

Volunteer Perspectives on the Impacts of International Development Volunteering

Cosmopolitan Development:

The Impacts of International Volunteering Project Findings Part 3

March 2017

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The research sought to capture the distinctive contributions of international development volunteerism (IDV) to development assistance and people-to-people links. It asked:

1. How does IDV enable the building of development partnerships?
2. To what extent does IDV produce or consolidate cosmopolitan orientations in volunteers and host organisations?

NEED FOR THE RESEARCH

IDV has been a part of bilateral aid programmes since the 1960s but there has been relatively limited research on its impacts. The existing literature suggests that IDV has beneficial capacity development and public diplomacy impacts but that these are difficult to measure through commonly used development indicators. In Australia, a commissioned review of the government funded volunteer program came to a similar conclusion but identified a tension between capacity development and public diplomacy objectives (Office for Development Effectiveness, 2014). This research project set out to find ways of evaluating the impacts of IDV programs, including the more intangible relational impacts that are increasingly recognised as being important to achieving transformational change. It focuses on the case of the Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) program, specifically the part of the program managed by Scope Global, the industry partner in this project.

This report, the third of four on the research findings, explores the perspective of volunteers. It is based on interview data collected from volunteers based in Cambodia, Indonesia, Maldives, Peru and Solomon Islands, and from returned volunteers across the Scope Global AVID program.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The impacts of international development volunteering are multidimensional. They touch host organisations and volunteers, range from skills building and organisational change to employability and life experience, and can change participants' world views, their understanding of development and aid, and their attitude to volunteering. In this report we focus on the volunteer perspectives on volunteering as a form of development assistance, and on three important areas of impact: capacity development, relationship building, and cosmopolitan orientations.

Development volunteering

According to research participants, volunteering can be distinguished from other forms of development work by a stronger focus on the host organisation's priorities and on developing collaborative relationships. Less pressure to produce outputs creates more opportunity for sharing knowledge and experience with local colleagues. This can make the impacts of volunteering more sustainable, but also less predictable.

Capacity development

All volunteers hope to contribute positively to the capacity of their host organisation. They learn that capacity cannot be developed unilaterally through their own efforts but with the active engagement of their host organisation colleagues. When volunteers understand this and have succeeded in establishing a solid collaborative learning space, they find that they are able to work towards significant changes in the host organisation's ability to mobilise and attract resources, plan and operate strategically, improve the quality of service and performance, and broaden its network of partnerships. In working with host organisations, volunteers also develop their own capacity to translate their skills to a different context, work with cultural difference and diverse knowledges, and understand their host country's economic and political systems, development challenges, and cultural norms and values.

Relationship building impacts

Most volunteers see relationship building as an important means of capacity development and as a valued outcome of volunteering. As a means, building relationships with host organisation staff is a pre-requisite to achieving the above-mentioned capacity development outcomes. Volunteers achieve much more if they work as a member of a team in their host organisation, rather than as a lone capacity builder working to a pre-established program. The host organisation, too, must invest in the relationship and find how and where the volunteer's skills and knowledge can be most effectively used. Time, a shared language, cultural confidence, experience with managing volunteers in the organisation and clarity about where the volunteer's accountability lies, are all necessary ingredients for building productive and equitable relationships.

Public diplomacy impacts

Volunteers see the people-to-people relationships they build in host organisations and beyond as a significant outcome of volunteering. The personal friendships and bonds with people from their host country facilitated information exchange which increased the knowledge stock on both sides and laid the foundations for a better, deeper, mutual understanding. Many volunteers found that host organisations and communities made them feel welcome, but they also encountered stereotypes of Westerners (both positive and negative), and questioned some of their own taken-for-granted assumptions about their host country and Australia. Volunteering gives participants the opportunity to act on their sense of solidarity and shared humanity with others, while at the same time gaining a deeper understanding of cultural difference and the importance of context.

1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

International volunteering has seen significant growth in the 21st century. Much of this is due to the rising demand for international experience among young people from the Global North (Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2011; Jones, 2011; McBride & Sherraden, 2007; Tiessen & Heron, 2012). At the other end of the working lifespan, older adults with “a lifetime of experience” seek opportunities for productive aging (Lough & Xiang, 2016). Many volunteers who work in developing countries are motivated by the desire for a fairer and more equal world. They are encouraged by global development goals that propose the end of poverty and other injustices as something that is achievable within their lifetime, and to which they can directly contribute (Roy, 2010).

Studies suggest that international volunteers contribute to the development of host communities in a variety of ways that include technology and skills transfers, building local capacity and social capital, and enhancing community relations (Devereux, 2008; Sherraden, Lough, & McBride, 2008). International volunteering also provides opportunities for participants to gain the skills and sensibilities required for global citizenship and for promoting intercultural understanding. In the often technical process of development, it has the potential of offering “a far wider view of development as a new, and morally informed, vision of global responsibility” (Lewis, 2006, 661).

This study focuses on international development volunteerism (IDV) which forms part of bilateral aid. Such IDV programs have their beginnings in the 1950s development era but have only recently attracted the interest of academic researchers. They are supported through government aid budgets and typically involve longer term placements of four or more months for volunteers with professional skills and experiences that match the needs of host organisations working towards social change in developing countries. Australia’s IDV program is one of the oldest, with its roots in the Volunteer Graduate Scheme that began sending skilled graduates to Indonesia in the early 1950s. It was a by-product of the Colombo plan which aimed to strengthen economic and social development in the Asia-Pacific region through human resource development (Brown, 2011, 35). In 2011, the Australian government combined several existing programs under the umbrella of the Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID). The management of the program is tendered out and for the duration of this research project, Scope Global, the industry partner in this ARC Linkage research project, was responsible for managing around 70 per cent of the AVID volunteer placements (Office for Development Effectiveness, 2014).

IDV programs are under growing pressure at both the global and the national level. At the global level, a greater emphasis on making development assistance more accountable and more effective has led to a managerial approach to development that focuses on measurable, outcomes-based development indicators (Elbers, 2012). This carries the risk of devaluing the more intangible relational impacts of IDV programs and reshaping their meanings and outcomes (Georgeou & Engel, 2011; Lough & Allum, 2013). At the same time, the shift from donor-recipient relationships to partnerships in global development policy (OECD, 1996) provides a space for IDV programs to establish more equitable and mutually accountable relationships with organisations in a rapidly changing Global South (Schech, Mundkur, Skelton, & Kothari, 2015).

The impacts of IDV are multidimensional. They touch host organisations and volunteers, range from skills building and organisational change to employability and life experience, and can lead to lasting changes in world views, knowledge and understanding of development, aid, and volunteerism. In this report we focus on three important areas of impact that emerge from the interviews conducted with volunteers during and after their overseas placements. These are capacity development, relationship building, and cosmopolitan orientation.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research is based on a mixed-method approach involving questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews. In this report we draw mainly on interview data collected from volunteers based in Cambodia, Indonesia, Maldives, Peru and Solomon Islands, and from involving returned volunteers across the Scope Global AVID program. (The views of host organisation staff are separately reported in Project Findings Part 2: Host Organisation Perspective on the Impacts of International Volunteering ISBN 978-1- 925562-03-3).

INTERVIEWS

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 48 volunteers on placements in Cambodia, Indonesia, Maldives, Peru and the Solomon Islands. A second set of interviews was conducted with 35 returned volunteers from across the whole Scope Global AVID program. All research participants were recruited with the assistance of Scope Global staff who forwarded email invitations from the research team to volunteers inviting them to participate in the study. The semi-structured interview protocol included questions about the volunteers' reasons for volunteering; their volunteering role; views on the capacity development impacts of volunteering; views and experiences of relationship building; and their perspectives on being Australian and Australia's place in the world. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and analysed with QSR International's NVivo 10 Software.

Table 1: Interview data collected by country and participant category

	Cambodia	Indonesia	Maldives	Peru	Solomon Islands	Other Countries	All
In-country volunteer interviewees	16	10	4	3	15	0	48
Returned volunteer interviewees	5	5	1	3	1	20	35

All data referenced in this report is available at:

Surveys: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5072/86/57C4D0206DE5C>

Interviews: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5072/86/57C4CF75D1824>

SURVEYS

This report draws also on a survey conducted among volunteers about to depart Australia for their placement (PPV Survey, 312 participants). Survey questions sought to elicit information about the reasons for volunteering, expectations about impacts, information seeking processes, self-assessed knowledge about the host country and host organisation, and a variety of topics relating to key development challenges and globalisation. A slightly amended version of the survey was sent to volunteers who had returned from their placements (RV Survey, 102 participants). Both surveys were analysed in SurveyMonkey, an online survey software tool (SurveyMonkey n.d.). (For a more detailed discussion of the survey findings see Project Findings Part 1: Expectations and Realities of International Volunteering ISBN 978-1-925562-05-6)

ETHICS

The research complies with the National Statement on the Ethical Conduct of Research. Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee in June 2013 (Project Number 6044).

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Informed consent from interview participants was acquired in

one of two ways. In the case of face to face interviews, participants were invited to sign the informed consent form prior to the commencement of the interview. When interviews were conducted via Skype or telephone, the consent form was sent to the participant and read out prior to the interview for verbal consent.

To ensure anonymity, where direct quotes from the interviews have been used, the participant's name has been changed. In addition, we only identify the HO of the placement by the type of organisation and country location.

Interview Data Management

From the interview questions we identified 26 subthemes and applied them to 1163 pages of transcribed interviews through auto-coding in NVivo. A coding manual was developed with coding categories, definitions, and examples of coded texts for each category. The initial coding was completed by a single coder, and verified by a second coder to ensure consistency. Differences in coding were discussed and resolved with additions made to the coding manual as and when required.

The subthemes can be classified into five broad themes (Table 2): perspectives on international development volunteering (comprising 24.9% of the interview material); capacity development impacts (33.1%); relational impacts (22.7%); impacts related to cosmopolitan orientations (14.9%) and cross-cutting issues (4.4%). Given the large volume of interview material, this report reports on those subthemes within each broad theme that have elicited most response (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Main themes and selected subthemes

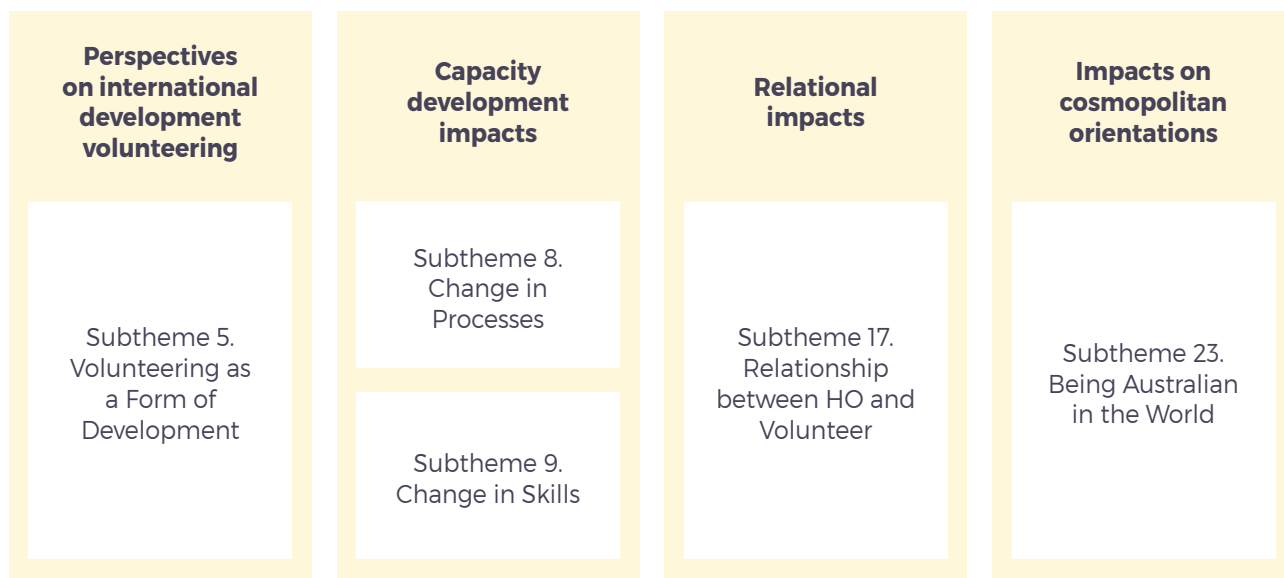


Table 2: Main themes and subthemes in the interview data

Themes and Subthemes	Interview material	
	Pages	%
Perspectives on International Development Volunteering	290	24.9
6 subthemes (% of interview material): Reasons for Volunteering (5.6%), Role in Volunteering (7%), Volunteering as a Form of Development (5.4%), Change in Perceptions of Volunteering (1.1%), Australian Development Volunteer Program (2.3%), Future Volunteering (3.4%)		
Capacity Development Impacts	385	33.1
10 subthemes: Change in Attitudes (4%), Change in Behaviours (1%), Change in Effectiveness (2.4%), Change in Knowledge/Understanding (5.2%), Change in Perceptions of Development (1.1%), Change in Processes (3.9%), Change in Skills (4.5%), Best Things That Have Happened (0.9%); Most Challenging Things That Have Happened (1.3%), Most Significant Change Example (2.3%)		
Relational Impacts	264	22.7
5 subthemes: Relationship between HO and volunteer (10.3%), Relationship between HO and International Volunteer Coordinating Organisation (IVCO) (0.4%), Relationship between Volunteer and IVCO(2.7%), Relationship between HO and other Organisations/Civil Society (2.8%); the Meaning of Partnership (3.4%), Managing, Negotiating and Resolving Conflicts (3.1%)		
Impacts related to Cosmopolitan Orientations	173	14.9
2 subthemes: Being Australian in the World (11.6%), Changes in World View (3.3%)		
Cross-cutting Issues	51	4.4
2 subthemes: Gender Issues (1.6%); Sustainability (2.8%)		
ALL CODES	1163	100

Source: Interviews <http://dx.doi.org/10.5072/86/57C4CF75D1824>

2. PERSPECTIVES ON INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT VOLUNTEERING

The volunteers' views about the distinctiveness of international development volunteering, and what it shares with other kinds of development work, provides insight into their motivations to volunteer, how they approached their placements, and their perception of impacts. We asked volunteers to tell us what in their opinion was unique or special about volunteers in the development context, and how they compared to international consultants and other development actors. Four issues emerged from the data. One is that volunteers perceive that a sense of flexibility and freedom comes with being a volunteer. At the same time, volunteers reported a strong sense of work ethic, which is due to being motivated to make a useful contribution, and to the maintenance allowance they receive as volunteers. Their modest lifestyle and local embeddedness distinguishes them from international development consultants and brings them closer to their host organisation colleagues. Closer volunteer-host organisation relationships are also enabled through the longer time commitment that volunteers make.

Flexibility and Freedom

For many volunteers, a sense of freedom was an intrinsic aspect of volunteering. This was partly due to having freely chosen to spend a year or more of their life as a volunteer, and partly to the fairly loose structure of volunteer positions. As one volunteer put it, "volunteering is a much more amorphous thing so it files under the radar of those who like to impose an agenda" (Allen)¹. Volunteers do not hold a standard job position and the host organisations do not pay their wages, therefore their work is less tightly prescribed and less constrained by reporting timeframes and 'red tape' than other work in development. This enables volunteers to be more creative, to experiment, work across projects, and focus on what they think is important. Those volunteers who had previously worked in the development industry, or had the opportunity to observe development consultants at close range, appreciated the opportunity to be less concerned with outputs and outcomes and ever shorter funding cycles. Instead they were able to put more time into gaining an in-depth understanding of the real issues facing the host organisation.

Box 1: Freedoms of volunteering

"the volunteer has a lot more freedom to do what you think you should do or what's important" (Charlie)

"perhaps there's a lot less rigidity, so our reporting timeframe, our reporting mechanisms aren't as constrained or budgetary because we're volunteers being able to work across projects" (Adriana)

"I have a lot more freedom in a volunteer role. And obviously freedom, that can be abused and I've been very conscious of that" (Emma)

"there was just definitely a sense from some people that this isn't real life, this is just a year break from my real life" (Catherine)

¹ Names mentioned in this report are not the real names of volunteers or organisations.

However, a less structured workplace can be experienced by some volunteers in negative terms as a lack of expectation and appreciation from the host organisation. This can occur when a volunteer is placed with a host organisation that has not had previous experience with volunteers and is unsure how to manage them. A lack of clear goals and objectives, or failure to establish clear lines of accountability to the host organisation, can be frustrating for some volunteers like Jeremy, who found that “as a volunteer, when I get motivated, I perform very well, but when I get frustrated I cannot perform well”. Flexibility can also be exploited by some volunteers who see their placement as a break from their real life.

Volunteers identified several reasons why most do not abuse the freedoms of their position. Firstly, they came with the intention to help their host organisation, and most feel appreciated by, and a responsibility to, their co-workers. Secondly, many volunteers regarded their placement as an opportunity to gain international work experience, and were keen to demonstrate their worth. Thirdly, many volunteers acknowledged that they were receiving a generous allowance from the Australian government and believed they should work for it.

Volunteer Allowance and Work Ethic

Volunteers commented on the fact that their allowance was enabling them a fairly comfortable lifestyle, even though it might be less than what they earned before joining the volunteer program. They responded in contrasting ways to this. Some pointed out that they earned more than even the most senior staff in their host-organisation. They felt that it did not make sense to refer to their volunteer status but rather considered themselves as a staff member. This attitude is reinforced by the application process for volunteer positions, which is designed similar to a job application.

Other volunteers pointed out the gap between their allowance and what they might earn as consultants or in Australia. This enabled them to take advantage of the flexibilities and freedoms as “just a volunteer” (Ryan), but also to establish a relationship with their local co-workers that they felt was more equal than relationships that highly paid consultants could have.

Whether or not the volunteer allowance encouraged this, there was a strong work ethic emerging from the volunteer interviews. A common response from volunteers was that they saw themselves as doing a job just like the other staff in their host organisation. They expected to keep regular hours, participate in staff meetings, and involve themselves in the organisation’s daily routine and work schedule.

Box 2: Volunteer or employee?

“I don’t think that the people, like my organisation see me as volunteering, they know that I get – just another staff member, I get paid, I get paid as much as they would” ... “I don’t say volunteer to people when I’m explaining what I do because it doesn’t make sense” (Brooklyn)

“I’m earning as much as a volunteer as the CEO of the Government organisation that I work for” (Martin)

“I don’t see a big difference, I do the same hours as they do, I’m pretty much involved in a lot of things they do and I don’t think they ... see me like a sort of stranger in the organisation” (Jesus)

“I personally was trying not to think of myself as a volunteer, I like to think of myself as doing my job and an employee” (Catherine)

More Like a Local Staff

In the views of many respondents, their position in their host organisations was an important point of difference with other expatriate workers in the development industry. Being embedded with their host organisation, living locally and using public transport made it easy to get to know local people and be seen more as 'one of them'. They felt that they were on "a more even playing field" (Ryan) with local staff than bilateral or multilateral aid professionals who earned big salaries, lived in luxurious houses and were driven around in chauffeured cars. While "fly-in, fly-out" consultants do not have the time to engage with local staff and face "an invisible barrier" (Miranda), volunteers felt that sharing an everyday routine with local co-workers for an extended period enabled closer relationships. Some volunteers felt that knowing people and the workplace better enabled them to be "more influential to everyone in the workplace" (Simone), and effect perhaps more modest but more sustainable change. They paid greater attention to small changes in the organisation. As one volunteer said about the changes he hoped to foster in his organisation, "I am not expecting a bush fire. The little spark - that is the satisfaction" (Barnaby).

Box 3: The difference of volunteerism

"when you say that you are just a volunteer, this is what I want to do, I want to help, people can get on board with it a bit easier than if you earn a large salary and living in a big house" (Ryan)

"being able to really work on a level where you get the ins and outs of the organization and get a feel for the organization" (Iris)

"So you just talk to people, have a little chat with people, on the way to work, on the way home. You're visible in the community, and [they] know what me and my housemates are doing. At work, they see that we are trying to help, not say, we know best. We're saying "Well what can we do to help?" I suppose that's the difference." (Oliver)

"your standards drop in terms of what you expect of the staff and what you expect of change" (Bernice)

A Relational Approach

Greater flexibility, less emphasis on outcomes and being an extra resource for the host organisation all contribute to make volunteering a relational approach to development work. Volunteers have time to nurture relationships, both in their host organisations and with community members and other development organisations. This enables them to gain insights into how the host organisations understand and respond to the context in which they are working.

Volunteers talked about getting "a feel for the organisation" (Iris) and learning how they might be able to contribute to its work. Putting time into relationship building creates a more trusting work environment where host organisation staff feel able to disagree with volunteer suggestions and ideas, but where they also might be more willing to engage with new ideas. This makes a more accurate and honest exchange of information possible, compared to short-term technical advisors consultants who may not "get the true story about why something is the way that it is" and embark on misconceived or ineffective interventions (Yuni).

Box 4: The importance of building relationships

“you have that opportunity to build relationships. You don’t have to come in and, you know, sort of push and get things done and stress because things are not moving as quickly as you need to be.” (Eleanor)

“it’s taken ages to be able to build up the trust to be able to get accurate information even. I think at the start everyone was just either not telling me things, or telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. And now they’re more willing to be like, ‘No, that’s not going to work, Leighton – you shouldn’t do that’” (Leighton)

“it’s building partnerships between, you know, opening doors, and making linkages, and building bridges, and whatever else [...] between your host organisation and others.” (Jim)

However, in some organisations and contexts it is more difficult to build strong relationships at work. Some volunteers felt that they were cast as the white expert “by virtue of being foreigner” (Joanne), others felt they were just another resource at the disposal of the host organisation. The relational impacts of development will be further explored in Section 4.

3. CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT IMPACTS

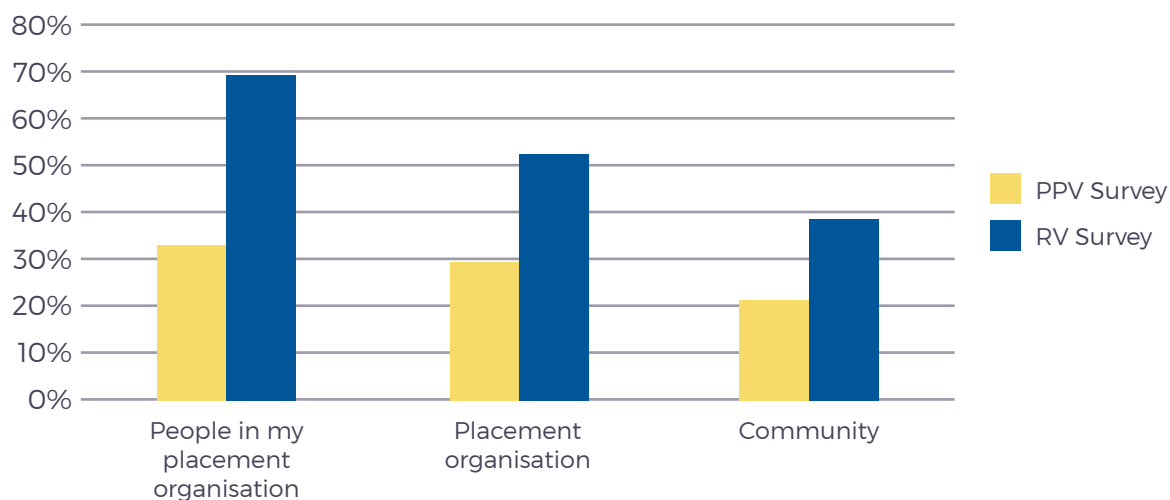
Capacity development in host organisations is a key objective of aid-funded volunteer programs (Office for Development Effectiveness, 2014, 12). Capacity development has long been recognised as central to achieving aid effectiveness and ensuring the sustainability of development initiatives (Lusthaus, Adrien, & Perstinger, 1999:1). There are broad ranging definitions of capacity development that mix normative and empirical perspectives, processes and outcomes, means and ends, and are variously applied to the individual, the organisation, or the enabling environment. One useful conceptualisation defines capacity as “the evolving combination of attributes, capabilities, and relationships that enables a system to exist, adapt, and perform” (Brinkerhoff & Morgan, 2010, 2). Following Brinkerhoff and Morgan, we distinguish five key capabilities that can be used to analyse the capacity development impacts of volunteering (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Five capabilities that define capacity



Most volunteers participate in the program because they believe they have skills and knowledge to contribute to the host organization, but few have practical experience in capacity development. The pre- and post-placement surveys asked respondents how certain they were about having a positive impact on i) people they work with; ii) the host organization, and iii) the host community more broadly. In both surveys volunteers expressed greater certainty about making a positive impact on their co-workers than on their host organisation, and were least confident about their impact on the wider community. Returned volunteers were consistently more certain about their positive impact, based on their own reflection and on their host organisation's feedback.

Figure 3: Feeling certain about having a positive impact, pre-departure and returned volunteers



The cautious stance of pre-departure volunteers regarding their likely impact indicates awareness that capacity development and intercultural understanding cannot be achieved unilaterally through their own efforts. In relation to capacity development, it is only when processes within organisations stimulate the creation and strengthening of core capabilities that we can speak of sustained capacity (Brinkerhoff & Morgan, 2010). For IDV programs this means while volunteers and other outsiders may be able to assist in developing and reinforcing capacity, this is sustainable only when host organisations lead and take ownership of the process.

Volunteers interviewed for this study reported impacts in their host organization ranging from building the confidence and skills of individual staff to improving organisational processes (interview excerpts coded under 'change in skills' and 'change in processes'). Many volunteers acknowledged that they also gained new skills and confidence in tackling new tasks. As one volunteer summed up, "it's just not coming here to develop the capacity of an organisation, it's also to develop your own capacity" (Kiera). This study found that mutual capacity building is one of the key features of development volunteerism.

Developing Skills in Host Organisation Staff

Volunteers, particularly those without previous international work experience, started their placement with the idea of building the capacity of a specific staff member in their Host Organisation. This expectation was fulfilled when volunteers and their counterparts were well matched in terms of professional expertise, shared a common language, and had formed a mutually beneficial relationship. In these cases, volunteers were able to observe a growth in the skills and confidence of their counterpart as a result of imparting generic technical skills such as word processing and web page management, report writing and grant writing, and professional communication skills in English. By improving staff capabilities to carry out technical tasks and mobilise resources, volunteers added value to the services provided by the HO and its capability to engage and commit, two key objectives of capacity development identified by Brinkerhoff & Morgan (2010, 3).

When volunteers and counterparts were not well matched, the individual skills development was difficult to achieve. Some volunteers reported disappointment about what they saw as a lack of interest or ambition among staff they were hoping to train in new skills. A minority of volunteers felt that their primary value to the host organization was as a prestige object - a white person from a developed country. This issue has also been reported in the volunteer literature (Georgeou, 2012; Hawkes, 2014). Many volunteers reported that they had reshaped their capacity development role to work with the host organization as a whole, or as part of a team, and to focus on organisational capacity (see Section 3.2).

Observing and learning over time was important to being able to respond to the capacity development interests of their HO, or that of the community partners. This was evident in one HO aiming to improve the quality of research in the community (technical capacity), while their community partners were more interested in learning how to strategically present their research findings to end users and to network with funding bodies. This recognition led the HO to modify its approach and focus more on building their community partners' capacity to relate and attract support.

Box 5: Skills building in the host organisation

“the relationship and the capacity building is on a personal level. It’s those incremental improvements that people that I’m working with feel like they are achieving” (Sophie)

“teaching particular staff skills, how to undertake a survey and working with the communications manager to teach them how to manage the webpage” (Claudia)

“there was an improved capacity to undertake tasks in a manner that was more efficient” (Paul)

“I was there as pair of hands and they wanted to me to write this report. There was no skills transfer at all.” (Ellie)

“[research skills/methods] was something I was pushing, or we were pushing, but what they [community] really enjoyed was access, network building” (Francesca)

Developing Organisational Capacity

In addition to building skills of individual staff, the main contribution to capacity development is at the organisational level. According to Brinkerhoff and Morgan (2010, 3), core capabilities that enable organisations to exist, adapt and perform include being able to mobilise resources, establish and manage linkages and partnerships, develop short- and long-term strategies, and cope with changing environments. Volunteers gave many examples of the ways in which they sought to foster these capabilities in their HOs (coded as ‘change in processes’).

A considerable number of volunteers reported that they were helping their HO mobilise resources, both internal and external to the organisation. Some volunteers contributed to putting processes and policies in place for staff recruitment, performance appraisal and supervision to enable HOs support, utilise and manage their human resources more effectively. Volunteers also sought to improve professional and ethical practices in their HO by designing training programs on specific issues including health and safety, confidentiality of client records, and child-friendly facilitation. Other volunteers worked on improving communication flows within the HO by making more effective use of ICTs and setting up processes for sharing information and documents. Other examples of mobilising internal resources include helping HO colleagues to see the value of monitoring and evaluating their programs not only for the purpose of donor reporting but also to review, adjust and improve them.

To attract external resources, development organisations have to be able to respond to changing aid flows and donor priorities and growing competition. Many volunteers were involved in identifying potential partners and writing funding applications with their HOs. While some volunteers saw this as a diversion from their area of expertise, and one that harnessed mainly their English language skills, others embraced the task as part of a broader goal to improve their HO’s communication and marketing skills, make its financial management more transparent and accountable, or help articulate the organisation’s strategic direction.

Strategic planning was reported by many volunteers as an area of capacity development to which they made significant contributions. In small NGOs some volunteers helped draft strategic plans to improve organisation's ability to cope with staff loss or funding cuts. More typically, volunteers reported that they were able to bring the "perspective of an outsider" and ability to "look at the bigger picture" with more objectivity (Allie). One volunteer, for example, collaborated with her supervisor in a strategic planning exercise which resulted in staff who had worked in silos to see "how it all contributes to the same shared goal" (Kiera). Volunteers reported better results when strategic planning was done in collaboration and led by the HO. Many found that language barriers made it "challenging to have a strategic conversation ... that engages all staff" (Nicola). When volunteers were left to design policies and guidelines by themselves, the products were likely to remain "sitting on a computer, forgotten" (Lucia), as some volunteers discovered with the work of their predecessors.

Bringing a set of fresh eyes and new ideas into the HO was also useful in identifying ways to improve performance and quality of service. Some volunteers mentioned that their ability to question established practices and the time they had to explore them helped their HO in identifying opportunities to achieve greater efficiency and growth. For example, one volunteer helped her HO to put in place a Standard Operating Procedure to follow up on HIV tests more efficiently. Another volunteer worked to strengthen his HO's capacity to plan and design buildings according to budget.

Establishing and managing partnerships is an important capacity for development organisations that aim to grow and sustain themselves. But this can be challenging for small non-government organisations that are under-staffed or lack the time or confidence to engage with external partners, particularly with larger international organisations. A number of volunteers reported assisting their HOs in this area by using their status as foreigners and English language skills to facilitate linkages between their HO and other organisations.

Box 6: Improving the organisational capacity of Host Organisations

"I've worked a little bit with the admin and HR manager, just the basic things like performance appraisals." (Alice)

"designing a building, working with them. We'll do this style of staff house, we'll do this style of clinic, we'll do this for the school building. Work out a budget, building to suit the budget" (Lenny)

"making their processes more consistent and streamline them, they understand the importance of certain things like communication, record keeping and that kind of stuff to support their programmes" (Iris)

"I was like, "oh I don't think this is quite working out well", and so I put in a whole system ... of actually following up with results, and we wrote out a whole SOP [Standard Operating Procedure] for that particular aspect of their organisation." (Jade)

"the thing that I really contribute to is articulating as an organization what the vision is and what the strategic planning is going to be" (Reanna)

"capacity development was more around maybe organisational strategy or program strategy and how to look at a things a little bit more efficiently and give a bigger picture approach" (Allie)

Capacity development included "proposals that I developed for other thematic areas which were successful, you know, relationships that have been built institutionally" (Jim)

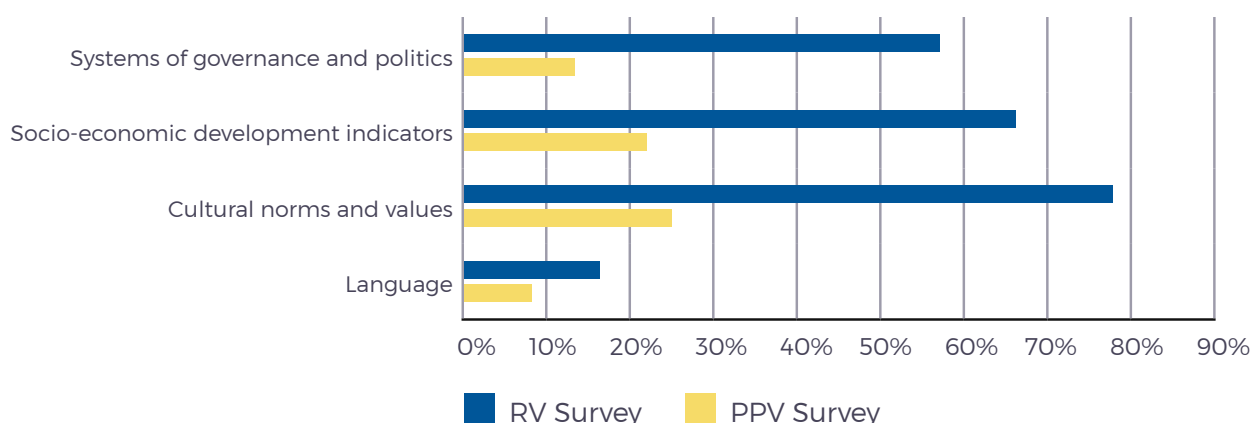
Volunteers often drew from their Australian work experience when suggesting improvements to the management, strategy or processes in their HO's. Some observed a reluctance among their HO colleagues to embrace and implement their ideas, which they put down to a fear of change. However, others acknowledged that their HO might be experiencing an "advisor fatigue" after many international experts "coming in and trying to change things" (Ryan). Volunteers with an academic or practice-based knowledge of development were more aware and more critical of the workings of the aid industry, and some were able to shift their HO's strategic plans back to their areas of strength instead of chasing donor funding. A number of volunteers challenged the idea that HO's needed their capacity development to improve its performance, arguing that a lack of resources, rather than capacity, explained "why things weren't being achieved – just like in Australia" (Eleanor).

Developing Capacities in volunteers

Volunteering is recognised as a way of gaining international professional experience and advancing career prospects in the globalised workplace (Fee & Gray, 2011; Jones, 2011; Noxolo, 2011). By working in host organisations and communities, volunteers gain global work experience and insights into the complexity of development challenges. They develop collaborative skills and international networks that assist them in finding paid employment. Volunteers gained generic employability skills including adaptability, 'thinking outside the box' and extending their comfort zone at work. Some volunteers described their experiences as 'character building' – they learned about themselves and became more resilient and self-reliant. All these new and enhanced skills and capabilities contribute to volunteers' career prospects, particularly if they are able to communicate their unique skill set to potential employers.

Country specific knowledge in the Asia-Pacific region can be a valuable capacity, particularly at a time when Australia is seeking deeper engagement and stronger relationships with the region to secure its future. Through deep cultural engagement and building their foreign language skills, volunteers are part of the "smart cultural engagement with Asia" a recent report of the Australian Council of Learned Academies argued was key to Australia's long-term and mutually beneficial engagement with the region (Ang, Tambiah, & Mar, 2015, 17). The surveys indicate that volunteers benefit from a significant growth in knowledge about their host country (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Self-rated knowledge about the host country, pre-departure and returned volunteers



A significant proportion of the volunteers interviewed for this study, both in country and returned, reported that they had gained specific skills as a result of their placement. Their host organization colleagues were often highly skilled professionals who shared their technical knowledge and experience of practicing their profession in an environment that was not familiar to the volunteer. Volunteers learned to apply and question their theoretical knowledge and gained work experience in a new environment.

Volunteers also reported learning new skills while responding to their Host Organisation's needs which sometimes fell outside their professional experience, or required them to work at a higher level of responsibility than they were used to. New skills developed by volunteers included designing and implementing monitoring and evaluation tools, fundraising, managing projects, formulating policies and guidelines, conducting staff training, and supervising or managing colleagues.

The greatest capacity development for volunteers came through being able to extend their work experience and applying their professional skills to new areas or different contexts. A substantial number of volunteers reported that they had opportunities to extend themselves and gain a breadth of work experience which would have taken them years to accumulate in more structured workplaces in Australia. Such opportunities included working on a greater diversity of projects, taking on higher level management responsibilities, moving from service delivery into policy development, interacting at a more senior level with government and non-government organisations, and working with new and different client groups.

Box 7: Skills building in volunteers

“that’s been really good, to be out here working for a water authority and seeing, like the day to day physical things of ‘this is what goes wrong with that type of valve’” (Leighton)

“the skills that I got this year are huge because they do really know what they are doing and their technical knowledge is really good and my boss is one of those who wants to involve me in everything” (Alice)

“I was exposed to a much wider range of projects than I would have been in the same time frame back here [Australia]” (Adriana)

“working within an environment where you are so limited in terms of resources and what’s available really did teach me to think outside of the box and to look for solutions that fit what we had” (Yuni)

“I am now confident of going to foreign country and surviving. Adaptability skills, that’s what I have and I can use them anywhere.” (Paul)

4. RELATIONAL IMPACTS

Relationships are the means by which volunteering achieves capacity development impacts, and are also an outcome in themselves. The interview data shows that many volunteers see the relational approach to development work as a distinctive feature of volunteering. Establishing good, trusting relationships with co-workers and supervisors in the host organisation is crucial to having a positive impact. When capacity development is conceived as a dialogical process in which new knowledge is created by learning from each other, it requires competences in collaboration, partnership formation and dialogue (Wilson, 2007). Volunteers valued the relationships they build through volunteerism as an achievement in its own right. They saw it as forging fruitful and equitable links between people of different cultures (this will be further discussed in Section 5).

Building Relationships

Volunteers provided extensive descriptions of their relationship building practices with their colleagues. Colleagues were mainly local people in government and non-government host organisations, or members of a multinational and multicultural workforce if the volunteer was placed in an international NGO or a multilateral development organisation. Some of successful strategies include:

1. taking time to get to know colleagues and their work (eg. by introducing themselves to each staff member individually, and listening to them)
2. seizing opportunities to spend time with colleagues outside work (eg. by sharing food at lunchtime, showing an interest in their personal lives and sharing about your own)
3. reflecting/knowing who you are makes relating with others easier)
4. asking questions and not pretending you know everything
5. having fun together (sharing humour, leisure time, enjoyment of cultural & social activities)
6. learning the local language

Box 8: Building relationships

“they want to pry into your life and that doesn’t worry me because I want to pry into theirs, so fair’s fair” (Germaine)

“[I realised that] if I’m going to build relationships with people in my organisation, I’m going to have to start being myself, and that’s when my relationships with my colleagues in my team became easier” (Cara)

“But as far as that question of trust and respect, getting to know people I suppose is the first way of doing that” (Eleanor)

“it took me a while to realise that I guess that relationship building is much more critical within that work environment so it took me a little while to I guess break the ice.” (Bernadette)

“You can work more strategically once the relationship is built.” (Alice)

***“they got my sense of humour, we had fun together, we could make jokes and stuff”
(Catherine)***

“I arrived and I was poked into a corner and told to do all this and so I was excluded from everything that was going on.” (Kiera)

To take the first months of their placement to observe, learn, and get to know your colleagues was a common piece of advice that many volunteers had picked up from returned volunteers. Most interview participants insisted that it was important to invest time in building personal relationships in host organisations, particularly if these were local NGOs. A number of volunteers reported of having made good friendships in their host organisation.

While most volunteers saw close relationships with their local work colleagues as important to achieve development outcomes, some found that this erased the separation between work and private life, which remains clearly established in the Australian context. In many host organisations, “it’s almost a little bit weird if you’re not friends” with your work colleagues (Martin), particularly in smaller non-government organisations. In large international NGOs or multilateral organisations, a more ‘Western’ style of working relationship was common, and volunteers tended to have less out-of-office or personal interaction with their work colleagues.

Sharing food with work colleagues helped some volunteers in establishing relationships. Food was a conversation opener, an opportunity to show respect and curiosity for local cultural practices, and a means of reciprocating hospitality.

Box 9: Relational impacts of sharing food

“sometimes I just had to suck it up and eat that mutton - eat that boiled mutton, and have a few shots of vodka with the Principal. And once I agreed to do that I found that they were much warmer towards me” (Hazel)

“I’d bring morning tea in and try and build relationships that way by sharing food” (Jade)

“So we would go out, we didn’t have cafes but we would go out and eat together or hang out at home together.” (Lian)

“Some of the others are very much, ‘Tell me about yourself. I want to share this with you. What’s that funny food you’re eating?’, and everyone’s very open and friendly.” (Catherine)

“I used to have lunch and coffee with the executive director most days so I was kept in the loop” (Jonathan)

Volunteers acknowledged that building relationships took effort and time not just on their own part, but also on part of their host organisation colleagues. Some volunteers experienced their work colleagues as deeply caring. Host organisation colleagues went out of their way to make the volunteers feel at home, watching out for them, even treating them like a family member. In organisations with many volunteers this could become a burden as staff had to go through the process of developing relationships with their volunteers over and over again. Where volunteers perceived that their host organisation did not make an effort to build a relationship with them, whether due to a lack of experience, interest, time or staff resources, they felt excluded and isolated, and felt unable to achieve any impact.

Sharing a Language

One factor that impacts on relationship building is the extent to which volunteers and host organisation staff share a common language. Where volunteers had a significant level of proficiency in the local language, relationships were reportedly easier to establish and stronger. Volunteers who shared a language and cultural background with their host country tended to settle into their new environment faster.

But when volunteers had no local language skills, building relationships depended on the host organisation's foreign language capacity and willingness to practice English. Some volunteers considered providing opportunities for host organisation staff to practice their English language skills as an important capacity development contribution because it increased their ability and confidence to communicate with international funding bodies. Other volunteers reported that they were able to collaborate with colleagues who had English skills in building staff knowledge in the host organisation, which resulted in more sustainable outcomes.

Several volunteers took advantage of the language training allowance provided through the AVID program and invested in further language training in order to be able to communicate better with their work colleagues and host community. Even limited skills in the local language were an asset in relationship building, as it showed a willingness to learn on the part of the volunteer, and enabled them to extend their social network beyond the English-speaking colleagues.

Box 10: The role of language in relationships building

“I was feeling much more comfortable and spoke Tetum the whole time and that’s when I developed really strong relationships with those co-workers.” (Keira)

“Maybe because we speak the same language, we share the same sort of customs and everything, we really have built a good rapport.” (Jesus)

“For me, definitely the language speaking is very huge because it’s not very often that foreigners can speak Khmer. So when they can see that someone’s made the effort, they are instantly on your side.” (Alice)

“establishing relationships with the team and with the people I was meant to be helping out was virtually impossible because I didn’t speak the language and they barely spoke any English.” (Nerida)

“you do feel like a little bit of an outsider sometimes particularly with language barriers, and just because [the co-worker] know them. So typically my role was just sort of learn, listen and support” (Ruby)

Barriers to relationship building

Volunteers identified four types of barriers to relationship building:

1. Lack of shared language (see above)
2. Host organisation lack of experience with volunteers
3. Host organisation internal politics
4. Lack of cultural confidence of volunteer

The majority of volunteers we interviewed did not have sufficient local language skills to be able to blend in with local co-workers. Most managed to get by in English or managed to acquire enough skills in the local language to communicate at a basic level. Language became a significant barrier when the volunteer did not speak the local language at all and was placed with a host organisation where few could speak English, or spoke only limited English. A number of volunteers presented this situation as a failing of the host organisation and as evidence that it was inadequately prepared for their arrival. They had to modify their expectations of their placement, rely heavily on staff who were willing to act as interpreters, or in some cases change to a different host organisation. Other volunteers responded by enrolling in language courses or practicing English with their co-workers.

The host organisation's lack of experience or capacity to manage a volunteer was also identified as a barrier to establishing relationships. This was mentioned by volunteers who were placed in smaller places away from the capital city where host organisations were less practiced in dealing with foreigners. In other cases, volunteers felt they were in the way of host organisations that were undergoing restructuring and busy with other, more urgent issues, such as funding crises or problems with major projects.

Box 11: Managing volunteers

“I was the first one, so I think they weren't sure about what they wanted, what could be possible, or what the program involves” (Meredith)

“I found a lack of collaboration between staff members and a lack of communication. I found it to be quite a negative environment.” (Iris)

“he didn't have managerial skills, he didn't have human resource skills, and even though it was just like him and I, it was still a matter of learning how to relate to people and work in a team and coordinate” (Tam)

“they didn't have the wherewithal to manage a volunteer in the midst of everything else” (Ellie)

“fundamental misunderstandings between me and [co-worker] ...had been going on for months. ... there was nobody in that organisation that I could on a regular basis debrief about work in English” (Anne)

Hierarchical structures, poor management practices and internal office politics can also affect volunteers' ability to establish fruitful relationships in their host organisation. Some volunteers found that their host organisation were dysfunctional due to a divide between the leadership and rank-and-file workers, or between expatriates and local workers, and felt caught up in the dispute.

While many volunteers rated their own relational skills highly, some acknowledged that feeling out of their cultural comfort zone affected their ability to relate. Too much was unfamiliar, and they were unsure what they could and couldn't say, and that being misunderstood would jeopardise their relational efforts. This was mentioned by volunteers who had not spent any significant amount of time in another country by themselves. Language difficulties usually played into this.

5. IMPACTS ON PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND COSMOPOLITAN ORIENTATIONS

Government-funded international volunteer programs are often assumed to contribute to the sending country's public diplomacy. The stated aims of the AVID program are to contribute to building "people-to-people links" and generating "goodwill for domestic and foreign diplomacy" (Office for Development Effectiveness, 2014, 10). Australian volunteers have been called 'ambassadors of Australian compassion' who are "building bridges to the world at a very personal human level – right across the planet, in the good name of Australia" (Rudd, 2011). Similar statements have been made in Canada, where volunteers have been described as "grassroots ambassadors" and "human face" of Canada's aid program (CIDA, 2005, 3). The American volunteer program has been presented as a smart and relatively cheap way to enhance US soft power (Quigley & Rieffel, 2008, 4).

Public diplomacy is concerned with portraying a country as an attractive investment destination and extending its power and influence abroad by peaceful means. It is an instrument government use to communicate their national culture, political values, and foreign policy to the publics of other countries (Nye, 2008). According to the Australian government's Public Diplomacy strategy 2014-16, enduring people-to-people links are an important way to champion Australia as an attractive country and promote its commitment to democracy, human rights, multiculturalism, gender equality and freedom of speech (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2016). Linking the volunteer with the role of the ambassador suggests that volunteers might contribute to portraying their home country in an attractive light. At the same time, it is hoped that volunteers become ambassadors of their country's development assistance program in their home community.

A broader perspective on public diplomacy is connected to the image of volunteers building bridges to the world by acting on their sense of compassion or solidarity with others. In this perspective, volunteering connects people from different cultural and national backgrounds and helps to build mutual respect and a shared understanding of global challenges through dialogue. This "diplomacy of the public" is focused less on projecting power and influence than on "dialogue between different social collectives and their cultures" to promote shared understanding and mutual respect (Castells, 2008, 92). It is more a bottom-up process of communication and networking within civil society, rather than instigated by governments. This broader view of public diplomacy is aligned with notions of cosmopolitan or global citizenship which are based on the principles of solidarity with others, and engaging them as equals (Linklater, 1998). Dialogue that involves sharing critical perspectives on policy issues can make public diplomacy more effective because a more credible image of Australia is presented to foreign publics (Potter 2009, 52). Volunteer participants in this study provided examples of both public diplomacy perspectives.

Volunteers as Public Diplomats

Volunteers in this study provided many examples of how their presence in the host country helped to communicate Australian culture, ways of life and political values. At the most basic level, volunteers saw their role as establishing friendships and bonds with people from their host country, and contributing to public diplomacy in this way. These personal connections facilitated flows of information about Australia and the host country which increased the knowledge stock on both sides. This was particularly highlighted by volunteers posted to countries that rarely came to the attention of the Australian public, such as Bangladesh and the Philippines, mentioned in the Australian media only in connection with disasters. Some volunteers posted to countries that were more familiar to Australians as a holiday destination, such as Indonesia or Maldives, were confronting stereotypes in the local community about Australians only being interested in cheap alcohol, sex and consumerism, but acknowledged that they also needed to unravel stereotypical views of their host country.

Box 12: People-to-people bonds and knowledge sharing

“I think really what I did was establish friendships, exposing them to ideas of Australia that they were not exposed to earlier.” (Paul)

“The real value is that volunteering is part of diplomacy – it’s about creating bonds between countries and people. There is value in that in and of itself.” (Simon)

“it was a novelty for them to have an Australian and it was an opportunity for them to ask me about Australia... it works both ways. I knew nothing about the Philippines before I left, and I know a significant amount now” (Allie)

“I think we are tainted with a brush here [Bali], and probably rightly so. In many ways we have created a stereotype, I think we haven’t been the global citizen we probably should have been here.” (Ryan)

Some volunteers saw people-to-people links and knowledge sharing as the most important aspect of the volunteer program but acknowledged that this ‘soft diplomacy’ impact was difficult to measure and thus to convey to tax payers in Australia. A small minority of volunteers placed the public diplomacy impacts of volunteering in a geo-strategic context. They pointed out that Asia was Australia’s ‘backyard’ and it was important to establish strong relationships of mutual interest with countries in the region. In small Pacific countries, the presence of Australian volunteers was set in the context of donor countries competing for influence. When public diplomacy objectives appeared to override development objectives, volunteers tended to be less confident about the usefulness of their placement and work.

Being overseas and outside their cultural comfort zone made many volunteers more conscious of being Australian, what it means to them and how they are seen by outsiders. Volunteers reflected on their position of privileged global citizens, coming from a Western country with a sound government system and high living standards that afforded them many opportunities. Some felt that their host country’s problems put Australia’s problems into perspective. As one volunteer put it, she felt it was inappropriate to complain about “how everything’s not perfect in Australia” when speaking with “someone who’s come from so little, who dreams of going to Australia” (Catherine). In the host country, volunteers were frequently stereotyped as rich and largely indistinguishable from other Westerners. Within the host organisation, however, there might be a more nuanced view of Australians as easy-going and collaborative.

Box 13: Being Australian overseas

“just being grateful for the opportunities I’ve had as an Australian, to have educational opportunities and having health care” (Bernadette)

“I’m so privileged that I can be a volunteer in another country.” (Emma)

Australians are “perhaps more well regarded on an individual level even than on a sort of national level, because mostly Australians are pretty easy going, pretty accepting and want to involve everybody in whatever’s going on” (Karen)

“I like to represent myself as a half-decent foreigner in this country and not be drunk and loud all the time.” (Annette)

“I think foreigners are sort of all clumped together” (Rita)

“on the streets, the stereotype was that I was a wealthy westerner” (Allie)

Many volunteers drew a distinction between the people-to-people links they were making at a personal level and being Australian in that context, and the role of an ambassador. They connected the latter role with Australia's position in the world as a country. Some volunteers mentioned this separation in the context of being drawn into discussions about Australian policies they disagreed with. Such contentious policies related to aid, climate change, mining, and asylum seekers, which variously affected their host countries. For example, a few volunteers mentioned that Australia's stance towards asylum seekers clashed uncomfortably with their own perspectives and with the spirit of solidarity with less fortunate others that informed their volunteer work. Volunteers responded in different ways, drawing a distinction between their own views and Australian government policy, engaging in a dialogue about the policy issues, or avoiding contentious policy issues because as a volunteer they had to be 'diplomatic'. Not all volunteers are interested in politics. However, public diplomacy may be more effective if volunteers do not feel constrained as 'diplomats' and free to engage in dialogue about important policy issues with people in their host country.

Box 14: Drawing the lines on policy issues

"I don't defend what the government does; I'm just here to talk about my role and what I'm doing" (Brandon)

"I didn't want to be associated with some of the policies that are coming out of the country because they are inhumane and selfish" (Sophie)

"there are times when I'm so incredibly embarrassed to be Australian and especially at the moment with the boat policies [Australian asylum seeker policies]" (Bernice)

"the people we work with know that that's not our stance so you're embarrassed on a national level for your reputation as a country but on an individual level it's very easy to show that that's not your perspective." (Brooklyn)

"you're here to help develop a climate change program but Australia is also one of the biggest contributors to climate change ... That was not something I talked openly because I was not really allowed to, I think, as a volunteer, to be quite diplomatic about these things." (Allie)

"I don't feel like I came here as an ambassador. I'm just here, I'm just lucky enough to be funded by the Australian government to be able to do what I'm doing." (Shirley)

"I feel like an ambassador for good development, social justice, promotion of women's rights, equal rights, child rights and that sort of thing" (Alice)

Cosmopolitan Orientations

International development volunteering is part of an ethical project – development assistance – that recognises a shared responsibility to address global inequalities and injustices. That we owe strangers by virtue of our shared humanity is a cosmopolitan idea (Appiah, 2006:xvi). A cosmopolitan orientation thus involves recognising the shared humanity in strangers, engaging them as equals, and being open to the cultural difference of others and aware of their own.

Most volunteers acknowledged that they have learned a great deal about the cultural norms and values in their host country (see Figure 4). They realised that there was a much more complex social and cultural reality beneath the stereotype of the 'poor country'. Even volunteers who had previously studied or visited their host country acknowledged that their cultural learning curve was steep and they, as one volunteer put it, "learned that there is a lot I don't know" (Francesca).

Box 15: Recognising and appreciating difference

“I think I get the diversity of the world. I appreciate how each one is different and unique. I mean local cultures are different and not really replicated even within countries! Geography and cultural history matters. I think I always knew this but now it’s like I know it in my heart as opposed to textbook knowledge.” (Allen)

“I think it certainly caused me to question a lot of our own cultural practices that I hadn’t previously questioned.” (Claudia)

“learning about another culture you end up learning more about yourself” (Brooklyn)

“I can’t deny it’s been a transformative experience that has made me really reflect and even question my culture and values.” (Simon)

“There are so many Australians here. It’s like you live in Australia so you don’t feel different, special or unusual.” (Iris)

Living in the host country did not necessarily mean cultural immersion. Particularly in large cities or small island states, volunteers would often share living spaces with other volunteers and socialise mainly with Western expatriates. However, many volunteers actively sought the engagement with host country colleagues and citizens, and as one volunteer put it, “the everyday lived experience is a huge learning” (Allen). One of the key learnings is about diversity – how people think, live, work differently, and how place and context matters. Collaborating with local colleagues enables volunteers to gain an understanding of these different ways of thinking, living and working, and of differences within the host country. One volunteer summarised her cosmopolitan orientation as “extending your world view and understanding on a real personal level, what effect foreign policies have and what effect cultural communication has” (Reanna). Many volunteers commented on the diversity within their host country, between the internationalised, cosmopolitan cities and the rural and remote areas, and the need to create local solutions to local development issues, rather than imposing global blueprints.

At the same time, volunteers also recognised a shared humanity in the local people they met, and that there are many development challenges that their host country shares with Australia. Drug and alcohol dependence, gender violence, systemic poverty, discrimination against indigenous people and ethnic minorities, environmental pollution and climate change are examples of shared challenges for which there are no easy answers even in Australia. Some volunteers highlighted the cosmopolitanism of their local colleagues, who were much more aware of the world outside than expected. These recognitions encouraged some volunteers to move towards a position of shared learning and problem-solving. These responses indicate that volunteering can harness dialogue between different social collectives and cultures and produce shared meaning and understanding, which Castells argues is the essence of public diplomacy and key to attaining a sustainable world order (Castells, 2008, 91).

Box 16: Recognising difference and shared challenges

“I gained a local perspective on things. ...Sometimes it can be confronting, [but] I kind of get where they’re coming from now, having that kind of conversation, seeing them regularly” (Adrian)

“It made me realize that some things are just universal. There have been lots of moments where I’ve talked with my colleagues and they want the same things in life that I do and we come from completely different backgrounds and situations.” (Lynette)

“They feel like they are isolated in the world in dealing with these problems which are actually experienced in countries worldwide, rich, poor, whatever.” (Bernice)

“They were asking me things about Australian government policy decisions. I thought it was very cosmopolitan and worldly of them to be thinking of that.” (Francesca)

CONCLUSIONS

Most volunteers who participated in this study, both in host countries and back in Australia, saw volunteerism as a productive form of development work. They identified some advantages volunteerism has over other development work which made it potentially more effective and sustainable: a focus on the host organisation's priorities, rather than external agendas; less pressure to produce outputs and more time to develop collaborative relationships; more opportunities to combine volunteer knowledge and expertise with those of local colleagues. Compared to the larger footprint of other development professionals, volunteers considered themselves to be a more cost effective and humble form of development cooperation. Volunteers tended to see themselves as team workers rather than foreign experts. As more countries in the Asia Pacific region are moving into the middle income category on economic measures, this view sits well with host organisations expecting to collaborate as equals on development challenges.

Most volunteers believe they have skills and knowledge to contribute to the host organisation, but realise that capacity cannot be developed unilaterally through their own efforts. They have neither the power nor the resources to impose change, and rely on building collaborative relationships and working on tasks together with their host organisation colleagues. Capacity development becomes a "purposeful sharing of mindsets" (Fee & Gray, 2011, 546, citing Thomas 2002).

This sharing of mindsets involves listening, observing, communicating, and learning not only about the host organisation's development work but also about the local context in which it is operating. Being flexible, adaptable and responsive to the often complex, changing and sometimes unpredictable context of their work can be stressful and thus volunteering is "not for everyone" (Tonio). Not all volunteers felt they had been successful in their capacity development efforts, but many volunteers were able to provide examples of how their work has assisted their host organisation in improving its performance and adapting to change.

Capacity development goes both ways. Many volunteers, too, experienced a growth in skills, experience and professional networks that assisted them in their career, or in re-assessing their professional and personal goals. Their capacity to understand and engage with people from different cultural and social backgrounds was enhanced, as is their ability to use and move between different cultural repertoires.

While volunteers sought to achieve development impact through the relationships they built with local colleagues, they also saw relationship building as an outcome of volunteering in its own right. Building fruitful and equitable links between people of different cultures contributes to public diplomacy, particularly if public diplomacy is understood as a dialogue to promote shared understanding and mutual respect. Volunteers were aware that they were engaging with others not only as individuals, but also as Westerners, Australians, and participants in a government-funded program, and responded in various ways to the tensions and opportunities of these positionings. As well as being grateful for the opportunities they had as citizens of a well-off, stable and democratic country, some volunteers also gained a new perspective on their own taken-for-granted privileges and on their home country's foreign policies.

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