

Increasing volunteer retention in West Java

Policy Brief

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The Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) and the West Java Province Environmental Agency (Dinas Lingkungan Hidup, or DLH) formed a partnership in May 2018 to apply behavioural insights and rigorous evaluation to DLH's flagship 'Eco Village' volunteering programme. Eco Villages are villages with community-based volunteer groups that are set up and supported by DLH to tackle local environmental issues. This brief summarises the findings of our project.

Policy objective

As with many volunteering programmes around the world, motivation of Eco Village volunteers starts high and erodes over time, which can lead to volunteers leaving the programme. This high turnover can make it

difficult for programmes to maintain a consistent number of volunteers, let alone increase it. Our objective was therefore to encourage volunteers to attend Eco Village activities, such as waste separation and tree planting, more often, and to stay active in the programme for longer.

Intervention

WhatsApp is one of the most common forms of written communication in Indonesia - far surpassing SMS due to the high cost of phone network fees. Individual and group WhatsApp messages are also used by Eco Villages to invite volunteers to activities and share success stories. It was therefore both logical

Table 1: Behavioural insights used in Treatment 2 WhatsApp messages

Behavioural insight	Application
Personal challenge	Remind volunteers that their hard work will pay off and they will grow as a person from attending more activities.
Eco Volunteer identity	Remind volunteers about their identity as a volunteer for ecological causes and their standing as a volunteer in the community.
Planning support	Help volunteers plan for how they will overcome any barriers to attending activities.

and efficient to use WhatsApp to encourage volunteer attendance.

BIT and DLH tested the effectiveness of longer, monthly messages about environmental challenges (Treatment 1) compared to short, weekly messages that draw on behavioural insights (Treatment 2) over the course of three months. Treatment 1 drew on the more traditional idea that highlighting the negative consequences of environmental degradation can trigger positive environmental behaviours. Treatment 2 reflected the behavioural insights perspective that volunteering is motivated by a range of non-economic factors and that volunteers benefit from practical support to follow through on their intentions. The messages were sent to the lead volunteer in each Eco Village (Head Volunteer) and, where possible, dedicated WhatsApp groups independently set up by Eco Villages.

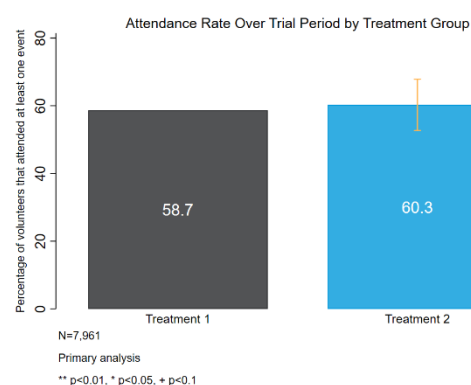
Results

We used a randomised controlled trial with randomisation at the lead volunteer level to evaluate the impact of Treatment 2 compared to Treatment 1 messages. The outcomes of interest were (i) whether or not an existing volunteer participated in at least one Eco Village activity over the four-month trial period; and (ii) the percentage of Eco Village activities an existing volunteer participated in during the trial period. Data was collected using a new mobile app.

We found that the short, behaviourally-informed WhatsApp messages (Treatment 2) led neither to significantly higher volunteer retention nor more engagement when compared with the longer, more traditional messages related to environmental challenges (Treatment 1).

To complement the quantitative impact evaluation, we gathered additional qualitative evidence to understand how volunteers reacted to our interventions. The interviews revealed that some Head Volunteers did not forward or otherwise communicate our messages to volunteers. These findings suggest that simple, behaviourally-informed

Figure 1: Impact on volunteer attendance



WhatsApp messages compared to lengthier messages may not be good value for money. However, we are unable to conclude whether sending any type of message is better than sending nothing. This question would benefit from testing, as would a trial which directly targets all volunteers.

The finding that WhatsApp messages are not read and shared may be limited to this context. There is always merit in running robust evaluations of similar interventions in other contexts. Where possible, these studies should use objective indicators of behaviour and not self-reported measures, as we had to rely on in this context.

Recommendations

- **Test the impact of messages against no messages.** We were only able to test the impact of different messages against one another. It would be useful to know whether sending any type of message is better than doing sending nothing.
- **Contact volunteers directly.** By adapting the sign-up process to collect phone numbers from volunteers, DLH can communicate with them directly and test the effect of different messages on volunteer engagement.
- **Develop new messages for testing.** Feedback at the post-trial workshop revealed a common preference among attendees for messages that draw on religious lessons and obligations.

- **Encourage all Eco Villages to continue using mobile data collection app.** Many volunteers reported positive experiences with the new data collection process, and DLH has a clearer indication of volunteer behaviour as a result.

Moving forward, we will support DLH to adapt the data collection app, after which they can use it independently. Our hope is that this app can improve the availability and quality of DLH-held data which in turn can support additional behavioural insights projects.