

8th Biennial National Local Government Community Development Conference

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“International Volunteering: The challenges facing us as we enter the 21st Century” by Bill Armstrong, chief executive officer Australian Volunteers International

I am delighted to have been invited to deliver a paper to you at this conference, primarily because I believe that local government is the most important part of our national government structure.

Local government has the capacity and the potential to make a real impact on people's lives. This sector is much closer to the community than State and Federal Governments.

What you do is of great interest to the organisation I represent, Australian Volunteers International, because our work is about building people-to-people and community-to-community links. This approach is arguably the foundation of local government, but those foundations have been shaken in recent times. Similarly for Australian Volunteers International.

So it is appropriate that this conference is about how to ride the rapids of change, and that I am addressing the challenges for international volunteering – which I think we share in common. I'll return to the issues, I believe, we have in common in a few moments.

First, let me tell you who we are and what we do.

We are Australia's largest international volunteer sending agency. We are a bit like the American Peace Corps – smaller, but a few years older and just as effective.

In the last 12 months, we have supported around 900 Australian Volunteers in placements in 50 countries in Asia Africa, the Pacific, Latin America as well as in Aboriginal communities in remote parts of Australia. This year we aim to have more than 1,000 Australian Volunteers in the field.

We have an alumni of over 5,000 returned volunteers who can be found in a broad range of trade and professional areas in Australia, and increasingly they work internationally.

As well as being the International Year of Volunteers, 2001 marks the 50th Anniversary of **Australian Volunteers**.

The program traces its roots to the Melbourne-based Volunteer Graduate scheme which began in 1951 when a solitary young graduate from the University of Melbourne set sail for Indonesia to live and work alongside the people of this newly independent nation.

Then, as now, the core principles of Australian Volunteers have remained very much the same. Australian Volunteers International is committed to work towards a peaceful and just world.

It achieves this by providing opportunities for Australians to volunteer to live, work and learn in partnership with people of other cultures. Volunteers contribute to developing communities and bring a reciprocal benefit to Australia.

The values that inform our work include:

Participation
Learning through experience
Respect
Partnership
Integrity
Equality
Cultural diversity
Recognition of reciprocal benefit

Australian Volunteers come from a variety of trade and professional backgrounds and range in age from 20 to 70 years – sometimes older. They come from rural and regional Australia as well as the capital cities. They might be new graduates or have many years of experience. What they share is a willingness to put up their hand to be involved - to undertake a task that makes a positive contribution to their fellow human beings, and *to do this at some personal cost to themselves.*

We encourage them to build the relationship with their employer and working colleagues and the community in which they live. We don't have in-country offices and staff, in part because we don't want to unduly intercede in that relationship. This can be tough on the Australian Volunteers but we believe strongly that it improves the quality of the partnership on the ground. Importantly, it demonstrates to the local employers and communities that we're not paternalistic. We genuinely attempt to foster a mature and beneficial relationship between the volunteer and the community which has agreed to host them.

The experience of most Australian Volunteers is profound and often life changing. It means that people are open to new opportunities and are more inclined to get involved in what's happening around them. It makes them an excellent resource for new ideas or approaches when they're back home – a quality very useful to future employers.

It is the people-to-people and community-to-community involvement which underpins what we do and it is in this area that the work of local government and the work of Australian Volunteers International has a lot in common

Your strength is closeness to the community. It's at this level that you are really effective. Although you are "local", you are perhaps more familiar with the notion of developing international linkages than many other sectors.

Running programs to promote and develop real and lasting relationships with communities outside your council boundaries is not an easy task but it is one that many Councils have taken on over recent years.

A recent good example and one we have been privileged to participate in, is our relationship with the people of East Timor.

There is no doubt that the events of late 1999 galvanised Australians into wanting to do something to support an independent East Timor. Australian Volunteers International certainly experienced this first hand when our appeal for skilled Australians generated some 2,000 enquires in just a few weeks. Since that time we have placed over 100 people in East Timor, making it our fastest growing program.

Local councils around Australia have developed relationships of many different kinds with East Timorese communities. I am most familiar with those that have occurred in Melbourne, in particular the cities of Port Phillip, Darebin, Moreland and Mornington. In each of these, there have been real and successful attempts to involve the community in these relationships.

I want to share what I've seen of the way this has happened - Port Phillip in Melbourne. They have committed themselves to a range of projects and activities over a 10-year period with Suai, one of the regions of East Timor, and have established a local group to ensure that these activities also have a strong connection to the people in Port Phillip.

The Council itself is supporting a range of projects in the areas of training and public administration, infrastructure, health, town planning and economic development. A decision by Council to add a small voluntary surcharge to the rate notice has seen the overwhelming majority of ratepayers make their own contribution to Port Phillip's East Timor initiative.

Many people also contribute to the appeals that have been held in conjunction with events like the recent St Kilda Festival. Port Phillip also has engaged the corporate sector - not by shaking a tin for donations, but rather asking them for their expertise in areas like logistics, administration, legal and financial matters.

In Moreland, Xanana Gusmao was the guest speaker at an annual lecture, while Council itself even sells the excellent coffee of East Timor.

A number of councils work in collaboration with Australian Volunteers International to support volunteer placements in East Timor. The range of activities reflects the idea that community involvement brings community ownership.

It should be noted that some councils have moved their communities from the starting point of providing charity, to encouraging people to embrace an ongoing relationship with communities in East Timor. This means both communities benefit.

Local government is to be congratulated for these achievements – and perhaps the next step is to take this to a deeper level. Australia is only now discovering that we actually live in the Asia/Pacific region of the world and this brings with it a responsibility of being good neighbors.

I think we also face common challenges. I'm referring to the increasing push for you to become merely service providers with little community connection or ownership – if you allow it to happen, you're in trouble.

Meals on Wheels is a good example. Meals on Wheels was never supposed to be simply about feeding people in their homes – the fact that someone delivers the food personally is a major part of it. Making it efficient by delivering five days worth of meals at once surely misses the entire point of the exercise – providing a human connection for people who may not be able to leave their home!

We have similar challenges at **Australian Volunteers International** and so we can relate to this example. We have been encouraged into the role of contractor and service provider. We are wanted for our excellent record in technical assistance but without an understanding that this is due largely to the quality and attitudes of those who volunteers their skills. Like the meals, technical assistance must be of the highest quality but also like the meal is to “meals on wheels” so is our technical assistance a tool for a much more important outcome—that of building relations, creating a climate of awareness, assisting our people to people understanding learning to respect difference and ultimately making the world a better place in which to live.

It's an issue that we're currently tackling because it goes to who we are and what we believe we do.. We are an efficient and effective volunteer organisation. We run the nation's volunteer program. We are not a commercial manager.

For us being a volunteer is not determined by how much a person earns but by their attitudes and their desire to make a contribution to build a better world.

Our three key challenges can be summarised in the following way. We must be clear about the purpose of our existence. We should extend International volunteering opportunities to a wider range of people – at different stages of their lives. And, thirdly, we need to expand our community partnerships – with people like you and the commercial sector.

Again, to reflect on the East Timor experience, your work can serve as a model for future linkages between communities in Australian and those in other countries.

There can be no doubt that our nation desperately needs to engage with our region. Consider the environment at the moment. We are being told that we are under threat of invasion by boat loads of “queue jumping refugees”. Others continue to chip away at Australia's successful multicultural society. Sections of our community see conflict in our neighbourhood and say that the answer for us is to close our borders and hope that it will go away.

We are told how important it is for Australia to be an outward-looking society and I certainly agree. But more often than not, this is seen as purely an economic relationship - making friends so that we can sell them good and services. There's nothing wrong with strong trading relationships – they're vital for the success of this country. However, if trade is all that we care about, then I don't believe we will be able to build relationships with true meaning and growth potential.

It is not something to be left up to the Federal Government and the Department of Foreign Affairs – although they do have a role. It is the relationships which come out of other parts of our society that tend to be far more enduring than those which are subject to the ebb and flow of political tension and perceived national interest.

Even though my organisation is celebrating 50 years of international volunteering, I can't help but reflect on the notion that what we have been doing is *only now* gaining widespread community acceptance and support – ours is an idea whose time has finally come. As I talk to people from a wide range of backgrounds, from business and the professions, to people at all levels of government, I am finding a growing understanding of the need for Australia to do much more to build our people and community relationships with the people and nations of this region.

A few years back, I wrote this in the forward to a book on volunteer work overseas:

'In a world where everything is measured in terms of economic return, volunteering of any kind is sure against the trend – a bit like swimming up stream. It is a brave person indeed, and perhaps a foolish one in the eyes of many in the community, who decides to undertake such an activity'

I am pleased be able to tell you that this is, I believe, changing quite rapidly. Human beings are always searching to belong and build relationships with meaning – they have a desire to make their contribution to society. Many people also want to grow in their understanding of other cultures, and have a desire to learn and develop as human beings.

At a time when research shows ordinary Australians feeling more alienated than ever before from their institutions, I believe that programs like ours provide a real opportunity for people to reconnect.

A lot of this language will probably resonate strongly with you as community builders in local government. I extend the challenge to you to work with us in building stronger communities and through this to build a better world for generations to come.

Thank you.