HOW DID THE AUSTRALIAN VOLUNTEERS PROGRAM RESPOND TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

Australian Volunteers

Introduction

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic declared in March 2020, the Australian Volunteers Program paused all mobilisations of volunteers getting ready to go on assignment and repatriated nearly all volunteers who were already overseas. A rapid review was commissioned to take stock of the significant changes the global crisis caused, and to assess how the program was responding.

The review had the following components:

• Component A looked at COVID-19 in-country assignments

• Component B looked at remote volunteering as a new form of volunteering for the program, and

• Component C looked at how the program's Innovation Fund helped the program respond.

Methodology

A rapid, real-time review was carried out by external consultants from August to November 2020. The review was based on:

• key informant interviews with partner organisation staff, volunteers, and program staff

• a document review, and

• analysis of program monitoring data available at the time.

A synthesis report was developed to document lessons for the Australian Volunteers Program and to draw conclusions on how well the program has adapted to the COVID-19 context.

Key Findings

Component A documented the outcomes from the small number of COVID-19 related assignments that remained in-country following the repatriation of Australian volunteers. Eight volunteer assignments were determined by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (in consultation with the program) to be in critical roles that could support COVID-19 preparedness and response in partner countries. Of these, six volunteers remained in-country in the Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, and Vanuatu, while two volunteers worked remotely.

The review found that partner organisations were directly supporting preparations for COVID-19 in the health systems of their respective countries. **Their achievements** included: designing clinical guidelines or standard operating procedures; implementing infection control processes; setting up triage and isolation units; training front line health staff; and delivering public health communications. In some cases, Australian volunteers provided technical assistance which helped to ensure DFAT's financial investments to support COVID-19 preparedness were well targeted and effective.

The partner organisations also supported the continuation of regular essential health services, which would otherwise have been disrupted because of the diversion of resources to prepare for COVID-19, or the impact of restricted movement within countries.

The review found that **Australian volunteers played critical roles in supporting partner organisations' achievements**. In addition, allowing selected Australian volunteers to remain in-country **was seen as a tangible demonstration of both the program's and Australia's commitment to its partners**, and to the development of recipient countries. The review **identified a few key lessons**:

• Keeping a small cohort of volunteers in-country in relevant positions during a crisis has real benefits, both directly to the partner organisations, and in strengthening the Australian Volunteers Program and the Australian aid program more generally.

• Volunteers remaining in-country required additional support, for both practical issues and moral support.

• The additional support needs and potential risks associated with having volunteers remain in-country need to be balanced with the benefits of supporting partner organisations.

• During a health crisis, equal priority must be given to maintaining regular essential health services and providing targeted support to respond to the crisis. This should be considered when deciding which volunteers to retain in-country and why.

Component B examined the Australian Volunteers Program's remote volunteering model. Remote volunteering was conceived as a new form of volunteering in response to restrictions on in-country volunteering resulting from COVID-19. It builds on 'open volunteering' prototypes developed through the program's Innovation Fund.

The review found that remote volunteering has been a successful aspect of the program's COVID-19 response. Drawing on learnings from the earlier 'open volunteering' prototypes, the program successfully implemented the remote volunteering model in a short timeframe without major issues or challenges. In its early stages, there was a strong take-up of remote volunteering. Volunteers reported reasonably high levels of overall satisfaction with assignments.

The review found that flexible assignment duration and commitment (full-time and part-time), as well as the system of partner organisations and volunteers developing the assignment together, worked well.
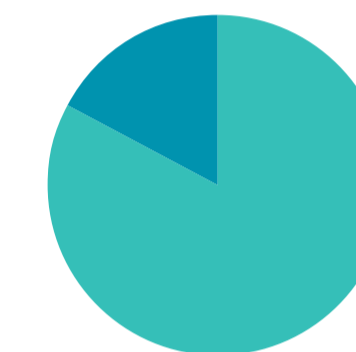
68% of volunteers on remote assignments reported they achieved their assignment objectives.

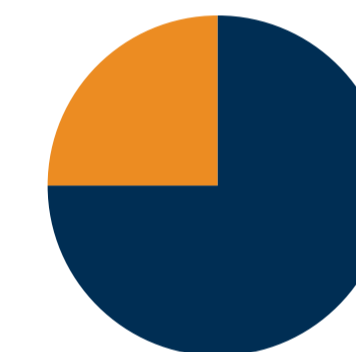**68%**
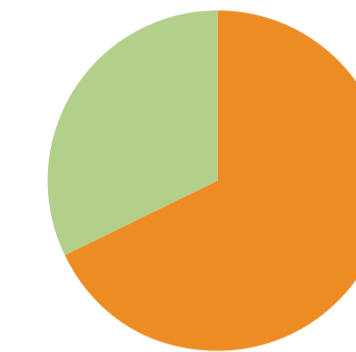
83% of volunteers on remote assignments were satisfied with the recruitment process.
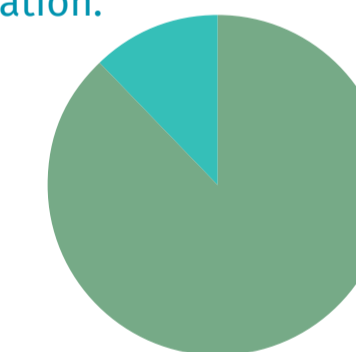
83%

75% of volunteers on remote assignments were satisfied with their training and preparation.
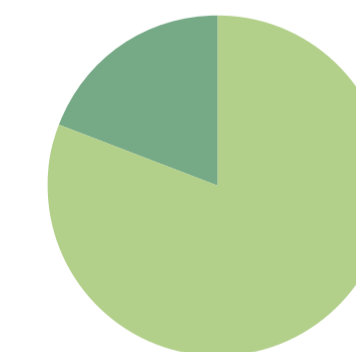
75%

88% of volunteers on remote assignments were satisfied with the working relationship with their partner organisation.
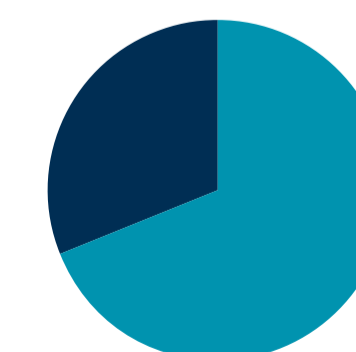
88%

81% of volunteers on remote assignments were satisfied with the program overall.

81%

69% of volunteers on remote assignments were satisfied with their assignment overall.

69%

The review identified several areas where improvements could be considered. These included allowing longer-term assignments; providing more guidance to in-country teams on country orientation processes; supporting the relationship between volunteer and partner organisations; and increasing inclusion of a diverse range of volunteers and ensuring a greater diversity of partner organisations.

Component C examined the Innovation Fund and the extent to which it enabled the Australian Volunteers Program to adapt in response to COVID-19. The Innovation Fund aims to develop innovations that can be integrated into the program.

The review found that the Innovation Fund has been vital to assisting the program to respond well to COVID-19. This is because the Innovation Fund has assisted program staff to be open to innovation. It has also developed processes and systems that enable innovation by allowing the program to tap into its internal expertise to generate and test new ideas.

As a result of this work by the Innovation Fund, the program has been able to:

• **rapidly implement remote volunteering at the onset of COVID-19**, drawing on earlier prototypes of 'open volunteering', and

• **quickly generate numerous ideas on 'volunteering for development'**, which aim to support volunteering and volunteerism in partner countries.

The review concluded that the Innovation Fund will continue to be critical to the ongoing success of the Australian Volunteers Program in the future. The review highlighted that **the ultimate success of the Innovation Fund will rest on its ability to sustainably integrate successful innovations into the program's ongoing work.**

What's next?

The review also highlighted that there were three key elements that enabled a strong response overall: excellent crisis management and program leadership; strong relationships that were effectively leveraged by the program; and the program's Innovation Fund. The review has helped the program appraise its approach to crisis management and consider what could be strengthened in future. The rapid review directly informed ongoing work to adapt and improve the program, particularly remote volunteering, as an important new part of the program that will likely to continue even when in-country assignments are again an option.

Acknowledgements