

Perspectives

BACK TO THE FUTURE: ENGAGING RETURNED VOLUNTEERS IN DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION

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'A man travels the world in search of what he needs and returns home to find it.' George Moore

Introduction

The opportunity to volunteer overseas is valuable on multiple levels: for the individual volunteer; for the host community; for the sending agency and potentially for people in society back home. This article explores the importance of development education in volunteering programmes and the potential for volunteers to continue their learning and engagement in development on their return from an overseas voluntary experience. The focus will be on the learning from experiences of sending organisations in Ireland, based on the findings of a survey that was carried out by Comhlámh in 2011, and informed by the Volunteering and Development Education committee, a group of sending organisations who are working to promote development education within volunteering.

The article will also explore the role of development education in volunteering, including the value of an overseas experience in developing new perspectives with which to enrich and challenge people in Ireland. It will consider the potential for returned volunteers to become development education 'multipliers', given the appropriate training, support and spaces for reflection throughout the volunteer programme. The article is concerned with 'short-term volunteers', that is, unpaid individuals who go overseas for a period of up to three months. Generally volunteers from Ireland tend to travel to countries in the global South for their volunteer work, however this is not exclusive and some sending organisations also have placements in countries in the global North.

Setting the scene: why development education and volunteering?

Development education can support overseas volunteers by providing the kind of critical literacy skills, values, knowledge and understanding needed for a deeper and more sustainable engagement in development. Development

education can support volunteers to make sense of their overseas experience by contextualising it within the wider picture of development and inspiring them to raise awareness and engage in actions on their return. A critical approach to understanding development and critiquing the role of the volunteer within this can uncover questions about the wider purpose of volunteering overseas. As Thomas Merton suggested:

“Those of us who attempt to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening our own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give to others. We will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of our obsessions, our aggressivity, our ego-centred ambitions and our delusions about ends and means” (1971: 178-179).

Paulo Freire (1970: 36) advocated praxis or ‘reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it’. Going overseas can sometimes be ‘disturbing’ for volunteers in the way that their norms, values and means of participating in the world are challenged. It is also, however, an opportunity for volunteers to critically self-reflect throughout the entire volunteer ‘continuum’ before, during and after the overseas experience, thereby deepening their own self-understanding and interrogating their views of the world.

The Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry (OSDE) methodology can usefully add value to the approach used within overseas volunteer training programmes. The space to explore diverse perspectives and global issues with a focus on interdependence is at the heart of how volunteers can have a critical engagement throughout their volunteer placement. This can involve ‘unlearning’ their existing ways of understanding the world and developing an openness to learn from other ways of understanding the world.

Living and working in a different cultural and social setting can challenge volunteers’ perceptions and understandings of working with people. By engaging with people in host communities and working in a culture very different from our own, volunteers can have their own perceptions challenged, develop critical thinking skills, learn from the perspectives of people in the host country in which they work, and share these alternative perspectives with people back home on their return. The space for volunteers to engage critically with their own and different perspectives can enrich the messages and awareness raising that happens on their return.

However, working overseas is challenging on a number of levels. Firstly, we cannot assume that just by going overseas that volunteers automatically become open to alternative perspectives and have developed the appropriate skills needed to become development education multipliers. There can often be conflict with local partners in the host country due to cultural misunderstandings, and there is also the possibility that by going overseas volunteers can reinforce stereotypical perceptions of the global South. If someone going overseas expects to see poverty, it can be very easy to reinforce this perception about the global South rather than exploring the more positive aspects of their location like resilience, local community based solutions, and social capital. Development education can enable volunteers to view the global South with this more rounded and informed perspective. Secondly, we cannot assume that an overseas experience automatically makes volunteers 'experts' in development, although friends and family often look to these individuals to inform them of various development-related issues.

Development education as part of volunteer training programmes

So how can we ensure that volunteers have a more informed development perspective? Sending organisations offer pre-departure and follow-up training which is crucial for volunteers to have the space to develop a deeper understanding of development issues, examine and challenge their own perceptions and to have ongoing spaces for critical reflection throughout the volunteer experience. A mapping survey to identify what sending organisations are doing in relation to development education was carried out by Comhlámh in 2011 with nineteen sending organisations. The survey identified the different ways in which development education is part of volunteering programmes, including the underlying principles of the organisation, the content and approach of the training, and the actions and awareness-raising carried out by volunteers on their return.

The survey found that development education plays a significant role in volunteer programmes of many sending organisations, with some embedding development education into the very fabric of their organisation by integrating it across all programmes. In relation to volunteer training programmes in particular, the survey found that there were a wide range of topics explored and the approaches used were often 'based on principles of experiential learning... which aim to enrich lives and to inspire global citizenship', as well as 'learner-centred and action-based methodologies' (2011: 12). The importance of valuing volunteers and linking in with their own lived experiences is one way in which an overseas experience can link into lifelong learning and potentially nurture positive values and actions that individuals can take on return.

A more critical approach within volunteer programmes is not just important for the volunteers involved, but needs to be relevant to the lives of people locally in Ireland. Raising awareness of development issues can sometimes seem ‘faraway’ and not connected to the lived experiences of people at home, and this can result in disengagement and potentially reinforce an ‘us and them’ mentality. Instead, making a comparative analysis (Storey, 2011) between the situation in Ireland and the issues faced by communities overseas can lead to a more meaningful engagement with people locally. There is also the potential in going overseas to learn from the experiences of communities in the global South, from their lived experiences of issues such as debt, climate change, as well as their resilience and community-based solutions. Volunteers who have the chance to live and work with communities overseas have a unique opportunity to bring back this learning which can inform and enhance ongoing action and activism with regards to local justice issues.

Development education as action and engagement on return

An overseas experience can be the inspiration for a deeper and more long-term engagement in development. As one returnee has commented, ‘engagement doesn’t end at the airport’. The way in which volunteers are supported throughout the volunteer experience, as well as on their return, can determine whether returned volunteers will stay engaged following an overseas experience. Development education integrated throughout volunteer programmes can support volunteers to have a deeper and more critical engagement with development and encourage involvement in the work of civil society groups at a local level. One survey response stated how the organisation seeks to:

“[E]ncourage participants to understand and educate others about the circumstances and root causes that make people vulnerable, the work the local projects are doing to help bring about real change in people’s lives. We also encourage them to challenge stereotypes and prejudice and help other people to understand how their actions at an individual, community, national and international level can positively affect the life of people in the Majority World” (Comhlámh, 2011: 12).

On return from their placements, volunteers will often feel inspired to raise awareness of issues like poverty and injustice that they experienced first-hand in their host countries. However, the way in which this is done can either reinforce perceptions of the public at home or represent an opportunity to critically engage with development. The approach to awareness raising can have an impact on the way in which audiences at home will go on to engage in development issues: adopting a ‘soft’ education approach is often easier and can

result in a successful fundraising ‘ask’; a more ‘critical’ education approach (Andreotti, 2006) can be more difficult but may raise more questions and have a longer term impact. However, the ‘soft’ education approach can actually reinforce simplistic messages and a ‘deficit’ approach to development, potentially leading to a disengagement of a public which has been saturated with charity images and messages for many years (Finding Frames, 2011).

What is the purpose of overseas volunteering?

It is important to explore the very purpose of volunteering programmes: is it for the benefit of individuals, sending organisations, host communities, or society at home? There is no simple answer, however limiting a volunteer experience only to the work done overseas may be missing the bigger potential that this experience may have. The opportunity to live and work in another country may be the inspiration and motivation to experience development issues first-hand and, on return, this can have a longer term impact in terms of educating people at home and taking informed actions to challenge the root causes of why poverty exists in the first place. One survey response saw the importance of development education in making connections between Ireland and the rest of the world to:

“[C]reate a link between the international development sector, local community groups and those who participate in the development education course... to enhance peoples understanding of the links between their own lives as Irish citizens and the social, political, and environmental practices that influence our world” (Comhlámh, 2011: 11).

Situating overseas volunteering within the wider context of power relations, dependence and colonialism can provide a valuable starting point to interrogate these issues further and deepen the understanding of the history and complexity of development. Often, the actual impact of short term volunteers in the host country is limited (Volunteer and Service Enquiry South Africa, 2011), but there can be a wider impact in terms of individual transformation, the impact on society at home through raising awareness, and taking action to effect the structural and underlying causes of injustice which can benefit communities all over the world. As one international voluntary service put it:

“Returned volunteers were more likely than outgoing volunteers to report higher international social capital, open-mindedness, intercultural relations, civic activism and community engagement. This is positive since it is on return to their homes that these volunteers

have the opportunity to make significant impacts on their families, peers and wider communities in respect of sharing insights and new knowledge gained during the volunteer experience abroad. Their ability to position their host organisations as significant players in development could ultimately influence the ‘superior/ inferior’ perspective of their countrymen and women in respect of relations between Africa and Europe” (VOSESA, 2011: 12).

Returned volunteers as development education multipliers

There is a potential for returned volunteers to act as development education ‘multipliers’ on their return, supported by sending agencies to provide critical spaces for reflection and access to adequate training. However, this is not to assume that returned volunteers automatically have the skills and knowledge needed to act as development education multipliers. It is vital for returnees to have access to appropriate training to support an understanding of a development education approach and tools to effectively engage with people locally. Each volunteer is unique and there is a varied picture of what returnees will go on to do, from further study to a career in development; from making ethical consumer choices to campaigning. The mapping report identified various continuous engagement opportunities offered by sending organisations, including peer support and facilitating pre-departure training, giving presentations, action projects, writing articles, local volunteering and individual actions (Comhlámh, 2011: 18). Research by Development Perspectives (2012) found that their flagship volunteering programme had a positive impact in terms of a change in attitude, knowledge and skills and that past participants acted as ‘multipliers of change’ through social media, further study, job opportunities, involvement in development education activities from Ireland and acting as peer leaders on further projects.

While there are many variables affecting the decisions and actions returnees go on to take (e.g. previous life experience, area of study, hobbies and interests, social circles, etc.) an overseas experience is often one significant factor that impacts on this decision. The process through which volunteers go overseas and return home may determine what individuals do following their placement. For some, they experience a personal transformation resulting in individual actions and personal lifestyle choices based on a deeper understanding of interconnectedness and how our actions affect communities across the globe. For others, they may go on to raise awareness through development education locally, with sufficient training and support being offered before returnees can become ‘multipliers’ of development education.

Conclusion

Volunteering overseas is an opportunity to experience another part of the world, develop new perspectives and can be the incentive for a longer term engagement in development practice. However it is how the experience is nurtured and supported that can be the difference between a one-off experience, or a longer term engagement in development. This can be a challenge for sending organisations but there are many good examples from the Comhlámh survey of how this has been achieved such as: developing strong relationships with volunteers; framing the volunteer experience within the wider picture of development; providing options for volunteers to engage in development work on their return; investing time in training on return; and keeping track of returnees and what they go on to do.

Volunteers bring learning and experiences from the global South that can be invaluable in supporting local development education programmes delivered by various sectors in Ireland (youth, community, church based, formal education, etc.). A challenge for the development sector can be how to engage volunteers on their return, harnessing their overseas experiences to involve them in development education and support their journey to become ‘multipliers’ for other sectors within Ireland. The mapping survey found that there is already a wealth of experience in development education among sending organisations. A recommendation from the survey is that closer links should be made between sending organisations and the wider development education sector in Ireland, to enhance the capacity of sending organisation in relation to development education, to signpost returned volunteers to access more and diverse development education opportunities outside of their sending organisations, and to harness the experience and energy of returnees in order to enrich development education practice from Ireland. Sending agencies and development education practitioners could work together to their mutual benefit and that of the volunteers, to identify a process toward implementing these recommendations and enhancing returnees’ engagement in development education.

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