

## 1. Introduction

This statement provides clarity to AVI's approach to 'international development volunteering' by contributing:

- An understanding of what we mean by 'development' and our approach to it, based on the philosophical and operational principles of community development, human rights, gender equity, and sustainability
- An understanding of what we mean by volunteering and its distinctive contribution to international development
- An outline of AVI's development programming, including its priorities and the desired goals.

At the heart of AVI's approach to development volunteering is:

- A commitment to instigating and contributing to processes of long-term, culturally appropriate, respectful and effective capacity development, through establishing and maintaining ethical, reciprocal and respectful relationships with the communities, organisations and others who have invited AVI to enter into a partnership
- The exchange of skills and knowledge, particularly concerning appropriate development, good governance and civil society, but also on more personal and philosophical levels between volunteers, as representatives of the Australian community, and the people of volunteer-receiving countries
- The integration of the rich cross-cultural experiences and understandings gained by volunteers into the culture and life of Australian communities upon their return, thus contributing to positive global transformation

## 2. AVI's Understanding of Development

'Development' means different things to different people. It has had a complex and, at times, chequered history. AVI's understanding of development rests on a tradition that has come to be known as people-centred, participatory development. It has benefited from a sustained critique of the normative, 'western-centred' development model, and is characterised by three fundamental and inter-related principles:

- development as community development
- human rights including gender equity
- sustainability through capacity development.

We are critical of understandings that equate 'development' with 'aid' or 'welfare'. The latter approaches may be appropriate and extremely important in certain circumstances, where human need is great and immediate. However, AVI's 'development' approach seeks to transcend the provision of immediate benefits to individuals and foster sustainable, positive change that provides broad community benefits. Our approach is enriched by our belief in the reciprocity of learning and the recognition that peoples and societies in the 'developing' world have much to contribute to the well being of those of us living in the 'developed' world. Our approach is further influenced by our sense of solidarity between all, which we deem necessary for global survival, especially given our awareness of deteriorating ecological processes and the respective responsibilities in creating ecological

sustainability. Finally, our approach recognises that addressing the production of poverty and empowering the disadvantaged and marginalised in 'developing' countries is essential, if poverty reduction and human development is to occur.

## **2.1 Development as Community Development**

First and foremost, AVI's approach to development is one of community development. Community development combines a set of practices, strategies and principles, based on a philosophy of participation and emancipation for all, especially for those groups of people who, for whatever reason, have been marginalised, disadvantaged, or denied access to the resources they need to live their lives with dignity and in a context of social justice.

Principles of community development include an orientation to:

- the locally-identified and articulated needs of the community of interest
- respect for, and validation of, the 'local knowledge' and other 'assets' possessed by the members of the community
- the primacy of local and indigenous leadership
- representative and democratic decision making
- establishing solidarity, through shared interests and endeavours, with the communities within which we work.

AVI places an emphasis on developing local capacity and raising awareness about poverty and development issues by working across cultural boundaries and by living and working in organisations within local communities for extended periods. It is also concerned with the building of community spirit and cohesiveness within the organisation and the wider local community.

## **2.2 A Rights-Based Approach to Development**

AVI advocates a Rights-Based Approach to development, incorporating both human rights and gender equity. Such an approach recognises that the poor, the marginalised and disenfranchised have basic rights, not just 'deficiencies'. These basic rights refer to access to clean water, adequate food, health, education, decent work, adequate housing, and personal security. They also relate to certain fundamental political, economic, personal and collective freedoms. Support for gender equity also recognises that women and men (girls and boys) experience disadvantage, poverty and development in different ways and that appropriate responses to these issues need to be based on such an awareness.

Poverty is not primarily an unfortunate consequence of both personal and structural inadequacies. It is understood as the *product* of a fundamentally inequitable global and local system of exploitation, resulting in the mal-distribution of available resources. It represents, therefore, a lack of access to the bases of social power, such as financial resources, social networks, information, surplus time beyond subsistence requirements, social organisation, knowledge, and skills. Empowerment, then, entails facilitating greater access to these bases of social power. This requires an understanding of the gendered and other power-based, poverty-producing structures and systems, including national and international policies. Critical to the development of this understanding is the active and inclusive participation of all people, whose voices – equally female and male – ought to be reflected at all levels of decision-making.

## **2.3 Sustainability**

Sustainability is crucial to any process of human development that seeks to transcend a 'welfare' or 'aid' approach to poverty and disadvantage. AVI seeks to address the issue of sustainability by incorporating into its processes elements aimed at increasing individual, organisational and community capacity to effect positive change. It does this by aiming for transformation at a number of levels.

- First, it is addressed at the level of personal engagement, with volunteers fostering and contributing to the development of the capabilities of local colleagues and communities, taking account of their awareness, their practices, their existing relationships and their cultural capital.
- Secondly, the program seeks to contribute to organisational capacity building by focusing on issues of structure and systems, process, resources, and management within the host organisation.
- Lastly, the program further contributes to capacity development at institutional and sectoral levels through creating and fostering networks that inform policy, sector strategies, and programming frameworks.

## **3. Volunteering and International Development**

AVI views volunteering as a committed way of living and working as global/local citizens in relationships of solidarity with those in communities who have been, and are, largely excluded from the possibilities of autonomous and self-directed development. It links us with our neighbours and those further afield in ways that seek to avoid the replication of processes that reproduce inequalities and poverty. The following outlines the kind of qualities that we seek in our volunteers and relates these to the capacity building characteristics of AVI's development volunteering.

### **3.1 Commitment to Community Development**

AVI volunteers live and work within communities that have, through their relationship with AVI, requested the presence of volunteers, and the skills and experience which they embody, to work in partnership with them in pursuit of specific objectives. Thus, the work of volunteers is, from the outset, guided by the interests and desires of the community and, in that sense, the volunteers' approach to development work must be characterised by local engagement, participation and reciprocity. This means that the volunteer is not simply a 'technical expert', disseminating ideas and technologies acquired elsewhere to a host community. Rather, their role is to facilitate and foster, in a participatory way, the development of appropriate and practicable strategies and processes to address locally-defined issues of disadvantage and poverty.

### **3.2 Commitment to Human rights and Gender Equity**

AVI selects volunteers who, in addition to their technical capacities, exhibit a range of personal competencies congruent with living and working in a cross cultural environment. Among them is a commitment to encouraging and assisting people to create the conditions necessary to live safe, healthy, creative and long lives regardless of who they are. Fundamental to this is the support for, and attention to, human rights and gender equity. In this regard, all volunteers have an informal advocacy role to play whilst on placement, as well as on their return. While on placement, and with an awareness of local cultural and social context, volunteers are able to model behaviour and attitudes that support a rights-based and gender equity

approach. Upon return they have a valuable role to play within their own communities, promoting an awareness of development issues and the importance of a rights-based approach in addressing them. In this sense, a volunteer is an agent of social change, contributing to the growth of local and transnational civil society.

### **3.3 Commitment to Capacity Building**

AVI volunteers are crucial to the process of capacity building, both in assisting individuals, organisations and communities to develop their potential and in creating an enabling environment through which that potential can be realised. They are committed to working in ways that build upon already existing individual and community strengths, and which are likely to have multiplier effects in terms of development outcomes. When the communities involved *own* the development process and where the partnership formed between the volunteer and the host community or organisation has drawn largely upon viable local resources, rather than external resources that are beyond the control of the latter, the transformative effect of the volunteer assignment is likely to be sustained more effectively. Moreover, by fostering partnerships and links between local organisations and communities, and with institutions beyond these local entities, volunteers contribute to the development of organisational and institutional capacity and performance.

## **4. AVI's Development Priorities and Goals**

Australian Volunteers International connects people and organisations internationally to learn from each other and achieve shared goals. Our work in people-centred development, particularly through volunteering, is central to this. We work with individuals, organisations and communities in response to locally identified priorities. Our commitment to building partnerships and trust between individuals and communities across national boundaries is a way of establishing a global culture of mutuality and solidarity crucial to addressing issues of poverty alleviation.

### **4.1 Our Vision**

We have a vision of a peaceful, just and sustainable world, a world of respectful global relationships where all people have access to the resources they need, the opportunity to achieve their potential, the right to make decisions about the kind of development they want and to participate in the future of their communities

### **4.2 Our Values**

Australian Volunteers International is guided by principles of equity and social justice, integrity, diversity and inclusion, partnership and respect for human rights.

### **4.3 Areas of Program Focus**

Australian Volunteers International pursues its vision and purpose by focusing on a number of program areas:

- *Governance*: improving the responsiveness, accountability, and service delivery of government departments and other agencies and institutions
- *Participation and Social Inclusion*: strengthening the ability of individuals and communities to participate in the decisions that affect their lives

- *Health*: improving the quality of, and access to, services aimed at enhancing the physical, mental, and social well-being of the disadvantaged
- *Education*: improving the capacity of formal and informal education institutions to provide culturally and socially relevant education opportunities that contribute to poverty reduction
- *Sustainable Livelihoods*: increasing opportunities for, and the ability of, disadvantaged peoples to gain employment or generate income, includes community-based natural resource management.

These priority areas reflect an assessment of the specific contribution that AVI's approach can make to international development, while acknowledging the priorities of partner organisations and the goals of the international development sector.

#### **4.4 AVI's Programmatic Approach**

AVI's capacity building approach to its development work, which seeks to improve capability and performance at a number of different social levels, can be pursued through the formation of productive relationships with a range of different partner organisations and entities. Depending on the specific processes and outcomes desired, AVI will enter into partnership with governments, at the national, sub-national and local level, with government agencies and with civil society organisations. The latter include NGOs, Faith-Based Organisations, Community-Based Organisations, Not For Profit Trusts and Foundations, among others.

Regardless of the specific nature of the partner organisation, AVI pursues a programmatic approach to the placement of volunteers based on long-term and in-depth partnerships with host organisations. Through such partnerships, AVI and the host organisation are able to identify long-term shared goals and the activities and personnel requirements to achieve them. A shared strategic vision enables greater application and coordination of the variety of volunteer placements, whether long or short-term, multiple or individual, serial, or some other form. It also provides for a more rigorous framework of monitoring and evaluation and assessing impact, both at the placement and program level. Finally, such partnerships, which include a shared accountability for results, enable an open environment for the capturing of lessons learnt and the utilisation of this knowledge for future improvements.

**AVI's Framework for International Volunteering and Development:  
Select References.**

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