



MFAT Management Response to Evaluation of VSA 2023-2025 New Zealand Volunteer Programme

Updated 28 November 2024

Objective 1 – Relevance and Effectiveness

No.	Evaluation Report Recommendation	MFAT Response and Action (Agree, Partially Agree, Reject)
1	<p>Country spread</p> <p>1.1 Continuing the current focus on 10 programmes seems appropriate, as it allows VSA to concentrate its efforts within an existing portfolio where it has established offices, staff, and a strong understanding of the countries and their stakeholders. If a reduction is considered, differences in costs across countries could be a key factor. Conversely, if expansion to other countries is explored, assessing the alignment of potential new countries with New Zealand's international development objectives will be important to ensure that new engagements are strategically focused.</p> <p>1.2 VSA shall further explore opportunities to work in rural areas to reach more vulnerable populations, considering factors such as additional costs and the need for pastoral care. It shall establish a target percentage for rural placements within its portfolio and agree on this target with MFAT.</p>	<p>Partially Agree</p> <p>MFAT agrees that the current country focus remains appropriate, while also having an interest in assessing support to Niue and Tokelau.</p> <p>MFAT supports VSA exploring opportunities to deliver assignments in rural areas, within available funding and assessing all relevant considerations.</p>
2	<p>Assignment design</p> <p>2.1 VSA should strengthen its assignment development process to enable more realistic and collaborative needs analysis for long-term planning (3–5 years). It is already exploring ways to improve the integration of needs assessments at various stages of assignments and is considering involving a broader range of stakeholders, including volunteers and counterparts from partner organisations, in this process. These efforts should continue to ensure more effective and sustainable outcomes.</p>	<p>Agree</p> <p>MFAT acknowledges this is already an area of work for VSA, and an outline of the needs assessment approach has been included in the 2025–28 Design.</p>

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	<p>2.2 The length of volunteering assignments should be carefully considered, with provisions for extensions where necessary to enhance knowledge transfer and foster stronger relationships with partner organisations.</p> <p>2.3 Where feasible, consider designing volunteer assignments that build on existing investments funded by MFAT or complement other international volunteer programmes, such as Australian Volunteers International (AVI), to enhance the achievement of outcomes.</p>	<p>MFAT and VSA reviewed the spread of modalities and agreed on targets and caps as part of the 2025–28 Design process.</p> <p>Assignment planning and pipelines are consulted with Posts and country teams as part of the annual country planning process.</p>
3	<p>Capacity Building</p> <p>3.1 Ensuring the sustainability of capacity building efforts and embedding of organisational and community development outcomes will be key for next phase design.</p> <p>3.2 The outcomes of each volunteer deployment tend to be assignment-specific and demonstrate varying degrees of sustainability, making it difficult to assess how changes in the mix of assignment modalities might affect outcomes without a more comprehensive effectiveness evaluation. However, it seems reasonable to infer that placing greater emphasis on standard and blended models, while reducing reliance on e-volunteering, could positively impact overall programme outcomes.</p> <p>3.3 Volunteers should balance task completion with mentoring counterpart staff to ensure effective knowledge transfer while respecting local practices. VSA can better support volunteers in navigating this balance during preparation by</p>	<p>Agree</p> <p>MFAT acknowledges this is already an area of work for VSA. Considerations around a capacity building approach and sustainability of outcomes were included in the 2025–28 Design.</p> <p>MFAT and VSA reviewed the spread of modalities and agreed on targets and caps as part of the 2025–28 Design process.</p>

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	<p>emphasising its importance and providing examples and strategies successfully used by other volunteers.</p> <p>3.4 VSA is streamlining its communication on capacity building, with updates to be included in the volunteer and programme manager handbooks. Additionally, VSA is considering a more explicit integration of capacity development principles into the assignment development process to align expectations and keep capacity building central to all assignments. VSA should also maintain open discussions with partners to shape the future of capacity building, focusing on equitable, inclusive, and localised approaches.</p>	<p>This is noted and welcomed.</p>
4	<p>Local partner engagement</p> <p>4.1 Expanding partnerships with local community-based NGOs and local government agencies operating in targeted thematic areas could strengthen grassroots capacity and enhance community engagement. Where feasible, VSA might consider prioritising partnerships with smaller, community-based NGOs over United Nations (UN) agencies to better support these objectives.</p> <p>4.2 Regular communication between VSA country programme managers, volunteers, and partner organisations is important to ensure clarity on volunteer roles and provide effective supervision. While such communication is already in place, increasing its frequency is recommended to further strengthen coordination and support.</p> <p>4.3 VSA should enhance the focus on cultural orientation and awareness of power and privilege dynamics, acknowledging that these dynamics exist both</p>	<p>Agree</p> <p>MFAT agrees that strong engagement with local partners (Government and NGOs) is essential to achieving sustainable development outcomes.</p> <p>MFAT supports VSA's ongoing efforts to strengthen collaboration and communication.</p>

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	<p>within and between cultures. This is particularly important for younger volunteers, who may have less experience navigating such complexities. Providing enhanced training in these areas would promote more equitable and effective collaboration with partners and local communities.</p>	

Objective 2: Efficiency

No.	Evaluation Report Recommendation	MFAT Response and Action (Agree, Partially Agree, Reject)
5	<p>Value For Money (VfM)</p> <p>5.2 VSA should focus on increasing the number of long-term placements, as these have proven more effective in achieving development outcomes while reducing costs over time. Prioritising returning volunteers could further enhance cost-effectiveness, as they bring prior experience, require less onboarding, and tend to be more mission-driven and resilient.</p> <p>5.3 It is recommended that VSA maintain in-country staff in all countries where it operates, with staffing levels aligned to the size of the country programme and the number of volunteers. Adjustments should be made as volunteer numbers grow. Experiences from the Solomon Islands and Tonga suggest that a 1:10 staff-to-volunteer assignment ratio is effective, with one country manager overseeing up to 10 assignments. For programmes exceeding this threshold, adding a coordinator to support the country manager would be beneficial. VSA could consider appointing a programme manager to oversee multiple countries where current volunteer numbers do not warrant full-time staff in each location.</p>	<p>Agree</p> <p>MFAT and VSA have agreed a 2025–28 Design that incorporates value for money and cost effectiveness and cost clarity.</p>

No.	Evaluation Report Recommendation	MFAT Response and Action (Agree, Partially Agree, Reject)
	<p>5.4 VSA should explore strategies to reduce indirect costs without compromising programme outcomes. One approach could be to reclassify specific marketing and communications expenses as direct costs tied to public diplomacy outcomes, provided these outcomes are defined in the updated programme logic. It is important to distinguish allowable expenses clearly, as not all marketing and communications activities align with public diplomacy objectives; some may relate to recruitment efforts. While this reclassification would not directly reduce indirect costs, it could enhance transparency by demonstrating how these costs contribute directly to achieving programme outcomes.</p>	
	<p>5.1 The rise in management-to-delivery cost ratio requires monitoring in the next phase to assess whether this trend is temporary or reflects systemic inefficiencies. Maintaining a delivery cost ratio close to 80% while scaling up to 170 assignments in 2024–25 will be important for ensuring cost-effectiveness. VSA should prioritise increasing the number of volunteers and assignment months to improve value for money. This can be achieved by addressing unjustified early returns, with a target to reduce these rates to below 5% of total assignments (currently 8%). VSA should identify the root causes of early returns and develop strategies to improve volunteer retention. In the short term, given the current high rate of early returns and its impact on the delivery of assignment months, VSA could consider over-programming as a temporary measure. This involves planning for additional volunteers or assignments to offset anticipated early departures, ensuring programme outcomes are maintained. For justified early returns, it is recommended that VSA and MFAT discuss how to assess whether assignment outcomes have been completed early.</p>	<p>Partially agree</p> <p>MFAT acknowledges the importance of monitoring early returns and supports VSA’s ongoing efforts to understand and respond to the underlying drivers. After further discussions with VSA, MFAT has agreed that early returns is not a significant issue but this should remain an area for monitoring.</p> <p>The 2025-28 Design reflects an appropriate delivery-to-management cost ratio. MFAT agrees that approaches such as over-programming may be appropriate to support delivery targets as the programme scales.</p>

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	<p>5.5 VSA should continue managing internal cost drivers to reduce direct costs. Accommodation, a significant cost driver, can be minimised through strategies such as improved planning for volunteer placements and subleasing unused properties. Offering housing allowances as an alternative could be considered, though this option should be carefully evaluated to ensure it does not compromise volunteer safety or satisfaction.</p>	<p>MFAT supports VSA exploring a different approach to accommodation.</p>
6	<p><i>Financial reporting for the next GFA period (2025–2028)</i></p> <p>6.1 VSA and MFAT should agree on a costed output table and establish appropriate annual outputs. VSA's MEL indicators, and its financial and narrative reporting, should align with these outputs for consistency.</p> <p>6.2 VSA and MFAT should agree on cost-effectiveness metrics. Two suggested metrics are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost per volunteer: Calculated as the total volunteer programme spend (including overseas programme costs such as travel, accommodation, and allowances, as well as Wellington-based costs directly attributable to volunteers) divided by the total number of volunteers. • Management-to-delivery cost ratio: Calculated as management costs divided by the volunteer programme spend. <p>6.3 VSA should clearly define direct volunteer programme spend and specify which Wellington-based costs are directly attributable to volunteers and which</p>	<p>Agree</p> <p>MFAT agrees that enhancing financial reporting and aligning it with clear outputs and cost-effectiveness metrics is important. MFAT supports the use of agreed VfM metrics and classifications, and will continue working with VSA to ensure consistent, relevant reporting.</p> <p>Value for Money will be considered over the next phase. MFAT and VSA have agreed enhanced reporting measures around VfM.</p>

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	<p>are considered indirect costs. These classifications should be consistently applied in all reporting.</p> <p>6.4 VSA should consider planning and allocating a budget for an external, independent Value for Money (VfM) assessment at the end of the GFA 2025–2028 period or earlier if needed to support programme evaluation. Alternatively, or in addition, VSA could enhance its annual reporting to explicitly reflect VfM considerations. While the current report addresses many aspects of VfM, these are not explicitly labelled. Aligning the report with the 4Es framework—economy, efficiency, effectiveness, and equity—would enhance clarity and provide a more comprehensive approach to VfM reporting. Guidance on specific reporting elements is included in the main text.</p>	

Objective 3: Key Improvements in Relevance, Effectiveness, and Efficiency

No.	Evaluation Report Recommendation	MFAT Response and Action (Agree, Partially Agree, Reject)
7	<p><i>Enhance integration of GEDSI issues</i></p> <p>7.1 VSA Strategy 2030 should include a dedicated GEDSI section aligned with New Zealand's policies and strategic action plans. VSA will monitor these plans during the next GFA period to ensure ongoing alignment.</p> <p>Suggested GEDSI approaches include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aiming to increase the number of gender-focused partner organisations and assist other partners to integrate gender equality into their work. • Including GEDSI-specific indicators in the MEL framework and disaggregate monitoring data by GEDSI dimensions, such as gender, where relevant and feasible. • Incorporating GEDSI training in volunteer orientation programmes to equip volunteers with the knowledge to implement and report on GEDSI aspects. <p>Recruiting a diverse volunteer workforce by intentionally encouraging participation from individuals with varying backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, genders, and abilities/disabilities. This includes representation from Māori, Pasifika communities, immigrants who are New Zealand citizens or residents, and people with disabilities. VSA will continue to collect and analyse demographic data to track progress in diversity and inclusion, using these insights to inform and enhance practices.</p>	<p>Agree</p> <p>MFAT acknowledges this is already an area of work for VSA and the 2025–28 Design incorporates this.</p>

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8	<p><i>Enhance integration of climate change and environmental sustainability</i></p> <p>8.1 VSA Strategy 2030 should include a dedicated section on climate change and environmental sustainability, outlining practical strategies, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanding partnerships with organisations addressing climate change and promoting environmental sustainability. • Incorporating climate change and environmental safeguards into all activities, such as evaluating and adjusting operational practices to minimise carbon emissions and reduce environmental impact. 	<p>Agree</p> <p>MFAT acknowledges this is already an area of work for VSA. VSA's climate change and environmental sustainability approach is outlined in the 2025–28 Design.</p>
9	<p>Improve localisation</p> <p>9.1 VSA should continue strengthening participatory approaches in assignment design and MEL to ensure volunteer assignments align with local needs and contexts, involving partners in both design and monitoring.</p> <p>9.2 VSA could consider supporting local volunteering organisations or programmes in the Pacific by placing New Zealand volunteers within them. This approach would build local capacity, strengthen volunteer systems, foster a culture of volunteering, and enhance employability in Pacific communities.</p>	<p>Agree</p> <p>MFAT acknowledges this is already an area of work for VSA. VSA's localisation approach is outlined in the 2025–28 Design.</p>
10	<p><i>Continue improving participatory MEL</i></p> <p>10.1 For the 2025–2028 phase, VSA should include a programme logic with long-term and short-term outcomes (including public diplomacy outcomes) and a corresponding MEL framework. The MEL framework should feature a results table with GEDSI-specific indicators and a work plan detailing resources, roles, responsibilities, and timelines.</p>	<p>Agree</p> <p>MFAT acknowledges this is already an area of work for VSA. VSA's participatory MEL approach is outlined in the 2025–28 Design.</p>

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	10.2 VSA should continue strengthening participatory MEL by involving local partners in the design, monitoring, and evaluation of assignments. Where relevant, use culturally appropriate data collection methods, such as talanoa and tok stori, to align with local contexts.	
11	Enhance efficiency in recruitment and deployment: 11.1 VSA could reintroduce fixed volunteer deployment periods to provide greater certainty for both volunteers and partner organisations. Volunteers should be given an estimated deployment window (within two weeks) and required to submit all necessary documents six to eight weeks prior to deployment. This will streamline planning and ensure smoother transitions for all parties involved.	Agree