



AVI Submission 2022

Australian Government International Development Policy

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Executive Summary

AVI supports the Australian Government's commitment to improving relations with other countries and contributing to a stable, prosperous and secure region, particularly through refocusing attention on the quality of relationships that underpin development-focused cooperation.

AVI commends the Government's efforts to develop a new policy framework to guide this work. The Government has stated that the policy will "deliver on Australia's commitment to work in **partnership** with our neighbours to achieve a peaceful, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific" with a focus on:

- building effective, accountable states that can sustain their own development;
- enhancing states and community resilience to external pressures and shocks;
- connecting partners with Australia and regional architecture, and
- generating collective action on global challenges that impact our region.

AVI confirms its support for the priorities articulated by ACFID. ACFID has collated the voices of its members across Australia, based on their long-term experience and deep understanding of the complexities of contemporary development contexts.

AVI has a long-standing and unique position in international cooperation and draws on over 70 years of experience based on a combination of values and evidence. The organisation's experience of supporting deep understanding between Australia and other countries through collaborative learning and contributions to mutually-agreed priorities, enables us to make recommendations included in this submission.

In summary, AVI recommends the Australian Government international development program:

- **emphasises strengthening and deepening the quality of relationships** as the basis for collaborative change (away from technocratic, top-down, externally imposed definitions of change);
- **invests in longer-term collaborative commitments**, recognising that sustainable change does not happen in short-term, project-driven contexts;
- **responds to each country's priorities** (sectors, topics, approaches), and away from driving developmental change priorities that may not be contextually relevant;
- **promotes** locally identified, owned and driven responses, ensuring the Australian development program supports coordinated, locally-led, sustainable change, and
- **reflects** the priorities and recommendations made within the ACFID submission.

These themes – *what AVI has learned and how this is relevant to the wider Australian development program* – are discussed further below.

Who is AVI?

AVI began in the 1950s, after the initial placement of Australian volunteers in Indonesia, with the intention of learning about and contributing to our nearest neighbour. Since then, AVI has maintained the original values of collaboration, mutual learning and contributing to locally-determined development objectives and learned a great deal about how to do so.

AVI is a community-based organisation which has attracted support from successive Australian governments over decades and adjusted its programs in response to the changing world. AVI now implements the Australian Volunteers Program, on behalf of DFAT and in consortium with DT Global and Alinea International. The Australian Volunteers Program is an internationally recognised volunteer-sending program working in partnership with hundreds of organisations in 26 countries.

What has AVI learned about development processes?

Over decades of learning, AVI has refined its processes so that its programs make the best possible contribution to effective development outcomes. AVI's theory of action recognises that Australians contribute to change within complex systems: key to effective outcomes is careful selection of both person and partner organisation, aligned to contextual priorities, within a framework of ongoing responsive management.

AVI operates as a development agency using the exchange experience to support positive social, economic and organisational change. This approach reflects various evidence-based theories about how change happens in international development, particularly:

- that development organisations can, at best, facilitate and support the development process, rather than drive it;
- that support for locally led and owned processes is more effective than forcing externally driven change;
- that mutual learning is critical for development processes, since expertise in one context is commonly not relevant in different contexts: a highly effective source of change is activists from different countries working (and learning) together, and
- that long-term, trust-based and respectful relations between people and organisations really matter, particularly in complex settings and to address complex issues.

AVI uses current and well-researched approaches, reflecting best-practice thinking. It challenges the more conventional approaches to development which are based on the false idea that transferring resources from one context to another brings about systemic change. AVI has a unique value in the Australian community, enabling Australians to better understand different cultures and contexts, as well as the complexities of developmental change.

AVI's contribution to Australia's international standing as a reputable and informed global player, is also significant. Most importantly, AVI's relationships with governments, community organisations and other partners around the world are contributing to the kinds of positive changes that help achieve the kinds of goals described in the SDGs.

Quality people-to-people relationships

The Minister for Foreign Affairs stated "The extent to which Australia can become an international partner of choice, sitting at the heart of a network of relationships, will determine Australia's capacity" to navigate the complexities of the contemporary world, particularly in our region of Asia and the Pacific. AVI's experience confirms that the quality of people-to-people and organisational relationships are absolutely central in any development programming. These require **concerted, sustained and thoughtful efforts at multiple levels**. The **depth of shared trust and respect** between people and organisations from **community, civil society, government and business sectors** is the most critical element to effective relationships. Without trust and respect, relationships do not work, and without relationships, developmental change cannot be achieved.

Partnerships continue to be at the centre of the way AVI works to support locally-led development. Our partnerships with Australian organisations enhance program delivery through a range of support options. AVI's Solomon Islands Medical Partnerships for Learning, Education and Research (SIMPER) is one such example. Through SIMPLER, Australian Medical Professionals are sent to Solomon Islands to work side by side with local colleagues to supervise and train large numbers of foreign-trained medical graduates returning to Solomon Islands. This is achieved by partnering with medical colleges across Australia including the Australian College for Emergency Medicine. Since 2015, the SIMPLER program has deployed 27 volunteer medical professionals in to the National Referral Hospital who have trained 87 foreign-educated medical graduates.

AVI places significant emphasis on the value of relationships formed between individuals and partners. It also sees value in the ongoing and long-term relationships developed between AVI and partners as successive volunteers, mentors and advisors move through the partner organisation or network. The modality of volunteering contributes to the Australian Government's objective to strengthen mutual relationships with people and communities across the Pacific, Asia and Africa. We have learned that relationships matter, particularly when working in complex situations.

It is only through relationship with local organisations that outsiders are able to support change which is likely to be relevant and adapted to local context, power and opportunities. From this perspective, effective development practitioners rely heavily on good relationships with key organisations and individuals within those organisations, to understand connections and processes critical to effective change. A focus on enabling development practitioners to develop good working relationships with local people and local organisations is therefore critical to effective work.

AVI has learned that when efforts are made to learn about different frames of reference and cultural values, and to work collaboratively with local leaders and people, then different approaches to achieving change (from those found in externally determined program plans) emerge. Approaches which are locally suitable and politically feasible (as opposed to technical fixes and tightly designed programs imposed from outside) are more likely to achieve sustainable change.

AVI has found that people-to-people links, as well as links between community-based organisations are critical both for identifying different priorities at a community level and complementing regional and global efforts on shared topics such as inequality, injustice, climate change and violence. Relationships between programs undertaken by groups of civil society organisations play a crucial role in achieving relevant and sustainable change. When governments respectfully collaborate with and support the efforts of civil society organisations relevant to each context, developmental change is more achievable.

First Nations Foreign Policy

Indigenous Australians are uniquely placed to combine their personal and professional experiences with an understanding of the importance of culture, communication, and sustainability in development. Indigenous Pathways is an Indigenous-led component of the Australian Volunteers Program (managed by an AVI-led consortium) that expands and strengthens Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in international volunteering by providing culturally safe, flexible and tailored support.

A strong focus of Indigenous Pathways is to connect Indigenous people and organisations from Australia, with Indigenous organisations and communities internationally, to build meaningful relationships across cultures and collaborate on projects that are mutually beneficial. Indigenous voices and leadership are embedded within formal structures of the program through the Indigenous Volunteer Support and Advisory Panel. This significant function provides ongoing advice, guidance and support to the program, current volunteers and alumni. The wide range of approaches and activities undertaken by Indigenous Pathways support localisation and decolonisation approaches, and align with DFAT's Indigenous Diplomacy Agenda.

AVI recommends that:

- The Australian international development program invests in promoting and supporting critical relationships between civil society organisations in Australia and in countries where development programs are delivered.
- A Civil Society Organisation (CSO) Hub is established in DFAT to strengthen engagement with civil society across the development program.
- The Australian development program reflect a clear strategy for locally led development approaches, shaped by partner governments and communities and which implements the OECD DAC recommendations on Enabling Civil Society, the commitments under the Grand Bargain and includes targets for local leadership in the design, delivery, and evaluation of programs.

Long-term, strengths-based collaborative commitments

AVI has learned that sustainable development outcomes are achievable in the context of **long-term, responsive, and collaborative relationships**. This reflects research that change occurs where there are multiple influences and where effective responses are built over time, rather than pre-planned or imported from elsewhere.

Governments and diplomats come and go and policies, priorities and political contexts change over time, but relationships between civil society organisations and between people who have lived and worked with each other last. People-to-people and community-to-community relationships can complement good Government relationships, counteract poor ones and help address challenges.

AVI knows that development challenges are complex and the selection of appropriate responses are generally contested, so respectful, culturally-informed and long-term collaboration is necessary. In a long-term context, people can develop deeper understanding of local histories of what has worked well (or not) in the past, complexities in leadership and relationships, cultural norms and inter-sectoral issues. They can learn about existing strengths and locally-relevant opportunities to bring about positive change. This requires good quality relationships, openness to learning as well as commitment to ongoing and joint reflection on what is working well and what options are available.

AVI has learned that donors' development programming often takes a 'problem-based approach': it is implied that countries where 'aid' is delivered are or have 'problems' or 'lack resources' which will be fixed by 'aid'. In our experience, this approach is both unrealistic (high-resource countries generally do not know what will actually work in contexts with different values and histories and cannot 'fix problems') and disrespectful (undermining trust-based and respectful relationships). AVI explicitly and deliberately prepares volunteers to enter new countries with the intention of finding out about what is working well in each setting – they go with a 'learning hat' rather than a 'teaching hat'. This enables them to listen respectfully and collaborate with others to support locally-led change.

AVI recommends that:

- DFAT's relationships with countries where development programming is undertaken, take a strengths-based approach to identifying priorities and jointly determining development approaches, recognising the strengths that exist in each context and that locally-determined visions for the future are more achievable than externally imposed agendas.
- DFAT's development programming shifts to more long-term programming, including through civil society organisations, rather than annual or short-term projects, and pays more attention to joint learning and reflective practice than short-term results-based reporting.

Joint determination of sectoral and programming priorities

AVI knows from experience in many countries that in each context, governments, communities and organisations have different histories, trajectories and development priorities. Two neighbouring Pacific countries, for example, may have completely different experiences of climate change, gender inequality and governance accountability. Two government agencies in an Asian country may have diverse expertise in particular topics or approaches. Therefore, the expectation that global or regional sectoral or approach-based priorities can be determined from Canberra and applied across multiple countries is inappropriate.

AVI has learned that the quality of relationships and longevity of collaboration (as above) are essential for allowing locally-determined priorities and approaches to emerge, which can then be discussed with and supported by donor countries such as Australia. If sectoral and programming approaches are imposed from outside, there is a high risk they will fail. It is now widely known that 'one-size-fits-all' approaches are not effective.

It is only through local leadership (in government, civil society and communities) and local collective action, that approaches to bring about change can be identified and supported by donors such as the Australian development program. The use of inclusive approaches by donors to determining and designing development programs can be particularly useful given the diversity of perspectives which will be found in every context.

When there are long-term, trust-based, respectful and inclusive relationships, jointly determined priorities and approaches can be identified and successful programs implemented. AVI recommends that DFAT reinstate Country Strategies/Plans to reflect appropriate contextual priorities, promote coordination among Australian government supported programs and enable inclusive and locally led consultation processes in the development of these plans.

AVI recognises there are no single 'right approaches' to support developmental change (i.e. what works in one place may not work in another), but has learned that coherent contributions at multiple levels can make a useful difference. For example, if DFAT officials are working on global human rights agendas, Australian civil society organisations can be supporting complementary local efforts on human rights that are relevant in each country. Similarly, if DFAT officials are funding regional organisations to undertake climate change policy development, civil society organisations can collaborate with local communities, organisations and networks to raise awareness, identify locally relevant responses and advocate for context-specific change.

AVI recommends that:

- DFAT policies ensure sectoral priorities and an inclusive mix of development approaches are jointly determined in each context, through facilitated discussions with governments, leaders and civil society organisations.
- DFAT reinstate Country Strategies/Plans to reflect appropriate contextual priorities, promote coordination among Australian government supported programs and enable inclusive and locally led consultation processes in the development of these plans.
- DFAT provide greater funding to **collaborative civil society efforts**, to balance the current over-emphasis on private sector involvement in collaborative relationships between Australia and its neighbours.

Conclusion

AVI welcomes the invitation to reflect on components of the Australian government development assistance strategy. As highlighted in this submission, we have emphasised the imperative for **strengthening and deepening the quality of relationships, investing in longer-term collaborative commitments, responding to each country's priorities** and **promoting locally identified, owned and driven responses**. AVI also supports and acknowledges the submission by ACFID.