



100 years

International volunteering:

an investment in development

Summary report
August 2014

the
power of
humanity



100 YEARS
PEOPLE HELPING PEOPLE
1914-2014

Foreword

Volunteering has been an intrinsic part of Australia's aid program since the 1960s, and the subject of ongoing debate as to its value and effectiveness.

For instance, do we measure its contribution by the life experience it offers young (and not so young) Australians? By its role in strengthening communities in the countries where volunteers work? Does it enhance the capacity of the organisations and local staff members that host Australian volunteers?

Does it perhaps foster an Australian community that values our neighbours and understands our role as global citizens?

This report by Australian Red Cross studies how international volunteering has its effect: how it can strengthen local volunteering; how it leads to an exchange of skills and capacities; how it can encourage people to challenge accepted 'ways of doing' and seek their own solutions.

I have seen the benefits of international volunteering first hand through my role as board member of Australian Volunteers International. In my view, international volunteers represent the best that aid programs have to offer: they do not arrive as 'experts' with pre-arranged solutions but instead as colleagues lending their efforts to help communities achieve their own goals.

The report from Red Cross affirms this and makes a strong case for a continuing investment in volunteering within Australia's aid agenda; and moreover, finding ways to measure and value its contributions to addressing poverty and inequality and building civil society.

Sam Mostyn

President, Australian Council for International Development (ACFID)

Introduction

Australian Red Cross is part of the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement that spans 189 countries and serves humanity through 17 million volunteers.

Voluntary service is the strength and the lifeblood of Red Cross in Australia and everywhere else. Our network of volunteers, drawn from the communities they serve, gives us an extensive reach that makes us local wherever we work.

As we celebrate 100 years of volunteering in Australia, Red Cross is committed to recognising and rewarding the volunteers who help people in their most vulnerable times – and to engaging a new generation of Australians in volunteering. This commitment is based on our belief that volunteering is at the heart of community building and sustainable development.

Four years ago we began sending volunteers overseas through the Australian Government's international volunteer program. We did so to offer our partners, in the Movement and beyond, an additional source of skills and expertise to draw on to advance their work with vulnerable people and communities.

This report, which summarises a comprehensive body of research, investigates how international volunteers effect change within their host organisations and, through them, the communities they serve. It identifies four critical ways in which change happens and draws important conclusions about the value of international volunteering within the development agenda.

The Millennium Development Goals end in 2015 and the international community is now setting future targets

that will map a Sustainable Development Framework. These include disaster resilience, employment and inclusive growth, food security, gender equality and many other areas. Not one of these targets is achievable without the active role of civil society and voluntary service, both locally and between countries.

This report makes a strong case for volunteering to remain a cornerstone of Australia's engagement with our region and the world, and helps us identify and enhance the factors that make international volunteering an effective tool for development.

Robert Tickner

CEO, Australian Red Cross

Contents



Volunteering is at the heart of community building and sustainable development.

Timorese Red Cross volunteers go door-to-door during an outbreak of dengue to identify cases and help people protect themselves.

Australian Red Cross/Conor Ashleigh

Foreword	2	Terms used in this report
Introduction	2	Capacity building: The process of strengthening an organisation in its planning, management structures, human resources, marketing, finances and sustainability at all levels. It is work done to improve or strengthen what already exists.
Summary	5	Global North and Global South: The divide between the 'Global North' and the 'Global South' is political and socio-economic rather than purely geographic. The North is generally held to include North America, Western Europe, Australia and Japan, with the South including Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Pacific. The terms Northern and Southern are occasionally interchanged with Western and Non-Western.
Background	6	Immersive time: Time used to by volunteers learn about their host organisation and local culture and language, and to build relationships with local colleagues
Current thinking on international volunteering	7	International volunteering: The practice of volunteers from one country travelling to another country to work on projects or with organisations that serve the local community.
Research overview	9	Volunteering: The practice of an individual or group of individuals contributing their knowledge, skills and time on behalf of others, in any setting, without the motivation of financial gain. Volunteering has a benefit (tangible or intangible) to the community and the volunteer, and is intended to promote or improve society.
The findings	10	
1. International volunteering can inspire or strengthen local volunteering within host communities	10	
2. International volunteering lays the foundation for a lasting exchange of skills	13	
3. The immersive time that volunteers spend with their host organisations makes their work more locally relevant and sustainable	15	
4. International volunteering can challenge prevailing development models	17	
Recommendations	19	
Acknowledgements	20	
Endnotes	21	
Australian Red Cross international program	22	

Cover Image: A client at a trauma recovery program shows an Australian volunteer the finer points of knitting. Australian Red Cross/Conor Ashleigh

Volunteering allows individuals to engage in their community and realise that they have the right and capacity to lead their own development.



Summary

Australian Red Cross is a humanitarian organisation guided by the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement).

This means that Red Cross is committed to and bound by the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality.

Of these, the principle of voluntary service is at the heart of the Movement's ability to mobilise the power of humanity through action and service to human well-being.

Voluntary service and civic participation play critical roles in sustainable development. They allow individuals to engage in their community, aware of their right and capacity to lead their own development. Between countries, international volunteering promotes the exchange of ideas, skills and capacities which enable communities to self-organise. As a result, we believe it is an important catalyst for human and social development.

Recommendations

This report strengthens the evidence base on the role of international volunteering within the development agenda, by exploring the way in which it has an effect on local communities.

The findings reveal that as well as inspiring and strengthening local volunteering within host communities and laying the foundation for lasting skills exchange, international volunteering can challenge prevailing models of development.

This is particularly so where the immersive time spent by volunteers makes their work locally relevant and sustainable.

International volunteering contributes greatly to a legitimate and sustainable development process, above and beyond public diplomacy. Its value can be best understood through indicators that measure contributions to civic engagement and direct service delivery, and their overall impact in bringing about transformative change.

International volunteering enables communities to become safer, healthier and more inclusive. This aligns with the key economic drivers for improved growth in economies, by contributing to resilient and self-sufficient communities and working to ensure no one is left behind.

Insights gained through international volunteering must continue to shape Australia's aid program; in particular the role of community participation and ownership. It is essential that we recognise communities as partners and not simply 'beneficiaries' in the development agenda.

Drawing on this field research with international volunteers, host organisations and Red Cross staff in Kenya and Mongolia, and as a leading humanitarian organisation and signatory to the Paris Accord on Volunteering for Sustainable Development, we strongly urge those responsible for sustainable development outcomes in our region and abroad to consider the value of international volunteering.

Australian Red Cross calls on the Australian Government to:

1. Invest strongly in volunteering as the cornerstone of a people-centred development approach and the delivery of a post-2015 sustainable development framework
2. Ensure appropriate indicators for volunteering are included in the aid agenda, to measure its contributions to addressing poverty, economic diplomacy and the strengthening of local civil society
3. Recognise the importance of immersive time within communities to ensure outcomes are community-owned, long-term and able to deliver results
4. Grow the international volunteer program strongly and fund it sustainably as an integral part of Australia's regional and global development agenda, and its national interest

Background



International volunteering is the practice through which volunteers from one country are sent to another country to work on projects or with organisations that serve the local community.

Children at a state-run protection centre in Mongolia.

What is international volunteering?

International volunteering is the practice of volunteers from one country travelling to another country to work on projects or with organisations that serve the local community.

Several donor governments and aid agencies utilise international volunteering programs, as do private for-profit organisations. These programs have two aims: to contribute to local aid and development priorities, and to give volunteers a rewarding experience. The ethos of the volunteer-sending agency determines the relative importance of these twin aims in any volunteer assignment.

Some agencies cover costs such as travel and living expenses; others require volunteers to pay expenses and project fees. Volunteer assignments can range from weeks to years.

International volunteering and the Australian aid program

Australia's first international volunteer went to Indonesia in 1951 to support the newly-established Indonesian Government with translation services. The Australian Government has formally supported international volunteering programs since 1965.

In 2011 the Australian Government brought several volunteer initiatives together under a single program – *Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID)*. The AVID program is implemented through a partnership between three agencies: Australian Volunteers International, Austraining International and Australian Red Cross. It is often seen as the 'public face' of Australia's aid program overseas.¹

Volunteers in the AVID program are supported with return airfares, living allowances, insurance, training (including some language training) and emergency assistance.

International volunteering and Australian Red Cross

Australian Red Cross is part of the largest humanitarian movement in the world, with more than 17 million volunteers working within National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in 189 countries. Voluntary service is at the heart of the Movement's ability to mobilise the power of humanity, and Australian Red Cross aims to deepen volunteer engagement across all areas of our work.

In joining the AVID program, Australian Red Cross became the first National Society to send its volunteers overseas within a formal, structured aid program. In doing so we aimed to complement our existing partnerships with other National Societies and external organisations, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. Our contribution to the AVID program has increased rapidly: from eight volunteers sent overseas in 2010/2011 to 128 volunteers in 2012/2013.

Current thinking on international volunteering

An overview of the literature and thinking that shaped this research.

What's the connection between volunteering and development?

Volunteering is integral to the achievement of sustainable development goals – from building resilience to disasters to promoting peace and security. It is a practical way for citizens to engage in development: it fosters inclusion and local ownership of development activities, which increases their sustainability.²

Volunteering is an individual expression of civic engagement, which refers to the various ways citizens work together to make a difference in their communities and address issues of public concern. The Paris Accord on Volunteering for Sustainable Development, signed in 2013 by over 50 organisations, describes volunteering as “integral to participatory democracy, to social justice, to fair, inclusive growth, and to environmental protection”.³

Australian Red Cross acknowledges that volunteering is at the heart of community building and sustainable development. This research explores how international volunteering, as a unique form of volunteering, contributes to these goals.

The global development agenda

The United Nations is leading a process to develop a sustainable development framework that will come into effect post 2015 and reflect the opportunities and challenges the world will face in future decades.

There are 16 areas of interest in the emerging development agenda: disaster resilience, economic rules, education, employment and inclusive growth, energy, environment, equality, food security, gender equality, governance, health, human rights, infrastructure, peace and security, poverty, and water and sanitation.⁴

What does Red Cross believe about voluntary service?

Voluntary service is at the heart and origins of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement. The concept refers to working not for personal gain but because of a freely-accepted commitment. It is a key means through which Red Cross delivers its mission of preventing and alleviating human suffering wherever it may be found.⁵

Australian Red Cross celebrates a centenary of voluntary service in 2014. We are committed to maintaining a culture of volunteering in all of our activities, providing volunteers with necessary support and recognition, engaging a diverse volunteer base, and advocating for volunteering in Australia and internationally.

International volunteering – who benefits?

The desire to ‘help others’ often motivates people to volunteer overseas. However, debate continues as to whether volunteers benefit more from the experience than their host communities, especially with the rise of ‘volunteer tourism’ where volunteers pay for the experience of working on conservation or community-based projects.⁶

While recognising the inherent benefits for volunteers, Australian Red Cross regards international volunteering as a development tool that supports our partners in helping vulnerable people. This research examines how international volunteering contributes to development.

Do time and skills matter?

International volunteer assignments are generally divided into short term (less than six months) and long term (12-24 months). Literature suggests that the longer the assignment, the more likely it is to achieve desired outcomes: the result of volunteers having the time to familiarise themselves with the culture and processes of their host organisation and community.⁷

The expertise of the volunteer can also determine outcomes. Under the AVID program, Red Cross has sent disaster management specialists, occupational therapists, logisticians, economists and many other specialist professionals as volunteers. While the use of technical specialists is widespread in the aid sector, international volunteering commonly operates under a different ethos: volunteers do not simply ‘give’ or transfer their knowledge to local colleagues, but rather participate in an exchange of skills where both parties gain insights and ways of working.⁸



International volunteering is one way Australian Red Cross supports its partners in helping the world's most vulnerable people.

Australian Red Cross/Drew Weatherstone

Red Cross volunteers in Kenya treat a child whose hands are infested with burrowing insects.

Who sends volunteers and who receives them?

Historically, volunteers from the Global North have gone to projects or organisations in the Global South. This has placed more importance on development models and approaches from the North. Published literature indicates growing interest in South-South volunteering, which is also reflected in the practices of volunteer-sending organisations.⁹ This may reflect a shift in critical thinking on what constitutes sustainable development.

What do host organisations have to say?

Studies of international volunteering have traditionally been informed by returned volunteers. The focus has recently shifted to consulting with host organisations, to better determine how volunteer-related outcomes are experienced and sustained within the host community.¹⁰

The international work of Red Cross is guided by the needs and perspectives of our partner organisations. As a result, their voices are an essential part of this research.

A complete literature review is included in the research report prepared for Australian Red Cross by Dr Martine Hawkes, available from research@redcross.org.au

Research overview



The international work of Red Cross is guided by the needs and perspectives of our partner organisations.

Australian volunteers in Laos are working with disabled people's organisations on advocacy and strategy.

This research examines the ways in which international volunteering has an effect on local communities and host organisations, illustrating its effectiveness as a development tool.

Who did we speak to?

The key findings of this report were drawn from the experiences of host organisations, current and returned volunteers, and Red Cross program staff.

We interviewed:

- 21 representatives from 20 host organisations in Kenya and Mongolia
- 18 volunteers based in those countries
- 7 Red Cross program staff in Kenya, Mongolia and Australia

Kenya and Mongolia were chosen for their potential to provide diverse perspectives on the AVID program. The work of host organisations ranged from disaster management to palliative care, community health and child protection. Volunteer assignments included logistics and warehousing, special

education, nursing, human resources, strategic planning and business development.

Interviews were held between June and September 2013. Interviewees were asked to reflect on their experience and spontaneous lines of conversation were also encouraged. Where requested, interviews were conducted in first language using professional interpreters. Additional data was gathered through a survey of returned volunteers, which had 26 respondents.

Ethics Approval (Protocol type: Full Ethical Review) was obtained through the Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee (ANU HREC) Meeting in May 2013.

The findings



The immersive time spent by volunteers in their host organisations can make their work more locally relevant and sustainable.

An Australian volunteer trained Kenyan volunteers in sustainable horticulture, a skill which they used to help farmers recover from a drought crisis.

1. International volunteering inspires and strengthens local volunteering within host communities

Volunteering is seen as essential to the achievement of sustainable development goals¹¹: both through its capacity to provide essential services to the most vulnerable and by encouraging people to achieve their full potential and lead productive and creative lives.¹²

An unexpected finding of this research was that international volunteering has an impact on local volunteering within host communities. This was evident in two ways.

1.1 International volunteering adds credibility and value to the concept of volunteering in the host community

In Mongolia, an international volunteer established new ways of recruiting and working with local volunteers. The host organisation then identified ways to make better use of the skills

of volunteers already engaged in delivering its services. These volunteers became more engaged as professional development and training opportunities became available and their roles became more skilled and diverse.



Australian Red Cross/Drew Weatherstone

“So before [the international volunteer assignment], somebody would come in and they would have a short interview just to talk a little bit about volunteering in this organisation. But now we provide training for these people so they have more responsibility and are more dedicated to the work they’re doing.”

- Host organisation, Mongolia

In Kenya, the presence of international volunteers led local volunteers to have a greater appreciation for the

value of their own contribution. It also attracted new volunteers to the host organisation.

“For local volunteers, having international volunteers come into training or work alongside them has increased the appreciation of local volunteers and what they actually offer. So they see themselves as doing something of great worth and professionalism as well.”

- Host organisation, Kenya

1.2 Host organisations applied elements from international volunteer assignment descriptions to the design of local volunteer roles

AVID volunteer assignments are designed with a view to strengthening capacity across a range of functions within a host organisation. One host organisation in Mongolia applied this design to its local volunteer roles, reporting that it has increased the sustainability of its volunteer program.

“Before we used to hire volunteers for the children’s camp only, but now we’re getting our volunteers to work for the organisation ... which makes a big difference and they are able to work more effectively because they’re working alongside the organisation.”

- Host organisation, Mongolia

This outcome is more significant because it was reported only by host organisations and not by the volunteers themselves. This perhaps indicates that host organisations placed a higher value upon the impact of local volunteers on their work.

As such, it is an important finding for organisations such as Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, whose effectiveness is directly related to their capacity to mobilise, manage and empower volunteers from the communities they serve.¹³

Volunteering is at the heart of community building and contributes to sustainable human development. International volunteers not only contribute their own efforts, but appear to encourage and support people in their host communities to do the same.

“I think that is something important to understand: that international volunteers are lending credibility to understanding the notion of volunteering.”

- Host organisation, Kenya



International volunteering allows for a process of exchanging ideas, skills and capacities that enables communities to self-organise and fashion their own solutions to challenges.

The findings

2. International volunteering lays the foundation for a lasting exchange of skills

Capacity building is often viewed as the transfer of skills from one person (i.e. a consultant or volunteer) to another (i.e. a local staff member). In recent years, international volunteering programs have emphasised a mutual exchange of skills between individuals, as a step in a broader process of capacity development of host organisations.¹⁴

In this research, ‘skills exchange’ topped the list of outcomes reported by host organisations and volunteers. This finding is noteworthy for two reasons: the impact of these skills on host organisations’ capacity to serve their communities; and the type of conditions that facilitate an exchange of skills between volunteers and their local counterparts.

2.1 Skills exchange leads to practical outcomes for host organisations

The exchange of skills between volunteers and their local colleagues led to practical improvements in service delivery: from building the finance and budgeting capacity of 50 Kenyan community organisations, to improving the procurement and supply of disaster relief items in Mongolia, to managing difficult behaviours in a state-run child welfare centre.

“We have seven regional disaster preparedness centres, geographically in different locations. We are trying to establish relief stocks. [The volunteer] helped us design how the warehouses should be. It’s very important since before he came here, there were no standards; no one had any idea how a warehouse should be managed. He did amazing work.”

- Host organisation, Mongolia

2.2 Host organisations were able to implement new policies and ways of working

Several host organisations identified new policies and approaches as an outcome of international volunteer assignments. These represent systemic changes that came about because volunteers spent time observing and understanding their host organisations’ needs and tailoring their approaches accordingly.

“Before, when we worked with foreign volunteers, our main focus was the budget. We usually worked on the budget and how to get more funding. But with this volunteer, she didn’t focus as much on the budget and instead she developed this volunteer recruitment program and worked on the child protection policy. We have the policy now in English and Mongolian. This is a very good base. So in the future when we need more funding, these things – demonstrating this policy that has been developed – will help us very much.”

- Host organisation, Mongolia

2.3 Trust and relationships are a strong foundation for skills exchange

International volunteering appears to facilitate skills exchange in a different and perhaps more lasting way than models such as technical assistance or short-term consultancy. This is because the volunteer is effectively embedded in the host organisation and local community: seen as an equal by their colleagues and given the time to understand context, learn language, build relationships and thus share skills and knowledge appropriate to the needs of the host organisation.

2.4 Planning for skills exchange is important throughout the volunteer assignment

Planning and investment is necessary to capture volunteers’ knowledge and expertise and retain this within the host organisation.

“One of the key things that we had discussed (...) is what should be his role towards the end? So he quickly identified someone (...) in Nairobi to pass on the skills, like shadow him for the last three or so months.”

- Host organisation, Kenya

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development emphasises that the exchange of knowledge and peer learning are strong mechanisms for capacity development – as long as they happen through engagement over a period of time, and are mutual in nature.¹⁵ This is exactly the way that international volunteer programs such as AVID operate.

Case Study

Palliative nursing in Mongolia



A herder family in Mongolia.

A volunteer nurse was assigned to the palliative care ward of a Mongolian hospital to support the professional development of local nurses and develop guidelines and training materials.

As a result of the volunteer's work, the hospital improved a number of aspects of patient care. As the nursing director reports:

"There is a difference between what our nurses learn in school. They learn how to make a bed, how to help the patient wash their body. But the way [the volunteer] was showing us, it was how to make the patient calmer. For example by using a warm towel and scented soaps and shampoos."

"When we needed to move a patient from one bed to the others, before the nurses used to pick them up in their sheets and that caused pain for the patient ... but [the volunteer] taught them another way; she brought this material that's kind of easy to glide, so transferring a patient from one bed to the other became really easy."

The volunteer also encouraged staff nurses to engage with patients' families. As a result, they established a respite area for patients and carers in the hospital ward and formed a support group for carers.

"We were paying a lot of attention to the patients but she paid

attention to the carers and helped us see that they also get tired and need some space and time."

Using her contacts in Australia, the volunteer sourced professional learning materials such as DVDs and handouts. Hospital staff are now using these materials when conducting training sessions for health workers in other districts.

According to the nursing director, the volunteer's contribution came not just from what she helped them do, but from who she was and how she worked.

"We miss [the volunteer] a lot. We miss her as a person – she's a really good person – and as a professional. She did a lot for us."

The findings

3. The immersive time spent by volunteers in their host organisations can make their work more locally relevant and sustainable.

Literature on international volunteering often connects the length of a volunteer assignment with its likelihood of achieving desired outcomes. This research indicates it is not just the length of time that matters; it is how volunteers use that time to increase their understanding and build connections with their colleagues and the local community.

“To understand the organisation and what their needs are, that was my only goal for the first three months.”

- Volunteer, Mongolia

‘Immersive time’ refers to time used to learn about the host organisation, culture and language, and to build relationships with local colleagues. This increases the chances of a volunteer’s assignment outcomes being relevant to the host organisation’s needs, locally owned and therefore sustainable.

Host organisations identified a number of outcomes from their international volunteer assignments: from product development to the implementation of new systems and processes, to improvements in workplace culture and attitudes. These outcomes would not have been possible without strong working relationships between volunteers and their colleagues.

“What I’ve observed from my team members is that once they felt that [the international volunteer] was just one of them, it was a totally different approach to even listening to him. It was like ‘okay, he’s a colleague’, he’s not just a consultant, an outsider. (...) I could share with him; I could bounce other ideas with him.”

- Host organisation, Kenya

Volunteers worked hard at building friendships; they made weekend trips to the shops or football matches with colleagues, or taught them English out of office hours. These friendships proved to be more than ‘soft’ or incidental outcomes. They increased trust between volunteers and their host organisation counterparts, enabling volunteers to suggest or model alternative ways of working, identify relevant solutions and foster positive attitudes towards change.

“We know she cares personally about the work, about us and what it is that we are doing here, about our community; because she does not just turn up and go home, you know? (...) She makes a real effort to understand our stresses, our pressures.”

- Host organisation, Kenya

Immersive time can also lead to a shared understanding of a volunteer’s role within a host organisation. Where this does not happen, volunteers may be under-utilised or given tasks unsuited to their skills. In this research, volunteers and host organisations who reported positive outcomes had spent time negotiating an appropriate role: developing realistic workplans, discussing new opportunities, and identifying and resolving barriers as they arose.

Language learning is another facet of immersive time. This was a critical issue in Mongolia, where English proficiency was often low among host organisation employees, and volunteers struggled equally hard to learn Mongolian. Some volunteers coped through extra language lessons or interpreters while others explored alternative ways to communicate.

“I’m continuing my Mongolian lessons but ... God I’m slow ... It’s probably a difficult language to learn anyway, but I’m not as proficient at learning it as I would like, so that has slowed things down. Lots of sign language, lots of scribbled diagrams, and a lot of pretty crazy networking with other people just to try and get a better idea of what’s out there ...”

- Volunteer, Mongolia

According to the International Forum for Volunteering in Development, “Volunteerism builds a shared vision, mutual accountability and a reciprocal learning relationship between people and between organisations”.¹⁶ Red Cross aims for its volunteers to support internally-driven rather than externally-mandated change by serving the host organisation’s purpose, getting under its skin, becoming part of its culture and helping it to realise and chart its future.

This research confirms it is immersive time spent by volunteers in their host organisations which enables these outcomes to occur.

Case Study

Financial reporting in Kenya



A Kenya Red Cross support service for people living with HIV.

A host organisation in Kenya was the recipient of a major grant to fund HIV and TB services. These services were provided by 52 smaller community health and social service partners, with the host organisation responsible for overall grant management. Community partners initially struggled to meet financial reporting requirements, leading to delays in funding.

A volunteer finance officer was recruited to identify and overcome bottlenecks in the process. Working with host organisation staff members, he rolled out new financial planning and reporting tools across the 52 community partners.

As the volunteer's supervisor reports:

"[The volunteer] came with a very good tool for forecasting the next month's expenditure depending on the last two or four months of actual implementation (...) He has heavily been involved in automating some of our forms and also teaching [the staff] analytical skills."

The volunteer also reported measurable changes as a result of these new skills and processes.

"In the first few months, we were having huge numbers of potential ineligible costs (...) We've had more than six months of implementation. You can actually see each month

now, the amounts that are coming back as questionable or potentially ineligible have gone down, and that's because we've done the work now to educate them on how to be accountable."

Accurate forecasting and monthly financial reporting were crucial requirements of the grant. The volunteer's work helped ensure the timely distribution of funds, which had a flow-on effect on the delivery of HIV prevention, treatment and counselling services to some of Kenya's most vulnerable populations.

The findings

4. International volunteering can challenge prevailing models of development.

While much has been made of the importance of the relationship between the volunteer and the host organisation, it must be remembered that traditionally the development relationship has been shaped by the histories and languages of aid and colonialism. This means that the international development agenda – which aims to improve the quality of life for people around the world – is often seen as something that the Global North does to the Global South.¹⁷

International volunteering can challenge prevailing development models. At a programmatic level, the AVID program challenges the commonly-held view of international volunteering – namely “the provision of commercialised, short-term and widely accessible international volunteering opportunities for those who live in the global North”.¹⁸ AVID assignments are shaped by the needs of host organisations rather than the interests of potential volunteers; they are locally managed by host organisations; and their stated outcomes reflect local priorities.

The outcomes of AVID assignments can also reduce the reliance on a North-to-South approach and help communities recognise their capacity to lead their own development.

An interesting example is the finding that international volunteering can enhance local volunteering; this illustrates the paradox of using the traditional North-South relationship to reduce dependence on this relationship. On one hand, volunteers from the local community were attracted to the host organisation because of the presence (and perceived credibility and prestige) of international volunteers. On the other

hand, a stronger and more engaged local volunteer workforce increases the host organisation’s capacity, making it less reliant on external support.

Similarly, host organisations reported using Northern approaches for their own objectives.

“I would say in Kenya, I have to be very honest, the quality of education is a bit different ... having someone from Australia with their educational background gives you an advantage, you sort of import the same educational system.”

- Host organisation, Kenya

International volunteers often do occupy a privileged position within host organisations. Nonetheless, international volunteering can empower communities to query accepted development approaches and drive their own solutions.



AVID assignments are shaped by the needs of host organisations rather than the interests of potential volunteers; they are locally managed by host organisations; and their stated outcomes reflect local priorities.

Recommendations

This report adds to the evidence base on the role of international volunteering in the development agenda, by exploring the way in which it has an effect on local communities.

The findings reveal that as well as inspiring and strengthening local volunteering within host communities and laying the foundation for lasting skills exchange, international volunteering can challenge prevailing models of development. This is particularly so where the immersive time spent by volunteers makes their work locally relevant and sustainable.

International volunteering contributes greatly to a legitimate and sustainable development process, above and beyond public diplomacy. Its value can be best understood through indicators that measure contributions to civic engagement and direct service delivery, and their overall impact in bringing about transformative change.

International volunteering is a sustainable model that is well placed to deliver against each of the priority areas in the emerging Sustainable Development Framework; as such it should be an integral and measurable component of Australia's aid program. It also aligns with the key economic drivers for improved growth in economies, by contributing to resilient and self-sufficient communities and working to ensure no one is left behind.

Insights gained through international volunteering should continue to shape the aid program; in particular, the role of community participation and ownership. It is essential that we recognise communities as partners and not simply 'beneficiaries' in the development agenda.

Drawing on this field research with international volunteers, host organisations and Red Cross staff in Kenya and Mongolia, and as a leading humanitarian organisation and signatory to the Paris Accord on Volunteering for Sustainable Development, we urge those responsible for sustainable development outcomes in our region and abroad to consider the value of international volunteering.

Australian Red Cross calls on the Australian Government to:

1. Invest strongly in volunteering as the cornerstone of a people-centred development approach and the delivery of a post-2015 sustainable development framework
2. Ensure appropriate indicators for volunteering are included in the aid agenda, to measure its contributions to addressing poverty, economic diplomacy and the strengthening of local civil society
3. Recognise the importance of immersive time within communities to ensure outcomes are community-owned, long-term and able to deliver results
4. Grow the international volunteer program strongly and fund it sustainably as an integral part of Australia's regional and global development agenda, and its national interest

Acknowledgements



The volunteer is effectively embedded in the host organisation: seen as an equal by their colleagues and given the time to understand context, learn language, build relationships and share skills and knowledge.

Staff and volunteers at a Timorese employment and advocacy service for women.

This report presents key findings from research commissioned by Australian Red Cross in 2013 and conducted by Dr Martine Hawkes.

Red Cross acknowledges and thanks the many people who, generously and in a spirit of hospitality, shared the experiences and reflections that inform this research. In particular we thank the host organisation representatives and AVID volunteers in Mongolia and Kenya, the returned volunteers who contributed to our survey, Red Cross program staff and the Research and Social Policy Unit.

Thanks must also go to Mongolia Red Cross Society, Kenya Red Cross Society and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies for their logistical support. Ninjin Bilegsaikhan was invaluable as an interpreter in Mongolia, while Adept Technologies in Kenya provided transcription services following the field research. Expert advice and guidance was provided through a steering committee, sub-working groups and a critical friends group.

Copies of the full research findings are available from research@redcross.org.au

Endnotes



Australian Red Cross/Conor Ashleigh

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Australian Red Cross international program

Our commitment

Australian Red Cross works with the most disadvantaged people, in their most vulnerable times and in the most disadvantaged places, primarily in Asia, Africa and the Pacific, to help them achieve healthier, safer, more protected and sustainable lives for themselves and their children.

We are committed to helping our regional Red Cross and Red Crescent partners as they find ways to reduce the vulnerability of their communities and tackle long-term challenges in their countries.

People are at the centre of our work – which means respecting the needs and priorities of vulnerable people, promoting our accountability, learning and sharing knowledge.

Our focus

- Assisting people to prepare for, respond to and recover from natural disasters and conflict
- Providing clean water and improving sanitation
- Helping to reduce preventable diseases through community-based health and hygiene promotion and first aid
- Saving lives by supporting the safe supply of blood services
- Supporting the most marginalised people, including people with disabilities, people living with HIV, women and children, to fully participate in their communities

In times of disaster, Australian Red Cross stands ready to meet people's basic needs and is uniquely placed to respond quickly and expertly to emergencies whenever and wherever they occur.

Our partners

Australian Red Cross always partners with other national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, whose extensive volunteer networks enable them to reach the most vulnerable, wherever they may live. We support our partners in providing services and also in becoming stronger, more viable and sustainable organisations in their own right.

We work in collaboration with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), particularly in times of disasters, and with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance.

We also work with government agencies, health services, schools and civil society organisations that share our humanitarian goals.

As an auxiliary to the Australian Government in the humanitarian field, we complement each other's contribution to save lives, alleviate suffering and provide development assistance.

Our people overseas

Aid workers

Australian Red Cross maintains a register of highly experienced aid workers, who can be deployed quickly when needed. From biomedical engineers to disaster law experts, they are highly qualified specialists who are trained to operate effectively in emergency and conflict zones. They also support long-term development projects with our partner National Societies and the IFRC.

Volunteers

Professional and committed people that help host organisations in Asia, Africa and the Pacific to strengthen their work and serve their communities. They include health workers, fire fighters, accountants, marketers, program coordinators and many more.



Australian Volunteers

for International Development

National Office
155 Pelham St
Carlton VIC 3053
T 03 9345 1800



Australian Government
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

The Australian Government is working in partnership to send volunteers overseas through the Australian Volunteers for International Development program.

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