

Can volunteers achieve the MDGs without unintended damaging consequences?

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Global Volunteering: Good Relationships, Better Aid

Abstract

Are volunteers achieving the MDGs without also being a conduit of neo-colonial transculturation? As a practitioner, I'm not so sure we in volunteer organisations prepare people adequately to avoid them falling into this trap and I'm concerned that the imposition of various structures for funded service providers might mitigate against a better approach.

It is my contention that volunteers' preparation and recruitment procedures can address these unintended consequences if given appropriate treatment. Recruitment drives should not make the opportunity for the volunteer to build their CV a central focus of information sessions, especially when the positions into which they go to work do not exactly replicate Western workplaces. We must also give more than lip service to the host community being in control of their own development.

I will further contend that volunteering, where mutual learning occurs, is better at putting the host community firmly in the driver's seat than many other development programmes driven by donor organisations from the North. However, considerable effort must be spent in developing a host/stranger dynamic if we want to assist volunteers overcome their difficulty of needing to drive the development directions in the communities to which they go to serve.

In this paper, then, I will attempt to detail the preparation and support volunteers need to cooperate effectively in host communities seeking to build sustainable poverty reduction.

Introduction

I would like to begin by thanking La Trobe University, ACFID and AusAID for this timely conference. This session is particularly timely, given AusAID's recent review of its volunteer program and current call for Expressions of Interest in a new program. I hope that through this session the vital role of volunteers in development, but also the importance of "doing it right" are made evident. The first two speakers have demonstrated a belief in the value of volunteering which I cannot help but echo. I would, however, like to focus on the importance of the means to the end we call development and share some examples of negative and positive examples to illustrate how, under the right conditions, volunteering can achieve the MDGs.

Over the past 50 years, thousands of Australians have volunteered for international development work. Palms Australia, for whom I work, Australian Volunteers International and similar agencies have shared many stories indicating positive development outcomes, mutually beneficial cross-cultural relationships and community engagement that supports just and sustainable development. This is not to say that volunteering always goes smoothly, nor that volunteer sending agencies necessarily create positive change. One of the big risks is that cross-cultural volunteers will be a conduit of neo-colonial transculturation, often inadvertently but sometimes even by design.

Development is inseparable from culture

Volunteers, and other cross-cultural private, public and community workers, bring their culture with them. Even those aspiring to remain culturally neutral, non-judgmental and open to new ideas, cannot divorce themselves from their cultural baggage. This baggage includes values, prejudices, symbols, attitudes and other conceptions transmitted historically and incorporating layers of meaning for a people (Geertz, 1973). That a volunteer will retain some aspects of their own cultural framework is unavoidable, and not entirely undesirable.

The interaction of different cultures provides a great opportunity for change and development, after all, is about change. Acculturation, "those phenomena that result when groups of individuals, having different cultures, come into continuous firsthand contact; with subsequent change in the original culture patterns of either, or of both, groups" (Redfield, Linton & Herskovits, 1936: 149), has potential to improve both Majority and Minority World communities. Some examples might include: the improved status of women (MDG 3), increased recognition of human rights, increased empathy with environmentally vulnerable communities (MDG 7).

Seeing only the potential for positive change through cross-cultural interaction can be a trap, particularly if members of one culture consider the change process to be uni-directional. If we are convinced of the superiority of our culture, there is a danger that we attempt to become agents of transculturation, a process which "does not consist merely in acquiring another culture ... but... also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation." (Ortiz, 1995: 102-103)

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The immediate examples of transculturation that spring to most minds are either missionary religions or corporate globalisation. However values or systems which we may consider more objectively valuable, such as democracy, free trade, gender equity, freedom of speech or affluence – and the list could go on – can be the intended outcomes of a process of transculturation. We are more likely to promote transculturation of an idea when we are absolutely sure of that idea's absolute correctness. "Missionaries" of democracy, for example, speak of voting as a human right, as they are entirely convinced that it is, at least, the best flawed system of government available. Such "missionaries" sometimes forget or ignore how recently certain democracies extended this right to all their own citizens, or that some such citizens still do not have this right.

While Australians who volunteer will operate using their own cultural framework and should understand the goals of the development program in which they are participating, be they the MDGs or some other goals, it is important that their intention is not to turn Cambodia, Columbia or Cameroon into clones of Australia. It is important for them to understand that even processes that that work well in Australia cannot simply be grafted onto organisations operating under different cultural frameworks. To many this may be obvious, but experience suggests many development workers and volunteers have a tendency to take such an approach.

The MDGs are important because they represent an international agreement on some important and necessary goals. Such agreement, however, does not remove the significance of cultural interpretation. In a given context, there are potentially many different means to these ends. Even assuming the benevolent intentions of a volunteer, there is a risk that they may bring with them a perception of cultural superiority, a belief that "what works in my country is what will *fix* your country."

I have little doubt that such simplistic attitudes regarding global poverty, its causes and its solutions are, in part, the result of simplistic community education about poverty reduction. I'm sure numerous development practitioners in this room have come across people whose understanding of poverty reduction has not progressed since Sister Mary collected tinned food in grade two. Limited timeframes and attention spans mean that Community Education necessarily must get to the point, unfortunately all too often the point is simply "Give Money". I'm sure without industry standards, such as those outlined in ACFID's Code of Conduct, the average Australian's perception of "poor people" would be much worse.

Volunteers, for whatever reason, are willing to do more than give money. Volunteers have such amazing potential to be the basis of a grassroots Global Partnership for Development (MDG 8). They are prepared to sacrifice their pay-cheques and comfort, to stand in solidarity with the less materially well off. However, they can't help but bring their enculturated frameworks with them, which potentially include patronising attitudes towards the programs' intended beneficiaries. Development volunteering agencies can either reinforce these attitudes or combat them.

Traps for volunteer-sending agencies

An important point to remember is that most volunteers have expertise in their field, but not necessarily in international development. Often volunteers are wrongly considered to be comparatively expert, in both their own culture and their host culture, by virtue of being from the same culture as those sending and funding them or by virtue of being from a country which has already “achieved development”. Bestowing such notions on a volunteer can result in the volunteer failing to acknowledge the expertise of their hosts. In Palms Australia’s experience, the host communities are almost always more expert in what should be the development priorities and how to best address them, but require what can be called the “technical” skills of the volunteer.

Despite this principle, in order to appease donors that their money is not wasted, some agencies ask volunteers to develop a comprehensive work plan, with outcomes and indicators, for their first year, prior to having set foot in their host culture. An alternative strategy is for the agency to develop the work plan, with only limited knowledge of the specific skills the volunteer brings. Such an approach is centred on either the volunteer, the sending agency or the donor and may not adequately allow the requesting community to drive their own development.

Simplistic pre-departure preparation warns volunteers of potential dangers and can inadvertently reinforce cultural stereotypes. For example, when hearing that the possibility of witnessing gender-based violence is higher, a lack of context and scope or the cursory nature of the preparation can lead the volunteer to project an image of violence onto every male and an image of victim onto every female. This preparation may come from the agency, returned expatriates¹ or the departing volunteer’s own research on the Internet.

In order to keep volunteers, or other development workers, safe some agencies will wrap them in cotton wool and cash. Then, upon a second glance, add a layer of barbed wire. The consequent fear of the locals means volunteers attempt to associate predominantly with expatriates, engage in expatriate activities and are taught about the local culture by expatriates, some of whom are deep in culture shock. Aside from missing a great opportunity to understand another culture and perhaps re-assess their own, this has implications for the volunteer’s effectiveness. Unwillingness to engage meaningfully across cultures, will result in reciprocal stereotyping with the volunteer seen as “narapela masta tasol” (just another “master”) and limits the likelihood of skill exchange actually happening.

The “vocationalisation” of volunteering, including the increased focus on using career-based incentives in recruitment, is also of concern. Career-based volunteer recruitment does appear, in some circumstances, to be more successful in attracting applicants – particularly as volunteering is viewed as either an entry point to “the aid industry” or as a way to “bookend” a career.² At a conference in 2005, Russell Hocking confirmed that an increased job focus sometimes resulted in a decreased

¹ Even those returnees who engaged meaningfully with the culture, can be prone to providing only simplistic or humorous anecdotes which can be easily misunderstood.

² Further discussion of this issue, will occur in a doctoral thesis soon to be published by Nichole Georgeou of the University of Wollongong, in partnership with Palms Australia.

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awareness of other issues. This reflects studies in intercultural effectiveness which indicate that a volunteer motivated by public esteem, self-advancement or a sense of superiority are less effective (Fox, 2003) as they are more likely to view their hosts and the volunteering process as means to a selfish end (Joyce, 2009).

At the absolute worst, an agency could send a volunteer: whose sole reason for volunteering is self-promotion; who sees development as a simple linear process, which has not been achieved due to local incompetence; with no understanding of how their own culture affects the way they interpret things; who has prejudged the host community as corrupt, lazy, incompetent, inept, dangerous or passive; who fears contact outside the expatriate community and expects to live the same lifestyle as they would in Australia.

The targets don't always justify the procedures

The need to answer our God of Aid Effectiveness can lead us to inadvertently reinforcing, in volunteers, notions of cultural superiority. In our attempts to achieve the MDGs, there has been an increased focus on Monitoring and Evaluation. The aim is accountability, transparency and effectiveness in our aid – three things we all agree are important, though the former two are perhaps more important to donors. This means more policies, strategies, regulations, guidelines, procedures, criteria, targets and indicators.

Of course we are aware that, in some contexts, gathering data can be a nightmare. Where data is attainable, evaluating the impact of a single project or volunteer placement on a nationwide indicator is often impossible, always challenging and sometimes prone to exaggeration. Furthermore, absolutely accurate measurements of sustainability are impossible except in hindsight, so we must always remember that disempowering projects can also meet targets.

While increased efficiency, effectiveness, accountability and transparency are undeniably attractive aims, they also embody the rhetoric “new managerialism” uses to ensure the donors’ needs are met, particularly ‘value for money’.³ The misuse of development funds, whether in ineffective or damaging projects or through corruption, is deplorable. However as each agency develops new layers of measurement and accountability, local NGOs must become increasingly adept at manipulating their own information to meet the needs of numerous international donors or partners. They become experts at satisfying the checklist bureaucracy, or must do so if they intend to continue receiving funds.

These are the dangers in trying to strictly define effectiveness for ease of measurement. An overemphasis on criteria may mean that those most likely to receive ongoing funding are those best able to jump through bureaucratic hoops and that a good project written poorly will be considered less worthy than a bad project described dishonestly but articulately. One wonders if double-speak is the cultural

³ Further discussion of the neo-liberal character of “new managerialism” is conducted in Nichole Georgeou’s forthcoming paper, *Ibid.*

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trait we want to transculture, or if such double-speak is not simply a lack of transparency writ palatable for Western democracies.

In such a situation, some host organisations request volunteers simply because they understand the language of our businesses and bureaucracies. If volunteers are placed for this reason, the quality of the applications and reporting may increase and the local NGO may receive more international funding. However, this does not necessarily increase aid effectiveness, may create new forms of dependence and, if the host community is still empowered enough to want to drive its development, encourage duplicity in its reporting to donors and beneficiaries. Furthermore, donors may choose to fund projects which have volunteers simply because communication is easier, reinforcing notions that the volunteer is the development expert.

The importance of cross-cultural preparation

Despite the potential issues associated with volunteering listed above, Palms Australia continues to recruit, prepare, send and support volunteers to work cross-culturally. This is because, when properly prepared and supported and with the host community in the driver's seat, volunteer placements can contribute to more effective and sustainable development than many other development programs driven by donors in the North.

Volunteers have the opportunity to work more closely across cultures than most other expatriate development workers. The cross-cultural solidarity and empathy, which develop when volunteers and hosts build "mutual relationships of acceptance, understanding and care" (Palms Australia, 2009a), are powerful development forces. Such close relationships are possible between paid development workers and local partners, of course, but the distance in lived experience of the host culture tends to be greater for those who earn significantly more than their counterparts, live in secure compounds and limit their cross-cultural interactions to a work context. Volunteers rarely have this option.

Central to the effectiveness of the volunteering process is the manner in which the agency communicates with the volunteer prior to departure, in the field and upon return. Pre-departure preparation, in the form of interviews, correspondence units, orientation courses, casual conversations and broader community engagement, is essential.

Preparation must inculcate particular understandings of development in the volunteer. The volunteer must understand that this is not their project nor is it the sending agency's project. This will require relinquishing control on the part of both parties. Fox (2003) identifies "tolerance for uncertainty" as the most commonly agreed upon quality in studies of intercultural effectiveness.⁴ Gittins (2002) calls this a host-stranger dynamic, with the volunteer as stranger with "no absolute rights".

⁴ Other qualities associated with cross-cultural effectiveness include "high openness", "low ethnocentrism", "high acculturation motivation", "intercultural receptivity", "low need for upward mobility" and "low security needs" (Fox, 2003).

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The host community should design their own programs, with assistance when necessary from the sending-agency or donors. Once the volunteer arrives, and sufficient time has passed to gain an understanding of cultural norms (both broadly and within the workplace culture), the volunteer will be able to suggest courses of action which may assist achieve an MDG in a manner acceptable to the hosts, but it will always be up to the host community to decide the way forward. The volunteer's ideas, some good, will sometimes be rejected but rather than take the rejection personally, the volunteer should remember they are a "stranger". They should see this interaction as an opportunity to gain more insight into why their suggestion was not welcomed by the host. Consequently, their later contributions will have greater potential to be culturally appropriate and sustainable in the longer-term.

Volunteer preparation must therefore dispel notions of the volunteer as the expert. Even within their own field, they should be reminded that the context and culture will affect the most appropriate techniques. For example, a builder should be wary of providing training utilising tools which will not be available to the community following his departure. Community development principles should be explained and explored with volunteers, such that they envisage themselves as resources for use by their hosts, not as saviours. "Train the trainer" techniques, which cater to different learning competencies, should be developed.

Such an approach, by extension, leads to a system where the volunteer is directly answerable to a local supervisor in the same way as another staff member. Abandoning notions of the external consultant, the volunteer will develop stronger relationships with his local colleagues and will be better able to exchange skills with them. Living a similar existence to their local counterparts, including avoiding common expatriate luxuries such as air-conditioned capsules, barbed-wire compounds and disproportionate salaries, will strengthen the bonds. The "vulnerable volunteer" who *must* travel by local transportation, or by foot, to the local market and purchase unfamiliar products will be more open to mutual relationship than one who is able to, or is encouraged to, remain aloof from the culture. (Joyce, 2009)

In order to enhance these relationships, for development outcomes but also for their own personal development, volunteer preparation must also include intensive training in matters of culture. This is not a simple matter of providing a laundry list of cultural attributes. Such lists might provide a useful starting point, but are rarely fair to complexity and diversity of the host culture. Instead, a volunteer should be introduced to discourses of culture; including, identifying which aspects of her own culture are at play, causes of intercultural tensions, identifying and dealing with culture jolts and culture shock, how cultural change occurs and "de-colonising the coloniser's framework" both by considering non-Western perspectives and understanding how they will feel as part of the cultural "minority". Analysing different personality types, anticipating how a volunteer feels she will react in a given circumstance and exploration of alternative responses build upon the theory.

Volunteers should also receive guidance on communicating with home. Volunteer stories offer excellent potential for quality development education in Australia. An Australian voice, but one which is sympathetic and respectful to their host culture, can go a long way to dispelling damaging, condescending and paternalistic stereotypes. Of course, such communications can also lose context if the volunteer is not careful,

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particularly if sent on an especially difficult day. What the volunteer might find a humorous anecdote, worthy of sharing because it does not reflect the daily life which is remarkably similar to home, may seem alien, childish or barbarous to the reader. Ensuring communications from the field contribute to a Global Partnership for Development (MDG 8) not simply a greater cultural disconnect is vital.

Palms Australia provides its volunteers with several correspondence units, a nine-day residential Orientation Course and ongoing dialogue with the staff who will be responsible for their support in country. During this engagement, particularly at the Orientation Course, strong relationships are developed such that Palms' program staff becomes sufficiently familiar with Palms' volunteers, to be able to provide individualised support in challenging times. The volunteers also feel comfortable enough to seek advice from Palms' program staff on issues ranging from personal to cultural to developmental. Connections are also fostered during this time with other volunteers whether departing, in the field or returned.

During the placement, program staff maintain regular communication with the volunteer. This need not always be in-country support – in fact, in-country support can sometimes diminish the control of the local partner over the relationship with the volunteer. The relationships developed prior to departure improve the program staff's ability to respond to a particular volunteer's situation and assess the progress towards development outcomes. When possible and appropriate, three-way conversations involving host, volunteer and sending agency occur, including for Monitoring and Evaluation purposes, but the agency does not overrule the host community's right to control the development project. Once established, the volunteer can assist in improving communication channels.

Case study: Water projects in Timor-Leste

Recently, a number of projects to ensure clean drinking water is available to communities in Timor-Leste have been undertaken with the assistance of Australian donors. In some cases the donors have been religious groups, Australian clubs or "friendship groups" - communities within Australia which attempt to maintain an ongoing relationship with a community in Timor-Leste for the purposes of development and cross-cultural understanding. Access to clean water is so vital that it can be directly linked to every one of the MDGs either through direct health and environmental benefits (MDGs 1, 6, 7) or the reduced time required to fetch water (MDGs 2, 3, 4, 5).

In two recent cases, Palms Australia has become aware of such projects and the effect different approaches by volunteers, donors or development workers can have. Out of respect for the communities and those involved, names of individuals, communities and organisations will not be mentioned. I concede that this makes the cases more anecdotal than perhaps a detailed case study would be.

In the first example, two Australian groups collaborated to install a drinking water supply to a Timorese community. The project was immediately successful. However, some members of the community did not adequately understand the limitations of the system and principles of sustainable water management. Water was being used for

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what might be considered non-essential activities and taps were left on resulting in water wastage. Frustrated by the wastage of water, and perhaps the lack of understanding by the community of the importance water conservation, a short-term technical volunteer placed a lock on the system so that people would need to seek his assistance to gain access to the water. Presumably he hoped to provide some education about water management each time he gave someone access. Perhaps predictably, upon going to collect water and finding they could not, someone broke the pipe above the tap and lock mechanism, resulting in damaged equipment and further water wastage. The short-term contractor was more upset by this.

In this case, mediation and community education about resource management was conducted by community leaders and a longer-term expatriate in the area. The water project is now successful, but it is telling that the longer-term volunteer had a greater understanding of how to respond to the needs in a more culturally appropriate manner.

In the second example, a similar project was being undertaken. The village had a gravity-fed water system, which was not functioning correctly. A Palms Australia volunteer in the community was asked to take a group of Australians to see the system. The visiting Australians identified what they believed to be the problem and promised to return in six months to patch the holes. The cost of returning the six Australians to Timor would have been \$13,000 (to be paid by the friendship group). Palms' volunteer learned that none of the Australians actually had expertise in gravity-fed water systems, whereas a Timorese company existed with the expertise.

Through the volunteer's conversations with the friendship group and the local community the project was managed locally. A Timorese NGO was employed to manage community expectations and understandings and provide education about appropriate use of the system. The cost was significantly less, skills within Timor were utilised and developed and the local community gained an understanding of how to sustainably manage their system and utilise local resources in the event of future problems (Palms Australia, 2009b).

Case study: Bi-Directional Development Volunteering

When mutual relationships are established between host, volunteer, sending-agency and Australian community, incredible new possibilities are available.

In 2007 and 2008, discussion with Timorese partners indicated that reversing the volunteer-sending process had great potential. Considering one of the most common statements from returned volunteers, to the point of cliché, is "I gained so much more from the experience than I could give", it seemed worth exploring. Palms Australia resolved to include all the lessons learned from our 48 years of volunteer-sending in the process, including providing preparation and support; protecting personal security and health; ensuring mutual skill exchange; providing opportunities for cross-cultural relationship in the workplace and beyond; and sharing the experience gained, on return to the home culture.

In 2008, two graduates from Venilale Girls' Vocational School, where a Palms volunteer was volunteering, were sent to Australia to improve their hospitality skills

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in Palms' Fair Trade café in Glebe. Celina and Veronica developed an understanding of the expectations of Australians in the hospitality and tourism sector, which have proven useful on their return to Timor. They improved their English language skills tremendously. It was not just a simple internship though. They returned to tutor for a short time at their hospitality school – reports are that the transformations in their confidence and capacity were astounding. They shared skills with staff, including culinary and hospitality skills they had learned at their school. They interacted with the Australian community, educating staff, customers and the broader Glebe community about Timor-Leste. They gave Palms Australia's staff a greater insight into the role of the host.

At this very moment, Palms Australia is hosting another Timorese volunteer – this time from Ahisaun Foundation, a Timorese NGO which provides support and training for young people with disabilities. Again there was a strong relationship, built over several years of traditional volunteer placements, which had included in gentle cultural changes such as Ahisaun's development into a facility for girls as well as boys. There was also an identified need for training, this time in administration, education and communicating with donors. As the placement continues, we can already see the potential to both improve Ahisaun's ability to serve their community and communicate more effectively with its Australian donors and enhance the partnership between Palms Australia and Ahisaun Foundation. Again, Australia and Timor both stand to benefit. Last week, Angelino travelled to Melbourne to speak at a conference of Australian disability workers – a great learning opportunity for them and for Angelino.

This new initiative, Bi-directional Development Volunteering, has worked so far because of the strong partnerships and the flexibility to think outside the traditional North-South volunteering framework. It has its own peculiar challenges and is being implemented somewhat conservatively at first, although it may be considered radical. It is certainly showing potential to enhance the effectiveness of traditional volunteer placements and improve Palms Australia's partnerships. At this stage, we are not planning to roll it out to all partners, for reasons relating to our limited capacity and Australia's apparently limited capacity to host foreigners, but also because it is a response to a specific need identified by a particular partner. It would be a mistake to attempt to offer this as a one-size-fits-all solution.

Conclusion

International volunteer sending, if managed poorly, can be ineffective and potentially damaging to the communities it seeks to benefit. The primary restrictions to effective volunteering programs are an overly ethno-centric approach which does not value either the existing capacity of the host, nor the potential gains resulting from cross-cultural relationships.

By contrast, volunteers prepared to accept the role as “stranger”, in programs driven by the host communities can be extremely effective in contributing to achieving the MDGs. Preparation which allows volunteers to critically assess their own culture, respect alternative cultural systems and understand their place in a sustainable development framework is essential to effective volunteering.

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Volunteers may be the missing link in many development processes, getting to know community expectations and ensuring 'downwards accountability' which otherwise might be neglected because of time concerns. Such volunteers though should be prepared through established volunteer sending programs which have detailed, comprehensive processes in place to ensure the volunteer can make the most of their unique potential.

While monitoring and evaluation are essential, an over-managerialising of these processes should be avoided as it can lead to and promote a narrow focus on statistics at the expense of sustainable outcomes. Development partnerships which live up to their rhetoric of mutuality, have great potential to respond to challenges in unique and interesting ways. This requires a flexibility of process however and an ability to consider new approaches.

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