



Submission No 37

Inquiry into Australia's aid program and its impact on human rights and security in the Pacific

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Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Human Rights Sub-Committee

Inquiry into Aid in the Pacific

1. BACKGROUND

Australia has been at the forefront of international volunteering since the early 1950s with the inception of the Overseas Service Bureau now Australian Volunteers International. Over fifty years later, there are a plethora of opportunities for Australians to volunteer overseas including substantial programs funded by the Federal Government and supported by Australia's Aid and Development and Foreign Policy. These include the Volunteer Program (VP) supporting short and long term volunteers and the Youth Ambassador (AYAD) Program.

Across the globe many donor countries also support international volunteering programs which are also known as development work, civil service or technical assistance. Australia has meanwhile been unique in its ability to combine the benefits of each of these elements of international volunteering as well as ensure a development education focus is not lost on the Australian community through the learnings of both the volunteer and the program.

2. AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

There is however a new context for international volunteer globally and government programs world wide have expanded to reflect the development opportunities and challenges. These dynamics are resonating within the Australian community and an international volunteer strategy for the future would capture this momentum.

Within Australia there is increasing interest from organisations in all three sectors (government, corporate, community) that are willing to twin with an overseas organisation so that expertise and skill can be shared across borders. Organisations are seeing the value of their staff taking part in international volunteering as a way to increase their talent and leadership capacity and achieve staff loyalty. Corporate social responsibility is being seen as global responsibility.

The diaspora communities affected by international disasters who live within Australia are also very interested in giving back to their home community, particularly those from ex refugee communities eg. Africa or in response to a disaster eg. Solomon Islands. Specific programs can be designed to include a development partnering phase in long term reconstruction and development projects linking the skills of diaspora back with their communities of origin. This would build on and add a new dimension to the significance of remittances in the development context.

International volunteering adds significant benefit to wider Australian foreign policy goals particularly in relation to:

- building demand led governance
- sharing Australia's strengths in public service skills by working with sub national government infrastructure to build resilient and robust public service capability
- linking with communities to give depth to international relations and understanding eg. increased participation with moderate Islamic communities and organisations
- reinforcing Australia's long term commitment to people-to-people relationships; and
- practical expression of informal diplomacy and Australia's desire for good regional relationships, which is an essential ingredient for peace and stability in the region.

International volunteering's strengths lie in the sharing and gaining of experience and skills at the local level. At AVI, fifty years of practice confirms the original premise that ethical and sustainable development must be defined by local people, not the donor country and their needs, otherwise it is not development and not a contribution to the 'global commons'.

AVI's model has been unique in its ability to combine the benefits of development work, civil service and technical assistance, as well as ensure a development education focus for the Australian community.

The new context for international volunteering has seen government aid programs worldwide expanded to reflect the new development opportunities and challenges. British and Canadian Aid Agencies, DFID and CIDA, lead a wide field of foreign government aid agencies in their innovative approach to international volunteering, by funding organisational twinning programs, exchange programs, south-south and north-south volunteering.

Such programs would meet the increased desire of the Australian corporate and not for profit sector to become involved in international volunteering as part of their corporate social responsibility program linked to internal staff development. As per overseas practice, the most appropriate place in the government's Aid program to locate new organisational twinning initiatives is within international volunteering policy and programs. This has been proved with the successful practice of DFID and CIDA and is borne out by recent AVI and Monash research, *The Right Person for the Job, International Volunteering and the Australian Employment Market*.

A review of the emphasis in the current international volunteer program funded by AusAID should take note of the changing context within Australia and across those countries where Australian volunteers are already being deployed. The demand from developing countries is towards older Australians with professional skill sets and significant experience. Furthermore, the absorptive capacity of the region, particularly the Pacific Islands, needs to be assessed. The view of the Pacific Islands is that they need more experienced Australians working with their youth and programs of peer support which join local and international youth in volunteering initiatives.

3. A CHANGING GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT

There is a new context for international volunteering globally with the shift to:

- demand rather than supply led approaches
- a focus on the organisational development of local host organisations
- programmatic approaches focussed on specific sectoral or issues eg. HIV/AIDS, rural livelihoods, governance
- two way volunteering between donor and recipient communities
- the call from local communities for specific rather than generalist expertise to fill placement requests, and
- the desire for more options to fulfil organisation needs in developing countries which may include research, leadership programs, access to project funds, networking opportunities, staff exchanges with organisations in donor countries to name a few.

Government funding of volunteering programs worldwide has expanded to reflect these developmental challenges with increases in funding for:

- organisational linkages or twinning
- co-development where diaspora return to volunteer in their country of origin
- north-south volunteering
- south-south volunteering
- regional volunteer program linkages, and
- focussed programs linked to sharing expertise of donor country eg. public service skills

Other trends that need to be factored into the new context for international volunteering are:

- the demographics of developing communities having very high youth populations

- the desire from developing countries to build their internal capacity for volunteering
- the desire from large outward looking international corporations, government departments and community organisations in donor countries wishing to share their skills and expertise as part of a long term relationship rather than donate dollars
- the increase in numbers of 'baby boomers' who wish to contribute their high level expertise and experience by volunteering
- the increase in youth organisations designing, funding and managing development programs based on youth-youth mentoring and development.

4. INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERING MOVING FORWARD

The value of international volunteering cannot be overstated and it is timely for the Australian government to ensure its programmatic and funding mechanisms best meet the needs of the new context. A more focussed volunteer strategy will keep Australia at the forefront of international volunteering practice.

To put the following program responses into effect while building on the current strengths and funding levels of international volunteer programs, AVI would recommend:

1. *A new international linkage program*
2. *A scoping exercise to ascertain support needs for regional domestic volunteering initiatives*
3. *A public service mentoring program for sub-national governments in the region*
4. *A program for diaspora communities within Australia to volunteer on a project basis in their country of origin particularly in disaster reconstruction phase or post conflict programs*
5. *An international volunteer innovations program fund for 3-5 year programs based on international volunteering experience in-country*

These programs would work by:

1. *International linkage program*
 - Organisations in the Australian business, government and community sectors can apply in conjunction with an AusAID funded VP provider, for 3-5 year linkage program funding where they submit an organisational development plan with an overseas host organisation.
 - The plan must focus on funding the exchange of skills between staff of the two organisations and can incorporate funds for research, leadership and/or staff development programs and project funds related to capacity building. In this way a suite of options, via one simple funding mechanism, is available to ensure the best outcome.
 - Priority would be given to organisations that are linked to current regional development priorities eg. gender, environment, legal and local governance and/or needs which are not addressed directly by other aid programs eg. disability, capacity building of peak community service bodies, youth organisations, multi faith, peace building, sport, culture and art, allied and community health and health promotion.
 - Funding for the linkage program will be in two phases to best ensure the quality of the organisational development plans and the viability of the linkage partnership.
Phase One: Resources for up to \$15,000 will be provided for the design of the organisational development plan. The plan must include a monitoring and evaluation component, be based on asset development principles and incorporate action research practice as far as practicable. Upon completion of the plan funded in Phase Two can be sought.
Phase Two: Resources for the implementation of the life of the linkage program can be sought.
2. *A scoping exercise to ascertain support needs for regional domestic volunteering initiatives* will involve a consultative scoping paper to be concluded by the end of 2008 which identifies and harmonises with current regional planning and thinking in relation to the strengthening of domestic volunteering policy, initiatives and organisations within the region. This will also include an emphasis upon the nature of youth volunteering options and the need to empower local young people in the development of their communities while encouraging peer support, mentoring and youth projects involving youth across the region.

3. *Public service mentoring program* for sub-national governments where international volunteers are mentors in sub-national district offices of government agencies and support a team of middle management and staff by attending with them an accredited management program and assisting in the implementation of program learnings back on site.
4. *Program for diaspora communities within Australia to volunteer on a project basis in their country of origin particularly in disaster reconstruction phase or post conflict programs*
5. *An innovations program fund for 3-5 year programs based on international volunteering*
This program will fund on an application basis 3-5 year innovative programs which have their genesis in an existing international volunteer program either placement specific or programmatically.