

May blog digest: Problems with Australia's volunteer program

Author : Stephen Howes

Date : May 31, 2013



Our monthly reflection on issues raised in the Devpolicy blog, this month authored by Stephen Howes.

Ashlee Betteridge's May 23 [account](#) of her time as a volunteer in Timor has quickly become our most commented-on blog post of all time.

Ashlee, who is now a Research Officer here at the Development Policy Centre, was assigned to an NGO in Timor-Leste in 2012. She only lasted six months (instead of the intended eighteen), as a result of two main problems. First, she received inadequate support from the agency which managed her assignment. There was no response let alone encouragement in response to her suggestions for change. Ashlee notes that while she was in Timor-Leste last year, that agency had a "rotation of temporary managers in place." Apparently, this managerial instability has continued.

Rapid staff turnover is not a new problem. The [Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness](#) noted that rapid staff turnover was the most frequent complaint from stakeholders about AusAID. Ashlee's post is a timely reminder that this is a challenge to effectiveness for all parts of the aid sector.

Australia's volunteer program has been massively scaled up since 2000. Up to the early 2000s, we sent less than 300 volunteers a year on average. By 2004, that had increased to 700. Now it is 900 and apparently set to increase further. The geographical spread has also increased. We now [send](#) volunteers not only through the Asia-Pacific region, but also to Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. We dispatch volunteers to Peru, the Maldives, Dominica and Suriname.

It is good that we are giving more Australians the chance to engage in development, but it is another thing that we are sending them all over the world. If things can go wrong in a country we know well, what chance do we have in Dominica? Increasing the number of countries we send volunteers to also adds to the overall management burden, stretching resources more thinly, and making the task of effectively supporting volunteers tougher across all countries.

The volunteer program is perhaps emblematic of the thin spread of Australia's aid program. We should be running a regional not a global volunteer aid program. It would be better managed, and more effective.

The other problem Ashlee identified is that she was completely unable to fulfil the key capacity building objective of her assignment. Her counterpart didn't want his capacity built, at least not by Ashlee, and declined to work with her.

I must admit I hadn't realised that capacity building was such an important objective for the volunteer program. But it is. The official AusAID volunteering website [says](#) that "Volunteers make a significant contribution ... by developing capacity, sharing skills and building relationships."

Capacity building is the holy grail of aid, and nowhere more so than for Australia. It is also the area of aid with the least satisfactory results.

It is especially surprising that capacity building has become such a prominent objective in the Australian volunteer program given that the other big change in the program over the last decade, apart from the increase in size, has been the switch to sending younger volunteers. In 2004, Minister Downer launched the Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development (AYAD) scheme for under-30s. The [latest figures](#) [pdf] I have seen are a few years old now, but suggest that more than half of all Australian-aid-funded volunteers are under 30.

These are people, like Ashlee, with university training but limited work experience. Many probably, unlike her, would have had no prior overseas experience. In other contexts, they would be interns or grads. It is reasonable to give the toughest job of all in aid to the least experienced members of the sector?

If they are good, young volunteers will certainly make a contribution, and might pass on some skills, but the main capacity building that will occur is their own. We wouldn't expect interns or entry-level staff to build the capacity of others here, and it's less not more likely to happen overseas.

What would be a more appropriate objective? The AYAD objective is actually very well and simply [expressed](#). AYAD "aims to strengthen mutual understanding between Australia and the countries of Asia, the Pacific and Africa and make a positive contribution to development."

The problem comes in not at this level, but by then insisting that the contribution to development be through capacity building (as AYAD does, prominently, on its [home page](#)). Some young volunteers, and more older ones, might be able to make their contribution in this way. But all can realistically aim to make a positive contribution to development one way or another. Delinking the volunteer program from a capacity building straitjacket (for example, by not requiring the assignment of a counterpart) would enable a much more flexible approach to be taken, with more emphasis on what usefully the volunteer can do while in country, and greater likelihood of positive results.

Ashlee's post was of course just one account. That is a small sample size. But while the numerous comments on her post touched on various themes, their most common thread was confirmation that the problems she identified were not one-offs. One comment said simply: "Ashlee I think you are very courageous to raise these issues, all of which many have wanted to for so long but have not been strong enough to do so. Well done."

The good stories around aid certainly need to be communicated. But so do the bad. We shouldn't accept every complaint at face value. Most stories have two sides. But the problem with aid is that outsiders are ignorant and insiders are bound by confidentiality requirements. Ashlee has essentially performed a very valuable whistleblowing service. She has also made a number of constructive suggestions. She has set the bar for the Office of Development Effectiveness Review of volunteers [currently underway](#), and opened up a new conversation for us, in which I hope many more will participate.

For more effective aid, we need more aid practitioners to speak out. For more effective volunteering, we

need a more focused and practical program.

You can find a summary of all May posts in the list below. As we transition to a new blog format, we have stopped most of our buzzes, but you can still catch our fortnightly [Pacific](#) wraps.

Aid

[The ODA/GNI ratio – does it reflect a government's commitment to aid?](#) By Angus Barnes.

"[I]n the 2012/13 budget it was estimated that \$1.42 out of every \$100 it spends would be on ODA related activities ... the 2013/14 budget has taken this up to \$1.45 out of every \$100 the government spends."

[The aid budget across the Tasman](#) by Terence Wood and Joanna Spratt.

"[L]ooking at the tiny increases in New Zealand aid, and comparing it to what you Australian's have done, it's hard not to feel that if we Kiwis were really serious about doing our bit in helping to fight global poverty we would be giving considerably more aid."

[Third time disappointed AND the third largest aid increase ever](#) by Stephen Howes.

"Overall, my summary take on the 2013-14 aid budget is the opposite to my assessment of last year's budget. This one is strong in relation to quantity, but not quality."

[Australia's 2013-14 aid budget: the macroeconomic context](#) by Anthony Swan.

"Failure of the government to control overall spending represents a significant risk to the aid budget in terms of further delays to achieving the 0.5% target or removal of the target completely."

[Regional and country allocations in the 2013-14 aid budget](#) by Matthew Dornan.

"East Asia is now clearly the largest recipient of Australian aid, pulling ahead of PNG and the Pacific since 2011-12."

[Australia's 2013 aid budget: third time disappointed or the third largest increase in aid ever?](#) By Stephen Howes.

"The importance of this year's budget will endure well beyond the next 12 months."

[Good news: the DAC likes Australia's aid program](#) by Robin Davies.

"Overall ... it's a comprehensive and balanced effort, which fact adds credibility to its predominantly positive findings."

[Greens go Tory on aid](#) by Stephen Howes and Jonathan Pryke.

"It's a sad reflection on us that what is mainstream policy in the UK is only advocated by a minority party here."

[Agriculture good, employment better: a regional employment strategy for Timor-Leste](#) by Richard Curtain, Robin Davies and Stephen Howes.

“[D]omestic employment generation will be important, but in our submission we emphasise the importance of taking a regional approach to Timor-Leste’s employment problems.”

Global development policy

[Was it really a big week for mining and development?](#) By Margaret Callan.

“If the absence last week of an emphasis on the record of extractive industries in contributing to good development outcomes indicates there is limited evidence of this to date, in my view we should be very concerned.”

[Why health services alone will not protect women’s reproductive rights](#) by Julia Newton-Howes and Helene Gayle.

“[Our] work on the ground indicates that critical shifts in gender norms and power dynamics can be achieved in a relatively short time, leading to significant, measurable improvements in the lives of women and their families.”

[Careers in development: an interview with Frédéric Jeanjean on the AusAID grad program, AYAD and working for the UN](#) by Frédéric Jeanjean and Jonathan Pryke.

“Networks are key. You also need to be able to sell yourself. Being in the international workplace you have to shrug off the Australian tendency towards tall poppy syndrome.”

[An ex-volunteer’s perspective on improving the Australian Volunteers program](#) by Ashlee Betteridge.

“If steps aren’t taken to harness the enthusiasm and energy of a volunteer in-country before it fizzles out in the face of problems, people may just stick out the assignment without having any real development impact or prematurely end up on a plane back home.”

[Transparency in extractive industries: time for Australia to show leadership](#) by Michael Wulfsohn and Stephen Howes.

“If Australia wants to be a leader rather than a follower in promoting good governance in natural resource industries, we need to step up by adopting the EITI and requiring payment transparency from listed companies.”

[A ‘wicked problem’: using high stakes testing of student learning in development – Part 2](#) by Robert Cannon.

“As frustrating as it will be for development specialists, it is not clear that we yet have the appropriate knowledge about assessment to conduct high quality tests for comparisons and for quality improvement across diverse cultures.”

[Orphanage tourism: cute kids, cashed up tourists, poor outcomes](#) by Ashlee Betteridge.

“Travellers need to be aware of child protection issues so they don’t actively seek out exploitative experiences and so that when they encounter them, they are shocked rather than snap-happy.”

The Pacific and PNG

[The power sector in the Pacific: big pay offs from limited reforms](#) by Matthew Dornan and Justin Austin.

“[T]he introduction of independent price regulation, which is normally accompanied by establishment of commercial objectives, has a positive impact on the technical and financial performance of power utilities.”

[Australia’s ban on the World Bank and the ADB lending to Fiji](#) by Stephen Howes.

“[T]here is an international cost to getting the World Bank and the ADB to impose sanctions on our behalf. It reinforces the impression that these organizations are the instruments of rich countries, rather than problem-solving tools for all countries. In this regard, the two multilateral institutions have a case to answer, as well as Australia.”

[The official evaluation of the Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme: an opportunity missed](#) by Jesse Doyle and Stephen Howes.

“The main disappointment of the evaluation is that its analysis of productivity gains lacks a quantitative basis.”

[In conversation with Sina Retzlaff](#) by Tess Newton Cain.

“Sina stressed that she wanted to see family based violence made a top policy priority in Samoa: *‘I think if we continue to ignore that domestic violence does happen in Samoa ... then it’s always going to have a negative contribution to all the other priorities that Samoa has set out.’*”

[Participate to grow](#) by Steve Pollard.

“The major obstacle to Pacific development is not distance or size, but the simple fact that the governments of these islands are not sufficiently oriented to the service of the public or the development of the economy.”

[Resource development and peace building in Melanesia](#) by Kylie McKenna.

“There are certainly a lot of problems associated with resource development, and it can be easier to identify the risks than the positives.”

[Managing fiscal risks amid resource booms: lessons from Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste](#) by Aaron Batten and Christopher Edmonds.

“While the justifications for significant increases in government expenditure in both countries are clear, it is also vital that these priorities be balanced with maintaining, or in some cases strengthening, the fiscal buffers required for managing the volatility that is endemic to small open resource-export-based economies.”

[Final Report of the Solomon Islands Truth & Reconciliation Commission unofficially released](#) by Tess Newton Cain.

“Even a brief reading of the report indicates that what it contains will be challenging on numerous levels. There are indications that the social, mental and emotional impacts of trauma experienced during the tensions continue to affect the people of Solomon Islands.”

Stephen Howes is Director of the [Development Policy Centre](#).