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International environmental volunteers: pursuing security and sustainability with human solidarity
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Abstract

In this paper I intend to consider how long term international volunteers contribute to human security, international development and sustainability. With so much emphasis on governance, security and counter terrorism in our now globalised world, it is easy to focus mainly on states and national defense and forget the importance of individual human beings for building trust, cultivating hope and making a difference. The paper will begin by discussing the history and evolution of international volunteer sending agencies and volunteers as a response not just to symptoms but to causes of global poverty and inequality. I will consider how international volunteers might be defined, what may make their role different to other forms of overseas development assistance via personnel, and the positives and negatives that may accompany those differences. I also want to reflect on international volunteers’ role and suitability as contributors in the transition to a globally more ecologically sustainable state using O’Riordans idea of the need for a ‘spirit of communal obligation’ that enables individuals to ‘relate to others’ needs’. I will link this reflection to some concrete international environmental volunteer experiences drawn from current PhD research on the topic.

Introduction

Towards the end of 2002 Michael Palmer wrote a viewpoint article for the journal Development in Practice on “the pros and cons of volunteering abroad” (Palmer 2002). This article was important because it was an extremely rare contribution to academic debate in development circles about the value of international volunteering. It was timely because of the ongoing legacy of valid queries about the efficacy and appropriateness of overseas technical assistance through foreign experts, raised in the early 90s by UNDP and the Dutch Government. These still linger in the new millennium as subtle doubts about the legitimacy of international volunteer work for development, but the current renewed emphasis on capacity development provides a new avenue to reflect on their distinct contribution in this area.

This paper emerges from the experience and standpoint of a reflective practitioner who has worked for fifteen years as both international volunteer and facilitator of international volunteering. By active reflection on these experiences with both Australian Volunteers International and United Nations Volunteers, combined with a broad based survey, web based discussion forum and specific case studies, this paper reflects a snippet of the tentative findings of my PhD research to date.

In 2005 UNDP published the Millennium Report entitled Investing in Development that reviewed progress and made recommendations towards the internationally ratified UN Millennium Development Goals (UN Millennium Project., Sachs et al. 2005). Despite the lack of clear progress, the report didn’t query the dominant view that market mechanisms and policy are still the most feasible enabler for the MDGs. As David Lewis suggests “for some observers, a neo liberal consensus around economic globalization and a belief in the transformative power of markets to reduce poverty has now begun to replace development as the dominant idea that informs global change (Lewis 2005:16).” David Lewis suggests that international volunteering
allows a ‘humanising response’ to the pace and impersonal push of globalization (Lewis 2005:13,14). I suggest that it is appropriate, given the mixed MDG progress, to reconsider what a non market mechanism like volunteering, and in this article long term international volunteering in particular, might offer as a realistic but creative and empowering way of mobilising people globally for development based on trust and understanding.

As the former UNDP administrator Mark Malloch Brown said:

> We – the global community – have set our sights on a more prosperous, healthy and educated world by striving to achieve a set of time-bound objectives called the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Many volunteers have joined this massive effort, and indeed, it would be difficult to accomplish without them (Malloch Brown 2003).

A further justification for the special consideration of international volunteering at this time is the current global concern over security-particularly since the 2001 bombing of the World Trade Centre in the USA. Security concerns are potentially becoming a catalyst for a new ‘cold war’ style division round the world causing tension between the North and South or East and West (Fowler 2005). In this climate it may be especially appropriate to consider the international exchange of international volunteers that can contribute to promoting trust, understanding and development through people. The 2005 UNDP Human Development report states “Development in poor countries is the front line in the battle for global peace and collective security” (UNDP 2005:12). However, development alone, as it has commonly been framed around MDG targets, may not be sufficient to ensure global security and the added value that international volunteering provides might suggest some crucial insights into other key human ingredients toward the broader goal of human security.

Caroline Thomas (2001) suggests that the idea of human security is a significant departure from conventional security analysis of international relations that revolve around the state. She says for human security “human beings and their complex social and economic relations are given primacy with or over states. …Human security describes a condition in which basic material needs are met, and in which human dignity, including meaningful participation in the life of the community can be realised”(Thomas 2001:161).

The central premise of this paper is that long term international volunteering should not be understood as either paternalistic charity, cross cultural exchange or a self serving career or personal development move on the part of well off Westerners. Neither should it be understood, though it has been, as a straightforward form of providing technical assistance for international development (Sogge 2002:81). It is, at its best, more appropriately considered a reciprocal endeavour that does bring benefits (and costs) to individual volunteers at the same time as providing the space for an exchange of technical skills, knowledge and experience in developing communities. But more than this it can also bring recognition and challenges to existing unequal power relations and deep seated causes of poverty, injustice and unsustainable development in the entire world. It is a form of international cooperation that can question power and economic structures and bring relational values and intimacy to the fore amongst divergent actors in different parts of the world. In this sense it has the potential to challenge the economic and technical focus of globalisation in favour of people connecting and relating globally. Long term international volunteering thus highlights the relational nature of development and the power of solidarity.
1 International Volunteering and the History of Volunteer Sending Agencies

The UNDP publication Essentials (UNDP 2003:2) on Volunteerism and Development talks about key universal principals of volunteerism as follows: actions are carried out freely and without coercion, financial gain is not the main motivating principle and there is a beneficiary other than the volunteer.

International Volunteer\(^1\) sending has a long history. While most popularly recognized from the commencement of VSO in the UK in 1958 or the Peace Corps in 1961, international volunteer work had begun prior to that, starting with work-camps for post World War One re-construction in Europe in the 1920s, and relief and emergency assistance in India and other developing countries in the 1930s and 1940s. In Australia, 1951 saw the inauguration of the Graduate Volunteer Program at the University of Melbourne. This program was probably the first formal opportunity world wide for international volunteering for development, though many other similar volunteer sending organisations were formed soon after. It was inspired by an Indonesian delegate at the World University Service Assembly who spoke of “the value that could occur if technical experts working in under-developed lands were able to enter into the whole life of that society, rather than merely contributing their knowledge (AVI 2001)”. As a result a postgraduate from Melbourne University, Herb Feith, travelled by boat to Jakarta in 1951 to take up a post on local pay and conditions as translator with the Ministry of Information and this led to the formation of the Australian Graduate Volunteer Program (Overseas Service Bureau 1995). This program, which soon transformed into the Australian Volunteers Abroad program, was founded on the idea of working for development by facilitating the sharing of technical skills at the same time as promoting cross cultural exchange with developing countries.

All international volunteer sending agencies (IVSAs) have been transformed to some extent in recent years as they have moved, like other international development NGOs, toward greater professionalism, efficiency and accountability. Some IVSAs in fact moved so far down this path as to distance themselves from the term “volunteer” and perceptions of unprofessionalism and overemphasis on cultural exchange or restrictions on resourcing/conditions that they felt accompanied it. One response has been the use more recently of the all encompassing term “personnel sending agencies” (Pratt 2002), that has a more neutral and broad connotation not tied to motivation, living conditions or remuneration. The remaining IVSAs\(^2\) generally still consider their 'personnel sending' as volunteer sending because the participants live and work under local conditions, i.e. they do not receive market rates of pay relative to their qualifications and experience and are generally motivated by humanitarian rather than financial concerns.

The international volunteer sending agencies have traditionally sent volunteers overseas from North to South\(^3\) but some agencies are increasingly encouraging and recruiting volunteers from the South to their programs. For example, 70% of UN Volunteers are now typically from the South and the British agency VSO, through its "Southern Volunteer Program", is also recruiting from the Philippines, Kenya and Uganda.

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\(^1\) Today I am using the term international volunteers to focus on those working outside their own country in a developing community for an extended period under local conditions with some payment to cover basic costs and with some support from a facilitating agency.

\(^2\) For example VSO from the UK or UN Volunteers or Australian Volunteers International.

\(^3\) I use in this paper the names North and South to cover the notion of what used to be termed first world and third world or developed and developing. While North and South aren’t perfect either they carry fewer value judgements.
2 Distinctive Features of International Volunteering for Development

Long term international volunteers can be considered distinctive from many other development workers in the sense that they are usually motivated by humanitarian values and desire for reciprocal benefit and change over financial rewards- and hence live and work under local conditions. They are also requested by a local organisation and work relatively long-term i.e. commonly in their posts for more than a year and most frequently 2 or more years. Their international volunteering is generally facilitated by an IVSA with a commitment to respond in the North and South to causes not just symptoms of poverty and underdevelopment, and act within a three way partnership with the local organisation who requests the volunteer. Volunteers are managed on a day to day basis by the local organisation they work for, be that a local government department or NGO. This approach gives unique power to the local organisation that requested the volunteer, to shape and adapt what the volunteer is doing in line with local priorities and concerns. In other words the volunteer is accountable first to the local organisation they work for and only more broadly to the agency facilitating their volunteer stint and its broad aims/objectives. These six criteria: humanitarian motivation, reciprocal benefit, living and working under local conditions, long term commitment, local accountability and North-South linkages to tackle causes not symptoms, constitute the niche of the long term international volunteers for development and IVSAs. In most bilateral or multilateral projects power rests more clearly with the financier and the technical adviser is not under control of the local organization.

It is worth comparing between the ‘long term development oriented’ IVSAs like Australian Volunteers International, Voluntary Service Overseas, UN Volunteers, to name just a few, and the shorter term assignment focused organisations whose aims and operational methods may differ substantially. The short term volunteer senders,(particularly the commercial ones), might be characterised negatively as facilitating the more ‘glossy’ or mainstream ‘volunteer tourism’ with potentially fewer long term benefits for ‘the visited’and perhaps greater potential for adverse impacts or reinforcing stereotypes than breaking them down (Simpson 2004). These opportunities may however also be considered positive opportunities for promoting international understanding, if structured carefully and with a social justice pedagogy as Simpson (2004) suggests. Andrew Jones’ research indeed acknowledges Simpson’s (2004) appropriate concerns but demonstrates the potential transformative benefits (in personal development, cross cultural experience and global perspective) from short term youth volunteering in Vietnam and Tanzania (Jones 2005).

Irene Pinkau did a unique evaluation of ‘volunteer development services’ in the 1970s based in 15 countries culminating in a three volume report entitled “Service for Development”. While Pinkau’s study covered four main categories including training and employment schemes, study services, social and technical services and finally foreign volunteer services, her findings were significant. From her assessment she concluded that “volunteer development services are non elitist in contrast to many voluntary organizations which focus on charity and involve the affluent… problem solving in Volunteers Development Services means modifying or eliminating underlying causes”(Pinkau 1981:61). This responds directly to Simpson’s call for tackling why global injustice exists.

Sherraden et al. (2006) in their working paper entitled “The Forms and Structure of International Voluntary Service” suggest a typology for international volunteering that divides firstly on the lines of service for international understanding or service for development aid and relief. It then divides on the basis of duration, nature of service and degree of “internationality” (Sherraden, Stringham et al. 2006). The dichotomy between promoting understanding or development is
however one that Herb Feith, that pioneer Australian volunteer abroad, expressly wanted to avoid in 1951. Herb’s pioneer spirit had the express intention of engaging intimately with the local people, society and context. This would provide a genuine insight into and feeling for deep seated problems and their global and local causes, beyond merely transferring technical skills as a necessary but rather one dimensional solution to complex problems, and this will be picked up in some detail by this paper.

3 Technical assistance through Personnel/ International volunteers

Aid for the South has conventionally been construed as requiring two categories: physical infrastructure like buildings, bridges, transport or machinery and the ‘skills and productive aptitudes available in the economy’ (OECD 2006:112). Technical assistance(or cooperation), addresses the second category aiming to enhance capacity in developing countries either with direct provision of skills from outside or enhancing the capacity of local people. Main elements have commonly been educational assistance via scholarships and traineeships, provision of personnel like experts, teachers or volunteers from donor countries or funding or provision of them by recipient or other countries of the South (OECD 2006). In 2004 OECD DAC members spending on technical cooperation amounted to $20.8 billion or 27% of total net Overseas Development Assistance (OECD 2006b).

Despite its significant volume, there have been significant critiques by UNDP and others of aid through technical assistance over the last fifteen years. They identified problems such as a lack of ownership by hosts, the dominance of a hierarchical expert paradigm that underestimated local skills and the importance of adaptation to local circumstances, inadequate proportion of women, and ambiguous accountabilities for technical officers (Morgan 2002; Pratt 2002). Also emphatically criticised have been highly paid expatriate advisers with privileged access to resources and infrastructure, donors who seek to circumvent local management systems for short term project goals and “excessive emphasis on tangible, measurable outputs as opposed to institution building” (Tarp and Hjertholm 2000:165). The recently released 2005 OECD Development Cooperation Report alludes to this when it states “Technical Cooperation remains a controversial aspect of development cooperation”(OECD 2006:125).

Clearly long term international volunteer work fits under the OECD definition of technical cooperation. International volunteers do share skills and contribute to capacity development but they usually also work and live alongside local people under similar conditions and most commonly within local organizations and structures. Volunteer Sending Agencies moreover usually expect volunteers to engage in experiential learning for their life and work overseas as well as their subsequent return to their home country. As a result international volunteers don’t fit the conventional technical expert role and perhaps this is why they have lacked respect in this sector. That is also why Sherraden’s separation of international volunteers for development from international volunteering for international understanding may prove ambiguous because they need not be mutually exclusive. Indeed according to the IVSAs modus operandi good development work is founded on international understanding and mutual learning.

Long term international volunteers may actually subtly challenge some claims of elitism, imperialism and state interests sometimes leveled legitimately at the modernization development project by Escobar (1996) and others. As Paulo Freire said a “real humanist can be identified more by his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favour without that trust”(Freire 1972:36). This he says, requires communion with people and personal change-key elements of long term international volunteering for
development and emphasized in recruitment by volunteer sending agencies in great contrast to conventional TA providers who are recruited to give proficient technical expertise and objectivity.

In late May 2005 Action Aid released its report titled ‘Realaid’ with a scathing criticism of the 13 billion dollar global technical assistance industry. The report condemned the “phantom aid” exemplified by technical assistance through tied aid, amongst other aid mechanisms and called for a “new international aid agreement in which donors and recipients are held mutually accountable” (Actionaid 2005:53).

In the light of this criticism of aid personnel, it may be tempting to lump international volunteers in with this self serving aid that Actionaid is so critical of. I suggest we should resist this. While volunteer sending agencies may facilitate volunteer assignments, local organisations or government agencies usually request the sort of volunteer they need according to their priorities. This is in great contrast to project consultants with external terms of reference. As one Cambodian Government Department of Fisheries manager said to me about the VSO volunteers working in the national department of fisheries:

"Even though VSO is paid low salary they are happy to do it, its not for the money. …they are happy for their contribution that is more effective, because they try to understand the local people and not try to put something and force local people to accept, this is not good, like consultants, national and international they have terms of reference, they have their program and agenda but …some people doesn’t understand what they look like, very high, and local people very low. The language is different, very different, this is very meaningful, but for the local people very meaningless… And then when they finish the result is one kg or two kg of documents they produced, they are…very good in writing these experts but fools for what does this mean. …I don’t know whether this one translates from the book or the words to the practice! (personal interview 26,2006)"

He then compares how his staff work with external people:

"I observe people, probably they can work more closely with the VSO than with the consultants because they feel consultant is high, yes high, VSO is people who very touchable, reachable, people who are accessible, …that is the feeling of people, because when we have consultants few people consult.. and the consultant is mostly with the director but the VSO, many people can approach, that is the difference (personal interview 26,2006)."

In the field however there appears to be some donor queries about the viability of a complementary role for volunteers and more commonly real structural and procedural barriers to melding the two because of a preoccupation with macro level interventions that are perceived as more efficient and showing greater impact. One donor representative explained to me her dilemma regarding where to direct project funding:

"I think probably if you’re an administrator and you look at the money that’s coming in and your saying, IDB is coming in and is designing the whole of the social protection program for Nicaragua and I’ve got a choice of putting some money in there or putting it into a small community project ok where should I put it, what’s my choice?”

"At the moment we would argue it’s better to go for that large social protection program, its probably got crap design, probably not very good, I would just have to change it marginally and make it a bit better and that would make a huge difference on a lot of peoples lives. Whereas if I put my money into a really wonderful little community project which is outside the bureaucracy because there’s a…"

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4 Though they do specifically say in the fine print that they haven’t factored in NGO aid, though its not clear if they do include aid grants to NGOs from governments.
volunteer in there, and you know its direct contact with the people and you work with 100 or 80 families or whatever, I have an impact there of much higher quality, but with very small coverage and of course you should be doing both and we do do both (personal interview 1, 2005).

Using international volunteers may shift the focus by encouraging a development intervention where project, finance and technical considerations are not the unique driving forces even if they are important ones. The 2003 VSO review says as much when it said: “volunteers are central to the work of VSO and play a key role in development….The fact that VSO is not a funding organisation, but an organisation that recruits volunteers in response to partners requests,… means there are qualitative differences in the process of partnership development and the nature of its partnerships (Munro, Muir et al. 2003:V.7).” As a Honduran NGO representative said to me: “I have seen how an international volunteer through their long term work can open spaces in the thinking of the people in an organisation, that you just couldn’t have achieved only with money (personal interview 2, 2005).

4 Critiques of International Volunteering

However, despite the regular critiques of technical assistance over the last 15 years, queries about international volunteering for development have rarely been articulated in any detail. Given international volunteering’s obvious overlap with some aspects of technical assistance, the latter’s critiques remain inevitably a subtle counter to tacit assumptions about the positive nature of international volunteering.

The lack of almost any other discussion about the pros and cons of international volunteers in academic or other development writings is unfortunate as it would provide an opportunity for the ambiguities of benefits and shortcomings to be systematically considered and accepted or rebutted. Indeed even the international volunteer sending sector has not done itself any favours by its overall lack of public reflection/research or transparent self-criticism. This public silence may have been due to the obvious fear that admitting any shortcomings in concrete overseas impact could jeopardise fragile ongoing funding commitments, largely from government aid agencies. From many accounts this ‘self censorship’ may have been singularly counterproductive in the longer term5.

The 2002 working paper from Global Service Institute on “Limitations of Civic Service: Critical Perspectives” (Brav, Moore et al. 2002) was a welcome rare independent exploration of possible broad limitations and criticisms of local and international volunteer service and ways to address and research these. Brav, Moore et al discuss limitations of civic service and focus on the central theme of ‘control of others ranging from paternalism to exploitation’ (Brav, Moore et al 2002).

However Brav et al (2002) state: “Due to the dearth of research and analysis on the possible limitations and negative consequences of service…we draw from criticisms of similar developmental policies and programs” (Brav, Moore et al 2002:4). The criticisms mentioned earlier of technical assistance are an obvious example of the real problems Brav, Moore et al refer to. However while international volunteers can be considered under this umbrella, the framework for their contribution can also be much broader to the extent they may challenge...

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5 For example the 2003 Danish MS review stated with some obvious frustration: “as long as MsiS is supported by public funds, the utility, effectiveness and efficiency of the personnel-based model applied by MS must be supported by evidence that is independent of MS’ own ideology. First and foremost, the personnel-based model must demonstrate comparative advantage over other assistance and partnership strategies in terms of impact on poverty” (Michelsen Institute, 2003).
these negative tendencies. So we still require specific research on the actual experience of long term international volunteering for development.

Virtually the only detailed and specific public ‘opportunities’ for reflection in busy, under-resourced VSAs have been the mandatory funder reviews that were survived rather than embraced as learning opportunities, given the perceived drastic ramifications of a negative report. Some programs like the KEPA Finnish long term volunteer program and the Irish volunteer sending agency APSO disappeared as a result of government disapproval. However while a defensive IVSA response is understandable in this climate, constructive criticism and change is also possible.

In 2003 the Danish volunteer agency MS, and VSO the largest British IVSA, were externally reviewed. The MS review conclusions were mixed with many positives along with a query about why intercultural cooperation should be an MS goal and whether, more fundamentally, volunteer ‘development workers’ should remain the central axis of its work. MS subsequently reaffirmed development workers as central, but in early 2005 MS subsumed intercultural cooperation as a means to its now sole goal of poverty alleviation, rather than a joint aim (MS 2005). The VSO review was singularly positive and affirmed VSOs role and strategy for development using international volunteers. The review’s only slight criticism was a call for greater systematic evaluation of VSOs outcomes (Munro, Muir et al. 2003).

In 2004 the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA) made a positive submission to AusAID about the development of its ‘Volunteer Program Policy’. In the submission ACFOA indicated public support and recognition from the Australian development NGO sector, perhaps demonstrating publicly for the first time that it considered international volunteering a valid contribution to the development sector. The submission explained that ACFOA's own NGO effectiveness research had identified five key components and concluded they were all ‘strongly reflected in VSA volunteer programs’. The five key components were “high quality relationships based on mutual trust and respect; long term engagement; learning; adaptation, working together and risk taking”(ACFOA 2004:4).

In early 2005 the Canadian International Development Agency released an evaluation review of the Canadian Volunteer Cooperation Program positively entitled “the Power of Volunteering” demonstrating a new and growing recognition of the relevance of the international volunteer sector to international development concerns. It said: “As the world is changing and global relationships are shifting and maturing, the relevance and role of volunteer cooperation is increasing significantly”... “International volunteering is a powerful mechanism in development co-operation” (CIDA 2005:89).

In summary while there have been some significant criticisms of volunteers, international volunteers and international volunteers for development there is also a tentative, small but growing acceptance of the relevance of international volunteers for development in the international development sector. Does this however mean that international volunteering is just another mainstream player in conventional aid with the pitfalls and problems Brav Moore et al have pointed out and no redeeming features? The following three sections will canvas long term international volunteers’ potential distinct contribution to capacity development, sustainability and development.
5 Capacity development and solidarity

Capacity development can be defined as a “process whereby people, organisations and society as a whole unleash, strengthen, create and maintain capacity over time” (OECD 2006b). While capacity building was in the past regarded as just another component in technical cooperation, it has over the last few years gained new conceptual depth and importance because it “has been one of the least responsive targets of donor assistance” (OECD 2006b:7). The “building” capacity metaphor has however been recently dropped in favour of capacity development because of the recognition that it should develop existing capacity and work through existing structures and national priorities. The OECD paper specifically acknowledges the “increasingly recognised importance of capacity and the difficulty of achieving it” (OECD 2006b:7).

UNDP has endorsed what they call 10 default principles for capacity development and these have great synergy with the international volunteer approach. They are:

1. “Don’t rush
2. Respect the value system and foster self esteem
3. Scan locally and Globally; reinvent locally
4. Challenge mindsets and power differentials
5. Think and act in terms of sustainable capacity outcomes
6. Establish positive incentives
7. Integrate external inputs into national priorities, processes and systems
8. Build on existing capacities rather than creating new ones
9. Stay engaged under difficult circumstances
10. Remain accountable to ultimate beneficiaries” (Lopes and Theisohn 2003:30)

Brian Pratt of INTRAC identifies some of the key characteristics that are associated with volunteerism that counter the recognised failings of technical assistance and reinforce and complement capacity development. Pratt says:

“Voluntary action has specific values and attributes that reinforce the processes of capacity development.

Values: commitment and solidarity…; belief in collective action for the public good; commitment to human rights and gender equity; Community ownership: …; direct contact with communities through living and working at the grassroots; and the reciprocity of exchanging skills and experiences;

Institutional basis: a generally lower level of institutional self-interest by volunteer placement agencies in perpetuating posts and dependence; synergies that arise from being able to simultaneously work at different levels…; the increased priority given to “soft skills” such as facilitation, communication and dedication to the overall processes of development, rather than short-term isolated technical inputs …; the fact that volunteers are generally requested by their hosts, rather than imposed as a condition of funding or other assistance (Pratt 2002:98).

One NGO representative explained to me how she saw the difference between an international volunteer she had worked with and other official international development organisations and their ‘experts’. These are not like international volunteers she said:

A Martin, a Pedro that goes and sits down and listens, these organizations come with recipes already elaborated somewhere else where they don’t know this reality….He,(Martin the international volunteer) has grown too, developed along with those of the group, and as he lives in the zone, its easier, he knows the campesinos, he knows how the northern farmers are, he really has accompanied them, I can say that because he didn’t just arrive to direct the orchestra but got involved with the hard work (personal interview 3,2005).
Jane Gilbert (2005) highlights the importance of self awareness and increased self knowledge in aid workers. She describes the importance of experiential learning where difficult feelings are openly reflected on with honesty and courage. She largely talks of techniques to facilitate this in training sessions but international volunteers often live this process through their work and are in a sense given license to do so because of the framework in which they enter. Their task is not simply to transfer knowledge and experience but to exchange or share it. Traditional experts on the other hand come within a framework where they are expected to know the answers and to admit or embrace doubt may be interpreted as incompetence.

The South has also much to teach us in the North, and volunteers are vital in creating the medium for revaluing that knowledge and strengthening networks for ongoing contact. As ordinary citizens returning to their own communities they are also in a strong position to advocate an accessible and yet meaningful and non stereotypical ‘public face of development’. This merging of the insiders and outsiders of the development community is a good example of the public faces of development which are so important “to the relationships between development practice and its constituencies and hence, should be central to any attempts to try and change those relationships to ones which afford the best opportunities of addressing poverty and inequality” (Smith and Yanacopulos 2004:661).

My own experience volunteering as an environmental adviser in Nicaragua in Central America exemplified my feeling that what I contributed was far outweighed by the new perspective on the world I took with me to Australia. Looking back at a letter from the Director of the Nicaraguan NGO FACS, where I had worked between 1991 and 1995, showed their clear recognition of this. It said in summary, thanks for your help, then:

To your far away land you will surely take what you have learnt of the customs and characteristics of our people, among them, perhaps the most important being the desire for progress and social justice. We hope that your stay in our Central American country has been valuable in your formation as an Australian citizen, friend of the Nicaraguan’s (personal correspondence,1995).

In other words the Nicaraguan NGO director saw clear value in what I had done but also what they had taught me. They could see it contributing, as it undoubtedly has, to my being a more active and informed Australian citizen, who understands and engages with my links to the world partly through the lens of my Nicaraguan experience and friendships.

6 Sustainability and relating to others’ needs-experiences from the field

In his paper Civic Science and the Sustainability Transition, Timothy O'Riordan (O'Riordan 1998) discusses sustainable development and social change. He suggests the sustainability transition is a shift to a more sustainable state that requires going beyond empowerment to capture the 'spirit of communal obligation' that enables individuals to 'relate to others needs'. I believe international volunteers can facilitate an exchange that cultivates respect and helps develop capacity and devolve power to grassroots levels because of their stature living and working alongside local people under local conditions.

It may be possible, for example, that international volunteers can help transform power differentials through the application of principles for congruence via personal development, organizational learning, reciprocal relationships, mutual accountability and negotiation of process as discussed by Chambers, Pettit et al. in their 2001 IDS paper entitled: The new dynamics of aid: power, procedures and relationships (Chambers, Pettit et al. 2001).
Let's hear the experience of an Australian volunteer working in Indonesia on a fisheries research project. She describes her unusually broad collaborative role, the unique expectations of her and honesty to her, as well as the importance for the work of being able to enter into the local life outside the office. She also suggests that her unique linking role only exists because she is a volunteer, as funded scientific positions have to prioritise their own individual agency’s work over broader collaboration.

International aid in my field typically involves teams of scientists undertaking either collaborative or semi (pseudo) collaborative research as project staff in the target country. Doing this work as an Australian Volunteer rather than as usual project staff had advantages in that I could prioritise activities aimed at strengthening the collaboration rather than just the activities of my single employer.

Essentially, the liaison role was a very different experience to a plain project staff role, with an entirely different set of expectations from the Indonesian side in particular. It was clear that there had never been an outlet like mine available to the project staff. Official liaison personnel in Jakarta representing the Australian institution do not have affiliations with individual projects and were essentially at too high a position to be useful as a sounding board for Indonesian project staff. My unique position as a volunteer was not only good for liaison at a project level, but also not too high to be exempt from conveying criticisms.

In terms of my role as an Indonesian-speaking volunteer compared to a fluent Indonesian-speaking Project Scientist, I couldn’t tell you as I never met one. To bridge the cultural gap… you need to speak everyday Indonesian and understand everyday Indonesian culture well enough to chat outside and around work. I am sure Indonesia is not the only developing country where most important dialogue takes place outside the office.

Although many of these issues don’t relate specifically to being a volunteer, but rather the position I was in, the relationship is not superficial as these kinds of positions are basically never funded in scientific collaborations of this type (survey respondent 12, 2005).

Another example from a volunteer working on sustainable agriculture in South East Asia, again illustrates how the volunteers role differs from that of other aid personnel. He talks here about some of the positive and negative aspects of his volunteer status compared to other forms of technical assistance. Highlighted is his lack of power and status and the fact that as a result he must accompany people at their own pace and be accountable predominantly to the local people he works with and their wishes. He also notes the satisfaction of personal learning which has practical advantages also for example learning a local language.

Positive – the absence of strict milestone requirements allows the volunteer to work at a pace that is determined by the NGO staff and farmers’ capacities. This means a more relaxed workplace where trust and understanding is developed over time and (probably) leads to improved sustainability after input completion.

Negative – a volunteer comes with very little power. No budget, no sanction from a government authority etc. This means that sometimes progress is slower than might otherwise be the case and can cause frustration and a feeling that not much is being achieved.

There are positives and negatives also with the language barrier. For consultants this may not be a problem because they may be provided with interpreters. The volunteer however must try to get by. The positives of this are that from a personal perspective you learn a new language which is a fulfilling achievement. Also positive is that the local people recognise your attempts to speak their language and this improves inter-cultural understanding. On the negative side communication is obviously diminished when a volunteer has only a rudimentary understanding of the language.

…accountability tends to be less rigid than with other forms of development. This means that apart from the volunteer, the target groups have the main influence – how can we best satisfy their wants.

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6 This is a series of quotes fed back to me as part of a survey I circulated amongst international volunteers.
This is different to other international consulting where the employer, government, funding agency all have a strong influence that at times may mask the true requirements of the target groups.

Having worked in both fields I do not believe that volunteers necessarily have different characteristics to others. However, when working as a volunteer you must have a different attitude and remember you are offering to help but this may or may not be accepted. So patience and tolerance are important (Survey respondent 8, 2005).

The idea of fostering an ethos of communal obligation so that people can relate better to others needs and thus work together for “sustainability” is also reflected in the work of Robinson (Robinson 2004). He suggests shifting from the language of “sustainable development” (with its implicit emphasis on economic growth), to the term sustainability, as more appropriate because of its implicit recognition of the importance of ‘the social constructions of sustainability’, where values considerations complement technical solutions. Robinson draws 5 key recommendations from the mixed experience with ‘sustainable development’ in the past.

Robinson’s recommendations have considerable resonance with new guiding principles for capacity development that have attempted to respond to the shortcomings of technical assistance in the past (Lopes and Theisohn 2003). These in turn relate well to the international volunteer modus operandi of experiential learning, skills sharing and accompaniment of communities and organisations or governments at a range of levels.

This also fits the experience and practice of international environmental volunteers where relationships, understanding, motivation and capacity development are key. I will quote the experience of a VSO volunteer on an environmental management project in Cambodia. She talks about the close relationships between volunteers and Cambodians and of volunteers’ sense of powerlessness combined with subtle influence that can help facilitate capacity development. She says:

The technical knowledge that I bring is important only if it is shared with my colleagues. I try to involve my counterparts in everything I do so that the knowledge stays after I leave. It is impossible to separate technical aspect from social and political as volunteers work very close to the Cambodian counterparts and influence not only the technical knowledge but the way of thinking, work habits and work culture, norms like accountability and transparency. Through close relationship which develops between volunteers and their counterparts, those aspects of our work are intrinsic part of our job and in my opinion have longer lasting effects than technical competence.

It is the closeness of work relationship between the volunteer and local counterparts that makes all the difference. We are on even level (to the extent possible and often depending on volunteer's personality) and most of barriers are not there (we do not bring money, we do not have more money than they do, we work together in the field, sleep and eat in the same room in villages).

We do not have the power and money big organizations can use to pressure governments into policy changes. Enforcement of any legislation, or any decision at all, is much easier if one has a big organization behind. Volunteers do not have any power, our influence is more subtle.

The disadvantage is that we attempt to share our knowledge with our colleagues, not do the job ourselves, so often the job does not get done. Often we spend so much time teaching this type of basic knowledge that we do not have opportunity to implement our real expertise.

I think aid agencies employing both international experts that are paid and that are not (volunteers) need to acknowledge that the difference is not in expertise level, but in the role and attitudes (Survey respondent 14, 2005).
7 The Role of International Volunteering for Sustainable Development

Some people have suggested that to link international volunteering, particularly of younger people, with development is a mistake. Pratt suggests this sort of volunteering should more be classed as solidarity or development education (Pratt 2003) in line with Sherraden’s dichotomy between volunteering for development and volunteering for international understanding (Sherraden, Stringham et al. 2006). I argue that these elements of solidarity and mutual learning are some of volunteerings’ special ingredients. They make an important and different contribution from conventional in country projects or policy interventions because of the implication for understanding and change between North and South. If we want the meaningful change in North South relationships and structures required for enabling development in our complex, interdependent and globalised world, international volunteers who return home may in fact be an essential complementary element. A 2004 special edition of the ‘Journal of International Development’ suggests that everyday citizens who have come to understand life in another country of the South may provide a key element in the ‘public face’ of development which can help catalyse change in the North (Smith and Yanacopulos 2004). I refer here for example to international volunteers returning home and wanting to change key constraints to development in the South like trade barriers, intellectual property rights or voracious Northern consumer demands for natural resources from timber to seafood and oil.

It is possible to transcend the simple giving and getting approach of aid, the feel good charity of gap year volunteering, and the objective technical world of one way skills transfer which is built on a deficit model of knowledge(where one knows the other doesn’t know). The international volunteer context of building long term meaningful cross-cultural relations and skills exchange is one attempt to do this. International volunteering can have a special place when trying to forge meaningful partnerships by genuinely attempting to walk in others shoes and relate to their needs, whilst looking for opportunities to learn ourselves, despite the inevitable starting point of unequal relations. In this sense the experience of living and working alongside local people is not solely a means to a development end but also a meaningful project in itself. Alec Dickson, the founder of VSO, is said to have recognised this explicitly when he wrote to developing countries seeking their involvement with VSO. “Dickson recognised that no country would accept the patronage implicit in any general offer of aid: so he made it clear that the advantages would be mutual, to the volunteer as well as to the project”(Wainwright 1965:116).

Conclusion

To summarise, long term international volunteering for human security, development and sustainability is about people. Technical assistance as a response to underdevelopment has had a range of problems associated with it and the new emphasis on capacity development is an attempt to address some of these. International volunteers can contribute uniquely through the pursuit of mutual capacity development and understanding. International volunteers respond at an individual, technical and personal level to broad development goals as well as immediate technical deficiencies. International volunteers highlight the importance of local accountability, respect for local values and knowledge as well as the appropriate pace and character of interventions and the need to remain engaged despite difficult conditions – fundamentals of capacity development. Sustainability is an integrating, holistic and practical concept that encourages capacity development and international volunteers can provide an apt link in this equation because they can relate to local peoples needs with a genuine spirit of communal obligation. They are also able to challenge in a small way, through individual action, the causes of underdevelopment not just overseas but also on return home.
References


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