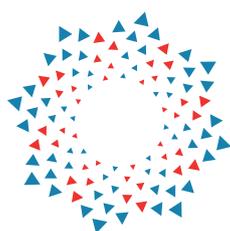


IVCO 2021 THINK PIECE

Inequalities & Imbalances in Research on Volunteering for Development

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Over the years, the exploration into the links between volunteering and development has developed into an important research field – generating useful insights for academics, practitioners and policymakers. Volunteer organisations, NGOs and aid agencies also contribute to this knowledge base as they utilise research to improve their practice and better engage with their volunteers.

But despite such interest, research-based understanding of volunteering in so-called Global South countries remains limited (Butcher and Einolf 2017), particularly, of the experiences of volunteers who, themselves, come from marginalised communities (Lewis 2015; Lopez-Franco and Shahrokhi 2015). In addition, it has been argued that dominant definitions of volunteering have been regarded as 'universal' despite being developed by analysing volunteering practices in the Global North (Hazeldine and Baillie Smith, 2015; Butcher and Einolf 2017; Millora 2020). This meant that certain forms of volunteering are privileged over others (Hazeldine and Baillie Smith, 2015). Several researchers on international volunteering have tended to use an 'exogenous lens' – whereby volunteering in the Global South is studied using frameworks developed elsewhere, often from Northern scholarship. Therefore, the lenses through which volunteering practices in the Global South are understood, and the yardsticks used to measure and evaluate them, often carries a 'Northern bias' (Butcher and Einolf 2017).

Such imbalance motivated me to conduct an ethnographic study on the volunteering practices of informal settlers and young people living with HIV/AIDS in two communities in the Philippines. Through this research, I wanted to expand dominant definitions of international volunteering that often sees countries in the Global South (such as the Philippines) as 'hosts' of development programmes from the Global North (Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011). At the same, I sought to challenge the fact that people labeled as 'poor' and 'vulnerable' are often seen as 'recipients' of volunteering programmes rather than as the volunteers themselves. My study builds on a range of research that has explored the complexity of volunteering in various contexts (see for example, Jenkins 2009, Banerjee 2011; Lewis 2015; Burns et. al. 2015). Engaging with this literature and approaches taught me two important lessons in the attempt to redress the above imbalances in volunteering scholarship.

I found that an important starting point is revisiting the kinds of (research) questions that are being asked. For example, the common query 'how does volunteering lead to development?' could be expanded into 'How can volunteering lead to what kind of development and for whom?'. The latter recognises that 'development' could come in many forms – peace building, gender equality, health equity, social justice, etc. Asking 'for whom' signals awareness of the power dynamics and inequalities in any development effort and that volunteers are not a homogenous group. Volunteers are women, youth, people with disabilities, informal settlers, indigenous peoples – they have varying volunteering experiences, activities, aspirations and are being impacted by development differently. This also encourages organisations such as IVCOs to not only focus on the experiences of the international volunteer but also those of local volunteers in their partner communities.

Apart from reconfiguring questions, I think one must also look into how they are finding the answers. Cross-country comparisons, global surveys and volunteer work measurements are important, but they only tell us part of the story. Ethnographic approaches that focus on understanding practices of everyday life have the capacity to generate highly contextual insights on how volunteering is enmeshed into local culture and wider helping activities (Chadwick, Fadel and Millora 2021). Such community-based research approaches can reveal power relationships at the local level and the possibility of volunteering to counterintuitively expand inequalities rather than narrow them. Much impact is also generated through action research by practitioners

where the main aim is not only producing 'new' knowledge but also changing and improving practices. There are also participatory approaches to research where volunteers themselves take on the role of research leaders or key research partners (as opposed to subjects) (see for instance, Burns et. al., 2015). Through these research methods, we can gain insight into the volunteering practices these communities are already engaged with before launching into our development programmes and interventions.

I am aware that my suggestions of expanding research questions and methods might lead to more questions rather than answers – an outcome that might be less expected by practitioners and policymakers who may be concerned with concrete targets and indicators. However, I believe that making research a more serendipitous and exploratory exercise (rather than fixed) could generate useful insights and expand understandings on the links between volunteering and development. This is important because how we understand volunteering and development influences the way we 'do' volunteering and development. Being aware of and challenging imbalances in research on this area could potentially lead to more inclusive practices and interventions.

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