

# The Australian volunteer evaluation and the capacity building straitjacket (part 3)



by Stephen Howes

15 April 2014

In my first [two posts](#) on the new Office of Development Effectiveness [evaluation of the Australian aid volunteer program](#), I focused on the findings relating to capacity development. Here I touch briefly on a range of other issues raised by the report, some of which receive inadequate attention in the report's recommendations, perhaps because of the undue focus on capacity development.

One of the findings of the survey of host organisations is that “longer-term assignments are more likely to be successful” (p.54). I couldn't find that quantified. The only related information was the useful (and surprising) revelation that the average assignment is 6-12 months (p.32). Not very long! Nor could I find the recommendation you'd expect: have more long-term assignments.

We're also told that country managers lacked the flexibility to extend promising assignments:

*Some volunteers and host organisations also expressed the need for this greater flexibility to extend this assignment because they could see how much more could be achieved with more time.*  
(p.54)

Again there is unfortunately no recommendation around this finding.

I was surprised that 54% of volunteers worked for NGOs. (p.33) I am a supporter of NGOs, but I would like to know whether volunteers are best suited to working in NGOs, or whether NGOs are the best organised to solicit volunteers. Not an issue addressed by the evaluation, though in Cambodia there is the suggestion that a lot

of them are engaged with writing grant applications.

The evaluation finds almost one in three volunteers are not happy with the support they get from their in-country manager. This is very little explored, and only indirectly addressed in the recommendations. It is good that the evaluation recommends we operate in a smaller number of countries. But there is no mention of staff turnover. We know, from our [stakeholder survey](#), that staff turnover is a huge problem for DFAT, and I suspect it is a problem for the aid sector more generally. It was a problem for Ashlee Betteridge, when she was a volunteer. As she put it in her [much-read blog](#):

*Despite notification of the problems to Austraining's in-country office, I received no intervention or advice from them on how to improve the situation. The inflexible nature of the program meant that suggestions I made about volunteering part-time for other NGOs or changing the terms of the assignment were apparently not possible.*

*(It should be noted that during the period of time I was volunteering, Austraining were searching for a new country manager for Timor-Leste – we had a rotation of temporary managers in place during this time, which likely contributed to my concerns not being addressed.)*

But nowhere is this issue raised, which goes back to the point I made in my [first post](#) on the disconnect of the evaluation from the debate we've been having on the Devpolicy Blog.

The last issue I want to raise is the recommendation of the report that we just have one volunteer program, and that we abolish the youth volunteer program, AYAD. This strikes me as an interesting, but incomplete recommendation.

One of the aims of AYAD is to give young Australians international experience. Will that not be an objective any more? Will there be a quota for under-30s? (Incidentally, I was surprised that DFAT's response included a desire to see more under-24s volunteering. Why? And how does that fit with a greater emphasis on capacity building, which is also recommended and promised?)

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In general, the report plays down the differences between AYADs and non-AYADs, but from my reading of the report there are significant differences, or at least there may be, as the amount of data presented is very limited. There at least seem to be significant differences around age, as I mentioned in my first post, and capacity development. But the more general point is that the evaluation does not adequately explore which sorts of volunteers do better.

At one point the evaluation says that “very experienced” volunteers are much better at capacity development. (p. 49) More generally, I would hazard that older volunteers are generally better as volunteers just because on average they are going to have more experience and expertise, and, if they are prepared to be a volunteer, they are not going to have a huge ego, which is the problem with some experienced consultants. But younger volunteers are the ones who will benefit most from living in a developing country. Indeed, we know from the evaluation that about 30% of volunteers end up working in development. If all this is right, there are serious trade-offs to be considered when working out the desirable age profile of our volunteers. Unfortunately, these are not considered by the evaluation.

To sum up, this evaluation gives us much to think about, and much to debate. Its strongest point is the data on which it is based. We hope that DFAT will be willing to make the data public so that we and others can extend the analysis now begun.

*This is the last in a three part [series](#) based on Stephen’s presentation at Devpolicy’s recent [ODE aid evaluations forum](#). Robin Davies’ analysis of the Lessons from Australian Aid report can be found [here](#).*

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