Volunteering, solidarity and development: exploring the links

Dr Chris Millora

Senior Research Associate | School of Education and Lifelong Learning | University of East Anglia, UK | c.millora@uea.ac.uk

Professor Matt Baillie Smith

Professor of International Development | Centre for International Development | Northumbria University, UK

matt.baillie-smith@northumbria.ac.uk

Key words: volunteerism; solidarity; development; global South; inequalities

Schlagwörter: Freiwilligendienste; Solidarität; Entwicklung; Globaler Süden; Ungleichheiten

Volunteering and development have often been explored through analyses of international volunteering, most dominantly North to South exchanges, as a form of transnational solidarity. Through this lens, there remains a strong emphasis on the experiences of international volunteers from the global North being 'hosted' by communities in the global South. This framing marginalises diverse forms of volunteering within and between global South settings, their multiple and contested relationships to development (Laurie/Baillie Smith 2017) and the solidarities they can produce. As a result, only certain solidarities are recognised, which echoes what has already been recognised as colonialism's profound influence on volunteering for development and how this strongly shapes policy and practice in this area (Howard/Burns 2015).

In 2021, we, the authors, convened a panel to explore the complex relationships between volunteering, solidarity and development as part of the EADI (European Association of Development Institutes) conference with the theme 'Solidarity, Peace and Social Justice'. Rather than focusing on international volunteers, the session explored research presentations on local volunteering in Uganda, Burundi and Sierra Leone to problematise the focus on

volunteers from the global North and question dominant narratives such as ‘volunteering as service delivery’ and ‘volunteering *for* development’. Instead, we set out to interrogate practices and understandings of volunteering within global South settings, and to critically explore how politics, power, voice and inequalities shape relationships within diverse forms of volunteering – and how they may be driven by and/or engender solidarity at different scales.

By situating local volunteering within the economic, social and cultural complexities of particular contexts, the papers challenged often assumed relationships with development and solidarity. In Burundi, Bianca Fadel’s (Northumbria University) research problematised the dominant giver-recipient dichotomy between the local volunteer who helps and the ‘vulnerable’ other who is needing help. In a protracted crisis, voluntary action works through and against boundaries between ‘development’ and ‘humanitarian’ approaches, often blurring them. In her research, Bianca showed how community-based volunteering became an agile response of communities to moments of emergency and both an expression of, and pathway to, cultivating values of mutual help that engender locally-owned collective actions over time.

Bianca’s presentation offers a nuanced analysis of what volunteering looks like in such a context. It reveals how, once volunteering is understood as situated within the complex realities of a community, it becomes difficult to ‘separate’ it as a discrete act by well-off community members (or organisations) delivering services to needy recipients. Rather, volunteering is a social practice embedded in everyday life and livelihoods – a response to everyday struggles and realities cultivating a sense of belonging. Community-based volunteers are also neighbours, friends, officemates – and they could also experience similar vulnerabilities as the people they are ‘helping’. This necessitates a shift in conceptual framing from volunteering as service delivery to volunteering as producing and being produced through (oftentimes, hidden) solidarities.

Of course, volunteers lending a hand to deliver services to others remains a common model of volunteering. In her work in Sierra Leone, Alice Chadwick El-Ali (University of Bath) reveals how young people gain important skills and work experience by helping implement development projects locally. Yet, she also found that young people’s agency – and the potential of volunteerism to cultivate solidarity – could sometimes be constrained by the tight timelines and outcome frameworks imposed by ‘service delivery’ models of volunteering and the wider value-for-money discourses within the development industry. In her paper, Alice

pointed to the need to problematise what sort of identities are being imposed on youth volunteers and the power imbalances within these service delivery programmes – especially those that are identified as 'youth-led'.

Such examples surface questions that may be familiar to development scholars – what kind of development is being facilitated (in this case, by volunteering) and for whom? This question is even more relevant in the current development ecosystem where we see a diversity of state and non-state actors with varying (and sometimes conflicting) agendas and visions for development. Certain 'visions' are prioritised over others and reveal inequalities as to who gets to decide what development should look like and how do we get there. As Alice pointed out during her presentation, volunteering's location within these spaces and struggles begs the question: to what extent can young people from marginalised groups *shape* local agendas through volunteering, or are they simply delivering a version of development envisioned by (more powerful) others.

Volunteering for development has tended to frame both volunteering and development as static and unproblematic concepts with a relationship that is direct, straightforward and one-way, with the former leading to the achievement of the latter. The focus on volunteering *for* development has limited critical interrogation of the kind of 'development' that volunteering facilitates, and for whom. Additionally, it fails to engage with how certain development practices work against particular (non-Western) forms of volunteering. These were themes that were explored in Matt Baillie Smith's (Northumbria University) presentation of findings from the Refugee Youth Volunteering Project (www.ryvu.org), which explores the relationship between voluntary labour amongst young refugees, and their acquisition of skills and search for employment. Matt's paper showed how, based largely on data from the global North, volunteering is increasingly promoted by governments and policy makers as a pathway to the 'proper job' (Ferguson and Li 2018). He discussed how this can privilege particular kinds of volunteering, silencing longer Ugandan histories of voluntary labour as well as more everyday kinds of voluntary labour that do not fit global norms around volunteering and development. It can also exacerbate inequalities, with some young refugees not able to access the forms of volunteering that provided the most benefits.

The discussion of the RYVU project findings, alongside Bianca's and Alice's work, provided an illustration of the ways that particular and dominant alignments and understandings of

volunteering and development mean that its potential to foster solidarities is sidelined in research and practice. Challenging dominant thinking on volunteering and development provides an opportunity to open up conversations about solidarities at different scales and over different timeframes. This requires new methodological thinking (see for example, Chadwick/Fadel/Millora 2021) as well as new conceptual frameworks. Such broader perspectives could also offer useful starting points for volunteer-involving organisations and institutions that facilitate volunteering when setting-up development programmes.

The Covid19 pandemic has accelerated some of these conversations, with growing interest in 'mutual aid' and celebrations of the roles volunteers have played in supporting communities as well as medical and other public systems. However, these too run the risk of reinforcing assumptions about who volunteers are and their relationships to wider processes and ideas of development. Exploring volunteering through a lens of solidarity at multiple scales provides an opportunity to think critically and politically about these issues, and in ways that can de-centre global North centric ideas and practices.

Acknowledgements

We would like thank Bianca Fadel and Dr Alice Chadwick El-Ali for their contributions, and the organisers of the EADI 2021 conference for their support for this session. The session, Uganda paper and development of this paper were supported by funding from ESRC/GCRF Grant ES/S005439/1.

References

Chadwick, Alice; Fadel, Bianca; Millora, Chris (2021): Ethnographies of volunteering: providing nuance to the links between volunteering and development. In: Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, online first, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00389-9 (13.3.2022).

Ferguson, James; Li, Tania Murray (2018): Beyond the "Proper Job:" Political-economic Analysis after the Century of Labouring Man. In: Working Paper 51. PLAAS, UWC: Cape Town.

Howard, Jo; Burns, Danny (2015): Volunteering for development within the ecosystem of international development. In: IDS Bulletin, vol. 46, no. 5, pp. 5–16

Laurie, Nina; Baillie Smith, Matt (2017): Unsettling geographies of volunteering and development. In: Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, vol. 43, no. 1, pp. 95–109.