

The Spectacle of Volunteerism: Aid, Africa, and the Western Visitor

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Introduction

This study emerges from the discourse on international aid effectiveness in Africa. There is a compilation of evidence that international aid has not produced significant gains in the quality of life in African nations and, in fact, has coincided with an overall decline in well-being. Following in this discourse, I propose that volunteerism represents another form of international aid whereby human ingenuity, capital, and physical labor are delivered to African nations in the form of helpful visitors from the United States and Europe. The purpose of this study is to explore in greater depth the impact of the Western helper. Do volunteers from the West deliver measurable benefits to the villages they visit? Or is volunteerism a spectacle that furthers a Western agenda through positive public relations?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framing of this discussion is based first in the concept of spectacle. Specifically, constructions of volunteerism in Africa have contributed to the reification of Africa as a place of need, and the Western Helper as the resolution to the need. A visual appraisal of the marketing materials of organizations sending volunteers to Africa is particularly compelling in arguing this point.¹ Overwhelmingly, the materials feature young, white women flanked by children. Usually, there are multiple children and usually, the children are young. In their midst, the volunteer stands out like a beacon. The message proclaims: volunteering is fun! The children are charming (and so plentiful!) and the volunteer is a celebrity. As a whole, the images construct a view of an undifferentiated Africa as the naïve child, and the volunteer, in a retreat from the privilege of her ordinary life, as the mother / caretaker.



¹ I did a Google search of the words "volunteering Africa" and examined the top 50 images. Twenty featured females with children, and nine featured young children only. Only six of the pictures show people actually engaged in some kind of project work such as planting trees or teaching in a classroom. Other images included a male volunteer with children (4), volunteers with exotic animals (4), scenery (2) and five "Other" pictures, including one of a small black hand on an outstretched white hand.

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It is unclear what the volunteers are actually doing through the photos, since the shots are posed with the children as props around the volunteer. The purposes of the photographs are not to convey information about development or relief work, but rather to recruit participants from a particular segment of the Western population to buy an experience that is at once exotic, adventurous, and altruistic. And, while altruism may indeed be a motivating factor for the volunteers who join the experience, the question remains about the impact of their presence. Volunteers deliver more than their talents, skills, and care to villages. They also embody and transport a system of values that are inserted into the culture through the act of helping. While the premise is to do good and alleviate suffering, the intervention of a particular set of visitors from advanced capitalist nations into particular villages with underdeveloped infrastructures and lower levels of human functioning reinforces the inequality and exploitation of one nation over another. The images of fair-haired helpers with their arms wrapped around smiling black children mask the deeper and more difficult entanglements of Western nations and their former colonies.

In his book, *The Uncertain Business of Doing Good: Outsiders in Africa*, documentarian Larry Krotz explores the varieties of encounters occurring between individuals engaged in extended humanitarian and medical work in Africa and those with whom they work. He raises a series of important questions about the attitudes and motivations of those who are genuinely desirous of affecting positive change, yet perplexed by the realities they find. Despite their perplexity, they remain determined to forge ahead with their mission. What are the impacts of their dedication? Often, the work yields good results—the outsiders he follows are all experts in their fields. However, the results are limited. The structural change imagined for these efforts never actually happens. Further, the outside experts unwittingly assume the position of the powerful upon whom the “African” is dependent. Consequently, the need for the continuous stream of volunteers remains, whether the volunteers are professionals engaged in public health, civil engineering, and agricultural projects, or helpful visitors playing with children at orphanages.

Hilary Kahn writes that “Neocolonialism need not be limited to situations where so-called independent states are directed by or dependent on more powerful nations; it also lurks within imperialistic attitudes that seep into ways of defining, observing, and

practicing development and educational programs in international contexts" (Kahn, 115). Indeed, how we construct our interactions with African nations can serve to either perpetuate inequitable relations, or can establish a new ground for engagement. Thus, the second framing of this essay is based in the concept of cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism is a philosophy based on the twin concepts of a common humanity that transcends the particularities of social and political boundaries, and a deep respect for those very particularities that distinguish groups across communities of humans.

Cosmopolitanism is morally challenging insofar as it requires that we hold in tension our obligations to the world, with the rights and self-determination that each group claims for itself. If we follow the critique of the Western helper to its end point, we are then left with the question of whether it is ever appropriate for the people of one nation to intervene in the circumstances of another. This problem is followed by the niggling question of what should be done when the crises of the other produces such enormous suffering that non-response is unethical? Kwame Appiah grapples with this very problem when he addresses the question of our basic obligations to strangers in the world. He advises "the exercise of reason, not just explosions of feeling" (Appiah, p. 170). This means coupling engagement with intelligence and curiosity—an authentic cosmopolitan response that seeks to understand *why* before imposing a course of action that may not be in line with systemic realities. Thus, cosmopolitanism provides a way between the two poles of intrusion and inaction that presents new possibilities for transnational relationships. Specifically, global citizenship as an expression of cosmopolitanism can begin to lift the spectacle of volunteerism in order to uncover more authentic interactions that are transformative for everyone involved.

Overview of Volunteerism in Africa

A survey of organizations sending volunteers to Africa presents an array of options ranging from voluntourism and mission work to collaborative educational ventures mediated by third-party providers and placements with non-governmental and charitable organizations through the United Nations Volunteer program or governmental programs

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such as the Peace Corps.² Opportunities through large scale organizations such as the Peace Corps require placements of one year or longer and expect their applicants to complete a rigorous vetting process, followed by an equally rigorous training period that includes language immersion. These organizations have bureaucratic structures that develop placements in concert with nationally and internationally articulated priorities, and are systematic in their tracking of volunteer placement and impact. According to its 2008 Annual Report, the UNV placed 5,077 volunteers in 123 countries, with a third of the volunteers serving in their home countries. Recognizing the role that volunteers can play in advancing peace and development worldwide, the United Nations promotes volunteerism not only as an intervention, but also as a means for building civil society within countries where conflict, natural disaster, or underdevelopment weakens the social fabric.³

Likewise, the Peace Corps, an extension of the United States' diplomatic efforts, uses "soft power"⁴ to promote democracy and address key areas such as education, youth and community development, health, business and information & communication technology, agriculture, environment, and food security. Notably, the Peace Corps has mandated that all volunteers serving throughout Africa and the Caribbean be trained to address the HIV / AIDS crisis, regardless of their primary assignment objectives. Currently, there are 2,580 active Peace Corps volunteers across Sub-Saharan Africa.

The UNV and Peace Corps represent two large-scale volunteer programs responsible for placing significant numbers of Western helpers across the globe. However, they are representative of only a portion of the volunteers traveling to Africa. It is far more

² A conservative estimate of 2005 figures provided by Brookings Institution analysts suggests that 53 organizations send approximately 46,300 volunteers abroad. These organizations include the Peace Corps, as well as smaller programs categorized as generalist, professional, corporate, and faith-based. The faith-based category does *not* include volunteerism that is linked to proselytizing.

³ The UNV is unique in its emphasis on promoting national volunteerism in developing countries. In addition to its careful documentation of numbers of volunteers sent to / sent from / working within their own country, there is also a strong rhetorical weight given to stories of people, often young professionals, who are engaged in civic projects in their own country. A visual comparison is worth noting as well. All of the photographs in the annual report show the volunteers doing something specific—teaching a class, conducting a meeting, conferring with elders on a plot of land, and so forth. While the UNV does place volunteers from Europe, Australia, and the United States in developing countries, these volunteers tend to not be highlighted in the report.

⁴ A policy brief from The Brookings Institution identifies international volunteering as the most important of the "soft power" programs of the United States government for improving international relations and contributing directly and indirectly to national security.

difficult to capture comprehensive data on the total number of volunteers that go to various parts of Africa, sometimes for as little as two weeks at a time.⁵ Some of the volunteers are as young as 15 years of age, and many lack the language proficiency needed to communicate directly and effectively with the very people they have gone to help.

Two of the more reputable organizations specializing in short term international volunteerism are Cross Cultural Solutions and Global Volunteers. Cross Cultural Solutions, founded in 1995, offers volunteer stints ranging from one to twelve weeks in length, with four of its program sites in the countries of Morocco, Ghana, Tanzania, and South Africa. Its clientele range from teens traveling independently, to families and corporate groups wanting unique bonding experiences (although a visual appraisal of its website suggests that most volunteers are of traditional college age). Global Volunteers, founded in 1984, a decade before the rise of "volunteer vacations," likewise conducts programs in Ghana, Tanzania, and South Africa for a broad clientele. Branding its work as "Travel that feeds the soul" the organization provides short-term experiences of one – three weeks, and extended experiences of up to 24 weeks. Its website includes a list of endorsements from news agencies and travel magazines extolling the organization as a standard bearer in the field of voluntourism. Both were granted Special Consultative Status by the United Nations⁶.

Interrogating Volunteerism Abroad

Is it possible for a continuous cycle of untrained, short-term volunteers to make a difference? Global Volunteers asserts that while the impact of any single volunteer is small, the long-term organizational relationships do add up to some significant results. Its website dedicates significant space to defining Global Volunteers' organizational

⁵ Volunteer programs in Africa tends to be based in Ghana, Tanzania, Uganda, and South Africa. Global Volunteers also has a program in Kenya and with the Masai. Volunteer 4 Africa also works in Ethiopia, Senegal, and Togo. Madibas, a "Responsible Travel company" that invites its clients to be more than a tourist—to be a traveler, a conservationist and a humanitarian—is based in South Africa with offices in the U.S. and the U.K. It has the broadest range of options, including Lesotho, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Zambia, Madagascar, Malawi, and Swaziland.

⁶ Special consultative status is granted to NGOs that have a special competence in, and are concerned specifically with, only a few of the fields of activity covered by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. These NGOs tend to be smaller and more recently established. Their work aligns with United Nations priorities and deliberations.

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philosophy of service, which emphasizes collaboration with local and grassroots leadership and the willingness to learn from and share in the life of others. The statement also discusses the role of the outsider as someone who "can provide some catalytic assistance to empower others toward self-reliance" but whose position is "vital, albeit precarious."⁷ To their credit, Global Volunteers provides a critical reflection on the power inequities inherent in volunteerism:

We have found that people everywhere need and want to share their personal gifts and talents. However, it is not always easy for individuals to discern how to best make this type of contribution. Global Volunteers affords such an opportunity. A contemporary theologian observed that the poor of the world are enslaved; they are shackled by their struggle for daily subsistence. He also observed that the affluent of the world are likewise enslaved; they are chained to their material possessions. We are both enslaved, and thus, neither the economically poor nor the economically affluent can fully appreciate the full value of life.

Global Volunteers offers the possibility to shatter those chains. Many of our service programs are in rural communities in developing countries, emerging democracies and economically impoverished villages and small towns in developed countries. By working with and learning from economically struggling people, the materially affluent volunteers can learn first-hand that the mere acquisition of possessions is not a very satisfying route to happiness and that love and friendship, stable families and vibrant communities can be reality, even amidst enormous hardship. At the same time, the economically poor can acquire new skills and catalytic assistance from the volunteers, thus creating new possibilities for self-reliance as they continue to enjoy the richness of their culture, communities and simplicity of life.

Of course, the shackles of material poverty weigh a bit heavier than the chains of material possessions, which the affluent can choose to discard or reclaim at will. Philbrook's bid for reciprocity across the gulf of economic difference tends to spiritualize the potential for

⁷ Strategy for Development A PHILOSOPHY OF SERVICE by Global Volunteers Co-founder and President Burnham J. Philbrook, Copyright 2006. Retrieved July 7, 2011 from <http://www.globalvolunteers.org>.

change, keeping it personal—at least for the volunteer, and to romanticize the poor as happy despite their privation.⁸ The interrogation of power relations and distribution of wealth is absent from this framing of reciprocity. It is unlikely that a two-week immersion of the affluent Western helper in undeveloped communities will prompt the level of critical reflection that can lead to transformative change that extends beyond the personal to the social and political.

Cross Cultural Solutions also has an international infrastructure that works with 250 in-country staff members. Its mission and core values are based in the concepts of shared humanity, respect, and integrity, as well as the belief that cultural difference can be an asset rather than a barrier to solving social problems. Volunteer impact surveys conducted with Cross Cultural Solutions' in-country partners use satisfaction ratings and anecdotes to provide evidence of social impact. Feedback suggests that the presence of volunteers enhances the work of organization, in part because the volunteers are culturally different.

A supervisor from a primary school in South Africa wrote: "The children are very happy! The volunteers have contributed to improving the attendance of the school. The children don't want to miss a day. Parents say their children insist on coming rain or shine. Volunteers have also helped us meet our government's social service evaluation standards." Another supervisor with an orphanage in Ghana indicated that the volunteers' work influenced local action: ""Some of the children in public schools will now visit us to interact with the orphans and learn songs, rhymes, poems, and games that they've learned from the volunteers. To us, this is a huge impact – other children now realize that orphans have something to share, too.... Also, people in the community have begun volunteering to help at the orphanage."⁹

Both anecdotes point to worthwhile impacts—increased school attendance, the achievement of national metrics, the acceptance and inclusion of marginalized populations

⁸ It is not that I disagree with Philbrook on this point. Wealthy nations are experiencing a loss of community and a spiritual alienation that can be tied to the rise of capitalism. My critique is the framing that stops short in examining the relations of poor and rich nations, as well as the reductionistic conclusions that could be drawn by less reflective people who read the statement in preparation for volunteering. (Presuming, of course, that they read the statement.)

⁹ From the Cross Cultural Solutions website: <http://www.crossculturalsolutions.org/>. See *Volunteer Impact Ensuring our Volunteer's Impact on the Community Remains Positive*.

into the community. Most interesting is the point of how the helpfulness of Western volunteers inspires locals to be helpful as well. Thus, volunteerism is celebrated as a value in itself—the coming together of diverse peoples and groups, the enthusiasm of a common project, the pleasure of doing good work.

But is good will good enough? Neither of the organizations address, for example, why there are so many orphans in the first place. Nor do they state why the Western helper is needed to travel far distances to improve the life circumstances of these orphans. Or why an orphanage system is the best way to manage all of these children who are not being cared for by relatives. And, by the way, where are the relatives—are they deceased? Incapacitated? Unable to provide? Were the children removed from their families, brought to the orphanages by neighbors, or found wandering alone and given shelter? Thus, volunteers see only the need and not the complicated pathologies underlying the need.

And then there is the question of return on investment. It costs a minimum of \$3,299 (without airfare, visa, and immunization fees) for someone to travel from the United States to Ghana (as an example) for a three-week experience through Cross Cultural Solutions.¹⁰ The program fee alone insures that only those people with sufficient disposable income can consider a foray of this kind. Is the work accomplished and the relationships formed during that brief period worth the cost and effort taken to get there and get established? Would the money raised to purchase an experience that is transformative primarily for the Western visitor be spent more effectively in other ways? Would the talents and energy expended by local hosts and administrators in the receiving countries be better directed to other ends? Esther Wanjiku Chege, teacher and educator in Kenya, believes that the cost-benefit of hosting volunteers largely depends on their professional output, particularly the skills and abilities the volunteers bring. “Those with specializations tend to benefit the organizations more than the cost incurred. However, if there is no specialization, the cost and the benefit tend to balance.”¹¹ In other words, any gains for the recipients are ephemeral, lasting only as long as the volunteer’s visit. Yet, for indigenous grassroots organizations, even these ephemeral gains are important. Alfred

¹⁰ Global Volunteer charges \$2,795 for a comparable trip. Other programs’ costs are \$2,345 with Projects Abroad, \$2,265 with United Planet; and \$950 with Volunteering Solutions. Program fees for third-party providers based in the United States are tax deductible.

¹¹ Personal correspondence via Facebook, March 14th, 2011.

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Onyango who works with the Angira Development Community said that Western volunteers are “handy” because African organizations “lack adequate funds to pay workers at the community level.”¹² Additionally, these volunteers occasionally bring new funding to the organizations because they are able to communicate directly to others the challenges faced by the communities.

An assessment of the value of volunteerism is not limited to short-term experiences. In 2008, Robert Strauss, a former Peace Corps volunteer, recruiter, and country director, raised critical questions about the evolution of sending what he calls “too many innocents abroad.” His New York Times Opinion piece made the claim that the agencies’ need to keep its numbers robust trumped the quality of work accomplished, “perhaps because the agency fears that an objective assessment of its impact would reveal that while volunteers generate good will for the United States, they do little or nothing to actually aid development in poor countries.”¹³ Strauss, who is now a management consultant, even went so far as to charge that the agency was neglecting its customers (the communities hosting volunteers) when it relied solely on personal anecdote and volunteer satisfaction polls rather than systematic evaluations of projects and project communities. Perhaps the most compelling point in Strauss’ argument was the arrogance of sending inexperienced volunteers to poor countries under the assumption that their privilege and status as Americans qualified them to propose solutions in places where they had no experience:

In Cameroon, we had many volunteers sent to serve in the agriculture program whose only experience was puttering around in their mom and dad’s backyard during high school. I wrote to our headquarters in Washington to ask if anyone had considered how an American farmer would feel if a fresh-out-of-college Cameroonian with a liberal arts degree who had occasionally visited Grandma’s cassava plot were sent to Iowa to consult on pig-raising techniques learned in a three-month crash course. I’m pretty sure the American farmer would see it as a publicity stunt and a bunch of hooey, but I never heard back from headquarters.

Needless to say, Strauss’ opinions generated significant response, including a statement

¹² Personal correspondence via email, Date, 2011.

¹³ From his Opinion piece, Too Many Innocents Abroad, in The New York Times, January 9, 2008.

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from the National Peace Corps Association president, Kevin Quigley, who defended the agency as having a three-fold mission that included cross-cultural and diplomatic objectives, as well as development goals. Overall, the responses, whether they were in agreement with Strauss or not, agreed that the Peace Corps' greatest value was its impact on the volunteers.

If this critique is leveled against Peace Corps volunteers who are vetted and trained prior to placement and then committed to a 27-month stay, what can be said about the volunteers who simply drop in to developing countries for short-term placements? Even if the volunteers conscientiously observe the mission of their service providers, are they prepared to negotiate the cultural, social, and political complexities they are bound to face? What tools do they bring with them to mediate these challenges? Or, do they enact through their naïveté yet another form of neo-colonialism where they unwittingly advance a Western globalization agenda in otherwise independent states? Indeed, has volunteerism become the grand narrative of powerful countries (specifically, the United States)?

Mabel Erasmus, a professor of Higher Education Studies at the University of Free State, has observed helpful visitors coming to her country "for the purpose of 'doing good' and 'helping' 'poor' South Africans," bringing with them gifts of toys, boxes of crayons, and clothes—items that are fun for children to receive, but not vital to their well-being or particularly meaningful contributions to the community. She has also observed students whose faculty-led visits were part of international service-learning experiences, and noted that these volunteers had an entirely different approach—one that was grounded in academic content and thoughtful pedagogy. Initially, Erasmus had misgivings about importing a United States educational approach based on the actions of the United States in the world. However, because she had cultivated collegial relationships with her colleagues in the United States, and trusted the individuals who engaged in service-learning praxis, Erasmus determined that a closer inquiry was needed:

In view of the persistence of the wide gap between what is stipulated by the South African constitution, on the one hand, and the harsh realities of the lives of the majority of people in the country, on the other, we...realize that we need to work closely with colleagues in the United States and other countries in our efforts to find

more effective ways to prepare students for their future roles as responsible citizens and leaders of their countries and the world. (Erasmus, 349)

Thus, international service-learning held promise insofar as it presented new opportunities for South Africans who would be—not recipients of aid, but authors of their own future.

The Option of International Service-Learning

International service-learning represents the intersection of three distinct educational domains: service-learning, study abroad, and international education. ISL draws strengths from each of these educational strategies, however it is the principles of mutual benefit and reciprocity that define best practices in service-learning that transforms the ISL exchange. Service-learning researchers, Robert Bringle and Julie Hatcher, provide an operative definition:

ISL is a structured academic experience in another country in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that addresses identified community needs; (b) learn from direct interaction and cross-cultural dialogue with others; and (c) reflect on the experience in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a deeper understanding of global and intercultural issues, a broader appreciation of the host country and the discipline, and an enhanced sense of their own responsibilities as citizens, locally and globally.¹⁴

Among the assumptions underpinning international service-learning is the notion of humility on the part of the volunteers whose decision to travel and serve abroad is embedded in the larger objective of purposeful learning. The context for learning is critical reflection, where actions are followed by dialogue and self-interrogation, which presumably leads to new action, in an ever-deepening cycle of discovery. The engagement is dynamic and the volunteers are prepared to be challenged and, ultimately, to be changed by their encounters. At the same time, the volunteers, who are first and foremost learners, are prepared to do work that draws upon their own skill sets and contributes something worthwhile to the communities they are visiting.

¹⁴ Bringle, Hatcher, 19.

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The notion of humility (described in the literature as “listening to the community”) counters the spectacle of an increasingly commercialized volunteerism industry. Whereas most purveyors of international experiences claim that their activities are developed in concert with local partners (and we have no reason to think that these claims are untrue), not all incorporate a means for critically examining the relationships of helper and helped through a lens of sociopolitical theory. In fact, power relations often remain unchanged, so that the presence of need becomes in itself an economic engine that brings external support to under-resourced areas. Conversely, well-designed international service-learning initiatives can act to unveil these relations and give audience to multiple narratives.

At Swarthmore College, an undergraduate who participated in a course on Democracy in Action developed a community service-learning project as an exchange student at the University of Western Cape, Cape Town, whereby he involved youth at a newly integrated high school, Zonnebloem, in learning the skills of active citizenship. The development of an active citizenry is a priority in post-apartheid South Africa, and the project was designed to impart skills such as community needs assessment to youngsters who would then enact them in their community. In this example, the Zonnebloem youngsters learned something that would enable them to have structural impact on the emerging democracy in their nation. Yet, the Swarthmore student experienced deeper insights about democracy as well. While he began his project well-informed about the democratic traditions in the United States, he realized through his service-learning that he could not merely transpose this tradition to South Africa. What made the exchange successful was his uncovering and raising up of the indigenous democratic traditions articulated by Steven Biko, Nelson Mandela, Sol Plaatjes, and Mohandas Gandhi.¹⁵ The Zonnebloem youth responded more readily to the homegrown theories than to ideas transplanted from the United States, and therefore could situate their own action within a South African democratic tradition. If the Swarthmore student had not been mindful of this fact when he tried to teach democratic action through a North American lens, the project may have unfolded as an interesting activity that concluded when the student left, instead

¹⁵ Community Service Learning as Democratic Education in South Africa and the United States [vol. 3, no. 1] Mendel-Reyes, Meta; Weinstein, Jeremy, [Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning](#).

of becoming an integral component of the school's curriculum in line with national objectives.

Another feature of the Swarthmore student's experience that is worth noting here is the fact that his service-learning occurred as part of an international exchange with a South African university. The significance of this detail is that the student entered the country as a learner, rather than as a helper. He participated in coursework in classrooms led by South African educators. He studied alongside South Africans who shared concerns about democracy and citizen action. Presumably, he was immersed in local culture, living in student housing with South African students, eating in the dining halls, and socializing in the local taverns. Consequently, the student's capacity to receive from the experience was enlarged beyond the personal or spiritual. His total experience served to link local concerns with national, international and intellectual affairs, thereby redrawing the parameters of citizenship beyond the borders of nations to the global.

The Swarthmore example demonstrates what Longo and Saltmarsh propose when they advocate for a reframing of language from international to global service-learning. According to Longo and Saltmarsh, the international coinage tends to place greater emphasis on the location of the service, whereas a global framing points toward outcomes that transcend the issues particular to bordered nations. These outcomes include the kinds of competencies typically associated with study abroad programs—language skills, knowledge of the host country, and intercultural sensitivity, as well as the knowledge and dispositions to navigate and act within contexts where “there is no script.”¹⁶ This engagement calls forth reflective inquiry “on the origins and intent of the projects in which [students] participate, the relationship of the projects to the social and power structures of the host community and country, and the degree to which their projects and activities might either perpetuate or liberate political, social, and economic structures” (Longo, Saltmarsh, 77). Within this framework, volunteerism is global citizenship, which is an expression of cosmopolitanism.

In general, universities are invested in international/global service-learning initiatives as extensions of their broader internationalization goals. Rhetorically, these goals include

¹⁶ From Boyte, H. (2008). *Against the Current: Developing the Civic Agency of Students*. *Change*, 40(30), quoted in Longo, Saltmarsh, 2001, p. 73.

the value of preparing graduates to be culturally competent and civically engaged. Pragmatically, however, cultural and civic objectives are secondary to the demands of globalization, and the commodification of higher education in an increasingly competitive global market (Plater, 38). Nevertheless, a growing contingent of educators and researchers are invested in models of internationalization that counter Western hegemony and advance global citizenship, and regard international / global service-learning as a means for achieving this. By design, these initiatives prompt a level of critical, systemic reflection that would otherwise remain buried in the myth of American exceptionalism:

If proponents of international education are really to foster global civil society and citizenship, the task is twofold. First, students (and their teachers) must get out of the United States for a significant part of their education. Second, and no less important, *the United States must get out of the students* (and their teachers). In other words, faculty and higher education administrators should be working against the "relentless commodification" of everything...to help students understand the manner in which the consumerist sensibilities to which they have been socialized distorts their understanding of other cultures and peoples (Karn, Skelley).

Likewise:

Those learning through service must share their gazes and shift their eyes away from the "others" with whom they are working, to themselves. They will then become members of the casts they analyze, alongside the communities where service is provided. They will become objects of their gazes and that of others (Kahn, 115).

Thus, global / international service-learning requires extensive preparation prior to the experience (a two-course sequence is recommended) that includes an examination of the United States' role in the world and the interconnectedness of Western interventions and conditions in developing nations. Issues of reentry must also be factored into the design, in order to direct students to how they might enact their burgeoning global consciousness in their home environments.

Of course, as with any initiative, there are thick and thin models. Not all service-learning abroad is conducted with the level of rigor and intentionality described here. In fact, as universities promote internationalization among undergraduates and establish metrics for increasing students' travel abroad, there is likely to be a rise in short-term

opportunities that accommodate academic calendars. Third party providers like Cross Cultural Solutions will continue to flourish in order to meet this growing market. The presence of a pedagogical design that is grounded in cosmopolitanism can somewhat stem the tide of volunteer spectacle by setting standards of best practice that influence the work of third party providers, or works in close partnership with them—so that the provider is responsible for the logistical details while educators integrate content work with preparation, education, and reflection. Even more powerful is the prospect of conducting exchanges with universities abroad, so that Westerners can host students from Ghana or South Africa or other developing nations as helpful visitors in our own country.¹⁷

Conclusion

So what does all of this mean for Africa?

This is a difficult question to answer, since the discussion of volunteerism easily veers into one of programmatic design and the personalities and qualifications of the individual volunteers, leaving questions of direct impact behind. Yet, when I look back at the comments received from community leaders in the Congo and Kenya who responded to my inquiry about volunteerism¹⁸, I can see a very clear message: Western visitors are welcome.

Initially, I was incredulous. I thought that their overwhelmingly positive feedback was either to flatter me as someone who worked in the field of volunteerism, or indicative of cultural articulations. However, reflecting back in light of this study, I can read a deeper level of meaning into their statements. Perhaps it is best stated by Jared Akama Ondieki, a young man with aspirations to be the President of Kenya (he is the national chairman of the United People's Congress and the executive director of the Center for Partnerships and Civic Engagement Trust, and organization he founded), yet also deeply embedded in a spirituality of service:

¹⁷ For several years, Virginia Tech conducted a Global Citizen Partners service-learning exchange that aimed to realize this purpose of reciprocal learning through civic action. Unfortunately, the bureaucracy of the bilateral exchange format made it difficult to sustain.

¹⁸ I received responses from seven community leaders from Kenya and the Congo working with grassroots initiatives about their experiences with Western volunteers. Their responses were predominantly positive and reflected a desire to have more interactions rather than less. One of the respondents gave a very florid, theoretical response on the importance of volunteerism as invoking "the inherent capacity of each one of us to do good not only in the villages... but in every facet of societal life" (Ochieng Kharaila).

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To be honest, our communities here have not embraced Volunteerism in it's totality but due to International Volunteerism and having Volunteers from abroad in communities has ended up motivating many people in our community to embrace the Volunteerism spirit, They normally ask themselves, if people can come from very far to volunteer in our community work, why can't we our self come out and Volunteer because this is our community?¹⁹

Thus, volunteerism is generative—prompting engagement and fueling ideas that can be



Jared Akama Ondieki (left) with CEPACET staff in the Kware Slums where they conduct outreach.

brought to bear on the common good. Further, in Jared's view, volunteerism is a way to foster interdependence across peoples of diverse backgrounds. In addition to formulating a platform and philosophy that is rooted in human rights and social justice, Jared simultaneously leads direct service projects in rural villages across Kenya as well as participates in an elite

gathering of predominantly North American and European intellectuals driving the Interdependence Day movement, challenging these key thinkers to incorporate grassroots voices into their dialogues.

If I consider international volunteerism through Jared's perspective, then I can take the long-view of how volunteerism positively benefits Africa. However, we need to place the work of people like Jared in the forefront and act in response to their invitation. It is young leaders like Jared and his CEPACET colleagues who will set the direction for Africa's future. Western visitors can support this future through global citizenship.

¹⁹ Personal correspondence via Facebook, March 4, 2011.

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