

## Canadian Volunteer Impact Study

### Final Report – Executive Summary

Volunteers have always been a critically important element in CCA's international development program. From the beginning, CCA has been drawing on the skills and experience of volunteers for the benefit of partners around the world. Not only do volunteers share practical expertise and experience with partners, they have also shouldered a major part of the load for educating Canadians about international development and raising funds for CCA's programs.

The Canadian Co-operative Association hired Foot in the Door Consulting to undertake the Canadian Volunteer Impact Study. The purpose of the impact study is to help CCA measure the impact of a volunteer's experience with its international programs at three levels: individual, organizational and community.

*"I gained a stronger understanding about co-ops...Here [in Canada], we forget what it means to be a co-op. I also have better understanding of what grassroots means. I'm from a bigger credit union and we sometimes forget where we started. The program brought it home to me and gave me a sense of pride in helping other credit unions who will grow that way." – Focus group participant*

The focus of the study was on the changes in Knowledge, Attitudes, Behaviours and Practices (KABP) that happen at the individual, organizational and community level after an experience volunteering with CCA's international development program. Criteria within knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and practices had not previously been defined by CCA. Criteria within each of these sections were developed in consultation with CCA staff for the purposes of this study.

The study focuses on volunteers who participated in projects and volunteer missions that are a part of CCA's Partnership Program which is funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (DFATD), formerly known as CIDA.

This study includes Canadian volunteers who have participated through the current DFATD funded Partnership Program (2011-2015), and the previous Partnership Program (2007-2011):: Women's Mentorship Program (WMP) hosts, credit union coaching missions, governance missions, Development Ladder Assessment (DLA) missions, short- and long-term technical co-operant postings, YOU-Lead, study tours, and international internship extensions. The study does not include volunteers on CCA programs funded by other donors, or volunteers with the Co-operative Development Foundation of Canada (CDF). CDF works with volunteer fundraisers across the country to raise money for CDF projects, such as CCA's International programs.

The study reached 105 former volunteers (44% of those invited) and 29 representatives of credit unions / co-operatives (30% of those invited) through online surveys. A total of 32 people participated in two in-person focus groups held in Saskatoon and Vancouver and two virtual focus groups. Interviews were conducted with an additional 9 organizational representatives and 5 CCA staff members. With the exception of CCA staff and one interviewee, all focus group and interview participants also responded to an online survey.

#### The numbers:

- 396 volunteers
- 669 postings
- 32 countries
- \$4.4 million in-kind contributions
- 496 presentations and
- 445 media pieces reaching
- 5.9 million people

## Program overview

- CCA's Partnership Program has engaged a total of 396 individual volunteers in 669 placements in 32 countries since the beginning of 2007. Almost 33% were engaged in more than one posting, and over 40% of these participated in a coaching mission as their first volunteer posting.
- A total of \$4,355,732 of in-kind contributions was generated through the international volunteer program in the four years of the 2007 – 2011 Partnership Program.
- From 2007 – end-January 2013, volunteers have made a total of 496 presentations to 44,381 people in their communities, and generated 445 media pieces which have reached almost over 5.9 million people.
- Word-of-mouth and direct communication with co-operators are important tools in CCA's volunteer engagement toolbox as 27.5% of survey respondents heard about the volunteer opportunity(ies) in which they participated through an email from CCA and/or from a past CCA international volunteer (22.5%).
- Experiencing / contributing to international development is the overwhelming reason survey respondents volunteered. Time constraints were the most frequently cited barriers prior to participation.

## Individual-level impacts

- International development issues, culture and customs of different countries and CCA as an organization were the top three topics about which volunteers gained knowledge. Those who volunteered four times indicated knowledge was gained in the most number of topics compared to those who had volunteered one, two, three and five or more times.

*"When I had to leave my job recently I was very committed to staying in the credit union system because of programs like the coaching volunteer program." – Volunteer survey respondent*

• Learning about / gaining an enhanced appreciation of co-operative principles, values and the co-operative difference as an impact of the CCA volunteer experience was a clear theme.

- The level of commitment to their employers increased slightly for volunteers after their CCA international volunteer experience.
- Interest in international development and interest in CCA were the attitude areas in which the most survey respondents indicated they experienced an increased / positive change. Respondents who had volunteered twice had the highest percentage of respondents indicating growth in the most number of areas.
- Changes in behaviours were not as marked as changes in knowledge and attitudes. Over 61% of volunteer survey respondents noted they started "reading / learning (more) about international development" because of their CCA international volunteer experience. Soft skills such as empathy, open-mindedness and patience also increased.
- Thirty-seven percent of volunteer survey respondents started donating to CDF after their volunteer experience(s) and 16% increased their donations.
- For all respondents who were staff or board members of credit unions / co-ops, the CCA international volunteer experience allowed them to use skills they typically did not use in their day-to-day roles. The top three skills in which the most survey respondents indicated they developed or improved skills were cross-cultural communication, credit union / co-operative development and public speaking. The development / improvement of skills increased after the first volunteer experience.
- Most of the volunteer survey respondents felt the CCA international volunteer experience allowed them to develop or improve their leadership skills.

*"I am more open-minded, open to possibilities since participating in this program and I volunteer more." – Focus group participant*

- Almost three-quarters of volunteer survey respondents said they feel participating in the CCA international volunteer experience made them better staff / board members of their credit unions / co-operatives. Over 85% were inspired to make changes at their organizations because of their CCA international volunteer experience. The most frequently cited change, noted by 72% of all respondents, was promoting the co-operative principles and values. Almost 48% were inspired to fundraise for CDF.

*"The skills needed for the CCA international volunteering experience – because the learning and application happen in real-time – help create leadership and, as importantly, resiliency in your employees to adapt quickly to stressful environments, develop deep listening skills to understand the needs of others and refined in-the-moment problem solving skills." – Focus group participant*

### **Organizational-level impacts**

- Co-operative principles and values, culture and customs of different countries and the co-operative difference were the top three areas of increased knowledge noted by organizations of their staff / board members who participated in the CCA international volunteer program. In most areas, organizations' perceptions of the topics in which staff who participated in CCA international volunteer opportunities contributed to increased knowledge in their credit unions / co-operatives is lower than increases in knowledge as identified by the volunteers themselves.
- Although not in the same ranking order, the top four changes in attitudes reported by organizations and individuals are the same: interest in international development, cross-cultural sensitivity, appreciation of the co-operative difference and interest in CCA.

*"We spend a ton of money each year on very expensive MBA and other professional development programs. The CCA experience is a minimal cost to the organization and the learning and application is immediate plus it supports what we espouse in our mission and vision." – Organization interview*

- Increased empathy, increased open-mindedness, and increased patience were the top three behaviour changes noticed by organizations. Forty percent of organization survey respondents noticed the staff / board who participated in the CCA international volunteer program play greater leadership roles upon return.
- The top five skills developed by staff / board members noticed by organizations are mirrored by the results of the same question asked by volunteers: 1) cross-cultural communication, 2) credit union / co-operative development, 3) public speaking, 4) strategic thinking, and 5) interpersonal communication.
- There is not a significant perception of increased leadership skills or practices by staff / board members following the CCA volunteer experience. This is in stark contrast to the volunteers' perception that this is a significant area of growth.
- The CCA international volunteer experience currently has no significant impact on staff retention, employee advancement, organizations' abilities to attract and higher staff, member engagement practices, the development of organizational policies, or the quality of customer service at participating organizations. There was a somewhat significant impact of engagement in the CCA international volunteer program on staff morale.
- The fulfilment of co-operative principles and values was the organizational development area where the most significant impacts were made, and there are strong indications that the CCA international volunteer experience has impacts on staff / board members' professional development.

### **Differences between large and small organizations**

- There was significant consensus that staff and board members from smaller organizations can provide more support to overseas partners because they run most similarly to them.

*"My board saw the value and always asked me when I was going back because they saw me so energized and connected to the co-op values – it really was a personal morale booster and motivator." – Organization interview*

- Overall, volunteers from small organizations tend to have more skill acquisition compared with their colleagues from larger organizations.
- In terms of increased knowledge, volunteers from big and small organizations are pretty much at par with each other, with the exception of knowledge related to international development and knowledge of CCA's work at home and abroad where more volunteers from small organizations were perceived to have increased levels.
- Representatives of larger organizations felt the leadership practices of their staff / board members increased significantly compared to volunteers from smaller organizations.
- Volunteers from larger organizations seem to have experienced the most significant change in attitudes in areas related to understanding of co-operative principles and values and appreciating the co-operative difference.
- Volunteers who come from large organizations are significantly more likely to fundraise or donate to CDF than those that come from smaller organizations.

### Support to volunteers

- Support from their organizations did not make a significant impact to volunteers' decision to volunteer with CCA. Involvement in this program is largely initiated and driven by staff or board members.
- The most frequently cited types of support provided by credit unions / co-operatives to staff / board members for their participation in CCA's international volunteer program includes financial contribution (23% of organization survey respondents), paid time off (22%) and facilitating public engagement after the volunteer returns (16%).
- For volunteers, the level of desire for financial contributions is equal to "genuine interest / moral support from management / board" in terms of the type of support they would like from their organizations.

*"Seeing small co-ops helping people on a personal level really brought home to me the power of the co-op model. I work for a large credit union that creates impact on a grand scale and it was heart-warming to see the other end of the co-op spectrum." – Focus group participant*

- Eighty-five percent of responding organizations do not have a formal volunteer policy. Barriers included: integration into other policies, implicit expectation of staff to engage in volunteering, fear of putting a policy in place that is not manageable, uncertainty of where the policy would best fit, and belief that volunteering be done in the true definition of the word – that is, on individuals' own time and money.
- Suggestions for organizational volunteer policies include: having a statement on volunteering in the vision/mission/policies that states organizations support volunteerism, be framed as an opportunity for staff – not an entitlement, opportunity to fundraise at work if the organization is not able to contribute, offering a few paid days off a year, including CCA's international volunteering program as an option to choose from for annual professional development funding, encouraging credit union centrals to issue their own statement or develop a policy supporting volunteering in CCA's program, sharing the financial and/or time requirements between the organization and volunteer, compensation for longer term placements, and having a fund available to anyone that qualifies for the program but has difficulty meeting the financial requirement.

### Community-level impacts

- Even though three-quarters of survey respondents said they volunteered before, over 20% said they started volunteering (more) in their communities because of their CCA international volunteer program experience.
- Volunteers felt the top three impacts of their

*"My personal goal is to have our [organization's] definition of community include international credit unions." – Organization interview*

public engagement activities were raised awareness about CCA's work and volunteer opportunities (91%), raised awareness about international development issues (78%), and raised awareness about co-operative principles and values (73%).

## Recommendations

- Overall
  - Adopt a program-wide theory of change to better track and evaluate actual impacts over time, be in a better position to make evidence-based decisions and better target volunteers and organizational partners.
  - Move quickly to engage key organizations in discussions for strategic funding and other partnerships.
- Strengthening the impact of the program
  - Have clear public engagement objectives and indicators with a defined menu of objective choices for volunteers to choose from.
  - Invest in the design and implementation of program-wide reporting tools with built-in calculation formulas for volunteers to share the burden with staff of reporting and increase accuracy in reporting.
  - Build a more comprehensive volunteer opportunity dissemination contact list for the circulation of postings that includes engaging persons or departments responsible for employee professional development and CSR.
  - Expand and articulate the thinking of impacts for this program to include the professional development benefits that occur through working with peers within the Canadian credit union / co-operative sector in addition to overseas partners.
  - Administer pre- and post-placement self-assessments of hard and soft skills to help the volunteers process their experiences and help them to better articulate professional development impacts back to their employers.
  - To make the postings more accessible to people with transferrable skills and help volunteers make the case internally for participating in the program, include examples of skill sets that could be relevant for the posting along with a list of the possible professional and leadership development outcomes.
- Increasing buy-in from volunteers
  - Use alumni more strategically and systematically post-placement for recruitment, briefing, training and debriefing new volunteers, and project monitoring and evaluation.
  - Greater continuity between volunteer missions would significantly help volunteers understand their impact, reduce potential duplication in volunteer work and provide motivation to continue volunteering.
  - Offer more virtual, longer-term volunteer opportunities.
  - Expand the number of placements suitable for people working in co-operatives instead of credit unions.
- Increasing buy-in from organizations
  - CCA senior leadership needs to strategically engage with and cultivate champions in the leadership at key organizations.
  - Emphasize and articulate the professional development and leadership impacts of participating in the program including CCA's stringent selection criteria.
  - Invest in developing and marketing three types of business cases with which to approach strategic partners: a case on the cost-effective, real-time opportunities for leadership and professional development; a case centered on participation in

*"Most [of us] are now specialized. It's an opportunity to stretch and grow, have chance to learn." – Focus group participant*

*"Sell the case of the cost-effectiveness of this experience in terms of professional development. This is real-time learning at its best." – Focus group participant*

- this program as a way of fulfilling commitments to co-operative principles; and a case on participation in this program as a living, marketable example of corporate social responsibility as a means of attracting new members in addition to the recruitment of new talent.
- Funding for CCA volunteer programs
    - Encourage credit unions to use a portion of their surplus to support the program annually. CCA should raise its expectation of contributions from credit unions and these should be based on earnings.
    - Position the international volunteer program as a flagship activity for provincial credit union foundations.
    - Create a special group of organizational funders across Canada and give them some authority to recommend people for placements