

# The importance of engaged communities for social good visualisation

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## ABSTRACT

Viz For Social Good is a community project which has worked with non-profit organisations large and small since 2017, with in excess of 4000 volunteers across the globe. We will share the challenges we've faced along the way along with our success stories as we move to full non-profit status. We also present our vision for the future of the organization as we consider the importance of our strongest asset – our global community of data visualisation volunteers – and how we can strengthen and improve our offerings to non-profit organisations large and small.

**Keywords:** Volunteers, community, non-profit, data visualisation.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Viz For Social Good (VFSG) is an organization independent of Visualization for Social Good @VIS21. It was first proposed in a talk at Tableau Conference in November 2016 by Chloe Tseng, who describes the ethos of the resultant organization as “We are Data Visualisation lovers who help non profits design visualisations promoting social good.”

Developing from her experiences in the Tableau community, Chloe identified that she would often produce personal visualisations in order to improve her skills and gain experience. Tableau community initiatives and personal visualisation projects allowed for feedback, interaction, and showcasing of visualisations. All of these things are fulfilling for those who take part, but left Chloe the nagging doubt that she was missing the opportunity to use her growing skills to do real good.

So what began as an individual ambition and a simple #VizForSocialGood hashtag was quickly taken on by a collection of equally inspired volunteers. By the end of the next year the collection of volunteers had participated in over ten projects for mission driven non-profit organisations by creating visualisations to help them understand and publicise their data. Also by the end of 2017, VFSG had already won a community Silver award at the industry leading Information Is Beautiful Awards.

VFSG has continued to grow, with a community of over 4000 volunteers now signed up. Of our active participants, we have had an estimated amount of 684 visualisations in total from 441 volunteers recorded in our participation tracker (this is likely to be an under-count because some submissions will not have been included in the tracker). We have completed 36 projects in total and continue to run approximately 6-10 projects a year. We have worked with non-profits of all sizes – our non-profits are sometimes working with disadvantaged or deprived people in more prosperous countries (such as Food Bank Japan, Furniture Bank Toronto, or Guy's & St. Thomas Charity in United Kingdom), but more often focused on issues in LMIC countries, such as Bridges to Prosperity (focusing on bridge-building in Rwanda), the United Nations Papua New Guinea, Kiron in Germany (focusing on education opportunities for refugees in Germany and globally) and Crowd2Map, a project mapping rural communities in Tanzania. The projects and clients mentioned previously are just a hand-picked selection to give a general idea of size and scope of our non-profit clients and the regions that they benefit.

At time of writing (July 2021) we are in the final stages of the process of obtaining official non-profit status.



Figure 1: Examples of VFSG visualisations submitted to Information is Beautiful Awards

## 2 THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

Viz For Social Good relies on a passionate community of visualisation volunteers offering their services from anywhere around the globe. The bottom line is that's how we can guarantee that collaborating on a project with our non-profit partners will result in a healthy number of submissions. This healthy base of submissions is a great incentive for non-profit organisations to take part in a project with VFSG in the knowledge that they will have a great pool of visualisation projects to work with.

Our in-built community is also how our volunteers grow in skill, confidence in their ability, and visualisation experience.

The profile of our community is global and diverse in nature, with participants usually early to mid career as they make use of the opportunities to learn and gain experience from each project. Participants are mostly English speaking and therefore from English-speaking communities, though we have a strong active following in India and Japan. We have run two bi-lingual projects (in French and Japanese respectively), with the remainder being conducted in English. Our volunteers are well represented by both male and female participants, and though we don't record this information, it's clear from video calls and face to face meetups that there is not an overwhelming bias in favour of either male or female participants.

Our Board of Directors works hard to ensure that our community of volunteers is well serviced with opportunities and has everything they need in order to participate regularly. A great dataset and interesting challenge on its own will go some way to ensure that we get a good standard of contributions, but as the initiative continues, we rely on our community being involved and engaged in order to avoid too much community attrition.

### 2.1 Benefits for volunteers

Every volunteer wants to help and offer their visualisation services for social good. That's a given, because it's in the title of our organization, and the model is pretty clear. But often people will want something back. We give them opportunities to present back to the client, and opportunities to "win" by having their viz chosen as a favourite for

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\* email address

the client to use. Feedback from volunteers has confirmed that this opportunity to present their

work and interact with clients can be a helpful experience to take back to their professional roles.

Our volunteers have the opportunity to contribute in whichever way they see appropriate to meet the goals of the organization. While we are usually looking for a data visualisation, there is rarely a specific requirement beyond that. This allows for outputs in the form of interactive visualisations, static infographic style posters, maps, data art, or anything our participants deem to be fitting the brief, allowing any volunteer to choose their own path to a final product.

All these benefits come in addition to those mentioned in the introduction of community projects in general. Benefits such as a free dataset, an engaged community, opportunities for feedback, inspiration from fellow participants, and opportunities to showcase each participant's growing portfolio.

### 2.2 Benefits for non-profits

Our non-profit partners will likely have a wide range of visualisations to choose from. The core organization of VFSG may only be a handful of volunteer Board members who are responsible for organization, operation and communication, but the pool of visualisation skill on offer is significantly bigger, and we can generally guarantee that there will be at least 10 potentially usable visualisations to help our non-profits.

The quantity of quality submissions is usually much appreciated by the non-profit clients.

We are usually delighted to see that those they prefer are very often not from those who are considered the most "well known" - the visualisations chosen may depend on whether the client focus is on social media, for internal analytical consumption, or for other forms of publicity. The client may be trying to focus on storytelling, design, analysis, impact or anything else.

### 2.3 Online / Virtual Communities



Figure 2. An online call with VFSG volunteers and our client – Bridges to Prosperity

Online and virtual communities will emerge around every individual project. A handful of regular participants may take part in most projects, with other less regular (and new) participants making up the remainder of each community. Here we see an online call between non-profit client and volunteer participants, always also attended by VFSG board members and our lead client contact, in order to help cement the relationship between VFSG, volunteers, and client for the future.

As a global organization we're fortunate that our virtual collaboration and meeting model was always the default – it's not something that's arrived out of necessity. Volunteers can communicate over Slack where members from our non-profit can join to assist them and answer questions. There are opportunities to review, collaborate and iterate before submission, and we don't tend to find that volunteers submit to "win", rather they submit to learn, help and add skills and outputs to their own portfolio.

Our most successful projects are often presented to clients over two time zones to take account of our popularity in the APAC (Asia-Pacific) region including Japan, Singapore and Australia.

## 2.4 Face to Face Communities



Figure 3. Online community gathering in Berlin

Face-to-face community events are understandably on hold but are likely to be part of our working practices if and when times return to a pre-COVID state. We have the opportunity of running face to face hackathons in local city chapters, and hosting events and workshops at events such as Tableau conferences. Some of our most engaged community volunteers have taken on the role of Chapter Leaders with the opportunity to organize local hackathon events. These have been fantastic experiences for participants in the form of opportunities to meet each other face to face while offering further publicity to our organization. The downside of local hackathons can be that people gain from the networking, experience and engagement, but if attendees don't have enough time to get to a final visualised project, they will most likely not continue it after the event. It's not clear whether investment in face-to-face hackathons is always worth the investment for final output.

Conference events have the advantage of attracting new participants – the face-to-face downsides can be the same but the proportion of participants brand new to Viz for Social Good is likely to be significantly higher. Many of our most consistent participants including current board members were first introduced to the organization via a face-to-face introduction as part of a wider event or conference.

### 3 THE NEXT PHASE

Viz For Social Good have recently announced their latest Board of Directors and Board Committee members in conjunction with a website refresh and branding change. We are using this opportunity to look into our future and challenge our current model of working in order to improve our initial success. With the knowledge of a solid community of regular participants behind us, we want to improve the offering we can give both to our non-profit partners and our loyal participants.

#### 3.1 What has worked well

VFSG has good brand awareness among the Tableau Community. Helped by its longevity it remains a well-known community opportunity to participate in a visualisation challenge whilst promoting social good and helping non-profits. With on average 6-10 projects a year, our list of non-profits that we have helped has grown consistently.

#### 3.2 What we can do even better

Our recent informal talk at the Data Visualization Society's Outlier Conference was a first attempt to reach a wider audience of data visualisation professionals and open the discussion around social good visualisation. Are there improvements we can make so that we retain our best volunteers and develop better relationships with our clients?

##### 3.2.1 Reach out of our bubble

It's easy to work to the "If it ain't broke", don't fix it maxim. Viz For Social Good has grown from the first initial volunteers in early 2017 to a healthy community with over 1000 members. But we have the opportunity to reconsider how we work to really make a difference. Our initial roots from within the Tableau community mean it's not surprising that the vast majority of our submissions are using Tableau, but we need to proactively look to include those using other tools. We can reach out better to communities outside of Tableau and within the wider field of data visualisation. We also have the opportunity to learn from the practices of other experts in the field. We promote VFSG to potential volunteers as an opportunity to join a successful organization that helps non-profits, but we don't promote it so well within the wider visualisation community or non-profit community in order to further raise awareness and benefit from expertise in the field.

##### 3.2.2 Work on client relationships

We are looking to improve long-term client relationships. Our regular contact can often end once the visualisations are handed over and presentations delivered. We believe we can better help our clients with better post-event communications and assistance. What can we do next? How can you interpret and use our visualisations? Do our clients and/or their stakeholders need further education on

how to interpret their data and can we help them? Is there a second phase of communication we can help with, or a follow-up dataset that needs analysis? For non-profits, we want to scale our impact by not only designing visualisations for them but also strengthening their skills through presentations and training. The key to improving our offering is in looking further than just data visualisations.

In terms of client relationships, we also want to work harder on the initial process – determine whether or not the partnership is likely to be a success so we can eliminate potential future pain points. Our checklist for potential clients needs to include criteria such as:

Does the non-profit have charity status?

Can the non-profit supply reliable, sharable, clean, open data?

Does the non-profit have a clear problem statement and goals?

Does the non-profit have capacity to communicate daily via Slack and answer questions of our volunteer community?

Meeting these criteria will avoid potential pain points we have encountered in the past around data quality, project direction and communications

##### 3.2.3 Improve engagement

Our model works on the principle of visualizing data supplied from clients which is clean, perhaps incorporating published open data sources where appropriate. We have the opportunity to do more than this. Offering education to non-profits, around data literacy for example, represents an opportunity to cement relationships and remain in contact.

In addition, partnerships do not need to be limited to those with our non-profit clients. Cementing agreements or partnerships with software companies, visualisation tools, or other community initiatives with similar missions to our own, will allow for additional experiences and engagement opportunities that go further beyond just taking part in a visualisation exercise.

In short, we are looking to provide volunteers more growth opportunities. In the future this may be through in-person events and opportunities, but in the more immediate future this may be through continuing involvement in virtual events.

In terms of our volunteer community, maintaining an engaged community is also a chance to minimise the number of "one-off" contributions. Whereas this is not so much of an issue for our non-profit partners, more "repeat contributions" will lead not only to a larger pool of regular contributors but a greater chance that our volunteers will widen the scope of their own skills and contributions. The variety of our non-profits

should increase the chance of a better “fit” of project and volunteer which we have a much better chance of maximising if our volunteers are contributing regularly, so we continually aim to make sure that our volunteers have more to gain from a continued relationship with Viz for Social Good.

#### **4 CONCLUSION**

We welcome the opportunity to present the story of Viz For Social Good and share in our journey over four years. All of our successful projects are based on a large, engaged and thriving community and we continue to strive to ensure that this remains the most important element of our working model, while inviting discussion and expertise from within the workshop’s attendees on how to maintain and develop opportunities for our volunteers and clients.