INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEER SERVICE AND DEVELOPMENT: 
PITFALLS AND POTENTIAL

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Panel Abstract

International service refers to an intensive volunteer placement that is performed outside of the 
volunteer’s home country. The goal of most programs is to promote development. Program 
examples include Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers, 
Canada World Youth, the Peace Corps, Jesuit Volunteer Corps, Nigerian Technical Aid Corps, 
and United Nations Volunteers. From reviews of research, international service is found to lack 
rigorous and critical study—and this is in spite of its increased prevalence and its complexities as 
a form of international development (Ellis, Davis Smith, & Brewis, 2004; McBride, Lombe, 
Tang, Sherraden, & Benitez, 2003; McBride & Daftary, 2005; Smith & Elkin, 1981; Woods, 

International service has roots in missionary service and post-war reconstruction. In recent years, 
its forms have proliferated from eco-tourism to technical aid. The majority of international 
service programs are sponsored by civil society organizations with complex relationships among 
all sectors in the sending and hosting countries (McBride, Danso, & Benitez, 2003). Program 
goals are diverse and targeted to host communities as well as the volunteers. Goals include 
improved skills, civic engagement, cross-cultural understanding, and economic development 
Beyond anecdote, the majority of research focuses on the volunteers and changes in their 
attitudes (McBride & Daftary, 2004), while only a limited number of studies have assessed the 
potential negative effects of international service as a form of development (Simpson, 2004).

Development and implementation of international service programs are delicate processes in a 
globalized world marked by power differentials on the one hand and norms of access, 
participation, and justice on the other. In fact, in the context of globalization, international 
service has new prominence, with potential to promote global citizenship, youth development, 
transnational social policy, and peace and tolerance (Grusky, 2000; Heddy, 2000; Pitner, 
forthcoming; Sherraden, 2001; Sherraden & Benitez, 2003). But its roots in imperialism, elitism, 
and state interests complicate this potential (Brav, Moore, & Sherraden, 2002). This panel 
acknowledges these pitfalls and potential of international service, and critically asks what we 
know about its forms and effects.

The theme of the proposed panel is “International Service and Development: Pitfalls and 
Potential.” Three papers are proposed, which are rooted in the development, volunteerism, and
civic engagement literature. Following an introduction on the prevalence and forms of international service worldwide, the first paper will advance a conceptual framework regarding international service, couched in the context of globalization and evolution of the international development field, highlighting the potential positive and negative effects of international service. Then two empirical papers will address the role of technical or “professional” international service volunteers in development. One paper focuses on the Nigerian Technical Aid Corps as a form of “South-South” development, and another examines volunteer scientists in Asia and their contribution to global sustainability. These papers intend to advance applied research on international service, building an evidence base from which to inform program and policy decisions.
International voluntary service is defined by McBride and Daftary (2004: 2) as “long-term, intensive volunteering whereby the server engages in social, economic, or community-based activities in a country other than her home country.” Under the auspices of long established programmes such as the United States Peace Corps, the United Nations Volunteers or a range of specialised non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such schemes have long been an integral component of international development work. Such work encompasses a diverse range of volunteers and beneficiaries in poverty reduction, business development, community work, environmental preservation or cultural exchange. Relatively well documented are the tradition of long-term developmental volunteering in the “third world” by people from industrialised countries and the growth of associated activities such as the “gap year” phenomenon popular among UK school leavers.

But international volunteering remains a relatively under-researched topic, at least compared to other aspects of international development work. At the same time, it is a rapidly changing field of human activity. Newer forms of international service include “North to South” and “South to South” volunteering. Emerging themes include shifting practices within organizations, such as Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) as they seek to work more closely than before with indigenous volunteering groups in the developing world and changing sets of transnational expectations which exist between sending and receiving groups and between the developed and less developed worlds. Partnerships have in many cases moved towards greater equality as, for example, in the case where Oxfam organised for a community worker from India to work for a period in a run-down UK housing district (Thekaekara 2000).

This paper argues that research on the changing patterns of international service is best linked to (a) the processes of economic, technological and cultural change that are usually loosely bundled together under the term “globalization,” and (b) current shifting ideas about the meanings and aims of “international development.” This paper identifies and reviews current issues on the theme of international service (or international volunteering as it is known in some contexts) based on a selected review of current international literature and elaborates a conceptual framework for future research on this topic.

International volunteering as an arena of development activity is important because it potentially humanizes what is often left as a technical or managerial process. It can bridge the gap between the professionalized world of development experts and organizations and the “non-specialized publics” who engage with the ideas and practices of development. Ideas about development still crucially frame the way in which people in the “North” think about people in the ‘South’, and in many cases too, the ways in which people in poor countries think about themselves and the rest of the world. International volunteering can provide tangible contributions to development in the
form of skills and other resource transfers, but also perhaps more importantly it can promote international understanding and solidarity.
This paper examines the assumption that international service promotes development through what may be the only government-led international service program in Africa, Nigeria’s Technical Aid Corp (TAC). TAC was established by the Nigerian government in 1987 to serve as an agency for providing development assistance to African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries, as a practical demonstration of “South-South” cooperation within the context of Universal Economic Cooperation among developing countries (UECDC).

TAC is a voluntary international service program through which Nigerian professionals (e.g., doctors, nurses, attorneys, educators, engineers, scientists, etc.) volunteer to serve in developing countries for a given period. The policy objectives of the scheme include: (i) giving assistance on the basis of assessed and perceived needs of the recipient countries; (ii) promoting cooperation and understanding between Nigeria and the recipient countries; and (iii) facilitating meaningful contacts between the youth of Nigeria and those of the recipient countries (TAC Document, 2004: 12). As such, while this scheme is primarily designed to provide development assistance to recipient countries, it is also expected to leverage Nigeria’s national project of civic engagement and citizenship development. If international service connects with national development plans and efforts, whose “development” is it?

Related to this, in the research on international service, there is the tendency to concentrate more on the positive effect of service on the volunteers, while understating the negative effects on the volunteer and host communities (Tang, McBride and Sherraden, 2003: 11). I attempt in this paper to give a tentative response to the challenge to assess the positive and negative effects of international service on the peoples, nations and cultures that provide service and those that may benefit from it (McBride, Benitez and Sherraden, 2003). My claims derive from interviews and focus groups with stakeholders, volunteers, and alumni of TAC.

Classical studies of international society were concerned with the relationship between duties to fellow citizens and duties to the human race (Linklater, 2002: 320). For some philosophers who have promoted the Kantian idea of cosmopolitan citizenship, “its role is to ensure that the sense of moral community is not confined to co-nationals but embraces the species as a whole” (Ibid.). Contemporary theorists of civic republicanism emphasize the role of ethical goodness, specifically, civic virtue, and concern for common good shared by fellow citizens (Honohan, 2002: 11). This territorialized ethical goodness, the idea of “a determinate community” for the exercise of civic virtues seems to clash with the “cosmopolitan ideal”, a “universal community of humankind” ’ (Linklater, 2002: 321). Challenging for the theory of citizenship is the exploration of ways in which “de-territorialized” forms of citizenship are linkable to the global community (Delanty, 1998: 33). Relating civic republicanism and expanding it beyond the nation state holds a theoretical allure for understanding the interface of citizenship and international service.
Conventional discourses on development speak to particular ways of life and socio-economic and political projects. So the question is: development for whom? Does the conception or project of development in the sending country correspond to, or reflect, the notion or project of development in the recipient country? And how do these relate to personal and professional development of the volunteers? The paper analyzes the paradoxes and ambivalence of international service in its connection to civic and practical development.
How do we respond to our current vulnerable situation with respect to human security and our environment? International service provides a unique vantage point for this discussion because international volunteers help us sharpen our focus beyond the common technical or financial considerations to the people as central to the development process. People from different countries living and working together, can provide a constructive combination of experiences for resolving problems, sharing knowledge and building understanding so as to consolidate human security and ecological sustainability. Volunteers in international service programs are uniquely placed to contribute to the “sustainability transition” that O’Riordan (1998) suggests requires going beyond empowerment to capture the “spirit of communal obligation” that enables individuals to “relate to others needs.”

This paper aims to encourage critical and transparent debate about the role of international volunteers and volunteer sending agencies as individuals and organizations contributing to international development and specifically, global sustainability. We do well to consider whether international volunteers are no more than inept learners, tourists, or imperialists (Simpson 2004; Brav, Moore, Sherraden, 2002) in what should be a serious development project or whether some of their perceived and potential weaknesses also double as their greatest strengths. I propose that international volunteering can, in certain circumstances, fit well into an integrated sustainability framework where empathy is key.

Drawing on qualitative research conducted with international volunteer programs, the paper will consider the history and work of some of the most long-established and independent volunteer agencies and use examples of the activities that long-term international environmental volunteers engage in. The central aid issue of using personnel in “technical assistance” will be discussed in terms of drawing on its potential problems and whether international volunteering simply shares all of these dilemmas or should be considered a separate and distinct contributor to capacity development. I suggest that one of the key positive features of international volunteering is the North-South interchange. By putting a “public face on development,” it may also help diversify and transform international relations in a way that breaks down negative stereotypes and encourages understanding and action towards global social justice, security, and sustainability through human solidarity.

Potential key characteristics of international environmental volunteers will be considered as evidence for building a case for greater use of the term “sustainability” in development. This idea is based on the work of Robinson (2004) who suggests shifting from the language of sustainable development with its implicit emphasis on economic growth, to the term sustainability because of its implicit recognition of the importance of “the social constructions of sustainability” where value considerations complement technical solutions.