



Challenging Indifference to Extreme Poverty: Considering Southern Perspectives on Global Citizenship and Change

By/Par | **Barbara Heron**

School of Social Work, York University, Canada
bheron@yorku.ca

ABSTRACT

Canadian universities are expanding opportunities for students to travel, study, volunteer and work abroad for academic credit, especially in regions of the global south often called “developing countries.” It is widely assumed that exposure to extreme poverty through short-term placements overseas will make young Canadians and other Northerners into “global citizens” who would by definition be incapable of indifference to the lack of freedom that accompanies extreme poverty. This paper asks whether it is warranted for Northerners to attain a claim to global citizenship via this mechanism, especially in light of the burdens falling upon Southern organizations that host young people from Canada and elsewhere.

Keywords: Global citizenship, internationalization, ethics

RÉSUMÉ

Les universités canadiennes accroissent les opportunités de voyage pour les étudiants, pour les études, en tant que volontaire et pour travailler à l'étranger pour des crédits académiques, en particulier dans les régions du Sud souvent qualifiées de pays en développement. Il est largement considéré que l'exposition à l'extrême pauvreté à travers des séjours de court terme favorise pour les jeunes canadiens et les autres jeunes de pays du Nord l'immersion dans une citoyenneté mondiale ; en raison notamment de l'impossibilité de rester indifférent aux privations de libertés qui accompagnent l'extrême pauvreté. Cet article examine si réellement un tel mécanisme permet d'atteindre une citoyenneté mondiale, en particulier à la lumière des fardeaux que les organisations du sud, qui accueillent les jeunes du Canada ou d'ailleurs, doivent assumer.

Mots clé : citoyenneté mondiale, internationalisation, éthique

RESUMEN

Las universidades canadienses están expandiendo las oportunidades de sus estudiantes para que viajen, estudien y realicen trabajo voluntario en el extranjero (especialmente en países del Sur a menudo denominados “países en vías de desarrollo”) a cambio de créditos académicos. Existe un consenso generalizado que la exposición a la extrema pobreza mediante estancias cortas en países del Sur hará que los jóvenes canadienses, y de otras nacionalidades del Norte, se transformen en “ciudadanos globales” los cuales, por definición, no pueden sentir indiferencia hacia la falta de libertad que acompaña la extrema pobreza. Este artículo se pregunta si este mecanismo garantiza a los ciudadanos del Norte la adquisición de una ciudadanía global, considerando, especialmente, las cargas que recaen sobre las organizaciones del Sur que acogen los jóvenes que provienen de Canadá y de otras partes del mundo.

Palabras clave: ciudadanía global, internacionalización, ética

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INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on ethical issues associated with a growing phenomenon that is impacting development in many Southern countries: the rapid proliferation of young Canadians and other Northerners undertaking short-term placements with local NGOs (non-governmental organizations) in Southern countries. It is argued that the pervasiveness of short-term volunteer, intern, and practicum assignments raises a crucial ethical question: whether it is warranted for Northerners to attain a claim to global citizenship via this mechanism, especially in light of the impact on Southern organizations that host young people from Canada and elsewhere. In order to propose an answer, two relevant issues are taken up in this paper: (1) the impact on local host NGOs in the South; and, (2) individual motivations on the part of young Northerners. The ethical implications for the internationalization focus in Northern countries' educational policies – such as the policy of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada – that support these activities are then discussed. Prior to engaging with these discussions, the context and assumptions that give rise to them will be discussed.

CONTEXT AND ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

Since 1995 Canadian universities have focused on expanding opportunities for students to travel, study, volunteer and work abroad for academic credit, especially in “developing countries.” “Internationalization” is increasingly the watchword for

Canadian universities, and efforts are made to produce graduates who possess a global perspective. This dates back to 1995 when the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) adopted a framework of action to move forward the internationalization of Canadian post secondary education (AUCC, 1995). One of the cornerstones in this undertaking is providing students with international experiences, the most often cited rationale for this approach being “to develop responsible and engaged global citizens” (AUCC, 2007).

This rationale also underscores the Canadian government’s international focus in the Youth Employment Strategy (YES) that was inaugurated in 1997 to support internships for young people from 18 to 29 years of age. YES programs have resulted in thousands of international internship opportunities for Canadians, mainly in Southern countries (Heron, 2006). The government of Canada has been explicit in advertising these opportunities as a way to develop Canadians into global citizens.

This is not solely a Canadian phenomenon. University students and other young people in many Northern countries are increasingly involved in short-term assignments overseas. The “gap year” (the year between secondary school and university when young people engage in various work, travel, and voluntary experiences) has become a social institution in the UK, and as such, it has begun to be a focus of research. It is estimated that in 2004 at least 10,000 young Britons ventured abroad, mainly to the South, to engage in volunteer placements of six months or less each year (Simpson, 2004, 681-692). The numbers continue to grow as do the avenues by which such placements may be accessed in the UK and elsewhere. International volunteering is now prevalent among middle class youth in most, if not all, Northern countries.

It is commonly assumed that exposure to conditions such as extreme poverty in “developing countries” will make young Canadians and other Northerners into “global citizens” – i.e., individuals whose consciousness has been transformed, and for whom this transformation produces ongoing changes in life choices. Linked by authors like Giddens (1991) and Bennet (2003) to concern for others and consciousness of poverty and inequality, these central aspects of the concept of global citizenship are captured by Lagos (2005) in the notion of transnational activists pursuing a more interdependent world. In this conception, it would seem that a global citizen from the North, even one who is in another country for a very short period of time, would be incapable of indifference to poverty witnessed in Southern countries and the lack of freedom that accompanies extreme poverty; and once back home, the global citizen would continue to work to change conditions impacting poor people in Southern countries. These views share something with those expressed on the website for the International Development Ethics Association’s 2009 conference on “Ethics of Human Development and Global Justice”, which states that: “... no one should remain indifferent to the lack of

freedom implied by conditions of extreme poverty or the impossibility for many people in the planet to fully develop their capabilities” (IDEA, 2009).

At the same time that growing numbers of Northerners are volunteering in “developing countries”, the conditions they encounter there are becoming more and more difficult for local peoples. In light of this reality it seems vital that the influx of young Canadians and other Northerners to these countries be ethically justified through the contributions they make in their placements with local organizations. This raises the need to assess the impact and the cost to Southern NGOs of these short-term placements, and the global citizenship effect of such short-term exposures to Southern countries’ realities.

The foregoing issues are being examined in a five-year research project (2007 to 2012) entitled “Creating Global Citizens? The Impact of Volunteer/Learning Abroad Programs”, funded by the International Development Research Centre of Canada.¹ Dr. R. Tiessen of the Royal Military College of Canada and Queens University in Kingston, Ontario and I are co-principal investigators in this study. Dr. Tiessen is heading up the Canadian part of the project and I am primarily responsible for the international aspect. We define short-term placements as between three to six months in duration. In our study global citizenship is explained as a way of understanding the world in which an individual’s *attitudes and behaviours* reflect a compassion and concern for the marginalized and/or poor and for the relationship between poverty and wealth – within and between communities, countries and regions.

This paper draws on preliminary findings from both parts of the study. The following discussion is based on a preliminary analysis of 100 interviews with staff from local NGOs in South Africa, Malawi, Guatemala, Peru, and Jamaica conducted in 2008 by a local consultant in each country, and an analysis of interviews with 30 young Canadians just prior to, and shortly after, volunteering in Southern countries. The next section concerns Southern perspectives, that which follows it reports the views of young Northern participants.

IMPACT ON LOCAL HOST NGOS IN THE SOUTH

Southern NGO staff participants in the research willingly and enthusiastically cite the following benefits of having Northern volunteers, students and interns: fresh perspectives; new ideas/knowledge; new skills, especially IT (information technology); capacity building; new energy; augmented staffing capacity; enabling

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local people to meet/get to know foreigners; cross-cultural exchanges; understanding one's work/organization better because of explaining it; increasing the NGO's community status; acquiring additional resources and funds; and, in the case of the African countries, improving credibility with foreign donors. These benefits are usually seen as becoming much stronger in direct correlation to the length of time the Northern volunteer, student, or intern stays.

There is also a qualitative difference between short-term (two-to-three month) and longer-term (six-to-nine month). This difference is much more pronounced, however, when the comparison is between two to three months and one or two years in duration. With longer placements come more of the benefits mentioned above, but also: understanding and fitting into the organization, which produces an insider status that impacts on the skills transfer and produces more in-depth offerings of new perspectives, capacity building, etc. mentioned above; forming friendships through work; understanding the country, which increases the ability to fit into the organization and to form friendships; and, adjustment to the country, which also impacts on the above. It is noteworthy in respect to the last point, that there is near unanimous agreement that placements of three months or less cannot enable adjustment to the country; on the contrary, the Northern volunteer, student, or intern who is present for such a short period of time is seen as virtually never getting past the initial newness stage. By the same token, those volunteers who stay for two years or even more are generally talked about with much affection and deep appreciation for all their contributions to the Southern NGOs that they have worked with.

In terms of costs to local NGOs, the following emerged in relation to short-term placements: there is a need to provide transportation, accommodation, translation and other logistical arrangements which strain the resources of the local NGO; because of security concerns in most countries, short-term volunteers, students, and interns may need looking after on evenings and weekends; providing an effective orientation for newcomers is very time consuming; it is difficult to deliver a coherent, meaningful program of activities for short-term Northerners – this is related to the first point above regarding the drain on scarce organizational resources; in connection to the previous concern about a program of activities, short-term Northerners are likely to have “big agendas” and not enough time to do everything they intend to do; there is not enough time for short-term volunteers, students and interns to share skills or complete work on a project before they leave; they are susceptible to illness because of food and water that they have not adjusted to; short-term Northerners may be demanding or impose their own values and knowledge; they may also be arrogant; they sometimes do not seem to be serious about their purpose in the country; and, perhaps most importantly in terms of the focus of this paper: the short-term experience may contribute to the volunteer's growth but not the NGO's growth.

These issues can and do occur with long term volunteers (i.e., those who normally stay one to two years), but it is evident from what has been presented so far that for

local organizations the negative aspects and the overall burden associated with hosting short-term Northerners can be diminished, or at least compensated for, by a longer stay in the country on the part of the volunteer or intern, and by the adjustment progress that comes with staying on. In light of this, it is apparent that short-term placements of approximately three months are on the whole problematic, for these accrue fewer benefits, as was already noted, but also incur greater costs. Not surprisingly, the overwhelming consensus among participants is that they would prefer to have volunteers, students, and interns stay for a minimum of six months, and to have volunteers with them for longer than that. There are of course a few exceptions, and many participants are careful to point out that there is no hard and fast rule: all three-month placements are not “bad” or to be avoided. However, few of them are really useful for the Southern host NGOs. The NGO staffs who were interviewed felt that although they did learn a great deal from their experiences with short-term Northerner volunteers, students, and interns, the learning is disproportionately on the side of the Northerner. Moreover, what learning occurs seems limited rather than transformative – from the Southern NGO staff perspective.

INDIVIDUAL MOTIVATIONS ON THE PART OF YOUNG NORTHERNERS

At this point the discussion turns to what has emerged so far in respect to motivations for going overseas on the part of young Canadians in the “Creating Global Citizens?” study, and the resonance of this with research on international volunteering during the gap year. For the “Creating Global Citizens?” project, in-depth interviews were carried out from June 2007 to April 2008 with 26 young Canadians between the ages of 18 and 30. The analysis of the data revealed that a desire to travel was one of the main motivations expressed by the interviewees. Related to the attractiveness of travel was the prospect of adventure, both of which were reinforced by feelings of boredom at home and the fact that it was convenient to travel at this stage in the interviewees’ lives (Tiessen, 2008). Tiessen argues that “the context in which participants talked about learning showed the way in which the learning was of a consumerist orientation and done in a one directional way that benefited the volunteers but not the host community” (p. 3). There was also a longing for a kind of authentic experience that is considered unavailable in Canada and that derives from an exploration of what is seen as a kind of morally “pure” life being led by people whose cultural heritage appears to remain intact in ways that are visible to foreigners from the North. Tiessen views this as an expression of a “consumerist” approach: in return for an investment of time and money, an authentic experience abroad can be, in a sense, purchased and then exchanged for a university course credit and/or an enhancement on a resume back in Canada.

Tiessen's (2010) subsequent more thorough analysis of 68 interviews, which included the original ones discussed above, a second round of reflective interviews with these same participants on their return from overseas, and 42 additional shorter interviews with young Canadians who had just recently returned from short-term placements in the South, added further complexity to the "Global Citizenship?" study's findings. Study, adventure and travel did not appear to be very important motivations in comparison to the ones most often cited by this larger group, especially when their retrospective comments were considered. Instead, participants cited the desire for personal growth, cross-cultural understanding, skills development, testing academic knowledge in practice, and trying out a career choice as their main motivations for undertaking a short-term placement. What seems especially noteworthy on the whole, though, is the extent to which the participants' motivations remain consistently centred on themselves.

Tiessen's initial findings resonate with those of Simpson (2005), writing on the phenomenon of the gap year:

One of the purposes of the gap year is to seek out difference, to leave the ordinary in search of the extra-ordinary. The value of the gap year is premised, to a large degree, on the presumed relationship between encountering difference and knowing difference (p. 68).

Simpson goes on to make the case that such differences are predicated on, and sustained by, stereotypes of the "other", and concludes:

"To assume that a short period of contact with the stereotyped other will automatically contradict, and hence unseat, such stereotypes is, at best, naïve" (p. 69).

In contrast to the prevailing valorization of the global citizenship learning that is thought to flow from short-term placements in the South, Simpson asserts that the knowledges produced by such encounters must be challenged. In earlier writing she made the case that one of the knowledges that gap-year participants acquire is an explanation of being born "lucky", meaning that they see themselves as fortunate to have been born in the UK and not in a "developing country" (Simpson, 2004). Connected to this is a sort of distancing from extreme poverty that is encountered in gap-year volunteering in Southern countries, so that such poverty can be looked at as a kind of characteristic of the people whose very lives are being limited by it. Distancing in this way is a very different response from the perspective of "Global Citizenship" noted above, that indifference would be impossible, or that this kind of exposure must lead to a recognition of "the impossibility for many people in the planet to fully develop their capabilities" mentioned above (IDEA, 2009). Instead, the narrative that young people in Simpson's research rely on is the old trope of being "poor-but-happy", with the accompanying explanation that material privation "doesn't bother them" (p. 688).

In the “Creating Global Citizens?” study, it is noteworthy that so far the young Canadians who have been interviewed do not seem to have come back from their international experiences imbued with a passion for social justice, determined to change the world – the emerging transnational activists mentioned earlier. Nor do their accounts of their experiences in Southern countries suggest an incapacity to be indifferent to the poverty they encountered, or an emergent awareness of the lack of freedom that accompanies extreme poverty. These young people evince some degree of certainty about their new knowledge of the world, and appreciate having seen what they have seen (Tiessen, 2010). However, they do not appear at this preliminary stage of the data analysis to have become global citizens in the way the term has been defined in the study. There are more interviews to come, so it is possible that these conclusions may change to some extent. Nevertheless, it seems important to acknowledge the direction of the findings to date, especially given that the resonance with Simpson’s studies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NORTHERN INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT OF SHORT-TERM PLACEMENTS

What is emerging here is a very different picture of short-term placements in Southern countries than the trajectory imagined by global citizenship advocates. Rather than being spurred by an innocent curiosity perhaps combined with a degree of altruism, young Canadians and other Northerners in short-term placements in Southern countries appear to display self-centred interests imbued with a consumerist orientation. It is difficult to see how such starting points could result in transformative knowledges of the kind expected of “global citizens”, and so far the “Global Citizenship?” study does not indicate that such a transformation occurs. When taken together with what Southern NGO staff have to say about the challenges and imposition of hosting Northerners for periods of three months or less (especially compared to the benefits of having Northern volunteers, students, and interns remain with them for six months or more), it is apparent that the justification of Northern educational, institutional and government support for short-term placements in Southern countries begs re-thinking. It seems evident that policies of “internationalization”, such as those adopted by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, leave a great deal to be desired, not so much in terms of their goals, but in terms of their strategies for achieving these goals. On the whole, the impact of these strategies appears to be at best mixed; at worst, harmful. Although the “Creating Global Citizens?” study is still in progress and the data is only presented here in preliminary form, it is already beginning to be clear that, apart from the failure to produce transformative learning for young Canadians and other Northerners, there is an unfair and unrecognized burden being placed on the

Southern organizations that host them. Given the conditions that obtain in these countries and the resulting difficulties for local NGOs, their staff, and the communities they serve, there is a moral responsibility for institutions in Northern countries whose policies are enabling and encouraging a growing influx of short-term volunteers, students, and interns to reconsider their approach to internationalization.

Goulet made the point that globalization destroys what he so eloquently termed “the possibility for human communities to be genuine subjects of their own social history” (2000, p. 35). Goulet went on to critique globalization as a process that reduces individuals, organizations, and communities in the South to “the status of objects, known and acted upon instead of actively knowing and acting (p. 35)”. It must be recognized that Canadian and other Northern institutions’ pursuit of internationalization and global citizenship comprises an aspect of globalization. The mechanism of short-term volunteering and learning abroad programs is, in fact, inadvertently inequitable in the burden it places on Southern organizations, staff, and communities, even at the same time as they are to some extent being benefited through these programs. As long as this is the case, for Canadians and other Northerners to lay claim to global citizenship in this way must be seen as at best an ethically questionable practice with limited capacity to challenge indifference to extreme poverty. This is a practice to which alternatives need to be found.

CONCLUSION: A WAY FORWARD

What would an alternative practice look like? The discussion above suggests that at the very least the shortest of the short-term placements, of less than four months’ duration, need to be re-thought, and longer-term placements that may be counted in years need to be encouraged. One simple way of making a significant change would be for Canadian educational and volunteer-sending institutions to require overseas stays of not less than six months, unless there is a compelling case for a shorter time period. If six months were to be the base line duration of international placements, that would in and of itself shift the balance of cost and benefit for Southern organizations quite considerably in favour of benefit. This is something that could be accomplished by a change in policy on the part of the institutions that are sending young Canadian volunteers, students, and interns abroad. To be sure, this would have cost implications for young Canadians, who often fully or partially subsidize their international placements. However, requiring longer stays would also serve to deter those who are interested in travel, putting international experience on their resumes, *etc.*

One condition that would also serve to ensure more serious commitments from young Canadians who wish to participate in placements in “developing countries”

would be the requirement of substantial preparation prior to going overseas, in the form of taking a pertinent course (or courses) for credit, for example, in the case of university and college students. The preparation aspect is very important, not only because of the potential to provide in-depth knowledge of the country the young person is going to, but also because this kind of awareness has the potential to affect motivations. If the postcolonial dimensions of the way the world operates are understood, and if there is awareness of the history and impact of national debt and structural adjustment programs, to name just two foundational areas for study, then it is more likely that a young person embarking on an international placement will do so with some sense of context for understanding the injustice of the poverty about to be encountered, some appreciation, even if only at an intellectual level, that it was not always so. That awareness might produce a stronger urge to make a positive contribution. I have argued elsewhere that the de-briefing process is equally important, for it is on the return to Canada that the meanings of experiences overseas become fully consolidated (Heron, 2005). Therefore, it would seem that requiring additional course work of students on their return would also be beneficial, provided that the course(s) undertaken enable critical self-reflection.

Such Canadian/Northern volunteers, students, and interns, better prepared before leaving, serving for longer periods in “developing countries”, and undergoing additional relevant learning and reflection on their return, would seem to have the potential to become global citizens in the way that the “Global Citizenship?” study defines the term. In such a process, international experience is a key ingredient, but not the only factor in generating the kind of transformative learning that is thought to produce global citizens.

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