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Fall 2020

## Learning to Fish Together: Imperialism and Hope in International Volunteer Service

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### Recommended Citation

De Luca, Sadie, "Learning to Fish Together: Imperialism and Hope in International Volunteer Service" (2020). *WWU Honors Program Senior Projects*. 422.  
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**Learning to Fish Together:**

Imperialism and Hope in International Volunteer Service

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*Honors Senior Capstone Project, Fall 2020*

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Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime. Or so the saying goes. But what if we took this imaginary situation a bit further? If we consider this scenario to take place in our present world, there are many potential complications behind this interaction that could lead to a more confusing reality. For instance, if you are the one who is fishing, did you ask your friend if he already knew how to fish, or did you make the assumption that he lacked this knowledge? What if there were preexisting stereotypes which assumed that where your friend comes from, no one knows how to fish? By teaching him – or even offering to teach him – would you be reinforcing paternalistic ideas about him or his culture? Did your friend ask to be taught how to fish, or does he even want to learn? What if after all of this, your friend tells you that he never liked fish? Although examining this proverb through such a thought experiment may seem trivial, the complications and consequences of parallel real-life interactions can be applied to the very real world of international aid.

On the subject of national development, industrialized countries like to believe that through international aid, they are helping so-called “underdeveloped” countries by figuratively teaching them to fish. When examining trends of international aid, it is hard to miss the fact that most aid flows from what we tend to call “The Global North” – mainly previously-colonizing countries – to what is termed “The Global South” – mainly previously-colonized countries (Perold et al. 2013; Ngo 2013; Sherraden 2008). Many argue that such north-south trends are continuations of paternalistic and imperialistic practices and thought in our modern day which work more to further inequalities than to lessen them (Sherraden 2008). This begs the question: are forms of international aid simply a new variation of imperialism?

One rapidly expanding field of international aid is that of international volunteer service (or IVS), which utilizes volunteers from sending countries who work across international borders

in host countries in a variety of fields (Sherraden 2008). While theoretically based on ideals of cross-cultural understanding, the foundation of international volunteer service is also based in ideas of “development” and postcolonial stereotypes, which are arguably systems of Empire (Escobar 1995). Such volunteer work has the potential to – and in some instances, continues to – assert paternalistic ideas about unindustrialized countries and their people, as well as negative stereotypes, power imbalances, and ideas of dependence (Ngo 2013; Perold et al. 2013). In many ways, this could be considered a continuation of imperialistic practices and ideas. However, current research and work is being done into changing potentially damaging patterns of international volunteer service so that it fosters genuine cross-cultural understanding, cooperation, social justice, and anti-racist frameworks (Ngo 2013; Perold et al. 2013; Raymond and Hall 2008). While international volunteer service may function within a world which is in many ways still ruled by Empire, it is also a space for compassion, and for learning together what true human connection and cooperation can look like.

### **Empire in Development**

But how can we define Empire? After World War II and the growing number of countries gaining independence from colonial rule (Encyclopaedia Britannica), there was a shift from physical colonization of peoples to the global and divisive concept of “development” (Lewis 2006; Ngo 2013). In his book *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (1994), Arturo Escobar discusses the creation of this concept of “development.” Escobar points specifically to the inaugural speech of United States president Harry Truman, in which he proposes addressing the problem of global poverty through envisioning “a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing... [in which] greater production is

the key to prosperity and peace” (Escobar 1994, p. 3). High goals of eliminating poverty and bringing prosperity and peace to the world, in reality, used the concept of development to create new patterns of inequality and oppression (Perold et al. 2013). In the name of spreading “material prosperity” and the social and economic “progress” of the countries in power (mainly in Europe and North America), such ideas of global development “had become hegemonic at the levels of the circles of power” (Escobar 1994, p. 4).

Now ideas of “advanced” and “prospering” countries are associated with those that were called “developed” – which coincidentally coincided with many of the previous colonizing powers – and concepts of poverty and need were associated with “undeveloped” countries – mainly those who only recently independence from colonizers. Even colonial administrators transitioned from their previous careers into new ones as “development professionals” (Lewis page 7). Our reality “had been colonized by the development discourse” (Escobar 1995, p. 5), and Empire had taken a new and insidiously omnipresent form in how global leaders and individuals viewed countries and peoples around the world. The power of this concept can be seen in the fact that “[i]deas 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.” (Lewis 2006, p. 6).

Development had become a tool of Empire.

### **International Volunteer Service and Neo-imperialism (Existing Research)**

International volunteer service is, in many ways, exceedingly centered around ideas of development: doing work in development programs, volunteering to work in “underdeveloped” or “developing” countries (Sherraden 2008). Service Civil International is the oldest IVS

organization, started in 1934 mainly to help rebuild areas devastated by the First World War (United Nations history map, Preface), but the creation of international volunteer service is also partially rooted in colonial missionary work, as well as in post-WWII European reconstruction efforts crossing national boundaries (Lewis 2006). With the formation of the United Nations and a “new framework for international development assistance” (Lewis 2006, p. 2; also see Ngo 2013), along with the spread of international volunteering, development discourse in international interactions continued to be solidified.

With this framework based in Empire and discourses which perpetuate inequality and past oppressions, there are many potential dangers to the interactions that make up IVS – those between our hypothetical fishermen. For instance, some studies have found that volunteer work contributes to relationships and interactions based on stereotypes (about volunteers, hosts, countries, and individuals alike), sometimes perpetuating such stereotypes, actively or otherwise. Research stressed that without thorough pre-deployment training, volunteers would lack sufficient knowledge about host countries and cultures to critically engage with their experience and to form meaningful relationships (Perold et al. 2013; Ngo 2013). Research also showed that programs that did not require specific qualifications or skill training for the volunteer work left volunteers feeling more like a burden to host communities, and that if sending and host organizations did not purposefully plan work between foreign volunteers, local workers, organizers that cross-cultural interaction was less likely to take place (Ngo 2013). Additionally, studies found that shorter durations of volunteer work – a few weeks, for instance, as opposed to a few months or years – led to volunteers and people in host countries making fewer connections on individual levels, and doubting if valuable work took place (Raymond and Hall 2008; Ngo 2013).

Here also exists the potential of volunteer work to create relationships between countries in the “Global South” and “their former colonial masters,” enforcing a “sense of dependence [which] characterizes the global context of power imbalances and exploitation” (Perold et al. 2013, p. 7). It is profoundly true and vital to remember that IVS “does not occur in a vacuum,” but is shaped by a vast array of discourses and histories which continue to affect the world today (Perold et al. 2013, p. 13). And while many of the stated goals of international volunteering espouse ideals of cross-cultural understanding, if relationships between the host and sending countries and individuals are not built with care, but instead are “overlaid by notions of superiority and inferiority, of developed and underdeveloped,” then such relationships will likely “continue to function paternalistically” (Perold et al. 2013, p. 13).

The same dangers apply to volunteer tourism, a type of international volunteer service in which voluntary work is combined with travel for pleasure (Raymond and Hall 2008). Research shows that this type of volunteering may also perpetuate cultural and national stereotypes, and may even “deepen dichotomies of ‘them and us’” (Raymond and Hall 2008, p. 4). Additionally, there continues to be a growing understanding

... that certain types of [volunteer tourism] may represent a form of neo-colonialism or imperialism, in which volunteer tourists inadvertently reinforce the power inequalities between developed and developing countries, and even within such countries (Raymond and Hall 2008, p. 4).

These studies show that international volunteer service, while perhaps not sinister in nature, exists within a world and a framework based on historic and deeply-rooted inequalities. In both reality and perspective, IVS has the potential to reinforce these systems of inequality through lack of communication, uninformed cross-cultural interaction, and ignorance, and thus may do more damage than good to the communities in which it works.

## **Case Study – The United Nations Volunteers**

In the present day, there are nearly countless organizations dedicated to providing international aid through the form of voluntary service. But if we consider the imperialistic ideas of development that such service is based in, we cannot simply assume that all such programs are helpful and effective. Because of the vast number of such programs, and because of their wide variability in methods and practices, this paper will focus its examination on one: The United Nations Volunteers.

### *History of the UNV*

Founded in 1970, the United Nations Volunteers acts as a subsystem in the broader processes of the United Nations and is administered by the United Nations Development Programme, or the UNDP (UNV: “A Short History”). As one of the most prominent development programs in the world, key focuses of the United Nations Volunteers heavily involve furthering development. But from a perspective of Empire, might this just mean working to restructure so-called developing countries in the image of Northern previously-colonizing powers? The United Nations Volunteers certainly began by being centered in Northern spaces, beginning with its first headquarters in New York in the United States, then moving soon after to Switzerland in 1972, and later relocating to Germany in 1995 (UNV: “A Short History”). Additionally, the UN’s agenda of furthering international development can be seen in its 2015 resolution, “Integrating volunteering into peace and development,” in which the General Assembly recognizes “that volunteerism can be a powerful and cross-cutting means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” and which can work to engage people in the planning and implementation of such an agenda (United Nations General



Assembly). And in 1989 the UNV was serving in 108 “developing” nations but nearly half of all volunteer assignments were in the African continent (UNV: “A Short History”). In these ways, the UNV’s core ideas of development may perpetuate biases and stereotypes of north-south relationships as ones of dependence.

Furthermore, in 1997 UNIFEM and UN Development Program sent to developing countries “gender specialists” as part of the UNV to “bridge the gap between gender policy and programming by means of women’s participation” (UNV: “A Short History”). While on the surface this seems beneficial, it also connects to Michele Murphy’s concepts of the “economization of life,” through which the advent of economics and population statistics (specifically of “developing” countries) perpetuate Empire and oppression, especially in the context of viewing women in “developing” countries (Murphy 2017). From an initial glance, it appears that the United Nations Volunteers are poised to operate out of positions of power – namely northern countries – and implement continuing imperialistic ideas of development in poorer nations throughout the world.

### *Examining Contradictions*

But is it that simple? Foundational concepts of the United Nations Volunteers may be in ideas of seemingly neo-imperialistic development, and the organization itself may have begun in the Global North, just like our hypothetical fishing scenario the UNV is more complex than it seems. First, the issue of the geographic placement of UNV headquarters in places of northern (white) power. It must first be mentioned that the idea for an international United Nations volunteer program was actually first proposed by the Shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, in 1968 (UNV: “A Short History”). The very fact that the idea for this organization did not come

from a leader of a European or North American country is significant. And while during its first few decades of operation the UNV operated mainly in developing countries, the volunteers themselves came from many countries as well. For example, during 1989 when UNV was serving in 108 countries (many in Africa), the volunteers came from 101 different countries themselves (UNV: “A Short History”). And in 2015 and 2016, while still headquartered in Germany, the UNV opened regional offices all over the world, in Asia, Africa, Latin America, East Europe, and the Caribbean (UNV: “A Short History”; “UNV: Who We Are”). Regional offices are run by locals, and represent an effort by the UNV to decentralize power and to be “closer to the field and closer to its clients” (UNV: “A Short History”).

Additionally, research has shown that a key to effective IVS which does not perpetuate stereotypes or reinforce ideas of dependence is diversity in the volunteering population – ethnic, racial, gender, age, ability, and otherwise (Ngo 2013). Previous UN Secretary General Kofi Annan explained in 2001 that international volunteering is not taken up solely by wealthy white individuals from the Global North, but “is people from all walks of life and stature of society who have made the choice to serve their fellow men and women whether at home or abroad” (Annan, in UNV: “A Short History”). He also explained that at that time, “of the 4500 UNVs serving around the world every year, more than two thirds of them come from developing countries, working in their neighboring states or overseas in the true expression of South-South cooperation” (Annan, in UNV: “A Short History”). The UNV also involves a great many youth-centered volunteer programs, and in 2008 UNV volunteer Nreddin Amro paved the way for future program inclusivity as he became the first disabled UNV volunteer (“A Short History of the UNV”). These instances demonstrate that the UNV is not solely an organization based in wealthy, northern, able-bodied white power.

Furthermore, studies have shown that lack of prior training and education about the specific culture and history of the host country has the potential to reinforce inequalities and historical oppressions (Ngo 2013; Perold et al. 2013). But the UNDP Governing Council's Decision on the UNV program "stresses the need for adequate and improved pre-assignment preparation, cross-cultural orientation and language training for all volunteers, and supports increased collaboration in this area with the sending societies" (UNV: "A Short History"). So while the trend of North-South aid is still very real, and still has a potential to perpetuate historic inequalities, it is clear that the UNV acts outside of this trend as well.

While these are examples of concrete trends and realities, we must not forget the importance of ideas and ideals in the existence of international volunteer service. IVS was, after all, created mainly out of a genuine human desire to help others (Lewis 2006). This can also be seen in the functioning of the UNV, and former Secretary General Kofi Annan highlights this in his opening ceremony speech for the 2001 International Year of Volunteers. While he did address issues of inequality, he emphasized that at the heart of international volunteering "are the ideals of service and solidarity," and he pointed out the ways in which IVS aims to combat inequality, provide for people's needs, and protect their rights, giving them a voice in the process (Annan in UNV: "A Short History"). He said that in these ways, (international) volunteering represented the ideals and goals of the United Nations itself. Annan also spoke to the importance of sharing (time, skills, and human experience) that is centered in IVS, and stated that volunteers "do not seek to impose their values, their ideas, or their agendas. Rather, they find out what people need and want, and they work *with them* to make it happen" (Annan in UNV: "A Short History," emphasis mine). He summed this up perfectly by saying:

[V]olunteerism is not a matter of wealthy and generous people dispensing largesse to the poor [...] In intervening not only with their hands and minds, but also with their hearts, volunteers do more than provide services; they bring hope to those they help (Annan in UNV: “A Short History”).

The Secretary General explained the fact that while in practice international volunteer service may be complicated, in principle and in heart, IVS is about working and connecting with fellow humans around the world, in efforts to limit suffering and increase solidarity and equality. While the United Nations Volunteer Service may also feature such contradictions, especially when considering the discourse of development, through its principles and its practices it also manages to address and combat its presence within Empire in various ways.

### **Aid Outside of Empire? A Proposed Framework...**

International volunteering may very well exist inside a framework built on Empire. But as we see in the UNV example, IVS has great potential for good as well. So does the fact that these international volunteer programs exist inside a structure built by and on Empire necessarily negate any good intentions behind humanitarian actions? If Empire truly is inescapable, can it exist simultaneously with honest humanitarianism? Carole McGranahan addresses similar questions in her ethnography “Love and Empire: The CIA, Tibet, and Covert Humanitarianism,” in which she examines relationships between United States CIA agents and Tibetan refugees and army veterans (McGranahan 2018). She demonstrates that while Empire may dictate certain situations of interaction, compassion and human connection still find ways to exist in its margins.

But what would international volunteer service look like on the edges – or even outside – of Empire? For one, it could start with reexamining the current discourse of development. Various scholars are searching for new methods to alter this way of thinking so based in colonial conceptions of the world. For instance, the characterization of “development” by host

organizations may instead be viewed as “a process of continuous and sustainable improvement of their living conditions. [...] that brings about qualitative change to key socio-economic sectors including food security, education, health, housing, infrastructure, and sustainable energy” (Perold et al. 2013, p. 9). From a more theoretical framework, multiple scholars suggest viewing development as a kind of “morally-informed” global responsibility with three aspects of meaning: hope, administration, and critical understanding (Lewis 2006). This can connect to IVS as well if one chooses to view “volunteering as an arena of development activity [which] is important because it potentially humanizes what is often left as a technical or managerial process” (Lewis 2006, p 3). If we view Empire as a collection of processes, practices, and perspectives which further imperial power imbalances, and see the development discourse as one such perspective, redefining development is invaluable in transitioning IVS away from Empire.

Perhaps the most essential steps to countering Empire within IVS are active reimagining and restructuring of international service programs and their interactions with host communities. Educator Mai Ngo in her 2013 piece on Canadian youth volunteering abroad outlines an exceptional framework for education and cooperation as new bases for international volunteering. Ngo argues for creating frameworks based in education and engagement with social justice and anti-racist teachings and actions both prior to and during international voluntary service. She also calls for understanding and incorporating diversity in sending organizations as well as in host organizations, and engaging volunteers and members of host communities in conversations about power and privilege (Ngo 2013). Ngo concludes by stating that “[t]he goal for ethical volunteering can only be reached if we maintain our vision for equitable partnerships, so that the local people hold the baton to their own emancipation” (Ngo 2013, p. 60).

Furthering this argument, additional studies argue that strong relationships and communication between sending and host organizations are essential in creating equitable and just international volunteering. This communication can be around what kind of volunteers – if any – are needed, how many, and what kind of training is required for what purposes. Members of IVS host countries argue that an essential step would be sufficient training of host organizations in recognizing “their own power and agency” in relationships with sending organizations, and training sending organizations and volunteers to understand and recognize this as well (Perold et al 2013 p. 13). If such relationships incorporate understandings of equity and justice, individuals and groups may be more capable of “realizing the transformative potential of the international service relationship to create awareness and change” (Perold et al. 2013, p. 13).

With thorough training and education of both volunteer and host organizations; effective communication between various participants on what host communities determine would be most helpful; and continuous engagement with historical and current dynamics of power, privilege, oppression, and frameworks of social justice and anti-racism, international voluntary service may be able to enhance genuine cross-cultural human connection and understanding. With all these frameworks, it is possible that IVS could “be seen as one of these ‘domains’ which can potentially shape such new thinking” and genuinely create positive change (Lewis 2006, p. 2).

### **Directions for Future Research and Conclusion**

This paper examines some of the relationships between Empire and international volunteer service, as well as some of the current work being done to bring IVS beyond Empire, but does have weaknesses. The studies reviewed for this paper were only some of those written

in English, and were written mainly by scholars from the United States (the exceptions were one study from Canada, one from New Zealand, and one from South Africa). Further research must involve more perspectives, both from sending and host countries. Additionally, this paper is based only in review of other studies and mainly secondary-source research and information. Future research would benefit from primary source information such as ethnographic interviews. Much of the research reviewed for this paper was focused on the experiences of the volunteers, and more perspectives and opinions should be heard from individuals and leaders in host communities where volunteer work took place. For instance, was the work requested and appreciated? Was there cooperation in the planning? How did members of the community feel, and what would they have done differently?

We have an obligation to consider these questions and these perspectives as we move forward, not simply through the evolution of international volunteer service, but through our continuing interaction with our world and with Empire. Australian Murri artist and activist Lilla Watson is quoted as saying: “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together” (Watson in Taylor, 2018). While it is exceptionally vital to consider the answers to questions of power imbalances and historical oppression – even when addressing our proverb about teaching and learning to fish – that may not be the sole source of important action towards a socially just and equitable future. Perhaps an equally important step is to simply be sure to take the time to ask such questions; to have conversations (between the fisherman and the potential-learner) about those histories and oppressions, and about what each participant would like to do moving forward. The role of conversation, education, and cooperation cannot be overstated in creating an IVS that works to overcome existing patterns of oppression and move into a space of equity and

social justice. Perhaps the answer isn't who should teach whom to fish. Maybe we need to focus on learning to fish together.



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