

IS THE AUSTRALIAN VOLUNTEERS PROGRAM GOOD VALUE FOR MONEY?

Introduction

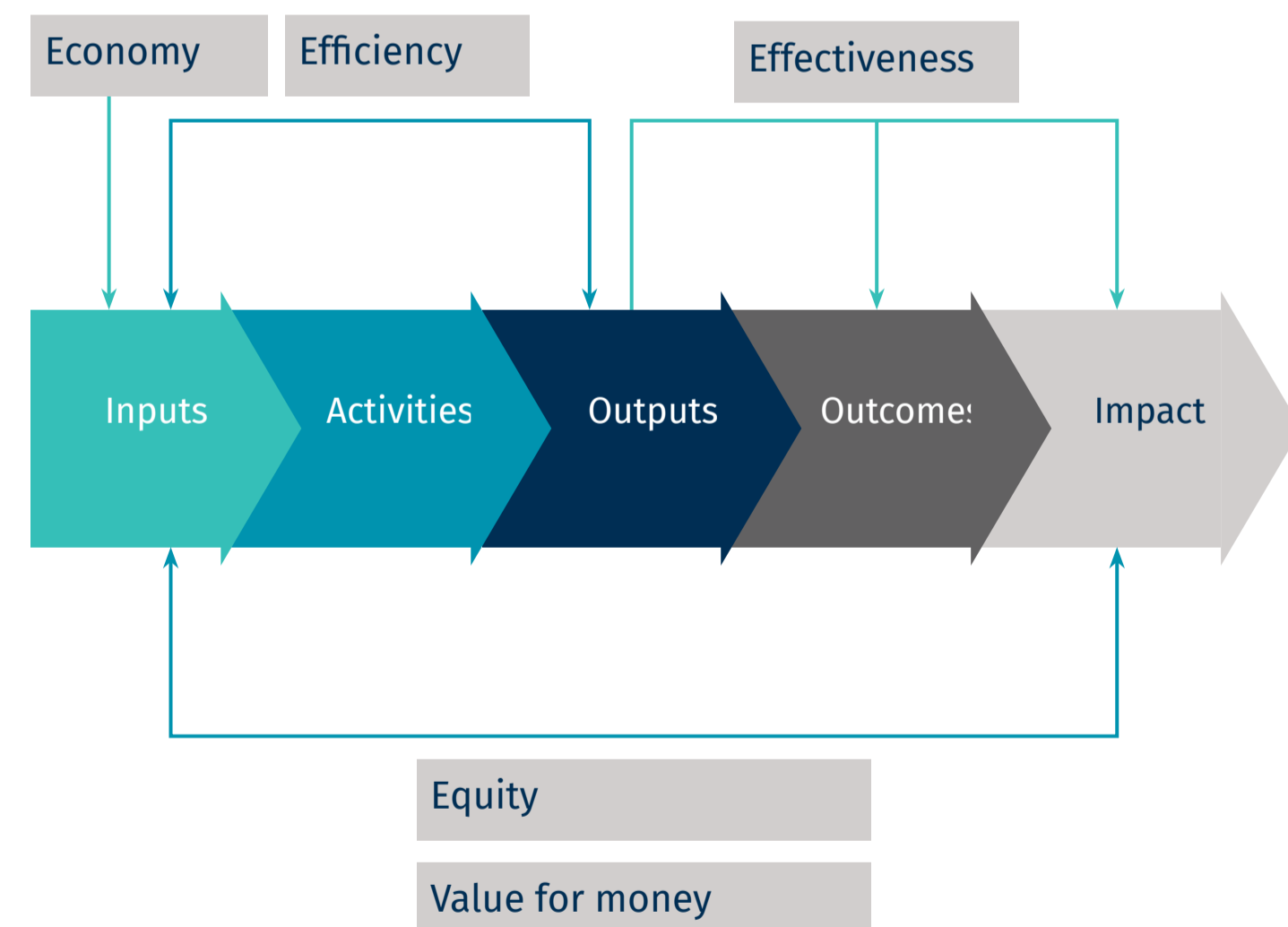
Value for money can be understood as maximising the impact of every dollar spent. In international development, it is not about doing things at the lowest possible cost, but about the developmental outcomes achieved with a given investment. Value for money is a critical consideration for the Australian Government and for the Australian Volunteers Program.

Assessing value for money in a rigorous and holistic way is not straightforward. The Australian Volunteers Program is unique in the context of the Australian aid program. There has not been a value for money assessment previously and there have been few such assessments of other international volunteering programs.

Based on this, the Australian Volunteers Program commissioned an independent assessment to support the program. It considered an appropriate approach to measuring value for money and a preliminary analysis based on this approach was carried out as a proof of concept. The objectives of the assessment were twofold:

- propose an approach to assessing value for money appropriate to the program, and
- conduct an initial value for money assessment of the program using that approach.

In looking at value for money, it is usual to consider the four different elements of economy, efficiency, effectiveness and equity:



Methodology

The first part of the assessment was to agree an approach that was tailored to the context of the program. One critical consideration was the timing of the assessment, taking place half-way through the program's five-year implementation period. This meant the assessment could not look at the overall effectiveness of the program, as data on the achievement of the program's desired outcomes was not yet available. As such, the assessment focused on economy and efficiency criteria.

The assessment was based on a thorough understanding of the program's theory of change: the approach the program takes to achieving change and the exact outcomes that are measured to know if outcomes have been achieved.

Based on this theory of change, the independent consultants developed a value for money framework. This framework set out what was to be assessed under defined sub-criteria for the four criteria of economy, efficiency, effectiveness and ethics. A rubric was then developed based on these sub-criteria, with performance standards for each defined in advance:

- *Excellent* – performance in this area is consistently very strong and exceeds expectations.
- *Good* – performance in this area is generally strong, consistent and meets expectations.
- *Adequate* – performance in this area is at the minimum acceptable standard, is inconsistent and could be manifestly improved.
- *Poor* – performance is weak and does not meet expectations.

To use the rubric consistently and effectively, it was necessary to identify and analyse a wide range of qualitative and quantitative data on program behaviour and performance. The independent consultants reviewed a large amount of program data (including financial reporting, performance and monitoring data, program strategies and plans) and conducted key informant interviews with a range of stakeholders. They then used this evidence to assess the program against the defined standards and criteria in the rubric.

Key Findings

The assessment of the Australian Volunteers Program at the program-wide level gave the following results:

Data for the efficiency assessment was based on financial year 2019-20. This was a year in which the COVID-19 pandemic meant the program had to pause all mobilisations of volunteers and repatriate volunteers already overseas. This had a major impact on the number of volunteers supported during the year and thus the budget. This was particularly noticeable at the country level, resulting in efficiency assessments of poor or adequate. Budget variance was less noticeable at the global level, where differences in country costs were balanced out, resulting in a lower overall budget variance and a score of good.

Criteria	Sub-criteria	Assessment
Economy	Total program costs	Good: Total program costs annually and at the end of the program cycle marginally at variance with the annually approved budget.
	Country program costs	Variable by country, but typically either adequate or poor.
	Country office operating costs	Variable by country, but typically poor.
	Volunteer placement costs	Variable by country, but typically poor.
	Overall economy rating	Good
Efficiency	Cost management	Good: Strong cost management procedures are in place.
	Risk management	Excellent: The risk management system is fit-for-purpose and proactively used to manage implementation risk.
	Productivity	Good: A high proportion of planned inputs and outputs have been delivered across the program and on time.
	Innovation	Excellent: The innovation system is fit-for-purpose and is producing a range of innovations that have been, and will likely continue to be, mainstreamed.
	Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI)	Good: The strategies, plans and activities that promote GEDSI are of a high quality and likely to foster ethical outcomes, but more could be done to mainstream them across the program.
	Accountability and transparency	Excellent: Governance structures facilitated accountable and transparent decision-making.
	Overall efficiency rating	Excellent

What's next?

The assessment shows, based on the data available, the Australian Volunteers Program provides good value for money.

The assessment also helped consider different options to measuring value for money, and showed that the methodological approach taken was sound, appropriate and provided useful results. As the proof-of-concept assessment was conducted before the end of the program, it could not look at the criteria of effectiveness and ethics. A next step would be to follow-up at the end of the program cycle when achievement of end of program outcomes can be considered to assess the entire five-year program based on all four criteria.

Acknowledgements

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