

Australian Volunteers International

DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

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Executive summary

Australian Volunteers International (AVI) works to contribute to effective development through the placement of skilled volunteers into partner organisations in countries around the world.

In line with a commitment to quality and ongoing improvement, AVI has partnered with the Institute for Social Change at Latrobe University, to explore and refine its current approach. This includes the strategy used by the agency (its theory of action), and the current research and evidence base which supports this overall development approach. It also includes attention to the underlying theory of change which guides the AVI work.

The AVI Theory of Action

AVI seeks to contribute to change through the placement of skilled volunteers into competent partner development organisations, through a people centred approach to development. It is assumed that those volunteers then contribute to improved capacity, in some form, within the organisation, which in turn contributes to the partner's ability to work towards positive social change for their community or constituency. It is also assumed that the volunteer returns to Australia with improvements in both his/her personal and social competencies, which they utilise in some way.

The AVI theory of action (what it is the organisation does to contribute to this change process) has changed over time as AVI has learnt from experience about how to bring about more effective change. The organisation is modest in its assumptions, recognising that it *contributes* to change within complex systems. From that perspective, it proposes that key to effective outcomes is careful selection of both volunteer and host organisation, aligned to contextual needs and priorities, within a framework of ongoing responsive management. AVI are more than an agency managing volunteers. They operate as development agency utilising the volunteer experience to support positive social change at both an individual and organisational level.

Theory of change

The AVI development approach appears to draw from a variety of theories about how change happens in international development.

AVI is different to most other development organisations in that it seeks to facilitate and support the development process rather than directly drive the process. This aligns closely with the proposal that the most effective change is locally owned and led. This TOC assumes that effective development outcomes are most likely to be achieved, particularly in complex development situations, by supporting locally owned and led processes.

AVI places significant emphasis upon the value of the relationships formed between individual volunteers and the host agency. This closely aligns with a relational approach to international aid delivery. This TOC identifies that relationships matter, particularly when working in complex development situations.

AVI experience suggests that providing different volunteer placements over time helps build agency capacity to respond to complex problems. The best outcomes are achieved through long-term relationships with organisations, working responsively with that organisation as it develops over time. This closely aligns with a view that most development challenges occur in complex situations where there are multiple influences and variables and where effective responses are built over time rather than pre-planned or imported from elsewhere.

AVI stress that the development they seek to achieve flows both ways, with outcomes and impact expected for both the partner organisation as well as the volunteer. In line with this, recent debate around Sustainable Development Goals and the future of development organisations has suggested that what is needed is an integration of perspectives between 'developed' and 'developing' countries, with practitioners who are able to work for shared solutions to change. From this perspective, positive social change is most likely to be achieved by activists in rich and poor countries able to working together.

Further consideration

The AVI development approach is underpinned by a strong set of assumptions about the value brought by AVI to the volunteer process and a people centred development approach. While many of these assumptions are supported by international research, there is limited direct evidence from the AVI experience across a number of areas. Some specific longer term examination of these areas would strengthen AVI presentation as a development agency.

The AVI theory of change draws from various different, albeit overlapping, assumptions about how change happens. Many of these are current and well research approaches, reflecting best practice thinking. They also tend to challenge the more conventional approaches to development, based on resource transfer. This is significant. It potentially places AVI in the vanguard of development thinking and suggests it is a highly relevant development actor. It would therefore be valuable for AVI to more explicitly identify its theory of change and accompanying evidence. This would further support the unique value the agency contributes to progressive social change.

Acronyms

AVI	Australian Volunteers International
AVID	Australian Volunteers for International Development
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
TOA	Theory of Action
TOC	Theory of Change

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Introduction

Australian Volunteers International (AVI) works to contribute to effective development through the placement of skilled volunteers into partner organisations in countries around the world.

In line with a commitment to quality and ongoing improvement, AVI has partnered with the Institute for Social Change at Latrobe University, to explore and refine its current approach. This includes the strategy used by the agency (its theory of action), and the current research and evidence base which supports this overall development approach. It also includes attention to the underlying theory of change which guides the AVI work.

This document outlines the findings from this exploration to date. Focused at the organisational level, it explores the AVI development approach and accompanying theories about how change happens. It looks at the current challenges for AVI and potential areas for further development.

Exploring the AVI development approach

AVI has evolved as an organisation. Building on its cumulative experience and growing in-country knowledge, the agency has refined and developed the process of matching volunteers with organisations in order to make the best possible contribution to effective development outcomes. In addition, the organisation has experimented with a wide range of programs and activities alongside its more traditional volunteer placement process.

At the same time, the AVI theory about how change happens and how its programme practically demonstrates that theory of change, has not always been explicit to all stakeholders. This exercise was an opportunity for AVI to more clearly articulate its organisational TOA or development strategy and to explore what might be its underlying TOC.

Towards this end, researchers from Latrobe University met with a small group of staff from AVI to explore agency strategy and existing sources of research and evidence. In order to build the understanding of the AVI theory of change the following questions were explored:

- What is the impact AVI seeks?
- What is the AVI strategy to achieve that impact?
- How does AVI maintain, manage and ensure the quality of this approach?
- How does AVI monitor and evaluate its performance?
- How does the AVI approach and impact differ from that of comparable organisations?

Alongside this, a review of relevant literature was undertaken to explore both the wider field of research around volunteering and international development, as well as the themes and issues reflected in the discussion with staff. A broad document was developed identifying those key themes, accompanying research and some of the assumptions which appeared to underpin the AVI approach. This document was shared widely with staff for comment. Elements of the document were explored in a workshop with staff from the Australian office of AVI.

These multiple sources of information provided the basis for this report. It explores the agency approach to development and accompanying strategy. It then summarises the TOC which appears to underpin the core work of AVI as an organisation (noting that there will be variations of this operating in each of the countries where AVI works, as well as differences between the various program activities included in the agency portfolio of work). Alongside these elements, reference is made to relevant literature and to examples drawn from AVI experience.

The AVI Theory of Action

AVI seeks to contribute to change through the placement of skilled volunteers into competent partner development organisations, through a people centred approach to development. It is assumed that those volunteers then contribute to improved capacity, in some form, within the organisation, which in turn contributes to the partner's ability to work towards positive social change for their community or constituency. It is also assumed that the volunteer returns to Australia with improvements in both his/her personal and social competencies, which they utilise in some way.

The AVI theory of action (what it is the organisation does to contribute to this change process) centres on two key elements, careful and informed selection of the partner organisation as well as good quality selection and management of the volunteers. Added to this, is the attention given to the context of any particular placement, and the management systems AVI has developed to support the entire process. The specific elements in this process are important in describing and understanding the AVI strategy, or the value that the organisation adds to the volunteering process

These elements have changed over time as AVI has learnt from experience about how to bring about more effective change. Its current approach is supported by international research, which suggest that while a volunteer placement scheme in and of itself is unlikely to lead to significant social change¹; volunteer placements can make a significant contribution to change for people when undertaken within a framework that gives attention to the personal attributes of the volunteer, the leadership and approach of the host organisation and the overall management and shape of the interaction between the two. (Fee, Heizmann & Gray, 2015)

The AVI approach to its core activity of volunteer placement is in line with these findings. The organisation is modest in its assumptions, recognising that it *contributes* to change within complex systems. From that perspective, it proposes that key to effective outcomes is careful selection of both volunteer and host organisation, aligned to contextual needs and priorities, within a framework of ongoing responsive management. AVI are more than an agency managing volunteers. They operate as development agency utilising the volunteer experience to support positive social change at both an individual and organisational level.

More detailed examination of the AVI TOA is covered in the following sections.

Recruitment and Placement of Volunteers

The AVI selection of volunteers is a critical element of their approach to change. Partner organisations and AVI staff identify the specific capacity or technical need in an organisation, and then AVI recruits for that particular need using a detailed competitive process to find the best match. In this way AVI have moved from a *supply driven* approach to one that is now *demand based*.

Volunteers are required to have a range of technical skills which match the specific placement requirements but they also screened for appropriate psychosocial competencies and skills.² This gives particular attention to the ability of people to operate in challenging and different

¹ The available studies suggest that a volunteer agency working purely to bring together 'people with skills' and 'organisations with needs', is not by itself enough to achieve sustainable transformations to people's lives (Burns et al, 2015).

² AVI identify these additional skills as including integrity, the ability to manage stress, self-reliance and self-confidence, self-awareness, resilience, cross-cultural sensitivity, ability to work with and for the development of others, flexibility, problem solving ability, and being achievement orientated.

environments. AVI also give attention to the capability of the volunteer to support a capacity development approach within their host organisation.³

In line with what is considered good practice in volunteering⁴, host organisations are typically also involved in both the design of the volunteer placement and the selection of the volunteer⁵.

As a result of this demand based model, the typical volunteer working with AVI has shifted over time. AVI report that there is an increase in volunteers with considerable skills and life experience. People are selected as volunteers because they meet both the specific requirements of the position and bring with them the capacities and interpersonal skills to enable them to support the development of individuals and organisations. This in turn has shifted the value able to be provided by those volunteers (for example AVI have shifted from sending teachers and are now more likely to be sending curriculum development officers; rather than selecting volunteers who are trained as nurses, they are more likely to send health worker training specialists). Research suggests that AVI is therefore more likely to be contributing to effective development outcomes.⁶

Partner organisations

Also key to the AVI approach, and in line with good development practice⁷, is its work to select and partner with good quality and effective development organisations. There appears to be no typical AVI partner organisation. While all partners are located in low income countries, they might operate at local, regional or national levels and could include organisations from the public, private and civil society sectors. While the AVI selection of any specific partner can come about in a variety of ways⁸ there is an emphasis on using the long term experience and contextual understanding developed by in-country AVI staff to ensure partner agencies are able to make good use of volunteers and are positioned to contribute to effective development outcomes.

Experience has provided AVI with a set of minimum requirements for partner organisations⁹; overall the emphasis is on organisations where there is strong commitment to change and a clear understanding of how a volunteer will bring value to that change process. In addition, the agency draws on the experience of the country managers to understand both the potential of particular partners and their relevance to development needs in the country. (This in-country expertise comes

³ AVI (2006) 'Information Sheet - Introduction to Capacity Building', May.

⁴ Recent research that highlights the importance of host organisations being involved in the recruitment of volunteers (Lewis, 2015).

⁵ according to the review undertaken in 2000 14/80% of AVI host organisations reported being actively involved in designing the volunteer assignments and three corners were involved in choosing the volunteer (ODE, 2014).

⁶ Sherraden, Lough and McBride (2008, in Lough 2013) also provide a general typology of international volunteering programs. Clearly, AVI are located at one end of this spectrum, described by Lough (2013) as "international volunteerism for development (IV4D)". (Voluntourism, or volunteer tourism, is at the other end of the spectrum.) This approach is most likely according to the authors, to make a sustained contribution to positive social change.

⁷ Burns et al, (2015a) found that the ability of development organisations to reach the poorest and most marginalised is largely determined by the partners that they work with.

⁸ AVI do not have fixed formula for selection of partner organisations. Selection includes agencies where there are clear strategies to achieve specific development outcomes. But AVI also works with organisations where there might be a clear sense of the development objectives to be achieved but as yet no specific strategies or plan of action. AVI are also influenced by other factors such as the country priorities strategy of its donor organisation, the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

⁹ AVI report that partners are excluded if there is a major language barrier, i.e. insufficient English competency in the organisation; if the partners don't have the capacity to manage a volunteer (which usually includes certain standards on internal management, planning capacity and HR functions in place); if the partner doesn't have a clear plan for capacity development and is likely instead to see the volunteers as a cheap option to avoid paying for local skills; with the situation would be too high a risk or involve too much social isolation for the volunteer; and finally where there is insufficient volume of work to actually occupy a volunteer. Also, the level of registration needed to sponsor a volunteer visa is a significant filter in some places.

with the long term experience in the volunteer process by those country managers, and their engagement as development workers within a specific country context. AVI consider it a particular strength of the organisation as a whole).

AVI describe three types of partnerships, and in some cases more than one type of partnership with any given partner organisation. These include:

- Partnerships that explicitly focus on helping groups or organisations targeted for assistance to help themselves through development of their skills, systems and capabilities. In these situations there is a strong focus on the autonomy and agency of assisted groups through enhanced ownership and empowerment. E.g. fostering women's participation in the Bougainville peace process, supporting people with disability to work for disability Inclusion in Lesotho.
- Partnerships that seek to design, advocate for, coordinate or monitor sectorial, national and/or global public policies. These partnerships may require that AVI work quite politically. E.g. fostering women's participation in the Bougainville peace process, supporting long-term organisational capacity development in Kiribati, supporting the regional policy work of the Pacific Islands Private Sector Organisation. It requires a good understanding of the 'joined up' nature of effective development, being able to understand the contribution one agency can make in combination with others.
- Partnerships that engage non-state actors in delivering public services (for example, government-NGO service delivery partnerships). E.g. supporting a deaf volunteer in a Government university (Pham Ngoc Thach) in Cambodia - building the first generation of speech therapists in Vietnam.

AVI argue that there is a distinct type of relationship developed between volunteer and host organisations in the placements. It is a more equal power relationship than is commonly present between donors and local organisations (because host organisations can more easily reject a volunteer). Effective partnerships are also built on shared values.¹⁰ This people centred approach to development engagement is a core foundation in the AVI approach.

Relationship to context

AVI recognise that in different contexts they need different approaches to working with partners and placement of volunteers. Examples drawn from a broad range of AVI work indicate a high degree of flexibility and adaptation to different contexts in order to maximise the likely development outcomes.

¹⁰ The AVI code of conduct highlights the importance of values, and AVI as a development organisation is guided by specific principles of equity, respect, integrity, cultural diversity and partnership. AVI appears to choose partner organisations that share its values particularly those of respect, adaptability and flexibility and equity and inclusion. The case studies provided suggest particular attention is given to partners who support a rights based approach to development.

AVI adaptation to context

Fostering women's participation in the Bougainville peace process

Bougainville Women's Federation operated in a highly politicised environment, with a tendency towards personality-based leadership. Volunteers adapted their approach to suit this environment through frequent and clear communication with women leaders via phone, email and face to face visits. This approach allowed AVI to manage partner expectations and to build trust with BWF.

AVI in China

AVI originally established a relationship with the State Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs (SAFEA) to facilitate the placement of English language volunteers, a government agency. Once AVI became more established, they began to explore broader engagement with an emerging civil society in mainland China, working more with local CSOs, in addition to existing partnerships with tertiary institutions.

This is an important strength of the AVI approach, which builds upon the knowledge of both volunteer and partner organisation to utilise those elements in different ways as required. A significant aspect of this response to context, reflected in many examples of AVI work, is the long term relationship developed with some organisations, supporting them in different ways over time. Making use of different volunteers who bring different sets of skills and knowledge AVI is able to shape a responsive process of support, appropriate to context and changing organisational need. The cumulative impact and outcomes of such support appears to be where the most significant development contributions emerge. This appears to be a distinctive aspect of the AVI approach.

AVI long-term support

AVI in Thailand

In Thailand, the nature of contributions made by volunteers changed in response to the changing development context. From the provision of individual capacity in the early stages of the program, through the delivery of English teaching and in-line roles, to organisational capacity development, as volunteers were increasingly placed to strengthen the ability of organisations to conduct their work. Institutional capacity development was a feature in the final years where volunteers were able to bring increased networks, sustainability and effectiveness to well-functioning Thai and regional organisations. By the time AVID commenced in 2011, the volunteer program in Thailand was focused wholly on regional issues, reflecting the country's status as a leading country in the region on many issues and an emerging hub for sectoral and civil society networks.

Supporting long-term organisational capacity development in Kiribati

AVI's long-term relationship with the host organisation here allowed them to implement a staged placement of volunteers. Assignments shifted from initial "gap-filling" support to focus on more long-term capacity development. AVI adapted their approach over time from capacity substitution (volunteer assignments that responded to a significant skills-gap e.g. lawyers who took on legal caseloads to help the under-resourced organisation carry out their work) to a broader focus on building organisational capacity in internal governance and administration. Assignments also started focussing on mentoring local People's Lawyers and supporting advocacy for policy change.

Balancing competing objectives

AVI recognise that the emphasis upon skilled volunteers does risk limiting the diversity of volunteers. (AVI may be excluding people with different contributions to bring through their demand driven

approach. AVI may also be denying the opportunity for particular groups of people to learn through the experience of volunteering and bring that learning back to their networks and situation.¹¹⁾

This requires the agency to consider the primacy of the objectives to be achieved. While a demand driven approach to volunteer recruitment emphasises the intention to support partner organisations in achieving their objectives, for other areas of agency work the primary objective shifts, to some degree, to an emphasis upon the value of the experience for the volunteer and the impact this has on their future actions.¹²

AVI offer a portfolio of programs that contribute to different degrees to both objectives. This increases the potential impact of the agency, allowing them to draw from different approaches to change.

AVI management approach

Underpinning the AVI approach are the systems, policies and processes that it has developed over time to support volunteer selection and development of placements with appropriate host organisations. Critical to these processes is the long term agency experience, together with the expertise brought by experienced staff, particularly those working in specific countries.¹³ This fits within a broader trend of formalising volunteer involvement (Paine, Ockenden & Stuart, 2012) and greater professionalism of the voluntary sector (Smith et al, 2011; Howard et al, 2015).

Alongside volunteer selection is the ongoing process of managing and supporting those volunteers and of maintaining relationships with host organisations. AVI monitor volunteer placements on a regular basis. They assess ongoing volunteer fit and organisational response. They address specific needs and challenges as these emerge and adjust arrangements, where required, to maximise volunteer benefit and organisational outcomes. Research suggests that the significance of this attention to good management by volunteer agencies such as AVI is not necessarily well understood by donors¹⁴, but it appears critical to shifting the volunteer experience from a placement to a development contribution.

¹¹ Certainly this issue is raised extensively throughout the volunteer literature. Paine, Ockenden and Stuart (2012) note that formalised recruitment and application procedures for volunteers are often perceived to be too formal, lengthy and impersonal (Gaskin 2003), acting as a barrier to potential volunteers, particularly those from marginalised groups (see IVR 2004).

Weeks et al. (1996, in Paine, Ockenden & Stuart 2012) found that professionalisation in AIDS/HIV organisations led to the recruitment of a 'new type of person' not directly affected by AIDS/HIV. This has implications for the 'proximity' of volunteers (i.e. their experience) to service users. The literature on volunteering suggests that volunteers in industrial societies tend to come from more privileged socio-economic and educational backgrounds and that there is a strong correlation between social class and volunteering (Voicu and Voicu 2003; Flick, Bittman and Doyle 2002; Reisch and Wenocur 1984) (Patel et al. 2007).

McBride and Lough (2008) report that, inter alia, the stringent eligibility requirements, as well as the overall lower supply of volunteer roles may make international volunteering less accessible to certain populations (Sygall and Lewis 2006; IVPA 2006; IVR 2006; Hong et al. forthcoming). In this sense, even if individuals have an interest in volunteering internationally, they may not have access to these volunteer roles (McBride, Sherraden, and Menon 2007).

¹² For the AVI work under the Australian Volunteers for Development Program (AVID) where volunteers are carefully selected and matched to partner agency needs, the primary objective is to support the achievement of development outcomes by the partner. In programs which provide more short term exposure and where the selection process is more supply-driven the objectives clearly focus more on the value for the volunteer.

¹³ This has been recently highlighted in monitoring by DFAT staff who visited the AVI/AVID Myanmar program, as a particular strength of the AVI approach.

¹⁴ Kwitko & McDonald (2009) found that volunteer sending organisations have demonstrated various initiatives to address operational efficiencies and development effectiveness which support good practice and innovation, but that these are not being well captured in the current reporting structure and are therefore not visible to DFAT.

Finally, AVI assesses the progress and outcomes of its work, giving attention both to the experience for the volunteer as well as the changes achieved for the partner organisation. They give particular attention to the experience of the volunteer and their satisfaction with the overall experience. They also assess the immediate value for the organisation. While these are important systems for ensuring good ongoing operations, as discussed in the next section, the more sophisticated process of evaluating the development worth of particular placement or indeed the AVI approach overall has been more challenging.

Outcomes and impact

AVI describe the expected impact of their work as twofold. They expect that there will be improved development outcomes demonstrated by partner agencies. They also expect that the returned volunteer will be impacted by their experience, gaining skills and knowledge which will influence both them and others.

In terms of partner impact, AVI have identified over time that often the most effective partner impact results from long-term and multiple volunteer engagements which have built the partner's capacity in various ways. However they also recognise that this is dependent upon the particular partner (their capacity, values, focus and resources) and the partner's ability to operate effectively within a particular context. AVI further recognise that development outcomes are often influenced by critical junctures or opportunities where the partner is able to drive change and use their capacity and resources. AVI therefore have limited direct control over the impacts at this level, but recognise that different capacity development inputs are likely to be required over time and within specific organisations.

From the partner perspective, it appears that volunteers and the volunteer placement is also highly valued because of additional intangible aspects bought by the process of interacting with the volunteer. These include the trust, local accountability, creativity and optimism of volunteers as well as the diversity and new ideas that international volunteers can bring to development projects and program management. The research suggests that organisations and communities identify volunteers as adding a unique value to their development work.¹⁵

Other research suggests that volunteers bring additional broad benefits such as networking, people centred approaches, partnership, the motivation beyond money, and an openness to exchange ideas and information which are key elements of social capital (Randel et al, 2004).

From the perspective of impact upon the volunteer, AVI propose that they are building cadres of people with international experience and an appreciation of self-reliant development. They assume that sending volunteers to effective placements will shape the perceptions of those individuals and change both their understanding and skills. This is supported by international research.¹⁶

¹⁵ Lough (2013) found value volunteers for their labour, expertise and the resources they contribute to development goals. However, they also strongly emphasise other contributions that would not otherwise be available without the presence of international volunteers. Organisations and communities value the trust, local accountability, creativity and optimism of volunteers. They value the increase in civic engagement and local volunteerism that accompany international volunteerism. They value the diversity and new ideas that international volunteers bring to development projects and program management. These are the contributions that organisations and communities identify as adding unique value to development projects. Such outcomes are often difficult to assess in logic models, and may be overlooked in organisational theories of change.

¹⁶ Frontani and Taylor (2009, in Schech et al. 2015) note that volunteers often report life-changing impacts of being immersed in another culture, including gaining a critical perspective on mainstream development practices and the position of their own country in the world. Thus, if volunteers forge close links with their host communities they may be

Research undertaken by AVI (Brook et al, 2007) has identified that returned volunteers commonly have well-developed skills in particular areas:

- interpersonal communication and teamwork skills
- cross-cultural communication skills
- organisational and management skills
- initiative, resourcefulness and adaptability
- problem-solving skills

More recently, staff observe that, particularly for some Pacific countries, that there is a definite presence in the volunteer cohort of relatively early-career people seeking experience that will boost their curriculum vitae; and that this does in fact work for them post-assignment.

More broadly, the volunteer process is assumed to contribute to public diplomacy. That is, the presence of skilled volunteers helps to shape the perceptions of individuals and groups in other countries in ways that promote Australians foreign policy goals. Volunteering is also intended to be a vehicle for generating positive opinion towards and a better understanding of, the Australian government's foreign policy agenda at home (ODE, 2014). Research suggests that volunteer placements including those undertaken by AVI, does make some contribution towards this intended outcome.¹⁷

Finally, AVI offer particular 'value for money'. Notwithstanding the increased remuneration to attract more skilled individuals, volunteers provided by AVI still operate at a considerably lower cost than technical advisors or experts bought from Australia and elsewhere. They offer the opportunity for assistance that is low-cost and high-quality.

The existing AVI evidence to support these range of impacts and outcomes is inconsistent. AVI have good research around the impact of volunteering upon individuals. They have anecdotal evidence about the long-term development impact bought about through organisations. They have less evidence about broader intangible changes contributed by volunteer. These all appear to be areas where longer term research and assessment would be of value.

Theory of change

In international development a theory of change (TOC) refers to the set of assumptions made by a program, organisation or alliance about how change is likely to happen (both positive and negative change) and the key features within a situation likely to further enable or inhibit change.

able to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the Global South and shift public perceptions in their home countries (Georgeou 2012).

Similarly, McDevitt (2009) notes that the impacts of volunteering on volunteers included: positive effect of cross-cultural 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; and increased humanitarian and communitarian values and viewpoints, especially a more tangible sense of issues related to social justice and equity.

¹⁷ A survey of returned AVI volunteers (ORIMA 2012, Draft) found that almost all (95 per cent) returned volunteers said that their assignment increased their knowledge of aid and development issues. The returned volunteers' survey also showed that most (87 per cent) volunteers' family and friends now know more about development, but there is less evidence about the impact of volunteering on the way the wider Australian community thinks about development issues and foreign aid. Further, the survey revealed that host organisations generally described their Australian volunteers very positively, and returned volunteers describe the positive relationships they built within their host organisations (ORIMA 2012, Draft). This suggests that Australian volunteers are building Australia's profile overseas

In an organisation, the TOC should underpin the way that organisation understands and acts for change. It should provide the 'map' by which people define 'what this organisation does' and 'why'.¹⁸

Most often a TOC is implicit in the way an organisation or program operates. However recent debate in international development has highlighted the value of more explicit exploration of the underlying assumptions that guide development work.¹⁹ An explicit TOC accompanied by a clear strategy or TOA, allows an organisation to identify the areas it needs to monitor and evaluate over time in order to ensure that its work is effective. Identifying assumptions about how change is likely to happen allows for more critical examination of the rigour of those assumptions and how they may or may not hold in different contexts

The AVI development approach (or TOA) appears to draw from a variety of theories about how change happens in international development. The major features of each of these are summarised below.

Effective change is locally owned and led

AVI is different to most other development organisations in that it seeks to facilitate and support the development process rather than directly drive the process. This aligns closely with the proposal that the most effective change is locally owned and led. This TOC assumes that effective development outcomes are most likely to be achieved, particularly in complex development situations, by supporting locally owned and led processes. This assumes that change that is driven by the people who are closest to the problem, and have the best understanding of local processes, is more likely to be fit for purpose and lead to the most effective outcomes (Carothers & de Gramont, 2013).

Review of the AVI program suggests that it makes similar assumptions about how to achieve change and many of its programs demonstrate a clear alignment with the specifics of this TOC.²⁰

Volunteer as facilitator

External support in this TOC focuses less on transfer of resources and more on mentoring, capacity development, and relationship brokering in order to stimulate and contribute to those local processes. External organisations need to act as facilitators rather than as managers (Menocal, 2014).

An AVI volunteer with the Eastern Tibetan Training Institute (ETTI) used a student-centred approach that acknowledged student voice as central to the learning experience and placed the volunteer as a facilitator of learning rather than simply the instructor. The volunteer, together with his ETTI counterpart, consulted local employers around what skills they needed in their staff, and then worked with students to design a teaching unit based on the employer consultation (AVI in China case study).

¹⁸ A TOC is not an organisational strategic plan or a specific country strategy, although both of these will ideally reflect elements of the organisational TOC. The TOC is the overarching set of assumptions and approaches within the organisation which define the impact being sought and how the organisation works to bring about that impact.

¹⁹ See

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/JSRP/downloads/JSRP1.SteinValtersPN.pdf>

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/JSRP/downloads/JSRP17.Valters.pdf>

<http://www.odi.org/publications/9883-theories-change-timeradical-approach-learning-development>

²⁰ AVID's Thai Program Evaluation (AVID 2014, p. 17) notes that "For AVI it is important to recognise ... individual volunteers are placed to contribute to the existing goals and plans of their HO, rather than to pursue a particular external programmatic agenda"; or, as one volunteer put it, "... there are always local organisations ... working with marginalised groups or to improve gender equality ... and they know the community better than we ever could, and the volunteer's role is really just to support them in their work, it's really behind the scenes."

Politically informed

External organisations need to understand local politics and work in politically informed ways that reflect local realities (Menocal, 2014). Relationships are key and external agencies need to be sensitive to supporting partners to extend and develop their relationships and networks rather than creating a situation of dependency upon the external agency (Booth & Unsworth, 2014).

Since 2007, AVI has managed twelve volunteers across six government and civil society host organisations to support disability inclusion in Lesotho. As part of this program, AVI developed strong relationships in Lesotho that span both government and civil society, with three local NGOs, one national NGO, one educational institution and one government host organisation all working to promote and support disability inclusion. This approach has helped create links amongst AVI's partners in-country, and has helped leverage AVI's contribution towards disability inclusion in Lesotho (Disability Inclusion in Lesotho case study).

Utilise local leaders and change agents

The role of local leadership, in particular the individuals, alliances or groups who drive and sustained change, is important (Leftwich & Wheeler, 2011, Faustino & Booth, 2014). External organisations need to allow local leaders to negotiate and deliver local solutions. They need to avoid dominating the agenda or process of change (Booth & Unsworth, 2014).

AVI has partnered with the Bougainville Women's Federation (BWF) since 2011. BWF brings together women leaders from Bougainville Island and various small atolls in the region. It provides these women a space to meet and form a collective voice to address the major social and development issues facing the region. AVI's role included mentoring BWF Board Members, and networking on behalf of BWF (Fostering women's participation in the Bougainville peace process case study).

Relationships are significant to the change process

AVI places significant emphasis upon the value of the relationships formed between individual volunteers and the host agency. It also sees value in the ongoing and long term relationships developed between AVI and host agencies as successive volunteers move through the host organisation.

Indonesian Disabled People's Association of Padang City. Through a social encounter, the volunteer established links for PPDI with a senior constitutional lawyer in Padang, who subsequently became a disability rights champion; lending his expertise and personal connections to the successful campaign around the legislation, and forming an association which lobbied for and saw the revamping of the central Padang market as a model of an accessible market place.

This closely aligns with a relational approach to international aid delivery (Eyben, 2010). This TOC identifies that relationships matter, particularly when working in complex development situations. It is only through relationship with local organisations that outsiders are able to support change which is likely to be relevant and adapted to local context, power and opportunities. From this perspective, effective aid practitioners rely heavily on good relationships with key organisations and individuals within those organisations, to understand connections and processes critical to effective change. A focus on enabling aid practitioners to develop good working relationships with local people and local organisations is therefore critical to effective development work.

AVI selection and management of volunteers draws extensively from this TOC. In what it describes as its 'people centred approach', AVI recognise the significance of relationships and emphasise the value of careful selection of volunteers with strong relational competencies. It engages with partners over the long term building relationships across the organisation and beyond to support their action for change.

The majority of AVI's program in China contributed to education, with most volunteers occupying in-line teaching positions across 43 tertiary education institutions. The program supported marginalised communities in China (rural, remote, ethnic minority, children and youth) and endeavoured to enhance an emerging civil society, particularly in later years. The evaluation revealed changes at the individual, organisational and institutional level, however, the majority of volunteers on the program directly contributed to the increased capacity of individual students.

The people-to-people links formed as a result of the program emerged as the most prominent contribution, with both volunteers and host organisations describing the mutual respect and understanding that accrued during volunteer placements. Host organisations in particular attributed high value to the less 'tangible' outcomes of the program, collectively described as 'the invisible changes', referring to the way in which volunteers were able to model and foster new ways of thinking and working in their colleagues and students. (Case Study 2 – Education and Community Empowerment in China)

Change is most often a complex process

AVI experience suggests that providing different volunteer placements over time helps build agency capacity to respond to complex problems. They argue that the best outcomes are achieved through long-term relationships with organisations, working responsively with that organisation as it develops over time. AVI propose an approach to capacity development that goes beyond the individual to influence organisations, networks and broader social systems.

This closely aligns with a view that the most development challenges occur in complex situations where there are multiple influences and variables and where effective responses are built over time rather than pre-planned or imported from elsewhere (Mowles et al, 2008).

Capacity development in complex development situations needs to go beyond a focus on skills transfer to consider how to build and support a broad range of organisation capabilities (Morgan et al, 2005), as illustrated below.

Different approaches to Capacity Building		
	Functional Approach	Political Approach
Internal systems – ‘Push’ strategy	Strengthening formal structures, systems and skills: e.g. budgeting, planning, policy, financial management etc	Change internal dynamics through supporting internal reformers or leaders, creating new incentives & culture, or values
External Stakeholders – ‘Pull’ strategy	Strengthening capacity of individuals and organisations to deal with and relate to other actors e.g. NGO funders, government, CBOs, and communities	Seek to change external pressures: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting organisations’ stakeholders to put pressure on it perform or respond, • Creating changes in norms or standards which drive change

Adapted from Morgan (2004), Bolger et al (2005)

Development is a mutual and iterative process

AVI stress that the development they seek to achieve flows both ways, with outcomes and impact expected for both the partner organisation as well as the volunteer. Significantly they expect that volunteers will have an increased appreciation of international aid and development challenges which in turn will impact on their attitudes and actions beyond the placement.

Recent debate around sustainable development goals (SDG) and the future of development organisations has suggested that what is needed is an increasing approach to understanding the interdependence of global problems (Hewett & Roche, 2014). The SDG require an integration of perspectives between ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries with practitioners who are able to work for shared solutions to change.²¹

From this perspective, positive social change is most likely to be achieved by activists in rich and poor countries able to working together. Critical to this end is an increased understanding of interdependency by those in rich countries. AVI approach and objectives for the changes sought in volunteers, place it firmly at the forefront of this TOC.

Areas for further consideration

AVIs development approach

The AVI development approach is underpinned by a strong set of assumptions about the value bought by AVI to the volunteer process and a people centred development approach. While many of these assumptions are supported by international research, there is limited direct evidence from the AVI experience across a number of areas.

In particular, evidence about selection of partners and their subsequent effective contribution to development impact is largely anecdotal. More work in this area to systematically track the

²¹ Dawkins discusses how the SDGs play a role of international norm setting <http://www.odi.org/publications/8813-global-goalsinternational-agreements-lessons-design-sustainable-developmentgoals>

contribution to change over time would strengthen the argument for the value of the AVI work in this area.

While AVI have some information about the short term outcomes for returned volunteers, the long-term impact upon volunteers and their networks, future employment and any subsequent engagement in international development, has not been extensively explored. While there is a proposition in the literature that these aspects of volunteering are important, this remains to be explored in detail through AVI research.

Significantly the AVI proposition that it gives good attention to context and to an adaptive and responsive approach that works long term with organisations to ensure good quality support and capacity development, is currently being challenged by the DFAT's push for individual volunteer placements to more closely align to specific Australian government priorities with any given country. It would seem to be very important that this element of matching volunteer, organisation and context in an adaptive way, over time, is more carefully understood and evidence gathered about the subsequent outcomes and impact.

This might be undertaken as a comparative study or a longitudinal assessment across several locations. It would be a valuable contribution to identifying the distinct difference in the AVI approach and strengthen its positioning as a development agency.

AVI theory of change

Currently the AVI theory of change draws from various different, albeit overlapping, assumptions about how change happens. Many of these are current TOC, well supported by recent research. They represent best practice in development approaches. They also tend to challenge the more conventional approaches to development, based on resource transfer. This is significant. It potentially places AVI in the vanguard of development thinking and suggests it is a highly relevant development actor.

Some more detailed examination of the respective TOC outlined above might be of considerable benefit for AVI, allowing it to draw together what it sees as valid assumptions about how change is likely to happen. This in turn would allow it to articulate more clearly the value that it offers as a development organisation. It would further serve the purpose of identifying critical elements of the AVI approach that need to be retained through any funding arrangement.

Significantly such an examination would also to how AVI can expand its practice to complement and further enhance the impact of the volunteer arrangement. It would contribute to AVI's further evolution as a development organisation.

Monitoring and evaluation

The monitoring and evaluation currently undertaken by AVI serves the needs of its donor and public communications, but does not necessarily provide AVI with systematic information about its own unique approach. As noted above there are various areas in the development approach which propositional and require further research.

A more nuanced and detailed theory of change would also point to areas where AVI need to systematically collect information to assess progress. This would be a good basis for a monitoring and evaluation framework that specifically served the needs of the organisation.

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