

A FORMATIVE EVALUATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN VOLUNTEERS PROGRAM'S THEMATIC 'IMPACT AREAS'

Introduction

The Australian Volunteers Program Global Program Strategy 2018-2022 identifies three thematic impact areas that act as lenses to understand the Australian Volunteers Program and help the program demonstrate policy alignment with Australian Government priorities. The impact areas were informed by DFAT's Foreign Policy White Paper. The Australian Volunteer Program is not limited to the three impact areas, but they provide a means of looking in more detail at the work the program is doing.

The thematic impact areas are:

- Human Rights
- Climate Change, Disaster Resilience & Food Security
- Inclusive Economic Growth

The overall objective of the formative evaluation was to map the global footprint of the Australian Volunteers Program portfolio in three impact areas in order to:

- establish a baseline
- inform strategic options for strengthening engagement in the impact areas
- propose a methodology for demonstrating outcomes in impact areas

Methodology

The evaluation had three domains of inquiry (definitions of impact areas; alignment of program portfolio to impact areas; learning and recommendations), with key evaluation questions under each.

Given the different types of evaluation questions, the varied nature of the data and the mixed methods approach, different data collection methods and modes of analysis were used.



Quantitative data was sourced from the program's Management Information System (MIS) dataset. This comprised 811 assignments, and included volunteers that were in-country between January and December 2018.



Qualitative data was collected through key informant interviews and a document review. Interviews were held with eight people to inform the working definitions of the impact areas, and another three people to inform the case studies.



The document review looked at numerous documents including the Global Program Strategy, DFAT policy documents, Country Program Plans, Aid Investment Plans and volunteer and partner organisation end-of-assignment reporting for the case studies.

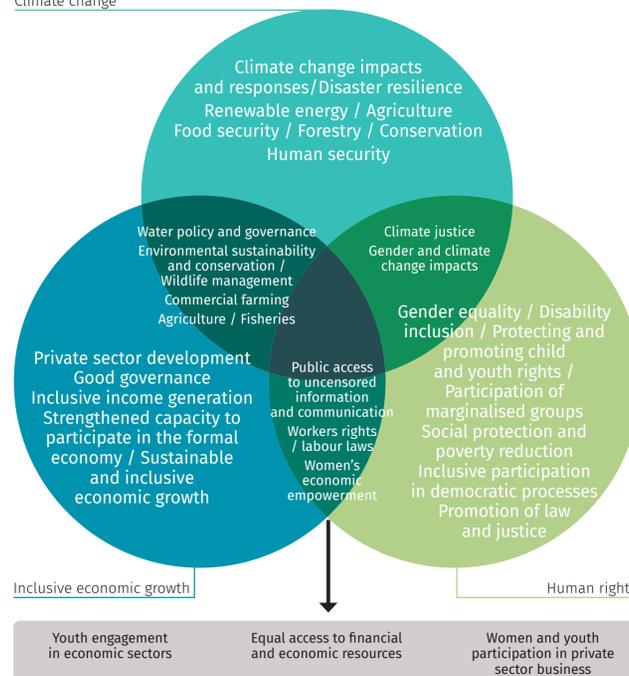
Key Findings

Impact area definitions

Impact area definitions were developed based on the triangulation of findings across multiple data sources. Interviewees reported differing views regarding the intended use of the impact areas, highlighting the need for improved and consistent understanding across Australian Volunteers Program staff.

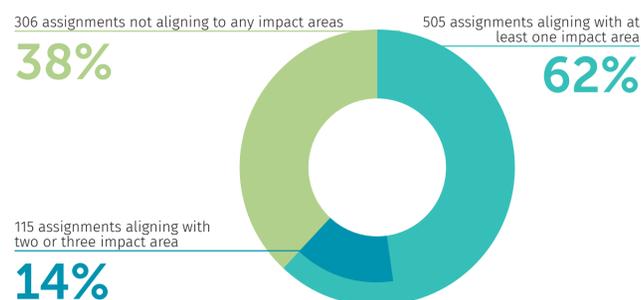
Impact area definitions were used to describe and communicate the impact areas. They were also used in the quantitative mapping of the volunteer portfolio.

Climate change

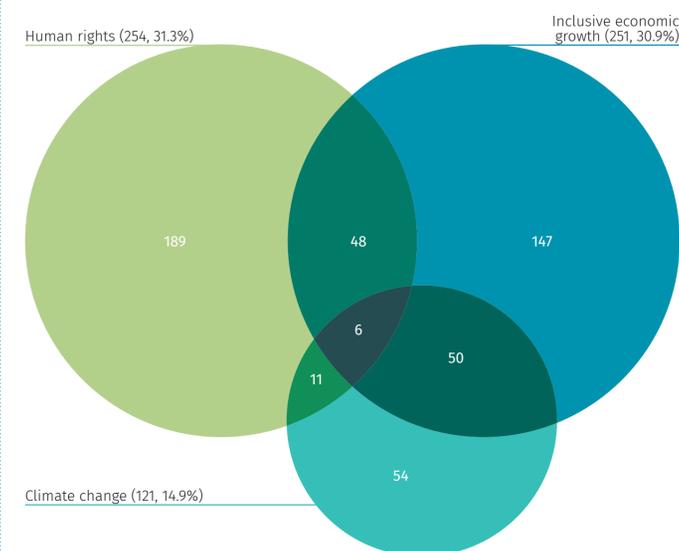


Alignment to impact areas:

- 62% of assignments aligned with at least one impact area.
- Of the 38% of the portfolio that did not align to an impact area, the vast majority were in the health and education sectors (although some assignments in the education and health sectors did also align with the impact areas, for example girls' education also maps to human rights).
- More volunteer assignments aligned with Human Rights and Inclusive Economic Growth than with Climate Change.



- Of the 62% of assignments that align with one or more impact areas:



Recommendations

The evaluation did not recommend an increase in alignment to the impact areas, instead it recommended that the program use the three impact areas as a means to reflect on current practice, identify innovation, effective partnerships and utilise communications on the three impact areas for public diplomacy.

The program should build on and strengthen existing engagement within the three impact areas. Approaches to strengthen engagement include:

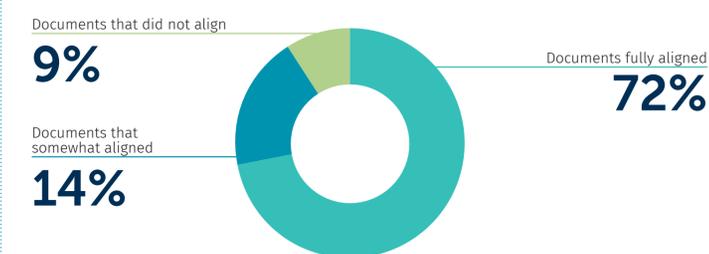
- Continue efforts to maintain long-term relationships with high profile and influential partner organisations as a means to positively contribute to impact.
- Continue deliberate focus on the overlap between impact areas to maximise contribution (e.g. Climate Change and Inclusive Economic Growth).
- Strengthen links between the program and DFAT expertise, particularly in relation to climate change.
- Actively pursue new partnerships with Australian organisations with climate change expertise as a means to further support engagement and contributions to the Climate Change impact areas.

Country-level alignment to impact area reflects the overall patterns of alignment to the impact areas globally. That is, across the 26 countries, more assignments aligned with Human Rights and Inclusive Economic Growth than with Climate Change, Disaster Resilience and Food Security. There was no significant variation of alignment to impact areas across the geographic regions.

Data quality relating to data codes is key for ongoing understanding of impact area coverage. Discrepancies and data quality associated with the DAC-CRS data codes somewhat hindered the quality of mapping. This finding informs a recommendation to improve the data coding process.

There was strong alignment to the impact areas across **Aid Investment Plans and Country Program Plans**:

- 72% of these documents 'fully aligned' with an impact area
- 19% 'somewhat aligned' with an impact area
- 9% 'did not align' with an impact area



The differences in alignment were indicative of the flexible and adaptable nature of the volunteer program, and the ability of DFAT Post and the Australian Volunteers Program to respond to emerging needs through volunteer placements. The program should continue to ensure alignment of Country Program Plans to Aid Investment Plans, whilst also recognising the value and opportunity that flexibility offers to meeting emerging needs of DFAT Post and partner governments.

What's next?

The evaluation recommended an approach to measuring the program's contribution to partner organisation's outcomes in the impact areas. This approach will focus on partners' contributions to sector-wide change, employing a theory of change and systems perspective to understand multiple drivers and contribution to change. In the year ahead (19/20), a 'deep dive' is planned, to explore one of the impact areas in one country in more detail.

This research will provide significant learning on contributions to impact areas to the Australian Volunteers Program and DFAT, relevant for future communications, strategic partnerships and public diplomacy efforts.

Acknowledgements

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