

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEERING IN VANUATU?

Introduction

Volunteering offers a valuable approach to international development cooperation. Valuing volunteering is a key, enduring principle of the Australian Volunteers Program.

The specific objective of this study was to better understand what value different stakeholders in different countries place on international skilled volunteering, and why.

The program undertook this research to assess progress toward the end of program outcome 'Key stakeholders in Australia and partner countries appreciate the value of volunteering' and the key evaluation and research questions in the MEL Framework. Vanuatu was selected as the first in a proposed series of country case studies.

Methodology

This study implemented a co-designed study protocol developed with a co-design team based in Vanuatu. Through interviews and focus groups, the study sought to answer key research questions.

The study engaged 43 individual perspectives, including those from collaborators (i.e., Partner Organisations, Government Agencies, Development Practitioners and Community Groups), facilitators (e.g., volunteer coordinating groups such as the Australian Volunteers Program and JICA), as well as returned volunteers who had completed assignments in Vanuatu.

Key Findings

The research asked how different stakeholders define the 'value of volunteering'. All stakeholders defined value in terms of its benefits, such as providing essential and critical skills that supported the capacity strengthening of partner organisation staff. Stakeholders referenced improvements in individuals' skills through one-to-one mentoring, coaching, and training delivered by volunteers.

Development outcomes, such as improvements in health services, were also identified as a key part of the added value of volunteering. Some stakeholders also highlighted the benefits of volunteering in its role in supporting public diplomacy and international relations.

"We have a glimpse of the low income and high-income country on how they do things, being able to expose to that helps us to understand the correct way of doing things in clinical situation. In medicine, it is always based on evidence based so we need international capacity support. We can now update our procedures and ways of doing things."

- Partner Organisation

Stakeholders were asked under what conditions volunteering provides the most value for partner organisations, communities and volunteers. Six conditions were identified, covering: long-term engagements; deep training and cultural immersion; strong local support; aligned values; locally relevant policies and procedures; and in-person assignments.

The study identified a variety of ways that volunteering contributes to the attainment of the broad economic, social and environmental outcomes desired in Vanuatu. These pathways include work at individual, organisational and community levels; activities that strengthen the capacities of individuals and teams as well as directly deliver services; efforts to promote diversity and inclusion; and fostering healthy and enduring relationships that provide the basis for ongoing collaboration in pursuit of meaningful development outcomes.

As a development modality, volunteering is uniquely positioned to build and strengthen long term organisational capacity through deep immersion, long-term relationships and understanding of local contexts. When compared with other modes of development assistance, such as delivered by a consultant or paid advisor, it was noted that volunteering brings some unique and valuable contributions:

- Trusted and unique perspectives
- Affordable skilled labour contribution
- Enduring relationships and deep immersion
- Transfer of knowledge and skills to support capacity strengthening
- Greater “value add” for development partners
- Reciprocal value for volunteers

“Volunteers spend more time here and understand the challenges that the communities face. Consultants are the flying ones. They are just paid for a job and not networking. Consultants are overpaid to deliver, they will not go outside of the box”.

- Partner Organisation

“Starting volunteering missions can be the first step toward a bigger cooperation between two territories. It creates a solid foundation for a bigger cooperation. All the programs that we develop involve government, funding agencies, - the volunteer is part of something bigger: developing a sustainable cooperation between countries.”

- International Volunteer Cooperation Organisation

Recommendations

While the findings suggest that volunteering in Vanuatu is delivering significant value for all stakeholders, it also indicates opportunities for further strengthening volunteering efforts. These opportunities include:

- Enhanced knowledge sharing to strengthen evaluation and learning and demonstrate the value of volunteering to stakeholders in Vanuatu.
- Strengthen connections with government agencies and actors in local contexts to provide greater political, policy and practical support to volunteering efforts.
- Invest in support to volunteers to ensure they have a foundational understanding of Bislama and local cultural practices in Vanuatu, and an understanding of international development theory, frameworks and practices.

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