



Response to DFAT's review of Australia's unique soft power strengths and capabilities

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ABOUT AVI

Founded in 1951, AVI is an Australian international development non-profit organisation that works for a peaceful, sustainable and just world by partnering with people to achieve the positive change and development goals they seek.

In doing so, we are committed to a theory of change that recognises: 1) locally owned and led change; 2) inspiring, engaging and connecting people around the world; 3) strengthening capacity through sharing expertise and knowledge; 4) building relationships of mutual respect and trust; 5) evidence based practice and outcomes reporting; 6) supporting, not driving, the development process; 7) a strengths based, human rights, culturally appropriate and inclusive approach; and 8) volunteering for development and the 2030 Agenda.

Since sending the world's first international volunteer for development abroad 67 years ago, AVI has supported the establishment of similar agencies across the world and, in close collaboration with the Australian Government, universities, businesses and other organisations, we have supported over 12,000 Australians to share their skills and experience to build capacity in 3,000 partner organisations in 89 developing countries.

In AVI's experience, the local people that worked with Australian volunteers, students, mentors and technical advisers have experienced their high level of credentials and are always appreciative of Australia's support.

Australia, through AVI, has demonstrated soft power over this period with its support for establishing equivalent organisations in UK (VSO), New Zealand (VSA), Ireland (now VSO), Canada (CSO), Norway (Nor-C) and the United States (Peace Corps), as well as supporting the development of similar programs with governments in our region, including China, Thailand, Fiji, Malaysia, Singapore, Nepal and Japan.

In the past, Australia, through AVI, has also chaired the global peak body, International Forum for Volunteering for Development and is expected to again be chair in October 2018.

ABOUT THIS SUBMISSION

AVI welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) review of Australia's unique soft power strengths and capabilities.

In this response, AVI refers to *Australian deployees* as:

- Volunteers, as a generic term covering the current and previous Australian volunteer programs, recruited for their skills in response to capacity building needs of partner organisations in-country;
- Students, that AVI deploys to development partners and projects in partnership with Australian universities as part of their student mobility programs;
- Mentors, who are similarly skills as volunteers but remunerated between a volunteer and an adviser. Mentors are current utilised on two DFAT projects;
- Corporate staff, selected and deployed as part of career development and shared value projects; and
- Advisers, who are recruited, remunerated and deployed for their specialist technical expertise, usually as part of a program or facility.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 'ability to influence the behaviour or thinking of others through the power of attraction and ideas'ⁱ relies on the building genuine relationships of mutual respect and trust between people. This is not a one-way-street in that both sides need time, goodwill and empathy, a shared purpose or value, matching expectations, and to appreciate, learn and adapt. This means both Australians and those in-country need to change, including cultural adaptation.ⁱⁱ

As Father Walter Lini, Vanuatu's Prime Minister from 1980-1991, noted:

The success of Australia's relations with the Pacific Islands states will be based on the practical and sustained recognition that no one culture is basically superior to another, that each and every culture, together with its social, political and economic ingredients, has a meaning and value to the people who gave birth to it.ⁱⁱⁱ

The strength of relationships has enabled AVI to sign a world-first MOU with the Indonesian government in 1953 that placed Australians in government roles on a local salary; capacity building with the African National Congress (ANC) during apartheid South Africa; conflict resolution in Bougainville after the 1997 ceasefire; one of four spearhead Australian NGOs setting up an office in Cambodia before formal Australian government representation; acting as a operational base in Australia for Abel Guterres for the East Timor independence movement; and established the first Pacific Technical Assistance Facility as the Australian Government's primary means to provide technical assistance to Pacific Island governments.

This response posits that Australian deployees are an essential means for soft power as they possess both the **technical expertise and soft skills** to effectively influence and represent Australia.

AVI proposes that DFAT can build on their success to enhance Australia's soft power through growing this modality:

1. Continuing to strengthen DFAT's Australian Volunteer Program, including e-volunteering.
2. Increased utilisation of mentors as an alternative to technical advisers.
3. Reciprocal placements in Australia for skills development of local leaders, managers and specialist people.
4. Exchanges of Australians and local people between like organisations, such as local government, companies and professional associations. This approach has been successfully trialled by Norway with corporates.

RESPONSE

The Foreign Policy White Paper defines soft power as the ability to influence the behaviour and thinking of others through the power of attraction and ideas.

People-to-people connections and exchanges are a key feature of soft power and this is embodied in the value of Australian deployees, building trust and mutual respect, shared knowledge and experiences.

An integral part of soft power is *public diplomacy*, using communication as well as personal interaction to inform and influence through the power of connection and relationships.

It is through these connections that ideas flourish. Australian skills, expertise, and culture are used to explain our purpose and attract ongoing, meaningful partnerships and relationships.

Maximising soft power

The value of volunteering

Over the past 60 years, AVI has sent more than 12,000 skilled volunteers from Australia to work with communities, small organisations, NGOs and governments across the globe.

Australian volunteers have a unique ability to connect with all layers of society from students in the higher education sector, skilled workers using their expertise with local organisations, and professionals engaged in the government sector.

Volunteers "create(s) strong personal bonds and relationships which leads to a different kind of collaboration, based on a mutual appreciation of each other's knowledge, skills and networks. **These more informal relationships help to build trust, contribute to the generation of soft outcomes.**"^{iv}

Volunteering “contribute(s) to public diplomacy. That is, **the presence of skilled individuals from Australia helps to shape the perceptions of people and groups in other countries in ways that promote Australia’s 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).”^v

In 2014, an independent evaluation of the Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) program by the Office of Development Effectiveness (ODE) was completed and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade management response was released. The evaluation found that *volunteers are making an effective contribution to the Australian Government's development and public diplomacy objectives.*^{vi}

A stronger national brand

Australian deployees embody our national identity, including our diversity. Their very presence showcases our considerable educational and cultural credentials through their own credentials, including professionalism and skill level.

They work in local business, government, health, education and community organisations and systems across a wide variety of sectors, including:

- community and social development
- health
- media, communications, public relations, fundraising
- education, training, library
- business, marketing, tourism, art and design
- management, administration, human resources.

A survey of returned Australian volunteers revealed that in-country partner organisations generally described their volunteers very positively, and returned volunteers describe the positive relationships they built within their partner organisations^{vii}. **This suggests that Australian volunteers are building Australia’s profile overseas.**

As mentors, AVI deploys technical experts who work in a mentoring capacity and through their expertise in medicine they help to strengthen the systems in countries such as Solomon Islands (health) and Timor-Leste (education).

In deploying Australians, AVI works with a range of Australian organisations to harness their expertise, as well as their staff. For instance, Australia is a world leader in emergency care. Fellows and trainees from the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine, as well as the broader organisation itself, have supported the development of the first triage system in the Pacific, and emergency medicine in Myanmar with the Ministry of Health.

Similarly, fellows and trainees from the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists have supported the development of the National Obstetrics and Gynaecology Standard Treatment Manual in Solomon Islands.

The National Obstetrics and Gynaecology Standard Treatment Manual “has enable us to develop and produce the manual and this is one of my life time achievement, which will be of beneficial to the people of Solomon Islands and this is a huge contribution.”^{viii}

The national brand is also bolstered by quality technical advice that is valued and requested by foreign governments. The Pacific Technical Assistance Mission (PACTAM), initially developed by AVI and managed until 2005 for DFAT, is an example of quality technical advice.

The PACTAM program deploys Australian and other technical advisors to work within Pacific governments in highly specific technical areas. A key distinction of this program is that the deployments **were identified and driven by the host governments**, and that the deployees were fully embedded within government departments. Within the scope of this review, the PACTAM project would be considered an effective partnership with another government that promotes and develops the national brand.

Digital engagement

Digital engagement by Australians deployees overseas is central to Australia’s soft power.

As outlined in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s *Digital Media Strategy 2016–18*, digital engagement offers Australia the “means to better connect with government and non-government organisations, business and community groups, and draw on these conversations to design and deliver responsive policies, programs and services.”

Deployees have stories to tell and they can use what all have at their fingertips - smartphones, tablets, and social media – to capture personal, compelling stories that can be shared across multiple platforms.

“Stories are deeply embedded within the diverse cultural contexts of the Indo-Pacific. They inform behaviours and interactions, not just between individuals but importantly between peoples and societies. They are a soft power resource. Through their telling they can enable understanding and empathy and generate influence.”^{ix}

Returned Volunteers also use digital media to tell their stories and to continue the connection with their partner organisations.

Partnerships, relationships and friendships drive digital engagement. This is where cultural exchange flourishes and volunteers are particularly important as a soft power asset. They inform Australian audiences about our engagement overseas and they allow foreign nationals to experience Australian culture and friendship.

It is essential for deployees to tell their stories. People-to-people links are important, but it is through digital engagement that these links continue and grow – soft power depends on it.

Institutions, systems and standards

Australian institutions, systems and standards are a soft power strength where they can be harnessed to benefit partner countries. It is through these institutions that Australia can expand its influence and allow us to collaborate.

Through Australian deployee programs, AVI has decades of experience in identifying and partnering with hundreds of Australian organisations, such as universities, research organisations, professional bodies and government institutions, to work in collaboration with overseas partners to build capacity by sharing their expertise, experience, systems and standards.

An example, is AVI partnering with the Australian Bureau of Statistics to build capacity in sister organisations in the Pacific through Australian volunteers.

It is the reputation of Australian institutions, the expertise of staff, the history of engagement and the recognition of the Australian brand that allows volunteers and experts to work within national organisations and government departments.

These partnerships leave a lasting influence and goodwill for Australia, including across a country's government. As an example, Australian volunteers have supported key government bodies in Myanmar, such as the:

- Union Electoral Commission
- Union Parliament
- Constitutional Tribunal
- Attorney General's Office
- Myanmar Police Force
- Environmental Conservation Department
- Myanmar Gems Enterprise
- Directorate of Investment and Company Administration
- Central Statistical Organisation, and the
- Department of Fisheries.

Soft skills needed for soft power

From research on Australian volunteers, in order to influence others and demonstrate Australia's credentials, we know that it is crucial for Australian deployees to possess and harness a number of soft skills that can build shared trust:^x



In turn, they use these soft skills to employ a number of techniques to influence others:

Minimise power differences

Australian volunteers use a range of quite sophisticated communication techniques to consciously re-negotiate the power expectations of their colleagues in order to be seen as peers rather than superiors or outside experts. These included verbally reinforcing their position at the same or a lower status level and explicitly referring to the colleague as a peer.

Promote two-way learning

By overtly demonstrating the nature & extent of their own learning to their partner organisation colleagues. As well as promoting trust, this reinforced power equality & encouraged ongoing information sharing by their colleagues.

Enhance interdependence

As well as the work structure & the office environment, volunteers focus on, and celebrate, the achievement of small tangible markers of success early in the relationship.

Build a personal friendship

Volunteers reported using social situations consciously to foster trust & understanding with partner organisation staff.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This response demonstrates that Australian deployees have the technical expertise and soft skills, as well as being value for money, to be highly effective as modalities for DFAT's soft power objectives.

Accordingly, AVI suggests that DFAT could develop Australian deployees further, including by:

1. Continuing to strengthen DFAT's Australian Volunteer Program, including e-volunteering.
2. Increased utilisation of mentors as an alternative to technical advisers.
3. Reciprocal placements in Australia for skills development of local leaders, managers and specialist people.
4. Exchanges of Australians and local people between like organisations, such as local government, companies and professional associations. This approach has been successfully trialled by Norway with corporates.

END

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ⁱⁱ Bird P (2018) *Why we need to change, to help others change*, DevPolicy

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^{iv}

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^v Kelly L, Deppler F & Roche C (2016), *Australian Volunteers International Development Approach*. Unpublished

^{vi} Australian Government (2014) *Evaluation of the Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) Program*, DFAT Office of Development Effectiveness, Canberra

^{vii} Survey of returned volunteers, prepared by ORIMA Research, AusAID, Canberra, 2012

^{viii} Dr Leanne Panisi, Head of O&G at National Referral Hospital, Solomon Islands

^{ix} *Storytelling, soft power and the craft of public diplomacy*. Article by Dr Caitlin Byrne, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Society and Design, Bond University and Marcus Corowa, musician, singer and songwriter. Griffith Asia Insights

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