

CASE STUDY 1:

Decarbonising Australian Volunteers International

Australian Volunteers International (AVI) supports effective and sustainable development outcomes through partnership and connecting people, organisations and communities within and beyond Australia. This case study demonstrates AVI's approaches to decarbonise its programs and operations and provides lessons for other organisations looking to integrate low-carbon actions.

LOCATION:

AVI partners with local organisations in 27 countries in Asia, the Pacific, Africa and Middle East: Bhutan; Cambodia; eSwatini; Federated States of Micronesia; Fiji; Indonesia; Kiribati; Laos; Lesotho; Mongolia; Myanmar; Nepal; Palau; Philippines; PNG; Republic of the Marshall Islands; Samoa; Solomon Islands; South Africa; Sri Lanka; Tanzania; Kenya; Timor-Leste; Tonga; Tuvalu; Vanuatu; Vietnam.

ORGANISATIONAL OBJECTIVE:

AVI aims to reduce poverty, promote human rights and gender equality, increase access to health and education services and protect the environment through ethical volunteering and partnering programs¹.

AVI supports partner organisations in achieving their own development goals by recruiting skilled volunteers from Australia through the Australian Volunteers Program and fostering strong reciprocal relationships between Australia and global communities².

LINKS TO ACFID CLIMATE ACTION FRAMEWORK:

OPERATIONAL

Decarbonising programs and operations

DEMONSTRATION OF ENABLERS:

1: Multi-year, core funding and flexible funding options

2: Partnerships, relationships, and knowledge exchange

3: Ongoing and holistic approach

4: Prioritising climate change action within organisations

5: Strength-based approaches, recognising traditional and local knowledge

6: Recognising the 'what' and 'how' of climate change integration

CLIMATE CHANGE INTEGRATION APPROACH:

This case study provides an example of an organisation taking intentional steps to decarbonise its programs and operations, whilst also taking a holistic approach environmental and social sustainability. Five key highlights of AVI's organisational climate change mitigation approach are provided below.

STRONG ORGANISATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The importance of environmental sustainability – including the importance of decarbonising its operations – is demonstrated by its senior leadership, and visible through its governance structures. AVI has in place an Environmental Sustainability Policy, Action Plan and Committee to maintain progress, accountability and focus on tangible outcomes that result in mitigating its carbon emissions - these are described below.



Photo: Australian Volunteers Program providing remote volunteering support. Photo credit: Harjono Djoyobisono, Australian Volunteers Program.

Environmental Sustainability Policy: AVI developed an Environmental Sustainability Policy to incorporate climate action into business strategy and operations (Enabler 4). The Environmental Policy informs the senior management to take strategic decisions on climate change integration activities. AVI recognises its budget limitations, and the policy reflects realistic ambitions of the organisation on where it can invest. The Environmental Sustainability Policy is updated every two years to identify new areas where AVI may invest and take informed practical decisions (Enabler 3).

Environmental Sustainability Action Plan: AVI launched its Environmental Sustainability Action Plan 2023/2024 to make environmental sustainability an integral part of AVI-led programs at the operation level. The Action Plan provides specific actions for the organisation's mitigation actions including waste reduction, energy efficiency, sustainable water consumption, purchasing sustainable goods and products and reducing the environmental impact associated with staff travel. While the Environmental Action Plan has been introduced for AVI's Melbourne office, AVI's offices in the countries in which it operates are also developing and implementing their own Actions Plans.



We have an objective to make environmental sustainability an integral part of AVI."

Melanie Gow, AVI CEO.

Environmental Sustainability Committee: AVI established an Environmental Sustainability Committee to ensure AVI has up-to-date, innovative and effective environmentally sustainable policies, procedures and programs that reduce AVI's environmental footprint. During 2021-22, the committee provided ongoing leadership and engaged in different activities to learn, evolve and improve environmental sustainability practices across all areas of the organisation. The AVI Chairperson's membership on the Environmental Sustainability Committee highlights AVI's organisational priority on climate action and sustainability. The Committee's membership is open to all staff, which encourages staff across the organisations to participate in the conversation, share new ideas and champion climate change integration activities within the organisation (Enabler 2).

1 See AVI website

2 See AVI volunteer programs

STAFF ENGAGEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT

AVI recognise the importance of strong senior leadership to support organisational climate action as described above but also understands the need to encourage staff ownership to ensure AVI's policies, strategies and actions are genuinely taken up across the organisation. AVI provides staff with various options to engage on environmental sustainability issues, including through the Environmental Sustainability Committee where they are encouraged to voice concerns and suggest activities to support the organisation to reduce emissions and its environmental impacts.



Engaging your staff is a fantastic way from the start. They help set the KPIs and goals and they will buy into them because they are helping set them up."

Melanie Gow, AVI CEO.

CONCRETE ACTIONS FOR LOW-CARBON OUTCOMES

AVI took intentional and strategic mitigation decisions to embed low-carbon and emissions reduction activities within the organisation. For example, the following actions have been implemented:

- In its Melbourne office refurbishment, AVI worked closely with architects to include low-carbon aspects of office design (e.g. using recycled timber and other recycled materials in the build).
- No staff car spaces are available at AVI's Melbourne office. However, staff have access to secure and accessible bicycle parking, showers and lockers to encourage active transport.
- A focus on waste minimisation across the organisation, e.g., staff are not provided rubbish bins at their desks and are discouraged to print, which has encouraged waste minimisation.
- A focus on procurement, with environmental sustainability integrated into purchasing decisions (e.g. selecting suppliers who value and promote sustainability in products).
- Setting ambitious but realistic goals and targets to reduce water consumption.

Although the new approaches caused initial discomfort amongst some staff (e.g. reconsidering their mode of transport to work given the lack of car parking on site), over time there have been positive behavioural changes among the staff at the organisation. The AVI interviewee for this case study also noted the importance of setting baselines to enable the tracking and measuring of change. Baselines needed to be set once the main impacts of COVID-19 on AVI's operations had lessened.



Anecdotally, we see the impacts of these activities. The bike racks are full every day."

Melanie Gow, AVI CEO.

OFFSET CARBON EMISSIONS FROM FLIGHTS

AVI is demonstrating a commitment to environmental sustainability by offsetting emissions from international flights taken by the Australian Volunteer Program's volunteers and staff (Enabler 4). For example, from July 2021 to June 2022, the Program volunteers and employees took total 352 flights aggregating 369,633 miles and emitting 142 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent. To offset these emissions, the organisation invested \$4,024 and purchased carbon credits from a project in Vietnam that supported the Bac Lieu Wind Farm³.

EXPLORING LOW-CARBON PROGRAMMING APPROACHES

AVI is also exploring partnership and volunteer programming modalities that have lower carbon emissions (Enabler 3). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated innovation when most volunteers were repatriated, and international flights were no longer possible. This led to the launch of a remote volunteering component of the Australian Volunteers Program and provided further impetus to initiatives that support national volunteering (which is still being explored). Although starting as an alternative option during the COVID-19 pandemic, remote volunteering has demonstrated lower-carbon modalities of volunteerism, and AVI continues to support hybrid and remote volunteering options to ensure continued low-carbon volunteering efforts. Initiatives that promote national volunteerism and capacity building of local partners also have the added benefit of empowering local volunteers, partner organisations and supporting the localisation agenda (Enabler 5).

LESSONS FOR NGOS FROM SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES OF CASE STUDY

Supportive senior management and opportunities for staff engagement are key. Organisational change supporting low-carbon approaches is enabled by top-down senior leadership, policy and governance, coupled with bottom-up staff engagement and participation. Both approaches have seen genuine change at AVI at the organisational level and allowed staff to meaningfully engage in sustainability activities.

Clear entry points for climate action support tangible change. AVI's Environmental Sustainability Policy helps the organisation's senior management make informed decisions on the investment of resources for sustainability and low-carbon activities.

Having a clear plan helps to document realistic ambition. Developing a plan that includes achievable activities with genuine low-carbon outcomes. Over time, these activities become normalised within the organisation, reflecting long-term behaviour change (e.g. riding bikes to work, reducing waste).

Maximising the multiple benefits of low carbon programming enables progress in different areas. AVI is considering and testing new and alternative modalities of partnership and volunteering to reduce AVI's carbon footprint, which is subsequently empowering partner organisations and supporting localisation agenda of partner countries.

CONCLUSION

This case study provides examples of best practice for mitigating climate change at AVI's operational level. The integration efforts taken by AVI encourage sustainable practices and support good development outcomes. AVI's integration approaches can be a good example for ACFID members and support ACFID members to identify accessible entry points for integration and to begin, continue and/or strengthen their climate change integration actions.