

# Independent Evaluation of the Australian Volunteers Program

Final Report



April 2021

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*Front cover images: DFAT Australian Volunteers Program website*

# Acknowledgements

The evaluation team consisted of: Team Leader / Lead Evaluator Scott Bayley; Organisational Development Specialist / Evaluator, Susan Hayes; and Research Associates, Jacqui Lord (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) and Jake Phelan (Alinea Whitelum).

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## Executive summary

For over 60 years the Australian Government has supported Australians to volunteer overseas. From 2018–2022 the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) intended (prior to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic) to invest up to \$190 million to place more than 1000 Australian volunteers a year with over 600 partner organisations in 26 countries across the Indo-Pacific.

AVI manage the Australian Volunteers Program (the program) on behalf of DFAT and deliver it in consortium with Cardno Emerging Markets and Alinea Whitelum. At the end of five years (2022), the program aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Partner organisations are supported by Australia to progress their development objectives
- The public in Australia better appreciates the value of international volunteering
- Australian volunteers gain professionally and personally.

The program demonstrates Australia's commitment to supporting the Sustainable Development Goals through volunteering. The program enables Australia to increase the footprint of its development program and multiply the impact of its development investments. In line with DFAT's strategic priorities, the volunteer program is likely to continue as a significant part of Australia's development program.

### Evaluation purpose and scope

The aim of this evaluation is to account for Australia's investment through the program, and to improve what future investment can achieve. It aims to:

- Demonstrate program achievements to Australia's partners, stakeholders, and taxpayers
- Inform future design for the program particularly in a post-COVID-19 environment
- Inform decisions about whether the program and the term of the current service provider/contractor should be extended by the second term option of up to five years.

The evaluation was backward looking—July 2017 to 2020 including the transition phase—to provide evidence of the outcomes achieved, and forward looking to provide recommendations on the policy and strategic foresight of the program.

The evaluation aimed to focus on volunteering assignments across all 26 countries, noting 40% of assignments are in the Pacific region.

This evaluation therefore:

- Focused at the strategic level when looking at all activities within the 26 countries of operation
- Focused on certain types of impacts from the program's three key impact areas as well as key sectors (health, education, etc.) that will offer an opportunity to examine specific strands of interest e.g. different sectoral impacts and partnership structures
- Focused on certain assignments types that will offer an opportunity to examine specific strands of interest e.g. different volunteering modalities
- Sought to ensure that a wide representation of voices and opinions are gathered, particularly local populations
- Undertook high-level analysis of the program to provide insights into the efficiency of governance arrangements and program management systems
- Undertook five country level case studies which captured a range of country-level stakeholder opinions and examined two partner organisations per country.

### Key evaluation questions

The evaluation is guided by key evaluation questions organised under four objectives:

**Objective 1: Relevance.** To examine the extent to which the program's design remains relevant.

- How well does the design of the program respond to and continue to remain relevant to the strategic objectives of Australia's development assistance program and country strategies?
- To what extent are the program's activities and outcomes aligned with the needs and priorities of partner organisations?
- Is the program's logic 'fit for purpose' and being used to inform program management?

**Objective 2: Effectiveness.** To examine the extent to which the program is making progress towards its three end of program outcomes.

- Have partner organisations sustainably strengthened their capacity?
- To what extent does the Australian public better appreciate the value of international volunteering?

- How have volunteers gained professionally and personally?
- Has the change to unified branding under the Australian Aid banner delivered greater recognition for the program?
- What do stakeholders' perceptions tell us about the program's contribution to Australia's soft power?

**Objective 3: Efficiency.** To review the efficiency of the governance model and program management arrangements.

- To what extent does the program represent value for money?
- To what extent do corporate governance arrangements support efficient decision making and program management?

**Objective 4: Future direction.** To inform future directions of the program.

- To what extent has the program been affected by COVID-19 and other issues?
- How is the program adapting to its changing external environment?
- What do stakeholders perceive as the key challenges and risks facing the program in the future?
- What strategies, alternative modalities and approaches could be considered to strengthen the program's resilience and sustainability into the future?

## Summary of findings

Since the program commenced, it has been very effective in supporting partner organisations to achieve their capacity development goals across a range of impact areas. Partner organisations consulted in this evaluation were unequivocal in their view that participation in the program strengthened their capacity.



Worked with  
over 900 partner  
organisations



26 countries



1,775 assignments



1,410 volunteers

The evaluation found that the program is highly relevant to the development needs of overseas partner organisations and generally relevant to the strategic objectives of Australia's development assistance program and country strategies. At the same time, the program's external environment has experienced significant changes in recent years. These include the emergence of non-traditional donors, new forms of volunteering, budget pressures on the Australian aid program,

Australia's evolving foreign policy priorities, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite being significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the program has adapted well. This included the safe repatriation of volunteers and a quick pivot to remote volunteering. Partner organisations were continuously supported through remote volunteering and direct grants.



Repatriated 464  
volunteers due  
to COVID-19



150 remote  
volunteer  
assignments

Stakeholders provided a range of different views on the extent to which the program should prioritise the benefits to volunteers, strengthening the Australian public's support for volunteering, building the capacity of partner organisations, enhancing Australia's soft power and public diplomacy, or advancing the social and economic development of partner countries.

The evaluation team found the program logic and monitoring, evaluation and learning framework to be of a suitable quality and consistent with DFAT's standards. However, there is an opportunity to further improve the program's overall purpose, end of program outcomes and its logic.

In examining the extent to which the program is making progress towards its end of program outcomes, the evaluators are mindful that the program is four years into its five-year contract period and for almost a third of this period, program activities and outcomes were somewhat limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The program's strategic partnerships with Australian organisations have to date been very successful in achieving sustainable capacity development outcomes in various sectors including health, climate action, agriculture, and inclusive economic growth.

The unified branding under the Australian Aid banner is very slowly improving recognition of the program. The elimination of a competition environment for volunteers and partner organisations in host countries has allowed an increased focus on well-designed assignments. The program also contributes to some degree to Australia's 'soft power' in its various interpretations, but this is difficult to measure.

Generally, volunteers and partner organisations perceive the program to provide good value for

money (VfM), as volunteers provide excellent contributions to the work and capacity of partner organisations. DFAT agreed for this evaluation to coordinate with and incorporate findings from the program's commissioned VfM assessment. However, the delay in presenting the draft assessment meant the inconsistency between some findings of the draft VfM report and the evaluation team's findings was unable to be reconciled. The evaluation team did not have time to change the scope of the evaluation, find other sources to inform this evaluation, or provide comprehensive analysis of value for money.

There is general agreement amongst program staff that after some 'teething problems' the program's consortium model is now working effectively. There are clear lines of responsibility and the model draws on the complementary strengths of the three consortium members.

The program has comprehensive governance arrangements in place. This complex system is coordinated through regular dialogue with DFAT, the program's annual planning processes, and the program management group (PMG), which has overall responsibility. While the program management group has a thorough terms of reference, it is not fulfilling the full range of functions expected from a peak governance body.

There was agreement among all stakeholders interviewed that COVID-19 presents the most significant risk and challenge for the program at this time of restricted travel. While some other challenges were raised, most stakeholders were preoccupied with the flow-on impact and associated challenges from the pandemic.

The Innovation Fund provides an established mechanism to adapt the program to external drivers and internal desire for change. It provides the opportunity for DFAT and the program to pursue alternative volunteering modalities that support partner organisations through more locally led volunteering. It is not suggested that such alternative modalities replace the existing program design but that, in countries where it is feasible, they might supplement the existing model.

### Summary of recommendations

The findings of this evaluation informed 9 recommendations for DFAT, the program and program management group (PMG).

**Recommendation 1:** That DFAT and the program work together to refresh the program's outcomes and logic. This is an opportunity to reposition the program in an evolving global context, to consider the benefits of alternative volunteering modalities,

and test and recalibrate priorities to help to build a consensus amongst program stakeholders.

**Recommendation 2:** That current strategic partnerships are expanded, and new partnerships are explored to identify and scale up new volunteering modalities, multiply capacity development outcomes, and increase the program's profile and outreach through leveraging international networks.

**Recommendation 3:** That consideration is given to establishing appropriate, consultative, or advisory mechanisms in-country to engage government, peak bodies representing the private sector, small and medium enterprises, and civil society with DFAT and program managers at a strategic level.

**Recommendation 4:** That in refreshing and recalibrating the program's outcomes and logic, particular attention is given to reviewing two of the three EoPOs, '*The public in Australia better appreciates the value of international volunteering*' and '*Australian volunteers gain professionally and personally*', to ensure logical articulation into program goals, a description of the desired future 'end state' and compliance with DFAT standards.

**Recommendation 5:** That DFAT examine the value for money assessment and build on it by commissioning relevant follow-up work as required.

**Recommendation 6:** That DFAT and senior program staff work together to address the role of the PMG to ensure that it is fulfilling all of its mandated functions and DFAT is receiving an appropriate level of performance assurance and transparency commensurate with its role as the program's funding body.

**Recommendation 7:** That DFAT and senior program staff work together to update the program's approach to risk management to include all main categories of risk.

**Recommendation 8:** In refreshing the program logic and End of Program Outcomes, thought should also be given to how best to incorporate alternative modalities within the program logic, and how success or failure of such modalities is to be determined.

**Recommendation 9:** That the contribution of the Innovation Fund to achievement of program goals is clarified and given more visibility in the program logic and the fund continues to be used as a vehicle to help the program stay strategic in approach and remain relevant as wider social issues shape the aid sector. In doing so there needs to be commitment not only to piloting alternative volunteering modalities but to mainstreaming them within the program.

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# Acronyms

ACEM	Australasian College of Emergency Medicine
ACIAR	Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research
AHP	Australian Humanitarian Partnership
AVI	Australian Volunteers International
AVID	Australian Volunteers for International Development
CBM	Christian Blind Mission (Australia)
COVID-19	Novel coronavirus
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DFAT	Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
EoPOs	End of Program Outcomes
EWB	Engineers Without Borders
FGDs	Focus group discussions
GEDSI	Gender equality, disability, and social inclusion
HR	Human resources
ICMT	In-country management team
KEQ	Key evaluation question
LGBTIQA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer or Questioning, Asexual and others
MEL	Monitoring, evaluation, and learning
MIS	Management information system
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PMG	Program management group
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SIMPLER	Solomon Islands Medical Partnerships for Learning, Education and Research
SMEs	Small and medium enterprises
UTS	University of Technology Sydney
VfM	Value for money
Vol4Dev	Volunteering for Development



# Chapter 1: Overview of the Australian Volunteers Program

The Australian Government has supported Australians to volunteer overseas since the 1960s. The Australian Volunteers Program (the program) is the current iteration in Australian Government support for international volunteering as part of Australia's aid program. Under the program, the Australian Government will invest up to \$190 million over five years (2018–2022). The program aims to match a diverse group of skilled Australians with partner organisations in 26 countries<sup>1</sup> across the Indo-Pacific, with 40% of assignments in the Pacific and Timor-Leste.

The program works across multiple sectors with over 600 partner organisations a year to build links and diverse partnerships with individuals, communities, and organisations, strengthening Australia's relationship across our region and globally. Australian volunteers use a capacity building approach to support partner organisations to achieve their own development goals.

At the end of 2017 the Australian Volunteers for International Development program (AVID) concluded. The new Australian Volunteers Program replaced AVID and set out a potential ten-year phase of volunteering from January 2018 to December 2027.

The program design considered recommendations from the 2014 Office of Development Effectiveness independent evaluation of AVID. The evaluation found that volunteers make an effective contribution to the Australian Government's development and public diplomacy objectives. All evaluation recommendations were accepted, which led to a focus on further improving the development effectiveness, efficiency, and value-for-money of the program. This included consolidating AVID into a single volunteer program and retiring the youth stream: Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development.

The program design aims to place more than 1000 Australian volunteers each year in 26 countries. The program is managed by a single contractor, Australian Volunteers International (AVI), which delivers the program in consortium with Cardno Emerging Markets and Alinea Whitelum.

In July 2019 to July 2020 the program expenditure was \$36.5 million. The program supported 933 volunteer assignments in 26 countries and linked 572 organisations across the Indo-Pacific region with skilled Australian volunteers.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of five years (2022), the program aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Partner organisations are supported by Australia to progress their development objectives
- The public in Australia better appreciates the value of international volunteering
- Australian volunteers gain professionally and personally.

The program demonstrates Australia's commitment to supporting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through volunteering. The program also acknowledges the shared benefits to the partner organisation, the volunteer and Australia. There is an explicit program mandate to increase opportunities for people from diverse groups within the Australian community to participate in international development. These diverse groups include people living with a disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from diaspora and multicultural backgrounds, younger and older Australians, LGBTIQ+ people, rural and regional Australia, and people with diverse experience and skills.

The program enables Australia to increase the footprint of its development program and multiply the impact of its development investments. In line with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) strategic priorities, the volunteer program is likely to continue as a significant part of Australia's development program.

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<sup>1</sup> Bhutan, Cambodia, Eswatini, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Indonesia, Laos, Lesotho, Marshall Islands, Mongolia, Myanmar, Palau, Papua New Guinea, The Philippines, Nepal, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Tanzania, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Vietnam.

<sup>2</sup> Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, program volunteers were not mobilised after March 2020.

## Chapter 2: Relevance of the program design

### 2.1 Key findings

#### KEQ 2.1: How well does the design of the program respond to and continue to remain relevant to the strategic objectives of Australia's development assistance program and country strategies?

A cascading series of policies and plans guide the program:

- Australian Government's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper
- DFAT's policies and plans including Aid Investment Plans/COVID-19 Development Response Plans
- Australian Volunteers Program, Global Program Strategy 2018–2022
- Australian Volunteers Program, Country Program Plans
- Australian Volunteers Program, Partner Organisation Plans
- Australian Volunteers Program, Annual Plans.

DFAT posts contribute to Country Program Plans and work plans by identifying country-level priorities and opportunities for the program, new potential partners and/or sectors, resources required for implementation and requirements for public diplomacy.

According to the program's 2019–2020 Annual Report, 95% of DFAT Posts reported that the program was aligned to local aid priorities and other Australian aid initiatives (59% fully/mostly aligned, 38% adequately aligned). In the case studies undertaken for this evaluation (see Annexes 2–6), DFAT posts report variable levels of engagement with the program due to resource constraints and perceptions of the program's strategic relevance. As part of the case studies conducted for this evaluation, some posts also reported that they were unclear about their role in the program.

In the program's 2019 Post Survey Report, four DFAT posts rated their local program in-country management team (ICMT) as not meeting expectations. Some of these posts would like to see ICMTs expanding support to volunteers on assignment, particularly in remote and challenging locations. For some of these country programs, improvement in the strategic targeting and selection of volunteer assignments to align with Australia's aid investments would improve posts' perceptions of the program.

During interviews for the evaluation a range of different views emerged within DFAT, the program itself, and volunteers on the extent to which the program should focus on the benefits to volunteers, strengthening the Australian public's support for volunteering, building the capacity of partner organisations, enhancing Australia's soft power and public diplomacy, or advancing the social and economic development of partner countries. There are tensions and trade-offs in pursuing these different outcomes as well as practical implications for operational programming.

Many DFAT staff referred to how external factors influence the program and how this constant evolution requires the program to adapt. Contextual developments include the emergence of non-traditional donors, new forms of volunteering, budget pressures on the Australian aid program, Australia's evolving foreign policy priorities,<sup>3</sup> the SDGs, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Program staff agree that the policy context has changed, and DFAT's Partnerships for Recovery policy highlights the question of the program's alignment with Government priorities.

DFAT's Aid Investment Plans and the program's country plans are intended to align. The program's senior leadership group advised the evaluation team that the program generally aims for a two-thirds alignment, but this is undertaken on a case-by-case basis. Both DFAT and program staff stressed the importance of the program's flexibility and ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

It is not clear to the evaluation team what aiming for a two-thirds alignment means in practice. In 2014 DFAT's Office of Development Effectiveness evaluation of AVID found that just under two-thirds (63%) of the volunteer assignments examined were generally aligned with DFAT's country strategies. However, the same evaluation found that only 28% of volunteer assignments in the three case study countries were aligned with a high priority in the relevant DFAT country strategy.

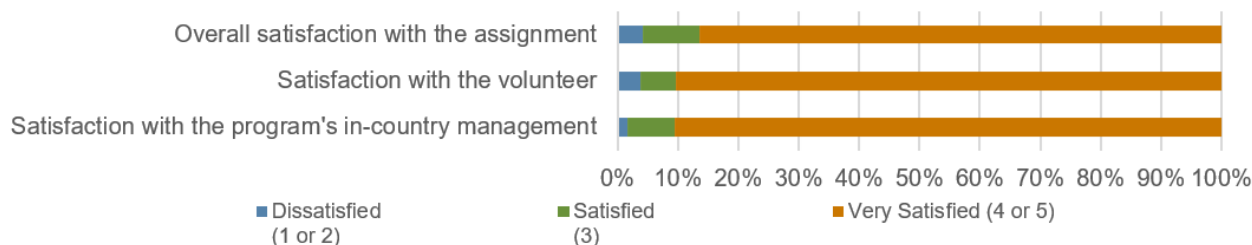
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<sup>3</sup> 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, Pacific Step-up initiative.

## KEQ 2.2: To what extent are the program's activities and outcomes aligned with the needs and priorities of partner organisations?

Partner organisations report a highly positive view of the program's relevance in end-of-assignment evaluations. For the three-year period 2018–2020, 86% of partner organisations were satisfied with their assignments, 90% were satisfied with their volunteers and 91% were satisfied with the program's in-country management (see **Figure 1**). A comparable result emerged from the focus groups and interviews conducted with 31 partner organisations for this evaluation's five case studies.

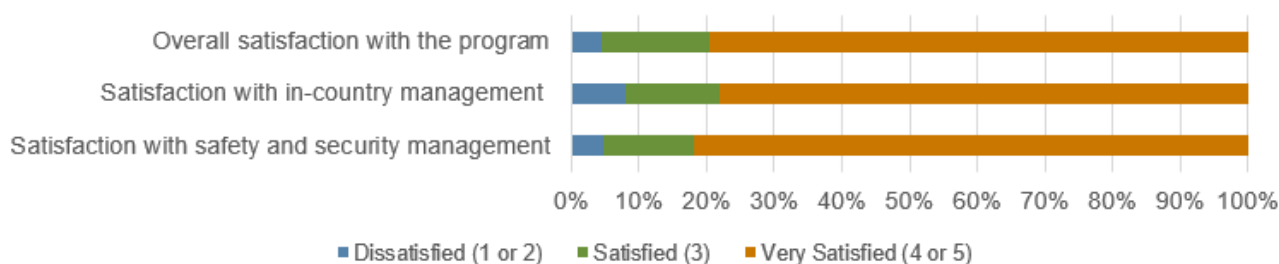
**Figure 1: Partner organisation satisfaction (n≥422)**



Source: The program Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Unit produced *Global Data Sheet: 2018–2020*.

The survey of 422 volunteers undertaken for this evaluation (refer Annex 7), found 83% agreed that their assignment was a good match to partner organisation needs. Volunteers also report high levels of satisfaction with the program through the program's post assignment surveys (see **Figure 2**).

**Figure 2: Volunteer satisfaction (n≥695)**



Source: The program Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Unit produced *Global Data Sheet: 2018–2020*.

The 2020 Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers that the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Business School<sup>4</sup> undertook identified the need for better alignment between the expectations of volunteers and partner organisations. Only 54% of volunteers who completed a survey<sup>5</sup> undertaken for this evaluation reported that the partner organisation had a clear understanding of the assignment and proposed role of the volunteer on arrival. During interviews and focus group discussions volunteers reported that their assignment objectives needed reshaping on arrival in country in accordance with the partner organisation's needs. Indeed, the program allows for volunteers to spend the first six weeks of their assignments reviewing the objectives with the partner organisation and establishing an activity plan and intended outcomes to be recorded in the first Assignment Plan.

Volunteers consulted for this evaluation reported that in most cases they were able to adapt their assignment objectives while in-country, with 81% of volunteers surveyed reporting that they believed their partner organisation appreciated their contribution and 63% reporting that they believed their assignment objectives were achieved.<sup>6</sup>

During interviews, program staff were unanimous in stating that the program is strongly aligned with the needs of partner organisations because the program is demand driven. The program's in-country management teams work with partner organisations to assess their organisational needs and facilitate the recruitment of a suitable volunteer.

During interviews for this evaluation, the four government representatives interviewed consistently stressed the importance of the program aligning with and supporting the country's national development plan. National government representatives appeared to have limited familiarity with the program and were not able

<sup>4</sup> Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (Phase 2) Final Report (October 2020), UTS Business School

<sup>5</sup> Australian Volunteers Program Evaluation – Survey of Volunteers (February 2021)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

to comment on its relevance to the needs of partner organisations. This differed from country to country. Program managers advise that in some countries national governments influence the selection of partner organisations involved in the program.

### **KEQ 2.3: Is the program's logic 'fit for purpose' and being used to inform AVI's management of the program?**

The 2014 Office of Development Effectiveness evaluation found that AVID lacked an integrated, single-program vision and a documented program logic. The evaluation recommended a revised design be prepared including a program logic. The design of the current program included a program logic in response to one of the evaluation recommendations.

Program staff use this new program logic to inform the structure of the program's comprehensive MEL framework; guide the program's analysis, reporting and accountability to DFAT; and to support the program's annual reflections and learning workshop.

DFAT has comprehensive policies, guidance, and standards in place to ensure that programs are well designed and implemented. Performance feedback is available to support program management and drive continuous improvement; and to ensure external accountability requirements are satisfied.<sup>7</sup>

While program staff are making good use of the program's current logic model, there is an opportunity to further improve the program's design and logic by ensuring that:

- Program outcomes are statements of outcomes (not activities) and are measurable.
- The causal relationships between individual activities, outputs, intermediate and End of Program Outcomes (EoPOs) are specified (i.e. a clear line of sight is present from activities through to the EoPOs). These assumed relationships should be periodically examined as part of testing the program's overall strategy.
- The key assumptions contained within the program's logic are identified and incorporated into the program's Global Risk Management Plan and register.
- The Innovation Fund refers to the program logic when seeking to identify opportunities for improvement.

## **2.2 Conclusions**

The program is highly relevant to the development needs of overseas partner organisations and generally relevant to the strategic objectives of Australia's development assistance program and country strategies. At the same time, the program's external environment has experienced significant changes in recent years. These include the emergence of non-traditional donors, new forms of volunteering, budget pressures on the Australian aid program, Australia's evolving foreign policy priorities, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

This program's logic is being appropriately used to support the program's management and reporting; it is also a key part of the program's annual reflections and learning workshops. The evaluation team finds the MEL framework to be of a suitable quality and consistent with DFAT's standards. However, there is an opportunity to further improve the program's overall purpose, EoPOs and consequently also its logic.

The program is seeking to achieve a series of diverse outcomes without key stakeholders having a shared understanding of the program's priorities. Stakeholders have a range of different views on the extent to which the program should be focusing on the benefits to volunteers, strengthening the Australian public's support for volunteering, building the capacity of partner organisations, enhancing Australia's soft power and public diplomacy, or advancing the social and economic development of partner countries. This poses a challenge for the program as there are tensions and trade-offs involved in pursuing these different outcomes in an evolving policy context. The program would benefit from a refresh/rebalancing of the program's outcomes, priorities, and logic (but a wholesale redesign is not required).

## **2.3 Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1:** That DFAT and the program work together to refresh the program's outcomes and logic. This is an opportunity to reposition the program in an evolving global context, to consider the benefits of alternative volunteering modalities, and test and recalibrate priorities to help to build a consensus amongst program stakeholders.

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<sup>7</sup> DFAT has clear standards for the design of new programs, formulating outcome statements and developing a program logic. See: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2020, Aid Programming Guide, Australian Government.

# Chapter 3: Progress towards end of program outcomes

## 3.1 Key findings

### KEQ 3.1: To what extent have partner organisations sustainably strengthened their capacity?

During the period January 2018 to December 2020, the program worked with over 900 partner organisations across 26 countries on 1,775 assignments filled by 1,410 volunteers.<sup>8</sup> The program data<sup>9</sup> demonstrates the significant nature and extent of the program's capacity development work over this period, including:

- Partner organisation assessments of progress against assignment objectives were: 81% excellent or good and 13% satisfactory. Volunteers reported that they had strengthened organisation, its beneficiaries, and stakeholder levels (87%); systemic and networking (57%); individuals (80%).
- The most common development sectors of partner organisations supported by the program were: agriculture, forestry, fishing (11%); health (14%); social infrastructure and services (16%); education (23%); and government and civil society (40%).
- The most common types of partner organisations supported were: private sector (3%); international non-government organisations (11%); government (local and national) 29%; and non-government organisations (local and national) 32%.
- The five most common SDGs that partner organisations contributed towards were: Goal 5 gender equality (13%); Goal 8 decent work and economic growth (18%); Goal 10 reduced inequality (18%); Goal 3 good health and wellbeing 22%; and Goal 4 quality education (26%).
- Impact areas that partner organisations contribute towards were: climate change, disaster resilience, food security (13%); inclusive economic growth (31%); and human rights 35%.
- The number of partner organisations supported to address specific cross-cutting themes were: indigenous (30); private sector (92); disability (139); child protection (243); and gender (261).

Evidence from 2020 research<sup>10</sup> into the program's contribution to addressing climate change in the Pacific found that in all 24 participating case study partner organisations,<sup>11</sup> positive changes were made through volunteer assignments in areas related to climate change. Partner organisations studied reported their most common capacity development outcomes in disaster risk reduction and management, followed by environment conservation and disaster resilience. This research demonstrates that Australian volunteers are making a very real contribution to partner organisations achieving their objectives, with partner organisations reporting that Australian volunteers are 'catalysts' for organisational change.

The Deep Dive Evaluation of Inclusive Economic Growth in Indonesia (2020)<sup>12</sup> found that Australian volunteers have contributed to developing partner organisations' capacity in marketing and promotion to global markets, international tourism skill development (including cross-cultural understanding), international networking, building private sector partnerships and English language skill development.

The Deep Dive Evaluation of Human Rights in Southern Africa (2020)<sup>13</sup> identified impacts in human rights through the work of partner organisations Australian volunteers have worked with. Key impacts identified were in the areas of: service delivery to groups who are marginalised or discriminated against; and advocacy and influencing change in broader community perceptions. This evaluation found that Australian volunteers are highly valued for their 'professional expertise and experience, coupled with their positive personal qualities'.

Evidence from this evaluation confirms that the program is generally very effective in supporting partner organisations to achieve their capacity development goals across a range of impact areas. The partner organisations consulted for this evaluation were unequivocal in their view that participation in the program strengthened their capacity. They cited many examples of capacity development outcomes at individual, organisational and sectoral levels, in relation to cross-cutting issues of gender equality, disability, and social inclusion (GEDSI) and across the program's impact areas.

The volunteers interviewed generally agreed that capacity development was occurring but had mixed views about its sustainability. Volunteers raised issues they believed may limit sustainability including: high turnover of staff resulting in capacity development efforts being lost to the partner organisation when individuals traded on their new skills and took up opportunities outside the partner organisation; and

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<sup>8</sup> *Global Data Sheet: January 2018 to December 2020*, produced by the program MEL unit for this evaluation

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Leaine Robinson and Iris Low, CoLAB Consulting (2020)

<sup>11</sup> A number of participating partner organisations were key implementing agencies for their government's national climate change and disaster risk management action plans and policies.

<sup>12</sup> Winterford, K., Gero, A., Megaw, T., Fee, A., Cunningham, R. (2020) Deep Dive Evaluation of Inclusive Economic Growth in Indonesia. Prepared for the Australian Volunteers Program by Institute for Sustainable Futures, UTS

<sup>13</sup> Winterford, K., Gero, A., Megaw, T., Cunningham, R., Fee, A. (2020) Deep Dive Evaluation of Human Rights in Southern Africa. Prepared for the Australian Volunteers Program by Institute for Sustainable Futures, UTS.

language barriers that preclude volunteers working with counterparts on organisational / systemic change, e.g. policies and practice guidelines. A common experience of volunteers was being asked to write grant applications (in English). Some volunteers spoke of capacity substitution occurring, where organisations replaced volunteers who operated in the same role over many years.

Partner organisations consulted in this evaluation were unequivocal in their view that participation in the program strengthened their capacity. Some partner organisations however demonstrated misunderstanding about the difference between capacity development and capacity substitution. The evaluators note that in some circumstances capacity substitution results in organisational capacity development and is appropriate e.g., to develop digital platforms and provide user training or when medical or other specialists are needed to fill technical expertise gaps, to undertake a discrete piece of work required by the partner organisation, facilitate mentoring or allow local counterparts to be released for training.

Pre-mobilisation preparation is an important foundation for successful capacity development. The program for the three-day pre-departure briefing is comprehensive and includes a component on *Capacity building and working cross-culturally*. Of the volunteers who participated in 2019–2020 pre-departure programs, 89% agreed or strongly agreed that the briefing helped them to better prepare for their assignment.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, 88% of volunteers surveyed<sup>15</sup> for this evaluation ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that the pre-departure learning program and briefing is effective and efficient. Of those volunteers who had experience of a previous program (2012–2017), 24% rated the pre-departure learning and briefing process as ‘more or far more effective and efficient’ and 42% as ‘no different’ to their experience on a previous program.

Several partner organisations consulted for this evaluation expressed a need for some changes to pre-mobilisation arrangements in the context of improving capacity development outcomes. Several partner organisations mentioned a need for language training prior to mobilisation and a desire to have more contact with their volunteer prior to mobilisation, to brief them on the local cultural context and develop a shared understanding of assignment scope and objectives. Though volunteers and partner organisations are encouraged to make contact prior to the volunteers’ arrival, there appears to be a lack of uptake by both volunteers and partners to do this. Greater facilitation by the program in bringing partner organisations and volunteers together prior to mobilisation would likely assist in managing both volunteers’ and partner organisations’ expectations, developing a mutual understanding of assignment goals in terms of capacity development outcomes and improving cultural awareness for the volunteer on arrival.

Evidence from a program study on early returns<sup>16</sup> indicates 23% of early returns in 2018–2019 (2% of assignments overall) were due to volunteer dissatisfaction with their assignment or partner organisation. This relatively small percentage of assignments overall indicates that the pre-departure briefing, and other pre-mobilisation activities are operating quite effectively. Some stakeholders interviewed however, noted a disproportionate risk to relationships with partner organisations, volunteer loyalty and program reputation that this small percentage can generate. This evaluation found that this risk may be mitigated through partner organisation and volunteer meeting pre-mobilisation and strengthening the ICMT support to volunteers.

Interviews with Australian partner organisations and through the country case studies undertaken, indicate that sustainable capacity development outcomes are very likely to be achieved when partner organisations engage with the program through a strategic partnership involving DFAT and an Australian partner.<sup>17</sup> Such strategic partnerships are achieving systemic change, contributing to global SDGs and country strategic development priorities. Australian partner organisations and partner organisations consulted note that these partnerships are of high value to both countries. Characteristics of strategic partnerships identified as valuable included:

- The reciprocity of the individual and organisational capacity development that occurs; the systemic nature of the changes that are implemented
- The expertise in specialised fields (e.g., in emergency medicine, engineering and agriculture) that Australian partner organisations bring to an assignment
- The inclusion of early and mid-career professionals as volunteers
- The high potential for cluster volunteering, including sectoral and multi-organisational assignments and support to partner organisations across regions
- The established connections to other DFAT programs

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<sup>14</sup> *Pre-Departure Briefing – Participants Feedback 2019-20: Summary data provided by program*

<sup>15</sup> *Australian Volunteers Program Evaluation - Volunteer Survey (February 2021)*

<sup>16</sup> *Study on Early Returns of Volunteers from their Assignments (July-December 2019)*.

<sup>17</sup> Current strategic partners include Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research; Crawford Fund / Researchers in Agriculture for International Development; Global Green Growth Institute; Australian Humanitarian Partnership; Engineers Without Borders; Australasian College of Emergency Medicine; Atlassian and The Pacific Community.

- The extensive networks and collaborative relationships across sectors and fields that Australian partner organisations bring with them that can be leveraged for a multiplying effect
- The strong networks and communities of practice that are generated.

Examples highlighted in this evaluation as very effective program strategic partnerships are: the Australasian College of Emergency Medicine (ACEM) in implementing the Solomon Islands Medical Partnerships for Learning, Education and Research (SIMPLER) project in the Solomon Islands;<sup>18</sup> the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) with projects across South East Asia and the Pacific; Engineers Without Borders (EWB) providing assignments supporting water, sanitation and hygiene projects; and Australian Humanitarian Partnership (AHP) which includes the Disaster READY volunteer cluster across the Pacific and Timor Leste. The AHP also has well-established, collaborative relationships with six key international agencies that can be leveraged by the partnership for synergistic effect.

### **KEQ 3.2: To what extent has the program contributed to the Australian public's appreciation of the value of international volunteering?**

A baseline survey of a sample of the Australian public conducted in 2018<sup>19</sup> showed that 35% knew of the program and 66% of the respondents agreed that the Australian government should support international volunteering. The evaluation found mixed views about the degree to which the program contributes to the Australian public's appreciation of volunteering. Most stakeholders consulted are of the view that many Australians had heard of the program and that there is some broad understanding of the program.

Since the commencement of the program, most awareness raising and media campaign work has been suspended at DFAT's request. The program reports receiving a small number of 'backlash' comments on social media from members of the Australian public. The public perception in some communities that 'volunteerism should start at home' is a current challenge for the program. Program managers are mindful that this current environment is not conducive to a large-scale promotion campaign.

Program staff do believe that since the program commenced in 2018, targeted 'inclusion' communications were successful in increasing general awareness, engagement, and appreciation of the program across different diversity sectors and GEDSI themes. For example, appreciation and awareness of the program amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is increasing. Pre-COVID, in 2018–2019 the program had 3.4% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander volunteers, which is on par with population statistics. More people with a disability are also applying or are already involved in remote volunteer work.

The program has also invested in external expertise to conduct some significant baseline reviews on key GEDSI priorities. These reviews include the *Disability Inclusion Review*<sup>20</sup> and the *LGBTI+ Inclusion Review*<sup>21</sup>. Internal expertise has been strengthened with the addition of new positions of Indigenous Programs Coordinator and Gender Equality Coordinator to help inform action plans that are taking forward improvements to support diversity and inclusion.

Overall, volunteers believe that there is little public appreciation of the value of volunteering: the personal and professional benefits of volunteering nor the strategic diplomatic benefits of volunteer programs. Most volunteers consulted for this evaluation think that only a limited number of Australians in their personal circles, i.e., their families and local communities, appreciate the value of volunteering and that there are common misconceptions about the program. Under 30s volunteers consulted believe that most young people have little knowledge of the program, the professional development opportunities it provides, and that many young people perceive the program as a 'voluntourism' opportunity.

DFAT post staff demonstrate a clear understanding of the value of volunteering, particularly in promoting public diplomacy.

Australian partner organisations interviewed<sup>22</sup> believe that their partnerships with the program are changing perceptions of volunteering in their fields. They believe that volunteering is highly, mutually appreciated within their professional communities in Australia and the professional sectors they operate in overseas.

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<sup>18</sup> The SIMPLER program is a partnership project involving ACEM and the Ministry of Health and Medical Services in the National Referral Hospital in the Solomon Islands. The project is not only building the capacity of Solomon Islander emergency care physicians in triaging and treating emergency patients, it provides challenging professional experience for Australian volunteers in emergency medicine practice in high patient volume, serious medical emergency, low-resource environments.

<sup>19</sup> *Market Research into Public and Opinion Leaders' Perception of International Volunteering (baseline)* 2018

<sup>20</sup> Conducted by Christian Blind Mission (CBM) Australia

<sup>21</sup> Conducted by Edge Effect.

<sup>22</sup> ACEM, ACIAR, EWB, and AHP.

### **KEQ 3.3: How have volunteers gained professionally and personally?**

This evaluation found that volunteers gain professionally and personally from their volunteer experience. Most volunteers who participated in focus groups and those who responded to the survey describe their experience as ‘transformational’ or ‘life-changing’. DFAT post, program staff, partner organisations and volunteers themselves agree that the program provides an exceptional opportunity for personal and professional development. They report developing new personal skills in resilience, adaptability, rapport-building, cultural awareness, and creativity in low-resource environments.

Volunteers on Innovation Fund-associated assignments are learning new skills in innovation and human-centred design and research. Young professionals gain entry point into a career in the international aid sector and older professionals cite the program as an opportunity to mentor others and ‘give back’.

This evaluation found that the EoPO, *Volunteers gain professionally and personally*, is consistently being achieved. Professional and personal gain has been a strong attribute of Australian volunteer programs for many decades. Considerable investment has been made attracting and recruiting the right volunteers, matching of volunteer with assignment and partner organisation, supporting the volunteer and measuring how they gain both at the personal and professional level. Many volunteers support or at least maintain contact with their partner organisations for years after their assignments are completed.

### **KEQ 3.4: Has the change to unified branding under the Australian Aid banner delivered greater recognition for the program?**

While many of the volunteers consulted for this evaluation still identify as AVI or AVID volunteers, a new cohort of volunteers recruited since 2018 are using the correct term ‘Australian volunteer’ and are promoting the program under the new branding. Volunteers were strongly of the view that the branding change made little difference ‘on the ground’ in host countries.

Partner organisations are not concerned about branding. Those consulted for this evaluation still perceive the ‘AVI brand’ as synonymous with DFAT and Australian aid. It could be argued that regardless of branding, soft power benefits come from the recognition from partner organisations that volunteers are Australian.

DFAT and program staff are promoting the program under the unified banner. Program staff report that the new brand is gradually gaining a profile on social media with the hashtag, *#ausvo/s*, now being used by DFAT posts, partner organisations, Australian partner organisations and volunteers. Usage increased from around 1,900 times in 2018–2019 to 2,500 times in 2019–2020.

The unified program is seen by program staff and leadership as having improved the effectiveness of program operations. They see the program as very flexible and achieving results in the countries in which it operates as demonstrated by the MEL framework. They see the priority focus now as being on developing good assignments in-country without concern for competing with other providers. They believe that decision-making as a global program is more efficient and discussions with DFAT are more open because the need for balancing collaboration and competition with other providers has been removed.

### **KEQ 3.5: What do stakeholders’ perceptions tell us about the program’s contribution to Australia’s soft power?**

The evaluation found that there is no shared understanding of the meaning of ‘soft power’ across DFAT, program staff and other stakeholders. Those who interpret ‘soft power’ as the people-to-people links created through the program see this as a strength of the program. Most stakeholders consulted think that ‘soft power’ is a difficult concept to understand and measure. However, the topic was explored in this evaluation to gauge stakeholders’ understanding and perceptions of the program’s contribution to soft power and positive bilateral relations. DFAT and program staff expressed very mixed views on this topic. Some DFAT posts are of the view that the program makes only a minor contribution because it is not strategic enough.

Program managers variously: interpret ‘soft power’ as ‘reputation’ and believe that the program contributes significantly to Australia’s reputation; note that the program’s diplomatic influence differs widely from country to country, depending on Australia’s bilateral relationships; see the program as an opportunity to engage with government. In-country program managers are of the view that volunteers create a good reputation at local community and regional levels but that the program needs to focus more on national government level. Some program managers believe that the program provides DFAT with a major international diplomacy ‘asset’ in terms of thousands of volunteers and an extensive network of Australian and in-country partner organisations.



Australian partner organisations and volunteers believe the program contributes significantly to positive diplomatic relations, though did not refer to this as ‘soft power’. Partner organisations expressed a variety of views on this topic. Most saw the strong relationships with volunteers as strong relationships with Australia. One partner organisation perceived volunteers as substituting for locals in jobs when partner organisations didn’t have funds to hire staff. Another took exception to the idea that ‘contribution to Australia’s soft power’ might be an intentional objective of the program.

Government representatives interviewed had little awareness of the program and had little to say on the topic of ‘soft power’. The evaluation team notes that partner governments are not mentioned in the program logic as stakeholders in the program. Program managers and DFAT reported quite variable levels of national government engagement with the program. The evaluators note that peak bodies<sup>23</sup> representing the private sector, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and civil society sectors are formally engaged with the program either. This is undoubtedly because program assignments are mainly demand-driven focusing on the needs of individual partner organisations. The lack of a formal consultative or advisory mechanism in-country that engages government, and perhaps the private sector and civil society, with DFAT and program managers at a strategic level is noticeable.

The evaluators believe that such a mechanism would support achievement of program goals, provide opportunities to better align the program to national development priorities and improve the recognition and perceptions of the program in the countries in which it operates.

## 3.2 Conclusions

In examining the extent to which the program is making progress towards its EoPOs,<sup>24</sup> the evaluators are mindful that the program is in year four of its five-year contract period and for almost a third of this period, program activities and outcomes were somewhat limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Evidence from interviews and focus groups suggest that the new design was being realised at the time the pandemic was declared. Overall, the program is making good progress towards achieving its EoPOs, despite the environmental limitations of the 2020–2021 year. Most stakeholders consulted for this evaluation were of the view that the repatriation of most volunteers in early 2020 and the pivot to remote volunteering negatively impacted capacity development outcomes.

Good progress is being made towards achieving the EoPO: *Partner organisations are supported by Australia to progress their development objectives*. Program evaluation data and stakeholder consultations conducted for this evaluation provide evidence that capacity development outcomes are being achieved at individual, organisational / systemic and sectoral levels. However, volunteer experiences indicate that generally little capacity development is occurring in situations where partner organisations utilise volunteers in an ongoing way, sometimes over many years, to fill technical expertise gaps. Such situations of capacity substitution—distinct from short-term, specialist volunteer inputs that build organisational capacity—may need to be addressed at the assignment design phase of the volunteer cycle.

Partner organisations and volunteer perspectives also indicate that an increased focus on developing a relationship between the volunteer and partner organisation pre-mobilisation would improve the likelihood of assignments being completed successfully.

The program’s strategic partnerships have to date been very successful in achieving sustainable capacity development outcomes in priority sectors including health, climate action, agriculture, and inclusive economic growth. The evaluators noted that only a very small number of assignments over 2018–2020 (approximately 47)<sup>25</sup> were associated with such strategic partnerships. Increased investment in such strategic partnerships would provide opportunities to pilot and scale up innovative volunteering modalities such as exchange, cluster, multi-modal and other forms of volunteering, strengthen the sustainability of capacity development outcomes and generate soft power and diplomatic relations benefits.

The unified branding under the Australian Aid banner is very slowly improving recognition of the program. The unified branding and consortium contractor arrangement makes good sense in terms of improving the effectiveness of program operations and global decision-making. The elimination of a competition environment for volunteers and partner organisations in host countries has allowed an increased focus on well-designed assignments.

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<sup>23</sup> These might include such bodies as: employer federations, chambers of commerce, trade union federations and associations of small and medium enterprises; and disability, gender equality, and other civil society/social inclusion organisations.

<sup>24</sup> Partner organisations are supported by Australia to progress their development objectives

<sup>25</sup> *Global Data Sheet: January 2018 to December 2020*, produced by the program MEL unit for this evaluation

The program does contribute to some degree to Australia's 'soft power' in its various interpretations but this is difficult to measure. Sensitivities and lack of a shared understanding of the meaning of the term were highlighted by this evaluation and have been described in various studies.

Introducing a formal mechanism that engages national governments and peak representatives of civil society, the private sector and SMEs with DFAT, program regional directors and country managers in planning and prioritising assignments in-country, is likely to improve program effectiveness in terms of diplomatic relations and capacity development outcomes. This may be helpful where DFAT and the program wish to further strengthen diplomatic relations in-country at provincial and national government levels. Such a mechanism could take the form of:

- A high-level advisory or consultative group comprising government, peak private sector, SME and civil society representatives
- Several sectoral (or thematic) advisory groups comprising representatives from government, the private sector, SMEs and civil society
- Any other composition or process that works in-country to achieve strategic engagement in the program locally, particularly with government.

Most stakeholders consulted agreed that the program contributes to some degree to the Australian public's appreciation of the value of volunteering. Such appreciation though is on continuum between those that have heard of the program and know little about it, to those who understand the value of volunteering due to being in the family or friendship circle of a volunteer or in the professional field of an Australian partner organisation.

In the context of DFAT and the program working together to refresh and recalibrate the program logic to comply with DFAT standards (see Recommendation 1), the evaluators believe that particular attention should be paid to two of the three EoPOs. DFAT's standard for defining an EoPO is an 'end state when the outcome has been achieved, 'the type of change that is expected to occur' or 'the desired development change that can be achieved within the timeframe of the investment'.<sup>26</sup>

The evaluators believe that: *The public in Australia better appreciates the value of international volunteering* is relevant as an intermediate outcome but is not compliant with DFAT standards as an EoPO. It needs to be recalibrated in the context of achieving the program goal, *'Australian aid is perceived positively in Australia and internationally'*, including the international component. Indeed, it could be argued that even one of the current intermediate outcomes, i.e., *The program is recognised and respected by key stakeholders (the Australian public, the Australian government and partner organisations)*, is more logical and of a higher order as an EoPO in relation to the relevant goal.

Similarly, the evaluators are of the view that the EoPO: *Australian volunteers gain professionally and personally* is useful as an intermediate level outcome as it is important in attracting volunteers to the program, but it is not suitable or compliant with the DFAT definition of an EoPO. This outcome could be reframed for example, to clarify the point of difference in this program compared to its previous iterations and other international programs; or to highlight innovative volunteer modalities, desired types of skilled and/or specialist volunteers and/or the program strengths in innovation and GEDSI strategies. It needs recalibrating in relation to what the desired future Australian volunteer experience might 'look like' (i.e., the 'end state') and to more clearly articulate into achievement of the long-term objective, *Australians are more globally literate and connected*.

### 3.3 Recommendations

**Recommendation 2:** That current strategic partnerships are expanded, and new partnerships are explored to identify and scale up new volunteering modalities, multiply capacity development outcomes, and increase the program's profile and outreach through leveraging international networks.

**Recommendation 3:** That consideration is given to establishing appropriate, consultative, or advisory mechanisms in-country to engage government, peak bodies representing the private sector, small and medium enterprises, and civil society with DFAT and program managers at a strategic level.

**Recommendation 4:** That in refreshing and recalibrating the program's outcomes and logic (see Recommendation 1), particular attention is given to reviewing two of the three EoPOs, *'The public in Australia better appreciates the value of international volunteering'* and *'Australian volunteers gain professionally and personally'*, to ensure logical articulation into program goals, a description of the desired future 'end state' and compliance with DFAT standards.

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<sup>26</sup> PROGRAM LOGIC, August 2018 (DFAT's guide to developing a program logic)

## Chapter 4: Corporate governance arrangements and efficiency

### 4.1 Key findings

#### KEQ 4.1: To what extent does the program represent value for money?

Perceptions of volunteers and partners organisations interviewed in this evaluation, were that the program generally provided good value for money. Many partner organisations specified that it represents value for money (VfM) as volunteers provide excellent contributions to the work and capacity of partner organisations. Many noted the value when the 'right' volunteer is placed but that it can be frustrating and inefficient when it is not a good fit. Partner organisation satisfaction ratings over the period January 2018 to December 2020<sup>27</sup> (that 86% of partner organisations were very satisfied with the assignment and 90% were very satisfied with the volunteer) supports a finding that the program is proving to be efficient.

The program contracted a firm to undertake a VfM assessment of the program prior to the commencement of this evaluation.<sup>28</sup> The draft assessment was shared with the evaluation team in March 2021, representing a delay of at least three months. The findings differed with some findings of the evaluation team under the efficiency criterion. Specifically, there were differences in ratings for risk management, and accountability and transparency, and differences in assessment parameters. For example, on the sub-criterion of Risk Management the VfM assessment focused on program implementation and operations, whereas this evaluation considered a broader definition of risk including fraud, occupational health and safety, and diplomatic relationships, amongst others. In addition, the VfM preliminary findings are based on only one year of the program's implementation, whereas this evaluation considered a three-year time period. Due to delays in the delivery of the draft VfM Assessment, the evaluation team did not have time to adjust the scope or source alternative data to help resolve these inconsistencies.

#### KEQ 4.2: How does the program's costs compare to those of other donors?

An analysis of the cost of volunteer programs of four other donors: Canada, New Zealand, Norway, and United Kingdom is provided in **Annex 1**. A very small amount of anecdotal evidence was gathered from volunteers and program staff that the program is more cost effective than technical assistance. The annex highlights the significant variances in approach, delivery models, program size and funding arrangements. Combined with a lack of empirical measures and analytical data relevant for a comparison across the donor group, meaningful or direct comparison was not possible.

#### KEQ 4.3: To what extent do corporate governance arrangements support efficient decision making and program management?

According to the program's Annual Plan 2020–2021, the program has well-established and comprehensive governance arrangements in place. The Program Management Group (PMG) is the primary governance body responsible for strategic oversight of the program. The PMG meets every six months and is chaired by DFAT. Other key aspects of the program's governance are undertaken by: DFAT's Humanitarian Deployments Section and staff at posts; the Contract Management Group; the program's leadership team; the Risk Management Committee; and the Consortium Group.

In practice, the coordination of this complex system occurs through regular discussions between DFAT and senior program staff, through the program's annual planning process, and the overarching role of the PMG. According to program staff the role of the PMG has varied along with changes in DFAT staff.

The three partners in the program's consortium have different but complementary roles and strengths. AVI brings volunteering expertise and extensive international relationships. Cardno's skills are in program management, contracting, financial management and compliance. Alinea Whitelum offer proficiency in MEL. There was widespread agreement amongst program staff that a consortium arrangement was essential for a successful volunteer's program, as no single organisation would have the breadth of expertise required to manage the program alone.

There is general agreement amongst program staff that after some 'teething problems' the program's consortium model is now working effectively. There are clear lines of responsibility and the model draws on the strengths of consortium members. The work of each of the partners is highly integrated on a day-to-day basis.

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<sup>27</sup> *Global Data Sheet: January 2018 to December 2020*, produced by the program MEL unit for this evaluation

<sup>28</sup> McGillivray, M. and Carpenter, D. 2021, Australian Volunteers Program Value for Money for Money Assessment, idras Pty Ltd.

During interviews with DFAT staff the evaluation team were advised that the program is generally performing well, and the program's leadership team is very responsive to DFAT's requirements. A few DFAT interviewees raised concern about the potential program risk should integral program staff leave their employment. This could pose a significant challenge for the program unless its key systems are at a mature stage of development.

In interviews, several DFAT staff reported that they found the program's systems and operational practices difficult to comprehend and would like greater transparency and assurance on internal management arrangements. It is understandable if DFAT staff find the program's internal systems and operations difficult to comprehend as these arrangements are complex and continue to evolve over time. These systems and how they are managed include:

- **Volunteer life cycle management:** The program has drawn heavily on AVI's experience in managing previous iterations of the program. This system is further enhanced under the current program contract by program staff, with some initiatives supported by DFAT, and some funded (for example Salesforce, Customer Relationship Management) by AVI outside of the contract.
- **IT dashboards:** An updated aspect of the current program.
- **Human resources (HR) and staff training:** These systems build on AVI's pre-existing systems and processes; and drew on Cardno's processes around recruitment and in ensuring recruitment satisfies contractual obligations; training packages on fraud were drawn from Cardno.
- **Financial management:** The program utilises AVI's newly established financial management system, NetSuite. The program draws on Cardno's expertise around ensuring financial management meets DFAT obligations; AVI and Cardno co-funded additional finance support in the first year of the program; Cardno (through the Contractor Representative) continues to provide support to the program Finance Manager.
- **Risk management and security:** The program initially drew on AVI's past approaches but has since been adapted to meet the program's current needs. Cardno provides support and advice regarding developing risk tools such as the newly introduced Deployment Decision Matrix.
- **Contract management:** AVI has limited contract management experience and hence Cardno staff are embedded within the program's structure to provide this.
- **Organisational structure:** The program adopted the structure that was submitted to DFAT in the tender process. Structures were since refined further to meet the changing challenges of implementation.
- **Strategy and planning:** Mechanisms are specific to the program to meet contractual obligations and implementation requirements. Draws on AVI and Cardno expertise.
- **Operational management and record keeping:** Program systems come from both AVI (in terms of what was in place) and Cardno. For example, the first program Operations Manual drew heavily from Cardno's Quality Management System manuals, processes, and templates (and with additional Cardno personnel support) and tailored to the program. The program developed subsequent iterations.
- **Procurement processes:** These are drawn from Cardno's Procurement Toolkit to meet the Commonwealth Procurement Rules.

Although the scope of this evaluation did not extend to examining the functioning of the program's individual systems, stakeholders brought various issues to the team's attention. DFAT and senior program staff may wish to consider the following matters:

- Frequent delays and last-minute changes to plans for the mobilisation of volunteers causes considerable inconvenience
- The availability of secure accommodation for female volunteers in some Pacific countries, which was a significant concern for several volunteers
- Several volunteers suggested there was a need to improve in-country support for volunteers living in remote locations
- The program's complaint handling system appears to focus on responding to individual matters and is not being used to identify and improve systemic performance issues
- The limited staffing resources allocated to the financial management function affects the capacity of this team to undertake budget analysis and financial projections
- A small number of program staff members raised concerns about the role of AVI's Board in relation to the program and stated that role boundaries between AVI and the program is not always clear which has implications for the management of the program's funds.

DFAT's policies for risk management aim to minimise the impact of uncertainty on delivering the development program's objectives. Development program risk management includes the assumptions arising from the program's internal design logic, due diligence assessment of delivery partners; evaluations of partner governments' financial systems; fraud control and anti-corruption; countering terrorism resourcing;

and environmental and other safeguards (including child protection; sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment; and displacement and resettlement).

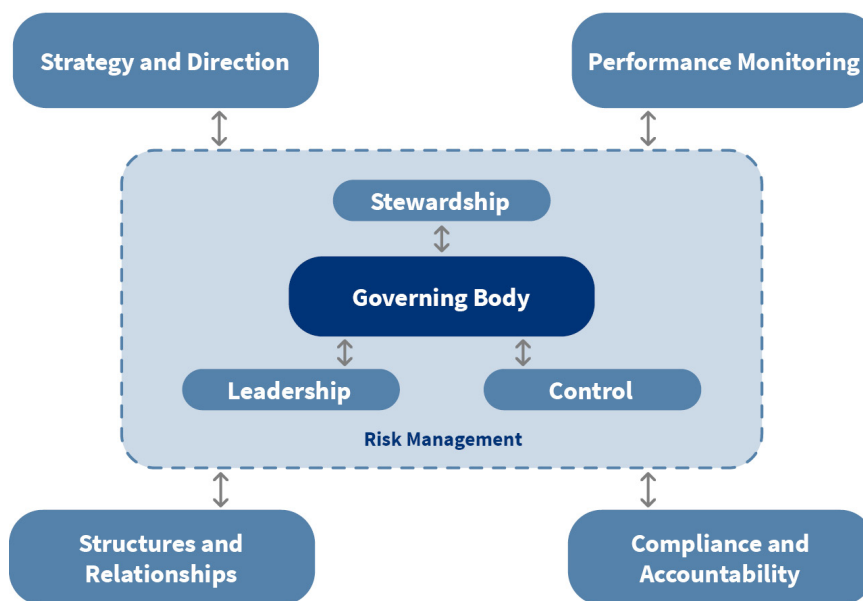
A review of the program's Global Risk Management Plan coupled with interviews of DFAT staff and volunteers identified the opportunity to enhance the comprehensiveness of the program's risk management:

- Some DFAT interviewees raised concern about the potential program risk should integral program staff leave their employment. This could pose a significant challenge for the program unless its key systems are at a mature stage of development.
- Volunteers raised the topic of risks posed by insecure accommodation in some Pacific countries and delays in getting in-country management teams to attend to this issue.
- An assessment by the evaluation team identified certain types of risk that are not currently captured in the program's Global Risk Management Plan. The program's approach to risk management should be updated to include categories of risks related to the program's own internal logic, operational risks (including fraud, occupational, health and safety), risks related to the behaviour of partners, risks to Australia's diplomatic relationships, and risks potentially arising in the external environment.

As the program's funding body and chair of the PMG, DFAT continues to play a significant role in the program's governance and decision-making. While senior program staff report a close and trusted relationship, they also say that DFAT can be quite slow to make decisions. For example, DFAT's approval of the program's annual plan and budget historically has taken some time which causes problems for the program.

A diagram outlining the generic expectations for a peak governance body such as the PMG is shown in **Figure 3** below.

**Figure 3: Duties of a peak governance body**



Source: Adapted from the Victorian Auditor General's Office 2008

A review of the PMG's agendas and minutes combined with staff interviews suggests that the group is not undertaking the full range of functions specified in its terms of reference. The evaluation team suggest the operation of the PMG needs to be addressed to ensure that it is fulfilling all its required functions. The evaluation team suggest this may require the PMG (and its working committees) to meet to:

- Facilitate greater sharing of key information
- Review and revise program policies, strategies, and plans
- Oversee of the program's performance and the implementation of any remedial actions that may be required for the entire program and / or individual country offices
- Seek assurance regarding the functioning of the program's key systems such as strategy and planning, financial management, operational management, the volunteer life cycle, HR management and training, volunteer security and occupational health and safety, and contract management
- Update the program's approach to risk management to include categories of risks related to the program's own internal logic, operational risks (including fraud, occupational, health and safety), risks related to the behaviour of partners, risks to Australia's diplomatic relationships, and risks potentially arising in the external environment.

## 4.2 Conclusions

The program commissioned a VfM assessment that differed in approach, and in some preliminary findings, from the work of this evaluation. The delayed delivery of the VfM assessment meant that additional data could not be sought to make a comprehensive finding regarding the program's value of money.

There is general agreement amongst program staff that after some 'teething problems' the program's consortium model is now working effectively. There are clear lines of responsibility and the model draws on the complementary strengths of the three consortium members.

The program has comprehensive governance arrangements in place. This complex system is coordinated through regular dialogue with DFAT, the program's annual planning processes, and the PMG which has overall responsibility. While the PMG has a thorough terms of reference, it is not fulfilling the full range of functions expected from a peak governance body. The functioning of the PMG needs to be addressed as a matter of priority.

## 4.3 Recommendations

**Recommendation 5:** That DFAT examine the value for money assessment and build on it by commissioning relevant follow-up work as required.

**Recommendation 6:** That DFAT and senior program staff work together to address the role of the PMG to ensure that it is fulfilling all of its mandated functions and DFAT is receiving an appropriate level of performance assurance and transparency commensurate with its role as the program's funding body.

**Recommendation 7:** That DFAT and senior program staff work together to update the program's approach to risk management to include all main categories of risk.

# Chapter 5: Impact of emerging issues and challenges

## 5.1 Key findings

### KEQ 5.1: To what extent has the program been affected by COVID-19 and other issues?

The program was significantly affected by COVID-19 and has adapted well. Given the primary modality of the program is to send skilled Australians abroad, the impact of restricted international travel has been significant. This is being felt by all donor countries interviewed as part of the Comparative Analysis for this evaluation. The United Kingdom, Norway, New Zealand, and Canada reported significant impacts due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was especially true in programs where North-South volunteering is the primary modality of the program, as all volunteers living in country were repatriated to their home countries.

Common trends that Australia and the above countries are dealing with in their programs include discussions around how to implement a localisation agenda, and address broader social movements such as 'Black Lives Matter' and a growing discussion around racism and 'decolonising development'. Ideas of reciprocal volunteer exchanges, supporting local volunteers and volunteer structures and South-North and South-South volunteering models, were all common themes for the donors interviewed. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have accelerated the thinking around these themes and has also resulted in the emergence of remote volunteering as a major method of supporting partner organisations when travel is restricted.

The program's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was timely and effective, especially in terms of repatriation of volunteers. In interviews with DFAT stakeholders, a common view expressed was that the program got the timing right for the repatriation of volunteers and made a rapid and strategic response to the risk. Mobilisation of volunteers was suspended in early March 2020 and 464 volunteers (or 97%) were safely repatriated by 2 April 2020. Those who remained in-country included six who were supported by the program in key roles to support pandemic preparation and 10 who chose to exit the program.

During interviews with the evaluation team and from the volunteer survey, both partner organisations and volunteers noted how quickly the decision to repatriate was made. While many volunteers expressed disappointment about repatriating, most noted that they understood how fortunate they were to have this option considering the unprecedented global uncertainty. Most partner organisations also noted their disappointment with the abrupt withdrawal of volunteers but appreciated the option for volunteers to continue supporting their organisation remotely. The vast majority of stakeholder groups interviewed for this evaluation agreed that the program response to the COVID-19 pandemic was handled professionally and with few difficulties.

In addition to being impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the program has adapted to a number of other issues, including significant weather events such as cyclones, volcanoes and earthquakes as well as countries experiencing political instability, such as the bombings in Sri Lanka or government change in Tanzania.

The program remains alert and responsive to Australian Government development priorities as a core part of DFAT's people-to-people program portfolio, connecting Australians to Australia's aid program and the Indo-Pacific region. For example, recently the program's Country Program Plans were re-aligned to Australia's new international development policy: *Partnerships for Recovery: Australia's COVID-19 Development Response*.

#### **KEQ 5.2: How is the program adapting to its changing external environment?**

The pivot to remote volunteering due to the COVID-19 pandemic was almost immediate. By May 2020 the first remote volunteer officially started on the program and the numbers grew throughout the year to approximately 150 volunteers. Remote volunteering remains a focus for the program in 2020–2021. The nature of remote volunteering means that assignments are shorter in length at 4–12 weeks. One additional benefit is that this opens the program up to a more diverse group who otherwise couldn't have participated in the program. Conversely, both volunteers and partner organisations felt strongly that remote volunteering is no replacement for face-to-face volunteering when comparing the two. Most volunteers and partner organisations also raised that it works best when there is already a relationship between the two. Other challenges frequently raised in interviews include internet access by partner organisations, lack of people-to-people links, and cultural awareness and understanding from volunteers. Volunteers noted the financial impact on them, especially those (predominantly young people) without savings.

The program's ability to pivot program operations so rapidly and effectively was in the main due to the in-country presence of regional directors and 75 national staff of ICMTs remaining in-country to support partner organisations. Senior program staff in Melbourne were key in conceptualising how the program could pivot. The pivot included allowing a small number (6) of volunteers to remain in country to support health systems to prepare for the impacts of the pandemic. At the end of December, almost 100 assignments with a focus on COVID-19 response have been established, including 13 volunteers in-country on assignment and the remainder (86) volunteering remotely.

The program is adapting to the impacts of COVID-19 and the drastically changing external environment by trialling 15 new ideas through the Innovation Fund. Volunteering for Development (Vol4Dev) is a work stream under the Australian Volunteers Program Innovation Fund, which began in early 2020 and accelerated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Vol4Dev explores the key question of '*How might the Australian Volunteers Program create and support alternative forms of volunteering, or support volunteerism?*' These ideas include exploring how to support local volunteering, youth volunteering and national volunteering infrastructure, among others. The program's ability to trial these ideas through the Innovation Fund at such a time of global uncertainty, enables the program to develop a strong evidence base for potential changes or complementary modalities for the program that all consider the impacts of COVID-19. The program, largely through the Innovation Fund, has already considered how different modalities might work alongside the traditional North-South model of volunteering. All stakeholders agree that the COVID-19 pandemic has provided the program with a major opportunity for change and to look at different ways of doing volunteering.

In terms of adaptation and ongoing learning in the program, the embedded MEL system also provides a strong basis to adapt to a changing external environment. This is a standout amongst other donor programs interviewed for the comparative analysis. A common challenge discussed during the interviews was data collection, triangulation, and aggregation, specifically when assessing people-to-people links and improved diplomatic relations. This system, which includes regional reflections with key stakeholders, provides the evidence needed to understand the impacts of the program and contribution towards EoPOs, and therefore an excellent basis for decision making about the program's future and adapting to the external environment.

#### **KEQ. 5.3: What do stakeholders perceive as the key challenges and risks facing the program in the future?**

There was consensus among stakeholders that the key challenge for the program right now is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated uncertainty around international travel. Most stakeholders agreed that it was hard to look past this as a huge risk to the program. Many stakeholders also discussed the impact of associated risks such as a change (reduction) in the program budget, revised contract, recruitment challenges including less interest from Australians to volunteer and travel overseas, and significant gaps for

partner organisations. However, stakeholders also agreed that the outlook is not all doom and gloom. Many see this as an opportunity for the program and a time to look at how volunteering can be done differently.

Key challenges, risks and opportunities for the future were identified during interviews and focus groups.

**Program managers** identified the following:

- Potential reductions in the program's budget will affect the scope of operations and has the potential to reduce benefits of diplomatic influence and soft power. It could lead to a perception that Australia is investing less in neighbouring countries, which may have political consequences.
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to be with us for at least the next couple of years. This has implications for the ability of volunteers to travel overseas, and for the program's ability to safeguard the health of volunteers and provide travel insurance. How can the program continue to demonstrate its relevance, supporting partner organisations into the future?
- Higher levels of unemployment in Australia may potentially have a negative impact on the supply of Australian volunteers. It is possible that the recruitment pipeline of volunteers could slow because of the unknown fallout from the pandemic.

**DFAT** staff identified the following:

- Certain countries find it difficult to attract volunteers, and this will likely become more challenging even when international travel is permitted.
- Strong feeling that remote volunteering isn't a substitute for in-country work as it's difficult to communicate and build networks and work jointly on projects.
- There are mixed views on local volunteering as an option for the program. This approach could support existing structures rather than create a new program, which could work well in humanitarian settings. However, there is a view amongst a number of those interviewed that the soft power benefits of the program rely on sending skilled Australian overseas.
- It is important to focus attention on health security and economic recovery. COVID-19 will likely affect the willingness of government partners to strengthen their engagement with the program.

**Volunteers** stressed that not being able to have face-to-face volunteering is a huge risk for the program. They stated that remote volunteering isn't a substitute for working in-country, especially for the long term. *'Remote volunteering sounds good on paper. But the program is about capacity development. For capacity development you need to be on the ground understanding the local community to achieve the goals you are setting.'* Despite this, some volunteers appreciated the opportunity to continue to volunteer remotely and thought there may be ways to create a hybrid-system in future that utilises both remote and face-to-face volunteering.

**Partner organisations** were understandably preoccupied with the recent withdrawal of volunteers and the subsequent impact on their organisation. Many sought to know when volunteers would be allowed to return in-country with a number noting the challenges associated with remote volunteering, despite appreciating this as a necessary interim measure. Some partner organisations in certain contexts noted that work permits and visas for volunteers remained a challenge. Other partner organisations noted that certain technical skill gaps can't be addressed by the current volunteering model. They noted that for real and sustainable change, the program would need to partner with other organisations that could support these technical gaps.

**Australian partner organisations** noted that finding the right volunteer for the right partner organisation is a constant challenge. They also noted that the program could do better at articulating the type of capacity that needs to be developed and how this is measured. Streamlining approvals processes and better coordination in-country between Australian partner organisations and partner organisations was also aspirational.

**Partner governments** appreciate remote volunteering but mentioned this wasn't the same as having Australians in-country, working alongside partner organisations. Language skills was also noted as an area that could be improved, especially in Timor-Leste.

#### **KEQ. 5.4: What strategies, alternative modalities and approaches could be considered to strengthen the program's resilience and sustainability into the future?**

Stakeholder groups offered a range of diverse suggestions for strengthening the program's resilience and sustainability into the future. While there was no clear consensus of ideas across stakeholder groups, themes emerged around localisation and a greater emphasis on demand driven development through enhanced local engagement.



For example, the following emerged as common examples from stakeholder groups interviewed as part of this evaluation:

- Support for **national volunteering bodies** as a way of advancing the **localisation agenda** and maximising local knowledge of the in-country context and key challenges. This is particularly pertinent in many Pacific countries where the retirement age is 55 and there is an available cohort of skilled retirees.
- Promote **two-way volunteer exchanges** between Australia and in-country partner organisations (i.e. North-South and South-South) or potentially looking at supporting **South-South volunteering** models. For example, exchanges may involve staff from a partner organisation traveling to Australia to have the opportunity to learn from living and volunteering in Australia. These individuals would bring these skills back to their home organisation and country. The exchange would also facilitate cross-cultural exchange that enables shared learning between the volunteer and exchange participant. South-South volunteering would involve two lower income countries learning from each other and bringing learning back to their home country and organisation.

An argument for increased localisation and alternative modalities for the program is consistent with the findings from the Comparative Analysis. It showed that donor programs that use a suite of models did not experience the same level of 'shut-down' during the pandemic as those who implement a traditional North-South volunteering approach. Therefore COVID-19 has compounded these themes and brought alternative models such as South-South or remote volunteering to the forefront for stakeholders.

Additional suggestions that emerged from the interviews are outlined below. While the evaluation team did not explore each of these options in detail, and does not necessarily endorse all suggestions, it notes that some ideas have merit in exploring further while others are already being piloted through the Innovation Fund or being developed by the program. The Innovation Fund as well as partnerships with Australian partner organisations will be key to supporting continued adaptation and providing highly specialised volunteers to be part of the program.

- Continue to support the **Indigenous Pathways** model already underway with pairs or small groups of Indigenous Australian volunteers on short-term assignments. Consider supporting more assignments that engage Indigenous Australian volunteers in sharing their expertise in indigenous-specific issues such as land rights, culturally appropriate service provision and community development. The Indigenous volunteering support and advisory panel is seen as highly desirable by program staff.
- Noting this was explored early in the program, some stakeholders suggested further engaging **diaspora communities in Australia** to return to their home countries as volunteers. This approach would overcome the cultural awareness and language barrier challenges some partner organisations experience with their volunteers.
- Some stakeholders, especially partner organisations and some volunteers suggested **longer assignments** (>12 months) to better support long term partner organisation sustainable development and have a greater opportunity for change at the systems level. Program staff note that it is harder to attract candidates to longer-term roles.
- The program could **support the value of volunteering** in a different way. For example, supporting governments to put more volunteer strategies in place, or supporting partner organisations to utilise volunteers in different ways.
- There is a significant opportunity to further support governments with their **COVID-19 responses**.
- The program could be **working more closely with partner governments** and aligning with their national development plans.
- Some in the program felt that there could be improved **long-term strategic planning**. Running on an annual planning cycle is challenging and potentially risky. Long-term planning aligns annual planning to strategies and allows for adequate testing.
- Some stakeholders, especially volunteers suggested building **Communities of Practice** and supporting these as networks to build stronger partnerships and foster learning.
- While some examples of **cluster volunteering** (multiple volunteers, multiple partner organisations) already exist in the program, these could be further explored or expanded.
- Some DFAT stakeholders felt that the program could be more **targeted and competitive** to attract more specialist skill sets and improve the program's reputation. This may involve further expanding the role of Australian partner organisations in the program and linking with industry or professional bodies.
- Several repeat volunteers wanted the program to consider **part time and flexible volunteering**. It was suggested that part-time volunteering could be paid at half (or pro-rata) of the allowances while allowing those who aren't looking for a full-time arrangement to be engaged with the program. They believed this would have the benefit of attracting greater diversity of participants in the program.

## 5.2 Conclusions

Despite the significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the program has adapted well. This included the safe repatriation of volunteers as well as a quick pivot to remote volunteering and the continuous support of partner organisations through remote volunteering and direct grants. The evaluators noted a passionate commitment and significant desire for change amongst DFAT and program staff, and volunteers. It would be timely to leverage in light of the changes that COVID-19 necessitates, and wider social changes and debate within the aid sector relating to safeguarding issues, the Black Lives Matter movement, localisation in the humanitarian space and a growing discussion around racism and 'decolonising development'.

The program utilised the Innovation Fund to fast-track the pilot of new ideas that consider how the program can continue to achieve its objectives despite the COVID-19 pandemic and drastically changed external environment. Many wanted to see greater involvement from locals and advancing the localisation agenda, for example through the inclusion of local volunteers, support for local volunteering bodies or two-way exchanges facilitated through the program. Around 15 ideas are currently being explored through the Innovation Fund and will provide practical examples of new ways of working that have the potential to be scaled up as part of the program.

There was agreement among all stakeholders interviewed that COVID-19 presents the most significant risk and challenge for the program at this time of restricted movement. While some other challenges were raised, most stakeholders were preoccupied with the flow on impact and associated challenges from the pandemic.

The Innovation Fund is an established means to realise the internal desire and external causes for change and adaptation. It provides the opportunity for DFAT and the program to pursue alternative volunteering modalities that support partner organisations through more locally led volunteering. It is not suggested that such alternative modalities replace the existing program design but that, in countries where it is feasible, they might supplement the existing model.

## 5.3 Recommendations

**Recommendation 8:** In refreshing the program logic and EoPOs, thought should also be given to how best to incorporate alternative modalities within the program logic, and how success or failure of such modalities is to be determined.

**Recommendation 9:** That the contribution of the Innovation Fund to achievement of program goals is clarified and given more visibility in the program logic and the fund continues to be used as a vehicle to help the program stay strategic in approach and remain relevant as wider social issues shape the aid sector. In doing so there needs to be commitment not only to piloting alternative volunteering modalities but to mainstreaming them within the program.

# Chapter 6: Overall conclusions and future directions

## 6.1 Conclusions

The Australian Government has supported Australians to volunteer overseas since the 1960s. The current program (implemented from 2018) works in 26 countries, across multiple sectors and 600 partner organisations each year.

In examining the extent to which the program is making progress towards its EoPOs, the evaluators are mindful that the program is four years into its five-year contract period and for almost a third of this period, program activities and outcomes have been somewhat limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This evaluation found that the program is highly relevant to the development needs of overseas partner organisations, generally relevant to the strategic objectives of Australia's development assistance program and very effective in supporting partner organisations to achieve their capacity development objectives across the program's three impact areas of: climate change, disaster resilience, food security; inclusive economic growth; and human rights.

This evaluation found that the program is very effective in supporting partner organisations to achieve their capacity development goals across a range of impact areas. Partner organisations consulted in this evaluation were unequivocal in their view that participation in the program strengthened their capacity. Extensive, current evidence of the program's effectiveness in the capacity development space can be found in: the program's MEL data; a longitudinal study of volunteers conducted by the UTS Business School; independent research into the program's contribution to addressing climate change in the Pacific; and deep

dive evaluations into the program's contribution to inclusive economic growth in Indonesia and human rights in Southern Africa (all conducted in 2020).

The program's strategic partnerships with Australian organisations have to date been particularly successful in achieving sustainable capacity development outcomes in various sectors including health, climate action, agriculture, and inclusive economic growth.

Stakeholders consulted for this evaluation have a range of different views on the extent to which the program should be focusing on the benefits to volunteers, strengthening the Australian public's support for volunteering, building the capacity of partner organisations, enhancing Australia's soft power and public diplomacy, or advancing the social and economic development of partner countries. This poses a challenge for the program as there are resourcing priorities, tensions and trade-offs involved in pursuing these different outcomes in an evolving policy context.

The unified branding under the Australian Aid banner is very slowly improving recognition of the program. The elimination of a competition environment for volunteers and partner organisations in host countries has allowed an increased focus on well-designed assignments. The program also contributes to some degree to Australia's 'soft power' in its various interpretations, but this is difficult to measure.

Despite some 'teething problems' identified by program staff, the consortium model of AVI, Cardno and Alinea Whitelum, has clear lines of responsibility to their complementary strengths and is working effectively.

The program has comprehensive governance arrangements in place. This complex system is coordinated through regular dialogue with DFAT, the program's annual planning processes, and the Program Management Group which has overall responsibility. While the Program Management Group has a thorough terms of reference, it is not fulfilling the full range of functions expected from a peak governance body.

Despite being significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the program has adapted well. This included the safe repatriation of volunteers as well as a quick pivot to remote volunteering and the continuous support of partner organisations through remote volunteering and direct grants.

There was agreement among all stakeholders interviewed that COVID-19 presents the most significant risk and challenge for the program at this time of restricted movement. While some other challenges were raised, most stakeholders were preoccupied with the flow on impact and associated challenges from the pandemic.

The Innovation Fund provides the program a means to adapt to the external drivers and internal desire for change. It provides the opportunity for DFAT and the program to take a more strategic approach through pursuing alternative volunteering modalities and position the program as a global leader. It is not suggested that such alternative modalities replace the existing program design but that, in countries where it is feasible, they might supplement the existing model.

## 6.2 Future directions

The program has some key strengths that provides a sound environment for adaptation and change. The program has already demonstrated its capacity to adapt in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Innovation Fund is an excellent vehicle to support the program to adapt to the changing environment. Similarly, for the program to trial and scale up new volunteering modalities and innovations to support partner organisations.

Substantial, dedicated resources and capability in the MEL function provides an excellent foundation to fast-track learning from Innovation Fund activities. The program's significant MEL and innovation capability has created ideal conditions for piloting and scaling alternative volunteering modalities, advancing the localisation agenda, and testing how the program could adapt to strengthen its resilience and sustainability. These themes are consistent with other international donor perspectives in terms of how volunteer programs can better facilitate demand driven development.

Dedicated resources and activities in the GEDSI space are also supporting innovation in modalities of volunteering and pioneering partnerships in some countries where diversity and inclusion issues need addressing. The calibre of Australian partner organisations and the significant outcomes these strategic partnerships are delivering is also a strength of the program that could be leveraged and expanded in the medium term. The program has a secure funding base, a highly committed workforce (including 75 local staff in 26 countries) and a record of highly positive outcomes over the last four years for large numbers of volunteers and partner organisations.

There will always be merit in having a development program that shares Australia's skills with partner countries, utilising the traditional model of volunteering we have seen over the past 60 years. Similarly, the changing external environment for volunteering and new challenges in the global environment presents an opportunity to review and recalibrate the current program design and ways of working to strengthen the program's resilience and sustainability.

Key options for consideration into the future are outlined in recommendations and can be summarised as:

- Refresh and recalibrate the program's outcomes, priorities, and logic to improve the visibility of the innovation work that is going on, allow an opportunity to rethink volunteering modalities, reposition the program in the current global context, and help to build a consensus amongst program stakeholders.
- Ramp up the activities of the Innovation Fund which should be used as a vehicle for developing alternative volunteering modalities and committing to piloting and mainstreaming new modalities.
- Better engage with partner governments through new and more formal mechanisms in-country that engage government, the private sector and civil society with DFAT and Program Managers in aligning the program to national development priorities.
- Focus the program more strategically, possibly through expanding strategic partnerships, to attract more highly qualified volunteers and expand the reputation and reach of the program in Australia and internationally.
- Ensure the PMG is fulfilling all its mandated functions particularly in terms of performance assurance and risk management.

The current desire for innovation and change amongst most stakeholders, and especially DFAT and program staff, is an excellent pre-condition for successful change that could be leveraged immediately. The timing is just right for DFAT and the program to move to the forefront of an international paradigm shift in volunteering.