

A Nicaraguan/Guatemalan *Encuentro*: Villagers Hosting International Service Learning Groups Reflect on Their Experiences

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Abstract

In August 2017, 27 residents from four Nicaraguan and four Guatemalan communities met in Managua, Nicaragua, to discuss their experiences hosting International Service Learning (ISL) groups from the Global North. Despite having many positive recollections, these host community representatives identified a number of issues of concern. This article describes the background to this *encuentro* (gathering), the issues raised, and the solutions identified in order to encourage Global South host organizations to become better able to articulate their expectations of their Northern visitors and to insist that Northern-sending agencies become more responsive to the expectations of their Southern hosts.

Keywords: North–South partnerships, Southern epistemologies, international service learning, short-term study abroad, experiential education

Résumé

En août 2017, 27 résidents de quatre communautés nicaraguayennes et quatre communautés guatémaltèques se sont réunis à Managua, au Nicaragua, pour discuter de leurs expériences en tant qu'organiseurs de groupes d'apprentissage par le service international (International Service Learning, ISL) du nord global. En dépit de nombreux souvenirs positifs, ces représentants de la communauté d'accueil ont identifié un certain nombre de problèmes. Ce document décrit le contexte de cet *encuentro* (rassemblement), les problèmes soulevés et les solutions identifiées afin d'encourager les organisations hôtes du Global South à mieux exprimer leurs attentes vis-à-vis de leurs visiteurs du nord et à insister pour que les agences d'envoi du nord deviennent plus réactives aux attentes de leurs hôtes du sud.

Mots-clés : partenariat Nord–Sud, épistémologies du Sud, apprentissage par le service international, études à l'étranger à court durée, éducation expérientielle

Background

The past few decades have shown a dramatic increase in the number of students (secondary and post-secondary) from the “Global North” travelling to the South to engage in International Service Learning (ISL) programs, with no signs of abatement (Council of the Federation Secretariat, 2011; Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, 2012; Tiessen & Grantham, 2017a, 2017b; Universities Canada, 2017). These programs are sponsored and organized by educational institutions (schools, colleges, and universities), non-profit organizations and NGOs (educational, faith-based, cultural, etc.), and, increasingly, for-profit education/travel companies (Jefferess, 2012). Students engage in study (formal and/or informal) in host nations and communities for periods of time that range from a few days to several months, and sometimes participate in a “service” component that involves working on projects in local communities, such as the construction of schools and community centres.

Extensive research has now been undertaken on the effects of ISL programs on Canadian and American students who have engaged in them (Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005; Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Crabtree, 2013; Kiely, 2005; O’Sullivan & Smaller, 2013; Pompa, 2002; Smith-Paríolá & Gòkè-Paríolá, 2006). In many cases, studies conclude that the ISL experience has benefited some or many ISL students in a number of ways. At the same time, some studies point to inherent tensions in ISL programs; for example, to what extent might they inculcate values of “dependency” and “charity” among participating students instead of equity and solidarity? In this regard, some researchers suggest that ISL experiences (mainly) create “we–they” binaries or stereotypes of the “poor but happy” that in turn reinforce ISL students’ assumptions that their Global South hosts are people who continually need help from the North (Heron, 2007; Tiessen & Heron, 2012; Zemach-Bersin, 2008). Such critics raise significant concerns about the validity of many ISL programs, which, they argue, do little or nothing in terms of providing students with opportunities to critically examine and question the larger historical and political contexts and causes of the socio-economic conditions that they witness, and to truly learn from their hosts—not to mention what they might do to help correct these imbalances upon returning home (Brabant, 2011; Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Hatcher & Bringle, 2012; Moely & Miron, 2005).

Another area of research that is less explored is how ISL programs and visiting student groups affect the host communities in the South that receive and support them. Not surprisingly, ISL promotional literature, supported by some scholarly publications, emphasizes a positive impact on host communities—for example, the provision of monetary resources, labour, cross-cultural understanding, and long-term partnerships (Kielburger & Kielburger, 2004; Kiely, 2005; Williams, 2000). Still, some studies question such claims in a number of ways. John Williams (2000), for example, signals the potential risk of neocolonialism, noting the danger of designing ISL programs solely for the participating students, and reminds us that “the needs of the people of the host countries must be considered along with the students’ needs” (p. 57). Similarly, Bringle, Hatcher, and Jones (2011) insist that addressing “identified community needs” (p. 19) must be considered as a central component of these programs. Both Crabtree (2008) and Erasmus (2011) also note that if student engagement in the host community is dismissive or disruptive of local practices, it further raises the issue of neocolonialism (see also Larsen, 2016; MacDonald & Tiessen, 2018).

However, despite the scholarship that probematizes the positive impact of ISL on host communities in the South, few studies have taken into account the voices of community members, due in no small part to the complications of research in international contexts (Tonkin, 2011). The logistical and ethical difficulties of doing research with human subjects tends to dissuade researchers from using qualitative methods. Qualitative work that has been done (e.g., Kiely & Hartman, 2011) has centred on arguments such as credibility and the technical aspects of the study that preceded the *encuentro*—a demonstration of the institutionalization of ISL. In scanning the literature that critically examines host community impact, Larsen’s (2016) work being among the most comprehensive, we realized that the inclusion of community voice, specifically in an international context, remains obscure, as such studies generally focus on the nature of partnerships (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009), the cost-benefit analysis of these programs for community organizations (Srinivas, Meenan, Drogin, & DePrince, 2015), or the need to further include community partners and organizations in planning, assessing, and goal setting (Tauscher Birdsall, 2005). The lack of inclusion of community voice speaking to community impact demands further attention.

In light of this background, in 2013 we received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council to conduct further research on the impact of ISL

programs on host communities.¹ The primary research question was “In what ways (both positive and negative) are host communities in the Global South impacted by ISL initiatives?” The two secondary research questions were “How are ISL participants from the Global North perceived by the host communities?” and “What kind of knowledge, skills, and understandings develop amongst host community members through ISL initiatives?”

Central to this research was a focus on community members as research subjects. Based on our previous involvement with programs in Nicaragua and Guatemala, four communities from each country were identified for engagement, each of which were recipients of ISL programs. Following protracted discussions with the principal researchers, residents in each community granted permission to conduct the study. In addition, the project proposal went through a standard ethical review process in two Canadian universities. Two research assistants (from Nicaragua and Guatemala, respectively) engaged community residents in discussions about their experience hosting ISL programs, using formal and informal interviews and focus groups, along with field observations and notes. During the same time period, the Canadian team members interviewed representatives of sending agencies and in-country ISL program coordinators and administrators. By mid-2016, a significant amount of data had been collected, transcribed, and analyzed. For further details of this project, including its methodology and its findings, see O’Sullivan and Smaller (2016); Smaller, O’Sullivan, Rerrie, and Hernandez (2018); and Smaller and O’Sullivan (2018).

Preparing for the *Encuentro*

Because we were committed to the continuous involvement of community residents in the collection and interpretation of our data, a later stage of our project involved the organization of an *encuentro*—a three-day, face-to-face gathering in Managua, Nicaragua, for representatives from the eight communities. While we looked forward to receiving feedback about our research findings (triangulation), the main purpose of this gathering was to provide community residents the opportunity to share, discuss, and debate their

1 The SSHRC grant was awarded to Dr. Geraldine Balzer (Principal Investigator) of the University of Saskatchewan, Dr. Harry Smaller of York University, and Dr. Michael O’Sullivan of Brock University, the latter two being co-applicants.

experiences in hosting ISL programs as a way of giving back (Hernandez, cited in the minutes of the research team meeting, August 6, 2017).

In preparation for this event, four local community-based facilitators were hired to engage in a number of meetings in the eight communities in order to define a framework for the *encuentro*, develop a draft agenda, and determine a method whereby four participants from each location would be selected. The facilitators explained that the research team had made three requests: (a) at least two of the four participants from each community would be female, (b) the broad theme of the discussions would include the impact of ISL programs on their communities, and (c) our research findings would be presented in order to support this discussion.

After gathering the input of the future participants and others who were involved with these meetings, the facilitators and the research team formulated a number of observations, as well as plans for the *encuentro*:

- No single methodological approach or dialogic condition would serve either the participants or the research team in meeting our various expectations;
- Conditions should allow for true dialogue (i.e., build trust and confidence) and be mindful of power relationships, given the Global Northern research team's presence as non-participatory observers;
- All activities from the outset should be seen as part of a continuous dialogue and inquiry process;
- Space should be provided on the agenda for community presentations, keeping in mind that few participants knew anything about the reality of the community life of their fellow participants;
- Given that the representatives of some communities were still living with the aftermath of war and/or state repression, strategies to allow the participants to express their historical grievances were to be included;
- Two additional activities were to be included: (a) a session on the final day during which Managua-based representatives of sending organizations would be invited to participate in dialogue with the *encuentro* participants; and (b) visits to Nicaraguan communities following the *encuentro* sessions.

In order to achieve the results that the host community representatives identified in the pre-*encuentro* planning meetings, the facilitators proposed that the techniques

of popular education be used (Arnold & Burke, 1983; Equipo Maiz, 2005; Freire, 1968/2000). Specifically, the facilitators recommended that a modified theatre of the oppressed (Boal, 1992) be employed as a strategy allowing the *encuentro* participants to use drama to express their concerns and aspirations.

In addition, based on the experience of the pre-*encuentro* workshop organized by the facilitators for community residents in Guatemala, it was clear that differences of opinion could well emerge among participants. Therefore, it was agreed that the facilitators might need to use conflict resolution skills at the *encuentro* if necessary.²

The *Encuentro* Participants

While 32 participants were expected (four from each of the eight participating communities), 27 delegates were able to attend and participate—15 from Guatemala and 12 from Nicaragua. Fourteen of the participants were women. All 15 Guatemalans were Maya and 12 of them spoke their Indigenous language, while three of them spoke only Spanish, having lost their native language as a result of colonization. Four of the Nicaraguans self-identified as Indigenous and all came from the same community, although none of them spoke their native Indigenous language.

All of the communities from which the Guatemalan participants came had suffered the impact of the country's 36-year-long civil war (1960–96), particularly during the 1970s and 1980s. Two of the communities (Santiago de Atitlan and the Ixil Region) were particularly devastated by the state military campaign, one of which (Ixil) is formally recognized as genocide (Canby, 2013; Volpe, 2016). All of the Maya participants at the *encuentro* worked in initiatives that seek to recuperate their language and their heritage. Many of those from the Ixil Region are also involved with the Ixil University, whose mission is to re-establish the local Maya language and cultural practices, including traditional agriculture (Roberts, 2013; Sabas, 2016). In addition, some of the participants explained during the *encuentro* that they were also involved in struggles against multinational corporations, such as Canadian mining companies, that operate in the country (Jiménez,

2 In the end, such intervention was not needed, as the entire three days reflected a high level of mutual trust and engagement. This is not to say that there weren't differences of opinion or at least emphasis on some issues, as described below.

2018; Shipton, 2017). Of particular importance to the Guatemalan participants involved in these struggles and reclamation efforts of Indigenous identity were their stories of *epistemicide* (Santos, 2014). These were life experiences that greatly affected their contributions in the *encuentro* in ways that, we realized, compelled us to consider Indigenous paradigms and scholarship related to Indigenous methodologies as helpful theoretical and analytical frameworks (Jiménez Estrada, 2005; Kovach, 2009, 2010; Martin & Mirraboo-pa, 2003).

The Nicaraguans, too, had suffered the impact of violent conflict in the 1980s, in the form of the Contra war against the revolutionary Sandinista government. The community of the four Nicaraguan Indigenous participants, El Cacao, suffered incursions by the Contra during that war, while the other participating Nicaraguan communities which are located further south lost young people who joined the Sandinista Armed Forces to fight the Contra. All of the Nicaraguan communities represented at the *encuentro* reflected a state of economic marginalization; in spite of their ongoing struggles to achieve a decent standard of living, they have been forced to reside in “internal colonies” (Kanu, 2006, p. 8), with few opportunities to move out.

All but one of the represented communities regularly receive ISL groups, some from several sending organizations. The one exception, El Arenal, Nicaragua, did receive ISL groups over the course of 18 years (1992–2010). However, community members had very specific expectations of their visitors and had exercised agency over this program. As a result, they ceased hosting these groups when their Northern visitors began to resist these expectations (for an analysis of this community’s history with ISL, see O’Sullivan & Smaller, 2019). To be sure, there is no question that all communities in both Nicaragua and Guatemala have specific expectations of their visitors; however, based on the *encuentro* discussions as well as our ongoing research, it seems clear that these host organizations vary considerably in the extent to which they are able (or wish) to define and/or uphold their expectations with the sending organizations. In fact, as will be explained in some detail, the issue of clear community-defined expectations (overt or subtle) became a major topic of discussion—and for some groups, a source of considerable frustration—at the *encuentro*.

Activities During and Following the Three-Day Event

The program for the *encuentro* was designed by the four locally hired facilitators in collaboration with the research team. This process included email and video conferencing between the various parties over the course of approximately six months. The facility at the Pedro Aruppe Centre was chosen partly because of the many beautiful social spaces scattered throughout the various buildings and gardens of the complex. The main hall where everyone gathered throughout the three days was bright and breezy; reflecting on these environmental elements, it is easy to see how they contributed to participant involvement during our gathering over the hot days of the rainy season in Managua.

The *encuentro* began with a Mayan spiritual smoke ceremony initiated by the Guatemalan participants to integrate Southern and Indigenous contextual practices as a way of building trust with one another (Jiménez Estrada, 2005) for the purpose of meaningful conversation (Kovach, 2014). One of the participants, a spiritual leader from the Ixil Region (Guatemala), led the ceremony. This provided an opportunity for all participants, facilitators, and the research team to join in to pay their respects to the land where we gathered and to the people who would partake in the event. The four cardinal directions, important in Mayan cosmology, were used as a guiding image to draw together all involved who came from different places with different histories—and who might have had different expectations—to consider each other's diverse voices during the *encuentro*. Finally, a member of the research team was given time at the end of this opening ceremony to welcome the participants and to elucidate the purposes of this project.

The inclusion of the spiritual smoke ceremony represented an important decolonial pivot point for the project and the research team, as it decentred the inherent power of our roles as researchers, offered a moment for us to cultivate an openness to surprise (Lugones, 1987), and in our interpretation represented a manifestation of one of the design goals suggested from the community visits—that conditions should allow for true dialogue (i.e., build trust and confidence) and be mindful of power relationships.

At the outset of the formal gathering time and as a part of the beginning of each day, the local facilitators hosted *dinamicos*: short game-like activities designed to introduce the participants to each other. These were well received and created energy that was well utilized during the longer scheduled conversational segments throughout the day. In addition to these *dinamicos*, the facilitators created a schedule with diverse methods that

fostered participant involvement throughout the various segments, being considerate of the inclusion of conversational and embodied elements. Highlights included a morning workshop referred to as a World Café (*Café Mondial*), wherein groups were organized to converse about salient topics that were distilled based on the research team's initial findings; community presentations, which were opportunities for each of the visiting communities to highlight something interesting or unique about their social, economic, and political context; and reflective segments designed as a way for participants to express their experiences through a modified theatre of the oppressed (Boal, 1992) methodology. On the final day a reporting session was held, during which time representatives of local and regional non-profit and NGOs, whose roles and vocational interests intersected with ISL programs, were invited to hear and respond to a presentation of the *encuentro* discussions delivered by the participants. The facilitators' intentions were clear and multifaceted: to design an *encuentro* that benefited group integration with the goal of bringing people together from diverse backgrounds (*dinamicos*), to promote effective communication as important to developing dialogues with the other (community presentations), to create spaces for participatory and inclusive conversations (World Café, modified theatre of the oppressed), and to focus on knowledge mobilization (reporting session).

After the formal three-day *encuentro*, the program included visits to two of the communities that had been represented at the *encuentro* (El Arenal and Santa Julia), and to a rural agricultural co-op known to one of the facilitators. These visits were designed to offer the Guatemalans an experience similar to that of the Northern ISL participants who visited their communities, as well as for the Nicaraguan communities to play host to groups consisting of Southern rather than Northern visitors.

The Guatemalans expressed surprise and appreciation for the role-reversal that these visits represented, as community members were given the opportunity to be positioned as guests experiencing a range of "models" of how ISL visits are handled at the communities they visited. Participants' reflections on these experiences led to realizations about the potential of South-South ISL exchanges to facilitate solidarity; many participants made specific note of how important it was for them to hear stories of similar land, economic, and political struggles.

Discussion of ISL Issues of Interest/Concern to *Encuentro* Participants

As part of the preparation for the *encuentro*, the research team identified six main issues of concern to the participants that had emerged from the community-based discussions and program coordinator interviews undertaken during the data-collection phase of the research project. For discussion purposes at the *encuentro*, these themes were written on poster paper, hung on the walls of the meeting room, and then utilized in the World Café. The six topics were:

1. Pressure felt by the host communities to accommodate the needs and desires of the visiting ISL groups.
2. Gender issues created or exacerbated by the ISL visitors, notably the division of labour between men and women during the visits.
3. Nature and distribution of material benefits arising from the visits.
4. Nature and distribution of social/non-material benefits arising from the visits.
5. Questions about the outcomes of the ISL experience (e.g., what do the visiting groups do with their new understandings once they return home?).
6. Nature of the planning/decision-making process prior to and during the visit and the importance attached by the host communities to their visitors respecting local protocols.

Each of these themes evoked much discussion among the participants over the course of the three days. What follows is a brief overview of the background to each of these findings, followed by a summary of the participants' reflections on each.

Accommodating the Visitors

With respect to the first theme (pressure on host communities to accommodate the needs and desires of the visiting ISL groups), all of the communities reported that they have felt obliged to accept visiting groups' program requirements and to make arrangements to meet visitors' requests regarding food and living arrangements. These demands vary, from groups that make only day visits to the communities, utilizing hotels for meals and accommodations, to requests from groups that any meals eaten in the community be

prepared by a locally hired cook using food supplies that groups bring with them. Programmatic demands usually involve a list of activities requested by the Northern organizers that frequently do not reflect the priorities of the community; such programming is rarely worked out with the communities beforehand. The Guatemalans were particularly articulate about these issues. As mentioned above, one Nicaraguan community (El Arenal) ceased to accept ISL groups several years earlier because the visitors resisted following clearly defined community expectations (see O'Sullivan & Smaller, 2019; Toomey, 2008). Comments made by participants included:

- We want [the visitors] to respect the norms of our ancestral culture, spiritual guides, council of elders, midwives, and the mayor of the community.
- They should know our realities and norms, and try to understand them.
- It is better that the visitors accommodate themselves to the community than that the community accommodate them.
- If difficulties arise, tell us the truth, and don't hide things. It is not impossible to accommodate your needs.

Upon reflection, such comments demonstrate a deep desire from host communities for Northern groups to develop sensitivities toward their ways of life as well as to gain new perspectives and understandings about different cultural, social, and economic realities. Although we interpret the overall tone of such commentary as one of hopefulness that points to the potential of what ISL experiences might yield for host communities, we cannot help but read between the lines, sensing that these comments highlight experienced deficiencies with Northern groups.

Gendered Division of Labour in Accommodating ISL Visits

The topic of the division of labour between men and women during the visits led to some of the most powerful and impactful moments during the *encuentro*. For example, a woman who was a formidable leader at the local and the national level alike spoke passionately and eloquently of spousal abuse and her victimization at the hands of her ex-husband. While discussion of spousal abuse was not contemplated during the planning process, it came out as a logical extension of the role and circumstances of women in the communities.

Some comments were less specific, with statements like “The family does their activities together. There is trust between men and women—there is mutual support” and “The family takes care of the groups.” However, many more comments referred directly to the women carrying the workload and the primary responsibility for the success of the visit. This reality was exacerbated when ISL groups would plan their visits with little regard to peak agricultural seasons, when the men would be indisposed to a greater degree. Examples of this include:

- When we receive guidelines [from the visiting group] on how to take care of the group and what food they want to eat, all this responsibility falls on the women.
- The responsibility falls on the women because we cook and we take care of them so that they do not get sick.
- The leadership in the community around these visits falls to the women, few men are involved.
- When the young people arrive at the family home, we give them food, clean the bedroom and the bathroom.
- The women cook, do the laundry, talk to the visitors. The boys [sic] take care of showing the community to the visitors.

We were struck with the consistency of these comments and wondered whether this was something that could be addressed through clearer communication regarding the timing of ISL visits in communities or whether ISL visits somehow contributed to greater divisions of gendered labour. We also noted that while women maintained a traditional role in the home, shifts in leadership were occurring. More younger women have leadership roles in their communities and are engaged in wage employment. Changes in household responsibilities may evolve as the leadership changes affect community dynamics.

Material Benefits

Material benefits derived from ISL visits was certainly a hot topic at the *encuentro*. These visits invariably involved the visitors working on a project for which they provided funding (e.g., building a school house, repairing a playground). Ideally, these projects are determined by the community ahead of the visit, but several comments suggested

that visitors all too often flatly state that they are going to work on a project decided on by themselves (e.g., this community needs additional latrines, so we will build several latrines during our stay).

In any event, such projects, even those requested by the host community, can be problematic for a variety of reasons. At the most practical level, as noted by a number of participants, there are many cases where ISL projects create asymmetric benefits for community members. Furthermore, and more profoundly, there is the issue of creating dependency, a situation represented most clearly by the experience and the discourse of the El Arenal community (O’Sullivan & Smaller, 2019). The question thus remains: Is accepting money from overseas volunteers a dependency-creating process, as some argue (Angod, 2015; Dear, 2012; Zemach-Bersin, 2008), or is it a clever adaptive response of the community leaders to new economic realities to bring much-needed resources into the community? An NGO worker who participated in our study called this a “reaction to exploitation”; after spending some time in a coordinating position, the same participant detected communities’ growing awareness of the economic possibilities these programs offered—sometimes attaching monetary value to “things like cultural nights” (field notes, May 8, 2016).

Gifts from visitors were also frequently identified as problematic. Sometimes visiting groups present gifts to the community as a whole, such as sports equipment donated to a local recreation centre, a church, or a school. However, if the community has more than one sports centre, church, or school (as is frequently the case), the question of who benefits from such gifts can be divisive. Gifts given by individual visitors to members of their host family—ranging from toiletries to articles of considerable value—were a subset of this particular issue discussed at the *encuentro*.³ Besides gifts as particular objects, monetary gifts were also mentioned; sometimes visitors decided to leave a rather generous amount over and above the agreed-upon per diem paid to host families by the sending organization. As noted by *encuentro* participants, it does not take community members long to figure out who got what, which often leads to hard feelings.

Gifts to individuals certainly occasioned much discussion at the *encuentro*. Some participants spoke against the giving of such gifts entirely, while others—perhaps

3 The topic of gifts was raised frequently in our interviews with the representatives of Managua-based organizations that facilitated visits by Northerners to Nicaraguan communities (O’Sullivan & Smaller, 2016).

recognizing the futility of banning them and/or understanding the thoughts and motivations of those making the gifts—suggested ways to minimize their negative and potentially divisive impacts. The range of comments included such statements as:

- Gifts sadly cause conflict and division in the community and create their own hierarchies [in] the community.
- [If gifts are to be given] follow these steps: (a) before doing so, get to know the needs of the community; (b) be sure that the gifts are useful for the family or community considering that [gift giving] can generate division since there is only one beneficiary.
- Gifts should support organized groups.
- Discussions should be held with community authorities before gifts are distributed.

As can be ascertained from these contradictory statements, participants did not arrive at a consensus about the consequences of individual and group gift-giving.

Social/Non-Material Benefits

With respect to the distribution of social benefits arising from the visits, most of the comments made by *encuentro* participants related to the interpersonal relations developed during the brief stays (a few days to a maximum of two weeks). These positive feelings were expressed by many during the *encuentro*, although not unanimously. As noted:

- Nice friendships are left behind.
- We are motivated by our Jesuit visitors.⁴
- We share experiences and understandings.
- We learn how they work; they give us English classes and craft classes—these are social benefits for the community.
- Although most of the visitors are young and we are adults, they encourage us to move ahead.

4 One community represented at the *encuentro* had a long history of receiving lay Jesuit volunteers, mostly Americans, who spent time in their community as part of their orientation process prior to starting a two-year volunteer stint in the country.

- They learn from us about our feelings towards the multinational mining companies and their impact on us.

Integral to the positive comments made was an emphasis on the possibility to develop relationships of substance through ISL exchanges. The space created through these programs for community members to tell their stories and to receive the stories of visitors is seen as an opportunity to develop relationships of solidarity, which is seen as a social benefit.

Less positive comments included:

- Spending only two days does not benefit us or them much—there is no learning. All they bring are some materials. There are also volunteers who stay for a year and learn our language and about our culture.
- Groups that stay only a week have not benefited the community. Because we have a different language, there is no conversation possible, there is no benefit in such short visits.
- There is no benefit; rather, these groups [negatively] affect our culture, language, and way of dressing.

Interestingly, one Nicaraguan participant stated that the material benefits her community had received over the years (e.g., the building of an elementary school; the creation of a chicken cooperative; support for electrification, irrigation, and the development of orchards) were also a social benefit. All of these projects supported a women's cooperative, which led to the emergence of a cadre of articulate and skilled women leaders—undoubtedly the reason why these projects were listed as socially beneficial.

Visitors' Applications of New Understandings Upon Returning Home

Interest in—indeed often concern about—how the visiting participants are shaped and formed by the learnings derived from the experience once they return home was a frequently mentioned issue at the *encuentro*. Invariably, despite promises to stay in touch, it

is rare for short-term ISL visitors to do so.⁵ Understandably, many host families wonder what has happened to the individuals who have shared their home and with whom they have developed relations of affection. Two comments in this regard were that “there is a great void in the communities and sadness when they leave” and expressions that “we are left empty, there is no communication from them after they leave.”

Representatives from some communities—particularly those presently engaged in struggles with foreign mining and hydro-electric developments on their lands⁶ and proliferating sweatshops—talked about the importance of preparing their visitors to share their experiences back home. Understandably, they were very interested in the impact (if any) of their efforts to inform the students, and in this regard, they raised a number of questions. Do their visitors tell stories of the struggles for social justice they have heard about during their stay in the communities? Do they seek to dispel stereotypes about the people they have met and speak positively about them and their communities? Do they engage in solidarity movements such as those dealing with the impact of mining companies or sweatshops? Comments related to this issue included the following:

- There is some distrust—what do they do with the information they collect?
- There is a fear that they will return another day with another objective.
- We would expect them to have an impact in their country.
- We need to find a way to better communicate with them and to exchange information.
- We should enter into a written agreement so that they return the information that they have learned from us.

5 Given that few of the visitors speak any Spanish and few host communities have access to the Internet, such heartfelt promises to stay in touch are seldom fulfilled. Most ISL visitors are students who soon move on and their teachers/professors lose touch with them. Studies on the impact of ISL experiences on former participants are scarce (see, for example, Balaisis, 1999; Gough, 2013; Kornelsen, 2014). Even if certain group leaders return with new groups to the same community multiple times, it is hard for them to report on the impact of previous visits except in the most general of terms.

6 During the country’s armed conflict, visitors to Maya communities, sometimes foreigners feigning an interest in the community, later proved to be informants and passed on intelligence to the Guatemalan military, often with lethal consequences (personal communication made by one of the Guatemalan participants in a pre-*encuentro* workshop to a facilitator). Given this history, it is understandable why some people, including those engaged in our study, are cautious or suspicious about the purposes for which the information gleaned during the visits is used.

In short, the concerns raised by the participants range from simply wanting to keep in touch with the people with whom they shared their lives (even if only briefly) to wanting to know if certain activities to which the communities attach importance (such as informing the public in the home country and participating in solidarity movements) are being taken up by participants. As social media and technology become more prevalent and accessible in Central America, the possibility of maintaining contact increases; however, language-related challenges remain a communication barrier.

Decision-Making Prior to and During the Visit: Respecting Local Protocols

Two particularly important and related issues that emerged during the *encuentro* (and our community interviews) were (a) the decision-making process for planning the ISL visit and (b) the extent to which community customs and protocols are respected by leaders of the visiting groups and the participants themselves. Comments on these issues were particularly pointed, and often quite critical. For example:

- It's the university that makes the decision about the program that the students follow.
- As for the program, some groups take advantage of us—they just want to take from us and not give back anything.

Comments regarding concerns about respecting local customs and protocols varied widely. Certainly, there was widespread consensus that sending organizations must negotiate all aspects of the visit ahead of time with a recognized community organization (usually a host organization in the community, be it an NGO, a faith community, or municipal authorities). Such negotiation needs to include programmatic concerns; although many communities have strong views about what they have to offer their visitors, these are too easily ignored if the sending organization's leaders hold tightly to their own educational objectives. The host organizations seem ready to accommodate their visitors, but accommodations, like other aspects of the arrangement, must be clearly defined and agreed upon by both parties. The following suggestions were made in the hopes of enhancing collaboration and reducing the power disparity:

- The program and logistics are shared by both the community and the sending organization.
- Share the sending organization's proposals for the work they wish to do in the community and seek the community's response so that both sides work together.
- Give prior notice with respect to the group's arrival in the community and elaborate a joint agenda that meets the needs of both sides.
- Mutual respect is important—prepare the community for the visit and enjoy it.

Discussion

Our intention in organizing this gathering was twofold. To be sure, we looked forward to the opportunity to “triangulate” the findings we previously gathered in the communities. At the same time, we were very keen “to share our privilege”⁷ by providing an opportunity for our Central American partners to engage in a South–South dialogue about their differing ISL experiences. The event itself took place under the ideal conditions of the Pedro Arrupe Centre described earlier and, although most of the participants did not know each other, an atmosphere of trust was established very quickly. This made possible some very passionate and profound discussions that took place over the three days of the meeting.

For the research team, the most striking thing that emerged from the *encuentro* was that the discussions identified a far greater level of critical perception than had emerged from our one-on-one community-based interviews. In seven of the eight communities, those interviews did not raise any real concerns about the possible negative impacts of the ISL visits. Respondents spoke very positively and even with great affection about their visitors and the project support that they provided (O’Sullivan & Smaller, 2016). With the exception of El Arenal (the community that had ceased to

7 Guatemalan community member used this phrase in a discussion about what Global Northern researchers could give back to communities in which we conduct research. He admonished us to “share your privilege” by supporting meetings (like the one described in this article) where representatives of host organizations/communities could meet to discuss matters of mutual concern related to hosting Global Northern ISL delegations.

host ISL visitors in 2010),⁸ the only “critique” that emerged in these earlier community-based interviews was that the visits were too short and that the visitors typically didn’t speak Spanish—factors that diminished the impact of the visits and complicated communication.

However, during both a workshop held with the Guatemalan communities by the facilitators (as part of the preparatory *pre-encuentro* process) and at the *encuentro* itself, a number of critical issues were raised. These included what community members viewed as visitors’ lack of respect for local protocols; the pressure they felt to accept a program developed without consultation with the host communities by leaders of the visiting groups; and visitors’ lack of post-trip communication. Clearly, the process of collaborative discussion, including the introduction of role plays and modified theatre of the oppressed performances (Boal, 1992), allowed these critiques to emerge and to be discussed—again, responses that did not present themselves during our one-on-one interviews.

Another example of this can be found by examining our *pre-encuentro* field research, where the issue of gender and workload was raised only by ISL program coordinators; no mention of it was made in any of our interviews in the community. ISL program coordinators often have had greater travel and education opportunities than other community members, and their exposure to feminist theory may have raised their awareness of the gendered division of labour that community participants took for granted. However, when gender/workload was presented at the *encuentro* as one of our overall findings, it quickly emerged as a major issue for discussion. Several women gave passionate testimonies about the situation facing women in the communities, some directly related to work and responsibilities imposed on them immediately prior to and during the visits, and some, like spousal abuse, that were not directly related to the ISL visits. These and other concerns raised in discussions showed a dramatic shift from our community-based interviews, which had produced a somewhat sanitized version of the positive impact of these communities’ ISL experiences with their ISL guests.

We do not think that the host community respondents intentionally misled the interviewers; their answers were undoubtedly truthful. They did enjoy the visitors, and many commented on the affection they developed for them. They appreciated their

8 As noted above and explored more fully in Smaller and O’Sullivan (2019).

presence in their homes and in their community. They were grateful for what they saw as gestures of solidarity in the form of financial support for locally defined projects important to the community, and while some of the interviewees who served as host mothers admitted that hosting students did add to their workload, they said this was not a problem: “This is what you do for guests.” The *encuentro* process, however, clearly led to discussions that were far less likely to happen in one-on-one interviews. We surmised that this different openness to critical engagement emerged due to our facilitators’ methodological preparation. They were wise to utilize culturally contextualized theories in their designs that demonstrated a concern for “process, wholeness, and the collective” (Kovach, 2014, p. 101),⁹ which naturally elevated the value of the personal knowledges shared by participants. The context of the *encuentro* also facilitated a greater degree of relationality, offered spaces for trust-building, and emphasized collaboration; personal knowledges were offered with a sense of immediate grounding and purpose in the midst of conversation.

In reflecting on the level of critical perception expressed at the *encuentro*, it must be kept in mind that none of the participants suggested that the circumstances about which they had concerns would lead them to discontinue receiving ISL visitors. It became evident that all of the communities had expectations of their visitors, some being more open to meeting the visitors’ requirements with respect to food, housing, and program content, and others expressing a greater level of concern about receiving visitors who did not meet their locally defined expectations. Some communities seemed quite open to a variety of ISL models required/requested by their Global North partners and would accommodate quite a range of requests, while others, perhaps those more aligned to the El Arenal approach, had expectations of their visitors but had not systematized them. What became obvious was that there is no single ISL “model” that works for all participants.

Of the six themes discussed at the *encuentro*, one emerged as key to all of the others and can be seen as a foundation of respectful ISL partnerships: the nature of the planning and decision-making process prior to and during the visit, and the importance to the host communities that their visitors respect local protocols/customs. The major complaint raised about many ISL visitors was that they arrived with a package of expectations as to the type of accommodation they would accept, the types of food and water they

9 In this way we see echoes of an Indigenous theory, as outlined by Margaret Kovach (2014), guiding the methodologies at the *encuentro*.

would consume, and the type of program they expected—all with little to no consultation with members of the host organization about their preferences or even suggestions about possible learning opportunities that the community could provide.

By way of example, most of the Guatemalan participants came from communities engaged in struggles with nearby mining operations (frequently Canadian-based corporations) that had dislocated traditional communities, polluted water sources, and spawned negative social consequences, including a rise in alcoholism and prostitution. The Guatemalan participants wondered if their visitors were interested in learning about these struggles and were prepared to engage with these issues upon their return home. The Guatemalans were also engaged in sustained efforts to reclaim their Maya cultural heritage, their language, and their values. To that end, they questioned the extent to which their visitors sought to comprehend and address such concerns through practical engagement that respects local practices and protocols based on these values.

Many of the Nicaraguan participants came from communities that simultaneously engage in the daily routines of raising children, working locally in agriculture, or traveling to work in urban centres to make ends meet. In addition, they were also involved in struggles to obtain funding for essential services like health care, potable water, quality education, improved roads, and public transportation. Clearly, the underlying question expressed by more than one participant was identifying exactly how many of the in-country educational programs “made in the Global North” used local expertise to delve into these issues and to help the students see beyond the day-to-day life they observed during their stay in the community.

Conclusions

Our observations and analysis of the *encuentro* events led us to formulate a number of recommendations for those in the North responsible for planning and undertaking ISL programs. At a fundamental level, ISL visits must avoid the neocolonial trap of seeing ISL as a way “to help the poor.” The purpose of these visits should be built around learning respectfully from the host communities and coming to appreciate their strengths, resilience, and determination—not to help them with charity. Any support given to locally defined projects must be seen as part of an equal exchange. As Williams (2000) points

out, “the entire community should have a vested interest in the success of the project [i.e., the ISL visit] which must have a clearly defined goal that considers the needs of the student, the community, the instructor and the institution” (p. 57). In this way, all parties to the experience benefit.

The requirements of the communities hosting an ISL program will differ from one community to another and from one sending organization to another. What is essential is that such needs be fully articulated to determine a good fit. El Arenal had the experience of a sending partner institution that understood and accepted the community’s expectations and prepared its students for a very particular experience. When that partnership ended and the community entered into a new partnership, the new sending organization either did not understand or did not accept these expectations, and that experience caused the host organization to end the program.

Clearly, all of the communities expect their visitors to respect them and their social norms and to conduct themselves accordingly while in the community—but not all of the communities have the same programmatic expectations of their visitors. It would therefore be inappropriate to suggest that anyone, Global Northerners or Global Southerners, should develop a “one size fits all” model of ISL programming. What is reasonable, indeed essential, is that each host organization that receives ISL visitors be provided the opportunity, as part of the ISL planning process, to state their interests and concerns, and to negotiate these expectations with ISL Northern partners. Similarly, it is equally important that Global North sending organizations understand that their host community harbours an immense resource that, if engaged fully in making decisions about the in-county experience, will enrich the experience for all concerned and lead to a deep and more gratifying learning experience for host community members and visitors alike.

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