



Researching Organisational Capacity Strengthening: Year 1 Global Synthesis Report

Australian Volunteers Program and
Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology
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Acknowledgment of Country

UTS acknowledges the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation, the Boorooberongal People of the Dharug Nation, the Bidiagal People and the Gamaygal People upon whose ancestral lands our university stands. We would also like to pay respect to the Elders past, present and future, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for these lands.

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About the project

From 2024 to 2026, 14 organisations in Fiji, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam who are partnering with the Australian Volunteer Program are conducting participatory research on their organisation's capacity strengthening. These organisations are leading the design and implementation of the research, with regular technical support from the Australian Volunteers Program's monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) team and researchers from the University of Technology Sydney's Institute for Sustainable Futures (UTS-ISF).

The 14 participating organisations are exploring seven key research questions:

- How is organisational capacity strengthening understood in different contexts in which the Australian Volunteers Program works?
- What changes are experienced by partner organisations to their organisational capacity over the research period?
- Who or what contributed to organisational capacity strengthening in the partner organisations?
- In what ways has the Australian Volunteers Program contributed to organisational capacity strengthening?
- Do changes in organisational capacity enable partner organisations to achieve their development objectives, and if so how, if not why not?¹
- Informed by the research findings, in what ways can international volunteering best support organisations to achieve development outcomes?²
- Informed by the research findings, what lessons can be learned about researching organisational capacity strengthening in the context of international volunteering?

This report presents the synthesised findings from the first year of the research (2024) across all 14 organisations.

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¹ This question will be reported on in 2026/2027 reports.

² This question will be reported on in 2026/2027 reports.

Executive Summary

From June 2023 to March 2025, 14 diverse organisations in Fiji, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam who are partners of the Australian Volunteers Program designed and implemented the first of three years of participatory action research on organisational capacity strengthening (OCS) in their organisations. The Australian Volunteers Program's Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) team provided technical and project coordination support to these organisations, and the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology's International Development Effectiveness team provided technical and project coordination support to the Australian Volunteers Program MEL team. This report presents the findings and lessons learned from Year 1.

The findings reveal diverse understandings of OCS amongst the Australian Volunteers Program's partners. Organisations used familiar or preferred OCS frameworks, and their staff's existing concepts of OCS to drive the research. Some organisations focused on OCS as a process of identifying gaps and weaknesses and making improvements, while others focused on specific functions or processes to strengthen, explored the existing strengths of their organisations to build upon, or reflected on the future direction of their organisation. Over the year, many organisations reported a shift towards a more holistic, continuous and long-term view of OCS, influenced by both internal and external factors.

In Year 1 of this three-year research project, organisations researched the history of OCS in their organisation over the past one to twelve years, and the current state of their organisational capacity. Common existing strengths of organisations included highly qualified, skilled and committed staff; strong and varied partnerships and community engagement; and strong leadership. Areas for further strengthening varied significantly across organisations, including opportunities to strengthen leadership, strategy, staff retention and benefits, and sustainable funding. Changes to OCS were observed at different scales, including changes to individual staff members' awareness and skills; to changes in organisational processes and systems; and changes in partnerships, networks and the larger scale social, political, and economic systems that organisations are embedded in.

Organisations identified both internal and external factors that had contributed to their OCS in the past one to twelve years. Internally, strong leadership and positive staff attitudes were commonly highlighted, with leaders driving the adoption of technologies and effective fundraising approaches, and new or younger staff bringing fresh perspectives. Externally, partnerships and networks played a crucial role in OCS, with local community members, government representatives, universities and media outlets providing support and resources. Similarly, major disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, while challenging, sometimes catalysed positive changes including digital transformations that have endured.

Organisations found that the Australian Volunteers Program had significantly contributed OCS by building networks and collaborations, strengthening organisational processes and systems, and enhancing staff skills and knowledge through training and mentoring. Nine organisations across Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Fiji reported that Australian volunteers facilitated new connections with local governments, community members, international universities, and donors, boosting their visibility, reputation and funding in some instances. Seven organisations highlighted the value of training and mentoring provided by volunteers, which improved staff skills and knowledge in numerous diverse fields. Furthermore, organisations found that volunteers introduced new perspectives, approaches and innovations, and fostered a culture of learning and improvement.

For most of the researchers across the 14 organisations, this was their first time undertaking research. Researchers reflected that using broad conceptual frameworks like the Five Capabilities Framework and Three Horizons Framework allowed them to consider various factors and stakeholders contributing to OCS. The participatory approach and the Australian Volunteers Program and UTS-ISF's flexible support enabled organisations to take ownership of their research, enhance their research capacity, and open space for organisational reflection and learning. All 14 organisations will continue the research in Year 2, 2025-2026.

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Glossary

CSO	Civil society organisation
INGO	International non-government organisation
IRGSC	Institute of Resource Governance and Social Change
MEL	Monitoring, evaluation and learning
MEL-C	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Coordinator
OCS	Organisational Capacity Strengthening
UTS	University of Technology Sydney
UTS-ISF	University of Technology Sydney, Institute for Sustainable Futures
VTC	Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Technical Centre
SVTC	Soqosoqo Vakamarama iTaukei Cakaudrove
WRO	Women's rights organisation

Research Design and Methodology

The aim of this research is to explore, from 2024 to 2026, organisations' experiences of capacity strengthening initiatives and how the Australian Volunteers Program contributes to their development outcomes. In doing so, the program would like to support partners to reflect on and learn about effective strategies for strengthening organisational capacity in ways they also can benefit from. The overarching research design was developed in 2022 to 2023 through consultations between UTS-ISF and the Australian Volunteers Program MEL team; a review of program documentation and grey and academic literature on organisational capacity strengthening and international volunteering; interviews with representatives from nine organisations partnering with the Australian Volunteers Program; and collaborative sense-making workshops to design the participatory action research approach. The resulting research design engaged 14 organisations in Fiji, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam in a process of designing their own participatory research on their own organisational capacity strengthening, with support from the Australian Volunteers Program MEL team and international development effectiveness researchers from UTS-ISF, as outlined below.

1. Researchers and research participants

In 2024, a diverse range of the Australian Volunteers Program's partners conducted and participated in this research. Table 1 provides the full list of organisations whose staff (and in some cases volunteers and partners) participated in the research. Two organisations participated in the initial stages of the research - World Wide Fund for Nature Vietnam and Animals Fiji – and discontinued prior to the development of this report.

Table 1. Participating organisations in Year 1

Location of organisation	Name of organisation	Development focus	Number of staff in the organisation	Number of research participants in Year 1
Fiji	Birth Fiji	Civil society organisation (CSO) – health	11	5
	Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Technical Centre (VTC)	Vocational training institute	24	9
	Soqosoqo Vakamarama iTaukei Cakaudrove (SVTC)	Indigenous women's rights organisation (WRO)	6	10
Indonesia	Friends of Nature, People and Forests (FNPF)	CSO – environmental	40	11
	Juag Laut Lestari (JARI)	CSO - environmental	10	6
	Layanan Disabilitas dan Pendidikan Inklusif (LDPI)	Provincial government service for children with disabilities	33	10
	Institute of Resource Governance and Social Change	Research institution	10	7
Sri Lanka	Hambantota District Chamber of Commerce (HDCC)	Regional chamber of commerce	43	8
	Organisation of People for Engagement and Enterprise (OPENE)	CSO – community development	34	30
	South Asia Partnership Sri Lanka (SAPSRI)	CSO – community development	35	4

	Jaffna Social Action Center (JSAC)	CSO – women and children	60	10
Vietnam	Centre for Knowledge Co-creation and Development Research (CKC)	Nonprofit research centre	8	21
	GreenViet	CSO – environmental	20	10
	University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH), Anthropology department	Research institution	15	21

The Australian Volunteers Program MEL team identified organisations to conduct and participate in the research based on the following criteria:

1. Organisations based in the country where each MEL team member is based (Fiji, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam)
2. Organisations interested, committed and with capacity to collaborate on the research for three years.
3. Diversity of types of organisations, including CSOs, government entities, INGOs and academic/research institution partners; organisations that have engaged with the Program for shorter and longer durations with current or past volunteers; organisations that have hosted a diverse number and range of volunteers, including remote volunteers, volunteers in person, volunteers doing specific technical tasks or broad strategic work.

2. Principles of the research

The Australian Volunteers Program MEL team established the following principles to inform the research process:



Locally led: organisations lead decision-making and practice in the research design, implementation and review. The Australian Volunteers Program MEL team provided technical support to plan and undertake the research, and UTS-ISF resources to support the research and facilitated cross-learning opportunities.



Adaptive and action-oriented: organisations could change their research designs and adapt their organisation's work based on their findings.



Collaborative: organisations shared their findings and lessons learned from the research within their organisation, with other organisations in the same country, and with organisations across Asia and the Pacific in participatory cross-learning forums.



Respectful of diversity: organisations defined organisational capacity strengthening themselves and chose their own unique combination of OCS research frameworks and methods, rather than conforming to a single, preset approach.

3. Research Co-Design

From November 2023 to April 2024, each organisation worked with the Australian Volunteers Program MEL Team to co-design the three-year research for their organisation. UTS-ISF provided a guide for co-designing the research including a diverse suite of frameworks and research methods for organisations to choose from and adapt for their context.

OCS Research Frameworks

Organisations used a range of different definitions and frameworks of OCS to guide their research. UTS-ISF and the Australian Volunteers Program supported organisations to either define OCS on their own terms or use an existing framework. Organisations were introduced to four different frameworks:

Five Capabilities

The Five Capabilities Framework³ supports organisations to evaluate five broad areas of their organisation's capacity: the ability to act and commit; the ability to relate and attract support; the ability to achieve coherence; the ability to adapt and renew; and the ability to deliver results. The framework is unique in its holistic approach, focusing not only on internal capacities and specific functions within the organisation (for example, fundraising, human resource management), but also external factors that contribute to organisational capacities and broad areas of functionality that are relevant and applicable to diverse organisations. In year 1, nine organisations used the Five Capabilities Framework to guide their research on OCS: including all organisations based in Indonesia and Fiji; one organisation in Vietnam; and one organisation in Sri Lanka.

Organisational Strategy

Four out of 14 organisations (two organisations in Sri Lanka and two organisations in Vietnam) decided to use their organisation's existing organisational strategy to monitor and evaluate progress in OCS, tracking progress against specific goals identified by the organisation.

Organisational Capacity Assessment Tools

One out of 14 organisations, in Sri Lanka, decided to use USAID's organisational capacity assessment tool⁴ to assess specific functions within their organisation. The tool frames organisational capacity regarding ten specific functions of an organisation: financial management; board governance; leadership development; legal affairs; mission, vision, strategy and planning; fund development; information technology; marketing and communications; program design and evaluation; and human resources. This organisation combined the use of USAID's organisational capacity assessment tool with the five capabilities framework, to capture both specific functions of the organisation and broad capabilities of the organisation.

Three Horizons

Organisations were introduced to the Three Horizons Framework⁵ as an approach to planning, monitoring and evaluating what is working well that the organisation wants to sustain/is sustaining; the organisation's preferred future state of capacity; aspects of the organisation that might become/are already barriers to achieving their preferred future state of capacity; and actions, innovations and disruptions that may support/have supported the organisation to achieve its preferred state of capacity. One out of 14 organisations, in Indonesia, used the Three Horizons Framework alongside the five capabilities framework to complete their analysis, recognising the value of the three horizons framework for identifying their organisation's desired future state. One organisation in Fiji initially intended to use the Three Horizons Framework to guide their research, but later changed to using the Five Capabilities Framework, which was seen as easier to comprehend for a diverse range of participants within and connected to the organisations.

Research Methods

Organisations used a range of different research methods to undertake their research in year 1. UTS-ISF and the Australian Volunteers Program provided organisations with training on the following methods, which they then selected from and combined to undertake their research in year 1.

Participatory Photography

The most popular method for researching OCS in year 1 was participatory photography⁶, which combines photography and storytelling to empower individuals within or connected to an organisation to document and raise awareness about their experiences, perspectives and concerns, in this case, in relation to OCS. Eight

³ See Interpeace (2015). The 5 Capabilities Framework: Effective Advising in Statebuilding and Peacebuilding Contexts – How. Available at: https://www.interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/2015_10_12_Effective_Advising_How-The_5Cs_framework.pdf

⁴ See John Snow Inc. (2009). Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool: Participant's Copy For Organizations Funded by USAID. Available at: https://publications.jsi.com/JSIInternet/Inc/Common/_download_pub.cfm?id=15691&lid=3

⁵ See Sharpe, B., Hodgson, A., Leicester, G., Lyon, A., Fazey, I. (2016). Three horizons: a pathways practice for transformation. *Ecology and Society* 21(2). Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26270405>

⁶ See Byrne, E., Daykin, N., & Coad, J. (2016). Participatory photography in qualitative research: A methodological review. *Visual Methodologies*, 4(2), 1-12.

out of 14 organisations (all three organisations in Fiji, three organisations in Sri Lanka, and two organisations in Vietnam) used participatory photography to research OCS in their organisations in year 1, with staff, volunteers and partners taking photos and sharing written or spoken observations about OCS in relation to the five capabilities in the Five Capabilities Framework; the specific goals in their organisational strategy; and/or specific functions within their organisation, for example, fundraising and IT.

Key informant interviews (KIIs)

KIIs were another popular method for researching OCS in year 1. Seven out of 14 organisations (four organisations in Indonesia, one organisation in Fiji and two organisations in Vietnam) undertook interviews with staff and/or volunteers and partners about OCS in relation to the five capabilities in the Five Capabilities Framework, combining this with method with participatory photography and learning diaries to capture diverse perspectives on OCS.

Surveys

Three out of 14 organisations (two organisations in Sri Lanka and one in Vietnam) used staff surveys to research OCS in year 1, capturing quantitative insights on OCS in relation to the five capabilities in the Five Capabilities Framework, or specific functions within their organisation. One organisation in Sri Lanka complemented these quantitative insights with qualitative methods including participatory photography and workshops, providing them with both a breadth and depth of findings. One organisation in Fiji used the online survey form to gather information from staff on changes in organisational strengthening under the 5Cs, however, participants were unable to use the platform correctly.

Learning Diaries

Three out of 14 organisations (two organisations in Indonesia and one organisation in Fiji) supported staff to document OCS using individual learning diaries to reflect on their experiences of OCS against the five capabilities in the Five Capabilities Framework, which were then analysed by the nominated researchers within their organisation.

Document Reviews

One out of 14 organisations, in Vietnam, reviewed their organisational reports and data to find evidence of OCS in their organisation. One organisation in Fiji reviewed key documents in the organisation including Annual Reports to gather information on OCS and to supplement data following unsuccessful roll-out of the survey online platform.

Focus Group Discussions and Workshops

The majority of organisations used group discussions and/or whole of organisation workshops to analyse the de-identified and synthesised results from their research and generate further insights and lessons learned from the research.

Research Ethics



All researchers in the participating organisations received training from the Australian Volunteers Program MEL Coordinators (who received training from UTS-ISF) on research ethics principles and protocols. They used standardised templates and protocols for informing participants about the research; gaining free, prior and informed consent; and ensuring confidentiality, privacy, beneficence and prevention of harm. All data in their reports and this synthesis report has been de-identified to protect the privacy of participants.

Co-design and research implementation process

From June 2023 to March 2024, the Australian Volunteers Program MEL Coordinators in each country worked closely with the participating organisations to build their awareness and understanding of the abovementioned frameworks and methods, and research ethics principles and protocols; pilot the methods

and research ethics protocols; and adapt their research designs and methods before commencing the research activities. From April 2024 to March 2025, MEL Coordinators provided remote and occasional in person support to the organisations during data collection, analysis and reporting. Organisations followed their own preferred timeframes for research implementation in year 1, to enable them to streamline research activities with their other activities and allow flexibility to tend to other priorities.

Throughout the co-design and research implementation, UTS-ISF provided remote support to the Australian Volunteers Program MEL Coordinators, including resources and training on the frameworks and methods, and support to planning and coordination of research activities. Organisations met regularly online as a full global team, to share their experiences and learning about the research process and support each other with diverse insights and different approaches and methods. In December 2024, two organisations (one in Vietnam and one in Sri Lanka) that had exchanged support to each other through these global cross-learning events, participated in a [podcast highlighting their collaborative research experiences](#) in Year 1.

Limitations

There were several constraints to the research in year 1. For most of the participating organisations, this was their first experience of undertaking research, and support from the Australian Volunteers Program and UTS-ISF was mainly remote. The quality of the year 1 research reports by participating organisations was therefore not of an academic standard. There will be further opportunities to develop data collection, data analysis and reporting skills and experience in years 2 and 3, with additional support from the Australian Volunteers Program and UTS-ISF. Organisations undertaking this research were also undertaking their regular activities, which meant there were competing priorities at times, and in some cases, there was turnover of staff, which created disruptions to data collection, analysis and reporting. Two organisations decided not to continue due to some of these constraints and the time involved. The findings presented in this report are not comprehensive – they are synthesised from the 14 organisations' research reports, some of which were translated from Bahasa Indonesian to English using Microsoft Co-Pilot.

Research Findings

1. Diverse understandings of organisational capacity strengthening

This section presents the synthesised findings from 14 organisations in relation to the question: How is organisational capacity strengthening understood in different contexts in which the Australian Volunteers Program works?

During the design of the research, organisations were encouraged to use the definitions and concepts of organisational capacity strengthening that they were familiar with or that appealed to them most from a suite of OCS frameworks (see methodology section). Organisations described a range of different ideas about what OCS is and whom OCS is for.

In Sri Lanka, three of the four organisations described OCS in terms of identifying areas for improvement or “gaps” in their operations and systematically working to address and improve those areas. One organisation’s research findings focused entirely on what staff perceived to be the deficits of their organisation to work to improve. This conceptualisation of OCS reflects a common, deficits-focused understanding of OCS that implies that an organisation is lacking in something and requires capacity strengthening through a ‘transfer’ of knowledge, skills or technologies.⁷

Four organisations (two in Vietnam, one in Indonesia, one in Sri Lanka) described organisational capacity strengthening as a process of improving specific functions of their organisation, for example, project management, financial management or communications. Related to this point, one organisation in Vietnam and one organisation in Fiji highlighted OCS as a process of building staff skills and organisational systems and processes to meet international standards and donor requirements to enable their organisation to acquire funds and continue their work.

After one year of undertaking the research, three organisations (one in Vietnam, one in Sri Lanka and one in Fiji) organisations reported that their staff’s understandings of OCS had changed through the process of undertaking and participating in the research, to be more holistic and long-term in focus, and involving both internal and external inputs. Four organisations (two in Fiji, one in Indonesia, one in Vietnam) noted the benefit of using the Five Capabilities Framework⁸ to research their organisations’ broad capabilities and the internal and external factors that influence those capabilities, rather than assessing their organisation based on functions and indicators valued by external parties.



[Staff] increasingly view [OCS] as a multi-dimensional, iterative process that balances internal development with external collaboration, operational rigour with flexibility, and community engagement with strategic partnerships

– Organisation representative in Vietnam.



⁷ VSO Annual Report 2021/22, p12)

⁸ See Interpeace (2015). The 5 Capabilities Framework: Effective Advising in Statebuilding and Peacebuilding Contexts – How. Available at: https://www.interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/2015_10_12_Effective_Advising_How-The_5Cs_framework.pdf



One significant learning is that many within the organisation view OCS as a process of continuous improvement rather than a one-time goal. This understanding reflects the growing emphasis on adaptability and resilience in the face of external challenges, such as climate change and economic shifts. ... [staff] now better understand that OCS is a holistic approach, requiring consistent effort, shared ownership, and alignment with the organisation's mission and values.

– Organisation representative in Fiji.



2. Changes to organisational capacity

This section presents the synthesised findings from 14 organisations in relation to the question: what changes are experienced by partner organisations to their organisational capacity over the research period?

In year 1, organisations in Indonesia reflected on, explored and reported on changes to their organisational capacity in the last one to seven years, and their current capacity. In the next two years they will monitor, evaluate and research their organisational capacity strengthening since 2023. In year 2, all organisations will focus on changes to capacity over the past one year, since they started the research.

There were two common findings amongst organisations that reported on their organisation's current capacity in year 1. All four organisations in Indonesia identified the existing strengths of their organisations: their broad and effective community engagement, trust and reputations with the people they work with, strong leaders who have been able to drive the growth and sustainability of their organisations, highly qualified and skilled staff, their adaptability to deliver results despite having limited funds at times, and the development outcomes the organisations have been able to achieve and sustain. For example, one organisation had contributed to the conservation outcome of increasing the Bali Starling bird population in Bali, one organisation had increased access to services for children with disabilities in Western Sumatra, and one organisation had used their research on human trafficking to influence local policy.

The second common theme amongst organisations reporting on their current capacity was the constraint of insufficient funding and staffing (mentioned by one organisation in Vietnam, three organisations in Indonesia and one organisation in Fiji) which organisations found had caused some staff to feel overstretched and burnt out at work.

Organisations' research reports described changes at different scales, including:

[Changes to individuals' awareness, confidence, knowledge and skills](#) through their participation in training and mentoring and/or through the initiative of leaders. Specifically, four out of 14 organisations reported improvements in leadership skills (one in Vietnam, one in Sri Lanka, two in Fiji); three out of 14 organisations reported improvements in financial management skills (two in Fiji; one in Sri Lanka); three out of 14 organisations reported improvements in IT skills and knowledge (one in Sri Lanka, two in Fiji); two out of 14 organisations reported improvements to fundraising skills (one in Fiji, one in Sri Lanka); two out of 14 organisations reported improvements to in environmental conservation knowledge or skills (one in Vietnam, one in Indonesia); one organisation (in Vietnam) reported improvements to technical skills in academic publishing; one organisation (in Fiji) reported improvements to skills in community engagement; and one organisation (in Indonesia) reported on improvements to skills in disability services.

One organisation in Fiji highlighted that OCS - in the form of participating in the civil society sector and gaining recognition from funders - increased the confidence of their members:



[Our organisation's] biggest leap would be its ability to adapt to the civil society sector. Always holding to its position as a rural-based, women-focused and women-led NGO, receiving invitations to be part of a meeting or being invited to the Provincial Office ... creates fear. Given the space and the platform, the ladies began to realise their place in the CSO sector, community and national development space ... instilling confidence in the women.

– Organisation representative in Fiji



Changes to organisational processes and systems

Eight organisations (one in Vietnam, three in Sri Lanka, two in Indonesia, two in Fiji) found that their organisational capacity had changed through intentional, planned changes to organisational processes and systems. At least four of these organisations (two in Sri Lanka, one in Indonesia and one in Fiji) went through significant digital transformations in the past one to five years, particularly in the years of the COVID-19 pandemic when offices were shut down and organisations were forced to begin working remotely.

One organisation in Indonesia working on disability services and inclusive education implemented a digital transformation in its administrative services with the support of a volunteer from the Australian Volunteers Program. The process has improved efficiency in internal data management and enabled more streamlined reporting and coordination within a centralised database. It is easier for staff to compile and report tasks, partner schools to compile reports, and schools and parents to access and retrieve disability assessment reports.

In Sri Lanka, two organisations upgraded their digital communications systems and processes in the past year, enhancing both internal coordination and external outreach. Internally, the organisations adopted clearer communication protocols and digital tools like Share Point to streamline information sharing among staff. Externally, they revamped their branding, messaging, and adopted a more strategic approach to content creation—especially on social media platforms. These communication upgrades have not only amplified both organisations' public profiles but also contributed to tangible outcomes: increased exposure, new networks, and additional funding opportunities that are helping them scale their impact.



The organisation's sustainability has been bolstered by its ability to secure more diverse and stable funding sources. The use of social media campaigns and the strategic monetisation of these platforms have attracted a wider range of sponsors and donors, making the organisation's financial foundation more resilient.

– Organisation representative in Sri Lanka.



Organisations highlighted the specific contributions of volunteers from the Australian Volunteers Program to developing and maintaining website and other digital platforms and providing training for digital skills development during the pandemic.

In Fiji, one organisation that had been grounded in face-to-face education and outreach, found itself needing to adapt quickly during the COVID-19 pandemic. With support from Australian Volunteers Program volunteers, the organisation pivoted to digital platforms to continue delivering services, ensuring vital community support despite restrictions on physical gatherings. The adoption of e-learning platforms enabled

remote education, extending the organisation's reach beyond its usual boundaries. Capacity-building efforts also evolved, incorporating digital literacy into staff and volunteer training. This empowered the team and community to confidently use technology for learning, communication, and outreach. What began as a reactive shift has now become a lasting part of the organisation's approach.

Changes to partnerships and networks

The most reported type of change to organisations' OCS was changes to partnerships and networks. Ten out of 14 organisations (three organisations in Sri Lanka, two in Fiji, three in Indonesia, and two in Vietnam) reported on gaining access to new partners and funding, and/or strengthening their partnerships as both an outcome of OCS and a factor that contributes to OCS. For one organisation in Indonesia, increased collaboration with local stakeholders and government enabled them to access funding for basic infrastructure to continue and sustain their work: an office space and a vehicle. Access to new funding through partnerships also enabled seven organisations (three in Indonesia, two in Sri Lanka, one in Vietnam, one in Fiji) to expand the reach of their organisation's work.

In Fiji, an organisation recognised the need to partner and network more effectively to better serve vulnerable communities. A key step was the signing of an MOU with a charitable trust committed to building safe housing and supporting low-income families. This enabled open, transparent collaboration and created space for joint planning and shared progress. With limited staff stretched thin, the PO adopted innovative ways to continue supporting its clients. Furthermore, the PO also engaged in sustainable, community-focused projects such as a borehole water initiative which was delivered in collaboration with a government technical agency; reflecting a growing role in infrastructure support that complements its core mission of empowerment and mental wellbeing.

In Vietnam, one organisation reported deepening its partnerships with academic institutions, including two international universities. Through their collaborations with international universities, the organisation took new methodological approaches.

In at least two cases (both in Sri Lanka), organisations partially attributed the new or strengthened partnerships and new access to funding to their improved communications processes and systems, including enhancements to websites, social media and other digital outreach platforms as described above. Building and strengthening networks, collaboration and partnerships was the most frequently cited contribution of volunteers from the Australian Volunteers Program, as discussed further in section 4.

Changes to organisational culture

In year 1 of the research, four organisations described long-term changes to their organisation's cultures.

In one example, an organisation in Fiji implemented a more inclusive leadership approach, whereby staff and volunteers were actively encouraged to participate in strategic discussions, enabling them to take stronger ownership of projects and develop a greater sense of responsibility. This involved capacity-building training sessions for staff equipping them to execute plans more efficiently, improving decision-making processes and enhancing operational consistency. Through targeted leadership training and mentorship programs, team leaders gained skills in guiding their teams more effectively, creating a culture where individuals felt empowered to take action.

Changes to organisational culture were commonly linked to interactions between the organisations' staff and new collaborators, particularly volunteers from the Australian Volunteers Program (as discussed further in section 4), who introduced new perspectives, approaches and innovations, and fostered a culture of organisational learning and improvement. New perspectives and approaches also came from new staff within organisations.



The influx of new energy from younger individuals, students, and experienced staff [has] sparked fresh perspectives and ideas, driving positive change within the organisation.

- Organisation representative in Indonesia.



Unexpected changes to organisational capacity

Organisations found a diverse range of unexpected and unintended changes to their organisational capacity in year 1 of the research. In most cases these were due to external disruptions, for example delayed approvals and rejected applications from government for receiving overseas development assistance (one organisation); disruptions to the ability to provide services and obtain funding during the COVID-19 pandemic (two organisations); stricter funding and reporting requirements of donors causing delays and inflexibility in programming (one organisation); and increased tourism constraining conservation efforts (one organisation). Two organisations in different countries noted that the introduction of numerous new staff had unexpectedly contributed to human resource management and communication challenges. Research participants in one organisation highlighted that the direction or messaging of their organisation's work may potentially change in the future due to the recent change in the national government.

3. Factors contributing to OCS

This section presents the synthesised findings from 14 organisations in relation to the question: **who or what contributed to organisational capacity strengthening in the partner organisations?**

Organisations identified a broad range of contributing factors to their OCS in year 1, including both internal factors and external factors. As noted in section 1, organisations recognised the value of using the broad Five Capabilities Framework to guide their research, supporting them to identify both internal and external factors that contribute to capacity.



Capacity strengthening requires internal and external inputs. [Our organisation] has recognised the importance of independence in capacity strengthening. ... Relying solely on external support, such as volunteers, is not sustainable for long-term growth. Simultaneously, [we] acknowledge the value of external expertise ... [including the] contributions of Australian volunteers.

– Organisation representative in Vietnam



Internal factors contributing to OCS

Leadership: four organisations (one in Sri Lanka, one in Vietnam, one in Fiji, one in Indonesia) found that leadership within their organisation had been a significant contributing factor to OCS, including the leadership of managers and board members. For example, an organisation in Sri Lanka found that the major instigator for their organisation's digital transformation was the strong leadership within the organisation and that leadership had also enhanced fundraising and monitoring and evaluation. One organisation in Indonesia that had researched OCS in two of their offices in different locations, found that the experience of OCS in one of the offices was more pronounced due to a leader with a drive to implement new ideas and connect with collaborators.

Staff attitudes: four organisations (one in Vietnam, one in Sri Lanka, two in Fiji) found that staff attitudes had contributed to their organisation's capacity strengthening, specifically, staff's openness to change and trying new approaches. Two organisations (one in Indonesia, one in Fiji) found that a new generation of younger staff had brought to their organisations fresh perspectives, new connections, skills and ideas.

External factors contributing to OCS

Partnerships and networks: All organisations identified partnerships and networks as a significant contributing factor to OCS. They noted the contributions of local community members as their key collaborators that sustain and build their organisations (one in Vietnam, one in Sri Lanka, one in Fiji); partnerships with local government representatives that connected them with other relevant stakeholders (one in Vietnam, one in Fiji); local and international university partners that provided technical advice, training and access to networks (one in Vietnam, two in Indonesia); national CSOs that provided funding, networking opportunities and publicity (two in Indonesia); and local media outlets that provided publicity for their services (one in Indonesia). All organisations also researched the contributions of the Australian Volunteers Program to their OCS, which are outlined in section 4.

Disruptors: There was also recognition from two organisations (one in Sri Lanka, one in Fiji) that major disruptions, most notably the COVID-19 pandemic, had rapidly catalysed OCS. Even though such disruptions were not necessarily positive in themselves, they had forced their organisations to change in ways that improved their overall efficiency and reach. Other unexpected disruptions had negative outcomes for organisational capacity. For example, one organisation in Vietnam had to discontinue their research because of the significant, negative disruptions to their operations caused by the dismantling of USAID programming in early 2025.

4. Australian Volunteers Program contributions to OCS

This section presents the synthesised findings from 14 organisations in relation to the question: in what ways has the Australian Volunteers Program contributed to organisational capacity strengthening?

In year 1, the most cited contributions of the Australian Volunteers Program to organisations' OCS were the program's contributions to building networks and collaboration across the sector, and the Program's contributions to staff skills and knowledge through training and mentoring.

Building networks and collaboration

Nine organisations (three in Vietnam, one in Sri Lanka, two in Indonesia, three in Fiji) found that volunteers from the Australian Volunteers Program have facilitated new connections with diverse stakeholders, including local governments, community members, international universities and donors. The Program facilitated network building and collaboration through volunteer placements as well as through financial support, for example:



Six-month funding support from the Australian Volunteers Program Impact Fund program designed for community level awareness and training on building disaster resilience and strengthening food security targeting several communities was the launching pad for [our organisation] to be recognised by DFAT ... and invited to be part of the 2022 Asia Pacific Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Risk Reduction.

- Organisation representative in Fiji



Developing and diversifying staff skills and knowledge through training

Seven organisations (one in Vietnam, two in Sri Lanka, two in Indonesia, two in Fiji) found that staff frequently highlighted the value of training and mentoring provided by volunteers from the Australian Volunteers Program. Volunteers had provided training in a diverse range of fields to organisation staff and community members connected to organisations, contributing to skills improvement and the building of new knowledge.



[Three Australian Volunteers Program volunteers – one in person and two remote] assisted academic staff in achieving international publication. More than 25 academics [in our organisation] – including PhD students and 15 women – received training, including one-on-one mentoring in research writing and publishing. Six articles have been submitted to international journals, three have been accepted, and three have been accepted with revisions.



– Organisation representative in Vietnam

Some organisations found that the training and mentoring provided by Australian Volunteers in turn contributed to boosting their organisation's reputation. For example, the organisation in Vietnam quoted above also found that the training and mentoring provided to students and staff had not only led to those participants publishing in international journals, but in turn, this had boosted the university's global visibility and reputation. Similarly, four organisations (two in Vietnam, one in Indonesia, one in Sri Lanka) found that when volunteers from the Australian Volunteers Program engaged with community members and other local stakeholders, staff perceived that their interactions and presence contributed to the visibility and credibility of their organisation.

Organisations that have hosted more than one volunteer over a longer period of time noted the cumulative impact of the Program. For example, an organisation that has been supported by the program for seven years, and regularly hosts learning visits for disability service providers across Indonesia, noted:



The first [volunteer from the Australian Volunteer Program] assisted the team in the field of Occupational Therapy, followed by the second volunteer ... in the field of speech therapy, and the third ... in the field of family program assistance. These volunteers have made contributions that are still used at [our organisations]. Their presence not only helps the institution internally but also enables it to share knowledge related to services for children with disabilities with other institutions that have disability service units spread across Indonesia.



– Organisation representative in Indonesia.

In addition to contributing to skills development and new knowledge, organisations also found that staff frequently identified the role of volunteers from the Australian Volunteers Program in more broadly introducing new perspectives, approaches, and innovations, and in turn fostering an organisational culture of learning and improvement.

[Strengthening organisational processes and systems](#)

Organisations found that volunteers from the Australian Volunteers Program also contributed to updating, strengthening and building upon their organisations' processes and systems. From updating policies and procedures and enhancing occupational health and safety plans and practices in Fiji; to digitalising a database for a disability service provider in Indonesia; and creating new websites in Sri Lanka.



The [Australian Volunteers] Program facilitated enhancements to both the organisation's website and the project's website. These improvements have been crucial in modernising the organisation's digital presence, making information more accessible, and engaging with a broader audience. By updating the websites, the organisation has been able to communicate more effectively with stakeholders, donors, and the general public.

- Organisation representative in Sri Lanka



5. Lessons learned: researching OCS

This section presents the synthesised findings from 14 organisations in relation to the question: informed by the research findings, what lessons can be learned about researching organisational capacity strengthening in the context of international volunteering?

Reflecting on year 1 of the research, organisations highlighted the value of using participatory methods with a broad range of staff, volunteers, partners and community members to evaluate their organisational capacity strengthening. Participatory approaches have generated rich learning within and across organisations, and enabled participants to make sense of diverse perspectives of the organisation, rather than understandings solely based on their own experience or quantitative indicators that are difficult to interpret on their own.

Organisations described the value of using broad conceptual frameworks such as the Five Capabilities Framework to measure their changing capabilities and capacities, as compared to using detailed, predetermined indicators set by outsiders who are unfamiliar with their organisational contexts. Using broad conceptual frameworks, and leading the research on their own terms, has also supported organisations to consider the diversity of factors and stakeholders that contribute to organisational capacity strengthening, rather than focusing narrowly on one contributing initiative or stakeholder group. Organisations have opened spaces for critical reflection on their desired future for their organisation, and aspects of their organisations that they wish to continue, build upon, change or discontinue. For example, one organisation reflected that the research process had allowed their staff to revisit its twelve-year journey up until now, and issues that had never previously been questioned were brought into the open and re-examined.

Facilitating cross-learning activities between participating partner organisations within each country and across the four countries has also fostered peer learning on both research processes and findings. Some participating organisations have adapted their research methodologies or methods after learning from other organisations' experiences of different approaches. Cross-learning activities have also built a broader, more diverse base of research findings for participating organisations to learn from, about what and how volunteers contribute to organisations' capacity and development outcomes in different contexts.

One organisation noted that by participating in the research, their staff gained a greater appreciation for the strengths of the organisation:



[The most valuable aspect of the research in year 1 was] the realisation that we are stronger and more capable than we initially thought. The findings from the research highlighted the untapped potential within our team and the resilience of our organisation.

- Organisation representative in Indonesia



6. Lessons for the Australian Volunteers Program in Year 1: researching OCS

Having supported the 14 organisations to undertake their own research on OCS over the past year, the Australian Volunteers Program MEL team shared the following reflections on researching OCS.

Encouraging Australian Volunteers Program partners to conduct their own research initially presented challenges, particularly as many were new to research. A flexible approach has proven to be key—this includes not only providing access to relevant resources and being consistently available for guidance, but also deliberately shifting leadership and decision-making to the partner organisation over time. Rather than driving the process, support is positioned to enable partners to take ownership of the research agenda, define their own questions, and lead the implementation. This approach helps strengthen research capacity.

PAROCS shows that when organisations reflect on their own work and use evidence to make decisions, they learn more effectively. This approach moves away from relying only on external monitoring and instead supports learning that is locally meaningful. It helps organisations strengthen their systems in ways that fit their own context. At the same time, it still fits well with the goals of the Australian Volunteers Program, showing that local learning and donor priorities can work together.

The research design has successfully navigated the tension between maintaining open inquiry about contributions to organisational capacity strengthening while acknowledging the Australian Volunteer Program's interest in specifically understanding its own impact. This balanced approach enhanced the credibility and utility of the findings while providing a framework that could potentially be scaled to engage with a larger group of Partner Organisations—though this expansion will present both challenges and opportunities requiring careful consideration.

Conducting the research transparently and inclusively, with regular feedback through multiple channels, fostered organisational learning and a culture of reflection. By linking inquiry to experiential learning and adaptation, the process emphasised that organisations grow not through static assessments alone, but by testing new approaches and learning from experience. Strong leadership and inclusive governance emerged as critical enablers throughout the research.

Partner Organisations demonstrated remarkable engagement with the research process, embracing it as valuable to their own strategic objectives rather than viewing it as an external imposition. Their willingness to actively participate exceeded initial expectations, suggesting that our approach to partnership-based research resonates with their needs and organisational contexts. Moving forward, maintaining a focus on creating mutual value will be essential to deepening these research partnerships and ensuring the work continues to serve both the volunteer program's learning needs and partners' operational goals.

The same 14 organisations are continuing their research on OCS throughout 2025 to 2026 (Year 2), and 2026 to 2027 (Year 3). Annual research reports will be published mid-year in 2026 and 2027.

Further updates about the research are available on the UTS-ISF International Development webpage:

<https://www.uts.edu.au/research/centres/isf/explore-research/international-development>

