Helpdesk Research Report: Impact of International Volunteering
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Query: What evidence is there of the cost-effectiveness, cost-benefits, impact (on alleviating poverty and raising awareness of development) and value for money of international volunteering?

Enquirer: DFID

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1. Overview

There appears to be little robust evidence on the impact of international volunteering on development, poverty alleviation or awareness-raising. What evidence there is tends to be based on a small number of case studies. There is little comparison across programmes and no comprehensive assessments of the sector as a whole. Given this gap, part 3 of this helpdesk report includes a selection of case studies and evaluation reports which illustrate some of the documented impacts in different contexts.

There is even less literature addressing the economic dimensions of international volunteering, particularly issues of cost-effectiveness and value for money. Some work has been done on the economic contribution of national volunteering and a number of tools have been developed to measure this (most notably by the Center for Civil Society Studies at John Hopkins University [http://www.ccss.jhu.edu/index.php?section=content&view=9&sub=12]). However, these have not been included in this report.

It is worth noting that international volunteering is not monolithic and varies greatly from agency to agency. In particular, the contrast is made in the literature between volunteering oriented towards long-term development and that which is focused on shorter-term assignments (in particular, ‘gap-year’ volunteering and ‘voluntourism’). The latter are likely to provide fewer long-term benefits and have greater potential for adverse impacts. In the case of the former, it is difficult to make any assessment of long-term impacts on development.

From the literature identified in this report, the following direct and indirect impacts of international volunteering on development in host countries were most commonly noted:

- Direct services related to capacity building and technical transfers.
- Positive effects on host community recipients, particularly in the areas of health and education, environmental management and protection, construction and physical resources, and various social supports.
Increased knowledge of cultural differences, global perspectives, and respect for diversity
Enhanced ability of the volunteer to solve conflicts
Widespread and democratic participation in global affairs;
Growth of international social networks
Improved international cooperation across borders.
Increased human capital, particularly higher interpersonal and employment skills.
Increased civic engagement
Increased humanitarian and communitarian values and viewpoints, especially a more tangible sense of issues related to social justice and equity

Some of the potential negative impacts include:
Reproduction or reinforcement of existing inequalities
Dependency and neo-colonialism
Elitism or the advancement of state interests over host community goals.

However, as noted by Lough (2008, see summary below), “it is difficult to know the size of [these effects] and whether benefits exceed costs.”

Quantifying the economic value of international volunteering presents a further challenge because it ignores other intangibles that volunteers may provide beyond time. Nevertheless, it has been noted that international volunteers are substantially cheaper than other forms of long-term technical assistance, because they live and work under local conditions. Volunteers also have a comparative non-monetary advantage over consultants, for example, because of their perceived independence and status as practitioners. Furthermore, volunteers may engage in communities in ways that develop relationships, interpersonal trust, and understanding that lead to capacity development at the grassroots and provide an alternative to traditional development strategies.

One recent approach to measuring the value of international volunteering is to assess its contribution in terms of social capital, rather than in terms of narrow economic indicators. According to Randel et al, (2004, see summary below): “many of the broad benefits volunteers bring – networking, a people-centred approach, partnership, a motivation beyond money, an openness to exchange of ideas and information – are key elements of social capital – which is widely recognised as having the potential to sustain and renovate economic and political institutions”.

2. Impact and value of international volunteering


Chapter 5 of this report reviews 45 empirical studies on the impacts of international volunteering and service (IVS). Of these, more than half focused on effects on volunteers. Based on the analysis, the author states that “there is little strong evidence regarding the impact of IVS on intended beneficiaries.” (p83) This may be because nearly all studies are based on the examination of one or two programmes and do not address significant variations among programmes. Single studies can only be valuable for guiding overarching programme and policy recommendations, and for developing and substantiating theory, when individual and institutional characteristics are made explicit. Yet only a handful of studies explicitly identified theory in their research.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the main positive impacts indentified across the studies were:
Impacts on volunteers and their home communities

- Increased human capital, particularly higher interpersonal and employment skills.
- Positive effect of crosscultural exchange on volunteers’ global understanding and cross-cultural competency skills, including increased knowledge of cultural differences, global perspectives, and respect for diversity.
- Increased civic engagement following volunteering experience
- Increased humanitarian and communitarian values and viewpoints, especially a more tangible sense of issues related to social justice and equity

Impacts on host community members

- Direct services related to labour force expansion and technical transfers.
- Positive effects on host community recipients, particularly in the areas of health and education, environmental management and protection, construction and physical resources, and various social supports. These services were generally associated with increased participation in the labour force and increased overall quality of life.
- Knowledge and skills transfer (although it was not specified which skills or specific knowledge were transferred to the communities, or whether these skills were useful in the host country context.)
- Cross-cultural exchange leading to more peaceful relations on a micro and macro level, which could have valuable effects on international diplomacy and security.
- More dense social networks and “thicker” relationships having a significant effect on community empowerment, advocacy, social mobilization, and peace-building.

Impacts on organizations

Volunteer effects on organizations were the least frequently cited area in the outcome studies. Capacity development was the most frequently cited outcome area. Additional outcomes included organizational networking, skills sharing, and public relations.

None of the studies under review directly addressed the possible economic impact of international volunteering on host communities. Thus, “while volunteering affects intended beneficiaries in multiple ways, it is difficult to know the size of this effect and whether benefits exceed costs […] Effective impact studies may need to complete a basic cost-benefit analysis along with impact analysis in order to more closely estimate the total value of IVS and its overall utility compared to other development strategies.” (p 86)


According to this paper, international volunteering and service (IVS) may lead to greater cross-cultural competence, including language and communication skills; greater international understanding; enhanced ability to solve conflicts; widespread and democratic participation in global affairs through global civic society organizations; and growth of international social networks among ordinary people. IVS may lead to improved international understanding and cooperation across borders. In contrast to models of traditional development that rely on professional technical assistance, IVS volunteers may engage in communities in ways that develop relationships, interpersonal trust, and understanding that lead to capacity development at the grassroots level, and provide an alternative to traditional development strategies.

In contrast, IVS may do little to improve global relations if it reproduces or reinforces existing inequalities, creates dependency and a “new form of colonialism,” contributes to elitism, or
advances state interests over host community goals. A paternalistic model in which IVS is limited to volunteers from wealthier areas of the world may offer privileged volunteers an international perspective and a career boost, but it does little for people who currently lack access to an IVS experience. It also is likely to do little for host communities. Those who volunteer will continue to reap the benefits of IVS, using host organizations and host communities as a rung on the ladder of personal advancement, without making lasting contributions and providing avenues for advancement to those who are “served.”


The labour performed by domestic volunteers is commonly assigned an economic value to determine its contribution to the national economy. This brief summarizes several approaches to estimating the economic value of US volunteers abroad, and compares these estimates to calculations using the 2005 Current Population Survey volunteer supplement and the Independent Sector’s 2005 estimation of the hourly “wage” of a volunteer at $18.04. By these standards, in 2005 the value of US volunteer time abroad was $2.92 billion.

This demonstrates the economic benefits of voluntary labour, assuming a wage would be paid to an employee to complete the same work in the absence of a voluntary contribution of time. Quantifying the economic value of volunteers is challenging because it ignores other intangibles that volunteers may provide beyond time. As with any economic estimation, there are multiple assumptions and limitations to this approach.

One important assumption in this calculation is that the profile of international volunteers and domestic volunteers is fairly equal in terms of hourly earnings. Differences in income are minimal; however, there are significant differences in age, employment status, and education. These discrepancies could alter the value of voluntary labour performed overseas.

The hourly wage of volunteers, as determined by the Independent Sector, is based on the assumption that volunteers perform specialized skills for their hosts. It could be that international volunteers perform unskilled services for host organizations, in which case the estimated value would be lower. Also, the calculation assumes that beneficiaries would have purchased the services if they had not been donated, and is based on the cost of wage labour in the United States. The actual value of international volunteer labor could be lower due to differences in wage parity between countries.

For further literature from the Center for Social Development on the impact of international volunteering, see: http://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Lists/Projects/DispForm2.aspx?ID=202

Devereux, P., 2008, ‘International volunteering for development and sustainability: outdated paternalism or a radical response to globalisation?’, Development in Practice, Volume 18, Number 3, June

According to this paper, effective long-term volunteering for development is characterised by six important criteria: humanitarian motivation; reciprocal benefit; living and working under local conditions; long-term commitment; local accountability and North–South partnership; and linkages to tackle causes rather than symptoms. (pp359-360)

The paper contrasts ICVOs that are oriented towards long-term development – such as AVI, VSO, and UNV – with organisations that are focused on shorter-term assignments (in particular, ‘gap-year’ volunteers). It notes that the latter are likely to provide fewer long-term benefits and have greater potential for adverse impacts. With regard to the former, it argues that:
“...international volunteers make an important contribution that differs from conventional in-country projects or policy interventions because of the implication for two-way understanding and change between North and South.” (p368)

With regards to the cost-effectiveness of international volunteering, the author refutes the argument that international volunteers are expensive because they need airfares, living allowances, insurance, training, and preparation that locally contracted staff would not require. Instead he argues that on-going requests by local organisations for international volunteers show that external people can make contributions that complement local resourcefulness and other external inputs such as finances, training, or consultants. External volunteers can often also be catalysts and bridges to other sources of resources, support, or collaboration for the organisations where they work, both while overseas and on return to their home country. Furthermore, international volunteers are substantially cheaper than other forms of long-term technical assistance, because they live and work under local conditions. (p362)

The paper concludes that "[...] International volunteers respond at an individual, technical, and personal level to broad development goals, as well as immediate technical deficiencies, through the pursuit of mutual capacity development and understanding. International volunteers highlight the importance of local accountability, respect for local values and knowledge, the appropriate pace and character of interventions, and the need to remain engaged despite difficult conditions – all fundamentals of capacity development. Volunteers are also able to challenge the causes of underdevelopment in a small way, through individual action, not only while they are overseas but also on their return home. Finally, sustainability is an integrating, holistic, and practical concept that international volunteers implicitly promote as they relate to local people’s needs with a genuine spirit of communal obligation.” (p368)


This paper provides a review of the structure, costs, and benefits of international volunteer programmes in order to help inform the implementation and monitoring of the 2003 Volunteers for Prosperity Presidential Initiative. It draws most heavily on evaluations of three structurally similar programmes: the Financial Services Volunteer Corps (FSVC); the Canadian Executive Services Organization (CESO); and the Farmer-to-Farmer Program (FtF). Both the FSVC and the CESO directly place American and Canadian executives for short-term consultancies throughout the world, while the FtF program represents a consortium of individual agriculturally oriented placement-agencies.

Based on this review, the paper offers the following observations about international volunteer programmes:

- The most important characteristic for volunteer recruitment is significant technical experience, although return or "professional" volunteers are seen as more effective.
- A short-term international volunteer costs approximately $1,200 per day, a cost that is comparable to that of a consultant.
- Volunteers have a comparative non-monetary advantage over consultants because of their perceived independence and status as a practitioner instead of a professional advisor.
- Placement costs for volunteer assistance are most commonly shared by the volunteer sending agency and the host organization.
- Successful programmes are characterized by well-defined goals for individual volunteer assignments and guided by a long-term vision.
http://www.unite-ch.org/Diverse/Added%20value%20final%20report.pdf

This paper discusses the use of a social capital framework as a means of measuring the value of international volunteering. It argues that many of the broad benefits volunteers bring – networking, a people-centred approach, partnership, a motivation beyond money, an openness to exchange of ideas and information – are key elements of social capital – which is “widely recognised as having the potential to sustain and renovate economic and political institutions”. (p 14)

Thus, using a social capital analysis could help IVSOs to demonstrate a wide range of benefits which flow from international volunteering. These include: international sharing of ideas and perspectives, awareness of mutual rights and responsibilities, the fostering of transferable skills and the adaptability to work within different environments and cultures.

The paper goes on to argue that social capital as an approach is especially valuable when the definition of development being used is rather narrow. In recent years, donors have focused development policy quite closely on poverty reduction. The social capital framework focuses attention on some of the less tangible (but no less vital) elements of the development process.

Using this framework the paper identifies what international volunteering contributes in terms of social capital:

**In OECD countries**
- International understanding/solidarity
- Linkages between organisations and communities
- More informed public on globalisation and development cooperation
- Opportunity for development of young people
- Training for sector – but also training in how to work effectively in a global economy
- Contacts through volunteer sending mean that southern concerns can be more effectively factored into northern policy engagement
- Volunteer sending agencies can enable wider society to engage in contact with developing countries
- Anti racism and challenging xenophobia

**In developing countries:**
- Volunteers are good at promoting partnership (because they embody it)
- Northern volunteers may help to create links within sectors such as health
- Volunteers can help broker resolution between parties in dispute
- Volunteers often ‘go the extra mile’ undertaking activity beyond their remit, which tends to reinforce community level action
- The presence of an international volunteer in a project or programme can broaden a community’s network of contacts and help people access and share information.

### 3. Case studies and evaluation reports

Laleman, G. et al., ‘The contribution of international health volunteers to the health workforce in sub-Saharan Africa’

This paper estimates the cost of posting an expatriate volunteer to be most often between US$36 000 and US$50 000 per year. This cost does not vary greatly with qualifications or experience, nor with geographical origin of volunteers. The total cost of the estimated maximum of 5000
international health volunteers in sub-Saharan Africa would then amount to between US$180 million and US$250 million annually.

Country experts express more negative views about international health volunteers than positive ones. They see that they are not very cost-effective, as compared with investment in local capacity and see them as increasingly paradoxical in view of the existence of urban unemployed doctors and nurses in most countries. Creating conditions for employment and training of national staff is strongly favoured as an alternative. Only in exceptional circumstances is sending international health volunteers a legitimate temporary measure.

Nevertheless, all actors interviewed in the course of the research for this paper stressed that the role and significance of expatriate health volunteers is much broader than their quantitative contribution to the health workforce in sub-Saharan Africa. From their different perspectives, most informants – also those representing the views of African government officials – had good reasons to defend the continued presence of expatriate health volunteers in a variety of situations and roles.

The paper concludes that on the whole the present contribution of international health volunteers to the health workforce is rather limited, even in countries facing a severe human resources for health (HRH) crisis. It seems also that only in exceptional circumstances their contribution can be considerably increased, but in these exceptional circumstances their role may be very significant.


This report aims to assess the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme in Nepal (1987-1996) in terms of its impact through six dimensions:

1. changes in human capital
2. changes in social capital
3. changes in job opportunities, poverty, women’s lives, and the environment
4. the relevance of the work of the Volunteers
5. the performance of the Volunteers
6. the results and sustainability of the work of the Volunteers.

Chapter 6 of the report concludes that a positive impact of the programme could be found in relation to human and social capital accumulation and with respect to changes in the environment, the level of poverty, and the availability of jobs. With respect to changes in women’s lives, a positive impact was less evident. Overall, the impact of the programme was most notable in areas outside the capital Kathmandu. The programme was rated very highly by the users and beneficiaries of the programme with regard to its relevance and the performance of the Volunteers. In terms of the sustainability of the activities initiated by the programme, more could still be done to ensure lasting benefits of the programme. Both the users of the programme and the Volunteers themselves appreciated the performance of the head office of the UNV programme, and the Volunteers indicated that they had benefited considerably from participating in the programme.

This report reviews CIDA’s Volunteer Cooperation Programme (VCP) to determine the relevance and effectiveness of volunteer sending as a delivery mechanism for CIDA’s aid programme. The key findings are:

- Developing country organisations (DCOs) were overwhelmingly positive in their assessment of the impact that volunteers and the volunteer cooperation agencies (VCAs) have had on their organisations’ motivation, capacities and performance. They report significant positive changes to their organisational culture, systems, processes, programmes, visibility and reputations, as well as positive impacts on their clientele. However the capacity development approaches and strategies employed and the level of tools, resources and skills were mixed.
- In Canada, the VCP has had profound impacts on volunteers’ values and beliefs, as global citizens, their skill levels and career decisions, and their involvement and support to local communities or international development. The VCP support to public engagement work is having significant positive effects on Canadians’ understanding of, and openness to, different cultures as well as their knowledge of international development issues.
- VCA programmes are closely aligned with CIDA’s development priorities. Furthermore, Canadian volunteers represent the human face of Canada’s ODA.
- International volunteering is a powerful mechanism in development co-operation because it forges bonds between and among Canadians and their counterparts in the South; it fosters the development of civil society networks for change, both in Canada and around the world; it actively engages Canadians in international development and builds Canada’s capacity and expertise in international development; and it helps to build a supportive constituency for Canada’s aid programme.


This review of the Australian Government Volunteer Program (AGVP) examines the current achievements, effectiveness and strategic opportunities for the programme. It concludes that the diversity of VSPs is a key strength of the AGVP in promoting different approaches, good practice examples and innovations:

- There is strong evidence that Australian volunteers have had a positive impact on host organisations and other volunteers, in terms of mutual capacity development, cultural exchange and enhancement of personal and professional linkages.
- VSPs have demonstrated various initiatives to address operational efficiencies and development effectiveness, which support good practice examples and innovations that are not being captured in the current reporting structure.
- At the VSP and volunteer assignment level, mutual capacity development, and fostering linkages and partnerships, have been found to create the greatest positive impact, with a potential for sustainability if supported by long term investment in stakeholder relationships. Assessing AGVP impact on public awareness is more difficult to determine at the broader level of the Australian community, but certainly there is a positive impact on return of the volunteer, at the local family and community level.
- At a broad level the goals and objectives of the AGVP are largely consistent with Government of Australia (GoA) and partner government development priorities, and will need to be updated to reflect the current GoA development assistance agenda.
However, the AGVP has been limited in its implementation by:

- the prescriptive nature of contracts
- the absence of an integrated and coherent programme structure and goal
- the lack of a clearly developed set of guidelines for program management, data management, planning, M&E; program learning, coordination, and program promotion
- the need for further clarification of roles and responsibilities
- limited programme resources.

The report also identifies a number of broad lessons from a small sample of international organisations (United Nations Volunteers (UNV), Japan's International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Fredskorpset (FK Norway), Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Department for International Development (DFID):

- There has been a shift from a focus on recruitment of individual volunteers and assignments, to a partnerships and programme approach.
- The partnership approach recognises that long term engagement with partners contributes to most effective international volunteering experiences. These partnerships apply both to partners in developing countries, as well as between donors and VCAs over the long term.
- International volunteering has shifted from service delivery to capacity development. There has been a move away from technical assistance and 'gap filling' towards concepts around exchange, capacity development and local skill development. Capacity development of individuals, organisations, and communities is seen as a key objective, through skills and knowledge exchange.
- There has been a move to increased professionalism, including links with professional bodies and organisations for the identification, recruitment and support of volunteers, and towards more clearly defined roles and contribution to the development process.
- There is increasing support for developing linkages between developing countries, including the growth in South-South exchanges.
- Increasingly discussions of aid effectiveness and impact are emerging as key issues across all international volunteer sending organisations, and present challenges in parallel to broader discussions within the development assistance sector.

4. Further information

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Websites visited include:

About helpdesk research reports: This helpdesk report is based on 3 days of desk-based research. Helpdesk reports are designed to provide a brief overview of the key issues; and a summary of some of the best literature available. Experts are contacted during the course of the research, and those able to provide input within the short time-frame are acknowledged.

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