Hidden contributions of ODA: the Australian Volunteer Program

Australian volunteer Jessica Evans (centre) with her Empower Pacific colleagues Ruci Sekitoga (left) and Vika Bete (right) in Lautoka, Fiji.
Photo Credit: AVP / Darren James

by Anthony Fee

3 September 2024

Attitudes towards the Australian government's foreign aid spending have always fluctuated. Yet most Australians support the idea of aid, especially within the Asia-Pacific region, and this support is fortified by a genuine commitment to Australia's being a good humanitarian neighbour, not just to aid that serves Australia's national interests. At the same time, the cost-effectiveness of aid spending relative to other priorities remains important to both taxpayers and policymakers.

Given this, it seems important to be able to recognise the full gamut of contributions that our aid funding makes, including in situations where benefits may fall outside the narrow window of pre-defined program goals or might manifest in unexpected ways.

This might be the case for the Australian Volunteers Program, funded from Australia's Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget. The program supports highly skilled Australian volunteers to work in development-focused positions in partner organisations in 25 countries in the Asia-Pacific and beyond.

Over the past five years, I've led a longitudinal research project, funded by the Australian Volunteers Program, tracking a cohort of 50 Australian volunteers. While the study's main focus is the personal and professional impacts on the volunteers themselves (one of the three objectives of the volunteers program), our regular interviews with volunteers about their experiences during and after volunteering have unearthed surprising evidence of hidden development contributions that volunteers make. I say "hidden" because these contributions accrue outside volunteers' formal roles and assignment objectives, and so are not fully captured by the regular monitoring and evaluation (M&E) activities that programs like this typically undertake.

The study identified three common types of contribution.

First, there is evidence of discretionary in-country volunteering during the volunteer assignment.

Although all the volunteers have position descriptions defining their volunteering roles, our study unveiled the vast, informal “discretionary” contributions that volunteers make during their assignments that go well beyond their formal volunteer roles. These include:

- through their networks and other sources, helping partner organisations to access equipment, broadband or mobile data access, reference materials, subscriptions and other resources (including funding and supplies during crises)
- connecting partner organisations with professionals, associations and organisations in Australia and elsewhere that provide access to information, projects, funding or knowledge exchanges
- applying their expertise to “after hours” voluntary activities for the partner organisation or for other community groups, such as schools, libraries and local NGOs, or for individuals and families they meet (examples include conducting evening lessons, coaching weekend sports teams, mentoring managers and board members, offering pro-bono counselling or consulting, developing business plans, and creating or managing websites)
- facilitating opportunities for their accompanying partners to volunteer with local community groups that can take advantage of the partners’ interests and skills (examples include helping to run a stray dog shelter, instigating and leading a women’s community sewing group, and overseeing the installation and operation of an upgraded IT system for a local school).

Second, volunteers provide ongoing informal support for partner organisations after the assignment.

For the 50 participants in the longitudinal study, this amounted to a total of approximately 70 months of additional, continuous informal support and advice in the first 12 months following their assignments – equivalent to about six weeks for each partner organisation. The type and extent of support varied greatly. Some was relatively minor, like ad-hoc assistance writing grant applications, while other support was much more comprehensive – for instance, regular online mentoring for managers and specialists involving several hours per week. With a few notable exceptions, this support has dissipated in intensity over time as partner organisations shift to new projects and volunteers continue their careers elsewhere. Nonetheless, even several years after the assignment ends, most partner organisations that reach out to former volunteers for support continue to receive assistance, and so continue to benefit from the volunteer’s expertise beyond the assignment’s duration.

Third, volunteers make the transition to subsequent “prosocial” jobs. This hidden impact comes from the professional decisions volunteers make after their assignment – decisions that build on the contacts, experiences and inspirations that grew out of their time as volunteers.

Within three years of finishing their assignments, one in four of the volunteers in our study had changed their careers to work in roles, organisations or sectors that were tangibly more prosocial – that is, providing better opportunities to use their expertise to help people, society or the environment. These included some volunteers who entered the program hoping their assignment would be a stepping-stone to a career change, as well as others whose assignments inspired these changes quite unexpectedly. One volunteer, for instance, made the shift from corporate consulting (pre-volunteering) to advising large-scale government projects on sustainability issues. A former business owner and engineer now sits on the board of an international NGO. Another volunteer who was dissatisfied with their previous job as a project coordinator now conducts field work in disease control with an intergovernmental agency. A former government program administrator now manages international human rights programs.

Not all these career changes are international or development-focused. Not all have been smooth (or well remunerated) transitions. Importantly, however, the positive social and environmental impacts of these new roles – like the ongoing support given to partner organisations – continue well after volunteers leave the host country. Common to all these activities is that, even though they may be largely invisible to policy makers, their impacts are indirect manifestations of Australia’s ODA. Being nurtured, as most of these activities are, through genuine goodwill between volunteers and colleagues and friends in host countries, they might represent some of the strongest “long-tail” impacts that Australia’s ODA funding makes and that are not often accounted for. Collectively, they point to more wide-ranging and residual benefits than might currently be recognised, and that might only be picked up through exploratory research processes like our study, which focuses on a variety of volunteer experiences and on unplanned, not just planned, outcomes.

While some might argue that such hidden benefits are likely to confined to volunteer programs, it seems feasible that similar hidden contributions exist throughout a range of ODA programs connecting Australians with host communities in the region. Pertinently, these findings highlight the incomplete picture presented when aid impact evaluations are confined to predetermined objectives and fixed project lifespans. They suggest that efforts to identify, monitor, and nurture these largely below-the-radar contributions can broaden how programs conceptualise the range of contributions they make within a wider development ecosystem.

Disclosures:

The Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-2026) is funded by the Australian Volunteers Program and is being undertaken by researchers from the University of Technology Sydney. The Australian Volunteers Program is funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Author/s:

Anthony Fee
Dr Anthony Fee is a Senior Lecturer in the Business School at University of Technology Sydney.

Link: https://devpolicy.org/hidden-contributions-of-oda-australian-volunteers-20240903/