

IVCO 2022 Think Piece

International Voluntary Service Praxis: A vehicle reinforcing colonial legacies?

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The historical context of International voluntary services (IVS) incorporates the previous forms of travel by missionaries, explorers and colonisers. Dann (1996), Simpson (2004), Roberts (2004) and Tubb (2006) assert that missionary activities increased during the period of colonialism and imperialism (Simpson, 2005, Roberts, 2004). It is important to point out that even present-day travel by long-term volunteers is influenced by colonial history. It can be argued that imperialism and colonialism provided both the possibility and the rationale for this travel. Colonialism was not just about conquering the world, but also a conquest about the way the world was known. As colonialism itself has been dismantled and criticised, however, the constructed colonial gaze lingers on, influencing destination choices for long-term volunteers.

International Voluntary Service (IVS) operates within an arena of global power politics (Tubb, 2006). According to Simpson (2005), these power politics play a crucial role in IVS, because most of the power is invested with the organisation in the Global North. Organisations in the Global South have less power on exchange programs for long-term volunteers, and most decisions are taken in the Global North. This scenario complicates the partnership arrangement, because some partners are more equal than others. Some partners in this relation have very limited power to influence decisions which impact them either positively or negatively. The main thrust of IVS is 'doing development', a notion that reinvents the thinking of the colonial era through its framing volunteers' relationships and encounters with the visited others. According to Tubb (2006), 'doing development' has two major goals – personal growth and helping others. The others in some cases are perceived as poor, and they need to be liberated from poverty through deploying (often young) volunteers from the Global North.

According to Tubb (2006), Simpson (2004) and Robert, (2004), IVS is a vehicle used by the North under the powerful influence of development experts intervening in the Global South, offering a bridge between modern and the traditional ways of life. They will be doing this under the auspices of helping 'others'. This approach has failed to address the root cause of poverty and global inequality; instead it has only served to limit the participation of people in the South to address problems of development as they see them, and to navigate their own paths of change (Mwaruta, 2011)

Roberts (2004) asserts that post-colonial development theory has been framed in the language of charity, technical expertise, civil engagement, civil services and volunteerism. This language reinforces a colonial legacy, through the liberal position of wealthy nations in the Global North exercising a moral obligation to assist poor countries in the Global South. Inherent in this position is the assumption that countries in the Global South are willing to receive the assistance. Even in this age of globalisation, the Global North still perceives the Global South as weak and poor. The notion of IVS reinforces this ideology of the North-South divide through texts and images from the South which reinforce a colonial legacy. This discourse encourages a particular notion of other, masked behind celebrated connotations, influenced by the colonial legacy. The discourse, therefore, is blinkered to suit the needs of the voices from North, potentially at the opportunity cost of the destination in the South (Roberts 2004, Griffin, 2004)

Post-colonialists argue that these systems remain today between the former coloniser and the colonised even though official control has ceased (Simpson, 2005, Williams and Chrisman, 1993). It is difficult to draw a line between colonial and post-colonial discourse because of the power relations which still exist after decades of independence (Simpson, 2004). The colonial representation remains important in understanding the

contemporary perception. Some volunteers prefer to do voluntary work in a country where they have some historical ties, such British volunteers preferring go to Kenya, Uganda and Zambia, while German nationals prefers Namibia and Tanzania and Spanish volunteers prefer Latin America. In this case, IVS is controlled by the past colonial legacy which perpetuates the traditional travel patterns of the missionaries, explorers, and colonisers, hence the dire need to deconstruct this trend through breaking the existing power structures which reinforce neo-colonialism and climate colonisation.

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