

# WHAT IS THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF VOLUNTEERING ON VOLUNTEERS' LIVES? A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF AUSTRALIAN VOLUNTEERS - PHASE 2

## Australian Volunteers

### Introduction

The Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers is a three-year research project (2019-2022) that explores the personal and professional impact of participating in the Australian Volunteers Program.

Phase 2 of the study interviewed 55 participants at the end of their volunteer assignment. It addressed participants' in-country experiences, self-reported learning and changes, perceptions of in-country support from the program, and the perceptions of 38 participants who returned home in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Volunteers' views

*'It is a different form of aid that Australia supplies, instead of giving money it's like a two-way system, professionals get experience in another place and the other place also should benefit from their skills.'*

– Australian volunteer

*One volunteer highlighted the mental health challenges she experienced due to isolation. 'My volunteer friends were in two separate major cities so their experience was different. I'd go into work every day. Relationships are key, people are so close. I'd immediately be engulfed in this beautiful family at work, and then I'd go home to just being on my own.' Over time she did forge friendships with colleagues outside of work. These friendships flowed back into her organisation, 'where they became so supportive of my ideas because I think I'd been supportive of them. We had so many conversations about the struggles that they have and the feedback they were giving me on what to do for my assignment. It was very mutual - me asking for their help and them also asking for my help.'*

– Australian volunteer

### Methodology

The Longitudinal Study collects information from 55 volunteers using three semi-structured interviews over two years. The interviews collect data at three points during the participants' volunteer journey:

- (i) before their departure (interview T1)
- (ii) during or shortly after the completion of their assignment (interview T2), and
- (iii) following completion of their assignment (interview T3), 12 months after interview T2.

This report provides a summary of findings from the latest round of interviews, at T2. These interviews:

- provide an overview of in-country experiences reported by participants
- identify participants' personal and professional changes, and
- provide participants' perceptions about the program and program staff.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the research, as 38 participants returned home in March 2020. Their planned assignment was reduced by 31% (from 366 days to 251 days).

### Key Findings

#### Overview of in-country experiences

Forty per cent of participants reported having an overall positive experience. These participants described their experiences as: 'stimulating, interesting, fascinating', 'the highlight of my life', 'an amazing experience', and 'great for me personally and professionally'. Nine of those reporting positive experiences were repeat program volunteers, one participant whose assignment was 'outstanding... my first (volunteer assignment) was good, second one was better and this one was the best'.

For 47% the experience was mixed, with substantial positives reported with difficulties or challenges. Seven participants (13%) expressed overall negative feelings about their experience. Challenging volunteer roles and the experience of being isolated were common contributors.

Volunteers were influenced by demands beyond their formal role with their partner organisation. This led many participants to undertake additional discretionary or voluntary contributions beyond their assigned role with the partner organisation. These varied in formality and how they drew on participants' professional expertise. All contributed in some way to direct and indirect capacity development of individuals, organisations or communities that was additional to their formal volunteer role.

#### Perceptions of program support

Participants' perceptions about the support provided during their assignments were generally positive, with judgments ranging from strongly positive to unfavourable.

Twenty-seven per cent were clearly positive. These participants described aspects of their preparation and in-country support with terms like 'extremely good', 'fantastic' and 'amazing... very, very supportive'. Forty-seven per cent of participants were expressed both positive and negative judgments, although these tended toward approving especially in relation to contact with in-country staff. Twenty-three per cent of participants were generally negative in their appraisal, describing program support as 'on the whole, not great', 'off the mark', and 'a bit sporadic'.

Participants generally approved of the preparation they received for their assignment in pre-departure briefings and in-country orientations, and in particular the program's role in nurturing informal support networks with other volunteers.

Participants reported making structured and proactive public diplomacy contributions during their assignments. Consistent with some participants' pre-departure view, several were uncertain about the purpose of public diplomacy and their role in it.

Overwhelmingly positive feedback was received about the planning, communication and mobilisation procedures involved in the program's management of the COVID-19 repatriations. The post-assignment allowance, which was seen as helpful and sufficient, assisted almost 75% of repatriated participants to continue providing support to their partner organisation after they returned home.

#### Personal and professional changes

Several participants emphasised the importance of viewing the assignment as a mutual learning process, based on a sense of equalising relations and recognising a shared agenda.

More than 50% of participants feel their future career prospects are enhanced by their assignment, while 20% attributed their enrolment in formal programs of study to their experiences in the program. Some reported a change in direction of planned study programs due to their involvement. Participants also reported a range of learning outcomes that they attributed to their assignment. These included cultural, professional and interpersonal skills, as well as personal development outcomes like resilience and patience.

Fifty-three per cent of participants were open to volunteering through the program again. Sixty-four per cent expressed an intention to remain formally involved in the program through the Returned Australian Volunteer Network. At least 38% have ongoing contact with other program volunteers.

#### Recommendations

- Provide volunteers with direct access to partner organisations, country program staff, and/or returned volunteers prior to their departure.
- Review in-country orientation program contents and activities to ensure they are inclusive of the diversity of volunteers' needs, including volunteers deployed to remote areas.
- Consider opportunities for facilitating partner organisations to support each other to help individually and collectively prepare, orient and support volunteers.
- Review how the relationships between country program staff, volunteers and partner organisations can be framed to improve mutual understanding of each other's roles.
- Support country teams to have more regular, informal and proactive contact with volunteers during their assignments to allow issues of wellbeing, comfort or satisfaction to be raised.
- Consider ways to promote and support inclusive and continuous learning and informal networking opportunities across volunteers, partner organisations and communities.

### Next steps

This study will interview volunteers between December 2020 and July 2021 about:

- contact and support from the program after their assignment, including interactions with the program's alumni network, and
- the impact on volunteers' personal and professional development, one year after the end of their assignment.

### Volunteers' views

*'It made me realise how important (the program) is. I thought, when we were signing up for the program, "Oh this is cool", but I had the idea that it was wasting money because I didn't really see the impacts. Now that I've done it, it is absolutely amazing, it's incredible. I didn't think it'd be like this. It certainly changed my expectations because I thought this big development stuff had to be just throwing money at countries but actually being there... I think it's amazing and incredible and I'm pretty proud to say that I'm an Australia volunteer.'*

– Australian volunteer

*'I see what I did achieve in nearly a year, I start to understand that it really is a long game.'*

– Australian volunteer

*One volunteer initially found his work in a government agency "depressing" because it was slow, unclear and not progressing. However, things changed when he got to spend more time with colleagues outside of work, when 'I got to learn a lot more about how they lived, their work, how their family works, culture, how that interacts their daily life. When I was trying to understand the country, and understanding the community, I discovered a lot more information outside the formal discussion of a policy. I discovered a lot more through that informal conversation with them about what's going on.'*

– Australian volunteer

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