

Challenging Indifference to Extreme Poverty: Southern Perspectives on Global Citizenship and Change

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Abstract

Canadian universities are expanding opportunities for students to travel, study, volunteer and work abroad for academic credit, especially in “developing countries.” It is widely assumed that exposure to extreme poverty through short-term placements overseas will make young Canadians and other Northerners into “global citizens” who would by definition be incapable of indifference to the lack of freedom that accompanies extreme poverty. This paper asks whether it is warranted for Northerners to attain a claim to global citizenship via this mechanism, especially in light of the impact on Southern organizations who host young people from Canada and elsewhere.

Keywords

Global citizenship; internationalization; ethics

This paper focuses on ethical issues associated with a growing phenomenon that is impacting development in many Southern countries: the rapid proliferation of young Canadians and other Northerners undertaking short-term placements with local NGOs (non-governmental organizations) in Southern countries. It is argued that the pervasiveness of short-term volunteer, intern, and practicum assignments raises a crucial ethical question: whether it is warranted for Northerners to attain a claim to global citizenship via this mechanism, especially in light of the impact on Southern organizations who host young people from Canada and elsewhere. Three aspects of this question are taken up in this paper in order to lay a groundwork on which to pose an answer: (1) the impact on local host NGOs in the South; (2) individual motivations on the part of young Northerners; and, (3) the justification in Northern countries for institutional policies – such as those of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada – that support these activities. Prior to engaging with these questions, the context and assumptions that give rise to them will be discussed.

Since 1995 Canadian universities have focused on expanding opportunities for students to travel, study, volunteer and work abroad for academic credit, especially in “developing countries.” “Internationalization” is increasingly the watchword for Canadian universities, and efforts are made to produce graduates who possess a global perspective. This dates back to 1995 when the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) adopted a framework of action to move forward the internationalization of Canadian post secondary education (AUCC, 1995). One of the cornerstones in this undertaking is providing students with international experiences, the

most often cited rationale for this approach being “to develop responsible and engaged global citizens” (AUCC, 2007).

This rationale also underscores the Canadian government’s international focus in the Youth Employment Strategy (YES) that was inaugurated in 1997 to support internships for young people from 18 to 29 years of age. YES programs have resulted in thousands of international internship opportunities for Canadians, mainly in Southern countries (Heron, 2006). The government of Canada has been explicit in advertising these opportunities as a way to develop Canadians into global citizens.

This is not solely a Canadian phenomenon. University students and other young people in many Northern countries are increasingly involved in short-term assignments overseas. The “gap year” (the year between secondary school and university when young people engage in various work, travel, and voluntary experiences) has become a social institution in the UK., and as such, it has begun to be a focus of research. It is estimated that in 2004 that at least 10,000 young Britons ventured abroad, mainly to the South, to engage in volunteer placements of six months or less each year (Simpson, 2004, 681-692). The numbers continue to grow as do the avenues by which such placements may be accessed in the UK and elsewhere. International volunteering is now prevalent among middle class youth in most, if not all, Northern countries.

It is commonly assumed that exposure to conditions such as extreme poverty in “developing countries” will make young Canadians and other Northerners into “global citizens” – i.e., individuals whose consciousness has been transformed, and for whom this transformation produces ongoing changes in life choices. Global citizens would, it seems,

be incapable of indifference to the poverty they witness in Southern countries and the lack of freedom that accompanies extreme poverty, and once back home would continue to work to change conditions impacting poor people in Southern countries. Here reference is being made to the website for this conference on “Ethics of Human Development and Global Justice”, which states that “... no one should remain indifferent to the lack of freedom implied by conditions of extreme poverty or the impossibility for many people in the planet to fully develop their capabilities” (IDEA, 2009).

At the same time that growing numbers of Northerners are volunteering in “developing countries”, the conditions they encounter there are becoming more and more difficult for local peoples. In light of this reality it seems vital that the influx of young Canadians and other Northerners to these countries be ethically justified through the contributions they make in their placements with local organizations. This raises the need to assess the impact and the cost to Southern NGOs of these short-term placements, and the global citizenship effect of such short-term exposures to Southern countries’ realities.

The foregoing issues are being examined in a five-year research project (2007 to 2012) entitled “Creating Global Citizens? The Impact of Volunteer/Learning Abroad Programs”, funded by the International Development Research Centre of Canada. Dr. R. Tiessen of the Royal Military College of Canada and Queens University in Kingston, Ontario and I are co-principal investigators in this study. Dr. Tiessen is heading up the Canadian part of the project and I am primarily responsible for the international aspect. We define short-term placements as between three to six months in duration. In our study global citizenship is explained as a way of understanding the world in which an individual’s *attitudes and behaviours* reflect a compassion and concern for the

marginalized and/or poor and for the relationship between poverty and wealth – within and between communities, countries and regions.

This paper draws on preliminary findings from the two parts of the study to examine respectively the first two of the ethical aspects identified earlier: (1) the impact on Southern host NGOs; and, (2) individual motivations on the part of young Northerners. Once these have been presented, the discussion will turn to (3) the justification in Northern countries for institutional policies that support these activities, and lastly will take up the issue of whether it is ethically justifiable to encourage young Northerners to lay claim to global citizenship via the experience of a short-term placement in a Southern country. The following discussion is based on a preliminary analysis of 100 interviews with staff from local NGOs in South Africa, Malawi, Guatemala, Peru, and Jamaica conducted in 2008 by a local consultant in each country.

The benefits of having volunteers, students and interns working with local Southern NGOs are willingly and enthusiastically acknowledged by almost all participants in the research who cite: fresh perspectives; new ideas/knowledge; new skills, especially IT (information technology); capacity building; new energy; augmenting staffing capacity; enabling local people to meet/get to know foreigners; cross-cultural exchanges; understanding one's work/organization better because of explaining it; increasing the NGO's community status; acquiring additional resources and funds; and, in the case of the African countries, improving credibility with foreign donors. These benefits are usually seen as becoming much stronger in direct correlation to the length of time the Northern volunteer, student or intern stays.

There is also a qualitative difference between short-term and longer-term placements which pertains to two-to-three month as compared to six-to-nine month placements, but is much more pronounced when the comparison is with placements of one or two years in duration. With longer placements come more of the benefits mentioned above, but also: understanding and fitting into the organization – taking on an insider status which impacts on the skills transfer, offering of new perspectives, capacity building, etc. mentioned above; forming friendships through work; understanding the country, which increases the ability to fit into the organization and to form friendships; and, adjustment to the country, which also impacts on the above. It is noteworthy in respect to the last point, that there is near unanimous agreement that placements of three months or less cannot enable adjustment to the country – on the contrary, the Northern volunteer, student or intern who is present for such a short period of time is seen as virtually never getting past the initial newness stage. By the same token, those volunteers who stay for two years or even more are generally talked about with much affection and deep appreciation for all their contributions to the Southern NGO that they have worked with.

In terms of costs to local NGOs, the following emerged in relation to short-term placements: there is a need to provide transportation, accommodation, translation and other logistical arrangements which strain the resources of the local NGO; because of security concerns in most countries, short-term volunteers, students and interns may need looking after on evenings and weekends; providing an effective orientation for newcomers is very time consuming; it is difficult to provide a coherent, meaningful program of activities for short-term Northerners – this is related to the first point above

regarding the drain on scarce organizational resources; in connection to the previous point about a program of activities, short-term Northerners are likely to have “big agendas” and not enough time to do everything they intend to do; there is not enough time for short-term volunteers, students and interns to share skills or complete work on a project before they leave; they are susceptible to illness because of food and water that they have not adjusted to; short-term Northerners may be demanding or impose their own values and knowledge; they may also be arrogant; they sometimes do not seem to be serious about their purpose in the country; and, perhaps most importantly in terms of the focus of this paper: the short-term experience may contribute to the volunteer’s growth but not the NGO’s growth.

These issues can and do occur with long term volunteers (i.e., those who normally stay one to two years), but it is evident from what has been presented so far that for local organizations the negative aspects and the overall burden associated with hosting short-term Northerners can be diminished, or at least compensated for, by a longer stay in the country on the part of the volunteer or intern, and by the adjustment progress that comes with staying on. In light of this, it is apparent that short-term placements of approximately three months are on the whole problematic, for these accrue fewer benefits, as was already noted, but also incur greater costs. Not surprisingly, the overwhelming consensus among participants is that they would prefer to have volunteers, students and interns stay for a minimum of six months, and volunteers longer than that. There are of course a few exceptions, and many participants are careful to point out that there is no hard and fast rule: all three-month placements are not “bad” or to be avoided. However, few of them are really useful for the Southern host NGOs and although the

learning is disproportionately occurring on the side of the Northern volunteer/student/intern, it nevertheless seems limited rather than transformative – from the Southern NGO staff perspective.

At this point the discussion turns briefly to what has emerged so far in respect to motivations for going overseas on the part of young Canadians in the “Creating Global Citizens?” study, and the resonance of this with research on international volunteering during the gap year. For the “Creating Global Citizens?” project, in-depth interviews were carried out from June 2007 to April 2008 with 26 young Canadian women between the ages of 18 and 30. The analysis of the data revealed that a desire to travel was the main motivation expressed by most of the interviewees. Related to the attractiveness of travel was the prospect of adventure, both of which were reinforced by feelings of boredom at home and the fact that it was convenient to travel at this stage in the interviewees’ lives (Tiessen, 2009). Tiessen argues that “the context in which participants talked about learning showed the way in which the learning was of a consumerist orientation and done in a one directional way that benefited the volunteers but not the host community” (p. 3). There was also a longing for a kind of authentic experience that is considered unavailable in Canada and that derives from an exploration of what is seen as a kind of morally “pure” life being led by people whose cultural heritage appears to remain intact in ways that are visible to foreigners from the North. Tiessen views this as an expression of a “consumerist” approach, meaning that in return for an investment of time and money, an authentic experience abroad can be, in a sense, purchased and then exchanged, as it were, for a university course credit and/or an enhancement on a resume

back in Canada. Tiessen's findings resonate with those of Simpson (2005), writing on the phenomenon of the gap year:

One of the purposes of the gap year is to seek out difference, to leave the ordinary in search of the extra-ordinary. The value of the gap year is premised, to a large degree, on the presumed relationship between encountering difference and knowing difference (p. 68).

Simpson goes on to make the case that such differences are predicated on, and sustained by, stereotypes of the "other", and concludes: "To assume that a short period of contact with the stereotyped other will automatically contradict, and hence unseat, such stereotypes is, at best, naïve" (p. 69). In contrast to the prevailing valorization of the global citizenship learning that is thought to flow from short-term placements in the South, Simpson asserts that the knowledges produced by such encounters must be challenged. In earlier writing she made the case that one of the knowledges that gap-year participants acquire is an explanation of being born "lucky", meaning that they see themselves as fortunate to have been born in the UK and not in a "developing country" (Simpson, 2004). Connected to this is a sort of distancing from extreme poverty that is encountered in gap-year volunteering in Southern countries, so that such poverty can be looked at as a kind of characteristic of the people whose very lives are being limited by it. Rather than the leading to a recognition of the resulting "impossibility for many people in the planet to fully develop their capabilities" mentioned above (IDEA, 2009), the explanation that young people in Simpson's research offer is the old trope of being "poor-but-happy", with the accompanying assumption that material privation "doesn't bother them" (p. 688).

What is emerging here is a very different picture of short-term placements in Southern countries than the trajectory imagined by global-citizenship advocates. Far from being spurred by an innocent curiosity perhaps combined with a degree of altruism, the interest in short-term placements in Southern countries is revealed to be self-centred and imbued with a consumerist orientation. It is difficult to see how such starting points could result in transformative knowledges of the kind expected of “global citizens”. When taken together with what Southern NGO staff have to say about the challenges and burden of hosting Northerners for periods of three months or less (especially compared to the benefits of having Northern volunteers, interns, and students remain with them for six months or more), it is apparent that the justification of Northern educational institutional and government support for short-term placements in Southern countries begs re-thinking. It is evident that policies of “internationalization” such as adopted by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada leave much to be desired, not so much in terms of their goals, but in terms of their strategies for achieving these goals. The impact of these strategies appears to be at best problematic; at worst, harmful. Although the “Creating Global Citizens?” study is still in progress and the data is only presented here in preliminary form, it is already beginning to be clear that, apart from the failure to produce transformative learning for young Canadians and other Northerners, there is an unfair and unrecognized burden being placed on the Southern organizations that host them. Given the conditions that obtain in these countries and the resulting challenges to local NGOs, their staff, and the communities they serve, there is a moral responsibility for institutions in Northern countries whose policies are enabling and encouraging a proliferating influx of short-term volunteers, students, and interns to reconsider their

approach to internationalization. At the very least the shorter of the short-term placements need to be re-thought, and both longer-term and more serious commitments need to be sought from young Northerners who wish to participate.

Goulet made the point that globalization destroys what he so eloquently termed “the possibility for human communities to be genuine subjects of their own social history” (2000, p. 35). In conclusion it must be acknowledged that Canadian and other Northern institutions’ pursuit of internationalization and global citizenship comprises an aspect of globalization. The mechanism of short-term volunteering and learning abroad programs is in fact inadvertently contributing to a process that inequitably burdens Southern organizations, staff, and communities, reducing them to “the status of objects, known and acted upon instead of actively knowing and acting”, as Goulet went on to say. As long as this is the case, for Canadians and other Northerners to lay claim to global citizenship in this way must be seen as at best an ethically questionable practice with limited capacity to challenge indifference to extreme poverty – this is a practice to which alternatives need to be found.

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