

VSO Policies and Guidelines

Institutional Mandate

The Vincentian Solidarity Office (VSO) was established in 2002 to mobilize resources for the works and needs of the Congregation of the Mission (CM) in serving the poor throughout the world. The VSO is a program of service of the General Curia established by the Superior General and his General Council on June 15, 2002, and opened for service on January 1, 2003. It serves as the International Development Office of the Vincentians and operates as a not-for-profit charitable organization in the USA, organized under the laws of the State of Missouri. The Organization is exempt from federal income taxes under Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code based on its affiliation to the Congregation of the Mission and publication in the Official Catholic Directory.

Vision and Mission:

Vision: Building a Vincentian sense of Solidarity for and with the poor towards enhanced services, improved well-being and quality of life, equitable development and social transformation.

Mission: To assist the Congregation of the Mission (CM) with mobilizing and managing resources and building capacity and accountability for its work of evangelization and service of the poor.

Core Values and Principles:

Vincentian Option for the Marginalized: living up to St. Vincent's heritage, mission and preferential option for the evangelization and services of the more 'abandoned' poor (disadvantaged, marginalized, vulnerable sectors).

Solidarity and Subsidiarity: building partnership networks through resource-sharing and collaboration in integral development that involves and empowers the most affected sectors.

Patrimony of the Poor: cultivating responsible stewardship, transparency and accountability for the resources of and for the poor (resources that belong to the poor as their patrimony for development).

Goals and Services:

Serving as the Development Arm of the Vincentians worldwide, the VSO provides the following intermediary support and mission services to the different Vincentian provinces and missions:

1. Supporting projects for evangelization and development: assists in the design, planning and funding of the implementation of initiatives that help the Vincentians to respond to emerging needs and improve their ministries in the mission, formation and socio-pastoral services to the more disadvantaged sectors.

2. Promoting resource leveraging processes: builds up and administers the Vincentian Solidarity Fund (VSF) through internal fund generation from the Vincentian networks to leverage external funding resources from donor agencies and development partners for co-funding based on 'matching fund schemes'.

3. Building inter-provincial solidarity for the poor: brokers solidarity among Vincentian provinces through resource sharing and collaboration networks where several provinces provide annual contributions to enable other provinces with less resources to implement micro-projects that directly benefit the marginalized.

4. Mentorship in project development and grant management: provides oversight, mentoring and technical assistance at each stage of the Project Management Cycle and assists in building capacity and accountability for nurturing partnerships with donors and development agencies: designing viable projects, exploring funding sources and resources, writing grant proposals, monitoring and documentation, communicating and reporting in compliance with the terms of grant agreements.

5. Promoting a Systemic Change perspective: consolidates the benefits of delivered services and builds up the transformative impact to address the structural roots of poverty and vulnerability.

Operational Guidelines, Policies and Procedures

A. Pre-Application Phase

1. The Superior General and the General Curia set the criteria of eligibility and determine the provinces, vice provinces and missions that can apply for grant assistance and services through the VSO. The list of Vincentians Institutions that are eligible for VSO service can be found on page 2 of the VSO application which is found here: <https://cmglobal.org/vso-en/apply-for-service/>.

2. The VSO provides the following types of grants:

- **Micro-Project Grant:** A micro-project grant is a grant of up to \$5,000 (USD) for a small-scale, impact-oriented project that can be implemented within a short period of time to address compelling needs of the poor. *Please see Annex 1 for the full description of the Micro-Project Grant priorities.*
- **Project Grant:** A project grant is awarded to a larger scale project that will typically require the VSO to apply to outside agencies and solicit funding from provinces and individual donors.

3. Prior to application, confreres from eligible Vincentian Institutions are encouraged to communicate with the VSO their interest (Expression of Interest), inquiry (Letter of Inquiry), or brief project descriptions (Project Concept Notes) for possible assistance. While doing preliminary correspondence serves as a standard procedure or 'best practice' for contacting many grant agencies, this can also facilitate the level setting of expectations and will further enable the VSO to assist in developing the project concepts and design.

4. All project-related communications are to be directed to the VSO to avoid the tendency to request funds directly from the Superior General, the Econome General, or seek direct support from the designated confreres who assist in the fund-raising.

5. Sending applications to other funding agencies prior to applying to the VSO is not allowed, particularly if the applications pledge the VSO's commitment to co-finance without prior informed consent.

6. Prior to applying to the VSO, eligible applicants will go through a pre-qualifying process by filling out a 'pre-application form' that will help determine which application they need to complete for the specific type of project. A checklist will be provided to assist in: qualifying the scope and limitation of what the VSO can and cannot support (Project types, scale and budget thresholds); accounting for previous projects that the VSO has supported in the past (Project Review and Inventory); initially assessing the viability/non-viability and identifying major implications for project-specific budget planning.

B. Application Process

1. Only provinces, vice-provinces, and missions of the Congregation of the Mission that have been determined and listed to be eligible for VSO service by the Superior General and the General Council can apply for VSO assistance for a project or for a VSF micro-project grant.

2. Applications can be submitted to the VSO at any time, without any deadline, using the VSO application form. The application form and guidelines can be accessed online at <https://cmglobal.org/vso-en/apply-for-service/> or requested by email (VSO1@cmphlsvs.org)

3. The VSO will not process applications coming from Vincentian Institutions that are not on the 'eligibility list', Dioceses and Archdioceses (even under Vincentian Bishops) and non-Vincentian Institutions.

4. Applications for grant assistance should be submitted directly to the VSO for processing and not to the Superior General or the Curia.

5. The application will be reviewed based on the standing criteria set by the Curia and will be further assessed based on feasibility, financial viability and development impact. Being on the 'eligibility list' with the official endorsement of the Provincial/Superior does not guarantee outright entitlement for VSO services and funding support.

6. In the spirit of Vincentian solidarity and subsidiarity, priority attention may be given to applications from remote missions or for initiatives that respond to compelling needs.

7. The eligibility list and criteria will be periodically revisited and amended to respond to emerging social changes and 'signs of the times'.

8. The application should provide the essential information as required in a fully filled out VSO application form. Sending Proformas and Bill of Quantities (BOQs) without complete project descriptions cannot be considered a complete or proper application.

9. The VSO will not process applications for projects or needs that do not qualify within the scope of what the VSO can fund.

Projects that cannot be funded:

- natural disaster relief or crisis-intervention;
- individual scholarships for students or seminarians;
- staff salaries, administrative costs, or operating costs;

- projects or needs that the local province can/should be providing;
- projects that have already been funded by the Curia or other donors;
- similar needs that have just been recently addressed or funded by the VSO;
- projects that have already been started or completed;
- big projects with unrealistic scales and unreasonable budgets;
- projects that will take long period of years to implement;
- projects that do not have a reasonable chance of securing grants or are difficult to fundraise for.

10. In the spirit of Vincentian solidarity and subsidiarity, limits will be set on the number of applications that an eligible Vincentian Institution can send relative to: project scale and budget size; unfinished/incomplete projects and pending applications; manifested capacity and accountability to deliver and implement.

11. The VSO will review and assess each application on a project-per-project basis, hence, sending multiple or volume applications altogether will not help in expediting the process.

12. In the spirit of Vincentian solidarity and subsidiarity, the Curia will set a policy to determine when, how often and how many times an eligible province can apply for assistance for vehicles.

13. Application for large scale construction and infrastructure projects should be discerned critically as a last resort only after exploring other cost-saving alternatives.

14. Where applicable, applicants should declare possible 'conflicts of interests' in the application (e.g., undue benefits or favors for particular confreres or relatives in contracting services).

15. The VSO encourages the eligible Vincentian Institutions to nominate focal persons for VSO project applications, and where applicable, the VSO should be updated or informed of any change in representation.

16. The VSO will periodically clear up the 'legacy' files and cancel pending applications.

B.1 Applying to other Agencies

1. The VSO respects and supports the option of eligible Vincentian Institutions to submit applications to other funding agencies. This provides a strategic step in building capacity and accountability for partnership with donor agencies and development partners and potential for long-term sustainability. However, considering the sensitivity and standards of the donors' market, some terms and conditions need to be followed, in particular, for applications that involve the VSO's intermediary role in co-financing or other related support.

2. The VSO does not encourage nor allows the practice of:

- sending applications to other funding agencies prior to applying to the VSO and assuming or committing the support of the VSO without prior notice and informed consent;
- sending the same application to several agencies either for more funding possibilities or for a proposed multi-funding scheme that commits the VSO as a co-funder;

- sending substandard or ‘weak’ applications to other agencies, while referring to the VSO to gain possible traction;
- committing the VSO as a co-funder without proper communication and informed consent;
- not providing the VSO full and updated information and documents about the application status, results or responses (e.g., approval or non-approval letters and related documents);
- requesting additional funds from donor agencies beyond the approved amount after project implementation begins.

C. Review and ‘Due Diligence’ Assessment

1. Incomplete applications that do not provide the basic information (project descriptions) and relevant supporting documents (proforma receipts, bill of quantities, etc.) will not be reviewed and assessed. The official endorsement (signature of the Visitor, Vice Visitor, Mission Superior) cannot compensate for an incomplete application, nor will it warrant an automatic approval.
2. The applicant will be notified and advised on the need to provide the missing information and will be given a period of 3 months to be able to complete the application and update the VSO on any emerging changes in budget and other aspects of the proposed project.
3. The application will be given a filing reference number for ‘unassigned application’ while the VSO communicates and follows up with the applicant on the process of completing it. The application number is solely for filing and referencing purposes and does not signify an assigned project reference number.
4. The proper or completed application will be reviewed based on the standing criteria set by the Curia and will be further assessed based on feasibility, financial viability and development impact.

D. Cancellation of Application

1. The VSO reserves the right to annul or cancel the application after a prescribed period of completion has lapsed without any response, interest or initiative from the applicant: 3 months for micro-projects, 3 months for projects.
2. A cancellation notice will be sent by the VSO for pending applications. The applicant is given the option to resubmit a complete application, but the process will have to start all over again.
3. The VSO will periodically clear up the ‘legacy’ files and cancel pending applications.

E. Deliberation and Decision

E.1 Disapproval and Non-Acceptance

1. The VSO reserves the right to reject or disapprove applications that do not measure up to the set project criteria of completion and potentials for fundability.

2. The applicant will be informed in writing of the negative decision and the specific reasons why the application cannot be funded. The VSO will likewise inform the Superior General of such a decision.
3. For applications submitted to other agencies, the VSO or the applicant (where applicable) should communicate about the unfavorable responses from the agencies.

E.2 Deferral and Reconsideration

The VSO reserves the right to defer applications that can/will be reconsidered in future deliberation relative to the availability of funds (micro-projects); potentials for adjusting and improving fundability (projects).

F. Approval and Acceptance

1. The VSO will assign corresponding reference number to an application for Micro-project grant that has been 'Approved' (VSF #) and a Project that has been 'Accepted' for VSO service, particularly for multi-funding or matching fund schemes (VSO #).
2. The applicant will be informed in writing of the favorable result of the application. The proposed project cannot be started before or even upon approval. This is to avoid the tendency to preempt the approval or to advance spending prior to the actual receipt of allocated funds.
3. The approved finalized Project Document, in particular, the Budget and Financing Plans will be the basis for the implementation, monitoring and evaluation and accountability for the project. Any further modification to the budget and major aspects of the project will not be allowed except in cases where there is reasonable cause for making adjustments. This must be negotiated with and approved by the VSO and supported with the necessary documentation (such as new BOQ) and justification.
4. The same project that has been approved and accepted by the VSO cannot be used for applying to other agencies.

G. Funding and Resource Mobilization

1. The 'approved' micro-project is to be funded entirely from the Vincentian Solidarity Fund (VSF) through a micro-grant award sourced internally from the generous contributions of several provinces in solidarity with the Vincentian work and mission beyond their own institutions.
2. Funding the 'accepted' project will involve further fund mobilization and co-financing arrangements based on the VSO matching fund scheme. The VSO will/can provide a maximum of 50 % of the total project cost as 'matching fund' which will only be made available when the other 50 % of matching funds are secured from other funding sources, including and preferably from other grant agencies.
3. The matching funds from the VSF should be proportionally allocated for the different types of projects to ensure the balanced distribution of financial resources for all the diverse aspects of Vincentian mission, work of evangelization and services of the poor.

4. The VSO matching fund scheme requires the provision of reasonable 'local counterpart', monetary or in-kind, particularly, for large scale projects. The applicant is expected to honor the commitment to provide for the declared/ targeted contribution and is likewise encouraged to explore available resources or possible sources of support locally from the government, the private sectors and other potential donors of good standing (3rd party contributions). Funds generated as contributions for the project are to be accounted for to maintain the trust and support of the local donors.
5. The VSO will coordinate and check with the Curia regarding support that may have been provided, in particular, to subsidized International Missions and new Missions. The grant applicant is also expected to inform the VSO of funds from the Curia that may be intended for the same purpose so that the risk of double funding can be avoided.
6. The VSO will work to secure the funds requested and needed for the 'Accepted' Project by: exploring and investigating potential funding sources and grant windows; providing assistance with writing grant proposals; submitting grant proposals to the appropriate funding organizations; keeping track of grant proposals submitted to various funding organizations; handling communication and correspondence with funding organizations regarding these grant proposals.
7. The VSO cannot guarantee that the project will be funded by the grant agencies. Success in securing external or third-party project grants depends on several factors such as: the type of project, the project cost and amount of money requested; the areas of support, thematic interest or geographical scope of the funding agencies.
8. The applicant is expected to cooperate with the VSO in supplying key information about the project, letters of endorsement or commitment of support from the Bishops and other institutional heads as well as other supporting documents required for particular types of projects.

H. Fund Release and Accountability

1. A letter of Project Approval/ Acceptance will be sent to the Institutional Head (Provincial, Vice Provincial, Mission Superior) to confirm the awarding of the project grant based on the availability of funds and the agreed funding plan. The Econome General is provided with a copy of the approval/acceptance letter for his reference.
2. The VSO will communicate with the Econome General regarding the transfer of funds with a 'fund transfer request form' that spells out the key details of the project grant. The Provincial or Institutional Head is also furnished a copy of the fund transfer form as a reference for directly requesting the Econome General for the transfer of the project grant. The Institutional Head himself should request for the fund transfer by providing the details of the Institutional Bank account. A back-up process may be considered in case he is not available which may cause undue delay in the availability of funds for the project.
3. The fund will be transferred directly from the VSF Account of the Curia to the Institutional Account provided by the Provincial or Institutional Head. The fund transfer should be confirmed and promptly communicated to the Econome General and the VSO by sending the appropriate bank document of remittance and taking note of the exchange rate and bank charges. Any delay in the bank transfer should also be communicated.

4. Project grants from external donors are normally remitted to the VSF Curia account. But in case the grant is sent directly to the project implementor, the VSO should be duly notified in writing with a copy of the document of fund transfer from the donor or the bank. This will help maintain transparency and accountability as well as facilitate the accounting for the matching funds. Funds that are received directly from external donors cannot be used until the full financing plan for the project is finalized with the fund transfer from the Curia.

5. The transferred/received project funds should be made available once the project is ready to commence in keeping with the target timelines. The project implementor will be accountable for delays in implementation due to issues of funding availability.

6. The funds are to be used solely for the intended project based on the approved purposes under agreed terms and conditions. A 'Grant Agreement' is issued, particularly for projects with external funding and large-scale projects, to set the parameters of accountability for the project funds and implementation.

7. The project implementor is accountable for keeping clear records of financial transactions and providing proper financial documents for the use of funds. Unspent/unused funds are likewise to be duly accounted for.

I. Project Implementation

1. The Project should be implemented based on target timelines and an agreed budget plan. The signed Grant Agreement serves as a key reference for project implementation and budget management. The VSO must be informed and consulted for any major adjustment that needs to be made.

2. Proper risk assessment should be done prior to starting the implementation. The project implementor should be able to explain any delays in implementation.

3. The budget should also be subject to risk assessment and when applicable, a contingency fund should be included. Any budget issues should be disclosed before escalating to a major budgetary deficit. If rising costs are jeopardizing the project, the project manager must inform the VSO before informing the other funders.

4. Where applicable, the VSO should be informed or advised if new contractors are engaged other than the original contractors.

5. Any changes to the contract or the bill of quantities must be sent to the VSO.

J. Monitoring and Evaluation

1. The Project implementor should monitor the project as it progresses through documented transactions and proper bookkeeping and should be able to provide updated information based on the reporting schedule.

2. A functional oversight mechanism should be set up for monitoring and ensuring the regularity and quality of contracted services and major deliverables.

K. Project Completion

1. The Project implementor is expected to complete the project as proposed. Failure to start and fully implement the project is not acceptable.
2. Long/extended delays in completing the project should be avoided as this can have serious budgetary implications. Funds cannot be totally expended without completing the project nor can the project be stretched out over years.
3. In some justifiable cases, a 'no cost extension' may be negotiated and granted to complete the project beyond the declared project duration without additional funding and any alteration in the project plan.
4. A timely completion of the project is expected, but this does not warrant any expectation of another phase even with a new application shortly after the final report. Every completed project is considered a stand-alone project that serves its purpose upon completion.
5. A 'Project Completion Letter' will be sent upon submission and acceptance of the final report and proper accounting of project funds. The 'close' letter marks the official completion of the VSO services for a particular project and the handing over of the tasks of the maintenance of sustainability of the project to the local institution.

L. Reporting and Documentation

1. The project implementor is expected to provide timely and adequate information on the project by completing a Final Report (narrative and financial) using the VSO Report and Evaluation template.
2. For projects with external funding, interim or final reports are to be submitted based on prescribed timelines and formats. Failure to do so reflects the inability to comply with Reporting and Accountability policies and can undermine the relations with certain funders and the extended/broader donors' network.
3. The project implementor should be able to provide any additional information needed to fulfill the reporting requirements for grants awarded by external funding agencies.
4. The VSO does not normally require unspent funds to be returned after the full completion of the project. Excess funds can be negotiated to be spent for additional needs to enhance the project. The project implementor can have the discretion to wisely use any small amount of unused funds (e.g., \$250 of a \$10,000 project).
5. Reports are expected to be submitted based on the reporting timelines set out in the Project Approval/ Acceptance Letter and Grant Agreement. Timely reminders will be sent by the VSO to avoid falling into habitual tardiness that can have adverse implications on future grant applications.
6. Submitting reports directly to external funding agencies is not strictly prohibited. But the project implementor is encouraged and expected to coordinate first with the VSO to enhance the quality and accuracy of the reports.

M. Post-Project Sustainability/ Scalability

1. The project implementor is accountable for the maintenance and upkeep as well as the long-term sustainability of the completed project. Such an obligation should be seriously considered right from the initial stage of developing the project design and application.
2. The VSO does not tolerate the failure to provide for the proper maintenance and upkeep of the project and any attempt to apply for the same project again.
3. Large scale construction and infrastructure projects are not to be considered purely pastoral, humanitarian or welfare projects, but rather, are to be treated as real assets or investments in property development. Contracts and legal agreements are to be secured to guarantee the long-term sustainability and fair return on investment and benefits.
4. The benefits and services of the project should be optimized and preferably extended to the poor and grassroots communities in the locality. The long-term social benefits can be scaled up towards broader transformative impact and the envisioned systemic change.
5. The project implementor should take account of and ensure that the project does not have or contribute to adverse impacts on the environment.
6. The VSO will assist in identifying good practices and innovative projects and assessing potentials for replicability and scalability.

Annex 1: Micro-Project Grant Priorities (Updated August 21, 2023)

The Vincentian Solidarity Office (VSO) aims to maximize the opportunities of the Micro-Project scheme for building development impact on the lives of the poor and vulnerable sectors. Introduced in 2005, funds for the \$5,000 maximum grant per micro-project are pooled from the annual contributions of several provinces that commit to support the works of fellow provinces with less resources for their ministries. Over the years, micro-projects have helped confreres respond to emerging needs and improve their socio-pastoral services to the more disadvantaged sectors.

Given the invaluable benefits of the Micro-Project scheme, the VSO has also come to recognize the emerging risk of minimizing or reducing its opportunities to primarily addressing logistical needs of eligible Vincentian institutions. Moreover, the VSO is impelled by a need to redirect an apparent misperception of the 'one micro-project per year' policy as a mandatory annual entitlement even for routine requests or repetition of similar applications. There seems to be tacit time pressure to apply for the micro-grant due to the limited availability of the annual funds.

The VSO is introducing new guidelines to amplify the potential benefits of the micro-project scheme. Preferential option will be given to micro-projects that can serve as 'catalyst projects' in bringing about significant effects in the immediate and long-term. The micro-grants will be primarily allocated for 'catalyst projects' that can:

- deliver direct services and immediate benefits to the poor,
- address prevalent needs and concerns of the vulnerable sectors,
- initiate social development efforts at grassroots level,
- mobilize collective participation and involvement of key stakeholders,
- contribute to grassroots community building,
- stimulate significant change in the living conditions, public attitudes, power relations, policies and access to opportunities for the poor,
- demonstrate innovative approaches and alternative technologies,
- help address the systemic roots of poverty and inequality,
- build up transformative impact towards the envisioned systemic change,
- be aligned to Global Development Goals (UN-SDGs),
- advance and scale up the Vincentian work of solidarity with and for the poor.

The VSO Micro-project scheme will focus on 'priority sectors' that are in line with the UN-Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDGs), particularly: Environment and Food Security, Clean Energy and alternative sources, Socio-Economic promotion, Education, Health Care, Water and Sanitation, Social protection and inclusion of the vulnerable groups (women, children, youth, disabled, elderly, migrants and refugees). The micro-grant cannot be used for emergency or relief assistance and individualized benefits (e.g. school fees and scholarships), administrative and running costs, expenditures incurred before the approval of the micro-project.