

Australian Volunteers



**Australian Volunteers Program
Annual Report**

July 2023 – June 2024



Cover: Cambodia: *Australian Volunteer Ugyen Choden (right) is a WASH Capacity Development Mentor with Cambodia's Ministry of Rural Development. Ugyen is pictured with Prak Pin (left) – Mobilization and Partnership Development Lead of Engineers Without Borders Australia in Cambodia. They are testing a foot-operated tap that eliminates hand contact with the tap. This innovative device was distributed to the community during the COVID-19 pandemic and has been widely adopted.*

Inside cover: Samoa: *Apia Harbour.*

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1. Executive summary

Skilled, global volunteering promotes cultural understanding and solidarity by establishing people to people links and forming partnerships between communities and organisations around the world. In 2023-24 the Australian Volunteers Program mobilised a diverse range of Australians to work with partners in 25 countries across the Pacific, Asia and Africa in support of equitable development and locally led change.

The Australian Volunteers Program plays a distinctive role in supporting locally led change by sourcing skilled Australians and Australian organisations to work alongside local partners to help bring about the change our partners want to see. It is valued for its partnership approach which starts from a position of respecting our partners' deep contextual and cultural knowledge and aims to provide volunteers who can complement and build on partners' strengths.

The program also has a unique value in the Australian community as it connects skilled Australians to our development cooperation program and the region. Volunteers have the opportunity to experience a different culture, sharing knowledge in a mutual exchange with the communities in which they are embedded. This was strongly evident this year as a small group of First Nations rangers shared their experience of conservation and culture with Solomon Islands communities.

The Australian Volunteers Program remains strategically aligned to Australian Government priorities and is well-positioned to support the International Development Policy launched in August 2023. The Policy's commitment to strong and respectful partnerships and its emphasis on the need to anchor Australia's development cooperation in Australia's strengths are already reflected in the way the program operates.

Our Global Program Strategy was updated during the year to clearly align with the Policy and further strengthen the program's focus on core issues such as gender equality, disability inclusion and climate action.

2023-24 marked the seventh year of the 10-year period for program implementation. During the year, in the context of increased operating costs alongside continuing high demand for in-country assignments, the program sharpened its focus to enable in-country assignments, as our primary means of delivery, to grow over the remaining years of the program.

During 2023-24, the program recruited, supported and mobilised 376 volunteers to deliver 446 assignments across 25 countries. Sixty volunteers delivered more than one assignment. Those assignments supported 299 partner organisations – from small community-based organisations to government departments – to progress their own development objectives. In addition, the program helped partners to strengthen capacity in key areas such as gender equality, volunteer management and organisational governance through learning events including webinars and communities of practice.

Program highlights

Throughout 2023-24, the program continued to implement the full range of program activities to progress end of program outcomes. Evidence is available to demonstrate positive impact for both partner organisations and program participants, as well as impact in key thematic areas over time. Other stakeholders, such as program alumni and Australian organisations, have provided evidence of widespread satisfaction with their engagement in the program.

Program highlights from 2023-24 include:

- Supporting **299 partner organisations** with volunteer assignments, with 88% reporting good or excellent progress against assignment objectives.
- Supporting **376 volunteers** to deliver **446 assignments**, with 84% of volunteers satisfied or very satisfied with the program.
- Incorporating lessons learned about different volunteering modalities and increasing the number of hybrid assignments across the program (combining in-country and remote modalities). This year, the program supported **224 in-country**, **78 hybrid** and **144 remote assignments**.
- Awarding **five small grants** to partner organisations in 5 countries to strengthen their capability to implement local volunteering.
- Working with **109 Australian organisations**, with 85% of survey respondents highly satisfied with their program engagement and 96% found that it benefited their organisation. Over the year, 11% of all assignments (47 assignments) were supported by an Australian organisation.
- Delivering **18 online learning events under our Global Webinar Series** to 824 participants on topics such as the prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment; remote and hybrid volunteering; partner networking; gender; and environmental conservation.
- Delivering a successful **International Volunteer Day campaign** including a Melbourne based event attended by over 70 guests including alumni, current remote volunteers and Australian partner organisations; alumni-led events involving 130 alumni around Australia; and a range of events in partner countries.
- Delivering a successful group assignment in the Solomon Islands under **Indigenous Pathways**, involving four Indigenous female rangers working in conservation.
- Co-designing and **piloting a volunteer management resource kit** with 20 partners across 6 countries, which will be launched to our global partner network in 2024-25.
- Conducting **two surveys** – one for past and current volunteers and one for partner organisations – to collect anonymous feedback about their experiences with the program.
- Implementing **three strategic evaluations** to gather evidence to demonstrate progress towards the end of program outcomes. This included the next phase of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers, the launch of a participatory research project on organisational capacity strengthening and research into perceptions of the value of volunteering in Vanuatu.

Looking ahead, the Australian Volunteers Program is well-placed to deliver a high-quality program that is clearly aligned to the International Development Policy, and responds to priorities articulated at country level. The program is poised to deliver increasing numbers of in-country assignments to support partner organisations in the pursuit of locally-led change, while continuing to evolve our approaches to enhance effectiveness and improve the experience of partner organisations and program participants.

July 2023 to June 2024 at a glance

299 partner organisations supported by

376 volunteers delivering **446** assignments

Total budget **\$23M**

About volunteers

60.4% women

39.1% men

0.5% self-describe

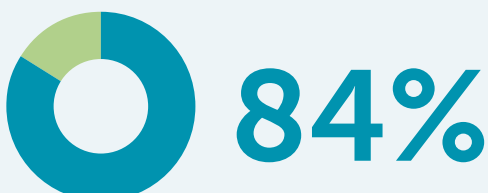
2.7% volunteers identify as having a disability

1.6% volunteers identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

Volunteers were aged from **21** years old to **79** years old

35 dependents accompanied volunteers on their assignments

84% of volunteers were satisfied or very satisfied with the program



81% of volunteers reported good or excellent progress against assignment objectives



About volunteer assignments

224 in-country

78 hybrid

144 remote

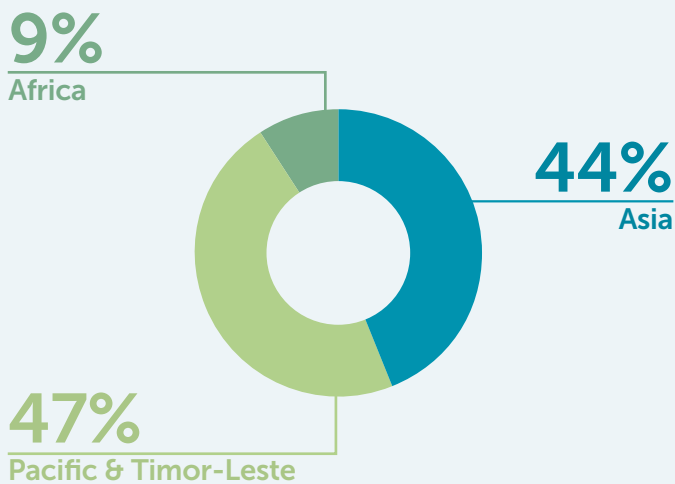
281 assignments started this year

165 assignments continued from previous years

291 assignments completed during the year

About partner organisations

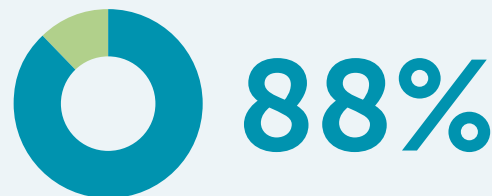
Location of partners



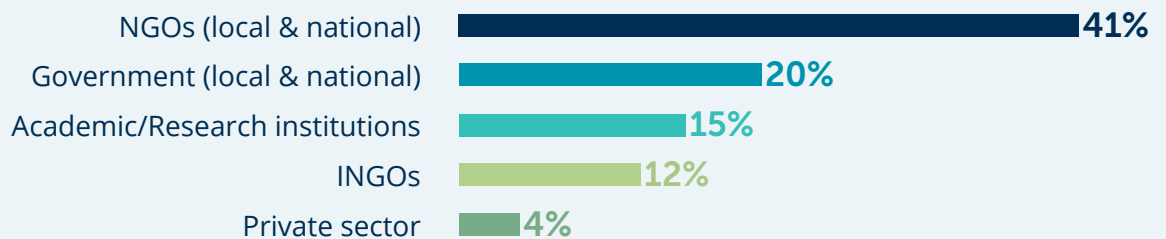
88% of partner organisations reported good or excellent progress against assignment objectives



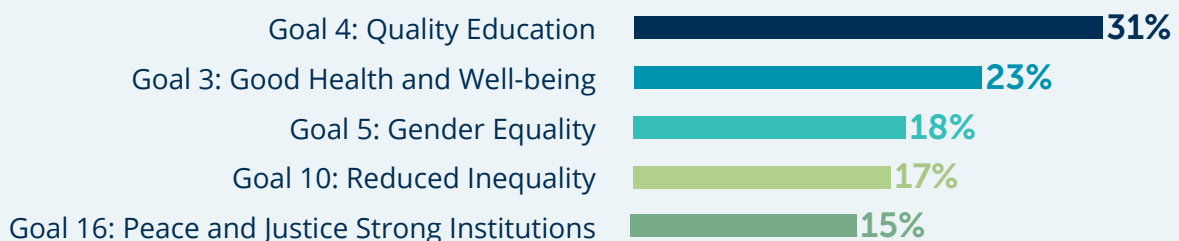
88% of partner organisations were satisfied or very satisfied with the volunteer assignment



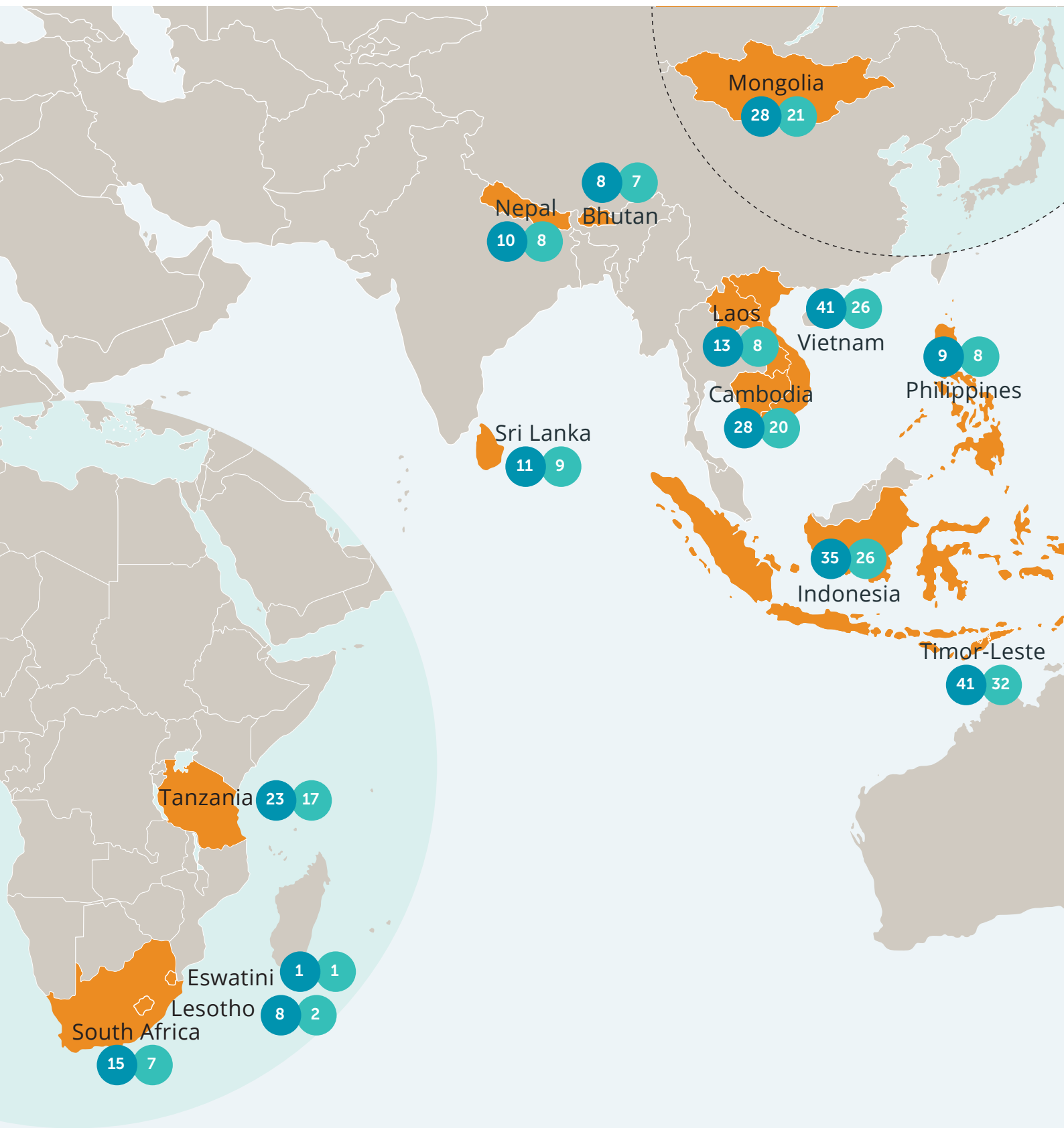
Our partner organisations

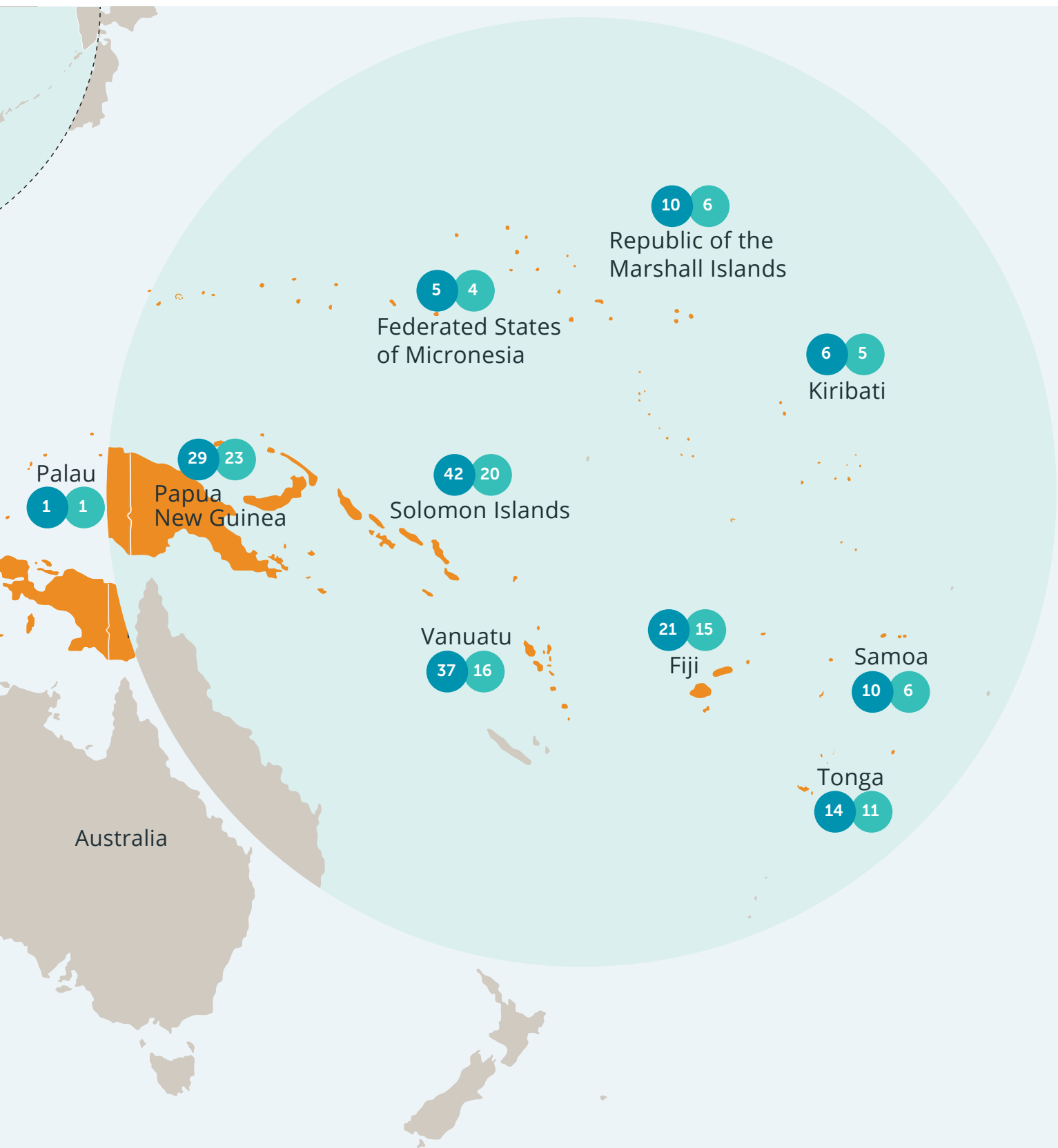


Top 5 SDGs that partners contribute to



Where we operate (2023 - 2024)





- Number of assignments supported
- Number of partner organisations

Seven years at a glance (2018 – 2024)

1133 partner organisations supported by

2017 volunteers delivering **2926** assignments

Assignments

1971 in-country

87 hybrid

868 remote

About volunteers

62.5% women

37.1% men

0.4% self-describe

2.0% volunteers identify as having a disability

2.0% volunteers identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

201 dependents accompanied volunteers on their assignments

85% of volunteers were satisfied or very satisfied with the program



73% of volunteers reported good or excellent progress against assignment objectives



86% of partner organisations were satisfied or very satisfied with the volunteer assignment



79% of partner organisations reported good or excellent progress against assignment objectives



2. About the program

The Australian Volunteers Program develops long-term, mutually respectful partnerships with organisations across the Pacific, Asia and Africa to contribute to locally led change and the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Australian volunteers have supported overseas partner organisations to achieve their development goals for more than 65 years. The Australian Government's Australian Volunteers Program continues this rich history.

The program matches skilled Australians with organisations in developing countries to help those organisations to deliver on their own development objectives. It uses international volunteering as a people centred approach to capacity strengthening. The program is part of the Australian Government's people-to-people program portfolio, connecting Australians to Australia's aid program and the region.

The Australian Volunteers Program aims to deliver the following outcomes by the end of program:

- Partner organisations are supported to progress their development objectives
- Key stakeholders in Australia and partner countries appreciate the value of volunteering
- Program participants gain greater cultural awareness and build stronger connections across countries

By successfully achieving these outcomes, the Australian Government aims to strengthen mutual relationships with people and communities across the Pacific, Asia and Africa that contribute to achieving equitable development outcomes.

The program highly values First Nations perspectives and knowledge and seeks to increase Indigenous participation in international volunteering. The program is also committed to human rights, gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI), and works to increase the diversity of volunteers and organisations that we partner with.

The Australian Volunteers Program started in 2018 and is managed by AVI, in consortium with DT Global and Alinea International. In July 2022, the program commenced its second five-year term to 2027, with a refreshed program logic and a total five-year budget of up to AUD\$130 million.

3. About this report

This is the seventh annual report prepared by the Australian Volunteers Program. It covers the period from 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024.

Ensuring accountability and promoting learning is one of the program's guiding principles, and this report represents one way in which the program aims to fulfil this principle. It is structured to provide an update on progress against each of the program's three end of program outcomes, and the principles that underpin the program.

Following on from the executive summary, which includes a summary of program achievements, and of the operating context for the year (Section 4), this report documents lessons learnt over the last year (Section 5) and highlights key management actions for the program to take forward in the year ahead (Section 6). Evidence of progress toward intermediate and end of program outcomes is covered in Section 7.

Separate 'Focus Areas' aim to demonstrate the program's commitment to its guiding principles. In the current report, the focus is on three principles:

- Support locally led change
- Value volunteering
- Evolve good practice and embrace innovation

Additional case studies throughout the report aim to further illustrate how the program is supporting our partners' work.



Solomon Islands Indigenous Australian volunteer Cindy-Lou Togo (centre) and rangers from Nusatuva exchanging knowledge about a useful plant that grows in both Far North Queensland and Solomon Islands. Cindy volunteered in Solomon Islands as part of the Indigenous Conservation Knowledge Exchange.

4. Operating context

The external operating context was challenging due to global economic conditions. Inflationary and cost-of-living pressures continued across many of the countries in which the program is operating, impacting on both governments and local communities. In some countries this led to political and social unrest. Global mobility returned to normal levels and medical evacuations and relocations were operating at full capacity in the 25 countries in which the program operated.

The demand from partners for in-country volunteers remained high. This continued to place pressure on the program's human and financial resources. Key operational costs such as travel and insurances also remained very high but are expected to stabilise in coming years.

Australian Government priorities

In August 2023, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade released Australia's International Development Policy. This seminal document outlines Australia's approach to contributing to a 'peaceful, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific'. The Australian Volunteers Program continues to contribute to locally led development in close alignment with the approaches outlined in the policy.

The program commenced work with Posts to update Country Program Plans to align with the Development Partnership Plans as they are developed in consultation with partner governments. The program continued to support the government's priorities to foster cooperation between First Nations Australians and regional partners, and support the government's commitments to address climate change, gender equality and disability inclusion.

External context

During the reporting period, the political, social and economic contexts in some countries deteriorated. Global economic stresses continued, partly due to the ongoing effects of the war in Ukraine as well as the conflict in Gaza and the Occupied Palestinian Territories of Gaza and the West Bank. Inflationary pressures and cost of living increases continued to present challenges for many communities in countries where the program operates.

The heightened security environment in Papua New Guinea in January 2024 led to a 14-day state of emergency being declared. This impacted directly on the work of program participants, staff and partner organisations. General elections were held in Indonesia, Solomon Islands and South Africa. Contingency planning was put in place for program participants and staff in country at the time of elections, with minimal disruption reported.



Papua New Guinea CUFA PNG focuses on financial development, including micro-enterprises, social enterprises, employment placement programs and financial literacy education for children and adults. Australian volunteers Mikaela O'Neil and Kerrie Noad supported CUFA through assignments focused on GEDSI monitoring, evaluation and learning and children's financial literacy. Left to right in this photo: Lead Trainer Susan Viraniat, Australian volunteer Mikaela O'Neil, Project Officer Jehu Lakatani and Australian volunteer Kerrie Noad.

The Pacific Games were held in Solomon Islands in November-December 2023 with representatives from 24 Oceania countries participating. Comprehensive and robust contingency planning was put in place, including holding a safety and security briefing workshop with program participants. These approaches ensured that there was minimal negative impact on program operations, volunteers and staff.

There were several significant natural disasters during the year, including floods, drought, tsunami warnings, cyclones and earthquakes. In North Pacific, the impacts of ongoing drought led to a spike in the cost of living, including for potable water. In response, the program temporarily increased the living allowances to cover these additional costs for in-country program participants.

The increase in the prevalence of water borne diseases including malaria and dengue was monitored carefully. The program continued to educate program participants on how to minimise the chance of contracting these diseases and provided appropriate equipment such as mosquito nets for sleeping. Air quality in some program countries remained a concern with Jakarta being declared the most polluted city in the world. Volunteers were encouraged to wear masks and were provided with access to air quality devices as needed.

5. Lessons learned

The program is committed to continuous improvement and promotes learning, reflection and knowledge exchange across and between all partners to ensure that we deliver on our outcomes and support improved practices.

Over the last year, we have noted the following insights:

- **The Australian Volunteers Program is strongly aligned with the Australian Government's International Development Policy.** Our emphasis on partnerships, on learning from the perspectives of First Nations Australians, supporting local leadership and our commitment to gender equality, disability equity and climate action are all recognised in the policy as central to effective development.
- The program has positive impact through and with the partner organisations we support. In revising the Global Program Strategy, we have identified three core issues which already align with the existing impact areas, and which will be given priority in alignment with Australia's International Development Policy: gender equality, disability inclusion, and climate action. In looking at the proportion of organisations supported in these areas, we know **change will not happen without intentional planning and extensive outreach to develop partnerships with relevant organisations.**
- **Volunteering has demonstrated systemic benefits for partner organisations by contributing to significant capacity strengthening at individual, organisational, and systemic levels.** Program case studies and independent evaluations focused on the health sector highlight how sustained volunteer assignments have bolstered the effectiveness of partners, enabling them to advance their development objectives across a wide range of health-related concerns.

This long-term engagement has not only improved specific health outcomes – such as trauma response, diabetes care, and mental health initiatives – but has also contributed to strengthening health care systems. In some cases, the cumulative support from multiple volunteers over several years has played a role in achieving systemic, national-level changes, supporting progress towards key global development goals such as Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3).

- Volunteering is a distinctive and highly valued modality for delivering effective socio-economic development, as highlighted by recent research and a global survey of the Australian Volunteers Program's partner organisations. **Four out of five partner organisations recognise the significant role volunteers play in supporting socio-economic development.**

Notably, around two-thirds of respondents believe that volunteers are more effective than paid consultants, and nearly half see skilled international volunteering as a superior approach to organisational capacity strengthening compared to financial support. These findings underscore the unique impact of volunteering, emphasising its effectiveness and the deep, lasting connections it fosters within communities.

- As a modality, there is also direct benefit to volunteers themselves. **Volunteers report significant personal and professional benefits from their assignments**, with many describing their experiences as transformational. These benefits extend beyond the duration of their assignments, manifesting in enhanced career prospects, increased confidence, and a deeper understanding of international development. The program has been particularly effective in fostering soft skills and preparing volunteers for 'prosocial' careers, while also contributing to their global literacy and civic engagement. The relationships and cross-cultural experiences gained have had a lasting impact, enriching volunteers' worldviews and personal lives. Even years after their assignments, volunteers continue to value the profound changes and connections shaped by their experiences.
- **Supporting locally led change requires continuous self-reflection and a commitment to addressing power imbalances** within international aid systems. The program's ongoing efforts, including staff involvement and feedback collection, have highlighted the importance of recognising the diverse experiences of individuals in these systems and the need to confront Australia's colonial history and its impact on power dynamics. The challenges of ensuring equitable decision-making and fostering intercultural understanding were identified as areas for improvement. However, these challenges also present opportunities to enhance the effectiveness of the Australian Volunteers Program by prioritising local knowledge, recruiting culturally sensitive volunteers, and fostering deeper, more meaningful partnerships.
- Developing partnerships requires time and patience, but the long-term strategic value they offer is significant. The Australian Volunteers Program's experience with **Indigenous Pathways highlights the importance of building relationships of trust before moving forward** with volunteer assignments. This approach has proven particularly important in advancing First Nations engagement, as seen in ongoing partnerships in the Pacific region. The slow, deliberate process of partnership development has not only strengthened relationships but has also fostered meaningful cross-cultural knowledge exchange and created a strong foundation for future collaboration.

The lessons learned underscore that while partnerships may not yield immediate results, their sustained impact is invaluable for achieving strategic goals.

- Innovation activities within the Australian Volunteers Program have underscored **the importance of developing and adapting new models of volunteering to meet diverse needs**. Through initiatives like Vol4Dev, several promising approaches, such as co-volunteering, early career pathways, and youth engagement, were explored, each offering unique benefits and challenges. The program learned that successful innovation requires not only the introduction of new models but also a shift in how partnerships are developed and managed.

Collaborative approaches, especially those that emphasise co-design and capacity strengthening, have proven to be effective in creating sustainable volunteer opportunities that align with local needs. The process also highlighted the need for clear structure, expectations, and stakeholder engagement, particularly when incorporating innovation methodologies. By valuing the lived experiences and expertise of in-country teams, the program has been able to develop context-specific solutions, foster stronger relationships, and create a more inclusive and effective approach to volunteering.

- Operationally, the Australian Volunteers Program continues to refine its processes by responding to stakeholder feedback and addressing key challenges. While hybrid assignments have received positive responses from both volunteers and partner organisations, **the program is still learning, reviewing and updating its processes for hybrid assignments to ensure they meet the needs of all stakeholders**.

Ongoing challenges include how best to work with potential partner organisations that need support but may not have the capabilities to effectively manage a volunteer, and how to support volunteers to most effectively be a 'useful outsider'. Communication has been another area of concern, with volunteers expressing a desire for more frequent and meaningful interactions with the program, both from Melbourne-based teams and in-country staff.

6. Management actions and forward priorities

In 2024-25 the Australian Volunteers Program will remain focused on core activities to place skilled Australian volunteers into assignments developed in close collaboration with our partner organisations in all 26 program countries – supporting locally led change as well as mutually beneficial and enduring relationships.

The launch of the Australian Government's International Development Policy in 2023 refreshed the policy context for program implementation and a new Global Program Strategy will be finalised early in 2024-25. The program is already strongly aligned to the principles and priorities articulated in the Policy – particularly those related to locally led change and respectful partnerships. Greater emphasis will be given in some areas where we can strengthen policy alignment.

Through both 2022-23 and 2023-24, the program continued to respond to the challenging operating environment following the global pandemic. The demand for in-country volunteer assignments returned very quickly but substantially increased operating costs constrained our ability to respond within available budget. With this situation easing in 2024-25, the emphasis will return to delivering in-country assignments as the main modality.

Key management actions and priorities to be taken forward in 2024-25 include:

Supporting partner organisations through the placement of skilled and well-prepared Australian volunteers, as our core approach to supporting locally led change.

This will include growing the number of in-country assignments across the full range of 26 program countries, in line with available budget and updated, agreed Country Program Plans. The program expects to support the recruitment, onboarding and mobilisation of volunteers for over 300 new assignments in 2024-25 with the vast majority being in-country or hybrid assignments. This represents a substantial increase in new in-country assignments compared to 2023-24, when there was a much larger percentage of remote assignments. The program will also make strategic use of other program offerings where these have been shown to add value. For example, small grants to complement or supplement support provided by in-country volunteers and remote assignments where these have been shown to support particular types of volunteers, assignments or locations.



Indonesia Australian volunteer Laura Wallace was a Research Development Mentor (Nursing Specialist) at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta (UMY). She supported her colleagues to increase their research publication capacity.

Focusing attention on the core issues outlined in our Global Program Strategy – gender, disability and climate action – and articulating how we can continue to strengthen work in these areas.

In 2024-25, the program will increase its focus on these core issues in line with individual Country Program Plans and the Global Program Strategy. The program's existing approach to gender and disability includes direct support for partner organisations with these areas of focus (for example, volunteer placements and gender impact grants), efforts to increase the diversity of volunteers recruited, and opportunities for both participants and partner organisations to exchange learning and knowledge to address gender and disability issues across all aspects of their work. The program will articulate and update these approaches in response to new gender and disability strategies to be finalised by DFAT in 2024-25.

Engaging a wide range of Australian and international stakeholders by sharing learning, evidence and stories that demonstrate the value of volunteering.

The program's public diplomacy and communications activities will continue to engage key stakeholders in the value of volunteering and attract a diverse range of Australians to participate in the program. Activities will include an International Volunteer Day campaign and events, producing and disseminating compelling content, promoting the program to new and existing audiences, and undertaking a range of Alumni activities.

Continuing to build and strengthen connections between partner organisations and a diverse range of Australian individuals and organisations, including through our Indigenous Pathways program, for mutual benefit and continued knowledge exchange.

In 2024-25, the program will review the existing portfolio of Australian organisation partners which provide significant value to overseas partners, including, but not only through sourcing high quality candidates for volunteer assignments. We will maintain and strengthen relationships with those partners which are engaged, committed and have the greatest strategic alignment with program priorities. The program will also increase in the number of identified positions for First Nations volunteers and continue to build and strengthen relationships with Indigenous organisations and networks in Australia.

Case Study

Strengthening research capacity at Fiji National University



Left: Connor Graham (right) with Peni Koroivulavou (left), Administrative Facilitator at the College of Medicine Nursing and Health Sciences of Fiji National University in Suva Fiji.

Top right: Connor with Kartika Karun Lata at the College.

Bottom right: Connor with Inoke Sivaro (left) and Etivina Lovo (right).

The support of Australian volunteer Connor Graham has helped improve the quality of teaching and learning in the College of Medicine at the Fiji National University. He contributed to building a learning culture within the college, where staff reflect on how to improve their service delivery.

Connor was recruited as a volunteer Research Officer after the University identified a need to enhance education and research for health professionals across the College of Medicine. One of Connor's tasks was to assist with establishing a research centre for health professional education.

With Connor's support, a virtual research centre is now operating, and a team of local staff are offering webinars for health professionals.

Connor also strengthened research capacity within the College by reviewing proposals, delivering manuscript writing workshops and assisting Masters and PhD students with data analysis.

Connor guided staff through college audits and student satisfaction surveys and analysis and has provided the team with a template to use for future audits. He also held a position on the College Human Health Research Committee and supported the review of the Committee's Standard Operating Procedure.

The Fiji Institute of Pacific Health Research also benefited from Connor's participation in the 2023 Pacific Islands Health Research Symposium as rapporteur on research meetings, a member of the organising committee and co-leader of the symposium conference proceedings.

During his assignment, Connor supported the design and submission of three significant grant proposals under the Health Professional Education program, with one grant focused on gender-based violence worth AUD\$500,000.

7. Progress towards outcomes

This section of the report details progress against the program's outcomes over the last year.

Three sub-sections reflect the three end of program outcomes and related intermediate outcomes:

- Partner organisations are supported to progress their development objectives
- Key stakeholders in Australian and partner countries appreciate the value of volunteering
- Program participants gain greater cultural awareness and build stronger connections across countries

A fourth sub-section covers the systems and activities that support the program overall.

Evidence of progress towards end of program and intermediate outcomes is drawn from a range of sources, including:

- Research and evaluation activities exploring specific elements of the program in depth
- Monitoring data and feedback on assignments provided by volunteers and partner organisations
- The program's management information system



Vietnam Through the Australian Volunteers Program's partnership with Vietnam National University of Agriculture (VNUA), RAID (Researchers in Agriculture for International Development) and the Crawford Fund, a unique multi-phase project supporting agricultural research has developed. The project has already included online and in-country phases, with more phases planned.

Pictured are Australian volunteers and their counterparts from VNUA and RAID learning about local crops in Bac Giang Province, Vietnam, as part of their hybrid volunteer assignment.

7.1 Supporting the development outcomes of our partner organisations

Volunteers play a crucial role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is recognised in the 2030 Agenda and is why the program’s overarching goal is for volunteering to support locally led change and the realisation of the SDGs. Volunteerism extends the reach and impact of SDG efforts from local to national levels, strengthening capacities and connections essential for achieving equitable development outcomes.

End of program outcome: Partner organisations are supported to progress their development objectives

A strength of the program is the diversity of organisations it supports. The development efforts of our partners contribute to all 17 SDGs. With this diversity comes challenges, one of which is how to assess and communicate the achievements of our partners when they span such a range of different thematic areas.

During the year, the program started a series of thematic reviews framed around the SDGs. The first review looked at partner organisation contributions to SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being.

The Australian Volunteers Program, in its various iterations, has a long history of supporting partner organisations in the health sector, dating back to the 1960s. The COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian Government’s Partnerships for Recovery policy, and the ongoing emphasis on health through the latest International Development Policy, continue to underscore the significance of health-related assignments. The program’s support to partners operating in the health sector is strongly aligned to the Australian Government’s policy priorities, and those of a substantial number of partner organisations.

From January 2018 to June 2023, the program has supported 240 partner organisations whose work supports the realisation of SDG 3. That represents almost one-quarter of all partners supported by the program during that time. Those 240 organisations have been supported by 723 assignments, or 27% of all volunteer assignments.

Program case studies, independent evaluations and assignment evaluations provide evidence of the outcomes achieved by partner organisations, supported by Australian volunteers.

This evidence shows that assignments have helped strengthen the capacity (at an individual, organisational and systemic level) and organisational effectiveness of partners working in the health sector. This support has enabled organisations to further their own development objectives across a broad range of health-related concerns.

Assignments have supported improved health outcomes including physical outcomes such as responses to trauma or diabetes; improved mental health care and public health initiatives; support to specific populations such as child health; and strengthened capacity of health care systems. In some instances, through more sustained engagement, the available evidence points to the program having supported partner organisations’ contributions to systemic, national level changes that may have a direct bearing on a country’s progress towards SDG 3.¹

Other research commissioned by the program during the year has approached the issue by focusing on a specific country rather than thematically. A study into the value of volunteering in Vanuatu asked, in part, what is the contribution of international skilled volunteering in supporting equitable development outcomes?

“This study has 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 build the capacities of individuals and teams as well as directly deliver services and supports; 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.”²

A specific example of how the program has supported health outcomes in Vanuatu is provided in the following case study.

1. Supporting partners in the health sector: documenting contributions to SDG 3, Australian Volunteers Program, June 2024
2. Value of Volunteering, Day Four Projects, January 2024

Health care in Vanuatu

As with many small and developing nations, Vanuatu faces challenges in providing healthcare services to its population. Many assignments in Vanuatu have been with partner organisations focussing on health, including several partners that have received relatively high numbers of volunteers over multiple years.

Assignments have supported the Ministry of Health, related government divisions in Public Health and Mental Health, the largest hospital in Vanuatu in Port Vila, and an NGO-run paramedical service. While a single volunteer assignment will always be a small part in any story of social change, the cluster of assignments with these organisations show the potential cumulative impact of volunteers on a national and sectoral scale.

The Ministry of Health in Vanuatu has achieved significant health outcomes through the contributions of volunteers. Volunteers have provided training and education to healthcare professionals, conducted education sessions on various topics, delivered courses on advanced life support and primary trauma care, mentored nurses and doctors, and facilitated the progress of young doctors through online certificate programs.

Volunteers have contributed to improving patient care and services by introducing new structural changes in the Emergency Department, enhancing patient flow and efficiency, redesigning ICU admission and observation

forms, mentoring ICU staff, and participating in mentoring COVID-19 Isolation Ward nurses.

They have also co-written palliative care guidelines and provided care for neglected cancer patients. The leadership skills of volunteers also played a crucial role in managing the impact of COVID-19 at Vila Central Hospital. They helped prepare the hospital for community transmission, implemented protocols for COVID-19, and set high standards for training, assignments and work.

In addition to their assigned duties, volunteers have supported community engagement and provided care beyond expectations.

They conducted health talks, introduced exercise sessions for non-communicable diseases patients, organised social events, provided dietary advice, purchased ingredients for healthy sandwiches, and bought footwear for patients in need. Their advocacy for inclusivity and care for marginalised groups has further contributed to positive health outcomes.

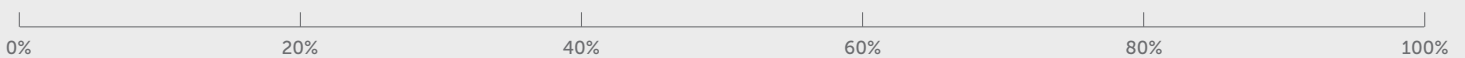
The Ministry of Health is the primary health care provider in Vanuatu, but mental health services are limited outside the main island of Efate. Volunteers, such as a Mental Health Specialist, have made lasting impacts on mental health services in Vanuatu by building up and mentoring the mental health workforce, raising awareness, and advocating with the government and NGOs.

Proportion of respondents reporting positive impact from the program

To what extent has the partnership with the Australian Volunteers Program delivered on your organisation's expectations and requirements?



To what extent has the Australian Volunteers Program supported your organisation to strengthen organisation's capacity to progress its development objectives / organisational mission?



■ Don't know ■ Not at all ■ Very little ■ Somewhat ■ To a great extent

An anonymous survey of over 200 partner organisations carried out during the year asked partners if they think their partnership with the Australian Volunteers Program is helping them have an impact in the work they do. Three-quarters of organisations responding reported that the program has, to a great extent, met their expectations and has strengthened their organisational capacity to deliver their development objectives. Just under a quarter said the program had 'somewhat' contributed. Less than 5% reported little or no capacity strengthening benefit from the program.

In their comments, most answers were very positive, with many starting their response with a clear affirmative:

"Yes! The partnership with Australian Volunteers Program assists our organisation to enhance academic capacity, gender equity promotion, national and regional linkages."

Themes that emerge from respondents' comments include the positive impact on organisational capacity strengthening, knowledge transfer, program development, securing funding and equipment, establishing networks and connections and organisational profile enhancement. While nearly all responses were positive, some added caveats. Some noted challenges with specific assignments, while others nuanced their response by saying benefits were due to having the right volunteer for the role, not just any volunteer.

Intermediate outcome: Partner organisations have strengthened their capacity and gained from the program

During the year, the program supported 299 partner organisations, an increase on the 249 organisations supported the previous year. Twenty-eight per cent of organisations were supported with more than one assignment.

A total of 446 assignments were supported during the year. This included 281 new assignments and 165 ongoing assignments from the previous year. 291 assignments were completed during the year.

From 231 assignment evaluations completed by partner organisations, 88% of partner organisations reported that good or excellent progress had been made in achieving the objectives of the assignment. This is an increase from 80% the previous year. For in-country and hybrid assignments, this proportion was even higher, with 95% of partners reporting good or excellent progress compared to 76% for remote assignments.

In addition to their own unique objectives, all assignments have one common objective to promote strategies that support gender equality, disability and social inclusion throughout the work of the assignment. This reflects the program's efforts to mainstream inclusion in all assignments. Reporting from partner organisations on just this common objective was slightly lower than for assignment specific objectives, but still high at 85% compared to 89% for specific objectives.

Volunteers can be powerful advocates of social inclusion. Feedback from partner organisations highlights how this happens at a technical level specific to the focus of the assignment, as well as at a more personal level, as the two quotes below illustrate.

“The volunteer has supported in fostering the engagement of EWB’s local volunteers, with an emphasis on female engineers, in leading and supporting the implementation of EWB’s WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) projects. This also included facilitating communication and coordination with one of our local partners to re-establish the local management group, which is now spearheaded and predominantly composed of women. This restructured leadership is instrumental in overseeing the operation and maintenance of the WASH systems in our targeted community, also to promote and encourage the active participation of women in various community aid initiatives.”

~ Engineers Without Borders (EWB), Timor-Leste

“In the News Room, [the volunteer] advocated a lot for women (about 50% of the team are women). The volunteer focused on ensuring there is balance of power in the News Room. Whenever they had their staff meetings, she always stood up for the vulnerable groups, and asked questions on how to empower them in whatever decision was taken.”

~ Broadcasting and Television Corporation, Vanuatu

Feedback from partner organisations reflects the huge diversity of assignment objectives, but some common themes are clear. Most frequent feedback is in relation to how assignment objectives have been achieved through collaboration between volunteers and partner organisations. A large number highlight how individual members of staff have increased their capacity through the assignment, and how the volunteer was able to promote inclusion through their work and partner organisation activities.

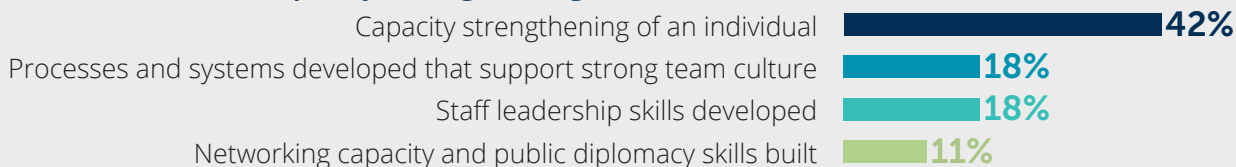
Where challenges were reported by partner organisations, and outcomes were not as hoped, the most common reason given was that the assignment duration was too short, in some cases compounded by delays due to external factors. The challenges of working remotely were also highlighted by some organisations.

The nature of capacity strengthening is not straightforward, depending on a range of factors specific to the organisation and the context in which it operates. One way of analysing capacity is by looking at it at different levels: capacity at the level of individuals; the organisational level; and the systemic level. Volunteers are asked to report which level they feel they helped strengthen capacity through their assignment. Most reported strengthening capacity at more than one level. Ninety-three per cent reported strengthen capacity at the individual level, 87% at the organisational level, and 65% at the systemic level.

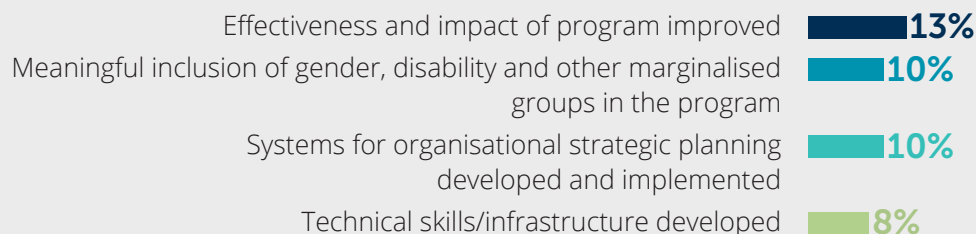
More detailed outcomes reported by volunteers at these different levels is provided in the following graph, while the quotes, from partner organisations, illustrate what these outcomes can mean in practice, as well as the overlap between them.

Volunteers reported on specific outcomes that they feel their assignment achieved across the three broad areas:

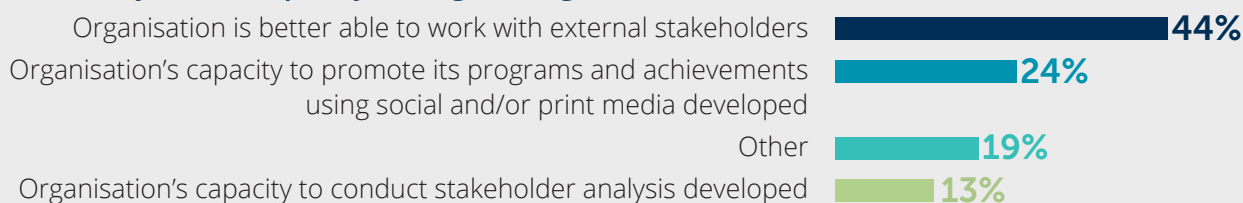
Individual capacity strengthening outcomes (93%)



Organisational capacity strengthening outcomes (87%)



Systemic capacity strengthening outcomes (65%)



Strengthening skills of individuals

"[The volunteer] gave me more understanding of how to make more engaging posts, such as the importance of choosing font, colour, and pictures. The clarity and the branding must be the priority. After following her suggestion, the number of likes improved compared to the old post."

~ Mudfish No Plastic, Indonesia

The volunteer gave us the confidence in making assessments, and managing injuries (short, moderate and severe). He gave us the confidence to help the athletes trust the physio so that the athletes can go back to training."

~ Solomon Islands National Institute of Sports

Strengthening the organisation

"The volunteer assisted with laparoscopy equipment set up, including setting up trays and other equipment for the surgery team to use. The volunteer's experience and expertise to use the surgery equipment has benefited the staff a lot on how to use the equipment"

~ Ministry of Health and Medical Services, Solomon Islands

"The volunteer identified that the organisation was only reaching out with response recovery services after any disaster, but not necessarily involved in preparedness. So through his observations, he coached the staff to broaden their focus. Staff are better equipped now in assisting communities in advance preparation plans for any disasters, as well as doing post disaster recovery plans."

~ Anglican Church of Melanesia, Vanuatu

Strengthening systems and networks

"[The volunteer] and EWBA-Cambodian Environmental Engineers have collaborated and strengthened gender and climate change networks with key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Women's Affairs."

~ Engineers Without Borders, Cambodia

"[The volunteer] actively engaged with the schools in order to share information and to encourage greater participation. Networks with teachers and principals have been strengthened as a result of this effort. We anticipate that there will be schools that participate in the 2024 iteration of the Youth Arts Program that would otherwise have not done so."

~ Moresby Arts Theatre, Papua New Guinea

Sixty-nine per cent of volunteers report that they think it is likely or very likely that their partner organisation will be able to sustain the initiatives they have been involved in, with 17% neutral and 14% thinking it unlikely.

The same proportion of partners (88%) that reported good progress against assignment objectives also report being satisfied or very satisfied with the assignment. This is the same satisfaction level as the previous year. A higher proportion of partners are satisfied with their volunteer (91%) and with the program's management (93%). Assignment satisfaction was lower for remote assignments (85%) than for in-country or hybrid (89% and 96% respectively, noting a small sample size for hybrid assignments).

Qualitative feedback provided by partner organisations reflected this overall sentiment, expressing satisfaction with the successes of the assignment, capacity strengthening outcomes, and positive relationships with the volunteer and the program. In the small number of cases where partners were dissatisfied, the most frequent feedback related to assignments not progressing as planned or being too short, followed by frustrations with remote assignments and poor communication with the volunteer or with the program.

Ninety-eight per cent of partner organisations would like to host another volunteer in the future, with 2% unsure. Ninety-eight per cent would also recommend the Australian Volunteers Program to other organisations with, again, 2% unsure.

The Impact Fund small grants program continued to support partners to identify community needs, deliver services in response to those needs, and reinforce links between the program, partners, professional networks, and communities.

The eighth round of the Impact Fund was focused on projects to strengthen the local volunteering capability of partner organisations. In collaboration with the Innovation team, the grants supplemented a broader workstream centred around the value of local volunteering in the countries which the program operates. The panel selected five high-quality project proposals for funding, for a total grant value of AUD\$24,849. The grants began implementation in January 2024.

A second round for the financial year was launched in June 2024. Round nine focuses on gender equality projects or activities which demonstrate collaboration between volunteers and partner organisations working towards gender equality, with five grants of up to AUD\$10,000 to be awarded in 2024-25.

Impact Fund grant supporting environmental civil society organisations

An Impact Grant supported an Australian volunteer working with Caritas in Mongolia to develop volunteer management training for environmental civil society organisations (CSOs). The three-day training series for 23 environmental CSOs on developing their own volunteer management plans included sessions on opportunity mapping with the aim of enhancing their organisational capacity through volunteering. Through the training, 50 environmental youth volunteers reported acquiring new skills to enhance their organisation's likelihood of hosting volunteers. The training series also strengthened and established new connections between environmental CSOs in Mongolia. This led to the successful organisation of a large-scale Earth Day event involving 327 volunteers where 200 bags of waste were collected. The resources, toolkits and staff training packages can be used to deliver similar events in the future.

Partner organisation satisfaction (n228)

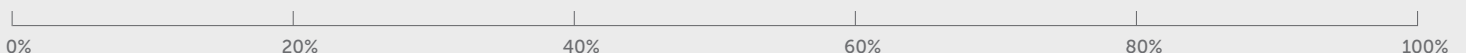
Overall satisfaction with assignment



Satisfaction with volunteer



Satisfaction with program's in-country management



■ 1 - very dissatisfied ■ 2 - dissatisfied ■ 3 - neither satisfied nor dissatisfied ■ 4 - satisfied ■ 5 - very satisfied

Intermediate outcome: Partner organisations have a strategic rationale for participation in the program, provide safe and productive working environments, and contribute to quality assignments

The positive feedback from partner organisations speaks to the benefits they see in collaborating with the Australian Volunteers Program and the rationale they have for doing so. This aligns with the perspective of volunteers, 90% of whom report that their assignment fit the priorities of their partner organisation.

Over three-quarters of volunteers (77%) believed that their partner organisation contributed to an effective assignment. A lower proportion (67%) felt that their partner provided adequate supervision, while 66% of volunteers felt their partner had the resources to benefit from a volunteer assignment. This points to a common challenge reflected in volunteers' feedback, where the resource constraints faced by many organisations impact the assignment. More broadly, it points to the tension the program faces between supporting organisations that have greater capacity to manage a volunteer, and those that have less ability to do so but have a greater need for the support.

From volunteers' perspectives, partner organisation counterparts not being available or being too busy, and operational issues within the organisation such as internal politics or poor systems, were key limiting factors as to the effectiveness of the assignment.

Sixty-four per cent of volunteers reported that the assignment length and partner organisation expectations were a good fit. This lower score also reflects a challenge noted in feedback from many partner organisations that the assignment duration was too short. In part, this may be due to budget constraints faced by the program, where with limited budget the length of individual assignments has had to be balanced against the overall number of assignments supported. Delays caused by external factors and sometimes over-ambitious assignment objectives also contributed to a desire for longer assignments.

Partner organisations provided a safe working environment for volunteers in 83% of in-country and hybrid volunteer assignments. Overall, 88% of volunteers reported that the program provided good or very good in-country safety and security management, but this was lower for women (86%) than men (92%). A similar trend is apparent in feedback on in-country health management, further details of which are dealt with under volunteer satisfaction in section 7.3.

Intermediate outcome: Relevant and diverse partnerships with partner organisations are established, maintained and supported by DFAT, the program and Australian organisations

The diversity of the partner organisations supported is one of the remarkable elements of the Australian Volunteers Program and of international skilled volunteering as a development modality. This is seen in the type of organisations supported and their thematic focus, as well as in the diversity of countries in which they operate.

During the year, the program supported 299 partner organisations. Of the 214 partner organisations that had an assignment start in the reporting period, 132 (62%) had not had an assignment the previous year and so were new to the program in its second term. Program staff invest heavily in scoping and establishing partnerships, building relationships with staff, ensuring due diligence requirements are met and supporting organisations to develop assignments and recruit and manage volunteers.

Local and national NGOs are the types of organisation most frequently supported with assignments, making up 41% of partners supported during the year. Government entities make up 21%, while academic, research or educational institutes comprise 15%. Organisations are coded to the SDGs that they are most closely aligned to. Education is the SDG most organisations align with (Goal 4, with 31% of partners supported aligned), followed by health and well-being (Goal 3, 23%), gender equality (Goal 5, 18%) and reduced inequality (Goal 10, 17%).

While supporting partners working across all 17 of the SDGs, the program's global strategy identifies three '**impact areas**' that act as thematic lenses. Half of the organisations supported during the year align with the human rights impact area. Thirty-eight per cent align with inclusive economic growth while 22% align with climate change, disaster resilience and food security.

In addition, the program has three **focus areas** where we aim to provide more targeted support and see an increase in the proportion of organisations supported over the course of the strategy, to 2027. In 2023-24, 14% of partners had a significant or principle focus on gender equality (up from 11% the previous year, and a more targeted definition than alignment to SDG 5 given above), 8% on disability inclusion (down from 10%), and 10% on climate action (the same as last year).

Of new assignments starting during the year, 16% were either with a gender focused partner or mainstreaming gender in a non-gender focused organisation. This was 9% for disability and 12% for climate action.

A recent, anonymous survey of partner organisations (read more in Focus Areas 1 and 2) asked program partners for their views on the health of the partnership and support from the program. Overall, a high proportion of respondents provided positive feedback on their partnership with the program: the relevance of the program to their organisation, their understanding of the program, and processes and communication around managing assignments.

Organisations were asked if there is 'anything the Australian Volunteers Program and your organisation can do in the coming years to strengthen the partnership between us?' Not all respondents had comments, while a number reaffirmed the positive regard they had for the program. Other suggestions included the need for additional volunteers and/or longer assignments, improved communication and feedback, greater strategic engagement and the need for longer-term planning, preference for in-country volunteers, and a desire for more support with networking and resource mobilisation.

Australian organisations

Australian organisations (AOs) play an important role on the program, from sharing information and helping to find and recruit skilled individuals from within their networks, to long-term partnerships with overseas partner organisations. The program currently has more than 100 AOs in its portfolio, with approximately 40% actively engaged. These partners contribute by promoting hard-to-fill roles, creating a pipeline of referred candidates, mentoring volunteers, sharing research and knowledge with partner organisations, and assisting with technical details on assignments.

A survey of AOs provided valuable feedback for the program. Respondents consistently expressed an interest in capacity strengthening and knowledge sharing. Engagement with the program was predominantly through promoting assignments, referring candidates and assisting with drafting assignment descriptions. A majority (85%) reported a high level of satisfaction with the current level of engagement with the program. There is also a strong interest among partners in providing technical advice and participating in networking events. Ninety-six per cent of partners reported that partnering with the program benefited their organisation.

Forty-seven assignments (11% of all assignments) benefitted from a contribution from AOs, including referred candidates, reviewing assignment descriptions or sharing information about volunteer assignments with their networks.

Engineers Without Borders Australia (EWB) remains a steadfast partner, supporting in-country and remote volunteers in Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Samoa and Vanuatu. Over the past year, EWB supported nine assignments with referred volunteers, underscoring its commitment to these countries.

The Australia Centre for Emergency Medicine (ACEM) continued its long-term support by identifying suitable candidates for assignments. This collaboration resulted in eight assignments, in Vanuatu, Fiji, and Solomon Islands, involving emergency and critical care nurses, and visiting emergency registrars.

Other examples of AO engagement through locally driven partnerships include working in partnership with Fiji National University (FNU) and the Global Intensive Care Initiative (GICI), and fostering linkages between local government planners in Australia and their counterparts in Timor-Leste and Sri Lanka.

Australian Academic Volunteers Abroad (AAVA), a relatively new AO, has supported university partners by providing technical support for assignment design and sourcing volunteers through their network of Australian academics. In 2023-24, AAVA developed a partnership with University of South Pacific and referred a volunteer Research Training Adviser, and with Solomon Islands National University referring a volunteer Academic Programs Review Mentor.

During the reporting period, the program intensified its collaboration with regional organisations (ROs) in the Pacific. ROs play a crucial role in assisting their members to formulate regional strategies to address challenges in the Pacific such as climate change, health and education. The program had strong engagement with several key ROs such as the International Labor Organisation Pacific office for gender roles, the Pacific Community (SPC) with the public health and human rights division, the University of South Pacific, SPREP, Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agencies, and the Pacific Disability Forum. Assignments with these ROs are expected to commence in the next financial year.

Indigenous Pathways

Over the course of the year the program was active developing and supporting partnerships focussed on First Nations engagement, including an Indigenous Rangers' assignment in the Solomon Islands (see below). The Indigenous Pathways' approach to establishing partnerships is to progress slowly, building relationships of trust before overseas and Australian partners develop volunteer assignments together.

Engagement with DFAT's First Nations Taskforce and the newly established Association of First Nations Australians in Development supported learning and new ways of working aligned to the International Development Policy commitment to embed the perspectives of First Nations Australians into development efforts. The program's Indigenous Pathways Advisory Panel continued to meet quarterly to guide the program.

There is strong demand in the Pacific for First Nations direct engagement, with several volunteer assignments in the pipeline. The partnership with Soqosoqo Vakamarama i Taukei Cakaudrove (SVTC) in Fiji continued strongly, with a second assignment for a Kaurareg Traditional Owner from Waiben (Thursday Island).

A partnership engagement visit to Fiji and the Solomon Islands facilitated discussions with various organisations about future volunteer opportunities. Additionally, engagement with the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) led to a community forum focused on cultural connections and partnership development. The TSRA expressed strong interest in collaborating with Indigenous Pathways, particularly in co-designing volunteer assignments for coastal land and sea management.

WWF Australia (WWF-A) continues partner with the program, particularly through the Indigenous Pathways initiative. WWF-A facilitated a group assignment for four female conservation ranger volunteers placed with WWF-Solomon Islands. WWF-A supported developing the assignment, recruitment, and volunteer assistance, as well as in organising a Women's Summit held at the end of the assignment.

Knowledge exchange

The Flexible Learning Exchange (FLEX) continued to provide shared learning and professional development opportunities for partner organisations, and volunteers, through a range of formats. These included events, communities of practice and knowledge sharing spaces to connect and learn.

The Global Webinar Series continued to bring together program participants, partners and staff to share and learn on a variety of themes. Over the year, the program hosted 18 webinars, attended by 824 participants. Topics included prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, remote and hybrid volunteering, partner networking, innovation in volunteering, due diligence, technology, environmental conservation and a spotlight on volunteering for development in the Philippines. We also held one public global webinar recognising International Women's Day, with a focus on gender.

Professional development for both partner organisations and program participants has been supported through communities of practice circles. Members connect online around a thematic area to discuss, network, share knowledge and resources, and explore best practice. The Education and Learning circle and the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning circle continued, and new circles included GEDSI, Grant Writing and Fundraising and a Philippines Volunteering for Development network. Planning for a safeguarding circle is in progress.

In Tanzania, a GEDSI Workshop was held for partner organisations, focusing on topics such as gender strategy, gender-responsive budgeting, and gender-based violence (GBV). Facilitated by local experts, the workshop emphasised the importance of local knowledge and peer-learning, motivating partners to become gender equality advocates in their communities. Similarly, in Southern Africa, a partner networking event resulted in the formation of a GBV community of practice, enhancing collaboration on GBV response and prevention.

The program also supported the Marshall Islands Council of NGOs to host a gender finance workshop, addressing gender differences in financial literacy and exploring policy responses. This initiative built on previous finance-focused assignments, strengthening the capacity of local organisations. In Papua New Guinea, a gender workshop led by local experts enabled non-gender focused organisations to learn about integrating gender concepts into their mainstream programming.

Establishing mechanisms through FLEX that support program wide knowledge exchange and collaboration has been a focus over the year. Examples of activities supported include the North Pacific NGO Governance training series, a five-week online training series in partnership with Marshall Islands Council of NGOs and facilitated by an Australian volunteer. The collaborative design and delivery process resulted in the training series being packaged as an online learning course after the event, available to all program partner organisations.

Focus Area 1: Support locally led change

The Australian Volunteers Program's overarching goal is to support locally led change and the realisation of the SDGs. Supporting locally led change is a guiding principle for the program: *"The program supports our partners to progress their own locally determined objectives. We start from a position of respecting their deep contextual and cultural knowledge and expertise. We work together to jointly identify how best the program can support them to further strengthen their organisation. We recognise that capacity strengthening is a long-term, complex process that must be locally owned."*³

Long-term partnerships between organisations overseas and in Australia support positive social change that is locally led. As noted by DFAT, *"Locally led development approaches will help deliver Australia's commitment to genuine partnerships, working with and listening to our partners in the region, and will create opportunities to deliver better development outcomes."*⁴

By building trusted relationships, skilled Australian volunteers support partner organisations to achieve their own goals. While the program aligns with the Australian Government's development priorities in each country, volunteer assignments are determined and developed by partner organisations. Together with program staff, they identify how one or many Australian volunteers can support them to achieve their goals. The program's in-country teams consist of local staff who hold long-term relationships with partners and develop a deep understanding of their development needs.

Indigenous Pathways provides in-house learning and innovative practice around supporting equitable partnerships and First Nations direct engagement. Indigenous Pathways invests in building relationships between First Nations individuals and organisations in Australia with partners in the Pacific where there are shared objectives and requests for knowledge exchange.

The Pathways approaches emphasise the importance of strong personal relationships, and respect for cultural context and local knowledge. It centres values alignment between volunteers and partner organisations, where volunteers respect and support local communities and leadership and work through genuine partnership.

The program aims to live up to its commitment to supporting local change in all that it does. We know that context matters. In organisational capacity strengthening, and in research, there can often be a bias towards certain forms of knowledge over others. Unequal power relationships can distort partnerships. Imposed funding frameworks and norms can sometimes determine the capacities required to deliver programs at the expense of organisations' own self-determination.

We understand that organisational capacity strengthening must support local leadership and ownership; empower local people and organisations; and be accountable to partners.

A participatory action research project launched by the program during the year aims to unpack these dynamics and explore, in detail over multiple years, partner organisations' experiences of capacity strengthening initiatives and how the Australian Volunteers Program contributes to partners' development outcomes. Through this research, along with collecting data related to the program's end of program outcomes, we want to support our partners' own learning agenda in ways which are useful for their strategic priorities around organisational effectiveness.

3. Australian Volunteers Program Global Strategy (2024)

4. DFAT Guidance Note: Locally Led Development (2024)



Solomon Islands Indigenous Australian volunteer Azarnia Malay (right) weaving with a community member in Sagheraghi, Solomon Islands, as part of the Indigenous Conservation Knowledge Exchange 2023.

The program is committed to learning and continuous improvement and recognises that a key part of that is listening to the insights and feedback from our partner organisations. Previous research carried out in 2022 on ‘Partnerships, power and supporting locally-led change’ helped the program understand how its partners perceive its partnership approach, to better understand the power dynamics involved, and to consider how the program can best ensure equitable partnerships that support locally-led change. One of the recommendations was to provide a stronger avenue for partners to provide anonymous feedback. Following this, an anonymous survey of partner organisations was carried out in 2023.

Overall, a high proportion of respondents provided positive feedback on their partnership with the program: the relevance of the program to their organisation, their understanding of the program, and processes and communication around managing assignments suggesting satisfaction with a strong and healthy relationship with the program.

Ninety-one per cent agreed or strongly agreed that the program responds to the needs of their organisation, its objectives and goals. Ninety-four per cent said their organisation decides the types of assignments and the volunteers they need. While the feedback was mostly positive, it is important to note that a small number of respondents did not agree with some statements.

A commitment to supporting locally led change requires self-reflection around ways of working. In recent years, AVI, as managing contractor for the Australian Volunteers Program, has been reflecting on its position in the global aid system and involving program staff in discussions on locally led change and how to better balance power.

Feedback from both program staff and from our partner organisations highlighted the crucial role the Australian Volunteers Program has in supporting volunteers to appreciate and respect the importance of local knowledge and local leadership.

“While international skilled volunteering offers numerous benefits, it’s essential to approach it with cultural sensitivity, humility, and a focus on the needs and priorities of the local community. Effective partnerships and collaboration between volunteers and host organisations are key to maximising the positive outcomes of internationally skilled volunteers.”

~ Anonymous partner organisation representative

Crucial to the program’s approach is recruiting the right people with the right skills and approach, helping volunteers understand the cultural context, providing opportunities to learn local languages, and supporting volunteers to reflect on power relations and their own positionality. We also know that volunteers highly value deepening their knowledge, cultural connection and meaningful engagement with partners, in ways that can have profound effects on their lives.

The journey towards balancing power may be a long one, but the program is committed to improving ways of working and better contributing to change that is locally owned and led.

Case Study

Touch Roots Africa strengthens fundraising and communications



Australian volunteer Fundraising and Resourcing Mentor Skaidy Mandryk with her colleagues at Touch Roots Africa, Lesotho, from left to right: Thakane Mokhethi, Programs Manager, Skaidy Mandryk, Australian volunteer, Motloheloa Molupe, Executive Director, Malimema Lenko, Finance and Administration Officer.

Touch Roots Africa (TRA) assists children and young people in Lesotho by delivering psychosocial support, upholding child rights and protection, and advocating for disability inclusion. Historically, the organisation has relied on donor funding to operate, but Australian volunteers have strengthened the capacity of staff to move to a more flexible funding position.

During the last five years, nine Australian volunteers have helped to build TRA's fundraising visibility and refresh the organisation's brand presence. The most recent Australian volunteer, Skaidy Mandryk, strengthened TRA's capacity to deliver fundraising events, write grant proposals, mobilise resources and engage in social media.

As a Fundraising and Resource Mobilisation Mentor, Skaidy strengthened staff skills and delivered a fresh perspective on fundraising through one-on-one mentoring and group training. She assisted in building TRA's first database of partners and supporters, which has aided communication and fundraising efforts.

Skaidy's networking initiatives, including interactions with the American Corner in Maseru, have elevated the organisation's profile and strengthened staff capacity. She inspired staff excellence, particularly within the internship program.

Following Skaidy's mentorship, TRA's social media platforms now regularly highlight project activities and donors, which fosters engagement and awareness with followers.

Skaidy also supported TRA's 20th anniversary celebrations, by assisting with the development of new logos and refining TRA materials. She brought valuable assistance to TRA's fundraising efforts, introducing new ideas and strategies such as incorporating a live auction into the 20th anniversary event.

One of the most significant impacts of Skaidy's support was the enhancement of staff skills and confidence in relationship building with stakeholders. The team is now better equipped to develop effective and diversified fundraising strategies, write compelling grant proposals, and manage and grow donor relationships.

7.2 Promoting the value of volunteering

Valuing volunteering is a key, enduring principle of the program and the focus of one of the program's three end of program outcomes. The program's public diplomacy and communications activities aim to increase key stakeholders' understanding and appreciation of the contribution that global volunteering makes to locally led change.

These stakeholders include partners overseas and in Australia; current, potential and past volunteers; DFAT (Australia and overseas); participants of other DFAT people-to-people programs; Australian parliamentarians; the development sector; and other international volunteering agencies.

Progress towards this end of program outcome is measured through a range of indicators, as outlined in the MEL Framework, and qualitative research. See Focus Area 2 for findings from valuing volunteering research undertaken in Vanuatu in this reporting period.

End of program outcome: Key stakeholders in Australia and partner countries appreciate the value of volunteering

The program delivers a range of activities to increase the appreciation of the value of volunteering among key stakeholders in Australia and partner countries.

During this period, the program delivered successful International Volunteer Day and International Women's Day campaigns. The contribution of global volunteering was also promoted through content shared across digital channels, conference participation, events and targeted newsletters. Volunteers and partners were supported to share their stories through rich storytelling and videos. Communications also demonstrated our commitment to diversity and inclusion. See section 7.3 for information on how our Alumni program supported past volunteers to remain connected and promote global volunteering.

Many of these activities also contributed to the program's recruitment marketing objectives to increase diversity of volunteers and promote in-country, hybrid and remote volunteering to existing and new audiences.

Intermediate outcome: The benefit of volunteering is recognised and promoted by partner organisations, Australian organisations, volunteers and DFAT

The program worked with partners, volunteers and DFAT to share stories that demonstrate the value of volunteering, including forming strong mutually respectful relationships, exchanging knowledge and supporting partners to achieve their development goals.

International Volunteer Day

International Volunteer Day (IVD) falls on 5 December annually, providing an opportunity for the program to celebrate the contribution of international volunteering and engage stakeholders in Australia and overseas in the value of volunteering. The program delivered another successful IVD campaign in 2023.

The program's theme for IVD 2023 was 'Celebrating our Stories'. The program recognises the power of storytelling – it is through stories that we find meaning and make sense of the world. Stories help us transcend geographical boundaries and find connection with each other. The stories of our partners and volunteers inspire, motivate and engage our stakeholders in the value of volunteering.

This theme was explored in the program's [IVD video](#), which invited our audience to experience a day in the life of Australian volunteers. In response to the changing social media landscape and with budget constraints in mind, our video featured user-generated content and was filmed from the lens of volunteers to celebrate their unique and diverse stories. Individual videos about five of the volunteers featured in the IVD video were also shared on the program's social media channels as part of our week-long social media campaign.

The program's IVD video was viewed more than 39,000 times. This was a 275% increase on views of the 2022 IVD video. The program provided IVD social media content to Posts, with 18 Posts sharing content relating to IVD.



Australia Australian volunteers Ben Clare (left) and Bukhosi Masango (right) sharing their volunteer stories at an IVD event in Melbourne.

The Hon. Pat Conroy, Minister for International Development and the Pacific, shared a post on X (formerly Twitter) about the volunteers he met in Solomon Islands and DFAT's Humanitarian Coordinator reshared the Minister's post.

The program hosted an in-person IVD event in Melbourne on 5 December, at AVI's office. More than 70 guests attended the event, including alumni, current remote volunteers, Australian partner organisations, other stakeholders and staff. The event showcased the theme 'Celebrating our stories', with a mix of program videos and alumni speakers.

With International Day of People with Disabilities (IDPWD) falling on December 3, the program invited past volunteer Ben Clare, who is visually impaired, to speak at the event. Ben shared stories from his volunteer experiences which include assignments in four Pacific countries. Remote volunteer Bukhosi Masango also shared his experience of volunteering with partner organisation QuadPara Association of the Western Cape (QAWC) in South Africa. Bukhosi also spoke at the Southern African online IVD event and featured in our IVD video.

In addition to attending the Melbourne event, alumni attended IVD events organised by Alumni Representatives in Canberra, Darwin, Hobart, Brisbane, Sydney and Perth. More than 130 alumni joined IVD celebrations across Australia.

IVD events and activities were also delivered in 19 countries. For some countries, it was the first time they celebrated with volunteers in-country since 2019.

The events were a mix of face-to-face and virtual events, with some events run in collaboration with Posts or other volunteer sending agencies while others engaged specifically with partner organisations and volunteers.

In the Philippines, December is designated National Volunteer Month to promote volunteering across the country and acknowledge the contribution volunteers make to development, with IVD a key activity during the month. The program partnered with the Philippine National Volunteer Service Coordinating Agency, the University of Mindanao, and Davao Colleges and Universities Network to deliver IVD activities.

The program's Innovation team presented on Social Innovation and Volunteering at the Philippines International Volunteerism Symposium and Fair. Over 100 guests attended the event including other international volunteering agencies, local partners, educational institutions, national and regional agencies, local government, and the corporate and voluntary sectors.

The Southern Africa team hosted two IVD events. These included an online event attended by 20 participants across South Africa, Lesotho and eSwatini. Volunteers and their partner colleagues shared their experience and achievements, with volunteers expressing that the experience had been transformative. The in-person event in Lesotho was delivered in collaboration with partner organisation Touch Roots Africa. Guests heard from the Touch Roots Africa staff and their Australian volunteer, and leadership training was provided to 20 youth volunteers.

In Vanuatu, the program partnered with other international volunteering agencies (France Volontaires, VSA, JICA and Peace Corps) to deliver an event in Port Vila which engaged the local community in volunteering through activities such as health checks, ambulance tours and seated ball games. The event was featured on local television.

The Samoan team joined with five international volunteering organisations to deliver a morning of activities to celebrate IVD. Almost 200 guests attended, with a keynote address delivered by His Excellency, Dr. Trevor Matheson, High Commissioner of New Zealand. Partner organisation representatives and the volunteering agencies also presented throughout the morning. Each volunteering organisation hosted a booth to highlight the work of their partners and volunteers.

International Women's Day

Each year, in March, the global community pauses to acknowledge progress towards greater women's rights and gender equality, and to highlight the ongoing challenges and barriers faced by women and girls around the world. In 2024, the program delivered a digital campaign and several events to acknowledge our partners' and volunteers' efforts towards greater gender quality.

The program's digital campaign showcased the theme of #InvestInWomen across all program social media channels through sharing a program video, which tells the story of three women leaders in partner organisations in Cambodia, Indonesia and Fiji. This theme was echoed in content throughout the month of March as we promoted two program webinars for IWD and put a spotlight on our partners working to 'invest in women'. Overall, the campaign achieved an organic result of over 16,000 impressions and nearly 500 engagements through utilising existing content.

The program hosted two global webinars where partner organisations from Vietnam and Indonesia shared their work with approximately 150 attendees, including partners, volunteers, DFAT and staff.

In the first webinar, representatives from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, shared their project to support academic women to strengthen their research and leadership skills. Participants of the leadership training and mentoring project explained how it supported their professional development and ability to navigate a male-dominated sector. The project was supported by an Australian volunteer and a small grant from the Australian Volunteers Program.

The second webinar featured Persatuan Cricket Indonesia (PCI). PCI representatives explained that cricket coaching remains a male-dominated profession in Indonesia despite the national women's cricket team currently ranking 20th in the world. They shared their project, supported by a small grant from the program, to increase the number of female coaches.

In South Africa, the program marked IWD with partner organisation Malamulele Onwards, at the Tambo Memorial Hospital in Johannesburg. Malamulele Onwards, a long-term partner of the program, aims to improve the quality of life of children with cerebral palsy and their families. Over 30 women caregivers, mothers and grandmothers and their children gathered to share experiences and find support. Dr Buthelezi from Tambo Memorial Hospital acknowledged their partnership with Malamulele Onwards and expressed appreciation for their family-centred approach and helping to bring a voice for those affected by cerebral palsy.

DFAT

The program contributed content to support DFAT's public diplomacy and communications efforts, including more than 100 pieces of social media content supplied to DFAT Posts. Social media content was also provided to DFAT Canberra to acknowledge IVD, IWD, IDPwD, International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction, Reconciliation Week and 16 Days of Activism.

To support the release of Australia's new International Development Policy, the program supplied several case studies and a collection of program images. The program's Indigenous Pathways featured in the policy, along with several program images. The program also supplied videos, animation, images and stories on our partners' response to the climate crisis to support the Australian Government's presence at COP28.

Australian Organisations

In addition to the range of support and activities contributed by Australian organisations outlined in section 7.1, Australian organisations also share the value of volunteering with their networks in a range of ways. For example, EWB shared a series of volunteer stories on their website, RAID published a web article about the Vietnam project and other AOs shared updates on social media.

Intermediate outcome: Innovation, learning and program achievements are promoted and shared

The program engaged with audiences through a range of in-person and online activities to share knowledge and program achievements.

Conferences

The program participated in key conferences to share knowledge with the development sector and other international volunteering agencies.

Two successful submissions were made to the 2023 International Volunteer Cooperation Organisations Conference (IVCO), which had the theme: 'A new generation of volunteers as change makers'. The program supported two representatives from our Indonesian partner organisation, Indorelawan, to participate in the conference and join the panel discussion on 'Engaging and retaining a new generation of volunteers'. Indorelawan's Executive Director, Marsya Nurmaranti, explained how the organisation works to understand young volunteers' needs, interests and aspirations in order to engage them.

The program's Regional Director Asia Archipelago joined another panel to address the question of how to create an enabling environment for the new generation of volunteers. Examples of the program's recent work to better understand youth volunteering were shared with delegates. An Australian volunteer also contributed a blog to the IVCO 2023 Blog Series, about efforts in Mongolia to connect active youth with volunteering organisations.

The program's Indigenous Programs Manager joined the 'First Nations' engagement in the new international development policy' panel at the 2023 Australasian Aid Conference in December. The panel shared insights and experience and explained that there are many opportunities for First Nations engagement, perspectives, and ways of working across the development program. The Indigenous Programs Manager provided tangible examples from recent Indigenous Pathways projects.

In October 2023, the program's Innovation Hub Manager co-delivered a session on innovation approaches that can be applied to prepare for a future, even when that future is unknown, at the Australian Council for International Development Conference.

In addition to the international conferences referenced above, the program participated in the Australian Association of Special Education conference and the Midsumma festival, a large LGBTQIA+ pride event, to build awareness of the program among relevant networks.

Media and content

The program continued to identify, develop and share rich impact stories through a range of channels and platforms.

GEDSI themes were prioritised in our content development. Stories spotlighting disability inclusion included an interview with past volunteer Ben Clare, who is visually impaired, and an interview with Nas Campanella, ABC's disability affairs reporter, about the impact international volunteering had on her career. The ongoing collaboration between the Mongolian Association of Sign Language Interpreters (MASLI) and two Australian volunteers, one of whom is deaf, was shared through a video created by MASLI and an article produced by the program.

Indigenous Pathways activities were shared across the program's digital platforms, on DFAT channels and in Indigenous media (National Indigenous Times and Torres News). The program's commitment to LGBTQIA+ inclusion was highlighted through content created for International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia, and celebrating our participation at Midsumma.

Volunteer and partner stories shared across the program's social media channels consistently achieved high engagement levels and increased the program's audience. In addition to the GEDSI content mentioned above, successful social media content included: celebrating achievements with partners Researchers in Agriculture for Development (RAID) and Vietnam National University of Vietnam; highlighting volunteers ready to depart for their assignments or arriving in-country; an IVD wrap up; and acknowledging the vital work our partners in Southern African are doing to end gender-based violence.

Our social media audiences grew by an average of 37% across Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. We reached the milestone of 20,000 followers on Facebook in this reporting period. Of note, X (formerly Twitter) restricted access to analytics to paid accounts during the reporting period so no meaningful reporting is available for this platform.

During the reporting period, there were 40 media articles relating to the program, with about 60% of the media hits in the countries the program operates in. Media outlets included: National Indigenous Times, Torres News, ABC Pacific, Fiji Sun, Solomon Star, The Philippine Biz News and Daily Post (Vanuatu). In Australia, the program's development and implementation of hybrid volunteering was recognised in the Australian Financial Review Most Innovative Companies awards, with AVI coming fifth in the Government, Education and NFP category.

Australian Volunteers Program website

The program's website is our key digital communication and recruitment tool. In this reporting period, a new technical platform was implemented to ensure the website is robust and stable and can continue to evolve to meet program priorities over the remainder of the program. All website content was reviewed and refreshed, and the Innovation Hub microsite was incorporated into the program website as part of the migration to the new platform.

Intermediate outcome: Innovative approaches to, and alternative models of volunteering are designed and tested to expand the program's reach and adaptive capability.

In recent years, the program's Innovation Hub explored alternative models of volunteering and ways of increasing localisation, with dedicated initiatives looking into ways the program could support national and community volunteering. In response to changes in the program's context, resources and priorities through the year, the Hub focused on finalising the locally led initiatives and embarking on new activities to improve current ways of working. This shift in focus led to the closure of the Innovation Hub at the end of the reporting period and the transition of innovation activity to a new program effectiveness team.

The program is committed to evaluating our activities and sharing our stories of innovation within the program and with our external audiences. We partnered with an external communications agency to develop engaging content to creatively tell the story of Volunteering for Development.

Global Volunteer Accelerator

The Global Volunteering Accelerator explored how we can partner with national governments and peak bodies to strengthen volunteerism.

We co-designed research projects with national partners in Mongolia, Timor-Leste and Indonesia which catalysed important conversations on national volunteering in these contexts. In Timor-Leste, program-funded research strengthened progress towards establishing a national agency and volunteering scheme. In Mongolia, key volunteering stakeholders came together in a series of workshops to share research outcomes, develop an agreed definition of volunteering, and discuss global volunteering standards. We also undertook program-wide research into the state of volunteering to understand where support may be most valued and valuable.

The program partnered with Philippines National Volunteer Service Coordinating Agency (PNVSCA) to co-design and co-deliver an innovation action plan to facilitate knowledge exchange and innovation capability development. Program staff delivered presentations at key PNVSCA events and delivered an eight-week online innovation course to over 20 participants, including staff from PNVSCA, higher education institutions and local government units.

Growing Community Volunteering

The Growing Community Volunteering workstream explored how to support partner organisations' use of local volunteers, particularly in civil society and non-government sectors. A volunteer management resource kit was co-designed with 20 partners across Mongolia, Cambodia, Fiji, Nepal, Tanzania and Sri Lanka. A series of workshops was delivered with 20 participants from 15 partner organisations to help them implement the resource kit. Through this initiative, five Impact Fund grants of AUD\$5000 each were made to partners to develop systems, processes and tools for improved community volunteer management, and to provide specialist training to upskill community volunteers. The final resource kit will be launched to our global partner network in 2024-25.

Vol4Dev

The Volunteering for Development workstream was in a reflection and reporting phase. A series of interviews and workshops drew out and synthesised learning from the portfolio of Vol4Dev projects. Findings cover three key areas: new models of volunteering; possible new roles for the program in supporting volunteering beyond direct volunteer management; and new ways of working that support localisation.



Solomon Islands The Solomon Islands National Institute of Sport provides high performance sports programs, services and training facilities for athletes and coaches. Australian Volunteer Jack Doyle (right) supported the Solomon Islands National Institute of Sport (SINIS) through his volunteer Strength and Conditioning Coach role. In this photo he is with Strength and Conditioning Coaches Mary Teasanau (left) and Joachim Rande (centre).

A draft report and infographic were developed to communicate the high-level learnings. The report outlines possible future directions and highlights questions to be further explored if the program decides to take up new approaches. The report will be finalised early in 2024-25 and will be shared with key audiences interested in volunteering, social innovation and international development.

Optimising Remote Volunteering

A Remote Volunteering Product Desirability Discovery project investigated opportunities to enhance remote volunteering by making it more attractive to partners and volunteers. A cross-program project team identified insights and opportunities for improving the remote volunteering product. Some opportunities are transferable (either fully or in part) to other volunteering modalities. In particular, further effort is required to enhance the quality of assignment descriptions, ensuring they cover expected time commitments and support to be provided, contain clear and sufficient information, and use language to target an Australian market.

Images opposite

Top left: Timor-Leste Australian volunteer Martin Moignard (left), HR and Administration Coordinator, Carmelita de Carvalho (centre), and Director of Klibur Domin, Joaquim Soares (right). Martin supported Klibur Domin in his role as Program Management and Operational Mentor.

Top right: Papua New Guinea Shianne Kusunan is an Intern Sustainable Development Officer at partner organisation Solar Solutions PNG LTD in Port Moresby.

Middle left: Cambodia Engineering Technology Officer Keo Chanrika (left), and Australian volunteer Meg Cummins working with a prototype of toilet developed by EWB.

Middle right: Indonesia Australian volunteer Philip Thomas (left) and Executive Director of Yayasan Usaha Mulia, Vanessa Reksodipoetro (right). Philip supported Yayasan Usaha Mulia through his role as Economic Development and Fundraising Specialist.

Bottom: Fiji Indigenous Australian volunteer Rosaline Tomsana, known as Aunty Rose (left) and Maca Shaw (right) during the handicraft workshop run by Soqosoqo Vakamarama iTaukei Cakaudrove as part of their Women's Economic Empowerment Program.



Focus Area 2: Value Volunteering

Valuing volunteering is a key, enduring principle of the program. The program recognises that volunteering offers a valuable approach to international development cooperation and plays an important role in action towards the SDGs.

The value volunteering brings to our partner organisations, and to Australian volunteers, are core components of the program's approach. Promoting the value of volunteering among the different stakeholders we engage with is also a key objective for the program (see section 7.2).

To better understand what different stakeholders perceive to be the benefit of volunteering, while recognising how context-specific notions of volunteering are, the program commissioned research to better understand what value different stakeholders in one of our program countries, Vanuatu, place on international skilled volunteering, and why.

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 support 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 evidence based so we need international capacity support. We now can 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 engagement; deep training and cultural immersion; strong local support; aligned values; locally relevant policies and procedures; and in-person assignments.

The study also 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 that delivered by a consultant or paid advisor, volunteering was noted to bring 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

The in-depth, qualitative research carried out in Vanuatu was complemented by a survey of the program's partner organisations in 2023. Completed anonymously by 205 organisations, the survey provided global breadth to our understanding. Four out of five of those organisations agreed that volunteers have an important role in supporting socioeconomic development.



Vanuatu Left: ProMedical's Paramedic and Emergency Medical Technician Vanessa Manuake (left) and Australian volunteer Paramedic Clinical Instructor Red James (right) examining ambulance supplies. ProMedical, a long-term partner of the Australian Volunteers Program, is Vanuatu's only professional ambulance service providing paramedic services on the islands of Efate and Espirito Santo, Vanuatu.

Top right: Australian volunteer Sadia Abdullah (left) with Procurement and Contracts officer Nimrod Siosi (centre) and Project Coordinator and Planning Andrew Taribiti (right) at the Department of Water Resources offices in Port Vila, Vanuatu. The Department of Water Resources is responsible for delivering, maintaining and ensuring water supply for Vanuatu. Sadia is a volunteer civil engineer with the Department. She has valued exchanging knowledge and skills with the passionate team who are working towards Vanuatu's goal to ensure safe and secure access to water for all communities by 2030.

Bottom right: The Vanuatu Paralympic Committee (VPC) provides opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in sport, seeking outcomes including healthier lifestyles, expanding networks and friendships. VPC also seeks to improve community perceptions about the ability, not the disability, of people living with disabilities. Australian volunteers Asha Boehula and Margaret Johnson supported VPC to provide opportunities for people with disability to participate in sport through "come and try" games days for people with disabilities. In this photo, Asha (left) coaches Linnette Romon (centre) in shotput techniques at a VPC event in Luganville.

Similar to the Vanuatu research, the survey asked about the value of volunteering in comparison to other modalities of international development assistance. Around two-thirds think that volunteers are more effective than paid consultants (63%). Just under half (45%) believe that organisational capacity strengthening is better achieved through skilled international volunteering rather than the equivalent financial support.

Overall, survey results show that most partner organisations value volunteering not only for the results it delivers, but for the specific benefits skilled volunteers bring as a modality, distinct from other forms of international development cooperation. Principally, that added value was seen to be **capacity strengthening**.

International volunteers bring knowledge, expertise, and best practices from their home countries, which enhances the capabilities of partner organisations and their staff. The other area highlighted was **cross-cultural exchange**. International skilled volunteering provides an opportunity for individuals from different countries and cultures to come together and learn from one another.

"They bring a whole different perspective and structure in the running of an organisation specific to the service provision and linking it to their qualifications, knowledge and expertise. It helps in the growth and credibility of an organisation as well as upskilling of staff."

~ Partner organisation

Case Study

Supporting Indonesian tutors to empower marginalised youth

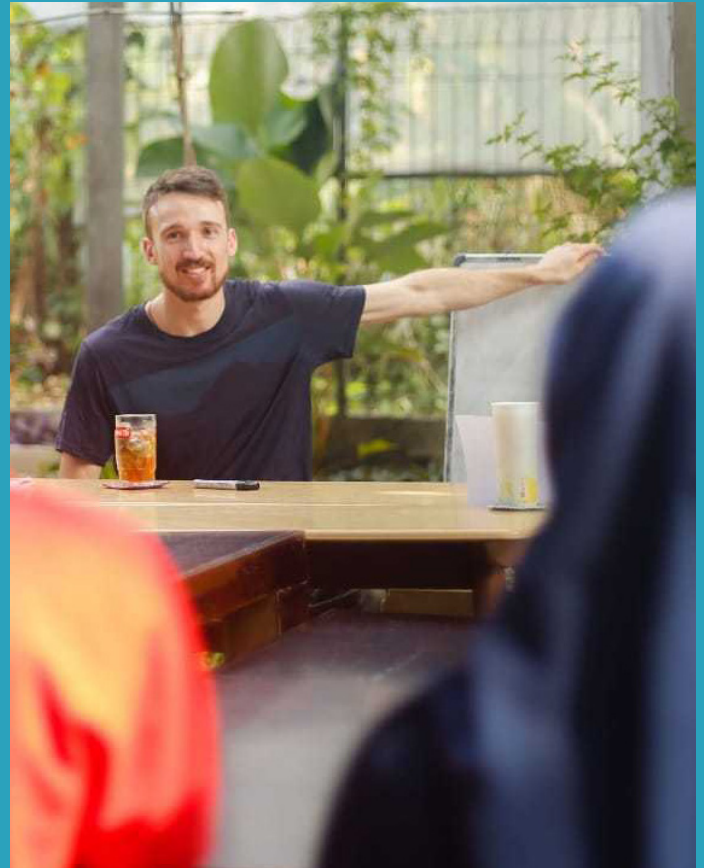
COVID-19 stalled many industries around the world, including valuable community organisations such as Yayasan Cipta Mandiri (YCM), which assists young people to gain skills and find work.

YCM offers English language courses for financially disadvantaged students. It has grown to become a place for youth to explore their interests and talents, particularly for those from difficult economic backgrounds like child labourers or street vendors. The students' talents are also connected to work experience opportunities, such as working as English-speaking tour guides for foreign tourists. YCM has been part of many success stories where people from low economic backgrounds are able to find successful careers and continue their education.

YCM was largely inactive during the pandemic, as the participants didn't have resources for online learning. They were finally able to restart their activities in 2023 with the support of Taylor Bonin, an Australian volunteer Youth Development Mentor.

Following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, YCM's tutors were eager to reconnect with their students in person and share their expertise. While the tutors are the facilitators of the classroom, they don't have a strict curriculum to follow. Taylor supported them to get back into the swing of teaching, creating engaging learning materials and strengthening their English skills. He observed tutors in their classes via Zoom and travelled to Indonesia to observe classes and provide feedback.

Whenever questions about English popped up, the tutors knew they could turn to Taylor for guidance. His support boosted the tutors' confidence so they could better engage their classes. Now, the number of participants has increased and YCM has received funding again. The organisation is focused on sustainability and committed to making a positive impact for the next 50 years.



Indonesia Australian volunteer Taylor Bonin working with YCM tutors to develop engaging content and facilitation techniques.

7.3. Supporting program participants to gain greater cultural awareness

Over 400 individual participants were involved with the program over the course of the year. This included 376 volunteers on assignment, and 35 approved accompanying dependents. Evidence suggests that a high proportion of those involved gain greater cultural awareness and develop personally and professionally.

End of program outcome: Program participants gain greater cultural awareness and build stronger connections across countries

All current and former volunteers were invited to respond to a volunteer impact survey in 2024, with 482 people answering questions anonymously online. The survey, designed with input from academic researchers at University Technology Sydney, aimed to complement the qualitative depth of the ongoing Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers with quantitative breadth.

Fifty-eight per cent of respondents were female, 41% male and 1% self-identified. Forty-three per cent of respondents had completed an assignment within the last five years, with the remainder having volunteered six or more years ago.

In the last month, 88% of respondents reported staying updated on international issues, with 87% following events in the country in which they volunteered. Asked to consider the last year, 92% reported having a better understanding of global issues.

Respondents were also asked an open question about how their life has changed in the past year, positively or negatively, due to their participation in the program. In the responses given, a recurring theme was the formation of strong relationships and connections through volunteering experiences. Participants emphasised how meaningful it was to build bonds with fellow volunteers, local communities, and colleagues during their assignments. Many volunteers shared how their initial assignments sparked a long-term commitment to supporting communities and addressing social issues, highlighting a deep, ongoing dedication that extended well beyond their initial involvement.

Participants also reflected on the challenges they faced, and the insights gained from overcoming these obstacles. Some volunteers encountered cultural differences, language barriers or logistical issues. These experiences prompted reflections on personal resilience, adaptability, and the importance of cultural sensitivity in cross-cultural interactions. The theme of legacy and influence also emerged as an important element of the volunteer experiences. Many volunteers noted that their experiences had a lasting impact, shaping their decisions and actions long after their assignments ended. Responses included:

"My volunteering experience continually helps me to better understand what is going on politically/socially/economically in Australia and in the rest of the world. It has provided me with a 'big picture' view of what goes on in the world, especially with regard to cultural differences between Australians and people from diverse cultures."

"I'm more tolerant of others and become more empathetic to others, in particular to refugees"

"Being a participant in the Australian Volunteers Program (2017-2019, 2023), immensely broadened my understanding of the world and my place, role and responsibilities in it."

"Volunteering in-country on long-term assignments has had a profound impact on my worldview, social justice, and personal values. I've never experienced anything as fulfilling as the work we contribute to with partner organisations and this has led me to seriously explore ways to stay in country to continue to support locally-led sustainable development."

"I have a much greater appreciation of Australia's contribution to providing positive help to lesser developed countries."

Intermediate outcome: Program participants gain professionally and personally

The survey also provided countless examples of how volunteers have developed personally and professionally because of their assignment. In many cases, volunteering profoundly influenced people's trajectories, from marriages to life-long careers.

Of volunteers who completed an assignment in the last year, 87% reported feeling that they had grown personally or professionally as a result. In commenting on skills gained, improved professional technical skills in their own area of expertise was the area most commonly mentioned, with volunteers often learning more by having to apply their knowledge in a different setting. Greater cultural awareness and improved knowledge of their host country were also frequently mentioned, as was increased personal resilience, adaptability and self-confidence.

Volunteers' learning on remote assignments is often different – with greater skills gained in online applications and working remotely, less on local languages – but certainly not absent. Though less intensive, many remote volunteers still spoke of gaining insights into a different culture and gaining new professional skills.

"In an environment where printers fail, computers crash, flashdrives burn, the weather is hot, sudden events cancel school programs, I have definitely learned not to worry about the little things and to just do my best. It's a very good growth from somewhat perfectionism to peace I feel I have developed resilience and flexibility to a new level."

~ Volunteer, Solomon Islands

"After this experience I feel more able and confident to work remotely and to adapt my way of working to local conditions and culture.."

~ Remote volunteer, Federates States of Micronesia

"My assignment with the Law Reform Commission of the Solomon Islands afforded me the opportunity to expand my knowledge and understanding of the criminal law and to develop greater expertise in specialist areas such as mis/disinformation and treason. In addition, through talking to my colleagues, I learnt a lot about the political and legal system of the Solomon Islands."

~ Remote volunteer, Solomon Islands

"I have gained increased knowledge and awareness of the disability sector, in particular disability education. I have been able to develop advocacy skills in this area to advocate for increased funding for [the organisation]. While I have been coaching and mentoring other staff in different corporate roles for over 40 years, I have gained additional experience in these skills."

~ Volunteer, Kiribati

Alumni

The Australian Volunteers Program Alumni is the key mechanism for engaging past volunteers. The Alumni aims to support past volunteers to advocate for the program and increase awareness and appreciation of the value of volunteering; provide past volunteers opportunities to increase cultural awareness and maintain connections across countries; and provide professional and personal development opportunities to Alumni members.

The Alumni supported a range of program activities, including delivery of post assignment workshops and information sessions for potential volunteers. Sixteen former volunteers facilitated discussions at post assignment workshops in Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney as Alumni Facilitators. They received briefings and resources to strengthen their facilitation skills prior to the workshop. Nine members of the Alumni supported information sessions, face-to-face and online, by joining panel discussions to share their experience and inspire future volunteers.

Supporting past volunteers to participate in conferences contributes to their professional development and is an opportunity for them to advocate for the program and international volunteering. In this reporting period, conference support was significantly reduced due to budget constraints. Three alumni were supported to attend conferences, including the ACFID conference and the Crawford Fund Conference.

The Alumni continued to explore opportunities to connect past volunteers with Australia Awards scholars. The Alumni team collaborated with Australia Awards Cambodia to connect alumni who volunteered in Cambodia with the Australia Awards Cambodia scholars. Following successful networking event in the previous reporting period, two networking events were delivered in August 2023 and May 2024. A small number of New Colombo Plan alumni also attended the May event. Attendees heard presentations from Australia Awards scholars and past volunteers, and engaged in networking activities in a relaxed, friendly environment. Attendees provided positive feedback following the events, identifying making new connections as a key benefit.

Alumni Representatives (past volunteers) delivered networking events in most capital cities in the reporting period. The Alumni Facebook Group, which grew to more than 1,000 members, provides past volunteers a forum for connection and sharing. The Alumni newsletter continues to inform volunteers about events and other opportunities, and it enjoys an average open rate of 45%.

Intermediate outcome: Volunteers complete their assignment well and learn from their partner organisation

Volunteers assess their progress in achieving their assignment objectives, independently of their partner organisation. From assignments completed during the year, 81% of volunteers reported making good or excellent progress. This is an increase from 75% the previous year. Assignment progress was lower for remote assignments (73%), while in-country assignments were at 82% and hybrid assignments 92% (noting a small sample for feedback from hybrid assignments).

Scores from female volunteers (86%) were slightly higher than males (81%). Progress reported by volunteers with a disability, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander volunteers and volunteers who preferred to self-describe their gender identify were all good or excellent, though from a small sample size.

The range of different assignments that volunteers and partner organisations have worked on is impossible to summarise at the global level, encompassing as they do such a variety of goals.

For example, during the last year, successful assignments contributed to a rural hospital in Tanzania now having the capacity to provide emergency care for newly born and premature babies; assisted a newly established organisation in South Africa to set up strong governance and compliance mechanisms so they can better support early childhood development; and supported the development of the first Timor-Leste coffee association.

Volunteer assignments helped organisations successfully organise the Pacific Games in Solomon Islands and improve teaching and academic research at universities in Nepal, Vietnam and Fiji. In Indonesia, assignments strengthened government systems for controlling and eliminating malaria, and supported a partner organisation to implement nutrition improvement programs for pregnant women and children to prevent childbirth mortality and stunting.

In their feedback, volunteers' comments were various, relating to the specifics of their assignment, but most often touching on their appreciation for the work of the partner organisation, and the satisfaction of achieving assignment objectives and of overcoming numerous challenges they faced.

Where volunteers made less progress, their feedback on assignment objectives highlighted challenges including staff shortages, limited time or lack of management support. In comments from all volunteers regarding the challenges faced on assignment, the most frequent issues related to difficulties in the working relationship with their partner organisation, followed by external circumstances that had an impact on their assignment.

Progress on achieving assignment objectives - reported by volunteers (n229)

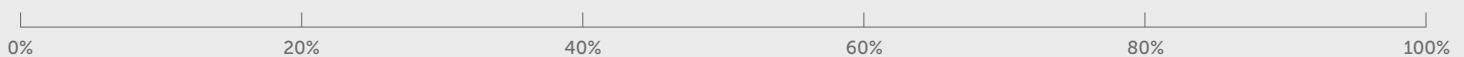
All volunteers



Female



Male



1 - minimal progress 2 - partial 3 - satisfactory 4 - good 5 - excellent progress



Fiji Social Worker Ruci Sekitoga (left), Australian volunteer Jessica Evans (centre) and Counsellor Vika Lumuni (right) at Empower Pacific in Lautoka, Fiji. Empower Pacific aims to enhance quality of life through targeted physical and mental health programs for local communities. The organisation's telephone help services respond to high demand from clients across the country. Empower Pacific also delivers professional training and employee assistance programs. Jessica is supporting the team at Empower Pacific in her volunteer Clinical Supervisor Mentor role. Jessica's hybrid assignment will enable to her continue supporting her colleagues remotely when she returns to Australia.

Overall rates of early returns and extensions were very similar when compared to the previous year. In 11% of cases, an assignment ended sooner than planned. Around half of these early returns were due to volunteer health or other personal issues (46%). One-quarter were due to assignments not going as expected and dissatisfaction of the volunteer and/or partner organisation – these accounted for 26% of early returns and 3% of all assignments. The remainder were due to other reasons including the original assignment objectives being met early.

Fifteen per cent of assignments were extended beyond their planned end date. A higher proportion of remote assignments were extended than in-country, possibly reflecting the greater flexibility possible for remote assignments.

Overall, around half of all assignments were under six months in duration, but this included remote assignments which are intended to be shorter. In-country and hybrid assignments were similar in duration, with one-third under six months, just over half between six months and one year, and the remainder (15%) more than one year.

Duration of assignments

In country



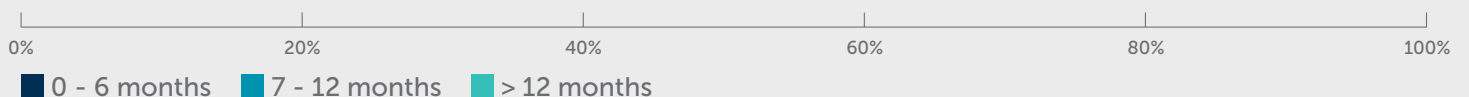
Hybrid



Remote



All assignments



Volunteer satisfaction is a key indicator for the program. Satisfaction with the program overall was 84% (81% for women and 91% for men). This compared to 87% the previous year.

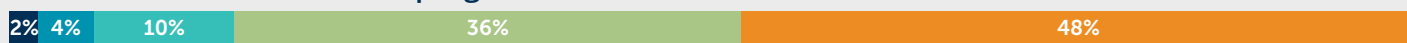
Volunteers' satisfaction with the assignment was 79%, with little difference according to modality (80% for in-country assignments, 78% for hybrid and remote assignments). This was 78% for women and 81% for men. In the previous year, satisfaction was higher for women than men.

There was no clear pattern of satisfaction varying by age, while the sample size based on volunteer demographics was too small to draw conclusions from other than it being broadly in line with the average.

In explaining their satisfaction scores, most volunteers' responses highlighted positives around their relationship with staff in their partner organisation, the support provided by the program, the sense of fulfilment from the assignment and the progress they made towards achieving their objectives.

Volunteer satisfaction (227)

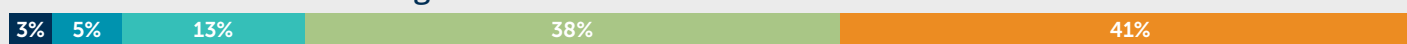
Overall satisfaction with the program



Satisfaction with working relationship with partner organisation



Overall satisfaction with assignment



0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

1 - very dissatisfied 2 - dissatisfied 3 - neither satisfied nor dissatisfied 4 - satisfied 5 - very satisfied

Volunteer satisfaction on different elements of program support

	Proportion of female volunteers satisfied or very satisfied	Proportion of male volunteers satisfied or very satisfied	Proportion of all volunteers satisfied or very satisfied
Recruitment and selection	89%	92%	90%
Training and preparation	76%	84%	79%
Relationship with partner organisation	78%	85%	81%
Safety and security (in-country)	86%	92%	88%
Assignment overall	77%	80%	78%
Support from the program overall	81%	91%	84%



Sri Lanka Australian Volunteer David Havig is supporting Matara District Chamber of Commerce and Industry through his role as Digital Marketing Mentor for Tourism. One objective of this role is to increase the Chamber's financial sustainability through increasing membership, particularly from the tourism sector. David (left) is learning about one of the new Chamber members, Culture Resort, from the Hotel Manager, "Indu" S.H Indrani (centre) and Hotel Owner, Dr Indika Prasad Mohotti (right).

"My PO was exceptional at supporting me during my 6 month in-country placement. They supported me to achieve tangible and satisfying outcomes at work and to overcome the practical and social challenges of a remote assignment."

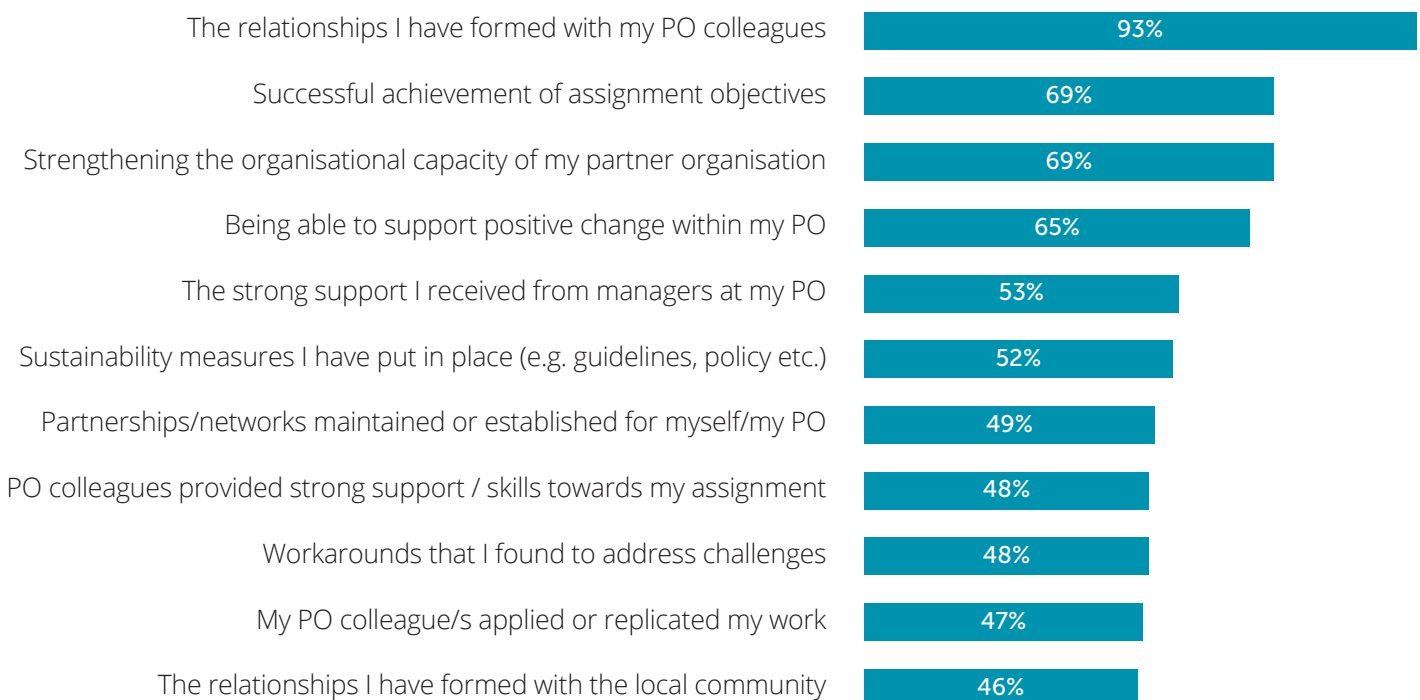
~ Hybrid volunteer, Sri Lanka

"Excellent support and assistance from PO and Vietnam program staff. Also, the Australian recruitment staff were highly helpful and professional in facilitating the commencement of my assignment in Vietnam."

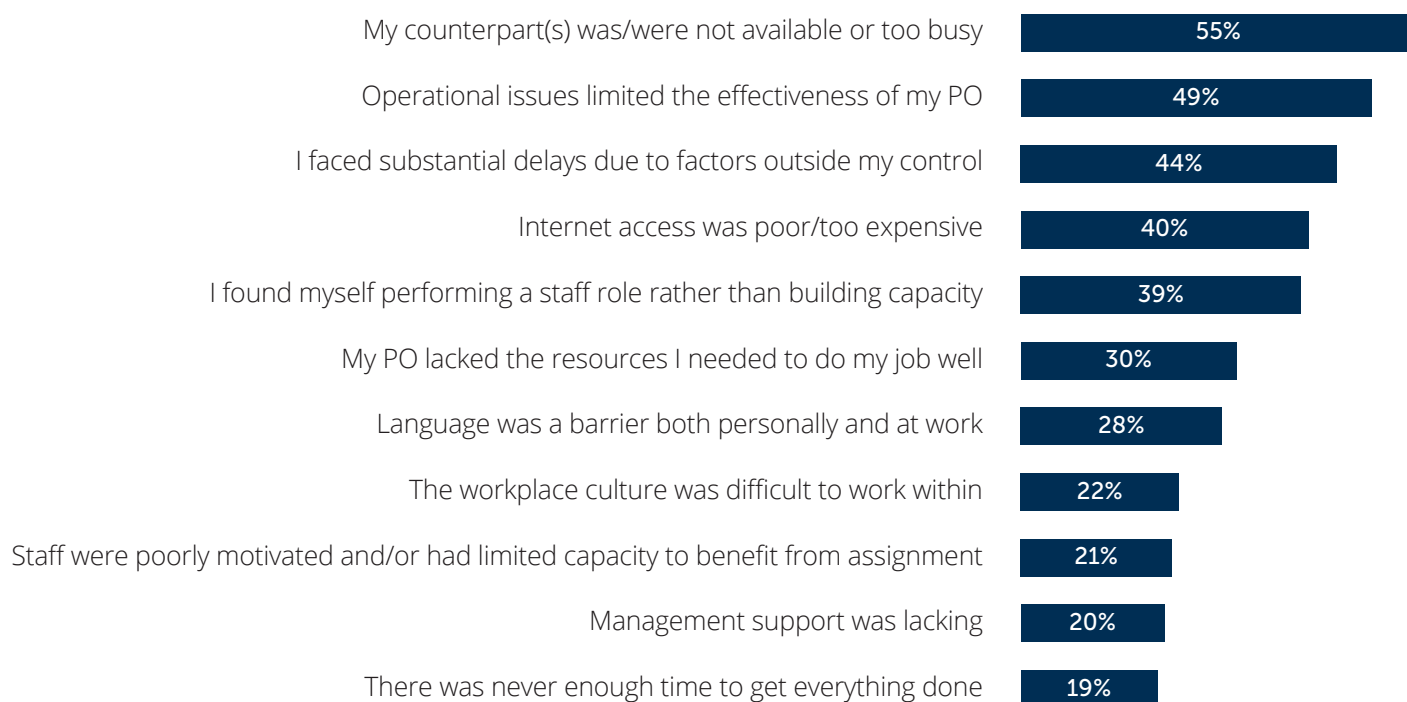
~ In-country volunteer, Vietnam

Reasons for being less satisfied included, in order of frequency: lack of specific preparation or support for the assignment, frustrations with the recruitment process, onboarding and completing forms online; a lack of availability of partner staff; lack of or unclear communication from the program; assignments not going as planned; and the duration of assignments being too short.

Most successful or beneficial aspects of assignments reported by volunteers



Challenges to achieving assignment objectives - proportion of difficulties reported by volunteers on in-country or remote assignments



Some practical challenges were specific to the assignment modality. For those volunteering in-country, the issues most commonly faced were inadequate allowances, difficulties with transport, difficulties finding suitable accommodation, and personal security concerns. For remote assignments, communications being difficult or delayed was most often mentioned, followed by difficulty in balancing the assignment with other personal and professional commitments, time-zone differences creating a hurdle, and some costs not being reimbursable.

"I must express my disappointment in the lack of support from Australian Volunteers. Over the 6-month period, I received minimal communication and felt that my work and efforts were not being acknowledged or valued by the program. A simple check-in or show of interest in my activities would have greatly boosted my confidence and morale."

~ Remote volunteer

As noted in relation to the broader operating context for the program (section 4), cost of living pressures impacted the program's overall budget and individual volunteers. This was particularly acute in certain countries, and an allowances review conducted during the year led to an increase in allowances in six countries, as well as different approaches to finding suitable accommodation.

At the end of their assignment, volunteers are asked for their suggestions on how their experience could be improved. Some comments related to points of feedback already discussed, such as financial support, accommodation or duration of assignments. Other suggestions included simplifying bureaucratic processes, particularly those related to medical evaluations and compliance, with less reliance on impersonal technology and automated systems. The need for better support and increased communication from both the head office and in-country teams was mentioned. It was also suggested that the program should provide more tailored training for volunteers, such as providing mental health first aid training for volunteers.

The program is continuously working to improve the experience for volunteers and partner organisations, and reviews feedback on an on-going basis. Some suggestions are excellent but must be balanced against the need for cost-efficiencies while others, such as communication, clearly constitute a core part of the program that needs ongoing attention.

Intermediate outcome: The program is inclusive of and accessible to a diverse range of people

Of the 281 Australian volunteers who started an assignment in the year, 55% were going on their very first assignment with the program. Forty-four volunteers started two or even three assignments during the year.

Volunteers were aged from 21 years old to 79 years old. Most volunteers on assignment during the year were women (60.4%), 39.1% were male and 0.5% preferred to self-describe.

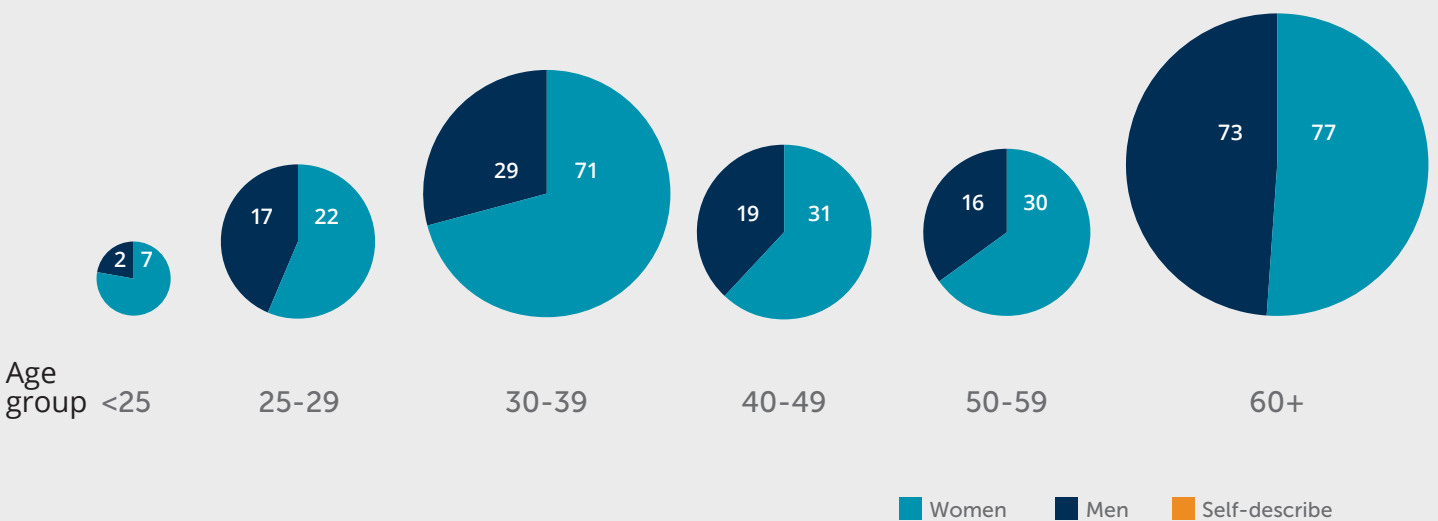
2.1% of volunteers identify as of diverse SOGIESC. 2.7% of volunteers identified as having a disability. 1.6% of volunteers were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders.

Broadly in line with the overall population, most volunteers came from New South Wales (27%), Victoria (23%) or Queensland (22%). Eight per cent were from Western Australia, 6% from South Australia and 6% from the Australian Capital Territory, with 4% from Tasmania and 3% from the Northern Territory. Fifteen per cent of volunteers speak a language other than English at home.

The program continued efforts to increase the diversity of volunteers, particularly around gender and diverse SOGIESC, disability, and Indigenous volunteers. Through a variety of targeted initiatives, the program enhanced inclusivity, representation and support for these groups. The recruitment process underwent a comprehensive inclusion review, analysing the journey from initial engagement to the interview stage. This review resulted in systemic changes, including language and terminology, website clarity and staff training, to enhance inclusivity and ensure a diverse volunteer base.

Direct support continued to be provided to volunteers with disabilities. From recruitment through the entirety of their assignments, volunteers received tailored access and inclusion plans. These plans involved coordination with in-country teams and partners, adjustments to systems and processes, and the removal of barriers wherever possible. Additionally, the volunteer portal was modified to enable the direct payment of disability support allowances, facilitating necessary adjustments such as transport, personal support, and assistive devices. The volunteer learning journey modules were also reviewed for accessibility, with recommendations from an accessibility audit being implemented to ensure comprehensive support.

Gender and age of volunteers



The program actively participated in Midsumma, a prominent LGBTQIA+ pride event, to promote the program within the LGBTQIA+ community. Staff and volunteers also participated in the Timor-Leste Pride Parade, demonstrating the program's commitment to supporting the LGBTQIA+ community. Additionally, the program implemented regular gender learning workshops aimed at mainstreaming gender equality within volunteer assignments and partner organisations. These workshops, which included volunteer-led sessions, successfully led to the formation of a volunteer-led gender equality community of practice.

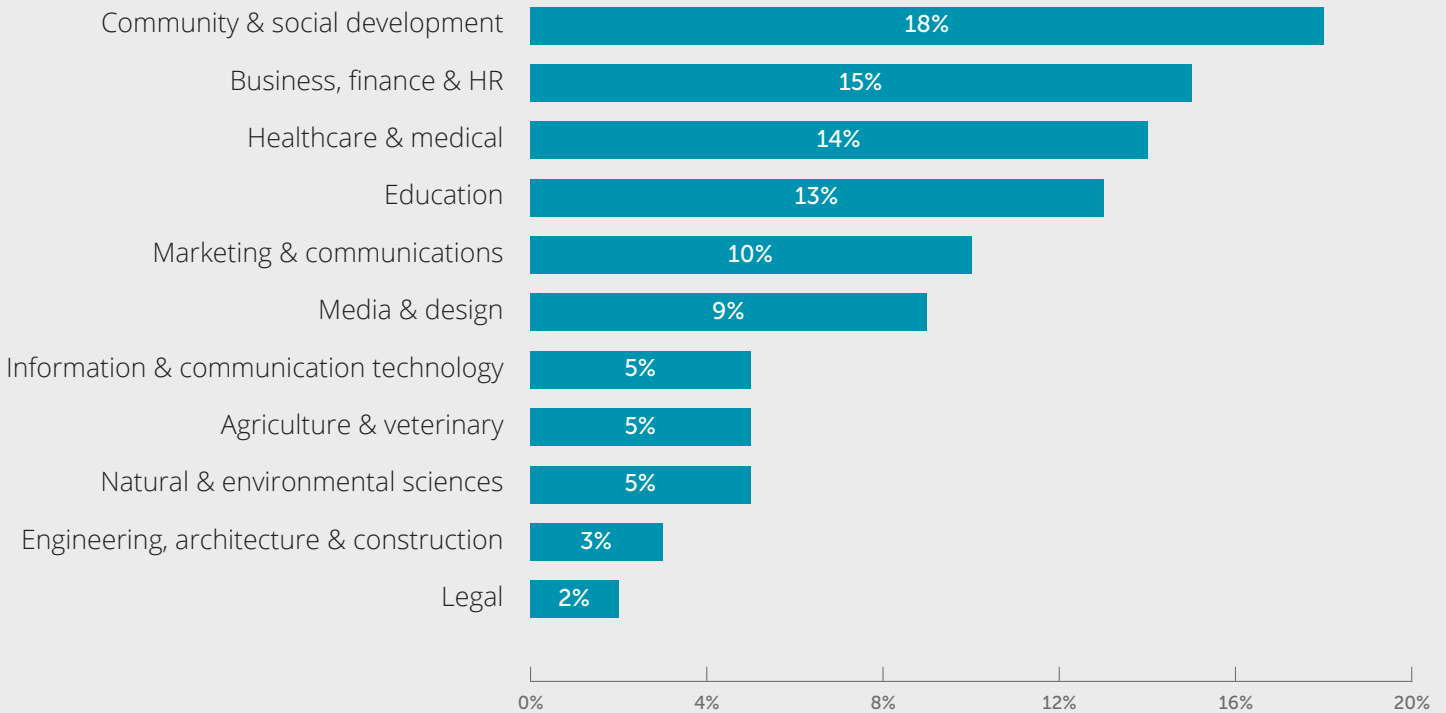
Through the program's Indigenous Pathways, volunteer opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders continued to be promoted and supported. Four Indigenous Australian women working in conservation participated in a knowledge exchange with communities in the Solomon Islands.

Additionally, an elder from the Torres Strait completed her second volunteer assignment in Fiji, accompanied by the Indigenous Pathways Coordinator. This ongoing engagement underscores the program's dedication to supporting Indigenous Australian volunteers and promoting cross-cultural knowledge exchange.

The highest education level of volunteers varied from 40% with a Masters, 30% with a Bachelors, 12% with a Graduate Diploma, 12% with a PhD and the remainder with Professional Certificates or other qualifications.

Volunteer assignments cover a wide range of professional sectors. The most common sectors are provided below.

Professional sector of assignment



Focus Area 3: Evolve good practice and embrace innovation

Embracing innovation has been a guiding principle of the Australian Volunteers Program since its launch in 2018. The program design took a forward-thinking approach to the evolution of volunteering and included an Innovation Fund to explore and enhance volunteering as the program was delivered.

In that same year, the program undertook a high-level design for the Innovation Fund which would guide the creation of a portfolio of innovation workstreams to leverage or enhance volunteering for international development and increase the impact of the program.

While the Innovation Fund later changed its name to the Innovation Hub in 2021, the initial Fund design established new ways of thinking and working that informed 34 projects across eight workstreams over the next six years.

Innovation Hub timeline

2018	2019	2020	
<p>Innovation Fund established.</p> <p>Gathering ideas: Workshops with volunteers, partner organisations and staff about what might work.</p> <p>Innovation Pathway Group: Governance group established, comprised of DFAT representatives and senior program staff, to prioritise the portfolio of work.</p>	<p>Open Volunteering (Alumni): First prototype of hybrid volunteering with a small group of returned volunteers and their previous partner organisation.</p> <p>Networked Volunteering: Activities with partners, volunteers and staff to understand how networks can amplify impact. A potential networking model defined.</p> <p>Innovation Associates: A network of volunteers and staff trained to act as the in-country eyes, ears and hands of the Innovation Fund.</p>	<p>Open Volunteering (Leadership Mentoring): Second prototype of hybrid volunteering tested with mid-senior leaders matched with senior leaders at partner organisations.</p> <p>Partners & Families: Researched opportunities for volunteers' families and partners to increase their sense of purpose while accompanying a volunteer on assignment.</p> <p>Remote Volunteering: Rapidly tested remote volunteering with volunteers and partner organisations whose assignments were cut short or never commenced due to COVID-19. Resulted in the implementation of the new remote volunteering modality, which enabled continued support to partners throughout the pandemic.</p>	<p>OK Computer: Activities across different contexts to understand how the program could contribute to increasing partners organisations' technology capabilities.</p> <p>Volunteering for Development (Vol4Dev): 14 new projects launched, aimed at exploring alternative models of supporting volunteering in partner countries.</p> <p>Social Innovation & Development Course (first cohort): Delivered a short course to build the innovation capability of partners, volunteers and staff.</p>

The Hub, working in partnership with The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI), used a human-centered design approach to create knowledge and connections between ideas, data and people. Innovation projects often took a ‘learn by doing’ approach, collaborating with volunteers and partner organisations and adopting a flexible style that allowed project participants to change as they developed.

A stage-gate process was overseen by the Innovation Pathways Group (IPG), consisting of program and DFAT representatives. The IPG led each project through rigorous stages of discovery, design and testing, to ensure the right questions were asked and answered at the right time. Not all projects progressed through all stages, but lessons learned were fed back into the broader portfolio and knowledge base.

Through this investment in innovation, the program opened up new ways of working, explored ground-breaking volunteering initiatives, and generated important learning. The innovation capability of staff, volunteers, and partner organisations was expanded, and opportunities for effecting change across the program were uncovered.

The Innovation Hub has had a lasting impact on the program, particularly through its rapid implementation of remote volunteering during COVID-19 and the locally led Volunteering for Development workstream that oversaw the delivery of 14 innovation projects across 11 countries.

With this knowledge in hand, the program is now shifting focus to strengthen our existing activities and respond strategically to emerging challenges and opportunities to deliver better development outcomes. We will continue to innovate and apply human-centered design principles to our work, focusing on effectiveness and continuous improvement. While the Innovation Hub has ceased formal operations, the program will continue to stay connected to our innovation partners and continue to learn from emerging opportunities across the international volunteering sector.

2021	2022	2023	2024
<p>Optimising Remote Volunteering: Tested an alternative approach to matching remote volunteers with partner organisations and explored other opportunities to enhance remote volunteering.</p> <p>Global Volunteering Accelerator: Evolving from Vol4Dev projects, a new workstream explored how the program could partner with key volunteering bodies to strengthen national volunteering in Timor-Leste.</p> <p>Social Innovation & Development Course (second cohort).</p> <p>Renamed Innovation Hub: Developed a new sub-brand and communications strategy to showcase the program’s innovation activities.</p>	<p>Growing Community Volunteering: Co-designed a volunteer management resource toolkit with partner organisations to strengthen community volunteering.</p> <p>Global Volunteering Accelerator: Investigated how the program could co-fund national volunteering initiatives in Mongolia.</p> <p>Social Innovation & Development Course (third cohort).</p>	<p>Volunteering for Development (Vol4Dev): Projects finalised, and reflection events to capture the lessons learned.</p> <p>Global Volunteering Accelerator: Researched the state of volunteering and commenced a national volunteering partnership in Indonesia.</p> <p>Optimising Remote Volunteering: Discovery project to explore how to make remote volunteering more desirable to volunteers, partners and program staff.</p> <p>Growing Community Volunteering: Volunteer management toolkit tested with partners across several program countries.</p>	<p>Innovation learnings consolidated and Innovation Hub closed.</p>

Case Study

Strengthening evaluation in Mongolia's arts sector



Mongolia Above and below: Australian volunteer Nathan Stoneham working with colleagues at the Arts Council of Mongolia to strengthen the organisation's approach to evaluation and reporting.

The Arts Council of Mongolia promotes the sustainable development of Mongolian arts and culture and the preservation of cultural heritage. While the council has always reported on its activities, the organisation hadn't established a process that could provide compelling evidence about the impact of its work.

To help build capacity in evaluation, Australian volunteer Nathan Stoneham spent seven months at the Arts Council of Mongolia, focusing on the development and implementation of an evaluation framework. The framework guides staff to identify the objectives of their activities and collect stories, data, media and artwork from the people the project intended to benefit.

Through a series of team workshops and one-on-one meetings, Nathan worked with staff to strengthen their capability to measure and communicate the impact of their activities. Staff gained knowledge about the outcomes that arts and culture can achieve, tested evaluation plan templates, practiced conducting evaluation interviews, and discussed how storytelling, data and imagery can work together to paint the whole picture of a project and its impact.

Being able to co-design the assignment resulted in a strong match between the interests of the organisation, and the skills of the volunteer. Nathan's experience in collaboration, cultural development, and his growing understanding of the local context, coupled with a skilled and passionate team at the council, created a productive environment to introduce and trial the new evaluation framework.

Council staff will continue to practice outcomes-focused cultural planning, measure outcomes, share their evaluations to celebrate their success and advocate for the value of arts and culture in society.



7.4 Program foundations

Program governance

The program has a well-established and effective governance framework. The Program Management Group (PMG) provides strategic oversight of the program and is the primary forum for coordination, discussion, and recommendations on program operational matters. The PMG met twice during the year, in August 2023 and February 2024. Senior staff also participated in quarterly Contract Management Group meetings, which are chaired by DFAT, and Risk Management Group meetings, which are chaired by program staff. These meetings align with the submission of quarterly financial and risk management reports.

Regular progress meetings between DFAT Canberra staff and the Program Director and Deputy Program Director continued throughout the year to maintain an effective and positive working relationship between DFAT and the program. In addition to these governance arrangements, the Consortium Group continued its advisory role, with input from the three consortium group partners: AVI, DT Global and Alinea International.

To support effective program management, the assurance program continued. These internal audits and reviews aim to ensure continuous improvement of AVI's contractual obligations. In 2023-24, seven in-country audits were conducted by three auditors. Audit spot checks were also conducted in seven country offices by travelling senior staff, to check fundamental practices and procedures. Recommendations from all internal audits and spot checks are recorded, managed, monitored, evaluated, and closed.

A number of internal reviews were also conducted during the year relating to volunteer security, staff compliance with mandatory training requirements, procurement processes and downstream partner compliance. Analysis was also conducted of previous audits to evaluate systemic issues and organisational improvements. In 2023-24, DFAT engaged a third-party provider to conduct a comprehensive due diligence assessment of AVI. This assessment found that AVI "demonstrated a strong risk-based approach to the implementation and management of its projects and specifically the Australian Volunteers Program".

Annual planning and ongoing implementation

The annual plan is a key operational document for the program. It outlines the program's strategic approach to implementation and provides details of proposed activities to be implemented across all aspects of the program as well as staffing arrangements. It is supported by a fully costed budget. The annual plan is developed by the program's leadership team and involves extensive consultation across the program and with DFAT Canberra and Posts. The process commenced in March 2024, and included feedback from Posts regarding priorities for 2024-25. These priorities were considered and reflected in a draft annual plan submitted on 7 June 2024 for DFAT's consideration and approval.

The program procured goods and services in accordance with Commonwealth Procurement Rules and as outlined in the program's Operations Manual. Of note, in 2023-24 the program procured goods and services through nine Indigenous suppliers with a total value of AUD\$37,925.

Through the delivery of targeted activities, the program continued to support activities relating to public diplomacy; monitoring, evaluation and learning; partnerships, innovation, inclusion, and Indigenous Pathways. Expenditure for program activity costs, including salaries, was AUD\$1.76 million in 2023-24.

Change Process

Significantly increased operational costs and a rapid return of high demand for in-country assignments from all stakeholders since 2021 combined to present budget and program management challenges. The program began the year considerably overprogrammed against available budget. At DFAT's request, a change process commenced in Q2 to better align the program priorities and activities with available budget in the 2023-24 financial year, and a potentially reduced budget envelope in the remaining years of the program.

Throughout the reporting period, the program continued to implement the full range of program components and activities, but at a reduced scale. Spending was tightly controlled across all areas. Every effort was made not to actively reduce the number of volunteer assignments through the year, however costs were carefully managed. This meant, for instance, that fewer assignments were extended.

Resources for all program activities were reduced through the year. This resulted in: less direct support for alumni events and professional development; reduced expenditure on attendance and presenting at events and conferences; very limited staff international travel; limited expenditure on impact grants; deferral of one planned in-person returned volunteers workshop and reduced expenditure on others; reduced spend on program merchandise and communications content; and no new innovation activities commenced. At country level, expenditure on in country meetings and events was reduced.

Volunteer services

In 2023-24, the Volunteer Services team supported volunteer recruitment, mobilisation and briefing which led to 446 supported volunteer assignments (and 35 approved accompanying dependants) with at least one supported assignment in each of the 25 program countries.

The team continued to develop and adjust its processes for hybrid assignments, for which demand and interest continued to increase. Of note, there were five times more supported hybrid assignments this year compared to last year.

Several post-assignment workshops were successfully delivered in-person in Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane and Melbourne, with a total of 114 past volunteers attending the refreshed workshops. Participants' feedback was very positive, with over 96% agree/strongly agree they would recommend a volunteer to attend the post-assignment workshop if they have not attended one yet.

Risk

The program's risk management approach is supported by proven systems, policies and processes and is underpinned by a global risk management framework. These enable the program to comprehend, manage and articulate the level of risks across the program, and to determine sound and appropriate responses. Through effective governance, monitoring and reporting, the program can quickly adapt to address immediate and foreseeable shifts in the risk environment. Of note is the robust approach to risk awareness in-country, with environmental scanning regularly undertaken in conjunction with in-country teams to identify current and emerging risks.

Key areas of risk include the health, safety, security and well-being of program participants and staff. Safeguarding risks such as child safeguarding, PSEAH and fraud and corruption remain a priority focus. During the reporting period the risk context stabilised somewhat, particularly compared to the impacts of the global pandemic in previous years. However, the context remained challenging with the global environment dominated by the impacts of war in Ukraine as well as the instability in the Middle East. High and unstable inflationary impacts were noted in many countries, with ongoing disruption to food security and supply, contributing to a level of economic and social instability. Cyber security threats continued to be persistent throughout the year. AVI's IT team monitored and adapted its IT approaches to minimise vulnerabilities to systems, staff and participants, and on the program's website.

Safeguarding

The program continued to demonstrate its commitment to a 'do no harm' approach. By assessing safeguarding risks and managing the responses accordingly, the program applies safeguarding principles to improve the quality of activities. Our program of assurance (above) further demonstrates the program's commitment to fraud control. Coordination and management of fraud investigations continue, in line with reporting obligations.

Child and vulnerable adult safeguarding

The program continued to strengthen its ongoing commitment to the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH) and Child Protection and Safeguarding. Risks were monitored and managed, with an update to the register to include risks to children living in residential care institutions and established controls; enhancements to the program's due diligence processes to better identify high risk PSEAH and Child Protection partner organisations; and the updated website to include enhancements to the PSEAH and child safeguarding webpages and inclusion of partner policy workbooks and resources in both English and translated versions.

World Children's Day was recognised with the publication of social media posts highlighting the program's Child Protection Focal Points and their engagement with volunteers and partner organisations to support to mitigate risk and support children's rights.

Collaboration with partners continued throughout the year in the development and review of partner child protection policies to ensure compliance with DFAT minimum standards. In December 2024, Child Protection Focal Points transitioned to become Safeguarding Focal Points.

Child Protection workshops for key stakeholders were held in Indonesia, Mongolia and Kiribati. In Indonesia, 30 attendees participated with a guest speaker from the ECPAT office. Two Child Protection workshops were held in Mongolia, with 33 government officials from the Departments of Education and Sciences of Zavkhan and Uvs provinces and 25 staff from the Polytechnic College of Ulaangom in attendance. The Kiribati workshop included presentations from the Ministry of Women, Youth, Sports and Social Affairs and others, with 28 participants from government and non-government partner organisations in attendance. The workshop was not directly funded by the program, however the program's Child Protection Adviser developed the materials, and together with the Program Manager, Kiribati, supported delivery of the workshop.

Safeguards sessions were included in in-country orientation programs across the regions. A PSEAH session was held in February 2024. It was noted that the session usefully focussed on the East Asia context along with scenarios based around a people-to-people program. In line with our four-year PSEAH strategy, the program continued to work towards ensuring that all active, in-scope partner organisations have a DFAT compliant PSEAH Policy.

New tools and templates for partners were developed, including a PSEAH policy development guidebook and supporting resources. A PSEAH-focussed global webinar, with all partner organisations invited to attend, featured presentations from the Solomon Islands Woman's Division GP Government and from Community Independent Living in Nepal. Additional resources were developed to support staff and program participants, including a staff SAFER Guide and Participant SAFER Guide to support the identification of SEAH, survivor supports and reporting. PSEAH Country Risk documents for program participants were developed for the countries in three regions (East Asia, Asia Archipelago and Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Kiribati). In April a survey was sent to all active partner organisations to establish a PSEAH compliance baseline of how many partners already have PSEAH elements and policies embedded in their organisations.

Building on the collateral developed and lessons learned through 2023-24, the strategy was revised in June 2024 to accelerate plans, while maintaining a risk-based approach. In June, changes were made to the structure of the team responsible for child and vulnerable adult safeguarding to provide increased resources to strengthen compliance, particularly around ensuring PSEAH obligations with downstream partners. In 2024-25, additional overseas-based resources will be employed to support this increased focus.

Health, safety, security

The health, safety and security of all program participants and staff is a key priority for the program. During the reporting period there were a range of natural and man-made events that impacted the program. Political and civil unrest led to a heightened security environment in Papua New Guinea, with a 14-day state of emergency declared in January 2024. Economic pressures remained an ongoing challenge in many countries in which the program operates, with cost of living and inflation impacting volunteers, staff and local communities. In RMI, the program temporarily adjusted volunteer living allowances in response to a spike in cost of living.

The program prepared for, and responded to natural disasters, including ongoing drought in the north Pacific region, heavy rain and flooding in Fiji and Tanzania, as well as low level earthquake alerts and tsunami warnings in Fiji, Indonesia, Solomon Islands, Philippines and Vanuatu. There was an increased risk of mosquito-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue which remained prevalent in some program countries.

With support from the global risk and security team, the program undertook contingency planning for the 2023 Pacific Games held in Solomon Islands in November 2023, along with contingency planning for elections in Indonesia, Solomon Islands and South Africa.

During the reporting period there were a number of serious (level 3) security related incidents, involving program participants. In response, the program has introduced a Level 3-5 security incident review and reporting process. This process, led by the Global Risk and Security team, ensures any lessons learned can be quickly and efficiently addressed and any systemic changes made.

Environmental safeguarding and carbon offsets

In accordance with DFAT's Environment and Social Safeguarding Policy, the program is committed to being environmentally proactive through environmentally responsible programming and the sustainable use of natural resources. The program works with communities to adapt to the damaging impacts of climate change. We consider the potential impacts of our activities and feasible methods to reduce any adverse effects on the environment of vulnerable people.

While the program is not often involved in projects that cause major environmental disturbance (for example, major infrastructure development), the risk to the environment is assessed and managed where impact could be reasonably expected or the possible impacts are high. A check has been introduced within our procurement process that includes a specific question on climate change impact.

The program is reducing staff air travel, and has offset the inevitable emissions associated with a program that moves people internationally. In 2023-24, program staff and volunteers flew 2,689,697 kms and emitted 415 tonnes of CO₂e in the process. Carbon credits were purchased from a project in Vietnam supporting an offshore wind farm. This cost AUD\$4,278.65.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)

Regional Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Coordinators continued to provide support to in-country teams, volunteers and partner organisations on MEL activities. This included assignment level MEL practices, data quality and data analysis, support to the MEL Community of Practice, and research and evaluation activities in line with the program's MEL Framework.

The three strategic evaluations aligned with the program's three end of program outcomes remained priorities. A participatory action research project focused on organisational capacity strengthening continued through a co-design process, training, piloting and data collection. Research into the value of volunteering in a particular country, Vanuatu, was conducted. The Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers continued, providing further insights during the year, with the next interim report due early in 2024-25.

Additional surveys were carried out with both partner organisations and volunteers during the year, while internal reviews were conducted around exit interview processes, support for international organisations in relation to local leadership, and program support for both the health sector and sport for development.

The MEL team also continued to work across the program to follow up on previous evaluation recommendations and management actions.

In support of the program's commitment to continuous improvement, the MEL team facilitated the program's annual reflection event online in August 2023. This brought staff and DFAT together to review progress, highlight achievements and discuss challenges.

Finance

Program expenditure for 2023-24 was AUD\$23 million against an approved annual budget of AUD\$23 million, representing a nil variance. In April 2024, additional funds of AUD\$2 million were made available to the program from DFAT's Office of the Pacific. This expenditure was accounted for under a separate payment event number. The additional funds were welcomed and will contribute to the program supporting additional in-country volunteer assignments in the Pacific in 2024-25.

Human Resources

At 30 June 2023, the program was supported by 110 staff, 69 based overseas and 41 based in Australia. The overseas cohort includes four expatriates. Five Regional Directors continue to lead the in-country teams from their regional bases in South Africa, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vietnam and Indonesia. Following the resignation of the Regional Director, Papua New Guinea, in February 2024 the program trialled remote support and oversight from the Regional Director, Asia Archipelago. This proved successful and will remain in place. There were 19 resignations in this reporting period, nine overseas based staff and ten in Australia. Of significance, after six years, the Program Director resigned and was replaced in September 2023.

As part of the change process outlined earlier, 15 roles (13 in Australia and two overseas) were made redundant and several more were held vacant for an extended period although not considered surplus to requirements. Seven new roles (five in Australia and two overseas) were created to boost capability in areas including program effectiveness, safeguarding and compliance.

AVI continued to support learning and development opportunities for its workforce, as identified during the annual performance management process.

List of abbreviations

AO	Australian organisations that partner with the program
FLEX	The program's flexible learning exchange that includes all learning and development activities across the program
GEDSI	Gender equality, disability and social inclusion
IVD	International Volunteer Day (December 5)
IWD	International Women's Day (March 8)
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans/transgender, intersex, queer and other gender, sexually diverse or body diverse characteristics
MEL	Monitoring, evaluation and learning
PO	Partner organisation
PSEAH	Prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment
RO	Regional organisations in the Pacific that partner with the program
SDGs	The UN's Sustainable Development Goals
Vol4Dev	Volunteering for Development is one of the program's innovation workstreams

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