

PARTNERSHIPS, POWER AND SUPPORTING LOCALLY-LED CHANGE

Australian
Volunteers

Introduction

Partnerships and supporting locally-led change are key principles for the Australian Volunteers Program and central to how the program works with its partner organisations.

The Partnerships, power and supporting locally-led change research was conducted from August to November 2022 to help the program understand how its partners perceive the program's partnership approach, to better understand the power dynamics involved, and to consider how the program can best ensure equitable partnerships that support locally-led change.

Methodology

The research findings and subsequent recommendations are informed by perspectives from partner organisations collected via an online survey, interviews and workshops.

Data collection was conducted by external researchers with full anonymity assured to participants. A total of 28 interviews captured the perspectives of 33 stakeholders across three countries. A total of 79 partner organisations from Fiji and Timor-Leste participated in the research.

A review of program documentation and broader literature related to partnerships, decolonisation, aid and volunteering, and interviews and sensemaking workshops with program staff also informed the research.

Key Findings

The research found that the program is focused on deepening its engagement with partner organisations, demonstrated by the program's collaborative approach underpinned by program systems, processes and people focused on supporting partner organisations to achieve their objectives.

Of the partner organisations surveyed and interviewed, a majority expressed high satisfaction with the level of engagement and support provided in their partnership with the program, describing it as a partnership built on trust, open communication, and that program support responds to their needs.

Seventy-three percent of partner organisations surveyed strongly agreed that their organisation decides the type of assignments and volunteers they need, while 52 percent strongly agreed that the program effectively supports local partners through the partnership.

It [the partnership] is based on what the partner organisation needs. First, the program communicates with the partner organisation who then submit their proposal, they then recruit the volunteers. The program always informs the partner organisation how this process goes and asks the partner organisation to interview the candidates. Recently, the program has involved us directly in the interview process of candidates.

– Partner organisation, Timor-Leste

The partnership is informed by our organisation's needs and what we identify as areas where volunteers can assist. Also important is for volunteers to understand our organisation and the context we work in.

– Partner organisation, Fiji

Partner organisations view their partnership with the program as centred around volunteer support, and few spoke about working with the program in a planned and strategic way. Instead, partners' strongest influence within the partnership is the ability to influence volunteer support; from assignment design, to recruitment, and subsequent volunteer management in their organisation. There is less to no influence of partner organisations in contributing to the program's broader strategic direction or programming, an area that is still largely determined and set by donor and program priorities and plans.

They [the program] have their set procedures, templates and forms. We don't have much say in this respect as we have not been involved in the design of these elements. So they are what we have to use.

– Partner organisation, Fiji

Partner organisations reported not having access to some documents or participating in exit interviews with volunteers. Partners feel more comfortable providing critical feedback verbally, rather than in written format, and current monitoring processes are not anonymous. Some feedback may therefore not be captured through the program's formal monitoring process.

Many partner organisations feel the program empowers them to raise concerns when a volunteer is not suitable, however, this also depends on the level of trust in the relationship between the partner organisation and in-country teams.

The relationship that I had with the program enabled me to push back on a volunteer.

- Partner organisation, Fiji

Ultimately, it's the partner organisation that determines what the volunteer role is, the work they will do and who they'll report to, however the program decide which volunteers are shortlisted, as highlighted by one partner organisation:

We did not get the opportunity to shortlist the volunteers. In a standard recruitment process you would see all the job applications. The program are the decision makers on who gets shortlisted, so essentially, they end up deciding who the best person is for you. Partner organisations should be part of the recruitment process from the start.

- Partner organisation, Fiji

Despite greater awareness across the international volunteering sector, there are still underlying and powerful dynamics within the relationship between organisations that receive volunteer support and the volunteers. Specifically, when volunteers adopt a 'white savior' mentality.

Some volunteers think they are superior as they are older than the staff members and have more experience and knowledge. When the volunteer only has direct communication with the Director of the organisation to approve things but doesn't involve other staff members, staff can feel inferior.

- Partner organisation, Timor-Leste

Most partner organisations successfully navigate issues with volunteers who display a superiority complex.

Familiarising volunteers to their host country's context and culture was identified as a key part of the program's approach to partnerships.

The research found that the program has a strong commitment to creating more equitable partnerships, finding ways to move beyond a merely transactional relationship. This is demonstrated by program support including Impact Fund grants, partner organisation webinars, facilitating partner organisation's access to shared networks and providing learning opportunities.

We discovered during the pandemic how flexible the program was willing to be in supporting our immediate needs in the field. This has built our confidence in requesting specific support from the program.

- Survey respondent

Recommendations

The report provides several recommendations that the program is taking forward:

- Implement a more strategic approach to partnerships with partner organisations
- Design and implement mechanisms that encourage open feedback from partner organisations
- Establish processes that encourage and promotes partner organisations' input into decision-making in how the program operates
- Continue to involve partner organisations in volunteer selection to promote shared power and decision making
- Familiarise volunteers about issues of power, race and privilege, and build this into program processes
- Continue to document and share the program's learnings in implementing program approaches that promote locally-led development, localisation and decolonisation
- Continue the model of local in-country teams having direct oversight of partner organisation engagement and relationship building.

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