

# International Volunteers for Development and Sustainability

## Volunteer Survey Results Summary June 2007

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In order to directly canvas volunteers about my research into the work of long term international volunteers for development and sustainability I sought the collaboration of a range of International Volunteer Cooperation Organisation's (IVCO's). They provided assistance with survey distribution to volunteers in environment related fields, a comparatively small subset of their total numbers. I commenced the request to survey international volunteers through Australian Volunteers International and UN Volunteers but gradually, given the limited response, extended the survey request beyond this to Skillshare International, Austraining's Youth Ambassador Program and once I gained assistance from the local Cambodian field office, VSO. Through each agency I was able to send a one page summary of the research with a request for interested volunteers to contact me so I could send them the detailed survey form with 15 open ended questions.

The invitation from IVCOs for volunteers to complete the survey resulted in 30 volunteers or former volunteers, (15 women, 15 men), responding individually. The surveys were received between July 2004 and January 2006 during or after assignments in Indonesia, China, Papua New Guinea, Eritrea, Thailand, Cambodia, Swaziland, Botswana, Mozambique, Lesotho, Indonesia, Malawi, Mongolia Nepal, Samoa and Sri Lanka. The surveys were input into QSR NVIVO software and coded to allow more effective data management and analysis. From this analysis major themes were identified and/or confirmed with the highest rated themes being mentioned by greater than 65% of volunteers and the lowest reflecting the view of at least 20%.

The themes that emerged from the volunteer survey are grouped under the research queries of: 1. How do international volunteers see their role and how is it unique?; 2. How do international volunteers see the mix of technical, social and political factors in their work?; 3. Through their experiences have the international volunteers changed perspectives – themselves or of others?; 4. Have they as international volunteers 'added value'?; and 5. How are international volunteers recognised in the development sector?

### ***How do international volunteers see their role and how is it unique?***

Those surveyed highlighted 15 elements that they regarded as unique or special elements of their role in the development sector.

These, in order of the frequency of volunteers mentioning them, were:

- Being locally accountable, commonly through integration in local organisations to the point many described themselves as employees with the resulting opportunities, difficulties, frustrations and compromises this involved;

“we go into organisations not with the intention of taking over and trying to change the world but instead we go into organizations with the intention of being part of the existing team, to work with them and learn from them as much as help them. We are not in a position of ‘power’ and we work within the parameters of the existing organizations” (Anne, Indonesia).

- “The [international] technical staff at CARDI certainly have different agendas to myself, they are doing a job and obviously accountable to their employers. I feel my role is more integrated and I feel accountable to my colleagues (local staff). There is certainly a separation between the technical staff here and the local staff, while I feel I am here to work with local staff” (Jane Cambodia).

ethos, preparation and support of an International Volunteer Cooperation Organisation that facilitated their assignment;

- Appreciation of cultural aspects as a personal learning process as well as for showing and gaining respect and responding appropriately to local preferences;
- Personal aspects as important in terms of personal learning as well as bringing personality and network connections to the work;
- The importance of learning for volunteers, not just doing or transferring knowledge;

“I strongly believe that consultants and contract staff would not have the opportunity to engage in the interactions I mentioned .... The length of time we are stationed for allows us to establish relationships with the staff and local people, so that they get used to having us around. The way in which we live and work also ensures that we have close interactions with local people. I catch the bus to and from work everyday, I shop with local people, I live next to a Sri Lankan family, I go to the office/field everyday and interact with ordinary Sri Lankan people” (Lyn, Sri Lanka).

- Living and working under local conditions and the work/social mix that allows. This was attributed to physical proximity and shared experience which cultivated positive social relations and understanding of resource limitations both within and outside work;
- Building and showing trust and understanding whilst recognising limitations that meant relying on local colleagues local wisdom and community trust;
- Working at a pace in keeping with local people, processes and procedures;
- Having limited power and resources at their disposal to create unilateral change;
- Being motivated for volunteer work in a way that moderates expectations of results;
- Mixed respect for volunteers with local organisations often having more and outside aid organisations less;
- Relationships as important to a meaningful experience and successful work;
- Collaborative work within local organisations as well as providing a liaison role to different outside links and support;
- Being present for an extended period as fundamental to gaining trust and understanding as well as effective work;
- Contributing to local ownership of work rather than imposing outside demands.

### ***How do international volunteers see the mix of technical, social and political factors in their work?***

They highlighted the following 4 ideas most commonly:

- Capacity development was an important part of their work but at times this translated to a more basic focus that meant more specific outcomes were not achieved;
- Working closely alongside local people illuminated local realities and built shared trust and understanding;

“Most other aid is becoming more and more project dependent requiring ticks in a log frame which is often too ambitious and regulated and doesn't take into consideration time required for capacity building and skills development. Volunteers bring in external expertise, ideas and experience and also an understanding of methodologies from other countries and a willingness to experiment and research” (Grace, Botswana).

- Working within local organisations meant political influences had ramifications for technical outcomes;
- Planning in keeping with the local Context was crucial for success.

### ***Through their experiences have the international volunteers changed perspectives – themselves or of others?***

The volunteers here highlighted particularly the following elements:

- They now had a better and more grounded understanding of local realities and an appreciation of the complexity/difficulty of achieving sustainable development. They had a new appreciation for the importance of capacity development

“As a direct result of my experience in promoting environmental management in a development context I believe that I have developed a greater appreciation of factors that can affect the achievement of sustainability as well as an understanding that sustainability issues are complex and not easily solved. Attitude, social structures and political factors play a very strong part in determining the success or otherwise of a development project and changing attitudes, social structures and political factors is a very complex and slow process that must be done in a sensitive manner to ensure that they are fully understood and that the positive aspects of a culture are preserved. On my return to Australia I have found that this experience has made me more sensitive to social and political factors” (Jenny Thailand).

- They recognised the importance of local direction for making difficult decisions;
- They had a greater sense of flexibility and appreciation for timing and the importance of community:
- They felt they had influenced local understanding through their expertise, partly by complementing existing knowledge, but felt this was difficult to measure.

### ***Have they as international volunteers ‘added value’?***

What can’t they achieve that other aid personnel can?

- Volunteers felt it was difficult or impossible as a volunteer to have a policy or institutional reform impact, significant physical outputs or provide financial incentives or achieve management level change but the flip side of this was that
- Volunteers felt they had influenced local understanding and made achievements specifically because of their volunteer status and characteristics (as discussed above and earlier) particularly their flexible terms of reference and their work level within the ‘inner workings’ of local organisations.

“Money is a universally motivating factor in all countries. I think as volunteers we are faced with the challenge of trying to work with people without offering the motivation of potential funds. This requires that volunteers gain respect and motivate others through different avenues, and this is where the challenge, and great reward, lies” (John Mongolia).

### ***How are international volunteers recognised in the development sector?***

- Many volunteers felt they were not well respected by other official aid players though many described this as a mixed reception varying with the degree of contact and mutual goals.
- However despite the mixed reception, volunteers were very clear that their grassroots experience (despite its resource or power limitations), was at times used by and had great potential to further complement other aid initiatives to mutual benefit.

“I think that Volunteers get a very grass roots understanding of issues, and although they may not always have the power, time or the resources to facilitate the development of programs to address those issues, they do gain very deep insight into the nature of those issues. I think that with greater interaction between Volunteers and Government Aid Agencies and Non-Government Organisations more could be achieved, as each of these groups has very different areas of strength and they are ultimately trying to achieve the same objectives”(Jenny, Thailand).