

Australian Volunteers: doing better by thinking bigger

by Ben Davis

18 July 2014



Discussions about the merits of volunteer programs often centre around who wins. Is it all about the host organisation or the individual undertaking the assignment?

Ashlee Betteridge [recently questioned](#) the Australian volunteer program's dual focus of public diplomacy and efforts to build host organisation capacity:

... is it reasonable to expect volunteers to achieve long-term organisational capacity development, something that professional consultants and aid managers often struggle to do themselves?

Like the [ODE Evaluation](#) on volunteer programs, Ashlee proposes that volunteers take on more 'role-based' assignments, to allow them to meet partner expectations.

Quite rightly, she advocates for less spin about the capacity development benefits of volunteer programs:

... ditching this capacity building obsession could cut the spin in assignment descriptions so that volunteers have a better idea of what they are signing up for and host organisations actually get the chance to more honestly articulate what they want and need, bringing everyone's expectations more closely into alignment.

Ashlee points out that, like the broader aid program, we should never fool ourselves into setting-up false dichotomies of public diplomacy versus development

objectives. It is always going to be somewhere 'in-the-balance'.

While I take Ashlee's points, it is also important to note that some attempts are being made to ensure that volunteers can contribute to partner development as part of a broader strategy, and therefore meet host organisation expectations.

A volunteer position can both fill a capacity gap within an organisation and have a wider impact on development outcomes. Sure, the volunteer may not be lifting their host country out of poverty day in day out, but their small actions can cause a ripple in the pond.

As I observed in Indonesia, we also need to think strategically to situate volunteer assignments within a country's broader development portfolio in order to identify where the capacity gaps lie. After all, volunteer placements are just one tool (albeit a blunt one) at the development practitioner's disposal to respond to 'immediate needs'. A volunteer's placement can have short-term, lead-on effects for capacity development.

I witnessed this trend of 'positive targeting' volunteer placements in Indonesia. For example, as part of a program that worked to build capacity of civil society organisations to produce better analysis for policy making, volunteer placements were offered as one of a broad suite of measures based on an organisational development assessment. Assignments included financial management, translating, researching or analysing, editing, media management and report writing roles. These were often used to plug holes where staff had taken scholarship opportunities overseas or skilled staff were not easily available.

In contrast to a 'scatter-gun' approach to identifying organisations based on a random skill match with volunteers, a 'whole-of-development portfolio' approach ensures that host organisations are selected through a well-considered identification process and that those organisations are more self-aware of capacity gaps and what they hope to achieve by taking on a volunteer. This leads to more opportunities to fill much needed capacity gaps and, with these jobs taken care of, allows more skilled staff to achieve higher priority objectives.

There is also great variation in the capacity of volunteers, with some requiring capacity development themselves. There may also be transaction costs for the organisation taking on a volunteer given the time it can take to train newcomers and the fact that placements can be short. That said, there is a great deal that volunteers can do for host organisations. While positions might initially focus on 'on the job' learning for the volunteer, these tasks offer opportunities for transferring basic skills, such as those relating to English language ability, writing or knowledge

about how a country like Australia approaches a relevant issue. This informal support can be invaluable.

All in all, purposeful placements ensure that volunteering is not just about public diplomacy and the up-skilling of Australia's next generation of development practitioners. DFAT is happy because volunteers are contributing to its broader development objectives, the volunteer is happy because they are contributing to meaningful work, both formally and informally, and the host organisation benefits by having a volunteer that contributes to its goals.

Purposeful placements are not a panacea. Top-down approaches don't always work. But my experience in Indonesia suggests that we can improve the volunteer experience for all parties by doing a better job of incorporating them into the overall aid effort. We can do better by thinking bigger.

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