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**Citation:** Jones, A. (2005). Assessing international youth service programmes in two low-income countries. *Voluntary Action*, 7(2), pp. 87-99.

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**Assessing International Youth Service Programmes in  
Two Low Income Countries**

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## **Abstract**

Within the ambiguously defined ‘gap year’ phenomenon, it has been argued that certain forms of activities are of greater benefit to young people’s personal development than others. Of particular interest has been the debate around the nature of structured overseas volunteering placements, offered by a number of leading ‘gap year’ provider organizations in the UK and Australia. This paper presents research into education placement schemes in two low income countries – Vietnam and Tanzania – offered by two leading provider organizations. In contrast to previous studies that have suggested little positive benefit is derived from this kind of ‘volunteer tourism’, it argues that young volunteers do derive a range of benefits from the transformative experience that these placements offer. These beneficial impacts of the experience include the acquisition of ‘soft skills’ (communication, organizational, interpersonal capabilities) but also the wider learning associated with a cross-cultural experience and immersion in host country communities.

## **1 Introduction: assessing the benefits of international youth service**

The rise of the gap year phenomenon in the UK and elsewhere has provoked a growing interest amongst academic researchers and policy makers (Jones 2004). A particular focus has been the growing popularity of international volunteering activities amongst young people taking a gap year in a number of countries including the US and Australia. Yet the impact of undertaking international youth service remains little researched and poorly understood (ibid.). In policy circles there is no clear consensus on whether international youth volunteering programmes offer any greater benefit to volunteers than schemes in their home country (c.f. Thomas 2001). Furthermore, some research has criticised the schemes available to young people in the UK as being relatively poorly organised, under-resourced and lacking quality assurance (Simpson 2003). A debate has thus emerged as to whether current trends in provision and the organizations involved in providing placements should be supported.

In this context this paper presents research into overseas volunteering schemes offered to young people in two low-income countries in different regions of the world: Tanzania in East Africa and Vietnam in south-east Asia. The research took a longitudinal approach to assessing the transformative impact (if any) of undertaking an overseas volunteering placement on young people aged 18 to 25 years as part of their gap year. The aim was to assess in more specific and tangible ways the way in which the common assertion amongst all kinds of stakeholders in the youth volunteering sector of the dramatic benefits and personal development effects that undertaking a volunteering placement has on young people (Travellers Worldwide 2003; Gap Year.com 2004). In the popular and policy literature on gap years in the UK, as well as amongst careers advisors,

such schemes are cited in vague terms as being enormously beneficial. However, little detailed social scientific research has addressed this issue to date.

The argument developed is that the structured placement schemes that were undertaken by my case-study cohorts in each country do add considerably to the skills base of the young people who undertake them. Such placement schemes do potentially offer invaluable learning around a series of ‘soft skills’: communication, leadership, organisational and interpersonal skills (c.f Thomas 2001). This fits with the findings of similar studies of civic service schemes in the United States (Wilson & Musick 1999; Perry & Imperial 2001). Perhaps more importantly, the research suggests that the experience of placements in the two low income countries studied also provided valuable cross-cultural insight, knowledge and skills capacities for young volunteers. The remainder of this paper elaborates these arguments in a series of stages. After providing discussing the context for this research in the next section, the third section then discusses case study countries and the methodology. Section four presents research findings around three key areas: skills and personal development, the impact of overseas volunteering in low income countries as a cross-cultural experience and the development of ‘global perspective’ amongst volunteers. The final part of the paper draws out a number of conclusions and wider policy implications.

## **2 Structured Overseas Volunteering as part of a gap year**

In the UK over the last fifteen years there has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of young people taking what has been generically termed a ‘gap year’, with in excess of 100 000 young British people estimated to be undertaking a gap year at any given time (Jones 2004). The concept itself is vague and chaotic,

being used to refer to a wide variety of age-groups, time periods and activities.

After reviewing the literature, I developed a definition for the UK Department for Education and Skills (DfeS) of a gap year as ‘a period of time between three and twenty-four months that represents time out from education, training or employment’ (Jones 2004: 24).

One of the key policy questions that emerged from this gap year review was what impact different kinds of activities had on individuals and to what extent young people were benefiting in terms of skills and personal development from taking a certain type of gap year. In particular, the review identified limited and anecdotal evidence that certain kinds of gap year activities – notably ‘structured’ overseas volunteering placements – offer a number of important benefits to young people that mark them out as distinctively beneficial. This finding partially contradicted some of the existing research into low-income country youth volunteering. It has been argued that even structured placements amount to little more than ‘volunteer-tourism’ and make little significant developmental impact in low-income countries (Simpson 2004). Simpson also suggests that participants have very limited and simplistic conceptions of development and the cultures of low-income countries where projects are undertaken.

Whilst not refuting aspects of Simpson’s (2004) analysis, the findings of this study present a counter-balance to an entirely negative interpretation of ‘volunteer-tourism’. The provisional findings of the gap year review suggested that whilst the developmental impacts on host communities of these kinds of structured placements in low-income countries is likely to be very limited, the volunteers themselves did gain considerably in the two case study countries

studied. The contribution of this paper is to develop the debate on impacts of overseas youth volunteering schemes further.

### **3 Two Low Income Case Studies: Vietnam and Tanzania**

The research discussed represents a longitudinal study of the transformative effects of undertaking structured volunteering placements on 16 to 25 year olds from the UK and Australia. The material discussed in this paper represents one part of a larger project covering placements in 12 countries, included developed ones, and specialised shorter term expedition schemes for the younger age group (16 and 17 year olds). The focus here is on placements undertaken in two contrasting low-income countries: Vietnam and Tanzania. Three cohorts were followed through the whole experience, starting from summer 2004 in a study which encapsulates a ‘before’, ‘during’ and ‘after’ approach. All the young people in the study were using one of two large UK-based provider organizations. Both offered similar kinds of placement opportunities to work as teaching assistants in primary and secondary schools (in the case of Tanzania) and schools or universities (in the case of Vietnam). One provider was a private sector company (Tanzania) and the other a charity (Vietnam). Both operate in the UK and Australia, and have been attempting to launch operations in the USA. Despite this apparent private sector / charity difference, however, the nature of the placement ‘product’ on offer is similar and both share an ethos of the young volunteer’s personal development being a key goal (as opposed to providing a tourism experience).

The research involved two distinct qualitative forms of data collection: focus groups and depth interviews. The first phase comprised three focus groups with the cohorts of young people prior to departure during their induction session in the UK during summer 2004 (there were a total of 16 focus groups in the wider study). These focus groups discussed young people's motivations for undertaking the placements, expectations about the volunteering experience and their existing views of the destination country. These group discussions were recorded and transcribed. The second phase comprised face-to-face depth interviews undertaken 'on location' in the middle of the placement period in Vietnam and Tanzania. These interviews were either on a one-to-one basis or one-to-two and were again recorded and (part) transcribed. These interviews revisited the questions raised by the focus group discussions and then went on to examine what young people thought about the placement experiences and how it had affected them.

The final component of the research project comprises the initial 'after' phase (some months after returning home) and consists of a large number of semi-structured email questionnaires combined with a sample of face-to-face recorded depth interviews. At present, about thirty-percent of this material has been gathered and some of this data has been integrated where appropriate.

#### **4 Impacts on Young Volunteers**

Whilst specific differences emerged between the experiences of the young people on the projects in Vietnam and Tanzania, as well as between the different provider organizations, a number of clear areas of commonality can be identified from the



interviews. The findings are divided into three major transformative aspects of the overseas volunteering experience. I am not arguing that these transformations are unique to the schemes examined, nor indeed to overseas volunteering. The effect on different individuals does also vary considerably. However, I will argue that the projects researched do offer a strong transformative and beneficial experience for the majority of participants, some of which are specific to the low income country context. The transformative impacts of the experience I divide into three areas: personal development, cross-cultural experience and the development of ‘global perspective’.

#### **(i) Personal Development**

The majority of those interviewed suggested that the volunteering experience had had a positive impact on their abilities in a range of areas that are loosely covered by the term ‘soft skills’. The first, and perhaps one of the most important overall, was the widely cited view that the experience improved confidence. Many of the eighteen and nineteen year olds in the study stated they were seeking an experience that would remove them from their existing networks of support at home:

*“I haven’t been away from home much, certainly never abroad on my own... so the placement has really given me a lot more confidence ... being able to do things for myself, to deal with situations my parents would have ”*

(Anna, 19, university teaching support, Hanoi, Vietnam)

*“We have had to deal with lots of problems ourselves, ...having to look after yourself is a big part of it for me”*

(Sam, 18, secondary school, Moshi, Tanzania)

There was a recognition of a ‘lack of worldliness’ in their past ‘safe’ experience.

This was part of the attraction of working in a developing country:

*“I definitely wanted to get away from the security of back home (Sydney, Australia), where you’re looked after and your parents do everything for you”*

(Tammy, 18, primary school, Hanoi, Vietnam)

*“I wanted to get away from being looked after all the time...it’s about doing things for yourself.”*

(Rob, 18, secondary school, nr Moshi, Tanzania)

Many respondents said they felt more confident to tackle day-to-day challenges and were able to face the ‘unpredictability of real life’ as opposed to the ‘mapped out’ nature of their lives back home (James, 18, secondary school, nr Moshi, Tanzania).

Second, volunteers in both countries described the experience as having enhanced their ability to work with people, as well as for many giving them a first experience a ‘real work environment’ (Chris, 18, secondary school, nr Moshi, Tanzania). Many of the respondents saw this as offering them valuable experience which they felt would help them at university and generally in later working life:

*“It’s very different from being in school. I think most of us [the Tanzania cohort] have not had a job before apart from maybe a bit of working in a shop... we’ve all had to learn to how to get on with people and work with the teachers...I’ve been lucky but I know [Jack and Sarah] have had a hard time. They didn’t get on with their Head...”*

(Mark, 19, primary school, Moshi, Tanzania)

This in particular involved exposure to ‘difficult’ work situations where the young volunteers had to negotiate potentially problematic situations with, for examples, teachers in the schools or universities where they were placed. One volunteer described her own learning experience in having to get along and be ‘respectful’ to the Vietnamese teachers in her placement even though she found it a sometimes difficult set of social relationships:

*“I didn’t know what to expect from the Vietnamese teachers. Some resent us ...we had to be careful about the money thing, and showing them proper respect which was sometimes hard because several only knew a little English. You want to correct their mistakes, but you have to bite your tongue...”*

(Anna, 18, secondary school placement, Hanoi, Vietnam)

Third, many of the young volunteers highlighted a sense that they had gained wider problem-solving skills and the ability to deal with the organizational and logistical situations presented by daily adult life:

*“We have been left to take classes on our own without any materials...so you have to think up ways to teach...lots of games, trying to get the kids to be interested....”*

(Max, 18, university TEFL placement, Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam)

*“All those kind of daily problems...unblocking the toilet, sorting out clean water, making sure you have food...stuff I never had to do for myself before.”*

(Sarah, 18, primary school placement, nr Moshi, Tanzania)

Fourth, a large proportion of the volunteers felt the experience was enhancing their communication skills. Many suggested they had gained considerably in their abilities to speak publicly and be able to communicate with different kinds of groups, depending on the nature of their placement. One respondent in Tanzania summed up the viewpoint that I have also heard echoed by corporate graduate recruiters<sup>1</sup> about the impact of these kinds of placements on enhancing these kinds of skills (see also Bowden, 1999, CSV, 2000 and Jones, 2005):

*“When I got here I was terrified ...it was really difficult as I have never had to stand up in front of a large group of people before,*

*especially people who don't speak English that well...the first couple of weeks were awful. But when you get more relaxed about it, you really feel like you've achieved something..."*

(Jon, 19, university placement, Hanoi, Vietnam)

The placements develop communication skills in a much broader form than just simply 'public speaking'. Volunteers also pointed to their improved abilities to communicate with each other and to be able to develop good rapport on a one-to-one or small group basis with people 'they had never met before':

*"I think we've learned as a group... got better at talking to each other and listening as well. When we all got here, people weren't on the same wavelength...I've definitely learnt how to talk to the others, even the people you don't like so much."*

(Sam (F), secondary school, placement, Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam)

Overall, these skills are not necessarily unique to the developing country context of the volunteering placement but the overseas dimension did serve to heighten the learning impact of volunteers' experiences. Many of the volunteers emphasised in the interviews how their attitude to undertaking these overseas placements predisposed them to facing up to new challenges and 'taking things seriously' (Max, 18, University Placement, Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam) in a way that they would have not done in the UK or Australia. Being in a strange language and cultural environment forced cohorts to interact with each other more than they might have done in a home country or more culturally familiar setting, and many

volunteers pointed to the ‘greater stresses’ placed on them by being in an overseas placement. In terms of confidence, interpersonal, problem-solving and communication skills, the transformative impact was more acute in these low income country settings for a variety of contextual reasons that made the experience more challenging than it would have been in a home country context.

## **(ii) Cross-cultural experience**

The second dimension to the impact on the volunteers can be summarised in the idea of the ‘cross-cultural’ experience. Both Tanzania and Vietnam represented unknown parts of the world for the majority of the young volunteers and the focus groups prior to departure indicated a very limited degree of knowledge about these countries and the way of life there. Two main aspects of this cross-cultural experience emerged from the research that can be identified across both cohorts. First, the placement experience broke down young volunteers’ prejudices about the placement country. In general, simplistic and uninformed viewpoints about these countries and how people lived there were dispelled:

*“You have these ideas about Africa being all mud huts and poor people...the people are poor but you realise it’s not like the TV images at all.”*

(James, 21, primary school placement, Tanzania)

*“What surprised me most is that people make do. They have a lot less, but you realise they live just the same and get by...I think I expected something different, a more basic way of life.”*

(Sarah, 18, primary school placement, Tanzania)

In contrast to Simpson's (2004) points about simplistic and crude understandings of different cultures amongst the volunteer tourists she studied, the research indicates that with greater structure and greater community interaction, placements can be effective learning experiences that allow young people to develop a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of cultural difference and the issues surrounding development. This is likely to be influenced by the quality of the placement, its length and almost certainly would be enhanced if the placements were to embrace more direct pedagogical goals.

Second, the *in situ* interviews in particular suggest that the volunteers had gained a much wider ranging and sophisticated understanding of cultural difference and its value. Many commented on how host communities were much more 'subtly different' than the crude representations of cultural difference they had gleaned from the media in their home country. Volunteers in both countries emphasised the value in particular of informal embedding in host communities as they became more settled into their placement and encountered more of the wider community:

*"What's been really good is spending time in the village at the weekends...we get invited to parties and weddings by the students, and then you really get to understand what life is like here."*

(Jack, 18, secondary school placement, Tanzania)

*“One of the best things has been to see a different culture close-up... making friends, ...that’s helped me understand the problems people face living here.”*

(Jon, 19, primary school placement, nr Moshi, Tanzania)

Existing discussions of overseas youth volunteering has either glossed over the question of cross-cultural interaction as a vague positive benefit or argued that it has little effect other than to reinforce crude and simplistic understandings of development and different cultures amongst young western people (Simpson 2004). In contrast, this research indicates that the value of these cultural interactions can be significant and much greater than has been thus far explored. Young volunteers can gain sophisticated and wide ranging cultural understanding about host country cultures and communities in the kinds of placement researched here.

### **(iii) Global Perspective**

A third form of impact that the research identified might be termed the promotion and development ‘global perspective’ or even ‘global citizenship’. The majority of the volunteers had not travelled outside of the advanced western economies previously and therefore only had limited ideas and understandings of life in the countries in which they had undertaken placements. Simpson (2004) suggests that gap year takers perceptions of poverty and questions of development often rely on simplistic misrepresentations and rationalisation of the nature of global development. Again in partial contrast to that finding, the volunteers on the



structured placements did display evidence of thoughtful engagement with the wider questions of low-income country development.

I want to suggest three identifiable trends. First, many volunteers suggested that the volunteering experience for them had promoted a realisation of the complicated linkages between host countries and western countries, including their home.

*“I never realised how Africa was so... you think its miles away and people live in mud huts and so on, whilst in fact people work for the same companies here, at the other end of things if you like...like there are lots of farms growing coffee or flowers near my school which they sell in Tesco’s back home.”*

(Gemma, 18, primary school placement, Tanzania)

*“I think I’ve been surprised by how much people here know about England...loads of the kids say they support Manchester United in my school, and it makes you see how this is not some backward place separate from the way we live back home.”*

(James, 18, secondary school placement, Hanoi, Vietnam)

Second, volunteers appear to have gained a sense of modest empowerment to affect global society. Many of those interviewed during their placements suggested that whilst, if anything, their current voluntary contribution ‘was only a small thing’ (James, 18, Tanzania) and really a case of ‘a first introduction to this kind of thing’ (Anna, 18, Hanoi, Vietnam), the experience had been important in

developing in them a realisation of their potential ability to affect change through volunteering:

*It's made me think I can do something... that it's possible to make a difference. It sounds cheesy, but when you're at school you just think Africa is far away and there's nothing you can do that will affect people there...*

(Max, 18, university TEFL placement, Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam)

*"We are only doing a very small bit, but you realise you can help even then...several of the students in my class have been really keen which makes you feel appreciated."*

(Krissy, 19, secondary school placement, Tanzania)

In that sense, these volunteering experiences were having an important effect in developing a sense amongst young volunteers of the value of what they were doing (even if that value was modest) and of the potential for and importance of individual action itself.

Third and finally, the volunteers also displayed a greater disposition to the idea of future volunteering when interviewed during their placements. At the focus groups prior to departure, the groups showed considerably uncertainty about whether their placement experiences would be anything more than a 'one-off' gap year experience. By the middle of the placements, however, many had developed a stronger view that they would like to undertake overseas volunteering again at some point in the future:

*“It has definitely changed my view of voluntary work...I would certainly do this again...although not with [Provider1]...something for longer where you can get more involved.”*

(Mark, 18, primary school placement, Moshi, Tanzania)

*“You see how the richer countries affect what goes on here...it’s made me think about what people can do back home [UK] and how that could help Tanzanians...”*

(Sam [F], 18, secondary school placement, nr Moshi, Tanzania)

Overall, the groups of volunteers in both countries were expressing a greater likelihood of undertaking future volunteering than when this was originally discussed in the context of the motivations for going in the first place. Whilst perhaps not an entirely surprising finding, it does offer support for the view that these kinds of placements are valuable as a ‘taster’ experience for young people (Jones 2004) which engages their interest and motivation around volunteering more generally.

## **5 Conclusions and Policy Implications**

The research strongly suggests that overseas volunteering placements do, for a large number of the individuals in this study, have a significant personal development impact on a range of skills, attitudes and capacities amongst young people. In both Vietnam and Tanzania, the evidence indicates that for the young volunteer, undertaking a structured placement in a low income country also offers

a strongly transformative experience in terms of cross-cultural interaction and in enabling young people to develop a sense of their own identity in a much wider global context than they have developed through home country education.

However, these findings come with a series of significant caveats. First, the research also identified significant weaknesses in existing placement schemes and suggests that provider organisations could do considerable more to improve the quality (especially in a pedagogical and personal development sense) of the overseas volunteering experience. This echoes Simpson's (2003; 2004) points about the lack of sufficient engagement amongst provider organisations with development issues and building pedagogical goals into the placement experience. Second, the derived benefit does depend considerably on the personality, characteristics and capacity of individual volunteers to 'rise to the challenge' and gain from the experience. I argue that in order to ensure individuals derive the most possible benefit from these experiences, there is a need to revise and develop the nature of selection, pre-placement training and in-placement support for volunteers. Third, certain formats of placement are more effective than others in developing a beneficial experience for the volunteer and the implication is that provider organisations should reconsider the range and scope of placement activities from those currently on offer.

Furthermore, the research presented here also has a specific focus on the two cohorts of young volunteers followed in two specific countries and not all structured placement schemes are likely to be equally effective in developing skills. The research has produced a series of specific insights into issues concerning the quality of structured placement provision but the exploration of this topic in any depth is beyond the scope of this paper. The important general

point to emphasise, however, is that without adequate host country support systems and quality assurance mechanisms, there is a significant risk that the beneficial aspects of the volunteering experience identified by the respondents in this study would be greatly diminished. Both provider organizations in the two countries in this study were well-established organizations and continue to invest considerable staff and financial resources in maintaining the quality of the placements on offer.

The tentative policy conclusion that emerges from this research is that within the growing 'gap year' sector there is an argument for actively encouraging young people to undertake projects of the kind described in this research as part of their gap year experience. There is sufficient evidence from this research to suggest that there are considerable benefits derived by young people in undertaking well structured and supported overseas volunteering in low income countries. The evidence suggests that there are a string of positive transformative impacts on young people which are unlikely to be as pronounced in a volunteering experience in their home country or a more culturally familiar environment. Whether any additional benefits gained by young volunteers outweighs the extra costs and difficulties in maintaining such schemes is to a large extent a subjective issue, but would also benefit from further detailed comparative research.

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