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# International Volunteerism and Capacity Development in Nonprofit Organizations of the Global South

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**Abstract:** Although international volunteerism has been a part of official development assistance for decades, the capacity development (CD) impacts of such programs in non-profit organizations (NPOs) in the Global South have received scant attention. This paper provides insights into the ways international volunteerism contributes to endogenous CD processes by analysing survey and interview data collected from Australian volunteers and their host organizations in four countries. It shows that volunteers' contributions can be usefully examined through the lens of Baser and Morgan's (2008) framework of five core capabilities: to carry out tasks; to relate and attract support; to adapt and renew; to balance diversity and coherence, and to commit and engage. While the voluntary nature of the relationship between host organization and volunteer can make CD impacts less predictable and controllable, it also affords time to explore and negotiate what contributions are most useful to an organization within a specific context.

**Keywords:** international volunteerism, capacity development, nonprofit organizations, Global South

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## 1. Introduction

Volunteering in non-profit organizations (NPOs) of the Global South has grown in response to increasing popular awareness of global development challenges and global agendas encouraging publics of the Global North to become actively involved in addressing them (Devereux, Paull, Hawkes, & Georgeou, 2017, p. 56; UN Volunteers, 2016). With ‘leaving no one behind’ as the motto of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 2015-2030), recent studies have argued that volunteers and NPOs can play a crucial role in reaching poor and marginalised groups (Aked, 2015; Howard & Burns, 2015). Capacity development (CD) is integral to the SDG agenda because achieving the development goals rests mainly on the shoulders of local people, their organizations and governments. International volunteering is part of this global effort.

It has been claimed that international volunteers take a distinctive relational approach to skills and knowledge sharing in NPOs that acknowledges local ownership of development goals (Devereux, Stocker, & Holmes, 2017, p. 261; Schech, Skelton & Mundkur, 2018; Turner, 2015). However, there is limited empirical research into the ways in which international volunteerism plays a part in developing the capacity of NPOs in the Global South. This is partly due to the introduction of a more complex notion of CD in lieu of older concepts of capacity building and technical assistance in mainstream development discourses (OECD, 2006). While these older concepts stressed the transfer of skills and knowledge from the Global North to the Global South, CD depicts “the process through which individuals, organizations and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time” (UNDP, 2008, p. 4). This understanding reflects the view that developing countries choose and follow their own development paths, but it does present challenges for international development cooperation preoccupied with measurable outcomes (Lewis, 2006; Vallejo & Wehn, 2016). Furthermore, despite widespread support for local ownership of development among international development institutions, CD continues to be premised on the assumption that developing countries have deficiencies that require the intervention of Northern experts (Bockstael, 2017). International volunteerism can thus be criticised as just another way to “marginalize people in the Global South from the resolutions to their own development challenges” (Tiessen, 2018, p. 109).

Discussions of international volunteerism have side-stepped these knotty questions surrounding CD by framing the impact of international volunteers on VHOs more loosely in terms of helping (Palacios, 2010; Tiessen, 2018), assisting (Trau, 2015) or having an impact (McBride, Lough, & Sherraden, 2012). This acknowledges the fact that many international volunteer programs are short-term, targeted at relatively inexperienced young people and likely to benefit volunteers more than VHOs (Tiessen & Kumar, 2013). In addition, the voluntary nature of the endeavour renders capacity development impacts more unpredictable as they rely on good relationships between hosts and volunteers and on compatible values, traits and motivations (Barton, Tucker, & Lough, 2017). While these issues pose challenges for evaluating the CD impacts of volunteerism, they also encourage fresh ways of examining how CD is practiced and understood.

This paper provides an analysis of the perspectives of participants in an Australian development volunteer program that sends skilled professionals abroad to help “develop the capacity of host organisations” (Office for Development Effectiveness, 2014, p. 12). The aim is firstly to gain a more comprehensive understanding of capacity development through volunteering by analysing the perspectives of VHOs alongside those of volunteers, who have

been the focus of research to date. Secondly, we shift attention to the capabilities of the VHOs by applying Baser and Morgan's (2008) CD framework which conceptualises capacity development as an endogenous process of adaptation and change. This places the emphasis on an organization's capabilities to do things and sustain itself, rather than on its measurable attributes, as other models have done (Suarez & Marshall, 2014). Before explaining this framework and using it to explain our empirical findings we briefly review the literature on CD in the context of international volunteerism and describe the methods used in gathering and analysing the data.

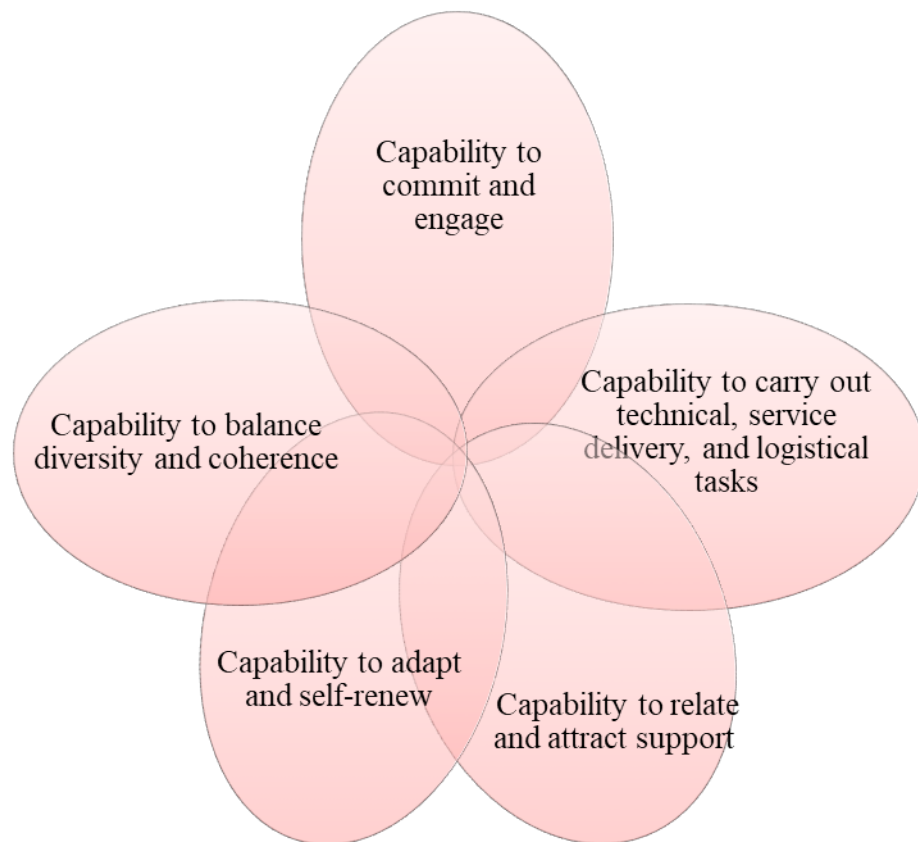
## **2. Capacity development in the international volunteering context**

International volunteer programs embedded within bilateral aid programs are designed to enable citizens from donor countries to spend an extended period of time of 6 months or more with an organization in a developing country. Such programs expect volunteers to make "a contribution to a process of social change that is of value to the local community/host organisation" (McGloin & Georgeou, 2016, p. 405). The volunteers are usually tertiary educated professionals, in their early or late career stages, with skills and technological expertise that are deemed relevant to developing the capacity of organisations to which they are assigned (Lough & Xiang, 2016; Sherraden, Stringham, Sow, & McBride, 2006). Furthermore, the involvement of host organizations in defining the placement and selecting the volunteer supports endogenous capacity development). According to a survey conducted as part of an evaluation of the Australian Volunteer program, over three quarters of the VHOs selected their most recent Australian volunteer, and 84 percent determined what the volunteer would do (Office for Development Effectiveness, 2014, p. 44). This contrasts with supply-driven short-term youth volunteer programs where VHOs have "little if any control over the selection of volunteers" and end up hosting young volunteers with limited skills and experience (Perold et al., 2013, p. 192). In the Australian Volunteer program, government stipends enable the volunteers to defray the costs of undertaking a year-long placement and contribute to establishing a working relationship with employment-like attributes (Fee, Heizmann, & Gray, 2017). Volunteers usually live and work locally, utilise locally available resources and have a sense of accountability to the VHO (Devereux, 2008), and are thus well-positioned to support endogenous capacity development.

While most literature on capacity development impacts of international volunteerism is based on information provided by Northern volunteers (Fee & Gray, 2011; Hawkes, 2014; Lough, McBride, Sherraden, & O'Hara, 2011), some recent studies have also explored the perspectives of Southern VHOs (Barton et al., 2017; Impey & Overton, 2014; Perold et al., 2013). They found that organizations can strengthen their existing capabilities, objectives and ethos by strategically deploying volunteers if they are able to assert ownership of the capacity development process (Impey & Overton, 2014). However, the rationales and interests of Northern donors may prevent NPOs from pursuing their own development goals (Elbers & Schulpen, 2013). One study found that Australian volunteers started their placement with hopes to facilitate transformative change but found themselves restricted to helping organizations survive in the neoliberal development industry (Georgeou, 2012). Furthermore, while volunteers "understood the exchange in terms of particular skill or knowledge as per their role description", their host organizations appeared to have a different view of the volunteer as a "whole resource to be utilised" (Georgeou, 2012, p. 158). The different expectations regarding what is to be exchanged, how, and for what purpose, highlights the importance of understanding CD processes from both sides of the volunteerism relationship.

In the broader literature it is now widely recognized that Northern development workers need both technical and ‘soft’ skills to facilitate CD. The ability to build collaborative relationships, understand and adapt to local culture and exercise self-awareness are considered essential soft skills for effective Northern development practitioners, along with normative commitments to self-determination, social equity, and empowerment (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2010; Clarke & Oswald, 2010). Volunteerism has long been associated with relational skills even though it operates in a context of historically shaped hierarchies between ‘aid givers’ and ‘aid recipients’ (Fee et al., 2017; McWha, 2011; Sobocinska, 2016). To better understand the unpredictability and relational quality of CD through volunteerism, and how it can facilitate the resourcefulness of volunteer hosting NPO, we apply a framework developed by Baser and Morgan (2008) for the European Centre for Development Policy Management. Grounded in empirical analysis of CD projects across time, scales and a wide range of geographical and institutional contexts, the framework conceptualizes CD as an endogenous process of adaptation and change, where capacity refers to “the evolving combination of attributes, capabilities, and relationships that enables a system to exist, adapt, and perform” (Brinkerhoff & Morgan, 2010, p. 2). CD centers on supporting and enhancing five core capabilities: to carry out tasks; to relate and attract support; to adapt and renew; to balance diversity and coherence, and underpinning all these, the capability to commit and engage (Baser & Morgan, 2008, pp. 25-26; Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Elements of capacity (Baser & Morgan, 2008, p. 26)**



Baser and Morgan understand capacity as “the collective skill or aptitude of an organisation or system” whereby each of the core capabilities plays an important role and interacts with the others (p. 25). The capability to “carry out technical, service delivery, and logistical tasks” relates to the organization’s performance in achieving outcomes. Supporting this outcomes-focused capability is what many volunteers have in mind when they begin their placement. The capability to “relate and attract support” refers to an organization’s ability to establish and maintain linkages, alliances, and legitimacy with others in order to “defend its autonomy, functioning and existence” (Baser & Morgan, 2008, p. 31). An example is marshalling external sources of support such as international volunteers. The capability to “adapt and self-renew” relates to incorporating new ideas, individual and institutional learning, monitoring progress and outcomes, and coping with changing contexts and new challenges. Another core aspect of capacity is “balancing diversity and coherence” in ways that recognize diversity both as an asset in innovation and resilience and as a potential source of conflict. While organizations must diversify their staff and skills base to deal with different clients, shifting priorities and changing external factors, they also must keep fragmentation and destructive conflict at bay by actively managing tensions and building consensus. Fifth, and most fundamental to capacity, is an organization’s capability to “commit and engage”, which refers to being aware of “its place in the world”, taking ownership of its goals and aspirations and mobilizing the commitment of its staff. Baser and Morgan identify this as a deeper, slower, second-order change that involves “a complex blend of motivation, power, space, legitimacy, confidence, security, meaning, values and identity” (p. 28).

Informed by systems thinking, this framework offers an alternative to the technical, linear and reductionist approach to capacity often found in development cooperation (Clarke & Oswald, 2010; Venner & Wehn, 2015). By conceptualising capacity as emerging from the interaction between people’s competences and collective capabilities, it highlights the relational, invisible and transitory elements that determine the functioning of organizations as dynamic systems (Fowler & Ubels, 2010, p. 17). Researchers have applied the framework to analyzing how and why donor-funded CD often fails to enhance the resourcefulness and flexibility of Southern organisations operating in complex, unpredictable environments (De Lange, 2013; Wetterberg, Brinkerhoff, & Hertz, 2015). However, some argue that a systems approach which describes CD processes as often “unpredictable and disorderly” (Baser & Morgan, 2008, p. 18) is not well suited to development cooperation where donors are under pressure to achieve measurable outcomes quickly (Vallejo & Wehn, 2015). Another downside is that drawing attention to systemic problems in the enabling environment may lead to more rather than less donor intervention and “dominance of development” (Venner, 2015, p. 94). In the volunteering context where outcomes are not the priority, these criticisms are less relevant than the model’s potential to advance understanding of volunteerism’s distinctive contributions to CD. It does this directing attention to the interplay between volunteers and VHO in “endogenous actor-led” CD processes. Secondly, conceptualizing capacity as a set of interconnected capabilities offers a more nuanced language to describe the complex and diverse CD processes and interactions taking place. This assists in understanding why the impacts vary between placements, organizations and countries even within the same program. Before analysing our empirical data with reference to Baser and Morgan’s framework, the next section outlines the research methods and data used in this paper.

### 3. Research Methods and Data

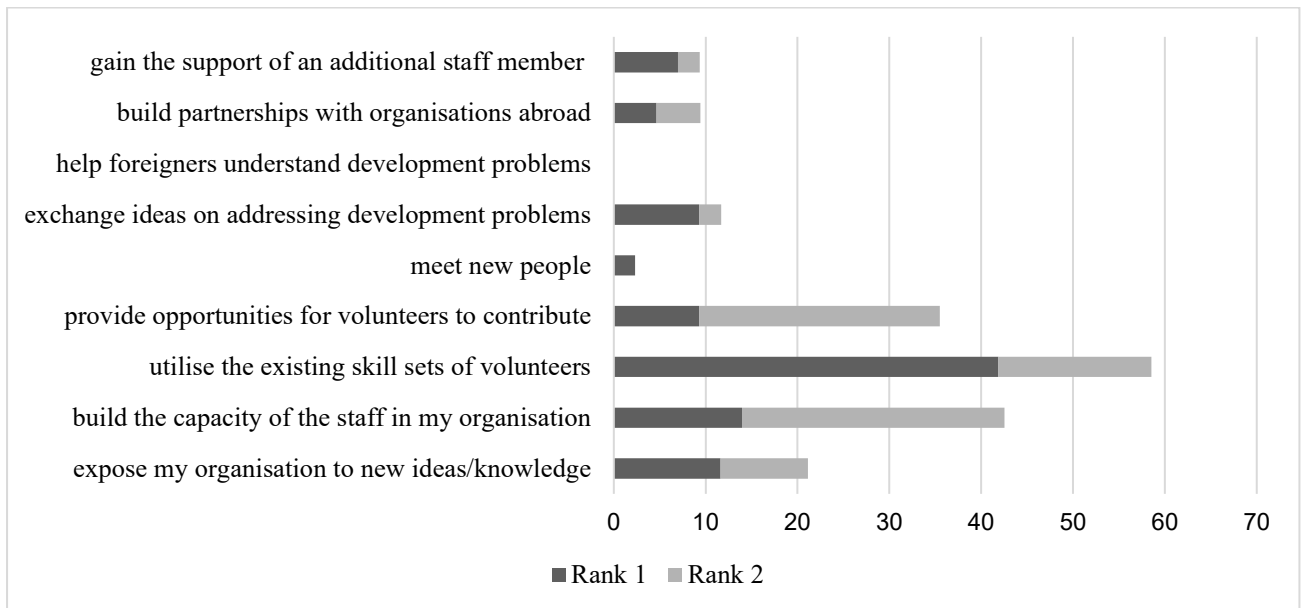
The data discussed in this paper are part of a broader study on the impacts of development volunteering focused on the case of an Australian Volunteer program that has been operating since the 1950s and supported by the Australian government throughout its history. In 2018 the Australian government provided AUD\$ 41 million to support over 1200 volunteers working in 750 organizations across Asia and the Pacific region (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2018). Our study took a mixed methods approach consisting of questionnaire surveys followed by in-depth interviews and focus group discussions in selected countries. The surveys provided a broad map of the individual motivations, reasons and expectations of participants in the program. Volunteers were surveyed at their pre-departure briefings in Australia between August 2013 and May 2014 [N=311, response rate 66%]. A modified version of the survey was translated into local languages and distributed to staff from volunteer host organizations during focus group discussions in the case study countries [N=47]. In this paper we report on two survey questions to establish the importance of capacity development in motivations to volunteer and to host volunteers (1).

Detailed information on the practices of capacity development was sought through semi-structured interviews conducted with volunteers and host organization staff. A total of 135 interviews collected between September 2013 and December 2014 with volunteers in Cambodia, Indonesia, Peru, Solomon Islands and Australia and with a wide range of host organizations including NPOs. All interviews were digitally recorded, anonymized, transcribed in full by a professional transcribing service or translated by research assistants conversant in the local language and imported into QSR International's NVivo 10 software (2). Interview texts were analyzed in four steps. First, we applied "broad-brush coding" to six interview questions and responses about changes – in processes, knowledge, skills, attitudes, behavior and effectiveness – that the HOs and volunteers were working to achieve (Bazeley, 2013, p. 71). These questions were designed to break down the CD 'black box' and resulted in 21% of interview text coded under six nodes for each participant group. The second step involved selecting the interview material pertaining to the sub-set of 50 HOs and volunteers working in the NPO sector. Next, the selected interview material was manually analyzed using sub-coding to capture the finer nuances and complexities of the changes described by participants, the connections between these changes, and the relationships between participants in the CD processes. Slicing data into their component parts opened new analytical possibilities which were most aptly articulated by the Baser and Morgan framework, and this in turn shaped our selection of vignettes and examples to capture and discuss the five core capabilities.

### 4. Capacity Development as Process: Perspectives from NPOs and Volunteers

Capacity development was the primary reason for volunteers and host organizations to participate in the Australian volunteer programme. When host organizations were asked to rank a list of reasons for wanting a volunteer, "utilise their skills" and "build the capacity of staff" emerged as the main motivations (Figure 2). The exchange of ideas and providing opportunities for volunteers to contribute were important to a smaller share of VHOs.

**Figure 2: Most important reasons for hosting volunteers (% of organizations selecting ranks 1 & 2)**

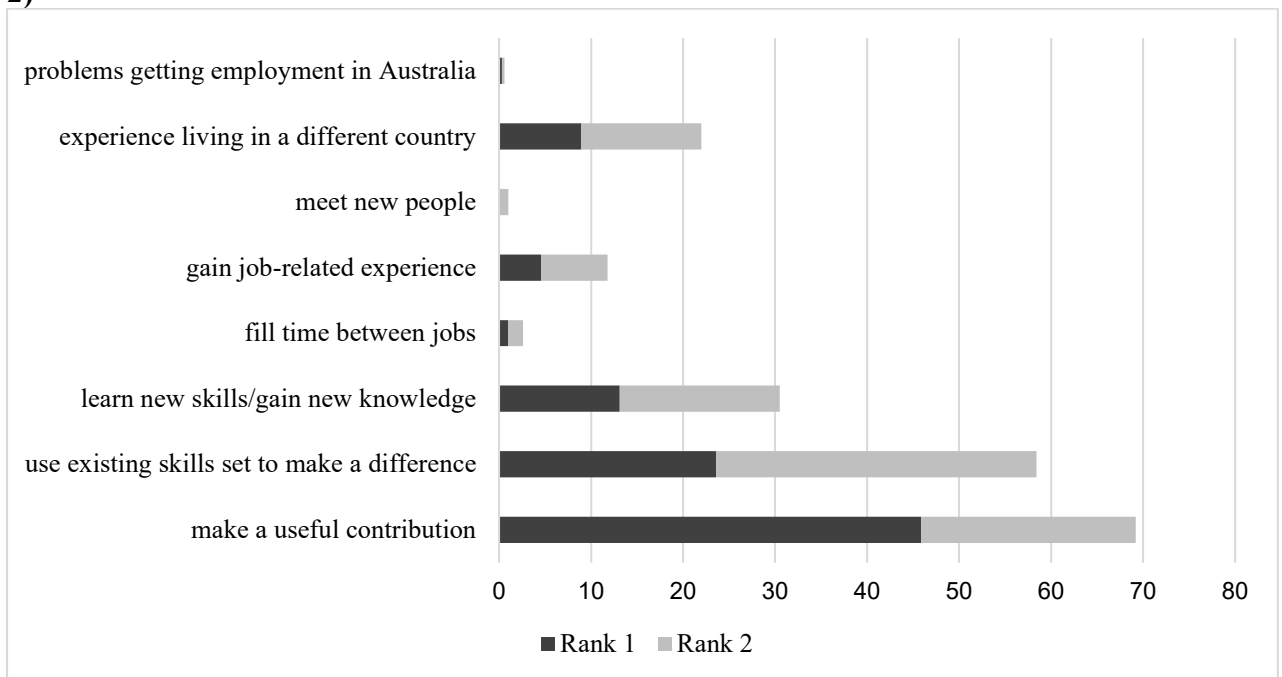


Source: VHOSurvey 2013-2014 (N=47). Ranking question.

For volunteers, “making a useful contribution” and using their skills “to make a difference” emerged as the most important motivations, followed by the desire to learn new skills/knowledge and gain experience of living and working in a different country (Figure 3). This suggests that volunteers see capacity building as both sharing existing skills and gaining new ones. When volunteers were asked to select from a list of ten tasks those that best described their expected role (Figure 4), the majority expected to mentor, train or provide technical support and advice to local counterparts, which references a one-way transfer of technical skills. However, a significant proportion of respondents also anticipated that they would support the organization in planning, strategizing, evaluation and/or research and two thirds of the volunteers expected to develop resources, which suggests a more VHO centered and endogenous notion of capacity development.

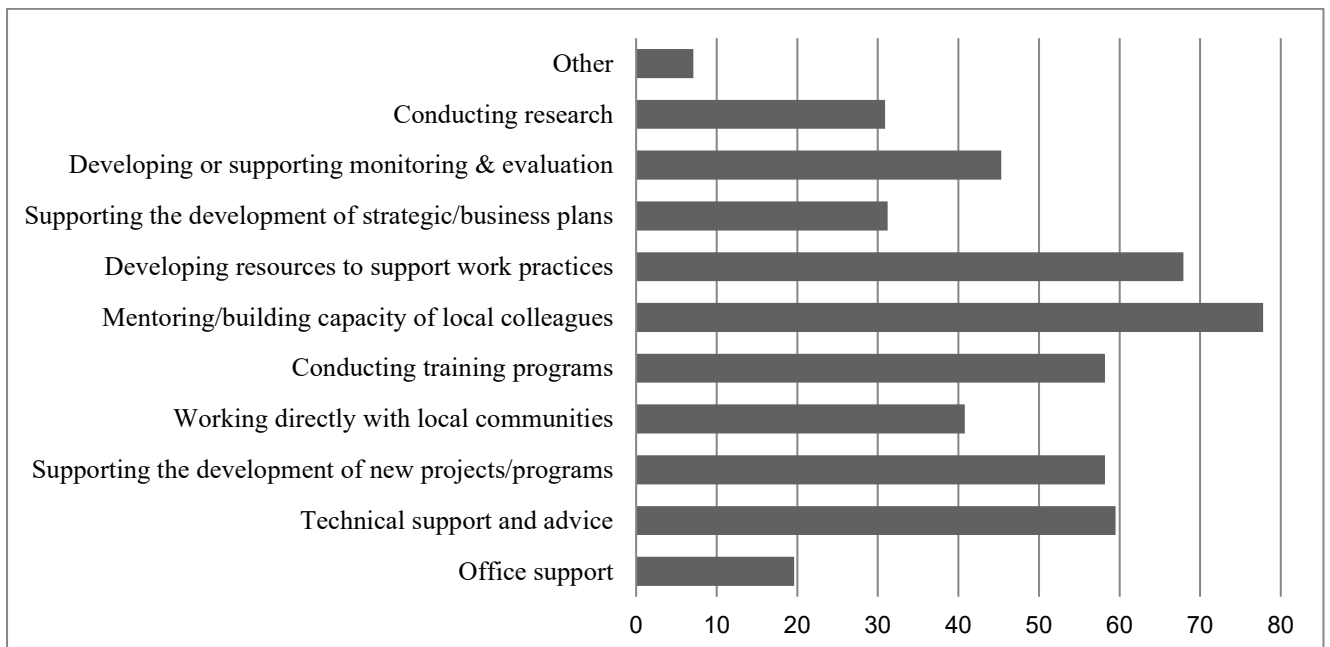


**Figure 3: Most important reasons for volunteering (% of volunteers selecting ranks 1 & 2)**



Source: VPD Survey 2013-2014 (N=311). Ranking question.

**Figure 4: What volunteers expect to do during their placement (% of volunteers)**



Source: VPD Survey 2013-2014 (N=311). Multiple response question.

While these surveys provided a useful indication of expected CD roles, semi-structured interviews offered a deeper understanding of the ways in which host organization staff and volunteers understood, experienced and critiqued capacity development. The core elements of

Baser and Morgan's framework are used as the analytical headings for our findings and discussion below.

#### ***4.1 Capability to carry out technical, service delivery and logistical tasks***

Analyses of CD tend to focus on the 'how' issues – that is, on the capability to carry out technical tasks (Baser & Morgan, 2008, p. 56). This is because an organization's capacity assessed first and foremost by its ability to deliver services and produce results (Vallejo & Wehn, 2015). The volunteering literature reflects this concern with achieving technical, functional, procedural and structural improvements. For example, Fee et al. (2017) categorize volunteer CD efforts in two ways: helping individual staff members improve their capability to carry out tasks, and contributing to the efficiency and effectiveness of organizational processes and systems. Many volunteers begin their placement expecting to mentor, train or advise a counterpart in their VHO. When matched with a local staff member willing to be trained, they could observe "incremental improvements that people that I'm working with feel like they are achieving" (Sophie, Cambodia) (1). The direct impact of skill transfer on the organization's capability to carry out tasks was most easily identified when technical skills were involved. In a NPO engaged in educational film production, a staff member described how working closely with the volunteer on tasks extended her capabilities: "Because I worked a lot with him I could actually see him in the process of editing all of the shots and also taking the voiceovers and all of those things. Now I can do it myself without having to have him." (Gabriela, VHO, Indonesia).

While Gabriela's account of learning skills from the volunteer fits the description of functional improvements, many volunteers were unsure of their CD contribution. This happened when volunteers were asked to carry out tasks rather than showing a local counterpart how to do them. Some volunteers in this situation attributed the mismatch between role expectations to a lack of understanding of CD in the VHO. As one volunteer put it, "the organization just applied for a [volunteer] because it would be helpful to have an employee. They didn't have a counterpart set up... and there was no support for me to do anything" (Simone, Cambodia). While Simone took CD to mean working with local staff to improve their capacity, her VHO was more interested in using her skills to deliver outcomes. This was commonly found in small organizations. As one staff member put it, "volunteers are very valuable to small NGOs who do not have the capacity to employ all the staff with the kinds of skills the organization needs. So volunteers not only help build capacity, they act as staff as well" (Jones, VHO, Solomon Islands).

When volunteers were willing to act as staff, they were more likely to work within a team and focused on organizational capacity. For example, one volunteer observing that her VHO did not "have a collective database of all the clients that we work with currently" set up a client records system (Rowena, Cambodia). In another example, the volunteer worked with his colleagues on logistical improvements including "designing the organogram ...; attending to the goals of the organization, and the needs of human resources to achieve those goals, and organising internal procedures for an information management system" (Manuel, VHO, Peru). From this VHO's perspective, the volunteer's work had a direct and positive impact on the organization's ability to pursue its goals, and ultimately on service delivery.

The key point here is that VHOs and volunteers had different ideas about the volunteer's role in supporting the organization's capability to carry out its tasks and programs, with some volunteers clinging to older models of capacity building as teaching and advice-giving

(Fowler & Ubels, 2010, p. 16). Others pursued a collaborative approach of creating knowledge and finding solutions by working together, or “doing together” (Aked, 2015, p. 32). This entails collaborative learning, dialogue and building relationships of trust, which are widely acknowledged as key to effective capacity development but often neglected in an industry shaped by “unhelpful dichotomies, such as knower and ignorant” (Wilson, 2007, p. 193). Volunteering relationships are not immune to these divides between having and lacking capacity, and some volunteers in our study continued to understand their role as a provider of technical expertise, but the majority sought collaborative ways of strengthening the existing skills and processes in their VHO to improve its effectiveness.

#### ***4.2 Capability to relate and attract support***

Often a lack of resources, rather than technical capacity, prevents an organization from fully delivering its desired results. For many development organizations, increasing their visibility to potential donors and developing external relationships is a crucial aspect of capacity development, particularly in countries where international aid is a significant resource. To attract external support, organizations must respond to changing aid flows, donor priorities and rules, as well as to growing competition for limited aid funds.

Australian volunteers’ English language skills were an important asset in helping VHOs to attract support. When organizations had limited English language skills and worked on locally defined development issues that were not well-recognized by the wider development industry, volunteers were able to produce documents in English and enhance the organization’s profile through marketing materials, websites and social media presence. One VHO staff described how the volunteer contributed to developing a pitch to potential funding partners:

She spent a lot of time to study to learn, to capture what we are doing, and finally she did the research and then helped us to develop the training ... about selling technique for long-term relationships. And we are going to use her training module to translate into our language, a little bit simplifying in order to be applicable (Phary, VHO, Cambodia).

Highlighting time, learning, and multiple translations, Phary exposes the effort that goes into developing the capability to attract external support for locally defined development goals. In other VHOs the mere presence of Australian volunteers, with their international networks, was perceived to offer opportunities. As one VHO staff explained, “by them being here, we are better recognised by local and international funding bodies. Our relations grow. The organization’s funding is 60% from donations so it helps us a lot when we need funding” (Belinda, VHO, Indonesia). Amidst fierce competition for aid funding, small organizations relied on volunteers to strengthen and diversify their external connections. In the Solomon Islands, one VHO staff credited the volunteer with helping “to connect with new donors, which opens up possible funding opportunities for us” (Jones, VHO, Solomon Islands). In Cambodia, a VHO presented the work of the volunteer as critical to the organization’s very survival: “[The volunteer] developed two concept notes for us to submit to funding agencies and helped us to develop the strategic plan. ... Because we don’t have funding we cannot operate. And they can connect us, link us to the other organizations, because they might have connection to other organizations” (Nareet, VHO, Cambodia). Here Nareet connects the international volunteer’s experience, language skills and provenance from a wealthy Northern country with his organization’s capacity to attract potential funding bodies. Aid dependency

and aid fragmentation put pressures on NPOs to demonstrate capacity, and many organizations seek external validation through consultants to enhance their competitiveness (Suarez & Marshall, 2014).

International volunteers represent more affordable social capital that a VHO can use to its advantage. One Indonesian NPO staff explained how it benefitted not only from the technical accountancy skills of the volunteer but also from his connections to the expatriate donor community: “We know our weakness. We are very bad on PR. Like it or not, some of them [volunteers] are connected with our donor, they talk to our donor. They will give validation for our work. This is one of the biggest benefits we have” (Wayang, VHO, Indonesia). Wayang’s reasoning indicates a pragmatic approach to Northern volunteers opening doors to the corridors of power. Previous research found that volunteers embraced their privileged position as a tool to attract resources that could change local conditions - the purpose of their role as they saw it (Georgeou, 2012, p. 151). Similarly, some volunteers in our study took an instrumental view on the racial dimension of privilege: “the fact that I’m moderately white, off-white, as I like to say, it’s definitely an element of legitimacy. People will take me more seriously. ... I understand it and it’s not necessarily a good or a bad thing, it’s just the way to get things done here” (Oliver, Solomon Islands). In this example whiteness is deployed to lend legitimacy to the VHO and at the same time played down to lessen the difference with local colleagues.

In summary, a key aspect of enhancing the capability to relate and attract support was leveraging the volunteer’s position as “outsiders on the inside” (Devereux et al., 2017, p. 261) to act as conduits, “brokers and translators” (Georgeou, 2012, p. 154) between the local community and international funding bodies. The fact that most volunteers spoke the language of Western donors and shared their culture helped them in this role, even though this was also a source of discomfort and critical reflection.

#### ***4.3 Capability to adapt and self-renew***

NPOs in the Global South operate in a rapidly changing development landscape that requires constant adaptation. Often with limited resources, they must be flexible to comply with new government regulations and donor requirements, adapt to changing community needs and take advantage of emerging opportunities. Exchanging ideas with volunteers can contribute to an organization’s capability to adapt and self-renew (Baser & Morgan 2008).

In VHOs where few staff had travelled abroad for study or work, volunteers provided an “opportunity to be exposed to other ideas and different ways of doing things” (Rita, VHO, Cambodia). Volunteers also acted as an international benchmark which the organization could use to measure its performance. As one VHO staff member put it, “they tell us our gaps and give us new ideas to fill those gaps” (Yeong, VHO, Cambodia). If their ideas were not of immediate use, they can be stored until the time was right: “at least we have an idea that is applicable in the future” (Phary, VHO, Cambodia). These comments indicate ambivalence about the appropriateness and useability of Northern volunteers’ knowledge and ideas, lending support to longstanding arguments about the ineffectiveness of much knowledge transfer across cultural and technical boundaries (Wilson, 2007). As one VHO employee pointed out, adapting new ideas must be led by the organization: “volunteer cannot give you directly if we do not pick up like our own” (Sathurn, VHO, Cambodia). Here Sathurn alludes to endogenous capacity development by contrasting the passive receiving of ideas from the volunteer with the active process of learning. Whereas ‘learning from’ volunteers is framed

by dominant knowledge, ‘learning with’ volunteers produces new knowledge over which the organization can claim ownership (Wilson, 2007, p. 193).

Most volunteers were conscious that organizations drive their own transformation and they only played at best a supportive role. One approach taken by volunteers was to ask questions about “the system in place here” and “how do you manage that?”, rather than imposing their own ideas about how the organization should run (Leighton, Solomon Islands). Planning processes became opportunities for reflection about current work practices and possible improvements. One volunteer recalled how he “facilitated the opportunity for the staff to develop their ideas and provided a process by which they could take those ideas and put them into a long-term frame” (Jonathan, Cambodia). VHOs pointed out that the volunteer’s outsider perspective stimulated reconsideration of established practices: “By talking with them we are sometimes made aware of things we take for granted – we say ‘oh, that is our culture’. But when they share with us how it can be done differently it gives us insight into what we can do here” (Joses, VHO, Solomon Islands).

The responses from VHO staff confirm findings from other studies that the exchange of ideas and knowledge with volunteers is important for host organizations (Lough & Matthew, 2013; Nelson & Child, 2016). However, turning new ideas and knowledge into capabilities for action and performance is not straightforward, and may take much longer than a volunteer placement. Becoming aware of an idea can help people think differently and modify their behaviours, but the process of absorbing and mastering new ways of thinking needs time and encouragement from the organization leadership, particularly if it involves unlearning skills and behaviours that have been practiced for a long time (Baser & Morgan, 2008, p. 55). This time lag helps to explain why volunteers tended to be less aware than their VHOs how sharing ideas and knowledge supported the latter’s capability to adapt and self-renew.

#### ***4.4 Capability to balance diversity and coherence***

Diversity and coherence are seemingly contradictory features of an organization. Many host organizations in our study were aware of the benefits a variety of perspectives and ways of thinking can bring to their work. This diversity, however, has to be properly harnessed and managed to retain the overall coherence of the organization and avoid fragmentation and losing focus (Baser & Morgan, 2008, p. 33). For some VHOs, the most important contribution of international volunteers was “giving us opportunity to meet with people from different culture. ... So then we can see the project from different angle, different point of view. [And] if you have a multinational team, it's healthier, you can learn to communicate with the people from different culture” (Meera, VHO, Indonesia). Meera’s comment draws a connection between diverse cultural and knowledge inputs and better outcomes. Her observation about the value of a multicultural team resonates with other host organizations that perceived international volunteers as a resource to improve cross-cultural communication skills.

The diversity that international volunteers bring can also pose challenges for VHOs. Research has found that fully integrating volunteers into the daily management and operation increases coherence (Impey & Overton, 2014) but it can also test the VHO’s ability to manage tensions between volunteers and staff. Tensions were sometimes the result of volunteers creating a distance with their colleagues by refusing to work to the same rules on the grounds that they were ‘just volunteers’ even when their stipends were higher than local staff salaries. Other volunteers created disharmony by adopting a supervisory role with local colleagues or seeing

their own knowledge and skills as superior. VHOs adopted various strategies to manage emerging tensions in the relationship with volunteers: “Whatever the volunteers are working on, we harmonise that in terms of work plans with their counterparts ... We try for communal meetings and catch-ups” (Rita, VHO, Cambodia). By bringing staff and volunteers together in meetings, this VHO created opportunities to explain existing work practices and exchange different perspectives, which improved the coherence of its endeavours. Other VHOs insisted on the volunteer working as part of a team, and a few sought regular feedback from staff on “how this volunteer is doing” (Harto, VHO, Indonesia). Such measures can have long-term beneficial impacts on communication flows and productive management of diversity within the organization.

From a volunteer perspective, the capability to balance diversity and coherence was most noticeable when found lacking. Some volunteers found that their VHO lacked experience in dealing with international volunteers or were too preoccupied by an internal or external crisis to manage a volunteer. Among the issues affecting volunteers were hierarchies between the VHO leadership and rank-and-file workers and between expatriates in the organization and local workers which undermined their own and the organization’s effectiveness. According to one volunteer, “a lack of collaboration between staff members and a lack of communication” hampered her contribution to the VHO (Iris, Cambodia). Volunteers responded variously by adapting their capacity development activities to suit the situation, changing to a different VHO, or terminating their placement early.

Although volunteers tended to rate their own relational skills highly, being outside their cultural comfort zone could present challenges for them and their VHOs. At the top of the list of concerns were “language and cultural barriers” (Roseanne, Cambodia). One volunteer acknowledged that “fundamental misunderstandings between me and [co-worker] ... had been going on for months [and] there was nobody in that organization that I could on a regular basis debrief about work in English” (Anne, Peru). Other volunteers mistook local cultural protocols of politeness for agreement with their ideas, which led to frustrating waste of time and resources on activities that did not meet the needs of the VHO: “I’ll have a great idea [for a] project and how I think it will help and I get a ‘yes’. Then it turns out that was a stupid idea because of things I just didn’t understand” (Annette, Cambodia). One VHO staff member explained that hosting Australian volunteers made her organization more aware of the factors that helped to achieve coherence: “language, communication, and previous experiences, adaptability [as well as] similarities in global outlook [Spanish: *cosmovision*]” (Giaconda, VHO, Peru).

Thus, VHO’s capability to benefit from the diversity that an international volunteer represents depended on many factors, including open communication, shared language and a willingness to adapt and learn. By taking time to build relationships with their colleagues, actively seeking their input and encouraging questioning, volunteers were able to contribute to this capability, particularly if they shared the vision of their host organization and were committed to its purpose.

#### ***4.5 Capability to commit and engage***

To generate public value, an organization needs a sense of identity, collective drive, confidence and ambition (Baser & Morgan, 2008). In the development context, this capability can be undermined by external factors such as aid dependency and political instability which reduce the organization’s autonomy and space for action. Internal factors such as conflict

over the direction or resistance to change can also diminish an organization's sense of purpose. The capability to commit and engage relies upon a coherent strategy that reflects the organization's self-definition and core values, and new resources and diversifying relationships with outside groups.

Although this core capability is developed over a longer timespan than volunteers can provide, two examples from Peru show how volunteers can support this process. One VHO was in the process of transitioning from being a subsidiary of a Northern NPO to an independent organization. In this critical phase it recruited a volunteer to review the organization's engagement policy with the mining sector. She soon became part of the leadership team working on several strategic projects including the first strategic plan of the organization, image creation and marketing. Asked about her capacity development role the volunteer was ambivalent about the term and described it instead as encouraging collective problem solving and challenging her colleagues' "mindsets by playing the devil's advocate" (Tora, Peru). From the VHO perspective, the volunteer's work "moved the organization a step forward in terms of being able to relate to the mining industry" and resulted in "changing the organization so it can do better work" (Aron, VHO, Peru).

In the second example, the VHO was a grassroots organization in the rural highlands of Peru looking for new sources of livelihood for its members. It hosted a volunteer to help develop tourism as an alternative income stream for a local farming community suffering from the impacts of armed insurgency over an extended period. The VHO head emphasised the organization's strong social commitment and his expectation "to develop a synergic and sustainable relationship with the volunteer based on our principles and also our institutional goals" (Arcani, VHO, Peru). Despite being strongly rooted in the community, the VHO had difficulties in persuading its members to invest their time and labour in tourism. The volunteer managed to convince his VHO to establish a social enterprise, rather than seeking to partner with large tour operators. As he explained, "when people manage to get that vision [social entrepreneurship]", both the organization and the community benefit "because everything would stay locally". By the end of his placement, community members no longer identified themselves as "disadvantaged from the results of the war" but now "saw themselves more like small business people" (Tonio, Peru). From the VHO's perspective, the volunteer had inspired the local people "to hope again" (Arcani, VHO, Peru). Overseeing their own tourism business enhanced the VHO's and the local community's sense of identity, autonomy and confidence, which is key to the capability to engage and commit (Baser & Morgan, 2008, p. 27).

In both cases, the VHOs demonstrated a strong sense of ownership of the capacity development project, which indicates that there is a virtuous circle connecting existing capability to engage and commit with the effective utilization of a volunteer to enhance it. Secondly, these volunteers were able to communicate in the host organization's language and understand its commitment to local ownership, identity and ethical development. Shared values, meaning and moral purpose are at the heart of "a convincing answer to the 'why' of capacity development" (Baser & Morgan 2008, p. 56), or as Woodhill (2010) argues, CD becomes meaningless without shared objectives and sense of purpose.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to gain a better understanding of the ways in which international volunteerism contributes to capacity development in NPOs in the Global South. Such a

contribution is a key objective of skilled volunteer programs funded through aid budgets, but the voluntary nature of the engagement, distance and diverse contexts, and the inherent complexity of capacity development processes pose challenges in analyzing their impact. In the context of historically unequal North-South relationships, CD is often associated with patronising and dependent aid relationships that clash with the aspirations to equal partnerships of many volunteers and host organizations. This is captured by one volunteer's observation that "there was something a bit colonial about [CD] and you could see the frozen look on their faces" (Anne, Peru), particularly when VHOs were looking for a "bigger definition of capacity building than training and teaching" (Aron, VHO, Peru). Many volunteers and host organizations in our study avoided the term altogether and talked instead about contributing to change.

Baser and Morgan's framework offers a way forward by capturing the complexity and relational nature of CD, as well as the aspirational search for deeper capacity "beyond organisational self-interest, personal advantage or greater efficiency" (Baser & Morgan, 2008, p. 56). Although developed within the international development context, it moves away from donor perspectives of capacity and places the emphasis on endogenous capabilities that enable organizations to perform and sustain themselves (Wetterberg et al, 2015). The first to apply this framework to volunteerism, this paper brought to the fore some of the distinctive features of volunteerism where the actors rely on soft skills to move the host organization a step closer to its goals. Above all, learning and making time for learning, relational skills and co-creating knowledge are widely recognised as playing a pivotal role in emancipatory social change but take time and can lead to uncertain outcomes (Clarke & Oswald, 2010). As volunteers are less bound by pre-determined CD goals and pressured to demonstrate aid effectiveness, they are in a good position to engage these soft skills to support their host organizations' capabilities.

Our research also shows that volunteers were not immune to the hierarchies and pressures of the aid industry. They tended to look first for practical ways to help the organization achieve small improvements in its service delivery, the most measurable of the five capabilities. But in many cases they were able to offer also strategic support that enabled VHOs to negotiate complex environments, adapt to changing circumstances, seize new opportunities, attract external support and enhance local autonomy and sense of direction. These impacts were sometimes surprising, serendipitous and frequently described as emergent rather than fully realized. The findings of this research suggest that Baser and Morgan's framework enriches understanding of volunteerism's contributions to the more intangible, "higher end" aspects of capacity (Fowler & Ubels, 2010; p. 16). These insights can usefully inform preparatory training, evaluation and debriefing in volunteer programs that take a transformative approach to CD. Future research should also examine whether the framework can adequately capture longer-term impacts of volunteer programs in VHOs and whether it can accommodate different cultural perspectives that could inspire a pluriversal notion of organizational capacity.



**Notes**

- (1) For a more comprehensive analysis of survey data see Schech & Mundkur 2016.
- (2) All research participants' names are pseudonyms. Quotes are from volunteer interviews unless identified as VHO.

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