

# The Impacts of International Volunteering: Summary of the Findings

**Cosmopolitan Development:**

The Impacts of International Volunteering Project Findings Part 4

November 2016

## Acknowledgements

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Research Council, Scope Global, or the Universities involved.

### SUMMARY REPORT

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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 mainly 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. 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.

## Results From The Research

### Building partnerships through IDV

Volunteerism works through relationships. AVID volunteers spend significant amounts of time and effort to establish good and productive relationships with host organisation staff. Most host organisations value relationship building highly. Relationships are the conduit for capacity development and the 'stuff' of the people-to-people links that are IDV's principal objectives. Both volunteers and host organisations describe the relationships they build as equal and mutually beneficial – qualities that characterise a true partnership. IDV programs such as AVID are therefore part of the global push for a shift from donor-recipient relationships to equitable and mutually accountable partnerships. They contribute to Sustainable Development Goal 17: 'a global partnership'.

### Capacity development and reciprocal learning

Capacity development through IDV is mutual rather than one-sided. Host organisations gain specific skill and ideas that help them innovate and work effectively in a global environment, and these capacities are more sustainable if they are acquired through collaborative work rather than formal training. The research found that volunteers also develop their capabilities by gaining valuable soft skills, international professional experience and specific country knowledge that are useful for living and working in a global world. This outcome, and the contribution of host organisations to it, should be acknowledged as a positive impact of IDV.

### Developing cosmopolitan orientations

The research confirms previous findings that IDV assists in promoting a positive image of Australia overseas. But it also found more far-reaching impacts on the orientations of volunteers and host organisation staff towards development, volunteerism, and engaging with other cultures. IDV offers volunteers opportunities to practice and gain a reality check on their openness towards other cultures, as well as developing their intercultural competencies. Host organisations enhance their ability to engage effectively with foreign development actors by developing and practicing different cultural repertoires and opening up to new ideas and knowledge.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the empirical findings of this study. These recommendations are aimed at improving the impacts of the AVID program and the ways to evaluate them. Four ways are identified in which the positive impacts of the AVID program can be further enhanced:

### **Increasing host organisations' sense of ownership of volunteer placements**

The current system of assignment reporting encourages volunteers' accountability to the program rather than the host organisation. Greater ownership by host organisations can be achieved through a reporting structure that involves host organisations more centrally in managing, monitoring and evaluating their volunteer placements. Embedding the volunteer in internal reporting structures may help host organisations and volunteers to negotiate placements that are responsive to the changing circumstances of the host organisation and have beneficial outcomes for both parties.

### **Creating more flexibility in the program**

Volunteers' expectations are shaped by the position descriptions under which they applied. But the reality is often different, and volunteers need to be able to respond to changing needs of host organisations. Volunteer placements could be advertised in a manner that encourages more flexibility and a realistic perspective on achievable outcomes. The design of the volunteer program could embed mutual learning and relationship building as a core component of the placement. Greater flexibility for in-country volunteer management teams in regard to the deployment of volunteers can help improve the quality of volunteer placements.

### **Recruiting volunteers with appropriate skills and attitudes**

Current recruitment practices focus on the volunteer's professional skills. But volunteers must also have a generic skill set to achieve capacity development goals with their host organisation. Flexibility, collaborative skills and being open to learning are highly valued by host organisations. Host organisations should play a key role in selecting the volunteer as they are best placed to assess who best fits their organisation. Volunteers need intercultural skills and cultural awareness to build productive collaborative relationships with host organisations. This can be assisted by a greater focus on intercultural communication and unpacking the volunteer's own cultural background at pre-departure briefings.

### **Finding better ways of evaluating the impacts of volunteering**

Volunteer programs struggle to substantiate their claims that volunteer programs have significant positive impacts because these impacts are relational and difficult to measure. The focus has been on evaluating the volunteer's achievements of the tasks they anticipated carrying out. A more reflective approach to evaluation that focuses on changes that have taken place, both planned and unplanned, in terms of building partnerships, mutual capacity development and cosmopolitan orientations would capture more effectively the impacts of IDV.

## 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 (B. J. Lough & Xiang, 2014). 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 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 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; B. 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).

At the national level, governments in Australia and elsewhere have cut their aid budgets in recent years in response to changing global and domestic financial fortunes. The impact has been felt in terms of reduced resources available to support IDV programs and increased competition between organisations that manage IDV programs (Georgeou, 2012; B. Lough & Allum, 2013). This research was conducted in 2013-2014, a period marked by an Australian federal election and change of government which resulted in the disestablishment of the Australian Agency for International Development, the government agency responsible for the AVID program. Development assistance was incorporated into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade amidst significant policy adjustments and cuts to the aid budget (Ware, 2015). Part of the 2014 aid policy is to make development assistance responsive to national economic interests and foreign policy goals. In this context, IDV programs are seen as a means of public diplomacy, which is to improve foreign relations and foster trade and investment. Defining IDV more broadly as part of people-to-people linkages in the context of a global civil society (Castells, 2008) may better grasp its potential to contribute to cosmopolitan citizenship and international solidarity by practicing intercultural communication and collaboration.

## RESEARCH AIMS AND ETHICS APPROVAL

The ARC Linkage Project 'Cosmopolitan development: the impacts of international volunteering' sought to evaluate the impacts of international development volunteering on host organisations and volunteers. The project sought to contribute to research on the impacts of IDV in two ways:

1. By placing IDV within the conceptual framework of global development partnership, represented in the Millennium Development Goal 8 and the Sustainable Development Goal 17. This offered a new perspective on volunteerism as a relationship between volunteers and host organisations/communities.

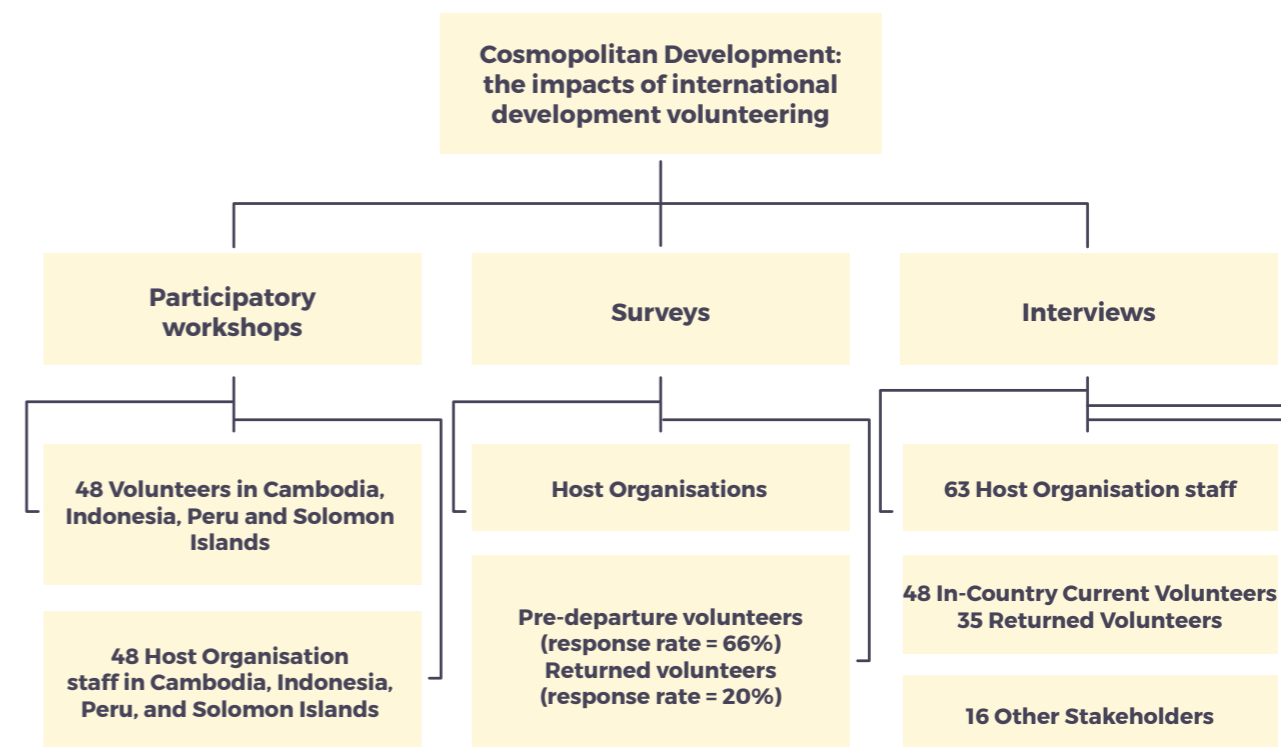
2. By conceiving volunteers and their host organisations as cosmopolitans, rather than locals or nationals. This opened up new ways of exploring the impact of IDV on the participants' orientation towards other cultures and their own place in the world.

Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee in June 2013 (Project Number 6044).

## RESEARCH METHOD

The empirical data were gathered through a mixed-method approach involving participatory workshops, questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews (Figure 1). Data were gathered between August 2013 and December 2014. Scope Global, the industry partner in this project, facilitated access to host organisations and volunteers in the part of the AVID program it manages.

**Figure 1: Research methods used in the project**



### Questionnaire Surveys

Three surveys were conducted to provide a broad map of individual motivations, reasons and expectations held by volunteers (pre-placement and returned) and host organisation workers participating in the AVID program. The surveys consisted of about 40 questions in four sections:

- perspectives on volunteering (e.g. motivations, expectations, knowledge of host country and host organisation);
- views on development;
- views of Australia and the world;
- contextual personal background information about education, language skills, and year and country of birth

The survey was administered face-to-face to volunteers at five pre-departure briefings in Australia between August 2013 and May 2014 (PPV Survey, N=312; average completion rate 66%). A slightly adapted online version of this questionnaire was sent to returned volunteers in three survey rounds between November 2013 and November 2014 (RV Survey, N=105; estimated completion rate 20%).

The survey was adapted to the host organisation perspective by including additional questions about managing and evaluating volunteers. This survey was translated into Indonesian, Khmer and Spanish translation and given to host organisation staff during workshops conducted in Indonesia, Cambodia, Peru and the Solomon Islands between August 2013 and February 2014 (HO Survey, N=47).

### Workshops

Five one-day participatory workshops were conducted each with volunteers (N=48) and host organisation staff (N=48) in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap (Cambodia), Jakarta (Indonesia), Lima (Peru) and Honiara (Solomon Islands). These workshops facilitated small group discussions on the role of volunteerism and its impacts, and the participant's own experience of the AVID program. Flipchart presentations and ensuing discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, translated and thematically analysed.

### Semi-structured interviews

Confidential interviews were conducted with volunteers (N=83, including 35 returned volunteers) and host organisation staff (N=63) to capture in greater depth participants' perspectives on the impact of volunteering on development partnerships, cosmopolitan orientations, and how place and culture matter. In addition, interviews were conducted among other in-country stakeholders including IDV service providers and Australian embassy staff (N=16). These interviews were conducted face-to-face during fieldwork in Cambodia, Indonesia, Maldives, Peru and Solomon Islands. Returned volunteers were interviewed via Skype or telephone.

The volunteer and host organisation interviews were coded under 26 themes in NVivo qualitative software. Three broad themes emerged:

1. Building partnerships - the relationships that develop between host organisations and volunteers through the AVID program;
2. Capacity development and reciprocal learning - changes in skills, knowledge/understanding and processes at the individual level and the organisational level in the host organisation
3. Developing cosmopolitan orientations - changes in perceptions of Australia and being Australian, changing views on volunteering and development, and on international solidarity and a common humanity.

**Table 1: Qualitative data collected by participant category and country**

	In country Volunteer workshops	In country volunteer interviews	Returned volunteer interviews	Host Organisation workshops	Host Organisation interviews	Other Stakeholder Interviews	All workshops	All interviews
<b>Cambodia</b>	2	16	5	2	15	3	4	39
<b>Indonesia</b>	1	10	5	2	14	1	3	30
<b>Maldives</b>	0	4	1	0	5	1	0	11
<b>Peru</b>	1	3	3	1	10	5	2	21
<b>Solomon Islands</b>	1	15	1	1	19	5	2	40
<b>Other Countries</b>			20			1	0	21
<b>ALL</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>162</b>

All data referenced in this report is available at:

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

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

## BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

Relationship building lies at the heart of IDV. Recent research indicates that relationships are the means by which volunteers and their local partners are able to work together towards locally defined development outcomes (Aked, 2015; Devereux, 2008; B. J. Lough & Matthew, 2013). When IDV works well, it provides spaces for the exchange of skills and knowledge, for collaboration between people from different cultures and with different sets of experiences, and for nurturing locally owned solutions to complex challenges. The values that development practitioners and researchers associate with IDV - local accountability, equality, mutual learning and reciprocity (Devereux, 2008; McWha, 2011) - are all associated with the notion of partnership.

Relationships in international development are commonly described as 'partnerships'. Initially used to capture the ideal of shared development goals, solidarity and trust in North-South relationships between non-governmental organisations (NGO), 'partnership' became part of the mainstream language of development institutions in the 1990s (OECD 1996). By reconceptualising donor-recipient relationships as partnerships, development institutions seek to encourage a more people-centred, participatory, sustainable development process and more effective and efficient aid delivery. The notion of development as a 'global partnership' was incorporated into the eighth Millennium Development Goal (MDG) and the seventeenth Sustainable Development Goal. While critics argue that actual relationships in most other development contexts fail to live up to the partnership ideal, (eg. Hatton & Schroeder, 2007; Overton & Storey, 2004), IDV is a space where egalitarian and progressive notions of partnership can be put in practice.

This study found that volunteers and host organisations share an understanding that 'volunteering is about working in equal partnership to facilitate development' (Table 2). Working collaboratively was considered a more distinctive feature of volunteerism than developing capacity in host organisations ('passing on knowledge') or volunteers ('building the skills of international volunteers'), or serving the needs of local organisations. However, the mutual benefits of the IDV relationship were not acknowledged equally on both sides, with host organisations being most likely and returned volunteers least likely to agree with the statement that volunteering is about building the skills of international volunteers.

**Table 2: 'How close are these statements about volunteering to your opinion?**

Responses rated 'very close' or 'close' to respondent's opinion

Volunteering is about...	Pre-Departure Volunteers	Returned Volunteers	Host Organisations
<b>Passing on knowledge and experiences to facilitate development</b>	75%	52%	91%
<b>Working in equal partnership with local organisations to facilitate development</b>	87%	75%	96%
<b>Building the skills of international volunteers</b>	48%	33%	78%
<b>Serving the needs of local organisations</b>	81%	61%	84%

### More like a local staff

The qualitative interview data provided further insights into partnership building. One factor affecting partnerships was how volunteers were positioned in their host organisations. Most host organisations in this study were from the local non-government sector (NGO) but some were international NGOs (INGO), government and private sector organisations. Many volunteer participants perceived their position in their host organisation to be similar to a local staff member, and said that this enabled them to interact with host organisation staff as equals. A modest remuneration (by Australian standards), living locally and using public transport enabled volunteers to relate more easily to local people. Sharing everyday work routines over an extended period provided opportunities to learn how best to contribute to the host organisation.

Most host organisation participants emphasised the need for volunteers to be open to learning, able to adapt and be willing to collaborate. Doing things together was central to a productive partnership. Relationships were perceived as less equal when volunteers saw themselves as being more skilled and more knowledgeable than the host organisation staff with whom they were working. Some volunteers struggled to form strong relationships in their host organisation because they felt were being cast as the 'white expert' by virtue of being a Westerner. Volunteerism is embedded in historically shaped hierarchies of Official Development Assistance (ODA) which position volunteers as possessing superior knowledge, resources and useful connections. Volunteers sometimes find themselves placed in positions of power, status and privilege that are hard to resist or challenge (see also Georgeou 2012, 153). This can lead to a mismatch in expectations about the volunteering relationship and tensions over what is exchanged in the relationship.

**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 (Volunteer)**

**What has worked is collaboration and partnership - we work together on this so what do you have in place, what can we expand on. I think this has worked. What has not worked is 'Oh I am superior to you, I am here to help you put in place what I know.' This will not work, we are just too proud a group of people - Laila (Government Organisation)**

### Time to build relationships

Volunteerism is a more relational approach to development work partly because it affords participants more time to build and nurture relationships. Most host organisations identified relationship building as a key point of distinction between volunteerism and other types of development interactions. From an host organisations perspective, relationships are important to achieving any positive change. Putting time into relationships creates a more trusting working environment where people can open up to new ideas and discuss them freely.

Hosting volunteers also demands time from host organisation staff. Host organisation staff invest time into settling volunteers into their new environment, getting to know them, involving them into social activities, acting as translators and interpreters when volunteers do not speak the local language, explaining about the work of the organisation, identifying productive ways for volunteers to contribute, and managing their workflow. Organisations need to be aware that hosting a volunteer comes at a cost - of time rather than money.

Many volunteers were aware of the importance of building relationships and investing time in getting 'a feel for the organisation', getting to know their host organisation colleagues and observing how they worked. The majority of volunteer participants valued the fact that their assignments were not determined by log frames and anticipated outcomes. Having the flexibility to 'go with the flow' gave volunteers the time and space for relationship building and laying the groundwork for a productive collaboration.

**It can be very motivating for teams to have a volunteer come in with a fresh pair of eyes who will stay rather than a consultant come in for a short period of time. They don't understand the context. What we find valuable is we like to start relationships. I think interpersonal relationship and relationship building are important - Rita (NGO)**

**Supervisors need to know that it [volunteers] doesn't come in for free... instead of paying them a salary you invest time. They have to learn and be more useful and more productive, and learn how things work - Aron (INGO)**

**You have that opportunity to build relationships. You don't have to come in and push and get things done and stress because things are not moving as quickly as you need to be - Eleanor (Volunteer)**

## The role of language in relationship building

Sharing a common language was one important factor impacting on relationship building. Volunteers with a significant level of proficiency in the local language, or a shared cultural background with their host country reported that they had stronger relationships with their colleagues. When volunteers had little or no local language skills, relationship building was more challenging. It placed increased burden on host organisations to provide interpreting services, and the volunteers felt thwarted in their efforts to make a meaningful contribution. Those volunteers who took advantage of the language training allowance provided through the AVID program reported improved relationships with colleagues and host community members. 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.

**I was feeling much more comfortable and spoke Tetum the whole time and that's when I really developed really strong relationships with those co-workers - Keira (Volunteer)**

**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 (Volunteer)**

## CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT AND RECIPROCAL LEARNING

What distinguishes IDV from other forms of international volunteering is its aim to contribute to social and/or economic development. This contribution tends to be in the form of capacity development in the host organisation and/or community (Devereux, 2008; Sherraden, et al., 2008). A recent evaluation of the AVID program states that volunteers contributed to 'the capacity of host organisations' (Office for Development Effectiveness, 2014, 2). Most definitions of capacity development describe it as change processes that aim to improve capabilities and performance (see Box 1). These change processes can be intentional and planned or emerge organically over time from 'collective engagements among organisational actors and between them and external stakeholders' (Wetterberg, et al., 2015, 970).

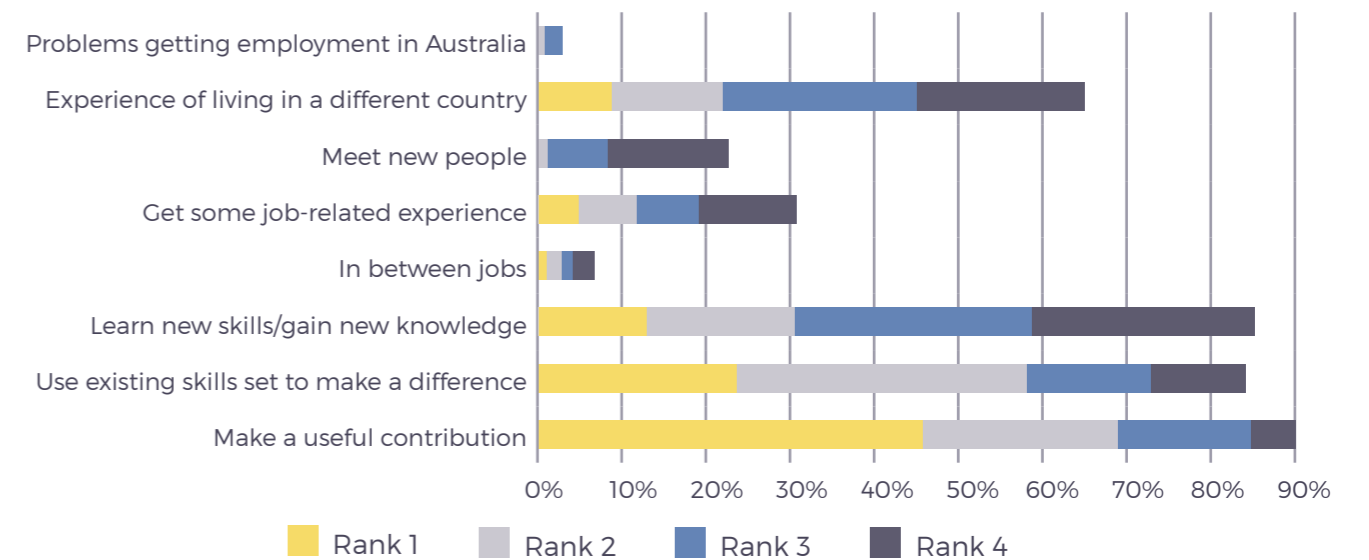
### Box 1: Defining capacity development

**Capacity development refers to processes of change that enhance the capabilities of organisations to improve their performance. The European Centre for Development Policy Management identifies five core capabilities: commit and engage; complete technical tasks and deliver on development objectives; relate to (external) stakeholders; adapt and self-renew; balance diversity and coherence (Brinkerhoff & Morgan, 2010; Wetterberg, Brinkerhoff & Hertz, 2015)**

### Expectations about capacity development

In pre-departure surveys, AVID volunteers prioritised 'making a useful contribution' and 'using existing skills set to make a difference' among eight reasons for volunteering. This indicates that volunteers see their primary task as helping the host organisation through developing its capacity. Other important motivations for volunteers are gaining international experience, new knowledge and skills, which are connected to the volunteer's own capacity development.

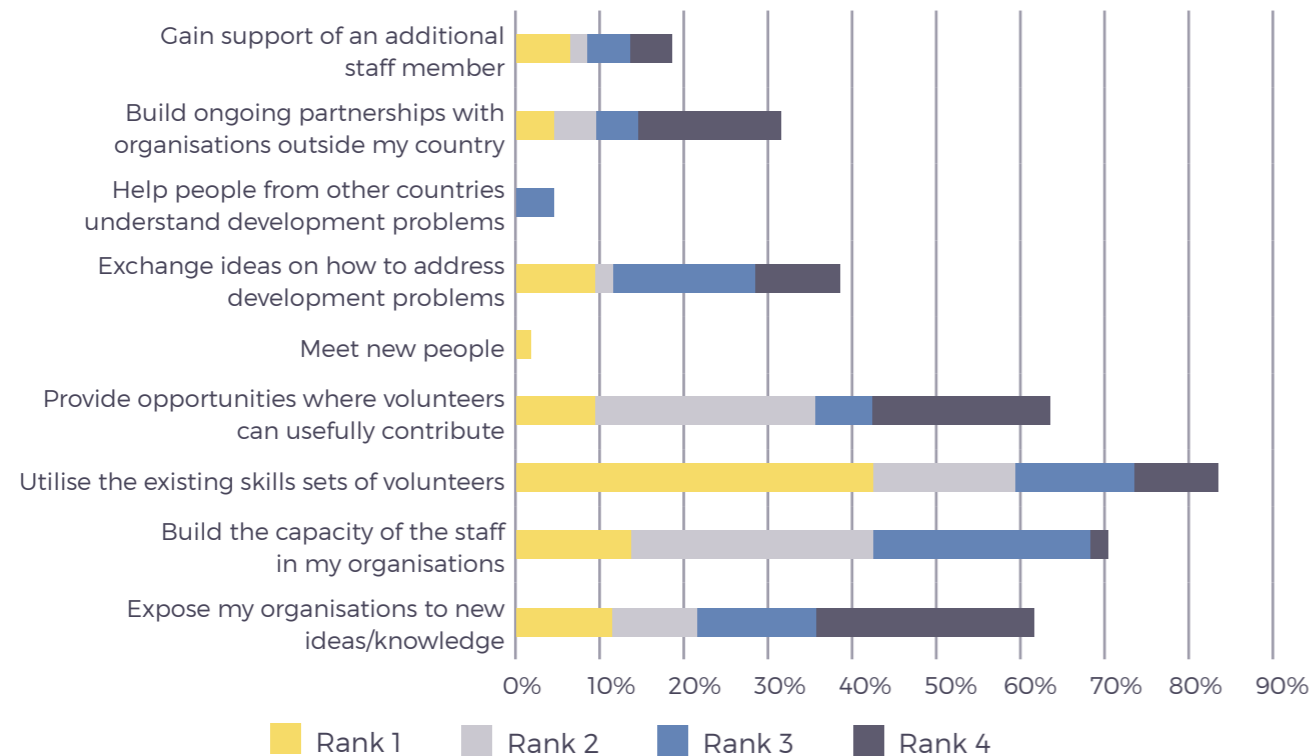
**Figure 2: Reasons for volunteering as ranked by pre-departure volunteers**





Host organisations ranked among nine reasons for hosting a volunteer. The three highest ranked reasons match the volunteers' priorities: 'utilise the existing skill sets of volunteers', 'building the capacity of the staff in my organisation', and 'providing opportunities' for volunteers to contribute. Another important reason for hosting a volunteer is the promise of ideas exchange, a core element of capacity development.

**Figure 3: Reasons for hosting a volunteer as ranked by host organisations**



### Developing capacity by doing

This study found that IDV's contribution to capacity development emerges organically from the engagement between host organisations and volunteers. This confirms other research that working collaboratively with host organisations on practical problems develops mutual trust among development practitioners (Aked, 2015; Wilson, 2006). Trust enables genuine dialogue and joint learning that are key to sustainable capacity development.

Host organisation participants were clear about their understanding of capacity development as a product of working together, rather than formal training. However, a significant proportion of volunteers started their placement with a concern about achieving their goals and an expectation of conducting training workshops where they could impart their knowledge. Most soon adjusted their understanding of capacity development to a more hands-on a collaborative approach. Some volunteers described the capacity development process as 'teaching each other' or 'working it out together'. Others felt ambivalent about seeing IDV as capacity development and preferred to see their role as facilitating and enabling.

By taking on specific tasks and working as part of a team, international volunteers expand the host organisation's capacity to complete existing work and/or take on new work. This is particularly important for small host organisations, or those located outside the capital city or in small countries facing human resource constraints. As donor funding is becoming more scarce, international volunteers provide affordable access to expertise.

**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 say, 'No, that's not going to work, Leighton - you shouldn't do that' - Leighton (Volunteer)**

**In the daily work environment you don't have too much time to share, you need to share in action, you need to share in the work, not as a class, not as a teacher - Lorena (NGO)**

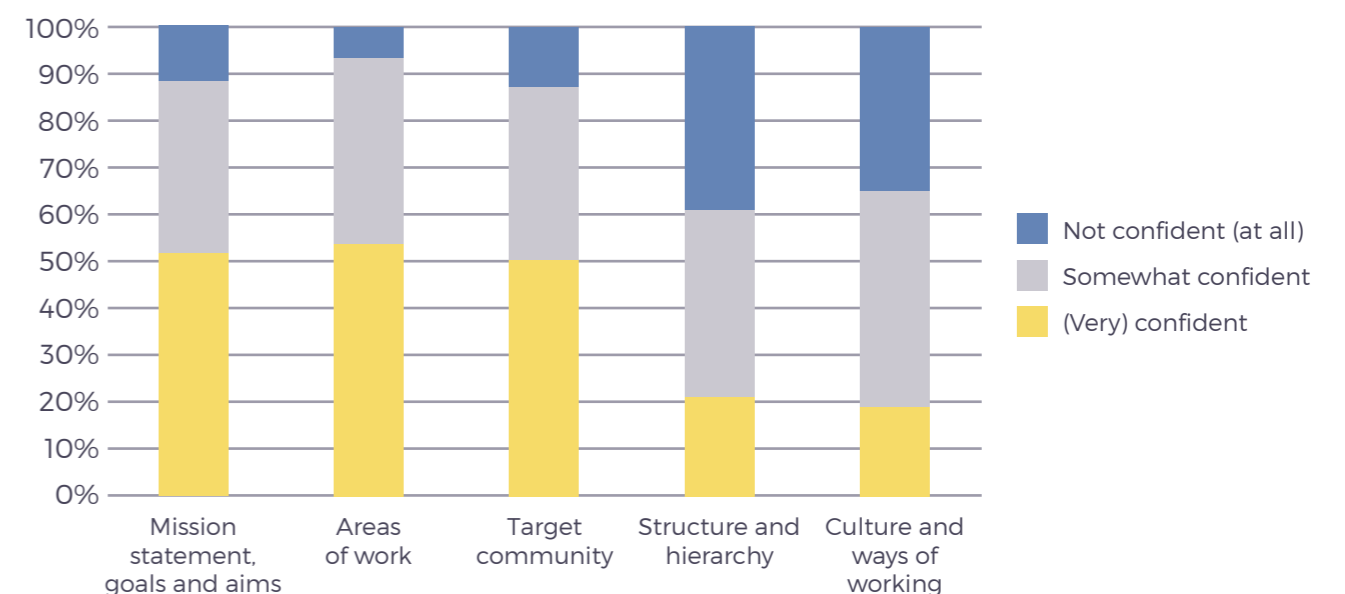
**We had no experience, both of us, in writing proposals for grant money, so we worked together and kind of taught each other - Jade (Volunteer)**

### Reciprocal learning

The concept of the 'learning space' (Wilson, 2006) describes well the IDV space in which reciprocal capacity development takes place. Many volunteer participants in this study acknowledged that they relied on the professional and contextual knowledge of their local colleagues to maximise their impact in the host organisation. For volunteers there is much to learn: only 50 per cent of the volunteers surveyed at pre-departure briefings felt 'confident' or 'very confident' that they had an adequate knowledge of their host organisation's areas of work, and a minority felt this about the host organisation's structure, culture and ways of working (Figure 4). By comparison, around 80 per cent of returned volunteers were confident in their knowledge of all five areas.

Capacity development in IDV is a two-way process. Most volunteers stated that they had developed their own skills in intercultural communication, gained knowledge about their host country and were able to see issues from a local perspective. A significant proportion also extended their professional skills by being given space to experiment, put academic learning into practice, and extend into new areas of work.

**Figure 4: Volunteers' self-rated knowledge about the host organisation (pre-departure)**



Host organisation participants described the reciprocal learning as one where volunteers shared specific skills, knowledge or networks that the host organisation lacked in exchange for cultural and professional learning opportunities. From host organisation perspectives, organisational capacity was enhanced in three ways:

1. skills development, ranging from broad areas like using the media and ICTs, grant writing and strategic planning, to technical areas like water and sewage management, speech pathology and counselling;
2. building the organisation's profile by developing marketing materials and strategies, connecting the host organisation with other organisations through volunteer networks, and using the volunteers' fluency in English to establish links and credibility with potential donors;
3. internationalising the host organisation, by building the staff's confidence and capability in communicating across linguistic, cultural and professional boundaries, and being introduced to new ideas and different ways of tackling problems.

**I had more experience in terms of the written advocacy whereas my counterpart has a lot more knowledge about the local circumstances and history and a much better understanding of how to strategically approach different government areas - Ruby (Volunteer)**

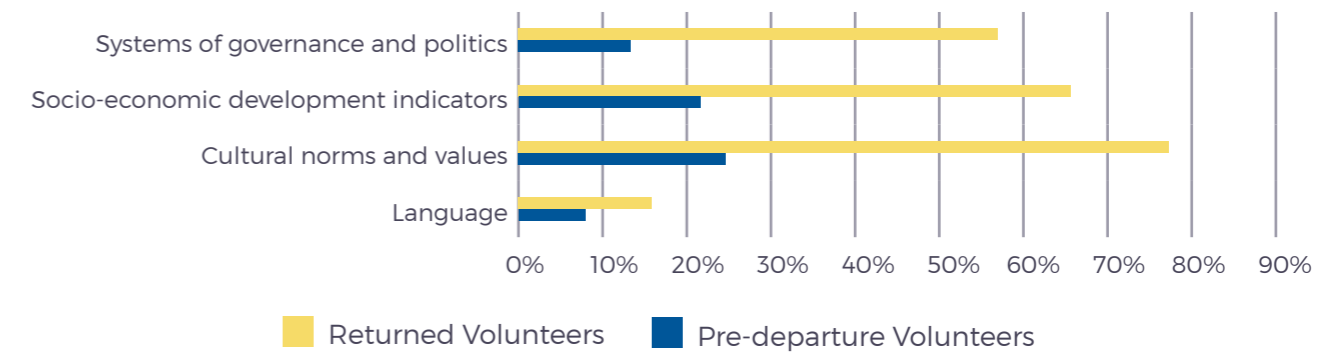
**I learnt so quickly and I learnt so much. But that was definitely not something I expected to do and I'm now able to put some of that into practice in the work I'm doing now - Lionel (Volunteer)**

**They can tell us some of our gaps and give us new ideas to fill those gaps. In Cambodia not many people go travelling for work so we don't know what is happening outside - Yeong (NGO)**

**Some of them [volunteers] are connected with our donors. They will give validation for our work. This is one of the biggest benefits we have, apart from the work they do here - Wayang (NGO)**

Host organisations were aware that IDV also holds an instrumental value for volunteers. Volunteering is widely acknowledged as a way of gaining international professional experience and advancing career prospects in the globalised workplace (Fee & Gray, 2011; Jones, 2011). The volunteer surveys indicate a significant growth in knowledge about the host country (Figure 5). By working in host organisations and communities, volunteers also gain valuable experience and insights into the complexity of development challenges, develop collaborative skills and international networks that assist them in finding paid employment.

**Figure 5: Self-rated knowledge about the host country (pre-departure and returned volunteers)**  
High or very high level of knowledge of host country's...



## DEVELOPING COSMOPOLITAN ORIENTATIONS AND PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE LINKS

A cosmopolitan orientation describes a way of relating to the world that is characterised by openness towards other people, things and experiences whose origin is non-local (Skrbis & Woodward, 2007). Engagement in IDV fosters cosmopolitan orientations in three ways:

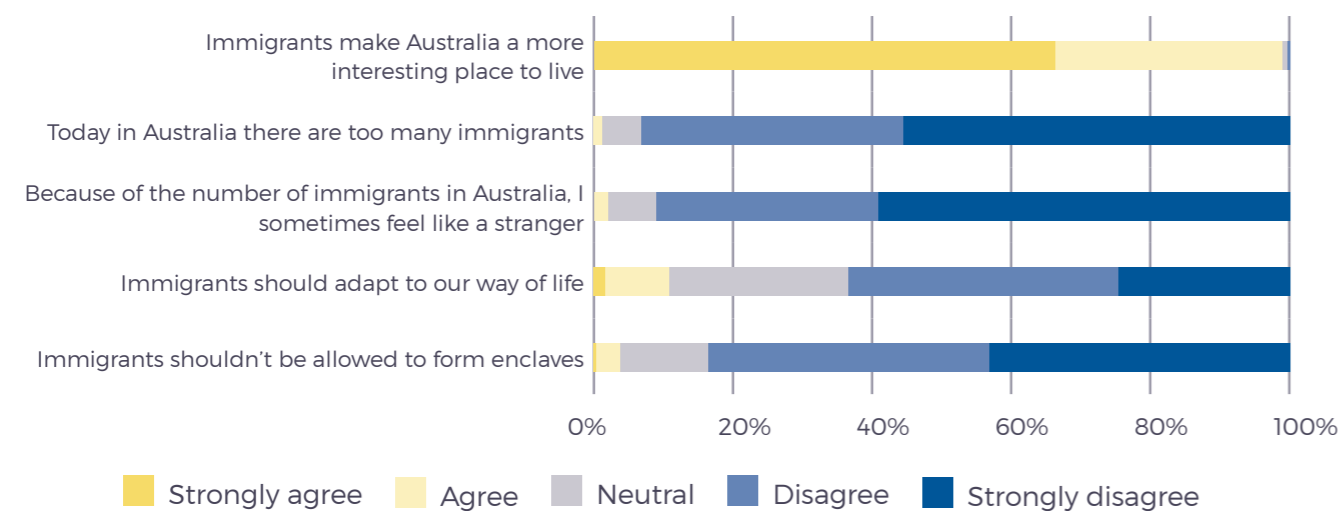
1. through the volunteers' mobility, both volunteers and host organisations are exposed to other cultural influences and able to develop an appreciation of them;
2. working together builds intercultural competencies, including the ability to 'know, command and enact a variety of cultural knowledges and repertoires' (Skrbis & Woodward, 2007, 732);
3. reciprocal learning encourages an awareness of global interconnectedness, of collective fortunes and shared problems, and a sense of 'shared humanity' (Appiah, 2006, xvi).

By fostering these orientations, IDV contributes to a 'diplomacy of the public' which emphasises conversation, dialogue and mutual learning through which people from different countries can establish a shared understanding (Castells, 2008). The Australian government's public diplomacy objectives include presenting to the world a positive image of Australia and its development credentials (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade). This study has found that IDV contributes to these goals through mutual learning rather than imposing external agendas.

### Openness to other cultures

Both volunteers and host organisations demonstrate an openness towards other cultures through their engagement in IDV. Volunteers display a cosmopolitan orientation through their willingness to live for an extended period in a different social and cultural environment, while host organisations do so by seeking access different ideas, skills and experiences through international volunteers. Volunteers surveyed pre-departure were found to be highly mobile, with 97 per cent expressing willingness to move overseas for paid work and 95 per cent for personal or family reasons. Openness to other cultures was also reflected in positive attitudes towards immigration, with volunteers almost unanimously agreeing that 'immigrants make Australia a more interesting place', and disagreeing with the statement that Australia had 'too many immigrants' (Figure 6). The Returned Volunteer Survey produced very similar trends.

**Figure 6 : Volunteers' agreement/disagreement with statements about immigrants (pre-departure)**



### Box 2: Developing cosmopolitan orientations about gender equality

**A significant majority of AVID volunteers are women. They constitute a pool of ambassadors for gender equity through their agency as skilled volunteers. Two examples indicate how female volunteers create spaces for dialogue about gender issues: Claudia encouraged her host organisation colleagues to question the gendered language of their recruitment strategy: "I might have helped them to think a little bit about those values around gender and equality, rather than change it for them." Karen, an organisational expert, supported her host organisation colleagues by raising the chairman's maltreatment of female staff as an issue of gender equality at work: "We made some progress, he stopped actually abusing them, he stopped demanding that the administration lady work for him on his private projects."**

Interviews with in-country and returned volunteers reveal that curiosity plays an important role in the intercultural engagement and learning. Volunteers appreciated the opportunity to see how local people live and to gain different perspectives on life. They experienced cultural difference and found out what values and interests they shared with their hosts. Many encountered curiosity and interest among their host organisation colleagues which facilitated the intercultural exchange. Some volunteers reported struggling with some of the views and practices they encountered, for example, related to the roles and status of women, but took opportunities to engage in dialogue about them (box 2). Others were reportedly shocked about the inequality and poverty they witnessed and felt grateful about their privileged position as Australians.

As most volunteer participants were placed in metropolitan areas, they were living in globalised places with large expatriate communities and had to actively create spaces of engagement with local people outside the workplace. The interviews indicate that the majority of volunteer participants were able to critically reflect on their assumptions about culture and development and come to a more nuanced understanding through which they could challenge the notion that Western solutions are best.

**[The best thing was] the experience getting to meet the people, I've worked with some amazing people and gotten to see how real Solomon Islanders live, out in the villages - Anna (Volunteer)**

**There is interest of other people to know what he's doing...So the most important thing from [this volunteer is that] somehow he is promoting interaction among all the staff of this unit - Timo (Government Organisation)**

**They [host organisation colleagues] are quite experienced with dealing with foreigners and those with less experience are quite curious to learn, which I think makes a difference - Nicola (Volunteer)**

**As a small organisation, which works in a small environment, our view is more inwards. But [the volunteer] has shared many things with us that gave us a broader outlook and vision. - Arcani (NGO)**

Many host organisations had previous experience with foreign staff and volunteers. Most acknowledged that having a volunteer brought a new energy into the work environment. Positive impacts of having a volunteer included improved staff interaction, a stronger team spirit, and bringing different perspectives and knowledges. For smaller NGOs, having a volunteer was like having a window to the outside world. Local staff and community members learned how to interact with foreigners not only by working with them but also by sharing everyday experiences, such as eating, sharing public transport and casual conversation.

### Intercultural competencies

The ability to 'know, command and enact a variety of cultural knowledges and repertoires' (Skrbis & Woodward, 2007, 732) is part of a cosmopolitan orientation. The importance of these 'soft skills related to cultural understandings' is increasingly recognised for global employability (Crossman & Clarke, 2010, 608). Volunteer participants gave examples of intercultural competencies they had gained through their placements:

- settling into a different work culture;
- finding ways of tackling sensitive policy issues;
- controlling their emotions;
- questioning the normality of their own cultural practices;
- communicating in culturally appropriate ways with a variety of stakeholders.

Volunteers who were willing to listen, observe and ask questions found it easier to gain intercultural competencies. Having local language skills and an understanding of their own cultural moorings also helped. Cultural misunderstandings occurred more frequently when volunteers lacked language skills and left unsure how to reach out. Some volunteers who took their own culture as the norm and/or moved mostly in expat circles were more likely to fall back on cultural stereotypes.

AVID volunteers are a self-selected group with relatively high levels of intercultural skills. However the surveys found that returned volunteers were significantly more confident than pre-departure volunteers about their ability to operate effectively in a different cultural context (figure 7). Returned volunteers indicated a very high level of confidence in their intercultural skills but retained awareness about culturally based mistakes and communication challenges. Over 50 per cent of the returned volunteers were confident about being able to do what was expected of them, compared to less than 30 per cent of the pre-departure volunteers, indicating a higher level of confidence in their professional capabilities.

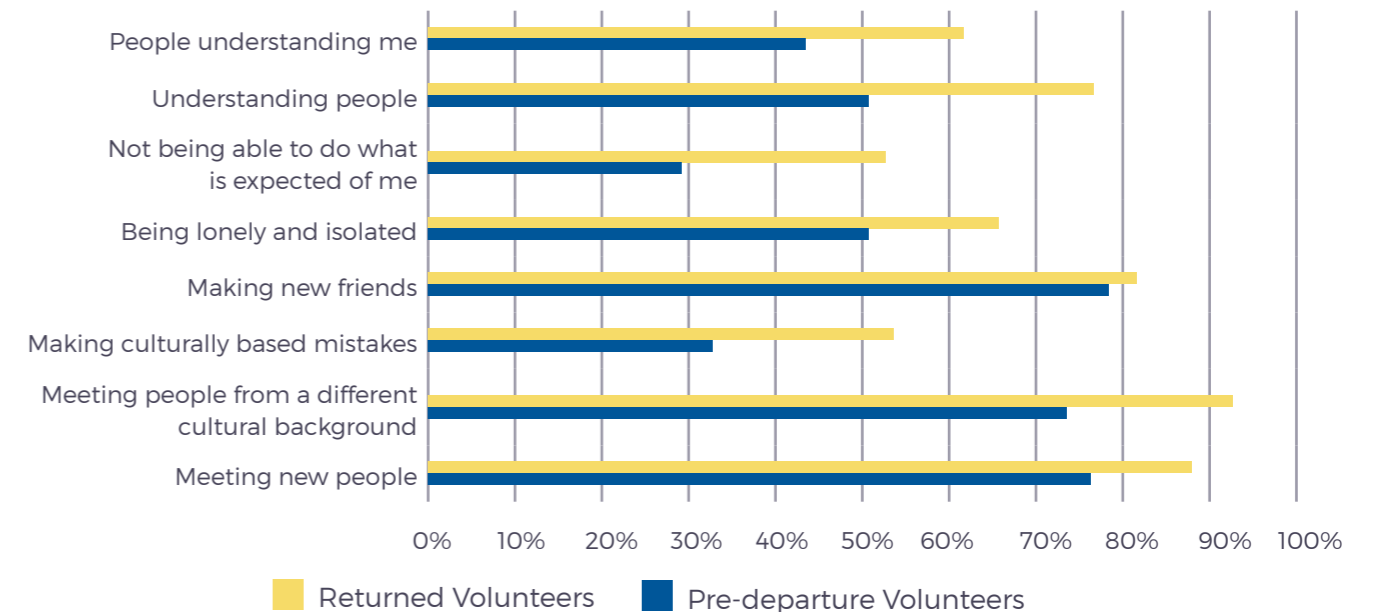
**Every time I write an email, especially a formal email, I ask my colleagues to check it before I send it. They are having to make it more polite and sensitive.- Francesca (Volunteer)**

**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 (Volunteer)**

**It's such a loss of face to express anger so you do become quite good at hiding it and just thinking before you act and that's been a good thing - Nicola (Volunteer)**

**Figure 7: Self-rated intercultural confidence**

I don't feel nervous about...



Host organisation participants in this study highlighted intercultural competencies as an important capacity development outcome for volunteers and their staff. Hosting and working with a volunteer required host organisation staff to develop and practice different cultural repertoires. Some host organisation participants described themselves as a 'mediator' or 'bridge' between their own culture and that of the volunteer. They took time to explain cultural practices, norms and values and support volunteers in gaining an understanding of local manifestations of poverty and other development problems.

Some host organisation participants mentioned that directly communicating with volunteer candidates in the selection process helped to get a sense of their intercultural skills and whether they would be able to integrate well. Two important benefits for host organisation staff were increased confidence in communicating with people from other cultures and improved English language skills.

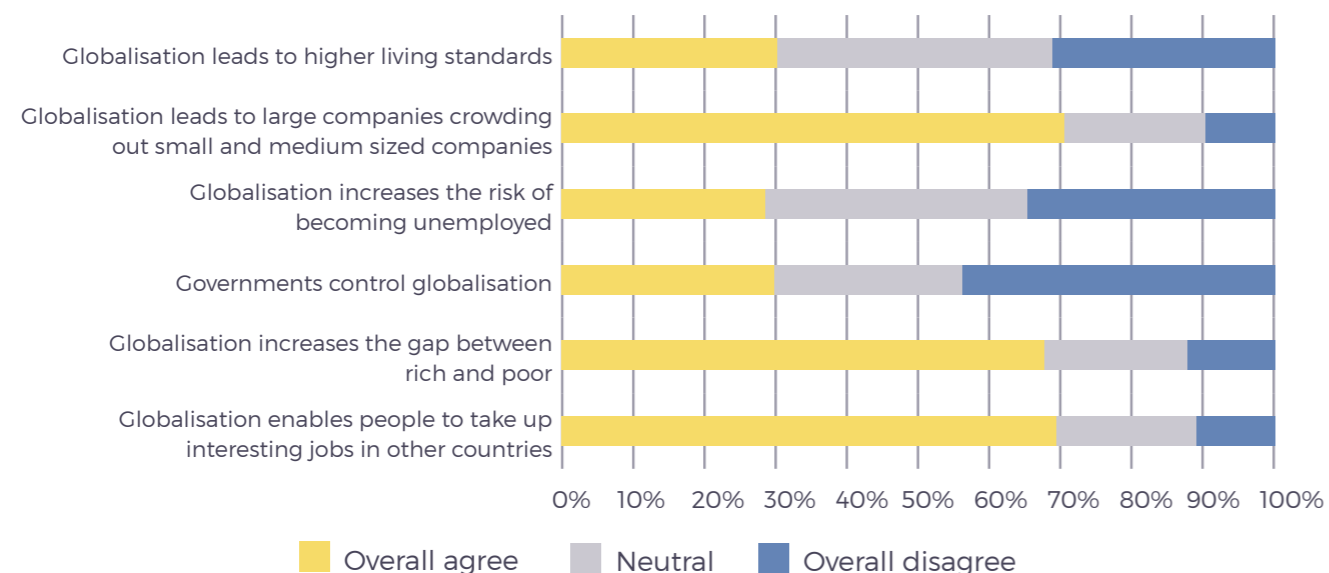
**But this is the purpose, we have different cultures working together. [My role is] being the bridge between these two cultures. Alert and aware of possible tension but also how to find the way that the dialogue continues - Arunny (NGO)**

**They learn to adjust and deal with the pressure of working a developing country where we need to get things done but may not have the skills and resources. We learn not only the skills the volunteer has to share according to the terms of reference but also other skills like writing reports, how to interact with foreigners. We learn English, they learn Pidgin, and they also learn about our cultural practices. - Commins (Private Sector)**

### Awareness of global interconnectedness and shared humanity

A cosmopolitan orientation involves recognising that communities are increasing interconnected through transnational social, economic and environmental processes (in short, globalisation) (Mau, Mewes, & Zimmermann, 2008). Volunteers were found to have complex views about globalisation as both causing problems and contributing to their solution. Pre-departure volunteers were divided about whether globalisation led to higher standards of living but agreed that globalisation led to greater inequality on the one hand, and greater employment opportunities and choices on the other (Figure 8). Returned volunteers held very similar views but were slightly less hopeful about globalisation leading to higher living standards and somewhat more hopeful about governments being able to control globalisation.

**Figure 8: Volunteers' perspectives on globalisation (pre-departure)**



Since the majority of volunteers associated globalisation with processes that lead to increasing inequality, there is a sense of 'shared humanity' and solidarity underpinning their decision to contribute their labour and skills to organisations in developing countries. Working together with local staff on development issues gave volunteers a better understanding of the complexity of development, and that social transformation happens slowly and cannot be externally imposed.

Some volunteer participants reported that volunteering had taught them to value local knowledge and expertise, which they argued was important to sustainable development interventions. They also reported becoming more aware of the common development challenges that their host country shared with Australia and other countries, including unemployment, chronic poverty, climate change, and domestic and gender based violence. These shared global challenges elicit a sense of shared humanity and present opportunities for mutual learning.

Host organisation participants raised two key points about the impact of IDV on cosmopolitan orientations among their staff. First, exchanging information and ideas with volunteers expanded the perspectives of host organisation staff by becoming aware that they can tap into global networks to find solutions to problems. Second, some host organisation participants reported feeling cheered by the knowledge that distant strangers cared about their development challenges, and that this improved staff morale.

**I have realised that long term issues need long term solutions we cannot expect to change things overnight or even in the short term - Paul (Volunteer)**

**I have to appreciate the deep dilemmas these countries face. I mean they need employment which a mining company might provide yet they want to protect and preserve their environment - they are grappling with complex issues. - Allen (Volunteer)**

**We are all from different countries and backgrounds and our challenges are different but it makes us realise that the internal affairs of one country are also the concern of other countries in the world. - Francis (NGO)**

This study supports the view that AVID program contributes to a positive image of Australia and Australians in host organisations and communities. In countries that are less exposed to Australia's influence, having a volunteer opens up possibilities to talk about Australian people, their challenges, values and cultural practices. In countries where engagement with Australia and Australians has been controversial at times, volunteers can help address stereotypes and negative perceptions through engaging in open dialogue.

Volunteerism can be 'diplomacy of the people'. For volunteers it is a way of finding out about what goes on behind government rhetoric and 'knowing what kind of geographical world we are intervening in and producing' (Harvey 2000, 560). Host organisations can work through volunteers to challenge stereotypes about their country and promote a more nuanced understanding of their development experiences.

**A part of soft diplomacy is having a visible aid presence in countries where we also have other strategic interests like mining. - Allie (Volunteer)**

**[I] was regarded in some way a representative of all that's right in the world (...) but there is a very real sense now that the refugee deal was a bit of a betrayal of the ideals [among] Cambodians that regarded Australia as a human rights defender. - Jonathan (Volunteer)**

**The volunteer is more aware that we...are not a bunch of wretches leading abysmal lives! This is how many see the Solomons. I think Australians who interact with [the volunteer] will get a good rounded understanding of life here. - Peter (NGO)**

**[In the Solomon Islands] some are very critical of RAMSI. There is some truth in what they say. But from working with the volunteers I think Australia is interested in the needs of developing countries. It's not just about giving money but building capacity which is much more important - Losefa (NGO)**

## CONCLUSION

International development volunteerism is an established part of Australia's aid and international engagement for good reasons. Three key impacts emerged from our analysis of over 140 interviews with host organisations and volunteers about the impact of volunteering:

1. IDV contributes to mutual capacity building: Host organisations gain specific skill and ideas that help them innovate and work effectively in a global environment, and volunteers gain soft skills, international professional experience and specific country knowledge that are useful for living and working in a global world. By combining local knowledge and experience with those of the volunteers, host organisations can increase their capacity to achieve their goals in sustainable ways.
2. IDV contributes to the development of cosmopolitan orientations: It offers volunteers opportunities to practice and gain a reality check on their openness towards other cultures, and develop their intercultural competencies; and it enhances host organisations' abilities to utilise different cultural knowledges through close contact with Australian volunteers. IDV is also a vehicle for promoting a positive image of Australia overseas and instilling a sense of international solidarity and common humanity among participants.
3. IDV provides a space for practicing a global partnership: the research shows that international development volunteerism is a relational form of development. Firstly, it allows time for building relationships and secondly, it places development actors on a more level playing field than is usual in North-South aid relationships. This facilitates relationships of mutual trust and benefit that underpin the impacts on capacity development and cosmopolitan orientations. In the broader context of development assistance, the concept of 'partnership' implies a view of development as a shared responsibility, while 'aid' is associated with asymmetrical relationships between donors and recipients. In the partnerships that IDV fosters, local development actors take the lead in development interventions with the support of external actors, which is how the OECD described the 'true partnerships' for the 21st century (OECD, 1996).

The findings summarised in this report confirm other recent research that 'volunteers work through relationships' (Aked, 2015, 31). However, development partnerships are embedded in a wider institutional context in which 'conflicting forces ... push towards and pull away from the ideal of partnership' (Elbers, 2012, 29). The institutional context of volunteerism matters. True partnerships are more likely to develop when host organisation play a key role in the selection, management and evaluation of volunteers (Impey & Overton, 2014). Relationships are more equal when host organisation are aware of their 'power to effect change in the lives of the volunteers' (Perold, et al., 2013, 193), and volunteers are encouraged to see their placement as a collective endeavour rather than an individual mission. To realise the transformative power of 'volunteering at its best', IDV programs should identify and support relationship building as a core component of volunteerism and include it in their monitoring and evaluation systems (Lough & Matthew, 2013).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study indicate four ways in which the positive impacts of the AVID program can be further enhanced:

1. increasing host organisations' sense of ownership of volunteer placements;
2. creating more flexibility in the program;
3. recruiting volunteers with appropriate skills and attitudes;
4. finding better ways of evaluating the impacts of volunteering.

### Increasing host organisations' sense of ownership

The current system of assignment reporting encourages volunteers' accountability to the program rather than the host organisation. Greater ownership by host organisations can be achieved through a reporting structure that involves host organisations more centrally in managing, monitoring and evaluating their volunteer placements. Embedding the volunteer in internal reporting structures may help host organisations and volunteers to negotiate placements that are responsive to the changing circumstances of the host organisation and have beneficial outcomes for both parties.

### Creating more flexibility in the AVID program

The way placements are advertised could be revised to take into account flexibility and a realistic perspective on achievable outcomes. Position descriptions should reflect the actual needs of the organisation and allow scope for negotiation. Volunteer placements work best when host organisations identify the capacity gaps at an organisational level that need to be developed rather than a narrow skill level. Greater flexibility for in-country volunteer management teams in regard to the number of volunteers to be deployed can help improve the quality of volunteer placements.

The design of the volunteer program could embed mutual learning and relationship building as a core component of the placement. The manner in which the volunteer placements are currently structured assumes that the work begins from the day one of the placement. In practice, considerable time is invested by volunteers in understanding their new working environment, and by both volunteers and host organisations in reaching out and building relationships. Relationship building should be recognized as a valuable outcome of IDV.

### Recruiting volunteers with appropriate skills and attitudes

Current recruitment practices focus on the volunteer's skills. While this is important for capacity development, volunteers must also have the right attitude to achieve capacity development goals with their host organisation. Flexibility, collaborative skills and being open to learning are highly valued by host organisations. Selecting the right volunteer will require host organisations to play a greater role in recruitment as they are best placed to assess the match between their organisation and the volunteer. The contact between host organisations and volunteers during recruitment can be encouraged through a variety of commonly available online communication tools.

If the impacts of IDV are contingent on the quality of relationships built in-country, volunteers need to be well prepared in how to negotiate cultural differences. This can be assisted by a greater focus on intercultural communication at pre-departure briefings. This should include unpacking the volunteer's own cultural background and taken-for-granted privileges that come with Australia being part of the 'developed' world. Greater cultural self-awareness can help volunteers challenge the role of the Western expert in which many feel trapped, and build more equal relationships with host organisations. The pre-departure briefing can provide a safe place to explore these above issues.

Language barriers inhibit the relational impacts of IDV and greater efforts need to be made to provide language training to volunteers prior to their placement, with additional resources available while in country to improve fluency.

Many volunteers are unsure what capacity development means and how it is done. They associate capacity development with formal training or teaching, and may miss opportunities to integrate it into their everyday collaborative work. Time invested during the pre-departure briefing on broadening their understanding of capacity development will strengthen the outcomes delivered through the placement.

### Evaluating impact

Evaluations of volunteer placements have traditionally tended to focus on the number and length of volunteer placements, and on the tasks completed by the volunteer. As a result, volunteer program reviews have struggled to substantiate the widespread perception among stakeholders that volunteer programs have significant positive impacts. Rather than evaluating the volunteer's achievement of pre-conceived placement goals, the perspectives of both volunteers and host organisations should be canvassed. A more reflective approach to evaluation that focuses on changes that have taken place (or have been resisted) in terms of building partnerships, mutual capacity development and cosmopolitan orientations would yield more insights into the impacts of IDV. It would also enable unplanned impacts to be included, such as the promotion of cross-cutting issues of gender equality and disability inclusion, facilitated by the flexible and relational nature of IDV placements (see Box 2). Alternatives to written forms in English should be considered to allow for greater input from HOs, such as exit interviews or jointly produced reports facilitated by the in-country volunteer management team.

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