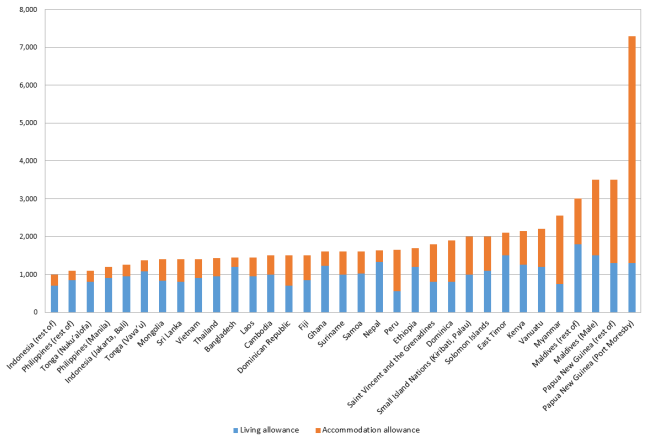


The volunteer hiring freeze: first victims of the aid cut

By Ashlee Betteridge
9 June 2015

One of the aid budget losers last month was the Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) program—it faces a sizable cut of 30%, or $17 million, bringing its allocation down to $39.6 million.

The impact has been swift.

The three implementing partners–Scope Global (formerly Austraining), Australian Volunteers International (AVI), and the Australian Red Cross (ARC)–quietly added messages on their recruitment pages the day after budget giving notice of a DFAT-mandated volunteer hiring freeze

> *It is our first priority to ensure that volunteers currently in the field are able to complete their assignments. We are also committed to deploying volunteers who have been selected for assignments in 2014-15.*
>
> *DFAT is also exploring how the reduction may affect the number of new volunteers who are able to be deployed in 2015-16. To manage this impact, DFAT has instructed the three AVID implementing partners (Scope Global, AVI and ARC) to delay the recruitment and selection of new volunteers for 2015-16.*

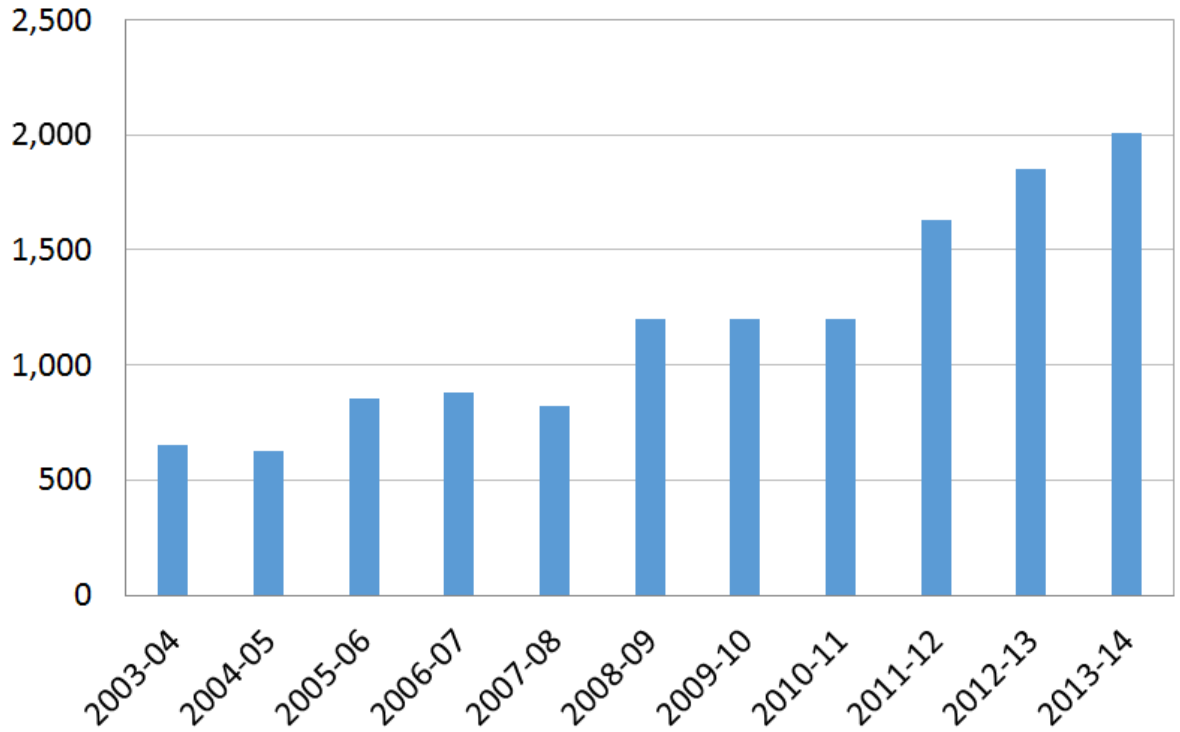
Australian Business Volunteers (ABV), which delivers a short-term business volunteering arm of AVID in partnership with Scope Global, was more vocal and publicly expressed its dismay at the cuts. It argued:

> *Government funded volunteering is one of the most visible forms of aid; there are often news stories in-country about the good work Australian volunteers do, and volunteering builds closer people to people links. Cutting a program which generates so much goodwill for Australia seems strange.*

While DFAT "explores" how the reduction may affect volunteer numbers, as Robin Davies has pointed out, based on just over 2,000 volunteers being funded for assignments in 2013-14, roughly 650 fewer volunteers will be supported in 2015-16.

We can see the scale-up on volunteer numbers over the past decade in the chart below (the numbers come from historical AusAID annual reports).

Figure 1: number of Australian volunteers supported per year



As a returned volunteer, an email I received in April from Scope Global hinted that other ways to make savings were already being investigated, beyond reducing volunteer numbers.

> *There are changes happening in the way the AVID program is managed, with the aim of increasing efficiencies. For Scope Global this means that from 30 June 2015 we won't be deploying any new volunteers to Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Mongolia and Ethiopia. The program is not finishing in these countries and there will still be volunteer opportunities provided by another Core Partner, either Australian Volunteers International (AVI) or Australian Red Cross (ARC).*

While savings from efficiencies in the management of the unwieldy program may preserve some volunteer spots (hopefully without increasing dissatisfaction with the level of in-country support), there will still need to be a substantial reduction.

This will no doubt impact on organisations in the region who have come to rely on volunteers to fill skilled positions, often over a long period of time (and as the evaluation of the program showed, often in in-line roles).

As my colleagues wrote, "organisations within many developing countries… will be left with a smaller pool of free labour on top of the funding cuts already coming their way".

This will not be the only cost–what the volunteer program seems to have always done best, whether anecdotally or in evaluations, is to build connections between Australians and the region. It does seem strange for the government to disproportionately hack at this program when it is scaling up the New Colombo Plan to increase the numbers of young people in the region.

The volunteer program already faced a significant shake-up just last year, with the abolition of the Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development (AYAD) brand, which guaranteed places for people aged below 30.

Without dedicated AYAD places in the AVID program and fewer places available overall, the application process will only become more competitive, pushing less experienced applicants out of the race. Ideas of putting aside a quota or encouraging younger applicants seem to have not eventuated.

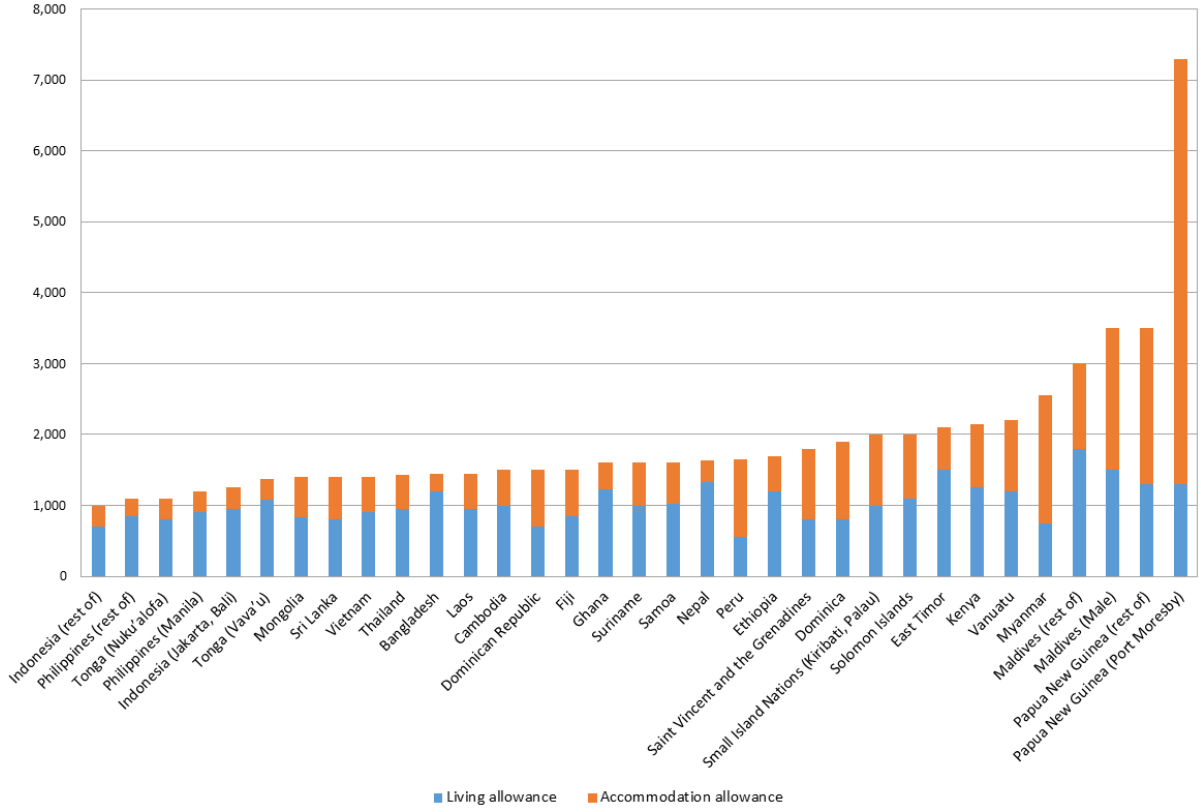
So the profile of the average volunteer may change—but will they still go to the same countries?

The volunteer program has always had an Asia bias, yet this region bore the brunt of the aid cuts at large while the Pacific was protected.

Yet volunteers heading to the Pacific (particularly PNG) tend to be more expensive than those heading to Southeast Asia (with the exception of Myanmar's sky high rents)—cost of living is generally higher, the travel costs are higher, and accommodation is more expensive.

We can see this from the chart below (compiled from accommodation and living allowances paid to volunteers, published by Scope Global and valid as of 1 July 2013 [pdf]). Note that this chart does not include expenses such as medical insurance, pre-departure training, travel to and from assignment location, other support costs, or in-country management costs–so it by no means reflects the full cost per volunteer.

Figure 2: Total AVID allowances per volunteer per month ($AUD)



If the three implementing partners push to preserve as many places as possible with a reduced budget, will the Pacific be more likely to miss out? If you assume these numbers are somewhat reflective of the overall costs per volunteer, you could possibly send seven volunteers to a regional part of Indonesia for the cost of sending one to Port Moresby.

If we go by allowances, the second most expensive country is the Maldives. Which raises the question: why are we even sending volunteers to the Maldives? Our aid to the Maldives in 2014/15 will be a tiny $1.8 million. It is clearly not a priority.

This is another reminder that like most parts of the aid program, the volunteer program was not immune to the great scale-up, as the first chart in this blog demonstrates—the legacy of which is the handful of volunteers we send to far-flung locations like the Maldives, Dominica and Suriname. For example, Latin America and the Caribbean region, the North Pacific and some countries in Africa only came on board as volunteer destinations in 2011-12.

Stephen Howes argued against this spread in 2013, stating that: “we should be running a regional not a global volunteer aid program. It would be better managed, and more effective”.

In 2013-14 (with a budget of $55 million), we know that 55% of volunteers went to Asia, 28% to the Pacific, 14% to Africa, 2% to Latin America and the Caribbean and 1% to the

Middle East. [pdf here]

Even if the programs to Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and the Middle East were cut completely (17% of placements), there would still need to be more savings.

If Robin Davies' guess of a drop of around 650 places is correct, that would bring the program back to around its 2010-11 levels (when it had a budget of $42 million).

In this context, it would seem absurd to keep sending small numbers of volunteers to high-cost, distant locations that aren't prioritised by Australia's aid program. Consolidation seems to be the only logical step. But even then, hard decisions will be needed: fewer volunteers to Asia or fewer to the Pacific? If cost is the criterion – and it is hard to see why it wouldn't be – the Pacific is bound to lose out.

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About the author/s

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Ashlee Betteridge was the Manager of the Development Policy Centre until April 2021. She was previously a Research Officer at the centre from 2013-2017. A former journalist, she holds a Master of Public Policy (Development Policy) from ANU and has development experience in Indonesia and Timor-Leste. She now has her own consultancy, Better Things Consulting, and works across several large projects with managing contractors.

Link: https://devpolicy.org/the-volunteer-hiring-freeze-first-victims-of-the-aid-cut-20150609/
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