EVALUATION OF 'VSA 2023-2025 NEW ZEALAND VOLUNTEER PROGRAMME'
Evaluation Report

21 February 2025

Contents

List of Abbreviations

AVI	Australian Volunteers International
AVP	Australian Volunteers Program
DAC	Development Advisory Committee
DFAT	Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
FTE	Full-time equivalent
GEDSI	Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion
GFA	Grant Funding Arrangement
IDC	International Development Cooperation
KEQ	Key evaluation question
MEHRD	Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
MFAT	New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PAG	Pacific Advisory Group
PNG	Papua New Guinea
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
TA	Technical assistance
VCP	Volunteer Cooperation Program
VfM	Value for Money
VSA	Volunteer Service Abroad
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas

Executive Summary

Background

Volunteering for international development is part of New Zealand's International Development Cooperation (IDC) Programme, administered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT). The IDC delivers New Zealand's official development assistance, with a strong focus on the Pacific Islands.

MFAT's primary agency for a broad range of international development volunteering is Volunteer Services Abroad (VSA). MFAT supports VSA through a grant mechanism formalised in a Grant Funding Arrangement (GFA). The current GFA, covering the period from 2023 to 2025, is titled *VSA Volunteering for International Development Programme 2023–2025* (the Activity). The Activity is guided by the Strategic Design (1 July 2023–30 June 2025), which aligns with MFAT's Partnerships Four-Year Plan (4YP).

The Activity operates in a complex, multi-country context, primarily focusing on the Pacific region and, secondarily, on Southeast Asia. It currently covers 10 countries: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea (including Bougainville), Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu, Timor-Leste, and Cambodia[1].

The Activity has three priorities:

- Restoring volunteer participation to pre-COVID-19 levels
- Enhancing the capacity and capability of partners that host skilled New Zealand volunteers
- Strengthening connections between New Zealand and communities in the Pacific and Southeast Asia.

Evaluation Overview

MFAT commissioned Alinea International to evaluate the *VSA Volunteering for International Development Programme 2023–2025*. The evaluation was scheduled for completion at the end of the previous GFA period (2018–2023) but was postponed due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions. As a result, it is now being conducted midway through the current GFA period (2023–2025).

The purpose of this evaluation is to inform the design of the international volunteering programme for 2025–2028. Key objectives are to[2]:

- Examine the delivery of VSA's volunteer programme between 1 January 2023 and 30 June 2024
- Review the cost-effectiveness of the VSA volunteer model during this period (COVID-19 restrictions notwithstanding)
- Identify the key learnings to increase positive impact in the future.

The evaluation employed both qualitative and quantitative research methods. It included a review of VSA's documents and data, including progress reports, budget and financial reports, as well as reports from other international volunteering programmes and grey literature on volunteerism and development effectiveness. Data collection also involved key informant interviews with stakeholders from Solomon Islands and Tonga. Findings and recommendations are structured around each key evaluation question.

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[1] The volunteering programme in Cambodia concluded in November 2024, following the completion of the two remaining volunteers' assignments and their return home.

[2] Detailed objectives and the scope of work for the evaluation are outlined in the Evaluation Plan in Appendix 1.

Objective 1 – Relevance and Effectiveness

Key findings

The Activity aligns closely with New Zealand's strategic goals in the Pacific, as demonstrated by its alignment with New Zealand's strategic development frameworks, its focus on thematic areas relevant to New Zealand's broader international development cooperation, and its focus on the Pacific, reflecting New Zealand's regional priorities. Volunteering adds unique value to traditional aid by embedding expertise in communities and fostering people-to-people connections, reinforcing New Zealand's commitment to sustainable, locally driven development.

VSA's country programme strategies are aligned with MFAT's country strategic plans and the policies and development priorities of partner countries. However, individual assignments occasionally lack alignment with MFAT's country strategic plans.

VSA's presence in partner countries enhances New Zealand's public diplomacy efforts. The programme raises New Zealand's profile in the 10 nations where it operates by fostering local engagement between skilled New Zealand volunteers and counterpart staff within partner organisations, as well as broader communities.

VSA's partner organisations operate in sectors aligned with MFAT's country strategy objectives, contributing to a range of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through volunteer assignments. Most are government departments or civil society organisations (CSOs), which appears to be an effective approach as it drives institutional change, strengthens community-led initiatives, and enhances overall programme impact.

VSA's partner organisations highly value the expertise, skills, and cultural awareness that volunteers bring, as well as VSA's ability to adapt to shifting organisational priorities, emerging needs, and evolving contexts. Regular and transparent communication between VSA, volunteers, and partner organisations is recognised as a key factor in ensuring assignments remain responsive and relevant.

While VSA's capacity needs assessment process for partner organisations is valuable, translating identified gaps into effective long-term assignment planning remains a challenge. There is an inherent tension between addressing immediate capacity needs for operational stability and fostering sustainable, long-term development outcomes in under-resourced government and civil society organisations.

Volunteer placements have been predominantly concentrated in capital cities. Pre-COVID, 37% of assignments were based in rural areas in 2018, increasing slightly to 39% in 2019. However, by 2023, this figure dropped to 11%, with a modest rise to 12% in 2024. VSA has adopted a cautious approach to returning to rural areas post-COVID, but increasing rural placements remains a priority.

VSA's volunteer modalities offer varying levels of development impact and relationship-building effectiveness, each suited to specific contexts and needs. The standard in-country modality remains the most in-demand option among partner organisations, offering strong potential for relationship-building and capacity development through on-the-ground engagement. The blended model shows promise by allowing volunteers to begin with in-country engagement and transition to remote support, making it particularly effective for assignments requiring continuity and flexibility. E-volunteering is best suited for select cases where partner organisations have the capacity for online engagement and where assignment outputs can be easily delivered remotely. The Uni-Vol programme is most effective when used selectively in proven environments, focusing on assignments that align with the skills and experience of young professionals. Additionally, longer assignments are generally more effective than shorter-term placements for capacity building, as they enable volunteers to build trust, understand local contexts, and ensure sustainable knowledge transfer.

The way capacity strengthening is defined, understood, and measured is important. VSA's capacity building approach focuses on developing, strengthening, and sustaining the

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capabilities of individuals, organisations, and communities over time. VSA adopts a collaborative, culturally sensitive approach to capacity building, aligned with its localisation agenda. Occasional misunderstandings arise between partners and volunteers regarding gap-filling versus mentoring.

Some partner organisations rely heavily on volunteers, risking regression once volunteers leave.

Successful collaborations between VSA and MFAT-funded assignments, such as Tonga's National Rugby League (NRL) initiative, as well as partnerships with other international volunteering programmes, such as with the Australian Volunteers International (AVI) in the Solomon Islands hospital where New Zealand and Australian volunteers complement each other's strengths, highlight the potential of this approach where feasible.

Key recommendations

1. Country spread

1.1 Continuing the current focus on 10 countries 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.

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.

2. Assignment design

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.

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.

2.3 Where feasible, consider designing volunteer assignments that build on existing investments funded by MFAT or complement other international volunteer programmes, such as AVI, to enhance the achievement of outcomes.

3. Capacity building

3.1 Ensuring the sustainability of capacity building efforts and embedding of organisational and community development outcomes will be key for next phase design.

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.

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 emphasising its importance and providing examples and strategies successfully used by other volunteers.

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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.

4. Local partner engagement

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.

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.

4.3 VSA should enhance the focus on cultural orientation and awareness of power and privilege dynamics, acknowledging that these dynamics exist both 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.

Objective 2 – Efficiency

Key findings

VSA's volunteer programme is more efficient when benchmarked against other international development modalities. It is a less expensive model for delivering capacity building support compared to traditional technical assistance (TA).

VSA's volunteer programme appears to be as efficient as other international programmes, with direct costs broadly comparable to those of AVI. When comparing accommodation costs—a component of direct expenses—differences in management approaches must be considered. VSA directly manages accommodation, while AVI uses an allowance-based system, which affects cost interpretation. Indirect cost comparisons were not conducted because AVI's overhead data is confidential and unavailable. If such data were accessible, it might reveal differences in programme management costs that could alter the overall efficiency comparison.

In 2023–2024, VSA delivered or had ongoing 137 assignments, a 13% shortfall from the target of 159, primarily due to fewer-than-planned standard in-country placements. Volunteer months totalled 785, falling slightly below the target of 815—a 4% shortfall—resulting from fewer assignments and earlier-than-expected completions.

- A total of 24 volunteers (18% of assignments) returned earlier than planned. Of these, 54% were categorised as justified early finishers, as they completed their assignments ahead of schedule. This evaluation relied on VSA's reporting, as volunteers in this category were not interviewed. The remaining 46% (8% of assignments) were categorised as unjustified early returns, with reasons including family commitments, health issues, difficulties adjusting to living in-country, assignment-related challenges, and partner organisation dissatisfaction.

- In 2023–24, the management-to-delivery cost ratio was 27:73, a slight increase from 23:77 during the pre-COVID period of 2018–19. The number of volunteer assignments decreased to 137 in 2023–24, compared to 190 in 2018–19. In other words, fewer assignments were delivered with higher overheads, which indicates a potential decline in efficiency compared to the pre-COVID period.

VSA's current budgeting and reporting to MFAT do not clearly distinguish between management and delivery costs, making it difficult to assess the ratio of management to delivery expenses or the proportion of management costs in the total programme expenditure.

VSA's strategic focus on increasing in-country staffing enhances programme development, management, and cultural competency. Partner organisations and volunteers have highlighted the critical role of in-country staff in designing and supporting volunteer assignments. This approach is expected to improve efficiency, as local staff costs are lower, provided Wellington staffing levels remain stable. It would also enhance programme effectiveness by stronger local engagement and support. Recent organisational restructuring has positioned VSA to deliver outcomes effectively within an evidence-based framework.

Key recommendations

5. Value for money

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

6. Financial reporting for the next GFA period (2025–2028)

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.

6.2 VSA and MFAT should agree on cost-effectiveness metrics. Two suggested metrics are:

- 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.

6.3 VSA should clearly define direct volunteer programme spend and specify which Wellington-based costs are directly attributable to volunteers and which are considered indirect costs. These classifications should be consistently applied in all reporting.

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.

Objective 3 – Improvements in relevance, effectiveness, and efficiency

Key findings

VSA faces challenges in consistently integrating cross-cutting issues such as GEDSI, climate change, and environmental sustainability. Currently, the connection between these issues and development outcomes is often unclear.

VSA's volunteer base shows underrepresentation of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including Māori and Pasifika communities and immigrants who are New Zealand citizens or residents.

VSA's recruitment process is cost-effective. It has been praised by volunteers, programme managers, and partner organisations. There are still occasional delays in deployment processes, largely caused by slow medical clearances and visa processing.

VSA has made significant progress in participatory MEL, including piloting culturally appropriate methods such as talanoa and tok stori. It is also addressing gaps in reporting and feedback mechanisms from partner organisations and volunteers. However, cross-cutting issues remain insufficiently integrated into the MEL framework.

Key recommendations

7. Enhance integration of GEDSI

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.

Suggested GEDSI approaches include:

- 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.

- 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.

8. Enhance integration of climate change and environmental sustainability

8.1 VSA Strategy 2030 should include a dedicated section on climate change and environmental sustainability, outlining practical strategies, such as:

- 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.

9. Improve localisation

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.

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.

10. Continue improving participatory MEL

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.

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.

1. Background

The Activity

Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter referred to as New Zealand) advances sustainable development through aid, trade, environmental stewardship, diplomacy, security cooperation, and humanitarian support. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade — Manatū Aorere (MFAT) oversees New Zealand's International Development Cooperation Programme — Ngā Hoe Tuputupu-mai-tawhiti (IDC Programme), previously known as the New Zealand Aid Programme. International volunteering is one component of the IDC Programme.

MFAT's primary implementing agency for international development volunteering is Volunteer Service Abroad – Te Tūao Tāwāhi (VSA). VSA, founded by Sir Edmund Hillary in 1962, is now New Zealand's most established international development volunteering non-governmental organisation (NGO). It is registered with New Zealand Charities Services and operates under its own constitution with a governing council which provides strategic oversight to VSA. VSA reports to members at an Annual General Meeting.

MFAT is VSA's main funder, providing over 90% of its operational costs through a grant funding mechanism. VSA covers 10% of the in-country expenses related to volunteer assignments (excluding staff costs). This is supplemented by contributions from in-country partners and, in some cases, from international and New Zealand partners, depending on the specific assignment and agreements.

The partnership between MFAT and VSA is guided by MFAT's *Partnerships Four Year Plan* (January 2022), which serves as the blueprint for achieving New Zealand's international cooperation goals through civil society, including NGOs. The IDC Programme collaborates with New Zealand NGOs through long-standing partnerships, negotiated partnerships, Manaaki projects[3], and a few bilateral arrangements. VSA falls under MFAT's "long-standing partnerships" category in the Plan.

MFAT funds VSA through Grant Funding Arrangements (GFAs). The current GFA, titled *Volunteer Service Abroad Volunteering for International Development Programme 2023–2025* (hereafter referred to as the Activity), follows the previous GFA from 2018–2023. Under this arrangement, MFAT's total funding is NZ$ 22.8 million over two years—NZ$ 11.1 million for the first year and NZ$ 11.7 million for the second—averaging NZ$ 11.4 million annually. The 2023–2025 GFA is aligned with VSA's *Strategic Design* for the period 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2025.

The Activity operates in a complex, multi-country context with a primary focus on the Pacific Region. It currently covers 10 countries: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea (including Bougainville), Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu, Timor-Leste, and Cambodia.

The Activity has three priorities:

- Increase volunteer participation to pre-COVID-19 levels,
- Strengthen the capacity and capability of public, multilateral, and civil society partners (see Appendix 4 for the full list) that host New Zealand volunteers, and
- Foster connections between New Zealand and Pacific and Southeast Asian countries and communities.

Programme efforts are concentrated on seven strategic thematic areas, identified as critical for post-COVID-19 recovery, community sustainability, and improved wellbeing. These areas are:

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[3] Manaaki is a contestable NZ$6 million fund for New Zealand NGOs working with in-country partners to support vulnerable and/or marginalised people and groups.

- Agriculture, livestock, and fisheries,

- Business and economic growth,

- Climate change,

- Environment,

- Health and wellbeing,

- Organisational development, and

- Quality education.

MFAT and VSA are committed to using research findings and evaluation recommendations, including those from this evaluation, to drive continuous programme improvement and guide strategic planning for the next phase of the Activity, set for 2025–2028. In parallel, MFAT is developing an overarching strategy for international volunteering to steer the future direction of its programme.

Evaluation Overview

In December 2023, MFAT commissioned Alinea International to evaluate the *VSA Volunteering for International Development Programme 2023–2025* (this Activity). The purpose of this evaluation is to inform the design of the international volunteering programme for 2025–2028.

The evaluation of the international volunteering programme was originally planned for the end of the previous GFA period (2018–2023) but was delayed due to disruptions caused by COVID-19 travel restrictions over the past several years. It is now being conducted partway through the current GFA period (2023–2025) as a process evaluation. The evaluation has three objectives[4]:

- Examine the delivery of VSA's volunteer programme between 1 January 2023 and 30 June 2024;

- Review the cost-effectiveness of the VSA volunteer model during this period (COVID-19 restrictions notwithstanding);

- Identify the key learnings to increase positive impact in the future.

The analytical framework guiding this evaluation is outlined in Table 1.

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[4] Detailed objectives and the scope of work for the evaluation are outlined in the Evaluation Plan in Appendix 1.

Table 1. Evaluation analytical framework with key evaluation questions

OBJECTIVE	DESCRIPTION	KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS
Objective 1: Relevance and effectiveness	To assess how relevant and effective the VSA volunteer programme's delivery has been	What are the strengths exhibited by the various delivery modalities within the VSA volunteering programme?
		What are the gaps in the programme's alignment with New Zealand's strategic goals across the broader Pacific region?
		What obstacles and challenges are preventing the achievement of the outcomes specified in the Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (MERL) framework?
Objective 2: Efficiency	To review the cost effectiveness of the VSA volunteer model (COVID-19 restrictions notwithstanding)	How does VSA's cost-effectiveness align with other international volunteering programmes, such as the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) Australian Volunteers Program (AVP)? Consider cost per volunteer, variations in cost across different modalities (short-term vs long-term placements; standard, Uni-Vol, and e-volunteering), sectors, and countries.
		How does it compare with other development approaches like technical assistance, and what are the factors that make it difficult to compare?
		Is the ratio of management to delivery costs set at the most cost-effective level?
		What metrics does DFAT's AVP use to assess its value for money? Could these metrics be applied for use in MFAT's programme, and if yes, how?
Objective 3: Key improvements in relevance, effectiveness, and efficiency	To derive key learnings that could amplify the programme's positive impact in the future	In designing and delivering future New Zealand volunteering for international development programming, what considerations are critical to maintaining (or increasing) relevance, effectiveness, inclusion and sustainability?
		What opportunities exist to more effectively achieve the outcomes specified in the MERL framework?
		How can VSA enhance cost effectiveness without compromising impact?

This evaluation report is organised around the key evaluation questions outlined in Table 1. Additional significant findings and emerging themes from the evaluation are presented under supplementary subtitles.

Methodology

The evaluation was conducted between November 2023 and October 2024. The Evaluation Plan can be found in Appendix 1.

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining data collection from both primary and secondary sources, followed by qualitative and quantitative analysis. The study used a purposeful selection of case studies, focusing on the Solomon Islands and Tonga, which were chosen for their high levels of VSA engagement to provide deeper insights.

The methodology included:

Desk review: Alinea International conducted a comprehensive review of relevant literature and programme documents provided by MFAT and VSA. Additional sources were identified

through keyword searches in academic and grey literature databases. The list of reviewed documents is available in Appendix 2.

Key informant interviews: A total of 62 interviews were conducted with key informants (39 female and 23 male) nominated by MFAT and VSA. These included partner organisations, volunteers, MFAT staff, representatives from New Zealand High Commissions in the Solomon Islands and Tonga, as well as VSA staff from Wellington and the programme countries. In-person interviews were held in the case study countries, while virtual interviews were conducted with volunteers in other countries and representatives from regional intergovernmental organisations, MFAT, and VSA staff in Wellington. A list of key informants is provided in Appendix 3.

Data analysis: Qualitative data from interviews and secondary sources were coded based on the key evaluation questions (Table 1) and analysed to identify common themes, focusing on strengths and areas for improvement. This analysis informed sections on relevance, effectiveness, and cross-cutting themes. Quantitative analysis was employed to assess VSA's cost structure and compare it with other international volunteering programmes and development aid forms, using VSA's financial reports and publicly available data from comparable programmes.

2. Discussion of Findings

Objective 1 – Relevance and Effectiveness

Key findings
• The Activity aligns closely with New Zealand's strategic goals in the Pacific, as demonstrated by its alignment with New Zealand's strategic development frameworks, its focus on thematic areas relevant to New Zealand's broader international development cooperation, and its focus on the Pacific, reflecting New Zealand's regional priorities. Volunteering adds unique value to traditional aid by embedding expertise in communities and fostering people-to-people connections, reinforcing New Zealand's commitment to sustainable, locally driven development.   • VSA's country programme strategies are aligned with MFAT's country strategic plans and the policies and development priorities of partner countries. However, individual assignments occasionally lack alignment with MFAT's country strategic plans.   • VSA's presence in partner countries enhances New Zealand's public diplomacy efforts. The programme raises New Zealand's profile in the 10 nations where it operates by fostering local engagement between skilled New Zealand volunteers and counterpart staff within partner organisations, as well as broader communities.   • VSA's partner organisations operate in sectors aligned with MFAT's country strategy objectives, contributing to a range of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through volunteer assignments. Most are government departments or civil society organisations (CSOs), which appears to be an effective approach as it drives institutional change, strengthens community-led initiatives, and enhances overall programme impact.   • VSA's partner organisations highly value the expertise, skills, and cultural awareness that volunteers bring, as well as VSA's ability to adapt to shifting organisational priorities, emerging needs, and evolving contexts. Regular and transparent communication between VSA, volunteers, and partner organisations is recognised as a key factor in ensuring assignments remain responsive and relevant.   • While VSA's capacity needs assessment process for partner organisations is valuable, translating identified gaps into effective long-term assignment planning remains a challenge. There is an inherent tension between addressing immediate capacity needs for operational stability and fostering sustainable, long-term development outcomes in under-resourced government and civil society organisations.   • Volunteer placements have been predominantly concentrated in capital cities. Pre-COVID, 37% of assignments were based in rural areas in 2018, increasing slightly to 39% in 2019. However, by 2023, this figure dropped to 11%, with a modest rise to 12% in 2024. VSA has adopted a cautious approach to returning to rural areas post-COVID, but increasing rural placements remains a priority.   • VSA's volunteer modalities offer varying levels of development impact and relationship-building effectiveness, each suited to specific contexts and needs. The standard in-country modality remains the most in-demand option among partner organisations, offering strong potential for relationship-building and capacity development through on-the-ground engagement. The blended model shows promise by allowing volunteers to begin with in-country engagement and transition to remote support, making it particularly effective for assignments requiring continuity and flexibility. E-volunteering is best suited for select cases where partner organisations have the capacity for online engagement and where assignment outputs can be easily delivered remotely. The Uni-Vol programme is most effective when used selectively in proven environments, focusing on assignments that align with the skills and experience of young professionals. Additionally, longer assignments are generally

more effective than shorter-term placements for capacity building, as they enable volunteers to build trust, understand local contexts, and ensure sustainable knowledge transfer.

- The way capacity strengthening is defined, understood, and measured is important. VSA adopts a collaborative, culturally sensitive approach to capacity building, aligned with its localisation agenda. Occasional misunderstandings arise between partners and volunteers regarding gap-filling versus mentoring.

- Some partner organisations rely heavily on volunteers, risking regression once volunteers leave.

- Successful collaborations between VSA and MFAT, such as in Tonga's NRL initiative, and with AVI in the Solomon Islands hospital, where volunteers complement each other's strengths, highlight the potential for scaling up similar efforts where feasible.

Key recommendations

1. Country spread

1.   1.1 Continuing the current focus on 10 countries 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.

2.   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.

2. Assignment design

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.

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.

- 2.3 Where feasible, consider designing volunteer assignments that build on existing investments funded by MFAT or complement other international volunteer programmes, such as AVI, to enhance the achievement of outcomes.

3. Capacity building

3.1 Ensuring the sustainability of capacity building efforts and embedding of organisational and community development outcomes will be key for next phase design.

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.

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 emphasising its importance and providing examples and strategies successfully used by other volunteers.

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.

4. Local partner engagement

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.

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.

4.3 VSA should enhance the focus on cultural orientation and awareness of power and privilege dynamics, acknowledging that these dynamics exist both 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.

Alignment with New Zealand's strategic goals in the Pacific region

The Activity demonstrates alignment with New Zealand's strategic goals in the Pacific region, as evidenced by alignment of the design with New Zealand's strategic development frameworks; relevance of thematic focus areas; strong geographical focus on the Pacific; and volunteering as a unique value-add to traditional aid.

Alignment with New Zealand's strategic development frameworks: The intended outcomes of the Activity, as outlined in *VSA's Strategic Design (1 July 2023–30 June 2025)*, are closely aligned with New Zealand's key strategic priorities, particularly *MFAT Partnerships Four Year Plan (2022)*. The Programme Logic (see Appendix 5) reflects the strategic goals of the MFAT Partnerships Four Year Plan, which include:

- Development: Achieving sustainable development impact by fostering resilience across economic, social, environmental, and climate sectors, while also addressing disaster preparedness, intergenerational equity, and cultural resilience.

- Partnership: Strengthening and empowering local partners and communities to build a more vibrant and resilient civil society.

- Public diplomacy: Ensuring that the New Zealand public is well-informed about the partnerships' outcomes and the value they bring.

Relevance of thematic focus areas: VSA's seven thematic areas— (1) agriculture, livestock, and fisheries, (2) business and economic growth, (3) climate change, (4) environment, (5) health and wellbeing, (6) organisational development, and (7) quality education—address key regional challenges, including food security, economic resilience, and climate adaptation, which align with New Zealand's development priorities in the Pacific.

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VSA is working to streamline its sectoral focus to become more targeted and strategic. There is increasing emphasis on climate change, as evidenced by the Solomon Islands' draft country strategy, which aligns with New Zealand's focus on building climate resilience in the Pacific and supports broader regional goals, such as those outlined in the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*.

Geographical focus in the Pacific: The majority of VSA's volunteer assignments are concentrated in the Pacific, accounting for 89% of all assignments, with an average of 12 assignments per country. In comparison, 11% of assignments are in Southeast Asia, averaging seven per country (Figure 1). This distribution means that most resources—and the associated outcomes—are primarily focused on the Pacific region.

This geographical focus aligns with New Zealand's foreign policy and development priorities, as outlined in key frameworks such as the *Policy for International Cooperation for Effective Sustainable Development* and the *Pacific Reset* strategy.

New Zealand's International Development Cooperation (IDC), previously known as Official Development Assistance, has allocated 60% (NZ$ 1.746 billion) of its 2024–2027 funding to the Pacific region. Southeast Asia, particularly its Least Developed Countries, including Timor-Leste and Cambodia, is the secondary geographic focus for IDC funding.

In determining the number of volunteer assignments per country, VSA takes several key factors into account. These include development needs, alignment with New Zealand's strategic priorities, and the feasibility of scoping, designing, and managing assignments. Feasibility is largely influenced by programme costs, which include risk management considerations such as health and safety requirements, along with logistical challenges. Additionally, the availability of volunteers with the necessary skills and expertise is a critical factor.

VSA operates in countries with Human Development Index (HDI) values ranging from 0.562 in the Solomon Islands to 0.739 in Tonga. The highest concentration of assignments is in Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and Samoa, which together account for 42% of all placements (Table 2). This focus on countries with lower to medium HDI rankings demonstrates VSA's and MFAT's commitment to addressing significant development challenges in the Pacific.

Beyond development outcomes, VSA's presence also contributes to New Zealand's public diplomacy efforts. Operating in a set of 10 countries, the programme enhances New Zealand's visibility in priority areas.

Figure 1. Percentage distribution of assignments by region, 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024
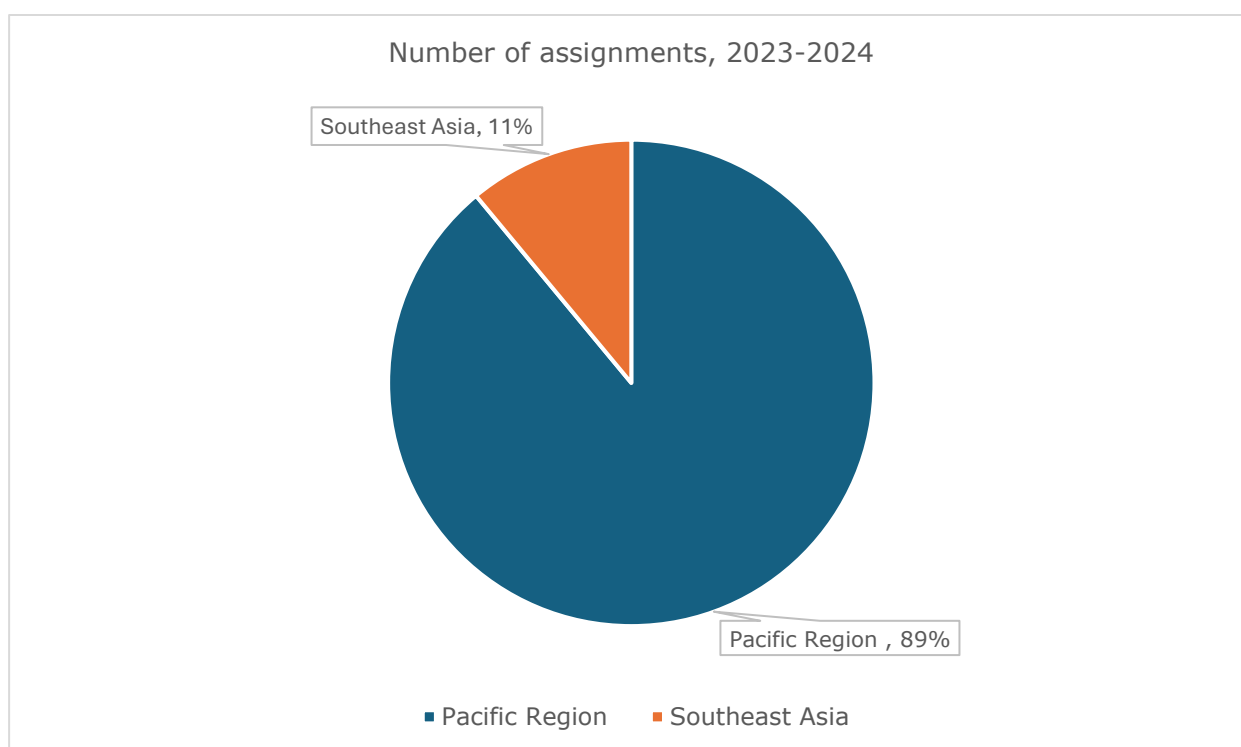

Table 2.Distribution of assignments across countries with HDI ranking, 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024

Country	Number of assignments	Percentage of total assignments	HDI value	HDI ranking
Vanuatu	25	18%	0.614	140
Solomon Islands	15	11%	0.562	156
Samoa	18	13%	0.702	116
Cook Islands	15	11%	N/A	N/A
Tonga	14	10%	0.739	98
Timor-Leste	16	12%	0.566	155
Fiji	12	9%	0.729	104
PNG	14	10%	0.568	154
Kiribati	6	4%	0.628	137
Cambodia[5]	2	1%	0.600	148
Total	**137**	**100%**		

Source of HDI data: UNDP (2024). Human Development Insights. Retrieved from Human Development Reports.
Notes: Cook Islands is not listed among the 193 countries in the HDI on the UNDP website.

Volunteering as a unique value-add: Volunteers complement traditional aid through their relational and people-centred approaches to capacity building, as well as through the support of "soft" public diplomacy. International volunteering is particularly relevant to international development as it offers pathways for rights-based participations[6]. This approach empowers communities and individuals to take an active role in decisions that shape their lives. By working closely with communities, volunteers bring human rights principles—such as equity, transparency, and accountability—into practice at the local level.

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[5] The volunteering programme in Cambodia was completed at the time of finalising the evaluation report (November 2024), as the two remaining volunteers had returned.

[6] United Nations Volunteers (UNV). (2021). State of the World's Volunteerism Report 2022: Building equal and inclusive societies. United Nations Development Programme.

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Volunteering, in essence, has the potential to increase the impact and sustainability of New Zealand's wider international development efforts. This value-add is also recognised globally; other donor countries, including Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, allocate a portion of their Official Development Assistance (ODA) to international volunteering programmes. International bodies, such as the United Nations, recognise volunteering as a unique model that complements traditional aid.

Alignment with MFAT country strategies and policies of partner countries

VSA's country programme strategies align with MFAT's country strategic plans and the development priorities of partner countries. However, individual assignments occasionally lack alignment with MFAT's country strategic plans.

Prioritisation at the country level is informed by VSA's country strategies, which are reviewed annually by VSA staff and adjusted as necessary to respond to changes in national priorities or shifts in MFAT's strategic direction.

VSA is currently developing new country strategies for its partner countries, including the Solomon Islands and Tonga. The draft strategies for the Solomon Islands and Tonga align with MFAT's respective strategic plans and reflect national development needs, as outlined in the *Solomon Islands National Development Strategy 2016–2035* and the *Tonga Strategic Development Framework 2015–2025*. Notably, the strategy for the Solomon Islands places an increased emphasis on addressing climate change, and this is reflected in VSA's country strategy.

Case in point – Solomon Islands' programme maintaining relevance

VSA's priorities in the Solomon Islands are guided by the VSA's *Solomon Islands Programme Strategy*. The previous strategy (2018–2023) focused on youth, education, tourism, governance, and organisational development. A new strategy, covering March 2024 to June 2025, is being drafted to align with the 2023–2025 GFA period. The revised focus areas include health and wellbeing, environmental sustainability, climate change, and economic growth, while integrating cross-cutting themes such as youth, peacebuilding, gender equality, and human rights. This shift reflects MFAT's increasing emphasis on inclusive development and aligns with the Solomon Islands' own priorities for sustainable and inclusive growth, as outlined in its *National Development Strategy 2016–2035*[7].

The new VSA's strategy aligns closely with MFAT's *Solomon Islands Four Year Plan (2021)* and national government priorities, as detailed in key policies and frameworks:

- *National Development Strategy 2016–2035*

- *National Climate Change Policy 2023–2032*

- *National Strategy on the Economic Empowerment of Women and Girls 2020–2023*

- *National Youth Policy 2017–2030: Youth Empowerment for Sustainable Livelihoods*

- *Education Strategic Framework 2016–2030.*

By aligning with these frameworks, VSA ensures its programme remains relevant for both MFAT's agenda and the Solomon Islands' long-term development aspirations.

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[7] Key objectives from the *National Development Strategy 2016–2035* that reflect the Solomon Islands Government's aspirations for sustainable and inclusive development are: *Objective 1:* Sustained and inclusive economic growth; *Objective 2:* Poverty alleviation, improved basic needs, and food security, with more equitable distribution of development benefits; *Objective 3:* Universal access to quality social services, including education and health; and *Objective 5*: Building a unified nation with stable and effective governance and public order.

Certain individual assignments may not always align directly with MFAT's strategic focus but still provide value in different ways. For example, in the Solomon Islands, roles such as a Gym Management and Training Adviser with the Honiara City Council and a Prop Design Adviser for DreamCast Theatre may not explicitly contribute to MFAT's core strategic objectives. However, these assignments support broader social and community development outcomes, including public health, youth engagement, and the growth of creative industries, which can have indirect yet meaningful impacts on national development priorities.

Beyond achieving development outcomes, VSA's country presence contributes to New Zealand's public diplomacy efforts. Operating in a selected group of 10 countries, the programme ensures New Zealand maintains a visible presence in these nations and in key priority development areas.

Alignment with the partner organisations' needs

VSA assignments generally align well with the development needs of partner organisations, who highly appreciate the expertise, skills, and cultural sensitivity that volunteers bring. They also value VSA's adaptability in meeting their changing needs.

Partner organisations consistently highlighted the volunteers' critical technical expertise in areas with limited local capacity, including disability and social inclusion (Tonga), healthcare (Solomon Islands and Tonga), education (Solomon Islands and Tonga), and agriculture (Tonga). While technical skills were highly valued, partners equally—if not more—appreciated the volunteers' cross-cultural competencies, which have been a long-standing strength of VSA's programme.

At times, partner organisations underwent changes between the planning of assignments and the deployment of volunteers. For example, key staff intended to serve as counterparts sometimes left their roles before volunteers arrived. Additionally, some assignments were initially designed with an overly ambitious scope, overestimating the available capacity, which became apparent only after volunteers began their work. As a result, adjustments to assignment descriptions were necessary to ensure they remained relevant to the evolving needs of partner organisations. These changes were managed collaboratively by VSA, partner organisations, and volunteers. While they occasionally caused minor delays compared to initial scoping plans, the flexibility of volunteers—supported by VSA's local staff—ensured that assignments remained aligned with partner organisations' priorities.

Volunteers generally reported that their roles were well-suited, with necessary adjustments made during deployment.

The areas for improvement identified by partner organisations and volunteers are:

- Longer assignments: Partners expressed a need for extended assignments, particularly when initial delays occurred due to ambitious plans or changing circumstances. Longer placements would strengthen relationships, improve knowledge transfer, and allow more time for effective on-the-job training—especially for system-level improvements like creating workflows or databases, ensuring sustainability before the volunteer departs.

- Enhanced cultural orientation and sensitivity to power dynamics: Some partners recommended more comprehensive cultural orientation, particularly for Uni-Vol participants, as they felt an appreciation of the local context was not always evident from the start. Additionally, volunteers reported that hierarchical structures within government sectors sometimes hindered their ability to contribute fully. Greater emphasis on preparing volunteers for local power dynamics would benefit both volunteers and partners.

- Improved supervision and feedback: Some volunteers noted inconsistent supervision from partner organisations, particularly those with limited experience hosting volunteers or facing staffing shortages. A lack of regular feedback reduced volunteer

effectiveness. Resource constraints, including financial and human resource limitations, also hampered volunteer outcomes.

- Clearer volunteer roles: In some cases, partner organisations initially lacked clarity on the volunteer's role, especially when it was a new position. Once volunteers proactively engaged with team leaders and clarified their contributions, they became well-integrated and highly valued by the teams.

Partner organisations' needs assessment

The VSA's needs assessment process for partner organisations is valuable; however, challenges arise in translating identified capacity gaps into long-term planning. This underscores the importance of ongoing reassessment and finding a balance between addressing immediate needs and achieving longer-term development goals.

VSA employs a capacity assessment process that includes workshops and a tool/template with targeted questions to evaluate organisational needs in collaboration with partners. This initial step is crucial to ensure that assignments are designed to address the real needs of partner organisations.

While partners find capacity assessment workshops useful, VSA's experience indicates that identified gaps do not always translate into effective long-term assignment planning. This disconnect is often due to organisational changes, budget constraints, and the limited capacity of smaller organisations to absorb support. Sustainable capacity development in the Pacific is also shaped by external factors, such as reliance on external funding and regional labour mobility schemes, which contribute to high staff turnover and prolonged vacancies, affecting the stability and sustainability of local organisations.

A challenge in the needs assessment process arises when volunteer roles are new to the partner organisation, particularly when the required skills are scarce in the local context and the broader Pacific region. For instance, the Business Analyst role at Solomon Water was introduced as a new position, with no prior equivalent in the organisation. This made it difficult for Solomon Water to fully define its needs. In such cases, VSA programme managers and partners often find it challenging to conduct a realistic needs assessment.

VSA addresses this challenge by relying on volunteers to reassess and refine the role's scope once they are deployed and have spent time with the organisation. For example, the Business Analyst role at Solomon Water was initially not fully understood by all team members due to its novelty. However, through proactive engagement by the volunteer with the team, specific ways in which the adviser could assist were identified. Over time, the demand for the volunteer's expertise grew as the organisation recognised the value of the role. Further details on this example, along with other case studies, can be found in Appendix 6.

When supporting under-resourced government or civil society organisations with limited staff, VSA assignments must carefully balance addressing immediate capacity needs critical for operational stability and service delivery with fostering longer-term development plans.

Diversity of partner organisations

Partner organisations hosting volunteers are selected based on their alignment with MFAT country strategy objectives. Potential partner organisations are identified in VSA country strategies and annual plans[8], using a mixed approach for scoping. VSA proactively identifies organisations based on gaps identified by country programme staff or volunteers, responds to expressions of interest from organisations, and considers recommendations from AVI, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), New Zealand High Commissions or

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[8] For example, the draft *VSA Solomon Islands Programme Strategy (2024–2025)* identifies key partners, such as the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, Rural Training Centres, and youth organisations in the education sector. In the environment and climate change space, VSA plans to collaborate with organisations like SPC, the Ministry of Environment, Climate Change, Disaster Management and Meteorology, and Rural Training Centres.

Embassies, and other development programmes. Once potential partners and assignments are identified, they are submitted to VSA's Wellington office for approval as part of the annual planning process. An analysis of partner organisations in the case study countries, Solomon Islands and Tonga (see Appendix 4 for the full list), highlights their broad alignment with MFAT's country plans and strategic objectives, particularly in terms of sectoral priorities.

To ensure alignment at both international and regional levels, VSA maps assignments to its thematic areas, the SDGs, and the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*. Through volunteer assignments, partner organisations are supported to contribute to a broad range of SDGs. In the current GFA, all assignments contribute to SDG 17 (*Partnerships for the Goals*), with SDG 4 (*Quality Education*) representing 48% and SDG 3 (*Good Health and Wellbeing*) covering 31%. It is important to note that some organisations address multiple SDGs concurrently. For a detailed breakdown of all assignments across SDGs, refer to Figure 2.

The majority of partner organisations are public sector entities (government agencies) and civil society organisations (NGOs), a composition that has proven effective in achieving programme goals. The focus on government agencies and NGOs ensures a complementary approach: government agencies benefit from the expertise and resources provided by volunteers, while NGOs leverage their local networks to directly serve communities. This combination effectively addresses both governmental capacity building needs and community-based initiatives.

Figure 2. Distribution of assignments by SDGs
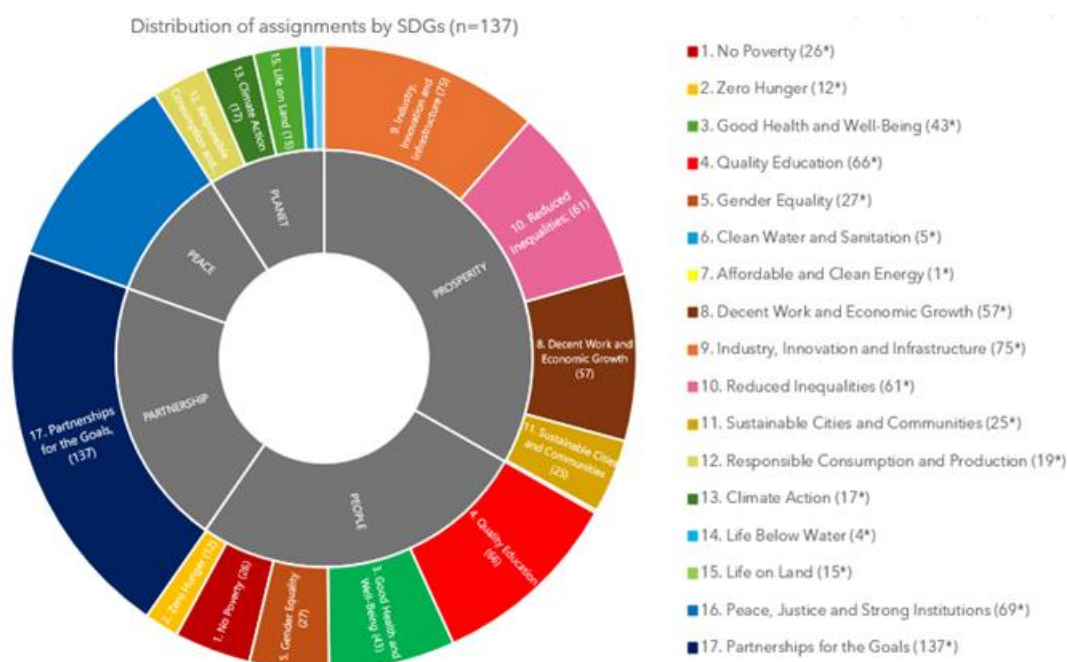
Source: VSA Annual Report 2023–2024.

Recommendations

Continuing the current focus on 10 countries 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.

Expanding partnerships with local community-based NGOs and local government agencies operating in targeted thematic areas could strengthen grassroots capacity and enhance

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community engagement. Where feasible, VSA might consider prioritising partnerships with smaller, community-based NGOs over UN agencies to better support these objectives.

Effectiveness of different volunteering modalities

The VSA volunteering programme offers a variety of modalities—including standard volunteering, e-volunteering, blended models, and the partnering for good—enabling it to respond effectively to diverse partner needs and adapt to different operational environments. For a detailed analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of each modality, refer to Table 4. For the distribution of volunteer assignments by modality, see Table 3.

The standard in-country modality accounts for most assignments (55 %). It remains the most preferred and effective model for partner organisations. It allows for direct, hands-on engagement and fosters strong relationships through face-to-face interactions. This model is particularly valued for its ability to build trust and provide deep cultural immersion, essential for sustainable knowledge transfer. While it incurs higher costs, the long-term benefits justify the investment. In-country volunteering also promotes New Zealand's values and expertise, supporting public diplomacy objectives.

E-volunteering, introduced pre-COVID and significantly expanded during the pandemic, provides a flexible option, particularly for tasks such as developing manuals and delivering software training that require less personal interaction. It has the potential to enhance inclusion by enabling volunteers with disabilities or those facing other constraints to contribute without the need for travel or fieldwork. Moreover, e-volunteering serves as a valuable tool for in-country volunteers to support partners and counterparts transitioning to operating independently, particularly for those ready to implement tasks but needing ongoing remote guidance to build confidence. However, e-volunteering poses challenges, especially in establishing relationships remotely, which is particularly significant in the Pacific context, where face-to-face interaction is often essential for building trust and fostering effective collaboration. Additionally, e-volunteering assignments can be difficult if counterpart staff or partner organisations lack the necessary technological infrastructure, reliable connectivity, or the skills required to effectively engage in this modality. Consequently, partner organisations generally prefer a hybrid approach that combines initial in-person engagement with subsequent remote support to maximise the benefits of both modalities.

Blended models, which combine in-country and remote work, offer a middle ground between cost-efficiency and the effectiveness of direct engagement. The division of time between in-country and New Zealand, including the duration and timing within the assignment, is tailored to the specific outcomes of the assignment and the needs of both the partner organisation and the volunteer. By starting with face-to-face interactions and transitioning to remote work, this modality helps overcome the challenges of building trust remotely while extending the volunteer's contribution. However, recruiting volunteers who can commit to both phases can be difficult, and the costs vary depending on the proportion of in-country versus remote work.

The hub-and-spoke model, in which a volunteer supports multiple organisations from a central base, has shown promise. This approach enables smaller organisations, which may lack the capacity to host a full-time volunteer independently, to benefit from shared expertise. However, the model requires careful coordination and has been implemented in only a limited number of cases, resulting in a lack of comprehensive evidence on its overall effectiveness.

The Uni-Vol programme, designed for young professionals, brings fresh perspectives to volunteer work while reducing costs, as these volunteers share accommodations and receive lower living allowances. Uni-Vol volunteers are well-suited to placements with civil society organisations, where they can support youth-to-youth development, rather than in public sector organisations. With the right partner organisation, they can make meaningful contributions to public diplomacy and the health and wellbeing of young people. However, their limited experience can sometimes impact effectiveness in specialised roles, and

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cultural sensitivity has been identified as an area needing additional focus. Recent adjustments to the programme include aligning assignments more closely with the volunteers' academic qualifications and expanding the target sectors beyond traditional international development.

Partnering for good model, involves the spouses or partners of volunteers in assignments and has proven successful in the Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, and Tonga. Feedback from partner organisations in Tonga highlights the model's strong potential to fully utilise accompanying partners' expertise for the benefit of local communities. Overall success depends on the Programme Manager's ability to identify partner organisations that are both interested in and capable of leveraging these skills. Unlike standard VSA assignments, where volunteers are recruited based on an assignment description provided by the partner organisation, partnering for good assignments are developed by identifying opportunities aligned with the accompanying partner's skillset and work experience. While still partner-led—since partner organisations assess their needs and determine how the assignment addresses them—these assignments are often viewed as more supply-driven than demand-driven.

Table 3. Distribution of volunteer assignments by modality, 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024

Volunteering modality	Number of assignments	Percentage in total number of assignments
Standard in-country	76	55%
Uni-Vol	23	17%
E-volunteering	23	17%
Blended	12	9%
Partnering for good	3	2%
Hub-and-spoke	0	0%
Total	137	100%

Table 4. Strengths and weaknesses of volunteering modalities

Modality	Strengths	Weaknesses
Standard (in-country)	• Highly valued by partner organisations due to face-to-face interactions that foster strong relationships and trust. • More effective for hands-on knowledge transfer, with volunteers working directly alongside local staff. • Encourages spontaneous capacity building, as volunteers can engage with local communities during their free time, increasing cost-effectiveness by supporting lifelong learning initiatives like community English groups. • Offers deep cultural immersion, enhancing cooperation with local staff and promoting a better understanding of local contexts. • Provides direct visibility of New Zealand's values and expertise, strengthening both the New Zealand and VSA brands in the field.	• High costs associated with visas, medical care, travel, accommodation, living expenses, and risk management make this model more expensive than alternatives like e-volunteering or blended approaches. • Limited to volunteers able to commit to full-time, in-country presence, reducing the available volunteer pool. • Higher risk of early returns due to challenges with local conditions or medical issues, which can affect the success of the assignment and cost.
E-volunteering	• Provides flexibility and access to a more diverse volunteer pool, including those unable to commit to in-country assignments. • Enhances inclusion by accommodating volunteers with disabilities or impairments that would prevent travel. • Ensures continuity during travel restrictions, as demonstrated during COVID-19. • Effective for specific tasks like manual development or software training, where remote support is sufficient.	• Connectivity issues and time zone differences can hinder communication and make relationship-building difficult, especially in Pacific contexts where trust is crucial. • Often excludes the most vulnerable populations who lack internet access, reducing the reach and inclusiveness of the programme. • Partner organisations typically prefer volunteers to begin with face-to-face interactions to establish trust, before transitioning to remote work, which complicates initial remote-only engagements.
Blended	• Combines the strengths of in-country and e-volunteering by starting with face-to-face interaction, building relationships that can be sustained remotely.	• Recruiting volunteers who can commit to both on-site and remote phases can be challenging, limiting the volunteer pool.

	• Offers flexibility, reducing the need for continuous physical presence while extending volunteer engagement. • More cost-effective than purely in-country assignments, as the model leverages both in-person and remote phases.	• Costs vary depending on location and the balance between in-country and remote stages, making budgeting less predictable.
Uni-Vol	• Engages young professionals, fostering innovation and fresh perspectives. • Lower overall costs compared to standard assignments, as Uni-Vol placements are typically in areas with lower living costs and shared accommodation, reducing expenses. • Provides opportunities for youth engagement in key areas such as climate change advocacy.	• Lack of experience among young volunteers can be a disadvantage in roles requiring specialised skills. • Cultural context is sometimes overlooked by Uni-Vol participants, which requires careful management and more extensive briefings to prepare them for local environments. • Partner organisations may benefit less from young volunteers compared to the volunteers themselves, necessitating careful targeting of placements.
Hub-and-spoke	• Maximises resources by enabling volunteers to support multiple partner organisations from a single base. • Particularly beneficial for smaller organisations that cannot sustain a full-time volunteer alone. • Offers increased opportunities for public diplomacy, as volunteers interact with multiple stakeholders.	• Requires careful coordination to ensure all partner organisations receive adequate support, which can be a logistical challenge. • The effectiveness of the hub-and-spoke model has not yet been fully established due to the historically limited number of cases and the absence of assignments during this evaluation. As more assignments are implemented, an evaluation of its effectiveness should be conducted before considering scaling up.
Partnering for good	• Leverages the skills of volunteer partners, adding expertise and multiplying community impact. • Provides additional support to partner organisations by engaging spouses/partners in volunteer activities, increasing the programme's value.	• Limited to situations where both partners are available and willing to volunteer, making it a niche model. • Effectiveness has not been extensively studied due to the small number of cases, requiring further evaluation to determine scalability and impact.

Effectiveness by duration of assignment

Evidence from interviews with partner organisations shows that longer assignments are generally more effective in achieving sustainable outcomes compared to shorter ones. Extended time on the ground allows volunteers to settle in, engage with the local community, and fully understand the local context, resulting in more meaningful and durable knowledge transfer.

However, shorter assignments also have their place. They tend to attract a larger pool of volunteers. While these volunteers may not establish deeper peer-to-peer relationships, their quick interventions can be highly valuable, especially when no long-term volunteer is available - they reduce opportunity costs for partner organisations—ensuring some assistance, even if limited, is available rather than none at all when a longer-term volunteer is not available. Short-term assignments are often successfully used to address immediate capacity building needs or as part of a sequenced effort.

The current GFA sets a target for 20% to 35% of assignments to be short-term (up to six months) and 65% to 80% to be long-term (over six months). Current reporting indicates that 75% of assignments exceed six months, meeting the GFA target. This distribution appears effective, as the programme is progressing well toward achieving its outcomes by the end of the GFA period with this allocation. However, feedback from some partner organisations suggests a need for extending assignments to allow volunteers to stay longer within their organisations, ensuring knowledge is effectively transferred and capacity building is more sustainable. This indicates there is room for improvement by increasing the proportion of longer-term assignments where feasible.

Factors influencing achievement of intended outcomes

Distribution within countries

Volunteer placements have been predominantly concentrated in capital cities. Pre-COVID, 37% of assignments were based in rural areas in 2018, increasing slightly to 39% in 2019. However, by 2023, this figure dropped to 11%, with a modest rise to 12% in 2024. VSA has adopted a cautious approach to returning to rural areas post-COVID, but increasing rural placements remains a priority.

To illustrate the distribution of volunteer assignments across different countries:

- Solomon Islands: Currently, 87.5% of assignments (14 out of 16) are based in Honiara, the capital, while 12.5% are located in Gizo, Western Province. The new draft country strategy aims to expand efforts in rural areas, prioritising engagement with rural training centres. According to the Solomon Post, this shift is already underway, with five rural placements planned for 2025.

- Tonga: Currently, all assignments are based in Nukuʻalofa, the capital. VSA is actively exploring placements in Vavaʻu and plans to engage a contractor to support volunteers in these rural areas, particularly regarding safety and security.

- Vanuatu: Volunteers are currently based in Port Vila, Santo, and Tanna. VSA is conducting scoping exercises in Malekula, where volunteers were stationed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Papua New Guinea (PNG): The entire programme in PNG is classified as rural, based on the *Degree of Urbanisation* methodology adopted by the United Nations[9].

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[9] This system uses population size and density to differentiate urban from rural areas. For example, Kokopo, the capital of East New Britain Province, has a population of 40,231 and a density of 98 people per km², both below the urban classification threshold. Consequently, Kokopo, along with much of PNG, including Bougainville, is considered rural.

Focusing primarily on capital cities may hinder VSA's long-term strategic goals of fostering inclusive and widespread development, as it restricts the programme's reach into rural and remote communities where volunteer support is critically needed, as illustrated by the following case in point.

Case in point: Educational needs in rural areas of Solomon Islands and Tonga

Both the Solomon Islands and Tonga have communicated a need for volunteer support in rural areas, as expressed by partner organisations and volunteers.

In the Solomon Islands, a VSA volunteer serves as an HR Adviser with the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (MEHRD). MEHRD is implementing the *National Education Action Plan (NEAP) 2022–2026*, which aligns with the *Education Strategic Framework 2016–2030*. The focus of this plan is on improving education management systems and ensuring inclusivity, so that all children have access to education. It also aims to equip teachers with the resources and training necessary to deliver quality education. New Zealand supports NEAP implementation through its contribution to the Education Sector Support Program, which is part of the Australia-New Zealand Joint Solomon Islands Education Sector Support Program 2020–2023.

One of the key short-term outcomes (STO 2) in MFAT's *Solomon Islands Four Year Plan (2021)* is to ensure that "all Solomon Islanders, including women and girls, rural communities, and people with disabilities, have access to quality education." During consultations, MEHRD representatives expressed their appreciation for New Zealand's volunteer support, while emphasising the need to extend this assistance beyond Honiara into rural schools. MEHRD highlighted the need for volunteers to mentor teachers and school principals, with an emphasis on enhancing gender equality and improving STEM education. In particular, there is high demand for volunteers who can strengthen teachers' subject knowledge, pedagogical skills, and foster more effective, inclusive educational leadership.

In Tonga, two volunteers work with the Ministry of Education and Training's Inclusive Education Department—a sign language teacher and a speech pathologist. A representative from the Inclusive Education Department indicated that VSA should consider expanding volunteer opportunities to the outer islands, beyond Tongatapu. There is a pressing need for support in working with persons with disabilities in these areas, where human resources are particularly scarce.

On the positive side, expanding to these areas would enable VSA to address significant development needs outside urban centres. However, on the downside, concentrating volunteer efforts in a single rural institution may yield narrower benefits compared to supporting initiatives with broader, national-level impact. Also, rural assignments typically involve higher expenses for support and come with greater risks, particularly regarding medivac capabilities and volunteer safety. As highlighted by the *Solomon Post*, rural and remote placements present substantial challenges, particularly in terms of pastoral care. Many parts of the Solomon Islands face significant logistical difficulties, making it extremely challenging to provide adequate pastoral support.

Capacity building

VSA's capacity building approach focuses on developing, strengthening, and sustaining the capabilities of individuals, organisations, and communities over time. Using a strengths-based and inclusive method, VSA builds on existing local capabilities and ensures that all stakeholders, particularly marginalised groups, are involved in the process. This inclusive approach empowers stakeholders to manage and deliver self-determined services and products, fostering sustainable, locally owned development.

VSA encourages volunteers to engage in capacity building efforts across three levels, adapted from a UNDP model:

- Individual level: Developing skills, knowledge, confidence, and work approaches for counterparts.

- Organisational level: Supporting organisations in enhancing processes, structures, and networks to achieve their objectives effectively.

- Community level: Raising awareness, promoting participation and lifelong learning, and building social capital.

VSA's approach moves away from traditional top-down knowledge transfer, especially at the individual and organisational levels, aligning with its localisation agenda. This collaborative, culturally sensitive model promotes change that resonates with local values and practices. At the community level, capacity building initiatives include both formal activities, such as workshops, and informal engagement, where volunteers interact with local communities during their free time. Volunteers report on both types of contributions, capturing their broad impact.

VSA communicates its capacity building strategy during pre-departure briefings for volunteers and programme managers. However, some interviews highlighted occasional misunderstandings between partner organisations and volunteers. Resource-constrained partners often requested volunteers to perform gap-filling tasks, whereas volunteers preferred to focus on mentoring and training. This disparity may arise from differing interpretations of "capacity" and "capability," with capacity often understood as the availability of human resources, while capability refers to the development of skills. Although these instances appear to be isolated, further investigation is recommended to assess the scope of the issue and address any recurring challenges effectively.

Balancing capacity building with capacity substitution is essential for achieving long-term, sustainable outcomes. Traditional Western methods, such as formal training or workshops, may not always align with local preferences for skill development. In some cases, what might appear to be "capacity substitution"—where volunteers perform tasks that local staff could undertake—can serve as effective training. For example, a nurse educator delivering services while teaching fellow nurses demonstrates skills in real time, building trust and strengthening relationships. Though this may initially seem like task substitution, it helps volunteers better understand local capacities and fosters capacity building from within, rather than imposing external expertise. Achieving the right balance between task execution and mentoring is crucial. Volunteers must be adaptable, integrating mentoring into their tasks while respecting local practices and ensuring sustainable capacity development.

Long-term planning and continuity

Developing the capacity of partner organisations is a core objective of VSA's work. While most partner organisations and volunteers express confidence in the ability to achieve the desired outcomes from assignment design, concerns remain about whether the built capacity will be retained once the volunteer departs.

The ability to retain and sustain capacity after a volunteer leaves is crucial. VSA's 2018-2022 Activity Completion Report highlighted that people-centred development is key to ensuring knowledge and skills remain in the country, even if individuals move to different roles or organisations. However, in some cases, such as in Tonga, skilled individuals who received training left for opportunities in Australia or New Zealand via labour support schemes, posing a challenge to capacity retention. While skills migration is a trend that is out of VSA's influence, it does highlight the need to focus capacity building efforts on lasting organisational strengthening.

VSA can enhance continuity by strategically "stacking" volunteer assignments, ensuring consecutive deployments to the same partner organisation. This approach, while already in practice, would benefit from more systematic and widespread implementation. Country strategies could better support this by integrating longer-term plans that balance immediate capacity needs with future development objectives.

Demand for New Zealand know-how and values

Partner organisations consistently associate their volunteers with both VSA and New Zealand, with many recognising—without prompting—that VSA is funded by the New Zealand Government. These organisations seek New Zealand volunteers for their expertise, particularly in sectors where local resources and skills are limited. Consultations revealed that the primary motivation for hosting New Zealand volunteers is to access specialised skills and knowledge that are scarce in the host countries, along with the added advantage of New Zealand's internationally recognised expertise. For example, a representative from the Solomon Islands Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development noted that they specifically seek New Zealand volunteers due to New Zealand's strong reputation in education expertise.

Additionally, partner organisations greatly value the cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural competencies of New Zealand volunteers. Interviewed partners highlighted that they see New Zealanders as sharing similar values with Pacific communities. This cultural alignment is considered crucial for the success of volunteer placements.

Complementing other development programmes

Volunteer assignments delivered as standalone engagements often face limitations in achieving substantial development outcomes, primarily due to the typically limited budgets of partner organisations. This challenge has been consistently highlighted in both the Solomon Islands and Tonga, with evidence of similar issues in other partner country contexts.

Successful models of collaboration between VSA and existing donor-funded initiatives demonstrate ways to overcome these limitations. For instance, the National Rugby League Tonga's *Voice Against Violence* programme, funded by DFAT and MFAT, integrates VSA volunteers to strengthen the programme's outcomes. Similarly, in the Solomon Islands, VSA and AVI volunteers have collaborated at Honiara Hospital, where each focuses on different thematic areas and complements each other's strengths. These collaborative models illustrate the potential for scaling up partnerships where feasible, especially in cases where New Zealand High Commissions express interest in VSA working with partners they are already funding.

Recommendations

VSA should consider increasing rural placements, with a proposed target of 25% for rural assignments overall. However, while expanding rural placements is recommended and offers clear benefits, this should be pursued selectively, considering the specific context and needs of each country. The proportion of rural placements can be negotiated with MFAT Posts and MFAT country teams, as each country presents unique challenges and opportunities. Practical implementation may vary due to factors such as cost, pastoral care requirements, and risk considerations, particularly in terms of medivac capabilities and volunteer safety. Placing several volunteers in the same rural area offers a practical solution to address these challenges. This approach, successfully implemented in the Western Province of the Solomon Islands, enabled volunteers to support one another, reducing the logistical and emotional burdens associated with remote placements.

VSA should prioritise in-country volunteering as the primary modality due to its strong impact on building relationships, trust, and effective knowledge transfer through face-to-face interactions.

Blended volunteering could be expanded as a strategic complement to in-country assignments. This model allows for flexibility by starting with in-country interactions to build relationships, and can also serve as a bridge between two in-country visits.

E-volunteering should be reduced and reserved for specific tasks and partner organisations that are well-equipped for online collaboration.

Uni-Vol placements should continue, but partner organisations should be carefully selected to match the skills and capabilities of young volunteers. These placements offer valuable

opportunities for youth engagement, especially in areas like gender equality and climate change advocacy.

The hub-and-spoke model should be explored further for its potential to optimise resources by supporting multiple partner organisations from a single base. While this model has shown promise, further evaluation is needed to assess its effectiveness across different contexts.

The partnering for good model should remain an option, but its long-term viability warrants further evaluation. While it offers the potential to bring valuable additional expertise through spousal or partner volunteering, its scope is constrained by several factors. These include the availability of couples willing to volunteer together, the alignment of the accompanying partner's skills with the needs of partner organisations, and possible immigration or visa challenges for couples.

Ensuring the sustainability of capacity building efforts and embedding of organisational and community development outcomes will be key for next phase design.

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.

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 emphasising its importance and providing examples and strategies successfully used by other volunteers.

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.

Objective 2 – Efficiency

Key findings

- VSA's volunteer programme is more efficient when benchmarked against other international development modalities: it is a less expensive model for delivering capacity building support compared to traditional technical assistance (TA).

- VSA's volunteer programme rates well in efficiency comparing to other international programmes. When compared with AVI, it could be inferred that the programme volunteer spend is comparable to AVI.

- Direct costs broadly comparable to those of AVI. When comparing accommodation costs—a component of direct expenses—differences in management approaches must be considered. VSA directly manages accommodation, while AVI uses an allowance-based system, which affects cost interpretation. Indirect cost comparisons were not conducted because AVI's overhead data is confidential and unavailable. If such data were accessible, it might reveal differences in programme management costs that could alter the overall efficiency comparison.

- In 2023–2024, VSA delivered or had ongoing 137 assignments, a 13% shortfall from the target of 159, primarily due to fewer-than-planned standard in-country placements. Volunteer months totalled 785, falling slightly below the target of 815—a 4% shortfall—resulting from fewer assignments and earlier-than-expected completions, referred to by VSA as "early returns."

- A total of 24 volunteers (18% of assignments) returned earlier than planned. Of these, 54% were categorised as justified early finishers, as they completed their assignments ahead of schedule. This evaluation relied on VSA's reporting, as volunteers in this category were not interviewed. The remaining 46% (8% of assignments) were categorised as unjustified early returns, with reasons including family commitments, health issues, difficulties adjusting to living in-country, assignment-related challenges, and partner organisation dissatisfaction.

- In 2023–24, the management-to-delivery cost ratio was 27:73, a slight increase from 23:77 during the pre-COVID period of 2018–19. The number of volunteer assignments decreased to 137 in 2023–24, compared to 190 in 2018–19. In other words, fewer assignments were delivered with higher overheads, which indicates a potential decline in efficiency compared to the pre-COVID period.

- VSA's current budgeting and reporting to MFAT do not clearly distinguish between management and delivery costs, making it difficult to assess the ratio of management to delivery expenses or the proportion of management costs in the total programme expenditure.

- VSA's strategic focus on increasing in-country staffing enhances programme development, management, and cultural competency. Partner organisations and volunteers have highlighted the critical role of in-country staff in designing and supporting volunteer assignments. This approach is expected to improve efficiency, as local staff costs are lower, provided Wellington staffing levels remain stable. It would also enhance programme effectiveness by stronger local engagement and support. Recent organisational restructuring has positioned VSA to deliver outcomes effectively within an evidence-based framework.

Key recommendations

5. Value for money

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.

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.

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.

- 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.

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. Additionally, 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.

6. *Financial reporting for the next GFA period (2025–2028)*

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.

6.2 VSA and MFAT should agree on cost-effectiveness metrics. Two suggested metrics are:

- 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 total volunteer programme spend.

> 6.3 VSA should clearly define direct volunteer programme spend and specify which Wellington-based costs are directly attributable to volunteers and which are considered indirect costs. These classifications should be consistently applied in all reporting.
>
> 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.

VSA's budgeting and reporting process

VSA reports to MFAT on:

- Actual expenditure versus budget (overall and by country),
- Costs by major cost centres, and
- Costs for volunteer monthly- and hourly-equivalent assignment (by modalities).

The financial narrative in VSA's reports focuses on budget utilisation and explanation of variances, but does not provide analysis that links budget allocation to outputs from the GFA output costed table.

VSA's current budgeting and reporting practices for MFAT use cost categorisations that do not clearly and consistently distinguish between management and delivery costs. Table 5 compares how direct and indirect costs are categorised in VSA's current budgeting and reporting processes, and shows differences in interpretation. This lack of consistency and clarity in defining what constitutes direct and indirect costs creates challenges in calculating the ratio of management to delivery costs or determining the proportion of management costs within the total programme expenditure. Addressing these discrepancies is essential to ensure more effective financial analysis and reporting.

Table 5. Cost categories in VSA's current budgeting and reporting process

VSA programme budget 2018–2025		VSA GFA 2023–2025 progress reports	
Direct costs	Volunteer costs (in-country): travel, accommodation, allowances and grants, medical, insurance, security	Volunteer programme costs	Overseas programme costs: in-country volunteer expenses directly allocated to assignments, such as travel, accommodation, living allowances, medical expenses, insurance, in-country staff salaries, utilities, and rent
	Volunteer management and support costs (in-country): travel, accommodation, salaries for country programme managers, programme advisers, and local country programme coordinators		
	Volunteer management and support costs (in New Zealand): volunteer recruitment, health checks, vaccinations, briefing,		Other volunteer programme costs: New Zealand-based costs that support the in-country programme but are not allocated to specific assignments, including volunteer recruitment,

	training, monitoring, support, fundraising, and salaries		briefings, operations, programme management, and outcome reporting
Indirect costs	Marketing and communications costs: including VSAConnect and salaries	Other expenses	Wellington administrative cost centres
	Overheads: rent, audit, governance, insurance, finance, HR, legal, IT, and salaries		

Cost-effectiveness metrics

Evaluating cost-effectiveness in volunteer and international development programmes requires a mix of qualitative and quantitative metrics. There is no consensus among volunteer organisations on the most effective metrics, and this is an area of ongoing development.

Different programmes adopt varying approaches to cost-effectiveness evaluation. For example, the UK's VSO uses quantitative metrics such as cost per volunteer and cost per beneficiary, supplemented by qualitative assessments of procurement processes and overhead management. A list of cost-effectiveness quantitative metrics is provided in Table 6.

A Value for Money (VfM) assessment offers a more holistic approach to evaluating cost-effectiveness by linking inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impacts. It has been widely used in international development, but there have been few VfM assessments conducted for international volunteering programmes, including AVI[10].

VfM assessment often uses the 4Es framework:

- Economy: Are **inputs** procured at the lowest cost without compromising quality?

- Efficiency: How effectively are inputs converted into **outputs**?

- Effectiveness: To what extent do outputs achieve intended **outcomes**?

- Equity: How equitably do outcomes lead to **impact** for all including vulnerable groups?

Applying the framework requires defining sub-criteria for each element[11] with predefined performance standards (excellent, good, adequate, poor).

External evaluation can enhance credibility, but this depends on budget availability. Annual assessments are not necessary; midterm or end-of-programme evaluations are typically sufficient for meaningful insights.

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[10] In 2021, AVI commissioned a proof-of-concept Value for Money (VfM) assessment through an independent contractor. The assessment included a preliminary VfM analysis and the development of a framework for future evaluations, though no follow-up assessments have been conducted. AVI's Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Framework also provides guidance for VfM assessments, addressing two key questions: (1) How efficiently is the programme delivered, including achieving outputs on time, of good quality, and within budget? and (2) To what extent has the programme adapted and improved its management of volunteering, including trialling new methods?

[11] For example, under economy, sub-criteria might include total programme cost, cost per country, and cost per volunteer, along with a qualitative assessment of procurement practices. Under efficiency, sub-criteria could address cost control measures, risk management, and staff and volunteer recruitment practices.

Table 6. Comparison of cost effectiveness metrics

Metric	Calculation method	Comments
1. Cost per volunteer	Total volunteer programme expenditure[12] ÷ total number of volunteers	This metric is easy to calculate but requires a clear definition of Wellington-based costs directly attributable to volunteer management and support. It provides valuable insights into costs across countries or regions for planning purposes. However, when using it for benchmarking, contextual factors must be considered, as the cost of doing business varies across locations. VSA's focus on the Pacific region may result in comparatively higher costs per volunteer than programmes operating in other regions, due to low economies of scale and the region's remoteness from international markets.
2. Cost per FTE (12 months, 1 month, 1 day, 1 hour)	12 months: Total volunteer programme expenditure ÷ FTE (total volunteer months ÷ 12) 1 month: Divide 12-month FTE by 12 1 day: Divide 1-month FTE by 22 (standard working days in a month) 1 hour: Divide 1-day FTE by 8 (standard working hours in a day)	A 12-month FTE is useful for comparing costs between countries to assess expenditure differences but may be misleading if countries have significantly different proportions of short-term and long-term assignments. For example, two consecutive 6-month assignments are more expensive than a single 12-month FTE due to the additional onboarding and debriefing costs. This metric should be supplemented with data on assignment durations for a fuller understanding of cost dynamics. Metrics for 1-month, 1-day, and 1-hour FTEs provide valuable insights for comparing the costs of different modalities.
3. Cost per beneficiary	Total volunteer programme expenditure ÷ total number of direct beneficiaries	This metric is useful for understanding the reach of the programme, specifically the number of beneficiaries served per dollar spent. However, a higher number of beneficiaries does not necessarily indicate greater effectiveness, as it does not reflect the quality of support provided. Programmes that focus on fewer, strategically important partner organisations and individuals with deeper engagement may achieve more significant outcomes than those targeting larger numbers of direct beneficiaries.

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[12] The total volunteer spend includes three cost categories:
1. Volunteer field costs: These include travel expenses (flights to and from New Zealand, visas), rental accommodation and utilities, insurance, living, establishment, and resettlement allowances, security expenses, and motor vehicle costs.
2. In-country volunteer management and support costs: These cover travel and accommodation expenses for staff traveling from other countries (not applicable for local staff) and salaries for country programme staff.
3. Wellington-based volunteer management and support costs: These include recruitment expenses, medical costs (pre- and post-assignment check-ups, vaccinations, medical kits, and dental care), briefings and debriefings, monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL), as well as a proportion of staff salaries allocated to volunteer management and support.

		Including indirect beneficiaries—such as communities benefiting from the strengthened capacities and improved services of partner organisations—can provide a broader perspective on programme impact. However, capturing this information through monitoring is challenging.
4. Management-to-delivery ratio	Total indirect costs divided by total direct programme costs	This metric provides insight into resource efficiency, indicating how administrative functions support volunteer delivery. Clear definitions and detailed itemisation of indirect and direct costs are essential for transparency and to ensure an accurate assessment.
5. Percentage of overheads in total programme costs	Toal overheads divided with ta programme cost	This metric indicates efficiency but does not reflect the quality or impact of outcomes. While a low overhead ratio may suggest efficiency, it could also indicate underinvestment in critical functions.

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Cost effectiveness of VSA's programme

Number of assignments

In 2023–2024, a total of 137 assignments were delivered or are ongoing, representing a 13%shortfall against the target of 159. The shortfall is due to fewer-than-planned standard in-country placements. Although targets for e-volunteering, blended assignments, and Uni-Vol placements were exceeded, these gains did not offset the decline in in-country placements.

Both internal and external challenges contributed to the shortfall. Internally, VSA faced capacity constraints, including understaffing within the volunteer recruitment team in 2023, which delayed the processing of applications. Externally, visa delays—particularly in PNG—disrupted timelines for volunteer placements. Additionally, a small number of volunteers withdrew during the pre-deployment phase, primarily for personal reasons.

Number of assignment months

The total number of volunteer months in 2023–2024 reached 785, falling slightly short of the planned target of 815 months—a shortfall of approximately 4%. This gap is attributed to a combination of low assignment numbers, early finishers[13], early returns[14], and cancelled assignments[15].

VSA data shows that 24 volunteers returned earlier than planned from their assignments, approximately18% of the total 137 assignments. Of these, 54% (13 volunteers) were categorised as justified early finishers. It is important to note that this evaluation relied on VSA's reporting for this information, as volunteers who returned early due to completing their assignments were not interviewed. The remaining 46% (11 volunteers), equivalent to 8% of the total assignments, were categorised as unjustified early returns.

The reasons for early departures included personal circumstances, such as family commitments and health issues; difficulties adjusting to local conditions; assignment-related challenges; and dissatisfaction from partner organisations with volunteer performance. While these issues suggest potential gaps in pre-deployment preparation, volunteer skill matching, in-country support, or alignment of expectations, the small number of early returns makes it premature to attribute these gaps to the entire VSA system.

VSA has introduced a monitoring system to track early returns and assignment extensions, but insights remain limited due to the small sample size, as the system was implemented only during this evaluation period. As more data is collected, VSA anticipates gaining a clearer understanding of these trends. Addressing the underlying factors will be essential for minimising early returns and achieving programme outcomes.

Cost per volunteer

The average direct cost of a full-time equivalent (FTE) assignment over 12 months is NZ$139,286 without e-volunteering and for blended volunteering (in-country only). This represents the average cost across all countries, noting that actual costs vary by country due to differences in living expenses, travel, and operational costs.

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[13] Volunteers who ended their assignments early because they achieved the assignment outcomes earlier than the planned duration.

[14] Volunteers who ended their assignments early without achieving the assignment outcomes.

[15] Assignments that were terminated when partner organisations withdrew from hosting a volunteer, or when volunteers withdrew or were red-flagged.

Table 7. Cost per volunteer (without e-volunteering and with blended volunteering), 1 July 2023 – 30 June 2024

Cost effectiveness metrics, 2023-2024		Cost per volunteer (NZ$)	Cost per 12-month FTE (NZ$)
Total volunteer spend (NZ$)	7,124,497	69,848	139,286
Total programme cost (NZ$)	9,843,560		
Number of assignments	102		
Number of assignment months	614		

Source: Volunteer Service Abroad. (2024). VSA Annual Report 2023–2024 – Table 1: Financial Summary Table: 1st July 2023–30th June 2024 (p. 46).

The cost per 12-month FTE, including e-volunteering, blended, and in-country assignments, has increased by 36% from 2018–2019 to 2023–2024 (Table 8). This increase is largely justified by higher living and operational costs, particularly the rising expenses of placing volunteers in-country[16]. Airfare prices have surged post-COVID-19 pandemic. Accommodation remains a major cost driver[17], with rental prices rising—anecdotally due to heightened demand from returning donors and NGOs amidst a limited supply of safe and secure housing. Insurance costs have also increased and are a significant contributor to overall expenses[18].

A smaller contributing factor is internal efficiency issues, particularly the impact of lower-than-planned volunteer assignment numbers and total assignment months on the cost per FTE. Fixed costs, such as pre-rented housing and Wellington-based expenses for volunteer management (including recruitment, briefing, and debriefing), are distributed across fewer volunteers, driving up the cost per FTE.

Table 8. Cost per 12-month FTE assignment, 2018–2025

Fiscal year	Cost per 12-month FTE assignment (NZ$)
2018–2019	81,857
2019–2020	87,655
2020–2022 (COVID-19)	n/a
2022–2023	91,377
2023–2024	111,637

Source: VSA 2024–2025 financial summary table [Excel spreadsheet]; VSA Annual Report 2023–2024 – Table 1: Financial Summary Table: 1st July 2023–30th June 2024 (p. 46).

There is an increased volunteer presence in local communities outside formal assignments, contributing to programme visibility, enhancing New Zealand's public diplomacy outcomes, and delivering additional benefits to local communities. In 2023–2024, 80% of volunteers engaged in extra community work, with 46% participating at least once a week and 34% at least once a month[19]. This work is not accounted for in the cost per volunteer calculation. Including the time volunteers spend beyond their official assignments in the cost-per-

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[16] This has had a particular impact on overall costs, as approximately three-quarters of volunteer placements were in-country in 2023–2024.

[17] In 2023–2024, VSA spent NZ$1,498,866 on rental accommodation, which accounted for 20% of total direct costs.

[18] In 2023–2024, insurance expenses totalled NZ$382,513, representing approximately 5% of total direct costs.

[19] Volunteer Service Abroad. (2024). *Annual report 2023–2024: Figure 19 frequency of volunteers (N=38) and accompanying partners (N=3) participation in community activities* (p. 36).

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volunteer-hour assessment would lower the calculated cost, indicating that the economic value of volunteer contributions is currently underestimated.

Cost per country

VSA has volunteer assignments in both higher-cost and lower-cost countries, with significant variation in cost per volunteer across countries. The average expenditure per 1-month FTE, excluding e-volunteering and blended volunteering (in-country only), ranges from NZ$2,870 in Cambodia, the lowest, to NZ$24,462 in PNG, the highest (More than half of VSA's 2023–2024 portfolio (64%) is concentrated in below-average-cost countries, allowing the organisation to maximise its reach and outcomes while staying within budgetary constraints.

Table 9).

As shown in Figure 3, countries with costs above the average are the Cook Islands, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, and PNG. VSA's *Annual Report 2023–2024* attributes this significant discrepancy in country costs largely to holding accommodation costs and higher safety-related expenses in PNG compared to other countries[20]. Similar challenges are noted in Kiribati, though the overall impact is less pronounced.

Expenditures in PNG and Kiribati significantly exceeded their budgets, particularly in PNG, which was budgeted at NZ$7,328 per month. This considerable variance highlights the challenges VSA faces in managing unpredictable, context-specific expenses. It underscores the need for a more flexible budgeting approach to better accommodate these variances while maintaining programme effectiveness across diverse operating environments.

More than half of VSA's 2023–2024 portfolio (64%) is concentrated in below-average-cost countries[21], allowing the organisation to maximise its reach and outcomes while staying within budgetary constraints.

Table 9. Cost per country (without e-volunteering and with blended volunteering), 1 July 2023 – 30 June 2024 (NZ$)

Country	Expenditure	Assignment numbers excl E-Volunteers	Cost per volunteer	Cost per 12-month FTE	Cost per 1-month FTE
Cambodia	68,871	2	34,436	34,436	2,870
Cook Islands	656,688	14	46,906	108,351	9,029
Fiji	359,388	6	59,898	100,840	8,403
Kiribati	298,601	2	149,301	219,368	18,281
PNG including Bougainville	1,066,934	9	118,548	293,544	24,462
Samoa	508,990	13	39,153	76,278	6,357
Solomon Islands	1,026,484	13	78,960	110,872	9,239
Timor-Leste	675,114	12	56,260	96,615	8,051
Tonga	648,001	9	72,000	68,018	5,668
Vanuatu	776,263	22	35,285	78,225	6,519
Total	**6,085,334**	**102**			

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[20] Due to the limited availability of suitable housing in required assignment locations, VSA must pre-rent properties to ensure availability. However, these properties may remain vacant if volunteers are deployed later than expected or if assignments do not proceed as planned. Additionally, VSA must secure high-quality, safe accommodation, which is significantly more expensive in PNG than in countries like Fiji or Vanuatu.

[21] VSA allocated 50 assignments to above-average cost countries (Cook Islands, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, and PNG) and 87 assignments to below-average cost countries (Cambodia, Fiji, Samoa, Timor-Leste, Tonga, and Vanuatu). This allocation demonstrates a cost-efficient use of resources.

Source: Volunteer Service Abroad. (2024). *Annual report 2023–2024: Figure 21 Total in-country costs vs budget* (p. 48).

Note: The sum of all country expenses in this figure (NZ$6,085,334) does not match the total direct costs reported in the VSA annual report (NZ$7,070,690), indicating a discrepancy in the report. While this may slightly affect the accuracy of individual country costs, the overall comparison remains reliable.

Figure 3. Cost per 1-month FTE across countries (NZ$), 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024
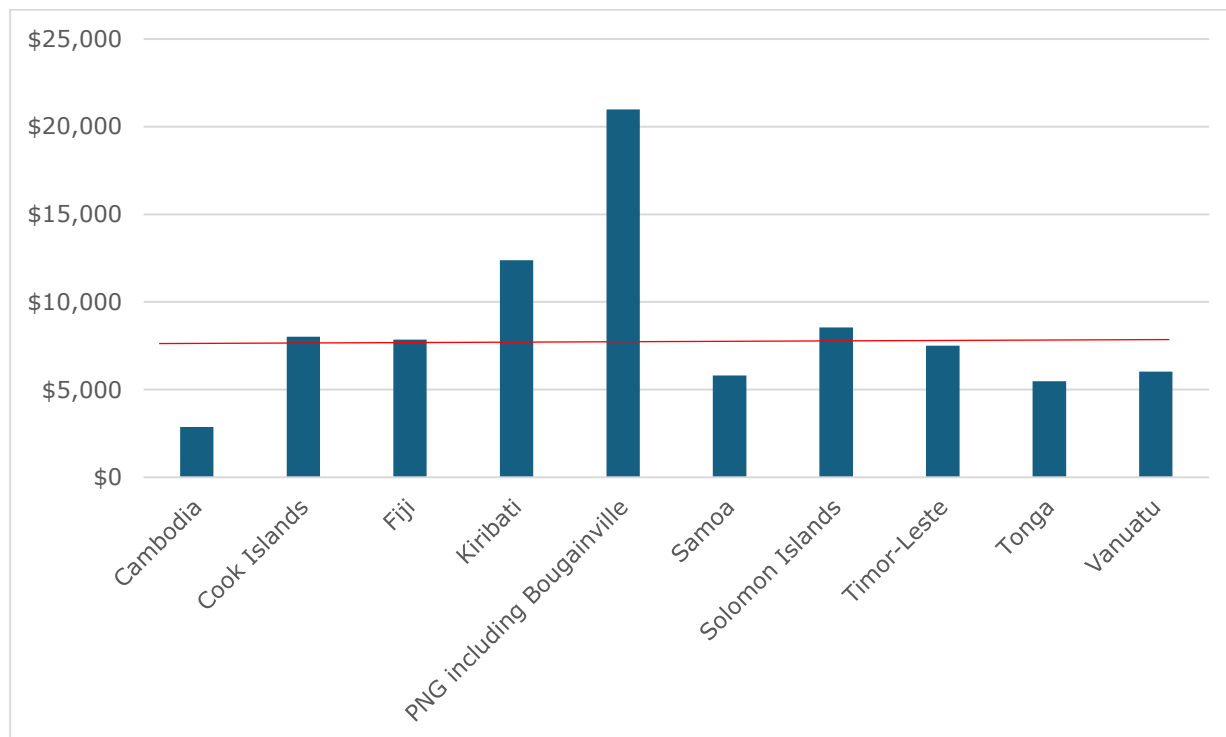
Source: Volunteer Service Abroad. (2024). *Annual report 2023–2024: Figure 21 Total in-country costs vs budget* (p. 48).

Note: Red line represents the average in-country cost per volunteer 1-month FTE across all countries for 2023–2024, which is NZ$ 7,883.

Direct volunteer cost by assignment modality

Standard assignments are the most expensive modality, followed by blended assignments, while e-volunteering is the least costly. The cost of blended assignments varies based on the location, as some countries are more expensive, and whether the volunteer is in-country or working remotely during the reporting year. Uni-Vol assignments are slightly less expensive than standard assignments, as they are generally located in areas with lower living costs and involve volunteers using shared accommodation.

Table 10. Direct volunteer cost by modality (NZ$), 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024

Metric / volunteering modality	Standard (in-country)	E-volunteering	Blended	Uni-Vol	Partnering for good
Cost per volunteer/month	4,335	132	1,475	3,893	2,119
Cost per volunteer/day	216	16	72	192	104
Cost per volunteer/hour	27	2	9	24	13

Source: VSA (2024) Annual Report 2023–2024.

Note:

- Cost per volunteer/month: Calculated as the total volunteer spend divided by the number of assignment months during the reporting period.
- Cost per volunteer/day: Derived by dividing the monthly cost by 22 (standard working days in a month).
- Cost per volunteer/hour: Derived by dividing the daily cost by 8 (standard working hours in a day).

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Management-to-delivery cost ratio

In 2023–24, the management-to-delivery cost ratio was 27:73, a slight increase from 23:77 during the pre-COVID period of 2018–19 (Table 10). The number of volunteer assignments decreased to 137 in 2023–2024, compared to 190 in 2018–2019. In other words, fewer assignments were delivered with higher overheads, which indicates a potential decline in efficiency compared to the pre-COVID period. The rise in management costs requires ongoing 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 2024–2025 will be important for ensuring cost-effectiveness.

Table 11. Proportion of direct and indirect costs in total expenditures (2018–2025)

	2018–19	2019–20	2020–22 (COVID-19)	2023–24	2024–25
Volunteer costs (in-country)	43%	44%		n/a	*38%*
Volunteer management and support costs (in-country)	19%	21%		n/a	*24%*
Volunteer management and support costs (New Zealand)	18%	18%		n/a	*17%*
Total direct costs – volunteer program spend)	**77%**	**78%**	n/a	**73%**	**80%**
Marketing and communications costs	4%	3%		n/a	*4%*
Overheads	19%	19%		n/a	*16%*
Total indirect costs – other expenses (Wellington)	**23%**	**22%**		**27%**	**20%**
Number of assignments	190	162		137	*170*

Source: VSA 2024–25 financial summary table [Excel spreadsheet];2023–2024 figures are based on VSA (2024) Annual Report 2023–2024.

Note: n/a – data not available; Data in *italics* represent budget estimates, not actuals.[22]

Volunteer-to-staff ratio

The recent organisational restructuring has positioned VSA for effectively delivering outcomes within an evidence-based framework.

In 2023–2024, each VSA FTE staff member supported, on average, 2.8 volunteers, while each in-country FTE staff member supported 8.4 volunteers (Table 12). In comparison, pre-COVID levels in 2018–2019 saw each VSA FTE staff member supporting 4.0 volunteers and each in-country FTE staff member supporting 12.7 volunteers. This decline is primarily attributed to a reduced number of volunteer assignments during the year. The ratio is expected to improve with the projected increase in volunteer numbers in the next GFA period.

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[22] Please note:

- Volunteer costs (in-country): travel, accommodation, insurance, allowances, grants, medical, security
- Volunteer management and support costs (in-country): travel, accommodation, and salaries for country programme managers, programme advisers, and local country programme coordinators
- Volunteer management and support costs (New Zealand based): recruitment, health checks, vaccinations, briefing, training, monitoring, support, fundraising, and salaries
- Marketing and communications costs: including VSAConnect and salaries
- Overheads: rent, audit, governance, insurance, finance, HR, legal, IT, and salaries.

Table 12. Volunteer to VSA staff ratio (2018–2025, excluding COVID-19 impact)

Fiscal year	Total VSA staff funded		Total Wellington staff		In-country programme staff		Number of volunteer assignments	Volunteer to VSA staff ratio	Volunteer to Wellington staff ratio	Volunteer to in-country programme staff ratio
	#	FTE	#	FTE	#	FTE				
2018–19	50	47.3	35	32.3	15	15.0	190	4.0	5.9	12.7
2021–22	41	40.5	26	25.5	15	15.0	95	2.3	3.7	6.3
2022–23	49	47.1	31	30.8	18	16.3	116	2.5	3.8	7.1
2023–24	53	49.4	34	33.1	19	16.3	137	2.8	4.1	8.4

Source: VSA internal documents; Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA). (2023). Completion Report: 2018–2023; Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA). (2024). Annual Report: 2023–2024.

VSA has shifted towards increasing local in-country staff for programme management and support, with the number of in-country staff growing from 15 in 2018–2019 to 19 in 2023–2024. Hiring locally is more cost-effective than deploying New Zealand-based staff to the Pacific and facilitates locally-led, culturally-informed assignment design, and better volunteer support and management. Interviews with partner organisations emphasised the importance of having in-country staff for face-to-face engagement in the Pacific context. Partners valued their role in assignment design and appreciated the ability to address performance issues directly with someone on the ground. Volunteers expressed gratitude for the support provided by local staff during their assignments. Moreover, local in-country staff have enhanced VSA's cultural competency, as noted in interviews with VSA. This approach is anticipated to increase volunteer placement numbers, boost volunteer performance, and reduce costs, thereby improving cost-effectiveness.

Wellington-based staff numbers have remained relatively stable, increasing slightly from 50 in 2018–2019 to 53 in 2023–2024 (Table 13). This modest growth reflects VSA's response to rising compliance demands, particularly in volunteer recruitment, where staff increased from 5 to 6.5 during the same period to address growing needs. At the same time, efficiency gains in operations have allowed staff numbers to decrease from 7 in 2018–2019 to 6.5 in 2023–2024.

A key development in 2023 was the establishment of the International Development and Insights team, comprising three staff members. This team has strengthened the programme's monitoring and reporting capabilities. They now conduct research, evaluations, and reviews internally, rather than engaging external contractors as was previously the case, which reduces the effort required for contract management.

Table 13. VSA's human resources (2018–2025, excluding COVID-19 impact)

VSA's human resources	2018/19		2021/22		2022/23		2023/24	
	# of staff	FTE	# of staff	FTE	# of staff	FTE	# of staff	FTE
Executive	4	3.8	2	2	2	1.8	2	1.8
Finance and IT	6	4.3	5	4.5	5	5	5	4.53
Human Resources	2	1.8	2	2	3	3	3	2.8
Operations	7	7	4	4	5	5	6.5	6.5
Volunteer Recruitment	5	5	4	4	5	5	6.5	6.5
Stakeholder Engagement	11	10.4	9	9	8	8	8	8
International Developments and Insights	0	0	0	0	3	3	3	3
Wellington total	35	32.3	26	25.5	31	30.8	34	33.1
In-country Programme Managers	8	8	9	9	9	9	9	9
Other in-country staff	7	7	6	6	9	7.26	10	7.26
In-country total	15	15	15	15	18	16.3	19	16.3
Total	50	47.3	41	40.5	49	47.06	53	49.39

Source: VSA internal documents

Cost of VSA compared to other programmes

VSA volunteering is cost-efficient comparing to other volunteering programmes.

Direct cost

The closest equivalent organisation to VSA is AVI, a programme funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

VSA's average monthly living costs, including living allowances and accommodation, are approximately 15% lower than AVI's across all countries, excluding the Cook Islands where AVI does not operate (Table 14).

It is important to consider the context behind these figures for VSA and AVI, as they have different approaches to managing accommodation costs. VSA directly manages and pays for accommodation, while AVI provides allowances to volunteers, who are responsible for arranging their own accommodation.

A direct cost comparison between VSA and AVI would need to account for all programme expenses related to volunteers, including air travel, staff salaries for volunteer management, medical checks, insurance, security, accommodation, and volunteer honorariums. However, such a comprehensive comparison is not feasible due to differences in reporting, data availability, volunteer placement locations, and the number of placements. It is reasonable to assume that international travel costs are similar for both programmes, as airfare prices are comparable and VSA uses economy flights. This analysis, therefore, focuses on volunteer living allowances and accommodation costs, collectively referred to as volunteer living costs.

In addition, VSA's establishment grants to volunteers are approximately 30% lower than those offered by AVI[23].

Table 14. VSA and AVI: volunteer monthly living costs

	VSA	AVI	VSA	AVI
Country	**Living allowances (NZ$)**		**Accommodation (NZ$)**	
Cambodia	1,595	1,475	379	1,138
Fiji	1,131	1,447	1,485	1,262
Kiribati	1,449	1,428	2,231	1,415
PNG including Bougainville	981	1,781	3,489	4,017
Samoa	1,173	1,515	761	668
Solomon Islands	1,513	2,024	2,513	1,678
Timor-Leste	1,531	1,491	782	2,089
Tonga	1,063	1,381	1,273	1,639
Vanuatu	1,511	2,073	959	1,600

Source: For VSA numbers: Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA). (2024). Annual Report: 2023–2024; For AVI numbers: AVI. (2024). Living and accommodation allowances. Available at https://www.australianvolunteers.com/assets/documents/Support/September-2024_Living-and-Accommodation-Allowances_AVP.pdf.Note: AVI does not operate in the Cook Islands; therefore, cost for this country is not compared.

Indirect cost

Obtaining AVI's indirect cost data was not possible, as it is considered sensitive information, making a comparison between VSA and AVI cists unfeasible. Publicly available data on indirect costs from other international volunteering programmes are also not available.

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[23] For assignments shorter than six months, VSA grants NZ$375, compared to AVI's NZ$550. For assignments longer than six months, VSA provides NZ$750, while AVI offers NZ$1,100.

Some evaluation reports offer insights into efforts to reduce indirect costs as a percentage of total programme costs. For example, a formative evaluation of the Volunteer Cooperation Programme (2015–2020) [24] found that cost-saving measures helped maintain costs at a reasonable level but had mixed impacts on programme delivery—positively by fostering synergies and negatively by overextending human resources.

The UK's Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) Programme Completion Review (2022) report that the programme strengthened procurement practices and reduced overhead costs from 15.5% in 2016/17 to 11.5% in 2019/20, primarily by reducing the number of London-based staff. This led to a significant decrease in the cost per beneficiary, from £20.79 (~NZ$42) to £10.79 (~NZ$22). However, the review did not provide evidence on how these reductions affected programme outcomes, leaving it unclear whether the cost reductions improved overall cost-effectiveness or compromised the achievement of intended outcomes.

Cost of international volunteering compared to technical assistance

VSA volunteering is more cost-efficient than technical assistance (TA) consulting.

To compare VSA volunteering costs with TA advisers, VSA provided an indicative figure stating that technical advisers can charge up to NZ$ 3,000 per day, though no reference or methodology was provided for this figure.

For a more robust comparison, this evaluation used DFAT's Short-Term and Long-Term Adviser Daily Rates (effective 1 July 2021) from the Aid Adviser Remuneration Framework (ARF) [25]. This framework outlines DFAT's policies and procedures for determining the remuneration of commercially contracted international advisers, with benchmarks aligned to other aid agencies and Australian labour market standards, making it relevant for comparison with VSA. The ARF categorises advisers into four Discipline Groups (A, B, C, and D), with levels ranging from entry (level 1) to senior executive (level 4). For the purpose of comparison with VSA volunteers, Discipline Group B is most relevant, as it includes advisers in fields such as education, community development, agriculture, and gender, particularly at levels 2 and 3 (middle and senior levels). Under the ARF, short-term contracts are defined as up to six months, while long-term contracts extend beyond six months.

Table 15. DFAT's international adviser rates

Discipline Group B	Daily rate (effective 1 July 2022 to 30 June 2023)	Daily rate (effective 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024)
Middle (Level 2)	602 AUD (648 NZ$)	605 AUD (652 NZ$)
Senior (Level 3)	781 AUD (841 NZ$)	785 AUD (845 NZ$)
Discipline Group B	Monthly rate (effective 1 July 2022 to 30 June 2023)	Monthly rate (effective 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024)
Middle (Level 2)	10,228 AUD (11,015 NZ$)	10,279 AUD (11,068 NZ$)
Senior (Level 3)	13,211 AUD (14,225 NZ$)	13,277 AUD (14,296 NZ$)

Source: DFAT's Aid Adviser Remuneration Framework

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[24] Global Affairs Canada. (2019). Evaluation of the Volunteer Cooperation Program (VCP): Summary report. Retrieved from https://www.international.gc.ca/gac-amc/publications/evaluation/2019/VCP_summary-sommaire-pcv.aspx?lang=eng

[25] This comparison uses Australian technical assistance rates rather than New Zealand rates, which may seem more logical for evaluating the cost of New Zealand volunteers. The choice is due to the availability of DFAT's Aid Adviser Remuneration Framework, which provides detailed and publicly accessible information on TA remuneration. New Zealand's MFAT does not have one central remuneration framework and hence it is difficult to obtain general TA rate information.

This evaluation finds that VSA volunteering is significantly more cost-efficient than TA consulting. The daily cost of a VSA volunteer assignment is substantially lower than market rates for TA consultants:

- VSA standard volunteering: NZ$ 216 per day (direct cost)
- DFAT middle level 2: NZ$ 652 per day
- DFAT senior level 3: NZ$ 845 per day.

Anecdotal evidence from interviewed stakeholders also suggests that partner organisations perceive volunteers as more cost-effective than TA advisers, who are often seen as highly paid consultants providing short-term inputs to development programmes.

While comparing the cost-efficiency of international volunteering and traditional TA consultancies is insightful, it is important to contextualise the differences in cost structure and the nature of services provided. For example:

- Volunteers receive living allowances or stipends, along with a one-off establishment grant, rest and respite grant, and a monthly resettlement grant. They are also covered for medical tests, insurance, and orientation, which often includes language training.
- TA advisers charge market rates for their services and receive additional per diems while in the field. They typically bring pre-existing technical expertise and do not undergo the same induction processes as volunteers.

Moreover, TA advisers often provide specialised expertise that the average volunteer may not be able to offer. On the other hand, volunteers can build long-term peer-to-peer relationships and integrate into the community, which short-term TA consultants may not have the time to develop.

In 2023–2024, Wellington-based indirect expenses totalled NZ$2,719,063, accounting for approximately 27% of the total programme cost of NZ$10,021,991. This percentage is comparatively reasonable when benchmarked against international development consultancies, where overhead costs typically average around 30%. Such levels are generally deemed acceptable by donors for covering the indirect costs of programme management and implementation.

VSA's practices for cost effectiveness

VSA is committed to cost-effectiveness through robust systems and processes, strong governance oversight, and adherence to the *Council for International Development's Code of Conduct*. Regular business and cultural reviews ensure continuous improvement. Additionally, VSA manages volunteers in line with the *Global Standard for Volunteers for Development* (2019), prioritising duty of care and effective management.

Key practices for enhancing cost-effectiveness currently employed by VSA include:

Procurement practices: VSA regularly reviews procurement systems to ensure suppliers deliver value for money. The organisation also hires local contractors for orientations and language training, reducing the need for permanent staff and thus lowering staffing expenses.

Recruitment practices: Recruitment processes have been optimised through the adoption of virtual interviews. Previously, in-person interviews for volunteers in Wellington cost approximately NZ$40,000 annually. By transitioning to online interviews, recruitment expenses have been reduced to around NZ$6,000 per year.

Accommodation management: VSA directly manages accommodation, including searching for, paying for, and maintaining properties. Accommodation represents the highest in-country cost and occasionally incurs holding costs when pre-rented properties remain vacant due to delays or cancellations in volunteer deployments.

To optimise expenditures, VSA subleases vacant rental properties whenever possible. In 2023–2024, subleasing in the Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, and Vanuatu reduced rent expenses by NZ$19,656. VSA also collaborates with landlords to fund necessary property upgrades upfront, recovering these costs through rent deductions over time. This approach ensures properties remain in good condition without increasing overall costs. While managing accommodation directly adds some administrative expenses, it helps reduce overall programme costs by mitigating risks related to volunteer health, safety, and security. Accommodation quality has a direct impact on volunteer satisfaction and retention, as emphasised in interviews with volunteers and programme managers.

Contributions from others: VSA has established a system to leverage contributions from various sources, stretching the reach of MFAT funding. Returned volunteers contribute their time by assisting with recruitment efforts and participating in public events to support New Zealand's public diplomacy. Collaborative partnerships with New Zealand and regional organisations facilitate resource sharing, including financial contributions. In-country partners provide in-kind support for volunteer assignments, such as accommodation or logistical assistance. Suppliers offer charity rates for software and advertising discounts.

Recommendations

Value for money

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

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volunteer placements and subleasing unused properties. Additionally, 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.

Financial reporting for the next GFA period (2025–2028)

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.

VSA and MFAT should agree on cost-effectiveness metrics. Two suggested metrics are:

- 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.

VSA should clearly define direct volunteer programme spend and specify which Wellington-based costs are directly attributable to volunteers and which are considered indirect costs. These classifications should be consistently applied in all reporting.

VSA should consider planning and allocating a budget for an external, independent 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 for enhancing VfM reporting:

Economy: Assess the cost-effectiveness of procurement practices. Examples could include VSA's regular procurement reviews, the use of local contractors for in-country orientations, and good procurement practices for major cost drivers such as accommodation, insurance, and airfares.

Efficiency: Include metrics such as cost per volunteer, number of volunteer assignments, and total assignment months. Comment on recruitment processes for timely and appropriate volunteer placement (for example, online recruitment, panel selection) and measures to reduce early returns (include percentage of early returns in total number of volunteers). Highlight cost control measures, such as engaging local staff for in-country programme management and subleasing vacant accommodation). Evaluate risk management strategies and their success in mitigating disruptions.

Effectiveness: Refer to a dedicated section on outcome achievement in the report and highlight how MEL processes inform programme adaptations and improvements.

Equity: Elaborate on how programme benefits are distributed fairly. Include metrics such as the percentage of partner organisations working in remote areas to demonstrate efforts to expand programme reach. Provide evidence of equity through initiatives that diversify the volunteer workforce and address barriers faced by volunteers with disabilities.

Objective 3 – Key Improvements in the Design of a New Phase

Key findings

- VSA faces challenges in consistently integrating cross-cutting issues such as GEDSI, climate change, and environmental sustainability. Currently, the connection between these issues and development outcomes is often unclear.
- VSA's current volunteer base shows underrepresentation of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including Māori and Pasifika communities and immigrants who are New Zealand citizens or residents.
- VSA's recruitment process is cost-effective. It has been praised by volunteers, programme managers, and partner organisations. There are still occasional delays in deployment processes, largely caused by slow medical clearances and visa processing.
- VSA has made significant progress in participatory MEL, including piloting culturally appropriate methods such as *talanoa* and *tok stori*. It is also addressing gaps in reporting and feedback mechanisms from partner organisations and volunteers. However, cross-cutting issues remain insufficiently integrated into the MEL framework.

Key recommendations

7. Enhance integration of GEDSI

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.

Suggested GEDSI approaches include:

- 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.
- 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.

8. Enhance integration of climate change and environmental sustainability

8.1 VSA Strategy 2030 should include a dedicated section on climate change and environmental sustainability, outlining practical strategies, such as:

- 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.

9. Improve localisation

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.

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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.

10. Continue improving participatory MEL

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.

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.

Relevance, effectiveness, inclusion and sustainability

Cross-cutting aspects

The evidence indicates that MFAT's priority cross-cutting issues (human rights, gender, and the environment) are reflected in VSA assignments. However, there is a lack of clarity, consistency, and robust monitoring of how these issues are systematically addressed across the entire programme.

A document review highlighted that while cross-cutting issues are acknowledged, VSA's approach is not clearly defined. For instance, in the country strategies like that of the Solomon Islands, these issues are referenced as IDC priorities, but there is no clear framework outlining how they will be addressed. Additionally, there is no direct linkage between cross-cutting issues and the short-, medium-, or long-term outcomes in VSA's Programme Logic.

VSA's reports provide examples of assignments addressing cross-cutting issues, but this evidence is inconsistent across the entire programme. There is no aggregated data that assesses the overall impact of these efforts at the programme level. For example, while partner organisation selection forms and assessment criteria include action on human rights and environmental sustainability, standard assignment descriptions do not consistently clarify how volunteers will engage with these issues.

Interview findings revealed inconsistencies in how cross-cutting issues, such as gender equity and climate resilience, are addressed. Many volunteers and partner organisations struggled to articulate how their assignments contributed to these issues, except where they were explicitly tied to the volunteer's role (e.g., assignments focused on sexual health, domestic violence, or environmental projects). In some cases, volunteers reported that their assignments did not address cross-cutting issues unless they were the core focus of the organisation.

GEDSI in assignments

VSA integrates GEDSI into its assignments, though there is considerable room for improvement. In Tonga, for example, VSA partners with the Uluaki Faiako Cooperation Society, a women-led CSO that has been running an early intervention programme for children with disabilities for over a decade. Expanding partnerships with organisations

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focusing on women's rights, LGBTIQA+ communities, and disability inclusion can further enhance GEDSI outcomes.

Uni-Vol volunteers, who often bring fresh perspectives, are particularly well-suited for these assignments. For instance, a Uni-Vol volunteer in Tonga worked on the Mai e Nima programme, which focuses on improving children's health and wellbeing and raising awareness about gender-based violence through the Health, Wellbeing, and Voices Against Violence initiative.

GEDSI in VSA staff and volunteer base

VSA prioritises equality, participation, sustainability, and accountability in its international volunteering programming. Both volunteers and staff are trained to model and uphold gender equity and social inclusion when representing the organisation. A critical factor in addressing these issues is ensuring volunteers and staff are aware of individuals in communities who are often excluded from decision-making. VSA recognises that understanding cultural and linguistic nuances is essential to promoting gender equality and social inclusion and is exploring ways to enhance its personnel's language and cultural competency.

Volunteers are selected based on both professional qualifications and personal attributes, including their attitudes towards gender equity and human rights. VSA also supports mixed modalities, such as e-volunteering, which can promote inclusivity by allowing greater involvement of people with disabilities. However, VSA currently lacks volunteers with disabilities, which highlights an area for improvement. Empowering people with disabilities who wish to volunteer is a future goal for VSA.

Like many other organisations, VSA faces challenges in achieving ethnic diversity within its volunteer cohort. This issue is not unique to VSA, as many volunteer organisations struggle with low demographic diversity, often due to informal recruitment through existing social networks and the use of language that resonates predominantly with already represented groups. Research from the International Forum for Volunteering in Development highlights this as a global issue and encourages a more inclusive approach to volunteering, advocating for diversified and inclusive volunteer profiles.

Other volunteer programmes are making strides in this area. For example, the 2022-2023 AVI Annual Report shows that 60.4% of their volunteers were women, 39.0% were men, 0.6% self-described, 2.2% identified as having a disability, and 0.8% as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. AVI is committed to enhancing the inclusion of First Nations Australians through its Indigenous Pathways initiative, which provides a flexible and culturally safe route for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to participate in international volunteering.

Although VSA's volunteer profile is diverse in terms of age, profession, and gender, it remains predominantly Pākehā, which does not reflect New Zealand's broader demographic makeup. This highlights an opportunity for VSA to further diversify its volunteer base. Engaging more Pasifika New Zealanders as volunteers shows promise. For example, a successful case involves a Pasifika Business Analysis Adviser from New Zealand working with the Solomon Water Authority. This demonstrates the potential for increasing ethnic diversity within the volunteer cohort, thereby enhancing VSA's representation of New Zealand's multicultural society and contributing to more culturally appropriate outcomes in the field.

Ensuring demographic diversity is a key priority for VSA. Some strategies VSA is employing to increase diversity in its volunteer base include:

- Increasing VSA's presence at local events frequented by diverse ethnic communities, such as farmers' markets and cultural festivals.

- Using inclusive language in recruitment materials to appeal to volunteers from a wide range of backgrounds.

VSA is already implementing these strategies, with a specific focus on engaging Pasifika people from New Zealand. A key step in this direction is the recent appointment of a Pacific Liaison staff member. Additionally, VSA conducted a desk review of volunteering in the Pacific, offering insights into the cultural context of volunteerism. Building on these efforts, VSA plans to develop and implement strategies to recruit and engage more Pasifika volunteers.

VSA recognises that it has been underprepared to accommodate volunteers living with disabilities. It has committed to improving how it supports these volunteers and plans to clearly define the types of accommodations and support it can and cannot provide. This information will be transparently communicated to volunteers prior to their placement in-country. Additionally, e-volunteering presents a valuable opportunity for individuals with disabilities who may face challenges with travel or accessing physically inclusive offices.

Climate change and environmental safeguarding

A similar approach to climate change, as used for GEDSI, can be adopted by employing a twin-track strategy to:

- Establish climate change as a key thematic focus, with separate assignments and measurable outcomes,

- Integrate climate change considerations into volunteering assignments where appropriate.

For VSA, focusing on climate-related projects with selected partner organisations may be the most feasible approach. VSA is already involved in some climate change assignments, and it is recommended to continue expanding these efforts. This could involve creating more assignments focused on climate change by partnering with organisations that specialise in this area. For instance, in the Solomon Islands, VSA plans to collaborate with the Ministry of Environment on climate initiatives.

Additionally, VSA can strengthen its environmental safeguarding initiatives. Although not thoroughly examined in this evaluation, VSA could follow the example set by AVI[26] and expand its climate-related impact through operational improvements.

Localisation

Localisation has been a significant topic of discussion in both global and New Zealand's international development and humanitarian sectors. The phrase *"as local as possible, as international as necessary,"* first introduced by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon during the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, has become central to the localisation agenda.

VSA's pursuit of localisation has been effective thus far. The organisation's approach is partner-led, with assignments being locally owned and directed. Moving forward, there are opportunities to strengthen this strategy by improving capacity assessments of partner organisations, co-designing assignments collaboratively, and involving partners more actively in participatory MEL processes.

The promotion of local volunteering is a recurring theme in the literature and an area that VSA is exploring. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated efforts to engage local volunteers. While this approach intuitively seems more cost-efficient than deploying New Zealand volunteers, it also comes with risks and challenges. These include the risk of diluting the New Zealand brand and potentially drawing local volunteers away from paid employment, leading to unintended negative consequences. Feedback from partner organisations during

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[26] In its 2022-2023 annual report, AVI detailed its integration of climate change considerations into strategic, programmatic, and operational activities. Led by an internal working group, AVI launched guidance for volunteers, provided climate-risk-aware training for staff and volunteers, and reviewed internal processes to better incorporate climate change messaging. AVI also reviewed its environmental safeguards and worked to decarbonise its programmes and operations. From July 2022 to June 2023, AVI staff and volunteers travelled 2,023,068 kilometres and emitted 476 tonnes of CO_2. To offset these emissions, AVI purchased internationally certified carbon credits from a small-scale renewable energy project in Sri Lanka.

this evaluation highlighted a preference for New Zealand volunteers, citing their expertise in specific sectors as a key advantage. Insights from VSA's Timor-Leste localisation pilot during COVID-19 demonstrated that engaging local volunteers can positively impact development outcomes and community wellbeing. However, there is insufficient evidence to recommend a more strategic pursuit or significant scale-up of this model.

There is opportunity for VSA to contribute to creating an enabling environment for a national volunteering system and supporting its implementation. For instance, the Timor-Leste government has expressed interest in establishing a national volunteering scheme to promote youth empowerment. While progress on this initiative has stalled due to shifting priorities, if revived, VSA could provide support to facilitate its development and implementation.

Recommendations

Enhance integration of GEDSI issues

- The 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[27].

- Suggested GEDSI approaches include:

• 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.

• 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.

- *Enhance integration of climate change and environmental sustainability*

- The VSA Strategy 2030 should include a dedicated section on climate change and environmental sustainability, outlining practical strategies, such as:

• 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.

Improve localisation

- 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.

- VSA could consider supporting local volunteering organisations or programmes in the Pacific by placing New Zealand volunteers within them. This approach would build

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[27] Key documents include the Policy for International Cooperation for Effective Sustainable Development, the Human Rights Strategic Action Plan for International Development Cooperation (2021–2025), the Gender Action Plan (2021–2025), and the Child and Youth Well-being Strategic Action Plan (2021–2025).

local capacity, strengthen volunteer systems, foster a culture of volunteering, and enhance employability in Pacific communities.

MERL framework

VSA uses a combination of written reports and *talanoa/tok stori* discussions to gather feedback from stakeholders. Additional feedback is collected from partners during in-country forums, which have been conducted in Tonga and Timor-Leste.

To enable data triangulation, the questions in the reports are similar across different stakeholder groups. Stakeholders also have the option to engage in *talanoa* with the International Development and Insights team instead of submitting written reports, which several volunteers and partner organisations have chosen to do.

Feedback from partners and volunteers is gathered at the start, midpoint, and end of assignments through written reports. Programme managers also submit reports at the end of each assignment. The average report return rates for FY2023/2024 are: volunteers 81% (n=176), accompanying partners 78% (n=14), counterparts 57% (n=55), partner organisations 56% (n=89), and programme managers 89% (n=67).

Strategies used to improve report return rates include:

- VSA introduced new, easier-to-use report formats in 2024. Stakeholders have appreciated the simpler structure and clearer expectations, which have led to improved compliance.

- Since May 2024, VSA has used MS Office forms for data collection from partner organisations and counterparts. This transition has resulted in an increase in report submission rates.

- The International Development and Insights team tracks report return rates and regularly follows up with stakeholders, which has led to better compliance.

- Data from reports are analysed and shared with programme managers each quarter. VSA has also shared these insights with partners, such as those in Tonga, to demonstrate how their feedback is being used to improve programmes.

In June 2024, VSA launched a pilot project in Tonga to test the use of *talanoa/tok stori* alongside written reports for monitoring outputs and outcomes. While it is too early to fully assess the data quality, early signs suggest that this approach allows participants to provide feedback in their local language, fostering greater engagement. VSA is considering using *talanoa/tok stori* to gather impact stories from local community members to better understand if and how capacity development efforts translate into improved service delivery.

However, feedback from local facilitators highlighted challenges in scheduling *talanoa* sessions with partners, likely due to consultation fatigue. Tonga partners were engaged in several VSA activities this year, including this external evaluation and partner forums. To mitigate this, partners were allowed to skip qualitative sections in their written reports and discuss their feedback verbally with local contractors instead. Interestingly, VSA found more success in obtaining written reports directly from partners than through contractors, suggesting that partners may prefer certain feedback mechanisms over others.

VSA's experience with *talanoa* in Tonga has shown that supporting local participation can be resource-intensive, requiring significant time and investment. Identifying suitable bilingual facilitators across the small Pacific Island states where VSA operates will be challenging due to tight labour markets.

For the next GFA period, VSA plans to focus *talanoa* on select partners who have worked with the organisation across multiple assignments. This targeted approach will provide deeper insights into the long-term impact of these assignments while balancing the need for efficiency.

Recommendations

Continue improving participatory MEL

- 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.

- 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.

Cost-effectiveness

VSA systems and operational processes

VSA adheres to the [International Forum for Volunteering in Development's Global Standard](#), implementing best practices in assignment design, duty of care, volunteer management, and impact measurement. It also applies the [International Volunteer Program Association Principles and Practices](#) to ensure programme quality and support appropriate volunteer conduct in intercultural settings.

VSA's thorough recruitment process includes candidate outreach, panel selection, and medical and criminal background clearance. VSA leverages LinkedIn and social media to target passive candidates, expanding its volunteer pool. Selected candidates attend pre-deployment briefings in New Zealand, followed by one to two weeks of tailored in-country orientation. These sessions are continually reviewed and refined based on volunteer feedback.

VSA's recruitment process is cost-effective. It is widely praised by volunteers, programme managers, and partner organisations for successfully matching volunteer skills to assignment needs. Partner organisations in Solomon Islands and Tonga noted during this evaluation that volunteers effectively meet their expectations.

The shift to online interviews, initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic, provided more time compared to face-to-face settings. This enabled selection advisers to ask detailed follow-up questions and allowed volunteers to clarify their roles, improving candidate selection, volunteer preparedness, and potentially increasing assignment effectiveness. Elimination of travel and accommodation costs enhanced efficiency. The online format continues to be used due to its advantages.

Occasionally, there are long intervals between assignment agreements with partner organisations and volunteer deployment, suggesting delays in the recruitment process. Some partner organisations reported that assignment scoping can take up to 12 months. Volunteers noted delays due to waiting for VSA briefings. As VSA conducts group briefings, the timing of a volunteer's acceptance in relation to the next cohort's schedule can result in uneven wait times, with some volunteers waiting longer than others.

VSA indicated that delays are primarily due to a lack of suitable candidates or high ineligibility rates among applicants. For example, between July 2023 and May 2024, 38% of applicants were ineligible due to visa issues. Procedural challenges also contribute to delays. Volunteers are responsible for their medical clearance, but some fail to complete the process promptly. When medical issues arise, clearance times can be extended. For instance, volunteers with mental health conditions may require additional testing and must demonstrate six months of stability on prescribed medication before being approved for deployment.

VSA plans to improve forecasting for future assignments to reduce scoping time. It will also conduct targeted recruitment campaigns to attract suitable and eligible candidates. To

minimise delays in visa processing and medical clearances, VSA will implement a documentation database with automated email and SMS reminders to ensure timely completion of tasks.

Recommendations

Enhance efficiency in recruitment and deployment

- 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.

3. Appendices

Appendix 1. Evaluation Plan

Provided as a separate document.

Appendix 2. Reviewed Literature and Documents

VSA's documents

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Appendix 3. Consulted Stakeholders

Provided as a separate document.

Appendix 4. VSA's Partner Organisations

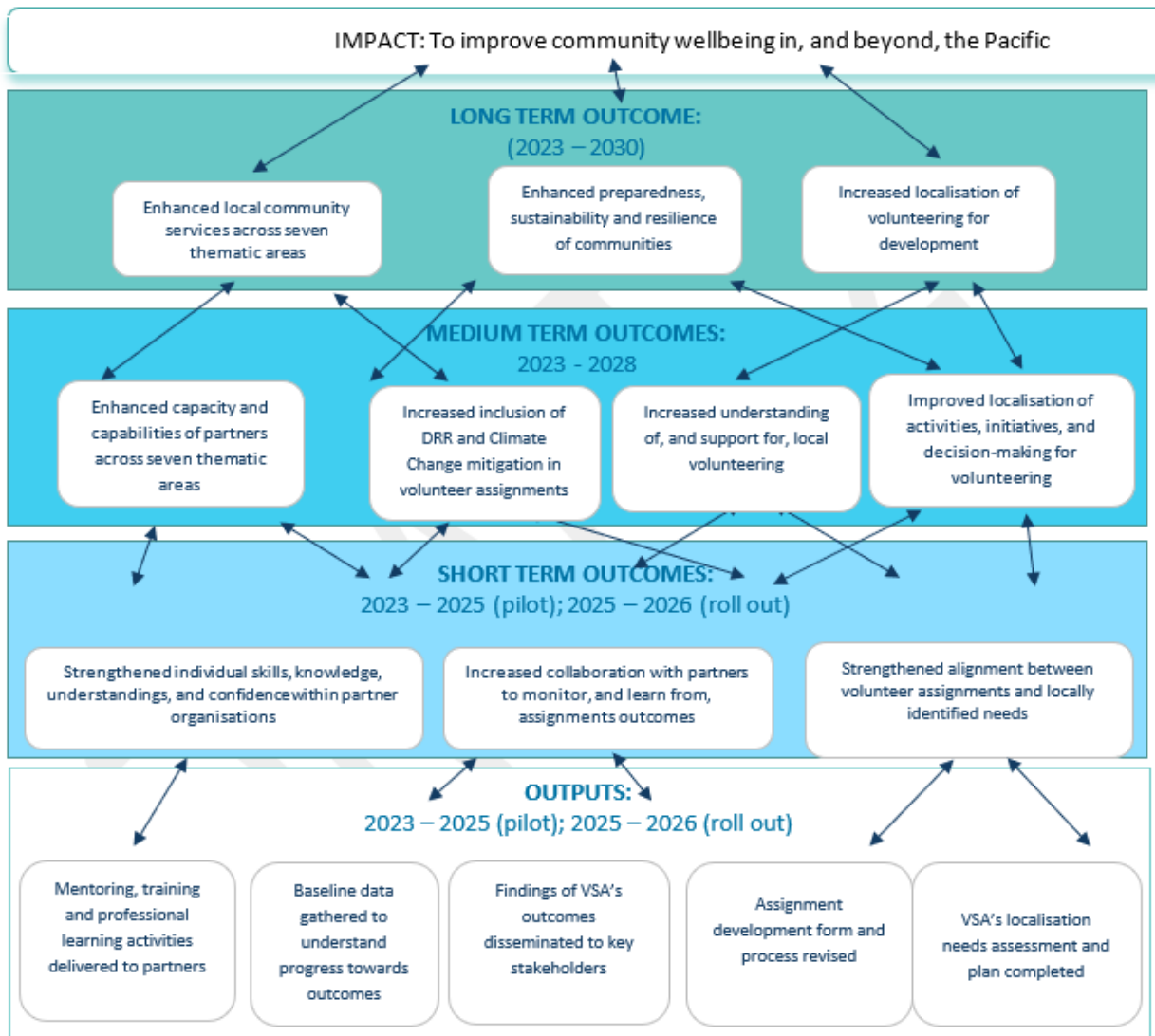| Country	Partner organisation	Sector
Cambodia	World Hope International	INGO
Cambodia	World Hope International	INGO
Cook Islands	Cook Islands Centre for Research	Academic and research institution
Cook Islands	Cook Islands Civil Society Organisations Inc.	NGOs (local and national)
Cook Islands	Cook Islands Sports and National Olympic Committee	NGOs (local and national)
Cook Islands	Cook Islands Sports and National Olympic Committee	NGOs (local and national)
Cook Islands	Cook Islands Sports and National Olympic Committee	NGOs (local and national)
Cook Islands	Ministry of Education	Government (local and national)
Cook Islands	Ministry of Education	Government (local and national)
Cook Islands	Ministry of Health	Government (local and national)
Cook Islands	National Environment Service	Government (local and national)
Cook Islands	Office of the Public Service Commissioner	Government (local and national)
Cook Islands	Te Ipukarea Society	NGOs (local and national)
Cook Islands	Te Vaerua Community Rehabilitation Centre	NGOs (local and national)
Cook Islands	University of the South Pacific (USP)	Academic and research institution
Cook Islands	University of the South Pacific (USP)	Academic and research institution
Fiji	International Planned Parenthood Federation	INGO
Fiji	South Pacific Tourism Organisation	Intergovernmental organisation
Fiji	South Pacific Tourism Organisation	Intergovernmental organisation
Fiji	The Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI)	Intergovernmental organisation
Fiji	The Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI)	Intergovernmental organisation
Fiji	The Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI)	Intergovernmental organisation
Fiji	The Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI)	Intergovernmental organisation
Fiji	The Pacific Community (SPC)	Intergovernmental organisation
Fiji	The Pacific Community (SPC)	Intergovernmental organisation
Fiji	UN Women	Intergovernmental organisation
Fiji	World Health Organization (WHO)	Intergovernmental organisation
Kiribati	Childfund New Zealand	INGO
Kiribati	Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources Development	Government (local and national)
Kiribati	Teitoiningaina	NGOs (local and national)
Kiribati	United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF)	Intergovernmental organisation
PNG	Daughters of Mary Help of Christians	NGOs (local and national)
PNG	Divine Word University	Academic and research institution
PNG	Divine Word University	Academic and research institution
PNG	Kamuri Cacao	Private sector
PNG	National Fisheries College	Academic and research institution
PNG	Pacific Island Projects	NGOs (local and national)
PNG	Pacific Island Projects	NGOs (local and national)

PNG	St Peter Chanel Catholic College of Secondary Education	Academic and research institution
PNG (Bougainville)	Bougainville Women's Federation	NGOs (local and national)
PNG (Bougainville	Department of Community Development	Government (local and national)
PNG (Bougainville	Department of Community Development	Government (local and national)
PNG (Bougainville	Department of Health	Government (local and national)
PNG (Bougainville	Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation	NGOs (local and national)
PNG (Bougainville	Plan International	INGO
Samoa	Goshen Trust Mental Health Services	NGOs (local and national)
Samoa	Goshen Trust Mental Health Services	NGOs (local and national)
Samoa	Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries	Government (local and national)
Samoa	Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries	Government (local and national)
Samoa	Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries	Government (local and national)
Samoa	Ministry of Education and Culture	Government (local and national)
Samoa	Ministry of Education and Culture	Government (local and national)
Samoa	National Rugby League Samoa	NGOs (local and national)
Samoa	Pacific Water and Wastewater Association	NGOs (local and national)
Samoa	Poutasi Development Trust	NGOs (local and national)
Samoa	Samoa Family Health Association	NGOs (local and national)
Samoa	Samoa Recycle and Waste Management Association	NGOs (local and national)
Samoa	Samoa Tourism Authority	Government (local and national)
Samoa	Samoa Women's Association Growers	NGOs (local and national)
Samoa	Savai'i Samoa Tourism Association	NGOs (local and national)
Solomon Islands	Don Bosco Technical Institute, Henderson	NGOs (local and national)
Solomon Islands	Dreamcast Theatre	NGOs (local and national)
Solomon Islands	Dreamcast Theatre	NGOs (local and national)
Solomon Islands	High Court - National Judiciary	Government (local and national)
Solomon Islands	Honiara City Council	Government (local and national)
Solomon Islands	Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development	Government (local and national)
Solomon Islands	National Referral Hospital	Government (local and national)
Solomon Islands	National Referral Hospital	Government (local and national)
Solomon Islands	National Sports Council	Government (local and national)
Solomon Islands	Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions	Government (local and national)
Solomon Islands	Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions	Government (local and national)
Solomon Islands	Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions	Government (local and national)
Solomon Islands	San Isidro Care Centre	NGOs (local and national)
Solomon Islands	Solomon Water Authority	Government (local and national)
Solomon Islands	Western Provincial Government	Government (local and national)
Solomon Islands	Western Provincial Government	Government (local and national)
Timor-Leste	Care International	INGO
Timor-Leste	Kaebauk Investimentu no Financas	NGOs (local and national)
Timor-Leste	Kaebauk Investimentu no Financas	NGOs (local and national)
Timor-Leste	Kaebauk Investimentu no Financas	NGOs (local and national)

Timor-Leste	Oxfam	INGO
Timor-Leste	Oxfam	INGO
Timor-Leste	Red Cross	INGO
Timor-Leste	The Asia Foundation	INGO
Timor-Leste	TradeInvest Timor-Leste	Government (local and national)
Timor-Leste	UNICEF	Intergovernmental organisation
Timor-Leste	UNICEF	Intergovernmental organisation
Timor-Leste	UNICEF	Intergovernmental organisation
Tonga	Air Terminal Services (Tonga) Limited	Government (local and national)
Tonga	Mai E Nima	NGOs (local and national)
Tonga	Mai E Nima	NGOs (local and national)
Tonga	Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forests	Government (local and national)
Tonga	Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forests	Government (local and national)
Tonga	Ministry of Education and Training	Government (local and national)
Tonga	Ministry of Education and Training	Government (local and national)
Tonga	Ministry of Health	Government (local and national)
Tonga	Ministry of Health	Government (local and national)
Tonga	National Rugby League Tonga	NGOs (local and national)
Tonga	Nishi Trading	Private sector
Tonga	OHAI Incorporated	NGOs (local and national)
Tonga	Tupou Tertiary Institute	Academic and research institution
Tonga	'Uluaki Faiako Cooperation Society	NGOs (local and national)
Vanuatu	Churches of Christ Medical Santo	NGOs (local and national)
Vanuatu	Department of Correctional Services	Government (local and national)
Vanuatu	Department of Correctional Services	Government (local and national)
Vanuatu	Department of Correctional Services	Government (local and national)
Vanuatu	Department of Water Resources	Government (local and national)
Vanuatu	Department of Water Resources	Government (local and national)
Vanuatu	Elwood J Euart Association	NGOs (local and national)
Vanuatu	Fine Foods Ltd	Private sector
Vanuatu	Fine Foods Ltd	Private sector
Vanuatu	Lenakel Hospital	Government (local and national)
Vanuatu	Luganville International School	Academic and research institution
Vanuatu	Ministry of Health	Government (local and national)
Vanuatu	Northern Care Youth Clinic	NGOs (local and national)
Vanuatu	Northern Care Youth Clinic	NGOs (local and national)
Vanuatu	Northern Provincial Hospital	Government (local and national)
Vanuatu	Northern Provincial Hospital	Government (local and national)
Vanuatu	Northern Provincial Hospital	Government (local and national)
Vanuatu	Tafea Provincial Council	Government (local and national)
Vanuatu	United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF)	Intergovernmental organisation
Vanuatu	Vanuatu Cultural Centre	Government (local and national)
Vanuatu	Vanuatu Volleyball Federation	NGOs (local and national)
Vanuatu	Vila Central Hospital	Government (local and national)

Vanuatu	Vila Central Hospital	Government (local and national)
Vanuatu	Wan Smolbag Theatre	NGOs (local and national)
Vanuatu	Wan Smolbag Theatre	NGOs (local and national)

Appendix 5. Activity's Programme Logic

IMPACT: To improve community wellbeing in, and beyond, the Pacific

LONG TERM OUTCOME:
(2023 − 2030)

| Enhanced local community services across seven thematic areas | Enhanced preparedness, sustainability and resilience of communities | Increased localisation of volunteering for development |

MEDIUM TERM OUTCOMES:
2023 - 2028

| Enhanced capacity and capabilities of partners across seven thematic areas | Increased inclusion of DRR and Climate Change mitigation in volunteer assignments | Increased understanding of, and support for, local volunteering | Improved localisation of activities, initiatives, and decision-making for volunteering |

SHORT TERM OUTCOMES:
2023 − 2025 (pilot); 2025 − 2026 (roll out)

| Strengthened individual skills, knowledge, understandings, and confidence within partner organisations | Increased collaboration with partners to monitor, and learn from, assignments outcomes | Strengthened alignment between volunteer assignments and locally identified needs |

OUTPUTS:
2023 − 2025 (pilot); 2025 − 2026 (roll out)

| Mentoring, training and professional learning activities delivered to partners | Baseline data gathered to understand progress towards outcomes | Findings of VSA's outcomes disseminated to key stakeholders | Assignment development form and process revised | VSA's localisation needs assessment and plan completed |

Appendix 6. Case Studies

Relevance of volunteering assignment for a partner organisation

Assignment Title: Business Analysis Adviser
Country: Solomon Islands
Location of Partner Organisation: Honiara
Partner Organisation: Solomon Islands Water Authority
Duration: 12 months (in-country)

The Business Analysis Adviser volunteer assignment at Solomon Islands Water Authority (Solomon Water) has been highly relevant and valuable to the organisation. The volunteer's expertise in data management, business analytics, and staff training has significantly enhanced Solomon Water's ability to analyse and utilise data for informed decision-making. The assignment has led to improved operational efficiency, a reduction in financial losses, and a stronger foundation for sustainable growth.

Background: Solomon Water is a state-owned enterprise established in 1993 with a mission to provide reliable and safe water supply and sewerage services in the Solomon Islands. Its staff require support in analysing data collected across different teams, which is crucial for data-driven decision making. As business analysis skills are not available locally, external expertise is essential to bridge this gap.

Assignment goal: Solomon Water is able to identify, critically analyse, evaluate, and interpret data, information, and processes that support strategy and policy decisions.

Outcomes:

- Solomon Water understands its business processes and makes informed decisions concerning data collection and analysis.

- The staff learn how to analyse data collected throughout the organisation.

- The organisation has information that results in evidence-based decision making.

Activities: A VSA volunteer collaborates with the finance team and department heads to review and analyse business services, processes, and information needs. The volunteer also assists the organisation in identifying and addressing operational inefficiencies to enhance overall efficiency. Capacity building is a key aspect of the assignment, achieved through hands-on collaboration, mentoring, coaching, and structured training, as agreed with the Chief Financial Officer.

Insights from the Business Analysis Adviser:

I'm working with Water Authority as a Business Analysis Adviser in a 12-month role, currently nearing the end of my 10th month. I focus on the finance team, managing data, reporting, and quantitative work, which is a rare skill in Australia, New Zealand, and certainly in the Pacific. Overall, I believe my role has been a good fit for their needs, and there's much more that could be done. I conduct a lot of training for using Excel, which is fundamental for a finance team. The engagement from coordinators and junior staff has been great. They regularly attend my Excel training and are now much more capable of performing tasks independently. Previously, they often needed my help with basic formulas. Data management is another area of focus. The team is now more considerate about how they handle data in the system, they check and fix issues before month-end billing. This change is significant and helps avoid financial losses. I also work on billing and collections and have started addressing non-revenue water. We are identifying financial losses from leaks or unpaid bills. Helping them analyse and address these issues is crucial. Initially, not all team members had a clear understanding of my role, especially since there wasn't a business analyst position before. I proactively engaged with team leaders to identify how I could assist, and now I'm well-utilised and in demand.

Effective volunteering assignments: partnering for good modality in Tonga

VSA's Partnering for Good assignment has been successful in Tonga, as demonstrated by Marcelle and David Mafi, a couple who volunteered together through this initiative. Partnering for Good enables couples to undertake volunteer assignments together, fostering shared experiences and collaborative impact in local communities. Marcelle has served as a Nurse Educator at Vaiola Hospital for over two years.

David, a New Zealander of Tongan heritage, has worked as a Special Needs Education Adviser with Uluaki Faiako since 2023, supporting early intervention programmes for children with disabilities. Uluaki Faiako, a civil society organisation dedicated to disability advocacy and support, has led early intervention efforts for over a decade. The organisation's name, Uluaki Faiako, meaning "first teacher," aligns with David's belief in the vital role of families as primary caregivers.

David's engagement with Tongan families caring for children with disabilities and Tupou Tertiary Institute has resulted in innovative solutions, including the use of locally sourced materials to develop tailored learning resources for children with disabilities. His deep cultural understanding has been instrumental in strengthening the capacity of Uluaki Faiako staff, volunteers, and other civil society organisations working in inclusive education.

As a dedicated inclusive educator, he encourages young Tongans to pursue careers in disability support, particularly in specialised areas such as autism and cerebral palsy care.

David and Marcelle in VSA Tonga office

Reflection from a Samoan background volunteer from New Zealand - giving back to the Pacific

Backround

This is my first volunteering experience. The reason I'm doing it is largely due to my personal background. I'm mixed race—half English and half Samoan. I grew up in a predominantly English way, was educated in New Zealand, and worked in England for a long time. I always felt I was missing that connection with the Pacific community. Because I don't have strong family ties in the Pacific, I sought opportunities to work there for a couple of years. Ideally, I wanted to work in Samoa, but my skill set didn't align with many job opportunities there, which are largely quantitative, such as those in banking and large financial institutions. So, I started looking at volunteer opportunities.

Growing up in a white European community in New Zealand during the 80s, I didn't see many Islanders in skilled jobs or on TV. There were no role models for me to look up to, which influenced how I saw my own future. I thought if I could come to the Pacific and share my experiences and career success, I could be a role model for someone who doesn't see many people like them.

The volunteering role I took is also an opportunity for me to learn more about my Pacific heritage and contribute to the Pacific community.

Recommendation from the volunteer

Having more volunteers like me with a Pacific background from New Zealand would be beneficial. Targeting new graduates of Pacific Island descent from universities could also be effective as part of the UniVol modality. Companies like the Big 4 consulting firms in New Zealand have specific Pacific teams, which could be a valuable resource.

More diversity in the volunteer crowd would be amazing. New Zealand is diverse, and it's important to reflect that diversity in our volunteer programmes.