A Critical Perspective on Volunteer Tourism and Development

https://www.e-ir.info/2012/10/04/international-citizen-service-a-critical-perspective-on-volunteer-tourism-and-development/

JOE SUTCLIFFE, OCT 4 2012

Introducing 'Volunteer Tourism'

On October 17th I will be embarking on a three month volunteering placement, funded by the Department for International Development (DFID), which forms the central part of the International Citizen Service (ICS) programme. ICS sends young people – 18-25 – to work on development projects with respected development agencies in the global south. I will be working in India for Restless Development, promoting livelihoods skills and health awareness among local young people. Programmes such as ICS commonly hold a positive place within the public imaginary, which emphasises how morally praiseworthy it is for young people to put their time and energy towards something so worthwhile. The contentious development aid debate aside, the general public's engagement with poverty reduction efforts through charities and development NGOs tends to be on a moral level, praising efforts to tackle poverty and help the less fortunate.   However, volunteering programmes like ICS, development NGOs and the 'development' agenda cannot be exempt from critical examination. Such critique is commonly seen as the reserve of a virulent brand of right-wing politics[1], yet the assumption that any effort to 'help' the less fortunate is inherently positive in nature and/or outcome is misleading, and scholars from various critical traditions have led the charge against the ineffective and even harmful consequences the idea of 'development' – and the efforts of development NGOs – can have for those seen as the beneficiaries of these interventions.

The idea of 'volunteer tourism' – '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 (Wearing 2001) – has come under increasing scrutiny from this critical scholarship.[2] The explosion of the gap year industry has led to justified cynicism about volunteer tourism, with the 'gap yah' experiences of privileged young people from the global north often aimed at satisfying the wants of the volunteer and little else. Current research demonstrates an abundance of cases where foreign interests are prioritised over the stated desires of local communities (Palacios 2010) and unskilled volunteers can actually impede development projects and produce unsatisfactory work (Guttentag 2009). Furthermore, many volunteer tourism programmes do not encourage critical reflection about poverty and global inequality and can encourage simplified notions of development based upon 'a western superiority ideology' (McGehee 2012, 96), with development portrayed as conscientious western intervention to save the poor and powerless. The subtle power relations of volunteer tourism demonstrate this narrative, with the literature and visual media of volunteer tourism operators portraying western volunteers bestowing material, educational and emotional gifts onto local communities, who are themselves rarely depicted or portrayed in a dominant or even neutral position in relation to volunteers (McGehee 2012). The process of 'othering' (the creation or reification of an us-and-them dichotomy) can be reinforced rather than broken down during the volunteer tourism experience, and volunteer perceptions of host communities as poor-but-happy can be used to excuse and even justify material inequality – with poverty misrepresented as a struggle local people accept (Guttentag 2009).

Critical Theory and Development

It is clear that in order to offer a worthwhile experience the ICS programme must seek to avoid the unhelpful, and

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even harmful, tendencies associated with many gap-year volunteer tourism experiences. Yet this is only to scratch the surface of the issues facing volunteer tourism programmes. In order to contextualise the ICS programme properly, it must be considered that through forming part of the efforts of development NGOs and conforming to the 'development' agenda, the ICS programme is equally open to the critical backlash these have faced. Robert Cox's (1981) famous distinction between problem-solving theory and critical theory is particularly useful for examining this issue in a little more detail. Problem-solving theory 'takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as the given framework for action. The general aim of problem-solving theory is to make these relationships and institutions work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble' (Cox 1981, 128-129). Orthodox notions of development and the work of many development NGOs are therefore examples of problem-solving theory and approaches, attempting to tackle the problem of poverty and develop the poorest regions through utilising the resources and power of the global north to help those in the south – with help often conceived as aiding in access to liberal-democratic rights and institutions and the free market.[3] On the other hand, critical theory 'stands apart from the prevailing order of the world and asks how that order came about'; it 'does not take institutions and social and power relations for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing' (Cox 1981, 129). Critical theorists working in the field of development would therefore problematise the historical power imbalance between global north and south and consider how global patterns of poverty and inequality originated, how they are reproduced and how they have changed over time in order to better understand how poverty can be challenged.

From a critical theory perspective, the answer to whether problem-solving theories of 'development' can tackle global poverty and inequality is, quite simply, no. The basic argument of many critical theorists is that: 'the Western intention of *helping* underlying the development aid goal is humanitarian as much as it is colonialist. However, it tends to reproduce the same global patterns of inequality and poverty, leaving intact – if not reinforcing – the dominant position of the North' (Palacios 2010). The countries of the global north (and increasingly, southern powers), the international institutions and the global economic system we consent to and enforce actively reproduce poverty and global inequality. This can be witnessed most obviously in the enforcement and horrific consequences of neoliberal economic policies upon the global south, the northern bias inherent to most international institutions and agreements (the development miracle that is South Korea would likely never have been possible under the stringent rules of the WTO), and in sometimes well-intentioned yet commonly ill-advised 'humanitarian' and military interventions.[4] This is only to scratch the surface of the complexities of the dominant hegemony (itself a hugely problematic concept) of the global north and neoliberalism, yet it is clear that the critical approaches highlight the inconsistencies and downright hypocrisies of the development orthodoxy. Development NGOs are not exempt from these charges. Ferguson (1990) refers to them as an 'anti-politics machine' (Ferguson 1990) compliant with the dominant hegemony, manipulating the complex realities of the global south to fit modernisation assumptions and reducing development to a technical exercise of instigating neoliberal reforms. Of course some NGOs are far more open to sustainable, participatory approaches than others, which can have positive impacts upon local communities, but these changes remain problem-solving in that their impacts will forever be limited through compliance with the structural violence that underlies the global reproduction of poverty.

The critical approaches are incredibly diverse, and the explanation offered does not do justice to the scope and analytical sophistication of this research,[5] yet it is clear from this outline that adherence to a critical perspective makes volunteering on a development project highly problematic. Consideration of how we can do more, or be more effective at, trying to *help* those in poverty is therefore simply not enough; those of us in the global north need to interrogate the role of our governments and ourselves in actively reproducing global patterns of poverty and inequality in order to *stop harming*. Complicity is an uncomfortable concept to grapple with, yet as a citizen and consumer of the global north, I support/consent to play an active role in the reproduction of global poverty, and if development efforts are equally culpable than my decision to volunteer appears reflective of the worst kind of well-intentioned hypocrisy. Yet this particular line of reasoning leads to a bizarre stand of principled inaction: recognising injustice yet being paralysed by the inevitable contradictions and hypocrisies that activism would evoke. As Terry Eagleton (1999) has adroitly illustrated, 'if complicity means living in capitalist society, then just about everyone but Fidel Castro stands accused of it', and if lack of complicity stands as the necessary pre-requisite for active involvement in development issues then even the best of the critically minded are reserved to a politically anodyne

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postmodernism. [6] Any form of politically motivated action, particularly that which attempts to straddle the north/south power imbalance, is cursed with its own internal contradictions and the hypocrisies inherent to complicity; this simply means we must seek to continuously reflect and engage with these contradictions as we attempt to enact change.

ICS and Social Movement Theory

Social movement theory offers a possible solution to this dilemma, emerging as a 'framework for agency and enduring social change' (McGehee 2012, 103) that is nevertheless mindful of the insights of critical theory. Social movements represent 'an organized effort by a significant number of people to change (or resist change in) some major aspects of society' (McGehee 2012, 92), and scholarship on social movements in both the global north and south has grown exponentially in recent years. The rise of the anti-globalisation movement, the mass actions of the Arab Spring and the growth of various social movements combating the nefarious consequences of global neoliberalism and the financial crisis have spurred a new generation of scholar-activists to consider how these movements offer possibilities for combating structural inequities and enacting positive change (or even development) as defined by actors themselves – especially the poorest in the global south. McGehee's (2012) attempt to analyse volunteer tourism in light of social movement theory suggests potential for those in the global north to get involved in development activities in such a way as to encourage social movement development and further the critique of orthodox development perspectives and practice: 'much like social movements, volunteer tourism organizations may provide a place for the powerless to gain power and act as agents of change' (McGehee 2012, 92).

The extent to which the ICS programme offers such an experience can be analysed in relation to its three core aims:

1. Development impact in developing countries
2. Personal and social development of national and international volunteers
3. Creation of active global citizens

The first of these is the most problematic. In all fairness, the ICS programme avoids many of the pitfalls associated with volunteer tourism programmes. It is a challenging work-based experience on projects designed to be long-term and sustainable instead of an integrated volunteering-travelling holiday, and volunteer training includes reflection on issues such as development, poverty and the limits to the role volunteers can play. Perhaps most crucial is the insistence that volunteers will have as much to learn from their host communities as *vice versa*, and the inclusion of national volunteers from the local area – whose position is of equal standing to international volunteers – suggests greater equality in the volunteer-voluntoured power relationship than is commonly found in volunteer tourism programmes. However, critical perspectives on the role of development NGOs are not included within training activities and the sanctity of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) remains unchallenged despite considerable criticism,[7] demonstrating that whilst a commitment to long-term, sustainable projects is highly commendable – and certainly more desirable than the self-perpetuating tendencies of the gap-year volunteering organisations – ICS offers little in response to critical understandings of development. The ICS programme and development NGOs that have adopted participatory approaches grounded in the knowledge and desires of local communities do offer opportunities for incremental positive change, yet their problem-solving approach may well aid in the reinforcement of structural inequality and the reproduction of global poverty.

However, the second and third aims of the ICS programme are far more conducive to social movement theory and could potentiate critical engagement with development issues and support for more enduring forms of structural change. Most volunteer tourists demonstrate a sense of self-efficacy – the belief that one is capable of doing something and creating change – simply by joining a volunteering programme, yet McGehee (2012) suggests this sense of self-efficacy is commonly strengthened during the volunteering experience, forming part of the personal and social development of volunteers. Furthermore, 'exposure to social inequalities and environmental and political issues' (McGehee 2012, 101) during the volunteering experience can lead to increased consciousness of poverty and development, as well as global injustice and inequalities, reflecting greater critical engagement with these issues and potentiating the adoption of more beneficial behaviours in the everyday lives of international volunteers upon their return. Hypothetically this could also be true for national volunteers, who are faced with the implicit and explicit

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reflection of global inequalities during their interaction with international volunteers. Importantly, the personal development and raised consciousness of volunteers can act concurrently with the forging of personal bonds between both sets of volunteers, forging not only mutual understanding but associational networks which can continue once the volunteering experience has ended. Collectively, the possibilities of the volunteer tourism experience outlined above can lead to the creation of active global citizens, who through raised consciousness, a strengthened sense of self-efficacy and emotional/empathetic ties with like-minded young people across the global north/south divide can forge the nexus of ongoing social movement activism enacted across unequal borders. It is in these movements, which question, critically berate, challenge and seek alternatives to the structures that allow the continued reproduction of global poverty and inequality, that the potential for positive and enduring change (or, dare I see *real* development) lies.

As part of the ICS programme, I am expected to fundraise £800 which goes towards ensuring the programme remains financially viable for future volunteers. Please do visit my fundraising page – http://www.justgiving.com/Joe-Sutcliffe – any donations would be greatly appreciated!

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Joe Sutcliffe *is an Associate Editor of e-IR. Read more of the Editors' blog here.*

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[1] For a typical example see: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1389886/Foreign-aid-budget-Its-time-shut-ministry-foreign-aid.html

[2] Critical Theory specifically can be understood to have arose in the neo-Marxist philosophy of the Frankfurt School, yet the 'critical tradition' or 'critical approaches' can here be understood as the broad spectrum of approaches from neo-Marxist and Gramscian thought to post-structuralist and post-colonial scholarship. The onus is therefore largely critical and anti-positivist (if not always anti-empirical).

[3] For a fuller discussion of the Eurocentrism and neoliberal bias of the development discourse, see: http://www.e-ir.info/2012/05/30/is-human-progress-inevitable/

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[4] For an introduction to the imposition of neoliberalism see: Harvey, D., (2007) 'Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610, 22-44; and for the northern bias of international agreements, see: Wade, R.H., (2003) 'What strategies are viable for developing countries today? The World Trade Organization and the shrinking of 'development space', *Review of International Political Economy* 10 (4), 621-644.

[5] A full explanation of critical analyses of 'development' and the global hegemony is far beyond the limited scope of this blog. For two brief introductions to these ideas, see http://www.e-ir.info/2012/05/30/is-human-progress-inevitable/ and this excellent essay from e-IR's Cecil Sagoe http://www.e-ir.info/2012/08/12/the-neo-colonialism-of-development-programs/. Useful academic texts include: Escobar, A., (1995) *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World,* Princeton: Princeton University Press; Harvey, D., (2003) *The New Imperialism,* Oxford: Oxford University Press; Bush, R., (2007) *Poverty and Neoliberalism: Persistence and Reproduction in the Global South,* London: Pluto Press; Ferguson, J., (2007) *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order,* London: Duke University Press.

[6] Internal critique is a common feature of the critical approaches. Analytical pluralism is a great strength, yet can at times make the critical approaches (particularly post-colonialism) appear indecipherable to new readers. Terry Eagleton's critique of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is a case in point on both counts: http://www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n10/terry-eagleton/in-the-gaudy-supermarket.

[7] For just one example, see: Vernon, P., and Baksh, D., (2010) 'Working with the grain to change the grain: Moving beyond the Millennium Development Goals', International Alert, http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/publications/MDG.pdf (Accessed: 25th September 2012)

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