

28 February 2003

Professor Peter Newman,
Director Sustainability Policy Unit
Department of Premier and Cabinet
197 St George's Terrace
PERTH WA 6000

Dear Peter

Please find attached a short submission on the draft Western Australian Sustainability Strategy from Australian Volunteers International.

We commend the draft strategy and particularly appreciate the endeavour to have Western Australia "play our part in solving the global challenges of sustainability".

As our submission details Australian Volunteers is glad to have been able to facilitate since the 1950's the significant contributions of 478 West Australians, (including 34 currently in developing communities), to many facets of global sustainability including environmental protection, education, health, rural development and governance.

Equally important to Australian Volunteers International is the reciprocal benefit from their experience those West Australians have brought back home. Returned Australian Volunteers have unique and inspirational experience that provides special insights and linkages for global and West Australian sustainability challenges.

We hope the State Sustainability Strategy will prove an enthusiastic vehicle for not only encouraging sustainability within West Australia but also for building global bridges of solidarity, support and encouragement people to people.

Yours sincerely

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Submission on Draft Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy February 2003

1. Australian Volunteers International

Australian Volunteers International (AVI) is Australia's largest and most experienced international volunteer sending agency. Since 1951, more than 6000 assignments have been completed in 68 countries throughout Asia, Africa, the Pacific, Latin America, and the Middle East. 444 of these assignments have been completed by West Australians and 34 are currently working in developing communities.

The purpose statement of Australian Volunteers International states that:

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

Australian Volunteers International affirms that central to this purpose is the belief that all people should have access to resources to meet their basic human needs, the opportunity to achieve their potential, and a right to make decisions about their own development and to participate in the development of their own society.

This strongly-held perspective is based on the strengths of our 50 year program built upon the following components:

- providing long-term, cross-culturally sensitive and effective technical assistance which builds lasting relationships with developing countries
- placing volunteers in response to locally identified needs and who will work in partnership with the local organisation under the management of the local employer
- working in partnership with local employing organisations to achieve the building of capacity of local institutions, good governance and civil society, particularly through the strengthening of public and community sector planning, management and service delivery
- providing volunteers who are aware of the cross-cultural dimensions of their role and are adaptable and open to two-way learning from this dynamic experiential learning process, generally up to two years
- maintaining a strong commitment to the importance of direct people-to-people links in affecting development that is appropriate, effective and sustainable and builds international learning and links between the two countries
- facilitating the integration into Australian culture and life of the individual and collective cross-cultural experience and understanding gained by its 6000 returned volunteers.

2. Context for understanding the benefits of international volunteering

For people directly involved in working within multi-cultural contexts, either in Australia or overseas, there is a strong imperative to acknowledge and understand the vastly different cultural frameworks. This is particularly the case for those engaged in interventions into the lives of others as their actions may directly affect the life prospects and aspirations of people in other countries or from other cultural backgrounds. This is the case whether working in service delivery or policy development in Australia, or 'aid delivery', development or international trade.

*... we know that to be sustainable development needs to be broadly inclusive ... too often in the past, the World Bank focussed too much on the economics of growth, without a sufficient understanding of the social, the political, the environmental and the cultural aspects of development. Nonetheless, the Bank has recognised ... that development must be people-centred – that is, people must be the focus of the development agenda.*¹

Growing understanding of these imperatives has led to recognition of the need for more participatory, people-centred and culturally appropriate approaches to 'development'. In turn, these approaches are beginning to be translated into program design both by multilateral organisations and in government to government aid flows. In the case of the World Bank:

Further, in discussing volunteer capital as a new source of growth towards empowered globalisation, the World Bank is now articulating that:

*Volunteer capital is as important as – and perhaps more important than – many other forms of capital participation in the development process. ... Human voluntarism as a new set of values and perspectives ... should become the principal guide to a new way of doing economic development.*²

Indeed,

*... volunteers are providing the services that the 'egotistic' market has decided to forget ... they correct the negative external effects of markets (local and global) and in the jargon of economists are correcting market failures.*³

3. Global Sustainability and the Australian Volunteers International Program

In 2001 the International Year of Volunteers Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General stated explicitly the value of volunteering:

*Volunteering is the ultimate expression of what the United Nations is all about: service and solidarity and the belief that together we can make our world better.*⁴

¹ Judith Edstrom, Sector Manager, Social Development Division of the World Bank, "Multilateral Reports: The World Bank", *Social Development Review*, 3, 1, March 1999

² Alfredo Sfeir-Younis, "Volunteer capital: a new source of growth towards empowered globalization", *International Symposium on Volunteering – Final Report*, 2001, p. 13

³ Sfeir-Younis, op.cit., p.14

⁴ UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, "A turning point for volunteers", *The UN General Assembly Debate on Government and United Nations System Support for Volunteering*, New York, 5 December 2001

3.1 Contributing to and improving relationships in development aid, and environmental technology

*The purpose of Australia's development cooperation program is to assist developing countries to reduce poverty and improve the standard of living of their people through sustainable economic and social development.*⁵

In all of its work, Australian Volunteers International makes an important contribution to the main thrust of Australia's development cooperation program – 'poverty reduction through sustainable economic and social development'⁶ – by providing much needed, experienced and cross-culturally 'aware' technical expertise to build local capacity and provide support for institutional strengthening at comparatively low cost.

AusAID also emphasises the importance of capacity building and institutional strengthening being linked to the valuable role of NGOs and volunteers:

*Australian NGOs and volunteers, often working in partnership with local NGOs, have a strong record in providing assistance to address basic needs through small-scale activities run on a participatory basis. ... volunteers in particular, can play a catalytic role in helping the poor to help themselves.*⁷

West Australians have provided diverse contributions to global sustainability in all its facets through a range of positions including for example a women's community health worker in India, community development worker in Solomon Islands, health information officer in Bougainville PNG, teacher trainer Vietnam, water and sanitation engineer Pakistan, wildlife sanctuary project manager Thailand, Assistant Attorney General Marshall Islands, watershed management officer Indonesia, Women's development adviser Afghanistan, vocational trainer Eritrea, general practitioner Vanuatu, environmental educator Cook Islands, sustainable agriculture adviser Nicaragua, HIV/AIDS program Liaison officer Zimbabwe, agricultural adviser East Timor, people's lawyer Kiribati, human rights trainer Guatemala, and eco-tourism trainer China.

To illustrate:

- Bunbury high school teacher John Taylor spent his long service leave helping select and train english speaking guides on a new community based eco-tourism project as part of the Yunnan Great Rivers Project, a joint venture between the Yunnan Provincial Government and the Nature Conservancy.
- Kate Crossing, a Geophysicist from Joondanna worked for two years using Geographical Information Systems(GIS) technology to obtain satellite images of project areas. She then worked with local counterparts to create detailed maps showing forested areas, pasture land, roads, rivers and settled areas. These maps were then utilised as a tool for conservation management.
- Environmental engineer Heath Morgan worked for 13 months as a watershed management coordinator in India's Nilgiri Hills in Tamil Nadu. He worked with the Rural Development Organisation (an Indian NGO), on water supply and sanitation projects running rural appraisal programs with local communities to help them assess their situation history and problems and consider responses.
- Health science graduate Rachelle Maddock worked for two years as a community health facilitator with the Institute for Development of Community Strengths in Sri Lanka. She helped write proposals for community education programs, and established a resource centre on sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS and other health issues. She also conducted training programs on

⁵ Federal Government White Paper, "In the National Interest" DFAT, 1997, p.48

⁶ *One Clear Objective*, DFAT, 1997

⁷ *Poverty Reduction and Economic Growth in Australia's Development Cooperation Program*, AIDAB, 1993, p.25

sex education for women from poor rural backgrounds and assisted with research in remote villages on nutrition for pregnant mothers. Since her return and drawing on her community development experiences in Sri Lanka, Rachelle has begun working as the Youth and Community Development Officer in the Shire of Nannup.

3.2 Contributing to cross-cultural experience and understanding in aid and development activities

The West Australian alumni of 444 former Australian Volunteers provides a valuable pool of cross-culturally experienced and skilled Australians progressive in their attitudes about development cooperation and committed to working in partnership modes with people in developing countries. Many complete additional overseas assignments either with AVI or other Australian NGOs. Others work for commercial consultants engaged in the implementation of bilateral projects, are employed by AusAID or take up positions in foreign and multilateral development agencies. A study conducted for AVI by an external consultant showed that 29% of all former Australian Volunteers have worked in a developing country since completing their initial volunteer assignment and 12% have worked in a government or commercial agency concerned with overseas development.

3.3 Contributing to enhancing tolerance and racial harmony within the Australian community

*National interests cannot be pursued without regard to the values of the Australian community, ... Central to these values is an unqualified commitment to racial equality and to the elimination of racial discrimination. The rejection of racial discrimination ... is fundamental to Australia's acceptance by, and engagement with, the region where its vital security and economic interests lie.*⁸

Since the 1950s, and more rapidly in the last 20 years, Australia has become an increasingly multicultural and internationally engaged society. As a result, Australian communities have had to deal with the effects of more globally orientated economic and political perspectives as well as developing increased knowledge and sophistication in dealing with the cross-cultural mix that characterises Australian society. These changing requirements are an important stimulus enabling people to come to terms with and celebrate ethnic differences and their contributions to the continuing development of Australian society.

Fundamental to achieving this is the existence within the Australian community of people who have experience in living and working within other cultures or with people from different cultural backgrounds in Australia. Australian Volunteers provide a significant resource in cross-cultural experience and experience of living and working in developing countries. For example:

*There's a tradition of regarding volunteers as somehow part of our aid program. My experience of over 30 years tells me that they are very much more than that. Certainly, we do hope that Australians who come to Indonesia or anywhere else as volunteers, are able to help, to leave something behind, to show that they've made a difference. But more than that, there's no question that the volunteers take away at least as much as they leave and that Australia is a very significant beneficiary of that.*⁹

A responsibility of Australian Volunteers International is to utilise the knowledge and experience gained by volunteers to increase understanding in the Australian community about cross-cultural and international development issues. AVI supports returned volunteers to become involved in community

⁸ DFAT, 1997, op.cit., p.iv

⁹ Mr Richard Smith., The Australian Ambassador to Indonesia, November 2001, speaking at the opening of a photographic exhibition in Jakarta to celebrate 50 years of the work of Australian Volunteers in Indonesia (transcript).

education and advocacy work in Australia, speaking from their first-hand experience of the complexity of aid and development issues, their relationships with people in developing countries and promoting the recognition and celebration of cultural diversity and exchange. One effect of AVI's work in this area is that four out of five returned volunteers on assignment during the 1990s have subsequently been involved in talking with community groups, briefing prospective volunteers or have participated in other AVI activities¹⁰. In all of these kinds of activities they make a direct contribution to the knowledge and understanding of the Australian community.

3.4 Contributing to positive understanding of Australia

The previous Foreign Affairs White Paper states that one area in which government and the wider Australian community (including NGOs) need to cooperate is in:

*Conveying a contemporary and positive image of a changing Australia... Unless others know us better, and we others, our relationships will remain limited and the capacity to pursue Australia's national interests diminished... For relationships to grow... they need a broad base.*¹¹

The AVI Program provides an identifiable, positive, long-term Australian presence at many levels in developing countries across a broad range of sectors and geographic areas. In daily interactions with people in their host community Australian Volunteers share their values and beliefs and provide examples of Australian work practices and community spirit. In AusAID's 1995 review of Australian volunteer sending programs, 92% of AVI Program respondents believed that their assignment had assisted in developing relationships between Australia and the recipient country. Also, research indicates that, over time, memory of the personal qualities of Australian Volunteers remains strong.¹²

The links developed between Australian Volunteers and the people with whom they live and work are highly sustainable. More than three quarters of the volunteers on assignment between 1963 and 1996 (and 86% of those who were on assignment during the 1990s) said that they have maintained contact with people from the country where they worked as volunteers.¹³ These links are maintained even when diplomatic relationships change – in the case of Indonesia, since the early sixties difficulties have sometimes arisen at a bilateral level, while the links between former Australian Volunteers and their Indonesian colleagues have remained stable or grown stronger. It often takes many years for the fruits of these linkages to develop to their fullest and to result in broader, long-term outcomes which impact on the wider Australian community.

¹⁰ Reark Research.

¹¹ DFAT, 1997, op.cit., p.78

¹² AVI 1993,

¹³ Reark Research (1997).

4. Concluding comments

Australian Volunteers International develops strong links between people, organisations and communities in Australia and the countries of the developing world. The AVI Program, from small beginnings, has now been running with extraordinary success for more than 50 years. The West Australian contribution to this success has been significant. The importance for global sustainability of people to people links, between Western Australians and people in developing communities should be explicitly acknowledged and facilitated by the Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy. One example of doing this could be to include in the State Strategy's chapter 4: "Contributing to Global Sustainability" - "Population, development aid and environmental technology"¹⁴ participation by development agencies with offices in WA (like Australian Volunteers International and its returned Australian Volunteers), in initiatives like the proposed Global Centre for Sustainability.

Through the experience of volunteers working effectively at all levels - from local communities through to senior public service roles - in more than 50 developing countries, the AVI Program and its returned volunteers provide Western Australia with a unique perspective on, and understanding of, sustainability issues facing the region. It also provides a major and demonstrably effective contribution to the provision of technical assistance funded through the Australian aid program. The benefits to Western Australia and support for developing countries can be further increased, by increased recognition for the program from the Western Australian Government through the State Sustainability strategy.

¹⁴ Government of Western Australia 2002, *Focus on the future: The Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy*, Consultation Draft, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Perth.