

# RESEARCHING ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Australian  
Volunteers

## Introduction

**From 2024 to 2026, 14 organisations in Fiji, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam who are partnering with the Australian Volunteers Program are conducting participatory research on their organisation's capacity strengthening and ways in which volunteers contribute.**

These organisations are leading the design and implementation of the research, with regular technical support from the Australian Volunteers Program's monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) team and researchers from the University of Technology Sydney's Institute for Sustainable Futures (UTS-ISF). This report presents the synthesised findings from the first year of the research (2024) across all 14 organisations.

## Methodology

This research examined how 14 organisations across Fiji, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam experienced capacity strengthening initiatives and whether and how the Australian Volunteers Program contributes to their development outcomes. The study aimed to help partners learn effective strategies for strengthening their organisational capacity.

Organisations designed their own participatory research on capacity strengthening with support from the program's monitoring and evaluation team and UTS-ISF researchers. Each organisation used different definitions, frameworks and research methods to conduct their studies in the first year.

## Key Findings

In Year 1 of this three-year research project, organisations researched the history and current state of organisational capacity in their organisation. Common existing strengths of organisations included highly qualified, skilled and committed staff; strong and varied partnerships and community engagement; and strong leadership.

Areas for further strengthening varied significantly across organisations, including opportunities to strengthen leadership, strategy, staff retention and benefits, and sustainable funding

## Shifting Views on Organisational Capacity Strengthening

Organisations initially understood organisational capacity strengthening (OCS) differently. Most used a "gaps-focused" approach, identifying deficits to fix, while others saw OCS as improving specific functions like project management or financial systems to meet donor requirements.

After participating in research for a year, several organisations' thinking evolved. Staff developed more holistic, long-term perspectives valuing both internal strengths and external inputs. The research suggests organisations benefit from moving beyond deficit-focused approaches to embrace comprehensive understandings that recognise existing strengths whilst planning sustainable development.

*"Many within the organisation now view OCS as a process of continuous improvement rather than a one-time goal. This understanding reflects the growing emphasis on adaptability and resilience in the face of external challenges, such as climate change and economic shifts. ... [staff] now better understand that OCS is a holistic approach, requiring consistent effort, shared ownership, and alignment with the organisation's mission and values."*

**– Organisation representative in Fiji**

## Changes to Organisational Capacity

Research revealed capacity changes across five key areas in partner organisations. Individual skills development improved leadership, financial management, IT skills and fundraising through training and mentoring. Organisational processes and systems changed in eight organisations, particularly digital transformation accelerated by COVID-19, with support from the Australian Volunteers Program.

Partnerships and networks were the most common changes, with 10 organisations gaining new partners and funding. Organisational culture shifted toward more inclusive approaches in four organisations. Unexpected changes included external disruptions from government delays, COVID-19, donor requirements and staff expansion, highlighting the need for adaptability.

## Contributors to Organisational Capacity Strengthening

Organisations found that effective capacity strengthening requires balancing internal and external inputs. Internally, strong leadership from managers and board members drove digital transformation and fundraising improvements in four organisations. Staff attitudes, particularly openness to change and fresh perspectives from younger employees, significantly contributed to development.

Externally, all organisations identified partnerships and networks as the most significant factors, including community collaborators, government partnerships, universities, national CSOs, and media outlets. The Australian Volunteers Program was universally recognised as a key contributor. Interestingly, major disruptions like COVID-19, whilst challenging, rapidly catalysed beneficial changes by forcing digital adaptation.

*“Capacity strengthening requires internal and external inputs. [Our organisation] has recognised the importance of independence in capacity strengthening. ... Relying solely on external support, such as volunteers, is not sustainable for long-term growth. Simultaneously, [we] acknowledge the value of external expertise ... [including the] contributions of Australian volunteers.”*  
- Organisation representative in Vietnam

## Australian Volunteers Program Contributions to Organisational Capacity Strengthening

The Australian Volunteers Program contributed significantly to capacity strengthening through three main areas. Building networks and collaboration was the most cited, with nine organisations reporting volunteers facilitated connections with governments, universities, donors and communities. Seven organisations highlighted training and mentoring contributions across diverse fields. The program also strengthened organisational systems through policy updates, database digitalisation and website development.

Organisations hosting multiple volunteers over extended periods noted cumulative impacts, with one Indonesian disability service provider benefiting from seven years of support across occupational therapy, speech therapy, and family programs, enabling knowledge-sharing across Indonesia's disability sector.

*“The [Australian Volunteers] Program facilitated enhancements to both the organisation's website and the project's website. These improvements have been crucial in modernising the organisation's digital presence, making information more accessible, and engaging with a broader audience. By updating the websites, the organisation has been able to communicate more effectively with stakeholders, donors, and the general public.”*  
- Organisation representative in Sri Lanka

## Lessons Learnt About Researching Organisational Capacity Strengthening

The research revealed valuable lessons about studying capacity strengthening in international volunteering contexts. Participatory methods involving diverse stakeholders proved essential for comprehensive evaluation, generating rich learning and enabling organisations to understand multiple perspectives rather than relying on individual experiences or quantitative indicators.

Using broad conceptual frameworks was more valuable than predetermined external indicators, allowing organisations to lead research on their own terms whilst considering diverse factors and stakeholders. The research process opened spaces for critical reflection on organisational futures, enabling staff to examine previously unquestioned issues.

*“[The most valuable aspect of the research in year 1 was] the realisation that we are stronger and more capable than we initially thought. The findings from the research highlighted the untapped potential within our team and the resilience of our organisation.”*  
- Organisation representative in Indonesia

The participatory approach enabled organisations to take ownership of their research, enhance their research capacity, and open space for organisational reflection and learning. All 14 organisations will continue the research in Year 2, in 2025-2026.

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