

Volunteering for Development – What Germany and Weltwärts can learn from the Global South

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Abstract

Comparing concrete volunteering for development programs and experiences in the Global North and South (Weltwärts in Germany and host organizations in Guatemala), this paper proposes that it is necessary to evaluate and create stronger and more coherent programs in the North which respond more ethically to current needs and demands from the Global South. There is a clear tension between two paradigms: (cosmopolitan) global education and (human) development approaches in volunteer-abroad programs, such as Weltwärts in Germany. It is necessary to explore new ways of integrating both perspectives coherently and ethically and avoid contradictions. This article proposes to integrate more fully the demands and experiences from the South into the agendas and objectives of the programs designed in the North. Strengthening the relationships between volunteer-sending organizations and host organizations would empower and benefit both types of organizations and (German) volunteers while advancing 'education and development' goals in the North and South.

Keywords: Global North-South; organizations; global education; volunteers; volunteering for development; Weltwärts

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel vergleicht Freiwilligendienste und Erfahrungen in solchen im globalen Norden und im globalen Süden (Weltwärts in Deutschland und Aufnahmeorganisationen in Guatemala). Dabei wird die Notwendigkeit betont, die Freiwilligendienstprogramme im Globalen Norden stärker zu evaluieren und kohärenter auszustalten, damit sie eine moralische Antwort auf gegenwärtige Bedürfnisse im Globalen Süden geben. Es existiert eine klare Spannung zwischen zwei Paradigmen: Einerseits eine kosmopolitische, globale Bildung, andererseits (menschliche) Entwicklungsansätze in internationalen Freiwilligendiensten – wie z.B. Weltwärts in Deutschland. Es muss weiterhin erforscht werden, wie diese beide Perspektiven kohärent und ethisch vertretbar in die Programme integriert werden können, ohne Gegensätze zu erzeugen. Es wird vorgeschlagen, dass die Forderungen und Erfahrungen aus dem globalen Süden verstärkt in die Agenden und Ziele der im globalen Norden konzipierten Programme implementiert werden. Von einer Stärkung der Beziehung zwischen Entsendeorganisationen und Aufnahmeorganisationen würden sowohl beide Organisationstypen als auch (deutsche) Freiwillige profitieren. Außerdem würden Ziele aus dem Bereich „Bildung und Entwicklung“ im Norden und im Süden vorangebracht werden.

Schlagwörter: Globaler Norden-Süden; Organisationen; globale Bildung; Freiwillige; entwicklungspolitische Freiwilligendienste; Weltwärts

Recently the German volunteering for development program Weltwärts celebrated its tenth anniversary. Inaugurated in 2008, run and funded by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), this program contributes sending young volunteers (between the ages of 18 to 28) to “learn from” and “support” development projects in the Global South (BMZ-weltwärts 2014).

Based on recent data from countries from the Global South, especially from interviews with the staff of volunteer host organizations in Guatemala (Ortiz Loaiza 2018), this paper compares the implications of these findings with the German experience. From a normative approach, it is proposed here that German government agencies, not-for-profit organizations in charge of the volunteer abroad programs, and volunteer host organizations could benefit from two processes. First, evaluating the underlying ideas supporting the design of the volunteering programs and second, strengthening the relationships between volunteer-sending organizations and host organizations in the Global North and South.

Evaluating the ideas underlying the design of the volunteering programs is fundamental to creating stronger and more coherent volunteering for development experiences. Revised programs need to respond ethically to current demands from both (cosmopolitan) global education and complex (human) development approaches. Acknowledging the tensions and commonalities of these two paradigms may contribute to recognizing and integrating the experiences and agency of their counterparts and collaborators in the Global South. Closer collaboration between volunteer organizations would also contribute to strengthening the links between theory and practice (i.e. the links between academia, government and NGOs) in the Global North and South.

Strengthening the relationships between volunteer-sending organizations and host organizations in the North and South would empower and benefit both types of organizations, and especially the German volunteers. In the specific contexts of fragility, where the state and the rule of law are weak, it is the local host organizations which provide a formal and informal institutional framework to protect and guide the newly arrived volunteers from the Global North to perform their duties. These local host organizations are also the ones who (directly or indirectly) benefit from or bear the costs of the volunteers’ successful or failed actions (Ortiz Loaiza 2018). These organizations can also contribute to better monitoring and evaluating of volunteering programs.

The ideas and recommendations explored through these pages may contribute to improving the work of Western agencies sending volunteers to the Global South who are interested in learning from experiences and lessons from the South. Additionally, these somewhat normative comments and ideas resulted from a two-day conference in Cologne in September 2018 with among close to one hundred German academics, public servants, practitioners and volunteers discussing the Weltwärts “experience”.

1. Challenges at the root of the design of the volunteer abroad programs

In several volunteer-sending programs, as in the case of Weltwärts, there is a strong tension between two paradigms: global education versus human development ideas. For example, the Weltwärts program is conceived as a “global learning” program, *but* it is run under the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The word *but* emphasizes that besides its characteristics as a learning program, Weltwärts funding counts towards aid for development in the Global South in the BMZ budget.¹

First, the program offers a “learning experience” for the young people volunteering abroad, and the possibility to complement their formal education with a hands-on (internship-like) experience (BMZ-weltwärts 2014). The global education for development paradigm promotes the importance of teaching and learning to create global citizens who are aware of social inequality, poverty, social responsibility and global participation, among other issues (Lough et al. 2014; Killick 2012; Baillie Smith/Laurie 2011; Ortega 2007). However, depending on how the promotion of the volunteering programs is done, (e.g. by offering the opportunity to see and experience the world, while enriching the volunteer’s work experience and resume), this perspective may emphasize an individualistic feel-good experience, and may even create some paradisiac expectations for the volunteers. For example, Weltwärts literally means “world-wards”, or “out into the world” as translated by Fischer and Haas (2014: 6). This dynamic also underlines the importance of the volunteer’s safety and the quality of their experience abroad. However, this attractive discourse may clash with the difficult realities faced by the volunteers once in the field, (as attested to by a staff member from a host organization in Guatemala quoted below). This emphasis on the volunteer’s experience is not always coherent with the development of the Global South challenge.

There could be some context-specific obstacles, for instance, the issue of the lack of safety, the impact of having to live under these conditions, maybe they knew about this before coming, but it is not the same having to face this every day, this could really have a negative affect on their emotional state.

Second, the (human) development paradigm assumes that the goal of volunteering for development is, as its name suggests, to contribute to the development of the Global South (not necessarily only to the education of the volunteers from the North). From an ethical perspective, this implies the North’s moral obligation to help and give back to the South (e. g. Jones 1999; Singer 2002; Pogge 2002; 2005).

¹ The volunteers’ support is be reflected in the budget of aid for development in Germany under the category of ‘civil society and business groups and institutions’, which amounts to 1,113,264,000 Euros (11.8% of the BMZ budget) for 2018. The specific Weltwärts budget is around 38,000,000 Euros.

Although there are long debates about the validity of this presumed moral obligation, in general, there is an acceptance that if there is no contribution, at least there should be no harm (or burdens) to these countries (UN-GA Resolution 46/182).

Additionally, there is another accepted principle among the multilateral organizations regarding development in the Global South: respecting the ownership and agency of the Southern countries. Ownership means assuming their responsibility to design their own development.² According to this premise, the complex task of contributing to the development of any Southern country should comply with national development plans or, at least, specific local priority goals. However, in the case of the volunteering for development programs, it is hard to identify any general priorities for development in the volunteers' work because their agenda mostly responds to the Northern NGOs mandates. When the links between Northern and Southern NGOs are strong, the host organization's needs may be better reflected in the volunteers' mandate (Tiessen/Lough/Grantham et al. 2018). However, this subject needs further research. Additionally, considering that Weltwärts prides itself on being a 'demand driven program' the strong links between sending and host organizations are fundamental characteristics that contribute to the success of the program, precisely because, in theory, Weltwärts responds to the demands of the local German organizations sending volunteers abroad (not to the needs in the South).

2. Strengthening the North-South relationships: the volunteers' experience

The most recent data, specifically from organizations hosting volunteers in the Global South (Tiessen/Lough/Grantham 2018) shows that there are positive and valuable contributions, and exchanges from the volunteers working in the South. As part of that same research project,³ following my analysis of interviews with local staff from host organizations in Guatemala (Ortiz Loaiza 2018), these pages propose that there is still a lack of information in the North and the South regarding the mandates and expectations of the sending organizations, the host organizations, and the volunteers. See, for example, the following quotes from host organization staff in Guatemala:

I would say that a real impact has been that it has improved our work methods and our international relationships...that are maintained whether or not the volunteer remains in Guatemala...

This is a limitation; not counting on funding prevents us from having any volunteer selection criteria, and we accept whoever comes, and we are thankful, and

² This later idea can also be contested by many arguments rooted in the dependency or post-modern theories, recognizing the structural and systemic limitations of the developing countries to achieve such complex goals.

³ Led and published by Rebecca Tiessen, Benjamin Lough and Kate Grantham (2018).

they are welcome, but they are not always what we need...If we could pay, we would have more comprehensive selection criteria.

The evidence shows that host organizations in the Global South generally do not know or identify the differences between each volunteering program in the Global North. In the specific case of Germany, the research by Geis and Lipsch⁴ shows that local organizations in Nicaragua do not know when German volunteers come either funded by government programs such as Weltwärts or come as tourists or voluntourists to help for a few weeks. In the same vein, local staff from host organizations in Guatemala categorize a wide range of people coming from the Global North to their organizations as volunteers: from backpackers, voluntourists, retired expats, graduate students working on their research projects, to volunteers funded by any organization. See, for example:

We maintain some kind of relationship with short-term volunteers, but with long-term volunteers, here for two years or more, we have had the luck of having volunteers for over six years, the shorter ones for four years with CUSO, and this gives you a lot of stability, not so much with short-term volunteers.

There is an accompanying process for the long-term volunteers as well; most of them are sponsored by an NGO or cooperation agency that will pay for their housing, and so they do not have the same pressures short-term volunteers have because they are here with their family. They have better conditions, and normally they start by working in the capital [city], and they receive a more complete orientation process, and they will go to the [rural] community being there for two or three days one week, and then the next week and so forth, so this is different.

Although the previous quotes refer to different lengths of the volunteer's stay, they also reflect the different conditions under which each volunteer comes to the South, according to different programs, funding conditions, and sending organizations (if any). However, this important information is not always known or shared with the local hosts, and in many cases, this also creates confusion and unbalanced power relations:

For example, French volunteers have come and they receive a good salary and because it is from the government, they suddenly only come to control the organization, and, in a way, they neutralize the organizations in our country.

It is proposed here that in the host organizations, it is precisely the lack of knowledge and differentiation between each volunteering program from the North what makes it more difficult for the staff in the South (in this case in Guatemala) to categorize, monitor and evaluate the work of the volunteers. For example, every time

⁴ See their contribution in this volume.

a Guatemalan interviewee gave an example of a negative experience with an international volunteer, those experiences could hardly have happened to one of the volunteers sent by regulated volunteering programs, given the formal conditions and guidelines of the funding agencies. See, for example:

We have had some cases of people who wanted to go home and had a crisis because they didn't come with proper awareness, and the ones who come with little awareness do get disenchanted. It happened with a volunteer who went to an occupied land [finca] that was owned by the army... when he saw the situation, he said he definitely didn't want to be there and left the community and went to be a tourist. This is an extreme case.

In other words, if the local staff is aware of the mandates and conditions regulating the volunteers' activities, including education, general skills, length of stay, organization sending the volunteer, main contacts, and more, this kind of negative experience could easily be minimized. This information could also reduce the risks and burdens for the volunteers and the host organizations in the South. Furthermore, better information would allow the host organizations to make better decisions regarding whether or not they should accept or decline a new volunteer. For example, volunteers without any organizational affiliation or medical insurance can become a burden for the host organization, as the following case shows:

For the host organization, a volunteer means extra effort...then he becomes ill, and you have to take him to a doctor, and they don't have any health insurance. They say they can stay anywhere but it's not the same as in Europe... so you can't just say 'I will take these two volunteers to my home.' Normally we all have a family life, and everybody has many things to do.

Then, knowing the differences between the volunteering abroad programs, their guidelines, and the conditions for the volunteers is key information for any host organization in the Global South.

3. Conclusion

Evaluating the philosophical, theoretical and practical ideas guiding the volunteering abroad programs is a fundamental task for those programs to express coherent ethical values related to human development and global education for development. In other words, these programs can move between the scope of selfish pro-market interests and more global cosmopolitan ethical values. Some of the following questions may contribute to reflecting on these issues: Is volunteering for development exclusively related to the education and safety of the volunteers abroad? Are these programs promoting internships abroad? Is this an issue on how to safely send volunteers abroad in order to have a real impact on the development

of the South? Alternatively, how may these two perspectives – global education and development be combined and reconciled?

In a fast-changing world, analyzing how to reconcile these questions and ideas requires close collaboration between academia and government agencies, as well as other social and community organizations. Then—and responding to some of the debates which arose during our conference in Cologne—there is no room to question whether there should be a link between academia and government, but to question how that collaboration will happen.

Depending on how the German agencies and volunteer organizations would respond to the previous questions, it would be relevant to transform the way volunteering abroad programs are promoted, monitored and followed up on. For example, if the German agencies continue their actions privileging the global learning paradigm, favoring the volunteer's experience over their contributions to the Global South, then the question could be: How can volunteers give back, as a fair exchange, in a consistent way to the Global South? In this case, the idea of bringing volunteers from the Global South to Germany may seem like a good, coherent complement to those programs. However, that may require implementing more resources and programs to bring more Southern volunteers to the North (in more significant and inclusive amounts). This would also require implementing clearer actions engaging the returned volunteers in development activities in their communities in the North as well as in the South. These actions could more consistently complement a commitment to global education for development.

On the contrary, if the contributions from the volunteering abroad programs are seen as key tools to bringing development to countries in the Global South, then the challenge is how to prepare the Northern volunteers better to achieve development goals. On the one hand, it would be important to provide the volunteers with the proper training and tools to make meaningful contributions (taking into account particular circumstances, time, and places) in the Global South. On the other hand, it would be necessary to discuss the following: What are the development goals? Who is setting the agenda? What development objectives are German programs promoting? Are the volunteers' mandates reflecting the needs expressed by host organizations in the Global South?

However, to advance and reconcile both objectives, global education and development would require transcending the Western paradigms and include Southern voices and experiences in the way the Northern programs work. In this sense, strengthening the connections and relationships between the sending and host organizations appears to be a fundamental step. Regardless of the size and characteristics of the host organizations in the Global South, they play a key role in allowing the volunteering (learning and developing) enterprise to happen in fragile

contexts. These organizations contribute to the volunteers' safety and provide different means for them to succeed in their tasks (beyond the reach of the sending organizations' scope).

The sending organizations in the North and host organizations in the South would benefit from closer cooperation. For example, building more efficient development-related mandates, goals, screening and training mechanisms for the incoming volunteers. These organizations could facilitate different mechanisms for the volunteers and their local staff to learn, teach, and exchange knowledge and skills. For example, more integrated North-South pre-departure work could contribute to fulfilling many of the knowledge gaps in the host organizations, as discussed in the previous section. As the following quote shows, gaining knowledge is generally a two-way process, and this knowledge exchange could contribute to human development goals on both sides of the equation, North and South:

It is good to have the opportunity to learn from them, particularly their vision on institutional dynamics, because in some way or another, they have a different perspective and knowledge. Also, to have the opportunity to make them go through a deep process of awareness of the Guatemalan situation in order to promote this consciousness in other countries.

Additionally, having a stronger relationship between local NGOs in the North and South could contribute to empowering both types of organizations as global social partners. On one hand, providing the host organizations with key information, better-screened volunteers, and more skilled workers to fulfill challenging tasks. On the other hand, providing the sending organizations with first-hand information from the South to design more development-coherent working plans and mandates, responding to real needs from the South, while providing more clear learning and teaching opportunities for the volunteers. Furthermore, strong alliances could lead to the possibility of achieving more solid development goals and more solid learning processes in the Global North and South.

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