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Measuring Volunteerism in civic engagement¹

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International Volunteering in its current form can be traced back the best part of 100 years and certainly its contemporary models are clearly recognizable in the initiatives of the 1950s and 1960s². It is interesting to ask whether in those earlier years the measurement of international volunteering was an issue. One caricature of the life of International Volunteers in the past suggested they were sent off into pastures new for two years in the hope they would do something useful and gain some benefit.³ The watchword - or phrase - might have been "do no harm", which contains the appreciation that external interventions can have negative consequences no matter how well intentioned they might be. However, the idea that international volunteering was important and, in principle, beneficial appears to have held sway.

Times have changed. Measurement of whether international volunteers achieve their objectives has become an increasingly critical issue. Most IVCOs with a development focus will have systems of monitoring and evaluation which aim to capture the contribution each volunteer makes at their workplace. This has been a strong focus of collaboration amongst IVCOs as exemplified in a recent project led by UNV with the support of the International Forum on Development Service, which has piloted and developed a comprehensive template for M&E for agencies to use.

International volunteering has always had a multiplicity of aims, which have embraced different emphases at different times and in different contexts.⁴ The trend for international volunteering to be seen as primarily a form of technical assistance emphasised the primacy of the relationship between the volunteer and the local partner. In this model, volunteers are allocated placements which can be assessed against work objectives, pretty much like a regular workplace performance review system. Have the objectives been met? Has organisational performance improved as a result? Measuring the impact of the organisation during that period can then become a proxy indicator for the measurement of the volunteer's performance. Well, nearly. There is, after all, the small question of attribution⁵.

¹ This paper was prepared for the panel presentation at ACUNS conference, Bonn 5-7 June 2008. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Skillshare International, FORUM or its members.

² See Allum(2007) for consideration of the historic models and how they have changed in recent years.

³ . Indeed, for some organisations it is not that long since the purpose of international volunteering had greater emphasis on the benefits to the volunteer, than to the people and communities they worked with. See, for example, the early strategic Plans of VSO in the 1990s, but the use of and support for international volunteer programmes to train future leaders has often been a formal, and certainly an informal, feature.

⁴ Plewes and Stuart (2007)

⁵ Attribution is not just a problem for International Volunteering, but all development interventions. An illustrative example of the challenge might be as follows: increased crop production might well be the result of rainfall coming at

IVCOs have in the recent past - and continue - to address the workplace contribution; sometimes this is because they would like to improve the quality of their own decision-making; sometimes, it is due to donor accountability.

Plewes and Stuart (2007) in their paper presented to the annual IVCO conference in 2007, identified three different typologies for international volunteering, which might overlap with each other depending on the focus of the organisation.⁶ These were:

- Development Model - A contribution to poverty reduction and social justice
- Learning Model - Developing global citizenship
- Civil Society Strengthening Model - building democratic capacity

The second and third typologies take us into the terrain of civic engagement, which is the main focus of this paper.

The Learning model focuses on international volunteering as an experience that changes hearts and minds:

"...there is an assumption that this kind of learning will expand their understanding and commitment to global issues in all aspects of their life"⁷

This leads to a further hypothesis:

"...returned volunteers are more sympathetic to development cooperation and in their personal, working and civic life undertake activities and support policies that favour poverty reduction. They will become the social and economic catalyst for pro-development change in their own societies."⁸

The civil society strengthening typology looks at both where the volunteer is placed and what happens when they return.

"From this premise, strengthening civil society organizations or the voluntary sector (which includes not-for-profit organizations that have paid staff) becomes a valuable foundation for a healthy society. There is also much to be learned from exchanges and solidarity among such organizations, both in terms of providing services and other public goods like public policy advocacy.⁹ A wide variety of citizens organizing for their mutual or public good is a development benefit in and of itself, as a basis for a modern state."¹⁰

the right time, rather than the new farming techniques brought in by the volunteer. The challenge of attribution is not unfamiliar to social scientists.

⁶ Plewes and Stuart (2007)

⁷ Plewes and Stuart (2007)

⁸ Plewes and Stuart (2007)

⁹ Anyone who doubts the importance of the latter as a public good need only think of the anti-slavery movement and the movement for women's equality as two important examples. Environmental advocacy is rapidly joining them in importance and impact.

¹⁰ Plewes and Stuart (2007)

These typologies indicate the incompleteness of measuring technical performance as the value of the volunteer's contribution. It has seen a growing interest amongst IVCOs as to how to capture these features, potentially as distinctive contributions of international volunteering. In recent years there have been attempts to explore how we might measure this engagement through a social capital approach. In 2005, the International Forum on Development Service commissioned a research scoping activity undertaken by well-reputed consultants *Development Initiatives*¹¹. This established the potential importance of the social capital approach, and a number of ways this could be taken forward. The detailed research has still to be pursued, however, but FORUM has pursued one area - public engagement.

In 2007, FORUM commissioned a discussion paper on public engagement. The researcher noted:

*„Almost everyone I spoke with reminded me that deciding to volunteer, and then volunteering, are important steps along an individual's trajectory of personal change, and are likely indicators of both international awareness and engagement that predate the decision to volunteer. Certainly, international volunteering has a marked impact on the worldview and attitudes of the people who do it.“*¹²

The conclusion of the impact on civic engagement is indicated at the level of the individual volunteer.

*“Anecdotally, we all know that (good) volunteer experiences can and often do influence the choices that former volunteers make later in their lives. This is borne out in at least two studies of volunteer alumni.¹³ An enhanced sense of 'global citizenship' (my word), and engagement - at a rate higher than average, in community or international organisations, or professional life - appear to be predictable outcomes of a volunteer's experience. As they move into the next phase of their lives after finishing their international assignment, former volunteers seek 'coherence and continuity' with the values, attitudes, inter-cultural and other skills they acquire or deepen as volunteers. They tend to re-orient their personal and/or professional lives in ways that can integrate their new learning and worldview.“*¹⁴

Taken together the work of Plewes and Stuart with that of Christie and Development Initiatives helps us formulate at least four hypotheses:

- 1) That the learning journey of the international volunteer will tend to result in an attitudinal change that will expand their understanding and commitment to international development issues. This will be reflected in individual volunteers becoming “the social and economic catalysts for pro-development change in their own societies.”
- 2) That returnees become more involved than their compatriots in addressing local and national development issues, while still maintaining an

¹¹ Randel et al (2004)

¹² Christie (2007)

¹³ Studies from Canada and Switzerland reached remarkably similar conclusions about the impact of the volunteer experience on the choices returned volunteers make later in life.

¹⁴ Christie (2007)

international worldview, and an interest or involvement in specific international concerns

- 3) That there is a tendency for newly-returned alumni to seek coherence and continuity between the values, attitudes and skills acquired in their international employment, and their future work. Volunteers often make quite dramatic career (and study) changes on their return, in order to align their working lives more closely with their new worldview. This might mean bringing an international perspective into 'mainstream' institutions, companies, trade unions and professional associations
- 4) That international volunteers generate enhanced levels of social capital and civil society infrastructure within the societies where they are placed.

The inevitable question is whether there is any research undertaken to address any of these hypotheses. It is probable that most IVCOs at one time or another have surveyed returned volunteers, but whether such studies stand up to academic scrutiny may be doubtful. It is inherent in the very nature of point 3 above, that individual volunteers may well change their lives or seek out means to address the levels of cognitive dissonance. Traceability is not that easy. And many do not come back.

As Sherraden et al (2008) have identified:

"There are few studies that measure possible outcomes such as enhanced human capital formation, capacity for cross-cultural interaction and conflict resolution, ability to contribute to development, global civic engagement, international social networks, and public policy support for IVS (international voluntary service)."¹⁵

Alumni studies offer perhaps the best opportunity. Christie identified two such studies - one in Switzerland and one in Canada - which gave similar results. The remainder of this paper considers the Canadian research in more depth to see what it tells us about our hypotheses.

The power of volunteering: A review of the Canadian Volunteer Cooperation Program.¹⁶

In 2001, there was a conference of the Canadian International Volunteer Coalition on the value and future of Canadian International volunteering. In 2004, CCIC (The Canadian NGO umbrella organisation) issued a report about engaging Canadians as global citizens. And then in 2005, CIDA commissioned research on how the overseas experience impacts on "the motivations of returned volunteers, their capabilities, and their performance as volunteers." The CIDA funded survey of over 500 returned volunteers on line, followed up by a 10% sample for interviews, came up with some positive results:

"The findings affirm that the overseas experience had a profound impact on the values of beliefs of returned volunteers, as well as on *their skill levels, the career and education decisions they have made on their return, and their involvement and*

¹⁵ Sherraden et al (2008)

¹⁶ Universalis (2005)

support to local community or international development. [Their involvement in] public engagement work is having positive effects on Canadians' understanding of, and openness to, different cultures as well as their knowledge of development issues, leading to increased involvement in international development and support to development programs¹⁷

[These efforts] give Canadians an upclose encounter with other cultures and world perspectives without ever leaving their homes, schools, workplaces or communities.... Community members were often quite moved to hear of the issues facing people in developing countries, which they had not been aware of, but some were also quick to identify with the similarities in 'struggling to make ends meet and support their family too.' As such, returned volunteers provided a 'human face' for people in developing countries... and created an attitude of openness toward fellow Canadians from a different background"¹⁸

The key findings of this research are summarized below:

- Returned volunteers (RVs) believe that their overseas experience had an impact on their beliefs and values

Survey respondents said that their values, beliefs, and attitudes had changed to a great extent in several areas: international development issues (78%), people of a different background (70%), international politics (67%), and community development (63%)

- The majority of returned volunteers report that volunteering overseas helped develop their skills in a variety of ways

Survey respondents said that their overseas experience affected the skills, knowledge, and abilities they use in their personal life, work, community, and education. More than half (58%) said that it affected the skills they use in their personal life to a great extent. Forty percent (40%) said that it affected the skills they use in work, community, and education to a great extent.

- Overseas volunteer experience influences career and education decisions

Many volunteers returned to Canada to study development-related topics, while others shifted career paths to stay involved in the nonprofit or public sectors. Forty-six percent (46%) of returned volunteers said their career decisions had been affected to a great extent by their overseas experience. Forty percent (40%) said that their career decisions had been somewhat affected. Only 4% said there was no affect at all. Similar results were found for the impact on volunteers' decisions about education.

- Many returned volunteers continue to be active in community or international development through work, volunteerism, or donations.

¹⁷ (Universalis et al., 2005, p. iii).

¹⁸ (Universalis et al., 2005, p. 37).

Sixty percent (60%) of survey respondents reported that they were still involved in development issues through community or service groups. Half (52%) were still involved in development through their career. Only 18% reported no involvement with development issues.

Kelly and Close (2007) critiqued the report on the basis that while it provides valuable information on returned volunteers, it does not assess how much volunteering they actually do once they are back home. Nor does it explore the types of volunteer activity they are engaged compared to that of the average Canadian.

*The Overseas Experience: A Passport to Improved Volunteerism
A Research Report*¹⁹

"The aim of our research was to explore the volunteering patterns of these Canadians once they return home. Does the overseas experience spark the volunteer spirit or was it there before they journeyed abroad? Do these volunteers continue to contribute their time to global issues after they return to Canada or do they re-focus on local concerns? Do they volunteer more, having been bitten by the "volunteer bug" or do they volunteer less, having "paid their dues" overseas?"²⁰

Kelly and Case attempted a survey of some 1,150 former CUSO volunteers and had nearly 647 responses. These were supplemented by 40 interviews. They standardized their sample against the regular profile of CUSO volunteers, allowing for when people undertook their volunteering and which parts of Canada they came from.

Their main findings were:

- Canadians who volunteered abroad tend to be active volunteers on return to Canada. Not only are these returned volunteers more likely to volunteer than all Canadians, but they contribute more volunteer hours
- Canadians go overseas because they were already active volunteers committed to the idea of nonprofit service
- Although many survey respondents and interviewees said that the overseas experience did not affect their level of volunteer activity in Canada, they noted that it increased their commitment to the idea of volunteering.²¹
- The tendency to volunteer on return to Canada varied according to the era when overseas volunteers served. Those who served in the 1960s, 1970s, and

¹⁹ Kelly and Case (2007)

²⁰ Kelly and Case (2007)

²¹ "One of the more fascinating findings from this research is that leaving Canada to live in a different community (and in another culture) deepened the commitment of many returned volunteers to their own community once they returned home." Kelly and Case (2007).

1980s were more likely to volunteer in Canada than were those who had served in the 1990s or 2000s.²²

- Returned overseas volunteers who volunteer in Canada tend to get involved with more than one organization. Nearly half (44%) of the returned volunteers who volunteered in Canada volunteered with three or more organizations and 85% offered their services to two groups.
- Almost all of the interviewees and many survey respondents talked about how their overseas postings deepened their knowledge of international development and broadened their worldviews.
- With regard to an individual volunteer's outlook and disposition, four benefits stand out: increased confidence; increased flexibility and resourcefulness; increased patience, tolerance, and openness; and new or enhanced skills.

Conclusion

Based on survey models we seem to have a picture which can show the benefits of International Volunteering within civic engagement in both a quantitative and qualitative sense. The Canadian research appears to support at least three of the hypotheses of the International Volunteering model, but does not tell us about the contributions of international volunteers in civic engagement in the host country.

Jean Christie proposed that longitudinal studies, would be useful, and tracking a control group in parallel would be a way forward. Certainly, the use of survey methodologies and interviews of former volunteers has its limitations in extrapolating to a more rounded view of impact on civic engagement.

If we are to gain a fuller insight into the part international volunteers play in civic engagement, before, during and after their placements, then we may need more complex methodologies to improve our appreciation of the impact of international volunteering in building social capital.

"Impact Assessments require comparative designs that permit researchers to compare the target of change with a similar target, but one that does not have an IVS programme."²³

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June 2008

²² "However, this variation in volunteer activity may be more a reflection of the age of the volunteers rather than the historical circumstances of when they went overseas". Kelly and Case (2007).

²³ Sherraden (2008)

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