

# INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERISM IN ASIA

Key findings on a recent report commissioned by the Singapore International Foundation, which provide insights on new trends and challenges.

BY CAROLINE BRASSARD, MARGARET SHERRADEN & BENJAMIN LOUGH

To date, there has been no comprehensive study of international volunteerism in Asia. The recent report, supported by the International FORUM on Development Service and the non-profit organization Singapore International Foundation (SIF), on “Emerging Perspectives on International Volunteerism in Asia”, addresses this gap by exploring the current challenges and emerging perspectives in international volunteerism in Asia. International volunteering and service (IVS) is an organized period of engagement and contribution to society by volunteers who work across an international border, in another country or countries.

The report is based on a review of the literature on volunteerism in Asia, extensive field interviews with 60 key informants representing 47 organizations in six Asian countries, and an online survey with 80 IVS sending organizations in 20 countries across Asia. Findings were also taken from focus-group discussions held with returned volunteers, as well as

with national volunteers working with IVS sending organizations in Asia. However, there are no figures currently on the number of international volunteers in Asia. Below are some of the key findings and implications from this research:

## GROWTH OF ASIA-TO-ASIA VOLUNTEERING

Asia has experienced a trend toward Asia-to-Asia placements. On the supply side, volunteers reported that volunteer placements in Asia are more convenient due to greater ease securing visas and other travel documents, especially within ASEAN countries (these include Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam). At the country level, competition in the global market and trade regionalization has pressed Asian countries to focus development aid more tightly on strategic ‘South-South cooperation’ (cooperation from countries located within the southern hemisphere).

On the demand side, volunteer-hosting organizations must spend less time training Asian international volunteers because there is more immediate cultural ‘connections’ between Asian volunteers and Asian host communities. Cultural practices such as ‘saving face’ and ‘patronage’ often do not have to be explained to Asian volunteers. Therefore, while many volunteer-hosting organizations previously received international volunteers from the West, now explicitly seek volunteers from Asia as the pool of available volunteers there is growing rapidly.

The tendency towards South-to-South volunteering is a relatively new trend in international volunteering worldwide, which has been dominated historically by North-to-South volunteering. This trend may signal a new model of IVS emerging from Asia. In a related shift, some respondents expressed a desire for South-to-North volunteering in order to gain exposure to Western countries, a practice that has been minimal in

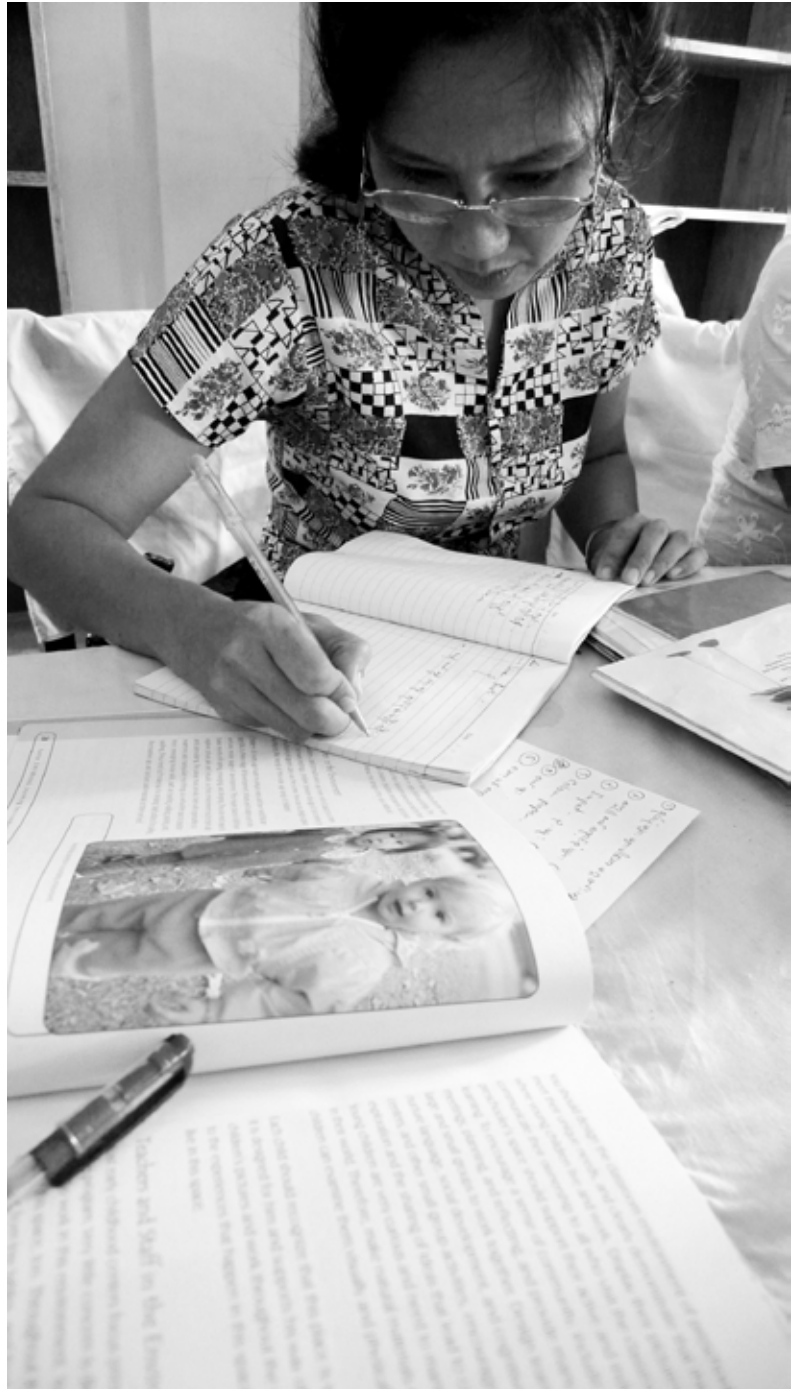
Asia – as it is in many other regions of the globe.

### FOCUS ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Many bilateral donors have prioritized climate change-related projects as part of their financial support to developing countries in Asia. However, many IVS host organizations voiced concerns about their own lack of knowledge about climate change issues at technical and managerial levels. They also expressed challenges attracting volunteers to work on these issues due to the high technical skills required, especially in the context of post-natural disasters. Moreover, some respondents believe that volunteerism related to climate change should undergo a paradigm shift, not just to do what is necessary (the 'what'), but also understand 'why' the implications of climate change touch us all.

### SHIFT IN VOLUNTEERING FOR DISASTER RELIEF

There is a clear trend towards greater professionalism in disaster relief efforts. For some Japanese International Volunteer Cooperation Organisations (IVCOs), for example, this translates into a preference for paid professionals instead of international volunteers in order to reduce risk and negative repercussions of low expertise among "amateurs", and to enable greater accountability and coordination of on-the-ground activities in the aftermath of a disaster. In Singapore, IVCOs now require volunteers to take a standardized training course to



Myanmar participant: An early childhood care practitioner in Myanmar works on her curriculum after being trained by Singapore volunteers during the Singapore International Foundation's (SIF) Specialist Team (Early Childhood Care and Development) Project.

help them prepare mentally and technically for the challenges of working in a post-disaster context.

## NEW PATHWAYS TO INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERING IN ASIA

### a) Targeting the 'Asian Diaspora' (a phenomenon that led to the dispersion of people outside their country of origin, due to factors such as hardship, oppression, social struggles, or search for more prosperous lives)

– IVS organizations have begun to target first, second and third generations of Indians, Filipinos, and Vietnamese living overseas, encouraging them to return as volunteers to their ancestral countries. This includes corporate and other professionals as well

as the children of immigrants serving in short- and long-term assignments.

**b) Domestic to international volunteering** – A trend toward greater domestic volunteering in many Asian countries has led to greater awareness of opportunities for international volunteering. For example, the Chinese Government encouraged volunteering during the 2008 Olympic Games, raising awareness and interest in volunteering, and Singapore formally introduced volunteering in the educational system. Extensive media coverage of natural disaster relief efforts has generated interest in international volunteering. For example, the Asian Tsunami in Indonesia and the earthquakes in Taiwan and China mobilized large numbers of domestic volunteers

and raised awareness of the key role of international volunteering.

### c) Volunteering among youth

– In addition to recruiting and encouraging Diaspora youth, there has also been concern in some countries that youth may be reluctant to volunteer internationally because it takes time away from career-building. Some countries have responded by providing returned volunteers with subsidies or incentives such as employment guarantees. For example, in Japan, where hiring practices give little credit to IVS experience in the formal labour market, some IVCOs receive governmental support to provide long-term volunteers with employment guarantee schemes and wage subsidies.



SIF volunteer, Alvan Yap, took a year off from work to teach international sign language to hearing-impaired children in Timor Leste.



Water For Life: A corporate social responsibility project involving the installation of bio-sand water filters in Siem Reap, Cambodia.

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**d) Volunteering among older adults** – Due to the challenges in recruiting early to mid-career volunteers, another emerging trend is towards increased numbers of volunteers who are older. Senior volunteers are defined as being over 35 or over 55 depending on the categorization of the IVCOs. With the potential for online volunteering using SKYPE or e-mails, senior volunteers can easily share their experiences and work virtually with partners abroad.

### CHALLENGES

For programmes operating in Asia, the study highlighted four challenges. First, IVCOs report a lack of funding and resources.

Second, respondents report lack of coordination and communication, and the related issue of mismatched expectations, between sending and hosting organizations. For example, there may be some time lag between the identification of volunteer needs and the identification of volunteers, during which time the situation on the ground changes. Third, IVCOs face challenges in placing volunteers in under-resourced communities lacking infrastructure to support volunteer projects (including adequate housing). Fourth, host organizations lack effective methods and tools to evaluate the impact of volunteer activities on host communities (either due to lack of knowledge, time, capacities

or financing).

In summary, IVS in Asia has experienced considerable growth in recent years. Although there is significant variation in the nature and forms of international volunteering across the Asia region, rising affluence and growing civil society has encouraged more people to consider volunteering, both domestically and internationally. Trends such as Asia-to-Asia volunteering, volunteering among the 'Asian Diaspora', national interest in the contributions of volunteers, and volunteering across the life course suggest that international volunteering will continue to thrive in Asia in years to come. 

Caroline Brassard is an assistant professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore; Margaret Sherraden is a professor at the University of Missouri, St Louis, US; and Benjamin Lough is a research associate at the Center for Social Development, Washington University, St Louis, US. Their report was detailed at the International Volunteer Cooperation Organisations (IVCO) Conference in October 2010 that was held in Singapore and organized by the Singapore International Foundation ([www.sif.org.sg](http://www.sif.org.sg)).

*Pictures courtesy of the Singapore International Foundation.*