WILEY

Building relationships and negotiating difference in international development volunteerism

Susanne Schech[1] | Tracey Skelton[2] | Anuradha Mundkur[1]

[1]School of History and International Relations, 388 Social Sciences South, Flinders University, Bedford Park, South Australia, Australia

[2]Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, Singapore City, Singapore

Correspondence
Tracey Skelton
Email: geost@nus.edu.sg

There is growing recognition that building relationships is central to creating sustainable partnerships to achieve meaningful development outcomes. International development volunteers, embedded in the community where they are volunteering, are seen as being ideally placed to build and facilitate these relationships. The nature of international development volunteerism requires both volunteers and host organisations to negotiate through and across cultural difference in order to build mutually beneficial relationships. Three discourses – partnership, globalisation, and everyday encounters with a different culture – frame our analysis of the effort required for effective relationship building. We explore how host organisations and volunteers negotiate difference to build trust and mutual respect as they navigate everyday exchanges and reconcile different expectations and outcomes of volunteerism.

KEYWORDS
Asia-Pacific, difference, host organisations, international development volunteerism, partnerships, volunteers

1 | INTRODUCTION

International volunteering is broadly defined as an organised period of engagement and contribution to society in another country, sponsored by public or private organisations and with little or no monetary compensation to the participant (Sherraden et al., 2006). While volunteering tends to centre on the volunteer as the main actor, *volunteerism* encompasses a broader range of participants and practices involved in hosting volunteers and organising, managing or funding volunteer programmes. Although North–South international volunteerism is still predominant, more recently, volunteerism increasingly encompasses a greater variety of geographical relationships, including South–South, South–North, professional and diaspora volunteering. This reflects a shift towards "shorter placements for skills transfer" (Howard & Burns, 2015, p. 7) attributed to broader changes in the architecture of development assistance associated with austerity policies, commodification of volunteering and the marketisation of state–society relations. Here we specifically examine the relationships that volunteers and host organisations create in the context of development volunteering as part of official development assistance, providing skilled volunteers, with development in the recipient community as a core objective (Georgeou & Engel, 2011, p. 298). Such development volunteer placements tend to be long term (Sherraden et al., 2006; Tiessen & Kumar, 2013). We are interested in exploring how the relational and partnership aspects of volunteering contribute to its effectiveness, and, as these are more evident in long-term volunteering (Devereux, 2008; Howard & Burns, 2015), we focus on an Australian skilled international development volunteerism (IDV) programme that is North–South, involves single placements for between one and three years, and is set within a formal framework of volunteer–host organisation relationships. We argue that relationships between host organisations and volunteers are central to achieving development impacts, as well as being outcomes in their own right. Creating and

maintaining a collaborative relationship characterised by mutual respect and trust requires considerable effort on both sides. Drawing upon our extensive research data, examined through three discourses – partnership, globalisation, and encounters across cultural difference – we provide an innovative analytical interpretation of the processes involved in the formation of relatively effective relational development partnerships.

First, in arguing that volunteerism works through relationships, we draw on research that has critically examined the concept of *partnerships* in international development assistance, and specifically in IDV[1] (Georgeou, 2012; Impey & Overton, 2014; Schech et al., 2015). The literature on North–South partnerships focuses on donor–recipient relationships and their dimensions of power, participation, trust, sustainability and mutuality (Baaz, 2005; Lister, 2000), and there are clear parallels between the ideals of partnership and the qualities attributed to IDV, including equality, mutual learning, sustainability, and accountability to local organisations (Devereux, 2008). Research on North–South practitioner partnerships has found that when partnerships are perceived on both sides as a joint endeavour and learning process, they come closer to the ideal of partnership as a mutually enabling, inter-dependent process with shared intentions (Johnson & Wilson, 2006). Mutuality in volunteerism centres on the relationship between skilled volunteers and their colleagues in host organisation and is highlighted by making the *sharing* of skills and knowledge an explicit goal of volunteer programmes. In the broader sense, volunteerism is part of what Eyben (2010) describes as the social relations of international aid and shaped by global and local power and meaning.

This links to *globalisation*, the second factor in the flourishing of IDV, which shapes the "simultaneously localized and transnational spheres of experience and expectation" of people, and particularly of younger generations (Beck & Gernsheim-Beck, 2009, p. 27). By tightening and reshaping the links between the global and the local, globalisation has revealed local or national problems, such as inequality, pollution or political rights, as global challenges that can only be successfully tackled with a sense of shared international responsibility, as espoused in the "global partnership" Millennium Development Goal 8 (2000–2015) and Sustainable Development Goal 17 (2016–2030).[2] Volunteering is a part of this collective effort to promote global development. However, while the problems may be global, blueprint solutions often do not work effectively in local development contexts. Creating locally appropriate solutions requires particular kinds of skills, orientations and attitudes to harness the different sets of knowledge and experience of development partners. Volunteerism is a form of "global work" through which such capabilities can be honed, not just among volunteers (Jones, 2011, p. 532) but also, as we demonstrate, in volunteer host organisations (hereafter written as VHOs).

Third, the growth of IDV has taken place within the context of a *cultural* turn in development. It is now widely accepted among development scholars, practitioners and institutions that development and change cannot be fostered or understood without taking "the cultural" into account (Schech & Haggis, 2000; Skelton & Allen, 1999). However, the old binary between the developed *West*, with its "superior" cultural attributes of modernity, democracy and respect for human rights, and the developing *Rest,* which is assumed to lack them, is difficult to transcend even though some development institutions now claim to embrace a culturally inflected vision of development (Watts, 2006, p. 35). Western development practitioners are increasingly aware that their own (institutional) cultures are partially responsible for development projects failing, due to a reluctance: to learn lessons from previous interventions; to hear, understand, value local perspectives and knowledge; to give up power; and to question the superiority of Western knowledge and experience (Baaz, 2005; Porter et al., 1991). The ability to see "through other's eyes" (Eyben, 2014, p. 101) often results from close relationships and immersive collaboration between differently positioned development practitioners. Long-term volunteerism offers the opportunity to learn from different knowledges and experiences relatively free of pressures to produce predetermined development outcomes, but participants have to be willing to re-examine assumptions about expertise, appropriate behaviour, and the "right" cultural approaches.

The discourses of partnership, globalisation and culture intersect in volunteerism, which posits an ideal partnership between southern and northern development practitioners as characterised by mutuality as a core principle, with a shared intention to create a better world, and willingness to leverage[3] difference – in knowledge, perspectives and roles – to work towards this goal. In the remainder of this paper we examine the extent to which the relationships formed through the Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) programme live up to this ideal and how volunteers and their VHO colleagues navigate the many problematic elements of partnership formation.

2 | RESEARCH METHODS, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

We focus on AVID, a longstanding programme established in the 1950s and funded, under different names, through Australia's official aid programme since the 1960s. The programme provides opportunities for Australians to contribute to development, by developing the capacity of organisations and building people-to-people links in countries Australia regards

as development partners. As in other Western donor countries, a growing aid budget in the 2000s in Australia led to the "rejuvenation of interest in, and support for, international development volunteering" (Georgeou & Engel, 2011, p. 298). In the 2012/13 financial year the Australian government provided AUD$55 million, around 1% of its aid budget, to fund just over 1,000 volunteers with 85% serving in the Asia-Pacific region (Schech et al., 2015, p. 364).

Our empirical research is based on a mixed-method approach involving questionnaire surveys and participatory workshops. The surveys provided a broad map of the individual motivations, reasons and expectations of participants in the AVID programme. The workshops elicited collaborative reflections on the role of volunteerism and its impacts, and on participants' own position and agency in the relationships produced through the programme.

The volunteer survey was administered to volunteers at five pre-departure briefings in Australia between August 2013 and May 2014 [Volunteer Pre-Departure (VDP) Survey, $N = 312$; average completion rate 66%]. We distributed a modified version of the survey (translated into local languages where appropriate) to VHOs in four case study countries including Cambodia, Indonesia and the Solomon Islands (SI) (VHO Survey, $N = 47$). The VHO survey contained questions about managing and evaluating volunteers in addition to a set of questions shared with the VDP survey on motivations, perspectives and expectations in regard to volunteering. Both surveys included questions designed to gauge respondents' views on globalisation, global problems, and engagement with different cultures. Cambodia, Indonesia and SI receive a substantial share of Australian aid and volunteers, and have well established relationships with Australia. The questionnaires featured a combination of question styles: multiple choice; ranking of importance; Likert scale (attitudes and behaviour); biographic information; and open-ended text-based questions. During fieldwork we conducted eight one-day participatory workshops, separately with volunteers ($N = 41$) and VHO representatives ($N = 33$) in Jakarta (Indonesia), Honiara (SI), Phnom Penh and Siem Reap (Cambodia). Researchers introduced the project and facilitated discussion of its broad aims and objectives, and the research participants' own interests. Subsequent small group themed discussions focused on the roles of volunteers and their host organisations; and the motivations, benefits, impacts and challenges of participating in the AVID programme. Participatory workshops as a method acknowledge and harness the reflexive capacity of participants, and the role of dialogue in generating and sharing information (Kindon et al., 2007, p. 13). Creating small subgroups of four to five participants helped mitigate common problems affecting group discussions, such as peer pressure and unequal participation (Gough et al., 2014, p. 303). Participants discussed the themes in their own language and presented the results of their discussions on flipcharts at various stages (interpreters translated when required). Further discussion in larger groups focused on differences and similarities in the participants' views and experiences. The flipchart presentations and ensuing discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, translated and thematically analysed. Below we map out how scholars of IDV have tackled the question of relationships followed by our research findings.

3 | RELATIONAL PRACTICES OF IDV

Recent scholarship has revealed the diversity, multi-faceted nature and rapid growth of international volunteerism, including short-term, tourism-oriented and educational forms. Long-term government-funded programmes form an established part of the development landscape, but have only recently received scholarly scrutiny. In particular, while relationship building has been recognised as an important contribution of IDV, there has been little detailed research providing information about when, how and under what circumstances relationships are built that contribute to volunteerism's effectiveness (Sherraden et al., 2008). One contribution is Devereux's finding, based on a study of long-term volunteer programmes, that volunteers contribute to effective development work by building trust and engagement, which enables "two-way understanding and change between North and South" (2008, p. 368). More recently, a study of the UK Voluntary Service Overseas scheme identified the relational nature of volunteer work as a distinctive feature of volunteerism, arguing that volunteering initiatives must be based on principles of mutual learning to be successful (Howard & Burns, 2015). One of the study's findings is that "volunteers affect positive social change through their relationships" characterised by informality (encouraging feelings of trust), networked reciprocity (fostering social commitment and a sense of ownership) and "doing together" (building new competencies by sharing responsibilities) (Aked, 2015, p. 30). However, while volunteers may strive for reciprocity and equality in their relationships with those with whom they work, many find it difficult to "make reciprocity a feature of their relationships at the outset" due to the ways IDV programmes position them as experts able to achieve change (Aked, 2015, p. 39). Similarly, Georgeou's research on a long-term Australian IDV programme discovered that volunteers "began their journey with egalitarian notions of human relations" (2012, p. 153) but found themselves placed in positions of power, status and privilege that were hard to resist or challenge. Volunteerism is embedded in historically shaped hierarchies of global development that position volunteers as donors or experts in possession of superior knowledge, resources, and useful

connections (Perold et al., 2013). This can lead to a mismatch in expectations about the volunteering relationship and tensions over what is exchanged. The relational volunteering space is therefore critically important to work through these tensions and the deeply entrenched constructions of knowledge and power that underpin them (Howard & Burns, 2015).

While these studies illuminate the relational aspects of volunteerism from volunteers' perspectives, few have researched how their host organisations perceive the relational aspects of volunteerism. In Cambodia, an exploration of relationships between local and foreign development workers suggested that local development workers found it easier to relate to volunteers than to other foreign workers. Volunteers occupied a similar position to local workers in the aid industry in terms of power and income, and were more interested in cultural exchange and friendship (McWha, 2011, p. 37). Other research indicates that the institutional context of volunteerism plays a significant role in shaping relationships between VHOs and volunteers. Real partnerships are more likely when VHOs have a role in the selection, management and evaluation of volunteers (Impey & Overton, 2014). Additionally, these relationships are more equal when VHOs "become aware of their agency and their power to effect change in the lives of the volunteers and to manage their own development" (Perold et al., 2013, p. 193). When the power of host organisations is acknowledged then capacity development becomes recognised as a two-way process. Northern volunteers develop their professional and intercultural capacities along with those of the VHOs and co-workers. Existing studies argue that VHOs value skilled volunteers' human resources (Perold et al., 2013, p. 189), but the extent of capacity building is difficult to quantify. As McWha (2011, p. 31) points out, capacity development aims to empower others and thus its effectiveness cannot be prescribed and varies according to context. Skilled volunteering has been found to foster valuable global skills, capabilities and "personal growth" in volunteers (Fee & Gray, 2011), but in its current framing as a contribution to development assistance these benefits tend to be subordinated to those accruing to host organisations (Hawkes, 2014). In short-term youth volunteerism, the emphasis shifts from knowledge transfer to personal development of the volunteer (Diprose, 2012, p. 186), with volunteers and sending societies acknowledged to benefit more than VHOs (Palacios, 2010; Tiessen & Heron, 2012).

While short-term volunteerism may produce intercultural encounters that develop into "friendships full of reciprocity and deep conversations" (Palacios, 2010, p. 872), the research on long-term volunteer programmes indicates that relationships created through long-term volunteerism tend to be more productive. Immersion within host organisations and communities over extended periods can be pivotal in building mutual understanding and trust between volunteers and co-workers, making effective capacity development possible. Devereux (2008) identifies living and working under local conditions, accountability to local organisations, and long-term commitment as key relational qualities that characterise effective long-term volunteering. Building relationships takes time and effort on both sides. It includes working out how to observe and engage with each other's ways of thinking and working; communicate across language and cultural difference; respect each other's ways of living; and understand when to challenge mindsets, stereotypes and power structures. Even a long volunteer placement may not be sufficient time to achieve all of this. What volunteers and VHOs expect from their engagement with volunteerism is likely to have a significant impact on the effort they are prepared to put into relationship building. These expectations are explored in the following section.

4 | IDV PARTNERSHIPS: EXPECTATIONS AND ANXIETIES

Our survey findings offer insights into the expectations held by volunteers and host organisations. The volunteer survey asked pre-departure AVIDs to rank reasons for volunteering (Table 1). Just over two thirds of the respondents ranked altruistic motives such as "helping" or "making a difference" first. A minority of volunteers prioritised self-focused reasons including gaining new skills and knowledge (13%), wanting the experience of living in a different country (9%), or gaining job-related experience (5%). Very few identified their primary motive as being unemployed, in-between jobs, or the desire to meet new people. In terms of hosting a volunteer, VHOs identified "utilising the existing skill sets of volunteers in my organisation" as the most important reason. Capacity building was prioritised by 14% of the VHO respondents, but 22% wanted to expose their organisation to new ideas or to exchange ideas. Providing volunteers with opportunities to make a useful contribution, the key priority for volunteers, was less important to VHOs (see Table 1).

Although volunteers are mainly motivated by the prospect of making a useful contribution, less than a third of the volunteers said that "the best thing" would be to have a positive impact on their co-workers, host organisation or host community (Table 2). The majority (58%) pinned their expectations on their own experiential learning and on expanding their understanding of different cultures and development (Table 2). However, *not* being able to achieve positive impacts in their placement is the greatest source of anxiety for volunteers.

TABLE 1 Most important reason for volunteering and for hosting a volunteer

% first ranked	Volunteers Reasons for volunteering	Host organisations Reasons for hosting a volunteer	% first ranked
46	To help people/make a useful contribution	To utilise existing skill sets of volunteers in my organisation	42
24	My existing skill sets will/can make a difference	To build staff capacity in my organisation	14
13	To learn new skills/gain new knowledge	To expose my organisation to new ideas and knowledge	9
9	To gain experience of living in a different country	To exchange ideas about addressing development problems	9
6	To get some job-related experience so I am more employable	To provide opportunities where volunteers can make a useful contribution	9
1	To use my skills while in-between jobs	To gain the support of an additional staff member for my organisation	7
0	Problems getting employment in Australia	To build ongoing partnerships with organisations outside my country working on similar issues	5
0	To meet new people	To meet new people	2
Source	VDP Survey (N = 312)	HO Survey (N = 47)	

Source: VDP and HO Surveys (responses are collated from two separate surveys and presented in descending order of importance).

TABLE 2 Volunteer hopes and anxieties (% of respondents)

	"What do you think will be the *best thing* that can happen as a result of this volunteering experience?"	"What do you think will be the *worst thing* that can happen as a result of this volunteering experience?"	
26	Gaining invaluable life experiences	No/negative impact on the organisation I will be working with	23
12	Positive impact on the community I will be working with	No/negative impact on the community I will be working with	20
9	Positive impact on the organisation I will be working with	No/negative impact on the people I will be working with	15
8	Gaining invaluable work experience	Feeling overwhelmed/ disillusioned by global development issues	11
7	Opening my mind to new ways of looking at the world	Negative personal experience/s outside work	10
7	Better understanding complex global development issues	Negative personal experience/s while at work	7
7	Living and working in a culture different from my own	Significant difficulty adjusting to a new environment	5
7	Positive impact on the people I will be working with	Gaining no valuable work experience	1
5	Building a long-term partnership with my host organisation		
5	Being immersed in another culture		
2	Building life-long friendships		

Source: VDP Survey (responses are collated from two separate multiple choice questions and presented in descending order of importance). "Other" responses (5% in column 1 and 8% in column 4) have been omitted.

The survey also found that 78% of volunteers expected to develop the capacity of their local colleagues and act as a mentor, 60% to provide technical support and 58% planned to conduct training programmes. This reflects the AVID programme's primary focus on capacity development, coupled with a secondary aim to build intercultural relationships, or "people to people links" (Office for Development Effectiveness, 2014). These seemingly contradictory responses may be due to the volunteers' anticipation of a mutual and inter-dependent relationship in which their ability to achieve capacity development impacts depends on being able to establish trust and rapport in their host organisations. Beneficial impacts on the self are more predictable because these depend on the attitudes and orientations of the volunteer.

Host organisations were asked to identify the best and worst possible impacts from the volunteer they were hosting (Table 3). A large proportion skipped these questions (45% and 77%, respectively) because they were not currently hosting an AVID, or did not believe a bad result was possible. The remaining respondents hoped the volunteer would enhance their organisation's effectiveness, capability and capacity for innovation (Table 3), and feared most that they might not take sufficient advantage of the volunteer's skills.

TABLE 3 Host organisation hopes and anxieties (% of respondents)

	"Thinking about the Australian volunteer you are currently hosting, what do you think will be *the best* result for your organisation?"	"Thinking about the Australian volunteer you are currently hosting, what do you think will be *the worst* result for your organisation?"	
42	A more effective organisation	Skills of volunteer not properly utilised	64
27	Enhanced capabilities of my organisation's staff	Inefficient use of my organisation's resources	9
15	Unique ideas added to the organisation	Staff feel demotivated because they think they lack the expertise to do their jobs	9
8	Enhanced capabilities of the volunteer	Only the volunteer benefits from the international work experience	9
8	A higher profile for my organisation	Once staff capacity has been built by the volunteer, my staff will leave for better work elsewhere	9

Source: HO Survey

These survey findings demonstrate VHOs' and volunteers' shared perspectives of volunteerism as a collaborative effort, yet there are distinct, sometimes contradictory, expectations. Hence, considerable negotiation is necessary to find a meeting point between these different expectations. In the final section we explore aspects of the cultural negotiations articulated by VHOs and volunteers that emerged from the qualitative workshops.

5 | NEGOTIATING THROUGH DIFFERENCE AND BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

Of the many forms of negotiation identified by the key actors, we interrogate three: the gaps between expectation and reality, making adjustments and being adaptable; the ways in which both sets of actors interpret capacity development through contradictory expectations and perceptions; and the daily negotiation required to develop the volunteerism relationship into an effective, equitable and mutual partnership.

5.1 | Bridging expectations and realities

The survey highlights some differences between what volunteers think they will be doing while on assignment (*helping and making a difference*) and VHOs' expectations from volunteers (*organisational capacity development and exposure to new ideas*). In addition, volunteers are looking for experiential learning opportunities, which may not be what VHOs see as their role to facilitate:

> The volunteer wants to visit provinces even when that might not be necessary. There is personal interest in wanting to travel but the actual task need[s] to be completed and that needs to be made clear to the volunteers.[4] (SI VHO)

Volunteers take on assignments based on advertised job descriptions and expect the advertised skills are what they will develop within a VHO. However, VHOs may have a different priority. For instance, the VHO workshops identified confidence and competence in English as a highly valued skill attached to Australian volunteers. Their linguistic skills saved the VHO time on reports and funding applications, and helped to enhance the VHO's reputation and potential success with donors:

> We have our policy but we don't trust our English, we need the volunteer to review it, give us English support … editing, writing and correcting our grammar, communicating and connecting with international NGOs and donors … they can help our staff improve their English. (Cambodia VHO)

Volunteers initially took their English language for granted, not recognising it as part of their capacity-building priorities nor its cultural capital. Volunteer workshop discussions presented "English" work as something that was at times irritating and a distraction from the "real" stuff of development. Later in their placement volunteers were more inclined to acknowledge the value of their English to their VHO:

> The English language capability is huge because it ends up being involved in anything and everything, from drafting of reports to conducting visits. Sometimes you think that your most valuable skill is just that you speak English, regardless of what background you came in with and what your role is. It feels like English is the one thing they are after. (Cambodia Volunteer)

Working alongside their VHO colleagues and living immersed in the host culture encourages volunteers to recognise their roles as cultural translators not just in the workplace but also within the broader community:

> Trying to translate for the people at the ground level what the hell these white people are talking about/what their expectations are and why – not just in the workplace but because we walk everywhere and catch buses we have these conversations with other people as well. (SI Volunteer)

By learning the host country language to some degree and becoming more culturally adept, volunteers acquire a critical component of global workplace capabilities (Fee & Gray, 2011; Jones, 2011). For VHOs, English language competencies and cross-cultural communication skills are also key to being able to work globally. In the volunteering context, these cross-cultural skills enable volunteers and their VHO colleagues to work *with* each other on joint tasks using their mixture of languages and learning from each other's cultural models.

5.2 | The challenges of capacity development

Capacity development is a central tenet of international development, and the survey indicates that VHOs and volunteers emphasise its central place in volunteer assignments. However, they have different understandings of what it means or how it works in the context of volunteering. While volunteers are expecting to be mentors or conducting training, VHOs are expecting volunteers to transfer skills and knowledge by showing how things should be done. Some VHOs see the value of a volunteer as being an extra pair of hands, yet some volunteers perceive doing the work for the VHO staff as a conflict with their role as capacity builders:

> They [VHOs, particularly government orgs] don't understand capacity building. You're a foreign worker. You might do some work but there is also a hope that you will bring money as a volunteer and disappointment when you don't. The whole idea of capacity building doesn't work. (Indonesia Volunteer)

Unless managed carefully, capacity development can perpetuate neo-colonial perspectives of donors and recipients. Often volunteers find that their local colleagues are more skilled in what they do than expected. VHOs in turn can be uncomfortable with the notion of capacity development when it is pitched in terms of expert and learner. Recognising these realities places volunteers in a difficult position where they have to reassess their expectations. One way to respond is to assert their status as expert and refuse to collaborate effectively; another is to withdraw into the role of volunteer and refuse to take responsibility for the VHO's work. In both cases little or no effort is being made to reflect on the unequal power relations in development assistance, and the relationship becomes unproductive:

> Some volunteers have a tendency to argue. They act as supervisors instead of volunteers and neglect to follow instructions given to them – sometimes they don't want to listen, they think they know better than the host organisation. (SI VHO)

> Some volunteers, they try to introduce the way they think it works in their countries to the host organisation. We know our contexts, so in a friendly manner we share with them why it's hard to implement even though their idea is really good. But if they don't listen, if they are not flexible, if they do not adjust, it's hard. (Cambodia VHO)

> [As an organisation] we have output deadlines, requirements from the donor. [If]the volunteer's perception is that they can go at their own pace, 'I'm a volunteer, not a working professional, that's why I work at my own pace'. Then we have conflict, we have deadlines pressing. (Cambodia VHO)

Resolving these power issues requires a willingness on the part of VHOs to assert their authority by engaging volunteers in a discussion about the nature of their assignments. It also requires volunteers to acknowledge the capabilities of VHOs and work collaboratively to achieve desired outcomes. A more productive response by volunteers is to recognise their role as a temporary part of the organisation, and broaden their understanding of capacity development beyond the narrow relationship of local counterpart and volunteer:

> I think we can add value . . . put systems in place that will help the organisation as a whole, and in working with a team and building these systems together, we are learning by doing. Volunteers can also sometimes validate that they [local staff/VHO] have more knowledge and experience than they think they do. (SI Volunteer)

Conversation, working as colleagues and developing capacity together requires all actors to be willing to engage in explaining and seeking to understand each other's perspectives, adapting to each other's way of working, and being open to learning from one another. If this "purposeful sharing of mindsets" (Fee & Gray, 2011, p. 546) occurs on an equal basis, then partnerships are built that enable all kinds of valuable development impacts to be achieved.

5.3 | Daily encounters and working with difference

The task of building meaningful partnership begins with an attempt to establish a relationship that embraces cultural differences and at the same time involves a significant investment of time and effort to work through those differences. For volunteers this process involves breaking down stereotypes. Some volunteers perceive greater value in pitching volunteering and development as exchanges of ideas, building cross-cultural understanding and relationships rather than the narrower framing of capacity building:

> [It's really about] breaking down stereotypes, e.g., that Australians have sex on the beach all the time, that they all eat just bread, that it's a mono-cultural country. Even teaching kids that Australia is Indonesia's neighbour is more important than any of the work we are doing. (Indonesia Volunteer)

VHOs are curious to learn about the volunteers' home country, hoping that this will help them better relate to their volunteers. Their eagerness to explore new ideas about development and what happens in other parts of the world drives a cultural exchange that is vital to relationship building:

> We ask the questions. How do you live in your country? How do you go to work and so on? We also observe how they do things, but observing does not get us much information. We want to learn about global issues so that we understand Cambodia but learn about the international issues. An adaptable volunteer can share with us, we can learn through conversation. (Cambodia VHO)

Many VHOs reported working hard at helping volunteers adapt to the new environment and feel part of the organisation. On their part volunteers recounted working to understand and connect with people in the organisation, treading lightly, being observant and trying harder to learn the local language. Understanding difference is played out through care, mutual respect and openness towards the other. VHOs give advice about local cultural norms and expectations such as respect for elders, styles of dress and behaviour. Many volunteers described invitations to cultural events and celebrations by colleagues as opportunities to get to know them and their cultural practices better. However, when volunteers are not familiar with their host country, laying these foundations can take up a significant proportion of the placement period:

> [If we have a one-year volunteer] at the beginning it takes time for understand, to learn the culture, to communicate with each other. When we can understand and learn from each other, then volunteer is leaving. (Cambodian VHO)

Volunteers too have to show patience and adapt to different working practices, such as the two-hour lunch break in Cambodia. This is an important part of everyday life among Cambodian workers that nurtures professional and personal relationships and networking, yet many Australian volunteers tended to see it as a waste of time. Some responded by being "more Cambodian" about lunchtime, while others demanded access to the building to continue working after a short lunch.

Some volunteers viewed the VHO working practices as a reflection of fixed cultural difference from Western norms to which they had to adapt:

> They are highly motivated workers in some aspects, but the overriding norms of Indonesian work culture take over. Such as coming late, delaying meetings that were planned, watching YouTube during work-time [it took a while for me to get used to that]. (Indonesia Volunteer)

Both volunteers and VHOs highlighted the importance of a settling-in process of cross-cultural learning if there was to be any hope of building a productive partnership. Long-term volunteering provides the space for this to occur, and to reach a level of understanding that enables both sides to leverage difference for mutual benefits.

6 | CONCLUSION

Our research with volunteers and host organisations in a long-term skilled volunteer programme operating in three Asia-Pacific countries shows that while participants approach volunteerism with an expectation of partnerships, there are challenges encountered in building these. "True" partnerships in volunteerism are difficult to define but mutuality, joint endeavour and cultural learning play a central role. While volunteers and host organisations may have different priorities, both recognise the linkage between capacity development and meaningful partnerships. Building such partnerships requires a commitment on the part of *both* VHOs and volunteers to navigate difference across multiple scales – personal, workplace and the global international aid context. There are strong parallels between our findings and other research arguing that mutuality in North–South partnerships hinges on how development practitioners accommodate and work with difference – whether it is seen as a driver of mutuality through harnessing diverse knowledges and perspectives, or as a barrier that denotes systemic inequalities (Johnson & Wilson, 2006, p. 73).

Although participants in volunteerism identify relationship building as a core component, this is not clearly articulated in the design of such programmes. Foregrounding relationship building as part of volunteer assignments will go a long way in mitigating anxieties and facilitating more realistic expectations of what can be achieved at the end of a volunteer assignment. This is particularly important as the geographies of volunteering make a difference; development issues and relationships are not the same everywhere. For example, language and communication issues were more significant for volunteers in Cambodia than in Indonesia, where a sizable proportion of volunteers was conversant in Indonesian, or in the Solomon Islands, where most VHO staff spoke English. The design of volunteer programmes should explicitly encourage and facilitate the cultural aspects of relationship building, and recognise that effective partnerships take time to develop (Lister, 2000). IDV programmes that take relational processes seriously will be able to promote the mutual development partnerships that can bring partial knowledges together to address systemic development issues at local and global levels.

ENDNOTES

[1] IDV is the shorthand term used for "international development volunteering"; here we specifically mean the more expansive term international development *volunteerism*.

[2] MDG8 was the goal for "a global partnership for development" and contained six targets. These included global co-operation around financial transparency, dealing with debt problems, cooperation with pharmaceutical companies and private sector technology industries to provide resources at lower cost, and special attention to the least developed, landlocked and island states. SDG17 is the goal to "revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development" and contains 17 targets which are clustered under five categories: finance, technology, capacity building, trade and systemic issues.

[3] We use this term to indicate a kind of mechanism that lifts, raises difference to a level where it is not an obstacle but rather a means to build connections.

[4] All quotations are taken from participants in workshops in Cambodia, Indonesia and the Solomon Islands (SI).

REFERENCES

Aked, J. (2015). What is different about how volunteers work? Relationship building for wellbeing and change. *IDS Bulletin*, *46*, 29–42.

Baaz, M. E. (2005). *The paternalism of partnership. A postcolonial reading of identity in development aid*. London, UK: Zed Books.

Beck, U., & Gernsheim-Beck, E. (2009). Global generations and the trap of methodological nationalism for a cosmopolitan turn in the sociology of youth and generation? *European Sociological Review*, *25*, 25–36.

Devereux, P. (2008). International volunteering for development and sustainability: Outdated paternalism or a radical response to globalisation? *Development in Practice*, *18*, 357–370.

Diprose, K. (2012). Critical distance: Doing development education through international volunteering. *Area*, *44*, 186–192.

Eyben, R. (2010). Hiding relations: The irony of "effective aid". *European Journal of Development Research*, *22*, 382–397.

Eyben, R. (2014) *International aid and the making of a better world*. London, UK: Routledge.

Fee, A., & Gray, S. J. (2011). Fast-tracking expatriate development: The unique learning environments of international volunteer placements. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *22*, 530–552.

Georgeou, N. (2012). *Neoliberalism, development, and aid volunteering*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Georgeou, N., & Engel, S. (2011). The impact of neoliberalism and new managerialism on development volunteering: An Australian case study. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, *46*, 297–311.

Gough, K., Langevang, T., & Namatovu, R. (2014). Researching entrepreneurship in low-income settlements: The strengths and challenges of participatory methods. *Environment and Urbanization*, *26*, 297–311.

Hawkes, M. (2014). International volunteerism: Supports and barriers to capacity development outcomes. *Third Sector Review*, *20*, 63–81.

Howard, J., & Burns, D. (2015). Volunteering for development within the new ecosystem of international development. *IDS Bulletin*, *46*, 5–16.

Impey, K., & Overton, J. (2014). Developing partnerships: The assertion of local control of international development volunteers in South Africa. *Community Development Journal*, *49*, 111–128.

Johnson, H., & Wilson, G. (2006). North-South/South-North partnerships: Closing the "mutuality gap". *Public Administration and Development*, *26*, 71–80.

Jones, A. (2011). Theorising international youth volunteering: Training for global (corporate) work? *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *36*, 530–544.

Kindon, S., Pain, R., & Kesby, M. (2007). Participatory action research: Origins, approaches and methods. In S. Kindon, R. Pain, & M. Kesby (Eds.), *Connecting people, participation and place: Participatory action research approaches and methods* (pp. 9–18). London, UK: Routledge.

Lister, S. (2000). Power in partnership? An analysis of an NGO's relationships with its partners. *Journal of International Development*, *12*, 227–239.

McWha, I. (2011). The roles of, and relationships between, expatriates, volunteers, and local development workers. *Development in Practice*, *21*, 29–40.

Office for Development Effectiveness. (2014). *Evaluation of the Australian volunteers for international development (AVID) program*. Canberra, ACT: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Palacios, C. M. (2010). Volunteer tourism, development and education in a postcolonial world: Conceiving global connections beyond aid. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *18*, 861–878.

Perold, H., Graham, L. A., Mazembo-Mavungu, E., Cronin, K., Muchemwa, L., & Lough, B. (2013). The colonial legacy of international voluntary service. *Community Development Journal*, *48*, 179–196.

Porter, D., Allen, B., & Thompson, G. (1991). *Development in practice: Paved with good intentions*. London, UK: Routledge.

Schech, S., & Haggis, J. (2000). *Culture and development: A critical introduction*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Schech, S., Mundkur, A., Skelton, T., & Kothari, U. (2015). New spaces of development partnership: Rethinking international volunteering. *Progress in Development Studies*, *15*, 358–370.

Sherraden, M. S., Lough, B. J., & McBride, A. M. (2008). Effects of international volunteering and service: Individual and institutional predictors. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, *19*, 395–421.

Sherraden, M. S., Stringham, J., Sow, S. C., & McBride, A. M. (2006). The forms and structure of international voluntary service. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, *17*, 163–180.

Skelton, T., & Allen, T. (1999) Culture and global change: Theoretical considerations. In T. Skelton & T. Allen (Eds.), *Culture and global change* (pp.1–10). London, UK: Routledge.

Tiessen, R., & Heron, B. (2012). Volunteering in the developing world: The perceived impacts of Canadian youth. *Development in Practice*, *22*, 44–56.

Tiessen, R., & Kumar, P. (2013). Ethical challenges encountered on learning/volunteer abroad programmes for students in international development studies in Canada: Youth perspectives and educator insights. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, *34*, 416–430.

Watts, M. (2006). Culture, development and global neoliberalism. In S. A. Radcliffe (Ed.), *Culture and development in a globalising world* (pp. 30–58). London, UK: Routledge.