REVIEW OF REMOTE VOLUNTEERING

Australian Volunteers

Introduction

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian Volunteers Program stopped sending volunteers overseas and moved to a remote volunteering model in early 2020. In-country volunteers were repatriated to Australia, new mobilisations were suspended and volunteers were offered remote assignments.

Initially, the model focussed on volunteers who had been in-country but had returned to Australia. It has now evolved to include volunteers who are new to the program and have not been on an overseas assignment before.

This review aims to:

- understand if and how the remote volunteering model contributes to the Australian Volunteers Program's outcomes, and
- recommend improvements to the program learning and adaptation.

Methodology

The review was based on:

- a desk review of program documents and monitoring data, and
- focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with program staff, remote volunteers and partner organisations.

Seven program staff, 12 partner organisation representatives and 10 volunteers participated in semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Feedback was reviewed from 146 volunteers and 135 partner organisations' end of assignment reports (July 2020 to April 2021).

'[It] gives me an interest and it's worthwhile to do as well as about helping other people. I had not thought of volunteering at all – just came across the opportunity and thought it was really good and suited to me and my skillset.'
– Australian Volunteer

Key Findings

Outcomes of remote assignments for partner organisations

The remote volunteering model resulted in successful volunteer assignments and has supported effective relationships between program stakeholders.

Partner organisations engaged remote volunteers to meet their capacity development needs, and sought technical advisory support to deliver effective programs.

Partner organisations applied for remote assignments to build their staff capacity in English, networking and program management.

Partners engaged remote volunteers to strengthen their plans, systems and processes, meet technical requirements and secure resources. Volunteers provided support to deliver inclusive programs that considered gender equality, disability and social inclusion, child protection and the environment.

Partners engaged remote volunteers to help them pivot to COVID-19 programming. Partners asked volunteers to build their capacity to plan and strengthen their systems, so they could offer services and deliver programs online. This included developing or revamping online service platforms to maintain the efficiency and reach of services.
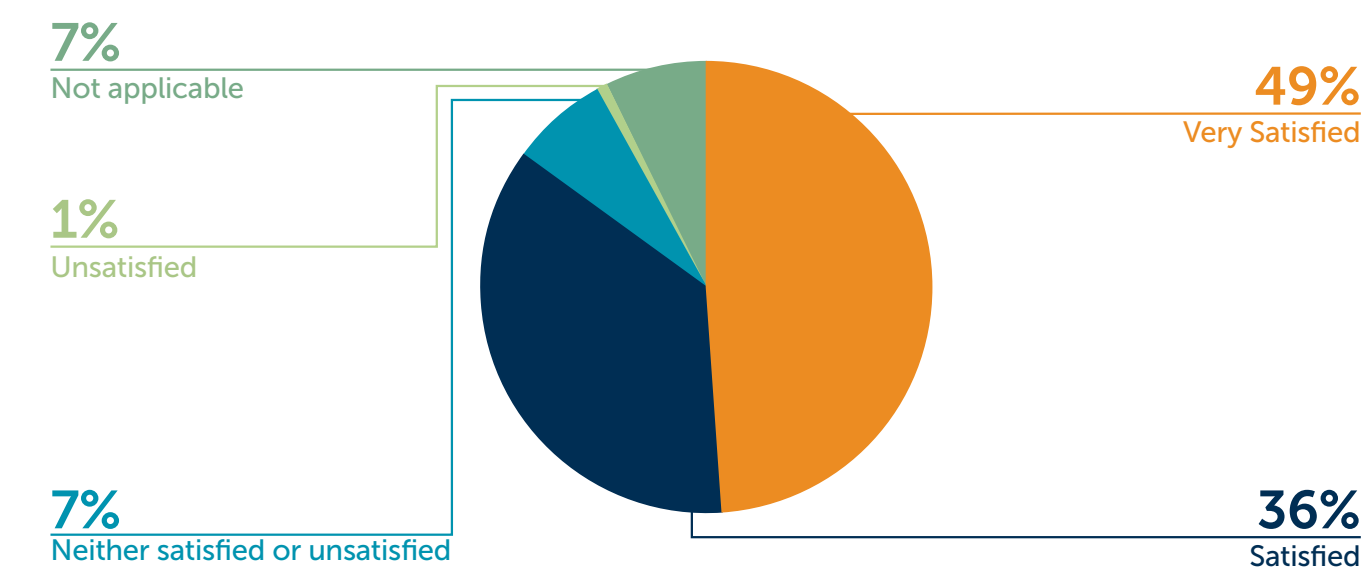
Eighty five per cent of partner organisations were satisfied or very satisfied with the outcomes of volunteer assignments, demonstrating that remote volunteers were highly effective in meeting their needs. This was supported by:

- strong coordination by program teams
- partner organisations being 'volunteer ready', and
- volunteers having the right skills, motivation and attitude.

Outcomes of remote assignments for volunteers

The review found that remote volunteers were satisfied with their assignments and experienced personal and professional benefits. The ability to support partner organisation needs was rewarding for volunteers. They valued shared learning and making a difference in the lives of individuals and partner organisations. Program initiatives such as Impact Funds and Go Back Give Back grants enabled volunteers to further support partner organisations to implement small projects based on identified needs.

Volunteer satisfaction with assignments

- 7% Not applicable
- 1% Unsatisfied
- 7% Neither satisfied or unsatisfied
- 49% Very Satisfied
- 36% Satisfied

Remote volunteers were satisfied with their assignments. Volunteers were very motivated to assist partner organisations and contribute to international development. Seventy two per cent of remote volunteers were very satisfied or satisfied with their assignments.

Remote volunteering provided opportunities to share skills to contribute to international development without having to leave Australia. There are indications remote volunteering can help diversify the range of Australians interested and able to volunteer.

There was shared learning between the remote volunteers and partner organisations. Volunteers gained an understanding of the local context and culture. Remote volunteering provided Australians with the opportunity to improve personal skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and communication.

Remote assignments enabled the continuation of in-country roles cut-short by COVID-19. For volunteers who had in-country experience, their connection with the country, people and partner organisation motivated them to help the partner organisation meet its objectives.

Many volunteers experienced personal benefits that helped them grow personally and professionally. Remote volunteering opened remote volunteers minds about people's living experiences outside of Australia. It provided opportunities to learn and understand new culture and way of life.

Helping others, contributing to a partner organisation and individual growth offered a sense of accomplishment for remote volunteers. This allowed volunteers to advance their professional careers through the connections and opportunities offered through remote volunteering.

The Impact Fund enabled volunteers to further support partner organisations to implement small projects. The remote volunteers were instrumental in writing winning proposals for the Impact Fund and supporting partner organisations to implement projects. This positive experience also contributed to volunteer's satisfaction with assignments.

Recommendations

- Streamline remote volunteers' recruitment and onboarding processes. The current process risks demotivating Australians who apply for remote assignments due to the length of the process.
- Provide consistent, ongoing communication and support to remote volunteers through the program's in-country teams. This will address the current challenges that volunteers are facing in working effectively with partner organisations.
- Review the cost of language classes or courses in countries in which volunteers are raising concerns. Consider a separate price range for these countries.
- Consider expanding the timeframe for assignments with clear and longer term outcomes for volunteers.
- Expand the program's outreach and advertising to attract and support inclusion of a diversity of volunteers, such as working with Disabled Persons Organisations, using social media and working through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), in-country staff and DFAT Posts.
- Consider using the digital capacity assessment tool implemented by the Philippines In-Country Program Team across the program to help determine partner organisation readiness to host volunteers. Tailor engagement with partner organisations who cannot not host volunteers so they can remain connected with the program.
- Clarify roles during the development of volunteer assignments, including regular health checks between in-country program teams, partner organisations and volunteers to ensure assignments are progressing as planned and volunteers are receiving the appropriate support from counterparts and supervisors.

'It has stretched me professionally and I have only been going with it for six weeks now. Long term, it will be beneficial to me to work in a different operating environment, one that I know nothing about (Sri Lanka), getting a bit of a feel for the operating environment now but it's made me appreciate how easy we have things in Australia.'
– Australian Volunteer

Acknowledgements