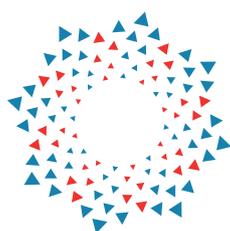


IVCO 2021 THINK PIECE

Decolonising thinking & practice of volunteering *for* development

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As we all try to find our feet again in the midst of a pandemic with so many concurrent crises unequally affecting countries and communities, decolonising the ways we study and practice volunteering has never been so relevant. More than a rhetorical exercise, this is an effort that requires academics and practitioners to reconsider our very notions of development and volunteering, as well as the assumptions about the ways volunteering offers a pathway to development.

When conducting my PhD fieldwork activities with local volunteers in Burundi, I was often asked about my area of studies. After initial attempts at describing my research as within 'international development', I quickly realised that qualifying development as 'international' was not only meaningless for my counterparts but also loaded with top-down assumptions around how development is achieved and who is responsible for that. Instead, describing my research as within 'community development' immediately resonated with those I met, who quickly understood my quest to analyse volunteering roles and experiences in this process. The challenge to the 'international' as the norm, therefore, resonates with the process of decolonising our understandings of both development and volunteering.

Colonial legacies continue to perpetuate power inequities from local to global scales. This, in turn, tends to determine whose voices are heard in which spaces, including when it comes to shaping volunteering agendas. In effect, the language used to conceptualise volunteering remains dominated by experiences from/within the global North. It overshadows African concepts such as '*Ikibiri*' in Burundi (work that is carried out together for someone in need) and '*Bulungi bwansi*' in Uganda (voluntary commitment for the good of the nation), the latter unearthed in

the context of the participatory and collaborative project Refugee Youth Volunteering Uganda (RYVU).¹ Northern-centred lenses on volunteering also limit our acknowledgement of practices around volunteer remuneration that are ubiquitous in African settings; crucial to livelihoods but also sometimes creating hierarchies and inequalities.² These persistent silences and exclusions narrow our understandings of the myriad kinds of voluntary labour that are part of how 'development' happens in practice.



COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERING ACTIVITY IN A RURAL VILLAGE OF MAKAMBA PROVINCE, BURUNDI. PHOTOGRAPHER: BIANCA FADEL, 2019

- 1 RYVU is an interdisciplinary research project funded by the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), ES/S005439/1. It aims to understand whether volunteering by refugee youth in Uganda helps their skills acquisition and employability and reduces the inequalities they experience. The project is a collaboration between Northumbria University (UK), Mbarara University of Science and Technology (Uganda), Uganda Martyrs University (Uganda) and Loughborough University (UK). For more information on the project: www.ryvu.org
- 2 Matt Baillie Smith, Bianca Fadel, Aisling O'Loughlen and Shaun Hazeldine (2020), 'Volunteering Hierarchies in the Global South: Remuneration and Livelihoods', *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-020-00254-1>>

The common description of local communities as 'hosts', for instance, preserves the verticality of such relationships and implies a level of passiveness from those welcoming international volunteers. At worst, it comes with the assumption that local partners are supposed to 'entertain' international guests who are often unfamiliar with their context and particular vulnerabilities. Challenging this narrative requires building truly horizontal relationships between 'partners' that can collaborate to address locally-defined needs rather than impose external agendas. This is part of what is defined elsewhere as 'supportive solidarity', in which "the role of external actors and agencies is to listen and take time to understand existing community-based models of social support and voluntary action and learn from community members about what types of support would amplify or strengthen these approaches"³.

Understanding how to operationalise models of 'supportive solidarity' in international volunteering spaces requires an honest assessment of the benefits and mischiefs of the types of practices that were prevalent in the sector before COVID-19. This can then encourage donors, organisations and the volunteer sector as a whole to (re)frame its priorities as we – slowly and unequally – regain or rein in our international mobility. Importantly, these changes need to be grounded in transformed and continuous conversations and relations with community actors. Decolonising this process, therefore, starts with challenging the very notion of volunteering *for* development to question "what sorts of volunteering lead to what kinds of development and for whom?"⁴. Only by recognising this complexity can we then shift our research and practice towards building up horizontal collaborations and understanding the relationships between volunteering and community development – as well as the potential roles of international volunteers in this process.

3 Alice Chadwick and Bianca Fadel (2020), *Volunteerism and Community Resilience: Locally Owned Solutions Delivering Impact*, Volunteering Together to Enable Change and Create a Better World Context Papers (Washington DC, 2020), p. 7, <<https://www.iave.org/iave/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Volunteerism-and-Community-Resilience-Locally-Owned-Solutions-Delivering-Impact.pdf>>.

4 Alice Chadwick, Bianca Fadel, and Chris Millora (2021), 'Ethnographies of Volunteering: Providing Nuance to the Links Between Volunteering and Development', *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 2021 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00389-9>>.