

Contributions of AVI Volunteers in the Middle East

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REVIEW PURPOSE

Since 2001, Australian Volunteers International (AVI) has managed the Australian Government-funded volunteer program in the Middle East, providing support to partner organisations across Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. The program's transition from Australia-based management to in-country management in early 2012 was an opportune time to conduct a review of the 10-year program.

The review:

- > analysed the contributions of Australian volunteers to developing the capacity of AVI's partner organisations in the Middle East
- > sought to understand how the process of capacity development could be made more effective.

AVI collected data from a wide range of stakeholders, including partner organisations, current and former volunteers, Australian Embassy representatives and AVI staff. This brief summarises the main findings and recommendations that emerged from the review.



Above > Australian volunteer Physiotherapist (front right) running an exercise and laughing workshop at the Dbayeh Palestinian Refugee Camp in Lebanon.
Photo > Courtesy Glenys Davies / Caritas



Above > Staff member at Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA), with Australian volunteer Marine Park Management Adviser (background), in Aqaba, Jordan.
Photo > Alec Simpon

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Between 2001 and 2011, AVI supported 20 partner organisations in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, through the provision of 54 skilled professional volunteers undertaking 61 assignments in the areas of governance (41%), health (36%), education (18%) and sustainable livelihoods (5%).

Of the 61 volunteer assignments, 28 were in United Nations (UN) agencies, 23 in local non-government organisations (NGOs), eight in international NGOs, and two in government positions. *Table 1 (overleaf)* summarises the first 10 years of the Middle East program.



Countries in which AVI has placed volunteers (Lebanon, Jordan and Syria)

KEY FINDINGS

In AVI's approach to development through international volunteering, sustainable, positive change is sought through a process of 'capacity development'. Working with in-country partner organisations, volunteers contribute to the development of capacity at individual, organisational and institutional levels. The review found that volunteers in the Middle East made significant contributions to the development of capacity across all three levels.

In essence, the review revealed that Australian volunteers in the Middle East:

- > **Supported the capacity of individuals:** The flexibility, relationship-building skills and willingness of volunteers to understand their host organisation context were key factors that enabled them to help build the capacity of their colleagues and the communities in which they worked.
- > **Supported the capacity of organisations:** Australian volunteers supported AVI's partner organisations to provide better services to their target communities, to enhance their organisational systems and processes, and to improve organisational strategy and planning.
- > **Supported the capacity of institutions:** Australian volunteers helped to strengthen the reach and efficacy of civil society organisations¹ in the Middle East.
- > **Developed links and partnerships between Australia and partner organisations:** The volunteer program is valued as an avenue for building links between Australia and the Middle East. The review outlines specific examples of these links.
- > **Supported sustainable change:** Assignment outcomes were generally considered sustainable, meaning that identified positive changes were able to be maintained following the volunteer's departure.

METHODOLOGY

The review took a multi-method approach, using both qualitative and quantitative strategies, to identify the contributions that Australian volunteers in the Middle East have made to the different dimensions of capacity. The approach comprised the following:

- > **Database review:** AVI reviewed and analysed the completed monitoring and evaluation surveys that were submitted by AVI's partner organisations and volunteers in the Middle East between 2001 and 2011. The monitoring and evaluation surveys provided quantitative and qualitative data on perceived assignment outcomes and the enabling and inhibiting factors that influenced assignment 'success'.
- > **Semi-structured interviews:** Preliminary data from the monitoring and evaluation surveys informed the development of semi-structured interview scripts used with a wide range of stakeholders. A three-week field trip to Jordan and Lebanon was undertaken to conduct interviews with partner organisation representatives, current volunteers, Australian embassy representatives and AVI staff. Returned volunteers were also interviewed via Skype. In total, 14 partner organisation representatives, 12 current volunteers, 23 returned volunteers, three embassy representatives and eight AVI staff participated in these interviews.
- > **Returned volunteer survey:** A survey of returned volunteers provided additional data across a number of dimensions: their experience prior to starting their assignment, the capacity development contributions they observed as a result of their assignment, and the technical and personal competencies they gained from the experience. Of the 43 returned volunteers who were contacted, 22 responded to the survey².

Table 1: Overview of AVI assignments in the Middle East; 2001-2011

Country	Average Age	Gender		Key result area				Average assignment duration			Partner organisation category			
		M	F	Education	Sustainable Livelihoods	Governance	Health	Less than 6 months	6-17 months	18 months +	Government	International NGO	Local NGO	UN agencies
Jordan	42	10	8	1	3	11	3	0	9	9	2	0	4	12
Lebanon	40	23	12	8	0	10	17	7	14	14	0	8	19	8
Syria	43	7	1	2	0	4	2	1	5	2	0	0	0	8
Total	43	40	21	11	3	25	22	8	28	25	2	8	23	28

¹ Organisations that occupy the space between the individual and the state, and come together to advocate common interests through collective action.

² AVI sent surveys to only 43 of the 54 returned volunteers because updated contact information was not available for the remaining 11.

FINDINGS

Program support to partner organisations was through the provision of skilled professional volunteers in the key areas of governance, health and education. These volunteers varied in background, age and gender, but shared a commitment to fostering sustainable, positive change for AVI's partner organisations.

The review found that:

- > Partner organisations value the way in which volunteers work as highly as the technical skills they bring. Assignments that had ongoing benefits were those where the volunteer brought a **capacity development approach** to their work, pointing to the importance of AVI fostering this approach in volunteers from the time of recruitment, through their preparation, and during their time in-country.
- > **Sustainable change** was particularly apparent where assignments were structured to contribute directly to organisational capacity (as opposed to individual capacity), and where the volunteer stayed for eighteen months or longer.

Key volunteer achievements of AVI's Middle East program include:

- > Development of a **Disability Inclusion Strategy and Policy** and its adoption by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which had a significant impact on disability inclusion across Lebanon, Jordan and Syria.
- > Increased capacity of UNRWA Headquarters and Field Offices, including: increased skills and ability to provide **english language education for refugees** (Lebanon); an integrated patient-centred approach to health care, and **increased accountability and community participation** (Jordan).
- > The contribution of a volunteer to a broad civil society campaign in Lebanon that successfully brought about **changes in attitudes and legislation** to recognise unregistered Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.
- > The combined work of three volunteers in Lebanon – a physiotherapist, an occupational therapist and a social worker – that encouraged colleagues to analyse cases by 'integrating the social and medical'. This sparked a cultural shift by encouraging in-country colleagues to **adopt a holistic approach to care**, which staff have since championed amongst Palestinian NGOs.
- > **Increased youth leadership and employment**, with local young people taking ownership of a program introduced by two Australian volunteers in 2006.
- > Following guidance from three allied health volunteers, one NGO partner in Lebanon increased its capacity to deliver **community health services for elderly women** (and was still conducting fall-prevention workshops three years after they were introduced by a volunteer).

- > The facilitation and **increased collaboration** and networking among civil society organisations, specifically in the areas of **gender-based violence in Syria** and **allied health in Lebanon**.
- > The establishment, by an Australian volunteer, of the **Australian-Palestinian Partnerships in Education and Health (APPEH)**. APPEH aims to facilitate mutual learning and understanding between Australians and Palestinians, to develop the capacity of education and health services for Palestinian refugees, and to provide fellowships for Palestinians to gain professional exposure and experience in Australia.



Above > Red Sea, Aqaba, Jordan. Photo > Christine Crosby / AVI



Above > Australian volunteer English Language Adviser (left) and UNRWA Education Team's School Supervisor, showing new English language text books for Palestinian refugee schools in Lebanon. Photo > Alec Simpson.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The review confirmed that AVI is effectively managing the volunteer program in support of the capacity development of its partners in the Middle East. The program has also been successful in developing sustainable links between host countries and Australia.

Despite the achievements and effectiveness of the Middle East program highlighted by the review, the review also outlined a set of interconnected areas for improvement to help provide increased support to partner organisations and volunteers.

The recommendations were grouped into three categories:

1. Strengthen partner organisations' knowledge of and engagement in capacity development.

- > Develop **Capacity Development Plans** with partner organisations, to help outline how consecutive volunteer assignments with that organisation can consistently work to build the capacity of the organisation over time (a three-to five-year period), and at different levels.
- > Implement **partner organisation workshops** to help foster a joint understanding of capacity development and strengthen relationships with other partner organisations. The workshops would focus on developing a consensus about the purpose of volunteer assignments within each partner organisation, and help to identify the support and resources required for volunteers to be able to successfully achieve their assignment goals.

2. Improve volunteers' understanding of their role in capacity development.

- > Foster a strong **capacity development understanding and approach** in volunteers and look for specific ways to nurture this understanding beyond the recruitment phase and the pre-departure briefing (for example, during in-country meetings).
- > Despite evidence of outcomes at all three levels (individual, organisational, institutional), the review found that **sustainable change** was most often associated with assignment outcomes at the organisational level. AVI should structure all assignments to include an organisational capacity development component.
- > Provide volunteers with specific information on the crucial importance of **learning and understanding a partner organisation's structure, policies, procedures and working culture** before they propose any changes within the organisation.

3. Improve volunteers' understanding of their role in capacity development.

- > Support AVI recruitment consultants to **develop a deeper knowledge of country-specific challenges**, to help them to set volunteer expectations of assignments early in the selection process. Provide resources for AVI recruitment staff to visit the Middle East region and for AVI's partner organisations to foster this understanding.
- > Seek innovative means by which to **share greater levels of country and assignment-specific information** with volunteers during the pre-departure preparation process.
- > **Increase the partner organisation's participation in the selection of volunteers** through the production of recruitment reports (distilled versions of the first and second interview reports, summarising all themes covered throughout the recruitment process) that can be presented to representatives of the partner organisation, and the AVI Country Manager.

Following the review's completion in 2012, all recommendations have either been fully implemented by AVI or are currently being implemented.



Above > Cityscape, Amman, Jordan. Photo > Alec Simpson / AVI