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International Service in the Context of Globalization: Research Conference Summary Report

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Introducing the Conference

International service or cross-national volunteering is increasing worldwide. Meanwhile, knowledge about the forms and impacts of international service and understanding of effective practices lags behind. To address this situation, the Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis and the Institute for Volunteering Research in the UK, in partnership with the Center for International Studies at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, convened 35 researchers and leading practitioners in international service, representing 15 countries. They met in London from May 25 to 27, 2005. The purpose of the meeting, entitled “International Service in the Context of Globalization: A Research Conference”, was to document what is known about international service and to identify key questions and strategies to guide future research.

Background and Objectives

International service is increasingly prevalent worldwide, though it is the least studied. International service refers to an intensive volunteer placement that is performed outside of the server’s home country. Program examples include the Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), Canada World Youth, the Peace Corps, Jesuit Volunteer Corps, Nigerian Technical Aid Corps, and United Nations Volunteers.

International service programs vary widely. They take different forms, have different criteria and objectives, operate within different administrative structures, and come from different ideological perspectives. Some are unilateral placements, others are transnational. Some are short-term and some long-term. Some international service is done by groups and others individually. Moreover, international service claims a range of goals for the volunteer and the communities where they serve, including improved skills, civic engagement, cultural integration, local capacity building, and economic development. Beyond anecdote, however, there are few studies that verify these impacts and their sustainability, and, indeed, some studies highlight potential negative effects of international service.

Scholarship can inform the development and implementation of international service, building an evidence base from which to inform program and policy decisions. The

group of international service leaders and researchers who convened in May 2005 sought to develop this evidence base, by seeking answers to questions such as: What are the operational distinctions of international service worldwide? What are the most effective service and administrative program structures? What are the long-term effects on those who serve and the host communities? What policies can promote positive effects?

Objectives of the conference were:

1. To document what is known about international service and possible policy and program implications;
2. To identify research questions and possible studies that can substantially expand the knowledge base;
3. To develop working groups interested in studying international service.

This paper provides a summary of the discussions that took place over the course of the meeting, and outlines the recommendations that arose during group-work sessions.

Paper Summaries

Keynote presentations

David Lewis kicked off the conference with an engaging paper relating changing patterns of international services to the broader processes of economic, technological and cultural changes associated with globalization. Drawing both on personal experience and academic literature, the paper provided an overview of the issues emerging from existing research on international service, and concluded with a framework for future research based on a view of development as 'global responsibility' and the place of international service within this.

Kate Simpson provided a challenging after dinner speech, highlighting the dangers of commercialized, short-term, forms of international volunteering. The paper focused on the growing 'gap year' phenomenon in the UK. Kate's paper drew into question what and how volunteers learn about those they visit, looking in particular at the messages conveyed through the marketing materials produced by gap year providers. The paper also explored the ability of individuals to learn about each other through international volunteering, and the possibilities of regulating the gap year industry in order to ensure quality within international service programmes.

Jon Snow (UK News Anchor) was the conference guest speaker. At the age of 18, Jon had spent a year teaching in Uganda with VSO, an experience which he described as the 'most radicalising' of his life. Jon drew on his personal experience of being an international volunteer to discuss the impact that such action can have on individuals and society, before widening the debate to outline a number of challenges associated with international service.

History and status of international service

The aim of the first main session of the conference was to outline the history of international service, the ways in which it has evolved over recent years, and its current status.

Amanda Moore McBride and Dolly Daftary's paper sketched out a history of international service from its beginnings during colonial expansion in the form of

Christian missions, through a step change in form and scale following the World Wars, after which international service was developed as part of the reconstruction and reconciliation efforts. In the contemporary context, international service has been recast in terms of reciprocal relationships, while also being shaped by both globalization and regionalisation. The paper concluded by outlining some of the pitfalls and potentials currently facing international service.

The following two papers highlighted the ways in which international service has evolved over the past decade or so. Robert Leigh reflected on the changes within United Nations Volunteers, as it has grown over the past 34 years from a center for the recruitment and placement of volunteers within UN Volunteer programme, to become a central point for volunteer promotion and development worldwide.

Brain Rockcliffe's paper outlined a number of paradigm shifts in development perspectives that have occurred in recent years, emphasizing mutuality and reciprocity, and the ways in which VSO has changed in response to these. The paper also outlined the challenges that such changes present for the future of international service.

Margaret Sherraden and Matthew Pearce broadened the discussion, framing international service, and especially transnational service, within the context of international institutions of cooperation. The paper drew a distinction between unilateral programmes, within which volunteers serve in another country, and transnational service, in which volunteers serve in two or more countries. The paper concluded by suggesting that while transnational service faces a number of challenges, it also has the potential to offer a number of unique benefits in a globalizing world.

Forms of international service

The second session of the conference focused on specific forms of international service, with three papers discussing the particularity, impacts and issues associated with each form.

Gord Cummings drew on his experience of the Canadian Executive Service Overseas (CESO) programme to discuss the involvement of older people in international service. The paper drew on data from CESO and a number of similar programmes operating in different countries around the world, to explore issues such as the changing nature of development and the challenges currently facing organizations that involve older volunteers in international service.

Youth service was the focus of Andrew Jones's paper as he presented results from research that assessed the impact of two youth service programmes on two countries. The paper argued that young people gain a range of benefits from international service, including the acquisition of soft skills and the wider learning associated with a cross-cultural experience.

Marcia Ollie's paper focused on faith based international service, arguing that this is a virtually un-researched form of service, despite considerable numbers of people engaging in it each year. The paper explored the history, status, forms and effects of faith-based international service, focusing in particular on the evangelical nature of short-term missions. The paper concluded by outlining future research implications.

Government and civil society as facilitators of international service

The relative role of government and civil society in facilitating international service was the focus of the third paper session, with three papers offering different perspectives.

John Stringham provided an overview of the legislative framework for international service within Europe, highlighting a number of different models of government support that exist across the EU. Within the paper, John identified a number of incompatibilities regarding international youth service, and suggested how these might be overcome through the application of EU political and/or legislative instruments, alongside policy developments in the individual member countries.

Wale Adebani provided an example of a government-led programme by discussing the Nigerian Technical Aid Corps, which was established in 1987 as a 'practical demonstration of south-south cooperation'. Wale's paper provided details of the programme structure, before discussing some of the more controversial issues associated with its development.

Grace Aguilin-Dalisay provided an example of civil society-led international service, by drawing on experience in the Philippines. Arguing that the two could and should not be considered separately, Grace's paper compared international and in-country service and discussed the role of civil society organisations in supporting both types of action.

Impacts of international service

The final paper session of the conference focused on the impacts of international service, for different stakeholder groups.

An overview paper was provided by Justin Davis Smith, Angela Ellis and Georgina Brewis, which argued that despite a lack of existing research evidence, a number of positive impacts of international service on volunteers, sending and hosting organizations and wider communities can be identified. However, the paper also highlighted a number of potential dangers of international service, which could lead to negative impacts if programmes are not structured or supported in appropriate ways.

Mitch Hammer presented his work on the Intercultural Development Tool, a research tool that has been designed to measure an individual's progression in terms of intercultural development. The model has been tested in international education programmes, and could be applied to international service programmes.

As an illustration of the impact of international service on individual organizations, Elisabeth Hoodless outlined the work of Community Service Volunteers, its international service element, and the impact that work has for developing the capacity of other programs worldwide.

The impact of international service on host communities was the focus of Jacqueline Butcher's paper, which drew on evidence from Mexico. Jacqueline's paper explored different concepts of service within Mexico, and used case studies of two

organizations to illustrate the impact of international service. A series of future research questions were laid out in the conclusions.

Moving a Research Agenda Forward: Conference Delegate Recommendations

All conference delegates reflected in small groups on the themes of the conference at the end of the first and second days. Each group developed a range of recommendations, responding to the following questions:

- What aspects of international service have been most fully covered by research?
- What are the key research questions arising from this meeting that still need to be addressed?
- What would be suitable methodologies for addressing these research questions?
- How can we take the agenda forward – individually and collectively?

Summarizing across the groups, the following recommendations were identified as important to build the knowledge base on international service. They are categorized into three main strategies.

Synthesis of existing knowledge and research on prevalence

1. Specify the forms of international service in all parts of the world, including developing countries and countries in transition, particularly in Asia and the Global South
2. Define the likely effects by form of international service, for example, technical, development-oriented service, and youth service;
3. Synthesize existing research, with a priority on research in multiple languages, including research reports and evaluations, and identifying effective practice models;
4. Increase documentation by international service programs of their activities and outcomes;
5. Document the scale and nature of international service, for example, through the integration of questions about international service participation in national and international-level population surveys.

Rigorous research on impacts

1. Conduct qualitative research assessing the perceptions of international service on hosts and host communities, including motivations for involvement and perceived outcomes;
2. Develop and implement a comparative, longitudinal research project on the short-term and long-term impacts of international service on the volunteers, all participating organizations, and host communities;
3. Gauge the impacts of international service on the Millennium Development Goals;
4. Assess the relationships between international service programs and national and community-based volunteer programs.

Capacity building and information dissemination

1. Increase capacity for research in under-researched areas of the world, including the developing countries and countries in transition?, hosted and implemented by programs and researchers from these areas;
2. Develop an electronic repository of existing research, including a searchable, bibliographic database with publication abstracts;
3. Create information exchange mechanisms among programs, policymakers, and researchers, possibly including the Internet and practitioner-researcher conferences;
4. Integrate international service research into existing associations and their conferences, including for example, United Nations Volunteers, International Association for Volunteer Effort, International Society for Third Sector Research, through panels, presentations, and other media.

Practical next steps

A number of specific, short-term, recommendations were made in terms of taking the agenda forward in the near future. These included:

- Producing a special issue of *Voluntary Action* journal, to disseminate papers from the conference;
- Posting remaining conference papers on the CSD website;
- Establishing an area of CSD's GSI website to focus on international service;
- Sharing contact details of conference attendees and other interested individuals, in order to facilitating networking between researchers and practitioners;
- Using existing websites (<http://www.youth-knowledge.net>, <http://www.worldvolunteerweb.org>, <http://www.unesco.org/ccivs/> and <http://www.gapyearresearch.org>) as repositories and sources of information;
- Individual conference attendees working together to plan future research projects on international service within the framework that emerged from the conference.



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