Australian Red Cross and international volunteering: an evaluation in Kenya and Uganda

Summary report
October 2015
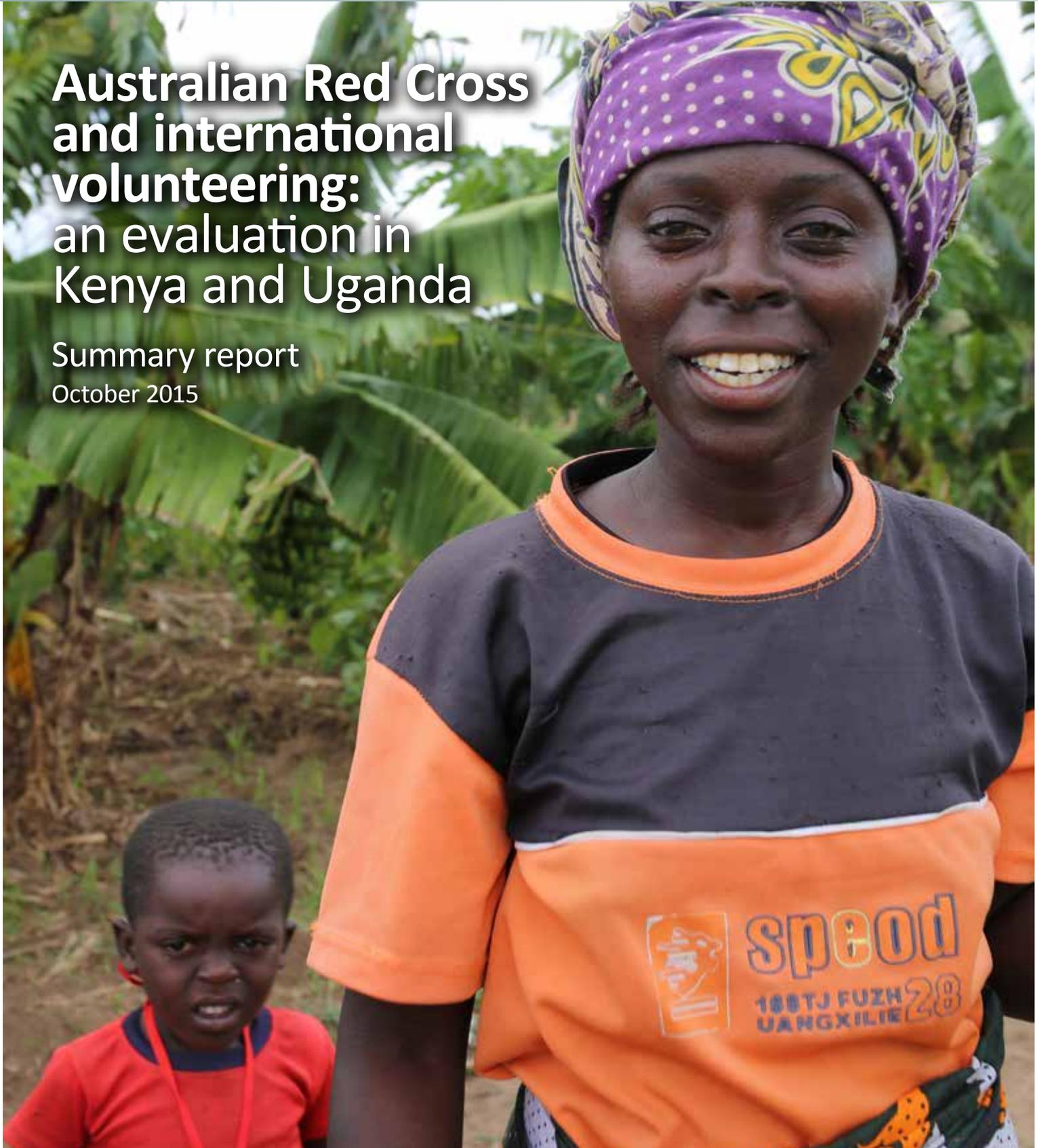
Introduction

The Australian Government launched the **Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID)** program in 2011. Australian Red Cross was one of three delivery partners in the program, which sees skilled professionals volunteering with local organisations in Asia, Africa and the Pacific, including National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Volunteer assignments focus on capacity development: they assist partner organisations to strengthen services and improve policy and practices through training, systems, planning, professional development and other support. By strengthening local humanitarian and development organisations, the program helps disadvantaged people to achieve healthier, safer and more sustainable lives.

The AVID programs in Kenya and Uganda were planned, designed and implemented to work programmatically and collaboratively with Kenya Red Cross, Uganda Red Cross and other humanitarian organisations, supporting them to achieve their long-term goals.

Red Cross exited the AVID program in Kenya and Uganda in June 2015. This evaluation provides an important opportunity to document and share our journey in East Africa, particularly the achievements and lessons learnt in four years of international volunteering. This evaluation was commissioned by Australian Red Cross and conducted independently of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

A message of thanks

Red Cross is profoundly grateful to all the organisations and volunteers that made the AVID program in Kenya and Uganda so powerful. We have seen you change so many lives for the better and we feel both privileged and proud to have supported you on this journey.

We have learnt so much from working with you, our friends and colleagues, over the past five years. Your wisdom, honesty, and integrity will inspire us always.

Caption cover: Prisisca is a farmer in Gandini, Kenya. A partner organisation ran a horticulture project, with support from a volunteer, which enabled the village to grow sustainable food crops for the first time in many years. Australian Red Cross/Conor Ashleigh

"This program contributes to the alleviation of human suffering - this is very obvious - the program contributes to positive change in the lives of marginalised communities."

Program purpose

Over the past decade Kenya has experienced a reversal of health gains made in the 1980s and 1990s. Diseases such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis, coupled with unacceptably high maternal and child mortality rates, have placed a significant health burden on many communities. Meanwhile in Uganda, chronic health and food security challenges persist despite improvements in economic and health reforms. These are exacerbated by perennial floods and droughts.

The AVID program in Kenya and Uganda aimed to address these and other significant development challenges, such as gender-based violence and access to education. This was done through partnerships with 36 organisations in Kenya and Uganda, who worked to:

• improve access to quality health services

• strengthen food security and livelihoods

• help communities prepare for and respond to disasters

• support women, young people and people with disabilities to live free from violence, access education and vocational opportunities

A capacity development framework was applied across all Red Cross assignments. This framework focuses on five core capacity development elements which aim to facilitate locally-owned change (see page 7).

The framework aims for assignments to build on one another, with the ultimate aim of supporting better-functioning and more sustainable partner organisations.

About this evaluation

This evaluation was conducted as Red Cross exited the AVID program in Kenya and Uganda in June 2015. The objectives were:

• to examine whether Red Cross had achieved its program aims and objectives, and demonstrate how these had been met

• to assess the strengths and challenges strengths and challenges of Red Cross programming

• to document and share lessons learnt in order to inform Red Cross international volunteering programs in the future

Data was collected through desk-based reviews, key stakeholder consultations, interviews and focus groups. This evaluation was led by consultant Chrisanta Muli and suported by Red Cross staff in Kenya, Uganda, and Australia.

For further information, email internationalvolunteers@redcross.org.au

Caption: In Kenya, a volunteer mentored staff at a community-run school for children with special needs, helping to improve teaching practices.
Australian Red Cross/Conor Ashleigh

The evaluation found that volunteers were crucial in strengthening partner organisations' capacity to self-govern.

Did the program achieve its aims?

The overarching objectives of the AVID program provide a broad framework for evaluating achievements.

Our evaluation found more than half of all partner organisations (55 per cent) felt that the AVID program demonstrated Australia's commitment to international development and specifically to poverty alleviation through capacity development. The majority of our partners appreciated that Australian Red Cross worked collaboratively with them to achieve their long-term goals.

"Australia has come full-cycle in our program. Not only is the Australian Government a back donor to the Global Fund but then also sends us volunteers to support the grant management program. This shows commitment and dedication of the Australian government to addressing health issues globally."

In Africa, the AVID program focuses on three strategic goals:

- **Saving lives** through improved health service delivery and water and sanitation services
- **Sustainable economic development** through improved food security and natural resource management
- **Humanitarian disaster preparedness** and response through addressing humanitarian need in protracted and sudden onset crises and supporting conflict migration

Each of these strategic goals was aligned with our partners' priority areas. The greatest focus was on saving lives:

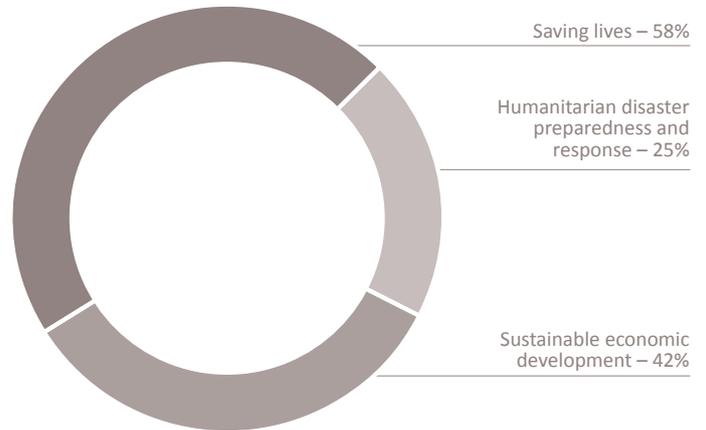**Figure 1: Partner organisations' priority areas - Kenya**

Saving lives – 58%

Humanitarian disaster preparedness and response – 25%

Sustainable economic development – 42%

Figure 2: Partner organisations' priority areas - Uganda

Saving lives – 86%

Humanitarian disaster preparedness and response – 14%

Sustainable economic development – 42%
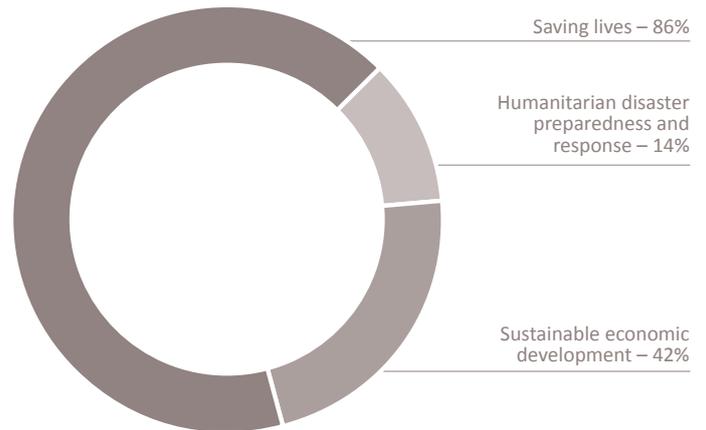
Volunteers played a crucial role in the development of child protection policies, communications strategies, monitoring and evaluation frameworks, knowledge databases, and publications.

Helping our partners reach their goals

As a direct result of their engagement with the AVID program, our partners were able to enhance the capacity of their staff, strengthen systems and policies, access critical human resources and increase innovation.

Two-way learning

A key reason for partner organisations' engagement with the AVID program was the potential for two-way capacity development. The evaluation found that the program had a clear learning agenda with opportunities for both local staff and Australian volunteers to benefit.

Partner organisations also stated that AVID volunteers' commitment and dedication to their assignments served as a source of motivation for local staff.

"If volunteers can come all this way to serve my people with such commitment, I have no choice but to help and learn from them! They changed the attitudes of some of our staff."

Stronger systems and policies

All partner organisations interviewed in Kenya and Uganda said their engagement with the AVID program aimed to strengthen, and in some cases develop, policies and systems. All reported this outcome was achieved, with volunteers playing a crucial role in the development of child protection policies, communications strategies, monitoring and evaluation frameworks, knowledge databases, and publications.

"She streamlined our organisational processes and systems. An unexpected outcome was the development of the knowledge and information sharing system on Google drive. We previously had all our files on our personal computers but now we can all access our files on Google drive."

Resources to achieve organisational goals and objectives

All partner organisations highlighted that their lack of skilled resources impacted on their ability to achieve their goals and objectives. In many cases volunteer assignments eased the pressure on organisations with very limited resources, helping them to achieve their mandate. Australian volunteers were able to share their professional knowledge and skills with local staff effectively and with far-reaching results.

"We were a team of two and now with an extra hand we could get a lot more done, we were complete. With her here she could take on some of the work of the manager and take on more program work."

New ideas and perspectives

Another benefit reported by partners was a 'third eye' to review and improve their ways of working, and identify gaps and areas for improvement. Seventy per cent of organisations interviewed felt that volunteers had achieved this objective.

"Our volunteer was pursuing her Masters degree in maternal and child health through correspondence at Deakin University; she applied the work with us to her assignments and shared her school assignments with us. This work has fed back into the program. This goes back to the two-way capacity development between the volunteer and host organisation."

Caption: Staff at a Ugandan organisation that produces publications and radio programs for young people developed their communication skills with support from a volunteer. Photo: Australian Red Cross/Bradley Rae

Contributing to capacity development

Red Cross' approach to capacity development supported our partners to strengthen organisational systems, broaden networks of influence and increase agility.

To exist

The evaluation found that volunteers were crucial in strengthening partner organisations' capacity to self-govern. Seven partner organisations in Kenya specifically identified the role their volunteers played in securing sustainable sources of income for community programs. For example, a volunteer developed a proposal that secured $10,000 in funding from the Australian High Commission, which was crucial to the existence of the organisation.

To organise

All partner organisations interviewed reported that Australian volunteers contributed to their organisations' internal systems, structures and policies. Some volunteers contributed to new ways of working and approaches when it came to internal systems. For example, one volunteer "... developed a tool that we still use today that helped us track the activities that the outreach workers were involved in on a day-to-day basis".

To relate and mobilise

All partner organisations indicated that volunteers had been vital in broadening their networks: 75 per cent saying that volunteers helped them to build networks with local and national organisations to which they had no previous access. In some cases, these networks created opportunities for new partnerships to be formed.

"Our volunteer came to support us in the development of our domestic resource mobilisation strategy. She began by networking with a number of organisations which resulted in the development of a long-term relationship with British Army. They are now a key partner and from this relationship we have achieved a number of key outcomes."

To perform

This considers the partner organisations' ability to deliver on their mission and objectives by establishing internal and external feedback mechanisms so as to remain relevant to their target groups and partners. This area was not strongly achieved by the AVID program. As the majority of partner organisations were small to medium sized, many had very limited resources and policies in places. Thus, feedback mechanisms were often considered the next step for many organisations, once they had developed and implemented policies and strategies.

To adapt and grow

The evaluation found that Red Cross AVID assignments had been critical in supporting partner organisations to adapt to changing contexts and environments. Partner organisations highlighted a number of changes in this area as a result of their engagement with the AVID program:

Highlighting gaps in programs: 65 per cent created permanent roles after their volunteers left. Some partners found that the volunteer's role had highlighted the importance of this work to their organisation, and after the volunteer left they sought opportunities to create permanent roles to continue this work.

"Our volunteer has brought talent and experience - innovative, cutting edge. She has proved how critical this role is to our organisation and donors and so we have now created a permanent role."

Introducing innovative ideas: 75 per cent said volunteers had injected innovative and fresh ideas into their approach to program design, fundraising, and project implementation, which was instrumental to program growth.

Funding proposal support: 65 per cent said volunteers had supported the development of successful proposals that resulted in funding and program growth. For example, one volunteer supported their host organisation to collaborate in a consortium funding proposal which secured over AUD $350,000 for work across the group. The idea of a consortium and how to collaborate in fundraising was new to the organisation.

Tackling gender-based violence in Kenya

In some cases, the volunteers' support in building networks led to significant progress for partner organisations. In Kenya, a volunteer helped a community-based organisation to develop murals in a Nairobi slum to address the issue of gender-based violence.

According to the volunteer's colleague, the journey between multiple service providers can be highly confusing, especially given that many women have been denied the right to an education and are illiterate.

"It's important to get justice for women who live within the community, who are poor and cannot be able to afford the services of private lawyers," she explains.

"My role as an outreach worker is to accompany survivors of gender-based violence from hospitals to police stations and finally the courts."

The partner organisation was seeking a simple way to explain the process, while also reminding perpetrators that they would face consequences: a creative challenge taken on by the Australian volunteer. One mural depicts the process for seeking help, as the volunteer explains:

"The mural steps people through what is violence – so they can see if they've been affected by a similar thing – but also talks to people about what to do if they've been affected."

While the murals are now a permanent resource for the community, the benefits have gone even further. The volunteer documented the process, which ultimately led to USAID becoming the organisation's main donor. In this case, the volunteer's support in building networks was crucial to this outcome.

Caption: A mural in a Nairobi slum depicts the process to seek help for gender-based violence. Photo: Australian Red Cross/Drew Weatherstone

What worked well?

The commitment and flexibility of our partners and volunteers helped us to build strong programs.

New perspectives and ideas

All partner organisations interviewed described in detail the new ideas that volunteers had injected into their programs and highlighted positive outcomes as a result.

Small grants funding

Volunteers had the opportunity to support their host organisations by developing proposals and applying for small grants through the AVID program. This built volunteers' capacity in proposal writing; if successful, these grants would further contribute to the organisation's programs.

Two-way capacity development

The AVID program had a clear learning agenda and created opportunities for both the partner organisation's staff and Australian volunteers to mutually develop capacity.

Supporting partners to achieve their goals

All partner organisations interviewed said this was a key strength of the program. Through a participatory process, the program met a need within the organisation and provided an opportunity for capacity development which partner organisations would otherwise not be able to access due to their limited resources.

> "It is not about outsiders identifying our need rather we have to define it ourselves and ask for help, this program did that for us."

Changing lives for the better

The majority of partner organisations felt that Australian aid, through the AVID program, had positively contributed to their programs and had resulted in positive change in the lives of community members.

Development of strong networks

The ability of Australian volunteers to tap into their international networks was seen as a clear added value and resulted in partnerships that helped organisations to leverage limited resources.

Cultural learning and exchange

The AVID program led to valuable cultural exchange between and across Australian volunteers, Kenyan and Ugandan partner organisations and other agencies in the sector. All evaluation participants said that they had learnt a lot culturally from the experience.

Success factors

Volunteers' flexibility and willingness to learn and adapt to organisational contexts

All partner organisations interviewed stressed that the program would not have worked had the volunteers not been ready and willing to learn and adapt to their new contexts. Although the volunteer assignment descriptions descriptions and work plans were defined prior to their arrival in country, the translation of the theory of the role to the reality on the ground required ongoing negotiations and re-negotiations of expectations and outputs. The volunteers were willing and able to creatively and innovatively adapt to the ongoing changes of the partner organisations' priorities.

Other success factors:

- Clearly identified need matched with clearly defined volunteer roles
- Strong volunteer selection process
- Good relationship and communication between partner organisations, volunteers and Red Cross
- Volunteers' professionalism and commitment
- Partner organisations providing a welcoming and enabling space for volunteers

Food security in Kenya

A volunteer working on food security with a humanitarian organisation in Kenya not only built the capacity of local staff, he literally changed a life.

The volunteer asked his supervisor if he could mentor the organisation's gardener, who he could see had natural talent. He felt sure that he could help the gardener to grow his skills. The result was life-changing, as the volunteer's supervisor explains:

"I thought it was a good idea and so I agreed to this arrangement and allowed the volunteer to take him under his wing. This was 18 months ago - today our gardener is in charge of our greenhouse management program and even trains our partners for a fee on greenhouse design and implementation.

"He is the expert in this area. His life has changed, his family's life has changed, and many more are benefiting from the skills he now has. All because a volunteer was interested and committed to building his capacity."

The volunteer also supported staff to develop alternative and creative ways of doing horticulture. He introduced natural methods that do not use pesticides, which has been much more cost effective for the organisation.

Caption: Maize is a household staple in Kenya... and for the first time, Harrison has grown more than he needs, thanks to a local food security project.
Photo: Australian Red Cross/ Drew Weatherstone

What can be improved?

Volunteer policies and induction processes were two of the greatest challenges facing the programs.

Negotiating between volunteer targets and strategic objectives

Sixty per cent of partner organisations said they were unclear about the AVID program's overall strategic focus as there was a sense from interviewees that the country program focus was on achieving volunteer target numbers, which distracted from the broader strategic focus.

> "Targets set [in Australia]means that the program is largely reactive and not strategic, for example, last year when there were security issues in Kenya we were asked to quickly find placements for five volunteers in Uganda."

Lack of focus on partner organisation performance

Some partner organisations felt the main focus for program performance monitoring was on volunteers and there was a gap in monitoring the performance of their organisations, which was important for their own learning.

Limited timeframes

All partner organisations and volunteers interviewed felt that 12-month assignments were not long enough for the program to have sustainable outcomes. On average it took three months for the volunteer to get oriented and settle into their host organisation and new context, leaving nine months to implement planned activities.

Unclear management expectations between partner organisations and Red Cross

There was a sense across 72 per cent of organisations interviewed that management roles and expectations between Red Cross (head office and country team) and partner organisations were unclear. For example, where partner organisation policies clashed or were not consistent with Red Cross policies, this caused frustration. It raised the question: who did the volunteer work for and which policy was most applicable? Ultimately, where systems and processes of management and supervision were unclear, this raised questions around the power dynamics between host organisations, volunteers, and Red Cross.

Challenges

Gaps in volunteers' cultural induction and orientation process

Two-thirds of partner organisations highlighted that volunteers were not adequately culturally inducted. Volunteers usually had no previous experience of the cultural context they were working in, and misunderstandings in relation to culture impacted on the volunteer's relationship with the partner organisation.

> "In our culture when one is sick they are visited and cooked for by the community - this is not the case in Australia because many times we were turned away from seeing her when she was sick. This created further gaps in our relationship with her."

Other challenges were:

- Partner organisations had limited resources to support volunteers
- Volunteers' personality and ideological differences
- Inconsistent volunteer exit strategy due to security and travel restrictions.

Recommendations for international volunteering programs

The lessons learnt from our work in Kenya and Uganda may have various applications for the international development sector.

Red Cross will incorporate these recommendations into our own future programming, and we encourage other volunteer-sending organisations to consider their value.

Policies and systems

- *Nurture an open and transparent volunteer selection process*. To achieve this, the partner organisation's selection criteria and procedures need to be clearly defined so that the selection process is aligned with their strategic priorities as well as the broader mission of the volunteer program.

Program design and capacity development

- *Take a longer term strategic approach to program planning, design, and implementation to ensure sustainability*. In particular, longer term and cumulative volunteer assignments will ensure work towards achieving the partner organisation's outputs and outcomes will continue with each successive volunteer.

- *Increase the duration of volunteer assignments to maximise learning*. Longer assignments, and the option for longer term extensions to existing assignments, will ensure outputs and outcomes are consolidated.

- *Conduct thorough stakeholder analysis at the beginning of the volunteer program*. This will identify key stakeholders and their interests in the project, as well as assess the influence and importance of each stakeholder and their potential impact on the program.

- *Conduct a power analysis between key stakeholders*. An analysis between volunteer program staff, partner organisations, and volunteers, will help the volunteer-sending organisation to understand the forms of power, and identify the positive kinds of power, that can be mobilised to achieve positive social change before and after the volunteer is hosted.

- *Clearly define a set of partnership principles that all stakeholders adhere to*. These principles are crucial in supporting management expectations and ways of working across and between key stakeholders.

- *Consider expanding into a volunteer exchange program* to maximise capacity development opportunities.

Program learning

- *Integrate a three-way capacity development approach*, bringing together volunteers, partner organisations and program staff, and guided by a clearly defined learning agenda.

- *Implement linking and learning reflections across and between partner organisations and volunteers* to ensure ongoing sharing, learning and growth of the program.

- *Integrate monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL)* into the program planning, design and implementation stages of the capacity development framework.
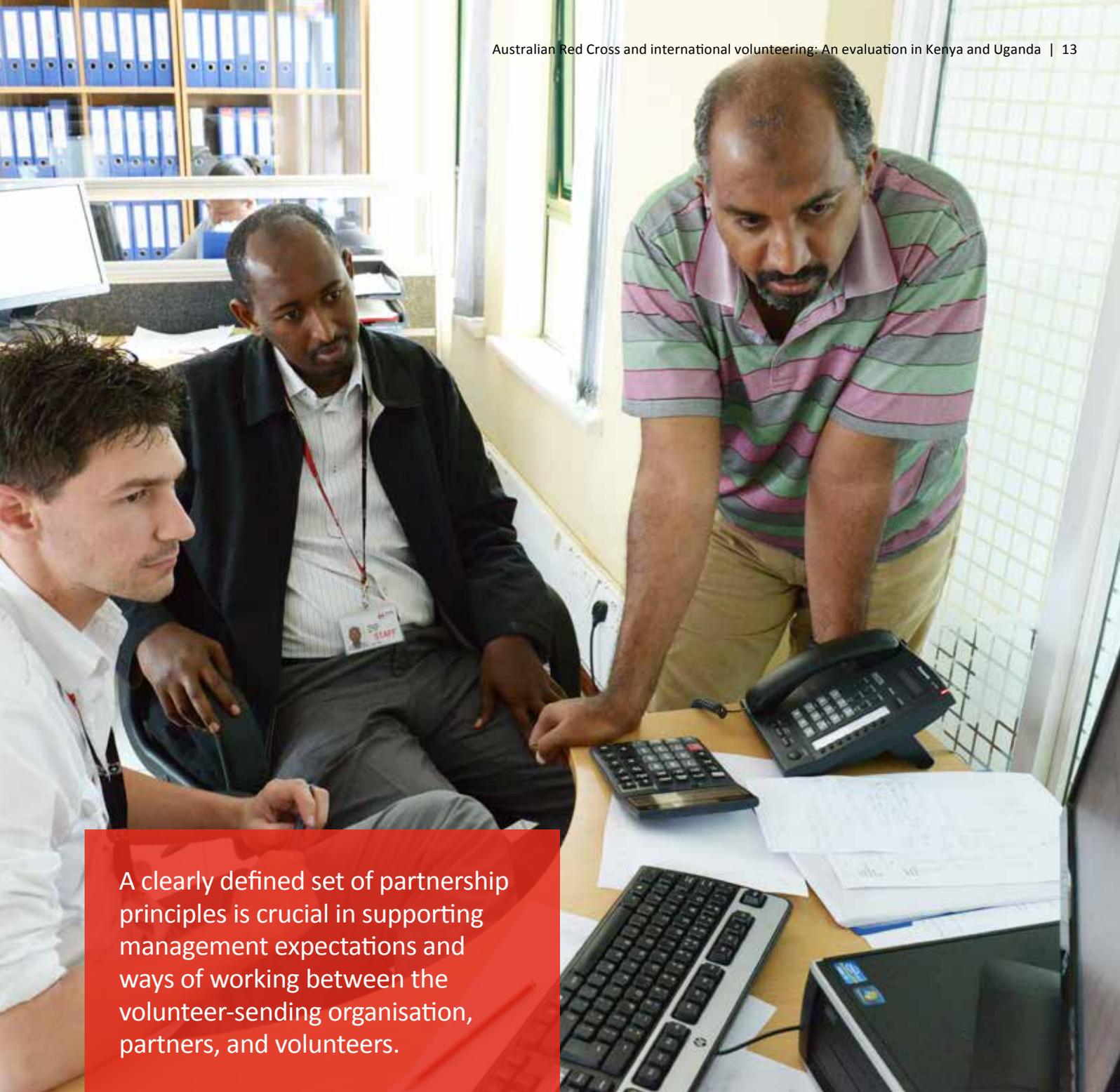
A clearly defined set of partnership principles is crucial in supporting management expectations and ways of working between the volunteer-sending organisation, partners, and volunteers.

Where to next?

Red Cross will transition out of the AVID program in 2016. Under a new partnership with the Australian Government, international volunteering will be integrated within our ongoing humanitarian and development work.

We will use the lessons we have learnt from our partners and volunteers through the AVID program in Kenya and Uganda to help us shape a new model for international volunteering.

Caption: A volunteer supported a partner organisation in Kenya to rollout financial planning and reporting tools essential for grant management. Photo: Australian Red Cross/Glen Smith

"We are very grateful to both our volunteers because they both started projects that we would never have dreamed we could have; these projects are sustainable and will be here forever!"

Get involved

Australian Red Cross maintains a register of highly experienced aid workers, who can be deployed quickly when needed. Find out more **redcross.org.au/international-aid-work**

Download our How Aid Works podcast for rare and raw insights from aid workers in the field **redcross.org.au/howaidworks**

Interested in building your humanitarian skills? View our international training opportunities at **redcross.org.au/training-courses**

How do I become a supporter?

Red Cross relies on committed volunteers and donors. You can support Red Cross by:

- giving monthly, leaving a bequest in your will or making a one-off donation by visiting www.redcross.org.au or calling 1800 811 700

- giving blood, visit www.donateblood.com.au

Image above: In Kenya, a partner organisation strengthened its volunteer management processes with support from an Australian volunteer.
Photo: Australian Red Cross/Drew Weatherstone
Image right: The Kilifi branch of Kenya Red Cross has worked with the local community to improve livelihoods through income generation activities such as chicken farming.

Australian Aid

The Australian Volunteers for International Development
(AVID) program is an Australian Government initiative.
This report has been developed by Australian Red Cross,
a delivery partner for the AVID program.

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