

APPROVED ACCOMPANYING DEPENDANTS (AADs) ON THE AUSTRALIAN VOLUNTEERS PROGRAM

Australian Volunteers

Introduction

In 2018-2019, 112 volunteers travelled on assignments with their partners or families, leading to a total of 151 Approved Accompanying Dependants (AADs) living in 20 of the 26 countries in which the Australian Volunteers Program operates.

The program supports eligible AADs to accompany volunteers to their country of assignment where the assignment period is 12 months or longer. AADs attend pre-departure briefings and join volunteers for In-Country Orientation Programs (ICOPs), In-Country Meetings (ICMs), and language training. AADs have the same medical and insurance coverage as the volunteer, and the volunteer receives an additional 25% allowance to cover the additional living costs. However, AADs do not undertake volunteer work with partner organisations (although they may provide services to the local community depending on the visa conditions of the country of assignment).

While there is provision within the program to provide financial and logistical support for AADs, the role that AADs play in the program has not always been acknowledged nor is it formally monitored. Previously, questions about the benefits or challenges of including AADs were only answered anecdotally. Should AADs have a more formal role in the program? Should we do more to prepare or support partners and/or children? Should support for AADs be limited to long term assignments? Would it benefit the program to invest in innovative models of engagement with AADs? These questions and others were considered but were previously difficult to answer without robust evidence.

As a first step towards providing this evidence, a study was conducted to examine the role of AADs, to identify benefits to the program resulting from the presence of AADs, the cost-benefit balance to the program of supporting AADs, and potential risks to the program incurred through support for AADs. Recommendations made by study participants were provided for the program's consideration.

The research questions guiding the study were:

- What benefits has the inclusion of AADs conferred on the Australian Volunteers Program?
- Is there additional workload or risk incurred through the inclusion of AADs on the program?
- Apart from financial and logistical support provided to AADs under current policy, how could AADs be better supported to maximise any benefits or mitigate any risks identified above?

Methodology

The research questions above were used to guide online and face-to-face interviews with volunteers and in-country program management. Researchers interviewed 21 volunteers and their partners from Bhutan, Indonesia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Vanuatu. With the permission of interviewees, interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

Cambodia, Indonesia, Vanuatu and Vietnam were the countries with the highest AAD presence (these four countries hosted 50% of our AADs), consequently the Program Managers/Regional Directors from those countries were interviewed to consider the cost-benefit balance of supporting AADs in their countries.

Additionally, the thoughts of a wide cross-section of in-country and Melbourne-based program staff, and DFAT representatives, were canvassed on these issues during the program's annual regional reflection workshops held in August 2019. These responses were collected and used to inform the analysis.

Key Findings

The program logic for the Australian Volunteers Program assumes that, in relation to volunteers, the following intermediate outcomes are prerequisites for the achievement of our long-term goal of a 'more globally literate and connected' Australia.

1. Volunteers are diverse, well supported, and have the required skills, attributes and attitudes for the assignment.
2. Volunteers complete their assignments well and have a positive volunteering experience.
3. Volunteers (current and returned) promote greater cultural awareness and build stronger connections between partner countries and Australia.

This is the lens through which the question of benefits to the program is analysed. The following is a brief summary of findings:

- 80% of couples interviewed said that they would not come on a longer-term assignment (over 1-2 months) without their partner/family; three of the nine couples interviewed gave examples of offers that they had declined because their partner could not go with them. This has implications for the diversity of Australians who may be attracted to volunteer and opens the question of whether AAD provisions should be extended to assignments less than 12 months in length.

- Most of the volunteers interviewed identified the primary advantage to them as having someone whom they could trust and rely on to be honest with them, available as a sounding board and a sympathetic pair of ears to share concerns with. However, a relationship under stress for other reasons can add to volunteer stress levels rather than being a source of support and suggests that it might be beneficial for couples/families going on assignment together to be interviewed and prepared for the experience as a couple or family.
- A key factor to a successful AAD placement was the opportunity for meaningful engagement over the assignment period. Where visa conditions preclude community work, a parallel volunteering assignment can sometimes be a good solution. Efforts made by program staff to provide information about work/hobby options in the country of assignment were appreciated.
- A key advantage to the program that emerged from interviews was the entrée to the community that a volunteer gains through being on assignment with a partner or family. Volunteers with families were unanimous in their belief that the family-orientated culture of the countries in which they had volunteered, resulted in volunteer families being more easily accepted into local communities.
- Volunteer parents also spoke about the benefits of their children becoming made aware of their privilege coming from a more developed country and how it had built their awareness of other lifestyles and cultures. However, the responsibility for the security and health of accompanying children is keenly felt by in-country teams. Processing visas for AADs can also be an administrative burden.

What's next?

The Australian Volunteers Program has been keen to give greater attention to the role of AADs and the positive contribution they often make to the aims of the program. The program has also tried to adapt how it communicates and supports dependents. For example, the program now invites accompanying dependents over 16 to join in pre-departure briefings and is looking at further options of how to prepare families for assignments.

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