries (Woods, 1974, p. 39).

Despite historical challenges with implementing the counterpart model, a number of modern organizations practice this form of reciprocal engagement. For example, in Sweden’s Sida Exchange Programme, the concept of *ömsesidighet* (i.e., reciprocity) is a key guiding principle. In the Sida model, young people from the North and South are matched together for at least four weeks—spending time in pairs for at least two weeks in each country (Norad, 2006). In Sida’s model, however, participants do not necessarily engage in volunteer action or aim to contribute to development in their exchange country. In contrast, the UK’s International Citizen Service program explicitly pairs young volunteers from the UK with young volunteers in the Global South, and volunteer action is a centrepiece of the young people’s experience (ITAD, 2011).

A number of commentaries have emphasized that encouraging and strengthening national youth volunteering is critical for any international volunteer partnership that claims to prioritize objectives of reciprocity—even when IVCOs do

not formally follow a volunteer counterpart model (Franco & Shahrokh, 2015; Scott-Smith, 2011). As one researcher articulated: "Organisations aiming at developing and/or strengthening youth volunteering actions must put greater emphasis on encouraging national youth volunteering with elements of reciprocity" (Franco, 2012, p. 19). According to this perspective, reciprocity between countries justifies investing in equitable volunteer opportunities for all young people.

**Table 1: Spectrum of Reciprocal Partnerships in International Volunteer Cooperation**

	 <b>Less Reciprocal</b>	<b>More Reciprocal</b> 
<b>Relational reciprocity</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Conditions of privilege (e.g. living and working with other international volunteers, high stipends)</li> <li>✓ Shorter durations of service</li> <li>✓ One-off volunteer placements</li> <li>✓ Lack of continuity in IVCO and partner relationships</li> <li>✓ Inability to communicate effectively due to language, physical distance, cultural misunderstanding, or other barriers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Conditions of equality (e.g. living and working with community members, low stipends)</li> <li>✓ Repeat interactions: Longer duration of service; multiple volunteer placements</li> <li>✓ Continuity in IVCO and partner organization relationship (including memorandum of understanding)</li> <li>✓ Ability to communicate effectively</li> </ul>
<b>Mutual benefit</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Supply orientation (supply of volunteers &gt; demand for volunteers)</li> <li>✓ Uneven gains by volunteers, hosting-community, or organizations</li> <li>✓ Volunteer-centered learning</li> <li>✓ Unbalanced costs and benefits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Market balance of volunteers (supply = demand)</li> <li>✓ Mutually-strategic gains by all stakeholders</li> <li>✓ Reciprocal learning</li> <li>✓ Balanced costs and benefits (including compensation if needed to hosting organizations)</li> </ul>
<b>Joint decision-making</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Top-heavy ownership and design of projects</li> <li>✓ One-sided selection, allocation, mobilization, and supervision of volunteers</li> <li>✓ Undisclosed budgeting and spending</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Joint ownership and design of projects</li> <li>✓ Joint selection, allocation, mobilization, and supervision of volunteers</li> <li>✓ Transparent budgeting and spending</li> </ul>
<b>Multilateral reciprocity</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Unidirectional North-to-South volunteer sending</li> <li>✓ International volunteers only, without national volunteer counterparts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Reciprocal North-to-South and South-to-North exchange</li> <li>✓ South-to-South or North-to-North volunteer coordination</li> <li>✓ International / national volunteer counterparts</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

As illustrated above, diverse conceptions and practices of reciprocity depend on a variety of actors—stretching from macro geopolitical partnerships to micro interpersonal relationships. The metaphor of the simple saw and the complex kaleidoscope has been used to illustrate the concept of reciprocity. The saw represents a give-and-take or tit-for-tat conception of reciprocity, while the kaleidoscope represents the variety of practices that embody the values of equality and multidirectional giving and learning (Dostilio et al., 2012, p. 29). Reaching for a more explicit understanding to “say what we mean” when discussing the principles of reciprocity in international volunteer cooperation, Table 1 summarizes the spectrum of reciprocal partnerships and practices discussed in international volunteer cooperation circles.

It may be unrealistic for each IVCO to practice fully reciprocal international volunteer cooperation at all levels. Indeed, at the geopolitical level of partnerships, few IVCOs have enough flexibility with their donors to realize multilateral South-to-North volunteer placements or to practice largescale volunteer counterpart placements. Despite limitations, however, all IVCOs can all work towards more reciprocal relationships with partners at lower levels of partnership—such as between volunteers and local actors.

Some solutions may, in fact, be relatively independent from resources or donor priorities. It is certainly likely that all IVCOs could enhance the spirit of reciprocity through strengths-based dialogue and by encouraging critical conscious-

ness in volunteers, partner organizations, and communities. Through such dialogue, disparities in power and resources can be acknowledged as constant and present, and organizational policies can be implemented to minimize the effects of differences as they are recognized. If reciprocal relations are truly a valued ideal, even small differences in power and partiality can be acknowledged, made explicit, and translated into creative and innovative policies and organizational practices.

Target 17.16 of the SDGs aims to “Enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals.”<sup>2</sup> The spectrum of partnerships described above illustrate the potential for volunteers, IVCOs, and local partner organizations—together with governments and donors—to support the aspirations advanced in the new global goals. Reciprocal relationships are necessary to genuinely engage these multiple partners in equitable and sustainable partnerships for development.<sup>3</sup>

Although achieving full reciprocity will remain a demanding challenge, programs that prioritize mutual exchange and cooperation between Southern and Northern partners can overcome many of the complications inherent in conventional aid relationships. To the degree that diverse international volunteer partnerships strive to embody principles of reciprocity, at whatever level is feasible, they offer meaningful alternatives over less equitable forms of aid.

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<sup>2</sup> See also SDG Target 17.17: Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships.

<sup>3</sup> SDG Target 16.7: Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.

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