



Report: Nations that Incorporate Skilled Volunteers in International Development Programs Corroborate Effectiveness of Skilled Volunteers

By Derek Q. Watkins, Business Development Associate

April 3, 2017

Frequently volunteer impact is conveyed through compelling stories and anecdotes—often told from the perspective of the donor or the volunteers themselves. But how do the local partners—the beneficiaries and host organizations—view the contributions of international volunteers? In recent years, several independent studies on the impact of donor-funded volunteer programs underscore the overwhelmingly strong volunteer value and relevance in the eyes of their developing country counterparts. VEGA’s survey of these studies has found that the relevance, impact and long-term value of the volunteers’ people-to-people engagement, transfer of knowledge, expertise and experience is quite high. This review is one way VEGA seeks to incorporate best practices and learning into our volunteer programs. The following is a review of studies from skilled volunteer international development programs funded by six countries: Australia, Britain, Canada, Netherlands, Singapore and the United States.

Skilled Volunteers – A Significant Feature of Foreign Donor Assistance Programming

Skilled volunteer service constitutes an important dimension of international development programs. U.S., Dutch, Canadian, British, and Australian programs each contribute between \$10 – 24 million annually to mobilize skilled volunteer experts. For U.S. foreign assistance, volunteer programming is limited primarily to the Farmer-to-Farmer and VEGA programs, and overall U.S. funding for volunteer experts is a far smaller percent of total assistance levels than that contributed by other donor countries.¹ In addition, other donor countries have continued to invest in independent evaluations of these skilled volunteer programs.

Netherlands – In 2016, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs commissioned an independent evaluation of PUM Netherlands Senior Experts advice to small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and related organizations in approximately 70 countries. PUM is a nonprofit

¹ In FY16, VEGA (U.S.) \$22.7M/922 volunteers; PUM (Netherlands) US\$10.6M/275 volunteers; AVID (Australia) US\$12.9M/223 volunteers; WUSC (Canada) US\$11.3M/600 volunteers; SIV (Singapore) 167 volunteers; and VSO (UK) \$23.6M/inconclusive volunteer reporting data.

formed by the largest Dutch employers' organization VNO-NCW and a member of VEGA, which has access to a pool of around 3,000 experienced Dutch senior experts, who all work on a voluntary basis. The *Evaluation of PUM Netherlands Senior Experts 2012-2015* found that based on interviews with beneficiaries in the four countries visited:

- The majority is (very) positive about the mission(s) to their organisation and consider the advice highly relevant.²
- Experts bring practical and useful knowledge: on how to improve quality of outputs, how to produce in a more efficient manner, how to gain access to new markets, how to reduce costs, how to better manage the company, how to use new technologies, how to train staff, etc.³
- As a result the gaps in both knowledge and skills are effectively addressed. About 80% of the interviewed entrepreneurs witnessed an improvement in knowledge and skills in their companies as a result of the recommendations of the PUM expert.⁴
- Another indicator of relevance is the degree to which advice has actually been implemented. Most beneficiaries interviewed in the case study countries state that the majority of the expert's advice have been implemented (up to 80%).⁵
- Virtually without exception it can be concluded from the interviews with the beneficiaries that in their perception the required expertise was not available locally, and if available (also for example internationally) only at costs that the recipient SMEs could not afford.⁶

“For what we have seen in our evaluation is that the entrepreneurs with whom you [PUM] work are significantly better equipped and knowledgeable to succeed, often under very trying circumstances. And, most importantly, what we have also seen is an improvement in company performance.”

**~ Dutch Minister of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation
Lilanne Ploumen**

² *Evaluation of PUM Netherlands Senior Experts 2012-2015* <https://www.government.nl/documents/reports/2016/10/18/evaluation-of-pum-netherlands-senior-experts-2012-2015>, 24.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 36.

Australia – The Australian Government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Office of Development Effectiveness, funded an evaluation in 2014 on the impact of volunteers on capacity development called *Evaluation of the Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) program*. Australia’s (former) Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (now president of the New York-based think tank the Asia Society) launched the AVID program in 2011, a body that now brings together under a single program, the four separate overseas volunteer programs of the Australian Government.⁷ Fieldwork in three countries included a survey of all 192 host organizations in these countries and interviews with a representative sample of host organizations, volunteers and DFAT staff. Key findings of the evaluation determined:

- The Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) program is making an effective contribution to the Australian Government’s development objectives⁸
- Volunteers are a cost-effective form of development assistance and contribute to the capacity needs of host organisations, providing their staff with new knowledge and skills and developing people-to-people links.⁹
- Volunteers benefit from their experience and bring expertise and professionalism that host organisations value highly.¹⁰
- Volunteers contribute to the capacity of host organisations, develop people-to-people links and generate goodwill for domestic and foreign diplomacy.¹¹
- Many host organisations were confident their organization would be able to sustain its capacity gains once the volunteer left. Most (83 per cent) saw their organisation as continuing to benefit from their most recent volunteer, and three-quarters (73per cent) of host organisations said they remain in contact with their Australian volunteer. In many of the fieldwork interviews, volunteers said the knowledge or skills they transferred to staff would remain as long as the staff remained; most (81per cent) host organisations agreed that their staff had learned new skills.¹²
- More than two-thirds of host organisations agreed that their Australian volunteer contributed to their organization’s ability to develop their own capacity, including helping them to think about how their work could be more effective (78 per cent) or to clarify their objectives and strategies to manage their own affairs better (67 per cent).¹³

⁷ http://foreignminister.gov.au/releases/Pages/2011/kr_mr_110526.aspx?ministerid=2

⁸ *Evaluation of the Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) program* <https://dfat.gov.au/aid/how-we-measure-performance/ode/Documents/avid-report-jan-2014.pdf>, 2.

⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰ Ibid., 2.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 45.

¹³ Ibid.

- In addition to its objectives for volunteer personal and professional development and host organisation capacity development, the premise of the Australian Volunteers Development (AVID) program is that sending adequately skilled volunteers will shape the perceptions of individuals and groups in other countries in ways that promote Australia's foreign policy goals. Volunteering is also valued as a vehicle for generating positive opinion toward, and better understanding of, the Australian Government's foreign policy agenda at home.¹⁴
- Almost all (95 per cent) returned volunteers said that their assignment increased their knowledge of aid and development issues, and almost all (97 per cent) agreed it improved their understanding of other cultures.¹⁵

“Australian volunteers bring unique expertise and perspectives to their host countries — from setting up clinics for women to give birth safely or building stronger homes to withstand cyclones, Australian volunteers directly contribute to improving people's lives in developing countries.”

~ (Former) Prime Minister of Australia Kevin Rudd

United Kingdom – The UK Government, through the Department of International Development (DFID), invested in a strategic grant arrangement with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) to fight poverty and support poor and marginalized people. VSO's volunteer programs were reviewed in a 2015 study, *The Role of Volunteering in Sustainable Development*, and reported the following:

- It is not just what volunteers' do but how they support change that makes their contribution unique. Volunteers' embeddedness within communities and organizations, living and working alongside individuals in the community and their colleagues, enables them to develop a shared understanding of each other and the challenges they face. Where this works effectively, it creates strong personal bonds and relationships which lead to a different kind of collaboration, based on a mutual appreciation of each other's knowledge, skills and networks.¹⁶
- These more informal relationships help to build trust, contribute to the generation of soft outcomes (such as increased confidence, agency and leadership skills) that enable

¹⁴ *Evaluation of the Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) program* <https://dfat.gov.au/aid/how-we-measure-performance/ode/Documents/avid-report-jan-2014.pdf>, 64.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64-65

¹⁶ *The Role of Volunteering in Sustainable Development* https://www.vsointernational.org/sites/default/files/the_role_of_volunteering_in_sustainable_development_2015_vso_ids.pdf, 10

solutions to be owned and sustained at local level and harness networks that enable things to get done. However, the research also found that the unique contribution of volunteers can be diminished when agencies present volunteers as experts to respond to donor and partner expectations. This can perpetuate a one-way relationship in which the volunteer's knowledge is perceived to be more valuable than that of their local counterparts.¹⁷

- The research showed the power of the merging of 'outsider' and 'insider' knowledge as a way of catalyzing and supporting local innovation.¹⁸
- It also demonstrated the role of volunteers in extending the reach of services to the poorest and most marginalized; their ability to act as brokers and to use their networks within communities to link individuals to public services and information outside of the community.¹⁹
- The study also found that by modelling active citizenship, more equal gender roles etc., volunteers could inspire new ways of thinking and being and prompt others to want to get involved. This 'ripple effect' and the ability of volunteering to act as a route to increased active citizenship were most evident where individuals had witnessed the impact of volunteer activities. These approaches illustrate how volunteers have been able to work in ways that are far more effective than more traditional approaches to imparting expert knowledge.²⁰

Volunteers for Economic Growth Alliance – VEGA's direct benefit to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Missions includes serving as the most effective organization to deliver volunteer-based economic growth activities worldwide derived from the collective strength of our member organizations, the unsurpassed ability to mobilize volunteer experts, the easy procurement mechanism to access our services and the proven ability to deliver sustainable programs designed from best practices.

VEGA programs use a combination of long-term program staff to ensure program sustainability, on-the-ground support for volunteers, and coordination with other on-going economic activities in the country in question. The volunteers provide

¹⁷ *The Role of Volunteering in Sustainable Development*

https://www.vsointernational.org/sites/default/files/the_role_of_volunteering_in_sustainable_development_2015_vso_ids.pdf, 10

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

*technical assistance as needed for periods generally ranging from one week to one year. VEGA member organizations have substantial experience and records of accomplishment across the spectrum of economic development programs.*³

United States – In 2008, USAID commissioned a review of the use of volunteers in economic growth programs. *Effective Use of Volunteers in USAID Economic Growth Programs*, a technical brief commissioned by USAID’s EGAT Bureau and conducted by BGI, stated the following:

- The focused expertise of VEGA volunteers is carefully matched to overall program goals and the specific needs of beneficiaries to ensure achievement of measurable and sustainable impacts.²¹
- Business volunteer implementation teams deliver a cost-effective mix of expertise and assistance services. Integrating volunteer and paid professional services maximizes team resources by enabling the design and delivery of a broad, coordinated portfolio of expertise customized to the needs of program beneficiaries — from individual entrepreneurs, small or medium-sized local business, professional associations and government entities, both national and local.²²
- The experts available to participate in VEGA programs represent practitioners in virtually every industry and profession – including, but not limited to, successful entrepreneurs, agricultural enterprise managers and owners, CEOs of multinational firms, former U.S. cabinet members, computer programmers, and dairy farmers.²³
- Diaspora and/or regional volunteers participating on program teams help establish and foster a culture of volunteerism within host countries. Diaspora volunteers can serve as examples of success for beneficiaries and can provide breakthroughs based on their knowledge of local language and culture that may not be achieved with U. S. or third-country national experts. They may be especially valuable in training and trade development programs. In the former, their linguistic and cultural skills can help with understanding particularly difficult concepts or in breaking down barriers to understanding between U. S. and third-country nationals. In trade development, Diaspora volunteers very often have contacts in their home community that can be invaluable in assisting an entrepreneur, for example, in gaining a foothold in a new market.²⁴
- Most program volunteers, regardless of the length of their in-country assignments, stay engaged with both program staff and/or client beneficiaries long after they return to the

²¹ *Effective Use of Volunteers in USAID Economic Growth Programs* http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnadm289.pdf pg. 8

²² *Ibid.*, 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

U.S. Working from their homes, volunteers frequently provide valuable, on-going assistance to program beneficiaries by email, telephone or travel within the U.S. that supports achievement of program and client objectives.²⁵

“It costs a lot of money to move international experts around the world. Here in Sri Lanka we have worked with companies from agricultural to metal working. If we were to hire all of those experts to come on sight without the use of a VEGA Alliance mechanism there’s no way that we would be able to work with that variety. The flexibility of the VEGA volunteer mechanism allows you to really pinpoint that accurately and get the right people in country to do the work that you need.”²⁶

~ (Former) Acting Director USAID Mission Sri Lanka Kimberly Bell

Singapore – In 2016, the Singapore International Federation (SIF) commissioned an evaluation report from external consultants, a third study in a series of papers on the contributions of international volunteers in Asia. The report focuses on the Singapore International Volunteers (SIV) program, through which SIF provides volunteers with the opportunity to work with overseas partners to build capacity through specialist and direct service projects. This study, *Global Partners for Sustainable Development: The Added Value of Singapore International Foundation Volunteers*, reports:

- Findings from this study provide further evidence that International Volunteer Cooperation Organizations (ICVOs) and international volunteers have a comparative advantage in their collective pursuit to meet the needs of vulnerable segments of the population.²⁷
- A growing number of case studies strongly suggest that volunteers have a comparative advantage in building capacity, network and relationships, revitalizing service delivery, and promoting inclusive and empowered approaches to development.²⁸
- Findings from this study suggest that specialist volunteers demonstrate comparatively high levels of philanthropic motivation, dedication and commitment during their service

²⁵ *Effective Use of Volunteers in USAID Economic Growth Programs* http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnadm289.pdf pg. 5

²⁶ <http://vegaalliance.org/partner-with-us/what-our-partners-say-about-us/>

²⁷ *Global Partners for Sustainable Development: The Added Value of Singapore International Foundation Volunteers* http://www.sif.org.sg/files/ebook/GPSD_Journal_A4_011116.pdf pg. 41

²⁸ Ibid.

abroad. Trainees interpret these motivations and values positively—showing high levels of trust and interest in the information shared by volunteers.²⁹

- When progress has slowed or innovation is needed to jump-start initiatives, international players may be particularly beneficial. Because foreign experts are likely to co-create innovative hybrid solutions in collaboration with local partners. Findings from this study provided multiple examples of new ideas and methods generated through these types of mutual collaborations.³⁰
- In order to truly value the contributions of volunteering as a people-centered development approach, donors and decision-makers need to place a higher value on intangible constructs such as friendship, compassion, inclusion, enthusiasm and trust. Although these constructs are not typically received with high esteem from an evaluation perspective, they have real value in the eyes of beneficiaries.³¹
- “Soft” qualities act as intermediary outcomes that multiply the effectiveness of volunteers’ contributions to “hard” development impact.³²
- Until stakeholders place a greater emphasis on less-tangible but valued intermediary constructs, the true merit of volunteers’ contributions to sustainable development will remain undervalued.³³

“In recent research on this topic, volunteer hosting organizations and communities reported that international volunteers provide important “value-added” contributions such as innovation and ingenuity, trust, prestige, diversity, optimism, social capital, non-instrumental friendships, peace and understanding.³⁴

~Benjamin J. Lough, Ph.D., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

This review of donor-funded volunteer programs underscores the important contribution of pro bono experts to accomplishing global development objectives – especially strengthening the capacity of a wide range of host organizations – SMEs; business serving organizations; financial service institutions; producer associations; Co-ops; and national, regional and community level civic organizations. To more systematically incorporate the perspectives of host organizations and local beneficiaries into its program design and implementation practices, VEGA rolled out a

²⁹ *Global Partners for Sustainable Development: The Added Value of Singapore International Foundation Volunteers*
http://www.sif.org.sg/files/ebook/GPSD_Journal_A4_011116.pdf pg. 41

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 43.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Lough BJ, Matthew L. Measuring and Conveying the Added Value of International Volunteering. Ottawa, Canada: International Forum for Volunteering in Development; 2013.

comprehensive Volunteer Value Reporting System in 2016. VEGA will continue to incorporate lessons learned and best practices to further improve on the impressive results skilled volunteer experts are having in addressing the developing world's talent gap globally.

For more information, please contact:

Michael Deal, President and CEO, VEGA

mdeal@vegaalliance.org

Derek Q. Watkins, Business Development Associate, VEGA

dwatkins@vegaalliance.org