



ACFID Practice Note

Responsible International Volunteering for Development

Prepared by AVI in collaboration with ACFID member organisations

Purpose

The ACFID Practice Note for Responsible International Volunteering for Development sets out best practice principles for ACFID member organisations, who manage volunteer programs for international development, to commit and apply to their own work.

The Practice Note focuses on organisations that manage international volunteers, who are defined as those who travel from their home country (Australia) to another country to volunteer.¹ While this practice note acknowledges important lessons and approaches in domestic volunteering, and does have some applicability in this context,² it is not focused on domestic volunteering.³ This practice note is also not focused on humanitarian or 'spontaneous' volunteering. While some principles and practices may overlap (e.g. the need to match volunteer skills to the locally identified needs), the particular circumstances of humanitarian volunteering require considerations and standards of practice that cannot be comprehensively detailed in this note.

This is a Practice Note for purpose, meaning the principles are to be applied. It complements ACFID member commitments under the ACFID Code of Conduct, furthering some of the key principles in the Code to allow for the management of the unique complexities of sending volunteers overseas.

This Practice Note does have applicability for non-ACFID organisations who are managing Australian volunteers internationally, and it can be used to guide organisational changes to support better practice volunteering. It is also useful for Australians interested in volunteering for development, providing important considerations in the decision to volunteer and the means in which to engage in volunteering for international development.

Outline

This practice note:

- Provides an overview of the unique role and purpose of international volunteering for development, and key trends and considerations for the sector
- Presents principles for best practice design and implementation of international volunteering for development opportunities and programs
- Includes evidence for each principle, drawn from existing good practice by ACFID members and global peers, which are intended to guide implementation

¹ VSO and Institute of Development Studies. 2015. [The Role of Volunteering in Sustainable Development](#). Brighton and London: VSO and Institute of Development Studies.

² It is perhaps most relevant to non-Indigenous Australians volunteering in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

³ See Volunteering Australia. 2001. [National Standards for Involving Volunteers in Not-for-Profit Organisations](#).



- Is accompanied by a supplementary appendix that outlines case studies drawn from ACFID members' own programs and experiences
- Is accompanied by a supplementary appendix with examples of guidelines, consent forms and policies to support organisational management of volunteers

What is responsible volunteering for international development?

Responsible volunteering for international development involves individuals or groups of people who, of their own free will and without expectation of monetary rewards, participate in activities⁴ to support long-term international development priorities, as identified and progressed in partnership with members of the partner community in which the volunteers are based. Volunteer sending organisations (VSOs) include a range of organisations with different objectives and ways of operating. Generally, VSO's engage in activities that support development objectives of partner organisations and community representatives through (exclusively or as part of other development activities) sending and managing volunteers abroad.

Some key principles, relevant for all development approaches, are worth reiterating here as they underpin 'responsible' volunteering.

International development includes activities undertaken in order to reduce poverty and address global justice issues.⁵ It involves a range of activities but is underpinned by a process of working in harmony and partnership towards constructive, inclusive, long term, resilient and sustainable social, human and economic change while ensuring environmental protection.⁶

As applicable to all international development approaches, and clearly outlined in the ACFID Code of Conduct, the development efforts of volunteers must be underpinned by respect and the universal protection of human rights. Human rights are legal statements that assert the equality and dignity of all human beings. These rights include civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.⁷ Fulfilment of human rights requires a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment. International development approaches must respect and respond to the needs, rights and inclusion of all people including those who are vulnerable and are affected by marginalisation and exclusion.⁸

Volunteering for international development offers a unique contribution to fulfilling these development objectives. It places significant emphasis upon the value of the relationships formed between individuals and between partner organisations. It provides volunteers and the people with whom they engage the opportunity to form strong and deep personal relationships that can result in true collaboration and a mutual exchange of skills and knowledge, which can in turn empower individuals and organisations to effect endogenous change.⁹ If volunteers work with partner organisations on locally identified, owned and driven priorities, volunteering programs facilitate the

⁴ For the basis of this definition in regards to volunteering, see [United Nations Volunteers](#). 2015.

⁵ ACFID. 2017. [General Definitions](#).

⁶ The [Sustainable Development Agenda](#), United Nations, January 2016.

⁷ ACFID. 2017. [General Definitions](#).

⁸ For more, see [ACFID Code of Conduct commitment 1.2](#)

⁹ [VSO](#) *ibid*.



development process instead of directly driving it, promoting local agency and ensuring that development is contextually relevant, adapted and sustainable.

Volunteering for international development can take a number of forms. Volunteers may work directly with local counterparts, with a team, or across several organisations. Alternatively, volunteers may also work within the local offices of their volunteer sending organisations (VSOs) as part of a broader development project, and/or with locally based organisations with which the VSO has a partnership.

Recently, there has been greater awareness and research shedding light on the damaging effects of volunteer tourism (*'voluntourism'*), which involves people undertaking volunteer activities (including time and/or financial contributions) as part of their travel to a particular destination.¹⁰ Voluntourism typically involves short-term, once off volunteering, and may include orphanage volunteering, involving individuals volunteering in orphanages or children's homes.¹¹

Without good practice and design implementation, volunteer development programs can be an imposition on local communities, undermining local skills and ownership while excluding social groups and imposing agendas on communities. Paid, locally engaged resources could be supplanted by international volunteers if the volunteer positions are improperly assessed, directly undermining concerted efforts develop capacity in partner communities. It may also directly lead to exploitation and harm.¹² For example, orphanage tourism may involve supporting institutions that traffic children for profit, keeping them in sub-optimal conditions which carry with them an increased risk of abuse, which can result in children developing attachment disorders, developmental delays and behavioural issues.¹³ Poor practice can also harm the international volunteers, as they risk entering unsafe workspaces; finding themselves inadequately prepared for cross-cultural challenges; and may be left lacking in-country support.

As with expatriate development workers, volunteers themselves may also reinforce or create power imbalances. With the wrong attitude volunteers may view themselves as giving knowledge and skills one-way to 'lesser' people, reinforcing power imbalances and robbing partner communities of agency. Volunteers could also be viewed to be giving a 'gift,' which communities feel they must receive and cannot repay.¹⁴

These issues highlight the need to ensure international volunteering is contributing constructively to development efforts rather than inadvertently or by design supporting the commodification and exploitation of partner communities.

This practice note should be read, discussed and implemented in conjunction with:

- [ACFID Code of Conduct](#) (2017)

¹⁰ For more, see the [Smart Traveller website](#).

¹¹ [Position Paper: Residential Care and Orphanages in International Development](#), ACFID, December 2016

¹² Devereux in [VSO ibid](#)

¹³ [ACFID 2016 ibid](#)

¹⁴ Devereux in [VSO ibid](#)



- [ACFID Position Paper on Residential Care and Orphanages in International Development](#) (2016), and for ACFID members, [Child Protection policies and procedures](#) (2016)
- [ACFID Practice Note on Youth Participation in Development](#) (2016)
- [ACFID Practice Note on Disability Inclusive Development](#) (2015)
- [UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (1948)
- [UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) (2015)

Principles of Responsible International Volunteering for Development

ACFID member organisations support the principles listed below for responsible volunteering for international development:

1. **Respecting human rights and advancing social inclusion**

Our volunteer programs respect and promote human rights; protect people affected by crises; safeguard children; and respond to the needs of the vulnerable, marginalised and socially excluded.

Volunteering for international development has inherent power dynamics. These must be acknowledged and managed by VSOs and volunteers to ensure human rights are respected and protected, and that those who are affected by marginalisation and exclusion are included, so as to prevent the creation or exacerbation of exploitation and inequality. The intersecting drivers of marginalisation and exclusion include, but are not restricted to: people with disabilities; people from diverse socio-economic, religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds; indigenous peoples; gender and people with diverse sex, sexuality and gender identities.¹⁵ Responsible volunteering means viewing all development activities through an inclusive lens where the needs of diverse backgrounds are considered and addressed in designing and delivering these activities.

Volunteering for international development should combat unequal power relations, and should seek to systematically address the deep-seated roots of poverty, injustice and unsustainable development in a bid to promote systemic change.

This principle underpins all of the following principles and evidenced practices below. It is reflected in the ACFID Code of Conduct through Quality Principle 1- [Rights, Protection & Inclusion](#).

2. **Programs and their priorities are locally defined and led**

Our programs actively seek to understand and work through local systems to both engage and empower partner communities/actors in the decision-making process.

There can be a disparity between perceptions of what a community needs, and what the actual priorities of the community are. Partner organisations should decide whether volunteering is the best modality to support their priorities. If so, VSOs should enable local partners to identify program priorities/objectives, including capacity development needs, and ensure active participation in the implementation and evaluation of said programs. In planning these programs, VSOs should

¹⁵ For more on inclusivity, see [ACFID Code of Conduct commitment 1.2](#)



seek to ensure that volunteers do not replace the roles of local staff members or volunteers, but rather work to provide services to, or further develop the existing capacities of, the partner community. VSO's should understand and work via local systems and processes.

This kind of cooperative engagement affords communities greater control over the decision making process that directly affects them, and ensures development programs can comprehensively address local priorities and needs.

Evidence of this practice:

- As defined and agreed by local partners, VSOs have established, through a formal evidence-based process, clear strategic goals for all volunteer programs prior to sending volunteers on assignment¹⁶
- International volunteer programs and volunteer objectives are co-designed and managed with partner communities/organisations¹⁷
- Local partners are involved in the volunteer selection process

This principle is reflected in the ACFID Code of Conduct through the following Quality Principles:

- #2- [Participation, Empowerment & Local Ownership](#)
- #4- [Quality & Effectiveness](#)
- #5- [Collaboration](#)

3. Long-term sustainability

Our programs work towards long-term development outcomes and sustainability.

Volunteering for international development is not a 'once off' or isolated event; rather each volunteer contribution should be part of a long-term plan that supports the capacity development of individuals and organisations in partner communities, leading to systemic change and long-term, sustainable development outcomes.¹⁸

Each volunteer should have clearly identified objectives for the duration of their assignment, which relate to long-term objectives. If multiple volunteers are deployed, each volunteer should build on the work of previous volunteers, aided by the monitoring and evaluation of volunteer contributions. These programs should complement other development efforts within the communities, and should work within local systems and structures.

Evidence of this practice:

- Volunteer assignments directly build on the work of previous efforts (of volunteers, local organisations etc). Transition and handover plans between volunteer assignments support this process.

¹⁶ For more on establishing clear strategic goals, see [ACFID Code of Conduct commitment 4.1](#)

¹⁷ For more on the participation of partner organisations, see [ACFID Code of Conduct commitment 2.1](#)

¹⁸ For more on systemic change, see [ACFID Code of Conduct commitment 3.2](#)



- International volunteer programs contribute to long-term, locally identified development outcomes, with each assignment having objectives that directly support this (as identified for example in a long term capacity development plan)¹⁹
- Roles associated with volunteer assignments are appropriate to the tenure of the assignment (whether short or long-term), and contribute to their mutually-agreed, long-term sustainable development outcome
- International volunteer programs support and enable local development processes not supplant
- To ensure programs remain relevant and adapt to support longer-term change, monitoring, evaluation and learning (and consequent adaptation of programs) is undertaken to identify changes affecting long term plans and build on achievements.
- Volunteers are recruited and selected on the basis of partner organisation agreed assignments and that their skills, knowledge and life experience match the assignment requirements
- VSOs collaborate and coordinate their activities to compliment and/or build on other relevant development organisations/programs²⁰
- VSOs have adequate resources to support the volunteer work for the duration of the volunteers time abroad²¹

This principle is reflected in ACFID Code of Conduct through the following Quality Principles:

- #3- [Sustainable Change](#)
- #5- [Collaboration](#)

4. Adapting to international contexts

Our programs are adaptable and contextually relevant.

Volunteer programs need to be designed and implemented in consideration of the enabling environments for volunteerism, based on context analysis, evidence and research. This includes the contextual elements (political, social, cultural and economic factors in which the program will take place, social inclusion); actor based elements (the role of state, civil society and private sector actors); relational elements (including power dynamics and relationships between actors); and system-wide factors (such as partnerships, technology, resources and funding).²²

VSOs need to carefully select, through due diligence, the actors with whom they will partner so as to ensure constructive development impacts that support human rights. VSOs and partner organisations need to ensure the volunteer program is implemented in a manner that compliments the work of other key actors within the communities and is appropriate to local contexts.

¹⁹ For more on sustainable development, see [ACFID Code of Conduct commitment 3.1](#)

²⁰ For more on collaborating, see [ACFID Code of Conduct commitment 5.1](#)

²¹ For more on ensuring capacity to deliver programs, see [ACFID Code of Conduct commitment 9.1](#)

²² [O'Brien et al 2017](#)



Volunteer programs (and volunteers) need to be adaptable to changes over time. Ongoing feedback should be sourced from both the communities and organisations within which the volunteers work, and also from the volunteers themselves. VSOs need to address this feedback, adapting their approaches to better meet community priorities and the needs of volunteers. Volunteers should be adequately prepared for changes to their assignments as adaptation can occur during assignments.

Evidence of this practice:

- VSOs collaborate with partner organisations to undertake a detailed contextual analysis of the local community in which volunteers will work before they are sent
- VSOs ensure that volunteers are recruited, selected and trained according to the cultural requirements of the country
- VSOs adapt their volunteer programs in response to their monitoring, evaluation and learning procedures, in response to changing contexts and/or priorities of partner organisations²³
- VSOs seek ongoing feedback from partner organisations to ensure the design of both in-country programs and pre-departure training modules remain relevant²⁴

This principle is reflected in ACFID Code of Conduct through the following Quality Principles:

- #4- [Quality & Effectiveness](#)
- #7- [Governance](#)

5. Providing volunteer assistance that secures a constructive impact

We work to select, prepare and support volunteers to support our programs, do the best job they can, and to benefit from their time in country.

Volunteers are selected using a documented approach, so the right volunteers are selected for the right volunteer assignments. This is not just about technical skills, relational skills are also important and selection of volunteers involves matching volunteer skill sets and attributes to the role. Volunteers who are able to develop strong relationships and personal bonds with community members are able to build mutual respect and trust, helping to develop important 'soft outcomes' such as confidence and leadership within community members, and also helping to identify and implement changes that are the result of combined knowledge, skills and networks, so changes are locally owned and appropriate.²⁵ When preparing to send volunteers on assignment, VSOs educate volunteers through a mix of pre-departure preparation, training, and in-country orientation. During this pre-departure process, key responsibilities with their role should be clearly communicated to volunteers. This includes working with volunteers to manage their expectations of their time overseas.

²³ For more on program adaptability, see [ACFID Code of Conduct commitment 7.3](#)

²⁴ For more partner organisation feedback, see [ACFID Code of Conduct commitment 2.2](#)

²⁵ VSO and Institute of Development Studies. 2015. [The Role of Volunteering in Sustainable Development](#). Brighton and London: VSO and Institute of Development Studies.



Volunteers are also provided with in-program support throughout their assignment, including pastoral support; technical support; grievance resolution mechanisms; and cultural training to help them carry out their responsibilities to the best of their ability. Once volunteers have completed their assignment, they are given opportunities to debrief.

Evidence of this practice:

- VSOs attract a diverse range of people from all sectors of the community (people with disabilities; people from diverse socio-economic, religious and cultural backgrounds; indigenous peoples; and women and men of all ages) and develop assignments that fit different life, career and volunteering motivations
- VSOs undertake a criminal history check (nationally and from their country of birth) on volunteers prior to sending them on assignment
- VSOs recruit volunteers that are suitable for their respective roles
- VSOs establish a comprehensive pre-departure program with an emphasis on relevant volunteer education and training, including basic language, cross cultural and diversity training; risk identification; education on local laws; and information regarding volunteer responsibilities²⁶
- VSOs provide volunteers with in-program support to help them carry out their responsibilities to the best of their ability, including 24 hour emergency support/security plans; access to safety equipment; and access to counselling services²⁷
- VSOs provide volunteers with opportunities to engage in post-assignment debriefs, in both individual and group contexts, to help them consolidate and communicate their experiences in a respectful, realistic manner
- VSOs provide opportunities for ongoing involvement to successful volunteers, whether through new program placements or program referrals
- VSOs have a complaints and whistle blowing policy and procedures in place for VSO staff, volunteers, local organisations and community members in case of misconduct.

This principle is reflected in ACFID Code of Conduct through the following Quality Principles:

- #4- [Quality & Effectiveness](#)
- #9- [People & Culture](#)

6. Ensuring safeguards are in place to protect communities and volunteers

Our programs have comprehensive policies and guidelines in place which are enforced and monitored to ensure the safety of volunteers and communities.

VSO's have comprehensive safeguards in place to ensure volunteers and the communities within which they work remain safe. These safeguards/practices must be clearly communicated with all individuals involved in the program. These include a code of conduct for all volunteers, to which they are held accountable; child protection policies; and environmental protection policies, to mitigate

²⁶ For more on preparation, see [ACFID Code of Conduct commitment 9.4](#)

²⁷ For more on security, see [ACFID Code of Conduct commitment 9.2](#)



any potentially damaging effects volunteer programs could have on partner communities. These safeguards should also include minimum standard emergency procedures and insurance to protect volunteers, and appropriate pre-departure preparation. Deliberate and adequate measures are taken to protect against gender based violence and discrimination and to support gender equity principles.²⁸

Evidence of this practice:

- VSOs take a safety first approach to development, ensuring the safety and wellbeing of all actors involved in or impacted by the activities being carried out, including through safety and security assessments and briefings
- VSOs ensure volunteers agree upon and sign up to a Code of Conduct (see more in principle 7 – ‘Responsible program management’)
- VSOs ensure volunteers are submitted to full health checks prior to deployment; have adequate insurance including emergency, air ambulance and counselling services cover; and have obtained an appropriate visa
- VSOs and partner organisations have comprehensive, functioning Child Protection Policies in place that ensure the security and wellbeing of children involved, directly or indirectly, with development programs²⁹
- VSOs embed environmentally conscious practices in to their organisational structure, covering both environmental security and respectful practices for culturally or historically significant sites³⁰
- Policies regarding personal photography and publication are clearly communicated with and agreed to by volunteers
- International volunteer programs abide by local laws
- VSOs have appropriate security training and in-country security arrangements in place for volunteers
- VSOs establish and implement counter-terrorism practices
- VSOs establish and implement anti-money laundering practices
- Partner organisations provide volunteers with a functioning and safe workplace in which to work
- VSOs have a complaints and whistle blowing policy and procedures in place for VSO staff, volunteers, local organisations and community members in case of misconduct.
- VSOs establish and implement policies and procedures against exploitation and misconduct for all involved, this includes volunteers, local community members and VSO staff members.

This principle is reflected in ACFID Code of Conduct through the following Quality Principles:

- #1- [Rights, Protection & Inclusion](#)
- #2- [Participation, Empowerment & Local Ownership](#)
- #3- [Sustainable Change](#)
- #7- [Governance](#)

²⁸ For more on gender equality, see [ACFID Code of Conduct commitment 2.3](#)

²⁹ For more on child protection, see [ACFID Code of Conduct commitment 1.4](#)

³⁰ For more environmental protection, see [ACFID Code of Conduct commitment 3.3](#)



7. **Responsible program management**

We manage our program with integrity and transparency.

VSOs and their volunteer development programs are managed with integrity and transparency. This includes the truthful and respectful representation of communities and volunteers in any communications and reporting materials, including free, prior and informed consent on the use of personal images and information. The collection of monitoring and evaluation data from members of partner communities, as well as volunteers, is used to improve the program and address issues as they arise. VSOs are accountable to partner communities and the Australian public, and as such must truthfully report on volunteer outcomes. VSOs are transparent in the management of funding, particularly if it involves management of money volunteers provide, through fundraising or personal contributions.

Evidence of this practice:

- VSOs carry out respectful marketing practices, and seek the consent of relevant parties prior to using any images in marketing materials³¹
- VSOs provide volunteers with a Code of Conduct that abides by these principles
- VSOs regularly monitor and evaluate their international volunteer programs according to their pre-identified objectives
- VSOs permit regular, independent audits covering financial integrity and impact reports
- VSOs publish regular financial reports
- VSOs meet all legal requirements, both domestically and internationally
- VSOs provide a means for international communities, staff and volunteers to provide feedback or to voice grievances
- VSOs establish a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with relevant governing bodies in countries where international volunteer programs are being carried out³²
- VSOs protect any private information provided to them by volunteers, beneficiaries, stakeholders, partner communities etc.
- VSOs consider joining FORUM as the global peak body for VSOs³³
- Local organisations, VSO staff members and volunteers are aware and can access a complaints mechanism for any aspects of the volunteer assignment and/or behaviour of anyone involved.

This principle is reflected in ACFID Code of Conduct through the following Quality Principles:

- #6- [Communication](#)
- #7- [Governance](#)
- #8- [Resource Management](#)
- #9- [People & Culture](#)

³¹ For more on good communication practice, see [ACFID Code of Conduct commitment 6.1](#)

³² For more on MOUs, see [ACFID Code of Conduct commitment 7.3](#)

³³ See [FORUM](#)