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## Short-Term Volunteering and Local Development Projects in Developing Countries

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### **“Having Fun While Doing Good”: To What Extent do Short-term Volunteering Schemes Benefit Local Development Projects in Developing Countries?**

“Somewhere in the world, a child needs your help. Who needs something you know how to do. Who needs a week or two of your time, and their life’s arc will be forever changed. You will leave your mark on the world. And the world, in turn, will leave its mark on you.”

(Global Volunteers, 2002)

In the last decade, this kind of rhetoric has become increasingly popular in especially Western societies. The concept of sending young individuals to developing countries in a spirit of altruistic benevolence to help others has turned into a staple activity for people striving to “make a difference”. This practice, primarily known as international volunteering, is identified by Wearing as a process that:

“applies to those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment” (2001; 1).

Today, volunteering has been likened to a tool for a bottom-up and grassroots form of development, involving many individuals working towards a collective goal rather than being ruled by a single person. By this, it has progressively attracted considerable attention from various global agents such as international aid organisations and human development policy-makers.

Volunteering is not an entirely novel concept; its history is deeply linked to that of the evolution of the development agenda from the late-colonial period, marked by the establishment of the Bretton Woods institutions coupled with the post-decolonization emergence of the “era of development”. First instances of international volunteer service occurred in the aftermath of World War II (Forsythe, 2009; 5), when overseas voluntary organizations served to control colonized peoples and suppress anti-imperial struggles. According to Manji and O’Coill (2002; 570), “charity was not only designed to help the poor, it also served to protect the rich”. Before the emergence of the development discourse following Africa’s independence, volunteering was more concerned with the “apparent failings of Africans” (*ibid*; 571), inspiring an imperial trait within the concept of charity.

Decolonization launched the new “era of development”, whereby the colonial mindset was formally dismissed and the creation of Bretton Woods institutions and the subsequent realignment of global power structures meant that international bodies now regulated the financial economic and political systems of nation states (Roberts, 2004; 22). Once the development discourse emerged, outlining severe territorial inequalities of wealth and general welfare, Western as well as local non-governmental organisations (NGO) rapidly emerged and multiplied to form a “development machine”, a vast institutional and disciplinary nexus of official agencies and practitioners, consultants, scholars, and other miscellaneous bodies producing and consuming knowledge about the developing world (Manji,

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O’Coill 2002; 568). This framework of development provided a significant backdrop for the creation of the first volunteer agencies, the most prominent ones being the British Volunteer Service Overseas organization (VSO) in 1958 and the US Peace Corps in 1961.

However, the mix of foreign development policy and volunteering has over time created a clash between interests and values over development issues. An example of this is the Peace Corps’ primary concern over the spread of communism to newly independent colonies (Roberts, 2004; 23) rather than central development issues. Today, these ambiguities have sparked an ongoing debate surrounding the practice of international volunteering, in which the activity is either endorsed as a creative and engaging solution to local development issues by supranational bodies like the United Nations (UN), or rejected by critics as a paternalistic and inappropriate activity steeped in neo-colonial motives (Forsythe, 2011; 571). Ultimately, it becomes an issue of determining whose interest is prioritized when these exchanges are established.

This is what the following research intends to discuss. Overall, it is widely recognized that volunteering can be a significant source of aid in achieving local development. However, the expansion of the volunteering industry and the prominent marketization of short-term volunteering placements have created obstacles that betray the notion that the volunteering market is now primarily driven by Western capitalism rather than by normative values of international development and global solidarity. For now, short-term volunteering as practiced is inherently more suited to the volunteer than the host community, giving its practice a neo-colonial connotation.

With primary focus on the relevant literature and volunteering cases dating from within the last decade, the research will study how the increased marketization of short-term volunteering has a direct impact on problems engendered in short-term volunteering activities. This discussion is of considerable importance to international development studies, as international volunteering has been hailed as a potential tool for sustainable development as a result of grassroots, bottom-up development strategy where transnational communities come together in a cooperative effort. Therefore, the issues preventing its overall success need significant attention to prevent these and further obstacles to sustainable development.

## Methodology

This section will provide a rationale for the way in which this research has been conducted, in the aim of analysing the benefits incurred by short-term international volunteering, and its suitability as a development strategy. Firstly, it will briefly outline the conceptual framework within which the main debate is placed, and which is used throughout the dissertation. Secondly, it will introduce the secondary avenues of research and highlight the ways in which they will contribute to a more critical understanding of the main research question. Finally, it will determine and explain the parameters used for the overall analysis, providing reasoning for the use of the selected time frame and the case study chosen to illustrate the main findings of the research.

### *Conceptual Framework*

The central focal point is the concept of volunteering and its suitability as a viable development strategy. Based on the altruistic provision of social work, it has become increasingly popular when applied to international service and development work, especially for young adults and students. While international volunteering is readily used by NGOs and supra-national bodies such as the UN, it is also widely criticized for its implicit promotion of neo-colonial relations between Western volunteers and local host communities. On one hand, international volunteering is supported for its promotion of neo-liberal values of solidarity and the fight against hunger, poverty and misery; on the other hand, critics argue that the predominantly North-to-South flow of volunteers encourages exactly the opposite, persisting neo-colonial ties and influencing so-called “Third World” countries that “need help”.

This tension between neo-liberal and post-colonial critics has created a heated debate within international development bodies, as human aid via technical assistance is increasingly being marketed and promoted by processes of globalisation. The global commercialization of volunteering schemes, and by extension the professionalization of international development, has prompted disagreements as to the suitability of such practices

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to meet local development goals. More importantly, the prominence of short-term volunteering projects has raised a serious concern surrounding the ethics embedded in volunteering; what is viewed by some as an altruistic initiative is seen by others as a holiday with a twist. Although there is a general consensus that “with well-planned programmes with clear objectives, young people can add value in a number of ways” (Barkham, 2006), it is also clear that volunteers should not be expected to change the world (Brodie, 2006).

The research will thus critically assess the validity of post-colonial critiques against supporting neo-liberal arguments, while analysing the main dynamics affecting volunteering placements and their impacts on local development. These include the role played by sending organisations; the volunteer’s perception of their position within the host community; and the local communities’ perspectives on the work provided by the young individuals they host.

In order to provide a comprehensive evaluation of relative benefits incurred by volunteering, this research will use Matthews’ concepts of mutual benefit (2008; 108-111) as the benchmark against which the level of benefits gained will be assessed. Such discourse assumes that travel experiences involving authentic interactions with locals should leave one changed; for instance, the heightened global awareness experienced by a volunteer might be considered as beneficial for his or her global education, almost as important as those benefits delivered to the communities they are engaged with. In this, cultural exchanges of knowledge incurred by host-volunteer interactions are simultaneously accumulated in a spirit of reciprocity. Within the context of this particular research, ultimate benefits for the host community will be identified as the results of a positive-sum game and an equal exchange of knowledge and resources, that do not suggest an imperial relationship between volunteer and host. Thus, for international volunteering to be truly beneficial to host communities as much as volunteers, there must be evidence of an exchange of knowledge that may avoid post-colonial critique.

## *Secondary Avenues of Research*

In order to facilitate a comprehensive critique of international volunteering recognizing the potential “clumsiness” of aid via human interactions and assistance, three main questions will recur throughout the analysis.

The first sub-research question aims to examine whether processes of international volunteering risk reproducing neo-colonial patterns between the global North and South. For this, levels of exchanges of resources as well as knowledge shall be analysed to delineate how volunteering may implicitly project paternalistic attitudes on the developing world. The rationale behind this first sub-question is to determine whether volunteer projects are driven by pure benevolence, or if they are a new contemporary illustration of the perpetuation of imperial legacies through aid. This concern will figure most prominently in the literature review, where the validity of neo-liberal and post-colonial arguments will be evaluated.

The second sub-research question revolves around the role played by sending organisations and volunteer NGOs in the delivery of proper volunteer services. For this, the research will focus on how the significant expansion of the volunteering industry has affected the efficiency of local development projects. Links will be drawn between the structure of sending organisations, including their processes of recruitment, and the direct impact on communities on the receiving end. This will provide a more nuanced understanding of how the outcomes of volunteer projects may be determined directly by the organizations themselves.

Finally, the third sub-research question will constitute an evaluation of whether volunteering projects help or hinder the host community overall. This question of gain on behalf of local hosts is one that has not been sufficiently analysed by the wider literature, especially since the increase of available short-term volunteering projects is a result of the volunteering industry’s significant expansion. In essence, volunteering must serve the aid-recipients before the volunteers themselves; it is important to verify whether those principles are still present.

## *Parameters of Research*

Literature documenting the debate surrounding international volunteering has especially focused on the motivations inciting individuals to participate in such ventures (Clary and Snyder, 1999; Söderman and Snead, 2008; Wearing,

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2001), as well as how voluntary sending organizations operate within a wider framework of training for global corporate work (Jones, 2011; Smith and Laurie; 2011). However, less literature has specifically focused on the perspectives of recipients of volunteering aid, and the overall impact on host communities. The aim of this research is therefore to contribute to areas of study relating to the direct impact of volunteering on local communities and investigate whether they are fully satisfied by such projects or not.

For this, the timeframe of the research has been limited to the start of the 21st century; although most post-colonial critiques of development were developed closer to the years following decolonization, the overall concepts of international volunteering have changed as a result of the boom in the volunteering industry dating from the early 2000s. As the changing industry has had a direct impact on such concepts, it is therefore appropriate to restrict the chosen timeframe of research from early 2000s to the current date.

A case study will be used to illustrate the main findings of the research, to provide a more empirically in-depth analysis. For this, it will draw from the author's own field research, investigating the general impact of volunteers on a school located in a rural village in Ghana. Identified by Forsythe (2009; 11) as the 3<sup>rd</sup> most popular volunteer destination in Africa, Ghana is considered as "proof that development works": indeed, it has one of the highest GDP per capita on the continent and is considered one of the safest countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, despite its rich resource base Ghana is still dependent on international financial and technical assistance: the state's main challenges include weak public sector institutions, resulting in poor delivery of basic services in areas such as agriculture, health and education, as well as limited access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. Many NGOs operate in Ghana to defeat these challenges from a grassroots development approach, notably with as many as 103 different volunteerism organizations as of 2009 (Ibid), which mostly deal with environment, education and civil empowerment. As such, Ghana figures as an important component of the typical international volunteering industry and is a central attraction for Western short-term volunteers wishing to explore different landscapes and cultures while providing social work.

The case study will concentrate especially on the perspectives of students and staff at El Shaddai International School Complex (ELISCO) in rural Klikor-Agbozume. While the research carried out reflects arguments made in the wider literature, it is important to note that the results of this specific case do not apply to all volunteering projects in Ghana itself. Indeed, given the diversity of the volunteering industry and the diverging degrees to which placements are managed by sending organizations and host communities, it would be misleading to assume that the results of the ELISCO case study can speak for all Ghanaian volunteer placements. Nevertheless, this case aims to supplement the existing literature on the perceived impact of volunteers on local development projects, as it still remains an under-researched topic in development studies.

## Literature Review

The following section reviews some of the prominent literature contributing to the debate on the potential of short-term volunteering to promote sustainable development in so-called Third World countries. Though volunteer tourism is strongly encouraged by neo-liberal concepts of development, there are contradictions within such discourse that are strongly highlighted by post-colonial critiques.

### *Volunteering, a Neo-Liberal Development Strategy*

Literature involving international development strategies and efforts for transnational growth are steeped in neo-liberal values of development; indeed, the emergence of the development discourse following decolonization was based on the promotion of liberal democracies through fighting against poverty, hunger and ignorance. By promoting notions of individual autonomy and responsibility, contemporary international volunteering exemplifies neoliberal ideas while contributing to concepts of collective global citizenship, solidarity and activism. According to Smith and Laurie, "neoliberalism is producing a complex re-imagining of international volunteering", where the activity is shaped by ideas of political community and moral obligations towards others (2011; 546). In their article relating to dynamics linking global citizenship and volunteering to neoliberal professionalization, Smith and Laurie argue that international volunteering can promote global equity through its capacity to develop volunteers whose impacts emerge upon their

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return as much as during their stay overseas.

While Smith and Laurie choose to focus on the global citizenship aspects of volunteering, Robinson (2008; 139) brings a more comprehensive narrative as to why such neo-liberal practices have gained prominence in global consciousness. For one, this rise in global awareness depicts the world as being “for itself”, rather than “in itself”, echoing Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address of government “of the people, by the people and for the people” (1863). Concerned with the subjective dimension of globalization, Robinson explores theories of homogenization that see a global cultural convergence, highlighted especially by rising processes such as world tourism (2008; 140). By combining increased global cultural flows with volunteering activities, the link between globalization theories and Smith and Laurie’s notion of global citizenship place volunteerism at the heart of the construction of what Robinson calls the “global village” (Ibid; 139). By improving these global connections between societies, contemporary international volunteering is clearly a product of globalization.

These globalization processes further contribute to neo-liberal development discourse. Perceived by Lewis (2006; 17) as “a morally-informed vision of global responsibility”, development has been present in foreign policy agendas since decolonization; concepts of responsibility and solidarity have become staple values within global society. Lewis asserts that practices and understandings of volunteer tourism are thus constantly changing in line with a wider set of development and globalization factors; through an increase in global awareness, the concept of “global civil society” is actively invoked by development agendas to explore the range of development issues and practices from a bottom-up perspective. Through this, Lewis affirms that international volunteering can provide tangible contributions to development in the form of skills and other resource transfers (Ibid, 16). This is echoed by Smith and Yanacopulos (2004), who identify the surge in international development NGOs, development education programs and volunteering agencies as the diversification of the “public faces of development”; in this:

“The production of different public faces of development by a wide range of civil society and other development actors offers the possibility of prompting shifts in the relationships that currently shape relations between north and south, such as affording opportunities beyond the traditional giver and receiver, enabling the south to better represent itself, and the framing of relationships centred on forms of solidarity.” (Ibid; 661)

This expansion of a global civil society is owed to the way the development discourse is represented, which in turn is influenced by geopolitical changes and the shifting roles and agendas of NGOs and governments. The use of this development forum can arguably enable the South to better represent itself and frame relationships based on solidarity. Therefore, international volunteering can further advance processes of globalization by spreading concepts of solidarity and development “for all, by all”.

Lastly, Wearing’s *Volunteer Tourism: Experiences that make a difference* (2001) and Wearing and Lyons’ *Journeys of Discovery in Volunteer Tourism* (2008) are a staple in studying the processes and dynamics of contemporary volunteering. While the former provides a wider analysis concerning the place occupied by international volunteerism alongside alternative and eco-tourism, as well as a focus on the sustainability of such volunteering activities, the latter analyses the motivations to volunteer and the NGOs’ overall role in supporting and enhancing volunteer opportunities. Supporting such projects as a way to overcome the issues engendered by mass tourism, such as the unsustainable exploitation and degradation of the environment and the imprint of Western behaviour on indigenous cultures, Wearing sees volunteer tourism as an avenue for sustainable tourism, echoing Gilmore and Dunstan’s support for “building on cultural strengths and marketing the local culture as attractive for what it is” (cited in Wearing, 2001; 159). By generating a more “environmentally friendly” industry, volunteer tourism can then provide more sustainability and control to local communities.

Therefore, the inherently neo-liberal nature of literature supporting international volunteering fundamentally argues that such practices constitute a form of grassroots social development movement; indeed, the implied solidarity and collaborative efforts implied in the achievement of development goals are inherent values rooted within neo-liberal societies. However, over time, international volunteering, as well as neo-liberal development discourse, has been criticized for indirectly perpetuating North-South neo-colonial attitudes. Though in theory, international volunteering can promote what is claimed by neo-liberal enthusiasts, in practice the results seem to be reversed: instead of

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empowering the South, such activities may rather encourage and re-create paternalist attitudes towards the “underdeveloped” and so-called Third World.

## *Post-Colonial Critiques of International Volunteering*

While neo-liberal arguments support the emergence of international volunteering as a development strategy, post-colonial theory identifies and highlights inconsistencies found within the development discourse, and by extension within practices of volunteering. Based on the premise that “history has determined the configurations and power structures of the present” (Young, 2001; 4), post-colonial critics argue that former colonies remain dependent on ex-imperial powers because of debt and their relative “underdevelopment”. In his work on *Postcolonialism*, Young maintains that colonial legacies continue to portray peoples of the formerly colonized world as inferior, childlike, feminine, requiring the paternal rule of the West to advance their best interests, and are ultimately deemed to require development. Through this, he links the emergence of development discourse with the implicit notion that white culture is still widely regarded as the basis of civilization.

Escobar’s *Encountering Development: the Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (1995) furthers Young’s arguments, by asserting that the realization that “something has to be done” to increase levels of equality and stability in the Third World was prompted by the notion that such states posed a direct threat to the developed world. He deplores the fact that the emerging development discourse conforms to Western expectations of evolution and progress, where the “poor” are defined by what they lack in terms of monetary and material wealth; by this, the concept of Western neo-liberal modernization tacitly insinuates that that indigenous populations need to adopt the “right” values held by a white majority in order to succeed.

Escobar’s analysis shows how the professional institutionalization of development perpetuates the subordination of formerly colonial populations, as the interests of the “Third World” are processed within Western capitalist paradigms. As a result, poverty, illiteracy and hunger have become the basis of a lucrative industry for development planners, experts and civil servants. By applying a post-structural and post-colonial approach to development, Escobar counters neo-liberal arguments by arguing that, in reality, development discourse suppresses the South’s emancipation due to negative side effects of neo-liberal economic policies of structural adjustment.

Globalization and international volunteering cannot escape these critiques. For one, Sutcliffe (1999; 147) identifies that the penetration of multinational corporations and debt dependency, supervised by neo-liberal economic institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and international trade organizations, encourage this imbalance of power between North and South. Globalization has been constructed in such a way that the North exploits the South through unequal exchange, profit repatriation and debt repayment, thereby restricting the South’s economic development. This ties into Sutcliffe’s polarisation critique of development, whereby “the process of development is not one of homogenization and universal attainment, but one of polarisation and exclusion” (Ibid; 136); nations are polarized according to Eurocentric values into developed and underdeveloped categories, directly contradicting Robinson’s homogenization theory, and the industrialization of underdeveloped countries is prevented by the vicious cycles of capitalism. Sardar further criticizes this promotion of Eurocentric globalization in his *Development and the Locations of Eurocentrism* (1999), where he defines Eurocentrism as intrinsic in the way that development experts organize knowledge. As decision-makers from less developed states use the West as a standard for measuring their own societal progress, Sardar asserts that globalization and Eurocentrism are joined within development discourse.

Finally, Palacios is one among many to argue that international volunteering creates unrealistic expectations and problematic assumptions on behalf of sending organisations as well as volunteers themselves. In his article “Volunteer tourism, development and education in a postcolonial world” (2010), Palacios criticizes the use of volunteering language as a tool of development aid by volunteering organisations and other voluntary NGOs, as there is a general concern that young volunteer tourists portray a new form of colonialism. Palacios demonstrates this ambiguity through his research on an Australian program offering short-term volunteering placements for university students in Mexico, Fiji and Vietnam; though at first the volunteers visualized themselves as “helpers”, he found that, in practice, such visualizations changed as their prospective role proved unrealistic once cultural conditions were

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challenged. According to Palacios:

“When a short-term project in a developing country is organized by an educational sending organization as a “volunteering” program, ambiguous expectations about what kind of impact is feasible within the local community, and what volunteers are supposed to achieve, can be fostered. Ambiguous expectations can take the form of Eurocentric attitudes among the local staff and intra-group conflicts among the volunteers, making both guests and hosts susceptible to frustration.” (p. 870)

This ambiguity brings significantly negative aspects of international volunteering to light: warning that “negative outcomes like Eurocentrism, teamwork conflicts and public critiques are likely to appear, and in a worst case scenario, perhaps, be detrimental to hosts” (Ibid; 871), Palacios insists that volunteers, mostly university students who tend to have intermediate knowledge and experience but barely any suitable training, should not expect or be expected to embrace the goal of sustainable development through aid. Instead, they are more suited to educational tourism or service learning projects that do not encourage the excess of Eurocentric authority engendered by volunteer labels.

Overall, while the main literature remains centred around case studies focusing on the efficiency and impacts of volunteers in host communities, the debate surrounding the potentials and impacts of international volunteering are deeply anchored within a critique of the Eurocentric development discourse, from which the phenomenon of international volunteering is undeniably borne. Clearly, despite evidence of intense, beneficial and genuine social interactions, in many cases the promotion of international volunteering as a sustainable development strategy remains deeply conflicted in ethical terms.

## The Role of Sending Organisations

Three main components are responsible for the dynamics shaping the volunteering industry: the sending organisations, the volunteers and the host communities. Though the last two will be further discussed later, this section will focus on the role played by the NGOs and other volunteering agencies that recruit individuals deemed fit for the task. For this, it will look at tensions within NGO discourse and its place in global development issues, before looking at ‘real’ volunteering aid agencies and how their *modus operandi* affects their selection process. However, the recent expansion of the volunteering industry has prompted an increasing number of travel companies offering volunteering packages, with little regard for the host community’s actual needs. Their recruiting processes indirectly affect volunteers’ perception of their placement, which may ultimately create issues during their stay with their hosts.

### *The Emergence of a Global Market for Altruism*

Formed by operational NGOs and intergovernmental specialized agencies, the 21<sup>st</sup> century “development machine” has over time worked to achieve small-scale change directly through mobilizing financial resources, materials and volunteers to create localized programs in the field. Though such organisations deal with a wide range of issues involving the delivery of services and welfare and emergency relief, these “missionaries of development” (Manji, O’Coill, 2002; 568) have also been criticized since their rise to prominence in the international development agenda. According to Becker (2011):

“There’s a debate that NGOs take the place of what should belong to popular movements of the poor – others argue that NGOs are often imperialist in nature, that they sometimes operate in a racist manner in Third World countries and that they fulfil a similar function to that of the clergy during the colonial era.”

On one hand, NGOs typify the strive for states’ emancipation from poverty; however, critiques of NGOs present them as embodying mixed values of charity and a deeper sense of paternalism. Indeed, critics argue that Africa’s relative decline contributes to the continuing justification of their work, as according to Fowler “NGOs will do better the less stable the world becomes... finance will become increasingly available to agencies who can deliver ‘stabilizing’ social services” (cited in Manji and O’Coill, 2002; 581). Further, Shivji (2007; 37-38) argues that NGOs’ main problem is that they privilege activism without understanding it; the common NGO slogan “Make Poverty History” falls short

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when its discourse is full of “blind spots”, making NGOs unable to understand the many sources of said poverty.

Despite this, the emergence of volunteering NGOs as a development strategy has constructed a “global market place” of value and ideas (Lewis, 2006; 16). This increased transnational advocacy, connected with a public presentation of development, has in turn prompted the creation of widely adopted development institutions such as Fair Trade and the concept of equitable commerce based around a North-South “ethical” relationship, as well as an increased global advocacy for debt relief (Smith and Yanacopulos, 2004; 657). These processes, involving the constant reshaping of development, offer an ideal setting for the rise of volunteerism organisations and projects, in which a lucrative industry combining benevolence and solidarity can truly thrive and expand into a global arena.

However, there are still tensions within this marketplace for altruism: on one hand, the concept of grassroots community participation promotes local ownership of one’s own development, whilst on the other this participation may be regarded as a pawn in a game of Western consumerism and the lucrative profit of benevolent work. Instead of promoting cross-cultural understanding, volunteering NGOs may encourage just the opposite. This is where the role of voluntary NGOs and similar organisations play a crucial role: depending on how they function, they may enhance cross-cultural relations where volunteer tourists gain a sophisticated understanding of the local culture. However, they may reinforce existing stereotypes and deepen dichotomies between “us” and “them”, the “developed” and the “underdeveloped”. As a result, sending organisations are implicitly tied to how our global civil society’s “public face of development” and its ambiguities are shaped. There is therefore a need on their behalf to consider the different aspects involved within volunteerism, notably the volunteers’ qualifications, their suitability to the tasks at hand and their capability to reflect on their experience.

## *Aid and Volunteering: UN Volunteers and Voluntary Service Overseas*

One of the main and most reliable volunteering bodies is the UN Volunteer programme (UNV). Created in 1970, UNV served as an operational partner in development cooperation, whose mission was “to support sustainable human development globally through the promotion of volunteerism, including the mobilization of volunteers” (UN Volunteers; 2014). UNV prides its promotion of volunteering activities as “putting people at the centre of development” (UN Volunteers, 2011; xxiii) and building on human resources and capabilities in all societies at all levels. According to former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, “volunteerism is the ultimate expression of what the UN is all about”, as “it values free will, commitment, engagement and solidarity” (Ruhanen et al., 2008; 25-26).

According to UNV, volunteering helps strengthen the capacity of the most vulnerable to achieve secure livelihoods and to enhance their physical, economic, spiritual and social well-being; it also reduces social exclusion, marginalisation and other forms of inequality; further, it can diminish tensions by contributing to building trust and work to create a common purpose in the aftermath of a war (Ibid; 27). Given all these virtuous benefits, it seems obvious that international volunteering should be further incorporated in global development strategies.

The UN play a particularly important role where volunteerism is concerned; proclaiming 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers, the UN General Assembly designated UNV as an international focal point for development, recognising the work of millions of past volunteers and encouraging more to engage in the activity. Working alongside the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), UNV enhances economic opportunities of developing countries through the development of a tourism sector that is economically, socially and environmentally sustainable and competitive.

An instance of this policy is the UNWTO’s TedQual Volunteers Programme, which aims to train young tourism professionals and enable them to carry out hands-on transfers of practical knowledge, thus empowering beneficiaries to undertake initiatives related to the sustainable development of tourism (UNWTO, 2014). Through training young professionals with the suitable expertise and skills in the field of development and tourism, all levels of government of developing countries are provided with high calibre junior professional tourism specialists where gaps in local expertise exist. Through this, knowledge is transferred to and between volunteers from universities and other institutions, promoting a transfer of tools and educational capacity across borders and enhancing cross-cultural collaboration.



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Preparing suitable volunteers for the Programme is a thorough process: designed to generate benefits for all stakeholders, participants are required to submit extensive preparatory coursework and research before commencing their fieldwork, at the end of which they must submit a final report with conclusions and recommendations for future projects (Ruhanen et al., 2008; 30). The importance of preparing volunteers prior to sending them in the field relates to the enhancement of productivity and efficiency in delivering services during their placement; a fully prepared volunteer can take full advantage of its limited fieldwork time.

Another strongly efficient volunteering service provider is the British organisation Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), which works to break stereotypes embedded in Western societies towards the so-called Third World, whilst promoting etiquette for ethical volunteering. Focusing on relatively extreme deprivation and poverty, these stereotypes give the impression that people in the developing world are helpless victims; according to VSO's *Live Aid Legacy* report, 74% of the British public believe that these countries "depend on the money and knowledge of the West to progress" (VSO, 2002; 3). Breaking down these stereotypes present in mainstream volunteering can forge stronger associations with individuals rather than aiding "an amorphous mass of victims". Combating these stereotypes also means countering the way the developing world is portrayed by the media; indeed, as put by Sorious Samura, "Africans have been betrayed by the Western media, because they failed to get the readers and viewers to understand that these people are moving on" (Ibid; 10). VSO asserts that, through volunteering, "the benefits of us all taking a step back and challenging our sometimes lazy assumptions of the developing world are, we hope, an obvious step on the road to building a global community" (Ibid; 15).

In this, VSO does not use philanthropic and altruistic language to attract volunteers; they instead reflect on volunteering as a way to help but also a way to challenge North-South perceptions and subsequent relations. This is especially shown through their extensive recruiting regulations: for one, requirements include at least 2 to 5 years of professional experience, official qualifications and must be of at least 25 years of age (VSO, 2014). Interestingly, candidates must also be available for long placements, lasting from 6 to 24 months. Though they also offer a number of placements for people aged 18-25 under the UK government's International Citizen Service programme (ICS), it is clear that VSO strongly demarcates itself from volunteer services part of the mainstream gap year industry. As will be discussed further, VSO are very critical of players in the industry, blaming it for sending underqualified individuals to various volunteering placements, thereby promoting the image of "the rich teenagers' playground" (Brodie, 2006). While groups such as UNV and VSO may be considered as 'real' volunteering organizations, putting development before personal gain, these types of organisations are relatively few compared to those within the growing gap year industry.

## *When Aid is Commercialized: the Gap Year Industry*

Despite the growing enthusiasm for sending young energized individuals to provide human aid and resources to volunteering projects around the world, the concept of gap year volunteering has attracted a considerably negative connotation due to the very nature of its industry. A product of the commercialization of aid, the phenomenon of gap year volunteering has increasingly become the norm in Western societies; appealing to young adults' desire to mix charity and travel, about ¼ young people aged between 18-25 take a gap year, usually before starting university (Ward, 2007). This concept of "tourism with a conscience" (Conant, 2005) embedded within the booming gap year industry (GYI) and its lucrative commercial market has seemingly become "an obligation that must be fulfilled by ambitious future professionals" (Brown, 2003). Clearly, volunteering agencies are a significant source of profit: a review of gap year provision commissioned by the government in 2004 found more than 800 organisations providing overseas volunteering, with average fees ranging from £500 to £2,000 (Ward, 2007).

These mainstream volunteering agencies highlight the "blind spots" present in aforementioned neoliberal discourse; their first fault lies in the over-simplification of the notion of 'making a difference'. Through supplying underqualified young volunteers to 'underdeveloped' communities, not only do GYI volunteer agencies support North-South stereotypes, but also engender more problems than solutions. This is in part owed to the professional importance placed on gap years; as put by Simpson (cited by Brown, 2003), "as the gap year has become professionalized, so it has increasingly been marketed at future professionals, with an assumption that further education and successful employment are to follow". In this, most organisations design package trips to appeal to parents and future

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employers, with little concern for local communities.

What sets GYI volunteer agencies apart from more serious voluntary organisations such as VSO lies mainly in the characteristics of their package trips. A primary difference concerns their duration: most last for a couple of weeks, rarely exceeding a month. Compared to VSO's duration policy, it is clear that the lengths of such placements are important factors regarding the benefits incurred by the host community. Indeed, where short-term volunteering is concerned, the potential for creating and implementing innovative development strategies remains very low, considering the substantial effort required to ensure a policy's effectiveness. In this way, short-term volunteering may be seen as quasi-exclusively designed to complement students' experiences rather than actually helping host communities. This is especially shown where volunteering agencies offer placements featuring a 2-week volunteering program followed by a 2-week "adventure travel" program, such as International Student Volunteers (ISV), a popular organisation whose 4-week packages average at a cost of £2,450 – not including air fares, visas or transportation costs. Such packages use volunteering language as a marketing strategy for businesses that are perhaps more travel than volunteer agencies.

A second notable difference lies in the different recruiting processes; contrarily to VSO, commercial voluntary agencies such as ISV have a very limited and unspecific requirements checklist to select volunteers. Instead, applicants are required to simply fill out an application form with a short personal statement to determine applicants' suitability to the selected program. Though this personal statement may implicitly constitute a significant requirement on behalf of applicants, specific skills and experiences are not outlined. It is not altogether surprising that such agencies fall short in this area; specific professional skills or experiences are perhaps not considered crucial for a placement lasting a mere couple of weeks.

Undoubtedly, these organisations use volunteering language mainly as a marketing strategy to attract participants to disburse large sums of money for what former participants call "an unforgettable experience" (ISV, 2014b). In such ventures, motivational statements are used to entice applicants to "challenge yourself to make a change that will have a lasting impact on your life and your planet, and the lives of those who need your help!" (ISV, 2014a). This rhetoric increases what Palacios describes as volunteering language ambiguity, creating "a volunteering framework [facilitating] cross cultural connections that might not be as productive and emotional under other frameworks such as service learning, cultural exchange or educational tourism" (2010; 874). Organizations prioritizing volunteers over communities arguably do not belong in the volunteering business; according to VSO, "gappers" risk becoming the "new colonialists" given the gap year industry's attitudes to the developing world (Ward, 2007); indeed, VSO UK's former director Judith Brodie asserts that:

"it's dangerous to think that digging borehole wells or teaching children English will help a community, without questioning whether local people would prefer piped water to their homes or if speaking English will be of any practical use." (2006)

The current manifestations of NGOs further risk enduring an imperial relationship between "benefactors and beneficiaries" (Shivji (2007; 54), through wanting to change the world without understanding it.

This does not mean that organisations considered outside of the gap year industry are faultless; Raymond's comparison between the Foundation for Sustainable Development (FSD), an NGO offering placements of a minimum of 9 weeks and ISV suggested that neither placement should be assumed as automatically benefitting both the volunteer and hosts, based purely on their different characteristics and demands (2008; 57). While longer-term placements are undoubtedly more beneficial to hosts, these may still fall short in other areas, especially regarding the specificity of relevant skills and overall suitability of their selected volunteers.

In summary, enthusiasm for international volunteering is challenged by cynicism over the efficiency of the activity, an efficiency in which the sending organisations play a significant role. This rightly suggests that volunteer tourism does not always represent a mutually beneficial form of tourism; organisations' assumptions that "doing anything is reasonable" is then largely inappropriate. Clearly, the level of success of a volunteer placement is primarily judged on the relationship between sending organisation and host, which must be based on mutual respect and trust. Whether

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a genuine voluntary organisation like the UN and VSO or a profit-making volunteer agency like ISV, any sending organisation needs to develop and manage their programmes carefully to avoid behaving in an imperial way: their role is to recognize that volunteer placement involve a process rather than an isolated experience. This is where critics notice a difference between the gap year industry and organisations driven by development institutions; those that take the extra effort to impose stricter regulations on the industry ultimately come out with the more favourable reputation.

## Helping or Hindering? International Volunteering in Practice

This section will examine both the benefits and failures engendered by host-volunteer exchanges. These exchanges are crucial in constructing good relations between the two, which subsequently affect the quality of services provided by volunteers. For this, the analysis will assess how the nature of volunteers' motivations reflects on their approach to the host community. However, the sending organisations' ignorance regarding the communities' needs seems to affect the volunteers' behaviour, causing discrepancies that negatively affect the host community. These burdens verify the post-colonial critique that volunteers to more harm than good, further suggesting that, had they been sufficiently prepared by their sending organisations, volunteers could have brought some form of benefits to their hosts.

### *Why Volunteer?*

Each year, over 1 million individuals volunteer abroad from the US, of which between 70% and 80% participate for less than 8 weeks (Lough et al., 2011; 121). What each volunteer takes away from his or her experience stems from a complex interplay between their original motivations and the specific context of volunteer work. Motivations for Western individuals to undertake non-paid work in the aim of alleviating material poverty of some groups in society (Wearing, 2001; 1) typically stems from "the willingness and ability of citizens to give their time, out of a sense of solidarity and without expectation of monetary reward" (UN Volunteers, 2005; 6). Strongly related to concepts of global solidarity and humanitarianism, these values are inherently promoted within institutions such as the UN, as well as international development agencies.

Over time, volunteering has not only been an area of no-returns philanthropy, but has also adopted a sense of reciprocity. Indeed, the desire to volunteer is now found to stem not only from altruistic motives but also from a desire for personal gain, including personal education and growth, increased social awareness, the acquisition of personal skills and professional self-development (Forsythe, 2009; 9). Sweeping general statements of "making a difference" make such placements attractive avenues for self-improvement and image-boosting. Nowadays, proof of such activities is a welcome addition to a CV (Butcher and Smith, 2010; 28).

Other motivation factors relate to the micro-sociological aspect of impulses to travel abroad: as well as a curiosity to visit different landscapes, individuals living in postmodern societies may experience information-saturation and overall reduced levels of spirituality, wanting to connect with different ways of life in a quest for achievement and distinctiveness (Pearce and Coghlan, 2008; 135). In this, they use the volunteering experience to add value and meaning to their own lives while taking a break from their monotonous routine; "guilt for living a cushioned life" is a further impulse (Forsythe, 2009; 10). In some cases volunteers undertake such travels to overcome a past trauma such as loss or divorce.

This search for fun, adventure and social expansion coupled with an altruistic motive then associates benevolent volunteering with a form of recreational travelling through which youths can, according to Desforges, "stretch out beyond the local to draw in places from around the globe" (Sin, 2009; 489). In this, volunteers desire an "authentic" understanding towards local situation, differentiating them from "mass" tourists. Indeed, by the end of their placement volunteers generally have gained more skills and insight than they had at the start. Also, many believe that they have left a strongly positive impact on their hosts: for instance, when interviewed about their experience former volunteers express feelings of having "had a good short-term effect on the children" (Barkham, 2006), hoping it would develop into a long-lasting impact despite the volunteer's rapid departure.

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Roberts' research on ex-volunteers placed in Ghana gives good examples of this, where interviewees agreed they had benefited tremendously from the experience; there was a general consensus that "volunteering in Ghana had been the most exciting, life-enhancing and beneficial experience they had ever had" (2004; 43). Roberts notes that most of the skills they developed involved communication abilities as well as boosted confidence to confront challenges back home such as job interviews and presentations (Ibid, p. 44). Another point of interest is the fact that their time in Ghana made most of them re-think their career choices. For instance, several volunteers who had previously set out to become teachers in their home country ultimately decided it was not suited to them; two of them are now even working for the very same organisations who sent them to Ghana in the first place. This shows the long-term impact that short-term volunteers may have; the ways in which former volunteers promote their new intercultural understandings, whether through continued financial support or campaigning, contribute to a diversity of perspectives and a broadened tolerance when orchestrating local development projects. This introduces a sustainable dimension to the overall exchange: the larger the support network, the better chance it may have to continue backing at a local as well as international level.

What is more, international volunteers can help bridge social capital to organizations in low-income regions of the world (Lough et al., 2011; 126); indeed, volunteers supply both tangible and intangible resources such as funding, support networks and further collaboration opportunities. By supplying extra hands volunteers bring a form of non-monetary human aid that helps complete projects at smaller costs: as volunteers are not financially remunerated, and in most cases even pay to volunteer, volunteer work is highly attractive to poorer communities who would otherwise not be able to pay for the extra labour. Further, it creates collaboration opportunities that, depending on their success, can maintain transnational support networks once the volunteers have finished their placement, allowing the host community to extend their appeal to welcome more volunteers in future.

## *Failures of International Volunteering*

However, despite these attractive and possible reciprocal gains, more often than not both parties complain about negative aspects entailed by the activity. A primary criticism of volunteering revolves around the notion that, given its industry's recent expansion, placements are suited to the volunteer's demands rather than the local community's needs in terms of skills and capabilities, moulding international volunteering through what Lough et al. describe as a supply-based model (2011; 132), prioritizing paying clients over the "underdeveloped". As a result, critics place more emphasis on where volunteers fall through and how those shortcomings have a serious impact on local development projects. For instance:

"These short-timers take home more from their slumming in the Third World than leave behind for the underprivileged they are supposed to help... I imagine the charities and aid agencies must play host to a revolving number of people who never stay long enough to make any difference – and who might even complicate matters because of their lack of experience." (Kwa, 2007)

This neglect of local communities' desires initiated by sending organisations and perpetuated by ignorant volunteers demonstrates a clear lack of understanding and appreciation for what the community and development project fundamentally needs; instead, hosts are hijacked into a capitalist money-making business where "the [volunteering] market is geared towards profit rather than the needs of the communities" (Fitzpatrick, 2007). A chief example of this is the recruiting of young, unskilled and inexperienced volunteers for tasks that they would otherwise need official qualifications for in the Western world, such as teaching. According to Simpson (2004, 682), this legitimizes the validity of young unskilled international labour as a development solution, thus allowing gap-year volunteers to "get a level of experience and decision-making which they would not get at home, but [are] also doing things in other people's hospitals and schools that would never be allowed at home" (Brown, 2003).

As a result, volunteers are unable to provide significant aid; in order to counter this inefficiency, hosts must spend more time training their volunteers so that the real potential of 'making a difference' may be realized. According to Roberts (2004; 42), local employees are taken away from their usual daily tasks in order to help train volunteers. This in turn places more intense demands and strains on hosts to the point where the effort may not seem worth the trouble; this is especially true with short-term volunteers, as their burdensome frequency of coming-and-going

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requires extensive and nearly constant assistance. Roberts explains that it is clear that if a school receives a new teacher who they know will stay for the next two years:

“it is worth their while to invest a considerable amount of time inducting them. However, if they are only going to be with them for a couple of months and don't have any teaching qualifications or experience, it may well not be considered a constructive use of time” (2004; 42).

This gap between the hosts' expectations and the volunteers' actual contributions represents a severe hindrance for both parties, as it risks creating resentment and tension within the overall project.

A further problem is the fact that volunteers may decrease local labour demand and promote dependency. “Short-term mission groups almost always do work that could be done (and usually done better) by people of the country they visit” (Van Engen, 2000; 21), such as teach and build infrastructure. This can have a disruptive effect on the local economy and local labour markets, limiting employment opportunities for locals. In this, the blessing embodied within the principle of free labour may also be a curse for locals. Indeed:

The problem when volunteer tourists perform work that could be performed by local community members is that volunteer tourists work for free – and actually pay for the opportunity to perform the work – so they may undercut competing local labourers. (Guttentag, 2009; 544)

This is another example of how volunteering can burden their host communities; the fact that Western volunteers can come and occupy the kind of employment that would have readily been attributed to a local reinforces this notion of a supply-based model of volunteering. This view is further legitimized by the fact that young, unskilled volunteers are deemed in a higher position than local individuals to complete tasks and to understand what development truly needs. Moreover, this contributes to the idea that volunteers are the “new colonialists” (Barkham, 2006): when painting their portrait in terms of their flaws, volunteers are indeed individuals around whom a whole industry has been built based on their desire to experience new environments. Though this critique is somewhat extreme, it is nevertheless somewhat valid.

Other volunteering failures result from the issue of the divergence in cultural norms and language barriers. From day one, host-volunteer exchanges are challenged by severe culture shock, which can have a massive impact on the first few weeks of the volunteer's stay: adapting to local customs and the different levels of organization may significantly hinder volunteers' physical and emotional capabilities. It comes as no surprise that under-prepared and under-qualified volunteers take longer to adapt and become efficient in their tasks because of the duality of the challenges they face: not only must they learn new skills, such as how to handle a classroom or how to build infrastructure, they must especially do so taking into account different customs and practices that they themselves are not used to.

Volunteers may also harm local culture during their placement; this can be seen through the demonstration effect (Guttentag, 2009; 537), a process by which a host culture is impacted when volunteers draw attention to their lifestyles and items of wealth. This has been argued to possibly inspire positive change, but in actual fact it is usually detrimental, and concerns both local adults and children. Local inhabitants may try to imitate consumption patterns which are beyond the reach of the community, such as acquire new technology that they might not be able to afford, or indulge in inappropriate behaviour such as drinking and smoking; this comes as a direct consequence of wealthy volunteers travelling to poorer communities, unintentionally provoking cultural change. Therefore, pre-placement preparation and in-country orientation are crucial to ensure that the volunteer is doing more good than harm to its host community.

These culture barriers are particularly impeding when the volunteers' work directly affects children in schools and orphanages. For now, volunteers assume that no matter what they do or where they go, they will affect people in a positive way, believing they “had a good short-term effect on the children”, and that “perhaps in the long-term having [the volunteers] there was better than nothing” (Barkham, 2006). However, one must recognize how important children's education is to development, and how putting it in the hands of young unskilled volunteers might jeopardize their potential.

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21% of volunteer projects in the world deal directly with vulnerable children and young people; placements in orphanages are especially popular. Though volunteer projects are beneficial to children's lives through the provision of new insightful activities, gifts and valuable emotional care, they may create unstable power relations and financial interdependencies that limit the sustainability of the volunteer's impact. This is what Voelkl based extensive research on when studying children's experiences with short-term volunteers in a Ghanaian orphanage. Research findings showed that, though they are unhappy to see them go, children are accustomed to white, Western volunteers coming and going (2012; 37). The fact that there seems to be no long-term commitment on behalf of volunteers refutes the ideas argued by Randel et al. (2004) that volunteering constructs social capital and offers opportunities for sustainable social relations, as it "does not seem to broaden the social network of the children nor make information more accessible to them" (Voelkl, 2012; 38). Also, children have come to associate volunteers with material wealth and gifts; this mirrors the understanding of wealthy "help-givers" and needy beneficiaries, perpetuating binaries of "us" and "them", and of Africa being "poor but happy". In turn, this perpetuates the notion that host communities' relative material poverty drives their underlying need to attain a standard of development set by the Western aid donors.

In essence, Voelkl's research demonstrates that short-term volunteers have very little impact on children's educational development and welfare. Indeed, despite the volunteers' presence, children still received poor education from unskilled or unpaid teachers, both local and volunteer, and have no health care, no mattresses, and unsanitary living conditions in a region where malaria and other diseases are rife. The reality of volunteering is that any aid provided, whether tangible or intangible, is largely superficial when contrasted with the larger scale of issues at hand such as the education and medical systems. On the other hand, Voelkl did note that children develop more emotional attachment and respect with volunteers that stay for a longer period of time (2012; 43): therefore, one might assume that long-term volunteers will have more impact on children and may be able to benefit them more than short-term visitors that just come and go.

It is evident that, all in all, short-term volunteering is scarcely relevant when trying to tackle Africa's long-term development problems. Although intentions might be positive, most volunteers do not have the required knowledge of international development or skills to understand their role in the process. Though there are difficulties in the ultimate assessment of qualities and faults of volunteering processes, it is clear that Matthews' previously outlined concept of mutual benefit as a positive-sum game is not verified within short-term volunteer placements, as these participants are more burdensome than not. Therefore, it is perhaps too early to fully embrace volunteering as a development strategy, as for the moment the difficulties encountered in the processes surrounding it seem to hinder the host community more than help it. This is why sending organizations, NGOs and even universities must make them aware of the larger implications of their participation.

## Case Study: ELISCO, Ghana

This final section introduces a case study to illustrate the main findings of research and the arguments made by opposing sides of the debate; the author carried out the following field research over a 7-week period while participating in a voluntary teaching program at El Shaddai International School Complex (ELISCO) in Ghana. This case study will mainly concentrate on the volunteers' role and impact as teachers, as this was where power relations particularly came into play, and where issues became most noticeable.

### *Methodology*

In order to provide a comprehensive case study of how volunteers affect the development and improvement of the school, the sending organisations', volunteers' and locals' perspectives on the activity were considered, with a close emphasis on the latter. The bulk of research was thus attributed to investigating the local opinion of volunteers. For this, 11 local teachers and 99 students were surveyed on their expectations of as well as their experiences with volunteers; a semi-structured interview was also conducted with the school's headmaster. Then, 2 different NGOs who run volunteer programs with ELISCO were surveyed, as well as volunteers already present on-site, in the aim of verifying the criteria upon which the organisations sending volunteers to ELISCO base their recruitment process. Apart from David, ELISCO's headmaster, all participants retained confidentiality and anonymity, upon which the

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researcher obtained their informed consent.

This form of research proved incredibly useful, as there is a distinct lack of information on volunteering experiences in Ghana and much less on the general views of the host communities on volunteers; furthermore, results verified arguments previously made within the wider literature. Survey questions focused mainly on how the volunteer's role in the school affected the students and whether they made positive or negative impacts on the teachers and the workplace. The headmaster's interview questions were designed to provide a more comprehensive study of the impetus for the school to welcome volunteers in the first place; questions concentrated on the school's history with sending organisations and volunteers, inquiring as to what kind of difference he saw once volunteers started arriving. Finally, NGOs were surveyed regarding the levels of preparation they gave to their volunteers pre-placement, and were interrogated on what they perceived to be the school's fundamental needs; these answers were compared to the needs expressed by the headmaster himself, in order to determine how consistent the relationship is between sending organisations and ELISCO.

There were however limitations to the fieldwork research, concerning the students' surveys: aged between 11 and 18, there was an underlying risk that children misunderstood the task at hand, or offered answers they thought were expected of them. The author frequently had to remind them that there was no right or wrong answer to these questions, as it was not a simple school test. Another limitation was noticeable when surveying and interviewing the teachers and headmaster, as it was clear that discontents were perhaps downplayed, fearing that what little help they were receiving would be cut off. These limitations were retained while interpreting the resultant analytical data, the main results of which will be discussed below.

## *ELISCO*

El Shaddai International School Complex, located in the rural Ghanaian village of Klikor-Agbozume, is a school annexed with an orphanage, both chaired by the school's headmaster David. Though suffering from a severe lack of funds as well as a distinct lack in professionally trained teachers, ELISCO provides private education for villagers while sustaining projects for building a new orphanage and boarding school. Both the school and the orphanage are affiliated with the Friends Foundation, a local NGO founded in 1994 with a mission to promote the empowerment and general well-being of orphans and other vulnerable children, by providing integrated family care and community-based services (Friends Foundation, 2014). Apart from the Friends Foundation, also run by David, there is no other NGO presence within the school; as the Friends Foundation does not offer its own volunteering programs, volunteers register with outsider organizations that act as a shuttle to and from Klikor-Agbozume upon their arrival in and departure from Ghana. Most teachers employed by the school had barely finished secondary education, and were not professionally trained educators.

Volunteering programs available at El Shaddai allow volunteers to either teach or work in the orphanage, though the two are usually mixed as participants are involved in the orphanage in the evening, after teaching hours. These placements are typically short-term, as in 2013 the average stay duration was 4 weeks for a total of 15 volunteers. As ELISCO already had 16 hired, mostly non-professional teachers, volunteers occupied a somewhat substitutive role, where certain classes of the volunteer's choice were taken away from local teachers' responsibility and reattributed to volunteers.

As well as daily teaching, staff would ask volunteers for advice on how to solve problems such as "sacking": in the first few weeks on-site, volunteers noticed how children who had not succeeded in paying their school fees were "sacked" and sent home, thoroughly disrupting class hours and inhibiting the provision of an adequate learning environment. Volunteers were also asked to chair staff meetings when the headmaster was away; the main issues discussed there were about sacking and caning, where volunteers insisted that caning was a counter-productive method of punishing unruly students, before suggesting alternative ways to discipline a child. From a post-colonial point of view, this follows the classic volunteering images of older locals asking young, Western volunteers for guidance in their daily workplace, perpetuating the stereotype that the West has all the answers for the under-developed.

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During such meetings, there was also a distinct lack of respect from the teachers towards the volunteers, which seriously hindered any kind of statement the volunteers were trying to make anyway. After the first two weeks of observation, it was clear that volunteers could indeed contribute to improving the school; however, unless they solidly fit into the local culture and mentality, such innovations may be very difficult to implement and sustain.

## *Results*

### 1. Achievements

The main results of the research first reveal a positive outlook on the volunteer's contribution to El Shaddai. When asked how he would qualify a successful volunteering exchange, David explained that in his eyes, perseverance and dedication to the project were the first and foremost qualities a volunteer could offer. Indeed, he states that:

"At times, [...] some leave before their planned departure date, without accomplishing their volunteering placement. If the person is staying here for 6 weeks and perseveres until the last day, that is a successful stay, because whatever he or she does in the daytime continues to benefit the children every time." (Kporfor, 2013)

David's general satisfaction with volunteers stems from various aspects; one chief area is his concept of "development in freedom", inspired from the volunteer's work. He further explained that "there are some people who strictly impose their ideas on us, which the volunteers do not do"; instead, "the volunteers coming are making us develop better in freedom, [where] we need to look at both practices and both cultures, and pick what we want and what we don't want to accept". This notion of freedom of choice in development echoes the UN Volunteers' earlier designation of international volunteering as putting people at the centre of their own development.

This assertion of control over the services provided by volunteers somewhat counters the argument pertaining that volunteering is an inherently neo-colonial practice; on the contrary, David seems to welcome this flow of voluntary aid, no matter the origin, as "[volunteering] is something we are very pleased with" (Kporfor, 2013). He further asserts that:

"Our system of teaching here, it is through the volunteer's work that it is becoming different; we are starting educational reform here. Our people are sent to Western countries to learn, before coming home to teach us. But now, Westerners coming directly to us can teach us first-hand."

Some of these "entities" of Western life he mentions revolve around the issue of caning. Formally, it is thought in Ghanaian education that caning helps change and discipline the child; however, through his interaction with volunteers, David realized that "the best way for a child to understand is not by caning". This volunteers' campaign against caning was of course readily appreciated by students, whose preference for volunteers in lieu of their regular teachers is partially owed to the more peaceful ways in which volunteers teach. Indeed, the general consensus amongst pupils was that "[the volunteers] did not like beating us" and that "[they] teach with kindness, love and harmony". Also, local teachers commend on the volunteers' presence for their provision of care for the children as well as the improvements they bring to the school. Indeed:

"The students gain a spirit of fraternity. They also learn how to organise their studies, how to learn better and succeed, as well as learn new methods of teaching. The school gains much knowledge and awareness about issues such as environmental conservation, finance, moral education, thus continuously forming a new education system." (French teacher, 2013)

"There are some entities of western life which I appreciate, and I want my people to understand those."

"By the time the government decides to implement new things, we can say that we already know them."

Teachers also notice that they themselves have something to gain from the volunteers' presence, especially in behavioural terms, influencing their methods of teaching:



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"I have a lot of insight now on how to treat and care for kids without using the cane. I also learned how to approach teaching in a modern way." (English teacher, 2013)

"I have gained a lot of life experience to help me; on how to be time conscious and use my time profitably." (Maths teacher, 2013)

Other beneficial policies suggested by volunteers involved the implementation of class rules, in order to introduce some sort of order to optimize teaching conditions. Another welcome contribution from volunteers was the drawing and painting of a world map on the wall of the unused library and the pre-school, as well as maintaining the computer lab.

This assumption of a "freer" development and education lifestyle introduced by the volunteers' contributions to the school appears as a direct gain for the school and the local community, insofar as it aids to improve the school and its education processes.

## 2. Limitations

Despite these listed benefits, there were many apparent shortcomings on behalf of the volunteers, as understood by both teachers and students. A first problem encountered by host communities was the short duration of each volunteer's stay. Unsurprisingly, staff and children at ELISCO prefer longer stays, as this ensures a firmer implementation of development policies in the long-term. According to David:

"If [the volunteers] were not leaving soon, I would have time once we break to sit with [them] and discuss how to adjust and plan the next term. One cannot always plan wisely on his own." (Kporfor, 2013)

The fact that volunteers stay for a short period of time means that their overall efficiency is undermined, as they must first learn to adapt to a rural Ghanaian lifestyle which may take time. This primary discomfort is very noticeable within the local community, as David notes that:

"When volunteers come, things are new to them here, so they take time to understand everything before they can do something valuable. Once it is not a western school and environment, everything is new and it will take some time before the volunteer understands the culture and the lifestyle." (Kporfor, 2013)

Clearly, short-term placements can be counter-effective from the start, as volunteers must first overcome the anxieties of stepping outside their comfort zone before properly working as a teacher.

With culture shock also comes culture clashes: this complaint was readily brought up by most of the teachers surveyed, as they disapproved of the volunteers' dress code and certain bad habits such as drinking and smoking. This was seen as a negative impact on the school, as they feared that younger, more impressionable children would attempt to copy such habits. For instance:

"Our young ones always accompany [the volunteers]. As some volunteers smoke and drink a lot of beer, young ones can also practice." (English teacher, 2013)

"Their behaviour is not favourable to our community." (Building, Design and Technology teacher, 2013)

These adverse behavioural traits create tensions between volunteers and locals, making cooperation and collaboration difficult, in turn giving way to disrespectful behaviour, especially between students and volunteers. All of these significantly impede on efforts for improvement of the school and further development plans; David's initial "development as freedom" concept then becomes void.

Thirdly, introducing short-term volunteers to children and exposing them to different styles of teaching can hamper on their schooling; communication barriers were a prominent complaint from teachers and students about volunteers.

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For one, two thirds of students surveyed found it difficult to adapt to volunteers' different style of teaching: this was partly owed to communication problems between volunteers and the students, as most of the students failed to fully understand the volunteers' English. Language was a further impediment: though the official language in Ghana is English, schoolchildren are educated in both English and in their regional language, Ewe. While local teachers could easily translate from English to Ewe to enable the student to better understand, Western volunteers could not. Indeed:

"When regular teachers are teaching we get it clearer than the volunteers because they sometimes translate it for us. The [volunteers'] way of speaking is different from [the teachers']." (Student A, 2013)

"I usually understand clearly what my regular teacher teaches than a volunteer because [the volunteers] usually teach so fast to the extent that you can't get what they are saying." (Student B, 2013)

Due to these gaps in communication between volunteers and students, the project's potential for a positive outcome is significantly reduced. This contributes to the critique that volunteers' help is misused, and questions why they are placed there in the first place, as the children's education needs are not met. Because of this language barrier, barely half of the students genuinely enjoyed the volunteers' presence as their temporary teacher. In turn, these hindrances contribute to the notion of a certain "clumsiness" encountered in volunteering placements that may pose significant setbacks for the host community's improvement.

Most of these obstacles could be easily prevented by better pre-placement planning on behalf of the sending organisations. The school's own NGO, the Friend's Foundation, determined the school's fundamental needs as sufficient funds as well as professional teachers. However, among the two other NGOs surveyed, the first expressed its ignorance regarding the school's needs, while the second one responded that El Shaddai needed "teachers to teach Maths, English and General Science" (NGO B, 2013). Though the latter is partly correct, this illustrates the critique that NGOs largely do not recognize local communities' essential needs when sending volunteers. Moreover, neither had any set criteria of required skills or experiences by which to select their volunteers, further highlighting how host communities are not masters of their own fate when it comes to welcoming volunteers.

## *Conclusions*

Overall, the research gives mixed results regarding the successes and failures of short-term teaching volunteers at ELISCO. Although, for the most part, volunteers bring a positive contribution to the school through their involvement with the children and staff, such input is undermined by the hidden faults of short term volunteers that are only uncovered when questioning those directly affected. While they help encourage policies that will enable a smoother running of the school, their relatively inadequate language and behaviour verify Simpson's (2004) and Brodie's (2006) critiques about young volunteers' inability to significantly advance development. These mitigated results lead to Brodie's conclusion that in order to minimize these limitations there must be stronger regulations imposed on the volunteering industry, in the aim of improving the selection of volunteers available to host communities. It is important to note that these critiques of volunteering do not altogether condemn the activity, but rather the ways in which it is currently being exercised; young volunteers can travel and help communities along the way, but this aid will only be truly beneficial through well-organised programmes promoting bottom-up development projects.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the research, it is demonstrated that there lies an important debate within the realm of international volunteering, as it is clearly limited in terms of who ultimately benefits and what it can achieve in sustainable development. These limitations were illustrated by the specific case of a short-term volunteering placement in a Ghanaian school, where the somewhat ideal contributions of volunteers through their care for the children were countered by faults emanating from significant communication issues and culture clash. In turn, these weaknesses place significant burdens on hosts and hinder the volunteers' level of contribution in improving the school and its quality of education.

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This clumsiness is largely common in volunteering projects. Indeed, within the wider literature many critics have based their arguments against international volunteering on their own case studies in different developing countries. There is a general consensus that volunteering projects desperately need regulation if they are to improve, especially regarding processes by which sending organisations recruit and train their volunteers. This shows the significance of the volunteering industry's role, as the outcome of volunteer placements and the extent to which they benefit local development projects may be determined right from the start by sending organisations' policies.

This research chose to approach the question of mutual benefit within host-volunteer exchanges with specific attention to post-colonial critiques, with the understanding that the perpetuation of neo-colonial patterns somewhat stains whatever relative benefits are incurred. This note of imperialism, hidden by a primary expression of altruism, is supported by the overwhelmingly North-to-South nature of volunteering flows and the marketing of images of young Western individuals "making a difference" to poorer, and older, African, Asian or Latin-American communities. This projects the notion that former colonial communities are in need of Western help, just as they were framed by the emergent development discourse following decolonization.

Despite the danger of reproducing colonial-like relations with the global South, international volunteering can still achieve highly optimistic goals, albeit in a progressive manner; there is still for the most part a positive-sum exchange of resources and knowledge between volunteer and host, an exchange which does not necessarily end at the end of the placement. Indeed, one of the great qualities of volunteering is the life-changing experience lived by volunteers, who, no matter the amount of time spent on the project, may continue to act to support the host community even after returning home. This sustainability of volunteering, resulting from the establishment of intense societal interactions and profound relationships, make the volunteers reflect on their actions, giving them greater meaning and which may involve "a renegotiation of the individual's identity" (McIntosh and Zahra, 2007; 543). These newly acquired perceptions and identities can be used in furthering their careers, before possibly returning to their former volunteer project with improved skills and a better grasp of their general impact on the local community.

All in all, international volunteering as it stands today certainly has the potential to benefit local development projects in developing countries, as the principles underlying the activity promote neo-liberal values upon which the contemporary world is gradually building itself. This notion of expanding a global civil society and encouraging transnational relations through bottom-up development plans projects a concept of civil empowerment, putting people at the centre of their own development. However, as the case in Ghana shows, there remain many obstacles to providing an absolute positive-sum exchange between host and volunteers, which is owed to the loose regulation of the volunteering industry.

If the enthusiasm encountered in the potential long-term effects of international volunteering could be anchored within a more regulatory framework, there is no reason why Matthews' notion of mutual benefit could not be attained in transnational volunteering projects. To improve the volunteering industry as a whole, it would perhaps be useful to incorporate a sense of ethical volunteering within sending organisations while encouraging prospective participants to distinguish the "good" organisations from the "bad". In order to promote this sense of ethical volunteering, prospective applicants should be wary in determining how certain organisations operate, especially in terms of the selection process and the amount of preparation supplied pre-departure. By implementing stronger guidelines and protocols within sending organisations and encouraging a more principled practice of volunteering, the quality of development work supplied by volunteers will substantially improve, thus enabling international volunteering to be considered as a viable bottom-up development strategy.

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