

A Response to the Australian Government Volunteer Program (AGVP) Review

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Introduction

This paper provides Palms Australia's response to the recent review of the AGVP. As an agency currently independent of this program, yet with a history of partnership with the Australian Government (Skilled Australians choosing to volunteer through Palms were assisted with Government funding for over 20 years until 2005), Palms Australia is vitally interested in, and is in a unique position to respond to the observations and recommendations made in the review.

Palms Australia is an independent organisation with 48 years experience in recruiting, preparing, sending and supporting skilled Australians who respond to the requests of communities seeking to achieve sustainable development through skill exchange. Grounded in the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, Palms Australia cooperates with church, government and community based organisations to reduce poverty in Australia and overseas.

Congruence between the AGVP and Palms Australia's Program

Essentially, the AGVP seeks to support Australians who generously give of their time to volunteer while complementing the aims of the broader Australian international development program. The benefits of cross-cultural volunteering are many, with positive outcomes for the volunteer, the host organisation (HO) or community, and the sending community at local and national levels. While the positive outcomes can be enumerated in great detail, the review team has chosen to broadly categorise the benefits for volunteers and HOs in terms of:

- mutual capacity development, particularly in relation to organisational and individual capacities;
- cultural exchange; and
- the enhancement of personal and professional networks and linkages. (AGVP Review, p. 13)

These broad categories mirror Palms Australia's three-point mission statement:

- To develop the capacity of individuals and strengthen institutions through the exchange of knowledge and skills between Palms Australia Global Volunteers and partner communities;
- To advance mutually enriching and challenging relationships of understanding, acceptance and care, to the point of sharing worlds of meaning with a people of a culture different from one's own; and
- To engage Australian communities and partner communities through Global volunteers so that each increases their awareness and enthusiasm to encourage just, sustainable, interdependent and peaceful development.
(<http://www.palms.org.au/about/#mission>)

Palms Australia's volunteers contribute to the same outcomes as those engaged in the AGVP. In many cases they work side-by-side with volunteers funded by the Australian Government, either for the same host organisation, or working in partnership for related organisations with shared goals. Palms' volunteers have both

preceded and followed other Australian volunteers, in a continuing relationship between Australian VSPs and HOs. They are identified by host organisations and communities as Australian Volunteers, contributing to sustainable development through skill exchange.

Criteria for good practice

The review identified ten criteria for good practice in volunteering. Half of these are directly linked to, or enhanced by, commitments to long-term, mutual partnerships for development. The first five criteria include long term/strategic engagement, good relationships, engagement of stakeholders in planning and monitoring, ongoing support before, during and after the placement and repeat assignments.

Palms Australia has always maintained that long-term relationships are essential for sustainable and effective development. Over 48 years, Palms Australia has established long-standing partnerships with HOs and developed a particular expertise in working with local NGOs. Palms Australia also has demonstrable expertise in multilateral partnerships involving HOs and APOs, facilitating effective cross-cultural communication and development education, aimed at enhancing development effectiveness.

Like AusAID who have recognised the importance of partnering with church groups, (as highlighted in partnerships such as the Australia PNG Church Partnership) Palms Australia recognises the potential of such partnerships to contribute to effective development. Palms finds that such an approach is particularly appropriate in the Pacific and countries like East Timor. In these contexts church organisations provide a significant proportion of social services, such as health and education.

Palms Australia's strong connections with both overseas and Australian faith-based groups ensures that ongoing linkages are fostered, maintained and enhanced for the mutual benefit of all parties. Palms' approach enables volunteers to understand the faith context (either multi-faith or singular) as an integral part of the host culture and to work effectively within it.

Faith-based NGOs and others have expressed particular support for the preparation Palms Australia provides its volunteers to work in their cultural context. Many religious orders utilise Palms' preparation for their own volunteers and development workers. **Palms places more emphasis than most VSPs on cross-cultural and development preparation and suggests that a greater emphasis by all VSPs on such preparation could be a key factor in the success of future partnerships.**

Further criteria for good practice highlight the importance of sustainability and cooperation. These two principles are at the core of Palms' vision: "to participate in and develop networks that link and engage people across cultures in order to cooperate in reducing poverty and achieve a just, sustainable, interdependent and peaceful world." (<http://www.palms.org.au/about/#vision>)

As is the practice of AGVP, VSPs, Palms Australia evaluates each position description against criteria of sustainability. Palms works with local partners to

ensure volunteers are not simply filling in-line positions and thereby depriving local individuals of work. Position descriptions are developed cooperatively with HOs to ensure sustainable skill exchange can occur and that joint ownership of the outcomes is present.

Palms Australia is then able to recruit and place skilled volunteers to meet the specific requests of host communities to achieve appropriate development outcomes. It is the comprehensive volunteer preparation prior to departure that ensures the volunteer is able to maintain a relationship with the HO and Palms. The relationship developed with the volunteer through this process and the ongoing support throughout, and beyond placement, is a key factor in cooperatively achieving the sustainable outcomes identified with HOs.

Palms Australia also welcomes the recognition of the importance of cooperation between VSPs and with other organisations. Palms has, over the course of 48 years, collaborated with other agencies in a range of areas (e.g. with AVI for volunteer insurance). When cooperation is strong it enhances the effectiveness of all organisations in achieving shared development goals.

Palms does have concerns that an increase in “competitiveness” over cooperation may be a consequence of the most recent AGVP program contracts. Tendering for contracts may significantly discourage cooperation. Also the need for agencies to achieve quotas outlined in their contracts may be a further cause of competition and segmentation of the Australian volunteer effort.

Where possible Palms has attempted to maintain these relationship that promote co-operation. Such partnerships have been most evident through communication between in-country managers and during the two evacuations of volunteers from Timor-Leste.

Palms Australia also has been involved in the establishment of numerous cooperative agencies. These include the Australian Global Volunteer Network (AGVN) which unites a number of parties interested in sending, receiving and supporting cross-cultural volunteers, including universities, church and other non-government organisations; ACFID, then ACFOA, whose Code of Conduct was greatly contributed to by Palms’ staff; and the Australasia Federation of Fair Trade organisations.

Palms appreciates the review’s acknowledgment of the existence of non-AGVP programs. While not funded by the Australian government, volunteers in such programs can also be seen as the “‘public face’ of Australia’s development cooperation” (Kwitko & McDonald 2009, p.15) particularly as the review identifies the confusion over the identity of the AGVP. Palms Australia has witnessed such confusion not only amongst HOs, who have maintained relationships established prior to the AGVP tender process, but also amongst AusAID and government representatives, who seemed of the opinion that AusAID funded all Australians volunteering.

While such misunderstandings are not especially troublesome in these cases, given the congruence between Palms’ aims and the AGVP’s, the potential for “volunteers” being described as “tourists” or “interns” to be seen as the public face of Australia’s development is worrying. Research conducted by Palms with the University of

Wollongong has identified a trend towards the commercialisation of volunteering with approaches that contradict good practice and an ethos of development that is inconsistent with social and economic sustainability.

Palms is uncertain that the reviews claims for a “branding” of AGVP is the solution. Palms Australia supports the need for AGVP to identify with volunteering for development, as distinct from tourism and internships, which should not be considered part of Australia’s international development program. However, care needs to be taken that this does not remove a diversity of providers with diverse philosophies and orientations that more truly represents the diversity of Australia.

Palms Australia proposes an expansion of the AGVP to incorporate other agencies that contribute to skill exchange that assists in the sustainable reduction of poverty and the achievement of Millennium Development Goals. **An accreditation process would identify all those who are contributing to appropriate sustainable development and ensure all Australians volunteering for development are adequately supported.** It would also provide a broader base of experience from which the AGVP could benefit.

Competitive tenders are designed to achieve success for the most cost-effectiveness approaches. Understandably the AGVP review may not have received strong views from previously successful tenderers, or AusAID, for whom such a process provides demonstrable efficiencies in choosing service providers. Certainly Palms Australia as a smaller agency has an interest in other approaches. However, beyond our own interest, we also believe the tendering process might contribute to a failure to promote diversity and inclusiveness while at the same time contribute to the promotion of a competitive and fragmented approach by VSPs.

The value of diversity

We are encouraged by the acknowledgement of the Review team of the need for diversity as a key strength of the AGVP. Each VSP has unique characteristics due to their target age group, skill sector, countries of operation, length of operation, established partnerships, religious or secular background and not-for-profit or commercial status. Diversity allows host organisations to seek a style of volunteering best suited to their specific request and model of development and allows volunteers choice of programs according to their own support needs. Such needs, of either HOs or volunteers, can be professional, personal, social, cultural or spiritual. A volunteer placement will be more effective and beneficial, for both volunteer and host, where these needs are met.

It is appropriate that a range of options for volunteers is supported by the Australian Government. Such a choice is available to Australians making choices in health care and education, in recognition of the different needs and priorities of different people. Where a HO or volunteer prefers a particular VSP, it is important that they are able to avail themselves of the service best suited to their needs. HOs should not feel pressured to use a particular VSP solely because of its funding status (this is linked to the concern that some HOs request “free” volunteers at the expense of local staff or in competition with local initiatives). Such an approach respects the role of host

communities as at least equal partners in program design, management, monitoring and evaluation, which is consistent as a criterion for good practice.

Diversity also allows and promotes innovation. An entirely uniform approach would discourage innovation as VSPs sought to fall in lock step and facilitate “ossification”. While ensuring that VSP strategies are inline with the broad objectives and priorities of the AGVP it was noted that flexibility in operational matters, particularly in piloting new programs is essential. The review noted several innovations of the AGVP VSPs. Palms Australia supports the recommendation for enhanced communication of innovations and good practice.

Innovations of Palms Australia

In the interest of sharing innovations and examples of good practice, we will outline briefly some recent innovations of Palms Australia that have contributed to achieving effective development outcomes.

1. The Fair Trade Coffee Company

In 2006, Palms Australia established the Fair Trade Coffee Company, a retail outlet located at 33 Glebe Point Road in Glebe, New South Wales.

The Fair Trade Coffee Company has served a variety of purposes for Palms Australia, including providing funding for our volunteer program, serving as a location for community education and engagement in development, promotion of a holistic approach to development incorporating just global trade practices and recruitment of volunteers.

The Fair Trade Coffee Company has served as a locus for community activity in Australia relating to development issues. Groups such as Caritas Australia, World Vision, Oxfam and RAYAD (Returned Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development) have used the facility for community education and engagement activities.

Additionally, it has been useful in supporting some of the following innovations.

2. Reverse Immersion

In 2008, Palms Australia trialled a “Reverse Immersion”, which can also be described as an initiative promoting South-North volunteering.

Building on a partnership between Palms Australia and the Salesian Sisters’ Girls Vocational School in Venilale, Timor-Leste, the “Reverse Immersion” provided the opportunity for two recent hospitality graduates to further develop their skills in an Australian hospitality context – at the Fair Trade Coffee Company. Palms’ relationship with the school had included the provision of vocational English teachers, however an opportunity for deeper partnership was identified. Two young women from the school, who had been taught English by a Palms Australia volunteer, were selected and brought to Sydney for three months. By engaging the Glebe Catholic

and Anglican churches, Palms Australia was able to provide an experience of Australian culture and the culture of an Australian workplace, which prepared the girls to better serve Timor's slowly growing tourism industry. This strategy is inline with both the school's intention to provide women with opportunities for employment in Timor-Leste and Prime Minister Gusmao's recent emphasis on the importance of tourism for Timor-Leste's economy.

Feedback from our partner organisation and the participants has been overwhelmingly positive, with partners identifying increased competency and confidence in both hospitality and English amongst the benefits. Upon return to Timor-Leste, the participants provided support to teachers at Venilale School, ensuring the benefits of skill development were not limited to the participants.

Benefits in Australia included an opportunity for the Glebe community to build closer links and engagement with Venilale through the participating women and increase "their awareness and enthusiasm to encourage just, sustainable, interdependent and peaceful development." Staff and customers at the café were able to meet "real people" affected by Australia's engagement in global development and trade. The Catholic parish of Glebe were involved in fundraising events and providing support for the two women, as were a number of returned Palms volunteers.

Palms is in discussions with Venilale regarding a follow-up program, and also with another Timorese partner organisation Ahisaun Foundation, which serves young men and women with disabilities. We hope to continue to provide opportunities for such Australian cultural experiences focussing on development of vocational and networking skills. We would recommend that any future AGVP programme find a way of supporting similar extensions of skill exchange opportunities.

3. Three-way partnerships

Palms Australia has engaged in and developed partnerships with existing friendship arrangements between Australian and overseas communities. Such relationships often exist in the form of links between Australian local councils, churches or clubs and an overseas community. Many of these relationships are relatively new, with most under ten years old, and vary in their effectiveness in achieving satisfactory outcomes for both parties. (Spence et. al. 2005)

Palms Australia has worked with existing partnerships and assisted the establishment of new partnerships between Australian and overseas communities, aiming to ensure the partnerships are maintained and enhanced through better communication and increased cross-cultural understanding. Palms has worked with Australian communities to move from a "donor mentality" to one of "equal partners in development". We have also advised Australian and overseas groups on processes for effective, appropriate and sustainable development and assisted defuse tensions caused by cross-cultural miscommunication. Palms has also provided pre-departure cultural and development preparation and re-entry support for numerous participants from such groups.

These partnerships have sometimes involved the placement of a Palms Australia volunteer to enhance communication and facilitate cooperation, though have often

extended beyond the volunteer's placement period. This process has served to enhance the development effectiveness and life-span of such partnerships which, based in principles of international solidarity, offer great hope for positive, sustainable change. We would recommend that the AGVP find further ways to encourage three-way partnerships where the Service Provider can educate and focus the groups who might otherwise send big money to dead ends. The preparation we do to make sure our human resources (volunteers) work to best effect would be usefully done with those sending money.

4. Palms' Encounters

Concerned by the proliferation of short-term immersion or exposure programs with little or no foundation in development theory and practice, Palms Australia saw a need to offer short-term experiences to Australians seeking a cross-cultural experience. Many of the experiences currently on offer can be culturally, socially, environmentally and even economically damaging on host communities. Palms' Encounters, while being a community education rather than a development program, are based firmly in development and ecological principles.

Palms' Encounters do not purport to bestow benefits of a volunteer's experience on a host community and is sure to distinguish this program from its volunteering program. Such short-term engagement does not offer the opportunity to build the relationships necessary for meaningful development or skill exchange. Such experiences do provide, though, opportunities to better engage Australian communities and educate them about issues of development, culture, the environment and justice. Encounter participants have the opportunity to visit developing communities to learn about the daily reality of their lives. Participants will stay at an Eco-Tourism resort, Nema's Eco-Lodge in Timor-Leste, with which Palms Australia has had a partnership since its foundation and engage in village activities, including permaculture. Participants will also have the opportunity to visit Palms Australia volunteers to witness Australia's contributions to development.

Palms' Encounters initially aim to engage Australians and form their understandings of culture and development. Beyond the Encounter Visit, the program aims to build greater linkages between Australians and local NGOs and generate future interest in longer-term volunteering opportunities. The Encounters are offered to individuals and Australian community groups, including churches, clubs, workplaces and schools. Palms Australia will facilitate ongoing linkages between such community groups and their counterparts. Australian communities in friendship arrangements (as discussed above) and sending communities of Palms' volunteers are specific target markets for Palms' Encounters as their existing connections to the volunteer or community provide a great starting point and opportunity for ongoing connection. Palms' experience also shows that such visits assist volunteers in their re-entry to Australia following the end of their placement.

This is another programme to which we would recommend the AGVP give serious consideration as a way of achieving so many of the criteria for good practice.

5. Connect East Timor

Palms Australia established Connect East Timor (CET) in 2001. Providing village radios, similar to those used for Australia's Royal Flying Doctor Service and School of the Air, CET has connected communities too poor to afford more modern forms of telecommunication. In addition to health and hygiene education programs delivered over the radios, the radios have had dramatic benefits to communities seeking urgent medical treatment. Major Michael Stone of the Australian Army has applauded the radio systems as a means of diffusing dangerous and incorrect rumours in times of crisis, such as when Alfredo Reinardo was a fugitive.

Since establishing the pilot program in Ataebae, Connect East Timor has been extended to Balibo, Lacluta and Dili districts. President Ramos-Horta and Prime Minister Gusmao have both expressed their admiration for the efforts of CET and the government of Timor-Leste has committed to pay for the program to be extended to all 66 sub-districts under the name Project Telesuco. This remarkable achievement has been possible because the commitment of past and present Palms Australia volunteers and their extended networks, communities in four districts so far, the ACT government, Queensland Rail and other Australian partner organisations. Facilitated by Palms Australia, it is testament to the possibilities of volunteer placements to achieve development outcomes, foster linkages and provide development education and engagement opportunities in Australia.

Streamlining and diversity

The review emphasises the importance of streamlining processes inside the AGVP. Palms Australia agrees that streamlining in some areas would eliminate unnecessary duplication and simplify processes, especially in administrative areas such as travel document acquisition and volunteer insurance. Other areas though, which maintain the essential diversity of the AGVP, should be considered carefully before being streamlined, lest the process remove the individual character of the VSPs. For example, the different recruitment and scoping processes, respectively, may appeal to different types of volunteers and HOs. As indicated earlier, HOs should be free to indicate a preference for a particular type of volunteer at it should not be assumed that the recruitment, preparation and support processes of individual agencies cater to the same needs. For example, Palms Australia provides a comprehensive pre-departure correspondence course and nine-day residential orientation prior to departure. Some host communities have indicated their preference for volunteers receiving such preparation.

The review suggests a benefit of streamlining the AGVP would be improved branding of a single Australian Government program, both to Australian and overseas observers. The reviewers do not explain why branding of the program in this way is necessary. Given that international development assistance should be a cooperative process – a global partnership for development as outlined in MDG 8 – it is unclear why a brand needs to be established for the AGVP. It seems the simplest way of establishing a single brand, would be to have a single service provider, though this would remove the benefits of the current program diversity. In our experience, though sometimes parties are unaware of the precise structure of the program,

Australian volunteers are identified by the host community as Australians and therefore contribute to local goodwill towards Australia. This is particularly the case given that each agency's name includes the name Australia.

Community Engagement in Australia

The review suggests that: "Assessing AGVP impact on public awareness is more difficult to determine at the broader level of the Australian community, but certainly there is a positive impact on return of the volunteer, at the local family and community level." (Kwitko & McDonald 2009, p. viii) Palms can indeed demonstrate both. The impact on public awareness at the broader level has been particularly effective through the Fair Trade Café, our CommUNITY initiative and Reverse Immersion. For example, the Glebe community has produced several enquiries and donors and two applicants have been prompted to engage more when their church became involved last year. Similar stories abound wherever Palms' volunteers depart.

Palms' CommUNITY initiative builds connections between volunteers' sending communities and the overseas communities to which volunteers travel. Through regular updates, building professional support networks and opportunities such as Palms' Encounters, CommUNITY has demonstrated that volunteering is not the solitary process some imagine.

In partnership with University of Wollongong and other AGVN members, Palms Australia has conducted research into volunteer effectiveness and sought to share their findings with the wider community. Two academic forums, in 2005 and 2009, have been hosted and a collection of papers, including a doctoral thesis, will be published shortly. Palms is currently hosting a number of Focus Workshops around the country. These workshops have proven very effective in building community understanding of development issues and the importance of Australia's contribution to reducing global poverty and achieving the MDGs.

Palms' strong networks within the Australian Catholic Church extend to 28 dioceses and over 1300 parishes, 1200 primary schools and 400 secondary schools. These networks extend across all states and territories, including urban and rural areas. Strong links exist with other large organisations such as Caritas Australia and 28 Catholic Education Offices. Palms Australia also maintains communication with the National Council of Churches and other faith groups including Coptic Orthodox, Ba'hai, Buddhist and Islamic. Providing the majority of Palms' volunteers, these networks also receive regular communications from Palms Australia about overseas aid and development work.

Currently though, as Palms Australia is not financially supported by the AGVP, those hearing the news do not attribute it to the Australian government or AusAID. Were Palms Australia brought into the AGVP, this would be a considerable expansion of the AGVP's networks and capabilities for community education.

As the review identifies the difficulties in raising broader public awareness of the AGVP, its goal and objectives, Palms suggests a "matched giving" program is an option to encourage community engagement. By matching donations given by the

Australian community, perhaps by a factor of three or four, AusAID would be encouraging VSPs to better engage and educate the Australian community. Such a process would have numerous benefits, including increased citizen pride in Australia's international development efforts, increased recruitment for the volunteer program and a better community understanding of Australia's role as a global citizen and regional leader in development not to mention cost-effective benefits of Government funds being used to leverage private giving.

The recommendations of the review

The reviewers suggest four future options for the AGVP. While the review does not enter into the details of implementation of the options, there are some apparent consequences of each approach.

Streamlined AGVP – The reviewers correctly identify that the “siloeing” is likely to continue under only a minor revision of the current approach. Competitive tenders, by definition, encourage competition and reduce the potential for cooperation and sharing of good practice. This is particularly the case where VSPs have quotas in individual countries that they must achieve to maintain funding.

Devolved Streamlined AGVP – While increasing harmonisation with country strategies, it is difficult to imagine how this would serve to increase the overall unity of the program. The review also correctly identifies the large increase in resources required for this approach.

One Stop Shop – Streamlining of processes such as travel documents, insurance and other risk management is recommended, though processes such as pre-departure preparation offer greater scope for piloting different approaches and catering to specific needs of volunteers and host communities. Key components of the VSP approaches, which reflect their diversity, especially preparation and support of volunteers, would be best maintained by the individual VSPs. It should be recognised that host organisations often have a preference for one Australian provider over another, because of their particular approach to partner relations, development ethos as well as volunteer preparation and support. Removing such choice from HOs may serve to devalue the program and the role of the Australian government in the eyes of its intended beneficiaries.

The role of Facility Manager, to be assigned through a tender process, has potential to cause some problems within the program. The most capable organisations to fill this role are current VSPs, and the awarding of such a key role to an existing stakeholder may result in a particular VSP approach being favoured, with the potential for resentment and negative results in terms of program diversity and innovation.

Partnerships – This approach seems able to address the concerns of the review. The approach, which steps away from competitive tendering, would better serve to encourage cooperation across the program. An accreditation program, in which VSPs demonstrate their competencies in order to be accepted into a Partnership Agreement, does indeed have the potential to maintain diversity, encourage innovation and reduce “siloeing”. VSPs would be able to maintain their own recruitment, selection,

preparation and support processes for volunteers and scoping, position development and other aspects of relationships with host organisations and communities, in line with accreditation requirements. Where HOs identified a particular VSP was more able to meet their development needs, their preference would be respected and supported by this approach. This would lead to more effective development and improved relations between HOs, AusAID and VSPs.

The potential for enhanced partnerships within Australia, such as those between Palms Australia and the University of Wollongong and Australian Catholic University, would be worthy of consideration particularly to assist with volunteer preparation, research and development and community education and engagement. The program would be more flexible in piloting new ideas, including the expansion of the program to include Australian volunteers sent by other VSAs where the placements match the objectives of the AGVP. The potential for a cohesive program is greater too, though would require considered planning – for example if agency quotas were maintained, a centralised database of placement requests and applicants may lead to “poaching” of placements scoped by a particular partner. This, of course, could be avoided by engaging stakeholders further in the development of key processes and maintaining mutual and open dialogue with VSPs.

Conclusion

The review into the AGVP reveals many strengths and challenges facing the program. Palms Australia welcomes the commitment by AusAID to undertake the review, with a view to enhancing the development effectiveness of its volunteer program. Whichever of the suggested approaches is chosen, Palms Australia hopes that the revisions consider the importance of:

- Maintaining diversity within the AGVP, including respecting the individual character of the various VSPs;
- Removing structures which serve to encourage competitiveness and secrecy at the expense of cooperation, while respecting the intellectual property of individual agencies; and
- Broadening the program to include other Australian VSAs, so that they too can benefit from the cooperation with AusAID and other VSPs, thereby becoming more effective as agents of development.

References

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