Rebecca Tiessen, Benjamin J. Lough, and Kate E. Grantham (eds.), *Insights on International Volunteering: Perspectives from the Global South*

Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden, Germany, 2018, \$69.00

Roseanne Mirabella¹

Published online: 23 July 2020

© International Society for Third-Sector Research 2020

This special issue of *Voluntaris, the Journal of Volunteer Services*, includes a collection of nine case studies written by scholars from the Global South, primarily from Latin America and Africa, hired to validate “voices of Southern partners in host communities where international volunteer service (IVS) takes place” (8). Noting a perceived absence in the volunteerism literature of Southern voices and perspectives from volunteer host organizations, the editors have assembled a collection of papers that provide an alternative view to challenge Eurocentric understandings. In their introduction to the collection, the editors outline the debates of IVS that have emanated from the North, arguing that critical theories meant to critique and expose the neoliberal and performative aspects of volunteering actually end up reinforcing neocolonialism and its unequal power relationships thereby stripping actors from the South of their agency. This volume was developed to shift the conversation and provide alternative ways of being and knowing reflective of voices at the local level thus decentering the dominant Eurocentric knowledge of more privileged scholars from the North.

Locally based researchers from nine countries both collected and analyzed the data for the case studies included in this volume, interviewing over 200 individuals in these countries, conducting 21 focus groups in three of them, and drawing primarily on qualitative methods to transcribe and analyze the content of these conversations to more fully explore the views of local partners from the

South. Each case in the volume follows a somewhat similar format presenting the findings in two broad areas, those that point to the benefits of hosting international volunteers and a second set focused on the challenges associated these programs. Each case concludes with an analysis of the findings along with recommendations for IVS program improvement.

The benefits of the volunteer programs to host countries were almost identical across all countries, with capacity building identified as the top benefit for all. Volunteers provide a variety of capacity building skills training for host organizations, including training on technology, management, leadership development, grant writing, and evaluation to name a few. In addition to these skills, Northern volunteers are frequently employed to provide ESL language to children and adults in the community, a much-needed service. The opportunity for cultural exchange between the North and South was another frequent benefit identified by host organizations, though many lamented that the exchange was only one way, with no opportunity for individuals from the South to volunteer with partner organizations in the North. Finally, the receipt of financial support from abroad and hosting volunteers reduced or eliminated the need for local host organizations to hire paid staff from the local community. This was reported as a double-edged sword, however, as it led to an increase in the country’s unemployment rate or resulted in a brain drain as local experts left to find employment elsewhere.

IVS programs presented more challenges than benefits as reported in these cases. Southern partners reported that the practice of “tied,” where funding from the North was dependent upon the volunteer successfully completing her or his placement, resulted in an unstable resource base largely outside of the control of the host organization. The

Book review editor: Marc Jegers.

✉ Roseanne Mirabella
mirabero@shu.edu

¹ Seton Hall University, South Orange, USA

length of stay of volunteers was identified as another challenge. Short term volunteers take up a lot of time and resources and leave after a few weeks. When the length of stay is longer—6 months, a year, 2 years—the host organization gains more of a benefit. However, host organizations commented that they have no control over the length of placement. Moreover, the attributes of volunteers also posed problems for host organizations with younger volunteers, particularly students or interns, looking to party and have fun while in country and not that serious about volunteering. Finally, these younger volunteers often left their placement early due to depression, loneliness, or inability to adapt to the local culture, which impacted the ‘tie’ with funding.

The findings from this volume de-colonizing the scholarship on international volunteer service replicate many of the findings from critical theory scholarship on volunteer programs. Locals feel that Northern volunteers are exploiting their communities with the host country providing a training ground for Northern volunteers who take their experiences back for the home country’s benefit. Local voices found this reminiscent of colonialism with international volunteers benefiting more than local host organizations. Sustainability of programs provided through volunteers is threatened when communities who depend on volunteers to fill program needs face gaps when the volunteers depart. The impact of COVID-19 on host countries participating in IVS programs is bound to be devastating as college students and other volunteers from the North are recalled or prohibited from traveling due to the virus. Rather than supporting travel of Northern volunteers to the South, might international funders be encouraged to just send donations to Southern organizations allowing them to hire local folks rather than depending on volunteers who

come with strings attached? Would this be more sustainable in the long-term?

Though giving voice to host organizations in the South is a good first step, further research should be done to further understand the impact of IVS on program beneficiaries. The negative impact of volunteer programs on beneficiaries was only hinted at in most of the case studies, for example, the oft-mentioned negative impact on children that results from breaking ties when the volunteer leaves. Host organizations noted the emotional toll related to the frequent rotation of volunteers that can be unhealthy for children. In addition, the cultural exchange aspect of these programs, frequently touted as so beneficial for both partners, may end up reinforcing colonial stereotypes as locals end up feeling inferior to white volunteers from the North. Several cases reported the effect of broad global power relationships that lead those from the North to reject the culture of the South as inferior.

This book is essential reading for scholars examining international volunteer efforts, particularly those interested in de-centering the Eurocentric foundation of IVS. This book of cases will provide important lessons for students in introductory NGO courses at both the undergraduate and graduate level and would be a valuable supplemental text in courses incorporating service learning. Finally, volunteers traveling abroad need to be informed about the historical context of the host country making pre-departure training essential. This text should be required reading for ALL volunteers from the North prior to their departure for placements in the South.

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.