

**Independent Evaluation: Australian Volunteers Program's thematic impact areas
MANAGEMENT RESPONSE**

Investment Summary

Investment Name	Australian Volunteers Program
AidWorks reference	Investment INM247
Original dates:	17 June 2017 to 30 June 2022
Amended dates:	nil
Original value:	Total value: A\$190,000,000
Implementing partner:	Australian Volunteers International (AVI)
Country/Region:	Various
Primary sector:	Capacity Development
Initiative end of program outcomes:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Partner organisations are supported by Australia to achieve their own development objectives; 2. The public in Australia better appreciate the value of international volunteering; 3. Australian volunteers gain professionally and personally.

Review Summary

The purpose of the independent formative evaluation was to assess the outcomes and contribution of the Australian Volunteers Program to the program's three impact areas.

The Australian Volunteers Program Global Program Strategy 2018-2022 identifies three impact areas that act as lenses to understand the Australian Volunteers Program and help the program demonstrate policy alignment with Australian Government priorities. The impact areas were informed by the Australian Government's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper.

The three impact areas are:

- Human Rights
- Climate Change, Disaster Resilience, Food Security
- Inclusive Economic Growth

Volunteer assignments under the Australian Volunteers Program are not limited to the three impact areas, but they provide a means of looking in more detail at the work the program is doing.

The overall objective of the formative evaluation was to map the global footprint of the Australian Volunteers Program portfolio to the impact areas to:

- establish a baseline;
- inform strategic options for strengthening engagement in the impact areas; and
- propose a methodology for demonstrating outcomes in impact areas.

This formative evaluation is part a long-term evaluation activity to run from 2019 until the end of contract in 2022. This phase – the formative evaluation – will be followed by a series of summative evaluations of each of the impact areas, which will be carried out over the next three years.

Review Team:

The formative evaluation was conducted by the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology (UTS), Sydney, led by Dr Keren Winterford, Research Director, and Anna Gero, Research Principal. The research team also included Research Consultants, Tamara Megaw and Jay Falletta, and Expert Advisor, Dr Anthony Fee.

The evaluation took place between February and June 2019 and was managed by the Australian Volunteers Program Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Manager with the support of a dedicated Evaluation Steering Group. Initial consultations were conducted in Melbourne with key program stakeholders. Three areas of inquiry were identified (definitions of impact areas, alignment of program portfolio to impact areas, learning and recommendations) with the review team drawing on a range of qualitative and quantitative primary and secondary data. A sense-making workshop with key stakeholders in Melbourne reviewed findings and identified the approach to interpretation and communication.

Key messages:

- Mapping of the volunteer portfolio found that 62 per cent of assignments aligned with at least one impact area
- 14 per cent of the 811 assignments reviewed aligned with two or all three impact areas
- A greater number of the volunteer assignments aligned with Human Rights and Inclusive Economic Growth
- There is no significant variation of alignment to impact areas across the geographic regions
- Of the 38 per cent of the portfolio that did not align to an impact area, the majority were in the health and education sectors
- Further alignment to impact areas would be to the detriment of other key sectoral areas, especially health and education

Overall response to the evaluation

DFAT welcomes the evaluation findings and acknowledges the recommendations. More detailed responses to each recommendation are included in the table below:

Response to recommendations

RECOMMENDATION	RELATED KEY LESSONS	RESPONSE (AGREE/PARTIALLY AGREE/DISAGREE)	IF PRACTICAL, SPECIFY TIMEFRAME HERE
<i>Recommendation 1: Recognising a large portion of the volunteer assignments fall outside the three impact areas, the Australian Volunteers Program should not increase alignment efforts, and should not increase its focus on impact areas. The Australian Volunteer Program should however employ the three impact areas as a means to reflect on current practice, identify innovation, effective partnerships and utilise communications on the three impact areas for public diplomacy.</i>	The design of the program ensures strategic alignment between volunteer assignments and DFAT's aid priorities in partner countries. This is achieved through Country Program Plans (CPPs) covering 26 countries developed in alignment with DFAT aid investment plans (AIPs).	Agree: It was not the intention of the program to use the impact areas to change the strategic focus of the Australian Volunteers Program, but rather to use them as a lens for exploring how to strengthen work in the impact areas, including through new partnerships, better evidence and communication of program impact in the impact areas.	

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<p><i><u>Recommendation 2:</u> Further research is required to better understand Australian Volunteer Program's contributions to the three impact areas. Research should focus on Partner Organisation contributions to sector-wide change, employing a theory of change and systems perspective to understand multiple drivers and contribution to change. The methodology could be applicable to both impact area and other sectors such as health and education. This research would provide significant learning on contributions to impact areas to the Australian Volunteers Program and DFAT, relevant for future communications, strategic partnerships (with Partner Organisations and Australian organisations) and public diplomacy efforts.</i></p>	<p>Learning is a guiding principle of the program and a key element of the Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Framework (MELF). Drawing on the 2014 Office of Development Effectiveness (ODE) evaluation of the predecessor Australian Volunteers for International Development Program (AVID), the program takes a developmental evaluation approach to assessing progress. This approach emphasises monitoring from multiple data sources to identify patterns and prompt new thinking. A clear focus on learning and reflection tests the program is progressing on the right path to achieve the desired outcomes.</p>	<p>Agree: The program agrees with the proposed approach set out by the formative evaluation to further research contributions to the impact areas. A series of 'deep dives' into each of the impact areas will be undertaken over the next three years. The program has agreed that the focus of the next phase will be the inclusive economic growth impact area. Plans for a summative evaluation in this impact area have been included in the 2019-20 Annual Plan.</p>	<p>2019-20</p>

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<p><i>Recommendation 3: The Australian Volunteers Program should build on and strengthen existing engagement within the three impact areas. Approaches to strengthen engagement include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>• continue efforts to maintain long-term relationships with high profile and influential Partner Organisations as a means to positively contribute to impact</i> <i>• continue deliberate focus on the overlap between impact areas to maximise contribution (e.g. Climate Change and Inclusive Economic Growth);</i> <i>• strengthen links between the Australian Volunteers Program and DFAT expertise, particularly in relation to climate change (see also recommendation 5)</i> <i>• actively pursue new partnerships with Australian organisations with climate change expertise as a means to further support engagement and contributions to the Climate Change impact area (see also recommendation 5)</i> <i>• improve efforts to communicate success stories within the volunteer program for public diplomacy and support for the Australian Volunteers Program</i> 	<p>Building strong relationships and partnerships is a foundational element of the program. Establishing long-term, mutually respectful and valued partnerships with organisations is fundamental to the program's development approach.</p> <p>Linkages to other DFAT-managed development programs have been an ongoing feature of the program. The program will further sharpen key relationships that contribute to objectives of both the volunteers program and relevant DFAT investments.</p> <p>The Australian Volunteers Program has a purposeful focus on communicating the value of volunteering. Learning from the impact area evaluations will add to the body of evidence available for the program to promote and highlight the impact and opportunities available under the program.</p>	<p>Partially agree: The program does not intend to increase the size of the portfolio covering one or more of the impact areas (see Recommendation 1) but will further strengthen engagement in these areas.</p> <p>The different approaches suggested by the recommendation are all worth pursuing, and require sustained effort. The challenge for the program is prioritising thematic areas, such as gender equality and disability inclusion (both the subject of recent external reviews with similar recommendations to strengthen engagement). The program will consolidate recommendations from various program reviews and evaluations and jointly agree (DFAT and implementing partner) on priorities, timing and resourcing, as part of formal annual planning processes.</p>	<p>As part of annual planning processes commencing in February each year</p> <p>Mapping of links between the volunteers program and key DFAT development programs will commence in 2019-20</p> <p>New partnerships on climate change are being actively pursued with DFAT-related investments commencing September 2019</p>

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<p><i>Recommendation 4: The Australian Volunteers Program should strengthen its staff and stakeholders (Partner Organisations, DFAT Post, partner government) understanding of purpose and objectives of the impact areas.</i></p> <p><i>Strengthened understanding of the impact areas will:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>• address inconsistent understandings of the purpose and function of impact areas both internally and with external stakeholders</i> <i>• ensure engagement of the impact areas is considered together with other development priorities and strategies</i> <i>• contribute to the effective assessment of the contribution of the Australian Volunteers Program to impact areas.</i> 	<p>Communicating the contribution of the volunteers program to Australian Government priorities remains a key objective of the program as part of DFAT's people-to-people portfolio.</p>	<p>Agree: The Global Program Strategy (that includes the Impact Areas) was officially launched in February 2019, during the course of the formative evaluation. The program still needs to continue socialising the strategy and the impact areas. The formative evaluation provides an important opportunity to increase understanding of the purpose and objectives of the impact areas.</p>	<p>The Global Program Strategy and formative evaluation were included in the program's Regional Reflection Workshops in Honiara and Jakarta in August 2019 bringing together 130 program and DFAT representatives. Further opportunities for sharing the evaluation findings will also be explored and will be publically available on DFAT and AVP websites.</p>
<p><i>Recommendation 5: In line with efforts to strengthen engagement in the three impact areas and recognising the lower proportion of the program portfolio that aligns with Climate Change, Disaster Resilience and Food Security, the Australian Volunteer Program should consider a variety of options to more effectively engage across this impact area. Strategic partnerships should be prioritised, for example improving links between the Australian Volunteers Program</i></p>	<p>The program will pursue linkages to other DFAT-managed development programs and technical expertise on climate change and disaster resilience and identify new partnerships that support this impact area.</p>	<p>Partially agree: The program notes the lower proportion of assignments in this impact area and agrees with the reasons for this as given in the report. While noting the possible tensions with Recommendation One above, the program should strengthen the depth of engagement in the climate change/disaster resilience/food security impact area, and document and communicate results. Current work underway to support this recommendation includes the partnership with the Australian Government's Australian Humanitarian</p>	

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<p><i>and DFAT's climate change expertise, strategic selection of local partner organisations and Australian organisations working on climate change issues to ensure volunteer assignments are appropriately scoped and new relationships with influential partner organisations are developed and maintained.</i></p>		<p>Partnership (AHP) program and initial discussions with DFAT's Australia Pacific Climate Partnership.</p> <p>The program also needs to ensure it continues to be responsive to the requests of partner organisations and host governments and sufficiently align to Australian Government Aid Investment Plans (AIPs).</p>	
<p><i><u>Recommendation 6:</u> The Australian Volunteers Program should improve the quality of data in the Management Information System (MIS) database to better monitor and measure contributions to the impact areas. For example, careful selection of DAC-CRS codes and SDGs, consistent approaches to describing Assignment Objectives (length and detail) and improved coding to gender and child-focused priorities.</i></p>	<p>The quality of data collection and analysis is an important element of understanding and demonstrating program effectiveness. As such, there are checks and balances in place to support and mitigate burdens on country teams, for example through development of online tools with in-time guidance so that data can be entered in real-time. Data quality checks are also carried out periodically including for the annual report process.</p>	<p>Agree: As the program monitoring tools have been moved onto a new online platform, many of the data collection tools have been updated to better code and capture relevant data. Coding of organisations (to DAC codes) and assignments (to align to SDGs) is not always obvious, and is often reliant on the interpretation of the person coding, either program staff or volunteers themselves. As such, the program will raise awareness of the importance of accurate coding, and provide guidance and common standards. Findings from the formative evaluation provide a useful opportunity to share with staff the importance of accurate coding.</p>	<p>Guidance for staff and volunteers on coding will be finalised in 2019-20</p>
<p><i><u>Recommendation 7:</u> The Australian Volunteers Program should use MIS data to routinely map the program portfolio (volunteer assignments and contribution to partner organisation development objectives) to impact areas. MIS data fields such as DAC-CRS Codes, SDG targets, and</i></p>	<p>Ongoing work to measure the contribution to the program to each of the impact areas through a series of summative evaluations provides a useful opportunity for re-visiting the mapping.</p>	<p>Agree: Data analysis is already a part of the annual data analysis and reporting cycle and this will continue.</p>	

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<i>keywords relevant to Assignment Title and Assignment Objectives should be used. Routine mapping should be monitored for ongoing improvements.</i>			
<i>Recommendation 8: The Australian Volunteers Program should continue to ensure alignment of Country Program Plans to Aid Investment Plans in relevant countries, whilst also recognising the value and opportunity that flexibility offers to meet emerging needs of DFAT Post and partner governments.</i>		Agree: The program engages in ongoing discussions with DFAT Posts to ensure strategic agreement on the alignment of Country Program Plans (CPPs) and Aid Investment Plans (AIPs). As AIPs are reviewed and updated, the program continues to adapt the CPPs, while maintaining flexibility to respond to emerging priorities as agreed with DFAT.	Country Program Plans are reviewed every May/June to identify need for refresh