

Climate action for organisations that don't focus on climate change

by Anna Gero, Jake Phelan, Tazrina Chowdhury and Keren Winterford

24 November 2023



Volunteer Maureen Bolawaqatabu with Disaster Management Officer Mafi Penisoni in Tonga
Photo Credit: © Darren James, The Australian Volunteers Program

The potential risks and impacts of climate change can seem overwhelming. Organisations that don't work on directly related issues may not know where or how to start addressing them, or if they need to address them at all. The [Australian Volunteers Program](#), which does not have a primary focus on climate change, has taken a proactive approach to integrating climate change across its strategic and operational activities. The program did this by using a participatory approach to identify relatively easy actions that built organisational momentum and buy-in for further climate change integration work. By sharing the insights and lessons learned, we hope to help other organisations identify entry points for integrating climate change considerations and to start or strengthen their own climate change integration actions.

Funded by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the Australian Volunteers Program has been supporting Australians to volunteer in low- and middle-income countries since the 1960s. The program has supported volunteer assignments with organisations across the Indo-Pacific that seek to address climate change; identified "climate change, disaster resilience and food security" as thematic impact areas in its [global strategy](#); and committed to offset emissions from international air travel. The program also introduced remote volunteering (largely due to the global pandemic), which has the additional benefit of lower emissions (as no flights for international travel), and is doing more to support national volunteering. While these activities have helped mitigate or reduce the program's climate impact, it had not previously taken steps to coherently integrate a climate-risk-aware approach across all its functions.

In 2022, the University of Technology Sydney's Institute for Sustainable Futures (UTS-ISF) partnered with the Australian Volunteers Program to support and implement climate change integration activities within the program. The research was informed by [an earlier evaluation](#) of the Australian Volunteers Program's "Climate change, disaster resilience and food security" thematic impact area,

conducted by UTS-ISF in 2021.

Activities to mainstream a climate-risk-aware approach will vary considerably depending on the specific context of the organisation or program. What we wish to highlight in this blog are the factors that enable progress to be made that are, we believe, relevant to other programs.

In collaboration with a working group of program staff, UTS-ISF researchers identified five enabling actions that supported and accelerated climate change integration within the program.

Start simple and build momentum. The Australian Volunteers Program started with small-scale, relatively uncomplicated activities. The 2022 research involved an audit of existing documents and interviews with internal and external stakeholders to identify possible actions. This provided evidence of where a climate-risk-aware approach could be embedded, and a list of opportunities for the program's climate change integration working group to pursue.

One relatively quick win was producing a guidance note for volunteers that outlines the importance of climate change to the Australian Volunteers Program. The guidance note has also been repackaged for different purposes – for example, as part of volunteers' pre-assignment briefings, asking volunteers to consider how climate change is affecting different country contexts and the partner organisation they will be volunteering with. Developing the guidance note involved a collaborative approach and brought together diverse people from across the Australian Volunteers Program. The process has built positive momentum for further work on climate change at strategic, programmatic and operational levels.

Ensure supportive senior management. The program's senior management decided to invest resources for climate change integration activities based on the evidence from the 2021 evaluation by UTS-ISF. The program leadership also operationalised a reference group to support the 2022 climate change integration research, to ensure that the research outputs were coherent and meaningful to different levels of the organisation.

This support is also demonstrated through the Australian Volunteers International (which manages the Australian Volunteers Program in a consortium with DT Global and Alinea International) environmental sustainability policy, action plan and committee to enable progress, accountability and focus on tangible actions including mitigating carbon emissions across the organisation.

Identify clear entry points for climate change integration. The program's [Global Program Strategy 2018-2022](#) and DFAT's 2019 [Climate Change Action Strategy](#)

provided a strategic framework and a mandate for integrating climate change. The Global Program Strategy identifies “Climate change, disaster resilience and food security” as one of three thematic impact areas, while DFAT’s Climate Change Action Strategy notes the need for Australia’s development program to “address climate change and strengthen socially inclusive, gender-responsive sustainable development in our region”. These strategies provide an important strategic directive to take meaningful action on climate change.

Take an intentional focus on collaboration and learning. The approach taken by the Australian Volunteers Program was designed to involve stakeholders from different organisational levels and geographic regions. A group of program staff came together in an internal climate change integration working group to coordinate activities and to reach out to the wider program. Creating a collaborative process supported capacity building among staff members, increased motivation and internal buy-in, and helped disseminate research learnings throughout the organisation.

Identify internal champions to lead and coordinate activities. The Australian Volunteers Program does not have a dedicated climate change advisory function. However, an internal champion was able to galvanise support from a group of staff across the program and coordinated activities between UTS-ISF researchers and the reference group. Having an internal champion, within a supportive organisational culture, made it possible for the program to effectively implement initiatives that facilitate climate change integration.

As a result of this work, the program has taken several steps to mainstream a climate-risk-aware approach. This is a work in progress. As examples, the program has:

- introduced environmental screening into the program’s procurement processes for all goods and services;
- incorporated guidance on climate change into volunteers’ pre-assignment briefings and online training;
- developed short briefing notes for volunteers on the likely impacts of climate change in destination countries;
- given greater focus to climate-specific impacts in country risk and security plans;
- prioritised sharing knowledge about climate change risks and impacts from partner organisations with relevant expertise through the program’s monthly webinars for volunteers and partner organisations; and
- focused rounds of the Australian Volunteers Program’s small grants program, [the Impact Fund](#), on organisations working on climate action and environmental sustainability.

Disclosures:

The Australian Volunteers Program is funded by DFAT. This research was conducted by the University of Technology Sydney's Institute for Sustainable Futures in partnership with the Australian Volunteers Program.

Author/s:

Anna Gero

Anna Gero is a research principal at the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney.

Jake Phelan

Jake Phelan manages the monitoring, evaluation and learning team of the Australian Volunteers Program.

Tazrina Chowdhury

Tazrina Chowdhury is a research consultant at the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney.

Keren Winterford

Keren Winterford is a research director at the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney.

Link:

<https://devpolicy.org/climate-action-for-organisations-that-dont-focus-on-climate-change-20231124/>