Bill Armstrong: volunteering with attitude

By Robin Davies

For generations of young Australians with a passion for social justice, volunteering in developing or indigenous communities has been a rite of passage. **Bill Armstrong** has been deeply involved in this movement since the 1960s, making considerable contributions and observing its shifts and successes.

It's the late 1950s in Australia. You're a recent university graduate, wanting to do something useful and gain some international experience before you step onto one or another professional conveyor belt. You're happy to work for close to nothing. In fact, you're determined to work under the same conditions as your local counterparts. Coming from White Australia, this makes some kind of a point. Thanks to Herb Feith and the Australian Student Christian Movement, you can apply to participate in the Volunteer Graduate Scheme and perhaps go to Indonesia.

Two generations pass, and it's the late 1990s. International volunteering is more commonplace yet harder to break into. Volunteers are now mostly middle-aged and mid-career, with plenty of skills and experience. Fortunately for you, the Howard government fondly recalls the 1950s when volunteering was much more about building relationships and taking young Australians outside their comfort zones. It has recently created an 'Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development' program to which you can apply.

Another generation passes. It's today. The Youth Ambassadors program is no more, having been inexplicably cancelled, as it was created, by a Coalition

government. Nevertheless, you want to apply to go to a developing country as a government-sponsored volunteer. You read up on the relevant scheme, Australian Volunteers for International Development. You find it byzantine, but never mind. What might you get to do?

The scheme, you learn, 'provides opportunities for skilled Australians to contribute to the Australian Government's aid program'. It also seeks 'to promote a positive perception of Australia in the Indo-Pacific region'.

Those weren't exactly your objectives but never mind, you press on. What, in particular, might you do? Well, you'll 'support the capacity of host organisations to deliver effective and sustainable development outcomes focused on economic growth and poverty reduction'. You'll also 'promote positive people-to-people links between individuals, organisations and communities in developing countries and in Australia'.

At which point, if not entirely discouraged, you hazard a hopeful guess that somewhere within this formidable fortress of dead words and bureaucratic obstacles is probably much the same thing that you might have found a few generations ago—a way of doing useful and fulfilling things overseas. So you brace yourself and get on with the application.

Bill Armstrong in Vietnam, 1987.

Missionaries, mercenaries, misfits

Bill Armstrong has been deeply immersed in Australian volunteering through all these passing generations. He is best known as head of the Melbourne-based non-government organisation Australian Volunteers International, which until 1999 had been known as the Overseas Service Bureau, for two decades until his retirement in 2002. But he goes back much further than that, having joined the fledgling Overseas Service Bureau as a junior staff member in the early 1960s, around the time it absorbed the Volunteer Graduate Scheme.

Unsurprisingly, Bill has encountered sceptics in the course of his career, people who think that volunteering is a kind of amateur activity without much impact, or at least lasting impact.

> *'There are lots of people who somehow can't get out from under the fact that if you don't earn big money you're not really professional, or there's something wrong with you—you're a "missionary, mercenary or misfit".*

Bill well recalls the period when Papua New Guinea was heavily dependent on the substantial numbers of Australian volunteers who worked as doctors, nurses, teachers and engineers throughout the country. He points to OSB's early project in Vietnam, which trained or upgraded about 1,000 Vietnamese English-language teachers before the Australian government was ready to go back in with its own aid program. He points to the contributions of Australian and other volunteers in refugee camps in Africa and other parts of the world. And he talks also about the particular importance of volunteers in small and fragile states.

> *'I can think of a situation in the Cook Islands in the Pacific, where for something like 10 or 15 years a series of volunteers were responsible for electrical engineering at the power plant, until the local authorities were able to take responsibility. And in East Timor, following the crisis of '99, there were some 200 volunteers from Australia, some attached to the UN, working in very senior positions within the fledgling public service.'*

The crisis in East Timor, in fact, called forth perhaps the fullest expression of Australian international voluntarism up to that time. Much of this came from the state of Victoria, OSB's home state, owing to its historical close relationship with East Timor, dating back to World War II, and its status as a node of the East Timorese diaspora.

> *'A lot of Victorians were in East Timor at that time. We, AVI, were looking to work closely with the Victorian government, and we put out a joint call for volunteers. And we had something like 2,000 responses. So there was an incredible upsurge of interest and support, which of course continues through the "friendship groups" whose members have often gone to work in the field, in rural areas, as organisers, administrators, teachers of English and so on.'*

Bill himself has long been involved with the township of Suai in the province of Cova Lima near the border with West Timor. Notoriously, some 90 people were slaughtered in Suai's cathedral in 1999. AVI placed several volunteers there over a period of six or seven years. Working with the community of Suai and the City of Port Phillip 'friendship group', they assisted in the establishment of a substantial community centre. It's thriving, Bill says. It now employs between 20 and 30 full- and part-time staff to train people in government and in the community in English, computer skills and agriculture, and to deliver women's programs in

surrounding villages.

> *'While you can't say that that resulted from the work of the volunteer, it was the volunteer's job to facilitate and encourage, and enable those people to come together and to rebuild that community.'*

So, to anybody inclined to doubt the quality and the professionalism of volunteers, Bill's response is swift and unqualified: 'there's no problem about that'. In his long experience, volunteers are usually very highly qualified; often much more so than the better remunerated international staff alongside whom they sometimes work. But, as we'll see, he's not much interested in the comparison. He thinks volunteers are, and should be, a different category of being.

Bill Armstrong (right) signing a volunteer program agreement with Foreign Minister Gareth Evans (centre) and Christopher Fogarty, former Chair of OSB/AVI, in 1990.

Stars aligned

Bill started with the Overseas Service Bureau more than 50 years ago, in 1963,

and worked there for seven years. Later, in 1982, he returned as Chief Executive Officer. When he took on the leadership role, it was a very small organisation of just a dozen or so staff and a budget of around $400,000. It had been struggling with some financial and management problems. When he left, two decades later, it was one of the most substantial NGOs in Australia. The staff had grown tenfold and the budget was around $20 million.

> *'I was a bit lucky in one sense, to be able to pick up an organisation that had had some difficulties. The government came in behind us at that stage and was really keen to have the volunteer program, as a community-based and community-run program, develop. I have to give credit to the government for giving us that sort of support. And right through Africa, Asia and the Pacific, there was huge demand for Australian volunteers at the time. At the same time, there were a lot of Australians—and there still are and always have been—prepared to be volunteers. So all that came together and provided the opportunity for the volunteer program to grow.'*

The government, and in particular Malcolm Fraser's foreign minister Tony Street (a Victorian), had come in behind OSB after considering the recommendations of a Senate committee review of the organisation. The review, headed by Senator Baden Teague, had been established essentially to assess the merits of establishing an Australian version of the US Peace Corps, and was looking at OSB's contribution from that perspective. In the end, the best option was judged to be—on the basis of advice from the then Australian Development Assistance Bureau—an intensification of support for OSB's existing, community-based efforts.

> *'We grew very quickly, and that helped us to attract good staff. By the end, I would have thought that Australian Volunteers International had one of the best staff of any non-government organisation in the country. It was an organisation that was open, flexible and innovative. We were able to move quickly, as we did with English-language training in Vietnam in the early days, and in Cambodia later on. And we were able to build complex partnerships like that with the Solomon Islands Development Trust, which saw us provide 20 or 30 volunteers over time to work on community development programs in the outer islands.'*

How did Bill manage the scale and pace of his organisation's expansion? He wryly

cites his early apprenticeship as a fitter and turner, which taught him how to learn on the run. He certainly had to learn a great deal about managing a large and growing organisation, with a quickly rising budget, but he didn't think he could learn it all. He wasn't slow to recruit expert advice and support where he thought it was needed, and he gives his staff a lot of credit.

Community roots

Beyond volunteering, Bill has been active in the Australian NGO community for a long time, working with ActionAid Australia and Caritas Australia, serving as President of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) for four years, and also working in the earlier part of his career, before taking on the CEO role at OSB, in development education. This experience has given him a unique and unusually long-term view of the Australian NGO landscape. And the

landscape looks very different these days.

> *'I think the major change that's taken place is that the community engagement component of the community sector has lessened quite dramatically over the last 30 years. For most of these organisations, their beginnings, their foundations, were very much initiatives that came out of the community. If you take Oxfam/Community Aid Abroad, it began as a series of school groups, of community groups, right around the country linking with projects and programs overseas and raising funds and building relationships. The same goes for the Australian volunteer program. It was an initiative out of Melbourne University and the Student Christian Movement.'*

Bill owes his own introduction to international development, and indeed a good deal of his education, to the Young Christian Worker's Movement, a Catholic youth organisation with which he became involved as a 16-year-old apprentice. In time, it was deemed to be too progressive an organisation, and lost the support of the church. Its equivalent would be hard to find now.

During Bill's early years at OSB, much of the support for the volunteer program came from churches, the community, and service groups like Rotary. Over time, beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, the Australian government came in behind the volunteer program and the work of other NGOs. The Australian Council for Overseas Aid, the forerunner of ACFID, functioned as a link between NGOs and the government. With Bill's participation, it helped negotiate the terms on which the government would provide support to community-based organisations.

It was understood at that time that the government was, within limits, providing additional support for priorities and programs of the NGOs themselves, so that this work could be expanded. But in more recent years the emphasis has shifted. Governments are now more inclined to see NGOs as implementing or at least reinforcing parts of the official aid effort. Accordingly, NGOs have increasingly been required to tender for government programs.

> *'Today, most of the 140 organisations that make up ACFID are fairly dependent, many of them very dependent, on Australian government money. So their programs aren't so much initiatives of the community; they are programs of the government that sometimes link fairly closely to the work of the NGO, and sometimes not quite so closely. You've got a great dependence on government*

tendering, and that means, of course, that the control of NGOs, or their programs, is much more in the hands of the government than in the hands of the community.'

Bill's concern is not so much that, under conditions of financial dependence, governments will tell NGOs what to say and do. His concern is a deeper one, based on the conviction that official aid programs don't have much to offer from a development perspective. Aid and welfare, he believes, treat symptoms and do little to enable lasting change. His view, which owes more than a little to his current and longstanding involvement with the domestic NGO Indigenous Community Volunteers, is that if change is to happen, communities and governments must take genuine responsibility for their own situations and challenges.

'We hear this being said a lot about Indigenous Australia: "They've got to be responsible; they've got to take responsibility". But most of the programs that are government-funded and run are programs that provide services. The slogan that we use in Indigenous Community Volunteers is, "We do things with people, not to or for them". So I hope that what will take place in the next few decades is that community organisations will move back to the community much more. They may not be able to raise the sorts of funds they can get from government now. But the control of these organisations should be much more in the hands of the community.'

As NGOs have become, on average, more dependent on government funding, NGOs have also proliferated. Indeed, the two trends are not unrelated, as the availability of core funding and tax incentives from the government creates incentives for new NGOs to spring up. Many NGOs are in much the same line of business, and run the risk of competing for funds from much the same donor base. Bill's instincts tend in the opposite direction.

'I've always believed that NGOs should at least work together in partnership, if not combine. I mean, you've just got to look at the NGO community, where they come from and what their real motives are for operating. But over the years, competition has increased dramatically because NGOs now have to compete for funds. You can't share with the other organisation what you're doing because that's part of your competitive edge to get the funds. So yes, there's far too

much of that. And I put the blame on the competitive approach to funding.'

In the case of volunteer-sending agencies, there has in general been less competition, since OSB/AVI held a near-monopoly for much of its lifetime. However, the Howard government's youth ambassadors scheme was conceived not only as a return to the roots of volunteering, but also as an opportunity to break AVI's monopoly and align volunteering more closely to the objectives of the official aid program. It was designed in such a way that AVI would have little hope of the winning the contract to run it, and every six months the latest batch of youth ambassadors was given a ceremonial send-off by one or another political figure. Bill, however, sees little merit in competition among volunteer-sending agencies.

'I do think that there's a place for other volunteer programs that specialise in particular fields. RedR, for example, which is a volunteer program for engineers. But under foreign minister Downer there was a very strong feeling there should be broader competition. I don't know what it was meant to do. The seeds of the Youth Ambassador program were really with us at AVI. In fact, we did the work on a pilot program in Thailand. Then somehow along the way it was taken away and given to what was fundamentally, at that time, a consulting firm owned by the government of South Australia.'

'Did that improve the volunteer program? I think you can absolutely say that the cost per volunteer went up quite considerably. I'm not in a position to say whether quality improved. But I've always had a view that volunteers are good people, really good people, and you can mess them around a lot and they'll still do a damn good job.'

Bill Armstrong with Abraham Baeanisia, Director of Solomon Islands Development Trust, 1994.

Money and control

As must now be clear, Bill does not subscribe to the view that Australia's volunteer program should be a branch of Australia's official aid program, nor to the view that it should be managed by a contracted service provider or providers. He sees a fundamental difference between volunteers and consultants. It's important to be clear, though, that the difference is not merely one of remuneration. In fact, he regrets the common misconception that a volunteer is 'a person who will do things for nothing' (in fact, their basic costs are met and they receive some level of compensation for their labour). The difference, as he sees it, is one of attitude.

> *'Volunteers work with the community. They work with the government. They work as employees of whoever it is they're working for. They work alongside their colleagues. They're much more like one of them. That's where the whole concept of volunteering came from in Australia, and also in the UK and Canada. Australia's Volunteer Graduate Scheme was all about building relationships between Australia and Indonesia, and Australians working alongside of their*

counterparts in Indonesia, on the same salary level and on the same conditions.'

Sometimes in conversation with government officials, Bill would be told that he was really only interested in seeing Australians educated through their experiences as volunteers. Putting it as politely as he can, he describes this assertion as nonsense.

'The two things go together – work together, build relationships, make a contribution. Of course you don't go as a volunteer unless you've got a skill to take and you've got a job to go into, but it's just as important to build those relationships and to learn from one another, and to bring that experience, that cross-cultural experience, back to Australia to help Australia be a better nation.'

In Bill's view, as the distinction between volunteers and consultants has eroded, a perception has grown that Australia's neighbouring countries are to be divided into basket cases in need of help and emerging markets in need of exploitation. The result?

'I think we were a lot closer to those parts of the world, especially Indonesia and parts of the Pacific, 20, 30 or 40 years ago than we are today.'

Over Bloody Eighty

Bill retired from AVI around 15 years ago now, and will tell you he has been awarded an OBE—meaning, 'Over Bloody Eighty'. (He was in fact made an Officer in the General Division of the Order of Australia in 2003 for services to the international community.) His mania for practical action continues unabated and is now directed mainly toward his work with Indigenous Community Volunteers.

Bill sees an 'incredible thirst' among young people to participate in similar action within Australia and overseas, but also thinks there are now too few organisations that know how to capture and direct their enthusiasm and commitment.

That's something he hopes to see change. 'Before I go, anyhow'.

Listen to Robin's interview with Bill below, or download as a podcast here. You can also download the transcript.

Robin Davies interviews Bill Armstrong

http://devpolicy.org/aidprofiles/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Bill-Armstrong-interview-podcast.mp3